

ACTIVE SETTING SERIES



Mary Buckham's mastery of the effective use of setting delivers in this instructional and must-have tool for any author who wishes to improve or refine their writing skills.

— Kelly L. Stone, author of

*Thinking Write: The Secret to Freeing Your Creative Mind*

# WRITING

## Active Setting

Book 1 • Characterization and Sensory Detail

# Mary Buckham

*Award-winning co-author of Break Into Fiction™: 11 Steps to Building a Story That Sells*

**WRITING ACTIVE SETTING**  
**BOOK 1: CHARACTERIZATION AND SENSORY DETAIL**

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For the writers who want to expand their understanding of the craft of writing!

### **Note to Readers**

Every effort has been made to cleanly edit the text. However, typos do slip in. If you find an error in the text, please email: [Mary@MaryBuckham.com](mailto:Mary@MaryBuckham.com) so the issue can be corrected. I appreciate you as a reader and want to make sure you enjoy the reading and learning process. If you find errors, please bring them to my attention so I can continue to provide better books for all readers.

Thank you!

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## Part 1

### INTRODUCTION

Setting is probably one of the most underused tools in a writer's toolbox, but it doesn't have to be.

Settings involve so much more than stringing together a list of adjectives or dumping a chunk of visual clues to orient the reader. Setting can create the world of your story, show characterization, add conflict, slow or speed up your pacing, add or decrease tension, relate a character's back story, thread in emotion, and more. Some authors are known for creating Settings that are so deeply integrated into the scene that when readers step away from reading they still find themselves in the place described on the page.

Think of Setting as the stage which contains your story, and it should be as important as any character whether you choose to write sparsely or in great detail. The setting orients the readers to the geography, climate, social context, time of the story's events, foreshadowing of unfolding events, architecture, and much more. When handled well the Setting can also impact the thoughts of your readers and actions of your characters and thus move the story forward.

If not handled well, poor Setting description can thwart or frustrate the reader to the point where they want to throw away the story or actually do put your book down and walk away.

Setting can add so much to your story world or it can add nothing. When creating Active Setting we're looking to add subtext in your writing, a deeper way for your reader to experience your story. Instead of simply describing a place or thing for the sake of description, we'll look closely at how to maximize what you are showing the reader. You'll learn how to verbally illustrate a place and where to insert this information so the reader will understand the intention of your scenes and be pulled deeper into the story. Specifically in Book 1, we'll be looking at using Setting to *reveal your characters* and to *add sensory details*.

We'll make sure you do not focus your reader on something that isn't pertinent to your story.

**Note: The details of your Setting must matter to your story.**

Example — you're showing the reader a room in a house. That room and the details in that room should show characterization or conflict or emotion or foreshadowing or be there for a reason instead of simply describing placement of objects in space.

In Book 1, let's examine Setting in two vital ways: to show Characterization and to add Sensory details. But first an overview of what Setting is and what it can be.

## OVERVIEW

In this book we'll focus on keeping in mind three key elements in crafting Setting:

- (1) You need to create the world of your story.
- (2) Each character in your story experiences the story world differently.
- (3) Your story world involves more than one sense.

What this means is that your role as a writer is to create the world of your story so that the reader not only sees it but experiences every detail. Regardless if you're writing about a famous place that millions have lived in or experienced, your *Character's* perceptions of that world are what matters in your story. You're not writing about *any* living room, *any* small town, *any* large city; you are writing about a specific living room, a specific small town, a specific large city and why those things matter to your character.

Pull the reader deeper into your story by allowing them to experience the Setting on a deeper level. It can be the difference between standing on a beach facing the Pacific Ocean, feeling the sand beneath your bare toes, inhaling the scent of tangy salt spray, hearing the roar and slam of the waves versus looking at a postcard.

Learning to write Active Setting is as easy as knowing when and where you want to ramp up your Setting details and why.

I've had the privilege to work with thousands of writers in all genres over the years and to see them take the blah or non-existent Setting of their stories and make it work harder. That's my wish for every writer who takes the time to study Active Setting.

## READY TO START?

Throughout this book we'll be looking at how you can ramp up elements of your story by how you use or do not use your Setting. In this book we'll take an overview of why Setting matters to a story and see examples from published authors showing you in a variety of genres how they maximized Setting in their novels. Setting is more than describing a place.

**Note: Active Setting means using your Setting details to work harder and smarter.**

First, I want you to focus in on what seems like a basic assumption:

*Your reader has never been in your world — wherever your world is.*

I don't care if it's New York City and most of your readers live in Manhattan; your reader has never been in *your* world. The Setting and world you'll be painting on the page are more than a travelogue or a list of street names.

Not everything that a character sees, smells, tastes, or touches need end up in your final manuscript, but it's a place to start. For example, a POV [point of view of the person whose thoughts, emotions, background, and world view the reader is experiencing the story through] character that is miserable in a school environment will not see or notice the same items as a POV character who finds school a sanctuary and the center of their world.

Think of you as the author focusing the reader on what's key about the world Setting of your POV character and then bring that information to life through your word choices, the details, and how you thread these details together.

**Remember that the details you choose to share must matter.**

Do not focus your reader on something that is not pertinent to your story. Why? Because you're wasting an opportunity to make your Setting work harder. Too much narrative, which is what Setting can be in large chunks, slows your pacing.



*Example:* You're showing the reader a room in a house. That room and the details in that room should show characterization or conflict or emotion or foreshadowing or be there for a reason instead of simply to describe placement of objects in space.

Remember, you are not just working with objects in space — you're creating a world. When we make characters interact with the space they're in, we can make those few words work as more than just descriptors and turn them into ways the reader can get a grasp on the world as the character experiences it.

*Poor example:* Sue walked into her mother's living room, past the couch and the coffee table to sit down in a chair.

What is the above sentence showing you? Revealing to you? Letting you experience? Not much, it's simply moving a character through space.

*Rewritten example:* Sue walked into the gilt and silk living room of her mother's home, gagging on the clash of floral odors: lilac potpourri, jasmine candles, lavender sachets. Did her mom even smell the cloying thickness anymore? Did she ever try to glance beyond the draped and beribboned window coverings that kept the room in perpetual dusk? Or was she using the white-on-white colors and velvet textures to hide from the real world? With a sigh Sue sank into a designer chair and hoped she could crawl out of it sooner rather than later.

*Or*

Sue walked into the heart of her childhood home, remembering playing cowboys and Indians behind the worn tweed couch, building tents draped over the nicked coffee table, hiding behind the cotton drapes that were now replaced by newer blinds. Her grandmother used to shudder when she deigned to visit the house, but Sue's mum didn't care. Now she'd no longer be knitting in her easy chair or patting the sagging couch for a tell-me-all-about-it session.

See? The details painted allow you to experience a lot more than simply seeing a room. That's the power of Active Setting.

## ANCHORING THE READER

So... how do you initially show the Setting in the scene? One thing to remember is that the reader does need a quick "anchoring," probably in the first few paragraphs of a new scene or new chapter, or a change in location. Where are we? What time of day is it? Is it quiet or noisy? What is the quality of light?

**Note: Use of light can show time change. Instead of telling the reader it's twenty minutes later, show them by the cast of late afternoon shadows, the glare of the sun directly overhead, the quieting of the birds as dusk falls.**

The reader will be mentally asking these questions, and the longer you keep the information from them, the less they will focus on what **you** want them to focus on, and the more removed they will be from the story and the characters, waiting to figure out the where, when, who, or why.

Once you've established or anchored the reader into the where using a strong Setting description — let the characters interact with the Setting, move through it, pick things up and brush past them.

**Note: It's important to let a reader know the passage of time since the last scene or chapter ended because readers will want the sense of how much time has passed since then.**

Whenever there's an introduction of a Setting that's different for the POV character, or for the reader, you'll want to use a few words of description to orient or anchor the reader into the new environment. For example, we always notice what's changed — you might not notice an object on your mantel every day, but you do notice when it's missing. If this object was foreshadowed earlier in the story, say a beloved photograph, by now showing that it's missing, the reader mentally sees the rest of the room that you've already established, but also knows where the POV character is. We're in that character's skin seeing what was once there and now is not. So instead of starting this scene with the character re-

entering the living room, you show the reader that the first thing the character notices when she enters the living room is the gap on the mantel. The space where her mother's photo was. Bam! We're in that living room without spending a lot of time redescribing what the reader has already been shown.

Look at how Laura Anne Gilman orients the reader as to where the character is physically in space and gives a hint of the protagonist's back story, characterization of two different characters, and a hint of potential conflict between characters through her description of a room. All in only one paragraph!

*The only way to describe J's place was "warm." Rosewood furniture against cream-colored walls, and touches of dark blue and flannel gray everywhere, broken by the occasional bit of foam green from his Chinese pottery collection. You'd have thought I'd have grown up to be Uber Society Girl, not pixie-Goth, in these surroundings. Even my bedroom — now turned back into its original use as a library — had the same feel of calm wealth to it, no matter how many pop-culture posters I put up or how dark I painted the walls.*

—Hard Magic — Laura Anne Gilman.

