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Teen Writer!

Descriptive Writing & The Five Senses

Discover innovative ways to depict your story's *setting* with rich and specific descriptions – and it all starts with indulging your *five senses!* Award-winning writer Gina Catanzarite leads teens through an energizing exercise that challenges them to notice *and describe* not only what characters are *seeing*, but also what they're hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting in a story's setting.

TRANSCRIPT

Gina Catanzarite:

Every story has a *setting*. It means the *location and time period* in which *your* story takes place.

Whether it's a sunny beach. . . or a spooky mansion. . . a bustling city. . . or even outer space. . . *vivid descriptions* of those *settings* transport readers to another world, even if it's a world *you* totally imagined.

For instance, if I were writing a story about where I am *right now*, the *setting* would be a riverbank alongside the Ohio River in western Pennsylvania.

One thing I've noticed in all the years that I've taught creative writing is that when it comes to *describing* a setting, young writers tend to focus on things that can be *seen*.

I see the river, I see the trees, I see these rocks.

But we experience the world through *five different senses*: things we can see . . . but also, things we hear. . . Touch. . . Smell . . . And taste.

One of my favorite quotes says: when you start using senses you've neglected, your reward is to see the world with completely fresh eyes. Once you build an *awareness* of your five senses, you're more likely to incorporate those details in your fiction. So here's a writing activity that challenges you to notice *sensory details* in *settings* where *you* live.

Take a walk and find *five* things you can see. . . *four* things you can touch . . . *three* things you can hear . . . *two* things you can smell . . . and *one* thing you can taste. Then . . . *practice writing descriptions of them!*

Get in the habit of *breaking down the scene*. Here's a house with a garden. . . But *really* look at that garden. How many *separate elements* are in this scene? It has flowers. . . There's a

lantern. . . A statue... shrubs. . . It has a banner. That's already *five different* things I can *see* in this one small plot of land!

And don't just look straight ahead, either. Look *up* and describe what you see at the *tops* of the trees. Describe the pattern of the sunbeams. Then. . . Look *down*. Notice details that are literally right beneath your feet.

Finally, look at the same thing from different *angles*. . . like this old fence. From far away, it's just white planks. Up close, you'll see individual details like splintered wood. . . peeling paint... even an exposed rusty nail. Unique details create a very vivid picture to help your reader imagine your story's *setting*.

Think of all of the different *textures* your fictional characters can experience through the sense of *touch*. For instance, I'm sitting on a cement block right now. It's hard; I would have guessed that. But it's also smoother than I would have expected, and it's pretty cool, even though the weather today is very warm.

What if your story was set in a *desert*? What would the *sun and the air* feel like on your skin? How would this *cactus* feel if you touched it? Do *you* think it would feel *sharp*? *Spiky*? *Prickly*?

Now think about places *you've* visited, and consider how you experienced those places through your *sense of touch*. Write down descriptions of those settings *from memory*. Then, if you can, re-visit those places, and see how your memory compares to the real thing!

Describing *sound* is really great practice for a writer. Can you hear all of the birds around me? The water is making some noise. There's even a lot of sounds of traffic on the road that's across the river. The world really is a *musical* place.

(SOUND OF WATER RUSHING INTO DRAIN)

Water is the perfect example.

(SOUND OF HEAVY RAINSTROM)

It's the same rainstorm but do you hear how *different* the raindrops sound each time they hit a *different surface*?

(SOUND OF RAINSTROM ON PAVEMENT, SOUND AT DRAIN, SOUND AT STREET)

Think about how many different settings include *water*. How would you describe the sound of *this* fountain?

(SOUND OF FOUNTAIN WATER)

How about this mixture of waves and wind on this beach?

(SOUND OF WIND AND WAVES ON BEACH)

Here's a tip to really focus on what you're hearing: Close your eyes and just . . . *listen*.

(SOUND OF EXPLOSIVES)

Can you guess what *this* sound is?

(SOUND OF EXPLOSIVES- FIREWORKS)

(SOUND OF MACHINERY)

How about *this*?

(SOUND OF MACHINERY – CONSTRUCTION SITE)

(SOUND OF CROWD CHEERING)

Try one more. Can you guess the setting that goes with *this* sound?

(SOUND OF CROWD CHEERING – BASKETBALL GAME)

Sound really is a crucial element in any setting, so be sure to focus on those details when you write!

When it comes to the sense of *smell*, I, personally, think these are the *most* important sensory details you can incorporate in your fiction.

Scientific studies *prove* our sense of smell is closely linked with our *memories*. When you describe the smells and the fragrances in a setting, it may trigger a particular memory in your reader, and that's a great way to engage them *emotionally* in your story.

And last but not least. . . we get to the sense of *taste*!

Obviously, settings could include *food*, so you might describe what your characters are tasting. But don't forget some of the less obvious opportunities for describing taste. . . like a character catching snowflakes on her tongue. . . or that dry taste of fear you get in your mouth when you're in a scary situation.

Remember: Five, four, three, two, one . . . *Write!*

References to all five senses *complete* the description of your story's setting, so the next time you take a walk, take a writing pad, too, and make this "five senses" exercise part of *your* creative writing work-out!

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