



FASTER COMBAT

presents

GAME MASTER'S GUIDE:

HOW TO RUN
FAST & EXCITING
COMBATS

Roleplaying Tips Publishing

Faster Combat: Double Your Drama and Story in Half the Time

Faster Combat

**How to GM Fights in Half the Time While Doubling
the Story and Excitement**

Presented By

Roleplaying Tips Publishing



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Welcome to Better GMing

Congratulations on taking action to improve your game mastering and session experiences! This book will teach you how to run combat encounters faster while adding more excitement and storytelling at the same time.

Your players will be amazed once you start putting this advice into play. As you speed up fights, you'll have more time within each session for more encounters and story. This alone will have a big effect on your game.

But this book also shows you how to make combats more interesting and dramatic in the design stage, before the fight even starts.

When you combo more compelling encounters with more encounters squeezed into each session, your game will explode with fun. Your players will be cheering and demanding to play again. There's no better praise for a GM than players enthusiastic about your game.

Opening Shot from Johnn

I have always loved combat in my games. It's a cornerstone of my plotting. Combat to me means drama and excitement at the game table and in my stories. The characters risk their lives over something worth fighting for, whether it's treasure or heroic deeds. And nothing beats a showdown with a cool monster or hated villain.

What I like most about GMing fights is the story that emerges from each round of action. You might not realize it, but every combat tells a unique story. Often it hides behind the numbers and logistics of running the most complicated part of the game. But it's there, and I love to put the spotlight on it as I run combats so we all see and savor it.

After the dice settle and results tabulated, something happens in the story of the combat. The tough fighter suffers a humiliating miss. The bad guy scores a big hit and surprises players with his prowess. The years of magic study pay off with a powerful evocation. The rogue confronts his fears and goes toe-to-toe with a foe.

Adding speed and flavor to fights makes a huge difference in my games. I can feel the energy rising in my players, and I feed off it to GM an even better game session.

I remember one fight in my most recent campaign with drow guarding a corridor. I knew right away the encounter was bland and boring. I could tell from my players' reactions. What was interesting about this encounter? Not much. Drow are always fun, but the combat lacked something.

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So I took a minute and made quick changes. I added a floor wire trap and a crushing wall trap. Then I added a second wave of drow, and these guys had time to drink invisibility potions.

The wire trap caught the leading two PCs by surprise. The table energy instantly rose. I could see tension in my players because the combat had a new dimension, even though it was a minor one.

Then the PCs triggered the crushing wall trap. That worked awesome because it caught everybody off-guard. My players figured there was only one trap. Plus, the wall delivered significant damage because I happened to roll well, and this compounded the perception of risk.

In the second round, a pair of invisible drow struck. Now everybody at the table was yelling, shouting tactics and calling me a killer DM. All I did was clone one drow's stat block and add an invisio potion. But it created a new element, more risk and the hint of unknown.

For the rest of the combat, the characters were paranoid about traps and unseen foes. My players told me it was a crazy fight. And it was a big part of the story the PCs told their employer in a roleplaying encounter afterward, even though bigger plot points happened later during the adventure.

This corridor fight taught me a huge lesson about approaching combats better. If a combat looks boring, I either spice it up or kill it. Why suffer through dull gameplay? And seeing how much excitement a great combat created makes me want to repeat that experience every time.

We show you how to design exciting combats and fix boring ones in Chapter 2. All the other chapters touch upon this topic as well, so I encourage you to read the whole book and come back to it often to refresh yourself with more ideas on how to build better battles.

Opening Shot from Tony

Thanks for reading this book! My name is Tony, and I write, teach and game. Sometimes all at the same time!

My favourite thing about GMing combats? I love creating that cinematic sense of wonder, drama, purpose and excitement. Pulse-pounding action, larger-than-life monsters and high stakes!

I wrote Faster Combat so GMs could run shorter, crisper, more dramatic combats. Faster combat means saving time and creating a great storytelling experience all at once.

