

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

What is the status of the various arts (dance, music, theater, etc.) in this society? Are artists revered or mistrusted?

Who supports the arts? Which arts are most highly valued and why?

Are there permanent theaters or concert halls for performing arts? If so, who owns and runs them? Are there also traveling troupes?

What do people at various levels of society do for fun?

Can magic be used in the arts and if so, how -- paint that glows, pictures that move, flutes that play themselves, etc.? Is there a separate branch of purely magical art, like illusions?

What sports or passtimes are common (hawking, hunting, skiing, baseball)? Which ones take skill, money, and/or liesure time?

What games are commonly known -- chess, dice, poker? Which are common among everyone, and which are limited to the peasantry or nobility? Are certain countries/cities known for a passion/expertise for particular games or passtimes?

Are there non-human races who tend to be naturally talented painters, dancers, etc.? How does this affect human praticioners of these arts?

Do non-human races have their own games and liesure passtimes? How do they differ from human games? How do they reflect the physiology and/or particular magical talents of the non-human races?

ARCHITECTURE

What is the most common building material? Why is it used (availability, cheapness)? Does it have any major drawbacks (wood=the Great Fire of London)?

How are buildings normally ornamented? Carved gargoyles, painted murals, geometric patterns?

How tall a building can be constructed at a reasonable cost and in a reasonable time?

What are typical floor plans like --can people affort to waste space on hallways or do they just have a series of rooms opening into other rooms? Are buildings normally built square, triangular, domed, what?

How many people usually live in a typical house? How large is a typical house?

What are the differences in materials and appearance between a lower-class, a middle-class, and an upper-class type house? How do city houses differ from those in rural areas?

How are living quarters arranged? Are bedrooms on the top floors for privacy or on the ground floor for convenience? Are parlors or libraries common? How are houses heated/cooled?

CALENDAR

Is there a single, generally accepted calendar (including time measurement) or do different countries or peoples or races have different ones?

How is the day divided into smaller time units? What are they (Hour of the Lark, Sunrise Bell, Nones, etc.)? Are the names relevant to anything? Is the length of an hour fixed, or does it vary depending on changes in the length of the day as the seasons change?

What are the names of months, and how many days are there in each? How many days in a week/week-like-period? Months in a year?

Are there leap years? If so, who keeps track?

Which days are general holidays or festival times? What do they celebrate? Are there any that are only celebrated in particular countries, cities, or regions?

What event(s) do people use to date years? Is it a single occurrence (the creation of the world, the end of the Great War, the invention of atomic power, etc.), or are events dated based on recurring things (the 12th year of Tiberius' reign, the 300th year of the Han Dynasty)?

How do people tell what time it is? Are there clocks, watches, sundials, etc., or do people have to listen for the bells from the castle or church, or do they just eyeball the sun?

Are there any days that are considered "outside the year"--like Mardi Gras? How did they originate?

CRIME AND THE LEGAL SYSTEM

How has the presence of magic and magicians affected law and government? Are wizards barred from certain kinds of jobs (judge, jury, police)? Do some jobs require that their holder be a wizard?

What are considered normal and legal ways of gathering evidence and determining guilt? Is torture allowed? Truth spells? Are arbitrary judgements by the lord or landowner allowed, or is there a standard that they are supposed to follow?

If someone doesn't like the judgement he receives in court, is there anyone he can appeal to, like the Emperor or the Supreme Court?

Are there laws forbidding certain types of people (peasants, wizards, priests, women) from carrying arms? Are there laws requiring certain people to be skilled with certain weapons, as England for some centuries required yeomen to be proficient with the longbow?

Is forensic magic possible? Commonly used? Admissible in court? Used only for certain types of crimes (and if so, what)? Is it something any wizard can do, or do you have to specialize?

Are certain spells (as opposed to magic generally) illegal? If so, how would a criminal magician be detected? Apprehended? Punished?

Are criminal magicians dealt with by the same court system as everyone else, or is there a special branch of the courts, or are they handled by the Wizard's Guild, or do you just send out a bunch of heroes to kill them off?

Are there separate courts for civil and criminal matters? For magical and non-magical matters? For humans and non-humans? What are the differences?

What things are considered truly serious crimes and why? (Example: a trade-oriented culture might consider counterfeiting a death-penalty crime; in a place where life is cheap, murder might be something that only results in a small fine.)

What are the punishments for serious vs. minor crimes? Are there prisons, or are people punished and released? Are there degrees of punishment--branding vs. cutting off ears vs. cutting off a hand vs. decapitation--or do they just hang everybody?

Who is responsible for catching criminals? Who pays the crook-catchers--the king, the city government, a consortium of merchants, somebody else? How are they organized--into independent police precincts, or into overlapping districts, or just according to whoever wants to hire them?

Are there lawyers or advocates? Who can afford them? Who trains and/or certifies them?

Are people guilty until proven innocent, innocent until proven guilty, or does it depend on the mood the lord is in when the case comes in front of him?

Are there judges other than the lord/king or landowner? If so, how are they paid, and by whom? How often are outlying areas likely to see a judge? Is "mob justice" common?

Approved of or disapproved of?

Are there sumptuary laws requiring certain clothes to be worn or not worn by certain occupations or classes? Do judges wear robes or wigs?

Are highwaymen, muggers, bandits, or pirates common or rare? What sorts of crimes would the average citizen be likely to run across during his/her lifetime?

Who can make or repeal laws--a group (such as an elected Senate, an appointed Council, or an hereditary House of Lords) or only the king/emperor/head-of-state?

How are alleged criminals treated before/after their convictions? Do the police/military/city guard make a practice of roughing up suspects, or is this frowned upon?

DAILY LIFE

How do people feel about foreigners? Non-humans? How ready are they to accept different ideas? How cosmopolitan are they?

How much social mobility is there? Is it easy or hard for a person born a peasant to advance to the middle class, or for a middle class person to advance to the upper class or nobility? How much resistance would there be? Would such a person ever be accepted socially?

What things are considered luxuries--chocolate, coffee, cotton, flush toilets, spices?

What do people in general look like? Would a blonde (red-head, brunette) stand out in a crowd? Someone 5' tall? 7' tall? Do non-humans?

