

On a Quest for the Perfect Names

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Names! It's hard to come up with good ones. The right names can add the just-right flavor to a character or a campaign, while the wrong ones can leave a false impression. Let's face it, your mental picture of a planet called Hooter's Last Stop just isn't the same as your vision of one named Can-Thiet or Gemynd.

So how *do* you discover the perfect names?

One method is to use foreign words. Go to the foreign language section of your local library and browse through the dictionaries until you find a language or languages that fit your worlds and their people. You might decide to use German or Old English on a planet with a medieval level of technology, French or Italian for a highly aristocratic society, Hawaiian for a campaign on a watery world, Hopi or Navaho for one on a semi-arid planet.

If your adventure includes people from several very different cultures, use widely different languages. For example, the people on a low-tech planet could have names derived from Old English, while a space trader from an ice planet has an Icelandic-based name, and a diplomat from a jungle world has a name developed from Vietnamese.

Once you've chosen your languages, it's time to start developing names.

The simplest way is the one-word translation. Is the owner of a space port bar a large gruff woman, given to quarreling with customers? She could be Kampa (fight in Swedish), while her handsome son is named Hermoso or Sheyn (handsome in Spanish and Yiddish). A thief could be Ladron or Ganev (thief in Spanish and Yiddish), a deep river, the Tief (deep in German), and an orbital city, Etoile (star in French) or Raum (space in German).

Be creative when you choose the words to use. Is that thief slippery like a snake? Call him Orm (snake in Swedish). Does the good-looking son yearn to leave his home planet? Name him resande (traveler in Swedish).

If single words don't work, try combining words or using phrases. A deep and narrow river could be the Schmoltif (schmol is narrow and tif is deep in Tiddish), while an animal that looks like an elephant but jumps like a rabbit is a

sautnoz (saut is jump in French, noz is nose in Yiddish).

Don't be afraid to use long phrases. A person who speaks many languages could be Talamoltisprak (tala is speak in Swedish, multi is many in Italian, sprak is language in Swedish). That's a bit long, so you could break it up into given and family names: Tala Moltisprak or Tal Amol Tisprak. Or just shorten it by using only part of each word: Tamoti, Tisolta, Molalis.

This system of using only part of several separate words leads us to the second method of generating names: Take familiar English words and combine them in various ways. You can use the first part of both names, the last part of both, the first of one and the last of the other, or any irregular combination. For example, Cindy + Mike yields names like Cinmi, Mikei, Dyike, Kendy, Cinke, Midy, Inake, and Ikcin.

Try combining several names, or the words of a descriptive phrase. That jumping animal with the long nose could be a nojum, a nomp, a junos, or an umpse. The speaker of many languages could be Spemala, Anguake, or Guakeran.

This method is especially nice because not only can you do it without dictionaries, but you can generate a lot of names very quickly, then decide who or what they should be used for.

Another method with these same two advantages is the letter-substitution method. Take a familiar word or name, then change some or all of the letters. I generally exchange letters *within* these groups: c,s,z c,k,g g,gh,j b,p t,th,d m,n f,ph,p a,ah y,i,e u,oo w,v. When you use this method cat became kaht, gaht, kath, or gath, while Cindy turns into Zyndi, Zynthi, Kyndi, Kindy, or Kinthi, to list just a few of the possible transformations.

You can also use this substitution method to change the names you've developed using the other methods. Recently I needed a name for a female musician. Galen means sing in Old English, but that sounds masculine to me, so I changed g into j and e into i to get Jalin, and that's the name I used.

So, don't be satisfied with names that are dull, boring, or just plain *wrong*. Take a little extra time, and you'll be rewarded with names that bring your characters or your campaign to life!

