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The Ultimate Guide To World-Building: How To Write Fantasy, Sci-Fi And Real-Life Worlds

World-building is so much more than just a framing device. It's the very essence of any good fantasy or science fiction story, and the basis of a sense of place in other genres. Good world-building lends an immersive richness to your writing, while also giving readers the information they need to understand characters and plotlines.

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So, how exactly should writers go about building worlds in their fiction? To find out, we'll break down the concept of world-building into three main categories:

- **Imaginary worlds** – the construction of entirely fictional universes, found primarily in fantasy genres.
- **Alternate reality** – re-imaginings of the details of our existing world; popular with writers of science fiction.
- **Actual locations** – the invocation of a real place in the world, utilised in novels with no elements of the fantastic.

Let's begin by entering the wondrous realm of fantasy fiction.

IMAGINARY WORLDS

Creating an imaginary world is one of the most complex types of world-building. It's most often utilised in fantasy and science fiction, where a writer conjures up from scratch every detail of a world: geography, history, language, lore, characters, social customs, politics, religion…

Understandably, the thought of creating all these elements to form an entire fictional world can be very daunting – and deciding where to start can seem almost impossible! For inspiration, we recommend turning to some of the great world-builders of our time to see how they've built up whole universes from nothing.

Deciding on a starting point

J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* and countless other classic works, began the development of Middle-earth in an unusual way: by first creating an entire fictional language to be spoken by his characters. A professional philologist and talented linguist, Tolkien developed the Elvish language of Quenya, using it as a base for expanding his imaginary world into the vast, detailed, lore-rich Middle-earth we know today.

Of course, not all writers will be capable of (or interested in) creating a functional, fictional language – but budding world-builders can still follow Tolkien's lead in order to get started. By pinpointing one aspect of your imaginary world that you're most interested in or most apt at developing, you've got yourself a great starting point. Work hard on this element first, and then concentrate on building up and fleshing out from there. You'll find that the pieces of your world fall much more easily into place once you have a solid foundation from which to expand.

Asking questions about your world

After you've got the ball rolling by establishing a starting point, you'll need to begin working out the details that make up a convincing, consistent imaginary world. A great way to start doing this is to ask (and answer) a set of questions pertaining to the different aspects of your world.

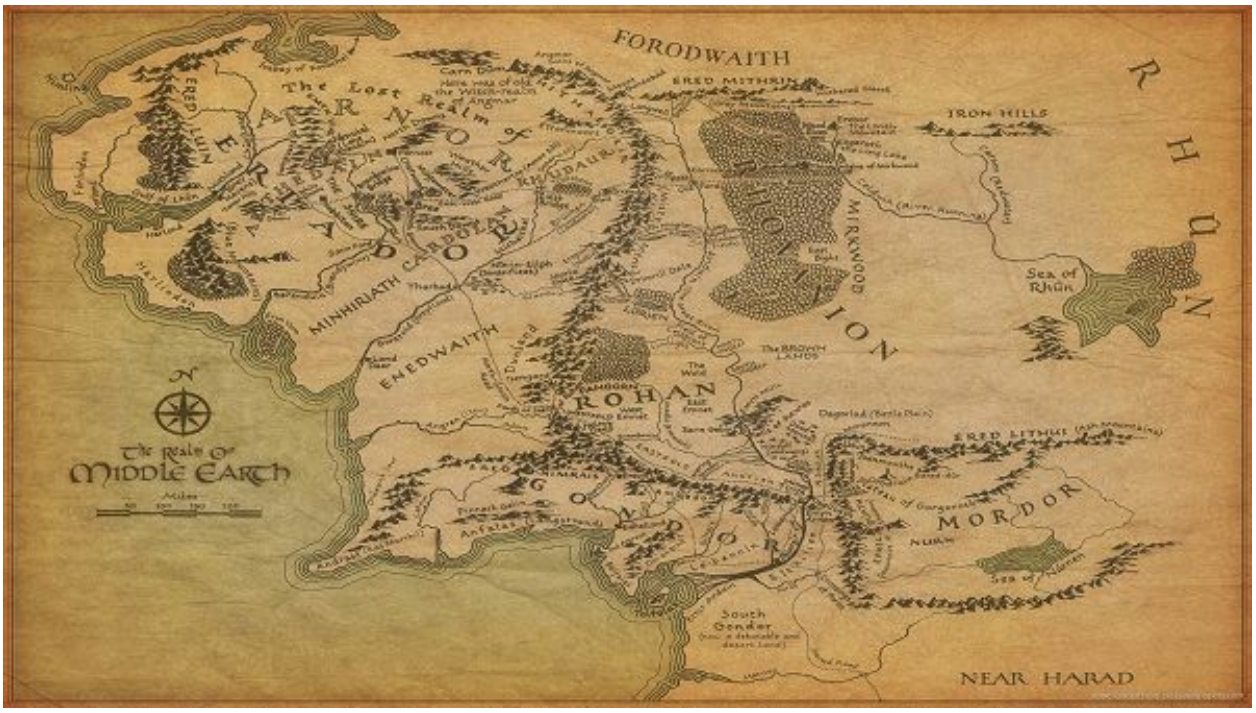
Approach this exercise as if you were describing your home country to someone who knows nothing about it – or, on a larger scale, as if you were introducing Earth to someone from an alien race. How would you explain:

