

THE 7 SENSES OF SETTING

Techniques for evoking the world
your characters occupy



FICTION YOGI
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Introduction

Unless you're a sci-fi or fantasy author, you may be forgiven for thinking that your story's setting is much further down the list of priorities for your novel than, say, strong characterization and the all-important plot points. However, regardless of your genre, setting encompasses much more than simply “the place where your story happens”, and when incorporated mindfully, can become a powerful tool with which to set your book's tone and hook your readers' interest.

In this short guide, we'll discuss how each of the senses can aid you in creating immersive worlds so vivid your readers lose themselves entirely in them.

But what's with the **seven** senses, I hear you ask, aren't there only five? Okay, so I might riff on the term “sense” a little bit in the last two, but they're still valid and you'll see what I mean when we get there. Before we jump in, though, let's first clarify what we mean when we say setting...

WHAT IS SETTING?





Your novel's setting

From the macro to micro level, setting is the world or universe your story takes place in, the country or countries, cities, towns or villages, and then the immediate environment of each scene. But aside from physical locations, setting also includes the time period, the climate, the social, cultural and historical context, and the people who inhabit your characters' lives. Where your characters exist influences every single thing about them - who they've been, who they are, who they might become.

Think of standing at one end of a long, dark tunnel, looking down the narrowing passage to a glimpse of daylight at the very far end. Setting is about what is down there on the outside where that daylight peeps through, as well as what is in front of you right here where you stand, and all the darkness in between.

And the easiest way to make this tunnel's existence "real" for your reader is through your narrator's or characters' senses.

1. SENSE OF SIGHT



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Sight in setting

The sense of sight is used in your story to vividly describe your scenes so readers may visualize and immerse themselves in them, whilst also evoking emotion, establishing mood, and conveying deeper meanings without directly stating them.

This you can achieve to powerful effect through: descriptive imagery; symbolism or repeated motifs; metaphor and simile; character physical description; movement and action, or stillness; foreshadowing through visual clues; time and seasons; or unexpected and striking visual contrasts. Importantly, when writing setting description, keep in mind who's perspective you're looking at it from.

For example, consider for a moment what an amateur boxer observes at a professional fight - maybe techniques the boxers use, their physiques, their focus, their coaching team. Then what a young child might see - crowds yelling, drinks spilled, money changing hands, sweat on the fighter's bodies, blood dripping to the mat, legs that collapse. Same fight, same scene, different things noticed.



Sight in setting example

Book: The Shadow of the Wind

Author: Carlos Ruiz Zafón

Narrator-character: 16-year-old Daniel Sempere

“A reef of clouds and lightning raced across the skies from the sea. I should have run to take shelter from the approaching downpour, but the man’s words were beginning to sink in. 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.”

This passage occurs in the aftermath of Daniel’s encounter with a mysterious and intimidating disfigured stranger, and as such it colours everything he sees as foreboding. In his shaken state, he perceives the storm as threatening and unstoppable now it’s set in motion - racing clouds and lightning, rivers of blackened blood, blotting out the moon, darkness - echoing the ominous events in the story.



Sight in setting tips

Setting does more than simply place visual markers in the reader's mind. Whether your reader consciously realizes or not, you are also both compounding the atmosphere/mood in each scene, and providing valuable insights about your characters. In the boxing match example previously mentioned, the amateur boxer is pointedly focused on learning in order to become a better fighter himself, while the child is overwhelmed by the unfamiliar chaotic sights and violence of the event.

So when describing “visual” setting in any given scene, it's useful to bear in mind:

- who is narrating;
- what the narrator notices, or chooses to focus on;
- how the narrator interprets what they see - for character-narrators, this is based on their individual life experiences, comprehension, and current mood;
- what mood you want to evoke in that scene.

2. SENSE OF HEARING



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Hearing/sound in setting

Vivid description of sound in your writing gives readers an opportunity to immerse themselves in your setting by adding another layer to it. As well as providing aural pointers that readers recognize, sound - like sight - is also used to create atmosphere and evoke particular moods.

