



# WORLD-BUILDING 101

---

How to construct an  
unforgettable universe for  
your fantasy or sci-fi story



ProWritingAid

BY HAYLEY MILLIMAN AND KATHY EDENS

# ► CONTENTS

WHY WORLD-BUILDING MATTERS .....	4
WORLD-BUILDING 101: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW .....	5
THE GREATEST FICTIONAL WORLDS EVER CREATED .....	7
THE THREE MAIN RULES OF WORLD-BUILDING .....	11
CREATING THE SPECIES IN YOUR WORLD .....	13
CREATING THE MONSTERS IN YOUR WORLD .....	15
CREATING GOD CHARACTERS IN YOUR WORLD .....	17
THE ULTIMATE WORLD-BUILDING QUESTIONNAIRE .....	19
WORLD-BUILDING SOFTWARE .....	22
ABOUT PROWRITINGAID .....	24



# ► CONTRIBUTORS

## ■ HAYLEY MILLIMAN

Prior to joining **ProWritingAid**, Hayley spent a number of years as an elementary school teacher, which was a crash course in learning how to entertain an indifferent audience. These days, she puts her storytelling skills to use writing blog articles, eBooks, and working on her first novel. When Hayley isn't hunched over her keyboard, you can find her figure skating at the ice rink or hiking with her dog.

## ■ KATHY EDENS

Kathy Edens is a B2B copywriter, ghostwriter of 6 non-fiction books, and lover of the written word—in any form. She especially likes to take fiction writing classes as a way to procrastinate writing her own fiction. You can reach Kathy at [www.kathy-edens.com](http://www.kathy-edens.com).

## ■ KATJA KAINÉ

Katja Kaine is the creator of **The Novel Factory**—software for novel writers. The Novel Factory includes heaps of useful tools for novelists, including plot templates, character builders and even a step-by-step guide to writing a novel. Katja has had fiction published in various print and online magazines, and writes YA and Middle Grade Fantasy novels.



# ► WHY WORLD-BUILDING MATTERS

By Hayley Milliman

**C**an you remember the first world (besides our own, of course) that really drew you in?

For me, it was the *Star Wars* universe. I remember spending hours obsessing about how I would build my treehouse in Endor. When it was cold outside, I would pretend I was on Hoth.

Later, as I grew up, more fantasy and science fiction worlds drew me in. On my 11th birthday, I secretly hoped to receive my invitation to Hogwarts. As an adult, I walked the rolling hills of New Zealand and felt like I was in Middle Earth.

That's the power of world-building: when done right, it creates a living, breathing environment for a story that feels just as real as the world that we actually live in.

As a fiction writer, particularly in the fantasy or science fiction genres, world-building can make or break your book. If you construct a world that is believable and compelling, your readers will sink right into it. If, on the other hand, you don't pay enough attention to world-building, your story can come across as implausible or boring.

In this eBook, we've pulled together advice on how to build your story's world. We cover everything from the basics of world-building to how to use software to assist you in the process.

We can't wait to explore the worlds you'll build after reading this eBook!



ProWritingAid

# ► WORLD-BUILDING 101: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Kathy Edens

If you write science fiction or fantasy, your readers expect a new world—or worlds. Only you can decide how many worlds to build and how many stories to set in your worlds.

When you have one world per story, you can achieve a certain depth. But if you have multiple worlds, creating believable societies for each world gets tricky. If you're creating many worlds, they must have enough depth for your readers to acclimate themselves.

One shortcut is to build your fictional world with tropes that every reader will immediately grasp. Think of elves, hobbits, fairies, dragons, wizards, and magical castles. As a writer, though, you should question whether you want to repeat what everyone else has done.

World building lets you be ultra creative beyond your storytelling. New worlds and character types are harder to create but potentially more fulfilling.

It's difficult, and it takes time to do it right.

## TRICKS TO WORLD-BUILDING

There are a few tricks you can have up your sleeve that will help you create an amazing world without spending days, weeks, or years doing it.

### ■ The Rule of Three

Expert world builders sometimes choose a familiar trope to base their new world on and then change three significant things about it. For example, you've created a grouchy elf with pointy ears and shoes who lives in the forest. Does this sound like a lot of elves you know? So instead of pointy ears and shoes, give your elf another physical characteristic that affects your story. Maybe the elf has super-sensitive hearing, he lives in town, and is a tad absent-minded.

Changing three significant things in your world can take a trope to a new level that will still feel fresh to your readers.

Suzanne Collins makes ample use of the “rule of three” in her series, *The Hunger Games*. Consider her “tracker jackers.” These creatures are like normal wasps except they:

- are larger and have poisonous venom
- are genetically engineered by the government
- can track people and so are used as a weapon

With the tracker jacker, Collins takes something familiar and twists it to make sense in her story's world.

### ■ Creating New Names

There's risk involved when you create new plants and animals. For example, say there's a rose in your new world that looks just like those on Earth but has poison in its thorns. If you call it a rose, your readers will automatically think of the rose they're accustomed to, forgetting about its poisonous nature. If this new rose is essential to your story, you'd have to keep referring to it as the “poisonous rose” so your readers don't lose that characteristic. That can become cumbersome. You might try modifying the known name in a way that indicates it has special characteristic, like a “netherose” or a “venomrose.” That way, your readers keep the image of the rose but always associate the poison.

You may choose to create a brand new plant or animal and give it a unique name. The trick here is to firmly implant a description in your readers' minds so they can clearly picture the new creation each time they read the name. If you use a common term for a new species in your world, for example “tree goblin,” your readers will expect a certain image. And then if you describe it as something that looks like a chimpanzee, you'll confuse your readers.



ProWritingAid

## ■ Decide How Many Worlds You Need

Some writers love creating an extensive, complex world in which they can set many different stories. Others create a new world for each new story they write.

Take the *Harry Potter* series. It relies on a single world that comes alive in different ways in each new story. When JK Rowling introduces a new part of the wizarding world, we understand enough of its life and culture that we can follow right along without starting from scratch.

Similarly, in the *Lord of the Rings* series, when we travel to Rohan we're already grounded in the mechanics of Middle Earth. We know the major players, we understand the laws of magic and men. We may be meeting new characters and seeing new ways of wielding magic, but it's all within the same world that we've already become accustomed to from the first book.

Now consider a series like *Star Trek* that introduces new worlds and galaxies in each episode. There are new species, life forms, and cultural expectations to uncover in each adventure. Each time the author must start from the beginning, showing the geography, species, and culture of this new world.

