

World- Building

Part 5: Geography

Getting Started

Welcome, World-Builders!

We've got Geography up next on the 6-week world-building series! I figured I'd give myself a bit of a break between the dense subjects of the past few weeks and the final big topic of Civilization next week.

Not that Geography is easy! In fact, it takes a lot of logical thinking. And Geography done well can lend itself to great supporting information and help your readers imagine what you see in your head when you write!

But overall, this is much less intensive than other weeks. I hope you're in need of this little break too! By the way—I'd love to see some of your progress. Tag me @mmkastanek in your Instagram or Facebook posts so I can see what world-building info you've found useful so far! I'd love to connect with you.

In Geography, we're going to explore all aspects of your physical world— from Terrain and Boundaries to Creatures to Weather and Seasons to Influences on Peoples.

In a way, I think I should have made this section the first one, but then again, I think that about each one! I hope this next section is as helpful for you as the past ones.

I'm so excited to adventure with you!
Michelle

Elements of Geography

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Terrain

Terrain plays a large part in giving a feel to your world. Many times, readers can assume certain things about your world just by the description of the terrain. A world with snowcapped mountain peaks and rugged hills paints a much different picture than a sun-drenched desert with tornados of sand. That being said, do not info-dump your terrain on people!

Let's talk about how we can flip the narrative on terrain here. How many fantasy stories have you read that take place in a city guarded by a wall with a palace and nice deciduous trees with mountains in the background overlooking a lake. It's classic and it can work if your story necessitates that, but start thinking more broadly about how your characters can interact with your natural world in a more creative way.

What about a world that has a traditional castle and a moat but that is in the middle of a desert. Maybe it's only uncovered for one hundred years before it sinks back beneath the sand. Or think about a tropical island world. Or the arctic. There are so many possibilities—don't limit yourself to the traditional European-style of fantasy.

Various terrain elements you could include:

- rivers
- streams
- oceans
- lakes
- deserts
- oases
- frozen wasteland
- dry or cracked ground
- caves
- mountains
- hills and valleys
- flat fields
- lava fields
- sulfur deposits
- rocky cliffs
- forests
- meadows
- plateaus
- farmland
- coastlines
- wetlands
- islands
- prairie
- canyons
- natural arches
- tropical forest
- glens

Info Dumping

Ah, the notorious info-dump. In some ways, it is a rite of passage for fantasy authors. But we must remember to make the info-dump both enjoyable and pertinent for the reader.

What do I mean by an info-dump?

An info-dump is a large chunk of information poured out to your reader that (should) influence the rest of the story. Think of Elrond's council in *Lord of the Rings* or Allanon's tale in *The Sword of Shannara*. The key here, is that the info dump should be information that is **useful** to the reader. There should almost never be a terrain info dump. I don't care if the world you have created is the most beautiful place in the universe, I don't need five pages on it. Your reader will put your book down faster than a tarantula with diarrhea.

How to do an info-dump

I'm thinking of possibly writing a whole blog post about this, but in short, you should only use an info-dump if absolutely necessary and absolutely every detail that you include should be useful to your reader. Don't overload with unnecessary information. Your reader is trusting you with their imagination. Don't waste their time with the unnecessary.

Terrain

Questions

1. List some physical geographical settings of your world. Describe them as vividly as you can.
2. Are there any specific formations or landmarks important to your story or character?
3. What is the closest body of water to your main character's homeland?
4. How long does it take to get from place to place? Are there roads or other types of infrastructure to help people from place to place?
5. Are animals useful when traversing the terrain of your world or is it easier to go on foot?
6. What types of trees and other foliage does your world have?
7. How does the terrain factor into the climate of the area? For example, the Great Lakes of Michigan cause massive snowstorms and an insane amount of snow accumulation. Describe how your terrain affects the climate and weather!
8. Describe the transitions between varying terrains (if any).
9. When looking at your world from above, what would the terrain look like? How does that differ from your characters' actual experience of the terrain?
10. Are there any dangerous flora or fauna?
11. Are there any places your characters won't travel for their own safety? What makes it so dangerous?
12. Do any areas/locations have magical or spiritual significance?
13. Are there any natural wonders? Do people travel to see them?
- 14.

