

HANDOUT

Worldbuilding? You'll Need Some Government.

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for Quills 2026

1. Only world-build as much government as you need

2. Consider/define human* nature

*or your other sentient characters' nature(s)

- How submissive are they?
- How capable of self-discipline?
- How individualistic? How group-oriented?
- Strong religious or philosophical culture of independence, interdependence, or submission?
- Conflicting natures/inclinations among different races, tribes, or species?
- Conflicting natures/inclinations among individuals?
- Conflicting natures/inclinations in the same individual?

3. Nearly 20 questions to ask when world-building government

1. What entices and constrains these beings?

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

2. What defines the nation, people, or tribe that is governed? What binds them together?

- Race, ethnicity, species
- Religion or other ideology
- Common language
- Customs, habit
- Place
- Shared experience or shared enemies
- Something else (be imaginative)

Sample tension points:

- Who belongs? Who doesn't? Who decides that? What consequences?
- Expansion or contraction
- Internal and external threats to whatever binds them together

3. Where did this government come from? (We'll separate myth & reality later.)

- Evolved from a family
- Mutual cooperation for self-defense
- A broader social contract
- An idea
- Instituted by God(s)
- Imposed by a conqueror or colonial power
- Any combination of these
- Other (be imaginative)

4. Who governs whom? (Lenin: Кто кого?)

- Class
- Race/family/tribe
- Party
- Gender
- Education
- Magic
- Exclusive scientific knowledge or access to technology
- Species
- Other physical characteristics
- Something historical
- Be imaginative!

Are these required attributes of ruler/ruling class or simply how it's been?

5. What form(s) of government?

(not mutually exclusive, and not even mentioning most of the -isms)

- Monarchy
- Republic
- Democracy
- Oligarchy
- Autocracy
- Military/civilian dictatorship
- Theocracy
- Feudalism
- Anarchy
- Bureaucracy

- Technocracy
- Ergatocracy, kleptocracy, kakistocracy, plutocracy

6. Are the people subjects (property) or citizens?

- In practice and often in theory, traditional monarchy and other authoritarian systems consider the individual as belonging to the state, e.g. specifically as property of the monarch. (If that sounds like slavery or serfdom or USSR . . .)
- The basic meaning *republic* is “not a monarchy” – the people are citizens, not subjects or property of the state; they’re the source of government power, at least theoretically.
- Are non-government (private, civic, religious) organizations positioned between the people and the state? Are they important? (Tocqueville.)

ON EARTH BUT THEORETICAL: BASIC MARXISM—VICTIMS AND OPPRESSORS

- At first: economic haves and have-nots
- Later: race, gender, etc.
- Often called a republic, but in effect it’s not. The people belong to the state.
- Oligarchic: the elite who believe they should rule—but they rule in the name of the people—but they sometimes call it the dictatorship of the proletariat.
- Injustice to individuals is the price of group justice (victim tribe resisting oppressor tribe).

7. Related: Where is a being’s principal value and identity?

- As an individual, inherent (or God-given)
- As a member of a tribe or other group

8. How are rulers chosen/designated?

- Old Testament: prophet chose King Saul, King David
- King Arthur and the sword in the stone
- Primogeniture
- King/queen choose among sons/daughters/both
- Election (could be an elected monarch or dictator)
 - Who gets to vote?
 - Fixed term, life tenure, or indefinite?
 - Term limits?
- Random chance (c.f. Athens, modern jury selection)
- Other? Be imaginative.

9. What are the qualifications to rule?

- How do people prepare, or how are they prepared, to rule? (By whom?)

- Is marriage required? Who chooses the spouse and how? Is celibacy required? (a eunuch king?)
- What makes a good, bad, or great ruler?

A brutal thought experiment:

- Was a hereditary monarchy, where the current ruler chose a child to be the next ruler. But generation after generation, the ruler's children kept either killing each other or starting civil wars.
- So they made a new law: When a man or woman becomes the ruler (by whatever means), all the new ruler's children and grandchildren are put to death, and the ruler is sterilized.
- What are some possible points of internal and external conflict?

10. How are rulers removed? (in theory and practice)

- Term expires (orderly succession?)
- Death
- Assassination
- Deposed
- Vote of no confidence
- Other?

11. Short of removal, what happens when new ruler is unpopular?

- Popular resistance
 - Violent
 - Non-violent
- Resistance from within government
 - Open/structural (e.g. Congress vs. President)
 - Active or passive bureaucratic resistance
- Nature itself resists
- Other?

12. How does the state maintain order?

- What degree of violence? What degree of fear?
- Indoctrination/propaganda?
- Telepathy?
- Drugs?
- Is there rule of law?
 - Procedural due process (same justice system for everyone)
 - Substantive due process (just results)
- Other?

