

Feeling and Reflecting

Language is never neutral, and literary language least of all. Even a simple description carries an emotional charge and implies some kind of opinion about its subject.

Whether consciously or not, a writer always has designs on the reader. The aim of any piece of writing is to inspire thoughts and feelings in the person who reads it.



C W Cope, 'Palpitation', 1844
Museum no. FA.52

Feeling

The best writing arouses a powerful response in the reader. The energy that drives such writing comes from the writer's own response to his or her theme.

There are many reasons why the sight of an object may stir up potent feelings. Perhaps it is beautiful, or appealingly grotesque. Perhaps it carries some symbolic meaning; perhaps it has associations that touch us in some way. Maybe it reminds us of old memories. It may represent or allude to a scene from a story that moves or intrigues us. All these things and more may be at work.

In order to write effectively, we must be prepared to tap into our deepest emotions. For some people this is instinctive and easy. For others, this may require a more deliberate effort. It may take time and mental quiet for a full emotional response to surface.

Reflecting

The best writing also contains insights: it illuminates its subject for us.

Sometimes the writer's thoughts on a subject are expressed explicitly. Often, they are left implicit; they work on the reader's perception through symbols and associations. Sometimes both kinds of expression are found in the same piece of writing.

We gain insights into our chosen subject when we take the time to reflect on it. Sometimes insights come to us spontaneously. At other times we have to tease them out and work on them to develop them.

They don't have to be Great Thoughts about Life. Often they may be witty or playful, ironic or paradoxical. They may be expressed in deliberately ambiguous language, or in a deceptively casual, throwaway manner.

However, they ought to offer an interesting, distinctive way of looking at the subject: your own way of looking at it.



'The Skeleton Dress', Elsa Schiaparelli, 1938, Museum no. T.394-1974

Starting off

One way of starting off is to meditate quietly on your subject and note down everything that occurs to you.

Let go of all your immediate preoccupations and keep your subject in the forefront of your mind. Don't strain for great thoughts or especially fine phrases: just aim to keep the ideas flowing and jot them down as they come up.

Call to mind all the associations that your subject has for you. Don't be concerned if these seem very personal, and even eccentric. Don't try to be too rational about this whole process. Just let the words well up. If something emerges that seems irrelevant or even nonsensical, write it down regardless. At a later point you may be able to figure out how it fits in.



Teddy Bear, Merrythought Hygienic Toys, about 1935, Museum no. MISC.148-1976

Does your subject possess any symbolic associations? Many of the things in museums are symbols of some kind. Here are some examples:

- A sceptre is a symbol of the power of a ruler
- An image of a skeleton symbolizes death
- A clock may be viewed as a symbol of time

Perhaps what you are planning to write is a poem. If so, it becomes particularly important that you aim to express your thoughts through images (similes and metaphors). Ask yourself: what is this like? what does it remind me of? Images have their place in other types of creative writing too.

The result of all this is likely to look like an unstructured mess. Don't let this worry you. What you are producing is raw material, from which you are going to shape your finished work.

Exercises

These exercises offer some more structured ideas for producing raw material you can use in your writing:

- Objects and memories
- Memory poetry engine
- Concrete and abstract images