



Dream of Travel Writing

Creating Ambiance with Journalistic Detail

So, today is the last webinar in our series on journalistic detail. And in so many ways, it's the most important. Often when we do series, they are really informational, in terms of, each webinar built on the previous one. Or like when we did the several month-long article Nuts and Bolts series. Each webinar stands alone in a way in terms of what it covers. It really covers the different piece of a larger picture, in which you don't need to have all the pieces, you pick and choose which pieces apply to you personally.

So, this week as we talk about creating ambiance, it's not just that ambiance is something that's easier to understand, building upon what we've talked about with journalistic detail in the last couple weeks, it's also that creating ambiance is really one of those higher level goals more generally, of what you want your writing, your words, and especially your travel writing, period, to achieve, right?

I have a slide on this specifically. But if we think about what we want to do with travel writing, so often people use this idea of creating a sense of place. How often have you heard of sense place? Sense of place. You need a sense of place. I write with a sense of place, my books exemplify a sense of place, right? That seems to be the be-all-end-all of what we would like to do with our travel writing, and when you really get down to it, that's ambiance.

And I'm using the word ambiance instead of sense of place, because I find like angle, like, you know, why did we start using journalistic detail instead of specifics? Like, so many of these words, sense of place, is used so often, in so many places, by so many people, with so many different ideas of what that means, that it, kind of, ceases to mean anything at all, because it means so many different things to different people.

That as we say it, it's not actually communicating anything that we intend to the recipient, it's only meaning a layer of different values they already have attached to that word. And obviously, that's the case with all words, but I'm trying to take ambiance, which is a little new in this setting, and use it to recreate our sense of how we build up that sense.

So, today we're gonna follow the same format that we've been following, both in these more recent journalistic detail webinars, as well as in the earlier article, Nuts and Bolts webinars. I'm gonna talk to you a little bit about, if you wanna call it the theory and practice behind this idea, and then we're gonna move into looking at some specific examples.

And I've got some really interesting things cued up for you today. One, I'm really excited to share, because it comes from an exercise that I did, and, in fact, an exercise that was timed, so it's really easy for you guys to do it yourself. And I'll explain how that exercise works so



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that you can test it as well on your own at home, or with another writing friend, or with a non-writing friend even, you just need somebody to interview in order to accomplish this.

And then, I'm also gonna share with you a relatively long piece, it's a feature from outside, we're not gonna read through the whole piece, but I chose it and I chose to focus on it in this webinar. And not necessarily just because of its timeliness, and you'll see what I mean about that when we get there, but also just because of how incredibly tied everything in the story is into this ambiance. And the fact that the story itself, theoretically, seems to be about one thing, but it's really about this ambiance that it's creating, and that's what I wanna encourage all of you guys to do as well.

So, enough about us, let's talk about your writing. I mentioned before that I'm using this word "Ambience," rather than "Sense of place," or even "Atmosphere," or a lot of other words that can be used. And I wanted to, just because it's always interesting, I wanted to dig into the official definition of that. But first, I wanted to explain a little bit of why, why we're talking about ambiance, and why ambiance ties into journalistic detail.

And that's because of something that you have probably heard when you were young, or you've probably heard, it's a trite thing that people are told, or you've heard it from me when I look at your pitches. But "Show, don't tell," is so real. "Show, don't tell," is the most fundamental thing in all forms of communication at all times that causes something to fall flat.

I see it again and again, whether I'm putting my reader hat on, or particularly when I put my editor, who receives 200 pitches a week, and I'm very harried and I don't have time for this, but I'm looking for one specific thing I need and that's why I've even opened up these unsolicited pitches in the first place, hat on, and I look at people's pitches. I'm not grabbed by things, you feel it when you're grabbed.

For those of you who are very into wine, or beer, or some type of food, whether it's cupcakes, or maybe you really like dog videos, you know in that thing that you know well and you love, or that you're just very often exposed to, whether it's your kids tantrums or what, you know when there is an outlier. You know when there is something that stands above the rest, when it has some quality that makes it different and important.

And in writing, that's writing that goes beyond the words and creates pictures. Now, this is really more the, sort of, science side, if you will, behind "Show, don't tell." It's that, as we see with so much visual marketing, and as photographic or static, visual marketing is moving



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so much into video. And as video marketing is moving into more episodic, almost fictional content, as opposed to straight non-fiction content, i.e. movies being used to promote destinations like Rio, what do you think that's about?

