

POETIC TECHNIQUES TO POWER UP YOUR FICTION & NARRATIVE NONFICTION

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SPECIFIC DETAIL THAT APPEALS TO THE SENSES

IMAGERY (THE "METAPHOR STUFF")

LANGUAGE OVERLAY

POETIC ALLITERATION

POETIC LISTING

POETIC REPETITION

DICTION DROPS & SPIKES

RHYTHM & SOUND FOR ENERGY & MEANING

SCANSION

I GO BANANAS WITH WALLACE STEGNER!

RECOMMENDED READING

SPECIFIC DETAIL THAT APPEALS TO THE SENSES

The reader's imagination responds most vividly not so much to generalities—*it was cold*, or, say, *it was a nice day*—but to specific detail that appeals to the senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, and gut sense /intuition). For example:

something green blurred by to his left
 mustiness of the back of the cave
 the droplet of honey on her tongue
 the slippery bulk of a half-folded camping tent
 the rasp of a breeze in the willows
 he felt a knife-turn in his stomach: there, the bear's fresh scat

From a letter by Anton Chekov:

“In descriptions of nature one should seize upon minutiae, grouping them so that when, having read a passage, you close your eyes, a picture is formed. For example, you will evoke a moonlit night by writing that on the mill dam the glass fragments of a broken bottle flashed like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled along like a ball...”

From Susan Shelby Magoffin’s diary of 1846-47, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico*:

“Passed a great many buffalo, (some thousands) they crossed our road frequently within two or three hundred yards. They are very ugly, ill-shapen things with their long shaggy hair over their heads, and the great hump on their backs, and they look so droll running.”

More about specificity:

<https://madam-mayo.com/techniques-of-fiction-the-number-one-technique-in-the-supersonic-overview/>

IMAGERY (THE "METAPHOR STUFF")

ALLUSION

An expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly; in indirect or passing reference.

“Where’s the Plantation?” John Wesley asked. “Gone With the Wind,” said the Grandmother. “Ha ha.”
—Flannery O’Connor “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

ANALOGY

A comparison between two things, typically on the basis of their structure and for the purpose of explanation or clarification; a correspondence or partial similarity.

My playing is no more like hers, **than a lamp is like sunshine.**
—Jane Austen, *Emma*

METAPHOR

A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable; alternately, a thing representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract.

She had heard any number of women talk of pregnancy as a slow ordeal to be endured, but now from month to month **she felt only a peaceful ripening.**
—Richard Yates, “A Natural Girl”

PERSONIFICATION

The attribution of a personal nature or personal characteristics to something nonhuman, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form. (Throw animal forms in there, too, whydoncha.)

He watched **the clouds: dark swift horses** surging up the sky
—Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*

SIMILE

A figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid.

...a young woman in slacks, whose **face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage**
—Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

LANGUAGE OVERLAY

"My first person narrator was a newspaperman, he had printer's ink in his blood. [I went] through the novel, splicing in words and images, a discourse, in other words, that reflected my hero's passion for the newspaper world. So, for example, Precious now begins: "Jerry Menenga's bar hid like an overlooked misprint amid a block of jutting bank towers..." Or, in moments of excitement, the narrator will spout a series of headlines in lieu of thoughts."

–Douglas Glover, *Notes Home from a Prodigal Son*

If your character is a doctor, perhaps her world might include:

stethoscope, Rx, nurse, pills, scalpel, sterile, billing, paperwork, white coat, bedside manner, cold corridors, patient, tubes, IV, tongue depressor, "Say 'ahhh!"

If your character is a chef, perhaps:

skillet, toque, cooking school, spices, basil, aroma, seasoned, blisters on hands, oven mitt, scalloped potatoes, seared, grilled, boiled, steamed, souffle, sweating in a hot kitchen, hsssss of sausage hitting the oil, Salvadorean pot-washers, waiters, paté, fois gras, freshness, crispness, apron

And surely, with a few minutes and pencil you can add another 10 to 100 more items.

