

Backgrounds and Skills

Characters are defined by more than race and class. They're individuals, with their own stories, interests, connections, and capabilities beyond what class and race define. Skills and backgrounds reflect this additional layer of depth that each character possesses.

Skills

Skills represent areas of expertise, advanced training, or natural talent for performing a specific task. They represent concrete ways that your character's past continues to influence the present, giving an edge at some activities.

Skill Proficiency

A character's class and background grant the character proficiency in one or more skills.

If your character would gain the same skill proficiency from two different sources, you can become proficient in any other skill of your choice instead.

Specialized Ability Checks

Each skill is related to one of the six abilities. For example, the Athletics skill applies to certain Strength checks that depend on athletic ability, and the Arcana skill applies to some Intelligence checks related to knowledge about magic.

The skills related to each ability score are shown in the following list. (No skills are related to Constitution.) The "How to Play" document outlines the tasks commonly associated with each skill.

Strength

Athletics

Dexterity

Acrobatics
Sleight of Hand
Stealth

Intelligence

Arcana
History
Nature
Religion
Search

Wisdom

Animal Handling
Insight
Medicine
Perception
Survival

Charisma

Deception
Intimidation
Performance
Persuasion

Using Skills in Play

Sometimes, the DM might ask for an ability check using a specific skill—for example, "Make a Wisdom (Perception) check." At other times, you might ask the DM if your proficiency in a particular skill applies to a check you're making. In either case, proficiency in a skill means that you can add your proficiency bonus to ability checks you make to perform tasks relevant to that skill.

For example, if you attempt to climb up a dangerous cliff, your Dungeon Master might ask you for a Strength (Athletics) check. If you are proficient in Athletics, you add your proficiency bonus to your Strength check.

Backgrounds

Every story has a beginning. Your character's background reveals where he or she came from, how he or she became an adventurer, and his or her place in the world. Your fighter might have been a courageous knight or a grizzled soldier. Your mage could have been a sage or an artisan.

Your rogue might have gotten by as a guild thief or commanded audiences as a jester.

Choosing a background is one of four key decisions you make about your character, providing you with important story cues about his or her identity. In addition, that background includes a special trait and suggestions for starting fields of lore, proficiencies, and equipment.

Traits

A background provides your character with a trait. A trait is a special ability that describes something your character can do, or can expect, related to his or her place in the world. Typically, traits are exceptional, and the description of each trait explains how it functions in the game.

Proficiencies and Languages

A background gives your character proficiency in three skills, reflecting the tasks that you grew up practicing and perfecting. In addition, it gives you proficiency with up to three types of equipment. Finally, some backgrounds give you the ability to speak, read, and write one or more additional languages, beyond what your race and Intelligence give you.

Equipment

Each background provides equipment suggestions appropriate to the background to speed up the creation of your character.

If you take the equipment package, you must also take the equipment package granted by your class. You can forgo taking the equipment packages and instead spend 175 gp to purchase your starting equipment.

Creating a Background

You or your DM might want to create a background that is specific to your character or the campaign setting. To create a background, choose a trait, three skills, and three tool proficiencies or languages from the sample backgrounds, and spend 175 gp on gear. (You can't also take the equipment package suggested for your class.) If you can't find a trait that matches your desired background, work with your DM to write one.

As a rule of thumb, a trait should tie your character to the world in some way. It should provide links to organizations and people that your character had contact with in the days before he or she became an adventurer. It can also reflect special advantages and opportunities that a member of that background enjoys. Traits never improve your character's class abilities or provide bonuses to rolls.

Sample Backgrounds

Most adventurers have one of the following backgrounds.

Artisan

You apprenticed under a master artisan until you learned enough to strike out on your own. You have the skills needed to create finished items from raw materials. Additionally, you are well connected to other artisans in your field, perhaps as a member of a guild, and have learned to deal with colleagues and customers alike in good faith.

When you choose this background, choose a profession, or roll a d12 and consult the following table to determine it.

d12	Result
1	Alchemist
2	Blacksmith
3	Bowyer or fletcher
4	Brewer
5	Carpenter
6	Cartographer
7	Cook
8	Goldsmith/Silversmith
9	Jeweler
10	Painter
11	Potter
12	Weaver

Your trait and trade lore depend on your particular profession.

