

# APPEAL TO THE SENSES



To write vividly and memorably, appeal to the senses. As Anton Chekhov advised, “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

You may have been told by your teachers to use “concrete language,” but did you ever wonder what “concrete language” was? Despite what it sounds like, it’s not Portland cement.

If you thought it had something to do with going beyond the general to the specific, you were right. But using “concrete language” involves more than being specific. Former poet laureate Donald Hall uses a more revealing phrase in *Writing Well*: “sense words,” or language that can be perceived by the five senses.

Why are sense words important?

Writers who use sense words are more likely to create a vivid impression and to evoke an active response from their readers. Their writing is more vivid, colorful, and memorable.

For example, rather than “My customer was extremely dissatisfied with my letter,” write, “My customer slammed my letter down on the counter.” Rather than “The passengers below the *Titanic*’s deck were having problems,” write, “Below the *Titanic*’s deck, the icy water rose to the passengers’ knees.”

Sense words enliven your writing in at least three ways: They can add color (“My cubicle is so small that when I lean back in my chair I bang my head on the wall”), evoke an emotional response from your reader (“The owners flew around the country in Learjets while their workers drove rusted-out used cars”), and clinch an argument (“If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit”).

There are times, of course, when generalities are preferable to specifics. If you want to de-emphasize negative information, for example, rather than “Our

sales have fallen like a rock, plummeting 15 percent since we introduced our new line of sleepwear,” write, “The response to our new line of sleepwear has been disappointing.” In persuasive writing, you should refer generally rather than specifically to negative information or information that undermines your argument, just as in narrative writing you might go with the general rather than the specific to set a fast pace.

But when you want to make your writing memorable, appeal to the senses.

The challenge is to achieve an appropriate balance between generality and specificity. Writing that is too general (“For some time now, we have been making less money than we had projected, so we may have to reduce our workforce either this year or next”) as well as writing that is too specific (“The meeting was held from 9:07 to 10:43 AM in conference room C, the one that has the blinking fluorescent light and the nice view of the Theodore Wirth Golf Course”) can exasperate your reader.

So don’t overdo it as you appeal to the senses. Rather than “We didn’t notice that the food was less than perfect,” write, “We didn’t notice that the dumplings were stuffed mostly with stringy squash and that the oranges were spotted with wormy holes,” as Amy Tan does in *The Joy Luck Club*.

Rather than describe a summer evening ritual of sitting on the front porch with your grandpa by writing “I loved the sounds coming from the house as the rest of my family started doing the dishes,” write, “About seven o’clock you could hear the chairs scraping back from the tables, someone experimenting with a yellow-toothed piano ... [m]atches being struck, the first dishes bubbling in the suds and tinkling on the wall racks,” as Ray Bradbury does in *Dandelion Wine*.

Here are a few more examples of the effective use of sense words. Jean Shepherd’s description of a group of kids walking to school makes us feel winter’s chill.

Kids plodded ... through forty-five-mile-an-hour gales, tilting forward like tiny furred radiator ornaments, moving stiffly over the barren clattering ground with only the faint glint of two eyes peering out of a mound of moving clothing.

Can you see those eyes? Can you feel the icy wind?

Here’s how Colum McCann describes pilot John Alcock in his novel *TransAtlantic*.

A single man, he said he loved women but preferred engines. Nothing pleased him more than to pull apart the guts of a Rolls-Royce, then put her back together again. He shared his sandwiches with the reporters: often there was a thumbprint of oil on the bread.

Would you like a bite of that sandwich?

Most writers favor visual images, but don't forget you have five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

Colum McCann describes how another transatlantic traveler, Frederick Douglass, notices a peculiar aroma in Dublin.

There was an odd smell in the air. Douglass still couldn't figure out what it was. Sweet, earthy. He walked quickly up the steps with the butler in attendance. He was brought to the fireplace in the living room. He had seen the fire the night before, but had not noticed what it was: clods of burning soil.

And as you may recall from the quote in the opening pages of this book, it was a "whiff of tobacco" coming from a seventeen-year-old maid named Lily that made the world "ordinary again."

One more example. How might you use sense words to make your point more vividly in the following sentence? "He was such a good pitcher he could get anything past even the best batters."

