Writing friends,

A long time ago, we were two writers struggling with *show, don’t tell* and decided to do something about it: create a series of brainstorming guides to help all writers craft stronger description. It started with the *Emotion Thesaurus* and then continued to include other important areas of description. We had no idea how many writers would eventually end up needing those resources!

The magic of these thesaurus guides is that they are part how-to, part list. The instructive how-to front matter gives writers insightful information on how to use each area of description to power up storytelling, and the lists in each thesaurus entry help writers brainstorm stronger, more specific details as they write and edit.

As writing coaches, we wanted to put together a sampler of our guides so people who struggle with showing instead of telling can get a better handle on it and see how the right details can characterize the story’s cast, create powerful, emotion-driven settings, and drive the story forward so no word is wasted.

We hope the samples below (and the links to further resources) will help you to show more effectively and see how every descriptive choice you make can shape the reader’s experience and wow them with a magnetic, unforgettable story.

Happy writing!

**Helpful *Show, Don’t Tell* Articles, Mother Lode Lists, & Tools:**

- [Mastering Show, Don’t Tell](#)
- [When Telling Trumps Showing](#)
- [Choosing the Right Details](#)
- [The Mother Lode of Show, Don’t Tell Help for Emotions](#)
- [The Mother Lode of Show, Don’t Tell Help for Emotional Wounds](#)
- [Setting as a Vehicle for Conflict](#)
- [Powering Scenes Using the 5 Senses](#)
- [How to Use the Setting to Deliver Critical Backstory](#)
- [One Stop for Writers Description Database](#)
- [One Stop for Writers Character Builder](#) (This tool is a game-changer. You won’t believe what it will do.)
Readers buy books to have an emotional experience, so learning how to show, not tell emotion is so important. Describing a character’s feelings so they come across as raw, authentic, and relatable will encourage your audience to feel empathy and imagine what the character is going through.

To craft powerful emotion, you need to make sure it comes from a place of truth, meaning you should explore who your character really is first: their personality, backstory, and emotional range. Once you understand these things better, it becomes easier to write their emotion-driven attitudes, behaviors, and actions so they line up with who they are. In turn, readers can easily navigate the story, as the character’s emotions will always reflect their needs, fears, and goals.

**SHAME**

**DEFINITION:** The feeling that arises from a dishonorable or improper act; disgrace

**NOTES:** Not all shame is deserved; many victims of violence and abuse feel shame when they are, in fact, blameless. Even when a feeling of shame is unfounded, it will present the same way.

**PHYSICAL SIGNALS AND BEHAVIORS:**
- Cheeks that burn
- Crumpling onto a chair or sofa
- Pulling one’s arms and legs in toward the core
- Muttering *What have I done?* or *How could I let this happen?*
- Using the hair to hide the face
- Pulling a ball cap low
- Pressing one’s hands against the cheeks
- Dropping the chin to the chest
- Eyes that are wet with tears
- An inability to meet another’s gaze
- Crumpling under scrutiny
- Shaking, trembling, and shivering
- Hunched shoulders
- A perpetual slouch
- A closed-off stance (crossing the arms, making oneself small, averting the head, etc.)
- Pressing a palm over the lips to hold back a cry
- Shaking the head
- Letting out an uncontrolled moan
- Punching one’s fists against one’s thighs to release frustration
- Lashing out at others to transfer anger or blame
Arms hanging at the sides  Hitching breaths  
A trembling chin  
Shielding the body  
Angling away from those bearing witness to the shame  
Pulling and tugging at one’s clothes to make one less visible  
Vandalism of one’s own things (self-punishment)  
Loss of interest in one’s personal appearance  
Seeking out second chances (fawning, begging, following others, etc.) to regain self-worth  
Lying or doing whatever it takes to keep a shameful secret  

INTERNAL SENSATIONS:  
Hypersensitivity to noise, crowds, and activity  
Flu-like symptoms (nausea, sweats, tingling in the chest, etc.)  
Weak knees  
Thickening in the throat  
Heat and tingling in the face  
Body tremors  

