

Avoiding the description trap

We all remember sitting in a class at either primary or secondary school where we were trying to write stories. Some people were always considered great at it, some people weren't great but managed to get through breezily, and everyone else struggled to write anything, let alone something acceptable. I still have a vision of a powdery, middle-aged woman standing up the front of my English class in year eight, and banging on about how important description is in your writing. Description, she contended, will bring your story to life.

To a point that is true. Description is what will give a reader a sense of what is going on, a sense of place, a sense of time. Where my agreement with the proposition stops, is in the contention that description brings a story to life. In my experience, description is too often the suffocating factor in much new writing. When it's overdone, or even poorly executed, 'description' can return a raging story back into a smoky mess, it can make readers impatient and tired, and it can be just plain boring.

In many ways, English teachers have a lot to answer for, in terms of encouraging students to produce overly descriptive prose. They are also to be blamed for a lot of formless and technique-less poetry—but that's for another article. School teachers are very rarely writers or editors themselves, and so the continual exhortation to 'description! description! description!' needs to be heeded with the utmost care.

Description makes stories stop

One of the most awful things is to be an intelligent person, and to read a book where the writer leaves absolutely nothing for you to create yourself. These writers walk into a room, describing the entrance. They then cast their eyes around the room and describe every feature and every wall. They tell you the colour of the walls, the texture of the floor, and how shiny the pots and pans on the stove are. They tell you what decorations are in the

room and how they have been arranged. They explain how the room connects to other rooms in the house; and if someone walks into the room, every single thing about that person is described, from the colour and brand of their shoes to the type of shampoo that their hair smells like.

In the meantime, the story has ground to an absolute halt, hopping from foot to foot in the background until the narrator shuts the hell up and it can go on with things. For that is the truth of it: every time a writer gives in to the urge to describe anything and everything, the story stops.

Is description integral to what you're writing?

To determine whether or not you need to head off into Description Land, ask yourself whether it is integral to what you're writing. Does the description add something that would otherwise be lacking, and that is important? It is no good saying 'yes, the house hasn't been described', but is it important that the house is described? Usually, the environment will become obvious through the action. You don't need to describe how Martha's lives in the bush, for instance, if your character walks down a rutted lane through stands of eucalyptus to the house, and sits with Martha on her verandah watching roos fight down the back.

Using the characters and the story to gradually unravel environs and situations is far more palatable to an intelligent reader, because it feels more realistic. Except for those who prefer pulp fiction, most readers don't like having the writer spread the story out in front of them, painstakingly pointing out every tiny detail. Readers prefer to have the story gradually reveal itself, for the connections to gradually become apparent, for narratives to be a little bit unstated.

'Less is more' is a tired old cliché, but one that is a cliché because it is true. That other old cliché



'show, don't tell' also has a ring of truth about it: that will be covered in another article.

Examples of good description

In order to show how description can work to your advantage, there are a couple of examples below.

'One afternoon I made a pen drawing of the window and the landscape it framed. I drew the window's aluminum frame and steel hardware; I laid in the clouds, and the far hilltop with its ruined foundation and wandering cows. I outlined the parking lot and its tall row of mercury-vapor lights; I drew the cars, and the graveled rooftop foreground.'

Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (p.28)

'Her body carried no blemishes except those she had put there herself, by violence. Her hairstyle and makeup were merely an extended version of the self-obliterating damage she had done with the razor. Her voluptuously curved outline was purely drawn. If she was incapable of propelling it into graceful movement, he would either have to imagine graceful movements on her behalf, or else simply try to accept what he saw.'

Clive James, *Brrm! Brrm!* (p.47)

'A silver mailbox with the names FLOWER and STONE written on it stood beside an unpaved road that led through a dense tangle of woods and shrubs. It looked uncared-for, as if it might have been the entrance to an old, broken-down farm. Nashe swung the Saab onto the bumpy, rut-grooved path and inched his way forward for five or six hundred yards—far enough to make him wonder if the path would ever end.'

Paul Auster, *The Music of Chance* (p.64)

These examples above give three separate instances of description that works well. Annie Dillard, a queen of writing nature and environs, effortlessly sketches in her surroundings as she brings us into her world of writing. At the same time, the reader is almost sitting where she is sitting, without feeling as though absolutely everything has been pencilled in.

Clive James's example shows us a simple, yet very effective, means of describing a character. James tells us that his female character is given to violence, that she's a haphazard sort of person, that she is not graceful; but we see that she is inherently beautiful despite how she treats herself.

The final example is a little 'regular'. Auster uses one of these early passages to help set the scene for the rest of the novel. From these bare four and a half lines, he brings us a sense of foreboding, a sense of the character's hesitation, and he also gives us a very clear idea of the environment that the character is hesitantly moving into.

An example of bad description

Contrast the three working examples above, with the one below. Hopefully the difference will stand out immediately.

'She had make-up on, her thick brown hair was shining and combed loosely round her shoulders, and she was wearing a smart black leather jacket with a Mao collar over a tight blue top bursting with cleavage and tucked into a pair of black Levis. The girlfriend had a pretty face with dark eyes and soft lips emphasised by just the right amount of make-up. Her thick dark hair was roughly parted in the middle and she was wearing a cream Levis jacket and a silver and brown top, tucked into a pair of brown Levis.'

Robert G. Barrett, *Les Norton and the Case of the Talking Pie Crust* (p.102)

Besides the phrases all connected together in a running gush that very quickly becomes tedious (*and she was ... over a ... tucked into...*), this piece of description contains redundant words and phrases (pretty, just the right amount), and it reads like the author was paid to advertise the Levis brand. It is no good saying that someone was pretty if the description otherwise shows the character to be fairly bland; 'just the right amount'



of makeup could be anything from overdone to not done up at all, depending on the character.

It's unfortunate because Robert G. Barrett is a writer whose early work I really like; yet in the book above, there is an astonishing level of poorly executed description. Much more could have been done with the example above, not to mention the rest of the book, if the detail was handled differently, pared down, or used only where absolutely necessary.

Detailed description isn't always bad

Lest I come across as inflexible and prescriptive, I must add the point that using a paragraph like the one in the 'bad example' above, can be done to your advantage. If you use the device rarely, you can use a paragraph of description to signal to your reader that something is very important about the detail you have just released. You do, however, need to be careful that you render it well enough that the description doesn't sound like a section of poor writing.

One more word

Each of the three good examples is powerful because each one is short and concise; yet they feel like they contain so much more within that space. Paring the prose down is often what gives good description its sense of greatness; there is, after all, no need to say in ten lines what you could say in three.

Recommended reading

For the sheer beauty and breathlessness of exquisitely rendered description, you can't go past Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. This book is a great lesson in making your description work well.

