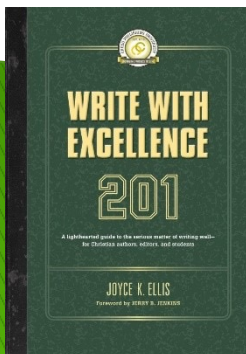


Take Me There:

*Adding Sensory Depth to
Your Fiction and Nonfiction*

presented by
Joyce K. Ellis

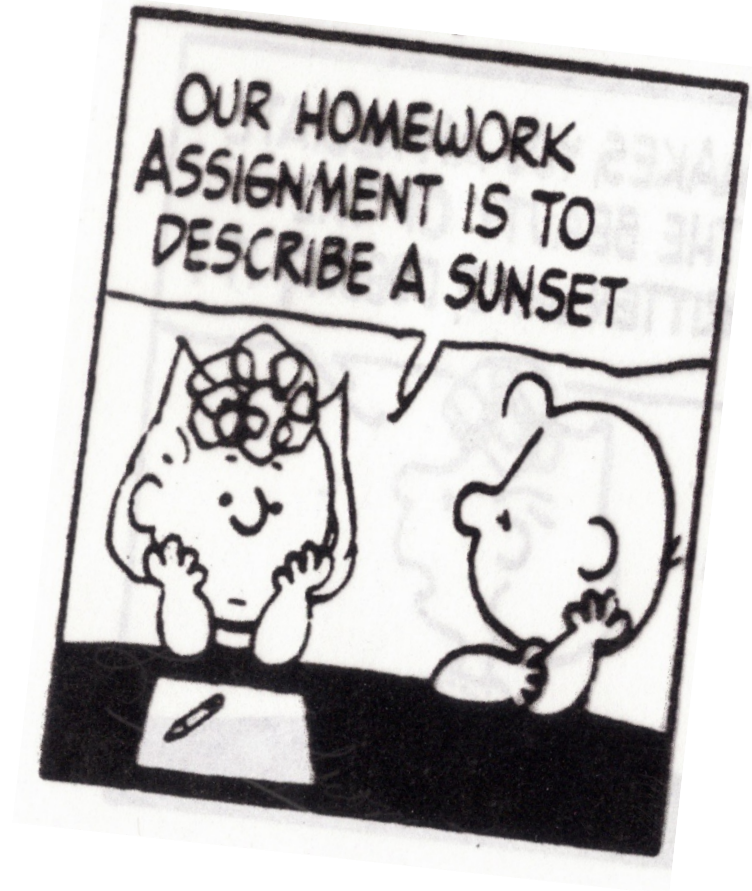


A Write-with-Excellence Workshop

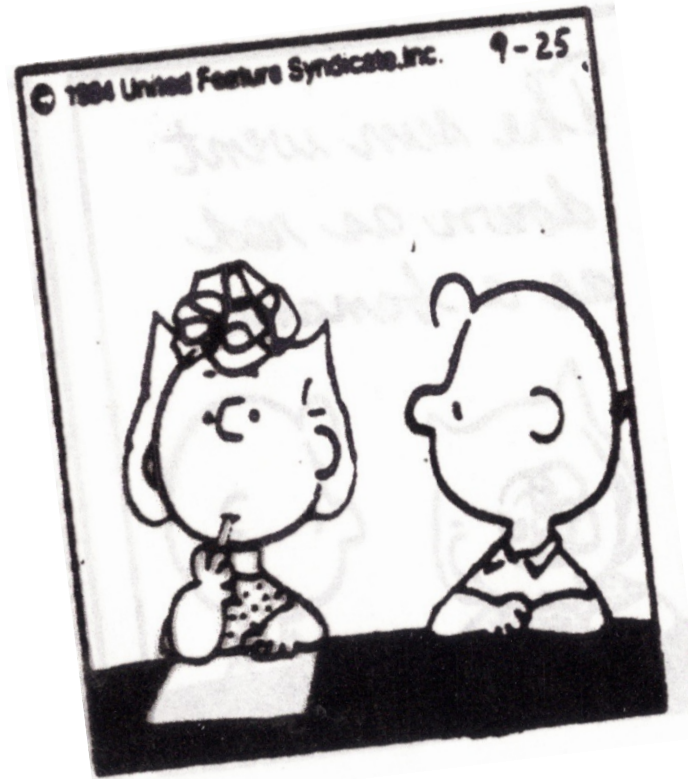
Peanuts

By Charles Schulz

A little humor to start with from my favorite comic strip. In the opening frame we have Charlie Brown trying to help Sallie with her homework, and Sallie says,...



She thinks
and thinks
and thinks...