MENTAL RESPONSES:  
Flight reactions  
Pulling away from friends and loved ones  
Avoiding familiar places and activities  
Self-loathing, berating oneself, anger, and disgust  
Risk-taking behaviors; hoping something will happen to balance the scale  
An utter lack of self-confidence  
A desire to fade into the background and avoid notice  
Believing that people are watching and judging (if the shameful event is a close-kept secret)  

ACUTE OR LONG-TERM RESPONSES FOR THIS EMOTION:  
Self-violence (scratching, cutting, pulling hair, etc.)  
Depression  
Substance abuse  
Eating disorders  
Increased sexual activity  
Panic attacks  
Anxiety disorders  
Perfectionistic tendencies to balance the source of shame  
Seeking power as a means of self-validation  
Denial  
Diverting blame to others  
Suicide  
Abusive relationships  
Attempting to change one’s appearance  
The belief that one deserves pain  
Rejecting help out of a desire to do penance  

SIGNS THAT THIS EMOTION IS BEING SUPPRESSED:  
Engaging with others, yet showing discomfort (avoiding eye contact, fidgeting, etc.)  
Holding oneself rigidly tall and upright  
Taking deep, steadying breaths  
An overly bright smile
Being unreasonably aggressive or confrontational
Overcompensating

**MAY ESCALATE TO:** Depressed, Humiliation, Remorse, Self-Loathing

**MAY DE-ESCALATE TO:** Appalled, Defensiveness, Guilt

**ASSOCIATED POWER VERBS:** Avert, clutch, cower, cringe, disguise, duck, flinch, hide, mask, quiver, retreat, self-harm, shake, shrink, sob, tremble, withdraw

*Writer’s Tip:* There are dozens of physical, internal, and mental responses to use when conveying a given emotion. Filter possible cues through what you know about your character. “Would my character react this way?” is a great question to ask to stay on the right track.

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**Emotion Amplifiers: A Companion to The Emotion Thesaurus**

Emotion Amplifiers are similar to emotions but have subtle differences. These states of being have the power to magnify emotional reactions, pushing the character off-balance, making them more volatile, and increasing their likelihood of making mistakes. Consider **pain.** When your character is hurting, will they act rashly, lose their patience, choose what’s easy over what’s right, or make stupid mistakes? Very likely.

Amplifiers generate conflict, affecting your character’s judgement. Often, fallout occurs, causing problems for the character that they will need to fix if they are to reach their goal in the story.

**PAIN**

**DEFINITION:** physical discomfort associated with an injury or illness

**PHYSICAL SIGNALS:**
- Clenching or grinding the teeth
- Probing, rubbing, or grabbing at the pained area
- Wincing
- Hobbling about; taking tentative steps
- Eyes that water or cry
- Flinching when touched
Leaning back and grimacing
Expelling a grunt or pained hiss at exertion
Asking for aid (to move, to get something, to call for help)
Medicating
Breaths that saw in and out
Flaring nostrils
Trying to sleep it off
Gripping people or nearby objects for support
A bent back, hunched shoulders
A stiff walk
Trembling limbs
Blotchy skin
Glassy eyes
Screaming, moaning, or groaning
Biting the lip
Rocking back and forth
Panting
Repeating the same phrase over and over
Distracting gestures (flapping a hand, tapping a foot, nodding the head)
Squeezing the eyes shut, refusing to look
Squirming in discomfort
Arching the back

INTERNAL SENSATIONS:
Shuddering breaths
Hyperventilation
Nausea
Light-headedness at the sight of blood
Starbursts behind the eyelids
Tight muscles
Dizziness
Painting or blacking out
Cramping
Feeling cold or feverish
A dry or coppery taste in the mouth
The body shutting down or going into shock

MENTAL RESPONSES:
Panic
Attempting to calm oneself
Hallucinations
Short-temperedness
Trying to convince oneself that it isn’t as bad as it seems
Bargaining with God

CUES OF ACUTE OR LONG-TERM PAIN:
Begging for the pain to end
Making final preparations
Depression
A haggard face
Drooping eyelids and mouth
Dark hollows under the eyes
A pale complexion
Excessive sleep
Passing out
Medication dependency or addiction
Personality shifts
Asking for death
Researching, planning, or attempting suicide

CUES OF SUPPRESSED PAIN:
Clenching the jaw
Whitened lips
Tension throughout one’s body
Lying down
Remaining perfectly still
Avoiding talking to others
Sweat gleaming on the face
Hands clenching
Hands bunching up a blanket or clutching at one’s clothing

Writer’s Tip: Each person has a different pain tolerance. Your character's personality and (in)ability to withstand pain will determine whether he would show open symptoms of pain or suppress them.

