

AN EDITING GLOSSARY

By Norma J Hill (aka Pen and Paper Mama)

© 2021

5. Setting, Show Don't Tell, Spelling

Setting

Setting—that's simple, right? Time and place. So why do we even need a separate section on setting? It turns out that setting is a bit more complicated than that—and it's also one of the most important elements of a story. Let's try to break it down a bit. Here's a checklist of items to consider when you're self-editing (and/or writing) the setting for your story.

What are the key aspects of setting?

- Time frame: historical era (or present or futuristic) in general, and time within scenes (seasons/time of year, time of day or night, holidays, significant historical dates and/or dates of significance to the characters, etc.); may be reflected in current events. Be careful in dealing with elapsed time which a story encompasses, use of flashbacks, lengthy travels, etc.
- Geographic location(s): in general, and specific to scenes; may include the natural world (landscapes, topography, land masses, bodies of water), ecosystems including vegetation and animal life, soils and minerals, climate and weather, lighting, ocean currents, altitude. It may also include public or private places created by people ranging from rural to major cities; our effect on the environment; landmarks; influences and consequences of mankind in using the land.
- Social structure or milieu: in which the characters reside; reflected in differences in buildings, street scenes, clothing, technology, conversations. The social era of a story influences characters' values and social beliefs and sensibilities. Population density is another aspect, as are cultural influences—depicted in cityscapes, cuisine, dialogue, and other aspects of setting.
- Setting choices develop the backdrop, mood, and tone (atmosphere, emotional timbre) of a story—which in turn helps the audience relate to the plot and characters.
- Setting can be an actual region, a real place made larger than life, or a place of the author's imagination.

Setting affects the pace of your story

- Too much setting and your story will grind to a halt. A couple sentences in each scene are usually enough. Choose details that matter to the story. But if in doubt, leave extra details out. A few key details are more effective than long descriptive passages.
- Still, setting is important, drawing your readers in and anchoring them to the story. So, use enough setting to accomplish those purposes.
- Avoid information dumps. Add small details of your setting where needed as the story unfolds. Lead your readers in gradually, without slowing the story down.

Choosing setting details

What setting details should you choose? You want to allow your readers to experience in their mind's eye what the narrator is experiencing:

- A little can go a long way—but don't be too vague. Be specific and more detailed if the setting plays a large role in the overall story or a particular scene.
- Sensory details are an important part of setting. Writers often focus on the visual, on what is "seen," and neglect other senses. Engage all five physical senses. Think about your settings carefully when deciding what sensory details to use: different environments focus on and appeal to different senses.
- If possible, personally go to a similar environment and observe it with all your senses and choose the details that are most important to your story (plot) and your characters. Spend time in the environment; become involved, talk to locals, experience their food, clothes, activities, and arts.
- If you're writing a novel based in a historical period, learn all you can about that place in that time period. Check out museums and historical re-enactments. Watch period dramas (but be careful; they aren't always accurate). Read primary historical documents; look at period maps, paintings, etc.

Setting is an important part of developing your character(s)

- Different characters will experience the setting in different ways. The setting details you choose for characters to focus on should reflect their background and history, previous experiences, mindset, and emotions.
- Think about how the setting's environment will shape your characters, the way they think, feel, and act.
- How will the setting affect the relationships between your characters?
- Some possibilities to include in setting to help develop your character(s):
 - Location—region, city, neighborhood, house
 - Climate, weather

- The type of people around your character
- Personal items—pets, style of home, clothing, artwork, books, music, collections
- Personal habits—messy house, yard, car—or perfectionistic; foods and drinks
- Sounds in the environment—birds, airplanes, industry
- Cultural reflections and subcultures your character moves in
- The character’s workplace, favourite places to hang out, vacation locations
- The part of society your main characters inhabit—and how that looks, smells, sounds, etc., as well as how it shapes the characters’ values and actions
- Past events, locations, social issues (seen through setting) which impact the characters

When setting is the antagonist in the story

Setting may actually be the antagonist in your story, as in cases of “man versus nature”; it may create a conflict/problem that characters need to resolve, such as climbing a steep mountain or traversing a swamp or jungle—which in turn will change and develop the character.

