

What is setting? Why do we need it?

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What is setting and why do we need it?

Well, of course, all story, and that story can be fictional, it can be memoir, it can be narrative non-fiction. Anywhere where you have things happening, it happens somewhere. It happens in a place, in a

setting, from an epic fantasy world to a one-room literary novel, to a globe-trotting thriller — the type of thing I write. And of course, this is *The Western Wall* in Jerusalem, and I've set several books in Jerusalem — to a personal travel memoir. All of these things happen in a setting.

Now, a scene, and I go through this in my *How to Write a Novel* book — we're not going to go into all the aspects of writing a novel — but **a scene has a character, or multiple characters in a setting, performing some kind of action toward a specific goal.**

So, there's always a setting in a scene, and the scene is essentially what makes up a story. Lots of scenes make up a story. The setting is just a really important part of writing books, whether that's fiction, or memoir, or narrative non-fiction. Obviously, not for hardcore non-fiction self-help, that kind of thing, but for any other examples you might give. In general, it's a very important part of writing.

What is a setting? What is a world?

Essentially there are multiple settings within a world. This is an example from *The Hobbit* by J.R.R Tolkien:

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat. It was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

So, in this case, we know it's a hole in the ground, and we know it's a comfortable hole in the ground. And of course, the chapter goes on to describe a lot more about the hobbit-hole, and you can probably picture it in your head. Either you've read the books, or you've seen the movie. But essentially this particular place, the hobbit-hole, is in the larger world of Tolkien's Middle Earth. So, that's how you need to think about it.

What's also interesting about this descriptions is that it is a negative description because it's like, *not* a nasty, dirty, wet hole, and *not* a dry, bare, sandy hole. So, we're almost describing what it is by describing what it isn't. It's just an interesting example.

Why do we need to write better settings and inspire a sense of place?

Well, hopefully, you are here because you know why you want to. But essentially, **your job as a writer is to manipulate the reader.** Make them think what you want them to think, and to feel the emotions you want to evoke. And we do that through our language. And setting is one of the ways we can do that.

If you say something like 'A tree.' The tree in my head is completely different to the tree in your head. It might be a palm tree, it might be a towering fir tree. The type of forest will depend on where you are. Maybe it's a eucalyptus tree in the Australian bush. I mean, there are so many different types of trees.

So, the reason we need to be careful about settings is to control the mind of the reader. Not in a bad way, but in a good way in terms of making sure that what we're evoking in their imagination is what we intended to evoke. And your setting will absolutely influence the book.

Now, of course, you don't need to layer it on massively thick all the time — like every element of writing it should be not too much, not too little. Vary the techniques. You don't always have to bash people over the head with whatever you are describing. I mean, you might want to, but for some particular types of book.

But generally, this sense of place, which is how I like to describe it, means I know where this is, I know what's happening here. And it's almost like I can read the story, and know what's happening without getting bogged down in it.

Talking heads in an empty white room

Now, one of the reasons that I wanted to do a course on this is because many writers have a strength and a weakness.

I did this workshop live, and I asked people, 'What is your strength?'

75% of people in the room said their strength was dialogue. And that was really interesting to me that people who are strong on dialogue were coming to a setting workshop.

So, it may be that you are also strong on dialogue too, but this is the problem with when you're strong on dialogue, it's talking heads in an empty white room. It is literally like, 'Ooh, **interesting conversation.**'
But we haven't got a clue where it's happening.

And many people who I did this workshop with said, they just couldn't see where it was taking place. They have this incredible dialogue going on, but they didn't know where it was set. And so, I'll show you some tools within this course, we can use tools to help us where we are weak.

Now, it's interesting that I'm doing this course because I feel like dialogue is actually a weakness of mine. I'm such an introvert. I don't have many conversations, to be honest. I know people say, 'Oh, go to a coffee shop, and listen to conversations.' But that's like one of the worst things, I can possibly imagine.

So, I don't listen to other people really. I guess I listen to podcasts, but it's interesting.

But I'm inspired by setting. You might be inspired by dialogue, but we have to do bits of everything. So, this is kind of hopefully filling in a weakness for you.