Now let's dissect that paragraph to see the power of the individual parts.

*The only way to describe J's place was "warm."* [Subjective emotion from the POV character that gives a hint of her relationship with the room's owner. Plus we are able to get a quick sense of the feel of a place; we know when we've been in a warm or cool room even if we don't have too many details yet.]

*Rosewood furniture against cream-colored walls, and touches of dark blue and flannel gray everywhere,* [Notice the pieces of furniture are not described because it's not important to know there's a couch or two chairs in the room. It's more important to get a sense of the owner of the room by his choice of subtle and understated colors and the wood of his furniture — rosewood is a world away from oak or distressed pine. We're getting a glimpse into the world of the secondary character here.]

*...broken by the occasional bit of foam green from his Chinese pottery collection.* [Here, because collecting Chinese pottery is not the same as collecting baseball cards or stamps, the reader has another image of the wealth and refinement of the room's owner.]

*You'd have thought I'd have grown up to be Uber Society Girl, not pixie-Goth, in these surroundings.* [Now the reader is focused on the differences between the POV character's sense of self and the room's owner by use of contrast. This is/was her home yet it's clear she does not see herself as belonging.]

*Even my bedroom — now turned back into its original use as a library — had the same feel of calm wealth to it, no matter how many pop-culture posters I put up or how dark I painted the walls.* [Conflict and foreshadowing hinted at as well.]

Through her specific word choices and which objects she's chosen to comment on, Gilman has deepened her world building between these two characters in the series. We are now seeing where the POV character came from and where her mentor still lives through the use of Setting description. The author's word choices point out the contrast between "calm wealth," "pop-culture posters," and dark-painted walls reveals to the reader the POV sense of not belonging in the world in which she was raised, which is a key theme in this story.

Let's look at another example approaching the Setting from a rough draft version to the final version.

[First draft] The wardens led me to a room and left me there.

Pretty bland description. The reader is not deep into this character's POV because the character does not experience the room.

**Note: Showing the room through deeper POV allows the reader to experience the room on a more immediate level. The reader is in the room with the character.**

[Second Draft] I'm conducted to a room and left alone. It's the richest place I've ever been in.

Better because now we're given a little more insight into what the POV character is feeling based on the response to the room. But we still have no idea why the character feels this way. Nor can we see the room.

[Final Draft] *Once inside, I'm conducted to a room and left alone. It's the richest place I've ever been in, with thick deep carpets and a velvet couch and chairs. I know velvet because my mother has a dress with a collar made of the stuff. When I sit on the couch, I can't help running my fingers over the fabric repeatedly. It helps to calm me as I try to prepare for the next hour. The time allotted for the tributes to say goodbye to their loved ones.*

–Suzanne Collins – The Hunger Games

Here we have more Setting details that allow the author to show some characterization of the POV character, reveal emotions based on her interaction with this room, and all by adding just a few more details of Setting.

**Note: As in painting, when you use a cool ultramarine color then dab a spot of warm orange on the blue, it makes it pop. The reader can suddenly be “popped” deeper into the POV character’s head with a clearer picture of how he or she sees the world.**

### SUBTEXT IN SETTING

Have you ever attended an event with a friend or family member and later in discussing the event, you discover that based on the description the friend seemed to have —been at a totally different event? Mystery writer Agatha Christie used this ability of people to focus in on what matters to them in one of her *Hercule Poirot* stories to great effect. The Belgian detective asked half a dozen participants of a party to describe the room where the murder took place. All of the characters, because they came from different backgrounds, with different interests, described highlights of the room from totally different perspectives. One noted the very valuable and esoteric collectibles scattered around on the tabletops. Another, a soldier who spent many years in the Middle East, could tell the detective the tribal names of the woven rugs on the floor, whereas another character saw the room in terms of colors, and another could describe the type of period furniture.

Now if the reader had not “seen” the room through the detective’s eyes initially with a whole room image, but only saw the small snippets from the individual secondary characters the reader might see only a room with knick-knacks or just a room with carpets, but no furniture. By letting the audience see the whole room through Poirot’s POV first, and then revisiting the room through each character’s POV, the reader is led to solve the mystery of who killed the victim because only one character “saw” the weapon that was at hand.

**Note: The world Setting you are creating will be seen only through one character at a time, so it’s important to make sure that what your character sees matters.**

Let’s revisit an earlier point to see how a POV character that is miserable in a school environment will not see or notice the same items as a POV character who finds that same school a sanctuary and the center of his or her world.

*Example 1:* I strolled down the empty hallway, hearing the slap of my hard soles against the worn linoleum, remembering the all too many times I had crawled this same route to Mrs. Pendragon’s office.

One slap; you’re in trouble.

Two slap; shouldn’t have got caught.

Third slap; loser.

The stink of sweat and cheap cleaning supplies gagged me back then and did the same today. The flicker of a fluorescent light sent a shiver down my back. But I wasn’t sixteen anymore and heading down the fast slope of trouble even as I stopped before the closed wood and glass door of the principal’s office.

*Example 2:* The sounds caught me first. Laughter ricocheting off the metal lockers, the low rumble of a guy’s voice changing timbre, the kick slam of tennis shoes hitting stubborn locker doors. Then came the memories. Hand-lettered signs promising the next school dance, an orange and black banner urging the football or basketball team on to new heights, the crepe paper streamers still hanging from the last Pep Con. I’d been gone twenty years and in the space of twenty footsteps this hall tugged me back to the best times of my life.

## SETTING THE STAGE

Remember to think of Setting as the stage that contains your story.

Keeping setting lean and mean is important, but it can be dangerous to stuff all the details about a story setting into one paragraph. Often this will stop your pacing dead. However, it can be done well if your pacing is so strong that all the reader wants to do is get back into the story already. For example:

*It was a sunny April day. But Stark Street looked dreary. Pages from a newspaper cart wheeled down the street and banked against curbs and the cement stoops of cheerless row houses. Gang slogans were spray painted on brick fronts. An occasional building had been burned and gutted, the windows blackened and boarded. Small businesses squatted between the row houses. Andy's Bar & Grill, Stark Street Garage, Stan's Appliances, Omar's Meat Market.*

—Seven Up – Janet Evanovich

Let's look more closely at the above and break the Setting down to specific elements. First off Evanovich describes this Setting in depth because it is the first time her POV character arrives at this new location and she wants to make her character's world vivid to the reader. This is one of the places [pun intended] where the reader will allow the author to slow the pacing a bit in order to see where the character is so that the reader can feel and be in that place with the character.

Let's examine more closely how Evanovich uses her descriptive phrases to create the world of NJ Bounty Hunter Stephanie Plum — she does not leave it to the reader to guess about the neighborhood; she uses key details to make it come alive.

*It was a sunny April day.* [Orient the reader to time of year and a general sense of time of day. It's not night or early morning given that it's sunny. Also acts as a contrast to what comes next, which makes the reader take notice.]

*But Stark Street looked dreary.* [The author "tells" (versus shows) here what the POV character thinks about the Setting, but then goes on to show with specific details. Telling alone is shorthand and too much of it holds the reader at a distance from the story, but when telling is used with showing it can be effective. By telling us, Evanovich gives us a direction from which we can interpret what we're going to see next on this street.]

*Pages from a newspaper cart wheeled* [Action verbs, as opposed to passive "to be" verbs, make stronger, more concrete images in the reader's mind.]

*...down the street and banked* [action verb] *against curbs and the cement stoops of cheerless row houses.* [Specific types of houses — these are not bungalows or 80s ranch style homes and the reader can start to see the Setting more clearly by this small detail.]

*Gang slogans were spray painted on brick fronts.* [Very specific details showing the neglect of the area and how the buildings were made which paints a distinct image. Change this one detail, from brick to concrete or faded lap siding and you have very different images of the houses.]

*An occasional building had been burned and gutted, the windows blackened and boarded.* [By repeating the terms — burned and gutted, blackened and boarded, the author hammers home the images in this specific world.]

*Small businesses squatted* [action verb] *between the row houses. Andy's Bar & Grill, Stark Street Garage, Stan's Appliances, Omar's Meat Market.* [Notice the male names most common in the 50s. This tells the reader these are small, family-owned and probably older businesses.]

Now what if Evanovich had simply written:

It was a sunny April day. But Stark Street looked dreary. We looked for Omar's Meat Market and found it.

The reader would have felt rushed, and while knowing they were on a particular street in New Jersey because the story is unfolding in New Jersey, they would have no more sense of this world especially if the reader had never been to New Jersey. So instead of seeing the world of Evanovich's story the reader could be inserting images from a Kansas town or a French city.

Without clues the reader will default to what they know already and may get an erroneous setting image. One paragraph was all that was needed to anchor the reader to the world of the characters and make the setting come alive. Evanovich does not use a lot of Setting in her stories, but makes sure that at least once or twice in every story the reader

experiences the world of New Jersey-bounty hunter Stephanie Plum.

