

Crafting Your Fictional World

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Stories take you to another time, place, and state of mind. They can reveal sprawling metropolises with zooming sky ships on a planet billions of light years away, or a small, cramped room, where a flickering oil lamp sheds a meager yellow light across the parchment of a letter. World-building is how we, as authors, reveal the world our characters experience to our readers.

Why do we focus on world-building?

- *Flavor*

A gritty crime scene, an elegant palace, a high-tech society, a beaten road... Different settings have different flavors, and enhance the reader's experience of your world.

- *Realism*

By setting the rules of the world, such as what technology exists, how magic works, and how much information a character knows, you can enhance the believability of the world, and make it easier for readers to "suspend disbelief" while reading. Even if you don't state the rules explicitly, keeping those rules consistent will help.

- *Conflict Opportunities*

The right setting can create an environment ripe with conflict. Everything from how a society interacts with your main character based on conflicting values, to the weather posing problems for a character trying to make a timely delivery, to the props available to a character in a fight.

A quick note before we get into the details...

- *Avoid world-builder's disease!*
- *Beware the research rabbit hole...*

World-builder's disease is when you spend all your time developing your world without actually writing any of the story.

Similarly, the research rabbit hole is what happens when you go to look up a specific detail in your world and, hours later, you're looking up something equally fascinating but generally unrelated to the specific story you're trying to tell.

(For example, I needed to know whether the characters in my fantasy story could feasibly have access to nitroglycerin. I realized after I finished watching a fascinating YouTube video about how to make an arc welder that I still didn't know if my characters would have the right ingredients to make the necessary explosive.)

It's easy to get lost in the creation of your world. World-building is wonderful for developing the setting and creating potential conflicts for your character but, at some point, you have to start writing if you want to complete a novel, or even a short story.

Unfortunately, there's no hard line for how much world-building is too much. But if you're spending all your time tweaking the world, and you have the main character, their goals, and the conflicts facing them, it may be time to set the brainstorming aside and start writing. Or try outlining the story. You can work with more of the setting details during revisions.

Aspects to Consider

- Geology and Climate
- Resources
- Culture

Knowing a little about each of these aspects can help you to extrapolate and develop your world as you write. There's a ton of detail we could explore about each aspect, but for now, we'll look at a few examples in each.

Depending on the kind of story you're writing, you may focus more on one aspect than another. For example, a survival story may focus heavily on geology and climate. A dystopian story might focus more heavily on culture. A post-apocalyptic story might focus more on technology and resources (or lack thereof).

Geology and Climate

- *Weather*
Temperature, Humidity, Storm

- *Bodies of Water*
Lakes, Seas, Rivers, Springs
- *Landscape*
Deserts, Mountains, Plains, Forests, Swamps
- *Natural Disasters*
Wildfires, Floods, Tornados, Earthquakes, Tsunamis

The geology and climate will affect the day-to-day life of your character, and in some cases, may present opportunities for conflict, especially in survival stories. Being able to sprinkle in a few details about the arid dryness chapping everyone's lips and skin, or the constant dampness that put papers in a perpetual state of semi-sogginess, can help add flavor. If you're trying to add realism to your fantasy story, you might set a scene in a town that developed near a lake, because settlements often start near supplies of water or other crucial resources.

Disasters could create backstory for a region, or be used to develop mythologies for why these disasters occur.

Tip: Not sure how to describe a region?

Look up local blogs, travel blogs, and news reports regarding similar regions.

The geology, weather, and ease of travel will all affect what resources are available and what resources are valued. Which brings us to our next section:

Resources

It's kind of like the fifth-grade social studies books with their illustrations that showed which regions had coal or corn or cattle. Knowing what resources are available to your characters will dictate what kind of things they can do, and knowing what resources are available to the society will determine the level of technology they have, how well they can recover from disease and health issues, what kind of trade they have, and even what their homes and buildings are made from. Additionally, if you're writing fantasy, you might consider whether or not magic is a resource, and how it changes and affects society as well as day-to-day life.

