




Bullet Points Skill School

By Owen K. C. Stephens

In this installment we look at three broad, tricky questions involving skills. In most cases, the questions seem to come from gamers who feel the rules as written don't jibe with reality. This is a common perception with any game, and it deserves a brief discussion in its own right.

No game can perfectly match how reality works, and in most cases we wouldn't want it to. Reality is a hash mistress, and she tends to crush heroes. That's why there aren't really people swinging through the steel mountains of Manhattan looking for evil to vanquish. Also, game rules need to produce a good game at least as much as they need to model reality. The real question is not "does this rule match how things actually work perfectly?" It's "does this rule work well enough for us to have fun?"

If everyone in a gaming group doesn't like how a rule compares to reality, the solution is easy -- change it (the rule, not reality). The problem comes when one or more people don't like it and others do. That's what the GM is for. The GM should listen to player opinions but never forget that he has final say. After a brief discussion and quick resolution, it's time to move on. Dissenters can continue the discussion (politely!) after the game, but don't bog down play. Even if the game's "reality" doesn't match your view of the world, you should be able to ignore missteps and move on for the sake of the adventure. Most of us have seen a movie where unbelievable or unrealistic things happened, but we enjoyed the movie anyway. Most games are like that at the best of times. Shrug off the minor annoyances, and focus on having fun. It is, after all, just a game.

 **If you buy up your Intelligence score, does that increase the skill points you get per level for previous levels? My group is all convinced it doesn't, but none of us can find a rule that states so.**

Likely, you are suffering from an effect I call "system confusion." This results from minor differences between various *d20 System* games. In the current edition of *D&D*, on page 10 of the *Player's Handbook* where it discusses the effect on Mialee's skill points when she buys up her Intelligence score, it specifically states, "She does not retroactively get additional points for her previous levels."


Looking under the same "Changing Ability Scores" heading in the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, we don't find anything like that sentence. The rule may be buried somewhere else (as soon as I say it's not included anywhere in *d20 Modern*, some sharp-eyed reader is sure to find the one place I didn't look), but on first blush it doesn't look as if it's a part of the *d20 Modern* game. Unless I missed a rule, it appears that Intelligence changes to skill points/level are retroactive.

The more important issue is, what makes more sense to your group and in your games? The

question of current Intelligence score changes affecting the skill points of previous levels can get tricky fast. For example, if you rule it does not impact the skill points of previous levels, whenever you make a high-level character from scratch, you must decide at what level any Intelligence increase came so you can figure skill points for each level with the Int modifier the character had at that level. Believe me, that's a huge pain.

On the other hand, if you allow past levels' skill points to be altered by changes to Intelligence, what happen if your Int is drained for some reason? Do you lose all previous skill ranks bought with bonus skill points from past levels? How fast does that happen? Does a curse that places you at -4 Intelligence for a day mean you're down 2 skill points per level for 24 hours, forcing you to do a quick rewrite of your character? If you pick up an alien helmet that gives you +2 Int when worn, are you more skilled only when wearing it (requiring two sets of skill totals)?


In my experience, the easiest solution is to say that permanent changes to Intelligence, including buying the score up every four levels and cybernetics, are retroactive, but temporary changes, including high-tech gear and magic items, are not. That dodges most of the really weird corner-cases and reduces the amount of bookkeeping you need to do.

 **Why do feats with skill requirements force you to buy a given number of ranks rather than have a certain level of bonus? There isn't really a difference between having four ranks and a +1 ability modifier and having 1 rank and a +4 ability modifier, is there?**

Sure there is. One qualifies you for a feat, the other doesn't.

Think of it this way. Your skill rank represents how much technique you have with a skill. Your ability modifier represents your raw aptitude. In some cases, no matter how much aptitude you have, you lack the technique to apply it properly. For example, no matter how wise and insightful you are, if you don't have the basics of Treat Injury down, you can't learn Surgery. Sometimes the reverse is also true, which is why many feats have ability score prerequisites (and some feats take both technique and aptitude, such as Frightful Presence). This is also the reason why taking a feat that grants a bonus to a skill doesn't allow you to make checks as if trained in that skill -- the feat represents additional aptitude, not technique.

