How to Think Faster on Your Feet

And GM with More Confidence

114 Ways
How to Think Faster on Your Feet
And GM with More Confidence

By Johnn Four

Based on tips submitted by wise Roleplaying Tips Readers

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114 Ways to Think Faster (or Slow the Players Down)

GMing is part preparation and part performance. And great storytelling and game mastering requires confidence. Study this ebook of over 100 short tips to add at least +1 your mental agility so you can GM with more confidence.

On with the tips!

1. **Focus on outcomes.** Worry not about *how* the PCs reach an outcome, just think about consequences to the outcome itself. For example, think about what will happen if your players bypass a key encounter, not all the ways they could bypass the encounter.

   Outcome-based thinking helps you focus better on the story by not getting overwhelmed with details and possibilities.

2. **Break encounters into Lego-like pieces** so you can mix-and-match freely, based on the situations players present you. For example, NPCs and monsters, locations, traps, items and treasure.

3. Listen to your players and **use the ideas they come up with**. Call breaks when you need inspiration, and listen to their chatter. Or have an NPC roleplay with the PCs and probe for ideas.

4. **Have a table of campaign hooks**, rumours and clues ready to provide NPC conversation ideas and help steer wayward PCs.

5. You can think fast on something you know about. **Study your adventure** until you've [internalized](#) it, so you understand the big picture, the big pieces and the moving parts.

   Once you've mastered these materials, you'll be able to change them on-the-fly in reaction to gameplay with confidence.

6. **Do not over-plan.** Do not plan every option or potential choice the PCs might make. Instead, figure out how NPCs and the game world would react to these standard actions: violence, deception, diplomacy, negotiation, indifference.

7. Know how key NPCs would react to general situations, **focusing on emotion**. To paraphrase the Buddha: emotions lead to thoughts, thoughts lead to actions, actions lead to reactions.

   How would various NPCs feel if the PCs foiled their plans, their bosses were whacked by the PCs, they were offered a deal by the PCs, their plans succeeded?

8. **Use story prompt items** such as story dice here and here for inspiration.

9. Scientists have discovered brains are elastic. Improve your mental agility with mind games, such as puzzles, problem solving, social time, exercise and IQ software.

10. Carry a notebook or device everywhere and record all your ideas. While you might not page through your ideas mid-game, writing things down will embed them deeper into memory for sudden "inspiration" when you need it. Fill the well.

11. Consider giving **group ownership** to campaign creation and world details. Collaborate with players to create details and scenarios. While you remain Keeper of Secrets and Final Arbiter, you can enlist player help for tracking, remembering and creating details, including consequences. Just ask, "So, what do you guys think could happen now?"

12. **Create a random events table**. Use this to buy time or make decisions with. You might title it, "Things That Could Happen Next" and include things like an NPC has a seizure, a recurring NPC shows up, an animal approaches nearby, a pickpocket targets a PC.

13. **Study improv**. Takes classes, join a local theatre sports troupe, read some books.

14. **Keep a list of names** available for NPCs who crop up during a game. Players will often fill in a lot of details of an NPC in their own minds if the NPC has an evocative name.

15. A tip from Robin's Laws of Good Game Mastering: **keep a random flowchart** available. Use it for a quick dungeon, city or adventure.

16. **Keep a Rejected Pile**. Store all plans, designs and builds the players failed to trigger for future use. Page through this file before each session to keep these top of mind for sudden implementation.

17. **Reskin**. Take something you've already GM'd (an NPC, adventure, location, item, village, etc.) and change three simple things about it and put it back into play.

18. **Deflect**. Tell the PCs they've made a discovery. Point them to something you've got prepared. Chances are the party will focus on the new shiny thing, giving you time to react to the PCs' original actions.

19. Use [Chandler's Law](). "When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand." If you get stuck, have the villain attack via minions who break down the door and rush the PCs.

20. Have the PCs **explore and discover during the reward portion of an encounter** to buy time for thinking. If you usually just hand out a list of treasure found, roleplay through this portion instead and let the PCs figure out what things are, how valuable items are, and how to split treasure up between party members.

21. Convert treasure into smaller units or different forms to present PCs logistical problems. While they try to figure out how carry heavy objects, awkward items or thousands of coins, you think about what happens next.

22. **Lead the way**. Structure your game to maximize player participation. This will reduce dead zones between encounters, encourage character-driven actions and increase player agency.