If you have the leisure of time to dedicate to your stories, creating new worlds for each tale can be creative and thrilling. But beware world-building fatigue. You may feel pressed to include more details than your story needs because you have invested the time developing them. Also, for the time and effort you spend creating and inventing new things, you may not be getting any writing done on your plot or main characters, which should always be the primary drivers of your story.

If you're new to world building, consider a one-and-done approach to get your feet wet. You create exactly the characteristics you need for your story. It takes less time and effort than creating a world that can carry a whole series of stories. You can learn a lot from your experience and then make your next world more complex.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

As authors, we're sometimes too close to our work to get a feel for what's excessive world building versus what needs more depth. Reading successful sci-fi and fantasy novels will help you realize the detail you need. Beta readers can also be an invaluable tool to help point out what's working and what's not.

The more you write, the better you get at identifying how to take a trope and change it into something new and amazing that readers will love.



# ► THE GREATEST FICTIONAL WORLDS EVER CREATED

By Kathy Edens

**S**o you want to create a compelling world, but you're not sure where to start? Looking for inspiration from some of the most-loved and most famous worlds can help. In this chapter, we've compiled ten examples to inspire your own world-building efforts.

#1

## Middle-Earth from *The Lord of the Rings*

Perhaps the most famous fictional world, Middle-Earth has everything from the wise and immortal elves to barbaric savages and a dark overlord who wants to rule them all.



Middle-Earth



Narnia

#2

## Narnia from *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Narnia is an epic world full of fantastic creatures and fierce battles between good and evil. Just like Middle-Earth, Narnia has risen above the fantasy genre to find itself firmly lodged in classic literature. Narnia is a land where magic meets reality, one that has drawn in young and old alike over the past decades. As a writer, you can take lessons from Narnia: think about whether your world will have a moral theme or what kind of battleground might be needed.

#3

## Westeros from *A Game of Thrones*

Thanks to the wildly popular television series, fans and non-fantasy-fiction fans alike love George R. R. Martin's epic tales set in Westeros. However, Westeros is only one part of the sprawling fictional world created by Martin. Thanks to a firm grounding in historical lore, Westeros feels entirely real. Is there a period from history that you feel passionate about that can feed into your world?



Westeros

Credit: Kjell Leknes / Shutterstock.com



ProWritingAid

**#4**

## The Unnamed Land in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time*

Fans of Robert Jordan call the world he has created Randland, after one of the main characters, Rand Al'thor. Full of various nations, each with a rich and distinct history, Randland feels authentic because it's inspired by real cultures around the globe. Based on a mix of history and mythology, Randland is a compilation of cultural traits. Consider how this can affect your work: is there a lesser-known piece of culture or folklore that you can develop into a full-blown mythology?



Credit: JoystikX



The Land of Oz

**#5**

## The Land of Oz from *The Wizard of Oz*

From the Munchkins to horses that change color and flying monkeys, Oz is rich with magic and witchcraft. Charming and perhaps a little old-fashioned, the land of Oz is surreal and magical, and captures one's imagination with enchanting detail. Oz is a great example of the importance of place, as well as a show of magical surrealism.

**#6**

## Dinotopia by James Gurney

The eponymous world of James Gurney's novel, *Dinotopia* is a peaceful society where humans and dinosaurs live in harmony. In fact, the dinosaurs there are sentient and can speak; they somehow avoided being wiped out like all the other dinosaurs around the world and created a haven on this remote, uninhabited island. Consider for yourself: what creatures will inhabit your new world? Will the main species be human-like, or something else entirely?



Dinotopia

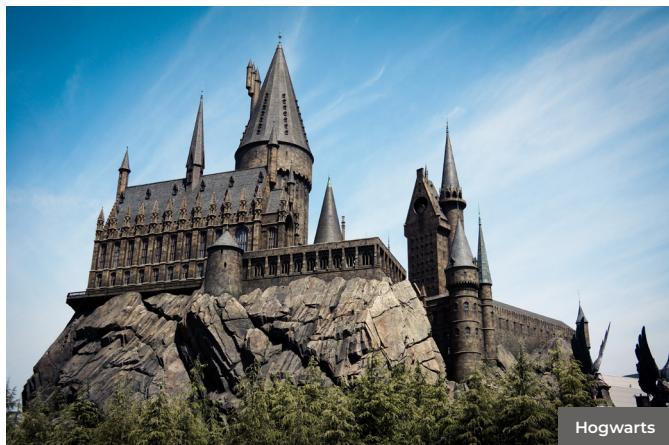


ProWritingAid

**#7**

## Earthsea from *A Wizard of Earthsea*

Ursula K. Le Guin created one of the greatest sorcerers of all time, Sparrowhawk, who inhabits a world called Earthsea. Full of magic, power, dragon-taming, and more, Earthsea features thousands of islands surrounded by an uncharted ocean. People in Earthsea base their way of life on contact with the sea. Magic is a central part of life in Earthsea, except for Kargish where it is banned. What geological features will your world have? Which will be the same, which will be new, and which will be familiar but used in a different way? For example, does rain have nutritional value? Can cold be used to harness energy instead of heat?

**#9**

## Wonderland from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

When young Alice tumbles down a rabbit hole, she enters an entirely different world where everything seems absurd and mind-bending. You'll meet talking animals, magic potions, animated playing cards, a tyrannical queen, and more. What will your world look like? Will it be challenging? Confusing? Surreal?

**#8**

## Hogwarts from the Harry Potter series

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is truly magical. The school itself feels sentient thanks to magic that moves staircases and statues that come to life. There are dark parts to Hogwarts like the murderous centaurs, Dementors, and others, but it can also be a place of comfort to those who dwell within. What are the creatures you will use to infuse atmosphere into the world you create?



#10

### Neverland from Peter Pan

With the Lost Boys and Tinkerbell the fairy, Peter Pan never has to grow up thanks to Neverland. He can fight pirates, duel Captain Hook, elude the crocodile that ticks, and fly around to his heart's content thanks to pixie dust. Neverland is both wild and seductive, a place full of amazing adventures. Think about what your characters need from their world—and then create it!

## GET OUT THERE AND BUILD YOUR WORLD

There are so many other fictional worlds that deserve a mention, but we don't have room for them all. Check out Madeleine L'Engle, Suzanne Collins, Louis Lowry, and Margaret Atwood, to name a few, for more intriguing stories set in unique worlds.

World-building is one of the most exciting and challenging tasks for an author. After all, every time you create a world, you have the opportunity to build the next Narnia... or to create something that makes no sense at all.

With the information included in this eBook, you'll have everything you need to create a compelling, engaging setting for your story. We can't wait to visit it!

