

Frank's Writing Tips and Bachelor Cookbook: Description

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Very common expression, that. And it is true; if you try to sit down and describe a picture fully, to get every detail you can find about the picture into words, you'll fill up quite a few pages.

But you'll notice, when you read fiction, that authors don't usually do that. I mean, sure, you hear all the time about descriptive writing being 'painting a picture with words' or some other garbage, but the reality of it is that no one actually attempts it this way, and you shouldn't either. If you want to really paint a picture, pick up a paintbrush and some paint and give it a go.

Writing descriptive passages is actually a lot more subtle than that. This is by necessity: 'description' shouldn't ever be just describing something in detail, because that's horribly boring to read no matter how you slice it. You know. Pick up a manual on car repair and start reading it and you'll see what I mean.

No, there's a better way to do it. By now, you should be starting to recognize that fiction writers typically employ a whole lot of tricks in order to shortcut certain goals while still achieving the desired effect. Description is no different than that, but the nice thing here is that the trick you have to employ is both easy and a lot of fun. You try to invoke this little thing that most people who read have and tend to enjoy, which is called 'imagination'.

You see, the car manual requires no imagination. The car manual says 'do this', 'do that', 'this gizmo looks like this and is located here', and so on. It tells you exactly what you need to know in order to fix your car. Full of specific details so that you don't screw up. But that's far too practical an approach for something like fiction. The reader isn't there to get told instructions and a list of things to memorize; they're there to get told a story, about people and places and things and events. All they want is the words and the thoughts in their head.

Detail is often the enemy of imagination, in that sense.

Now, as with all things, that statement comes with a huge caveat. You don't want to chuck in so many details that you bog the reader down, but you also don't want to be so sparse on the details that the reader can't even get a vague picture in her head about what's going on. But this one, rather than being a happy medium type deal, is more like happy first quintile type deal. Maybe second if you get greedy.

Let me give you a bad example to start off with. This is my favorite bad example, because I see it done all the time, and it never ceases to make me want to crumple up the story and throw it into a flaming cauldron of churning hatred. Even if it's a digital copy.

Bob's eyes fluttered open with the sound of the alarm clock. He struck the snooze button with a fist and rolled over onto his side, not wanting to get up. Five minutes later, the alarm went off again, so he finally shut it off and sat up in bed. Once he rubbed the sleepiness from his eyes, he stood and made the bed, then walked into the bathroom. He looked

himself in the mirror. His brown eyes were looking a little rheumy, and his black hair was standing on end in a wonderful cowlick. That mole was still growing on the side of his neck, too. He straightened out his hair, then put some toothpaste on his toothbrush and brushed his teeth. Once finished, he spit the toothpaste into the sink, washed the residue from the brush and put it back in its little white holder with the four holes in the top, rinsed his mouth out with water, then went into the kitchen to make himself some breakfast. He reached into the cupboard for some cereal and a bowl, and

I'm cutting it off there, because you get the idea. Now, that example had two things in particular that I despise seeing: the description of a character's boring-ass morning routine, and the old 'describe the character when he looks in a mirror' trick. I strongly advise everyone who reads this to never, EVER do either of those things, unless you really love hurting your audience.

But those weren't the only problems, of course. Notice the attention to detail: the narrative there is guiding you through every single boring step of this fellow's routine, right down to what kind of container he keeps his toothbrush in. The sentence structure is all pretty similar, lots of sentences begin with the same word, and there's no creative imagery or language used. It is a list of things that Bob does in this story.

And really, when it comes to descriptive passages, the list format is the problem most of the time. Everyone veers instantly toward writing a list. But don't do it. No one is going to sit there and memorize that list, so all you accomplish by doing that is wasting everyone's time. Two pages from now, you won't remember that Bob first let the snooze alarm go off once, or that he fixed his cowlick, or that he had cereal that morning for breakfast.

Unless those things end up being integral to the story.

So, there's a literary device, coined by one Anton Chekhov, who Wikipedia tells me was one of the greatest short story writers in history. The device is called Chekhov's Gun, from this lovely quote by Mr. Chekhov way back in the day:

Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.

This concept is normally brought up in the context of plot, of course, but it applies to description as well, to those little details you feel the need to insert into your story. Those details, you see, need to have a purpose. Now, we can't all be as brilliant at connecting the dots as Mr. Chekhov apparently was (maybe he wasn't; I've never read a story by him), but we at least have to make the effort to include only the details that will stick in the reader's mind when giving descriptions of things, only

the things that are truly important to that picture you want to paint and that will build a good feel for the things being described.

This is where it's good to be lazy and to let the reader start doing most of the work, you see. We're getting back to imagination, here. When you write a passage, your only job is to plant the seeds. The reader's imagination gives those seeds the water and makes them grow.