Finally, she writes:



Notice who's NOT there in the next frame:

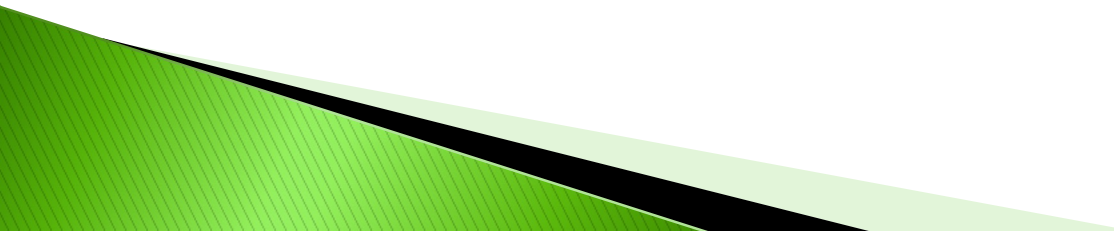
MAKES YOU APPRECIATE
THE BEAUTY OF THE
WRITTEN WORD, DOESN'T IT?



So let's talk about
*Adding Sensory Depth to
Your Fiction and
Nonfiction*

My hope:

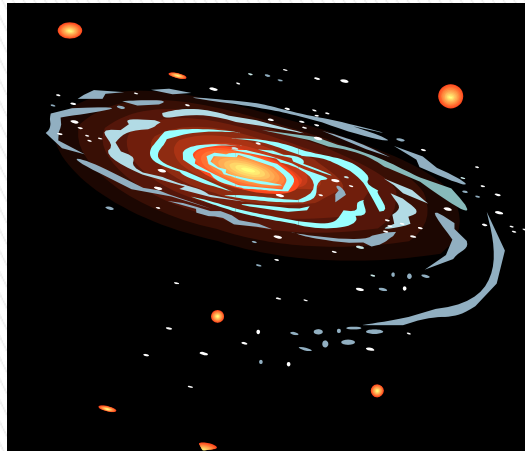
that this workshop will help us get excited about the possibilities of transporting our readers to a different place as we skillfully weave sensory details into all our writing—both fiction and nonfiction—in a way that's appropriate and engaging for the reader.



In the beginning...

King James Version

...the earth
was without form, and void;
and darkness
was upon
the face of the deep.
And the Spirit
of God moved upon
the face
of the waters.



What if we were trying to explain this to other people, helping them really see the scene clearly?

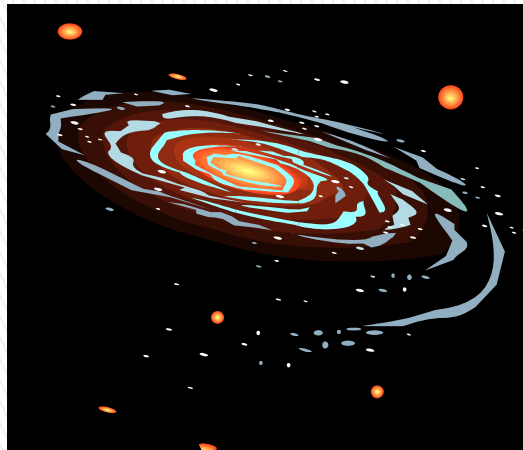
»» Much of what a Christian writer does is to handle Scripture carefully while helping readers see it clearly. In some cases, we may paraphrase a passage, not translating it literally but conveying the essence of the passage.

That's what Eugene Peterson did with the Genesis 1 passage in his paraphrase, *The Message*.

In the beginning...

King James Version

...the earth
was without form, and void;
and darkness
was upon
the face of the deep.
And the Spirit
of God moved upon
the face
of the waters.



The Message

(a paraphrase)

...earth was a soup of
nothingness,
a bottomless emptiness,
an inky blackness.
God's Spirit brooded
like a bird
above the watery
abyss.

The word *brooding* here captures a feeling

- ▶ sullen
- ▶ moody
- ▶ dark
- ▶ troubled

The word *brooding* here captures a feeling, and then...

- ▶ sullen
- ▶ moody
- ▶ dark
- ▶ troubled



God creates
light!

What a stunning contrast!

In all our writing, we can create beautiful imagery that will transport our readers to the scene.

Here's a little exercise that may help.
Author Anne LaMotte says...

The image shows a theater stage with red curtains on the left and right sides. In the center, there is a large green screen. The text is displayed on the screen. Below the screen, the wooden floor of the stage is visible, and at the bottom, the red seats of the audience are shown.

“Imagine yourself as the set designer for a
play

or for the movie version
of the story you are working on.
It may help you to know
what the room (or the ship
or the office or the meadow)
looks like
where the action will be taking place.
You want to know its feel,
its temperature,
its colors.”

Anne LaMotte

As I thought about that I realized
that we can do that, no matter
what kind of writing we do.

So make this your goal:
when you write...



Create 3-D
moving pictures
with sound & textures,
aromas & flavors



How do we do that?

Author Bob Slosser's 3-word advice has stuck with me over the years...