What is furniture like--big and blocky, delicate, simple, elaborately carved or decorated? What is it mostly made of--cloth, wood, stone, etc.? Are certain things (like chairs with arms) reserved for high-status individuals?

In what ways does furniture design reflect the customs of people (example: beds with bed-curtains for privacy in medieval keeps where servants wandered through rooms without warning; chaise lounges as common furniture in a society where people are accustomed to recline rather than sit, etc.)?

What are plumbing and sanitary systems like? Who builds and maintains them? How reliable are they, and who do you call when the drains back up? How do they differ from city to farm?

How do people cope with various disasters--fire, floods, volcanoes, plague, etc.? How common are such disasters?

How early do people get up in the morning in the city? Country? Are clocks common, or do people tell time by the sun or by listening for the church bells?

DIET

What dishes are considered holiday food? What foods/drinks are associated with particular holidays, events, (e.g., funerals, weddings) or times of the year?

When a guest arrives, is food or drink offered immediately, after an interval, or only on request? Is there a particular food or drink that it is customary to offer a newly arrived guest? A guest who is departing (stirrup cup)?

How many meals are considered normal in a day? When are they served? Which are substantial, and which are smaller? Are certain foods (e.g., eggs and bacon) reserved mainly for a particular meal (breakfast)?

What dishes would be considered typical of this area? What wines or beers?

Is there a safe supply of drinking water, or do people (including children) drink ale or beer exclusively because "water is unhealthy" (i.e., contaminated and will make you sick)?

What foods are considered peasant food? What foods are staples, commonly eaten every day? What foods are rare? What foods are normally cooked/eaten raw?

What is the food like? What herbs and spices are readily available, and which must be imported? How common/expensive are imported foods and spices? What spices are commonly used? Do people tend to like highly spiced food, or not?

How is food preserved for use during the off-season--smoking, canning, drying, etc.? How reliable are the methods used--how often does "preserved" food spoil?

When food is in limited supply, who gets first crack? The laborers and farmers who have to work to produce more, or the children who are the next generation, or the wise and revered elders?

What foods do non-humans like, and how do these differ from those favored by humans? Are some foods poisonous or distasteful to one species that are delicacies or necessary to another?

FASHION AND DRESS

What do people wear? How expensive is it? Can the material be produced locally, or must some or all of it be imported?

Are certain clothes customary for certain occupations -- e.g., military uniforms, judges' robes, sports team uniforms, etc.? How much variation is allowed? Could a scholar wear a fluorescent green robe as long as the cut was right, or would that be too much? Is it color or style that is most important?

Are the dyes for certain colors -- purple, indigo blue, etc. -- rare, making cloth of that color more expensive and/or reserved for nobility or other high-status people?

Are there sumptuary laws, defining who can wear what? What are the penalties? Who decides when changes are needed? How often are they adjusted?

How many changes of clothes can a normal person afford? A noble person? A peasant?

What are current fashion in clothes like? In hats? Jewelry? Shoes? Do such fashions differ for humans/non-humans? From country to country?

What materials are appropriate for the climate? What cloth (e.g., silk) must be imported, and is therefore used only for expensive upper-class clothing?

What styles are considered tacky and vulgar, and what is stylish?

What types of decorations and accessories are common? What colors and combinations of colors are thought to look well together, or to clash? Do opinions of this vary from race to race?

What physical types and characteristics are currently fashionable--tan vs. pale skin, the "consumptive look" vs. robust good health, fat vs. thin, blonde vs. brunette, muscles vs. "dead poet", etc.? How does this vary for non-human races?

How do non-human fashions reflect the habitat and physiology of non-humans? Do mermaids have a nudity taboo, for example? Do dragons dress for dinner?

EATING CUSTOMS

Do men and women, parents and children, servants and master, eat separately, or does everyone eat together? How is status displayed at the table (seating above or below the salt, near or far from the head, serving first with the best, etc.)?

What dishes are considered holiday food? What foods/drinks are associated with particular holidays, special events (e.g., weddings, funerals), or times of the year?

What distinguishes a formal, high-court dinner from an ordinary meal, besides quantity and variety of food? How do formal, high-court manners differ from everyday ones?

What eating utensils are used, if any? Forks, eating knife, spoons, chopsticks, what?

What is the order of a typical upper-class meal--do they start with wine, then a sweet, then stew, then salad, or is everything brought in at once?

What shape are tables/eating areas (round, oblong, square, rectangular, etc.)? Where is the "place of honor" for a guest? Where do important members of the household sit/recline/whatever?

Are special arrangements necessary for entertaining guests of different races/species--taller chairs for dwarves, raw meat for werewolves, perches for harpies, etc.? How do the eating customs of different races reflect their cultures and biology?

What things are never eaten (i.e., what's not kosher)? Why? Are some common human foods poisonous to dwarves or elves (or vice versa)?

EDUCATION

How much does it cost to get various levels of education?

What education is available, and where? Are there schoolhouses in every town, or do ordinary people have to travel if they want to be educated? Are there universities? Private tutors?

What is the literacy level in the general population? Is literacy considered a useful/necessary skill for nobility, or something only scribes/clerks/wimps need?

What areas are considered absolutely necessary knowledge for a courtier (poetry, languages, skill at arms, etc.)? Which are nice but not necessary? Which would be slightly embarrassing if anybody found out (a passion for comic books, etc.)?

How respected are teachers and scholars? Who supports them?

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Does this country have formal relationships with other countries? If so, who can be an ambassador/envoy? Are there standing embassies and consulates, or are envoys sent only when something specific comes up?

How are treaties arranged? Are there any significant ones currently in force or coming up for signing?

How much do official attitudes toward other countries affect commerce and trade? Do merchants pretty much ignore tensions between governments as long as they can make a profit, or will this get them into trouble?

How much formal spying and intelligence gathering is normally done by governments? By the military? By merchants? Who has the best information-gathering system?

Which countries are traditional allies? Which are traditional rivals? How do these traditions affect current foreign policy?

Which heads of state are related by blood or marriage? How important are marriage alliances? How do ties of blood/marriage affect foreign policy?

