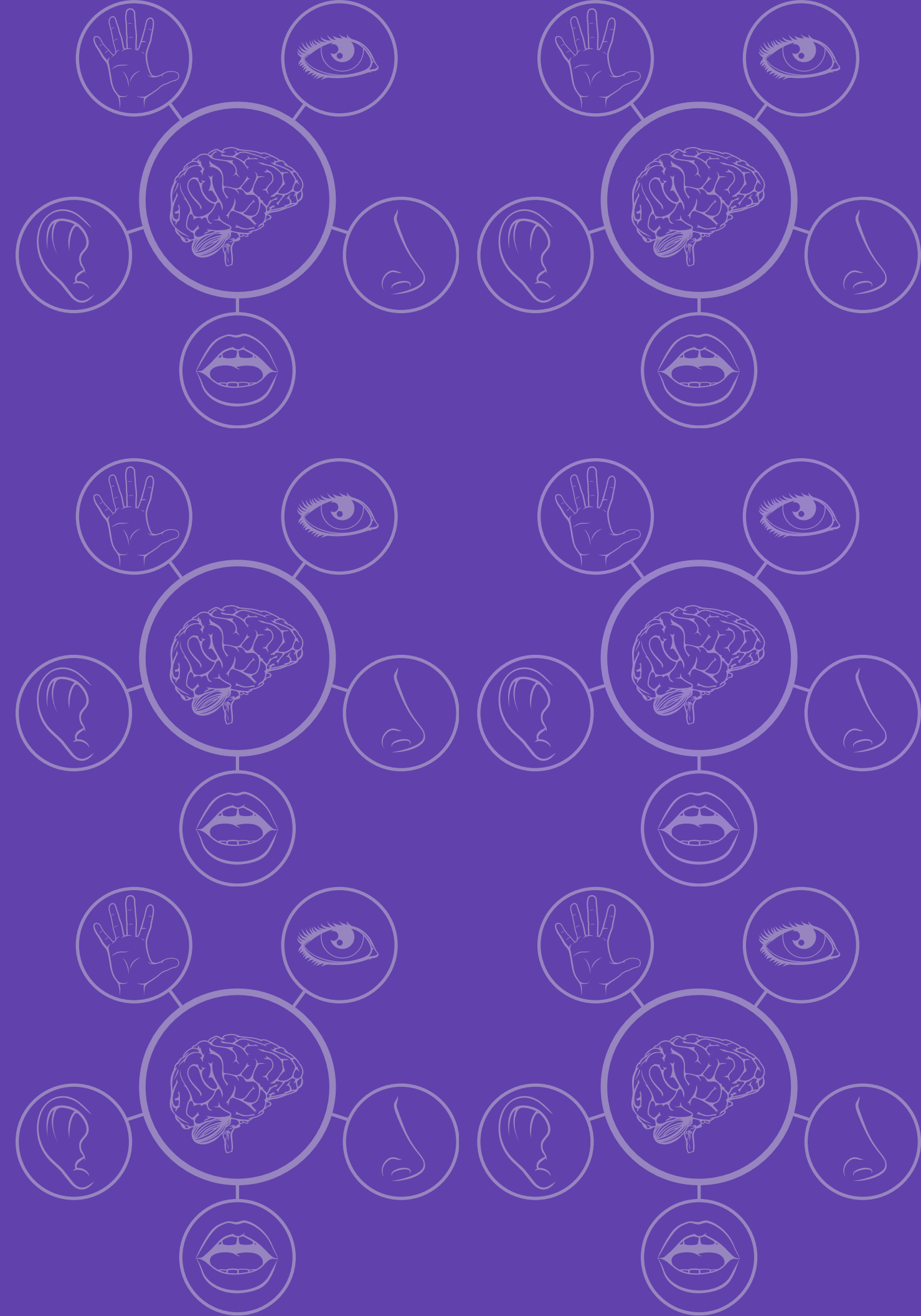


PROWRITINGAID

# THE SENSES

Sacha Black





# IT ME!

## *STUFF ABOUT SACHA BLACK*

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# Session Topics

## WHAT WE WILL COVER

- Why and When
- Some tools to use (and one to avoid)
- Layering
- Examine individual senses deeper (smell, taste, touch)

# Why Bother with the Senses?

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOUR GENRE?

