



# Dream of Travel Writing

## Weaving Journalistic Detail into Descriptions of Places

So this week, we are doing the second to last webinar in our series on “Journalistic Detail.” And, you know, this is a topic where it’s a term that I’ve made up. I’ll go into what that means for those of you who haven’t joined us for any of the earlier ones in this series. But it seems like, “Oh, detail, yeah. That’s something that I’ll need to learn someday,” or, “I’ll have to pay attention to that when I’m doing bigger, longer pieces,” or something like that. It doesn’t feel as sexy as talking about, you know, how to structure your pitches or how to get more stories out of your trips.

But the thing is that this is the key. It’s so interesting, since I’ve been doing this series, to see how many coaching calls I’m on where we are looking at somebody’s pitch, and this is the problem. This is what’s keeping that pitch from being one where my eyes just go right from one sentence to the next, and I get to the end and I’m like, “Yeah,” as an editor would.

And that’s the problem, is that the secret sauce for all these things, whether it’s pitching more, being better about how you use your time, having better writing, it’s never something sexy or formulaic. It’s skills, and it’s coming to a deeper or better, or new understanding of how something really works that you really get, that’s so internalized that you can just go out there and apply it to everything. And so that’s why we’re spending five weeks on this topic, because it will be the turning point with your pitches getting responses, with your pieces getting repeat business from those editors, with so many different parts of being a well-paid, productive, happy travel writer with a full-time successful career. So that being said, in particular, this week is we talk about how to incorporate journalistic detail into descriptions of places.

As I said, I’m gonna check back in for those of you who haven’t gotten the earlier calls in this series on what I mean when I say, “journalistic detail,” since, as I said, it’s a term that I have entirely made up. I don’t know if anybody else ever uses it. But I’ve made it up with the particular words that I have in it for a number of reasons, and it can do some really great things for you, some of which I hinted on earlier. And then we’re gonna look at the particular challenges of journalistic detail in terms of descriptions of places. And the irony is that, as opposed to short articles, or descriptions of people or other areas where we showed how the particularities of the detail might be the hard part, with descriptions of places, as you’ll see, great pieces or pieces in big outlets, or whatever you want to call them, don’t have very much of what you might call “place descriptions.” And we’re gonna talk about why that is, and where exactly and how exactly you should be using place descriptions best in your pieces.

Because, I mention this all the time when we do the “Journalistic Detail” webinars, I know, but I hear folks say all the time that they don’t know how to write that flowery descriptive stuff. Or they just say, “I don’t know how to write like a travel writer.” And what they really mean is they’re not comfortable writing descriptions. But the irony, and we’ll look at this in a



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couple different pieces, is that a very straight, kind of, description of a place is very and frequently part of even long travel pieces. And so we'll look at where you use it and why, and what should go into it. But the corollary of this is that journalistic detail is more often used to create ambiance rather than to strictly describe a location, and so that's why we've got a separate webinar on that.

And I also broke that out because this idea of "ambiance" and what it is, and what it means, and how you show it on the page rather than telling it is all very fuzzy and very crafty. And it feels very, you know, scary, or something that you don't know how to do. And so I wanted to really spend time breaking into that.

And then, as we've been doing with both these "Journalistic Detail" webinars and the "Article Nuts and Bolts" that came before them, we're going to go and look at several different real-world examples. And I've pulled one that I'll also use next week. I have a couple other ones that I queued up next week as well, while I was looking for these because they don't have descriptions of places, but they've got great ambiance. So we're gonna look at a couple different ones. We're gonna look at one which is kind of a counter-example. I have one place where it does go into a more place-oriented description, but the rest of the article actually uses descriptions of people to create its descriptions of place. So we're gonna look at a few different types of examples today, in terms of how they relate to the topic as opposed to the more typical, "Here are examples of exactly what you want to do."

We're gonna look at some examples that also illustrate why this is a challenge and where you don't want to do it.

So as I mentioned earlier, before we start talking about journalistic detail, specifically in the realm of descriptions of places, I just want to take a second to remind you guys who are perhaps joining this series for the first time and also those of you who, perhaps, haven't caught a webinar on it in a little bit, what I mean when I say, "journalistic detail." Again, this is a word that I made up. I don't think you will hear any other people use it. But if they do, then say, "Yay. You must also know Gabi," because I'd be very excited to hear other people start using this.

