Beginner's Guide

Learn to play D&D in minutes, and never fear the massive rulebook again!

Boring Legal Stuff

Welcome to this Dungeon Masters Guild supplement for the 5th edition of the world's greatest roleplaying game! Within, you'll find a brief guide for learning how to play the game, helping you to sift through the rules that really matter without getting overwhelmed by a bunch of stuff that can wait for later.

Honestly you really could just be skipping this page; the actual guide starts on the next page. This page is just here to include some legally-required text and so forth. Don't worry about it.

I hope you enjoy the guide; if so, then please consider leaving a review so that other players can find it as well! Thanks for reading, and best of luck in your adventure!

Welcome to D&D!

People everywhere are discovering (or re-discovering) the amazing game of heroic adventure that is *Dungeons and Dragons*. There's something special about gathering your friends and leading heroes of your own making on adventures through a rich fantasy world full of magic and monsters. If you're reading this, then you've decided to give it a try as well, and that means we're in this together.

You may have noticed that rules are a bit extensive; the *Player's Handbook* is not a small document. It's rather daunting to try learning all those rules, *so I suggest you don't*. You see, much of what's in the *PHB* is stuff you can just reference as you go. Instead of trying to learn it all right away, this guide will show you which key mechanics you need to focus in on, and help you grasp the fundamentals of the game, equipping you to play with confidence in a fraction of the time.

Here's what we're going to cover:

The Big Idea. What's an RPG? Just what kind of a game is D&D, anyway?

The Essential Mechanics. Out of all the rules, which ones are you going to be using constantly, and how do they work?

What to Expect. What comes up a lot, and what doesn't? What terms do you need to recognize and respond to?

Character-Building Basics. What steps must you go through to build your first character?

Best Practices. What are some good habits to get into that will help your games go smoothly from day one?

We're going to cover all that, and we're going to do it without you having to spend all day reading. Are you ready? Let's go!

The Big Idea

Okay, so what's the deal with this game at the most basic level? It's a game whose goal is to create a story of high-fantasy adventure, but without anybody knowing ahead of time exactly how things will play out.

The **players** each have their own character, who serves as one of the protagonists. The **DM** ("Dungeon Master") controls everything else, much like a narrator but without the ability to control the protagonists. The DM presents a situation, describing what the **PC**s (player characters) see and hear. Then the players act out what they want their PCs to do. Finally, the DM describes the effects of the PCs' actions as well as how **NPC**s (non-player characters) respond. The players respond again, and the cycle continues.

Along the way, sometimes the PCs or NPCs (or monsters) will do things with uncertain results. For example, if the monster tries to eat you but you try to jump out of the way, what happens? Which of you is successful? That's when we use all those wacky dice you might have already seen or heard of. The dice are named for their numbers of sides (**d4, d6, d8, d10, d12** and **d20**).

Rolling the dice will resolve those uncertain moments, determining the results of risky or dramatic activities. This is why nobody knows how the story will go. That's part of the fun!

The Essential Mechanics

Okay, let's talk nuts and bolts. Don't worry, you don't have to know everything. Let's narrow our focus to the things you really need to understand in order to play, and leave the rest for once you get the hang of things.

Levels

Your character's overall power is summarized with their **level**. In all likelihood, you'll be starting with a **1st-level** PC. Very gradually, your level will go up and you'll get cool new abilities, but that's not something you need to understand right away. There's plenty of time to learn how gaining levels works after you've started playing.

Abilities, Ability Scores, and Modifiers

One of the most fundamental sets of information about your PC is their abilities, ability scores, and ability modifiers. **Abilities** are six attributes which represent your PC's basic aptitude:

Strength (STR)
Dexterity (DEX)
Constitution (CON)
Intelligence (INT)
Wisdom (WIS)
Charisma (CHA)

These abilities more or less mean what they sound like. Your **ability scores** are numbers (usually ranging from about 7-18) which rate how much aptitude you have in each ability. Finally, your **ability modifier** is a smaller number (0-5, could be positive or negative) derived from an ability score.

Truth be told, you mostly only care about the ability modifier, and the only purpose of the ability score is to determine the modifier. (There's some old history for why both numbers exist when you only care about one; you don't need to know all that.) Your modifiers will be added (or subtracted) from a lot of die rolls, and sometimes factored into other stats for your PC.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	13 (+1)	12 (+1)	11 (+0)	11 (+0)	12 (+1)

Example of ability scores with modifiers in parentheses. Your DM will tell you how to generate your scores, and what their corresponding modifiers will be.

