Discover innovative ways to depict your story’s setting with rich and specific descriptions – and it all starts with indulging your five senses! Award-winning writer Gina Catanzarite leads teens through an energizing exercise that challenges them to notice and describe not only what characters are seeing, but also what they’re hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting in a story’s setting.

**TRANSCRIPT**

Gina Catanzarite:
Every story has a setting. It means the location and time period in which your story takes place.

Whether it’s a sunny beach. . . or a spooky mansion. . . a bustling city. . . or even outer space. . . vivid descriptions of those settings transport readers to another world, even if it’s a world you totally imagined.

For instance, if I were writing a story about where I am right now, the setting would be a riverbank alongside the Ohio River in western Pennsylvania.

One thing I’ve noticed in all the years that I’ve taught creative writing is that when it comes to describing a setting, young writers tend to focus on things that can be seen.

I see the river, I see the trees, I see these rocks.

But we experience the world through five different senses: things we can see . . . but also, things we hear. . . Touch. . . Smell . . . And taste.

One of my favorite quotes says: when you start using senses you've neglected, your reward is to see the world with completely fresh eyes. Once you build an awareness of your five senses, you’re more likely to incorporate those details in your fiction. So here’s a writing activity that challenges you to notice sensory details in settings where you live.

Take a walk and find five things you can see. . . four things you can touch . . . three things you can hear . . . two things you can smell . . . and one thing you can taste. Then . . . practice writing descriptions of them!

Get in the habit of breaking down the scene. Here’s a house with a garden. . . But really look at that garden. How many separate elements are in this scene? It has flowers. . . There’s a
lantern. . . A statue… shrubs. . . It has a banner. That’s already five different things I can see in this one small plot of land!

And don’t just look straight ahead, either. Look up and describe what you see at the tops of the trees. Describe the pattern of the sunbeams. Then. . . Look down. Notice details that are literally right beneath your feet.

Finally, look at the same thing from different angles. . . like this old fence. From far away, it’s just white planks. Up close, you’ll see individual details like splintered wood. . . peeling paint… even an exposed rusty nail. Unique details create a very vivid picture to help your reader imagine your story’s setting.

Think of all of the different textures your fictional characters can experience through the sense of touch. For instance, I’m sitting on a cement block right now. It’s hard; I would have guessed that. But it’s also smoother than I would have expected, and it’s pretty cool, even though the weather today is very warm.

What if your story was set in a desert? What would the sun and the air feel like on your skin? How would this cactus feel if you touched it? Do you think it would feel sharp? Spiky? Prickly?

Now think about places you’ve visited, and consider how you experienced those places through your sense of touch. Write down descriptions of those settings from memory. Then, if you can, re-visit those places, and see how your memory compares to the real thing!

Describing sound is really great practice for a writer. Can you hear all of the birds around me? The water is making some noise. There’s even a lot of sounds of traffic on the road that’s across the river. The world really is a musical place.

(SOUND OF WATER RUSHING INTO DRAIN)

Water is the perfect example.

(SOUND OF HEAVY RAINSTROM)

It’s the same rainstorm but do you hear how different the raindrops sound each time they hit a different surface?

(SOUND OF RAINSTROM ON PAVEMENT, SOUND AT DRAIN, SOUND AT STREET)

Think about how many different settings include water. How would you describe the sound of this fountain?

(SOUND OF FOUNTAIN WATER)
How about this mixture of waves and wind on this beach?

(SOUND OF WIND AND WAVES ON BEACH)

Here’s a tip to really focus on what you’re hearing: Close your eyes and just . . . listen.

(SOUND OF EXPLOSIVES)

Can you guess what this sound is?

(SOUND OF EXPLOSIVES- FIREWORKS)

(SOUND OF MACHINERY)

How about this?

(SOUND OF MACHINERY – CONSTRUCTION SITE)

(SOUND OF CROWD CHEERING)

Try one more. Can you guess the setting that goes with this sound?

(SOUND OF CROWD CHEERING – BASKETBALL GAME)

Sound really is a crucial element in any setting, so be sure to focus on those details when you write!

When it comes to the sense of smell, I, personally, think these are the most important sensory details you can incorporate in your fiction.

Scientific studies prove our sense of smell is closely linked with our memories. When you describe the smells and the fragrances in a setting, it may trigger a particular memory in your reader, and that’s a great way to engage them emotionally in your story.

And last but not least. . . we get to the sense of taste!

Obviously, settings could include food, so you might describe what your characters are tasting. But don’t forget some of the less obvious opportunities for describing taste. . . like a character catching snowflakes on her tongue. . . or that dry taste of fear you get in your mouth when you’re in a scary situation.
Remember: Five, four, three, two, one . . . Write!

References to all five senses complete the description of your story’s setting, so the next time you take a walk, take a writing pad, too, and make this “five senses” exercise part of your creative writing work-out!

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