University of Essex

Setting in literature and creative writing

A resource for teaching A-level English

About these resources

At the University of Essex we want to invest in the next generation of students to better prepare them for future university study. We recognise that the teaching they receive in school and college is a centrally important part of this preparation, and therefore we are committed to investing in this teaching process wherever we can. We hope that these teaching resources will help to get students thinking at a more in-depth level about their chosen subject, and will aid teachers in encouraging this level of engagement.

The resources are deliberately designed to be flexible so that teachers can choose the sections and exercises that they feel are most relevant and beneficial to their students and insert them into their own teaching plans as they see fit. Throughout the resources we have tried to include elements of the teaching carried out at the University of Essex whilst staying closely linked to A-level syllabi.

About the authors

These resources are based on the notes of Dr Chris McCully, who lectures in creative writing and literature at the University of Essex as well as being a freelance writer. Chris has thirty years of experience in academic writing and research spanning linguistics, philosophy, stylistics and literature. His current research interests surround the origins and development of poetic forms in English.

Dr McCully's work has been adapted for these resources by Mona Becker, a PhD student in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex.
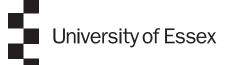
Dr McCully would also like to acknowledge the contribution of his colleague Mike Harwood for his ideas that have contributed to this material, particularly surrounding the extracts from Graham Greene's Brighton Rock.

You can find out more about the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies and the courses they run at **www.essex.ac.uk/lifts**

▶ www.essex.ac.uk/lifts

University of Essex

CONTENTS

▶ www.essex.ac.uk/lifts

University of Essex

1. SETTING

Setting is important whether you write in poetry or prose. Setting doesn't just concern nice descriptive passages about houses, woodlands, mountains, roads and so on. **Setting doesn't mean merely 'scenery'.** Careful choice of setting:

- Directs the reader's attention to significant details of character or action
- Plays off character against the environments in which they live and act
- Enhances the credibility of a piece of writing

Class activity

Think of examples of literature you have read this year where setting is both convincing and important, and then be prepared to say something about how and why it's important.

Writing Exercise

In five sentences, describe a place that was important to you during your childhood. Think about the **details** that made the place special. Try to be as **specific** in your description as possible, but try to avoid simply naming the place, rather, attempt to describe it so well and detailed that the reader can guess where or what the place is, without being explicitly told.

Share your texts with the class and discuss them: *How are we affected by the description? What kind of mood or atmosphere is created, does the text evoke emotions or memories? Does the place lend itself to action or plot? What would we, as readers, expect to happen there?*

University of Essex

2. SETTING, CHARACTER AND INTERACTION

Class activity

Read the extract given to you and **analyse** why the setting is important. *(How do the characters and the setting interact? What do we learn about the character through his interaction with the setting? What kind of mood is created through the setting? How does the author achieve this?)*
Highlight examples that show how the character in the extract interacts with the setting.

Extract 1

Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him. With his inky fingers and his bitten nails, his manner cynical and nervous, anybody could tell that he didn't belong – belong to the early summer sun, the cool Whitsun wind off the sea, the holiday crowd. They came in by train from Victoria every five minutes, rocked down Queen's Road standing on the top of the little local trams, stepped off in bewildered multitudes into fresh and glittering air: the new silver paint sparkled on the piers, the cream houses ran away into the west like a pale Victorian water-colour; a race in miniature motors, a band playing, flower gardens in bloom below the front, an aeroplane advertising something for the health in pale vanishing clouds across the sky.

It had seemed quite easy to Hale to be lost in Brighton….

(Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 1938)

Extract 2

We camped that night on a grassy slope, sleeping under the open stars. And what a lot of them there were. The sun had been brutal during the day, so hot that I felt always half-afraid my cartridges would go off when I slipped them into the blistering shotgun. As the sun slid down now it shot the fire of its orange flame against the clouds. The clouds threw it back against the earth. The result was bewildering. It was as if the world around us had suddenly turned to gold. The green leaves nevertheless had become a peculiarly resonant green. The Italian blue of the sky had taken on a green tinge, across which now slowly floated islands of pale flamingo clouds. Towards the direct set of the sun the trunks of the forest above us were an ebony fretwork against flaming orange. In these few minutes a hyena brayed and laughed ironically. Then it was night.

