



Day 4: Using Setting to Develop Plot

Instructor: Jackie Cangro

For the past three days, we've discussed how setting and place can add depth to your story by grounding the reader, becoming another character, and revealing emotions (the character's and the reader's). Setting and place provide the framework for the story, but we often overlook the role setting can have in moving the plot forward.

Keep in mind these two points while you're reading this lesson.

1. **Setting can be active.** On a smaller scale, we've seen how different settings can affect the mood and therefore the characters in your story. Today we're going to look at how manipulating the setting can also be a catalyst to change.
2. **Setting can have a life of its own.** Yesterday we looked at how to apply characterization techniques to setting. Today we're going to take that a step further to make setting dynamic by giving it momentum.

Ready? Let's dig in!

Setting in Plot Development Tip #1: The change factor.

Changes in setting, whether by adding or subtracting an important element, can be a catalyst to move the plot forward by driving the characters to take action. Here are a few ideas:

1. **Reveal something previously unknown in the setting.** This can a small or large discovery, positive or negative, something that affects just your character or many

people. For example, your character discovers a trap door to a secret basement. Or no one in the town realizes that the lovely park statues are cameras in disguise, watching their every move.

2. **Create an outside threat to the stable environment.** There are many ways to create a setting roadblock for your characters. Maybe a terrible storm or an earthquake strikes the area. Or perhaps a sinister force cuts the power supply to the hotel, plunging everyone into darkness.
3. **Remove objects from the character's world.** Objects and possessions play an important role in setting. They are part of the "set pieces" that give depth to the world of your story. Don't lose sight of how they can change your character's perceptions. Your character may lose a sentimental locket while at the beach. She may break her favorite mug. Maybe her car is stolen.
4. **Move your character into a new location, even if temporarily.** Maybe your character falls asleep on the train home and ends up in a part of town he has never been to. Or he might get evicted from his current apartment and need to move somewhere new. Consider how he might experience this change and what he would notice. This point piggybacks on the next tip about contrast in setting to reveal conflict.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ What is one thing you can add or subtract to allow your characters to interact with the location in a new way?

Setting in Plot Development Tip #2: Contrast in setting reveals potential conflict.

Use your character's emotional connection to a place to develop potential conflict in your story by contrasting what the character is used to, wants, or knows well with a new environment.

Here, the main character, who has been estranged from his father, returns home for his father's funeral. He contrasts the idyllic town and his late father's sporting-goods store with references to slasher movies.

The hunter-green awnings of the shop, usually speckled with dried bird droppings and water stains, have recently been cleaned, and the windows, anticipating the fall season,

are crammed with hockey, ski, and snowboard gear. The mannequin in the corner is wearing a goalie mask, and in the ominous flicker of the fluorescent light he looks like Jason, the serial killer from those Friday the 13th movies. Elmsbrook is the perfect town for a serial killer, and I mean that in the best possible way. It's always the picturesque towns, with clean sidewalks and clock towers, where Jason and Freddy come to slaughter oversexed teenagers.

~ *This Is Where I Leave You*, Jonathan Tropper

Here is another example from the same novel:

When people give directions to any home or business in West Covington, they use our house as a negative landmark; if you see the big white house, then you've gone too far. Which is precisely what I'm thinking as I pull into the driveway.

~ *This Is Where I Leave You*, Jonathan Tropper

It's clear that the character feels a lot of trepidation and anxiety about being in his childhood town and home. This is not a joyful return to his roots, and it's not just because he is there for his father's funeral.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Review a scene in your story that has a new setting or important object. Does your character have mixed emotions about it? Does she feel differently than she is *supposed* to feel about it?
- ✓ How can you show this contrast to the reader?

Setting in Plot Development Tip #3: Foreshadow plot events.

Foreshadowing is a technique you can use to hint at upcoming events in your story. Mystery and suspense writers are often skilled at employing foreshadowing, but it is a useful device in any genre. It gives readers clues like little breadcrumbs. This increases tension because the reader has certain expectations about what's to come. Another great reason to use foreshadowing—it can make extraordinary and unusual events appear credible because the events are predicted beforehand so readers are prepared for them.