For example, in a mystery or horror, the firing up of a chainsaw in a neighbour's garden or a car backfiring on the highway late at night may make your character jump; or in a romance, ocean waves lapping or chirping birds may set the scene for a heartwarming coming together of your characters.

Just as with sight, consider what your characters take notice of when it comes to sound? Do some sounds stand out to them because they're unfamiliar, unexpected, or carry joyful or unpleasant memories? Likewise, what is important for your readers to know or feel in each scene, and how can you steer them in that direction through your descriptions of sound in your setting?



Sound in setting example

Book: The Aerodynamics of Pork

Author: Patrick Gale

Character-narrator: 15-year-old Seth; feigning sleep on the train home from school.

“Doors opened and he could hear the carriage fill. Mumbled apologies and murmured thanks sounded around him. A titter of children stamped past in the aisle. Doors slammed and the carriage was once more in motion. He could feel someone’s skirt against his knees. ‘Excuse me?’ Her voice was firm and forties, faintly troubled.”

With his eyes closed, Seth relies on his other senses to imagine the scene unfolding in the carriage, notably his hearing. The sounds he describes are of a setting familiar to most readers and give the impression the train is busy. We infer from this that Seth is feigning sleep so he won’t have to speak to anyone or move from his window seat. His sardonic, alliterative depiction of the woman’s voice is befitting of his youth - “firm and forties, faintly troubled”. As this scene proceeds, he paints a vivid picture of the ensuing moments until he does fall asleep, using only his hearing and his youthful imagination.



Sound in setting tips

Just as with all the sense perceptions in your narrative, what your character hears, or your narrator reports, guides your readers towards a particular understanding and/or emotional response. So, for example, sound can be used to:

- Resonate - connect readers to familiar scenes (city, countryside, coast, restaurant, busy office, bus ride, home at Christmas, etc);
- Suggest season or time - crackling fire, crunching footsteps on snow, hum of lawn mowers, buzzing insects, clash of breakfast dishes, hoot of an owl;
- Convey atmosphere - peaceful trickling water, loud competing voices;
- Describe the weather - its effect on events or the mood (suffocating, refreshing);
- Provide background noise - peaceful or chaotic, mirroring or contrasting with the scene;
- Foreshadow or surprise - tolling bells or sudden silence; a harsh scream cutting through an otherwise playful moment at the beach.

3. SENSE OF SMELL



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Smell in setting

Smell is closely linked to memory and emotion, and as such can be used to powerful effect. It can resonate universally - the salty scent of the sea air. Or it can be an aroma specific to your characters that provokes a reaction in them, good or bad - the earthy combination of cow manure, mud and sodden grass on a farm after a downpour; the chemical sting of sterilized surfaces in a laboratory.

Smell is like taste, it's subjective, and everyone has a different sense of smell or degree to which they are able to smell, so keep this in mind as your characters or narrator use scent to describe the setting. One character may be transported back to the pleasant memories of their childhood at the scent of freshly cut grass. Another may find the cigarette smoke and car oil combination of the mechanic's garage a poignant reminder of the father they lost.

Perhaps some of your characters can't smell at all, and this could have profound consequences, such as not smelling a gas leak in their home or place of work.



Smell in setting example

Book: The Ghost Road

Author: Pat Barker

Narrator-character: Billy Prior

“He was pulling his half-buttoned tunic over his head when he noticed a smell of gas. Faint but unmistakable. Tented in dark khaki, he fought back the rush of panic, sweat streaming down his sides, not the gradual sweat of exercise but a sudden drench, rank, slippery, hot, then immediately cold. He freed himself from the tunic and went to open the window...”

The book is set in 1918, and in this scene Billy is visiting with a prostitute before returning to combat in France. The “faint” scent of gas in the woman’s room is enough to send Billy into a panic - he goes on to describe his dry mouth, wet armpits, skipping heart, bulge in his throat, tight and shrivelled genitals - and we infer from this that the smell provokes a memory of his experiences in France, the “tented in dark khaki” adding to the imagery of the soldier in wartime.



