

Writing a Snapshot



“Writing is knowing how to see. Writers have two lenses: a telephoto lens for big pictures and a lens a dentist would use. What they use to show the big picture is to use details they see with the small lens.”

Carolyn Chute

Writers have a special camera that they can point at the world and create snapshots that contain smells and sounds as well as colors and light. Writers create a picture with words of moments. Instead of “Dad took me ice fishing.” Try “Dad knelt beside me by the ice hole, his hand in the icy water reaching for the perch that slipped back in.”

Maniac had seen some amazing things in his lifetime, but nothing as amazing as that house. From the smell of it, he knew this wasn't the first time an animal had relieved itself on the rugless floor. In fact, in another corner he spotted a form of relief that could not be soaked up by newspapers.

Cans and bottles lay all over, along with crusts, peelings, cores, scraps, rinds, wrappers—everything you would normally find in a garbage can. And everywhere there were raisins.

As he walked through the dining room, something—an old tennis ball—hit him on top of the head and bounced away. He looked up—into the laughing faces of Russell and Piper. The hole in the ceiling was so big they both could have jumped through it at once.

He ran a hand along one wall. The peeling paint came off like cornflakes.

Nothing could be worse than the living and dining rooms, yet the kitchen was. A jar of peanut butter had crashed to the floor; someone had gotten a running start, jumped into it, and skied a brown, one-footed track to the stove. On the table were what appeared to be the remains of an autopsy performed upon a large bird, possibly a crow. The refrigerator contained two food groups: mustard and beer. The raisins here were even more abundant. He spotted several of them moving. They weren't raisins; they were roaches. (1990, pp. 131–32)

Ma kissed them both, and tucked the covers in around them. They lay there awhile, looking at Ma's smooth, parted hair and her hands busy with sewing in the lamplight. Her needle made little clicking sounds against her thimble and then the thread went softly, swish! through the pretty calico that Pa had traded furs for.

Notice how Ingalls Wilder zooms in closer to her subject with more particular physical detail in each sentence. I sometimes tell students that details are boxes inside boxes. One detail unlocks several others, and so on. Laura Ingalls Wilder begins by looking at Ma and ends up dwelling on Ma's hands sewing. This telephoto quality becomes sharply apparent when we convert this snapshot back into the questions Laura Ingalls Wilder may have asked in her mind as she wrote this passage. Here's what I came up with.

- What did Ma do to put the girls to bed?
- What did the girls look at?
- What did Ma's hair look like? How was it parted?
- What were Ma's hands doing?
- How much light was in the room?
- What did the needle sound like when it hit against the thimble?
- What did the thread sound like when it went through the calico?
- Where did the calico come from?

Laura Ingalls Wilder's wonderful books are full of these moments where the smallest detail like a needle clicking against a thimble brings an entire world alive in the reader's mind. Making students aware of the thought processes of a master writer is a wonderful way to model craft for their own writing.

In this chapter, we will go deeper into different types of detail and the value of discerning the differences in the student's reading and writing.

Alisa Johnson is a sixth grader at Mallet's Bay School in Colchester, Vermont. Her snapshot of entering the house after a morning of sledding is packed with the same type of well-observed physical detail we've seen in the works of the masters:

I went inside. The smell of hot cocoa flowed throughout the house. The fire crackled in the small red and brown bricked fireplace. My mother was stirring the beef soup. My two year old brother was quietly playing with wooden blocks that had little letters carved in them. My father sat playing a slow, sad song on his beautiful country guitar. I took off my parka and hung it on the brass coatrack. My mother gave me a bowl of hot beef soup and cocoa. The broth felt warm running down my throat. The feeling of warmth spread all over me.

Alisa understands the power of physical detail to create a mood. She could have just written, "I went inside and it was warm and wonderful and everyone was there," but then we wouldn't see her brother playing quietly with his blocks or hear her father playing the slow sad song on his country guitar. We wouldn't smell the hot beef soup or the cocoa. We wouldn't feel the warm broth running down her throat. Learning to write in physical detail is often the process of slowing down our senses and truly observing the world around us. Building on the ability to dig for details, the following exercise teaches students to observe moments in *closer* physical detail.

Another way is to simply read great literature often pointing out the qualities of craft we have discussed. When I read snapshots to students I usually ask them this question: "What detail sticks with you the most?" Think about this as you read the next snapshot of a baker from the short story, "A Small Good Thing" by Raymond Carver.

The baker, who was an older man with a thick neck, listened without saying anything when she told him the child would be eight years next Monday..The Baker wore a white apron that looked like

a smock. Straps cut under his arms, went around back and then to the front again where they were secured under his heavy waist. He wiped his hands on his apron as he listened to her. He kept his eyes down on the photographs and let her talk. He let her take her time. He'd just come to work and he'd be there all night, baking, and he was in no real hurry. (1983)

For me it's the way he wipes his hands on his apron as he listens. I can see this big guy standing, smearing flour on his apron as he talks to her. This one detail makes the baker come alive for me. For you it might be the baker's thick neck or the way he doesn't look up from the photographs of birthday cakes as the woman talks to him. Like Laura Ingalls Wilder, Raymond Carver gives us many physical details about his subject and each detail brings a little more life and another chance for the reader to be drawn in. Look at the way Jerry Spinelli makes a dilapidated house come alive in his young adult novel *Maniac Magee*:

She was sitting by the fire with her head down, looking at the dog. As she was looking she was petting the sleeping dog with a brown and shiny coat. The dog was regular size sitting next to her with the face of the dog on its side. She was being warmed by the warm fire in the olive and black stove. She was sitting indian style with her other hand on her lap holding a cigarette. She seemed to be thinking hard about something, something important to her. Maybe her children, maybe her dog. No one knows what.

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Pops always worked hard. Tall and powerful, he sunk the shovel into the ground and turned over the soil. "We'll have pumpkins right here in the fall. How does that sound?" he declared. The young boy digging with a small Government Issue army-trenching shovel nodded his agreement but kept digging. Uncle Carl long gone now had brought the shovel back from World War Two, and the young boy felt useful with it in his hands. Pops breathed heavy as he took off his soiled cap and wiped the sweat off of his brow. The midday sun was hot and the air was still. Placing his heavy work boot on the heel of his grown up shovel, Pops sunk the blade deep into the ground and made tilling the soil look easy. The young boy trying to emulate him met with varying results but labored on with the thoughts of colossal orange pumpkins dancing in his head. The old man and the boy looked up to see his older brother chucking dirt bombs at the garage. He had given up on this project long ago, finding throwing the exploding earth less painful and more entertaining. Pops looked down at his still digging grandson and their eyes met. He gave him a smile and a wink. The young boy dug harder.



Jason was on one knee gasping for breath. Robert was next to him on his back, his huge chest heaving up and down. I was barely standing, bent over at the waist, my hands resting on my knees. I could hear myself breathing, desperately trying to get oxygen. Steam was rising from our huddled mass.

Rugby Practice Akin

