

Maps Workshop – Developing the Fictional World through Mapping

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Most of the books I've written have started with a map.

Not with an idea, or a character, or a theme. With a hand-drawn map, doodled out first while I was sitting and keeping someone else company, or while I was on break, or when I couldn't think of what to write and had no ideas to speak of and knew that if I drew a map something would come to me. Some of the maps were fairly artistic from the start. Some began on napkins or the backs of throw-away paper, and only became things of any artistic merit after they'd served their initial purpose of handing me an idea for a novel.

If you want specific titles of books that began as maps, I give you **Fire in the Mist**, **Bones of the Past** and **Mind of the Magic** (the Arhel novels), **Sympathy for the Devil**, **The Devil and Dan Cooley**, and **Hell on High** (the DEVIL'S POINT novels), **The Rose Sea**, **Glenraven** and **Glenraven: In the Shadow of the Rift**, **Hunting the *Corrigan's Blood***, **Curse of the Black Heron**, and finally the trilogy I'm currently writing, **Diplomacy of Wolves**, **Vengeance of Dragons**, and **Courage of Falcons** (the SECRET TEXTS trilogy.) In other words, you'd have to look through your stacks a bit to find a book I've written that didn't begin as a map.

Now I know this is a weird little quirk of mine, and I can't guarantee you that if you'll just draw a map, it will give you a novel that will sell. But on the chance that what works for

me will work for you, too, I'll go through the steps I use in doing my maps, and maybe my process will spark something for you.

I have favorite tools for mapping. I like graph paper, and I like the drafting markers that you can get from Office Max or Office Depot for about six bucks a set that come in five thicknesses, from .1 mm up to .5 mm. (Tech-Liner Drawing Pen Set, from Alvin) I don't use pencil, ever, and while you're doing this workshop, you shouldn't either. If you like the technique but find the inability to erase a detriment instead of a plus, feel free to modify it, but at least this first time, do not give yourself waffling room. Use pen and grit your teeth.

This first map is going to be your continent. I frequently also draw city and town maps, and in some instances street maps. I usually draw floorplans for ships, houses, and other indoor places where my characters will spend a lot of time. I've never written a book that didn't have mapping as one stage of its production. It's just that occasionally mapping is the second stage, or even the third—say around about the time I get the first two chapters written and realize there are important things about my characters' world that I do not know.

Before we get started, I want to be VERY clear about one issue that I know some of you are already sweating over. This doesn't have to be pretty. You do not get extra points for artistry. I'm showing you a technique for generating ideas and creating a story where you didn't have anything before, not trying to turn you into an illustrator. If you can't draw a straight line, no problem. You aren't going to need any straight lines. Wobbles are part of the process. Nobody but you ever has to see this map. Nobody but you ever has to know it even exists. It doesn't have to go in front of the book you're going to write, and if you decide you do want it in the front of your book, your publisher is going to hire an artist

to redraw it, no matter how cool you made it look. So stop already with the complaining about how you can't draw. 😊

Okay. Read all the following instructions BEFORE you start drawing, down to the line of asterisks (****). Then go back and draw your map.

- Get out your graph paper. Draw a dot. Draw another dot. Draw a third dot.
- Draw some upside-down V's in a line (but not necessarily a straight line). These are your mountain range. Name the range. You can have more than one. You can make it thick or thin. If you leave any gaps between the V's, these can become passes.
- Draw some snaky lines from the mountain range outward in a couple of directions. Name each snaky line "Something" River. (Do not be a smart-aleck and take this literally).
- Draw some broken [- - - - -] lines separating at least two of the dots from each other. Call these borders. Name the states, counties, or countries on either side of each border.
- Add a couple of other things that you find appealing—maybe a lake or an ocean or a desert. If you give yourself a shoreline (another long, wavy, wobbly line) stick some islands offshore. Maybe doodle in a forest. I use those kindergarten cloud shapes to indicate forests. You know, a whole bunch of little puffy, fluffy thingees all crammed in together. To me, these look like a deciduous forest as seen from the air in the summer. At least, they come close enough to satisfy me.
- Now name the dots you've already drawn—they're major cities. Draw a few more dots in interesting places, and name them, too. They're towns. Draw two small squares in

out-of-the-way places. These are ruins from previous civilizations. Call them whatever you want.

It's time to make use of your mistakes.

Find the places where you wanted to erase. You drew a line someplace where it didn't belong, (you right-angled off a river, maybe). That's okay. That right-angled thing was designed by engineers. Really it was. It's an aqueduct, or a canal, or a wall. You have a road that goes nowhere? That's cool—somebody made it, and it used to go somewhere, and now all you have to do is figure out who made it, and where it used to go, and why it doesn't go there anymore. You have a ruin-box in what accidentally became a lake, or an ocean? No problem. Once upon a time that ruin was above ground. Or maybe it wasn't, and once upon a time there was a civilization that lived under the water.

See what I mean about mistakes? They're a treasure-trove of story ideas waiting to happen.

Now...

Put the art supplies away and get out a few sheets of notebook paper, or sit down at your computer (I usually do this stage on paper, but that isn't essential). This is the essay portion of the workshop. Don't groan—this is a lot more fun than drawing the map was.

Answer the following questions, taking as much space as you need

for each answer.

Why are the borders there? By this I mean, why do these people have borders in the first place? A border always implies that conditions, people, philosophies, governments, or something else is different on each side.

What goes up and down the rivers? (People, contraband, products?) How does it get there? Who takes it?

How are the people on one side of the border different from the people on the other side? (Religion, government, race, species... go into detail. Really take some time working out what these differences are, and put some effort into figuring out why they were important enough to necessitate the creation of that border.)

What lives in the mountains? (Animals, people, big scary things, all of the above?)

How does the weather endanger the lives of the people who live in your world? (Along with weather-stuff like tornadoes, droughts, hurricanes, snowstorms, avalanches, and so on, you should include things like areas where you'll have earthquakes and volcanoes. Don't be afraid to be generous in heaping out troubles. You'll find plenty of use for them.)

What else endangers the people on your continent? (Plagues, barbarians, people from the other side of the world, monsters from the oceans or beneath the earth... Again, take some time on this. And be generous.)

Do a quick timeline in hundred year increments, for maybe two thousand years. Write down one really big thing that happened in each of those hundred-year periods. It can be geological, political, religious, magical, whatever. But it needs to be big. (Example: Invasion of the Sheromene headhunters into the country of Dormica, and subsequent decimation of the native

population and establishment of the Sheromenes in the southern half of that country.)

Write whatever else you can think of right now. See where you're starting to get the feel for a novel? A big novel? Good. Keep moving back and forth, from your map to your notes. Add stuff to the map as it occurs to you. Add stuff to the notes until something inside your brain goes "ding" and lets you know that you have a book idea that you're genuinely excited about.

You can follow this same process with a single city. (You should have seen the map I did of Ariss—it was so cool. I started out with a compass, and drew something like ten concentric circles, called them walls, and filled in the spaces between with roads and buildings. And divided the city right in half. The first book I ever sold was born from those circles with the line right down the middle. I still get goosebumps thinking about it.)

Good luck. If this works for you and you get something you really like, let me know. I'd love to hear about it.

NOTE: While I have frequently been the Goddess of Massive Worldbuilding Overkill (and have sold a bunch of fiction that way), I also know how to build a world that will support a story in just five minutes (and have sold a bunch of fiction that way, too). [*If you struggle with writing stories in places that feel real and that fuel your conflicts and drive your plots, let me show you what I've learned.*](#)

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