

Imagery in Literature

Curriculum: NOVICE and ADVANCED

Created by: Dar Bagby

Definition: Imagery is a process wherein an author provides words and phrases relating to the reader's physical senses and thereby creating ideas or "images" in his/her mind; it draws the reader into the work by expressing and evoking emotion.

Goals: 1) Be able to recognize the use of imagery in others' writing.

2) Be able to write examples of imagery.

Tools: 1) a picture or photo of something old, something that makes noise (e.g., bell, clicker, baby rattle, etc.), chocolate (e.g., candy bar, instant cocoa, etc.), stick of gum, a cotton ball, something that moves (e.g., a wind-up toy, a toy car, etc.), a picture or photo of a person in distress (e.g., starving, sick, etc.)

2) a copy of the HANDOUT for each enthusiast

Ice Breaker: Using the seven items from #1 in **Tools** above, go around the room and allow each enthusiast to examine them one at a time. Ask them which of their senses each of the items evokes. Tell them, "The sensory responses each of you experienced are necessary to draw your reader into your story. But the reader won't have the actual items, so it's your job to provide words that take the place of those items. A reader can't actually feel the softness of a cotton ball or hear the sound of a bell or smell the chocolate, so you have to provide the imagery through your words."

Lesson

Distribute the HANDOUT; encourage the enthusiasts to follow along and take notes on the HANDOUT sheets.

I. The purpose of imagery in writing

- A. To give the reader a frame of reference to something in the story
- B. To generate a graphic presentation of a scene in the reader's mind
- C. To enhance the reader's imagination
- D. To provide the reader with a more realistic vision of the events and characters
- E. To provoke an emotional response
- F. To make the story more interesting for the reader
- G. When called for in the unfolding of a story, imagery adds symbolic meaning to the text
- H. If done well, it can put the reader right into the action as opposed to being merely a

spectator

II. Visualizing

- A. Provide descriptive words and phrases that represent objects, ideas, or actions. (e.g., The street was darker than I thought possible, and the night air was closing in around me, heavy and riddled with smells I couldn't identify.)
- B. Use figures of speech. (for more detailed information on the figures of speech below, go to the LITERARY TERMINOLOGY glossary at the back of this curriculum)
 1. simile – comparing two different objects by using the words “like” or “as” (e.g., The lamb's coat felt **as** soft as cotton when I stroked it.)
 2. metaphor – compares without using “like” or “as” (e.g., The lamb's cottony coat was pleasant on my fingers as I stroked it.)
 3. personification – animals, inanimate objects, and ideas are given human characteristics (e.g., Sylvia Plath's "The Moon and the Yew Tree," in which the moon "is a face in its own right, / White as a knuckle and terribly upset. / It drags the sea after it like a dark crime.")
 4. onomatopoeia – the sound of a word is similar to the noise it makes (e.g., whoosh, buzz, plop)
 5. allusion – a reference to a person, place, or event without direct identification
 - a. the author assumes that the reader will recognize the source (i.e., has enough awareness and level of education to be familiar with it)
 - b. often refers to mythology, historical events, legends, biblical references, geography, etc. (e.g., “You may be extremely powerful, Major, but don't try **parting the Red Sea!**”)

III. Seven types of imagery

- A. **Visual** imagery allows the reader to “see” an image in his/her mind. (e.g., The old tree, its bark chipped and peeling, its leaves shrunken and withered, reached its branches upward to the passing clouds with a plea for one small burst of moisture.)
- B. **Auditory** imagery allows the reader to “hear” sounds. (e.g., The screech of the train's wheels on the track, like a hundred-thousand fingernails on a blackboard, made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.)
 1. Onomatopoeia is often used to portray auditory imagery, such as the word “screech” in the above example
 2. A simile “like a hundred-thousand fingernails on a blackboard” was also used in the above example
- C. **Olfactory** imagery allows the reader to “smell” aromas and scents. (e.g., The odor of a skunk wafted through the car window, and I was reminded of the sickening smell that my Boston terrier, Windsor, brought with him into the dining room after encountering one of the same animals.)
- D. **Gustatory** imagery allows the reader to “taste” things. (e.g., He bit down on a section of the orange, and the sweet, refreshing juice squirted into his mouth.)
- E. **Tactile** imagery allows the reader to “feel” the texture of certain things (e.g., Crystal ran her hand over the baby's fine, silky hair.)
- F. **Kinesthetic** imagery allows the reader to conjure up visions of movement, such as

actions of characters and objects. (e.g., The jaguar slunk through the underbrush, slithering along like a serpent, barely visible as it passed through the branches and tufts of grass.)

- G. **Organic** imagery allows the reader to feel the same things a character feels (e.g., My mouth is parched, my throat feels as if it's swollen shut, and my tongue seems to be glued to the inside of my teeth.)

IV. Use imagery carefully in your writing

- A. Too much can cause your story to be overwhelming, even to the point of seeming silly
B. Too little can cause the text to be boring

Activity: Have the enthusiasts identify the various types of imagery in the examples at the bottom of the HANDOUT.

