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My Advice on Writing Effective Visuals

By Lazarus Black

INTRODUCTION

According to David Farland, 70% of readers are visually oriented. This means, visual descriptions of people, places, and things are the primary sense in their imagination.

Writing effective visuals is a craft, and like any craft, skill can overcome talent with dedication and practice. Even writers who are used to diving into narration, world-building, or dialogue, can improve their use of visuals. But I've not yet seen a decent lesson on how to create them.

This presentation is mostly an overview on the elements involved in writing visuals, along with advice and suggestions on how to improve them in your own work. Everything inside has details and caveats and tributaries for lengthy exploration, so feel free to discuss them and invite me to participate. Future presentations may include actual lessons to practice.

I was greatly influenced by David Farland's Enchanted Prose video series and, though he doesn't go into this level of detail on Visual Appeals, this information fits well inside the KAV cycle.

But first, one always begins in The Endless Night.

THE ENDLESS NIGHT

Your reader begins with a blank image in their mind.

I call this The Endless Night. For me, defaults to a black universe – no light, no stars, nothing. Other's might begin with the color white, like a painter's canvas. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that no detail exists.

VISUAL DETAILS

Every visual detail that appears from the written word comes from one of three places:

1. The author's literal description.

2. The author's referral to some *shared visual language* between them and the reader.

3. The reader's own imagination.

It is the author's responsibility to control all three.

DESCRIPTION

An author may describe an element in detail to construct something the reader may be unfamiliar with. Such as:

> There stood, in the short green grass, a metal stalk topped with an octagonal sheet of aluminum, painted red with four tall white letters reading *Stop*.

REFERRAL

An author may reference a *shared visual language* with the reader and apply a symbol the reader is already familiar with. Such as:

> A stop sign stood at the corner.

This has limitations, in that the author may mistake a symbol they prefer as part of the shared visual language with their reader.

> The quetzal spread it limbs like Elhar and vaulted through the baobab.

Do you know what a *quetzal*, *Elhar*, and *baobab* look like? I do. Makes perfect sense to me. Which one of us is causing the problem?

Me. But I'm doing it deliberately to prove a point. Don't do it by being careless. When in doubt, remove vocabulary words or support them with more description.

> The emerald-quilled quetzal spread its wings and vaulted through the limbs of the mighty baobab tree.

This helps immensely. Just don't ask what a Central American bird is doing anywhere near an African, Madagascar, or Australian baobab.

READER IMAGINATION

Anything not described will be filled in by the reader. Period. There is no stopping them. So don't give them a chance.

> The RV caught fire.

This is an actual example. Years ago, my RV caught fire. The single flame never grew above one inch in height and lasted about 9 seconds before I blew it out. What did YOU imagine?

This means that timing of descriptions is incredibly important. Visual readers will fill in the blanks between the author's words. The more time between details, the more distance grows between the reader and the author.

> I swam along the coast, fifty feet from golden sand turning red from the setting sun. My suit clung to me like a second skin. I felt like grace, incarnate. A goddess of the sea.

Think about that scene. What does this character look like? Does it help your internal image if, over the next few pages as she swims, you learn she is stressed about her new boyfriend? That swimming relaxes her? That she has a white VW Beetle in the parking lot? That she graduates from college in a couple of weeks but is worried about getting a job?

Swimming suggest she is fit. Boyfriend and college suggest she is in their early 20s. She could be any skin color or ethnicity, really, but the reader will likely default to their own or to the "majority" of their culture.

So, great! The author let you use your own. She is firmly placed in your mind and you can relate to her emotionally because you have an expectation of her behavior based on her age, lifestyle, and the culture she belongs to.

But then, several pages later:

> I climbed from the sea and wrung my white hair dry. Finding my towel, I scraped wind-whipped sand from my deep brown wrinkles before fitting on a clean sari and collecting my car keys and cane.

Oh! Turns out you were wrong. Your imagination is invalid. She is no longer who you imagined her to be. She is now a completely different person – a stranger you have to relearn and imprint with all over again. How much time did you waste? How long will it take to reconfigure your imagination to accept the new image? It's like saying goodbye to friend forever, isn't it? Will you have to start over, reading from scratch with that visual in mind to climb back into the story? Why bother? The author is probably going to do this again, soon, and often. *Closes book.*

It is worse in 1st person, but anytime the POV character is hidden from the reader's view, it is a cheap trick at best (called false tension) and sloppy writing at worst. Short stories have different description criteria than novels but only slightly because of word-limits. But an author is never allowed to provide incomplete descriptions, give their reader time to fill in the gap, and then contradict the reader. That is an argument the author automatically loses.

