Common Settings in Science Fiction and Fantasy

Many stories use the same general settings, most of which fall into just a few categories.

Space is a big place. You might want to decide what part of it you want to set your space battles, conflicts, and adventures.

Near space—Earth Orbit, where satellites and space shuttles circle the world. The space between the earth and the moon. Stories can be set on space stations, spaceships, space colonies, and other artificial constructs in near space.

Interplanetary space—Anywhere within the solar system, the ring of planets that revolve about the sun. Beyond the orbit of the outermost planet, Pluto (but keep abreast of the latest discoveries—there are astronomical bodies beyond!), lies interstellar space, vast reaches of the universe between the stars of our galaxy, the Milky Way. Distances between stars are staggering. A single lightyear is trillions of miles. Beyond these unending reaches of emptiness is intergalactic space, unimaginable stretches of vacuum that bridge the distances between galaxies, distances that measure in millions and billions of lightyears.

Alien Planets—Remember that a planet almost always has a star around which to orbit. If you dream up a planet, and it isn’t one that revolves about our sun, you are talking about a planet around another star. That star could be relatively nearby—a few lightyears—or it could orbit a star in another galaxy, which would put it far away indeed. Remember this when you construct the parameters of your story universe. If you want to write stories about galactic empires, realize just how big a galaxy is. It would be very hard to govern an empire that stretches for a hundred thousand lightyears. Take that fact and other basic astronomical realities into account when you erect your settings. A mere interstellar federation can cover only a small star cluster but still be vaster than any empire in history.

Fantasy worlds with quasi-historical settings—This is epic fantasy territory. The underlying assumption of most epic fantasy stories is that the setting is a quasi-historical past with major alterations. The setting may look like the Middle Ages, or a barbaric prehistory, or some undefined past, but it might be one in which magic is real and plays a major
role. Also, no actual historical figures or events need occur. In fact, most epic fantasies can be considered alternate versions—most of the time virtually unrecognizable versions—of historical periods. Some epic fantasy settings do not resemble any historical period at all, but are simply strange and wondrous.

**The Future**—Many science fiction stories are set in one future or another—earth’s future, the future in space, or the future of some alien world that is part of an interstellar political entity. A story can be set in a future that need never happen. For instance, many stories in the 1950s and 1960s dealt with the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust that arose out of the Cold War. No such conflict, thank heaven, ever happened. And now those “futures” are safely in a permanent limbo. (However, the threat of nuclear holocaust is still with us.) But SF/fantasy is not restricted to the shape of things to come. SF/fantasy stories can be set in the past as well. They could be set in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, or in the remotest prehistory. Or, they could be set in...

**The Present**—Many SF/fantasy stories happen against a present-day backdrop. Something then happens to change the world picture radically—an earth-killer asteroid approaches, a plague is loosed, aliens land, or some invention causes rapid and radical change. Don’t think that all science fiction is set in times to come. The “future” can be here, now.