There are countless possibilities, but here's how legendary sportswriter Red Smith described Yankees pitcher Whitey Ford: "He could throw a lamb chop past a hungry wolf."

Get the idea? Have some fun. Use your imagination. Appeal to the senses.

## EXERCISES

1. Add detail that appeals to the senses to bring the following sentence to life: "A little while later, when the police cruiser happened upon her and her children, she was stuck in the ditch crying."

(Use your card.)

Here's how Jonathan Odell wrote that sentence in *The View from Delphi*.

An hour later, when the black-and-white cruiser with the big star on the door happened upon Hazel and her boys, she had sunk the two left tires deep into a sandy ditch and was hunched over the wheel sobbing.

2. Here's a wonderful example of sense words from E.B. White's essay, "Once More to the Lake," which Donald Hall cites in *Writing Well*. In describing his son's lack of experience with lakes, White writes that his son "had seen lily pads only from train windows." White also points out that his son had never had a certain unpleasant experience common to all swimmers.

How do you think he completed this clause, "My son, who had never had ..."?

(Card, please.)

Here's how White breathed life into his observation: "my son, who had never had water up his nose."

3. What are your most enduring memories of childhood?

Are they the smell of fresh-mown grass on a hot summer afternoon, the sight of your big brother dressed as a mummy for Halloween, the squeeze of your grandmother's hand the last time you saw her, or the sound of your father's voice singing "Ol' Man River" to put you to sleep at night?

Chances are your most vivid recollections involve one or more of your five senses. You may use abstract words such as *contentment*, *shock*, *longing*, *emptiness*, *love*, and *comfort* to describe the feelings evoked by those memories, but if you want your reader to share and experience your feelings, present your experience the same way your memories were created: through firsthand perception of vivid, specific, sensory details.

Make a list of some of your earliest, most cherished memories, describing them in succinct phrases made up of sense words.

\* A FURTHER THOUGHT: OVER-THE-TOP  
ANALOGIES USE SENSE WORDS

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Several years ago some over-the-top analogies from a high school essay contest circulated around the Internet. They were so bad they were good.

Here's one example. (Warning: It may not be appropriate for all audiences.) "She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh, like that sound a dog makes just before it ..."

How do you think that sentence was completed? You guessed it:  
"... throws up."

Yuck.

Not all sense language need be gross to be vivid. In *TransAtlantic*, Colum McCann describes an encounter between two characters in this way.

He waited a moment in the doorway, stepped across, took her in an embrace. Only that. He held his hand at the back of her hair. He hesitated a moment. She sobbed. When he pulled away ...

When he pulled away what? Here's how McCann completed the sentence: "When he pulled away, the shoulder of his shirt was wet." As you can see, the smallest visual detail can convey great significance.

Sense language can be delivered with a light touch. Consider how the following sentence might be completed by building on the metaphor of *spilling*: "Many economists warn that a recession in Europe could spill over to the world economy, which could ..."

Which could what?

How about "... wash back on the United States"?

With *wash back on* neatly reprising the notion of *spill over*, the language is pleasingly understated.

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WEEK 4

## COLLECT GOOD WORDS



Our words are close to our hearts. We use them to convey our thoughts and ideas, our values and concerns.

Sometimes we use our words to show off, as in "I deem it imperative that we commence work on this project at our earliest possible convenience," when all we mean is "Let's get to work on this project."

And sometimes we can't think of the precise word that captures our thought, as in "His explanation for failing to file his report is hard to believe" when we might have said, "His explanation for failing to file his report is implausible."

Having a broad range of words at our command and knowing how and when to use them is key to memorable writing.

Are you satisfied with *your* vocabulary? Would you like to improve it? Here's how.

1. **Be curious about language.** Be inquisitive. If you listen attentively to the spoken or written language of articulate people, you'll expand your vocabulary.
2. **Listen and watch for words you don't know.** Be on the lookout for words whose sound you like. Collect words you think might be useful to you, words that suit your style and personality. Learn the vocabulary of your field or profession.

The secret to building your vocabulary is to pay attention. The first thing you'll notice—and this will happen immediately—is that you've developed a greater sensitivity for words. In *Writing Well*, Donald Hall refers to "sensitivity to the insides of words." Hearing a word