

# DRIZZT DO'URDEN'S GUIDE TO **COMBAT**



The ultimate resource for running  
unforgettable combats.

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## ONE THE COVER

Omercan Cirit's depiction of Drizzt Do'Urden readying his magical scimitars, Twinkle and Icingdeath.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Purpose.....	1
Why Run Combat? .....	1
<b>Chapter 1: The Dungeon Master .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Adjudicating Player Intent.....	4
Settling Rules Disputes.....	5
DM style.....	5
DM Etiquette .....	6
<b>Chapter 2: Players.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Knowing Your Players.....	8
Player Etiquette .....	10
Player Engagement .....	12
Encouraging Player Creativity .....	15
Allies.....	16
Metagaming.....	17
Player's Running Combat .....	18
<b>Chapter 3: Understanding the System</b>	
.....	<b>20</b>
Familiarize Yourself.....	20
Building Encounters .....	22
Tracking Initiative .....	24
Using Homebrew Materials .....	25
6+ Member Parties .....	25
Speeding Up Combat.....	26
Cheating .....	27
Optional Rules .....	28

<b>Chapter 4: Grids Versus Theater of the Mind.....</b>	<b>31</b>
Playing on a Grid .....	31
Tokens.....	31
The Joys of Miniatures.....	31
Pros and Cons of Grid Play .....	32
Theater of the Mind.....	32
What is Theater of the Mind? .....	33
Trust and Intent .....	33
Descriptions .....	33
Distance .....	33
Abstract Maps .....	34
Pros and Cons of Theater of the Mind	
.....	34
Additional Thoughts .....	34
Another Tool for your Toolbox.....	34
<b>Chapter 5: Narrative .....</b>	<b>36</b>
Roleplay in Combat .....	36
Descriptions .....	36
Battlefields and Narrative.....	38
Enemies and Narrative .....	38
Defeat.....	39
Running Simultaneous Combats .....	40
<b>Chapter 6: Tactics .....</b>	<b>42</b>
Battlefields .....	42
Objectives.....	44
<b>Final Thoughts .....</b>	<b>45</b>

# INTRODUCTION

*What distinguishes the master swordsman from the novice, or even many veterans? The novice may submit that it is the master's ability to handle a blade with greater precision, a skill honed through countless hours of experience. Though there is truth in that belief, it is not the whole truth. What the master possesses goes beyond that, beyond the rote memorization of forms, beyond the mundane knowledge of the correct parry. It is harmony of mind, body, and spirit that manifests in an experience of them all at once, without deliberation or doubt. And this feeling does not arise from study alone.*

*No, mastery requires genuine passion and an understanding that combat is not simple violence, but an expression of one's self. Through this experience, the novice not only improves their skill with a blade, but aspires to be greater on the whole. It is my hope that the contents of this text guides those who read it to express combat not as barbarism, but as a manifestation of their inner passion.*

*- Drizzt Do'Urden*

## PURPOSE

Combat, along with social interaction and exploration, is one of the three pillars of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Some would argue that it has been the core of the game since its conception. Yet, despite the enduring ubiquity of combat, it is the least favorite pillar for many players. Although Fifth Edition has streamlined fighting to be less of a slog, common grievances include that it is too slow and monotonous, with each player needing to wait 15-20

minutes only to say, "I attack the wyvern," and nauseam. Is this just a feature of the system, or is there something we can do about it?

Many dungeon masters (DMs) will testify that combat in their games doesn't suffer from these problems, so it would seem that the system can support more engaging styles. However, the question of how DMs should go about addressing the issue depends on the orientation of each individual DM, and the needs of their players. Indeed, some tables even enjoy a slow, grindy battle. *Drizzt Do'Urden's Guide to Combat* addresses numerous aspects of combat in Fifth Edition and different suggestions on how to approach them. It is designed to be useful for different styles of DMs of all levels of experience. This guide is not a rulebook. It doesn't rewrite how combat works in Fifth Edition, nor does claim to have the only legitimate ways to run battles. It is ultimately the prerogative of you and your players to decide what style best suits them. To that end, you are encouraged to take what you need from this guide, and discard anything that you don't think will be helpful to your particular situation.

## WHY RUN COMBAT?

*Dungeons & Dragons* players tend to take combat for granted, as an obligatory part of the game. Most groups run at least one fight every session. Some will contend that *Dungeons & Dragons* is incomplete without combat, while others tell of how they regularly play multiple sessions without any fights. Every table is going to have a different threshold of how much fighting they enjoy.

When thinking about when you should run a battle, something to consider is why you even run combat in the first place. This query leads to the issue of what the role of combat in *Dungeons & Dragons* really is, or at least, what role it has in *your* game. In order to help address that issue, here are a number of reasons why you should (and when you shouldn't) run combat.

## SYSTEM DESIGN

Whenever players create a character, they choose from one of the 12 classes offered in the *Player's Handbook*. Although each class tells its own story, they all ultimately serve to distinguish different playing styles in battle, with social interaction and exploration as secondary concerns, while race and background are geared more toward those other two pillars. Additionally, the rules for combat in the *Player's Handbook* are far more defined than those for social interaction and exploration.

All this is to say that Fifth Edition, like all other editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, is heavily designed around the idea of supporting players engaging in combat. It is a system that has been refined for decades and most would argue that it works. As such, simply having this wonderful system available to you is a reason to run combat, at least occasionally.

## NARRATIVE

One of the more apparent reasons why combat is a part of *Dungeons & Dragons* is because games tend to take place in dangerous worlds filled with hostile creatures. Some creatures stand in the way of the characters from achieving their goals, and some of those are willing to risk their lives to stop the characters. In these situations, if you are a DM that places value in the game's story, including combat upholds internal consistency of the narrative.

Other times, narrative reasons for including combat go beyond simple cause and effect. When the characters need to fight to survive, it reinforces the notion that the situation they find themselves in isn't a safe one, that the world itself faces many threats. Furthermore, going back even before J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, to Homer's *The Odyssey*, or the legends of even more ancient cultures, vanquishing foes in battle in order to fulfill a quest has always been at the heart of fantasy. Allowing players the opportunity to defeat the evil overlord in a climactic duel provides them the opportunity to feel like they are part of their own epic fantasy story, and what is *Dungeons & Dragons* if not cooperative, fantastical storytelling?

## DRAMA

One of the quickest ways to increase the sense of drama in the game is to put the character in a life-or-death situation. Of course, if it feels contrived, or if the threat doesn't feel real enough to the players, using combat in this way loses its value. However,

"To learn how to use a sword, one must first master when to use a sword."

-Drizzt Do'Urden

(THE HALFLING'S GEM, BY R. A. SALVATORE)

combat can also increase drama in a less direct sense as it is one of the least contrived ways of effectively draining a party's resources, such as hit points and spell slots. When characters are low on resources, players begin to feel the tension mount as they wonder whether they have what it takes to survive the next encounter, and if the characters have already fought that day, it usually spurs the players to believe that they are susceptible to more attacks, unless the characters have already cleared the area.

As much fun as it can be to spend hours arguing with a town's shopkeepers in a *Dungeons & Dragons* game, or chasing random animals, even these activities can start to feel meaningless after a while and the players begin to lose focus. Introducing a situationally-appropriate combat can break up dull moments and bring players back into the present. If you introduce a battle in this situation, something that is often helpful is calling for a short break immediately after rolling initiative. This gives players the opportunity to air out any remaining distractions and arrive ready for the change in pace when they return.

## WHEN NOT TO RUN COMBAT

Even though there are many reasons to run combat, there are times when it is inappropriate to do so. There are legitimate playing styles where games consist almost entirely of cycles of combat and resting. However, in other games that include more of the other two pillars of *Dungeons & Dragons*, you should refrain from forcing the players into a combat under certain situations, the most important of which is if it is going to make the game less fun for your players. Sometimes players need a break from that style of play. As previously mentioned, everyone's threshold is different. If you find players looking bored, falling asleep, distracted, or on their phones after hours of combat, it is probably time to switch things up.

Likewise, if the players seem intent on resolving a situation non-violently, if possible, give them the opportunity to do so; if the players think that they have been forced into a combat when believed they could have avoided it, they might feel robbed of agency. An example of this would be the players rolling high on a group Dexterity (Stealth) check to evade a patrol of guards, but a guard dog mysteriously appears from the bushes to alert the guards to the characters' presence. Not all fights can be avoided with conventional means, however; contrary to popular memes, no matter how high the bard's Charisma score, they are not going to succeed in seducing an ancient dragon if it is not amorously interested in pesky adventurers. Even a roll of a natural 20 doesn't guarantee success on an ability check, per the rules as written. Nonetheless, it is still a bad idea to discourage players' creative problem solving, even if you had planned for there to be a battle

Sometimes entire parties are wiped out during a combat, this is known as a total party kill, or TPK. TPKs are not usually the result of bad DMing. It may have been the result of unfortunate dice rolls or poor party strategy. It is, however, problematic when a TPK happens because the DM knew the characters were already on their last legs and decided to throw another combat at them that was not planned or a logical result of events in the game. This is likely to result in the players feeling discouraged at best, or, more likely, resentful toward the DM, believing the DM to be on a power trip. Avoiding unnecessary

combats that would result in TPKs helps prevent major DM-player conflict.

When it comes to combat, the only thing that is more likely to make a player irate than a DM making a poor judgement call that results in the death of their character is when they feel personally targeted. Never, repeat, NEVER throw the players into a combat situation because you want to punish them for issues you happen to take personally. If you are having interpersonal problems at the table, take a moment outside of the game to talk through them in a direct and respectful manner.

Even great DMs can fall into the trap of doing things in the game because that is the way they have always been done. Combat is one example of how this can manifest; some DMs run combat simply because they take it for granted as a requirement to happen every session. If combat every session is what the party wants, then those DMs would be absolutely correct. However, many tables are perfectly okay with going a session or two without combat because they were enjoying the non-combat activities. Or maybe combat would not have made narrative sense at that moment. In any case, if you are going to run combat, run it because it makes the game more fun, not because you think it is obligatory for 'proper' *Dungeons & Dragons*.



# CHAPTER 1

## THE DUNGEON MASTER

As the DM, the way that you approach combat can define most of the experience for the players. Regardless of personal style, in the realm of combat, DMs have two primary responsibilities: to adjudicate player intent and to act as rules referee. On top of these two building blocks, DMs must also determine their individual style and maintain prosocial etiquette.

### ADJUDICATING PLAYER INTENT

Adjudication is the most fundamental task for the DM. It is up to you to translate what the players' descriptions of what their characters do into in-game mechanical and narrative outcomes. For example, a player might say that they wish to attempt to climb a Huge monster. The DM would then determine the appropriate rules for that situation. In this case, suppose the DM decides to use the "Climb onto a Bigger Creature" optional rules in chapter 9 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Following the contested check by the character and the monster, the DM describes the outcome of the attempt in narrative form. On a success, the DM might say, "The giant fumbles about in vain as it attempts to snatch you as you grab hold of a strap on its leg and begin to climb your way onto its back." This is just one example. In other cases, what the player wants to do may not even be mechanically possible, even if the character is often capable of at least attempting.

Many 'how-to' guides to DMing take this process for granted and assume the reader understands how to do it. However, adjudication is a skill that, while easy to learn, takes years to master. Nonetheless, here are some helpful tips on how to do so in a way that leaves the players satisfied:

**Listen attentively to your players.** It doesn't feel good when you say something and the person responding seems as if they ignored large parts of what you said. The same goes for players involved in a combat. Players respond best when they feel they have been heard and the DM did their best at translating their attempt into in-game character

actions. If you are unsure about a player's intent, it never hurts to ask for clarification.

**Give the players the benefit of the doubt.** This is to say that you should interpret the players' intentions in the most charitable way possible when thinking about how you imagine their characters going about the task described, but not going so far as to change the world to accommodate the character's actions, meaning you should:

**Maintain internal consistency.** Abiding by the rules and statements you have already made about the world and the situation the characters find themselves in is important to having an immersive game. Going back on what you said previously because it is inconvenient in the present situation is a detriment to the game long-term.

**Make the players' actions feel meaningful** (including consequences). When adjudicating a case of a character reducing a monster to 0 hit points, it is technically correct to say only, "The monster goes out of action." However, that carries a lot less meaning than something like, "As the monster comes at you for one final strike, in one fluid motion, you dodge to the side at the last possible moment and bury your blade between its ribs. The monster slumps to the ground, lifeless, as it begins to sink in that you have just slain the scourge of Phandalin." There is also the now famous approach of asking the player how they would like to finish the monster, and elaborating in a rich description. Of course, player success can only feel so meaningful if their failures don't also carry meaning. If a player makes a clear blunder and the monsters don't exploit that blunder (assuming it would be in character to do so), then that can feel as though you have sheltered the player from the consequences of their own actions.

**Use your imagination.** One of the most effective ways to make a player's actions feel substantial is to envision the situation in your mind's eye. What would that character climbing up the monster look like? How does the monster react to such a devastating attack? All of these things can spur a more captivating theater of the mind, even if you are playing on a grid.

### ***Not rolling dice when it is unnecessary.***

Although rolling a d20 is an essential facet of *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is not always the best approach to take. Sometimes it can even pull players out of the moment. Occasionally, players appreciate their characters being allowed to simply do things without dice getting in the way, especially if it is a task their characters would reasonably be expected to accomplish from a narrative perspective. An oft-cited example of this is a rogue sneaking up on a helpless, sleeping guard. Technically, there are rules for attacking sleeping creatures, but in such an instance, does making the player roll really make the game more fun for the players? If your answer to that is an affirmative, that is perfectly valid. These are just questions worth asking.

## **SETTLING RULES DISPUTES**

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Sometimes, how the rules apply in a particular situation isn't clear. Even the most experienced DMs can forget certain rules or not understand how they apply in a specific edge case. The most common piece of advice given in this situation is that the DM should make a quick ruling based on what makes sense and move on in order to keep the pacing of the game. While this approach is a valid one, it is important to examine some of the nuanced factors in the situation.

First and foremost is that it could be a case of a forgotten rule and one of the players around the table happens to know the answer of the top of their head. In this case, the situation can resolve itself. Another possible variable is if the ruling is one where the character's life could hang in the balance. If you want to avoid player resentment from a bad call resulting in the death of their character, spending 30 seconds to look up the answer is the best approach.

Secondly, if you are a novice DM, making certain rulings can carry greater consequences down the line. For example, a DM that rules that a character that sustained an injury to the jaw can't speak because of that injury. However, imagine if that character is a spellcaster. Now, they are unable to use core class features because of that ruling. Novice DMs may also benefit from taking the time to clarify the rules in cases like these rather than making snap rulings.

With those circumstances in mind, quick rulings are often an effective and legitimate way of resolving rules disputes because they result in minimal disruption to the heat of the moment. Something to

*"It is more difficult by far to be independent of our own inner shackles than it is of the shackles that others might place upon us."*

*-Drizzt Do'Urden*  
(THE LONE DROW, BY R. A. SALVATORE)

be sure of when taking this approach is that the rule is indeed looked up later. The exact answer may not be in the *Player's Handbook*, but might be inferred from what information is available. If not, the website [Sage Advice](#) collects answers to the vast number of questions lead rules designer, Jeremy Crawford, has answered regarding edge cases with the rules as written. Appointing a player to do such research immediately after the case comes up allows the DM to continue running the combat while giving the player something to do when it is not their turn.

## **DM STYLE**

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What approach to DMing do you see yourself gravitating toward? Are you someone who likes to run the rules as written, or are you more of a follower of the 'Rule of Cool,' wherein the official rules and realism take a back seat to epic character moments? Most DMs don't follow a single, rigid school of thought when it comes to running a game, preferring to make decisions based on the situation. However, most still have various tendencies and leanings.

As with any art, it is important to be aware of the strengths and weakness of our particular style. For example, forsaking the rules too often can set bad precedents in the future, and can be exploited by opportunistic players. On the other hand, being overly rigid with rules as written can lead to monotonous combats where players don't feel like they have sufficient freedom to try creative things, such as causing a loose stone to fall on top of an approaching monster. However, there are also strengths in both a rules as written and a narrative approach. Abiding by rules as written allows for a sense of consistency and fairness that the players can rely upon. As previously mentioned, the designers of the game have put a lot of work into making the system balanced for such occasions. On the other hand, a narrative approach can really inspire players to be creative and develop their characters through their expressions in combat.



There are also other metrics for DM styles, such as combat difficulty or lethality. Some DMs and players alike enjoy a death march style campaign, wherein the players must struggle their way through brutal fight after brutal fight. In such campaigns, at least one character will almost certainly perish. Many players find this style rewarding because it gives them a chance to test their ability to create effective character builds and test their tactical acumen. It also provides a sense of satisfaction derived from overcoming great challenge. Optional rules such as the injury table and longer resting periods can enhance the tension that provides this style's backbone. When used in horror campaigns, this results in an increased sense of dread and fear for the players since they are aware of how vulnerable they are.

