



Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets

Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.

Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.

Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.
And keep Learning Together.**

Please note:

The following resource was created with love and care by a member of the Learning Together Network. We sincerely hope that the creator's work will be respected by distributors, readers and users, and will not be subject to plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Thank you for your cooperation.

ThinkLet #4

Using Your Senses in Creative Writing

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This resource is designed to help you use your senses in creative writing – particularly when you’re writing a description. The two extracts in this ThinkLet are both taken from non-fiction books, but you can use your senses in all types of writing, including fiction and poetry.

*Extract one is from the very start of the first volume of Maya Angelou’s memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Virago Modern Classics, 1984).*

Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

Photo: President Barack Obama presenting Maya Angelou with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2011.

Source: Office of the White House

Maya Angelou was an American poet, memoirist, and actress whose work explores the themes of economic, racial, and sexual oppression. She was brought up by her grandmother in rural Arkansas, where an early trauma left her mute for several years. She wrote about her experiences in the first volume of her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.



Read the extract the first time just for pleasure.

Then read it more carefully and look out for the following:

1. Underline in the text where the author has included colours.
2. Has she used other senses e.g. touch, sound, smell, taste?
3. Are there any descriptions you particularly like? (e.g. when she compares something to something else - "... like...")
4. What effect does using brand names have on the writing (e.g. **Singer** sewing machine and **Blue Seal Vaseline**)? Could you use brand names in your writing?
5. The author uses very precise details e.g. "a number-two pencil". What effect does this have on the way she paints the picture?
6. This extract ends with a short sentence. What effect does that have on you, the reader (if any)?
7. By the end of the piece what do you know about the narrator?

Finally, read the piece out loud. Are there any words that sound like poetry?

Prologue from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

"What you looking at me for?
I didn't come to stay . . ."

I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember. Other things were more important.

"What you looking at me for?
I didn't come to stay . . ."

Whether I could remember the rest of the poem or not was immaterial. The truth of the statement was like a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms.

"What you looking at me for . . . ?"

The children's section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was wiggling and giggling over my well-known forgetfulness.

The dress I wore was lavender taffeta, and each time I breathed it rustled, and now that I was sucking in air to breathe out shame it sounded like crepe paper on the back of hearses.

As I'd watched Momma put ruffles on the hem and cute little tucks around the waist, I knew that once I put it on I'd look like a movie star. (It was silk and that made up for the awful color.) I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world. Hanging softly over the black Singer sewing machine, it looked like magic, and when people saw me wearing it they were going to run up to me and say, "Marguerite (sometimes it was 'dear Marguerite'), forgive us, please, we didn't know who you were," and I would answer generously, "No, you couldn't have known. Of course I forgive you."

Just thinking about it made me go around with angel's dust sprinkled over my face for days. But Easter's early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway. It was old-lady-long too, but it didn't hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with the Arkansas red clay. The age-faded color made my skin look dirty like mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs.

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about "my daddy must of been a Chinaman" (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.

"What you looking . . ." The minister's wife leaned toward me, her long yellow face full of sorry. She whispered, "I just come to tell you, it's Easter Day." I repeated, jamming the words together, "Ijustcometotellyouit'sEasterDay," as low as possible. The giggles hung in the air like melting clouds that were waiting to rain on me. I held up two fingers, close to my chest, which meant that I had to go to the toilet, and tiptoed toward the rear of the church. Dimly, somewhere over my head, I heard ladies saying, "Lord bless the child," and "Praise God." My head was up and my eyes were open, but I didn't see anything. Halfway down the aisle, the church exploded with "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" and I tripped over a foot stuck out from the children's pew. I stumbled and started to say something, or maybe to scream, but a green persimmon, or it could have been a lemon, caught me between the legs and squeezed. I tasted the sour on my tongue and felt it in the back of my mouth. Then before I reached the door, the sting was burning down my legs and into my Sunday socks. I tried to hold, to squeeze it back, to keep it from speeding, but when I reached the church porch I knew I'd have to let it go, or it would probably run right back up to my head and my poor head would burst like a dropped watermelon, and all the brains and spit and tongue and eyes would roll all over the place. So I ran down into the yard and let it go. I ran, peeing and crying, not toward the toilet out back but to our house. I'd get a whipping for it, to be sure, and the nasty children would have something new to tease me about. I laughed anyway, partially for the sweet release; still, the greater joy came not only from being liberated from the silly church but from the knowledge that I wouldn't die from a busted head.

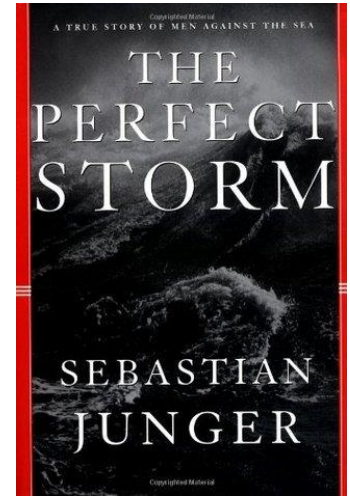
If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult.

