The Rules of Cool
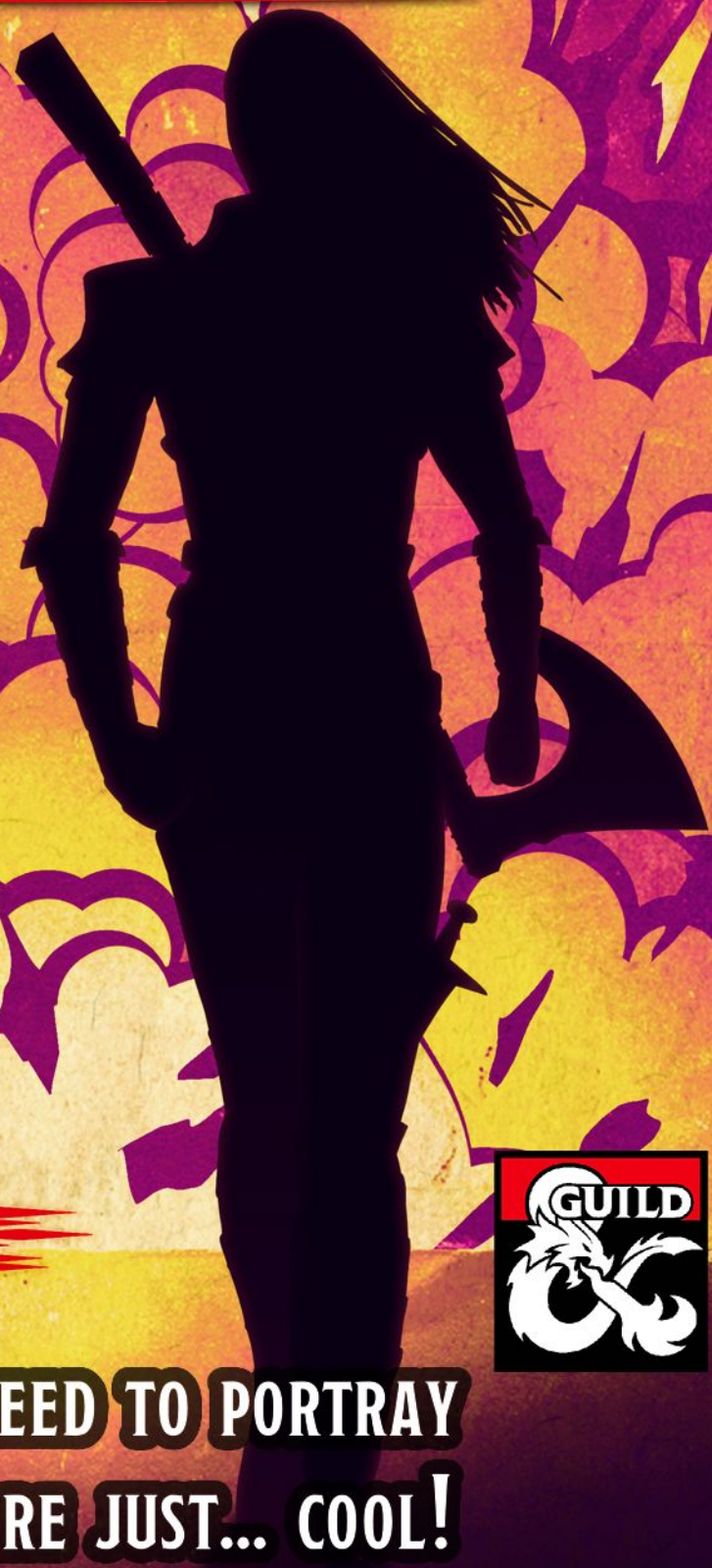# Characters

by Ashley May

Everything you need to portray characters who are just... cool!

GUILD

The Rules of Cool Characters

1.00

Everything you need to portray characters who are just... cool!

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INTRODUCTION

When trying to capture an element as ephemeral as coolness, players often seek out aspects of characters that they want to emulate. In Dungeons & Dragons, your character's actions are determined by the player's free will, but the results of their actions are at the mercy of the dice. A character does not become cool by succeeding at everything, because statistically, they aren't going to. Simply being talented or powerful is not enough to make a character cool. What a player *can* control is how their character reacts to situations and deals with adversity.

The goal of this book is not to tell you how every character should be written. "Cool" should not be the chief goal for every adventurer you set out to create. Many of my favorite characters that I have played or interacted with were not cool, but instead were funny, or quirky, or mysterious, or rough around the edges. The goal of this book is to provide advice and resources if you *do* want to write someone who is cool.

Though most players are willing to accept dragons, elves, and fairies in a fantasy world, they expect some predictability from the characters and situations in the story; in this sense, even fiction must be rooted in plausibility. "Suspension of disbelief" is a requirement for enjoying a fantasy adventure, but willing suspension of disbelief still has its limits. Reasonably speaking, one fighter will be overwhelmed by a horde of forty goblins bearing down on them. However, audiences tend to be willing to stretch the limits of their suspension of disbelief for characters or situations that just seem cool.

When asked directly, no two people's interpretations of what is 'cool' are the same. Typically, a "cool" character is someone that others aspire to emulate. A cool character is bold, but not braggadocious; they exercise great skill or talent, but they do so with a calm air. A cool person doesn't need your attention or praise in order to validate them, as they are securely confident in themselves.

Playing a character who is cool is a challenging prospect. As said before, no two people's interpretations of what constitutes "cool" will be the same, and yet, your character is only cool if they are perceived by others as being cool. This is not something that can be forced. Though seemingly paradoxical, if people feel that the "coolness" of a character is being forced on them, they may interpret the character as being distinctly uncool, even a "tryhard".

GRIMDARK EDGELORDS

For many people, the idea of a cool character has a great deal of overlap with a character who is dark, edgy, or tragic. While these are not the only ways to construct a cool character, they're popular enough that a significant amount of the book will focus on avoiding common pitfalls associated with these traits, and how to breathe new life into potentially stale tropes.

Universal Definition Of 'Cool'

In an effort to find some universal definition, we need to consider the origins of the phrase in English. Though it has always referred to temperature (not quite "cold"), it also inferred a certain degree of calmness (as opposed to emotions "running hot"). In the early 1700s, the word "cool" was applied to large sums of money, providing additional emphasis on the amount, and roughly a hundred years later it was used to describe people or things that were "calmly audacious". A hundred years after that, it was being used as a synonym for "fashionable".

However, the earliest known definition of the concept of cool actually comes from the Yoruba people of Africa, who pioneered the concept of '*itutu*', a sort of "spiritual coolness" as a major part of of religious philosophy. The aesthetic of itutu infers calmness, not only in situations when one would be expected to become angry or upset, but also when one is being emotionally expressive in a positive way. One remains 'cool' while dancing, one remains 'cool' while being praised, and so on.

Though we may think of the samurai of Japan as being "cool" today, they on the whole considered distinctly "uncool" in the Edo period (1603 to 1868). As the merchant class rose in the city of Edo, they viewed the samurai social class as being self-conscious and superficial; things that were definitely *not* '*iki*', their word referring to stylishness, chicness, and coolness. The idea of an individual samurai being 'iki' was possible, which has carried over into the modern idea of a warrior who is stylish and direct, but at a time when samurai were prevalent, they were typically pretty uncool as a whole.

The Italian word "*sprezzatura*" appears in Baldassare Castiglione's 1528 "The Book of the Courtier", where it is defined by the author as "a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it". It conveys a sense that one performs their tasks in a way that appears as though it took no real conscious effort.

From all of these things, we can draw certain notes to define "coolness".

- *Nonchalant behavior.* Seemingly unconcerned or indifferent to outside forces.
- *Master of one's own emotions.* One who is not easily shaken, not driven to anger, sadness, or joy at the expense of one's calm demeanor.
- *Dismissive of praise.* A lack of boastfulness, instead replaced with a quiet confidence. Downplays the importance or awe of impressive things that they've done without being self-deprecating; it simply "isn't a big deal" to them.