Trait – Guild Membership

You are a member of a guild that is connected to your chosen craft. Fellow members of the guild will provide you with lodging and food. In some cities and towns, a guild hall offers a central place to meet other members of your profession.

Guilds often wield tremendous political power. If you are accused of a crime, your guild will support you if a good case can be made for your innocence or the crime is justifiable. You can also gain access to powerful political figures through the guild, if you are a member in good standing. Such connections might require the donation of money or magic items to the guild's coffers.

You must pay dues of 5 gp per month to the guild. If you miss payments, you must make up back dues to remain in the guild's good graces.

Proficiencies

Skills: Insight, Persuasion, Search

Tools: Two different kinds of artisan's tools

Languages

One of your choice

Equipment

Artisan's tools, small steel mirror, autographed or otherwise marked masterwork of well-known artisan (appropriate to your craft), common clothes, 39 gp, and 5 sp

Bounty Hunter

You track down and capture fugitives for the bounty placed on their heads. You might have worked on the frontier, where you hunted outlaws, or maybe you sniffed out thieves and other criminals in the city's underworld.

Trait – Bounty Board

When you are in an area of civilization, you can find information about fugitives and the bounties placed on their heads, and you can secure the legal authority to hunt down and capture or kill those fugitives. Sometimes the authorities will come to you, as an established bounty hunter, with specific requests. Your reputation and knowledge make it easy for you to establish useful contacts in the town watch or guard.

When you attempt to locate a fugitive, if you fail to locate that quarry yourself, you often know where to go and from whom to obtain information on that quarry's whereabouts. Usually this comes in the form of contacts you have cultivated on past hunts. Your DM might

rule that this information is unavailable—some creatures have ways of hiding themselves that are very difficult to uncover.

Proficiencies

Skills: Perception, Search, Stealth

Tools: Mounts (land)

Languages

Two of your choice

Equipment

Collection of "Wanted" broadsheets, two sets of manacles, silk rope (50 ft.), climber's kit, lock of hair from previous or current bounty, common clothes, 35 gp, and 5 sp

Charlatan

You can talk your way out of almost any situation and know the right things to say to get the information you seek. You're a swindler, and the use of deception to get your way comes to you as naturally as others tell the truth. You think of yourself as a confidence artist; you can pull off short and long cons, and in a pinch, peddle snake oil.

Trait – False Identity

You have created a second identity that includes documentation, established acquaintances, and disguises that allow you to assume that persona. Additionally, you can forge documents including official papers and personal letters in a specific person's handwriting, as long as you have seen an example of the kind of document you are trying to copy.

Proficiencies

Skills: Deception, Insight, Sleight of Hand

Tools: Disguise kit, gaming set

Languages

One of your choice

Equipment

Two sets of clothes (common and noble), disguise kit, ten stoppered vials filled with colored water, set of weighted dice, playing cards, signet ring of an imaginary duke, 29 gp, and 5 sp.

Commoner

You come from a humble social rank, perhaps working as a farmer, servant, or laborer. Although your background is not as glamorous as others, you find it easy to blend in wherever you go and have a sort of folksy wisdom that can sometimes help you out of a jam.

When you choose this background, choose a profession that is found among the common folk, or roll a d20 and consult the following table to determine your particular expertise.

d20	Result
1–2	Fisher
3	Forester
4–7	Laborer
8–11	Messenger
12	Sailor
13–16	Serf
17–18	Servant
19	Shepherd
20	Trapper

Trait – Salt of the Earth

Since you come from the ranks of the common folk, you fit in among them with ease. You can find a place to hide, rest, or recuperate among commoners, unless you have shown yourself to be a danger to them. They will shield you from the law or anyone else searching for you, though they will not risk their lives for you.

Proficiencies

Skills: Animal Handling, Athletics, Survival

Tools: Artisan's tools, gaming set, mounts (land)

Equipment

Common clothes, iron pot, spade, block and tackle, flask of rotgut, tool kit (appropriate to your profession), 14 gp, and 4 sp

Guide

You know the wilderness like the back of your hand. You have spent many days and nights in the wild, sometimes traveling on your own but more often leading others along rarely used tracks and paths.

Trait – Wanderer

You have an excellent memory for maps and geography, and you can always recall the general layout of terrain, settlements, and other features around you. In addition, you can find food and fresh water for yourself and up to five other people each day, provided that the land offers berries, small game, water, and so forth.

