

# Immersive Description In Fiction Writing

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*Based in part on my writing experience, education, study and research, and as-Editor work.*  
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Immersive Description in fiction prose is an all-important aspect of good writing and good storytelling. However, it is, unfortunately, the bane of many, if not most, writers, for whom it does not come naturally.

There is often a decided lack of a proper amount of detail and description in beginning and amateur writer's fictional prose, and too often in that of more advanced and experienced writers, as well. This can have a deleterious affect on our writing and storytelling. The tendency for most writers seems to be to write minimal description, at best, if that. *So we must force ourselves* to include detailed description of characters, locations, and objects to make our writing and stories better. And usually the more description the better. Few writers will have to worry about including too much description. (if you do, your editor will help you with that)

There are as many writing styles as there are writers, with some ability to group them into categories and sub-categories for those that are similar and similar enough. And I suggest there are very few absolutes in fiction writing. Different people will make different claims about this. Many claims that are presented as "absolute" and "fact" are actually more opinion. (you do have to consider the source, of course) So know that any suggestions provided herein are just that – suggestions. And encouragements. Sometimes more strongly worded where deemed necessary.

The reason description is important, especially "enough" description, other than obvious reasons, is that it makes your story more readable, memorable, and enjoyable, and less likely to be received as "stark", "sterile", "uninteresting", and even "shallow" (or, worse, "boring" or "unreadable"). It also prevents "blob characters" (**burn** your characters into your reader's mind), hard-to-visualize, "where-am-I?" locations, and "random (forgettable/forgotten) objects". (some characters, locations, and objects are obviously of more importance in your story than others)

Remember: Fiction prose is not nonfiction essay, article, or technical writing, or script/screenplay writing, so your fiction writing should not read like those forms. It is also not like someone telling someone else what they saw happen while they are having a discussion over coffee. This type of writing can be described as 'laundry list' or 'grocery list' writing – first this happened, then this happened, then that happened, then we went over there.... Which is different from prose fiction and good storytelling, which should generally be more "flowery", and peppered with descriptive detail.

For example, if you were telling someone about something that happened to you the other day, you would most likely not tell it like this:

The dawn broke early that morning like a God spreading his crimson anger across the eastern sky. An otherwise azure firmament was a clear blue pond enveloping the world. Melodious songs of birds singing in the dew-drenched trees were a joy to the heart, and the leaves were a thousand shades of green. When I spied Tom, he was standing in a relaxed repose, his attention on some unknown object he held intently in his hands. I approached cautiously, not wanting to startle him like a rabbit from the underbrush.

If you did do that, you would probably receive a laugh in response. This style could be used as a humorous situational telling of a personal story. However, read in a fiction story, the reader's response is more likely to be one of 'what wonderful imagery', if conscious, or simply, 'I like this story', if subconscious.

Following are two sections of a story written in two different “styles” (if you will). The first can probably be best described as containing minimal description. (some, if not most, knowledgeable and experienced writers and teachers and so forth would probably describe it as such, *if that*) The second contains what can best be described as Immersive Description, and should probably be more what most writers should shoot for. Comparing the two should make it clear and obvious what the difference is.

Mary pulled up in front of the grey house with white trim and stopped. She turned off the engine, and without the noise the neighborhood was noticeably quiet. Looking in the rear view mirror, she primped her blonde hair to make sure she looked presentable. With a sigh, she opened the car door and stepped outside, then closed it and looked around. No people were in sight and it was just as quiet outside as inside the car. This seemed odd for a Sunday afternoon.

The gravel crunched under her feet as she walked around the front of the car and started up the walkway toward the house. It was set back and had a small front lawn, with flowering bushes in front. The bright red color of the flowers contrasted with the neutral coloring of the house, and they scented the air. Then she was across the small porch and at the front door.

Mary hesitated a moment before knocking, made three sharp raps, then waited to see if anyone would answer. Apprehension seemed to fill the air as she stood there. Then the door knob started to turn slowly.

Not bad, really, but not particularly "good" fiction writing, either. Probably best described as (minimally) “adequate” (again, *if that* – which is probably NOT what most writers should be shooting for).

