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DETAILS (GOLDEN), CHARACTER (IMMORTAL), AND SETTING (RURAL INDIA)

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1 SESSION, 2 HOURS

THIS IS THE LESSON I USUALLY GIVE ON THE FIRST MEETING OF MY EVENING high school writing class. I'm trying to do the following things:

-  Get the students thinking about specificity in their writing
-  Get them thinking about the value of personal observation
-  Get them better acquainted with each other (in my class, the students are from all over the Bay Area, but this is just as useful in a setting where the students all think they know each other)
-  Get them started on a short story that challenges them to solve fairly sophisticated problems of setting and motive.

Note: Any portion of this two-hour plan could be used alone. Most steps could easily take up a 50-minute class period. The time guidelines are only included if you happen to have a 2-hour, or two-class-period, block of time available.

Step 1: The Power of Observation (12 minutes)

Start with the head of a stuffed crocodile. Or something like that. 826 Valencia is next to a store that sells taxidermied animals, so I usually go over and borrow one of their crocodile heads. Whatever you choose to use, this object should be something fairly unusual, but it should also be something that the students have seen before. Now—without showing the students the object—pass out blank pieces of paper, and ask the students to draw the object. For example, if I have the stuffed crocodile head hidden in my desk, I would tell the students, “You have 5 minutes to draw a perfectly accurate rendering of a Peruvian caiman (a type of

small crocodile).” The students will laugh, but you will be serious. They have to get down to business, and draw that crocodile.

After 5 minutes, most students will have a pretty sorry-looking crocodile. They will have drawn the animal from memory, trying to recall if the crocodile’s eyes are on the top of the head, or the side, and if the teeth are inside its mouth or protrude out the sides. Collect the drawings and show them to the class. Guffaws will follow.




Now take the actual crocodile head out, and place it where the students can easily see it. Now ask them to draw the Peruvian caiman again, using the actual animal as a model. After 5 minutes, you’ll see a tremendous difference. Where there was guessing and vagueness and error in the first drawings, there will be detail, specificity, and accuracy, now that the students can refer to the genuine article. They’ll see that the eyes are actually on top of its head. They’ll see that the eyes are like a cat’s—eerie and many-layered. They’ll see that the snout is very long, very narrow, and very brittle-seeming.

Step 2: Apply the Lesson of the Peruvian Caiman to Any and All Writing (5 minutes)

The lesson is pretty clear: if you draw from life, from observation, your writing will be more convincing. It doesn’t matter if you’re writing science fiction, fantasy, or contemporary realism—whatever it is, it will benefit from real-life observation. Is there a street performer in the novel you’re writing? Go watch one in action. Is there a short-hair terrier in the story you’re writing? Go observe one. Is there a meat-eating Venus flytrap plant in your poem? See how they really do it. Nothing can substitute for the level of specificity you get when you actually observe.

Step 3: Knowing the Difference in Details (25 minutes)

My students and I talk about the three types of details. With different classes, we’ve given these three types different names, but here we’ll call them:

-  Golden
-  Useful
-  Not-so-good

Now let’s try to define them, in reverse order so we have some drama:

Not-so-good: This is a very nice way of referring to clichés or clunky descriptions or analogies. First, clichés: if there’s one service we can give to these students, it’s to wean them off the use of clichés. Clichés just destroy everything in their path, and they prevent the student’s writing from being personal or original. *He was as strong as an ox. She ate like a bird. His hands were clammy. She looked like she’d seen a ghost.* There’s just no point, really, in writing these words down. When students can tell a cliché when they see one, they become better critical thinkers, better readers, smarter people. When they learn to stay away from clichés in their own writing, they’re on their way to becoming far stronger writers. The other type of not-so-good detail is the clunky one. *His legs looked like square-cut carrots. Her dog was like a blancmange crossed with a high-plains cowboy.* This is, in a

way, preferable to a cliché, but it's so strange and hard to picture that it disrupts the flow of the story.

Useful: These are descriptions that are plain but needed. *His hair was orange. Her face was long and oval.* These pedestrian details are necessary, of course. Not every description can be golden. Speaking of which . . .

