

How to Write a Novel

LESSON 13



Writing Active Description

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Intro

The biggest problem most folks have writing description is the fiction version of this:

Walk the reader around, look at a thing, stop to describe it, move the reader a couple steps to the left, look at another thing, stop to describe it.

This is why writers find description boring to write, and why readers find it boring to read.

I have specialized since the beginning of my career (following the receipt of that “Much, much, much much, much too much exposition” rejection slip, anyway) in writing **active** description.

This week, you’re going to learn to do that.

The Active Description of Settings & Inanimate Objects

We're going to start this out with four rules and four questions for describing settings and objects—inanimate stuff.

Rule One: If it doesn't matter *to the story*, don't describe it. If you want to describe it, *make it matter*.

This is the toughest rule for inexperienced fiction writers to wrap their heads around, because when you're sitting inside your world and your story, and you've created all this amazing stuff, you want to use it.

Believe me, I know. New and passionate, I did not build Tolkein-style full-on worlds, languages, and cultures, and then ignore 99.9% of everything I built.

And I justified (to myself) that every single thing I built mattered to the story and to the reader because it mattered to me.

And then an editor (or a hundred) sent me booze-scented, tear-stained, ragged, desperate rejections begging me to stop hurting them (slight authorial exaggeration there)... and I started realizing that "*If I built it, it matters*" was **not** a workable rule.

This is what did work...

Asking the question, "Why does this matter to my story?"

A workable, acceptable answer to this question needs to be specific.

The gorgeous magical floating castle I spent a full month designing, mapping, and building a scale

model of matters **because** half of all scenes in the current story (and each following story in the series) will be set inside it... **Because** half of all my story's characters live inside the confines of this castle and can never leave it, and **because** the other half of the characters in my story must interact with characters trapped in the castle and deal with the magical problems the castle causes in the mundane world they inhabit.

If your special item can justify its existence in that fashion, you get to describe it.

But you don't start by writing the history of Aiarwip Castle (yes, [my imaginary nonexistent catle is named after the podcast](#), and yes, it's filled with Invisible People). You don't start by describing how it flies, or who built it, or even why they built it. Every bit of that is passive description.

Rule Two: If it does matter, figure out the context in which it matters.

So, having created this lunatic monstrosity—a flying castle—I now have to figure out its context.

The context of any building starts out mattering because it is the setting in which something interesting happens.

And to make sure you are writing ACTIVE DESCRIPTION, settings get described incidentally WHILE interesting things are happening.

So you don't start with a description of the setting, or an object, or a character.

Ask the question, “What interesting thing involving this object or item happens?”

My muse asks, “What’s interesting? Okay... I’m going to say that someone is burying a body on the drill grounds in the flying castle. *How can that go wrong?*”

Almost instantly, **Muse answers its own question with the emphatic two-word**, “FLYING castle.”

And gives me the image of the idiot with the shovel digging a hole while standing in it while the corpse is lying on the solid ground above him... and the idiot falling through the hole he’s dug and crashing hundreds of feet to the ground, dying when he hits.

Thus introducing to the reader the fact that the castle is *a flying castle* in a way that makes that fact meaningful, that gives that fact a practical reality and a practical consequence, without starting with the expository and irrelevant...

Aiarwip Castle flew over the village, its beautiful red-and-gold pennants flapping gaily in the breeze of its passing, its beautiful whitestone walls shimmering in the sunlight...

Yadda, yadda, puke.

Rule Three: Figure out what you want the reader to know he sees.

In every scene, you’re going to show the reader stuff that’s important to the story right at the level you’re showing him.

So the third question you ask is:

What do I show the reader that is important to this scene?

In the example above...

I want the reader to see a live guy digging a hole in a castle courtyard with a corpse beside him, having the hole he's suddenly turn into sky beneath his feet, having him claw at dirt that crumbles away beneath his fingertips. I want the reader to see the guy falling while looking up at the faint light through the hole he dug and the light of first dawn creeping across the countryside a long way below him, to see the underside of the floating castle dropping away from him as the ground rises up, to know that he's doomed.

