



Reminiscence: A Creative Writing Workshop



INSTRUCTIONS FOR SEATING!

- ▶ **PLEASE SIT AT THE TABLE WHERE I'VE PLACED YOUR NAME TENT. EACH WEEK I'LL DO A DIFFERENT CONFIGURATION SO YOU AREN'T ALWAYS CRITIQUING AND GETTING FEEDBACK FROM THE SAME PEOPLE.**
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The more I wrote, the more of a human being I became.

We are all writers in one form or another. The need to express ourselves is essential to our survival. The written word allows us to take what is hidden below the threshold of waking consciousness and shape it into a form of expression that delights, persuades, informs, and teaches others. Whether correspondence with a loved one, a dream in a diary, a final paper to graduate, an imaginative story, a poem, a textbook, or a life's opus, writing is a vehicle to manifest the intangible into a tangible expression of who we are.

~Henry Miller, Writing as a Way of Healing



Narrative Elements:

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- Imagery/Descriptive Detail
 - Plot/Story
 - Character
 - Place/Setting
 - Scene & Dialogue
 - Point of View & Tone



Sight:

Sight is the most obvious and easiest of the senses to describe. It delivers on color and texture, as well as important aspects of scenes like landscapes, cityscapes, objects, and faces.

- A shadow passing outside the window**
- The way leaves dance with a gentle breeze**
- The slight discoloration on the couch that reminds your character about where her brother spilled a soda the last time she saw him**
- The seam in the wallpaper that's a fraction off**



Smell:

The sense of smell is most closely linked with memory and is highly emotive. For example, you might transport the reader to a seaside village on a Croatian island by describing the slightly sweet, putrid scent of seaweed baking at low tide in the late afternoon sun.

- Who hasn't taken a deep inhale of fresh-mowed grass and immediately been transported to a lazy summer day?
- Or caught the whiff of a perfume and you're suddenly remembering a best friend or family member who died.
- What about the smell of a favorite food to transport you back to holidays when the family still got together?



Taste:

At least 75% of taste actually is formed from smell. Taste can be broken down into four areas: salty, bitter, sweet, and sour.

- A character who arrives at the beach will lick her lips and taste the salt from the ocean breeze**
- A character who's been running on a hot day might taste the grit of dirt**
- During a long car ride, a character stares at the passing scenery and catches sight of the Golden Arches and can suddenly taste the Quarter Pounder with cheese and the salty fries.**



Touch:

Unlike the other senses, the sense of touch is distributed all over the skin and even inside your body. Your hands, lips, face, neck, tongue, fingertips, and feet are the most sensitive areas of the body.

- The prickle as an ant crawls up your arm
- The stab of pain when you stub your toe on a curb
- The comforting warmth of a blanket

There are times, though, when it's not as much what the character is touching but the act of the touch itself.

- A character putting his hand on another's upper arm in a "keep it under control" gesture



Sound:

Hearing is often described as the most important sense because it's our early warning system. We can follow a variety of sounds at one time:

- ▶ the strains of voices or instruments while also taking note of water slapping on a boat hull; the whistle of wind through a crack in the window; the tinkle of glasses; a backfiring engine.

Your reader needs to hear what your characters are experiencing.

- ▶ The raspy sound of a character's cough
- ▶ The twang of an accent
- ▶ The rev of a motor
- ▶ The jangle of keys



Sample Paragraph with Sensory Detail:

- ▶ **Trisha stirred the large stock pot of stew, watching as flashes of bright orange carrot and stark white potato danced around, occasionally peeking through the thick brown liquid as it bubbled and steamed. The stew had a strong, spicy scent, and when she ventured a taste, Trisha was immediately struck by a slap of red cayenne pepper and a bold tanginess that reminded her of the sauce served at her favorite steakhouse. The stew was hot on her tongue, and even the small amount she had taken was enough to warm her throat as it slid down. As she leaned forward, the steam made her face equally warm, and the soft sound of roiling bubbles tickled her ears. It wouldn't be long now until the dish was ready, and the thought made her stomach give a small grumble of anticipation.**



More on Imagery:

- ▶ Pick any common noun that comes to mind, such as chair, book, shoe, house, girl, boy, etc. (Please don't be limited by these common nouns!)
- ▶ Now create an image as we did with the common noun of car above (“a green Ford rattling to a stop”)
- ▶ Chose a recorder for your group.
- ▶ Share your image with your group members.
- ▶ Vote on the image that best creates a picture in the reader's mind and have the recorder share it with the rest of the class.



