

Emotion in writing

Take your manuscript from competent to compelling

If an otherwise well-written story lacks emotion, readers will struggle to bond with that story. Often when emotion is lacking in a story, it's not because of the writer's inability; instead, it's because of their unwillingness—even fear—to write emotion.

But it is crucial to get over that obstacle, because as Maya Angelou famously said:

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Readers will fall in love with our stories, remember our world and the characters, and spread word about our books, only if our stories make them *feel*. And feeling something requires emotion.

So let's dive in and find out more about emotion in writing.

Today's talk will cover three points:

1. Why do writers struggle with writing emotions?
2. How to grow comfortable portraying emotion on the page
3. Techniques for writing emotion

Why do writers struggle with writing emotions?

“I think, therefore I am.”

~ René Descartes

This famous quote by 16th century French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician René Descartes has caused centuries of misunderstanding about how the human brain functions.

For years, people went on using this quote out of context—basically misusing it—attributing “thinking” as the main purpose of the human brain. People went on believing that thinking and feeling were separate neural processes, even mutually exclusive, and that “feeling” was some nebulous process that only interfered with good quality thinking.

Such opinions pitting “thinking” and “feeling” kept propagating until the late 20th century, when this concept was challenged by a celebrated Portuguese-American neurologist Antonio Damasio.

Dr. Damasio is a pioneering researcher in the field of neurobiology of emotion. His 1994 book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* challenged traditional ideas about the connection between emotions and rationality. This book goes on to show how emotions are not only NOT separate from thinking, but are a crucial part of moment-to-moment decision-making circuits of the human brain as we navigate the world.

One of the sentences from that book stuck with me and completely changed my approach to writing.

He said:

“We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think.”

There is a reason why this quote impressed and helped me so much. And I believe it will also help other writers who might be struggling to put emotion on paper—the way I once did.

To explain that, let me tell you a bit about myself.

When emotions are the enemy

I am a former neurosurgeon. During my career, I have performed over 600 surgeries on the human brain and spine. Many of these surgeries are done under an operating microscope, where we deal with structures finer than human hair, where a moment's inattention can cause disaster.

To train to get to that level, we had to go through a rigorous (and often toxic) environment where there was no place for mistakes—we had to be ruthless, especially with ourselves. The general idea was to be efficiency machines, purely rational at all times, uncorrupted by emotions in the slightest. Emotions made one weak; emotions were the enemy.

Add to this my family background, where being stoic was celebrated, and displaying emotion was considered pathetic and made one a loser.

This entire background created an unhealthy brew where I learned to suppress emotions and to function only using cold, hard logic and reason. I can't tell you how many bad decisions I made during that phase in life because I had shut the door to the guidance that emotions provided.

Later, once I took up full-time writing, those years of emotionless existence came to haunt me. Yes, it sounds strange to say this today, but I struggled to write emotions in my early days as a writer.

Thankfully, I did manage to figure out how to access and understand emotions. And since then I've gone on to publish three books, and am currently working on a couple of series of epic fantasy and humorous fantasy.

Meanwhile, I'm continuing to explore the role of emotions in the creative process—in writing, editing, branding, and marketing.

Revenge of the emotions!

In my early days as a writer, I received some feedback that seemed brutal at that time, but ultimately helped me see what was missing in my writing.

There were comments like:

- Your prose is beautiful, but I couldn't connect to the characters.
- I love your concept, but it's not really making me feel anything.
- I really wanted to like this, but I didn't feel compelled to keep reading.

When I analyzed all the comments and looked for a common factor, I found an overwhelming theme emerge: despite so many things going for my story, I was not making my readers *feel*.

But how could I make someone feel when I was antagonistic towards the very existence of emotions?

After setting aside my manuscript, I returned to it after a few weeks and decided to do something about the situation. A part of my brain rebelled. It said, "I don't want people to feel. I want them to think. Who cares about some stupid emotions—they're useless anyway."

