

WRITERS FUN ZONE PUBLISHING

WORLD BUILDING WORKBOOK FOR FICTION WRITERS

Essential Blueprint for Science Fiction and
Fantasy Novelists

BY BETH BARANY

A JOURNAL AND GUIDE FOR YOUR STORY BUILDING BY
AWARD-WINNING NOVELIST & WRITING TEACHER



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INTRODUCTION

How To Use This Workbook

Use this workbook to brainstorm your story's world, either when you are in the story planning phase, or in the revision stage.

Topics are presented in no specific order as to help you make new connections. Under each topic I've listed a few questions to get your imagination flowing.

Keep in mind

Take note of your genre, as genre is about reader expectations. This will give you a general ideal of the kind of world your readers expect, so you can give that to them *and* surprise them.

Time budget

I recommend you take your time with your world building. Come back to these prompts anytime you need help focusing.

Take notes

You can use the prompts to take notes in your journal or digital application or print this document to write on.

Note: This workbook doesn't walk you through every topic of world building. Instead, use this workbook to get your imagination going. Only answer what's relevant or useful to your story world and leave the rest. Invent new categories as needed. I've left some space for you at the end for that.

The Importance of World Building in Any Genre

Though most people associate world building with science fiction and fantasy writers, world building applies to all writers.

Here's why: You can use the details of your world to reveal character, ratchet up the tension, and move the story forward. But first you need to know your story world.

You can discover your story world as you go—many writers do this, myself included—*and* you can also prime your imagination by brainstorming as much as you can ahead of time.

As if you're making a movie, you're the set designer, sound engineer, costumer, and props master (and more!) for your world.

Overwhelmed with World Building? Let's Break it Down

Do you feel overwhelmed when you sit down to write about your fantasy or science fiction world? Or any other world you're creating?

You may not know all the parts of your world, nor will all parts of your world end up in your book.

I most often start with the facts and lore that just flows from my subconscious and research the rest.

You may do it the other way around. You may be curious about something, start researching it, and then get inspired. I've done that too.

The process of world building is a personal one, so each of you will discover or has discovered your own method of creating your story world.

I've found some entry points into world building.

The strongest entry point for me is my characters.

I specifically encourage you to build your story world from the perspective of your main characters. It is their story after all, and the reader wants to experience the story world through their heart, mind, and body.

The Story Building Process is a Personal One

As I write and edit my book, I answer new questions that arise about the story world.

Later, when my critique partners ask me questions about my story world, I flesh out those, too.

All this is to say that I don't sit down with the list below and fill in the blanks. I tried that once, and it didn't work for me. But it may work for you.

Try one way, and if that doesn't work, try another. You'll eventually find the way that works for you.

Interview Your Characters

What may separate my method and process from other writing teachers is that I encourage you to interview your characters to discover your story's world instead of trying to write encyclopedic entries about the world. You may choose to do that later, but ground your story building in your characters, and that includes world building.

I interview my main characters—the point of view characters and the named secondary characters—to learn about my fantasy and science fiction worlds.

TIP: If your main character can't tell you what you need to know, interview secondary characters.

In fact, I interview all my characters, even the minor ones, to learn about my world. I've invented "off screen" characters to learn more about my story world. That's sometimes how characters get "on screen."

For story creation, I start with my main character, her GMC (Goal, Motivation, Conflict), her backstory and history, then start developing the world with that material.

From there, other characters and their stories start fleshing out the world.

After that, I look at plot, and as I develop that, I come up with more questions and answers about the world.

Character World Building Example

For example, my young adult fantasy heroine, Henrietta (in my trilogy, *Henrietta The Dragon Slayer*) trained to be a blacksmith and sword smith. Why? Because I'm interested in those things. I researched by visiting a blacksmith and by reading about medieval sword construction and use. That was fun!

Technology Examples

For my science fiction murder mystery series, I often start by researching the current and upcoming technology, and then get inspired on how to use it in my stories.

Side Note: Research is Fun...

If the research isn't fun, STOP.

The first person you get to please is yourself, so research only the things that are fun. What is joy-producing for you is also a clue that you're on the right path with your research and your story.

Example: While I loved researching 1850s Paris and asking question about how Paris was built to become the marvel it is today, it was tortuous trying to write a novel set in that period. However, if I think of a time travel story that uses that period, then I'm on fire.

Notice what sets you on fire and use that as background, back story, and setting. Your readers will sense your passion and be engaged.

A Note on Fantasy versus Science Fiction and Making Up Stuff

Though we can blur the lines between the fantasy and science fiction, I want to draw a distinction on how we make up stuff for each genre.

From what I understand and have read, you can make up everything when you write **fantasy**. You can do this if everything holds together logically and has meaning for your characters. If the world you're building feels random and that's not your intent, then you need to spend time figuring out the Why and How of things.

If you want to make up words, that's cool, as long as you and your reader don't get confused.

For **science fiction**, the world is usually based in some scientific possibility. We aren't traveling the stars yet, but one day we could be. We don't time travel (yet!), but according to physics, there isn't any reason why we couldn't one day.

