



Day 5: Dos and Don'ts for Immersive Setting

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Building immersive setting is about weaving a dream for the reader. In order to do this most effectively, setting details should be infused into each scene. All of my suggestions from the past four days have been designed to present you with ways to do this in your stories.

Eudora Welty writes, "Time and place make the framework that any story's built on...a fiction writer's honesty begins right there, in being true to those two facts of time and place."

On this final day, let's pull everything together into this generative list, along with new examples and ideas, so that you can create the framework of time and place in your story.

Setting Do #1:

Consider the intention of each scene.

Ask yourself the role the location of this scene will have in the larger story. Keep in mind the intention of the scene when deciding what readers need to know about the setting. The more setting and place information you give readers, the greater importance they assign to that information. For example, do readers need to know what type of tree grows in the courtyard? Is that detail important to the character? And...would the character even know or care about the type of tree?

Setting Do #2:

Be a good guide for readers.

It is the narrator's job to orient readers to the world the characters inhabit by carefully choosing when to add setting details. Too many details at the wrong time can slow your story's momentum and overwhelm readers. Have you ever found yourself skimming passages of description in a novel? Setting details should capture the reader's imagination but not feel intrusive or out of place.

Setting Don't #3:

But don't wait too long.

Now, the moment a character walks into the kitchen, we don't need a soup-to-nuts description, but don't wait until the character is ready to leave the room to give readers the essential details.

Setting Don't #4:

And don't forget setting entirely.

You may be surprised that, as an editor, I see this "don't" more often than any other. Writers are understandably focused on character development and plot movement, but they may forget to include any setting or location description. Or, if they remember, there is a cursory sentence when a character enters a new space without serving a connection to that character or the story. If readers are confused about the location, they lose that dreamlike state while they step out of the story to figure out the answer.

Setting Do #5:

Have the characters interact with the setting.

Rather than the location being mere window dressing, let the characters move through the setting and interact with it. Show readers how it impacts and defines the main character. How does the setting relate to the character? How is she similar to or different from the setting?

Let's look at how Suzanne Collins lets Katniss interact with setting in *The Hunger Games*:

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.

~*The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins

Setting Do #6:

What your characters notice matters.

The setting details should matter to the story and it should matter to the character. In the above example, Katniss notices the velvet. She focuses on that one specific detail to show us how she is unaccustomed to this kind of opulence. That also has bearing on the plot at large which highlights the difference between the haves and have-nots.

Setting Do #7:

Consider your genre.

Historical fiction, science fiction, and fantasy lend themselves to world building. Readers of these genres expect more setting details. Mystery, suspense, and thriller genres are usually plot-driven stories. Writers in these genres can use fewer setting details. The momentum and pacing of the story are more important.

Setting Do #8: Specificity is your friend.

Back on Day 1, we discussed that it's best to be specific but not too specific. In other words, be choosy when selecting what elements of the location to describe to readers. These elements should be important to the character. Now, I'd like to extend that specificity to word choice. Words like *tall*, *large*, *strong*, and *beautiful* are so overused that they have become meaningless. Each person—and character—defines these words differently. What is large to you may be small to me. Before using one of these words, think about what it means to your character. ([Check out my blog post on this topic.](#))

Setting Don't #9: Banish generic descriptions.

Building on the above point, it is important to stay away from overused words, as well as generic descriptions that don't give the reader any meaningful details. Let's look at an example.

Jane inhaled deeply and thought the air smelled wonderful.

After taking this course, you already know that isn't going to cut it. What does "wonderful" mean to Jane? What, exactly, does she smell? Let's let the description work a bit harder.

The scent of summer flowers was heavenly to Jane.

Kudos for trying to incorporate the character's perspective into the description. Jane is the type of person who notices the scent of flowers and that means something to the reader. Also, the use of "heavenly" (although a dreaded adverb) gives readers a bit more to go on than "wonderful." But...what does this smell like? How about this?

Jane inhaled the sweet perfume of jasmine as she stepped off her porch.

Now we have a specific detail of what Jane smells and we know it is something that she enjoys.

Setting Do #10: Use contrast to your advantage.

Sometimes defining the opposite can help readers understand what is. The same is true of setting and place. Here are two examples:

The sun was flaring red in the west when I drove toward Tabitha's house, past sandstone boulders and gray-green brush. 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 was neglected. Faded gray paint curled from the wood siding, and weeds spread across the lawn, humped and matted like an overgrown beard...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 how the author creates a contrast between the exclusive city of Santa Barbara and Tabitha's home. The word choices are specific. (See tips #8 and #9 above.) Santa Barbara is a velvet sash, smooth, glimmering. Tabitha's home is faded, humped and matted, overgrown, dingy.

You may already be familiar with the next example:

The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green.

~**"The Lottery," Shirley Jackson**

This contrast is implied. Everything *seems* perfect and idyllic, but we have a sneaking suspicion that all is not right here. The setting is too perfect. What happens next is anything but idyllic.

Note that this tip is a bit different from yesterday's tip #2, which focused on the character's emotional contrast to the setting. Here we are exploring the difference of what this specific setting is to what it is not.

Setting Do #11: Take a page from other authors.

When you're reading other books in your genre, keep notes about how they depict setting. Jot down things like:

- ✓ How long are the setting and location passages?
 - ✓ Where are the setting details placed within each scene?
 - ✓ What types of sensory images are included?
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Setting Do #12:

Try to show rather than tell.

You've heard this adage a thousand times, and it applies to setting and place also. Readers become more immersed in the world of the story when the details are shown. To do this effectively, consider what the character is feeling, then show the reader how that feeling manifests itself. For example, it is more significant for the reader if Sam is seen fanning himself and wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, instead of telling the reader that it is 95 degrees in the shade.

Setting Don't #13:

Steer clear of repetitive word patterns.

Bogging your sentences with lots of adjectives becomes tedious for readers. *The big, dark house on the tall, wooded hill beside the small, quirky town.* Vary sentence structure to keep readers engaged and surprised.

Setting Do #14:

Anchor readers in the time and place of your story.

This is what immersive setting is all about! This means infusing the setting throughout your story. Let's review an excerpt from *On the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, by Jamie Ford. It pulls all of these ideas together. Note that this passage is from the middle of the novel. (**Bold** sentences mine)

As he walked along the damp sidewalks, (**Nice sensory detail but by itself this could be anywhere**) his breath came out in a swirling mist, adding to the fog rolling in off the water. (**Now we know there is a large body of water nearby.**) He tried to stay in the shadows, despite the fear that crept into his mind and curdled his stomach. Henry had

never been out this late by himself. Though with the crowds of people that bustled up and down the avenues, he hardly felt alone. **(At this part of the story, we know the character is in Seattle so we don't need as many details, which would be overkill. The author is anchoring us to this part of the city at this time of night.)**

All the way down to South King, **(Note that specifics make readers feel they are in the know)** the street was awash in the stain of neon signs that defied the blackout restrictions. **(This key historical reference reminds readers about regulations during WWII.)** Signs for bars and nightclubs reflected greens and reds in each puddle he jumped over. The occasional car would drive by, bathing the street in its dim blue headlights, **(again reinforcing the time period—blackout regulations)** illuminating the men and women, Chinese and Caucasian, enjoying the nightlife—despite the rationing. **(Another reference to time period)**

~Jamie Ford, *On the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Which of these tips can you implement in your story today?
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Up Next

Head over to today's exploration in today's classroom. I'm sharing one of my favorite exercises, and one that I do every day. It will help you move through the world as a writer.