

# Textured Writing

- Lee Russell

Stories are about people and how they react to events, not about things that happen. Texture helps to make characters feel authentic by drawing our reader's attention to those details that help them to imagine the full range of sensations and reactions that those characters are experiencing. When used well, Texture builds unique, individual characters who act in realistic ways with realistic motivations.

***Texture creates realistic feelings that explain why things are happening in their unique way.***

***It allows our characters' lives to interact in a way that forms an artistically beautiful expression of the story we want to tell.***

Good use of Texture in our fiction writing PROVOKES an emotional response in our readers. Readers recognise well-textured writing when they see it – but what actually *is it*?

Gail Gaymer Martin defines Texture as <sup>1</sup>:

*"... layering and deepening the colour of the story, using vivid language, strong emotion, dynamic characters and plot lines that build one conflict or point on another.*

*Texture is meant to be felt.*

*We want readers to feel the weave and enjoy the tapestry of the story because they can sense where the threads are knotted together and where they overlap. They aren't snagged or created happenstance but form a clear and beautiful picture."*

Here is an example from *The Stand* by Stephen King (1978). In this passage Mother Abigail is waiting for the Company to arrive who are going to oppose "... man with no face":

*"She never saw him; she didn't have to see him. He was a shadow passing through the corn at noon, a cold pocket of air, a gore-crow peering down at you from the phone lines. His voice called to her in all the sounds that had ever frightened her – soft, it was the tick of a deathwatch beetle under the stairs, telling that someone loved would soon pass over; spoken loud it was the afternoon thunder rolling amid the clouds that came out of the west like boiling Armageddon. And sometimes there was no sound at all but the lonely rustle of the nightwind in the corn but*

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<sup>1</sup> "Texture In Writing. What Is It?" - Gail Gaymer Martin - <http://writingright-martin.blogspot.co.uk/2008/04/texture-in-writing-what-is-it.html>

*she would know he was there and that was the worst of all, because then the man with no name seemed only a little less than God himself..."*

The texture here comes from the slowly building tension as Abigail talks about all the different moments that the man-with-no-face can frighten her, combined with a careful choice of simple but rich words that make the passage resonate in our imaginations: 'gore-crow', 'tick of a deathwatch beetle', 'thunder rolling... like boiling Armageddon', 'nightwind' – in these choices of words we know that Abigail has no peace from her nemesis by day or night, in fair weather or foul, he is a constant presence in her mind... and hence now in ours.

There is a balance needed between telling the reader enough so that they feel the Texture of the scene, without over-describing to the point of boredom or under-describing to the point of ineffectiveness. Some thoughts on this are shared by Writer's Digest University <sup>2</sup>:

*"The writer who underdescribes may tell us the scene takes place in an alley, but the reader never experiences the alley and, therefore, is never fully involved in the scene.*

*The danger when fixing this problem is to overdescribe ... by assaulting the reader's senses with every sight, smell, sound, taste, and feel of the alley.*

*Instead, concentrate on one telling aspect of the alley:*

*[for example] ... The alley bordered several low-cost restaurants competing for the lunch money of the secretaries on a budget in nearby office buildings. The cloying smell of things being fried—French fries, tempura, extra-crispy chicken—lay trapped between the buildings like a heavy fog. Randy was grateful for that aggressive odour, otherwise he'd have to deal with whatever was spilling out of all those Dumpsters, especially the one with the chicken feet sticking out like branches from under the lid."*

Can you see the Texture in that passage? The focus on smells and then ending with the visual snapshot of chicken legs provokes an emotional reaction in the reader, which may have been lost if there had been too many visual details.

Here is an example from *Gorky Park* by Martin Cruz Smith (1981), selected for its expression of what being a Russian might feel like:

*"... The other investigators were leaving, putting on their home-bound expressions and pulling on their coats. Their earnest coats, Arkady thought as he watched them from the top of the stairs. Their better-than-a-worker's Soviet cloth. He wasn't hungry, but the activity of eating appealed to him. He felt like a walk. He got his coat and went out.*

*He walked south all the way to the Pavaletsky train station before his legs took him into a cafeteria where there was a buffet of whitefish and potatoes awash in vinegar. Arkady moved to*

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<sup>2</sup> "Adding Texture With Description" – Writer's Digest University - <http://resources.writersonlineworkshops.com/resources/adding-texture-with-description/>

*the bar and ordered a beer. The other stools were occupied by railroad workers and young soldiers quietly drunk on champagne: sullen faces between malachite bottles.*

*A slice of bread with butter and sticky grey caviar came with Arkady's beer. 'What's this?'*

*'From heaven,' the manager said.*

*'There is no heaven.'*

*'But we're there now.' The manager smiled with a full set of steel teeth. His hand darted out to push the caviar closer to Arkady.*

*'Well, I haven't read today's paper,' Arkady conceded."*

Here it is the focus on small details that convey the sense of Culture: the 'home-bound expressions' that remind us of Ivan Denisovitch or Lowry's paintings, the sense of inequality in the Socialist state from 'better-than-a-worker's Soviet cloth', the contrast between the vinegared buffet and the manager's 'gift' (bribe) of caviar to Arkakady, whose clothes would announce his rank amongst the soldiers and railway workers.

As well as provoking an emotional response by providing *enough relevant* description, we also improve the Texture of our writing by using richly evocative words. One way of doing that is to read through your work and highlight all the words that could be stronger. Then go back and take your time replacing them. Do not rely on a thesaurus - the word you'll be seeking often won't be a synonym, it'll be something much richer.

This is the last example from my bookshelf, taken from Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad (1899). In this passage they are conveying Kurtz back down the river, away from the darkness at the heart of Africa:

*"The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Kurtz's life was running swiftly too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time."*

Everything is here in this short passage. The phrase that reads "... the brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness" invites us to remember both the African influences that have corrupted Kurtz and a feeling that those same influences could escape from Africa. We feel a sense of escape from moving "... with twice the speed of our upward progress" whilst Conrad describes the pain of Kurtz's life as it is 'ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time'. At only 40,000 words, Heart of Darkness is a masterpiece of textured writing.