

Writing Fiction

A HANDBOOK FOR CREATIVE WRITING

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— CHAPTER 5 —

Creating a Setting: *The Here and Now of the Story*

Creating a setting means helping a reader to “see” the time and place in which the story’s action occurs. Nouns and verbs are often more helpful than adjectives. Look at the beginnings of the following stories:

In the ancient city of London, on a certain autumn day in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, a boy was born to a poor family of the name of Canty, who did not want him.

Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*

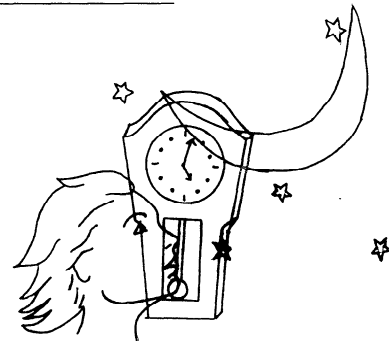
The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till somebody happened to note it as the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child.

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*

On a fine warm evening in late summer, over a hundred years ago, a boy might have been seen leading a donkey across Southwark Bridge in the city of London.

Joan Aiken, *Black Hearts in Battersea*

Each of these excerpts just happens to be an opening sentence. All three place the reader at once in time and locale. You also learn something of atmosphere and have some hint of the story to come, whether it concerns an unwanted child, a gruesome tale, or a young man with a donkey.



Setting locates your story
in time and space.

Knowing where you are in terms of both time and space helps you to follow the action of a story.

Developing a habit of observation, collecting settings, and recording descriptions are good things to do when you can't decide which story to write next.

● *Settings Crucial to the Story*

Some stories may take place almost anywhere. If setting doesn't matter, description of the setting should be limited. Sometimes, however, setting may be so important that it almost assumes the role of a character in the story. Just as the high seas and the pirate ships are necessary to *Captain Blood*, the frozen tundra is essential to *White Fang*. Note how the authors set the scene in the two examples below:

Yesterday afternoon set in misty and cold. I had half a mind to spend it by my study fire, instead of wading through heath and mud to Wuthering Heights. On coming up from dinner, however . . . , on mounting the stairs with this lazy intention, and stepping into the room, I saw a servant girl on her knees surrounded by brushes and coal-scuttles, and raising an infernal dust as she extinguished the flames with heaps of cinders. This spectacle drove me back immediately; I took my hat, and, after a four-miles' walk, arrived at Heathcliff's garden gate just in time to escape the first feathery flakes of a snow shower.

On that bleak hill top the earth was hard with a black frost, and the air made me shiver through every limb. Being unable to remove the chain, I jumped over, and running up the flagged causeway bordered with straggling gooseberry bushes, knocked vainly for admittance, till my knuckles tingled and the dogs howled.

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

In *Wuthering Heights*, the Yorkshire moors become a major part of the story. The harshness and isolation of the moors are a match for the uncultured, lonely Heathcliff.

Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely. Here is the way we put in the time. It was a monstrous big river down there—sometimes a mile and half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid daytimes; soon as night was most gone we stopped navigating and tied up—nearly always in the dead water under a towhead; and then cut young cottonwoods and willows, and hid the raft with them. Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come. Not a sound anywheres—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bullfrogs a-cluttering, maybe. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t’other side; you couldn’t make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn’t black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along ever so far away—trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks—rafts; sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled-up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there’s a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on t’other side of the river, being a woodyard, likely, and piled by them cheats so you can throw a dog through it anywheres; then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh and sweet to smell on account of the woods and the flowers; but sometimes not that way, because they’ve left dead fish laying around, gars and such and they do get pretty rank; and next you’ve got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the songbirds just going it!

Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*

The Mississippi River is *almost* as important as the title character in *Huckleberry Finn*. Like Heathcliff and the moors, Huck and the river have much in common. Like the river, Huck is strong, free, and very much a part of nature.

● *Exercises in Describing a Setting*

1. Think of novels and stories you've read in which the setting has either played a major part or at least made a strong impression on you. Why did the setting impress you? Have you ever wanted to visit a place as a result of reading about it?
2. Check through the quotation from *Huckleberry Finn*, listing examples of sensory description and dividing them according to the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Which sense, if any, is not represented? For which sense did you find the most examples? Which senses do you believe are most important in description?
3. Write at least a one-page description of a place. Choose something you know well—your own room, the classroom, the gym, the cafeteria, the place where you work, a park. Use plenty of visual details, but call on your other senses as well to create impressions of sound, smell, taste, and touch.

