

World-Building Profile Questions

Your “world” or society is the entire locale of your novel or series. It can be a room, a house, a town, a city, a country, a planet or a whole universe. It can be secondary characters, animals, planets and other living things. It is more than what you can see, hear, taste, smell or touch, more than description and setting. It a web of interlaced behaviors. It can be real or it can be imaginary. Historical or revisionist. It can be on earth or in space or anywhere your imagination can take you.

Here are some questions to ask. Pick and choose the ones most relevant to your story.

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1. What's the yearly climate/daily weather like?

How does this affect your characters' daily life?

Do they have to worry about it, or is it something that never troubles them?

What are the seasons? What are the yearly and monthly temperature fluctuations?

What are the variations based on topography i.e. is the weather different on the beach than on the mountain top?

What clothes or gear do people need to protect themselves from the elements?

What types of buildings do they construct for shelter from the weather/climate? Are these effective or not? Do they vary by wealth or social status? Use local or imported materials?

Do weather events such as hurricanes or avalanches cause major problems on a regular basis or once in a while?

Do people use the weather to their advantage?

How does the climate/weather affect people's daily activities and moods?

2. What about agriculture and food?

How do people get food?

Is it cheap or expensive?

Do your characters have any experience dealing with farming or hunting/fishing?

What are farms like? Are they mechanized?

What crops and animals are raised?

Do people worry about starving or is adequate food available to everyone or just some?

Are they comfortable around food workers, fisherman, and farmers, or is it a lowly profession?

Do they work in this profession? Do they know people who do?

Does eating or food play an important role in their life, such as a ritual or an escape, or even a reward?

Do they have any attitudes or beliefs about food?

How is food preserved or stored?

What are common foods, specialty foods, food eating establishments?

What food rituals/table manners do people subscribe to?

Where do people eat?

3. What kinds of plants and animals exist in this world?

Is nature a problem for the characters in any way?

Do they know anything about living on the land?

Would they recognize poisonous plants or animals?

Do they use nature to their advantage, or is nature violent and fear provoking?

Are they comfortable outdoors?

Are they good with animals?

Do they fear any animals?

Do they have any pets?

Does a particular plant or animal hold any significance for them?

What mood does the natural environment create in the characters?

4. What are the economy, industry, and resources like?

What natural and man-made resources are available in this world? i.e. Is there mining, valuable minerals, gems, fuels, heat sources, light sources, etc.

What industries and business and stores are there? Where are they located – in cities, villages, shopping malls?

Where do characters work or function in this economy?

Do the characters have access to any important resources and materials and goods used in the society? Do they need them? Want them? Hope to destroy them?

Do economic or industry leaders cause any of the characters trouble or threaten them in any way? Do they help them in any way?

Are the characters rich or poor or in the middle?

What are considered basic needs and luxuries? By the populace? By the main characters?

How do the characters see the economic or social structure? How does the populace?

What form of money is used?

5. What do people do for entertainment?

What do the characters do for fun?

What do they enjoy doing in their spare time?

What do they find pleasurable, boring, offensive, exciting?

What activities do they participate in regularly?

Do they take part in any group activities?

What do their friends do for fun? Do they approve or disapprove?
What do they think is normal or risky behavior?
Does their recreation provide them with a skill that they can use in their conflict/story?
What sports are common in this world? Do your characters participate in them?
What role do the arts – music/dance/drama/fine art—play in the society? In the life of your characters? Do they or their friends play an instrument, sing, etc?
Who are the major artists, performers, creators in the society?
Where are most entertainment events held? Are special buildings or areas set aside for these events? Do attendees/participants wear special clothing or uniforms?

6. How does education work?

What system of schooling exists?
What are educational institutions and buildings like?
What are teachers like? i.e. are they wizards or professors or schoolmarm or Yodas?
What's the characters' educational background?
Do the characters feel smart or dumb compared to other people?
How does the society feel about education in general?
Are the characters book-smart or street-smart? Admired or scoffed at?
What about their friends? Their colleagues?
Do they try to continue their education in some way or just deal with situations as they always have?
Do the characters or general populace have any biases toward people with different types or levels of education? Can this be a source for conflict? Can it provide a resource for overcoming a conflict or story problem?

