



**THE
ART OF
WAR
FOR D&D
PLAYERS**

**BY
M.T. BLACK**



THE ART OF WAR

FOR D&D PLAYERS

D和D球員的兵法



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Introduction

The Art of War is an ancient and revered Chinese text that describes military tactics and strategy. Said to be written by a brilliant philosopher-general named Sun Tzu, for hundreds of years it was the preeminent military textbook in East Asia.

Since the first translations appeared in the eighteenth century, the reputation of this remarkable book has spread around the globe, and it remains popular right down to this day. Many believe that the lessons this ancient text contains are applicable to every aspect of life, and each year numerous new editions appear on the bookshelves.

Given the importance of combat in DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, it seemed natural to take the tactical lessons of *The Art of War* and apply them to this game we love. The following book is divided into 13 chapters, matching the original structure and themes of Sun Tzu's work. Sometimes an imaginative leap is required to move from the original principles to our game, but I have striven to do this respectfully. Time and again, I was impressed by how well the ideas in *The Art of War* could be applied to DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, and my admiration for this ancient masterpiece only grew as I wrote this book.

I used the Lionel Giles translation, long in the public domain, for quotations. I have paraphrased it in places to modernize the language.

I hope that this book helps you in your journey to master the game of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. I believe that mastery enhances enjoyment, and so I've achieved my goal if I help you have more fun at the gaming table!

— M.T. Black



1. Making Plans

The leader who wins a battle does much planning before the battle is fought. The leader who loses a battle does but little planning.

— Sun Tzu

Many battles are lost before the first blow is struck or the first spell is cast. The degree and quality of your planning can easily determine the outcome of your next adventure.

Sure, there are many parties that blunder into dungeons with no real forethought yet still achieve dazzling success. This may be due to the weakness of the enemy, the overwhelming might of the party, or the fickle finger of fortune. But all things being equal, the party that plans will enjoy more and better victories than the party that does not.

Planning for Adventure

So, you are sitting in a dim, smoky tavern and the mysterious stranger has just told you about the dungeon beneath a nearby ruined castle. You should set out as soon as possible, right? Wrong! There is important preparation you can do beforehand that will greatly increase your chances of a good outcome.

Use Downtime

Make sure you use your downtime wisely. Scribing a spell scroll is a great way for a spellcaster to increase their firepower. Buying and selling magic items is a complicated process, but certainly worthwhile. Even carousing is worth your time, with new contacts able to provide valuable information when it comes time to go forth. Look carefully through the list of downtime activities and put together a downtime plan before the next adventure starts.



Conduct Research

There is often a surprising amount of information about your destination available in your starting city or town. Make sure you do some research before setting out. Chapter 13 has more details on how to gather information.

Upgrade Equipment

Do you have all the equipment you need? If you've collected some loot on previous adventures, now is the time to spend it. If there is an armorer in town, see what is available and determine whether an upgrade is worthwhile. The same applies to arms, and it may also be worth getting your weapon silvered if it is now magical and you expect to face lycanthropes or devils. You should also ensure you have a sufficient quantity of rope, iron spikes, oil, healing potions, and holy water. Don't be a miser when buying new equipment, as you can't spend your coin if you die down that dungeon. Chapter 2 has more information on equipment.

Review Spells

Spellcasters should ensure their spell lists are up to date before heading off on a new adventure. It's very easy to fall into a repetitive pattern when it comes to spells, relying on a few old favorites. It is worth your time to review all of your spell options and see if there is anything new you can try. This is also a good opportunity to refamiliarize yourself with your favorites, so that you can put them to full effect when required.

Engage Hirelings

The use of hirelings seems to have gone out of fashion in the modern era, which is a great shame as they can be tremendously useful and a lot of fun. If your party has three members or less, you certainly want to hire several warriors to bolster your numbers. Non-combat hirelings are useful, too. You may be able to find a guide who can prevent you from getting lost. A torchbearer can hold aloft a light source and keep your hands free for fighting. And shield bearers are soldiers that can stand in front of vulnerable party members (such as spellcasters) to protect them from melees. All of these can be well worth the expense.

Planning for Battle

All warfare is based on deception.

— Sun Tzu

With the adventure underway, it is time to think about the battles ahead. Once more, laying plans can make a vast difference to the outcome.

Fight Strategically

If your enemies are taking their ease, give them no rest. Attack them where they are unprepared, appear where you are not expected.

— Sun Tzu

It is not adequate to consider each battle in isolation. You need to fight in a manner that ensures long-term success and survival. At a minimum, you must understand:

- When to fight.
- How to handle superior forces.
- The importance of common goals.
- How to surprise the enemy.
- How to assess your combat capacity.

These topics are covered in more detail in chapter 3.



Practice Deception

Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make them believe we are near.

— Sun Tzu

Deception is a very powerful tactic—more powerful than many people realize. A well-planned and executed deception can leave enemy defenses in disarray, ready for you to sweep them aside. There are any number of things you can deceive the enemy about, including your location, identity, numeric strength, intentions, and capability.

Let's consider a practical example involving Grudd Haug, the den of the hill giants in *Storm King's Thunder*. Your goal in that adventure is to penetrate the stronghold and steal the *conch of teleportation*, possibly wiping out the hill giants along the way.

Sure, you can execute a frontal assault, charging straight up to the door. But if you do that, the hobgoblins in the watch tower will see you and ring the alarm bell, a giant then blocks the front door with a boulder, and the entire stronghold is suddenly on high alert. Your task has become that much harder.

A better option is to hide your approach. As Sun Tzu says, “when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away.” An obvious way to do this is via the *invisibility* spell, allowing you to stroll right up and through the front door. You could also use *fog cloud* to obscure the area and provide cover for your approach, or *disguise self* to take on the appearance of orcs. There are numerous other spells that can help here.

What about non-magical options? People have used darkness as a cover for hostile activities from time immemorial. You might also consider the power of disguise. Perhaps you get a wagon and a few barrels of wine, then disguise yourself as a wine merchant while the rest of the party hides inside the barrels. You approach the stronghold openly, pretending to sell your wares. There is a reasonable chance you will be admitted, especially if you share some of your stock liberally with those guarding the doors.

Yes, these sorts of deceptive plans can and do go wrong, sometimes quite spectacularly. But when successful, they give you a massive tactical advantage over the enemy, and so they are well worth attempting.

Separate the Enemy

Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush them. . . . If your opponents are of choleric temper, seek to irritate them. Pretend to be weak, that they may grow arrogant. . . . If their forces are united, separate them.

— Sun Tzu

In unity there is strength, and this applies to your enemies as much as to yourselves. In many instances, a group of monsters is more than a match for your party, although each individual monster is relatively weak. In such a case, one good tactic is to separate the enemy, drawing them out so you can engage them individually or in small groups. There are several ways of achieving this:

Food. If you are fighting a large group of beasts, you might be able to use food to separate them. A fresh hogshead thrown near a pack of wolves, for example, would cause at least a few of them to split from the pack.

Treasure. The same effect can be achieved with slightly more intelligent monsters using treasure. Perhaps there is a large band of goblins wandering the corridors. A trail of gold coins could easily split the band or throw it into disarray.

Distraction. If the monsters are in a fixed location, you can sometimes draw them out using an unexpected sound. For example, perhaps a large group of bugbears are sitting in a cavern. Ringing a bell loudly or blowing a horn may cause a small number of the creatures to leave the cavern and investigate.

Taunting. Powerful creatures often have enormous egos and are susceptible to taunting. If you were to walk into King Snurre's throne room and insult him before fleeing, he would likely send his hell hounds after you. This can be a very effective way to leech the strength from a strong location.



2. Campaigning

In war, then, let your great object be victory, not lengthy campaigns.

— Sun Tzu

Success in a single DUNGEONS & DRAGONS combat encounter can be achieved by tactical excellence, brute force, or a few lucky dice rolls. By contrast, sustained success across a whole campaign requires careful management of your resources.

Resource management is all about balance. If you are too extravagant in your use of resources, spending everything on the first couple of encounters, you may find yourself caught short later in the adventuring day. On the other hand, if you are too stingy you could find encounters more challenging than they need to be, and your party may be forced to retreat early or even face unnecessary character death.

Seeking Quick Victories

When you engage in actual fighting, if victory is long in coming . . . you will exhaust your strength.

— Sun Tzu

The key to combat success in DUNGEONS & DRAGONS usually lies in delivering as much damage as possible, as quickly as possible, while minimizing the damage you receive. Yes, there are ways of achieving victory that don't rely on brute force, but these tend to be exceptional. The general rule is that, once combat starts, you want to get as many weapons and offensive features active as you can. Be aware that the average fight takes just 3 to 4 rounds to complete. Fights that drag on longer than this are likely to deplete your resources dangerously.

Think of it this way. In any fight, you are probably only going to execute 4 actions at most. If you waste a single action, you are potentially reducing your combat effectiveness by 25% or more. Actions are precious! And so you should ask this question of every decision you make in battle: will it help inflict more damage on the enemy, and/or reduce the amount of damage you receive? If the answer is no, you may need to reconsider your plans.

For more information on actions and the so-called action economy, see chapter 5.

Taking Short and Long Rests

Now, when your weapons are dulled, your ardor damped, your strength exhausted and your treasure spent . . . then no-one, however wise, will be able to avert the consequences that must ensue.

— Sun Tzu

Your key consumable resources in combat are hit points, spell slots, and class features. All of these resources recharge on either a short or long rest, and therefore it is good to have a strategy in place around resting and how you will spend resources between rests.

Let's start with long rests. Your hit points, spell slots, and class features all reset on a long rest, so it really is a “fresh start” every day. An optimal resource management strategy would see you deplete all of your spell slots and class features between long rests, as well as finish the day with a positive number of hit points (of course!).

How can we plan this out? Generalizing greatly, in a wilderness or urban environment, you will typically have 1 or 2 combats between long rests, while in a dungeon environment you will typically have about 6 combat encounters between long rests (see “The Adventuring Day” in chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*). Using this information as a baseline, you can estimate how many resources to spend per combat.

What about short rests? For the reasons stated above, these tend to be most important while in a dungeon environment. You can take short rests as often as you like in a day, but it is common for a party to take two of them, since you can spend up to half your hit dice for healing during each one. Taking this average and the daily average of 6 combats means you are probably going to face 2 combats between rests, and therefore you want to use class features that reset on a short rest (such as a fighter's Second Wind or Action Surge) pretty frequently. I've noticed that fighters sometimes seem to “save” their Action Surge unnecessarily.

One final point. Calculating averages and managing resources might seem more appropriate to corporate accounting than a game of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS! Our intention is not to rob the game of color and reduce it to a dull bookkeeping exercise. Far from it! Once you practice these simple strategies a few times, you'll start to understand the resource consumption “rhythm” of your game and will no longer need to think about it.

Setting up a Base Camp

We come now to the question of encamping the army . . .

— Sun Tzu

Even the hardiest adventurers need to take long rests occasionally. Sometimes it is possible to find a safe hidey-hole in the dungeon, but you shouldn't count on that. Setting up a secure base camp near, but not too



near, the dungeon entrance is a worthwhile exercise. This becomes a safe place for you to retreat to between expeditions and means you don't need to risk trekking back to town whenever you get too badly beaten up. Hiring a few guards to keep an eye on your base camp is vital—assuming you don't have magical protection of some sort.

A spell such as *Leomund's tiny hut* makes encamping much easier but does not obviate the need for a secure campsite.

Managing Equipment

Bring war material with you from home . . .

— Sun Tzu

When creating a character, it's common for you to simply pick an equipment pack from the *Player's Handbook*. This is convenient, but it may mean you haven't given much thought to what your character is carrying around. The following items are very useful, and all could find a place in the typical adventurer's backpack:

Acid. A vial of acid is remarkably potent for its size, and, even better, only a few creatures are resistant or immune to it (see chapter 6). It's a good backup weapon for low-level parties to carry with them.

Alchemist's Fire. This can be hard to source but is another handy backup weapon, especially as it inflicts damage every round upon a hit and requires the target to use an action to extinguish it.

Antitoxin. This is expensive but could be a lifesaver if you know ahead of time that you will be facing poisonous creatures.

Ball Bearings. These are a very effective way to slow down pursuing enemies and are essential for anyone who wants to retreat well.

Caltrops. These are harder to lay than ball bearings and cover a more limited area but are even more effective at slowing down pursuit.

Chain. Very useful if you want to tie up a particularly strong monster, like an ogre.

Chalk. If you are not going to make a map, then at least use a piece of chalk to mark the corridors as you pass through them.

Crowbar. Greatly increase your chances of breaking down a door. Why mess around with picking locks or looking for keys?

Grappling Hook. Allows you to quickly secure a rope to any strong protrusion.

Hammer & Piton. With a piton you can attach a rope to anything, including a flat surface. A little more effort than using a grappling hook, but also more versatile.

Healing Potion. These are one of the few magic items that are easy to purchase on the common market. Buy as many as you can afford.

Manacles. An extremely useful item if you wish to keep someone prisoner without carrying them around (note that you need to confirm with your DM how these devices are handled at your table).

Mirror, Steel. An essential tool when you are likely to confront a creature with a gaze attack. But also useful for looking around corners or signaling to your comrades.

Oil. This is one of the most celebrated and valuable pieces of equipment you can take with you. You can use it to silence a squeaky door, create a simple torch, throw it at the enemy as an impromptu bomb, leave a burning puddle of it to block a corridor, coat a step in it to create a simple trap, and many other uses beside.

Parchment and Ink. Somewhere, sometime, you are going to want to write a note.