Let's take that passage about Bob again, but approach it a little differently.

Some kind of horrible buzzing sound, right by his head. A fist put a stop to it. Bob rolled over, stared at the blinking red numbers through foggy vision, until that sound came back. With a sigh, he sat up and switched the thing off, ran a hand through his bedhead, and got up to go remove the foul taste from his mouth.

More flecks of white got added to the mirror and he worked the toothbrush around his gums. He stopped a moment and tilted his head just so to the side, rubbing a mole on his neck with his free thumb.

The toothbrush clattered back into its white plastic Dollar store holder, and he went out to go pour himself a bowl of cereal before heading to work.

And so on and so forth. Now, despite that I still recommend you never start a story with the main character's morning routine, in this case I've tried to give it a little more purpose, to show the reader a few things about Bob. We get the feeling he's not a morning person (waits until the snooze alarm goes off before sitting up), that he's not particular tidy (his mirror is full of flecks of toothpaste he hasn't bothered to wash off), and that he's concerned for some reason about a mole on his neck.

Now, all (well, most) of this information was in the previous example as well, but in that example it was all buried amidst a bunch of other, slightly more mundane stuff. Not only does he turn the alarm off, but he makes his bed after getting up. Not only does he look at the mole on his neck, but he also looks at his own eyes and his hair. You don't single anything out, which means you don't place emphasis on any one detail, and all of the sudden you just have yourself a list. And all the reader has learned is that this guy did some stuff after he woke up.

You can see from this that a lot of the things mentioned explicitly in the previous example were pretty well unnecessary. Some things can be assumed without breaking the reader's suspension of disbelief. Like, I only mentioned an obnoxious buzzing and some blinking red numbers, and you probably still knew I was talking about an alarm clock of some kind. Also, when you read that the toothbrush clatters into its little holder, you can assume he's finished brushing his teeth, presumably spat out the toothpaste into the sink, washed his mouth out with a few swigs of water, and all of the other things people normally do after they're finished brushing their teeth. These things are obvious; you don't have to tell the reader that they happened. Unless the reader is horribly confused or insanely nitpicky about continuity errors, she's not

going to think that Bob is going to go eat some cereal with a mouthful of toothpaste because you never said he spit it out.

Let's get away from the morning routine example. Describing actions isn't always what people find difficult about this sort of thing. I know. It's describing *things*, or *characters* or *places*. Right? That's where everyone always gets stuck.

But don't fret, because it's the same concept, and so you should approach it in the same way. Maybe you were wondering why I said I hated it when authors make their characters look into mirrors as an excuse to describe them. Well, aside from it being a horrifically cheap and obvious ploy, it also almost always is followed by a word-dump. You know. 'His hair was blonde and nicely combed. He had blue eyes and a nice chin covered by a thin growth of unshaven beard. He was wearing his favorite blue and white polo shirt.' And so on and so forth.

I already talked about the list and why you want to avoid it, but I know when it comes to describing actual things it can feel hard to do so. This is why you avoid the 'looking in the mirror' trope and other things like it, though. You never want to give yourself an excuse like that to stop the narrative to description dump.

Just like every detail you mention should matter in some way to the story you're telling, every passage you write should move that story forward in some way. When people walk from one place to another, they don't stop and stare at every building or tree or street sign or flowerbed along the way and examine them in great detail. I mean, maybe you do, but I don't think most people do. I don't. When I walk around, I usually just take note of a few things to get my bearings as I continue on my way to wherever I'm going. One or two things that stand out as landmarks or signposts, just enough to know I'm not lost.

So approach it that way. Pick some good details and make use of them.

Lee stepped into the living room, placing a hand on the tacky orange sofa that was its centerpiece to guide herself through the too-narrow gap between it and the little folding table where her mother always played cards with her friends. She made her way up the stairs, avoiding the sixth one, and slid across the faux-fur throw rug and into her bedroom. She stepped carefully through the maze of potted plants she'd left on her floor and pulled open the curtains to let in the red rays of the setting sun.

Maybe not the greatest example in the world, but I'm trying to make a point. I didn't describe the whole living room: I just mentioned the orange sofa and the card-table. I didn't describe her whole ascent up the flight of stairs: I just mentioned the one step that she skips for some reason. I didn't describe her entire room: I just mentioned the potted plants all over her floor. These are key things, little guideposts for you, the reader, to grab hold of and start building the rest of the picture in your mind. The mother has a tacky orange sofa and just shoved her card table wherever it would fit despite that it's in the way, so maybe she doesn't have a good eye for decorating. The girl has a bunch of potted plants strewn about her floor, so maybe

she also isn't a big fan of decorating and is a bit messy, but loves growing things or gardening. From these clues, you start to imagine other things. Wood panel walls in the living room, maybe the kitchen has dirty dishes filling the sink, there might be a bookcase somewhere cluttered up with old magazines or Reader's Digest versions of classic literature, maybe a coffee table with tons of dark rings on it from old spills that were never wiped up. You form this picture in your mind, not just of what's there, but of the whole family that lives amongst the things that are there.