● *Keeping the Setting in Its Place*

Setting, as you've seen from some of the examples in this chapter, may be crucial in some novels. Less often does setting achieve such prominence in shorter fiction. As you work with short stories, think of setting—or any lengthy description—as the shrubbery of your writing. Keep it pruned back to stay in its place. Don't let it dominate the more important elements.

● *Exercise in Controlling the Setting*

Write single-sentence descriptions setting the scene in terms of both time and place for five different stories. You may want to refer to the one-sentence examples at the beginning of this chapter.



Create an imaginary setting.

● *The Here and Now of Fiction*

If you have ever been caught up in a story, you know what it's like to feel that the events of the story are real. Some writers are more successful than others in pulling the reader into the action of the story. Those writers create the illusion that the story is happening *here and now*.

Trying to create the here-and-now feeling, beginning writers occasionally insist on writing in the present tense, a difficult thing to do and rarely the right choice. The past tense usually works better for actual story writing.

If you are writing in the past tense and your story is set on the Planet Xrklyn or in New Guinea, how can you possibly make your reader feel that the story is happening here and now? First, don't take your story to your reader, bring your reader into the story. You achieve that magical feat by anchoring your story to a specific time and place. Even if both the time and the place are nonexistent, you can make them "real," make the reader believe in them, by using specific details. For example:

The old woman's room was narrow and dark, with but one small window to it; a lantern stood on the floor and lighted it up dimly. It was all filled with reindeer skins and wolf skins, and with reindeer horn, such as the Lapps use to make their carved buttons and knife-handles, and the air in here was rank and stifling. As soon as they were in, the woman turned to Simon, took hold of his head, and with her crooked fingers parted his hair and combed it down in Lapp fashion. She clapped a Lapp cap on him and stood back to glance at him. "Sit down on my stool, now," she said. "But first take out your knife." She was so commanding in voice and manner that the boy could not but choose to do as she told him; he sat down on the stool, and he could not take his eyes off her face, which was flat and brown, and as if smeared with dirt in its net of fine wrinkles.

Isak Dinesen, "The Sailor-Boy's Tale"

The room may be like none you have ever entered; but the author makes you see, feel, hear, smell the setting. Through sensory detail, you are there with Simon. **That** is the here and now of fiction.

● *Exercise in Using Sensory Detail*

Avoid talking about *how* a thing tastes or smells or feels. You can strengthen your writing by naming a sensory stimulus and allowing the

reader to react to the image: “I bit into a lemon.” “Before we went into the theater, Tom bought hot, buttered popcorn.” “Reaching for the limb above, my hand closed on a caterpillar.”

If you know the taste of a lemon, the smell of the popcorn, the feel of a caterpillar, the word alone will bring back the sensation. Write five sentences for each of the five senses (twenty-five sentences in all). For example:

- Sight* — A cardinal joined the bluejays on the snow-covered bird-feeder hanging from the bare branch.
- Sound* — “Listen to me,” screeched Miss Melson, stamping her foot.
- Smell* — As soon as she picked up his knapsack, Tommy’s mother knew he had found and then forgotten another clam from the beach.
- Touch* — The cool wind on my face didn’t make up for the pain as the sand burned my bare feet.
- Taste* — I licked my lips and found them coated by the salt spray of the ocean.

● **Writing with the Senses**

1. Make a sketch of the neighborhood where you live, or of a place where you previously lived. You don’t need to be able to draw. Label items of importance to you. Like this—

```

the creek  = = = = =
           the      CCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCC
           corn field CCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCC

           the pond  000000

           XX      my      my      XX
           XXXX  aunt’s house  x the shed  house  XXXX
    
```

Keep your plan simple enough to transfer to the chalkboard. Be prepared to share a childhood adventure that took place in the area you’ve outlined.

2. Write a description of the location you’ve sketched. Include sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings associated with the neighborhood you’ve described. Remember to name the source of each sensation rather than describe it.