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Sensory details examples in books

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The kitchen with aroma of vanilla cinnamon-scented candle reminded of the Big Red gum my father chewed

The beach air smelled of seaweed and salt the warm summer air smelled of freshly cut grass

TouchThe heavy quilt felt an x-ray vest draped across our legs

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The puppy's nose was dry like sandpaper

The sand was hot and grainy like my morning grits

Taste Sweet, juicy strawberries

Sour lemonade salty chips

Juicy tartness of orange rancid butter

A handout of this resource is available here

Using the 5 senses in writing can deeply immerse readers in scenes and stories. It's a skill that can elevate books to a whole new level.

So often we writers find ourselves lured into the trap of relying on sight and sound.

Describing how something looks or sounds isn't always enough to bring a story to life.

Many people experience things through smells, touch, and taste. It's our job as authors to use the five senses in writing to enrich our tales and prose with vivid imagery, which is often used to help the reader feel immersed and engaged.

In fact, the oft-forgotten 5 senses are some of the most powerful forms of description, things that can enrich a story and give it life.

As we'll see below, using a sensory description has an incredible ability to connect with us on a psychological level.

In this guide, we'll take a look at the five sensory organs, why we use senses in writing, look at a bunch of illustrative 5 senses examples, and ways we can use each one to elevate our stories to the next level.

How To Use The 5 Senses In Your Writing If you re-read some of your favourite books there'll no doubt be passages where the writer employs a sight and smell or taste or touch to great descriptive effect.

We'll look at examples of the five senses in fiction below. Often some of our favourite books are those that use to great effect the five senses.

Books that transport us to new worlds and take us on epic adventures. And so often it's the vivid descriptions that draw us in and help us walk amongst the characters.

Using your five senses in your writing is an incredibly powerful way to immerse your reader in the tale.

The more the reader can understand what it's like to be in your character's shoes at that precise moment, be it fleeing a demon or marching to war, knowing how it feels and smells like, as well as the visual and audio descriptions, can elevate stories to a whole new level.

It quite simply makes it more enjoyable to read.

From a writing perspective, incorporating each of the five senses in your writing at appropriate moments is something your readers will love.

From the perspective of the fantasy writer specifically, using the 5 senses is a terrific way to reveal the details created during your worldbuilding process.

This is especially useful when you're trying to convey unique imagery or something that's altogether alien to the reader.

It's something I used a lot when writing Pariah's Lament and readers loved it.

This is just one of the many 5 senses examples you'll find below.

Select A Section What Are The Five Sensory Organs? Before we dive into looking at the 5 senses in a writing context, let's look at what the five sensory organs are:

Eyes Ears Special receptors in the skin that enable us to touch and feel

Nose Tastebuds Combined, our five senses enable us to learn, experience and create memories.

Pepsi Max, for example, always reminds me of my history lessons in college—I'd drink a can during every lesson.

They have an incredible ability to transport us back to moments in our past.

Let's explore things in more detail. If you'd like to learn more about the basics surrounding the 5 senses, see more examples, or learn how to incorporate sensory description in your writing, see this quick video.

What Are Sensory Details? Sensory details make use of the five senses—touch, sight, taste, sound, and smell—to make your writing more immersive.

This draws readers deeper into the story such that they feel like they're experiencing everything the characters do.

What Is Sensory Writing? Sensory writing is the process of using the senses of sound, sight, touch, taste and smell in our writing to paint vivid images in a reader's mind.

Sight Perhaps the main one of the five senses, sight often receives information first and therefore forms our initial judgements.

When it comes to using sight in writing, our stories and characters are often guided by this prime form of description.

We describe what our characters see. However, it would be nigh impossible to describe every aspect of a scene, and even if you did achieve it, nigh impossible to read.

Some of the most acclaimed writers, Charles Dickens, in particular, approached it by picking the right details.

The little things that tell us everything.

Let's look at an example of the sense of sight in writing from Great Expectations:

"There was a bookcase in the room; I saw, from the backs of the books, that they were about evidence, criminal law, criminal biography, trials, acts of parliament, and such things.

The furniture was all very solid and good, like his watch-chain.

It had an official look, however, and there was nothing merely ornamental to be seen.

In a corner, was a little table of papers with a shaded lamp; so he seemed to bring the office home with him in that respect too, and to wheel it out of an evening and fall to work."

This is Jagger's office.

Though he doesn't feature, we've gleaned much about who he is from details like the types of books upon the shelves and the paper-filled table, suggesting he lives a busy, professional life.

Colour is another fantastic tool when it comes to sight.

Dickens was known for using colours to portray emotions or themes, such as red for frustration or anger, black for death, white for purity or goodness.

Using colour, particularly with themes and the premise, can add extra layers to a story.

We explore some more 5 senses examples below to give you some ideas when it comes to sight.

Writing Prompt Stand in the middle of your bedroom.

Look all around you.

Make notes of every little detail you see.

Colours, shapes.

Crumbs or dust on the floor.

The more attentive you can be the better.

Pick out things that could relate to characterisation.

The books on a shelf perhaps—what kind of books are they?

Are there empty glasses beside your bed, dishes too?

All of this helps to build interesting imagery, as well as contribute to the scents of the story, in this instance, characterisation.

Sound Sound is incredibly important when it comes to using the 5 senses in your writing.

Dialogue dominates many stories, but so often little attention is paid to how characters sound when they talk.

It's strange when you think about how unique people sound, and a person's voice makes such a difference to how we form views of them.

Something I learned not so long ago is that ducks don't quack.

They tend to grunt or even hiss.

It's easy to assume how things sound, but sometimes what we assume is wrong.

In doing so you may find new and original ways to describe the sound.

Using metaphors and similes, particularly if the sound is unusual, is a great way to bring clarity to descriptions.

Another often overlooked thing is silence.

Silence is an excellent tool to set the tone or build an atmosphere or tension.

A noiseless forest.

A still, foggy street.

Eerie.

Writing Prompt Either using yourself or ideally, your character, place yourself in a location in which things are happening around you—

a park, for instance.

Close your eyes and listen.

Make a note of every little sound you hear, from tweeting birds to jackhammers digging up roads.

If you can, make a note of how different sounds make you feel.

Do fireworks startle you, for instance?

Then think about why they could startle you or your character.

Touch Of all the five senses, touch is, in my view, one of the most powerful yet underrated ones.

If you can convey touch in an effective way, you'll reap the rewards.

The scope of this sense depends on the nature of the scene, but imagine, for example, walking barefoot through a forest.

The softness of moss between your toes, the cool slime of mud, the pokes and scratches of sticks and stones.

Such details can draw readers deeper into the story.

We'll look at some sensory writing exercises below, but as a brief writing prompt now, close your eyes and pick something up.

Describe how that object feels.

What features does it have?

The texture?

Sturdiness?

Width?

Weight?

These little details can make all the difference when it comes to incorporating the 5 senses in your writing.

Taste Taste is the more neglected one out of the five sensory organs when it comes to writing.

Just like all of the senses, using taste can enrich your story immensely.

How many times have you said the phrase, "It tastes like ..."

So many of our memories are tied to tastes.

Like I said before, Pepsi Max always reminds me of history classes in college.

Which tastes trigger memories for you?

If this happens to you, it happens to your characters too.

It's a great thing to include within your characterization process.

Like smell, taste can serve as a trigger for memories.

For example, a husband who shared a love for apple turnovers baked by his deceased wife is reminded of her whenever he eats one.

Taste can also trigger emotions.

There've been times when I've eaten food that tasted so good I bounced with glee in my chair.

Writing Prompt A fun one.

Head down to your kitchen and finding something to eat that has a bit of texture.

Close your eyes, take a bite.

Focus closely as you chew, as the food rolls around your mouth, over your tongue and down your throat.

How does it taste?

How does it make you feel?

Meet We, at last, arrive at smell, though its place is no reflection on its importance when it comes to using the 5 senses in our writing.

The power of smells cannot be underestimated.

We smell things all of the time and those scents help to shape our impressions.

What can you whiff right now?

A smell helps us to form a judgement on things, such as whether something's okay to eat.

And crucially, smells can trigger vivid memories and emotions, vital tools to any writer.

Here's an example of using the sense of smell in writing from James Joyce's Ulysses of how smells (and tastes) can enrich prose.

It truly is one of the great examples of the 5 senses in writing.

"Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls.

He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liverlices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencods' roes.

Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented yarrow."

Writing Prompt Similar to the task above which involves a trip out to a busy place, like a park, sit down and have a good sniff.

Another good place to try is a coffee shop.

Lots of smells of roasting coffee and baking cakes in there.

Importantly, think about where those smells lead you in your mind.

Do associated words pop into your mind?

From your character's perspective, this is what their experience would be like too.

How do you describe the smell of rain in creative writing?

The technical term for the smell of rain is "petrichor".

Rain brings with it a freshness, a crispness, an earthiness.

It awakens the scents of the earth, the scents of the flowers, the scents of the grass.

Are There More Than 5 Senses? Now, something you may be wondering about is whether or not there are more than the 5 classic senses.

It is, in fact, believed that there is more than touch, taste, sound, sight, smell.

These golden 5 were defined by Aristotle because he could relate them to sensory organs.

They are sometimes known as the "five senses folk model".

But it depends on the manner in which you define a sense.

Newer approaches look at the number of sensory organs we have.

And many academics now counter the sixth sense as the vestibular system.

This relates to the inner ear and the impact it has on our balance and vision.

But other academics have gone further than this.

Some tweak the definition to include sensory receptors.

Now the skin, for instance, has at least four sensory receptors, relating to pain, temperature, touch and body awareness (otherwise known as proprioception).

So when someone asks how many senses do we have, it's all a matter of definition.

5 Senses Examples It's always useful to reinforce something freshly learned with some examples.

As we've seen above, vivid imagery is often used to help the reader feel immersed in the story.

So in this section, I've provided some descriptive writing examples from some bestselling books that make great use of the 5 senses.

"The tearing of flesh, as though a butcher were yanking meat from a flank.