The definition of 'cool' is both broad and difficult to obtain. Characters throughout media and history have been viewed as "cool"; it's been applied to the blues, evolving into jazz, soul, funk, and hip hop musicians. "Cool" has been applied to wild west cowboys, and space cowboys. Gritty film noir detectives were cool. Chivalrous knights were cool. *Gilgamesh* was cool.

One thing you should take away from this is that there is no singular way to be cool, but instead, a million different options. Your grizzled old man Goliath Barbarian can be cool, as can your elegant Tiefling Red Dragon Sorceress, or your tinkering Dwarven Artificer.

Don't Take My Word For It

Collected in these edged infoboxes are quotes from other Dungeon Master's Guild writers. I was pleased to hear and now share their own unique views on what makes characters "cool", and how you can achieve coolness at the table.

Traits Of Cool People

D ark shades. Leather jackets. Motorcycles. The traditional idea of the 'cool' person has a number of associated traits, but few of those carry over into a strictly fantasy world, because most of them are purely aesthetic.

Self-Confidence

The power of self-confidence cannot be overstated. Cool people don't think about performing cool behaviors or worry about whether or not they seem cool to others, because their sense of self-worth is not built on the opinions of others. They are secure in their beliefs and opinions, they know what their goals are and they possess the drive to pursue them, and they know how to roll with the punches. Arrogance has no place here; if they're really self-assured, they don't need to brag to others.

> "A cool character doesn't need to waste their time telling others why it's cool."
>
> ~ Andrew Bishkinskyi, the Swords Below The Moonsea Saga

Effortlessness

Cool people don't try to be cool. Paradoxically, actively trying to be cool is a very uncool thing. This can be a difficult thing to pull off, because you as a roleplayer are trying to make sure your character appears cool, without them appearing to think about it at all. Just remember that your character doesn't care if they're seen as cool, and if something makes them look especially uncool, they're more likely to laugh it off than stress over it. Most other aspects of coolness can be traced back to the basis of effortlessness, particularly their authenticity, independence, and sense of equality.

Authenticity

What you see is what you get. A 'cool' character doesn't pretend to be someone they're not. Even if they have a mysterious backstory, those around them can generally trust that the personality they're putting forward is authentically theirs. It may seem difficult to achieve in roleplay, since you can't actively control how others view your character, but consistency is key in creating this kind of impression. Be honest and open with party members (at least, as open as you can be). If the party ever witnesses you telling a necessary lie, come clean to them at the nearest safe opportunity. The party should always feel as though they can trust you to have their best interests in mind.

Independance

Stronger friendships are formed by wanting to be near others, not by needing to be near others. This is not to say that your character needs to be a lone wolf who never needs to rely on anyone. However, by being generally independent and self-sufficient, it makes it clearer that the character's associations with others are based on teamwork and enjoyment of the company of others, rather than convenience or clinginess.

Equality

We've already determined that cool people are authentic and independent, and the natural extension of this mindset is someone who views others as equals. The cool person has already come to terms with who they are, for better or for worse, and they form friendships based on people and not usefulness. It makes sense that they wouldn't think much of the idea of social status. Sure, they recognize that it exists, but they don't actively apply it to their daily lives. A cool character is equally as comfortable in the presence of a king or a beggar, and will treat anyone with respect.

Racism and discrimination are pretty uncool things, and portraying them in a character may cast them in an unpleasant light. Consider how your character might judge people as individuals, rather than as larger groups. Even if they do judge someone by association, consider making their judgements based on a person's choices; they're more likely to hate all bandits rather than hating all goblins, or hate the clergy of a particular deity rather than hating an entire ethnicity.

This isn't to say your character isn't allowed to dislike entire groups, such as having a hatred of all orcs. You can still give them these opinions, preferably rooted in personal experiences; they have had a bad history with orcs that has informed their behavior, rather than just parroting the racism they may have been raised around. They may also keep a lot of their opinions quiet, perhaps treating orcs with disdain, but not openly voicing their hatred.

Uplifting

When a person isn't worrying about their own self-image, they can be more aware of others around them. Instead of needing to be the center of attention, they can think about the talents of their traveling companions. Who would be best for trying to talk to the guard? Who would be best at causing a diversion? Who would be best at picking that lock? Not only does this kind of 'directing traffic' show good leadership skills, but it allows other party members to shine, and have their 'cool moment'.

> "A cool character can shine at the perfect moment, but shouldn't strive to always outshine the others. To each their own."
>
> ~ Jason Bakos, The Malady Trilogy and more

Aesthetics of Cool

Jarlaxle and Artemis, The Spectrum Of Cool

Two remarkably "cool" characters within the Forgotten Realms are the drow mercenary Jarlaxle, and human assassin Artemis Entreri. Visually speaking, the two have very little in common with one another. Where Artemis crowns himself with a shady hood or a small-brimmed black hat, Jarlaxle is known for his wide-brimmed hat adorned with a large plume from an exotic bird native to the Underdark. Where Artemis is dark and muted, Jarlaxle is colorful and flamboyant, going so far as to cloak himself with a Cape of Scintillating Colors. Artemis is an assassin who lives for little beyond his work. Jarlaxle is an unrepentant dandy who also happens to lead a mercenary company.

Neither character is, aesthetically speaking, superior to the other. Neither embody the artistic concepts of cool better than one another, in spite of standing so distinctly opposed. Their coolness instead is drawn from the fact that their aesthetics are so closely tied into their personalities; both Jarlaxle and Artemis present themselves as precisely who they are.

Artemis Entreri's fashion choices are simple, because they're not about fashion, they're about utility. As an assassin, it's best that he's not seen, and if he is seen, it's best that he's not recognized. Jarlaxle, on the other hand, makes a number of his choices in order to send a distinct message. For example, Jarlaxle comes from Menzoberranzan, a drow city where hair styles are symbolic of one's rank and status. However, Jarlaxle chooses to sport a smoothly shaven scalp, as a rejection of his society's expectations.

When designing your character's appearance, their personal tastes should be brought into consideration. Why do they choose this style of clothing? What does it mean to them, and what does it say about who they are?

Colors

"Black" is widely used for "cool" characters because it presents the appearance of something dark and mysterious. However, it can be overused, and especially when dealing with artwork or miniatures of your character that you might procure, they could wind up resembling inky blots or blobs instead of people. This 'monochromatic' issue is not limited to black; if you decide that red is your character's trademark, then wearing solid red, and having red hair, will create a rather dull appearance.

Color theory is a complex subject, and many books and guides have been written by people far more experienced on the topic than myself. There are also color wheel tools available online to help you pick color schemes with relative ease. Two strong options to avoid the "monochromatic blob" problem are to pick a color and then seek colors that are analogous (adjacent on the color wheel), or complimentary (directly opposed to the color on the wheel).

Also keep in mind that many characters will be wearing some kind of armor, and you may not always have the option (or finances) to paint or polish that armor to be a specific color of your liking. Still, color can be used as accents alongside brown or black leather armor, or metal armor in shades of grays. Complementary combinations like blue and orange, or adjacent combinations like red, purple, and orange, can create a striking appearance. Even Jarlaxle follows the rules of complementary colors in his purple-and-gold wardrobe, as seen in Waterdeep: Dragon Heist.

> When a new novice at the monastery of the Monks of Cool was about to become a full member, he would be taken to a room full of outfits of all types. The master would ask, "Which is the coolest outfit here?" The novice replied, "Hey, man, whatever I choose."
>
> ~ R. P. Davis, How To Play Good and much more

But This One Is +1

Fashion can only carry one so far in Dungeons & Dragons. Eventually, your character will wind up finding upgrades to their equipment, that may not match their previously established aesthetic. Your character could take the "death before drab" approach and stick with their style, but your party probably won't appreciate you turning down a significant upgrade to your damage or survivability because you don't like how it looks.

Instead of designing your character's entire customized look, consider focusing in on specific pieces that are special to them, and easily transferable. Like Jarlaxle's flamboyant plumed hat, your character may have a cloak pin, a hat, a scarf, or some other accessory that they carry throughout their various upgrades. It's not required that the item be deeply woven into your character's backstory, but your DM may appreciate the opportunity to emotionally manipulate your characters by threatening their trinkets.