The Dice

Remember how the dice come up when you need to determine the outcome of something? Well, you can divide that concept into two categories, two questions that you'll be relying on the dice to answer: **"Yes or no?"** and **"How much?"**. The d20 answers the first question, and all the other dice take turns answering the second. Let's get into it.

Yes or No?

When it comes time to see whether or not you succeed at something, you'll end up rolling a d20. These d20 rolls come with lots of different names (attack rolls, ability checks, saving throws, etc), but they all use the same process. Learn the process, and the rest will fall into place. There are three parts to a d20 roll: the die, the modifier, and proficiency.

The Die. Roll the d20 and see what number comes up. The higher the better: you're looking to roll at least as high as a certain target number. There's some math to do (see below), but roll first, because if you roll exceptionally high or low then you can probably skip the math.

The Modifier. Remember how your abilities have modifier numbers associated with them? The main use of those numbers is to modify your d20 rolls. (That's why they're called "modifiers".) For any given d20 roll, you'll be adding **one** of your ability modifiers. Which ability? It depends on what you're doing, and we'll get to that later. For now, just understand that if you're rolling a d20, you're adding an ability modifier.

Proficiency. Every character has a "proficiency bonus". The size of this bonus depends on your level (at 1st level, it's +2). Your character will have certain skills, weapons, and/or tools in which they're proficient. If you're rolling a d20 for something you're proficient with, then you add your proficiency bonus. If you're rolling for anything else, then you don't.

That's d20 rolls in a nutshell: d20 + ability mod, then also add proficiency if you're proficient. It doesn't matter if it's a saving throw, a skill check, an attack roll, or a tool check; they all follow this formula. You'll be using this mechanic more than any other in the entire game, so make sure you've got it!

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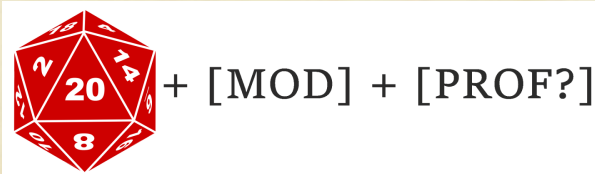
How much?

While the d20 answers "Yes or no?", the question of "How much?" is answered by the other dice. Most of the time, this question is being asked about damage during combat. Each PC, NPC and monster has a pool of **HP** ("hit points") which represent how sturdy and healthy they are. When someone gets hurt, they lose HP, and if their HP hits zero, they hit the dirt. The dice, then, tell you how much damage is subtracted from someone's HP, or how much HP is replenished by a healing potion or curative spell.

The item, spell, or effect you're using will generally tell you which dice to roll. The main thing you really need to learn about these rolls is this: if you're rolling for **the damage dealt by a weapon**, you will also add an ability modifier to the result (it will be the same ability as the attack roll). Lots of people forget this, because every other non-d20 roll is dice-only unless otherwise specified, so make sure this sticks: weapon damage gets a modifier added.

Actions and Combat

There's a lot of combat in D&D. When combat starts, suddenly the rules get a little more picky, but don't worry! It's not that bad as long as you get the basics down. In combat, everybody takes turns, and you have a certain assortment of things you can do on your turn: an **action**, a **bonus action**, and some **movement**. You also get one **reaction** that you can use whether it's your turn or not! Let's go over how these work.

Action. You have one action on your turn, and can use it to attack with a weapon, cast a magic spell, drink a potion, or do any miscellaneous things that make sense but aren't listed anywhere. Since you only get one action per turn, you'll often have to make hard choices.

Bonus Action. Sometimes a class feature or spell says it uses a bonus action. You get one bonus action on your turn, but can only use it for something that specifically says it costs a bonus action. If you don't have such an ability, you can't use your bonus action.

Movement. You have a pool of movement (usually about 30 feet) that you can hustle-walk on your turn. If you're slowed down by bad terrain or trying to climb or swim, your movement costs double. Standing up from prone costs half your pool. You can double your pool by spending your action to **Dash**.

Reaction. You get one reaction per round, and can use it even when it's not your turn. For the most part, you can only use a reaction as specified by a spell or class feature. However, there is one universal reaction, called the **opportunity attack**. If an enemy is within striking distance and tries to leave, you can use your reaction to make one attack. Enemies can do this too, so watch out! However, if you use your action to **Disengage**, you can move without fear of an opportunity attack.

Rest and Recovery

Something your character will be doing a lot of is resting up from their adventures (and boo-boos). Ignoring the fringe applications of resting, let's go over the fundamentals. **Hit points** ("HP") show how much damage you can take, and are influenced by your **hit dice** ("HD") which don't really represent anything at all but are still important. Both HP and HD come into play when you **rest**. Resting comes in two types: short and long.

