Workshop Proposal

Ray Rhamey

Crafting Killer Description and Dialogue Scenes

Specs:

- fiction (craft)
- all levels learn from this workshop
- Presentation, in-class writing and interactive critique
- Needs: handouts at session OR ability to project writing task info from a computer
- Bonus: will email instructive chapters from *Mastering the Craft of Compelling Storytelling* to people who sign up for the workshop

Three things that workshoppers will learn:

- 1. how to add dimension and characterization to description of scenes and characters
- 2. how to utilize beats in dialogue to add depth, move story, characterize
- 3. how to better create the experience of the story in a reader's mind

Writers work hard to deliver the *experience* of a story, to evoke in the reader's mind a visceral experiencing of what is happening. Two primary tools for doing that are *description* and *dialogue*. Those who sign up for the workshop will be emailed two free educational chapters in advance of the conference that focus on the topics to be covered; they are excerpts from *Mastering the Craft of Compelling Storytelling*. I have included the excerpts at the end of this proposal.

Experiential description:

So much description we read in novels is no more than a snapshot, a listing of the parts of a scene that is no richer in content or experience than what a camera could give us. It just is what it is.

But in a novel a scene doesn't have to just be "what it is." Description of a scene, an object, or a person is an opportunity to set mood and to characterize the characters featured in the scene. That characterization can take place if the description is *filtered* through the mind of the point-of-view character. It can take on new dimensions created by the nuances a character's beliefs, feelings, objectives, etc. bring.

I call it *experiential* description. A simple example: Steve, a young man, sees a woman in a blue dress.

> Snapshot: Sheila's dress was blue.
>
> Experiential: Sheila's dress was the same sleazy blue Steve's mother had worn whenever she went out to get drunk.

Workshoppers are given a snapshot description of a scene and two characters to work with. They write an experiential description of that scene from the two characters' points of view, striving to

include all the elements that the reader "sees." Then workshoppers read their descriptions and a critique follows. Here is the stimulus material used for the description part of the workshop:

> **Exercise 1: experiential description**
>
> Setting snapshot: The Montana courtroom gleams with polished oak—the judge's bench, the railings, the prosecution and defense tables. The court stenographer is a trim forty-year old, dressed in a gray suit with a mini-skirt. The judge is a rotund black man wearing reading glasses on the tip of his nose as he surveys the defendant and then the prosecutor.
>
> Characters:
>
> 1. Earl is the defendant, 24, a habitual criminal facing his third trial, this time for criminal assault. Raised in Georgia, he hates authority and hates blacks.
>
> 2. Greg is the prosecutor, fifty, often world-weary with the never-ending stream of criminals and the evil he sees each day. He is fired up for this trial though—the defendant beat a 12-year-old boy nearly to death. He is glad to see Judge Bell, the hanging judge, presiding. And Judy, the stenographer he has been dating for the last two years.
>
> Describe the setting from each point of view. Include everything you see in the snapshot. Workshoppers will read their descriptions aloud for a critique.

Dialogue beats:

The second part of the workshop focuses on the use of "beats" in dialogue to give it dimension: to characterize, to inform, to advance story/plot. Dialogue beats can be action, description and characterization of aspects of people, place, or action, internal monologue, and more. Skilled use of dialogue beats can also eliminate the need for dialogue tags, thus making the narrative even crisper.

As an editor, I see the addition of beats that do nothing to characterize or enrich the story. A short example, an actual bit of a scene from a first draft by a published author: A man and a woman sit at a table in a café, talking about a woman (his wife/her friend) who has been missing for over a week. In the course of the conversation in the woman's point of view, this happens:

> A man from the next table asked to borrow the extra chair to my right. As I nodded, Robert said, "I have not told you everything."
>
> "What?"
>
> "Her car was found abandoned in Stewart State Park."
>
> "Oh my God! When? How long after…"

The solo beat at the beginning did inject action into the scene…but it had nothing to do with story—it was "activity," not storytelling action. Here is what skillful use of beats can do to that scene:

Robert shifted his gaze away from me. “I have not told you everything.”

How like the man to withhold information. “What?”

“Her car was found abandoned in Stewart State Park.”

