

FOREWORD

WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK DIFFERENT?



World building is a pivotal aspect of storytelling, but it's filled with pitfalls. One of the most serious, one that can end the creative journey, is "world builder's disease." This insidious condition manifests when the creator becomes so engrossed in crafting their fictional realm that they neglect the actual writing of their story. This is a trap. An endless labyrinth of ideas and intricate details. And a human who catches this disease simply...never writes.

Their story remains untold. Their campaign remains unrun. Their whole creative journey stops.

To combat this disease, it might be tempting to jump straight into the story and ignore the world completely. Just dive in and sort out the mess later. This extreme leads to conflicting canon, cultures that no longer adhere to their own mythic logic, and fantasy elements that throw the reader out of the story rather than drawing them into the world.

What the world builder needs is the Goldilocks zone. Enough world building to get going with the story, enough freedom to build more world as needed, and a good way to track existing canon.

That's the approach I advocate for in this book. Just-In-Time-Worldbuilding is an iterative process of world building that integrates with the writing process (or the campaign building process, if you're a game master). Using this method, the world builder (let's call them you from here onward) can create all the elements required for their story, without getting trapped in too much.

You will track your world on worksheets that you can refer to whenever you add new lore to make sure everything still works together, that you haven't broken your canon. But you can start writing as soon as you've identified the core of your story. As your tale unfolds, the setting evolves organically, gaining depth through additional world building created by the story.

This book serves as a guide throughout the creative journey. It helps you lay the groundwork and incrementally create what is required, chapter by chapter in your story, or campaign session by campaign session in your game. With each step, the world gains richness, vibrancy, and a sense of authenticity.



How To Use This Book

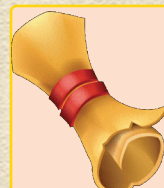
In each section, there is a theory component where I explain the concepts that are important for this section, an exercise with questions and thoughts for you to mull over, and a worksheet or template where you can fill in the basics of your world.

The theory is in a box with a brown border, just like this one.

Exercises will be in green boxes with a green border. Their heading will include a number in a bright green box, and their title in a brown box. Exercises are numbered 1 through 72 (that being the last exercise in the book).

Worksheets are in blue boxes and numbered per chapter, e.g. Worksheet 1A is the first worksheet in Chapter One and so on.

Additional important boxes are marked as follows:



Tips, tricks, definitions, and important things to remember will be in an amber box.



Caveats, warnings, exceptions, and other things to pay attention to will be in a red box.



Deep Dive Examples, both from real-world history and published fantasy.

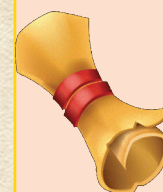


A potion bottle will mark ideas, world building prompts, and questions to reflect on.

Don't get hung up on filling in every worksheet in full. Some worksheets won't apply to your world—leave them out. For some worksheets, you only need a little bit of content right now. If you only write a single sentence in a section, that's all you need for right now.

As your story progresses, more of the setting will emerge, and then you simply come back to those worksheets and update them, just in time to use in the tale.

Remember, build what you need when you need it!



Follow this link: <https://tinyurl.com/wb1sheets>, to download a PDF of just the worksheets, so you don't have to write in your book or try to photocopy the pages. Should the download code not automatically populate, it is WBVOL1 and the full URL is <https://www.mariemullany.com/wbdownloads?accessCode=WBVOL1>. You can also scan the QR code.



Every chapter ends with a section called YouTube Resources. This contains a link to a playlist of videos curated from my channel that contribute to the content discussed in the chapter. The link is provided in two forms:

1. A tiny URL for ease of typing.
2. A QR code for even easier ease-of-use.



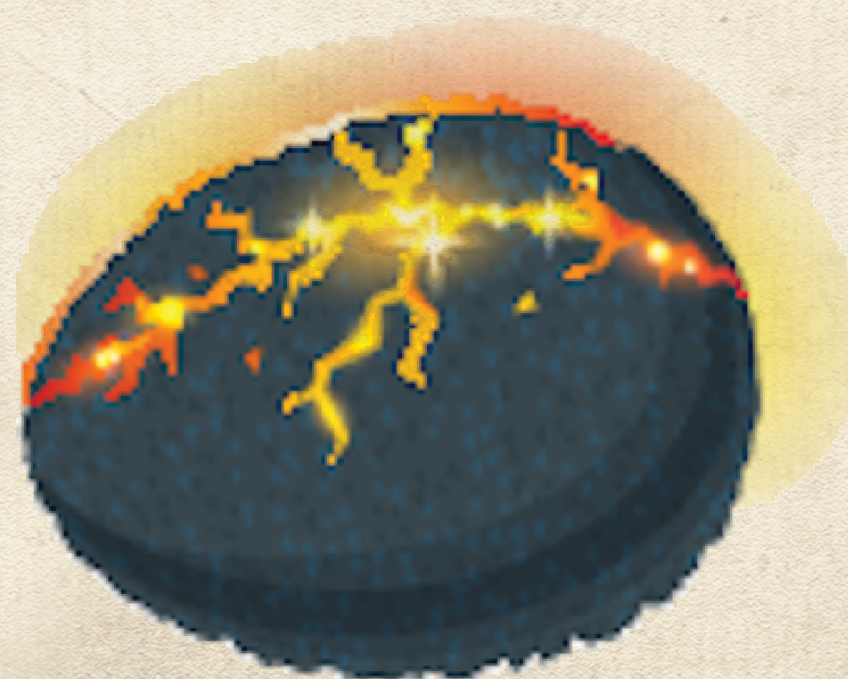
WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is written for fantasy authors and game masters alike. Though I mostly refer to the story as the thing you're writing, if you're a game master, where you see story or writing, read "running the campaign".

