

# World- Building

## Part 6: Civilization

### Getting Started

Welcome, World-Builders!

It's our final week together! I hope you've enjoyed this series as much as I have and I hope you have learned a lot about your amazing world!

I apologize for the delay on this last piece. My father had his liver transplant surgery at the beginning of June and my brother was his donor, so I've been busy taking care of them instead of writing. But I'm back and ready to go!

Please let me know other topics or areas you would like me to cover after this series ends. I would love to know what would be most helpful to you in terms of fantasy writing. Do you like prompts? Q&A with authors? Editing tips/advice? Shoot me a DM or comment with what you'd like to see next.

In this section, we're going to take a closer look at **Civilization**. I've broken this down into **History, Culture, Myths and Legends, and Medicine, Food, and Clothing**. These areas are broad, but I'm hoping that they summarize the parts of world-building you think I missed so far.

Thank you to all of my readers who have stuck with me, especially over this hiatus. I appreciate all of you more than you know.

I'm so excited to adventure with you!  
Michelle

### Elements of Civilization

Getting Started 1

History 2-3

Culture 4-5

Myths and Legends 6-7

Medicine, Food, and Clothing 8-9



# History

Everyone has a history. Every culture has a backstory. Knowing your world's history is important because what happened influences several aspects of your world from religion, to social structure, to government. History is, in my opinion, the place where you can dive deepest into your world. There are so many levels you can add to your story by knowing your world's history and the impact that history had on your present world.

Now history is obviously long and complicated. I'm not saying you should write the textbook on the history of your world (although major props to you if you do), but you should have a basic concept of the major turning points in history. Was there a war that eradicated a civilization? Did something happen to make slavery illegal? Were there any religious conflicts? Think about what elements of your story were impacted by historical events and start there.

To know your world's history is especially important if your story refers to something that happened in the past. If there's a reference, you should know all about it, from dates to length, to what happened. If you write "The cathedral was erected after the War of Rivers," this raises many questions! Why was the cathedral built? What did the War of Rivers have to do with the cathedral? Who were the opposing parties? Who won? Why is this so important that the writer mentioned it?

You get the idea.

Which leads to the next point—don't mention things just to mention them. Don't make up a war or event just to mention it and never flush it out. There must be a purpose behind everything. And make sure your historical events don't contradict each other (unless you're doing it purposefully for other reasons). You shouldn't have one section in your book that talks about the War of Rivers happening before the erection of the cathedral and another section saying the War of Rivers only happened thirty years ago, which was way after the cathedral was erected. You get my point.

## **World-Building Tip:**

One of my favorite world-building pastimes is to get a poster board and a pack of sticky notes. I write down everything that is historically important or that my characters reference during the story on a separate sticky note. Then I put them in order on my poster board. Finally, I go through and assign each a date in time (even if my world does not record time like we do, it is still helpful for me to know that event X happened 80 years before event Y). After I am comfortable with the arrangement of events, I plot them on a line on the poster board. I keep this close at hand when I am writing so that if I forget how many years ago a certain war was, I can quickly reference it.

As a pantsier, I don't use this for my storyline plotting, but this can also be useful for storyline! I write first and then plot how long everything takes in days on a poster board afterward. That way, I can see how much time has past and incorporate any season changes or necessary shifts into my narration later.

## History

### Questions

1. What is a general history of your world?
2. What are a few turning points in history?
3. What is a historical event that is remembered incorrectly? How does this impact your society/character?
4. Is history remembered differently by different peoples or is there a general consensus?
5. How is history remembered/ documented?
6. How do children learn about history?
7. Is there any part of history that your society keeps hidden? Who knows about it?
8. Are there certain eras of history? Would this be helpful for your readers to know?
9. How do historical events of your world shape the present world?
10. Can you link advancements in your world to specific time periods? For example, how long has your society been using swords? How long have they had educational systems?
11. Are there any statues or monuments to historical figures? Why or why not?
12. What does your main character think about the history of their world? Does it impact them on a daily basis?
13. What events are currently happening in your world that will one day be recorded as history? Is your main character living in the middle of a turning point?

# Culture

Culture is so broad, I found it difficult to define. It is very all-encompassing. So for the purposes of this section, I have chosen to define culture as; “the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group” (Oxford Languages).

So basically, everything!

You’ve worked out the details in this world-building part and in previous parts, now for Culture, we’re going to look at it all collectively. Everything you’ve worked on so far contributes to a culture. Hopefully, you’ve found that in different areas of your world, there are different cultures that occurred because of different values, religions, activities, or natural occurrences.

I find it helpful to create compare/contrasts with the cultures in my world. They can be somewhat similar, but there should be distinct differences between each of your cultures. I also like to detail how my main character(s) feel about each culture, especially the ones that are not their own but that they experience throughout the course of the story.

So how do the various cultures of your world fit in to your story? How does your main character interact with them?

## **My Favorite Writing Help Books:**

I’m planning to do a separate post on this soon, but since you’ve been following with me on this journey, I figured I’d give you a sneak preview!

1. **Write the Story**—this is a prompt book that works similarly to the way I present writing prompts on my blog. Great stuff.
2. **Writer’s Market**—this gives you the 411 on all of the places you can submit your work to be published.
3. **The Emotional Wound Thesaurus** (and others in this series)—though I find these tend to be geared toward general fiction writers, I still find them immensely helpful for character development.
4. **Bird By Bird** (by Anne Lamott)—This book kickstarted my writing process. It’s the simplest advice, but you need to hear it!
5. **On Writing** (by Stephen King)—I was hesitant with this one at first as I had never read King’s work because, frankly, I’m afraid of everything. But his advice is so stinking good. The first part about how he became an author was skippable, unless you’re really into King, but the rest was immeasurably helpful.

