How Much of My World Do I Build?

[By Holly Lisle](#)

First, let me say that worldbuilding is an essential skill for every writer, regardless of genre. Not all writers need to concentrate on all areas of worldbuilding, but every writer must do some worldbuilding if he hopes to have a novel that is coherent, consistent, and real.

Second, writers seem to come in three varieties — those who really have no idea what worldbuilding is or why they should bother with it; those who do know, but figure they'll wing the details as they go; and those obsessive folks who secretly believe that they really can't start the book until the whole planet is in place.

I've spent time in all three camps — most of my time in the last one. My yearnings still run toward nailing everything down in advance of writing, but after years of dealing with deadlines and the cold reality that money doesn't come in until the work goes out (actually, until well after the work goes out), I've learned to do a minimalist version of worldbuilding that still doesn't skip on the essentials. I used my new system to develop the world of Matrin — a world critics uniformly praised for the depth and complexity of its world.

The system works. It can work for you.

Build only what you need; imply the rest.

What do you need?

A — Special physics

It used to be that the only places where you might run into special physics were in SF and fantasy novels. In SF, the special physics generally related to faster-than-light travel or time travel; in fantasy, it came about in the form of magic. But now, with time-travel and space-travel romances, vampire detectives, ghostly lovers, and literary angels intervening in the most earthly of novels, everyone needs to decide whether his book will require special physics. If nothing in your story touches on the supernatural, the magical, the mystical, or the (currently) scientifically impossible, you can skip this step. Go to step B.

If you require special physics, however, you must now answer the following questions.

1. **In what way does my universe differ from the mundane norm? (e.g., use of magic, use of FTL, presence of ghosts, presence of vampires or other fantastic creatures, etc.)**
2. **What is the nature of the difference — how exactly will these special features manifest?**
3. **What are the rules by which my special physics operate?**
4. **What effects will these rules have on culture and story?**
5. **What are the laws of my special physics?**
6. **What is the nature of the people who will use these laws? How do they differ from regular people?**

Rather than try to work our a pretend example, I've linked the page in which I develop the special physics of the world of Matrin. You'll find all of these questions answered, and a useful template for your own development of your world's special physics.

[Special Physics — Matrin Magic](#)

B — Organized terrain

Everyone needs a map. Even if your entire novel takes place within a single house over the course of a single day, you need to lay out the house — the placement of windows, which side faces north, where doors, halls, and rooms lie in relation to each other. Nothing is more disconcerting than being told that sunlight is pouring through a window in a room we were previously told faced north. Or having bedrooms wandering around like sleepwalkers, on minute accessible from the kitchen and the next, only by going up stairs.

If you're working within the confines of a town, acquire a town map. (If you'd like to have maps to all the towns in the US in one convenient place — one of the coolest pieces of software I use — take a look at [TopoUSA](#), which offers complete maps to street level of the entire country, plus terrain maps that can be view flat or in 3-D and resized to your needs. AND printed out. Novelist heaven.

If you're working in fantasy or SF, you are pretty much on your own. No programs exist to create maps for you, nor should they — neither names nor geographical details would be well-served by an automated solution. The feel of your world will be determined by these things, and they shouldn't come from a cookie-cutter program.

To look at the way that I developed the world map of Matrin (I also have smaller city and neighborhood maps, but they aren't available online yet) go to:

[Maps of Matrin](#)

I detail my development process with descriptions and pictures in three map segments, moving from west to east.

Move on to step C.

C — Defined inhabitants

Who lives in your world? Tripod-legged aliens and telepathic

humans? Dragons? Cute, furry magic-user? This is not the area where you define the cultures of human beings — if all you have in your book are humans with no special powers, go on to step D.

But if you have (main character) ghosts, vampires, aliens, or fantastical creatures, you need to develop clear definitions of what these folks are, and what they are not. Don't satisfy yourself with saying, "Oh, they're Tolkien elves," or "Oh, they're typical vampires." Actually sit down and create the rules by which your creatures work. These are the mimimum things you need to define —

1. **physical form**
2. **advantages and disadvantages of the form**
3. **how the creature propagates, or how the condition is passed on**
4. **how the form works**
5. **a history of the form**

You can see what I've done with the Karnee (from the world of Matrin) by following this link:

[Details of the Karnee Curse](#)

When you've finished reading this, go to step D.

