

On Naming People and Places

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The reason I'm writing this guide is because I've seen *a lot* of posts on /r/Worldbuilding asking about naming things. It seems that there are many 'worldbuilders' struggling to name their characters and cities. Naming places and characters is easy when you know a few basic methods that can help you on your way.

This guide should be useful to any genre of worldbuilding. Fantasy, sci-fi, or whatever genre you work in. This guide will explain certain naming tactics with examples from pop culture. I love A Song of Ice and Fire/A Game of Thrones, so most examples will be using that world and lore. This is your first and only warning for **SPOILERS** for A Song of Ice and Fire/A Game of Thrones.

I want to note that English is not my native language. I will absolutely make spelling mistakes that a British twelve-year-old wouldn't. If (read: *when*) I make any mistakes, please send me a message or comment on where the mistake is made and how I should fix it.

I do not have an educational background in history, culture, languages, or anything in that area. If you do (or not, I'm not your boss), and you want to provide your own methods/expertise on this subject then you are free to suggest it to be added in this file. If you find any good examples that fit a certain section please send me a message so I can add it in. I'd like to update this file with new ideas, to the benefit of me and for worldbuilders who have trouble naming things (and found this guide in some obscure corner of the subreddit).

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1. Places

The question on how to name places might be the most common question asked on the worldbuilding subreddit. I often get the feeling that many worldbuilders don't want to put a lot of time or energy in their naming, because they have no idea where to start. Naming things is seen as a hurdle and not as something that can be fun or rewarding. That view is wrong, *especially* when one is naming places. More often than not, place names have meaning. You can get away with calling your character 'Peter' and not knowing or caring what that name means, but if you call a town 'Riverwood' and there are neither rivers nor woods, then why is it called that way?

But *why* wouldn't you like it? If you enjoy watching Game of Thrones on television, I know you get giddy when someone says they are going to 'the Wall'. If you love the Harry Potter books and/or movies, doesn't Hogwarts have some special place in your heart? When you create a world, you too can recreate the feelings you get when you enjoy other stories. By naming a place right you can make your, and your audience's, skin feel cold, just like it does when you hear 'the Wall' or 'Windhelm'.

Some place names have multiple/double meanings and might be named (or not named) in multiple sections.

If you want to know what the meaning is of a name of a city then look up the Wikipedia page of that city. The first section will sometimes be 'etymology' or 'toponymy', describing the meaning/origin of the name. Otherwise it's often found in the history section.

The next few sections will explain methods on how to name your places. These are just simple guidelines you can use. Break them anyway you want, put them upside-down and invert them if you want to. There are lots of names that don't follow any of these methods, and they aren't necessarily bad.

1.1 Name by Geography

This might be the easiest and most common method of naming a place. The idea is that you imagine standing on the spot where this place is going to be. The city/temple/town/whatever you want to name doesn't exist yet, how does this place look when no one has been here yet? Start writing down what you 'see' or imagine this place to look like.

There might be a river, maybe some trees? 'River' + 'Woods' = 'Riverwood'. You imagine a snowy wasteland and a big hill? Hmmm, cold and snow, what about 'Winter'? A big hill, let's look up some synonyms for that, what about 'fell'? 'Winter' + 'fell' = Winterfell. These two examples are incredibly easy and basic, but this process gets the job done really well. This doesn't only work for cities, it works for anything. Castles, caves, camps, temples, forests, hills, mountains, etc.

This method doesn't only work with 'big' geographical features, but anything you 'see' when imagining yourself in that location. If the city is in a field full of flowers, use that in the name. If it's a dwarven city settled in a cave with shiny gems, you can use that! Animals, plants, colors, the weather!

Here is a simple list of place names used in media with this method. You can imagine how the geography around it looks simply by looking at the name: Coldwater, Riverrun, Lonely Mountain, Hollow Hill, Summerhall, Lake-town, Storm's End, Mirrormere, Mistwood, Cloudrest.

This method is what we have often done in the real world. However, language evolves and place names sometimes don't. Many place names aren't so obvious for us modern speakers, we've simply 'forgotten' what the words used in the name meant. Sometimes place names do change; it gets updated or changed for other reasons. Language barriers/differences make it even more difficult to recognize the meaning behind names.