- What it looks and feels like – its landscapes, its climate?
- Its people – their appearance, customs, ethics and values?
- The dominant forces that shape change and development?

If you're feeling overwhelmed by all the potential details you need to cover, it's advisable to start by creating a list of fundamental questions you need to answer about your world. Many online resources, such as this list from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America website, contain suggested questions about everything from social organisation and government to the rules of magic and technology. (The latter of these is particularly important to keep in mind. Even though your world may be an entirely imaginary one filled with magic or made-up technology, it must still be governed consistently and carefully by the internal logic and laws you set up for it. Its fantastical nature cannot be used as an excuse for lapses in continuity.)

After devising your list, you may feel even *more* overwhelmed now you have such an expansive range of questions to answer! If this is the case, take a step back and make sure that all the questions you've listed really need to be covered. It's likely that some questions may not apply to or directly affect your characters and narrative, so decide which aspects are most crucial to the stories you want to tell within your world, and focus on answering the most relevant questions.

While you're answering these world-building questions largely for the benefit of your readers, it's imperative to keep in mind the age-old advice about *showing, not telling*. You don't want readers to feel like they're simply being spoon-fed a bunch of facts, details and history. The most successful storytelling comes from a subtle, nuanced approach to building your world through narrative detail, description and development.



Map of the realms of Middle-earth, as imagined by Tolkien.

Drawing inspiration from real life

Even though imagining an entirely new world is one of the most creative processes a writer can undertake, it's almost impossible to create something *entirely* from nothing.

Naturally – even if only subconsciously – you will adapt and incorporate some real-world elements into your imaginary setting and story, using them as a base of inspiration.

A well-known fantasy epic with strong undertones of historical influence is George R. R. Martin's series, *A Song of Ice and Fire.* Martin openly acknowledges the fact that many elements of *ASOIAF* are inspired by real historical events and locations: the Wars of the Roses, the Glencoe Massacre and Hadrian's Wall, to name just a few.

If you feel your world is lacking in depth or credibility, perhaps take a leaf from Mr. Martin's (extremely long) book and delve into some real-world history for inspiration. You may be able to flesh out your world by moulding, adapting or drawing parallels with real-life locations, landmarks, pivotal events, or even historical personalities.

The sprawling city of Meereen from George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire'.

Where reality and fantasy collide

An interesting way to provide contrast or conflict within your story is by developing your fictional world alongside, or within, an established location – for example, right here on Earth. Perhaps the most famous example of this reality/fantasy cross-over is J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which involves an entirely made-up world of magic that's hidden away on modern-day Earth. Harry himself, as the main character from whose point of view the story is presented, is as much a stranger to this world as readers are in the beginning. We're introduced firsthand to every person, place, detail and experience right alongside Harry; as he journeys into this magical new world and has his questions answered, so, too, do we as readers.

Harry enters Diagon Alley to explore his magical new world.

As well as adding depth and relatability to your story, such a setting also poses questions about the concept of an *alternate reality*. Let's now look at this concept in more detail.

