

Sometimes Less Is Better

Description, that is. Writers want to describe. And readers want to feel. But how do we get the reader to "feel?" How does the writer achieve that immediacy? We do it with sensory detail. We are instructed to "Show. Don't tell." We strive to provide lots of sensory information, so the reader can see what we want them to see, as well as hear and smell what we want them to sense. They will then feel they are there, in the scene. Sensory details make the experience more immediate, more real. Use all the senses, we're told. What does the air smell like? Is there a breeze? And what sounds surround the character? Don't just say "it's cold." Have them shivering, pulling their coat tightly around them. You get the idea. Provide lots of descriptive, sensory details.

But sometimes, less is better. Sometimes it is more effective to give the reader a chance to use their own imagination. Readers can fill in their own sensory details, conjure up their own pictures, sounds and smells, and thus create their own physical sensations. If it works well, a scene or character can feel more real to the reader, because they created it. They know these sensual experiences because they belong to them.

Let's consider an example. What happens when a man is simply described as "handsome?" Just that, nothing more. The reader will fill automatically in their own details with their ideas about "handsome." They will bring their own images to mind, their idea of what "handsome" is. That can work more powerfully for the reader than several sentences about hair and eye color, posture, style of dress, and so forth.

Well, you might ask, why then should writers ever describe a character in detail? There are often very good reasons. Sometimes you need a character to look a certain way to be consistent with his behavior and with the reactions of other characters to him. And often descriptive details add more information than just the person's appearance. Details can set a mood or set the stage for further action. A "dark scowl" is more than a facial description. It is a precursor to action. We're not surprised when that scowl leads to a violent act.

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The bottom line here is there are few hard and fast rules. Description is very powerful but there are times when a single word causes a description to arise in the reader's mind. It is the author's judgment about how much description is appropriate, but when you do use it, use the senses to heighten the effect.