    Decide before you start whether the game is about exploring an event or going on a mission. If it's an event, make the event big and obvious and mind-blowing and make sure the characters are explorers. If it's a mission, make sure the characters are a team and committed to taking on a mission, and state the mission clearly.

23. **Track events** outside the PCs' sphere of influence and attention. Use index cards, one per event, and add small updates once in awhile, time stamped. When stuck, pick a card and turn something on it into an encounter seed.

24. **Ask a player for a character development play**. Either at the table or in a one-on-one conversation, speak with the player about how a background detail can be turned into the next encounter. Great storytelling is all about collaboration and audience participation.

25. **Add more detail**. Picture scenes, NPCs and items in your mind's eye. Start with one section and work from there. Pan an NPC up and down, traverse a scene from background to foreground, envision an item from creation to its current location.

26. Ask players for **three character goals**. Pick your favourite goal for each PC and jot down a couple of future encounter ideas.

27. Say "Yes" and get there quick.

28. **Give the PCs a patron** or employer whom they respect. Use the NPC to hand out hooks or lead-ins to your planned encounters. Use this is a last resort, and practice getting good and graceful at these interventions. Do this well, then learn how to remove the middleman.

29. Keep a cheat sheet of major NPCs with their names and important details, especially their motivations.

30. **Be present**. We get into a state of high distraction at the table as players machine gun questions at us, we try to recall numerous rules and campaign details, and have several jobs to do at once. **Slow down**. Let the players talk and **really listen** to what they're saying, especially when they are planning their actions and discussing NPCs.

31. Review your notes, especially session logs.

32. **Create a campaign log** or newsletter. The creative writing helps you recall more details from sessions for future use, improves brain function, increases your awareness of detail and improves your diction.

33. Create Top 7 Lists to help you remember more. Our memory recalls items at the start and end of lists better than middle items. Break things down into more lists for better overall recall.

34. **Be less judgemental** about your ideas. This is part confidence and part open-mindedness. It starts with the belief your ideas have merit. Develop this belief by understanding there is a process involved.

    First, you get an idea. Then you play with it like Playdough until a rough shape of possibility emerges. Then comes the polish stage. Most ideas start out as poor, unfeasible or problematic. *It's what you do with an idea after it pops into your head that counts.*

35. **Relax**. Stress degrades brain performance. The best way I know to reduce stress at the game table is to create a quick de-stress ritual. It consists of three parts:
    a. Take a drink of water
    b. Take three deep breaths
    c. Feel gratitude I'm playing such a cool game with friends.

       This ritual takes just 15 seconds and I always feel better with a clearer head afterward.

36. Understand it's multiple brains against one. Players outnumber you. They get natural breaks when the spotlight is off them. You get no such breaks because you *are* the spotlight!

    Therefore, **get player help as much as possible**, and do not feel the need to outthink players or think faster than them. Instead, decide what pace you want to GM , stick to that pace and work at getting the most out of that pace.

37. **Focus just on what you control.** Do not worry about player moods, player choices or character actions. You have your designs: world, NPCs, encounters, plots. Focus on those. Pretend they're real and figure out how your designs would react to, and act upon, the PCs.

38. **Pre-plan the first two rounds of combat.** Planning further ahead wastes your time because too many variables trigger. Focus on foe tactics for just two rounds.

39. **Create a memorable quote for each NPC.** Use this to help you get into character faster. For generic NPCs, create quotes for common classes, cultures and types.

40. **Use highlighters.** Create a colour code to help you spot details in notes and books faster. Yellow might be fluff, orange might be tactical, green might be key rule points.

41. **Be organized.** Have a reliable and robust system for capturing, organizing and retrieving your notes, maps, ideas, plans and designs. [MyInfo is my tool of choice.](#)

42. **Use a timer**. Practice thinking under pressure by timing tasks outside of the game. Use a timer in-game to create a safe timebox to think while players do other things.

43. **Delegate** mundane tasks to free your brain to focus on more important things. Tracking treasure, tracking rounds and effects, tracking damage, keeping a session log, running ally NPCs.

44. **Use storytelling to limit player options**. Stories challenge protagonists at every step of the way. Create a chart of setbacks and complications to keep PCs on their toes.

45. **Be careful about magic rewards**. Expanded spell lists and magic items with nifty powers generate more character choices and ways to stump you. Consider giving out fewer wondrous items and offer more simple + items. Give wondrous items fewer powers, *but enrich them* with great histories and upcoming plot tie-ins.

