

World Builder

This reusable tool is designed to help you build a solid world when plotting. It can be used for fantasy and science fiction novels, but it can also be used for contemporary or other genres and niches to ensure the world you create—whether it's a far-off alien planet or a small town—is richly detailed and makes sense.

There are twenty common aspects to consider when world-building. You might not end up using most of the details you create, but if you know your world, you will have an easier time plotting what happens within it.

1. Consistency

This is the most important part of any world-building. Whatever you establish needs to make sense and remain unchanged. If someone is an exception to your world's rules, you need to have a solid explanation for why they can fly when everyone else is walking, for example. One way to ensure consistency is to lay out the details of your world before you start writing. Create a story bible, or something similar, to keep track of details.

2. The World

What kind of world are you building? Is this an alien planet, a historical period with magic, a dystopian future, or a small town, for example? Having a clear idea of what you're trying to build will help with the planning. Know the overview of what you're building so you can focus on the smaller details with the builder.

Also make sure it makes sense with what you're planning to write. It would be strange to build an alien world when you're going to write small-town westerns—unless you're writing about humans colonizing the universe and having an Old West planet, where that kind of story would fit. If you're going that route, ask yourself if there's a good reason to create a new world for this? Are you trying to get into a new niche, so you're finding a way to integrate the stories you want to tell with a marketable genre? If so, bravo. If you're doing it just to experiment and do something different, is it wise to be the one who tries to break the mold?

3. Inspiration

Is your world inspired by something else? Are you building a fantasy world with steam technology and borrowing elements of actual steam machinery and development from the past? If you are using elements of real historical periods or events, it might make your plotting easier, but it certainly isn't required, and it might not make sense. Your steampunk dirigible racing adventure story probably wouldn't work with a backdrop of an ancient Roman-style society.

If you are using a real event or period, you will need to research it extensively. You might find basing it too closely on existing history will constrain your creativity, and it will lead to a lot more

research. That's one of the fun reasons to build your own world—anything you want can happen, and you don't have to research to the nth degree, as long as everything is consistent.

4. Geography

What are the physical characteristics of your world? Is it the third planet from a brown dwarf star, or is it a small mountain community full of gay cowboys? Know where it's located, and also know what resources are available to your characters. Is there a body of water? Are there mountains? Do you have deserts and arctic tundras? Is it covered with fertile farmland, or do crops have trouble growing? What makes sense with your plot? It's cool to have a volcano in the heart of a small town, but does it make sense, and will you be utilizing that feature in one of your stories? Don't make your world unnecessarily complicated, or you'll create more work for yourself and your readers as they try to keep track.

5. Government

How is your world ruled? Do you have multiple types of government? If you have colonies or countries, how are they ruled, and do they report to a central governing body? It's important to decide what kind of rulers your world has. If you are basing them off a real time period or people, do you intend to keep the same terms, or will you create new ones for your people's roles? Is the system efficient, or is it rife with corruption? How will it impact your characters and events in your story/stories?

Ensure you have a system that makes sense. It wouldn't be plausible to say you have an emperor who rules with an iron-fist and then also create a group of senators who can overrule the emperor. The exception is if that element is going to play a part in your conflict. If you're setting it up so the senators are going to overthrow the emperor, that works. You want any conflicting details to be part of a plot and not realize three books into your series that you should have gone a different direction.

6. War and Peace

Is your world at war? If so, how does that affect the characters and your world-building? A world at war is going to have ruins and refugees whereas one at peace, especially a long-standing peace, will likely have improved, clean conditions for everyone (unless the government is oppressing the people). What is the general attitude toward war? Are people nationalistic, or do they want the war to end?

Another thing to consider in this category is weapons. Do the people have them and carry them? Are they forbidden by the government? What kind of weapons do they have and use, both in every day and in war, if relevant?

7. Finances

How does the money system work for your world? Do you plan to create a new currency system? This relates to society, because it's important to decide how finances influence both your characters and the world around them. If everyone is struggling, then money becomes a much bigger focus for desperate people than it would for a society whose needs are met (think Hunger Games vs. Star Trek). Will you have bustling financial centers, or is everything calculated by pale people with abacuses who don't get out much? Are there lenders, banks, and money houses? What happens to someone who borrows and can't pay? Do you have debtors' prisons? Is there a dowry required to make a marriage? What kind of jobs are there? Is everyone working in manual labor under an oppressive government, or are there varieties of jobs like in our society?

