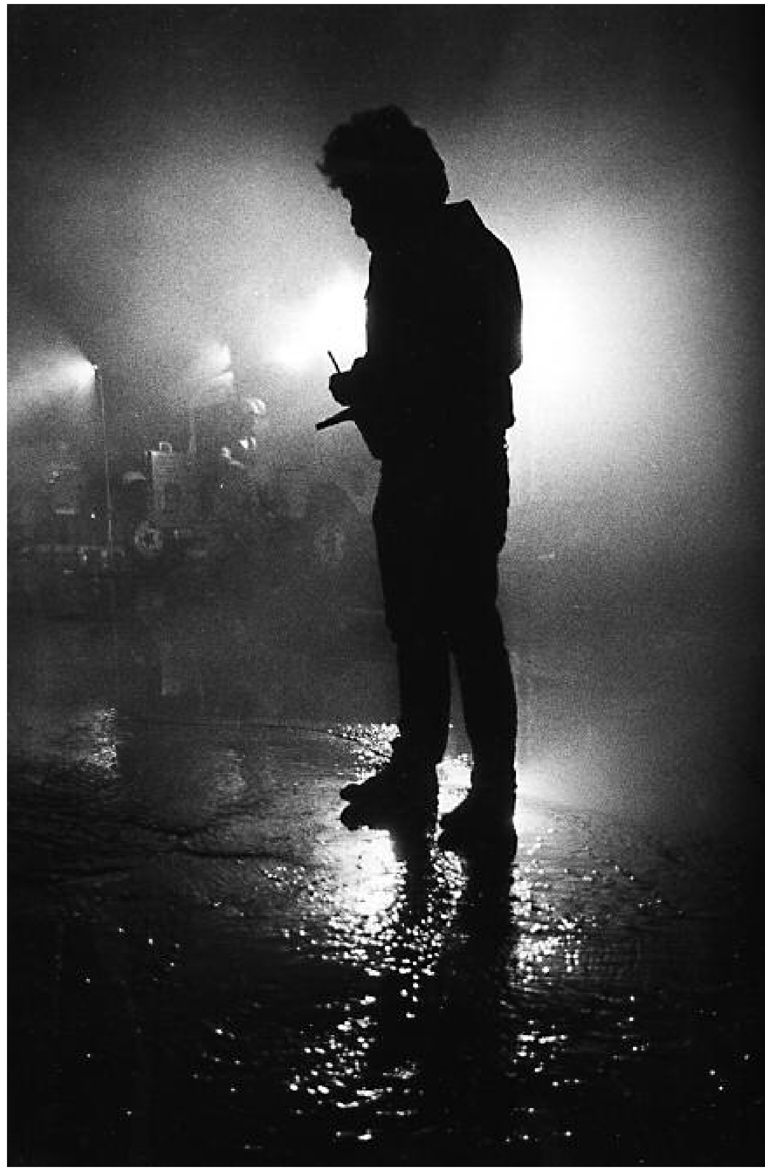


Observation

To bring news stories to life, you need to engage your senses — and the reader's, too.

There's an ancient adage that editors and reporters love to quote over and over: *Show,* don't tell.

Suppose you're covering a dorm fire. You talk to the fire chief, the cop, the students. They tell you about the blaze, the building, the damage — but where's the drama? The realism? The human cost?

Show, don't tell.

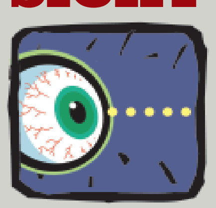
When you're at the fire scene, engage your eyes, your ears, your journalistic radar. Where are the victims? What are they doing? What are they wearing? Are they clutching pets? Possessions? Each other?

As a reporter, you're not simply a stenographer. You're an eyewitness, a spectator with a front-row seat. You're the eyes, the ears, the *senses* of the reader who visits the scene through the power of your words.

The ability to observe accurately — to record events so faithfully that details jump right off the page — is the secret to great reporting. In fact, it's the key to success in *any* kind of writing, which explains why so many successful novelists — Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Dorothy Parker, Ernest Hemingway, Carl Hiaasen — began as reporters.

Show, don't tell. So rather than tell you any more, we'll show you some classic examples.

SIGHT



Yes, it's time to retrain your eyeballs to notice the little things: the bald spot on the back of a man's head; the tattoos on a woman's hands; the exit wound behind the dictator's ear.