## SHOW

Sensory writing is the cornerstone of show don't tell

## EVOKE

Clinical research shows our brains light up the same areas when thinking about doing a thing and experiencing it (more shortly)

## DEPTH

Create richer prose and world building

## CHARACTERISATION

You draw the reader into the narrator or protagonist's inner mind. Intimacy with the reader is increased. Their reactions are part of their narrative lens. The way they react viscerally and physically tells the reader about the character's personality without slapping it in their face. It's subtext and characterisation. You can use it as description etc. What a character pays attention to matters.



# When to use the Senses?

## BECAUSE IT'S NOT ALWAYS

*Individual senses have specific moments when they are more or less likely to be used. For example, in romantic scenes you're more likely to use touch sense rather than sound\*, no one needs to know about squelching or taste of those scenes mmkay?*

*\*moans excepted.*

### SLOW DOWN

If you have an important scene, this is a good time to slow down and use the senses.

### HIGH EMOTION

Emotions and character reactions are naturally visceral. If you have an emotional scene, this is a key place to use the senses.

### NEW LOCATIONS

When introducing the reader to a new location, scene or setting you need to ground them—use the senses to do it.

### BUILDING

Whether that's atmosphere, world building, or characterization. Use the senses to help you build.

### AVOID FOR PACE

Using the senses takes up lots of words, so avoid in pacey scenes. The exception is a fight scene where you may add the sounds of clashing weapons etc.

# Two Types of Use

## DIRECT SENSORY USAGE

Direct usage means engaging one of the senses intentionally in prose. For example,

"Cool air whipped under the market's rattling metal rafters. The breeze circled around the stalls and brought the sharp tang of leeks and bitter coffee with it."

## INDIRECT SENSORY USAGE

Indirect refers to the use of words in sentences that may or may not be sensory, but the words have sensory meanings attached. For example,

"A corrosive stare" we know this means sharp, acid, caustic, eating away. "Corrosive" has sensory connotations buried in the word.



# Two Tools to Stick With

## SENSORY PRINCIPLES

### DOUBLE TIME

- Make your use of the senses work twice for you where possible.
- Consider the meaning and consequence when using the senses. Why is the fact X is smelling Y significant?
- Is there a deeper meaning you can add i.e., your character smells clove because it's symbolic. Maybe it's connected to their wound or something from their past.

### SUBVERSION

- A little different from picking out unusual details. Subversion speaks to the choices you make in your description. Blue skies are normal.
- But if you described it using something unexpected it creates better imagery.
- *The sky was the colour of a crinkled navy uniform.*
- Break the rules, use juxtapositions, double meanings and shocking descriptions.





## ONE TOOL TO AVOID: FILTERING

Filtering is when you, the author,  
add in unnecessary narration,  
causing the reader to be removed  
one step from the character.

I HEARD, I SAW, I FELT, I THOUGHT  
THIS TOOL CAN BE USED INTENTIONALLY BUT BE CAREFUL,  
KNOW WHY YOU'RE USING IT.

# Filtering Examples

## WITH FILTER

I heard an owl hooting in the trees and a moment later I saw the canopy leaves rustle as if replying.

## WITH FILTER

She felt his fingers caress her skin and heard his moan as her body tightened under him.

## WITHOUT FILTER

An owl hooted in the trees and a moment later the canopy leaves rustled as if replying.

## WITHOUT FILTER

His fingers caressed her skin. He moaned as her body tightened under him.



## LAYERING THE SENSES

Layering the senses means using more than one sense to describe something in your story. Rather than just describing a smell, you may have a smell that tastes or feels a certain way too. This creates description with more depth. Layering also refers to adding deeper meaning, emotions or symbolism to your use of the senses.

YOU SHOULD PROBABLY LAYER YOUR WRITING... IT MAKES IT  
4DX (PENCIL DRAWING VS FULL COLOUR OIL)





# Layering Examples

## EXAMPLES OF LAYERING SENSES

My eyes stream as I claw my way through brambles and shrubs [touch]. Arms stinging [touch] and stained red from thorny lacerations, I keep moving. I have to reach the clearing. Smoke [smell] cloys in my throat as I gasp for breath. Instead of oxygen, I swallow acrid gulps of air [taste]; my mouth fills with grit and soot. It tastes like soured meat and death. [taste]

"Words spill from my mouth. They sound like a promise but taste like a lie."

