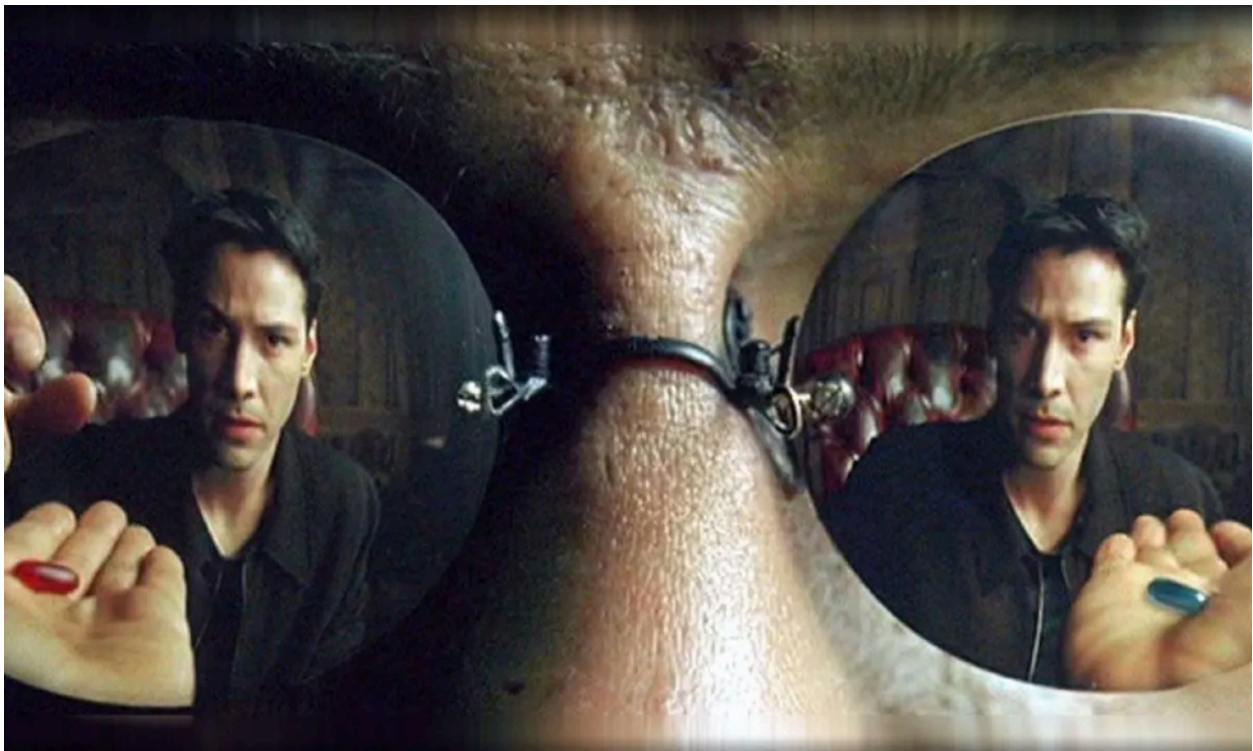


An Info Dump on Info Dumps

An **info dump** is when a lot of information (**exposition**) is “dumped” on the reader at once. Generally they are looked down upon, and not without cause—they can be boring (the first cardinal sin of writing), halt the action in its tracks (again, boring), and just unneeded. Often info dumps harbor lazy writing of the bland, clichéd, sort—or act as a crutch for lazy writing elsewhere.

Option One: you can sprinkle information in so the reader feels as if they are exploring the world, discovering information as they go—this is exciting and gratifying to the reader. Following the characters interests, revealing exposition with a mix of “show” and “tell” is generally best. This works well in combination with the “**iceberg theory**” of hinting at a world larger than is shown “on screen” (see Brandon Sanderson’s Youtube series for more—the goal is to “**go deeper, not wider,**” as he says). It also allows for the gradual reveal of information, which can be an opportunity to **raise the stakes** as the story develops (see the Ex Machina episode of Lessons from the Screenplay). Wonder and awe are *tools* of worldbuilding. An info dump can squander them. “Bloodchild” by Octavia Butler is my favorite example of this type of worldbuilding.

Another Option: write an excellent info dump. It exists!



