

# Brushstrokes: Exercises in Performing Setting

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## Preliminary Extracts

*'Stage with a jungle backdrop. Frogs croak and birds call from recorder. Farnsworth as an adolescent is lying facedown on sand. Ali is fucking him and he squirms with a slow wallowing movement showing his teeth in a depraved smile. The lights dim for a few seconds. When the light comes up Farnsworth is wearing an alligator suit that leaves his ass bare and Ali is still fucking him. As Ali and Farnsworth slide offstage Farnsworth lifts one webbed finger to the audience while a Marine band plays "Semper Fi." Offstage splash.'*

- William S. Burroughs: *Cities of the Red Night*

*'Scene 9*

*'All the different people in Alexandria, that city of gold.*

*'Two-storey pale blue, brown and pale grey brick and wood houses, side by side, down the streets.*

*Red-brown colour, air and surface, and, above that, gold light, the sun, and above that pale blue.*

*The air is grey and semi-thick.*

*'Birds call in the air. They're being scared by the increasing numbers of sudden loud noises. There are some modern apartments and the beach surrounds everything.'*

- Kathy Acker: *Blood and Guts In High School*

## Brushstrokes - Definition:

**Fig.1**



Take a moment and contemplate this photograph. You've tasked yourself with representing it as a setting. Relax. Be *in* the setting. You can already see it, now hear it. Smell it. What textures and tastes are there in the air that make you reluctant to breathe deeply in? You know all these features immediately. Now give them names.

A **brushstroke** is a 'name' (effectively an elaborate noun) for a sensory stimulus presented as the only content of a sentence, and accordingly lacking the minimum grammatical components to constitute a self-contained sentence: a subject, an object, a verb. Like chromatic approach tones used in jazz, **brushstrokes** are invalid according to conventional theory, but if used consciously and consistently can produce replicable, deliberate effects, and can constitute useful tools in an alternative theory system.

A **brushstroke** may be concise: "*Rain.*" Or it may be long and meandering: "*Lichen strata of splashed and coagulated paint - topography gradients from carbon to ash and dried burgundy to dessicated rose.*" (Refer to bottom left of **Fig.1.**) It is not brevity that makes a **brushstroke**, it is the fact of the 'sentence's sole content being the 'name' of a sensory stimulus. In the latter example above, the latter part of the 'sentence' is simply an elaboration on the name "*Lichen strata of splashed and coagulated paint*".

A **compound brushstroke** may contain multiple objects, which may relate to each other in some way: "*Sensed shift of the canal's mass suspended in leadweighted air.*" Note that as the verb 'suspended' occurs in its adjectival form, preventing it from resolving the grammar of the 'sentence'.

Each **Exercise** on this worksheet explores **brushstrokes** as used in an introductory portrait of setting. **Appended** to this worksheet are **11** additional **stock images** from which you may work, using a different photo for each of the **6 Exercises**. If you wish, you may work from an alternative photograph of your choosing.

**You are not obligated to depict the setting with perfect fidelity.**

**All examples** given will be drawn from **Fig.1.**

## Ex. 1

In this initial exercise you will **identify** and **name**, from a **stock image of your choosing**, 5+ sensory impressions either present in or suggested by (e.g. sound) the **stock image**. Terms that convey generalised appearance like colour palette, variation and texture can be particularly useful, since they can be more efficient than listing individual details.

**E.g.** "A patina of antique filth" (Orwell describing trousers) and "His hair was differentially bleached by the sun like a sloppy dye job" (Burroughs).

In the first part of the exercise, keep your **brushstrokes** concise, and simply name the impression:

**E.g.**

- Heavy canal
- Thick, still air
- Steep cement steps
- Sandy cement pavement
- Lichen effect of crusted paint
- Close horizon
- ...

**Concise strokes:**

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Next, write these **strokes** into a paragraph. **Vary** the **length** and complexity of your **strokes** by **elaborating** or combining concise ones, to give a sense of organicity to the paragraph. This is a good time to employ simile and terms of generalised appearance to convey sweeping or exact impressions. You may wish to follow a scheme such as **building** from short strokes to long, or **alternating** long and short.