## PACING AND SETTING

If the character is returning to a place that hasn't been described in depth earlier in the story, the reader will not be as open to the pacing slowing on the revisit so you as author can describe place. The reader has most likely already created their own visuals because as readers we need to see the characters in some context. This is a small, but very important point and an error I see many newer writers make.

\* Waiting until too late to describe and orient the reader as to place.

\* Or forgetting totally that the reader has no idea where the character is in the story because they've moved from a known location to a new, unknown location.

If I write "Joe left his home and went to the city," the setting is so vague as to leave you clueless and frustrated. But if I write "Joe left his beach-side cottage and drove into Lake Forest City, a northern suburb of Seattle," the addition of a few specifics gives the reader enough to inhabit the character's world while keeping the main focus on what's happening in the story.

**Note: Without clues the reader will default to what they already know and can get a totally erroneous Setting image.**

The following is an example of orienting the reader via Setting when moving a POV character from one location to another. Add more than a hint of Setting only when that new location has an impact on the story.

The POV character is showing up to an interview for a job she didn't apply for, but needs. Look closely at what the author focuses the reader on in describing this area of New York City.

*The office — or whatever it was — didn't exactly inspire confidence. The address was a mostly kept-up building off Amsterdam Avenue, seven stories high and nine windows across. Brick and gray stone: that looked like the norm in this neighborhood. We weren't running with a high-income crowd, here. Still, I had seen and smelled worse, and the neighborhood looked pretty friendly — lots of bodegas and coffee shops, and the kids hanging around looked as if they'd stopped there to hang on the way home from school, not been there all day waiting for their parole officer to roll by.*

—Hard Magic — Laura Anne Gilman

Now let's look closer:

*The office — or whatever it was — didn't exactly inspire confidence.*

[Emotion=wariness. The reader gets an emotional feel for the area via the POV character's impressions.]

*The address was a mostly kept-up building off Amsterdam Avenue.* [For those who know NYC this small specific street name can say a lot, but those who don't will skim over the specific name as having no context or assume the POV character is seeing an economic state of this particular area of town.]

*...seven stories high and nine windows across.* [Now the reader has a distinct visual and physical image.]

*Brick and gray stone: that looked like the norm in this neighborhood.* [The reader is beginning to be reassured, subtly, that the POV character can enter this building. This space is the norm means it doesn't stand out as better or worse, and the POV character would not be stupid to enter.] *We weren't running with a high-income crowd, here. Still, I had seen and smelled worse,* [Sensory detail (covered in more depth later in this book) — the reader doesn't get a specific smell, but is subtly reminded that most of us are very aware that the smell of a building or neighborhood can also tell us what kind of world the character has entered.]

*...and the neighborhood looked pretty friendly — lots of bodegas and coffee shops, and the kids hanging around looked as if they'd stopped there to hang on the way home from school, not been there all day waiting for their parole officer to roll by.* [Here the reader has been refocused from the wariness at the beginning of the paragraph to comfort —

the buildings have not changed, but what the POV character focuses the reader on — kids hanging out after school — creates a different emotion and feel for the buildings and makes it understandable why the character now enters the building and doesn't run away screaming.]

And here's a final example where the author chose simply to describe and not add much more. Why? Because the reader needed a sense of place in order to explain the events that happened in the story, but not more. Sometimes the author doesn't want the focus shifted into too much detail about the Setting, and that's fine.

You'll find this technique used more often in mysteries, suspense, and thrillers where the author wants enough detail to anchor the reader, but not enough to stop the fast-paced forward momentum or the tension being created. Other genre stories can afford more Setting details — historical and literary stories for example — because the pacing of these genres can be slower. But even in these stories, too much Setting description that adds little to the story can leave readers dead in the water.

In the following example a young woman has gone missing after having car trouble near a well-known cemetery.

*Erin knew the road: a narrow strip of pavement that ran a few blocks alongside the sprawling cemetery's high chain-link fence. There was a park on the other side of the road — with a smaller, unfenced, old cemetery for Veterans of Foreign Wars. Only a block away, quaint, charming houses bordered the park, but there was something remote and slightly foreboding about that little back road — especially at night. Surrounded by so many graves, it was an awfully scary spot to have car problems.*

—Final Breath — Kevin O'Brien

The last sentence is the reason for the Setting description. If O'Brien had chosen to simply write:

*Surrounded by so many graves, it was an awfully scary spot to have car problems* and skimmed on Setting and word choices that created an emotional feel for where the incident happened, the tension and conflict in the story would have been lessened because you as the reader would have been told the Setting was scary, but not shown that it was scary. The story question raised — what happened to the missing girl — would not be as strong. But O'Brien did not need to go into other details about this cemetery — about the fact it's the largest in Seattle, or is the final resting place for Bruce Lee and his son Brandon, or is one of the oldest cemeteries in the community. So a brief three-sentence description, followed by that key summation line, did its job to show you where the incident happened and why it was plausible that this girl disappeared in this location.

### ASSIGNMENT:

**PART 1:** Describe a tree, a house, and a car from your own POV. No right or wrong here, as we're trying to establish *your* baseline way to use description and Setting. Do this part of the assignment before you look at Part 2. If it helps, think in terms of your story and as you describe a tree, a house, and a car.

**PART 2:** Notice your default way of describing elements of a Setting. Look to see if you write with too much information, not enough, with vague word choices. To help you, I've included some examples of these issues.

Intention: This is to determine how you most naturally write Setting elements. It's hard to change what we don't understand.

Some writers will write really long descriptions such as this tree description:

A Utah pine, I suppose. I know it wasn't an alligator. Remembering, I'd say the trunk was about a foot through, but the reason for the tree's importance was a lightning strike that burnt out the core. So the tree was alive on the outside and dead in the middle. The lowest limbs got thick as trunks and the branches went out and up. The shape was perfect for a tree house. After the dead middle trunk was cut off level with the live limbs that is. Scrounged pieces of 2x4 and small offcuts of plywood formed the tree house, which we lined with gunny sacking to make it feel like a real house. Slept in that tree more than once. Now a road goes over where the tree was. I reckon it provided winter fuel for someone's fireplace. The old jailhouse, though, still stands not a hundred yards away.

Lots of details in this description, too many as you the reader can get easily shifted from focusing on a specific tree to a lot of other issues, a character's back story, how the character feels about the absence of the tree, a secondary building that's now on the site. This example lets this writer know that he might need to pull in and focus the reader more on the

tree description.

Over-describing can cause you story issues that will impact your pacing and frustrate your reader. The most important world-building aspect in the above example is the description of the tree as alive on the outside, but dead on the inside. This gives enormous insight to the POV character's world and his relationship to it — we assume the character, too, is alive on the outside, but dead on the inside.

Another common Setting detail speed bump:

*Example:* a blue tract home.

Here we have too little detail. The author assumes the reader knows what is meant by a tract home, but since tract housing has been around since the 17<sup>th</sup> century there can be a huge difference between coal-miner homes in an 18<sup>th</sup> century Cornish town and wooden detached homes created in an American suburb shortly after World War II. Adding a few more specific words will pull your reader deeper into your specific story Setting.

*Rewrite:*

- \* A blue tract home in a 50s suburb.
- \* A copycat row of brick tract bungalows built for the coal miners, some faded red, others painted blue.
- \* Little wooden box tract houses built for single mill workers or families who couldn't afford more.

**Note: A few small details can make a huge difference. Don't think that adding Setting means adding paragraphs of details.**

*Example:* Tall evergreens

Another example of too little information or too vague that does not give the reader a strong enough image to either see or experience this tree. What is meant by tall? Larger than a child or a second-story house? And since an evergreen tree can technically be any tree that has leaves all year round, one reader might imagine a Ponderosa pine while another sees a Blue Spruce and another a Live Oak — very different-looking trees.

*Rewrite:*

- \* The towering live oak dwarfed the one story shack built against its trunk. [The change here gives the reader a clearer idea of the type of tree and its size.]
- \* The leaning cypress tree once must have stood seventy feet tall or more, but now looked like a crooked-back elder at half that height. [The change here gives a specific tree type plus a hint of the tone or feel of the passage.]
- \* The broad-leafed magnolia once was my height, but now arched taller than my five-foot-seven stretch. [The change here added a specific tree plus shows the POV character and a hint of his or her back story.]

Ignoring Setting details or using vague, non-specific details as a default mode of writing leaves your reader at a distance from your story and that's what we're looking at with learning to write Active Setting. But always consider the intention behind why you're showing Setting at all.

Here's an example of Setting that does not need too many details or words because the Setting is not being used to show information about the POV character or to orient/anchor the reader into a change in the story's location. The Setting is used to show the reader only one thing:

*“Woods surrounded the clearing in which Merlotte's stood, and the edges of the parking lot were mostly gravel. Sam kept it well lit, and the surrealistic glare of the high parking lot lights made everything look strange.”*

–Dead Until Dark – Charlaine Harris

In the above example the author wanted to keep the reader focused on the feel, the emotion of the Setting, and nothing more. Look what would have happened if Harris had chosen to overwrite this Setting.