Short Rest. You can recover a little bit of your HP by resting for 1 hour. You do so by rolling hit dice, but be careful: you only have a number of HD equal to your level. Check your class to see what type of die your HD is, and also be sure to add your **CON modifier** to **each** hit die you roll. The roll plus your CON mod is how much HP you recover.

Long Rest. A long rest is basically a good night's sleep. You recover **all** of your HP. Also, remember those hit dice you spent during your short rest? You get some of those back, but no more than half your level (rounded up).

Also, every class has certain abilities that refresh on a short and/or long rest, so expect to take a lot of breathers if you don't want to die.

What to Expect

Sometimes it can be hard to fully grasp the rules of a game without understanding how those rules are actually applied in play, so let's talk a bit about what gameplay will be like.

Make a What Now?

All the time during the game, you'll be told to do things like make a Perception check, make a DEX save, or make an attack roll. These are all different types of d20 rolls, but you're not worried because you remember how all these d20 rolls work basically the same way.

If the DM tells you to make a certain type of check, it's usually a skill or tool. You will have already marked on your sheet whether you're proficient or not, so you'll be ready to roll a d20, add an ability modifier, and possibly add your proficiency bonus. The same goes for saving throws (sometimes abbreviated to "saves"), which usually happen when an enemy uses a spell or special ability against you, as well as for attack rolls.

Advantage and Disadvantage

Sometimes, the thing you're trying to do will be made harder or easier due to circumstances, spell effects, or even assistance or interference from other people. This is represented with the **advantage** and **disadvantage** mechanics.

Both of these mechanics mean that you roll your d20 twice but only keep one result, ignoring the other. If your roll has advantage, you keep the higher roll; for disadvantage, you keep the lower. Simple, right?

It's All Gone Wrong… or Right?

Because success and failure depends on d20 rolls, it's inevitable that sometimes you'll fail at things you thought you were good at, but also that you'll get lucky and succeed even when your character doesn't know what they're doing. That's okay!

Part of the fun of D&D is not knowing what will happen, so just go with it! Many people's best memories of D&D come from salvaging an improbably bad series of rolls or defying all odds to save the day. Remember, even if your character dies, you can always make a new one and keep playing. Plus, nobody can ever take away the fond memories.

Character-Building Basics

Creating your first character doesn't have to be scary. You create your character by assembling four main components: ability scores, race, background, and class. Each of these elements will contribute different things to the final character. You can do these steps in any order (and even bounce around if you change your mind about something), but the order below might be the easiest to start with.

Ability Scores

First, you'll need to generate ability scores. There is more than one way to do this; ask your DM which method to use. Once you've assembled a set of six scores, assign them to your six abilities in whatever order you please.

Race

Choose a race for your character. This will give you an assortment of benefits which you can apply to your character, the most universal of which is to increase two or more of your ability scores. Record all these things on your character sheet, then compare your ability scores to the chart at the top of page 13 of the *PHB* to determine your ability modifiers. Write these down as well.

Background

Your background represents what your character used to do before taking up a life of adventure. Your choice of background will give you a few things: skills, tools, languages, equipment, a feature and some personality characteristics.

Skills

Your background will list two skills in which you become proficient. Remember, this means that whenever you roll a d20 to use that skill, you'll get to add your proficiency bonus to the roll.

Tools

Your background may or may not give you proficiency with one or more tools. If it does, this has the same effect as a skill proficiency: when you roll a d20 for that tool, you get to add your proficiency bonus.

Languages

If your background says you know one or more languages, choose them from the lists on page 123, but ask your DM if any of them are off-limits first.

Feature and Characteristics

Each background gives you some kind of special ability called a feature. They do what they say. You'll also be offered lists of quirks and traits to choose from. You can use these to help you define your PC's personality, or you can skip them. Whichever is easier for you is fine.

Class

Finally, your class is what will determine most of your character's capabilities. Note that each class cares more about certain ability scores than others, described early in the class description. You can either shop around for a class that uses your best score(s), or you can find a class that looks cool and make sure you put good scores into its primary abilities.

Your class will tell you how many hit points you start off with, give you some more proficiencies, give you some starting equipment, and describe a couple of class features that let you do cool stuff. Write all this down.

