

Engaging Settings: A Narrative Writing Module

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

Aligned with Florida State Standard LAFS.910.W.1.3 and LAFS.1112.W.1.3: Use precise and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of a setting in narrative writing.

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Introduction

Engaging Settings is a narrative writing module aligned with Florida State Standard LAFS.910.W.1.3 and LAFS.1112.W.1.3: Use precise and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of a setting in narrative writing. The unit was designed for students who are interested in creative writing outside of traditional English curriculum but is applicable to any high school students enrolled in a writing or literature course. The slides and handouts can be used in conjunction with this guide to present the module remotely in a group setting or in a face-to-face classroom.

Target Audience: 9th-12th grade students who have expressed interest in creative writing. They will need access to a computer with word processing software and internet access. Students will submit their paragraphs to the instructor via email either pasted into the body of an email, as a document attachment, or written by hand if electronic communication is not available.

Instructional Goal: Students will produce (in writing) a narrative paragraph of at least 100 words to convey a clear description of a setting from a chosen point of view, using at least three sensory details.

Terminal Objective: Given an optional visual prompt and an optional point of view character, compose a logically connected narrative paragraph that conveys a clear description of a setting from a chosen point of view. The paragraph should use at least three different sensory details; include at least three active verbs as simple predicates and at least three adjectives in the descriptive sentences; consist of at least 100 words; and use accepted rules of grammar and mechanics. Sensory details may include sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch.

Pre-Assessment

Prior to beginning the module, either immediately or on an earlier day, students may be assigned the pre-assessment. This product can be scored using the same rubric for the final assessment to show growth and can also be used to determine areas where students are already meeting objectives, allowing for instructional time to be modified.

Engaging Settings Pre-Assessment

Objective: Use precise and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of a setting in narrative writing. (LAFS.910.W.1.3, LAFS.11.12.W.1.3)

Assignment:

Write a narrative paragraph using sensory details to describe a setting. The paragraph should use accepted rules of grammar and mechanics.

Lesson Introduction

Introductory Activities

Time of Instruction: 5 minutes (Intro and Slides 1-7 of Main Presentation)

Motivation: The module begins with a brief scrolling Power Point with photographs of famous settings, careful to include both a setting and a character. (Photos were licensed for the purpose of this module.) One slide includes photos from the Star Wars universe—a broadly recognizable setting. The instructor should mention how setting—a story’s time and place—and character are important elements of storytelling, pointing out how film has the advantage of visual representation to engage the viewer.

Transitioning to the primary Power Point presentation, the instructor should point out the importance of the human experience of a setting. In stories, readers experience places through the characters. In real life, we experience places visually—through all the things we see, but also through our other senses. Sound. Smell. Taste. Touch or feel.

Narrative writing relies only on words and description. Still, novels have the power to create incredibly vivid, engaging settings—settings so powerful that they’re translated

into film and various art forms. In English classes students have learned to identify setting and character as story elements, but how do writers engage readers in these settings? The closing photos reference Hogwarts School from the Harry Potter films, a broadly recognizable setting that should help motivate young writers to investigate the techniques used to create such a beloved setting.

Objectives: The instructor will explain that in this module, students will use techniques for narrative writing to clearly and effectively describe settings using sensory details to engage readers. The wording is modified from the included terminal and subordinate objectives to clarify and simplify the instructional goal for students. They will also be presented with the assessment rubric prior to completing the final assessment.

Presented visually and verbally to students: During this unit, you will recognize and interpret how the point of view character influences narrative description, use active verbs and adjectives to describe sensory details, and produce a logically connected, descriptive narrative paragraph using these techniques

Direct Instruction

Part I: Identify Point of View in Narrative Writing

Time of Instruction: 5 minutes (Slides 8-15)

[Objective: *Given an example narrative paragraph, recognize how the point of view character influences narrative description. (Sub skill 1.7)*]

In narrative writing, setting doesn't exist in isolation. The description of where and when the action happens—the setting—always comes through the filter of a particular point of view. The **point of view** may come from the perspective of the main character or actor, or it may come through the perspective of someone else—either another character or a narrator who exists outside of the story. To determine the point of view, we can ask three questions: “Who is the story about? Who is telling this story? When are they telling it?”

The main character, or POV character, tells us who the story is about. When the main character or actor tells the story directly, the narrative uses *first person voice*, with pronouns including *I and we*. When someone outside of the action tells the story—a narrator—the story uses *third-person voice*, with pronouns including *he, she, or they*.