Then there's those things that might want to eat you...

- What kind of creatures have developed?
- Are they creatures we're familiar with? (Dogs, horses, etc....) Or something new?
- Why have these creatures developed?
- What has been domesticated?
- What creatures are used for food, if any?
- Do the creatures have any special abilities that characters need to account for?

If there are dragons... who can fly and breathe fire... a nearby civilization might not build their castles and forts with wood. Maybe they have more air defenses. Maybe they burrow into mountains to protect themselves.

What sort of plants?

- Which ones are cultivated? Which are wild?
- What resources do they provide?
- Are there any resources they could provide but haven't been discovered yet?
- Poisonous plants characters try to avoid?

Consider the story of the time when people thought tomatoes were poisonous, and that belief was blamed on the possible leeching of lead from pewter plates. How might a region that didn't have pewter respond to complaints that they were poisonous from a region where pewter was common?

If all the plants in a region are poisonous, characters aren't going to be picking them wild to eat on the way. They'll be more meticulous in their planning for trips, or take longer to prepare food they've gathered in order to remove the poisons.

Many of the questions you ask about the fauna can be asked about the flora as well. Use what you know about the flora and fauna to add believability to your world.

Tip: If it walks, squawks, and pecks like a chicken, call it a chicken. No need to give it a fancy name.

Resources and Jobs

The jobs available to your characters will be limited by the resources available.

- Mining – Requires something like coal, iron, marble, copper...
- Fishing – Needs a lake or sea where fish are plentiful
- Merchant Caravan – Really helps to have a reliable road or path... And goods to trade
- Farming – Needs fertile ground and the ability to settle in one place
- Trapping – Needs a habitat with animals to trap... and people who want the resulting furs and meat
- Mage – Requires magic and an ability to direct magic in a way that is somehow useful

As an example, are your characters located near a sea? They might have plenty of fish, relatively easy access to salt, and a tendency for seagulls to provide entertainment as they try swiping food from unaware passersby. There might be a larger number of fisherman and canneries preparing fish. Imports of metal for tins. Exports of fish. Problems might arise if a chemical spill poisons the fish or leads to poisoning the people who eat the fish. It could result in a loss of jobs. On a more personal level, maybe one of the characters hates the smell of fish and can't wait to leave the area. Or maybe they enjoy visiting the harbor because the fishy smell reminds them of the fish market back home where they used to buy food for their family. Maybe the local artists use the bones for art, or maybe everyone discards the fish bones because it's so common? If a character has seafood allergies, it could be a major problem in an area where almost every primary dish involves fish. And being close to water... is it a large port city? Or hard to access and secluded? Do the nights get a chill because of winds across a cold sea, or is it warm because of tropical waters?

Unique Resources

Common resources include things like wood, stone, cotton, wool, copper, iron... etc. But are there any unusual resources in your world, or resources that have unusual interactions with part of your world?

For example, that silver kills werewolves, or iron hurts the fae. Or that certain beings can't cross a line of salt. Or maybe there's a magical flower with healing properties, or a mineral that doesn't exist in our world but is a key ingredient to magic.

What special requirements do those materials have? For example, does the iron that hurts fae need to have been manipulated or crafted in some way, or does raw iron cause the same problem?

In my *The Wishing Blade* series, one of the elements I explore is the idea that magic and radioactivity don't mix. (Or they do, but with big explosions). There, a material known as magebane can actively cause discomfort to mages or kill them, depending on how potent it is. From a real-world perspective, their using pitchblende and the substances derived from it—radium and uranium. This idea was largely spawned from discovering Depression era glass for the first time, which glows under UV light (known as the “revealing light” in the series). The plot of the third book largely revolves around the threat of what could happen if magebane gets introduced to particularly powerful magic. I even had fun determining the differences in how the magic reacts differently to radium versus uranium (one deals with critical mass and the other deals with the radiation), but those are details I mostly know for consistency's sake, and don't explicitly state in the series, at least not yet. A resource with an unusual interaction.