“Take Me There”

Author Bob Slosser

And that, for me, has meant,

“Paint a picture so vivid that you transport the reader to the world you’re writing about.”



—jke

How do we do that?

I. Sharpening our powers of observation

- ▶ Putting all five senses to work
 - ▶ seeing
 - ▶ hearing
 - ▶ smelling
 - ▶ tasting
 - ▶ touching

A quick look at this list makes us realize that most writers and writing use only 2 senses: seeing and hearing. We can do better.

The others are more difficult. Writing is hard work. But it's worth it!

Carve these three words into your brain:

Take me there



“Take Me There”

Author Bob Slosser

Repeat:

“Paint a picture so vivid that you transport
the reader to the world you’re writing about.”

—jke



True story...



Reading inside her house

A reader wrote to a fiction author I know and said that she became so engrossed in that author's book that this happened:

In the scene she was reading, it was raining. So when her mom asked her to go outside to get the mail, she grabbed an umbrella and headed out—only to find...



a bright sunny day



outside



Author
Philip Yancey
transports us
to the scene
of a tsunami
in this
nonfiction
piece.

Vivid description of Japan tsunami

by Philip Yancey

...[A] pastor fled with his wife to high ground after the earthquake. A sudden snow squall hit just as the tsunami approached and for a few minutes they could see nothing from their safe perch. They heard the wave roll in, then surge back out to sea carrying human bodies and tons of debris, the backwash as dangerous as the initial wave. Seventeen times it rolled in and washed back out, like water sloshing in a bathtub. Sixteen of the times they heard frantic cries for help, then at last a loud sucking sound as if from a huge drain, then silence.

When the snow cloud passed they looked out over a neighborhood utterly destroyed, not a building left, only the cross from their church sticking up at an unnatural angle like a broken bone. A few scraggly trees stood by the beach, sentinels of what the day before had been a dense forest.

When the giant wave found a sheltered cove tucked among the hills, it increased in velocity and force as a huge volume of water poured into the narrow opening. On flat land the wave measured ten to thirty feet high; in the hilly coves it rose to the unimaginable height of a twelve-story building.



Vivid description of Japan tsunami

by Philip Yancey

Given their history with tsunamis, the Japanese had well-organized evacuation sites...and many residents fled to these for shelter when the warning sirens sounded.

No one had anticipated a tsunami so colossal, however, and in a cruel irony many hundred died in the very buildings meant to save them.

In one senior citizens' center situated high on a hill, forty-seven seniors died; today a pile of wheelchairs, mattresses, and furniture marks a grim memorial.

In the same town scores of people climbed to the roof of a three-story evacuation center but only a few managed to avoid getting swept away, by clinging to railings and a television antenna.



From Yancey's book *The Question That Never Goes Away*

How can we transport readers to the scene?

- ▶ I. By sharpening our powers of observation
 - ▶ A. Put all five senses to work.
 - ▶ **B. Pay attention to settings around you**
 - ▶ Note details for fiction and nonfiction
 - ▶ If possible do interviews in the person's natural surroundings and note sensory impressions
 - ▶ **Example** of David Wheaton interview
 - ▶ tiny hockey jacket, “hunting” artwork, souvenirs, trophies
 - ▶ description of things like these can heighten your readers' interest and engage them emotionally
 - ▶ **Example** of Pam Thum: phone interview



“Writers are like vacuum cleaners,
sucking up all that we can see
and hear and read and think
and feel and articulate,
and everything that everyone else
within earshot can hear and see and think and feel.
We’re mimics, we’re parrots—we’re writers.”

–Anne Lamotte, *Bird by Bird*

How can we transport readers to the scene?