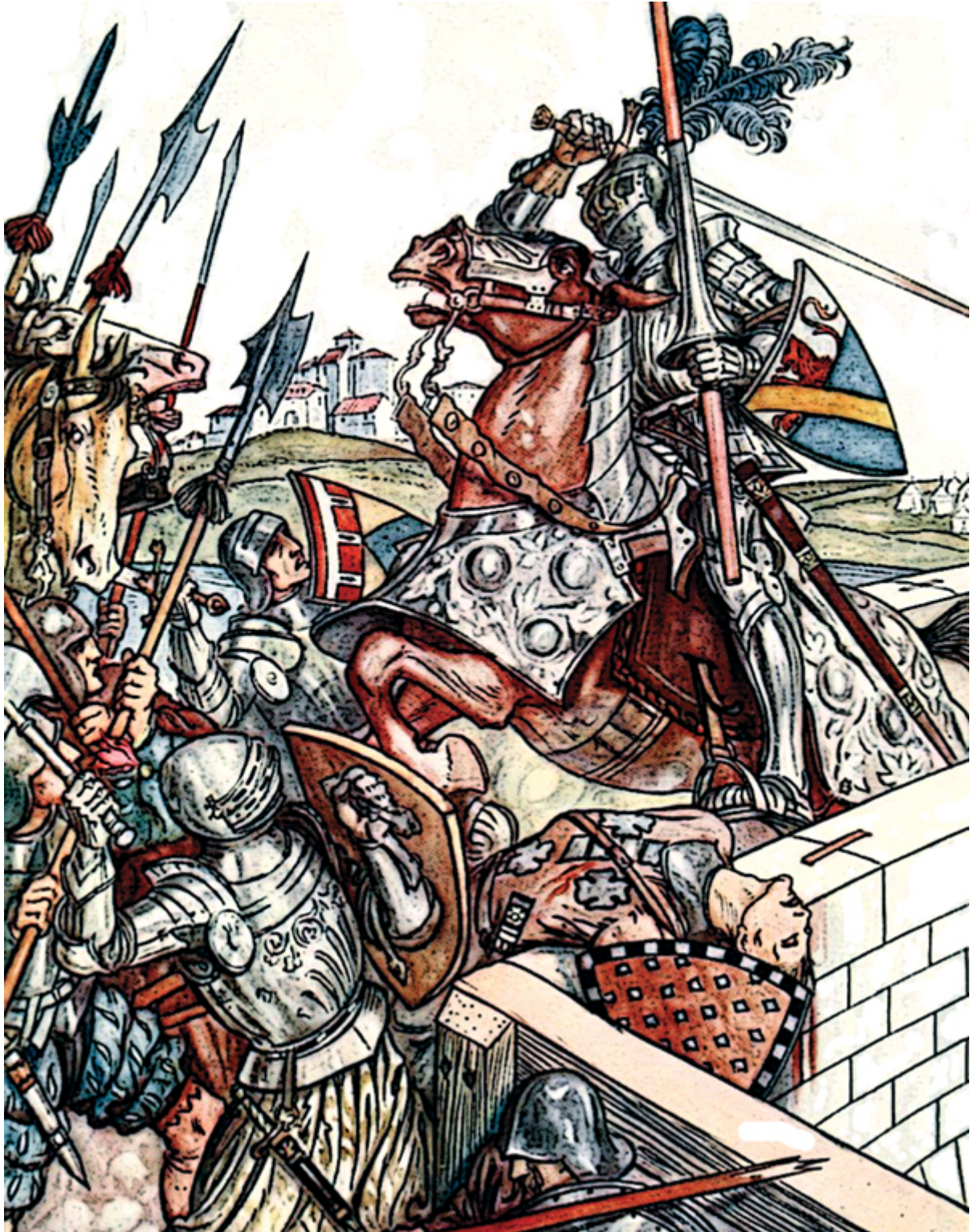
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Right now I'm about to run a new nautical D&D Next mini-campaign with friends and family - including a couple of new players, which I'm really excited about! After that, it's back to our gritty, tremendous Dragon Age campaign and my smooth-talking Antivan rogue.

Writing for Faster Combat has taught me to be a more aware player and GM – more aware of motivations and the environment and how to improvise and be more creative with it, and more aware of the power and surprising combinations that can come from team play, whether I'm part of the adventuring party or controlling a whole orc war party.

You'll find me writing, playing, designing or teaching just about anything somewhere on this plane of existence – and beyond! Follow me on Twitter @LeonineRoar and check out my D&D blog @ LeonineRoar.com

Chapter 1: Knowledge(Game)



1.01 Who is Your Time Thief?

“Believe nothing... merely because you have been told it...or because it is traditional, or because you yourselves have imagined it.” – Siddhartha Gautama Buddha

I Fingered Two Culprits But Ended Up Wrong

A little while ago I timed my group to find out who the time thieves were. Turns out I was wrong about who the real time thief was.

If I had pursued my theory without checking facts, I would have tried fixing the wrong thing, and my combats would not have become twice as fast, like they are today.

I fingered two players who I thought for sure were making combat slow.

The first player had a complex character, and I thought he'd be taking longest on his turns because of all the things he could do in a round.

The second player makes decisions slowly. He's smart, but likes to account for all factors, weigh them, and try to pick the best tactic each round. While commendable, it does slow play down.

Just to make sure, though, I timed my combat next session. I wanted proof to back me up when I approached these two slow joes between sessions to get them running their turns faster.

Well, I was never more shocked than when I saw the results. Yes, the two players took longer than others. But they were not the slowest.

I was!

I thought I ran a tight ship. I go to great lengths to keep combat fast paced. All those techniques, which you will learn in this course, do make my combats fast and fun. But, apparently, fights were not as fast as they could be because I was slowing them down.

The good news with me being the slowest player at the table is I have total control over solutions. You only ever have control over yourself in any situation. You can't force players to do what you want. You can't force their dice to roll what you want.

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You can, however, make changes to your GMing. And that's what I set about to do. This inspired a dozen new lessons for Faster Combats, all focused on you, the GM.

But I would never have achieved such success in making my group's combat faster if I had not timed actual combats to get true facts.

Why Measure Combat?

Where you think the time goes is likely wrong. While GMing we are too busy running the game, thinking ahead, and handling player actions to be objective about how time gets used. We think we know, but until we measure objectively, we do not know for certain.

We need to work on areas you figure can get you the best gains for faster combats. Work on the wrong areas and your game sessions will not improve. They might even get worse as you try to fix stuff that isn't broken.

If we measure to determine the truth about combats, then we identify with precision the slow and miserable points. We also know exactly what to target for solutions, like a laser guided missile. With proper intel, we take action that will truly have a positive impact on our games.

Identify your time thieves so you know where to point your sword. Most lessons in this course are standalone. You pick and choose what's right for your GMing style and group style. Point your sword at just the perfect lessons and techniques, informed with true statistics.

You become a smarter GM this way. It was fine for me to theorize where time leaked out of fights, but now that I have hard evidence, I will carry that lesson with me for the rest of my game mastering career. You will too.

For example, what if I had not measured and went ahead with my plans to work with those two players to help them get faster? Based on my numbers, cutting their turns in half would have shaved 11.5 minutes off a 77 minute fight. But cutting my time in half would have shaved 17 minutes 7 seconds off the combat.

