

Building Emotional Depth in Writing



Pepper and Carrot – David Revoy, https://www.peppercarrot.com/en/webcomic/ep18_The-Encounter.html

Emotional depth is what makes readers care. It's the difference between watching characters from a distance and feeling as though you're standing right beside them.

When readers understand what a character feels, and *why*, they become invested. The character stops being words on a page and starts feeling like a real person: someone with fears, hopes, regrets, and moments of quiet joy. That connection is what keeps readers turning pages.

Importantly, emotional depth isn't about telling readers what a character feels. It's about helping the reader *feel it themselves*.

Show the Emotion Instead of Naming It

One of the simplest and most effective tools is to avoid naming the emotion outright. Instead of writing “*She was sad,*” show what sadness looks like.

Think about: what the body does, how the character moves (or doesn't), what they notice around them

A character who is grieving might move slowly, avoid eye contact, or leave a cup of tea untouched until it goes cold. These small details make the emotion feel real.

Example

He folded the letter twice, then a third time, though it already fitted the envelope. He sat there a moment longer, listening to the kettle boil dry.

Useful ways to show emotion include:

- **Physical responses:** fidgeting, clenched fists, shallow breathing, slumped shoulders
- **Thought patterns:** looping worries, self-reproach, wishful thinking
- **Actions:** slamming a door, withdrawing from conversation, avoiding a place or person

When readers recognise these signals, they do the emotional work themselves - and that makes the moment stronger.

Let Us Hear the Character's Thoughts

Internal thoughts give readers direct access to a character's emotional world. They don't need to be long or dramatic.

A single line of doubt, hope, or regret can say more than a paragraph of explanation.

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Example

She smiled and nodded. *Right*, she thought. *Of course you did*.

Used sparingly, inner thoughts help readers understand:

- what the character wants
- what they fear
- what they're avoiding

The key is restraint. Let thoughts appear where they matter most.

Give Characters an Emotional Past

People react to the present through the lens of the past. Characters are no different.

You don't need a full biography, but you do need a sense of what has shaped them. A past loss, betrayal, or long-held belief can explain reactions that might otherwise seem odd or exaggerated.

A character who overreacts to abandonment may have learned, long ago, that people leave. Once the reader understands that, the reaction feels earned.

Allow Characters to Be Vulnerable

Strong emotional moments often come from vulnerability: fear, uncertainty, tenderness, or shame.

Letting characters drop their guard, even briefly, helps readers trust them. Perfection is dull. Struggle is relatable.

This doesn't mean every moment has to be intense. Quiet vulnerability is often more powerful than dramatic confession.

Example

"It's fine," he said, a little too quickly, and changed the subject.

Use the Senses

Emotion lives in the body. Sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste can all carry feeling.

Instead of explaining an emotion, anchor it in sensation.

Example

The room still smelled faintly of sunscreen and dust. He hadn't realised how much he'd miss that, until it was gone.

Sensory details pull readers into the scene and make emotions immediate rather than abstract.

Let the Body Do the Talking

People often hide what they feel - but their bodies give them away.

Look for small, believable signals; a jaw tightening, a forced smile, a hand lingering too long

These details work best when they're understated. Trust the reader to notice.

Show Change Through Behaviour

Emotional shifts often show up as changes in habits or appearance.

A character who stops caring about their clothes, arrives late, or withdraws from routines may be struggling. Someone who suddenly takes more care might be falling in love or regaining confidence.

Consistency matters, but so does noticing when consistency breaks.

Use Dialogue to Carry Emotion

Dialogue is never just about information. How something is said matters as much as what is said.

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Emotion can show through:

- word choice (sharp, gentle, evasive),
- sentence length (short and clipped vs flowing),
- tone (warm, flat, defensive),
- what's left unsaid.

Example

*"You staying long?" she asked.
"I'll see how it goes."*

Pauses, interruptions, and indirect answers often reveal more than direct statements. Subtext - the tension between what's spoken and what's meant - is where emotion lives.