“Oh my God!” Fear for my missing friend jolted through me. “When? How long after…”

In the workshop, the presenter first solicits from the attendees a half-dozen random bits of dialogue. The attendees write down the lines and then are given a scene: a snapshot of the location and two characters. Their task is to use the dialogue given and apply it to the characters and the scene. They will then read the result aloud and the class will critique the effort. This is the exercise:

Exercise 2: beats in dialogue

Setting snapshot: The reception area of the Exotics Veterinary Clinic. A ten-foot counter holds displays advertising cat and dog medicines and food. Behind it is the receptionist, a 20-something young woman who is bored with her job. There are two patients waiting, one with a yappy little miniature poodle and another with a cat in a carrier that yowls every once in a while, which sets off the poodle. The veterinarian (below) is present when the scene starts, talking with the owner of the cat.

Characters in the scene:

1. Virginia is a fifty-year-old woman who is a veterinarian. She specializes in small, exotic animals—snakes, rabbits, hamsters, mice, parrots, etc. She is a caring woman, but does not approve of dragons in general, though she’s never really talked to one. She has avoided contact ever since one flew off with her miniature pony.

2. Gargoo is a dragon who has a pain in his side. He’s about the size of a horse, not including his tail. He can talk, of course, and he works undercover for the police, which is where he got hit in the abdomen. He doesn’t trust human medical science, but he’s in pain. He knows about this veterinarian because he saw her sign when he carried off a tiny horse he had for brunch a few years back.

I’ve taught this workshop at:

- 2012 Write on the Sound Writers Conference, Edmonds, WA
- 2012 South Coast Writer’s conference, Gold Beach, OR
- 2012 Write on the River workshop, Wenatchee, WA

I’ve received workshopper evaluations from Write on the Sound for this workshop. The class of 75 was sold out (I’m pretty sure there were more people there than that.), and 55 evaluations were turned in. Here are the ratings on a 5-point scale, with 5 = excellent, 1 = poor:

5 – 28 votes
4 – 23
3 – 2
2 – 0
1 – 2 (Well, you can't please everyone.)

Average rating: 4.4

Credentials:

I operate a book editing and design business, Crrreative Book Editing and Design—I've been freelance editing full-length fiction manuscripts for about 13 years. I also run the "litblog," Flogging the Quill. I get about 9,000 page hits per month.

I published my writing craft book titled *Mastering the Craft of Compelling Storytelling* in 2014, a redo of my *Flogging the Quill, Crafting a Novel that Sells,* 2009 and now out of print.

Bestselling author Tess Gerritsen said this about my book:

> "For some time now, I've been a fan of "Flogging the Quill," Rhamey's excellent blogsite about the how-to's of writing. Now he's compiled his expertise into a writing guide, and it's a must-have for any novelist--published or aspiring. It's one of the most readable, entertaining books on writing out there."

I'm also a novelist; I've published 4 novels, and have had literary agent representation. My novels are commercial fiction and include speculative fiction; fantasy; and mystery. Samples are at rayrhamey.com.

In screenwriting, I was a story editor for Filmation, Los Angeles, and my screen credits include an adaptation of *The Little Engine that Could* and 20 half-hour screenplays for animated series.

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The Craft of Experiential Description and Dialogue Beats
(excerpted from *Mastering the Craft of Compelling Storytelling):*
by Ray Rhamey

Make it *experiential* to characterize

The reader of a novel wants the narrative to create a very specific effect: he wants to be taken away from the real world he sits in. He wants to feel and see and do things he would never do. Readers want to *experience* the world of the novel.

That's your task: to create an experience. It is not to *tell* a story. It is to cause a specific reaction in your reader's mind. A suspension of disbelief, a connection to the life of a character. Characters are the key to and core of creating an experience for the reader.

This relates to the old saw, "show, don't tell." *Telling* is the mere delivery of information. A newspaper does that. A novel should be delivering a character's experience. (Note: I'll italicize *telling* and *showing* whenever I'm referring to that craft aspect of creating a narrative.)

Description is a key element of every novel, every scene. Scenes need to be set (described) so the reader has a context within which to experience what the character experiences. It's needed to show action, of course. In a novel, descriptions shouldn't be simple photographs of what the character sees. Oh, they can be and often are, but snapshots don't create an experience. They are *telling*, they are information, they are not emotion, they are not experience.

The best description happens from within the character's point of view, colored by the character's emotions, needs, beliefs, and desires.

It characterizes.

