

Dynamic Worlds

A Generative Approach to Worldbuilding

Heath M Rezabek

Session IV

Dynamic Worlds at the Character's Scale

In Session I we learned the fundamentals of the Dynamic Worlds process, and of making a wordgarden. In Session II we explored the creation of elements at the global scale of a whole world. In Session III we began to detail the Cultures which shape our Characters' worlds. If you missed these sessions, you will want to come for the next round and get refreshers. If you follow along with the exercises here, there should be no problem. It will just be a bit confusing, at first, why we're doing it this way.

We've talked about the fact that Worldbuilding can be approached from at least three levels: Top-down (the level of the World), Bottom-up (the level of the Character) and Middle-out (the level of Culture). This session will focus on the scale of Characters, and the settings that form their small worlds. In many ways, these settings are characters in a work as well, and their incidental details can also help shape narrative and plot.

In theater, there is a concept known as Chekov's Gun, named after Anton Chekov, who expressed the importance of setting details in this way: "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there." As we flesh out our worlds, there may be details that will never make it into the story. But knowing these details ourselves can help shape the story and world in a way that gives it cohesion.

There is a quote by the Argentine author Julio Cortazar which goes: "Tell the story as if it were only of interest to the small circle of your characters, of which you may be one. There is no other way to breathe life into the story." This gives us something to think about. Imagine your favorite character in your fiction, the one for whom you have the clearest picture.

Her or his actions and reactions are shaped and expressed through the details of the small world in which the character roams and acts. The day to day objects which matter to those characters, or which spark their memories, can often be the best of handholds by which our readers can enter the worlds of our stories. Home, work, school, a pub, a library, a dance studio, a train, a jungle canopy... Each of these settings is filled with details which relate to the character's choices and actions.

The last wordgarden we did in Session III was about **Home**, and we were encouraged to see things in our favorite characters' homes. We will continue this process, but back up a step and identify other concepts, like Home, that shape our Characters' worlds. Wordgarden with a partner for 3 minutes. The seed theme is **Character's Influences**. As always, they can be general, or can be specific cases of interest to you.

Examples: Livelihood ... Childhood Grove ... First Love ...

Let's harvest these and take a look at them. What are the most particular or specific ones we've found? What are the most general?

Starting at the highest level you can and working your way downwards and inwards is a way to organically reach a level of authentic detail that is very difficult to achieve otherwise. When you try this practice, in each case, you are encouraged to look at the largest scale which makes sense for the part of the story you are working on, and go inwards from there. Always allow yourself to be more specific, but at the same time don't be afraid to widen the lens and plant seeds that are more general. When it comes time to try writing exercises or worldbuilding tasks using the resulting words, the dynamic tension between the larger and the smaller will lend momentum and vitality to the paragraphs that result.

Cut apart '*Character's Influences*' and mix them with '*Home*'; Draw 3 from 5 and do a paragraph.

Read the examples. Are there entire scenes? Are there setting descriptions? Were some of the results unexpected?

Next we will try a wordgarden around the theme ***Daily Life***. This one will be long; these could be impressions (scenes) or objects. They could also be other characters or commonly occurring archetypes. Allow this one to range widely.

Cut apart '*Daily Life*'; Try another paragraph or page which combines these items into *Home and Influences*.

Now that we have the beginnings of the toolkit we need to fully flesh out our characters' worlds, we will do a wordgarden which delves into the characters themselves. We will try another one with the theme ***Motivations***. These are the things that compel a character to act in certain ways. They too can be combined with more concrete things.

Wrap-Up: We have covered a vast range of activity, from the largest details of a world to the smallest details of a character's life. We have explored a method for bypassing writer's block and creating material that has a depth of authenticity to it. The method of wordgardening can be expanded indefinitely, and the dynamicworlds site will be fleshed out in the future both with new material from this workshop as well as more general wordgardens.

If you're interested in exploring this technique more widely, I will also do stand-alone workshops called simply "Writing with Wordgardens", where we will allow for wide-ranging wordgardens and then draw words for direct writing, regardless of setting or scale.

Thanks for participating!

- Heath Rezabek

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