But to continue, let's say your character is a beekeeper:

Bees, hives, smoker, sunshine, blossoms, clover, lavender, moths, gnats, sting, hive tool, veil, gloves, seasons, orchards, Queen, drone, worker, nectar, pollen, propolis, furry, wings, extractor, candles, farmer's markets, bottles, pans, wax, comb, jars, raspberry, apple, recipes, candy, pesticides, "ouch!" mites, cold, wind, directions, forest, nature

Or a shaman:

drum, flutes, shells, spells, chimes, stones, nature, mmm-bb-mmmm-bb, animals, wolves, robes, chants, tent, walking, dancing, running, wind, rain, sun, moon, stars

> More about Language Overlay:

<https://madam-mayo.com/language-overlay/>

POETIC ALLITERATION

Alliteration = the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words

Small **h**ear**t** **h**ad **H**arriet for visiting
— Jane Austen, *Emma*

...hold on with a bull-dog grip and **ch**ew and **ch**oke as much as possible
— *Letter, President Lincoln to General Grant*

From (of all things) a movie review by Desson Howe in the *Washington Post*:

There he is, in all his glory, **B**rad Pitt, that **b**eautiful, **ch**iseled **ch**unk of celebrity manhood. You want him? Go see Fight Club. You want **a**ction, muscle, and **a**tmosphere? You want **b**oys **b**ashing **b**oys in **b**loody, living color? Fight Club is your flick, dude.

More about Poetic Alliteration:
<https://madam-mayo.com/workshop-poetic-alliteration/>

POETIC LISTING

“During the first days she kept busy thinking about changes in the house. She took the shades off the candlesticks, had new wall-paper put up, the staircase repainted, and seats made in the garden round the sundial; she even inquired how she could get a basin with a jet fountain and fishes.”

— Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

“We eat our supper (cold biscuits, bacon, blackberry jam) and discuss tomorrow. Tomorrow the kind of work I like best begins: buying. Cherries and citron, ginger and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pineapple, rinds and raisins and walnuts and whiskey and oh, so much flour, butter so many eggs, spices, flavorings: why, we’ll need a pony to pull the buggy home.”

—Truman Capote, *A Christmas Memory*

More more about Poetic Listing:
<https://madam-mayo.com/poetic-listing/>

POETIC REPETITION

“You have also never said one word about my poor little Highland **book** **my only book**. I had hoped that you and Fritz would have liked it.”

— Queen Victoria (letter to her daughter, 23/12/1865)

Tancredi, he considered, had a great future; he would be the standard-bearer of a counter-attack which the nobility, under new trappings, could launch against the social State. To do this he lacked only one thing: **money**; this Tancredi did not have; none at all. And to get on in politics, now that a name counted less, would require a lot of **money: money** to buy votes, **money** to do the electors favors, **money** for a dazzling style of living...

— Guiseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*

There is about our house a **need**... We need someone who's afraid of frogs. We **need** someone to cry when I get mad, not argue. We **need** a little one who can kiss without leaving egg or jam or gum. We **need** a girl.

— George H. Bush, letter to his mother, 1953

More more about Poetic Repetition:

<https://madam-mayo.com/poetic-repetition/>

DICTION DROPS & SPIKES

“As I thought about composing a new blog post over the past couple of weeks, I resisted the idea of writing about wildfire, even as the topic claimed a growing share of mind day after day. For one thing, I’ve touched the subject before. For another, yet another blog **bemoaning the lack of precipitation seemed tiresome**. Plus, **well, geez: fires are such a downer.**”

— [Andrea Jones, “Out of the Background” in “Between Urban and Wild” blog, July 4, 2018](#)

SPIKE: “...*bemoaning the lack of precipitation seemed tiresome.*”

DROP: “*Plus, well, geez: fires are such a downer.*”

“What then, does one do with one’s justified anger? Miss Manners’ meager arsenal consists only of the withering look, the insistent and repeated request, the cold voice, the report up the chain of command and the tilted nose. They generally work. When they fail, she has the ability to dismiss inferior behavior from her mind as coming from inferior people. You will perhaps point out that she will never know the joy of delivering a well-deserved **sock in the chops**. True— but she will never inspire one, either.”

— Judith Martin, *Miss Manners’ Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*

SPIKE: “*What then, does one do with one’s justified anger? Miss Manners’ meager arsenal consists only of the withering look, the insistent and repeated request, the cold voice, the report up the chain of command and the tilted nose.*”

DROP: “*sock in the chops*”

RHYTHM & SOUND FOR ENERGY & MEANING

Philadelphia, I was told in New York, was so slow that it was safe for people to fall out windows—they just wafted down like gossamer...