8. Education

How are the people educated? Is public school free and mandatory? Do parents have to pay? Do they have advanced learning, like universities, and if so, is that open to everyone, or just the elite? Are there apprenticeships instead? Is there any class of person, like gender or race, who can't work, or can't get educated to hold a certain type of job? Are the masses well educated or just barely enough to train them to do a job but not teach them how to think and protest? Does everyone read and write?

9. Technology

How is their technology? Are they still using sticks and stones, or are they flying around in spaceships? You need to decide the level of technology that makes sense with your plot, and with the circumstances of your core group. If you're writing a dystopian series, will your poor populace have conveniences like smartphones? Also consider if technology would be filtered or suppressed among a subset of the population, particularly with a totalitarian government in power.

Don't overlook the small details of technology either. How do they brew their tea? Do they have running water? Indoor plumbing? Are there televisions or something similar? How do they communicate across distances?

10. Religion and Ceremonies

Most worlds have some variation of religion. You can eschew it entirely, or you can choose to integrate it into the plot, but if you're going to reinvent the religious wheel, you'll need to determine the structure. Do you have one god or many? Are they petty gods like the Olympians, or are they the aloof type? Are they real and integrated into society, or are they just a best guess by a populace who made it up to have answers? How much of your population believes in or is influenced by the religion? Is it used to control and oppress people, or do they find hope from it? How pervasive is it in society and the ruling class? Are there special ceremonies associated with the religion, like mass or pagan rituals? Are there orders of religious people? What kind of influence does the religion wield? For example, the Catholic church dominated the Middle Ages,

and the system was rife with corruption, so one could argue it had a negative impact on the lives of everyone under its thumb.

Holidays would also likely fall under this category. If you have holidays in your story, are they religion-inspired, or did they come about because of a historical event, etc.?

11. Medicine

What kinds of medicine are available? Are they using herbs, or do they have advanced medicine? Is that medicine actually helpful, or do the people fear it for some reason? Is it greed-driven, or is it populated with people and companies who really want to help? Are they required to help everyone who is ill, or can they refuse people, who might then die on the street? Can medical care cost enough to bankrupt someone? If someone incurs medical debt, can they work it off, or do they go to debtor's prison? What kind of ailments will your people experience? Is their biology different enough from humans that you'll have to create physiology for them? Can their technology or medicine treat humans, if that's relevant to your plot?

12. Society

How is your society structured? Do you have the elites at the top of the food chain, and the rest of the people are commoners? Is there a sharp disparity between classes, or is your society all one class (either doing well like in a utopia, or all suffering like a dystopia)? How does one's status affect their opportunities? Are disabled people part of society? If so, are they integrated and accepted, or are they pushed to the fringes? How is someone who's different in any facet treated? Are they tolerated or ostracized? It's likely your characters will have something about them that's different from the average person, so how does that influence their existence?

Other things that fall under society include how one dresses. Is that influenced by class? Do women and men wear makeup? Is there jewelry or some kind of decoration? Do married couples have a symbol, like a wedding ring, to mark them as married? Is a certain color forbidden (purple used to be reserved only for royalty), or are types of garments forbidden? Are there items reserved just for ceremonies or special occasions, like wedding dresses or robes? How is hair worn? Is a certain length associated with a particular gender? Is it taboo to wear long hair when you're a man, for example?

This is the society your characters will move around in daily, so you really need to nail these details.

13. Etiquette

This is related to society, but different enough to have its own consideration. How do your people interact? What is a polite greeting? What is impolite? What are the consequences for someone who breaks the rules of etiquette? Shunning, a reminder, or being imprisoned? Do the

consequences vary depending on whom is affected? For example, if a commoner touches a royal, is the consequence harsher than if they break rules of etiquette with another of equal status?

