

MONSTERS' GUIDE TO COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

*For Dungeon of the Mad Mage
Level 15: Obstacle Course*

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About this Guide

Combat is one of three main pillars of the game, apart from exploration and interaction. And it takes a lot of time to prepare and run good combat encounter. The goal of this guide is to help DMs who are running Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage adventure to get better understanding on how to run combat encounters, how to make them coherent, memorable and fun!

Preparation process divided into 3 steps:

1. Determining Encounter Difficulty.
2. Determining Surprise.
3. Determining Creatures' Tactics.

First step will give you general understanding about how difficult combat encounter might be for your player characters. Each level of WDMM is designed for PCs of particular level. I use a guideline from Encounter Building section in Xanathar's Guide to Everything (XGE, p. 88) to evaluate how many PCs of corresponding level should be in the party to overcome the encounter. Math is simple. If you have the same number of PCs – it is good fight. If you have more PCs (2/3 of number of PCs is needed) – they will pass it with ease, but it still be challenging. If you have less PCs (3/2 of number of PCs is needed) – encounter will be hard, but still winnable. Also, I put notes about combat difficulty, which I think is important. Depending on this information you can adjust the encounter for your group, skip it entirely or think about possible defeat consequences.

Second step is always up to DM, so you should be prepared in advance. General guidance is written in Player's Handbook (PHB, p. 189). Basically, you should determine who is surprised when the first round of combat begins. To do so, you should know answers for these questions:

Are creatures trying to hide? They roll Stealth.

Are they successful? Compare results to PC's Passive Perception score.

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Based on the results you will understand who will take actions in the first round of combat and who will not. I also put my notes for the encounters when circumstances may differ from the standard procedure.

Third step will help you to understand how to use creatures in combat. Where should they stand? What course of action will be most efficient and logical depending on the lore? Who do they need to attack? Will they fight to the death? Will they flee or surrender? I also put more detailed explanation on how some creature's abilities and traits work.

Abbreviations and Font Styles

The following abbreviations are used throughout this guide:

PHB = Player's Handbook

MM = Monster Manual

DMG = Dungeon Master's Guide

SCAG = Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide

XGE = Xanathar's Guide to Everything

VGTM = Volo's Guide to Monsters

MTOF = Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes

WDMM = Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage

WDH = Waterdeep: Dragon Heist

PC(s) = Player Character(s)

AC = Armor Class

DC = Difficulty Class

CR = Challenge Rating

hp = hit points

gp = gold piece(s)

AoE = Area of Effect

RAW = Rules as Written

The following font styles are used throughout this guide:

Bold style is used for the creatures' names

Italic style is used for the Spells.

Bold Italic style is used for the Abilities and Traits.

Level 15: Obstacle Course

This level is designed for four 13th level PCs. If you have more than 4 PCs, you can add more creatures or maximize their hp to make combat encounters more challenging. If you have less PCs, then you can decrease the number of creatures in combat or use less optimal tactics. All creatures in Encounter Difficulty section are compared to 13th level PCs.

Area 2

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Gelatinous Cube** (CR 2, MM, p. 240) = 1 PC

Surprise

Thanks to **Transparent** trait PCs can only notice the **Gelatinous Cube** if they have Passive Perception 15 or higher. Otherwise they are surprised.

Creatures' Tactics

According to the lore, oozes are unintelligent spawns of Demon Lord Jubilex. They don't use any tactics, they don't surrender or flee, they just attack everything they can eat.

Make the **Gelatinous Cube** use **Pseudopod** only for opportunity attacks. Since the combat encounter takes place at 10 ft. wide corridor the **Cube** can move 15 ft. forward using **Engulf** attack and force all PCs on its way to make up to three Dexterity saving throws (once per 5 ft.). Note, that you can use **Cube's** regular 15 ft. movement to move closer to PCs, but this movement doesn't allow to enter PC's space. Don't forget that since PC can't stop at the space of another PC, he or she can be engulfed even with successful saving throw. As a DM you decide if PC can hold breath (1+Con mod minutes, minimum of 30 sec.) or start suffocating immediately (Con mod rounds, minimum of 1 round). It is also up to DM if PC who can't breathe is able to cast spells with verbal component. The other important thing is that PC can't regain hp if he or she is dying because of Suffocating (PHB, p. 183).