This issue could be caused by a fear of "info dumping" whereby the author is concerned with providing too much visual information at once. This concern can be controlled through blocking (see *Techniques > Blocking).*

SHARED VISUAL LANGUAGE

You and your readers share a written language. You may or may not share a native dialect that colors that language, but likely share enough that readers will understand your words anyway (like soda vs pop). But you can go too far. Writing in a deeply focused dialect, slang, or patois can lose readers.

Visual language is no different. The closer people are culturally, the more likely they are to share visual elements. This can be leveraged to create shortcuts in describing things. You can refer to a human hand without describing five fingers. Everyone American knows what a Stop Sign looks like: red, octagonal, with white letters. If an American refers to a stop sign in any way, every other American will understand without needing it spelled out. This works because there is only one look for a stop sign in the U.S. It will only be important to describe how a common item is different from expectations: a hand with four fingers or a stop sign with graffiti.

But then there are elements with default variations authors may forget. If you refer to a pistol, some readers will imagine a revolver and others a semi-automatic. If you refer to a castle, some will presume an ancient worn gray structure with parapets and a moat, others will imagine a gleaming white set of towering spires with sparkling blue roof tiles, others will imagine a dashing middle-aged writer pretending to be a detective. You cannot get away with omitting the qualification.

People, places, and things, without a shared reference require full descriptions.

TECHNIQUES

Filling in The Endless Night must be seamless and cohesive. The challenge is how to do that strategically.

Info dumps are sneered at because they provide details that are unimportant at the time they are revealed. But there are always important details that must be revealed. Theme, foreshadowing, character, mood, etc. Don't throw away the baby with the bath water.

The techniques of writing visuals go from childishly simple to ridiculously complex. And that is the order in which they will be presented here:

ADJECTIVES/ADVERBS

I will assume you already know what adjectives and adverbs are. They are modifiers that improve the level of descriptive detail around a noun or a verb.

Modern fiction writing techniques prefer to limit these on the page. There are plenty of resources out there describing why and how that I won't spend much time on this.

Adverbs affecting verbs may be replaced with a more descriptive verb.

Adjectives attached adverbs are short-cuts for detailed descriptions. They may be multiplied for added specificity at the expense of clarity and pacing. Of course, in rare cases an extended list of harmonious colorful playful humorous adjectives may be presented as poetry. But don't push it.

The best rule to determine when to use a full description versus an adjective (or adverb-modified adjective) is this: *The level of detail in the description must be equivalent to the importance of what is being described.* And this can/should be POV restricted. An object the POV character doesn't find important yet does not have to be described in as much detail as

when the POV character realizes the object's importance—when it should be given a thorough paint job.

RELATIONSHIPS

People, places, and things may be related to other people, place, and things to provide a great amount of detail. Elements may be positioned in relation to each other to compare characteristics.

PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Elements may be physically compared to each other in size, shape, density, color, texture, ad infinitum.

They may also be positioned in such a way that their relationship is stressed as important, such as how close or distant they are, how similar or opposite they are, and how important they are to the POV character. For instance, in the opening of Breakfast at Tiffany's the character Holly is separated from an extravagant piece of jewelry by a piece of glass. This is a powerful metaphor for the class boundary she is stuck behind, desperate but unable to break through to high society.

HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Elements can be positioned in time, not just across pages, but across minutes or generations. The display of an elements age is one thing (e.g., a tarnished wedding ring, the various stages of the Great Pyramids of Giza, or even The Picture of Dorian Grey), but the control of an element in unusual time is another (e.g., that black cat in The Matrix who appears twice exactly the same way but in rapid succession to show there is something wrong with the world).

EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Every important element in a story could be considered a character. Connecting the reader to that element cannot be overstated. This could be expressed through story, of course, but it can also be done in simple description. Similes and metaphors are powerful tools to connect elements to emotions (but not the only ones).

SIMILES/METAPHORS

I love similes and metaphors. Way too much. I trim mine out a lot.

The problem is that they rely on too many idiomatic symbols and shared visual language. If you share my visual language perfectly, then my use of s&m's won't interfere with your understanding of the text—and should even enhance it. But in enhancing it for some readers, it causes stumbling blocks for others. Or worse, confuses even further as different readers interpret the references differently.

