

Instant Campaign Builder

by DungeonMastering.com

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Foreword

I poured hours of writing and years of dungeon master experience in this project. I believe any DM can use the information in this document and reduce campaign preparation time drastically.

The Instant Campaign Builder Project was originally published on DungeonMastering.com. I gathered the articles and made a few additions and corrections to provide the DMing community with a concise and helpful campaign building tool.

Any suggestions and comments are welcome.

-Yax

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Introduction

What is the Instant Campaign Builder Project?

This project will help you achieve 2 of the main goals a dungeon master should have when preparing a campaign:

- *Create the best campaign ever.*
- *Not spend any time doing it.*

They seem to be contradictory goals. Well, they are. Compromises have to be made. The more time you spend planning and plotting, the better your campaign should be. But I believe that it is possible to prepare a quality campaign without spending *too much* time at the drawing board.

The Instant Campaign Builder will help you to:

- *Optimize prep time*
- *Channel inspiration*
- *Create unforgettable scenes*
- *Have more D&D fun with less work*

If you're *really* short on time and have a to prepare a game in 30 minutes right now, then check out this article on [How to prepare a great game in 30 minutes](#).

The objective of the Instant Campaign Builder

What is too much time? In my opinion anything over 1 hour of prep time for 4 hours of play is unnecessary but feel free to spend as much time as you want creating and writing – I wish I could!

So let's say you're planning a campaign that will last 100 hours of play - roughly 25 4-hour games. You should be able to plan the whole campaign in 25 hours so you'll probably need as much as a few weeks of preparation in

your spare time – or 1 week-end if you're really pumped up. (to get pumped up, you can browse this collection of [gaming motivational posters](#) or read this article on the [Top 10 ways to get pumped up for your next D&D game](#).)

The objective of the Instant Campaign Builder is to give you the necessary tools to keep that prep-time to play-time ratio under 1 to 4.

The prerequisites

None. This project will help all dungeon masters.

However. If you're just undertaking the dungeon master profession, You might be best served by using a published campaign setting, and maybe a [published adventure](#) to get your feet wet, see what your players like and what your strengths and weaknesses are as a dungeon master.

Knowledge

The most important building block in a campaign is knowledge. Your knowledge of yourself, your DMing skills, your players and their characters. If the characters have yet to be created, I suggest you plan a [first game](#) around character creation before you start working on the details of your campaign.

During this first game, make sure all the players have some backstory. Also survey their expectations and style of play preferences.

Your draft is your final product

Chances are you will be the only one ever using your campaign. If your goal is to publish your work then the Instant Campaign Builder is not for you. Let's take for granted that your work will not be submitted to an art or literary contest. It is yours. Don't spend too much time on maps or character sketches and be brief in your notes - as long as you are able to understand your notes when you read them. All the shortcuts are worth something - time! If you can save time by bookmarking a rulebook instead of writing down

some info, then do it.

Have faith in your improvisation skills

If you believe in your improvisation abilities you won't feel like you need to plan out every single detail of the campaign. For improvisation helpers check out [Before the second game](#) and [The second game](#) - 2 articles I wrote about planning and running a spanking new game. More on improvisation on page 15.

Style of play

Determine what your style of play will be. Hack & Slash? Heavy role-playing? Casual fun? [Burlesque D&D](#)? Ultimately that decision should be heavily influenced by your players. The best way to assess the success of a DM (and his campaign) is by measuring the enthusiasm of his players, so make sure they are playing the kind of game they enjoy.

Cashing in on familiarity

Do your players have a particular hatred for one kind of monsters? That's probably because you have introduced that creature in a past game. By planning a campaign around creatures and monsters you know well, you'll save a lot of time. A couple of tweaks and modifications to these creatures should bring unexpected surprises and a new challenge while still triggering memories of past encounters.

Familiar creatures also have the advantage of rarely being [utterly retarded monsters](#).

Copy games and stories you liked

I don't know how many DragonLance games I've played when I was in high school but I know I always had fun during them. I've also played Amber, based on the Roger Zelazny novels. It rocked.

Check out these resources for getting inspiration from various sources:

- [Historical characters to jumpstart your campaign](#), by me.
- [Start a novel game](#), by [D&D Nerd](#).
- [GM as a video game designer](#), by [Treasure Tables](#).

Props

Your players don't need to know that you only spend 1 hour or less preparing for each game. They just want to be entertained. They want something different.

