



# Settings and Atmosphere in Your Fiction



**Paula Writes, my blog:  
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## 5 Tips for Describing Locations in Realistic Fiction

First things first: Why in realistic fiction, exclusively? Because, basically, that's what I write myself, and the majority of what I've read has also been realistic fiction. I don't feel qualified to give advice relating to speculative genres.

1. Keep descriptions brief. This does vary, depending upon the type of story, and your own particular writing style - but, in general, modern readers don't appreciate page upon page of descriptive writing. Mixing it up with other elements, such as dialogue, can help, as it does make it much easier to consume.
2. Use specific details. Yes, this does come under the “show, don't tell” umbrella. If there's a tree, is it an oak tree? Lime tree? Birch? It makes a difference, and makes the scene feel more authentic, if we have a little more information - and it doesn't exactly require many additional words.
3. Use all five senses. A sound or aroma, for example, might be the extra touch, that brings a visual image to life.
4. Be inspired by real places - but, at the same time, not confined or restricted by them. The amazing aspect of writing fiction for me, is the blending of fact and fiction, so don't be afraid to mix it up.
5. If you find that you don't naturally include much description in your first draft - don't worry. I personally tend to write mainly dialogue, and minimal narrative, initially. It's easy enough to add more description during rewrites, and anything that slows down your writing process should probably be avoided.

So, these tips should provide you with a starting point. They're definitely worth keeping in mind, as you progress through your drafting and revisions.

## How To Address White Room Syndrome in Your Fiction

What exactly *is* White Room Syndrome, right? Well, the term refers to a common writing problem. Most writers will be familiar with White Room Syndrome, even if they haven't yet heard it referred to by that name.

White Room Syndrome refers to writing that lacks grounding in physical reality - lacks even basic description, in terms of setting. Scenes that might as well be taking place in a white room - hence the name White Room Syndrome.

Personally, I've been guilty of this, to varying degrees, as a writer. I become so immersed, at times, in the dramatic situations my characters are going through. I get deeply involved with writing dialogue, as well as describing the thoughts and emotions of my viewpoint character, or characters. And, whilst I might be very aware myself of where the scene is located, I may neglect to communicate this, through my actual words. I would have described this as my characters floating around in the middle of nowhere, but White Room Syndrome is probably a clearer way of expressing the same idea.

Identify specific instances of this problem occurring, throughout your work. As you become increasingly aware of it, you may well be able to stop yourself from White Room writing, in the first place. But, actually, it's not that important to cure White Room Syndrome in your early drafts. It's generally something that you will be looking out for at the revision and editing stage.

Having identified scenes that need attention - basically, your White Room Scenes - it should be relatively straightforward to improve your prose, and make them feel more real. The tips, just provided, for describing locations might be of some help, and also, what I'm about to mention, about how to create atmosphere in your stories. But, basically, you need to add details, such as physical descriptions of places, and sensory details - remembering to make use of all five senses. Maybe more action tags, within your dialogue? There are so many options.

And you don't need to overdo it. Less is so often more. Simply provide sufficient tangible information, to give the impression that your story is actually taking place somewhere, as opposed to anywhere, or nowhere, or in possibly some random white room.

I hope that this information was useful, and will help you to notice, and rectify, any problems with White Room Syndrome, in your own fiction.

## Creating Atmosphere in Your Fiction

One element to consider, when writing fiction, is the atmosphere or mood of the tale. This is less tangible - more abstract and difficult to define - than other aspects of storytelling, such as plot, and character development.

Consider any of Daphne du Maurier's novels or short stories. In my opinion, du Maurier would be a perfect example, of an author who mastered atmospheric writing. Were her plots good? In truth, they varied. It's not easy to defend *Frenchman's Creek* or *The Scapegoat*, in terms of plot alone. Yet, both are excellent, classic novels, with qualities that more than compensate for weaknesses in their storylines. And yes, strong characterisation was a part of this, but also, atmosphere. As for du Maurier's finest literary works, including *Rebecca*, *My Cousin Rachel*, *Jamaica Inn*, and much of her short fiction, such as *The Birds*: so atmospheric, that the very mood, underlying them, could be said to be a character, in its own right.

