

Generating Sensory Details (PME's)

Writers share their perceptions and understanding by painting pictures with words. These word-pictures give readers the impression of direct, firsthand experience—the more specific the description of what the writer sees, hear, tastes, smells, and touches used to “paint” the picture, the more realistic the image received by the reader.

Describing mental or emotional states gets a little trickier because the natural tendency is to affix a label to the emotion the writer thinks his/her subject is experiencing. For example, writers often label their subjects as being happy, sad, angry, nervous, embarrassed, frustrated, or excited rather than describe what that person was doing or how the person was speaking or acting to cause the writer to draw that conclusion.

Sometimes, in an attempt to avoid blatant labeling, writers add equally vague words or phrases to the label which still fail to make the word picture any clearer for the reader. Describing someone as having a “frustrated look on his face” or speaking in a “nervous tone of voice” does little to help the reader visualize that person’s expression or recognize the particular sound described.

The writer needs to let readers draw their own conclusions about the emotions the characters are experiencing rather than labeling those emotions for their readers. By describing the physical manifestations of those emotions (PME), the writer can help readers visualize the physical “clues” to how a character is feeling so that the readers can draw their own conclusions.

PME Emphasis Areas

facial expressions – particularly the **eyes** (shape, movement, dilation of pupils, etc.)

mouth (including lips, teeth, and tongue – position, shape, degree of movement, etc.)

forehead and **eyebrows** (movement, position, etc.)

nose and **nostrils** (movement)

stance – particularly position of and movement of head, shoulders, chest, waist, back, hips, buttocks, knees, legs, ankles, feet, etc.

gestures – particularly those created by the movement of fingers, hands, and arms

PME Generating Techniques

- 1) Observe objectively, simply listing what you actually see or hear the characters do or say without drawing conclusions. Pay particular attention to the PME emphasis areas previously discussed. For example, instead of writing, “. . .he nervously waited,” you could observe: “. . .crouched, with knees bent and every muscle flexed to pounce.” See what a difference specific observation makes!

- 2) Reenact emotion in a mirror, then write what you see. Many a drama student has practiced this little exercise to perfect the emotional states they must present for their characters. You would simply be taking the process a step further by writing these observations down. Once again, pay particular attention to the PME emphasis areas. For example, instead of saying, “She had an angry look on her face,” you could observe: “. . .her face reddened, teeth clenched, and temples throbbing, she glared back at me.”
- 3) Draft your friend or family to “act out” the particular emotions you wish to capture. This technique will expose you to a variety of interpretations of the same emotional response. Don’t forget to write your observations down for future reference.
- 4) Keep a reaction journal. We spend a great deal of time waiting – in lines at movies, grocery stores, registration, for our meals in restaurants, in doctor’s offices, airports, etc. This “empty time” can be turned into valuable research time if we jot down emotional observations in a pocket-size notebook. Keeping this type of journal can be a time-saver the next time we brainstorm character reactions for a piece of writing.

Examples of PME’s

clenched fists
 clenched teeth
 taut jaw
 grinding teeth
 sweaty palms
 quivering lower lip
 eyebrow cocked
 furrowed brow
 reddened face
 fidgeting/wiggling
 eyes glazed over
 blank stare
 skipping/humming/whistling
 slouching in a chair
 biting fingernails or cuticles

Emotions Represented

anger/frustration
 anger/frustration
 anger/frustration
 anger/frustration
 nervous/anxiety
 sadness/fear/anxiety
 suspicion/disbelief
 worry/suspicion
 embarrassment/anger
 nervous/anxious
 disorientation/shock
 shock/disbelief
 happiness/carefree
 tired/depression
 nervous/anxiety/fear