Neverland



# ► THE THREE MAIN RULES OF WORLD-BUILDING

By Kathy Edens

**W**hen you build another world, you're responsible for creating everything from the flora and fauna surviving in this new universe to a variety of species, including man, who inhabit this universe. Readers are drawn to a novel that creates an entire new world where they can experience unexpected places to live, work, and play.

The idea of having to construct a whole fictional universe can feel overwhelming, but actually, there are only three main rules you need to follow:

## FIRST RULE OF WORLD-BUILDING: CREATING A NEW WORLD GOES WAY BEYOND MERE SETTINGS

When writing for sci-fi or fantasy, simply setting a particular scene won't cover it. Worlds comprise both written and unwritten laws, some kind of governance or regulatory body, a complete history, and their geography, geology, ecology, etc. You also must know the prominent cultural norms, their philosophy, and mythology. Don't forget technology, science, and medical accomplishments. And that's just the big stuff.

What do your characters eat? Where do they live? What jobs do they have? What transportation do they use? What is their currency like? If they don't have currency, what type of economic system do they use? If they don't have electricity, how do they heat and cool their living quarters? So many details to keep track of! Later in this eBook, we'll show you how to use our **world-building questionnaire** to help you with this.

If you're writing for other genres, you will still be setting your story in a particular time and location. Whether it's historical, present-day, or future will affect the amount of exposition required, so it's a good idea to think about whether your readers will automatically know the answers to these questions.



## SECOND RULE OF WORLD-BUILDING: USE OTHER AUTHORS' WORLDS TO INSPIRE YOUR WORLD

Several authors have based pieces and parts of their alternate universes on Greek or Roman mythology. And others use components from fairy tales and other stories to create new worlds full of elves, trolls, dragons, fairies, and more.

Read sci-fi and fantasy novels. Check out the list we dictated in an earlier chapter to gain inspiration and see how authors have created their own worlds. Watch movies like *How to Train Your Dragon* or *Blade Runner* to analyze how someone created a new world. Movies are a great source of ideas because you have so many from which to choose.

Spend time in other worlds and make notes about what you like. Then mix and match these different ideas to create something uniquely yours.



## THIRD RULE OF WORLD-BUILDING: DON'T MAKE THIS NEW WORLD YOUR STORY'S FOCUS

You might go down a rabbit hole chasing after elements of your new world, but your readers don't need to know everything about it. Your world might take center stage in particular scenes in your story, but it shouldn't be the ultimate focus.

### Questions to ask when you introduce a new element in your world:

- Does the element move the story along?
- Does it develop the main characters in any way?
- Is it only feeding my need to exploit how hard I worked to develop this new world?

Based on your answers, you might decide to cut or develop your new element.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

It helps most writers to have a map of the new world. You need not be a professional map maker or an artist to sketch out your world-building ideas. Just try to get a basic outline of your world and add detail to flesh it out.



# ► CREATING THE SPECIES IN YOUR WORLD

By Kathy Edens

**O**n earth, race is a social construct that tries to categorize different versions of the same species: homo sapiens. Different species, on the other hand, are animals that don't share DNA, like dogs and cats.

You need to decide if your new world has various races and species, then you need to create them—quite a tall order, but one with which you can ultimately have fun.

If you decide to have different races in your story, they'll share DNA. They'll have superficial differences like different shaped eyes, noses, mouths, and more. But they'll still be genetically the same, so consider this when creating races in your world.

Species in fantasy and sci-fi novels are entirely different from each other. You wouldn't expect a dragon in your novel to give birth to a chicken any more than you would expect an elf with pointy ears to bear a human child.

It's up to you to make sure readers understand if your world's inhabitants are different races sharing similar DNA, or if they're an entirely different species like a humanoid character with gills who can live underwater. If it's new species you're after, read on!

You can't populate your sci-fi world with Vulcans and Klingons. Those species are proprietary. You must create your own.

Focus on creating a few species in depth instead of a host of species that only show up in a paragraph or two. For example, Vulcans, Klingons, and humans are standard in Star Trek, while other species crop up for a single episode or two. Those that crop up shouldn't get too much of your effort; but you need those who are part of your spacecraft's crew to be well-developed.

In fantasy tales, you have a ripe selection of species in the public domain like dragons, elves, dwarves, etc. Just stay away from Hobbits, which Tolkien owns. If you really want a Hobbit-like species in your fantasy story, change at least three of its aspects to create something entirely new.

## WEIGHING THE RISK

Whether you're writing a sci-fi or fantasy novel, you run the risk when creating a new species that readers won't warm to it. Weigh the pros and cons of using what's already in the public domain. For example, writers have written about elves so often, there's not much new you can say about them. If you're craving the freedom of creating your own species, though, you can have fun with it.

Consider inventing a species to tell a specific story. Let's say you create a bizarre species, but its characteristics are elemental to the story. Without its bizarre aspects, your story would be dead.

On the other hand, you could invent a new species in-depth and then think of ways to use it in a story. It really depends on the type of story you're creating. For example, if you're thinking "series," you'll want to build a comprehensive species and an exciting new world in which they live. At the very minimum, you must determine in advance what they physically look like and their overall disposition.

Don't waste your time writing a cast full of different characters who have little to no impact on your story.

Think of Chewbacca in Star Wars: you never see another Wookie, so you assume other Wookies are just like Chewy. Because he never actually speaks a word, Lucas didn't have to go deep to create Chewbacca. He's more of a straight man for Harrison Ford's jokes.



## BACKSTORY

To make your new species believable, you need to know where they're from, its climate, what their physical appearance is like, and social elements like language, history, clothing, etc. If you're writing sci-fi, you must pay particular attention to their technology.

It's easy to go overboard, but sometimes it's necessary to create depth. Write in the backstory and get your beta readers to tell you if any of it can be stripped out when editing.

For a series, make sure to think deeply about characteristics, history, relationships, language, customs, even combat methods. Once you've written the first few books in your series, you can't go back and retroactively assign new characteristics to a species that you need them to have in future stories. For example, a species can't suddenly sprout wings in Book No. 4 because your main character needs to fly out of a pickle.

## HABITAT

If your story includes humanoid species, you need not spend as much time on habitat because readers will expect something similar to Earth. But if your species' habitat is a frozen tundra on a far-off planet, they must have evolved to live in sub-zero temperatures.

Consider how a water habitat requires certain characteristics like gills and webbed fingers and toes. You wouldn't put heavy armor on a water species because they would sink. But they might use their water world to develop specific weapons like using poisonous fish to develop poisoned darts.

