

NORTHERN BLUEJAY PRESS

THE WORLDBUILDER'S CODEX

A guided workbook for creating fantasy worlds that feel alive

Ten craft chapters • Original examples • Printable worksheets

AUTHOR RESOURCES COLLECTION

How to Use This Codex

This workbook is designed for novelists, short-story writers, and game storytellers. Work through the chapters in order or begin with the problem your story needs to solve. Each chapter offers a craft lesson, a fictional example, diagnostic questions, and generous space for your own decisions.

The sample world used throughout is original and illustrative; you do not need to copy it. Strong worldbuilding starts with the needs of your own story.

Three guiding principles

Cause and effect: Geography, institutions, and history should influence one another. Human scale: Show what a rule means to an ordinary resident. Story pressure: Keep details that change what characters can do.

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Publishing note

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CHAPTER 01

The World's Central Promise

A world is memorable because it changes the choices characters can make.

The craft

Begin with a one-sentence promise: what experience can readers have here that they cannot have elsewhere? Make the promise specific enough to guide decisions, but broad enough to sustain many stories.

Choose three pillars: a defining wonder, a defining cost, and a defining conflict. Every major worldbuilding element should reinforce or deliberately challenge one of these pillars.

Create a short list of boundaries. Decide what your world will not contain so that familiar fantasy elements do not arrive by accident.

Example from an original sample world

In the realm of Vael Taryn, cities are built around wells that reveal one true memory each winter. Wonder: living memory. Cost: the well takes a different memory in payment. Conflict: rulers control who may drink.

Questions to test your design

- What makes this world unmistakably itself?
- What does every resident know that an outsider would find astonishing?
- Which tempting idea does not belong in this setting?

FIELD NOTES / THE WORLD'S CENTRAL PROMISE

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

One-sentence world promise

Three pillars: wonder / cost / conflict

Elements deliberately excluded

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

What is the official story about this part of the world, and what is actually true?

CHAPTER 02

Land, Climate & Travel

Terrain is not a backdrop. It determines who meets, who trades, and who survives.

The craft

Sketch major landforms before drawing borders. Mountain chains influence rainfall and travel; rivers create corridors; coasts encourage ports and exchange. You need not model every detail, but causes should fit effects.

Estimate travel in days, not just map distance. A messenger crossing marshland, a caravan climbing a pass, and a ship following seasonal winds all move differently.

Give each region one resource, one hazard, and one reason people remain there despite the hazard.

Example from an original sample world

The Saltglass Coast has rich fisheries but seasonal storms that turn the shallows into razor-sharp crystal. Its fishing towns are wealthy only when their signal towers remain lit.

Questions to test your design

- Which natural barrier separates rivals?
- What route carries food into your capital?
- How does weather interrupt the plot?

FIELD NOTES / LAND, CLIMATE & TRAVEL

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Regions and defining terrain

Routes, obstacles, and approximate travel days

Resources and environmental hazards

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

What is the official story about this part of the world, and what is actually true?

CHAPTER 03

Settlements & Everyday Life

Readers believe a world when they can imagine buying bread there.

The craft

Design settlements by function. A fortress town, pilgrimage site, mining camp, and university city need different buildings, workers, and infrastructure.

Trace one essential supply chain: where water comes from, how food arrives, who disposes of waste, and what happens when any link fails.

Use sensory detail sparingly but precisely. One distinctive sound or smell can suggest a larger culture without interrupting the scene.

Example from an original sample world

In Bellharbor, public bells mark the changing tide rather than the hour. Fishmongers sell on raised stone steps, and every doorway keeps a coil of emergency rope.

Questions to test your design

- Where does the poorest resident sleep?
- What service would fail first in a siege?
- What ordinary custom surprises visitors?

FIELD NOTES / SETTLEMENTS & EVERYDAY LIFE

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Settlement purpose and population

Food, water, shelter, and sanitation

Marketplace and daily routine

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

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CHAPTER 04

Peoples, Languages & Customs

Culture is a set of lived choices, not a costume.