Smell in setting tips

Use the universally recognized scents to paint a picture of your scene's setting, such as exhaust fumes and street food in the city, or sunscreen and sea salt at the beach. But then get more specific, associating scents with your characters for a deeper, more original and immersive reading experience.

What memories do certain smells provoke for them and how does it make them feel? Are they reminded of family holidays, school years or boarding school, periods of struggle, people no longer with them? Do certain smells remind them of places they were once happy? Or does the scent of a house or room bring back bad, unexpected, or repressed memories?

When your characters emotionally connect to particular smells (good or bad), your readers will empathize even if they're unfamiliar with the scents themselves, and this enables you to build on the atmosphere of a particular setting, the emotion of the scene, and your readers' engagement with it.

4. SENSE OF TASTE





Taste in setting

Taste is most often used in setting to evoke a sense of place and time period, such as flavours that have associations with certain countries, cultures or traditions. Think of the spices of India, sushi of Japan, buttered croissants of Paris, or the UK's fish and chips wrapped in newspaper.

Flavours carried in the air may also leave a taste in your characters' mouths, such as the gritty dust of a traffic jam during the height of summer, or the damp, earthy air of the forest. And as smell and taste are closely connected, what your characters smell may make their mouths water - freshly baked cakes, frying onions; or their lips and stomachs curl in revulsion - farm silage, rotting meat.

Again, taste is subjective, and your characters will have their own ideas of what's tasty and what's repulsive. Tastes, just like smells, also come with emotional attachments to particular settings - home-cooked meals, school dinners, rum and coke in Ibiza, the fish that induced food poisoning in Mauritius.



Taste in setting example

Book: The Catcher in the Rye

Author: JD Salinger

Narrator-character: Holden Caulfield

“You should’ve seen the steaks. They were these little hard, dry jobs that you could hardly even cut. You always got these very lumpy mashed potatoes on steak night, and for dessert you got Brown Betty, which nobody ate, except maybe the little kids in the lower school that didn’t know any better - and guys like Ackley that ate everything.”

In this scene Holden is referring to the same meal they had every Saturday night at Pencey, the boarding school he gets expelled from for failing classes. He’s cynical about the school’s “steak night”, believing it was only to impress the parents who visited on Sundays. This youth-like cynicism extends to other areas of the school, his life and friendships, and culminates in him catching a train to New York until such time his parents will have learned of his expulsion.



Taste in setting tips

Taste can be used as much as any of the senses to add layers of authenticity to your setting. People, by nature, are quick to make associations between experiences, events and places, and you can use this to add depth to your story. For the purposes of demonstration, here are some of my taste/setting associations:

- **Burgers with fried onions, green pop in polystyrene cups** - **high school**, buying food in the canteen after years of packed lunches in primary school;
- **Chargrilled shish kebabs** - **Beefeater**, first meal in a restaurant with friends;
- **Roast dinners/chicken chasseur** - **home**, my mother's cooking;
- **Scrumpy Jack Cider** - **Torquay B&B**, first holiday with my now-husband;
- **Harvey Wallbangers** - **Nightclub**, 18, drunkest and most hungover ever;
- **Salted peanuts** - waiting at a **hospital** as a kid, ate enough to make me sick;
- **Tomato and herb soup** - **Department store café**, a pregnancy craving that abruptly turned to a pregnancy aversion.

5. SENSE OF TOUCH





Touch in setting

You can use the sense of touch to describe setting via: physical sensations, textures, temperatures, or the weight or pressure of objects in your scene's environment. This tactile imagery helps readers not only visualize the setting but also “feel it”, adding a deeper sensory connection to the world the characters inhabit. Here are some examples:

Physical sensations - nausea at a crime scene; trembling hands at the lectern;

Textures - rugged rocks on the coast; plush carpet in the drawing room; polished desk in the boss's office; hard plastic of the waiting room chair;

Temperature - whispering breeze against cheeks in a dark forest; scorching sand underfoot in a foreign country;

Weather - rain battering clothes to the skin on the sidelines of a football match; prickle of snow down the collar while waiting for roadside recovery at night;

Objects - a heavy glass paperweight in a deceased parent's study; a tractor's icy cold steering wheel in winter at break of dawn.



