

## Setting the Scene: Fiction and Non-Fiction (Including Memoirs)

By Joyce Shafer



You can provide scene setting through narrative, as well as dialogue. And you need to provide the setting each time characters shift from one scene to another. You never want to leave readers "wandering in the dark," with no idea where they, through the characters (or the non-fiction writer), are or should be. When you write in first person, your main character (or you as the "star of your show") provides this information. In third person, the narrator (you) does this.

Here's a two-paragraph example of first-person fiction from best-selling author James Lee Burke (indents removed for my publishing purposes):

***I drove home at 5 p.m. and parked my pickup truck under the porte cochere attached to the shotgun house where Molly and I live in what is called the historical district of New Iberia. Our home is a modest one compared to the Victorian and antebellum structures that define most of East Main, but nonetheless it is a beautiful old place, built of cypress and oak, long and square in shape, like a boxcar, with high ceilings and windows, a small gallery and peaked tin roof, and ventilated green shutters that you can latch over the glass during hurricane season.***

***The flower beds are planted with azaleas, lilies, hibiscus, philodendron, and rosebushes in the sun and caladiums and hydrangeas in the shade. The yard is over an acre in size and covered with pecan trees, slash pine, and live oaks. The back of the property slopes down to the Teche, and late at night barges and tugboats with green and red running lights drone heavily through the drawbridge at Burke Street on their way to Morgan City. At early dawn there is often ground fog in the trees and on the bayou, and inside it you can sometimes hear a gator flopping or ducks wimpling the shallows.***

Burke's setting gives you a good sense of his home and property and the neighbourhood. You can practically see the plants and trees--smell the flowers and appreciate their varied colours and shapes. You can easily imagine yourself lying in bed there at night with the windows open, hearing the sounds created by nature and man.



Setting the scene also allows you to either play out a scene as it happens or summarize what happened, say, the previous night, rather than playing out the scene from the previous night. When this is done, it's important that whatever is conveyed moves the present story forward. Here's an example:

***Mack's eyes opened. It took a few seconds for him to remember where he was--he groaned. At the restaurant the night before, Karla had returned to the table and packed up her food in silence. The ride in the pickup truck to the motel was made in silence. She'd carried her small duffle bag and took her room key from him, again, in silence then slammed her motel room door, causing several people to stick their heads out of their own doors to see what was going on and to frown at Mack.***

Although the scene above wasn't played out in "real-time," you can easily grasp mood; that something happened at the restaurant the previous night, something that caused Karla to stop speaking to Mack--which is unlike her usual chatty self, and to express her feelings by slamming her room door with a great deal of energy. You get enough information to picture a single-story motel at night in your mind, cars parked in front of rooms, doors opening and people looking out to see what's going on. You even get a sense of what the rooms may be like, based on your own experiences possibly, even though the interior isn't mentioned.

Time of day and days of the week are something most stories benefit from including as part of scene setting. We all relate to time and timing. The way to do this is to have a system for tracking these. You don't want to get confused or confuse readers about how much time has passed, or get so confused (or careless) that you mess it up and cause readers to think, "Hey, wait a minute." I've worked with clients who did not pay attention to time and timing, and even as the editor, I had no sense of when (time of day or time intervals) events happened. This can cause the writer to have a character go outside to get something from



his car in the morning, which takes just a few minutes, and then suddenly it's nearly midnight, with no transition provided to justify the time leap. Hours disappear at random, not as part of the plot, but because the writer wasn't paying attention to the plot and timing thread.

Sometimes the simplest way to start to set a scene is to give the time of day or tell how much time as passed. Examples include:

- It was 9 a.m., and Mary was still asleep.
- Marcus parked his car in front of their house and dialed Mary's phone number. Ten minutes later, Mary, breathless from rushing, got into his car.
- Three minutes after Marcus and Mary headed south on Main Street, their house exploded, sending orange and blue flames and a black cloud of smoke over the treetops, and car alarms screeching.

Here's a three-paragraph example of setting scene while the characters are directly involved, which is from a novel by Elizabeth George. It's British, so some of the terms are different--boot rather than trunk (of a car) and torch rather than flashlight, and towards rather than toward, for example. You can see how E. George creates setting as she moves these two characters closer to their destination (indents removed for my publishing purposes).

***Robin slowed his Escort perhaps a half mile beyond this village. When he made a right turn, it was into a lane so narrow and overgrown that Barbara knew she would not have been able to distinguish it from the rest of the night-shrouded landscape had she been alone. This lane began to rise quickly towards the east, bound on one side by the glitter of wire fencing, bound on the other by a line of silver birches. The roadway was potted by craters. And the field beyond the fencing was knotted by weeds.***

***They came to a break in the birches, and Robin turned into it, onto a track that jostled them over boulders and through ruts. The trees were thick here but shaped by generations of wind; they loomed over the track like sailors bending into a storm.***

***The track ended at a fence of wire and posts. To their right, an old rail gate hung at an angle like a listing boat, and it was to this gate that Robin led Barbara, after rooting through the Escort's boot and bringing out a torch, which he handed over to her. He himself took out a camping lantern, slinging it over his arm and saying, "It's just this way."***

Look at how much is provided in this example above: the characters involved, the car they're riding in, distance, and lay of the land. When the driver makes turns, you make the turns as well. In your imagination, you create a narrow lane with potholes and ruts and overgrowth on both sides of the car. You know it's night-time, and that's they're in a remote area. When the



lane rises, you can relate to what that feels and looks like. Re-read those paragraphs and see how much of the setting plays out in your mind. Feel the mood of how this scene is set. Even if you don't know the whole story, you can tell it's not a light-hearted or comedic experience. Is there anything you think you'd remove from this scene because it's extraneous? I'm willing to say, "Likely not." George set the scene well. It's crisp and concise and informative, without too much detail.

Can you see how, why, when, and how much setting may be necessary to make a fiction or non-fiction--including a memoir book a more engaging read? It's all story. And story is what readers look for, no matter the genre or topic of a book. I wish you the best with your writing and progress.

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