> "A cool character needs a unique style. Sometimes it's not that they dress or act cool, but the consistency of certain styles and acts redefines what cool is."
>
> ~ Isaac A. L. May, Weird Stuff I Found On The Dungeon Floor and much more

Mannerisms

Cool appearances aren't solely related to fashion. Consider your character's mannerisms with the same effort that you put into their visual design; you've probably already figured out the color of their eyes or the style of their hair, but have you considered the way that they move? Do they carry their staff in their off hand, keep it on a strap across their back, or resting lazily over their shoulder? Do they walk heavily or softly, with graceful poise or with a relaxed swagger? Do they smirk? Do they smile enthusiastically with all of their teeth showing? Do they have a lopsided, crooked grin?

These are the kinds of things you'll want to think about, and carry through into your character's descriptions, but you don't need to constantly hammer these points home. You needn't describe their walk every time they take a five-foot-step; once you've established that your character has certain mannerisms or behaviors, you can reserve mention of them for times when you find them especially poignant, such as casually strolling into a queen's throne room, or the kind of smile they give after delivering some heartfelt message.

Likewise, these mannerisms can become meaningful any time they are changed. If the easy-going, laid-back swagger of the party's always-chill fighter is suddenly replaced with heavy, purposeful steps toward their arch nemesis, the party is more likely to take notice of the gravity of the situation.

The Effects Of Loss

Cool characters to not generally appear spontaneously; most have endured various trials in their life that have shaped them, hardened them, or honed them into the person that they are now. One of the most powerful ways to shape a character's evolution is to take something away from them, and focus on the ways that they deal with their loss.

> ## Trauma Is Not A Competition Sport
>
> When writing a character who has a tragic, painful backstory, you need to avoid the urge to tell that story. You do not need to explain how a character became the way that they are, or worse, become boastful about how much worse your character's life has been than their peers. While their history should never be far from *your* mind, as it should actively impact their worldview, a cool character isn't going to go around telling other people about their old wounds.

Losing One's Innocence

For many people, the transition from childhood to adulthood is a process. Adolescence itself may be rife with difficulty, awkwardness, and strife, but it's decidedly better than not being granted the time to make that transition.

A character's innocence is taken from them in any situation in which they are *forced to grow up*. Even at the age of a child, they are no longer allowed the carefree life of a child, and must behave as a responsible adult. This may be seen in situations in which a child must become a ruler, a head of their family or clan, when they must now become a parent to younger siblings, or in situations where children are pressed into war.

The loss itself does not necessarily make a person cool, but instead, it called upon them to behave with a degree of maturity that would never be expected of a child their age, especially in the situation they endured. As they grow into adults, this maturity and calmness in the face of danger and trauma sticks with them. Alternatively, a child who never got to be a child may grow into an adult who strives to be more laid back and relaxed, to recapture the fun times that they missed out on long ago.

Losing One's Home

A "home" generally means more to a person than simply a house, or merely a place that they live. People who have never lost a home before tend to think of their home as a safe space, and a place that is *theirs*, filled with their memories and experiences. When someone loses their home, they not only lose the property, but they may lose a sense of belonging or security as well. They may also lose the ability to form new feelings of security and safety in a new home; if the last one was taken from them, what's to say this one won't be taken away too?

The loss of one's home doesn't make someone cool, but the way the experience impacts them can influence 'cool' behaviors. Their loss may drive a sense of independence and wanderlust; the character lives out of their backpack, fancying themselves a traveller who never stays in one place for long. Alternatively, their loss may drive them to make 'home' wherever they go, keeping a small few precious items with them that they always make a point to unpack in their tent, their inn room, etc. Through this subtle personal ritual, they make every place they lay their head into a place of comfort. By having these mannerisms permeate their life, they carry a sense of mystery that the party may wonder about, without their loss having to be explained.

Losing One's Reputation

Though someone's reputation may seem like a minor loss in comparison to other material or emotional losses, it can still be devastating to the victim. It is not always a matter of ego, either; it may have nothing to do with losing the respect of one's peers, or adoration of onlookers, but instead be focused on the loss of a title or reputation that was representative of one's accomplishments or history.

Someone who has lost their reputation may be driven to try to recover it. If they lost their reputation unjustly (were framed, etc), they may seek out some way to bring the truth to light. If their reputation was stripped from them legitimately, they may seek some way to make amends for their crimes or mistakes.

Alternatively, one may not care about recovering their reputation, but might still be scarred by the loss. They may be mistrustful of authority figures who exercise control over someone's social station, or they may shirk praise or honors bestowed upon them; they know what that leads to, they've been down that road, and they don't want anything to do with it again.

Losing One's Appearance

In fiction, scars or grievous wounds are typically considered the side-effects of past traumas, but are seldom treated as serious losses themselves. This is likely because pain or self-pity associated with scarring is treated as vanity. However, in reality, scars can have severe emotional and psychological impacts on a person. Scarring can impact someone's sense of how others will perceive them; they may view themselves as ugly, or feel that others are taking notice of their scars, to a greater degree than anyone else would ever pay attention.

In truly disfiguring cases, it may also impact one's sense of self; if someone's identity is deeply connected to their attractiveness, or resemblance a family member or social or ethnic group, they may feel as though the change in their appearance causes them to lose their connection to these people or groups.

Scars may serve as constant reminders of a traumatic event, making it difficult for a person to heal emotionally, when the physical evidence is always there. It can also be a case of adding insult to injury; whoever caused the scar may revel in the fact that the character will never be allowed to forget them.

Wanna Know How I Got These Scars?

One of the more important aspects of coolness is to not over-share one's traumatic backstory. However, scars are one thing that other people are more likely to directly ask about. If you still want to *show* and not *tell*, your character may choose to mislead others about the source of their scars.

A character may tell misleading stories when asked, made obvious by the fact the story changes every time she tells them. These stories could range from fantastical (my eye was ripped out by a dragon, jealous that I wouldn't return his affections) to mundane (I ran into a fence post). However, when faced with the *actual* source of her scar, she may have a silent physical tell, like absentmindedly rubbing her eyepatch. This allows observant party members to pick up on an unspoken aspect of her story, and feel as though they've discovered something.

Losing One's Power

Adventurers are not born into their class. The 'Backgrounds' chapter of the Player's Handbook delves into many of the life experiences that a character may have had before embarking on their adventures, and studying the martial or magical ways of their class in earnest. However, one possibility is that an adventurer *used to be a different class*.

This is an aspect of a character's background that will need to be discussed at length with your DM, but consider what sort of powers and abilities your character may have once possessed, and lost. Perhaps they were once a warlock, drawing all of their power from a patron, and they were either abandoned by their patron, saw their patron killed or banished, or had their connection cut off by an outside force. Maybe they were once a cleric, and lost their divine power when their god was killed or deposed, or when they were excommunicated from their faith.

Losing one's power can't be accomplished with every class. Some classes simply don't make sense as to why someone would suddenly no longer be able to perform their abilities; a sorcerer has no logical reason why they'd suddenly stop utilizing magic that literally runs in their veins, and removing one's natural born genetic traits is most likely more difficult than severing a spiritual or arcane connection. However, this *is* a world of fantasy, and almost anything can be achieved with enough planning and consideration, especially by a villain with no qualms about how it must be done.

Alternatively, a character may elect to abandon their power, due to a deeply held personal belief. For example, a bard whose politically charged song was responsible for a mad king going on a rampage, may swear to never sing again. Likewise, a wizard whose magical experiments caused mass destruction may give up the arcane entirely.

Unless you plan to multiclass your character, packing early levels of these 'background classes', you need to come up with an airtight reason why they would *never* resort to these powers, even in the most dire of circumstances... Because from a technical standpoint, they literally *can't*. Discuss with your DM ways they may have sought out having their previous powers sealed away, without providing them any recourse should they change their mind.

