

# D&D DM TIPS

## KNOW THE RULES...

Make sure you have a good grasp of the basic rules. Encourage players to learn their own special rules for their class, spells and so on.

## ...BUT DON'T BE RULED BY THEM

If the rules seem to be making things less fun, or it's taking too long to work them out, make a quick decision on how to handle it and move on. The basic rules will nearly always work.

## DON'T LOOK THINGS UP DURING PLAY

You can change your mind about things later, but right now you're playing the game! Don't slow it down for rules. Just let people know how you're doing it now and come back to it later.

## DON'T PLAN TOO MUCH

Have an idea of what is going on, and some relevant rules - monster stats etc - handy. But try and respond to the players. It makes it easier for you, and more fun for them.

## DON'T DESCRIBE TOO MUCH

Tell the players enough to paint the scene, but let them ask questions.

## LET THE PLAYERS HAVE SOME INPUT

You don't have to make everything up yourself. If the fighter asks if they know anyone in the local army outpost, tell them they have an old friend there - and ask them what their name is, and how they know each other.

## NOT EVERYTHING HAS TO BE A PUZZLE

Don't decide how the players must "win" in advance. If they come up with something cool or clever, reward them and push the story forward!

## YOU'RE NOT CRITICAL ROLE

Every game is different. Figure out what your group likes and do that!

# ROLLING THE DICE

## WHEN TO ROLL ABILITY CHECKS

Dice rolls are meant to push the story in a surprising direction. You don't need them all the time! Only roll if a character is actually *doing* something. If the rules don't require a roll, save them for when it's interesting. For example:

- Someone else is opposing the characters
- They are under pressure - there's limited time, they're in a fight, there's imminent danger etc.
- They don't have the right equipment, resources or skills for what they're trying to do
- There's more than one way the story could go
- They're trying to do something extra, or more than one thing at once

## WHEN NOT TO ROLL

If a character is doing something simple or straightforward that they're good at, let them just do it without a roll. Don't make a player roll if nothing interesting or dangerous will happen if they fail; you want every roll to be exciting!

You are also allowed to say a character isn't able to do something they don't know how to do. Not only don't they roll, they just fail or don't do it. Let them try something else! This is important so players feel cool when they get to do the thing their character is good at.

## HOW DIFFICULT SHOULD A ROLL BE?

Not every roll should be hard. If a character is good at something, they should probably succeed. The rules give a bigger chart, but most of the time you can just use a Difficulty Class (DC) of 10 (Easy), 15 (Medium) or 20 (Hard). Most rolls should be Easy or Medium; save the Hard ones for when it counts!

## ADVANTAGE/DISADVANTAGE

You can give out Advantage for a clever idea, if they have help, or for any reason you like - but remember unless the rules say otherwise, you get to say if a character has Advantage or not. Don't let a player talk you into it if it doesn't seem right!

Disadvantage is for when something has gone wrong; don't use it just for difficult tasks, that's what the higher DCs are for. But you might use it if an NPC or monster is suspicious or alert, as a consequence for a previously failed roll or bad idea, or if there's an extra factor making things difficult, like having a leg trapped under a branch or they're stuck in a blizzard.

Giving out Advantage and Disadvantage is also a quick and easy way to hint to players whether they are on the right track. Use it to encourage them when they are working together, being brave (whether in-character or out!) or otherwise making the game more fun for everyone! But don't give them out too often or too easily, or they'll stop having much of an impact.

## WHAT DOES FAILURE MEAN?

No roll should mean "nothing happened" - even a failed roll should push the story forward by changing things. Some easy options for this:

- the character does the thing, but *also* does something bad or loses something
- they get part of what they want, but not all of it
- they do the thing too much - or too well!

## SAVING THROWS

These are mostly given by specific rules like spells or attacks, but it's an easy way to let a player have a go at resisting something nasty. If there are no rules for the specific situation, just set the difficulty as above, but a little lower.