For game masters, there is one more aspect to consider. Your world might come with pre-packaged magic and other fantasy elements through the system you're using. For example, if you're running DnD in a homebrew world, your magic system is the DnD system. In that case, don't replicate the system details in the worksheets, only note down your house rule changes, and instead, focus on the culture and environment that makes your implementation of the system unique.

Most of the worksheets in this book are not about system elements; instead, they focus on how those fantasy elements impact your world, your story, and your audience.

Ready? Got your pencil? Alright. Let's dive in.





CHAPTER ONE

FIND YOUR NORTH STAR

To make this process work, you need a north star to steer your creative ship by. This provides a critical reference point against which to measure everything else. Before you add a piece of magic or a strange monster to your setting, you measure it against your north star and determine if it truly fits your world.

There are five steps to defining your north star, and we'll unpack them all in this chapter. I like to start by thinking about who I'm writing the story for (or running the campaign for), because there are some audiences that some stories are really not meant for. I have a group of humans I run a game for every Tuesday, and I know there are some campaigns they'll just never enjoy, for example. However, you might like to start with the story's needs (section 2) and then think about who it's for. It's perfectly okay to start with Understanding Your Story's Needs and then come back to Understand Your Audience.

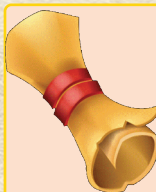


UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

No story is aimed at everyone. This book, for example, is aimed at people who want to be authors of fantasy novels or game masters who want to build homebrew worlds. It's not aimed at, say, thriller writers, and doesn't delve into the theory of writing a thriller.

In order to write your book for maximum impact on the reader, you have to know who you're writing for. It's perfectly okay to write for people like you and just fill in the answer to this question as "people like me". Understanding your audience simply allows you to consider what they would like and why they would engage with your setting.

By understanding your audience, you can ensure that you don't over- or under-build your world, that you pace your story correctly and that your themes strike the right note. You don't have to invest in massive research here; simple answers are fine, as long as they help you understand who you're creating this world for.



For game masters, when you're creating your campaign, consider your potential or and actual players as your audience. If they love going deep into a world and role playing all manner of non-combat encounters, you need deep world building, not broad. If they're more of the murder-hobo type (homeless monster killers), then focus your attention more on the creation of opponents rather than the depth of culture.

And with that, here is our very first exercise:

Consider the following questions about the potential audience for your book.

- *Other Media*: What fantasy books does your audience read? What TV series do they enjoy? What movies do they watch?
- *Depth of World*: How deep does your audience want to plunge into the world? Do they want to go down to the detailed customs of a culture and the effect of languages ala Tolkien? Or do they prefer to skim over the top like a fairytale? Or somewhere in between?
- *Pace of Story*: Does your audience prefer the galloping pace of a mystery or the slower burn of an epic fantasy?
- *Danger to Protagonist*: Does your audience prefer the gentler challenges of a cozy book, or do they want to turn each page in fear of the protagonist dying? Or somewhere in between?
- *Thematic Impact*: Themes are the philosophical stakes of your story. This is when your protagonist faces questions like: Do the ends justify the means? Or the theme could address statements like: Love conquers all, proving the statement true or false. Themes are what readers remember most about a story—it's what they walk away with. But for some audiences, there are themes that hit harder than others. For example, many fantasy audiences are quite fine with violence as a general principle, even for the protagonist to use violence, but they would be far less accepting of following the adventures of a protagonist who is a sexual predator.

Or consider a magic system that uses the consumption of an addictive substance as part of using the magic. This kind of setting could unintentionally introduce substance abuse as a theme. It might even glorify substance abuse, quite by accident, through tying great power to the use of this magical drug. Since addiction is a genuine problem in our world, introducing such a theme in your setting and then not addressing it might cause backlash from your audience.

Of course, for some audiences, some themes hit harder than others. A historical fiction audience is probably less bothered by casual misogyny than a general fantasy audience, since the historical fiction audience regards misogyny as part and parcel of history. But for a secondary secondary-world fantasy audience (an audience who expects a completely made-up fantasy world), misogyny is not just par for the course.

So, for your audience, consider: Are there any themes that hit harder? Why does your audience care more about these themes? Understanding the why will allow you to use the theme in a way that resonates with your audience, rather than repulsing them.



I believe that you absolutely should introduce themes of great weight, like substance abuse and so on. Sometimes, the themes with the most baggage hit the hardest. So don't be afraid of these themes, just be aware of what you're doing with them and make sure your inclusion is deliberate.

Include these themes *by design*, not by accident.

An example to demonstrate feels appropriate: If I'm writing a Bronze Age-inspired story, especially one rooted in Levantine Bronze Age cultures, I might very well include the concept of "women belong to men," because it reflects the time period and the societies I'm drawing inspiration from.

But I also know that for some of my audience, this is a heavy theme. That doesn't mean I avoid it. It means I include that aspect of historical culture on purpose, fully aware of its potential impact.

This question is about being aware of themes that can have a high impact on your audience, not about avoiding them.

1. Media Your Audience Enjoys:

2. Story Elements

Element	Audience Preference
Pacing: on a scale of 1 (slow) to 10 (fast)	
Danger: on a scale of 1 (cozy) to 10 (George. R.R. Martin)	
World Depth: on a scale of 1 (fairy tale) to 10 (Tolkien)	

3. High Impact Themes

Theme	Why does this theme hit hard?



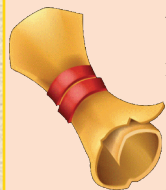
A simple cheat: consider what your answer to these questions would be and write for an audience based on your own preferences.



