

Imagery: Avoiding Some Common Pitfalls

Imagery can bring a piece of writing to life by engaging the audience, or it can bludgeon the reader and “paralyze the senses” (Strunk & White 75). When the urge strikes to use multiple adjectives, consider the information presented on the back of this handout and the totally different ways in which the two authors, quoted below, make use of imagery.

This is a famous passage from a Victorian-era English novel that is way over the top:

It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents – except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.

Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford*

A few thoughts to illuminate **why** this passage is over the top:

- Lines 1 and 2: Either the **rain fell in torrents** or it didn't!
- Lines 2, 3, & 4: The prose will be much more active if we **link the main points** of this long clause (bulwer-lytton.com).
- Line 5: **Along** is redundant and dilutes the action.
- Lines 5, 6, & 7: **Fiercely agitating?** If something is **agitating**, **fiercely** is repetitious.

The passage now freed of redundant adjectives:

It was a dark and stormy night – the rain fell in torrents. Violent gusts of wind swept up the London streets, rattling the housetops and agitating the scanty flame of lamps that struggled against the darkness.

One could say that the following quote is skirting on the edge of overloaded prose, but taken in the context of her contemporary essay about the San Pedro River near Tucson, Arizona; Barbara Kingsolver's use of plain language evokes a vivid image:

In the heat of late April the modest saint invites us down from the blazing desert into a willowy tunnel of cool shade, birdsong, and the velvet-brown scent of riverbank.

Barbara Kingsolver, “The Patience of a Saint,”
Small Wonder: Essays

Here are a few thoughts about **why** this imagery works quite nicely:

- San Pedro is the name of a **saint**. As a rule, saints are supposed to be **modest** and **humble**, which fits the **character** of the San Pedro River – a very small river in the middle of the Sonoran Desert.
- A person might ask, isn't **cool shade** redundant? In Southern Arizona the summer shade is not necessarily cool, just a little less hot. Juxtaposing “the blazing desert” with the “willowy tunnel of **cool shade**” makes a **nice contrast**.
- The texture of **brown velvet** used to describe the scent of the riverbank, together with birdsong, bring **all of the senses** to bear in this living image.



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Some Tips to Think About While Writing Prose

- **Focus** – Decide what the focus of your story should be and write accordingly. Is what you are describing or calling attention to serving a purpose for your story or character, or is it just more information that gets in the way of what you are trying to say? (Rose 3)
- **Choose Words Carefully** – Be careful when using a thesaurus. If a word sounds pretentious, does not add to your message, and only focuses attention on itself, it does not need to be there. Strunk and White tell us that some words are better than others and that being able to tell which are better is “a matter of ear, a matter of reading the books that sharpen the ear” (69). If you are unsure about which books “sharpen the ear” for imagery, a safe bet would be starting with the classics in any genre.
- **Break Unwieldy Sentences Apart** – If you find yourself struggling over the same sentence, chances are it is too involved and the basic construction may be faulty. It is better to break it apart and make two or more shorter, well-constructed sentences (Strunk & White 72).

Works Cited

Bulwer-Lytton, Edward George. Paul Clifford. The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest. 1830. 21 October 2006. <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/>
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Rose, Jake. “Imagery in Writing.” ESL Teachers Board. 21 October 2006 <<http://www.eslteachersboard.com/cgi-bin/writing/index.pl?noframes;read=60>>
Strunk, William Jr., and E. B. White, Elements of Style. New York: Macmillan, 1972.