Losing One's Village

To lose one's village is like losing one's home on a much larger scale. Not only is the physical location of many of the victim's memories now wiped from the earth, but it is seldom that the loss of an entire village is not accompanied by many deaths. Villages are, on the whole, generally made up of innocent people... Even if the village had soldiers, or was hiding a secret cabal of conspiring ne'er-do-wells, chances are, the baker or the seamstress had nothing to do with that. The loss of a village is scarring because for many people who have not yet adventured into the wider world, because it is the first lesson that violent death is not reserved only for those who deserve it.

Losing One's Parents

The loss of a parent can be difficult, even for an adult who knows that their parent's time is coming to an end. However, the traumatic loss of a parent can be a life-changing experience, especially for a child or adolescent. Losing one's parents often means that they are losing their protector, teacher, and the person that they assumed would remain with them throughout most of their life.

Losing one's parents is perhaps one of the most common backstories of childhood tragedy, because it is often hand-in-hand with losing one's innocence, and may also be paired with losing one's village. This combination of tragedies not only gives a character plenty of motivation to become an adventurer, but can come preloaded with emotional triggers, and even a mortal enemy. However, because it's so common, you need to consider what you can do to make this tragedy unique in your character's storyline. It's not that losing one's parents isn't an understandably painful tragedy, but it loses its power when the response is, "Yeah, you and every other adventurer."

Losing One's Sibling

The loss of a sibling carries a different feeling from losing a parent. In some ways, it may cause an even deeper wound, as a sibling is as much a contemporary as they are a family member; the character may share secrets or experiences with their sibling, like 'adventuring' in the woods outside of town, or running the streets together, that they would never speak of to their parents. An older sibling may feel like a caretaker, while a younger sibling may be someone that the character feels protective of. If the sibling relationship was strained, one may mourn the loss of the opportunity to make things up with their sibling. Especially so with twins, but not strictly limited to it, is the feeling that one has lost the person who understood them best.

Losing One's Best Friend

There is the family you are born into, and then there is the family that you choose. A best friend can have a sibling-like relationship with a character, complete with all of the ups and downs, fights and make-ups, and even hard-fought rivalries. At the end of the day, a character might be willing to lay down their life for their best friend, and that can be what makes their loss so difficult. Worse still, if one's best friend laid down their life *for them*, they may now feel driven to accomplish the goals that their best friend left unfinished.

Losing One's Teacher

Similar to losing a parent, losing one's teacher is traumatic in the sense that a character likely spent much of their day in the presence of this person, learning, enduring trials and hardships, and working hard to please their teacher and seek their approval. The loss of a teacher is not only emotionally devastating, but can have a catastrophic impact on the studies and training of the character; whatever their teacher was in the process of instructing has now come to a painful halt, and they may be reluctant to simply find another teacher.

Losing One's Lover

One of the deepest tragedies can be losing the love of one's life, because not only are they losing a soul mate, but they are losing the future they foresaw with them. Losing a lover can also mean a loss of trust and closeness with others; having lost the person they love once, one might not want to love again, in order to protect themselves from the pain.

Keep in mind that the loss of a lover doesn't necessarily mean death. An irreparable separation can carry just as much weight; a lover being married off for political reasons, elevated to a station in which they cannot have further contact with the hero, sent away to a distant land, etc. Furthermore, a separation between a character and their lover could be a reluctant choice, after it becomes clear that the adventurer's life will only put their lover in more danger from here on out.

Don't Put Her In The Fridge

As I discussed at length in The Lovers' Handbook, there is a terrible tradition in fiction of killing off a hero's love interest in order to further the main character's story. Though this may not seem like bad storytelling, it can quickly become gratuitous when NPCs are brutalized purely for the sake of furthering the PC's storyline, because it takes away their value as individuals. In these cases, a lover isn't a person, they're a prop to cause strife for the hero.

In order to avoid the "disposable lover" problem, think about how the loss of this character affects people other than their lover. Will they have other friends or family who are impacted, and will carry out changes in the world? Will their loss be recognized by their village or town, or larger organizations like guilds or governments? The person does not exist purely for the sake of the hero, so don't treat their death like it's only for the hero either.

Losing One's Child

Perhaps the most devastating loss one could experience is the loss of a child; it can feel like losing a part of yourself. Depending on the situation, to lose one's progeny could mean the end of their line, with all of the implications to follow; no one to inherit and carry on one's title, lands, power, teachings, or genes.

Losing One's Previous Party

How do you wrap as many kinds of loss into a single situation as you can? Losing one's previous adventuring party is a pretty good start. An adventuring party can mean many things to a person, and it may include people who function as their teacher, their best friend, their sibling, or even their lover. If the previous party held property, such as a guild hall or keep, it could also be combined with the loss of home or village.

Losing one's previous party can be traumatic, and heavily impact the ways a character deals with future adventuring parties. However, you need to be able to reign in the ways they express this trauma. If your character will never trust another party again, will always keep everyone at arm's' length and remain a lone wolf who hates teamwork… They probably wouldn't go adventuring with other people anymore, and are a bad choice to roleplay in a party. Instead consider ways that they may be protective of their party, but try to maintain certain emotional walls.

Wanting Back What Was Lost

A common coping mechanism for characters who have experienced loss, is to want to recover those things. Generally, this is a more abstract concept than literally getting back whatever was taken from them, and doesn't always mean they want to recover these things for their own direct benefit. An adventurer who lost their innocence and was denied their own childhood isn't looking to be a child again, but they will be protective of child, or an innocent and naive person. An adventurer who lost their parents isn't looking to revive their own parents, or even to find a new surrogate parent for themselves, but will feel drawn to preserve a parent-child relationship between their friends. By preserving the things they could not have for themselves, they are able to cope with their own loss.

Portraying Vices & Flaws

Cool characters are seldom perfect. When you imagine various 'cool' characters in media, it's easy to spot them; the traveling priest who takes a nip from a flask when he thinks no one is looking, or the cowboy with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. While many of these modern interpretations of 'cool' are the result of focused efforts of advertising companies to portray vices as positive elements ("look how much fun they're having while consuming this potentially harmful product"), it doesn't change the fact that many vices have become interwoven into our idea of 'cool'. When you step back and look at the effects of these vices, however, it's easy to see that they're *not actually that cool*.

The problem with vices and flaws are two-fold. First and foremost, many of these things are actually quite negative and destructive in the real world, and there's a very good chance that you're sitting at a table with people whose lives have been impacted in some way by them.

You should always talk with your Dungeon Master before you begin portraying a character with any kind of addiction, both to clear it with them, and to allow the DM to speak with other players and ensure that the subject won't cause anyone discomfort. You don't have to lay out your character's entire backstory and personality to the other players, when the DM could instead say, "This campaign may have some themes of drinking and alcoholism. Does that bother anyone?"

The second issue falls hand in hand with the first. When things like addiction or compulsive behaviors are portrayed in an unrealistic way, not only is it harmful to those who've endured it, but it also makes the character feel cheapened by the portrayal. If their problems don't actually cause them any problems, and are only there to give the thin veneer of edginess, then you don't actually need to incorporate this element at all.

Alcoholism

This is a common flaw seen in characters who "want to forget something", often tied into a difficult past, especially one that they feel guilty for. There are two common ways of portraying the alcoholic, the 'drinking problem' and the 'career alcoholic'.

The 'drinking problem' doesn't necessarily mean that someone drinks all the time, but when they do drink, *it's a problem*. The adventurer with a 'drinking problem' may never touch the stuff when out on a quest, but when you get back to town, they need to be kept far from the tavern, or they may go missing for a week. They generally don't see anything wrong with what they're doing; after all, they're just "having fun" and "cutting loose". However, their behavior can cause a host of issues, including but not limited to spending large amounts of money, becoming involved with seedy people, and not being present or clear of mind if the party needs them.

The 'career alcoholic' is seldom blackout drunk, but instead, spends a significant portion of their time being *just a bit* inebriated. They've learned to get by hiding enough of the symptoms that most people they live or work with don't realize they have a problem. They may drink more heavily during times of stress, but they always stay just a little 'numb'. This feeling of 'relaxation' brought by the liquor may even contribute to their 'cool' attitude, but do not be fooled; it's a bandaid for a larger issue, and prevents them from coming to grips with stresses and painful memories that will rear their heads not long after the bottle runs dry.