How to Ask Questions for World Building

Here are some of the things I ask my characters about. These questions are posed as if you're interviewing your character.

Use these categories to guide you and add more categories as needed.

TOPICS FOR WORLD BUILDING

Language/Jargon

- Does your world have different languages? How did they evolve?
- What important slang do you use?
- What swear words and other exclamations do you regularly use?

Annual Rituals

- What rituals are important to your world and why?
- How do you celebrate weddings, funerals, birthdays, puberty, other?
- What rituals take place in your story?

Origin Tales

- How did the world come to be?
- How do people explain the world's origins?
- How do you understand how your world came to be?

Folklore

- What is your favorite childhood folktale or fairytale?
- What are the popular tales of the day? How do you feel about those?
- What tale is relevant to your life now?

Family Tree

- What do you know about your family tree? What do you wish you knew?
- How is family history recorded and remembered?

Flora & Fauna & Funga (Bioata)

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fauna>

- What are some of the important or relevant plants (flora), animals (fauna) and fungi (fungus) where you are?
- What are your favorites?
- What are unique to your region?

Food

- How is food planted/harvested/hunted/gathered?
- What do people eat and when? How is it cooked?
- Who cooks? What's poisonous?
- Do you like to cook? If so, why? What is your favorite dish to cook? To eat?

Geography

- What are the main geographical regions of your land?
- How did they form?
- What else is relevant to know about your geographical region?

Jobs/Professions

- What kind of jobs do people have?
- What is your job? How were you trained for it?
- Do men and women divide work, share it?
- What kind of training do people receive, if any? How are they trained and by whom?

Gender Roles

- What are people's attitudes about gender roles?
- What are the typical roles and why?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about gender roles and how you fit into them?

Clothing/Costumes

- How do people dress?
- What do your friends and colleagues wear and why?
- Where does fabric come from? Who makes it?

Weather

- What kind of seasons does your location have?
- How do you feel about that?
- What's unusual or bizarre about the current weather, if at all?

Technology

- What kind of technology exists?
- How is it powered?
- Who created it?
- What training did they need?

Animals

- Are there any special or magical animals in your world?
- What kind of pets do people have? Do you have?
- What special relationship do you or others have with special animals?

Religion/Spirituality

- What are your religious or spiritual beliefs?
- What is your area's main belief system?
- How do people's religious or spiritual beliefs create conflict and why?

Magic

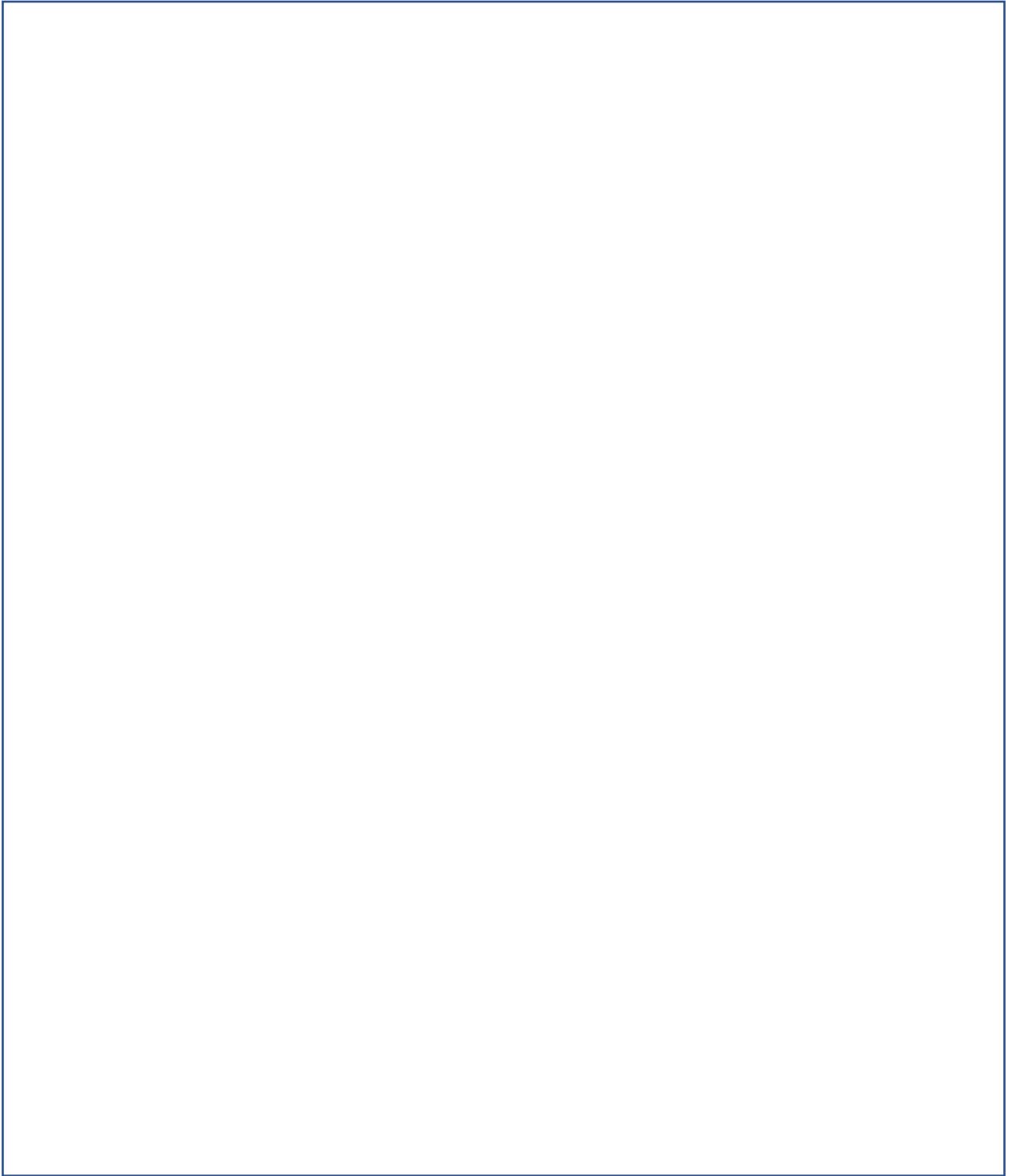
- What are the rules and boundaries around magic?
- What is the cost of magic?
- How are people trained in magic?
- Do you have magic?