**E.g.**

Steep cement steps down to the grey body of a heavy canal. Sensed shift of the canal's mass suspended in the leadweighted air. Scrubby pavementscape to the immediate horizon - thin ribbon of industrial habitation under the bloated sky. Wauling chorus of exhausted motors. Stony cement pavement along the bank splashed with lichen strata of coagulated paint - topography gradients from carbon to ash and dried burgundy to dessicated rose. Sour weight of paint in the air.

**Image:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph:**

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**Consideration:**

Did you begin with a long or a short stroke? How do you feel about the effect of this choice?

**Ex.2**

The portrait you have just painted is likely a very static one. You may often want to establish a level of typical, baseline action in a setting as a basis from which narrative can arise. The grammatical equivalent of this baseline is the **past-imperfect** tense, or the "**I was working** at the supermarket when I met the dachshund that changed my life..." It is common for writers to err on the side of taking too long to establish baseline activity, and sometimes taking a long time can be warranted, particularly if this baseline incorporates a latent **inciting conflict** (see the narrator's insomnia in *Fight Club*), however if your goal is simply to orient the reader in the setting, it can be desirable to do this as efficiently as possible. James Joyce's *Dubliners* is an excellent study in efficient establishment of setting, and one technique used to sound effect is that of characterisation by habitual behaviour. Arundhati Roy also uses habitual behaviour extensively as a means of efficiently introducing her extensive casts of characters and giving her novels the sense of being populated 'cities'.

In trying to render a static portrait more active, one wants to identify and introduce something - anything at all - that is *going on*. Often this can be an occurrence that is explicitly or implicitly recurrent, and can therefore add character to the setting. For example, if in a piece drawn from **Fig.1** there is a single dilapidated barge pushing its way along the canal, this can be assumed to be a typical occurrence, and the condition of the barge suggests a great deal about the decline of the setting's relevance as a piece of industrial infrastructure.

**Identify or invent at least 1** example of habitual activity, either in the paragraph you have just drafted, or in a new paragraph you may choose to draft based on a new **stock image**. Give this activity, or these activities, a name, and use it to follow up the initial paragraph.

**E.g.**

"Slow-rolling wake of a sluggish barge - retired red hullpaint relieved by rust; prow manned by a male child in miner's blackface, sounding for and shifting debris with a long pole in the low water."

**Image:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Paragraph Plus Baseline Action:**

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**Considerations:**

How would it be different if the activity were introduced at the beginning of the paragraph instead? Perhaps it would feel more central to the narrative, and the setting would seem to materialise around it, whereas in the present example the activity appears to cut through or embellish an established static scenery. Would the activity feel more like an indistinct part of the setting if it were introduced in the middle?

### Ex.3

In this exercise you will practice converting **brushstrokes** into grammatically complete sentences. This will consist mainly in introducing verbs and restoring missing articles.

Writers who make use of **brushstrokes** frequently use them to conjure a setting and allow them to coalesce into fluent prose once the setting has stabilised. **Brushstrokes** can also be useful as a drafting tool even if you do not plan to use them in your final output, in which case you must be comfortable making the conversion to fluent prose.

For this exercise, you may either draft a new set of **brushstrokes** from a new **stock image**, or you may reuse one of your previous sets.

Each sentence you produce must be grammatically self-contained, having a subject, object and verb, and not being grammatically dependent on anything outside the sentence. You will probably prefer to incorporate multiple sensory impressions into a single sentence.

**E.g.**

A set of steep cement steps descend to the grey body of a heavy canal, the sensed shift of its mass suspended in the leadweighted air. A scrubby pavementscape recedes to the immediate horizon - a thin ribbon of industrial habitation under the bloated sky, wailing with the chorus of exhausted motors. A sandy cement pavement runs along the bank, splashed with a lichen strata of coagulated paint in topography gradients from carbon to ash and dried burgundy to dessicated rose. The sour weight of paint thickens the air.

**Image:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Grammatically Complete Paragraph:**

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## Ex.4

In this exercise you will attempt the effect, used by certain writers who make use of **brushstrokes**, of conjuring a setting, or '**fading it in**', by transitioning from **brushstrokes** to fluent prose as the setting gains substance and consistency.

Using a new **stock image**, you will draft a paragraph beginning with **brushstrokes** of static sensory impressions, and transitioning into fluent prose around or after the half-way point, as, or shortly before, you introduce **habitual activity**.