"There is a scented candle [smell] burning on the window ledge and flowers on your desk, but they can't hide the smell of cancer, a bloated fart [sound] hanging in the air. The smell of rotting [smell] that escapes with every acidic burp [smell + touch] emitted from your poor insides. I look at Penny and squeeze [touch] her hand. I wish I hadn't chosen a Christmas candle [smell] to burn [smell + unsaid meaning]." Sarah Pinborough, *The Language of Dying*





# Smell and Memory

## AND WHY THEY'RE LINKED

Smell is in my opinion one of the more powerful senses.

The olfactory bulbs that process smell run next to three areas in the brain: the amygdala, hippocampus and temporal lobes, which together manage our memories. When the smell neurons fire, they occasionally hit memory receptors which is why smells can trigger such strong memories.





# Smell Sense

## IN PROSE...

"The house smelled musty [smell] and damp [smell], and a little sweet [smell], as if it were haunted by the ghosts of long-dead cookies [smell and taste]."

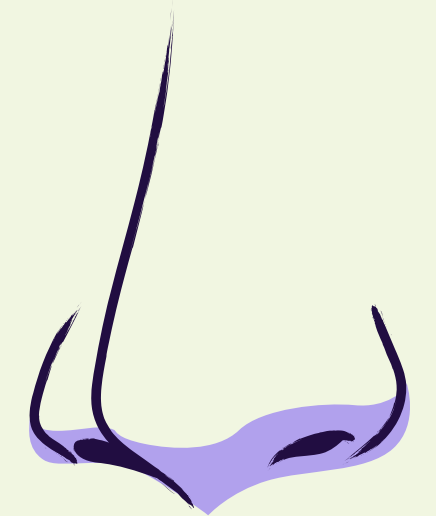
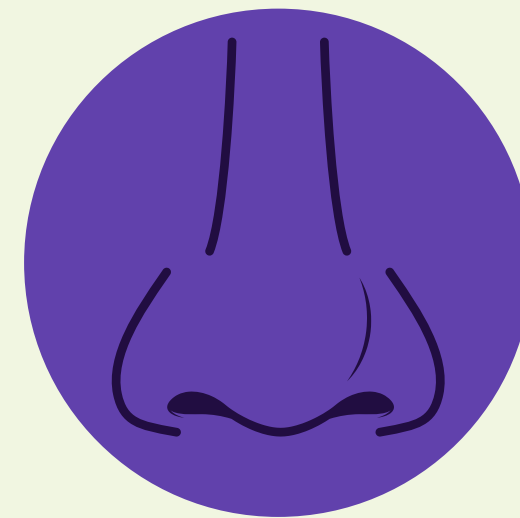
Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*.



# Conflicting Smell

## IT'S NOT JUST STORY AND CHARACTER CONFLICT

- One of the things that makes Gaiman's description work, is that he used conflicting (or juxtaposed) smells.
- Juxtapos + conflict create sharper comparisons which make the imagery stronger. Consider what kinds of conflicting smells you can match together to create vivid descriptions.
- When you conflict smells or use smells that conflict with the tone of the scene it creates tension at the sentence level, and that produces depth.





# Smell Consequence

## EMOTIONAL RESPONSES = MORE CONFLICT

Smell can often provoke emotional responses, so consider how you can time the use of smell in your manuscript to add conflict, memories or emotion in the right place. This also helps to create atmosphere in your story.

## MEMORY

It's a useful exercise to create some smell-related memories for your characters, as it will deepen their characterisation for both you and the reader. How can history repeat (or change) itself smell wise?

## GOOD SMELLS GONE BAD

Smells don't always have to be good smells. There could be a smell (good to others or not) that has negative consequences to your character or just a bad smell! Think about how you can twist smells and the consequences of them.

Make an expected good smell (pancakes) smell bad to your character. Subversion!

# A Quick Note on Smell

## DON'T BE OBSCURE OR USE NICHE KNOWLEDGE

For maximum impact, make sure the smells you pick are well known. Not strange and obscure and unheard of smells. The point is to create smells people can relate to.

If you're a scientist writing fiction, don't say his skin smelt like "Ethyl mercaptan\*\*". No one knows WTF that means.

