

## ~ Take a Good Look ~

*Our sense of sight is AMAZING!*

Almost 50% of our brain is involved in processing visual images. 70% of all our sensory receptors are in our eyes. Our eyes can take in a visual scene in 1/10 of a second. WOW.

We rely so much on our sight that we often use the verb *to see* as synonymous with *to understand* and *to know*. But in fact, all our eyes really perceive are colors, light and dark, and motion.

### DEVELOPMENT OF SIGHT

Infants have blurry vision for the first three months. Perhaps, this is nature's way of protecting the young brain from receiving too many unintelligible images. At about one month they start to see color. Before that it is a black, gray, and white world. At about three months, they start to see in focus. Because we have two eyes, they have "stereo vision" that means depth perception.

We see depth because each eye sees something slightly different. You can explore this effect, by holding a finger in front of you at arm's length. Close one eye and note what in the background is behind the finger. Without moving your hand, close that eye and open the other. Did what was behind the finger seem to move? That is called parallax and if you were in my science class (yes, I have taught science) I would show you how this discovery let astronomers figure out the distance to the stars back in 1838.

Low vision or blindness will affect a baby's development of social skills – being able to read faces and hand gestures is extremely important in developing emotional empathy and language understanding. It will also hamper development of motor skills such as walking up and down stairs. In adults, being nearsighted (not being able to see far) can have similar effects.

Today we have glasses and contact lenses, but as a severely nearsighted person myself since early childhood, I doubt that I would have functioned well in a society without corrective lenses – something to consider if you are writing ancient romance. Being farsighted on the other hand would have been a great advantage to a hunter who didn't have any need to read.

Side Note: (Sorry about this. Sharing this information is one of my life's missions.) Children's vision solidifies by age 5. Early reading before age 5 is linked to nearsightedness. Today, young children who rarely go outside and look at screens on phones and computers all the time are also very likely to become permanently nearsighted. Indeed, in Singapore over 90% of middle schooler are nearsighted. Being nearsighted is a handicap in life. (This is the woman who has

put in her contact lenses while huddling out of the wind behind a sheepfold in Greece) Keep those screen things away from your little ones!

We rely so much on our sense of sight that we tend to think that what we see is objective and real. But, as optical illusions show, our brain can be “tricked” by visual images. Here is a great site about optical illusions. <https://www.michaelbach.de/ot/>

Artists use perspective to trick our eyes into thinking a two-dimensional painting shows reality. Photographs also trick us into thinking we are seeing things in correct proportions and depth depending on the type of lens being used (just picture those selfies with the odd noses). Mirrors are the worst, showing us our “mirror” image.

## **VISION AND WRITING**

When we read, we create visual images in our heads. We picture the heroine’s dress. We see the hero’s house. We visualize the car speeding past. These visual images grow out of our own visual memory of things our eyes have seen.

In describing objects using the visual sense, it is the effect of color and light that is key. Any description that draws on the qualities of light and color or lack of it, are visual images. Without light, our visual sense ceases to work and becomes useless.

### **Seeing Color**

Colors like red are pure visual elements. Our eye is designed to differentiate between the wave lengths of light in the visible color spectrum. Most people can see about 150 colors. However, environment plays a part in how accurately we differentiate between shades and tints of the same color.

Not everyone sees the same. Synesthesia is the ability to see colors when hearing musical notes. People with migraines and epilepsy can see auras – halos of colors around objects. People who are colorblind may not see all the colors—perhaps seeing green and red as brown.

Any of these conditions may affect how you describe colors in your writing.

**To learn more about color visit these sites.**

Test how well you see colors <https://gizmodo.com/these-tests-will-tell-you-just-how-good-your-eyes-are-a-1826868420>

Color Blind Test <https://colormax.org/color-blind-test/>

Color Schemes <http://paletton.com>

Internet Colors <https://htmlcolorcodes.com>

## WRITING VISUAL IMAGES

Much of what we write in fiction relates to the visual sense. However, because writers rely on words rather than actual images, we need to be careful to describe fully. For example: What image do you see when you read this sentence?