46. Avoid treasure and character abilities that affect the meta aspect of the game. Things that break the rules just give you more surprises you have to react to.

47. **Create more encounters with time limits** to put stress on players. They'll find it fun and challenging.

48. **Keep the action fast paced.** Though counter-intuitive to the idea of how to think faster, you tend to do better when *acting upon* instead of *reacting to.*

    Make players react to you so you have more control and ability to think because you can focus on fewer things. You just need to think about the next action upon the players instead of reacting to multiple players acting upon you.

49. **Use more puzzles and mysteries**. As the group thinks, you can do some thinking ahead of your own.

50. **Create more dilemmas**, where each course of action before the PCs has pros *and* cons. As the party roleplays to reach consensus, plot what's next behind your screen.

51. **Keep foes simple**. Eliminate powers and abilities not likely to affect the PCs or an encounter. Allow more uses of a single power instead of single uses of multiple powers. For example, make an attack at will instead of 1/day, and remove the other special attack options. Great for minions, as this gives them a solid hook (one trick ponies are memorable and [easy to](#) [theme](#)).

52. **Learn the math** behind the rules of your game. Doing this lets you craft NPCs and foes on-the-fly better.

53. **Roll less**. When you have an idea for a result, run with it rather than making it fit a dice roll.

54. **Roll more**. When you can't decide, let the dice do the work for you. The time it takes players to look up their stats to calculate modifiers to the roll request gives you a couple seconds to relax and think. Alternatively, if you can't decide flip a coin so you can move on.

55. **Fudge more**. [Roll behind your screen](#). **Learn to listen to your inner voice** that will tell you what result it's hoping for before the dice settle. Then use the desired result over the rolled one. Nurture this voice until you don't need the threat of a dice roll to make it speak to you.

56. **Use wandering monsters** to stall for time. But always try to hook the encounter into your story at some point, whether at the start, middle or end. This is a good time to use your ideas file for campaign clues and hooks to drop into the wandering encounter to make it more meaningful.

57. **Create a monthly weather calendar**. Just 30 days ahead will do. Use weather events as inspiration for encounters (storms and such) and roleplay (who doesn't talk about the weather?).

58. **Create an [NPC Traits table](#)** to help with impromptu NPC creation and roleplaying.

59. **Have five contest ideas** in your back pocket. Example: drinking contests, gambling, races, limericks, storytelling. Queue up a contest when stuck for an encounter. Watch hook and seed ideas dovetail for you as players interact!

60. **Create random charts** during games to generate results. Enlist player help. For example, a player asked who was on the street. I grabbed a pad of paper and asked for ideas until I hit 20. I used that chart thereafter many times.

61. Use **information inheritance** whenever possible. A child takes on the traits of the parent, the parent takes on the traits of their parent, and so on. An ice dwarf barbarian inherits dwarf traits, then ice dwarf traits, then barbarian traits.

     Add one unique trait to differentiate the NPC. In this way, you leverage the world you've created to think faster, but reward players for learning your world as well.

62. **Use on the spot details**. If you declare a feature or detail, or name something, write it down. If you say the Shrine to the Holy One is supposedly located in the middle of the jungle, make a note. If PCs are interested in that shrine and ask questions, write down everything you tell them.

     Present the information as rumors or potentially questionable sources. **Note what facts are true**.

     Decide later between sessions how to tie the information together. If it doesn't all fit, not all rumors are true.

63. **Ask *Why*.** Understanding the reasoning or background of something helps you understand it better, and therefore use it or react to it better. Ask *Why three to five times* for deeper dives.

64. **Switch the spotlight to give you time to think.** Leave a player on a cliff-hanger and move to the next player to keep players engaged. "Bob, the NPC surprises you with his answer...Bill, it's your turn now."

65. When confronted with "What happens next?" the answer should always be "The most obvious thing you can think of." Don't force something clever, cool or interesting.

    Narrate whatever is the most obvious and sensible course of action. This is very easy to do, and it leads to interesting situations anyway because of the PCs and their antics.

66. To make fast and interesting NPCs, **give them just two traits, but have the traits conflict**. Traits are more than just personalities and attributes. Use quirks, motives, goals, secrets, abilities, history, relationships, possessions, jobs.