How do you think that happened? Right? So, it's because of the showing, it's because that is so much more powerful than straight telling. I mean, just a very simple statistic, for instance, is that, people retain 95% of what they hear in a video message or what the message is in a video, as opposed to 10% of the message in a block of text. And no judgments on the block, or the text, or whatnot there, that's just a general statistic, okay?

So, another example here is, I'm not sure how many of you guys are familiar with Rosetta Stone, it's a language learning software. I'm not really sure how they've evolved with the times, in the app-based world of Duolingo and things like that, but for a very long time they were really the preeminent, and very expensive to boot, way to learn a new language. And the way they did it was by tying your acquisition of new words in a language entirely into images.

So, if you're learning German, you don't see B-O-A-T and then the German word for boat, you see a boat, and the app speaks the German word for boat to you. So, you are associating the visual with the word. There's another thing a lot of people, our savvy language learners do, where they put posted notes around their homes of the new word that they're trying to learn in a different language on their mirror.

They'll put the word "Specchio," for instance, is the Italian word for mirror, right? And they'll put that everywhere, they'll put "cama" on their bed if they're learning Spanish, things like that. But this still introduces that, you're seeing the letters in your mind translate into the word. The best way to understand anything is to see the picture and have that picture speak directly to the part of your brain that processes that picture into something.

And so, that's why as writers, ironically, even though there's often photography along with our pieces, we are trying to paint word pictures. That's what we do, we paint word pictures. We say things that jump off the page, into the reader's mind, and do something there. But the most important thing in all communications, whether you're trying to get your husband to pick up your kid from water polo practice in the morning, so that even though you have to get up at 5:00 to drive them there, you can go home and do something else, you don't have to sit there and wait in your cold, cold car for two hours, from 5:00 to 7:00



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So, when you are trying to affect something in a reader, what you're trying to affect is emotion. And these visuals, showing things, do that so much better than telling somebody. You know, how often have you been in a disagreement with a family member, or a significant other, something like that? And they say, you know, "You shouldn't be annoyed at me right now." Or, "Don't take it that way." How often do people actually feel the way that you tell them to feel? Not very often, right?

You need to create something that causes them to feel. And so, that's really what we're doing with "ambiance." And that's why I'm not using the word "atmosphere," which is very related, because "ambiance," goes more to the feeling or mood associated with a particular place, person, or thing, right? So, if we are talking about the ambiance of a restaurant, it might be romantic, it might be trendy, it might be... I don't know, what would be the appropriate word for family-friendly. Let's say, energetic, or young, or something like that, right?

So, an ambiance is this sense that you get about things, and you often feel it before you even think to describe it, right? I think that happens really often, and you can think about it, especially if you are a female who travels by herself on occasion or often, you often get these feelings of perhaps not feeling so safe somewhere, or feeling like you need to watch out without knowing why. There's all sorts of things that our brain does to cause this, to cause us to be aware of those things that we might not be consciously aware of.

Our attention is constantly going from the focus of what we're actually looking at, to what's going on around us. There's this constant, kind of, widening and narrowing going on that we're really not aware of. But that's what creates these sensations. So, your brain is spending almost 50% of the time on creating that ambiance, on subconsciously taking in information that's giving you a feeling or mood about a place, completely separated from facts.

Now, it's interesting because, I know we've spent so much of this journalistic detail series talking about facts, and how you use different facts, and different things that you observe, and different pieces of that data collection, that is taking notes, and being in a destination, or other online research, how you use those different things strategically to get the point of your story across.

So, now we're taking it to the next level. Your story may be about solo female travel, but is it exuberant? Is it wary? Is it confident? Is it conservative? How does your story feel? Or it might not feel like it yet. How do you want your story to feel? How do you want someone to feel after they've read your story?



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Because you cannot tell them, if you're writing super cheap content for a super cheap content site, if you really want you can, but I really don't recommend that you do that even in those settings, because you wanna be practicing your best writing at all times. You wanna use every time you're being paid to put words on the page as an excuse to be paid to practice, really, right?

So, you don't wanna tell someone, "This is a place where your whole family will feel at home." Unless you have had a bunch of words before that, that set that stage, that create that ambiance, that have that reader nodding along and feeling like, "Yeah. They've got something for my kids. Oh my God, my mother-in-law would just love that Jacuzzi."

Unless they already feel all of those things, when you tell them this is where their whole family can feel at home, they're gonna be like, "I don't think so." It's a great way to incite mental pushback in your readers, is to tell them what to feel. So, that's where this ambiance comes in, is that we've been using all of these journalistic details in different ways, whether it's to describe a place, to describe a person, by putting them into a very, very short space, very strategically, to get across what we want people to understand from our story.