Pick & Shovel. Some creatures still like to bury their treasure. And it's surprising how often you need to dig up a corpse.

Pole, 10-foot. The proverbial 10-foot pole has many uses. You can sweep the ground in front of you for tripwires or pressure plates. You can use it to touch dangerous-looking items or to prod that seemingly dead monster. You can use it to test the depth of a murky lake or to stir through a pile of trash. They are admittedly pretty unwieldy and can easily break, and hence some people prefer a 5-foot pole made of steel.

Ram, Portable. Very heavy and inconvenient to carry around, but it will reduce most doors to splinters. It's the sort of item you might leave at your base camp, and only retrieve when needed.

Rope. As soon as you come to something you want to climb, you are going to need rope. You can also use it to tie up enemies, to build a temporary shelter, to drag things along the ground, or to create a simple trap. And lots of other uses, too. In short, take plenty of rope with you.

Spikes, Iron. You can use these to spike a door shut, to anchor a rope, to block a pressure plate, as improvised range weapons, as a little snack for a rust monster, and many other things.

String. String is very handy when combined with a 10-foot pole. You can tie a grappling hook to the pole and have an extended arm to pick things up with. You can tie a mirror to the pole and use it to safely look around a corner. You can even tie meat to the pole and use it to safely lure away ravenous beasts.

Tinderbox. Sure, your wizard can create fire, but it doesn't hurt to carry around a backup.

3. Strategic Combat

Thus, we may know that there are five essentials for victory: (1) You will win if you know when to fight and when not to fight. (2) You will win if you know how to handle both superior and inferior forces. (3) You will win if your army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks. (4) You will win if, being prepared, you take the enemy unprepared. (5) You will win if you have military capacity.

— Sun Tzu

A *murder hobo* is an adventurer that wanders the world, indiscriminately killing and looting everything in their path. If this describes your game, this chapter may be of little interest to you!

However, most of you wish to take a more strategic approach to adventuring and combat, applying force appropriately and intelligently. This chapter shows you how.

Knowing When to Fight

You will win if you know when to fight and when not to fight. . . . If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.

— Sun Tzu

Almost every monster you meet while on an adventure is dangerous, but not all of them are hostile. A lot of creatures in an adventure environment attack on sight, so when something doesn't attack, it is worth keeping your sword in your sheath for a few moments while you try and start a conversation.

Why would you want to talk to a monster? Well, there are a lot of things a friendly or neutral monster may be able tell you about an adventuring environment, such as:

- The location of any boss monsters
- The history of the local area
- The location of any prisoners
- The identity of an important enemy
- Information about disarming or avoiding a trap
- Instructions to open a secret door
- The weakness of a powerful monster
- How to get to the next level
- The location of treasure

All of this information may be lost if you kill everything on sight. And it's worth noting that even some hostile creatures are willing to talk to their enemies before combat is joined. Dragons are notorious for this.

Sometimes you can't talk to a monster, but it is too powerful for you to defeat in combat and you need to avoid it. How do you determine how powerful a monster is? Part of this comes with experience. The longer you play the game, the more familiar you become with the typical creatures and their abilities, but here are a few tips that may help when you meet a creature you don't know anything about:

- Your character knows things that you don't, and it's possible the DM will let you make an Intelligence (Nature) or Intelligence (Arcana) check to reveal valuable information. There are times when Intelligence (History) or Intelligence (Religion) may reveal useful information, as well.
- There is a reasonably strong correlation between monster size and durability. The bigger it is, the harder it is to kill.
- Evidence in the monster's lair might indicate how tough it is. If a red dragon corpse is lying at its feet, that tells you something.
- Certain class/subclass features can help out here, such as Favored Enemy (ranger), Know Your Enemy (Battle Master), and Hunter's Sense (Monster Hunter).
- Several spells in the divination school, augury for example, may reveal helpful monster information.



Having exhausted these options, you may still find yourselves with very little information to work with. In that case, you may be better off avoiding the monster if you can or being prepared to retreat quickly if it proves too difficult after a round or two of combat.

Handling Superior Forces

You will win if you know how to handle both superior and inferior forces.

— Sun Tzu

There are many times when you need to defeat a force that can outfight you in a straight pitched battle. Assuming you are unable to sneak around the enemy or avoid them in some other way, there are several strategies you can use:

- A well-executed surprise attack can effectively augment your offensive power. See “Using Surprise,” below.
- Weakening an enemy force by separation is also very effective. See “Planning for Battle” in chapter 1.
- Good tactical positioning can enable you to destroy a numerically superior force. See “Concentration and Dispersal” in chapter 9.
- Hit-and-run attacks can wear down a numerically superior force. See “Hit-and-Run Attacking” in chapter 7.
- The clever use of magic, especially control magic, can quickly redraw the battlefield in your favor. See “Control Spells” in chapter 12.

Having a Common Spirit

You will win if your army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks.

— Sun Tzu

This seems an obvious point, but it is worth stating. Your party needs to be reasonably united in order to succeed, especially against challenging foes. An obtuse adventurer who turns left when everyone else is turning right brings trouble on themselves and on the group. The same goes for clerics who refuse to heal, bards who refuse to buff, and fighters who declare they are tired of being in the front rank. There has to be a general spirit of cooperation and good-will if the party is to survive.



Using Surprise

You will win if, being prepared, you take the enemy unprepared.

— Sun Tzu

Surprise is a very powerful tool. Mechanically, it gives you a round of unopposed attacks. Given that most combats only last 3 or 4 rounds, this essentially represents a 25% or more increase in combat capability.

Even if you just walk around blundering into encounters, you will occasionally gain the benefit of surprise. However, there are two tactics that greatly increase the likelihood of this occurring.

Ambush. In an ambush, you conceal yourselves in a fixed position and then attack the unsuspecting enemy as they come in range. You must first select the “kill zone,” which is the area the enemy is expected to pass. Ideally the kill zone will have some sort of barrier on the flanks (such as a tree line or a cavern wall) that prevents the enemy from simply scattering when the assault begins.

If you are using magical invisibility for concealment, then you can set the ambush almost anywhere. If not, you must select terrain that helps you hide, such as a forest or a cavern full of stalagmites. Finally, you need an agreed signal for the attack to commence. A tin whistle can be used for this.

Surprise Attack. In a surprise attack, you and your comrades stealthily approach a fixed position and attempt to attack before you are seen. It is much harder to execute than an ambush since it is more difficult to conceal yourselves while moving, and you also lack the advantages that come from being able to prepare a defensive position.

The optimum strategy is to use magic that hides you from sight *and* makes you silent. Another good option is to create a distraction behind the enemy line, for example using illusion magic to create a loud explosion. Using smoke or fog to obscure the vision of the defenders is another time-tested tactic.

Assessing Combat Capacity

You will win if you have military capacity.

— Sun Tzu

The final element of strategic fighting is having the capacity to fight. You may have chosen the right fight, or you’ve united behind a careful plan, but if you’re low on resources you could still fail. Key questions to answer are:

- How many hit points do you have remaining?
- How many spell slots do you have remaining?
- How many class or subclass features do you have available?

Patience is often key here. Sometimes you simply need to rest before the final assault begins. Chapter 2 discusses resource management in more detail.

4. Tactical Roles

The victorious strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won, whereas the one destined for defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory.

— Sun Tzu

There are many character classes in DUNGEONS & DRAGONS and even more subclasses. In combat, however, characters tend to adhere to a small number of defined tactical roles. Each role brings a different capability to bear on the battle, and each role makes a unique contribution to the different challenges faced. The roles are:

- Defenders
- Strikers
- Controllers
- Boosters

It's not strictly necessary to cover each of these roles in your party, but it will usually make victory easier if you do.

Defenders

The skillful fighter puts themselves into a position which makes defeat impossible.

— Sun Tzu

Defenders are frontline combatants who protect the rest of the party from enemy attacks. They typically have a high armor class, a high hit point total, and other defensive features. A party without defenders may soon find itself overrun in battle.

Defenders are also known as tanks, meat shields, and bricks. The following character options make good defenders:

Barbarians are specialist defenders with high hit points and useful damage resistance. You are tough as oak and your Rage feature makes you very difficult to ignore. The Ancestral Guardian subclass and Totem Warrior (bear) subclass are especially good for defenders.

Bards following the colleges of Valor or Swords can be competent defenders.

Clerics can be very effective defenders. Select a domain that gives you heavy armor proficiency and combine that with spells like *bane*, *shield of faith*, or *spirit guardians*, and you become very hard to hit. The Forge, Tempest, and War domains all have features that can help.

Druids following the Circle of the Moon are very good defenders, since Combat Wild Shape gives you a large pool of extra hit points to soak up damage. The **dire wolf** and **brown bear** are both popular combat shapes.

Fighters are excellent defenders who combine a high AC with excellent hit points and a range of useful battlefield features like Second Wind and Indomitable. The Battle Master, Cavalier, and Champion subclasses are all good selections here, as are the Protection and Defense Fighting Styles.

Paladins make good defenders, combining good AC and hit points, and the ability to self-heal. The Redemption and Crown subclasses are both excellent options for defenders, as are spells such as *compelled duel* and *shield of faith*. As with fighters, the Protection and Defense Fighting Styles are of great use.

Warlocks with the hexblade pact can play the role of defender, so long as you are willing to wear armor. Spells such as *booming blade*, *armor of Agathys*, and *lightning lure* are all good selections for defenders.

Strikers

The onrush of a conquering force is like the bursting of pent-up waters into a chasm a thousand fathoms deep.

— Sun Tzu

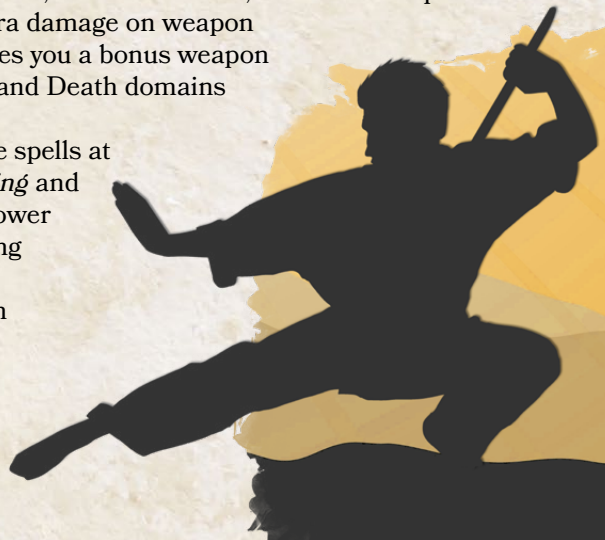
Strikers are able to deal massive amounts of damage, often (though not always) focused on a single target. A party without strikers may struggle to defeat the more powerful boss monsters and could find lesser battles devolve into painful attrition contests. Some strikers specialize in range attacks, while others are most effective in melee.

Strikers are also known as damage dealers, blasters (if spellcasters), and dps (damage per second). Almost all classes offer striker options, though sometimes it requires a feat to make it work:

Barbarians selecting Path of the Berserker alongside the Great Weapon Master feat can inflict serious amounts of damage. By 5th level (when you get an extra attack), when using Frenzy you have 3 attacks per round, all with advantage, and each with a potential +10 damage from the feat. You must be mindful of exhaustion, however!

Clerics following the Light domain gain access to potent damage spells such as *scorching ray*, *fireball*, and *flame strike*, while the Tempest domain gives you significant extra damage on weapon attacks, and the War domain gives you a bonus weapon attack from level 1. The Arcana and Death domains are also good options.

Druids have some fine damage spells at higher levels, such as *call lightning* and *fire storm*. A very good spell at lower levels is *conjure animals*, allowing you to summon **8 giant wolf spiders** all equipped with poison attacks!



Fighters selecting the Battle Master subclass can inflict strong sustained damage using the Feinting and Riposte maneuvers. Pairing this with Great Weapon Fighting and the Great Weapon Master feat turns you into a very effective melee striker. Remember that superiority dice recharge on a short rest, so you should spend them generously.

Monks are highly mobile melee strikers, able to execute multiple attacks per round from first level. Ki recharges on a short rest, so you can use Flurry of Blows frequently once it is available.

Paladins can deal out enormous bursts of damage using the Divine Smite feature. Paladins taking the Oath of Vengeance can use the Vow of Enmity feature to offset the Great Weapon Master feat penalty, leading to high, sustained damage. Coupling that with Divine Smite and *hunter's mark* (an Oath of Vengeance spell) makes you one of the most effective boss killers in the game.

Rangers are very capable strikers, whether in melee or at range. All of the subclasses give you interesting damage dealing options. For example, combining the Hunter (ranger) Horde Breaker feature with a glaive, the Polearm Master feat and *hunter's mark* lets you wreak havoc on a crowd. Range attackers should certainly consider the Sharpshooter feat.

Rogues are specialist strikers in combat, using Sneak Attack to deliver large amounts of damage with strategically placed hits. The Assassin archetype's Assassinate feature is very good for strikers.

Sorcerers are excellent strikers, using Metamagic to maximize the damage of your many dangerous spells. Empowered Spell enables you to boost damage, Quickened Spell enables you to cast both a damage spell and a cantrip on the same turn, while Twinned Spell allows you to effectively double the damage of certain spells, such as *chromatic orb*.

Warlocks have many good damage spells and can be effective strikers. The *hex* spell and *eldritch blast* cantrip combine well.

Wizards have access to many excellent damage spells. Evokers make especially good strikers, as the Sculpt feature allows you to drop fireballs wherever you wish without harming allies. Overchannel is another excellent damage dealing feature.



Controllers

It is in your power to control success.