Now consider how an underground species would behave differently from those in a water world. Would it be blind and use echolocation, or have hyper-developed sight to see in underground darkness?

What if you created a species that was amphibious—it lived both in water and on land? How would that affect its characteristics, physical appearance, clothing, technology, combat style, etc.? What if this new species was nomadic and built settlements around your story's world? What kind of habitat would such a species need to survive and thrive?

Part of habitat means you know what materials your new species builds with. Do they use stones to shape spears and other weapons, or do they have sophisticated engineering skills that let them build huge skyscrapers? Maybe they're squatters living in another species' abandoned settlements. Consider how their technology affects warfare, travel, culture, buildings, etc.

How does the terrain in their habitat impede or help them? For example, a species that is hunted, stalked, and killed needs places to hide. They wouldn't settle in an open plain-type terrain; they'd be sitting ducks. Rather, they might look for dense forests or mountainous terrain in which to live.

Climate also plays a role in creating a believable habitat for your species. Maybe one species is cold-blooded and needs a suitable habitat. What if you put a warm-blooded species in an inhospitable habitat? How would it adapt to its new climate?

## FINAL THOUGHTS

When creating new species, you need to know their physical appearance, clothing, and accessories like tools and weapons. You should know characteristics, world view, societal norms, language, history, relationships, any supernatural or magical elements, technology, their combat style, and so much more.

But only do this for the main characters in your sci-fi or fantasy novel. If you try to get this in-depth with every species in your new world, you'll spend years working out the details and never write the book.



# ► CREATING THE MONSTERS IN YOUR WORLD

By Kathy Edens

Here would a good sci-fi or fantasy novel be without a monster or two? The dark wouldn't frighten children, nor would adults leave the closet light on if it weren't for the brilliant monsters created by master storytellers.

## WHAT IS A MONSTER?

Since you'll be creating all new species, plants, and animals, a quick definition will help you keep everything straight.

A monster is something unnatural to your world. Its purpose is to harm in some way, and it usually defies conventional morals.

Writers often use monsters to foreshadow something evil coming or happening, which is why they're usually cast out.

## HOW ARE MONSTERS DIFFERENT FROM SPECIES?

When your main character arrives on a new planet, he or she might at first glance think the indigenous species are monsters. Maybe they're terrifying-looking or seem threatening.

The difference between a monster and a new species has to do with their minds. An intelligent species, especially a humanoid one, will have a society and a culture. They'll have a philosophy that's sophisticated much like humans. Monsters, on the other hand, are purely the basest of animals with none of those characteristics.

Once you give a monster intelligence, it becomes more human-like and more of a species. Think about it: you can't reason with a monster, nor can you communicate with it. It would kill you before you tried.

Monsters differ from animals because they don't come in numbers. If you have more than one of the same monster, you must come up with a name for them and then they might develop human-like characteristics, such as language so that they can communicate. Which means they're becoming a species instead of a monster.

## WHERE DO MONSTERS COME FROM?

You don't have to tell your readers where the monster came from, but brainstorming can help you create a richer, deeper monster to scare your readers.

Monsters can be accidents of magic, technology, or some unexplained phenomena. More importantly, accidents happen to pre-existing species. This can capture your reader's sympathy until they realize the monster has no impulse control and eats someone. Or maybe the monster is dangerous because somewhere deep inside it realizes that old life is gone. Or the accident wiped all that away, and the monster is dumb. Or incredibly smart.

Consider how Frankenstein created his monster. It was once a human, maybe with a family, and then after death, it returned as a monster. This means the monster is more engaging to people.

Accidents don't just happen. Someone caused it, intentionally or inadvertently. Have fun dreaming up the circumstances that led to the accident, who it involved, and what their motivations were.

Someone might also create monsters on purpose. For fantasy, think about why a powerful wizard or god would create a monster. In sci-fi, think about how someone could use advanced technology to create a monster from nothing. Regardless of how your monster is ultimately created, it must be created for a reason. Anyone creating monsters usually has a darker purpose.



Think about how much control the creator has over the monster. Do they like or loathe each other? If the creator is killed, what happens to the monster? Figuring out the relationship between creator and monster will help you decide how the monster will act.

## WHERE DO MONSTERS LIVE?

While you might never fully reveal it to your readers, it's important to your story to know where your monster lives. You can show its home directly or you can give hints to create mystery.

In sci-fi, monsters might travel farther from home. Maybe your monster found a portal or stowed away in an interstellar ship and killed the crew after launch. In both sci-fi and fantasy, your characters may find it inevitable they'll search for the monster's lair, whether it's a cave in a fantasy world or a spaceship in a sci-fi story.

Part of knowing where your monster lives means understanding how that affects your characters' quest to find it. Do they need magic (fantasy) or technology tracking equipment (sci-fi)? And is the monster nocturnal? Things that prowl at night are scary; characters generally fear monsters more at night.

## WHAT'S THE MOTIVATION?

Motivation has two arms: why are your characters pursuing the monster and what does the monster want?

Are your characters hunting the monster because people are afraid of it, or did it do something to deserve retaliation? Do your characters all want to capture or kill the monster or do any feel it has a right to be left alone? Think about how you could use conflict to create even more tension.

Maybe your monster just needs food, which means it must kill to eat. And the bigger the monster, the more food it needs. Or maybe your monster feels threatened by your characters' search for it and attacks them to protect its lair.

Just because it's a monster doesn't mean it has to kill. Give it a reason. And make it a mystery. Why does this monster kill one species but not another? Your readers might not know why the monster kills until they learn more of its backstory.

## WHAT DOES YOUR MONSTER LOOK LIKE?

Like with any other character in your story, you need to show your readers what your monster looks like. But instead of giving your monster an extra eye or an arm coming out of its head, think first how its physical characteristics will help it get what it wants. Justify its appearance in your story, and you'll avoid creating a cliché monster.

A monster who can do scary or strange things is better than one who just looks creepy. Incredible strength, speed, endurance, or the ability to control minds—regardless of the attributes you give your monster, they must relate to your monster's purpose in your story.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

You might have a picture of a monster in your mind. Maybe you picture it tormenting or attacking your characters. Now take it a step further and consider where it lives, how that impacts its actions and its physical abilities. Next, decide who created it and use that information to help you figure out the monster's motivations.

If you follow these suggestions, you'll create a unique monster that has more depth instead of just being scary.



# ► CREATING GOD CHARACTERS IN YOUR WORLD

By Kathy Edens

If you're writing science fiction or fantasy, your world probably has gods. Consider how every society on Earth has a creation myth, an end-of-times myth, and more.

