

## Setting and Mood

Suppose you are immersed in a story about ten castaways stranded on an island. What makes the story such a page-turner? At first, you might credit the intriguing conflicts and characters. However, the setting and the atmosphere may also be responsible for drawing you in. The perilous terrain, the raging storms, the lurking wildlife—details like these can transport you to the world that a writer describes. Read on to find out how setting and mood can make you feel as if you are there.

### Part 1: Setting

You know that the **setting** of a story is the time and place in which the action occurs. The time can be a particular time of day, season, year, or historical period. The place can be anywhere—from a Civil War battlefield to Mars.

A writer reveals a setting by describing details of that time and place, such as clothing, hair styles, household objects, or even lifestyles. These details often reflect the customs of a region, era, or society.

In some stories, the details of a setting do more than create a backdrop for events. As this chart shows, a setting can affect how characters live and what they do, value, and believe. It can even create conflicts that they must endure.



Included in this workshop:  
**READING 3C** Explain how the values and beliefs of particular characters are affected by the historical and cultural setting of the literary work. **6** Draw conclusions about the elements of fiction. **8** Make inferences about how an author's sensory language creates imagery in literary text.

ROLE OF SETTING	EXAMPLE	
<p><b>Setting can affect characters by</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>determining the jobs and living conditions available to them</li> <li>influencing their values, beliefs, and emotions</li> </ul>	<p>Small-town rural life had taken its toll on Garrett. He was sick of being around people who had no intention of finishing school or exploring the world. Garrett was determined to do more with his life than settle for a job on his family's farm.</p>	
<p><b>Setting can create conflicts by</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>exposing the characters to dangerous weather or natural disasters</li> <li>making the characters live through difficult time periods, events, or situations, such as poverty or war</li> </ul>	<p>The flood had ravaged their home beyond repair and destroyed their personal belongings. For the Tilak family, the loss was devastating. It would take months, even years, for them to rebuild their lives.</p>	

### MODEL 1: SETTING AND CHARACTERS

For Sun-hee's entire life, Korea has been under the rule of the Japanese emperor, who has, by law, forbidden the practicing of Korean customs. When World War II breaks out, life becomes even more difficult for the people of Korea. While no battles are fought on Korean soil, Japanese soldiers patrol the streets, and school classes are replaced by war drills.

from **When My Name Was Keoko** Novel by Linda Sue Park

It seemed as if the war would never end. Day after day of too much hard work, not enough food, constant exhaustion—and no chance to make or do anything beautiful. If a war lasts long enough, is it possible that people would completely forget the idea of beauty? That they'd only be able to do what they needed to survive and would no longer remember how to make and enjoy beautiful things?

I was determined not to let this happen to me. At school every day, while I was working with my hands, I let my mind float away to think of something beautiful.

#### Close Read

1. How has the war affected people's daily lives?
2. Reread the boxed text. How does the narrator fear a long-lasting war could shape people's attitude toward their surroundings?

### MODEL 2: SETTING AND CONFLICT

In this science fiction novel, a chain of volcanic explosions has caused ash to seep into the atmosphere. Miles and his family live in Minneapolis, where the air has become increasingly murky.

from **Memory Boy** Novel by Will Weaver

"I'm not leaving," Sarah said, jerking away from me. "Everybody's going to die anyway, so why can't we die in our own house?" She plopped down onto the lawn. Pale pumice<sup>1</sup> puffed up around her and hung in the air like a ghostly double. That was the weird thing about the volcanic ash; it had been falling softly, softly falling, for over two years now—and sometimes it was almost beautiful. Tonight the rock flour suspended in the air made a wide, furry-white halo around the moon. Its giant, raccoon-like eyeball stared down and made the whole neighborhood look X-rayed.

"Nobody's going to die," I said. "Though if we stay in the city, we might," I muttered to myself.

1. **pumice**: a powdery substance that comes from volcanic glass.

#### Close Read

1. Find two details that help you to understand the effects of the volcanic explosions on Minneapolis.
2. How do Sarah and Miles each view the conflict that the setting has created for their family?

## Part 2: Mood

The way a writer describes a setting can make you feel as if “you are there,” whether “there” is a war-torn country or a city threatened by volcanic explosions. Like setting, mood is responsible for prompting this reaction in you.

