

# William Bernhardt's Red Sneaker Writers Book Series

## Book 10: Dazzling Description

### Chapter 1: Why Description Matters

Not in Bernhardt's book, though he refers to it: Elmore Leonard's Top Ten Rules for Writing:

Elmore Leonard: 10 Rules for Good Writing



Elmore Leonard started out writing westerns, then turned his talents to crime fiction. One of the most popular and prolific writers of our time, he's written about two dozen novels, most of them bestsellers, such as *Glitz*, *Get Shorty*, *Maximum Bob*, and *Rum Punch*. Unlike most genre writers, however, Leonard is taken seriously by the literary crowd.

What's Leonard's secret to being both popular and respectable? Perhaps you'll find some clues in his 10 tricks for good writing:

1. Never open a book with weather.
2. Avoid prologues.
3. Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue.
4. Never use an adverb to modify the verb "said"...he admonished gravely.
5. Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose.
6. Never use the words "suddenly" or "all hell broke loose."
7. Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly.
8. Avoid detailed descriptions of characters.
9. Don't go into great detail describing places and things.
10. Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.

Two rules to highlight from Leonard:

1. You want your readers to read your book, not skim it.
2. When readers see something they're not interested in, they skip it.

Writing the Unskippable

1. Reader engagement is the key to reader enjoyment.
2. Don't let description undermine the pace of your book.

### Leaving the Door Ajar

1. Learn to trust your reader.
2. If you are describing the less commonplace, more words may be advisable.
3. Do not spell out every little detail.
4. Readers want to feel located in a certain place and time. Once they understand where they are, they can enjoy the story.
5. Root your book in a specific place and time.
6. Skillful description has a transformative impact on your book.

### Establishing the right tone

1. Use weather to set the tone and provide insight.
2. Weather is a reflection of depression within the character.
3. The reader has to feel the tone, the mood, the ambience, and skillful description can help you put that across.

### Finding the bed that's just right

1. Popular fiction demands a fast pace.
2. If a word, phrase or sentence isn't advancing the story, it needs to go, and that is never more true than with description.

### *Chapter one highlights.*

1. You want readers to read your book, not skim it.
2. When readers see something that doesn't interest them, they skip it.
3. Reader engagement is key to reader enjoyment.
4. Don't let description undermine the pace.
5. Description matters.
6. Setting matters.
7. Skillful description has a transformative impact on your book.

### Chapter two: less is more.

1. Less is more.
2. The best description is often the least description.

### Doing more with less

1. Don't bury the reader in unneeded description.
2. Don't waste your reader's time telling them what they already know or don't need to know.
3. Whatever you choose to describe your. Readers have already seen it.
4. Modern day writers are minimalists. They suggest, rather than exhaust.

### Readers are your partners

1. Trust your reader. Let the reader fill in the blanks.

### The best descriptions provide subtle insight.

1. In Bernhardt's book *Creating Character*, he suggested giving details that readers will remember and give insight into who this character is.
2. These details can be provided without stopping the story.
3. Forget adjectives. Instead, find the perfect word to economically convey what you want to say.
4. The best approach is not abundant description, but abundant observation.
5. Focus on sparing description that provides insight.
6. **The best observations are linked to emotion.**

### *Chapter two highlights*

1. Less is more.
2. The best description is often the least description.
3. Don't bury the reader in unneeded character description.
4. Don't waste your reader's time telling them what they already know or don't need to know.
5. Trust your reader. Let the reader fill in the blanks.
6. Focus on sparing description that provides insight.
7. The best observations are linked to emotions.

### Chapter three: Sensory description.

1. You have five senses use them. Use them all.

### Triangulate the reader

1. Use sight plus one or more of the other senses to triangulate the reader.
2. Using sound: try to avoid too much onomatopoeia readers. Readers tire of "clash" and similar sound effect words.
3. Smell: scientists say that smell is the sense most closely linked to memory.
4. Touch: temperature also creates a mood. Warm surfaces are appealing, cold surfaces are off-putting.
5. Use the sensory description that best fits the scene you're writing.