The tense tells us when the story is being told. Stories told *as they happen* use present tense. For example, “I *kick* the ball across the field.” Stories told *after* the action takes place use past tense, for example, “Sam *kicked* the ball across the field.” (Review of entry skill 1.3)

Why does this matter? Why would an author choose one method over another? Let’s look back at our Harry Potter example.

J.K. Rowling wrote Harry Potter in third person, past tense, possibly because she wanted to tell the reader things that Harry doesn’t always know at the time. But Harry is still the main character, the *point of view character*. But why does that matter?

For Harry, going to Hogwarts was an escape from an abusive home. He loved it—for the first time in his life, a place felt like home, and many readers felt that same emotion for Harry’s world. Can you imagine how the same story might have been different from Ron Weasley’s perspective? He grew up in the magical world, a middle child—for Ron, Hogwarts might have just been--school.

Worked Example 1

Let’s take a look at an example of description of a graveyard that uses third person past tense. (Show video clip from with paragraph from *The Graveyard Book*.)

Was the description what you expected for a graveyard? How does Bod’s perspective influence the description? How do you think Bod feels about this place?

For Bod Owens, a graveyard isn’t a scary or sad place—it’s his home. He lives there, and Silas is one of the adults who looks after him.

Let’s look specifically at the point of view Gaiman uses.

Silas gave Bod a quest—to find each of the twenty-six letters in the graveyard—and Bod finished it, proudly... Every day Bod would take his paper and crayons into the graveyard...

This is in third person, past tense. We see this because it doesn’t use I, and we see the verbs *gave* and *finished*, indicating that it happened in the past. Two characters are mentioned, but Bod is the point of view character. We know because he continues acting in the sentences that follow. The words *finished it proudly* and *every day* start to show us that Bod’s reaction to the setting was a positive one.

Part II: Using Point of View and Sensory Details to Describe a Setting

Time of Instruction: 7 minutes (Slides 15-28)

[Objective: *Given an optional visual prompt and using the elements from the introductory sentence, compose a logically connected sentence to describe an element of setting. The sentence should continue the point of view from the introductory sentence, use at least one active verb to show either the POV character or an item in the setting performing an action, and use at least one adjective to describe a sensory detail. Sensory details may include sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch.*]

Now, let's use our example from *The Graveyard Book* to see how Gaiman describes the scene.

A sunny day: bumblebees explored the wildflowers that grew in the corner of the graveyard, dangling from the gorse and the bluebells, droning their deep lazy buzz while Bod lay in the spring sunlight watching a bronze-colored beetle wandering across the stone of G. Reeder...

First, Bod is relaxed in this place, watching what's happening around him. The description that follows is a positive one because we see it from Bod's perspective.

Notice these words marked in yellow: explored, grew, dangling, droning, lay, and wandering. These are all active verbs. Gaiman isn't telling us what it looks like—things are happening, and the reader is engaged by visualizing the *action* in the scene.

Next, let's look at these words marked in green: sunny, deep, lazy, spring, and bronze-colored. These are adjectives that help to paint or fill in some of the details of that scene.

And finally, let's look at the words marked in blue. We have the nouns here, and they provide us with at least two sensory details—visually we can imagine the wildflowers, the bees, the sunlight, the beetle, and the stone. We have a sound included here as well, the buzz of the bees. You could also infer from the two uses of sun a certain warmth. In one sentence, we see some effective techniques for engaging the reader in the setting—sensory details described using active verbs and adjectives.

Guided Practice

In this guided practice example, students will be given the opportunity to identify the elements of point of view and setting description. The text will be presented visually during verbal explanation.

Now let's look at another example paragraph. (Show video clip with a paragraph from *Paper Towns*.)

Let's start by identifying the point of view. (Allow students to identify the answer aloud.)

We jogged across I-Drive and then started bushwhacking through a thicket of tall shrubs and oak trees. I started to worry about poison ivy, but ninjas don't worry about poison ivy, so I led the trail, my arms in front of me, pushing aside briars and brush as we walked toward the moat. ...

From the use of the words we and I the tense of the verbs jogged, started, and led, we see that this paragraph uses *first person, past tense*, and refers to **Quentin Jacobsen**, the main character in *Paper Towns*. And how does Quentin feel in this situation? We can infer by the action of his not wanting to worry that he feels anxious or nervous but wishes that he didn't.

