

Setting grounds your writing in the reality of place and depicts the theme of your story through powerful metaphor. Without setting, characters are simply there, in a vacuum, with no reason to act and most importantly, no reason to care. Without a place there is no story. Setting helps with plot, determines and describes character and gives metaphoric links to theme. Like the force in Star Wars, setting provides a landscape that binds everything into context and meaning.

Place Your Story

According to acclaimed novelist Richard Russo, if you're not writing stories that occur in a specific place, you're missing the opportunity to add depth and character to your writing. We are creatures of our environment, adds Robert Louis Stevenson. Our outlook on life is colored by the setting in which we find ourselves. Editors have told me that they have little faith in the vision of writers who don't clearly depict the world their characters inhabit. Imagine Thomas Hardy's characters without Egdon Heath or Scarlet O'Hara without her beloved Tara or Dorothy without the Land of Oz. In science fiction and fantasy, which I write and teach about, setting becomes an entire world.

Setting includes time, place and circumstance. These three form a kind of critical mass that creates the particular setting best suited to your story. If you change any of these it will affect the quality of the others.

Setting as Character

Settings can not only have character; they can be a character in their own right. A novelist, when portraying several characters, may often find herself painting a portrait of "place". This is setting being "character". The setting functions as a catalyst, and molds the more traditional characters that animate a story. The central character is often really the place, which is often linked to the protagonist. In Lord of the Rings, for instance, Frodo is very much an extension of his beloved Shire. Setting, then, comes to mean so much more. Setting ultimately portrays what lies at the heart of the story.

Setting as Metaphor

When you choose your setting, remember that its primary metaphoric role is to help depict theme. This is because place is destiny. Russo tells us that place is crucial to human destiny and the formation of human personality. "The more specific and individual things become, the more universal they feel," says Russo. This is not an oxymoron, but an example of the principle of a truism, which comes to us in the form of paradox (like all good truisms).

Detail provides the color and texture of your story and helps it resonate with a sense of place. This does not necessarily translate into lots of exposition; but it does require creative choice of words. So, instead of "John took a drag from his cigarette as he drove his sports car along a winding road in the country" (twenty words) try something like "Vinnie sucked on a Camel as his red Corvette careered the hair-pinned curves of Hell's Gate" (seventeen words).

Setting & Emotion

The setting may amplify a character's emotions or contradict them, depending on the circumstance of the character, her mood, disposition, tendencies, and observational

skills. And the kind of story you're telling. Either way, setting provides an "emotional landscape" upon which a character's own temperament may play counterpoint or may resonate in a wonderful symphony. The writer should think of the less obvious, of contrast, and how you can increase tension and emphasize the character's situation.

Setting as Weather

Weather conveys the mood and tone of both story and character. Weather is not just part of the scenery. To a writer, weather is a device used in plot and theme. A good example is Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and how he used the desert setting and the hot winds to evoke mood, character, tension, theme and ultimately story:

"The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East"

In summary, here are some suggestions that will help you create vivid, memorable and meaningful settings:

Don't "tack" setting in; make it an integral part of the story; give it purpose

Describe selectively and with purpose—through integration in "scene" rather than exposition

Be specific (e.g., soft pink rose, not flower; beat up Chevy, not car; old clapboard cottage, not house)

Use similes, metaphors, and personification to breathe life into setting

Use the senses like sight, sound, smell, taste, feel

Don't tell, show (e.g., don't say the time is the 1920s; show the cars and dresses.

Don't tell the reader it's raining; show them by describing the dripping trees, etc.)

Compare and contrast settings and relate them to the point of view characters

Don't describe setting all at once in the beginning; work it in slowly throughout the story; let it unfold as the story does.