But we have to first think about, and then craft, that thing that we want people to understand in our heads. We have to understand it for ourselves, about how we feel about this topic, how we feel about this destination, how we feel about this experience that we've had, or how we feel the interviewee that we're gonna be writing about, how they feel about the topic that you're gonna be writing, what emotion is coming across there.

So, I was thinking about this, particularly in the case of interviews, because the example that I'm gonna give you of this exercise comes from an interview-oriented setting. Now, when you're interviewing someone, it can be, in many ways, significantly easier for you to capture...let's call it, you know, what's going on in their head...what's going on in their body, I think, is a better way to do it.

Are they speaking very fast? I'm told often that I'm known for doing this, I do it a lot at conferences, because I'm trying to keep the excitement in the room up, the excitement but the topic, the excitement about this talk, the excitement about this conference, and particularly, a sense that we can go out and do this stuff that I'm talking about. I'm giving people very specific tactics, and I want them to feel excited.

So, I am excited, I am energetic, and I put my content across in that way, in hopes that they catch that vibe as well. But the thing is, when we are interviewing people, how often are you



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writing down, or even noticing, in the first place, the tone the person is using when they say things to you. How that tone changes from one thing to another, what parts do they get excited about, what parts do they sound less excited about, right? That's actually more important, isn't it?

And I think in particular there, something that I tend to notice a lot, is when I am with groups doing these different events that we do, where we go out to different destinations and we interview folks, I will often see a very clear shift in someone that we're interviewing. For instance, I see somebody ask a question, that I know the person being interviewed, that it's, like, not their subject matter area, by how they respond.

I see that they, maybe, get shifty, that they change their enthusiasm level, that they perhaps seem standoffish or something. And the person, the interviewer, quite often takes that to be about them, and about how they're presenting the material, whereas it's really just a signaling mechanism that the person doesn't feel comfortable. On the flip side, I've often seen that really great interviews and really great article ideas particularly come from this idea of looking at when somebody lights up, when someone that you're interviewing starts to really talk faster, and give you more, and not allow you to interject, and they just, like, their eyes light up and they just keep telling you things, and things, and things.

That's when they're excited about something. And the thing is that, there are stories where there's places for both, you'll see that in the story that I'm gonna show you. But the important thing is that you have to notice that early. You have to notice it in the people you're interviewing, and you have to notice it in yourself. If you are the main protagonist in the story, if you are writing a first-person narrative piece about something and you don't know how you feel about that thing, or if you are coming across very clearly in the writing and how you feel, but you're fighting it with the words that you're choosing to put on the page, that comes across, and that creates a disturbance in the ambiance of your story.

So, like I said, this is layering on so many of the other things that we've spoken about in this journalistic detail series, in terms of figuring out what your story is about, what point you wanna get across, making sure every single, single, single thing, every detail in your story ties into that, and this is one more layer. But this is the layer that will take your stories from good to great, this is the layer that creates award-winning stories, as opposed to just features that run in AFAR.

And yes, I know that features that run in AFAR sound fantastic, but if you don't already have a relationship with AFAR, you need to be sending them award-winning-level writing to get their... This idea of creating ambiance, like I said, it has so much to do with listening,



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listening to yourself, listening to people in the destination, listening to a person that you're interviewing. And so, it's something that you need to, if not capture in the moment, then you need to be capturing upon recollection.

So, Tim Cahill is a really compulsive note-taker. If you don't know who Tim Cahill is, he's one of the founding editors of "Outside magazine," he was formerly at "Rolling Stone," he's written boatloads of books, he is very acclaimed. And he is very big on note-taking, but he says it's much more important to get how you feel in the moment than how something looks, or other sensory details. How you feel is the most important thing, and you can never get that back, it evolves over time.

Now, this exercise that I wanted to tell you guys about that you can also practice at home that we did, was focused on eliciting emotions from other people. And we were supposed to ask them either about their hometown or a place that they had been. And at the end, we were supposed to write only a couple of sentences. So, we really needed to get something really juicy and something impactful, as in, we needed to get some, whether it was a fact or an actual quote, from this person, that was gonna really make an impact in our "story" which would be like a short, little thing that we wrote afterwards.

