

# Coming to Your Senses

## Layering in the Six Senses to Bring Your Story to Life

by Deborah Raney

E.L. Doctorow said, “Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader—not the fact that it is raining, but the feeling of being rained upon.” I've learned that one pass through my manuscript carefully layering in the six senses enriches the novel and helps my reader feel "rained upon."

### SOUND

The most obvious use of sound in a novel is dialogue. As you read through your scenes with sound in mind, consider if you've given each character's voice a distinct quality? A Southern drawl, a gravelly voice, a lisp or stutter—helps distinguish even minor characters.

Background noises are every bit as important in setting the tone of a scene, and helping the reader *experience* it. Close your eyes. What sounds might you hear in the setting you've created? Search for the words *listen*, *noise*, *soft*, *loud*, and eliminate a few in favor of more descriptive words. Or imitate a sound using onomatopoeic words: *whoosh*, *tick-tick-tick*, *chirrup-chirrup*, etc.

### SIGHT

Before characters ever speak (or at least *very* early in each scene) we need to be able to visualize them in their setting. This is done by “painting” a backdrop for the

reader. Read the opening lines in each scene with an eye to making sure you've set the stage for your reader. When you do that, everything that follows will play like a movie in your reader's imagination.

## SMELL

Think how many places you could identify by smell alone. Use that fact to add even more realism to each scene. And don't just tell what your characters smelled. Show how the smell *affected* your character: **The pungent scent of rubbing alcohol stung her nostrils.**

The object is to get the reader's nose to sting because you've painted such a vivid picture. Again, use creative, descriptive word choices like *acrid*, *pungent*, *aromatic*, *stench*, etc. This is where a good thesaurus is invaluable.

## TASTE

Taste conveys not only pleasure, as in the mouth-watering taste of savory food or the refreshment of peppermint or a cool drink of water, but it can also express emotion—the bitterness of bile in one's throat, the salty taste of tears or of blood from a cheek bitten in anger. A kiss has a distinctive and “emotional” flavor.

Other than to describe food, the sense of taste is probably the most neglected sense in literature. Infuse your scenes with deep emotion by layering in flavors in ways that reflect more than the obvious.

## TOUCH

Adding literal texture to your scenes helps your novel become a figuratively textured piece of work as well. Don't forget that your characters have sensitive skin and fingers that allow them to feel more than mere psychological "feelings." The velvety softness of a baby's skin speaks of much more than texture. The roughness of a man's work worn hand can invoke love or hate, depending on how you write it. Adding in those tactile sensations gives depth to your scenes and often becomes a metaphor for any emotion you wish to portray.

### **THE "SIXTH SENSE"**

The sixth sense, perhaps more than the other five, is what makes our characters most vivid and real to our readers. In the inspirational market, this sense is often considered to be that "still, small voice" we seek for confirmation of the rightness and validity of our actions. If you write fantasy or paranormal, that sixth sense might take the form of a spirit guide, mental telepathy, etc. In mystery or suspense novels, it could be the ultra-keen instinct of a detective. In matters of romance, it might be labeled "woman's intuition."

Whatever form it takes, that sixth sense incorporates deeper levels of complexity, intensity and mystery into any story.

### **A PINCH OF THIS, A PINCH OF THAT**

Like seasoning in a fine stew, too much of one spice might overpower the more important one, but with a judicious edit, purposefully sprinkling the six senses throughout your manuscript, you can breathe new life into your story.