**Mood** is the feeling or atmosphere that a writer creates for readers. A mood can be described as *exciting*, *somber*, *terrifying*, *cheerful*, *carefree*, or something else. To identify the mood in a work of literature, notice the following elements.

- **Descriptions of Setting** Does the story take place in an abandoned house on a stormy night or on a crowded beach during the summer? The writer’s choice of setting and the words he or she uses to describe it can create a mood.
- **Imagery** Writers use **imagery**—language that appeals to your senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch—to affect your emotions and establish a mood. For instance, images such as *squeals of laughter* and *a rainbow of beach umbrellas* help to convey a cheerful mood.
- **Descriptions of Characters’ Speech or Feelings** Pay attention to what the characters say, think, or feel about the setting and the conflict. Are they scared, joyful, or depressed? The characters’ reactions often reflect the mood the writer is trying to create.

Examine this graphic. Notice how these three elements work together to create a terrifying mood.

### DESCRIPTIONS OF SETTING

The forest at the edge of town was even more ominous at night. There wasn’t a house or store within two miles. So far, no one in Jake’s class had been brave enough to explore it.

### IMAGERY

He walked hesitantly, **leaves crunching** under his feet. **Bare trees hovered** over him, casting **armlike shadows** across his path. His **heart hammered** in his chest as he inched forward.

### CHARACTERS’ SPEECH OR FEELINGS

Jake couldn’t believe he accepted the dare. “What was I thinking?” he muttered to himself, stopping suddenly when he heard approaching footsteps. Fear paralyzed him.

**MODEL 1: COMPARING MOOD**

Set in New England during the Civil War years, *Little Women* follows the lives of the four March sisters. This excerpt describes the day on which Meg, the oldest sister, is to get married. As you read, pay attention to the descriptions of the setting and the roses.

from *Little Women*

Novel by Louisa May Alcott

The June roses over the porch were awake bright and early on that morning, rejoicing with all their hearts in the cloudless sunshine, like friendly little neighbors, as they were. Quite flushed with excitement were their ruddy faces, as they swung in the wind, whispering to one another what they had seen; for some peeped in at the dining-room windows, where the feast was spread, some climbed up to nod and smile at the sisters, as they dressed the bride, others waved a welcome to those who came and went on various errands in garden, porch and hall, and all, from the rosiest full-blown flower to the palest baby-bud, offered their tribute of beauty and fragrance to the gentle mistress who had loved and tended them so long.

**Close Read**

1. In the boxed text, the roses are described as if they were human. What details help you understand the roses' "feelings" about the wedding?
2. What imagery is used to describe the setting?
3. How would you describe the mood of this scene?

**MODEL 2: COMPARING MOOD**

The mood of this scene is dramatically different from the one you identified in the *Little Women* excerpt. As you read this passage, look closely at the descriptions that help to create this different mood.

from *MAX*

Short story by Chaim Potok

That night it stormed, and a school bus turned slowly into our small street from the main road, one block away. Our new house was only two blocks from my school, and yellow school buses went up and down the street mornings and afternoons. But never during the night! Now the bus moved carefully along the rain-drenched asphalt, and about fifty feet from our house, it picked up speed. Lying in my bed, I heard the revving of the engine and stepped quickly to the window—in time to see the bus skid from the street and mount the curb, barely missing our sycamore tree. It advanced solemnly, ponderously, as if in slow motion. . . .

**Close Read**

1. In what ways is this setting different from the one described in *Little Women*?
2. Consider the boxed examples of imagery, as well as the descriptions of the setting. How would you describe the mood?



## Part 3: Analyze the Literature

Now, you'll use what you've learned about setting and mood to analyze the following two novel excerpts. In each, the main character is seeing his or her new home for the first time.

The first excerpt is from *Journey to Topaz*, which is about a Japanese-American family being moved to an internment camp, or holding facility, during World War II. How will life change for Yuki and her family?