Touch in setting example

Book: Dracula

Author: Bram Stoker

Narrator-character: Jonathan Harker

“When the calèche stopped the driver jumped down, and held out his hand to assist me to alight. Again I could not but notice his prodigious strength. His hand actually seemed like a steel vice that could have crushed mine if he had chosen.”

This is taken from Jonathan’s journal early in the book as he makes his way to Count Dracula’s castle in Transylvania. The journey has already been filled with eerie and terrifying foreshadowing elements, and here, as the coachman drops him at the castle before hurrying away, his steel grip is another clue to both the strong man’s anxiety towards the castle and of Jonathan’s vulnerability. There’s a sense that what he’s entering will not be easy to leave. Dracula is the epitome of horror novels, for which all the senses are pivotal in describing the setting to full effect.



Touch in setting tips

Use touch to elaborate on the atmosphere and mood you want your scene to convey. You may use a harsh wind buffeting your character's body to foreshadow the struggles coming their way; or the prick of their chef's kitchen knife against their finger to show distraction; or the cold chill passing through an empty room and raising goosebumps on their arms to give your story an eerie quality.

Harsh touches - push, pull, hit, grab, pinch - can be used to indicate an unpleasant environment; for example, an angry crowd at a political convention, the discomfort of a busy subway train in rush hour, a mass fight in a bar. While the opposite is also true; the lap of cool ocean waves around sun-warmed ankles, silk sheets in a luxury hotel suite; dew-damp grass soaking through soft sandals in springtime.

Contrasts also work to convey mood and meaning. Such as the strong hand that gently guides your character away from the drunken bar brawl; the luxury hotel silk sheets cold comfort for the lover who couldn't get away from his wife.

6. SENSE OF CHARACTER





Character as inseparable from setting

So this is where we riff a little on the senses, and our sixth sense - somewhat ironically - is character. As we've alluded to repeatedly during each of the five senses, your characters' perceptions are primarily the vehicle through which setting is conveyed to readers, and these perceptions are coloured by everything from your characters' genetics, upbringing, life experiences, values, morals, likes and dislikes, etc.

What Character A notices and feels about a particular setting is likely to be different from what Character B notices and feels. Hence why people often have slightly conflicting recollections or impressions of the same event or place.

By viewing setting through your characters' eyes, you give readers the space to observe for themselves: an original take on a familiar scene; vivid images of unfamiliar scenes; your characters' nature, life experiences, and current state of mind; the story's emotional tone and where the plot may be heading.



Character in setting example

Book: The Bell Jar

Author: Sylvia Plath

Narrator-character: Esther Greenwood

“It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen. With her white hair and white dress she was so white she looked silver. I think she must have reflected the neons over the bar. I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I’d never seen before in my life.”

Nineteen-year-old Esther is in New York having won a prize to work on a magazine with eleven other young women. Doreen is the only one in the group Esther is drawn to, and in this scene early in the book we infer Esther’s sense of being in an unfamiliar place and out of her depth from the way she describes the setting - bar too dark, Doreen dazzling in the darkness, reflecting the neons as if she belongs there while Esther moves into the shadows, unrecognizable to herself. Her impressions foreshadow the mental disintegration she’s heading towards.



Character in setting tips

Your character's perception of their environment impacts their life and relationships in many ways. For instance:

- Shapes their identity - where they grew up is likely to have influenced their background, beliefs, personality and outlook on life (optimistic or pessimistic, go-getting or reticent, etc);
- Influences their choices - the constraints or opportunities afforded by their setting may determine their actions or decisions (e.g., resourceful or clueless in a crisis, self-respecting or self-destructive);
- Reflects their inner conflict or growth - setting as a mirror or contrast to their internal state (chaotic weather event or natural disaster, place of peace or solace, etc);
- Forces them to act or change - your story's setting can propel your character's journey and drive them towards change (surviving hostile environment, navigating societal norms/expectations, etc).

