



Bullet Points

Skills

by Charles Ryan

Welcome to the fourteenth installment of *Bullet Points*. I'm Charles Ryan, one of the designers of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**. I'm here to answer your questions about the game, offer advice on tricky issues, and give you a little peek into the minds of the designers. You'll be hearing from me every couple of weeks.

If you've checked out the earlier installments of *Bullet Points*, you know the format. Every two weeks I pick an issue that's provoked a lot of questions or comments, begin with a general discussion of the topic, and then answer specific questions related to it. If there are any unrelated but pressing questions in my mailbox, I might tackle them at the end of the column, but only if there's room and they can't wait for an appropriately themed column.

Skills

Before I get started on questions relating to skills, I want to talk a bit about the Concentration skill. I've been asked a number of times why Concentration is based on Constitution. The skill description says, "You are particularly good at focusing your mind." So wouldn't Wisdom make more sense? This question, of course, is not unique to the **d20 Modern** game -- Concentration is also a Constitution-based skill in the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, and throughout the d20 system as well.

It may help to think of it this way: The act of concentration is in many ways an act of endurance, of persevering through difficulties that are often (though admittedly not always) physical. And endurance and perseverance are generally Constitution-related concepts -- but again, not always. So why Constitution, when Wisdom might be just as good a choice?

Many people find it frustrating when the term "game balance" is used to justify a design direction, so I won't use it. But I will say that the d20 system is first and foremost a game system, not a simulation. There are lots of really useful skills that rely on Wisdom, so there's no need to add any more. The designers of the D&D game (versions 3.0 and 3.5) felt that Concentration could easily be classified as either a Constitution skill or a Wisdom skill, so they went with Constitution to make the distribution of skills among the various abilities more interesting.


Game designers run into that kind of situation often: There are two valid ways of doing something, so they choose the way that makes the game play better. Sometimes, proponents of the method not chosen find that sort of decision frustrating. That's unfortunate, but I think the success of the d20 system shows that the overall strategy of good game design (over strictly simulationist design) works in general.

I've also encountered similar questions regarding some of the feats in the **d20 Modern** game. For example, some people wonder why the Burst Fire feat has a Wisdom prerequisite -- what does Wisdom have to do with firing a gun? If you find yourself wondering about such issues, try not to take too narrow a view of the ability in question. Wisdom is the ability that governs perception and self-control, and that's what a character needs to use the Burst Fire feat. Sure, any old mook can fire off a blast of autofire, but not

everyone has what it takes to do so effectively.

Questions and Answers


All right, enough about the ability scores associated with skills and feats. Now let's look at some skill-related questions.

 **After you have chosen your character's starting occupation, you get to choose some skills as permanent class skills. If you choose one that already is a class skill for your character, you get a +1 bonus on checks made with it. So can you choose the same skill twice (or even thrice), so as to get a higher bonus on it? For instance, suppose I have a Fast hero and I choose the Athlete starting occupation, which gives me three class skill choices. Jump isn't one of my class skills, but I would very much like to have it. So, I choose Jump as a class skill. Can I choose Jump again to get a +1 bonus (and again for a +2 total bonus) on my Jump checks?**


Absolutely not. Your class skill choices based on your starting occupation must all be different. So your Fast hero could take Jump as a class skill, along with, say, Drive and Balance. That way, she'd get a +1 bonus on those latter two skills, since they're already class skills for your Fast hero. But you can't stack the benefit for a single skill.

 **Does a class skill that a hero gains through his starting occupation remain a class skill forever, regardless of what classes he takes in the future? Does he always buy ranks in that skill as if it's a class skill? Are his maximum ranks always calculated as if it's a class skill?**

Yes, yes, and yes. Any class skill derived from a character's occupation is treated as a class skill for him every time he goes up in level, regardless of what class he gains the level in.

