

SETTING
AND
ATMOSPHERE

CREATIVE WRITING

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black ... It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. (*Hard Times* by Charles Dicken)

A reef of clouds and lightning raced across the skies from the sea. . . . My hands were shaking, and my mind wasn't far behind. I looked up and saw the storm spilling like rivers of blackened blood from the clouds, blotting out the moon and covering the roofs of the city in darkness. I tried to speed up, but I was consumed with fear and walked with leaden feet, chased by the rain. I took refuge under the canopy of a newspaper kiosk, trying to collect my thoughts and decide what to do next. A clap of thunder roared close by, and I felt the ground shake under my feet. . . . On the flooding pavements the streetlamps blinked, then went out like candles snuffed by the wind. There wasn't a soul to be seen in the streets, and the darkness of the blackout spread with a fetid smell that rose from the sewers. The night became opaque, impenetrable, as the rain folded the city in its shroud. (*Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Luis Zafon).

That Friday, their son's birthday, everything went wrong. The subway train lost its life current between two stations and for a quarter of an hour they could hear nothing but the dutiful beating of their hearts and the rustling of newspapers. The bus they had to take next was late and kept them waiting a long time on a street corner, and when it did come, it was crammed with garrulous high-school children. It began to rain as they walked up the brown path leading to the sanitarium. There they waited again, and instead of their boy, shuffling into the room, as he usually did (his poor face sullen, confused, ill-shaven, and blotched with acne), a nurse they knew and did not care for appeared at last and brightly explained that he had again attempted to take his life (*Symbols and Signs* by Vladimir Nabokov).

Functions

- **Connects the story's elements.** An effective story setting connects the characters to the plot, and ties together the story's themes and events.
- **Builds meaning to the narrative.** Without the setting of a story, there may not be as much meaning to be gained since setting provides context.
- **Elicits emotional response in the reader.** When readers are engaged in your story's settings, they will be actively reading and invested in experiencing the narrative and how it will unfold.
- **Helps readers visualize your story.** Authors use story setting to describe the environment, time, and place for the reader, which provides more context and engages the reader.
- **Improves the story's flow.** With an effective, well-crafted setting in your narrative, the plot will flow together well, and the events will feel real.

Elements of Setting

- There are three types of setting: the elements of time, place, and environment (both physical and social). Each of these types contributes to building the setting of a story.
- To find the setting of a story, you will have to read through the book or story, and identify sections where the time, place, and environment is being described.
- The setting of a story through detailed descriptions the author may include that tells the reader when and where the story is taking place. An expert author also incorporates elements of setting subtly for the reader, such as through dialogue.
- Setting affects the story by contributing to the plot, character development, mood, and theme. It also affects the story by engaging the reader and helping them visualize the events and context in which the narrative is being told.
- A good setting is one that appropriately describes the time, place, and environment of the narrative. A good setting also helps to connect the plot to the characters, and builds the mood and theme appropriately.

Important Points

- **Make your story setting fit the purpose of your plot. Your story setting should be aligned to your plot so that it all makes sense to your reader, and is realistic.**
- Examples:
 - To fit that purpose of a murder mystery story, make the story setting be in a town with high crime rates, many places to hide, and a resourceful police station.
 - To fit the purpose of a fast-paced, or slow-steady Sherlock Holmes mystery, a rural, backwoods setting will be more appropriate.

- **Make the setting fit the story.** The setting of a story should fit the actual story; things, events, or objects within a story's setting should not feel out of place to the reader, based on prior knowledge of a place or time period.
- For example, does the Volkswagen on the bumpy road carry a car full of lawbreakers? They'll probably not want to draw attention. Place them in America in an era when old Volkswagens were common.

- **Make the setting of a story fit your character. The setting of a story should always be aligned with the main characters found within that story.**
- For example, is your character shy and withdrawn? Have her sitting on the ledge surrounding the red brick school building writing short stories in her mom's old notebook instead of enjoying recess with the other kids.

Techniques

1. Decide what mood you're trying to establish

- Mood is defined as the overall feeling the reader has when reading a story, and it is created by the author.
- What mood are you trying to establish?
- How do you want readers to feel as they read your story? Think on that, then create that mood with your writing.
- Think of it in terms of this: A bright summer morning in the middle of a large, grassy park where happy families are out casts a much different mood than a dark forest with crooked, gnarled trees and low hanging fog.