Whether your character is a morose drunk, an angry drunk, or even an exuberantly happy drunk, the fact remains that their problem is destructive, and only stands to worsen if not addressed.

Note that this doesn't mean that *all drinking is a problem*, only that it can be a problem for some people. Arguably, drinking is very common within the Forgotten Realms. As Ed Greenwood established in his landmark Elminster's Forgotten Realms, beer is a cheap, readily available, and even daily drink for many folk. This is likely a reference to time periods in which it was safer to drink beer than water, simply because they hadn't figured out that boiling the water was what made it safe. Likewise, some groups like dwarves, gnomes, and goblinoids consider liquor to be a part of their culture. An old dwarven joke claims that when served tea, the dwarf replied, "*Water*? I'm thirsty, not dirty!"

Substance Addiction

There are varying levels of substance addiction. You may have a character who is always chewing on a twig of a certain plant that they find pleasant, and they get a little irritable or anxious when they run out. At the other end of the spectrum, they may be fully dependant on a harmful substance in order to even function.

The human body (and presumably elves, dwarves, and every other vaguely humanoid race) benefits from something called homeostasis, which is designed to keep certain chemicals in equilibrium throughout the brain and body. When an outside substance changes these chemicals, even in a way that feels pleasant to the subject, their body attempts to 'balance things out' by changing its own internal levels. When the external substance is removed, the body becomes off-balance again, and the subject craves the substance in order to return themselves to a feeling of 'normalcy'. The body's adaptive properties only contribute to addictions growing worse, as the body becomes accustomed to higher and higher levels of a substance, and the subject needs to take in more to get the same positive feelings they once received at a lower dose.

A very minor addiction may have little influence on a character's life. They may feel 'on edge' or snap at their allies when they don't have their fix, but typically it isn't going to be significantly detrimental. A more serious addiction, however, may be highly disruptive to the party, and such a development should be handled with care.

Substances Of The Realms

Numerous DM's Guild authors have sought to tackle the subject of drugs and illegal substances within Dungeons & Dragons, and I can't honestly recommend any singular work as the cream of the crop, I can suggest a list that was written and assembled by myself and Isaac A. L. May, in our book Great Gilded Guilds. The list we composed is made up not only of new creations, but also some classics with roots in the Forgotten Realms, such as Lurien Spring Cheese, Bloodroot, and more.

Compulsive Behaviors

A compulsive behavior is something that a person feels persistently compelled to do, even without the presence of a reward. Compulsive behaviors like shopping, eating or gambling are well known, and obviously one could imagine that someone enjoys shopping, eating or gambling (if they're winning), but the pleasure is no longer a part of the equation; even if someone isn't being rewarded through the behavior, they still feel a *need* to do it. This can involve more mundane behaviors, like compulsive counting, cleaning, or hoarding.

Compulsive behaviors don't have to be at the forefront of a character's behavior to be a part of them. A character may never step foot in a town without asking where the nearest brothel is, but it doesn't mean they're obsessively looking for a roll in the hay every day. Many tables related to common compulsive behaviors are available in the Downtime Activities of Xanathar's Guide To Everything, including carousing, gambling, shopping for magic items, etc, and your Dungeon Master can use these opportunities to roll your character's compulsions into storylines or obstacles for the party.

Bloodthirst & Sadism

One of the most shocking moments associated with a calm, cool, collected character, is when they are no longer calm. This moment may arise when the party has defeated an enemy, but the ordinarily level-headed character has decided that *defeat* is not simply enough; they need to *suffer*, and they need to die *horribly*.

Instead of being cruel and bloodthirsty in all combat situations, consider what your character might treat as a particularly hated foe. Unlike the ranger's "favored enemy" being something they know and understand better than any other beast, a "hated enemy" is something that your character feels is entirely undeserving of mercy, or maybe even is deserving of the utmost suffering. This should not be a random choice; whether they hate bandits, ogres, mercenaries, or gnolls, it should be deeply woven into their backstory.

Apathy

'Not caring' has been long associated with coolness. It's easy to imagine the disillusioned, detached badass in a leather jacket, existing as a symbol of rebellion against society. But one thing to remember is that while this image may look cool from a distance, people who don't care about anyone but themselves are actually pretty annoying.

There are plenty of things that are cool to not care about. Not caring about what others think of you is fine, as long as it's not being used to excuse bad behaviors. Not caring about rewards or praise is *pretty freaking cool*; you're doing it for your own reasons, not for the gratitude of others. Just don't confuse one's 'not caring' with being a jerk.

Bad Behaviors & How To Avoid Them

The pursuit of cool is a difficult one. As said in the introduction, if people feel that a character's coolness is being shoved down their throats, they may rebel against it, instead viewing the character as a 'tryhard'. However, some attempts to make a character 'cool' (or dark and edgy) can be disruptive or even harmful in a roleplaying environment. Roleplaying is, after all, a cooperative form of gameplay. Though I'd never recommend that you avoid all forms of strife and disagreement with other players or their characters, there need to be limitations on just how much disruption you cause.

The most dangerous statement in roleplaying, in my personal opinion, is "but it's what my character would do." No phrase has been used to excuse more bad behaviors in the history of Dungeons & Dragons, or any other roleplaying game. If your character is behaving in a way that is disruptive to the party, it is because you are playing them that way, and if it's "what your character would do", it's because *you wrote them that way*. You always have the choice to create, grow, and evolve your characters, and even if they have endured great hardships and strife, you can always control how much they take out their traumas on others.

In a cooperative game like Dungeons & Dragons, no one is *forced* to work with people they actively dislike, unless the storyline calls for it. A party could simply leave, slipping out of the inn before you wake up, or abandon you in a dungeon. If a character is making threats or carrying out acts of violence, the party could simply report their behaviors to the local authorities then leave them to rot in jail while they carry on with the adventure. If you feel comfortable in the belief that the party won't abandon you, or that the DM won't allow them to, you really *shouldn't* feel that comfortable; you're essentially taking advantage of the tolerance of others, and building up resentment that will eventually come back to haunt you.

Awe

Lots of people want to have a cool character. When you have a cool character, on occasion, someone might even say, "Man, that was really cool." But in general, people don't actively focus on how cool your character is. No one is going to praise your character at every session, or defer to your character in all decisions because they're "the cool one". As a collaborative game, everyone is expected to share the spotlight, and there will always be a moment when someone else gets to be cool too.

If your goal is to have the party to be in awe of your character, you'd best find a new goal; NPCs who are essentially 0th-level townies may be awe-struck, but other players aren't going to elevate you to that level. If you want to receive special attention, you're better off trying to figure out ways that you can make yourself especially useful to the party. By specializing in a field that is invaluable to your group, the rest of the party may not be in awe of how cool you are, but they will think to call on you specifically when need of your expertise arises.

Fear

Some people want the party to fear their character, perhaps because they equate it with respect. Many of the ways one might attempt to instill fear in others (threats, "crazy" behavior, excessive violence, etc) are disruptive to the party, and will not be enjoyable to other players.

Nobody but you will ever enjoy having your character be feared by the party, especially if you are the one deciding that you are to be feared, rather than a fellow player deciding their character is afraid of you on their own. By attempting to take control of the party's opinion of you, you're robbing them of their agency, and essentially ruining one of the most fun parts of the roleplaying experience.

Threats & Violence

The classic "murderhobo" is a character who travels about without any solid connections to others, killing, stealing, and looting as they wish. However, a murderhobo can only exist in a vacuum; in a world that has consequences for one's actions, a murderhobo would be put down rather quickly by local authorities, or some greater power (a benevolent deity, a party of heroes, etc).

When you think you want your character to threaten or kill NPCs, or worse, other players' characters, what you *really* want is to be able to do so without repercussion. The idea that it's "what your character would do" does not shield you from the fact that, quite frankly, no one will want to play with you if you've decided to be aggressive toward your supposed teammates. You need to find a new, non-cooperative game.