ALTERNATE REALITY

Similar to the creation of an imaginary world, but slightly less demanding due to the existing base you have to work with, the construction of an alternate reality is a type of world-building often found in dystopian, speculative and science fiction. By creating an alternate reality, you are developing an alternative version of our own Earth, imagining how things could be different and posing questions about what these differences would mean for humanity. Authors often use this style of writing to express their thoughts about the flaws of humanity and today's world, exploring the consequences these flaws may have to potential to produce.

What if?

As a writer imagining an alternate reality, the most important question you can ask is 'What if?' This is the base-level query on which your story's entire premise should be founded, and upon which you will build the individual elements of your world. For example:

- What if a particular, important historical event had never happened?
- What if our planet and its inhabitants had evolved differently?
- What if a fundamental aspect of life as we know it was to change suddenly?

- What if we invented new technology that could accomplish wonderful/terrible things?
- What if we could visit or communicate with other life forms (or vice versa)?

These are the type of questions you should be asking as you develop the differences between your world and the real world. They are the essence of the changes, challenges and consequences you should examine through your alternate setting, its characters and their narrative.

Advanced technology features prominently in Suzanne Collins' 'Hunger Games' series.

Belief and disbelief

A key difference between creating an alternate reality and creating an imaginary world is the suspension of disbelief you can expect from your readers. The imaginary worlds of fantasy and science fiction we examined above – Westeros and Essos, the kingdoms of Middle-earth – imagine an entirely new world, quite unrelated to our own. Due to this

complete removal from reality, readers automatically enter with a higher level of tolerance for things that may otherwise have jarred the story's logic or lifted them out of the moment. Readers would never think to question, for example, the fact that a single magic ring has the power to rule the world; they're also less likely to query the fact that a teenage girl is slowly conquering a kingdom when there are dragons involved in the equation!

In alternate reality fiction, however, you may have to work a little harder to draw readers deep into your world – and keep them there. The slightly familiar settings, warped realities and semi-relatable human scenarios presented in this type of storytelling will heighten readers' senses of what's believable and what's not. Therefore, you'll need to convince them that everything happening in your story is a realistic possibility for the Earth on which it is based. Let's look at some of the best ways to achieve this.

A cityscape from an alternate reality. Image credit: Ashish Dani.

Past, present or future?

One of the best ways to begin establishing your alternate reality is by clarifying the *time period* in which you want it to be set. When will your story take place in relation to the real world? Is it:

Each of these approaches has its own advantages and benefits, and each lends itself well to different purposes. You'll need to decide which of these settings best serves the particular story you want to tell.

If you choose to rewrite the *past*, you are employing the gift of hindsight to imagine what could have been; think of it as alternate reality historical fiction, if you will. A well-known example is sci-fi author Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, which explores our world 'as it might have been' if the outcome of World War II had been different. Likewise, the majority of volumes in Jasper Fforde's *Thursday Next* series take place in an alternative 1985, where England and Russia have been fighting the Crimean War for over a century. Not restricted to reimaginings of definitive wartime conflicts, however, this method of storytelling is also a popular vehicle for stories about time travel; H. G. Wells' pivotal novel *The Time Machine* and more recent books such as Stephen King's *11/22/63* are great examples of time-travel tropes used effectively to explore alternate realities.

Stories set in the *present,* on the other hand, have an element of immediacy and can be more easily related to by the reader. This type of story can often be considered similar