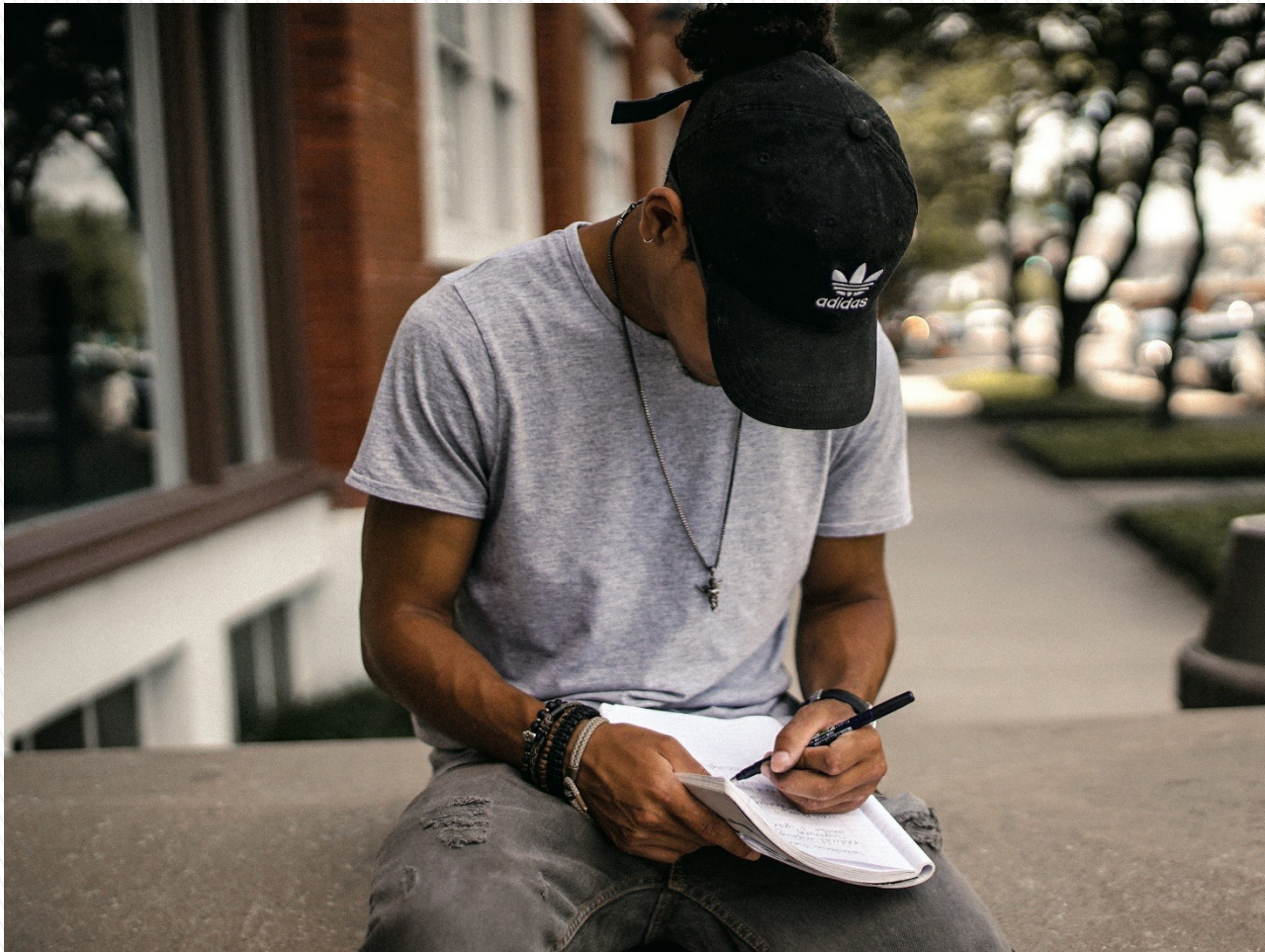
- ▶ **C. Mentally describe everyone you see**
(people watching)
 - ▶ walking down the street
 - ▶ sitting in church (before the service begins, of course)
 - ▶ Standing in line at the grocery store
 - ▶ everywhere
- ▶ You can also make those kinds of notes about people you're interviewing for an article.
- ▶ Then capture those impressions like an artist...



My artist sister and her sketchbook

One of our visits
to an indoor garden
on one of Minnesota's
cold winter days





Start a writer's sketchbook

not just while working
on a particular writing project
but as a regular habit

How would you briefly describe each individual in a story or article?

Here's a tip:

Don't just give physical descriptions, but describe these people in action, maybe give them a snippet of dialogue, maybe write down a fragrance you notice or how their presence makes you feel (and why)



I wrote this brief sketch while sitting alone in a diner, eating:

A young woman with multiple tattoos and black-and-candy-apple-red hair, in two ponytails, carefully brushed her three-year-old's waist-length blond hair down the back of the child's daffodil sundress.

How would you briefly describe each individual in a story or article?



Another observation while sitting in a park:

A runner with a thin jelly-bean-shaped head conquered the jogging path, nearly knocking over a “trespassing” cyclist. “Go pedal somewhere else!” he hollered.

We can record the same kinds of “observations” for objects and scenery

Examples:

- my many descriptions of clouds from airplane window
 - someday I may know exactly where they fit
- in one of my articles, I described a full moon as a “white neon moon”—an observation I wrote down during a very dark time years before.
 - You’ll come up with your own favorites, I’m sure

Any magazine article or book chapter can benefit from anecdotes.

And using vivid sensory description in those anecdotes can draw the reader in to the meat of what you're trying to say.

My example: Prince of Egypt



How can we transport readers to the scene?

- ▶ I. By sharpening our powers of observation
 - ▶ A. Put all five senses to work.
 - ▶ B. Pay attention to settings around you.
 - ▶ C. Mentally describe everyone you see.
 - ▶ **D. Listen!**

▶ Listen to *everyone*

○ Observe mannerisms as people talk

- eyes darting about, toying with her necklace, tears coming to his eyes easily...
 - These can provide action beats for “dialogue tags.”
- Beware of clichés, though, such as
 - He raked his fingers through his hair.
 - She steepled her fingers in contemplation.