The craft

Build cultures around adaptation, history, values, and internal disagreement. No population shares a single personality or opinion.

Consider kinship, hospitality, ceremonies, naming, education, mourning, art, and attitudes toward strangers. Show regional and generational variation.

For languages, choose consistent naming sounds and a few socially important expressions rather than inventing a complete grammar unless the story needs one.

Example from an original sample world

The hill communities of Orven exchange woven knots instead of written promises. Older merchants trust the knots; younger traders increasingly demand ink contracts.

Questions to test your design

- Who challenges the dominant custom?
- Which tradition began for a practical reason?
- What is considered polite in one region but rude in another?

FIELD NOTES / PEOPLES, LANGUAGES & CUSTOMS

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Shared values and competing viewpoints

Rites, celebrations, and taboos

Naming conventions and expressions

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

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The contradiction

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CHAPTER 05

Power, Law & Institutions

Every law benefits someone, and every institution has a blind spot.

The craft

Decide how authority is gained, maintained, contested, and transferred. A monarchy still needs administrators, tax collectors, and local enforcement.

Distinguish written law from actual practice. A rule may be ignored in the capital and enforced harshly at the frontier.

Create two institutions with overlapping interests, such as a temple that records births and a guild that controls apprenticeships.

Example from an original sample world

The Archive Council decides inheritance by preserving sworn testimony. When a vault floods, rival families discover that proof of ownership is more fragile than property itself.

Questions to test your design

- Who can legally punish a noble?
- How can an ordinary person appeal injustice?
- What happens when a leader dies suddenly?

FIELD NOTES / POWER, LAW & INSTITUTIONS

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Government and succession

Laws, punishments, and enforcement

Institutions and their competing goals

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

What is the official story about this part of the world, and what is actually true?

CHAPTER 06

Economy, Trade & Scarcity

Scarcity creates incentives, and incentives create stories.

The craft

Identify the goods people need and the goods they want. Track who produces, transports, taxes, stores, and sells each one.

Choose a believable exchange system: coinage, credit, barter, labour obligations, or a mixture. Consider seasonal prices and unequal access.

A trade network should carry more than goods: it also carries rumours, diseases, fashions, ideas, and conflict.

Example from an original sample world

Moon-iron can be forged only during winter eclipses. The royal mint purchases nearly all of it, so smugglers use fishing vessels to move tiny amounts to independent smiths.

Questions to test your design

- What is expensive for a poor family?
- Which import would cripple the kingdom if lost?
- Who profits from a shortage?

FIELD NOTES / ECONOMY, TRADE & SCARCITY

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Major exports and imports

Currency, labour, and taxation

Shortages, trade routes, and black markets

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

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CHAPTER 07

Belief, Myth & Religion

A believable faith shapes behaviour even when miracles are uncertain.

The craft

Distinguish belief, doctrine, ritual, and institutional power. Two people may worship the same deity while disagreeing about how to live.

Ask how the faith explains death, suffering, duty, and the unknown. Include skeptics, reformers, and everyday adherents.

If gods demonstrably exist, decide what evidence they provide and what questions remain unresolved.

Example from an original sample world

The Lantern Faith teaches that stars are lost souls. Priests tend observatories, but a growing reform movement argues that souls deserve darkness and rest.

Questions to test your design

- What ritual marks adulthood?
- What question divides believers?
- Who gains political influence from the faith?

FIELD NOTES / BELIEF, MYTH & RELIGION

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Creation myths and core beliefs

Rituals, sacred places, and holidays

Internal divisions and social influence

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

What is the official story about this part of the world, and what is actually true?

CHAPTER 08

Magic, Technology & Their Costs

Extraordinary power must have ordinary consequences.

The craft

Define access: who can use the system, how they learn, and what tools they require. Define limits before inventing spectacular feats.

Specify costs and failure modes. Costs can be physical, social, economic, legal, emotional, or moral; they should matter during the story.