Golden: This is a detail/description/analogy that is singular, is completely original, and makes one's subject unforgettable. *She tapped her fingernail rhythmically on her large teeth as she watched her husband count the change in his man-purse.* In one sentence, we've learned so much about these two people. He has a man-purse. He's fastidious. She's tired of him. She's exasperated by him. She has large teeth. Golden details can come about even while using plain words: *Their young daughter's eyes were grey and cold, exhausted.* Those words, individually bland, are very specific and unsettling when applied to a young girl. In one key sentence, a writer can nail down a character. This is a sample from one of my students, describing a man she saw in the park near 826 Valencia: *He wore a beret, though he'd never been to Paris, and he walked like a dancer, as if hoping someone would notice that he walked like a dancer.*

Working this out with the class: Getting the students to understand the differences between these three kinds of description is possible with an exercise that's always good fun. Create a chart, where you have three categories: not-so-good, useful, golden. Now give them a challenge: come up with examples of each. Tell them that they need to conjure examples for, say:

The feeling of traveling at 100 miles an hour.

The students in one of my classes came up with these:

Not-so-good: like flying; like being on a rollercoaster; so fast you want to puke; like being shot out of a cannon.

Useful: terrifying; dizzying; nerve-racking; hurtling.

Golden: like being dropped down a well; as the speed grew, I heard death's whisper growing louder and louder.

The exploration of these types of description can last a full class period, for sure. If you want to keep going, consider this game I use sometimes. This takes the concept to a new level of fun.

Optional Game (25 minutes)

Take 25 sheets of blank paper, or one for every student in the class. At the top of each—leaving plenty of room below—write something that might need description: the smell of a grandparent; the sensation of a first kiss; the atmosphere of a funeral home; the taste of a perfect apple; the look in the eyes of someone who's just seen a car accident. Now, pass these out, one page per student. The task is to come up with the best (golden) description or analogy for each prompt. It works like this: Student A might start with the “smell of a grandparent” sheet. Student A then spends a few minutes trying to come up with the best description

he can think of. When Student A has written something down, he passes the paper on to Student B, and Student A receives another one that's been passed by Student C. The next paper Student A gets might be "the taste of a perfect apple." Student A then spends a few minutes on that one. If he comes up with something, then great. If he doesn't, he can pass it on. Each student writes his or her own analogy below the rest of the descriptions. The final object is to come up with the best description for each prompt. I usually give the students 25 minutes, so those 25 minutes are pretty madcap, with the papers flying, the students searching for the prompts that inspire them. At the end of the 25 minutes, each prompt might have 10–15 descriptions written below it. The teacher then reads all the descriptions aloud, and the students vote on which one is best. Whichever student wins the most prompts is feted in some appropriate way.

Step 4: Interviewing Your Peers While Observing Them Shrewdly (15 minutes)

Start by telling the students that they're going to interview each other for 15 minutes. The students will be paired up—try to pair up students who don't usually talk to each other much—and they'll find a quiet place to talk. One will interview the other, and after 7½ minutes, they'll switch. Before getting them started, talk about what sorts of details are useful in defining a character, making that character singular and intriguing. They'll be applying what they know from the caiman exercise, and also using good interviewing techniques, to immediately get beyond the "Where do you go to school?" sorts of questions. By asking good questions and observing closely, the interviews should produce strong results very quickly, now that the students know that they're looking for golden details.

Step 5: Immortalizing Your Subject (30 minutes)

Once all the students have notes about their assigned peer, they can do one of two things:

The Simple but Essential Character Sketch




You can ask them to simply write one-page character sketches of their peers, which should be compelling, true, well observed, and (of course) beautifully written. This alone is a very worthwhile assignment. When these are read aloud, the interview subjects benefit from what in most cases is the first time they've ever been thus defined. It's strange but true: it's pretty rare to have someone observe you closely, write about your gestures and freckles and manner of speech. In the process, the interviewers improve their powers of observation, while the interviewees blush and can't get the words off their brain. And these two students get to know each other far better than they would almost any other way. It's a good way to break though cliques, and create new bonds of understanding.