*“Sarah wore a dress.”*

What you see and what I see may be totally different. The word *dress* instantly limits what we can imagine Sarah is wearing to the kind of dresses we are familiar with. Based on our experiences and culture, we might conjure up a garment that perhaps has a skirt joined to a top and which covers the torso and some or all of the legs. It may or may not cover the arms. The fabric may be black or white or polka dot. But if we have never seen a dress, we will not be sure exactly what Sarah is wearing.

As writers, therefore, it is important we make sure that our descriptions make sense to our intended readers. One way to do this is to add more visual description words, such as colors and shapes, and light and shadow effects.

## ADDING VISUAL DESCRIPTION

Specific descriptions help us to create an image in the readers’ minds. We allow them to fill in the blanks and help them to see what we want to ‘show’ them. Adjectives are the most common tools we use. The red car. The black cat. The happy man. These work, but adding in more detail, phrases, comparisons, and strong verbs and nouns will deepen the experience for the reader and raise your writing level to best-seller level.

I think this quote says it all:

*“If I tell you my character has grey hair, you will not see her. If I tell you she has a tiny scar at the upper left corner of her lip from which protrudes one grey whisker—you will make up the rest of her face with absolute clarity. If I tell you my character is waiting in a car, you won’t be ‘caught,’ but if I tell you he pushes his fingers down in the crack of the car seat where the*

ancient leather has pulled away from the seat frame, and pulls up a small coin purse with a faded note in it—you will be mine.” ~Pat Schneider *Writing Alone and with Others*

So, how does the sentence above change when more visual elements are added?

*“Sarah wore a red satin dress.”*

Now we have identified a color and a lighting effect. Satin is both a texture and a visual image. If we have touched satin before, we will imagine the smoothness of the fabric to our touch, but we also see the way the fabric catches and reflects light.

Do you have a better visual image now, or do you need more detail?

### **USING VISUAL CONTRASTS**

Without relevant experiences, the description above is no more meaningful than the simple sentence we started with. The third thing the writer can do to help the reader visualize is add a comparison or contrast.

*“Sarah wore a dress as red as the setting sun.”*

*“The fabric of Sarah’s dress was as smooth and shiny as polished silver.”*

### **ADDING THE QUALITY OF LIGHT AND SHADOW**

Or another choice is to describe the actual light and shadow or write about the quality of the light and how it affects one’s view.

*“The folds in Sarah’s dress created an interplay of pinks and reds as she moved.”*

*“The red of Sarah’s dress deepened to maroon as she moved into the shadow of the pines.”*

*“In the fog, Sarah’s dress was a mere smear of red in a sea of gray.”*

### **DESCRIBING SHAPES AND FORMS AND MOTIONS**

Our eyes are also capable of recognizing shapes, seeing three-dimensional forms, and noticing movement. These can be used to delineate an object or setting effectively.

*“Sarah’s V-necked red dress of feather-weight satin floated around her as she moved.”*

## DESCRIBING SKIN TONES

As romance writers we describe the colors of skin, hair, and eyes all the time. Recently there was a long discussion on the RWA PAN loop about describing skin color. For some reason, brown skin is most often described using food items and spices. Many people of color dislike this practice. Calling skin the color of food and edibles has two unintentional and offensive consequences. First of all, it fetishes certain skin colors. Second, it can also seem stereotyped, especially as food terms are most often applied to people of color, while the skin color of white people is rarely mentioned. The website *Writing with Color* provides useful information on skin color and race and stereotyping. <http://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com>

Here are some suggested skin color names

<http://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/96830966357/writing-with-color-description-guide-words-for>

Introducing characters with different skin colors

<http://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/post/94355184347/introducing-race-skin-color-naturally>

## DESCRIBING CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ELEMENTS

Another thing we need to be aware of is the influence of culture or time period on how the reader will visualize a scene or object, and how a character from another time or culture would describe the object. When we write “the wooden trencher,” the contemporary reader may not be able visualize what this is.

i.e. **A wooden trencher sat on the table.**

The trick is to add enough other detail to make the item clear. You might show the object in use.