Writing Down Numbers

It's boring, but you've got to do it: write down a lot of numbers. See the list of skills? Each one is associated with a certain ability score. If you're proficient, add the ability modifier and your proficiency bonus, and write the total next to the skill. (This will save you some math later, only having to add a single number to your d20 roll.) If you're not proficient, just copy over your ability modifier by itself. Now you'll have numbers next to all your skills, so you'll know exactly what to add when you roll a d20.

Do the same thing with your saving throws, pre-mathing the ones you're proficient in and copying down the ability modifiers for the rest. Again with weapons: presumably you have weapons you're proficient with, so you can write down the total you'll add to your d20 rolls with those weapons. You can also write down the damage for those weapons: the dice listed on page 149 and the relevant ability modifier.

Fill in your armor class by finding your armor on page 145 and following instructions. (Note that you never make d20 rolls for your armor, so being "proficient" with armor just means it's okay to wear it.) Also fill in your speed, HP, and anything else you haven't written down yet.
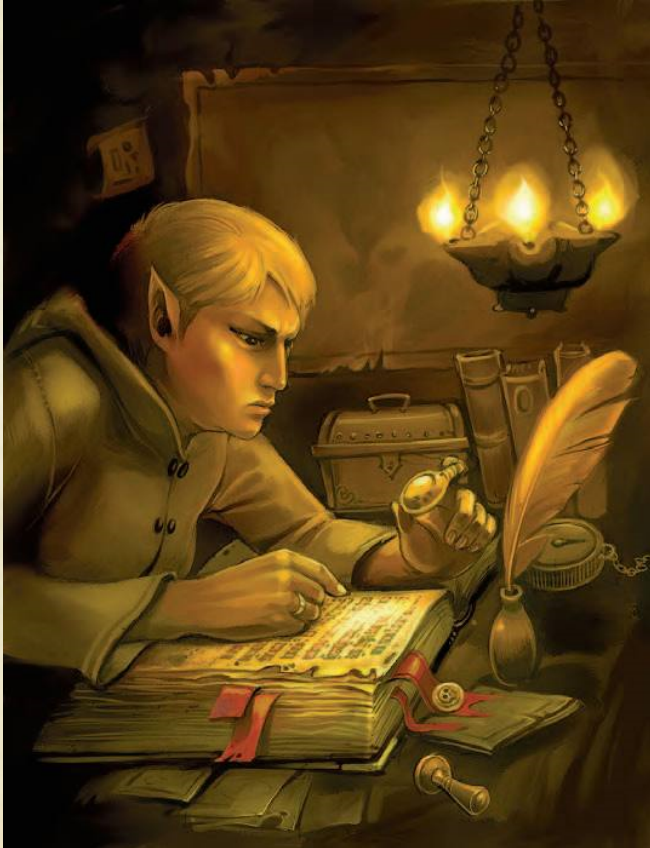
Best Practices

Here are some things to keep in mind when playing, which should keep things going smoothly even without you having to memorize a 300-page book first.

Think Ahead

Especially in combat, you will often have a moment to think about what you might like to do next before you actually have to commit. Think about what you might like to do next, and if necessary, look up the relevant rules. For example, if your wizard is in a fight, think of which spell you might cast and look it up while other people are taking their turns. Then, when your turn comes around, you'll be all set!

Learn Your Bread and Butter

Speaking of being ready in combat, you'll quickly find that you have certain actions you use again and again. Maybe it's your best cantrip or your favorite weapon. Whatever it is that you're doing consistently, have its details ready. Nothing gets old faster than having to search through the rulebook to verify the damage die of the same sword you've been using for the past three months.

Share the Spotlight

You're playing one of the heroes of this story, but so is each of the other players. Before you jump into action to save the day, think about how often you've already done so. If you've been on center stage for a while, maybe stay quiet and let other players be heroes for a while. In fact, you could even have your character ask one of the other characters what they think would be a good course of action.

Of course, this goes the other way too. If you've not been very involved lately, speak up! Jump in with both feet, and don't be afraid to get involved in the scene. The magic of D&D happens when players react to each other, so it's best when everyone is involved!

Roll With It

Sometimes, something will come up and nobody's sure how the rules are supposed to work for it, or two people disagree. Remember, this isn't a grad school thesis, it's a game; it doesn't have to be perfect! If the consequences are minor, just have the GM pick a way to handle it for the moment, and then you can all figure it out after the game.

Game On!

I hope this quick-start guide has been helpful. Remember, even long-time gamers make mistakes and ask questions sometimes, so don't be afraid to be new! Ask for help, learn as you go, and remember the basics that you learned here.

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Finally, if you want to see more of my D&D content (like new backgrounds and classes), you can see it all on the DM's Guild here: https://bit.ly/2MxD64i