### from *Journey to TOPAZ*

Novel by Yoshiko Uchida

The eager hopeful voices on the bus died down and soon stopped altogether. Mother said nothing more and Yuki herself grew silent. At the western rim of the desert they could see a tall range of mountains, but long before they reached their sheltering shadows the buses made a sharp left  
5 turn, and there in the midst of the desert, they came upon rows and rows of squat tar-papered barracks sitting in a pool of white dust that had once been the bottom of a lake. They had arrived at Topaz, the Central Utah War Relocation Center, which would be their new home.

Ken turned to look at Yuki. "Well, here we are," he said dryly. "This is  
10 beautiful Topaz."

The minute Yuki stepped off the bus, she felt the white powdery dust of the desert engulf her like a smothering blanket. The Boy Scout Drum and Bugle Corp had come out to welcome the incoming buses, but now they looked like flour-dusted cookies that had escaped from a bakery.

15 Yuki coughed while one of the team of doctors inspected her throat and then she ran quickly to talk to Emi while Ken finished registering the family.

"We've been assigned to Block 7, Barrack 2, Apartment C," she informed her. "Try to get the room next door."

Emi nodded. "OK, I'll tell Grandma," she said, for they both knew that if  
20 anybody could manage such an arrangement, Grandma could.

A boy about Ken's age offered to take them out to their new quarters. He had come in one of the earlier contingents and already knew his way around the big, sprawling barrack city.

"It's a mile square," he explained as they started toward Block 7, and like a  
25 guide on a tour he told them all he knew about Topaz.

"There're forty-two blocks and each block has twelve barracks with a mess hall and a latrine-washroom in the center," he pointed out. "When the barracks are all finished and occupied, we'll be the fifth largest city in Utah."

"Imagine!" Mother said.

30 It sounded impressive, but Yuki thought she had never seen a more dreary place in all her life. There wasn't a single tree or a blade of grass to break the monotony of the sun-bleached desert.


### Close Read

1. Where does this scene take place? Find three details that reveal the setting.
2. What conflicts has the setting created for the characters?

3. Reread the boxed lines, which reveal Yuki's first impression of her new home. Which word best describes the mood of this scene?

- a. hopeful
- b. bleak
- c. threatening

Now read this excerpt from the novel *The House of Dies Drear*. Thomas Small and his family are driving across states toward their new house, which is rumored to have a long, interesting history. During the Civil War years, the house was owned by an abolitionist who hid fugitive slaves there. How will Thomas react when he sees his new home for the first time?



from **THE HOUSE of DIES DREAR**

Novel by **Virginia Hamilton**

Thomas did not wake in time to see the Ohio River. Mr. Small was glad he didn't, for through the gloom of mist and heavy rain, most of its expanse was hidden. What was visible looked much like a thick mud path, as the sedan crossed over it at Huntington.

5 Thomas lurched awake a long time after. The car went slowly; there was hardly any rain now. His mother spoke excitedly, and Thomas had to shake his head rapidly in order to understand what she was saying.

"Oh dear! My heavens!" Mrs. Small said. "Why it's huge!"

Mr. Small broke in eagerly, turning around to face Thomas. You've waited

10 a long time," he said. "Take a good look, son. There's our new house!"

Thomas looked carefully out of his window. He opened the car door for a few seconds to see better, but found the moist air too warm and soft. The feel of it was not nice at all, and he quickly closed the door. He could see well enough out of the window, and what he saw made everything inside him grow

15 quiet for the first time in weeks. It was more than he could have dreamed.

The house of Dies Drear loomed out of mist and murky sky, not only gray and formless, but huge and unnatural. It seemed to crouch on the side of a hill high above the highway. And it had a dark, isolated look about it that set it at odds with all that was living.

20 A chill passed over Thomas. He sighed with satisfaction. The house of Dies Drear was a haunted place, of that he was certain.

"Well," Mr. Small said, "what do you think of it, Thomas?"

"It must be the biggest house anyone ever built," Thomas said at last. "And to think—it's our new house! Papa, let's get closer, let's go inside!"

### Close Read

1. What clues in the text could help you determine the location of the Small family's new house?
2. What images in lines 16–19 help you to visualize the Small's new house?
3. Pay attention to Thomas's thoughts and speech in lines 11–24. How does he feel about the setting? Support your answer.
4. Review your answers to the preceding two questions. How would you describe the mood of the scene when Thomas first sees the house?