



# Backstory Cards Techniques Guide

## Instructions

*Backstory Cards* helps a group of disconnected PCs forge tight, compelling ties to each other and to key setting elements. From adventuring chums to political rivals, *Backstory Cards* makes any group come to life!

**Using *Backstory Cards*:** First, come up with PCs. Then fill out the setting grid with interesting elements in your game world. The players each answer a couple of prompts, and the GM works with those answers. Voila! Detailed backstories!

**The Setting Grid:** The setting grid is a list of noteworthy individuals, groups, places, and events in the game world that the PCs could be connected to. The GM or the group together writes down one to three entries for each category. Once the characters and setting grid are ready, it's time to create some backstory! For much more on making and using setting grids, see page 2.

**Tip Cards:** These three cards will be handy to have out while using *Backstory Cards*—GM Tips/Prompt Card Anatomy, Player Tips/Arrow Diagram, and List of Tags. The player and GM tips are also on page 2.

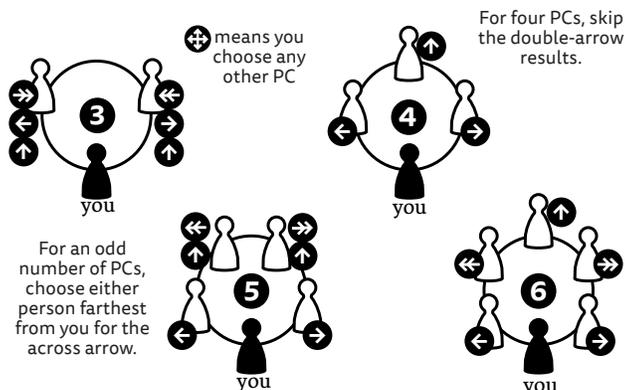
**Answering Prompts:** One at a time, each player draws a card, reads the prompt, then fills in the prompt callouts by drawing other cards.

To determine other PCs, draw the next card. The arrows in the lower-right corner tell you which PC fits in the blank. See the Arrow Diagrams for details.

To determine setting elements, draw the next card. The number on the bottom correlates to a space on the setting grid. If that slot is empty, work with the GM to fill it in or draw another card.

With the prompt filled out, read it and answer the questions. If it involves another PC, work with that player to come up with answers. If the prompt inspires ideas that don't directly answer the question but are related to the prompt, describe those as well.

**End of Prompt:** Discard all the cards you drew, and proceed with the next player. Once everyone has answered one prompt, do another round of prompts.



**Discarding Cards:** If you or the GM thinks a prompt doesn't work for the game, or one of the elements drawn to fill in a prompt doesn't work, draw another card to determine the element. The decision to redraw should be made jointly by the GM and player, in case one has an idea the other isn't seeing.

**Tags:** The lower-left corner of each card lists its tags. Tags give you a quick indication of what sort of prompt you drew, so you can discard and redraw at a glance, either because you're not interested or there's already enough of that type.

Some prompts have multiple tags. Others have a slash ("/") in the listing, meaning the card could go one way or another, which could influence how you choose to answer it.

See page 4 for a list of tags, as well as what each one means and more on using them.

**Using with Fate:** *Backstory Cards* is a great tool for *Fate Core System* and *Fate Accelerated Edition*. For *Fate Core*, replace the two "crossing paths" phases with two rounds of *Backstory Cards*, then make aspects from any moments involving your character. For *Fate Accelerated*, use *Backstory Cards* for your fourth and fifth aspects.

**Sheets and Techniques:** Download the Setting Grid sheet and Techniques Guide, as well as view demo videos, at [BackstoryCards.com](http://BackstoryCards.com).

## ASSUMED TERMS

*Backstory Cards* uses typical roleplaying shorthand, mainly to fit information on the cards. These terms include:

- ▶ **PC:** player character, the protagonists that the individual players will play.
- ▶ **NPC:** non-player character, the supporting cast in the game world.
- ▶ **GM:** the game master/moderator, who runs the game for the players (for games without a GM, this would be a facilitator). The GM guides the *Backstory* process and asks follow-up questions.
- ▶ **Player:** a person playing a PC; the participants who aren't the GM. Players will be doing most, if not all, of the prompt answering.

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Parts of this work are based on *Fate Core System* and *Fate Accelerated Edition* (found at [www.faterpg.com](http://www.faterpg.com)), products of Evil Hat Productions, LLC, developed, authored, and edited by Leonard Balsera, Brian Engard, Jeremy Keller, Ryan Macklin, Mike Olson, Clark Valentine, Amanda Valentine, Fred Hicks, and Rob Donoghue, and licensed for our use under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license ([www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0](http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)).

## Essential Tips

Here are some common tips for players and GMs to enhance your *Backstory Cards* experience. You can find these on the aid cards in the core deck.

### Player Tips

- ▶ For prompts with other PCs, talk it over with their players.
- ▶ Help those who are struggling, if they ask for it.
- ▶ Answer related questions the card doesn't directly ask.
- ▶ Keep your answers short. Let more details come out in play.
- ▶ Write important things down so you can build on them later.
- ▶ Be respectful of the rest of the group. Retract any elements that make anyone uncomfortable.

