

Writer's Idea Box: Can you smell that?

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And never forget that writing is as close as we get to keeping a hold on the thousand and one things. Childhood. Certainties. Cities. Doubts. Dreams. Instants. Phrases. Parents. Loves that go on Slipping. Like sand. Through our fingers.

—Salman Rushdie

Writing Warm-up

Set a timer for three minutes. Think of a significant female figure from your life story who influenced you strongly. Jot down as many memories as you can that include that person.

Read the Writing Sample

- [*Sensory Details and Memoirs, Lee Martin*](#)

Writing Exercise #1

Using the list of memories you created during the writing warm-up as a prompt, choose one of the strongest memories and recall a specific moment in time with this significant female. Try letting your smell sense-memory guide you into writing a piece of flash-memoir, the way Lee Martin does in the writing sample. You might begin with “I can smell...” For example, remembering my mother coming home from work, I might begin:

I smell double-mint chewing gum when she opens the car door. “I want some,” I say.

“Aw! I don’t have any more. Here. I’ll spit mine out,” she says, taking the gum out and placing it in a tissue she pulls from her handbag. It is five-thirty in the evening and she is coming home from work. She’s a stenographer and I love to watch her fingers fly across the keys of her typewriter. I aspire to type like her one day.

Writing Exercise #2

When you have taken exercise #1 as far as it will carry you for now, try doing the same sensory rich, smell-guided writing of another specific incident or event with the same significant female or with another significant female from your story. Of course, this kind of writing will also work with significant others of any gender. For example, I might begin to write about my grandfather beginning with:

The smell of the piney woods of East Texas is like no other, a rich, sweet-stinging bite infused with rotting needles and black soil that fills the air. I take my grandfather’s hand and the scent of his Old Spice Cologne mingles with the pine resin as we walk together into the semi-dark understory.

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Hints for more writing

The potential for continued writing in this way, letting strong or influential characters from your life emerge in your memory (and they will!) then focusing in on specific experiences, events, moments with the individual characters and letting your senses, especially smell guide you, can result in many pages of rich memoir.