

SIMPLE 5E ENCOUNTER BUILDING GUIDELINES

These guidelines are intended to help dungeon masters quickly build combat encounters for 5e. These guidelines are built to show dungeon masters what a "hard" encounter looks like so you have the freedom to tune the battle to make it easier or harder depending on the story and your goals for the encounter.

Because many variables can change the actual difficulty of encounter, consider these loose guidelines, not hard rules.

FOUR STEPS FOR BUILDING COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

1. Start with the story. What type of encounter makes sense for the current location and direction of this story? You might know this ahead of time or might want to build a quick encounter right at the table. When designing an encounter, start with the story first and the mechanics second.

2. Choose appropriate monsters. Use the monsters by challenge rating index or the excellent Monsters by Environment list in appendix B of the Dungeon Master's Guide to help you choose the right monsters for the encounter you want to build. Aim for creatures with a challenge rating roughly equivalent to 3/4 the level of the characters or less. If you're aiming to have them fight a single monster, the challenge rating should be at the character's level or up to two ratings higher.

3. Determine the number of monsters. Choose a number of monsters based on the monsters' challenge rating compared to the characters' level.

- For monsters with a challenge rating of 1/4 the character's level, use two monsters per character.
- For monsters with a challenge rating of 1/3 the character's level, use one monster per character.
- For monsters with a challenge rating of 3/4 the character's level, use one monster per two characters.
- For monsters with a challenge rating equal to or above the character's level, use one monster per four characters.

4. Adjust difficulty. These guidelines aim for a "hard" encounter as described on page 82 of the Dungeon Master's Guide. Increase or decrease the difficulty by adding or subtracting monsters, choosing monsters with higher or lower challenge ratings, or by increasing or decreasing the monsters' hit points.

5. Evaluate the action economy. Compare the number of monsters to the number of characters. Too many creatures on one side or the other will have a big effect on the difficulty. Big monsters that fight by themselves are much easier to defeat than a somewhat big monsters with a couple of lackeys to keep the wizards busy. In general, for most encounters, have at least one monster for the first four characters plus one monster for each additional character.

QUICK LOOKUP TABLE

The table below helps you select the appropriate challenge rating for monsters based on the number of monsters per character at a certain character level. These too are based on a "hard" encounter as outlined in the Dungeon Master's Guide. This table is slightly more accurate than the rules of thumb in part 3.

Character level	CR for two monsters per character	CR for one monster per character	CR for one monster per two characters	CR for one monster per four characters
1	Too hard	1/4	1/2	1
2	1/8	1/4	1	3
3	1/4	1	2	4
4	1/2	1	3	5
5	1	2	4	6
6	1	2	5	7
7	1	3	5	8
8	2	3	6	9
9	2	4	7	10
10	2	4	7	11
11	3	5	8	12
12	3	5	9	13
13	3	5	10	14
14	4	6	11	15
15	4	6	11	16
16	4	7	12	17
17	4	8	13	18
18	5	8	14	19
19	5	9	15	20
20	6	10	16	21

LOOSE GUIDELINES, NOT HARD RULES

The challenge of any combat encounter cannot be easily measured or quantified. Too many variables can increase or decrease the difficulty of a battle. These include the variance in difficulty between monsters at the same challenge rating, the class mixture of characters, the particular spells a character may have, which side wins initiative, how many resources the characters have exhausted previously, circumstantial or environmental considerations, and the skills and proficiency of the players

All encounter building systems, including this one, lack precision. Thus, we aim for faster, looser guidelines to help dungeon master's quickly build encounters while recognizing that actual difficulty will still vary.