The Emotional Wound Thesaurus: A Writer’s Guide to Psychological Trauma

One piece of your character’s backstory is more important than everything else: their unresolved emotional wound. This is a past event that hurt them deeply and forever changed how they see the world and themselves. As a result, they often make choices out of fear, avoiding the people, places, and events that may hurt them again.

Unfortunately, letting fear shape their behavior leads to unmet needs that will grow until something must be done to fix the situation. However, until they can realize this wound is causing the dysfunction in their life and take steps to work through their past pain, they are doomed to unhappiness and unfulfillment. In your story, helping them come to terms with what happened in the past will allow them to let go, find the future they deserve, and achieve a goal that makes them feel complete.
MISPLACED LOYALTY

EXAMPLES
Learning that one was a pawn for someone else
Being used by a love interest to get to one’s best friend
Discovering that a friend used the relationship to gain access to a popular group, club, or organization
Defending a friend and discovering that he or she was guilty of the accusation
Being thrown under the bus by a family member
Trusting a mentor with a secret only to have him or her tell someone else
Overhearing a close friend’s hurtful gossip
Being excluded based on unfair criteria like race, sexual orientation, immaturity, personal values, etc.
Having a family member choose someone else over oneself
Standing by someone who doesn’t return the favor when the chips are down
Being physically intimate with someone and learning the person wasn’t interested in a relationship
Doing a favor for a friend, then learning that the activity was illegal (e.g., delivering a package that ended up containing drugs, evidence in a court case, or laundered money)
Being let down by a trusted organization or social system
Telling the police the truth but not being believed
Having one’s ideas or work stolen by a relative

BASIC NEEDS OFTEN COMPROMISED BY THIS WOUND: Love and belonging, esteem and recognition

FALSE BELIEFS THAT COULD BE EMBRACED
I can’t trust my own instincts.
I’m so gullible; I believe anything anyone says to me.
No one can be trusted.
People are only looking out for number one.
People aren’t worthy of loyalty. If you believe that, you’re a fool.
I need to look out for myself.

THE CHARACTER MAY FEAR...
Intimacy with others
Making themselves vulnerable to others
Sharing personal information with anyone
Professions of loyalty from others and being obliged to take responsibility for them
Being betrayed by a loved one
New people seeking friendship
Misreading other people’s motives and being duped

POSSIBLE RESPONSES AND RESULTS
Blaming oneself for being gullible
Negative self-talk
Withdrawing from others
Not opening up to others
Clinging to the friends and family members one knows are trustworthy
Obsessively going over the betrayal in one’s mind, trying to figure out what one did wrong
Laughing it off; acting as if the betrayal was no big deal
Claiming that one knew what was happening all along
A reluctance to rely on anyone else
Difficulty asking others for help
Becoming cynical; refusing to give anyone the benefit of the doubt
Convincing oneself that one doesn’t need more friends
Pushing existing friends away so they can’t cause the same hurt
Keeping busy so one doesn’t feel lonely
Avoiding places where one might run into the betraying person
Assuming that everyone has an agenda
Becoming disloyal
Making promises carefully and thoughtfully so one can never be accused of betrayal
Truly appreciating the trustworthy people in one’s life
Never breaking another person’s trust
Recognizing the signs of misplaced loyalty and warning others who might be caught up in it
Studying people so one can learn to read them better and avoid being misled in the future

PERSONALITY TRAITS THAT MAY FORM

Attributes: Analytical, appreciative, bold, cautious, centered, decisive, diplomatic, discreet, honorable, pensive, private, proactive, proper, responsible

Flaws: Apathetic, antisocial, callous, catty, know-it-all, needy, obsessive, oversensitive, subservient, suspicious, timid