*“Piney woods with a few wild magnolia trees surrounded the ninety foot by ninety foot clearing in which Merlotte’s stood, and the edges of the square parking lot were mostly gravel of the light grey variety, clashing with the red of the Georgia soil. Sam kept the lot well lit with at least six vapor-arc lights high overhead and a spotlight near the front door of the bar. The surrealistic glare of the high parking lot lights made everything look elongated and warped, like looking into one of those mirrors at carnivals.”*

See? All this detail shifts the focus away from the mood of the Setting and can slow the story pacing.

**Note: Be aware of the intention of using Setting details. If the reader needs to know the type of tree, then show it.**

**But if they don’t need that information, if it doesn’t add in some way to your story, then leave it out.**

*PART 3:* Start creating your own library of books where the author creates the world of the story in enough detail that you as a reader feel you are on scene. Notice particularly how these authors use Setting to show characterization and sensory detail. Look at where and how much Setting detail is used.

**Note: We’re always aiming for that balance in your story between no Setting or very little, and too much or unnecessary Setting.**

### RECAP

- \* A POV character that feels comfortable or at home in his or her environment will not see or notice the same details as a character who feels threatened or uncomfortable in that same environment.
- \* If your POV character is arriving in a place that hasn’t been described in depth earlier in your story, the reader will be more open to slowing your story pacing in order to orient or anchor the reader as to where the character is, but only if the Setting matters in some way in your story.
- \* The more narrative in your story, the slower your pacing, so thread your Setting details in judiciously and intentionally. If the piano in the corner of a room is meant to show the reader the environment of a character then add the piano. But if a couch and tables are described because they happen to be in a living room, and serve no other function, then refrain from allocating words to their description.
- \* Be specific in your details versus vague. A Ming vase shows more than a pretty vase.



## Part 2

### USING SUBJECTIVE SETTING DETAIL TO REVEAL CHARACTER

One of the ways that Setting can work harder in your stories is by using it to reveal something about the character viewing the Setting. Instead of stopping story flow to tell the reader Joe is a former Special Forces operative or that Fran loves children, you show this as you filter what they see through their experiences, personalities, backgrounds.

Here's a generic Setting example:

The street was a block long with three-story buildings on either side. Most of them brick. One was built out of concrete. All had steps leading down to the sidewalk. Five trees had been planted along the outer curb and several cars were parked along the street.

Pretty bland and non-descript. The reader sees buildings, but not much else. But look what happens when we take our Joe and Fran from above and revisit this Setting:

Joe stood on the corner, with the widest viewpoint of the 400-meter long street running east to west. Buildings squatted, all of uniform height and width, three-stories on either side. Most of them brick, but one of Soviet-grey concrete. Hide sights for a sniper? Possibly, but nothing stood out. Several areas of vulnerability and strength — the largest areas of view, but no faces at the windows or along the rooftops. Good. Escape route would be dead ahead or behind, unless he could access the buildings and use the roof. No alleys to create choke points, garbage cans that could contain a bomb, or loose items, backpack, boxes that could hide an IED. The types and number of vehicles were what he expected on a quiet street, except for the big van that could be surveillance, especially with its out-of-state plates and dark tinted windows. The one with leaves from one of the scrawny trees fronting the sidewalk littered on its roof, which meant it'd been there for a while.

Do you get a clearer image of not only the street, but of Joe and his background? The reader experiences the street on a deeper level and is right there with Joe, seeing what he's seeing, and learning a lot about him from how he views the Setting.

Let's see how child-loving Fran might see the same street.

The street stretched a block long with the sounds of kids of all ages shouting and laughing, noise that zipped from the three-story buildings on either side. Most of the apartments were brick — the old fashioned-kind of brick that screamed genteel families and industrious lives. One building stood out — being concrete, as if the people who lived there didn't care so much about their surroundings. Steps led down from each home to the cracked sidewalk, filled with chalk drawings and hopscotch squares. Five boxwood trees marched along the outer curb, one with a droopy Happy Birthday balloon snagged in its branches. Several mini-vans and SUVs parked along the street, waiting for the next trip to school or soccer.

So what did you learn about Fran? About what matters in her life? What she wants more of in her world just based on how she subjectively focused on this city block?

**Note: How the Setting is revealed says a lot about the character.**

Joe can't get away from threat assessment whereas Fran is focused on the happy families she sees living there, or the possibilities of happy families. The writer needs to be aware that the relationship between the POV character and the Setting is what allows the reader to see/experience the story on a deeper level.

It's important to remember that place can and should be filtered through a specific character's emotions, impressions, viewpoint, and focus — this is how it reveals character and why it is that what one character sees in a Setting can be more important than the Setting itself. Ignoring the powerful use of characterization and Setting decreases the subtext of

your story and also decreases the immediacy a character feels in your story world. If your POV character simply walks through a Setting with nothing revealed except that the character is now at a store, on a street, returning home, you are showing your readers that this Setting doesn't matter that much to the story. So if it does matter, show it!

**Note: Don't use Setting simply as window dressing.**

### **RIGHT INFORMATION/ RIGHT SIGNALS**

Don't confuse the reader. They are going to come into your Setting with very little context, so they'll be trying to visualize the *who* as well as the *where* and *when* of the location and how it feeds into your story. So you might go back and edit to make sure you're:

- \* Sharing the right information and sending the right signals for that character. Fran would not think of offensive and defensive positions and Joe would not notice chalk drawings unless they constituted a threat.
- \* Filtering the Setting through one character's experience, emotions and mindset at a time.
- \* Not stopping the story flow to show place, or details of a place, unless that place reveals something that's important to know about the characters.

**Note: Adding Setting description is not necessarily an intrusion on the page, but can be an extension of the character's communication. Important to realize if your first drafts are heavy on showing characters via their dialogue or movement.**

### **REVEALING CHARACTER THROUGH SETTING**

Here's the beginning of a Setting passage from a Nancy Pickard mystery. This novel is part of a series, so the author chooses to reveal character via Setting rather than simply repeat what readers of the series may have already learned. You discover so much about this couple by what the POV character sees just by looking around her own living room.

*Our furniture didn't match, at least not in theory, but it fit together perfectly in practice. We'd used my favorite clear, bright colors — yellows, oranges, reds — and mixed them with his favorite deep brown wood tones, so the house had an autumnal atmosphere all year long, kind of crisp and cheerful and cozy all at once. There were always books and magazines littering the rooms like scattered leaves, and often a week's worth of newspapers trailing from the kitchen to our bedroom upstairs and the bathrooms down to the living room and finally into recycling. And books, so many books it looked as if a convention of librarians had dropped by with armloads and joyously tossed it all up in the air and dumped everything, leaving us to sort through the detritus on our deliciously erratic quest for wisdom.*

—Confession — Nancy Pickard

The passage continues on, but serves so well revealing who these characters are. It gives the reader a broader understanding of who they are, as a couple, and individually by what they surround themselves with — these two are comfortable with themselves, casual and intelligent.

What if Pickard chose to tell, not show? What if she wrote:

Our home reflects the fact we are intelligent people comfortable with our lives and who we are.

Since this novel is part of a series, as the stories move forward Pickard does not necessarily need to describe this room in this much detail because the readers of the series will remember this room. In another book the author could choose to highlight a different room in the house — the kitchen, bedroom, or even the garage — so new readers to the series, as well as the series readers, can experience this home on a deeper level, see these characters by their environment and feel a part of the world of the story.

I'm not saying that in every story you want this much Setting description for every character, or that you have to reveal character every time, but I do want you to think in terms of how would this one specific POV character relate to *this* Setting versus a different character? It's a great place to open up opportunities to reveal your character to the reader in different ways.

Let's examine another example of characterization being shown through Setting.

*"Out of the way, please. Sheriff investigator. Come on now. Out."*

*Merci Rayburn ducked under the ribbon and continued down the walk. Her heart was beating fast and her senses were jacked up high, registering all at once the cars hissing along Coast Highway to her left, waves breaking on the other side of the building, the citizens murmuring behind her, the moon hanging low over the eastern hills, the smell of ocean and exhaust, the night air cool against her cheeks, the walkway slats bending under her duty boots. She figured a place like this, ocean front in San Clemente, would run you two grand a month and you still got termites in your walkway and spider webs high in the porch corners.*

–Red Light – T. Jefferson Parker

This one paragraph description opening the story shows a lot about the character through how she looks at the Setting. The reader is not introduced to the crime scene as a laundry list of narrative description — building, location, time of day. No, the author threads all of this information throughout the character's description of the Setting in such a subtle way that the reader is pulled deeper into the story and the skin of the POV character while actively moving the story forward.

