# Introduction

Mass combat is something 5e doesn’t handle by default, yet is something many DMs seek a system for. Many homebrew systems out there, such as the one provided by Matt Colville in Strongholds and Followers, are in-depth and involve complicated mechanics that can take a long time to resolve in play. While some DMs might want such a system, others most likely want something easier to run, especially when this mass combat is taking place in the background.

I was never really interested in making my own mass combat system. That said, my DM ran a session that involved mass combat, and he handled it *really well*. So afterwards, I asked him how this system works, and transcribed it into the document you see here.

The system has the following qualities:

* **Easy to Use:** It takes less than a minute each round to resolve the ongoings of that round. It also holds up when the players try to influence the course of the battle somehow.
* **Simplistic:** The system doesn’t go in-depth with stuff like morale, tactics, or anything like that. That said, a lot of that can be handled via flavor, or by adding to the system itself.
* **Very Modular:** The core of the system is very basic, allowing for it to be extended in various ways and to be altered as needed.

While this system isn’t for everyone, I hope many of you can find a use for it in your games.

### Using this Document

This document goes through the step-by-step process of how you can set up and run a mass combat. It also explains how you can expand or change this system as you see fit.

# 1. Assign Tiers and Groups

Not all participants in a mass combat are equal. Most participants will be at some baseline, followed by the elite members of their side, with the equivalent of a leader at the top. The higher up in **tier** you go, the stronger a given participant will be.

So, split your teams into these tiers. For example, you might have 80 regular soldiers, 15 elite soldiers, and 1 leader on one side.

Within each tier, we are now going to assign **groups**: one group to a d6. The group size is arbitrary, but it should be feasible for you to roll an entire tier’s d6s when the time comes. Using the example setup above, you might have 10 regular soldiers to a group (8 d6s for them), three elite soldiers to a group (5 d6s), and one leader to a group (1 d6).

### Special Tiers

Do note that a group doesn’t have to represent just soldiers. For example, you can have a special tier for siege weapons or other defensive fortifications as appropriate. Such tiers, and the groups within them, don’t follow any special or different rules.

# 2. Assigning Health Levels

Later on, we are going to roll these dice; on a roll of a 1, a group takes damage or dies. That said, not all tiers are created equally, so it will take multiple 1s to kill groups in the higher tiers. So, let’s represent this via **health levels**, which we will track for each tier throughout combat.

Our baseline is that a group of normal soldiers tends to die from a single roll of 1. So, we will give the normal tier one health level per group. When a 1 is rolled, this tier loses one health level, causing a single group to die, disperse, or otherwise be removed from play.

Meanwhile, the elites are tougher, so let’s give the elite tier two health levels per group. When a 1 is rolled, this tier loses one health level, but a group doesn’t die (because each group has two health levels): instead, they suffer some wounds, or they only lose a portion of their members. It will take another 1 for a group of elites to die.

Similarly, leaders are even better than the elites, so the leader tier gets three health levels per group. It will take a total of three 1s before a group in this tier dies.

As mentioned, health levels are tracked for each tier. You won’t need to track which specific group gets a 1 multiple times: if two different elite groups roll a 1, that is enough damage for one group to be taken away.

### Regaining Health Levels

We’ll get into this later, but note that health levels can be restored by healing effects (typically ones that target multiple creatures).

# 3. Rolling the Dice

It’s the start (or end) of the round. We have done the first two steps for all factions participating in the fight. It’s time to roll the dice.

When we roll the dice, we do each side one at a time, and we do each tier within these sides separately. Roll all of the dice within this tier, and rather than summing them up or writing down all of the results, count how many of the dice landed on 1. For each 1 you find, subtract a health level from this tier.

So using the example earlier, let’s take the 8 d6s we assigned to the normal tier earlier, and roll all of them. We land on two 1s, and because this is the normal tier, this means that two groups die; so, we **take away** two dice (in this case, just take away the ones that rolled the 1s).

Now we roll the 5 d6s for the elite tier. We land on three 1s, and we know that this tier has two health levels per group. So one group dies, and another is wounded. If we get only one 1 next round, another group will die due to their wounds. Take away dice as appropriate.

Finally, we roll the 1 d6 for the leader tier. We land on a 1, so the leader takes a wound. It will take two more 1s over the next few rounds for the leader to die.

Repeat this process for the other side of the fight. When you’re done, you will know how many participants have died on each side.

## Describing the Rolls

So now that we know how many participants have died on each side, you can describe these events to your players. For example, perhaps the party’s side is winning, but their leader took a blow from a stray arrow, and the elites got hit by a big cannon blast. If this continues, then the leader might die, causing things to go wrong.

## Advantage and Disadvantage

This is where the true power of the system comes in. If we just continue the above process, the fight continues on while the players do their own thing. But what happens if they, or some other force, tries to interfere in the fight? Or what if something else happens?