I was able to cut my turns in half the very next fight because I had the hard data. Working with the two players might have taken longer to achieve results. And without measurement, I would still have been working with theory. I would not have known if combat was actually getting faster, if the two players improved, or if there was any difference at all.

Here's another example. What if you think the problem lies with weak PCs? You buff them up with magic items to increase damage output. Your next combat goes faster.

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Success. Then the next combat is a cakewalk, and so is the next, and the next. Game balance has suddenly gone askew. The PCs are too powerful now. And we all know how difficult it is stripping PCs of their magic items. Even if you manage it, your players will be in an uproar.

Imagine instead that it was not weak PCs that caused combats to grind on until everybody was bored. It was monsters with armor classes too difficult to hit. You were giving critters and NPCs too many defenses. This resulted in characters missing too often, and dragging fights down into toe-to-toe dice fests for hours.

With a bit of measurement, you could have identified that the PCs were missing most of the time and tweaked your foes instead, preserving game balance and having an instant effect of combat speed.

Where Does All the Time Go? What to Track

Here are things you can measure to get at the truth behind your long combats:

- Total Combat Length
- Total Rounds
- Round Length
- Player Turn Length
- Your Own Turn Length
- Decision Versus Resolution
- Time Spent Looking Up Rules
- What ACs PCs Hit
- How Much Damage Does Each PC Does

Track Total Combat Length

How long does each combat take in real life?

My goal is 30 minute combats, real time, for standard fights. 1 hour for boss fights. 4 hours for epic fights.

What's yours?

There is no wrong answer here, because your group's version of fun is a unique blend of everyone's personality and expectations.

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Armed with an ideal time limit, though, empowers you to assess progress and effectiveness of techniques you use to make combat shorter.

I like this metric best. Within combat there are so many variances. Fast players, slow players. Fast turns, slow turns. Tricky rules and simple ones. The overall combat length smoothes out these ups and downs and gets you a useful statistic.

This stat is also fast and easy to measure-another reason I like it.

Track Total Rounds

I cringe a bit when I hear the words real time. What is time, if not real? Time is a constant. It passes at the same rate for everyone at the game table.

However, I need to use the phrase real time to separate clock time from round count.

How long do your combats last? You might answer 10 rounds or 2 hours. Thus, real time refers to time on the wall clock, and round count refers to the total number of rounds it took for combat to end.

Total round count gives you insight into how long it takes PCs to whack down their foes. Too many rounds indicates long and boring grinding. Too few rounds consistently indicates you are a pushover GM or you are running meaningless fights.

I aim for 3 rounds for average fights, 6 rounds for stage bosses, 12 rounds for epic battles.

What are your goals?

Track Round Length

How long did it take to go from top of the initiative order to the bottom, in real time?

This is another nice aggregate statistic that can reveal problem areas.

Long rounds indicate you need to look at turn length for each player. Rounds too short indicates players not using or having enough options, resulting in toe-to-toe boring play.

I like to see 10 minute rounds for my 6 person group (GM included). 3 rounds makes a 30 minute combat, which is ideal for us. In stage boss battles, round length should be the same as in standard fights. However, for epic battles I expect a lot more collaboration amongst players, so I aim for 12 rounds in 4 hours, 20 minute rounds.

What is your ideal round length?

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Track Player Turn Length

How long in clock time did it take for each player's turn?

This offers a telling stat. You will see who is fast and efficient, and who needs help.

In some cases, you might confront mix/maxed PCs versus PCs built too simply. (We'll assume your game rules puts most PC classes on equal footing, and that weaponized PCs face as many opportunities each round as spellcasters, skill users.) In such cases, you will need to offer simplistic PCs more avenues for involvement each round, if the players want it.

I ask players to keep their turns to 1.5 minutes each. With an average player attendance of 5, that makes the player side of rounds 7.5 minutes.

Track Your Turn Length

How long do you take as GM on your turns? Depending on how you run initiative, your turns might be spread over multiple points in initiative, or you run all foes at once. Either way, record your total time consumption each round and call that your turn length.

Another tricky part is your involvement on each player's turn. Foes have defenses, triggered reactions, and responses in consequence to PC activity. Players rarely run their their turn without needing response from you.

So, do you track your time during players' turns or just yours?

Right now, I only track time for my turn. In the long term, fast foe turns means I should be able to adjudicate foes quickly during player turns.

When I tried tracking my time involved during player turns, measurement became disruptive and a hassle. Your mileage may vary.

If you do track all your interactions during a round, I advise keeping a players timer going while you handle things during their turn. Technically, the player waits on you, and keeping their timer going might seem unfair.

However, the player's measurement tells you how often they depend on you during their turn. Players who run their PCs without needing much from you are ideal. Players who need you to referee more for them should be a flag to dig deeper, looking for improvement opportunity.

The reasons for more refereeing during a player's turns might vary, so we can't say at this point if there is an opportunity. But measuring this way will at least identify a possibility.

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My goal is 2.5 minute GM turns each round. Even during epic fights. Epic battles usually do not mean more complexity for GMs, unless you have ramped up the foe count. Foes with more powers just mean a bit more preparation before the game, without much impact on in-game turn length. This gives players more spotlight during epic battles, which is nice.

Track Decision versus Resolution Time

How long does it take players to come to a decision about actions on their turn?

Once decided, how long does it take to resolve those actions?

Finally, how do the two compare?

Decision vs. resolution might give you insight into player personality and rules knowledge. Fast decisions might suggest impulsiveness, good analytical ability, analysis paralysis, confidence, fear.