The description also begins here, but let's move on further in the paragraph. (Ask students to identify first the active verbs, then the adjectives, and any sensory details, color coding the verbs and adjectives and sensory details.)

We jogged across I-Drive and then started bushwhacking through a thicket of tall shrubs and oak trees. I started to worry about poison ivy, but ninjas don't worry about poison ivy, so I led the trail, my arms in front of me, pushing aside briars and brush as we walked toward the moat. We made it across and then knelt down in the knee-high grass beside the parkway....

And I didn't think about alligators or the disgusting layer of brackish algae. I just got a running start and jumped as far as I could. I landed in waist-deep water and then high-stepped across. The water smelled rank and felt slimy on my skin, but at least I wasn't wet above my waist. ...

We ran through a small thicket of trees, hugging tight against these huge opaque tanks that might have stored animals, and then we came to an asphalt path and I could see the big amphitheater where Shamu splashed me when I was a kid. The little speakers lining the walkway were playing soft Muzak.

We have many visual descriptions here. I-Drive, the trees and shrubs, the moat, more trees, the path, and inside Sea World, the tanks and amphitheater. Notice that Green isn't telling us there was a path...Quentin is acting in this place. He's jogging and jumping and smelling and feeling. He's interacting with the setting. In this short section, we also get that the water smelled rank and that it felt slimy on his skin. He's wet below his waist. We also get the sound of Muzak playing on the speakers. Green uses four out of five senses in this short section to describe the setting.

Notice also the connection here between that feeling of anxiety that Quentin had in the opening line—again, he's nervous, but he wants to be brave. He doesn't want to think about alligators. We're keeping with Quentin's point of view and his specific experience.

Modeling/Application – Worked Example 2

Step 1: Establish the Point of View

Time of Instruction: 5 minutes (Slides 29-32)

[Objectives: 1. *Given an optional visual prompt and an optional point of view, compose an introductory sentence to establish a point of view, written in either first or third person, past or present tense, and referring to the character acting in the paragraph.*

Given an optional visual prompt and a verbally provided optional point of view character, name the character who will be acting in the paragraph. (Sub skill 1.8)

Given an optional visual prompt and an optional point of view character, use the appropriate nouns and/or pronouns to denote either first person or third person. (Sub skill 1.9)

Given an optional visual prompt and an optional point of view character, use appropriate subject-verb agreement to denote present or past tense. (Sub skill 1.10)]

We've identified the techniques of using point of view, active verbs, adjectives, and sensory details to describe settings. Now we need to apply them in our own writing.

Let's look at how we can apply these same techniques to actually compose a descriptive paragraph. We can use WWW questions to identify and establish a point of view. For this practice, these answers will be given. What do we need to know for our introductory sentence?

1. Where: The place or setting
2. Who: POV character
3. How: 1st person POV or 3rd person narrator

4. When: Present or Past Tense
5. What: Character interacts with the setting

The setting will be a bedroom. For this example, my point of view character will be Sam, a seventeen-year-old boy with a younger sister, Jenny. Jenny's birthday is coming up, and Sam is trying to decide what to get her as a present. I'm going to use 1st person present tense, and Sam will be interacting with Jenny's bedroom. (Display photo.) I need to compose a sentence in the chosen point of view that places Sam in the room in an active way.



I walk into my sister's room and sigh. Jenny always knows exactly what I'll like, but she's a mystery to me. (With the POV established, we're ready to move to step 2, the sensory details.)

Step 2: Describe a Sensory Detail

Time of Instruction: 14 minutes (Slides 33-43)

[Objective: Given an optional visual prompt and using the elements from the introductory sentence, compose a logically connected sentence to describe an element of setting. The sentence should continue the point of view from the introductory sentence, use at least one active verb to show either the POV character or an item in the setting performing an action, and use at least one adjective to describe a sensory detail. Sensory details may include sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch.]

Next, we'll use the chosen point of view to decide which sensory details to describe. Sam wants to choose a gift--I'll start with that. Maybe he wants to know what Jenny likes, or what she already has.

Now, I need to choose an action—either Sam’s action or an action of some object in the room. I **see** some **books** around the room. (A sight detail.) Sam could pick one up—that would be an action. But is there a way to use an active verb differently here? Maybe with these covers? Yes—cover can be a noun, but it can also be an active verb. A paper **jacket** **covers** the **book**.

Our next step is to choose an adjective, which is easy here because these book jackets have different colors. **Pink, green, and blue**. Finally, we put all of this together into a sentence.

