

Writing About Places You've Never Been

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(Some of the ideas and examples used in this summary were borrowed and modified from various blogs, especially the following: <https://writerunboxed.com/2021/06/28/how-to-create-an-authentic-setting-from-a-place-youve-never>)

We've all heard the famous bit of writerly advice, "Write what you know." This is good advice for all authors, particularly when it comes to setting. After all, you cannot create a convincing, authentic setting if you don't know anything about the place.

Does that mean you have to have *been* to that place? Absolutely not! For generations, skilled fantasy and science fiction authors have created fascinating and highly detailed settings. Well, sci-fi and fantasy authors can do it for fictional settings, you can also do it for real places you have never been.

You need to write about what you know. So, it is simply a matter of getting to *know* your setting. Let's look at some of the ways you can learn about places you have never been so that you can create convincing scenes.

Personal note:

Trish and I have been lucky to have visited a lot of wonderful places, particularly in the tropics. I feel that I can confidently write a convincing scene in a tropical forest or a small Caribbean village without doing any further research at all. However, I think I can write an even more convincing scene for a place I have never been—Papua (the Indonesian portion of the great island of New Guinea). Why? Because I did extensive research on Papua, finding details from the experiences of many different people who traveled there. This is much *more detail* (and from multiple perspectives) than I would have personally experienced if I had traveled there for a week-long exploration.

Of course, some places have more information available than others. Tourist destinations tend to have the richest sources.

The following is an excerpt from *Diffusion*. The scene takes place in Wamena, a town in the Central Highlands of Papua.

Bobby, Carlos, and Addison burst through the door onto the street. The air smelled of strange food and pigs. Barefoot walkers and bicycle riders were everywhere, some with bundles balanced on their heads or hanging behind them from straps across their foreheads. Two Papuan men wearing only *horims* walked by, holding hands and talking to each other in Dani. Across the street a Papuan woman sat on the ground. Two naked children rolled an empty can around in the dirt next to her. An Indonesian boy, waiting with combed hair and white clothes for his mother to finish talking to someone, watched them play but didn't try to join them.

The three students decided to head for the Pasar Nayak market. As they walked, they passed Papuans squatting in the dirt with small piles of sugar cane, ginger root, or yellow tomatoes spread out on cloth before them. Bobby couldn't imagine they could make much money selling these, and he was tempted to give away the last of his own money. He thought about the Papuans they had met at Lorentz Park. Pupun and his friends had few possessions and maybe no money at all. But unlike the Papuans here, Bobby hadn't thought of those men as poor.

At the Pasar Nayak market, which was open on the sides but covered by a metal roof, they wandered for over an hour through endless rows of goods. Carlos couldn't find a necklace he liked, so finally he bought a machete in a sheath decorated with animals and the words, *Wamena, Indonesia*.

The above scene is meant to give the reader a sense of the setting, as well as the cultural divide between the “Indonesians” and the indigenous Papuans. But... this information is funneled through Bobby’s point of view. Which brings us to the first important point:

1. Readers need to experience settings through your character’s eyes

It is not enough to provide details about your setting. Stories are about *people* (or other cognizant beings). So, your setting needs to be shown through the unique perspective of your point-of-view character.

How does your *character* perceive the details. What do the smells remind your character of? Does your character have emotional connections to the people, buildings, streets, restaurants, etc.?

Your setting is yet another opportunity to *develop your character*.

The following is from *Infinity*. Passerina (*Infinity*) is going away forever, and she has decided to visit her childhood home (in Phoenix) one last time. The scene is intended to develop *Infinity* as a character. She becomes a legend, but there was nothing particularly good about her childhood. She had been a difficult child and had run away at 14.

Passerina crossed to the other side of West Cypress Street as she approached 4760. She didn’t want to be too close—someone might look out and see her staring. The three-bedroom ranch house looked pretty much like all the others around it—row after row, mile after mile of pastel, cookie-cutter homes with dirt, sand, or gravel yards. The house now had bars on the door and windows, like many of the others in the area, but little else about it had changed since she’d last seen it.

How long had it been? She’d left home at fourteen, so about eleven years. After leaving, she’d never looked back—until now. Her parents hadn’t beaten her. They hadn’t locked her in a closet or starved her. They hadn’t called her names or played cruel mind games. They weren’t alcoholics or drug addicts. Nevertheless, at the age of fourteen, Passerina had decided she didn’t like them anymore.

So, regardless of where and how you get your information about the location, you need to show it as perceived by your character.

