

Snapshots—adapted from Lane
Language Arts—Kaye

“Writing is not writing skills, but knowing how to see... There are people who can't read or write who are novelists. They've got two lenses. A telephoto lens for big pictures and a lens a dentist would use. What they do to show the big picture is use details they see with the small lens.”

Carolyn Chute

Writers are like photographers with giant zoom lenses, observing life in incredibly fine detail, pulling back to make sweeping generalizations, then zooming in again to make those generalizations come alive with detail.

SNAPSHOTS are the practice of writing in sharp physical detail. One thing to remember: details are boxes inside boxes. One detail unlocks several others, and so on.

Here is a snapshot of Ma putting the children to bed from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big House*. *woods*

Ma kissed them both, and tucked the covers in around them. They lay there awhile, looking at Ma's smooth, parted hair and her hands busy with sewing in the lamplight. Her needle made little clicking sounds against her thimble and then the thread went softly, swish! through the pretty calico that Pa had traded furs for.

Wilder begins by looking at Ma and ends up dwelling on Ma's hands sewing. This telephoto quality becomes sharply apparent when we convert this snapshot back into the questions Wilder may have asked in her mind as she wrote this passage. Examples?

- What did Ma do to put the girls to bed?
- What did the girls look at?
- What did Ma's hair look like? How was it parted?
- Etc...

Notice how the smallest details (ex. A needle clicking against a thimble) brings an entire world alive in the reader's mind? Your details should stick with your readers; your mission is to make them resonate.

Look at the way Jerry Spinelli makes a dilapidated house come alive in his young adult novel *Maniac Magee*:

Maniac had seen some amazing things in his lifetime, but nothing as amazing as that house. From the smell of it, he knew this wasn't the first time an animal had relieved itself on the rugless floor. In fact, in another corner he spotted a form of relief that could not be soaked up by newspapers.

Cans and bottles lay all over, along with crusts, peelings, cores, scraps, rinds, wrappers—everything you would normally find in a garbage can. And everywhere there were raisins.

Nothing could be worse than the living and dining rooms, yet the kitchen was. A jar of peanut butter had crashed to the floor; someone had gotten a running start, jumped into it, and skied a brown, one-footed track to the stove. On the table were what appeared to be the remains of an autopsy performed upon a large bird, possibly a crow. The refrigerator contained two food groups: mustard and beer. The raisins were even more abundant. He spotted several of them moving. They weren't raisins; they were roaches.

Writers need to develop a habit of seeing the world in close physical detail. Learning to write in physical is often the process of slowing down our senses and truly observing the world around us. Building on the ability to dig for details takes practice. The following exercise will teach you to observe *moments* in closer physical detail.

The Magic Camera:

1. Your mission is to use your magic camera that all writers (and storytellers) have; point it at your experiences & memories and create snapshots that contain smells and sounds as well as colors and light.
2. Dig for deeper details when you stall out. Remember the power of asking questions to dig up more “specific” detail.
3. Think of an experience or memory you consider significant. Place that “event” in the middle of an empty page and then pretend you have a magic camera that can freeze that moment in time. Web-chart at least five or six minutes, briefly noting the particulars.
4. Pick one moment (the one you used above for #3 if all went well) and write a snapshot of that one moment, using words to convey your picture. For example, instead of “Dad took me ice fishing,” a snapshot starter would look more like this: “Dad knelt beside me by the ice hole, his hand in the icy water reaching for the perch that slipped back in.” This is the type of descriptive writing you’re striving for. How can you recreate your experience in way where your reader becomes an active participant?
5. Write for twenty minutes or however long it takes to create a snapshot of your experience. After writing, read over your work and ask yourself at least two questions that will lead to more detail. Then, go back and insert these details to your snapshot.
6. Share your snapshots with a friend or family member. Ask the listener to write down questions that grow out of their natural curiosity. Use these questions to guide you in adding even more details to your original snapshot.
7. Draw a picture of your snapshot, putting in all the details from your words. Strive to add one or two more details from your drawing to your writing.
8. Bring the following with you to class on _____: your web, your 20 minute write, the questions your listener asked, your final sketch, and your supplemental artwork.