TRIGGERS THAT MIGHT AGGRAVATE THIS WOUND
Suspecting that one is being used again by someone else
Not knowing if a friend can be trusted or not
Seeing a loved one be taken advantage of in a similar way
 Catching a friend in a lie
Making time for someone only to be blown off or dismissed again

OPPORTUNITIES TO FACE OR OVERCOME THIS WOUND
Finding that one is guilty of betraying the trust of someone else
Being given the chance to join a group instead of living on the fringes of community and having to decide whether or not to do it
Accusing a friend of disloyalty, then realizing the person was devoted after all
Seeing a friend in need, which gives one the choice between continuing to live in isolation or making oneself vulnerable again by offering them support
A character’s positive qualities reflect the best parts of who they are, making them likable or interesting to readers. Yet this is not their most important function. They also directly impact the character’s ability to have functional relationships, achieve goals, and successfully navigate their world.

Unless you are writing a tragic ending, no matter how difficult the path is, the character must overcome internal and external roadblocks (conflict) to achieve their goal. Their strengths—possibly ones they don’t realize are there—will be the very things to help them outwit adversaries and overcome challenges. And, as they realize they are more capable than they previously thought, their self-belief will increase, leading to internal growth. Plan your character’s positive traits carefully, as they have a big role to play within their arc.

**PROTECTIVE**

**DEFINITION:** Inclined to safeguard, shield, or carefully supervise the persons or items in one’s charge

**CATEGORIES:** Achievement, identity, interactive, moral

**POSSIBLE CAUSES:**
Serving in a caregiver role
Love and respect
Being responsible for others (one’s younger siblings, etc.) at an early age
Exposure to “lean” times (where water, food, or shelter is scarce)
Having struggled in the past to provide for one’s family
Proximity to danger or corruption where one must defend one’s resources
Abuse
The belief that one cannot be too careful
Being the caregiver of a family member with a mental or physical handicap
A past failure (real or imagined) to protect a person, one’s assets, or one’s resources

**ASSOCIATED BEHAVIORS:**
Being aware of danger and risk, and avoiding them as much as possible
Carefully watching situations that could grow volatile
Asking questions; needing to know details
Researching and fact gathering
Being in close proximity to the one needing protection
Being an active listener; offering support and counsel
Wanting someone to succeed and working to help them achieve their goals
Balancing concern for safety with respecting another’s independence and freedom
Lightly touching others to let them know one is there
Being proactive; thinking ahead to what might be needed
Distrust of strangers
Encouraging sound choices and decision making
Offering strength when it is needed
Understanding the risks before acting
Being vigilant when it comes to friends or influencers
Acting in someone’s best interest without being overbearing, bossy, or controlling
Protecting someone for their sake, not for one’s own best interests
Following rules and behavior patterns that have proven safe in the past
Seeing to the needs of those in one’s care
Being an advocate for someone else
Worrying, especially when one has little or no control over events
Calling, texting, and visiting as a way of checking in
Difficulty trusting others and letting go of control
Taking on more responsibility to help someone or increase one’s influence with them
Seeing a possible threat in every situation
Being wary of new experiences or places
Being there when help is needed
Looking out for those who are ill-equipped to do so themselves
Providing information or advice to help someone be prepared

ASSOCIATED THOUGHTS:
She has no idea that Neal’s a player. I better let her know.
I’ll go to Rick’s party so I can make sure he doesn’t get out of hand like last time.
I can’t let Peter wear that to school; the kids will rip him apart.
Bob’s home situation is so awful. I’ll cover this shift to get the boss off his back.

ASSOCIATED EMOTIONS: Conflicted, determination, gratitude, irritation, regret, skepticism, suspicion, wariness, worry, unease

POSITIVE ASPECTS: Protective characters care deeply and have the best interest of their charges at heart. They are willing to set aside their own wants and needs to make sure the needs of their loved ones are taken care of. As their loved ones explore the world and their place within it, protectors act with vigilance to ensure that no harm comes to them. These characters are excellent at assessing possible risks and minimizing them, protecting their assets and resources from those who might take advantage, while offering help and counsel to loved ones who need it.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS: While protectors safeguard the people and things they care about, conflict arises when opinions differ as to the best course of action. Despite good intentions, power struggles can create a tug-of-war between the protector’s need to keep a charge safe and the charge’s desire for autonomy. When rules and precautions chafe, a charge may rebel, damaging the relationship or worse—intentionally putting himself in danger in order to prove that he can take care of himself.