I limit mine to less than one per two pages. Some say less than 1 per 10. Some say never use them at all, but I have yet to hear or read a proper technical argument for that, instead defaulting to "because I said so" (imagine a tongue sticking out). Ultimately, over time your similes and metaphors will lose cohesion. Think about how hard it is to read Shakespeare centuries after the fact. Now, people don't enjoy his works as much as they study them. (And yet, they study him because his metaphors were genius. Hmmm.)

SYMBOLISM & THEME

The term Symbol is used here to refer to any visual element (e.g., noun, verb, or adjective) that conveys a message by its existence alone. This only works when the reader shares the same visual language as the author, otherwise, authors must educate the reader about the symbol in the story itself.

An author should use visual symbols to reinforce their story's theme.

Example: In environmental studies, scientists consider the health of frogs in a biome as a symbol indicating the health of the entire ecosystem. So, if one were writing a story about a swamp, inserting images of frogs in some state would accent the reader's experience of that environment. And it can be further used to foreshadow the story's future, as in the MC comes across a dead frog suggesting that their place in the story is doomed.

If the reader can't be expected to know this detail, the author must explain it in advance of the symbol's appearance. There are good and bad ways to do each of the following methods:

Exposition

The narrator can explain the symbol.

An example would be the narrator using cactus as a metaphor or allegory in the opening hook, then in a later act the characters find themselves in a desert where they do or do not find one.

Education

The POV character can learn the information themselves and the reader learns along with them. Alternately, the POV character could have always know the information and divulges it in some way to another character.

An example would be one character describing the meaning behind a hummingbird in Mayan culture to another character, and then having one show up in the next act meaning exactly what was described.

SENSES

Color

Color is a special Symbol that deserves its own presentation. I could lecture on this for hours. In fact, I do at workshops across the country.

Colors are integral to a culture's shared visual language. This can be leveraged to inspire emotions in readers. Every culture interprets colors differently, but Americans generally see sun-yellow is a happy color, blues are omnipresent (even omnipotent), red is passionate, etcetera.

Paint something in that color and the reader will automatically have an emotional connection to it. In the U.S. red by itself means excitement and passion and fight-or-flight. There is a reason the big red button is big and red. Put red-white-and-blue on something and an American will think of patriotism and all the emotions tied to it. In Israel and many middle eastern nations, blue-and-white or blue-and-silver mean the same thing. In China, red by itself means life itself and power and good fortune and more. In Mongolia, blue means life and divinity and soul. (While red does not. do not confuse Mongolian symbols with Chinese.)

Colors can also be used to tie symbols together. If yellow objects are stressed throughout a story, they must be related in some way (actually, make *certain* they are related in some way). While yellow could meaning happiness, it could be used to link all the people affected by the same tragic yellow school bus accident changing the color's meaning to grief. Symbolism in this way is a great way to help you decide what color things should be if you can't decide for aesthetic purposes. In fact, it's better.

In my novel featuring many ethnically Chinese characters, I link characters with the color red. Whenever a new character appears that will eventually become the MC's ally, some article of clothing or object they possess is red. This is because red is the most sacred and important color to China.

But there is a challenge to color. Authors may not feel experienced or educated enough with color to make aesthetic choices. To alleviate that, I highly recommend authors research (*gasp*). While that could mean reading papers on color theory, it really means researching things like appropriate fashion trends for your characters (black trench coats are so last century) and architectural styles (and materials) for your buildings. Avoid color limited media like old comic books. Most of those decisions are/were based off what was cheapest to produce and not what looks best while still appealing to children. Authors are not bound by pigment prices. It you want gold leaf and ground lapis on your Bugatti, just type it. If you want great color ideas, look at masterful oil paintings and modern fashion designers. Stay out of the Crayola box.

Patterns

And don't forget patterns. Paisleys and plaids and ginghams, ad infinitum exist. Use them. Just don't try to describe every color in them. A gold paisley with green accents is enough.

Textures & Temperature

Textures can also be used to describe emotions and themes. They aren't just there for sense appeals. The character is going to pick up a lot of objects. Some will be more important than others. If it's the first time they touch a gun, will it feel hard and cold or warm and oddly familiar. Does it really matter that the wine in their hand is chilled? It does if it gets spilled on someone later in the scene (foreshadowing AND dramatic element). Otherwise, it's a waste of words.