UNDERSTAND YOUR STORY'S NEEDS

Before you sketch the first mountain range or name the ancient gods, stop and consider the core needs of your story. What is the central conflict? Who are its heroes and villains? What challenges will they face? Your world should be a crucible for your story, providing opportunities for conflict, growth, and resolution.

If you're a game master, what is the flavor of the plots you want to run? Are they political in nature? Do you plan to run fetch quests? What kind of antagonists will your players face? Do you have any big, bad evil guys planned?



What is conflict in a story? Conflict doesn't mean action, or combat or anything like that. Conflict is simply what your protagonist (main character or player characters) wants and what is the force stopping them.

In a survival story, your main character might be trapped on a desert island and need to build a raft. The conflict is surviving nature. In a political fantasy, your main character might want to become king, but he has two older brothers. The conflict is getting the two older brothers out of the line of succession.

2

DEFINE YOUR STORY'S CORE

EXERCISE

- *Define a touchstone:* Come up with a simple one-line description for your story. Consider the following examples: *The Final Empire* (Mistborn book 1) by Brandon Sanderson: A cross between *My Fair Lady* and a Bank Heist". Or *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin: A zombie apocalypse against the backdrop of the War of the Roses. Or *Sangwheel Chronicles* by Marie M. Mullany: A medieval James Bond redemption tale.
- *Identify the main conflict in your story:* What is the central issue that will drive your narrative? It could be a personal vendetta, a quest for power, a journey of discovery, or surviving against all odds. At a very high level, Define define what is going to go wrong for the protagonists at a very high level, and what conflict they will need to overcome. For our examples above:
- *Protagonists and antagonists:* Characters are the heart of your story. Who are the villains, with their nefarious plans and dark motivations? Who are the heroes, with their noble goals and personal quirks? Make a list of these characters and jot down a line about their core motivations and roles in the story. This list will absolutely expand and contract as you tell the story, so don't think of it as carved in stone.



Remember, this is your starting point, not the endgame. The goal isn't to have a fully fleshed-out plan but to lay a firm foundation that you can build upon. The clarity you gain here will guide every decision you make henceforth, ensuring every element of your world is there for a reason, contributing to the story you want to tell.



- *The Final Empire:* Rebellion against a god-like tyrant. The protagonists must infiltrate, manipulate, and ultimately overthrow an oppressive regime (The Lord Ruler), while dealing with personal trauma, trust issues, and a society built on rigid class hierarchies. It's a heist with world-shaking stakes.

- *A Song of Ice and Fire:* Political power struggles distract humanity from an existential threat.

Noble houses fight for the Iron Throne, even as an ancient supernatural force (the White Walkers in the show, or Others in the book) begins a deadly march south. It's a clash between human ambition and cosmic horror.

- *Sangwheel Chronicles:* Saving the world involves changing it, and change is hard. A forbidden magic threatens to break the seal on a world-ending entity, and rival factions clash over whether to preserve the crumbling protection or unleash a revolutionary ritual that will alter the fabric of the Empire. The protagonists must navigate betrayal, civil war, and theological upheaval as they fight to save the world—without agreeing on what that salvation should look like.

1B

STORY CORE

WORKSHEET

1. Touchestone

2. Conflict

3. Characters

Role	Name	Character Motivation	Brief Description



INITIAL WORLD CONCEPTUALIZATION

It's not just the characters that contribute, but also the world. A story's setting creates tone, challenges and context for everything the characters do. In this section, we're trying to capture the essence of your world. Think of it as creating the vibes of your world before diving into the details of magic, culture, and geography.

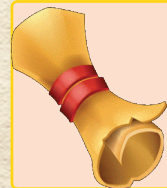
By getting your vibes set up front, you ensure that all the world-building elements you add later on will resonate with a consistent frequency and thus will never feel out of place. In other words, you'll be able to vibe-check later. (Heh. See what I did there? Hur-hur)

3

DEFINE YOUR WORLD IN BROAD STROKES

EXERCISE

- ▶ *Jot down the first impressions of your setting's environment:* Is it a verdant land teeming with life or a stark landscape where survival is a daily struggle? Think about the climate, geography, and the emotional tone they set.
- ▶ *Describe the general level of technology and magic:* Are you envisioning a steampunk world clanking with gears and coal-fired engines, a high fantasy realm woven with enchantments and spells, or a post-apocalyptic wasteland with scattered, forgotten tech? Define the role of technology and/or magic: is it a rare art or a common convenience?
- ▶ *Consider the dominant cultures and their interrelations:* How do the cultures within your world interact? Are they in a state of peace, tense coexistence, or open conflict? Reflect on the cultural exchanges, trade relationships, and potential prejudices that could shape interactions.



This conceptualization is not meant to box you in but to provide a frame for your world's grand picture. As you develop your story, this framework will guide your hand, ensuring that every additional detail you paint onto the canvas serves the greater vision you have set for your world.



1C

THE BIG PICTURE

WORKSHEET

1. *Environment:* Detail the broad environmental aspects of your world. Describe the landscapes, predominant climate patterns, and the general 'feel' of your world.

2. *Magic/Technology:* Note the overall prevalence of magic or technology. Describe its influence on society, daily living, and the conflicts within your world. Is it accessible to all or guarded by the few? (There will be more on this later, so don't worry if you do not know what to fill in here now).

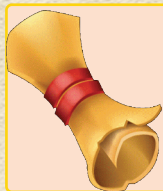
3. *Cultures:* List the prominent cultures, their defining traits, and how they fit into the world at large. Remember that while you might note defining characteristics here, these are *very* broad generalizations, and we'll be defining cultures in much more detail later.

PLOT BEATS

This book isn't meant to be a full breakdown of creating a plot, but I feel that having at least an understanding of the story you want to tell helps create a world that better supports that story. In this section, we'll go through my adaptation of Dan Harmon's story circles at a top level and how I use it to define character arcs and plot beats.

