

Setting That Works

How Memorable Setting Can Advance Plot, Reveal Character, Echo Theme, and More

EIGHT 'JOBS' SETTING CAN DO

1. Setting advances the story. _____

- (a) The setting is an obstacle the protagonist needs to overcome.
- (b) A change in setting creates danger—and creates new plot development.
- (c) The ticking clock builds suspense.



In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, Alec Leamas and Liz Gold have to escape East Berlin by climbing over the Berlin Wall.

2. Setting drives the story. _____

The setting itself is the story. It's what the protagonist must face and overcome.



A Perfect Storm is a classic man against the sea story, where the crew of the Andrea Gail is lost at sea during a storm in the North Atlantic. The men's fight to survive in the treacherous conditions in the North Atlantic is the central story.

3. Setting defines character, changes character.

The characters are so defined by the setting, they couldn't exist elsewhere.



In *Lonesome Dove*, two retired Texas Rangers and their fellow cowboys drive a cattle herd to Montana, facing bandits, Indians, disease, and the harshness of the landscape. The challenges of the Old West breed a certain kind of character—a loner, macho, self-reliant, independent.

4. Setting establishes the rules of your universe.

For historical fiction or sci-fi/fantasy, the writer needs to describe the rules.



In *The Martian*, a dust storm on Mars forces the crew of astronauts to evacuate and they leave behind Mark Watney, thinking he had died. But he's alive, and now stranded and alone with no way to even signal Earth that he's alive.

5. Setting unifies the story.

Some books have multiple storylines connected by a common backdrop.



In *Hotel*, Arthur Hailey weaves together stories from a variety of characters who are staying in a New Orleans hotel.

6. Setting conveys mood and tone.

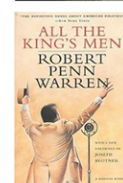
Weather is often used to unify story by conveying mood and tone. All the characters experience the same weather.



In *The English Patient*, the desert setting and the hot winds evoke mood, character, tension, theme, story.

7. Setting echoes theme.

Best done with a subtle touch.



In *All the King's Men*, one theme is how the past impacts the present. And yet, on page 1 is a description of how, after car crashes, the Louisiana highway department puts up crosses on the side of the road to warn drivers. But then the kudzu vines cover up the crosses. We don't learn from the past.

8. Setting serves as metaphor.

Because place is destiny.



In *The Great Gatsby*, the green light at the end of Daisy's dock represents Gatsby's hope and dreams for the future, a guiding light to lead him to his goal.

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