The matrix info dump is *huge* and *fairly complicated*, yet works for a variety of reasons. The matrix has a fantastic beginning which sets up the texture of the world and the concerns of Neo, but actually tells us very little. Here's the plot summary up to this point:

“At an abandoned hotel within a major city, a police squad corners Trinity, who overpowers them with her superhuman abilities. She flees, pursued by the police and a group of mysterious suited Agents capable of similar superhuman feats. She answers a ringing public telephone and vanishes just before the Agents crash a truck into the booth.

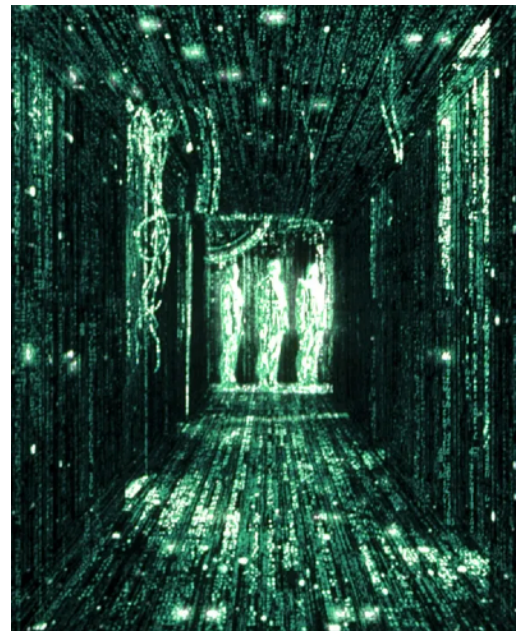
Computer programmer Thomas Anderson, known by his hacking alias "Neo", senses something wrong with the world and is puzzled by repeated online encounters with the phrase "the Matrix". Trinity contacts him and tells him a man named Morpheus has the answers he seeks. A team of Agents and police, led by Agent Smith, arrives at Neo's workplace in search of him. Though Morpheus attempts to guide Neo to safety via telephone, Neo is captured and coerced into helping the Agents locate Morpheus, whom they regard as a "known terrorist". Neo then wakes up from his apparent dream, and a woman he met at a bar arrives in a car to take him to Morpheus.

Neo then meets Morpheus, who offers him a choice between two pills; red to reveal the truth about the Matrix, and blue to return him to his former life. After Neo swallows the red pill, his reality disintegrates, and he awakens naked in a liquid-filled pod, among countless other humans attached to an elaborate electrical system. He is retrieved and brought aboard Morpheus's ship, the Nebuchadnezzar."

We see that Neo is in danger, that there are exciting “superhuman abilities” to find out about, that there is an awesome cyberpunk/action underground world beneath the normie world (the Thomas Anderson identity that Neo bucks against), and so on. *It is full of style*. It also gives us questions: Neo and the audience has to decide if the Agents are trustworthy, if Morpheus is trustworthy or a terrorist. We deeply want to understand this world, so when Morpheus offers Neo *a choice*—Do you want this info dump?—of course we want Neo to say Yes!

Importantly, the info dump that follows is both logical and interestingly presented. It, too has style. It sets up the background (this is an info dump, after all), the stakes of the world, and *Neo's part in all of this*. This info dump would be far less effective if it came as a prologue at the start of the movie, as it wouldn't be able to lean on how much the audience has come to identify with Neo, or the interest that we've gained about the world. It also sets up the rest of the plot—it allows for the world to continue to develop after the dump. There is much more that Neo will have to do and learn after this.

A good info dump gives *just enough* to get to the next part of the story. It is stylish, enticing.



Can there be a good prologue info dump?

This is often where info dumps become storytelling crutches, but they don't have to be. Compare the opening crawls from Star Wars.