So other words that often substitute for this that are harder to really nail down what somebody wants is when people say, "Oh, like, this is a bit vague. We need more specifics," or when people say, "Oh, I just don't know. It doesn't sound really interesting." All of these sort of responses tend to come from a lack of journalistic detail. I was talking on a coaching call earlier today with somebody who has a pitch that they're doing which is specifically about a hotel, and I'm gonna paraphrase here exactly what the sentence we were working on



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was. But she was pitching a section of a magazine which is specifically about one hotel, preferably a new hotel that's opening. And it's about the hotel, but then it's also about the surrounding area. So in her second paragraph of her pitch, when she was talking about what she would explore in the piece, you know, she said, "I'd like to propose a, whatever, 700-word story on blah-blah-blah hotel for your blah-blah-blah section because it's the newest five-star hotel in this area, and this city recently got this incredible accolade."

And then the very next sentence, after that sentence, which had a lot of details in it, right, the detail of the section, the number of words, the specific accolade, all this stuff, her next sentence was, you know, "I will describe, or I will explain, or I will explore the rooms, the amenities, and the dining options at the hotel." And I was like, "Okay. If I was writing this sentence, I would spend just a little bit of time on the website," and we did that together on the phone. And I would say, you know, "I will explore the..." You know, you might want to pick an adjective here. I'm trying to not be too specific about this hotel. But you could say, you know, "I'll explore the 18th-century design elements and the hotel's 223 rooms, which include 7 suites, all with balconies overlooking blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, with dining areas overlooking the ocean, and the 7 dining options including 2 from Michelin-starred chefs, and one from an up-and-coming James Beard Award winner, along with amenities such as 24-hour butler service." So you can definitely say that sentence becomes longer.

We talked, especially, in the webinar on using journalistic detail in short articles, about how to use journalistic detail and when, and when you shouldn't use it. But that's the kind of thing where, if you are writing something about a hotel and you, obviously, in your piece are gonna talk about the rooms and the amenities, and the dining options, in that pitch, you want to describe them somehow in a way that is interesting. And something that we talked about in that coaching call that I thought we really kind of helped hit the nail on the head with what we're looking for in journalistic detail here, is that journalistic detail is something that modifies a noun – that noun might be the topic, or it might be something larger, like the rooms in the hotel, or something more narrow rather than the rooms in the hotel – in a way that makes it very interesting.

So if you ever say a noun and on its own, it's not interesting, you need journalistic detail to make it sound like that, or it doesn't belong in the piece. But likewise, it doesn't belong in the piece unless it's related to your hyperclear story concept.

So for instance, as we were talking about this pitch that I was talking about earlier with this hotel, one of the things that we talked about is, "What is the point of this piece? What is the point of this pitch? What is she really trying to get across?" And what we landed on was this "because" sentence, which I told you earlier, "because it is the newest, and the city has recently gotten a lot of acclaim for its food scene." So what that means is that the details that



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we choose to include need to fit into that. The details need to be highlighting this new chapter, this new neighborhood in this city. They need to be showing how what's great about the hotel is these new things that have never been there before. And also, of course, highlighting how this fits into the city's food scene. And it might be that the restaurants at the hotel aren't that great, but then we talk about how incredibly close it is or how incredibly easy it is to access these other great dining opportunities.

So this lens of both, "What can we say that will make things more interesting than they currently look on the page, that will make anybody, in fact, interested in this?" and also, "Does that thing relate to the point of the story? If not, it shouldn't be here." And having the ability to incorporate journalistic detail to your pieces will do two really wonderful things for you. And we're gonna talk a lot more about the first one on this call, specifically.

But it will make your editors notice your pitches more. I mentioned this earlier when I talked about the idea that there are some pitches that I get that I read them, and my eyes just keep going. I don't stop reading. I don't get hung up on anything. There's nothing that I highlight that I need to talk to the person about on our call. There's nothing that I stop and make a note next to about how I might change it, or about what I don't like about it. My eyes just keep going.

And that's what happens when you have, not just an appropriate amount of detail or level of detail, but really focused details that tie into your story concept, a.k.a. "journalistic details," in your pitches. Your editors go with them. And it might be that they don't have a place right now for a story on a random Pacific island, because they just covered a different random Pacific island. And even though it's not the same one, they can't cover Pacific islands that are hard to reach more than once a year, or more than once every 18 months, or more than once every 6 months, or whatever it is for that publication. But they will be impressed with your writing, and that is the point of a pitch. The point of a pitch is not to sell a single story idea. It's to make an impression on an editor, and journalistic detail will do that for you.