GESTURES

Are gestures and body language in this society generally subtle, or not? Do people talk with their hands, or is that considered vulgar?

What gestures are insulting? What do they mean? Do some gestures differ in meaning depending on the culture or time (example: the American "V" for victory sign, which became the peace sign, is/was highly insulting in Europe)?

How do overall gestures and body language differ between countries? Are there things that don't matter in one area that are mortal insults in another (eating with the left hand, etc.)?

What are the different ways of showing respect (bowing, saluting, etc.)? To whom is one expected to show respect--one's elders, superiors in rank, social superiors, teachers, priests, etc.?

GOVERNMENT

How has the presence of magic and magicians affected law and government? Are wizards barred from certain kinds of government jobs or offices? Do some positions require that their holder be a wizard?

How has the presence of non-human races affected law and government?

What is the basic form of government in this country--feudal aristocracy, oligarchy, absolute rulership, democracy, what? What forms of government are used in neighboring countries, and why are they the same or different? What services does the government or head of state provide: schools, wells, courts, an army to protect people from the Vikings?

What services are provided locally or privately?

Who has the right to levy taxes? For what purposes? On what or whom? Can taxes be paid in kind, or do certain things require money?

Who provides support services for the head of state? What are they called: King's Councilors, Cabinet ministers, Secretary of State?

Are these hereditary offices, appointees, career civil servants, or elected officials?

Is the relative power of a country or king usually measured by the size of the army, the number and ability of the wizards, or the amount of money/trade flowing through it?

What are the easiest/most common ways to advance in status--amass more money, marry well, get the king's eye, etc? How much resistance is there to someone advancing in social status?

Who will take over running the government if the current head of state is incapacitated? How is this determined? Is there an heir apparent (either actual or political)? What happens if the heir is a minor?

Who is responsible for protecting the king or head of state? His personal guard, the Secret Service, an elite group affiliated with the regular military? What safeguards have they got against assassins, poisoning, direct assault, magical attack?

Who can give orders (to military, to tax collectors, to servants, to ordinary folks on the street)? How are such people chosen?

Who is responsible for coinage: the king, local barons, merchant guilds, someone else? Are there generally acceptable standards for coins? How easy/common is counterfeiting?

Is there an organized system of education? If so, who provides it: government, temples, private persons? How is it supported?

Who can call up men for an army, and how? Does the king ask his lords for men, who in turn draft their peasants, or can the king go straight to the bottom?

How much formal spying and intelligence gathering is normally done by governments? The military? The merchant guilds and wealthy tradesmen?

Do relations between countries depend mainly on the relations between the heads of state, or can two kings hate each others' guts without being able to just declare war and drag their countries into it?

GREETING AND MEETING

How did the greeting gesture originate (example: shaking hands to prove one's weapon hand was empty)? Is there a special I-am-not-armed gesture for wizards?

Is there a difference between the greeting offered to an equal and that offered to a superior or inferior? Between that offered a man or a woman? (cf. the various levels of curtesy) Between that offered a human vs. a non-human?

Is there a way of changing a greeting gesture to make it insulting?

When meeting someone for the first time, how are they greeted--wave, handshake, bow, some other gesture? Does this differ if one already knows the person? If you see someone you like on the far side of the street, how do you acknowledge them?

How are two people who have not met before introduced to each other? What is the order of precedence when there are several people of differing sex, social status, or race/species present who must all be introduced to each other?

Are there people or beings who are never introduced to each other? Are "true names" significant, and if so, under what circumstances would someone be given someone else's true name? Are there customs involving the way in which someone is named when being introduced (example: giving all of a person's names and titles at the first meeting, but never repeating them afterward, so that he's always referred to as "George" even though he's introduced as the Duke George Edward Canterbury Gordon de la Suis-Foule, Marquis of Horsham, Whitewater and Framingham, Earl of St. Peter's Close, and Viscount of Abernathy.)

LANGUAGE

Is there a "trade language" that facilitates commerce between countries that don't speak the same tongue? Is there a "universal language" spoken by educated or noble persons, as Latin was in the Middle Ages?

Are some or all people bilingual? Is there a common second language many people know?

Are there "secret" languages or codes known only by priests, soldiers, guild members, etc.? If so, why were they developed?

What are the variations in speech patterns, syntax, and slang from one social class to another? One occupation to another? One region to another?

What areas do local slang phrases come out of? (Example: In a fishing town, referring to good luck as "a good catch"; in a farming town, as "a good harvest", etc.) What kinds of colorful turns of phrase do people use?

What things in this culture would their language have many specific words for (e.g., the Inuit languages that have 14+ words for different kinds of snow)? What do the people in this culture consider important enough to name?

What will people swear a binding oath by? What do people use as curse words?

How many languages are there? Which ones are related (e.g., the Romance languages of Europe) and why? Which languages borrow words or phrases from other languages? Which are likely to be most widely spoken?

Are there different languages for different races (dwarves, elves, etc.), or is language based more on geography than race/species? Is there a special language you need to learn in order to talk to dragons or other magical beasts?

Do wizards have a special language that is used for magic? If so, where do they learn it? Is it safe to chat in this language, or is everything said in it automatically a spell?

MAGIC AND MAGICIANS

Are the laws of nature and physics actually different in this world (to accomodate magic) or are they the same as in real life? If the same, how does magic fit in? How do magical beasts fit in?

If there is no specific point of divergence, what are the differences between this world and ours? If magic exists but history is the same, how is this justified? How do organized religions react to magic?

If there are imaginary animals (dragons, unicorns, etc) how do they fit into the ecology? What do they eat? How much and what kind of habitat do they require? Are they intelligent and/or capable of working spells, talking, etc.?

Where did civilization begin? What directions did it spread? How was its development affected by the presence of magic? The presence of non-human races, if any?

Which peoples/races/cultures/countries are most technologically and/or magically advanced? Least advanced? Why?

Is magic legal? Any magic, or only some types? Do laws vary widely from country to country, or is the attitude generally similar?

What wild animals, actual or imaginary, live in this area? Are any of them potentially useful--e.g., for fur, whale oil, hides, magical ingredients, etc. Are there magical beasts, like dragons and unicorns? If so, which ones? How many? Are they common, or are some endangered species? Have any been domesticated?