14. Romance and Relationships

This is related to etiquette. How does one declare interest in a partner? Are there stifling social rules like you'd find in the Regency era, or is everyone free to interact with whomever they choose? Do women have agency, or is a male relative's permission required for anything from dating to marriage? Do men have restrictions on them or their behavior? Are chaperones required for dating? Are there lavish parties that allow people to mingle, or do they meet while protesting the horrible conditions of their society? Is premarital sex okay, or will that get one shunned? What about more informal ways of interacting? Are PDAs acceptable? Can a woman be alone with a man? Are men perhaps disenfranchised instead of women in your world? Are same-sex relationships acceptable? Are triads or more okay? How uptight is your world about differences?

Love and romance will feel the same regardless of what genre or subgenre you're writing, but the rules and the design of that romance will vary depending on the world you create. It will be much easier for a rancher to develop a romance with his housekeeper than it would for a prince to fall for a commoner if they're in a world with formal manners and limited opportunities for interaction, for example.

15. Sex

Related to love and romance, but it usually has its own rules. If you're writing a contemporary novel, you can skip this step for world-building.

First, determine the mechanics of the act. Are your characters different from humans? Do they have different physical ways of interacting, or differences in anatomy? If they're going to interact with a human, how will those differences work? Science fiction romance readers like to see unusual traits in their aliens, particularly the penises, so give some thought to how you can make that exotic and unique without being off-putting while maintaining compatibility with humans (if relevant to your plot).

Also under this category: What about birth control? How do they prevent pregnancy? Do they have advanced technology, like a brain chip to prevent conception, or do they use chemical birth control? Does the society mandate a certain number of children, or is there a limit one couple is allowed to have? Must children be conceived in an official union? If someone is conceived outside of marriage, how does that affect their life and status? If your population is poor and oppressed, they might not have any form they can afford, so you're limited to pull-and-pray. Pregnancy can become a much bigger focus/conflict in a situation like that as well.

16. Reproduction and Birth

This is more relevant to building a non-human, non-contemporary world. If there is a difference in how babies are conceived and grown, you'll want to figure that out. If there's something unique about your world, like children are typically born in pairs, why is that? You'll want to have a way to explain it to readers without a big info dump. How does birth differ? This can encompass the small details, like whether the woman births alone or with friends or a midwife, or bigger issues, like if your males can conceive, how will they give birth?

17. Family Structure

Similar to society's structure, but more intimate. How do families live and work together? Is it the "conventional" mother and father, or are there triads and more raising children? Are children a visible part of society, or are they hidden away or sent to boarding schools? Are they raised at the parents' discretion, or is the government a nanny state that controls all aspects of the upbringing? Do they stay with their families, or are they separated? For example, boys in Sparta were sent to train at age eight, and a lot of babies were stolen from their unwed mothers in the 1950-90s in Ireland. Society is inevitably an influence on the family. Family is also what you make of it, so how does it look in your world?

18. Food

What do your people eat? Since it's so commonplace, it's easy to overlook, but chances are good your characters will eat at least once or twice in a book. Do they have common foods, like pigs and cows, perhaps just with different names to sound alien? Is their society vegetarian? Does food play any other role, like in courtship or as a sign of welcome? Does your FMC present a type of food to indicate her interest in your MMC? Food is an integral part of world-building. An army marches on its stomach, and a world functions on theirs.

19. Drinks and Other Substances

Along the same vein, do they have alcohol or other mind-altering substances? Is it acceptable to indulge, or are such things illegal? Are drugs a part of the society? Recall soma was used to drug the populace in "Brave New World." Is there something like that in your story? Are people seeking an escape from the horrible conditions? Is there a drug or potion they can take to help them find or bond with a mate? Not all drugs or mind-altering substances have to be treated negatively, but how you use them should be relevant to the plot and your characters, and they should make sense in the world. If you have a lot of poor, desperate people, they're more likely to be brewing moonshine than all using some kind of designer drug.

20. Dwellings

What kind of homes do your characters have? It likely varies depending on wealth and the environment. For example, Lando lived in a cloud city in "The Empire Strikes Back," while Ruby Dixon's barbarian aliens live in caves. You should have some idea where your characters sleep at

night, and how that fits into the world. Government buildings, churches, and businesses will also likely be different from the characters' home.