3. Make up a good title for a best-selling novel.

4. Listen carefully to the language other people are using. The next time you read something by a favorite author, find three words whose sound you like.

5. Find three words that impress you from someone in your field who writes unusually well, and look for opportunities to use those words in your own writing. As you put these words into play, be sure they not only say exactly what you want to say but also sound good to you.

WEEK 2

WRITE WITH DETAIL

To keep your reader's attention, move beyond generality and abstraction. Write with detail. Or as Joseph Conrad famously said, "Don't tell the reader; show the reader."

Which of the four sentences below makes you want to keep reading?

1. The reporter ducked down in the back seat.
2. The reporter ducked down in the back seat to avoid being shot.
3. The reporter ducked down in the back seat to avoid being shot by a hooded motorcyclist.
4. The reporter ducked down in the back seat to avoid being shot by a hooded motorcyclist toting an AK-47.

Note how the increasing level of detail makes each successive sentence more interesting.

Consider this statement: "Obesity is a threat to public health."

Unsubstantiated, the assertion carries no weight. (Pardon my pun. It was unintentional.) Note how supporting the statement with detail makes it weightier: "Studies of obese children have indicated a correlation between obesity and a number of maladies—hypertension, alteration of lipoprotein levels, and increased prevalence of certain respiratory, skin, and orthopedic conditions—as well as problems with psychological adjustment in childhood, and later stigmatization and loss of self-esteem in adolescence."

So the next time you write, "Susan works hard," "Our customers aren't very happy," or "My boss really liked my report," don't stop there. Give your readers something they can sink their teeth into.

Tell them Susan worked until eight every night last week to prepare for a presentation for a prospective client. Tell them customer complaints have risen from 230 last quarter to 385 this quarter, an increase of 67 percent. And tell them in last Tuesday's staff meeting George held up your report on quality control, taped each of its five pages to the whiteboard, uncapped a yellow felt-tip marker, and drew a big star on each page.

You can win or lose an argument based on detail. You can move your reader to tears with the right detail, or you can bore your reader to death with vague generalities.

In expository writing, rather than "I'm concerned about a softening market," write, "I'm concerned about the 15 percent decline in sales of our high-resolution computer screens."

In persuasive writing, rather than "The Defendant was driving at an excessive speed," write, "The Defendant was driving eighty-five miles an hour in a residential neighborhood." And don't forget to mention little Jimmy Connors and Shane Williams, ages nine and ten, who were riding their Schwinn bikes down the sidewalk.

In descriptive writing, rather than "The doves ate everything that had been planted," write, "[The doves] ate the sprouts of new flowers and the buds of apples and the tough leaves of oak trees and even last year's chaff," as Louise Erdrich did in *The Plague of Doves.*

In narrative writing, rather than "When my friend and I were little we were given two swords and we headed for our neighbor's flowers," write, "When [Buddy Doberman] and I were four his grandfather gave us a pair of wooden pirate swords that he had made in his workshop and we went with them more or less straight to Mrs. Van Pelt's prized flower border, which ran for about thirty yards along the alley," as Bill Bryson did in *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid.*

A friend of mine who is a novelist and short story writer revises her writing by looking for missed opportunities. She works through her drafts several times, each time adding subtlety to her plot, complexity to her characters, and detail to her descriptions. She calls this process "layering."

Layering. I like both the concept and the word.

But don't overdo it. Adding too much detail will slow down your narrative and weigh down your description beyond the modern reader's patience.

In his evocation of "the happy bounty" of America's prosperity, Bryson may be pushing the boundary of too much detail when he describes the items in a photograph that ran in *Life* magazine in 1951.

> [The photograph] shows the Czekalinski family of Cleveland, Ohio—Steve, Stephanie, and two sons, Stephen and Henry—surrounded by the two and a half tons of food that a typical blue-collar family ate in a year. Among the items they were shown with were 450 pounds of flour, 72 pounds of shortening, 56 pounds of butter, 31 chickens, 300 pounds of beef, 25 pounds of carp, 144 pounds of ham, 39 pounds of coffee, 690 pounds of potatoes, 698 quarts of milk, 131 dozen eggs, 180 loaves of bread, and 8½ gallons of ice cream, all purchased on a budget of $25 a week. (Mr. Czekalinski made $1.96 an hour as a shipping clerk in a DuPont factory.) In 1951, the average American ate 50 percent more than the average European.

What do you think? Too much detail or the right amount to make the point?

For memorable writing, provide detail—not too much and not too little.

EXERCISES

1. Rewrite the following banal passage into text that might be used in a promotional brochure.

> Our company is twenty years old. We started as a small company, but now we are a large one. Over the years, we have worked hard to provide quality service to our clients.

Use a notecard to cover the next two paragraphs; try your hand at rewriting these three sentences before you look at my suggestion for a rewrite.

Here's one way the passage could be enlivened with detail.

> On August 1, Quality Video Products celebrated its twentieth anniversary. We've come a long way since those early days when we had only eight full-time people, two cameras, and a cramped production studio located in the basement of a furniture warehouse.

> Today, we rank among the largest video production firms in the country, and we have built a reputation as a truly world-class company. In this special anniversary brochure, we highlight some of QVP's achievements and discuss how we have made a difference in the lives of our clients, our employees, and our competitors.

It may not be F. Scott Fitzgerald, but I think it's an improvement over the original.

2. Writing with detail involves more than adding specific information. It also involves using specific verbs rather than general ones. Using strong verbs relieves you of an overreliance on adjectives and adverbs. Compare "The sales representative talked incoherently" with "The sales representative babbled," or compare "My boss spoke continuously for forty-five minutes" with "My boss droned on for forty-five minutes." Modifiers such as *incoherently* and *continuously* have their place, but to paraphrase Strunk and White, the adverb hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate verb out of a tight place. (More on the power of verbs in Weeks 13, 14, and 15.)

How might you use a stronger verb to add detail to the following sentence? "News of our boss's departure affected all of us."

(Card, please.)

Here's one possibility: "News of our boss's departure saddened all of us."

Here's a better version: "When our boss announced he was leaving, we stomped our feet, pounded the table with our fists, and raised our voices in a chorus of unbridled joy and celebration."

Depending on your feelings for your boss, you may find one version more appealing than the other.

3. On a tastier note, imagine you're writing a story on how the rapid growth in new breweries in Minnesota has spurred "new suds-friendly state laws." You've written a good lead (or *lede*, as they spell it in the industry), and you're working on your second paragraph.

> New beer-friendly state laws have sparked a brewery boom in Minnesota that has catapulted the state into one of the nation's fastest-growing craft brew markets.
>
> The suds are flowing. Lagers, ales ...

What might you add to hold your readers' interest? Of course, the more you know about the craft-beer movement, the easier it is to come up with the right detail.

Here's how Jennifer Brooks wrote the second paragraph in an article that appeared in the June 30, 2013, *Star Tribune*.

> The suds are flowing. Lagers, ales, pilsners, stouts. Heady, hoppy, handcrafted beer, rolling out of one-man operations in basements, brewpubs, micro-breweries, and mega breweries around the state—many of which didn't exist just a few years ago.

Now that's one savory paragraph. I love the sound of "heady, hoppy, handcrafted beer" don't you? The alliteration rolls off the tongue. Makes me thirsty just reading it.

4. Select a paragraph at random from your writing. Underline your nouns and pronouns, and circle or italicize your verbs.

Then ask yourself if any of the objects, persons, or actions marked could be depicted more vividly. Add details that underscore the impression you're trying to achieve. Be specific. Name names. Use strong verbs.