Are there magical artifacts (rings, swords, etc)? If so, who makes them? How? Are they permanent, or does the magic wear off after a while?

What effect has magic had on laws? Art? Technology? Entertainment? etc.

Where is scientific and/or magical research done--universities, private labs, under the auspices of the king/government, etc.?

Given the magical/technological level of this society, what is an appropriate ratio of farmers or food producers to urban residents? If this is based on the presence of magic, how many urban residents are going to starve if the spells supporting farming fail suddenly?

Are magicians a force in politics, or are they above it? Are there national politics that revolve around magic/wizards (i.e., trying to outlaw or promote certain kinds of magic,

trying to draft all wizards into the king's army, licensing of magicians, etc.)?

How much as the presence of magic affected military strategy and tactics in general?

Is healing usually a magical process? If so, how does the magical healing talent/spell work (i.e., speeding up the body's natural healing mechanism vs. doing instant repairs from outside)? Does a magical healer have to consciously direct the healing process (meaning that lots of knowledge of anatomy, etc. would be required), or does magical healing simply speed up the normal, unconscious healing process in the patient? Is there more than one kind of magical healer (as there are surgeons, eye doctors, orthopedic doctors, etc.)? Are there both magical and non-magical healers, and if so, are they rivals or simply different specialties?

What level is medicine at? Who are the healers? Do you have to have a talent to heal? Who trains healers, herbalists, apothecaries, surgeons, magical vs. nonmagical healers, etc?

Is forensic magic possible? Commonly used? Used only to investigate certain types of crimes (if so, which)? Are the results of forensic spells admissible in court as evidence?

Are there separate civil and criminal courts? Is there a separate court or procedure for magical crimes? Are judges and other court officers required/forbidden to know magic?

Can magic be used in the arts, and if so, how -- paint that glows, pictures that move, flutes that play themselves, etc. ? How do "normal" artists feel about this?

MAGIC AND TECHNOLOGY

Are there magical means of transportation (teleport spells, magic carpets, dragon-riding)? How do they compare in speed, safety, and expense to non-magical means? Are there any drawbacks (e.g., air sickness)? How commonly are they used, and for what purposes (industrial shipping vs. travel for fun)?

Are magical weapons available? Can magic be used in warfare? In what ways? Are spells fast enough to be useful in hand-to-hand combat, or is magic more of a siege weapon, useful only for long, slow things?

How has the presence of magic affected weapons technology? Do you have to do anything special to armor, weapons, walls, to make them better able to resist spells?

Can ordinary objects be enchanted to make them extremely lethal (the Frying Pan of Death) or will this work properly only on things that are already weapons? Can ordinary objects be enchanted to make them (or their user) much, much better at whatever they do (the Frying Pan of Ultimate Gourmet Cooking, the Comb of No Bad Hair Days Ever)? How common and useful are such enchantments?

To what degree do magical objects and the presence of wizards and spells replace technology (e.g., a chest that is enchanted to stay cold replacing refrigerators)? Duplicate technology? Supplement technology?

MANNERS

What distinguishes a formal, high-court dinner from an ordinary meal, besides quantity and variety of food? How do high-court manners differ from everyday ones?

What are the rules of precedence--who gets to go through doors first? Who gets introduced first?

Is there a distinction between "formal" good manners and informal, everyday manners? When and where are people expected to be on their best behavior?

How important are "good manners" in this society? How do "good manners" differ from race to race? How do people/dwarves/elves/dragons react when someone has just been, by their standards, rude?

MEDICINE

What customs surround death and burial? Is there a special class of people (doctors, priests, funeral directors, untouchables) who deal with dead bodies?

How accurate is the diagnostic process? Do healers have ways of telling two diseases apart if they have similar symptoms? Do healers depend on standard physical medical tests -- reflexes, temperature, contracted pupils -- or do they normally use spells for diagnosis?

How expensive are healers? How available are such services to ordinary people?

How much is known about anatomy, physiology, pathology, etc? Are treatments based on purely practical experience ("We know this works but we don't know why"), or do healers understand at least some of what they are doing?

How much training does a healer normally get? Where? From whom?

Is healing generally a magical process? If so, how does the magical healing talent work? Does a magical healer have to consciously direct the healing process (meaning that lots of knowledge of anatomy, etc., would be required), or does magical healing simply speed up the normal, unconscious healing process in the patient?

Is there a reliable method of birth control? Who normally handles births--midwives, or doctors? What is the mortality rate for pregnant ladies, new mothers, and children?

Who can become a healer? Are there various kinds of healers (herbalists, wisewomen, pharmacists/apothecaries, surgeons, doctors, etc.)? If so, why are distinctions made?

What kinds of treatments are available--herbal brews, vaccinations, acupuncture, etc.? How effective are they?

Is it possible to resurrect/resuscitate someone who has died? If so, how long is it before this becomes impossible? Before serious brain damage sets in?

How is insanity treated? Are there asylums or treatment centers? How effective are treatments for insanity?

How much do the physical differences between human and non-human races affect their medical treatment? Are there some diseases that only affect non-humans, or only humans? Are some treatments lethal to one species but effective in another? Do doctors have to specialize in non-human medicine in order to do a good job of it?

PEOPLE AND CUSTOMS: ETHICS AND VALUES

What will people swear a binding oath by? What do people use as curse words?

What are the most desired/most valuable things in this society--gold, jewels, drugs, money, furs, reindeer, oranges, etc? Why is it desired/valued? Do different races value different things? Is there a race/culture for whom non-material things (information, time) are the valuable things? How did they get that way?

What things are considered normal and acceptable in this society that would not be considered normal or acceptable in yours?

(Examples: dueling, drugs, open homosexuality, polygamy, infanticide.)

What things are considered shocking in this society that are not considered shocking in yours? (Examples: showing a woman's ankles, eating left-handed, reading in public.)

What are the reactions of ordinary people when someone does one of these things?

What are the acceptable limits to honor and/or honesty in this society? Is a binding oath unbreakable no matter what, or can you get out of it if the other party turns out to be evil scum or if you weren't fully informed? Are "white lies" acceptable socially, or is lying in any form unacceptable?

