5 Ways to Write Emotion That Feels Real

WHY EMOTION MATTERS (AND WHY IT'S SO HARD TO GET RIGHT)

As writers, we're told that emotion is what makes readers care. But too often, emotional writing swings to extremes: it's either too vague ("she felt sad") or so overdone it reads like a soap opera.

The sweet spot?

Writing emotion that feels honest, grounded, and true to the character, all without ever having to name it directly.

Five Tips for Underwriting, Rather than Overwriting Emotion

- 🐸 **Get Underneath the Obvious**
- ✂️ **Use Restraint for Power**
- 🦉 **Let the Reader Do Some of the Work**
- ⚓ **Anchor Emotions in Specifics**
- 🎭 **Let Emotion Change the Scene**

5 Ways to Write Emotion That Feels Real

Get Underneath the Obvious

Don't name the feeling. Instead, reveal how it moves through the character.

❌ *She was nervous.*
✅ *She twisted her ring until her finger turned red.*

Ask: What does this emotion look, sound, or feel like in the body?

Use Restraint for Power

What parts of your story light you up?Keep those.

Once you know that, mold them to serve both your genre and your vision.

Let the Reader Do Some of the Work

Emotion deepens when the reader fills in the blanks. Give just enough—then step back.

Instead of: *She couldn't breathe. The grief was overwhelming.*
Try: *She pressed the phone to her chest and closed her eyes.*

Anchor Emotion in Specifics

Sensory details and micro-behaviors show us what your character feels, without telling or labeling.

Examples:
A door left ajar
A coffee gone cold
A silence that lasts a beat too long

Let Emotion Shift the Scene

Emotion should create movement (internal or external).

Ask:
- What choice does this feeling influence?
- What changes in the character or the dynamic?
- Does this emotion cost them something? If it doesn't, it might be filler.

THE BIG TAKEAWAY

Emotion isn't a performance. It's **a current underneath the scene**. The strongest feelings are often the ones you **don't name**. Trust your characters **to show**, your readers **to feel**, and your words **to carry the weight** without explanation.