

Ingredients:

Two different ideas, each equally significant to the narrative

Concrete, sensory details to give the reader direct, immediate, intense access to those two ideas

An opening line that anchors the narrative to a moment in time (e.g., Marie Ursule waking in the morning)

RECIPE

Directions:

Try this exercise even if you don't end up using it in your work. At the very least it will help you clarify the controlling ideas of your novel or story, as well as forcing you to craft specific, sensory details that make those abstract ideas concrete for the reader. Readers access stories through the senses, after all.

To begin, you'll need to craft an opening sentence, one that will be repeated later and spun into the second "verse." Brand's structure here works wonderfully as the opening to her novel, but I think it could be used effectively anywhere in your novel (or a short story). Your sentence doesn't need to be as darkly foreboding as Brand's; it only needs to have some sense of uncertainty or predicament.

If you haven't already, write the controlling ideas of your story (aka themes) as single sentences. This exercise in clarification is meant for yourself only, not to be included in the narrative. (e.g., "A single act of defiance, if traumatic enough, can haunt a woman's descendants for generations.")

I suggest doing a timed freewrite to uncover the freshest, most vivid, most original sensory images that will transform your controlling idea from something abstract to concrete. Relax and turn your mind to one of the controlling ideas. Focus on letting the images arise from your subconscious to the surface of your mind. Write them down immediately, without second guessing them, without editing them. Repeat this process for the other controlling idea.

Plan to give a significant amount of "narrative real estate" to the description of each controlling idea. If you make these "verses" too short, then the reader will not have the room needed to experience the idea fully. You need to signal to the reader that these ideas are important and this can be achieved simply by spending a significant amount of narrative space on the ideas.

MARGIN
NOTES
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