Describe from the inside, not the outside

Here's description from a writer's sample where characterization could have happened but didn't. The writer describes Jimmy and his girlfriend this way:

> Jimmy was high-school skinny, that lean, still-growing time when muscles are tight everywhere and the sinews are loose and respond quickly. He wasn't tall, only five seven, but she was only five three and they appeared to be the perfect couple.

I liked "high-school skinny," but these lines are clearly the author getting some exposition out of the way—we're taken out of the boy's head and made to feel distant from the scene. The phrase "they appeared to be the perfect couple" is clearly from another point of view entirely, since the boy can't see what they look like together. Not to mention a first-degree case of *telling*.

I know it's tough to describe a character when you're in his point of view, and you don't want to resort to the tired old idea of looking in a mirror, but there are ways to do it. For example:

> Jimmy worried Kathy would think he was too skinny, which his mother said was just because he was still growing, all sinewy with long lean muscles. But he wasn't so worried about being only five foot seven—Kathy was maybe five three, tops, and he thought they made a perfect couple.

As you can see, this gives a picture of them but characterizes him as well, and it comes from inside the character, not from outside, from the author. The reader not only doesn't leave the character's head, she is drawn more deeply into it.

Experiential description of place

When you "see" a place through a character's point of view, you can do two things at once: set the scene to give the reader the context in which things are happening, and show a character's personality.

Here's an example: a mailroom in a large corporation seen as a simple snapshot, the approach many writers take to description.

> In a gray room with fluorescent lights, a rack of pigeonholes for sorting mail sat along one wall. Next to them stood a wheeled delivery cart, a desk with a computer on it, and a worn swivel chair.

Now let's describe that same setting in a way that characterizes a middle-aged man who works in the mailroom.

> Jeff switched on the mailroom lights. The fluorescents glared at him the way they had for fifteen years, and the gray walls radiated depression. The rack of pigeonholes for sorting mail along one wall stared at him, each empty hole like his life. The delivery cart stood ready to cause the daily pain in his hip when he trudged through the offices, delivering mail to people who didn't see him, like he was furniture.
>
> On his desk the computer waited to be turned on—no, they said "booted up," didn't they—its programs lurking, waiting to trip him up again when he tried to send out a shipment. He sat in his beat-up swivel chair, and a small sense of comfort came with the way the worn cushions conformed to his body and it squeaked when he tilted back.

Just as the snapshot approach did, this experiential description gave you a picture of the room and what was in it, so it served the purpose of setting the scene. But it also defined Jeff's character.

The same room seen through another character's point of view has the same physical characteristics, but can be a very different place. Here's the room described through the point of view of Jinny, a twenty-something new employee.

> Jinny burst through the mailroom door and was disappointed yet again to see Jeff already there. One of these days she'd beat him in and do the setup. He hadn't even turned on the computer yet. She reached past him, slumped as usual in that crummy old swivel chair with the ratty cushion—why didn't he requisition something decent?—and flicked on the computer. When break came and he went out for a smoke she'd surf her favorite blogs.
>
> The gray walls under the soft fluorescent light soothed her headache. The racks of pigeonholes waited for her to fill their mouths with the mail that helped the company function. The delivery cart stood ready—maybe today she'd ask Jeff

> if she could be the one that wheeled it through the cubicles, saying hi, meeting people. Even though she'd only been here a month, the mailroom felt like an old friend.

Same pigeonholes, same everything picture-wise, but very different characterization—that's experiential description.

Whenever we step into a room, we not only see what's in it, we react to it in ways that characterize us. Have your characters do the same, and color their perceptions with the result.

Experiential description of action

Experiential description means that the exact same action, as experienced by two different characters, is a very different experience for each character and, thus, for the reader. First, the objective camera technique.

> Morticia leaned forward and her nostrils flared. She sank her fangs into Frank's neck. Blood rushed into her mouth and dribbled down his neck. He moaned and writhed, but she pinned him to the wall and continued to drink his essence.

The thing is, characters aren't cameras. They're experiencing this action, not watching it happen. And their experience flavors the action with meaning. So here's this action from Morticia's point of view.

> Morticia leaned forward. The scent of Frank's blood, pulsing just below the skin of his neck, aroused her. Her fangs lengthened and she sank them into a vein. The sweetness of blood washed over her tongue and poured down her throat. His moan aroused her further, and when he writhed within her grip, power rushed through her and she pinned him to the wall, drinking in the smell of his fear and relishing the rich taste of his essence.

Do you think Frank's experience of the very same action will feel the same as Morticia's? Hardly.