2. Tools for researching your location

Google Maps – An author’s best friend. Satellite and aerial photos of the entire world at your fingertips.

Street View – Allows you to drive down almost every street in the world. You can look at street signs, styles of houses, types of trees, the clothing worn by pedestrians, the types of cars, and much more. Don’t forget to look up! You can see what the taller buildings look like from the ground.

Measure Distance – Right-click a spot on the map, select Measure Distance, then click on any other spot on the map to see distance between the two spots. Keep clicking to extend the path.

Topographic Layers – Select *Terrain* as the layer to see changes in elevation.

Driving Directions – You want your characters to take the most logical route, right?

Google Earth Timelapse – Allows you to scroll back through time to see earlier maps of locations (at least back as far as the images exist).

Fire Insurance Maps – Available at the *Library of Congress* website. These date back to the late 1800s. Detailed city maps were created to help fire insurance companies assess their liability in urbanized areas. “They can help a writer reconstruct the past by offering unique insight into the life of a city, including its water distribution system, the types of construction materials used in its structures, and special buildings that contributed to the community’s economic and social landscape.”

Trip Reports – Amazingly valuable online diary-like descriptions of people’s trips to almost any destination. People describe the sights, sounds, smells, frustrations, dangers, etc. Photos are often included. Search Google using phrases like “Trip Reports Wamena”

Blog Posts – Search for any blog posts related to your location. Helps you get the “local perspective.”

TripAdvisor (and similar sites) – Good place to find people’s firsthand experiences visiting local attractions in just about every location.

YouTube – Search for videos of your location. Travelers often include commentary narration.

Travel Guides – Yep, the good old-fashioned print travel guides are terrific. Why? Because most travel guides try to give you a good feel for what the locals are like. Also, the nature of the food, the best travel routes, local customs, things to take with you, and much more.

Ask for help – Contact some people that live in (or grew up in) the area you are writing about and ask them if they would fact-check (or beta read) your scenes (or maybe your entire book). Ask them to point out anything that does not sound authentic.

3. Organize your information!

Research information is useless if you cannot find it quickly. It needs to be on your computer and exactly where you think it should be. Use a logical filing system.

Even if some of your sources are printed books and other materials. As you read them, keep digital notes categorized by subject and with notations of which book and the page number.

Scrivener can greatly help with this organization, but there are others ways to do it.

4. But *should* you write stories about places you haven’t been?

It’s a matter of opinion, of course. My opinion is *yes*. Mainly because of the vast array of research sources available online.

In 1995, Trish and I stayed in Cairns, in Queensland, Australia. We went on a long hike on the Blue Arrow trail near the botanical gardens. Years later this site inspired my story *Blue Arrow*.

Here’s an excerpt:

“Oh, but you’re not. I have already stuffed a pack with tucker, and we are going to sit and enjoy it from atop Lumley Hill. We’re going for a picnic, sweet Rose.”

This was how Peter was. He knew I adored Lumley Hill, and he knew I fancied prawn salad and fritters, which he had secretly made while I was at the shop the previous day.

So we drove to Flecker Botanical Gardens, climbed the Red Arrow track then the Blue Arrow track into Mount Whitfield Park, and then we climbed the side trail to the top of Lumley Hill. This was a

combined trek of over two hours, and in 1978 the trails were crude at best. We sat in the shade of a mango tree as we ate. The air was clear and we could see the turquoise water of the reef around Green Island, nearly thirty kilometers out in the Coral Sea. Peter pulled a bottle of wine from his pack, and I sniggered when he realized he'd forgotten the corkscrew.

Peter talked endlessly. He said the mango tree was there at the top of the hill because a cassowary had carried the seed in its gut until it shat it out. The giant birds were still common on Mount Whitfield and Lumley Hill, which was one reason I loved the place. Peter then did an impersonation of a cassowary shitting a mango seed, making me laugh. I listened to him talk and told a few stories of my own.

Late in the afternoon the sun cast a spellbinding hue over the Coral Sea. Peter wandered off to relieve himself somewhere in the trees. When he returned he sat beside me and held his cupped hands out. Resting in them was a long but delicate feather that sparkled with indigo iridescence in the sun's light.

"You found a cassowary feather!" I said.

Remember... setting is seen through the eyes of your characters. In this case, Rose.

Did our experience in Australia help me write this story? Yes.

Was the experience *essential* for writing the story? No.

Everything I need to know about Cairns, the Blue Arrow trail, and the cassowaries that used to live there (including Blue Arrow himself) I can find online, including the sights, sounds, and smells.