For game masters, the character arc section might be something you leave out, or you could use it for major NPCs, especially villains. That being said, understanding plot beats can help enormously in creating the framework of a campaign. It does for me anyway.

Before we delve into the meat of creating a plot, just a quick explanation of exploratory writers versus planning writers and how to use this section to work with your writing style.



- *Exploratory writers* (or "pantsers") discover their story as they're writing it. As the scenes appear in their head, they write them and string the story together as they're writing.
- *Planning writers* (or "plotters") plan the entire story upfront and then write according to plan.

There is no right or wrong way to do this—there is only what is right or wrong *for you*. Your creative process needs to work for you. Depending on that process, the way this section is used is somewhat different.

If you're very far on the plotting spectrum (a heavy planner), you'll use this section upfront and will probably plan even more than I have here.

If you're very far on the exploratory spectrum (a heavy pantser), you'll use this section after your story is completed to help you edit the scenes into a coherent tale.

If you're like me and somewhere in between these two extremes, you'll use some of this section to get your ideas refined, then you'll write for a while discovering the nature of your characters, then you'll come back to this section and update it.

Do whatever makes sense for your process. (If you're a pantsing GM, I'm pretty sure you skip this section, but I've never met a GM who plans absolutely nothing for a given campaign. Not saying they don't exist, just I haven't met them).

The way I plan a story is to define the tent poles that support the rest of my tale, so let's talk about tent poles.

PLOT TENT POLES



This is the high-level structure of your story. Think of it as the scaffolding that supports your world and characters. I break it into three broad phases, loosely based on a three-act structure, and include nine key tent poles, adapted from the "Save the Cat" plot structure. Let's go through these tent poles using *Star Wars: A New Hope* as an example.



Phase 1: Introduction (Act 1)

1. *The World in a Steady State*: What does the world look like before the story begins? The galaxy is ruled by a Sith Emperor. There is a rebellion against the emperor, and the rebels are in dire straits, but they have one card left to play: they have the plans of the Death Star. Luke is a farm boy on Tatooine and longs to be a pilot. As the main character, the tent poles would focus on Luke, but for the sake of completeness, I include the two big supporting characters, Han and Leia. Before the story kicks off, Han is a smuggler and Leia is a Rebellion leader.

2. *Catalyst for Action*: What disrupts that world? This is often called the inciting incident. In *Star Wars*, this is when Luke gets R2D2 and plays the message of Leia asking Obi-Wan for help.

3. *Point of No Return*: What commits the protagonist to the journey ahead? The death of Luke's aunt and uncle pushes him over the point of no return. For Han, Jabba the Hutt and his decision to end the smuggler for defaulting on his debt is the point of no return. Leia is already committed.

Phase 2: Learning (Act 2)

4. *Reacting*: The protagonist responds to events; as the world acts, they react. This covers the early part of the second act, where Luke is being carried by the momentum of others' actions. He follows Obi-Wan's lead, enters the Mos Eisley Cantina, and joins up with Han and Chewie. He's not driving the plot yet—he's learning, watching, and responding to the crisis around him.

Han is also reacting—he only agrees to help because he wants the money. He's skeptical and keeps his distance emotionally.

Leia, meanwhile, is captured. She also reacts to her circumstances, resisting interrogation and hiding the Rebel Base's location.

5. *Midpoint Climax*: Raise the stakes. Introduce urgency, risk, or reversal. This is the revelation that the Death Star can destroy planets. It's epitomized in two outstanding pieces of dialogue: "That's what I'm trying to tell you kid. Alderaan ain't there." And "That's no moon. It's a space station." This is when Luke realizes he has to act, and he pulls Han with him and they storm the prison complex to rescue Leia.

6. *Acting*: The protagonist acts with intention based on lessons learned. Luke, Han, and Leia escape the Death Star with the plans and make it to the rebel base, leading to the climax phase.

Phase 3: Climax (Act 3)

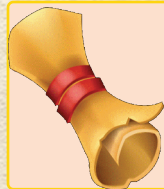
7. *False Overcome*: A first, failed attempt to solve the core problem. This is when everyone is trying to use technology to hit the vulnerable point of the Death Star during the initial trench run.

8. *All Hope Is Lost*: The protagonist's darkest hour. Many of the squadron around Luke have been taken out. He fires his missiles, but misses. Then Darth Vader himself is on Luke's tail.

9. *Turning Point*: A moment of clarity or resolve leading to final transformation. Han Solo rescues Luke from Vader, giving him a clear run. In that moment, Luke hears Obi-Wan's words: "Use the Force Luke". Instead of using technology to overcome the final obstacle, he puts his faith in the Force.



This is of course a very high level description of the plot, but it's enough to at least give you a north star to aim for. And enough to start writing if you're not a very heavy plotter. In fact, I often start writing once I have my phase 1 tent poles and at least a rough idea of what my climax will look like. When I reach the end of phase one, I'll stop to take stock, read what I've written and then plan phase two and three properly.



If you're a GM, don't try to plot your players' action. That leads to too much railroading (a little bit of a railroad is fine, too much and you remove your players' agency). Instead, plan how the plot would unfold without player involvement. I usually plot my campaigns from the villains' side and then leave places where the players can intercept and upend the plot..

However, the tent poles are only one half of the equation in writing a story. The second half is character arcs and the emotional or philosophical journey your characters take. And this is where Dan Harmon's story circle really shines.