What are the attitudes toward ownership? What constitutes "theft" and what can be stolen--gems, gold, purses, small moveables, someone's good name? Are thieves organized in a guild, licensed by law, freelance, or what?

Who is considered a citizen, with the rights and privileges thereof? What are those rights and privileges (voting, protection from thieves, the right to a hearing in Rome) and what responsibilities go along with them (jury duty, providing funds or knights for the lord's army)?

Are there certain classes of people (wizards, foreigners, children, peasants, women) who have fewer legal rights or less recourse than full citizens? Why? Are they considered mentally or morally deficient, a danger to the state, or is there some other rationale?

What are the most controversial subjects in this culture? What things can you easily start a friendly argument about in any bar? What things will automatically start an unfriendly argument? (cf. the list of topics forbidden for discussion on this echo)

What are the social taboos--what things are "not done", like wearing a bathing suit to the office? What things are never talked about?

What would happen if someone did? How do these taboos vary for different races?

What are the biggest social faux pas--burping loudly at a formal banquet, drawing steel in the presence of a king/noble, asking a dwarf whether it's a male or a female? What subjects or actions cause embarrassment or discomfort?

What are the society's mores regarding courtship, marriage, and family? Is marriage primarily a civil or a religious institution?

What are the standards of beauty for people? For paintings and sculpture? For clothes and furniture? How do they differ from the standards in your culture (example: a culture which considers fatness a highly desirable beauty trait)? How do they reflect the physical traits of the various people (example: dwarves considering height a *negative* trait, werewolves attracted by length of teeth or scent, etc.)?

What kind of ideal life do people aspire to? Does everyone want to be an English country gentleperson, living out in the country, or is it the New York social whirl, or the jet-set lifestyle, that attracts most people?

What kinds of people are the rebels and outcasts of this society? How does society deal with them--prison, exile, decapitation, reformation, etc?

Who are the arbiters of ethics (as opposed to law)? How did they get to be arbiters? Who are the arbiters of the social milieu? Ditto, ditto.

PHYSICAL AND HISTORICAL FEATURES

In which geographical areas will the story take place? How much ground will the story cover? What are the most striking features of landscape, climate, etc. in the story area?

If there are non-human inhabitants, are there any areas they particularly claim as their own (e.g., dwarves in caves under mountains)?

CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY

Have human activities affected climate, landscape, etc. in various regions? How? (Example: Growth of the Sahara Desert has been increased by over-farming.) If this is an alternate earth, will the "alternate" part change existing effects (if there are no people in north Africa, growth of the desert would be slower, etc.)?

How do differences from Earth (multiple moons, suns, etc) affect the climate in various areas?

How much land is in each of the equatorial, temperate, and polar zones?

Note: climate affects landscape through erosion and weathering, the distribution of plants and animals, and soil formation. Winter freezing and thawing may change travel patterns as waterways freeze or flood, or mountain passes close. Weather also affects available sports, like skiing. Are all these things consistent with what you say the climate is like in

particular areas?

Where are mountain ranges? Rivers and lakes? Deserts? Forests, tropical and otherwise? Grasslands and plains?

If there are imaginary animals (dragons, unicorns, etc.) how do they fit into the ecology? What do they eat? How much and what kind of habitat do they require? Are they intelligent and/or capable of working spells, talking, etc.? How common are they? Are any endangered species?

NATURAL RESOURCES

Which areas are the most fertile farmland? Where are mineral resources located?

Which animals, birds, fish, and other wildlife are commonly found in which areas? If there are imaginary animals such as dragons, where do they live?

Which natural resources, if any, have been depleted in which areas over time?

Which resources (e.g., coal, oil, iron ore, gold, diamonds, limestone, etc.) are particularly abundant, and in which areas? Which are scarce and where? Are there places with major deposits that haven't been discovered yet, or where such deposits haven't been fully exploited?

How much conflict has been or might be caused by these imbalances in resources? How much active, peaceful trade?

What water resources are available, and for what uses? (Example: a millwheel requires flowing water, i.e., a river or stream; irrigation needs a large, dependable water source like a lake or large river, etc.)

GENERAL HISTORY

How far back are there records or tales of historical events? How widely known are these stories?

Do average people believe old tales, or do they dismiss some that have a basis in fact (as people dismissed Troy at one time)?

How long have there been people on this world? Did they evolve, were they created by the gods, or did they migrate from somewhere/when else? If there are non-humans, how long have they been around and where did they come from?

For an alternate Earth, how similar are history and cultures to real history and cultures? Why are things similar/different?

Where did civilization begin? What directions did it spread? How was development affected by the presence of working magic? The presence of non-human races (if any)? The actions of gods?

Which peoples/countries/races have, over the centuries, fought, been allies, traded, or traditionally been rivals? Where are such old events still important--still causing hard feelings?

Which peoples/countries/races have been in conflict, allied, etc. in the *recent* past? Why? When and why were the most recent wars?

Who won?

Which peoples/etc. are considered the most civilized? Which are most technologically advanced? Most magically advanced? Least advanced?

Is there a single, generally accepted calendar (including time measurements like hours and minutes) or do different countries, peoples, races, etc. have different ones?

How many languages are there? Which ones are related (as the Romance languages are) and why? Which languages borrow words or phrases from other languages? Which is likely to be most widely spoken? Why?

Is there a "trade language" that facilitates commerce between countries that don't speak the same tongue? Is there a "universal language" spoken by educated or noble persons (or magicians), as Latin was in the Middle Ages?

HISTORY OF A SPECIFIC COUNTRY

Who are the rivals or enemies of this country? How close are they physically? How powerful?

Who are the heroes and villains of each country's history (e.g., Washington and Lincoln in the U.S., Henry V in England, etc.)? Why are they heroes, and what does this say about the country and people?

How accessible is this area? What natural features mark the borders? Who are the neighboring countries/peoples and what are they like?

Why did people settle in this area in the first place--strategic location, trade route, water transport, minerals, good farming, etc.? Have things changed much since, or do people still depend on whatever brought them here in the first place?