67. **Use NPCs to drive plots** forward. This is much easier than trying to use items, world events or brute force plotting.

68. **Avoid maps**. They force you into decisions you might not be ready for. There's more freedom in fleshing out a map as you go. In addition, relationship maps often produce more and better gameplay than location maps.

69. **Be more descriptive around partial successes** (partial failures). Do this more to get better at it. Interesting gameplay occurs with complications, entanglements, setbacks, and "two steps forward one back" type results.

70. **Be a player**. Seeing things from the other side of the screen opens you to new ways of looking at the game in-character and out.

71. **Listen to actual play podcasts**. Note how other GMs respond, what techniques they use, what words and descriptions they use. Steal from the best.

72. **Aim for consistency**. Over time this creates predictability that lets you work through in-game details and situations faster.

73. **Build detail through play**. Rather than creating or consuming large amounts of background information, which turns GMing into a memorization task, build detail over time through gameplay so you learn from experiencing the game, not reading about it.

74. **Turn rules lawyers into your consultants**. Let them explain their understanding of rules when issues come up, and then you be the judge on how gameplay develops accordingly.

75. **First think about your most desired result**. With the end in mind, it's often easier to work backwards from there to the current situation, or to work forward from the current situation to there. In either case, it directs your thinking better.

    To avoid the railroad, let players make decisions and just refactor your thinking to change course as needed. To allow for big course changes, redefine your most desired result based on the current game state.

76. Consider **goal post planning**, with four typical outcomes:
    a. Most likely outcome if PCs succeed
    b. Most likely outcome if PCs fail
    c. Best possible outcome
    d. Worst possible outcome

       In most situations the PCs head in one of these directions, which you've already anticipated and given a bit of thought to.

77. **Keep at least one NPC ally with the party**. Often you can think easier through roleplay than just in your own head with no one else to bounce ideas off of.

78. **Ask your group if they enjoy being lead**. Often players just want to get to the story bits or action fast and wish the GM would be more direct about where the most excitement is.

79. **Use more omens and prophecies**. These let you be vague in the moment while you connect dots with more certainty later on.

80. **Play a round of Questions**, a simple "getting to know you" game where one PC asks a question about something they noticed about another PC. "That is an unusual sword you carry, what is the story behind it?" "How did you get that scar?" Award XP as you take notes.

81. **Good answers often come from good questions**. Write these questions on your GM screen:
    a. What NPC could jump in to help nudge the PCs to the next encounter?
    b. Say the smart villain anticipated this. What could he have prepared that would spring right...about...now?
    c. Who stands to lose something in this situation? They need to react immediately. How?

82. **Know the PCs well** to anticipate the players. But just focus on the essential: write what each PC does best and note his poorest skills, saves and abilities. Mix gameplay up so characters can show off and are challenged.

83. **Understand how your players think** and how they view the world. Common types are:
    a. Expert
    b. Big picture thinker
    c. Judger
    d. Feeler
    e. Creative
    f. Empathic

    Then "roleplay" your players in your mind to see things from different viewpoints for inspiration.

84. **Plan your reactions in advance** to typical game stumpers:
    a. Breaking the law
    b. Disrespecting the (potential) patron
    c. Ignoring the hook or missing the clue
    d. Committing random acts of violence
    e. Stealing
    f. Making NPCs do things against their will.

85. **Use more pictures**. You might find visuals easier to work with and draw inspiration from. Use Pinterest, bookmarks and file folders to keep images organized and just a couple clicks away.

86. Try mindmapping.

87. **Work *with* the players**. Find out the dreams each player has for his PC. Then just open up opportunities to make this happen.

88. **Note the intelligence** of the NPC or monster you're GMing. If it's low, do not overthink things. Just have the foe react on instinct.

89. **Join game [forum](#) [discussions](#)**, especially the types of topics you have trouble with at the table. The practice improves your skill.

90. **Use more props**. You might be a [kinesthetic learner](#). It's amazing what you can do with [something simple as a scarf](#).

91. **Use GM aids** to handle more details or to visualize combat better. Initiative boards, hit point counters, status markers, minis, whiteboards, battlemats.

92. For NPCs, **plan a personality not a scenario**. Characterize three things to think faster about plausible situation reactions:
     a. What is the motivation?
     b. What is the restriction?
     c. What is the time constraint?

