

English 9: Setting

Settings That Reinforce Characters

The setting is where and when a story takes place. Of course, many novels have more than one setting, ranging from the general (a city, country, or world 100 years ago) to the specific (a character's house or room during the Superbowl). What's great about setting is that you can use it to mirror or reinforce your characters.

For example, if you are writing about a mysterious person, you might place him or her in a dark, creepy mansion on a hill outside of town. Or, if one of your characters is feeling trapped in his or her life, he or she might live in a small town in the middle of nowhere.

Here's us just telling you about Larry:

Larry was having a hard time. He felt sad and trapped. He was once a famous author, but he hadn't written a word for years.

And here's us telling you about Larry, but through the space that he is living in:

Larry's apartment was less of a living space than a glorified closet. The bathroom was just big enough to sit on the toilet without having his knees touch the sink, and the window was more like a ship's porthole. The bed was so small his feet hung over the edge, and there was really not much to do but watch static on the television. The sound of that static often kept Larry company late into the night. The place did not have a kitchen, so he bought a camping hotplate to make his single-serving meals. He ate the same thing every night, but he did not seem to mind the monotony of his repeated dinner of rice, wilted spinach, and baked beans or the peculiar odor that the beans left on his sheets. The only item on the wall of Larry's apartment was a framed, yellowed copy of the New York Times Best Seller list from 16 years ago. Larry's name was at the top of it. Below the newspaper clipping, on Larry's desk, sat an old, dusty typewriter and an even dustier stack of blank paper.

Larry doesn't even have to speak for himself; his apartment speaks for him.

Settings That Enhance Mood

Settings are not only used to reinforce characters, they can also enhance the different moods in a novel. A mood describes the emotional quality of something, whether it is a song, a painting or, in this case, a scene in your novel. *It might help to think of mood as the way you want someone to feel while reading your novel.*

If you wanted to create a creepy mood for a scene in your novel, you could start with something like:

A one-eyed crow is picking at something on a branch of a dead tree in the yard, while a three-legged dog howls at the moon.

These images remind us of dark, disturbing things, and show the reader that the scene of the novel is “creepy” without having to tell him or her directly.

For each of the moods listed below, write some details about a setting that would be appropriate in creating that mood. Think of details about how that place looks, sounds, smells, and feels to visit. Try to write two or three sentences for each mood.

Stressful

Romantic

Comfortable/peaceful