Where Am I?

One of the women wrote a story in which everyone lived within a walled community, a compound encircled by a wall too high to see over. The story had a surreal quality in spite of fairly realistic action. I asked her what lay behind the wall, and she didn’t know. I asked if anyone in the community knew, and she said it had not come up in the story and she had not thought about it. That explained the surreality.

Were the inhabitants placed there? Can they leave? Is the wall to keep them in, or to keep an enemy out? Has no one ever left and returned? Is the community absolutely self-sustaining? No supplies coming in, no exports going out? Each question opens a fan of possibilities, too many for one short story.

The writer has to know what lies beyond the wall and has to give the readers enough direct instructions or else imply enough through the characters’ behavior for the readers to be able to piece it together.

Think of a story as existing at the peak of a high pyramid, with the pyramid foundation anchored in bedrock in a real world. A world exists in which the pyramid is appropriate. The structure itself is the general setting for the story, with a particular culture and a level of civilization and technology that is appropriate for the story. The peak is the immediate setting where the actions of
the story take place. They are all necessary. Although the peak is
the focus of a short story, the foundation and the world have to
be implied one way or another.

The background, the world with its diversity of creatures
and cultures, the period of time in which the story takes place,
and the general setting are all necessary ingredients to establish
the reality of the immediate setting. The immediate setting can
not float in a void.

Setting, world, and culture are so intricately wed to
to character that it is nearly impossible to talk about one without
the other. We are affected by our world and our setting, and we
have an effect, however infinitesimal, on it.

Every living creature shares the trait of curiosity, and the
higher the level of intelligence and imagination, the greater the
curiosity, until in humans it becomes a powerful drive. We have to
know what lies beyond the wall, what treasures or terrors exist in
the deepest sea trenches, what is under the frozen poles, what is at
the edge of the ocean, over the mountain, in the darkest forests.
What is on the dark side of the moon, on Mars, beyond Jupiter?
We are driven to learn what is out there.

I asked that same woman if she had peeked over the wall
while thinking of the story and she said she never visualized
stories at all. While I cannot imagine writing without an active
visual imagination, apparently many writers do it that way. I came
up with a simple test for the students to determine how active
their own visual imaginations were.

Close your eyes, and then imagine someone walking up
stairs. That’s it. I gave them only a second or two; then I told
them to open their eyes and jot down what they had seen, if
anything. Most of them wrote something, but a surprising
number of them had nothing to write yet. For some people, the
images flow more rapidly than they can cope with: a woman in an
evening dress going up a regal staircase in a grand ballroom, a boy
scurrying up a fire escape, someone plodding up narrow tenement
stairs that are badly stained and smelly, a man walking up a broad
outdoor staircase to an official building. Those were real images,
all of them, and as that group wrote, it became obvious that each
detail furnished others. Think of those writers as visualizers.

For those with nothing to write yet, a structure of some
sort had to be built for the staircase, then a person created and
put on it; word-by-word construction had to take place. Those
writers are constructionists.

For those who visualize as they write, it would seem very
simple to describe what they have seen through the mind’s eye,
but it does not always happen this readily. Sometimes if the
mental images are very sharp and strong, the slightest cue will
be sufficient for the writer to furnish the rest of the description
mentally, but that small hint may not evoke the same vision for
the reader. The writer who visualizes must learn to sift through a
plethora of material, to pick and choose specific details that will
allow the reader to form approximately the same picture that is in
the writer’s mind. It will never be exactly the same, but it should
be as close as possible in order for the reader to follow the action
of the story.

For those who rely on logic and words to convey what is
necessary for the story, there falls the chore of constructing the
setting, then deciding what should reasonably be included, and
they often forget to include the general setting and the implied
world. Also, surprisingly, they sometimes overwrite, describe too
much in too much detail, as if after going to all that work, they
are reluctant to discard a single effort. Often they fall back on
clichés because that’s the easiest way to get on with the story.

The two ways of arriving at the setting as done by
constructionists or visualizers usually will differ widely. A simple
scenario might illustrate this. A woman emerges from the subway and has several blocks to walk home to a high-rise tenement, where she lives on the fourth floor. She is carrying two large bags of groceries from the store where she is a cashier. She's tired and angry because her shiftless boyfriend didn't meet her at the subway to help carry things.

A constructionist might take a paragraph or two to describe the awful street—a store window boared up, broken glass strewn on the fractured sidewalk, the smells, traffic noises, and so on—and then start creating a woman trudging along. We would get the picture, but it would not be very economical.

A better technique might be to construct the street and the woman, and then merge the two instead of introducing them separately. The woman is in a definite place from the start. It would be nearly impossible to visualize her otherwise. In the end, it should not matter which method is used; the result should be much the same.