As you probably expect, the death march is not for everyone. Others prefer an approach where the characters are heroes in their own story, vanquishing the forces of darkness that stand before them. This style can be lots of fun for more laid-back players that want a chance to shine and be heroic. Moreover, if your players show up to the game to unwind from the rest of their lives, this kind of game is less stressful but still fun to many players.

Another dynamic to consider when developing your DM style is how realistic you want your game to be. Obviously, the extent to which *Dungeons & Dragons* can be realistic is constrained by both its gameplay elements, such as hit points, and by the nature of being fantasy oriented—a setting in which magic exists. With that in mind, it is perfectly legitimate to embrace these facts, even lean into them, running a game where the characters resemble those from *Dragonball Z* in their fighting abilities, and where Rule of Cool reigns. This carries many of the benefits as the heroic narrative style—the players get to relax and have fun with the absurdities rather than worry about the minutiae that would exist in a more realistic setting.

On the other hand, with a few modifications, such as altering carrying capacity, and reflavoring other elements, such as treating hit points more as luck or stamina rather than bodily integrity, it is possible to run a gritty realistic campaign. Many players enjoy this because it adds a sense of depth and immersion to a campaign; the laws of physics behave as expected, the world feels more concrete, and players can use more real-world problem solving to overcome challenges. Additionally, in a gritty realistic game, outland survival-focused campaigns

become viable, whereas in heroic campaigns, any challenges imposed by factors such as hunger can easily be dismissed.

If you have run games before, you probably fall somewhere between the extremes of the various spectrums presented thus far. Moreover, your place on these spectrums likely changes across different situations, and your overall style will likely change over time. The most important thing is that you find the style that works best for you and your players so that you can play to your strengths and run your game with confidence.

## DM ETIQUETTE

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DMs have a responsibility to conduct themselves ethically not only because they are beholden to the same standards of decency as the rest of the table, but because of the inherent power their position holds. As a DM, you are the one who should be setting the gold standard for the rest of the group because you are the one who is most often looked to as the social enforcer of respect at the table. Trust is an essential component of being an effective DM. A DM that the players trust can get away with trying audacious things in combat, even if they seem harsh at first, because the players know the DM isn't doing them out of malice. Conversely, if the players don't trust you, they are less likely to be willing to try less-structured styles of play and will be less engaged with the narrative. Having respect for the players is a key component of establishing trust among them.



Don't assume that, just because you were already friends with them, that they have full confidence in your ability to run a game or even a fight. Note that this section covers the most important aspects of DM etiquette in regards to combat specifically. Covering all aspects of DM etiquette would be beyond the scope of this guide.

## ADVERSARIAL DMING

One of the most dreaded types of DM is the antagonist. A common assumption about such DMs is that they are on a power trip and use the game as a way to exert their power over the players by proxy. Even though this isn't always true (such DMs are often just competitive by nature), players tend not to have fun when their DM exhibits the following traits:

- Views the players themselves as the enemy
- Is willing to bend the rules to get a leg up on the players, but does not extend the same leniency to them
- Doesn't give the players the benefit of the doubt in dubious situations
- Belittles the players

Remember that it isn't your role to be the bane of the players, it is to be the bridge between the imaginary world played in and the players' intentions. One antidote to the adversarial DM is to instead view the player characters as the protagonists in a co-authored story. Protagonists face adversity and sometimes even die, but not as a result of malice on the part of the authors.

Another great way to avoid being viewed as an adversarial DM is to roleplay the monsters; would it really make sense for an ogre to demonstrate Napoleonic levels of tactical thinking? Not by itself, no. As such, when directing the monsters, instead of treating *Dungeons & Dragons* like a tabletop wargame, consider how that monster would act in that situation, which isn't always aligned with what is the most effective way to dispatch the adventurers. That is, of course, unless you have established with the group that you all have the most fun when playing *Dungeons & Dragons* like a tabletop wargame, in which case, that style is perfectly valid. Most of the time, however, the players are there to play a roleplaying game.

## IMPARTIALITY

Little in a game feels less fair to a player than sensing that they are being treated less equitably during a

session because the DM likes another player more. Playing favorites not only jeopardizes the trust of anyone you are not favoriting, but causes problems because if even one player has serious issues, you risk the entire table being thrown into discord. Moreover, it isn't safe to assume that anyone you play favorites to appreciates such treatment, even if they are your family member or romantic partner. Most players prefer to be treated equally than to be handled with special care.

## INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS

As previously stated, this guide doesn't cover all aspects of DM etiquette. However, sometimes interpersonal conflicts will arise in the middle of a battle. If the particular grievance was small and in passing, it may be best to wait until there is a break before bringing it up. If it threatens the enjoyment of the players beyond a few seconds, however, then it may be necessary to pause the game and sort it out. Sometimes, the immediate problem can be handled within a few minutes and any deeper issues can be addressed later. Other times, it may be necessary to air things out in a public manner. For this reason, it is important to stay aware of what your players are feeling the table as a whole so that you can better help facilitate a group dialogue.

Conflict resolution is a skill people spend lifetimes mastering, as is group counseling. For the purposes of this guide, simply be aware that occasionally, a reason people don't enjoy certain battles is because of a looming interpersonal issue. These issues should be addressed directly, respectfully (even if you happen to be frustrated with the player), and calmly. Let each person be heard and respect the needs of the group. Sometimes, the problem runs deep in a player's life as a whole and can only be addressed through professional counseling. In these cases, the best thing you can do is be supportive in them getting the help they need and doing what you can to make sure the enjoyment of the other players is not jeopardized by these issues.

*"A king is a man strong of character and conviction who leads by example and truly cares for the suffering of his people, not a brute who rules simply because he is the strongest."*

*-Drizzt Do'Urden*

(THE CRYSTAL SHARD, BY R. A. SALVATORE)

## CHAPTER 2

# PLAYERS

"Joy multiplies when it is shared among friends, but grief diminishes with every division. That is life."

-Drizzt Do'Urden

(EXILE, BY R. A. SALVATORE)

### KNOWING YOUR PLAYERS

Every table has its own standards. Different players want different things; there is no universal, optimal experience for all. A lot of players like constant action and deadly battles, while others prefer each fight to be part of a heroic story unfolding before them. Part of a DM's duty is to calibrate their style and combats to be as fun to the players as possible. This is not to say that *you* shouldn't also be having fun—you are a part of the table as well! Ideally, a DM should find a point where they can run something that they feel passionate about and do so in a way that appeals to the players' individual preferences.

Knowing one's players is not always easy. Preferences can change from moment to moment, so getting a read on how the players react to the things happening in the game is an immediate way to gauge that. Other times, it is a good idea to talk to them between sessions about what they are enjoying and what they would like to see changed. Here are a few metrics you can consider when assessing how to calibrate your DM style to the preferences of your players.

#### AMOUNT OF COMBAT

The *Dungeon Master's Guide* explains that Fifth Edition is balanced off of the premise that, over the course of the standard adventuring day, the party

should have six to eight encounters that drain character resources. However, that number isn't always needed for a martially-exciting game (see "Building Encounters" on page 22 if you are curious why), which is good news because many players don't enjoy going through unremarkable fight after unremarkable fight simply to abide by some law of character resource attrition. However, the dungeon crawl—room after room of enemies to slay—can be an appealing grind for other players. When thinking about what kind of battles you are going to throw at your players, one of the first things you should consider is how many combat sequences you should include in a day of adventuring. Some roleplay-heavy groups like one big fight every day, others feel most engaged when they have enemies to fight, so real-world time between fights should be more brief. If you want to maintain a coherent narrative in your game, it is necessary to craft the story and environments based around how often the players like to fight; sending them into a 200-room enemy stronghold doesn't typically make a lot of sense if you only plan on including one or two fights.

#### COMBAT APTITUDE

Player experience, the mechanical strength of character builds, and strategic mindsets have a massive influence on how capable a party is of taking on an encounter. If you are unfamiliar with how your players fare in combat, when you first start running the game for them, you will have to take your best guess about how much they can handle based off their levels of experience, character builds, and party composition. However, only after a handful of encounters can you really get the sense for what they can handle. In this case, start small with the first encounter (or two if the party is low level since low level characters are at higher risk of dying), then work your way up in difficulty until you find their limit, which may be in preference of difficulty or simply inability to overcome the encounter.

Likewise, you will also have to consider party composition in the kinds of encounters you present to the players. Do they have a character that can dish out modest amounts of magical damage? Probably, but if not, then any fight against a monster that is immune to nonmagical attacks is going to be very challenging for them. Similar issues exist when it comes to healing capabilities; a party without a cleric or other character with lots of healing magic will not be able to endure as many encounters, and options such as *revivify* are out of the question, so quick resurrections between combats are impossible. Finally, there is the matter of general party synchronicity and cohesion: do the characters work well together? Do their styles complement one another? All of this comes into play when determining a party's capabilities.

### PLAYER STYLES AND INTERESTS

Similar to how every DM has their own style of how they like to run the game, every player has their own style of how they like to play. This can take form in which parts of their character they emphasize: is it the character's mechanical build? What about their backstory? Or maybe they value spontaneous roleplaying. Some even enjoy the logistical aspects of *Dungeons & Dragons*, such as wealth management.

In any case, not all players place equal importance on combat. Players who are less enthusiastic about that pillar might be less engaged during this time. If the entire party places little value on combat, the solution is simply to run fewer battles. However, it is more often the case that one or two players are less enthusiastic about combat, while the others enjoy it or even come to sessions primarily for it. In this instance, no matter what you do, some people aren't enjoying the game as much as they could be. Therefore, it becomes a matter of finding a way to give all the players a chance to do what they enjoy throughout the game. Many DMs simply do their best to balance time spent in the pillars of play (social interaction, combat, and exploration). However, a more elegant approach to combat is to incorporate the elements that less battle-oriented

players enjoy into combat. For example, if the player is more interested in roleplaying and developing their character, then have the enemies occasionally make short remarks to that character so they can respond in kind.

In order to accommodate for these individual styles, it is necessary to identify what they are. This is done in two ways. The first of which is to notice what the player reacts positively to—what they get excited about. You may notice a player's face light up when you ask them to describe how their attack looks. You can use these moments to give the players time doing what they enjoy. The second, and more straightforward way of discovering their styles, is simply to ask them what they like. Their response may not highlight everything about their preferences, but it provides a good starting point in terms of what to look for.



## PLAYER ETIQUETTE

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As with the previous section on DM etiquette, player etiquette is a broad topic. This guide doesn't cover every aspect of the subject, only that which pertains to combat. With that said, proper player conduct is essential to players having fun during their *Dungeons & Dragons* session. A single, disruptive player will often compromise table cohesion. For this reason, it is critical to establish expectations and boundaries around behavior at the table during session zero. Have an open conversation with the players about what is and is not acceptable to them, and find a place where everyone can agree the lines should be drawn. If no expectations are laid out, some players may be more disruptive because they believe that they can get away with it, and with good reason: the rules were never explained to them. Other times, a player may simply be unaware that their actions are offsetting the enjoyment of other group members.

### ENFORCEMENT

Enforcing appropriate behavior is a delicate matter. On one hand, some players might find the DM taking charge of player behavior itself is too dictatorial, on the other, some players see the DM as the most legitimate authority when it comes to how table standards are governed. This is another matter where you must get to know what your table wants from you, the DM. In general, enforcement can be handled by direct communication—talk to the player about what they are doing and explain how and why others are finding it disruptive.

If a player causes only a minor disruption in the middle of combat, such as talking loudly over someone else, it is typically sufficient to give an informal admonishment of the action, such as saying, "Hey, I'm having trouble hearing Kate. Can we cut it out so she can have her moment?" When doing this, avoid sarcasm, insult, and criticisms of character. If there becomes a pattern of such behavior, then it is necessary to have a more long-form discussion. Alternatively, if your players respond better to in-game motivators, you can be more liberal with using inspiration to reward positive behavior, and penalties for negative behavior. Such penalties can be controversial and seen as DM policing, so check with your group before going through with such a policy. A simple but effective behavioral reinforcer that isn't usually opposed to by players for mild to minor disruptions is to confer disadvantage on the player's

next attack roll, ability check, or saving throw that comes up during that combat. More severe misbehaviors shouldn't be handled as a game mechanic and instead should involve a serious conversation about that player's place in the group and if they were willing to abide by the game's social contract.

### DECENCY

The first and most common rule of etiquette for players to have is "Don't be a jerk," (sometimes using more colorful language). That is a great starting point, but isn't always sufficient because players don't always have the same conception on what it is to be a jerk. Some players enjoy trash-talking one another (usually in a good-natured way), while others have more closely-guarded boundaries. This is another reason why discussing these boundaries during session zero is essential. With this in mind, the goal is to establish an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust that is important to enjoying the game.

There are some general truths concerning basic decency around the table that you, as the DM, should work to uphold. One such example is that players should not belittle other players. This is different from the good-natured trash talk between consenting players that was mentioned earlier. Belittlement done out of disrespect, however, is a socially hostile act that shouldn't be tolerated. This applies to any kind of directed disrespect, particularly when the perpetrator touches on sensitive subjects, knowing that they will be especially hurtful to their target.

Less serious, but still important, aspects of decency include general politeness around how the game is played. For example, players should avoid talking over other players who are trying to take their turn, nor should they be throwing things across the room, make jokes at inappropriate moments, or derail another player's moment in the spotlight. Although these standards may seem subjective, they are universally distracting and should be avoided.

### STEALING THUNDER

When players have their moment in the spotlight, they enjoy getting to shine. Sometimes, other players will butt in and take away some of that first player's glory. For example, if Chris' character is slaying the boss monster, narrating the final blows, and Kate steps in and describes how she is ultimately the one to finish off the monster, Kate has stolen Chris' thunder. This diminishes the sense of satisfaction

Chris would have felt from the act, thus players shouldn't engage in this behavior unless they have made a prior agreement that this is the kind of relationship they want their characters to have.

Other instances of this include when one character is more powerful than the rest of the party. Perhaps this happened as a result of the character receiving all of the best magic items, or maybe the player was more deliberate in constructing a character that is highly effective in combat. This kind of player often bears the stigma of the "power gamer." However, it isn't necessarily a bad thing to have a powerful character or to optimize character builds. It only becomes a problem if the other players feel like they are losing out on all of the glory. This problem can arise from a miscommunication about what type of game is being played; some players like to create suboptimal characters. Other times, it is a difference of experience in making optimal characters. This is another topic to discuss in session zero.

If the players agree that well-optimized characters are fair game, then the DM or the players most experienced creating optimal builds can help the others make something that will meet both of their roleplaying needs and their tactical needs. If that isn't an option, it may be better to lift up the players not faring as well in combat rather than dragging down the one that is doing well. Magic items or certain boons are a way to go about this. Other times, you might be required to talk with the "power gaming" player about playing their character in a way that doesn't take away from the fun of the other players.

## KNOW THE RULES

In doing research for this guide, one of the most frequent reasons players cited as a barrier to them enjoying combat was other players not knowing how the rules work. Less than 1% of respondents, however, thought combat rules were too complex, making this by far the least common complaint. In summary, respondents thought that the rules for combat are easy to understand, but a lack of understanding can be harmful to the enjoyment of the game.

A player who doesn't know the rules will bring the entire combat to a screeching halt as they fumble through their materials, deciding what to do next. If the player is brand new, have a little patience, but if

they have been around for more than a few sessions, here is a fact all players would do well to remember:

THE COMBAT SECTION OF THE *PLAYER'S HANDBOOK* IS ONLY 11 PAGES LONG.

Even with the three or so pages for a player's core class and subclass features, that's still only a few trips to the bathroom worth of reading material. A way you describe this to the players is that, since you likely spend 2-5 hours every week playing a game, spending just a few minutes to read and re-read the rules is the best investment they can make if they want their character to survive and to remain on good terms with their fellow players. Spells also need not be fully memorized. Having read the spell a couple times, the player should be familiar with what it does, and when it comes time to cast, simply use a spell card to quickly impart the effects. Spell cards can be purchased as decks or printed from free and legal online resources.

Fifth Edition's combat rules, especially compared to previous editions and other combat-heavy roleplaying games, are very straight-forward. In fact, the research done for this guide suggested the rules being too complicated was the least common gripe players had with combat, with several times that factor wishing they were more detailed.

It is worth remembering that some players are new to roleplaying games as a whole and take a little longer to become familiarized with the process. Additionally, some people have trouble learning from written text only. For this reason, it is necessary for learning to also occur on an experiential level. If the player has never played before, run a short demo for them. When they join in the game, have one of the veteran players explain what is going on as the game unfolds. When it comes to the new player's turn, you can ask them to describe what they would like their character to do in general terms, and you can translate that to mechanical terms and explain the process. For example, the player might say, "I want to run at them with my shield and knock them off of their feet!" and as the DM, you can translate that to the character using their movement to approach a monster and use the Shove action to knock it prone. If a new player seems stumped on what to do, start with recapping and elaborating on the situation; remind them of where the threats are. From there, you can also outline some possible courses of action to help the player become aware of how different



things are possible in combat, thus spurring their tactical thinking.

Even if a player doesn't grasp the more nuanced aspects of combat, they should have four of their character values memorized: armor class, attack bonus, spell save DC (if any), and main weapon attack bonus. Those four values come up over and over again, but are, thankfully, very easy to remember.