When it comes to your senses, choose wisely.

CHARACTER & COSTUME

Character traits can be conveyed visually by more than skin, hair, and eye color. They can be described by the verb choices in their actions and the costumes they choose to wear.

Faces and bodies

Faceless characters exist for a few reasons. The author is being lazy. The author wants the reader to pretend THEY are the protagonist – which is another word for being lazy because thousands of people who don't look like Harry Potter pretended to be Harry Potter while reading it. The author is afraid to alienate their audience (super lazy). The author can't decide on their appearance for some reason (do I need to say it?).

Maybe you don't need to describe the shape of every character's nose (please don't), but if it's important to the story, you must. Paul Atreides description in Dune is important because his lineage is everything to the plot. In my own novel. I use noses and face shapes across characters unknown to each other to foreshadow genetic relationships to be revealed.

Gesture

The term Gesture in art refers to more than a single action like waving or flipping someone off. It refers to their entire pose that, while literally static, is drawn in such a way as to suggest action and invoke drama. Nobody just *stands*. They are erect with authority or wait sheepish or slouch, etc. A slave shouldn't be standing in chains. They should wrenching their bodies away from the whip or reeling from it.

The gesture is arguably more important than any other descriptor, if only because it is the most likely to convey the character's emotion and role in the scene. And this also applies to object and environments as characters. A snow globe could sit on a mantle-piece or lord over it.

Clothing

A character may dress vibrantly or drab (see *Color*, above). They can be stylish or not. They can possess affectations like rings and tattoos that give them history and bonds to the world around them.

I will counter David Farland's advice on this one point. He recommends putting your characters in uniform costumes for ease of identifiability. That may work for fantasy where it references old world culture where few had much clothing. It may also work for stories over a short period of time, where costume changes may affect timeline and pacing. But modern stories should have modern people. Sure, there are people who wear the same clothes—or similar—every day, but are those really the adventurous ones? Or is the author being lazy?

A person's WARDROBE will be consistent with their personal favorites. But Beau Brummel be damned, people are more than one suit. That's where affectations are important. A character can have a favorite hat or tie or pair of boots. Or they can have a collection of Hawaiian shirts or watches or ties (Hi, Martin!). They may have a favorite color (oh gods, not black again). They may cherish a special heirloom that reminds them of what they are fighting for or what they lost or yadda yadda yadda.

Make them special.

And if they insist on wearing the same clothes every day, make that banality important to their character. Is it a uniform forced upon them? Have they never had the ability or encouragement to express themselves through fashion? Are they too poor? You aren't. You only need to spend words to give a character a wardrobe they spent a lifetime developing.

Shoes define a person (see Blocking). Practical shoes are practical. Comfortable and stylish shoes are expensive. Worn comfortable shoes are cheap. Heels (for both men and women) may be used to get attention or show athleticism or may be a symbol of oppression. Do they only have one pair of shoes? Do they match sneakers or pumps with every outfit? Do they prefer socks or none? Sandals or thongs? Are their combat boots polished or pissed on?

Tattoos

Tattoos on a person may represent a kind of person who is proud of their history and literally wears it on their sleeve. Use tattoos to reveal that history and hopes.

Hair Styles

Hair styles are incredibly important to a character. Besides time period, it represents social status and emotional state. Is the balding man hiding their head or shaved bare? Will the divorced or recently out queer woman shear herself short to start life anew? Does the Black woman spend a ton of time and money getting her hair braided or relaxed?

What about facial hair? Underarm hair? Pubes? How they tend to themselves is part of their value system and sense of self-worth.

This is not a snippet of a story. This is an actual friend of mine. She is a bisexual fashion model, burlesque dancer on the weekends, plays role-playing games, paints her own Warhammer figures, cosplays her own costumes, fences and recreates practical swordfights with period swords and techniques, owns her own house, has many pets, has her PhD in research genetics and is the head of an entire department within a nationally recognized Veteran Hospital. And she just got married. If I were to write her down as a character, haters would have a field day. But who cares?

Don't restrict your characters to those your audience would find "realistic" because real people are more interesting than anything you can make up. Fiction is for escape.

Be creative. Have fun.

BLOCKING

This is the most important and difficult technique of writing visuals.