Match the Writing Style to the Feeling

Your sentence structure can mirror a character's emotional state.

- Short sentences can convey urgency, fear, or stress.
- Longer, more reflective sentences suit calm, wonder, or deep thought.

You don't need to overdo this. A brief shift in rhythm can be enough to signal a change in mood.

Let the Environment Reflect Emotion

Characters don't experience the world neutrally. Their emotional state colours what they notice. A happy character may see light and movement. A lonely one may notice empty spaces and silence.

Example

The street was busy enough, but no one seemed to be walking with anyone else.

Objects and settings can quietly echo emotion - a locked door, an abandoned nest, an overgrown path - as long as they feel natural to the scene rather than symbolic for its own sake.

Allow Emotions to Change

Real emotions don't stay fixed, and neither should fictional ones.

Let characters grow, soften, harden, recover, or fail to recover. Emotional movement, even small shifts, makes characters feel alive and keeps readers engaged.

Draw on Your Own Experience

Writers don't need to invent emotions; we've all felt them.

When writing a strong emotional moment, think about a time you felt something similar. Notice the physical sensations, the thoughts that wouldn't stop, the small details that stayed with you.

You don't need to copy the event - just borrow the truth of the feeling and shape it to fit your character.

In the End

Emotional depth isn't about explaining feelings. It's about creating scenes that allow readers to experience them.

If readers feel something, even quietly, you've done the job.

Sources

"Crafting Emotional Depth: A Step-by-Step Guide to Deepening Your Writing" by James Whitfield Thomson, <https://jameswhitfieldthomson.com/crafting-emotional-depth-a-step-by-step-guide-to-deepening-your-writing/>

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"*Writing with Emotion: How to Make Your Character Feel Real*" by Ember Quinn, <https://explorewithember.wordpress.com/2025/04/30/writing-with-emotion-how-to-make-your-character-feel-real/>

"*Emotional Writing: 8 Inspiring Techniques for Deeper Connections*" by Richard Lowe, <https://thewritingking.com/emotional-writing/>

"*Writer Cliff Notes: Emotional Craft of Fiction*" by Megan Beth Davies, <https://meganbethdavies.substack.com/p/writer-cliff-notes-emotional-craft>

"*How to Show Emotion in Dialogue – 5 Tips That Work*" <https://writeabooktoday.com/how-to-show-emotion-in-dialogue-5-tips-that-work/>

"*Conveying Emotions Through Dialogue*" by Dennis-Danziger, <https://dennisdanziger.com/conveying-emotions-through-dialogue/>

ChatGPT helped reduce the word salad I'd gathered from the above sources into a succinct article.

Writing Challenge - *Let the Reader Feel It*

Write a vignette, scene, or short story (roughly 300–1000 words) in which an important emotion is never named.

You may *not* use the words for the core emotion (sad, angry, afraid, relieved, in love, grieving, etc.). The reader should still clearly understand what the character is feeling.

Choose one:

- a moment of quiet change (something shifts, even slightly)
- a conversation where something important is not said
- a character alone with a decision they don't yet admit they've made

Requirements:

- Use at least **two techniques** from the article (for example: body language + environment, or dialogue + sensory detail).
- Include at least **one small, ordinary action** that carries emotional weight (making tea, waiting for a message, folding laundry, driving somewhere familiar).
- Let the emotion evolve, even subtly, between the beginning and the end.

Optional constraints (for the brave or foolhardy):

- Limit internal thoughts to no more than three short lines total.
- Set the scene in a familiar, everyday place.
- Write it as if the reader already knows the characters - no backstory dumps.

Here are a couple of prompts if you need them.

"A phone call that doesn't go as planned"

"Returning something that didn't work out"



Pepper and Carrot – David Revoy, https://www.peppercarrot.com/en/webcomic/ep24_The-Unity-Tree.html