Slow decisions might mean a player does not understand their character's options, thoughtfulness, a tentative personality, perfectionism, or too casual an attitude.

Slow resolution often indicates poor rules knowledge, and poor understanding of a character's abilities. However, it could also mean too much interference from the group through chatter, suggestions, distraction.

Fast resolution might mean excellent rules knowledge, savvy tactics, helpful attitude, or boredom with perceived slow pace of others.

Observe players to learn more, as the numbers alone will not tell you the whole story but just point you in a direction.

For example, through observation, you might feel a player gets paralyzed from too many group suggestions. You implement a fast play table rule that no one can speak to the player whose turn it is unless asked. After trying that out, the decision portion of the slow player's turns gets much faster, and the player is happier. Success.

I recommend measuring this once in awhile, say, one battle every three sessions. Measuring this takes quite a bit of effort. And there's no need to get this feedback constantly, unless you are experimenting with certain techniques aimed at speeding up decisions or resolutions.

Track Time Spent Looking Up Rules

During my research, I found this to be the most common complaint amongst GMs. They felt their players took too long with rules references, or that rules arguments drew combats out too long.

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Best way to check this is to measure it. Keep a separate timer handy for just rules management. Time it for the group as a whole, because while a player might not know the rules, the group should be there to support him. And you should be able to help, as well.

Rules arguments are a group activity as well. Even if just two players tend to bicker, the group lets it happen, causing everyone to suffer.

However, if you want the specifics, time rules issues per player, including yourself. Present this stat as a way to motivate more player cooperation and collaboration, or to identify problematic players objectively.

Two Special Measurements

In addition to time-based metrics, you should consider tracking two other combat stats: AC hit and damage done.

These are crucial factors in how combats play out, as you'll see in future lessons.

Track What ACs PCs Hit

PCs who can't hit don't do damage. No damage means longer combats.

Game rules should be balanced for ratio of successful attacks. However, designers cannot account for variances per group or campaign, such as treasure awarded, GM style, group preferences, player tactical abilities, and so on.

This stat becomes important later in the course when you learn about planning challenging encounters and tweaking monsters to suit your combat goals.

Best way to measure is record AC hit each time a PC attacks.

Do not record whether a character hit a foe or not, just record the actual AC achieved. You want to use this information for future planning and need the absolute AC penetrated, on average, by characters.

Track How Much Damage Does Each PC Does

After hitting, what's the damage?

Two potential stats here. First is damage per character per round. Useful for opponent selection, foe design, and checking in on game balance once in awhile.

Second is total damage done by party per round. Useful for boss design. A party that can do 200 points of damage per round should face bosses who have a lot of health.

Conversely, expensive foes cause combat grind—a party that does 30 points of damage per round on average will take a long time to defeat foes with a total of 600 hit points.

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Best way to measure is to record damage each time a PC hits, along with round #. Use this after the game to calculate total damage per round, per character in a combat, and for the whole group in a combat.

Damage will vary with foe defenses per combat, but getting averages will help you a lot when planning encounters.

Start With One Measurement

Do not try to measure everything at once. During your first attempt at measurement, try measuring only one thing.

Measurement gives you yet one more thing to do during combat. It also requires a bit of skill. And it needs a sleek system in place for fast, easy, and accurate tracking.

Start slow and scale up as you learn how to measure combat without disrupting combat.

I recommend your first measurement being total real time for a combat.

Note the start time. Note the end time. Done. This offers a valuable statistic and does not get in the way during the combat.

Next combat, track round count.

Then get into tracking round length.

Once you are comfortable with all this, start tracking turn length.

This might take a dozen battles or so. Take as long as you want. You will need to tweak your measurement system as you go to make it easier and less obtrusive. Find out what works for you, and improve it a little bit each session.

When ready, track AC and damage.

Could be you are a natural measurer. If so, go all out when ready.

If you are like me though, it takes awhile for it to feel natural. I remember forgetting to stop timers, note end times, increment the round counter and other gaffs each time I brought in a different measurement. That's ok. It takes time.

How to Measure and Track Combat Performance

Method 1: Watch & Form

Simple often works best. I have used this method before with success.

Get a stopwatch that has easy timer function.

If using a mechanical watch, it is easy to note the seconds hand. If you prefer a digital watch, get one with a single step reset.

The digital stopwatch I first used required three steps to reset. This became intrusive during combat. I changed to a watch where you pressed one of the four buttons to reset, and I was happy.

Make a paper form with rows and columns for what you want to track.

Fill the form out as you go.

That's it. Nice and simple.

Method 2: Timer & Spreadsheet

I use this method now because I have a laptop when I GM. A spreadsheet makes tracking and calculation easy.

For example, create a column for round start time (real time). Create another for round end time. Create a third column that automatically calculates the time used.

Spreadsheets offer more space and additional ways to organize your data, according to how you think.

I have a combat dashboard that displays all kinds of information for me to help battles run faster. This will be covered in a future lesson. If you opt to use something similar, you could do your combat tracking in it, combining your tools for greater ease of use.

For timer, I use the Chronology App on my iPad. However, you can use a stopwatch, timer software, or an online timer. See the Resources section below for links.

Delegate to a Player

Ask a player to track stuff for you, relieving you of the duty.

Measuring combat stats requires a certain temperament. Ask your group for a volunteer. If none come forth, that is a sign you have no players with the right temperament.

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However, before giving up, between sessions tell the tale of the tape. Reveal your tracking in a short session summary. Sometimes a player will find that information very interesting, and you might now get a volunteer. Players might not understand what you are asking when you first call for a volunteer, so sharing combat stats gives them the whole picture, and they could then become interested.

