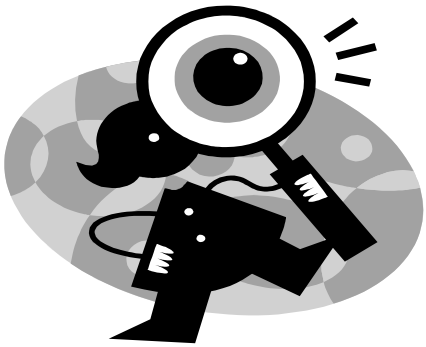
SPECIAL REPORT

How to Avoid Detail Traps and Write Descriptions Editors Will Love



By Jennifer Stevens

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About the Author

Long a writer for and the past editor of *International Living*, Jennifer Stevens has spent the balance of the last seven years gallivanting through Latin America and the Caribbean -- to Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize and beyond reporting on and writing about the best locales for overseas travel, retirement, and investment.

She is also the former editor of *Island Properties Report*, a monthly letter devoted to living and investing on islands around the world, and she was a writer and editor for several years at *Trade & Culture* magazine, a bi-monthly devoted to international trade issues. Jennifer is the author of *The Ultimate Travel Writer's Program*, published by the American Writers & Artists Inc. For more information: www.thetravelwriterslife.com

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Published by:

American Writers & Artists Inc.
245 NE 4th Ave, Ste. 102
Delray Beach, FL. 33483

For more information: www.thetravelwriterslife.com

How to Paint Vivid Word Pictures

The descriptions that editors like -- the ones they pay for -- are those that paint pictures so vivid, readers see and feel and taste right along with the writer.

How do you make sure your descriptions do that?

The short answer is: "Show don't tell" -- a maxim of good writing you'll come across in nearly any book devoted to the subject.

But what, exactly, does it mean? How do you, in fact "show" and not "tell" in your own writing?

Turns out, it's not that easy. Don't despair: In a moment, I'll let you in on a secret that will help immensely.

First, though, let me back up...

What, Exactly, Is "Show Don't Tell?"

"Show don't tell" means that you shouldn't just announce directly what a place is like and how it makes visitors feel. Instead, you should describe it in such a rich way that your reader experiences it for himself...

In other words, lead your reader to draw his own conclusions about a place. Don't lay them out for him.

For example: Say you're writing about a back-of-beyond hotel on some barely charted island in the Mozambique Channel. You could say it's remote. And you could say it's peaceful.

But a more skillful writer would, instead, describe the place in such a way that the reader would find himself thinking, "Boy, this sounds like the most remote, peaceful place on Earth."

So, how can you "show" your reader remote? Well, tell him about how you get there -- the four-hour ride into dense bush in the canvas-topped back of a 1979 Peugeot pick-up truck with three chickens, four shrouded women, and an infant for company.

And how do you "show" peaceful? Perhaps describe the night -- how the only sounds you hear are the rustling of lemurs in the trees above, the squeaks of the fruit bats, the sloshing of the Indian Ocean as it slides between the jagged lava rocks that frame the sandy cove where this hotel sits.

I know... it's one thing to read it, it's another altogether to do it yourself. But take the following advice seriously, and you will improve every description you write:

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One of the Biggest Problems Beginning Travel Writers Have…

I think one of the biggest problems beginning travel writers have is nailing down interesting, stand-out details about the destination they're profiling. I see it all the time in samples from our written travel writing program (http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com).

The "pictures" they paint to describe a place either aren't particularly interesting... or they're not really "pictures" at all. Sometimes I finish reading an article about a place, and I still haven't the faintest idea what it's really like.

For example, here's a lead sentence that landed on my desk recently:

"The Village complex is an upscale, luxury development of world class lodging, boutiques, shops, bars and restaurants with plenty of ancillary activities and entertainment."

It's grammatically correct -- but it doesn't really say anything. I don't know what makes the place unique. As far as I'm concerned, it could be any "upscale, luxury development." What's more, my idea of an "upscale, luxury development" might not be anything like what the author is describing.

-- Lori Allen, Editor, The Right Way to Travel *and Director, AWAI Travel Division*

The Big Secret: Avoid "Filler" Words

Avoid filler words (often adjectives) that don't really say anything... or say something to one person and something else to another.