 **The Starting Occupations section of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game* states that if a skill gained from an occupation is already a class skill, the hero gets a +1 bonus on checks made with that skill. How do you determine how this bonus applies when multiclassing? Can the skill in question be a class skill for any class the character has and still gain the +1 bonus, or does that only happen if it's a class skill for the class she took at 1st level?**

The skills associated with a hero's occupation are always class skills for her, throughout her entire career. If an occupation-granted class skill is also a class skill for her starting class (the class she took at 1st level), she gains a +1 bonus on checks made with that skill. She does not gain the +1 bonus later, if an occupation-granted class skill is also a class skill for a new class that she adds after 1st level.

 **The Listen skill description doesn't give very many DCs for modern sounds. Can you give some additional ones?**

Sure. Check out the following.

DC	Sound
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5	Steady rainfall
0	Normal conversation, downpour, or small waterfall
-5	A lawnmower or raised voices
-10	A car horn, police siren, or melee battle
-15	A rock concert, jet engine, or major waterfall
-20	A gunshot or firecracker
-25	An explosion
-30 or lower	A massive explosion or lightning strike

 **Do characters get bonus languages for high Intelligence scores, as they do in the *Dungeons & Dragons* game? Or do they have to buy all languages (apart from their native tongues) with skill points?**

A hero does not gain bonus languages based solely on his Intelligence modifier. A character who wants to speak more than one language must purchase the Speak Language skill to do so, and the Read/Write Language skill if he wants to read and write that language.

As explained in the *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting*, creatures that come directly from Shadow do get bonus languages based on Intelligence. But that applies only to new arrivals -- that is, to creatures that have recently crossed over. Creatures that have lived in our world for years, or that are descended from Shadow creatures, do not get this same benefit.

 **It doesn't make sense to me that a character who can read and write English can then learn to speak Spanish and not be able to read it. Why are the skills different?**

It's true that the way the *d20 Modern* game handles languages isn't perfectly realistic. But to make it so, languages would need a whole system to themselves, and it would have to be at least as complicated as the skill system. We didn't think such a treatment would be worthwhile, since all the extra complication it would introduce would not make the game any better or more fun.

Here's another way of handling the situation that might ease your reservations about the rationale. Instead of 1 skill point to speak a language and another 1 skill point to read and write it, imagine that it instead costs 2 skill points to speak, read, and write the language. Such a system is essentially the same as the existing rules; it's just a bit more restrictive in terms of how a character can spend skill points. And it's a darn good deal compared to the cost of being competent at other skills. Feel free to use this alternate method of handling the language skills if it makes more sense to you, or just use the existing rules if you prefer.


 **If you take levels in Mage and buy ranks in Spellcraft, then take a Smart level, can you choose the savant talent for Spellcraft?**

No. The savant talent can be applied only to the indicated skills.

 **No Reflex DC is given for scratch-built explosives in the Craft (chemistry) table. Can you give us some values? What kind of damage (fire or concussion) do they deal?**

Scratch-built explosives deal concussion damage. The Reflex DCs vary according to type, as follows.

Explosive Type	Reflex Save DC
Improvised	DC 10
Simple	DC 12
Moderate	DC 12
Complex	DC 15
Powerful	DC 15
Devastating	DC 18

 **Is there any way to modify explosives -- perhaps a system similar to the poison rules in the *d20 Modern Web Enhancement*? Can you add abilities like "set on fire" by increasing the Wealth and Craft DCs?**

No such rules exist at this time. The idea seems pretty reasonable, though, so if you'd like to introduce some rules of that sort to your game, by all means do so!

 **Can you sell articles and novels written using the Craft (writing) skill, or use the skill in place of Profession?**

No. The Craft skill is just for making things that a hero can use in the game. Only the Profession skill can be used to generate Wealth.

Do you have a rules question about the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*?
Send it to bulletpoints@wizards.com, and then check back here every
other week for the latest batch of answers!

About the Author

Charles Ryan has been designing and editing games for more than twelve years. His credits include such diverse titles as the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, *The Wheel of Time Roleplaying Game*, *Deadlands*, *Millennium's End*, *The Last Crusade*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Dune: Chronicles of the Imperium*, and *Star Trek: Red Alert!*, to name just a few. Charles served as Chairman of the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design, the professional organization of the games industry, from 1996 through 2001. He lives in Kent, Washington with his lovely wife Tammie, three cats, and a dog. He works for Wizards of the Coast, Inc.



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