to

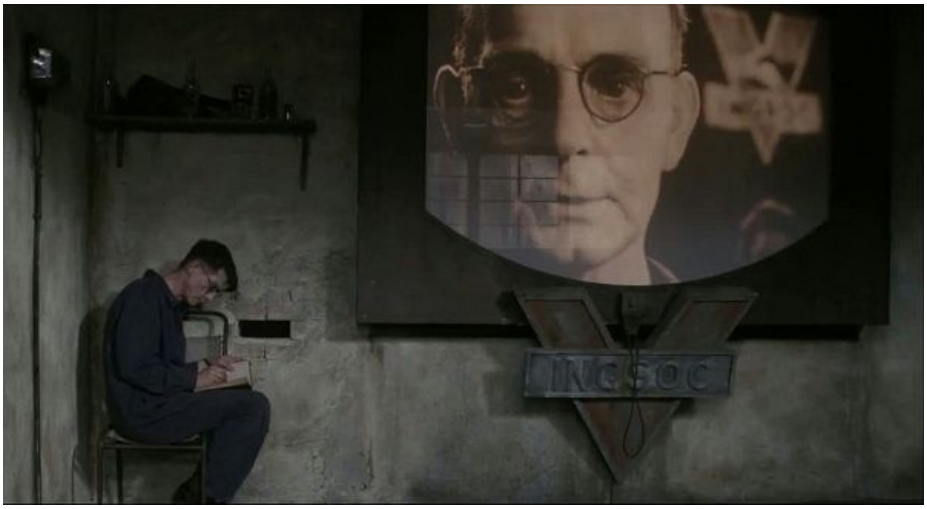
those that rewrite the past, as it often imagines drastically altered historical events preceding its own setting. However, the main difference is that present-day stories focus solely on portraying of an alternate version of today's world, rather than rewriting the history that has come before. As we mentioned above, the *Harry Potter* series, while primarily a fantasy, might also be considered an alternate reality; it takes place on Earth, in the modern-day U.K., but is largely set within a magical world that lies hidden within our own. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* employ similar settings of an unknown world-within-a-world.

Finally, imagining the *future* can serve as a warning or projection of what might be to come if the present-day world does not change its ways. George Orwell's seminal work, *1984*, is a classic example of this; published in 1949, it leaps almost 40 years into the future to make bold extrapolations about the potential dangers of politics and technology. Similarly, Suzanne Collins' wildly popular *Hunger Games* trilogy, as well as Aldous Huxley's esteemed 1931 novel *Brave New World*, both pose questions about the demoralisation of the human race, depicting the type of scenario that could be in store for our future.

Know your building blocks

In order to portray a compelling alternate version of the world, you must first be well-versed in the facts of the *real* version. Whether you're setting your alternate reality in a real-world location or reimagining a history event, learn all you can about its real counterpart and incorporate your knowledge into your new interpretation.

As mentioned above, Orwell's *1984* is perhaps the most well-known example of a novel exploring an alternate reality. On the surface, it's a story about an alien-sounding, utilitarian nation that's as far removed as possible from the Earth we knew in 1984. However, when we look a little deeper (as most of us were forced to do as high school English students), the meaningful real-world allegories Orwell is drawing – Soviet Union politics, life in wartime Britain – become all too clear. It's obvious he really knew his stuff before bringing to life his alternate futuristic vision.



George Orwell presents his own futuristic vision of society in '1984'.

The end of the world as we know it

Dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction has seen a meteoric rise in recent years, especially in the young adult sub-genre. The *Hunger Games* trilogy, perhaps the most popular of the bunch, has spawned a plethora of YA novels set in reimagined versions of Earth, and it's easy to see why. Imagining a global-scale apocalyptic event gives you the freedom to predict how humanity might rebuild itself after such a disaster – a meaty subject to tackle.

A key decision to be made when writing in this genre is how you will treat the apocalyptic event itself. The most common choice is to set the narrative *after* the event and describe its consequences (hence 'post-apocalyptic fiction' becoming a well-known genre in itself).

Series such as the *Hunger Games* and *Maze Runner* trilogies, as well as standalone novels like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Richard Matheson's much-adapted *I Am Legend*, choose the post-apocalyptic path. *I Am Legend* and the *Maze Runner* books allude to a deadly global pandemic, while *The Hunger Games* and *The Road* both choose not to disclose the manner of the cataclysm that preceded their events. Ultimately, you'll need to decide if clarifying the apocalyptic event is necessary by considering the ways it could benefit or detract from your story.

Despite the prevalence of the post-apocalyptic approach, remember that you also have the option to portray the actual details of the global catastrophe as it happens, as well as

the series of events leading up to it. If you choose this method of storytelling, you may wish to consult some novels that handle it particularly well, including *Lucifer's Hammer* by Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven, *The Stand* by Stephen King and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood.

Suzanne Collins' 'Hunger Games' trilogy takes place in a dystopian society.

Now, if you're *not* a writer of fantasy or science fiction, by this stage you're probably wondering whether there's any point in learning about world-building. Well, we're here to assure you that there is – so read on!

