

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 offers insightful information on how to use each area of description to power up storytelling, and the lists 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](#)

[Show, Don't Tell Isn't Just About Emotion](#)

[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](#)

[The Mother Lode of Show-Don't-Tell Help for Occupations](#)

[Setting as a Vehicle for Conflict](#)

[Powering Scenes Using the 5 Senses](#)

[How to Use the Setting to Deliver Critical Backstory](#)

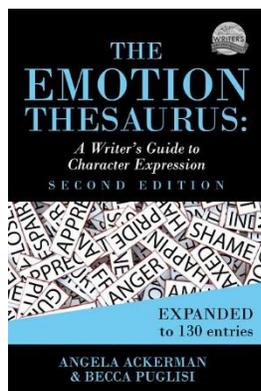
[One Stop for Writers Description Database](#)

[One Stop for Writers Character Builder](#) (A game-changer. You won't believe what it can do!)



The Emotion Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Expression

(Expanded 2nd Edition)



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
 Thickness 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, steady breaths
 An overly bright smile

Being unreasonably aggressive or confrontational
Overcompensating

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

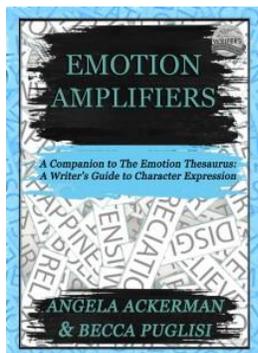
MAY DE-ESCALATE TO: Appalled, Defensiveness, Guilt

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.*



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
 Fainting 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

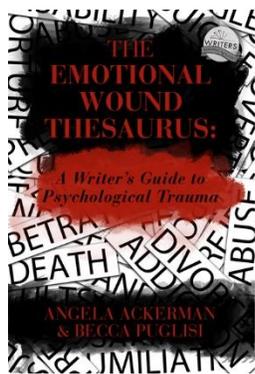
CUES OF SUPRESSED PAIN:

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

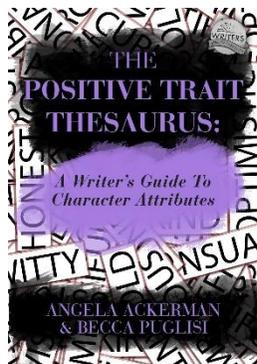
Suspecting that one is being used again by someone else
 Not knowing if a friend can be trusted or not
 Seeing a loved one be taken advantage of in a similar way
 Catching a friend in a lie
 Making time for someone only to be blown off or dismissed again

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



The Positive Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Attributes



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
 Needing to know where someone is, who they are with, and what they are doing
 Being hypersensitive to time; using time limits as a method of monitoring
 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:

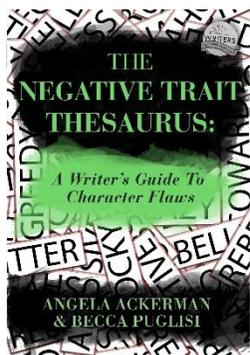
- Trying to protect those who undermine the protector's efforts out of a sense of unworthiness
- Encountering a powerful force (the police, the government) that tries to take one's resources
- Needing to protect someone despite not having the knowledge or resources to do so



**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 hyperlinked throughout for quick navigation and only available through our website.



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 Holmes 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.

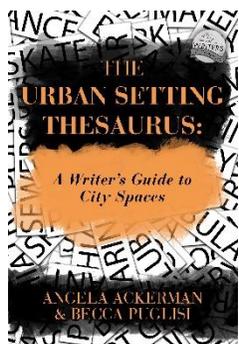
TRAITS IN SUPPORTING CHARACTERS THAT MAY CAUSE CONFLICT: Abrasive, confrontational, disciplined, flaky, needy, oversensitive, tactless, volatile



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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

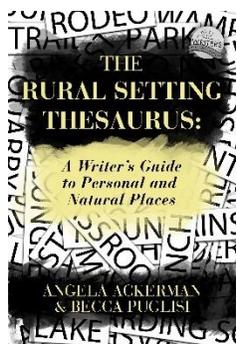
Weak, tea-stained light lit the stairwell and debris clouded the steps. I picked a path through the litter and rat feces, avoiding the wires spilling from the broken wall like a corpse's innards. Every few steps I would stop and listen, praying to hear nothing but building creaks and loose paper shifting 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 accidentality 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

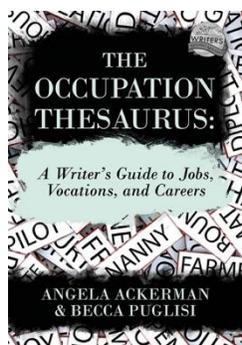
Gravel crackled under the tires as we coasted along Old Red Mill road. Two nights in a row, people claimed to have seen lights in the dark sky and heard an odd whine that had no business being out among the wooden rail fences and cow pastures. Our headlights bathed the narrow road in light—and hit on 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 busted 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



The Occupation Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Jobs, Vocations, and Careers



Authors don't often put a lot of thought into their characters' occupations. But the truth is that a job can say a lot about a character while also furthering the overall story. Among other things, a career can characterize, underscore theme, reveal motivation, and hint at unmet needs or past wounds that may be driving decisions.