Why props?

It makes an imaginary world more real, tangible. If you tell your players that their characters find an old ring in a chest and you actually hand them a worn ring, they'll be impressed. It definitely adds something to a game.

7 props suggestions for your D&D game

1. *An old parchment.* Soak a sheet of paper in watered down coffee then let it dry. You'll have a crispy, old parchment.
2. *Gold pieces* - real ones! Check out the [Campaign Coins](#) website. I learned about these thanks to this Treasure Tables post about [GenCon products](#).
3. *Jewelry.* You can find worthless necklaces or rings at thrift stores,

garage sales, or even at home.

4. *A message in a bottle.* A little cliché but your players should forgive you if you actually hand them a bottle. Opening the bottle and fetching the message inside will be like opening a Christmas present.
5. *NPC character sketches.* I like to browse [JCM's RPG art](#) every now and then for character sketches. He takes [requests and commissions](#) too.
6. *A sand rose or volcanic rock.* Anything strange or unique will do.
7. *An old compass or any anachronism.* That could be a good plot hook!

Reader suggestion – Psygnosed says:

A few years ago, when running a campaign around here (Portugal), I used an NPC that pretended to be a beggar, and addressed the players in a tavern. I used an iron mug, with a few coins inside, to make noise, and leaned the mug towards one of the players. Inside there was a folded paper with a message. When he saw it, he pretended to place a coin in the mug and took the paper without the other guys noticing.

What now?

I wrote this part of the Instant Campaign Builder early in the series for a reason. If you design your adventure and then try to find props that fit

specific scenes, you might come up empty handed. By finding a prop and then molding a scene around it you make sure you can enliven your game and you just might be inspired by all the random odd objects you find in your garage!

Meta-props

Sometimes before I plan a scene around an encounter I peruse available miniatures - whatever I find is what the PCs will face!

Improvisation

The tools and tips described in the Instant Campaign Builder Project can only be used successfully by a dungeon master willing to improvise... A lot!

Your D&D game will become more unpredictable, entertaining

Going with the flow and making stuff up on the fly is a good thing. I believe that it is beneficial to a D&D campaign. If you can keep the quality of improvised scenes high it should make your players feel like their characters can do anything and go anywhere. The gaming experience is definitely enhanced.

The DM's paradox: prepare for improvisation

As paradoxical as it may seem improvisation can be prepared! I personally improvise anywhere from 0% to 100% of any given D&D game depending on what my unpredictable players decide to do. I must admit that sometimes they will notice that I improvise but only when I don't follow my own advice (nobody's perfect!).

So here are some handy tips to keep your campaign railroad free and your players impressed.

How to make improvization seem planned in 14 easy steps

1. Extra maps

- Print random maps and floorplans. If the PCs veer off-course you can use your spare maps as a foundation for the unexpected direction the players chose. Here is a link to [387 free D&D maps](#). You can also use a random dungeon generator. I like [Jamis Buck's dungeon generator](#).

2. Name list

- Print a long list of random names for NPCs that you have to create and introduce during the game. You can come up with names yourself but if you don't feel like spending the mental energy you have other options. For a ridiculously long list of names you can check out a [baby names website](#). You can also use WotC's [name generator](#) for more fantasy targeted names.

3. Geographic locations list

- Print a list of geographic location names. To come up with such names, look up a world map - yes, the real world - or use any random name. I often use professional athletes names for places.

It's a trick I picked up from one of my first DMs who had our characters explore the Bagwell Tower (Check out [Jeff Bagwell's statistics](#)). In my current game, some of the action took place on the shores of the Ovechkin Sea ([Alexander Ovechkin's career stats](#)). This works better if your players don't like sports!

4. **Business list**

- Print a list of [random fantasy business names](#) from [Hack Slash](#). A good name makes every random inn or shop the PCs visit seem more important.

5. **Think in scenes**

- You can divide your games in scenes. An encounter is usually a scene. For each scene you should have a beginning that hooks the characters into the scene, a middle where information and clues are gathered, or monsters fought, a climax, and then an ending. If your players opt for unexpected destinations you can still use a hook or scene resolution idea from scenes that haven't been played out yet. You can then redesign the scenes from which you borrowed material later.
- More on scenes on page 23.

6. **Extra encounters**

- Read about 1 or 2 monsters in the Monster Manual and bookmark the page(s). If an unexpected scene calls for an encounter you can

easily throw a creature at the party. If the creature you had chosen doesn't quite fit the situation, just change the appearance of the creature and keep the stats. That way you don't have to research a new monster during the game.

7. **Outline**

- Having a clear outline of your whole campaign will help you improvise because you can base your decisions on the big picture. A good campaign outline will allow you to *improvise better between the major events* in the campaign - even if the characters are not acting as expected.

8. **Side quests**

- Having a side quest ready will give your players the feeling that they can follow any lead and find a well prepared DM. I often used pre-made adventures for side-quests. Here is a list of [83 free D&D adventures](#).

9. **Give players loot**

- My players are suckers for loot. It will take their minds off the details of the adventure for a few minutes. I personally [roll treasure at random](#) after encounters - and that takes very little preparation!

10. **Quirky NPCs**

- [Quirky, well-roleplayed, and unique NPCs](#) hint at good

preparation by the DM. Keep a list of NPC quirks handy. Anything will do: Excessive good humor, always mumbling, [annoying vocal habit](#). The point is not to win an oscar. Johnn Four from RP Tips wrote this great [article on NPC quirks](#) that lists 40 NPC quirks. You should print that list.

11. **Take notes so you don't forget**

- It's easy to forget stuff you haven't really planned. Being a note fiend is a good thing.

12. **Extra traps**

- This is not my area of expertise. I keep a sourcebook called *Book of challenges* handy for improvized traps but I rarely use it. Pitting the characters against an elaborate trap can keep them busy though.

13. **Plant info on the fly**

- If you have a good idea of where your campaign is heading you should be able to plant clues that will help the characters achieve their main objective. You can plant information that you know will be useful only at the very end of the campaign if the opportunity arises. If your players have a good memory and take good notes, they could use that planted clue 5 or 6 games later and be very impressed by your DMing skills. More on planting on page 28.

14. **Take a break**

- Something utterly unpredictable happened? Take a break and organize your thoughts. It's not ideal for the gameflow but it sure beats looking unprepared.

Reader Suggestions – Jill Seal says:

One further step I've found useful. As soon as possible after the end of the game session I go through my notes and work out whether the improvised people, places, and objects could have a deeper relevance. Can I weave them more tightly into the story? Did the players come up with ideas about them that I can decide are true? Is there anything that needs to be elaborated or decided on?

Campaign Outline

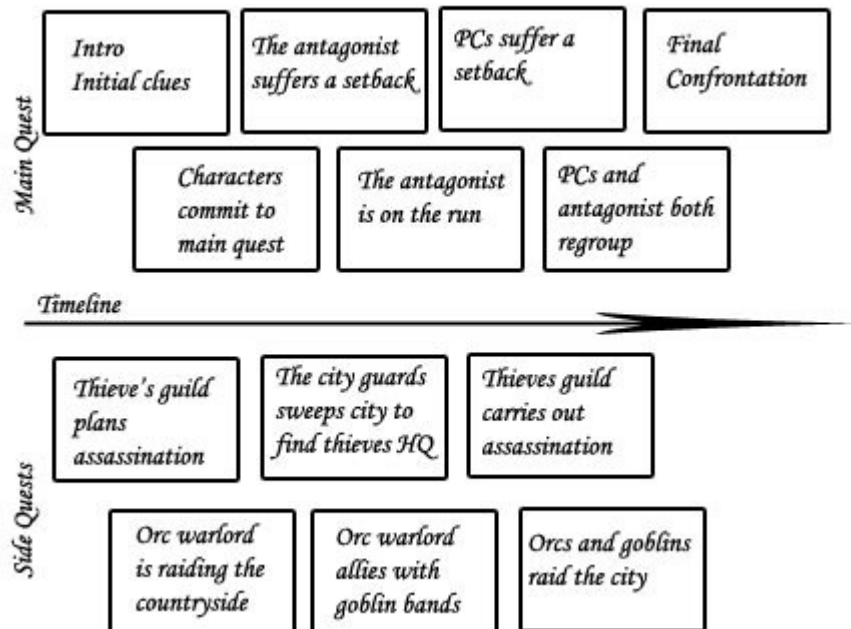
Railroad vs. Outline

I always want to plan badass campaigns and memorable scenes but I don't want to force the players into a linear storyline. That's where a good outline comes into play.