CHARACTER ARCS

First, let's define the story circle. This is an eight-step model that is focused on the character's internal transformation due to the events of the story. Here are the eight steps:

1. *You*: Who is the character at the beginning? What's their normal?
2. *Need*: What's missing in their life? What motivates them?
3. *Go*: They enter an unfamiliar world or situation because of plot events.
4. *Search*: They struggle, adapt, and grow.
5. *Find*: They obtain what they think they want.
6. *Pay*: There is a cost or consequence.
7. *Return*: They return to the world they came from (or a new one).
8. *Change*: They are transformed.

Let's continue with *Star Wars* and track Luke, Han, and Leia in this story circles:



1. *You*

- Leia is deeply entrenched in the Rebellion on a mission to Alderaan.
- Luke is a farm boy on Tatooine.
- Han is a smuggler.

2. *Need*

- Leia needs to get the Death Star plans into the hands of the Rebellion to defeat the Empire.
- Luke wants to become a pilot and fight the rebellion, leaving Tatooine like his friends have.
- Han needs to pay his debt to Jabba the Hutt.

3. *Go*

- Leia is captured, and Alderaan is destroyed.
- Luke's aunt and uncle are murdered while he is speaking to Obi-Wan.
- Han is confronted by Greedo, realizes his time is up, and joins Luke.

4. *Search*

- Luke learns Jedi skills from Obi-Wan and decides to go with Obi-Wan to rescue the princess.
- Leia is questioned by Vader, and resists but knows her time is limited.
- Han is convinced by Luke to join him in rescuing the princess for the sake of money.

5. *Find*

- Leia is rescued after much shenanigans, which allows her to get the plans out.
- Luke is part of her rescue, proving himself a hero.
- Han gets the money he needs, and he leaves the Rebel Base to pay Jabba the Hutt.

6. *Pay*

- Obi-Wan is killed, costing Luke his new mentor.
- Their ship is being tracked to the Rebel Base, which means Leia knows the time of the Rebellion is **short**.
- Han loses Luke's friendship because of choosing personal goals over the greater good.

7. *Return*

- Han returns and saves Luke instead of going to pay his debts.
- Luke puts his faith in the Force rather than technology and has become a valuable fighter in the rebellion.
- Leia is back with the rebellion, planning the culmination of her work to get the plans.

8. *Change*

- Luke is no longer the farm boy he was but is now on his way to becoming a Jedi Knight, and his new *need* is finding Yoda, the Jedi Master, to continue his training.
- Han is no longer quite as selfish as he was and now considers himself at least tangentially part of the Rebellion.
- Leia is no longer a spy but is a public part of the Rebellion's leadership. (Side note: Leia's journey is emotionally static. She changes roles but doesn't really change as a person. This is called a static or flat arc, and it's perfectly fine to have a few such characters in your story).

As you can see, the story arcs are closely linked to the events of the plot and also flesh out the events of the plot. A story works best when the plot events drive the character's emotional development and their understanding of the emotional and philosophical stakes of the story (or theme, as we defined earlier).



For your story, define the plot beats you need to start your writing process. Don't get hung up on defining each tent pole, just fill in the ones that come naturally. Believe me, this will change as you write! (I know mine do. All the time.)

While you're doing this, measure your story against your main conflict and the philosophical stakes or theme that you want to explore.

And speaking of measuring, remember the list of characters we defined in Exercise 2? For each of them, create a story circle. Don't forget your villains! Not all story circles have to end in positive growth; sometimes a story can end in tragedy due to negative growth driven by plot events (consider Hamlet or Macbeth as great examples of this).

What I like to do with my villains is plan the plot for them as a tragedy where they fail to understand the theme and thus pay the price of that failure. And so, villains get a story circle as well in my planning.

Tent Pole	Description
<i>Steady State</i> (What does the world look like before the story begins?)	
<i>Catalyst</i> (What event disrupts the state of balance?)	
<i>Point of No Return</i> (What pushes your characters into the journey permanently?)	
<i>Reacting</i> (How does the plot drag the characters along and how do they respond?)	
<i>Midpoint Climax</i> (What raises the stakes?)	
<i>Acting</i> (How do your characters begin to take control of events?)	
<i>False Overcome</i> (What looks like success but isn't?)	
<i>All Hope is Lost</i> (What moment breaks your characters?)	
<i>Turning Point</i> (What insight allows for eventual success or transformation?)	

Use this template to create a story circle for each important character.

Step	Story Circle Beat	Your Character's Journey
1	You	
2	Need	
3	Go	
4	Search	
5	Find	
6	Pay	
7	Return	
8	Change	



Villains should have story circles too!



DEFINE THE SCOPE OF YOUR WORLD

Now that you have a reasonable idea of your story, it's time to define the scope of your setting. This scope sets the stage on which your characters will act. It is the canvas for your story's mural. You don't want to build out a galaxy-spanning empire if all you're going to use is one backwater town. This is about practicality and focus and allows you to invest your time and creative energy where it will impact your story the most.

If you're a game master, think of the scope like the fog of war in a strategy game. You want to reveal the terrain as your players navigate it, always staying one step ahead. Know the lay of the land within a day's journey for your adventurers, so you're always prepared for their next move, but don't plan so far ahead that they never reach your awesome new mystery moor.

Remember, this scope is not a ball and chain. As with everything else in this book, it's meant to be flexible, growing and shrinking with the needs of your narrative. As your story or campaign evolves, so too can your world's horizons.

5

SCOPE & SCALE

EXERCISE

- *Outline where your story begins:* Think about the first setting your characters will experience. Is it a bustling city, a remote village, or perhaps a space station? Define the initial borders of your world where your story's roots will take hold. Refer to your characters and conflict here.
- *Consider where your story might end geographically:* Just as stories have a character arc, they also have a geographical arc. Where do you envision the climax taking place? How does the setting serve the story's ultimate resolution? Remember to check in with your challenges and update them if required. After all, if you have a challenge of needing to climb a mountain, you'll need a mountain.
- *Consider the necessary scale for your story to unfold naturally:* Determine the breadth of the world your characters need to explore. Will they traverse nations or stick to shadowy alleyways? Think about travel, communication, and the influence of the setting on plot development.