### GM Tips

- ▶ Ask follow-up questions.
- ▶ Help those who are struggling, if they ask for it.
- ▶ Discard prompts that don't fit.
- ▶ Directly fill in blanks when you have specific ideas.
- ▶ Write important things down so you can build on them later.
- ▶ Remember that you're playing, too! Work with players on setting elements.
- ▶ Be respectful of the rest of the group. Retract any elements that make anyone uncomfortable.

## Setting Up the Setting Grid

Along with the PCs, the **setting grid**—the collection of NPCs, groups, places, and events—is key to making *Backstory Cards* work. When you're creating a setting grid (whether you're the GM or the entire group), these suggestions will help you make a good one.

BACKSTORY CARDS SETTING GRID				
	INDIVIDUAL	GROUP	PLACE	EVENT
1				
2				
3				

Download blank and pre-made setting grids at [BackstoryCards.com](https://BackstoryCards.com)

## Read the Pre-Made Setting Grids

First, visit [BackstoryCards.com](https://BackstoryCards.com) and take a look at the pre-made setting grids. These setting grids showcase how to make effective elements for different genres and assumptions. The notes that accompany each setting grid explain some of the decisions we made in choosing those elements.

You can use those setting grids right away, grab the pieces you want for your own, or just read the notes to get a sense of what we were thinking when making these from scratch.

## Making Elements

The four core setting element types come with various things to think about.

**INDIVIDUALS** are people (or whatever exists in your game world) that the PCs can interact with and who could have some impact on the PCs' lives. These can be peers or people who are significantly higher or lower in status. They may be clearly friends or foes, though *Backstory Cards* can blur those lines. Or they might be characters that the group doesn't really know yet.

When writing down individuals, write only enough to convey the concept. A name or title, a role, and so on are typically enough, so long as everyone around the table isn't confused about this character. *Col. Jack Cranston*, *Mika Rydel: Covert Assassin*, *Battlemaster the Vigilante Superhero*, and *The woman from the flower shop on 57th* could be enough, depending on your needs. You could even establish individuals who already have direct connections to a PC—like a brother, mother, or husband—provided that such a character could be connected to everyone else.

**GROUPS** are collections of people who, like individuals, can interact with the PCs and could have an impact on the PCs' lives. They can be of any size or scope needed, from *Those thugs around the corner* to *The CIA*. These groups could also be hard-line allies or threats to the PCs, though the lines may blur just as with individuals.

As with individuals, write just enough to convey the general concept. And as with all elements, the concept may evolve as players answer prompts involving them. *Those thugs around the corner* could become *Battlemaster's underground 'Violence Acolytes'*, thanks to a prompt like "You found out the hard way that that **INDIVIDUAL** and **GROUP** are connected. How did you get out of that situation?" Likewise, a large group might whittle down into something smaller in scope, such as *The CIA* becoming *The CIA's Houston office* after a prompt involving the CIA and an event like *The botched Houston job*.

**EVENTS** are points in the timeline where something of interest happened, which is a broad definition. They could be missions or similar, like *The botched Houston job* or *The party's first adventure together*. They could be social events that are part of the overall game world, like *The election* or *Senior Prom*. Anything newsworthy works, like *When the hurricane hit* or *During that killer's spree*. They could be small in time, like *The seven-minute solar eclipse last year* or as vast as *When we were all trapped in prehistory*.

The events you write down say much about your game, because they're the framework for your setting's and characters' history. A military or spy game might have two missions and a third event of *During basic training*. A game heavy with intrigue would have events caused by shadowy forces, such as assassinations (or attempts) or heists, as well as points in time where many such forces have conflicting interests—a prince's birthday gala, for example. One set in a single city or other region could easily incorporate an event whose scope is far beyond the characters and groups in the setting and is instead something they had to react to, like *When the hurricane hit*.

**PLACES** are backdrops where PCs might have action or intrigue moments, that different people could have conflicting stakes in, or otherwise points where multiple interesting things can happen. They could be as small as *Ken's basement library* or as vast as *The Solar System*, varying in scale as much as groups can. Smaller ones will tend toward more intimate or cloistered situations, and larger ones can illustrate how big the play space of your setting is.

Some of these might even showcase the weirdness in your setting. One where dream technology is prevalent could involve *Fred's nightmares* as a place. One with characters who aren't just corporeal beings could have *The realm of the dead* (for ghosts) or *The Net-Grid* (for those who also exist as data). And even there, you could have one or two locations in whatever constitutes the normal world and the rest in the other world, if characters tend to switch frequently back and forth.

## Don't Assume Too Much

The relationships between the PCs and the setting elements will come up in the Backstory process. (See Understanding the Relationships You're Building on page 7.) It's great to make elements with a vague idea of how they might be used, but you'll probably find that the players and the process surprise you. Did you write up someone to be a nemesis for the players? They might draw prompts and give answers that sound more like allies, or give them complicated pasts rather than the simple one you expected.

If you assume too much about how the relationships will shake out, you're working against the Backstory process. This leads to another important thing to know: **If you want to keep a setting element from being changed in the Backstory process, don't put it on the setting grid.** Otherwise, be prepared to revise your ideas for the game.

## Know the Genre

The genre you're going to play in should tell you what sort of material to work with. Here are three examples.