Appropriate settings per genre

Now, the other thing about setting is that it needs to be appropriate per genre. Or if you're going to break genre tropes, then you need to do it in a really appropriate way that your readers will love it, or in an interesting way that your readers will love.

Here are some examples of book covers that demonstrate settings. And this is the other thing, I mean, our book covers are visual. Our books themselves are not usually visual. They're usually words.

The book cover is a great way to demonstrate settings. Here are some in a genres.

Best Murder in Show By Debbie Young. With the color palette there, and the bunting, and the kind of happy colors, it really is a cozy mystery, basically. It says that on the cover, but you can tell.

Then we've got, 'Bullets Don't Argue.' It says it's a western, and it's got a cowboy riding a horse, the wagons in the background, the cattle, etc. So, you know that westerns are gonna be set in the western states of the USA.

Then we've got, 'The Jump Ship,' and again, we know it's space. I guess it's sci-fi.

And then, this is my mum's book, A Summerfield Christmas Wedding: A Summerfield Village Sweet Romance.

And you can see there's a village church, there's dogs running in the snow, and a happy couple. And again, all of these use examples of a description in their subtitle.

But equally, the first glance of the image is, 'Oh, I know what this book is,' based on setting, based on the images.

Settings are indeed genre tropes, and they telegraph aspects of plot. Now, you are absolutely going to know the approximate plot of all of these books. Although I just read the 'Jump Ship' subtitle is, 'Adventures of a Jump Space Accountant.' Which was surprising. I wasn't expecting an accountant, but why not?

So yes, you can **telegraph aspects of plot through your setting**, and the settings per genre. So, you can think about what are some examples of settings.

As we go through, I'm going to give you tons of examples, tons of ways to look at things, but it's good to consider what might be the types of settings in different genres.

For example, a sweet romance with a happy ending might have a small town with a tight-knit community, with a cozy cafe, with warm lighting, delicious pastries. And we don't normally have delicious pastries in the beginning of a horror film unless you're going to subvert the tropes, I guess. Colorful flowers, cozy rooms, stunning sunsets, peaceful beach, quaint bookstore, candle-lit restaurant, a vibrant bustling farmer's market with fresh produce, you know, maybe the person selling the cupcakes falls in love with the vegetable guy, whatever.

A picturesque mountain resort, although personally, I don't find skiing particularly romantic. I'm not very good at it. And a picturesque vineyard.

You can see that these are, the way they're described, give examples of sweet romance.

Whereas these are examples of horror, and I use [ChatGPT](#) for this, and I will be talking more about chatGPT later, don't you worry.

So, this says, 'A creepy abandoned hospital with flickering lights, peeling paint, and eerie equipment left behind.' You can see that in your head, right? It's a classic horror trope.

A desolate foggy graveyard, an isolated cavern in the woods, a haunted mansion, a labyrinthine maze of underground tunnels with strange markings on the walls. Again, I love all of these. A cursed forgotten village. An ominous, deserted ship.

These are all settings with tropes of the genre. So again, **think about your genre**, what you are writing, what are the tropes that settings are in your area?

So, as part of this course, you can do writing exercises. You don't have to, but you can do them as we go through, or you can do them later. You can just use them whenever you like. The exercises build on each other, so if you do them, they will help you over time.

Writing Exercise:

Pick an image from a magazine, or search online. I have included this one, a yacht, or a boat in Antarctica or the Arctic if you prefer, either one, penguins, or polar bears.

Set a timer for 10 minutes, and then describe the setting to the best of your current ability. This is first draft writing.

I'm not going to mark it. This course has no interaction. No one's going to read your writing. This is for you.

Set the timer for 10 minutes, describe the setting to your current ability, and just give it a go. And from here we will obviously improve that with each lesson.

Questions:

What is a setting? What is a world?

Why is setting important for your particular story or your book, if it's a memoir or narrative nonfiction?

What are some examples of settings appropriate for your genre?

Examine some of your existing scenes if you've written books already, or if you've got first draft writing, or whatever you have — do you have talking heads in an empty white room?

What are your weaknesses as a writer, or strengths as a writer, and how might you address those?