By taking the time to sketch out the scope and scale, you're creating a map for yourself, a reference to keep your story's journey cohesive and coherent. Whether you're laying out the streets of a city or charting the stars of a galaxy, this exercise ensures that your story remains grounded and navigable for your characters, your readers, and you.



1F

DEFINE WORLD SCOPE

WORKSHEET

1. Beginning Location

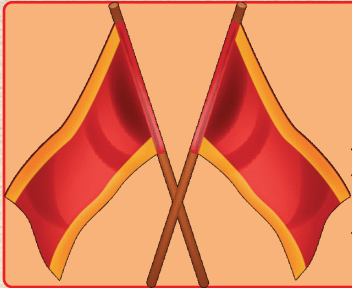
2. Potential End Location

3. Geographic Scale

By now, you should have a clear north star of what your world looks like from a ten-thousand-foot view. You should also have a vague outline of your story. The next step is to start slowly coloring in the details. From this point on, complete the following chapters in any order that makes sense to you.

If you find yourself going forward and backward in the book, that's completely normal. You should fill in geographic details here and then tweak the cultures over there. Don't fret or stress if you're not sure what to fill in with any given chapter. Move on to what you know and start there.

At this point, you can even start writing your story, pausing when you hit a point where you need to build some piece of the world. You can then return to this book and find the right chapter, build what you need and adjust the rest of your world and then return to your story. Every time you build something new, check it against your north star to make sure it fits the vibe and against your other worksheets to make sure you're not breaking your own lore.



The goal is *always* to build what you need when you need it, not to drown yourself in the details.



YOUTUBE RESOURCES

Playlist Tiny URL: <https://tinyurl.com/wb-1-ch1>

Playlist QR Code:



CHAPTER TWO

ADD FANTASY



This chapter will help you build out the fantastical elements of your world. Like with every chapter in this book, don't get trapped into thinking that you must fill in everything up front. Add the elements you're certain of, measure it against your north star, update what you need to and move on.

You can always come back to refine existing elements and add more.



MYTHIC LOGIC

Before we do anything else, we have to talk about mythic logic as defined by the legendary Ursula K. Le Guin.

Mythic logic refers to a form of narrative reasoning that is not analytical, cause-and-effect logic. It is the internal consistency of myths, stories, and symbols. Truth is conveyed not through literal facts but through resonance, metaphor, and emotional or archetypal significance. In mythic logic, contradictory elements can coexist because the goal is not explanation but meaning.

In Le Guin's essays, particularly in the collections *The Language of the Night* and *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, she often contrasts mythic logic with scientific or rational logic:

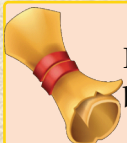
- *Scientific logic* asks: What happened? How can it be proved?
- *Mythic logic* asks: What does it mean? How does it feel? Why do we tell this story over and over?

For example, in mythic logic, a god can be both a creator and a destroyer; a hero can die and return; time may loop, pause, or fold. These "illogical" events are not failures of narrative. They are essential to how mythic stories convey truth beyond facts.

As the great lady says: "*Myths are not lies. They are stories that tell us what truths feel like.*" (Paraphrased).

But here's the thing, mythic logic must adhere to its own consistency. If there is magic in knowing something's True Name, then there must always be magic in knowing that name and people in the world must protect their True Names. If magic makes a dragon light enough to fly, then removing the magic makes the dragon fall.

Mythic logic isn't about realism, but it is about coherence.



In your world, your mythic logic reigns supreme and it does not need to be limited to scientific logic, but it must adhere to its own rules as defined by you.

And that's why we have worksheets! They let you make sure your mythic logic is both wondrous and internally consistent.



MAGIC SYSTEMS

Magic systems are the heart of the fantastical elements in many stories, setting the rules for the impossible and defining the boundaries of wonder. A well-crafted magic system adds coherence to your world and depth to your narrative.

Even if you're creating a soft magic system or working with an already defined system, these exercises and worksheets will help you think about your magic in terms of its role in the story. Magic is an element that can truly drive both plot and theme, no matter if its rules are hard enough to be coded into a video game or soft enough to flow away like snow melting in the spring.

And that's why we kick off defining the magic system with some meta-magic exercises.

06

THE PURPOSE OF MAGIC

EXERCISE

Please don't panic if you can't answer these questions. Just think about them and move on. You can always come back to this section afterward. This will probably be something you think about, refine and rework quite often as you create your world and plot.

And remember, magic always has the purpose to be cool and add fantasy. It's not just about deep philosophy and thoughts. It's not even mostly about deep philosophy and thoughts. Some of the magic is just cool.

And that's excellent!

But magic can also make your story thematically richer and more rewarding for the reader. So, approach these exercises with that in mind.

Remember: Don't Panic! (And carry a towel).

Magic's purpose in fantasy can broadly (very broadly) be divided into three categories:

- 1. Reflection of Human Nature and Society:** This includes exploring power dynamics, ethical dilemmas, social and political themes, and allegorical representations of real-world issues. Magic in this category is often a mirror or critique of societal structures or human behaviors. For example, *Mistborn* by Brandon Sanderson reflects themes of power and prejudice, while Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series uses magic to comment on ecological and societal balance. On the allegorical side of life, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* uses magic as an allegory for spiritual and moral truths.
- 2. Personal Growth and Self-Discovery:** Here, magic symbolizes the inner journey of characters, encapsulating their struggles, growth, and transformation. It's a tool for characters to discover their identity, understand their place in the world, or come to terms with their inner conflicts. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, where Dust and daemons are central to character development, and *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan, where characters' interactions with magic shape their personal journeys, are prime examples.
- 3. Exploration of Philosophical and Moral Questions:** Magic provides a platform to delve into philosophical and moral questions, challenging readers to think about the nature of reality, ethics, and the complexity of choices. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, magic is intertwined with moral choices and the nature of evil. I use my magic system in *Sangwheel Chronicles* as a vehicle to explore moral questions around does the ends justify the means and the price we pay for power.