Proficiencies

Skills: Athletics, Nature, Survival

Tools: Climber's kit, mounts (land), navigator's tools

Equipment

Backpack, bedroll, hempen rope (50 ft.), navigator's tools, tent, tinderbox, traveler's clothes, waterskin, winter blanket, 40 gp, and 8 sp

Guild Thief

You made a living by stealing as a member of a thieves' guild. The guild is similar to a modern organized crime syndicate. It exacts protection money from criminals and businesses alike, and it uses its influence to keep the city watch focused on apprehending criminals who operate without the guild's blessing.

Necessity might have driven you to this work, having no other means to provide for yourself, or you might have been an orphan taken in by a thieves' guild. Whatever your reasons, you learned how to slip into places where others would prefer you not go, neutralizing traps, locks, and sentries with uncanny skill.

Trait – Thieves' Cant

Among thieves, there is a secret language, which uses a combination of jargon words and secret signs that members of the criminal underworld know and use. Creatures hearing you converse in Thieves' Cant might think you say one thing when you are actually saying something else entirely.

You have learned the secret language of thieves. You can correctly interpret thief signs and doublespeak, and you can communicate in this manner to others familiar with this language.

Proficiencies

Skills: Deception, Sleight of Hand, Stealth

Tools: Disguise kit, thieves' tools, poisoner's kit

Equipment

Thieves' tools, lampblack, oil can, breeches with secret pocket, small steel mirror, belt pouch, 18 gp, and 4 sp

Jester

You were employed as a jester by a noble. You performed acrobatic stunts, told jokes and stories, and provided entertainment for your employer and his or her guests. You also served a key role, lacing your entertainment with criticisms and observations too controversial for others to speak aloud.

Trait – Licensed Fool

You enjoy the rare privilege of speaking your mind with little concern for repercussions. As a jester, it is your duty to use comedy to point out the absurdities of the world. You can criticize through the lens of humor without giving offense.

In addition, you can gain access to nobles so that you may perform. When traveling, you can usually find a meal and a place to stay in the local castle or manor house in return for a performance.

Proficiencies

Skills: Acrobatics, Performance, Sleight of Hand

Tools: Gaming set, musical instrument

Languages

One of your choice

Equipment

Jester's motley, tin scepter, disguise kit, book of bawdy poems and jokes, traveler's clothes, and 38 gp

Minstrel

You wander the land performing music, telling tales, and entertaining audiences with your talents. Rarely does a community not welcome you in, as you bring news of distant lands to the common folk.

Trait – Noted Performer

You can always find a place to perform, usually in an inn or tavern. At such a place, you receive free lodging and food (within reason) as long as you perform each night. In addition, your performance makes you something of a local figure. When strangers recognize you in a town where you have performed, they typically take a liking to you.

Proficiencies

Skills: History, Performance, Persuasion

Tools: Disguise kit, musical instrument

Languages

One of your choice

Equipment

Fine clothes, ink, musical instrument (your choice), paper (five sheets), traveler's clothes, and 27 gp

Noble

You carry a noble title appropriate to the realm you come from. Your family either currently has or at one time had wealth, power, and influence. Work with your DM to come up with an appropriate title and determine how much authority that title carries within the realm and beyond it.

Trait – Retainers

You are a member of a noble family and have the service of three retainers loyal to your family. These retainers can be squires, attendants, messengers, or even a major-domo. Your retainers can perform mundane tasks for you, but they do not fight for you and will leave if they are frequently endangered or abused.

Proficiencies

Skills: History, Insight, Persuasion

Tools: Gaming set, mounts (land)

Languages

One of your choice

Equipment

Fine clothes, signet ring, sealing wax, scroll of pedigree, riding horse with saddle and bridle, grooming kit for horses, feed (seven days), 29 gp, and 5 sp

Priest

You have pledged your life to serve a god, pantheon of gods, or philosophy. You act as an intermediary between your chosen power and the mortal world, conducting sacred rites, offering sacrifices, and expounding the teachings of your faith to those you meet.

When you choose this background, select a deity or power. Your knowledge and experience is drawn from your time as a priest in the service of that faith.