> "The socioemotional competence and humor thresholds of each person at your table is your boundary for 'coolness.' A cool character is one whose disposition is sufficiently open-ended and flexible at session 1, and adapts helpfully to the group as the campaign goes on.
>
> Rigid dispositions for the sake of "staying in character" at the expense of fluid gameplay is the antithesis of 'cool'."
>
> ~ Hiten Dave, Ulraunt's Guide To The Planes: The Shadowfell

Psychological Diagnoses

Few things are more frustrating for people who understand mental illnesses, than to hear mental illnesses be improperly self-diagnosed. Most people who are "so OCD" don't have obsessive compulsive disorder; they don't experience compulsive behaviors that prevent them from functioning in their day-to-day life, they're just easily annoyed by a crooked picture on a wall.

If you decide that your character is "schizophrenic", has "borderline personality disorder", or is a "psychopath", you need to have a very clear understanding of what these things actually mean. Furthermore, attempting to portray aspects or symptoms of mental illness (depression, self-harm, etc) may be both harmful and extremely disrespectful to players who have contended with these things in their own lives, or have watched a loved one go through them.

This is not to say that mental illness should be avoided entirely when creating a character. However, it should always be handled with the utmost respect and care. Instead of saying "my character suffers from *this*", instead focus on portraying those symptoms in ways that are subtle, and yet deeply woven into the character's behavior. People who struggle with mental illness don't get to turn their symptoms off when they're in the middle of a dangerous battle or delicate social situation, so you need to be prepared to carry out these aspects of your character *consistently*, or not at all.

Discomfort

A player who wants to make others uncomfortable usually enjoys the sense of power and control they get from the situation. They see the discomfort they cause as an extension of their ability to manipulate others. Some people have the opinion that making others uncomfortable isn't that big a deal, and in the grand scheme of things, it probably isn't. You have the freedom to offend, and others have the freedom to take offense if they wish. However, people also have the freedom to show you the door, should they so choose. Any time that you are making yourself unpleasant to be around, either as a player or through your character, you are reducing the chances that you'll be invited back to play again in the future.

Trauma Is Not A Competition Sport

Happy and content people don't decide to go out and become adventurers. For this reason, many characters will have traumatic backstories. It's important to remember that your goal is not to one-up someone else's pain and suffering. If another party member lost their mother, it's not your turn to say "Yeah, well I lost my *whole family*!"

Traumatic backstories exist to inform your character's behavior, influencing their personality and giving them motivation moving forward. Most people do not easily open up about their most painful memories to strangers at the drop of a hat; sharing these kinds of intimate secrets usually requires a strong foundation of trust to be built. If your character does not trust or respect their fellow party members, why would they tell them about their traumatic history, much less brag about it?

I Walk Into The Room

Before I get into this particular issue, I'd like to share a vague anecdote about my history as a roleplayer. The anecdote is not vague "to protect the identities of those involved", but instead because it is the amalgamation of numerous events, that all followed the same general thread. I am not talking about a singular event, but something that happened over, and over, and over during my time as a chatroom roleplayer, before stepping into the more structured and defined world of tabletop roleplaying.

The desire to be a part of something, or interject into conversations at an opportune moment, seemed universal. It was not uncommon for people to insert their characters without warning, to have them walk into the room at any given time, or simply have always been there hanging out in a shady corner, previously unnoticed. The problem is that little thought was given to where these events and conversations were taking place. More often than not, these sudden posts were answered with, "You're not there, we're in a private location. You have no reason to be there."

Worse still, in an RPG existing entirely within the theatre of the mind, there is a lacking sense of scale. Often characters would seemingly teleport from one side of a city to another, in order to stay in the middle of the action. Characters who could actually freely teleport were the worst.

Dungeons & Dragons, however, benefits from the constant presence of a Dungeon Master who sets the stage. You don't simply decide where your character is at any given time without the DM signing off on it. In D&D, we know exactly how long it would take for your character to traverse the town; it's right there on your character sheet. Your ability to teleport is generally limited by spell slots or item charges. An even overwhelming desire to be in the middle of everything is mitigated by the logic and rules of the world.

As said before, however, Dungeons & Dragons is a cooperative game. Even if you do succeed in building a cool character, everyone gets the opportunity to be cool at some point, as long as their DM arranges it. Let them have their moment.

I Meant To Do That

In my personal opinion, one of the cheapest literary cop outs in history is the tired phrase, "This was all part of my plan."

Most often, it's used by villains when they come back from near-defeat at the hands of the hero, and delivered with a cocky tone that says they were never concerned about being beaten in the first place. Except, there was never any clue given prior to that moment that the villain had any plans or fail safes in place for this specific situation. Because the writer didn't actually plan anything; they just wanted the villain to outsmart the hero, without actually having to *be* smarter.

However, because this line is generally associated with a villain being calm, cool, and in control (without actually having to state their genius plan), it's easy to want to adopt this line any time a supposedly "cool" character fails at their task. The problem is the idea that cool characters don't, or can't fail at what they set out to do. For starters, this is statistically impossible in Dungeons & Dragons; you are going to fail at lots of things. In fact, if your DM believes in the power of the crit (and critical failures by extension), you have a 5% chance at failing to do almost anything. These failures do not make your character uncool, but instead, your coolness is defined by how you handle your failure. Acting like you meant to do it, and it was a part of your master plan, is not cool.

However, one must never forget the prime exception for fools: If one fails spectacularly through their own wrongdoing and yet matters still work themselves out almost immediately, it is perfectly acceptable to say "I meant to do that." It's not necessarily cool, but it's almost a requirement.

I Didn't Mean That

Desperate backpedaling can be comedic, but it's rarely cool. In fact, one of the most frustrating things a player can do to their Dungeon Master or their fellow players is to try to "retcon" something (attempting to change the continuity retroactively) by saying that something they did or said was a mistake, or worse, misunderstood or misinterpreted by others. This kind of behavior often comes after a character suggests destructive, disruptive, or typically "murder hobo" behavior, and receives an unexpectedly negative response from the party or NPCs. One of the most painful phrases is, "I didn't say that in-character, I was just thinking out loud."

A variation on this technique is when players argue that their character is more intelligent, more wise, or more charismatic than the player. For example, a bard attempting to sound like a hotshot winds up insulting a city official, and when they realize they're going to be jailed for their insolence, they argue that "my bard would've been more eloquent than that". Or, a paladin removes the evil wizard's gag to question them, and when the wizard incants a spell and vanishes, the player argues that their character would've been smart enough to know better, or knew more about how magic worked.

The core of this strategy is a form of manipulation. By telling the DM, "My character is smarter than me, they wouldn't have done that.", you're framing the roleplay as the DM punishing you for something you can't control. Except, you could absolutely control your character's actions. Everyone at the table is held to this same standard.

While your character's statistics exist to solve conflict (determining if they notice things, if they can climb a tree, if they can tell a convincing lie, etc), these conflicts are always driven by the actions of the player and the Dungeon Master. Most DMs won't let you roll an intelligence check to just solve a puzzle without doing any of the groundwork, so why should they allow your character to 'figure out' a mistake they're making, especially retroactively?

The Complete Guide To Brooding In A Corner

Though we've discussed many ways that people can be cool (and many ways you might think they're cool, which are actually terribly *uncool*), the fact stands that some people still prefer dark and edgy characters. There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting your character to be dark and edgy, as long as it's handled with care.

In my early days of chatroom roleplaying, I saw many of these characters, often making their first appearances by brooding in the corner of the tavern. Looking back on it, I'm impressed by the construction of these apparently octogonal taverns, because there sure were a *lot* of dark corners to sit in all by oneself. They were dark, and they were mysterious, and they were edgy, and they didn't get a lot of attention or roleplay. It was not uncommon to see them make three or four posts about being in the corner, before they gave up and left.

The chief issue with these kinds of characters is that they often rely on the party to be the ones to approach them first, and require others to do the footwork to earn their trust. This is a big responsibility to foist onto players who have zero in-character obligation to interact with you.

Instead, you're relying on the DM and players to live up to the invisible social contract of D&D that states everyone sitting at the table has the right to play, meaning they have to go out of their way to involve someone who seemingly doesn't want to be involved.