**Noir:** Having corrupt cops, politicians, thugs, fatales, or victims as individual NPCs and groups is important, because noir centers around a dirty cast. Events dealing with political or social turmoil (like an election or a union strike) work alongside events that scar the setting (like a massive fire or riot). Good

places include bars or other common areas, shady districts where only those up to no good would go, and any location closely linked to a group or place.

You can use this structure for cyberpunk stories, dark fantasy intrigue, and so on.

**Pulp:** Potential nemeses or foils work great as individual NPCs (when they're iconic characters) or groups (when they're a vile organization). Places should be grandiose (like Atlantis or Deep in the Hollow Earth) or personal to the characters (like London, if the group is from there). Pull events from the PCs' past exploits and shared background.

Naturally, these guidelines fit anything where high adventure is the order of the day, like in many fantasy games.

**Mystery:** The trick with mysteries is that you don't want to give much away. So individuals and groups should be *potential* forces that are interested in either the PCs or the mystery—forces that the PCs would know about in the game's onset. Places need some importance to the PCs prior to their being involved in the mystery, since the Backstory process covers the past before the game gets going. Events could be the trickiest part of this, because you might be inclined to make them all about foreshadowing the mystery... but also look at personal events in the PCs' shared lives, and use that as event inspiration.

With a few minutes of thought, you should be able to come up with similar ideas for whatever genre you're bringing to life.

## PCs First, or Setting Grid First?

This is a chicken-and-egg problem. If you have the PCs first, you can use them for some of the setting materials—individuals and groups in their histories, along with places and events important to them individually or as a group. On the other hand, if you have a setting grid ready when characters are being created, *Backstory Cards* goes a bit faster.

If you're starting a campaign at home, have the group come up with enough details about their PCs so everyone knows the sort of roles and stories you're going to play out, then use that to inform your setting grid. Depending on the system you're using and how you like to play, that could mean writing down a couple sentences about your characters, or doing full character creation.

If you're playing a one-shot or a convention game, start by making a setting grid before making characters. See Using *Backstory Cards* in Convention Games on page 9 for more on this.

## Elements Are Starting Points

Over the course of your game, some elements you come up with could drop in importance—like *Harry's Diner* stops mattering once your campaign moves to another continent. Groups could shift dramatically in size and scope, like if you discover that *Those thugs around the corner* really *are* part of *The CIA*. Individuals could be killed or retire, or turn from friend to foe and vice versa. Whatever answers you all come

up with in the *Backstory Cards* process, always remember that the setting elements will shift and change based on how your story plays out.

## Advanced Setting Grid Tricks

Once you've got a sense of how to make a strong setting grid, here are some ways that you can tweak the process.

### Using More or Fewer Than Three Elements in a Category:

The baseline of three elements is a balance between variety and connection; too many and you'll rarely get two prompts hitting the same element, but too few and the story will start to feel contrived. That said, if there's an element type in your setting that you want more variety at the expense of connection, hack your setting grid to add one or even two more. Likewise, if you want to force connection at the risk of making the story seem too contrived, drop the number of elements in a category down to two or even one (like having one single group that is always the group referenced in a prompt).

It's up to you to make the randomization work for that element.

**Leaving Blanks:** Some people like to leave blanks on the grid that players have to fill in when those are selected. This is great if you have players who are strong collaborators and who already have enough details about their characters and the world to be able to fill in the sheet with confidence and success.

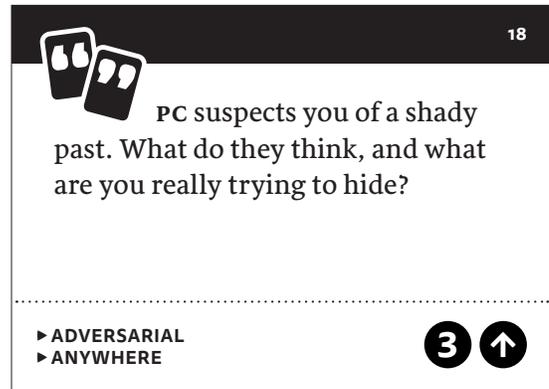
Some people even like to play with just a blank setting grid. That's a cool idea, though it does mean that if an early prompt is an Anywhere or Open type, there isn't much on the sheet to draw upon.

**Contextual Entries:** Akin to the blanks method, sometimes having a general idea rather than a specific one works wonders for a setting grid. (You see this in some of the setting grids we have online.) Having entries like *A love interest* or *A rival* for individuals, *These people hate you* for a group, or *Solemn space* for a place give just enough detail to know what the GM is looking for, but with room for the player to fill in the details. Once it's filled in, rewrite that element—if it comes up in future prompts, use the specific element the earlier player made.

Note that many of those contextual entries already assume a relationship. That can create some interesting juxtaposition with whatever prompts and answers involve those elements. See *Understand the Relationships You're Building* on page 7 for more.

## Prompt Tags

Every Backstory prompt card has one or more **tags** listed in the lower-left area of the card. These labels quickly indicate what sort of relationship your characters will forge with others or what sort of tone the prompt pushes for. Use these tags to filter the prompts as you draw them; see *Filtering Prompts by Tag* on page 5.



## List of Core Tags

The following list covers all of the tags in the core deck.

