

1

Setting up prospects and problems

How does Dickens introduce his characters and setting?

Your progress in this unit:

- explain how Dickens establishes characters and setting at the start of the novel
- explore the link between characters and setting
- write the opening to your own story with a distinct setting
- understand a literature writing task
- create your own key extract from the opening of the novel.

GETTING STARTED - THE STORY AND YOU

Setting and story

The following speaking and listening activity will help you explore some ideas that you will later build into a story of your own.

- 1 Work in pairs. Think of the loneliest place you have ever been, for example an empty street, a dark woodland or a deserted beach. Describe it in detail to your partner. When you have finished your description, your partner should ask questions to try and find out more detail. Afterwards, swap over so you are the one asking the questions.
- 2 Repeat Activity 1, describing different types of **setting**. You might try and describe a desert, a night-time park in a large city or a marsh.



Watch two actors try this activity on Cambridge Elevate.

Setting and character

The setting for a story should not only be an interesting place, it should also be linked to character and plot. The **characters** in a good story are part of the landscape.

- 1 Work in pairs. One of you should choose a setting and describe it briefly. The other then describes a character to put in that setting, explaining why the character is there. For example they might live there or work there, they may have been born there or they could be there to attack the place.

You can use one of the settings you described before or choose a new one – perhaps a multi-storey car park or a graveyard.



Watch writers discussing their ideas on Cambridge Elevate.

GETTING CLOSER - FOCUS ON DETAILS

How does Dickens use the early chapters to draw his readers into the story?

Read through the key details and quotations from Chapters 1-7 to get an overview of the section you are about to explore.

Chapter 1

Pip, a young orphan boy, is visiting the graves of his family on Christmas Eve. He encounters a convict whose legs are shackled in irons.

‘Blacksmith, eh?’ said he. And looked down at his leg.

Chapter 2

Pip thinks about stealing some food and drink from his sister, Mrs Joe Gargery – with whom he lives – for the convict.

My sister ... had brought me up ‘by hand.’

Chapter 3

The following morning he returns to the marshes with brandy, a pie and a file for the convict.

The last I heard of him, I stopped in the mist to listen, and the file was still going.

Chapter 4

At Christmas dinner, Uncle Pumblechook drinks the brandy that Pip has diluted with tar water. Pip is afraid that they will also discover the missing pie and accuse him.

But, I ran no further than the house door, for there I ran head foremost into a party of soldiers with their muskets.

Chapter 5

Pip and his sister’s kindly husband, Joe, accompany the soldiers in their search for the convict. He is caught and says he stole the pie.

Chapter 6

Pip feels guilty.

Chapter 7

Pip reads to Joe.



Key terms

setting: the description of the place in which a novel is set.
characters: the people in a story; even when based on real people, characters in novels are invented or fictionalised.

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‘She wants this boy to go and play there. And of course he’s going.’

Mrs Joe



- 1 The quotations to accompany the summaries of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are missing from the chart. Which of the following quotations goes with which chapter?
- a ‘Is there any Miss Havisham down town?’ returned my sister. ‘She wants this boy to go and play there. And of course he’s going.’
 - b ‘I wish to say something respecting this escape. It may prevent some persons laying under suspicion alonger me.’
 - c In a word, I was too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong.



Watch characters introduce the story on Cambridge Elevate.



Watch the characters summarise the story so far on Cambridge Elevate.

Linking character and setting

In the first two pages of the book, Dickens introduces two important characters and describes the setting. He also shows **links** between the characters and the setting. He sets the scene with a description of the marshland landscape:

... the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea ...

A convict then emerges from this threatening setting. The words ‘**hold your noise**’ are the first speech in the book. Up to this point we have heard the voice of the young narrator, Pip, talking about himself. We have learnt that he is an orphan and seen him visit the graves of his parents and siblings. Quite a lot of this information is written in an amusing way. Then suddenly a man jumps out and grabs him.

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1 This is a particularly cinematic moment, and in film adaptations of *Great Expectations*, directors often make the most of it. David Lean’s film version was one of the first, made in 1946. Look at the still image from the film.

- a List any differences between this film image and the way you imagined the opening of the **novel** when you read it.
- b How does this film image create an atmosphere of menace? How does the novel use language to do so in the first two pages?
- c Write down four bullet points explaining how terrifying this is for Pip. For example:
 - He is all alone in a churchyard.
 - He ...



Key terms

novel: a long story written in prose, describing characters and events.



Contexts

According to the 1861 census, 75% of males and 65% of females could read and write, but the literacy level of many of these people would have been very low. Despite this, Dickens was enjoyed by people in all sections of society and with different levels of education, so how did he achieve this popularity?

Great Expectations first appeared in the monthly magazine *All Year Round*, which had a readership of about 100,000. This opened it up to people on modest incomes, who could find small amounts of money regularly, so it was not only the prosperous ruling class who had access to Dickens’s works, but also those with office jobs and some skilled people who worked with tools. In addition, people who were literate often read to those who were not. One illiterate cleaner surprised her employer by showing she knew about Dickens’s novel *Dombey and Son*:

It turned out that she lodged at a snuff-shop kept by a person named Douglas, where there were several other lodgers; and that on the first Monday of every month there was a Tea, and the landlord read the month’s number [episode] of *Dombey*, those only of the lodgers who subscribed to the tea partaking of that luxury, but all having the benefit of the reading.



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PUTTING DETAILS TO USE

Setting and character


Use the following tasks to investigate the opening chapters more closely. Make notes of your answers. You will need these for the writing activity later in this unit.

