

THERE OUGHT TO BE A WORD

Do a brief reminder exercise with your students on the white board, asking them to name the five senses. List them, as they call them out:

Sight
Smell
Taste
Touch
Hearing

Talk to them about the importance of exact sensory images in writing, and how important they are.

Ask them to list one to three favorite places in the Skagit Valley area, and be as exact about it as they can. For example, the “Skagit River” itself is too vague. Where on the Skagit? “The beach” is too vague: which beach?

(Alternative: brainstorm on the white board some places, so students who need a cognitive push in the right direction can get one.)

Ask them to choose one of these places (a moot point if they only wrote one).

Little Mountain Overlook
Padilla Bay Trail
Edgewater Park
Skagit River, Fir Island Bridge

Now ask them to imagine themselves there, and to write down, say, three things from each sense, excluding taste (tell them these don't have to be things they *know* they remember; only things they might have experienced or might some day experience there):

example:

SKAGIT RIVER, FIR ISLAND BRIDGE

sight: two eagles on an alder snag; a coyote, sitting on the bank; tree root sticking out of the water.

sound: line running out of a fisherman's reel; splash of a kayaker's paddle; tractor's engine, in a field off in the distance.

touch: bite of a mosquito; wind in the hair; cold stone in the hand

smell: river mud; rotting fish; exhaust

Now, talk about words, and how they stand so often for things and experiences, but don't have the power, always, to completely encompass the personal. The Inuit have a tremendous number of words to describe varieties of snow, for example, but no word to describe how it feels to be experiencing a particular sort of snow in a particular place.

Have them write down, as the title of their poem, the place they have in mind. Then have them write, as the first two lines:

“There ought to be a single word to describe how it feels to be here,
but it would have to contain:

Then have them choose from their sensory observations things they might include in a word that could have that description, e.g.:

the stillness of an eagle perched on a low alder
limb; the mystery of a twisted tree root, current rippling
around it; the slow sting of a mosquito on a bare forearm.

It would have to contain the sound of a tractor’s
patient engine from a nearby field, the quick scream
of line racing from a fisherman’s reel, the line
disappearing beneath a surface the color of jade,
or the eyes of certain cats. It would need to be
cool and heavy as a flat wet stone in the palm,
then thrown at the empty page of the water,
skipping its way to the end of a brief, rich sentence.

Clearly you can adapt this. What we’re after with the assignment is to demonstrate the use of exact imagery, and how, by wishing for a word that doesn’t exist, you can still familiarize the reader with what you wish the word could do.

As a variation, you could, if you wished, ask them to concentrate on a single attribute of something. Here, for example, is a poem written about the color of something. You could hand the poem out, and ask them to think of one aspect of their place that they wish they could describe: a color, a sound, a smell, and so on. Think about some titles:

Skunk Cabbage, Reservation Road

There ought to be a single word to describe
the color [smell, touch, etc.] . . .

Hand out the sample poem, and see where it takes you.

TULIP FIELD, MCLEAN ROAD

If there were a single word
for the color of these tulips,
it would have to contain
the bright swirl of my mother's favorite
skirt. She square-danced in it for years, until
some inner joy faded faster than the fabric.
It would need to have the scarlet
of a single maple leaf
caught in a spider's web between
two trees in the orchard
my wife & I planted
together. And the splendor of an apple
polished on the wool of a Pendleton
shirt my grandfather left
a little wear in when he died.

I say *red* & want to hold it
with my tongue longer than teeth
& gums will let me—
skirt & leaf, shirt & apple—
& no lexicon to help me.