

I was asked this week about description. How much is too much?

And like a lot of questions that deal with writing, the answer is this:

It depends.

It depends on your script. It depends on the genre you're writing in. It depends on your characters. It depends on your writing style.

If you were writing a story that's deeply technical in nature, then you should probably be a little more descriptive than usual. BUT, you don't want to be SO descriptive that you lose the reader due to excessive technical jargon.

Have faith that your readers know what you're talking about. Have SOME faith that they've seen some kind of movie that has provided them with enough visual knowledge to understand concepts.

For example, in the script I'm re-writing now, there are a couple of scenes that have family videos. Because the script takes place WAY in the future, instead of screens, I have the videos playing in holograms.

Now, I don't need to explain to you what a hologram is. There's been TONS of holograms in TONS of different movies. From the hologram of Obi Wan Kenobi to Total Recall to G. I. Joe.

So if you're describing the inner workings of a hologram instead of just saying hologram...you're saying too much.

Now, what about rooms, houses, clothing choices and so forth? What's too much description?

There are easy ways to take care of this. First of all you have to be specific in your scene heading. I tend to see a lot of THIS:

INT. ROOM - DAY

Yeah, that doesn't do me ANY good. Ya gotta give me a shit ton more than that. So let's deal with your character. Let's say you're writing about a teenage girl (as we ALL do) and you want to introduce her in her room. For purposes of this example, let's call her ERIKA SMITH.

Let's also assume that Erika will be seen, at some point, in various other rooms of the house.

Here's what it will look like...

INT. SMITH'S HOUSE - ERIKA'S BEDROOM - DAY

With that, we know it's the family's house and she's in her room and it's day. Yes, I realize that it should be self explanatory and I'm simply repeating what I just wrote, but fuck...some of you guys need this.

So here's another thing I see that makes your descriptions too descriptive: repetition.

You guys repeat yourselves a LOT. Here's what I mean.

INT. SMITH'S HOUSE - ERIKA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Erika lays asleep in her bedroom.

That's repetitive. You've already stated it's a bedroom and that it belongs to Erika so why are you telling us again?

Don't do that. Just jump into it.

Now, let's assume that by jumping into it, you're going to describe the room.

Okay...let's go. Describe it.

Here's what I usually see:

INT. SMITH'S HOUSE - ERIKA'S BEDROOM - DAY

The walls are covered with Justin Bieber posters and Hello Kitty. In between, it looks as if pink was thrown up everywhere. A computer sits in the corner on a glass desk. The bookshelves beside the desk are filled with Stephen King novels and framed memories from high school. One shelf is dedicated to trophies and blue ribbons.

In the center of the room is a plush four poster bed. In the middle, asleep, lays Erika.

Yes. I will admit that there are certain things in that description that help create character. We know she reads, we know she's good at sports and we can assume she's probably a good student. We also know she has poor choice in music and Japanese inspired cats.

But so what?

Does ANY of this matter to your story?

If it does...if her love for pink or Stephen King or Hello Kitty or using a computer...is going to serve an event later in your script. Fine. Keep it in. Otherwise, this is what it should be stripped down to.

INT. SMITH'S HOUSE - ERIKA'S BEDROOM - DAY

A typical teen girl's room that has been dosed in pink, with smatterings of trophies and awards.

Erika lays in bed fast asleep.

So why did I cut all that shit out?

1) it's faster to read and...

2) people get paid a lot of money to create a "look" of a movie. One of which is the set designer. And if you say, in a script, that you need to have a Justin Bieber poster, then they will go out and get a Justin Bieber poster and now you've done their job for them.

Maybe, in their mind, they saw Erika more as a GaGa kinda girl. Too bad, they can't bring that to the character because you've already told them what to do.

Leave that shit to the people who get paid to do it. Your job is to think it up and write it down. That's it.

So why are you doing other people's jobs?

Keep it simple and at the end of the day, it's FASTER TO READ!!!

Even though I said it above, I'll say it again. Do this unless IT MATTERS! If it matters, keep it in.

Be descriptive.

IF IT MATTERS.

If you've thought up some wicked new weapon and you're trying to explain what it does...describe it.

When The Wachowski's wrote The Matrix, they explained, on the page the feeling of Bullet Time.

They had to because no one had ever done that before.

And now, because of them, WE (me and you) can now simply write "Goes into Bullet Time" and people get it.

See what I mean?

Figure out the descriptive words that will sell your image to the reader without describing it.

Here are some examples. I want you to think about the image that conjures in your mind when you read them:

School girl.

Catholic school girl.

Crack den.

Aged leather.

Accountant type.

Run down senior citizen's home.

A typical suburb.

A typical New Jersey Suburb.

A typical Los Angeles Suburb.

The ghetto.

A Detroit Ghetto.

The ghetto district in Calcutta.

Well? Did images come up in your head?

Did you come up with one school girl and then changed her outfit when you thought of a Catholic school girl?

Did your mind put the typical L.A. Suburb in sunlight and the Detroit Ghetto in kind of a shitty, dreary state?

When you read accountant type, did you picture someone dressed in a modest suit with a boring striped tie? Maybe you through some glasses on the person too?

Get what I'm saying? So we don't need to describe every little detail, right?

Cool. Glad you guys heard me.

So, one last time...

Only put in what NEEDS to be put in for your story. Leave everything else to the people whose job it is to do that shit.

Now go do that.

Till next week...