Now, I do want to point out that some magic systems answer "Yes" to all three of these. Let's take a deeper look at Brandon Sanderson's magic system in *The Stormlight Archive*.



Overview: The magic system in *The Stormlight Archive* is based on the concept of Surgebinding and spren, which is very closely linked to the characters' emotions and virtues.

Purpose:

1. Reflection of Human Nature and Society: The link with spren reflects aspects of human nature, such as integrity, courage, and honor, which are crucial for characters to access their magical abilities. The magic system also mirrors societal structures and conflicts, such as the division between lighteyes (nobility) and darkeyes (commoners), and the broader conflict between different peoples and nations.

2. Personal Growth and Self-Discovery: In *The Way of Kings*, characters' interactions with the magic system are pivotal to their personal development. Characters like Kaladin and Shallan undergo significant growth and self-discovery, closely tied to their understanding and mastery of magical abilities. The journey to becoming a Knight Radiant, which involves personal reflection, confronting inner demons, and adhering to specific moral codes (the Immortal Words), aligns well with themes of self-discovery and personal ethics.

3. Exploration of Philosophical and Moral Questions: The magic system in *The Stormlight Archive* serves as a backdrop for exploring deeper philosophical and moral dilemmas. Issues such as the responsibility that comes with power, the nature of leadership, and the ethics of warfare are central to the narrative. The magic itself, along with the history and lore surrounding it, raises questions about the cost of conflict avoidance, the price of power, and the complexities of right and wrong in a morally grey world.

So, you don't just have to pick one of these thematic paths with your magic system, you can bleed over from one to the other or even all three if you wish and tie your magic deeply into your theme.

Which one of these meta-purposes does your magic system fulfill? Does it check all three and if yes, in what way? Record your answers, but remember, don't panic if the answer is simply: Magic is cool.

Magic is cool and it's okay to use just to add fantasy to your world. And before you go scribble your answers down, remember to check your magic against your North Star and make sure your world remains coherent. You can adjust either your North Star or your magic's purpose to make sure everything still fits, but preferably adjust your magic's purpose. It should be harder to adjust your north star since it affects more elements of the story.



1. Is magic a reflection on human society in your world (allegorical or not)?

2. Is magic a vehicle for personal growth and self-discovery in your plot?

3. Does magic provide you with a way to explore philosophical or ethical questions in your world?



Now, having given our philosophical muscles a real workout, let's turn to more practical matters. How does magic actually work, and what kind of magic system do you need?

Since Brandon Sanderson coined the phrase "hard magic system", a debate has raged about using a hard magic versus soft magic system. The honest truth is: this is silly. Magic systems exist on a spectrum.

Some are hard, with fixed rules and set limits. All of Sanderson's magic systems are like this. You can take the rules and directly transcribe them to a video game or roleplaying system, and they work.

Some magic systems are softer, with a general idea of how they work, sort of. Jacqueline Carey's magic system in her *Naamah Trilogy* is like this. You understand roughly that the mage uses the power of twilight, the spirit realm, to do stuff. And that's all you need.

There are some magic systems that are entirely soft and exist as a feeling more than a system. It evokes the emotion of wonder only. But even for these magic systems, considering some defining questions will help you use magic better and embed it deeper into your world.

For the exercise of crafting the arcane, it doesn't matter if your magic is hard or soft, answer what is relevant to your magic with as much or as little detail as you like. At the very least, it will help you remain consistent in your world building so you don't forget that true love can resurrect the dead or other such trivialities.



- *Determine the source of magic in your world:* Is it drawn from natural elements, ancient deities, or the very fabric of reality? Does life-energy fuel your magic? Are there magical creatures that can increase magic? Whatever you use as your source will set the tone for the feel of your world. If your magic system requires blood to be spilled, it's likely that you have a darker world. If your magic system is fueled by unicorn tail strands, you could build a lighter world, with a more whimsical feel. If your magic system is fueled by the emotional bond between families, you could build a great cozy fantasy world and so on. What is the source of magic in your world?
- *Determine what magic costs:* Is the mage exhausted by casting magic? Do they need to consume a substance and magic is generated from that substance? Or perhaps they draw power from the natural world and use that as fuel for their magic? Be cautious here, you can introduce all kinds of unintended themes by going overboard with the wrong costs. For example, if you use a substance that mages consume as a cost of magic, be wary of making it seem addictive and straying into the territory of substance abuse as a theme, unless of course, you want to tell a story about substance abuse, in which case, this is a perfect cost for you. Run through all the aspects of your costs to understand what thematic elements you are potentially introducing here.
- *Set some limits on magic:* What can magic do? What can't it do? Setting clear limitations prevents magic from becoming a catch-all solution to every problem. Think about things like resurrection of the dead, healing and its limits, the use of one-off magic items, and effect of permanent magic items. Stick to broad categories for your first pass, you can always add detail later.
For example, I generally make it a rule that my magic systems can't resurrect the dead. The problem with resurrecting the dead is that it drastically reduces the stakes of the story.
For the same reason, I'm careful with healing. If everyone can insta-heal, this complicates a fight enormously. That being said, I absolutely did go the insta-heal path in *Sangwheel Chronicles*, but only for mages. It worked for both my system and my world, but I still limited the magic to the amount of elämää the mage has (which tied back to the cost, they have to spend elämää or life force).
- *How is magic manipulated:* Do people cast spells with special words? Do they have complicated rituals? Can they make up nonsense words and just channel the magic? Do they dance a jig, a rhythmic tango, or a stamping Tropanka? Or maybe they weave the magic into everyday items which then release a wondrous effect given a trigger. Is there any written magic, like runes or alchemical symbols? How about mixing up magical potions? Consider how the source of your magic interfaces with the manipulation of that source.
- *The role and creation of magic items:* How are magic items made and how prevalent are they? Are there permanent magic items? What can they do? Are there consumable magic items (like scrolls or potions). What can they do? What about artifact level items? Do magic items play any role in your world?
- *How are mages created:* Is magic inherited? If it is, does everyone in your world have magic? If not, why hasn't the magic gene spread? Or maybe it's just study that makes a mage, in which case, where do people learn magic? Perhaps it is something else completely, like a trial by fire which gives magic or some other mechanism. How are mages taught? Is there a final examination which has to be passed? Remember your source and your manipulation of magic and make sure it all hangs together to form one cohesive system that fits your north star.