— Sun Tzu

Controllers use control effects and debuff effects to shape the outcome of the battle. Control effects impede the enemy's ability to maneuver and attack, while debuff effects reduce enemy performance in some way. Most, but not all, control and debuff effects are magical.

Control effects often “change the battlefield map” so as to restrict where and how creatures can move, for example by dropping a *wall of fire* into the middle of the enemy formation. Control effects might also work directly on the opponent to restrict their ability to maneuver and attack, such as the hold person spell.

Debuff effects are related, but slightly different. A debuff effect reduces the performance of a creature, for example by lowering its AC or giving it disadvantage on attack rolls. The classic debuff spell is *polymorph*, which allows you to turn a red dragon into a kitten—severely impeding combat performance! More information on control and debuff spells can be found in chapter 12.

Controllers are very useful when dealing with large numbers of enemies as they can disrupt enemy tactics and prevent them from bringing their full capabilities to bear. Keeping a powerful foe out of battle for even a single round can make a huge difference to the outcome. A party without a controller can find itself overwhelmed by large numbers of foes and may find boss fights more difficult than they need to be.

Controllers are sometimes known as crowd control, CC, battlefield control, or board control. The following character options make good controllers:

Bards have access to outstanding control and debuff spells such as *sleep*, *Tasha's hideous laughter*, *thunderwave*, *silence*, and *fear*. You can also affect the battlefield with spells such as earth tremor and hallucinatory terrain.

Clerics have a fair selection of control spells, including classics such as *command*, *hold person*, and *banishment*. The Arcana and Nature domains give you access to additional controller features.

Druids make superb controllers with a great range of spells such as *entangle*, *fog cloud*, *spike growth*, and many more.

Sorcerers have a good selection of control spells at their disposal, though fewer than wizards have. Your limited spell inventory means you are more likely to be a secondary controller. Having said that, Metamagic allows you to use control spells in ways that wizards can't. For example, if surrounded by enemies you could use *Careful Spell* to safely drop *hypnotic pattern* right on top of your party.

Warlocks have excellent control and debuff spells, such as *hold person*, *hypnotic pattern*, *banishment*, and *hex*.

Wizards are the quintessential controllers, with a vast array of spells in this area. This includes classic control spells such as *grease*, *web*, *suggestion*, *wall of force*, and *forcecage*, and popular debuff spells such as *slow* and *confusion*.

Boosters

To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands.

— Sun Tzu

Boosters work by enhancing other members of the party. They might provide healing, magical protection, attack bonuses, magical enhancements, or some other buff. A party without boosters will find its resources are quickly depleted, that it cannot “turn around” a battle that is going badly, and that it lacks the ability to overcome difficult foes.

Boosters are sometimes called supporters, leaders, healers, and buffers. The following character options make good boosters:

Bards are classic boosters. Bardic Inspiration is the gold standard for buffing, and bards also have access to useful spells such as *heroism*, *healing word*, *lesser restoration*, *enhance ability*, and *invisibility*. For bards seeking to enhance their boosting capability, using Magical Secrets to access mass healing word or haste is a good option.

Clerics have always been incomparable healers, but they also have many excellent buff spells such as *bless*, *sanctuary*, and *heroes' feast*. The domains of Grave, Life, and Trickery are good for boosters.

Druids, like clerics, have an excellent array of healing and buff spells available.

Paladins have access to a small but first-rate selection of healing and buff spells, including *bless*, *shield of faith*, and *aura of vitality*.

Sorcerers tend not to be specialist boosters, but they do have access to helpful buff spells such as *enlarge/reduce*, *haste*, *invisibility*, and the incomparable *polymorph*. Once more, Metamagic gives the sorcerer unique capabilities, such as using Twinned Spell with haste.

Wizards tend not to be specialist boosters, but they have the same useful buff spells as the sorcerer, alongside other buff spells such as *remove curse*.



5. Use of Energy

The energy developed by good warriors is as the momentum of a round stone rolled down a mountain thousands of feet in height.

— Sun Tzu

If you peruse RPG strategy forums, you will come across the phrase “action economy” quite often, and you will see that people place a great deal of importance on it. But what does it actually mean and why is it important?

Understanding the Action Economy

Action economy is a meta-game term which describes how many things a monster or character can do in their turn during combat. Understanding and taking advantage of the action economy can greatly increase your character’s effectiveness in battle.

Let’s briefly look at how we can do that. In combat you may do the following each round:

Move	Change position up to your speed
One action	Attack, cast a spell, Dash, Disengage, Dodge, Help, Hide, Ready, Search, use an object, use a class feature
One bonus action	Cast bonus action spells, Attack with an offhand weapon, use bonus action class features
One reaction	Make an opportunity attack, cast reaction spells, perform a readied action, use reaction class features
One interaction	Speak plus a simple interaction with an object (open a door, draw your weapon, etc.)

That’s the essence of the action economy. Seems fairly straightforward, so how do we take advantage of it?

Using the Action Economy

In combat, everyone usually has something they can do as an action, but it is rarer to be able to use a bonus action or reaction. In practice, this means that you should seek to use bonus actions and reactions whenever available as they enable you to do more on your turn. Carefully check your feature list to see what is available as bonus actions or reactions. Spellcasters should also check the casting time on all of their available spells. Making good use of bonus actions especially can increase your combat effectiveness.

Class-Specific Examples

A couple of practical examples are in order. Say you’re playing a cleric, and one of your comrades is injured and requires healing. You could cast

cure wounds, but this consumes your action. However, *healing word* may be cast as a bonus action; it does less healing, but it leaves your action free, so you can still take an Attack action. Is one extra attack going to make much difference? Yes! See “Seeking Quick Victories” in chapter 2.

Clerics also have access to *spiritual weapon*, which creates a floating spectral weapon that you can make attacks with as a bonus action. This means you can use your action each turn to make a regular Attack, and then make a second attack using *spiritual weapon*. You get two attacks instead of one! This is how you use the action economy to your advantage.

Sorcerers can exploit the action economy in interesting ways using the Quicken Spell Metamagic option, which enables you to cast a spell that normally requires an action with a bonus action instead. This allows you to cast a powerful offensive spell in conjunction with an offensive cantrip, for example. It also means you can use your action to do things such as Disengage, Dodge, use a magic item, and so on. Sorcerers that have multiclassed with a martial class can become very powerful, casting a spell and making a regular attack on the same round.

There are some spells that can also be exploited with Metamagic. For example, if you cast *sunbeam* as a bonus action, you can use your action to create a new line of radiance, effectively doubling the damage of the spell on the casting round.

The action economy is very important for rogues, as your Cunning Action feature allows you to Hide, Dash, or Disengage as a bonus action. This means you can Attack, then use Disengage to safely move out of melee range. Alternatively, you could use your bonus action to Hide each round, thereby gaining advantage on your attack and activating your Sneak Attack feature (some DMs may put restrictions on this).

Feats Examples

Many feats leverage bonus actions or reactions to greatly improve your offensive abilities, for example:

- Great Weapon Master gives you an additional attack as a bonus action when you kill an opponent.
- Crossbow Expert lets you fire a hand crossbow as a bonus action when you attack with a one-handed weapon.
- Polearm Master gives you an extra, low damage attack every round as a bonus action.
- Shield Master lets you attempt to knock a creature over every round with your shield as a bonus action.
- Sentinel gives you an additional attack as a reaction when a nearby creature targets someone else with an attack.

These are just a few examples—there are many more. Understanding and using the action economy is something that really differentiates the experienced player from the novice.

6. Weak Points and Strong

Avoid what is strong and strike at what is weak . . . Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; soldiers work out victory in relation to the foe whom they are facing.

— Sun Tzu

All damage is not created equally. The fireball that annihilates a squad of orcs will have no effect at all on a hell hound. The mace that has crushed so many goblin skulls is surprisingly ineffective against a swarm of bats. And even your trusty sword might fail you when you come up against a werewolf.

Defense Profiles

Every monster you face has a *defense profile*, a specific combination of resistances, immunities, and (occasionally) vulnerabilities to different damage types. If you don't understand the defense profile of a creature, you may waste time and resources with ineffective attacks.

How can you tell what attacks are effective against what monsters? Sometimes this is quite self-evident—after all, it is no surprise to learn that a fire-breathing red dragon cannot be harmed by fire! And sometimes this is simply learnt by experience, the hard slog of facing a plethora of foes (although if you select the monster slayer subclass for rangers, you can discern these vulnerabilities magically).

However, you can make a good guess at the effectiveness of a damage type by being aware of the distribution of immunities and resistances according to creature type. The following tables show this information, collated for nearly 700 published creatures:



DAMAGE RESISTANCE/IMMUNITY TABLE (PART 1)

Damage Type	All	Aberration	Beast	Celestial	Construct	Dragon	Elemental
Acid	8%	16%	0%	0%	7%	17%	12%
Bludgeoning	26%	14%	6%	63%	53%	0%	58%
Cold	20%	24%	0%	0%	10%	17%	12%
Fire	21%	16%	0%	0%	10%	28%	42%
Force	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%
Lightning	15%	22%	0%	0%	10%	17%	18%
Necrotic	7%	0%	0%	13%	17%	2%	0%
Piercing	27%	14%	7%	63%	53%	0%	61%
Poison	29%	3%	0%	38%	80%	9%	73%
Psychic	3%	11%	0%	13%	33%	0%	0%
Radiant	1%	0%	0%	50%	0%	0%	0%
Slashing	27%	14%	7%	63%	53%	0%	61%
Thunder	4%	16%	0%	0%	7%	0%	12%

DAMAGE RESISTANCE/IMMUNITY TABLE PART 2

Damage Type	Fey	Fiend	Giant	Humanoid	Monstrosity	Ooze	Plant	Undead
Acid	0%	20%	4%	0%	3%	38%	0%	23%
Bludgeoning	33%	81%	11%	5%	18%	13%	16%	59%
Cold	14%	95%	19%	0%	6%	25%	5%	37%
Fire	5%	98%	11%	1%	8%	13%	5%	26%
Force	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Lightning	0%	64%	11%	0%	5%	25%	21%	33%
Necrotic	0%	5%	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%	70%
Piercing	33%	80%	11%	5%	18%	13%	37%	62%
Poison	0%	94%	4%	10%	11%	0%	11%	91%
Psychic	0%	0%	0%	1%	3%	0%	0%	5%
Radiant	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Slashing	33%	81%	11%	5%	18%	38%	0%	59%
Thunder	0%	2%	11%	0%	0%	0%	0%	23%

General Damage Strategies

There's a lot of data there, but we can use it to draw the following conclusions:

- Force, radiant, psychic, and thunder damage are the most effective overall, and are usually good options to use if available.
- While poison is the least effective damage type overall, it is still highly effective against aberrations, beasts, fey, giants, and oozes.
- Necrotic damage is potent against most creatures with the exception of undead and constructs.
- Acid is a highly effective damage type, though many oozes, and some fiends, are resistant or immune to it.
- A broad range of creatures are resistant to fire, cold, and lightning damage, including many aberrations, dragons, elementals, fiends, and oozes.
- Many creatures are resistant or immune to slashing, piercing, or bludgeoning damage. Note, however, that very few creatures are resistant to *magical damage* of those types, therefore it behooves adventurers to acquire magic weapons as quickly as possible.
- In general, beasts and humanoids are susceptible to most forms of damage.



7. Combat Maneuvers

Whether to concentrate or to divide your troops must be decided by circumstances. Let your rapidity be that of the wind, your compactness that of the forest. In raiding and plundering be like fire, in immovability like a mountain. Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.

— Sun Tzu

Every player should be familiar with the following basic combat maneuvers:

- Defending a Flank
- Attacking a Flank
- Hit-and-Run Attacking
- Stonewalling
- Retreating

Defending a Flank

Disciplined and calm, to await the appearance of disorder and hubbub amongst the enemy—this is the art of retaining self-possession.

— Sun Tzu

In military jargon, to “flank” means to attack the enemy from the side or rear. This is considered advantageous because the strongest point of a military force is usually the front. Flanking the enemy, therefore, enables you to attack its weakest point.

The same is true in D&D. If you consider a typical party, the front rank probably contains a fighter with a high AC and many hit points, while the second or third rank may contain a wizard with a low AC and relatively few hit points. A monster that can attack the party from the side (the “flanks”) can avoid the tough fighter and quickly take out the vulnerable wizard.

Attacking the flank also allows a numerically superior force to bring more of their creatures into the fight, meaning they begin benefiting from the action economy.



The defensive implications for adventuring parties are obvious. When fighting, you usually want to secure your flanks and force the enemy to engage with your frontline defenders. There are four ways to do this:

- Terrain
- Attack Interception
- Drawing Fire
- Magic Barriers

We'll examine each of these in turn.

Terrain

Terrain provides an excellent means of protecting your flanks. The walls of a dungeon tunnel are effectively impenetrable to the vast majority of the creatures you are likely to face, and hence give you perfect protection for your flanks. Whenever you enter a chamber or other open space, your flanks are usually exposed. If you suspect the enemy is likely to try and attack your flanks, retreating back into a tunnel is often a good option.

If you must fight inside a larger room, you can use a wall to protect one of your flanks. A corner potentially protects both a flank and your rear but may mean you are cut off from escape. Fixtures in the room such as an altar or monument can also be used to secure a flank, as well as furniture such as tables and benches. Finally, if you have time, you may be able to lay down caltrops or ball bearings to impede flank attacks.

Terrain provides options aboveground as well. Alleyways provide good flank protection, though be careful of windows and doors. If you are on a path through a forest, the tree line can provide some flank protection as well, though it is usually imperfect. Larger armies have traditionally used hills, mountains, and lakes to protect their flanks, but these are less useful to small forces.