We can use advantage and disadvantage to describe the events of the round. When a given tier has **advantage**, you roll their dice twice, and you keep the result that has the least amount of 1s. When a tier has **disadvantage**, you roll their dice twice, and you keep the result that has the greatest amount of 1s. In other words, advantage makes a group harder to kill, while disadvantage makes a group easier to kill.

Here are some example factors that might impose disadvantage on a given tier:

* Something causes morale to drop, such as fatigue, their leader dying, or some sort of display of power from the enemy.
* A hostile spell or effect decreases their defensive capabilities.
* The enemy has an informational, positional, or tactical advantage over them that makes them easier to take out.
* The enemy receives a buff or has some sort of other bonus that increases their offensive capabilities.

Conversely, here are some example factors that might grant advantage to a given tier:

* Some sort of buff spell or effect increases their defensive capabilities.
* A hostile spell or effect decreases the enemy’s offensive capabilities.
* They have an informational, positional, or tactical advantage over the enemy that makes them harder to kill.
* Something causes morale to be higher than usual.

## Party Buffs and Debuffs

As you can see here, it is up to the DM to determine when it is appropriate to impose advantage or disadvantage. This allows for the party to make freeform contributions to the fight. For example, a bard might be able to expend uses of Bardic Inspiration to play a song that increases morale, granting advantage to some of their allies, while the paladin’s Aura of Protection constantly grants advantage to the leader she is standing by. The rogue might also be spying on the enemy’s leaders, feeding intel to the party’s wizard via Rary's Telepathic Bond that might impose disadvantage on the other side if used effectively.

Keep the following advise in mind when coming up with such effects:

* Require the party to expend their class resources to enable certain effects. However, don’t feel constrained by the exact wording of the abilities when coming up with or enabling such effects.
* Whatever you say “yes” to can be used as a precedent in future mass combats. If the party wants to do something above and beyond what is normally reasonable, require them to work for it.
* While spellcasters have plenty of AoE spells that can affect large numbers of enemies at once, martials usually only have one or two attacks that they can make per round. To avoid being unfair towards the martial characters in the party, consider focusing more on special missions that involve normal combat, or emphasize that their abilities can go above and beyond the norm. For example, perhaps the barbarian’s sheer tanking power makes it harder to kill the groups adjacent to him, or the fighter’s Action Surge abilities can be extended to their allies, granting their allies advantage and/or their enemies disadvantage as appropriate.

## Party Damage

When the party throws out a fireball or some other area of effect spell, it is up to you to determine the number of enemies that die to it. First, estimate the number of groups that can be found in the affected area. Next, you might want to roll a general saving throw to see how badly they get hit, or you can simply rule that half of the enemies die on the spot. Meanwhile, stronger enemies might be able to take multiple hits from a fireball.

Use the normal combat rules when the party tries to initiate a special fight themselves. For example, they might have a normal fight against a lich while its undead army attacks the city in the background. This puts the spotlight on the players while also allowing them to play a key role in the battle.

# Limitations

* Limitations and Errata
  + Being Outnumbered
    - The base system works best with equal forces on each side
    - When one side starts dying off, the other group should die less
    - When a side has significantly more numbers than their enemy, the DM can choose not to roll some of their dice (to represent them not dying)
      * Measure being outnumbered in stages
      * Stage 1: the leader and elites have advantage or don’t need to roll
      * Stage 2: a quarter of the larger side doesn’t need to be rolled
      * Stage 3: half of the larger side doesn’t need to be rolled
  + Positioning
    - When groups are in bad positions, they might have disadvantage on their rolls; roll for them separately if they are significant
    - If groups are in bad positions, they might not be able to attack the enemy; give the enemy advantage or don’t roll for them as the DM sees fit
* Dice Bots or VTT
  + Makes it even easier to
  + Using **!roll Xd6k1** in Avrae (and probably Roll20) rolls Xd6 and only keeps 1s, meaning that it can automatically tally up the amount of health levels lost by that tier.
  + The **adv** and **dis** arguments can be used to impose advantage/disadvantage
* Variants
  + Each roll determines how much damage the *other* side takes, rather than how much damage they take. Rolling a 6 deals one level of damage to the other side
    - Use **!roll Xd6k6** instead of **!roll Xd6k1**
    - Advantage now means that you attack better, while disadvantage now means that you attack worse
    - Advantages
      * Makes being outnumbered a threat, and doesn’t require a workaround
      * Targeting
        + By default, attacks target the enemy’s lowest tier
        + Tactical decisions may allow for certain tiers to be targeted - e.g. by flanking the army, a few groups might be able to target some elites
    - Disadvantages
      * Group sizes need to be the same on each side, unlike the default
      * Targeting
        + Dogpiling a leader is an optimal strategy
        + Fix: leaders can only be targeted if they roll a 1 on their attack roll