Area 13a

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Ice Devil** (CR 14, MM, p. 66) = 3 PCs

Surprise

As a DM you can decide that appearing **Ice Devil** makes the party surprised.

Creatures' Tactics

Devils are lawful evil fiends from lower plane called Nine Hells (PHB, p. 300) collecting souls of mortals. They can't die on Material Plane, so they won't flee or surrender. They can take captives and can communicate via **Telepathy**.

Make the **Ice Devil** use **Wall of Ice** targeting as many PCs as possible whenever it's available. Otherwise make it use **Multiattack** against less armored martial PC, because spellcasters isn't very dangerous for the **Ice Demon** thanks to **Magic Resistance** trait and immunity to cold, fire and poison damage.

Area 14b

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Drow Mage** (CR 7, MM, p. 126) = 2 PCs

12 **Skeletons** (CR 1/4, MM, p. 272) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

According to MM and MTOF, drow are selfish, cruel and treacherous creatures, who believe in their supremacy over all other. They especially hate surface elves, so you can make them focus on elf or half-elf PCs in combat. Drow can negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Assume that the **Drow Mage** pre-casted **Mage Armor**. At the beginning of the fight make the **Drow Mage** cast **Greater Invisibility**. It requires keeping concentration which means the **Drow**

Mage won't be able to use *Cloudkill* or *Evard's Black Tentacles*. On the next turns make it cast *Lightning Bolt* using 5th and 4th level spell slots targeting as many PCs as possible. Don't forget to use *Shield* against attacks.

Skeletons are driven by necromantic energy that compels them to kill living creatures. They won't negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Skeletons** obey commands of the **Drow Mage**. Make them focus on less armored PC using *Shortbow*. Once PCs engage in melee make the **Skeletons** switch to *Shortsword*.

Area 15

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Adult White Dragon** (CR 13, MM, p.86) = 3 PCs

Surprise

As a DM you can decide that appearing **White Dragon** makes the party surprised.

Creatures' Tactics

This dragon isn't real, so it won't negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Adult White Dragon** can fly so make it appear in the air and stay out of melee reach between its turns. Don't forget, that Halaster's magic prohibits magical fly over the chasm, so it's quite safe place for the **Dragon** until it has *Legendary Resistance* to succeed on saves against *Hold Monster*, *Web* and other movement restricting spells or abilities. The **Dragon** has Legendary Actions so even if it loses Initiative it can act using them after first PC's turn. If any PC is within 10 ft. reach, make the **Dragon** use *Tail*. If the **Dragon** is surrounded by two or more PCs make it use *Wing Attack* and fly away. Once the **Dragon's** turn is started make it use *Multiattack* against PC with strong ranged attacks. Successful *Frightful Presence* gives Disadvantage on attacks against the **Dragon**, so you can focus on spellcasters until Frightened condition remains. Next turn make the **Dragon** use *Cold Breath*.

Area 19

Encounter Difficulty

3 **Ropers** (CR 5, MM, p. 261) = 3 PCs

Surprise

Thanks to *False Appearance* the **Ropers** can surprise PCs automatically, and PCs can't surprise them.

Creatures' Tactics

Ropers are voracious hunters of Underdark. They can't communicate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Ropers** use *Multiattack* against as many PCs as possible. You can roll a die to choose random targets, if you have more than 4 PCs within reach. You can also use this method to decide which PC the **Roper** will *Bite*. Don't forget that Restrained condition grants Advantage to **Roper's** attacks.

Area 23

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Stone Golem** (CR 10, MM, p. 167, with changes) = 3 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Golems are elemental spirits bound into material form by powerful magic. They blindly obey any commands given them by their creators, don't feel pain and don't afraid of death. They won't communicate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Stone Golem** use *Magic Theft* as a Bonus Action targeting nearest PC and *Slow* as an Action targeting as many PCs as possible. On the next rounds make it use *Magic Theft* targeting another PC and *Multiattack* against nearest PC.