○ Note word choices

- My example: the race-car driver’s expression
- How do they answer the phone?
- How might they change the way they speak, depending on the people they’re talking to?
- How do they express disappointment and other emotions?

○ Be a fan in the stands

- On-site research
 - **My example:** the cigar-smoking man at the teen’s baseball game

IS IT OK TO eavesdrop?

Cultural issues

Don't listen at keyholes

or with a glass to a wall to hear what's happening on the other side

My view

Listening to public conversations in public places can help you

1. learn what issues are important to people—issues you can write about from a biblical perspective
2. develop characters for fiction

My dining out experiences with my husband & my facetious “pledge”



Eavesdropper's Pledge

I, _____ [give name],
do hereby acknowledge
that I not only have a license
but also a responsibility
to eavesdrop
on every conversation
within my hearing.
and I hereby pledge to do so
from this day forward...

Until death... or deafness...or the rapture
ends my listening days here on earth.

How can we transport readers to the scene?

- ▶ I. By sharpening our powers of observation
 - ▶ Put all five senses to work
 - ▶ Take the eavesdropper's pledge
 - ▶ Capture details in our surroundings
 - ▶ Settings for fiction and nonfiction

How can we transport readers to the scene?

- ▶ I. By sharpening our powers of observation
 - ▶ Put all five senses to work
 - ▶ Take the eavesdropper's pledge
 - ▶ Capture details in your surroundings
 - ▶ Mentally describe everyone you see
 - ▶ characters for fiction, story people in nonfiction
 - ▶ also re: people you're interviewing

How can we transport readers to the scene?

Mentally describe everyone you see

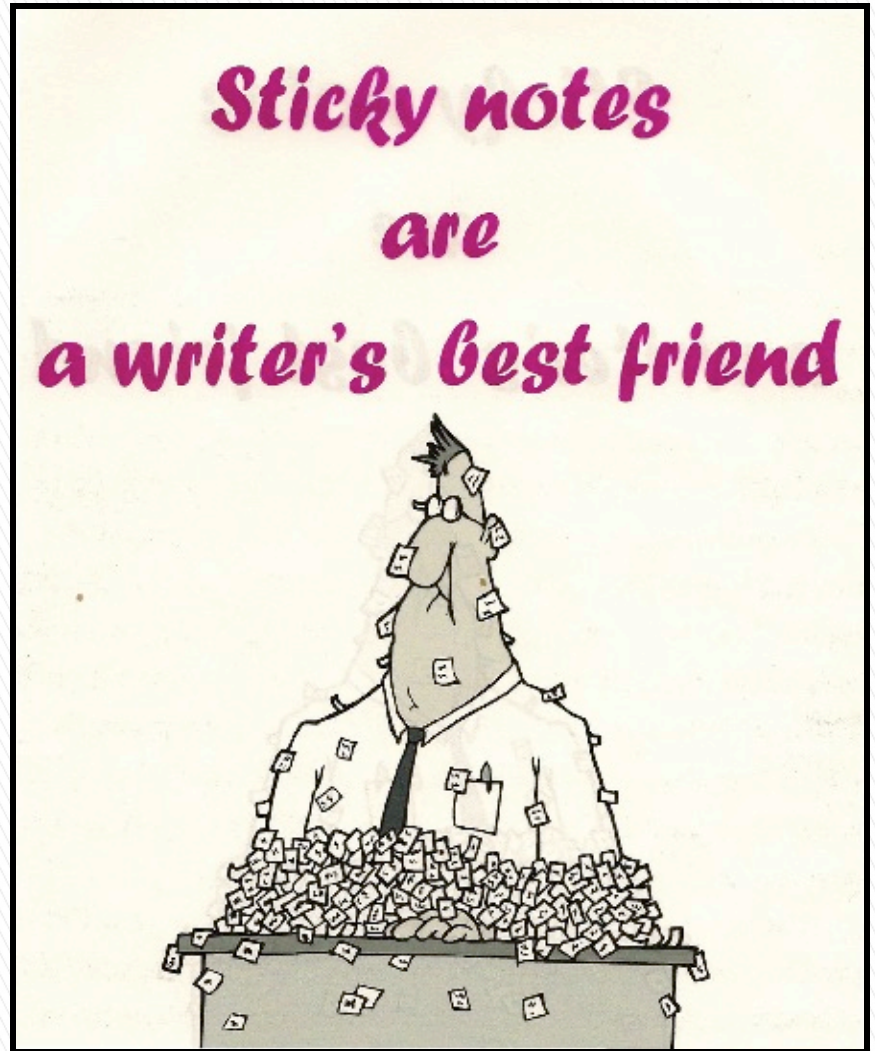
Then jot it down
including context/setting

Make a habit of maintaining a writer's sketchbook

Capture details with your phone's camera

Capture your impressions

- ▶ in notebooks
- ▶ in smart phones and tablets
- ▶ on sticky notes
- ▶ I confess, I even put sticky notes on my cellphone



Develop “take-me-there” techniques



II. By learning from the masters as painters do

Take me there...

