



Bullet Points

Skills

by Charles Ryan

Welcome to the twenty-fourth 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

This installment of *Bullet Points* is dedicated to skills. Before getting into the questions, however, I want to talk a bit about the Knowledge skill categories and why we chose to design them as we did.

Someone recently told me that the divisions between the categories aren't as realistic as they could be. In particular, this person pointed out, the Knowledge (earth and life sciences) skill seems a bit illogical. It would make more sense if it were split into two categories: earth sciences and life sciences. After all, someone studying genetics in college isn't likely to be equally knowledgeable about geology. Sure, a person could study both, but such a curriculum combination would be just as likely as, say, psychology and military tactics. So why not combine behavioral sciences and tactics into one skill too? Well, here's a bit of insight into why we set up the categories as we did.

The Logic: When we sat down to write the Skills chapter, we looked at many possible philosophies on how to break up the Knowledge skills. Each had its benefits and drawbacks. The logic we settled on is that a smart character (not just in games, but also in movies, fiction, and TV) usually has a generalized focus. Maybe he's a brainy physicist, or a scientific lab worker, or an art historian, or a psychologist.

The Game Mechanics: From the game mechanics standpoint, we wanted as few Knowledge categories as possible, because we didn't want to punish characters who put skill points into Knowledge by overly restricting the use of the skill. After all, a character who puts points into Move Silently probably gets to use that skill every game session. A character who puts points into a highly specialized Knowledge category might get to use it once in her entire career.

The Result: Combining those two factors led us to the set of subskills in the book. They reflect not so much specific curricula as the sorts of areas on which smart characters usually focus. The idea is that a player who wants a smart, knowledgeable hero can usually pick a single Knowledge skill to represent his character concept without having to spread points over five or six different Knowledge skills. Sure, he might want to spend a few points in some ancillary categories, but usually one is enough to represent the focus of the character.

For game purposes, it's best not to overanalyze the realism of the categories. After all, when the Buffy gang asks Willow (or the Scooby gang asks Velma) a science-based question, do you really stop to ask whether the character would have studied that particular branch of science in college? You might if it seems too far off the mark, but not otherwise. The same principle applies to the game.

Questions and Answers

That's enough about the Knowledge skill. Now let's get to some other skill questions!



Can I take 10 or take 20 on an ability check? Can I do so on a check for a skill in which my character has no ranks? How about a skill that can't be used untrained?

You can absolutely take 10 or take 20 on ability checks. Furthermore, there's no rule that says you can't take 10 or take 20 on the check even if the character doesn't have any ranks in the skill in question. Indeed, it's assumed that normal people take 10 on their tasks all the time -- that's why any task that most people can accomplish routinely has a DC of 10 (or lower).

So why is it "heroic" to have ranks in a skill? It's all a matter of degree. Sure, having a single rank makes very little difference. But with 5 ranks, it's possible to take 10 on a task with a DC of 15 (a big step up from DC 10) and possibly succeed at a DC 25 task, which is completely out of reach for ordinary, unskilled people. Even a very low-level hero commonly has 5 ranks in some skill (or at least a bonus of +5 on checks with a skill).

You can't take 10 or take 20 on skills that can't be used untrained. Such skills can't be used at all without training, regardless of whether you roll for the checks or take 10/take 20.



How much noise does making a Disable Device check produce? Would it be possible to disable a lock on a thick metal door without anyone inside hearing the attempt?

Hearing someone disabling a lock typically requires a DC 10 Listen check. You wouldn't add the +5 DC increase for hearing it through the door, however, because the sound is actually originating from within the door, not on the other side of it.



Does my character's armor penalty affect her Sleight of Hand skill? The skill's entry on page 72 says it does, but in other places (including the armor rules), that penalty isn't mentioned.

Yes, Sleight of Hand is affected by the armor penalty. The skill description is correct, but the information was omitted in the following important places.

- On Table 2-4, Sleight of Hand should have footnote 1.
- In the Armor Penalty section on page 109, Sleight of Hand should be included in the list of skills.
- Sleight of Hand should be marked with an asterisk on the character sheet at the back of the book.




Using the Intimidate skill takes a full-round action. But the skill description makes reference to circumstance bonuses and says, "A character holding a gun on a flat-footed opponent . . . should get a +2 circumstance bonus on his check." How would this be possible? If Intimidate is a

full-round action, how can it ever be used on a flat-footed target? Even if the target is flat-footed at the beginning of the Intimidate attempt, she won't be when the check is actually made.


You might be a little confused about the meaning of the term. A full-round action is an action that takes up your hero's entire turn, so that he does not get any additional move or attack actions. But it still occurs in his turn; he doesn't have to wait until the next round to complete the action. In other words, on your hero's turn, he can choose to do a full-round action. You make the check or roll or whatever, then the action takes effect. He can't do anything else except take a 5-foot step, and perhaps a free action if your GM allows it.

Thus, in the first full round of combat, if your hero's opponent didn't act in the surprise round (because she was surprised or because there was no surprise round), your hero can attempt to intimidate her, providing that his turn comes before hers.