We learn that Merci can multi-task and take in many different details at once, a good characteristic for an investigator to have, and something the author can use to slip in other important details later in the story without the reader feeling its strange for Merci to notice. The paragraph also lets us know that Merci covers her uncomfortable emotions with snarky thoughts — a place like this, ocean front in San Clemente, would run you two grand a month and you still got termites in your walkway and spider webs high in the porch corners. Later, if Merci does this again, the reader can assume she's uncomfortable in some way.

In the next example, the author uses Setting description to show the POV character's thought process and where he's coming from as well as filtering in insights about a secondary character. The POV character, Joe Pike, has been assigned to protect the life of a spoiled rich girl. Two attempts have already been made on her life, the latest one while she's been in Pike's custody, so he's now taking charge of where he's stashing her and they are moving to a new location [remember when you shift your characters you shift your readers and they need to become anchored in place all over again]. Look at what Joe Pike reveals about himself, and about his impressions of the girl, in this one paragraph of Setting.

*The girl was moody getting out of the car, making a sour face to let him know she hated the shabby house and sun-scorched street smelling of chili and epazote. To him, this anonymous house would serve. He searched the surrounding houses for threats as he waited for her, clearing the area the way another man might clear his throat. He felt obvious wearing the long-sleeved shirt. The Los Angeles sun was too hot for the sleeves, but he had little choice. He moved carefully to hide what was under the shirt.*

*She said, "People who live in houses like this have deformed children. I can't stay here."*

–The Watchman – Robert Crais

We not only get a sense of Joe Pike looking for threats and assessing safety issues, he's here not because the neighborhood is safe, but because he can keep her safe here. The house is anonymous. He doesn't think about the people in the houses or the paint job or anything but security. This also shows a lot about the intrinsic differences between him and the girl he's guarding by her response to the Setting and what he's seeing of her response. A lot going on in one paragraph and it never stops the forward momentum of the story.

Let's look at another example, this time from an author I always study for her ability to make every word do double duty. In this description we're about a third of the way into the story and the POV character is looking for a tenuous lead on her missing ex-sister-in-law. See if you can tell about what the POV character thinks about her ex-sister-in-law by what she observes of the surroundings and interior of the woman's cabin.

But first let's look as if the author was writing from First Draft to Finished Version.

**Note: Since I am using a published author's work, I'm imagining a rough first draft. No telling how the author wrote initially or how many drafts the author used to get to the final product. What I want you to look at are the possibilities you can apply to your own work if you're currently lacking in Setting detail and ways to add**

**Characterization via that detail.**

[First Draft] I drove my vehicle into the hills to my sister-in-law's house.

Bland. No sense of location. All the writer did was get the character from Point A to Point B.

[Second Draft] I drove my rig into the hills above Santa Barbara and when I arrived at my sister-in-law's place, I stopped and checked it out.

A little better. Now the reader knows where the POV character is, but we're not experiencing any of what that character is experiencing or the interaction she's having with what she's seeing.

[Final Version]

*The sun was flaring red in the west when I drove my white Explorer up a gully toward Tabitha's house, past sandstone boulders and gray-green brush. The air smelled thick with mustard and eucalyptus. The view of the city, two thousand feet below, was spectacular. Santa Barbara lay like a velvet sash between the mountains and the Pacific, smooth and glimmering.*

*The house itself looked neglected. Faded gray paint curled from the wood siding, and weeds spread across the lawn, humped and matted, like an overgrown beard. When no one answered my knock, I looked in the front window. The living room held some thriftshop chairs and a work table covered with pens, pencils, and drawings. In the dingy kitchen, shopping bags bulged with cans of creamed corn and SPAM. Was that what she cooked for Brian? No wonder he had requested sea duty.*

—China Lake — Meg Gardiner

Notice the author uses contrast — between what the city — Santa Barbara, known to be one of the nicest and most exclusive of California coastal towns, (also known for its red tiled roofs which creates the red of the red sash imagery) — and the area surrounding the home to show the world the POV character came from to enter the world of the sister-in-law. Gardiner also doesn't leave the reader to guess the POV character's impressions or emotions surrounding her ex-sister-in-law, choosing words to describe her living place such as neglected, faded, humped, matted, Thriftshop and dingy. She even names the specific food stuff visible — creamed corn and SPAM.

One last point to notice is that Gardiner doesn't stop the story to give a description; she filters in sensory details, movement — driving, looking — in with internalization (her internal thought process). This is a powerful use of description that places the reader in the Setting and gives insights into the POV character and the ex-sister-in-law.

**Note: Notice the specific word choice of velvet — a tactile, luxurious, even glamorous fabric used to contrast with the rough and decidedly unglamorous house. A clever use of the sense of touch for something we wouldn't ordinarily think of touching (the ocean, the city, the lawn, the house siding).**

The next is a fascinating example — a little long though, which impacts the pacing of the story, but reveals so much about the protagonist Salander. In the first section the author shows almost a full page of Salander's decision-making

process as she contrasts her current apartment with where she might like to live. Notice what this decision-making process reveals about her character.

*She had never thought about an alternative to the 500 square foot in Lundagatan, where she had spent her childhood. Through her trustee at the time, the lawyer Holger Palmgren, she had been granted permission of the apartment when she turned eighteen. She plopped down on the lumpy sofa in her combination office/living room and began to think.*

*The apartment on Lundagatan looked into a courtyard. It was cramped and not the least bit comfortable. The view from her bedroom was a firewall on a gable façade. The view from the kitchen was of the back of the building facing the street and the entrance to the basement storage area. She could see a streetlight from her living room, and a few branches of a birch tree.*

*The first requirement of her new home was that it should have some sort of view.*

*She did not have a balcony, and had always envied well-to-do neighbors higher up in the building who spent warm days with a cold beer under an awning on theirs. The second requirement was that her new home would have a balcony.*

*What should the apartment look like? She thought about Blomkvist's apartment—700 square feet in one open space in a converted loft on Bellmansgatan with views of City Hall and the locks at Slussen. She liked it there. She wanted to have a pleasant, sparsely furnished apartment that was easy to take care of. That was third point on her list of requirements.*

*For years she had lived in cramped spaces. Her kitchen was a mere 100 square feet, with room for only a tiny table and two chairs. Her living room was 200 square feet. The bedroom was 120. Her fourth requirement was that the new apartment should have plenty of space and closets. She wanted to have a proper office and a big bedroom where she could spread herself out.*

*Her bathroom was a windowless cubbyhole with square cement slabs on the floor, an awkward half bath, and plastic wallpaper that never got really clean no matter how hard she scrubbed it. She wanted a washing machine in the apartment and not down in some basement. She wanted to have tiles and a big bath. She wanted the bathroom to smell fresh, and she wanted to be able to open a window.*

— The Girl Who Played With Fire — Stieg Larsson

As I indicated this was a long passage, but the author consciously slowed the reading experience so that the reader could see how this young woman was metamorphosing. He showed where Salander was coming from to highlight where she was going. The above passage was on page 86-87. Salander encountered obstacles while finding a new place, but she persevered — which showed more characterization — and managed to acquire a new apartment. Later the author spends several more pages showing Salander making quite an extensive trip through IKEA to purchase new furniture to replace the marginal left overs. But the reader sees very little of the new apartment except that it does have a view and she bought furniture for a spare bedroom. We're shown only what matters to Salander — that her apartment is large enough to have a spare room, all the furniture is new, and that's about it.

Later, on page 623 in the same story, another character, Blomkvist, is asked to describe the protagonist's sofa as a means of verifying that he really did know her because the protagonist has a well-earned reputation of guarding her privacy, which includes her home space to an extreme degree.

*“On the occasions I visited her she had a worn-out, extremely ugly piece of furniture with a certain curiosity value. I would guess it's from the early fifties. It has two shapeless cushions covered in brown cloth with a yellow pattern of sorts on it. The cloth is torn in several places and the stuffing was coming out when I saw it last.”*

– The Girl Who Played With Fire – Stieg Larsson

Doesn't this description of one piece of furniture give you a unique perspective on who Salander is? The use of specific Setting details over the course of a book is used to symbolize change — the change in who Salander is from an earlier book and the start of the current story, what she values — or not — and reveals in small stages the growth of this character from totally isolated from others to one willing to live in a different way.

Later — on page 664 — Blomkvist has finally found Salander's current apartment and here's his description of where she lives:

*Blomkvist was standing at that moment by a window looking out at a magnificent view that stretched far from Gamla Stan towards Saltsjon. He felt numb. There was a kitchen off the hall to the right of the front door. Then there was a living room, an office, a bedroom, and even a guest room that seemed not to have been used. The mattress was still in its plastic wrapper and there were no sheets. All the furniture was brand-new, straight from IKEA.*

*What floored Blomkvist was that Salander had bought the pied-a-terre that had belonged to Percy Barnevik, a captain*

of industry. The apartment was about 3,800 square feet and worth twenty-five million kroner.