But secondly and I think, actually, much more importantly, I have so many conversations with so many of you about how long it takes you to write things. I don't know that I would say this is the number one thing that I see holding people back. I think not knowing what to do or where to start, or I think there's a couple other things that might hold people back more. But I would definitely say that spending too much time writing things creates a huge and horrible loop, which is that if you're spending too much time on something, then you can only do a few, then you're more attached to the ones that you have done and you get more emotional about whether you hear back from them or not. And because you're getting fewer out, you don't have so many things in circulation at a time. So that also is gonna make you



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feel more precious about the ones that you've already done and being precious is the enemy of being a freelance writer in so many ways.

So being able to write faster is really, I found, the crux to being a great and successful freelancer. And when you know exactly your hyperclear story concept and you know that it's pointless to include any detail that you can't put across in an appropriate level of journalistic detail, a.k.a. "factual and interesting, and clear and specific," then the few things that you have at your disposal to put in that pitch, that list becomes so small.

And the pitch just writes itself, or even the piece just writes itself. So all of these benefits of journalistic detail being said, people descriptions, descriptions of people, which we talked about in the previous webinar in this series, and description of places are where these benefits really start to deliver the most. And that's because editors are on the lookout, consciously or not, for lazy language around describing places. It really stands out to them very quickly.

I do this when I have my editor hat on and I'm reviewing people's pitches all the time. When I get to something where there is not either clarity and specificity or where there is a detail about a place that really shouldn't be there, especially if that detail is also vague and doesn't tie into the piece, in my head, I'm like, "Oh no," at the very beginning of your pitch, because this happens so often in the lead. And secondly, those are the places that I see you guys spending the most time on. Okay? So I'm gonna pop over now to something that I have set up for you guys as like an example/counter-example. Because before I start to tell you what journalistic detail really means in terms of the setting, the place setting or the description of a place in your piece, it's important to understand that it needs to be used sparingly. Which is completely counterintuitive, I know. And this goes back to what I was saying earlier about people who say, "Oh, well I can't be a travel writer because I don't know how to write that flowery descriptive stuff." And I say, "That's great because editors don't want that most of the time."

So before we talk about what you need to do with your descriptions of places, and when and how, and where and, most importantly, why, I want to show you, kind of, "in the wild," so to say, how they are and aren't used in a piece that I found to be a really interesting challenge of a piece in the first place, in terms of the scope of the travel. So this piece that we're gonna look at, it should be up on your screen now. Let me see if I can make it just a little bigger for you. Great. Okay. So this piece is in "The New York Times," and it came out quite a few years ago. So this is by Matt Gross, who I just saw the other day. He used to be the Frugal Traveler for "The New York Times," and then he went, he was the Editor of "Bon Appetite," and now I believe he's freelancing again. And in this piece, there's no subhead here, interestingly. But this piece is about him kind of not exactly following the route of "The



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Odyssey,” in terms of getting home from Troy to Ithaca, but kind of following the whim of it, following the “going where the boat will take you” of it.

So he, basically, starts at the beginning. He starts in Troy, and then he takes whatever bus he can – with no planning, whatever bus, boat, anything will get him to where he needs to go. And if this schedule doesn’t work out, then maybe he has to backtrack. So that’s kinda the whole idea of the piece. Now, in terms of, “What’s the conclusion of the piece? What is he really trying to do with all of this?” I’ll just run down to the end quickly, so we can see kind of where he lands with this.

So in terms of his conclusion on the piece, he in several places stops by to try to understand Homer, Homer’s life, Homer who wrote “The Odyssey.” And he says in the last paragraph, “Homer’s arrival signaled my departure,” this is, I think, a different Homer, “and I took my last looks at the waters I hadn’t swum and the hills I hadn’t climbed. A day earlier, a friend had emailed me Constantine Cavafy’s poem “Ithaca,” and a few of its lines stuck in my head: ‘Ithaca gives you the marvelous journey. Without her, you wouldn’t have set out. She has nothing left to give you now.’” And he says, “And as I boarded the ferry, there was nothing else that I wanted.”

So the overall sense of this piece is kind of that it’s about the journey rather than the destination in a really, really kind of simplistic term. So that being said, since it’s about the journey, but the journey goes through so many different islands, how does he show us these places? Does he even show us these places, or is it just about the journey? So you’ll see when we start here, he literally has a description of what “here” means for him at the moment. He says, “‘Here’ was the seaside town of Neapoli, on the southeastern end of the Peloponnesian peninsula of Greece, where nearly two weeks of island-hopping from the Turkish coast across the Aegean Sea had come to a sudden and maddening halt.” Okay? So even when he’s telling you here, is he describing the seaside town of Neapoli to you? Not really.

He’s telling you physically where it’s located, but only because that physical location is related to his journey. It’s related to the fact that he has hopped from the Turkish coast across the Aegean, now to the southeastern end of the Peloponnesian peninsula. Okay? So he’s not telling you more about this place – what he sees there, you know, what the people are like – than how it relates to his journey. Even here, he’s like, “In Neapoli, however, there were no buses until morning, and I had no choice but to spend this night in this cheerful, if sleepy, seaside town. Even a day or two earlier, I wouldn’t have minded. In fact, for the previous 10 days, I’d been delighted by the capricious whims of bus and ferry schedules. But now, I was due to fly home to New York from Athens in two days, and this delay was unbearable.” So again, he’s saying, “cheerful, if sleepy, seaside town.” That’s all you get there.



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What does he say here about this restaurant? “As I numbed disappointment with ouzo at a waterfront restaurant,” no descriptors there, “I noticed something unusual on the sidewalk before me: a penny-farthing, one of those 19th-century bicycles with an enormous front wheel and a tiny rear one. The owner, it turned out, was Jim, a 20-something hairdresser from Athens who was sitting nearby with his girlfriend, Chara, a schoolteacher. They were a sweet couple, definitely hipsters, and I smiled when they asked me, as had practically every Greek I met on the journey, how I’d wound up here.” So this is what I was saying about how descriptions of places are, in fact, quite sparing in pieces. Right? Even up here, we get only a more geographic-oriented description of Neapoli because that’s what matters here.

And even here, when he’s talking about the restaurant, he is not telling you about the food. He is not telling you about the view of the waterfront from the restaurant. He is pointing out something that’s not so much of the place. It’s in the place – he sees this penny-farthing – but it’s not of the place. It’s this guy, Jim, who’s a hipster hairdresser from Athens. The cycle is really more of a description of Jim so much than it is about this place. Right? And so we could say, “Okay. Well, why even mention the restaurant? Why mention the sidewalk? Why mention the penny-farthing? Why set this scene in the first place?” He immediately goes into himself and why he’s here. He says, “I’ve come from Troy, and I’m trying to get to Ithaca. Like Odysseus: no map, no guidebook, no route, no internet, no hotel reservations. Thus began a tale I’d been telling, and adding to, ever since I’d began my Odyssey.” And that’s all he says – no more about these people.

So we have to ask ourselves, “Why does he choose to include this detail?” And the point here is that he really needed to tell his own story of why he’s doing this in a setting. He needed to set it up for you as if he was telling a story. And rather than do it in a way where, you know, some other tourist has asked him or the local, like the owner of a restaurant or his taxi driver, or somebody in a rental car, he’s chosen to use this little, tiny snippet of color. “Color” is a word folks love to use when they mean that they’re introducing something interesting or unusual. This little, tiny snippet of color, which is actually meant to tell you about the place. Right? So he’s in this Neapoli, right? Which is a cheerful, if sleepy, seaside town. And rather than tell you about the way, you know, the types of hotels that were there or maybe to, you know, sit in his seat and describe the tourists or other visitors that he saw, he’s weaving it into his story.

He’s weaving in the need to tell us, as the reader, what he’s doing by offering this little snippet of this place and these people who asked him this question. So this is the thing – he’s not describing. He’s accomplishing multiple things at once while incorporating a little bit of description, which rather than being of a place, is of the people in it. And I went through this piece looking for, thinking, “Oh, he went to so many places. I’m sure there’s some great description of places in Matt’s piece. Matt’s a great writer. Let me find some to tell you.” But



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the funny thing is that it goes along and it's so about him. "I encounter uncertainty," he talks about these ferries and what happened, "unlike Odysseus, I got lucky." And then, again, this tiny, tiny description, "In Ayvalik, a lovely Turkish town with a jumble of old streets at its center, ferries were leaving for Lesbos." He doesn't tell us more than that. He doesn't even tell us too, too much about the setting, the physical description of the ferries. Okay?

In this one, he has, "Inside the ship, whose homey décor had not been updated in a couple of decades, about 100 families, couples, and groups of friends mostly kept to themselves, snacking on sweets packed for the trip. This was a modest ferry: other, larger ones would have free Wi-Fi and show reruns of 'Friends' dubbed into Greek. Outside was more exciting: the water flat and sparkling with golden-hour light, small sailboats and fishing skiffs cruising near shore, tiny islands silhouetted by the setting sun." So here, we do have a description of a place, but it's a transient place. Right? It's of the ferry. And he puts this in here because this is really the place, in a way, where he's spending this trip, on ferries. He says, "This two-hour ferry ride would be a typical one." So here is perhaps the best example in this whole piece of him actually setting a scene for you.

