

Making readers *feel* emotions

You want to make your reader *feel* the emotions in what you're writing?

The classic mistake – and we've all made it! - is to assume that because you feel emotional about what you're writing, then so will the reader. The truth is that it's not about what *you* feel; it's about communicating that feeling. We might not always work the magic but here are some tips that I find helpful.

Compare a) and b)

- a) Janie had loved her mother deeply. Every object in the room made her miss her mother more.
- b) She uncapped her mother's lipstick. Deep pink, worn unevenly in the three-swipe movement Janie had seen a thousand times in the mirror. As individual as a finger-print. Janie held the lipstick up to her own reflected mouth but her hand shook and refused to destroy her mother's traces. Careful not to catch the edge, she replaced the gold cap.

On the sofa two knitting needles were crossed neatly through a ball of wool, politely, like knife and fork placed just so on a plate. Janie didn't have to pick up the half-knit sleeve to know her mother's patterning; tension so tight it was as if she pulled every unlived dream under her control as her fingers clicked away.

I'm hoping that b) arouses more emotion than a) but I'm guessing b) also raises more questions about what the emotions in it *are* – good!

Many writers are told 'Show: don't tell,' but the advice seems to mean different things to different people and can be very fuzzy, so although I think that a) tells and b) shows, I'm going to be more specific.

- a) uses emotion words; 'loved', 'miss' These are a useful short-cut in telling a story but they don't usually make you feel the emotions mentioned – they quickly give you the information you need to get on to the next part.

That could be exactly what you want to do. But if you want to involve the reader, try these tips for the b) effect.

- 1) Avoid the emotion words (love/fear/happy/afraid/in love/scared)

2) Cut the clichés – if words come very easily, maybe that's because they've been used a million times. Readers' imaginations skim over clichés without becoming involved.

3) Give details and make the details personal. Reach for the shared experience (we can identify with bereavement) through creating a unique moment for an individual (Janie and her mother are unique)

In the context of a longer piece of writing

4) Build towards the emotional scene.

Workshop Exercises

I was thinking about scenes in books I've read that have roused real emotion in me and I wondered why. I realised that I've felt involved with the characters in every case, (so creating such individuals is part of our job as writers) and sometimes the scene has touched me personally because of my situation (and that is entirely out of the author's hands!)

Here are three of my 'most emotional scenes in fiction' - what are yours? Where does the motion come from? Your own experience? Something in how the scene is written? How do other readers feel about the same scenes?

1) Baloo and Bagheera vouching for Mowgli in 'The Jungle Book' by Rudyard Kipling. I suppose I'd like a bear and a black panther, outsiders like me, to stand up for me in public, in front of the whole wolf pack.

2) Bathsheba fighting to protect the hay in the storm, with Gabriel Oak, in 'Far From the Madding Crowd' by Thomas Hardy. I think there's something very sexy about a couple working in a physical activity together, particularly when fighting the elements. To me, this is one of the most romantic scenes ever written because the reader knows that Gabriel loves Bathsheba, and the fact her useless husband is in a drunken stupor adds to the undercurrents.

3) the ending of 'Brighton Rock' by Graham Greene. This is the most terrible, heartbreaking, pessimistic scene I've ever read and yet it is all in the reader's imagination. You know that what is about to happen will destroy all Rose's naïve illusions about Pinkie.

Show, Don't Tell

These statements 'tell' everything. Try replacing them with as many sentences as you like, without using 'emotion' words (excited, loved, horror, sad...) so that you *create* the emotion without *stating* it. Show, don't tell. (but all 'rules' should be broken when the writer judges it best).

Avoid clichés. Imagery and ambiguity enrich your writing. Give any contextual detail you like.

1. Claudine was very excited at the idea of seeing her mother again after ten years.

Replacement (draft)

e.g. Although she was only ten minutes early to meet the train, every minute on the station clock ticked an agonizing year long, one for each year since Claudine had last seen her mother.

2. Bruno was very much in love with Alice.

3. Veronique was alone in the house and she was afraid.

Show, don't tell, in your plot. Leave room for the reader to figure things out for themselves.

e.g.

Telling

The party was a disaster. It was obvious to Sue as she watched her husband with her best friend Angela that they were having an affair. She went moved quickly from hurt to anger and planned her revenge. She still had the silly photos of Angela wearing nothing but a Santa Claus hat and she would put them up in Angela's classroom at school.

Showing

'Have another.' Sue's smile was fixed as she handed round canapés, her eyes never leaving her husband. He played a good scene, did Fred, a smile here, an introduction there, like a bee flitting from flower to flower round the room. Just like a bee, dancing his way to the honey source. It wasn't Danielle, thought Sue as Fred danced on again. Nor Clare. 'Some more wine?' she asked brightly but her hand shook a little as she poured. 'Sorry,' she said automatically, wiping up the drops. Her bee had alighted. It was only the lightest resting of a man's hand on a woman's bare arm, a smile that promised, only thirty seconds when the world stopped for three people, but a wife knew. It was Angela. They'd shared homework when they were twelve, parent troubles when they were sixteen and now they were sharing Sue's husband.

In the time between another glass of wine, poured with a rock-steady hand, and four tapenade toasts, accepted by smiling guests, Sue had decided what she was going to do. No hysterics, no confrontations or at least not until after she'd got even.

The TAKE-AWAY TASK

This is the plot – you can add details and of course you start at any point of the story you choose but you can't change any of the 'givens' below.

Write the beginning of the story... and carry on if you like. For sharing and comparing.

LOVE STORY

Plot

Gordon and Ellie, both single cops, have been in a sexual relationship for 3 months but they work together so they have to keep it a secret.

The boss finds out and gives them the ultimatum – one of them has to ask for a transfer or they have to end their relationship.

Gordon wants to be self-sacrificing and be the one to move job.

Ellie doesn't want the pressure of his being a martyr, and is worried that it will become a cause of resentment between them in the future, but neither does she want to transfer.

They don't want to split up and they do love each other. The situation forces them to realize that they do want to commit to each other.

So they resign and set up their own consultancy private detective business as business partners and lovers, by their own rules.