*An outline **defines major events** in a campaign. A railroad determines how characters spend their time **between major events** in a campaign.*

Outline graphic

When I plan my campaign I will outline the main events like this:



The PC party is loosely tied to the main quest. However if the players choose to be passive towards the main quest, the events still take place - the antagonist still suffers a setback but to the hands of other characters, not the PCs. The PCs can be witness to these events and jump back in the adventure if the opportunity arises.

The PCs can also be active in 2 side quests. They might not be drawn into these side adventures but they might be around when these events unravel and they could end up taking an active part in them - willingly or not.

By having a loose campaign outline the world around the PCs comes to life. The players are free to jump from one storyline to another and the multiple stories could even culminate into one action-packed chaotic finale!

Do I have to prepare 3 adventures?

No! I think of these storylines in scenes. In my opinion it is the key to creating unforgettable games. So let's discuss scenes right now.

Scenes

The LOCK technique

I read about the LOCK system in a fiction writing book and quickly figured that it would be useful for my D&D game planning. According to this system here are the 4 elements of a scene:

- **Lead**

- In a roleplaying game the leads are the PCs. Rich, well-fleshed out PCs can trigger great scenes. If you plan a scene around the characters in the group, chances are your players will enjoy it. The lead can also be an interesting NPC, a strange location or a special object like a precious artifact.
- Anything that grabs your players attention is a good lead. When planning a scene just ask yourself *Why would my players or their characters care?* A lead has to be interesting enough to make everyone in the party care.

- **Objective**

- Once you have a strong foundation for your scene (the lead) you

can work on an objective. *What will the characters want to do?* If there is no clear course of action stemming from the lead, it might be a good idea to plant clues in earlier scenes that will allow your players to react to the present scene and decide on an objective.

- Note that the objective should not be set by the DM, but rather by the characters.

- **Conflict**

- Having set an objective, the characters move on, but something opposes them. An NPC, a monstrous creature, their environment, themselves, anything. As long as the PCs face a challenge before they reach their goal you're all set.

- **Knockout (or Kick ass)**

- Your players were intrigued, decided on a course of action, and their characters overcame obstacles to reach their goal. What's next? The knock out! The end of the scene has to be memorable. No matter what the scene is about, there is always a way to spice it up. Even if the PCs just vanquished an uber-villain they can stumble upon some mysterious fact or witness a strange event that leaves them wondering.
- The knockout can also consist of resolution. Your PCs have just

achieved one of the main goals of the campaign? Reward them accordingly and it should make the scene memorable. Let the characters bask in their own glory. But even if you choose this option you can squeeze an unexpected twist in the celebration.

Hype

Most great events are preceded by an insane amount of publicity, which sometimes generates anticipation. I believe a Saturday morning D&D session can benefit from fabricated buzz and hype.

How to generate hype

- Constantly *remind your players the game is coming up*. If the DM is so obsessed with the campaign it has to be great!
- *Leak information*. Give your players information about the campaign *inadvertantly*. It's like meta-foreshadowing.
- *Create characters*. [StupidRanger's better characters](#) article is worth a look.
- **Ask the players what they want** and include it in the campaign.
- Prepare [opening credits](#) for the campaign.
-

Watch and learn

If you feel your game isn't highly anticipated, watch sports news or entertainment gossip tv programs and observe how they generate buzz from nothing.

The danger zone

When purposefully generating hype you have to keep in mind that the expectations will be higher so you need to come up with a great campaign. If you follow the tips of the Instant Campaign Builder you should be alright!

Reader suggestions – [Stupid Ranger](#) says:

On of the things that keeps me jazzed about the campaign are awesome cliff-hangers. When your character is in mortal danger, you need to come back and resolve the situation.

Planting

So you've been preparing a brand new campaign. You have an outline, you drew up a few interesting scenes, and you might even have a cool prop for an upcoming game. What now? Well, it's time to plant some information, clues and hints.

Going over the scenes that are likely to be played first and adding information that the characters will need later in the campaign is called planting, and it can make good games great, or great games unforgettable.

Why is planting great?

- Your players will feel that you have everything planned and under control.
- Your scenes will be rich and detailed.
- Your players will feel good about themselves when they work their way out of a tough situation or solve a puzzling enigma thanks to some “random” item, or clue they found 5 games earlier.

How do I plant?

I think there are 2 main elements to planting effectively.