*\*\*For reference Google says it smells like a combination of rotting onion and cabbage, mixed in with a bit of sewer gas. Other references say it smells like old rancid buttered popcorn.*



# Vary Your Description

It's very easy to simply describe X as "it smelled like Y". While this is good for enhancing your prose, it doesn't create rich descriptions. Consider four things:

## STRENGTH

Is it a strong or weak smell? What words can you use to describe its strength?

## TYPE

What type of smell is it? Sweet, sour, tart, acrid etc?

## LAYER

Does the smell have layers? Most smells have a base and top note. Use the details of these different layers to create additional meaning.

## OPINION

What does the smell remind the character of? Can you create a metaphor? Does it have a second meaning?



## STUFF ABOUT TASTE

Taste and smell are intricately connected in the body. They share the same airway which means you smell and taste at the same time. Smell allows you to identify the specificity of tastes. With your descriptions, consider how you can connect smell with taste references.

TLDR: TASTE IS BFFS WITH SMELL

# Types of Taste Sense

## STRENGTH

Consider not just the taste but the strength of the taste too.

## MEANING

As with all senses, what meaning or emotions do the tastes evoke?

## TEXTURE

Tastes can have textures in the mouth, so consider how you can use texture to add depth.

## TEMPERATURE

Tastes can be hot, spicy, cool, icy etc. Don't forget temperature will add depth to your taste descriptions.

## FLAVOURS

Create a list of flavours so you don't keep reusing the same ones. Like sharp, bitter, salty, sweet, sour etc. Think about how these flavours can reflect the mood or theme of a scene.

AND WHAT ABOUT...

The absence of  
taste or another  
sense?

THIS CAN BE JUST AS IMPACTFUL IF USED  
INTENTIONALLY. NOT JUST LEFT OUT.

# Types of Touch Sense

## TEMPERATURE

Food, body temperature, weather, machinery, weapons, other people, hands.

## PRESSURE

Hands both pleasurable and painful, clothing, sitting, crushing, emotional.

## PAIN & PLEASURE

Torture, injuries, paper cuts, kisses, sex, orgasms, caressing, hugs, hand holding.

## TICKLE & ITCH

Playful, painful, general scratch, itch of emotions, clothes, people.

## VIBRATIONS

Pleasurable, pain. Machinery, cars, air and weather, emotions.

## TEXTURE

Objects, clothing, people, laughter, conversation, emotion.



# Touch Application

## BUILDINGS

Buildings have textures like glass and brickwork, structural foundations, furnishings and objects inside.

## WEATHER AND AIR

Weather touches your characters whether they want it or not. The sun can burn or warm, the wind can caress or ravage, the rain can patter on the arms or pound the body with hail and the air can be dry or humid.

## WEAPONS

Sharp blades, cool barrels, or the smoothed, polished wood of a mace handle.

## SKIN & CLOTHES

Skin can be rough, brittle, leathery, or smooth. Fabrics include textures like smooth silks and rough hessians, soft fleeces, and rubbery wetsuits.

## NATURE & GROUND

Nature is the ultimate texture haven. Plants have thorns, rose petals are silky, some plants are furry. The ground can squelch with treacherous mudslides, it can undulate or be rough and hard.

## EMOTIONS

You might not think of emotions as having a texture, but they do! Think about the hot, throbbing of rage, or the cold, prickle of fear.



# Touch Example

## IN PROSE...

Scarlett ran her hand over the blade. Its surface was smooth and icy, far colder than the air around her.

*Odd.*

Her fingers slipped to the cutting edge. As she examined the shape and lines of the weapon, she drew her finger down the tip. It was so sharp it stung hot and sliced into her skin.

Scarlett smiled; she hadn't pushed hard enough to cut flesh. The blade was obviously hungry for blood. A drop of red rolled to the metal point and she swore it vibrated in response: deep, rumbling. Almost as if it was greeting her: one weapon to another.

"I'll take it," she said and slung a pouch of coins on the counter.

# Final Touch Quirks to Think About

AND INCLUDE IN YOUR PROSE...

## CHARACTER AGE

Consider that the older you get, the worse your sense of touch becomes. Our pain receptors, temperature receptors and even nerve endings in our genitals all decline as we age.