—P. Gibbs, *People of Destiny*

We don't think that we could be more relaxed and have better neighbors any place else. So we stay put After all— we have' a very lovely home. The house may not be the nicest looking front. But when one visit the Interior of the Armstrong's home they' see a whole lot of comfort, happiness + the nicest things. Such as that Wall to Wall Bed— a Bath Room with Mirrors Everywhere' Since we are Disciples to Laxatives. A Garage with a magic up + down Gate to it. And of course our Birthmark Car' a Cadillac' (Yea). The Kids in our Block just thrill when they see our garage gate up, and our fine Cadillac ooze on out. They just rejoice and say, "Hi—Louis + Lucille— your car is so beautiful coming out of that rise up gate," which knocks me out.

—Louis Armstrong, *In His Own Words*

Tony Morrison said, "The function of freedom is to free someone else," and if you are no longer wracked or in bondage to a person or a way of life, tell your story. Risk freeing someone else. Not everyone will be glad that you did. Members of your family and other critics may wish you had kept your secrets. Oh, well, what are you going to do? Get it all down. Let it pour out of you onto the page. Write an incredibly shitty, self-indulgent, whiney, mewling first draft. Then take out as many of the excesses as you can."

—Anne Lammott, *Bird by Bird*

SCANSION

Scansion = representation of poetic rhythms by visual symbols

˘ = unstressed syllable

/ = stressed syllable

Examples, except where otherwise noted, are from the chapter on scansion in **Paul Fussell's** *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*

Favors to none, to all she smiles extends;
Oft she rejects, but never once offends.

To slow down, make it heavy:

For this, following Fussell, you'll want "a succession of stressed syllables without the expected intervening unstressed syllables" – for example:

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw
The line too labours, and the words move slow

To go fast, lightly, and/or easily:

Here what works, says Fussell, is "a succession of unstressed syllables without the intervening stressed syllables" – for example:

Ripple on the surface of the water –
were salmon passing under – different
from the ripples caused by breezes
– Gary Snyder "Ripples on the Surface"

Mirror the rhythm:

"all the waves of the billows of the sea"
– Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

To show something sudden / different / new:

Fussell: “an unanticipated reversal in rhythm”– for example:

The pig thrashed and squealed, then, panting, trembling, lay helpless.
–John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*

= MORE EXAMPLES =

WHICH SYLLABLES ARE STRESSED, AND WHICH UNSTRESSED?

...the roller coaster’s track dips and curves like a barn swallow. Just now, a train full of flushed riders climbs, swerves, tilts on its side, then plunges on the rail’s fixed flight through the park...

–Lynda McDonnell, “Veblen and the Mall of America”

I could not bear upper Madison Avenue on weekday mornings... because I would see women walking Yorkshire terriers and shopping at Gristede’s, and some Veblenesque gorge would rise in my throat.

–Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That”

THE FAIRIES

by

William Allingham

W.B. Yeats, ed.,

Fairy & Folk Tales of Ireland

Up the airy mountain
Down the rushy glen
We daren’t go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap
And white owl’s feather!

I GO BANANAS WITH WALLACE STEGNER!
EXAMPLES FROM
Beyond the Hundredth Meridian:
John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West

USE OF IMAGERY

It is easy to skirt the region, hard to cross it, for from Bear Lake at its northern border to the Vermillion Cliffs along the south, Utah **has a spine like a Stegasuarus**.

—Stegner, p. 161

Powell saw the boat **hang for a breath** at the head of the rapid and then sweep into it.

—Stegner, p. 63

Suppose he and his family endured the sun and glare on their treeless prairie, and were not demolished by the cyclones that swept across the plains **like great scythes**.

—Stegner, p. 220

The inflexible fact of aridity lay **like a fence** along the 100th meridian.

—Stegner, p. 229

His handling of the Commission was **like a skilled muleskinner's handling of a twenty-mule team**.

—Stegner, p. 289

Three hundred and sixty degrees of horizon ringed them, the sky fitted the earth **like a bell jar**.

