



Self-editing: Come to your Senses!

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.”

Let’s look at how each of the senses can add necessary depth.

SOUND

The most obvious use of sound in your novel is dialogue. As you read through your scenes, have you given each character’s voice a distinct quality? A Southern drawl, a gravelly voice, a lisp or stutter—these things help distinguish even minor characters.

But noises in the background are every bit as important in setting the tone of your scene and can help 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—readers need to visualize them in their setting. This is done by painting a backdrop for the reader. Read the opening lines in each scene to make sure you’ve set the stage. When you do that, everything that follows will play like a movie in your reader’s imagination.

SMELL

How many places can you identify by smell alone? Your readers can do this, too. Use that fact to add realism to each scene. But 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 your reader’s nose to sting because you’ve painted such a vivid picture. Use creative, descriptive word choices like *acidic*, *pungent*, *aromatic*, *stench*, etc. This is where a good thesaurus is invaluable.

TASTE

Taste can convey not only pleasure—as in the mouth-watering taste of savory food or the refreshment of peppermint—but can also express emotion. Think of the bitterness of bile in your throat, the salty taste of tears or of blood from a cheek bitten in anger. A kiss also has a distinctive flavor, apart from its emotional impact.

Other than to describe food, the sense of taste is probably the most neglected in literature. Infuse your scenes with deep emotion by layering in flavors to 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, 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 more than texture. The roughness of a man’s work-worn hand can invoke love or hate, depending upon how you write it. Add in those tactile sensations to give depth to your

scenes and create metaphors for any emotion you wish.

THE SIXTH SENSE

Perhaps more than the other five, this sense is what makes our characters vivid and real. In the inspirational market, this sense is often portrayed as the “still, small voice” of the Spirit’s leading. If you write fantasy or paranormal, the 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, it incorporates deeper levels of complexity, intensity, and mystery into any story.

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

DEBORAH RANEY’S first novel, *A Vow to Cherish*, inspired the World Wide Pictures



film of the same title. Her books have since won the RITA Award, ACFW Carol Award, HOLT Medallion, National Readers’ Choice Award, Silver Angel, and have twice been Christy Award finalists.

After All, the newest book in her Hanover Falls Novels series, released in May from Howard/Simon & Schuster. Deb and her husband, Ken Raney, enjoy small-town life in Kansas.