I do not delegate to a player. I could, but I run my combat dashboard and iPad, and it works fast and easy for me without disrupting combat. With me doing it, I know it'll get done the way I want. I am a GM because I am a control freak, right?

Add Measures As You Go

I advised before starting off with an easy measurement-total combat length. Then add more measurements when comfortable.

Do this with your measurement and tracking method. If using a paper form, for example, start with two columns: combat name and length. As you measure more, add new columns.

This prevents paralysis and stress. Big blank forms intimidate. You might feel compelled to track more than you are ready for, too.

Record Sessions

Here is a neat idea that solves the problem of doing too much while GMing. I am a veteran GM, so I do not have to focus so much on parts of the game as new GMs do.

If you are new, try recording sessions and then extracting the data from them afterwards. The ID DM did this with the Wizard of the Coast D&D podcasts, and [revealed some great analysis](#).

You could do the same. Record. Then between session, playback and time things.

You also get a great playback of your performance. Super feedback.

I recorded sessions a long time ago on a cassette player. We all got a kick out of hearing our game, but I especially learned a few important lessons. I tended to cut players off. I spoke too fast and slurred my pronunciation. I said "ah" a lot. Great feedback.

If unsure about listening to sessions to extract the combat data, try it beforehand with the [D&D podcasts](#), or any of the [RPGMP3 session recordings](#).

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Flesh Information Out After the Session

Take brief notes, record the core data in-game.

After the session, do the organization and interpretation.

Avoid stressing over details during the game by just getting the data recorded. Flesh it out after the session.

Resources

[Chronology iPad app](#)

[D&D podcasts](#)

[RPGMP3 session recordings](#)

[ID DM blog](#)

Online Timers

<http://www.online-stopwatch.com/>

<http://www.timeme.com/>

Your Progress Meter is Set

You've set faster combat as your goal and now you know how to find, identify and even measure your time thief – or thieves!

You are all set!

It is thrilling to see yourself improve. Without having a faster combat goal in mind and tracking it, you will not be able to tell for sure if your efforts are paying off.

Some combats will still go off the rails. A few always will. But you will notice improvement during most combats, which will be rewarding to see-and prove!

Daffy Duck says, "You never know where you are going until you get there." But we know where you want to go: faster combats that are more fun. That is why you are taking this course. So sorry, Daffy, we do have a desired destination, and we need a map to follow our progress. That map is our combat measurements.

It will be exciting seeing your progress.

See you in the next Faster Combat lesson.

1.02 Combat-Profile Your Players

Learn Your Playgroup's Combat Personalities

“Man, the living creature, the creating individual, is always more important than any established style or system.” – Bruce Lee

Today you'll learn how to profile your whole gaming group, yourself included, by looking out for five key player personality and gaming characteristics. You'll learn how to record and rate each characteristic, which will allow you to adjust the amount and complexity of rules, challenges and monsters you include in your combat with an eye towards increasing turn speed and saving session time.

Why Combat-Profile Your Playgroup?

Ever notice how stand-up comedians ask questions of their audience, trying to learn a bit more about who they are trying to make laugh? This gets the audience actively involved, and it inspires the performer with additional relevant material.

By the same token, to deliver faster and more engaging combat scenes as a GM, it's important to know who you're gaming with. After all, what GM wants to be booed off their gaming table?

But what if you had such a solid grasp of your playgroup's characteristics that you knew exactly what it took to speed up combat turns when players begin to stall?

Even better, what if you knew exactly who was going to stall, on what, and when, as you design an encounter, **before you even sit down to play**? Wouldn't you feel better prepared to flip the combat speed switches when you need them?

Combat Profiling Concepts

There are five core characteristics you want to watch out for when profiling you or your players' combat readiness and speed. Here's a summary of each followed by advice on how best to track each one for your playgroup.

Combat Characteristic 1: Gaming Style

- What is each group member's general approach to RPGs and combat? Are they combat-first killers, wanting nothing more than the kick-in-the-door style of RPG play and the thrill of pitched combat around every corner?

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- Or are they storytellers and roleplayers first, wanting to create and engage in a fantastic world with larger-than-life personalities and wondrous tales and legends?
- Are they focused on the story and encounters, or does conversation wander off-topic constantly, interrupting session pacing and combat turns?

Most RPG gamers fall somewhere in the middle of the extremes mentioned here, and it's important to find out where that sweet spot is.

Combat Characteristic 2: Rules Mastery

- How good is each player at remembering, reading, understanding and looking up rules?
- Does a particular player's turn stall every time there are special riders or conditions attached?
- Does a player read an attack or power out loud often?
- Do a player say they want to take an action but not know which dice to roll or skill to use?

A minimum level of rules knowledge is required to keep combat running smoothly. Players who don't make an effort to keep learning the rules – especially rules that continue to come up in play – contribute to combat getting bogged down.

Combat Characteristic 3: Tactical Speed

- How quick are you and your players at analyzing, deciding and executing the specific battlefield situation and tactical options on their turn?
- Is everyone planning tactical movements and attacks, including attack combinations with party members, as they go?
- Is everyone paying attention to changes in the combat scene so they're quick to modify their own plan of action?
- Or are you all spending too much time analyzing every attack and movement option, overloaded with information and choices?

Combat Characteristic 4: Calculation Speed

- Which players spend too much time rolling, adding and sharing dice roll results?
- Are some players slow at math?
- Does anyone have too few dice to match the abilities of the characters or monsters in play, prompting a lot of re-rolls or die-searching?

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Combat Characteristic 5: Roleplay Impact

- Does the level of roleplay match up well with turn speed in combat?
- Is there so little roleplay that the entire combat seems dry and boring, damaging pacing and engagement?
- Or is roleplay too lengthy or frequent, which interrupts and distracts others on their turns?