I want to leave the scene the instant before he hits the ground, while he's still screaming, "Nooooo!"

And I want the reader to know he's doomed without having to show the idiot going *splat*. I'm a big fan of writing gross and gory when it matters to the story, but if the point of the scene is to show the reader that the idiot was in a flying castle, there's no POINT in a detailed anatomy lesson on what happens to someone who hits the ground after a fall from way up high.

But let's say that the scene above actually had two points. The first was to show the reader in an interesting fashion that the character was in a flying castle.

But let's now say that I had a second point—to hide something from the reader in plain sight so that I could bring it back later and wow him.

That takes us to the OPTIONAL Rule Four...

OPTIONAL Rule Four: Figure out what you want the reader to forget he's seen.

From time to time, every good fiction writer uses misdirection to show readers things they need to know in the background, while putting clowns

and tigers and acrobats in front of them to distract them from what really matters. Not in every scene, not all the time, but getting some misdirection in early can really help you to wow your reader when you hit your ending.

So the fourth question you ask (sometimes) is:

What do I want the reader to forget he's seen?

Muse had the answer to this question loaded up the second I got to this section. Could not WAIT to tell me what it came up with.

When I ask, "What do I want the reader to forget he's seen," Muse answers, "The corpse."

Not the guy about to become a corpse, but the dead body up in there beside the hole. If I write the scene as I laid it out above, and then move to a scene with a different character (pretty essential, considering the first living character is now goo), the reader will jump with me to the next scene and the next setting and the next important thing without worrying about the dead body left beside the hole. It was dead. Someone will find it later, right?

Muse says...

Nope. Dead body is one of the inhabitants of the castle, and they never get to leave. Not even by death. So after the idiot (NOT a resident) falls through the hole, the dead guy stands up.

And I'm going to pretend that I'm not having a weird thematic recurrence of walking dead guys in my fiction lately, and will only mention in passing that my Muse figured out a way that I could use THIS SCENE in the novel *Dead Man's Party* that I'm writing for this class. It's doing what I've trained it to do (or what it's trained me to do).

I will note that I do not intend to use this scene in *Dead Man's Party*.

Muse says, Let's see who wins that argument.

Your Turn

You have four rules to work with now for describing settings and objects, and four questions to ask before we go any further.

So stop now and get a little practice with SECTION ONE of your worksheets in using them.

Select three settings or objects you need to describe in your story, and ask and answer all three required questions, and the optional question at least once.

I've set up the worksheets with three sets of Section One worksheets, because you'll use at least this many in any book you're writing (until your brain starts doing active description automatically and you don't need them anymore.)

Use these sheets to help you write important elements into your next few scenes.

Don't go to the next section until you've done these worksheets.

The Active Description of People, Critters, and Animate Objects

There are four rules for folks, animals, and sapient objects that walk around under their own power and with their own objectives.

And the rules are similar, but the way you use them is different.

- **Rule One:** If your character, critter, or animate object (shorthanded after this to CHARACTER) doesn't matter to the story, don't describe it. If you want to describe the character, make him/her/it matter.
- **Rule Two:** If the character does matter, figure out the size and scope of character's part, and build in limitations.
- **Rule Three:** Figure out the part of the character the reader gets to *know* he sees.
- (Optional) **Rule Four:** Figure out the part of the character you want the reader to *forget* he's seen.

What's Different About Describing Characters?

It's easy to fall in love with your words when describing characters. To get flowery, to get way too busy, to decide that because you just love this character, the reader needs to know everything you've done to make the

character cool, or wonderful, or scary... and to get all that information right up front.

Romance writers take a beating for “mirror scene” description, which was a staple of 1970s category romances, and in which:

The 19-year-old protagonist (who’s going to fall in love with a 30-year-old jerk) looks at herself in the mirror while doing a point-by-point dissection of how unhappy she is with her breathtaking beauty, in which her nose is too small, her boobs are too big, and her hair was too blonde.