Negley Farson, *Behind God's Back*, 1940

University of Essex

Extract 3

(…) As he neared the depot,
the dawn breeze salted him coming up the grey street
past sleep-tight houses, under the sodium bars

of street-lamps, to the dry asphalt scraped by his feet;
he counted the small blue sparks of separate stars.
Banana fronds nodded to the undulating

Anger of roosters, their cries screeching like red chalk
drawing hills on a board. Like his teacher, waiting,
the surf kept chafing at his deliberate walk.

By the time they met at the wall of the concrete shed
the morning star had stepped back, hating the odour
of nets and fish-guts; the light was hard overhead

And there was a horizon. He put the net by the door
of the depot, then washed his hands in its basin.
The surf did not raise its voice, even the ribbed hounds
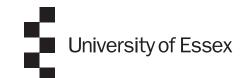
around the canoes where quiet (…)

Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 1990

Writing Exercise

All the above examples involve a human interacting with a setting or settings. It's the **interaction** that's important: a writer must convince the reader of why that human interacts with the setting in that particular way. By concentrating on and describing this interaction you can manipulate the **mood**, reveal important **traits of the character**, and move on the **action** of the scene.

Write about a landscape with a single tree. Describe the tree in as exact detail as you would a human being.
Add a human being to the scene. What is the relationship of the human to the tree?

University of Essex

3. SETTING AS CAMERA

Careful control of setting can be somewhat equivalent to directing a film camera. Many films begin with a *long shot* (distance), then a *middle shot*, then a *close up*. This three-fold use of the camera is called the 'establishing shot' and is a commonplace of screenwriting.

Beginning with a distance/wide angle 'shot' and then moving in to ever-closer details is also widely used as an orientation technique in both poetry and prose:

Class activity

Read the extract given to you. Create a **storyboard** *(a series of illustrations)* for your extract. If you were a director, how would you follow the movement of the 'shots' used by the writer? Prepare to discuss your conclusions in the class.

Extract 1

They are taking apart the cardinal's house.
Room by room, the king's men are stripping York Place of its owner. They are bundling up parchments and scrolls, missals and memoranda and the volumes of his personal accounts; they are taking even the ink and the quills. They are prising from the walls the boards on which the cardinal's coat of arms is painted.
They arrived on a Sunday, two vengeful grandees: the Duke of Norfolk a bright-eyed hawk, the Duke of Suffolk just as keen.

Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 2009.

Extract 2

They saw a valley far below. They could hear the voice of hurrying water in a rocky bed at the bottom; the scent of trees was in the air; and there was a light on the valley-side across the water. (…) Their spirits rose as they went down and down. The trees changed to beach and oak, and there was a comfortable feeling in the twilight. The last green had almost faded out of the grass, when they came at length to and open glade not far above the banks of the stream. (…) Just then there came a burst of song like laughter in the trees. (…) They were elves of course. Soon Bilbo caught glimpses of them as the darkness deepened.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 1937.

University of Essex

Extract 3

Luisa's rust-orange VW Beetle travels a flat road towards a kilometer-long bridge connecting Yerbas Cape to Swannekke Island, whose power station dominates the lonely estuary. The bridge checkpoint is not quiet today. A hundred-strong demonstration lines the last stretch, chanting, "Swannekke C Over Our Dead Bodies!" A wall of police keeps them back from the queue of nine or ten vehicles. Luisa reads the placards while she waits. YOU ARE NOW ENTERINT CANCER ISLAND, warns one, another, HELL, NO! WE WON'T GO! And, enigmatically, WHERE OH WHERE IS MARGO ROKER?

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, 2004

University of Essex

4. SETTING AS MOOD AND SYMBOL

Setting can be used almost symbolically. It can stand for a mood, a state of mind, an emotion. One of the best writers at using setting in this way was Graham Greene, the opening of whose *Brighton Rock* was given to one group earlier. Here's another excerpt from the same novel:

Extract 1

Outside the window the sea ebbed, scraping the shingle, exposing a boot, a piece of rusty iron, and the old man [*a beachcomber*] stopped, searching between the stones. The sun dropped behind the Hove houses and dusk came, the shadow of Mr. Corkery lengthened, coming slowly up from the Belvedere carrying the suitcases, saving on taxis. A gull swooped screaming down to a dead crab beaten and broken against the iron foundation of the pier. It was the time of near-darkness and of the evening mist from the Channel and of love.
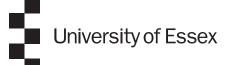
(Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 1938)

Class activity

What kind of mood is expressed in the text through **setting**? *(Think about the time of day, the description of the surroundings, etc. How does this make you feel?)* **Highlight** examples to explain your conclusions.