For all of these reasons, it is strongly recommended that you explicitly emphasize the importance of players knowing their characters from session zero and beyond if need be. In fact, session zero can be a great time for players to talk about what abilities their characters have, ask questions, and iron out any issues that need clarification so that they don't arise in the middle of a fight.

## RULES LAWYERS

Some players frequently challenge the DM's interpretation of the rules. When this happens in excess, such players are sometimes given the label of "rules lawyer." Some DMs view this as the player attempting to challenge their authority, but you shouldn't assume this is the case. Sometimes, these players simply enjoy the consistency of rules as written or to avoid the party suffering out of a misunderstanding. Be open to the possibility that they misinterpreted a rule, and players should also be mindful of when it is appropriate to bring such things up; if it shatters a moment of in-game immersion, it isn't the right time for the player. In the instances where the rules lawyering is being done because the player has a bone to pick with you, you and the player should speak to one another openly and directly, but not during the middle of the game.

## PLAYER ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is one of the most crucial parts of running a fun battle. Several factors go into whether or not the players are engaged, some of which you cannot even control, such as real world troubles the player is having, or overall disposition of the players. Others can only be determined in the long term, such as the relationship and trust you have with the players. This can be built up or eroded over time. Finally, there are short-term factors that are addressed here. In any case, working to make sure every player is engaged is critical because if a single one loses interest, it can have a ripple effect and send the wrong signals to the other players. Moreover, having engaged players is important to your satisfaction with running the game; feeling like what you are doing is ultimately meaningless will result in quick burnout.

## PACING

Key to the engagement process is pacing. Players begin to wear out if their experience is a constant stream of high-energy content and any climactic moments feel less meaningful if the baseline is already so high. In other words, there cannot be any peaks without valleys. Conversely, if the game is too slow, players can grow bored and not feel like they have to be on their toes.

Pacing is also an important factor during a combat as well. Namely, if too much time passes between a player's turns, they tune out and possibly even start playing around on their phones. One of the ways to combat this is to speed up combat (see "Speeding Up Combat" on page 26), and another is to create immersive transitions between turns. For example, instead of saying "And with that you deal a painful blow to the ogre, Chris. Gary, it is your turn," you can instead say, "And with that, you deal a painful blow to the ogre, Chris. Gary, as the ogre reels back, you have a moment of relief to act. What do you do?" This way, the battle flows rather than stutters between turns.

## 5-SECOND RULE

One of the reasons players tune out is because they don't think they have to pay attention when it isn't their turn. In such cases, when it comes to their turn, they will require a recap of the entire situation and

then decide what to do on their turn. This speed bump then increases the amount of time the other players have to wait until it becomes their turn again. The antidote for this is the harsh but fair 5-second rule: when it comes to a player's turn, they have 5 seconds to start describing what they are going to do. If the player cannot decide with those 5 seconds, their character takes the Dodge action. The rule makes sense narratively because these fights don't typically involve long drawn out periods of deliberation. Additionally, it can help reinforce the notion that the players need to know the rules; if a player doesn't know what a spell or class feature does when it comes their turn, they can't use it because they'll run out of time. Furthermore, the 5-second rule isn't as unforgiving as it might appear on face value. For one, the defensive bonuses of the Dodge action shouldn't be scoffed at. More importantly, that player has the turns of all the other players to decide what they want to do when it comes time for them to act.

Despite these factors, there is bound to be an adjustment period for the majority of players when the 5-second rule is implemented. Allow for some leniency at first, especially with newer players.

## CHALLENGE

Nothing quite brings out the life in people like the threat of death. When players realize that their characters are in real danger, they are more likely to pay attention and take the situation more seriously. This doesn't mean that your game has to be a death march or constant misery to your players, but if they are never pushed, then there is no sense of threat. Without a sense of threat, combat loses much of its gravity and purpose. Furthermore, overcoming greater challenges can feel more rewarding in all aspects of life, and doing so in a group strengthens party cohesion.

## VARIETY

If combat becomes too predictable, it becomes a routine rather than an event. The challenges players face should come from a wide array of sources, including different monsters, environments, and challenges. Furthermore, subverting player expectations in combat is an effective way of getting their attention; make an enemy that appears weak be strong, employ unexpected abilities from the monsters such as something similar to a Trickery Domain cleric's Invoke Duplicity feature. The

important thing is that players are put in a position where they have to adapt to the situation rather than default to a regular strategy.

## TAKING BREAKS

Even the most dedicated of players can become disengaged if set to the same task too long. Research varies on how long people can remain attentive, but [some](#) suggest that the number, as far as lectures go, is as low as 20 minutes. Of course, combat in *Dungeons & Dragons* is more participatory, thus extending the time players stay focused, but the concept still applies. Make sure to take short breaks whenever your players appear restless to allow them to decompress and take care of any biological needs.

## INCORPORATING NARRATIVE

Does the following combat sequence sound interesting?

"Kate, roll to hit."  
"17."  
"You hit. Roll damage."  
"11."  
"Okay. Ashley, your turn."  
"I attack."  
"Roll to hit."  
"19."  
"You hit. Roll damage."  
"9."

To most, the answer is that this sounds like a boring fight because it doesn't come off as a fight. Where is the sense that the characters are in a life-and-death struggle? Where is the satisfying impact of each blow? Where is any hint that the DM is attempting to connect with the players? In your battles, you should be able to answer all of these questions. Ultimately, the players should feel like there is something at stake during their fights, that the outcome has an impact on the narrative. Adding drama to the situation can increase the feeling of narrative importance, thus furthering player investment.

## USING CHARACTER NAMES

When it comes to a player's turn, saying "Rose (the character's name), you see the situation before you. What do you do?" is better than saying, "Satine (the player's name), your turn," not just because it is more



narratively involved, but because identifying the player by their character's name helps reinforce the notion that they are acting as that character. Just be careful not to refer to the player by their character's name outside of the game, an awkward experience which many a DM have gone through.

## NON-VERBAL

One of the ways you know someone is paying attention to you is through their non-verbal behavior. They make eye contact, their posture is attentive, they make eye contact, their posture is attentive, they make reflective statements, and they occasionally acknowledge what you say with a nod or an "mhm." You should be doing all of these things with their players; when a player feels like they are being paid attention to, they are more likely to pay attention in kind.

## INVOLVING EVERYONE

Assuming the party hasn't split, combat involves everyone at the table, and everyone wants their moment in the spotlight. When the players feel like they have a chance to shine, they become more excited during the battle. As the DM, be sure to offer the chance for this to occur, every character has their own unique strengths within the party, so give players their moments to show those off. Want the wizard to feel empowered? Have the party fight a

monster that is resistant to nonmagical attacks. How about the archer? Begin the encounter at long range. Realistically, not every player will get a chance to stand out during every combat, but using the opportunities you find goes a long way in making your players happy.

## INVOLVE PLAYERS IN THE PROCESS

Some players flourish when they are given more than one thing to do and some DMs find it helpful to have someone assist in running combat. When players participate in the process, they have things to do between their turns and feel more active in the session. However, involving players is not without its drawbacks, and DMs should weigh their options before deciding to do so. See "Players Running Combat" on page 18 for more details.

## PLAYER DESCRIPTIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Players describing their actions is covered in "Descriptions" on page 33. For the purposes of player engagement, simply understand that giving players the opportunity to express themselves through their character's actions in battle is a great way for them to get invested in the combat.

## ELECTRONIC DEVICES

With the existence of programs such as D&D Beyond, it is popular to store all of one's information on a laptop or tablet the player brings to an in-person session, rather than use physical books and character sheets. This offers a number of advantages, including quicker access to those familiar with the technology. In fact, services like Roll20 and Fantasy Grounds, being digital, rely on the use of electronic devices.

Despite the benefits, the presence of electronic devices has a major pitfall: they can be incredibly distracting. [Ravizza, Uitylugt, and Fenn \(2017\)](#) found that college students who used their laptops for non-academic purposes had poorer learning outcomes. Simply put, the temptation for players to use their phones or laptops to browse the internet or play other games is high, and doing so will cause them to become disengaged from the game. Moreover, when one player sees another distracted on their phone, the first player may pick up on that as a social cue to disengage themselves.

Ultimately, whether or not you allow the use of electronic devices comes down to the needs of your group. For some, the convenience outweighs the



costs, while other DMs can testify to a prohibition of phones and laptops being a boon to the engagement of their players. Frequent breaks, in addition to their previously mentioned benefits, also make the proposition of an electronics-free session more palatable.

## MUSIC

Whether or not we realize it, one of the most influential things in making a scene from a movie, video game, play, or audiodrama memorable is the music. Well-selected music provides immersive ambiance for a scene. In the case of combat, music tends to be more fast paced and high energy. Having this in the background can help drum up excitement in the players.

Not all music is created equal for *Dungeons & Dragons*. While rock, hip hop, or electronic dance music can be fun for a laid-back session that is more of an excuse to hang out than an attempt to get immersed in a story; soundtracks tend to provide better game music for the latter. One mistake a lot of DMs make is compiling a list of the most epic and popular tracks from movies. This is folly for a number of reasons. The first of which is that if the track is associated with a popular movie, players are more prone to think of the movie than *Dungeons & Dragons*. Secondly, as mentioned in the section about pacing, without valleys, there can be no peaks or, if all music is epic, then no music is epic. The music should fit the relative tone of the combat; if the players are fighting a small band of goblins, it sets the wrong mood when the music sounds like it fits better during the final battle with an apocalyptic demigod. Finally, if the music is too conspicuous, it ceases to be the background and starts to distract the players.

With all of that in mind, this guide recommends using soundtracks from video games, especially fantasy video games, that contain nondescript, lyricless, orchestral, but high-energy music that lacks electronic elements and dramatic changes in tone. Also, consider a separate playlist for boss music and general combat. Some games that contain multiple tracks well suited for traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* combat include:

- *Assassin's Creed (III and Unity)*
- *Pillars of Eternity (I and II)*
- *The Elder Scrolls (Morrowind, Oblivion, Skyrim, Online)*
- *Total War: Warhammer (I and II)*

## ENCOURAGING PLAYER CREATIVITY

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One of the most appealing things about tabletop roleplaying games is that player choice is hypothetically infinite. Giving players the chance to express themselves is a primary drive for many, both in and out of combat.

### YOU CAN CERTAINLY TRY

A popular expression used by DMs when a player asks if they can attempt something not strictly in the rules and potentially absurd is, "You can certainly try." Giving players permission to experiment with outside-of-the-box thinking can lead to all sorts of fun and unique moments at the game table. How a DM handles the specifics varies. For example, some DMs permit players to try almost anything, including catching a boulder hurled by a trebuchet, especially if they roll a natural 20 on an ability check (which, as previously mentioned, is not an automatic success in the rules as written). Other DMs draw a line in the sand at not breaking the laws of physics. Ultimately, it is up to you to decide whether it better fits the intended tone of your game for characters to have at least a 5 percent chance of re-writing the laws of physics whenever they attempt something, or if the game is willing to sacrifice a small amount of player choice in order to maintain immersion.

Regardless how you choose to run the game in this respect, choices should have consequences. If a player makes a tactically unsound decision, shielding them from the consequences diminishes the value of the having the choice in the first place. That isn't to say that you should set out to punish them, but rather to allow cause and effect to play out, bearing in mind the occasional need to roll dice.

### OPPORTUNITIES IN YOUR DESCRIPTIONS

There are some players who will spontaneously ask about ideas they have for doing something unique in combat. However, others won't even ask about the existence of certain things in the environment if they don't have reason to suspect it is there.

Providing rich descriptions about the battlefield can inspire players to think outside the box. For example, if you mention that the stone ceiling has many loose sections, a player is more likely to come up with the idea of making them fall on enemies

below. As this applies to environments, this can also apply to monsters. Describing a soft-looking area between a monster's arm and shoulder can cause them to think about ways they might exploit it. You may notice that both of these examples are rather on the nose. Generally, it is better to lean toward being more obvious than subtle when it comes to player hints, but if your players are the type to pay more attention to such things, try making the description more open to interpretation. For example, you could say that the stones are loose beneath the characters' feet, and a creative player might get the idea of trying to slide a monster down a ledge. This approach allows for a broader range of creative input, rather than just taking the bait you set.

## ALLIES

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Allies are both a great addition and a challenge for combat. On one hand, the ally can fill a role that the party has vacant, such as a healer or tank—a character that can take a lot of damage and hold the line so less durable characters, like wizards, aren't killed. Players can also form strong bonds with NPCs (non-player characters, which can include monsters with a personality) that help them in combat, and result in the players becoming more invested in the story. Third, allies can act as an in-game way to dispense critical information about an enemy. For example, if the party encountered a monster that was immune to both fire damage and nonmagical attacks, but vulnerable to cold damage, an NPC ally could reveal that vulnerability in a situation where the players would otherwise struggle to win. Finally, the idea of having allies can add to a sense of immersion to the world. If you have ever played a classic roleplaying video game, you should be familiar with how the NPCs stay in one place for all of their existence, never aiding you on any of the quests that they give you, despite being capable themselves. They are effectively dispensers of prescribed information. The benefit of *Dungeons & Dragons* is that you aren't bound to this type of NPC in your game; coming up with contrived reasons why that the NPCs can never come to the party's aid will come off as strange to the players.

At the same time, there are pitfalls when it comes to including allies, especially mechanical ones. Fifth Edition is balanced on what is referred to as the action economy, where each character has a limited number of actions they can take on their turn. This

has drastic tactical implications—the side of the combat that has more creatures that can take actions possess a huge advantage. Consequently, the introduction of allies will further tip the scales in favor of the players, requiring more enemies in order to present them with a challenge. The issue with this is that not only do you have an additional character slowing down the combat, but you have any additional monsters you needed to introduce as a result.

The issues with allies run deeper than this, though. An earlier section of this guide discussed avoiding players stealing other players' thunder. Well, an NPC ally can also steal a players' thunder. In fact, the issue is made even worse when the players don't feel like the victory belongs to them as a group, but to the character you placed in the world to fight their own monsters. At best, players can view this as a missed opportunity but still celebrate a well-liked character being useful, and at worst can view you as being self-indulgent for putting the players into that situation.

## TYPES OF ALLIES

Consequently, if you decide to include allies, think about how they add to the players' fun, not take a share of it. Support NPCs are a great way of going about this. They are any character whose primary role is to buff the player characters' combat effectiveness rather than mete out their own damage. Life Domain clerics are a classically-offered example of this kind of character (though one could argue in Fifth Edition that they can also be strong damage dealers as well). This way, the characters still get the satisfaction of taking on a greater challenge without feeling like the NPC did the work for them. Tanks are also valid choices for ally NPCs. If the party is comprised of fragile characters, having a tough character there to soak up hits allows the player characters to deal all the damage themselves, provided the tank doesn't deal too much damage.

Regardless of what role the ally you pick takes in your party, it is imperative that they slow down the combat as little as possible. For this reason, and for the sake the DM's prep time, it is typically better to avoid creating a fully classed character as a player would because of the time it can take to sort through options and use class features that are often more optimized to be fun for the person using it than to be time efficient. Instead, picking from the list of NPCs in the *Monster Manual* or *Volo's Guide to Monsters* offers allies that are more streamlined for quick reference

and shorter turns. Unfortunately, even both of these selections combined offers a rather meager selection. To solve this problem, check out *Versatile NPCs II*, which contains over 65 more NPCs.

## NARRATIVE ALLIES

Imagine if your players were participating in the large siege battle of Helm's Deep in *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, and the players were Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli. If you were to run this battle, would you try to account for every single creature fighting in it? Not if you wanted to finish any time in the next few years. Instead, you are likely to take a narrative approach to most of the allies. Describing the fighting the allies are doing as separate engagements from the characters allows you to place the players into the spotlight and not take away any of their time, while also satisfying any narrative demands for allies.

This can also be used outside of large battles. One prominent example is if characters are 4th level and have a frost giant as an ally. They could pit the giant against another giant—a foe beyond the capabilities of the players to handle—and describe the battle as it unfolds between the two giants in a narrative fashion, while the players take on whatever smaller enemies threaten them.

## METAGAMING

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The term “metagaming” has become a buzzword in tabletop roleplaying games, but how big of a deal is it? In this section, we explore different ways you can look at metagaming to optimize the experience of combat at your table.

### CONCEPTUALIZATION

The first issue you run into when discussing metagaming is the very concept, which is players making decisions for their characters based on information their characters don't possess. Somehow, this is commonly regarded as a problem. Can you guess what the problem here is? When players are engaged in combat, they are *always* metagaming. The game is structured such that players are forced to make choices based on the game's mechanics. For instance, the idea that a barbarian can rage twice per day is completely meta. Moreover, the foundations of a good adventuring group are based around meta ideas such as “don't split the party.”