How do the weapons of this country compare with those of surrounding cities and countries? Have there been recent innovations that may upset the balance of power, or is everyone more or less equal?

How many people are there in this country? How does this compare with world population? What is considered a small town/large town/ city in terms of number of

people?

How diverse is the population of this country--how many different races (human or non-human), creeds, etc. normally live in various cities and towns in this country? In what percentages?

Is population shifting from rural to urban, south to north, mountains to coast, etc.? Why? What effects has this had on the places being left? The places gaining people?

Is magic legal here? All magic, or only some types? Do laws governing magic vary widely from country to country, or are attitudes generally similar?

What does this country import? Export? How important is trade to the economy? How is currency exchange handled, and by whom?

What is the system of coinage used, and who mints it?

How much of this country is farmland? Forest? Desert? Mountains? Plains?

What are the primary crops (e.g., potatoes, cotton, tobacco, coffee, rice, peanuts, wheat, sugarcane, etc.)? Are any grown mainly for export?

What crops can not be grown here because of the soil, climate, etc.?

What water resources are available here, and for what uses?

What wild animals, actual or imaginary, live in this area? Are any of them potentially useful--e.g., for fur, whale oil, hides, magical ingredients, hat feathers?

Which animals, actual or imaginary, are commonly domesticated in this area? Which aren't here, but are elsewhere? (Example: water buffalo in India vs. oxen in Europe vs. camels in desert areas).

POLITICS

Is magic a profession, an art, or just a job? What is the status accorded to magicians in this society? Are they forbidden overt political action, or are wizards and/or the wizard's guild knee-deep in court intrigue?

Is there tension, rivalry, or outright hostility between any of the actual gods? How does this affect church politics? Court politics?

People's everyday lives?

Does the level of technological advancement match the level of social and political advancement?

What are the major political factions at present? How long have they been around? Which factions are allies, which enemies? Are there any potential new forces on the political scene (e.g., a rising middle class, a university gaining unexpected power because of certain magical discoveries, etc.)?

How much influence do "special interest groups" such as merchants, wizards, or various religions, have on court politics? How do they exercise their influence--indirectly (by talking lords or council members into taking their sides) or directly (by having their own representatives on the council)?

What political positions are considered conservative? Liberal? Unthinkable? How do such positions differ from what is considered conservative/liberal in your own society?

Are there any shaky political alliances between disparate groups? Why were they formed? How long is it likely to be before they fall apart? When they do, what will the effects be?

What ancient rivalries and hatreds still affect current attitudes and political positions (examples: Scottish and Welsh separatist groups; Catholics vs. Protestants vs. Muslims; Hatfields vs. McCoys; dwarves vs. elves)?

What kinds of people are likely to face prejudice: dwarves, werewolves, merchants, women, undertakers? Is this institutionalized (i.e., a matter of law), or is it mostly a matter of public attitude?

POPULATION

How many people are there in this country? How does this compare with world population? What is considered a small town/large town/city in terms of number of people?

How diverse is the population of this country--how many different races (human or non-human), creeds, cultures, etc. normally live in various cities and towns in this country? In what percentages?

Is population shifting from rural to urban, south to north, mountains to coast, etc.? Why--invasions, plague, job opportunities, gold rush? What effects has this had on the places being left? The places gaining people?

Given the magical/technological level of this society, what is an appropriate ratio of farmers or food producers to urban residents?

Is there much immigration into or out of various countries? Why? To or from what other areas?

Which geographical areas are most heavily populated? Least? Why? Are certain regions or types of terrain more popular areas for non-humans (dwarves, etc.) to live? Why?

RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

How do various religions, if any, view magic? Do any forbid it? Require it? Why, or why not? Do any require/forbid magicians to be priests/priestesses (as opposed to members of the congregation)?

Are there actual gods/godlike beings? If so, do they take an active role in the religions that worship them? Do they take an active role in the lives of everyday people? Why?

How many gods are there, and is there a hierarchy among them? Which ones are good or evil, or is this meaningless when speaking of gods?

How do various religions view non-believers? Foreigners? Non-humans? Which support the state/king/government, and which are more interested in ordinary people?

Is there a difference between miracles and magic? If so, how are they distinguished in everyday events?

Is there tension, rivalry, or outright hostility between any of the actual gods? How does this affect church politics? People's everyday lives?

Where does religion fit into this society? Is there a state church? Is freedom of religion the norm? Do people generally think of the temples/churches as parasites, or as useful parts of society?

If there are actual, demonstrable gods, what part does faith play in their worship? Why do they want worship? What are their various rites like, and why? What offerings are considered good, better, best? Are people supposed to pick one or more gods to worship and ignore the others, or do most people pray to whoever is most likely to grant results in a specific situation (the god of harvest when bringing in the crops, the goddess of war when in battle, etc.)? How do people decide whom to worship? Which temple to be affiliated with?

How much part do various religions and philosophies play in public and private life? Are philosophers and theologians considered academics, or do they debate in the marketplace, like Socrates? How much influence do their theories have on the way people actually behave?

Are priests or philosophers full-time occupations, or do they need day jobs? If they are full-time, who supports them--the congregation, a wealthy patron, the temple's investment fund?

Why are the gods interested in people? Are they like the Greek pantheon (quarrelsome, larger-than-life humans), or are they more transcendent and incomprehensible? Do the gods have limits to what they can do? To what they will do? Can the gods make mistakes?

How do the various temples and philosophies explain the classic "problem of evil"? Do they think bad things are always a just punishment for some transgression, a character-building exercise, the result of an evil antagonist (Satan, Loki), or just something the gods can't prevent?

RULES OF MAGIC

What things can magic *not* do? What are the limits of magical power?

Is there a difference between miracles and magic? If so, how are they distinguished?

Where does magic power come from: the gods, "mana" (cf. Larry Niven's Warlock stories), the personal will-power of the magician, etc.?

Is it an exhaustable resource?

How does a magician tap magical power? Does becoming a magician require some rite of passage (investing one's power in an object, being chosen by the gods, constructing or being given a permanent link to the source of power, successfully summoning a demon, etc.) or does it just happen naturally, as a result of study or as a part of growing up?