Creatures

Creatures are a great part of fantasy and one of my favorite things to create! Most of the creatures in my book I take from my nightmares. It's so much fun bringing them into reality (in a really creepy way).

If you want to involve not-yet-created creatures in your world but are unsure where to start, I recommend Pinterest. Browse through fantasy creature art and let them spark your imagination. I've found several images that help refine my descriptions of creatures even if the artwork doesn't look exactly like what I picture. Sometimes having that physical image in front of you can help you to describe something more accurately.

That being said, chances are you'll have some "normal" creatures in your world, too. As you should! Your book would become pretty complex pretty fast if not a single creature was real. I can't imagine how many pages of description you'd have!

Creating new creatures is fun, but make sure each of them have a purpose in your story. Creating creatures just to have them in your story doesn't do it any good. Everything you create for your narrative should advance the story. Avoid the bunny trails, however fun they may be!

Golden Rule #7: Watch your comparisons.

Know your world well enough to know how to compare things. As a broad example, if cats do not exist in your world, your character should not describe something as having "feline features" or "ears like a cat."

This seems self-explanatory but you have no idea how many young writers I have seen do this! You must know your world and your creatures enough to compare only what your characters know.

Think of other creative ways to describe creatures other than by comparing them to other creatures. Instead of saying a "cat-like" nose, you could say a heart-shaped nose. Or a nose like a smushed bean. You get the idea.

Avoiding these unrealistic comparison comes with knowing and understanding your world in greater depth. These world-building segments are a great place to start.

Creatures

Questions

1. What real-world animals live in your world?
2. What traditional fantasy creatures exist in your world?
3. What creatures have you developed specifically for your world?
4. How do real-world, traditional fantasy, and new creatures exist together in your world?
5. Do creatures vary by area? Do they have their own territories? How do they adapt to the seasons/temperatures in the areas they're in?
6. Are the creatures of your world used in any unique or different ways?
7. Can your creatures speak?
8. What do the sentient beings of your world use the various creatures for?
9. Are there any hostile creatures or creatures to be feared?
10. Are any creatures kept as pets?
11. How are animal-like beings treated in your society? Are there any sentient creatures?
12. Are animals used for transport?
13. Are any creatures worshiped?
14. What about your creatures is indicative of the type of terrain and weather they live in?
15. Are any parts of your creatures considered valuable? Magical?
16. How are creatures bought and sold?
17. How do each of your main creatures fit into the food chain?

Weather and Seasons

Weather is an often overlooked part of many fantasy books. In my reading experience, it either is sunny or it rains.

You can do so much with the weather! Instead of battling another wild creature have them face some sort of natural disaster—a forest fire, an earthquake, a lightning storm, a sandstorm! These make for interesting twists of “man vs. nature” that fantasy stories don’t always address. Sometimes fantasy is too focused on the battles and the monsters instead of nature. Both creatures and nature can be equally as challenging of foes!

Watch the Weather Channel.

I know, boring old-man channel, but I'm serious! There are several shows about natural disasters and weather patterns. Even seeing how weather progresses over a certain area is knowledge added to your bank of how the world works. The better you understand your reality and how it works, the better you'll be able to create a world that works!

Understand your world around you and through your understanding, create a world that your readers can understand through your description.

As always, this topic ties in to all the others! Seasons can bring about festivals, ceremonies, or religious rituals. The weather can be thought of to be an act of a god. By now, I hope you've started connecting the dots between these world-building parts to see that one section can't exist in isolation. What other elements that we've discussed so far tie in to these Geography sections? What about weather and seasons specifically? Take some time to connect the dots on everything you've built so far. The more dots you connect, the more cohesive your world.



Weather and Seasons

Questions

1. What seasons are in your book? Does your character experience all four seasons? Or is it perpetually one season?

2. What weather changes can you work into your story? (Make sure your adventures don't always take place in a cloud-filled blue sky with a perfect yellow sun... you get the picture)

3. What is considered hot to your people? What is considered cold? What would be the perfect temperature?

4. What astrological or physical signs are there that the seasons have shifted? That the weather is changing?

5. Is the entire area of one weather and season?

6. What natural disasters are common in your area? How do your people handle these disasters? Is there a magical or spiritual cause? What does recovery look like?