### SOCIAL CONTRACT

The social contract is a fundamental part of every *Dungeons & Dragons* game. The players and the DM all have an assumption of what is and what is not permissible to involve in the game. This can vary drastically from table to table. Metagaming is an example of this at work; one group may find the idea of players giving each other extensive tactical advice during a battle to be unacceptable, while it may be a crucial part of the game for other groups. Before you start holding your players to a particular expectation (and before they start hold each other to their own expectations), you should come to an agreement on what kinds of metagaming are acceptable and what are not during session zero. If these standards don't work out later on, you can always discuss it again and change them.

### IMMERSION

One of the more frequent complaints about metagaming is that it breaks immersion. “Excuse me, but your wizard didn't learn that fire is a weakness of trolls, so I need you to stop ruining the immersion of other players and stick to your character by not casting *fireball*.” Infuriatingly passive-aggressive tones aside, taking this perspective causes more problems than it solves. First of all, in a world filled



with fantasy monsters, a wizard almost certainly would have heard about the nature of trolls and other monsters, even most of the uncommon ones, simply from the stories that would pervade the world. Secondly, if a player is actively suppressing such crucial knowledge, acting as if they didn't is more immersion-breaking than the actual metagaming itself because of the effort involved.

There are certain edge cases where metagaming doesn't make logical sense, from an immersion-focused perspective. For example, a character unearths a never-before-seen monster present only in the 49th lair of the Abyss, and then proceeds to act on all this meta knowledge that influences the entire story because the player happened to have read a very obscure *Dungeons & Dragons* sourcebook. These situations come down to whether your group has determined if it is better to suppress that knowledge, at the cost of player authenticity, or to act on it anyways, at the cost of narrative authenticity. The results will vary depending on the extremity of the situation. Ultimately, if meta conflicts are a big deal to you at a certain part of a story, consider not putting the party in situations where players would have meta knowledge by means such as creating your own monsters.

## GOOD METAGAMING

Despite the fact that the blanket negative connotation that metagaming has been given may be unfair, at least in some situations. There are instances of it that few would disagree are bad: one player getting an unfair advantage over another, the game becoming less fun because one player points out everything that is happening on a meta level, and breaking the group's social contract with regards to when it is okay to metagame.

With that said, there are *good* types of metagaming, or at least potentially good. This includes prosocial discussion among the players about the game, discussion that encourages party cohesion, or gentle advice to new players figuring out how their characters work.

## PLAYERS RUNNING COMBAT

Many DMs struggle with the idea of relinquishing control of the game to players. On the surface, this sounds like an entirely selfish frame of mind. However, when you look deeper into the issue, there are legitimate worries when it comes to player immersion and attempting to tell a story without consensus, trust, or adequate experience. With that said, many other DMs find having players as an extra resource to help run the game benefits everyone at the table, especially in that it can give players something to do between their turns and a greater sense of agency. Whether or not involving the players is for you depends on if you think the costs outweigh the benefits in each situation, as described below. It should be noted that, regardless of whether you think that player participation in these matters fits your style, it is unlikely to be a fruitful endeavor if the players are uninterested in the task to begin with.

## RUNNING CREATURES

One way players can help run combat is by running some of the monsters. In order to do this, the player needs the monster's stat block and a basic overview on how they should roleplay the monster, including alignment, motivations, and potentially, plans. If your players run monsters, it is imperative that you communicate with them how you expect the monsters to behave in combat—are they to be ruthless to the point of sacrificing their lives just to get one more hit on the player? Do they work as a team? Once the players have this information, they can take over and you don't have to think about that monster's hit points, resources, or tactics.

Running allies works much the same way, except that a greater emphasis should be made on how that ally should be roleplayed in combat if they are a notable NPC. If you are worried about the effects of players running everything about a creature or NPC, then you can simply ask a player to track a creature's hit points. This also frees up some mental bandwidth.

*"I see quite clearly that rarely did I stand alone and rarely did I have to stand alone. Always there were friends, true and dear, lending me support even when I believed I did not want it, and when I did not realize they were doing it."*

*-Drizzt Do'Urden*

(THE HALFLING'S GEM, BY R. A. SALVATORE)

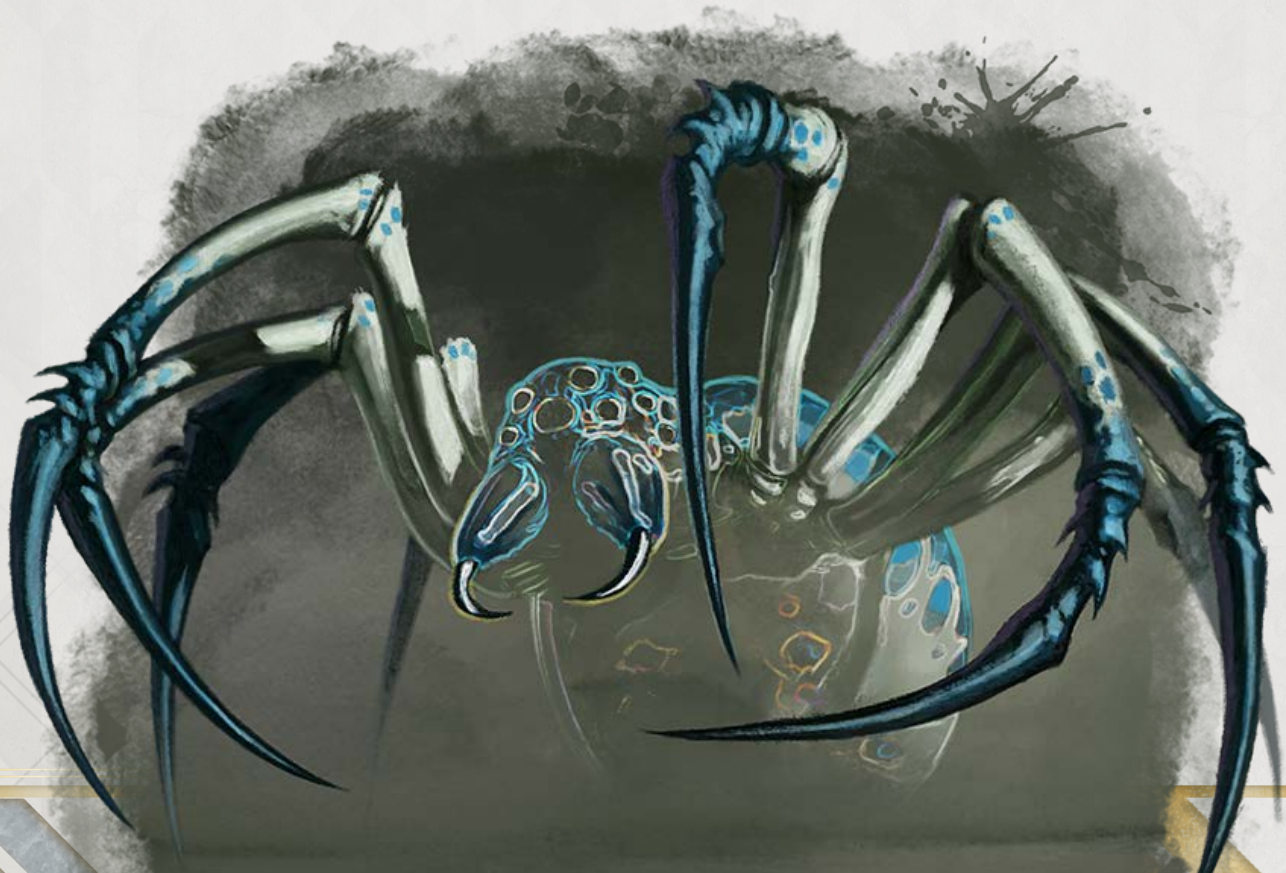
## TRACKING INITIATIVE

Something many DMs dread is tracking initiative. The truth is, there are very simple and effective ways to do this that don't require flash cards or fancy apps. See "Tracking Initiative" on page 24 for more details. Still, even the most experienced DM can accidentally skip a turn. If you don't want to expend mental bandwidth tracking initiative, you can delegate the responsibility to one of your players. Just roll initiative for the monsters and have them record the results.

## PITFALLS

As player-friendly and convenient as player involvement in combat tracking can be, there often arises a number of drawbacks, the extent of which varies situation by situation and table by table. Before you involve players, simply be aware the following may be impacted:

- Slower pacing from players not being as familiar with the material or in perfect sync with the DM.
- Describing a player or monster's actions in combat becomes less fluid if you are not the one to track a monster's hit points and damage.
- Narrating transitions between turns becomes less smooth if you aren't sure who is next in the initiative order.
- Narrative inconsistency from players not having all of the story context when running another character.
- Spoiled surprises for players because of the information given to them.
- You can't cheat (see "Cheating" on page 27) what the players run. This one is particularly noteworthy because of the potential cheating has. It can also simultaneously be viewed as a positive if the game is played more like a wargame.
- If any changes need to be made to the difficulty in the encounter, the fact that the changes are being made is immediately clear to the players, potentially harming immersion.
- Players running both their character and an NPC or monster can make it harder to stay in the mindset of roleplaying their character.
- Players fighting monsters they are also running can diminish the benefits of a group activity.
- If the players play the monsters, describe their actions and the monsters' actions, and track the initiative, you, as the DM won't also be able to enjoy participating in the combat.



## CHAPTER 3

# UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

### FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF

Fifth Edition is an elegant system. It is easy to learn, but can take much longer to understand in all of its nuances. It is set up so that encounters can be balanced according to your preferences. Disregarding the rules of Fifth Edition is a perfectly valid approach. Most tables have their own house rules. However, if you wish to preserve the benefits of using the system mostly intact, it is important that you understand how the system works in practical terms. Moreover, as the DM, the players look to you for guidance on the rules. Being able to make quick-yet-effective judgement calls is an important part of running combat. Understanding the system as it is laid out helps you in every aspect of setting up fun battles, from building encounters to even knowing when to cheat the system.

### ACTION ECONOMY

Central to Fifth Edition's combat system is the idea of action economy; the combat is divided into turns, and each turn, the characters only have a limited number of things that they can do, namely spend movement from their pool, take an action (such as Attack or Dodge), and use a possible bonus action. Reactions can also happen once every round of combat, which is separate from a turn.

Each side in combat is balanced by how many actions it can take. The side that has more actions (generally the players) has a significant advantage over the other because each creature on the side with fewer actions has to divide its attention between more than one target. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* provides evidence for this as encounter difficulties are given a multiplier per the number of enemies involved, not just their cumulative value. Fifth Edition attempts to resolve this issue with concepts such as legendary actions and lair actions when players are fighting boss monsters.

However, some difficulties with solo monsters still remain, namely that the combat lacks a sense of back-and-forth that is present with multiple-enemy encounters. A common and effective alternative is to assign the solo monster two or three minions that don't deal as much damage and have little health compared to the more powerful monster. Ideally, encounters are designed with as many enemies as there are players. In reality, it often doesn't work out that way for narrative and practical reasons. On the practical side of things, a combat with ten participants is going to move more slowly than a combat with six. Additionally, cramming six monsters into a tiny room can create quite a few issues when it comes to determining who can fight whom.

### MOUNTED COMBAT

One of the consistent sources of confusion when it comes to Fifth Edition combat rules are those for mounted combat. The *Player's Handbook* describes it in full detail. In the briefest terms, when you use a creature as a mount, rather than let it act independently, it acts on your initiative and can only take the Dash, Disengage, and Dodge actions. This does in fact mean that, when a character is taking their turn, their mount can also take the Dodge action without interfering with the rider's ability to take whatever action they wish. Alternatively, it means the rider can employ tactics such as using the mount to move in, using their action to Attack, then use the mount's action to Disengage, using the rest of the mount's movement to leave the target's threat range.

Being on a mount, however, doesn't impose any advantage on charging an enemy, at least in the rules as written. One way some tables address this, for those who enjoy the concept of epic cavalry charges, is to confer a +5 bonus to damage rolls when the rider makes a weapon attack immediately after the mount moves at least 15 feet in a straight line. Alternatively, if the rider wishes to use the Shove action instead, the target can be pushed 10 feet away

from the rider on a successful shove. This approach matches the Charger feat.

One final note about mounted combat rules that many DMs overlook is that they specify that a creature must have appropriate anatomy to accommodate any creature that wishes to use it as a mount. This means that, even though a pentadrome possesses all of the other criteria to be used as a mount, it cannot be under most circumstances because its shape isn't suited to carrying humanoids. This misunderstanding became prevalent when the *Unearthed Arcana* playtest rules released a centaur playable race. Centaurs are listed as Medium creatures with the ability to accommodate other Medium creatures on their backs. Consequently, a meme arose of a centaur carrying a stack of other centaurs, overlooking the fact that their anatomy would not be suited to such a task.

## UNDERWATER COMBAT

Although the rules for underwater combat are fairly straight forward on the surface, they are closely tied to other rules, such as swimming and suffocation, leading to questions about how they interact. For example, the rules for underwater combat mention nothing about spellcasting. However, most spells have verbal components, so the question becomes: does being underwater affect spellcasting? If you are going by the letter of the rule, then no, it doesn't affect verbal components. But speaking requires exhalation. Lead designer Jeremy Crawford's unofficial rule on this is that casting a spell with a verbal component underwater with no other means of breathing makes the caster begin to suffocate starting on the next round. Bear in mind this is just how his table runs it, but is helpful nonetheless.

There is also the matter of visibility. If creatures are deep enough underwater, little light permeates the depths. Additionally, creatures without eyes adapted to seeing underwater will suffer from blurry vision. It is up to you to determine the level of visibility. This guide recommends that, humans in fresh water less than 200 feet below the surface, without the aid of magic or technology, treat their surroundings as lightly obscured in a 60-foot radius, and heavily obscured beyond that. As humans get deeper underwater, the area that is lightly obscured shrinks to give way to heavily obscured surroundings.

## HIGH-LEVEL COMBAT

A common complaint about Fifth Edition, and *Dungeons & Dragons* in general, is that, at higher levels, the game begins to fall apart when it comes to balance and mechanical smoothness. Is this true? Yes and no. By the nature of tabletop roleplaying games, the more variables are introduced into a system, the more it begins to suffer from a sort of entropy, where things are more likely to go wrong and it is impossible to account for a given outcome. Combat at higher levels introduces many more variables as characters gain more class features and the number of dice and bonuses increase.

The point where this becomes too evident varies depending on whom you ask. A common level cited is 11th level. Others will argue it is 15th, while some will go all the way to 17th. Designer Mike Mearls has stated that most campaigns don't go beyond 10th level. In addition to new, powerful class features unlocked at these levels, they also correspond to the spells that are unlocked, which have the potential to alter the reality of the world. Some DMs don't want to deal with trying to create a narrative with that, let alone a combat.

Regardless of whether or not the game becomes broken, it undeniably becomes more fantastical, as fighters become capable of inhuman feats. One of the approaches certain DMs take to preserving mechanical integrity and a sense of groundedness is to have the characters no longer advance after 7th level. Instead, they receive other rewards when they would otherwise level up, such as temporary hit points, an additional spell slot, or limited-use bonus to damage. Other possibilities are detailed in chapter 7 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

With all of that said, many of the DMs that insist that high level combat is inherently broken haven't played much of *Dungeons & Dragons'* older editions. Back in the days of 3.5 Edition, there were dozens of supplements that gave additional player options, additional combat rules, spells, and much more. Despite the extreme number of variables present, people still enjoyed combat. The lesson here is that, sometimes, having cool options can outweigh game balance in terms of the fun players have. Nonetheless, at higher levels, combat can become slower and more clunky. As such, learning to run speedy combat (see "Speeding Up Combat" on page 26) becomes all the more important.



## BUILDING ENCOUNTERS

Sun Tzu famously believed that the outcome of battles are decided before they even begin. The same could be said of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Whether or not the players have fun has much to do with how the encounter is set up in the first place, though you do have the advantage of being able to change more things about a battle in the middle of it than a real-world commander. When designing an encounter, you should ask yourself the following questions: under what circumstances is the fight occurring? Would there justifiably be a way for players to avoid the conflict? These questions inform the type of encounter the players will have.

### BALANCE

Many DMs also like to ask “Is the encounter balanced?” Before that, it is better to ask, “Should the encounter even be balanced?” Balance can be important, but its necessity is often overstated. Total balance is an impossible goal.

“But what if I want balanced encounters?” you may ask. The response is that you sometimes should. There are multiple by-the-books ways to do this. One of which is to consult the encounter difficulty section in chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*.

Unfortunately, it would be generous to call this system flawed, at least when used in isolation. The difficulty thresholds don’t account for synergistic combinations of monsters, such as monsters that are good at holding characters in place while another monster deals massive damage. Secondly, the challenge rating is only a rough estimate. More importantly, it assumes an “average party.” Unfortunately, there is no such thing as an average party. The capabilities of each party differ massively from table to table.

However, the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* isn’t useless in this regard. When you design your encounters, take note of their difficulty as described in the encounter difficulty table. Then, figure out how much of a struggle each of these encounters were for your players. With multiple data points, and bearing in mind that the table lists those values with an expectation of 6-8 encounters per day, you should be able to find a baseline for your party’s difficulty threshold, compared to what the *Dungeon Master’s*

*Guide* expects. For example, you may have a canny party and find that a hard encounter for them more aptly matches the description of a medium-difficulty encounter. And if you find the encounter needs to be rebalanced after it has already started, you can always change it. For more information, see the Cheating section of this guide.