**Sarah placed the ball of dough on the trencher her father had carved from the lightning-struck oak tree and began to knead the bread.**

Thought for Writers. Did you see that little word show? Showing is what a good writer does and it has to do with sparking the reader’s vision. The first trencher sentence is plain telling. The second **shows**. You get an idea of what a trencher is used for if you never heard the word before and a little backstory as well. When you show in your writing, you add in the character’s interaction or associations with that object or scene. If anyone has ever said something you wrote is telling, you can fix it by showing that object through the eyes of the character.

Here is longish description that shows. Notice how by the end of what could have been a boring list of what was in the observatory, you also know that her father has died and a bit about his personality. I have highlighted the visual elements. Can you picture them all? Are you surprised by how many there are? Visual elements make up most written descriptions.

Lucy snatched up the **letter** and hurried upstairs to the **observatory**. It was far too grand a name for such a **small space: two overstuffed chairs with frayed upholstery, a writing desk scarred by compasses and candle wax, and as many books as could be crammed onto the shelves** without causing them to spontaneously combust from the pressure. Her father's chestnut instrument cases—violin and oboe, untouched since long before his death—were stacked coffin-like on the sheet music shelves. In the far corner, a spiral staircase led up to the slate roof, where the brass seven-foot telescope waited patiently beneath covers until its silver mirrors could gather starlight once again. Waite, Olivia. *The Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* .

## DESCRIBING VIA POINT-OF-VIEW

When we are inside a character's head, we can only see what that character sees. If it is dark, then, unless the character is paranormal, very little can be described visually and the other senses must be utilized. Nor can the character see through walls or doors into another room or see what is behind them unless they move. Or turn to look. As you write, try asking yourself. "Can my POV character see this?"

As with the other senses, we do not respond to the millions of visual inputs bombarding us every minute. The same for our characters. Visual signals of danger will be reacted to first – a sudden flash of an explosion, a flickering of flame where it shouldn't be, an object hurtling from the sky, a sword swinging at our head, a police car's flashing lights, and so on.

Thought for Writers. Characters can use their eyes to scan an environment. That is what Lucy is doing in the Waite example above. But any sudden visual element that affects a character should be placed before the character's reaction. Avoid the use of *as* or *when* if they reverse this order.

Police lights flashed behind him. He pulled to a stop.

Not He pulled to a stop when (or as) police lights flashed behind him.

All other visual inputs our POV notice need to be carefully chosen. If the character is in a room you would not describe every item in it, but pick out the items that have a special meaning to the character, advance the plot, or give a hint of setting. In writing the description make clear it is in the character's POV by including the character interacting with the objects as in the Waite example above.

## **WHEN TO ADD VISUAL ELEMENTS TO OUR WRITING**

Color, shape, form, movement, light, and shadow are rich sources of description to draw on in our writing. Add visual elements to –

1. Describe a setting
2. Describe a person's skin, clothes, features
3. Make an object more important
4. Describe nature, natural objects, or the weather
5. Add emotion
6. Show a significant change in color, shape, or light that relates to mood or action
7. Heighten romantic scenes.

## **VISUAL RESOURCES FOR WRITERS**

### **Color Name Lists**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_colors:A-F](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_colors:A-F)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_colors:G-M](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_colors:G-M)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_colors:N-Z#Colors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_colors:N-Z#Colors)

### **Colored Light**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hbxy1W9O\\_Wk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hbxy1W9O_Wk)

### **Color and Mood**

<https://www.infoplease.com/color-psychology>

### **Shape Lists**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists\\_of\\_shapes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_shapes)

<http://char.txa.cornell.edu/language/element/form/form.htm>

## **OVERUSED WORDS**

*See* and *look* are two of the most overused words in writing. My rough drafts usually has hundreds. Check out the Moby Thesaurus for alternatives. <http://moby-thesaurus.org>

Questions? Just ask.

Happy Visualizing

### **EXERCISE 6 Sight**

Choose one object.

Sentence 1 Write a plain description.

Sentence 2 Show that same object by having a character interact with it using their sense of vision.

Challenge: Avoid using see or look.