# Culture

## Questions

1. How is culture passed down between generations?
2. What aspects of culture make your world special?
3. What cultures clash in your world? How are conflicts resolved?
4. What is a source of cultural pride for your various peoples?
5. Is cultural evident in anything physical, such as appearance, dress, or mannerisms?
6. What is a popular pastime?
7. How does your main character feel about their culture? Do they identify with every part of it?
8. What do your peoples do for entertainment?
9. How has your main character's culture changed over time? How have other cultures in your world changed?
10. Name four values of your main character's culture. How are these reflected?
11. What does your main character's culture think about values such as modesty, chivalry, and respect?
12. How is culture reflected in art, music, literature, clothing, and other areas?
13. What are customs of your main character's culture?
14. What social institutions are there in your world? How do they impact your main character?

## Myths and Legends

Myths and legends are a big part of the development of any civilization. Stories help to shape a culture and instill in peoples the values of society. Think about the myths and legends of the Greeks versus the Native Americans. The myths and legends of a culture show what their values are.

Spend some time brainstorming common myths and legends from around the world. Think about the goal of each of those stories. Was it to

impact a specific lesson? Was it taught as historical fact? Or was it simply to entertain? The myths and legends that tend to endure the test of time are ones that teach something or ones that the listener can connect with. For example, the story of Icarus building his wings and flying higher and higher until he got too close to the sun and melted the wax that held his wings together, ultimately killing him. What does this teach us? Sometimes the meanings of myths and legends mean something different to everyone, and that's okay! Next, think about how the myths and legends you brainstormed are used in common culture today. Have you ever heard someone called an Icarus (all you Hamilton lovers should know this)? Now think about various phrases you use in your world. Are they tied to any legends?



### Golden Rule #8: K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple, Stupid)

I get it, you want to write a crazy complex world that puts Tolkien to shame. Dumb it down. Take the basic principles of your uber-complicated story and write those down. What does your reader absolutely have to understand in order to understand your world? Then you can salt those basics with complexities. If you need two chapters to explain a facet of your story, it's too much. Good stories rely on the action to carry the reader forward. Giving too much detail or making something too complicated only bogs down your writing.

# Myths and Legends

## Questions

1. Is there a creation myth? What is it?
2. What are some typical stories children are told?
3. How are stories passed on?
4. What myths explain ordinary occurrences (e.g. seasonal changes, sunrise)?
5. Are there any revered legendary figures? What are their stories?
6. How do the myths and stories of your society tie into religion? History?
7. Are there any phrases that stem from legends that are used in normal speech today?
8. Are there any faux pas that stem from legends?
9. What is your main character's favorite myth? What about it rings true for them?
10. Does a legend or myth play a central role in your story? How does your character's belief (or unbelief) in that story impact their progress?
11. Are myths and legends widely circulated? Or do they differ greatly from region to region?
12. What are the important lessons in each of your myths/legends?



## Medicine, Food, and Clothing

**Medicine:** The way a culture treats their sick, dying, and wounded, says a lot about their development and their views about life. Medicine, in my opinion, ties closely with religion, advancement, and culture, so I couldn't decide where to add this section! Does your world have buildings where they treat the sick? Or are ailments typically remedied at home? What is used to treat wounds? Materials that our world knows of? Or alchemical remedies? Herbs? Magic?

Think about how your world's belief systems view death. Does this impact medical care? What can be done to prevent someone from dying? And when someone does die, how is this handled?

I've said it before, and I'll say it again—studying other cultures and history is extremely helpful in this area. You don't have to copy (for example) the Egyptians in every aspect of your story, but using their innovations as far as preserving the dead might be a small takeaway for your own writing.

**Food:** Think about the wonderful food differences across our world? Thai food, Mexican food, Italian food... the diversity is what makes it interesting! Think about various ways the people of your world cook and eat. Do they use a lot of spices? What do those taste like? Or do they prefer blander foods that present colorfully on a plate?

Think about not only regional offerings but status offerings. Is food different for the rich? What about the differences in tavern food versus home cooked food?

**Clothing:** Clothing choices, materials, and style reflect values in a society such as beliefs about modesty, gender, and societal roles. But this also reflects the natural world around them. Think about what is available (cotton, metals, glass etc.) and how that is shown in what they wear. Think about shoes and jewelry, seasonal clothes, rain gear, fighting gear... There are so many aspects to think about!

Like everything, your clothing choices must make sense. A world in which it is extremely hot and arid would not have a people dressed in furs. Use what you have built so far in these lessons to influence the types of clothing your characters will wear.



## Medicine, Food, and Clothing

### Questions

1. What medical tools are available?
2. How do your characters deal with sickness?
3. Is medical care widely available?
4. What is a typical outfit for males? Females? Royalty? Commoners?
5. What fabrics are used for clothing?
6. What is a traditional meal?
7. How are meals eaten? Is it family style? Do people eat alone? Is it a pastime or is it simply looked upon as a necessary task?
8. How much does food cost? Clothing? Medicine?
9. What clothing is fashionable in society right now?
10. Do various professions have required clothing? What is it?
11. What is a traditional dish in your society? What is a delicacy?
12. What time are meals eaten? How many meals in a day?
13. If your main character was sick to the point of being unable to continue toward their goal, what would they do?
14. Do you have food that is unknown to this world?
15. How does clothing differ across the seasons or weather changes?
16. How is food acquired? Do people have farms/gardens or do they go to the market?

## 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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