Rank requirements also help ensure feats are first available to characters with appropriate backgrounds as represented by class skills. A Strong hero can't qualify for Surgery until 5th level, unless he has a starting occupation that grants Treat Injury as a class skill. That makes starting occupations more important, which is appropriate for a modern-day game.

 **All the starting occupations state that if I select a skill I already have as a class skill, I get a +1 competence bonus on checks with that skill. But if I later multiclass, it may stop being a class skill. Do I then lose the +1 competence bonus?**

Nope.

Once you select a skill from a starting occupation, it is always a class skill for you, even if you already had it as a 1st level character. The +1 competence bonus is an additional benefit, not an alternative benefit. A Strong hero who takes Athlete and selects Climb both counts that skill as a class skill from then on and receives a +1 competence bonus to climb checks forever.

The reason for the +1 competence bonus is twofold. First, we didn't want to penalize Strong hero athletes by having them lose out at 1st level. That concept makes sense as a character, so we want to encourage new characters to be interested in selecting skills that make sense for them. Second, as a Strong hero, even if you didn't select Climb from a starting occupation and you later switch to a class that doesn't have Climb as a class skill, your max ranks would remain character level +3. Thus, taking Climb from your starting occupation isn't as powerful as it would be for a character that might never have it as a class skill. To compensate, you receive the modest +1 bonus.



Does making a Diplomacy check really provoke an attack of opportunity (AoO)? The AoO chart states that any skill that requires a move, attack, or full round action "usually" provokes an AoO, and Diplomacy is listed as taking a full round on Table 2-4. How usual is "usually?" I can understand a Balance or Climb check requiring an AoO, but Jump? What if you use Jump to reduce damage from a fall?

First, the rule is "usually" because it's up to a GM to decide if a given use might be an exception to the rule. That said, unless there's a pressing reason to think otherwise, yes, most uses of skills that require an action provoke an AoO. Think about what it takes to make a proper Diplomacy check. You're trying to communicate important issues to someone, maintain eye contact, have a firm but likely non-threatening body posture -- not easy to do while ducking, dodging, and weaving to avoid attacks.

Second, remember that you can avoid those skill-provoked AoOs with a DC 15 Concentration check, and concentration can be tried untrained. Of course, if you fail that check, you also fail the related skill check. Caution has its drawbacks.

Finally, if a GM is having you make a skill check in a way that does not take an action, it likely shouldn't provoke an AoO. A Spot check to look for something you missed does involve standing still and carefully scanning your field of vision. A Spot check made as a reaction to see if you noticed something someone else did is a reaction and does not provoke a AoO.

Because you provoke an AoO as a result of being distracted from defending yourself, it's reasonable to ask your GM if taking a specific action is going to be distracting and thus provoke AoOs. In my games, intentionally jumping down and making a Jump check to reduce the damage by 10 feet won't provoke an AoO, but there's nothing in the rules to specifically support that ruling. I just reason that if standing up and falling down don't provoke, jumping down shouldn't either. Your mileage may vary.



Do you have a rules question about the **d20 Modern** Roleplaying Game? Send it to bulletpoints@wizards.com. For the quickest possible answer, please put the topic of your question in the subject line and keep the question as succinct as possible. If you have more than one question, feel free to send two or more emails -- but for best results please include only one question per email unless your questions are very closely related to one another. Please don't expect a direct answer by email. Check the **d20 Modern** website for *Bullet Point* updates.

About the Author

Owen Kirker Clifford Stephens was born in 1970 in Norman, Oklahoma. He attended the TSR Writer's Workshop held at the Wizards of the Coast Game Center in 1997 and moved to the Seattle area in 2000, after accepting a job as a game designer at Wizards of the Coast, Inc. Fourteen months later, he returned to Oklahoma with his wife and three cats to pick up his freelancer writer/developer career. He has author and co-author credits on numerous **Star Wars** and *Everquest* projects, as well as *Bastards and Bloodlines* from Green Ronin. He also has producer credits for various IDA products, including the Stand-Ins printable figures.

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