7. How does weather impact your characters' daily lives?



8. How do your people react to changes in the seasons or weather? Who or what do they believe is responsible for it?

9. What types of storms are there?

10. What signs of impending weather are there? Do your people track the weather?

11. What has been the worst weather-related destruction in the history of your world?

12. When are flowers in bloom? When is harvest? When is planting season?

13. How does weather affect commerce, trade, and other parts of society?

Influences on People

Yep—everything is still connected! Geography has a major impact on people, from the clothing they wear to the natural resources they have available to them to the food they eat! Think about it this way, a character living in the desert isn't going to dress in petticoats and eat watermelon. You still have to infuse reality with your fantasy!

Use your life as an example. How do you dress? Why? What about the weather and terrain around you calls for the way you dress? Do you always make sure to have an umbrella in your car? Do you bring hand warmers with you when walking? What fruits and veggies are in season at your local farmer's market? What animals are hunted in your area? All of these real-life observations can play directly in to your fantasy world! Start developing your fantasy world from the reality around you. It will make your world stronger because you'll be able to see how everything connects and your connections will make sense to your reader.

What other ties besides those listed on the next page can you make between the land and your characters? What about the natural world affects them on a daily basis?

Maps

I am always a big fan of maps. Chances are if you publish, you'll have a graphic designer drawing your maps (unless you're some sort of amazing artist). But that doesn't mean you shouldn't at least sketch your own maps! Don't worry, they never have to see the light of day! Maps are incredibly helpful especially if you're using the traditional quest troupe to figure out how long it would take to get from one place to another or what sorts of landmarks you need to remember to include in your story.

This is also gives you one place to reference the names of all of your locations. I don't know about you, but I often forget what I called that one river in that one chapter....

Influences on People

Questions

1. What clothing do your people wear that is influenced by the terrain or weather in your area?
2. What food is grown or available? How does this relate to the geography? What food is difficult to get? Why?
3. In what way do the characters in your story interact with the natural world? What do they think of it?
4. Are there country or territory boundaries? Are these physical? Are they respected by all parties?
5. How are your characters' lifestyles reflective of the weather/temperatures/seasons?
6. List any important locations in your story. How far would it take someone to travel between these important locations or cities?
7. Does the weather or climate have any impact on modesty?
8. How does the weather/climate/geography influence what is important to your peoples?
9. Is there anything your peoples have to ration due to the effects of weather/climate/terrain?
10. How was the world created? Is there any proof?
11. What astrological features are there (e.g. two suns, five moons, constellations)?
12. Where are the major ports? Cities? Is there a capital? Why are these places where they are?
13. How does the physical appearance of your peoples reflect the climate and geography of where they live?
14. What natural resources are available to your characters?

Connect with me!

About the Author: My journey began one day the summer before 5th grade. I had just finished reading J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and (in my young, naive mind) thought, if Tolkien can create such an amazing story, why can't I? I began what I continue to work on to this day, albeit with some major adjustments.

No. Strike that.

In truth, my journey began in elementary school in the days when schools had funding and therefore had print shops where you could submit your books to your teacher and she would "publish" them for you; spiral bound and laminated with your own design on the cover. I published over 25 books.

No. That's not right either.

My journey actually began one day during kindergarten when my teacher, Mrs. Johnson, brought in glossy scraps of paper that I thought looked perfect for writing books on (when in actuality, that paper was horrible and couldn't hold a pencil mark if its life depended on it). I wrote four books that year.

Well, whatever way it began, it endures. I'm a Michigander destined for adventure. Traveling is the only other pastime that stirs my soul (don't ask me my favorite destination - I don't know). When I'm not working my big girl job, I help run a comic book store with my family which means I'm always surrounded by fantastic art, good literature, mind-taxing board games, and love. A combination of cuddles from my cat (Aravis), a good cup of tea (or wine, or tequila - I'm flexible), and classical piano music is my recipe for a productive writing session. More often, I write to the sound of Office episodes and unending questions

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