Magic systems...

- Hard
 - Follows consistent rules
 - Has limits
 - Has outcomes that can be predicted
- Soft
 - Flexible rules “more like guidelines”
 - Often good for creating problems, but can be unsatisfying when solving them
 - Usually has a bigger sense of wonder and mysticism than hard magic systems

For a good explanation of a hard magic system, I highly recommend looking up Sanderson's Three Laws of Magic.

Sanderson's Laws of Magic:

1. An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic.

2. Limitations are greater than powers.
3. Expand what you already have before you add something new.

Want to read more about Sanderson's Laws of Magic? Start here:

<https://www.brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-first-law/>

<https://www.brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-second-law/>

<https://www.brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-third-law-of-magic/>

Knowing the general geology and climate can help you figure out what resources are available in a region, and thus extrapolate all kinds of possibilities and situations for your characters to encounter while there.

Culture

The customs of a region and even a subregion can add both flavor and realism to a world. Their dances, their way of speaking, their art, the way they avoid a particular subject and obsess over another. Conflicting values, that cause trouble when trying to follow, or values they often speak highly of about but rarely follow in practice.

- What ideals does this culture value?
- Is there any social class structure?
- Are there defined gender roles?
- How do they approach marriages and love?
- What myths do they often refer to?
- Are there any odd rituals they have? How did those come to exist?
- What prejudices do they have?
- How did those prejudices come to be?

When I was writing *The Wind Mage and the Wolf*, one of the things I kept in mind was the myth their culture believes (that mages were hunting them, an immortal wolf pretended to save them by leading them to a city that could protect them from magic, and then turned on them when he found one of their people was a mage. They have conflicting values, highly honoring

the original person who was killed, but mostly ignoring the fact that he was killed because he practiced magic, and yet they are strongly opposed to the use of magic and the presence of the gods, even though they revere the leader who later banished the wolf as if she was a goddess, at least from an outsider perspective. Their history plays a lot into who they are now, even when it, and their customs, are messy.

Religion

The beliefs of a culture can greatly influence what they value (or claim to value), and how they react in conflicting situations.

- What religion do they have, if any?
- Is it spiritual? Are there gods / goddesses / deities?
- Do those beings actually exist?
- If they do exist, how interactive are they?
- How much influence do these beings exert on the world?
- What can hurt these gods? What boosts their power?

Even if the characters don't know if the gods are real, it can help if you, as the author, do. Just be careful to avoid "deus ex machina" where the deity saves the day, because that takes away the satisfaction of seeing the main character succeed. Using greater powers to cause more problems, rather than solve them, typically does better.

As an example of how involved gods can affect a world, consider if there's a deity of agriculture, maybe farming is never an issue—until something comes up against that deity's power. Or maybe there is some sort of deadly being that they shut their doors against at day/night, and so the stories and songs warn of how they should behave, and they're all skittish when a stranger comes to town and ignores what they know to be dangerous.

Talking the talk... (Dialogue)

- How do they speak?
- What idioms and metaphors do they use?
- What phrases do they use that are specific to their world?

- What phrases are unique to them and their experience?
- How formal/informal is their speech?

(Ex. “Nsasrar’s whiskers!” or “What in the Community...?”)

Why does knowing these sorts of things help?

But now that you’re thinking about your world, and thinking of the kinds of questions you can ask yourself, we can move on to adding in the details.

The important thing is that knowing the state of your fictional world allows you to believably reference how characters interact with their surroundings.

Pitfalls

- Avoid info dumps.
- Readers don’t need to know every detail.

Use only details that are relevant both to your story and to your characters.

Enough with building the world...

Let’s add details to your story.

Evoke the senses!

- Touch
- Taste
- Smell
- Sight
- Hearing

Don’t rely on just one sense to reveal your world. Drop hints from all of them. Not all at once, but throughout.

