

CREATING PEOPLE A READER CAN TOUCH AND PLACES HE/SHE CAN VISUALIZE

One of your goals as an author is to entice the reader into your story. If he/she remains too detached from the characters and the tale, you risk losing your reader. The tool to do this effectively is description. Done well, it will help the reader develop an intimate relationship with a character and feel comfortable in the place where the action of the book occurs.

While attempting to create an image, you, the author, must ensure that the description flows naturally without disrupting the forward movement of the book. That can be done convincingly in a variety of ways.

All of us have basic senses: we hear, we touch, we smell, we feel. So must the characters you develop. Their reactions when they employ any of these senses tells the reader a great deal about them and helps to identify them. Similarly, a character's speech is a tool of description. Whether it's his/her accent or tonal level, or whether the person you create speaks slowly and definitively or impetuously, your reader forms an opinion of the person from the way he/she talks.

When describing a place, try to add some action that's pertinent to one of the characters. Perhaps he/she is strolling along a path and stops to pick a handful of blueberries from a nearby bush. Or maybe your character's neck stiffens from bending backwards to look skyward because he/she is overwhelmed by the immensity of the skyscrapers that border the road.

When Is Enough Enough?

Be aware of the need to balance description at any one point in the book. Too little will leave you with empty characters with whom the reader has difficulty empathizing or even identifying. A lack of adequate description will keep your reader from feeling comfortable in the setting in which you place your action. Conversely, if the description rambles on and on, the action of the book will stop and your reader will be bored and very likely place your book back on the shelf unread.

Monica Wood for whose book *Description* I have great respect, explains, "There is no greater (or more annoying) motion-stopper than immobile chunks of physical description. A head-

to-toe tour of a character's appearance, clothing, etc before we know more about him is at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive. It stops the natural flow of the story."

No one can give a standard set of rules or measurements to determine when enough is enough or perhaps too much or too little. As the author, you must depend on your own instinct and experience when you seek the perfect balance.

Show, Don't Tell

That phrase should always be your guiding light when creating description. Nothing is more boring than to describe the physical attributes of a character in what essentially becomes no more than a list, yet so many authors do just that. Your make believe person is tall, has wavy brown hair, has a scar on his cheek and dresses immaculately. That a boring list.

Let's look at the way any one of those characteristics can be captured. (Tall) He bends his head reflexively each time he passes through a doorway. (Hair color) When talking with him, he frequently pushes his wavy brown hair away from his forehead. (Scar) He has a tendency to rub his fingers along the vertical scar on his left cheek. (Meticulous dresser) He constantly smooths the lapels of his carefully tailored blazer. These are just top-of-the-head examples. With a little thought, I am sure you can do far better.

Be Specific

Adjectives are marvelous tools when used properly. That certainly flies in the face of Mark Twain who told his student, "If you ever see an adjective, kill it." It is essential that you recognize adjectives can be general or specific. You are not talking about just anyone or any place; you are describing a very specific character or location. When the gardener struggled to cut down a tree, did he use an ax (generic term for a tool with a handle of varying lengths) or a hatchet (a short handled tool)?

Flowers aren't growing in the bed along the garden path. A profusion of bright red geranium blossoms sway in the gentle easterly breeze. The doctor doesn't use a knife when operating; he uses a scalpel. Each of those more exacting descriptive phrases gives the reader far more insight than does the use of the universal words that can be applied to a variety of items, sizes or shapes.

Descriptive Dialogue

Just as people vary in their appearance, so they speak in different ways. Their speech is reflective of their lifestyles and their personas. It adds to the reader's understanding of the character. At the simplest level, a character's accent indicates that he/she comes from a specific geography. The mode of speech indicates level of education. A character's articulation and the pace of his/her speech offer insight into his/her makeup or mindset. Used well, speech can reveal a person's integrity either by the use of an obviously artificial accent or inclusion of words that don't truly match his/her character.

Because it is so revealing, many talented authors use dialogue instead of narrative to describe a person. In addition, speech can be used to describe another person or a place in a way that is far more interesting than simple narrative or exposition.

The Risks

There is an inherent risk of overusing speech mannerisms that you must always be aware of. For example, if your character comes from the Deep South, he/she will talk with a southern drawl. Introduce it strongly at first, but taper off as the reader comes to know the character, and no longer needs the drawl to identify him /her. Overworked accents can bore the reader or seem unreal. Once again, the decision as to when enough is enough is a subjective decision the writer must make. There are no rules.

Similarly, the use of profanity can portray much about a character, but when overused, it loses its impact and can be a turnoff. Although in real life people exist whose speech is riddled with constant profanity, when writing fiction this characteristic can be portrayed far more effectively if the cuss words are not overdone.

Despite all of this, you must bear in mind the fact that a person's speech can change with his/her mood. This requires a more sophisticated use of words, mannerisms and pacing so that you don't lose the essential identifying aspects of the character's normal speech. If someone is discussing a complex issue, he/she may speak more slowly than usual and take time to think through each statement before making it. There are times even a serious character may crack an appropriate joke.

Of course, there are situations when you will want your character to respond with just body language, not spoken words. You may have your character do something when speaking to reveal more about him/her. If your character is a gardener, he/she can be talking while admiring a rose or possibly even while working in the garden. Perhaps your character is taking a walk with a friend and suddenly stops to watch a beautifully colored butterfly or feel compassion for an injured squirrel. The possibilities are endless for a creative writer.