

Hello, World

Blending what you *know* and what you *love* to create a unique and believable world

Introduction

Stories are built around three major components:

1. Characters - the people the reader follows in a story.
2. Plot - the events that happen over the course of a story.
3. World - the place and time where a story unfolds.

Today we're going to focus on the third element - the World. The nature of a story's world and the creation of it by an author is referred to as "world-building".

The world of a story is similar to the setting, which could be medieval Europe, a space colony, a busy hospital in New York City, or an idyllic small town on the coast, for example, but the *world* also covers the atmosphere and unique features of the story. For example, a story's setting might be medieval Europe, but the world could be medieval Europe with dragons, elemental magic, and a simmering revolution.

Every book contains some amount of world-building, though the term is usually applied to science fiction and fantasy, where there are a variety of common, basic worlds, including:

- Steampunk Cities
- Generational Ships
- Alien Planets
- Medieval Fantasy
- Cyberspace
- Futuristic Megacities
- Parallel Worlds
- Post-Apocalyptic
- Urban Fantasy
- Totalitarian Regimes
- High-tech Military
- Mythical Worlds

Plus many, many, more. There are a lot of books and tutorials on building a plot and cast of characters, but fewer resources are available on how to create a world, in part because the world of each story is different, even within one sub-genre like "Generational Spaceships". So how do you make sure the world-building in your book is good?

One common piece of advice for writing is: "Write what you know". But what does that mean if you want to write science fiction or fantasy? Or if you want to set a story in the past, or the future? How can you write stories in fantastical worlds and still make them believable? Another common question for science fiction and fantasy is "How do you make your stories stand out"? How does a writer make an alien planet story feel fresh and different from the others published before them?

One answer to both questions is to mix your passions with your knowledge and come up with unique, exciting blends of what you *know* and what you *love*.

Blending what you know with what you love

When I'm building a world for a story, I follow this logic:

- My skills, life story, personality, hobbies, background, and interests (what I know) are important because they make my worlds more interesting, unique, and believable.
- Elements from my favorite books and shows (what I love) feed my creativity and drive me to write stories about places and times that I may not have experienced (like space!).
- Mixing elements of what I *know* with what I *love* creates unique, fantastical worlds filled with real-life elements that make the world feel believable and real.

Step 1: Make two lists of all the things you know.

This is where you're going to need to dig deep into your hobbies, interests, life, and background to create two lists: one of the cool and interesting things you know – your passions that you find yourself thinking or talking about a lot - and the other of some of the boring things you know about. Even boring things can come in handy when you're working on world-building!

Think about where you live, your family dynamics, and anything you've experienced that you think could be interesting to write about, like "summer camp". For boring things, think through chores and paperwork and time you've been bored while traveling or at home. List everything you can think of, then try to expand on every item, teasing out the details of what you know.

For example: on my fun list, I might write "tennis", since I used to play tennis. But thinking more about it, I might add "playing outdoors in summer", "athlete", "one-on-one competition", and "quick reflexes". On my boring list, I might put "stacking the dishwasher", then tease it out to "daily household cleaning", "domestic appliances", "kitchen", "soap tablets".

Step 2: Identify the things you love.

Try to list all your favorite books, TV shows, and movies. This list can get pretty big and it can be useful to break it up by genre (fantasy TV, realistic books, etc). Along with the title of each book/show, write a description of the elements of the world that immediately come to mind. Then, just like before, break down the world into as many elements as you can. Breaking down your favorite texts into elements like this can help identify what you're passionate about, because you'll see the same elements showing up again and again!

For example, you might say **This Mortal Coil** has a sci-fi dystopian, post-apocalyptic world where people can use technology to change their DNA. Then you could break it into elements like "genetic engineering", "implanted biotech", "mega-corporation", "underground bunkers", and "rebel networks". Going deeper, you could add: "wilderness", "abandoned towns", "military", "rustic cabin", "pine forest", and "human experimentation in creepy old labs".

Step 3: Mix-and-match the cool elements into something new.

Now for the fun part: take elements from the cool list of things you know and re-imagine how they could be combined with elements from what you love. Make a bunch of cool world-building elements from these combinations – the stranger the better. Don't work too hard on turning these into a full world or story immediately - the goal is to try combinations until you find one that speaks to you.

For example, from the lists above, I could put together: **Athlete, genetic engineering, one-on-one competition, sci-fi dystopian**. Maybe in this dystopian world, there's fierce competition for resources, and people engage in fights or challenges to gain money or food. People with athletic abilities would be highly regarded, and some might turn to genetic engineering to give them an advantage in such a ruthlessly competitive world!

Step 4: Look at your list of boring things.

Once you're hooked on an idea for a world - and trust me, you'll know - it's time to start adding texture to make it feel deep and believable. World-building relies on the little details in a story as much as the big ones. Your world might be on a spaceship, and involve wild alien races – but how do your characters get clean clothes? What do they do while waiting in line at the store? Do they ever run out of battery? How are these boring activities different or the same in your world?

Now is the time to go back through your “boring” list and look at some of the things you've written down. Would any of them be interesting or surprising in your world? Which can you imagine being very different, or even obsolete? What would people do instead? Adding a few of these details to your book will make your world feel consistent and realistic, even if it's totally fantastical.

For example, from the lists above, I could pick: **domestic appliances**, and **daily household cleaning**. If my dystopian world is so vicious, then people who aren't able to compete (or cheat with genetic engineering) might have tiny, micro-kitchens, or share kitchens with others as many people do in developing countries. Others might have staff who do their cleaning and cooking for them. Having characters prepare meals or clean up in different ways could expose the divisions in the world that I've created and show the reader the many sides of that world.

Exercises

To work on your creativity and spark new story ideas, try the following challenges:

1. Mix and match elements from the cool things you know and things you love into at least five combinations, and come up with a one-sentence description of what world they could create.
2. Mix and match to create just one combination, then come up with five different world-building ideas based on it. This is a great way to stretch your creativity!
3. Choose one combination and develop a one-sentence description of a world based on it. Choose at least three details from your “boring” list and use them to flesh out the idea for the world into a one-page summary with descriptions of how people live in your world, and the benefits and challenges they face.