93. **Prepare [vignettes](#) and [cut-scenes](#)** ahead of time. When stuck, use these to illuminate more of the campaign that would interest players most. And while they do help you stall for time, I find they put me in a better mood for descriptions and creativity, almost like a mental stretching exercise before I need to improv.

94. Create a lot of hooks and seeds. **Sow them constantly, reap them when needed**. For example, when stuck mid-encounter bring out a previous hook or seed and trigger it immediately. Players will go Aha! as they remember this hook now come to fruition, and they will think you are a genius.

95. Ask players who are natural collaborators to **make you offers** during sessions to help out. An offer in the improv sense is a suggestion or idea put out there in such a way that it's regarded by everyone as an *option* for consideration. Players can roleplay it ("This reminds me of when I was but a young elf....") or suggest it out of character ("Wouldn't it be funny if Krog was really a wizard?").

96. **Have players run monsters and NPCs**. But watch out. Things might get too challenging with player-operated foes. <evil chuckle>

97. **Run excellent published adventures** to experience firsthand how designers think. Read an adventure first with your designer cap on, noting how things are laid out, presented to the PCs, how the story progresses and how encounters are designed.

    Then observe during sessions how the adventure plays out. Make notes after about what parts of the adventure design worked well to help you internalize these practices and techniques.

98. **Design more**. Use published materials as models, but get your hands dirty as much as possible to [master](...) [your](...) [craft](...).

99. **Plan ahead, especially on small details the PCs pick up on** and think are very important because, "If the GM put that much detail into it, it must be important."

    If this, then that. If not, then A, B or C to get back to X. Else, notes on "How can I block this path they're on?"

100. **Cut down on noise and distractions**. Cross-table talk, beeping cell phones and clattering dice towers cause confusion. Enforce a rule that only the spotlight player can talk unless his PC is roleplaying with other PCs. Ask for all other distractions to stop. Create house rules to handle this respectfully.

101. **Use initiative to create order**. If everybody speaks at once and wants to take action, call for initiative and work with one player at a time. Consider just a pure die role so order is not always based on a character attribute.

102. **Give players homework**. Make it short because everyone is busy, but give keeners free reign. Use homework to solve stumpers. For example, if stuck on how to introduce an NPC, give a player this homework: "Your PC knows NPC X. Tell me how they met."

103. **Use a traffic control system**. Get three cards colored RED, YELLOW and GREEN. Set them where all can see, and change them out as needed.

     Red card means no actions from the party until you speak. Yellow card means go slow, and you will point to the player you want to interact with. Green means everyone can interact freely with the DM.

104. **Keep a log of when you get stuck**, moments you feel frustrated, times when you thought too slow. You might not even realize you feel this way when GMing, and just by calling it out you can improve your game by being more self-aware.

     Scan your log and look for patterns to help you search for laser-specific solutions.

105. Have failed rolls **narrated by the player** who failed.

106. **Do improv exercises**. A great one is to ask a friend to give you a list of random situations and you tell them how you would solve that situation as fast as possible.

     For example, "A man wants to get your autograph, but he is on the other side of the packed theatre hall. How do you get to him?" Start simple and work toward ever more complicated and ridiculous situations for practice.

107. Don't worry about *controlling* the players. Instead of control, **lightly direct**. RPGs are a cooperative effort. You don't need all the answers. You shouldn't be supplying the answers, just the questions.

     You ask the question – a problem – and your players in the role of the characters answer the question.

108. **Start rolling dice**. This will cause players to pause to see what is happening. Even if you are doing nothing, the action of rolling will slow them down.

109. **Change open-ended questions to Yes/No questions**. It's easier to answer yes or no than it is to answer a question that starts with who, what, where, when, why, how or how much. Turn such open-ended questions into one or more Yes/No questions and decide that way.

110. **Assign a Party Speaker role** for all character and party actions to funnel through. This relay slows information down to a manageable pace.

111. Ask players to **only speak in-character**. Not only does this improve roleplay, but it helps you process things faster through reduced translation to in-game thinking.

112. **Practice by debating with friends**. Forming good arguments on-the-fly is great exercise. Just don't make it personal.

113. **Offer a slow and vivid description** of something important and relevant to buy time so you can think about what's going to happen next.

114. Try the [SCAMPER model](#) to spur thought. **S**ubstitute, **C**ombine, **A**dapt, **M**odify, **P**ut to another use, **E**liminate, **R**everse.

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