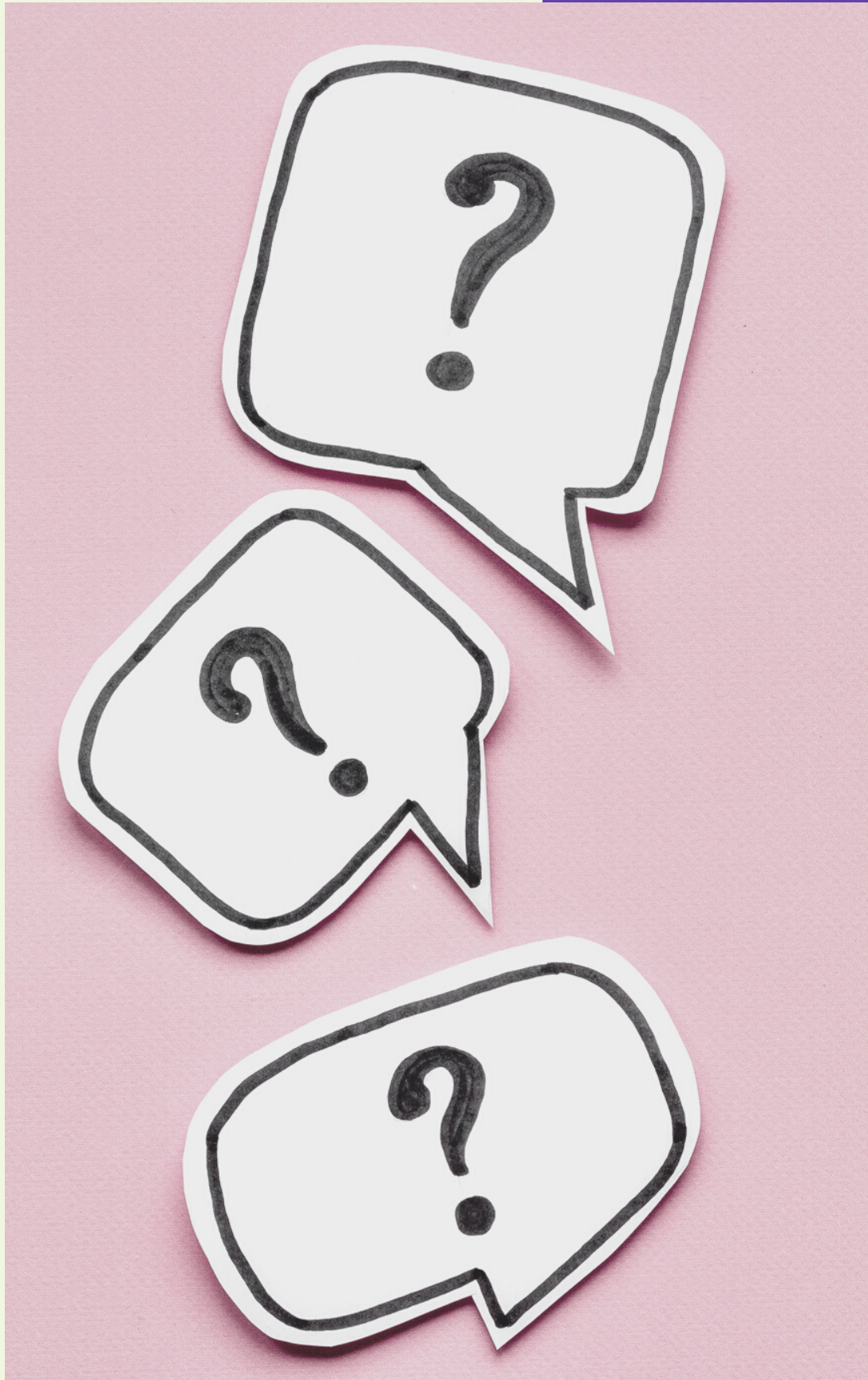
## UNEQUAL

All touch is not equal in the body. There are some parts of your body more attuned to touch because of their dense nerve endings. Fingers, lips, feet and genitals are the most sensitive to touch. Something to consider in your descriptions.

## EMOTION + REACTION

Emotion can change the way a person feels about touch. Which means it should change the way your characters feel about it too. If someone touches your hand when you're lonely it will feel comforting. If it's a lover, you might be aroused. If it's someone you hate, you'll be annoyed. And yet, it's the exact same touch each time.





# Questions?

ABOUT THE SENSES...?





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