> Frank shrank back when Morticia leaned forward, panic pounding in his mind. She was…smelling him? Oh, God, she had fangs, and they grew as he watched. She struck and twin points of pain pierced his neck. Hot liquid trickled down—his blood? A moan crawked out of his throat and he writhed, pushing with all his strength to escape. As if he were a child, she jammed him against the wall with terrible power.

Now, I'm not claiming that the above examples are great writing—hey, I just pulled them out of the air. But I do think that the technique illustrated is valid—no, vital—to creating an experience for your reader. Describe, yes, but flavor the scene with how the character feels it, experiences it. Even a color can have meaning. Which of these gives you experience versus information?

- Sheila's dress was blue.

- Sheila's dress was the same sleazy blue Steve's mother had worn whenever she went out to get drunk.

I came across an elegant use of this technique in *The Silver Swan,* by Benjamin Black. A woman watches a man who could simply be described as lean and lanky, but the author helps us perceive him through her eyes in a way that characterizes both of them.

> What a lovely loose way he had of walking, leaning down a little way to one side and then the other at each long, loping stride he took, his shoulders dipping in rhythm with his steps and his head sliding backwards and forwards gently on its tall stalk of neck, like the head of some marvelous, exotic wading bird.

Enough shown?

On the other hand

There are no rules. I feel obliged to point out that, while I think fiction that utilizes experiential description in key passages is stronger and more engaging, it isn't the only way to deliver a fascinating story.

The reason I feel obligated to point this out is that as I was polishing this manuscript, I picked up Stephen King's *The Eyes of the Dragon*. Published in 1988, it's King doing his thing with the classic fairy tale—the good prince and the bad prince, the evil magician, dragons. . .

And Stephen tells the tale. His voice is the storyteller's voice, and once in a while he speaks directly to you. He's not rendering the experience of the characters, and I'm distant from the story, much more of an observer than a participant.

Because of King's voice, and the fun of the tale, I'm having a great time. The distance from the story doesn't matter, it's fun because I have a gifted storyteller's voice whispering in my ear.

Just sayin'.

However, that is not to say that the same story, and the same characters, couldn't have been more powerful illustrations of how to be a person if they'd been written in a different way. That's the beauty of being a writer— you have an amazing amount of control over exactly what the reading experience will be: the reader's emotional involvement, her intellectual involvement, her takeaway.

It's your bus to drive, your road to take, just make the trip as good as you can.

Dialogue craft: cook up some tasty beats

Naked dialogue, just the speeches all by themselves, does only part of the job of delivering the experience of a scene. In life, and in fiction, dialogue doesn't happen in a vacuum—it happens in the midst of movement, body language, pauses for thought, and more. To bring dialogue to life, create "beats"— action interwoven with dialogue (including thought as action)—to invisibly accomplish a number of vital storytelling tasks, including:

- Advancing the story
- Increasing tension
- Illuminating character
- Identifying speakers without having to use dialogue tags

- Adding meaning to speeches that wouldn't otherwise be there
- Breaking up long strings of quotations to avoid a staccato effect and to create a pleasing rhythm
- Creating pictures in the reader's mind of what's going on (*Construe "picture" to include time [pace], scents, sensations, and sounds as well as action and physical description.*)

Here's an example of a beat that does one of those things…and yet is a waste of words. The scene is from a published novelist's first draft of a new story: a man and a woman sit at a table in a café, talking about a woman (his wife/her friend) who has been missing for over a week. In the course of the conversation in the woman's point of view, this happens:

> A man from the next table asked to borrow the extra chair to my right. As I nodded, Robert said, "I have not told you everything."
> "What?"
> "Her car was found abandoned in Stewart State Park."
> "Oh my God! When? How long after…"

The solo beat at the beginning did inject action into the scene…but it had nothing to do with story—it was "activity," not storytelling action. It didn't bear on the subject of the conversation, nor the people talking. It had no impact on the scene.

The dialogue that follows it suffers due to a lack of beats. How about a little body language when Robert confesses he hasn't told his listener everything? Or a reaction when the narrator learns fraught information?

> Robert shifted his gaze away from me. "I have not told you everything."
> How like the man to withhold information. "What?"
> "Her car was found abandoned in Stewart State Park."
> "Oh my God!" Fear for my missing friend jolted through me. "When? How long after…"

Here's what each of those beats accomplished:

- The first told you who was speaking and gave character and nuance to his speech.
- The second is internal monologue that adds characterization for both people.
- The last one injects emotion and more characterization.

