

WORLDBUILDING

It feels like a huge subject, and it comes up a lot with our editing clients who are writing science fiction, so we decided to boil it down to a few simple points.

Three main questions to consider about the world you're building...

We find that there are three main questions any author, of any kind of story, needs to consider about the world in which their story is set...whether that's the most ordinary street in the most ordinary town in the present day...Or on a planet orbiting a pair of binary stars at the edge of the galaxy.

And those questions are:

- What obstacles & opportunities does the world present to the characters in your story?
- What is your narrative device & point of view?
- How much does your reader need to know in order to keep reading?

Obstacles & Opportunities

Under the broad category of obstacles and opportunities, we include all the things most of us think of as worldbuilding.

Obstacles & Opportunities

- Climate, geography
- Socioeconomic system
- Culture, history
- State of science & technology

Even if you're not writing science fiction, you probably want to reckon with these elements of whatever world your story is set in.

Is life on a space station above a beautiful blue planet a good place to live, or is it a limiting environment that your protagonist wants to get away from?

Conversely, a squalid dystopian slum might seem like a terrible obstacle, something a protagonist would want to escape, but what if it's an opportunity because the most interesting and subversive people all live there?

Is there a class system in your future or alternative world? What is it based on? Can your

character move up, or fall down, in the social order? Do they want to?

And how about food? Is fresh food a rare commodity? Does everyone swallow a nutrition pill?

What are the constraints of communication? If your characters can communicate telepathically, how does it work?

What about regular messages? Does the speed of light create a significant barrier? Can just anyone afford to send messages?

How do people in your world get around? Robot flying cars? Wormholes? What's gravity like?

In every instance, if your characters go places, important story constraints will include how they go, how much it costs in time and energy and maybe money, and the obstacles and opportunities posed by the geography or space-ography--for example, a region full of pirates, a difficult planetary feature, an energy barrier in space, and so on.

If a journey from point A to point B is smooth and uneventful, you probably don't need to describe it, and the landscape—or the space-scape—it covers probably isn't important to your story.

Maybe you began with a world, and a map. And that's great. By all means, flesh it out. Readers who like adventures in magical lands usually like to refer to the map. But your map is not your story. The geography of your world is really only relevant to the degree to which it limits your characters' choices, raises the stakes, defines what they want and need, and supports your premise.

Narrative Device & POV

The second question after obstacles and opportunities presented by the physical realities of your world, is what's your narrative device and POV?

Narrative Device & POV

- Who's telling the story?
- To whom?
- Why?
- From what distance in time and space?

For example, in *The Martian*, Mark Watney is keeping a log, partly to have a feeling of someone to talk to so he doesn't lose his mind, and partly to document his ordeal for

posterity. His narrative is aimed primarily at his NASA team back home.

For those reasons, he reveals tons of technical and personal information and explains his actions. He's an engineer and a scientist, and he details virtually everything he does.

Your narrative device probably won't be as obvious as *The Martian's*, but you need to have some idea of who your narrator is, why they're telling the story, to what audience, and from how far away in time.

That will constrain how much of your science fiction world you should describe, explain, or simply drop hints about.

For example, if your POV character is entering a new world for the first time, everything will be strange. Everything is a potential danger, everything is unknown.

When Katniss first rolls into Panem on the fancy train in *The Hunger Games*, there's room in the first-person-present-tense narrative for the reader to experience quite a bit of detail through her eyes and her senses. But much of it can't be explained, because Katniss herself doesn't yet understand what she's seeing.

On the other hand, if your POV character is in their everyday world, they will only notice what's different or out of place, and you, the author, have to select the details that would naturally occur to that POV character, and will help bring the reader along.

Rick Deckard has always lived in the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*, so in order for the audience to understand what's going on, the film uses the narrative device of a film noir voiceover, where Deckard seems to speak directly to the audience and explain things.

The film has often been criticized for this choice, so if you use it, use it cautiously.

How Much Does Your Reader Need to Know to Keep Reading?

The Movie Mistake

We've all absorbed thousands of stories, and increasingly, most of them are via video. Filmmakers add a vast amount of worldbuilding detail to every shot.

As novelists, however, if we try to do that in words on the page, that's what I call the Movie Mistake.

Let me give you an example. Here's a screenshot of a marketplace in Wakanda in Ryan Coogler's film *Black Panther*. Prince T'Challa, may he rest in peace, is out walking in Wakanda with his lady friend Nakia.

It's hot, it's dusty, there's a smell of spices in the air. Handmade baskets hang in from pegs outside a shop. Plants grow up the sides of buildings everywhere.

The architecture is a jumble of exuberant shapes and forms, colored patterns, and black and white stripes, and the street lights are hoops of vibranium. Buildings rise right up a steep, lush green hill, taking advantage of every available space in this crowded, vibrant city.

A streetcar with ovoid windows and copper trim makes its leisurely way along the narrow street, and the brightly-dressed people stroll out of its way.

Are you bored yet? Would you like me to get on with the story?

What does your reader enjoy?

I don't know. I don't know your reader. The point is, some readers like a good bit of description and scene setting in order to feel grounded in the story. Some have little patience for it at all.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE? Write that. Test it with beta readers. Be prepared to modify it based on feedback.

No reader is ever going to picture the scene exactly as you do anyway, so all you can do is provide the two or three (or four or five) details that drive the story forward while helping the reader enter the spirit of the setting and form their own impressions.

But don't leave the reader in an empty room or vague outdoor space, either. You may have a vivid picture in your mind of everything in the scene, and forget to share it with the reader. (I make that mistake in my zero drafts all the time.)

Alternatively, you may be aphantasic, someone who doesn't have visual images in your mind to begin with.

Either way, it's important to select—or think up—a few details to include on the page.

For instance, what's out the window?

How do people in this space get around?

Can you reveal character with a detail like decoration?

A hint of the comfort or spartanness of the space?

Or some other detail that could reveal the nature of the character who lives there?

Be selective and precise in these choices, and most readers will feel they're experiencing the full setting.

Three pretty good guidelines.

To wrap up this worldbuilding discussion, we've got three pretty good rules of thumb for how much to include on the page.

First, Less is Usually more.

If you show us a ship emerging from a wormhole into the region of a beautiful home planet, how much do we need to know about the mechanics of the wormhole? Maybe a little, maybe nothing. Depends on what role the wormhole's going to play in your story.

If you show us a shanty in a dystopian future favela on the edges of San Francisco, do we need to know how many windows it has? Only if your character has to escape that way.

Describe a little, explain less, & don't interrupt action.

Second, If the reader genuinely needs to understand an aspect of your world in order to stay with the story, prefer description over explanation—and try not to interrupt action with either.

Remember that dialogue is a form of action, too.

Show us a character using a technology rather than telling us the history of that technology. Show your protagonist flying around a derelict freighter in space, and even if YOU know the whole history of the freighter and how it got there, and that history is really cool, think hard about how much of it the reader needs to know.

Select details that will pay off later.

For example, if you're going to have the character's community wiped out by a meteor in the third act, you probably need to introduce the meteor in the first act.

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