

Write Your Novel

How to write setting in a story

1. Choose your setting wisely

Let's talk about setting suitability: as the examples above clearly demonstrate, every great story hinges on setting. *The Great Gatsby* would not work if it were set during the Great Depression, and it's almost impossible to imagine most of Zadie Smith's books taking place anywhere other than London.

Here are a few important questions to consider:

- Exactly where and when will your story take place? Take this time to nail down the details. If it's "contemporary," does that mean present day or ten years ago? If it's in a certain country, what city or town? And if you have multiple settings, how long will the characters spend in each one?
- Is this setting a real place, and if so, how much research will it require to convey in good faith? If it's merely based on a real place, how much overlap will there be?
- How will the setting of the story factor into the characters' lives? Will it help them or prevent them from achieving their goals? If neither, why choose this setting at all?

Once you've answered these to your satisfaction, you can settle on your setting (as it were) and begin constructing it in more detail.


2. Focus on what's unique

Not every element of your setting will be worth noting, so focus on what's unique. If someone leans their head out the window, what do they hear besides traffic or birds? Does the town square smell like bread from the local bakery, or like pollution from a nearby factory?


Get the details straight


 *What's the history of this area?*

 *What is the weather like each season?*

 *What are the biggest landmarks of this setting?*

 *In what sorts of residences do most people live?*

 *How do people tend to get around (walking, driving, etc.)?*

 *Why do people like (or dislike) living (or visiting) here?*

The Ultimate Worldbuilding Template

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The natural addition to each of these questions is: *and how does this affect my characters?* This is where you'll tap into the most interesting features of your setting — by considering how your characters will perceive and react to what's around them.

Pro tip: When writing about places you've never been or have only seen as a tourist, over-emphasizing famous landmarks like Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, and the Empire State Building will make your work read like that of an amateur. To avoid this, play around on Google Street View and discover some more quotidian hangouts for your characters!

3. Use all five senses in descriptions

As you describe each setting of your story, make sure you don't just talk about how it looks. Instead, use all five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, and even taste. This is especially important when writing a first person account, but also applies to other POV's — and you can check out our free course below to learn more.

You shouldn't use *all* of these in every description, nor should you continuously rehash settings you've already described. But as a rule of thumb, each time your characters visit a new location — or experience that location in a new context (e.g. at night rather than in the daytime) — you should devote a paragraph to setting the scene.

Here's a great example of concise and multi-sensory setting description from Leigh Bardugo's *Ninth House*:

Inside, the music thumped and wailed, the heat of bodies washing over them in a gust of perfume and moist air. The big square room was dimly lit, packed with people circling skull-shaped vats of punch, the back garden strewn with strings of twinkling lights beyond. Darlington was already starting to sweat.

- Sight ("dimly lit, packed with people");
- Sound ("the music thumped and wailed");
- Smell ("a gust of perfume and moist air");
- Touch/physical sensation ("already starting to sweat").

The rest of this party scene consists of mostly dialogue and action, but Bardugo is careful to describe each new room the characters enter, so the reader always has a clear picture of what's happening. Indeed, the more you show rather than tell with sense-based setting descriptions, the more you'll immerse readers in your story. Just don't go overboard with pages and pages of detail — zero in on what's most interesting and unique.

4. Develop your characters' relationships to the setting

Once you've established the characters in your story, you can dig into their relationships with the setting.

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These relationships can take many forms. Say your main character has lived in the same town their entire life; they might have a longtime fondness for it, or they could resent and feel trapped by the setting. These kind of characteristics or desires can be established using a character development exercise, like the profile template you'll find below, which prompts you to dig deep into your character's background. Whatever you decide, make sure this nuance comes through in your narration!

What you don't want is a character so detached from their surroundings that their story could take place anywhere. At bare minimum, you need them to interact with the setting in specific, realistic ways. For greater impact, use setting to challenge them, assist them, or both.