**Contrasted to this:**

Mary Phillips spotted the house she was looking for and slowed her car. She pulled off the pavement onto the shoulder of the road and the dirt and gravel crunched under the tires. The car made a short skid, even though she had tried to stop properly. She never was a pedal-to-the-metal driver, and tended to be more of a careful, defensive driver. So the unintentional skid slightly irritated her — probably because she wasn't in the best mood, as it was.

Cement sidewalks had not been installed in this part of town as of yet, which gave the suburban landscape more of a rural look and feel. The neighborhood was not sparsely populated, however, and fairly well-kept houses on small lots installed next to each other filled the surrounding blocks of this sub-community. Probably not a bad place to live, or raise a family, if that was your *thing*. It was definitely not hers. A city girl is a city girl through-and-through.

She glanced down the street as she turned off her car. For a Sunday afternoon, the street was too quiet. No children playing, or heard, no one mowing their lawn, no couples taking casual lover's strolls, no other traffic. She switched off the ignition and the engine turned over a couple of more times, the car seeming to not want to stop here. That reminded Mary that it was past time to take her Honda Civic in for a tune-up. An oil change wouldn't hurt either. The 'click-schick' of the keys being removed from the ignition seemed an ominous sound, and her skin prickled with goose flesh. She ignored the sensation as best she could, almost successfully suppressing the accompanying small shudder. The car finally settled and the lack of engine noise and the air conditioner added to the silence. She sat there for a moment contemplating her next step.

Mary reached up and turned the rear view mirror so she could see herself, although she had to dodge and weave to take it all in. She brushed the bangs of her long, blonde hair out of her sparkling blue eyes, noticing that they were bloodshot, and circles of darkness were beginning to form under them. She wrinkled her small, pug-like nose, wishing she didn't have as many freckles as she did, and licked her full lips. A new coat of lipstick wouldn't hurt, but it would have to do for now. Stormy Pink was her favorite color, which almost matched the

color of her car. Before she looked away, she noticed that she still had the smooth, youthful skin that usually faded when women neared and passed the age of 30, or so, if you were lucky. So she still had a few more years, if she kept up her nightly beauty regimen and stayed out of the sun. Maybe not 'Peaches and Cream' these days, but it would do well enough. She supposed she should be thankful.

Returning the mirror to its proper angle, Mary pulled the door handle and opened the door to this unfamiliar world in which she found herself. As she stepped out of the car, the silence didn't change, except the noticeable noiseless difference between a small, enclosed space, and the out-of-doors. A small breeze might have added an almost imperceptible susurrant of the leaves on the tall trees that lined the block in most people's yards – front and back – probably maples and elms. This made the crunch of pea gravel underfoot seem unnaturally loud. Closing the door caused a sound that echoed down the street, even with the late-model, modern 'whump' instead of the slam of older vehicle doors. She turned and looked down the street in the direction from which she had traveled and found more of the same.

Pausing there, Mary shrugged to adjust her white cotton, short-sleeved blouse. Suddenly her clothes felt too confining. Although it didn't need adjusting, she tugged at her unbuttoned, pastel green vest, then smoothed the front of her matching skirt, though it, too, did not need hand ironing. She knew, as objective as she could be, that her clothes hung well on her almost-too-thin frame. Being told how attractive and pretty she was over the years, and not just by her parents or close girl friends, helped with her self-image, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Though she was not feeling all that confident this day. She stood up straighter, and with a sigh, forced herself to begin moving.

As she crunched across and through the non-sidewalk, around the front of the car, Mary realized high-heeled shoes – also outfit-matching, in color and style – were not the best idea for this kind of terrain. They worked fine in the city, on modern sidewalks, and indoors, but out here, in what she considered the near-boondocks, perhaps a more practical sandal with a low heel was called for. She walked past a weathered, pole-slanted mailbox that had seen better days, and upon which a new coat of paint would not help all that much. There was no number or name on the box, and the flag looked like it could fall off at any moment. Then up a single concrete step onto the short, cracks-here-and-there walkway that led to the small, set back, cottage-style house. She could smell the earthy aroma of recently mowed grass on each side of the path, something familiar to these surroundings, but probably not to those who had lived most, if not all, of their lives in the big city. The clack of her heels on the walkway sounded out of place and made her feel self-conscious. The twenty feet seemed at least twice that long.

