Background

Character Background

There are of course no hard and fast rules about background development. Much can depend on the world the game master presents and any limitations imposed. However, to help you get started, this chapter presents a detailed list of background elements that can flesh out your character. Of course, you aren't required to address every issue here, and it's certainly possible to build on your narrative over time, filling in details as you go.

As a general rule, when developing your background, try to be dramatic but not over the top. In the long run, it is more interesting to have weaknesses, barriers to overcome, and difficult goals to fulfill than to have abundance, power, or effortless strength (this last note is just as, if not more important for game masters). Ideally, you want to address four domains in your background:
1) **Conflict** (who or what does your character fight or fight for?)
2) **Challenges** (what limits your character?)
3) **Mystery** (what doesn't your character know?) and
4) **Passion** (what drives your character?)

If you already have your personality traits worked out, you can use the background to develop why your character is the way he or she is. If you don't have Part I done yet, you can start with your background and then develop personality traits that fit the narrative.

Brief Background

Writing a complete background can be time consuming. So, if you want something quick and dirty, I recommend answering the following questions as a good way to start…

- Where were you born? (name, size, location, interesting features)

- Who were your family? (family members, social class, profession)

- Name one mystery, conflict, or significant past event
- What is your adventure trigger?
- If different from your trigger, do you have a quest?

I confess that this Guide is geared towards fantasy-based games. However, this shouldn't stop a clever player from using the basic ideas to create backgrounds for any kind of setting.

Birthplace

- Name
- Location
- Size
- Geography (e.g. desert, plains, tropical, mountainous, tundra, forest, island, etc)
- Weather
- Industry
- Local government/nobility
- General character, what it was like (e.g. hospitable, communal, ugly, sleepy, dangerous, educated, commercial, pious, stuffy, fun, historical, youthful, political, upscale, transient, depressing, laborious, etc.)
- Or were you born isolated from a population center or in a group/family that travelled?

Family

- Father, mother, siblings, other relatives in your household growing up. If you didn't have a "traditional" family, what did it look like—explain what was different. E.g. maybe you grew up with a gaggle of urchins learning how to pick pockets for a local gang.
- What did your family do to earn a living? (See Professions & Crafts below)
- Socioeconomic class (e.g. nobility, gentry, merchant, peasant, serf, slave, etc.) Compared to average, how wealthy was your family? What kind of influence did it have? What kind of connections to power centers did it have? Did this change over time, and if so why?
- What was your family's reputation?
- Any family myths, curses, or legends?
- Did any members have a mental illness? (see the list above—remember, your character likely wouldn't know these terms, and might instead think a supernatural cause was the explanation)
- Were you raised by someone other than your biological parents?
- Do you know anything about your extended family and your relationship with them?

Professions & Crafts

Before we go on, here is a handy list of possible professions and crafts, which can be applied to your character, various NPCs, and people from your character's past. A way to differentiate them is to think of a craft as something a character can do or make whereas a profession is how one earns a living. As an example, one person can know the craft of brewing ale, whereas another has the training to engage in the profession of being a Brewer.

Most player characters are adventurers of one sort or another by profession. Giving up a home life to go around trudging through ancient dungeons and fighting dangerous creatures is a full time job (and takes a certain kind of unusual personality). So, as a rule of thumb, many characters will have learned something of a craft or profession well before they hit the adventuring trail. At the same time, some professions can make for interesting adventuring motivations. Is your character a scrivener or natural philosopher, adventuring to get material to write a book or publish an essay? Is he a spy under the guise of a hapless sorcerer? How about a storyteller who makes a living going from town to town? There are many possibilities, and this list is far from complete. In such a case, there's a lot to consider:

- What level did you achieve (apprentice, journeyman, or master)?
- Where did you train, and who did you work with—the family or someone else?
- Being a journeyman can require a contract with a master—did you break it to go adventuring?
- Were you part of a professional guild (or still)?
- Did you own a business?
- What drove you to leave the profession?
- Was your profession a family business?
- How successful were you in business?

Also, don't forget the list of religious roles in the Personality chapter.

PROFESSIONS & CRAFTS			
Actor		Jeweler	
Apothecary	Chemist, druggist, pharmacist	Joiner	Cabinet or furniture maker
Arbiter		Judge	
Architect		Lady in Waiting	Noble woman who waits upon higher nobility
Archivist		Landlord	
Armorer		Leather worker	
Assassin		Limner	Paints signs and heraldic devices
Astrologer		Locksmith	
Bailiff	Serves writs and makes arrests	Lumberjack	
Baker		Maidservant	
Banker		Manservant	
Barber		Marbler	Worker in marble or stone
Barkeep		Mariner	
Barrister	Lawyer	Mason	Builder in stone
Beekeeper		Mendicant	
Bellifounder	Bell maker	Mercer	Dealer in textile fabrics
Blacksmith		Merchant	
Bonder	One who keeps slaves	Messenger	
Bookbinder		Metalworker	Silver, gold, bronze, iron, etc.
Bookkeeper		Midshipman	Officer in training
Bookseller		Midwife	
Bowyer	Bow maker	Miller	
Breeder	Dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, etc.	Miner	
Brewer		Minstrel	
Brewing	Maker of ales, beers, or meads	Moneylender	