Reading these at 16, I was just envious. Reading them at 27, when I was dissecting published category romances with highlighter markers and a notebook of what worked, and trying to figure out how to make my own first novel better, I realized that the occasional “mirror scene” that showed up gave me reasons to dislike the character.

I came up with the term “voluntary stupidity” to describe this behavior, in which a woman who knows she’s perfectly gorgeous stares in the mirror and pretends she isn’t, and decided it was one of the sins the better writers I was reading never committed.

But I didn’t at the time catch the other problem with the “mirror scene” which was that it didn’t matter to the story. It introduced the reader to the appearance of the character, but in a completely pointless way. She’s looking in a mirror, we get to see her. And? Who cares? *Why* should we care? Nothing important is happening.

Rule One: Only describe characters who are essential to your story. And only describe the characteristics about them that matter.

Here’s where you have to give a hard look at what matters about your characters.

I'm going to run you through a description I did of a character named Phoebe Rain, from my (now pseudonymous) [paranormal suspense novel Midnight Rain](#).

Alan took a deep breath as he got out of the car and consciously shook off the night and everything associated with it. He had a couple days off. And he had never been more grateful for those days. He walked around the corner of his privacy fence, rubbing his eyes and yawning, and ran right into the girl with the cane.

She went over backwards with a cry of pain, and his first ungallant thought was Shit! My malpractice insurance. But he dropped to one knee beside her. "Christ, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention. Are you hurt?"

She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath, and with her eyes still closed said, "I'll be fine." She looked at him then, and he saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes – and she managed a strained smile. "You're the guy next door. The doctor."

He nodded. "Alan MacKerrie. Sorry to meet you this way."

Her pained smile got a little broader, but he noticed that she did not offer her name.

"If you were going to get pasted on the sidewalk, I guess you got pasted by the right guy."

She was pretty in a delicate, underfed sort of way. Long, curly dark hair worn loose, large dark eyes, a pointed chin, the undeveloped build of a teenager who might one day fill out and be gorgeous – but this girl wasn't a teenager, he realized. If he

looked at the first ghosts of smile lines in the comers of her eyes, he'd have to guess early thirties.

He'd only seen her in passing before and had never paid much attention – most too-thin women never showed up on his radar. "So where do you hurt?"

"My butt. My knee. The palms of my hands." She held them up and looked at them. Dirt embedded in the skin, a few scrapes and flecks of blood – nothing major.

"Any pain in your wrists?"

She wiggled them. "They're fine. My knee's the only thing that really hurts, and it already hurt."

"You feel a pop or a snap when you fell?"

"No. The pain just got worse, but it was already pretty bad."

"Let me take a look, okay?"

"I'd... rather you..." She sighed and shrugged. "Sure. Take a look. I don't think it's any worse than it was, but if it is I'd rather know now." She tugged up the leg of her jeans, and for an instant he thought she had really pretty legs, which made up for the flat chest, and then he saw the scar tissue and it was everything he could do to keep the shock from showing on his face.

He put his hands on either side of the knee and made a production of palpating and gently moving the joint to hide his reaction. Her right knee bore the branding of half a dozen surgeries; the square outlines of two grafts, one white and relatively old, the other pink and a bit puffy; a dozen black

circles tattooed into the skin and grown over; a missing chunk that had healed hard and red and ugly.

"What happened?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral and not looking at her face.

"Shotgun." He looked into her eyes and saw a wall so solid no emotion leaked past. She said, "I've had a bit of work done on it."

"I see that," he said. "I don't see any new damage, but if you want I'll take you to the ER and get it X-rayed for you. I'll cover the cost – I did knock you down."

She smiled and shook her head, and he marveled that her expression could convey absolutely nothing of what she was thinking. "I'll see if I can stand on it. It doesn't feel any different now than it did when I walked out the door. I think it just twisted a little when I fell."

"Twisting can be significant. Pins can slip loose, slice things up inside..." He stood and gave her his hand and said, "I'd feel better if you'd have it x-rayed."