What if you are creating a fantastical new world?

A new world still needs to be based in a level of reality your readers will recognize and believe. The story has to be internally consistent and make sense, based on the “rules” (such as scientific principles) of the setting you create.

Show, Don’t Tell

“Show, don’t tell” must be one of the most common pieces of advice for new writers. But is it always true? Let’s find out.

What is telling? Is telling useful? Read these points and you decide

- Narration to give the reader information needed to fill out the story.
- Summarizes events that aren’t so important they need to be dramatized in detail. Allows a writer to move quickly to the essential, interesting part of a scene.
- Useful to set a scene or explain a situation in order to move the plot or characterization along.
- Used when little emotion is involved.
- Saves use of excess words when dramatic showing isn’t needed.
- Often used for backstory. Provide small amounts organically where it is needed in the story—avoid information dumps at the beginning.
- Used for conveying material that takes place in general time rather than in specific time.

- Telling may be used to describe internal psychological states (though such states may alternatively be described through showing; this generally requires strong writing skills). If using telling, avoid clichéd, sentimental language.
- Involves exposition, summary, and description.
- Telling can cover an extended period of time concisely. It is useful for summarizing what happens between scenes so the story flows better.

Tips for good telling

- While good telling uses fewer words than showing, the words still need to be evocative. Make telling sparkle.
- Avoid telling verbs. Get rid of weak verbs and use strong ones. A single strong verb can create a vivid picture.
- Set scenes with vivid telling, usually through an omniscient narrator, to summarize setting and other narrative that doesn't directly contribute to characterization or plot.
- Even when telling, keep imagery lively.
- Use creative prose techniques to make telling original and imaginative.
- Telling tends to slow the forward motion of the story to provide information to the reader, so keep it succinct. Too much telling can bore readers.

What is showing? Does it need to be used all the time? What do you think?

- Showing is dramatizing with evocative, detailed imagery. It involves action, words, senses, feelings, and thoughts.
- It enables readers to visualize a situation or character.
- Uses a lot more words to describe a scene in a detailed, sensory manner than in simple telling.
- Is often done with dialogue, direct and indirect thoughts, and strong point of view.
- It is interactive, requiring the reader to think and imagine, to participate in the story, to become more engaged, to deduce, to draw conclusions—to take an active role in the story telling.
- Especially useful for dramatic scenes with plot points and twists, character development, and drama (both physical and emotional).

Tips for good showing

- Show character feelings by using direct thoughts to help readers feel a close connection to a character.
- Show character behavior through evocative, sensory images that allows the reader to experience those senses too. Use character actions and reactions to show their personality.

- As you write, close your eyes and visualize the scene, as if your characters are performers on a stage or screen.
- Dig deeply into detail. Ask who, what, where, when, why, how.
- Use all the senses—smell, taste, sound, sight, touch—and emotional senses, too. Use strong verbs that connote movement and create vivid images, allowing you to avoid the need for too many adverbs. Likewise, use strong nouns and avoid the need for too many adjectives.
- Too much showing can become tiring to readers. If showing is done constantly, the parts that need to stand out won't. Don't overdo it.
- When showing, use a variety of literary devices to create subtext and allow readers to extrapolate what you choose to leave untold.
- Respect your readers. Trust them to develop a feeling for the meaning behind the action.

Dialogue and character thoughts for showing

- Use dialogue, and both direct and indirect thoughts, to show character thoughts, feelings and emotions. Thoughts are internal dialogue; most dialogue is showing and contributes emotion and detail while moving the plot forward and developing the character(s).

But ... Dialogue tags are telling.

- Show aspects of the character and plot through the speech itself (unique to each character) and character actions, facial expressions, and body language. Avoid “-ly” adverbs in dialogue tags.

So what do you think? Show or tell or both?

How about a careful balance of telling and showing? Question every line in the story to see if it should be expanded through showing—or made more succinct through telling. Balance summary versus action. Consider the story's pace, tone, and rhythm in deciding whether to use telling or showing.

