

# Place, Plot & Problems

---

## Setting Mistakes Writers Make

### What Is Setting?

Setting is the time, place, and social environment (milieu) where your story takes place. It will shape your characters, conflict, mood, and plot.

Setting is not a backdrop or a box we check in the opening of our story. It must stay active throughout the story.

#### Time

Time can be specific or general. The “time” might not be explicitly stated, but we can get a sense of time through things like technology, customs, daily life, historical references, etc.

#### Place

Place is the physical “where” of the story. This includes the broad location, the immediate surroundings, and the objects that help define the space.

#### Social Environment

The unwritten rules of the world your characters inhabit — class structures, cultural expectations, and social norms that govern behavior. Like time and place, milieu is often felt rather than stated outright.

### Ways to Remind Readers of Setting

- 5 Senses
- Objects
- Terminology
- Landmarks
- Social Norms
- Dialogue
- Character Interactions
- etc.

### Details Should Do Multiple Jobs

Meaningful details can:

- **Reveal character** — show what someone notices, values, ignores, fears, or wants
- **Create mood** — shape the emotional atmosphere of the scene
- **Build the world** — make the setting feel specific, lived-in, and believable
- **Support the plot** — give readers information they need for what happens next
- **Set up a payoff** — plant something that will matter later
- **Show social environment** — reveal rules, customs, class, culture, power structures
- **Anchor the reader** — help them know where they are and why it matters

## Chekhov's Gun

Coined by Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, the concept that every element in a story must be necessary, and irrelevant elements should be removed.

- **Forward:** If you show the gun on the wall in Act 1, the gun must be used in Act 2.
- **Reverse:** If you shoot the gun in Act 2, show the gun on the wall in Act 1.

Make your setting work for you. Every detail planted is a promise to the reader.

## Deus Ex Machina

A plot device where an unsolvable, seemingly hopeless problem is suddenly resolved by an unexpected, unlikely occurrence. (Unexpected – something that comes out of nowhere that was not set up earlier.)

We don't want our resolutions to come out of nowhere, but we can plant something early, make it seem insignificant, and then bring it up later.

## Too Much Description

Description creates emphasis. When you describe something, you signal to the reader: this is worth noticing. If you describe everything — the bed frame, the curtains, the lamp, the rug — you have told them nothing is worth noticing. You are also training them to skim, which means they may miss the details that matter.

## The Myth of Flowery Writing

Good writing does not require lots of adjectives or elaborate descriptions. Precise, purposeful details are often better than overly ornate prose.

**Purple Writing:** Excessive use of adjectives, adverbs, and metaphors. It can disrupt the narrative and often clouds meaning.

- Choose one well-observed detail over three generic ones.
- Ask:
  - Does this description do at least one job?
  - What is the important idea I am trying to get across?
  - Have I already said this in another way?

## Quick Checklist:

- Every scene has at least one grounding sensory detail.
  - Five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch
- Descriptions reveal character, mood, or plot — not just scenery.
- Details introduced at the beginning of story, pay off at the end.
- No single room is inventoried top-to-bottom
  - (Unless, maybe, it is a crime scene)