The Writer as an Artist

Developing a grammar of style begins with learning to “see, literally and metaphorically. When an author lacks a visual eye, his or her writing has no heart and soul: images lie lifeless like cadavers in a morgue. For example, compare the following two images, the first written by a high school student, the second by well-known novelist Brian Jacques (1988):

- It was winter. Everything was frozen and white with snow. Snow had fallen from the sky for days. The weather was horrible.
- Mossflower lay deep in the grip of midwinter beneath a sky of leaden gray that showed tinges of scarlet and orange on the horizon. A cold mantle of snow draped the landscape, covering the flatlands to the west. Snow was everywhere, filling the ditches, drifting high against the hedgerows, making paths invisible, smoothing the contours of earth in its white embrace.


The Five Brush Strokes

Brushstroke #1: Participles

A participle is an *ing* verb place at the beginning or end of a sentence.
- **Without Participles**: The diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey.
- **With Participles**: Hissing, slithering, and coiling, the diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey.
- **With Participle phrases**: Hissing its forked red tongue and coiling it cold body, the snake attacked its prey.

Example of using participial phrases to create tension and action:
Ernest Hemingway uses participial phrases to create tension and action in this excerpt from *Old Man and the Sea*:
- **Shifting the weight of the line to his left shoulder and kneeling carefully**, he washed his hand in the ocean and held it there, submerged, for more than a minute, **watching the blood trail away and the steady movement of the water against his hand as the boat moved.** (56-57)

Here is another example of participles, from Robert Ludlum’s *The Bourne Identity*:
- The man got out of the chair with difficulty, **pushing himself up with his arms, holding his breath as he rose.** (23)

Find the participles in the flowing sentences:
1. Flying through the air on the wings of a dream, the Olympic long jumper thrust the weight of his whole body forward.
2. Melody froze, dripping with sweat, hoping with all her might that they wouldn’t hear the noise.
**Brushstroke #2 Appositives**

An appositive is a noun or noun phrase that adds a second image to a preceding noun. It expands details in the imagination.

**Without appositives:** The raccoon enjoys eating turtle eggs.

**With appositives:** The raccoon, a scavenger, enjoys eating turtle eggs.

**With appositive phrases:** The raccoon, a midnight scavenger who roams lake shorelines in search of food, enjoys turtle eggs.

Cornelius Ryan uses appositives in *The Longest Day: June 6, 1944.* expands an image with appositives and extends the picture further with specific examples:

- Plowing through the choppy gray waters, a phalanx of ships bore down on Hitler’s Europe: fast new attack transports, slow rust scarred freighters, small ocean liners, channel streamers, hospital ships, weather-beaten tankers, and swarms of fussing tugs. Barrage balloons flew above the ships. (243)

Find the appositives in the following sentences:
1. The volcano, a ravenous God of fire, spewed forth lava and ash across the mountain.
2. The old Navajo woman, a weak and withered lady, stared blankly.
3. The fish, a slimy mass of flesh, felt the alligator’s giant teeth sink into his scales.

*When working with fiction appositives expand the sensory details. In nonfiction appositives are usually used to add clarity. For example, “Michael Jordan, the famous basketball player.”

**Brushstroke #3 Adjectives out of Order**

Adjectives out of order, amplify the details of an image. Authors don’t overload their descriptions with too many adjectives. Shifting multiple adjectives into a different order can be effective.

- In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* Sir Arthur Conan Doyle uses this technique to shift three adjectives to the end of a sentence to describe a mysterious sound: “And then, suddenly, in the very dead of the night, there came a sound to my ears, clear, resonant, and unmistakable.” (72)
- Similarly, in The Alienest, Caleb Carr describes arriving at the Insane Pavilion at Bellevue in New York City: “The Pavilion was a simple city, long and rectangular”(27).

**Overloaded adjectives:** The large, red-eyed angry bull moose charged the intruder.

**Adjectives shifted out of order:** The large bull moose, red-eyed and angry, charged the intruder.
Find the following adjectives out of order:
1. The woman, old and wrinkled, smiled upon her newborn grandson with great pride.
2. The boxer, twisted and tormented, felt no compassion for his contender.
3. The cheetah, tired and hungry, stared at the gazelle, which would soon become his dinner.

**Brushstroke # 4 Painting with Absolutes**

An equally powerful brush stroke that also adds to the action of an image is the *absolute*. A absolute is a two-word combination- a noun and an *ing* or *ed* verb added to a sentence. Instead of writing “The cat climbed the tree,” you can add two absolutes to give it detail: “*Claws digging, feet kicking*,” the cat climbed up the tree.” Either way the cat gets up the tree, but in the second instance, he climbs with flair, and the dog chasing him is amazed.

**Without absolutes**: A mountain climber moves along a steep cliff.
**With absolutes**: The mountain climber edged along the cliff, *hands shaking, feet trembling*.”
Or in the reverse order: “*Hands shaking, feet trembling*,” the mountain climber edged along the cliff.”

**With absolute phrases**: “*Feet trembling on the snow-covered rocks*,” the mountain climber edged along the cliff.

Varying Sentence Beginnings allows the writing to flow more effectively. Provide variety in sentence beginnings by moving a phrase or clause to the beginning of the sentence instead of always beginning the sentence with the subject.

Sentence that begins with a subject: The cat climbed the tree with great caution.
Beginning with a prepositional phrase: With great caution, the cat climbed the tree.
Sentence that begins with the subject: Joey at the sandwich even though it looked disgusting.
Beginning with a Subordinate (dependent clause): Even though it looked disgusting, Joey ate the sandwich.
Using precise language helps make writing more specific by using specific action verbs precise nouns, and precise adjectives. By eliminating passive voice and reducing being verbs, writers can energize action verbs. Verbs of passive voice communicate no action. The image is like a still photograph with the subject of the action frozen with the prepositions by or with. Typically, passive voice verbs require the help of a being verb. Action verbs replace still photos with motion pictures.

Being Verb: The gravel road was on the right side of the barn.
Precise Action Verb: The gravel road curled around the right side of the barn.

Vague words: I always have trouble with this computer.
Precise Words: I can never get this computer to save or print.

Examples of passive voice:
• The runaway horse was ridden into town by an old, white-whiskered rancher.
• The grocery store was robbed by two armed men.

The following is the first draft and final draft of Shawn Jividens children’s book Goose Moon. In the first draft, she frequently used being verbs. In here revisions she replaced these with action verbs, mobilizing the action of the children and the geese. Visualize the difference in the motion picture of your imagination as you compare these two drafts:

First Draft
Rockwell was a beautiful lake. Canada geese could be heard across the water bugling like tuneless trumpets. Near the shore, two children were hidden behind a massive maple tree. Watching quietly, they hoped to see the first gosling begin to hatch. Tiny giggles escaped their whispers of excitement.

Final Draft
Rockwell Lake echoed with the sounds of Canada geese. Their honking bugles across the water like tuneless trumpets. Two children hid behind a massive maple tree. They silently watched, hoping to see the first gosling hatch. Tiny giggles escaped their whispers of excitement.