

TOOL 14



Get the name of the dog.

*Dig for the concrete and specific,
details that appeal to the senses.*

Novelist Joseph Conrad once described his task this way: “by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you *see*.” When Gene Roberts, a great American newspaper editor, broke in as a cub reporter in North Carolina, he read his stories aloud to a blind editor who would chastise young Roberts for not making him see.

When details of character and setting appeal to the senses, they create an experience for the reader that leads to understanding. When we say “I see,” we most often mean “I understand.” Inexperienced writers may choose the obvious detail, the man puffing on the cigarette, the young woman chewing on what’s left of her fingernails. Those details fail to tell — unless the man is dying of lung cancer or the woman is anorexic.

At the *St. Petersburg Times*, editors and writing coaches warn reporters not to return to the office without “the name of the dog.” That reporting task does not require the writer to use the detail in the story, but it reminds the reporter to keep her eyes and ears opened. When Kelley Benham wrote a story about a ferocious rooster that attacked a toddler, she not only got the name of the rooster, Rockadoodle Two, but also the names of his parents, Rockadoodle and one-legged Henny Penny. (I cannot ex-

plain why it matters that the offending rooster's mother had only one leg, but it does.)

Before the execution of a serial killer, reporter Christopher Scanlan flew to Utah to visit the family of one of the murderer's presumed victims. Eleven years earlier, a young woman left her house and never returned. Scanlan found the detail that told the story of the family's enduring grief. He noticed a piece of tape over the light switch next to the front door:

BOUNTIFUL, Utah — Belva Kent always left the front porch light on when her children went out at night. Whoever came home last turned it off, until one day in 1974 when Mrs. Kent told her family: "I'm going to leave that light on until Deb comes home and she can turn it off."

The Kents' porch light still burns today, night and day. Just inside the front door, a strip of tape covers the switch.

Deb never came home.

Here's the key: Scanlan *saw* the taped-over switch and asked about it. His curiosity, not his imagination, captured the great detail.

The quest for such details has endured for centuries, as any historical anthology of reportage will reveal. British scholar John Carey describes these examples from his collection *Eyewitness to History*:

This book is . . . full of unusual or indecorous or incidental images that imprint themselves scaldingly on the mind's eye: the ambassador peering down the front of Queen Elizabeth I's dress and noting the wrinkles; . . . the Tamil looter at the fall of Kuala Lumpur upending a carton of snowy Slazenger tennis balls. . . . Pliny watching people with cushions on their heads against the ash from the volcano; Mary, Queen of Scots, suddenly aged in death, with her pet dog cowering among her skirts and her head

held on by one recalcitrant piece of gristle; the starving Irish with their mouths green from their diet of grass.

(I could find no surviving record of the name of Mary’s dog, but learned that it was a Skye terrier, a Scottish breed famous for its loyalty and valor. Then a kind reader, Annette Taylor, messaged me from New Zealand to reveal that the name of the “wee doggie” was Geddon. It was a detail she remembered from helping her daughter with a term paper.)

The good writer uses telling details, not only to inform, but to persuade. In 1963 Gene Patterson wrote a column mourning the murders of four girls in the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama:

A Negro mother wept in the street Sunday morning in front of a Baptist Church in Birmingham. In her hand she held a shoe, one shoe, from the foot of her dead child. We hold that shoe with her.
(from the *Atlanta Constitution*)

Patterson will not permit white southerners to escape responsibility for the murder of those children. He fixes their eyes and ears, forcing them to hear the weeping of the grieving mother, and to see the one small shoe. The writer makes us empathize and mourn and understand. He makes us see.

The details that leave a mark are those that stimulate the senses. Feel how Cormac McCarthy begins the novel *All the Pretty Horses*:

The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door. He took off his hat and came slowly forward. The floorboards creaked under his boots. In his black suit he stood in the dark glass where the lilies leaned so palely from their waisted cutglass vase. Along the cold hallway behind him hung the portraits of forebears only dimly known to him all framed in glass and dimly lit above the narrow wainscoting.

He looked down at the guttered candlestub. He pressed his thumbprint in the warm wax pooled on the oak veneer. Lastly he looked at the face so caved and drawn among the folds of funeral cloth, the yellowed moustache, the eyelids paper thin. That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping.

Such prose demands the close attention we'd apply to poetry, starting with that glittering collection of merged nouns ("candleflame," "pierglass," "cutglass," "candlestub," "thumbprint"). More powerful is McCarthy's appeal to the senses. He not only gives us color — black and yellow — for our eyes, but also gifts for our other senses: the smell of burning candles, the sound of creaking floorboards, the feel of wax and oak.

WORKSHOP

1. Read today's newspaper looking for passages that appeal to the senses. Do the same with a novel.
2. The name of my dog is Rex — and he is the king. Ask a group of colleagues or students to share stories about the names of their pets. Which names reveal the most about the personalities of the owners?
3. With some friends, study the collected work of an outstanding photojournalist. Pretend you are writing a story about the scene captured in a photo. Which details might you select, and in what order would you render them?
4. Most writers appeal to the sense of sight. In your next work, look for opportunities to use details of smell, sound, taste, and touch.