**Co-op:** This prompt ties the character to another PC in a way that makes them both competent. Specifically, the person answering the prompt talks about how another PC is amazing, which not only ties the PCs together but also highlights something about the included PC that the answering player wants to see happen in the game.

**Drama:** This prompt generates dramatic history or complex tension between the character and another PC. Romance, competition, friendship, and responsibility are among the sort of prompts with this tag. Note: sometimes these prompts can lead to adversarial answers, and in fact some are tagged as "Adversarial/Drama;" see *Dual Tags* on page 5.

**Adversarial:** This prompt puts the character and another PC at odds with each other at some point in their shared past. This can be the hardest type of prompt to use! See *Playing with Adversity* on page 5.

**Solo:** This prompt doesn't directly tie the character to another PC, but instead focuses on tying the character to one or more setting elements. These exist to give characters their own agendas and issues with the world that don't involve a PC relationship. (But just as you can involve different setting elements into your answers beyond the ones called for, you can also include another PC in your answer if you like.)

**Anywhere:** This prompt doesn't include a specific call for a setting element. We recommend that you still incorporate one of your choosing, when possible, but that's up to the person answering the prompt (with GM and player recommendations as appropriate).

**Open:** This prompt ties to another PC, but it's left open to the player answering to choose which PC. While most prompts describe events that happen, these prompts ask about opinions or personal feelings first, and then ask you to fill in with some particular detail. These prompts are also considered Anywhere prompts (above), in that they don't call for a specific setting element—which means you can include setting elements in your elaboration as needed.

**Everyone:** Every player answers this prompt, reflecting either a group moment or a separate-but-shared history. Fill in the prompt before anyone answers, so that all players are answering the exact same thing. The player who drew it can decide if they want to answer first or last. Once everyone has given an answer, the player who drew this goes again—otherwise, they get fewer turns that are specific to them than the rest of the players.

**Everyone–Together:** As an Everyone prompt, but the players come up with a single answer together.

In addition to these tags, the expansions introduce their own tags revolving around specific themes. You can find a full list of tags, from the core set and all the expansions, at [BackstoryCards.com](http://BackstoryCards.com).

## Filtering Prompts by Tag

The tags exist to frame your thinking when answering the prompt and to provide a way to filter out cards with prompts you and the rest of the group aren't interested in. There are two common ways to filter out prompts: complete and situational.

When doing a complete filter, you immediately redraw a prompt card if that tag comes up. It's that simple. However, don't remove those cards from your deck, because that will alter the distribution of setting grid numbers and PC arrows (unless you're using *Backstory Cards* dice or some other way of randomly determining setting elements and PCs).

The situational filter has to do with the sort of prompts that have already been answered. For example, if a character already has an adversarial relationship with another PC, drawing a second Adversarial card might alienate that character from the rest of the group. Or if a player drew a Solo card during the first round for their character and no one else has a relationship with them, drawing a second Solo card could result in a character who's unattached to the core story. Some people like playing “without a net,” and others start filtering out as prompts are answered to ensure that they get the basic sort of party dynamic for the game that the players are looking for.

A somewhat advanced form of filtering doesn't cause redrawing, but instead tells you which random elements to reroll. For instance, you might draw an Adversarial prompt, and the GM could say “That's fine, but not with Maria. She already has one. You can have one with Judy or Carlos.”

## Dual Tags

Some tags combine two types with a slash, notably “Adversarial/Drama.” These signal that the prompt can quite easily go in either of two directions. When you're answering these, know which way you want to go. You might even start your answer with “This is a Drama answer.”

If you're filtering out a particular tag and you come across a dual-tag prompt, make it clear that the prompt shouldn't be answered in the way that's being filtered out.

## Playing with Adversity

PCs with an Adversarial prompt aren't required to have an antagonistic relationship when the game starts; in those cases, the prior adversity could reflect a time before the characters *really* knew each other or were forced to work together. Likewise, it's possible that the event described in the answer is the beginning of distrust and animosity entering the relationship.

If you're playing a game with intrigue, politics, and other themes that put characters of differing agendas together and give them reasons to work together despite animosity, having relationships dominated by Adversarial prompts can work great!

However, if you're playing in a game that's focused on common heroism and camaraderie, purely antagonistic relationships will get in the way... but that doesn't mean you need to throw out the Adversarial cards. Having a relationship defined by an Adversarial card and then a Co-op card creates rich layers of history and subtext to those characters' interactions. If, at the end of the Backstory process, there are PC relationships that will cause problems in the game, either ask them if they can come up with why their characters have moved on from their past (whether permanently or temporarily), or draw a Co-op card for those characters if they're having problems coming up with an answer.

Of course, you can also filter out Adversarial prompts and sidestep this issue entirely. Or allow them initially, and filter them out if they come up a second time for a given PC.

## Using Prompts to Their Fullest Potential

The open-ended nature of the prompts means that you have many different ways to address and use them.

## Go with the Obvious

You'll often have an obvious idea come to mind when you read a prompt, especially after you've done a round of answering prompts already. Use that! The obvious answer is a great starting point, and it's one of the best tools you have when creating interesting facts on the fly. Humor often starts with something obvious, and then you add something absurd or tilted to it. Likewise, serious moments frequently emerge because of something the audience sees coming, but they don't know exactly how the characters will *react* to it.