Player Combat Profiling: How To Build and Record Profiles

Similar to how you measured time costs and durations in *Who is Your Time Thief?*, you're now going to create a simple rating scale to measure the combat personalities of your playgroup. A clear picture of this means you'll know what kind of player personalities who have in your playgroup, yourself included.

Armed with this Knowledge (Game), you can decide when to highlight or minimize certain characteristics in players during combats.

This is where the other sections of *Faster Combat* come in. You may need to focus on the game knowledge aspects, encounter design, launching and managing combat, finishing or concluding combats, or analyzing and managing people and information. We will circle back on managing combat with player characteristics in mind in future lessons.

Create Your Profiles

1. In a spreadsheet, table, or on a piece of paper, write in Gaming Style, Rules Mastery, Tactical Speed, Calculation Speed, and Roleplay Level in a list or across a column.
2. On the opposite side, write down every player's name, including your own.
3. After your first combat, take a minute to rate each person on a scale of 1-5. A 5 means positive, high or good A 1 means poor, low or bad.

Example: A rating of 1 in Gaming Style might mean high interruption, very loose and unfocused style of play, while a 5 means high organization and good focus.

Example: A rating of 5 in RP Impact might be a healthy amount of flavorful and appropriate RP that makes the combat more fun, spiced in here and there, while a 1 might mean an utter lack of roleplay that makes it unclear what the player or GM is doing, thus prompting a lot of questions or creating a stale encounter.

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Alternatively, it might mean the RP is excessive and long, with monologues or constant and lengthy interruptions to other players' turns, including during calculations.

4. Add up each column and row. Note which one or two players score highest and lowest, and which one or two characteristics scores highest and lowest.
5. Repeat this process for each combat and for as many sessions as you feel it takes to get a good sample size. Between 3 and 10 combats ought to be enough.

Here's an example rating scale:

Combat Player Profiles – Session 1: Combat 1

| Name | Gaming Style | Rules Mastery | Tactical Speed | Calculation Speed | Roleplay Impact | Total |
|--------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------|
| Allie | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 12 |
| Corey | 2 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 15 |
| Jim | 5 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 18 |
| Katy | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 20 |
| Ty | 5 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 16 |
| Total | 19 | 16 | 14 | 14 | 18 | |

In the above example, it's clear this playgroup could improve at Tactical Speed and Calculation Speed, as those were the lowest rated areas. Lesson 1.6: Practice Strategy and Tactics is a good place to start, followed by the Faster Calculations tips and advice in the Launch lessons area.

Also, Allie and Corey might greatly benefit from the tips and advice in Lesson 1.4: How to Get Your Players to Know the Rules.

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Profiles Locked and Loaded

Congratulations, you've now learned how to profile players to avoid time-wasting questions or situations during combat!

You're armed with more detailed knowledge of the areas of the game where it would be wisest for you and your playgroup to spend energy on improving, such as rules mastery or tactical speed, and can now incorporate additional and deeper learning and tips from other Faster Combat lessons.

Next up, you'll compliment your new knowledge of who you game with by creating efficient profiles of the fantastic characters your players bring to life at your table.

See you in the next lesson.

Resources

You'll find an excellent analysis, along with some stunning charts, in the Id DM blog article, [Analyzing Combat Encounters – Returning to the Penny Arcade/PvP Podcast Series](#).

You'll also find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Know Your Players: Building Your Sessions Checklist, Part I](#) and [Part II](#).

And even more at [Leonine Roar: Win the Crowd: Play to Everyone's Style](#).

1.03 Combat-Profile the Characters

Study the Characters and Create Your GM Cheat Sheet

“Know your enemy and know yourself and you can fight a thousand battles without disaster.” – Sun Tzu, The Art of War

How many times have you paused the action to ask for a player’s defenses? Or how an attack works? Or how they were able to heal back to full strength so quickly? Sometimes, players surprise you with their character’s capabilities and resources, and while that’s a great thing in a storytelling game, it can stall combat as you scramble to react.

But what if you knew everything about the characters already? What if it was all in front of you in one place?

Why Study the Characters?

The players are not the GM’s enemy; certainly not. But, they face adversaries and enemies run by the GM all the time, and as such, the classic advice of “know your enemy” is especially important when it comes to heroic, deadly combat.

Here’s how to gather, study and interpret some core player character aspects. By knowing the PCs, you know what attacks or rules may slow down or complicate combat. Learning this beforehand allows you to plan better and manage combat smoothly in-game.

Character Sheets

Study the character sheets of your party. The character sheet is the best way to know the good, bad and the ugly about every character. There are many ways to go about studying character sheets, but here are the critical bits of information and several ways you can go about it.

Combat Stats

Focus on the combat-related stats and capabilities of your party, such as ability scores, speed, defensive stats and attacks. This gives you a sense of what they’re generally best at in combat, including mobility and range, toughness, and the style or delivery of most of their attacks – i.e. melee, ranged, area, close.

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When we get to the GM cheat sheet below, you'll see a mix of combat and non-combat stats, making the cheat sheet your one-stop shop for the entire session, both in and out of combat. Only the combat stats that change frequently or come up often on the GM's turn are listed on the sheet.

For example, you don't really need to know the characters' speed beyond an initial character sheet review, since it rarely ever changes and is something typically under the player's control on their turn, so speed is omitted from the cheat sheet.

Strengths and Weaknesses

What are their highest and lowest ability scores and defenses? Which are their most powerful attacks? What average amount of damage and conditions can you expect from those attacks? Knowing this helps you be more prepared to smoothly react to and even help resolve such attacks.