- 1
- The opening sentence of the book names the **narrator** as Philip Pirrip, but adds that his nickname is 'Pip'. Why do you think Dickens chose to call his character Pip?
- a

Write down five bullet points summarising Pip's situation at the start of the novel. Mention who has died and who takes care of him.
- b

Write down three quotations from the start of the novel that seem to emphasise Pip's loneliness. Whom has he never met, for example?
- c

Find three clues in Chapter 1 that suggest the writer is an older man looking back. Consider the language he uses.



Key terms

narrator: the character in a novel who tells the story in the first person.

Later, in Chapter 2, we learn a bit more about Pip's situation:

My sister, Mrs Joe Gargery, was more than twenty years older than I, and had established a great reputation with herself and the neighbours because she had brought me up 'by hand.'

As a child, Pip had not understood the expression 'by hand' and adds that his sister had:

... a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon me.

- 2
- a


What do you think Mrs Joe means when she says '**by hand**'?
- b

Write two or three sentences about the relationship between Mrs Joe and her husband, Joe Gargery. Be careful to distinguish between what you know (because Chapter 2 says so) and what you guess.

Language

In Chapter 3, Pip takes the food and file he has stolen to the convict:

The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes, so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me. [...] The gates and dykes and banks came bursting at me through the mist, as if they cried as plainly as could be, 'A boy with Somebody-else's pork pie! Stop him!'



Find out more about language in the novel in Unit 15.

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- 1 Write down eight words from this extract that make the landscape seem frightening and menacing.

In Chapter 5, the convict Pip has helped comes across another escaped convict and fights him:

Water was splashing, and mud was flying, and oaths were being sworn, and blows were being struck, when some more men went down into the ditch to help the sergeant, and dragged out, separately, my convict and the other one. Both were bleeding and panting.

- 2 a Copy the extract and highlight all the words associated with violence.
b Underline the words ending in ‘-ing’. What effect do these words have?

Plot and structure

At the end of Chapter 7, Pip has to temporarily leave Joe to visit Miss Havisham at Satis House:

I had never parted from him before, and what with my feelings and what with soap-suds, I could at first see no stars from the chaise-cart. But they twinkled out one by one, without throwing any light on the questions why on earth I was going to play at Miss Havisham’s, and what on earth I was expected to play at.

- 1 As with the entrance of the convict, Miss Havisham’s entrance is going to trigger events that affect the rest of the story. What do you think will happen next? Work in groups and discuss whether you think Dickens drops some hints about what these events might be towards the end of Chapter 7.



Find out more about plot and structure in the novel in Unit 11.



Learning checkpoint

Look back over your work so far and write:

- a a paragraph about Pip’s character
b a paragraph about the setting of the novel.

Use supporting detail from the text in your paragraphs.

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GETTING IT INTO WRITING

In your exam you will answer a question about *Great Expectations*. The format of these questions will be consistent. The first part of the question will make clear the part of the text provided, and the subject to be focused on. Then there will be two bullets, making clear that the answer should be based on the extract, and on the novel as a whole. The format of the question is like this:

In an extract from (Chapter X) Dickens describes (person, situation, event, place, relationship, emotions, etc.). Write about:

- how he presents the (person, situation, event, place, relationship, emotions, etc.) in that extract
- how the (person, situation, event, place, relationship, emotions) are presented in the novel as a whole.

The text lasso

Throughout the book, you will practise answering questions like this. To do so, you will need to choose extracts that are about 300 words long to write about. To find an extract of this length, follow these steps:

- Open your copy of the novel to any page and count a 300-word section.
- Lay a piece of paper over your page and mark out the space of the 300-word section.
- Take the paper off the page and cut around your markings. You now have a hole in the paper that is about the size of 300 words.
- Lay this piece of paper over any page in the novel to select a 300-word extract of your choice.

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Writing about Pip as a character

Look through Chapters 1 and 2. Choose an incident that reveals something about Pip’s character: perhaps the convict’s seizing him or his theft of the pie. Find a quotation at the centre of your chosen incident that seems worth noting. Now lay your text lasso over the page so that the key quotation is roughly in the middle. Move it about a little so that the extract coincides with the beginnings and endings of sentences.

Now complete these activities using the extract you have chosen.

- 1 Summarise your extract in one sentence.
- 2 Explain in a single sentence why your chosen extract is a key event in the chapter.

GETTING FURTHER

Considering the convict

Here, at the start of the novel, we do not know the convict’s personal story or what his home looks like. He is just a strange, violent character who has burst into Pip’s story. Later, we discover that his name is Magwitch. What are we to make of him at this point in the novel?

- 1 Do you think Magwitch is:
 - a cruel by nature
 - b made cruel and violent by things that have happened to him
 - c driven to cruelty by circumstances and need?
- 2 What do you think will be the impact of this event on Pip’s life and his character?
- 3 When Pip steals the file and the ‘wittles’, he commits the kind of crime for which people were sent to prison or even executed at the time the novel was written. Write a paragraph explaining how Dickens uses this event to comment on the conditions of the poor in 19th-century society.

Thinking ahead

In this unit, you have looked at how setting and character are connected at the beginning of *Great Expectations*. As you read on, keep looking for this connection – for example note the dark, sinister setting of Satis House in Chapter 8. Throughout the book, you will find that the settings reveal something about the characters that inhabit them.



Learning checkpoint

Write a paragraph that explains how your chosen extract helps you to understand Pip’s character. Use one quotation from the text as evidence.

How will I know I’ve done this well?

- ✓ Comment on specific words or phrases used in the text.
- ✓ Explain something about Pip’s character.
- ✓ Include some details about his relationship with other characters, for example his sister, Joe or the convict.
- ✓ Use accurate spelling and clear, well-punctuated sentences.