Sometimes it's hard to find that stand-out detail that really characterizes a woman's dress. So you just say it's "fashionable."

You ring the bell in a rural French town, and a shopkeeper comes down from his upstairs apartment to open his antique store. You wander through, even buy a little something -- silver ice cube tongs. In your story, the shop is "quaint."

Travel writing is full of words like "fashionable" and "quaint" that don't really say anything: pretty, lovely, charming, upscale, idyllic, cozy, colorful, fancy, beautiful...

When you use words like those, you're just filling space. You're taking the easy way out -- and editors know it.

Sometimes, to be fair, those filler words do say something -- it’s just that what they say to you as a writer might not be at all what they say to your reader.

As William Zinsser put it: "One man's romantic sunrise is another man's hangover."

Consider this description, which relies on too many "filler" words:

"We’re greeted on arrival by hot, tropical weather. A blessing. There’s the beautiful bay, Bahia de Zihuatanejo, that we saw in the pictures. Our palapa is at the edge of an idyllic jungle."

"Beautiful bay" -- one reader conjures up Cape Cod in his mind, another sees a Caribbean island.

"Idyllic jungle" -- one reader thinks of a tamed landscape with lighted, stone walkways and strategically planted frangipani, another sees a dense expanse of vines and trees, seemingly impenetrable.

Choose Specific Details

Choose, instead, specific details and lead your reader to draw his own conclusions from them.

Here is a description rich in specifics, which make it genuinely compelling. Ever since I first read this, I've had an itch to see Oslo in winter. And at least one editor liked it -- this appeared in the "New York Times":

"There were little white candles flickering everywhere in Oslo – even in the breakfast room of the hotel, where we guests all lingered over our lavish Scandinavian smorgasbord. According to our preferences, we fortified ourselves with three kinds of herring, with soft-boiled eggs or shrimp salad, with mackerel in tomato sauce or muesli. We refilled our plates and sipped our tea and coffee, reluctant to go out into the winter cold. Little white candles in silver-stemmed goblets, in smoked-glass boxes, in pewter saucers were burning on every table in every café and restaurant, like a promise to hold onto the light right through the winter darkness."

The writer doesn't tell us that guests have a wide choice of breakfast foods. He doesn't tell us it's cozy. He doesn't tell us Oslo in winter is surprisingly enticing. He provides us the specifics and lets us draw those conclusions from them.

You want your descriptions to make the places your describing come alive for your reader. You want him to join you there. It takes energy and effort. But if you're careful to shun "filler" words in favor of specific details, you'll be way ahead of the pack. And editors will notice that, too.

How to Train Yourself to Notice the Details that Count

One important trait the most accomplished travel writers share has nothing to do with their writing abilities.

The best travel writers are, simply put, observant travelers. They've trained themselves to notice things.

You can, too.

In fact, it's a critical habit to foster. Because the more you notice -- the more specific, interesting details you pick up, that is -- the more rich material you have to include in your articles. And it's those rich details, remember, that editors like.

How do you do it?

Seven Ways to Notice More

1. Rely on more than just your eyes.

Certainly, pay attention to what you see. But also take note of what you hear, what you smell, how things taste, how they feel. If there's a low, stone wall surrounding a village cemetery, don't just scribble in your notebook "low, stone wall." Go up to it and check if the top is dusty. Exactly how low is it? What sounds do you hear as you lean on it? Is there cheerful chatter from the kids sent to leave flowers? Or is it utterly silent, save for the occasional bird call and the scratching of squirrels?

2. Count.

How many steps must you climb to reach the top of that lighthouse? How many steeples do you see jutting up above the rooftops? How many tables does the café hold? How many tourists are standing in line? How many types of bread does the bakery sell? Specific numbers often provide the kind of astonishing detail useful in an article.