▶ II. By learning from the masters

- Example: my daughter the “copyist”
- Read, read, read
- Highlight, flag, & photocopy good passages of description
- Create/maintain files on computer, in notebooks/journals...
 - Many of the examples I’m giving you today are from my “private collection”

Take me there...

▶ III. By using fresh images and examples

◦ Use the concrete, not abstract

- What, specifically do you mean when you say God *blessed* you?
- In what practical ways, did God help you through that tough situation?
- How can you “show” more than tell?

In fiction or a profile of a person, instead of telling us he was angry, show him slamming his fist through the door. Then show us how he changed because...

Take me there...

- ▶ III. By using fresh images
 - Use the concrete, not abstract
 - Choose specific details, not generalizations
 - It wasn't just a *car* that raced down the street. Was it a 1968 cherry-red Mustang convertible or a beat-up rusty Chevy Nova? Or maybe even a gold Tesla?
 - She didn't wake up to just *bugs* crawling all over her bed. Were they silverfish, cockroaches, or fire ants?

Take me there...

▶ III. By using fresh images

- Use the concrete, not abstract
- Choose specific details, not generalizations
- Avoid stereotypes and clichés

Take me there...

▶ III. By using fresh images

◦ Avoid stereotypes

- What if you created a sloth character in a children's story who was always trying to hurry instead of taking his time?
- What if you wrote about a firefighter who wasn't brave, maybe his greatest fear is fire?
- Or what if you wrote a story about nurse who was criticized for not being compassionate enough, but she's the one who can calmly take charge in an emotionally chaotic situation?

Take me there...

▶ III. By using fresh images

◦ Avoid clichés

- What is a cliché?
- What clichés do you default to—or use automatically without thinking?

a Joyce-ism:

“Yesterday’s clever sayings
are today’s clichés”

cried like a baby
sly as a fox
fresh as a daisy
on fire for the Lord
morally/spiritually bankrupt

Do you recognize your default cliches?

- ▶ happy as a pig in mud
- ▶ tough as nails
- ▶ fresh as a daisy
- ▶ going like sixty
- ▶ quick like a bunny
- ▶ like a bull in a china shop
- ▶ you snooze you lose
- ▶ go big or go home
- ▶ no pain, no gain
- ▶ in the nick of time
- ▶ heart-rending
- ▶ gut-wrenching
- ▶ eager beaver

similes

other expressions

Take me there...

- ▶ III. By using fresh images
 - The Bible is full of wonderful similes and metaphors.

The Bible is full of this kind of imagery

Similes

(think of the word *similar*)

The kingdom of God is like a woman who lost a coin

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God

Those who hope in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles

Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.

Metaphors

(think of the word *metamorphosis*)

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.”

Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Jesus said, “You are the lights of the world.”

Take me there...

- ▶ III. By using fresh images
 - Have fun using fresh similes and metaphors in your own writing.
 - Here are some I've gathered over the years...

Comparisons using *like* or *as*

Similes

(think of the word *similar*)

She talks so fast that trying to interject is like threading the needle of a sewing machine while it's running. (Nelda Flynn)

...entranced, as if frozen in cobra hypnosis. (Anne LaMotte)

She uses tired clichés like coasters—a place to rest her mind before picking it up and using it again. (Janet Schwind)

A smallish man, who looked...like a rodent, shot out of the [crowd] as if emerging from a hole. (James Scott Bell)

Direct comparisons, in essence transforming one thing into another

Metaphors

(think of the word *metamorphosis*)

The Lord is my Rock (King David)

a rodent of a man [variation on Jim Bell's simile]

The oboe call of crows (Martin Cruz Smith)

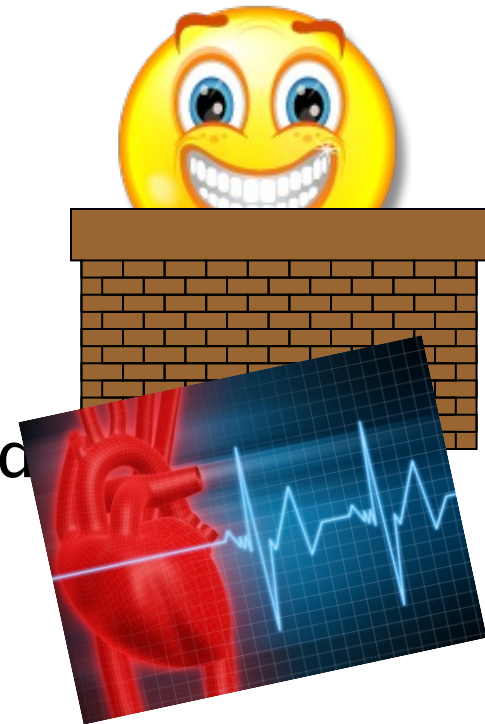
Fields of brown and gold stretch forth brittle fingers, waiting for the green of spring. (Cindy Fowell)

...an evening sun copperplating the scenery (Bill Barker, RD's "Pi)cturesque Speech")

But beware!

