



## SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 201

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### LESSON #4

#### Senses

It's time to get in touch with your elementary-school self to refresh your understanding of the five senses: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Most new writers tend to focus on one sense and ignore the rest. As an editor, it's your job to notice that and to help the writer see where more sensory details can be added, as well as which senses are overused. When authors can successfully incorporate all five senses, they create more relatable and engaging (i.e., more publishable) stories. Here's what we'll look at in this lesson:

- Engaging the Senses
- Overused Senses
- Sensory Faculties
- Comparisons

#### Engaging the Senses

To create compelling scenes that capture a reader's attention, authors need to engage all five senses. Not only will it help the reader visualize and sense what's going on, it naturally moves the story from telling to showing.

There are usually two camps when it comes to problems with sensory details: those who include none and those who focus on only one sense. It takes some skill and a conscious effort for a writer to use a good blend of all the senses. As the editor, it's your job to suggest areas for more sensory details, as well as point out when one sense is overused.

You'll also want to watch for authors who announce the sense they're going to write about (e.g., "he heard," "she saw," etc.). By announcing that a character heard or saw something, the writer is telling the reader which sense to engage. Instead, eliminate those announcements and suggest rewrites that *show* the senses. This will also deepen the POV, giving the reader a more intimate experience. Following are some examples:

### *Sight*

Mark waited outside for Cami. The door squeaked, so he turned and saw her step out of the house looking beautiful.

Instead of telling that Mark saw something, show the reader what he sees as he sees it. Then, instead of telling how Mark responded, show what he sees and how he reacts. A possible edit would be:

Mark waited outside for Cami. When the door squeaked, he turned. She stepped out of the house in a light blue dress that hugged every curve as her red hair hung around her shoulders, the ends brushing her waist. “Wow,” he said.

Removing *he saw* doesn’t hurt the scene or take anything away from it. In fact, it puts the reader right in Mark’s head. By describing what he saw and how he responded to it, the author lets the reader interpret Mark’s feelings, which increases the story’s impact on the reader.

### *Sound*

Caleb covered his ears. He heard the alarm ringing through his fingers. The constantly beeping alarm was getting on his nerves.

Instead of telling what Caleb heard, show the reader what he heard. Then, instead of telling how Caleb responded to it, show his response. A possible edit would be:

Caleb covered his ears.  
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!  
How could anyone sleep through that noise?  
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!  
His palms couldn’t stop the rhythmic scream from piercing his ears.  
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

There are other ways to rewrite this scene; this is just one possibility. However your author rewrites the noise, you want to make sure he or she eliminates *heard* and *sound*.

### *Taste*

Ella bit into the marshmallow. She didn’t like the taste at all.

Since we see the marshmallow going into Ella’s mouth, we know she’ll be tasting it (as opposed to seeing it), so there’s no reason to mention that she tasted it. Instead, show what she didn’t like about the taste. Put the reader into the character’s head, and let the reader experience everything as the character does. Here’s a possibility:

Ella bit into the marshmallow. The sugar oozed over her tongue, sticking to her teeth and coating her mouth in a gooey, uncomfortable mess.

Words like *oozed* and *gooey* project a negative vibe. Add them to *uncomfortable* and the author never has to say that Ella didn't like it. The description shows—in more detail—how Ella felt about it. Now suppose Ella liked the marshmallow. The description could read something like this:

Ella bit into the marshmallow. A sugar bomb exploded on her tongue, sticking to her teeth and coating her mouth in a melty, delicious mess.

Again, *taste* is never mentioned, but the sense is clear, as is Ella's reaction.

### *Smell*

The trash smelled terrible. Louise gagged.

This tells the reader what Louise thought of the scent, but what did it actually smell like?

Lime mixed with the stale musk of mold, covered with the sulfuric aroma of hard-boiled eggs, wafted from the garbage bag. Louise gagged.

By adding more description, the author can once again avoid having to name the sense used. It also creates a scene where the readers can imagine the scent and decide for themselves whether or not it was a pleasant aroma.

### *Touch*

Luke twisted a strand of Laura's hair around his finger. It felt so soft.

How soft? Soft like a baby's skin, or soft like goose down? The reader knows Luke is feeling with his finger (you don't hear with your finger), so *felt* can be cut. Suppose Luke is a farm kid. To strengthen the writing and deepen the POV, you could suggest an edit like this:

Luke twisted a strand of Laura's hair around his finger. Her dark hair took him back to his childhood on the family farm, to the slippery strands of corn silk that stuck to his hands as he helped his grandpa shuck corn.

These suggested edits are extreme and should be used judiciously. You can, however, offer one or two examples to help give your author an idea of how to show and not tell, but avoid the urge to rewrite every instance. Then you'll be book doctoring instead of editing, and you'll be adding your voice to the author's story. Offering a few examples, however, will give the author an idea of how to rewrite these descriptions to better engage the senses.