But I knew I was fighting a losing battle. If readers didn't feel connected to my story, it was not a failure on their part; it was *my* failure. As a writer, it was *my* job to help them connect with the story.

There were two reasons why was my writing like this.

Long-term conditioning

I had been conditioned to believe that emotions made one weak. But now I was in a situation where I needed emotions as my allies.

This conflict caused cognitive dissonance, which blinded me from the solution. And over years I've seen many other writers struggling with the same problem.

Finally, I saw a glimmer of light when I read Dr. Damasio's book on the neurobiology of emotions. And then all the pieces of the puzzle started falling in place.

So before we proceed further, it might be worthwhile to read his quote again.

“We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think.”

Lack of knowledge and experience

Of course, even after I realized I needed to infuse my writing with emotion, I still didn't really know *how* to do that. So my next quest became of two parts: 1) become comfortable portraying emotion, 2) learn how to portray emotion.

How to become comfortable portraying emotion on the page

Before we talk about how to portray emotion on the page, we must learn how to become comfortable portraying emotion on the page.

Some people are naturally good at this. If you are one of them, congratulations! For the rest, read on.

Explore own psyche

Get rid of labels

For dealing with any mental block, the answer lies within our own selves. By exploring our psyche, we can find the root of the problem and take care of it.

If you are someone like I was, whose self-image was built on a construed identity of being an unemotional, analytical person, then it's time to break out of that prison and dip your toes in the ocean of emotions. The confines of carefully built self-image give an illusion of comfort and safety, but they are nothing but prisons.

Unearth repressed emotions

Spend some time to dig out repressed lifelong emotions and look them squarely in the face. There are many ways to do this—some people write journals, some people see a

therapist, others talk to trusted friends, and yet others journey into their subconscious through mediation.

Whatever works for you, go for it. Maybe even check out something that you believe might not work for you. Who knows what doors it will open.

Develop emotional granularity

In a nutshell, granularity is the ability to differentiate shades and nuances of emotions instead of lumping everything under a generic label. Like, if someone asks us how was a movie, we might just say, “Nice!” But what does nice really mean for us in the context of that particular movie?

Discussing emotional granularity in detail is beyond the scope of this talk, but I urge you to look up the topic and spend some time exploring it. It will be worth it.

Once we’ve done that, it’s time to get to the craft of writing.

Techniques for writing emotion

General tips

1. Remember to include emotion
2. Beyond cliché emotions
3. From simple to complex emotions
4. Don’t just name emotions; show them
5. Embrace drama; discard melodrama

1. Remember to include emotion

In some stories with strong plots, even with every necessary turning point right in place, there’s still a mechanical feel through the scenes. The readers can **see** what’s happening, but they don’t quite **feel** it.

Adding emotion to such a story elevates it from a lukewarm “technically sound but not quite there yet” to a sizzling “oh my goodness, I love it!”

Often the writers who face this problem already know their craft. So it’s just the matter of becoming aware of the need to include emotion in the story—and to constantly remember it in every scene, on every page.

Perhaps even fix a flashcard above your computer with a reminder, “Does this page have emotion in it?”

2. Beyond cliché emotion

One of the reasons many writers fear writing emotion is from their trauma of having read books with poorly written emotions, where every expression of fear, anger, or love is generic and cliché.

The best way to break out of that fear is by reading books that have done emotions well and, more importantly, to start writing emotions in one’s own work.

The initial attempts might not yield great results. And that’s okay. As with everything else in life, producing excellent quality work takes practice. Hours and hours of practice.

Writing prompts and writing exercises are a great way to get this practice in a low-stakes setting. It can be a solitary activity, or one can get together with friends and follow the same prompts.

3. From simple to complex emotions

One reason why many emotions feel cliché is because only what is emotionally obvious and huge is shown on the page. In real life, however, there are many threads that weave together to form a major emotion.