With all of that said, balance is still ultimately just a guess. Players can be unpredictable at times, so you never know when the paladin is going to score a critical hit with a smite on top twice in a single battle. It isn’t the end of the world if every encounter is unbalanced. Unbalanced encounters can also be fun. On the easier end of the spectrum, players can enjoy occasionally flattening a few ill-prepared monsters. Asymmetric encounters that favor the monsters, on the other hand, are opportunities for the players to use clever tactics or outside-the-box thinking to avoid the encounter in the first place. In other words, they solve their problems with something other than a frontal assault, for a change.



## ENEMIES

Enemies are the foundation of every combat encounter setup. As such, you are going to want to pick the ones that best fit the situation, and in order to do that, you have to know what monsters are available to you. However, before you begin dismaying that you don't have the entire *Monster Manual* memorized, there are some simple tricks we can use to narrow this down. First and foremost, you want to pick enemies that make sense in the context of the story; if the characters are exploring a desert, an encounter with yetis won't make any sense. If you don't know what kinds of monsters fit for the area, consult appendix B of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for a list of monsters by environment. After that, determine what range of CRs the players are prepared to face. D&D Beyond offers a great set of filters to find the exact monsters that are appropriate for your encounter. After just a few steps of narrowing things down, you should be left with only a handful of official *Dungeons & Dragons* monsters.

It is at this point you should start considering what abilities they have that will make the combat interesting. Of course, core abilities such as a ghost's Stench trait are important, but you should also look at the broader picture of what kind of tactical role that monster fills; are they a tank that soaks up lots of damage? Are they fast but fragile damage-dealers? Do they specialize in debuffing characters? The kind of encounter you want to run should inform the response. For instance, if you want the characters to fend off an ambush, pick stealthy monsters like bugbears.

Knowing that there are implicitly different tactical classifications of monsters, it becomes essential to consider the variety of monsters in a combat. Having multiple types of monsters in play helps make the experience much more interesting; an encounter with five hobgoblins alone can be a slog as the characters just do the same thing round after round, trying to get through their armor. Instead, running three hobgoblins and three goblin archers gives the players other avenues to consider and tactics to employ. Not only can fighting the same monster over and over again get repetitive from a mechanical perspective, it is also boring from a narrative perspective.

While monsters' CRs does give a general idea of how powerful an enemy is, it is only an estimate. With that said, CR can still be useful. However, you are going to want to look at other factors when

determining how difficult an encounter you should create. The first of which is how much fighting have the characters already done up to this point, or how much do you expect them to have done? A party depleted of resources can be challenged by even weaker monsters. Secondly, you should look at the monster's maximum damage across all of its features and estimate how well you think the party can cope with that output. Generally speaking, a party below Fifth level will struggle with CR 5 and higher monsters because their hit points are so low and their AC isn't high enough to withstand more than a couple of attacks from such creatures, making combat an extremely volatile affair, even if it is a party of five 3rd-level characters versus a single CR 5 monster. Something the numbers in a stat block cannot tell you is how tactics play into the situation. A highly synergized group of monsters, even weak ones, can be devastating against a party that doesn't use the right tactics. For determining the effects of tactics when setting up an encounter, you must rely on your reason and experience.

Once you know how strong each monster is, you need to decide how many there will be. More monsters make the combat more difficult, not just because of the extra damage to the characters per round, but also because more monsters means the balance of the action economy starts to change to their favor. This can cause problems many DMs. On one hand, you want a balanced action economy with around as many monsters as there are player characters. On the other, combats with more monsters slow the affair down substantially. Additionally, there is more bookkeeping to do.

There are some ways to mitigate these effects. For one, you can group multiple monsters of the same type into the same initiative order. For example, if you have six goblins, you can group them into three pairs. Alternatively, if you want lots of monsters, you can utilize the mass combat rules (see "Optional Rules" page 28). However, at the end of the day, it becomes a matter of striking a balance between speed and keeping things interesting for the players, and every DM falls somewhere different on that spectrum.

## NUMBER OF ENCOUNTERS

Chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* states "Assuming typical adventuring conditions and average luck, most adventuring parties can handle about six to eight medium or hard encounters per

day.” This has been a source of consternation among many DMs because some have taken it to mean that a party *should* have six to eight encounters per day. Lead rules designer, Jeremy Crawford, clarified that the “six to eight” range is not required and there is no minimum; that number only indicates how long it takes to drain a party of resources. However, fellow lead designer Mike Mearls did confirm that “six to eight” was assumed during Fifth Edition’s design, but also stated that is only a “theoretical target” and that there are “a lot of variables.”

So is six to eight encounters what you should run in an adventuring day? Maybe, if that is the type of game you want to run. However, our research indicates people have significantly fewer encounters than that, citing that running so many encounters where there is no chance of failure (per the description of a medium-difficulty encounter) becomes very tedious. Moreover, conventional spellcasters like wizards feel behind the rest of the party in terms of their combat effectiveness, while players of martial classes complain of not being able to use their cool class features often enough and are left with too few options. Ultimately, even if the system is designed to accommodate six to eight encounters, stuffing in combat where it feels out of place and unwanted is going to make the game far less fun than a little unbalancing.

Unfortunately, some classes like the fighter and warlock depend on short rests, so running only one or two difficult encounters per day puts them at a significant disadvantage. If you run fewer combats during an adventuring day, you have a few options. The first is to use the “gritty realism” resting variant described in chapter 9 of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* — a short rest requires 8 hours and a long rest requires 7 days (though many groups reduce the latter to one or two days in a safe location). This forces the players not to squander their resources and just take a long rest whenever things begin to feel challenging. However, if you want to preserve the more heroic style of *Dungeons & Dragons*, another option is to simply change short rest features so that they can be used three times as often, but can only be used again after a long rest. This doesn’t work for all features, such as Second Wind, which don’t thematically make sense to be used multiple times, consecutively. In these cases, increasing the effect size is also a viable solution. Finally, if you are taking this approach, you should consider changing the warlock’s spell slots to match that of traditional spellcasters like the wizard. If neither of these two

options seem appealing to you, the third option is to simply leave the system as is. The game will not break, and the difference between short rest and long rest classes isn’t too catastrophic, even if there are fewer fights.

## TRACKING INITIATIVE

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Initiative is a simple mechanic that many DMs make more difficult than it needs to be. Here are a few common suggestions and why they aren’t optimal.

### SHOUTING OUT NUMBER RANGES

This is where the DM starts off by saying, “Anyone get a 25-21? No?” Then moves on to “20-16?” recording players who fall within those ranges.

**Why it isn’t optimal.** Calling out those additional categories is unnecessary while the excitement for the upcoming battle dwindles. Additionally, it is typical for at least two players to land in the same category, so you have to take that extra step in determining which one is going first anyways, and that is to say nothing of the monsters.

### FLASHCARDS OR PINS

Many DMs print out cards of the monsters they will be running in an encounter, and have one for the characters as well. When initiative happens, they arrange the cards in descending order. Alternatively, the same thing is done with different labels pinned to the DM screen.

**Why it isn’t optimal.** You still have to go through the trouble of figuring out who goes where on the initiative order, so you aren’t saving any time in that regard. Furthermore, you don’t have anywhere to track monster hit points and conditions unless you are okay with writing over your own flashcards or writing on a separate piece of paper, and if the latter, why even bother with this method in the first place? Additionally, these cards, and even sometimes the pins, take up physical space in your seating arrangement that could be used for other important notes.

### INITIATIVE-TRACKING APPS

Being that it is the 21st century, people turn to technology as an answer to this so-called problem. Initiative-tracking apps allow you to input which creatures go where in the initiative order. Some even roll initiative for you or let you adjust the order.

**Why it isn't optimal.** All initiative trackers that have been examined so far for the purposes of researching this guide all suffer from the same problem: if you are using a tablet or phone, it takes longer to input the names of the monsters than it would to write them down, and the same could be said about notating changes in monster hit points. If you are using a laptop with a full keyboard, keeping that up on the screen, which is required if you want to keep track of who is where in combat, prevents you from looking at other notes. Finally, these apps don't let you write notes next to the monster, which would also take longer on a tablet or phone.

## THE SIMPLE WAY

Simply go around the table, quickly asking each player what they rolled on initiative and write down the results on a sheet of paper with numbered lines. That's it. You aren't required to futz around with apps, call out number ranges, or drop any flash cards. You have plenty of room to track hit points and write notes. This guide also comes with printer-friendly, numbered sheets optimized for this purpose.

## USING HOMEBREW MATERIALS

Homebrew content can be one of the more fun parts of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This guide even features some homebrew content. However, you should be careful to only use materials that will run smoothly in your game; if a CR 6 homebrew monster has eight abilities, five actions, two reactions, and spellcasting, it is probably going to be very clunky in a game, which is why official monsters have more elegant stat blocks. Less is often more with class and magic item design as well. And although balance isn't the most important part of homebrew content, things that are wildly unbalanced can cause one player's character to become more powerful than the others, which is usually unpleasant for the rest of the players. If you aren't familiar enough with the system to ascertain if a homebrew is balanced, pay attention to the language. Good homebrew rules typically feature concise language and use terms consistent with official Fifth Edition books.

## 6+ MEMBER PARTIES

Official *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures state that they are designed for between three and six players. Unfortunately, we don't always get to pick our party size. Here are some tips for managing large parties in combat:

**Use the Speeding Up Combat guidelines.** The number one issue with running battles with large parties is how long it can take for a player's turn to come back around. A combat with eight players isn't twice as slow as a combat with four players, it is more so because of the additional monsters needed to balance the action economy. Because of this, you want to make combats go faster.

**Avoid solo monsters.** This may seem counterintuitive because you want to keep combats shorter. However, as a result of how the action economy works (see "Action Economy" on page 20), a party with seven members will demolish a single monster before it can so much as raise a hand, or it will kill a character outright because of the power differential needed to challenge such a large party. Using monsters with legendary actions and lair actions, as well as environmental hazards (see "Battlefields" on page 42) can help mitigate these factors, but prepare to give the monster more hit points than you normally would with a monster of comparable CR against a smaller party.



### ***Cut out unnecessary combat encounters.***

Dedicating time in a session to roleplay and exploration is important not only because the vast majority of players like it, but also because hours of combat make the activity less enjoyable; every game needs its upswings and its downswings. If you want to avoid spending two thirds or more of your game time doing combat, you have to cut down on how often it occurs. However, in order to keep up the drama, you should increase the encounter's difficulty with the aim of draining as many resources as you would with more less-challenging encounters. For more on this, see "Action Economy."

**Delegate tasks.** "Players Running Combat" on page 18 covers the different ways players can join in on orchestrating battles.

**Larger battlefields.** A 15-foot by 20-foot room is going to be nigh impossible to run a combat for any party with seven members when you account for the space the monsters take up. Players and monsters alike need room to maneuver in order to implement the tactics that make combat fun, so make those combat areas much bigger, especially if you run combat on a grid.

**Be willing to take control of the situation.** The larger the table, the more likely it is that a single remark sets off a discussion that derails the entire battle. In this situation, it is your job as the DM to step in and remind everybody that they are in the middle of a fight.

## **SPEEDING UP COMBAT**

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"Combat is too slow" is frequently listed as players' number one issue with combat in *Dungeons & Dragons*. A fast-paced combat is usually more exciting, and players have to spend less time between their turns. Here is how you can cut down time spent on doing things you don't have to do. Some of these may seem fairly trivial, but the seconds add up into minutes, and the minutes into hours.

### **SAVING TIME ON INITIATIVE**

A dirty secret of being the DM is that you don't have to roll initiative for monsters. Even if this approach isn't right for you, you can still save time on

initiative by pre-rolling for the monsters, or even the player characters, if the players are okay with that. Also, avoid the "Speed Factor Initiative" optional rule in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* if you don't want to spend minutes every round rewriting initiative.

### **SHORTER MONSTER TURNS**

Shorter monster turns starts with the monsters you select. Monsters with fewer abilities that take less time to use, such as a dire wolf's pack tactics will make their turns quicker. Just be careful not to make the encounters feel too one-dimensional or indistinct. Additionally, picking monsters that are more damage-dealers than damage-takers brings things to a swift end but still tax the players. Beware of encounters where a monster's damage is too high compared to its hit points. This can result in volatility, however — the players defeating their foes before they can act or their foes destroying half the party in a single turn, though higher-level parties are at less risk of this. Finally, avoid spellcasters unless you have their spells memorized or you narrow the spells they use to only a couple.

Simply knowing how the monsters you are using work is essential to running fast combat because you don't have to pause in your narration or monster's turn to act. One number in particular you should know is the average damage for their attacks. Instead of rolling for damage, simply use this number every time they hit (unless it was a critical hit).

### **SAVING TIME ON PLAYER TURNS**

The tricks for speeding up player turns are simple and straightforward:

- Make sure all the players know their characters.
- Have players roll their d20 for attack rolls and their damage dice at the same time instead of waiting to see if they hit before rolling damage.
- Employ the 5-second rule (see page 12).
- Reveal monsters' defenses such as AC and potentially damage resistances so that players don't have to wait for an answer as to whether their attack hits or to calculate the total damage.

"Where in all the nine hells did you ever find the notion that I would fight fair?"

-Drizzt Do'Urden (THE ICEWIND DALE TRILOGY, BY R. A. SALVATORE)

## SAVING TIME ON NARRATION

The frantic pace of combat can be mirrored in a fast-paced narration style that separates itself from exploration and roleplay. This also serves the purpose of cutting down on time. Speak quickly but with gravity, and don't make the content of what you are saying any less satisfying. For more information on satisfying narration, see page 36.

## ENDING EARLY

Not every fight is to the death, and not every fight needs to drag on longer than is fun. As the DM, it is perfectly within your purview to end combat early. For more on this, see "Ending Combat Early" below.

## CHEATING

Cheating isn't only done by DMs on a power trip. It can also be an opportunity for you, as the DM, to exercise your unique power for the betterment of the game. As the *Player's Handbook* states, the rules are "infinitely flexible" to you, and as long as you honor the spirit of the game — cooperation — and use this power to help make things more fun for the entire table, then you should utilize it. Here are a number of cheats that can situationally make combat more fun:

### SCHRODINGER'S ORC

If you use a DM screen or laptop, the players cannot see the stats of your monsters, if you aren't having them run the monsters (see "Players Running Combat" for more on that). This has the major benefit of being able to adjust a monster's statistics on the fly. Want to avoid killing everyone in the party but didn't expect the players to be momentarily vulnerable to your next big monster's special ability? That ability doesn't have to exist. Have the players reduced your boss to zero hit points and potentially caused an anti-climactic moment? Add a "second stage" by replenishing many of its hit points and sending in some of its minions. When doing this, it is important to be mindful not only of what you think is appropriate, but also how the players will have the most fun, be that in the short *or* long term.

### ADJUSTING ON THE FLY

Similar to the concept of "Schrodinger's Orc" (see above) is the idea that you can alter the parameters of the encounter itself to better suit the situation. The

most notable example of this is changing the number and/or type of monsters present in an encounter. This is a simple but effective way of changing things quickly in a way that requires no preparation beforehand, assuming you know the new monsters. You can also adjust battlefields on the fly. Maybe you only just now realized that putting a chasm between the characters and the boss was an interesting idea, and so you can.

## NOT ROLLING FOR INITIATIVE

Did you know you don't have to roll for the monsters' initiative? While this notion may cause some DMs to immediately clutch at their pearls, rest assured that it can be done both fairly and to the benefit of the player's enjoyment. When you call for initiative, players are usually eager to get into combat, and you can help speed that along by skipping rolling for the monsters — something that generally consumes a fair amount of time.

Instead of rolling, record all of the players' responses first, then write in each of the monsters somewhere between each of the players, taking into account what those monsters' initiative bonus. For example, if half of the players rolled higher than an 18 on their initiative, and the monsters' have a +0 modifier to their initiative rolls, you likely want a couple of the players to go before you start plotting in the monsters between the other players. The reason you separate out the monsters between the players is to help maintain a balance with the action economy. In this way, not rolling for initiative can make the game more balanced.

## ENDING COMBAT EARLY

A mistake that many novice DMs make is assuming that combat can only end when all the monsters are reduced to 0 hit points. This is untrue. Sometimes, the monsters run away. Other times, they surrender and, on some occasions where player victory is imminent without risk of them losing many resources, you can simply announce that the players finish off the remaining monsters without going through the formal combat mechanics. However, if you take this approach, you want to give a satisfying narration to that ending.