Method: name the place after what the first settlers arriving in the region would see before settling there.

1.2 Name by History

History can be the basis for naming a certain place. Maybe something has happened and the population wanted to honour that moment or the place exists as a result of a historic moment. The hard part about this method is that you already need information about history to base it on, or you still have to write it and make it work. This method assumes you are also writing about the history of your world while naming places, which isn't always the case. The positive effect of this method is that it connects your world together in a way that makes the names way more valuable than naming it after geographical features.

The best example of this method is the name of King's Landing, the capital city of the Seven Kingdoms in the story of George R. R. Martin. A quick summary on why it's called 'King's Landing': before the city existed the location was simply nature. There were hills and a forest. The mouth of the river Blackwater Rush had a small fishing village, but that's it. Until Aegon I Targaryen arrived with his army, ready to conquer the continent. He erected a fort on a hill, the Aegonfort. When he was finished conquering the kingdoms, he returned to the fort. The capital of the realm of the Iron Throne was constructed around the fort where the conquest started. The place of the city is the location where the *king* '*landed*' when he arrived with his army.

The great thing about naming a place after a historic event is that when people ask 'why is it called this way?' they'll only end up with even more questions when you tell them the meaning. How did Aegon conquer the kingdoms? Why? Was Aegon a good king? How long

did he rule? Who was Aegon? Where did he come from?

This is the place the last giant was killed? Why not name it... Giantsfall (*fall of the giants*). This is the place the elves and humans first met? Name it... Crossburg (*city built on the first crossing of two cultures*). If a city is built in a time of an economic boom or golden age, use words like 'gold' and 'prosper' or anything related to that golden age.

Method: use history to name the new place. This can be a small or big event, as long as it is relevant to the location.

1.3 Name by Person/People

Naming a place by a historical figure or group of people can be a great way to name places. This method has the benefit of making the name interesting by giving it meaning, without having to come up with something new. This can be a past or current ruler, a scientist, a general or admiral, an explorer, or maybe a dynasty.

An obvious example of this method is Washington, D.C. The capital of the United States of America is named after George Washington, the first president of the United States and one of the founding fathers. Alexandria, a city in Egypt, is named after Alexander the Great. Saint Petersburg, Georgetown, Charlestown, Jacksonville. Sometimes even whole countries are named after people: the Philippines, Bolivia, Colombia and Saudi Arabia. Where do you think the name 'America' comes from?

Alternatively, naming a place after a certain group of people can work, too. Paris is named after the Parisii, a Celtic tribe. Iowa County is named after the Iowa people. Lannisport is a city that has a lot of connections to the Lannister dynasty.

Method: name the place after a person or group of people.

1.4 Name by Religion or Culture

The method of naming a place after a god or something related to a religion isn't uncommon, either. Some of the most famous places in our world are named after gods: Athens is named after Athena, Rome to Romulus, and Salvador to Jesus. An example in fiction is Vivec City, Morrowind,

By naming a place after a god you introduce the reader into your world's religion without them even realizing it yet. This does assume you've already created (or are in the process of creating) a religion.

Comparable to naming a place after a religion or god is naming a place after something

cultural. Something like a famous legend or tale, a food or festival.

Storm's End is named after the tale of Durran Godsgrief, who battled against the sea god and the goddess of the wind. He raised multiple castles, but each one was destroyed by the storms. Until he created Storm's End, that is. The name of the castle represents the people and culture of the surrounding lands perfectly: fierce warriors and sailors, a martial culture. No fear, only bravery. They'll fight the sea and storms if they have to. *Ours is the fury.*

Method: base the place name on a religious or cultural aspect.

1.5 Name by Name

The name 'New York' makes a curious reader think. If there is a 'new' York, there surely must be an 'old' York! What connection does this newer York have with this older York? What happened there?

'New York' might be one of the most famous cities on the globe, pretty much anywhere you can ask someone where New York is on a map and they'll be able to point at it. When you ask someone where York is, they'll most likely know that it's somewhere in England, but where? I didn't know, and I'm sure many people don't either.