Myths are powerful tools in your world-building arsenal. They'll help you decide how many gods you need, if you need different religions and stories, and how active your god(s) are in your story arc.

Let's look at gods in science fiction first. Then we'll take a peek at fantasy.

## CREATING SCIENCE FICTION GODS

Science fiction often has characters who travel between many worlds. Each world could have its own distinct set of gods. While you need not spend days, months, or years creating gods for different worlds, having a general idea of how they differ is a must.

Consider how science doesn't negate religion. Many people you know are still fervent believers, even when faced with scientific evidence. So think about how religion could interfere with or guide your characters in new worlds. For example, Christian missionaries have traveled the world trying to spread their faith. You could have characters wanting to spread their religion across galaxies.

## CREATING FANTASY GODS

Fantasy stories sometimes have a priest who has powers either received directly or indirectly from a god or gods. These active gods have more of an effect on your story, which makes your story more interesting. You could have main characters on a mission for their god pitted against enemies on a separate mission from their god.

If your fantasy world has several humanoid species, do they each have their own gods or will they share? Think about how sharing gods between all species makes your story easier to manage. But having individual gods that affect how each species behaves and their beliefs might be more interesting. They're bound to clash over religion.

## GIVING GODS POWERS

Most gods have powers; however, not all powers are necessarily equal. You might have a single god with multiple powers that meld nicely together. Say your god of war can also control certain elements like fire and wind. Or you may give each god individual powers, with one or two more powerful than the rest. This could lead to an uprising either between the gods or their followers.

Part of determining how powerful your gods are is figuring out whether they can procreate. If your gods can have children, are these children more or less powerful than their parents? Can your gods mate with their followers to create demi- or half-gods?

Also think about the relationships between gods when considering their powers. For example, your god of life could be the twin of your god of death. Your gods could be friends or enemies, but most importantly, they should have conflicts between them.

## CREATING THEIR LIVES

Now think about where your gods live. Do they live in an alternate universe not accessible by your characters or do your characters need to visit them at some point? If your story comprises a trek to beg for help from a god, it should be a pretty arduous journey. Don't put them on a mountain top named Olympus though. Be more creative!



## OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR GODS' LIVES INCLUDE:

### ■ Are they immortal?

If someone can kill them, it must be due to a drastic method. For example, can gods kill other gods? Not any mere mortal should be able to slay a god unless he or she gets hold of a powerful weapon or uses powerful magic. Or maybe your gods are vulnerable to nature or technology. But you shouldn't have a peasant with a staff kill a god unless that staff has amazing powers.

### ■ Can gods interact with or hurt the species in your world?

Maybe the gods have a pact between themselves to leave your species alone, but one rogue god breaks the agreement with devastating results. In this case, you should certainly create an end-of-times myth your species believes in.

### ■ Can your gods create life?

If so, what is your creation myth? Was there only one god who created your world or several? If your gods can't create life, how was your world created? Or maybe creation was a huge secret that will reveal itself at the end of your story or in a sequel.

### ■ What characteristics do your gods have?

Are they basically good or evil? Are your gods liars, thieves, or other nefarious sorts? Or do they uphold a certain code or creed? You need to know what's true and what's not as you create your world.

### ■ What kinds of things do they do to each other or mortals?

Sometimes gods' behaviors and actions could serve as warnings to your characters. Do they have a reputation for anything in particular, like wrath or cruelty?

### ■ What names do they have?

Do they have titles like "God of Love"? Do they have any nicknames? Are they patrons of anything on your world, like Patron of Lovers or Patron of Hunters?

### ■ What do they look like?

For example, do they have a humanoid form, an animal form, or are they monsters? You can also identify your gods by other means like seasons or elements.

## WHERE TO START

Start with traits. What are they gods of? For example, the God of Love might be kind and benevolent and might carry a bow and arrow (a little cliché perhaps). There should be only one God of Love though. He or she can have other traits like the God of Spring or the Patron of Children. For the main things like love, hate, war, etc., stick with one per god.

You can borrow traits from gods in Greek, Roman, or Norse mythology, mixing and matching to create your own unique pantheon. Can you combine them in different ways to create something new? For example, Zeus is the father figure, the leader, and he can father children with mortals. Maybe your story doesn't have a father figure but instead has several who can procreate with human women. Maybe your God of Fire carries a lightning bolt. Use your imagination.

You can make lists of gods based on things you need in your world like a god of war or a creator god. Or you can start with Earth gods and re-imagine them.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Whenever you are world-building, you're in charge of creating the gods in your world. Every world has religion and myths to explain its creation and how it will eventually end. The only difference is, when it's your story's world, you get to choose!

Now that you know the theory of building an engaging world, let's take a look at a questionnaire that will help you do the actual work of world-building.



# ► THE ULTIMATE WORLD-BUILDING QUESTIONNAIRE

By Katja Kaine

## HOW TO USE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

Some writers will want to fill the whole questionnaire out straight away, some will only want to do a couple of sections right now, and others will want to just read it through now and engage with it later. All approaches are equally valid.

If you want depth in your world, consider writing a short essay on each of the key categories where there are clear differentiators from our own world. For example, if the continents are laid out in the same way in your new world, skip that question. Focus instead on the fact that there are non-human sentient species living on Earth and what that means in day-to-day life. Delving deep into these questions will allow you to add layers and depth to your world, making it feel true. You need to understand the rules of your world so you are consistent throughout—your readers will notice if you are not. You are unlikely to use all the material you write in your essay, but it's important that you have worked it out for yourself.

While we have tried to categorize the questions to make them easier to manage, this categorization is neither perfect nor comprehensive. Feel free to shuffle them around to suit your specific requirements.

### WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Remember, as you create your new world, you have immense power. It's up to you to create an interesting and engaging world, but more importantly... it must be believable. The more intimately you know your novel's world, down to the minutest detail, the richer and more compelling your writing will be.

Katja Kaine at Novel Factory put together this extensive list of world-building questions, and they've been kind enough to let us share it.

[www.novel-software.com/  
theultimateworldbuildingquestionnaire](http://www.novel-software.com/theultimateworldbuildingquestionnaire)

## THE ULTIMATE WORLD-BUILDING QUESTIONNAIRE:

### ■ PHYSICS/NATURE

- Are the laws of nature/physics different to earth? Elaborate.
- Are there multiple suns/moons?
- Describe the sky during the day.
- Describe the night sky.
- What is the climate like?
- What is the weather like?
- What are the seasons like? How many/how long?
- What are the birds like?
- What are the small animals like?
- What are the large animals like?