For instance, a character might love looking out of his window at night, gazing at the stars and feeling the breeze on his face. But what underlies that love or enjoyment? It could be because he’s confined in a mundane life, and looking at the night sky is the only time he senses freedom. It might also stir his sense of adventure, making him dream of traveling to distant galaxies. It might underscore his loneliness or his feeling out of place in his current situation.

Something as simple as a character enjoying the night sky can tell us so much about him, making him more relatable, stirring the same emotions within the readers. And all that happens when the writer is patient enough to explore beyond the simple emotion of enjoyment.

Look beyond using only simple, big, first level emotions—and instead, find opportunities to use complex, nuanced, second or third level emotions. Donald Maass talks about writing third level emotions in one of his articles. Take a look: <https://writerunboxed.com/2015/06/02/third-level-emotions/>

4. Don't just name emotions; show them

This falls under the part of “show, don't tell”. Where appropriate, show emotions instead of just naming them.

Dr. Damasio's book explores the reasons why this is important. Of course, he doesn't say this in context of the craft of writing, but we can extrapolate his research in our field.

He talks about how the entire body is connected to the circuitry for emotion and decision, giving rise to what he calls the “somatic marker” for every emotion. Essentially, when a specific conglomeration of signals occurs together in the body, the brain recognizes it as a particular emotion. So the tensing of shoulders, clenching of jaw, and a pounding in one's head occurring together tells the brain that one is experiencing the emotion of anger.

Studies done in patients whose illness or injury disconnected their somatic marker circuitry from the emotion areas showed that those patients were unable to recognize the emotion they felt, and so were unable to decide how to act.

This is a reason why showing internal sensations and physical markers of an emotion is more effective than just naming an emotion. The latter will mean nothing to the reader, whereas the former method will literally induce the emotion in them, as shown by fMRI studies.

If you're unsure of the somatic markers associated with each emotion, there's a good book that gives this information, called *The Emotion Thesaurus: a writer's guide to character expression* by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi.

5. Embrace drama; discard melodrama

When people say “I hate drama” what they really mean is that they hate melodrama.

Drama is good for writers; it's a crucial ingredient. There's even an entire book—a classic for craft of writing—called *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri.

On the other hand, melodrama is bad. Melodrama occurs when an emotion is shown on the page without earning its place. In the section I'll describe the technique to **earn**

the emotion. However, that technique is for prose level. To earn the emotion at the story level, you can 1) use foreshadowing, 2) use subtext to generate an undercurrent of emotion, and 3) use symbolism to weave emotion within the theme.

Earn the emotion

In the previous section we looked at the necessity to earn the emotion on page so that the scene feels dramatic instead of melodramatic.

One way to do it is by using what author Dwight Swain described as a “motivation-reaction unit” (which we’ll call an MRU for the purpose of this discussion) in his excellent book *Techniques of the Selling Writer*.

MRUs are units of action-and-reaction sequence that go on to build a scene. They are the building blocks of scenes.

A motivating stimulus is what the character perceives through any and all of the senses. Her response to that stimulus is what comprises the reactions, which occur in a specific order because of the sequence in which the brain processes the information.

Swain describes the reaction part of an MRU occurring in the following order:

Feeling
Action
Speech

I urge you to read that book, where he describes this (and other techniques) in great detail. Meanwhile, we can harness this MRU to generate emotion from sentence to sentence within a scene.

A motivating stimulus acts as a trigger for an emotional response.

This response is the reaction that Swain talks about: not just the feeling one feels after perceiving the stimulus, but also one’s thoughts, actions, and speech following it.

Like Swain said, the sequence has to be right for the most part, or we risk confusing the reader or pulling them out of the story. The sequence can be shuffled for stylistic purposes, but it has to be done deliberately and very, very judiciously.