As a result, it's important to take a closer look at your character's career options. Which one will reveal personality, passions, or individual values? Is there an occupation that will naturally enable you to explore your story's central idea? What job will provide the character with essential abilities and knowledge necessary for them to achieve their goal? Turning the character's occupation from an afterthought to a carefully considered detail can enhance and enrich the story itself, making career

choice an important one to consider.

FIREFIGHTER

A firefighter is a rescuer who extinguishes and prevents fires that threaten life, property, and the environment. They also respond to car accidents, chemical spills, natural disasters, and engage in water rescues. Many firefighters are certified EMTs, administering first aid until paramedics arrive. They complete

inspections, educate the public on preventing fires, and conduct investigations, particularly if arson is suspected. When they're not responding to an emergency, they work on call at a fire station, maintaining vehicles and tools, staying physically fit, conducting drills, and keeping up to date with industry changes. Because shifts can last 24-48 hours, they often eat and sleep at the station.

NECESSARY TRAINING

Firefighters need a high school diploma or equivalent. Some choose to complete a two-year degree in fire science, but it is not always a requirement. They receive training at a fire academy, where they must be interviewed and pass written, physical, and psychological tests.

USEFUL SKILLS, TALENTS, OR ABILITIES

Basic first aid, empathy, enhanced hearing, enhanced sense of smell, equanimity, high pain tolerance, knowledge of explosives, stamina, strength, strong breath control, swift-footedness

HELPFUL CHARACTER TRAITS

Adventurous, alert, analytical, bold, calm, cautious, compulsive, confident, confrontational, cooperative, courageous, decisive, disciplined, efficient, fanatical, focused, fussy, humorless, intelligent, objective, observant, persistent, protective, pushy, resourceful, responsible, sensible, unselfish

SOURCES OF FRICTION

Sustaining an injury due to someone's incompetence (a firefighter, volunteer, reckless member of the public, etc.)

A fellow firefighter dying in a fire

Strained personal relationships due to the inherent danger of the work A challenging fire investigation

An accusation of misconduct or poor decision-making by higher ups who were not on scene

Long and unusual working hours, including 24-hour shifts, holidays, and weekends

Living in the firehouse with people who have clashing personalities Private firefighting companies competing with traditional firefighters for jobs

Showing fear in front of other firefighters

Managing post-traumatic stress

Repeated exposure to trauma

The physical demands of carrying heavy gear or working in extreme temperatures

The weight of responsibility as a rescuer

Having to fight for government funding year after year

Losing someone in a fire and feeling responsible

PEOPLE THEY MIGHT INTERACT WITH

The fire chief, other firefighters (paid and volunteer), members of the public, police officers, paramedics, fire inspectors, fire investigators, public servants, reporters, psychologists, search and rescue training specialists

HOW THIS OCCUPATION MIGHT IMPACT THE CHARACTER'S NEEDS

Self-Actualization: In high-intensity situations, firefighters might struggle to problem solve. They may be faced with difficult moral decisions, such as saving one person over another. The lack of control in some situations may be hard to square with, especially if a firefighter is highly empathetic, and leave them wondering if this is the career for them.

Esteem and Recognition: Lives may be lost while a firefighter is on the job, resulting in guilt, shame, and possibly post-traumatic stress, all of which may lower self-worth.

Safety and Security: Firefighters work near traffic accidents, buildings with compromised structures, swift-moving water, and active fires, making this is an extremely dangerous profession.

Physiological Needs: Firefighters place their lives on the line in many of the situations they face, so this is a need that is definitely threatened on the job.

TWISTING THE FICTIONAL STEREOTYPE

Firefighters do more than serve the federal or local municipalities; they also work at ports, airports, for the armed services, and for chemical, nuclear, and gas and oil industries. Why not switch up your character's workplace to bring a fresh twist to the page?

Firefighting is an overwhelmingly male occupation. Consider crafting a female character who can meet the demanding physical, emotional, and mental requirements of the job.

The public inherently trusts firefighters. Keep this in mind and craft a character that defies stereotypes and surprises the reader.

CHARACTERS MIGHT CHOOSE THIS PROFESSION BECAUSE THEY...

Grew up with a family member in the same profession

Want to make up for a perceived past mistake where they failed to rescue someone

Desire to serve the public in a meaningful way

View camaraderie with other firefighters as a substitute for family

Are drawn to exciting activities and want a job that keeps them active
Want to channel their adrenaline-junkie tendencies into a healthy outlet
Are fascinated with fire



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