Attack Interception

Some characters are able to intercept attacks intended for others, either reducing the damage or eliminating it altogether. For example, as a fighter you can take the Protection Fighting Style and use it to protect a vulnerable ally standing behind you on an exposed flank (this is nicely complemented by the Sentinel feat, which makes it difficult for creatures to disengage from combat with you.)

The following features also allow you to intercept attacks:

- Redemption paladin's Aura of the Guardian
- Abjuration wizard's Projected Ward
- Lore bard's Cutting Words
- Grave cleric's Sentinel at Death's Door

Drawing Fire

Some features encourage enemies to attack you rather than those around you, which is something you can use to protect an exposed flank. We call this drawing fire, and it can be achieved through the following features:

- Battle Master fighter's Goaded Attack
- Paladin's *compelled duel* spell
- Ancestral Guardian barbarian's Ancestral Protector
- Cavalier fighter's Unwavering Mark
- Swashbuckler rogue's Panache

Magic Barriers

There are numerous magic spells that can be used to protect an exposed flank. Some examples include:

- *Flaming sphere*
- *Fog cloud*
- *Minor illusion* (e.g. create the illusion of a wall)
- *Wall of fire*
- *Spirit guardians*
- *Cordon of arrows*
- *Grease*
- *Warding bond*



Attacking a Flank

Ponder and deliberate before you make a move.

— Sun Tzu

We've seen that monsters might attack your flanks to get access to vulnerable members of the party. However, it does not always make sense for you to attack the flanks of a monstrous force. In D&D, it is very common for the monstrous force to be composed of identical creatures, in which case attacking the flank gives no obvious advantage.

Attacking the enemy flank may make sense in the following scenarios:

- There is an enemy spellcaster being screened by the front rank.
- There is a rank of range attackers behind a rank of melee attackers, and you wish to neutralize the range attackers as soon as possible.
- You outnumber the enemy and attacking the flanks allows you to bring more weapons to bear on the battle.

FLANKING RULE

Note that there is an optional rule in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* that covers "flanking," but the word is used in a game-specific way.

Hit-and-Run Attacking

Emulate the rapidity of a running hare, and it will be too late for the enemy to oppose you.

— Sun Tzu

In chapter 1, we considered the importance of being ready to retreat if the tide of battle turns against you. Sometimes, though, retreat is not a contingency but rather an integral part of the plan. In a hit-and-run attack, you engage the enemy and then retreat after one or two rounds of combat.

The usual purpose of hit-and-run attacks is to wear down a numerically superior foe. You retire between engagements to recharge your resources before striking at the foe again.

To successfully execute a hit-and-run attack, you need the following:

- The ability to effectively disengage from the enemy and throw off pursuit.
- A safe place to rest between engagements while you replenish your resources.
- The ability to launch a surprise attack against the enemy position. This becomes more difficult after the first engagement as the enemy is probably expecting you.

For more information about surprise attacks, see “Using Surprise” in chapter 3. For more information about retreating, see “Retreating” below.

Stonewalling

The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy.

— Sun Tzu

When entering combat, it is common for the frontline defenders to attack as well as absorb the enemy blows. However, the Dodge action allows you to impose disadvantage on enemy attacks, at the cost of giving up your own Attack action. This “stonewalling” can be useful in the following tactical situations:

- When the enemy is exceptionally strong.
- When you are low on hit points or other defensive resources.
- When your goal is to distract rather than damage the enemy. For example, a barbarian might enter the enemy chamber through one door and stonewall while the rest of the party launch a surprise attack through another entrance.

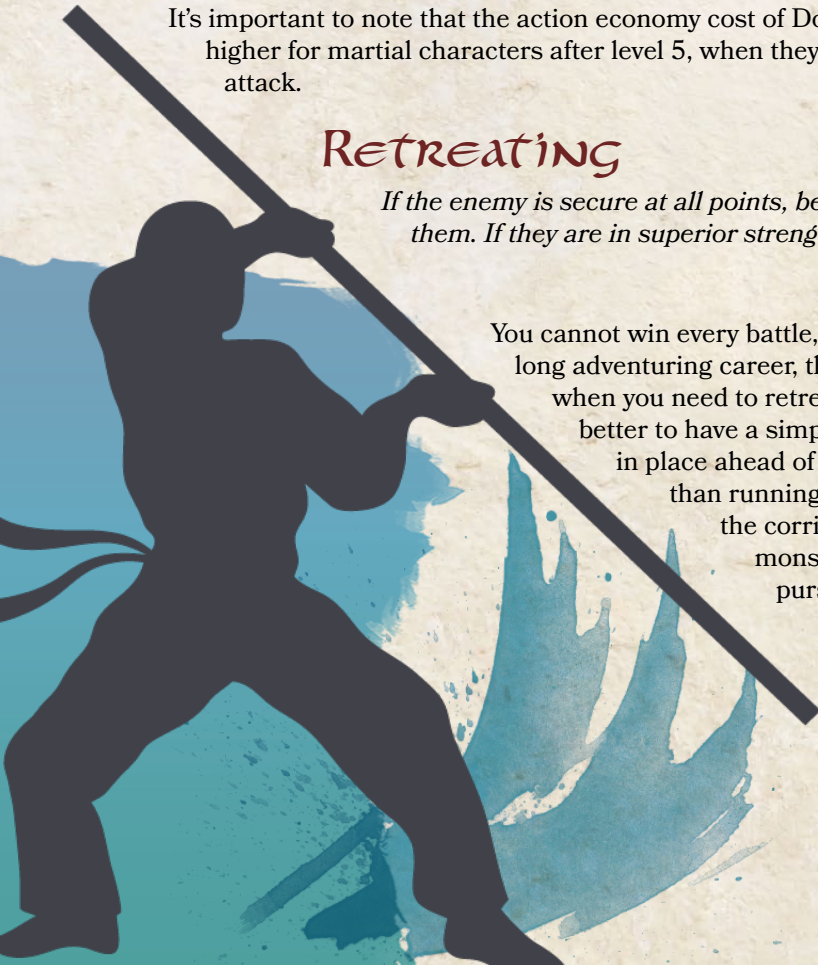
It's important to note that the action economy cost of Dodge becomes higher for martial characters after level 5, when they gain an extra attack.

Retreating

If the enemy is secure at all points, be prepared for them. If they are in superior strength, evade them.

— Sun Tzu

You cannot win every battle, and, over a long adventuring career, there are times when you need to retreat. It is far better to have a simple retreat plan in place ahead of time rather than running blindly through the corridors with the monsters in hot pursuit.



Set a Rally Point

You must first decide on a rallying point, a secure position where you regroup after a retreat. The ultimate rallying point is a base camp (see “Campaigning” in chapter 2), but it is helpful to find a position inside the dungeon itself. The ideal place is a chamber with a strong door and a second, safe exit.

Signal the Retreat

With the rallying point set, you need to decide when it is time to retreat from a fight. This is more art than science. Are you taking significant amounts of damage? Are the monsters showing signs of being resistant to your blows? Are you outnumbered and failing to whittle down the opposition? These are all signs that it is time to fall back. Given how subjective this is, it is inevitable that disagreements will arise. It is therefore helpful to have a party leader who is authorized to make a final decision and signal the retreat.

Disengage from Combat

Disengaging from combat can be a challenge in itself. One tactic is to have the frontline defenders keep the enemy occupied while the rest of the party retreat toward the rallying point. Once you have decided to retreat, doing damage is no longer a priority, so your defenders should probably use the Dodge action. The defenders themselves can then retreat, using Disengage to break off and flee, with the rest of the party providing covering fire with ranged attacks.

Note that if the defenders are separated by a monster in the initiative order, it’s possible for one of them to get isolated and surrounded when the others flee. In that instance, the defender higher in the initiative order should use the Ready action to ensure the retreat is simultaneous (“When Rolab disengages I will also disengage and move 30 feet up the corridor”).

Discourage Pursuit

There is a good chance that the monsters will give chase, so you should make plans to slow them down. Pools of burning oil, caltrops, doors spiked shut, and magical walls are all good ways to cover your retreat, as are spells like *grease* and *create bonfire*. Dropping food or treasure behind you might also stop some pursuers.

There is no shame in fleeing from a superior foe. And with a little more planning you can return to the field and be victorious!

8. Various Tactics

Hence in the wise leader's plans, considerations of advantage and of disadvantage will be blended together.

— Sun Tzu

Every party of adventurers presents a unique combination of races, classes, subclasses, feats, equipment, and spells, meaning that every party develops its own approach to combat. However, there are a number of broad tactical principles that can be applied to most combat scenarios, and these are described below.

Combat Advantage

Then you will be able to fight with advantage.

— Sun Tzu

Having advantage on your attack rolls is very valuable—in some instances it almost doubles your chance of hitting, with the benefit scaling up as the enemy AC increases. Many features and spells give you combat advantage, either as the primary effect or as a side effect. A few examples include:

- Spells such as *guiding bolt*, *entangle*, *faerie fire*, *blindness/deafness*, and *hold person*
- Using the Help action to aid someone's attack
- Barbarian's Rage feature
- Rogue Mastermind's Master of Tactics feature

You need to fully understand any features you have that grant combat advantage, and you need to use them at every opportunity.

Fire Focus

The ears and eyes of the army may be focused on one particular point.

— Sun Tzu

It is almost always advantageous for the party to focus your attacks on a single enemy at a time, moving on to the next enemy only after the previous one has dropped. This reduces the number of counter-attacks the enemy can potentially make against you and can easily be the difference between victory and defeat.

The only exception to this general rule comes when you find yourself facing a large number of weak enemies (although the optimal approach in such an instance is probably to use control spells, as described in chapter 12).

Target Priority

You may advance and be absolutely irresistible, if you make for the enemy's weak points.

— Sun Tzu

Having decided to focus our fire, we need to determine which enemies to eliminate first. Conventional wisdom says that enemy spellcasters should be the first targets. This is because magic has the potential to affect the outcome of a battle in highly unpredictable ways, making enemy spellcasters a wildcard on the battlefield. You are best to eliminate them early.

Humanoid spellcasters are usually easy to spot. They tend not to wear armor and stand behind the frontline combatants waving staffs and uttering incantations. They are almost always wearing robes, for some reason. With regards to non-humanoid spellcasters, the DM may permit you to identify them with an Intelligence (Arcana) check. You usually want to destroy healers first of all.

Having eliminated the spellcasters, the next priority target is less obvious. Any creature that can take your action away from you (such as the **umber hulk**, with its confusing gaze) must be dealt with quickly. Aside from that, it often comes down to a choice between a boss, who hits hard, and minions, who are weaker but collectively have more attacks. In the absence of other factors, taking down the minions first is often the best tactic, so as to swing the action economy in your favor.



Ranged Attacks

Energy may be likened to the bending of a crossbow; decision, to the releasing of a trigger.

— Sun Tzu

Ranged attacks allow you to inflict damage on your opponent without the risk of taking melee damage in return. You should use ranged attacks as often as practical, especially when the enemy has no ranged capability of its own.

It is perfectly possible to make ranged attacks through your own frontline (although the DM *might* grant your opponents a cover bonus). An effective strategy against larger forces, therefore, can be to have a defender (such as a barbarian) hold a choke point while the rest of the party make ranged attacks from behind.

Reach Weapons

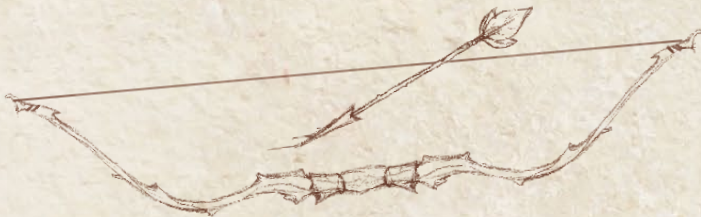
Strike and conquer and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary warriors.

— Sun Tzu

In the *Player's Handbook*, the following weapons have the reach property: glaive, halberd, lance, pike, and whip. When using these weapons, you add 5 feet to your reach (which is usually 5 feet to begin with). This allows you to be in the second rank behind your frontline defenders and still make melee attacks against the first rank of enemies (though you may incur a cover penalty).

Since any creature trying to leave your reach provokes an opportunity attack, these weapons allow you to control a very large area. You could, in theory, stand in a 25-foot wide choke point and hit anything that tried to bypass you.

What really makes these weapons worthwhile, however, is the Polearm Master feat (which only applies to certain reach weapons). This not only gives you a regular bonus attack, it also enables you to make opportunity attacks when a creature enters your reach (as well as leaving it). Using this capability enables you to stop and hurt an approaching creature before it comes close enough to you to make a melee attack and enables you to effectively control a large battlefield area.



Buffing

Come to each other's assistance just as the left hand helps the right.