Bright **pink, green, and blue** **paper jackets** **cover** all the **books** on her **shelf**, (*And now with the basic requirements met, I’ll go a little further. How does this relate to Sam’s perspective? What else are those jackets doing?*) **hiding** the **titles** on the **spines**. To know what she already has, I’ll have to open every one.

Notice also that we’ve stayed in the present tense—jackets cover and hide the titles now, in the present.

Step 3: Include 2 Additional Sensory Details

[Objective: Repeat previous step until paragraph is complete, with a total of at least three different sensory details, at least four sentences, and at least 100 words.]

We have a visual detail, and we could certainly include more visuals, but how can we incorporate the other five senses in this room using the same steps?

Let’s try smell. Remember, the photo is only an optional prompt—you can use it to inspire you and create your own details. That looks like it might be a can of hairspray, or body spray, and makeup on the windowsill. Perfume is something that has a smell and could be a birthday gift. Sometimes perfume makes me sneeze—that’s an action—and sometimes it smells floral—that’s an adjective.

Instructor writes: I **cross** the room to check her **perfume** **supply**, but I **sneeze** at the heavy **floral** **smell** in the air before I even **pick up** the **full** **glass** **bottle**.

And now one more...let’s try sound. There’s a computer on Jenny’s bed, and headphones. Maybe Sam wants to see what music she’s listening to now. Computers whir when you turn them on, especially old ones.

Instructor writes: I **plop** down on the **unmade** **bed** and **wake** up her **computer**. The **old**, **hand-me-down** **laptop** **whirs** to life, and I **don’t recognize** the **band** in the **background** **photo** or a single one of the **songs** in her recent **downloads**.

Notice the multiple actions here—Sam plops down and wakes up the computer, and the laptop whirs. We use the adjective old, and I’ve added a few others as I write. If we put this whole paragraph together, it is 125 words long, which meets our minimum word count of 100 words. (Display full paragraph.)

I walk into my sister’s room and sigh. Jenny always knows exactly what I’ll like, but she’s a mystery to me. Bright pink, green, and blue paper jackets cover all the books on her shelf, hiding the titles on the spines. To know what she already has, I’ll have to open every one. I cross the room to check her perfume supply, but I sneeze at the heavy floral smell in the air before I even pick up the full glass bottle. I plop down on the unmade bed and wake up her computer. The old, hand-me-down laptop whirs to life, and I don’t recognize the band in the background photo or a single one of the songs in her recent downloads.

Independent Practice

Learner Practice and Feedback

Instructional Time: 10 minutes (Slides 44-46)

Now students will practice these skills. We’ll use the same photo for inspiration, since they’ve had some time to examine it, but we’re going to change the point of view this time.

This is still Jenny’s room. Jenny is still the younger sibling. This time, though, Sam could be a boy or a girl, that’s up to you—and this time, Sam isn’t getting Jenny a gift. Sam is angry, because something important is missing—maybe a favorite shirt, a book, a game, a wallet—and Sam thinks that Jenny took it. Your three practice sentences should establish Sam’s point of view, have Sam interact with the room, and describe at least two different sensory details with an active verb and an adjective.

Note: On a computer interface, students may type into a Word document or into a chat box with the instructor. For situations where these are written by hand, the instructor should distribute note cards and allow students to check if they would like their work to be read aloud anonymously.

Instructor should provide positive examples with positive feedback to the group presentation, if possible, pointing out the POVs’ character, tense, and person. The instructor should repeat this method for sensory detail sentences as well, pointing out the active verbs, adjectives, and sensory details and offering students the opportunity to try at least three additional sentences as time allows. In the best scenario, the instructor is able to interact with each student individually, pointing out proper use of the techniques or ways to improve.

Post-Assessment

Application

Instructional Time: 10-15+ minutes (Slides 47-51)

[Terminal Objective: *Given an optional visual prompt and an optional point of view character, compose a logically connected narrative paragraph that conveys a clear description of a setting from a chosen point of view. The paragraph should use at least three different sensory details; include at least three active verbs as simple predicates and at least three adjectives in the descriptive sentences; consist of at least 100 words; and use accepted rules of grammar and mechanics. Sensory details may include sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch.*]

Now that we've had the chance to practice, you'll compose your own narrative paragraphs conveying a setting from a chosen point of view. You'll be given two optional visual prompts and two optional point of view characters, but you may also create your own characters and settings according to the steps we followed today. (Students should be provided with the assessment rubric, two visual prompts, and two optional point of view characters.)