But if you look, some of it is description of physical location. Right? Mostly, this part at the end about, "the water flat and sparkling," "small sailboats," "tiny islands." But it is in many ways largely, otherwise, of people. And this is one thing that I really want you guys to understand, is that most of the time when you want to describe a place, just like what he does up here, what you should actually do is instead describe the people in it. Let me get back to where we were. Okay? So like, if you are taking notes, write this down, "Most of the time when you want to describe a place, you should instead describe the people in it." So he says a little bit about the homey décor that hasn't been updated in a couple of decades. He doesn't say what he means there, but he tells you about the people on the ferry to give you a sense of his actual surroundings.

It's people keeping to themselves, but lots of them. And they have come on this ferry bringing their lives with them. They bring their friends or their families, or their couples. They bring food that they have brought themselves for the trip. Okay? This is what he's trying to create for you, is a sense that in this transient setting where he's on this journey on his own, other people have these journeys that are more well-wrought ruts in their lives, that they do this a lot. This is how they do it. You know, they even, in many of these ferries, have the normal comforts of Wi-Fi and reruns of "Friends." Okay? So it's just like they're at home, except they happen to be on a ferry, going to an island. Whereas for him, it's not like home. He's lost, basically, in this sea, trying to get where he needs to go.





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Now, there's one other part, really, here, and I'm gonna have to just do a keyword search, I think, to find it. There's one other part here, where he really kind of does what I might call "description of place." Okay? And that's here.

So he is on the island of Kythira, and he is in the island's biggest town and settled down under a taverna's awning for lunch. He says, "Of course, the rain eventually eased, and I found another, kinder rental-car outfit, and I drove back roads through luxuriously arcing hills to reach teeny-tiny Avlemonas, a village recommended by Anastasia of Ios, where the sounds of cool jazz and blues lured me to the waterside Mirodia Kalokairiou Café. And while I sat drinking Belgian beer and watching clouds rise over a ridge with the goateed owner, Stavros, and his employee, Stefanos, a recent cooking-school graduate. 'That one looks like a man,' said Stefanos. Stavros agreed: 'Like the god Hermes.' When Odysseus lost his way after Kythira, he landed 10 days later in the land of the Lotus-eaters. I was there already. The beer, the comradeship, the casual mythological references, the braised goat at Stefanos's family's restaurant, the dramatic gorges and homey cafes and earthquake-ravaged churches – why move on? If Ithaca represents sought-after home, Stavros said: 'Kythira is the opposite of that. It's the paradise you can never find.'"

So I really love this paragraph in terms of a description of place. Right? He paints this great picture that he caps off with this quote, which tells you, but in the words not of the writer, but of somebody he's quoting, what it is he's trying to illustrate for you here through the beer, the sense of community, like, the conversation, the food, the scenery. Right? And you'll notice that on most of these, he goes into detail. He doesn't tell you what beer, and the comradeship he's already painted. But then he doesn't say, "the conversation." He says, "the casual mythological references." He doesn't say, "the food." He says, "the braised goat at Stefanos's family's restaurant." He doesn't say, "the views." He says, "the dramatic gorges and homey cafes and earthquake-ravaged churches." Okay? This right here, folks, this is what I mean about journalistic detail. Okay?

And how does that fit into the larger point of this piece? Because the point of the piece is that it's about the journey, not the destination. Right? So this one very... Like I said, there's very few places in here where he's really describing a place, and he does it here. He "lands," so to say, on this description and this place because it ties into the point of the piece, that it's not about Ithaca. Ithaca doesn't have anything left to give you. It's about the places that you moved through on the way, and about those communities that you found that are, you know, in some cases, inherently magical because of their transience. Okay? Because of these chance encounters with these fascinating people, with cool jazz and blues music in the background. Okay?



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So the interesting thing about this particular point that I showed you is – like I said, when you want to describe a place, describe people – he describes the people first. Right? He describes who sent him here, he describes Stavros and Stefanos, he has a conversation with them, before he even gets into the description of places. Okay? And then, like I said, there's a lot in this particular piece that's of either him kind of describing his thoughts or his movements. And anytime he gets into talking about something, a place, it's all about people. Right? Here, we're back to talking about Ester, and she talked about the challenges and all of this. Okay?

