

Discover The Basic Elements of Setting In a Story

By: Courtney Carpenter | May 2, 2012

No matter if you are just getting started or want to break into fiction writing, setting is a crucial element to any story. In order to create an imaginary world for your story, you'll need to know the fundamental elements of setting first. Discover the basic elements of setting in a story from [Between the Lines](#).

Fiction has three main elements: plotting, character, and place or setting. While writers spend countless hours plotting and creating characters and then imagining their character's arcs and dilemmas, often too little attention is paid to place. This is a fatal mistake, since the place fiction is staged provides the backdrop against which your dramas ultimately play out.

But setting is more than a mere backdrop for action; it is an interactive aspect of your fictional world that saturates the story with mood, meaning, and thematic connotations. Broadly defined, setting is the location of the plot, including the region, geography, climate, neighborhood, buildings, and interiors. Setting, along with pacing, also suggests passage of time. Place is layered into every scene and flashback, built of elements such as weather, lighting, the season, and the hour.

The Fundamental Elements of Setting

Here is a list of the specific elements that setting encompasses:

1. **Locale.** This relates to broad categories such as a country, state, region, city, and town, as well as to more specific locales, such as a neighborhood, street, house or school. Other locales can include shorelines, islands, farms, rural areas, etc.
2. **Time of year.** The time of year is richly evocative and influential in fiction. Time of year includes the seasons, but also encompasses holidays, such as Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year's Eve, and Halloween. Significant dates can also be used, such as the anniversary of a death of a character or real person, or the anniversary of a battle, such as the attack on Pearl Harbor.
3. **Time of day.** Scenes need to play out during various times or periods during a day or night, such as dawn or dusk. Readers have clear associations with different periods of the day, making an easy way to create a visual orientation in a scene.
4. **Elapsed time.** The minutes, hours, days, weeks, and months a story encompasses must be somehow accounted for or the reader will feel confused and the story will suffer from a lack of authenticity. While scenes unfold moment by moment, there is also time to account for between scenes, when a flashback is inserted, and when a character travels a long distance.
5. **Mood and atmosphere.** Characters and events are influenced by weather, temperature, lighting, and other tangible factors, which in turn influence the emotional timbre, mood, and atmosphere of a scene.
6. **Climate.** Climate is linked to the geography and topography of a place, and, as in our real world, can influence events and people. Ocean currents, prevailing winds and air masses, latitude, altitude, mountains, land masses, and large bodies of water all influence climate. It's especially important when you write about a real setting to understand climatic influences. Harsh climates can make for grim lives, while tropical climates can create more carefree lifestyles.

7. **Geography.** This refers to specific aspects of water, landforms, ecosystems, and topography in your setting. Geography also includes climate, soil, plants, trees, rocks and minerals, and soils. Geography can create obvious influences in a story like a mountain a character must climb, a swift-running river he must cross, or a boreal forest he must traverse to reach safety. No matter where a story is set, whether it's a mountain village in the Swiss Alps or an opulent resort on the Florida coast, the natural world with all its geographic variations and influences must permeate the story.
8. **Man-made geography.** There are few corners of the planet that have not been influenced by the hand of humankind. It is in our man-made influences that our creativity and the destructiveness of civilization can be seen. Readers want visual evidence in a story world, and man-made geography is easily included to provide it. With this in mind, make certain that your stories contain proof of the many footprints that people have left in its setting. Use the influences of humankind on geography to lend authenticity to stories set in a real or famous locale. These landmarks include dams, bridges, ports, towns and cities, monuments, burial grounds, cemeteries, and famous buildings. Consider too the influences of mankind using the land, and the effects of mines, deforestation, agriculture, irrigation, vineyards, cattle grazing, and coffee plantations.
9. **Eras of historical importance.** Important events, wars, or historical periods linked to the plot and theme might include the Civil war, World War II, medieval times, the Bubonic Plague, the gold rush in the 1800s, or the era of slavery in the South.
10. **Social/political/cultural environment.** Cultural, political, and social influences can range widely and affect characters in many ways. The social era of a story often influences characters' values, social and family roles, and sensibilities.
11. **Population.** Some places are densely populated, such as Hong Kong, while others are lonely places with only a few hardy souls. Your stories need a specific, yet varied population that accurately reflects the place.
12. **Ancestral influences.** In many regions of the United States, the ancestral influences of European countries such as Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Poland are prominent. The cities and bayous of Louisiana are populated with distinctive groups influenced by their Native American, French-Canadian, and African American forebears. Ancestral influences can be depicted in cuisine, dialogue, values, attitudes, and general outlook.