Setting
Shortcuts and Usage
By Scott Coon

If you don't clue us in on where or when we are, you end up with floating heads in a void. Even if the dialogue is engaging and reveals conflict and character, you're still leaving your reader with nothing but sound in white space. Also, you are missing opportunities for plot and character development.

For example, here is a stripped-down version of the opening to my novel Lost Helix:

"What do you get when you cross a piranha with a goldfish?" Coreman refused to acknowledge the absurd question. So, Hochstein answered himself. "A piranha, because he's gonna eat that goldfish. This guy is a goldfish."
Coreman continued ignoring him.
Hochstein huffed at Coreman's silence. "He lived with that woman for three years. Bringing him into our division is a bad idea."
"He turned her in."
Hochstein loosened his blue and gold tie. "He doesn't know that he turned her in."
"All the better. It shows that Fletcher wasn't working with Brennan. We have attended to Brennan, and Director Bradley has approved Fletcher. End of conversation."

In this version, you have no idea where these guys are. You don't even know if they're in the same room or talking over text or what. This could be modern day, somewhere in the near past or somewhere in the far future. But as the reader, you don't know.

SHORTCUTS TO TIME AND PLACE

It can be quite easy to establish a time and place. There are shortcuts you can use.
For time, the general period can be established with any bit of technology, and I don't mean things like computers and watches. Clothing is a great marker of technology. In the Back to the Future series, a future McFly wears a self-sizing jacket, while a past McFly is baffled by someone going without a hat. For a more precise time within the modern era, any element of pop culture can establish time. From 1920 to today, each decade had something unique like Zoot Suits, parachute pants, or TikTok.
For place, make cliches work in your favor. You can give a small detail and the rest will fill itself in because people know the cliché. You can't build a plot on cliché, but you can build a location. Consider these two lines:

The hostess presented us with our leather-bound menus.
The kid in the paper hat suggested the new discount menu.

In both cases you immediately know you're in a restaurant, but you also know what kind of restaurant you're in. You don't need to describe the tables or the lighting or the other customers. It's all preloaded in the reader's brain. More details can be added as needed while the story unfolds. Does this place do tableside flambe? Is it Italian, French, or Spanish? Do these details even matter? It depends on the story and the scene within the story.

Then there' the problem of the unusual. As a sci-fi guy, I face this a lot. Sometimes you'll need to describe a place that is unusual, perhaps even unique. The trick is to not sound like you're a real estate agent or technician giving a brief. I suggest only giving enough detail to bring the reader into the space. You can use the most prominent feature as an anchor and build from there.

Ask yourself, if I entered this space in the way that my POV character is entering it, what would be the first thing I'd notice? Describe that. Then try to generalize the space around it, summarizing collective details. Then bring in the finer details on an as-needed basis.

For example, if I were to describe what I'd see walking onto the bridge of the Enterprise-D for the first time, I'd write:

> A view screen filled the forward wall. Facing it were two seated stations with the captain and advisors sitting a few feet behind them. Directly behind the captain's chair was a low, sweeping ramp with workstations built into its wooden railing. The back wall had more standing workstations. Above it all, a skylight into space.

When you must describe an unusual place, you can build in short cuts to help when you return. For the Enterprise-D, I'd use the view screen and mention whatever was on it even if it were passing stars or just blank. For a bedroom, it could be a music box on the dresser or a canopy bed.

…AND PEOPLE

When setting your scene, don't forget the people. It can be a jarring experience for readers when someone starts talking and they had no idea that person was in the room. This can be a good jarring experience if the characters didn't know this person was there either. But if there are four people at the kitchen table, and you only mention two of them for half the scene, when those other two chime in, it'll be the bad kind of jarring.

When there are only a few people, they can be mentioned individually. Bring them all in as early as possible. Again, this is not a report or briefing. We don't need a scene manifest. If there are a lot of people in the space, put them there en mass. You can describe them by their behavior, loud or quiet, sitting in rows or mingling about.

USE SETTING TO ENHANCE THE SCENE

Make sure the setting is a part of the scene, not an insertion. Keep the exposition to a minimum. As much as possible, have the setting come out as part of the action. For example, you don't need to tell us it's winter in the woods if you tell us your character is fighting their way through snow drifts and branches.

Don't abandon the scenery after the beginning. Keep it in the action. If they're waiting for their takeout order, have them get their napkins and sodas while they wait and talk. If two characters are having a heavy conversation, one might escape into the setting, looking at the people at another table, or out the window for a brief reprieve.

The setting doesn't change to suit your emotions, but your view of the setting does. You can be singing in the rain or wallowing in the rain. The rain doesn't care. But you do. Even sunshine can be bent to your will—the warm sun mocking your character's grim mood.

You don't want your scene to be overwhelmed by constant references to the setting, but you don't want your character to be floating in a void. Keep the setting in your scene with balance.

Here's the same opening to Lost Helix only with the setting doing its job to fill the void and contribute to the story and character development. I've left out some internal dialogue to focus on the effects of setting:

> "What do you get when you cross a piranha with a goldfish?"
>
> Coreman refused to acknowledge the absurd question as he stood properly positioned to board the elevator. His trainee, however, stood to his left, blocking any riders who may need to exit. The doors opened to an empty car, but that didn't excuse Hochstein's inefficiency.
>
> As Coreman entered, Hochstein followed, answering his own question. "A piranha, because he's gonna eat that goldfish." The doors closed. "This guy is a goldfish."
>
> Coreman continued ignoring him and tapped the icon for residential level nine. The elevator shot them out of the corporate center and into the tube connecting it to the rest of Black Mountain Mining Commercial Space Station IV.
>
> Hochstein huffed at Coreman's silence. "He lived with that woman for three years. Bringing him into our division is a bad idea."
>
> "He turned her in."
>
> Hochstein loosened his blue and gold tie. "He doesn't know that he turned her in."
>
> "All the better. It shows that Fletcher wasn't working with Brennan."
>
> The elevator zoomed into the central shaft of the massive metal box made of thousands of smaller metal boxes. As the elevator came to a stop, Coreman moved to the right side of the door. He spared a moment for a stern glance at Hochstein. "We have attended to Brennan, and Director Bradley has approved Fletcher. End of conversation."

IN CONCLUSION…

Just a couple sentences can eliminate the floating heads issue. But treating your setting like a character can enrich the writing, build character, and even advance the plot. Always remember your setting is there and your characters should interact with it. But don't over describe it. Let your reader do some of the work. After all, that's why they picked up a book instead of turning on a movie.