Spelling

Spelling is one of those very easy to resolve writing issues which, left unresolved, can totally turn off your reading audience. Just because you have difficulty with spelling doesn't mean you can let it go. There are a number of options which can help you—and far more easily than the memories you may have from school when your teacher forced you to flip through a 6 inch thick dictionary with tiny print. Let's take a look at some helpful tips:

Frequent spelling issues

- **Alternate spellings:** What if there are alternate spellings for a word? Choose the one that best fits your story and your audience. Hints:
 - Many alternate spellings are national preferences, so be sure to use a dictionary that is specific to your country or region.
 - Other alternate spellings are changes through time. Normally, use the most up-to-date, widely accepted spelling—though if you’re writing an historical novel, you might want to try using spelling suited to that time period if it’s still understandable to your audience.
 - Compound words or hyphenated words or separate words: Many of today’s compound words started out as separate words, then moved to hyphenated words, and are now written as compound words. Generally, choose the up-to-date format. However, be careful about hyphenated words that are adjectives; they will stay hyphenated even when their noun form becomes compound.
 - Homonyms (homophones) are **not** alternate spellings. You must use the correct spelling. Commonly misspelled homonyms are words like “to, too, two” and “their, there, they’re.”
 - Likewise, words that are close in spelling **cannot** be used interchangeably. These are words like “wondered/wandered”, “of/off” and “where/were.”
 - Then there are words which are frequently misspelled, but just because others misspell them doesn’t give you permission to do so. An example which particularly irritates me is “congradulations” but there are plenty of others, too.

Abbreviations:

In formal writing (including novels, short stories, poetry, nonfiction—in fact, just about anything other than social media tweets or statuses), you’re generally best to avoid using abbreviations other than common titles such as “Mr., Dr., Ms.” Even abbreviations such as “St.” (as in “street” ... though it can be used as a title as in “Saint”) should be avoided unless you’re using them in instances where you need to use as little space as possible, such as tables and graphs, letterhead, and technical uses. If in doubt, check your style guide. And, of course, be consistent.

Numerals or number words:

Other than in tables, addresses, or mathematical work, the most common rule is to write number words (one, two ...) up to nine or ten, and then use numerals for higher numbers. That said, different style guides use different rules, so check the style guide for your type of writing.

Plurals:

While adding an “s” to nouns is the most common way to make them plural, there are a number of other ways—and they are not interchangeable. You must use the correct format. For example, some words actually change their spelling and pronunciation from singular to plural form (mouse → mice) while others stay the same (moose → moose). Words that end in “-s, -sh, -ch, or -x” add the letters “es” (dish → dishes; church → churches; fox → foxes; mass → masses). For nouns that end in “y”, change the “y” to “i” and add “es” (bunny → bunnies). Words that end in “f” change the “f” to “v” and add “es” (wolf → wolves). Naturally, English being the confusing language that it is, there are always exceptions to the rules. If in doubt, consult your dictionary.

Names:

People names, place names, store names, etc. Names are often spelled in a variety of ways—but you must use the correct spelling for the particular person, place, building, etc. When naming your characters, places in your setting, and so on, create a style sheet and list all the names you will use, with your chosen spelling, then be consistent. If you are using real people or places, you must use their correct spelling.

Apostrophes:

There are two main uses for apostrophes: in contractions (e.g. cannot → can't; did not → didn't) and in possessives (the cat that belongs to Jim: Jim's cat; the dogs that belong to the students: the students' dogs; the pets that belong to the Jones family: the Jones' pets OR the Jones's pets—choice one format and stick to it!). Did you notice that there are different ways to use the apostrophes in possession? If in doubt, consult your style guide or a good grammar or spelling handbook). The third use for apostrophes is when, occasionally, an acronym could be confused with another word spelled the same—but usually acronyms just add a small “s”. Check your dictionary or style guide. Do **not** use apostrophes with plurals.

Ways to overcome your spelling issues

- If homonyms are an issue for you, check out these very inexpensive booklets by yours truly: <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Homonyms-Part-1-A-L-Easy-to-Learn-Series-768929> and <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Homonyms-Part-2-M-Z-Easy-to-Learn-Series-768931>
- Style guides/manuals: A style guide (the most up-to-date version of the style guide/manual for your type of writing) is a great source for examples of how to use abbreviations and acronyms. Not only are there general style guides for particular types of writing; many

publishers—whether book, magazine, colleges, etc.—have their own style guides which you must follow if you are writing for them.