*Blomkvist wandered through deserted, almost eerily empty corridors and rooms with patterned parquet floors of different kinds of woods, and Tricia Guild wallpaper of the type that Berger had once coveted. At the center of the apartment was a wonderfully bright living room with an open fireplace, but Salander seemed never to have had a fire. There was an enormous balcony with a fantastic view. There was a laundry room, a sauna, a gym, storage rooms and a bathroom with a king-size bath. There was even a wine cellar, which was empty except for an unopened bottle of Quinta do Noval port – Nacional! from 1976. Blomkvist struggled to imagine Salander with a glass of port in her hand. An elegant card indicated that it had been a moving-in present from the estate agent.*

*The kitchen contained all manner of equipment, with a shiny French gourmet stove with a gas oven as the focus. Blomkvist had never before set eyes on a Cornue Chateau 120. Salander probably used it for boiling tea.*

[The description goes on for another page until the author wraps up with the following paragraph.]

*The arrangement was all out of proportion. Salander had stolen several billion kroner and bought herself an apartment with space for an entire court. But she only needed the three rooms she had furnished. The other eighteen rooms were empty.*

*Blomkvist ended his tour in her office. There were no flowers anywhere. There were no paintings or even posters on the wall. There were no rugs or wall hangings. He could not see a single decorative bowl, candlestick, or even a knick-knack that had been saved for sentimental reasons.*

*Blomkvist felt as if someone were squeezing his heart. He felt that he had to find Salander and hold her close.*

*She would probably bite him if he tried.*

–The Girl Who Played With Fire – Stieg Larsson

I'm not advocating using so much word space to describe the living space of every character, or even using such long descriptions of Setting in every kind of story, but in this 724-page story the author chose to show much of Salander's personality via her personal space.

The reader saw only three rooms, and only the furnishings of those rooms because that's what mattered to Salander. These rooms made her appear as if her life was full and positively changing. But because we were able to get a different perspective on Salander's private space, from another character, Blomkvist, it allowed the reader to see Salander in a very different light and to feel, much like Blomkvist felt, that this young woman was very isolated and alone. By allocating enough words in his descriptions, he brought home the shock of the contrast of those descriptions.

Here's another example from mystery author Walter Mosley. The POV character, Easy Rawlins, has tracked down a lead on a missing person he is seeking. Instead of describing his impressions of the missing person directly, Mosley reveals the character through what he sees of the man's home environment.

*It was a studio apartment. A Murphy bed had been pulled down from the wall. It was unmade and jumbled with dirty clothes and dishes. A black-and-white portable TV with bent-up rabbit-ear antennas sat on a maple chair at the foot of the bed. There was no sofa, but three big chairs, upholstered with green carpeting, were set in a circle facing each other at the center of the room.*

*The room smelled strongly of perfumes and body odors. This scent of sex and sensuality was off-putting on a Saturday afternoon.*

–Cinnamon Kiss – Walter Mosley

What if Mosley had decided to short change the reader here and go for a more abbreviated room description:

It was a messy studio apartment. The man must have been a low-life loser to live in such a place.

Sometimes that's all a reader needs, but that is telling, not showing. With a few more lines, the author brought the reader deeper into the missing man's character by showing who he was via Setting.

**Note: The important element to remember is that place can and should be filtered through a specific character's emotions, impressions, viewpoint, and focus. How one character sees a Setting can be more important than the Setting itself.**

Ignoring the powerful use of characterization and Setting decreases the subtext of your story and also decreases the

immediacy a character feels in your story world.

## ASSIGNMENT

Using Setting to reveal character:

If you are not currently working on a manuscript or feel more comfortable working on a generic situation try Part 1 of this assignment. If you have a WIP [Work In Progress] feel free to try Part 2. Do whichever part works for you to understand the power of Setting to show characterization.

### *PART 1:*

Choose a room in your home. Look for a more private or personal room — a bedroom, writing area, kitchen, etc. — vs. a public space — living room, bathroom, anywhere you'd feel comfortable having strangers come in and walk through. Now describe this room in 2-4 sentences maximum from the following POVs:

- 1) Yours.
- 2) An acquaintance or relative you think may disapprove of you or your life choices.
- 3) Your POV [1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person] while giving an impression of you to the reader.

Again only 2–4 sentences max. What do you focus on? What do they focus on? What words do you choose to describe your space? What are their word choices that show you are in a different POV? What do your word choices reveal about the character viewing the room and the character that lives in the room?

### *PART 2 – YOUR WIP:*

Choose a Setting description of less than a paragraph from your story. In a maximum of 2 – 4 sentences, show this Setting through the following POVs, **even** if you do not use all three in your manuscript:

- 1) The protagonist's POV.
- 2) A secondary character's POV, especially one who is very different from the protagonist.
- 3) Your protagonist's POV again, but this time giving an impression of another character through describing that character's relationship with the Setting.

Again, only 2–4 sentences maximum. What does the protagonist focus on? What does the secondary character [antagonist or villain] focus on? What are his or her word choices to describe the Setting? How do these word choices change the feel of the Setting and what the reader sees?

Intention: The purpose of this exercise is to start to show you the power of POV as it related to Setting. Change the POV, and though the Setting might remain the same, the impressions the reader receives of that Setting can vary wildly. If those impressions don't change you probably are showing the Setting through **your** POV as opposed to your

characters.

### **RECAP**

- \* Remember that place can and should be filtered through a specific character's emotions, impressions, viewpoint, and focus. How one character sees a Setting can be more important than the Setting itself.
- \* Do not stop or slow your story flow to show a Setting or details of a Setting unless that Setting reveals something important about the story or characters.
- \* Consider showing the same setting through two different characters to reveal information about the POV character or information about another character that they may not know about themselves. For example if a young woman thinks of herself as independent and self-contained and the reader is shown from her personal space how she has saved mementos of her childhood or of the people who have cared for her in the past, you are showing the reader something about her the character that she herself does not realize.



## Part 3

### USING SETTING DETAIL TO ENHANCE SETTING

Sensory detail is one of the most underrated tools in a writer's toolbox and can make a world of difference in creating novels that stand out in a reader's mind. Not every Setting needs all five senses described in detail — that approach is overkill and can have a major impact on your story pacing. But when introducing the reader to a character, or changing the location of the story, or focusing a reader in on a place that's going to play a larger role in the story, then by all means dig deeper to create a strong Setting image. And a key way to do this is via sensory details.

Use sensory details in your Setting when you first change a location or open a chapter or to indicate a shift in the emotional state of the POV character. Think in terms of which sensory details a POV character would notice at that particular time. Change the time and emotional state of the POV character and you should notice a difference in which sensory details are being noticed. An example might be listening to specific music at the opening of the scene. What can be soft and relaxing at the beginning of the scene can be lonely and low-energy at the end of the scene. Have you ever entered a favorite store and found the music upbeat and fun only to discover that the person with you finds the same music annoying and dated? Each person's description of the music would create a different feel for a reader about the store Setting.

Texture is so often overlooked in a story, but can act as a metaphor rich in symbolism for the POV character. One character standing in an Iowa cornfield, feeling the wind and the sun enveloping them, feels nurtured and can taste the richness of the soil, the expanse of the Setting. Another character in the very same Setting can feel the dirt coating their tongue, the sun beating against them, drying their skin, sucking the very life out of them with its relentless sameness.

Think of the feel of different times of the day during different seasons. I moved from a four-season climate to a two-season climate and am still waiting for certain sensory cues as to what season it is based on daily temperatures.

But think beyond simple hot, warm, cold. One character who is very athletic or runs on a warmer body core temperature [many men, especially young men, can fall into this category] may find an environment just to their liking whereas another character in the same environment is shivering. [I'm always that other character!]. Also think of other tactile experiences — what does wind feel like? Or fog? Or dry dust in the air vs. humidity?

Smell is a wealth of communication. Were you aware that after three months we retain only 30% of our visual memory, but even after a year we retain 100% of smell memory? Smell activates our primordial or the oldest part of our brains, so if you are missing scents on the page, you're missing a very subtle but powerful element of sensory detail.

The following descriptions come from an interview with a Norwegian Scent Researcher. She is describing some of the locations she has visited to collect samples of scent.

*Havana. It smells sensual, of Cuba Libre [a rum, cola, and lime cocktail], coffee, dogs, and freshly washed laundry fluttering on endless balconies. The streets smell like they are crumbling, decaying, rotting. But unlike cities in the United States, Havana has been doing this for centuries. It rots in style. Berlin's Neukölln neighborhood is the closest you can get to Istanbul: sunflower oil, bread, dry cleaning, laundry detergent, tobacco, cheap aftershave, and kebabs. The outlying Colonia Hacienda de Echegaray district in Mexico City smells of fake leather boots, corn, dust, concrete, cocoa, burnt and moldy earth, plastic, sweat, chili peppers, and hot straw.*

One or two sentences max and a reader is in Cuba, Istanbul, or Mexico City. When we smell fake leather boots, burnt or moldy earth, plastic, sweat, and hot straw, we add to those smells an image of run-down neighborhoods, stray dogs, a city that's a working-man's world, because we fill in the blanks based on what we smell.

