

The Description Workshop

written by Holly

December 23, 2009

By Holly Lisle

Description is a frequently-reviled writing skill.

It gets a bad reputation from books that include pages of turgid, extraneous detail; no book has ever been rendered unreadable by virtue of too little description. Unpublishable, maybe, but not unreadable... whereas a couple of hundred-word descriptions jammed into a three-page paragraph can not only kill your book, but maybe even your editor or first reader. Bad.

So you don't want to do that. But you don't want to walk away from description entirely, either. Clear, relevant description gives you powerful tools for bringing worlds and characters to life. Used judiciously, it can make your readers believe, and that is a wonderful thing.

You have a number of things you'll routinely have to describe when you're writing settings, situations, and characters.

• Lets do setting first, since its the first thing most writers think about when they think about description.

If you've done a lot of worldbuilding, its easy to get carried away with this one. You've developed a ton of wonderful details, and you'll probably find yourself tempted to use them all, and to do all your describing at once. Probably, in fact, right at the beginning of your story, especially if you're

doing a novel and are writing about your own world. You'll definitely have to do SOME description, just so your readers will know where they are.

However, even in a solid block of description, **if you keep the background moving**, you'll bring the scene to life and keep your readers interest.

Here's an example of what I mean, taken from my novel **Diplomacy of Wolves**.

So Kait Galweigh stood off in one corner at the Dokteerak Naming Day party and scanned the crowd while she pretended to sip a drink. The Dokteerak Family women in their gauzy net finery clustered beneath the broad palms in the central garden, chatting about nothing of consequence. Torchlight cast an amber gleam on their sleek skins and pale hair and made the heavy gold at their throats and wrists seem to glow. They were decorative – Kait's Family had such women, too, and theirs was the fate she so desperately wished to escape. The senior diplomats from both Families, Galweigh and Dokteerak, gathered in the breezeway that surrounded the courtyard, leaning along the food-laden tables, nibbling from finger servings of yearling duck and broiled monkey and wild pig and papaya-stuffed python, telling each other amusing stories and watching, watching, their eyes never still. Concubines flirted and primped, tempting their way into berths in the beds of the high-ranking or the beautiful. Dokteerak guardsmen in gold and blue propped themselves against doorways, swapping racy stories and tales of bravado with Galweigh guardsmen in red and black. Outland princes and the parats of other Families and their cadet branches drifted from group to group, assessing available women the way hunting wolves assessed a herd of deer.

(You can read the entire chapter here to see how I continued the use of people to describe setting.)

Now this is a longish paragraph – 214 words. However, the reader gets a feel for the world from watching people doing things.

Description Rule Number One: People are more interesting than scenery.

When you're finished reading this one paragraph, you have an idea of the social and political structure and technological level of this part of the world, social mores and morals, the weather that evening, the climate of the region, and at least a suggestion of the social standing of the characters. And if I've done my job correctly, you're interested enough in what the people are doing that you don't see the things I've slipped in with them.

- Did you consciously notice the palm trees, the presence of monkeys and papaya on the menu, the women dressed in gauzy clothing? *Tropical climate.*
- Did you notice concubines, decorative women, uniformed guardsmen, outland princes, Families with a capital F? *Complex social structure* with a number of conflicting political models, sexual mores different than those of middle-class America, and the presence of a definite hierarchy.
- Torchlight? The possibility, if not yet the certainty, of *a lower-tech world.*
- The Naming Day Party? *An unfamiliar celebration* of some sort and something that obviously is of some importance.

What other rules did I use in this paragraph?

Description Rule Two: Forms of the verb “to be” are your enemy.

I did not write, *It was a hot night*, or *The Dokteerak women were beautiful but immoral*, or *The food on the table was strange*. Those would have been boring sentences.

If you're telling, you can't be showing, and when you describe something, you want to show it. You don't want to tell about it.

Think about a car salesman. He wants you to buy the car. So does he tell you how great it is?

No, he drags you out, sits your butt in the drivers seat, and lets you smell the leather interior, wrap your hands around the steering wheel, peer through the windshield, and feel the way it moves with you as you drive it through city streets.

Let your readers drive your world.

Exercise One:

List three or four important points about your story-universe that you want your readers to know. These can be anything from weather to political structure to the rules of a game characters will play that is integral to your plot. When you have them listed, write a paragraph describing them... but do it using people, and avoid as many variants of the verb "to be"... *is, was, are, were...* as you can.

Finished? Like the energy in what you've done? Have you managed to sneak your worldbuilding in disguised as action? If you have, great. If not, give it another shot, and then lets move on.

•Next, lets work on situation description.

In order to start a story, you have to let the reader know where your character is, what the problem is, and why it matters. This requires description – but again, description shouldn't be something your reader has to drag himself through out of obligation. It should, instead, reach out of the page, grab him by the throat, and drag him kicking and screaming

into your story and your world.

Here's a situation description I did for **Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**. It is, in fact, the first paragraph of the book, and this time it is straight description—no action.

The corpse's left eye squinted at me from mere centimeters away. Decomposition lent her face an increasingly inscrutable expression; the first time I'd regained consciousness, when I found myself tied to her, she looked like she had died in terror. After a while, she started leering at me, as if she had reached the place where I was going and took perverse pleasure from the thought that I would join her there soon. Now, having had her moment of amusement at my expense, she meditated; beneath thousands of dainty auburn braids, her face hung slack, bloated and discolored, the skin loosening. Threads of drool hung spiderwebbish from her gaping mouth. Her eyes, dry and sunken and filmed over beneath swollen lids, still stared directly at me.

