The Rule of Specificity

Explanation:

The difference between an excellent narrative and one that isn’t is found in the specificity of language the writer chooses. The principle of specificity is what creates imagery and how voice is infused in a piece. In other words, this principle is what takes a piece from mediocre to memorable.

But specificity is more than finding a 25 cent replacement for a ten cent word and it is more involved than right clicking over a word and employing the thesaurus function in Word. Specificity is intentional writing and that means that words chosen are not only more focused but also true to the tone the writer wants to convey. For example, if the story you are writing has to do with clowns and you loathe them, than your word choice describing the clown’s smile will be different than for one who adores them. If they aren’t, than your piece becomes anonymous and generic. Fill out the small table below to practice. What might some words be to describe the clown’s smile? Well, that depends on what your attitude (tone) towards clowns is.

The clown smiled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item described</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The clown…..</td>
<td>beamed</td>
<td>smirked</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rule of specificity should be applied to every word; noun, adverb, verb, and adjective in your piece. Intentional writing takes time and takes work but the end result is a story that is yours alone and will
never be mistake for someone’ else’s. The complexity and intention involved in employing the Rule of Specificity well is one of the reasons Annie Lamott advises that you view your piece through one inch picture fame.

Task/Revision:

1. Identify the tone of your piece. How do you feel about the event you are recording?
2. Go back through your piece and circle words that are generic, uninteresting or misleading.
3. Write possible replacements above the circles.
4. Make sure that these replacements are specific to the tone of your piece and that they are more focused.
5. Repeat this process as you continue to draft.