Because this is a great example of a piece where he covers so much ground in, for this topic area, a relatively small number of words. And he does it by keeping what he describes tuned into his point, which is that of being about the journey and not the destination. And that's what's really important, like I said, about journalistic detail, is making sure that you're tying it into the point of your piece. So that kind of begs the question, if you don't know exactly what your piece is about, should you even sit down to write it? Because if you do, what are you gonna write? If you don't know yet exactly what your piece is about, what is even gonna end up on that page? So I've had some really interesting chats with this about some people, particularly in the realm of long, like, book-lengths projects, sometimes in the cases of fiction and sometimes in the cases of narrative non-fiction.

And the thing that's been coming up time and time again that I've noticed is that in a really brief, almost like pedantic way, you could say there's two kinds of writers. There's writers who are thinkers first, writers who, you know, perhaps have spent years and years thinking about what this project might be, if this project even makes sense, if they even want to write it. And then, by the time they sit down, it's crystalized. They know that this is important, they know who the audience for it is, they know what they need to include and what they shouldn't include, and they're able to sit down and just write it. And then there are people who think through writing.

So they don't do it in their head and then write. Their head works as the words come out on the page. And what I mean by that is that these are folks who will sit down and perhaps write an entire novel to understand what their novel is about, and then throw that whole thing out and start writing from scratch the novel that they were originally trying to write because they now understand what it is.

So I don't want to tell you that one is better than the other. But you are probably one of these two types. And the sooner that you figure it out, the happier you will be. Because if you're in that first category, you're somebody who thinks in your head and then it goes down on the page, if you try to go on the page early, if you try to write when it's not yet clear to you what it's about, you're gonna hate it. And you're gonna hate yourself, and you're gonna hate the



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process, and you're gonna want to stop as soon as possible. If you're somebody who needs to think through writing and you don't give yourself that space, then you're either gonna think that everything that you've written is horrible because it doesn't have a point, because you haven't yet written enough to figure out what that point is, or you're gonna think everything takes you too long because you're not being honest with yourself about how long it needs to take you.

So to go back to what we're talking about today, which is about descriptions of places, I told you how these things play out differently for these two different people. But let's look at it in practice. So if you're somebody who already knows what it is that you want to say...And, you know, even if you're that kind of person in other areas of your work, like maybe you write in another job that you have right now that's not travel writing, and you feel like you can't do it in travel writing, you will get there, I will tell you that.

If you think you're that kind of person, but it doesn't apply in travel writing, it's experience. It's practice. You will get there. So let's say you're that kind of person, what does this mean? It means that as you're writing and you're thinking about what needs to go down on that page, you need to say, "Okay. I want someone to understand this. I want somebody to... You know, I want to describe this place, I want to describe this restaurant, and people need to understand why it's here. They need to understand why it's important and why it ties back into what I'm doing."

You ask yourself first, "Is the best way to show them that through the people in this place?" People that you saw, what average people do, perhaps some quotes. If not, if they need to see it rather than get a sense of it, then you do a description of a place. Now, if you're the second type of writer though, something really interesting happens. I actually really encourage you to write out lots of sensory details about whatever it is that you want to write about. Write about how it sounds, how it tastes, how it feels on your skin, not just how it looks. Because what will happen, interestingly, if you are a person who thinks on the page is that as you write out those details, the ones that you're subconscious has chosen to feed you will help you understand what it is about this place that you want to express. It will help you find out what your article is about so that you can then go back and use this more journalistic detail approach to say, "Okay. Everything I write needs to tie into the point of this piece."

So here's the thing – editors say...Every time I go to an editor panel and they have the time and the experience level in the audience to get past the really basics of how to pitch, they say that the one thing they wish they would see more of in pitches and pieces is characters. And that goes back to what I was saying, that you should more often be showing what a place is like through characters than describing it through location physical description place setting. Okay? So we will get, next week, into choosing the right tool at the right moment to create a



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sense of ambiance. That's what we're gonna talk all about next week. But you have to be really mindful, as in this piece of Matt Gross's that I just showed you, of where you use description of place.

Like I showed you in that piece, he used it to really land with Kythira. And it was interesting that you notice that we got to the end of the piece very shortly after that. So he was using it very powerfully as kind of a point of arrival, a climax almost, in his piece. Okay? Whereas when he was talking about the ferry and what the ferry was like, that was not necessarily so much a point of arrival in the same way of landing. But it was starting to give you a picture into what this journey is really like for him, and what really matters was the movement. So in this piece, what was important was journey over destination. Right? And so it was very telling that he didn't describe the destinations. He saved that description for what was important. Okay?