Many people try to avoid the obvious answer (or the first answer that comes to mind) because it seemed so effortless that it won't actually be interesting. If anyone in the group expresses that feeling, encourage them to express the idea—it might be the idea others love.

## Use Your Bad Ideas

Of course, if an idea has some problems, it's still easier to make a second idea come alive if you state the first one rather than just hold it in. No one who's awesome will mock a bad idea for being said, because we all have those from time to time.

More to the point, it's likely that your idea isn't actually all that bad. Most of us are our own worst critics, and we overanalyze what we're going to share with others. Don't kill an idea before it's had a chance to flourish.

If nothing else, it can be both amusing and illuminating to say, "Okay, this is a bad idea, but it just came into my head..." Amusing for the obvious reasons, but also illuminating because it shows your own thought process, and when the players have a good sense of how each other thinks, they're well on their way to jelling as a cohesive group.

## Workshop with the Group

*Backstory Cards* is a collaborative process. Your prompts involve other players' characters and elements that the GM controls, so you're never talking only about your character. That means two things: you're always impacting someone else's play with your answers, and they have a vested interest in helping you come up with entertaining and intriguing story elements that make everyone want to jump right into playing.

If you have what feels like half of an idea, put it out there. "I have this concept of my character being a secret gunrunner for *British Intelligence*, and that's clearly how he got into trouble and captured by enemy forces. Only, I don't know how to get out of that?"

## Be Aware of Emerging Relationships

As you come up with story beats, you're also creating relationship dynamics between your character and the rest of the group and world. You're putting in more data about how your character thinks of other people and vice versa, and your collective answers will dramatically enrich character interaction scenes.

Consider if a PC has only rival-oriented answers with the rest of the PC group. If you're playing as that PC, you'll feel alienated, and maybe even have a stronger bond with NPCs than with any of the other PCs. For some drama-heavy games, this is great! For globe-hopping adventure, that could be a drawback. So if you're starting to feel like you're getting alienated (or too integrated!) based on the character relationships, point that out—and either revise some answers, or add some more to the backstory that shows more depth to the relationships.

Likewise, if you have a friendly relationship with an individual NPC and another PC has an antagonistic one, that

NPC suddenly seems much more evocative than if they had only an antagonistic relationship with the PCs. (Though sometimes that's *exactly* what you want, such as a classic pulp villain plot.)

You get the most out of *Backstory Cards* when it creates these relationship dynamics, so watch for how they take shape.

## Refute with Style

Many prompts lead with an assumption. This is partly due to the small amount of space on the card, and partly to shape your thinking as you're coming up with ideas. However, you know your characters and game better than a bunch of cards do! That means you'll get some prompts that are *almost* right, but not quite, and you have to refute part of the prompt's assumptions to make it work.

Consider this prompt: "**GROUP** sent people to capture or kill you and PC. How did you help each other escape? Are you still hunted?" Depending on what setting elements you draw, maybe it doesn't make sense that you both escaped, but there's still an interesting story beat to explore. Instead of dismissing the prompt because it doesn't strictly work as worded, **refute** it with style. Some example refuting answers:

- ▶ "I helped my friend escape, yes, but inches from freedom, they caught me."
- ▶ "I didn't escape. They interrogated me for days, and then just let me go with no explanation, just dumped me on a random street in Dayton. I still don't know why they let me go like that."
- ▶ "Escape? I'm still working for these bastards. But I dream..."
- ▶ "Thing is, though I tell everyone I escaped, I really cut a deal. They let me go, and my old partner swung for it."

All of these push that character's story forward and use the story beat from the prompt while not buying into the prompt's heroic or competent assumption.

## Using Follow-Up Questions

The prompts are designed to leave holes in the various situations they propose. The main reason for this is because *Backstory Cards* wants everyone to think about the characters' present and how past actions and events impact that, so the prompts usually point toward the present (or at least the later part of a story beat). GMs, you get to determine the events and circumstances that got the characters into whatever situation the prompt says, as well as any aftermath based on how the players answered those prompts.

That leaves a lot of room for follow-up questions. Part of your job when GMing or facilitating the *Backstory* process is to ask directly related questions, particularly when an answer sounds interesting but it isn't clear how that character moment integrates into the story you're all building together.

Consider this prompt: “You and PC used to spend time together at PLACE. What memento do you each keep from that time in your lives?” Some follow-up questions include:

- ▶ *What did you two do at that place?*
- ▶ *The prompt says “used to.” What changed? How do you feel about that?*
- ▶ *Why that memento?*
- ▶ *If the memento seems odd, how did it come into your possession? Who covets that trinket today?*
- ▶ *Do you keep this as a reminder of good times, or as a reminder of a past you don’t want to repeat? Or maybe its meaning has faded over time, and it’s just an object in your home or office that you rarely think about?*

Depending on what the answer is to the initial prompt, there are a variety of directions you can go. But even with a host of potential questions, limit yourself to one or two per card; otherwise, you’ll exhaust each other before you’re done with the process, and you’ll leave less room to come up with interesting answers in later cards as well as in play.