— Sun Tzu

To buff a character is to enhance them in some way. There are several subclass features and numerous spells that you can use to buff the characters in your party, and this can make all the difference on those clutch rolls against the big bad boss. Buff spells are covered in chapter 12, but following is a sampling of class and subclass buff features:

Buff	Class/Subclass Feature
Damage Reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ancestral Guardian barbarian's Spirit Shield• Lore bard's Cutting Words• Redemption paladin's Aura of the Guardian• Crown paladin's Divine Allegiance• Abjuration wizard's Projected Ward• Grave cleric's Sentinel at Death's Door• Cavalier fighter's Warding Maneuver
Improved Attack Rolls, Saving Throws, or Ability Checks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Totem barbarian's Wolf Spirit• Zealot barbarian's Zealous Presence• Bard's bardic Inspiration• War cleric's Guided Strike• Spirit druid's Hawk Spirit• Mastermind rogue's Master of Tactics• Paladin's Aura of Protection• Spirit druid's Unicorn Spirit• Divination wizard's Portent• Purple Dragon Knight fighter's Bulwark
Improved AC	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Valor bard's Combat Inspiration• Forge cleric's Blessing of the Forge
Temporary Hit Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Glamour bard's Mantle of Inspiration• Spirit druid's Bear Spirit• Battle Master fighter's Rally
Extra Attack	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Order cleric's Voice of Authority• Battle Master fighter's Commander's Strike• Purple Dragon Knight fighter's Inspiring Surge

Finally, every character has access to the Help action, which lets you grant advantage to an ally on their next ability check or attack roll. This is one of the most powerful and versatile buffing features available and is sorely underused at some tables.

Grappling

Grappling is a sometimes misunderstood and underutilized option. A grapple is a special melee attack action where you make a Strength (Athletics) check contested by the target's Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. If you succeed, the target has speed 0—that is, they can no longer move.

This is a deceptively powerful action since it relies on an opposed skill check. Many monsters have either a high AC or good saving throws, but comparatively few monsters have either the Athletics or Acrobatics skill. Assuming you have the Athletics skill, you have a massive advantage over most of your opponents.

Controlling Movement. Is controlling a creature's movement all that useful? Yes, it is! For a start, it enables you to restrict who a creature can attack. You no longer need to worry about an exposed flank when the enemy is grappled! Furthermore, you can use grappling to keep a creature exposed to a certain area effect. One classic example is forcing a spellcaster to remain within a *silence* spell.

There are monsters that strongly rely on mobility for combat effectiveness, and grappling can shut these creatures down. Any creature with the Flyby feature, such as the **spined devil** or the **peryton**, becomes substantially more vulnerable when grappled. And creatures that rely on charging while in combat are far less dangerous with no movement.

Moving a Grappled Foe. You can drag or carry a grappled creature up to half your speed. This gives you a lot of offensive options. You can move a creature into a tactically advantageous position, or even move them to the edge of a cliff, ready for a good shove!

Shoving Prone. The shove action enables you to push a creature prone. A prone creature suffers disadvantage on melee attacks made against it, and also has disadvantage on its own attack roles.

The creature remains grappled after you knock it prone, which leads to a very powerful effect. Since a creature must spend movement to stand up, and since being grappled gives it 0 movement, the target cannot stand up until it breaks your grapple! This grapple/shove combination is an excellent way to neutralize a powerful enemy.



Shoving Away. You can also simply shove a creature away from you. Very handy if you have moved them in front of a fireplace, a window, or next to a cliff!

Tactical Healing

You need a different tactical approach to healing in combat as opposed to out of combat.

Healing in combat is an expensive proposition: it typically costs an action and the use of a class ability, spell slot, or item. Any turn you spend healing is a turn you aren't addressing your enemies, potentially prolonging the fight. Furthermore, an ally with a single hit point is just as effective as an ally at full hit points. Finding the right time to heal can be tricky!

Generally, delay healing until the last possible moment. Just as you prioritize enemies to attack, you should prioritize which allies to heal. The following is a good priority list:

- Unconscious allies at risk of dying
- Unconscious allies who can act before being targeted again
- A group of allies who will be unconscious before acting
- A single ally who will be unconscious before acting

If an ally isn't unconscious, consider how much damage they're likely to suffer before they act, how many hit points they have, and how much you can heal. Only heal them to ensure they take their turn. If you cannot, heal them after they fall unconscious. Bonus action healing abilities like the *healing word* spell are great for this, since you can still use your action to attack or activate other abilities.

Treat group healing spells like *prayer of healing* and *mass healing word* similarly. Remember, a splash of healing for everyone is much more valuable after the enemy mage knocks out the party with *fireball* than it is just before the mage casts *fireball* and knocks everyone unconscious anyway!

Healing outside of combat is comparatively cheap. Since the action economy is less relevant, focus on using the most efficient resources. After the fight, time is often readily available, so a short or long rest is usually the best option. If time is a factor or the area isn't safe, use renewable resources like wands, spell slots and class abilities before consumables like potions and scrolls. To minimize wasted resources, healing pool abilities like paladin's Lay on Hands or Celestial warlock's Healing Light are great for topping off the last few hit points.

9. Movement and Development

Those who exercise no forethought but make light of the enemy are sure to be captured.

— Sun Tzu

There are few things more important to an armed force than mobility. This chapter describes how to move and develop your characters while in combat.

Force Development

The one who can modify their tactics in relation to the opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain.

— Sun Tzu

In combat, to “develop your forces” means putting everyone in the most advantageous position possible. It is no use having a barbarian stuck at the back of the party, unable to melee the enemy. Nor is it helpful having a ranger who can’t get line of sight on a juicy target, or a wizard who can’t cast their favorite area of effect spell because everyone has rushed up into melee. Developing your forces gives each character a chance to excel and is essential if you want to enjoy the smoothest path to victory possible.

In chapter 4, we discussed the different roles your character could take. Following is the suggested positioning for each role:

Defenders need to be on the frontline of the battle, engaging the most powerful foes in melee. In the first round of combat you should decide where the line of battle is to be drawn and advance to it. Sometimes a spellcaster wants to blast the enemy battle line with an area of effect spell prior to melee, which can be problematic if the spellcaster is lower than the defenders in the initiative order. One solution is for the defenders to use the Ready action to move after the blast takes effect, e.g. “My character will advance to meet the enemy after Bobrick casts fireball.”

Strikers who focus on melee attacks typically hover on the perimeter of the battle, avoiding prolonged engagements and often attacking the enemy flanks. You typically do not want to advance ahead of the defenders lest you get isolated. Range strikers need to be in secure locations that give you line of sight over the whole battlefield, typically well behind the frontline and often protected by cover.

Controllers, like range strikers, usually need to be in secure positions that give you line of sight over the whole battlefield, typically well behind the frontline and often protected by cover. If you want to lay an area of effect spell on the enemy frontline, you will need to plan this ahead of time so that your defenders are not affected.

Boosters are very often found in the second rank, protected from the heat of battle but able to easily reach the defenders to administer healing or buffs as required. Well armored defenders, such as clerics, might also play a “sweeper” role, engaging any monsters that manage to barrel past the frontline. Boosters usually do not want to advance ahead of the defenders. If you are higher up in the initiative order, you might give up your movement on the first round and use your action to buff your allies (assuming you did not have a chance to buff them prior to battle commencing).

CONCENTRATION AND DISPERSAL

Whether to concentrate or to divide your troops, must be decided by circumstances.

— Sun Tzu

The one piece of tactical advice everyone seems to know is, “don’t split the party!” While a good general principle, there are various exceptions that you need to be mindful of. For example, sending a scout ahead of your party to investigate is a very good move (see chapter 13). Even when you enter combat as a single group, you must decide how concentrated your force will be. Broadly speaking, there are three formations your party can adopt:

Tight Formation. If defending a chokepoint (such as a tunnel), the party must necessarily be concentrated with everyone lined up behind the frontline defenders. We call this a “tight” formation. The advantage is that your flanks are protected, and everyone is in easy reach of touch-based buffs and healing. The downside is that the defenders block line of sight for those behind, meaning they might make their range attacks with a penalty. The party is also highly vulnerable to an area of effect attack.

Loose Formation. If fighting in a cavern or in the open, a better option is to spread out a little more. A checkerboard pattern can be effective, with frontline defenders leaving a 5-foot gap between each other, with boosters, controllers, and range strikers in the second rank filling the gaps, while melee strikers attack from the flanks. We call this a “loose” formation. The defenders can prevent anyone moving through the gaps via opportunity attacks, while the second rank have unimpeded line of sight for range attacks. The main disadvantage is that you need a reasonable amount of space to form up like this, and that in an open area it is easy to leave your flanks exposed (see “Defending a Flank” in chapter 7).

Dispersed Formation. Many higher-level monsters (such as dragons) have area of effect weapons or spells at their disposal. When facing such creatures, concentrating the party in a small area is a bad idea. In those instances, your party is better off approaching the creature in a “dispersed” formation, attacking it from multiple sides with your spellcasters and range fighters staying back, ideally protected by cover.

The main disadvantage of this formation is that it is very easy for a single character to get isolated. Sometimes, a better approach to tackling such monsters is to lure them into an ambush (see “Using Surprise” in chapter 3).

Movement in Combat

They will conquer who have learnt the artifice of deviation.

— Sun Tzu

Attacking is not the only option available in combat, and it sometimes makes tactical sense to use the other combat actions, especially when combined with movement.

Dodge. When you Dodge, all attacks against you are made with disadvantage. Frontline defenders should strongly consider taking the dodge action rather than attacking when facing a powerful or unfamiliar enemy (see “Stonewalling” in chapter 7).

Dash. The Dash action gives you extra Movement equal to your speed, usually doubling how far you can move. Moving and doing nothing else in combat is usually a suboptimal tactic, unless there are exceptional circumstances (trying to catch a fleeing monster, for example). Dashing to the frontline to be immediately attacked by a monster is a losing move (unless your intention is to draw the attack away from a more vulnerable ally).

Ideally, you want to combine Dash with an action or bonus action that justifies the extra movement. For example, rogues and monks both have features (Cunning Action and Step of the Wind) that allow you to Dash as a bonus action, which leaves your action free for an attack. A fighter can achieve much the same effect by using an action to Dash, and then using Action Surge to Attack.

A small number of spells have a casting time of a bonus action or reaction, and these might be combined effectively with Dash. For example, a wizard might dash close to an enemy spellcaster in order to cast *counterspell* when required. Check the casting time on your available spells.

You can also use Dash when fleeing from combat, although at the cost of an opportunity attack. Unless the monster is very fleet footed, it won't be able to catch you unless it also takes the Dash action, in which case it won't be able to attack you.



Disengage. The Disengage action enables you to leave combat without provoking an opportunity attack. It's a useful way to move during combat, but there is a drawback if you are trying to retreat. Any monster that is as fast as you can simply follow you to your new position, and then attack again. See “Retreating” in chapter 7 for ideas on how to effectively retreat from combat.

Rogues may use Cunning Action to Disengage as a bonus action. This allows them to use part of their movement to close with the enemy, attack with their action, Disengage with a bonus action, and then use the remainder of their movement to retreat from melee range. This is a potent tactical option.

Dropping Prone. You usually want to avoid being prone in battle, but it is advantageous when you are facing ranged weapons. Say you are in an open field exchanging longbow fire with a group of hobgoblins, and there is no cover to be found. You can fire your weapon as an action and then immediately drop prone, meaning that the enemy attacks with disadvantage. When your turn comes again, you can stand up, fire your weapon, then drop prone again.

10. Cover and Terrain

The natural formation of the country is the soldier's best ally.

— Sun Tzu

Every battlefield, whether an open field, the winding streets of a city, or deep underground, has unique physical characteristics. Learning how to effectively exploit these features can provide an enormous advantage in battle.

Cover

The general who is skilled in defense hides in the most secret recesses of the earth.

— Sun Tzu

The cover rules are quite straightforward:

Half Cover: A target has half cover if an obstacle blocks at least half of its body, which results in a +2 bonus to AC and Dexterity saving throws.

Three-Quarters Cover: A target has three-quarters cover if at least three-quarters of it is covered by an obstacle, which results in a +5 bonus to AC and Dexterity saving throws.

Total Cover: A target has total cover if it is completely concealed by an obstacle, which means the target can't be targeted directly by an attack or a spell, though some area of effect spells might still reach the target.

Cover is especially important to range strikers and controllers, who may not be heavily armored and hence require strong protection from enemy range attacks.



Following are the typical sources of cover:

Natural Cover. The terrain and flora of the battlefield usually provide cover. This includes stalagmites, stalactites, large fungi, trees, bushes, stones, bushes, and other natural formations or growth.

Artificial Cover. Structures such as pillars, doors, furniture, statues, altars, chests, fountains, thrones, sarcophagi and more are all good sources of cover.

Magical Cover. There are a number of spells you can use to create cover. The instant fortress wondrous item is an obvious example, as is the *mighty fortress* spell. The *darkness* and *fog cloud* spells can also be used to create cover. Some enterprising players have even loaded up *Tenser's floating disk* with crates and barrels and used it as a kind of clunky, mobile barricade.

Illusory Cover. Illusory cover is a powerful subset of magical cover. From the perspective of the rules, the illusion of a large boulder provides just as much cover as a real boulder.

Living Cover. You can use living creatures as cover as well. This includes mounts, allies—and even enemies!

Attacking from Cover. There is no restriction around making an attack from half cover or three-quarter cover, so long as you have line of sight to your target. Attacking from total cover is also quite straightforward. You can split your movement so that you leave cover, make your attack, and then return to cover. This is an excellent strategy for range strikers and controllers.

TERRAIN

Utilize the natural advantages of the ground.

— Sun Tzu

We've seen that terrain is an important provider of cover, but you can use it in other ways as well:

- You can position yourself on the far side of difficult terrain to slow down an onrushing attacker.
- You can use elevated positions, such as natural ledges or balconies, to protect yourself from melee combat.
- You can also use elevation to obtain uninterrupted line of sight across the entire battlefield.
- You can use impassable terrain, such as rivers or stone walls, to protect an exposed flank.

There are many other ways to use terrain in combat, all it requires is a close examination of the battlefield and a bit of forethought.

11. SITUATIONS AND COMBINATIONS

The different measures suited to the . . . varieties of ground; the expediency of aggressive or defensive tactics; and the fundamental laws of human nature: these are things that must most certainly be studied.