And this rolls back to that age-old thing, that an editor doesn't want a story about Macau. They want to know exactly, specifically, what you're pitching them. But it's not just about you knowing it. It's not just about you knowing that, "I'm pitching you this piece because you have a section about hotels that are luxurious, and this hotel is the newest five-star hotel in a city that's getting a lot of tourism for its food." It's not just about knowing that. Okay? It's not just about knowing what the point of your story is or what you want to focus on. It's also about showing an editor through the words that you choose to include, through the techniques that you choose to include in your pitch, that you have the ability to express that interestingly. Okay?

So let's take some more looks at what I mean by that. We'll scoot back over to the web browser. And I will be better about sending you the link at what we're looking at beforehand. So this piece right here is from "Outside" magazine. And I've actually honed in on sort of the beginning of this piece. But here's what it's about. It's called – this is a long subject line, right – "No Amount of Traffic or Instagrammers or Drunks Can Take the Magic Out of the (Semi-) Wilderness." And the subhead here, or the deck here is, "In which Wells Towers braves the rain, smog, and peak-weekend hordes of Great Smoky Mountains National Park to give his three-year-old son a first taste of nature's sweetness." Okay? So I'm just going down, let's see, one, two, three, four paragraphs here. And I'll make this bigger for you guys. This is where he is describing what the Great Smoky Mountains Park is like in the vein of the point of his piece. Okay? So this is really laden with journalistic detail, details that are descriptive of the place but entirely chosen because of how closely they hue to what this piece is about.

So here's what he says, "But to visit Great Smoky and complain that it's choked with out-of-staters and Winnebagoists is like going to the Grand Canyon and complaining that it's a large



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hole. Great Smoky is America's most heavily trafficked (if not necessarily trodden) national park. Close to 11 million people come here annually – nearly twice the Grand Canyon's tourist haul – and all of the houseguests are taking their toll. The park's fog-cloaked valleys resonate with Harley pipes. Smog has cropped the ridge top views. Acid rain has killed off brook trout in some high-elevation streams and is threatening red spruce. Thanks to industrial, vehicular, and coal-power emissions, air quality in Great Smoky has been among the worst in the eastern United States, though, fortunately, ground-level ozone has decreased in the past 15 years due to tighter air-quality regulations. For these reasons, although I've spent most of my life within a half-day's drive of the park, I've never once been tempted to make the trip."

So you could describe the Great Smoky Mountains and say so many things. I, myself, have written about them a ton of times for work, and I've been there several times, and I can't say that I disagree with everything that he's saying here. But I can tell you there are certainly many other ways to describe this park and, in particular, to describe the wonders of it that cause so many people to come here, or the accessibility or what not.

So this is a place where you'll see... We can look back up. You know, he's talking about Florida license plates and a Jeep. He's talking about park rangers. What are they trying to do? Nowhere up here is he telling you what's great about this park. He completely reserves his description of the place for details that tie entirely into his point, his topic, which is about how overcrowded it is. Okay? So you'll see here, he's saying, "It's choked with out-of-staters and Winnebagoists." He's talking about the traffic. He's talking about the number of people so that you can start to get a picture of that.

He even talks about the sound. Right? Remember how I was talking about using all of the sensory details. I love this sentence, "The park's fog-cloaked valleys resound with Harley pipes." When I first read that, I was like, "Is that some type of bagpipe that I don't know?" No. He means Harley-Davidson motorcycles, right? And these words are very active. He's saying that the valleys resound. He's saying that smoke crops the views. He's saying that the acid rain has killed brook trout. So he's very active in these detail sentences as well.

And you'll notice that several of them are quite short, which contrast with his kind of longer sentences where he includes more things in there. So this is a description in which the only things... Only, right? Nothing about why people go to Great Smoky Mountains. The only things he has in here are 100% related to the point of his piece, even to the point where he's talking about how the air quality is the worst, but then he starts to point to this upside. Right? Which is, fortunately, it's reduced due to tighter air-quality regulations. All right?