And to my personal dismay, they did not allow us to take any notes whatsoever during this exercise. So, I was just sitting there trying to hold different things in my head as the person was talking, but I really loved it. And I'm not saying do this all the time, notes are very important, but I really loved that it forced me to focus on the bigger picture thing of, "What is the takeaway here?"

And I'm gonna show you this little thing that I wrote which is...I think it gets away with being four sentences, and it looks a little bit long, but I'm gonna show it to you in a second. But what I wanted to make sure that you understand here is that, we talk a lot about how I can show you...or different tools to...or different strategies to extract many, many stories from each destination. And not every story is going to have such a deep emotional component. But when you feel this emotional component, there is always a story there, and you have to follow the emotion to figure out what's going on.

So, Don George, for instance, who is the editor of all the Lonely Planet anthologies, he wrote Lonely Planet's book on, sort of, how to write as a travel writer. He has this whole thing where he just writes one story for every destination, no matter how much time he spends there. And he feels like once he's done that story, the destination is spent in his mind. But it's because he focuses only on the most impactful, emotional experience that he had in that trip.



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And like I said, sometimes there is just one, and it stands out to you so much, there's nothing else that you can remember from that entire trip. But there's often one per day, sometimes there's one per hour, and if you take notes about how you feel as you're there, you can capture those and reflect on them and remember them for later. So, in this exercise that we did, I interviewed this woman and I interviewed her about China, where she goes relatively regularly for work.

So, this wasn't necessarily a place where she hadn't been before, it wasn't striking her that the destination was new, but she had a very interesting feeling, that as I listened to her and didn't take notes, continually emerged. So, here was what I wrote about that interview. "Trapped and stymied, seasoned ESL instructor, Liz Fonseca, punctuated every sentence with, as if the phrase and the feeling were as normal as a period.

During a teacher training in Huain'an in China, even though she spent time in other communist countries, and she spent her entire days and evenings with her outwardly hospitable host, she couldn't shake them, or the feeling that they may have been handling her. We were having this conversation on WeChat, which had a translate feature, so we could see the conversation our guide had with his boss. 'The foreign ladies want to go on the boat trip.' 'No. No. Security risk,'" she explained, lingering on the last phrase, "Security risk."

As she narrowed her eyes and gave a quick flash of a glance to her side, as if suddenly feeling that constant presence, again, of someone over her shoulder. Was she the security risk? Or was the risk to her own security?" I think they really only gave about two minutes to actually write this up, and maybe five minutes to do the interview, or something like that, maybe they had five minutes, maybe I'm not being generous. But we had very little time to write this up, and I actually wrote a totally different version and then I switched it around to this at the end.

But, when I wrote it the first time, I've got my version's over here that I'm looking at, I realized that all these different things that I was trying to get down were exposition, they were... When I asked her about her trip, or, you know, her giving the background of the trip itself, or different things like that, or her saying, you know, trying to get to the heart of why those experiences bother her so much, or what experiences happened. All of those, they were all background to this more important thing. And so, I cut all of that out, and this last slide here that I've stayed on, I actually have a little bit of an observation of her that shows how she was feeling as she gave me this little story about WeChat, that she actually, kind of, like, looked worried and looked over her shoulder again, reflexively.



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So, as you're doing this, I wanna pop over and look at this other story as well. As you are doing this yourself, like I said, if the story is about you, it's so important to figure out how you feel as well, okay? In this situation.

So, this story, like I said, this ran in "Outside Magazine." I believe they named it one of their top travel stories for the year, in the year that it appeared, and it appeared in 2017. Now, I wanna just read you this particular passage from it before I give you too much background on what the story is about. This is from... For the length of this story, we could say this is around the nut graph.

So, this is about the part where she's telling us, kind of, her stories about. So, she says, "Heading north from Springer Mountain in Georgia, the Appalachian Trail class of 2017 would have to walk 670 miles before reaching the first county that did not vote for Donald Trump. The average percentage of voters who did vote for Trump, a xenophobic a candidate who was supported by David Duke, in those miles? Seventy-six. Approximately 30 miles further away, they'd come to a hiker hostel that proudly flies a Confederate flag.

Later, they would reach the Lewis Mountain campground in Shenandoah National Park, created in Virginia in 1935 during the Jim Crow era, and read plaques acknowledging its former history as the segregated Lewis Mountain Negro Area. The campsite was swarming with our RVs flying Confederate flags when I hiked through. This flag would haunt the hikers all the way to Mount Katahdin, the trail's endpoint in northern Maine. They would see it in every state, feeling the tendrils of hatred that rooted it to the land they walked upon."