— Sun Tzu

The combination of races, classes, subclasses, features, feats, spells, and skills gives you the ability to create a truly unique character. But how do you decide which options to choose?

Optimization vs Narration

How to make the best of both strong and weak—that is a question.

— Sun Tzu

There is no denying that some character combinations work better than others. Some options allow you to hit more often, do more damage, and overcome more challenges. Having said that, all combinations are valid, especially when chosen for narrative reasons. You should choose the build combination that tells the story you want to tell. Narrative is ultimately more important than an optimal build. A halfling barbarian faces certain limitations, for example, but these can be surmounted with imagination and skillful play.

If narration trumps optimization, is there any value in knowing what the optimal combinations are? There are several reasons you might want this information:

- Sometimes you want the optimal combination for narrative purposes. For example, you might want to create a barbarian who is reputed to be the most skillful combatant in the village.
- Sometimes you don't care about a particular attribute (e.g. Background), in which case you might wish to default to an optimized selection.
- For novice players, the amount of choice can be bewildering. A set of optimized combinations helps make character creation and advancement easier.

Character build optimization is an enormous subject that could easily fill a book on its own. Everything that follows is an introduction to the fundamentals, and no more.

Multiclassing Essentials

The clever combatant looks to the effect of combined energy.

— Sun Tzu

Multiclassing is a powerful way to customize your character, and it massively increases the number of options available to you. Once again, any multiclass combination you create is valid, but there are some basic principles that may help guide your choices.

Feature Forfeit. You should start by being aware of what you are giving up when you multiclass. Since you are limited to 20 levels in total, dipping (as it's known) into other classes means you are giving up higher level features in your base class. Some classes have an excellent capstone feature, so consider carefully before multiclassing.

Feature Targeting. You choose to multiclass in order to access a feature that is available in another class. Sometimes this feature is one that complements the features available in your base class. For example, it is very common for non-martial classes to take a level of fighter in order to get armor proficiency and a Fighting Style.

However, you might also want to dip into a class to access a feature that extends your existing features in some way. For example, a cleric might dip into sorcerer in order to gain Metamagic effects for their cleric spells.

Attribute Synergy. You must consider attribute synergy when multiclassing. For example, a fighter who wants to dip into wizard must have a good Intelligence score—which might be a problem if Intelligence was your dump stat when you created your character! The best multiclass combinations are those with attribute synergy between the classes. For example, sorcerer and paladin are both Charisma-based spellcasters, and make for a good combination.

Multiclass Breakpoints. Choosing which class to dip into is only half of the challenge. You also need to decide when to dip. The general rule is pretty simple—compare the features you will receive with your next base class level with what you will receive from multiclassing and take whichever is more desirable. Given all classes get a big power boost at level 5, it is common to start multiclassing only after your base class reaches level 5. It's worth noting that novices tend to underestimate the value of ability score increases (known as ASI). If an ASI is on offer, you should usually take it.

Class Specific Combinations

Concentrate your energy and hoard your strength.

— Sun Tzu

This section presents optimal combinations for each class. It's worth noting that there is significant disagreement amongst the experts when it comes to some options!

Barbarian

Optimal combinations for the barbarian include:

Ability Scores. Strength should be your highest ability score as you use it for melee attacks, and it powers several of your class features. Constitution is the best choice for your second highest ability score as you rely on an ample supply of hit points.

Race. Half-orcs, mountain dwarves, goliaths, and variant humans all make excellent barbarians due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Perception is the most useful skill in the game. Athletics is a natural fit for you in terms of narrative and ability score affinity.

Background. Outlander is the default background and has good skills and a potentially useful feature. Sailor is a better option, with an excellent feature and skills. If you want something more unusual, try urchin, which turns you into a kind of thief-barbarian.

Feats. Great Weapon Master works well with your Reckless Attack feature, enabling you to deal huge amounts of damage with a heavy weapon. Sentinel is a great feat for frontline defenders, enabling you to control the enemies around you and protect weaker members of your party.

Subclass. Barbarians are defenders at heart. The Ancestral Guardian, Battlerager, and Zealot subclasses are all great defender choices. Berserker allows you to move your character toward a striker role, while Storm Herald and Totem both give you booster-style abilities.

Multiclassing. Dipping into fighter gives you helpful combat features such as a Fighting Style, Second Wind, and Action Surge. Dipping into rogue gives you Cunning Action, greatly increasing your mobility on the battlefield. You can combine rogue's Sneak Attack with barbarian Rage so long as you use a finesse weapon (most likely a rapier).



Bard

Optimal combinations for the bard include:

Ability Scores. Charisma is your spellcasting ability and also drives a number of your class features, so it should be your highest ability score. Dexterity is a good choice for second highest ability score as you may find yourself drawing a rapier or bow on occasion.

Race. Half-elves, variant humans, aasimar, and lightfoot halflings all make excellent bards due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Perception is the most useful skill in the game. As a bard, you are mostly likely the party “face,” so Persuasion and Deception are good selections, too.

Background. Entertainer is the default background and has fair skills and a potentially useful feature. Courtier may be a better option. If you want something more unusual, the urban bounty hunter has strong skill affinity and a useful feature, as well as interesting narrative potential.

Feats. Inspiring Leader is a powerful feat at lower levels that meshes well with your character both mechanically and narratively. Actor is worth considering if your campaign has lots of social interaction and you are the “face” character.

Subclass. Bards are boosters who also become increasingly powerful controllers as they level up. The Glamour and Shadow subclasses both enhance your controller abilities, while swords and valor give you the martial proficiencies required to become a defender. Lore is highly flexible, with Additional Magical Secrets enabling you to select spells that can enhance any tactical role you wish.

Multiclassing. For bards who want to fight on the frontline, taking two levels of paladin gives you a Fighting Style, Divine Smite, and some extra buff spells as a bonus. On the other hand, dipping into warlock allows you to complement your bard spells with some good blasting ability.

Cleric

Optimal combinations for the cleric include:

Ability Scores. Wisdom is your spellcasting ability and powers your Channel Divinity feature, so it should be your highest ability score. For your second highest ability score, choose Strength if you want to use heavy armor and melee weapons, or Constitution otherwise.

Race. Hill dwarves, wood elves, ghostwise halflings, githzerai, and variant humans all make excellent clerics due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Insight is a Wisdom-based skill that is very useful in campaigns that emphasize social interaction. Medicine is a handy skill that may save you spell slots. You might also choose Religion for narrative reasons.

Background. Acolyte is the default background and has good skills and a useful feature. Sailor is another excellent option if you have a good Strength score. If you want something more unusual, try far traveler.

Feats. War Caster and Heavy Armor Master are great choices for clerics who find themselves on the frontline of battle. Healer is a good thematic choice that helps you save spell slots.

Subclass. The classic cleric is a booster and secondary controller, but cleric domains are very flexible and allow you to take on any tactical role. If you wish to be a booster, choose Grave, Life, or Trickery. For a defender, choose Forge, Tempest, or War. To become a striker, choose Arcana, Death, Light, War, or Tempest, while controllers should choose Arcana or Nature. The Knowledge domain is of most use in campaigns that focus on investigation and social interaction.

Multiclassing. Melee-focused clerics can dip into fighter to get Fighting Style, Action Surge, and extra weapon proficiencies. Clerics focused on combat spellcasting might consider dipping into sorcerer, which gives you excellent offensive spells alongside Metamagic effects across your entire spell portfolio.

Druid

Optimal combinations for the druid include:

Ability Scores. Wisdom is your spellcasting ability and should be your highest ability score. Constitution is a good selection for your second highest ability score, especially if you plan to take on a defender role.

Race. Hill dwarves, wood elves, firbolgs, and ghostwise halflings all make excellent druids due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Perception is the most useful skill in the game. Survival is a natural fit for you in terms of narrative and ability score affinity, while Arcana often comes in handy for spellcasters.

Background. Hermit is the default background, but its skills and feature are uninspiring. Acolyte is probably a better option. If you want something more unusual, try inheritor.

Subclass. Druids are very flexible. If you want to be a booster, choose either Dreams or the Shepherd. Controllers should choose the Land, while defenders should choose the Moon.

Feats. War Caster is always a solid choice for a spellcaster. Resilient (Constitution) is a good choice if you are going to be fighting in the frontline.

Multiclassing. Druids don't benefit much from multiclassing, partly because your subclasses are already so flexible and partly because you have such an excellent capstone ability. However, dipping into Life cleric gives you a nice boost to healing spells.

Fighter

Optimal combinations for the fighter include:

Ability Scores. Strength should be your highest ability score if you are going to specialize in melee attacks, whilst you should choose Dexterity if you are going to specialize in range attacks. Constitution is a good second highest ability score, though you might consider Intelligence if you plan to select the Eldritch Knight subclass.

Race. Variant humans, mountain dwarves, eladrin, dragonborn, half-orcs, and goliaths all make excellent fighters due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Perception is the most useful skill in the game. Athletics is a natural fit for you in terms of narrative and ability score affinity.

Background. Soldier is the default background and has good skills though an average feature. Folk hero is a better option. If you want something more unusual, try pirate.

Subclass. Fighters are specialist defenders, and all the subclasses enable you to play that role. To push toward a striker, your best choice is Eldritch Knight, Battle Master, Arcane Archer, or Samurai. You can become something of a controller with Battle Master, Eldritch Knight, or Arcane Archer, while Purple Dragon Knight gives you excellent booster features.

Feats. Great Weapon Master is an excellent choice if you use a heavy weapon, while Sharpshooter is almost mandatory if you are a range fighter. Shield Master, Sentinel, and Crossbow Expert are also very good options.

Multiclassing. Dipping into rogue gives you Cunning Action, greatly increasing your mobility on the battlefield. Note that Strength-based fighters can use the rogue's Sneak Attack with a finesse weapon. War cleric gives you some excellent martial spells and features, though you will need a good Wisdom score.



Monk

Optimal combinations for the monk include:

Ability Scores. Dexterity should be your highest ability as you use it for attack and defense. Wisdom should be your second highest ability as it affects both your AC and your ki save DC.

Race. Wood elves, stout halflings, variant humans, aarakocra, and kenku all make excellent monks due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Stealth is a perennially useful skill and a natural fit for you in terms of narrative. Acrobatics is less often used but is probably the best of your remaining skill options as it is Dexterity-based.

Background. Hermit is the default background, but its skills and feature are uninspiring. Urchin is a better option. If you want something more unusual, try spy.

Subclass. Monks are very much strikers, and most of the subclasses reinforce that tactical role. Long Death and Four Elements both give you aspects of a controller.

Feats. Mobile is a very good feat for a monk, building on your natural strengths. Lucky is another good option.

Multiclassing. Your high Wisdom makes dipping into cleric a natural option. War cleric gives you access to *divine favor*, which is a nice damage boost. Ranger is also a perfect match as regards ability scores. Dipping there gives you a Fighting Style (probably Duelist) and spells, including the excellent *hunter's mark*. Dipping into Champion fighter for Improved Critical is another good choice, given how many attacks you tend to make.

Paladin

Optimal combinations for the paladin include:

Ability Scores. Strength should be your highest ability score as you use it for melee attacks. Charisma is your spellcasting ability and should be your second highest ability score.

Race. Mountain dwarves, lightfoot halflings, variant humans, dragonborn, half-elves, duergar, aasimar, and tritons all make excellent paladins due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Athletics is a natural fit for you in terms of narrative and ability score affinity. Persuasion or Intimidation are useful skills in social encounters and are both Charisma-based.

Background. Noble is the default background and has reasonably good skills and a useful feature. Mercenary veteran is another good option. If you want something more unusual, try guild merchant.

Subclass. Paladins are defenders who also have booster and striker features. If focusing on the defender role, you should select the

Redemption or Ancients subclass. To reinforce your ability as a booster, you should look at Devotion or Crown. Finally, Conquest and Vengeance both give you some controller features.

Feats. Heavy Armor Master is an excellent feat for paladins. Sentinel, War Caster, and Shield Master are also worth considering.

Multiclassing. Bard and sorcerer are Charisma-based spellcasters, making them excellent choices to dip into. Multiclassing into full casters gives you extra spell slots to burn using your Divine Smite. Dipping into bard enhances your prowess as a booster, while sorcerer gives you access to powerful damage spells plus Metamagic, making paladin/sorcerer one of the most powerful class combinations available. Dipping into warlock is another great choice as it allows you to refuel your Divine Smite on a short rest.

RANGER

Optimal combinations for the ranger include:

Ability Scores. Dexterity should be your highest ability score as you use it for ranged attacks and also, in all probability, your melee attacks. Wisdom is your spellcasting ability and should be your second highest ability score.

Race. Wood elves, stout halflings, variant humans, duergar, ghostwise halflings, bugbears, goblins, and aarakocra all make excellent rangers due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Perception is the most useful skill in the game. Stealth is also very useful and is Dexterity-based. Survival is a natural fit in terms of narrative and is Wisdom-based.

Background. Outlander is the default background and has reasonably good skills and a potentially useful feature. Sailor is a better option. If you want something more unusual, try urban bounty hunter.

Subclass. Rangers are primarily strikers, focusing on either range or melee, and the subclasses tend to reinforce this role. Monster Slayer adds aspects of controller at higher levels, while Hunter has elements useful for a defender. If you choose Beast Master, your choice of companion becomes paramount. **Flying snake, giant poisonous snake, panther, and wolf** are all good options.

Feats. Sharpshooter is usually an excellent feat for rangers. War Caster is useful if you are fighting in melee while casting concentration spells. Lucky is also worth considering.