EXAMPLE FROM TV: Dean Winchester from the series *Supernatural* is extremely protective of not only his brother Sam, but anyone he considers family, including his fellow hunters. He will go to any lengths to protect them from the evil they fight day-to-day, going up against demons, Leviathans, the Four Horsemen, and Death himself. Risking his life for others is in a hunter’s job description, but Dean takes it a step further, selling his soul to the devil in order to save Sam’s life. Other Examples from Film and Literature: Leigh Anne Tuohy (*The Blind Side*), Korben Dallas (*The Fifth Element*), the unnamed father in *The Road*
TRAITS IN SUPPORTING CHARACTERS THAT MAY CAUSE CONFLICT: Cruel, greedy, honorable, just, manipulative, self-destructive, selfish, sleazy, unethical, vindictive, violent

CHALLENGING SCENARIOS FOR THE PROTECTIVE CHARACTER:
- Trying to protect those who undermine the protector’s efforts out of a sense of unworthiness
- Encountering a powerful force (the police, the government) that tries to take one’s resources
- Needing to protect someone despite not having the knowledge or resources to do so

**If you’re curious about character traits, you might be interested to know that we have a digital boxed set that contains the Positive Trait and Negative Trait volumes. This boxed set is only available through our website.

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The Negative Trait Thesaurus: A Writer’s Guide to Character Flaws

No one wants to read about characters who feel like the shadow of a real person, meaning perfect protagonists need not apply for the starring role in your novel. Instead, readers crave flawed, troubled characters who lead challenging lives and make mistakes. In other words, they want characters who are in some ways just like them.

Choosing negative traits for a character not only will help them be more believable and relatable, it will provide you with something internal that they must overcome if they are to achieve their story goal. After all, flaws are a big piece of emotional shielding—a dysfunctional defense mechanism your character adopts to avoid being emotionally wounded as they have been in the past. These negative behaviors will trip your character up and hold them back. To get what they want most, they must break free of their fear of being hurt and shed the flaws keeping them from fully connecting with others and their world.

**TEMPERAMENTAL**

**DEFINITION**: Marked by unpredictable changes in mood

**SIMILAR FLAWS**: Capricious, erratic, mercurial, moody

**POSSIBLE CAUSES**
- Insomnia or poor sleep habits
- Prolonged illness or stress
Excessive social or financial responsibilities
A mental disorder (bipolar disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, etc.)
Behavioral issues
High anxiety
Dysfunctional family dynamics
Being bullied or abused
Alcoholism or drug abuse
Being highly creative
Paranoia
Hormonal shifts (menopause, etc.)

ASSOCIATED BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES
Erratic mood changes
Growing angry when others voice disagreement
Having a low tolerance for the mistakes of others
Venting
Being highly opinionated
Overreacting to slights, comments, and opinions
Outbursts (shouting, laying blame, etc.)
Low-level violence (breaking objects, bumping into things and knocking them over, etc.)
Mild violence against people and animals (pushing, hitting, pulling with too much force, etc.)
Using unnecessary force (gripping someone’s wrist painfully)
Being easily provoked
Difficulty taking criticism
Blowing mistakes out of proportion
Apologizing for one’s outbursts
Poor communication when one is upset
Always having an excuse for one’s behavior
Being sensitive to specific stressors (one’s mother-in-law, a co-worker’s annoying laugh, etc.)
Using risk and danger to blow off steam
Seeing one’s opinions, needs, and feelings as being more important than others
Assertiveness
Feeling hemmed in or trapped by responsibility
Frustration at delays or a lack of organization
Acting before thinking
Being happy one minute and depressed or cranky the next
Becoming touchy and argumentative when certain topics are broached
Taking offhanded comments as personal criticisms
Feeling overwhelmed
Taking everything personally

ASSOCIATED THOUGHTS
Why did she make meatloaf for dinner when she knows I hate it?
I was so excited about this weekend but now Brandy’s going. She ruins everything!
I can’t believe I bruised her arm. She must have sensitive skin, because I barely touched her.
Why did he pick The Burger Joint for dinner? They’ll probably give me food poisoning.