Note: Also look for senses that occur regularly throughout the manuscript. If you notice one sense or action happening a lot, use the "Find" function in Microsoft Word to see how often it occurs. Like pet words and phrases, some authors have pet sensory faculties.

### *Setting*

Incorporating the senses is the perfect way to show a novel's setting while eliminating telling. The location, season, and time period can all be shown through the use of the senses. Here's an example:

Summer 2007, New York City  
Mitch fanned himself. He felt his shirt sticking to his back as he listened to car horns beep. He could see lines of cabs for miles.

A rewrite might look like this:

Sweat rolled down Mitch's back as the late-morning sun cooked his head and neck. His shoes smacked the pavement as he walked down Fifth Avenue toward the Empire State Building, but the blaring car horns drowned out the sound. Exhaust fumes clogged his nostrils as cabs clogged the streets. Oblivious to the world, another man walked by staring at the screen of one of those new "smart" phones, whatever that meant.

Fifth Avenue and the Empire State Building immediately let the reader know where the story takes place. The late-morning sun cooking Mitch's head and neck gives an idea as to the temperature and season (either summer or unseasonably warm spring or fall). Finally, seeing a man with a new "smart" phone lets the reader see that this is a contemporary story but set in the early 2000s. Many of the senses are utilized, and the setting is created.

### *Overused Senses*

A common problem for authors is overusing one sense while ignoring the others. More often than not, the overused sense is sight. I once edited a historical romance set during a war. Every time a new soldier appeared—friend or foe, main character or secondary character—the author described the uniform, the shine of the buttons, and the soldier's hair. *Every* time. The first few times I read the descriptions I assumed the uniforms would somehow play an important part in the novel, but I quickly realized that the author was simply over describing unnecessary details.

There were two fundamental problems with her uniform descriptions:

1. She kept describing the sight of the same thing over and over again.
2. She spent time describing details that didn't advance the story.

When a reader spends a lot of time reading a description (either repeated descriptions or an unnecessarily long description), she assumes the description is important and that it serves a purpose in the story. When it doesn't, it can be frustrating, and it breaks the trust between the author and the reader. You don't want the reader skimming (or skipping!) pages because she doesn't know whether or not the information is going to be important.

Another example of overused senses occurs when the author shows the same routine every morning—she starts with the alarm clock going off, the character waking up, getting dressed, brushing her teeth and hair, then having coffee. While different senses are used, she shows the same thing every day.

As her editor, I didn't want to rewrite the scenes, but I did point out the redundancy. The reader shouldn't be able to predict what's going to happen. If you notice this in a novel you're editing, you might note something like this:

We saw the same thing happen yesterday morning. If it's important to start the scene in the morning, why not start it in a different location? You could start in the kitchen, showing the smells and sounds of making breakfast. If the action doesn't start until later in the day, you can skip the morning scene altogether.

## Sensory Faculties

I wasn't sure what to call this section. Technically, these aren't senses, but since they involve body parts that are typically involved in the senses, I thought I'd include the section here. Let me explain.

Often, you'll see characters who repeat the same action or rely on the same sense repeatedly. Characters will look at things, smile at people, or even combine actions that don't work together, often for no reason:

Leah smiled. "I'd like that."  
Pete offered his hand. "Follow me."  
Leah took his hand and smiled.

This happens all the time. Leah's already smiling, so we don't need to see it again. Either cut one of the smiles completely or show Leah doing something else.

Ben and Jerry sat in the booth across from each other.  
"It's a bad idea," said Ben. "No one likes pork rinds."  
Jerry looked at Ben. "Of course they do. Otherwise, they wouldn't make pork rinds."

There's no need to say that Jerry looked at Ben. They're sitting across from each other in a booth and having a conversation—where else would Jerry be looking?

“Whatever.” Aimee rolled her eyes and glared at her mother.

This is a case of combining two things that don't work. Did she roll her eyes or glare at her mother? She can't do both. Another example often happens in dialogue tags.

“Why do we have to go?” she asked frowning.

Have you ever tried to speak while frowning? It doesn't work very well. That can be fixed by changing the speaking tag to an action tag.

“Why do we have to go?” She frowned.

Watch for these redundancies or conflicting actions. When you can, offer suggestions for how the author might rewrite the section. At other times, just point them out so the author is aware.

## Comparisons

Similes, metaphors, and hyperboles are the most commonly used comparisons. In contemporary genre fiction, they can show a character's individuality, but they should be used appropriately and sparingly (unless it's a character trait, such as Biff Tannen). Let's start with a refresher in comparisons.

Similes: Comparisons using *like* or *as*

Her hair is as golden as wheat.

He's creative like a Pinterest mom.