### Description sets the tone

1. Give your readers the feeling that all is not as it should be.
2. Use skillful description to create tension. If this is a tense suspenseful, scary scene, go with the short sentences. Longer sentences create a more leisurely pace.
3. Tension is just one example of a mood that can be established through skillful description.
4. In every scene, remind yourself what emotional tone you're striving for.
5. You can provide the same sensory connection to your readers by evoking smell, sounds, songs, movies, clothing styles and other relics from the past.

### *Chapter three highlights*

1. Use all five senses in your descriptions.
2. Use site plus one or more of the other senses to triangulate the reader.
3. Use the sensory description that best fits the scene you're writing.
4. Skillful description can create tension.

### Chapter 4. stealth description

1. What should you do when you realize the story needs a little description or the reader needs to know something about the surroundings but you can't afford to slow the story down?
  - a. Stealth description.
  - b. Figurative language.
  - c. Use these to provide essential information.

### Making description invisible

1. Give the reader enough to visualize the scene without writing anything that strikes the reader as descriptive.
2. Integrate all the descriptive elements with the action.
3. Integrate the descriptive elements with verbs that are rife with emotion.
4. The reader gets description, but the most powerful takeaway is the emotional content of the sentence.
5. With enormous economy you've not only established the setting, but dramatized your character's reaction to the setting.
6. **Stealth description integrates description with action and emotion.**

### Figurative language

1. Figurative language can provide descriptive information that surprises. That surprises and delights us.
2. Consider using similes, metaphors, personification, and allusions.
3. Smilies can describe without appearing to describe.
4. Metaphors implied descriptive information.
5. Personification can be used to describe indirectly what might be boring or obvious if described directly.
6. Allusions can provide descriptive information by referencing other works. However, avoid using allusion unless it's absolutely necessary.

### *Chapter 4 highlights*

1. Use stealth description to provide essential information.
2. **Stealth description integrates description with action and emotion.**
3. Figurative language can provide descriptive information in a way that surprises and delights.
4. similes can be used to describe without describing.
5. Metaphors imply descriptive information.

6. Personification can be used to describe, indirectly, what might be boring or obvious if described directly.
7. Allusion can provide descriptive information by incorporating other works.

#### Chapter five: describing characters

1. Describing a character should involve more than physical appearance.

#### Describing characters to life, not to death

1. Do not describe characters in minute detail the first time they appear in a book.
2. Do not be excessively detailed in describing any character.
3. Give the reader a single, salient item to remember. The trick is to pick the right detail. You want something that will first cause the reader to remember who the character is. And second, convey some important information about the character.
4. In a typical novel, you will have between 50 and 100 characters. But 5 who are most important. You want the reader to remember who those 5 are every time they appear.
5. Even better is if that memorable trait gives insight not just to identity, but also to create personality.
6. The best character descriptions have both an identifying and defining aspect.
7. When you bring your new characters on stage for the 1<sup>st</sup> time, pick 1 or two traits that are worth hammering home and leave the rest to the reader's imagination.
8. Unless a character's clothes shoes hairstyle jewelry etcetera tell the reader something about the character, leave it out.
9. Let the reader supply details that don't matter.

#### Character description that matters

1. The description that will add tension drama and power to your narrative is the description of how your character impacts the other characters in the story. Describe the impact your character has on others.
2. What you imply, but don't say, can have more impact than what you do say. If readers can draw conclusions from your descriptive details that you don't spell out, the reader will not only get the point, but will feel smart.
3. Physical description is not as important as descriptive details that bring the character to life.

#### Don't base characters on real people

#### *Chapter 5 highlights*

1. Creating a character should involve more than physical description.
2. The best character descriptions have both an identifying and a defining aspect.
3. Let the reader supply details that don't matter.
4. Describe the impact your character has on others.

5. Physical description is not as important as other descriptive details that bring the character to life.
6. Don't base your characters on real people.

#### Chapter 6. description that shows but doesn't tell.

1. Show don't tell means you indicate the character's emotional state without directly feeding it to the reader.

#### Showing and telling

1. When you are trying to communicate an emotion, a feeling and ambience, a mood or a tone, well-crafted description may allow you to do it without express telling.

