

Setting, Mood, and Imagery

A good story is much more than the events that happen or the conflicts between characters. When and where a story takes place also affects your reading experience. Consider, for example, a story about two lost hikers who are fighting for survival. It's the setting details—the towering trees, the stark winter sky, and the approaching snowstorm—that make you care about the conflict. By creating an unforgettable setting, a writer seizes your imagination and whisks you into the world of a story.

Part 1: Setting

You know that the **setting** of a story is the time and place in which the action occurs. The time could be a particular year, a specific season, a time of day, or a historical period. The place could be anywhere—from a bustling ancient city to a deserted tropical island.

In addition to describing the time and location of a story, setting is another literary element authors use to develop complex, believable characters. Setting details often reveal information about the characters' lives, their occupations, their values, and their relationships. Setting may also play a more active role by creating conflicts for the characters or by influencing the decisions they make.

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:
RL 3 Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot. **RL 4** Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

ROLE OF SETTING	EXAMPLE SETTING
<p><i>Setting can influence characters by</i></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> determining the living conditions and jobs available to them shaping their personalities, their dreams, and their values 	<p><i>A poor, drought-stricken Midwestern farm town in the 1930s</i></p> <p>Despite months of grueling work, Joe's crops are failing again. Realizing that his life may never improve, he becomes bitter and angry.</p>
<p><i>Setting can create conflicts by</i></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> exposing the characters to dangerous weather, such as a storm or a drought making characters endure a difficult time period, such as the Great Depression 	<p>The drought has lasted seven years, and most of the farms are failing. People have begun to sell their most prized possessions because they need money. Recently, Mrs. Wilkes sold her wedding band to buy shoes for her daughter.</p>
<p><i>Setting can serve as a symbol by</i></p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> representing an important idea representing a character's hopes, future, or predicament 	<p>Some people have planted a small flower garden in the town square. The garden is a symbol of their hope that their community can still thrive.</p>



MODEL 1: SETTING AND CHARACTERS

Nervous Conditions takes place in a British colony in Africa during the 1960s. Nhamo has left his village to attend school at a mission. How has this opportunity affected him?

from *Nervous Conditions*

Novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga

... Nhamo was forced once a year to return to his squalid homestead, where he washed in cold water in an enamel basin or a flowing river, not in a bathtub with taps gushing hot water and cold; where he ate *sadza* regularly with his fingers and meat hardly at all, never with a knife or fork; where there was no light beyond the flickering yellow of candles and homemade paraffin lamps to enable him to escape into his books when the rest of us had gone to bed.

All this poverty began to offend him, or at the very least to embarrass him after he went to the mission, in a way that it had not done before.

Close Read

1. Identify two details that help you understand Nhamo's life in both settings—the mission and the homestead. An example has been boxed.
2. How has Nhamo's experience at the mission influenced his perception of life on the homestead?



MODEL 2: SETTING AND CONFLICT

In George Orwell's novel *1984*, the country is run by a government that monitors citizens' every move and demands loyalty to its leader—Big Brother. As you read this excerpt, pay attention to the description of this society. How might the setting create conflicts for the characters?

from *1984*

Novel by George Orwell

Outside, even through the shut window pane, the world looked cold.

Down in the street little eddies of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals, and though the sun was shining and the sky a harsh blue, there seemed to be no color in anything except the posters that were plastered everywhere.

The black-mustachio'd face gazed down from every commanding corner.

There was one on the house front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own. Down at street level another poster, torn at one corner, flapped fitfully in the wind. . . . In the far distance a helicopter skimmed down between the roofs, hovered for an instant like a blue-bottle, and darted away again with a curving flight. It was the Police Patrol, snooping into people's windows. The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered.

Close Read

1. In what kind of world does this story take place? Identify four details that help you visualize the setting. One has been boxed.
2. What conflicts might this society create for Winston and other citizens? Explain your answer.

Part 2: Imagery and Mood

To create a setting that stays with you long after a story ends, a writer paints pictures with words. With the right choice of details and the **tone** of the language, a writer can transport you to any scene and affect how you feel about a story.