Blocking is a photography-film-video term where visuals are narrowed in focus by using "blocks" or strips of black cardboard to "block" out extra or unwanted parts of a scene (ever see a person pretend to be a film director by holding up their fingers in a square shape? They are blocking). It's nearly identical to "cropping" except that it refers to the act of deciding what should be shown in the scene while cropping is the photographer's equivalent of actually cutting the photo after it's been taken.

In writing (esp. screenwriting), it refers to focusing on specific visuals in a scene to tell the story. What makes this so hard is that one must imagine everything possible in the scene and then decide the sequence of what happens when, showing the visual of those elements in the correct order. Time is a significant factor in proper scene visuals.

TIME

The sequence of actions, from A-Z is critical to a developing scene.

As a life-long sufferer of ADHD, I struggled with this until I could logically describe to myself how and when to apply it. I force myself to slow down and describe things at a proper pace for them to develop. Yes, I can describe a ton of actions taking place in a single sentence—even multiple senses—but the majority of readers will throw their hands up.

Slowing down is hard (for me) but it's critical, because if I don't do that in the first draft, I will absolutely have to rewrite the scene pretty much from scratch on the second. And I won't be able to show it to any reader until that second pass is done. I understand the appeal to "get through the story" and go back and put the visuals in later, but that inhibits the natural insertion of symbols and foreshadowing. It's amazing how many details I add in "on the fly" that turn out to be foreshadowing I didn't expect (but my subconscious did).

The best reason to inserting visual in the first pass is because adding them later can destroy the glorious pacing one originally vibes with. And losing a story's vibe is a soul-killer IMHO.

ACTIONS

This is what advisors mean when they say they want a scene's visuals to develop during the action of a story:

I passed through the decrepit hallway. Door 301 peeled from age and humidity, exposing bare wood like wounds. I grabbed its brass knob. It didn't turn.

"Ugh."

A ragged rubber matt lay beneath my pumps. Lifting its corner exposed a small silver key.

"Ah!" I said and took it.

It fit the lock perfectly and opened with the softest *click*.

This scene follows perfect blocking rules. Visuals are provided in the precise order necessary to follow the story. The reader has no choice but to follow the precise visuals provided. There is no cutting or changing focus to inconsequential things (squirrels).

As opposed to:

My footsteps echoed through the hallway until I stopped. A car alarm rang outside. A light flickered overhead. The doorknob didn't turn when I grabbed it.

"Ugh."

I removed a key from under my feet. It fit the lock perfectly and opened with the softest *click*. As it moved, flakes of paint peeled from door #301 revealing bare wood. I pulled the silver key from the brass knob. My black pumps scuffed the floor.

This is terrible. It's Frankenstein's monster without the genius IQ.

Visuals are out of order. Related images are separated. There are at least two squirrels: the car alarm and light flickering. It's not that those elements are inappropriate – they are improperly placed, and therefore whip the reader's head around wondering what to consider important. If one wanted those elements in, then find a place that isn't in the middle of the action.

This is critical when it comes to fight sequences. Just be careful not to get so detailed (e.g., which hand and foot does which) that you slow the scene down to a crawl.

PEOPLE

David Wolverton/Farland suggested describing the arrival of new characters by starting at the feet and rising to their head. This must be qualified but it's a great example of blocking.

> Two silver-tipped boots walked in, the size of canoes. Blue jeans rose from them half-way towards the ceiling before becoming an amethyst silk shirt, eagle-claw bolo, a dark clean-shaven face, sparkling white eyes, and a bouffant afro grazing the ceiling.
>
> "Evenin'" he said in bass voice so abyssal, the windows drummed.

Describing someone this way allows the visual to be set before all the dialogue and action. This is not info dumping. This is one short paragraph.

Do not do it like this:

> He strode, an eagle-claw bolo bouncing on his silk amethyst shirt. Blue jeans wrapped his legs above a pair of giant cowboy boots
>
> "Evenin'" he said in bass voice so abyssal, the windows drummed.
>
> At over seven feet tall, his afro grazed the ceiling, eyes white and gleaming from his dark clean-shaven face.

This just doesn't make sense. My mind's eye starts in the middle of his body, look down, then when he talks, I snap up to see his face– but I don't see his face. I see the top of his hair and then follow it down again. What a mess.

Other ways to do it correctly can be to start at a hand holding something and work up the shoulder to their face. When you do something like this, the visual of the character's footwear should be tied to an action.

More about footwear: Sorry men. It's important. Especially for women. In fact, there are even psychological papers written about how to evaluate a person's personality based on how they dress – and the analysis begins with the shoes. And those traits change from culture to culture and sub-culture to sub-culture.