# COMBAT TIPS

## PLANNING FIGHTS

- Concentrate on what the monsters or enemies *want*, rather than on what they might *do*. This helps you decide if they will fight to the death, run away if they're losing, or can be persuaded to stop somehow. It also makes it much easier to adapt when the players do something unexpected! (This applies out of combat too.)
- If a fight seems too easy or too hard, add or remove some enemies! Adding more is usually easy: the monsters call for help, the noise of the fight attracts trouble etc. Finding an excuse for enemies to run away when they're winning can be trickier, so it can be easier to start with fewer enemies than you think you'll need.
- Describe something interesting about the fight location: a barrel of oil, a glowing magic crystal, a fast-running stream, the edge of a rooftop, a chandelier on the ceiling... You don't have to use it - most monsters have enough cool powers on their own - but players can and will think of cool things to do with them. Let them!

## RUNNING FIGHTS

- Try to keep things moving! Combat should be fast and fun, but players have a lot of options. If the players are okay with it, especially in their first few fights, help them out with suggestions. Be prepared to explain more than once how turns work, and what they can do on their turn.
- Stick to the rules about one action, one reaction, one bonus action and what you can do for free. It might seem a little complicated but it makes sure everyone gets a turn without waiting too long.
- Encourage your players to pay attention when it's not their turn so they know what's happening and can decide their actions quickly! It's also more respectful to the other players.

## Useful things to have in front of you:

- Monster stats (a free D&D Beyond account, or the DM Basic Rules PDF, is good for this)
- The AC and hit points of each player character
- The rules for conditions

## “ROLL INITIATIVE!”

This is the traditional way to get a fight started. Get everyone to roll initiative at the same time, but then ask for results in order - “who rolled above 20?”, then “who rolled above 15?” This makes it way easier to write everyone down in the right order. Another option is to have cards with the players and monsters written on them, or use folded bits of paper hung on your DM screen so everyone can see whose turn is coming up next.

## DESCRIBING ATTACKS

Before a roll, only describe what a character or monster does, not the result. For example, “I swing my sword at the goblin's neck!”, not “I cut the goblin's head off!” The latter makes no sense if they miss, or even if they hit and don't do enough damage to kill the goblin. Encourage players to do the same so they don't have to “undo” or drastically revise something they've already said.

The basic attack action means “I am trying to hurt my opponent”. That's it. Wait until it works to describe what happened (see the next section).

## DESCRIBING DAMAGE

Damage doesn't do anything until a creature hits zero hit points, so I find it best to think of the fight as lots of near misses and minor cuts and bruises. Everyone's getting tired out, until eventually someone gets in one good blow that kills a monster or knocks someone unconscious. Doing 10 hp of damage never means you cut someone's leg off, because they can still move just as fast and they're not bleeding all over the place! (There are some powers that have special effects - that's what conditions are for.)

One way to describe it is like a fight with lightsabers or samurai swords - no-one gets hurt while the swords hit each other, but once one gets through, someone is dead or has lost an arm!

## TALK TO THE PLAYERS

Most problems in a group can be fixed just by talking about them! Make sure you and your players feel like you can talk to each other about whatever is happening.

Don't feel like you can't talk about the game while playing - if a player is stuck, help them out by referring to the rules or the specific skills and powers their character has.

If players are causing or having problems with other players, it's often best to talk to them separately in private, in between games. Listen to them first, then give advice. Encourage them to talk out problems with each other. Most problems aren't intentional, and most people are keen to fix things once they know there's a problem!

## CHARACTERS SHOULD GET ALONG

Make sure everyone knows that this is a collaborative game and encourage them to make characters who already know and like each other. They're friends on an adventure together, like Finn and Jake. That doesn't mean they won't have arguments, but they shouldn't be actively working against each other!

## LEVELLING UP

Don't use experience points (XP) for your first game - just decide a good point in the story to level up. This is called “Milestone Advancement” and is much much easier than counting XP.

When it is time to level up, take a break from the story and have a session where you just do that and the characters get a bit of a rest, too.