

Writing a Window Into Another World

Deepening Characterization

Ask: What does my character feel right now?

Become your character. Notice your present position and scan your entire body—head, neck, chest, back, stomach, buttocks, legs, feet, arms, hands.

Terms for various bodily sensations:

breathing—location, speed and depth;
position of body part in space; skin humidity; hot, cold;
tense, relaxed, big, small;
restless, calm; movement, being still;
dizzy; shivers, prickles, pulling, pressure; rotation, twist; contraction, expansion;
pulse rate, heartbeat; pain, burning, vibration, shaking;
weak, strong, sleepy, awake; yawning;
tears, crying; light, heavy; soft, hard;
tight, loose; crooked, straight;
balanced, unsteady; upright, tilted;
butterflies; shaky;
empty, full

Is your character comfortable? (Don't move.) How do you know? Which sensations indicate comfort/discomfort? Does she have an urge to change position? (Don't move yet.) Where does this urge originate? If she were to change position, what would she move first? Follow this urge back to the discomfort that produces it. Is neck tense, or is an area becoming numb? Are your fingers/toes cold?

Change position.

What alterations? Breathing easier? Pain/tension relieved? Feel more alert? Are your shoulders relaxed? Body generally warm or cool?

Change position again.

Try a new chair, stand up or sit on the floor, lean against the wall. Hold your new position.

Evaluate again.

Are you comfortable now, or not? Which bodily sensations tell you? tension, relaxation, warmth, cold; aching; numbness; breathing depth/location

Do you feel more awake since you moved?

Jot a few notes, using the language of physical sensation, tension, temperature, etc.

"In the chair, my shoulders tensed and my feet felt numb. Standing, my feet became warmer, and my arms seem more relaxed."

Use this to describe your character's visceral reactions and enliven each scene for your reader.

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Be sure not to discuss your hero's state of mind. Make it clear from his actions.

~ Anton Checkov (Letter to Alexander Chekhov, May 10, 1886)

When I used to teach creative writing, I would tell the students to make their character want something right away – even if it's only a glass of water. Characters paralyzed by the meaninglessness of modern life still have to drink water from time to time.

~ Kurt Vonnegut

It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does.

~ William Faulkner

My characters are quite as real to me as so-called real people; which is one reason why I'm not subject to what is known as loneliness. I have plenty of company.

~ William S. Burroughs

Characters must not brood too long. They must not waste time running up and down ladders in their own insides.

~ E.M. Forster