Scents can evoke memories so strongly. I love the smell of lilies whereas my mother detests the same smell because they remind her of her mother's funeral. Have you ever been overwhelmed in a new location because everything is new and different and the scents are what finally cause you to be overstimulated to the point you walk away with a pounding headache? Some scents mean pleasure — baking cookies, the smell of a new book, the warm scent of a babies' skin when you nuzzle their heads. Others evoke just the opposite response — the musty smell of damp basements, strong perfume in a small elevator, moldy bread.

Don't think that adding sensory detail means adding pages and pages of words and do remember to be specific. It smelled nice or of summer flowers doesn't tell the reader much and the words are not working hard enough for your story.

**Note: Make sure that your sensory details are specific to the Setting of your story and filtered through a specific POV character's awareness.**

Watch how mystery writer Nancy Pickard quickly orients a reader as to Setting by focusing in mostly on sounds in this paragraph.

*Students looked up at us curiously from inside their classrooms as we walked past. Teachers' voices jarred the air, like different radio stations turned up too loud. Somewhere a couple of locker doors slammed shut, and everywhere there was that smell that only schools have and that echoey sound and that odd slanting light in the halls.*

–Confession – Nancy Pickard

Did you find yourself thinking about your own school environment and being tugged into the place quickly by the sensory details?

This is the power of adding sensory details to Setting description. Readers quickly find themselves deeper into the Setting. They can feel themselves there on a three-dimensional level vs. simply a visual level. If Pickard had chosen to remain only on a visual level, see what she might have written.

*Students looked up at us curiously from inside their classrooms as we walked past. There were lockers on both sides of the long hall and a scuffed linoleum floor. Overhead were fluorescent lights, most of them off in the middle of the day, but a few flickering.*

Okay, but not great. We as readers are seeing what the POV character sees of the Setting, but we're not **in** the Setting the way sensory details can pull us into the Setting.

Now let's look at how T. Jefferson Parker uses sensory details to describe the scene of a crime:

*She noted that the table had been set for two. A pair of seductive high heels stood near the couch, facing her, like a ghost was standing in them, watching. The apartment was still, the slider closed against the cool December night. Good for scent. She closed her eyes. Salt air. Baked fowl. Coffee. Goddamned rubber gloves, of course. A whiff of gunpowder? Maybe a trace of perfume, or the flowers on the table — gardenia, rose, lavender? And of course, the obscenity of spilled blood — intimate, meaty, shameful.*

*She listened to the waves. To the traffic. To the little kitchen TV turned low; an evangelist bleating for money. To the clunk of someone in the old walkway. To her heart, fast and heavy in her chest. Merci felt most alive when working for the dead. She'd always loved an underdog.*

–Red Light – T. Jefferson Parker

The above description does not stop the reader, but orients them deeply into the where, who, and what of the crime and characters in one powerful paragraph. Parker doesn't just describe the apartment space clinically, but layers in strong sensory details and the effect is to pull the reader more deeply into the scene. We're standing there with the detective, hearing what she's hearing, smelling what she's smelling, feeling the texture of the gloves on her hands. The reading experience has changed from simply looking at the Setting to being in the Setting.

Here's another great example:

*The come-and-get-it smell of espresso welcomed her. Fall Out Boy was playing on the stereo, "Hum Hallelujah." Lieutenant Amy Tang stood at the counter, fingers double tapping, waiting for her order.*

–The Memory Collector – Meg Gardiner

How many sensory details did Gardiner manage to slide into the reader's awareness in three very short sentences? What is amazing is that the author could have painted a visual picture alone — "She entered the coffee shop, which looked and smelled like a million other coffee shops, and saw the Lieutenant waiting for her." But Gardiner went deeper with her writing and placed the reader into the scene, not with an overload of visual prompts, but with a smell and two

sound prompts. What Gardiner managed in the three sentences above was to anchor the reader into the new space through the senses. We all know the smell of a coffee shop and by reminding the reader of that specific scent, the reader “smells” that place, and can instantly put themselves there.

What about the sound prompt? What does that do? Is it okay that the reader doesn’t know the band? Can you still get a sense of Setting by the POV character’s reaction to the music playing? What if you change the band’s name to something more well-known — Sex Pistols or Coldplay? Or Chuck Mangione or Frank Sinatra? Just by changing what the reader mentally “hears” in this coffee shop you change the reader’s experience of it.

Here’s another example of sensory detail. Tess Gerritsen writes bullet-paced thrillers that rarely showcase a whole paragraph of detail so when she does the reader pays attention, knowing that this Setting matters:

*The school bell clanged, calling the students in from recess. He stood calming himself, inhaling deeply. He focused on the fragrance of fresh-cut hay, of bread baking in the nearby communal kitchen. From across the compound, where the new workshop hall was being built, came the whine of a saw and the echoes of a dozen hammers pounding nails. The virtuous sounds of honest labor, of a community working toward His greater glory.*

–Ice Cold – Tess Gerritsen

In the above example the reader can smell and hear and almost taste as well as see the growing community, but the Setting description did more. It placed the readers into a scene that might not be familiar to them, as in they have not personally lived in such an environment, but the different sounds are very familiar and have strong connotations. A school bell’s ring, the scent of baking bread, hammers and saws at work; all are sounds that are industrious, pleasant, and denote a certain amount of comfort. This environment might sound idyllic, but proves anything but to many of the individuals living there as the story unfolds. From ideal to hellish the reader will remember what this place sounded like and contrast it to what’s revealed later in the story.

## LAYERING POV AND SENSORY DETAILS

Sound sensory details can enhance a story in so many ways. We’ve been focusing on how to use Setting description to reveal character earlier, but we also need to pay attention that we’re describing the sensory details accurately through a very particular set of eyes. Think of New York City’s Times Square, or the heart of any other large city that is alive with sounds. The awareness of those sounds will change depending on where the POV character is coming from, what they are doing, and how they are feeling.

After a long frustrating day, standing in Times Square can be like nails scratching down a chalkboard on your nerves. But if you’ve landed a dream job in a city you feel is **your** city, the sounds of this tiny speck of space can be seductive and empowering. On the other hand what would you hear if your young child has just wandered off? Or if you were looking for a runaway teenager last seen hawking himself in Times Square? What might you hear in these few blocks?

The place hasn’t changed at all, and neither have the sounds, but how the author relates those sounds and threads them through their descriptive details would and should change to pull and anchor the reader in the character and the story.

Here is a small snippet from a debut story that is described as mesmerizing and evocative, which it is. One of the reasons is the use of sensory details. This passage takes place in 1942 in Seattle, right after a Chinese boy’s first date with a young Japanese girl. The POV character loves jazz and that love is something he shares with his home city of Seattle, the time frame of the story, and his new Japanese friend. It also creates a distance between himself and his very traditional father. Watch how the author uses those facts to weave meaning into the sensory details here.

But first we’re going to start though with a hypothetical rough draft:

[First Draft] Henry left his bedroom and walked down the alley.

What do you think? Do you know where you are? Any sense of the city surrounding him?

[Second Draft] Henry left his bedroom and walked down the dark alley near where he’d been in the Jazz club earlier.

Better but still pretty blasé. If we were reading the book we'd mentally orient Henry to where he'd been earlier on the evening, but not much else. We're not in his skin walking down this alley.

[Final Version] *Henry left his bedroom window up, feeling the cool air come off the water. He could smell the rain that would be coming soon and hear the horns and bells of the ferries along the waterfront signaling their last run for the night. And in the distance he could hear swing jazz being played somewhere, maybe even the Black Elks Club.*

–Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet – Jamie Ford

Are you as the reader in Henry's skin now? The above was a nice scene ending that creates part of the evocative feel to this book. Let's look closer at how:

*Henry left his bedroom window up, feeling the cool air come off the water.* [Anyone who lives or has visited an ocean-side locale can really feel the temperature drop in the evening. Here Henry is in an apartment building in Chinatown, only a few blocks from the shores of Seattle's Elliott Bay so this small sensory detail adds a lot.]

*He could smell the rain that would be coming soon and hear the horns and bells of the ferries along the waterfront signaling their last run for the night.* [Again a very specific Seattle sound and one that places this story in that city versus a different ocean-side locale.]

*And in the distance he could hear swing jazz being played somewhere, maybe even the Black Elks Club.* [This location is where he had been with his friend. The memory of a sound here layers a lot in the story and ends the scene on a very sensory detail.]