 **An Intimidate check is opposed by the target's level check (1d20 + character level) plus "any modifiers that a target may have on Will saving throws against fear effects. . . ." Is the actual Will saving throw added too, or just the modifiers? My character is a Tough Hero 3 with a +1 Will save and the Confident feat, which gives him a +2 bonus on Will saves made to resist intimidation. If somebody tried to intimidate him, would the check be 1d20 + 3 [level] + 2 [confident], or 1d20 + 3 [level] + 2 [confident] + 1 [Will save]?**

The former version is correct. The Will save itself is not added, just any modifiers that apply to fear effects.


For example, in a playtest I'm participating in here at work, my character has a special ability that gives him a +4 bonus on Will saves against fear effects. That +4 also applies when he opposes Intimidate checks.

 **Intimidate, when done by the book, seems really powerful and unbalancing. A low-level character can easily achieve decent ranks in this skill and be able to intimidate significantly higher-level opponents, resulting in encounters that literally end before they even begin.**

I see two issues to address in this question.


First, Intimidate must be used against a single opponent. A hero can't intimidate an entire group at once, but she can try to intimidate the leader (if she knows who that is) into ordering his flunkies not to fight. Success doesn't guarantee that the flunkies won't fight, since NPC behavior is always up to the GM, but it might work -- for a while at least.

Secondly, don't forget the GM's Best Friend (see page 193). If the target of the Intimidate check is surrounded by a bunch of well-armed companions, he's probably entitled to a +2 circumstance bonus on his check to oppose the intimidation attempt.

 **Can Craft (pharmaceutical) be used to manufacture drugs? If I want to make up some NPCs for a meth lab the PCs are going to bust, would they be using pharmacist kits or chemical kits?**

They would use pharmacist kits. Actually, since many illicit drugs are created using relatively simple chemical processes, a chemical kit might be a more realistic choice for some types of drugs. But if you don't feel like researching exactly which drugs require which processes (and I wouldn't, in most cases), by all means go with just the pharmacist kit -- or perhaps a mix of pharmacist and chemical kits, if the drug


makers are manufacturing more than one kind of drug

 **In real life, fugu (puffer fish) poison is lethal, and such poisoning is fatal in about 60% of the cases. But in the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, the poison deals 1d6 points of Strength damage as initial damage and paralysis for 2d6 minutes as secondary damage. Shouldn't the lethality of the poison be more accurately reflected in *d20 Modern*?**

If you believe it will improve your game, then by all means change the damage. The most reliable way for poisons to kill is to cause Con damage, so that's what you should change it to if you want to increase lethality. That said, however, it's generally true that lethal poisons and venoms are a bit underpowered in the *d20* system compared to real life. The reason is twofold.

First, the poison system is highly abstract, and it's generally a lot easier to use a poison in the game than it is in real life. For example, fugu poison is very lethal when ingested as part of an improperly prepared meal of puffer fish. But is it easy to extract? How long does it retain its poisonous properties after removal from the fish? Does it have any special storage requirements? Can it be administered easily? Does it have an odor, flavor, or appearance that makes it unlikely to be ingested by an unsuspecting victim? For better or worse, the system doesn't address all these issues. To balance all of these factors that, in real life, make the use of poisons very tricky, the designers reduced their impact in game terms.

Secondly, the game plays better when there aren't many reliable instant-kill methods available -- either to the heroes or to their opponents. If the heroes have access to techniques that can reliably take out an opponent with just one or two die rolls, the game gets pretty boring. Conversely, if the bad guys have methods of killing unsuspecting heroes out of the blue . . . well, that doesn't make for fun games either. After all, who wants to lose a favorite character to an unexpected bout of fugu poisoning?

 **I understand that Profession is supposed to be the only skill that characters can use to make money. But what if a character decides to pick someone else's pocket?**

If your character picks someone's pocket, he takes what's in the pocket. If what he takes is the person's wallet, he might get a little cash, but generally not enough to affect his Wealth score.

Your hero's Wealth bonus doesn't represent a few twenties and some change. It represents his ability to buy things, just as his Strength bonus represents his ability to lift things. Your hero's Wealth represents the balance of thousands of dollars in income, credit availability, bills, debts, and so on. Finding a \$20 bill on the ground -- or in a lifted wallet -- isn't enough to change that balance in terms of game mechanics.

If desired, however, your GM can handle a pickpocketing session as an encounter and give out a Wealth award accordingly (see page 204 of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*). Doing so would probably be appropriate only if the character attempted to pick the pocket of a particularly rich (and/or dangerous) target, or went on a pickpocketing spree and hit many targets.

Alternatively, for a small, one-time pickpocketing attempt, your GM might agree to give the hero a small, one-time circumstance bonus on his next Wealth check. Or she might say that he doesn't have to make a check on his next purchase of an item with a Purchase DC of 10 or below. Whatever solution works best for your gaming group is fine.

The important thing to realize in any situation in which a hero might gain a small bit of cash is that small bits

of cash don't really affect his Wealth one way or the other.

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 back here every other week for the latest batch of answers!

About the Author

Charles Ryan was one of the designers of the **d20 Modern Roleplaying Game**. He has been designing and editing games for more than twelve years. His other credits include such diverse titles as the *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, two rats, and a dog. He works for Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