Ideally, you should talk with your DM about reasons why your character will *have* to work with the party, either via their backstory or the plot hooks presented to them. This puts your dark and edgy character into a situation where the party doesn't have to earn their trust or their respect in order for them to tag along and stay involved. They can be standoffish, but not entirely removed from the situation; mistrustful, but not openly argumentative; apathetic, but still needs the party to *not die*, etc.

The onus to put yourself into the party always remains on you. Any time you choose to stand outside of active events, brooding or being solitary, you now force the party to seek you out before they can move ahead. It also breeds the temptation for the party to find some way to leave you behind, or at least not collect you until *they* need *you*, leaving you out of any potential opportunities to roleplay in the meantime.

> "One of the coolest characters we ever had used a catch phrase to explain cool. "Cool is as cool does." I.e. it's all in the attitude."
>
> ~ Jean Headley, Temple of The Mad Dragon Priestess

Always Serious

Being "serious" without being the party killjoy is a difficult balancing act. If you feel like goofy situations and zany antics will detract from the sort of character you want to portray, you need to consider the ways they'll behave in these situations, rather than trying to ignore them or weasel out of them. If your party members are getting drunk on magical fairy wine, chasing a cat through the town to answer an eccentric wizard's challenge, or cutting loose at the local carnival, the last thing you want to do is stop them from having a good time. There are a few approaches to maintaining your stoicism without putting a damper on the party's fun.

One option is a baseline of quiet, but not disruptive, annoyance. Your character doesn't have to like the situation, and is free to state their unhappiness (though not excessively), but they still acknowledge that they need to muscle through it. They may not like the party goofing off with a bottle of magic wine, but they still feel the need to be present in order to chaperone the numbskulls. They may think the eccentric wizard's challenge is stupid, but the sooner they catch this cat, the sooner they can get back on track. It causes a lot less upset if they just wear the stupid masquerade mask and walk around the festival, than if they actively fight it.

Another option is one who has no sense of humor because they have difficulty grasping the concept of humor itself. This works especially well with with more exotic races like lizardfolk and aarakocra, who live in very unique societies. They may have senses of humor, but it may be so alien to that of humans, elves, dwarves, and so on, that the two share very little in common. They may ask to have things explained to them. "Why is that funny?" or "Why do you enjoy this?" They don't treat the party's goofiness or comedy with disdain, but instead, with quiet confusion, perhaps even thinking their fellows are simply idiots.

The Loner

Speaking from a purely analytical standpoint, loners don't do very well in the worlds of Dungeons & Dragons. The statistics of monster design, dungeon design, and challenge rating, generally assume that a party of four to six adventurers is taking on any given obstacle. Any good dungeon is designed to appeal to a wide variety of play styles and different in-character talents, in order to involve every member of the party. If you plan to go it alone, you're probably not going to get very far without the Dungeon Master making considerable compromises to ensure your survivability. If you decide, in the middle of a dungeon or adventure, to go your own way, they probably won't be able (or willing) to make these compromises for you.

"Lone wolf" characters still need to be able to interact with the party and work together as a team. Even if they feel they'd be happier alone, you as the player need to understand that not only is that statistically unlikely, but it would be a betrayal of the social contract of gaming. You are there to play with others.

As mentioned before, you need to find a reason why your loner requires the party's company. Once they're solidly locked in with the rest of the party, you're welcome to have them brood and mope all you like, as long as it doesn't become disruptive. Consider allowing your character to open up to at least one other party member, allowing the roleplay associated with 'cracking your icy exterior', and making them something of a social liaison between your loner and the rest of the party.

Recovering From Being Completely Uncool

Try as you might, it's going to happen. You have a unique character, they're always chill, they've got a mysterious backstory, but when others try to dig too deep, they casually hand-wave it and treat it like it's 'not a big deal'. They've got their own personal style, they've managed to sneak in a snappy one-liner or two, and they are decidedly cool. Then, you fail a roll on something that seems simple, and your cool character is now face-down in the mud.

I will take a moment to reiterate a point from the introduction of this book: A D&D character does not become cool by succeeding at everything, because statistically, they aren't going to. What a player *can* control is how their character reacts to situations and deals with adversity.

One of my favorite characters that I've ever DMed for was a fighter, whom we'll refer to as Souka. In his first four levels he'd firmly entrenched himself as a folk hero, saving his village before boarding a ship of privateers and setting out to see the world beyond his tiny island. He was a bumpkin with virtually no knowledge of the outside world, but he was confident, charming, and just downright cool enough that no one ever noticed. At the third island of their journey, Souka rolled up his sleeves and decided that he wanted to help row the dinghy ashore.

In spite of a very impressive athleticism score, Souka rolled pitifully low on every check he made to row the boat. As the dinghy began to go in circles, and his fellow party started yelling at him, he clung to his misplaced confidence and continued to row in zig-zags until he reached the shore, several minutes behind the other boats that left after them. Later, both the party's rogue and the wizard would outdo Souka in rowing a boat.

If Souka (or his player) cared at all about being cool, this could have been a devastating moment. However, it was *just rowing a boat*. I don't remember the scene today because Souka had a meltdown over his failure; I remember the scene because laughs were had at his failure, jokes and jabs were thrown between the entire party, and Souka would go on being cool once they'd reached the shore.

> "You know you've got a cool character when other people actually enjoy listening to stories about them. Cool characters are the ones that move the story forward. They're the ones that people remember, and that are fun to play with... and to hear about."
>
> ~ Catherine Evans, Oath Of The Ally and more

Laugh It Off

Being laughed at is never a comfortable feeling, but if you can flip the script and turn it into a situation where others are laughing with your character rather than at your character, you can help salvage their image.

Admittedly, it's easier to laugh it off when others are simply laughing at your screw up, rather than actively picking on you for it. Rather than letting tempers flare, the best option is for your character to ignore it, not reacting to their heckling and continuing on.

Being Nonchalant

"I said I'd show you how it's done. I didn't say I'd show you how to do it well."

Admitting failure is an admirable trait, and not caring about the fact you failed (as long as it doesn't hurt anyone) is pretty cool. By not letting their failure get to them, cool people manage to dodge most of the negative feelings that can befall others; their self-worth is not impacted by their failure, their motivation isn't damaged, and they don't become more risk-averse than they were before. Obviously the failure still happened, but they don't blame themselves as being personally responsible for it. In the same way you have the dice to blame rather than yourself for your character failing to climb a tree or sing a song, they can simply shrug it off as bad luck or just "not their day".

How To Be A Cool *Player*

Most of this book has focused on coolness in terms of characters, and hopefully by this point you have some idea of how you want to craft your next cool character. However, there are a lot of ways that you, the player, can be cool too.

As I wrote this chapter, and many that came before it, I had to ask... Do I consider myself a cool person? To be honest, the answer is "Not particularly". I can think of plenty of other people in my life that I consider cool, but I don't always see those traits in myself. I try to follow many of the suggestions that I provide in this chapter, not because they're cool, but because I feel they're the right thing to do. I don't think I always succeed, but there's always a "next time" to try again and do better. Don't worry about whether or not others see you as 'cool'; if you're doing your best to uphold these guidelines, you'll still be the player that others want to have around.

The "No True Scotsman" Fallacy

A common form of gatekeeping involves setting arbitrary requirements for someone to be considered a "true" fan of something. This particular error of reasoning (otherwise known as an "informal fallacy") is known as the "No True Scotsman" Fallacy. Philosophy professor Bradley Dowden rendered the fallacy as such:

A: "No Scotsman puts sugar on his porridge."
B: "But my uncle Angus is a Scotsman and he puts sugar on his porridge."
A: "But no *true* Scotsman puts sugar on his porridge."

If anyone tries to challenge your knowledge or your enjoyment of Dungeons & Dragons, be confident in the fact that *they don't get to decide that*. They have absolutely no power to tell you that your knowledge isn't enough, or the way you and your table play is somehow 'wrong'. One of the most powerful statements in the 5e Player's Handbook lays in the preface on page 4, stating, "Above all else, D&D is yours."

