

Visualization for Writers

By Holly Lisle

Scenario One:

You're reading along, completely into the author's story, excited about where it is going – and suddenly the characters do something so sloppy, or so physically impossible, or so lame that you're thrown out of the book.

Scenario Two:

You pick up something in the bookstore that – from the cover – looks like it's going to be great, but when you start reading, you feel like you're standing in the dark listening to someone muttering on the other side of a wall. Nothing is getting through to you in enough detail to keep your interest. You put the book down and look for something else.

Or Scenario Three:

You send off a piece in high hopes; you've gotten an okay from an editor who, based on a nice chat the two of you had at a con, is already excited about your idea. But within just a couple of weeks, your story is back. Rejected. The editor's note says, "Nice idea, but development is too thin."

In all three scenarios, the author would have benefited from developing better visualization

skills.

The more clearly you as the writer can see a scene in your mind's eye, the more clearly you can write it.

Visualization is one of three essential skills for building a career as a professional writer. (The other two are good grasp of the mechanics of writing and the ability to tell an interesting story in a coherent manner.) All three are learnable skills, but visualization tends to not even show up in most books on writing and in most writing courses. Writers seem to assume that if they can write coherently and if their stories are good, their work is done.

Not so.

If you cannot put the reader inside your scene, and make him believe that he stands in the center of the world you have created, then it does not matter how technically proficient your writing is, or how compelling your plot: Your work will fall flat.

So how do you learn to visualize? And once you have learned this skill, how do you put it into practice in your work?

Visualization is exactly what it sounds like – it is seeing clearly and in great detail with your mind's eye. And you learn to visualize well by first learning to see with your other senses, and then transferring what you experience to your mind.

People believe that they truly notice their surroundings, but the sad truth is that, on a clear and conscious level, most people really see only those things that are going to run over them in the next minute if they don't pay attention.

Writers do not have the luxury of wandering through their lives in a state of blissful fogginess. We have to see –

really see – the people and places around us as if our bodies were full-sensory cameras and our minds were film. This workshop will give you some beginning visualization exercises. Beyond these exercises, make a conscious decision each day to notice in detail the people, places, and events around you.

On to the exercises, then. Before we start, gather up a couple of simple items:

- **a piece of metal jewelry** (something as plain as a gold wedding band, or as busy as a piece of costume jewelry)
- **a book**
- **a food item from the kitchen** – anything from a piece of fresh fruit to a can of peas
- **a photograph of a person**
- **a piece of unpatterned cloth.** A square of black cloth will be the least distracting, but you can use anything from a white business shirt to a plain blue terrycloth bath towel.

Exercise 1A:

Place your piece of jewelry on your cloth backdrop. Look at it until you are certain you have memorized everything about it. Then turn away and start writing. Do not look at it again until you are certain you have described everything about it in the best detail you can manage.

If you've done a good job of paying attention to detail, you should have no trouble expending a hundred words or better on the description of a simple wedding band.

If you're having trouble getting that far, I'll give you a couple of helpful hints. Did you remember to notice the shadows the ring cast? The many colors reflected in the metal? For smooth jewelry, the actual reflections you saw in the surface? Any engraving? Any signs of wear? Any scars? If it

includes a stone, have you remembered not just the details of the stone, but any light it scatters, the method by which it is attached to the ring, the way it reflects in the metal?

Exercises 1B-1D:

These exercises are the same as Exercise 1; simply replace the ring on your piece of cloth with the book, your food item, and your photograph of a person. In each instance, look at the object, hold it in your memory, and write every detail of your chosen object, no matter how minute. When you've finished check to see what you got right, what you got wrong, and what you overlooked entirely.

Exercise 2:

Next time you're out, spend some time looking at strangers. Imagine that you're going to have to identify them in a police line-up, or better yet, describe them to a police artist. (This also is great fun, in a paranoid, conspiracy-theory way.) Stare at one person only so long as politeness permits (or until you get caught). Start writing from memory. In busy public places, it can be tough to check your work. Restaurants can keep people in one place long enough that you can often see what you've missed. Bank lines can be good; doctors' waiting rooms are just great.

Exercise 3:

Time to put your folks into action. Find a couple of interesting-looking people, do your best to memorize them. Find a complex, interesting setting – a local mall, botanical park, grand old Victorian house with display gardens, or someplace equally challenging. Really pay attention to your surroundings. Do your best to notice everything, not just with your sense of sight, but with all your senses.

When you think you have a pretty good bead on your people and

your place, create a scene in which you use EVERYTHING you observed. Put action in there. Put dialogue. But your main issue in this exercise is to create an absolutely over-the-top all-senses-engaged presentation of two people and the space they occupy.

You aren't shooting for great literature here: in fact, you're going to be replicating some of the most extreme indulgences of many professional writers who are powerful enough to be able to override editors who would curb their excesses if they could.

BUT . . . you'll be duplicating a sin of **professional** writers, who have been visualizing scenes clearly for years, and in the process you'll be learning through excesses valuable skills that will, when toned down and controlled, take your reader right into your story.

He will stand in the center of your scene, tasting your protagonist's fear, smelling the moldering autumn leaves and the faintly cinnamony scent of autumn woods, watching living people moving through a living landscape.

(reprinted from **Holly Lisle's Vision: A Writer's Resource**)

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.

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