—Stegner, p. 297

POETIC REPETITION

He might see, as many conservationists believe they see, a considerable empire-building tendency within the Bureau of Reclamation, an engineer's vision of the West instead of a humanitarians, a will to build dams without die regard to all the conflicting interests involved. **He might** fear any bureau that showed less concern with the usefulness of a project than with its effect on the political strength of the bureau. **He might** join the Sierra Club and other conservation groups in deploring some proposed and "feasible" dams such as that in Echo Park blow the mouth of the Yampa, and **he might agree** that considerations such as recreation, wildlife protection, preservation for the future of untouched wilderness, might sometimes outweigh possible irrigation and power benefits.

—Stegner, p. 361

AND IN ADDITION TO IMAGERY AND POETIC REPETITION, EXAMPLES OF ALLITERATION AND LISTING:

The great men of Zion are on the map in Brigham City and Heber City and Knightsville, and between and among these are scattered those dense but hollow names, smooth outside with use, packed with associations like internal crystals, that come from the Bible or the Book of Mormon—names that are like Lehi and Manti and Hebron, Nephi and Moroni and Moab.

—Stegner, p. 192

But here before him was the opportunity of his life, the massive and complex problem of planning for the West whose parts meshed in an intricate system. And here was he with twenty years of experience and knowledge, every bit of which could be applied to the problem as an engine's power is applied to the axles. The action of Congress, stimulated by Stewart and Teller, had shifted him into gear, and he was not now going to be content with making a humming noise or moving pistons meaninglessly up and down. He was going to turn wheels.

—Stegner, p. 305

It was the West itself that beat him, the Big Bill Stewarts and Gideon Moodys, the land and cattle and water barons, the plain homesteaders, the locally patriotic, the ambitious, the venal, the acquisitive, the myth-bound West which insisted on running into the future like a streetcar on a gravel road.

—Stegner, p. 338

He was not merely an explorer, an opener, and an observer, he was a prophet. And yet by the law of motion (and hence of history) which he himself accepted, his motion as a particle in the jar and collision of American life was bound to be spiral. His reforms have taken effect, his plans have been adopted, but partially, belatedly, sidelong, as a yielding resultant of two nearly equal stresses.

—Stegner, p. 350

RECOMMENDED READING

Fussell, Paul, [Poetic Meter & Poetic Form](#)

More than a little bit crunchy and most of it won't interest the average prose writer, nonetheless the chapter on scansion is worth the price of the book, and, for any prose writer aiming to achieve vividness in their writing, worth rereading, pencil in hand, multiple times.

Gardner, John, [The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers](#)

Forget the subtitle, "for young writers." This is a book for writers of any age, and not necessarily beginners. The chapter "On Common Errors" is a gem, and also highly recommended for writers of creative nonfiction.

Glover, Douglas, [Notes Home From a Prodigal Son](#)

By one of Canada's most accomplished lyrical novelists and essayists, this is a splendid book throughout. Essential: his essay "The Novel as Poem."

Oliver, Mary, [A Poetry Handbook](#)

Short and sweet. Finally, an articulate answer to the question, Why is a rock not a stone? An excellent resource for poets, as well as prose writers, who should never – ever – underestimate the importance of the poetry in their prose.

Ricco, Gabriele Lusser, [Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-Brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers](#)

The first and biggest barrier to writing quality literature is your Left Brain, or your "Sign Mind." This book shows you how to quiet the Sign Mind and let your Design Mind emerge to play.

Scarry, Elaine, [Dreaming by the Book](#)

Essential for understanding how and why specific sensory detail "works" to create a vivid picture in the reader's mind.

Tufte, Virginia, [Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style](#)

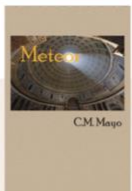
Elucidates the immense range of possibilities we have in the English language to arrange our sentences, and within them, the sounds and rhythms of words, the better to sharpen and strengthen what we mean to say. And that is power.

On my blog, *Madam Mayo*, the second Monday of every month is devoted to a post for my workshop students and anyone else interested in creative writing.

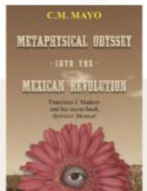
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SOME OF MY BOOKS INCLUDE:

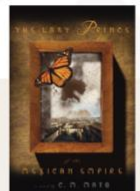
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METEOR (Winner of the Gival Press Award for Poetry)



Metaphysical Odyssey into the Mexican Revolution



The Last Prince of the Mexican Empire



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