

How to Write the Setting of a Story: 4 Tips for a Memorable Backdrop

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How many times have you felt yourself transported to a whole new world or time in history, simply by reading a great book?

Your imagination is able to conjure up images of a land you've never seen only because you read about them in a story.

The setting of a story is one of the most important elements that can determine whether a story works or not. To review, the [basic structure of a story](#) includes:

- characters
- setting
- plot
- conflict
- resolution

What Is the Setting of a Story?

The setting of a story essentially refers to the time and place when the story takes place. Although it might seem less important compared to plot or characters, setting actually plays an important role in how the story plays out.

Two Types of Setting

When you write your book, you can choose between the following common types of setting:

Backdrop Setting

The backdrop setting happens when the story is timeless and the writer does not specify the time or place when it happened. The timelessness of the story means that it could happen anywhere and anytime, and the focus is generally on the story's message.

Fairy tales, fables, and other children's stories commonly use the backdrop setting. For example, although [A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*](#) generally takes place in the Hundred Acre Wood, it does not point to any specific town.

It also does not specify the timeframe, making it a timeless favorite for generations of children across the world.

Integral Setting

In contrast to the timelessness of the backdrop setting, the integral setting is one that points to a specific place and time period. This is because the role of the setting is integral to the point of the story.

For example, historical fiction novels cover a specific time in history because that period plays a crucial role in unfolding the plot.

Everything that the characters do will also depend on the setting. If your story is set in the pioneer times, they will generally have to do what pioneer homesteading families did, such as maintain their own farms, churn their own butter, and do all the other countless chores of that time period.

How to Write the Setting of a Story

One important rule in writing is always “show, don’t tell.” So how do you show the setting of a story? The following tips will help you to create and share a believable setting.

1. Write what you know, or do your research.

The best way to create a believable setting is to write about a place that you do know. But if that’s not possible, your next best bet is to do plenty of research.

For example, in Judy Blume’s Masterclass, the bestselling author shares how she once set a story in a city that she had only visited on vacation. While it seemed interesting at the time, looking back, she believes that she could’ve done better by putting it in a place she knew more intimately.

You can also try creating fantasy maps to get a better feel of your setting (especially if it was born in your imagination), and share that map with your readers so they can understand the layout and details of your setting.

2. Describe the setting using your 5 senses.

When you arrive in any new city, what things stand out to you? How the skyline looks; how many people are moving around, how the city sounds, and how it even smells. Pay attention to the details.

When you write about the place your character lives in, create imagery by describing it in terms of all your senses. This will make it seem more real to your readers.

3. Let your descriptions flow naturally.

But, with your desire to present all the details of your setting, exercise restraint. Show only whatever is necessary in the first few pages, and incorporate the rest into your story over time.

For example, if your story is about a hero's journey through treacherous mountains, at the start you will likely only describe where your hero is at the moment. The rest can unfold as he goes along.

4. Describe your setting through your characters' eyes.

Unless you are an expert at using the omniscient third-person point of view, one creative way to make setting seem more real is to describe it through a character's eyes or thoughts. You don't have to make them say these things out loud, but they can think these thoughts.

For example, a trip to a new city will look different to an adult who has always been traveling than to a child who has never stepped foot outside his family's farmhouse. Describing the new city from the child's perspective will lend it a creative air.

Why Is the Setting Important in a Story?

The setting of the story plays several key roles in moving the plot forward.

It sets the mood of the story.

What is the mood of your story? The setting helps the readers to imagine the elements at play around the characters. Is your story set in a bustling city or a lonely town? Reading a description of the place where the story takes place can give the readers a fixed picture of what to expect.

It sets parameters around the characters and plot.

The setting also gives the limits around what the characters can do and what can happen. For example, in fantasy novels, you as a writer build a world where the story takes place: what are the laws of the fantasy land? Do the characters have magical powers? What are they capable of doing?

It helps make the plot believable.

The plot is an essential element of a story, but the setting plays a key role in making the twists and turns believable or not. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, much of Frodo's journey through Middle Earth depends on the terrain that characterizes the story's setting.

It can contribute to the conflict.

Great writers know how to connect the setting to the conflict. The venue can add obstacles and limitations that the characters need to overcome, raising the stakes and making for a more entertaining story.

For example, in the 2012 film *The Impossible*, the conflict is triggered by the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and the story being set right in devastated Phuket, Thailand adds to the suspense of whether the characters will eventually find one another.

Changing places can also change characters' viewpoints and options.

For longer novels, the changes that happen to your setting can change your characters, as well.

For example, in *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara first encounters Atlanta as a bustling metropolis that she falls in love with. Soon, the war ravages Atlanta, and we observe the changes through Scarlett's eyes.

Much later, she returns to the devastated city and watches as it is rebuilt again, while she rebuilds her own life from the ashes.

Examples of Setting

Below are 4 examples from literature that demonstrate an effective use of setting in a story.

***The Long Winter* by Laura Ingalls Wilder**

In *The Long Winter*, part of *The Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, an unexpectedly long winter blocks off the food supply and families in the isolated town must find ways to survive.

First, the setting places the story in southeastern Dakota Territory around 1880–1881, when a severe winter took really was recorded and experienced by the author in her childhood.

The mere fact that the area is difficult to get to makes the problems of food supply a more logical part of the story. Also, the time period gives us insights into how homesteaders in generations past made do with what they had.

***Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor**

To show the struggles of the black community in the South, Mildred Taylor sets *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* right in the cotton fields tended by black farmers, both owned by these black families and those that are leased out by white landlords.

This setting helps the readers connect with the plight of the black families.

***The Borrowers* by Mary Norton**

In *The Borrowers*, Mary Norton puts the setting right in the middle of ordinary things: inside the house of regular-sized human beings, a family of Borrowers run in and out to “borrow” common, everyday items.

The book lends charm to these regular objects by describing them from the perspective of inches-tall, humanlike creatures. The sequels to the book take place in other areas, such as in the fields and on the river, but this first book makes the Borrowers more easily imaginable by showing them in relation to things everyone has at home.

***The Magician's Nephew* by C.S. Lewis**

The Chronicles of Narnia takes place in two settings: the land of Narnia and the regular world where the main characters come from at the start of the story, which is also where they return.

One exception is *The Magician's Nephew*, where the children first go into different lands in Narnia but accidentally bring back the witch into their world. This unique use of setting catches the reader's attention and instantly brings to mind the question of, "What if something like this were to happen?"

Building Your Setting

When it comes to writing your setting, make sure you pay attention to each essential element of the story. As you write, keep in mind how your setting might affect certain elements of your plot or your characters' experiences.

After you work on setting, also consider learning some more about the other elements of a story, such as creating believable characters and building rising action for your conflict.