Setting is a vital part of atmosphere. A crowded commuter train, or an abandoned barn, or the local pub on a Friday night. Your story is going to have a very different feel to it, according to the type of setting. When you choose precise language, to describe your specific train, barn, or pub, it becomes real. Sentence construction and length comes into play here, too. Short sentences can help to build tension, although, as with many other techniques, this can sometimes be overdone.

Use the five sense. I honestly can't emphasize this enough. The truth is, most writers still default to using primarily sight and hearing, in their writing. This isn't necessarily a problem, but sometimes, you'll find that the addition of some aromas and textures, possibly during the revision stage, can increase the reader's sense of involvement. These extra sensual details can make a surprising amount of difference to the overall quality and believability of your fiction, and you need very few of them. In fact, they'll be much more effective, when used sparingly.

Keep in mind, the weather, time of day, and season. These all form part of your characters' experiences. Whilst taking care not to slip into cliché mode, it's important to include some details, that keep your story grounded in reality.

If, on occasions, the weather can either echo, or completely contradict, the emotional mood of characters, in any given scene, that can result in the powerful, atmospheric prose, that readers devour. However, please don't use: "It was a dark and stormy night." And definitely, don't use this as your opening line.

In my settings examples, two of those included time of day clues. The commuter train could be a morning or evening version, and knowing which would, in itself, make a difference, in terms of mood. The Friday night pub, again - that's going to be different, compared to mid-afternoon, at the same venue - or perhaps, Sunday lunch-time, for another variation.

It's worth focusing upon atmosphere in your stories. Getting this right can take the quality of your prose to the next level, and certainly make your fiction more enjoyable to read. You know that feeling of actually being inside a fictional world? That's what we all aim for, right? Immersion.

## Building Suspense and Tension in Your Fiction

**“Suspense arises naturally from good writing. It's not a spice to be added separately.”**

### Leigh Michaels

As pointed out in the above quote by Leigh Michaels, suspense cannot be regarded as “a spice to be added separately”. I agree. However, as with other elements of writing craft, it's possible to consider and discuss this specific aspect of storytelling. That's what I aim to do here.

In order to create suspense and tension in our work, we need to place a character, or characters, in danger. First things first, though. Your reader needs to care about your characters. I recommend my book *Creating Believable Characters*, if you're interested in learning more about character creation and development.

Now, let's return to the danger part. The precise definition of danger, in this context, will vary, according to genre. Physical danger - and, ultimately, danger of death - is the most extreme, from a survival point of view. But the fear of getting caught in the act of burglary - or adultery - are also going to result in feelings of tension. Or, for a school kid, getting caught cheating in an exam. And it's all relative and individual. Someone with agoraphobia can experience terror when stepping outside their front door, or entering a store. I know this is true, since I have agoraphobia myself. The conflict can come into many forms, but it must be important to the character.



Keep raising the stakes. Imagine a graph, with multiple peak points, each slightly higher than the last.

The tension shouldn't be relentless. Allow the reader to breathe, now and again - but never for too long. It can be effective to switch between multiple storylines, leaving the reader hanging. Do so with caution, however. You must create sufficient interest in each storyline, to retain reader attention.

You need the reader to keep asking questions. Let some answers, or partial answers, trickle through, but hold something back, and introduce further questions. Fear of the unknown is often the greatest fear of all.

Inner conflict is important, too. A combination of inner conflict and external pressures will push your characters to the breaking points - which is ideal, from a storytelling perspective.

Make that multiple sources of both internal and external conflict. You know - that world closing in feeling. The stress is becoming unendurable. The characters - and readers - can't take any more.

Sometimes it can help to speed things up. Experiment with the overall time frame. Could the novel's events take place in a week, instead of a month - or one year, instead of ten? Or cut to the action, losing significant chunks of time. Only make these changes if you feel they would benefit your story - if it seems to drag in places.

Shorter sentences - and paragraphs, and chapters - can definitely be effective, in conveying heightened tensions. Don't overdo it, however. It's a useful narrative technique, but like most such devices, loses its impact, if used too frequently.

So, now we've covered a few related topics. I hope that the advice given in this short book will be a useful starting point, as you create your settings, and consider atmosphere and suspense.



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