### ■ GEOGRAPHY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

- How are the continents laid out?
- How are the countries laid out?
- How much land is temperate, equatorial, or polar?
- Are there forests?
- Are there tropical areas?
- Are there grasslands/plains?
- What natural resources are available in different regions?
- Which natural resources are scarce?



## MAGIC AND RELIGION

- Does magic exist? What constrains it?
- What can magic not do?
- Do people believe in one God, many or none?
- Is there more than one religion?
- Do people make sacrifices to Gods?
- Do an elite control religion/magic or is it accessible to all?
- Are there any magical creatures? Describe them.
- To what extent is magic a learned skill or an innate talent?
- Is magic a specialist, elite skill or is it used easily by commoners?
- What is the price/cost of using magic?
- Do magicians need to meet any specific criteria? Be celibate? Go through a ritual?
- Does magic require tools and props?
- How is one magician stronger than another?
- Can magic be combined to increase its strength?
- What defeats magic?
- Is magic admired/respected/fearred/something else?
- Is any magic illegal?
- What is magic generally used for?
- What are temples like?

## POPULATION

- Are there non-human sentient species? Describe them.
- Did the people evolve on this planet or come from elsewhere?
- What is the relationship between the different species?
- Where and when did civilization begin?
- What is the total population (of the planet/the country/the city, etc.)?
- What is the level of technology (stone age, hi tech)?

## LANGUAGE AND GESTURES

- What languages do people speak?
- Do most people speak more than one language?
- Is there a common language? For trade?
- How do people greet each other?
- What is considered a rude gesture?
- How do they curse? Gods? Body parts?
- What titles/formalities are used?
- What is a gesture of respect (bowing, saluting)?

## WORK AND CULTURE

- Do people live in happiness or fear?
- Does the culture value strength or compassion more highly?
- Does the culture value wealth or generosity more highly?
- What are the common superstitions?
- Are the people diverse or uniform?
- How big is the gap between rich and poor?
- What do people wear?
- What is in fashion this year?
- What was in fashion last year?
- What topics of conversation are controversial?
- Which topics of conversation are safe?
- What constitutes a social faux pas?
- What forms of art are there?
- Is there theatre? Is it common or reserved for the wealthy?
- What is a highly desirable job?
- What is a lowly job?
- What are the cities like, if any?
- What are the houses like?
- Do most people live in rural or urban areas?
- Are there any domesticated animals?
- Are there professional guilds/institutes/etc?
- How do you get into a professional guild?
- What benefits do you gain from being a member of a guild?
- Are criminals common or rare?
- What calendar is used?

## CELEBRATIONS

- What are the major festivals?
- Describe a wedding.
- Describe a funeral.
- What are special celebratory foods?
- What sort of clothes do people wear on special occasions?

## EDUCATION

- Is there any formal education?
- At what age do children start school?
- Is education available to all or only certain groups?
- Are different groups of people educated separately?
- Is there a written language?
- Are most people literate or illiterate?
- What are schools like?
- What are there different types of school for?



## FAMILY

- What is a normal family unit?
- Do people marry for love or other reasons?  
What reasons?
- Are the genders treated differently?
- Who raises the children?

## TRADE AND CONFLICT

- What is the monetary system?
- Are there multiple currencies?
- Is there widespread trade?
- Is there widespread conflict?
- How long ago was the most recent war?
- How damaging was the most recent war?
- What was the cause of the most recent war?

## GOVERNANCE

- What is the system of government? Democracy?  
Dictatorship? Administration?
- Is it a matriarchy or a patriarchy?
- Does the leader have special protection (Kingsguard,  
secret service)?
- How long has the system of government been  
in place?
- Is there a class system? Different levels of citizenship?
- Is there slavery?
- Is there a form of police?
- Is there a formal army?
- How are wrongdoers tried and punished?
- Does the government provide social assistance?
- Is there any centralized healthcare?
- Is there public transport?
- Are there publicly run communications systems?
- Do people trust the government?
- Do the majority of people approve of or disapprove of  
the government?
- Is social mobility easy or hard?
- What is the system of taxation?
- Does the government spy on its enemies? Its people?

## FOOD AND DRINKING

- What does a feast look like?
- What does a basic pauper's meal look like?
- Do people mostly eat meat, fish, or vegetables?
- Do people eat plain or heavily flavored food?
- Do people eat together or separately?
- Do people eat in small or large groups?
- What utensils do people use to eat?
- Are there many restaurants? Who goes to them?
- Are there street food sellers?
- What do people drink?
- Is the water generally clean enough to drink?
- Are some foods poisonous to certain people?
- What are the tables like? Shape? High or low?

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Now you've got all the tools you need to build an unforgettable world for your science fiction or fantasy novel. If you're ready to dive into writing, keep reading to learn more about the different software platforms that can help you organize information about your world.



# ► WORLD-BUILDING SOFTWARE

By Hayley Milliman

There are numerous platforms online that make it easier for you to structure and create information about your world. These platforms are a boon for writers who struggle to organize world-building information. They offer systems and tools that make it easier for you to complete all the necessary steps to make your world believable.

A quick note before we dive in: most of these tools were originally designed for game-makers to have a way to keep track of the idiosyncrasies in their worlds. That being said, they are also valuable for novel writers. We've found that using software can really help to organize and keep track of all the information required for proper world-building.

**Without further ado, here's the list!**



## WORLD ANVIL

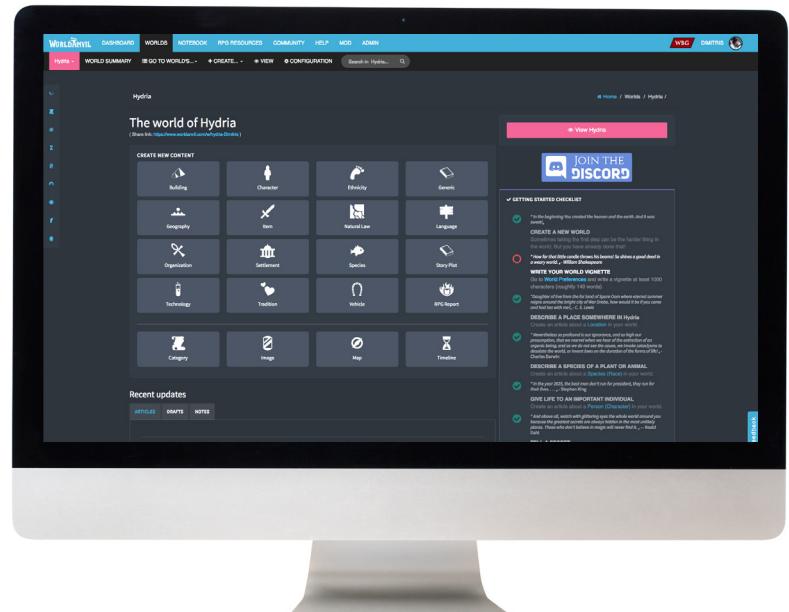
World Anvil is perhaps the best known resource for people who want to create a new world.