ENVIRONMENTS

Places are characters. Sure, you can describe an apartment as a red oriental rug with matching black leather sofas—but that's a talk show setup – not where someone lives.

Environments are where the most criticism is laid against "info-dumping". But there is a difference between painting a picture of a horse and beating a dead one.

When painting an environment, start with broad brushes first—while setting up the important details. My preference is to use some action through the environment to focus on and then move through to the rest.

May pushed the crimson door into her kitchen, scraping its rubber across the dark hardwood floor. A lone window let a sunbeam shine like a spotlight, showcasing a tiny dust devil dancing away from the draft. Faint aromas of garlic, ginger, and pepperoni wafted in the air.

She shook out her black ponytail and flung a scrunchy into the dark before turning on the lights.

"Come on in," she said.

Bison smiled and did.

The kitchen took over a third of the apartment. Below the window sat a Victorian marble-topped table on a carved mahogany pedestal. A Federal Hitchcock chair tucked beneath it. Black appliances, black laminate counter-tops, and faux-mahogany cabinets cover one wall. Across the room, three mismatched wardrobes stood, the middle one uncarved. This, she opened, placed her heels inside, and pulled out an enormous Falcons' jersey with a sloppy black squiggle across the chest.

"That signature real?" asked Bison.

So here was a scene with a lot of description – all of which is important. It's a modern apartment with some unusual antiques inside it. The POV character for this is the owner, hence

why it described the period and maker of the furniture. If the POV character was the guest, I would have to describe things according to their knowledge level.

The mind's eye starts at the door, is drawn instantly to a light source and follows that to moving dust on the floor. Then minimal character action and dialogue illustrate who is the owner (and her personality) and who is the guest. It then paints the kitchen's image, returning to the window the reader is already familiar with, then to an antique table to set the theme of new-mixed-with-old (and set it up for later scenes where it gets destroyed), then fully describes one contrasting contemporary wall (which does all of the following: foreshadow the MC's evolution in two ways and reinforces the theme), spins easily to another wall with a set of mixed wardrobes (reinforcing the theme), then seamlessly uses character action to reveal another themed element: a modern collectible piece of clothing.

This is not an info dump. There are actions throughout. Every element described will be used later, tying the environment directly into the story. There isn't a single item that isn't important. No clocks, no trash cans, etc. Oh, and there isn't any grime either because the owner doesn't cook. Did I need to specify that? No. Again, the owner is the POV character who wouldn't find that detail important. The description flowed from one thing to the next, only touching on important items, in a sequence based on proximity to each other and ease of relationship. And yes, I constructed the room to have those item arranged so they could be so described. And no, I didn't write it this way the first pass. I'm not that good yet. But I did make sure all those elements were there.

Relating back to symbols and theme, all these visual relate to character and theme in this way: One morning, the owner of the apartment is going to surprisingly turn into a red Chinese dragon with black feathers. They are an ancient race in a modern world and antiques are her

treasure. The Atlanta Falcons team colors are red with a black feathered bird as a logo. The red mahogany and black appliance also foreshadow this. And she will accidentally destroy both the black fridge and her precious antique chair – illustrating her difficulty understanding her place in the world, not being enough a part of either the old world or new. The black scrunchy has multiple purposes, one of them being her haphazard and carefree nature now that will turn into a more obsessive, detail-oriented person later as she wrestles with her identity.

There is nothing extra. Nothing wasted.

Good blocking fills the mind's eye with images, emotions, and critical story components.

Bad or non-existent blocking confuses everyone.

COMMON MISTAKES

I make mistakes frequently, but the more I put down initially the easier they are to fix later. I can modify description structure without losing pacing. I may even provide places to apply foreshadowing later quite easily (e.g., turning the kitchen cabinets and appliances red and black).

And I listen to reader feedback to tell me when then get confused.

CONFLICT

Avoid reader conflict at all costs. It will always be your fault. Did you use words they don't understand? You can't hand them a dictionary. Did you scatter clues around the page for the reader to find on their own instead of pointing them out one at a time in the best order? Did you try to integrate description with dialogue and action, one phrase at a time, instead of allowing the reader to absorb the sensory experience at a pace they can remember?

It's never about what works for you and how you read – it's what works for your readers. You may not be that visual a person, but 70% of readers are—don't alienate them.