In the examples at right, notice how vividly the visual details capture what the reporter is seeing. Some of these descriptions seem almost too poetic to be real. But the attention to detail lets you view the scene as if you're looking through the reporter's eyes.

CHARLES WALLACE *eavesdrops on a pearl merchant in Bahrain:*

Hassan Arrayed opened a ragged square of red felt on the desk in front of him and lowered his face like a falcon swooping on its prey.

With a cackle and a gapped-tooth grin, Arrayed held his prize out to a woman customer who, as tradition still dictates in conservative corners of the Arab world, was enveloped in gauzy black silks down to her tattooed hands.

"This one is $6,000," he said proudly.

Clutched in Arrayed's hand was a lustrous pearl the color of Devonshire cream. The pearl, which caught the sunlight flooding in from the streets of Bahrain's gold market outside the stall, was the size of a grape.

TOM WOLFE *describes the hair of an aging American author:*

As we approach from the rear, we notice a bald spot on the crown of his head. It's about the size of a Sunshine Chip-a-Roo cookie, this bald spot, freckled and toasty brown. Gloriously suntanned, in fact. Around this bald spot swirls a corona of dark-brown hair that becomes quite thick by the time it completes its mad Byronic rush down the back of his turtleneck and out to the side in great bushes over his ears. ▼

MILTON BRACKER *describes the scene in Italy in 1945 after dictator Benito Mussolini was executed:*

Mussolini had changed in death, but not enough to be anyone else. His closely shaved head and his bull neck were unmistakable. His body seemed small and a little shrunken, but he was never a tall man. At least one bullet had passed through his head. It had emerged some three inches behind his right ear. There was another small hole nearer his forehead where another bullet seemed to have gone in.

As if he were not dead or dishonored enough, at least two young men in the crowd broke through and aimed kicks at his skull. One glanced off. But the other landed full on his right jaw, and there was a hideous crunch that wholly disfigured the once-proud face.

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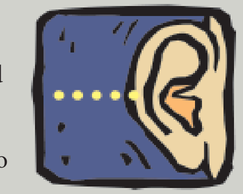
SOUND



Capturing sounds on the printed page isn't easy. In fact, you'll find some stories (say, a profile of a comic who does celebrity impressions) may be better suited for radio or TV if they're dependent on sound for their success.

Still, skilled writers employ all their senses to capture the smells, tastes and (yes) sounds of their stories. Notice how the descriptions at right range from subtle to extreme as they try to paint sonic pictures for readers.

TOM WOLFE *profiles a woman attending a new-age seminar in a California hotel:*

The trainer had said, "Take your finger off the repress button!" Let it gush up and pour out! . . . So she starts moaning.

"Ooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

And when she starts moaning, the most incredible and exhilarating thing begins to happen. A wave of moans spreads through the people lying around her, as if her energy were radiating out like a radar pulse.

"Oooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhh!"

So she lets her moan rise into a keening sound.

"Ooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhh-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

And when she begins to keen, the souls near her begin keening, even while the moans are still spreading to the prostrate folks farther from her, on the edges of the room.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeoooooooooohhhhheeeee-eeeeeeeeeooooooooooooh!"

So she lets her keening sound rise up into a real scream.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeaiaiaiaiaiaiaiaiaiaiaiai!"

And this rolls out in a wave, too, first through those near her, and then toward the far edges.

"Aiaiaiaiaiaiaiaieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeohhh-hhhheeeeeeeeeeaiaiaiai!"

And so she turns it all the way up, into a scream such as she has never allowed herself in her entire life.

"AiaiaiaiaiaiaiaAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRR-RRRGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!"

And her full scream spreads from soul to soul, over the top of the keens and fading moans —

"AAAAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGGHHHHaiaiai-aieeeeeeeeoooooohhhheeeeeaiaiaiaiaiaia-AAAAAARRRRRRRGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!"

— until at last the entire room is consumed in her scream.

SUSAN ORLEAN *describes an African record store in Paris:*

If you walk down the Rue des Plantes, you will at first hear just the usual rumbling and tootling and clattering sounds of a Paris street, and then, as you pass the open door of Afric' Music, you will be blasted by a few bars of a Congolese ballad, and as soon as you step past the door, the ballad will suddenly be out of earshot, and the Paris street sounds will resume, as if you had walked through a harmonic cloudburst.

JUSTIN DAVIDSON *reviews a classical musician in concert:*

The pianist Evgeny Kissin propelled himself stiffly onto the stage of Avery Fisher Hall on Thursday, looking rather as if his joints needed oiling. He dutifully bent his mouth into a labored and momentary smile, gave a quick jerk of his torso in lieu of a bow, and then sat at the piano where, in an instant, all his discomfort melted into power and control.