Area 24c

Encounter Difficulty

4 **Githzerai Zerth** (CR 6, MM, p. 158) = 4 PCs

Note. These creatures won't attack the party without reason.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Githzerai are a race of ascetic philosophers from Outer Plane called Ever-Changing Chaos of Limbo (PHB, p. 300). They can negotiate, flee, surrender and take captives.

Make the **Githzerai Zerths** cast *Phantasmal Killer* on martial PCs at the beginning of the fight. On the next rounds make them use **Multiattack** against less armored PC. Don't forget to cast *Shield* as a Reaction to avoid hits.

Area 27

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Vampire** (CR 14, MM, p. 295, with changes) = 3 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Vampires are intelligent undead, so they are able to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Vampire** has Legendary Actions so even if it loses Initiative it can act right after first PCs turn. It can't use **Bite** until it grapples or charms the target, but it can use **Move** to shorten the distance or **Unarmed Strike** if PC is within 5 ft. **Charm** is the most powerful ability the **Vampire** has, so make it use it against martial PC because spellcasters tend to have higher Wisdom saves.

Charm isn't a spell, so *Dispel Magic* can't end it, but *Greater Restoration* and *Dispel Evil and Good* will work. Charmed PC isn't dominated, so don't force him or her to attack other party members. Charmed PC can't attack the **Vampire** and the **Vampire** can use **Bite** against PC without need of grapple. Best course of actions for the **Vampire** is to **Charm** all PCs, convince them to give up their weapons and armor and deal with them one after another. Don't forget that every time the **Vampire** deals damage to Charmed PC, he or she makes new saving throw, so it's not auto-win. If this tactic doesn't work, because of high Wisdom saves, spells or class features such as monk's Stillness of Mind, you can make the **Vampire** fight. Make it focus on less armored PC using **Dwarven Thrower** in two hands as Action and continue with **Unarmed Strike** and **Bite** using Legendary actions. If you decide that it's time to flee make the **Vampire** use Dodge and run away using its regular movement and **Move** Legendary action after each PC's turn.

Area 29b

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Champion** (CR 9, WDMM, p. 312) = 3 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Champion is intelligent enough to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Champion** use **Multiattack** with **Maul** against less armored PC. Use **Shortbow** only if there is no chance to attack in melee. The **Champion** has very high bonus to Athletic skill, so it can Grapple and Shove effectively. Make the **Champion** use **Second Wind** as Bonus Action once it loses more than 20 hp and use **Indomitable** if it fails saving throw.

Area 30a

Encounter Difficulty

2 **Nycaloths** (CR 9, MM, p. 311) = 6 PCs

1 **Mage** (CR 6, MM, p. 347) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Nycaloths are yugoloth – neutral evil mercenary fiends from Outer plane called Gehenna (PHB, p. 300). They won't flee, surrender or take captives but can communicate using **Telepathy**.

Make the **Nycaloth** cast *Mirror Image* at the start of the combat, it is a very good defensive spell which doesn't require Concentration. After that, make the **Nycaloth** use **Multiattack** against less armored martial PC, because spellcasters isn't very dangerous for the **Nycaloth** thanks to **Magic Resistance** trait and resistance to cold, fire and lightning damage. The **Nycaloth** can fly, so make it use hit and run tactics, staying in the air out of melee reach between its turns. Always use **Greataxe** instead of **Claw** because the latter requires a lot of rolls which will slow down the pace of combat and deals less damage until fourth hit. It is also easily countered with magical healing. Use **Teleport** as part of **Multiattack** to reach and attack fleeing PCs.