D — A uniform method of counting time

Not everyone needs to worry about how time is counted (or about weights and measures, which are a sort-of-related category). Again, if you're writing about the here and now, you use what we use here and now. If you're writing a historical novel of any sort, however, you have to start paying close attention to how time was told in that period, because no one in the history of the world has told time the way we do — in minutes and seconds and pieces of seconds. People told time by bells, by the movement of the sun through the sky, by the fall of water from a pinhole or the burning of

a candle from mark to mark. And if you start figuring the telling of time in the future, or on other planets, then even the basics like length of day and length of year are up for grabs and need to be thought out.

This matters for such little things as dialogue — having a character say, "Just a second, I'll be right there," and such big things as how characters age, how long days last, and how seasons change.

I did a complete time breakdown for Calimekka, one of the major city-states in Ibera, the human territory in Matrin. It's important to note that it is only useful in this localized area, and by the people who are from this region — planets are big places and even in ours, even today, not all cultures tell time in the same manner, or even use the same calendar.

You can see what I did with hours, days, months, years and holidays at:

[The Bizarre Calimekkan Calendar](#)

E — Defined cultures

Everyone has to deal with defined cultures. Whether you have clashes between the rich and the poor, or between Northerners and Southerners, or between the literate and the illiterate, you have to define the characteristics that make people members of one subculture and not of another. Once you have done this, you can create characters who are members of their culture but defy stereotypes — until you have defined what makes someone a member of a culture, however, you'll tend to fall back on generalities, and all of your members of a particular culture will come across as pretty much interchangeable.

I've included a Sentient Cultures of Oria list from a version of the Sentinels of Cat Creek that I'm no longer using.

Sections of this material have made it into the final version, but that version gives away too much of the SENTINELS project. So I've used this one as a demo — equally useful, no real spoilers.

[Sentient Cultures (species) of Oria](#)

On to step F.

F — Spoken and written languages

It's easy to go overboard with languages, of which dialects are a subset. If you're writing historicals, the temptation to put most of the dialogue into the carefully researched (but almost incomprehensibly thick) dialect that would have been appropriate for those characters at that time can be seductive and almost overwhelming.

Resist! Resist! Nothing is more disheartening for the reader than coming across whole passages of text that might as well be in a foreign language. And this goes double for you folks writing in my neck of the woods — tiny suggestions of a language (a few words here, a sentence there) are fine, but don't do even as much as a whole paragraph in your beautifully crafted alien tongue in one block. It's so offputting many readers will put your book down and never pick it back up again. That said, it does pay to know what the dialects or languages would be like, how the grammar works, and what sounds the native speaker can and cannot comfortably form in casual conversation. This will allow you to hint at accents, suggest alien grammars, and whisper of far away places and foreign climes — without choking the reader on them.

G — Consistent (or at least explicable) technological level

Shakespeare had clocks in Rome. But I'll bet some reviewer caught the error and trashed him for it.

One reviewer of Diplomacy of Wolves was terribly upset that I

had airibles (my version of dirigibles) and sailing ships in the same culture. I had a very good reason for it — a reason that I had planned when I first developed the world. It was important, it comes into play in book three, Courage of Falcons, and it defines who the Families are and how they work. But I took a hit on it because I didn't make the reason clear in book one. (And this is something useful I've learned — you're going take heat from some reviewer no matter what you do, and no matter how you do it. The things one reader loves will be the exact things the next reader hates, guaranteed. So do what you have to do, and do it the best you can, and learn to live with the heat; that comes with the kitchen.)

If you design the overall details of your world in advance, you'll avoid having clock towers in worlds where time is measured by the pace of the sun . . . or if you do have them, you'll already know why.

On to step H, then — one everyone has to take.