Let's beat up some more dialogue. Here's part of a scene stripped naked, all of the beats removed. In this scene, KB, a law enforcement officer, reports to her superior, and she expects him to praise her for what she'd done the day before.

> Captain Berman's door was open, as usual. KB tapped on the doorframe and went in.
> "Take a seat, Lieutenant. So, you think you found a subject of interest."
> "Yessir!"
> "Did you see it with the thermal imaging device?"
> "I did, sir."
> "Did you record it?"

“Ah, no, sir.”
“I see. You say it changed appearance on three occasions?”
“From a youngish woman to an older woman, then to a hick, then to a girl. Yessir.”
“Did any of your team see these apparitions?”
“Schultz saw it come in. Sanchez saw it on the stairs, and Bailey saw it come out.”
“After receiving your email, I asked your team for their input. Schultz didn’t see a face.”
“No, ah, he didn’t get a good look. But he saw the glow in the camera.”
“I see. No one else saw the older woman?”
“Not before she, uh, changed into a farmer.”

You learn things, but there’s no tension, no depth, you can’t see a damn thing, and there’s no rhythm—it’s like a radio machine-gunning words at you. Now here’s the full narrative—note one other thing while you’re at it: there’s not a single use of “said” or “asked” or any other dialogue tag in this narrative.

Captain Berman’s door was open, as usual. His white-haired head was bent over a stack of paperwork, as usual. Adrenaline pumped her up, and she tapped on the doorframe and went in. The office was hot, as usual; the radiator must have been cranked all the way open.

He looked up and nodded. No smile. “Take a seat, Lieutenant.”

The old fart was old-fashioned and formal, so maybe he was not gonna come right out with her attaboy. Sitting, she told herself to be patient, something that never came easily.

He signed a piece of paper, placed it in an out box, leaned back, laced his fingers over his belly, and gazed at her. “So, you think you found a subject of interest.”

She smiled. “Yessir!”

“Did you see it with the thermal imaging device?”

Inside, she smirked at his fussy way of talking. “I did, sir.”

“Did you record it?”

Oh, shit. She’d been too excited. “Ah, no, sir.”

“I see.” He leaned forward and studied a printout of her email. “You say it changed appearance on three occasions?”

“From a youngish woman to an older woman, then to a hick, then to a girl. Yessir.”

“Did any of your team see these apparitions?”

Couldn’t the old idiot read? “Schultz saw it come in. Sanchez saw it on the stairs, and Bailey saw it come out.”

“After receiving your email, I asked your team for their input.” He picked up a printout. “Schultz didn’t see a face.”

“No, ah, he didn’t get a good look.” Why did she feel like she was on trial? “But he saw the glow in the camera.”

“I see.” He read more. “No one else saw the older woman?”

“Not before she, uh, changed into a farmer.”

The beats give pace to the conversation and much, much more. Through the beats you experienced:

- His chilly greeting when she expects warmth, and then his dawdling even though she is anxious (*finishing with papers, leaning back, lacing his fingers*)
- Her smugness (*the old fart was old-fashioned*)
- Her eagerness (*she smiled*)
- Her low opinion of him (*smirked at his fussy way of speaking to her*)
- Her realization of a mistake she's made (*too excited to record the suspect*)
- His calm, steady approach (*leaned forward and studied a printout*)
- More of her disrespect (*couldn't the old idiot read?*)
- His steady pursuit (*he picked up a printout and read it*)
- Her increasing anxiety (*was she on trial here?*)

You get a sense of escalating tension in KB. The scene continues to build from here, and ends with her feeling defeated, angry, and near tears when she'd begun the scene expecting praise. And it is the beats that take you there.

Not every line gets a beat—that'll wear a reader out. Every beat is tied to characterization and/or giving a picture of what is going on. The beats utilize physical action and internal monologue *(Couldn't the old idiot read?)* to add depth and context to the spoken words.

The beats help pace the exchange, creating pauses (*signed a piece of paper, placed it in an out box, leaned back, laced…*) and emphasis (*reading from something, etc.*). Although there are no dialogue tags, you always know who's speaking and how they deliver their speeches.

The other cool thing about using beats is that it avoids the third most common dialogue flaw, explaining the dialogue with "with."