

## Presence and Particularity

If you examine 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction, you find a striking increase in the *immediate scenes* and a corresponding decrease in *narrative summary* over time. You will also note a decrease in *descriptions* of places that put the story on hold, making readers skip ahead. Today's readers insist upon seeing what they are reading.

Understanding the differences among the three main components of fiction – **description**, **narrative summary**, and **immediate scene** – is important to the writer of modern fiction. The principles involved with these three forms of fiction relate to nonfiction as well.

**Description** – is a description of a locale or person. The Latin root of the word depiction means: to picture or to fashion a visual image.

**Narrative summary** – is a recounting of what happened (offstage), out of the reader sight and hearing—a scene that is told rather than shown.

**Immediate scene**—happens in front of the reader is visible and therefore filmable. That's the important test. If you can't film the scene, it's not immediate. Theatrical art consist almost entirely of immediate scenes.

Every form of writing expected to be read with pleasure moves away from abstraction and benefits from conveying as much as possible before the eye on stage rather than offstage.

Description should do more than describe. It should express the narrator's state of mind, or the theme of the story. Descriptions should not be static and move the story along.

Witnessed the beginning of "Bullet Park," by John Cheever:

Paint me a small railroad station, 10 minutes before dark. Beyond the platform are the waters of the Wekonsett River, reflecting its somber afterglow. The architecture of the station is oddly informal, gloomy, but unserious, and mostly resembles a pergola, cottage or a summer house along with its climate of harsh winters. The lamps along the platform burn with a nearly palpable plaintiveness. The setting seems in some way to be at the heart of the matter. We travel by plane, oftener than not, and yet the spirit of our country seems to have remained a country of railroads. You wake in a Pullman bedroom at 3 AM in a city the name of which you do not know, and you may never discover...

Cheever's description is not static. It is part of storytelling and that's the key to writing better descriptions. The best have more than one function.

Narrative summary if written well and briefly, can transport the reader from one immediate scene to another, though this is not always necessary. Fiction has borrowed a film technique called *jump cutting*, moving from one scene to the next with no transition for time to pass, or locations to change. If the scenes need to be linked, try a brief narrative summary to do the linking.

Marvin double locked his door and went to work. In the office...

In the first part of the sentence, we actually see Martin locking his door. That's immediate scene. "Went to work" is narrative summary. Just three words get us from one scene to the next. Narrative summary, if short, can be useful in setting up an immediate scene.

Remember that dialogue is always immediate scene.

One fault of the inexperienced writer is when he is writing a scene that the reader can experience he sometimes feels compelled to provide more information. Instead of finding a way to have the information

come naturally out of the characters in the scene, he baldly states the information. The author's voice interrupts the scene. That's breaking the fourth wall, an intrusion. Writers direct what transpires on the stage, they're not the actors or characters.

Detail is the lifeblood of fiction. It is not just detail that distinguishes good writing, it is detail that individualizes, the detail that differentiates one person from another, one act from another and one place from another like it. Sol Stein calls it particularity. Once you're used to spotting it and spotting its absence, you will have one of the best possible means of improving your writing.

Early in the "Touch of Treason," the lawyer, Thomassy is confronted by Roberts the patrician district attorney. Watch for the words that particularize:

Thomassy he could see Roberts' handshake coming at him all the way down the aisle, above it that freckle faced proclaiming I can be friendly to everybody, I was born rich.

Roberts' smile, Thomassy thought, is an implant.

The lazy way would have been to say Roberts had a fake smile. That is a tired expression and a generalization that does not particularize.

In just a few sentences, we know that, in Thomassy's view, Roberts is a pretentious prig. The particularization, though brief, is enough to convince the reader.

The temptation is always to use either a cliché or a generalization, top-of-the-head writing. Good writers should try to fashion sentences that are writerly, that particularize in an interesting way. Here's a top-of-the-head description that doesn't tell us much.

Cecilia wore short skirts.

Turn it into a sentence that characterizes and particularizes:

Cecilia's skirts were three inches shorter than her age allowed.

Have a look at the following paragraph. It's not by a famous author; it's by a student who has yet to publish her first work. Observe how she uses particularity:

Weeds and low hanging branches of unpruned trees swooshed and thumped against the car while the gravel popped loudly under the car's tires. As the car bumped along, a flock of startled blackbirds exploded out of the brush. For a moment, they fluttered and swirled about like pieces of charred paper in the draft of a flame and then they were gone. Elizabeth blinked. The mind could play such tricks.

Today many people write top-of-the-head messages, memos, letters, full of generalizations and clichés. Many of us think of clichés as something we learned all about in school. The fact is that some of the best educated writers fall back on clichés both in their speech and work much more often than they realize. For a fiction writer, learning to avoid them and finding those that slip by, are important steps toward learning one of the most important aspects of original creative work: examining each word for its precise meaning and the likely effect of every group of words on the emotions of the reader.

For a writer, top-of-the-head writing, even in letter writing, is dangerous because the habit could carry over into your work. If you work at particularizing in all of your personal correspondence, the recipients will enjoy what you write much more—and you will be practicing what you need to perfect to build an audience for your writings.