- First of all I try to plant a lot of information the PCs *might* use, but none they *have to* use. A lot of time might pass between games and I don't want them to die horribly because of an out-of-game factor (time).
- I try to plant some information, items, or clues that are useless. Sometimes the PCs actually find a way to use them! Sometimes it remains what it what meant to be: just a diversion so the actual clues don't stand out too much.

The positive side effects of planting

The planting phase of the campaign planning is one of my favorite. I usually think of dozens of cool scenes or events as I go back over the scenes I have already designed and add details.

Beginning

The first scene

This is the first impression the players will get. Blow your players minds and they'll be much more involved in their characters and your campaign. That should make your game easier to prepare - which is the whole point of the Instant Campaign Builder.

So after you have a campaign outline and scenes planned out, go back to the very first scene and make sure it is laden with uber-awesomeness.

Setting the tone

The first scene sets the tone for the whole campaign so you want to make sure it matches your vision of the campaign. Ideally it would also match your players' expectations for the upcoming campaign.

Setting the mood

What is the campaign mood? Humorous? Dark? Theatrical? Setting the mood right - dim lighting, Barry White? - in the first game might save you a lot of work. The players will assume the world's atmosphere and hasn't changed if you forget to mention mood details for a scene or two.

Make a promise

You could call this subtle foreshadowing. The promise lets the players know where the campaign is going and even what the main campaign goal is. This is done through the events of the first scene. It's not an actual spoken promise.

For example, if I started a campaign in which the characters' hometown is in a war-torn kingdom I could make this promise: "The good folks of the kingdom will live in peace again and the PCs will play a big part in ending the war."

I'd probably get the promise across by bringing an army scouting party led by a high-ranking army officer to the character's hometown, and have the

PCs defeat - maybe by some stroke of luck or genius - the officer and the scout party. That will set the tone for a campaign in which you can vanquish your enemy and win the war and live in peace (defeat of the scout party) and in which the PCs play an important part (they already kicked some high-ranking ass).

Get a spark

If you feel your first scene isn't up to par, you can check out Roleplaying Tips' [Story Sparks #1](#) and [Story Sparks #2](#).

Ending

Why plan the ending?

I strongly suggest planning the ending, the last scene of your campaign before the first game is ever played. Here's why:

- Knowing where the campaign is headed - or where it could be headed - can help you make a lot of decisions on the fly and improvise more effectively.
- You might realize you need to plant clues, items, or information along the way.
- Once the ending is planned, foreshadowing becomes an option. A while ago I wrote about [roleplaying foreshadowing](#).

How to end a campaign

I would definitely try to deliver on the [promise](#) you made in the first game. Other than that I would refer to TT's How to end a campaign articles:

End a campaign...

- [With a Bang](#)
- [With a Whimper](#)
- [A Sudden Stop](#)
- [On Indefinite Hold](#)
- [Fast Forward](#)
- [According to Plan](#)

Fine-tuning

All the hard work is done. The campaign is almost ready to be unveiled. *Almost!* There's still a few things you can do to make it better. In no particular order here are 4 things I'll do to make sure my campaign rocks. This is something that I often prepare in 5 or 10 minutes on game day.

- **The superstar potential.** I'll go over every scene and make sure at least one character has a chance to have a superstar moment. This is much easier to do if you have the PC character sheets at your disposal. That way it is easy to match a scene with a useful set of skills, a spell or feat. In my opinion, *this is the most important point of the whole Instant Campaign Builder Project.* If your players feel like their characters rock you can get away with an otherwise sloppy campaign.
- **Add a unique or bizarre element to each scene.** Spice up your game with unobtrusive, but interesting facts about the environment the PCs adventure in.
- **Add completely, utterly useless clues, events, and NPCs** throughout the campaign. I love watching my players meta-game an encounter.

They don't say so but sometimes it is obvious they're thinking: *If the DM mentionned it, it must be important!*

- **Get your game helpers together:** combat matrices, extra maps, spare dice, pen, paper, eraser, lucky hamster, whatever. Anything you might use during a game should be neatly placed together in a binder, a drawer, or a box.

Have fun

This is it! Your campaign is ready. Now try to keep your party alive for at least 3 hours! Don't forget to enjoy every minute of your D&D sessions and always take the time to chat with your buddies before or after the game.

If you feel like you're working too much to prepare your games, then you should read this document again, play shorter game, or [contact me](#). I'll be happy to give a few tips specific to your campaign.

I sincerely hope you'll find your D&D life more enjoyable now that you know how to create a campaign “*instantly*”.

-Yax

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