What are the themes of the extract? How does the setting impact on them? **Highlight** examples.

Note how this passage doesn't just contain 'scenery'. The elements of the setting are both **carefully chosen** and very **concrete** (the boot, the gull, the dead crab). The elements of **death** and **mutability** are juxtaposed against the **hopes** of Mr. Corkery (who is taking suitcases to an assignation, but is nevertheless careful enough to try and save money on taxis by carrying the suitcases himself). Note also how the passage begins with a **close up** (the tide working on the old boot) and ends with a **wide-angle shot** (mist, the Channel) and an abstraction (love).

University of Essex

Writing Exercise

Take a scene from your childhood. Think carefully about the scene and the mood you want to transport through the setting. *(Is it a memory of a summer birthday party, where you had such high hopes for finally being accepted by your friends, but spilled lemonade all over your dress and everyone laughed at you instead? How can you communicate the high expectations through the setting, and, reversely, how it all went terribly wrong? Think about the quality of the light, the details of your setting, the colours, smells, sounds of the place you describe.)*

    i. Take this scene and compose it following the pattern:
        Long Shot – Middle Shot –   Close Up.

    ii. Now take the same scene, but compose it inverting the order of the presentation: Close Up – Middle Shot – Long Shot. (You can use different images.)

How does the order of the presentation change or affect the mood. Which order was more effective for what you tried to achieve, which was easier to use?

Read and discuss the scenes and your conclusions with the class.

5. SETTING AS ACTION

Characters (and their motivations, desires, hopes) may be juxtaposed against the settings in which they appear. They may occupy the setting comfortably, or be uncomfortable in the settings in which they're placed. Here's an example.

Extract 1

Pop...owned two horses, one a young black mare for Mariette, the other a piebald pony for the other kids. Mariette...was wonderful about horses. She looked amazing on a horse. Perfick, he thought.

'Hullo, hullo, hullo,' he said. 'Good morning. Afternoon rather. Looking for me?'

The man, young, spectacled, pale-faced, trilby-hatted, with a small brown tooth-brush moustache, carried a black brief-case under his arm.

'Mr Sidney Larkin?'

'Larkin, that's me,' Pop said. He laughed in ringing fashion. 'Larkin by name. Larkin by nature. What can I do for you? Nice wevver.'

'I'm from the office of the Inspector of Taxes.'

Pop stood blank and innocent, staggered by the very existence of such a person.

'Inspector of what?'

'Taxes. Inland Revenue.'

'You must have come to the wrong house,' Pop said.

'You are Mr Sidney Larkin?' The young man snapped open the brief-case, took out a paper and glanced at it quickly, nervously touching his spectacles with the back of his hand. 'Sidney Charles Larkin.'

'That's me. That's me all right,' Pop said.

'According to our records,' the young man said, 'you have made no return of income for the past year.'

H.E. Bates, *The Darling Buds of May*, 1958.

Again, note the detail: the horses (creatures) are contrasted with the brief-case (artifice); the two characters are even contrasted in terms of their dialects/lexical choices/accent. One point is that setting can rarely be too detailed so long as it's aligned with mood and/or character and/or action.

Writing Exercise

Think of a character *(this can include a persona of yourself)* and then construct a setting to which that character can't return *(this can be based on the place you described in the first exercise if you wish)*. Obviously, in this exercise the setting and the character are mutually dislocated, and this in turn may lead to a mood of tension, hopelessness or foreboding. Above all, fill your piece with carefully-selected details (of setting and character): what sort of place? What are its peculiarities? What is the season, the time of day? What is the quality of the light? What is the architecture like? The selection of such details enhances the significance of the writing to the reader.

▶ www.essex.ac.uk/lifts

University of Essex