

TUTORIAL

Sensory Language

Humans and animals alike perceive the world through their senses; it's how babies learn about the world before they can speak or think critically. In writing, sensory language is a way for a writer to help the reader see or connect with an image, description, action, or scene.

Sensory language is language that connects to the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) to create an image or description.

Sensory language can be used in two different ways: (1) to create an image that we as readers are only meant to see (rather than experience); (2) to create a description that we as readers are meant to experience.

(1) As Beatrice came down the garden path, it was observable that she handled and inhaled the odor of several of the plants, which her father had most sedulously avoided.

The narrator is creating an image of Beatrice walking down the path. Rather than just say "Beatrice walked down the path" the author uses sensory words (observable, handled, inhaled, odor). Although we as readers are not meant to experience the touch and smell of the plants the way Beatrice does, we are meant to see her touching and smelling. In this instance, the sensory language is used to help the reader see the scene better.

Let's look at another example!

(2) "By the bye," said the Professor, looking uneasily about him, "what singular fragrance is this in your apartment? Is it the perfume of your gloves? It is faint, but delicious, and yet, after all, by no means agreeable. Were I to breathe it long, methinks it would make me ill. It is like the breath of a flower."

In this second example, we are meant to imagine (or experience) the smell that the Professor is describing. The smell is described to us through the Professor's words: faint, delicious, not agreeable, sickening, breath of a flower. From his words we can picture that the Professor is smelling the air, but the narrator never said "the Professor stopped and inhaled through his nose and then asked a question." We see his reaction to the smell, as well as what he thinks it smells like.

Let's look at each sense individually!

Touch: Sensory language that is associated with touch can be words like smooth, rough, wet, or dry, but it can also be words that trigger the idea of touch or texture: silk, wool, ice, glass, hot, cold. Sensory language can build an image of touch (for example, when two characters touch for the first time in a story, or when one character grabs another character). Remember: the writer can use words that focus on touch or build an image of touch.

Example: He could not quite forget the bouquet that withered in her grasp.

Example: Her iron fingers gripped tight around his shirtsleeve; he was caught.

Taste: Sensory language that is associated with taste can be words like sweet, spicy, bitter, or dry, as well as words that trigger specific tastes like lemon, cheese, milk, metal, mint, honey, etc.

Smell: Sensory language associated with scent or smell (olfactory), can be words like strong, faint, dusty, musty, flowers, baking, (words that have a strong connection to the sense of smell), but they can also be words that trigger smells but are hard to describe (the smell of rain, fire, burning rubber, babies).

Sight: Sensory language that is associated with sight can be a little tricky. Most often we see what is happening in a story because the narrator is giving us a description. The writer might say that the character looked at another character, or that a character saw something. The writer might also describe what a character looks like, or how a character sees something (each of which will use words like look, saw, watched, gazed, stared, gawked, etc.).

Ex: Giovanni gazed down into the garden. (The reader sees Giovanni gazing.)

Ex: There was a tall, emaciated, sallow, and sickly looking man, dressed in a scholar's garb of black. He was beyond the middle term of life, with gray hair, a thin gray beard, and a face singularly marked with intellect and cultivation, but which could never, even in his more youthful days, have expressed much warmth of heart. (The narrator describes an old man's appearance; the reader is meant to see the old man.)

Sound: Sensory language associated with sounds and hearing can be words like hear, sound, hoarse, or pitch, but it can also be words that simply convey a sound like gurgling, buzzing.

Ex: a little gurgling sound

Ex: he heard a rustling behind a screen of leaves.

Ex: The telephone buzzed obsequiously in a low muted voice on his table.

Because sound is closely associated with vibration, writers will often combine touch with descriptions of sound.

Ex: his footsteps kept time with the throbbings of his brain