ASSOCIATED EMOTIONS: Anger, depression, elation, excitement, happiness, overwhelmed, sadness
POSITIVE ASPECTS: This flaw breeds wariness, so others will watch their step with a moody character, often choosing to cater to their preferences. People with this flaw have high expectations and can challenge others to improve by demanding only the best from those in their charge.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS: A temperamental character can behave erratically and explosively, leaving relationship shrapnel in his wake. Friends don’t always know what will set him off, and many will avoid the character rather than deal with his outbursts. Others will placate the character in order to head off drama, thereby enabling his erratic tendencies. Those who stick around are always walking on eggshells, taking great care in what they say or do in order to avoid conflict.

EXAMPLE FROM LITERATURE: Sherlock Homes is a complex, moody character in book and film. His emotions swing quickly—first brooding and dismal, then manic in his desire to acquire knowledge and information. An abuser of both drugs and alcohol, he is an eccentric who pushes the limits, and very likely suffers from a mental disorder of some kind. Other Examples in Literature: The Queen of Hearts (Alice in Wonderland), Tinkerbell (Peter Pan), Edward Cullen (Twilight saga)

OVERCOMING THIS TRAIT AS A MAJOR FLAW: For a character to avoid this level of emotional touchiness, he would need to examine his life and see what stressors are prompting his reactive behavior, then work at lightening the load. Yoga, meditation, and therapy all might help the character learn to better accept the world for what it is and his own place within it. Taking up a hobby that brings joy will help him find fulfillment and make him feel more centered and able to deal with what life throws his way.

TRAITS IN SUPPORTING CHARACTERS THAT MAY CAUSE CONFLICT: Abrasive, confrontational, disciplined, flaky, needy, oversensitive, tactless, volatile

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The Urban Setting Thesaurus: A Writer’s Guide to City Spaces

The setting is one of the most powerful elements in storytelling, so it’s surprising to learn that most writers don’t use it to full effect. The good news is that this can be changed through meaningful show, don’t tell, starting with choosing where a scene takes place. For example, if a character has recently suffered a miscarriage and a friend wants to meet up for a walk, which location will cause her to be emotionally volatile: a stroll along a beachy boardwalk, or a route that passes a playground?

By carefully considering each scene, you can choose locations that will magnify emotions, play on personal fears, create a specific mood, foreshadow what is to come, cause conflict and setbacks, and more. In this way, you’re making sure each setting is
working hard to push the story forward and reveal a character’s hidden layers. The sensory details you choose will also reinforce the exact experience you want readers to have as they get lost in the pages.

CONDEMNED APARTMENT BUILDING

SIGHTS
Crusty paint peels and rippled wallpaper, colorful graffiti (tags, pictures, racial slurs, random numbers and messages), floors strewn with litter (broken drywall and glass, empty beer cans, alcohol bottles, trash, rags, old dirty mattresses, cigarette butts, used needles), ragged holes in the walls bleeding mouse-chewed insulation, broken plaster, doors hanging from broken hinges, rats or mice skittering through debris, squatters using the space to sleep or party, trash-covered stairwells, rusty or dented mailboxes near the entrance, spiderwebs hanging off old light fixtures, a broken elevator, exposed pipes and loops of loose wiring hanging through holes in the ceiling, torn-up flooring, old chewed rugs or carpet, dirty windows (missing panes, with rusted grates, or with boards over them), condom wrappers, crumbled brick and other rubble, yellowed newspaper and smashed mirrors, dirty toilets, refuse-filled bathtubs, dirt smudges and footprints on the walls from a previous occupant’s kicking, broken furniture, abandoned personal items (such as broken vacuums, smashed TV sets, mugs, appliances, ugly paintings hanging askew or lying on the floor, magazines, an old couch or chair missing its cushions), wall vents furry with dust, cupboard doors hanging open, shelves covered in rat feces and dead flies, holes in the walls that provide a view into the next room, dirt-streaked stairwells, exposed rebar, missing light switches and doorknobs, drawers open or missing, cockroaches, smashed bookcases and counters, dead animal skeletons, abandoned nests, rot and black mildew splotches on the walls, weeds growing on window ledges and balconies