Watching the awkward young pianist plunge into music was like seeing a seal slip into water, and in the 40 mesmerizing minutes that followed, Kissin gave one of the most lissome and lyrical performances of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 that I have ever heard.

BILL BLUNDELL *wrote this lead to a story on the vanishing American cowboy:*

The lariat whirls as the man on horseback separates a calf from the herd. Suddenly, the loop snakes around the calf's rear legs and tightens. Wrapping a turn of rope around the saddle horn, the rider drags the hapless animal to his crew.

The flanker whips the calf onto its back, and the medicine man inoculates the animal. Amid blood, dust and bawling, the calf is dehorned with a coring tool, branded in an acrid cloud of smoke from burning hair and flesh, earmarked with a penknife in the ranch's unique pattern and castrated. It's all over in one minute.

DAVID RHODE *watches a street dentist at work in Pakistan:*

As Mr. Sajjad sat on a small stool on a pedestrian bridge over a set of railway tracks, Mr. Jameel pried out brown chunks of dead tooth and flicked them onto the red plastic tarp spread out under the stool. At one point, the amateur dentist lit up a cigarette to smoke as he worked. At another point, a locomotive passed under the bridge, belching black diesel smoke onto the instruments and into the patient's mouth.

The factory worker showed no sign of discomfort as Mr. Jameel filed down his false tooth. He did not even complain when his gums started bleeding. Throughout the ordeal, he winced just twice. Afterward, he admired his new tooth in a small hand-held mirror and thanked his dentist.

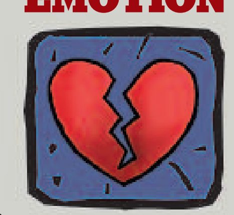
ACTION

Why are so many newspaper stories so boring? It's because nothing ever *happens.* There's no action.

If you want to write a dull sports story, for example, just quote the coach and spout some statistics. But if you want to bring that story to life, describe how the Big Play unfolded, how the touchdown got scored, how the players celebrated and the fans went nuts.

Verbs add *verve.*

EMOTION



It's not easy. Capturing the moods and emotions of strangers, without adding inappropriate goo or schmaltz, is terrifically difficult to do. And it's usually best reserved for the right moment in the right feature story.

But notice, in these examples, how the writers *show* you the scene, in simple and direct language, without *telling* you how to feel.

COREY KILGANNON *writes about Hermine Wilber, who has just undergone surgery to end a lifetime of deafness:*

"Are you ready?" asked the technician, named Sara Morton, who specializes in cochlear implants.

"Am I ready?" answered Mrs. Wilber, after reading Ms. Morton's lips. "55 years."

Then Ms. Morton held a piece of paper in front of her mouth so that Mrs. Wilber could not see what her lips were doing. "Bop, bop, bop," Ms. Morton said.

Right away, Mrs. Wilber repeated the sounds she had just *heard.* "Bop, bop, bop."

Everyone around her, all these people who loved her, started to cry.

"Come on," Mrs. Wilber said with a happy smile. "Talk to me."

Her oldest daughter, also named Hermine, put her hand gently over her mother's eyes and said words Mrs. Wilber had never heard before: "I love you, Mom."

Her grandson, Thomas, who is a teenager, tried to speak, but he was crying too hard with happiness to get any words out.

Her husband, Bill, walked up to her and said, softly, "I met you in 1946." It was the first time she had ever heard his voice. He asked her if he sounded as she had imagined. Yes, she said, his voice was low and strong.

BOB GREENE *describes the scene as a daughter visits her mother, who's dying of cancer:*

It was a Friday night. Her mother was in bed; she was hooked up to an oxygen tank by a long cord. The daughter climbed onto the bed next to her mother, just as she had as a little girl. The daughter sensed that her mother was thinking something but not saying it.

The mother looked over. She said the words:

"I just don't want to leave yet."

The two women both started to cry. They held each other, and the daughter could not tell who was rocking whom: the mother rocking the daughter, as in days long ago, or the daughter rocking the mother?

FOR TWO EXAMPLES OF STORIES USING DETAILED OBSERVATIONS, SEE **OREGON PAYS TRIBUTE TO ITS VIETNAM VETS** ▶ 202 AND **FOR THOSE CUT OFF, A LIFE PRIMEVAL** ▶ 213