In either method we could see her coming from the subway, and we know what she experiences: the bags she is carrying limit her vision below, but she can feel broken glass crunching underfoot, she might try not to breathe deeply the air thick with exhaust fumes, feel nauseated by the smell of garlic, onions, and chili peppers in hot oil; her fatigue making her less careful than she would be otherwise, she might twist her ankle slightly on the crevice created by the fractured sidewalk. Her anger would probably grow step by step as she walks.

We would get the same picture in both instances, but in the latter we would get something else as well, a character reacting to her world, being affected by it with her anger growing. And every sensory detail would help define the character: she feels the glass underfoot, she smells the garlic and oil, she hears the traffic noises, she sees boarded-up windows. No longer is it the author telling us what we should know to understand the story; now it is the character experiencing her world.

What she smells clues us to her neighbors, probably Hispanic, and suggests that she is not a hispanic, since the odor is disagreeable to her. The disrepair of the sidewalk tells a lot about the general setting; traffic places it in the here and now. A constructionist might still have to create each component separately, but they can then be linked. It is good technique anytime you can combine character with setting.

Another useful technique is cinematic, with a sweeping overview, then a narrowing of the focus until we are with the character. Imagine a broad overview of mountains, white tops dazzling in the sun, the blue cloudless sky punctuated by a contrail drifting apart. In a high alpine meadow, red columbines are coming into bloom. A stream races, gray with snowmelt, and a man in hip boots stands fly-fishing in the water. On shore, next to a backpack and within reach, is an assault rifle.

This kind of opening places us in a real world. We can fill in the rest. Contrail, assault rifle, backpack, hip boots tell a lot about the culture and period, and even a bit about the man, and our curiosity is aroused. Why an assault rifle on a fishing trip?

One sharp, correct detail can take the place of a paragraph of generalities. That one detail can make the world real so we don't feel we're adrift in a void.

I usually draw house plans for the buildings I write about. I need to know where the doors are, where the halls are, and where they lead to. I often use real city or county maps and alter them to suit my own purposes. Or I draw my own. I need to know how long it would take to get from here to there, what kind of terrain lies between point A and point B. Also, I feel very free to clear an entire area and build my own community, my own woods or city.
streets, with the kinds of buildings, shops, or whatever else my story needs. I may use a real highway, a street on a city map, and then add another one that isn't on the map for my own purposes. That street I just invented doesn't exist in your real world, but I make it as real as possible in my fictional world, and unless you look for it and fail to find it, not only should you never know it is my invention, you should not even ask. Other writers clear the space also and furnish it, and that's one of the reasons why you can't use anyone else's fiction for your own research in any way.

A published writer may have a hundred or more details of the setting to work with, some inventions, others based on the real world. She can pick and choose from a wealth of information what she needs, and end up using no more than ten details. If you use that writer's details for your own setting, you start with ten to pick from, and since you can't use them all or you could be guilty of plagiarism, you might end up using one or two details, and the ones you choose could well be the invention of the original writer. One setting will be rich and plausible; the second one will be flat and unconvincing.

The city I see is not the same one you might see. One who knows plants can go into the country and return with a basket of edible greens where someone else sees only unkempt weeds. We all have different areas of interest, a different focus even when we're looking at the same landscape, or at the same person.

You must do whatever research is necessary for your story, and primary sources are always the first choice. If you are writing about a museum, visit a few, pay attention to the lighting, the placement of art, and so on. Read up on museums. With the Internet available to almost everyone, research has become so accessible that there is no excuse for anyone not to make use of it. Fiction should never be a primary source for your research. Whatever that published writer learned has been filtered through that writer's needs, which are never your needs. What works well is to use enough of what's real to establish a solid core of belief, and then invent as you need to.

The Clarion Workshop is officially for writers of science fiction and fantasy short stories, but to my knowledge none of the instructors ever insisted that the students write only that. I know that we never did. Nevertheless, many of the students did write science fiction and fantasy, and most of them got into trouble almost immediately when they decided to place their action on other worlds, other planets.

One story was about a colony on a far distant planet where the settlers were struggling with fierce native beasts. We knew it was not Earth because there were three moons, the planet had a strange name with apostrophes here and there, and the creatures were named something unpronounceable.

The story elicited a great many questions. Had the writer thought of the different tidal forces? The different kinds of weather, the distance from the primary star, the different pathogens—bacteria, viruses, fungi—in the soil and air? Evidently not, because the colonists were trying to grow what looked very much like wheat with a funny name. And the fierce creatures looked suspiciously like saber-toothed tigers with scales and funny names.

James Blish put it succinctly: Don't call a rabbit a smerp.