Explore second-order effects. If magic heals wounds, what changes in medicine, warfare, class privilege, and life expectancy?

Example from an original sample world

Threadbinders can repair broken objects by surrendering a cherished memory. Wealthy households hire binders; the binders themselves often forget why they began the trade.

Questions to test your design

- What can this power never do?
- Who is excluded from using it?
- Which profession or institution has changed because it exists?

FIELD NOTES / MAGIC, TECHNOLOGY & THEIR COSTS

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Source, access, and training

Capabilities, limits, and costs

Impact on daily life and conflict

DEEPER EXPLORATION

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A day in the life

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The contradiction

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CHAPTER 09

History, Ruins & Competing Truths

The past matters most when people disagree about what happened.

The craft

Build a concise timeline with turning points rather than thousands of dates. Each turning point should change land, power, beliefs, or identity.

Create three versions of one historical event: the official account, the folk account, and the most plausible hidden truth.

Use ruins and artifacts as evidence of prior choices. Ask who built them, why they were abandoned, and who benefits from their rediscovery.

Example from an original sample world

The Seven Bridges fell during the Year of Ash. The crown blames invaders; river villages blame royal engineers; buried records suggest both factions sabotaged different spans.

Questions to test your design

- Which anniversary is celebrated differently by rivals?
- Who controls archives and schools?
- What ruin is still dangerous today?

FIELD NOTES / HISTORY, RUINS & COMPETING TRUTHS

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Five-event historical timeline

Official story / popular story / hidden truth

Important ruins and unresolved consequences

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

What is the official story about this part of the world, and what is actually true?

CHAPTER 10

Conflict, Story Integration & Revision

Worldbuilding succeeds when it gives characters difficult decisions.

The craft

Connect the setting to a character's goal, obstacle, and moral choice. Replace background explanations with consequences that unfold during action.

For each major chapter of your story, ask what only this world could make happen. If the scene works unchanged in any setting, look for a more distinctive pressure.

Revise for consistency and restraint. Readers need the details that influence the scene, not every detail you have invented.

Example from an original sample world

A courier must cross a mountain pass before the memory wells freeze. She can buy safe passage only by trading the memory of her brother - the very person she hopes to rescue.

Questions to test your design

- Which rule of the world causes your protagonist's worst choice?
- Where can you show a detail rather than explain it?
- What contradiction should be resolved before publication?

FIELD NOTES / CONFLICT, STORY INTEGRATION & REVISION

Use this worksheet to turn your ideas into decisions. Leave uncertain answers blank and return after drafting.

Protagonist goal and world-specific obstacle

Three scenes shaped by world rules

Continuity issues and revision priorities

DEEPER EXPLORATION

Answer in scenes rather than encyclopedic entries. Describe what a person living here would notice, fear, desire, or misunderstand.

A day in the life

Write a 150-word scene showing how this chapter's choices shape one ordinary person.

The contradiction

What is the official story about this part of the world, and what is actually true?

World Consistency Audit

Before drafting or revising, use this checklist to test whether your world holds together.

- ☐ Travel times match terrain and transport.
- ☐ Food, water, and shelter have plausible sources.
- ☐ Cultures contain disagreement and change.
- ☐ Institutions have incentives and limits.
- ☐ Costs of magic remain consistent across scenes.
- ☐ History has visible consequences in the present.
- ☐ Economic scarcity affects character decisions.
- ☐ Beliefs are reflected in everyday behaviour.
- ☐ The protagonist faces obstacles unique to this world.
- ☐ Exposition is placed where readers need it.

Priority fixes

Your One-Page World Bible

World promise and genre

Regions and travel

Peoples and power

Magic and technology

History and active conflicts

Three horizontal lines for writing.

The Final Oath of the Worldbuilder

A fictional world does not become alive because every detail has been documented. It becomes alive when its people must live with the consequences of its rules.

Choose one scene you are excited to write. Identify three world details that will change the outcome. Then begin.

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Create boldly. Build with purpose.