## FUDGING DICE ROLLS

Declaring a result that is not reflected in the roll of the dice, otherwise known as "fudging" dice rolls, is a

controversial subject among DMs. This guide takes the perspective that it is like any other form the DM can take when disregarding the rules, albeit with an element of deception. As stated before, it is the intent here that matters. Are you fudging the roll because you think changing it would make the game more fun in the short or long term? Or are you fudging the roll because you didn't like the fact that the villain you designed didn't kill one of the characters? A common, but also misguided, reason DMs fudge dice rolls is to shield players from the consequences of their actions. In any case, if you decide to fudge a roll, don't tell your players, even after the session. If you did it because you wanted to protect them, they may take it as you treating them like they are incapable, and if you did it because you wanted things to be harder for them, they may view the act as antagonistic. Fudging dice isn't always out of the question, but if your story truly depends so heavily on the outcome of a single die roll, consider severing that dependence and simply not rolling in the first place.

## OPTIONAL RULES

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The various house rules that different tables use are too varied to cover in this guide. However, the *Dungeon Master's Guide* presents many options that you may wish to consider.

### INITIATIVE VARIANTS

In "Not Rolling for Initiative" on page 27, the guide discusses how not rolling can benefit your game. The initiative variant, Initiative Score, chapter 9 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* poses a similar concept, where character's initiative is always 10 + their Dexterity modifier. Similarly to not rolling for initiative, this method is fast. You can just print out a fixed sheet with the characters' names on it and get to player's turns instantly. The downside is that there is no variation in the initiative order, leading to more predictable combats and characters with lower Dexterity being more likely to be consistently left out. Additionally, if you also use Initiative Score for the monsters, it can wreak havoc on the action economy.

The second initiative variant is Side Initiative, wherein players roll for initiative as a group and decide who goes first among them. On the positive side, players can engage in some tactical thinking even before combat starts, and you don't have to worry about tracking initiative yourself. On the other hand, it probably isn't going to be any faster (in fact,

it may be slower) than standard initiative because of the time it can take for players to deliberate. Additionally, the action economy is also greatly damaged in this process because there is no back-and-forth between the sides.

The third initiative variant is Speed Factor Initiative. In this variant, players receive modifiers to their rolls depending on the action they intend to take that turn. For example, attacking with a heavy melee weapon conveys a -2 penalty. This option is great for tactical thinking, getting your players to consider their strategies and adjust them every round, but is also terrible for speed of combat, given that you are required to go through the process every round.

### ACTION OPTIONS AND HITTING COVER

Chapter 9 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* also offers a collection of simple but effective options for character actions. They include climbing onto a bigger creature, disarm, mark, overrun, shove aside, tumble, and hitting cover. None of these options will break your game. In fact, they can be a nice way to spice up combat. Just understand that players who are less experienced may not find these options very enticing, and that monsters can use them too!

### FLANKING

Flanking is an optional rule laid out in chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for use when playing on a grid. In this optional rule a character can gain advantage on attack rolls against an enemy if they and an ally are standing on opposite sides of that enemy's space. This is a nice way to encourage the use of tactical movement to gain an edge in a fight. Unfortunately, the benefit gained far outweighs the inconvenience in the overwhelming majority of circumstances, making it too easy to obtain advantage, when normally one is required to inflict a condition on an enemy such as prone or stunned. Moreover, gaining advantage in these ways is the purview of many class features, and by offering advantage so easily, those classes suffer as a result.

### WEAK POINTS AND CALLED SHOTS

A mechanic commonly seen in video games and at many *Dungeons & Dragons* tables is the "weak point." This can appear as a soft, vulnerable spot between seams in an enemy's armor or a small target such as an eye. This concept goes hand-in-hand with the idea

of called shots, where players are allowed to target specific areas of a creature with their characters' weapon attacks. Commonly a DM will say that characters can make a called shot against an enemy's weak point, imposing disadvantage on their attack roll, but making the attack more devastating or inflicting some condition should the attack hit. An example is a character targeting a giant's knee. If the character were to hit, the giant might need to make a Constitution saving throw against whatever DC the DM set or fall prone. These types of mechanics are well-suited to boss battles. However, you should be careful about the precedents you set with these rules.

If your table wishes to use them more often, a standardized approach to called shots is to have the player designate which area on the table below they wish to target. The attacker then makes the attack roll with disadvantage. A called shot cannot be performed if the attacker already has disadvantage on the attack roll. If the attack hits, the target must make a Constitution saving throw with a DC equal to 8 + the ability modifier used by the attacker for the attack (usually Strength or Dexterity) + the attacker's proficiency bonus. If the target fails its saving throw, consult the table below to determine the effects. Bear in mind that these rules are designed for humanoid. Other creatures may not be affected the same. For instance, a called shot would be impossible on a black pudding.

LOCATION	EFFECT
Arm	The target has disadvantage on the next attack it makes with that arm.
Hamstring	The target's speed is reduced to 5 feet and it cannot take the Dash action until the end of its next turn.
Hand or Claw	The target drops whatever it is holding in that hand, but has advantage on its Constitution saving throw if it is holding an item in both hands.
Knee	The target falls prone if it is standing.
Head	The target suffers disadvantage on all ability checks until the start of its next turn.
Wing	The target's fly speed becomes 0 until the end of its next turn. If it is already flying, at the start of its turn it must land by the fastest route possible and thereafter has its fly speed reduced to 0.

## INJURIES

Chapter 9 also offers an optional injuries table for when creatures are reduced to 0 hit points. The

options are well-designed, if a bit harsh at times. The harshness can be abated by replacing "Lose an arm or a hand" and the "Lose a foot or leg" with a broken limb of either variety. If you wish to make the minor injuries more serious, you can add a costly material component (which the spell consumes) to any healing spells used to repair the broken limb. Injuries can be a great way to impose a sense of vulnerability on the party, which is well-suited to horror and survival campaigns.

## MORALE

Another mechanic presented in chapter 9 is morale — rules for instances which creatures must make a Wisdom saving throw or flee the combat. Unfortunately, this rule isn't one size fits all; certain creatures simply would be inclined to flee, even if they weren't immune to the frightened condition and failed a Wisdom saving throw. This guide recommends that you try to roleplay the monsters to decide if they would flee, and if you can't decide, use the optional morale rules.

## MASS COMBAT

Because it is mechanically impractical to have a turn for every single creature in a battle of dozens or hundreds of combatants, there are several approaches to handling mass combat efficiently. Chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* refers to its method as "Handling mobs." In essence, it involves rolling a single d20 for the attacks of each mob, the number of fighters in each of which determining what result is needed to score a hit. It is a handy approach, but has a couple flaws. Firstly, it adds more calculations to the combat, which can turn off some DMs who don't want to use up time doing math. The second is that the process of dealing damage is still inefficient because each hit is damage is calculated in the same way it would be if an individual monster had scored several hits, and each hit must be allocated to specific creatures. Finally, it doesn't address the use of special abilities that creatures might possess.

Wizards of the Coast provided an alternate way of running mass combat in an [Unearthed Arcana article](#). It allows for larger battles than the rules in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and goes into more depth on factors such as morale, critical events, and challenge rating.

Instead of bothering with statistics and dice, a common way of handling mass combat is with a



narrative approach. The battle is narrated as a constantly evolving struggle that wages around the characters. Unfortunately, this method isn't ideal for player engagement unless the table is okay with ignoring the rules of combat for a time and simply narrating the outcomes. Nonetheless, this guide strongly recommends using the narrative approach when the characters aren't directly involved in the battle.

When the players start to get involved, however, consider forming squads. Squads are collections of Small or Medium-sized creatures that fight as a single unit, similar to how swarms of animals work in the *Monster Manual*, using a single stat block. This way, hit points and attacks are all handled quickly and efficiently, and the squad can be given special abilities like other monsters. This guide offers a collection of squad stat blocks you can use in your battles, as well as a guide to making more in the supplementary materials included with this product.

When running mass combat, there are some important elements to consider. Exciting descriptions of the battle unfolding around the characters are essential to conveying the scale of the conflict and selling the sense of awe and chaos that comes from large engagements. See "Descriptions" on page 36 for more on how to provide interesting narration. Second, players should have a goal beyond killing as many enemies as possible. Present them with objectives or strategic opportunities to affect the overall outcome of the battle. After all, they are the heroes of the story, but battles aren't won by hacking down a few basic soldiers. They are won by exploiting weaknesses in an enemy's battle plan and negating their strategic advantages. These player actions should have consequences in the battle at large; even if defeat is inevitable, players should still see that what they did had an effect over its course, and possibly what happens after it is over.



## CHAPTER 4

# GRIDS VERSUS THEATER OF THE MIND

Most DMs run combat in one of two ways: using a grid or theater of the mind. Depending on your conceptualization of these two methods, there could also be a third: abstract maps. For the purposes of this section, abstract maps is included in the theater of the mind section because effectively using them requires utilizing theater of the mind techniques. The aim of this section is to help you make an informed decision about when you want to run which types of combat, and to provide tips on running each.

### PLAYING ON A GRID

Throughout this guide, running combat by using physical objects (such as miniatures or tokens) and measurable distances on a surface is referred to as “playing on a grid,” though most might say “playing with miniatures.” Of course, it is possible to play this way without a grid. In fact, hex maps are quite common, but the term “grid” will be used for shorthand.

The word “miniatures” isn’t used as a general descriptor because it perpetuates the most harmful myth about playing on a grid: you are required to have “real” miniatures for all the monsters you use. This is a recipe for making your combat less fun. One possible outcome is that you decide that you simply use what is at your disposal. However, inevitably, you don’t possess every miniature for every monster you would need for a battle, or that is written in the adventure guide. In this case, you must either forgo an ideal monster in favor of one that you own or using a miniature that doesn’t fit the description provided, negating the reason to even own a specific miniature to begin with. Even if you spend thousands of dollars buying every miniature for every monster listed in an official *Dungeons & Dragons* book, you will still lack the miniatures for homebrew monsters that weren’t designed with a particular miniature in mind. Another reason to avoid requiring miniatures to represent specific monsters is because both you and the players are more likely to start relying on the

miniature itself to describe the situation rather than using a narrated description. Even the most talented painter cannot convey the terrifying roar or hideous smell of a monster via a 28mm miniature. However, when players are made to use their imagination, they are able to fill in the blanks with sensory information that works for them.

Another outcome of believing that miniatures are necessary for grid play is that you decide that grid play simply isn’t worth it for the aforementioned reasons. In this case, you are shutting yourself off what could end up being your preferred style of play.

### TOKENS

The solution to the “real miniatures” problem is simply to use cutout tokens. This guide provides multiple sheets of tokens you can easily print out on 8.5”x11” paper, paste to a more firm surface (light cardboard works best), and cut out. The result is that you have all the visual aids you need for only a few dollars at most. The tokens provided are not all the same. Some of them represent different types of creatures depending on their battlefield role or natural traits, such as flight. This lets players distinguish one type of monster from another, and for you to still create rich descriptions.

### THE JOYS OF MINIATURES

None of the problems previously mentioned are meant to disparage those who enjoy the miniatures themselves. Having your own collection of miniatures is a very rewarding prospect for many, especially if you take the time to assemble and paint them yourself, which can be developed into wonderful artistic talent. There may also be some occasions where you are willing to spend the money to make sure you have the exact miniatures you want for a specific encounter you have planned, perhaps a boss fight. These special cases often lean to players becoming very excited for the fight.

## PROS AND CONS OF GRID PLAY

When choosing between playing on a grid or theater of the mind for your table, you should consider the good as well as the bad, and decide which factors are more important to you.

### PROS

**Easy to learn.** With the presence of visual aids, you needn't worry about mastering how to convey zones, abstract distances, or which monsters are where without breaking the narrative flow of combat. Chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* adequately explains playing with a grid in only two pages.

**Everyone is on the same page.** Instead of boring your players with descriptions of how far away things are, the answer is already known on a grid. Everyone knows the shape of the room, distances between points, and who is fighting whom.

**Disability-friendly.** Many *Dungeons & Dragons* players have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which makes it more difficult to visualize abstract representations of an environment. Playing on a grid solves this problem by providing concrete spatial information.

**Advanced tactics.** What many hardcore players enjoy the most out of grid combat is the ability to employ sophisticated tactics during a battle. With a grid, you have more options to engage in specific maneuvers and setups that are simply impossible for all the players and the DM to coordinate without a map.

**Dungeon exploration.** It is far easier for players to get a sense of the dungeon they are exploring when there is a map provided, as most adventures come with. Using a drawn or printed map of a dungeon and hiding unexplored areas underneath paper can be a great way for players to feel like they are discovering things as they progress.

**Fun setups.** If you are someone who collects miniatures, it can be fun to set up terrain and other things to make a scene really pop.

### CONS

**Slower.** Taking a turn in grid combat requires the extra time of physically interacting with the mini or token, which usually takes longer than a quick description of an action.

**It can feel like a wargame.** This isn't necessarily a detriment — wargames can be lots of fun — and many DMs like to run their games as wargames, but if your sessions are narrative-heavy, it might start to feel like you are playing a different game when initiative is rolled.

**Disengaged imaginations.** Running combat on a grid employs different cognitive processes than theater of the mind, and the thoughts that go through the brain become less focused on the internal movie and more on the pieces on the map. Consequently, players often conjure less vivid imagery in their minds.

## THEATER OF THE MIND

Those who avoid theater of the mind frequently fall into one of two contradictory camps: those that say that it is too simple, and those that find it too difficult. The issue is that there is no standardized way of adjudicating many core aspects of combat like distance and position, let alone how to communicate things effectively to your players. As a result, some people spend little effort in trying to iron out the details of combat, and end up running a very simplified scenario. Others grasp for the correct words to use to get players on the same page in an attempt to preserve tactical nuance. In this sense,



both of the groups opposed to theater of the mind are correct. However, there are ways to help get players on the same page and allow for at least some level of tactical complexity. Mike Shea wrote a great series of three articles for D&D Beyond entitled, [Why Run Combat in the Theater of the Mind?](#), [How to Run Combat in the Theater of the Mind](#), and [Adjudicating Edge Cases in Theater of the Mind](#). Much of the content from those articles informs parts of this section.

## WHAT IS THEATER OF THE MIND?

Theater of the mind is the least structured form of combat, requiring no tools and focusing on imagination. Shea explains it as the mode “In which DMs describe the situation, players describe their intent, and the DMs adjudicate the results. In this style, combat happens completely in the narrative. We just talk.” Removing the figurative guide rails is a daunting prospect for a lot of DMs — a simultaneous feeling of having too much control (in regards to needing to coordinate everything mentally) and too little (in regards to player interpretation). Learning to relinquish control and go with the flow is a key aspect of running theater of the mind. Ultimately, much of the skill involved with theater of the mind is to go with what makes sense to you in the edge cases rather than worry about clear-cut rules, because those are frequently inapplicable.

## TRUST AND INTENT

This guide discusses the subject of trust in chapter 1. Essentially, you must foster the kind of relationship where the players trust you with their dear characters. Never is this more true than with theater of the mind combat, wherein players must take it on faith that you aren’t twisting or misinterpreting their words, and that you are holding all the events of a battle in your head as you described them. In return, you should extend this kind of trust to your players as well when they take their turns in combat in order to encourage them to be creative. If you are ever unsure about what they are hoping to accomplish, always ask for clarification. Then, when you feel like you have a good enough handle on their desires, do your best to translate that player’s intent into the game’s reality while considering what rolls (if any) should be made in the situation.

## DESCRIPTIONS

One of the major advantages of theater of the mind is that players make greater use of their imaginations, allowing you to paint a more cinematic scene. For general advice on descriptions, see page 36. Don’t forget that, with theater of the mind, you have more freedom to describe things that aren’t written in the rules, such as the classic swinging from a chandelier.

Also, it is important to remember to update the description of the scene from the character’s perspective each time their turn comes around. This way, they have a clearer understanding of the situation. You don’t need to go into extravagant detail every turn. Just remind the player if there is something serious like a hostile creature within 5 feet or a downed ally, but the general scene should also be refreshed in the players’ minds once every round.

Descriptions also serve a functional purpose. Giving each monster of its type a distinguishing feature helps players remember which is which. This could be as simple as “the half-orc” and “the human” if there is a group of bandits with only one of each type, or it could be something more flavorful such as “the zombie with its entrails falling out” and “the zombie with a sharp bone sticking out of its stump of an arm.” These descriptions should be shortened for ease of use.

## DISTANCE

Being entirely precise with distances in theater of the mind is practically impossible. Consequently, you should think of distances in abstract terms. When a battle begins, explain how far each of the monsters and points of interest are from the characters, relative to their position. For instance, you could say, “The hag crouches in the mud, 50 feet away from you, while her zombies, 25 feet away, start closing the distance.” Then, each time a monster moves, state how far and in what direction it does so. Using landmarks such as “the stump sticking out of the mud,” can help establish positions. However, it often may be best just to keep things simple. Mike Shea provides the rule of thumb for players that, unless they are told otherwise, they can assume that enemies are within 25 feet, opening up a larger number of options for the player.

But what about areas of effect? How do we know how many orcs were caught in that *fireball*? Luckily, the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* already has this covered in chapter 8 under “Adjudicating Areas of Effect.” It provides a chart for many enemies each effect will hit based on its shape (such as a cone or

sphere) and its size. Sometimes, however, you are required to make a different determination based on what makes sense in that situation.