Creating a believable setting right here on our own rock is hard enough, but to create an entire planet, and then a local setting is Herculean and might well be considered more the setting for a novel than for short fiction. If the story can be told on the Siberian tundra, or in the vastness of the Brazilian forests, or in Nebraska, go there. History is replete with stories of settlers doing battle in hostile environments, and it is still going on. No one needs a whole new planet and solar system to add to that material.
Beginning science fiction or fantasy writers sometimes argue that because theirs is a work of pure imagination, they are free to invent whatever they want and need for story purposes. And I agree, up to a point, with the warning: You have to make your world consistent to make it plausible. If you are writing about an immense Saharan desert with nothing but sand dunes from horizon to horizon, you can’t plant a tree to provide convenient shade.

If you are writing about a distant planet, you have to stop and think about where the strange names of plants and animals come from. Any immigrant who has had his name changed summarily by an immigration official can testify that the one in authority feels free to make whatever changes are necessary to fit an unfamiliar name into his own perception of what is acceptable in his own language. It is hard to believe that colonists on a distant planet would adopt unpronounceable names for the flora and fauna they encounter, even if they have a native population to inform them.

Place and culture are intricately bound. One student wrote a story about a Balinese sculptor who was innovative and original, and highly regarded by his own people for his creativity. However, in such a traditionalist society, those are not qualities usually appreciated. The ideal is to replace what is worn out or broken with a replica of what was there originally, so that it is impossible to tell if the object is new or hundreds of years old. The new original carvings are in hidden places, on the back side of stairs, or under overhangs where they will not be seen unless one looks carefully.

Creativity is often the cause of artists leaving such a society to find a more hospitable welcome elsewhere. Some Balinese dances have not changed for thousands of years. To impose American values in such societies results in failure most of the time.

There is a travel book about two North American explorers who set out to explore part of the Amazon basin, then up to a high Andes peak. At first food was plentiful, with game, local fruits, and other vegetation easily found along the way. As the expedition continued to the mountain, food became scarcer, and they had to cut rations, then cut them again. Up past the tree line there was no food to be found except their diminishing provisions, until by the time they reached the summit and started back down, they were very hungry, and even at the point of starving. The natives finally spied a tree that was alive with caterpillars and cocoons, and they were jubilant. They brought out a kettle and proceeded to make a stew, which they all relished as nourishing and wholesome. When the white men tried to eat it, their stomachs rebelled violently, and they were in worse condition than before. They had to be carried for miles, too weak to walk.

This is the reality of the human condition. North American natives wondered at the white men who were hungry amidst plenty: caterpillars, grasshoppers, crickets, snakes, roots... Yet students often had their colonists on distant planets eating the local foodstuffs, planting Earth crops in alien soils, without a thought about the reality of life on that planet. And most often the writers imposed American values with minor variations on any alien society they encountered.

But, they argued, humans have always explored and sent colonists to newly found lands, and the answer was that there was also a sound economic reason for that. Gold from Central and South America, furs and timber from North America and later a lucrative slave trade and cotton, spices from the Far East, control of sea lanes. Empire building. Behind every great wave of exploration and colonization, one can find a strong economic incentive. If the reason was not economic for space colonists, but simply to seed the galaxy with humans, with the technology available for such a mammoth task, why were the colonists so often so poorly equipped to deal with what they found on those
distant worlds? The colonists who came to North America brought the contemporary technology of Europe with them, and unfortunately the space colonists often take that same obsolete technology with them. Why? Not only was that question seldom answered, but it was even more seldom addressed. The students just wanted to write about space and colonies.

We did not try to dissuade them from writing about other worlds, space travel, or anything else, but we did urge them to consider the reality of whatever setting they were writing about, and not substitute a Disney version or one derivative of a television series.

Whatever background and specific setting you use will be patently false unless and until every impression of it has passed through your own mind, attached itself to your own interpretation and interest. You will have to invent each setting, no matter if it is New York City, your hometown, a village in Mexico, or a distant planet. You have to invent it, or reinvent it, every time. Ask yourself repeatedly, What would it really be like? Would a newly arrived immigrant from Puerto Rico see the same New York that Woody Allen sees? How about a student from New Mexico? An Iowa farmer might regard the Great Basin as nothing but a wasteland to be filled with nuclear waste without hesitation. Those who love the high desert will see something else. Examine whatever background and setting you use through the eyes of your characters, not from an article in a national magazine or a travelogue. The landscape will change depending on who is regarding it.

Whatever setting you use, make sure it is consistent within itself and with whatever period you are writing about. If you know what lies on the other side of the wall, enough of that information will infiltrate the story so that we, the readers, will believe in the reality of your world.