Healing Resources

What healing options do the characters have? How deep are their healing reserves?

Healing slows combat, especially in fight-to-the-death scenarios. More available healing means lower attrition rates, or the ability to withstand sustained attack due to high healing resources.

Here are some ways you can handle overly high healing resources and a low rate of attrition in your combats.

Do More Of This:

- High damage attacks and powers (monsters and PCs).
- Combat encounters between rests.
- Difficult combat encounters between rests.
- Use monsters, spells, rituals, terrain, environmental features and phenomena (magical, supernatural or extraordinary) to nerf healing.
- Use monsters, spells, rituals, terrain, environmental features and phenomena (magical, supernatural or extraordinary) to increase damage (monsters and PCs).
- Use encounters where monsters steal or destroy healing and defensive supplies and consumables (for good story reasons).

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Do Less Of This:

- Hand out or sell magic items that heal, such as potions.
- Hand out or sell powerful healing magic.
- Rest periods. Interrupt them or make safe areas few and far between.

Character Combat Profiling: How to Build and Record Character Profiles

Now take everything you learned by studying their characters, and start building your cheat sheet, whether on paper or online. Or if you're short on time, or want some help, have the players fill in key pieces of information on your cheat sheet.

This is the single most important tool you can have in front of you at all times. It's a summary of all the details of your playgroup's characters, prominently featuring key combat statistics such as defenses and hit points.

Having this information at a glance means you can move combat along much more smoothly, plus have a better sense of all of a character's most critical combat resources, such as hit points, defenses and healing reserves.

All this info in one efficient place means you're familiar with the party's strengths. **It makes you ready for any kind of encounter or check**, whether it's combat-related, social or otherwise.

How to Create Your Cheat Sheet

Fire up a digital screen, grab a large index card or take half-sheet of paper and fill it up with the following info:

- Names, race & class
- Defenses
- Languages known
- Special vision type (i.e. lowlight)
- Perception, Insight and relevant Knowledge scores (i.e. Monster, Arcane)
- Trained Skill names
- DCs by level and difficulty for the party's level (the Easy, Moderate and Hard DCs for their level)

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On the bottom half of the sheet or back of the index card, note the entire level's worth of treasure.

Bring everything but the defenses with you pre-calculated; pass around the sheet or index card so the players can fill in their defenses at session start. (Make sure to tell players not to turn over the folded-in-half sheet or the large index card or else spoil their treasure!)

Customizing Your Cheat Sheet

Consider adding any of the following character combat statistics to your cheat sheet:

- Speed
- Maximum Range of Attacks
- Healing Resources
- Resistances
- Average Attack Bonus
- Average Damage Dealt (on basic, standard and/or more powerful attacks)
- Special Attacks
- Special Damage Bonuses (such as sneak attack)
- Initiative Modifier
- Key Magic Items

Average Attack and Damage

Average attack bonus and damage bear special attention because they give you a better sense of the party's accuracy and damage output as it compares to monsters of their level or in an encounter you've designed. We'll be covering this in more detail in the Design area of the Faster Combat program.

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Now You Know Who You're Fighting

Congratulations, you've learned how to study character sheets and which combat stats to look for, including how to boil the character's capabilities down into your own handy, easy-to-build GM cheat sheet. You know your party of mighty adventurers forwards and backwards – your profile of the characters is complete!

What's next? How you can learn the rules of your game smartly and in manageable bites as you play, transforming those rules into a powerful ally.

See you in the next lesson.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Character Sheets as GM Tools](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [4e DM's Cheat Sheet: Be Ready for Anything!](#) and [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#).

1.04 Your Path to Rules Enlightenment

How to Study the Combat Rules

“It’s not wise to violate rules until you know how to observe them.” – T.S. Eliot

When you finish this lesson, you’ll understand why knowledge of the game’s rules is so important, especially when it comes to combat and its motley crew: the rock-star characters and the fearsome monsters. You’ll find advice and tips on how to best learn, remember and organize combat and character rules and information.

Rules? We Need Rules?

Every game has rules – even if the one rule is there are no rules! Knowing the basic rules of combat, viewed directly from the eyes of each character, is essential to smooth and efficient combat. If you’re unfamiliar with how combat works and how your characters or monsters make and resolve attacks, combat slowdown is inevitable.

Rules Knowledge Concepts

Rules are a prescription for action. Since characters, monsters and their combat capabilities are often complex, that usually means there are a lot of things you need to know and do to choose and execute an action in combat.

Basic Combat Rules

These rules are the engine that keeps combat running mechanically. You typically attack by rolling for accuracy, and then you roll for degree of damage you deal. Most RPG combat rules generally follow and expand in complexity from this hit-damage paradigm.

Special rules for charging, for example, might include an accuracy or damage bonus. As charging is a common tactic in battle, it’s helpful to know ahead of time how to resolve a charge attack.

Read and review your combat chapter often. You might surprise yourself with some rare option you didn’t know you had, or simply gain more clarity on a confusing combat rule.

Challenge yourself to learn one new rule each readthrough and to implement that rule in your games at least once per session until you’ve mastered it.

Character and Monster-Specific Combat Rules

Yet what good does it do to read the entire combat chapter of your RPG and not be looking at combat through the right lens?

That lens, or filter, starts with your playgroup's character sheets and monster stat blocks. More specifically, **knowing the rules for tonight's game** means you just need to focus on the character sheets and monsters of a given level – a manageable snapshot of combat rules.

How to Learn the Game Rules

Rules Mastery Step 1. Keep the Rules Close

Make sure you always have a copy of the combat rules, digital or otherwise, within easy reach of you during session prep and during your game.