## Your Emerging Chronology

One of the most natural tendencies that we have when creating an interweaving story is to assume that the first story beat we come up with is the first thing to happen on our imaginary timeline, with the second beat being the next thing, the third following that, and so on. That’s fine much of the time, and can even provide some inspiration if used intentionally as a constraint, but like any good universal tool, it isn’t always the right way to go.

There are four particular times when the whole group might want to examine when in the timeline the story beat from a given prompt happens:

- ▶ *When it creates drama or antagonism between two forces (PCs, individual NPCs, or groups)*
- ▶ *When it causes a catastrophic change to any setting element (like a place being blown up)*
- ▶ *When the prompt seems like it would dovetail well with another event on the setting grid—whether that’s during, the cause of, or a result of that event*
- ▶ *When you have a really cool answer for the prompt, and everyone else likes the answer, but you can’t figure out how it works (in those cases, “distant past” or even “years from now” can be good choices, though the second one is harder to pull off unless you’re intentionally playing with a long timeline).*

## Understand the Relationships You’re Building

*Backstory Cards* creates relationships for PCs with each other and the setting elements. The sorts of prompts and answers push those relationships in particular directions, so it’s important to know how relationships emerge in this process.

If a character and a setting element never came up together in a prompt, then they have **no relationship**, an **undefined relationship**, or a **weak relationship**. Those characters or elements that came together in one prompt have a **partially defined relationship**. Those that came together in two or more prompts have either a **focused relationship** or a **complex relationship**.

Therein lies some of the magic of *Backstory Cards*: it forges all sorts of different connections in a single session. Here’s more on these relationships and how answers will impact scenes in play.

**No Relationship:** The two elements definitely have no history or current connection with each other. That might change over the course of the game, which means that initial encounters will be new, novel moments (though likely colored by whatever other relationships are in play during that encounter).

**Undefined Relationship:** The two elements probably have some history or current connection with each other, but we haven’t seen it in play yet. Unlike an initial encounter with no relationship, the first time we see these elements together we’ll see something implied about the relationship come to the surface.

**Weak Relationship:** There’s some relationship between the two elements primarily because of a third element that’s strongly connected to them. This could be a person tangentially connected to a group because they’re connected to another PC that’s intertwined with that group. It could be an NPC who has some small impact on an event because they had a strong impact on a PC before that PC was involved in the event. Whatever this weak connection entails will color any encounters that happen. As with the two above, though, that’s just the starting point for forming a genuine relationship.

**Partially Defined Relationship:** When there’s only one prompt directly tying two elements together—whether it’s two PCs, a PC and an element on the setting grid, or two elements on the setting grid—that’s a strong start to a relationship. But that’s just one moment in the relationship. It’s only partially defined because we haven’t seen what other moments exist for those elements, and whether the answer to that prompt is typical or unusual for those two elements together (which we’ll see in play).

**Focused Relationship:** When multiple prompts tie two elements together, and they generally state or imply the same tone between those elements, then that’s a focused relationship. We can expect the first interaction we see in play to follow those answers; in fact, if we see a very different relationship immediately emerge, that would be jarring because we haven’t

seen why that defined relationship suddenly changed. (There's certainly room for a focused relationship to change in play, though—don't feel like you're permanently pegged because of a few answers you gave in the first session of a campaign.)

**Complex Relationship:** When multiple prompts tie two elements together, but with rather different stated or implied tones to that relationship, that's a complex relationship. We never know what to expect when we see those two elements on stage. The classic example is having a PC connected to an NPC who was once a mentor and is now a hated enemy, or an assassin turned lover, etc. As play progresses, the relationship might become focused to just one facet, or might continue to bounce back and forth between different tones.

## Other Uses for Backstory Cards

While the most common use for *Backstory Cards* involves a few people playing a GM-run roleplaying game and sitting together to use the cards, that's not the only way to use this!

### Inserting an NPC

If there are only one or two PCs for the game, *Backstory Cards* won't necessarily work as well. One way to solve that is to choose some potential NPCs and have the GM pull prompts for them; count them as PCs for filling in the prompts. (There's similar advice on page 44 of *Fate Core System*, for doing the phase trio with fewer than three PCs.) If you use this method, don't also include them as individuals on the setting grid. How you as the GM use this depends on whether these NPCs will become allies, friends, or mentors. (You can also make this work for rivals, outright villains, etc., but usually those are better off left as individual NPCs on the setting grid.) Going in, know and communicate the intended direction to your players. Come up with roughly the same amount of detail for those NPCs as the players have for their PCs. And have a plan for using those NPCs in the game, likely one that involves changing the NPCs' status in the world. Some strong options:

- ▶ *NPC dies at the beginning of the scenario*
- ▶ *NPC is kidnapped or mysteriously disappears*
- ▶ *NPC turns renegade or otherwise unexpectedly becomes an antagonist*
- ▶ *NPC retires from the sort of life the characters lead, and the PCs effectively inherit their nemeses and problems*

(Notably not in that list: playing that NPC as if it was a PC. Even though you're using the rules for a PC in backstory creation, that's simply a different way of using the tool to make the PCs interesting and bonded to the world.)

Curate the prompts closely. If the NPC needs to not be an antagonist during backstory creation, discard Adversarial cards that come up (or have them point to the other PC only). Focus the follow-up questions on the past—recent and distant—rather

than touching on present action. If you plan to change the NPC's status once the game begins (like making someone who was a mentor become the villain), implying or stating what's going on when the game starts can work against that.