#### Revealing your character's inner feelings

1. Let the reader discover your characters through their actions.
2. Body language indicates character emotions without telling.
3. An overreaction or underreaction suggests something unspoken lies beneath the surface.
4. Ticks and "tells" often reveal what someone is thinking.
5. Passive, aggressive responses indirectly indicate emotion.
6. When readers identify even with a character completely unlike themselves, that's when you know you've written something terrific.

#### Don't tell what you've already shown

1. Students do a fine job of describing something, of showing the character's emotional state without telling. But they feel insecure about it... So they add a conclusory sentence that spells out what they hinted at before. That's a sentence I always cut.

#### *Chapter 6 highlights*

1. "Show don't tell" Means you indicate the character's emotional state without directly feeding it to the reader.
2. Description can provide a beautiful approach to showing without telling.
3. Let the reader discover your characters through their actions.
4. Body language indicates character emotions without telling.
5. An overreaction or underreaction suggests something unspoken lies beneath the surface.
6. Ticks and "tells" often reveal what someone is thinking.
7. Passive, aggressive responses, indirectly indicate emotion.
8. Never tell the reader what you've already shown.

#### Chapter 7: description traps

1. Ditching the too-familiar
  - a. avoid cliches

## 2. Avoid pointed descriptions

- a. Theme should emerge in a gradual and understated way. There should never be a character who announces what the story is all about. Description is not your opening to get preachy.

## 3. Don't let your feelings get away from you

- a. Don't let description become a distracting digression.
- b. Description cannot be your excuse for a meandering story.
- c. The characters have to be somewhere when they interact, but that isn't the most important part of the chapter and never should be.
- d. Integrate the description rather than dumping it on the reader.
- e. Kill your darlings.
- f. Always focus on the big picture. Make the overall book as good as it can be.

### *Chapter 7 highlights*

1. Avoid cliches.
2. Description is not your chance to get preachy
3. Don't let description become a distracting digression.
4. Description cannot be your excuse for a meandering story.
5. Kill your darlings.
6. Focus on the big picture. Make the overall book as good as it can be.

### Chapter 8: Finding the time and place

1. Locate the story for readers by giving them a strong sense of time and place.
2. Find the setting that is perfect for the story you want to tell.

### Creating an internally consistent world

1. Fiction works best when your imaginary world has its own consistent laws. Create an internally consistent world.

### Settings that heighten the drama

1. New setting to establish tone, mood or meaning.
2. You can still use your setting to make a point.

### You don't have to really live there

1. Make your characters believe in this world.
2. Focus on the humans living in this world.
3. Use technical terms and pseudo facts to create a sense of reality.
4. Establish your credentials.
5. Eliminate every apparent reason why this couldn't happen.
6. Remember that setting and description should move the book forward, not slow it down.
7. Create a world readers want to visit.

8. If the fictional setting you're creating is attractive a place where readers would like to spend some time, they are much more likely to share your fantasy.
9. The clear break from reality can be part of the settings appeal.

#### Large details and small details

1. Give the reader a sense of the people through dialog and interaction. Give the reader the big picture and the small picture. Give the reader a sense that this location was not chosen at random, but was chosen because it's the perfect place to tell the story.
2. Use large and small details to create a thoroughly developed setting.
3. Put your characters in a fully realized world filled with intrigue and possibility.
4. Let description and setting become not obstacles, but stepping stones on your path to success.

#### *Chapter 8 highlights*

1. You should locate the story for readers by giving them a strong sense of time and place.
2. Find the setting that is perfect for the story you want to tell.
3. Create an internally consistent world.
4. Use setting to establish tone, mood, or meaning.
5. Make your characters believe in this world.
6. Focus on the humans living in this world.
7. Use technical terms facts and pseudo facts to create a sense of reality.
8. Establish your credentials.
9. Eliminate every apparent reason why this story couldn't happen.
10. Remember that setting and description should move the book forward, not slow it down.
11. Create a world readers want to visit.
12. The clear break from reality can be part of a setting's appeal.
13. Use both large and small details to create a thoroughly developed setting.