Answer key

1. Lydia turned to go back into the house, waving over her shoulder to her grandmother who was backing out of the driveway in the old Chevy. The squeal of tires on the pavement, followed by crunching metal and shattering glass, caused Lydia to whirl back around. *B. Auditory*

2. The odors of antifreeze, gasoline, and the pungent smell of burning rubber filled her lungs as she gasped. *C. Olfactory*

3. She was aware of the increased pounding of her heart within her chest, the roaring blood surging in her ears, and the background noise of someone screaming, but the outside world had taken on an eerie silence. *C. Organic*

4. Everything went into slow motion. She began to run down the sidewalk but felt her feet and legs being pulled down, as if in quicksand. She thought, *Why can't I move any faster?* "I'm coming, Granny!" Her voice was low-pitched, and the words came out slowly, each syllable taking endless moments to form, as if it were playing at the wrong speed. *D. Kinesthetic*

5. Lydia was shocked that the windshield of the old Chevy was crystal clear. Then she realized there was no windshield, at least not one intact; it lay in shards all around the driver's side of the car. The roof was buckled, and the hood was standing straight up on its side, supported by a single hinge. The car was straddling the center line in a northwest-southeast position, and the passenger side of the vehicle sat higher than the driver's side. Pink-tinged water poured from under the engine. Then it hit her: *Where is Granny?* Her first thought was that her grandmother had somehow been thrown from the car and was lying on the street. She looked around and called to her again, "I'm here, Granny! Where are you?" *B. Visual*

6. She heard no voices and was glad the screaming had stopped. It dawned on her that it was her own screaming she'd been hearing. She stepped up to the car, the bits of glass on the tarmac filling the treads of her shoes, and grabbed the door handle; the door opened with no resistance. Her grandmother was slumped over in the seat. Lydia reached out and pulled her up to a sitting

position, feeling the thick, sticky blood that was dripping down her grandmother's arm. Lydia scraped the once-white, now blood-red hair from her grandmother's face and felt the gash just in front of her ear, oozing dark life. She jerked her hand away in disgust. *D. Tactile*

7. She forced herself to reach down once more to feel for a pulse in her grandmother's neck; there was none. Without thinking, she put her hand to her mouth and was overtaken by the rusty, metallic taste of blood. *A. Gustatory*

Discussion:

- 1) As a reader, why do you like being drawn into the action rather than being an outsider looking in at the things going on?
- 2) Why do you feel it's important to identify with the protagonist?
- 3) Readers tend to enjoy a story more if the imagery evokes emotions. Why do you suppose that's the case?

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IV. Use imagery carefully in your writing

- A. Too much can cause your story to be overwhelming, even to the point of seeming silly
- B. Too little can cause the text to be boring and dull

Read the following examples and decide which type of imagery is **most prominent** in each, then circle the letter of your answer.

1. Lydia turned to go back into the house, waving over her shoulder to her grandmother who was backing out of the driveway in the old Chevy. The squeal of tires on the pavement, followed by crunching metal and shattering glass, caused Lydia to whirl back around.

- A. organic B. auditory C. kinesthetic D. olfactory

2. The odors of antifreeze, gasoline, and the pungent smell of burning rubber filled her lungs as she gasped.

- A. visual B. tactile C. olfactory D. kinesthetic

3. She was aware of the increased pounding of her heart within her chest, the roaring blood surging in her ears, and the background noise of someone screaming, but the outside world had taken on an eerie silence.

- A. tactile B. auditory C. organic D. visual

4. Everything went into slow motion. She began to run down the sidewalk but felt her feet and legs being pulled down, as if in quicksand. She thought, *Why can't I move any faster?* "I'm coming, Granny!" Her voice was low-pitched, and the words came out slowly, each syllable taking endless moments to form, as if it were a vinyl record playing at the wrong speed.

- A. visual B. auditory C. olfactory D. kinesthetic

5. Lydia was shocked that the windshield of the old Chevy was crystal clear. Then she realized there was no windshield, at least not one intact; it lay in shards all around the driver's side of the car. The roof was buckled, and the hood was standing straight up on its side, supported by a single hinge. The car was straddling the center line in a northwest-southeast position, and the passenger side of the vehicle sat higher than the driver's side. Pink-tinged water poured from under the engine. Then it hit her: *Where is Granny?* Her first thought was that her grandmother had somehow been thrown from the car and was lying on the street. She looked around and called to her again, "I'm here, Granny! Where are you?"

- A. organic B. visual C. tactile D. gustatory

6. She heard no voices and was glad the screaming had stopped. It dawned on her that it was her own screaming she'd been hearing. She stepped up to the car, the bits of glass on the tarmac filling the treads of her shoes, and grabbed the door handle; the door opened with no resistance. Her grandmother was slumped over in the seat. Lydia reached out and pulled her up to a sitting position, feeling the thick, sticky blood that was dripping down her grandmother's arm. Lydia scraped the once-white, now blood-red hair from her grandmother's face and felt the gash just in front of her ear, oozing dark life. She jerked her hand away in disgust.

- A. visual B. olfactory C. kinesthetic D. tactile

7. She forced herself to reach down once more to feel for a pulse in her grandmother's neck; there was none. Without thinking, she put her hand to her mouth and was overtaken by the rusty, metallic taste of blood.

- A. gustatory B. auditory C. visual D. organic