Confidence

Few people truly expect you to know every word on every page of the Player's Handbook or Dungeon Master's Guide. You're expected to know how to play your character, obviously, and the basic rules of the game, often times the ability to find information is more important than rote memorization. Read the books, but focus more on the order of information so that you can easily flip to the section you want to find in detail. That way, when you need to speak authoritatively on a subject, you know exactly where to find the ruling you need.

Own Your Choices

As mentioned in the "I Didn't Mean That" section of the Bad Behaviors & How To Avoid Them chapter (pg. 19), backpedaling is never cool. One of the most powerful examples of confidence is being firm and clear about your choices. Openly state, "My character is thinking this." if you want to share a glimpse into their inner thoughts without risking them being interpreted as dialogue. Remove any doubt on the DM or party's behalf.

There will be times when you make mistakes. Being able to say "Oh, I didn't know that!" is a positive trait. Just as with your character, coolness isn't about perfection, but instead how you roll with the punches. Instead of trying to find a way around your mistakes, give apologies when they're owed, focus on moving forward, and keep your attitude positive.

I'll say it again: *Own your choices.*

"Cool characters don't mind being predictable sometimes, because it usually means they have clear motivation."

~ Justice Arman, Heart Hunt

Uplift Others

While this may sound like the "after-school special" definition of cool, it's worth repeating that there's nothing cool about bullying or putting down others. If you're cool, you don't *need* to put down anyone else in order to make yourself look good. A cool person is one who inspires and uplifts others, and there are a lot of ways to do that in Dungeons & Dragons.

At the table, you can be observant of other players and their needs. If new players are struggling with taking their turns, or finding information in the book, think of ways that you can assist them. Instead of doing things for them, just telling them what page they can find something on can not only help them in the moment, but also helps teach them where and how to find the information they need. Being willing to loan out a spare set of dice, hand someone an easily accessible book, or share your pencils or charge cables, can go a long way.

In-game, you can make sure that their characters help share the spotlight. Think not only about what your character can do, but consider who is the best person for any given job, be it conversational, skill-based, or a particular style of combat. If another player seems quiet, or as though they can't get a word in edgewise around more vocal players, make a point to have their character ask theirs, "What do you think about all of this?"

Any time you're uplifting others, you're improving the quality of the game that everyone is participating in. You may not be doing it for the gratitude, but you're absolutely still benefiting from your efforts.

Yes, And...

One of the cornerstones of improvisational comedy is the phrase "yes, and". Any time you say "no" to something, no matter how ridiculous the premise, the thread of conversation has immediately ground to a halt and everyone is forced to shift gears. Support others and encourage the free flow of ideas by building off of the suggestions they make, rather than talking over them. If someone puts forward a *truly bad idea*, consider how you can 'pivot' the suggestion rather than shutting it down entirely.

As R. P. Davis says in his book "How To Play Good" on page 11, "Accept everything that happens, then react."

The Balance Of Listening & Planning

Multi-tasking is not a skill everyone is blessed with, and yet, keeping combat turns or roleplaying scenes flowing swiftly seems to almost hinge on it. Not only do you need to be prepared when your turn comes around, but you need to be able to take in new and constantly changing information while you prepare.

Know Your Skillset

One of the most vital parts of always being ready is knowing your character and what they're capable of. Read and research your character's abilities, maintain spell cards or keep notes on hand about how your most common spells function, and take some time outside of play to figure out what combinations of actions and bonus actions your character will use most often.

By being prepared before you ever drop the dice, you remove a lot of the workload from the game. This also helps you roll with the punches when a situation changes suddenly. It can be frustrating to plan your next turn throughout the entire round, only to have a Darkness spell change the battlefield right before your turn. It's much easier to stay on the ball if you don't have to reference the Player's Handbook to figure out what to do next.

Being comfortable with all of the tools at your disposal can help you feel more confident when laying out your character's actions. By taking your turn without 'umm'ing and thumbing through the book while other players wait, you not only help keep the pace of the game going, but you're showing the DM that you're interested in what's going on, and coming across as a more capable player to your fellow gamers. If you're not ready to take your turn and need some help, feel free to ask the DM for a ruling or clarification on your turn; by being comfortable with other aspects of playing your character, this gives you more time to think out how you want to ask your question.

> "Players of cool characters work with the DM to create cool moments."
>
> ~ Justice Arman, Heart Hunt

Taking Notes

Note-taking is a valuable skill in roleplaying games that are heavy on both narrative and puzzle elements. By taking notes, not only are you showing the Dungeon Master that you're paying attention and you care about the world they're presenting, but you're also providing information that you can look back on at a later time. It always feels cool to be the person who remembers the name of *that one NPC*, or that particular town that was talked about a few sessions ago.

However, brevity is key. Note-taking takes time, and can distract you from new information being presented. Figuring out a note-taking system that works for you will be a valuable skill in the long run. This may mean writing pertinent keywords in one column and then expounding on them with details in the next column, or a free-flowing 'thought map' system may feel more natural to you.

Digital Note-Taking

The ongoing debate about electronic devices at the gaming table has a large number of pros and cons, and I doubt this document will make any headway in the overall war. One thing I feel can be directly addressed is the use of a digital device for note-taking.

Personally speaking, my handwriting is slow and awful. I can take handwritten notes, but they will be limited to single-word notations of subjects, rather than providing substantial details. This can be difficult to figure out when a note is referenced weeks later. For me, a typist with a words-per-minute rating in the upper 70s, digital note-taking seems ideal.

However, note-taking on a digital device does have its drawbacks. Setting aside concerns of distraction, a 2014 study of college students found that students who typed their notes were more likely to copy their professor's words verbatim, and were not processing what was being said as thoroughly.

Every DM has their own style of description, and some may be more flowery and chew more scenery than others, but even if you have the capability of keeping up with every word your DM says, you probably shouldn't be transcribing it all. Listen, and try to pick out the notes that you feel will be the most important. You may not catch everything, but you'll absorb more of the information personally, and you'll wind up with a more enjoyable gaming experience.

Take Your Time

Sometimes it feels like ideas are just bursting to get out. Inspiration has struck, you know exactly what you want your character to say, and if you don't say it now, it may slip away into the aether. Except, when your brain moves faster than your mouth does, it can be easy to jumble up your perfect idea.

Cool characters are seldom hurried and jumbled, and you as a player shouldn't feel pressured to keep a fast pace either. Take the time to craft your responses or statements whenever you can. If others are talking and you would be interrupting, take notes about your ideas and dialogue, in order to shape them and keep yourself on your train of thought. As long as you're not held to a time limit (a one-minute Wish incantation, a six-second combat round, etc), there's nothing forcing you to speak quickly.

Be Your Friends' Biggest Fan

It can be easy to hyperfocus on your character, their goals, and their activities. After all, it takes a lot of effort to bring a character to life. However, you're sharing the game with other players, who are also putting a lot of effort into their characters. Pay attention to their turns. Get excited for them and celebrate their achievements. Let yourself become invested in their characters' storylines and development. Be a fan of the story everyone is building together, and not just your character's role in it.

Walking Away From Explosions, and much more!

This document won't provide you with a Potion of Cool, because that would only turn out to be be a Tryhard Tincture. What this document *does* provide is advice on how to portray characters who are cool. It's not just about dark cloaks and mysterious histories and walking away from explosions (though it certainly *can* involve those things)... Being cool is a complex balance of nonchalance, cool heads, and confidence, without coming off as apathetic or overly distant. This guide can help you master that balancing act, and portray characters that are unmistakably *cool.*

I Had To Go Because
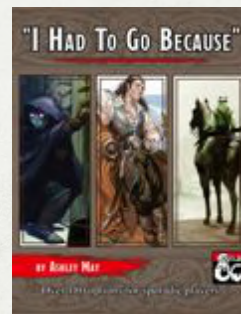
Don't cancel the whole game night! Quick, flexible, narrative solutions for when a player suddenly says "Sorry, I can't make it this week!"

Festivals, Feasts & Fairs

Between goblin invasions and evil necromantic cults, everyone needs an opportunity to unwind. FFF will turn your "pleasant downtime" into an interactive experience.

The Lovers' Handbook

A guide for love interests and romance in your adventures, including advice on player comfort levels and consent, magic items, charts for the creation of romantic gifts, and more.

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