ACTUAL LOCATIONS

In genres other than science fiction and fantasy, the practice of world-building is more commonly known as *creating a sense of place*. Place has an important role in every story, and is often used to great effect in literary fiction. In novels with an especially strong sense of place, the setting virtually becomes a character in itself; it embodies, reflects, supports and enhances the narrative at every turn. So how can you build and develop a deep, engrossing and original portrait of an existing location?

Pack your bags

The first piece of advice for anyone wishing to infuse their work with a sense of place is also the most obvious: *go to that place*! Whenever possible, spending a good amount of time 'on location' wherever you're setting your story is the best thing you can do as a writer. Bonus points if you're writing about the place in which you've grown up or spent the majority of your life; if you know the place inside-out, it's going to be much easier to paint a convincing and engaging picture for your readers.

The Brontë sisters are a fantastic example of writers drawing on personal influences and surroundings to create a strong sense of place. Emily's only novel, *Wuthering Heights,* interweaves a bleak landscape of English moors so powerfully into her narrative that it practically becomes a definitive character in itself. Charlotte's best-known work, *Jane Eyre*, creates a compelling portrait of life at a 19th century English boarding school; along with Anne's first novel, *Agnes Grey, Jane Eyre* also explores life as a governess in

a noble family (and as a woman in Victorian England). However, the Brontës are by no means the be-all-and-end-all of creating a sense of place – pick up any good novel set in a specific location and you're sure to pick up some tips.

The wild English moors become a character in themselves throughout much of the Brontë sisters' work.

Do your research

Sometimes – for example, in the case of a novel set 50 years in the past – it's not possible to have an authentic experience of the place you're writing about. In this case, you will really need to do your research – and we don't just mean a bit of Googling,

because unfortunately, that won't quite cut it! You'll need to delve deeply into the history of the place in any way you can: by watching documentaries, visiting museums, reading books and other literature from the time period – seek out anything you can get your hands on and start absorbing it all. If you can, we also strongly recommend speaking to people who *were* in that place at the right time; there's no better source than someone who can tell you all about it from firsthand experience.

Historical fiction books are a good resource for those wishing to write immersive, authentic fiction set in past time periods and real locations. An expansive genre, historical fiction contains a wealth of titles from which to gain inspiration and examples, but a good starting place might be exploring the work of:

- Charles Dickens – *A Tale of Two Cities* conjures up particularly vivid images of London and Paris during the French Revolution;
- Chinua Achebe – a Nigerian author whose African trilogy, especially *Things Fall Apart*, paints a striking portrait of post-colonial Africa;
- Philippa Gregory – author of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, who specialises in British historical fiction that mostly examines the stories of the aristocracy.

Other great titles to investigate include Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, which takes place in wartime Germany, and Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, set in twentieth-century Japan.

Arthur Golden transports us to twentieth-century Japan in 'Memoirs of a Geisha'.

Speak with your senses

Building and developing a sense of place is a great excuse to flex your descriptive muscles. But don't just rely on describing what you *see* – talk about the sounds, the smells, the *feel* of your chosen place; the atmosphere and the things that contribute to it; and, perhaps most importantly, the effect the place has on your characters. (On that note, it pays to remember not to get *too* bogged down in description at the expense of plot and character development. Keep in mind that your invocation of place is ultimately to serve the characters and story within it.)

What sort of world will you build in your fiction? Image credit: Mikhail Pavstyuk via StockSnap Creative Commons.

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After all that, you're probably feeling a little overwhelmed by the amount of effort it takes to build a whole world with words – whether that world is fictional, real or somewhere in between. Our suggestion? Take a well-earned break, make a cup of tea, and set aside your world for now. Tomorrow it will still be there waiting for you, and armed with your new knowledge, you'll be ready to build it from the ground up.

About The Author

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Claire is a freelance writer and editor from Newcastle, NSW. She holds a B. A. in English and Writing and a Graduate Certificate of Editing and Publishing. A lover of books, blogs, magazines, and everything in between, you'll either find her reading, working on an editorial project, or drinking endless cups of tea while writing things of her own. Check out more helpful tips and advice from Claire on WritersEdit.com