H — A cast of characters

Where many writers start developing their story idea is the place where you should actually be finishing development. People do not live in a vacuum (or if they do, that's part of your worldbuilding) — they are products of external forces as diverse as gravity and the rotation of their planet around a star or stars; the people who share their nation, city, and neighborhood; their interactions with the neighbor with the dog who barks all night, the television show that annoyed them, and the breakfast that didn't digest.

If you write exclusively in the here and now, limiting your stories to your own neighborhood and your own neighbors, then the vast infrastructure of the universe exists for you ready-made. But if you dare to drift even a few years into the past or the future with your tale, or to slip sideways into an alternate realm, the infrastructure weakens, the safe supports

begin to wobble, and you are forced to create havens in which your characters can be real three-dimensional people . . . people for whom not just the fate of the universe, but the fate of the annoying barking dog, are issues of importance.

Now, some general rules to help you keep from being overwhelmed by the task of building your story's world.

Build from most general to most specific.

If you're struggling to create names for your characters, don't start off by trying to name them. Start by figuring out what language they speak, and what sounds their language uses. The easiest way to do this is to eliminate a handful of sounds from your own language (I call this system alphabetic reduction, and it's the first step I take in developing languages for my worlds).

Then create a handful of rules defining the the ways in which people within their culture (not their world, just their culture) choose names. For example, do the rich have the right to name their children for mammals, while the poor must be content with reptile names? Are men named after inanimate objects while women are named after animate ones? Do people choose their own names based on their greatest deed, whether real or imagined? Or perhaps does someone else choose their adult names for them, based on the chooser's private criteria.

Once you've developed the sounds you can use and the rules for nomenclature, you can put together a whole list of names very quickly, and from them choose the ones you like for your characters. And they won't feel awkward or patched together.

Build as you go.

Don't create all the languages, don't name all the streets, don't fill in all of the map, don't develop all the cultures or all the religions or all the species. Do detailed work on whatever you're going to use for your main characters, and imply the rest. George Lucas didn't build all of Mos Eisley in Star Wars — he just built one street. But he put a lot of detail into that one street, enough that you had the flavor of that part of town.

If you think you're going to need big sections of a city or planet opened up later . . . wait. Write using the portions you've already developed, and when you actually need something new, build it then. You are in the business of creating the illusion of a world. You don't have to throw in the platypuses, and you don't have to have everything all at once.

Keep good notes (and good backups).

Arhel — the world of *Fire in the Mist*, *Bones of the Past*, and *Mind of the Magic*, is gone. All the notes I had on it were in a ringbound notebook, in hardcopy. The maps, the character and culture-development sketches, the religions and lists of gods and critter lists and everything else, existed in that one, convenient place. When my life blew up and I had to pack kids, cats and computer and leave my home in the middle of the night, I didn't have time to grab the notebooks. I thought I'd have a second chance to get them. I didn't.

Keep your notes organized, because you'll think you will remember more about your world's rules than you actually will, and you'll need to check from time to time to see if the Elizabethans wore trews or doublets or something else entirely, or if you had decided that the things that flew and sucked blood and were three times the size of mosquitoes were called "cherims" or "chaltims".

And keep your backups current, and separated from each other physically (preferably with one copy not even in the house), because a fire or a tornado or a another disaster could destroy everything you've ever created if you don't. If you don't already have offsite storage, check around on the Internet to see if you can find free or cheap storage — I used to have some recommendations up here, but the places I recommended have gone out of business. The best I can do is note that you don't need much space. Just enough for your current project and back-ups. 25 megs should do unless you're writing something mammoth with tons of graphical files.

Don't beat yourself up over this.

Worldbuilding isn't rocket science (unless, of course, you're doing hard SF about space travel, in which case, of course, it is.) Do the best you can with it, research when you have to, but remember that the point of worldbuilding is not to build a world — it's to create interesting, consistent backdrops in front of which your characters can play out their tale. Your aim is primarily to entertain, secondarily (and not always) to instruct, and as long as you can do that without your readers stumbling over gross inconsistencies or errors of fact, you'll be okay. So have some fun with it, and don't sweat the small stuff.

If you caught the worldbuilding bug, and need to know how to do it professionally without OVERdoing it, [take a look at my Create a World Clinic — which includes worksheets, video demos, a class forum, and more.](#)