IMAGERY

Imagery consists of vivid descriptions that recreate sensory experiences for readers. Rather than detailing every aspect of a setting, a writer may use **sensory language**—specific words and phrases that appeal to the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—to help you visualize a scene. For example, in the *1984* excerpt on the previous page, Orwell uses phrases like these to appeal to the senses of sight and hearing:

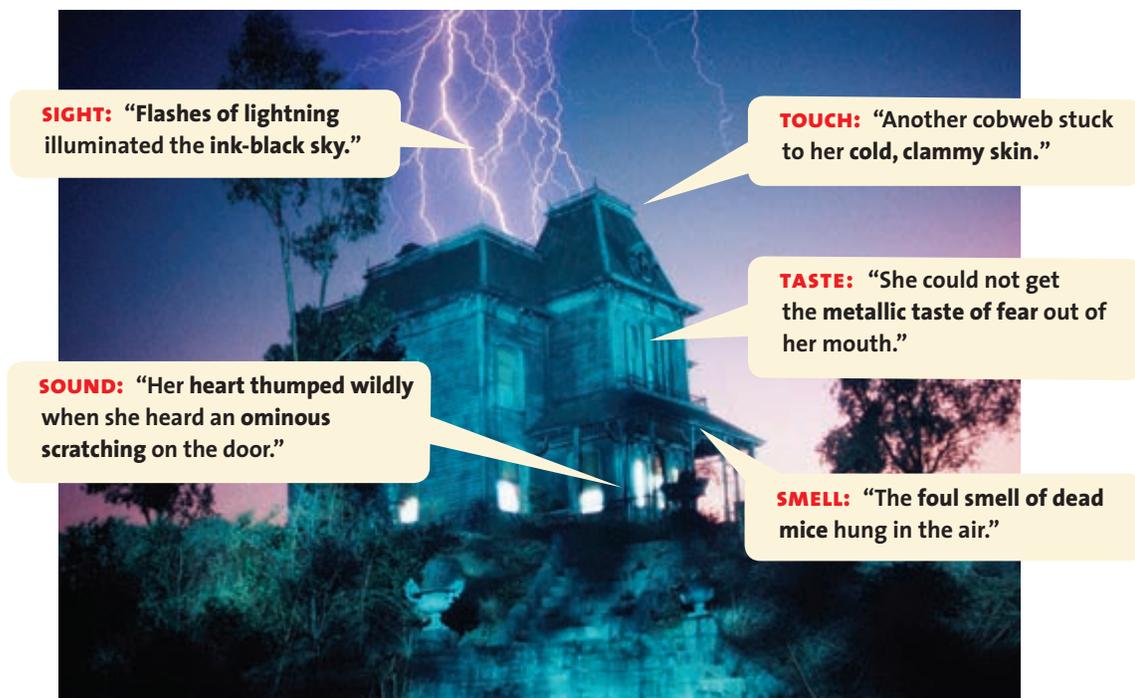
- “*eddies of wind were whirling dust*”
- “*another poster . . . flapped fitfully in the wind*”

Armed with these details, your imagination fills in the rest of the scene. While Orwell does not mention anxious people and wailing sirens, you can picture these details as part of the setting.

MOOD

A writer also uses imagery and setting details to create the **mood**, or atmosphere, of a story. Whether it is lighthearted, hopeful, or mysterious, a story’s mood can affect your emotional reaction to the characters and events. For example, the bleak, eerie mood established in *1984* might prompt you to sympathize with the characters as you are drawn into their unsettling world.

How do the sensory details in the graphic convey a mood of terror and fear?



MODEL 1: IMAGERY

This excerpt is from a chilling story by H. P. Lovecraft, a master of horror and suspense. As you read, pay attention to the sensory details he uses to describe an unusual street.

from

The Music of Erich Zann

Short story by H. P. Lovecraft

The Rue d'Auseil lay across a dark river bordered by precipitous brick blear-windowed warehouses and spanned by a ponderous bridge of dark stone. It was always shadowy along that river, as if the smoke of neighboring factories shut out the sun perpetually. The river was also odorous with evil stenches which I have never smelled elsewhere. . . . Beyond that bridge were narrow
5 cobbled streets with rails; and then came the ascent, at first gradual, but incredibly steep as the Rue d'Auseil was reached.

I have never seen another street as narrow and steep as the Rue d'Auseil. It was almost a cliff, closed to vehicles, consisting in several places of flights
10 of steps, and ending at the top in a lofty ivied wall. Its paving was irregular, sometimes stone slabs, sometimes cobblestones, and sometimes bare earth with struggling greenish-grey vegetation. The houses were tall, peaked-roofed, incredibly old, and crazily leaning backward, forward, and sidewise.