(Fair enough, the US is a bit weird; it has a lot of place names named after other place names. Ever been to Paris in Arkansas? There is also a Paris in Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, New York, Tennessee, Texas...)

A city built next to a mountain range might use that mountain range in its name. A town just outside the 'blue forest' might simply be called 'Azura'.

Method: use an old or established name this new place has a connection with, add/remove words or use synonyms.

1.6 Name by Foreshadowing

This can be an interesting naming strategy when you're writing a story. If not, this method isn't very useful. The idea is that you name a place as a little hint to what will happen in the future.

An example: let's look back at King's Landing. While I'm pretty sure it wasn't intentional, the name King's Landing became... fascinating... when a king jumped out of a tower to his death.

If you know what's going to happen in your story or lore, maybe you can name the place to

something relevant that will make the future event even more entertaining.

Method: name the place after a future event.

1.7 Name by Theme

The words of house Stark is ‘Winter is coming’. It’s only natural that their home has something connected to those words, like ‘Winterfell’. The words of their house and the place name ‘rhyme’ with each other, there is a theme that connects the two.

House Arryn has the words ‘As *High* as Honor’, with the sigil of a *bird*, living in a castle they call the *Eyrie* (meaning: a large nest of an eagle or other bird of prey, built in a high place) and this castle is situated on the *top of a mountain peak*.

Method: imagine a theme for the place you’re trying to name and then name it accordingly.

1.8 Name by Feeling

You can use a feeling as a starting point for naming your city. How does the city make you feel?

Solitude in Skyrim is an example of this. Solitude means a lonely or uninhabited place. What does that say about the city? Maybe it explains the feelings or thoughts of the first settlers, or maybe it’s something else?

If you’re writing a story: what is this place representing? What does the city symbolize in the story? How should the reader feel about this city?

Method: name the place after a feeling, this could be the feelings of the first settlers or the feeling the place is meant to symbolize.

1.9 Name by Function

What is the purpose of the place you’re naming? If it’s a castle or port, you can add that in the name. If it’s a fort that’s meant to defend a city then use that to create a name.

Lannisport and White Harbor are obviously two cities that are trading hubs, the ‘port’ and ‘harbor’ give it away. When you hear the name ‘Red Keep’, you know it’s a building built for defensive reasons. A place with ‘bridge’ in its name has well... you know what that means.

This might seem a bit boring, but it’s very helpful for anyone who reads your work.

Method: simply add the purpose of the place in the name.

1.10 Name by Inversion

This is a bit of a weird naming strategy, but I quite like it. As said before, names have meanings and origins. All words have meanings and origins as well. We've mostly looked at naming places after other things, but why not turn that tactic on its head?

Here is an example of how this method is used: I named a small tribe in a mountain range 'Bronz'. The inhabitants started mining in the mountains, finding all kinds of precious materials. They started messing around with metals and developed a new material they named after their tribe: bronze. The tribe Bronz is the origin of the word bronze.

Method: take a word and make the place you try to name the origin of that word.

1.11 Name by Prefix/Suffix

I'll name you a few names I use in my world: Rivilia, Nisia, Apentia, Ploia and Thrace. If Rivilia is a city, then what do those other names represent? Well, it's obvious that if Rivilia is a city, then Nisia, Apentia and Ploia are cities too. That's obvious because there is a rule/consistency: any word with '-ia' after it is most likely a city. Is Thrace a city? Well, you can't possibly know that for certain, because it doesn't fit with the rule that we've established.

Using prefixes/suffixes is a powerful technique to make your audience see what the meaning is behind a new name, without having to tell them explicitly. I don't have to tell you what 'Styxia' is, you already know.

The suffix '-ia' obviously means 'city' or something similar to that. It's a rule that is repeated over and over again. A prefix/suffix doesn't strictly have to mean a single word. It can mean an entire sentence. Example: Durimar and Ahmar, where '-mar' means 'the house of' and the word before it is the family name of the first settlers or ruling dynasty.

It's important to make your prefix/suffix sound fitting with the culture and the language. Using the suffix -gargh or -dakh for 'city' won't work if the culture of those inhabitants is peaceful and friendly.

Method: use made-up words multiple times to create consistency in the naming of places.