Messing up an MRU can jumble the thread of emotion

If you find that your intended emotion is not clear on the page, isolate various MRUs within a scene and look for potential problems such as:

- Lack of motivation

- Lack of reaction
- Muddled sequence of reactions

Using MRU for emotions

Please note that not every MRU needs to contain every component. In fact, doing so can feel repetitive and monotonous. Choosing to omit or expand specific components of an MRU can help you change the pace and keep a scene fresh.

The following is what emotion within a complete MRU with all its components will look like:

Someone bangs on the door at 3 a.m. (A motivating stimulus occurs, which is a trigger for emotion)

- Character jerks awake. Heart beating fast. Nausea. (Feeling: internal sensations. This is a somatic marker that's sending signals to his emotion circuits of the brain.)
- His fists clench and unclench. He's breathing rapidly. Pupils are dilated. (Feeling: involuntary reaction. This is also part of somatic markers.)

The somatic markers generated thus far hurtle towards the emotion circuits of the brain and flip the relevant switches, screaming simultaneously to the character and the reader that the emotion they're experiencing is fear. Then the reader waits to see how the character is going to respond to this fear, and the character gets into action.

- He jumps out of his bed and lunges towards his side table, pulling one drawer after another, hunting for a weapon. (Action: Voluntary action to deal with what's happening.)

Not finding the gun in its place would be an additional motivating stimulus that will emphasize the fear he's already feeling, giving rise to more somatic markers along the way.

- "Who's there?" he says, struggling to keep the tremor out of his voice. (Speech)

His action and speech will change his situation in some way. This is the new motivating stimulus.

To write emotions naturally and uniquely, mine for emotions within self

Keep a diary
Write a journal
Practice meditation

Check out books on memoir writing
Dissect the books that make you feel
Observe people

Whose emotion is it?

- Emotion of the POV character
- Observing and inferring the emotion of the non-POV character
- The POV character's personality and profession (plus hobbies, aptitude, and background) will determine how much and how accurately they observe others' emotions
- Emotion between the lines
- Emotion between the author and the reader

How much emotion? What kind of emotion?

Depends on the genre
Depends on pacing within a scene

Do fast-paced scenes need emotion? Yes, the well-written ones do, as seen in the next example.

The following is the opening paragraph of the bestselling thriller *The Bourne Identity*, by Robert Ludlum. It depicts emotion in an action scene with omniscient POV, supposedly the hardest situation in which to write emotion.

1

The trawler plunged into the angry swells of the dark, furious sea like an awkward animal trying desperately to break out of an impenetrable swamp. The waves rose to goliathan heights, crashing into the hull with the power of raw tonnage; the white sprays caught in the night sky cascaded downward over the deck under the force of the night wind. Everywhere there were the sounds of inanimate pain, wood straining against wood, ropes twisting, stretched to the breaking point. The animal was dying.

In the above example, I've underlined the imagery associated with the sea in black, whereas the trawler and its description are in tan. Ludlum has created a vivid opening by personifying the sea and the vessel and pitting them against each other. If you notice the language he has used for both the adversaries, it gives a sense of how he has created emotion on the page.

Some of the tricks he has used are:

- Personification
- Simile and metaphor, with extended metaphor
- Active verbs infused with subtext

I like to keep this example in front of me to inspire me to and create emotions for my own stories.

I'd like to close by reminding everyone of this quote by Maya Angelou:

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

So let's go ahead and make our readers feel.

Resources:

- Descartes' error: emotion, reason and the human brain (Antonio Damasio)
- Techniques of the selling writer (Dwight Swain)
- The emotion thesaurus: a writer's guide to character expression (Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi)

Memoir writing books:

- Writing life stories: how to make memories into memoirs, ideas into essays and life into literature (Bill Roorbach)
- Old friend from far away: the practice of writing memoir (Natalie Goldberg)
- The art of memoir (Mary Karr)

Link to Donald Maass article on third level emotions: <https://writerunboxed.com/2015/06/02/third-level-emotions/>
