

## SAN FRANCISCO WRITERS CONFERENCE 2023

Sunday, Feb. 19, 2023

76. Fiction Track: PANEL - Sensory Elements Your Story Needs That You've Never Used - Kristen Tate, Amanda Traylor, Cara Black, Julia Vee, Moderator C. S. Lakin

### DIAL UP YOUR SENSORY WRITING BY USING METAPHOR

By Julia Vee

Definition of metaphor:

*met·a·phor*

*/ˈmedəˌfôr/ noun*

*a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.*

***a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract.***

Why use metaphor when we have five senses already? For one thing, it's shorter. I think of it as the equivalent of a scene in a film when they have a montage. They can compress a lot of mundane things into a short amount of time. So metaphor can do some heavy lifting in one sentence that you might need paragraphs to describe. This is fundamentally breaking the rule of "show not tell" but used judiciously, is very powerful.

But practicality of length aside, the main reason to use metaphor in description is that it can transport the reader into a space beyond the five senses and connect to a feeling, memory, or a philosophy.

Use of metaphor is a way to get into deep perspective of the character or narrator in your work. Here are some examples and what they do for the reader.

"Books are the mirrors of the soul."

— **Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts***

Without metaphor, Woolf might have used a lot of words to make those connections. But stated as metaphor, the punchy sentence is succinct and gives us the protagonist (or Narrator's) opinion. What do we learn from the speaker? This speaker loves books. They don't love books because of the physical way they feel or smell, but loves book for the experience it gives them.

"My thoughts are stars I cannot fathom into constellations..."

— **John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars***

This is also the narrator or protagonist's opinion. So this metaphor is gives us insight to the character's views, and tells the reader that this character has introspection and big feelings. Stars and constellations are in space, and space is vast. So this sentence shows us where the speaker feels they are in relation to the universe.

“Her thoughts are DIAMOND sharp.” (from the reading)

What does that tell you? It tells you her thoughts are clear, important, painful.

What about this one:

“Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor.”

— **Truman Capote**

This narrator shows they are clever.

A metaphor can also be used for humor:

“Life is a journey. Time is a river. The door is ajar...”

— **Jim Butcher, Dead Beat**

Recently I had to write some flash fiction and I had a limited number of words I was allowed so I used metaphor to punch up sensory description. It was a parody of Silicon Valley, so here’s what I wrote to describe the location:

“It smelled faintly of citrus and bitcoin.”

— **Julia Vee, Elites R Us**

Some authors are very good at expanding the metaphor without going too far. This is sometimes referred to as “telescoping metaphor”.

“Memories are bullets. Some whiz by and only spook you. Others tear you open and leave you in pieces.”

— **Richard Kadrey, Kill the Dead**

## SIMILE

No discussion of metaphor is complete without also mentioning Simile. Simile is when you compare two things using “like” or “as”.

“Some people are like Slinkies. They aren’t really good for anything, but they still bring a smile to my face when I push them down a flight of stairs.”

— **Patricia Briggs, Iron Kissed**

## **Bonus Description Tactic: Using the Metaphysical**

Met·a·phys·i·cal - relating to metaphysics.

"the essentially metaphysical question of the nature of the mind"

“Derived from the Greek meta ta physika ("after the things of nature"); referring to an idea, doctrine, or posited reality outside of human sense perception. In modern philosophical terminology, metaphysics refers to the studies of what cannot be reached through objective studies of material reality.”

<https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gen gloss/metaph-body.html#:~:text=Derived%20from%20the%20Greek%20meta.objective%20studies%20of%20material%20reality.>

This is what John Green almost did when he wrote “My thoughts are stars I cannot fathom into constellations...” One cannot touch, hear, or smell stars and constellations. You can see them but they are millions of miles away so to use stars is taking the senses almost into the metaphysical realm.

But when Virginia Woolf said “Books are mirrors of the soul...” that was really taking the description into the metaphysical.

Experiment with what feels true to how your character would think or feel. Try metaphor.

Have fun with your writing!

Julia

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