1.12 Combining Methods

These methods work best when you combine them together. Bonus points if you can make one word fit in multiple methods.

Lannisport = name by people (the lannister family) + name by function (a port).

Atesir = name by people (the Ates family, (from the word ates; ‘fire’ in Turkish)) + name by suffix (‘-sir’ meaning ‘the people of’).

San Diego = name by person/religion (Didacus of Alcalá, also known as Diego de San Nicolás).

Venice/Venezia = name by people (the Veneti people).

Rio de Janeiro, or ‘*River of January*’ = name by geography (river) + name by history (‘found’ in January). *There isn’t actually a river there, but that’s not the point.*

Oldtown = name by history (it’s pretty old) + name by function (it was a town, now it’s a city).

Minas Tirith = name by function (translation: ‘tower of the guard’).

Rivendell = name by feeling (riven meaning ‘to tear apart or split’) + name by geography (a dell, or valley).

Gondolin, or ‘*Hidden Rock*’ = name by geography.

Alternatively, the original name was **Ondolindë**, or ‘The Rock of the Music of Water’ = name by geography + name by theme/feeling (after the springs of Amon Gwareth).

Moria, or ‘*black chasm*’ = name by geography.

Gotham City = name by geography (‘goat’) + name by function (‘home’) + name by function (It’s a city).

Midgard = name by geography (‘Mid’ means middle) + name by geography (‘gard’ meaning yard, enclosed land, realm).

Niflheim = name by feeling (‘Nifl’ means dark or misty) + name by function (‘heim’ meaning home, house, village).

Ironforge = name by function (named after the Great Forge).

Stormwind City = name by geography (hard winds) + name by function (it’s a city).

1.13 Additional Tips

1. Translate words using a translator like Google translate or something comparable to make your names more interesting. You don’t have to create a new language, but you can make people *think* you did.
2. Look up synonyms of words using a site like thesaurus or comparable. Some words are beautiful but underused.
3. Use Wikipedia to read up on other places and their name origins. If your place is situated on a mountain then go read something about mountains. You might find something or some words you’d like to use.
4. Keep your names short and simple. The best names aren’t long and they aren’t complicated.
5. If you do make a long name, realize that people are lazy and they will shorten it to something simple in the average day-to-day.
6. Don’t think too long about a name. It’s just a name; you can change it later if you really want to.

7. Most names sound bad at first. Sometimes it's the story behind the place that makes the name interesting. 'The Wall' and 'Castle Black' are unoriginal boring names, but *the story* makes those names sound fun and interesting.
8. Cities (generally) don't start as cities, they start as small settlements. Keep this in mind when you're naming your cities.
9. There isn't always a 'decision' on how to call a place; some places have multiple names because multiple people have named it a different way.
10. Places sometimes have nicknames. If you like giving your places some extra depth, giving them a nickname shows an inside look at how people view that place.
11. ALWAYS Google a name you're about to give to a place. You might be giving your place an inappropriate name without realizing it.
12. Place names might evolve overtime or they might stay exactly the same.
13. Avoid using special letters as much as possible. For a lot of people, the Ü or Û is not a common letter and they have no idea how to pronounce it. Please don't (over)use the apostrophe.
14. Don't use the word 'of'/'of the' too much. Using it a few times is fine, but you can also remove the 'of'/'of the' and swap the words. "Woods of the Gods" = "Godswoods". "Home of Hearts" = "Hearts Home". "Desert of Desolation" = "Desolation Desert".
15. Names don't always have or need to have a meaning. Sometimes names don't make sense at all. Sometimes they do have a meaning, but the meaning is in no way connected to reality.

2. Characters

Naming characters is quite a lot harder than naming a place. Character names don't always have a source or meaning; sometimes it's just an appealing word.

That doesn't mean character names don't have an incredibly important function. Character names can be used to show a certain trait, theme or feeling of that character. Are you going to name a nerdy character Chad? ...Most likely not.

Most importantly names show where a character comes from.