BLACK SCREEN

Give enough description and exactly when it is needed. Lack of description is a void your reader will fill in. If you leave a void — deliberately do so and never contradict whatever your reader is allowed to imagine. If you don't describe the 1st person POV character, then do not let any other character or thing in the story provide details to define them.

As for "info-dumping", one certainly can go overboard with description, but it is easier to edit than add.

SQUIRRELS

Errant information, inserted in the wrong place and time, are squirrels. They distract the reader from the flow of the story and confuses them as to what is important.

Sometime a symbol is needed to come in from an awkward angle—drawing the POV character's attention—but don't draw the reader's attention to something the POV character isn't focused on.

TELEPORTATION

Visuals follow a path as the eye moves across it. That is blocking.

Jumping from one visual to another without following a path is teleportation. The worst is moving a character from one scene to another without a transition, but it also happened above in the example with the tall gent where the description jumped from cowboy boots to his afro, skipping everywhere in between.

There are reasons and ways to transition across gaps, but even then, use those sporadically.

BAD COLORS

A person's imagination is influenced by their experiences. To get better colors, expand your experiences. As briefly mentioned before, comics and cartoon were heavily affected by technical limitations. The limited number of colors one could effectively print were limited. Compound that with grade school math teachers being forced to teach art without training and many authors suffer from "Primary color syndrome" and a rudimentary (and incorrect) knowledge of complimentary colors.

Primary color syndrome is where an author limits their pallet to red, yellow, blue, green, orange, purple, white, and black. The human eye can see around 1 million colors (less than a computer monitor than display, BTW). Use more than 8.

For the most part, don't dress a character in green and red. It's a vile visual and horrific trope that people do not dress in real life (successfully). One exception is a person with red hair, but that's because red hair is not actually red. Orange and green look lovely. And, for the love of the gods, don't paint a person or thing in orange and purple together.

Google actual fashions related to the time period you are writing in. You can even google for future fashion trends because fashion designers are visionaries and often design costumes for the future.

Also, just for fun, familiarize yourself with the color spectrum and learn the difference between indigo vs blue and magenta vs pink. You've probably been using those terms wrong your entire life (but lucky for you, so have your readers).

POETRY

Yes, there is a poetic license to be had in some cases where pretty words can be used to convey a "feeling" instead of a literal description - but there is a limit. To a visual reader, those must be handled carefully and minimally.

Similes, metaphors, and poetic references may convey a lot of information without a single visual attached to it.

Like 2% of the population, my wife is face-blind and doesn't remember people's faces. Not well—not at all. Instead, she remembers how they feel. That's all and well for her, but when she describes a person as "feeling squishy" or "like a toaster", they are meaningless visual descriptors.

In a famous example from an author using emotional imagery, a character's eyes are described as "…like a flower waiting to die." That is quite lovely and emotional, but visually meaningless. All cut flowers are waiting to die, whether they are brilliant and full or brown, withering, and half-rotten. But eyes don't look like flowers either. Are the flower petals supposed to be the eyelids? Or the irises? Is the flower's center (with the stamen and/or pistols) supposed to be the pupil? The iris? The albumin? Don't get me wrong – I understand the metaphor suggests the character had given up on advancing in their life. And that is a powerful message. But it has no visual component every reader will agree upon. Eyes may be heavy, hollow, sunken, worn, weary, with bags, wet or dry, etc. Those are descriptions. And after a while, poetry in place of the literal becomes tedious to a visual reader in The Endless Black, teased with false promises of images that don't exist. Authors should be careful when they use poetry to describe things.

CONTINUITY

The author is the expert of their universe. Errors erode that expertise in the reader's mind and they will give up.

Affix an exact description in your mind so you can write clearly and consistently through every part of your story. Don't refer to a pistol, describe its cylinder being loaded with 6 rounds later, and then have the character pull its slide back to cock it. That is a visual that automatically announces the author is not an expert.

AN ASS OUT OF YOU AND ME

Assumptions are the bane of every communicator. Don't give your reader room to assume anything. If done properly, the reader will be so riveted in what you have provided, they won't ask for more until you provide it.

You have a limited amount of time to provide those visuals. No, I will not wait a full page to know what a new character looks like. If you tell me someone is outdoors, you must immediately describe the sky and the level of day- or moonlight. If you vaguely mention someone is wearing a traditional costume for their culture without describing it, I will have no idea what you mean. Grass skirt or Lederhosen?

