

A flexible Outline for Courses on Worldbuilding — and three Examples of Courses using it

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Abstract

This brief PDF document lays out a flexible outline for courses on Worldbuilding. Anyone can use it to set up a course. **The Key Course Concept:** *students build a world after learning from examples.*

These Worldbuilding Courses start with the study of great examples selected by the instructor, and end with students building their own world as a course project. A project-based approach lets students learn by doing, with hands-on experience in this emerging field.

This writeup presents three examples of courses – including two fun examples: ‘*Dragonology 101*’ and ‘*Sword & Sorcery Worldbuilding*’. Although fun, these courses are also real, and can be taught anywhere.

Dragonology 101 is a course on ‘Worldbuilding with Dragons’. It is based on an excellent book about dragons that even has a chapter titled ‘Dragonology 101’. It discusses dragons in worlds developed by J.R.R. Tolkien, Anne McCaffrey, Ursula K. Le Guin, Terry Pratchett, Jane Yolen, Terry Goodkind, and J.K. Rowling — and also studies how dragons evolved over history, in both eastern and western cultures.

Sword & Sorcery Worldbuilding is a course for building swashbuckling adventure worlds, based on a standard reference about the historical development of the S&S genre. It discusses pioneering authors including William Morris, Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, E.R. Eddison, Robert E. Howard, J.R.R. Tolkien, and T.H. White, and explores their lives and how these great Worldbuilders actually worked. It was written by L. Sprague de Camp, a central figure in S&S and a leading author of both fantasy and science fiction.

These examples show that, with a selection of worlds, anyone can quickly set up an interesting Worldbuilding course. All three example courses can be memorable introductions to the field, and as rigorous as desired. The books are not essential, but give good illustrations of what is possible.

The course outline has actually been used for years in the Parageography course described on this site. It was the course’s success that motivated writing this up.

What is Worldbuilding?

The ‘worlds’ in Worldbuilding are places like Middle Earth, Hogwarts, or Westeros. They are sometimes called fictional worlds or story worlds. **Worldbuilding** is the process of developing a description of their landscape and characters, as well as any background that drives action in the world.

Why learn about Worldbuilding? It is becoming a part of work in a number of fields, including in games, fiction, and film. When a world is built up front, many projects can make use of it; this is the basis of the **Transmedia** concept, in which the world permits collaboration and adaptation of work across media. It is also the basis for the **Media Franchise**, which extends a world into a licensing business.

How do Worldbuilders actually build a World?

In practice, worldbuilders often create a *wikipedia-like* document about the world — in other words, a kind of encyclopedia with articles about the world, such as its flora and fauna. For example, the worlds just mentioned have detailed wikis: **Middle Earth**, **Hogwarts**, and the **Lands of Ice and Fire**. These examples are huge wikis; a much smaller wiki example is **Pandorapedia**, for the planet Pandora in the 2009 movie *Avatar*.

For many people, then, worldbuilding boils down to writing a set of articles about a world. This doesn’t actually require a computer — world descriptions are still created today with paper and pencil.

The Course concept: Students build a World after learning from Examples

A simple way to set up a course on Worldbuilding is to start with study of great examples, and end with students building their own world. This course outline lets students get hands-on experience in a new discipline and learn by doing.

This writeup presents some courses as examples — including *Dragonology 101* and *Sword & Sorcery Worldbuilding*. These examples are fun, but are real, and could be taught anywhere.

A Course Roadmap: the rough Outline for Courses on Worldbuilding

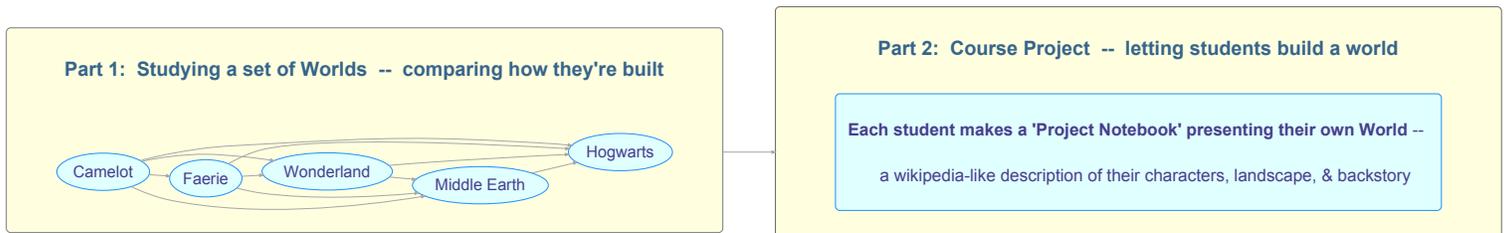


Figure 1: Roadmap of a Worldbuilding course, with worlds chosen by the Instructor. The key idea of the course is to let students build their own world after learning from examples. Here five worlds are studied, as indicated on the left.

Figure 1 shows the basic roadmap for these courses. The first part concentrates on studying examples — and the choice is up to the instructor. Five worlds are shown as examples: Camelot, Faerie, Wonderland, Middle-earth, and Hogwarts. Any set of worlds is fine.

A simple way to choose a set of worlds is to *choose an anthology of articles or tales about different worlds as the course textbook*. For example, a great anthology about *Dystopias* can be the textbook for *Dystopiology 101*. (Books for *Dragonology* and *Swords & Sorcery* are described below.)

Instructors may want to choose worlds that permit comparisons, so students learn about Worldbuilding from the differences. The arrows in **Figure 3** show possibly-interesting comparisons, for example between Camelot and Middle Earth, or Camelot and Hogwarts. Worldbuilding often shows an audience a world that differs from the one they live in, so these differences can be central to the world's design.



Figure 2: Five worlds selected by the instructor in the previous diagram. The arrows here indicate their historical order.