Names can feel hollow at first because character names are often not based on a (clear) meaning. 'Jon' or 'Bob' or 'Janet' or 'Karen' doesn't mean anything, really. It's just a simple boring name. But the name itself shouldn't be the most interesting thing about a character, *it should be the character itself*. I Googled 'most boring names' and looked through lists of names people thought were boring, but almost all of those names are names people have we think are interesting. Ivanka is a pretty boring name, but Ivanka Trump is a pretty *interesting* character, no matter what opinion you might have. Bob is a boring name, but I would never call Bob Ross an uninteresting person. A name doesn't make a character, the character makes the name.

If the name is more interesting than your character, you're doing it wrong.

You have to make sure that your characters have names that *you* like, because you'll be using their names for a long time. While writing and rereading and rewriting your work you'll be saying their names in your head. Over and over again.

Naming characters is more difficult than naming places. There are no easy tactics you can use; you have to keep in mind multiple factors when naming a character.

2.1 Language

Language is extremely important when it comes to creating a character name. You don't have to create a whole new language. Imagine how the language sounds. Does it use a lot of 'hard' sounds (think the Dothraki language, using words like/comparable to 'rakh haj' or 'rek hrakkares'? Then so should your character's name. Naming a character 'Tywin Lannister' born in a culture that speaks Dothraki makes no sense.

It's easy to see a distinction between names like Tauriel and Bilbo. Those two names obviously don't originate from the same language/culture. They don't sound alike, either.

2.2 Meaning

Names don't always have meaning, but sometimes they do. People can name their children after many things, from politicians to events to themselves.

In Avatar: The Last Airbender there is a character named Yue. She was born sick and her parents feared she would die. The parents prayed to the moon to cure her and the moon spirit did just that. Her hair turned white and she was cured. She was named Yue, meaning 'moon' in Mandarin Chinese, to honour the moon spirit. It's a simple story, but it gives the name Yue a lot more weight. The meaning of her name can be used in the story telling itself.

Names are given by the parents of the person (most of the time). Get in the shoes of the parents of the character you're naming and imagine what they think is important enough to name their child after. If the parents are highly religious then consider naming the character after something to do with that.

2.3 Connection

Names can also show a connection to another character. Some examples are: Boromir and Faramir, Cersei and Jaime, Tywin and Tyrion, Aerys and Daenerys. They have the same sounds as their sibling/father/child. There is a connection.

2.4 Character

Whatever you name your character, it has to fit their *character*. Arthur fits a knight, but Bilbo not. Just by seeing the name ‘Frodo’, you know that the character is a pretty nice dude. ‘Black Widow’ or ‘Lara Croft’ sound like characters that would beat you in a fight any day (and they totally will). ‘Karen’ will divorce you and take your kids and ‘Chad’ won’t call you back after the second date. Ask yourself: *what is the character like?*

There is no easy way of figuring out if a name fits other than ‘feeling’ if it does.

You can also name your character with a name that does not fit their character at all on purpose. This can be done for comedic relief.

2.5 Finding the Name

So there are a lot of things you need to keep in mind when naming a character, but how do you actually find the words and letters?

1. We’ve named millions upon millions of people in real life. All those names are sources of inspiration. If the language/culture of your character is comparable to one in our real world, look up names people have used in that language/culture.
2. Use a translator to translate words that fit your character. Change some letters if you think it sounds better. For example: Sansa means ‘charm’ in Sanskrit.
3. Use names or words you know and edit them to make them more different. Petyr is Peter with a different letter. Euron is Aaron. Mance Rayder... a rider with a mace?
4. Other sources of names being a phone book, Wikipedia, history books, graveyards...
5. If you base your world/story on history, maybe use the names used in that time period and location.

Example:

I want to name a male character that’s going to be the ruler of a kingdom. He was born in the royal family and is the sole inheritor of the crown and riches. He loves ruling but he isn’t very kind to the lower classes. The language is comparable to German.

I look up ‘German names meaning’ and find multiple lists with names and their meanings. There are multiple names I like: Diedrick (‘People/gifted Ruler’) and Gerald (‘Ruler of the spear’). Gerald fits best with his personality, but Diedrick sounds a bit more... warlike? It’s a name that his parents would be more likely to give than Gerald. There is also a sense of irony with this name. Maybe the meaning of ‘Gerald’ foreshadows his death? Killed by a spear?

