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The Fraught-Yet-Fertile World of Feelings

Let's start with a question I hear a lot: *Should I be including my feelings in my writing?*

As you might suspect, my answer to this is, "It depends." If you're writing a scientific paper, an academic treatise, or a purely journalistic article, probably not.

But if the goal of your writing is to connect with your reader—and this can be through fiction, memoir, poetry, nonfiction, or even sales and marketing writing—then the answer is a resounding YES!

Sharing feelings is one of the principle ways human being connect with each other. We tell stories that evoke feelings in others as a way to create community, offer support, present alternative viewpoints, change opinions, and promote ideas or products.

Renowned British author Ian McEwan has been very public in his claims that fiction writing is one of the best ways to foster empathy (check out any of his interviews online for details). When we tell stories well—in fiction or otherwise—we enable readers to stand in unfamiliar pairs of shoes. From there, they can experience thoughts and feelings that would otherwise be foreign to them. This is the key to empathy: understanding that other types of thoughts and feelings are possible and valid and happening all around us every day.

To awaken empathy, we've got to arouse feelings.

So, notice I said *arouse feelings*, not *present feelings*...

Here's where some skill and judgement comes into play.

Most of the time, we want readers to feel what the narrator or character is feeling—what I call "arousing feelings." That's done by, you guessed it, putting the reader in scene. (if you don't know what that means, check out my previous tip scene on Scene Work!)

Place your reader in the physical space. Give them the sensory data they need to be present in that location—the sights, the smells, the tastes, the background noises. Help them have a physical experience of the place by describing the bodily sensations the narrator or character is feeling. Then let things happen. Describe events as they unfold, in scene. This often involves the

use of dialogue—their own internal thoughts or their expressions and the expressions of others.

Offer your reader this scene, then trust that your work has done its job and let them feel. Imagine the reader putting the book down and sitting back to let the aroused emotions—pleasant or horrible—bounce around in their body. That’s what success looks like here!

What does “presenting feelings” look like, and how do I avoid it?

It often looks like a “feeling statement,” such as:

I was really mad at him for betraying me.

Susan was overjoyed to see her brother.

The cop was frustrated that he couldn’t get the man to confess.

You’re probably familiar with the phrase, “Show, don’t tell.” The sentences above are all “telling” sentences. They work well in a conversation or an email to communicate quickly, but they don’t work as well in stories and books because they don’t offer the reader any entry point into the experience. They can also sound a bit amateurish.

We all tend to write a lot of these into our rough drafts. That’s fine! There, they stand as placeholders for scenes—little markers that say, “Hey, you’ve got a little more work to do here when it’s time to revise.”

What kind of work? Scene work. Showing, rather than telling.

Questions to ask when transforming a PRESENTATION of feelings to an AROUSAL of feelings:

Let’s use the first sentence above, *I was really mad at him for betraying me*, as an example.

- What did he do that created the betrayal?
- What did the character do in response?
- What did he say that communicated the betrayal?
- What did the character say in response?
- What facial expressions or gestures did both characters employ when saying their words? Are there scowls, pursed lips, hands on hips, folded arms, hands making fists?
- What does the character feel in their body as the anger arises? A hot face? An accelerating heart rate? Do they pull on their hair or grind their molars?
- What is going on with the character’s breathing here?

- How about their point of focus—does it narrow and go inward or go outward to the rest of the room?
- And their thoughts? Do they berate themselves or plan revenge? Whom do they blame?
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As you can see, if you can answer even a few of these questions, you'll give the reader a literal taste of the character's anger.

Keep in mind that highly emotional moments in a story or a life are often best portrayed in scene. A betrayal can be a big deal, so there's a good chance a scene is warranted here.

How deeply should I dive into this stuff?

Again, it depends—this time, on how important the moment is to the story. If it's a passing moment, just a couple of comments will likely suffice. If it's THE big scene in the book, then take your time, slow down, and give the reader as much as you can.

Arousing AND presenting feelings (a.k.a. “showing then telling”)

I can't tell you how often this happens: I read a text in which the writer has done an amazing job of enabling me to feel the character's regret (for instance) through scene work, good dialogue, and great sensory language. Then, I get to the last line of the paragraph, and it says, *I really regretted what had happened.*

CUT THAT LINE! If you've done your work, then the reader already knows the character felt regret. Or, better than that, the reader actually FEELS and SHARES that regret. There's no need to state it. Trust that you've done your job and let them stew in that feeling.

The role of an editor or reading buddy

Of course, it's a lot easier for an outside reader to notice those unnecessary “telling” sentences than it is for us to see our own. That's where, yet again, an editor or valued reading buddy comes into play. They can spot these from a mile away!

Outside readers are also terrific at identifying both places in the text where they are already experiencing the characters' feelings and where they'd like to feel more. Chances are your readers and editors are already attuned to their feelings as they read; if you let them know that you're working on this, and they'll be even more aware and able to assist you.