And you do these things naturally because it's the *story* you're interested in, and not actually so much what the room looks like. The room is part of the story, and it has its own things to say about the story, but in the end it's just a room the characters happen to be in as the story progresses. So don't focus on the room itself. No one really cares.

Same thing goes for character descriptions, but here you can also use them to develop the characters themselves. Again, don't just list traits or physical features. That's not 'description'. Maybe instead do something like this:

The homeless man, Jim, was walking down the street again, carrying his one very full plastic sack at his side. Each step he took made the bag rise up just a bit, then swing back down and emit exactly one clink as whatever was inside resettled after the agitation. It was generally agreed that Jim never actually looked inside the bag; he just carried it, although Mary once said she thought she saw him holding it up to his face, right up until it started pushing into his bushy beard, and smiling. But even then she said his eyes never once fell inside the thing. Nonetheless, the bag was his identifier, a constant presence, even more constant than the baseball caps he often wore or the old broken watch chain he let hang from his coat pocket.

So, again, this is demonstrating a few things. The thing to ask yourself after reading a passage like this is, do I now have a picture in my head of what this person looks like? And notice that questions doesn't have the word 'exact' anywhere in it. 'Exact' is not what you're going for, as I've mentioned previously, because you're just trying to hit the imagination. So this little passage is doing basically the same type of thing as the description of the house up above; it's giving you only the interesting details, the ones that spark an image in your brain and that cause you to start building your own little scenario around what's being described.

Now, I admit, a quirky homeless man is an easy target in this regard, and at this stage has become a bit of a cliché, but you can apply this to just about anyone. But really, you should do your best to treat every character in your novel like a quirky homeless man. Maybe not every character has such obvious quirks to play off of as a clinking plastic bag of unknown contents that he always carries at his side, but you can find something interesting. And really, if you can't find anything interesting,

chances are it's because your character is actually excruciatingly boring, which means you need to work on your character a bit more. But that's another story.

Okay. I've given a few examples here with the same take away message. It all goes back to that thing called 'imagination'. In much the same way that 'show, don't tell' is a poor choice of words to describe that concept, 'description' may be a tad too general a word for what it refers to. You can describe things that are physical, yes, but you can also describe things that aren't. You can describe actions and emotions and concepts and all sorts of things. But what you're doing when you write fiction is not 'describing' some things that happened to some people, it's telling a story. So that's what you should always be doing. Not painting a picture with words, but telling a story.

Recipe #4: Frank's Disturbingly Pink Spicy Coleslaw

Preparation time, roughly 20 minutes

Ingredients:

1/2 head of green cabbage

1/2 head of red cabbage

Several whole shredded carrots

1/2 diced onion (red or white)

1 heaping helping of mayonnaise

Just a wee bit too much dill weed

1 squirt of lemon juice

1 squirt of lime juice

1 dash of dill pickle juice (yes: straight from the jar)

1 good shake paprika

1 good shake chili powder

1/4 cup vinegar (nothing fancy or it'll take over; like, don't use red wine vinegar or something like that)

1 sizable sprinkling of hot sauce (I'm a fan of Cholula, but use whatever floats your boat)

Slice up the cabbage into thin strips, shread the carrots with either a cheese grater or a potato peeler (or be a total weenie and just buy pre-shredded carrots, I guess), dice the onion, and throw it all in a large bowl. Dump in the mayonnaise (basically use enough to just coat everything in the bowl; start with what you think is not enough and then go up from there, because you actually don't want to overdo it), dill weed, lemon and lime juice, pickle juice, paprika, chili powder, and hot sauce, and give it all a good stir.

Major hint: this is really one of those recipes you want to do to taste, so if you're one of those people who has a problem eating off the mixing spoon, I got nothing for you. But if you're okay with that, try adding more hot sauce until it's the right

level of spiciness, try adding more dill or pickle juice (though not too much or you'll have a nice big puddle in the bottom of your bowl) if you want more of that sharpness or tanginess, try adding more chili powder and paprika if you want a little more pungency, and so on. If you want to soften some of the vinegar or hot sauce, you can add a touch of sugar, or if you want to bring the spiciness out even more, consider dicing up some jalapeños or other peppers into the mix as well. Play around, experiment, have fun, and enjoy, god damn it.

Serves: whatever, it's a thing you bring to potlucks or something. Make as much as you want.