

Key Elements of a Backstory

Goal: Create characters whose past actively shapes their present choices.

1. Backstory exists to explain behavior:

If it doesn't affect decisions, it's just trivia.

2. Focus on wounds, not timelines:

One emotional scar is more powerful than ten events.

3. Identify the “before and after” moment:

What happened that changed how this character sees the world?

4. Give them a false belief:

What did they learn that *isn't true*, but feels true?

5. Include one unresolved relationship:

Someone they failed, lost, or wronged.

6. Add a skill they learned the hard way:

Competence earned through pain feels real.

7. Decide what they won't talk about:

Silence is as important as memory.

8. Backstory should leak out under pressure:

Don't dump it—*trigger* it.

9. Let backstory evolve:

As the character grows, their interpretation of the past should change.

TAKEAWAY:

Backstory isn't about where a character came from—it's about what they're still carrying.

GAMER-SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

- **Backstory explains behavior**

Game example:

The rogue steals food, not gold → childhood famine.

- **False belief**

Game example:

“Authority always betrays you.”
That belief drives party conflict.

- **Unresolved relationship**

Game example:

A mentor who disappeared—or became a villain.

- **Backstory leaks under pressure**

Game example:

The paladin freezes when civilians are threatened—not monsters.

- **Silence matters**

Game example:

A character refuses to enter temples but won’t explain why.

Character Backstory Worksheet (Writer + RPG Version)

Purpose: Create a backstory that actively shapes choices, flaws, and growth.

A. Core Identity

- Character Name:
- Role (story) / Class & Race (RPG):
- Age:
- Occupation or Function in the World:

B. The Defining Past Event

- What happened?
- How old were they when it happened?
- Who was involved?
- Why does it still matter?

C. The Wound

- What did this event *cost* them emotionally?
- What fear did it create?
- What do they avoid because of it?

D. The False Belief

- What do they believe about the world because of this event?
- How does this belief protect them?
- How does it limit them?

E. Coping & Behavior

- How do they cope when stressed?
- What habit or flaw developed because of the wound?
- What line will they not cross?

F. Relationships

- One unresolved relationship from the past:
- Someone they trust too much—or not at all:

G. Secrets

- What do they never talk about?
- What would break them if revealed?

H. Growth Potential

- What would healing look like?
- What belief would need to change?

GM Tip: Choose 1–2 elements you plan to challenge during play.

Writer Tip: Let backstory emerge under pressure, not in exposition.

20 Backstory Wounds Prompts

Use one or combine two. Wounds should **explain behavior**, not decorate it.

1. They survived something no one else did.
2. They were believed once—and were wrong.
3. They failed someone who trusted them.
4. They were praised for something that hurt others.
5. They learned love is conditional.
6. They were blamed for something they didn't do.
7. They were protected too much.
8. They were never protected at all.
9. They chose wrong—and paid for it.
10. They spoke up once and regretted it.
11. They were abandoned at a critical moment.
12. They broke a promise they can't forgive themselves for.

- 13.They learned power equals safety.
- 14.They learned silence equals survival.
- 15.They lost a home, not just a place.
- 16.They were trusted with something they weren't ready for.
- 17.They were used as a symbol, not a person.
- 18.They were loved for who they pretended to be.
- 19.They were forced to grow up too fast.
- 20.They remember something everyone else forgot.

Prompt Extension:

- How does this wound show up under stress?
- What decision does it push them toward?

“False Belief” Generator

False beliefs are survival logic that no longer works.

Step 1: Choose a Category

- Trust
- Power
- Love
- Safety
- Worth
- Authority

Step 2: Pick or Roll a Belief

- Trust must be earned endlessly.
- Power is the only protection.
- Love always comes with a cost.
- If I relax, something bad will happen.
- I must be useful to be valued.
- Authority always betrays you.

Step 3: Define the Origin

- What event taught them this?
- Who reinforced it?

Step 4: Define the Cost

- What does this belief prevent them from doing?
- Who does it hurt?

Step 5: Define the Challenge

- What situation would force this belief to be questioned?

Story Rule: Growth happens when the belief fails them.