## ABSTRACT MAPS

If you are unable to communicate essential information about the battle with words alone, it is okay to fall back on quick visual aids. A dry or wet-erase surface, such as a whiteboard or battle mat, works well for simple diagrams. There are also other ways to quickly convey visual distances while still encouraging the use of imagination that theater of the mind offers. No matter how you do it, abstract maps should be quick to draw, lest they defeat the purpose of being abstract. It is even possible to make abstract maps with sticky notes, notating each room or area around a landmark.

## PROS AND CONS OF THEATER OF THE MIND

Like combat on a grid, theater of the mind has some situations in which it is more useful than others.

### PROS

**Conducive to player imagination.** Players put more effort into visualizing the scene if they are not relying on miniatures to do the work for them. Not being constrained by a grid also gets them to think more outside of the box on their turn.

**Less rules-focused.** This point isn't necessarily a benefit if your table prefers to run the rules as written, but it can be appealing to those who are less concerned with mechanical balance.

**No equipment needed.** You don't need to take the time to lay out a battle mat, draw out a scene, or otherwise futz around with any physical objects, let alone spend money on them.

**Smoother transitions.** In theater of the mind, the shift from roleplay to combat is more subtle and doesn't feel as much like you have started to play a different game.

**Quicker pacing.** Because there is often no need to pause in theater of the mind, except to roll dice, combat can flow more quickly than in other styles of play.

### CONS

**Reliance on DMs.** If you don't have all the information straight in their head or don't communicate it properly to the players, the entire

combat can be thrown off. Without an objective instrument such as grid, the players just have to trust that you are doing everything correctly.

**Hard to master.** Although this form of combat may be the easiest to pick up, learning how to effectively convey all of the necessary information in a way that doesn't break the flow requires a good deal of experience. Starting off with smaller, less complex encounters may provide an easier learning curve.

**Breaking of immersion.** Just as immersion can be heightened in theater of the mind, it can also be more easily shattered as a result of an incongruity between what the DM imagines and what the player imagines.

**Difficulty with visualization.** Each person's ability to visualize abstract information is different. As mentioned previously, individuals with ASD have a tougher time with this, and so theater of the mind may pose a greater challenge to them as a result.

**Lack of tactical options.** A lot of the nuances of the game are lost when combat is entirely abstract. For example, because distance is an imprecise thing, characters with a slightly greater movement speed may lose out on that advantage.

## ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

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Even though you may prefer one method of running combat over another, it is important to remember that you can use both. Mike Shea described the different modes as different tools. Therefore, you should pick the tool that is best for your table.

### ANOTHER TOOL FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

Here is an example method of play, partially inspired by *FATE*, that utilizes abstract maps, retaining many benefits from theater of the mind but more clearly defining the rules.

The theater of combat is divided into zones. Each zone is conceptualized as being a 20-foot square, but doesn't always have to be. A single room can have multiple zones. Each zone is defined by a descriptor, such as "the area with the ruined wall," and "the rubble-strewn field." Have a unique feature for each zone to identify them, and different zones will sometimes confer different effects such as the ruined wall providing cover against ranged attacks or the rubble-strewn area counting as difficult terrain. For more examples of how terrain can affect a battle, see "Battlefields" on page 42.

The most effective way of conveying the position of zones is to write the name of each zone on an index card and place them where they are in relation to one another, or writing them in circles on a surface such as a whiteboard. To help players remember where their characters and the monsters are, you can place tokens for the respective creatures in each zone. If you don't want to use visual representations, you can also verbally describe the spatial relationships of zones, but this requires the players to expend mental bandwidth to keep track of what is where.

A creature within a zone can make a melee attack against any other creature within that zone, and also count as within 5 feet of one another for the purpose of special tactical abilities, such as the Protection fighting style. If a creature wishes to move from one zone to another adjacent zone, it can do so by expending all of its movement. If it takes the Dash action, or if its speed is 45 feet or higher (or if there are other, situational factors), it can move across two adjacent zones. If a creature was a target of a melee weapon attack from an enemy still in the zone, either creature moving out of the zone provokes an opportunity attack from the other. A creature using a weapon with the "reach" property can make

opportunity attacks against any creature leaving the zone.

Creatures making ranged attacks when a hostile creature occupies the same zone suffer disadvantage as if the creature was within 5 feet. A creature making a ranged attack can expend all of its movement to negate this disadvantage, representing it moving around to avoid creatures getting too close. However, if that creature was the target of another creature's melee attack on the previous turn, the only way the evading creature can avoid disadvantage on ranged attacks is to use the Disengage action, provided the creature that made the melee attack is still within the same zone.

When determining the number of creatures within an area of effect such as a *fireball* spell, the guidelines in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* usually well-suited for zones.

Explain these rules clearly to the players, then give or send your players a written copy of these rules. You may wish to review them verbatim. After which, perform a test run with a simple combat involving three zones with the players.



# CHAPTER 5

## NARRATIVE

Although some view combat as a separate entity from a game's story, nothing could be further from the truth. The narrative is usually what gives rise to the battle in the first place and sets the tone for the fight to come. Without narrative, combat can feel hollow, but if placed in just the right moment of a story, a single battle can feel like the fate of the world is at stake, and it sometimes is.

### ROLEPLAY IN COMBAT

Contrary to popular conception, roleplay doesn't stop during combat. This assumption likely arises from the fact that, when combat starts, if a smooth transition doesn't occur, combat can feel like an entirely different game from the other two tiers of play. However, roleplay should be an important element of combat. Even if the creatures the party are fighting are mindless monsters, the players should be engaging in inter-party roleplay. Although encouraging roleplay is outside of the scope of this guide, you roleplaying the monsters is one way to do so. Making quick jabs at the characters or expressing other concerns about the situation can help not only humanize the enemies (see "Enemies and Narrative" page 38), but also warrant a retort from one of the players. Just remember to keep remarks short — each turn during combat is only six seconds.

### DESCRIPTIONS

Good descriptions are the cornerstone of exciting combat, from a narrative perspective. As a general piece of advice, if you want to get better at describing combat in *Dungeons & Dragons*, read fantasy novels with lots of small-scale combat, as you might find with an adventuring party. Familiarizing yourself with more words and phrases to depict the struggle will make it easier to conjure more engaging portrayals on the fly. Something else you can try is creating a list of combat-related verbs such as "rend," "evade," and "bellow," as well as adjectives like "grisly," "agile," and "forceful." It is also a good idea to

write a list of synonyms for mechanical terms such as "attack" and "miss." These lists can be quite extensive, so going through each word in the middle of a combat is not advised, but simply taking the time to write them down can help improve your descriptions.

### CONCEPTUALIZING HIT POINTS

Partially because of video games, a common assumption about hit points is that they represent a character's bodily integrity. This is not necessarily the case in *Dungeons & Dragons*. The *Player's Handbook* describes hit points as "a combination of physical and mental durability, the will to live, and luck." Gary Gygax himself said, "It is quite unreasonable to assume that as a character gains levels of ability in his or her class that a corresponding gain in actual ability to sustain physical damage takes place." Of course, there are circumstances in which hit points can describe wounds sustained, namely dropping to 0 hit points or receiving a critical hit. It is not a coincidence that these two situations are also where the optional rules for injuries in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* comes into play.

Stamina is also another way in which hit points might manifest. The more fearsome an opponent, the more energy a character has to expend to avoid attacks. The potential issue with stamina is that there is already the mechanic for exhaustion, which is why stamina should be considered only as one part of an aggregate of factors.

In most cases, the more esoteric manifestations of hit points are the most apt. For instance, a loss of hit points might mean that a character successfully dodged a huge oncoming attack, but at the cost of putting themselves in a more vulnerable position for a follow-up. In other cases, mental fortitude can be a notable use; player characters may not have to worry about morale checks, but that doesn't mean demoralization can't manifest itself in more subtle ways during a battle, especially with more frightening monsters that are likely to do more damage.

However, addressing hit points in an abstract sense isn't always straight-forward in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Contrary to Gygax's statement, a level 10 character is, in fact, more likely to survive a 100-foot fall than a 1st-level character. If that character fell out of an airship or anywhere else where there were no nearby handholds, there isn't much wiggle room to explain how that is possible. "The gods saved them," is one possibility, but also a cop-out. However, such unambiguous situations are rare, and when they do arise, remember that, at the end of the day, you are playing a game and might need to treat it as such.

No matter your style, you should alternate between all of these different conceptualizations of hit points based on the different situations the characters find themselves in, and these should inform your descriptions accordingly.

## BEFORE COMBAT

A good description of combat starts before the fight itself. Paint a picture of the battlefield. Talk about the tension that is mounting among the participants. Mention the posture of the enemy, and discuss the emotions being felt. These are all ways to set up a combat. However, descriptions of scenes should be short and sweet, and are comprised of four components and no more than 3-4 sentences (under normal circumstances).

1. **Set the scene.** A short and simple sentence to give a general picture of what is happening. For instance, "You look out across the desert dunes..."
2. **Engage the senses.** Go over sensory information, including more than sight. Example: "...as searing grains of sand rake at your skin as the wind blows from the West."
3. **Pick out details.** Mention a thing or two about the scene that gives it a more memorable feel. "A few bones from long-dead, exotic creatures poke out from the ground nearby."
4. **Draw attention to points of interest.** Points of interest generally include enemies and objects. This should be mentioned last because otherwise, the other information is likely going to fall on deaf ears as the players focus on the threat. Example: "In the distance, you spot four black-clad, lightly armored riders clutching scimitars, preparing to charge in and claim their mark."

Bringing the scene together, the end result is, "You look out across the desert dunes as searing grains of sand rake at your skin as the wind blows from the West. A few bones from long-dead, exotic creatures poke out from the ground nearby. In the distance, spot four black-clad, lightly armor riders clutching scimitars, preparing to charge in and claim their mark." Short and evocative, these kinds of descriptions give the players a sense of the backdrop they are fighting in, and in some circumstances, the states of their allies and enemies, which can be important information for the battle itself.

## DURING COMBAT

Making the actions of a player's character feel like they have impact is key to making the player feel engaged. There is a great deal of satisfaction from hearing about the fragments of bone that fly about as the character shatters an enemy's skull with a maul, or the feeling of the air rushing by as the character dodges the sword swipe by mere millimeters. Even when a character misses, which is normally a disappointing experience, you should try to make that dramatic as well by mentioning that, when the character's axe swing went wide, it split a crate behind the target right in half. You can also turn a miss from a feeling of "my character is incompetent," to "this enemy is really competent or lucky," by talking about the agility with which they move.

In-combat descriptions are inherently tied to the mechanics of combat; you need to know that hit points don't usually represent bodily integrity, that force damage is magical rather than physical, and that a single attack is not the same as a single blow. Understand the different types of damage and think about how that might manifest when applied to a body, if you can stomach such things (note: it doesn't need to be realistic, just exciting). If you are ever unsure, ask a player performing the action what their class feature says or how they would describe it.

More than just the content of your descriptions, you should pay attention to how you convey them. At the beginning of combat, you can afford to be more descriptive, but as it winds on, use shorter phrases to keep up the pace, except in dramatic moments where a key enemy or a character falls. Varying your descriptions and tone of voice is also important; you don't want to be using the same words over and over, in the same tone that you use for roleplaying.



Remember that this is combat and the adrenaline of the characters would be pumping.

## PLAYER COMBAT DESCRIPTIONS

In battle, players have the opportunity to showcase their character's personality when you allow them to narrate their own actions. Spell descriptions say little about what a spell looks like (and even that can be re-flavored), and the Attack action is a very broad term that can be described in any number of ways. Many players aren't used to this; you can help them visualize what their character does with prompting questions such as, "What do your magic missiles look like? Your character has fey ancestry so maybe they are multi-colored balls of light, or maybe something else?" and "How does your character approach their individual moves in combat?"

When players tell you what they want to do in combat, encourage them to be dramatic in how they vocalize their intent. For instance, saying "I'm bringing my axe down on that wyvern's head in one mighty swing!" is more likely to contribute to an air of excitement at the table than "I attack." The former is also appropriate because it is short, but full of energy.

The line, "How do you want to do this?" made famous by Matt Mercer, used to prompt players to describe how they wish to finish off an enemy, is an example of an established way of getting players to engage in descriptions. Matt does this by listening to the player's intent and then elaborating on the result. This formula works because the description the player gives is intent, not canon. Players often lack key context when it comes to the monsters they battle. For instance, they might not understand that certain elementals cannot be grappled, and if the player were to state "I grappled the elemental before slamming it to the ground," as a fact of the world, that would be harmful to the world's internal consistency, lessening immersion.

One final note of caution with regards to player descriptions is pacing. As previously mentioned, combat narration should move at a fast pace most of the time. Unfamiliar players may be too wordy in their narration, making it take longer for other players to get to their turns. Setting guidelines with the players about how combat descriptions should go can help with this issue.

## BATTLEFIELDS AND NARRATIVE

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You don't always have the opportunity to choose the location of an encounter, but the battlefield itself should never be forgotten. More than just an influence on the quality of combat, interesting backdrops also have an impact on the narrative impact of a battle; one that takes place on a moving platform over a pit of lava says "epic" a lot louder than some nondescript room in a stone dungeon, even if the enemies are the same. If possible, you should think about how the terrain itself speaks to the story that is being told. Even if you already stated that the area is a chapel, and you hadn't prepared for a combat encounter, you can always elaborate on features you didn't mention before in such a way that adds flavor to the battle as it goes on. Of course, battlefields should also play a key role in the tactical situation as well. For more information, see "Battlefields" on page 42.

## ENEMIES AND NARRATIVE

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Antagonists are often the first thing that many DMs think about when designing an adventure or combat encounter. The kind of enemies that the players face carries not only mechanical significance, but also narrative; it gives insights to potential motivations for how they ended up in the combat encounter to begin with and provides ramifications for the cost of defeat. Here, we take a look at some things important factors when considering the narrative impact of the enemies you place in the game.

### THEMATIC ENEMIES

An enduring (and often warranted) criticism of *Dungeons & Dragons* is that it is too random, thematically speaking. People make observations such as, "You know, this beholder being a guard for this necromancer's lair seems really contrived." These contrivances come from the good intention of wanting to vary the types of enemies the party faces. However, if the story is important to your game, you shouldn't use monsters that feel out of place unless their presence has a necessary impact on the story.

The desire to diversify encounters isn't sufficient justification if immersion is your goal.

There are hundreds of official monsters. Rather than stick in a random one and come up with some excuse for it to be there, look harder for other monsters that make more narrative sense, because they almost certainly exist. You can find lists in places like *D&D Beyond* that filter monsters based on type and other descriptors that can help narrow down which monsters fit the theme of the situation. In the event that you can't find any narratively-appropriate monsters in the official sources, change an existing one to fill the role you want. For instance, say you are running an encounter with zombies, and you want a relatively tough monster that flies and has ranged attacks that can deal damage while the characters are occupied with the zombies, and your first thought is that you would like to use a manticore. Well, a manticore working with zombies is unlikely, so what you can do is take the manticore's stats and change them very slightly: give it the resistances, immunities, and undead creature type that undead monsters like zombies have, and change its tail spikes to deal poison damage. After doing that, you can reasonably describe that as different monster such as an undead, bat-like abomination that spews poisonous ichor from its mouth. This kind of creature is more likely to fit in with zombies and not raise any eyebrows among the players, and yet it still fills the battlefield role you want.

If power level is your concern, you can boost a more thematically-appropriate monster's challenge rating by increasing its maximum hit points, giving it an extra attack, or raising its armor class. These changes are relatively simple, and while they may break some of the rules for official monster creation, it shouldn't cause any issues in your home game. With that said, creating your own monsters can be a fun and rewarding experience. Chapter 9 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* goes into more depth on this.

## HUMANIZED ENEMIES

Although cutting down mob after mob of nondescript goblins can be fun, enemies with personalities can massively benefit a game's narrative. Of course, not every goblin can or should be given an extensive backstory, but giving relatable characteristics to a party's enemies will increase the emotional impact of the battle because of the empathy, no matter how little, generated. This is particularly true with humanoid enemies. Even less important foes can be

given traits that become evident on the battlefield. Any easy way to accomplish this is to generate a list of traits and attach them to your DM screen, assigning each enemy 1-3 that might emerge during the fight (see "Roleplay in Combat" above).

Humanizing enemies also makes the encounter feel more personal, as can having recurring enemies or nemeses. These enemies are usually intelligent and interact with the party during each encounter, but aren't necessarily the main antagonist. They can also fill roles such as being a lieutenant of the antagonist or a meddling third party

## PLAYER CHARACTER ENEMIES

Part of the social contract in most *Dungeons & Dragons* groups is not to engage in player-versus-player (PVP) combat. In general, this is a good idea; it can generate a lot of animosity between the players themselves and potentially derail the campaign, creating further issues down the line when the two characters are more reluctant to work with one another.

However, there are two circumstances where PVP combat can work. The first of which is if the players amicably agree that their characters will fight in the interest of making the story more interesting. Settling a personal vendetta between the players isn't a good reason to engage in PVP. The second circumstance PVP can be conducive to the game is when a character has left the party and returns as a villain. The player who previously ran that character can take up that role again and run it during combat.

