Establishing Time Period

One of the most important elements in a work of fiction is the time period. Time period sets the context for a story and places limitations on what characters can do, how they speak, and even how they dress. Since time period plays such a crucial role in fiction, it is a decision that must be made early in the writing process. Below are some ways to establish time period.

**Put the date in a heading** - especially useful in texts that move through time or are written like a journal
- “St. Petersburg, Dec. 11th, 17—” (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*).

**Spell out the date in the text** - makes the context of the story very clear to readers
- “Alan Clay woke up in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It was May 30, 2010” (Dave Eggers, *A Hologram for the King*).

**Describe the characters’ clothing** - establishes time period in a subtle way
- “She was wearing pink aerobic pants, a pink T-shirt with KAUAI written in lilac letters across the chest, and tennis shoes” (Kate Braverman, “Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta”).

**Describe the historical context** - helps readers understand the time period of the text and how it relates to history
- A character in “Testimony of Pilot” by Barry Hannah is a soldier in the Vietnam War.

**Describe technology** - Since technology changes rapidly, a good way to set the time period is by including technology that was popular during that time.
- A modern story includes references to cell phones and the internet.
- A story set in the 1800s describes a telegraph machine.