The bubbling of liquids and the soft rasping of the cutting tools."

"Tooth & Nail, Ian Rankin "Stars spun across his vision and his head felt as if it were about to burst...

With difficulty, Hanno undid the chinstrap and eased off his helmet.

Cool air ruffled his sweat-soaked hair."

Hannibal: Fields of Blood Ben Kane "A cold wind was blowing out of the north, and it made the trees rustle like living things.

All day, Will had felt as though something were watching him, something cold and implacable that loved him not."

A Game of Thrones, George RR Martin "It was dark and dim all day.

From the sunless dawn until evening the heavy shadow had deepened, and all hearts in the City were oppressed.

Far above a great cloud streamed slowly westward from the Black Land, devouring light, borne upon a wind of war; but below the air was still and breathless, as if all the Value of Anduin waited for the onset of a ruinous storm."

The Return Of The King, JRR Tolkien.

This last one for me is a great example of a descriptive paragraph using the five senses.

If you'd like to find more sensory description examples, I recommend doing this simple exercise:

Pick up any book that you see, one ideally that you don't mind marking with a pen or highlighter.

Next, scan the pages, looking for descriptive scenes.

Whenever you see a sentence that refers to something is following you.

The sun has long since set.

The embers are dying in your fire.

And you begin to hear sounds close by...

You've just started a new job.

The office is big, labyrinthine.

On your way back from lunch on your first day, you get lost.

You open a door with stairs leading down.

You follow them.

Get further lost.

And the steps give way.

You awake in darkness to the sound of something growling.

You reach for your phone, turn on the torch...

There are a few writing prompts for you that focus heavily on the 5 senses.

See where they take you.

Adjectives For The Five Senses You can never have enough adjectives to help you describe the five senses.

Below, you can find a pretty simple list, but it serves as a great starting point.

From there you can add some of your own adjectives for the five senses.

Adjectives for the five senses | Image Credit - writingcity.com

When Should You Use A Sensory Description? For many writers, the toughest part is knowing when to use a sensory description.

As you may have heard, using too many adjectives and adverbs can slow down the flow of the writing.

So that leaves writers conscious about when to invest words in describing scenes.

However, there are certain points in a story that warrants a sensory description.

For example:

When describing a character - using sensory descriptions when describing characters can elevate the impression they give.

For instance, saying someone looked homeless is quite bland in comparison to describing how they smell, or how the coarseness of their hands.

Describing scenes - this is the most important moment to introduce some sensory description.

For instance, if you're trying to describe a battle scene in a fantasy book, in order to draw readers deeper into that scene, you're going to have to show them not just how the battlefield looks, but the cries of pain and terror.

The smells of the fearful, the dying, the dead.

The sensation of hacking another person down with a sword or axe.

There are so many details you can include, and all of them take your story to the next level.

When linking in memories - the five senses often provoke memories.

A smell, for instance, can transport us back years to a particular moment when we first experienced that smell.

These are definitely the key points in a story to introduce some sensory details in your writing, but be aware that it's not just limited to these instances.

Thank you so much for checking out this guide on using the 5 senses in writing.

I genuinely hope it's been of use to you.

Below, I've included some more guides on writing and writing tools you may find useful.

Join An Online Writing Group

People ask questions about using the 5 senses in writing, and if you've had one I sincerely hope this guide has answered them.

Or perhaps it hasn't.

Well, there's a place you could find those answers.

Everybody who joins my community of writers gains access to an exclusive online writing group.

It's a place you can share your writing and get feedback, discuss ideas, and above all, build friendships with fellow writers.

To join, simply click the button below.

In this final section, I've included answers to some commonly asked questions about writing with the senses.

Using The Five Senses In Writing - FAQs

Which sentence best uses sensory language to describe the setting?

"The icy wind rattled the ancient shutters upon the windows, stirring a shudder and setting every hair on her body on edge."

This sentence uses sensory language to describe not just how the setting looks (from the rattling ancient shutters we see it's an old possibly abandoned house), and crucially, we get a sense of how it feels to be in that setting, which is the main objective of using sensory language.

It feels eery, we feel the cold.

We're spooked.

What Are The 5 Senses In Writing?

Sensory description in fiction writing requires a writer to utilise the 5 senses - sight, sound, touch, taste and smell.

How do you incorporate the five senses in writing?

Incorporating the senses into your writing is simple.

First, focus on what your characters can see in the scene.

Then, one by one, think about what they can hear, smell, feel and taste.

Assort your various descriptions and pick out your most powerful few.

How are the five senses used in descriptive writing?

The five senses are often used to draw a reader deeper into the scene, to feel closer to the characters.

Writers do this by adding extra details focusing on the likes of touch and smell.

How do you find 5 senses examples?

The best way is to pick up your favourite book and highlight any sentences or paragraphs that utilise the 5 senses.

You'll then have a bank of sensory details examples to call upon whenever you need them.

What does sensory description mean?

A sensory description is one that includes sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

Using sensory details allows your readers to immerse themselves in the story and experience what the characters feel.

If you have any questions or need more examples of the 5 senses in writing, please contact me.

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