

Detail

Let's start by reading this excerpt from Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'*:

My mother and father were born in the most beautiful place on earth, in the foothills of the Appalachians along the Alabama-Georgia line. It was a place where gray mists hid the tops of low, deep-green mountains, where redbone and bluetick hounds flashed through the pines as they chased possums into the sacks of old men in frayed overalls, where old women in bonnets dipped Bruton snuff and hummed "Faded Love and Winter Roses" as they shelled purple hulls, canned peaches and made biscuits too good for this world. It was a place where playing the church piano loud was near as important as playing it right, where fearless young men steered long, black Buicks loaded with yellow whiskey down roads the color of dried blood, where the first frost meant hog killin' time and the mouthwatering smell of cracklin's would drift for acres from giant, bubbling pots. It was a place where the screams of panthers, like a woman's anguished cry, still haunted the most remote ridges and hollows in the dead of night . . . and where the cotton blew off the wagons and hung like scraps of cloud in the branches of trees.

After reading the paragraph above, take a moment to reflect on these 3 questions:

1. How does the detail Bragg provides affect your understanding of how Bragg feels about his home?
2. How does the detail Bragg provides compare with how you would describe your home?
3. How does detail affect the tone of the text and your enjoyment of it?

Now, let's take a look at a few examples of how added detail completely changes the reader's impression of a certain topic.

Compare how details change the act of getting in a car:

I got in my car.

vs.

I dove headfirst into the leather upholstery of my new '68 Camaro.

vs.

Distracted by my boss's comments, I whacked my head on the way into my too-small economy car full of coffee cups and crumpled receipts.

Compare how details change the act of eating cake:

I ate a slice of cake.

vs.

I pressed one rich spoonful of my mother's black forest cake onto my tongue and held it there, appreciatively, before swallowing.

vs.

I picked up a slice of birthday cake with my free hand and crammed it into my mouth on my way back to my desk where my displeased boss was waiting for me. *Happy Birthday, me.*

Compare how details change the reader's feelings about a character or a relationship between characters:

My dog was my best friend.

vs.

My 14-year-old, 65-pound retriever mix, with his curly red fur and beard grey as the distant mountains, was there for my first day of school and my last.

vs.

My dog often felt like the only friend I could talk to, even though she never talked back. She would rest her small, chronically runny nose on my knee and make soft grunts as I pet her disproportionately sized ears and told her about my day.

Detail Explained

Notice how in the more detailed examples, we are describing the same action or thing, but our details create dramatically different stories and emotions. Do the first sentences of each example make for interesting writing? Would you want to read a book that only had sentences like the first sentence of each example?

The second and third sentences of each example employ **imagism**, the use of precise and evocative images to express ideas. Imagism is closely related to the idea of “**show, don’t tell**.” When writing to evoke emotions in the reader, show the reader things that trigger the desired emotions; do not just tell the reader that something is sad. You might think of the guiding philosophy behind “show, don’t tell” as being “Seeing is believing.” If you want the reader to perceive a character as “rude,” for instance, it’s not enough to say “she was rude” because readers can’t *perceive* that she is rude. Instead, try “She had no problem letting people know she found them uninteresting and used to cut me off mid-speech in front of everyone by holding up her hand and yawning exaggeratedly.”

Use detail to establish tone, evoke emotion, intrigue the reader, and help the reader understand the significance of your writing.