So, first of all, wow, right? You can see why she got such accolades and how she got this story in "Outside" in the first place. Now, this is a story of somebody who is a relatively solo female traveler, but she was in, and she describes, the Class of 2017. So, there is a group of people who walk the Appalachian Trail every year, more or less. And so, that's why she was calling it the class of 2017. But her story ended up being probably much more racially motivated than she was expecting when she set out on this journey.

I don't know if she set out on it with, kind of, Cheryl Strayed wild views of what she was gonna experience, I don't know if she set out with anything in particular at all, but this was the feeling that she had consistently. Throughout her trip, she was struck by this feeling that she shouldn't be there, or that she was somehow negated by this land that she was passing through. And even as I tell you, I hate to tell you what it was that she felt because she shows it so beautifully in the piece, which is why I provided that link there.



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But this bit that I just read you is really going through these journalistic details to create this ambiance in a lovely way, right? She's giving you facts, she's giving you... "Have to walk 670 miles." Right? What a great specific fact, what a great journalistic detail she has there. Talking about, 30 miles further, they'd come to a hiker hostel with the Confederate flag. Then she talks about this campground, okay?

And even the way that she describes Trump is quite specific. And so, she's got these numbers, she's got these references, she's got these specific place names, she's got these years, she's got all this specificity that helps to ground this ambiance that she's creating, that she's telling you about. And so, by not telling you what she wants you to feel, which is, frankly, I think, clearly to be bothered by this as much as she would have been if she knew this maybe before she set out. She shows it to us, she creates that sense.

So, she also... Just before that bit that I just read you, there is a little exchange with a man that sets the scene for that, that I just wanted to share with you as well. So, a day hiker... So, this is a hiker, but a local, right? She's put in something much further along in her trip. So, she is on the Tennessee-Virginia border, okay? And the day hiker says, "Where are you from?" She says, "Miami." And he says, "No. But really, where are you from?" "He mentioned something about my features, my thin nose, and then trails off. I tell him my family is from Eritrea, a country in the Horn of Africa, next to Ethiopia."

He looks relieved. "I knew it," he says, "You're not black." I say that, "Of course I am, none more than black," I weakly joke. "Not really," he says, "You're African, not black-black. Blacks don't hike." She says, "I'm tired of this man, his from-froms and black-blacks. He wishes me good luck and leaves, he means it too, he isn't malicious. To him, there's nothing abnormal about our conversation. He has characterized me, and the world makes sense again. Not black-black. I hike the remaining miles to my tent and don't emerge for hours."

Now, it would be very easy, I think, to almost diminutively... But for sure I would say that this probably happens in the heads of some people who read this, to think, "Well, what a great, and deep, and impactful story she has, of course, the story is so great. This wrestles with large issues, okay? Like, here, you know what? I didn't even know that you saw this in America, I've seen it in Europe quite a bit.

But she says she's about to leave town when she sees blackface soap, a joke item that will supposedly turn a white person black if you trick them into using it. "I'm in a general store outside the Nantahala Outdoor Center, the soap is in a discount bin next to the cash register. I popped in to buy chocolate milk and was instead reminded of a line from Claudia Rankine's book 'Citizen.' 'The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.'"



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She fumbles to take a photo of the carton white woman on the packaging standing in front of the sink. She can't believe it, how could this happen? Her hands and face are black, she scrubs to no avail. And then she moves on, she doesn't tell you how to feel about this, she's not even actually telling you how she feels, she's showing you details that create feelings. This is the really important thing here.

So, she's saying that she sees it, she's saying where she sees it, she says it's in a discount bin next to the cash register. She even told you what brought her to the store. And then this is the closest line she says to telling you exactly what she feels, she shows you with this line, okay? And then she explains that she has to run but she's struck by this, and she talks with the picture on the packaging, okay? So, this is a good, like, 10, 12 lines on this blackface soap moment here, you know?

And that's the kind of thing that I often see in stories, that somebody might just write, "I couldn't believe that they actually sold blackface soap in these stores," or something like that. But by showing it in this kind of detail, and by showing you her thoughts without exactly telling you what they were, she's creating that impact on the reader, she's creating that ambiance of unease, of shock. She's creating all those things with what she's choosing to share with you there, okay?

So, again, here's the link to that story. I really love it, I feel like it's very specific... specifically this story, it's just flush with all the things that I wanted to talk to you about in this webinar. But it goes on for quite, quite, quite, quite a bit.