

Setting the Scene

Details about your story's environment usually come first. There's no rule about how to present them, but beginning with time, season, and/or weather can quickly convey the mood you seek. The location and its important physical features can follow.

EXT. PARADE GROUNDS - DAY

Early morning. Blue sky. Bright sun. Heat waves shimmer above the grass. Bleachers line the field. Red, white, and blue bunting drapes a reviewing stand.

PLEASE NOTE! Screenplay description amounts to bare essentials. In the above paragraph, you get just enough information to realize it's early on a hot day and there will be a military ceremony. Such minimal description is an industry standard and a producer preference. Yes, screenplays go through a series of readings, but don't let that confuse you. Producers give their readers specific guidelines to follow. From one filmmaker to another, those guidelines fit drama. Readers seek scripts that they know will work as drama on the screen. They aren't looking for short stories or novels.

True, you want to engage the people who read your work, but if you describe a sunset with Venus sparkling on the horizon, you're barking up the wrong tree. Film people hate that stuff, and the phrase "Your script reads like a novel" is a complaint. Some industry readers even say that they skip action paragraphs and read only the dialogue. I once heard a director grumble, "I don't need all that single-space crap. Just tell me where the shot takes place, who's in it, and what they do."

But, you ask, how does a writer convey mood, meaning, and human behavior without description? The key is to work for these things:

- Visualize the scene. (See it in your mind.)
- Decide what circumstances and behavior you want the audience to see.
- Write visual images that convey meaning without explanation.
- Write *only* details a camera can capture and/or actors can perform.

In our parade ground scene, the details are brief, but a camera can photograph them. Without explanation or narrative, the visual images can cause certain expectations. For example, morning light looks different from afternoon or evening light. Although it's morning, we see heat waves shimmer above the grass. That indicates the season is summer. The parade ground setting suggests a military ceremony. The bunting colors indicate the country is the USA. In the United States, what patriotic summer holiday rates a military ceremony? Memorial Day? The Fourth of July? What kind of behavior might we expect from characters who appear in such a setting? Now, for the sake of discussion, let's try a rewrite.

EXT. PARADE GROUNDS - DAY

Morning. Lead gray skies. Snow covers the grass. Bleachers line the field. Red, white, and blue bunting drapes a reviewing stand.