3. Pick up papers -- maps, brochures, local newspapers and magazines, brochures, postcards, menus, business cards.

I keep a one-gallon Ziploc bag in my suitcase when I travel, and at the end of each day, I toss into it whatever papers I've gathered. If I got a business card from somebody I spoke with, I make a note on the back, reminding myself who that person is. If I got a menu from a place where I enjoyed lunch, I scribble on it what I had and what I thought of it. I'll flip through a local paper, scanning for odd-ball items and ideas about what I might do the next day, making note of local politics, finding out what controversies are raging. You won't likely use all this material in your article, but it's all useful as you piece together a context for this place you're visiting.

4. Talk with locals.

No matter where you are -- in a bar, a café, a shop, a taxi -- strike up a conversation with a local. Ask directions. Ask for suggestions about what you might do or where you might eat. Inquire as to how things have changed in the past decade or more. Ask this person where he or she takes family and friends who visit. My colleague John Forde always suggests talking with anybody over 70. Smart guy, that John.

Doing a load of laundry in a Laundromat offers you the perfect excuse to start talking with somebody who lives in the neighborhood you're visiting. Have your hair done. I rarely take the time to have my hair cut at home, so I'll often do it on the road. (One of the best haircuts I ever got was in a woman's front room in Zanzibar; one of the worst was at a salon in London.) But both gave me ample time -- and an ideal excuse -- to ask questions and learn things.

5. Shop with locals.

Poke your head into as many "tourist" shops as you like, but make sure you also spend some time where the locals shop. Go to a grocery store and pay attention to what's on offer. How many types of cheese are in that case -- and how many is the average shopper buying? Is that an entire wall of lentils? Is that man perched on a stool at the back filling up people's empty glass jugs with wine from a vat? Investigate an outdoor market or a hardware store. My point is: By paying attention to how the locals shop, what they buy, and how

much things cost, you'll uncover all sorts of interesting quirks you'd never find out if all you shopped for were t-shirts, snow-globes, and fridge magnets.

6. Get into a local's home.

(I'm not suggesting you climb in a window.) Get yourself invited for tea or lunch or dinner... or just a quick tour. It's amazing what you'll learn once you step over a threshold into the private world tourists never see. You'll instantly know more about people's priorities, about how they order their lives... indeed, maybe a good bit about how that society is ordered. Here, again, notice how things look, feel, taste, and smell. (How do you get invited in, you ask? I promise: Strike up conversations, and you'll be surprised at how hospitable people become.)

7. Travel more.

The more often you travel, the more places you see, the better able you'll be to distinguish something that's really unusual. You'll develop a more well-rounded perspective. And you'll gain something else there's no other way to come by: judgment.

I asked Kathleen Peddicord, the editor and publisher of Live & Invest Overseas and former editor of International Living, what she thought distinguished a truly inspired travel article from a run-of-the-mill one, and that's the key word she came up with:

"Judgment. Being able to decipher what's special, unique, new, important, valuable in a place. Putting the place in context, historically and otherwise. Understanding what you're seeing and seeing beyond the tourist layer of a place."

How to Get Started Right Now

You don't have to board an airplane and head across an ocean before you start sharpening your observation skills. Start this weekend. Take a half-hour walk and methodically go through your five senses. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? How do things feel? How do they taste? (OK... get coffee while you're out or, if you live somewhere warm, grab an ice cream.)

Count a few things. How many homes on a block or trees along a street? How many people on the sidewalk? How many kids in the park? How many shattered car windows?

Then when you get back home, take five minutes and jot down the things that most stand out in your mind.

Being Nosy Helps

The truth is, gathering the kind of specific, stand-out details editors like to see in articles requires a certain amount of, well, nosiness.

Sure, even if you're shy, you can still use your eyes, ears, nose, and mouth to discover what's around you. You needn't be outgoing to count steps or steeples.

But if you never learn to peer through garden fences to check if the beds are weeded... if you never get up the gumption to ask that shop owner how business has been... if you never order the daily special in a restaurant, even when you have no idea what it is... then you're certain to miss out on some of the best opportunities there are for uncovering details a myopic traveler never even knows he's missing.

In my view, it’s just this sort of attention to what's around you, this "noticing" while you're traveling that makes travel writing so much fun.

As a travel writer you have an excuse -- indeed, a mandate -- to travel in a way a typical tourist does not. It makes your experience that much richer. And it will make your articles that much better.