Watch how Nevada Barr uses contrasting sensory details to show the reader where Anna, the POV character currently is and also to bring home vividly the difference between where she has lived in the past and the effects on Anna:

*Closing the door quietly behind her, Anna paused a minute to breathe in New Orleans in spring after the rain. In the mountains and deserts of the West there would be the ozone and pine, sage and dust — scents that cleared her head and the vision made the heart race and the horizon impossibly far away and alluring.*

*Here spring's perfume was lazy and narcotic, hinting of hidden things, languid hours, and secrets whispered on breath smelling of bourbon and mint. In Rocky Mountain National Park, the clean dry air scoured the skin, polished bone, and honed Anna's senses to a keen edge. Here it caressed nurturing flesh with moisture, curling wind-sere hair. It coddled and swathed till believing in dreams and magic seemed inevitable.*

–Burn – Nevada Barr

If the author in the last excerpt had chosen simply to describe the scents of New Orleans this would have been good sensory detail, but by using the sensory details in contrast to where she'd been, and obviously loved, to where she was now the reader received so much more — a strong sense of characterization and an awareness of being someplace mysterious and sensual and possibly a little dangerous. In Texas and New Mexico where Anna has lived and worked in earlier books in this mystery series, she was very much in her comfort zone. This new Setting in New Orleans, the extra-sensory overload is making her dreamier, less sure of herself. The author has shown the reader that the POV character is feeling out of her depth through Setting description.

Here's another example of sensory detail adding so much to the page. In this paragraph three characters have escaped from a French prison in an historical romance novel. The POV character is a French woman; the other characters are English spies, enemies of the French woman. See how the author threads in sensory detail as well as foreshadowing complications in a paragraph that's mostly Setting. This passage is the POV of one of the English spies and it is he that starts the dialogue.

*Her night vision was extraordinary. "I can't see a thing."  
"Stop trying to see, English. Listen instead. The night is telling stories all around you. The Rue Berenger lies ahead .... Oh ... fifty paces perhaps. The baker on the corner is even now baking bread. One can smell that. Rue Berenger runs east to the bridge, to Paris, where men in your profession likely have friends. Or you go uphill to the west, and you will come after a time to England, where you have even more friends, beyond doubt.*

–The Spymaster's Lady – Joanna Bourne

Now what if Bourne decided to use only a visual Setting? The prose would be as dry as someone reciting directions — go straight ahead until you reach the bridge and keep going till you reach Paris. Ho hum. No scent of bread wafting on the early morning air.

Taste is not often the first sensory detail one latches onto when writing Setting, but it can be powerful nonetheless. Think of taste like a fine herb used judiciously by a master chef — a little can go a long way.

Here's an example of sensory detail involving a tactile description implying taste among other senses that's set deep into a novel and used to quickly orient the reader to a new location. The taste, tactile scent is implied by the quality of the air, and what's in the air that can be tasted on the tongue.

*India — bleating animals wandering the streets, car horns blaring, dust mingling with masses of people, wrapping one in a blanket both suffocating and irritating. The monsoons had not yet broken the dry heat; an air of expectancy choked human and animal alike.* \

—Invisible Recruit – Mary Buckham

The intention of this Setting description was to let the readers know the characters have arrived in India, but I did not want to spend a lot of page space describing things or buildings or images. The intention was to anchor the reader in the fact that the characters were now in a totally alien (to them) environment and to set the emotional feel of that change. How many sensory details did I use? Can you pick out sound? Taste? (dust) Feel? (blanket of dust and dry heat) and smells? (animals and dust again) Two sentences and then back to the action of the story, but the reader is now *in* India instead of simply seeing India.

When you think of touch in a Setting, think of one's whole body and not just the fingers or the hand. Don't tell the reader that it's ninety degrees in the shade if you can show characters fanning themselves and blotting perspiration from their faces. If your character has grown up in dry heat the first time they travel to a location dripping with humidity their whole body can be gob-smacked with the change. Standing on an ocean beach you could feel warm, moisture-laden breezes or salt-tainted blasts of frigid, damp air — two very different beaches shown simply by touch and feel.

Instead of telling the reader your character was exhausted and crawled into bed can you show his or her emotional state by what he or she feels? There's a world of difference between finally creeping under the security of a well-loved eiderdown comforter on a cold night and falling into a creaking bed and yanking a scratchy, flimsy, paper-thin blanket over your shoulders that then exposes your toes to the freezing air.

Don't worry about sensory details in your first draft as you're juggling choreography, characterization, and so much more, but definitely think sensory in your revision process.

## WAYS TO BRING OUT SENSORY DETAILS

Think in terms of which sensory details a POV character would notice in the particular Setting at that particular time.

**Note: The smallest sensory detail can evoke a change in the emotional state of a character. We all know this instinctively, but using this simple technique can reap big rewards by deepening the reader's understanding and empathy for/with the POV character.**

\* Change the time and emotional state of the POV character and you should see a difference in which sensory details are being noticed.

\* Use the sensory details when you first change a location, open a chapter, or to indicate a shift in the emotional state of the POV character. An example might be listening to specific music at the opening of the scene. What can be soft and relaxing at the beginning of the scene can be lonely and low-energy at the end of the scene.

Texture is so very often overlooked in Setting, but can act as a metaphor or quickly orient a reader to the time of day, a change in location, or share more information about the POV character.

The bottom line is that sensory detail can enhance your Setting descriptions and thus the readers' experience of your story in so many ways.

## ASSIGNMENT

### Using Sensory Details to Enhance Setting

#### *PART 1:*

Place yourself in either a familiar Setting or a new one, but someplace you feel comfortable closing your eyes. [Note: Do not do this assignment while driving a vehicle.] Now see if you can describe the following:

Sound  
Touch/Texture  
Smells  
Taste

Now use the same Setting and place one of your story characters in that Setting. What would they see, hear, feel, smell, or taste differently?

#### *PART 2:*

Use any 2-4 sentences of Setting you currently have in your WIP — one without much sensory detail and preferably one at the opening of a scene or a chapter or in a change of location for the character.

See what sensory details you can add without adding a lot more words. [Note: This may require rewriting and replacing some visual details with other sensory details.] Put yourself in the POV character's state of mind and look around. What would he or she specifically smell, touch, hear, or taste? Write an example of each sense, then add to your current scene. Try for a minimum of two additional details, more if you wish.

Do you like the rewrite? Did you discover it added more depth to the story or insights into your character?

Intention: To start showing you the power of using sensory details while keeping you aware that if you change the character you'll change which senses they use or how they relate to the sensory details of a specific Setting.

## RECAP

- \* Use specific sounds to thread through descriptive details that can pull and anchor the reader onto the page.
- \* As you change your Setting, look at opportunities to quickly orient and anchor the reader as to where the characters are by focusing in on sensory details of that specific Setting.
- \* Change up your sensory details so you are not always using the same senses.
- \* By using more sensory details in your Setting description readers can feel themselves pulled deeper into a story on a three-dimensional level vs. simply a visual level.
- \* Make sure though that your detail is specific to the place and specific to the POV character's awareness.

## WRAP UP

I hope you have learned from the examples and explanations in this book of how to use your Setting descriptions in your own work to enhance the reader's experience. If you want more information on how to maximize Active Setting look for the next two books in this series **Writing Active Setting: Book 2: Setting to Show Emotion, Add Conflict, and Show Back Story**; and in **Writing Active Setting: Book 3: Anchoring, Action, as a Character and More**, coming soon in 2013.

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If you enjoyed this book, it's time to learn other considerations in how to maximize your Setting, such as using Setting to create foreshadowing and tension, how to show emotion and back story, as well as how to use Setting as a character in your story.

### WHAT FOLKS ARE SAYING ABOUT:

**Writing Active Setting; Book 2:** Setting to Show Emotion, Add Conflict, and Show Back Story (release: Spring 2013)

\* Learning how to write ACTIVE SETTINGS has been amazing. The examples are concise and fit seamlessly into the narrative. This book has been both challenging and informative. ~~ Laurel Wilczek, SciFi and Fantasy writer

\* ACTIVE SETTINGS is a fantastic book! Finally, I "really" understand what setting means. I have my sweat tea in one hand, a sharpened pencil in the other and my Active Setting book open before me. It doesn't get much better for a novice writer! – Sharon Marie Lightsley, Inspirational Suspense Writer

\* This book helped me identify areas where I really need to focus (Setting and emotion) and clarified how I can make my Setting work for me in the story and the world I've created. ~~ Wendy G – Memphis, Tennessee

**Writing Active Setting; Book 3:** Anchoring, Action, as a Character and More (release: Summer 2013)

\* The whole series, but this book in particular makes me feel like I can really dig in and write a stronger story. It's a very empowering feeling and makes me excited to revise my own work. ~~ Jim Robinson, Denver, Colorado

\* I was reading one of my favorite authors at the Laundromat this morning and suddenly I was hit with a thunderbolt. Why do I love this author? Because she brings me right into the scene. How? Through threading some of the setting into the interaction of the character. And that's exactly what you're showing me how to do in my own work through this book. Thank you! ~~ Tricia Cole, Erotic Romance writer

\* I am amazed how much can change in one paragraph of my manuscript with the manipulation of Setting. This book spells out how to do just that in clear, easy to understand, small steps. ~~ Judy Wirzberger. Women's Fiction writer