You may also wish to revert to a **brushstroke** when a new object is first introduced, somewhat like an [enter] **stage direction**.

You may prefer to write the whole paragraph as **brushstrokes** and translate the latter part of the paragraph, or to simply draft it in its intended form.

### E.g.

"Steep cement steps down to the grey body of a heavy canal. Sensed shift of the canal's mass suspended in the leadweighted air. Scrubby pavementscape to the immediate horizon - thin ribbon of industrial habitation under the bloated sky. Wauling chorus of exhausted motors. A stony cement pavement runs along the bank, splashed with a lichen strata of coagulated paint in topography gradients from carbon to ash and dried burgundy to dessicated rose. The Sour weight of paint thickens the air. Slow-rolling wake of a sluggish barge - its retired red hullpaint is relieved by rust; its prow manned by a male child in miners' blackface, sounding for and shifting debris with a long pole in the low water."

**Image:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Fade-In:**

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**Considerations:**

Can you think of any other way of organising when **brushstrokes** and fluent prose are used? What effects would you anticipate being produced?

**Ex.5**

In this exercise you will fade in a setting and then fade it out again. This may create a clean bookending effect if used at the beginning and end of a text or passage.

You will first draft a '**fade-in**' sequence based on a new **stock image**, then **fade it out** as below:

**E.g. 1**

A male child in miners' blackface mans the prow of a sluggish barge, sounding for and shifting debris with a long pole in the low water of a heavy canal. The barge's retired hullpaint has been relieved by rust. Its prow pushes a slow-rolling wake. The sour weight of paint thickens the air. Lichen strata of coagulated paint - topography gradients from carbon to ash and dried burgundy to dessicated rose - splashed on the stony cement pavement along the canal bank. Wauling chorus of exhausted motors from the narrow ribbon of habitation under the heavy sky. Scrubby sandscape from the immediate horizon back to the canal. Sensed shift of the canal's mass suspended in the leadweighted air. Steep cement steps down to its grey body.

**E.g. 2**

A set of steep cement steps descend to the grey body of a heavy canal, the sensed shift of its mass suspended in the leadweighted air. A scrubby pavementscape recedes to the immediate horizon - a thin ribbon of industrial habitation under the bloated sky, wauling with the chorus of exhausted motors. Stony cement pavement along the bank, splashed with lichen strata of coagulated paint - topography gradients from carbon to ash and dried burgundy to dessicated rose. Sour weight of paint in the air. Slow-rolling wake of a sluggish barge - retired red hullpaint relieved by rust; prow manned by a male child in miners' blackface, sounding for and shifting debris with a long pole in the low water."

**Image:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Fade-in:**

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Next you will **'fade out'** the sequence in two ways. **Firstly**, simply reverse the order of the sentences (as far as makes sense), to observe the **'fade-out'** effect.

**Fade-Out 1:**

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**Secondly**, retain the original sentence order, and translate the **brushstrokes** into fluent prose and vice versa. The expected difference in effect may be that in the first case the setting will appear to recede back into the fog it was conjured from, while in the latter case there will be the implication of cyclical progression.

**Fade-Out 2:**

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**Final Considerations:**

Do you see **brushstrokes** being useful more as a prose technique or a drafting tool? Can you think of any other situations beside the introduction of a setting where they might be used to effect? Consider this independently before contemplating the final extract.