We'll run through two examples, one hard magic system and one soft one, and then plunge into the worksheets, which will help guide you with further details in the creation of your magic system, including the use of items, spells and so forth.



Hard Magic System: Allomancy from Mistborn (As defined in *The Final Empire* by Brandon Sanderson)

Source of Magic: Allomancy is genetic, but tied to spiritual DNA, and thus functions a little differently from normal inheritance (more on evolution later in this chapter). Allomancers can "burn" metals ingested into their stomachs and gain the metal's specific ability. The source of magic is therefore both divine (Preservation's gift) and material (ingested metals).

Cost of Magic: The cost is consumption of metal. Once a metal is burned, it's gone. Overuse can lead to poisoning if the wrong metals are used or if impure metals are consumed. Emotional strain or intense use in combat also creates fatigue.

Limits on Magic:

- Only certain metals grant powers.
- Each metal pair (e.g. steel/iron) corresponds to a specific ability (e.g. pushes on nearby metals / pulls on nearby metals).
- Only Mistborn can burn all metals; most users (Mistings) can burn only one.
- No resurrection, no healing beyond pewter's temporary boost of physical abilities.
- Strong physical or narrative limitations exist (e.g. needing metal to function).

Manipulation of Magic:

- Magic is invoked by "burning" metals. There is no exterior action or ritual required.
- Some finesse is required, such as steelpushing requiring mental targeting and awareness of metal mass/distance.
- Magic works internally; it's instinctual but with a need for training to refine.

Magic Items:

- Not many. Magic resides in the person, not objects.
- Some exceptions exist, like hemalurgic spikes (another system).
- Metals act as consumables, so potion or scroll equivalents. Non-mages cannot use metals.
- There are artifact style "items" like the Well of Ascension, which is a permanently magical place.

Creation of Mages:

- Inherited genetically. Noble lines have magic due to ancient deals with gods.
- In-world, the spread is constrained by selective breeding and societal control.
- No formal school. Training often occurs informally or through noble houses.



There are, of course, a plethora of other details, but the ones mentioned above are sufficient to demonstrate the exercise.

I have been accused of preferring hard magic systems. This is false. I love whatever magic system works best with the story. Let's explore one more example, this one based on a soft magic system.



Soft Magic System: *Kushiel Trilogy & Naamah Trilogy* by Jacqueline Carey

Source of Magic: Multiple spiritual sources:

- The angelic and demonic realms (Elua and the Companions vs. the Yeshuites' One God vs. the demons called up by Raphael in *Naamah Trilogy*) are all real and interact with the world.
- In addition, some mortals (the D'Angelines) still have drops of divine origin in them and can summon some abilities tied to that divine blood (spiritual heredity).
- Some druids and the bear-witches of the Maghuin Dhonn can manipulate the power of the natural world either through spells, music, or innately.

Cost of Magic:

- Emotional or spiritual sacrifice is often a key cost, especially when making deals with divine or demonic entities.
- Some spells require ritual purity, pain, or submission.
- The magic of the Maghuin Dhonn requires the mage to rest and "recharge" in the "wild places", among green plants and life.
- The costs are not consistent physical costs but are instead symbolic costs.

Limits on Magic:

- Very few clear limits. Big effects, such as resurrection, require enormous plot input.
- Some rituals require specific rites (e.g., Imriel's binding in *Kushiel's Justice*).
- Power is often mediated through divine favor, not fixed mechanics.
- Some magic requires knowledge of specific names, such as the name of the One God to send away the angel Rahab, or the name of the demon banished by Imriel, or the names of demons summoned by Raphael de Mereliot.

Manipulation of Magic:

- Mostly ritualistic or devotional: prayer, offerings, the binding of the threads around Imriel to prevent the bear-witches from calling him away.
- Intent and spiritual connection matter more than technical skill: Moirin's connection to the land, her ability to access the "power of twilight", matters more than Raphael's knowledge of demon names.
- Manipulation varies depending on culture:
 - D'Angelines have the angelic blessing of their bloodlines.
 - Drujani skotophagoti access the dark power of Angra Mainyu through the Marhgikar.
 - Bear-witches' manipulate nature-based power inherently, though spells can help them with finesse work.

Magic Items:

- Yes, but rare. Imriel's croonie stone is magic enough to protect Sidonie for example.
- These items often require ceremony to empower or activate.
- No wide use of potions or scrolls.

Creation of Mages:

- Some are born with gifts, like Kushiel's line or the bear witches.
- Others gain power through religious devotion or training, like the ollamh (druids).
- Training is deeply cultural or religious.



