

Make It Real

By J. Michelle Newman

J. Michelle Newman is a writer, editor and literary consultant with a background in strategic planning. She is shopping her first novel, *A Deception of Crows*, inspired by her wild adventures working in commercial real estate in the mysterious kingdom of Wall Street and beyond. Michelle is completing her first historical fantasy novel, *Mistaken Knights*, in addition to a collection of surreal short stories.

I believed that I was writing historical fiction until an agent categorized my novel as fantasy. To me the world of the novel was grounded in history, or at least the historical facts about the type of food, clothing, animals, buildings, and weapons known to have existed during the sixth century. I built my world from the elements of this very real sixth-century foundation by adding blocks of fantasy: time travel, characters based on a legend, magical and mythical beasts. The world of my novel became real to me with characters and landscapes that were three-dimensional. I could see clearly the landscape in each scene in my mind's eye and I could experience what the characters were feeling. I write what I love to read and I love to get lost in fiction and escape to another reality, so I never questioned whether a dragon really could exist!

The craft is to create a world where dragons do exist, and your readers become so immersed in that world that they believe anything the writer tells them, even though it may be pure fantasy. To truly get lost in fiction, the reader must be able to experience the action of the novel along with the characters, to get inside their bodies and feel what they feel and see the world through their eyes.

If you've done your job as a writer, your readers will predict and anticipate your character's behavior before they act, just as in a real world social situation. This ability to discern one's own and others' mental states such as, "Purpose, intention, knowledge, belief, thinking, doubt, guessing, pretending, liking . . ." and to interpret behavior based on this discernment is a concept originally introduced by Premack and Woodruff in 1978 in their article, "Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?"

According to Lisa Zunshine, in her 2006 book *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, our "theory of mind" or "mind-reading" tendency is the reason why

we read and write fiction: “Fictional narratives feed our hungry theory of mind, giving us carefully crafted, emotionally and aesthetically compelling social contexts shot through with mind-reading opportunities.”

As my improvisation teacher, Melanie Chartoff, always tells me, to make a scene real: Stay in the moment, get inside your body, and interact with the objects in the world. If you believe the world exists, then so will the audience. And the same holds true for writing. If your characters slow down to see, feel, and interact with their surroundings, then your readers will believe in the new reality also.

So now, the question is how to make it real. Visualize the landscape of the scene before you begin to write. Paint the world with sensory experiences, allow your characters to react to the inputs, and follow Newton’s Third Law of Motion: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

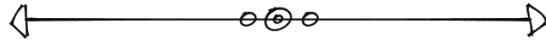
Make it sensory by incorporating sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. Be specific by providing details that readers can easily identify from their real life, so they have a base to compare with the “new” world or reality of your story. Imagine your character walking through this world and interacting with objects within the landscape rather than just listing them. If the reader can experience the world with the character, then it will be three dimensional and real. I need to see the world before I can even begin writing. If it feels real, then to me it is real.

Try this technique and see how it works for your story. With each revision, the scene will become richer and more believable. Don’t rush. Take the time to make it real.

EXERCISE

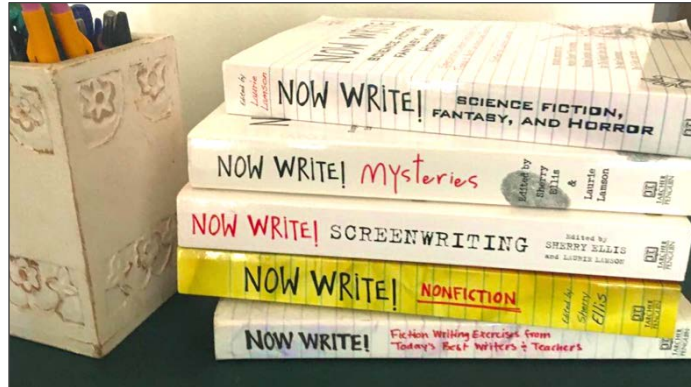
1. Pick a specific moment within your story. Before writing, try to imagine the setting for the scene. It could be a cave in Cornwall, a castle in Northumbria, a forest in Brittany, or an office tower on Wall Street in New York City, anything you desire. Write a description of the landscape (or place) without editing. Be sure to have your character look in all directions and try to describe what they actually see through their eyes.

Reread it. Did you include all five senses? If not, then revise by adding sensory inputs. How does it smell? What is the temperature? Is there any background noise?
2. Did you describe the world through the character's eyes, from his or her perspective? Get inside the character's body. What would the character notice at this particular moment within the story, and why? Have your character show what he is feeling by how he interacts with the environment in the scene in the moment.
3. Did you include some real-world details to ground your reader? For instance, you could describe a thatched hut with a sleeping roll stuffed with goose feathers, a glass jar of fermented ginger, and a box filled with amulets in the shape of serpent eggs. If the reader can relate to objects from his or her real world, then you can include a fantastical element like the serpent eggs.
4. Did you follow the law of action and reaction?
5. Reread it one more time and revise again. Remember to slow down and stay in the present moment with your character.



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- Laurie Lamson, *Now Write!* Editor



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