

Ten Ways to Inspire Your Description

Posted on November 21, 2014 by Chris Winkle



Good description is meaningful and imaginative, but it can be difficult to conjure an exciting rendition of every tree and shrub in your story. If you're struggling against another bland paragraph, here are ten ways to give it some interest.

1. Pick a Metaphor for Your Description

Perhaps the character in your scene is like a lion, mouse, or turtle. Their home could be a cave, or their workplace a beehive. Identify words that invoke your metaphor. If it's a cave, you might choose "dank," "shadowy," "echoed," "chill," and "drip." You'll want nouns and verbs as well as adverbs and adjectives, because [they add less clutter](#). Work these words into the way you describe and narrate your subject.

2. Make Your Description a Metaphor Itself

Your description can form a metaphor for a theme in your story. If your viewpoint character has a cozy chair, her reluctance to leave the chair could be a metaphor for her unwillingness to [leave her comfort zone](#) in general. Take some thoughts about the bigger theme, and work them

into your narration about the item. In this case, I could mention that she's missed important phone calls or even visitors because she didn't want to get out of her comfortable chair. I might also say that since her husband disappeared years ago, sitting in the chair reminds her of how she used to feel in his arms. Your readers may not understand the reference, but it will add to the feel of your work and provide more for them to discover on a second read.

3. Get More Specific

It's time to put the old adage "[show, don't tell](#)" to good use. Pick some part of your existing description that is either too vague or just isn't communicating as clearly as you'd like. Grab your thesaurus, and brainstorm words that are more specific and concrete. Transforming a book into a tome, a pot into a cauldron, and a cup into a goblet will strengthen the atmosphere of your scene.

You may also want to do a quick exercise focused on the subject of your description. Write a couple paragraphs about it. Give it a little backstory. Then review what you've written for interesting details you can use.

4. Gather Appropriate Media

Search the web for images that look like what you're describing. Find [music that amplifies the atmosphere](#) you're trying to create. If you'd like, you can do some free writing based on the images or music you found. Just jotting down word associations could give you some ideas.

Look for concrete details or symbolic imagery that are evocative of the media you found. Let's say you have a drawing of a sea monster rising up to smash a hapless vessel. One of the sailors is dangling on a rope over the beast's ready mouth, and you feel this detail communicates danger and urgency. Describe this figment in a couple sentences. Then feed the results back into your work.

5. Go Through the Five Senses

Good description involves many senses, but it's easy to use only visual imagery without thinking about it. Bolster your description by listing each of the five senses and brainstorming how they could be used. If your viewpoint character is by the ocean, he could see an eddy, hear the waves slap against the rocks, feel wind mixed with spray, smell rotting fish and seaweed, and taste the salt on the air. Don't try to stuff all five in if they aren't needed; just look for additional senses that can make your scene more vivid.

6. Evoke Emotion

Pick an emotion you want to convey. Identify colors, sounds, and symbols to represent it. If your emotion is [sadness](#), you might describe a vase as drab. The flowers in it are sagging, their petals falling off one by one and littering the table.

Just use restraint with this technique; too much emotion embedded in your description will come across as [melodramatic](#).

7. Reflect Your Narrator

Whether you're using a limited viewpoint of a character in your story or the omniscient viewpoint of someone outside it, your description can be filtered through their personality. Ask yourself how your narrator perceives the subject. Is it the same or different from what they are used to? Does it remind them of previous events? Do they associate it with a particular person, place, or characteristic? They could love it or hate it. Work their personal bias into your narration.

8. Develop a Character

If a character in your story has had any influence on the subject of your description, it can say a lot about them. If you're covering a person's appearance, set aside their eye color and hone in on the clothing, makeup, and styling they have [carefully prepared – or neglected](#). The way they decorate their home, maintain their car, or organize their workplace can add [depth to their personality](#). Similarly, a unique walk or nervous fidgeting will make them memorable to readers.

9. Describe the World

Does your world have a theme or mood you can invoke with your details? If you have a [post-apocalyptic setting](#) where the remaining humans are struggling to get by, you could show that the appliances have been broken and repaired a dozen times. You can also consider how your [worldbuilding choices](#) impact your subject matter. If all fossil fuels were burned centuries ago, a common dustpan might be made from wood instead of plastic.

10. Look Around

When we walk in a room, we often look at large pieces of furniture and decorative items that are close to eye level. But in any scene, there's a lot more to explore. What's on the floor or ceiling? What might your character see if they picked an object and studied it closely? What if they looked at the room from above? Or from far away?

There's more to examine than what most people would notice. Your choice of details will enrich the subject, narrator, and theme of your story.

Comments

Chris R

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All of this is great advice, but one thing I would add is to remember that the number of words you use to describe something should be directly proportional to how important that thing is to the story. You don't need to spend a lot of time setting the atmosphere in a kitchen if you're just going to immediately move to another room and never come back to the kitchen.