

Emotion in writing –

Writing is communication, plain and simple. Every word that's put to paper with the intention of being read by someone else has a purpose. What is that purpose? Early into my journey of professional writing, I developed a mantra: Writing is about making the reader feel what you want them to feel.

This goes for copywriting, poetry, and fiction writing...anything. It's easy to write out a story that explains a series of events or ad copy that tells the features of a product. Writing a story that induces feelings and advertising that compels someone to buy the product is a different story altogether. Good writing involves a great deal of emotional manipulation.

There are a few schools of thought when it comes to writing emotion into a story. The first school believes that emotion should be written in subtext, merely hinted to “artfully.” The second school believes that emotion can be applied directly to the page. Anger or joy can be assigned to a character openly and plainly. Then there's the school that believes “artful” and “direct” aren't mutually exclusive concepts.

As with most of these ideas, I posit that any method is acceptable as long as it works. It works when I cause the reader to feel what you want them to feel. Use one, use both...just accomplish the mission.

Method writing -

Since I talk about emotion in writing quite a bit, I was forced to come up with a label for my preferred, teachable process. When I started out with performing, I learned “method acting” as derived from the classic book “*An Actor Prepares*” by Stanislavski. In a nutshell, this system teaches the actor to use relevant experiences from their own life to summon emotions and motivation that apply to their role. The result is more a believable performance, as the actor is “living out” the feelings rather than trying to falsely portray them.

Such is the way of method writing, as I've taken to calling it.

In this toolkit, we're going to explore a number of writing prompts that are designed to prepare you for incorporating realistic, believable emotions in your story.

We'll also try out a few prompts designed to stir up your memories and emotions. Ideally, you'll be able to fictionalize these responses and apply them to your work. The result will be a deeper, richer portrayal of sensations, feelings, perceptions and actions.

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How to use this toolkit -

Unlike most traditional prompts, these tools aren't meant to get you writing or inspire you to fill a blank page. These tools are designed to enrich your work-in-progress by adding depth, fleshing out ideas and sharpening the impact of your story.

Follow the instructions in these method writing tools and apply the results to your story by fictionalizing your own feelings or using your responses to add powerful reality to your work.

Your tools -

Map your emotional terrain:

- When you're feeling relaxed and unburdened by stress or deadlines, ask yourself what feeling you're afraid to write down. What sort of feeling concerns you, frightens you to the point that writing about it strikes you as difficult? Is it parental love? Hatred? Your self-image? Past success? Everyone has emotional “nerves” that when struck, fill us with strong feelings. Strike that nerve! How does it feel to dwell on that pain or that joy? What thoughts spring out of that well of emotion? Write it down; Detail that emotional journey. Now apply it to your protagonist. Add that depth of fear or happiness to her. Spare nothing.
- You probably have a secret that you've never told anyone. Is it driven by shame? Pain? Give your protagonist (or antagonist) that secret. Make them live with it and deal with it. Now, expose that secret. You can feel how difficult that would be if it happened to you, right? Put it on the page.
- Think about a point in your life when you let down the person you care about the most. Does it make you feel terrible to revisit those memories? Good. At some point your character fails in the same way. Fill the page with what you're feeling now.
- Now, recall a time when you triumphed and made someone you respect feel proud of you. This memory should fill you with satisfaction. Detail that feeling. Add it to your story.
- We all have at least one deep scar from childhood. What's yours? What detail of this memory stands out the most? The look on your mother's face? The fear of punishment? The feeling of confusion in a place where you don't belong? Give this scar to your character and plant the reminders of it through the story. Make her confront it several times and relive that pain.
- We're always changing. Think about a major change in your own personality or world-view that's occurred over the past few years. How would an old friend recognize that change in you without being told? The way you carry yourself, speak or dress? The way people around you look at you? Your protagonist is changing throughout the story...add these cues and hints to the world's changing perception of him.

Letting go and reconciling:

- Who does your protagonist need to forgive? Does he need to forgive himself? What events in the story allow for this forgiveness? Have you ever forgiven someone and felt a burden lifted? Or maybe you felt vulnerable? Describe that feeling and express it through your protagonist's actions toward the forgiven party.
- There was something in your life you couldn't let go of, even though you knew it was crippling you mentally and emotionally. A lost love? A failed interview? A mistake? What did it feel like to be helpless against that feeling? Write it down. Now your protagonist has to deal with it.

Making your character laugh, cry and grow:

- You're feeling something new right now. In our lives, feelings come and go and change. What's the newest feeling that permeates your life? Is a new relationship filling you with joy, or has a failed relationship filled you with anger, loneliness or feelings of loss? Have you conquered an old bad habit or succumbed to a new one? Whatever it may be, this feeling is fresh in your mind. Explore it, and add it to your character.

- There's someone that you've hated or considered an enemy. Has there ever been a case where you've despised a person until you've found out something about them that completely changed that feeling? How did you feel about hating them? Make this happen to your protagonist when she discovers something about her nemesis.
- What does your protagonist want more than anything? How is that desire flawed? One of your other characters realizes this flaw before your protagonist does...how does it feel when he's told that his desire is flawed? How does he react? Your protagonist succeeds and attains this desire...how is it disappointing? You've desperately wanted something in your life that turned out to be a disappointment, or even harmful. Think about how it made you feel and put it in the story.
- Who does your protagonist consider their closest friend or most important adviser? Deepen their relationship several times throughout the story...make them inseparable. Now ruin this bond. Smash the friendship to pieces. How does it feel to lose someone of such great importance? Was your protagonist betrayed? Did she commit the betrayal? It's rough moving forward without your closest allies. Make the reader feel this loss. What will it take to fix this relationship in the future...and will you even allow it to happen?
- Who around your protagonist changes throughout the story in a way that the protagonist doesn't approve of? Imagine your friends growing up and how someone close to you drifted away. Their behavior, their circle of friends, their goals all changed. How did that make you feel? How did you try to prevent it and what did your friend do when you tried? Make this happen with your characters by demonstrating the changes and forcing a reaction. People change in ways that we can't accept, and so will your characters.
- What truth does your protagonist cling to the tightest? An oath? A religious belief? A moral stance? Reinforce that belief or value three times in the story. Now destroy it. Your protagonist must face undeniable evidence that his belief is wrong, harmful or misguided. How does it change her journey? How will she move forward with a shattered foundation? Think of a time when the truth slapped you hard in the face. What did it do to your outlook on life? How did you cope?

Change the presentation:

- Choose a scene in your story where the emotions are declared loudly and the feeling of the scene is made very obvious through your word selection. Remove these descriptors. Convey the feeling of the scene entirely through character actions. Don't show the reader. Make them feel it by relating to the way the character expresses it.
- Likewise, find a point of undertone and blow it apart with wanton emotion. Be over-the-top expressive! How does it change the flow and pace of the story? Is it better this way? Then keep it!

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