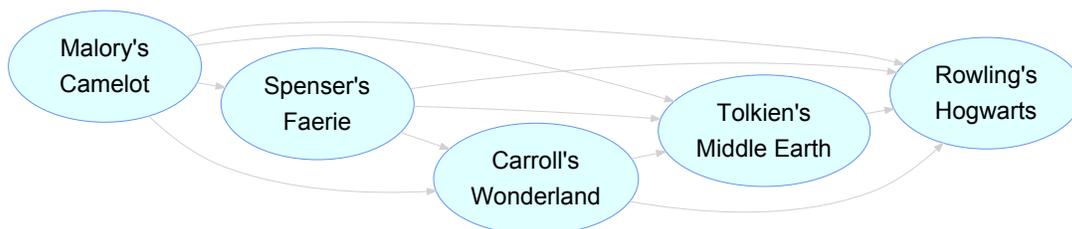


Figure 3: Five worlds selected by the instructor in the previous diagram. The arrows indicate the order of study in the course (in this case, historical order), and also represent comparisons among worlds that potentially could give insight. For example Camelot could be compared with Faerie, or with Middle-earth, or with Hogwarts.

Instructors also can choose worlds in a particular order — like historical order — so that students get perspective on how worlds evolved. In historical order, simpler worlds appear first, making them easier to compare. All examples here are in historical order, and arrows show possibly-interesting comparisons.

Sample Course # 1: *Great Hits of Worldbuilding (in Literature)*

A longer tour of great worlds like the ones just mentioned is shown in *Figure 4*. Instead of five worlds, it has ten. This is probably closer in length to a semester course, and gives more historical perspective, back to Mythical and Classical periods in Greece and Rome.

Studying more examples like this also permits stronger contrasts, such as between parodies — Faerie (by Spenser), *Gulliver’s Travels* (by Swift), and *Wonderland* (by Carroll). Hogwarts has elements of parody also. Parody contrasts the real world with another version that is exaggerated somehow — and being able to compare worlds is a basic skill in worldbuilding.

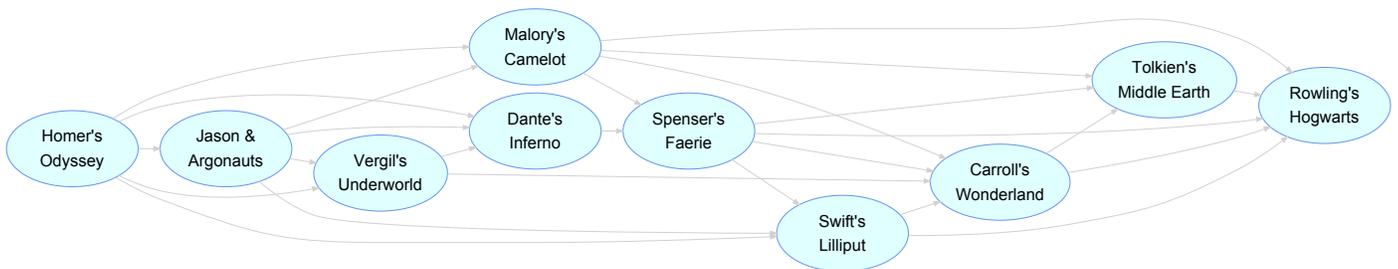


Figure 4: *A longer tour of Great Worlds through history. The Odyssey is a good anchor, since many think of it as a prototype for fantasy worlds. The worlds here are ‘great hits’ spanning almost 3000 years of history.*

For this course, is not hard to make a reading list that emphasizes freely-available online resources. At the end of this document is a large table of Worlds (in *Figure 12*), and this table also has links that jump to resources on the web. As a rough course outline, the instructor can select the ten worlds here as a subset, and the result might resemble the following table:

‘Week’	World	Author	Book	Date	Web Resources			
1	world of the Odyssey	Homer	The Odyssey	800 BCE	text	audio	video	images
2	world of Jason & Argonauts	Apollonius of Rhoc	The Voyage of Argo	300 BCE	text	audio	video	images
3	the Underworld	Vergil	Aeneid	20 BCE	text	audio	video	images
4	the Inferno	Dante Alighieri	The Divine Comedy	1320	text	audio	video	images
5	Camelot	Thomas Malory	Le Morte d’Arthur	1469	text	audio	video	images
6	Faerie	Edmund Spenser	The Faerie Queene	1590	text	audio	video	images
7	Lilliput (Laputa, Yahoo, ...)	Jonathan Swift	Gulliver’s Travels	1726	text	audio	video	images
8	Wonderland	Lewis Carroll	Alice in Wonderland	1865	text	audio	video	images
9	Middle Earth (Arda)	J.R.R. Tolkien	The Fellowship of the Ring	1954	shop	audio	video	images
10	Hogwarts	J.K. Rowling	Harry Potter/Philosopher’s Stone	1997	shop	audio	video	images

Since it contains links to readings, his table actually can serve as a course outline and syllabus. The ‘text’ links actually jump to [Project Gutenberg](#), where books can be freely downloaded in different formats. The links in the rightmost columns make queries about the books at [Librivox](#), [YouTube](#), and [Google images](#).

The ‘Week’ column here is a running index, suggesting here that one world might be studied each week. This ‘10-week’ outline might fit within a quarter schedule, and a 13-week expansion of it (perhaps with introduction at the beginning, exams, holidays and so on) could fill a semester. Each week the course can study a new world, and compare it with some earlier ones; the contrasts give insight into the worlds’ designs.

Again, any selection of worlds is fine. They do not need to be worlds from literature, but can be worlds from other media, such as film for [Middle-earth](#) and the [Wizarding World](#) of Harry Potter. (Transmedia contrasts are possible too, e.g., comparing the Hogwarts of literature with Hogwarts of film.)

Sample Course # 2: *Dragonology 101* (Worldbuilding with Dragons)

Material for a course on ‘*Dragonology*’ is laid out in an excellent book:

Anne C. Petty, [Dragons of Fantasy: All about Dragons and those who Create Them](#), *Kitsune Books* 2008

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This book discusses how the authors in the diagram have developed dragons. It also provides a useful ‘Toolbox’ of references to dragon resources of different kinds, as well as two chapters — actually titled ‘*Dragonology 101*’ & ‘*Dragonology 102*!’ — with historical and cultural background.

The book can be used as a textbook for building Worlds-with-Dragons. The chapters on J.R.R. Tolkien, Anne McCaffrey, Terry Pratchett, Ursula K. Le Guin, Jane Yolen, Terry Goodkind, and J.K. Rowling describe how these great Worldbuilders developed their dragons.

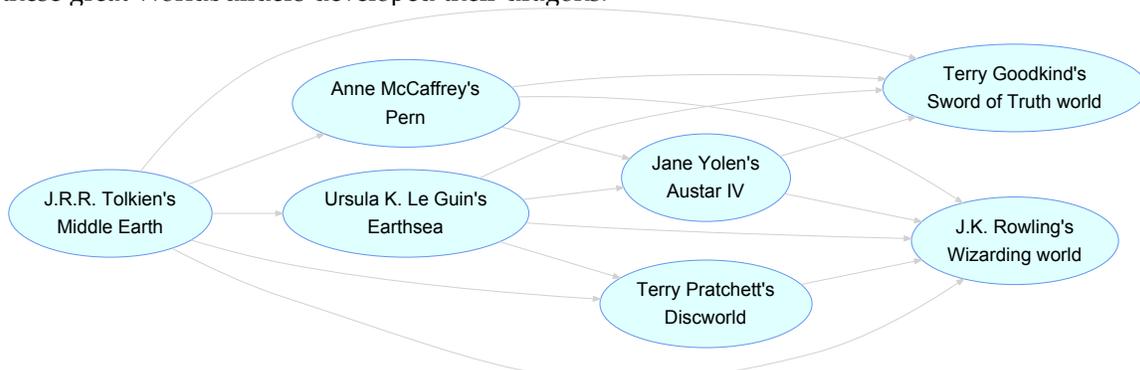


Figure 5: *Worlds with exceptionally good dragons — a set of worlds giving us a course about dragons in Worldbuilding.*

Figure 5 shows historical ordering among the work of these authors, and shows how earlier work by Tolkien, McCaffrey, and Le Guin might be compared with work of the others.

The book’s chapters *Dragonology 101* & *102* cover ‘*the history of dragons*’ and offer perspective: *101* covers dragons from ancient history up to the Classical period, and *102* from the Medieval age to present. Both describe striking differences in dragons in eastern vs. western cultures (e.g., western dragons are often reptilian and evil, while eastern ones are more snakelike and playful). The contrast says a lot about Fantasy and about dragon design for Worldbuilding.

With this book reviewing dragon designs of each author, our course outline might resemble this table:

‘Week’	World	Dragon	Author	Book	Year	Reading
1	Creating Dragons		Petty	Dragons of Fantasy	2008	[Petty Ch.1]
1	Dragon Hunter’s Toolbox					[Petty Ch.11]
2	<i>Dragonology 101</i>		Petty	Dragons of Fantasy	2008	[Petty Ch.9]
2	<i>Dragonology 102</i>					[Petty Ch.10]
3	Middle-earth	Smaug	J.R.R. Tolkien	<i>The Hobbit</i>	1937	[Petty Ch.2]
4	Middle-earth	Glaurung	J.R.R. Tolkien	<i>The Silmarillion</i>	1977	[Petty Ch.2]
5	Earthsea	Orm Embar	Ursula K. Le Guin	<i>Dragonfly</i>	1968	[Petty Ch.5]
6	Pern	Ramoth	Anne McCaffrey	<i>Dragonriders of Pern</i>	1968	[Petty Ch.3]
7	Discworld	Errol	Terry Pratchett	<i>Guards! Guards!</i>	1983	[Petty Ch.4]
8	Astar IV	Heart’s Blood	Jane Yolen	<i>Pit Dragon Chronicles</i>	1984	[Petty Ch.6]
9	world of <i>Sword of Truth</i>	Scarlet	Terry Goodkind	<i>Wizard’s First Rule</i>	1994	[Petty Ch.7]
10	Wizarding World	Norbert	J.K. Rowling	<i>Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them</i>	1997	[Petty Ch.8]

As an alternative, the course might use the [Wikipedia list of dragons in literature](#) as a kind of textbook. The instructor is then free to select any dragons, worlds, books, or authors they want. (In addition, there are books actually titled ‘*Dragonology*’ that might serve as an alternative, but many are juvenile fiction.)

CREATING DRAGONS

[Anne C. Petty, [Dragons of Fantasy: All about Dragons and those who Create Them](#), pp 15–17]

Dragonology can be separated into two main branches: actual (scholarly) and virtual (popular). Dragon research includes the work of mythologists, linguists, anthropologists, literary analysts, and cultural historians, while the virtual world is largely inhabited by loremasters, gamers, graphic artists, storytellers, animators, and visionaries. [But] Convincing writers of dragon fiction have managed to wrestle the likes of Smaug, Fáfnir, Typhon, or Tiamar onto the page, and that's what interests me most: how from the big picture down to the sentence level, they have accomplished this magic.

The Story's the Thing

In this study of fantasy writers, I'll be covering novels from a wide range of authors, from so-called young adult (YA) titles to strictly adult fare. But transcending such book-marketing categories, the bottom line for any good story is this: Is it a ripping good yarn with great characters? More to the point, no matter how well-crafted and intricate the plot, it must have characters you care about if it is to lift off and soar.

That is also where the line between YA and adult fiction tends to blur in writers such as J.K. Rowling, Ursula Le Guin, and T.H. White, not to mention books by Robert Asprin, Patricia McKillip, Barbara Hambly, Peter S. Beagle, Patricia Wrede, Andre Norton, Margaret Weise, and Tracy Hickman.

Writers who write for the sheer love of storytelling with little concern over which market they should conform to or the demographics of their potential readers fall into this cross-over category — their appeal is universal. Sometimes the best character inventions can be found here.

... the purpose of this book is threefold: to offer advice on how to write compelling dragon characters, to analyze the writing of seven authors whose fictional dragons are not only among the best in the business but are all widely different, and to provide an overview of those treasures from the vault — the vast trove of dragonlore available to all writers.

How does a fiction writer invest a dragon with personality and determine its roles among the cast of characters? The generic idea of "dragon" is drenched in symbolism: from earliest myth to modern psychology, its image represents the menacing unknown crawling with unnamed threats and obstacles to be overcome. Slaying the dragon is a fairly universal metaphor for conquering inner fears and doubt. Such handy symbology can be used when assigning a hierarchy of traits to one's fictional dragons.

... The authors I've included here have very different approaches to these techniques, yet each has successfully created memorable dragons — often as three-dimensional and complex as their human counterparts. In selected works of each author, I will be focusing on the following points:

- **The dragon's first appearance** — What is the reader's first impression of the creature?
- **What others say** — How are readers' expectations built up about the dragon?
- **Dragonspeech** — What does it sound like, and how is it rendered in print?
- **Alien thought patterns** — When narration is from the dragon's point of view, how does the creature think, and what's going on in its mind?
- **Physical description** — How traditional or unusual is the mental image created by the description, how specific are the details? Is the imagery literal or poetic?
- **Attributes** — What powers and abilities are given to the dragons?
- **Personality** — How do they act and behave; do they go through changes over the course of the story?
- **Plot significance** — At what level do the dragon characters affect the storyline; what is their power to act?
- **Interaction with humans** — Are they allies or foes?
- **Use of humor** — Do the dragons provide comic relief? If so, what type of humor is used, and how is it deployed in the story?

Figure 6: From Anne Petty's Introduction to [Dragons of Fantasy: All about Dragons and those who Create Them](#).

What Worldbuilding Topics could a ‘Dragonology Course’ cover?

There are many books about dragons. Petty’s book is about specific dragon designs, set against the backdrop of history. It studies writing mechanics of great authors, including style and humor and dialogue. The course outline sketched above overviews this background first, and then studies individual authors.

Figure 6 is an excerpt from Petty’s introduction. She notes that there are at least two different kinds of audience (and therefore two kinds of course): *actual (scholarly) and virtual (popular)*. The first might be more about culture and writing (different views of dragons as creatures, over millenia), where the second seems more about engineering (how dragons are constructed as characters in virtual worlds). She also mentions that some divisions get drawn between juvenile and adult audiences.

The course outlined above book is concerned primarily with writers — such as worldbuilders — and with creative designs for dragons as characters. Petty’s introduction in *Figure 6* stresses the purpose of her book is to analyze how seven outstanding writers have worked with dragons. For aspiring worldbuilders, this gives a way to look over the shoulders of ‘the best in the business’. The Dragonology material in her book emphasizes cultural differences across history, giving perspective on the space of existing dragon designs.

The course can use different topics and texts, of course; some alternative texts are below. There are books about every author above, other authors, history, etc. Instructors can use any books they choose:

Topic	ISBN	Year	1st Author	Book Title
Worldbuilding	1350016667	2018	Hergenrader	Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers
Dragon Anthology	1849391009	2011	Dann	The Dragon Book: Magical Tales from the Masters of Modern Fantasy
Dragon Anthology	1625791380	2013	Dozois	Bestiary: Stories about legendary creatures of myth and magic
A. McCaffrey	1604732997	2007	Roberts	Anne McCaffrey: A Life with Dragons
A. McCaffrey	0345412745	1997	Nye	The Dragonlover’s Guide to Pern (2nd ed)
A. McCaffrey	0345314344	1984	Fonstad	Atlas of Pern: Complete Guide to Anne McCaffrey’s Wonderful World of Dragons and Dragonriders
J.R.R. Tolkien	0395898714	1998	Tolkien	Roverandom
J.R.R. Tolkien	0753720809	2010	Day	Guide to Tolkien’s World: A Bestiary
J.R.R. Tolkien	178076927X	2012	Atherton	There and Back Again: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Origins of The Hobbit
J.R.R. Tolkien	1328497593	2019	Tolkien	The Annotated Hobbit (3rd ed)
Bestiaries	0486246094	1984	White	The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century
Bestiaries	069111689X	2003	Delacampagne	Here Be Dragons: A Fantastic Bestiary
History	1441166769	2018	Wood	Fantastic Creatures in Mythology and Folklore: From Medieval Times to the Present Day
History	9004186638	2011	Kuehn	The Dragon in Medieval East Christian and Islamic Art
History	1845432924	2008	Evans	Dragons: Myth and Legend
History	0786747684	2009	McGowan	The Dragon Seekers: How An Extraordinary Cicle Of Fossilists Discovered The Dinosaurs ...
History	0312207034	2000	Levy	A Natural History of the Unnatural World: Discover what Cryptozoology can teach us ...
‘Scholarship’	0851156800	1996	Blanpied	Dragons: The Modern Infestation
‘Scholarship’	144031067X	2012	O’Connor	Dracopedia — The Great Dragons: An Artist’s Field Guide and Drawing Journal

Table 3: A ‘Dragonology Course’ might cover topics like these. Related lists of books are at douglassparker.org

Sample Course # 3: *Sword & Sorcery Worldbuilding*

Figure 7 covers foundational works for the *Sword and Sorcery* subgenre of Fantasy. It is folklore that ‘*Sword and Sorcery*’ is a phrase attributed to Fritz Leiber in 1961 to designate a field that was popular since the 1930s.

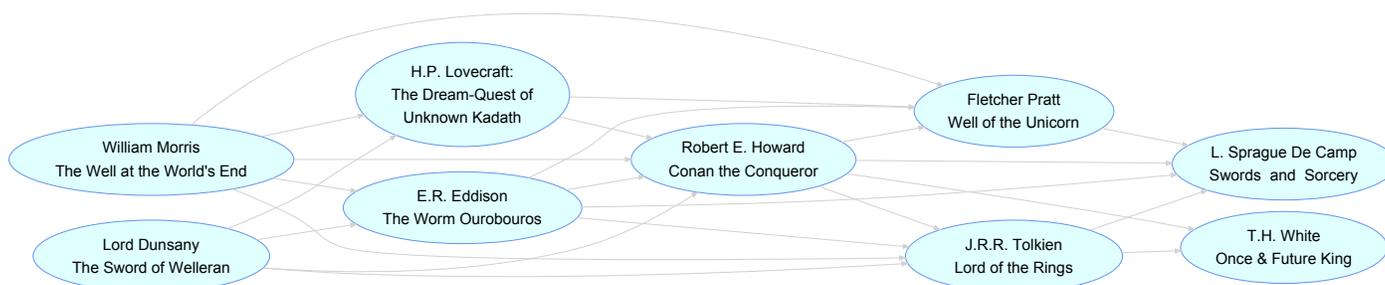


Figure 7: Readings in the *Sword & Sorcery* subgenre — showing early works by pioneering authors from 1890-1970. Work of Robert E. Howard in the 1930s (like *Conan the Barbarian*) is sometimes viewed as its purest expression.

In *Figure 7*, *Sword & Sorcery* tales are traced back further in history, to William Morris (1896) and Lord Dunsany (1908) — two early works that influenced Tolkien. For example, Morris’ *The Well at the World’s End* has a character named Gandolf. The *Lord of the Rings* also has parallels with the *Völsung Saga*, which Morris translated; he is sometimes referred to as ‘the father of Fantasy’. Dunsany was likewise highly influential.

Historical material that could be useful in a course is in a standard reference [\[book’s Wikipedia page\]](#):

L. Sprague de Camp, [Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: the Makers of Heroic Fantasy](#), Arkham House, 1976
[cover image](#) [nearby libraries](#) [Amazon](#) [B&N](#) [BookFinder](#) [eBay](#) [Reddit](#) [Google](#) [GoogleBooks](#) [Wikipedia](#) [0870540769](#)

This book has biographical sketches of early authors, including William Morris, Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, E.R. Eddison, Robert E. Howard, Fletcher Pratt, J.R.R. Tolkien, and T.H. White. Notice the ‘Literary’ in the title; this wonderful set of authors shows makes the book essentially a ‘history of modern Fantasy writing’ also, and offers insights about Worldbuilding that go beyond *S&S*.

The history has lessons about Worldbuilding too — de Camp’s book describes in a very unvarnished way what these authors were like, and the way they faced and handled challenges. (De Camp sometimes even gets judgemental where they underperformed; he was famous for this. For stylistic or literary analysis, the Wikipedia links for authors in the table below can give a different perspective.)

De Camp’s book only covers early work, prior to the early 1960s (when the term ‘Sword and Sorcery’ was coined). After this the genre headed in different colorful directions — so its definition can depend on context, and awareness of history is important.

For course references, the instructor can use [de Camp’s book](#) or just [Wikipedia information about S&S](#), along with [Clute and Grant’s online Fantasy Encyclopedia](#). Much has been written about *S&S*, though, so there are many resources to draw on. With de Camp’s book as a text, a course outline might look like this:

‘Week’	World	Author	Book	Year	Reading
1	Faerie	L. Sprague de Camp	Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers	1976	[de Camp Ch.1]
2	‘Middle Earth’	William Morris	The Well at the World’s End	1896	[de Camp Ch.2]
3	Fortress Unvanquishable	Lord Dunsany	The Sword of Welleran	1908	[de Camp Ch.3]
4	Cthulhu Mythos	H.P. Lovecraft	The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath	1926	[de Camp Ch.4]
5	Mercury	E.R. Eddison	The Worm Ouroboros (Nordic dragon)	1922	[de Camp Ch.5]
6	Hyborian Age	Robert E. Howard	Conan the Conqueror	1934	[de Camp Ch.6]
7	Dalarna	Fletcher Pratt	Well of the Unicorn	1948	[de Camp Ch.7]
8	Zothique	Clark Ashton Smith	Empire of the Necromancers	1932	[de Camp Ch.8]
9	Middle-earth	J.R.R. Tolkien	Lord of the Rings	1954	[de Camp Ch.9]
10	Camelot	T.H. White	The Once and Future King	1958	[de Camp Ch.10]

INTRODUCTION: NEOMYTHOLOGY

[Lin Carter, Introduction to: *Literary Swordsmen & Sorcerers*, pp. xi–xiv]

“Sword and Sorcery” is the term by which aficionados affectionately refer to **that school of fantastic fiction wherein the heroes are pretty much heroic, the villains thoroughly villainous, and action of the derring-do variety takes the place of sober social commentary or serious psychological introspection.**

In a word, then, **Sword & Sorcery is written primarily to entertain:** a motive generally suspect and largely obsolete in modern letters.

This heroic school of fantasy dates, of course, from remote antiquity and boasts an illustrious lineage. **The prototypes of swordly-and-sorcerous swashbuckling can be clearly traced back to** the voyagings of **Odysseus**, the adventures of **Jason**, the labors of **Hercules**, the wanderings of **Aeneas**, the exploitations of **Sindbad**, the exploits of **Beowulf**, **Siegfried**, and **St. George**, and the chivalric questings of **Amadis** and **Orlando**, of **Lancelot** and **Galahad**.

Most national literatures spring from bodies of heroic and fabulous legendary — except in countries like America, too recently founded to have enjoyed a myth-making period. Persia has her Rustom, Germany her Nibelungs, Norway her Volsungs, India her Rama, Arabia her Antar, France her Carolingian peers, Russia her Ilya Murometz, Spain her Cid, and even smaller nations like Ireland and Finland their Cúchulainn and their Lemminkainen. But America — whose age, measured in centuries, can still be counted on the fingers of one hand — has to make do with such feeble follow-ups in the doughty dragon-slayers of yore as the likes of Hiawatha, Davy Crockett, and Dan’l Boone.

This may explain why, although the modern revival of heroic fantasy began in the mid-nineteenth century, when William Morris penned his inimitable medieval romances, it remained for some half a century a predominantly British field of literary endeavor. Having once been transported across the Atlantic to these shores, fantasy took root. It proliferated so abundantly that today the primary living practitioners of this ancient craft of legend-spinning are all Americans, with the lone exception of England’s Michael Moorcock.

In a nation too young to have a mythology of its own, heroic fantasy has created a unique neomythology, in which so recent a creation as Superman has the status of an antediluvian epic figure, and Conan and Jirel, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Vakar of Lorsk and Thongor of Lemuria form a new Round Table.

... Instead of attempting a comprehensive approach to fantasy as a whole ... **L. Sprague de Camp** has, I think wisely, chosen to examine the evolution of **Sword & Sorcery** through the works of key writers whose oeuvres were central to the growth of the genre. He begins quite properly with **Morris**, therefore, the “man who invented fantasy,” upon whose monuments later generations upreared their own. He follows with **Lord Dunsany**, the first writer to introduce an element of the Oriental fable into Morris’s predominantly medieval and Malorian invention, who was also the first to adapt the genre to the short-story form.

He then looks at **E.R. Eddison**, the British romancer of the 1920s who revolutionized fantasy by bringing in documentation. Whereas Morris had set his scenes in a dim worldscape remote from history or geography, and Dunsany had established little kingdoms at the World’s Edge or in the Third Hemisphere, it was Eddison who buttressed his romances with firm chronological tables and detailed, seemingly-realistic maps — imaginary historical dates, to be sure, and invented geographies, of course: but they looked real.

De Camp then goes on to consider **major writers in the development of Sword & Sorcery** such as **Robert E. Howard**, **T.H. White**, **J.R. R. Tolkien**, and **Clark Ashton Smith**. ... [and **Fritz Leiber**.]

[De Camp has omitted] **James Branch Cabell** [and] the gigantic **A. Merritt** ... For, when it comes to the major living fantasy writers, Sprague has limited himself to those who wrote before the 1940s.

Sprague has chosen to leave out other living masters of heroic fantasy [e.g.] the Dying Earth stories of **Jack Vance**, or **Andre Norton**’s **Witch World** books, or **Lloyd Alexander**’s **Prydain** pentalogy, or the **Brak the Barbarian** yarns of **John Jakes**, or **Michael Moorcock**’s saga of **Elric of Melniboné** and his several avatars and incarnations, or **Jane Gaskell**’s **Atlantis** trilogy.

Figure 8: The start of Lin Carter’s introduction to de Camp’s book *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers*.

In the S&S diagram in [Figure 7](#), the oval for L. Sprague de Camp’s [Swords and Sorcery](#) represents an influential 1963 anthology that De Camp compiled — containing stories from the other authors in the diagram. It helped define S&S as a subgenre of Fantasy, and organized efforts after the pulp fiction era.

He later compiled [other anthologies](#), such as [The Spell of Seven](#) (1965), [The Fantastic Swordsmen](#) (1967), and also [S&S anthologies](#) in collaboration with Lin Carter. Anthologies like these can be used as a textbook. Some S&S stories are freely available, such as [stories by Robert E. Howard](#) at [Project Gutenberg](#). (Books after 1923 are still protected by copyright, so not usually available.)

IMPORTANT: Some S&S stories are very graphic, and not politically correct, so they must be chosen carefully. The course might focus on ‘literary’ work, as de Camp did in his reference book.

What Worldbuilding Topics could a ‘Sword & Sorcery Course’ cover?

[Figure 8](#) presents an excerpt of the enlightening and funny Introduction to [Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers](#) by Lin Carter. It puts the S&S genre in perspective, explaining how it has great historical connections with myth, legend, and literature — but also that it is a form of entertainment. This is a mixed blessing; some challenges facing the genre come from the difficult of reconciling this split heritage.

The main point Carter makes is this: ‘*in [America], a nation too young to have a mythology of its own, heroic fantasy has created a unique neomythology.*’ S&S was filling a need, and playing an important role. (Building a new mythology for Britain — *mythopoeia* — is a goal that Tolkien reportedly set out to accomplish. George Lucas also reportedly set out to accomplish this with *Star Wars*, and the first episode appeared in theaters in 1977 — the year after Carter made his point.)

A related aspect of S&S is that it is not just ‘Fantasy’, but some blend of Fantasy with Horror (heroes triumph over monsters). If Fantasy taps into our deep desires, and Horror our fears, then S&S taps into both. The excerpt from Carter’s Introduction in [Figure 8](#) also stresses the legacy of individual authors in exploring the potential of the genre.

A course on the Sword and Sorcery genre can cover any of these topics — historical legacy, great authors, and links with myth, fantasy, and horror. Courses can cover these topics using books like these:

Topic	ISBN	Year	1st Author	Book Title
R.E. Howard	193226521X	2006	Finn	Blood & Thunder: The Life & Art of Robert E. Howard
R.E. Howard	1719584915	2018	Beattie	Pulp Era Writing Tips
R.E. Howard	0916732207	1976	Weinberg	Annotated Guide to Robert E. Howard’s Sword and Sorcery
R.E. Howard	1400192234	2014	Howard	The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian: original Adventures of the greatest S & S Hero of All Time!
R.E. Howard	0756620953	2006	Thomas	Conan: The Ultimate Guide to the World’s Most Savage Barbarian
J.R.R. Tolkien	147661749X	2014	Parsons	J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard and the Birth of Modern Fantasy
J.R.R. Tolkien	1861712391	2008	Rorabeck	Tolkien’s Heroic Quest
M. Moorcock	1595824278	2010	Roy Thomas	Michael Moorcock’s Elric of Melnibone
F. Leiber	1593077130	2007	Chaykin	Fritz Leiber’s Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser
US authors	0765304562	2003	Thomsen	The American Fantasy Tradition
Worldbuilding	0826477607	2005	Hunt	Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction
Fantasy & Myth	0230005055	2009	Gray	Fantasy, Myth & the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald, Hoffman
Fantasy & Myth	0199316074	2014	Attebery	Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth
Fantasy & Reality	0230607853	2008	Castronova	Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun Is Changing Reality
Fantasy & Reality	0810869950	2010	Cramer	Medieval Fantasy as Performance: Society for Creative Anachronism & the Current Middle Ages
Fantasy & Reality	0809326248	2005	Bellin	Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation
Fantasy & Reality	0879725540	1992	Filmer-Davies	Scepticism and Hope in Twentieth Century Fantasy Literature
Fantasy & Reality	1583949313	2015	Davis	TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information
Cinema	0786423242	2005	Worley	Empires of the Imagination: A Critical Survey of Fantasy Cinema ...
Cinema	1476662916	2017	Kinnard	Italian Sword and Sandal Films, 1908-1990
Cinema	0879106905	2006	Ursini	The Modern Amazons: Warrior Women On-Screen
Cinema	0826415873	2004	Kapell	Jacking In To the Matrix Franchise: Cultural Reception and Interpretation
RPGs	0879756535	1991	Schick	Heroic Worlds
RPGs	9527065186	2017	Johnson	Appendix N: The Literary History of Dungeons & Dragons

Table 5: A ‘S&S Course’ could cover topics like these

APPENDIX N: INSPIRATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL READING

[E. Gary Gygax, recommendations to D&D players, *AD&D Dungeon Masters Guide*, p.224, 1979]

Inspiration for all the fantasy work I have done stems directly from the love my father showed when I was a tad, for he spent many hours telling me stories he made up as he went along, tales of cloaked old men who could grant wishes, of magic rings and enchanted swords, or wicked sorcerors [sic] and dauntless swordsmen.

Then too, countless hundreds of comic books went down, and the long-gone EC ones certainly had their effect. Science fiction, fantasy, and horror movies were a big influence. In fact, all of us tend to get ample helpings of fantasy when we are very young from fairy tales such as those written by the Brothers Grimm and Andrew Lang. This often leads to reading books of mythology, paging through bestiaries, and consultation of compilations of the myths of various lands and peoples.

Upon such a base I built my interest in fantasy, being an avid reader of all science fiction and fantasy literature since 1950.

The following authors were of particular inspiration to me. In some cases I cite specific works, in others, I simply recommend all of their fantasy writing to you. From such sources, as well as any other imaginative writing or screenplay, you will be able to pluck kernels from which will grow the fruits of exciting campaigns. Good reading!

Anderson, Poul: THREE HEARTS & THREE LIONS; THE HIGH CRUSADE; THE BROKEN SWORD

Bellairs, John: THE FACE IN THE FROST

Brackett, Leigh

Brown, Frederic

Burroughs, Edgar Rice: "Pellucidar" series; Mars series; Venus series

Carter, Lin: "World's End" series

de Camp, L. Sprague: LEST DARKNESS FALL; THE FALLIBLE FIEND; et al

de Camp & Pratt: "Harold Shea" series; THE CARNELIAN CUBE

Derleth, August

Dunsany, Lord

Farmer, P. J.: "The World of the Tiers" series; et al

Fox, Gardner: "Kothar" series; "Kyrik" series; et al

Howard, R. E.: "Conan" series

Lanier, Sterling: HIERO'S JOURNEY

Leiber, Fritz: "Fafhrd & Gray Mouser" series; et al

Lovecraft, H. P.

Merritt, A.: CREEP, SHADOW, CREEP; MOON POOL; DWELLERS IN THE MIRAGE; et al

Moorcock, Michael: STORMBRINGER; STEALER OF SOULS; "Hawkmoon" series (esp. first 3 books)

Norton, Andre

Offutt, Andrew J.: editor of SWORDS AGAINST DARKNESS III

Pratt, Fletcher: BLUE STAR; et al

Saberhagen, Fred: CHANGELING EARTH; et al

St. Clair, Margaret: THE SHADOW PEOPLE; SIGN OF THE LABRYS

Tolkien, J. R. R.: THE HOBBIT; "Ring trilogy"

Vance, Jack: THE EYES OF THE OVERWORLD; THE DYING EARTH; et al

Weinbaum, Stanley

Wellman, Manley Wade

Williamson, Jack

Zelazny, Roger: JACK OF SHADOWS; "Amber" series; et al

The most immediate influences upon AD&D were probably de Camp & Pratt, R. E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Jack Vance, H. P. Lovecraft, and A. Merritt; but all of the above authors, as well as many not listed, certainly helped to shape the form of the game. For this reason, and for the hours of reading enjoyment, I heartily recommend the works of these fine authors to you.

Figure 10: Gary Gygax's famous [Appendix N to the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeomaster's Guide](#), 1979.

Will this really work? Has anyone ever taught this kind of Course? Yes.

A very successful course (resembling Course #1 above) was offered for 25 years at the University of Texas. Detailed documentation about it is freely available at douglassparker.org, laying out how it worked. It won teaching awards, and got written up in CHE and the New York Times. Hundreds of students actually took the course, and many later expressed gratitude about it.

The course offered at the University of Texas covered worlds from the Odyssey to Middle Earth, with more from the Classical and Medieval ages, spending most of the course lecture time on comparing worlds. The course outline was essentially an expansion of [Figure 4](#); worlds in [Figure 12](#) covers most of the expansion.

Actually, it is because the course was successful that we decided to write this up. The course outline has good ideas in it, and worldbuilding is actually becoming an important discipline. It would be a pity if course outlines like this didn't get considered, so we wrote this up.

The most important Part of the Course? No question: the Course Project.

Students who completed the course at the University of Texas repeatedly mentioned the project as valuable.

This was amplified when the project was presented as a *challenge* — asking the student to stretch, to do something creative and personal. The challenge changed it from an ordinary assignment to something deeper. Some students also said they had not had any assignments asking for creativity before the course. Many students took the course specifically for the challenge of the course project.

Worldbuilding is probably best learned by doing, and involves a lot of legwork. Motivation is important; the project wants to be something students invest themselves in. Building one's own world is something to take pride in, and this pride is a motivation for learning.

Important for any Worldbuilding Course: Worldbuilding Communities

Students can find many resources in online communities. At Reddit.com, for example, [/r/worldbuilding](https://www.reddit.com/r/worldbuilding) is a huge and diverse community, with everything one could want — including [resources for getting started](#).

community	subreddit	subscribers (8/2019)
Worldbuilding	/r/worldbuilding	420K
Imaginary Maps	/r/ImaginaryMaps	145K
Imaginary Landscapes	/r/ImaginaryLandscapes	245K
Imaginary Monsters	/r/ImaginaryMonsters	225K
Imaginary Characters	/r/ImaginaryCharacters	120K
Lord of the Rings	/r/lotr	330K
Fantasy	/r/fantasy	625K
D&D Dungeon Masters	/r/DnDBehindTheScreen	230K
Role-Playing Games	/r/rpg	675K

Figure 11: *Communities: subreddits related to worldbuilding at reddit.com, with rough sizes on Aug.1 2019.*

Some related communities are listed in [Table 11](#), with approximate community sizes (and most are growing rapidly). Each of these communities has resources, and together involve thousands of people in every aspect of worldbuilding. There might not be anything like a *Bestiary of Worldbuilders* yet, but if there is one, these communities would be good places to look.

Today Worldbuilding is characterized by diverse communities. Because of their different interests, ranging from fiction to gaming to cinema, each community addresses problems differently. So there are many different terms for a world description: *wiki, encyclopedia, dictionary, design document, world document, world bible, atlas, gazetteer, guidebook, sourcebook, notebook, ...* The bottom line is that every community will have its own resources and jargon. Savvy worldbuilders will navigate multiple communities.

Conclusion

The material above lays out how a course could work. To get a course off the ground, there are a few more things to add about how an instructor can define the schedule and course project.

First, the table in *Figure 12* can be used in putting together a syllabus for a course about great worlds through history — by (1) choosing a subset of worlds (by deleting some rows), (2) ordering the rows in a way that fits the course timetable. (NOTE: dates in the table are historical, and may not be accurate.)

At the start we mentioned that worldbuilders often produce a ‘wikipedia-like document’ to describe their world. Examples mentioned were wikis for [Middle Earth](#), [Hogwarts](#), and the [Lands of Ice and Fire](#). There are sites that specialize on wikis like these, e.g., [Wikis at fandom.com](#), [Game Wikis](#), [RPG Portals](#), etc.

There are also many books describing worlds. For role-playing games, a list of [RPG Sourcebooks/Guidebooks](#) covers hundreds of examples. For fictional worlds generally, and worlds in film, there are also detailed Guidebooks and Encyclopedias. For many recent worlds in *Figure 12*, there are published Guidebooks. At [douglassparker.org](#) there are free bibliographies related to worldbuilding.

For more Information, please visit [douglassparker.org](#)

Some Great Worlds through History (in a table)

World	Author	Book	Date	Web Resources			
Islands of the Odyssey	Homer	The Odyssey	800 BCE	text	audio	video	images
Atlantis	Plato	Timaeus and Critias	360 BCE	text	audio	video	images
World of Jason & Argonauts	Apollonius of Rhodes	The Voyage of Argo	300 BCE	text	audio	video	images
The Underworld	Vergil	Aeneid	20 BCE	text	audio	video	images
Lucian's Fantasy World	Lucian of Samosata	True History	200 CE	text	audio	video	images
St. Brendan's Isle	Anonymous	The Voyage of St. Brendan	500 CE	text	audio	video	images
The Inferno (& Paradiso)	Dante Alighieri	The Divine Comedy	1320	text	audio	video	images
Medieval Fantasy Worlds	Sir John Mandeville	Travels of Sir John Mandeville	1371	text	audio	video	images
Medieval World of Mabinogi	Welsh Tales	The Mabinogion	1400	text	audio	video	images
King Arthur's Camelot	Thomas Malory	Le Morte d'Arthur	1469	text	audio	video	images
Utopia	Thomas More	Utopia	1516	text	audio	video	images
Enchanted World of Faerie	Edmund Spenser	The Faerie Queene	1590	text	audio	video	images
El Dorado	Sir Walter Raleigh	El Dorado	1595	text	audio	video	images
Bensalem	Francis Bacon	The New Atlantis	1627	text	audio	video	images
Hell	John Milton	Paradise Lost	1667	text	audio	video	images
Valley of the Diamonds, ...	Antoine Galland	Sindbad (The 1001 Nights)	1704	text	audio	video	images
Lilliput, Laputa, Yahoo, ...	Jonathan Swift	Gulliver's Travels	1726	text	audio	video	images
Fairy Land	George MacDonald	Phantastes: a Faerie Romance	1858	text	audio	video	images
Earth's Core	Jules Verne	Journey to Center of the Earth	1864	text	audio	video	images
Wonderland	Lewis Carroll	Alice in Wonderland	1865	text	audio	video	images
Looking-Glass World	Lewis Carroll	Through the Looking Glass	1871	text	audio	video	images
Treasure Island	Robert Louis Stevenson	Treasure Island	1883	text	audio	video	images
King Solomon's Mines	H. Rider Haggard	King Solomon's Mines	1885	text	audio	video	images
Oz	L. Frank Baum	The Wonderful Wizard of Oz	1900	text	audio	video	images
Neverland	J.M. Barrie	Peter Pan	1911	text	audio	video	images
The Lost World	Arthur Conan-Doyle	The Lost World	1912	text	audio	video	images
Pellucidar	Edgar Rice Burroughs	At the Earth's Core	1915	text	audio	video	images
Arcturus (Tormance)	David Lindsay	A Voyage to Arcturus	1920	text	audio	video	images
Cthulhu Myths	H.P. Lovecraft	The Call of Cthulhu	1928	text	audio	video	images
Hyborian Age	Robert Howard	Conan the Barbarian	1932	text	audio	video	images
Shangri-La	James Hilton	Lost Horizon	1933	text	audio	video	images
Castle Gormenghast	Mervyn Peake	Titus Groan	1946	shop	audio	video	images
Narnia	C.S. Lewis	Chronicles of Narnia	1952	shop	audio	video	images
Middle Earth (Arda)	J.R.R. Tolkien	The Fellowship of the Ring	1954	shop	audio	video	images
Arrakis	Frank Herbert	Dune	1965	shop	audio	video	images
Pern	Anne McCaffrey	Dragonflight	1968	shop	audio	video	images
Earthsea	Ursula K. Le Guin	A Wizard of Earthsea	1968	shop	audio	video	images
Amber	Roger Zelazny	Nine Princes in Amber	1983	shop	audio	video	images
Discworld	Terry Pratchett	The Colour of Magic	1983	shop	audio	video	images
Westeros, Essos	George R.R. Martin	A Game of Thrones	1996	shop	audio	video	images
Hogwarts	J.K. Rowling	Harry Potter/Philosopher's Stone	1997	shop	audio	video	images

Figure 12: A table of Great worlds (mostly western) that appeared in books. Beyond these, Wikipedia has more lists of worlds: [Fantasy Worlds](#), [Fictional Universes](#), [Science Fiction Planets](#), [Fictional Countries](#), [Paracosms](#), [Underworlds](#), [Mythological Places](#), and [more than 30 other kinds of Fictional Locations](#). (Each list is further broken down by category into Literature, Science Fiction, Graphic Novels, Anime/Manga, Comics, Film & Television, Music, Computer & Video Games, Table-top Gaming, etc.) There are also [Lists about Role-Playing Games](#).