Multiclassing. Fighter is an excellent option to dip into, enhancing your martial abilities with another Fighting Style and Action Surge. Rogue is another strong choice, with Sneak Attack and Cunning Action both increasing your combat prowess. Cleric is a Wisdom-based spellcaster and is a good option if you want to expand your spell list.

Rogue

Optimal combinations for the rogue include:

Ability Scores. Dexterity should be your highest score as you use it for your attacks and also for many signature skills, such as Stealth. Constitution is the best choice for your second highest score.

Race. High elves, eladrin, lightfoot halflings, variant humans, half-elves, feral tieflings, kenku, tabaxi, and bugbears all make excellent rogues due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Perception is the most useful skill in the game. Stealth and acrobatics are also very useful and are Dexterity-based, as well as being a natural fit in terms of narrative. Sleight of Hand or Deception are good choices for your final skill.

Background. Charlatan is the default background and has good skills and a useful feature. Criminal is another good option. If you want something more unusual, try pirate.

Subclass. Rogues are specialist strikers in combat, but some of the subclasses allow you to take on other tactical roles. Mastermind has one of the best booster features in the game with Master of Tactics. Arcane Trickster can develop into a (minor) controller with selection of the right spells.

Feats. Sharpshooter and Crossbow Expert are excellent feats for rogues. Magic Initiate opens up many interesting options, including *booming blade* and *find familiar*.

Multiclassing. Fighter is an excellent option to dip into, enhancing your martial abilities with a Fighting Style, Action Surge, and better armor. Warlock is another good option, giving you access to excellent bonus damage spells like *hex* and *booming blade*, as well as some useful invocations.

SORCERER

Optimal combinations for the sorcerer include:

Ability Scores. Charisma is your spellcasting ability and should be your highest ability score. Constitution is a good selection for your second highest ability score.

Race. Drow, lightfoot halflings, variant humans, half-elves, tieflings, aasimar, tritons, and yuan-ti purebloods all make excellent sorcerers due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Persuasion is a useful skill in social encounters and is Charisma-based. Arcana often comes in handy for a spellcaster.

Background. Hermit is the default background but has mediocre skills and a lackluster feature. Courtier is a better option. If you want something more unusual, try guild artisan.

Subclass. Although sorcerers are specialist strikers, Wild Magic and Divine Soul both give you booster features. You have many excellent controller-style spells available, however your best Metamagic effects (Quickened Spell, Twinned Spell, and Heightened Spell) combine better with damage-dealing spells.

Feats. Elemental Adept is essential if you are going to be a spellcasting striker. War Caster is very useful if you plan to fight on the frontline (which probably means you are multiclassing.)

Multiclassing. Dipping into paladin gives you a Fighting Style and Divine Smite. When coupled with Quickening, you can deliver devastating weapon and spell combinations, making this one of the most powerful class combinations available. Dipping into warlock gives you some potent damage spells, while Flexible Casting allows you to convert warlock spell slots (which recharge on a short rest) into sorcery points and thence into sorcerer spell slots. A very powerful combination!

Warlock

Optimal combinations for the warlock include:

Ability Scores. Charisma is your spellcasting ability and should be your highest ability score. Constitution is a good selection for your second highest ability.

Race. Drow, lightfoot halflings, variant humans, half-elves, tieflings, aasimar, tritons, and yuan-ti purebloods all make excellent sorcerers due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Intimidation and Deception are useful Charisma-based skills that are usually a good narrative fit for warlocks.



Background. Charlatan is the default background and has good skills and a useful feature. Criminal is another good option. If you want something more unusual, try faction agent.

Subclass. Warlocks are a combination of striker and controller (with a focus on debuff effects.) To bolster your striker abilities, choose the Fiend or the Hexblade. For additional controller features, choose the Archfey or the Great Old One. The Celestial and the Undying both give you booster abilities, while Hexblade allows you to operate as a credible defender.

Feats. Spell Sniper is an excellent selection for warlocks. The Lucky feat is another one to consider.

Multiclassing. Dipping into paladin gives you a Fighting Style and Divine Smite, the latter being very powerful since you can fuel it through a short rest. This is a good option for hexblades who want to fight on the frontline. Dipping into sorcerer also creates a powerful combination, as described in Sorcerer, above.

Wizard

Optimal combinations for the wizard include:

Ability Scores. Intelligence is your spellcasting ability and should be your highest ability score. Constitution is a good selection for your second highest ability, for both hit points and to help you maintain concentration.

Race. High elves, eladrin, forest gnomes, deep gnomes, half-elves, variant humans, and feral tieflings all make excellent wizards due to their racial ability score bonuses and features.

Skills. Arcana and Investigation are Intelligence-based skills and reasonably useful in most campaigns.

Background. Sage is the default background and has good skills and a potentially useful feature. Cloistered scholar is another good option. If you want something more unusual, try inheritor.

Subclass. The wizard's tactical role depends upon the spells you select, but you are usually either a controller and/or a striker. The Abjuration and Divination subclasses give you access to some powerful booster features, while Bladesinging allows you to potentially act as a defender (albeit a vulnerable one).

Feats. Resilient Constitution is an excellent selection for wizards. The Lucky feat is another one to consider. War Caster is only going to be useful if you anticipate fighting on the frontline.

Multiclassing. Multiclassing the wizard needs careful consideration as you get good power progress with every new wizard level and you also have an excellent capstone feature. With those caveats, dipping into cleric gives you access to healing spells and, potentially, heavy armor. Dipping into fighter gives you medium armor, Constitution saving throw proficiency, and Action Surge.

12. Attacking with Magic

Unhappy is the fate of one who tries to win battles and succeed in attacks without cultivating the spirit of enterprise; for the result is waste of time and general stagnation. Hence the saying: enlightened rulers lay plans well ahead; good generals cultivate their resources.

— Sun Tzu

The spellcasting system is arguably the most complex and powerful aspect of the game. So great in number are the options that many players opt to use just a small number of favorite spells. However, mastery of the different forms of magic grants you a massive advantage on the battlefield.

All spells can be divided into one of the following categories:

- Damage spells
- Buff spells
- Debuff spells
- Control spells
- Utility spells

Each of these categories is discussed in detail below. Note that there are a number of spells that cross categories. For example, *hunger of Hadar* is both a damage spell and a debuff spell.

Damage Spells

Damage spells directly reduce the hit points of the enemy. The classic example is *fireball*, which is rightly a staple spell for wizards and sorcerers.

Damage spells may seem pretty straightforward, but there are a number of factors you need to consider when selecting them:

- How much damage does it inflict?
- What damage type does it inflict?
- Does it affect a single target or multiple targets?
- Does it work instantaneously, or does it inflict damage over multiple rounds?
- What is the range?
- What is the size and shape of the target area?
- Does it inflict damage only, or does it also have a buff, debuff, or control effect?

The above variables make it difficult to generalize, but the following damage spells are generally considered amongst the best:

RECOMMENDED DAMAGE SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>eldritch blast, fire bolt, sacred flame, sword burst, toll the dead</i>
Level 1	<i>chromatic orb, dissonant whispers, guiding bolt, hex, inflict wounds, magic missile, searing smite</i>
Level 2	<i>cloud of daggers, flaming sphere, heat metal, scorching ray, spiritual weapon</i>
Level 3	<i>call lightning, fireball, lightning arrow, lightning bolt, sleet storm</i>
Level 4	<i>blight, ice storm, sickening radiance, vitriolic sphere, wall of fire</i>
Level 5	<i>cone of cold, conjure volley, destructive wave, flame strike, insect plague, maelstrom, synaptic static</i>
Level 6	<i>chain lightning, disintegrate, harm, sunbeam</i>
Level 7	<i>crown of stars, finger of death, fire storm</i>
Level 8	<i>incendiary cloud, maddening darkness, sunburst</i>
Level 9	<i>meteor swarm, power word kill, psychic scream</i>

Buff Spells

Buff spells enhance the performance of you or your allies in some way. A buff spell could increase an ability score, give you advantage on a roll, increase your armor class, give you temporary hit points, increase your speed, or numerous other things.

The classic buff spell is polymorph. Changing yourself or a comrade into a **giant ape** usually gives an enormous boost to combat performance!

The following buff spells are generally considered amongst the best:

RECOMMENDED BUFF SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>friends, guidance, resistance, shillelagh</i>
Level 1	<i>armor of Agathys, bless, guiding bolt, mage armor, sanctuary, shield, shield of faith</i>
Level 2	<i>aid, enhance ability, invisibility, magic weapon, pass without trace</i>
Level 3	<i>crusader's mantle, fly, haste, spirit guardians</i>
Level 4	<i>arcane eye, freedom of movement, greater invisibility, polymorph, shadow of Moil, stonewood</i>
Level 5	<i>antilife shell, Bigby's hand, circle of power, swift quiver</i>
Level 6	<i>globe of invulnerability, heroes' feast, investiture of wind, true seeing</i>
Level 7	<i>etherealness, simulacrum</i>
Level 8	<i>animal shapes, holy aura</i>
Level 9	<i>foresight, shapechange, true polymorph, wish</i>

Healing spells are an important subclass of buff spells (a healing spell increases your hit points, up to your hit point maximum). Following is a complete list of healing spells:

HEALING SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>spare the dying</i>
Level 1	<i>cure wounds, goodberry, healing word</i>
Level 2	<i>healing spirit, lesser restoration, prayer of healing</i>
Level 3	<i>aura of vitality, life transference, mass healing word, revivify, vampiric touch</i>
Level 4	<i>aura of life</i>
Level 5	<i>enervation, greater restoration, mass cure wounds, raise dead, reincarnate</i>
Level 6	<i>heal, heroes' feast, soul cage</i>
Level 7	<i>regenerate, resurrection</i>
Level 8	-
Level 9	<i>mass heal, power word heal, true resurrection</i>

Debuff Spells

Debuff spells reduce the performance of your enemies in some way. A debuff spell could impose disadvantage on some rolls, inflict a negative condition, remove a beneficial condition, negatively affect AC, interrupt actions and spellcasting, or several other things.

The classic debuff spell is also *polymorph*—turning a fierce dragon into a rabbit is one of the most effective ways to reduce its performance!

The following debuff spells are generally considered amongst the best in category:

RECOMMENDED DEBUFF SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>frostbite, vicious mockery</i>
Level 1	<i>bane, cause fear, faerie fire, hex</i>
Level 2	<i>blindness/deafness, heat metal, silence,</i>
Level 3	<i>bestow curse, counterspell, enemies abound, fear, slow</i>
Level 4	<i>elemental bane, polymorph, sickening radiance</i>
Level 5	<i>contagion, synaptic static</i>
Level 6	<i>eyebite, Otto's irresistible dance, sunbeam</i>
Level 7	<i>divine word, power word pain</i>
Level 8	<i>feeblemind, holy aura, sunburst</i>
Level 9	<i>psychic scream, true polymorph</i>

Control Spells

Control spells impede the enemy's ability to maneuver, which effectively means hindering movement or blocking line of sight. That may not sound very exciting, but it turns out to be one of the most powerful things you can do to influence the outcome of a battle. How come? Because it enables you to control the manner in which you engage your foe.

Being charged by a horde of orcs? Use *entangle* to slow them down, and let your fighters pick them off as they escape, one or two at a time. Confronted by a terrifying dragon and a small army of cultists? Use *wall of force* to contain the dragon while you deal with the cultists, then drop the wall to finish off the dragon. Hobgoblin archers tearing you to shreds? Use *fog cloud* to mess up their aim while you demolish the melee fighters. Control spells are true game-changers, making unwinnable battles winnable, and turning winnable battles into cakewalks.

Many control spells affect some physical aspect of the battlefield, with one of the most useful low-level examples being the web spell. Other control spells, such as *command* and *hold person*, directly affect the will of your enemy. Sometimes a damage spell has a control side-effect, with *thunderwave* being a good example of this.

The following control spells are generally considered amongst the best in category:

RECOMMENDED CONTROL SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>booming blade, create bonfire, lightning lure, minor illusion</i>
Level 1	<i>command, entangle, fog cloud, grease, sleep, Tasha's hideous laughter, thunderwave</i>
Level 2	<i>hold person, spike growth, suggestion, web</i>
Level 3	<i>erupting earth, hunger of Hadar, hypnotic pattern, spirit guardians, wall of sand, wall of water, wind wall</i>
Level 4	<i>banishment, charm monster, compulsion, control water, stone shape, wall of fire, watery sphere</i>
Level 5	<i>animate objects, Bigby's hand, dominate person, hold monster, wall of force, wall of stone</i>
Level 6	<i>bones of the earth, mass suggestion, mental prison, Otto's irresistible dance, wall of thorns</i>
Level 7	<i>force cage, reverse gravity, whirlwind</i>
Level 8	<i>dominate monster, earthquake, maddening darkness, maze, power word stun</i>
Level 9	<i>gate, imprisonment, prismatic wall</i>

Utility Spells

This category includes spells that don't fit in the other categories, such as *arcane lock*, *knock*, *leomund's tiny hut*, *comprehend languages*, and so on. These are situation-specific, so select and use them as required. Many utility spells are rituals, meaning they don't consume spell slots and hence have a low resource cost.



Recommended Spells by Class

In order to carry out an attack, we must have the means available.

— Sun Tzu

Amongst many excellent possibilities, the following spells are generally considered amongst the best for each class.