Episode I	Episode II	Episode III
<p>THE PHANTOM MENACE</p> <p>Turmoil has engulfed the Galactic Republic. The taxation of trade routes to outlying star systems is in dispute.</p> <p>Hoping to resolve the matter with a blockade of deadly battleships, the greedy Trade Federation has stopped all shipping to the small planet of Naboo.</p> <p>While the Congress of the Republic endlessly debates this alarming chain of events, the Supreme Chancellor has secretly dispatched two Jedi Knights, the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy, to settle the conflict....</p>	<p>ATTACK OF THE CLONES</p> <p>There is unrest in the Galactic Senate. Several thousand solar systems have declared their intentions to leave the Republic.</p> <p>This separatist movement, under the leadership of the mysterious Count Dooku, has made it difficult for the limited number of Jedi Knights to maintain peace and order in the galaxy.</p> <p>Senator Amidala, the former Queen of Naboo, is returning to the Galactic Senate to vote on the critical issue of creating an ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC to assist the overwhelmed Jedi....</p>	<p>REVENGE OF THE SITH</p> <p>War! The Republic is crumbling under attacks by the ruthless Sith Lord, Count Dooku. There are heroes on both sides. Evil is everywhere.</p> <p>In a stunning move, the fiendish droid leader, General Grievous, has swept into the Republic capital and kidnapped Chancellor Palpatine, leader of the Galactic Senate.</p> <p>As the Separatist Droid Army attempts to flee the besieged capital with their valuable hostage, two Jedi Knights lead a desperate mission to rescue the captive Chancellor....</p>
Episode IV	Episode V	Episode VI
<p>A NEW HOPE</p> <p>It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire.</p> <p>During the battle, Rebel spies managed to steal secret plans to the Empire's ultimate weapon, the DEATH STAR, an armored space station with enough power to destroy an entire planet.</p> <p>Pursued by the Empire's sinister agents, Princess Leia races home aboard her starship, custodian of the stolen plans that can save her people and restore freedom to the galaxy....</p>	<p>THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK</p> <p>It is a dark time for the Rebellion. Although the Death Star has been destroyed, Imperial troops have driven the Rebel forces from their hidden base and pursued them across the galaxy.</p> <p>Evading the dreaded Imperial Starfleet, a group of freedom fighters led by Luke Skywalker has established a new secret base on the remote ice world of Hoth.</p> <p>The evil lord Darth Vader, obsessed with finding young Skywalker, has dispatched thousands of remote probes into the far reaches of space....</p>	<p>RETURN OF THE JEDI</p> <p>Luke Skywalker has returned to his home planet of Tatooine in an attempt to rescue his friend Han Solo from the clutches of the vile gangster Jabba the Hutt.</p> <p>Little does Luke know that the GALACTIC EMPIRE has secretly begun construction on a new armored space station even more powerful than the first dreaded Death Star.</p> <p>When completed, this ultimate weapon will spell certain doom for the small band of rebels struggling to restore freedom to the galaxy....</p>

So it is widely agreed that the original movies (IV-VI) are better. I'd argue you can tell this from their info dumps.

They all attempt to get the audience just enough up to speed to begin the movie (good). They don't go deep into lore or worldbuilding—there's no time. But the earlier scrolls are better. Compare:

A NEW HOPE: 1. Setting: Rebels v. Evil Empire 2. The Plot **MacGuffin** (plans that reveal the Death Star's weak point) 3. Princess Leia intro 4. Stakes: Save the Galaxy

vs.

PHANTOM MENACE: 1. Taxation—Exciting? 2. Trade—Exciting? These two are overly specific and boring 3. Jedi Knights in secret (better) will settle conflict (vague)

Which movie would you want to see, based on these prologues? Obviously A NEW HOPE. It balances the description of the broader setting with intriguing specifics. It introduces a specific character, Princess Leia. It sets up a sense of urgency (she is pursued). It allows the movie to begin in the middle of things (**in medias res**) with a space battle in the following scene. We know just enough, but there is the promise (which is delivered on!) that we will learn more. Most importantly: it describes fun and danger. There will be an "evil Galactic Empire," "hidden bases," "spies," "space stations" and "space battles," princesses, etc. Compare with the language of PHANTOM MENACE: the "turmoil" is actually about "taxation;" they are "hoping to resolve the matter" (sounds bureaucratic); the "battleships" (cool) are drowned out by "Naboo" "trade"/"shipping" and the "endless debating" of "Congress." It emphasizes the boring. There are no specific characters named. The plot remains vague ("settle the conflict") and yet also overly specific ("stopped all shipping to the small planet of Naboo").

The rules remain the same. Give just enough exposition to get to the next part of the story. Your goal is not to inform. It is to entice.