Butcher		Musician	
Butler		Navigator	
Calligrapher		Page	Noble child in service to another noble
Candlemaker		Painter	
Carpenter		Papermaker	
Cartographer	Map or chart maker	Parchment maker	
Cartwright		Performer	Juggler, tumbler, acrobat, fire-eater, etc.
Clerk		Perfumer	
Clockmaker		Philosopher	Law, ethics, or the natural sciences
Coachman		Physicist	
Cobbler	Shoe maker	Playwright	
Coiner		Poet	
Composer		Politician	
Confectioner	Maker of candies	Potter	Makes pottery
Cook		Prostitute	Can be noble, religious, or criminal
Cooper	Barrel maker	Puppeteer	
Coper	A horse dealer	Quarrier	One who cuts stone from natural deposits
Coppersmith		Quartermaster	Military provisioner
Costumer		Rancher	Horses, cattle, or other livestock
Courier		Recruiter	
Cryptographer	Writes and breaks codes	Scribe	
Dairyman		Scrivener	Writer, author
Dancer		Scullion	One who cleans in the kitchen
Dentist		Sculptor	
Draper	Deals in cloth, clothing	Seamstress	

	and dry goods		
Dressmaker		Shepherd	
Dyer	Dyes cloth into various colors	Ships Captain	
Embroiderer		Shipwright	One who makes ships and boats
Emissary		Slaver	
Engineer	Designs public works, like bridges	Soap maker	
Engraver		Soldier	Rank and file or officer class
Executioner		Songwriter	
Falconer	Trainer of hawks for gaming	Soothsayer	A fortune-teller
Farmer		Spinner	One who spins into wool
Ferrier	Horseshoe-maker	Spy	
First mate		Stableman	
Fisherman		Steward	Servant that oversees the running of a household
Fishmonger	A dealer in cheap and imitation goods	Storyteller	
Fletcher		Tailor	
Florist		Tanner	Tans animal skins to make leather
Forester	Manages forestland	Taxidermist	
Furrier	Dealer in furs; trapper	Teacher	
Gem cutter		Teamster	
Glassblower		Thatcher	One who thatches roofs
Groom	Horse keeper	Tinker	A maker in small devices for common use
Groundskeeper		Toolmaker	A smith who makes metal tools
Harrier	Trainer of hunting hounds	Torturer	
Hatter	Maker and repairer of hats	Toymaker	

Hawker	Sells goods by yelling in the street	Tracker	
Headmaster	Head of a school	Trader	
Healer	With or without magic	Trainer	
Herald		Trapper	
Herbalist	For healing or hurting	Treasurer	
Herder		Undertaker	
Historian		Vintner	Wine maker
Hoyer	Animal driver	Wainwright	Maker and repairer of wagons
Iceman	Keeper of the ice house	Watchman	
Importer		Weaponsmith	
Innkeeper		Weaver	
Interpreter		Wheelwright	
Jester		Woodcarver	

Significant past events

Anything, even something small, can change you in major ways and lead to interesting game play. You can always look at your personality traits and come up with reasons why you're that way (an example: your Primary Motivator is Liberation because you were sold into slavery until you managed to kill your owner in the night, swearing that you would forever help free anyone in bondage). The possibilities are endless.

Family-related events

- Did your father tell you a dark family secret?
- Any unusual problems, deaths, illnesses, or trauma? E.g. did the landlord throw your family into the street? Were your parents or yourself taken into slavery?

- Or did something of great fortune happen?
- Were you taken far away from your family for some reason?
- Were there any interesting traditions, celebrations, or holidays in your family?
- Did you ever fall in love or have a serious relationship?
- Do you have a spouse or any children of your own? Where are they now?

Personal events

- Were you ever really sick or injured?
- What kind of education did you have, if any?
- Were you ever betrayed?
- Did you find a magic item buried in the woods? Or did a rabbit suddenly start talking to you?
- Were you ever dirt poor or filthy rich for a brief time?
- Did you ever commit any crimes, or be falsely accused of one?
- Did something happen that revealed an unusual talent?
- Did you do anything interesting, like travel with a performing troupe, join the military, serve the local nobility, or jump a trading ship for a year?
- Were you ever active in a church, religion, cult, or secret order?

- Did you ever have a chance to show leadership, such as leading a local rebellion, founding a school or animal sanctuary, being elected mayor of your small village, etc.

- Did anything really funny ever happen to you? Embarrasing stories can make for great tavern entertainment.

Notable individuals

- Any strangers come through town that gave you an unusual gift?

- Did a fortune teller predict something strange and unlikely?