Mary approached the house– painted a neutral grey, with off-white trim. She couldn't help but notice the immense contrast of the blood-red flowering bushes that lined the front. This variety of bougainvillea had flowered the week before, and the heady, perfumed scent permeated the air, almost becoming cloying in the noon-day heat. She resisted looking up at the sun in annoyance, even though she knew it was attacking her fair complexion. It really wasn't that warm yet. Not like it would be in the weeks to come, as summer reared its ugly head. Additional smaller potted plants, mostly flowers of various kinds, splashing an array of colors, also dotted the scene.

Normally the view of the beautiful picture before her would have made her smile, inwardly if not outwardly, but today it filled her with a sense of dread, and this only increased as she reached the small front porch that could barely be referred to as such. Then she was at the front door, at closer inspection painted a dark forest green, a solid block except for the arched, bubbled, amber glass window across the mid-top. There was a doorbell, but that suddenly seemed too impersonal for the reason she had arrived here today, so Mary decided a knock was preferable. She raised her hand, hesitating for a moment, and then introduced three

sharp raps – these also sounded too loud in the silent surroundings. As she waited for an answer, apprehension closed around her, and her feelings of dread increased even more so. As she was thinking about ringing the doorbell, a shadow played across the translucent door window, and her dread seemed to become unbearable as the worn, silver door knob began to slowly turn.

I don't profess to be some great writer, but I think these two examples minimally, if not adequately, show the difference between minimal description and what can easily be seen as Immersive Description, and are decent comparisons, or better than that. The second version could even be taken as "overkill" ('too much'), depending on one's writing style, intent, desire, and goals. These examples have no dialogue, but one should be able to imagine writing similarly with interspersed dialogue. (preferably 'good' dialogue, which is a sub-art and science unto itself, as each part of storytelling and writing is in its own right)

There is an obvious difference between the two examples, both describing the same story section, "painting a picture", as fiction is supposed to do, but the first doing so in what might be described as a black and white line drawing with not a lot of detail, and the second painting a true picture, in full, living, vibrant color, with a rich tapestry of textures, immersing the reader in all of the colors of the rainbow, and the other senses, as well, creating a world the reader can become lost within. It also helps with timing and story flow. (slow down and don't be in such a hurry to tell your story; rushing through a story is also often deleterious) The second version is what we, as writers, generally attempt to construct, as good fiction. (taking into account that I'm obviously not the best writer in the world, and have my own issues, and don't have an advanced educational degree, etc. – but it will suffice for example's sake)

I hope this information helps you, and helps you make your stories better, as good as they can be, and as good as they should be. Like all things, as you practice writing with Immersive Description, you will get better at it. Never forget that Immersive Description is your friend, and your story's friend, and done well, will help your story befriend your readers.

**Remember that writers do not write, we re-write.**

This is considered a fundamental aspect of good writing. Most stories need at least one fairly hefty re-write, and then maybe another look later. It is a good idea to walk away from a story for a week, or two, or longer, just to get it out of your mind, so you can go back to it with somewhat fresh eyes. You can only achieve that so much, because writers are so close to their story. That also makes it hard for us to be objective, and try to read it as we are editing it without knowing what is coming next, envisioning what a fresh reader would be seeing, and that sort of thing, which makes us miss things. *Which is why we need pre-readers, proofreaders, and a (good) Editor. Writers cannot edit themselves.* (and then more re-writing after that throughout the editing process, until you have a finely polished piece that is publishable and something to be particularly proud of)

One last thing to think about, and that is the concept:

***Know the Rules before you break them.***

This is a good maxim to keep in mind for writing (and most other situations). So a writer should learn as many of the "rules" of writing as they can, as well as they can, before they start doing things that break those time-honored and time-tested rules. Only then will the writer be more likely to 'break the rules' in such a way that they will more likely be successful. (rather than 'random' flailing (and failing), if you will)

Good luck. Keep up the good work. And write, write, write. (why are you still here? why aren't you writing??)

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