

World Building for Fictional Realities

A fictional world needs to feel **realistic and approachable**, even if it contains science-fiction or fantasy elements. To achieve that, you need to invest time into the world your story is developing within. For fictional realities, that often means handcrafting everything from scratch. Below is a list of tips for the world-building process:

- **Weaving together the plot and the world** – one cannot exist without the other. One way to do so is to “start your story at the point where the rules of the world are broken”: you establish the status quo, and then something happens that breaks it and your character is set on their adventure. Begin your plot where the world starts to show its cracks.
- **Using the *inside-out* technique:** you already have a story in mind and need certain premises to be present. Start your world off with these premises in mind, and then craft the rest while paying attention to how the premises you have already outlined affect the rest of the world. Whatever premises you include, they should feel as though they belong to the world and are not simply tacked onto it.
- **Using the *outside-in* technique:** craft the general understanding of the world, then work out the details, from country to cities to governments to cultures. You may prefer to craft the world first, and then create the characters and stories happening within it.
- **Not planning and discovering the world as you write about it.** Whichever method works best for you and you enjoy the most, go with that! You can mix any amount of different techniques into your craft and process. The drawback of this method is that you may have a lot of revision to do during the editing process as elements may be internally inconsistent as the world changes as you write.
- **Get on with the writing and do not get stuck in the world-building process.** While planning and outlining can help you have a solid foundation for your story, be careful not to get lost in the world-building and put off the actual writing. There is no need to have everything figured out before you write. Setting the most basic elements of the world and then getting down to writing is better than not writing anything, and you will discover which aspects of the world need to be developed and which can be left to the imagination by writing about it.
- **Be as detailed as you want.** You can go as far as creating your own languages, unique species, etc. The important part is for it all to benefit the story at hand. Focus on crafting the details that affect your characters and how they will see and experience their world. Which aspects of this world are crucial to the story?
- While writing, **sprinkle elements of your world in slowly**, the details woven into the story in an enjoyable manner. Overloading your reader with a lot of information at once will be confusing. This can be done through character dialogue, interactions, or actions, among others.
- No world is uniform: **every world has its uniqueness, its contrasts, its paradoxes.** To help you get inspired, you can take from the real world. The history of the world you build can be heavily inspired by historical events in our world, for example.

To help you brainstorm, there is a table on the back with **questions** you may want to address when building your world. Certain categories and questions may overlap, and some may be irrelevant to your story. Answer only those that are necessary, will help you narrow your vision, and build your world!

