

# WORLD BUILDING? YOU'LL NEED SOME GOVERNMENT

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## SESSION HANDOUT

You probably don't need to define your world's government comprehensively. But these questions may help you build the parts of government your story needs, besides suggesting countless possibilities for adding tension and conflict.

Note that the word *state* is used here generically for government as a whole or a nation, specific states in the United States of America.

Note also that your government will inherently be a response to and a product of the natures of the beings who govern and are governed. These beings of yours (human or otherwise) . . . How submissive are they? How capable of self-discipline? How individualistic? How group-oriented? Is there a strong religious or philosophical culture of independence, interdependence, or submission?

Are there conflicting natures and inclinations among different races, tribes, or species? Among individuals? Within the same individual? (Yes to all three questions, probably.)

### Questions to Ask When World-building Government

#### **What entices and constrains these beings?**

What entices them to do good or evil (by any definition)? What constrains them from doing evil? What constrains them from doing good? In what ways and to what extent is government the answer to these questions in your world?

#### **What defines the nation/people/tribe for which you're creating a government? What binds them together?**

A nation, for example, is usually bound together by something. Is it race, ethnicity, religion or another ideology, custom, place, or something else? Who belongs and doesn't belong? Who decides? What are the internal and external threats to whatever it is that binds them together?

#### **Where did this government come from?** (See also "Myths vs. Realities" below.)

Did it evolve from a founding family? From cooperation for self-defense? From a broader social contract or some other idea? Was it instituted by deity? Imposed by a conqueror? Some other origin?

#### **Who rules whom? On what basis?**

Are ruler and ruled determined by class, race, family, tribe, party, gender, education, species, something historical, or some other physical or other characteristics? Are there formally required attributes of the ruler or ruling class, or simply custom?

#### **What is the form of your government(s)?**

Monarchy? Republic? Democracy? Oligarchy? Autocracy? Military or civilian dictatorship? Theocracy? Feudalism? Anarchy? Bureaucracy? Technocracy? Ergatocracy? Kleptocracy? Kakistocracy? Plutocracy? These types are not mutually exclusive, and there are other possibilities. See Wikipedia, "List of forms of government," for a much longer list with explanations; it's full of ideas and possibilities.

### **Are the people – the masses – subjects or citizens?**

Does the individual belong to the state or to the ruler individually? Do power and legitimacy in government – in theory and/or in practice – issue from the people?

### **What is the principle source of a being's value and identity?**

Inherent, God-given worth as an individual? Primarily derived from membership in a tribe or other group?

### **Who chooses/designates rulers and how?**

Does a religious leader choose the king or queen? Some mystical power? Does the ruler choose among his or her children or more broadly? Is it automatically the current ruler's firstborn? Random chance? Are there elections (which could happen even for a monarch or dictator)? How long does a ruler serve? Is there a fixed term?

### **What are the qualification to rule?**

What makes a bad, good, or great ruler? How do people prepare, or how are they prepared, to rule? Is marriage required? Who chooses the spouse and how? Is celibacy required? Must the king be a eunuch? What makes a good, bad, or great ruler?

### **How is a ruler removed?**

Resignation? End of term? (Is succession orderly?) Natural death? Assassination? Coup? Vote of no confidence? Some other way?

### **What happens when a new ruler is unpopular, short of removal?**

Popular resistance, violent or nonviolent? Resistance from within the government – open and structural (such as Congress vs. the President) or active or passive bureaucratic resistance? Does nature itself resist a bad ruler in your world?

### **How does the state maintain order?**

What degree of violence is used (or required or tolerated)? To what degree are fear and persuasion used? Propaganda? Indoctrination? Telepathy? Drugs? Is there rule of law (whereby even the rulers must follow the law)?

### **How does the government provide for external security (e.g. national security)?**

Is there civilian or military command of armed forces? What could possibly go wrong? (War could yield many stories and could be a topic of its own.) Is there a military draft? Who is drafted? Who is not? Is there compulsory national service? Does the government build armies of mercenaries or slaves? Of machines? Is defense by ad hoc local militias, who pick up their weapons and gather to fight when the enemy comes? Who is allowed to be a soldier? Who isn't? Can anyone become an officer?

### **Does the government do anything to safeguard economic security?**

What does it do? Does it do these things in fact or just in rhetoric? What sort of economy exists under this government – command economy, economic freedom, a mix of the two? Who is included? Who is excluded or constrained? Are there programs to help the poor and needy? To safeguard business transactions, inventory, and transportation? Is banking regulated? What about weights and measures? Product safety? What about trade policy? Fiscal policy? Currency?

### **What public services does government provide, and how does it provide them?**

Utilities? (Which ones?) Public safety? Cultural and recreational programs? Education? Roads and other transportation infrastructure? Health care? Housing? Food? Supervision or arrangement of marriage and/or reproduction? Something else?

### **What levels of government exist in this place? How are they organized?**

Local, regional, national? Confederation, federalism, administrative divisions of the same unitary government? Are there rivalries, tensions, or hostilities between districts? How much allowance is there for local variations and local initiative?

### **How are laws made?**

Are they arbitrary? Made through an established, clearly defined process? By a legislative body, representative or otherwise? By a distant or proximate bureaucracy? Are the rulers bound by their own laws? Does a majority of the people (or voters) rule directly? Are the rights of minorities protected? Is the judiciary independent? Does it focus on interpreting the law or some notion of fairness or right, regardless of the law? How much transparency is there? How much accountability? Are laws written? Is there a written constitution (a supreme law of the land) to which all other law and all persons are subject?

### **What myths underlie this government, and how does actual practice reflect them or differ from them?**

What is taught about the government's origin and the selection of current or past rulers? Where does power come from? Are the myths decaying? To what extent does actual practice reflect them?

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## [Where to Start Your Government Worldbuilding](#)

To know how much, and which parts of, government your story needs, and which type(s) of government will serve you best, ask yourself these questions:

### The big stuff

- Do government officials, processes, or institutions play a major role in your plot (or subplots)?
- Does political intrigue play a major role?
- Will government provide any of the tools your characters need to solve (or cause) problems?
- Will government provide any of the obstacles your characters face?

### The small stuff

- Does a character need to buy, carry, or make a weapon? Is that legal generally? Is it legal for that character? Is a permit required?
  - Does a character need to travel inside or outside the country? Is this legal? Is a permit required? Must one check in with government when visiting a place?
  - How is government involved in your world's equivalents of courtship, marriage, and/or reproduction?
  - What other things are needed, or need to happen, which must be supplied or might be limited or denied by government?
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**Whatever your government looks like, here are some universal possibilities for plot tension and conflict:**

- Rulers are people too (public vs. private persona, public vs. private life)
  - Seeking/exercising/losing power
  - Rivals for power
  - Myth vs. reality
  - A liberation story (many possible senses)
  - Working/fighting for (or against) change
  - War
  - Founding
  - Moral good vs. political necessity
  - Corruption
  - Romance
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**Things to read or watch for detailed view of government and its interaction with human nature, economics, religion, etc.**

- *The West Wing*
- *The Crown*
- *Darkest Hour*
- Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*
- Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*
- Machiavelli, *The Prince*, etc.
- *Federalist* 1, 10, 39, and 51
- Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*.

And "[The real Lord of the Flies: what happened when six boys were shipwrecked for 15 months,](#)" *Guardian*, May 9, 2020. (Use the link or Google "the real lord of the flies.")

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