A stack of books is shown from a low angle, with the word 'PLOT' spelled out in wooden letter tiles on top. The books are slightly blurred, and the background is a soft, light green. A semi-transparent grey horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title text. At the bottom, more wooden letter tiles are scattered on a reflective surface.

7. SENSE OF PLOT



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Setting as inseparable from plot

My seventh riffed sense is plot and how setting is inseparably linked to it.

While some novels are more heavily reliant on setting than others - the dark and mysterious castle belonging to Dracula in Transylvania; uncharted territory of the African Congo in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* - all writers have to consider where their stories will take place and what impact that environment has on the characters and the events that unfold.

Generally, all plots are driven by the characters' actions, and those actions are driven by internal motivators as well as external, such as setting. Setting can either work in favour of your characters - somewhere familiar in which they're comfortable and can exert their strengths and maybe their status or power; or it can work against them - an environment that holds them back, doesn't allow them to grow as individuals, scuppers their dreams, disempowers them, or perhaps is unfamiliar and strange.



Plot in setting example

Book: Sunset Song

Author: Lewis Grassic Gibbon

Narrator-character: Chris Guthrie

“The wet fields squelched below her feet, oozing up their smell of red clay from under the sodden grasses, and up in the hills she saw the trail of the mist, great sailing ships of it, going south on the wind... she could never leave it, this life of toiling days and the needs of beasts and the smoke of wood fires and the air that stung your throat so acrid...”

This scene comes after Chris’s father has died and her brother left home. She realizes she’ll never leave the land she’s grown up on; that she is, effectively, bound to every element of it. *Sunset Song* is heavily setting-driven. It uses all the senses to reflect how life on the rural Scottish farm in often hostile weather conditions both influences and echoes the difficulties of this dysfunctional, broken family.



Plot in setting tips

Here are just some ways setting can be inextricably linked to your plot:

- As context for conflict - the social, political, or environmental conditions create challenges or tensions that drive the plot, e.g. social inequality in *The Hunger Games*, racism in the American South in *To Kill A Mockingbird*;
- As catalyst - setting as a direct trigger for key plot events, such as a natural disaster, or a city's political upheaval sparking revolution;
- As guide to pacing and tension - using different settings to influence and reflect the pace and mood of the plot, e.g. confined spaces for heightened, breathless suspense, or sprawling settings for slower, more reflective moments or expansive, multi-threaded plotlines;
- Shaping the stakes - environments that define what's at stake in your plot, e.g. in legal thrillers, societal norms and laws might pose life-altering consequences for the characters' actions, or the plot of fantasy novels may depend on the survival of entire kingdoms or control of magical elements.

SUMMARY



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Finally...

Rather than being an afterthought, or solely a device to enable your readers to visualize your story's world, your novel's setting is intrinsically entwined with both your characters and your plot. It influences your characters - who they are and their relationships - impacting how they respond to situations, what action and decisions they take, and their resources and capacity for change. Likewise, your plot will be influenced by your settings to a greater or lesser extent, potentially even directly impacting or being the forward driver of your plot's central storyline.

Essentially, all human experience is comprised solely of the senses through which we encounter the world. So by using these senses as a guide in your story, your characters or narrator can bring your settings to life through layers of sensual imagery, evoking atmosphere and mood in ways that complete your narrative and aid the reader's full immersion in your fictional world.



References

Eternal gratitude goes to the writers whose great work teaches us more than we could ever learn from textbooks. In this guide, those writers are:

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Final word

I hope you've found this guide useful.

Visit the **Resource Hub** at Fiction Yogi for more writing, editing and publishing tips, or drop me a line if there's something you'd like to learn more about that I haven't yet covered.

Take care & happy writing,
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