- Dictionaries: Use a respected dictionary that is meant for use in a particular nation or region—the area where the majority of your target audience resides. For example, in Canada, that would be the Canadian Oxford Dictionary. Such dictionaries will also make clear the preferred word in a particular area; a washroom may also be a bathroom, restroom, WC/Water Closet, loo, john ... Which word would your character(s) use? Which word will your readers understand?
- Online dictionaries: If you find dictionaries difficult to use, try quality on-line dictionaries. You can type in the first two or three letters, or even a close phonetic approximation of the word's spelling (for example, for "through" you might type "thru") and there's a good chance the dictionary will direct you to the correct spelling. There are even sites in which you can type the first and last letters of a word, and they'll give you the words that fit that pattern.
- Style sheet: As you write, create a style sheet with a space for each letter of the alphabet. Write down your chosen spellings for names—and for words which have alternate spellings. Then be consistent in using those spellings. When you are finished writing, use the "Find and Replace" feature in Word (or a similar feature in other word processing software) to check your entire manuscript to make sure you've consistently used the spelling on your style sheet.
- Commonly misspelled words: If you have words you know you frequently misspell, check their spelling and add them to your style sheet. If you're not sure which words you misspell, your writing software will no doubt point them out to you (unless the spelling you are using is the spelling of another actual word). If in doubt, there are lots of great "commonly misspelled words" lists on the internet. Do a search and go through the lists to spot words you misspell, then add them to your style sheet. There are also books that have lists of the 50,000 or so most commonly used words in English (without definitions; just spelling) which you can thumb through quickly to check spellings—which is fine as long as the spelling you find isn't a homonym or a similarly-spelled word.
- Thesaurus: Although a thesaurus actually provides synonyms for words, rather than spelling, sometimes what you really need is a better word that more accurately expresses what you mean. In which case, use a thesaurus to find a variety of synonyms; pick out 3 or 4 you think might do. Then check them in the dictionary to find their exact meanings so you can choose the best one.
- Spell check software: Most word processors come with "spell check" features. They are generally okay so far as they go. Unfortunately, they often have problems, such as a rather limited vocabulary (which is why it is a good idea to add words you use often in your writing, especially names but also other words that aren't in your spell check dictionary). Also, if you spell a word incorrectly, but it is a correct spelling for another word, the spell check probably will accept it as a correct spelling. There are some very good spell check

programs out there (e.g. Grammarly or Pro-Writing Aid) that have much broader vocabulary and are getting increasingly good at picking up on the “context” of a word in its sentence and letting you know if that might not be the word/spelling you want. However, spell checker programs aren’t perfect, and while they will flag misspelled words, they will almost certainly miss some, and may even flag words that are correct. It is up to you as a writer to check your work carefully and make decisions. If spelling is difficult for you, an editor with strong spelling skills or a good proofreader (or even your self-editing team members such as beta readers) can help you look out for spelling issues.

- Spelling handbooks or workbooks: There are lots of useful spelling handbooks and/or workbooks which you can use to improve your spelling skills or look up useful spelling rules. Just remember that lots of “rules” like “i before e except after c” unfortunately also have exceptions. Use “rules” to get close to spellings, but then double-check in a dictionary.
- Last, but certainly not least, read widely. As you read, slow down and consciously pay attention to spelling.
- As you can perhaps tell, spelling is a favourite topic of mine—and I’m working on creating a spelling handbook which features silly poems to help you remember spelling rules. Keep an eye out; I might actually complete and publish it one of these days. Meanwhile, you might like to check out an example, on the topic of “abbreviations”:

<https://normajhill.com/2017/03/31/abbreviations-poetical/>

Hmm... what do you think? Should I finish the series?

Don’t forget to place this exercise in your binder or Duotang. And now go on to part 6 in this series: Style, Synopsis, Titles and Headings.