13. How does the government provide for external security (national security)?

- Military draft? Who is drafted, who isn't?
- Universal compulsory service?
- Mercenaries
- Slaves (conquered/captured/bought)
- Ad-hoc militias (own weapons or supplied by government)
- Machines
- Who is allowed to be a soldier? Who isn't? Can anyone become an officer?
- Do military forces operate domestically in peacetime?
- How avoid military coup?

14. What, if anything, does the government do to safeguard economic security?

- Micro
 - Programs to help the poor/needy
 - Safeguard business transactions, inventory, transportation
 - Banking regulations
 - Weights and measures
 - Product safety
- Macro
 - Trade policy
 - Fiscal policy/currency

Give me a plot that turns on currency. Now give me a weirder one.

15. What public services does the government provide, and how?

- Law enforcement
- Roads and other transportation infrastructure (and services?)
- Education
- Health care
- Housing
- Food
- Arranged/supervised marriages and reproduction
- (Be creative)

Small scale: want to be a teacher or police officer

Large scale: taking food from the country for the city during famine

16. What levels of government (local, regional, national, world)?

- Different levels of a unitary government?
- Federalism?
- Confederation?
- How much allowance for local variations, local initiative?
- Rivalries, tensions, hostilities among districts?

17. How are laws made and enforced?

- Rule of law vs. rule of man (Do laws and processes apply equally to all people? Are lawgivers above their own laws? Etc.)
- Procedural and substantive due process
- Decree or other administrative order
- Democratic or representative legislative process
- Written laws?
- Written constitution (supreme law)?
- Does the law apply to the lawgivers?
- Plato: Who guards the guardians?
- Back to *Federalist*: “In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

18. Myths and realities

- Origin: mythology vs. reality
 - Monarch: really divine right?
 - US: Founders vs. Charles Beard vs. 1619 Project
- Function: myth vs. reality (how does it really work?)
- Also useful: ideals

4. Where do I start?

To answer these questions . . .

- How much government do I need in my story?
- Which parts of government do I need?
- What type(s) of government will serve my story best?

. . . answer these questions . . .

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?

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?

5. Whatever government(s) you build, some plots are universal

(Plots and subplots)

- Romance
- Corruption
- Power struggle/rivalry
- Revolution
- Succession
- Abdication
- Colonization/liberation
- War
- Founding
- Decay/fall
- Moral good vs. political necessity
- The good of the one vs. the good of the many
- Public vs. private persona, public vs. private life

6. David's Laws of Politics

Law of conservation of politics: If you mix ____ with politics, you get politics.

(Ominously, these include our major paths to truth.)

- Religion
- Science
- Art
- History
- Justice
- Economics
- Philosophy
- Education

(still considering: Romance, Family)

Law of conservation of power: The amount of power in a system (or over a person) remains constant.

Compare laws of conservation of mass (matter), conservation of energy, and conservation of mass and energy in chemistry and physics.

- To the extent that you have power over yourself, you are free.
- Freedom is another name for power, when it's your power over oneself.
- To the extent that someone or something else has power over you, you are in bondage.
- Lost freedom (lost power over oneself) becomes someone/something else's power (over you).
- Increasing your freedom reduces someone/something else's power.
- The total power over you (yours plus someone/something else's) is constant. The key question is how much or how little of that power over you is yours.

7. We're winding down

Watch (history and theory)

- *The West Wing*—many plots and subplots
- *The Crown*—likewise, but monarchy (mixed)
- *Darkest Hour* (2017)—Churchill biopic

Read

- Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*(also film: *Lincoln*)
- Machiavelli, *The Prince* (etc.)
- *Federalist* 1, 10, 39, 51
- Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*

Fictional governments you've noticed in your reading

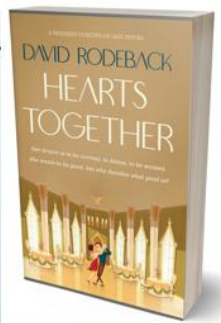
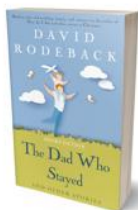
- Most interesting?
- Most unusual?
- Least imitative of known governments on earth?

For ideas: Wikipedia, "List of forms of government"

TL;DR

- Only build the parts of government your story needs.
- Be imaginative. Only mimic real-world governments to make a point.
- Consider the nature of your characters as you craft their politics and governments.
- Add large and small tension points based on government.
- Do enough scaffolding that the government and politics in your story make sense—then remove the scaffolding.
- If you have a point to make, let your story make it. Don't let your point make your story.

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