



## Creating Effective Settings – Strategies to Improve Locational Writing

Effective locational writing makes the reader ‘feel’ that they have stepped into the setting. In life, when we step into a location, we experience multi – sensory immersion within that environment. A simple strategy which significantly improves locational writing mimics the experience of visiting a real place: we ensure that it is multisensory!

Analysis of a wide range of writing samples demonstrates that many pupils describe a location in terms of only one sense – the sense of sight. To improve this situation, we need to model how to make locational writing multisensory.

It is useful to begin with a ‘worked’ example:

*The cottage was surrounded by tall poplar trees and from the gate, by which you entered the garden, a long winding brick path meandered between flower beds of purple and red. Walking along it I heard the soft call of a pigeon coming from deep within the foliage and the harsh cry of a crow overhead. The place was, however, silent save for birdsong. I knew though that it wasn’t empty; the scent of burning wood gave that away and looking up I saw the tell - tale sign of almost - blue smoke drifting lazily from the chimney. It was like being a small boy once again. I seemed to shrink with every step I took and at the front door, holding the cold steel handle and ready to knock, all my troubles had already been shed. I was as calm as I had been some fifty years earlier when I had played in the shadow of these same trees.*

When the example has been read pupils, in groups, are encouraged to list phrases from the passage in the following columns:

<b>Sight</b>	<b>Hearing</b>	<b>Smell</b>	<b>Touch</b>	<b>Feelings</b>
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The teacher then explains that effective locational writing uses all the senses and often includes the reactions of a character to that environment. The ‘feelings’ column helps with this and ensures that empathic response opportunities are maximised. (When we describe ourselves as ‘lost in a book’ it is because we have empathised with a situation or character in that book.)

Now that the pupils have deconstructed and discussed an example of multisensory writing, they should apply what they have learned in their own writing. It is advisable to begin with the familiar and ‘The Classroom’ works successfully as a starting point.

Pupils are, once more, given the grid (see above) and are asked to list what they can see, hear, smell touch and how they feel. It is best to model high expectations to avoid single word / staccato pieces of writing which are harder to transfer into a finished piece of narrative e.g. Sight: A window, cracked at the corner, with a spider’s web partially covering it; rather than Sight: A window.

With regard to 'Hearing', it is worth discussing sounds which can be heard outside of the classroom and sounds emanating from within the room. Phrase-banking words which can be used to describe the volume and / or type of sound may also produce a more 'polished' result e.g. muffled, scratching, low, whining etc.

When the columns have been completed the teacher may wish to orally model how to combine these.

Alternatively, a written example could be produced by asking the pupils to expand and link elements. The concept of 'expand and link' will need discussion as it is the key to transferring material on the grid into a 'finished' piece of locational writing.

Once the pupils have understood the importance of multisensory locational writing the teacher may wish to demonstrate how, by linking character traits and location, (e.g. If the character is sad the location should be sad/If the character is angry the location should be 'angry' [literally it should reflect the anger of the character] ) atmosphere can be created in their story.

To teach this, firstly ask pupils to choose a character trait (for the purpose of this article let's assume that 'sadness' was chosen). Pupils are then asked to close their eyes and imagine that the character is walking into 'the saddest house imaginable'. They are then asked to step into a corridor within this house and with their eyes still closed they are asked to look around them. The teacher then asks the following questions:

- What does the floor look like?
- What do the walls look like?
- How does it make you feel?

Pupils do not answer at this stage, but instead continue their imaginary walk through the house. The teacher asks them to walk to the end of the corridor, turn to their left and enter the living room. They are then reminded that it is a living room 'in the saddest place there has ever been'. Similar questions to those which were asked of the corridor are then asked. The author tends to add the following:

- What are the windows like?
- What is the view like?/ What can you see from the windows?
- What is in the living room and what is missing from it?

The process is then repeated for the kitchen and then the pupils are asked to open their eyes and to describe each part of the house. A range of responses is written up for all to see. Following this the teacher once again models how to transform a list of responses into a piece of flowing text. By making the location mirror the emotional state of the central character a pervading atmosphere is inevitably created. The teaching strategy is simple yet highly effective.

A final, important, ingredient of successful locational writing which is often neglected in pupils' writing is 'the weather'. In real - life different locations take on different

'atmospheres' according to the weather. Pupils can be taught how to use this in their story writing.

If one links, (a) the emotional state of the character with (b) the description of the location ('The paint was peeling and beneath their feet were bare boards' = sad) with (c) the weather ('From the windows the sky was an expanse of grey. Rain wept down the glass, forming in great puddles at the base' = sad), then the 'atmosphere' created in the story becomes all pervasive.

To conclude, excellent descriptions of settings cannot be isolated from other aspects of narrative writing. When teaching locational writing the teacher should demonstrate how characterisation and setting can be linked and how multi - sensory writing helps a reader to 'step into' the world of the writer.

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