Exercise:

Take a scene from a story you're working on and consider what senses the character might recognize. Make note of something for each of the senses (unless the character has lost that sense). Now try incorporating those sense into your story by adding a detail here and there that evokes these senses.

Is this normal?

You can take this concept of perception further by looking at the amount of words you spend on a particular subject and the attention you give to detail on that subject (or lack thereof).

For things a character doesn't recognize or that seems strange to them, spend more time describing it, and in ways that are unusual to your reader. Focus on what isn't the norm, even if you know what it is.

For example: How might you describe a spoon if you'd never seen one before?

The only thing on the table was a piece of metal slightly longer than her hand. She frowned, picking it up by the slender tail. It resembled a tadpole, if a tadpole was giant and made of stainless steel. She flipped it over. Tiny swirls had been engraved along the flat side. She traced her finger along the convex edge. Smooth, like a polished river stone.

Things that are normal or unimportant to the character, mention briefly for sake of the reader and keep going without lingering. These brief mentions don't evoke the same sense of wonder and awe.

Something that makes a character uneasy or stands out to them... take more time to describe it and linger on it, or maybe have them think back to it later.

Excerpt from *The Trial of Bells and Blood*:

She patted her side, checking that she still had her sword under her cloak, and then she unpinned the cloak, sliding it from beneath her bag. Sure, she'd be cold, but she still had thick, warm sleeves and pants. The stumbling man did not, and he was going to get frostbite if he didn't

cover himself soon...

Unless he was a dragon.

She looked him over again, but he lacked the usual markings a dragon would have. The alternative, that he was a fire mage, seemed even less likely given how he shivered.

“Sir?” She approached, her cloak in hand. “Sir, are you all right?”

Her consideration that he might be a dragon (which is rare) takes longer than her consideration that he might be a fire mage (common), and then she moves on to her next thought/action. For her, the existence of dragons and mages in this world is fairly normal. She doesn't spend a lot of time lingering on the thought.

In the meantime, as a reader, we know from this section that this is a world where characters wield sword, it's currently cold, and dragons and fire mages exist (or are believed to exist).

Contrast her familiarity the event to this character's experience:

Excerpt from *Deceived*:

She guides my sister toward the shallow end [of the pool] where I'm less inclined to go. Suits me. They can enjoy chatting while I enjoy the pleasure of treading water, floating without a care in the world—

Something ripples beneath me.

I frown, twisting to see the source. Thus far, the pool has been serene. The only source of motion comes from us and the water filters on the sides.

But this came from directly below me.

I sink, letting out my breath slowly so I can reach the bottom.

Nothing there. No strange ripple. Just... a feeling something's beneath me, even though there isn't. After a moment of fruitlessly trying to discern what's not really there, my lungs burn. I shoot to the surface and take a gasping breath. Community... I need to work on staying underwater longer. Normally I don't have a problem—I haven't since I stopped taking the daily pill—but something feels wrong.

Goosebumps crest across my skin where it's exposed to air. This pool has always been my second home. But now it's as if the water... as if it's breathing. As if it's restless.

Crazy.

For this character, the idea of powers has been called out as hallucinations and a sign of a deadly plague. So, when she notices the water acting up around her, she lingers a *lot* longer on what's happening, because this definitely isn't normal. (She even outright says it's crazy... though that might not be absolutely necessary).

Additionally, we know from this section that swimming pools are normal, the character has a sister and friends, enjoys swimming (treads water, easily descends to the bottom of the pool, even uses terms like “crests” (water-related) referring to getting goosebumps), uses “Community” as an exclamation, and hasn't been taking a daily pill of some sort.

Using the world-building you've already done, you can add relevant details directly into the narrative.

Exercise:

What common object, place, or event would a character from the story you're working on see as strange? Or, if you want to try an unrelated writing prompt, describe how a person from the future might describe a seeing a baseball field for the first time?

Try writing a couple paragraphs from their point of view. Does it evoke a sense of wonder, confusion, or surprise? What other emotions might something unusual elicit? What details have we now learned about the world?

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