He leaned back and pulled, and she rose to her feet without much difficulty. He guessed that she weighed less than a hundred pounds and that she was about five one or five two. But there'd been a sinewy strength to her grip that surprised him and a grace to her movements that changed his first impression of fragility. She was tougher than she looked at first glance.

"In the last two years I've seen more of the insides of hospitals than I ever wanted to; if I

never have to go through the doors of one again, that will be just fine." She scooped up her cane and tested the leg, putting her full weight on it, then taking it off several times in a row. Testing. Her face remained impassive, but Alan caught the flicker of suppressed pain in her eyes. She wiped her palms on her jeans and slung her bag – a small canvas backpack that looked heavy to him – over her shoulder again.

"Good as new," she said, then with a shrug added, "or at least good as slightly used."

Definitely tougher than she looked. "Let me know if it gives you any trouble."

She smiled, already moving away from him. "I'll do that. Thanks. Thanks for being so nice." She headed towards the parking lot. He watched her for a moment, wondering about her, about the scars, about her polite but carefully maintained distance and the fact that she didn't offer her name. As she limped out of sight, he turned to his townhouse – a corner unit of the building, which had eight total units, four facing south, and four that mirrored them, facing north. Each had a little fenced patio to the front; each made an attempt to feel like a detached home from the inside. But all shared side and back walls. For just an instant he was conscious of those other people in those other units, with their separate lives kept apart from his by only a layer of studs and drywall – but the walls might as well have been acres thick. He didn't know any of his neighbors by name, only a couple of them by sight. They were neighbors only in the physical sense, in that they inhabited the same building.

We all keep our secrets, he thought.

He found himself wondering what hers were.

This is an active description. This is the first time the reader gets to see the main character, who she met in the previous chapter when the MC was working and got a creepy phone call from her stalker ex (whom she immediately verified was in a coma 1200 miles away).

The reader already got to feel the MC's knee pain in the previous chapter, and knows about the cane. But this is her first glimpse of what the character actually looks like, and I keep it to light, and tuck it inside important action.

She was pretty in a delicate, underfed sort of way. Long, curly dark hair worn loose, large dark eyes, a pointed chin, the undeveloped build of a teenager who might one day fill out and be gorgeous – but this girl wasn't a teenager, he realized. If he looked at the first ghosts of smile lines in the comers of her eyes, he'd have to guess early thirties.

This is the only description of her in the book. Phoebe can be of any race. She has dark hair and dark eyes, she's too thin, she has a pointed chin. She's in her thirties. *Thin* matters because she has to keep her weight down to be able to walk on her damaged leg. The rest lets the reader make the character look like herself if she's so inclined, and then gets out of the way.

Why don't I specify eye color, hair color, skin color? Why don't I describe her features?

Because they're irrelevant.

The fact that she's short and tiny matters when the reader finds out what she did in the past, and see's what she does in the future, but at the moment, it just makes it easy to understand how someone walking too fast

and lost in his thoughts could run over her on a sidewalk and knock her down.

The only place where I go into clear, specific detail in the description is here:

She tugged up the leg of her jeans, and for an instant he thought she had really pretty legs, which made up for the flat chest, and then he saw the scar tissue and it was everything he could do to keep the shock from showing on his face.

He put his hands on either side of the knee and made a production of palpating and gently moving the joint to hide his reaction. Her right knee bore the branding of half a dozen surgeries; the square outlines of two grafts, one white and relatively old, the other pink and a bit puffy; a dozen black circles tattooed into the skin and grown over; a missing chunk that had healed hard and red and ugly.

The knee matters. The knee is the tie between these two characters, between this woman who knows things she doesn't want to know about people she's never met, and this man with a dead daughter who will come to visit him, and whose ghost will talk to this skinny, dark-haired next-door woman.

So I take my time to show readers the knee, to make them understand that the *something* in Phoebe's past that gave her that knee is a *something* that has sharp teeth and a long reach.