What does one need to do to cast a spell -- design an elaborate ritual, recite poetry, mix the right ingredients in a pot? Are there things like a staff, a wand, a familiar, a crystal ball, that are necessary or useful to have before casting spells? If so, where and how do wizards get these things?

How long does it take to cast a spell? Can spells be stored for later, instant use? Do spells take lots of long ritual, or is magic a "point and shoot" kind of thing?

Can two or more wizards combine their power to cast a stronger spell, or is magic done only by individuals? What makes one wizard more powerful than another--knowledge of more spells, ability to handle greater quantities of mana, having a more powerful god as patron, etc.?

Does practicing magic have any detrimental effect on the magician (such as being addictive, slowly driving the magician insane, or shortening the magician's life-span)? If so, is there any way to prevent these effects? Are the effects inevitable in all magicians, or do they affect only those with some sort of predisposition? Do the effects progress at the same rate in everyone?

How much is known about the laws of magic? How much of what is "known" is wrong (as Aristotle's ideas about human anatomy were wrong, but accepted for centuries)?

What general varieties of magic are practiced (e.g., herbal potions, ritual magic, alchemical magic, demonology, necromancy, etc.)? Do any work better than others, or does only one variety actually work?

Are certain kinds of magic practiced solely or chiefly by one sex or another? By one race or culture or another?

Does a magician's magical ability or power change over time -- e.g., growing stronger or weaker during puberty, or with increasing age?

Can a magician "use up" all of his/her magic, thus ceasing to be a magician? If this happens, what does the ex-magician do--die, retire, take up teaching, go into a second career?

Can the ability to do magic be lost? If so, how -- overdoing it, "burning out," brain damage due to fever or a blow, magical attack, etc.?

Can the ability to do magic be forcibly taken away? If so, how and by whom? (Traditional example: certain spells could only be worked by virgins; raping such a witch robbed her of her power.)

What is the price magicians pay in order to be magicians--years of study, permanent celibacy, using up bits of their life or memory with each spell, etc.?

RURAL FACTORS

Given the magical/technological level of this society, what is an appropriate ratio of farmers to urban residents?

Given the state of roads and transportation, how much food is it possible to ship to a given location before it spoils? (This limits the size of cities.)

Are rural areas primarily farms, forests, fields for grazing, or "waste land"? In outlying areas where there aren't many people, how many roads are there, who builds them, and who maintains them?

How reliable is the weather from year to year -- is crop production relatively dependable, or do people have to cope with regular famines due to drought or floods?

What kinds of catastrophic/weird weather are common--tornadoes, hurricanes, blizzards, waterspouts, dust storms? How do people cope? How do non-humans cope?

How are farming/food-producing areas divided up between humans/nonhumans? What kinds of conflicts are likely (example: expanding human farms encroaching on the forests werewolves or dragons use for hunting)?

Can peasants/yeomen own their own land, or does it all belong to the lord? What kinds of rights over land, crops, game, etc. does the lord/landowner have? Is poaching a problem?

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Is the level of technology in this society comparable to that of ancient Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, what?

What important inventions or advances have been made (the wheel, gunpowder, printing, flush toilets)? Have any of them been produced in quantities sufficient to affect the daily lives of the average person, or are flush toilet a luxury for nobility only?

What inventions or advances have not been made that you would expect to see at this stage of technological development? Why?

Which ones are about to be made?

How much is known about the laws of nature, physics, and magic? How much of what is commonly known is wrong (e.g., Aristotle's ideas about human anatomy, which were wrong but accepted for centuries)?

Are the laws of nature and physics actually different in this world, or are they the same as in real life? How does magic fit in? How do magical beasts fit in?

Where is scientific and/or magical research done -- universities, private labs, under the auspices of the king or government, etc?

In what areas might magic replace technology, and thus suppress its development (example: if a spell to keep food cold is easy and cheap, there's no need to invent refrigerators)? In what areas might magic cause more rapid technological or scientific development (common use of crystal balls might lead someone to think of inventing the lens/telescope sooner)?

How do the technology levels and scientific knowledge of non-human races compare to those of humans? Are there significant differences, and if so, why?

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Where is scientific and/or magical research done -- universities, private labs, by the government, etc.?

Does it require a license to be a wizard? A driver's type license (something nearly everyone gets upon coming of age) or a doctor's-type license (something that only a small portion of the population will ever get)? Who certifies wizards: the government, wizard's guild, local priests, independent accounting firm?

What are the various ranks and titles and proper forms of address for the aristocracy/nobility? Is everybody "my lord" or "my lady," or are there more distinctions (your grace, your highness, your majesty, your holiness, etc.)?

Which occupations are most respected? Which are most looked down on? Why?

How many levels are there in this society (e.g., peasant, bourgeoisie, warrior, nobleman)? How firm are the divisions between classes (is it disgraceful for a nobleman to engage in trade or for a warrior to help with the harvest)?

How difficult is it to rise or fall from one social level to another? How much social mobility is there? How much do people think there is?

TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

What are the common domesticated animals used for transportation at various levels of society -- e.g., oxen, horses, donkeys, camels, etc.?

Are there magical means of transportation (teleport spells, magic carpets, dragon-riding)? How do they compare in speed, safety, and expense to non-magical means? How commonly are they used, and for what purposes (industrial shipping vs. travel for fun)?

For traveling short distances within a city, what are the alternatives? Can people hire a cab, a litter, a rickshaw, or do they have to walk or rely on their own servants or horses?

How are messages sent when necessary? Is there a public/private postal system, or does everyone of importance have to send messengers? How fast can news get from one point to another?

Are there magical means of communication -- crystal balls, scrying in a pool of water, telepathy? How common? How reliable? How expensive?

How available is water transportation?

How common is travel (for any reason)? Does the concept of travel "to see the world" or for fun, even exist? How dangerous is travel?

How large a group is considered safe? How much traffic is there inside/outside the main cities? Which areas are the best/worst?

What are the fastest means of traveling long distances over land? Over water? Which are the safest?

What is transportation like? Are there good roads? Who built them? Who is responsible for maintaining them?

Where would a traveler stay at night? Are there enough travelers to support inns, or do people have to stay at the equivalent of medieval monasteries or in people's homes?