He's as cranky as a toddler who skipped his nap.

Metaphors: A figure of speech that refers, for rhetorical effect, to one thing by mentioning another thing

“A mighty fortress is our God.”

My life is a train wreck.

“All the world's a stage, and the men and women merely players.”

Hyperbole: An exaggeration, not meant to be taken seriously

That bag weighs a ton.

I haven't eaten in six hours—I'm starving!

If I have to take that test, I'll die.

All of these paint word pictures that help readers visualize the story, but they should be used in moderation. Similes in every paragraph on every page become more distracting than helpful.

Another thing to watch for is mixed metaphors (or similes). Sometimes writers will try to be creative (and avoid clichés), so they write one-of-a-kind comparisons; unfortunately, they often end up writing mixed metaphors. A mixed metaphor compares two unrelated things. Unlike a well-written metaphor (that assigns the characteristics of one object to another, unrelated object), mixed metaphors create confusion by

- creating a word picture that people can't visualize;
- comparing an undefined object to something else; or
- combining senses.

Here are some examples of each and explanations as to why they don't work:

The ocean breeze blew across her skin, like swirling blue and green patterns.

A breeze is felt. Blue and green patterns are seen. This description doesn't give the reader something to clearly feel or see (what is a blue and green pattern supposed to feel like?). Instead, it causes confusion—should the reader imagine a touch or a sight?

Her eyebrows clashed together like a culminating thundercloud.

How does one thundercloud clash together (wouldn't there need to be two?), and what is a culminating thundercloud (how does it differ from a regular thundercloud)? How does this translate to someone's eyebrows—what should this look like?

The fresh scent of cut grass whirled around her, a warmth to her arms and face.

A scent can't physically warm a person. It could warm her heart or soul, but not her face.

The goal of using comparisons in a novel is to paint word pictures that give the readers things to imagine as they read the story. The comparison should help readers create their own mental setting. If you, as the editor, can't visualize what's being described, the reader won't be able to visualize it either. These descriptions don't work because comparing unrelated things or undefined objects doesn't create a description people can visualize—they create confusion.

When you run across confusing descriptions, resist the urge to rewrite them. If you're confused, there's no way to know for sure what the writer wanted to portray, so you'll have to rewrite it from your understanding/interpretation, which could be wrong. Instead, explain that the description is confusing, tell why, and suggest a rewrite. If these happen frequently, explain the first few, then let the author know you'll be noting *mixed metaphor*, *comparing senses*, or *confusing comparison* any time you see it in the future. This will save you time, as well as cutting back on the number of comments (which will be easier for the author to read through).

Sensory details can add depth to characters and settings but only when they're used well. Knowing what to look for and how to correct/suggest corrections aid you in helping your author create more engaging—and visual—novels.



## Lesson #4 Assignments

*You will need to complete both assignments to qualify for the Certificate of Completion.*

### Assignment #1

Read through these comparisons. Select at least five, find the problems with them, and suggest ways for the writer to correct the mistakes:

1. I don't think we should wait until the other shoe drops. History has already shown what is likely to happen. The ball has been down this court before and I can see already the light at the end of the tunnel.
2. Her saucer-eyes narrow to a gimlet stare and she lets Mr. Clarke have it with both barrels.
3. You could have knocked me over with a fender.
4. He was watching me like I was a hawk.
5. I'll get it by hook or ladder.
6. He's a wolf in cheap clothing.
7. They're diabolically opposed.
8. I knew enough to realize that the alligators were in the swamp and that it was time to circle the wagons.
9. He received a decease and desist order.
10. I wouldn't eat that with a ten-foot pole.
11. Take a flying hike.
12. I shot the wind out of his saddle.
13. There is no man so low that he has in him no spark of manhood, which, if watered by the milk of human kindness, will not burst into flames.
14. He's not the one with his butt in a noose.
15. A loose tongue spoils the broth.
16. She took a sip of the warm brew, savoring the way it curled down her insides like a comforting blanket.
17. It's all moth-eared.
18. I can read him like the back of my book.
19. From now on, I'm watching everything you do with a fine-tuned comb.
20. It's as easy as falling off a piece of cake.

### Assignment #2

Read through these descriptions. Offer suggestions/corrections as you would for a novel you're editing:

1. Lily looked outside. She watched the cars drive by as she listened to their thumping bass. The sound of her daughter's cry pierced the air. Lily wondered if it was time to call the police about the noisy drivers.
2. Miles laughed at his sister. "How can you help me?" Ella shrugged. "I can hold signs." Miles nodded his head as he looked for a pole. "That could work."
3. Matt picked up the sheets. They felt scratchy and stiff. His wife wouldn't like them. He'd have to keep looking.

4. Sloane smiled. The sun made everything look cheerful. She watched birds fly through the air. She smiled.