One-Page Insights: The Art of Descriptive Prose

Do …

… begin *key* scenes with a descriptive passage to orientate your reader.

… decide WHAT the reader NEEDS to know about a character, location, or object and WHEN they need to know it.

… choose the best tone for each descriptive passage: visceral, cerebral, or lyrical (see below).

… trust your reader to complete the image themselves by not over-describing.

… be original/surprising; avoid cliché and pop-culture references.

… TELL the readers information but SHOW them emotion through your descriptions.

Don't …

… use descriptive mode when another mode would be better (action, interiority, exposition, dialogue).

… create a "red herring" by describing in detail something that is not important to the plot.

… disrupt action or dialogue scenes unnecessarily with lengthy descriptive passages.

… stray from the established POV (point of view) or deviate from character during a descriptive passage (unless you clearly introduce an omniscient narrator for the passage).

… simply convey how something looks; rather, involve all the senses.

… give belated descriptions that might contradict readers' established visualisation.

Descriptive Devices

- **POV:** Different points of view (first, second, or third person) can alter how something is described. See "One-Page Insights: POV".

- **Vocabulary and sentence structure** can create a specific tone:
    - Visceral (gut emotion: strong nouns/verbs, simple/punchy language)
    - Cerebral (no emotion: lofty, intellectual, convoluted language)
    - Lyrical (gentle emotion: poetic, rhythmic, wistful, universal)

- **Figurative tools**:
    - Simile: drawing an overt likeness.
    - Metaphor, inc. "pathetic fallacy" and "objective correlative": applying characteristics of one thing to something else.
    - Anthropomorphism or animalism: ascribing human or animal characteristics to inanimate things.
    - Patterns of imagery: calling back to key images/metaphors/similes throughout a descriptive passage or scene.

- **Dialogue**: Use characters to provide details about each other, locations, or objects naturalistically.