SOUNDS
Doors that creak when they’re pushed open, the wind whistling through broken window panes, flies buzzing, rats or mice chewing insulation and skittering behind the walls, the crunch of glass and debris underfoot, voices from people within, groans and creaks from the building, footsteps crossing the floor above, someone nearby smashing the walls or dragging furniture, water dripping during a storm, traffic noises from outside

SMELLS
Rotten carpet, mildew, musty cushions and fabric, dirt, pot being smoked, urine and feces, body odor, dead things, wet dog fur, a rancid smell from the fridge

TASTES
The burn of cheap alcohol, the pull of smoke into one’s lungs, the acrid and bitter taste of chemicals or drugs being huffed to get high, cheap fast food, food dug out of dumpsters, dusty air

TEXTURES AND SENSATIONS
Taking careful steps through a room scattered with broken furniture and pieces of plaster, glass crunching underfoot, dust from a countertop coating one’s fingers and streaking one’s clothing, slamming a length of wood or pipe into an old couch to see if anything is nesting inside, sleeping on a threadbare bed of rags and old cushions, shoving a door open with one’s shoulder, the slight give of a soft spot in the floor as one steps on it, the squish of soaked carpet that has been exposed to the elements, a rusty fire escape railing, a fire escape that shifts and sways under one’s weight, a cold draft sliding in through a broken window and chilling one’s skin
POSSIBLE SOURCES OF CONFLICT
The state of the building becoming dangerous (floors that give way, stairwells that are crumbling and rickety)
Discovering something disturbing inside (blood, a dead body, signs of a blood ritual)
The building being in disputed gang territory, putting those who use it in jeopardy
Being attacked by someone while inside
Hearing a baby crying
Injuring oneself in a fall and not being able to get help
Experiencing something paranormal while inside
Police officers showing up frequently to toss squatters out of the building

PEOPLE COMMONLY FOUND HERE
Building inspectors, drug users, firefighters, gangs, paramedics, police, squatters

RELATED SETTINGS THAT MAY TIE IN WITH THIS ONE
Alley, ambulance, homeless shelter, police car, run-down apartment

SETTING NOTES AND TIPS
The level of decay will depend on how long the building has been abandoned and whether it was closed up properly before it became condemned (boarded up windows, doors that were chained shut, water pipes emptied, etc.). Anything of value will likely have been looted and removed, but it’s always possible that an unusual item might be found squirreled away in one of the rooms. Condemned buildings often become crack houses, where strangers will come to buy, sell, and share drugs, and then get high together; this gathering of desperate people with little to lose can create a volatile environment for your characters.

SETTING DESCRIPTION EXAMPLE
Weak, tea-stained light lit the stairwell and debris clouded the steps. I picked a path through the litter and rat feces, avoiding the wires spilling from the broken wall like a corpse’s innards. Every few steps I would stop and listen, praying to hear nothing but building creaks and loose paper shifting in the drafts. Empty, these old buildings made a good place to get some rest, but rarely were they vacant. And all too often others would come, not to sleep, but to use the rooms and anyone in them as a destructive release.

Techniques and Devices Used: Light and shadow, multisensory descriptions, simile
Resulting Effects: Establishing mood, tension and conflict

The Rural Setting Thesaurus: A Writer’s Guide to Personal and Natural Places

One risk when describing a setting is getting caught up in the mood you’re trying to create and accidentally overdoing it. Not only does this bloat the wordcount, it also may cause your readers to jump ahead to a place where the action picks up, meaning they could miss a very important clue or detail that provides powerful subtext for the scene.

The better way to deliver description is to make careful choices about what to include and what not to, and to dribble in meaningful description that works with the action, not against it. If you are in a POV character’s head, they will be focused on setting elements
that are important to them in the moment. If they are fearful, their mindset will be to watch for threats or what could go wrong. If they are motivated to achieve something, then their focus will be on what can help them, give them an advantage, and provide them with what they need. Remember that powerful storytelling means delivering setting details that push the story forward and help the reader feel part of what is happening, not offering up a scattering of details in hopes the scene won’t feel like it’s happening in a vacuum.

