



## Notes from the Bunker

# Incantations

by Rich Redman

Welcome to my bunker. As one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, and a veteran of real-world modern combat (having served as a tank platoon leader in Operation: Desert Storm), I'm in a unique position to offer insights into the game.

## Incantations

Incantations were introduced in the *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting*, and complete rules for them can be found in Chapter Three: Spells of that book. In brief, incantations function like spells, except that a character need not be a spellcaster to use them. Anyone can cast an incantation simply by performing the correct gestures and phrases for the ritual.

The concept behind incantations was that any character who discovered an ancient text or pieced together some antediluvian ritual could summon a monster, transform himself into another creature, or wreak some other sort of chaos. Alternatively, a sufficiently scholarly character might be able to stop some horrible menace by coming up with the needed ritual in the nick of time. The modern media teem with examples—from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *The Mummy*.

In development, however, a problem with this concept became apparent. If anyone could create the desired effect by playing with an Ouija board or by speaking the three words "Klaatu barada nikto," then it would happen all the time. The challenge wasn't getting the effect to happen when the GM needed it to; the challenge was getting it to happen *only* when the GM needed it to. So incantation times became hours. Multiple secondary casters became one possible requirement (even though they can't use the Aid Another action; they have to be present; see page 102 in the *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting*), and the DCs for the required Knowledge (arcane lore) checks rose into the 20s and higher. Since a natural 20 is not an automatic success in *d20 Modern*, these very high DCs put incantations out of reach for some characters.

Mechanics such as these ensured that the successful use of incantations would be rare. So now the GM is back to figuring out how to make them available outside covens of highly educated ritualists.

## Variant Modifiers

Although incantations are meant to be difficult, they don't have to be impossible for characters of any level. Carefully managing the situation and applying appropriate modifiers can lower the check DCs to the point where luck-good or bad-can decide the outcome of the incantation.

Finding a set of instructions for an incantation requires one successful Research check for each Knowledge (arcane lore) check required to actually complete the ritual in question. The DC for each Research check equals the unmodified Knowledge (arcane lore) DC for the incantation -10. The GM should keep the success or failure of the Research checks secret, since failure has specific consequences (see Penalties, below, for details). Success on all the Research checks means that the character has assembled a

complete set of instructions for the ritual. Failure on any check indicates that faulty research has resulted in wrong or missing information about one or more key aspects of the ritual.

The modifiers described below are all under the GM's control, and she may make the specific options available at her own discretion. Each of these modifiers applies to all Knowledge (arcane lore) checks required to complete the incantation.

**Artifacts:** Various items may provide bonuses on Knowledge (arcane lore) checks made in conjunction with an incantation. Some may provide bonuses on all Knowledge (arcane lore) checks for incantations, while others may provide bonuses only for checks relating to certain specific incantations. For example, an ancient stone hammer carved with Norse runes might give a +5 bonus on Knowledge (arcane lore) checks made to complete a weather-changing incantation such as *control weather*. The GM designs such tools just as she would any other magic items.

**Books:** The right text, with mystic words, cabalistic diagrams, and illustrations of rituals, can help immensely in an incantation. While a GM might wish to have the players roleplay finding and acquiring such a text, the general rule in *d20 Modern* is a good guideline: Finding and acquiring the book takes a number of hours equal to its purchase DC. The appropriate book grants the user a bonus equal to its purchase DC divided by 5 on Knowledge (arcane lore) checks for the corresponding incantation.

**Sacrifices:** Some incantations may require sacrifices—from a few drops of blood to a live chicken to a human being. Some traditions require that a sacrifice be treated like royalty for some period (up to a year), while others require that the sacrifice first be tortured. Some incantations may require the sacrifice be a volunteer, while others might require that the victim be opposed to the sacrifice. In all cases, the more powerful the sacrificial victim, the higher the bonus. If the sacrifice also has arcane or divine spellcasting abilities, the bonus is even greater.

**Sympathetic Magic:** Incantations that summon or banish a creature or target a specific individual become more powerful if the primary caster possesses some article linked to the being, such as a cherished photograph, a lock of hair, or a few drops of blood. In some cases, particularly with fiends, knowing the being's true name is equivalent to possessing a physical object. GMs should apply this bonus only when the target is of the outsider type.

**Witnesses:** While the rules already support secondary casters, passive witnesses can also empower incantations. The witnesses must not be of an allegiance opposed to the incantation. For example, if the *Dedicate Site* incantation is being performed as a good ritual, only nonevil witnesses can provide bonuses for the primary caster. Performing an incantation in the presence of a powerful creature of appropriate allegiance (such as a fiend for an evil incantation) also provides a bonus.

**Other:** Occasionally an incantation requires that the location where it is conducted be specially prepared. Sometimes the preparation itself requires another incantation, such as *Dedicate Site*, prior to beginning the desired incantation.

## Summary

The table below sums up the bonuses discussed above and provides some examples. All these modifiers stack with each other unless otherwise indicated.

Source	Bonuses
Artifacts	Varies
Books	Purchase DC/5
Sacrifices	
Appropriate for incantation	+1
Treated appropriately for required period	+1
Appropriate allegiance	+1
Arcane or divine caster	+2
Sacrifice is appropriately willing or opposed	+1
<i>Level (Only One Applies)</i>	
Sacrifice has 1-5 HD or levels	+1
Sacrifice has 6-10 HD or levels	+2
Sacrifice has 11-15 HD or levels	+3
Sacrifice has 16+ HD or levels	+4
Sympathetic Magic	
Possession or belonging	+1
Body part	+2
Blood	+3
True name	+4
Witnesses	
<i>Number (Only One Applies)</i>	
Up to 10 witnesses	+1
Up to 100 witnesses	+2
More than 100 witnesses	+3
Powerful being present	+2
Other	
Site prepared appropriately	+2
Site prepared with required incantation	+2

## Example

Dr. Vannacutt needs a fiend to wreak bloody revenge on those who cast aspersions on his alchemical studies, so he researches the *Subjugate Outsider* incantation. The ritual requires six successful DC 33 Knowledge (arcane lore) checks to complete, so he must succeed on six DC 33 Research checks to discover the incantation. He succeeds on all six checks and discovers the true name of a fiend (+4 bonus). He spends most of his fortune (and the time of his dozen research assistants) on an ancient Tibetan text that contains the complete details of the incantation (Purchase DC 36, for a +7 bonus). From this book, Dr. Vannacutt learns that the incantation requires an unwilling sacrifice—a virgin, either male or female. He drugs a student (+1 for a sacrifice appropriate for the incantation, +1 for an unwilling sacrifice, +1 for a sacrifice with opposed allegiance, and +1 for a sacrifice with 1-5 levels). He steals a sacred bowl from the university (+2 bonus for an artifact; GM's decision as to bonus value) and prepares an abandoned church for the incantation (+2 bonus for preparing an appropriate site). Thus, the total bonus for his Knowledge (arcane lore) checks is the sum of the individual bonuses above, or +19. Thus, if he gets a result of 14 or better on each of his six Knowledge (arcane lore) checks, he completes the ritual successfully.

## Penalties

GMs can assess penalties on the Knowledge (arcane lore) check in the same manner as bonuses. In this variant, unless a character fails all the Research checks required to discover the incantation, he can still perform it. However, each such failure reverses one of the bonuses that the character would otherwise have gained and turns it into a penalty. The GM decides which bonus is affected, based on the specific incantation and the logic of the situation.

## Example

Milton Dammers is a petty, small-minded man who is obsessed with vengeance on his critics within the university. Having spent considerable time dabbling in arcane mysteries, he decides to put what he has learned to work in exacting his revenge. His research puts him on the trail of the *Sigil of Lyssa*, which is supposed to drive all who see the resulting rune mad for 16 hours. The incantation requires seven successful DC 35 Knowledge (arcane lore) checks, so Milton must succeed on seven DC 35 Research checks to discover it. In the course of his research, he fails twice. The GM rules that he doesn't learn about properly preparing the ritual site (-2 penalty), and he gets the wrong artifact. The GM decides that the appropriate artifact is an ancient brush used to create the rune, which would have given him a +4 bonus had he used it, so the penalty for using the wrong implement is -4. Thus, Milton has a -6 penalty on each of his seven Knowledge (arcane lore) checks. Considering that success on all seven Research checks would have given him a +6 bonus for those two aspects of the ritual, his two failures represent a considerable burden.

## Adventure Hooks

This variant gives the GM some tools for getting heroes involved in the machinations of the villains. In the first example above, Dr. Vannacutt absorbs the time of a dozen research assistants, drugs and kidnaps a student, buys an ancient Tibetan text, and steals a sacred bowl. Two of those events are crimes that the heroes might investigate, and characters already interested in arcane happenings might want to know why an obscure academic has suddenly purchased this Tibetan text. Heroes who are students themselves might wonder why their peers (the research assistants) are so secretive and suddenly seem to be busy almost around the clock.

## Implementing a Rules Variant

This checklist has been posted previously, but these guidelines are worth repeating with an eye toward their use in incantations.

Before implementing this rules variant, consider the following points.

- **Why am I using this?** The research variant for incantations allows lower-level casters to complete incantations successfully, thus making NPC villains who use this technique more reasonable threats for lower-level heroes.
- **Am I clear on how the new rule really works?** When you're considering a rules variant, it's important to understand not only its mechanics, but also how it may affect play. This variant increases the GM's workload by requiring her to adjudicate additional rules for incantations. If heroes use these rules, the players must roll many more dice than they would otherwise have to.

- **Have I considered why this rule wasn't included in the game to begin with?** As noted at the beginning of this installment, incantations slowly changed in development to keep players and GMs from using them constantly. Also, this variant is appropriate only in campaigns that use magic.
- **How will the new rule impact other rules or situations?** This variant allows higher-level opponents to use incantations even more easily than they can already. In fact, incantations may become ridiculously easy for high-level GM characters because they tend to have more ranks in both Research and Knowledge (arcane lore) than lower-level ones do. In addition, they usually have higher Wealth bonuses that enable them to get the items they need.
- **Does the change favor one class, race, skill, feat, or the like more than others?** Incantations automatically favor heroes with high Intelligence scores and ranks in Research and Knowledge (arcane lore). This variant reduces the dependence on those aspects of the character to some degree.
- **Overall, is this change going to make more players happy or unhappy?** If it lets the GM tell stories she enjoys, this variant will probably make more players happy—especially since they benefit from these rules as well.

Most importantly, remember to discuss variants and rules changes with your players before you decide to implement them. The players are part of your campaign too, and they deserve some say about proposed rules alterations.

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## About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the ***d20 Modern Roleplaying Game***, the ***Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game***, and **Dark\*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.