

A good question does half the work

How to ask players about their characters before session zero, so the answers give you something to run with.

The question "describe your family" can end with three names and the information that somebody's father was a blacksmith.

The question "who in your family could ask you for something you would not be able to refuse?" gives you a person, a relationship and a situation that may walk into the game one day.

The difference is not that the second question is more literary. It simply asks about something that can have consequences.

This document helps you put together questions for your players before session zero. Do not treat it as a list to work through point by point. Pick the few that fit your campaign, rewrite them in your own words and throw out everything you do not need.

1 Ask about things that can enter play

A weak question collects data. A good question hands you material for a decision, a relationship or a scene.

INSTEAD OF:

Where did you grow up?

ASK:

How does the place you grew up in still shape the way you see people?

The first answer can be "a small village up north". The second can give you something like this:

Everyone knew everyone. To this day I do not understand people who can live next door to each other for ten years and not know each other's names.

That is already a character.

2 A relationship beats a list of people

INSTEAD OF:

Do you have a family?

ASK:

Who in your family could make you drop everything and go home with a single letter?

or:

ALSO WEAK:

How many siblings do you have?

ASK:

Who in your family are you not speaking to, and who stopped writing first?

You do not need a family tree unless the campaign is about family. One relationship that means something gives you far more.

3 Do not ask only "what". Ask "why"

INSTEAD OF:

Do you carry anything important?

ASK:

What would you never sell, and why?

INSTEAD OF:

What are you afraid of?

ASK:

What do you do differently when you are genuinely afraid?

INSTEAD OF:

What is your secret?

ASK:

What truth about you would change the way the rest of the party looks at you?

The second version of each gives you less encyclopedia and more game.

4 Do not write the story for the player

Watch out for questions that already contain half the answer.

TOO MUCH:

Which member of the Cult of the Red Moon murdered your brother, and why do you want revenge?

BETTER:

You lost somebody and you still do not know the whole truth about what happened. Who was it?

The first version has effectively created the character for the player.

The second lets them decide what is theirs, and still leaves you room to attach the answer to your own world.

5 Ask about the present more often than about childhood

The past is interesting when it is still doing something to the person.

INSTEAD OF:

What was your childhood like?

ASK:

What did you learn as a child that you still believe is true?

INSTEAD OF:

Who taught you your trade?

ASK:

What did you learn from somebody you no longer trust?

That way the past is not an archive. It is still alive in the character.

6 Not every player wants to write

One person will answer a single question with three paragraphs. Another will write six words and have an excellent character.

Do not judge an answer by its length.

He was my brother. I am the one who told him to stay.

That can give you more than half a page of description.

If a player would rather talk than write, leave the handout partly empty and go through the questions together during session zero.

Matching questions to the campaign

The best question before session zero is often not a universal one. It comes out of the story you are about to run.

A campaign about travelling

- What are you leaving behind by setting out?
- Where did you once promise yourself you would return?
- Which place on the map do you never want to see again?
- What stops you simply turning back this time?

An investigation

- When were you last not believed, even though you were telling the truth?
- What secret can you keep even from your friends?
- Who do you trust more than you probably should?
- What would you have to find out to stop trusting somebody close to you?

Horror

Do not open with "what is your greatest fear". That usually ends with "spiders".

Try:

- What kind of situation takes away your ordinary confidence?
- What did you once see that you still cannot explain properly?
- Who are you most afraid of losing?
- What matters to you so much that it would be easy to use against you?

Politics and intrigue

- Who do you owe your current position to?
- Who thinks you were given something you did not deserve?
- What compromise have you already made and are still not proud of?
- Whose approval are you still trying to earn?

War

- Who would you risk more for than for yourself?
- What line would you not cross even under orders?
- What did you do to survive that you had not thought yourself capable of?
- Who on the other side of the conflict can you not treat as an enemy?

A city campaign

- Who has known you in this city for a long time?
- Where can you walk in without knocking?
- Who do you owe something to?
- Which street or district do you avoid, and why?

A sandbox

In a sandbox, the questions that work best are the ones that give the player their own direction.

- What are you looking for, even if the main plot never gives it to you?
 - Which place have you heard about and wanted to see for years?
 - Who could find you if you stay in one place too long?
 - What matter can you drop for a few months, but not for good?
-

Questions that tie the party together

You do not need a complicated web of relationships. It is enough that every character has at least one reason to treat somebody in the party differently from a complete stranger.

Try:

- Who in the party has already helped you once?
- Who do you owe something to?
- Who knows your family?
- Who have you worked with before?
- Who knows your secret?
- Who do you not entirely trust?
- Who did you promise to protect?
- Who reminds you of somebody from your past?

One thing matters: the answer is agreed together. Do not write a shared history into another player's character without asking them.

Following up during session zero

The best answers often appear only after the first question.

A player writes:

I have an older sister. We have not spoken for a few years.

You do not need her whole story straight away. One follow-up is enough:

DO NOT ASK FOR:

Tell me everything that happened between you.

ASK:

Who stopped writing first?

If the answer is "she did", you can ask one more:

Do you regret it?

And that is often a good place to stop. Do not pull every answer all the way to the end. Leave something for later.

Questions to avoid

"Describe your personality"

Too broad. The player will usually write a few adjectives. Ask about a specific behaviour instead.

"What is your greatest flaw?"

It sounds like a job interview. Better: what regularly complicates your life?

"Describe your whole family"

Unless family is the central theme of the campaign.

"What is your biggest secret?"

It can create pressure to invent something spectacular. Better to allow the field to be left empty.

"Why are you an adventurer?"

It does not fit every campaign and leads very easily to generic answers. Ask instead why this character ended up in this particular story.

A ready set to start with

If you do not want to build your own handout, pick six:

1. Who are you today?
2. What do you want most?
3. What usually gets you into trouble?
4. Who matters to you?
5. What did you leave behind?
6. What would you never sell, and why?

7. What in your past still will not leave you alone?
8. Who in the party knew you before the first session?
9. What do the others not know about you?
10. One question written specifically for this campaign.

Do not send all of them just because they are ready. Five good questions beat fifteen that start to look like homework.

One last rule

The point of session zero is not to know everything about the characters.

The point is to know enough that events in the campaign can mean something to them beyond the next job on the list.

If you come out of that conversation with a few people, relationships, wants and unfinished business, you already have material for a great many sessions.

The rest you can genuinely discover at the table.