

Story Bible Template

A build order for worlds that carry stories

From Nanowrit Labs · nanowritlabs.com/blog/story-bible-template

How to use this

Fill this in from the top down. Each section should be answerable because of the one above it — if a section needs information from further down, you are building out of order.

You are not trying to complete this document. A finished story bible is not the goal and is usually a warning sign. The goal is the smallest world that can carry your story.

The stopping rule: when you can write the next three scenes without inventing anything load-bearing, stop building and go write them. You will find the real gaps faster by drafting than by planning.

Sections marked REPEATABLE are meant to be copied for each character, place, or event you actually need. Copy them as many times as the story requires and no more.

Part 1 — The spine

Two answers. Everything else in this document is a consequence of them.

The premise, in one sentence a stranger could repeat back

Not a logline with genre jargon. A sentence a person would actually say to a friend. If you cannot write it, the idea is probably a setting or a vibe rather than a story.

The pressure — the condition your world is under strain from

Not the plot. The condition that makes plots inevitable. Examples: magic works but costs the user years of life. The empire fell forty years ago and nobody agrees why. Everyone can hear the dead, but only until they turn twenty.

Three people who want opposite things because of that pressure

If you cannot name three, the pressure is not generating conflict yet. Fix this before continuing — nothing downstream will work.

Before you build the rest

A premise can be described in a sentence and reacted to honestly. A half-built world cannot. This is the cheapest moment in the whole project to find out whether anyone else cares.

Who have you said the premise out loud to, and what came back?

What did they repeat back a week later?

An idea that gets played back roughly intact has a hook. One that comes back garbled — or as a different and more interesting story — is telling you what the real hook was.

Part 2 — The rules

What is possible here, and what does it cost? The useful half is always the cost.

What is possible in this world that is not possible in ours?

What does using it take away?

Time, memory, sanity, standing, someone else's life. A magic system with no price is a plot solvent — it dissolves every problem you invent. Price the power and keep the price.

Who decides who is allowed to use it?

What does travel cost? What does information cost?

These two questions do most of the work in worlds with no magic at all.

What is the one rule you will never break, even when it would be convenient?

Part 3 — The people

Ask who benefits from the rules and who is crushed by them. That question produces factions honestly, rather than four kingdoms with different coloured banners.

Faction (REPEATABLE)

Name

What they want

What they are afraid of

What they would never do

Who they blame

How the rules in Part 2 help or hurt them

Character (REPEATABLE)

Name and role

What they want, stated plainly

What they want that they would not admit

What they are wrong about

Who they owe, and who owes them

What would make them break their own rule

Physical anchors — the two or three details that recur

The last field matters more than a full physical description. Two recurring details a reader remembers beat a paragraph they skim.

Part 4 — The places

Geography should be a consequence, not decoration. A city exists because of a river, a mine, a border, a shrine, a chokepoint.

Location (REPEATABLE)

Name

Why it exists here and not somewhere else

Who controls it and who resents that

What it smells and sounds like

What the story needs to happen here

Test: if you can move this location a hundred miles with no effect on the story, it is scenery. Either give it consequence or cut it.

Part 5 — The history

Write only the history that is still hurting. A timeline of nine hundred years is a research project. Three unresolved events that living people still argue about is a story engine.

Event (REPEATABLE)

What happened

When, relative to the story's present

Who alive today wants it remembered differently, and why

What it still prevents or still permits

If nobody is arguing about an event, it is backstory. Backstory can wait.

Part 6 — Keeping it consistent

Consistency, not scale, is what makes a world feel real. It is also the first thing to break once the world outgrows what you can hold in your head. Readers never see your files; they only see whether the world behaves the same way twice.

Decision log

The most valuable page in this document. Every time you invent something while drafting — a distance, a title, a custom, a price — write it here immediately. The details you invent unconsciously are the ones that contradict you in chapter thirty.

[illegible]

Names and terms

One spelling, one meaning, one place to check.

[illegible]

Open questions

Things you have deliberately not decided yet. Keeping them visible stops you from accidentally deciding them twice, in two different ways.

[illegible]

Part 7 — If this becomes a series

Fill this in only when a second book or project is real. Doing it early is the most common form of productive procrastination.

What carries across every installment and cannot change

What is allowed to change between installments

What did you establish in book one that you now regret

Answer the third one honestly. It is cheaper to work around a constraint you have named than one you are pretending is not there.

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