



Imagery

Introduction

Imagery is the use of words to re-create a sensory experience. People often think imagery just refers to creating a visual picture for the reader, but imagery includes any experience with the five senses. Imagery captures in words what we see, what we hear, what we touch, what we smell, and what we taste. Visual imagery is most common, but expert writers experiment with all of the sense experiences in their writing. Imagery is another way to make writing alive and interesting.

It is difficult to separate imagery from diction and detail. In fact, imagery depends on precise word choice and specific detail. The difference lies only in focus: using words and details to capture a sensory experience. Effective imagery is built on effective diction and detail.

Imagery can be figurative or not. If you describe a family dinner as “a combination of boisterous conversation, badly burnt chicken, and the fragrance of freshly baked bread,” you would be using imagery but not figurative language. It describes the dinner exactly as it is, and there is no other meaning. If, however, you describe a family dinner as “a *quilt* of boisterous conversation, badly burnt chicken, and the fragrance of freshly baked bread,” you would be using imagery that is figurative. A family dinner is not literally a quilt. It is *like* a quilt, combining different sounds, smells, and tastes. It is a metaphor, and the metaphor is developed through imagery.

Imagery, like the other elements of voice, is a tool the writer can use to create a specific experience or feeling. The more specific the imagery is, the more powerful it is as a tool for the writer.

Getting Started with Imagery

Before you begin the imagery exercises, practice creating some specific images. Your images can be figurative or not. Use the chart and topics below.

Topic	Type of imagery	Image
your favorite song	sound	
a sunset	sight	
your favorite kind of pizza	taste	
a bowl of ice	touch	
a fish market	smell	

Imagery

Read and think:

The silence was delicate. Aunty Ifeoma was scraping a burnt pot in the kitchen, and the *kroo-kroo-kroo* of the metal spoon on the pot seemed intrusive. Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu spoke sometimes, their voices low, twining together. They understood each other, using the sparest words. Watching them, I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have. I wanted to get up and leave, but my legs did not belong to me, did not do what I wanted them to.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*

Talk about it:

1. Imagery is the re-creation of sensory experiences through language. Which of the five senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell) is most important here? Underline the particular words that create this sense experience for the reader?
2. The *kroo-kroo-kroo of the metal spoon on the pot* is described as *intrusive*. What does this mean? What image is contrasted with the sound of the metal spoon on the pot? What effect does this have on the passage?

Now you try it:

Describe your school hallway between classes. Focus on the *sounds* that are important in the scene. Use two contrasting images and a made-up word which imitates a sound, as Adichie does in her passage.