Geography	Cultures	Society(ies)	History	Technology	Magic
<p><i>Locations and Landscapes</i> Countries, planets, cities... what distinguishes them from one another? How are they unique? What are they called (and are the names convincing within the world you have built)? Where are their borders? What are their natural resources? What's their mood? Oceans? Rivers? Are the cities built on rivers? Mountains? Forests? Deserts? How does the geography affect transportation, trade, clothing...</p> <p><i>Climate</i> Seasons? Cold or hot year round? What kind of fauna and flora, animals, and humans live there? How is the climate habitually? When it's severe?</p> <p><i>Planet(s)</i> Is it a planet like earth? How is it / are they not? Is there an entire solar system matter? More than one moon/sun? What life forms exist there?</p> <p><i>Map</i> Creating a map is not necessary, but fantasy readers like referring to a map whether the characters are going somewhere new. It is also useful for defining distance and space and help you visualize the world as you're building it.</p> <p><i>Story</i> Is the story set within one small dense area, or is this a vast world full of different environments? How much of the world do you need to show to support the story? How does the geography affect the story?</p>	<p><i>Power Structures</i> What kind of government is it (monarchy, democracy, authoritarian...)? Which groups hold systematic power? Who reigns (group or individual)? How do the governments run as a result of power structures, of beliefs, of laws? Who created the laws? How are they enforced? What rights do different people hold? Are the laws considered just or is society frustrated by them? What punishments are exercised if the rules of society are broken?</p> <p><i>Religion</i> Which religion(s) does the culture follow? How does it / do they affect cultural norms and social laws? Which deity(ies) are worshipped? How is worship performed? What morality does a religion preach? Do the gods play an active role in the world? Are they entities people believe in? What is considered sacred? Reverence to symbols? Rituals and Customs? Festivals and celebrations? How many people believe or follow the religion(s)?</p> <p><i>Relationships</i> Between cultures? Conflicts? What do the cultures think of each other? Which norms are hated by another? Which are envied? How do they interact economically, politically? What resources does each culture have? How do they use them?</p> <p><i>And more...</i> Language(s) spoken? Gender norms? Code of conduct? What is considered moral/immoral? National holidays? How are relationships (family, friends, lovers...) defined? Do they choose their partners out of duty or love? How is death handled? Do they celebrate birthdays? How are life changes marked by social customs?</p>	<p><i>Social Classes</i> Are they enforced by the government or did they naturally arise? What are their boundaries? Determined by what? What does each class eat and drink? What professions are available? Which people fulfill which roles? How does each social class appear? What are the popular styles? What can they afford? How do people in different classes vary physically? How do they behave differently? What does each class wear? How do they adorn themselves?</p> <p><i>Art and Entertainment</i> How does culture affect art and entertainment? Who creates it? What type of art is created or valued? What sports are played? Games? Are there professional sportsmen or artists? How do artists live? Fairytales and folklore?</p> <p><i>Alien species</i> Is there more than one species (aliens, hybrids, faeries, vampires, ogres...)? How did they get to be a part of this world? How are they received in society? How ethnically and culturally diverse are they within their own species? Did they evolve or migrate from somewhere? Where do their powers come from if they have any, and which ones are they? Who or what do they worship? What languages do they speak? Do they have specific cultures and customs? Were they discovered? Are they friendly or antagonistic? Do they have specific goals/motivations? How does their presence affect the society? What do they eat? Weaknesses/strengths? How do they communicate? Does the public know of their existence? How long has their presence been known for?</p>	<p>How does it affect your story's plot? What kind of traumatic events (war, famine, plagues...) occurred and how did they impact cultures and people? Have they specifically struck your character's people? Did it affect populations, laws, norms, beliefs? Natural disasters? How changed the landscape? Are any nations still at war? Civil wars? Histories of the different cultures? How did the countries/settlements arrive at the point they are currently? Recent historical event of note? Religious and political events that are impactful to the plot? If you're dealing with a futuristic version of our reality, what happened between now and then? How did it develop? Historical anecdotes, quirks, powerful people making mistakes (adding imperfections to the history may help make it more realistic)? How do different groups and cultures interpret and understand the history of the world?</p> <p><i>Power structures</i> Has the country or religion recently come under new leadership or lived through a power shift? What tension does that create (or not)? How has the power shifts affected culture's laws and norms? Are people accepting or rebelling against the change? Who were the major rulers? What key events took place during their reign? How did reigns change the government?</p>	<p>Does it follow an archetype of fantasy tech (cyberpunk, steampunk, etc.)? Is the system based off ancient civilizations' technology? How so? Is it rooted in the modern world's technology? What technologies do people use to communicate? What technologies do people use to travel? What powers technology? What technologies have been developed solely for entertainment? What technologies have been developed to fulfill people's everyday needs? What is weapons technology like? Who can afford technology? How does technology affect education? How has it affected and changed society? What technologies does the government utilize to control the population? What are some up-and-coming technologies?</p> <p><i>"Soft" Sci-Fi (rules of reality unbroken)</i> Do the laws of physics as we know them still apply? How has our modern technology evolved? How has AI developed? Are robots self-aware?</p> <p><i>"Hard" Sci-Fi (rules of reality may be broken)</i> How can the laws of physics as we know them be broken? To which extent can they be broken? Is technology used almost indistinguishably from magic? Is there a consistent system within which laws of physics are broken? Is time travel possible? What are its rules?</p> <p><i>Space Exploration</i> Is there space exploration? Is this new, or have multiple worlds been aware of each other and living as a large community? What is the system to travel between worlds? How is the language barrier solved? Who regulates space travel? Can anyone space travel or is it reserved for specific individuals? Purpose of space exploration and travel?</p>	<p>What are its boundaries? Who receives magic? How do these powers manifest themselves? Is magic wild or can it be controlled? Can magic be learned or are people simply born with it? Where does magic come from? Are items such as wands or staffs needed to use magic? Is magic practiced or shunned by religious leaders? Do any of the social classes fear or ban magic? Is there good and evil magic? Can magic be defeated or destroyed? Does magic affect social standing? How does magic affect society? What are the consequences of possessing magic (both on the user's body and how they relate to society)? How does the magic system operate? Who can use it? Where does it come from? Are some individuals better at magic than others? Can you hone your magic and become stronger? Are there rules? What happens when rules are broken? Exceptions to the rules? How are they possible? How are magic users grouped or perceived?</p> <p><i>Defining a "spectrum"</i> Is magic a heavily rule-based system (reader can build an understanding of the system and more or less be able to predict what characters can/cannot do)? Is it an unexplainable phenomenon (reader trusts the writer that such a magic phenomenon is possible within the world)?</p>