Mage is intelligent enough to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Start the fight with *Greater Invisibility*. It will protect the **Mage** from a lot of spells that require seeing (especially, *Counterspell*) and give Disadvantage to attacks against it. *Cone of Cold* is the most damaging spell the **Mage** has. You can also make it cast 5th level *Fireball* if you can target more PCs within its AoE. Assume that *Mage Armor* was pre-casted before the encounter. Use the **Mage's** reaction to cast *Shield* against attacks or *Counterspell* against harmful spells. Note that you can use *Counterspell* on **Mage's** own turn against PC's *Counterspell*.

Area 38

Encounter Difficulty

40 **Zombies** (CR 1/4, MM, p. 315) = 4 PCs

Note. Fight in this area alerts creature from [Area 39c](#).

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Zombies are mindless servants. They won't communicate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Zombie** use **Slam** against nearest PCs. Roll a die, if several PCs are within same reach, to determine random target. If you want to try kind of cinematic approach, you can make all **Zombies** focus on nearest PC and Shove and Grapple (PHB, p. 195) him or her in order to get Advantage and prevent movement and standing up.

Area 39c

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Death Tyrant** (CR 15, MM, p. 185) = 4 PCs

Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from [Area 15](#).

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Death tyrants are intelligent undead, so they are able to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Death Tyrant** has very high Intelligence score, so it can make smart solutions regarding choosing targets for its **Eye Rays**. As a DM you can simply target weak saves of PCs you know about or you can use general approach like this. For **Eye Rays** requiring Strength saves target lightly armored PCs, for Dexterity saves target heavily armored, Paralyzed or Restrained PCs, for

Wisdom saves target martial PCs and for Constitution saves target spellcasters. All these things like armor type and fighting styles are obvious most of the time, so it won't be metagaming. Between the **Death Tyrant's** turns make it use *Eye Rays* as Legendary Actions and Lair Actions using the same approach. Other Lair Actions are weaker, because difficult terrain and grappling walls have no synergy with the **Death Tyrant's Eye Rays**, but they can slow down fleeing party. *Negative Energy Cone* won't cover big area because the height of the ceiling is only 40 ft. which makes it less effective.

Area 40a

Encounter Difficulty

4 **Magma Mephits** (CR 1/2, MM, p. 215) = 1 PC

Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from [Area 40b](#).

Surprise

Thanks to *False Appearance* the **Magma Mephits** can surprise PCs automatically, and PCs can't surprise them.

Creatures' Tactics

Mephits are capricious creatures native to the elemental planes (PHB, p. 300). They can negotiate, flee and surrender but they have no reasons to take captives.

The **Magma Mephits** can fly so make them stay away of melee reach and cast *Heat Metal* on PC wearing metal armor. It's powerful spell because if targeted on armor PC can't drop it, so he or she will take damage and make all attacks and ability checks with Disadvantage until the spell ends. Doffing the armor normally takes 1 minute for Medium armor and 5 minutes for Heavy armor (PHB, p. 146). After that make the **Magma Mephits** dive into the magma pool. Immunity to fire damage allows them to stay inside indefinitely and *False Appearance* makes them unnoticeable if they don't move. On the next turns make the **Magma Mephit** use Bonus Action to deal damage with *Heat Metal* and keep hiding.

Area 40b

Encounter Difficulty

8 **Lava Children** (CR 3, WDMM, p. 313) = 4 PCs

Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from [Area 40a](#).

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Lava children are born in the Fountains of Creation, also known as the Plane of Magma, which is wedged between the Elemental Planes of Earth and Fire (PHB, p. 300). They can communicate, flee, surrender and take captives to eat them later.

Make the **Lava Children** use *Multiattack* against PCs wearing metal armor or shield to get Advantage from *Metal Immunity* trait. They are immune to damage from both magical and non-magical metal weapons, so it's practical to focus on spellcasters.

Area 40d

Encounter Difficulty

6 **Lava Children** (CR 3, WDMM, p. 313) = 3 PCs

7 **Magma Mephits** (CR 1/2, MM, p. 215) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Thanks to *False Appearance* the **Magma Mephits** are unnoticeable if they stay motionless in the lava pool.

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 40b](#) for the **Lava Children's** tactics.

See [Area 40a](#) for the **Magma Mephits'** tactics.