COUNTRY ROAD

SIGHTS
A gravel or sunbaked road, wide open country, barbed wire fencing, leaning white mileage posts nearly lost in the weeds, grass growing on the road’s shoulder and ditches, crops growing in pastures (whiskery barley, yellow canola flowers, tall stalks of timothy hay, harvested round hay bales sitting in crop stubble), grazing cattle, scruffy brush and stunted trees dotting fallow land, scatters of broken glass along the roadside, shredded rubber tires or plastic light casings from past accidents, cigarette butts and beer cans, clumps of dandelions and foxtail, birds (hawks, eagles, falcons) flying overhead, roadkill, buzzards gathering at the side of the road, hardy wildflowers, old rotting shacks and barn structures forgotten in fields, crows or ravens sitting on fence posts, streaks of cloud, bright sun and blue sky, a plane flying overhead, the occasional passing car, a tractor throwing up a plume of dust in its wake

SOUNDS
Wind feathering through the wild grass and crops, crickets and grasshoppers whirring, the cry of a predator bird, the rustle of a mouse or lizard skittering through a clump of weeds, the scuff of gravel under one’s boots, the rumble of an approaching truck, rain pattering onto the pavement, thunder grumbling, the trickle and burble of water running along a ditch after a storm, the distant clank of a tractor

SMELLS
Hot pavement and road tar, dry grass, dust, the rotten decay of roadkill, flowering weeds or nearby crops, cow manure, clean air

TASTES
Chewing on a stalk of sweet grass while walking, water from a water bottle, dry mouth, dust

TEXTURES AND SENSATIONS
The smooth bounce of a pebble in the palm, gravel poking through thin-soled shoes, the gentle slap of grass against one’s legs as one cuts across a field or walks in the ditch, seed heads of a ripe crop tickling one’s hands, the prickle of sunburn on the neck, the pinprick of a spiny burr as one pulls it off one’s pant leg, heat rising off the asphalt in waves, dust in the throat that makes one cough, sweat dampening one’s clothes and hair, dust coating one’s feet or shoes, gnats flying around one’s face, heat from the sun beating down on one’s head, a breeze blowing the hair off one’s neck or brow, patting a horse’s warm flank, the tickle of a horse’s whiskery chin as it eats grass from one’s palm, the weight of a backpack or jacket slung over one’s shoulder on the walk home

POSSIBLE SOURCES OF CONFLICT
A breakdown or flat tire
Hitting an animal with one’s car when it crosses the road
Getting lost in a desolate place
Becoming dehydrated
Creepy-looking adults who offer one a ride  
Being caught out in the open during bad weather  
A careless cigarette starting a grass fire  
Coming across an animal who was hit by a car yet is still alive  
A breakdown far from people with no cell phone or cell service  
Coming across a wild animal while walking  
Cutting across a field only to discover it has a bull protecting it  

PEOPLE COMMONLY FOUND HERE  
Farmers, locals, lost tourists looking for a shortcut  

RELATED SETTINGS THAT MAY TIE IN WITH THIS ONE  
Barn, farm, farmer’s market, meadow, pasture, ranch, old pick-up truck  

SETTING NOTES AND TIPS  
If your setting is located in a real place, research the types of crops and animals that might naturally be found in the area. As well, consider the growing season. The stubble of green spring growth will lend a different view to the scene than bright fall foliage. Sensory details will also differ based on climate and location.  

SETTING DESCRIPTION EXAMPLE  
Gravel crackled under the tires as we coasted along Old Red Mill road. Two nights in a row, people claimed to have seen lights in the dark sky and heard an odd whine that had no business being out among the wooden rail fences and cow pastures. Our headlights bathed the narrow road in light—and hit on two flashes in the ditch. Mary and I screamed, and Jim hit the brakes, startling the mother deer and her spotted fawn into running across the road. The three of us burst up laughing. It was us who had no business being out here so late, chasing a silly rumor.  

Techniques and Devices Used: Light and shadow, multisensory descriptions  
Resulting Effects: Hinting at backstory, reinforcing emotion  

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