Trait – Temple Services

You belong to a specific temple dedicated to your chosen power. You have a residence there, and you can perform religious ceremonies and offer sermons drawn from the sacred teachings of your faith. While near your temple, you can call upon acolytes and fellow priests for assistance, provided the assistance you ask for is not hazardous and you remain in good standing with your temple.

Additionally, when you are in a location that has a temple, shrine, or other presence of your faith, you can expect to receive free healing, care, and religious services for yourself and your adventuring companions from others aligned with your faith.

Proficiencies

Skills: History, Insight, Religion

Tools: Healer's kit

Languages

Two of your choice

Equipment

Holy symbol, flask of holy water, abacus, ink, ink pen, paper (ten sheets), vestments, 3 gp, 9 sp, and 8 cp

Sage

You have spent many years learning the lore of the world. You scoured manuscripts, studied scrolls, and listened to the greatest experts on the subjects that interest you. Your efforts have made you a true master in the fields you have studied.

Trait – Researcher

When you attempt to learn or recall a piece of lore, if you do not know that information, you often know where and from whom you can obtain it. Usually, this information comes from a library, scriptorium, university, or a sage or other learned person or creature. Your DM might rule that the knowledge you seek is secreted away in an almost inaccessible place, or that it simply cannot be found. Unearthing the deepest secrets of the universe can require an adventure or even a whole campaign.

Proficiencies

Skills: Arcana, History, Search

Languages

Three additional languages

Equipment

Robe, ten candles, abacus, consecration kit, tome of spiritual teachings, ink, ink pen, paper (ten sheets), 12 gp, 8 sp, and 8 cp

Soldier

You trained in military skills and possibly fought in a war. You studied the use of weapons and armor, basic survival techniques, and how to stay alive on the battlefield. You might have been part of a standing national army or a mercenary company, or perhaps a member of a local militia who rose to prominence during a recent war.

When you choose this background, work with your DM to determine which military organization you were a part of, how far through its ranks you progressed, and what kind of experiences you had during your military career.

Trait – Military Rank

You have a military rank from your career as a soldier. Soldiers loyal to your former military organization still recognize your authority and influence, and they will defer to you if they are of a lower rank. You can invoke your rank to exert influence over other soldiers and requisition simple equipment, horses, and vehicles for temporary use. You can also usually gain access to friendly military encampments and fortresses where your rank is recognized.

Proficiencies

Skills: Athletics, Intimidation, Survival

Tools: Gaming set, mounts (land), vehicles (land)

Equipment

Lucky charm, souvenir of a previous military campaign (a weapon taken from an enemy, a scar, a medal, or some similar item), rank insignia, traveler's clothes, bone dice or cards, and 40 gp

Spy

You can learn information that others attempt to keep secret. You collect rumors, whispers, stories, and hard-won evidence. Then you use that knowledge to aid your own endeavors and, when appropriate, to sell to those willing to pay a premium.

Trait – Contact

You have a contact who acts as your liaison to a network of other spies. You know how to communicate with your contact over great distances (including through the use of magic for quicker communication if you have access to the appropriate spells or items) and typically can exchange information you have gathered for information you seek from your contact.

Proficiencies

Skills: Deception, Search, Stealth

Tools: Disguise kit, thieves' tools

Languages

One of your choice

Equipment

Disguise kit, traveler's clothes, small steel mirror, satchel with secret compartment, ink, ink pen, paper (ten sheets), 6 gp, 9 sp, and 8 cp

Thug

Years of being a street tough have given you an aura of menace. Your look communicates a basic message to those who annoy you: You'd as soon break their knees as receive an apology. Threats and bullying tactics come easily to you. Your demeanor has landed you jobs with less-than-reputable organizations in the past, where you've provided both protection and muscle.

Trait – Bad Reputation

No matter where you go, people are afraid of you due to your connections to the dangerous criminal underworld or your history of violence. When you are in a place of civilization, you can get away with minor criminal offenses, such as refusing to pay for food at a tavern or breaking down doors at a local shop, since most people will not report your activity to the authorities.

Proficiencies

Skills: Athletics, Deception, Intimidation

Tools: Gaming set, mounts (land)

Languages

One of your choice

Equipment

Sap (equivalent to club), tattoo, basic poison, half of a set of manacles, common clothes, 28 gp, and 4 sp