

REVISION TOOLS: Sensory Details

Sensory details are so much more than just what color the sky happens to be or the smell of fresh baked bread. Well-chosen sensory details add layers of meaning to the narrative and create emotional depth.

What you choose to focus on, or rather, what your character is focused on and how it affects their emotional state, is a great way to level up your writing and make that story really shine.

Many writers tend to rely heavily on sight and sound, especially during early drafts. But we have more senses than those, and adding a few of the others into the mix here and there can help the reader stay grounded and help them feel like they have been transported into the story, rather than sitting outside of it.

Here is a simple chart to use to remind yourself to use more than the basic senses of sight and sound.

Sensory Details



OLFACTORY/SCENT

What does it smell like to your viewpoint character?



GUSTATORY/TASTE

What might the character taste?



VISUAL/SIGHT

What visual details is the character noting/focusing on?



AUDITORY/HEARING

What sounds/noises are they taking note of?



TACTILE/TOUCH

What tactile sensations can you add? Go beyond their hands, to the skin, body, scalp, etc.



GUT/INSTINCT/SIXTH SENSE

What gut-level feelings might they have?



PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE:

Step 1: Pick a scene/setting in your work.

Step 2: List a minimum of three to five possible details for each sense. (The act of brainstorming here can uncover some real gems, so don't hold back!) For example, in a garden our character might

- SEE: flowers, a fountain, birds
- HEAR: birds chirping, splashing water, buzzing bees
- SMELL: honeysuckle, fresh air, manure
- FEEL: a warm breeze, moisture, thorns
- TASTE: fruit, fresh air, the tang of a poisonous plant
- SENSE: calm, restive, restless

Step 3: Now describe the sensory details through your character's lens.

- How does the character relate to the setting? (Are they breathing in the heady scent of flowers, or barely holding on as they recall a loved one's funeral?)
- How do the details affect them? (Is the weather working for or against their mood. Does the sunshine make them happy, or amplify their sour mood by seeming to mock them?)

Step 4: Choose the details that you feel are the strongest, the ones that really resonate, and add them to the scene or use them to replace others that aren't as strong.

TIPS:

- Keep your world in mind. Use world specific language.
- Consider tone and mood. Select your words accordingly. If you are trying to convey a dark mood and/or danger, don't give us details like bunnies and bowers, show us the thorny briars invading the boundaries and dark birds cawing from high branches.
- Work with and/or against your character's emotions. If it is stormy, is that dampening your character's cheerful mood, or matching it?