SENSORY DETAILS

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From Dickens' ***Hard Times***

2. Decide which period or moment best fits the context of your story

- The time period plays a huge part in developing the setting of a story.
- What kind of plot do you have? Does it best fit into medieval Europe, America's 1960s, or in current time? Or maybe it fits better in the future?
- Look at the language you're planning to use—the idioms, quotes, and expressions. Look at the props and the way the characters view them.
- Consider how the different people in the book are treated. Are the elderly respected? Are the police viewed as an authority? Are the parents held in regard? In what regard do people hold the churches and the government?
- All of these things and more have a bearing on the time period your story will fall into.
- Sometimes, the best gauge of what time period your story setting should be is to consider a time you know well and have loved. If you felt an emotional connection to that time, you'll be able to convey that to your readers, and that's what writing is all about.

3. Know the atmosphere you need to portray.

- As you write the setting of a story, you need to think about the atmosphere that you need to portray for the reader.
- Is the scene one with high tension? Write your story setting in one that implies an atmosphere of high tension.
- For example, maybe James and Lisa are working up toward an argument. Why would Lisa be noticing soft fluffy clouds above her head, singing birds, and the warmth of the sun's bright rays? When you read that description, you probably think about relaxation and peace – not high tense emotion

4. Incorporate all elements of a story.

- Remember that the setting of a story includes more than the terrain, weather, and climate of the place.
- Other elements that are involved in the setting of a story may include the government, religions, superstitions, and population. But how do you write them into your story?
- You should know all these little details in depth, but it doesn't mean you'll use it all directly in your story's setting.
- Only use what's necessary to describe the setting adequately. No more. No less. Write it in surrounded by action, and don't forget to break it up throughout the story!
- Also, make sure you're dropping setting descriptions throughout the book.
- It's not only needed in the beginning, but everywhere you need the plot deepened and your characters enhanced.

5. Use all five senses when you're describing the setting.

- When you're walking through a room or down the street, do you see it as two-dimensional? No. You experience every part of that walk. You use every one of your five senses.
- You want your readers to experience your story through each of their senses, too. An easy way to do this is by using literary devices in your writing.
- Begin by describing what you want them to see. When you do, describe it the same way the eye travels in real life. Start with the focal point, then move across in a straight line.
- Next, your main character would naturally notice what they hear. Don't describe everything they hear, but only the relevant sounds, and only the most obvious ones.
- What does he smell? Is the air dusty? Is someone cooking breakfast?
- Have him touch things. He can run his hand over the smooth desk, feel the rough board, and handle the cold metal rod.
- Lastly, explore his sense of taste. Your main character won't use this sense as much, but you do want to be sure to use it. Remember, you don't *only* taste when you put something in your mouth. Something can "smell so good that you can almost taste it."
- Sprinkle these details in – don't feel that you have to describe each and every little thing; otherwise, you'll overwhelm your reader.

6. Don't describe the setting of a story all at once.

- You don't want to give your readers an encyclopedia of facts. They won't read them. They'll skip them, or might even close your book altogether.
- When you start your book with a wall of details, your readers are more likely to lay down your book to never pick it up again. Your readers will skim or skip later clumps of setting as they try to get back to the action.
- Since the setting of a story is so essential to the plot and characters, it's very important that you stretch it out enough that it will be read and enjoyed.
- Instead, write the setting in as part of the action, adding in a piece here and there.

7. Don't over-describe the setting of a story.

- You block your reader's imagination. You must leave some details up to the imagination. You want your readers to be involved in the story. Otherwise, you'll lose them.
- You knock your readers out of the story. The quickest way to get a reader to abandon your story is to frontload them with too many descriptions.
- You don't need to include every detail. Appeal to your readers' knowledge of the world. Tell your readers the machine sounds like a buzzing bee. You don't need to describe the sound.

7. Remember that the setting of a story has a direct effect on the character and plot.

- Our environment affects our mood – this is true for almost every human and so is to the characters in your story.
- Let's look at some examples.
- If your character lives in Scotland, where it's dark and rain all long, they may become depressed as many people do.
- If she lives in a trailer in the middle of nowhere with the cold air seeping in through the cracks in the door and a furnace that won't stay lit, her character will beg for our sympathies.
- If she has a toddler playing on the cold floors and a idle boyfriend who won't provide for his child, we have the beginning of a plot.
- Those show how the plot and characters are directly affected by the story's setting.

Creating Fictional Setting

- **Develop the setting fully before you begin writing.**
- **Create your world first.**
- **Create your setting second.**
- **Provide enough details to make the world believable.**
- **Draw a map**