Here is an example from a classic—*Great Expectations*, by Charles Dickens. Dickens uses the macro setting of weather as observed by the main character, Pip.

Stormy and wet, stormy and wet; and mud, mud, mud, deep in all the streets. Day after day, a vast heavy veil had been driving over London from the east, and it drove still, as if in the east there were an eternity of cloud and wind. So furious had been the gusts, that high buildings in town had the lead stripped off their roofs; and in the country, trees had been torn up, and sails of windmills carried away; and gloomy accounts had come in from the coast, of shipwreck and death. Violent blasts of rain had accompanied these rages of wind, and the day just closed as I sat down to read had been the worst of all.

~*Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens

While this description may be a bit overwrought by today's standards, what do you think is coming next for our Pip? This description occurs just before the criminal Magwitch arrives. It is a foreshadowing of Pip's inner chaos. Just as the angry winds leave a trail of destruction in London, Magwitch's disclosure will open a path of destruction in Pip's life.

Let's look at a more recent (and shorter) example.

The day was gray, the color of Europe. Curtains were drawn around the car. Liesel made a clear circle on the dribbled glass and looked out.

~ *The Book Thief*, by Markus Zusak

The main character is Liesel, a young girl caught up in the horrors of WWII. Her mother has sent her away to give her a greater chance for survival. In the very confined setting of the car, the author correlates the dreary day with Liesel's emotions. We know she feels lonely from her actions, and we get the sense that her future is not necessarily brighter.

Of course not every description of the weather can or should include an element of foreshadowing, nor should foreshadowing be limited to descriptions of the weather, but used sparingly this device is very effective.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Look for opportunities to leave clues in the setting descriptions about important plot points.

Setting in Plot Development Tip #4: Give your setting a backstory.

In tip #3 yesterday, we discussed exploring the history of your story's setting. Today, we're going to use that history to create conflict. First, an important reminder about backstory from author Jamie Ford: "Writing backstory *feels* like storytelling but it isn't. It's regurgitating facts, or dolling up aspects of world-building—basically plugging in what that author already knows, hoping it will entertain and enlighten the reader. Instead it has the opposite effect. Less is more. Backstory is like creating a 'connect-the-dots' picture—you just need the dots. The reader will draw the lines."

I love his point. If we can move from using backstory as Information the Reader Needs to Know to using backstory as an opportunity to develop tension, conflict, and suspense in the forward motion of the story, it will feel less like a giant aside or interruption and more like a necessary part of the story. Whew! (Rant over)

One way to do that is to select backstory information that specifically shows the reader the way in which the change in situation directly impacts the current conflict. And one way to do that is through setting details.

Let's take a look at an example from the novel *Olive Kitteridge*. The character, Kevin, has been searching for the place where he feels most at home. It's been a long journey for him. He has floated in and out of a long list of towns. The author doesn't give us a description of each town, or even name them, which would otherwise feel like unnecessary backstory. She focuses on one place and offers specific memories of that place, simultaneously giving us the inherent conflict between the "open dustiness there and the ragged coastline here (Maine)" and why he is unsettled once again.

But every town had been promising. Every place at first had said, Here you go—You can live here. You can rest here. You can fit. The enormous skies of the Southwest, the shadows that fell over the desert mountains, the innumerable cacti—red-tipped or yellow-blossomed or flat-headed—all this had lightened him when he first moved to Tucson, taking hikes by himself, then with others from the university. Perhaps Tucson had been his favorite, had he been forced to choose—the stark difference between the open dustiness there and the ragged coastline here.

~ *Olive Kitteridge*, Elizabeth Strout

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ How can you use your setting's history to target conflict in the present?
 - ✓ How can you connect your character's specific memories of the setting directly to the present?
-

Up Next

I hope you found this information useful! Head over to today's exploration in the classroom module for the chance to use setting to drive plot changes.