## For Pre-Generated Characters

It's possible to use *Backstory Cards* for pre-generated characters, with four broad methods. Regardless of what method you as the GM use, you need a setting grid—which shouldn't be a problem if you're preparing an entire scenario that the characters are intended for. (In fact, you might create a shorter setting grid as described on page 4.)

First, if you can provide enough information about the characters to the players in a way that lets the players absorb the information quickly and easily, you can then use *Backstory Cards* as normal. This is one of the hardest ways to make a backstory, though, because the players are playing with less internalized knowledge than they'd normally need to make *Backstory Cards* sing. And it'll likely require more discarding and curating because you'll need to find prompts that offer immediate inspiration for characters the players aren't that familiar with and discard prompts that don't work for your prepared scenario.

Second, you can pre-draw the prompts and write them down, so that you know what you're going to ask the players immediately rather than leaving it to chance. You'll still have to feed the players enough information to make an interesting choice, but at least you know ahead of time what's going on. If you're planning to run this for a group of people and you know they're quick thinkers, this can be a fine option.

Third, take the pre-draw method and come up with two or three options for each prompt, effectively turning it into a multiple-choice question rather than a fill-in. Both choices will provide insight for the character's direction, and because this is text the players are forced to engage with rather than passively absorb, you're likely to find that even pre-made choices create lively characters in play.

Finally, you can fill out the answers in their entirety, making a character backstory for the players to read. This is popular with court LARPs where people are playing a cast of NPCs with whom the PCs interact, each one having a detailed background. This is also a feature of freeform games, where those running the game are expected to provide some character details. Because of how the prompts force you to think and pace making the backstory, you can use that structure in your write-ups to highlight the important information: current relationships, shared moments, and so on.

## GM-Less Games

Though many GM-less games already have character integration rules and techniques, you can still use *Backstory Cards* with most of them to add an additional layer of interweaving narrative. The most ideal time depends on the game, but usually it's after you've done the game's normal character creation and world creation process.

## Even More Uses!

Some people have said that they're going to use *Backstory Cards* as part of creative writing projects. Others are finding ways to use it just for their own characters, rather than as part of a group activity. Perhaps you'll find a use for *Backstory Cards* that we didn't think of!

## Using Backstory Cards in Convention Games

*Backstory Cards* is a great way to inject some player buy-in into convention games and various one-shots. Using them in a constrained, time-limited environment brings up some challenges, though, so here's some short advice for GMs.

First, plan for the Backstory process to take as much as 30 minutes of your game, depending on how many players you have at the table. As you get more experience using *Backstory*

### NOTE FROM RYAN

I personally like doing *Backstory Cards* live for groups I don't know well, but I can also say from experience that sometimes it doesn't quite fire off as I'd like. So make sure that your scenario doesn't critically hinge on what happens in the Backstory part of the session.

*Cards* in this environment, you'll start to make it work faster.

Second, have a pre-made setting grid ready to go. Make your own grid or grab one from BackstoryCards.com. Decide beforehand how you're going to filter the prompt tags, if at all. Along with the pre-made setting grid, you need the other necessary materials ready—namely pre-generated or partially

generated PCs, if you're using those.

Third, while using *Backstory Cards*, be keenly aware of the pitfalls that can happen. You may well be playing with people who have never used this or a tool like it, and they may be hesitant or shy about contributing. Likewise, you might find people throwing ideas that don't work with what you have planned for the character group dynamics. Take a firm grip on the direction that the group goes.

## Pitfalls to Avoid

The *Backstory Cards* process is designed to generate story ideas that players wouldn't necessarily have thought of on their own. Sometimes that means players will have hiccups in the process. Here are the most common pitfalls and how to avoid them should they come up.

## Creative Locks: the Blank Page Syndrome

There's a certain dread that many new writers understand: the blank page, even when given direct prompts. Here are some solutions for when that happens. Whatever method you use when answering a prompt, remember that everyone at the table wants you to succeed, because it makes their play experience richer.

If you're struggling, ask for **two ideas**—and just two. If one of them works, go with that. If they both work, blend them together. If neither work, explain why... and then use that to come up with a third option. No matter what you do with those ideas, by asking for those two, you're no longer dealing with a purely blank canvas. That can be enough to get an idea off the ground.

If you know you're the sort to lock up if you go first, ask to go later in the round. By then, people will have put some ideas down that you can work with either directly (by incorporating those past answers into yours) or indirectly (by using the emerging tone as a guide for your ideas).

On the other hand, if the problem isn't a lack of ideas but having too many, **state the top two or three that came to mind**. Tell the table why they interest you, and talk it out. Not only will they help you focus on one idea, but you might also inspire ideas in your fellow players that help them flow creatively.

### NOTE FROM RYAN

One concern I've received about using *Backstory Cards* is: "I like the added structure around backstory creation, but fear it will stifle creativity." I can understand that concern, because I would have thought that a decade ago. Any creative writing teacher worth your time will tell you that constraints are fertile ground for creativity, and that it's the blank page that causes problems. I've used this method of integrating characters in person for years, and those games have been by and large far more successful and fun than before I used this technique.