## DEFEAT

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The characters being forced to flee or surrender can be a powerful moment in a game, and highly memorable for the players. If you have watched certain popular *Dungeons & Dragons* live streams, you probably remember such instances as well. One of the reasons why this is so shocking is because players often enter the situation with the expectation that they can win every encounter and, as will be illustrated shortly, that isn't always the case. Even in balanced encounters, players still risk defeat.

There are two primary challenges when it comes to handling defeat. The first is that, because of the aforementioned expectation that encounters are winnable, parties are disinclined to quit when things clearly aren't going their way. The best way to address this is by being clear in your descriptions



that the party is losing; don't give them the impression that the enemies might crumble if the party just keeps it up for a little while longer. The second challenge with defeat is the prospect of a TPK. Many DMs are reluctant to go through with TPKs because they and their players have grown attached to the dynamic at play and don't want to end the adventure early, and that is a legitimate concern. If it is what you and your players want, you can come up with some reason why a TPK isn't the end. For instance, the party could be resurrected, captured instead of killed, or some sort of intervention saves them. Just be careful not to give the impression that there are no consequences for the players' actions.

## UNWINNABLE ENCOUNTERS

Players familiar with older editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* sometimes reminisce about the days when they would get their butts handed to them because they attacked a monster without considering their options. In those days, encounter balance wasn't so

heavily emphasized and the expectation was that the characters wouldn't always be able to win. Now, it could be argued that the standards have reversed.

This guide takes the position that, unless you are running a highly-regimented game that sticks to daily encounter budgets, XP, and character rewards, unwinnable encounters are a necessary part of creating an interesting narrative. If every encounter is winnable, the players can start to feel like the game world revolves around their characters, so they don't have to consider any options other than violence. An encounter that cannot be won communicates that the world is much bigger, and that they should think carefully before acting. It is also a fundamental part of building an atmosphere in horror and survival games.

## RUNNING SIMULTANEOUS COMBATS

As often as the phrase "Don't split the party," is repeated, it still happens on occasion. For example, a couple of stealthy characters go to scout the enemy's lair while the others hang back. Then, things go wrong as the stealthy characters are cornered by the guards and the loud ones are spotted by the enemy's own scouts. Some would argue that it is unwise for the DM to allow that to happen in the first place, but no matter your take on that position, it sometimes happens anyways. So what do you do in this situation? Perhaps the simplest way to go about multiple combats is to divide up the players. You can either keep the non-participants at the table, if they enjoy watching the spectacle, or you can send them outside or to another room to give them an opportunity to socialize and recharge.

Another way to do this is to alternate every round between combats. Each side rolls initiative as normal, and you record the results on two different initiative lists (for more on tracking initiative, see page 24). Choose which combat to run first. After the first round has ended, switch to the other combat. Repeat this process each round. End each round with a cliffhanger description to build up anticipation while the other battle rages. To help conceptualize how this works, think of it like an action movie where the main protagonists are forced to split their attentions to handle different tasks. The camera cuts between these fights in a dramatic fashion.

## IGNORING THE RULES

Temporarily setting aside the rules in the interest of a more engaging experience can be a great way of maintaining moments of heightened engagement. Even though players generally enjoy rolling dice, it can be nice to allow them simply to succeed at things. Indeed, you don't even have to ignore the rules for some cases: a rogue that wants to do acrobatic maneuvers for pure flavor doesn't need to make a Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to pull it off as that is assumed to be part of their attack if that is their fighting style. Although there are rules for attacking sleeping opponents, many groups simply choose to ignore them in many circumstances; players may feel cheated if their ranger sneaks up on a sleeping guard,

stabbing at their exposed throat, only to take away half of the guard's hit points.

Remember that, if you allow the players to do things, in almost all cases, you should allow enemies to do them, too. There may be no rule for a shadow demon to rise up out of a deep shadow next to a character, but it adds an element of drama. You should, however, exercise this power judiciously. Never do so if a player is going to feel like the outcome is unfair. This applies even with regard to giving characters benefits. If one player receives too many moments of glory where the rules are glossed over, then the others may feel like you are playing favorites.



## CHAPTER 6

# TACTICS

"Luck? Perhaps. But more often, I dare to say, luck is simply the advantage a true warrior gains in executing the correct course of action."

-Drizzt Do'Urden

(THE HALFLING'S GEM, BY R. A. SALVATORE)

One of the things that makes combat in *Dungeons & Dragons* fun is that players and DMs alike have options beyond, "I attack." When players are put in a situation where they are encouraged to use their wits to overcome challenges, rather than just repeat the "I attack" line, the experience is going to be more engaging and the victory more rewarding. Here are some factors that you can introduce into your battles to make them tactically more interesting.

### ENEMY ROLES

Different enemies have different roles in combat — general categories they can be lumped into. When employing enemies of different types, as you often should, you can categorize them into one of three roles, relative to that encounter.

**Soldier.** These are the basic, front line enemies; their strength is in numbers. When you have three or more soldiers on the battlefield, you can use them to obstruct the characters from reaching more vulnerable monsters. Alternatively, they can flank the party. Overall, they are versatile tools, sometimes with the ability to put up a good fight on their own. Examples include **bearded devils**, **hobgoblins**, **skeletons**, and **thugs**.

**Tanks.** Tanks are tough creatures with lots of hit points and sometimes a high armor class. They are more likely to be Large or bigger, as to take up as much space as possible, and serve the purpose of keeping the characters occupied for extended periods of time to prevent them from harming monsters that deal more damage or from reaching an objective. Examples of tanks include **balguras**, **berserkers**, **ogres**, and **golems**.

**Damage-dealers.** Creatures that are less durable but have a higher damage output, relative to their CR, can be classified as damage-dealers. Use these monsters to inflict real harm to the characters, but don't let them get surrounded or they will fall quickly. They include **banshees**, **hellhounds**, **sea hags**, and **spectators**.

**Support.** Player characters have clerics and bards, and monsters have support roles, which are also sometimes clerics or bards. These creatures, almost always magical in nature, buff or heal their allies while debuffing the characters. Keep them closer to the back so all the monsters can benefit from their abilities. They include **basilisks**, **coatl**, **green hags**, **incubi/succubi**, and **priests**.

### BATTLEFIELDS

A battle that takes place in an area without features the participants can interact with might as well take place in purgatory. Not only does the battlefield set the tone and the theme for a fight as described on page 32, but the presence of even the simplest features can drastically change the course of the battle. The classic example of this at play is the Battle of Thermopylae in ancient Greece, where a force of Spartans and Peloponnesians held off a force of Persians several times larger than theirs in part by exploiting a choke point to limit the numerical advantage held by the Persians. For your players, an interesting battlefield can make the difference between fun swashbuckling where players make use of critical thinking, and a boring slugfest.

### OBSTACLES

An area's obstacles are the foundations of a battlefield setup. There are several basic obstacles, most of which can be adopted across the majority of battlefield themes. You should keep all of them in your toolbox when constructing encounters.

**Barriers (walls, ridges, etc.)** Barriers exist to prevent things from moving past a certain point. Using barriers to direct the movement and limit the

actions of the participants — splitting forces, creating choke points, and more.

**Pits, chasms, etc.** These obstacles are similar to barriers in that they force participants to move around them. However, they don't obstruct line of sight. Additionally, if a creature is caught in a pit, it is likely trapped in there, hence why these obstacles are also listed as hazards below.

**Concealment.** This is anything that makes it more difficult for one participant to see another. It could be something as simple as tall grass that a character can hide in, or it could be a low fog that makes things lightly obscured. Concealment is important for ambushes and to provide combat options for stealthy characters.

**Cover.** Cover is a partial barrier between one participant and another. It can be used as a defensive feature and grants a bonus to AC and Dexterity saving throws, as described in chapter 9 of the *Player's Handbook*. From barrels to barricades, any object of sufficient size and density can be used as cover. The presence of cover on a battlefield helps protect against ranged attacks and incentivizes players to consider terrain in their movement.

**Choke points.** These are a function of barriers. Narrow spaces, such as corridors, make it difficult for larger forces to maneuver and be combat-effective. A party that uses choke points can feel heroic after defeating a much more numerous force, but if the players are made to fight in a 5-foot corridor, those characters inevitably left out of the combat will feel disappointed.

**Distance.** The most abstract yet simple obstacle, distance advantages ranged and fast-moving combatants. When creating an encounter, consider how many turns it will take for the participants to reach one another, and how much damage the ranged characters might inflict before the enemies get close. Then, remember that faster-moving characters can outmaneuver slower ones.

## HAZARDS

It turns out, there are a lot of things that can kill a person. Creating danger in a fight from something other than monsters makes battlefields more dynamic, and can pose deadly threats just like monsters. Here is a list of hazards and suggestions for employing them in a battlefield. These can be adjusted to match the level and situation of the party.

**Acid.** A creature takes 5d8 acid damage when it enters the acid for the first time on a turn or when it

ends its turn there. A creature that comes into contact with corrosive acid takes 5 (1d10) acid damage. The creature takes the damage again at the start of each of its turns until the acid is scraped off or destroyed. Against wood or metal, the acid deals 11 (2d10) acid damage each round, and any nonmagical wood or metal weapon or tool used to scrape off the slime is destroyed.

**Chasms and drops.** These are areas where a creature may fall. See chapter 8 of the *Player's Handbook* for rules on falling.

**Cold.** Whenever the temperature is at or below -80 degrees Fahrenheit, a creature exposed to the cold must succeed on a DC 10 Constitution saving throw at the end of each minute or gain one level of exhaustion. Creatures with resistance or immunity to cold damage automatically succeed on the saving throw, as do creatures wearing cold weather gear (thick coats, gloves, and the like) and creatures naturally adapted to cold climates.

**Difficult terrain.** Features such as mud and rubble constitute as difficult terrain as described in chapter 8 of the *Player's Handbook*. Making some areas difficult terrain and others not can force combatants to move through areas of your design.

**Diseases.** Rotten liquids, magic, or the air itself can carry disease. See chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for a list of diseases.

**Explosive and flammable barrels.** Barrels filled with smokepowder or other highly flammable contents explode when they take fire damage or are set aflame. Creatures within 10 feet of the blast must succeed on a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw, taking 24 (7d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much on a successful one.

**Heat.** In environments hotter than 130 degrees Fahrenheit, for each minute that passes, a creature must make a Constitution saving throw. On a failure, the creature gains 1 level of exhaustion. The DC starts at 5 and increases by 1 for each additional minute. Creatures wearing medium or heavy armor, or who are clad in heavy clothing, have disadvantage on the saving throw. Creatures with resistance or immunity to fire damage automatically succeed on the saving throw, as do creatures naturally adapted to hot climates.

**Obscurement.** Areas that are dark or filled with fog may count as lightly or heavily obscured, as defined in chapter 8 of the *Player's Handbook*. Such conditions can offer disadvantage on attack rolls and hence may have a profound impact on the battle.

**Lava.** A creature takes 6d10 fire damage when it enters lava for the first time on a turn or when it ends its turn there.

**Moving terrain.** Creatures that attempt to jump while standing on moving terrain must succeed on a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw. On a failure, the creature only makes it halfway as far as it normally would and falls prone.

**Noxious fumes.** The air here is hazardous to breathe. Creatures in the area can endure a number of rounds equal to 1 + its Constitution modifier (minimum 1). At the start of the creature's next turn it falls unconscious and suffers 1d4 poison damage at the start of each of its turns.

**Poison.** Creatures may be subject to the effects of a poison, depending on how it is administered. See chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for more information on poisons.

**Sharp ground objects.** Any creature that enters the area must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or stop moving this turn and take 1 piercing damage. Taking this damage reduces the creature's walking speed by 10 feet until the creature regains at least 1 hit point. A creature moving through the area at half speed doesn't need to make the saving throw.

**Slippery ground.** If a creature spends 15 or more feet of movement walking or running across the surface, it must succeed on a DC 11 Dexterity saving throw or fall prone.

**Strong wind.** Strong winds impose disadvantage on ranged attacks, among other effects described in chapter 5 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

**Thorns.** The area is difficult terrain, and when a creature moves into or within the area, it takes 5 (2d4) piercing damage for every 5 feet it travels.

**Traps, tricks, and magic.** There are too many types of traps to list here. For more information, see chapter 5 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Appendix A has a list of traps, and you can use the *Player's Handbook* as inspiration to draw ideas for magical hazards.

**Unstable terrain.** When a terrain feature, such as a loose stone in a cave, begins to fall on top of a feature, it must make a Dexterity saving throw with a DC you set according to the situation (see "Traps" in chapter 5 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*), and take an amount of damage appropriate to the object that falls. Alternatively, if the ground gives way, the creature must make a Dexterity saving throw or fall to whatever is below.

## OBJECTIVES

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Making players concerned with things other than whacking their enemies until they fall over can turn a typical combat to something much more memorable. Below are a few types of objectives you can use in your games. If you wish to turn up the stakes for any of these objects, consider adding a ticking clock — a limit on the amount of time the characters have to achieve the objective.

**Recover the person or object.** The party must retrieve someone or something important, but it is protected by the enemy or the environment. If the target is a person, and that person is unwilling, the objective becomes a capture situation (tip: when an attacker reduces a creature to 0 hit points, the attacker can choose to render the creature unconscious rather than kill it). Sometimes, an enemy may simultaneously be attempting to recover the person or object, turning the situation into a race. **Chase.** The characters must apprehend a creature that flees. See chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for more information on how to run chases.

**Cat and mouse.** The characters hunt an elusive enemy that is attempting to hide from them. This objective usually involves multiple Wisdom (Perception), Intelligence (Investigation) checks, and searching alcoves, closets, and other hiding places. The situation can also be reversed where the characters become the hunted as an enemy beyond their capabilities tries to find them.

**Disrupt the ritual.** A magical ritual is underway, and if it is not stopped in a certain amount of time, something will happen that the players don't want. This may be the summoning of a powerful demon or opening a portal to another plane as a means of escape.

**Sabotage.** An object or location must be altered or destroyed by the party. Examples include poisoning an enemy army's drinking water or planting barrels of smokepowder to destroy a building.

**Protect.** The opposite of "disrupt the ritual," the party must prevent a significant person or object from coming to harm. If it is a person, they may be performing an important task, such as an arcane ritual, or the players may be escorting them.

**Retreat.** This is the objective that players in traditional games are the least likely to pursue, even when it is within their interests. Retreat objectives

may arise spontaneously, or they may be planned as the players encounter a much more powerful force. In any case, if the players are outmatched, make it clear in your descriptions that the enemy isn't showing signs of folding any time soon.

**Distract.** In this objective, the characters draw an enemy forces attention away from another event. In some instances, hit-and-run tactics, may draw an enemy force further away from the event and prolong the encounter.


**Assassinate.** An enemy of high import must be slain. Assassinations typically involve stealth and surprise attacks.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Hopefully, from whatever parts of this guide you have read, you have gleaned useful information that will lead to greater enjoyment in your future games. Despite the fact that this guide accommodates multiple styles of DMing, it has a clear bias toward certain approaches in certain situations. With that said, if some of what you have seen here does not resonate with you, this guide may best be used as a way to expand your horizons for what is possible — more tools for your toolbox. The best way to run combat at your table is whichever way your table has the most fun with.

What you see in this guide is the result of years of DMing and extensive playtesting. However, many of these wonderful techniques wouldn't have been tested were it not for the advice given from numerous sources, which are listed below. They have both our thanks and our recommendations.

- The *Dungeon Master's Guide* (You may think this need not be stated. However, many DMs have not read the entire book. This is one of the few universal pieces of advice I have for DMs: read the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, cover to cover. Don't skim it.)
- Christopher Perkins
- Jeremy Crawford
- Matthew Mercer
- Sly Flourish and Michael Shae
- Web DM
- Matthew Colville
- The Angry GM (Long-winded and with an intentionally arrogant tone, this source may not be for everyone)
- Nerdarchy
- Johnn DM

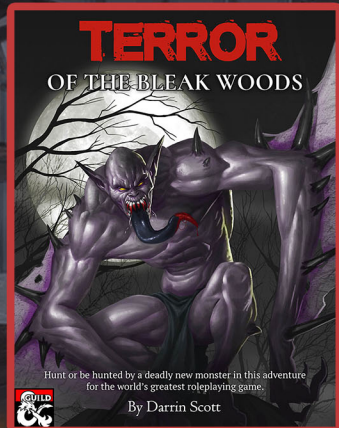
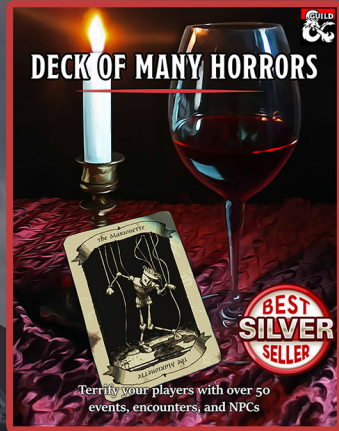


"This is the way of the world, but  
is not the only way."

-Drizzt Do'Urden  
(AS WRITTEN BY R. A. SALVATORE)



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