

The Power of the Significant Detail

by Robin Wells

A Significant Detail:

1. Reveals character
2. Builds tension
3. Adds color and depth to the story
4. Foreshadows the future
5. Sheds light on the past
6. Illustrates the theme of the book (symbolism)
7. Supplies insight and information
8. Elicits an emotional response

A detail is particularly significant if it means something to the character, has more than one meaning or illustrates theme.

A detail can be:

- A thing—something your character sees, uses, smells, tastes hears or touches
- A person—usually a minor or unnamed character.
- An action—the way someone swaggers, scowls, etc.
- A place – home, a church, a town.

Significant details can be conveyed through:

- Strong verbs

- Precise nouns
- Adjectives
- Adverbs (use carefully)
- Metaphors
- Synesthesia (using one sense to describe another)
- Nature
- Lighting

Five ways for your character to experience emotion:

- Sensual reaction inside the body. Example: stomach clenching, mouth goes dry
- Sensual reaction outside the body, perceivable to others. Example: blushing, twitching
- Flash of memory. Example: character remembers an incident from childhood
- Flash to the future. Example: character envisions hitting his antagonist
- Sensual selectivity. Example: angry character notices bloody meat on tray of passing waitress.

To highlight a detail, give us a written close up.

To incorporate significant details as you write, ask yourself:

- How can I appeal to the senses?
- What can I use as a launchpad for backstory?
- How can I best illustrate my character's current emotions and mindset?
- What might my character notice during a conversation?

- What details can recur throughout my story to symbolize something or illustrate a theme?
- What details can convey emotion or information without stating the obvious? (a shredded tissue, type of car, etc.)

Whenever possible, use specifics instead of generalities.