Setting as a challenge vs. setting as an asset

Susan Choi does an amazing job of positioning setting as a challenge in *Trust Exercise*, which begins with two young characters trying to walk to each other in a vast, highway-dense city:

The walk – without the benefit of sidewalks or crossing signals, for their city wasn't built for pedestrians – from the JCC parking lot to the southern gate of Sarah's complex had taken close to twenty minutes, in the heat of the damned, along a median planted with scorched rhododendron... during which several separate motorists had pulled over to ask if he needed assistance. In their city only the poorest of the poor, or fresh victims of crimes, ever walked.

But setting doesn't need to oppose your characters in order to feel relevant and meaningful. Here's an example of setting as an asset, from Madeline Miller's *Circe*, describing Circe exploring her new island:

I learned to recognise the different blooming vines and gaudy roses, to spot the shining dragonflies and coiling snakes. I climbed the peaks where the cypresses speared black into the sky, then clambered down to the orchards and vineyards where purple grapes grew thick as coral... I was drunk, as the wine and nectar in my father's halls had never made me. All this while I had been a weaver without wool, a ship without the sea. Yet now look where I sail.

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And remember, you're not limited to one or the other! Over the course of a story, a setting may play varying roles in a character's life, both positive and negative. Just make sure it doesn't sit there as an idle backdrop.

5. Keep your readers oriented

You don't want people to get distracted from your plot because they're too busy trying to untangle where the action is happening!

Ironically, one of the quickest ways to confuse readers is to give them too much setting detail. So when introducing a setting, keep the description concise, as in the *Ninth House* example — a few evocative sentences will do. If you have more to say about the setting, you can incorporate it later.

In terms of specific directions, again, less is more. "He walked out of his apartment building, turned left onto the road, then right onto the sidewalk, then another left onto another sidewalk" hardly makes for riveting storytelling. If you must use directions, at least ensure they're consistent! Don't say the police station is on the east side of town, only to describe the sun setting (a famously western phenomenon) behind it in the next scene.

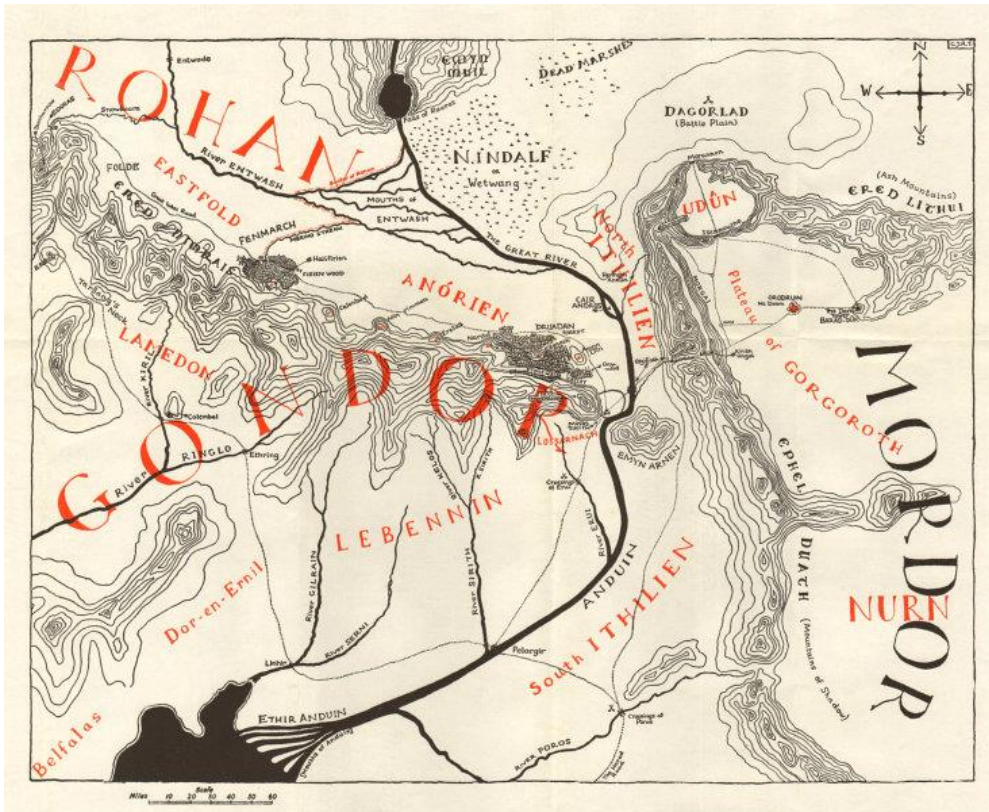
These are the kinds of issues that can really throw readers off, even subconsciously — so make sure you get them straight. If you're particularly worried about setting inconsistencies, you can always hire a copy editor to comb through your work.