7. How does religion work?

What types of religious organizations are there?
What do religious buildings look like, and how do they function?
How big a role do they play in the society?
What religious rituals do people follow?
How is birth, marriage, and death/funerals handled?
Are some religious groups persecuted?
Does the protagonist or other characters follow any particular religion?
How devout are they?
What about their friends?
Do they have any biases toward those of other faiths?
How do they feel about the extremes of their religion or other religions?
Does religion or religious persecution cause them any problems?
Can it be a source for conflict? Can it be a source for aid?
How much do they think about religion? Participate in religion or rituals?
Does their need for, understanding of, or belief change and how does the society react?

8. What role does fashion and style play?

What are the current styles (hair, clothes, shoes, manners, cars, etc.)

What are these made out of?

Are there gender, ethnic, national, class, or religious differences?

What kind of fashion does the protagonist and other characters admire or hate?

Do they have any biases toward a particular look or style because of their life experiences?

Do they aspire to a particular look or style? Why or why not?

Can this play a role in their conflict?

Can they use fashion to aid them in any problems? Does it cause any problems or conflicts?

9. What is the political system?

Do people live freely with no government intervention in their lives?

Does the government regulate business, ideas, access to goods? Or are these things controlled by powerful individuals?

Are people taxed too much?

Can people travel freely?

Are basic services available – public transportation, water, food, etc?

How are medical services provided? Does everyone have access?

Are some people/groups/races/ ethnicities/religions discriminated against by the government?

Do all or some people live in fear?

Is slavery allowed?

What are the official and unofficial policies relating to drugs, alcohol, organized crime, terrorism, etc.?

10. What is the policing and military situation?

Are there police or local law enforcement?

Do they wear uniforms, have special insignias, vehicles, weapons, or training?

How are they viewed by the characters and the general populace?

What behaviors are considered crimes?

What is the justice system like? Are all people treated equally, or is justice based on social status or wealth?

What is the prison system like?

What is it like to be a prisoner?

Is your protagonist on the right side of the law or an outlaw?

What weapons are available to the populace? Which ones do the characters have and have skills to use?

What type of fighting is most common?

Is there a military?

Do they wear uniforms, have special insignias, vehicles, weapons, or training?

Are men and/or women conscripted or can they enlist?

Are their different branches or levels of experience?

How are they viewed by the characters and the general populace? Are they admired or feared?
Are countries/communities/tribes at war or in conflict or is there peace?

11. Communication and Transportation Systems

What is the technological level of this world?
How do people travel on or in land, water, air, space?
Are animals involved?
How quickly can they travel?
How do they communicate with each other?
How quickly can they reach friends, family, get help in an emergency?
Are communication and transportation systems free for everyone or are they limited in some way?

12. Language, Literature, & Symbols

Do any of the characters or populace speak a language other than English?
Is there a local dialect or specialized vocabulary?
Do wealthy people speak differently than poor ones?
Are there special expressions?
Are there visual or physical symbols such as heraldic, tattoos, hats, jewelry, statues, idols, etc. with special or ritual meaning?
What role does writing and literature play in the characters' lives?
Are some types of literature or ways of speaking more valued than others?

13. General "World" Questions?

What is a normal day like for your protagonist? Your other characters?
What is a normal year like?
What social, religious, or economic groups do the protagonist's friends and enemies belong to?
What parts of the society does your protagonist participate in or avoid on a regular basis?
What are some challenges living in this world?
What are some advantages living in this world?

Setting Questions for an Individual Scene

Use this list of questions to record important elements of a scene.

What is the weather at the start of the scene? Does it change during the scene?
What is the time of day/night?
What is the day of the week?
Do any holidays or historical events occur during this scene?
What is the temperature? Does it change during the scene?

What is the source and quality of light?

Are there any natural sounds? Man-made ones?

What scents and odors are there?

Are there any tastes?

What colors, shapes, and forms are in this location?

What textures are in this scene?

What is underfoot? Overhead? All around?

What objects are in the scene? Are they natural or man-made? Are they personal, public, or communal?

How much space is there around the characters and objects?

Are there ways to get in and out?

Are there any moving objects?

Are there any symbolic, ritualistic, or theme-related objects?

Are there any objects that foreshadow later events?