

# Using Significant Details

LLC Writers' Workshop - 6 June 2023.

Dictum: **Show, don't tell.** But we only have words!

(source: *Writing Fiction*, Burroway 2003)

- Felt experience (vitality of understanding)

\*Technique: be specific, definite, and concrete. --- use details that matter.

- Specific: streets, stores, weather, politics/policies/concerns, the name of the bank, etc.
- Definite and concrete: appeals to the senses; what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched
  - Use Sense Detail
  - Use Details **that Matter**

Read from p.8 of *Orphan Train Girl* by Christina Baker Kline:

Molly's memories of her mother are a little hazy. When she thinks back, she can recall the smell of their trailer, mildew and cigarette smoke, the way the TV seemed to be on all the time. She remembers pulling open the refrigerator door when it was still big and heavy to her and rummaging inside to find things to eat—cold hot dogs, maybe some leftover pizza. She'd do that whenever her mother was at work. And sometimes even when she was home.

List anything specific:

List anything definite and concrete:

- Seen?
- Heard?
- Smelled?
- Tasted?
- Touched?

Significance:

What general feelings does Molly have for her mother, as shown in her memories?

The author doesn't say but thinks readers can figure this out.

2 things: 1) a detail is concrete when it appeals to the senses 2) it is significant if it contains an idea, or a judgement or both. For example:

- The windowsill was green *Both are concrete.*
- The windowsill was shedding flakes of fungus-green paint *Are they both significant?*

*WHY?*

ADVICE to Writers: **Get control of emotions by avoiding the mention of the emotion**  
**Why?** 1) you lose your reader 2) emotion is seldom pure

Let's try it!

Choose an **emotion** (avoid naming it! Only show it!)

**EX:** "I stood perfectly still and let the news expand inside of me, like a bubble in my chest that wouldn't rise or pop. I waited for anger or grief to fill the space it opened, but all I felt just then was an unsteadiness in my legs, a faulty connection with the ground."

Emotion(s) here?

Now you try: 10 min.

Share in pairs or to whole group.

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Remember from May's Writers Workshop?

What emotion is present (but not mentioned) in each of these settings?

In our back room, which is on the northern end of the house, and cold for sitting in that close to dawn, I sat and watched the texture of the sky change. It was going to snow, and I wanted to see the storm come up the valley."

End of story:

I was at the northern windows, looking through the mullions down the valley to the faint red line along the mounds and little peaks of the ridge beyond the valley. The sun was going to come up, and I was looking for it.

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Remember your writing assignment:

In one paragraph, write about a moment from your childhood and put yourself in a setting that communicates mood or emotion. 10 min.

Did you avoid naming the emotion? Go back and try writing it without mentioning the emotion.