It's a lot like when a group can't decide on dinner, then someone suggests sushi. Another person says, "No, I don't like fish. How about Nepalese?" It's easier to make decisions when reacting to stimulus than it is without. Likewise, I've seen people read a prompt and not like it, but then have a great story concept *precisely because of* that, not despite it.

## Trumping

Creative collaboration generally falters the moment one person hears someone's suggestion and blurts out with "*You know what would be even cooler?*" That dismissal cuts the other person out of the conversation, and with shyer players it can even cause them to stop offering great ideas. Along with that, trumping ideas are rarely so great that they're worth the problems that trumping causes.

Since *Backstory Cards* needs the players to riff on each other to make an amazing web of connections, this can get a little tricky. To keep from trumping, start with "Do you mind if I build on that?" or some other welcoming question. If it's okay, state your idea, then follow that up with "Does that work for you? We don't have to use it." Finally, if they use it, have them remix your idea into theirs.

If it turns out that your idea doesn't really fit or this isn't a good time to push for your own creation, remember that you'll have plenty of time to work ideas into the game, not only in the Backstory process but also in play! And your idea might find a better home elsewhere, whether it's in this game or a future one.

GMs, keep an eye on trumping. Rein in trumppers as best you can when it seems like someone's getting silenced. If you can do so without spoiling the trumper's sense of fun and shutting them out, so much the better. This isn't an easy skill to learn, but as you master it, it will be useful in other gaming experiences.

## Problematic Subjects

One thing that can come up in any game or activity with free narration is describing something that makes others at the table (including the GM) uncomfortable. Remember that you're all working together to make the game fun for everyone, so it's everyone's responsibility to not be dismissive of or hostile to

another person's needs.

That said, accidents happen—but they can be fixed! First, if there's something that you definitely don't want to see, state that up front. Jot those down somewhere, so that everyone can remember them. (Note: You can also state what you *do* want to see in the game as well, to put your intent out on the table and gives others a chance to express their feelings about that.)

### NOTE FROM RYAN

When I'm GMing (especially at conventions, where we don't all know each other), I take a moment at the beginning of games to open that discussion up. I like to start with something—generally leading with “no child or pet cruelty”—so that no one else feels like they have to be the first to speak up.

Second, uncomfortable topics that weren't expected might come up in the Backstory process or in the game. Stop for a moment, say that you don't want that in a game you're participating in, and roll the story back to remove that element. Then keep going, knowing that everyone should avoid that topic.

And remember that everyone, not just the GM, can filter a prompt that could lead to such topics—or at least ask that answers to such prompts refrain from going in unwanted directions.

## Using with Fate

*Backstory Cards* is a natural fit with the Fate roleplaying system, whether you're using Fate Core, Fate Accelerated, or another version.

For Fate Core, *Backstory Cards* replaces the “crossing paths” phases of character creation. For each player, come up with your high concept, trouble, and third aspects as normal. Then come up with some of your notable skills or stunts—ones that would help other players know what to think about when talking about your character. With that, fill in the setting grid with information from the game you created and any elements introduced in the group's character aspects so far (or use a pre-made setting grid).

Once you have that, do two or three rounds of Backstory to create the shared history. Use that to decide what you want for your crossing paths aspects, and revise the rest of your characters—and even the game's aspects, should inspiration

strike. Note that you don't have to use your own answers for your aspects; if someone else gave you a great idea for an aspect in their answer that involved you, use it!

For Fate Accelerated, once every player has come up with their first couple aspects, they know their best approaches, and have a setting grid ready, do two or three rounds of Backstory and use them to come up with aspects as described above.

For other Fate games, adapt the procedures above as needed. Note that the structure is intentionally different. The Backstory process works better if you have and can communicate more information about your character, and it wants you to use everyone's answers as inspiration, not just those that came from your mouth.

## Using Backstory Cards Expansions

*Backstory Cards* expansion sets can be used in a variety of ways. The two most common methods are mixed together and side decks.

**Mixed Together:** Shuffle the expansion cards you want into the core *Backstory Cards* deck and draw from the single pile. This method gives a hint of the expansion's theme, but doesn't guarantee any of its prompts are drawn. If any player draws a second expansion prompt, consider discarding it for a general prompt.

**Side Decks:** Use the expansion as a side deck, drawn just for prompts on either the first or second round. Do the first round if you want to start off with the theme, and let your answers color the rest of the process. Do the second or later round if you want to start with something more general, and then build on that first round with the expansion's theme. Either way, draw from the main deck when filling in the prompt's PCs and setting elements.

**The Expansion's Tags:** Whether you use mixed together, side deck, or another technique, look over the expansion and keep only the tags that fit your game's conceit.

**Dual Prompts:** Some prompts in expansion decks list two setting element types together with a slash, such as **EVENT/PLACE** or **INDIVIDUAL/GROUP**. When drawing one of these, choose whichever type has been less served so far in the process; if you get **EVENT/PLACE** and have answered three prompts about places and one for events, make this prompt about an event. Then draw to determine which element in that category you'll use. If there's a tie, draw the card first and decide between the two specific elements that card points to.

A few prompts have **PC/INDIVIDUAL**, which works a little differently. For those, draw a card as normal for picking a setting element, then look at which **PC** and which **INDIVIDUAL** that card points to. Decide which one fits better.