With World Anvil's software, you can do everything from tracking and making character motivations to storing notes about the geography of different areas.

Some cool features of World Anvil include:

- **Mapmaking:** You can design interactive maps and link your scenes and characters to points on them.
- **Timelines:** World Anvil's timeline feature lets you put events in order for a world or a character. You can even do parallel timelines to make sure that events line up.
- **Organization:** World Anvil lets you organize articles in an easy framework so that you can find and access documents in no time at all.

A basic World Anvil account is free. If you choose to upgrade, payment plans start at \$40 for the year.



ProWritingAid

22

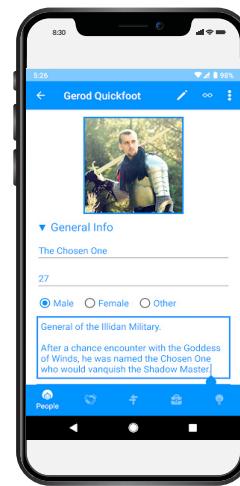
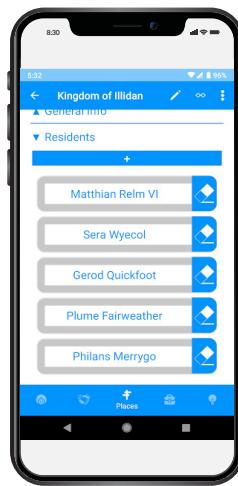
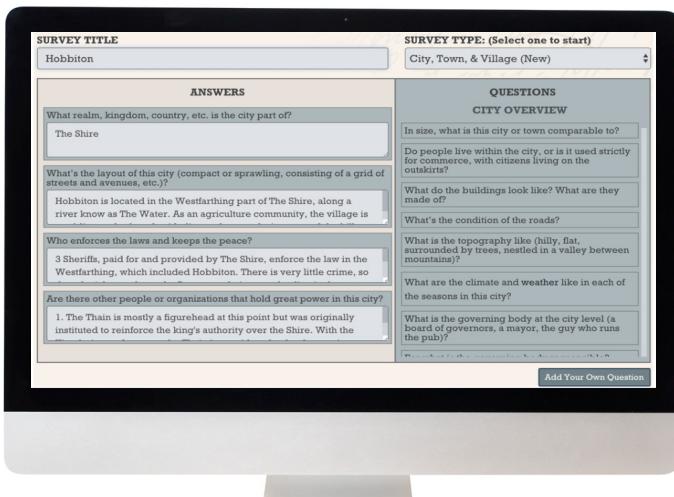
## #2 ONE STOP FOR WRITERS - WORLD-BUILDING SURVEYS

When you're creating a world from scratch, there are a lot of details to keep track of. That's where the world-building surveys from One Stop for Writers come in handy. These surveys help you answer all the questions that will flesh out your world.

For example, their "City, Town, and Village" survey asks questions like:

- What realm, kingdom, country, etc. is this city part of?
- Who enforces the laws and keeps the peace?
- Are there other people or organizations that hold great power in the city?
- What's the condition of the roads?
- In size, what is this city or town comparable to?
- What do the buildings look like? What are they made of?
- What are the climate and weather like in each of the seasons in the city?

One Stop For Writers lets you collect all this information in one place so that you can easily refer back to it as you write. The breadth and depth of these surveys will make your world feel well-constructed and orderly.



## #3 WORLD SCRIBE

World Scribe is an app that helps you organize every important element of your world with ease. Within World Scribe, world elements are divided into five specific categories:

- **People:** your cast of characters
- **Groups:** people united by blood, race, or driving motivation
- **Places:** the locales and vistas your world has to offer
- **Items:** gadgets, important artifacts, various belongings
- **Concepts:** definitions for world-specific ideas like magic systems, religions, and superpowers

What makes World Scribe special is that you can easily map out connections between these categories. For instance, when working on a particular character, you can tie him or her to a specific place, concept, and group. This feature helps you easily sort and keep track of information and relationships within your world.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

There's a lot to remember when you're building a new world. Software can make the entire process easy and fun.

Keep reading to find out about ProWritingAid, another software that can help you fix grammar mistakes and style issues so your writing shines.



**P**roWritingAid analyzes your writing and highlights potential improvements. Each report focuses on a particular area of your writing. Some reports provide quick fixes that will allow you to polish up a short piece of writing. Other reports will go in depth and reveal areas where you can do more to improve your writing style.

While ProWritingAid is not going to do your job for you, it will make your job easier. You'll improve your writing style as you use the reports because you'll become more aware of the mistakes that you make, just like having a real-life writing coach guiding you. Not every suggestion will work for every writer, so you'll have to use your own judgement.

## THE WRITING STYLE REPORT

The Writing Style Report is one of the most popular and comprehensive reports that ProWritingAid offers. We all know that there is a lot more to good writing than just correct grammar, and these suggestions are based on the same ideas you would learn in a university writing course.

The Style Report highlights several areas of writing that should be revised to improve readability, including: passive and hidden verbs, over-reliance on adverbs, repeated sentence starts, emotional tells, and much more. These suggestions are the same as a professional copy-editor would give you (in fact many of them use ProWritingAid). If you are going to send your writing to a copy-editor then, by fixing all these mistakes upfront, your editor will be able to focus on the more important aspects of your work, such as tone of voice. You'll get a more polished piece of writing as a reward.

## THE GRAMMAR REPORT

The Grammar Report is like Microsoft Word's grammar checker but with superpowers. We use the latest artificial-intelligence algorithms to catch all those issues that Word's grammar checker misses. What's more, our team of copy-editors have input thousands of specific checks that they have come across in

their years of editing. For example, they noticed that many writers write "adverse" when they actually mean "averse", so when this comes up, the software will offer a short explanation about how the two words are different. This additional understanding means you can make sure you select the correct word not just this time, but every time. You'll eliminate all the embarrassing errors from your text and learn not to make them in the future.