Politics/Power

- Who is in power and why?
- How is power transferred to the next generation?
- What can people do or must not do to get close to powerful people?
- How do you feel about power and why?

Your Topics Here...

- Ask your questions and answer them.



More Resources on World Building and Related Writing Topics

Books

The Complete Guide to Writing Fantasy by Darin Park and Tom Dullemond, Dragon Moon Press, c. 2003

How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy by Orson Scott Card, Writer's Digest Books, c.1990

Limits And Beyond: 50 Years on from The Limits to Growth, what did we learn and what's next? By Ugo Bardi, Exapt Press (May 9, 2022)

The Signals Are Talking by Amy Webb, PublicAffairs; Reprint edition (March 6, 2018)

Thinking in Systems: A Primer by Donella Meadows, Chelsea Green Publishing (December 3, 2008)

The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference: An Indispensable Compendium of Myth and Magic from the editors of Writer's Digest Books, c.1998

You're Gonna Need A Bigger Story: The 21st Century Survival Guide To Not Just Telling Stories, But Building Super Stories by Houston Howard, One 3 Books, c. 2017

Find these book resources here:

<https://bookshop.org/lists/world-building-resources-for-fiction-writers/>

<https://www.worldcat.org/>

Online Resources

Dana (Donella) Meadows Lecture: Sustainable Systems (Part 1 of 4)

<https://youtu.be/HMmChiLZZHg>

A Philosophical Look at System Dynamics by Donella Meadows (YouTube)

https://youtu.be/XL_I0oomRTA

Future Today Institute: <https://futuretodayinstitute.com/>

Genre Guide by Joe Bunting: <https://thewritepractice.com/literary-genres/>

What is Family Constellations? <https://www.hellingerinstitute.com/what-is-family-constellations/>

Elizabeth Moon: <http://www.elizabethmoon.com>

Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy (original radio play):
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy_\(radio_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy_(radio_series))

Ruby, the Galactic Gumshoe original radio play:
https://www.zbs.org/index_new.php/store/ruby

Janey McCallister mystery series: <https://author.bethbarany.com/e-books/>

SCIENCE DAILY: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/news/>

School of International Futures: <https://soif.org.uk/>

STEEP (a few resources out of many) <https://fourweekmba.com/steep-analysis/>;
<https://www.widenarrow.com/blog/what-is-steep-analysis-5-factors-to-predict-the-future/>; <https://ivto.org/steep-explained-foresight-cards/>

Writer's Fun Zone: <https://writersfunzone.com/blog/world-building-resources-for-fiction-writers/>

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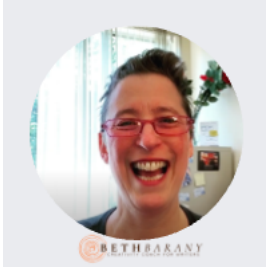
PLAN YOUR NOVEL LIKE A PRO: AND HAVE FUN DOING IT BY BETH AND EZRA BARANY

<https://books2read.com/pynlap>

HOW TO WRITE THE FUTURE PODCAST

<https://writersfunzone.com/blog/podcast/>

ABOUT BETH BARANY



Beth Barany (she/her) (bethbarany.com) teaches and coaches science fiction and fantasy novelists how to write, edit, and publish their books. Based in Oakland, California, she consults for local and international organizations. She's an award-winning fantasy and science fiction mystery novelist. Her series include the *Henrietta The Dragon Slayer* trilogy and the *Janey McCallister Mystery* series, about a space station investigator. She's authored many resources for writers including *Plan Your Novel Like A Pro*, with her husband and thriller novelist, Ezra Barany, and runs the podcast, "How To Write The Future." Connect with Beth via LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/bethbarany/> or email her directly bethbarany@gmail.com.

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