Find Your Subject in Rural India (for Example)

The lesson works pretty well either way, but something extraordinary happens with this second part, the curveball part. At this stage, after the first 15 minutes, hand out pictures to the students. These pictures, one per student, should depict some unusual, strange, foreign, bizarre, or historical setting. Usually I make copies from old *LIFE* books about various cultures of the world. Thus the student might end up with a picture of a Swedish farm, a royal Thai court, a Nairobi marketplace, or a scene from rural India. Then tell the class that they need to (a) use the details they've gathered about their classmate; and then (b) place that student in a foreign setting. The writers then need to concoct a reason why their character is in rural India, or in Barbados, or in Grenada, or in the drawing room of a Scottish duke. This requires the writers to imagine this new/strange world, and also solve the problem: What is their character doing there? Is their character stuck, is he or she trying to leave? How would this student react to being lost in a marketplace in Nairobi? Who or what is he or she looking for?

If you have some time, or want to expand the exercise, have the students research their location a bit. Even by using the picture alone, they are using their observational powers, but with the added benefit of some book-oriented or Internet research, they can conjure ever-more-convincing settings.

I have to admit that I came up with this exercise on the fly. I had no idea that it would work, but it did the first time I did it, and it always works. Here's why:

-  The process of interviewing one's classmates is always appealing to the students.
-  The close observation makes both students, interviewer and interviewee, feel valued and singular.
-  The curveball of putting this person in a foreign setting forces the students outside their own school/home/neighborhood, and requires the solving of a fairly sophisticated problem: Who is this person, and why is he or she here? The drama and conflict are built into the setting, and get a short story off to a quick and intriguing start.

A stellar example of one such exercise is on the following page. In their interview, 17-year-old Sally Mao's subject told her about some nightmares he'd been having, and mentioned having recently been to the hospital to visit his mother. Then Sally was given a picture of Bombay, circa 1970. From this, Sally created this story in about 20 minutes.

DUST-SILK POUCH

Up ahead, the road widens to reveal a slipshod blockade of cars, carts, and cargo. A yellow-curry smoke stews the engine of Mr. Kendall's van as he bites at the tail of jagged traffic. James, neck pressed against the seat, awakens from a sweaty dream to the grind of sound.

He has just suffered the same nightmare again. It gallops with him wherever he goes. He sees its lean legs and mane, its relentless tawny hooves swerving outside car windows, airplane windows, bedroom doors, its acrid breath clogging his nostrils, a familiar stench. The ride up the mountain has rattled his dreamscape like some monstrous cataclysm, magnifying his terror. This time the rodents had done it. They were wearing green uniforms, the whole lot of them. They swarmed, they crawled, they carried nooses, planks, kerosene, and razor-tipped whips. They were out for blood.

James asks, "Dad, what's a Nazi?"

"Eh? Are we having this discussion again?"

"What's a Nazi, what's a Gestapo, what are they?"

"A Nazi is a kind of monster," Mr. Kendall declares. "The kind that enslaves people, that performs cruel experiments. A Gestapo is their secret police."

"What kind of monsters are they? Are they some kind of furry creature? Rodents, maybe?"

"I wouldn't say that. But Nazis are less prevalent than they used to be."

"I just had a dream. It was the chipmunks, it was the rodents who made up the Gestapo, they wanted blood, Dad, they wanted blood, and they're right here in India—I'm not sure where but I think they're further up ahead. I'm scared."

Mr. Kendall laughs. "Well, son, who could really blame the rodents? The very term 'guinea pig' implies some sort of cruel and unusual experimentation. Yes, if rodents took over the world, they'd be out for blood."

His father's hands sweat on the wheel. "This may take longer than expected," he says. "The hospital is beyond this village. If I get this right, it'd probably be within the next two towns. I hope that's the one she's staying in. Otherwise, we're out of luck."

What they are waiting for James doesn't grasp. He fidgets, chews on imaginary gum, plugs his ears. Before this trip, India was a haze of cast-bronze Hindu idols, boiled-blood sunrises, young girls in jeweled saris and deep crimson makeup, and all that kind of exotic drone that keeps a dish of samosas spicy. But like any vision, this one has been extinguished. India isn't carved out of ivory. India bakes and suffocates. India is dirty, damp, and cauldron-colored. India sticks to the inside of his skin.

—Sally Mao, 17