Are some classes of people (slaves, peasants) not expected to travel at all? Are some (heralds, messengers) expected to travel constantly?

How do people find out what is happening in the world -- rumor, town crier, newspapers, TV and radio? How slanted is the news they get this way, and in what direction? Is there freedom of the press? If not, who controls/censors it and through what means?

How are books produced? Are they common (has the printing press been invented), or are they valuable hand-written objects? Where are the great libraries/collections? How accessible are they to scholars, wizards, the general public? Who supports them?

URBAN FACTORS

How many people are there in this country? How does this compare with world population? What is considered a small town/large town/city in terms of number of people?

Is population shifting from rural to urban, south to north, mountains to coast, etc.? Why? What effects has this had on the places being left? The places gaining people?

Does city layout reflect some philosophy (religious or architectural or political), such as that the "head" of the city must be at the center, the highest point, or the most strategic location? Or were layout considerations mainly practical? Or did most cities "just grow"?

Are there public or private parks in most/any cities? What kinds of activities take place in them?

Are cities generally laid out on a square-grid system of streets? How wide are the streets and alleys?

What are the landmarks in each city? Where are the interesting neighborhoods, like Chinatown, the dwarvish section, etc., and what things give each its special character? Where do people go to shop? To eat? To have fun? To do touristy things?

VISITS

Are there questions that must be asked or avoided when visiting someone (e.g., how's the family, how's the business, never talk politics or religion, etc.)? Are there topics that can only be raised by the host? By the guest?

How seriously does the culture take the responsibilities of host and guest? What rules define when someone becomes a host or guest (e.g., in some mid-eastern countries, giving bread and salt to someone makes the person your guest; giving him a 5-course meal without bread or salt doesn't)?

What things are considered courteous to offer a guest: food, reading material, personal guards or attendants, music/entertainment, a person of the opposite sex to sleep with?

What is considered a courteous response to a host's offer? Are there things it is considered rude to accept? Rude to turn down? Rude to ask for? Rude not to ask for?

When a guest arrives, is food or drink offered immediately, after an interval, or only on request? Is there a particular food or drink that is customary to offer a newly arrived guest?

How do the different customs of various countries/races interact, conflict, etc? Example: A man from a culture where it is not polite to refuse a host's offer of food being the guest in a culture where the guest is expected to say "when."

WAR

Which peoples/countries/races have been in conflict in the recent past? Why? When and why was the most recent war? Who won?

Who is still mad about that?

What major weapons of war are available (e.g., siege towers, catapults, cannons, A-bombs)?

How much is the presence of magic affected strategy and tactics? Do army commanders have to use specific unusual formations or techniques to deal with possible magical attacks? How can magic be used as part of a battle plan (example: getting a weather magician to make it rain so that the enemy cannons are harder to move in the mud)?

How are armies usually structured? Is there a formal, independent command structure, or is everybody officially under the command of the lord who brought them to the king's

army, or what? If a formal structure, what are the various ranks and titles?

Who can call up men for an army? How is this done? Does the king ask his lords for men, and the lords then draft their peasants, or can the king go straight to the bottom?

Are there professional soldiers/mercenaries? Is a career in the king's army possible, or would you have to be a mercenary or sell-sword in order to make a living as a soldier? Does the army accept volunteers?

How large is a typical army? What percentage of the soldiers in it will be trained (knights, professional soldiers, guards, mercenaries) and what percent will be untrained recruits? Are recruits given training, or are they expected to learn on the job (i.e., in battle)?

How is the army supplied? Are soldiers allowed to live off the land/peasantry, or do they pay for what they take? How are supplies handled during long campaigns? How many days worth of supplies can the army haul along with them? (Ref. ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE LOGISTICS OF THE MACEDONIAN ARMY for the math on how much a horse can carry, etc.)

What are the accepted conventions for making war (example: only fight in winter when nobody is busy with crops; don't make war on civilians; only certain kinds of weapons are used; etc)? Do they differ from race to race?

How does the presence of non-humans (dwarves, vampires, etc.) affect strategy, tactics, and battles generally? Are special weapons required if an army is facing certain kinds of non-human armies? How would non-human soldiers turn their physical differences from humans to their advantage?

Are particular non-human races traditionally better with certain weapons (e.g., dwarves with axes, elves with bows)? Why—because they have greater strength, better eyesight, more manual dexterity, etc?

WIZARDS

What do you need to do to cast a spell--design an elaborate ritual, recite poetry, mix the right ingredients in a pot, speak the right words in an ancient language, etc.? Are there things like a staff, a wand, a familiar, a crystal ball, that are necessary to have before casting any spells? Certain specific spells? If so, where and how do new wizards get these things? Do they make them, buy them from craftsmen, inherit them from their teachers, order them from Wizard Supply, Inc.?

Is there a numerical limit to the number of wizards in the world? Why?

Where does magic power come from: the gods, the "mana" of the world, the personal will-power of the magician? Do different races/species have different sources for their magic, or does everybody use the same one?

Are different races/intelligent species good at different kinds of magic? If so, what types are associated with what species? Are there species that use magic more or less

unconsciously--for instance, dragons using magic to fly without consciously being aware of it, or werewolves using magic to change?

How does a magician tap his/her magic power? Does becoming a magician require some rite of passage (investing one's power in an object, being chosen by the gods, constructing or being given a permanent link to a source of power, etc.) or does it just happen naturally as a part of growing up?

Does a magician's magical ability or power change over time --e.g., growing stronger or weaker during puberty, or with increasing age?

Can a magician "use up" all of his/her magic, thus ceasing to be a magician? What do such magicians do then--retire to teach, commit suicide, get a normal day job, go into consulting?

Is a magician's lifetime normally longer or shorter than average? Why? Does this vary for different races/species? Are there races/species all of whose members are magicians?

Are certain spells illegal (as opposed to magic generally)? Why--because of the effect of the spell, or because of the ingredients or procedures needed to cast it, or what? How are violations of this law detected?

How are illegal magicians apprehended? Punished? Is this the responsibility of the magician's guild, or do ordinary law enforcement agencies have to deal with it?