Assumptions about a 1st person POV character are the most critical to control. Once a reader is in that person's head – any assumptions they make are not just about the character, but about themselves. Related to that, gender roles are a touchy subject to talk about socially, but the practical reality is that authors use those roles—or break them—deliberately to tell a story. Don't hide from it. Male and female characters will have unique viewpoints on situations, and letting your reader assume one when you mean the other will cause conflicts. It will be worse if the author doesn't understand the uniqueness.

Here is a very simple example of why it matters:

> They stepped away from our table to use the washroom, leaving me alone with their favorite novel. Curious, I flipped open its cover. I blinked. Within it lay a paystub. Its amount leaped out at me. We had the same position in the same company and yet they earned so much more. I closed it quickly and shoveled another bite of dessert in my mouth to hide any expression.

This scene would feel very different if the character genders were known. A woman discovering her male co-worker earned more would be less surprised and the story would be about an all-too-common real-world experience. But a man discovering a woman earned more would be a reversal of that all-too-common real-world experience and could be considered a hook. Coworkers of the same gender in that situation would likely be a different story (e.g., relating to ability or social politics or something sinister). And letting the reader assume which story it is before you tell it is setting yourself up for failure.

ABOUT INFO-DUMPING

Set aside errant platitudes posing as advice like "don't info dump". Shake off comments by anyone who says, "Don't write an entire paragraph of description" especially if they follow it with "because I'm not a visual person". Write a paragraph of description. Write two. Write a page if you have to. If you move the reader's mind's eye to engage and educate the reader, enticing them through symbols and foreshadowing, everything should be felt like action instead of waiting for a polaroid to develop (too old a reference?).

The nay-sayers I have met have been a small percentage of the 30% of non-visual readers who gloss over visual content to get to what interests them the most. To combat this, ensure the visual content interest them. Don't let them skip the description of the antique chair that will be accidently devoured by a dragon with a sleep-eating disorder. Impress the symbols and foreshadowing so when realization strikes, they felt those details were worth their time.

But don't beat a dead horse.

AUTHOR LIMITATIONS ARE NOT AN EXCUSE

I have terrible allergies. Smells mean very little to me. If I smell something, it must be powerfully good or bad. For it to impress me, it must be jarring and take 100% of my attention away from everything else. I will not incorporate it into my experience of a person, place, or thing because it will become my *only* experience of that person, place, or thing. That means I have a terrible time knowing what scents to include in a story and when reading them, I usually just ignore them or it could very ruin my experience. Wet leaves, for example. So many stories in a forest describe the scent of wet leaves. I have never smelled wet leaves. I have smelled rot amongst dead leaves and that is disgusting. So, when prompted to imagine wet leaves in a story, I must either assume the scene smells absolutely disgusting and hate the entire scene for putting me in it, or just pretend that sentence doesn't exist. But when *writing* a forest scene where the leaves across the ground are damp, I know I must write the sentence "The aroma of wet leaves rose like the mist through my nostrils." and pretend that doesn't make me gag.

My wife is face-blind (Prosopagnosia). It's like being color blind but for physical features like faces. She does not remember faces of people. As an artist, she has become obsessed with painting people's faces in intricate detail. I know many artists who are color-blind and yet have

careers in art and some even won awards. Yet another artist friend of ours has aphantasia. They don't visualize anything when they close their eyes or have an inner voice to monologue their thoughts. But they are a very successful artist inspiring other to do those very things.

Authors may have these same or similar attributes that must be overcome. You may not be able to visualize a face, but readers will get frustrated very quickly if everyone in your story is an amorphous blob. You may have difficulties with color, either from actual color-blindness, or from a lack of interest in your life to study them. But using the wrong ones in your story can horrify your readers.

Then there are things like taste and fashion-sense. One of my favorite authors in the world is Robert Heinlein. Great storyteller. Couldn't visualize clothing designs to save his life, yet constantly tried to invent futuristic ones that just came out gross. I know people who can't stand his books for that.

Do not dismiss a subject just because you may have limitations in it. Understand yourself well enough to find a way through it or develop a style that can be appreciated by the most readers. I have honestly considered foregoing scents in my stories altogether and tried to convince my own selfish and lazy butt that *my* readers don't need them—that my stories are strong enough without them. Then I slapped myself awake and grew from it.

Every author has their obstacles to overcome, but it can be done. I encourage you to not give up. Hopefully this presentation will help you find your way.

Good luck!