Sebastian Junger (1962-present)

Sebastian Junger is a journalist and filmmaker. His most famous book, *The Perfect Storm* (1997), is the true story of how the massive storm of 1991 affected a fishing community off the coast of North America. The book was later made into a film starring George Clooney.

This extract is another start of a book. As you read it, think about the following:

1. Underline his use of colour
2. Circle any places where a colour is *suggested* e.g. "rusty".
3. Are there any examples where a colour also suggests the touch of what's being described?
4. What sort of atmosphere does this piece establish?
5. Are there any descriptions you think could be improved?
6. What part does weather play in the description?
7. How do place names help to establish the setting?
8. Do you like or dislike the way in which the piece starts with a quote?



Extract from page 5 of *The Perfect Storm, A True Story of Man Against the Sea* by Sebastian Junger

GLOUCESTER, MASS., 1991

It's no fish ye're buying, it's men's lives.

- Sir Walter Scott

The Antiquary, Chapter 11

A soft fall rain slips down through the trees and the smell of ocean is so strong that it can almost be licked off the air. Trucks rumble along Rogers Street and men in t-shirts stained with fishblood shout to each other from the decks of boats. Beneath them the ocean swells up against the black pilings and sucks back down to the barnacles. Beer cans and old pieces of styrofoam rise and fall and pools of spilled diesel fuel undulate like huge iridescent jellyfish. The boats rock and creak against their ropes and seagulls complain and hunker down and complain some more. Across Rogers Street and around the back of the Crow's Nest Inn, through the door and up the cement stairs, down the carpeted hallway and into one of the doors on the left, stretched out on a double bed in room #27 with a sheet pulled over him, Bobby Shatford lies asleep.

He's got one black eye. There are beer cans and food wrappers scattered around the room and a duffel bag on the floor with t-shirts and flannel shirts and blue jeans spilling out. Lying asleep next to him is his girlfriend, Christina Cotter. She's an attractive woman in her early forties with rust-blond hair and a strong, narrow face. There's a T.V. in the room and a low chest of drawers with a mirror on top of it and a chair of the sort they have in high-school cafeterias. The plastic cushion cover has cigarette burns in it. The window looks out on Rogers Street where trucks ease themselves into fishplant bays.

It's still raining. Across the street is Rose Marine, where fishing boats fuel up, and across a small leg of water is the State Fish Pier, where they unload their catch. The State Pier is essentially a huge parking lot on pilings, and on the far side, across another leg of water, is a boatyard and a small park where mothers bring their children to play. Looking over the park on the corner of Haskell Street is an elegant brick house built by the famous Boston architect, Charles Bulfinch. It originally stood on the corner of Washington and Summer Streets in Boston, but in 1850 it was jacked up, rolled onto a barge, and transported to Gloucester. That is where Bobby's mother, Ethel, raised four sons and two daughters. For the past fourteen years she has been a daytime bartender at the Crow's Nest. Ethel's grandfather was a fisherman and both her daughters dated fishermen and all four of the sons fished at one point or another. Most of them still do.

The Crow's Nest windows face east into the coming day over a street used at dawn by reefer trucks. Guests don't tend to sleep late. Around eight o'clock in the morning, Bobby Shatford struggles awake. He has flax-brown hair, hollow cheeks, and a sinewy build that has seen a lot of work. In a few hours he's due on a swordfishing boat named the Andrea Gail, which is headed on a one-month trip to the Grand Banks. He could return with five thousand dollars in his pocket or he could not return at all. Outside, the rain drips on. Chris groans, opens her eyes, and squints up at him. One of Bobby's eyes is the color of an overripe plum.

Writing exercises for you to try yourself!

1. Use your senses to build a description

Think about a place or time you want to describe. This could be anything - for example: your childhood (an extended time), a kitchen (a place) or a sporting fixture (a specific time in a given place).

Without thinking too much about the answers, write down:

- i. what it smelt like
- ii. what it felt like
- iii. its colour
- iv. its taste
- v. its touch.

Work on building this is into a fuller description.

2. Describe your favourite place.

Aim for 500 words and try to use your senses in your description.

3. Write about a cake and the occasion around it.

This could be a birthday cake, a wedding cake or a favourite cake you bought or baked for someone. You can interpret the word “cake” as broadly as you like. Aim for 500 words and use as many senses as you can.

4. Write about your earliest memory.

Try to use your senses and aim for 500 words.

5. Think of a journey you know well.

Describe it purely through sound. Aim for 500 words.

Here are some things to consider going forwards:

Why not share your writing with friends and family?
Encourage them to give you feedback on what you have written.
Suggest that they write their own short piece for you to read and reflect upon.

Are there other things you have read that use the senses in the writing to powerful effect? What stood out to you?
As well as colours, did they use textures? Sizes? Shapes?