## ***The Sky Is Thin as Paper Here* - William S. Burroughs, *Cities of the Red Night***

*Waring's house still stands. Only the hinges have rusted away in the sea air so all the doors are open. In a corner of the studio I find a scroll about five feet wide wrapped in heavy brown paper on which is written "For Noah." There is a wooden rod attached to one end of the scroll and on the wall two brass sockets designed to receive it. Standing on tiptoe I fit the rod into the sockets and a picture unrolls. Click. I remember what Waring told me about the Old Man of the Mountain and the magic garden that awaited his assassin's after their missions of death had been carried out. As I study the picture I see an island in the sky, green as the heart of an emerald, glittering with dew as waterfalls whip tattered banners of rainbow around it. The shores are screened with thin poplars and cypress and now I can see other islands stretching away into the distance like the cloud cities of the Odor Eaters, which vanish in rain ... the garden is fading ... rusty barges and derricks and cement mixers ... a blue river. On the edge of the market, tin ware clattering in a cold Spring wind. When I reach the house the roof has fallen in, rubble and sand on the floor, weeds and vines growing through ... it must be centuries.... Only the stairs remain going up into the blue sky. Sharp and clear as if seen through a telescope, a boy in white workpants, black jacket and black cap walking up a cracked street, ruined houses ahead. On the back of his jacket is the word DINK in white thread. He stops, sitting on a stone wall to eat a sandwich from his lunch box and drink some orange liquid from a paper container. He is dangling his legs over a dry streambed. He stands up in the weak sunlight and urinates into the streambed, shaking a few drops off his penis like raindrops on some purple plant. He buttons his pants and walks on*

*Dead leaves falling as we drive out to the farmhouse in the buckboard ... loft of the old barn, jagged slashes of blue sky where the boards have curled apart ... tattered banners of rain ... violet Twilight yellow-gray around the edges blowing away in the wind.*

*He is sitting there with me, cloud shadows moving across his face, ghostly smell of flowers and damp earth ... florist shop by the vacant lot ... dim dead boy.... The sky is thin as paper here.*

### **Notes:**

As the titular riff, taken from Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*, implies a vertiginous fragility of setting - as if the sky were ready to tear open allowing whatever horror it shelters us from to come spilling in - its use here can be reasonably interpreted as a cue to the reader of the fragility of the conjured setting. The use of **brushstrokes** appears to serve the same function, producing a fluttering effect in the backdrop like that of paper in wind. This extract appears to demonstrate that **brushstrokes** may be used to momentarily imply the superficiality, transience, or conjured nature of a setting.

# Stock Images

Fig.2



Fig.3

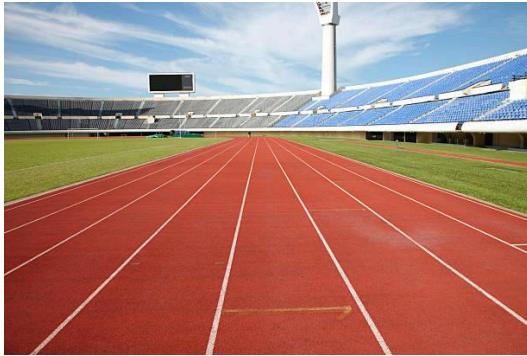


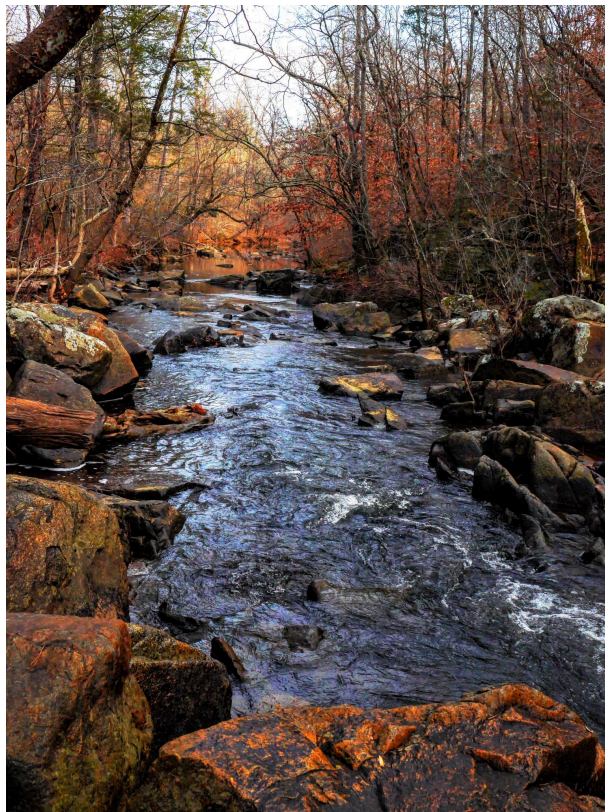
Fig.4



**Fig.5**



**Fig.6**



**Fig.7**



**Fig.8**



**Fig.9**



**Fig.10**



**Fig.11**



**Fig.12**