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So let's look all the way down here to the point of his piece and see how this is foreshadowed in this description. Okay? He says, "In the end, what do we want from the woods? Primitively put, we want woods to put us in a feeling that doesn't happen indoors. Its symptoms are looking around, shutting up, and greedy respiration. It's a feeling that has something to do with our helplessness before nonhuman splendor and geologic time, a feeling one can't describe without risking language best left to the druid grove or the kitty guestbook back at the Very Adorable Kuntry Kabin. To profess registering this feeling while not 20 minutes down a path from the blacktop might strike the reader as meretricious and unearned. But that's okay. Whatever it is, we are glad to stay dumb with it for 10 full minutes more, until the baby starts to cry and we head back to the road."

So his point is that even though... You know, he says, "three days of hordes, traffic, and spectacle hunting." Even though that is all present there, what do we really want when we go to a natural place? Things that you can still get here. And we see how that's echoed back up here, in that first paragraph that I read to you, where he says, even though all this stuff has happened... He talks about the park's fog-cloaked valleys, he talks about the ridge top views, he talks about the red spruce, and he talks about how the ground-level ozone is decreasing. So he's hinting at that point up here, as well. So even though all of these sentences, like I said, are meticulously conjoined with his topic, which is that it's completely overrun, there's also hints of his larger point of the piece that come through here as well.

Now, I'm trying to see... Ah, okay. So this one here, this is from "Granta." I'm not sure how many of you guys know "Granta." I'm gonna drop this in here. "Granta" is a very literary magazine, as in it's actually, like, a literary magazine as opposed to a consumer magazine, and they cover a lot of different things. But they do also cover travel, but they do it in a very literary way. So I wanted to share this with you guys because I know you often talk about description and physical description, and flowery description as a kind of literary endeavor. So this is a piece about... The title is "Vinyl Road Trip," and it's kind of around music and, particularly, old vinyl music. And in this part, the author is talking about a drive and describing Long Island. Okay.

"I drove out of Manhattan in a rented Ford to visit my father's grave at Beth David Cemetery in Elmont, which is one of those suburbs of Queens that blurs into Long Island. I was last here seven years ago, at his funeral, and, predictably, as the lack of sense of direction is one of the few things that I unmistakably shared with my father, I couldn't find his grave. I wandered around the fancier parts of the cemetery, the tombs and vaults, some of which have windows, 'for the dead to look out,' as my father said when I drove him and my stepmother out to the cemetery to see their death plot a couple of years before he died. The comedian and provocateur Andy Kaufman is buried here, despite the rumors that he faked his own death. I don't see his grave, and I couldn't find my father's, even with the photocopied map that an



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anxious woman at reception had furnished me with. She'd looked my father up on the computer system and scrawled a yellow blot with Magic Marker on the map. 'He's right here,' she said. Except that he wasn't."

So this is, as he says right up front, it's a road trip. It's one of these things where you're wandering from place to place, where you have sort of a destination in mind, but it's also about the stops, but in a different way than that, obviously, piece that we just looked at. Right? So some of the things that are happening here, you'll see this great use of specific detail. Right? A rented Ford, Beth David Cemetery in Elmont, you know, the fancier parts of the cemetery with tombs and vaults, some of which have windows for the dead to look out. Okay? But there's also this sense here of loss and of being lost, and even of mystery, right, that Andy Kaufman may have faked his own death. That even though he had the X on the map with Magic Marker, he still couldn't find it. And that's part of what this road trip is about. It's part of tracing this author's father and the musical legacy. And so this description, again, even though he's talking very clearly and specifically about this graveyard, it's completely infused with these senses and with the point of his piece, of loss and being lost, and questioning, and mystery. Okay?

So with that, I want to let you guys go. But I hope that you've seen from this webinar and, like I said, I really recommend diving back into those pieces and giving them a good read with your reading-as-a-writer hat on, as opposed to reading as a reader. Sometimes you have to do it twice to do that.

First, you need to read it as a reader. And then once you know what it's about, you can go back and read it as a writer. But I really encourage you to look back at some of these pieces now with your reading-as-a-writer hat on and see how the description, how the mentions, how what's chosen for inclusion and what's not chosen for inclusion that could be there... That's something that I love to look at, "What are all of the other things that this writer could have said about this place, about this person, about this meal, about this journey, but didn't say? And why did they not say them?"

I really invite you to read, not just going back and rereading these pieces, but also to read some other pieces, and particularly pieces by, you know, great writers and outlets with heavy editing. Because there, you're gonna see what it looks like when an editor really gets involved and really questions the writer about every single word. So that's where you're gonna find some great examples of these.



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So thank you guys so much for joining me. And since it's the end of day on Friday for those of us on the East Coast, I want to wish you guys a great weekend as well, and I will see you all again soon.