- Was there a nearby hermit that taught you about herbs or other lore?

- Any local clergy to influence your religion?

- Did you ever have any mentors or patrons before adventuring?

- Did you form any close friendships while growing up or in early adulthood? Is there anyone out there that you can really trust or look to for help?

Mysteries

Mysteries are great opportunities for role-playing and help keep your character interesting. They can provide the GM with ideas for sub-plots or even whole adventures, so be sure to let her know what you come up with. The ol' amnesia hook is discouraged unless you can come up with a really good story to support it. Some good mysteries could be:

- Who murdered my best friend?

- Who is my real mother?

- I had a strange vision when I was ten—what did it mean?
- Why do I keep having recurring nightmares about a flaming sword?
- One morning I woke up with this strange mark on my chest
- Why does the full moon fill me with dread?
- What did that cryptic prophesy given by an oracle mean?
- Why did the king grant 100 acres of land to my father 20 years ago without an explanation?
- Every now and then I think I see strange creatures out of the corner of my eye—what are they?
- Just before he disappeared, my father gave me a magical box that I can't open.
- A black cloak appeared one day in my room; I don't know who put it there or what it's about
- I was drinking one night at the local tavern and the next thing I remember I was alone, naked, and lying on a stone altar in an outdoor temple dozens of miles away

Existing Conflicts

It is possible to have ongoing conflicts in your character's life. Such conflicts are often between individuals, but they can also be between groups and institutions (such as another village, church, guild, school, family, or the law). You can add other details, like if you are mainly out to get them, or they you, or if the antagonism is mutual. If you choose to have a pre-existing or ongoing conflict, create the circumstances surrounding it:

- Who exactly is the conflict with?
- Why does the conflict exist? What happened?

- Why can’t it be worked out?
- How do you think it will end?
- What are the emotions surrounding it—hate, jealousy, vengefulness, grief, bitterness, regret, fear?

What triggered adventuring?

Even if you don’t answer many other questions about your background, this is a good one to know. Again, look to your personality traits to get ideas for your triggers, especially the Primary Motivator. Also, any of the background items above can act as your adventuring trigger. But if you’re still not sure, here are some ways to explore the essential question—how did you happen to take up a sword, lockpick, or spell book and go looking for trouble?

- Was it a thoughtful decision to go adventuring or did circumstances compel you? Why did you make that decision or what circumstances pushed you into it?
- If you left home, what set you off? Are you looking for something? Or…
- trying to accomplish anything? Or…
- was it wanderlust? Or…
- seeking fame and fortune? Or…
- trying to walk in a parent’s or sibling’s footsteps?
- If you are a fighter, you must have some minimal training with a sword—where did you get it and how did you learn to use it (friend, a job, parent, military)? Or if you have a knack for picking pockets, how did you learn the ropes? If you are a cleric, did you get “the call” from a deity, or were you indoctrinated into a religion?

Think about it this way—if the very first place you get to on your adventure is a pub and someone asks “so, what brings you here?” an honest answer to this hypothetical question would be based on your trigger.

Initial possessions

Do you own anything other than what you are wearing and what’s in your backpack? Do you have a family home, or own land? Also, don’t just think about adventuring equipment—look at your hobbies, quirks, and craft skills above and think if you might have items related to those things.

Bound duties

Are there any outstanding obligations or oaths that you need to fulfill? Any unusual debts? Is anyone looking for you for deserting service or a contract, or for some other reason? Did you make a promise to your family or friends?

Quests

Like the adventure trigger, this is the other background area that should be known for a well-played character. If you have filled out a good portion of the other background areas, then it is likely your quests are already known—they can come from anything in the Events, Mysteries, or Conflicts sections, for example (your trigger can also be a quest). You should add more quests as you continue to adventure. Having short and long term quests is a good idea—developing both can allow you to accomplish things sooner rather than later while still retaining something that drives you.

When working on your quests, think in terms of clearly defined goals—e.g. to become rich is a motivation, not a quest, but to obtain Brad’s Chest of Neverending Gold from the Cave of Certain Death is. Here are some basic ideas—remember, it works best if you can develop quests that collaborate with your personality traits:

- Revenge

- Solve a mystery
- Resolve a conflict
- Fulfill an oath
- Deliver a message or package
- Find or save someone or something that was lost or taken
- Discover a mythical place
- Solve a crime
- Remove a curse
- Provide a suitable person as a physical vehicle for your deity
- Earn membership in an exclusive organization
- Kill every last troll in the Brashduk Clan
- Open the portal to the Fifth Dimension
- Depose the local baron
- Fix the terrible mistake I made long ago
- Obtain Brad's Chest of Neverending Gold from the Cave of Certain Death

  Again, the possibilities are endless. It might be worthwhile to work with the DM on coming up with quests that fit within the game world.

Personality Part 2

Secondary Traits

Character Sheets

Basic and Full sheets

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