Close Read

1. The boxed detail appeals to the sense of smell. Find three more details and identify the sense each one appeals to.
2. What mood does this setting create? Point out specific examples of imagery that contributes directly to the mood.

MODEL 2: MOOD

The imagery in this excerpt evokes a very different atmosphere. Notice the specific sensory details that contribute to the mood.

from

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Novel by Zora Neale Hurston

It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to
5 come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously.

Close Read

1. How would you describe the mood of this excerpt?
2. Find four details that help to convey the mood. One has been boxed.

Part 3: Analyze the Text

Using what you've learned in this workshop, analyze setting, mood, and imagery in these two short story excerpts.

The first excerpt is from a story that takes place in the mountains of New Mexico, where people tell tales about a legendary white horse that roams the wild. As you read, notice the details that the writer uses to describe the setting and create a distinct mood.

from

My Wonder Horse

Short story by **Sabine R. Ulibarri**

I was fifteen years old. Although I had never seen the Wonder Horse, he filled my imagination and fired my ambition. I used to listen open-mouthed as my father and the ranch hands talked about the phantom horse who turned into mist and air and nothingness when he was trapped. I joined in the
5 universal obsession—like the hope of winning the lottery—of putting my lasso on him some day, of capturing him and showing him off on Sunday afternoons when the girls of the town strolled through the streets.

It was high summer. The forests were fresh, green, and gay. The cattle moved slowly, fat and sleek in the August sun and shadow. Listless and drowsy in the
10 lethargy of late afternoon, I was dozing on my horse. It was time to round up the herd and go back to the good bread of the cowboy camp. Already my comrades would be sitting around the campfire, playing the guitar, telling stories of past or present, or surrendering to the languor of the late afternoon. The sun was setting behind me in a riot of streaks and colors. Deep, harmonious silence.

15 I sit drowsily still, forgetting the cattle in the glade. Suddenly the forest falls silent, a deafening quiet. The afternoon comes to a standstill. The breeze stops blowing, but it vibrates. The sun flares hotly. The planet, life, and time itself have stopped in an inexplicable way. For a moment, I don't understand what is happening.

20 Then my eyes focus. There he is! The Wonder Horse! At the end of the glade, on high ground surrounded by summer green. He is a statue. He is an engraving. Line and form and white stain on a green background. Pride, prestige, and art incarnate in animal flesh. A picture of burning beauty and virile freedom. An ideal, pure and invincible, rising from the eternal dreams of humanity. Even
25 today my being thrills when I remember him.

Close Read

1. Describe the setting in this excerpt. Find details that reveal the season, the weather, and the narrator's lifestyle.
2. Find four examples of imagery in lines 8–14. One has been boxed. What mood do these details create?
3. How does the mood change in lines 15–19? Find three words or phrases that convey this change.
4. Notice the tone, or attitude toward a subject, revealed in lines 20–25. Which details help you understand how the narrator feels about the horse?

Now read this excerpt, taken from a story that is based on an experience from the writer's life. In 1897, Crane was a passenger on a ship that sank off the coast of Florida. He and three other men rowed back to shore in a flimsy lifeboat. How does Crane's use of imagery help convey a different setting and mood?

from

The OPEN BOAT

Short story by **Stephen Crane**

None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colors of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.

Many a man ought to have a bathtub larger than the boat which here rode upon the sea. These waves were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall, and each froth-top was a problem in small-boat navigation. The cook squatted in the bottom, and looked with both eyes at the six inches of gunwale which separated him from the ocean. His sleeves were rolled over his fat forearms, and the two flaps of his unbuttoned vest dangled as he bent to bail out the boat. Often he said, "That was a narrow clip." As he remarked it he invariably gazed eastward over the broken sea.

The oiler, steering with one of the two oars in the boat, sometimes raised himself suddenly to keep clear of water that swirled in over the stern. It was a thin little oar, and it seemed often ready to snap. The correspondent, pulling at the other oar, watched the waves and wondered why he was there.

The injured captain, lying in the bow, was at this time buried in that profound dejection and indifference which comes, temporarily at least, to even the bravest and most enduring when, willy-nilly, the firm fails, the army loses, the ship goes down.

Close Read

- Using details from the text, describe the setting as completely as you can.
- Identify five sensory details. One has been boxed. What senses do they appeal to?
- How would you describe the mood of this excerpt? Explain how the sensory details you found help to create this mood.
- In which excerpt does setting play a more important role? Support your opinion with specific details.