(You can read this paragraph in context here to see how I used description to create situation.)

Technically, it is a description of a dead body. However, it is a bit more compelling than a simple description of a corpse, because the narrator is telling you about the corpse in the first person while the two of them are handcuffed together and locked in a locker.

It is, I think, one of the catchier openers I've done. From this short description, the reader understands immediately and completely that the narrator is in terrible trouble, that the trouble is premeditated and the stakes are high, and that there is at least a bit of a mystery ongoing – people don't refer to those they know as the corpse – so the dead body to which the narrator is bound must belong to a stranger. We get confirmation of that in subsequent chapters, but I've planted the seed in the first one.

So what rules did I follow in setting up this situation?

Description Rule Number Three: Lead with the biggest gun you've got.

I didn't start by mentioning that the narrator was badly hurt, though she was, and you get a hint of that from the fact that she's been unconscious more than once. I didn't lead with the locker, or with the narrator's confusion over the fact that the woman was a stranger, or with a description of the space station – or Cadence Drake's job, or any of the events that got her where she was. I started her out eyeball to eyeball with the body of a dead stranger, and took a bit of time and a number of gritty words to describe the stranger. (I also followed Rules One and Two.)

Exercise Two:

Figure out what the most compelling detail is in a situation you're trying to set up for your character. Weed out all the things you wish the reader knew, and all the things that are secondary, and just dig into that one compelling detail.

• Finally, let's look at description of character.

Everyone knows about this one—

Missy looked at herself in the mirror. She liked her short, pert nose, her perfectly blonde hair natural, of course and the way her enormous breasts complimented her tiny waist. She didn't think she was perfect, of course. She thought she was too skinny and plain, but everyone else kept insisting she was beautiful, so maybe she was.

If you have ever written a paragraph like that, don't feel bad. Most of us have at one point or another. But it is

dreadful, and there are much, much better ways to describe character.

I had to dig for an out-and-out description of a character, because I rarely do a block of text telling what a character looks like. I'll sneak a detail in here or there, but for the most part, I let characters describe themselves by their actions. Every once in a while, though, someone comes along who deserves a real description. This is from Chapter Two of **Diplomacy of Wolves**.

Crispin and Andrew both grinned at each other. As they did, Anwyn slouched into the dungeon. Marcue had thought from his name that he would be human. Anwyn was a good Parmatian name, like Crispin or Marcue, for that matter. The thing that skulked into the dungeon wasn't human, though. He might have been one of the Scarred – one of the creatures from the poisoned lands whose ancestors, stories said, had once been men. If he was Scarred, however, he was from no realm that had ever traded in Calimekka. And if he wasn't one of the Scarred, then he was a demon from the lowest pit of Zagtasht's darkest hell. Long horns curled out from his forehead. His scaled brow beetled over eyes so deeply set they looked more like hollow sockets. His lips parted in a grin that revealed teeth long as a man's thumb and serrated like a shark's. He hunched forward, and Marcue could make out the ridge of huge spines that ran down the center of his back beneath his cloak. His hands were talons, though five-fingered, and while one of his feet fit in a man's boot and grew from a man-shaped leg, the other was a cloven hoof attached to a leg that, beneath a man's breeches, bent backward at the knee. That leg he dragged forward as he moved into the room.

231 words, most of it straight description. I used “to be” verbs in this, and interspersed a line-item description with reaction description from the scene's point-of-view character.

The only reason I wrote the paragraph this way is because Anwyn isn't human, or anything like it, and I wanted to get that point across quickly and with as much visual and visceral impact as I could manage.

Description Rule Number Four: Describe by list only as a last resort. Contrast the treatment above with the initial description of the young woman who is the actual focus of the scene.

The stone walls, rough-hewn and slime-coated, gleamed in the torchlight. The chill of the place, and the stink and the darkness and the skittering sounds of the rats, wore on Marcue's nerves even when all the cells were full and the men in them talked and quarreled and wondered about their futures. Now the dungeon was empty except for one prisoner, and that was a girl – a child, really – and she rarely spoke, but frequently cried. Her crying was worse than the rats.

That's it. That's all you learn about her in the first paragraph. I dole out bits and pieces of descriptive information throughout the rest of the scene, so that by the end of it, the reader has a very clear picture of Danya Galweigh – but it comes only a line here and a line there. You can read all of Chapter Two here: Take a look to see how description of a major character can be made subtle and spread out, and compare to how it can be blunt and in-your-face, and remember:

Description Rule Number Five: Only describe what is different.

Exercise Three:

List the characteristics that make your character different. When you have that list, write two samples—one in which you do straight description, and one in which you spread out the salient points about your character over paragraphs or pages.

Description doesn't have to be the part of your writing that readers skim to get to the good stuff. If you pay attention to the five basic rules of description, you'll make description part of the good stuff.

Reprinted from **Holly Lisle's Vision: A Resource For Writers**, Issue #8 (Mar-Apr, 2002)

NOTE: I offer a comprehensive introductory class based on my fiction-writing and publishing experience. It's called How to Write Flash Fiction that Doesn't SUCK, and it is no-strings-attached FREE, including a private classroom, downloadable lessons, and a friendly, well-moderated forum where you can work with other students. I hope you'll try it out.

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved