

Introducing the World and Rules.

Once you've given a good log line and your listener knows your concept, you are able to spend some time setting up your story by describing things like the setting and characters. The log line allows the listener to understand the significance of these elements. It gives everything to come some context. At this stage, most writers will launch into a description of the world in which their story takes place. (If it's an original story – if it's a rewrite, adaptation or director pitch, the setting might already be clear.) Depending on your subject matter it may already be clear. If your one-liner is comparable to our sample bank heist film, the setting may be super-clear: a bank. Nevertheless, there are many stories that require more time and effort than, “Fade in. It was a typical day at the bank...”

Some genres, like science fiction and fantasy, take place in an unfamiliar world that has to be established before you can delve into your story. This can be particularly challenging in a pitch. If it takes you ten minutes to describe the setting of your story, you risk boring the listener and using up time needed for character and story. You have to think carefully about how to set up the world efficiently. What aspects of the world are critical to the story? In “Children of Men,” the fact that humans have lost the ability to reproduce is critical, as is the fact that Britain has walled itself off from the outside world. However, the slightly futuristic advances in computers or cars are irrelevant and could be skipped in that pitch. When pitching science fiction, you should give a time frame – is this ten years in the future? A hundred? Thousands? This can help you establish much of the context and you'll only need to highlight the most relevant technologies. Fantasy is harder, but if you can compare it to something we know – medieval Europe, for example – you might be able to shorthand it for the listener.

This challenge can also occur in stories that are not science fiction or fantasy. A pitch with a historical setting may require some context for the politics or customs of the era. Would you be

able to pitch the hit series “Downton Abbey” without first establishing the highly specific cultural aspects of England in the early 20th century? Even a realistic, contemporary story can have a specialized world that requires some description. If you were pitching a movie like “The Big Sick,” you might need to describe the culture of Pakistani immigrants living in the U.S.

The other thing you’ll need to do is establish the rules of any magic, supernatural elements, or speculative technology. If you fail to clearly delineate what can and can’t be done in the world you’re attempting to portray, you risk confusing your listener or looking like you are making things up as you go along. For example, Harry Potter can perform numerous magical feats, but the filmmakers establish that this is what a wizard does and that they need a special wand to do it. Rules. Sometimes, if there’s only one unusual thing or rule in your story, it can be revealed in the course of the story. For example, in the science fiction/horror film “The Fly,” you could describe the rules of the teleportation devices when you explain how the hero invented them. However, if your world depends on these elements, you may need to address them up front. This applies not just to science fiction and fantasy, but also to supernatural horror, superhero movies, and other stories with these elements. Set up only the rules that will become dramatically necessary or relevant in your story. Be specific and clear.

Fortunately, our heist movie doesn’t require the establishment of a specialized world. However, it’s possible some of the plot twists could depend on the listener understanding the way bank security works or the unique physical or medical challenges of a person who is paralyzed. In the case of our sample story, it should be possible to add this information as it comes up in the body of the pitch. Indeed, conveying this information up front in our pitch might tip our hand and ruin a surprise in the story. And it may even be better for the listener to learn this information at the same time as the lead character. This is typical of the reasoning you must apply when deciding how to handle unique worlds or special rules in the world you are portraying.