

Better Backstories

Just like a character sheet, a backstory should be a functional document. Players who fall into the trap of instead writing a short story are wasting their effort — who needs all this useless information about the character's childhood, filmic descriptions and dense prose? Thankfully there's a better way.

By following this advice, players will create a functional document covering key moments from their character's history, a document full of ideas the player would be comfortable exploring in an eye-level roleplaying environment.

Goals for your backstory

Regardless of whether you follow or deviate from the advice in this document, your character backstory should fulfill these four functions:

- ✦ Explain why your character wants to adventure with this party in this campaign.
- ✦ Give the Dungeon Master space to insert their own campaign-relevant hooks.
- ✦ Justify your mechanical choices with narrative, character-building explanations.
- ✦ Provide a safe space to explore your character's voice and personality.

It's OK to make changes

At every step of this process, keep your ideas loose and nonrigid. You should feel comfortable changing or rewriting any narrative or mechanical choices along the way. Even after you've finished writing and started playing your first few sessions with the character, you could edit your backstory with your Dungeon Master's permission.



1. Brainstorm multiple ideas

The first step is to think of at least two character ideas you would be happy to develop, then pitch those character ideas to your dungeon master and party for feedback.

Unfortunately there is no surefire method to force an idea: it's spontaneous and personal by nature. But thankfully the bar for what constitutes an idea is very low. A good idea only needs to be a single sentence. You could approach this from either a mechanical perspective or a narrative perspective.

Mechanical perspective. Look for a class, race or feature in the rulebooks that combine in an interesting way.

Narrative perspective. Look for a character trait, personality or general story beat that catches your interest. This could be as simple as lifting an idea from a character in your favourite TV show or book.

2. Make the character sheet

Once your character idea has been approved by the party and Dungeon Master, fill out a character sheet as normal. Don't stress about your character's backstory yet; just pick options which seem fun and interesting to you. You can come back and change any decisions later.

3. Mine the character sheet

Believe it or not, your character sheet is filled with juice. Print out a spare copy to mark up, take a red pen and circle any points of interest.

POINTS OF INTEREST

- ★ Does your character have an exotic name?
- ★ Does your character have a unique class-race combination?
- ★ Does your character have an substantial strength or weakness in any ability scores?
- ★ Does your character have any skill proficiencies which stand out?
- ★ Does your character have any special or sentimental equipment or items?
- ★ Does your character have any feats?
- ★ Does your character have any divine, other-worldly or otherwise supernatural affiliations from their class or race?
- ★ Does your character have any signature spells?
- ★ Does your character have any out-of-place tool or language proficiencies?
- ★ Does your character have vast or limited wealth?

4. Scaffolding

This is the structural component of your character backstory, just the raw facts without the flair of fleshed-out prose. After this step, you'll be have a completely functional backstory.

SCAFFOLDING FORMAT

The point of scaffolding is to have something brief and scannable. Look at each point of interest you highlighted on your character sheet and assign each point of interest its own header, and beneath each header should have a list of discrete, supporting dot points as justification.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SCAFFOLDING

When you're reflecting on how effective your scaffolding is, consider these three goals in mind.

Explain why your character wants to adventure with this party in this campaign. Whatever reason you write for your character, be laser focused on the specific campaign. There is no other thing your character would rather be doing than pursuing the goals of this campaign with the party. Regardless of what other goals you character might have, the campaign's story should be the most direct way of achieving those goals.

Give the Dungeon Master space to insert their own hooks. There should be gaps in your story which you're comfortable leaving open for your Dungeon Master. Perhaps this means the fate of your character's parents is unknown, or maybe the identity of your brother's killer is a mystery, or perhaps the exact effects of your character's magical shield lay dormant, waiting for the right conditions to quicken. Send your scaffolding to your Dungeon Master and let them make additions.

Make at least three NPCs you would be comfortable meeting in the campaign. That's right: resist that instinct to have all the NPCs from your character's past die, waiting to be avenged. Instead, try to include one enemy, one friend and one rival.



5. Flesh it out

Finally! It's time to polish your scaffolding and transform it into something resembling prose. This last step is mostly cosmetic and totally optional — its only purpose is to let you explore your character's voice.

FINAL FORMAT

- ★ The whole document should be a maximum of 1000 words long.
- ★ The first segment should be a character description written in third-person to a maximum of 100 words.
- ★ Which the exception of your character description, the rest of the document should be written in first-person.
- ★ The points of interest headers from your scaffolding should remain unchanged, but each dot point should be expanded into a sentence that demonstrates the fact.
- ★ Your enemy, friend and rival NPCs should each get 50 words of dedicated space.

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