

WHOSE EYES ARE YOU WATCHING THROUGH?: WHY FILTERING WEAKENS WRITING

Consider the following passage:

Sarah looked across the street and saw the twisted, lifeless body spread-eagled across the gutter and the blood flooding across the pavement. She thought how horrifying the scene was and remembered that she had heard the car roaring up the street at what she imagined must have been double the speed limit. She remembered hearing the screech of the brakes. She looked at the skid marks. She was starting to feel sick in the stomach and she could taste bile rising in her throat. She could almost taste the blood. She realized she was witnessing death, and it horrified her.

What is the writer telling us?

He's telling us what Sarah saw and thought and remembered and felt. We, as readers, are not present in this scene. We are not experiencing, first hand, the horror of this road accident. We didn't see it. We didn't hear it. We are seeing Sarah seeing an accident. We are experiencing it through Sarah's eyes.

Now compare with:

The shrill screech of brakes followed the deafening roar of the approaching car. It skidded wildly to and fro, leaving long white scars on the black bitumen. The acrid smell of burning rubber filled the air. Then, the dull thud. The body lay twisted and lifeless, spread-eagled across the gutter, blood flowing from its veins to flood the pavement. Death. Sarah retched as the bile rose in her throat. She swallowed hard: hot, sickly-sweet syrup. She was drinking blood.

Now the writer has placed us in the scene. We hear the car. We see the skid marks. We smell the rubber. We see the horror. We experience, firsthand, Sarah's emotions, because we are there beside her, watching it with her; witnessing the horrific scene and feeling her reaction.

The difference between these two passages is filtering. The first is loaded with filters. The second is relatively free of filters.

So what, precisely, are filters?

Filters are words or phrases that place a character between you (the reader) and the action. They take you out of the story and force you to experience it from a distance.

Essentially, filtering denies you the experience and forces you, instead, to hear about it from someone else who saw it. You don't live the story. You are not in it. You are being told about it by someone else who was lucky enough to be there.

Writers who overuse filters place the reader at a distance from the action. They put tinted glasses on them. They still tell them the same story and describe things the same way, but the reader is denied the direct experience and the choice of how to react.

Filters take readers out of the story and force them to experience it from a distance.

The writer's goal is to put the reader in the story and let them experience it first hand.

Filters reduce emotional impact. If you want to evoke reader emotion, take the filters out and let the reader actually enter the story and witness events first hand.

Some common filter words are:

watched	heard	thinks/thought
touched	wondered	looked at
considered	realized	seemed
saw	feel/felt	decided
tasted	sounds like	remembered/recalled

Consider another example:

With filters:

Fred watched Sally read the invitation. When he saw that she tossed it aside he felt annoyed. He thought about why she might toss it aside and became really angry. He considered shouting "Damn you. I want to go. You are being unfair," but he thought it probably wouldn't do any good.

Without filters:

Sally read the invitation, then tossed it carelessly aside.

Damn her. She's being so unfair. I want to go....

"Don't say anything, Fred," he cautioned himself silently. "It'll do no good. She doesn't give a damn."

In the first example, we only see what Fred saw. We are told he feels angry and we are told what he was thinking. But in the second example, we actually see Sally's action and experience Fred's thoughts and feel his anger.

The writer's goal is to put the reader in the story and let them experience it first hand, not to have them sitting back having it told to them through the eyes of one or other of the characters. Of course, there are times when filtering is necessary or appropriate. There are times when you want the reader to sit on a bar stool or lounge with a cup of tea and listen to a character relating what happened. It's perfectly legitimate to tell readers what Jim heard and saw and how it made him feel — if the story is about Jim's reaction to the happening. If the story is about the happening itself, then it needs to be told in a way that lets the reader experience the happening — not just hear Jim's account of it.

For the reader, filters make the difference between being in the story and experiencing it first hand — seeing what the character sees and feeling what the character feels — and hearing someone tell the story of what occurred.

Will you see Sam beaten and feel the pain of the blows; swell with pride at his bravery, resisting and refusing to give in to the persecutor's demands; and shudder a little with fear that the bully might come for you next? Or will you sit in comfort and safety listening to someone describing the beating and telling you Sam was brave?

Removing filters makes writing tighter and more concise, but it also intensifies readers' emotional reactions to the story.

Will you flounder about in the flood waters with Jack, coughing and spluttering and fighting off the pain in his arm as he tries desperately to hang on to that branch. Or will you listen sympathetically and admiringly to his account of his battle for survival and merely take his word for how close he came to death?

A good writer puts you in the story, making you see and feel and smell the scene and experience the point of view character's emotions.

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