Engaging Settings Post-Assessment

Objective: Use precise and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of a setting in narrative writing. (LAFS.910.W.1.3, LAFS.1112.W.1.3)

Assignment:

Compose a logically connected narrative paragraph that conveys a clear description of a setting from a chosen point of view.

You may use either of the two optional prompts for the point of view character, either of the two optional visual prompts for the setting, or create your own setting and character.

The paragraph should:

1. establish and maintain a clear point of view character throughout the paragraph.
2. use at least three different sensory details. Sensory details may include sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch.
3. include at least three active verbs as simple predicates and at least three adjectives in the descriptive sentences.

4. consist of at least 4 sentences and at least 100 words.
5. use accepted rules of grammar and mechanics.

Students may be given the remainder of the class period to work or allowed to work on the paragraph at home. Paragraphs should be emailed or handed in to the instructor before the beginning of the next class period or another specified date and time.

Scoring Rubric

Narrative Paragraph Describing Setting	Meets Expectations	Attempts to Meet Expectations	Needs Improvement
Point of View - Character 10 points	10 points One point of view character is clearly established in the introductory sentence and is clearly continued throughout the entire paragraph.	5 points One point of view character is clearly established in the introductory sentence but is NOT clearly continued throughout the paragraph.	1 point A point of view character is NOT clearly established in the introductory sentence.
Point of View – Tense 10 points	10 points Either present or past tense is clearly established and continued throughout the entire paragraph.	5 points Either present or past tense is clearly established with 1-2 errors in consistency.	1 point Present or past tense is established with 3 or more errors in consistency.
Point of View – Person 10 points	10 points Either first or third person is clearly established and continued throughout the entire paragraph.	5 points Either first or third person is clearly established with 1-2 errors in consistency.	1 point First or third person is not established or is established with 3 or more errors in consistency.
Sensory Detail 1 15 points	15 points One or more logically connected sentences describes one sensory detail (sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch) in the setting using at least one adjective and at least one active verb in the simple predicate.	10 points One or more logically connected sentences describes one sensory detail (sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch) in the setting using at least one adjective OR at least one active verb allowing 1-2 errors .	5 points Sentence or sentences may not be logically connected, may not include a sensory detail, an adjective, or an active verb, resulting in 3 or more errors .
Sensory Detail 2 15 points	15 points One or more logically connected sentences describes one different sensory detail (sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch) in the setting using at least one adjective and at least one active verb in the simple predicate.	10 points One or more logically connected sentences describes one different sensory detail (sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch) in the setting using at least one adjective OR at least one active verb allowing 1-2 errors .	5 points Sentence or sentences may not be logically connected, may not include a sensory detail, an adjective, or an active verb, resulting in 3 or more errors .
Sensory Detail 3 15 points	15 points One or more logically connected sentences describes one different sensory detail (sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch) in the setting using at least one adjective and at least one active verb in the simple predicate.	10 points One or more logically connected sentences describes one different sensory detail (sight, smell, sound, taste, or touch) in the setting using at least one adjective OR at least one active verb allowing 1-2 errors .	5 points Sentence or sentences may not be logically connected, may not include a sensory detail, an adjective, or an active verb, resulting in 3 or more errors .
Length 10 points	10 points Paragraph consists of at least 4 sentences and at least 100 words total.	5 points Paragraph consists of at least 4 sentences and has 75-99 words total.	1 point Paragraph has 3 or fewer sentences and fewer than 75 words total.
Grammar and Writing Conventions 15 points	15 points The paragraph clearly demonstrates few, if any , convention errors in mechanics, usage, punctuation, and spelling.	10 points The paragraph generally follows conventions of mechanics, usage, punctuation, and spelling, with 2-4 errors at most.	5 points The paragraph contains 5 or more convention errors in mechanics, usage, punctuation, and spelling.
Total Score:			

Conclusion

The instructor should ask for any questions and remain available until the closing of the session for questions. The lesson will conclude with the instructor encouraging students to look for examples of other creative writing techniques when reading and to continue to apply these skills in other instances of narrative writing.

When the assessments are complete, the instructor should use the rubric to measure the application of the skills, and students will be provided with both their completed rubric and any additional comments or suggestions from the instructor via email. Positive reinforcement is incredibly helpful to young writers, and prompt, positive feedback will likely help with the transfer of these skills.