And I give this description when the frightened character is leaving her house, when the next-door neighbor is coming home from a long shift in the ER, when he's tired and grumpy, and I make it not about what they look like, but about how they meet.

So...

To use this, first you figure out the part of your character description that is actually relevant to **who your character is**, which is VERY different than what your character looks like.

What part of the character's appearance has changed the character's life?

Everything else you leave thin, **but the part that matters, you show in action**. When you can, give this description through the eyes of some other character involved with your character who is doing something important.

If you're writing first person, you'll have to have your MC describe himself or herself, but make sure your character mentions just the stuff that affects WHY the character is who he or she is.

"I lost my left leg in the Konata war, and the aliens who captured me grafted a tentacle from one of their work beasts onto the stump in its place so they could get some use out of me as a slave..."

You start a character with *that* description, and his eye color, hair color, and favorite food just. Don't. *Matter*.

Rule Two: Use your description to create limitations.

Describing the character's small stature and badly damaged knee is *setting limitations*. She cannot run quickly. She is not big and heavy and solid. This mattered in her past, when her ex did terrible things to her. It mattered when she fled. And it mattered when he found her and came after her and she dealt with him, though at terrible cost to herself and others who stood between her and him.

And it matters in what's coming at her right now.

Rule Three: Figure out the part of the character the reader gets to *know* he sees.

With Phoebe Rain, the reader does not forget the knee. The weakness. Or the weird psychic thing, or that she sees (or thinks she sees) ghosts.

(Optional) Rule Four: Figure out the part of the character you want the reader to *forget* he's seen.

Through around 110,000 - 120,000 words of novel, the character forgets a little bit about the ferocity this small woman exhibited in saving the lives of most of the students in her classroom. When she's scared, alone, being hunted, the reader forgets not that she faced down a big man with a shotgun when she was unarmed... That part I want the reader to remember.

What I don't emphasize is that she *won*. The knee looks a lot like losing, especially when it turns out the other guy is still coming after her.

The knee is the promise to the reader that this character will not flail her arms and scream and look pitiful and beg to be rescued.

I show that in the very first scene between her and Alan, when she does not take him up on the offer for the X-ray at his expense.

I show it again multiple times when she acts to protect herself rather than waiting to be rescued.

What I don't show... is any reminder that back when it counted, when everything was on the line for a bunch of kids in a classroom, and when no sane bookie on the planet would have given any odds whatsoever on this small, unarmed woman's survival or her ability to protect her students...

She *won*.

Your Turn

You have four rules to work with now for describing characters.

- **Rule One:** If your character, critter, or animate object (shorthand after this to CHARACTER) doesn't matter to the story, don't describe it. If you want to describe the character, make him/her/it matter.
- **Rule Two:** If the character does matter, figure out the size and scope of character's part, and build in limitations.
- **Rule Three:** Figure out the part of the character the reader gets to *know* he sees.
- (Optional) **Rule Four:** Figure out the part of the character you want the reader to *forget* he's seen.

So stop now and get a little practice with SECTION TWO of your worksheets.

Select (at least) two characters (and up to four) that you need to describe in your story, and ask and answer all three required questions, and the optional question at least once.

I've set up the worksheets with two sets of Section Two worksheets, because you'll use at least this many in any book you're writing. Just print out more if you need them.

Use these sheets to work some of what you've discovered about your important characters into your next few scenes. (If you got this wrong in the beginning of your first draft, don't worry about it, and DON'T go back and change things. Save that for revision.)

Next Week...

Next time, we'll be digging into "transition scenes" and real transitions, and shooting "but" in the butt.

So right here I'm going to tell you flat out that in good fiction, there is no such thing as a transition SCENE. "But..." you say, "I know they're boring, but I need to get my characters from Point A to Point B." So next week, you learn how to shoot "But I need to..." and find out all the really cool ways you can transition your characters and action INSTEAD of writing the scenes you hate to write... and your readers hate to read.

You can do this!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Holly Lisle

Class Creator, *How to Write a Novel*