## THE OVERUSED WORDS REPORT

Writers should be wary of many words and phrases in the English language that are indicative of poor writing style. Intensifiers like "very", for example, actually weaken your writing, or hesitant words like "just" or "maybe" make your writing feel unconvincing. Words like these are fine in moderation, but when overused can undermine your ideas. In this report, we'll flag the problematic words and phrases that are commonly overused by writers, and help you to eliminate them. As you work through them, you will begin to recognize and avoid using them in the first place.

## THE CLICHÉS AND REDUNDANCIES REPORT

Clichés are the crutch of the lazy writer! Don't rely on someone else's dusty old imagery. Brainstorm for innovative new ways to express your ideas. Fresh metaphors will leave a much stronger impression on your reader.

Never use two words when one will do the job. Redundant wording adds quantity to your writing, but not quality. Every word in your writing should be there for a reason. This report helps you eliminate the clutter.

## THE STICKY SENTENCE REPORT

Sticky sentences wobble around without getting to the point. They are hard to follow, and should be rewritten to increase clarity.

Every sentence contains some words that don't have any actual meaning; they just hold your sentence



together: *and, in, the, of*, etc. These glue words are empty spaces in your writing that your reader needs to get through to reach your meaning. Statistics show that published texts have a low percentage of glue words, and so should your writing.

## THE READABILITY REPORT

Being a great writer is not about using fancy words—it's about communicating meaning to your readers. If they have to look up words or decipher your language in any way, they will be distracted from your ideas. This report uses the top readability tools out there, including the popular Flesch Reading Ease Score, to analyze your writing and highlight those sentences that will be hard for your reader to understand.

## THE REPEATS CHECK

Writers often mistakenly use the same word several times in the span of one paragraph because it's foremost in their mind. But those repeats can set off an echo in the reader's mind—that subconscious feeling of "Didn't they just say that?" Too much of the same word or phrase can be irritating to read and, worse, it can detract from what you are trying to say. This report highlights repeated words and phrases in your document so you can use a more diverse vocabulary.

## THE SENTENCE LENGTH REPORT

Writing that uses varying sentence lengths keeps the reader's brain engaged. Some should be short and punchy, others should be long and flowing. Sentence variety adds an element of music to your writing. ProWritingAid creates a visual representation of your sentence lengths so you can pick out areas where you should add more variety. Too many long sentences may result in a monotonous text, or too many short sentences may result in a choppy text. You can see at a glance where adding more short, medium or long sentences will round out the piece.

## THE PRONOUN REPORT

Inexperienced writers often rely on pronouns to keep the narrative moving: "He did this", "She did that", "They ran there", "I found out." It's dull. On average, published writing contains only 4–15% pronouns. If your writing contains a higher percentage than that, then you need to replace your pronoun-heavy passages with more dynamic wording.

## THE TRANSITION REPORT

Transition words are the road signs in writing – they help your reader move smoothly between ideas. Transitions like "similarly", "nevertheless", "in order to", or "as a result" help you show your readers how separate points go together to support your larger idea. They illustrate agreement, contrast or show cause and effect. One in every four sentences (25%) should contain a transition. If your transition score is less than 25%, you should consider adding more road signs.

## THE CONSISTENCY CHECK

Consistency is essential in writing. It makes it feel professional and polished. The Consistency Check highlights inconsistency of spelling, hyphenation, capitalization, and punctuation. It also checks to make sure that you are consistently writing in either American English or British English.

## THE PACING CHECK

Great fiction always contains fast-paced sections, such as dialogue and character action, as well as slow-paced sections, such as introspection and backstory. Both are essential to create a strong narrative and believable characters, but you never want your readers to feel bored or bogged down by too many long, slow passages. Use ProWritingAid to monitor your slow-paced sections to make sure your readers never lose interest.

## THE DIALOGUE TAGS CHECK

Most dialogue tags, aside from "said" and "asked" break that cardinal rule of writing: show don't tell. If you write "Jane exclaimed" after her dialogue, you are depending on a word to get Jane's emotion across. Instead, show it to your reader with her actions. Describe how Jane's eyes bulge with shock. Make everyone in the room turn to look at her outburst. Use ProWritingAid to highlight all your dialogue tags and get your emotion across in a stronger way.

## THE CONTEXTUAL THESAURUS

The contextual thesaurus allows you to explore a range of synonyms by double-clicking any word. Unlike most thesaurus suggestions, our report offers replacement words that fit within that context of that sentence.



## THE DICTION REPORT

When it comes to writing, less is more. Too often, writers try to sound authoritative by saying simple things in wordy ways. Why write “has the ability to” when you can write “can”? You’re just using more words to say the same thing, which makes your writing less clear. We’ll find these unnecessarily verbose phrases so you can make every word count.

## THE ALLITERATION REPORT

Alliteration creates a pleasant rhythm when reading and so is often used in fiction, poetry and even advertising. Spark creativity by using ProWritingAid to highlight all instances of alliteration in your text.

## THE HOMONYM CHECK

Homonyms are words that sound the same and are spelled alike but have different meanings—and they slip past spellcheckers all the time! Our check will also catch homographs (words that are spelled the same but sound different and have different meanings) and homophones (words that sound the same but have different spellings and different meanings). If you write *He lost his patients* but really meant *He lost his patience*, your spellchecker won’t flag it as an error. The ProWritingAid tool will highlight every word in your document with a homonym, homograph and homophone so you can double-check that you have it correct.

## THE ACRONYM CHECK

The Acronym Report creates a list of all the acronyms you have used. Misspelled or inconsistent acronyms are not usually picked up by normal spell-checkers, so this list allows you to easily scan for errors. It can also help you create a glossary of acronyms for your text.

## THE HOUSE STYLE CHECK

Create customized reports to look for specific issues based on your needs. If you are a sports writer, input all the players’ names to make sure that they are spelled correctly. If you are a fashion designer, create a rule that “fall collection” should always be flagged and corrected to “autumn collection”. If you’re writing for a client, you can input their style guide rules into ProWritingAid and the software will flag any deviations for you. Create the ProWritingAid report that YOU need.

## THE PLAGIARISM REPORT

Plagiarism is a major concern for many people, especially those writing academic works. The plagiarism checks performed by ProWritingAid will check your work against over a billion web-pages and articles to make sure that you have correctly cited any unoriginal content. It is easy for unoriginal content to slip into your work, and the consequences can be disastrous. You need to purchase credits to use our plagiarism checker, available from as little as \$10.

## OVER 20 TOOLS IN ONE

We’ve just taken a look at some of our best writing and editing tools. ProWritingAid is continually evolving to make sure writers have everything they need in one piece of software. Try our free version now and see what ProWritingAid can do for you.