RECOMMENDED BARD SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>friends, mage hand, minor illusion, vicious mockery</i>
Level 1	<i>bane, dissonant whispers, faerie fire, sleep, Tasha's hideous laughter, thunderwave</i>
Level 2	<i>blindness/deafness, heat metal, invisibility, hold person, phantasmal force, silence, suggestion</i>
Level 3	<i>bestow curse, enemies abound, fear, hypnotic pattern, major image, plant growth, stinking cloud</i>
Level 4	<i>compulsion, confusion, dimension door, greater invisibility, polymorph</i>
Level 5	<i>animate objects, dominate person, hold monster, mass cure wounds, mislead, raise dead</i>
Level 6	<i>eyebite, mass suggestion, Otto's irresistible dance, true seeing</i>
Level 7	<i>forcecage, regenerate, teleport</i>
Level 8	<i>dominate monster, feblemind, power word stun</i>
Level 9	<i>foresight, power word heal, true polymorph</i>

RECOMMENDED CLERIC SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>guidance, light, resistance, sacred flame, toll the dead</i>
Level 1	<i>bless, cure wounds, guiding bolt, healing word, sanctuary</i>
Level 2	<i>aid, blindness/deafness, hold person, prayer of healing, silence, spiritual weapon</i>
Level 3	<i>animate dead, bestow curse, dispel magic, mass healing word, revivify, spirit guardians</i>
Level 4	<i>banishment, death ward, divination, freedom of movement, stone shape</i>
Level 5	<i>contagion, flame strike, mass cure wounds, raise dead, scrying</i>
Level 6	<i>create undead, harm, heal, heroes' feast</i>
Level 7	<i>conjure celestial, divine word, plane shift</i>
Level 8	<i>antimagic field, earthquake, holy aura</i>
Level 9	<i>gate, mass heal, true resurrection</i>

RECOMMENDED DRUID SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>control flames, frostbite, guidance, shillelagh, thorn whip</i>
Level 1	<i>cure wounds, entangle, faerie fire, fog cloud, healing word, thunderwave</i>
Level 2	<i>enhance ability, flaming sphere, hold person, moonbeam, pass without trace, spike growth</i>
Level 3	<i>call lightning, conjure animals, dispel magic, erupting earth, plant growth, sleet storm</i>
Level 4	<i>blight, confusion, conjure woodland beings, ice storm, polymorph, wall of fire</i>
Level 5	<i>antilife shell, conjure elemental, contagion, maelstrom, mass cure wounds, transmute rock</i>
Level 6	<i>bones of the earth, investiture of wind, primordial ward, sunbeam, wall of thorns</i>
Level 7	<i>fire storm, plane shift, reverse gravity</i>
Level 8	<i>animal shapes, feeblemind, sunburst</i>
Level 9	<i>foresight, shapechange, true resurrection</i>

RECOMMENDED PALADIN SPELLS

Level 1	<i>bless, shield of faith, wrathful smite</i>
Level 2	<i>aid, find steed, magic weapon</i>
Level 3	<i>aura of vitality, crusader's mantle, revivify</i>
Level 4	<i>banishment, death ward, find greater steed</i>
Level 5	<i>banishing smite, circle of power, destructive wave</i>

RECOMMENDED RANGER SPELLS

Level 1	<i>goodberry, hail of thorns, hunter's mark</i>
Level 2	<i>healing spirit, silence, spike growth</i>
Level 3	<i>conjure animals, lightning arrow, wind wall</i>
Level 4	<i>conjure woodland beings, freedom of movement, stoneskin</i>
Level 5	<i>conjure volley, swift quiver, wrath of nature</i>

RECOMMENDED SORCERER SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>chill touch, firebolt, minor illusion, ray of frost</i>
Level 1	<i>chromatic orb, mage armor, magic missile, shield, thunderwave, witch bolt</i>
Level 2	<i>cloud of daggers, mirror image, phantasmal force, scorching ray, web</i>
Level 3	<i>fireball, haste, hypnotic pattern, lightning bolt, sleet storm</i>
Level 4	<i>banishment, greater invisibility, polymorph, vitriolic sphere, wall of fire</i>
Level 5	<i>animate objects, cone of cold, hold monster, insect plague, synaptic static</i>
Level 6	<i>chain lightning, disintegrate, eyebite, mass suggestion, sunbeam</i>
Level 7	<i>crown of stars, finger of death, fire storm</i>
Level 8	<i>dominate monster, incendiary cloud, power word stun</i>
Level 9	<i>meteor swarm, psychic scream, wish</i>

RECOMMENDED WARLOCK SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>eldritch blast, frostbite, magic stone, poison spray, toll the dead</i>
Level 1	<i>armor of Agathys, armor of Hadar, cause fear, hellish rebuke, hex</i>
Level 2	<i>cloud of daggers, darkness, hold person, invisibility, suggestion</i>
Level 3	<i>enemies abound, fly, hunger of Hadar, hypnotic pattern, major image, thunderstep</i>
Level 4	<i>banishment, blight, shadow of Moil, sickening radiance</i>
Level 5	<i>dance macabre, enervation, hold monster, synaptic static</i>
Level 6	<i>eyebite, mass suggestion, mental prison</i>
Level 7	<i>crown of stars, forcecage, power word pain</i>
Level 8	<i>dominate monster, feeblemind, maddening darkness</i>
Level 9	<i>foresight, power word kill, psychic scream</i>

RECOMMENDED WIZARD SPELLS

Cantrips	<i>create bonfire, firebolt, friends, mage hand, message, minor illusion</i>
Level 1	<i>alarm, detect magic, disguise self, find familiar, grease, shield, sleep, thunderwave</i>
Level 2	<i>blindness/deafness, hold person, mirror image, misty step, phantasmal force, suggestion, web</i>
Level 3	<i>animate dead, counterspell, fireball, hypnotic pattern, Leomund's tiny hut, major image, slow</i>
Level 4	<i>arcane eye, banishment, greater Invisibility, polymorph, wall of fire, watery sphere</i>
Level 5	<i>animate objects, Bigby's hand, conjure elemental, cone of cold, hold monster, wall of force</i>
Level 6	<i>globe of invulnerability, magic jar, mass suggestion, Otto's irresistible dance, true seeing</i>
Level 7	<i>forcecage, reverse gravity, simulacrum</i>
Level 8	<i>antimagic field, antipathy/sympathy, maze</i>
Level 9	<i>prismatic wall, true polymorph, wish</i>

Note that the sorcerer and wizard spell lists overlap a lot, so for sorcerer I focused on damage spells, while for wizard I focused on control spells.

13. Gathering Information

What enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary folk, is foreknowledge.

— Sun Tzu

Skillful adventuring parties collect and analyze as much information as they can about the upcoming adventure and use this information to inform their tactics. This can have a massive impact on your combat effectiveness. To give a simple example, if you know the dungeon is full of devils, you won't bother preparing *fireball*.

You can research information before you set out, and later conduct espionage while you are in the field. Both areas are covered below.

Research

To remain in ignorance of the enemy's condition simply because one grudges the outlay of a hundred pieces of silver . . . is the height of inhumanity.

— Sun Tzu

You can often gather extensive information about the adventure ahead while you are still in town. If your destination is the typical dungeon, you are seeking answers to these sorts of questions:

- Who built the original dungeon?
- Why did the builders abandon it (assuming they did)?
- Who is occupying the dungeon now?
- Do the current occupants have any weaknesses?
- Are there any valuable treasures in the dungeon?
- Are there any secret entrances to the dungeon?
- Has anyone recently returned from the dungeon?
- Has anyone not returned from the dungeon?

When answering these questions, you should use the following major sources:

Rumors. There will probably be rumors swirling around town about any nearby dungeon. It is well worth your time to chase these rumors down. Even if half of them are false, the rest will give you some idea of what you are going to face. Taverns and inns are excellent rumor sources, but you should also visit the local markets and temples. Some cities have adventuring guilds that are likely to have much useful gossip to share.

Contacts. If you have spent much time in a settlement you have likely developed local contacts, and these are often a very good source of information. Some backgrounds (such as criminal) have features that

provide contacts ready-made. You can also generate new contacts using the carousing downtime activity (see *Xanathar's Guide to Everything*).

Libraries. Most cities have several libraries. These might be public, privately held, or owned by institutions such as temples. Gaining access to the library may involve a fee, but the expenditure is well worthwhile. Published histories, memoirs, and personal letters are all potential sources of information.

Divination. Divination spells such as *divination* and *contact other plane* can reveal specific details about the adventure ahead. If you lack the ability to cast these spells yourself, the local cleric will often do so in return for an appropriate donation. Once more, you should not begrudge this expenditure, as it may save your life.

Espionage

Be subtle! Be subtle! And use your spies for every kind of business.

— Sun Tzu

Once the adventure starts, it is vital that you find out information about the upcoming encounter if you can. You usually want to know the following:

- What is the location, strength, and composition of the enemy force?
- Are there any obstacles in the enemy location?
- What avenues of approach and exit are available to friendly and enemy forces?

This information can only be found out by spying on the enemy. The following methods may be used:

Scout. The classic approach is for someone to sneak ahead and then report back. Rogues have traditionally performed this role, but some races (such as the lightfoot halfling) are also good at scouting, regardless of class. It is easy for scouting missions to go awry, so it is best to have a clear plan ahead of time detailing what you will do if discovered.

Wizard's Familiar. Using a familiar to scout ahead is usually superior to using a party member. Granted, wizards are often very attached to their familiar, but it is easier to replace a familiar than it is to replace a comrade.

Magic. Magic can be used to gather information. Spells such as *arcane eye*, *clairvoyance*, and *scrying* are a superb way to reconnoiter the dungeon and should be used when available.

Shapechange. If you are able to change shape, you can scout ahead in the form of a rat or something else inconspicuous. The chance of detection is greatly diminished if you do so.

The leader that hears my advice and acts upon it, will conquer. . . . The leader that hears not my advice nor acts upon it, will suffer defeat.

— Sun Tzu

Glossary

The following terms are sometimes used by gamers:

action economy. A meta-game term that describes how many things a monster or character can do in their turn during combat.

AOE. Abbreviation for “area of effect.” It usually refers to a spell, attack, or other effect that affects multiple targets in a specific area.

AOO. Abbreviation for “attacks of opportunity,” also known as opportunity attacks.

area denial. A spell, item, or other effect that prevents an adversary from occupying or traversing an area.

ASI. Abbreviation for “ability score improvement.” This is a class feature that allows you to improve one of your ability scores.

BBEG. Abbreviation for “big bad evil guy/girl.” See boss.

bladeflock. A warlock that is built for melee combat. This might be accomplished by selecting Pact of the Blade, by selecting Hexblade for your patron, by multiclassing into fighter, or by some other means.

blaster. A spellcaster that primarily uses damage dealing spells.

booster. A character that uses buff spells or features.

boss. The most powerful enemy in an adventure location.
boss killer. A character able to inflict large amounts of damage on a single target.

buff. A spell or other effect that enhances the performance of a character in some way. A buff could increase an ability score, give advantage on some rolls, increase armor class, allocate temporary hit points, increase speed, or numerous other things. Healing is considered a type of buff.

capstone feature. The level 20 feature of a class.

control. Control spells and effects impede the enemy’s ability to maneuver or attack, either by changing some aspect of the battlefield or by directly affecting the enemy’s will or physical ability to move.

controller. A character that primarily uses control and debuff spells or features.

crit-fisher. A character designed to score as many critical hits as possible.

debuff. A spell or other effect that reduces the performance of a creature in some way. A debuff could give disadvantage on a roll, decrease armor class, interrupt spellcasting, or numerous other things.

defender. A character that is able to hold the frontline of battle, either due to high AC, numerous hit points, or other defensive features.

dip. See *level dip*.

DPR. Abbreviation for “damage per round.”

DPS. Abbreviation for “damage per second.” Also used as a synonym for striker.

dump stat. The attribute you assign your lowest score to when creating a character.

full caster. A class that can cast spells up to level 9. The full casters are bard, cleric, druid, sorcerer, warlock, and wizard.

face. A character who tends to handle the party's social interactions.

gish. A character that is skilled in both magic and physical combat.

glass cannon. A character that has excellent offensive capabilities but very poor defense.

god stat. An attribute that is considered disproportionately powerful. Some people consider Dexterity to be a god stat while others consider Wisdom to be so.

half caster. A class that can cast spells up to level 5. The half casters are rangers and paladins.

level dip. To take a level from another class, that is, to multiclass. Often just called "dip." For example, "My level 8 cleric dipped into fighter to get a Fighting Style."

lockdown. A spell or effect that prevents a creature from moving or taking actions.

MAD. Abbreviation for "multiple ability dependency." Refers to a class that requires high scores in multiple abilities in order to be effective. See also SAD.

meat shield. Another term for a defender.

nerf. To make something weaker and less dangerous, usually for balance purposes.

nova. Dealing large amounts of damage in a single round. Also called "burst damage."

OOC. Abbreviation for "out of character." Refers to any comments by the player as opposed to the character.

OP. Abbreviation for "over-powered."

RAI. Abbreviation for "rule as intended." Means the intention behind the rule.

RAW. Abbreviation for "rule as written." Means the literal interpretation of the rule.

rule zero. Rule zero states that the Dungeon Master has final say in all things relating to the game.

SAD. Abbreviation for "single ability dependency." Refers to a class that requires a high score in a single ability in order to be effective. See also MAD.

sorcadin. A sorcerer/paladin multiclass build.

striker. A character that is able to inflict large amounts of damage.

stunlock. The act of using multiple stuns in succession to prevent a creature from fighting or escaping.

tank. Another term for a defender.

third caster. A subclass that can cast spells up to level 4. The third casters are Eldritch Knights and Arcane Tricksters.

TPK. Abbreviation for "total party kill."