Let’s put these names aside for a while and do the last name. We know he likes ruling. Maybe he rules with an ‘iron fist’? Translate that in German and you’ll get ‘Eisenfaust’, which isn’t a

bad name. It's maybe a bit too long, though, I could simply shorten it to 'Faust' and still get the same effect that 'iron fist' did.

Diedrick Faust or Gerald Faust? I like the first combination better, so that's the name I'll go with. Maybe I'll use Gerald later for a different character.

2.6 Prefixes/Suffixes and Similarities

2.6.1 Prefixes/Suffixes

Just like in naming places, prefixes/suffixes are great ways to give meaning to a name. Just like with place name prefixes/suffixes, you can create your own words with their own meanings.

Sometimes cultures have entire naming structures. In the (western) world it's common to have a **first name** (+ **middle name**) + **last name**, but that isn't a system you have to follow. It could also be a **first name** + **first name of father/mother** + word meaning '**child of**'. Or **first name** + '**son/daughter of**' + **first name of father/mother**. What about **first name** + '**of**' + **place name born**? Maybe your world uses a whole different system!

2.6.2 Similarities

One thing you could also do is take a name you already have and use one part of that name as a base for more names. Here is an example of names from the Targaryen family: Aerys, Jaehaerys, Viserys, Daenys, etc. They all sound alike, yet they are all different. It's obvious they are all connected with each other, yet they still all have their own name. When I introduce a new character, say a girl named Daenerys, you know she is part of that Targaryen family without me having to tell it to you.

(There are more names: Daemon, Aemon, Aemond, Aegon, Aenar, Maelor, Maekar, Maegor and Baelor. If you think that's lazy, look up 'Thorin and Company' and their names.)

If you have trouble naming your characters right, it might help to use alliteration. That's when the first letter of the first name and the first letter of the second name are the same letter, like this: Donald Duck, Kim Kardashian, Sansa Stark, Podrick Payne, Peter Parker, Danny DeVito, Amy Adams, Lindsay Lohan, Mandy Moore, Gandalf the Grey, etc. These names tend to sound a lot friendlier and are more memorable.

2.7 Nicknames

Besides the 'official' name of a character, nicknames can be quite catchy too. Sometimes the nickname overthrows the official name. 'Kingslayer' is really the 'second name' of Jaime

Lannister.

Nicknames can be used to show affection between two people (Bill - 'Billy'). Nicknames can also form when a character has a long name; people are lazy (Thompson - 'Tom'). Maybe a character has done a thing that defines him or her, then a nickname can be created that is used to insult or praise that person (Jaime - 'Kingslayer').

2.8 Additional Tips

Most tips from 1.13 are applicable here, too.

1. Keep your names short and simple. The best names aren't long and they aren't complicated. If they are, know that people will shorten them.
2. If you picked a name and you don't like it while you review your work, wait before changing it. Maybe you just need to grow on the name. If you still dislike it after a while, change it.
3. If you base your world on our real world, make sure that the name you're about to give fits in that time period.
4. ALWAYS Google your names. You might have named your character after something or someone inappropriate.
5. Make sure to aim for a variety in naming characters. Matt, Mark and May being friends sounds nice, but people will confuse the three with one another.
6. Don't spend too much time on very small characters. The naming process can take a lot of time, time better spend on something else.
7. Make sure the name a few characters names that *don't* fit. Otherwise characters will become too predictable and boring.
8. If the character is supposed to blend in with other people, don't name that character something exotic.

3. Helpful Resources

Here are some helpful resources you can use in naming your characters or places. If you've got any recommendations, please send them to me so I can add them. ☺

3.1 Places

List of Generic Forms in Place Names in Ireland and the United Kingdom: prefixes/suffixes used in cities, related to geography.

Germanic Toponymy: prefixes/suffixes used in cities.

Toponymy: more of the above here.

Otherworldly Incantations: great guides on geographical features and names.

World Building – Creating Place Names Realistically and Artistically: great and fun video on

how to name places.

3.2 Characters

Behind the name: a website with names and their meanings.

Babble, baby names: baby names.

20,000-names: a lot of names.