Beware of mixed metaphors

- ▶ Think of them as dueling images, competing for reader attention
 - Example (actually submitted):
 - Christians who aren't properly equipped to minister may withdraw from conflict or crisis...**pasting on a good face** for Sunday morning services. As these **walls** are fortified, the **arteries** flowing to the **heart** of the local body become congested and hardened.



Take me there...

- ▶ III. A few more examples of fresh images
 - Novelist Jan Karon wrote about the
“...morning air embroidered with bird song.”
- ▶ I used this expression once:
 - ...drowning in suspicions—jke

Take me there...

- ▶ And in her classic book, *If*, Amy Carmichael wrote
 - “If I say, “Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget,” as though the God, who twice a day washes all the sands on all the shores of all the world, could not wash such memories from my mind, then I nothing of Calvary love.”

We can also create the “take-me-there” feeling...

- ▶ IV. By weaving sensory description into your writing—naturally.

Take me there...

- ▶ IV. By weaving sensory description into your writing—naturally

- **Create the illusion of reality**

- Readers love imagery that is part of the whole
 - Imagery that fits the subject matter, tone, style of story or article or publication

“He was lighter on his feet than a tumbleweed two-steppin’ a tornado.” —Kathie Greer

A good description for a western or country-music romance but not a high-society novel.

From an article about Y2K fears

▶ Example:

- Our out-of-control world can scare us: natural disasters, injustices, school massacres, even uncertainties created by global dependence on computer technology.

We could use a sure, stabilizing influence—a “bit,” a “byte,” a “gigabyte” of hope.

– from an article by Joyce:
“Facing the Impossible”
in *Pursuit* magazine



Take me there...

The best way to use description is to give the description something to do.

Metaphorical language can also help with pacing

- *In the middle of a murder mystery written in the first person, author Anne George writes a bit of description that provides readers with a welcome opportunity to breathe:*

“What is it about fog that is so beautiful?...It brings its own mood, its own quietness. The blurring of the familiar demands that you notice things you usually take for granted. And at the beach, it is especially beautiful. The horizon disappears, and you can’t tell which is water and which is sky. Vapor swirls around you as you walk, and gulls huddle together on the sand as if the weight of the air were too much for their wings.”

—Murder Makes Waves

Note: I have a feeling this is something she may have written in a journal sometime and then reworked to craft it into a lovely moment of calm in the chaos of the mystery plot.

Give description something to do

Blah

- ▶ The sunset was every shade of gold and copper...
- ▶ The guard's jacket had polished, shiny gold buttons...

Giving description something to do

- ▶ [in] the golden hour of the day, the sun had gone soft as a big dab of butter. (RD's Picturesque Speech, T. Coraghessan Boyle)

Sunshine blinked on the guard's gold buttons...
(Jocelyn Green, *Mark of the King*, 27)

Take me there...

This is crafting your
writing,
not just writing.

Take me there...

