The Ashmolean’s paintings provide creative starting points to inspire descriptive writing about settings from different cultures, times and places. Through the collections explore suburban streets, city rooftops, and unusual views of world cities such as Paris, Rome or Venice. Visit Oxford’s nineteenth century High Street and see cityscapes, both real and imagined. Experience birds-eye views, vast rural landscapes, pastoral country or waterside scenes and detailed naturalistic landscapes. Use these pictures a launch pad to describe a setting.

Starting questions:
Choose a picture. Use these questions to describe the setting:

- Choose one word to describe the place.
- What is the first thing you notice?
- What is the time of day and time of year?
- Describe the weather in detail.
- Describe what is happening.
- If you could step into the picture what would you see, hear, smell and touch?
- Where would you go in the picture and why?
- Describe the colours. What effects do they create?
- How is light used in the picture? How does this affect the mood?
- Would you like to visit this place? Why?
- Find something no one else might have noticed.
- Does this scene remind you of anything?
- Does it make you think of any situations, feelings or stories?
- Give the picture a new title.

Key Galleries:
Gallery 43: Italian Renaissance
Gallery 44: European Art
Gallery 49: Britain and Italy
Gallery 67:19th-century Art
Gallery 50-51: Landscape Oil Sketches
Gallery 66: Pre-Raphaelites
Gallery 65: Pissarro
Gallery 63: Sickert and his contemporaries
Gallery 62: Modern Art

The Slum, James Ferrier Pryde (1866-1941) WA1961.2
Murnau - Staffelsee I, Wassily Kandinsky WA1997.33
A Canal in Bruges at Dusk, Henri-Eugene-Augustin Le Sidaner (1862-1939) WA1937.51
Imagining your setting

- Describe the place to someone who cannot see it or to a partner who has chosen a different picture. Point out the smallest details and explain why you chose it. Try using prepositions to start each sentence.

- Annotate a copy of the picture with words to describe sounds, textures, smells, colours and atmosphere. Add your own questions, ideas and comments.

- Imagine something is hidden. What is it and who might find it?

Starting to write

Write down every idea and thought that comes to you about the setting: words, phrases, sentences, pieces of dialogue, images, a feeling, memory, smell or taste, the name of a character, a description of a person or place.

Share ideas with a partner and ask them questions about their place. Choose your favourite ideas and work with them.

Write a piece of descriptive prose as part of a story. What mood and atmosphere do you want to create? Which aspects of the place will you describe? What is about to happen next?

Write an imaginary travel brochure for your setting to persuade people to visit.

Imagine this picture is an illustration in a book. Write the caption to accompany it.

Further resources

Ashmolean Education Learning Resources: www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources