

Writing the Senses

ALEXANDRA FULLER SHOWS YOU HOW TO CREATE
SMELLS AND SOUNDS OUT OF WORDS

Who is Alexandra Fuller?

By the time Alexandra Fuller was 7, she knew how to assemble and load a rifle. Born in England in 1969, she moved with her family to Rhodesia, in Southern Africa, in 1972, and landed smack in the middle of a brutal civil war. After years of British rule, the Africans were fighting to reclaim their country, and Fuller's father was fighting to keep his farm. The war lasted until 1980, when the Africans renamed their country Zimbabwe. Fuller's family then began a series of moves that took them to farms in Malawi and Zambia.

Fuller's first book, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, recounts her madcap African childhood against the backdrop of an unpredictable war and the wild African landscape. Her second book, *Scribbling the Cat*, is the account of her journey with a Rhodesian war veteran through the battlefields on which he fought.

Fuller writes about life on the farm, fighting with her sister, and the daily violence of war with equal candor. Her matter-of-fact, sometimes humorous voice is spiced with Afrikaans and Shona slang that make the distant world of Africa come to life on the page.



How to Write From Models:

>> **READ
THE EXCERPT
THROUGH
ONCE**
WITHOUT
READING THE
NOTES.

>> **READ IT A
SECOND
TIME, WITH
THE NOTES.**

>> **THINK OF A
PLACE WITH A
STRONG
SOUND OR
SCENT.**

>> **USE THE
PROMPTS AT
THE END TO
DESCRIBE IT.**

1. Fuller begins with a series of adjectives, but follows up with a list of nouns that give the reader a reference for the scent she wants to evoke.

(from *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*)

What I can't know about Africa as a child (because I have no memory of any other place) is her smell; hot, sweet, smoky, salty, sharp-soft. It is like black tea, cut tobacco, fresh fire, old sweat, young grass. When, years later, I leave the continent for the first time and arrive in the damp wool sock of London-Heathrow, I am (as soon as I poke my head up from the intestinal process of travel) most struck not by the sight, but by the smell of England. How flat-empty it is; car fumes, concrete, street-wet.

The other thing I can't know about Africa until I have left (and heard the sound of other, colder, quieter, more insulated places) is her noise. . . .

In the hot, slow time of day when time and sun and thought slow to a dragging, shallow, pale crawl, there is the sound of heat. The grasshoppers and crickets sing and whine. Dying grass crackles. Dogs pant. There is the sound of breath and breathing, of an entire world collapsed under the apathy of the tropics. And at four o'clock, when the sun at last has started to slide west, and cool waves of air are mixed with the

2. The phrase "damp wool sock" calls up a distinct smell for anyone who's ever been near one, and also a tactile sense of cold next to the skin.

3. The short, industrial words used to describe London contrast sharply with the lush language describing Africa.

4. "The sound of heat" is an example of synesthesia, the overlapping of two senses, which Fuller enacts through onomatopoeic verbs.

5. Here, Fuller shows sound in action and brings the cacophony of farm life to the page. The quotation is an attempt to reproduce the cattle boys' call for the reader.

heat, there is the shuffling sound of animals coming back into action to secure themselves for the night. Cows lowing to their babies, the high-honeyed call of the cattle boys singing "Dip! Dip-dip-dip-dip" as they herd the animals to the home paddocks. Dogs rising from stunned afternoon sleep and whining for their walk.

The night creatures (which take over from the chattering, roosting birds at dusk) saw and hum with such persistence that the human brain is forced to translate the song into pulse. Night apes, owls, nightjars, jackals, hyenas; these animals have the woo-ooping, sweeping, land-travelling calls that add an eerie mystery to the night. Frogs throb, impossibly loud for such small bodies.

6. The words "saw and hum" convey the "pulse" of evening, while the list of animal names creates a song of its own through the repetition of "n," "y," and long-vowel sounds.

WRITE YOUR OWN SENSORY DESCRIPTION

USE THESE PROMPTS, YOUR EARS, AND YOUR NOSE TO DESCRIBE THE SOUND AND SCENT OF A PLACE

1 Reread Note #1. Adjectives are fine, but they can sometimes be vague. Comparisons help your reader to smell what you smell.

2 Review Notes #2 and #4. Just because you are focusing on two senses doesn't mean the others disappear. Pay attention to sight, taste, and touch as well.

3 Note #3. Contrast is another helpful tool for the reader. Is there a place that's the polar opposite of the one you're describing? How is it different?

4 Note #4. Verbs do the heavy lifting in description. Choose yours carefully,

especially when dealing with sound. Try to use at least one verb that sounds like what it means (onomatopoeia).

5 Note #5. Sometimes you can make up words that reproduce a sound for the reader. Try it.

6 Note #6. If you choose and arrange them properly, the rhythm of your words will convey the sounds they describe. Pay attention to your diction and flow.

7 Once you've sketched a description, have a friend read it. If your friend can smell and hear what you describe, you're done. If not, revise until your scene comes to life.