Session 2: Writing Prompt: Photo (more practice in sensory detail)

Here are some possible questions to ask yourself about it

- Why was I wearing that dress/suit/whatever?**
- What were my feelings toward the other people in the photo?**
- What was I thinking that I looked so sad/so happy/so surprised?**
- What does the composition of the photo reveal?**
- What does the photo hide? (Perhaps the most important question!)**

Photo writing prompt (cont'd)

Here is a sample response to this exercise from Marguerite Duras' reflection on a photo of her mother from her book *The Lover*. It helps her to discover something she otherwise might not have known:

- ▶ It's the courtyard of a house by the Small Lake in Hanoi. We're together, she and us, her children. I'm four years old. My mother's in the middle of the picture. I recognize the awkward way she holds herself, the way she doesn't smile, the way she waits for the photo to be over and done with. By her drawn face, by a certain untidiness in her dress, by her drowsy expression, I can tell that it's hot, that she's tired, that she'd bored. But it's by the way we're dressed, us children, all anyhow, that I recognize a mood my mother sometimes used to fall into, and of which already, at the age we were in the photo we knew the warning signs—the way she'd suddenly be unable to wash us, dress us, or sometimes even feed us. Every day my mother experienced this deep despondency about living. Sometimes it lasted, sometimes it would vanish with the dark. I had the luck to have a mother desperate with despair so unalloyed that sometimes even life's happiness, at its most poignant, couldn't quite make her forget it.

Photo writing prompt (cont'd)

The photo is an old, black and white snapshot, taken on a street in Paris. There isn't anything about the photo that would identify it as taken in any particular place, but there are hints if you look closely—the “do not enter sign” is the European standard of a white horizontal line in round sign, there is a moped in the picture, leaning up against a wall, and there is Minou, my cousin, standing behind me and holding my arms.

I have a look of surprise on my face—my mouth is open wide and I am looking away from the camera. It's as if Minou has just pulled me back onto the sidewalk, away from a speeding car. I don't look frightened, just surprised. It is that moment in between—that instant when I have just been saved but don't yet realize the danger I was in.

Minou has long dark hair, large glasses, and a moustache. He is wearing a dark, short-sleeved t-shirt and has one of those woven bags from Mexico slung over his shoulder. He is older than me, perhaps in his mid to late 20s, although I don't really know. I was 14-years old when this photo was taken and thought of myself as an adult. I saw nothing unusual about spending my time with other adults. I am spending this summer in Paris with my French family, away from the bad influences waiting for me at home. The purpose of this trip is to get me straightened out.

In your photo response, try to include more concrete detail from the photo than this student does here. Recall sounds, smells, and other sensations, as well as what things looked like. Recreate the scene for the reader. Limiting yourself to 500 words would be a great exercise in conciseness. Focus on appealing to all five senses. As always, aim to show as much as tell.



Critiquing guidelines:

- ***Meet in small groups of four plus the writer. I'll meet with one of the groups.***
- ***Choose a moderator who will keep the group focused and working within our time frame. (10 mins per person for reading and commenting in writing. 5 mins for oral sharing.)***
- ***Read the pieces silently and make brief notes.***
- ***Share your comments orally.***
- ***When you finish, jot down on my copy what your group told you so I can review what people have already said.***

Critique questions:

In these responses, you will not be pointing out grammar or spelling errors—and nor will I. We are interested in helping each person improve the content of his/her submission. Since there are no grades, you needn't feel in competition with one another. Remember, we are all in this together. Nasty or unnecessarily negative comments don't help the writer to improve. Instead of telling the writer "you should do this or do that," just point out if you felt confused or needed more details.

- What stands out about the piece? What caught your attention?
- Is there anything you don't understand about the narrative? If so, explain.
- What changes would you suggest to strengthen this piece based on elements we've covered so far that make for strong narratives?
- Has the writer appealed to multiple senses. Are there places where more showing rather than telling is needed?