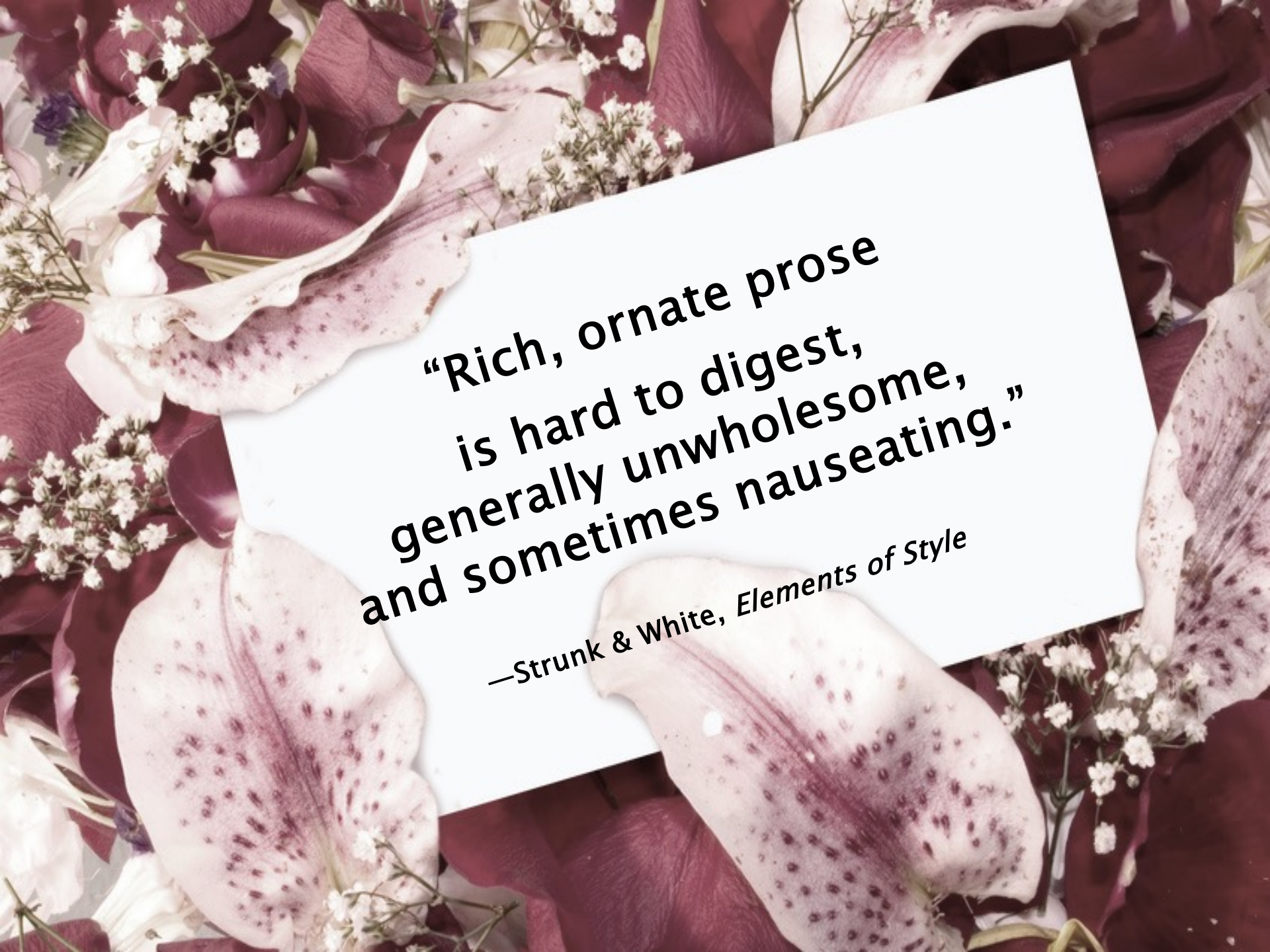
- ▶ IV. By weaving sensory description into your writing
 - Create the illusion of reality
 - Give your description something to do.
 - BUT avoid overwriting



**Avoid flowery
writing, also called
purple prose**

that too-much feeling
readers get
when trying to wade through it.

They may skip over it
or worse,
set the magazine or book aside.



**“Rich, ornate prose
is hard to digest,
generally unwholesome,
and sometimes nauseating.”**

—Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*

Sometimes there's a fine line



Beware of overly
descriptive writing that
draws attention to itself.

If readers become so
enamored with our
description that they lose
the story, we have failed.

If you're prone to
purple
passages...



prune them
from your prose!



Snow

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky, arrives the snow.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Snowbound, I watched the blizzard impounding parked cars at midnight.

—Saul Bellow in *New York Times*

The snow came out of the dark like a swarm of creatures attracted by our light.

▶ —Barry Unsworth

Window ledges shelved with loaves of snow

—Tom Furlong in *New York Times*

A storm sat down as heavy as a sleeping dog, drifting snow nearly to the roof line.

▶ —Jeff Rennie in *Backpacker*

▶ Here are some descriptions of snow I've collected over the years.

Fine writing

Snow

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky, arrives the snow.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Snowbound, I watched the blizzard impounding parked cars at midnight.

—Saul Bellow in *New York Times*

The snow came out of the dark like a swarm of creatures attracted by our light.

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Window ledges shelved with loaves of snow

—Tom Furlong in *New York Times*

A storm sat down as heavy as a sleeping dog, drifting snow nearly to the roof line.

—Jeff Rennie in *Backpacker*

But what do you think of this?

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky, arrives the snow.

Snowbound, I watched the blizzard impounding parked cars at midnight. The snow came out of the dark like a swarm of creatures attracted by our light, leaving window ledges shelved with loaves of snow. A storm sat down as heavy as a sleeping dog, drifting snow nearly to the roof line.

Fine writing

Overwriting

So take the time to
come up with just
the right words.

Craft and shape
your writing.

Don't just write.



Make your writing irresistible by transporting your readers.

Take them on site
and you'll greatly increase
your opportunities
of communicating to the reader's
head and heart.

It may seem like a daunting task,
but here's a promise for you...

Putting it all together

Putting it all together



“Be strong and courageous
and get to work.

Don't be frightened by the size of the task,
for the Lord my God is with you;
he will not forsake you.

He will see to it that everything is finished correctly.”

—1 Chronicles 28:20 TLB

David to Solomon about building the temple,
but we're building Christ's Kingdom.