Consider drawing a map

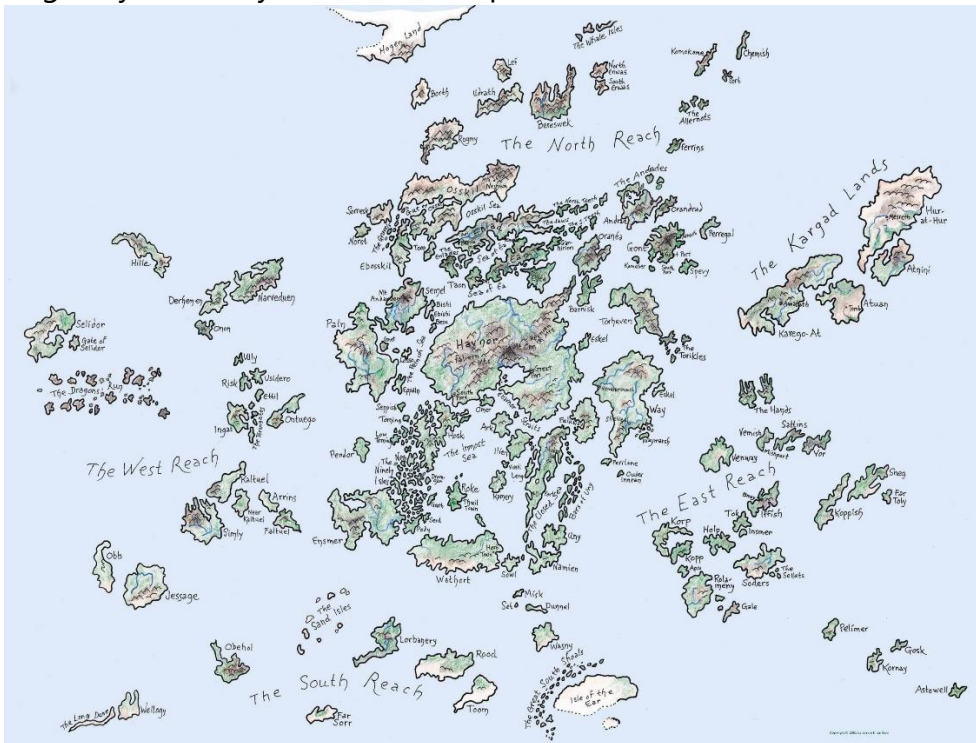
Whether you're building an elaborate world from scratch or simply want to be as accurate as possible when representing a real place, a map of your setting could help. This will give you a more concrete sense of your setting while you're writing, as well as streamline the reader's experience down the line.

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Here are some of our favourite fictional maps, for reference:



A map of Rohan, Gondor, and Mordor from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King*, originally drawn by his son Christopher Tolkien.



Ursula K. Le Guin's own map of the Earthsea archipelago from her *Earthsea Cycle*.

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Detailed map of Ketterdam, an Amsterdam-inspired city, from Leigh Bardugo's YA fantasy novel *Crooked Kingdom* (the second in her *Six of Crows* duology).

Source: blog.reedsy.com