

**FASTER COMBAT**

*Presents*

**3 Easy Ways  
To Add More  
Story  
To Combat**

*Roleplaying Tips Publishing*



***Faster Combat: 3 Easy Ways To Add More Story To Combat***

# **FASTER** **COMBAT**

## **3 Easy Ways To Add More Story To Combat**

Roleplaying Tips Publishing



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## **A Tip Request from a Faster Combat Course Member**

A little while ago, Faster Combat member Adam sent us the following plea:

*Hi Johnn and Tony,*

*I call for initiative and the game changes from an RPG to tactical combat. I am definitely as guilty of this as anyone at the table (if not more so). A major part of the problem is my brain is kept so busy managing the combat (whose turn is next, how does this rule work again, answering various questions about the room and their opponents, figuring out what action to take for the bad guys, etc.)*

*I don't have enough time to hold a conversation with the PCs, let alone think up any witty comments or anything like that. A couple of my players have tried on multiple occasions to trade banter, or even negotiate, with their opponents in battle and I've tried to keep the conversation up, but it is really hard to do.*

*This is especially true when it may be 20-30 minutes between rounds and you can't remember what insults were hurled last round (i.e. 6 seconds of game time ago!).*

*Similarly, describing the combat more in narrative terms and less in mechanical terms is something I want to do, but am struggling with.*

*Instead of saying he hits you for 15 points damage, I'd love to say, "He parries your lunging thrust towards his rib cage, counters with a slicing motion under your sword arm, before changing the arc at the last second with a flick of his wrist, sending his blade deep into the top of your shoulder."*

*Being able to describe the combat like that would be great, but I just don't seem to have the time to do it.*

*The other issue is coming up with descriptions that aren't repetitive after the third combat.*

*Any advice through the lessons on how to achieve any of the above would be great.*

*Thanks,  
Adam*

## **Let's Break This Down Into Its Parts**

This is a great request. We wrote a response to Adam, and have turned our advice for him into a larger piece to fully address all that's going on in his request.

If you also find combat multi-tasking overwhelming, and great combat descriptions difficult, hopefully the techniques and solutions in this ebook will help you out as well.

Let's dive in!

# **1. Create Mission Stat Blocks & Combat Encounter Plans**

Adam says:

***"I call for initiative and the game changes from an RPG to tactical combat."***

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In Faster Combat we teach two techniques that hard code story into your fights. The players cannot help but trip on story, even if they seek to avoid it!

This is important in groups that have varied personality mix. You know, the groups with a couple of storytellers, a couple of combat monkeys and a casual player?

This style conflict comes out in their gaming. And it can ruin sessions or even campaigns.

Because when you roleplay, the monkeys get bored. When you run combats, the dramatists get bored. And the casual player - well, who knows what makes him bored? Just pat him on the head once in awhile maybe.

But there is a way to get everybody leaning forward during a fight, highly engaged and very entertained.

That's through story. Everybody loves a story. We can't help but get engaged when there's a rip roaring good story on the line.

Hell, I get hooked even when I don't want to when my wife watches her favorite TV programs. You wouldn't catch me dead watching Gilmore Girls on purpose,

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but if I get hooked into an episode's story by accident, I'll stay to see how it ends. (Don't tell my wife I like her shows.)

That's the power of story.

Add story to your combats, and you hook any type of player with any playing style.

Even though player preferences can be worlds apart, story works to bring them together for several reasons:

- Combat stories are fast relative to how long adventure or campaign story lines are. You can tell several combat "stories" in a session, if you want.
- Drama is inherent. Combat means someone's gonna die or could die.
- Fights engage primary character attributes. The DNA of most characters in D&D style games is their combat stats and abilities.

Telling a story while engaging these parts of characters means you not only make combat monkeys happy, but you are working in synch with the game's design focus.

- The structure of story is inherent in the structure of combat. Every good story has a beginning, middle and end. So do good combats.
- Roleplayers love story any way they can get it. Add story to your combats and they will think they've died and gone to heaven.
- Embedding story into combat can actually make combats shorter! At the least, they add no overhead to your DMing when done right.

As you can see, it's all wins for doing this.

So how do you do it?

In Faster Combat we teach two techniques:

### **1) Mission Stat Blocks**

This is fancy lingo for "give your combats plot."

Do that by adding an objective to your fights beyond "last hit point wins."

We've developed an actual stat block for this, and provided members our top 10 cool combat objective templates using the stat block, but it all boils down to giving the PCs a goal for the combat.

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For example, save the hostage. The PCs must rescue a friend. This changes the whole complexion of the melee and adds a fun story to it. Will the hostage be freed? Will the PCs sacrifice themselves to save a friend?

Part of the stat block is to add a twist. In this example, we might make the hostage a zombie created by and serving a necromancer foe. The PCs now have to fight off their friend without destroying him.

This adds a nice follow-up quest of getting the friend unzombified.

Or, perhaps the PCs decide their goal during the middle of the combat is to see their friend laid to rest. Screw the rez - kill the necromancer and give Judd the Blacksmith peace in the afterlife.

Even when your players descend into toe-to-toe fury to the last hit point, your mission objective still turns this into an interesting story about the fate of the friend and the PCs' decisions.

Cool eh?

## **2) Combat Encounter Plans**

There are 8 story structure elements:

- Distinctive, Memorable Characters or Groups
- Overcoming Challenges
- Suffering Setbacks
- Complications
- Powerful or Sudden Revelations, Discoveries or Events
- Building Tension or Friction
- Releasing the Tension or Friction
- Multiple Paths, Solutions or Conclusions

Now that you have a Mission Objective for your combat, you add in your story structure elements.

We call this a Combat Encounter Plan because you are layering on these elements to your typical planning, which is foe selection, location selection and crunch prep.

For example, Overcoming Challenges could take the form of hazardous terrain. Perhaps the fight takes place in a field of thistle bushes. The undead won't care

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about thorns and scratches, but poorly armored PCs will. And heavily armored PCs will get slowed down from the clawing plants.

And the Complication would be the friend turning out to be a zombie fighting against them. Perhaps you wait until round two to reveal this surprise to help fulfill the story structure.

(Because all stories take place along a timeline, you need to space some things out. That gives us opportunities like Building Tension, Sudden Revelations and Suffering Setbacks. If everything happens in the first round, it's a boring fight and a broken story.)

***"A major part of the problem is my brain is kept so busy managing the combat."***

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Above, I've suggested you embed story into the combat itself. This solves your problem of being too busy running the logistics of combat to tell a story in a couple of ways.

First, the structure I've recommended ensures story is present regardless of whether you have time or not during combat to think about or tell the story.

Story JUST HAPPENS because of the Mission Objective and your Combat Encounter plan.

Second, the little bit of work you do in advance by planning a Mission Objective and various encounter elements in your Combat Encounter Plan means you have MORE FREE BRAIN CYCLES available to handle combat logistics.

You see, when you get overloaded with the details of managing combat you create a mental backlog. You can only do one thing at a time, try as you might to multi-task. You can't sing and chew gum at the same time (try it, your jaw stops chewing when you sing :).

So you start up a mental queue of what you need to do next. That queue takes brain cycles of its own. As your queue grows, you have fewer free cycles for other things, making your mental backlog grow even more.

Meantime, you are tracking a pool of details about who's got what modifier, which minis belong to which foes, what the rules for a certain spell are, and so on. This further clogs up yer noggin'.

But stop everything for a sec.



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Having a Combat Encounter Plan detailed out a bit - ahead of time - gives you fewer things you have to conjure up during fights. This frees your brain up to pitch in with other areas, like roleplaying or details tracking.

The Faster Combat course Module 3 will help relieve you of tracking so many details, Adam, and tips in past newsletter issues also will help anyone GM combat easier with various efficiency and organization techniques.

But at the core level, the story unfolds all by itself, relieving you of that stress and mental expense, and your players will notice the difference. They'll love having combat objectives other than clobbering.

## **2. Add a New Phase To Each Round**

*"I don't have enough time to hold a conversation with the PCs..."*

---

Multi-tasking is a myth. We've already covered that in our singing and gum chewing experiment.

What people actually mean when they say they can multi-task well when GMing is they are great at rapid task switching.

These GMs can hold a lot of temporary details in their head while retrieving memorized information like rules and names and what happened last session.

These GMs are also good at stopping something, doing something different, and then returning to the previous task while recalling the state things were in before the switch.

And these GMs are good at making these transitions back and forth fast. It might seem like they are thinking about the past, present and future all at once, but they are really just rapidly switching back and forth.

Most of us are not good at this. Talk to the brain scientists about why. I rely on my players to help me out. A couple are experts at the rules, one keeps great notes, a couple help track foe wounds and other details.

I also rely on GM aids and software.

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And I also rely on structure. Just as adding story structure relieves you of some GMing stress, so too can you add a new bit of structure to combat rounds to make sure you have some roleplaying time and ability.

Here's how it works. You know how in game systems there is an order of combat operations? It typically goes like this:

- 1) Initiative
- 2) Declare actions
- 3) Movement
- 4) Ranged attacks
- 5) Melee attacks
- 6) Magic

Games vary, but there's always some order that you need to resolve combat with.

All you need to do is add a new item in your order of operations devoted to roleplaying. Let's call it "free speech."

And let's add it to the end of the round. I'll explain why in a bit.

Our new order of operations now looks like this:

- 1) Initiative
- 2) Declare actions
- 3) Movement
- 4) Ranged attacks
- 5) Melee attacks
- 6) Magic
- 7) Free speech

During the free speech phase, you stop doing your other stuff. You switch to free speech mode. And you roleplay.

This gives you the structure and THE SELF-PERMISSION you need to roleplay a bit EVERY ROUND. It's now hard-coded into your game. It's a done deal.

Use this phase as a focused and safe time to include narrative and roleplaying.

Further, this structure lets you stop doing the other stuff for a moment so you can concentrate on having fun roleplaying.

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Before, you were fighting with yourself. You were trying to do several things at one (i.e. the myth of multi-tasking).

Instead, do one thing at a time. Do each thing as best you can (and you'll be great at it - I know it).

Be as efficient and organized as possible so you move through phases faster and faster (i.e. task switching) as your experience and learning progresses.

Soon you'll be switching between tasks like a pro! Just like those lucky DMs with the natural gift for it.

And you will not even feel the new free speech phase makes combat longer or more complicated. Your group might actually look forward to this phase the most.

You see, I placed it at the end for a reason: all the results are in. Let the reactions begin!

It's not as fun doing the free speech phase at the start of the round because nobody's done anything to anyone yet in the round. Instead, you do free speech at the end so players and NPCs can scream in pain, trash talk each other, and negotiate based on being closer to winning or dying.

Games like D&D do rounds a bit differently. They give each PC autonomy within their turn in the initiative order.

It doesn't matter if you are shooting a bow, lashing out with a sword, casting a spell or moving, your action triggers on your turn, not within a category in a certain combat phase.

In this case, you add free speech to the end of the round, after each combatant has had their turn.

The same benefits apply. Everybody has had their actions and now they can have their say!

If your group already has good banter, then you do not need to add this new phase to the combat round. But if your group is all about the numbers or are reluctant to roleplay during combat for any reason, adding this new phase will help draw them into more roleplaying.

If you prompt each round for the group to speak freely in-character to each other and to their foes, you will see this activity grow.

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Nurture it yourself by serving as an example - always get a bit of roleplaying in during the free speech phase. What PC can resist replying to an insult?

Once everybody starts roleplaying often and freely, you can remove the free speech phase if you find it a bit too structured. But until then, it's a great technique.

Another case might be your group already roleplays well in combat, but as you mentioned, Adam, as DM you might be too overwhelmed to join in.

A free speech phase is your way into the conversation. It lets you stop the other tasks and join the fun for a while.

The phase serves the purpose of letting the players know this is when you'll reply to their characters. It gives YOU a bit of structure so you can sort through things fast and easy.

It's like clearing a little space on your desk where you can keep a notepad and make notes. While the rest of your desk gathers growing piles of folders and clutter, your sacred note space lets you do this task well whenever you want.

Giving yourself a free speech segment of each combat round clears your DMing desk to make way for this important part of the game every round.

## **3. Create a Combat Description Swipe File**

*"I don't have enough time...let alone think up any witty comments or anything like that."*

*"Similarly, describing the combat more in narrative terms and less in mechanical terms is something I want to do, but am struggling with."*

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I know what you mean. It's not that you're tongue-tied. It's that your mind comes up with a blank.

Nadda. Nothing.

So you move on.



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Try this for an interesting experiment. Multiply  $24 \times 12$  in your head without using a calculator. Now quick - come up with a great NPC quip.

It's extraordinarily difficult because you are trying to do mental back flips. No, it's not just that.

Because in-game you are busy doing a million things in front of an audience with no safety net.

So it's more like you are trying to switch trains by hopping on to the other as it passes your train at high speed!

As DM, you have a bunch of left-brained tasks to manage, like doing math to determine damage and hit points, interpreting the rules as written, tracking initiative and analyzing character actions.

These are procedural things and need a certain type of thinking to achieve.

Then you are expected to create poetry on the fly and draw perfect verbal sketches of the action?

That's a whole new type of brain function. And it's a whole lot of pressure to put on yourself, flipping back and forth like that.

It's amazing we don't slam face first into the water tower when we switch trains like that mid-stream.

Creating a safe space each round to get into verbal creative mode is a great way to help you roleplay foes better.

But, as you learn how to do this better with practice, here's a shortcut.

Create a cheat sheet, or as I prefer to call it, a swipe file.

Record brief yet awesome combat descriptions in a file or notebook.

When GMing, just pick a line out of the notebook for instant witty or nasty commentary!

Add sections so you can find the kind of quote you need fast:

- Melee attacks
- Ranged attacks
- Spell attacks
- Defenses and misses
- Insults and challenges

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Why do I call it a swipe file? When you read or hear something that should go into your file, add it in immediately! Swipe that great line from the movie, book or game.

Better yet... queue up evil DM music...

Swipe the best lines from your own players and use them for your foes in the future!

When players hear their own words from the lips of their foes they'll go bananas.

Good times.

Use whatever recording and filing system you want. Pencil and paper. Treasured Moleskine. Notepad or Notes software. Here's the bonus round for digital DMs. Get randomization software like [Tablesmith](#) shareware and create random generators for yourself.

Now it's really fast and easy for you to roleplay in combat. While your brain is still calculating the speed of a dire sparrow, the random generator feeds you the perfect line when a PC misses their foe:

["You fight like a cow!"](#)

## **Enter the Combat Swipe File**

*"The other issue is coming up with descriptions that aren't repetitive after the 3rd combat."*

---

We have the same problem. And it's time to fix it.

When Adam made his request, we launched a contest. We asked for cool, short scripts you can use in-game to roleplay foes like a genius, and to provide awesome combat descriptions on the fly.

What we ended up with was over 250 easy scripts compiled into a slick PDF you can read out on a moment's notice!

We divided the scripts into five key categories:

- ✓ **Melee Attack Success**
- ✓ **Ranged Attack Success**
- ✓ **Attack Miss**
- ✓ **Spell Attack**
- ✓ **Insults & Challenges**

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Just find the kind of swipe you need or pick one a random to spice up your next combat.

Here are some example swipes:

**Melee attack success:** "Your weapon whistles through the air and opens an angry wound in your foe's brow."

**Ranged attack success:** "With a loud THOINK! your missile penetrates your foe's armor and he screams in pain and rage."

**Spell attack success:** "As the dying words of your incantation float into the air, there's a sudden sizzling sound followed by a brilliant flash. Your foe staggers and grunts in pain."

**Defense / Miss:** "Your foe's foul breath almost overwhelms you as he laughs heartily at your feeble swing."

**Insult / Challenge:** "You think that's tough? I'll show you tough! Watch out puny bug, I'm about to step on you."

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