

# The art of visualization

How to make your characters and settings come alive.



**Y**ou know those wonderful stories with a complicated protagonist who goes through a profound internal struggle? Where you can see her in your mind's eye and experience exactly what she's feeling? You temporarily forget you're just reading – that you're not actually the character herself. Every writer wants their characters to feel so real you can not only reach out and touch them but actually walk around in their skin. But how do you make it happen?

Here are two methods that will help you zap readers right into the heads of your characters.

I like to practice what I call “writing blindfolded” (well, I actually just close my eyes). Before you bruise a rib from raucous laughter, just give it a try. Let's write about someone going through an embarrassing experience; think of a time when *you* suffered an embarrassment.

Now, close your eyes.

Transport yourself to a time when something outrageously humiliating happened to you. Imagine yourself in that very moment. What do you hear? See? Smell? And most importantly, what do you feel?

What is your body language? Are your shoulders slumped in surrender? Is your head hanging low, looking down at your feet? Are your cheeks hot to the touch and turning a bright apple-red? Are you trying to make yourself invisible? Are there people around you who saw what happened? Are they laughing or defending you? Are there any smells surrounding you? (Does the scent of freshly baked school cafeteria yeast rolls still make you want to run and hide?)

OK. Now I'll close *my* eyes.

I am again twentysomething, hustling into work, my nose running from the cold wind. I speed-walk through the parking lot and count my steps – *one, two, three...* I wear

**“I find that visualization comes best from immersion,” says Jodi Picoult.**

my calf-length woolen dress coat over my office attire, stockings and high heels included. *Seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two...* At last, I come to the periphery of the parking lot, enclosed by a foot-high metal cord. Two things happen that make me want to melt into the concrete. First, I notice my half-slip with the loose elastic waistband has just fallen and puddled around my ankles. *Oh crap!* I scan the parking lot – did anyone see my pitiful wardrobe malfunction? Once sure I’m alone with my embarrassment, I grab my slip and hike it back up to where it belongs. Next, as cars whiz by on the street beside me, I lob my leg over the enclosure cord and unfortunately catch the heel of my pump in my coat’s hem, then tumble to the ground. The humiliation rises up my neck and blossoms across my cheeks. The only thing I know to do is pop back up as if nothing has happened. *Denial is a magical thing!* I brush off tiny pieces of gravel clinging to my coat, then run across the street. *Eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two.*

Now think about a scene you’re writing for your current work-in-progress. Close your eyes and zoom in on your character. Imagine yourself in her skin, down to every last detail, and put these elements down on the page.

If you have the time and means, another wonderful method to intimately visualize your characters, their environment, and how they would react in any given circumstance is to totally immerse yourself in their world. Like learning a new language,

having to *live it* makes you absorb it from the inside out.

Jodi Picoult, *New York Times* best-selling author of 22 novels, is a master at taking readers into the intimate lives of her characters. She uses a very physical method to capture their thoughts, feelings, and how they react to the circumstances she creates for them.

“I find that visualization comes best from immersion. I do extensive research to learn what my character does, where she comes from, who she associates with, what her history may have been. Walking through those experiences personally, and meeting with those who actually live the life I am planning to have my character live, allows me to pick and choose moments and images, and weave them together

into a fictional character’s life,” she says.

As an example, for her 2012 novel *Lone Wolf*, Picoult visited Shaun Ellis, author of the memoir *The Man Who Lives with Wolves*, to learn about his work at The Wolf Centre and Foundation. He even taught her how to howl and get a response from wolf packs in return. Now that’s immersion!

Whatever method you use, just remember that to have fully fleshed-out characters in your fiction, you’ve got to include all the details: their appearance, environment, sensory perceptions, and inner thoughts and beliefs. So whether you close your eyes or physically immerse yourself in their place in the world, make sure you capture those intimate particulars that make all of us real. **W**

K.L. Romo writes about life on the fringe: Teetering dangerously on the edge is more interesting than standing safely in the middle. She is passionate about women’s issues, loves noisy clocks and fuzzy blankets, but HATES the word *normal*. Her historical novel, *Life Before*, is about two women separated by a century who discover they’ve shared a soul. Web: [KLRomo.com](http://KLRomo.com) or @klromo.

“Revision is the spiritual practice of transformation—of seeing text, and therefore the world, with new eyes. Done well, revision returns us to our original love.”

Award-winning author and teacher Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew guides writers through the writing and revision process. Andrew asks writers to flex their spiritual muscles, helping them to transform their writing as they in turn transform into more curious and reflective human beings.

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