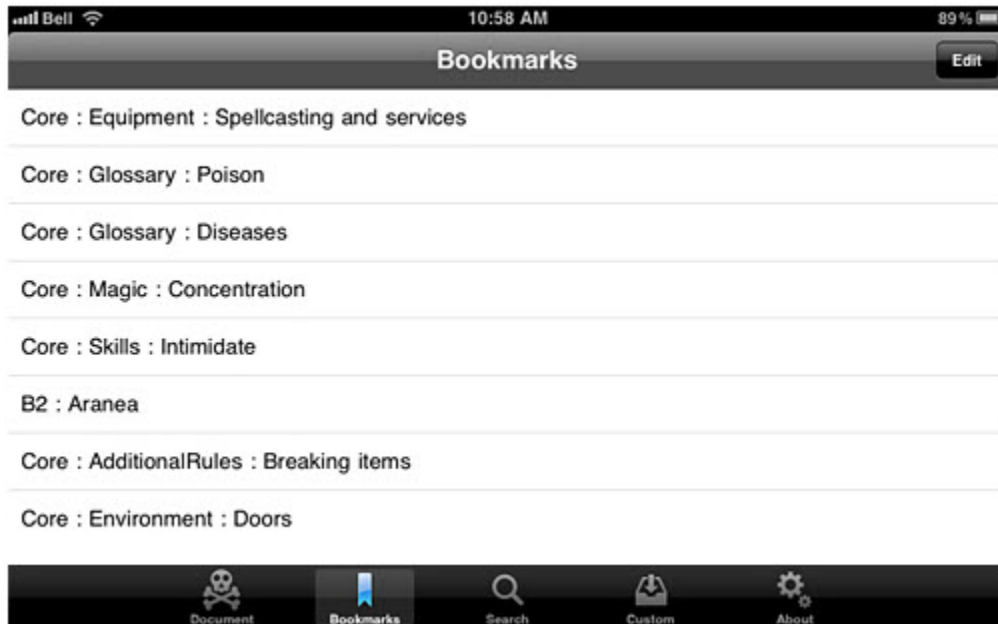
It may sound obvious, but pure “winging it” bogs down on some rules points. And nothing's worse than inconsistency when it comes to the rules of the game. After all, that's why there are rules in the first place – to prevent inconsistencies in the prescriptions for actions!

Rules Mastery Step 2. Mark Up the Rules

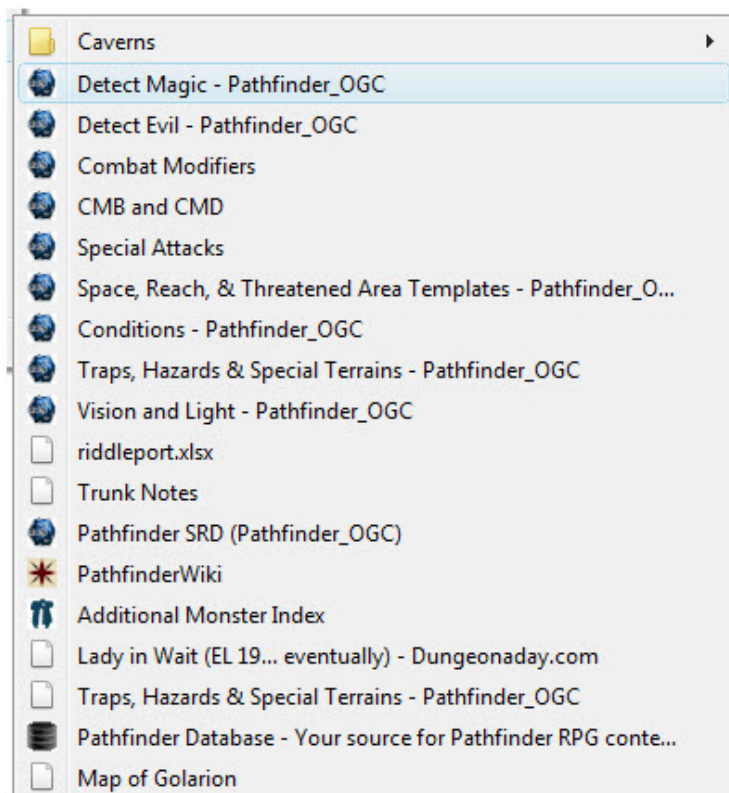
Before each session, highlight, circle, bookmark or otherwise make note of (i.e. in a separate note pad or notebook with bullet points or an outline) the combat rules you expect to see that game. It's important to be practical and focus on mastering the rules as you go since the initial reading or review of an RPG's rules are just that: a first foot in the water, without even really being in the water yet.

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Here's an example of Johnn's Pathfinder rules iPad app. He adds and deletes bookmarks to tricky rules as needed:



And here's an example of Johnn's browser bookmarks for his game. Again, he adds and removes per session, as needed:



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Rules Mastery Step 3. Schedule Time to Look Up Rules

Using printouts or screens of current character sheets and the expected monsters for the night, visually flag particular combat rules or keywords that are unclear or confusing to you.

Add bookmarks to rules sources as needed for faster recall. For print books, Post-It Flags or Notes work awesome and are re-usable and moveable.

Set aside time before the session to look up and familiarize yourself with each combat rule. Count each look-up as a quick 2 minute to-do.

For example, if you circled four things on character sheets, and three things on monsters, plan in 14 minutes of time before the session to cover each rule.

Rules Mastery Step 4. Mark Up the Rules Again

Once you grasp how a specific combat rule works, go back and **add additional notations to your copies of the character sheets and monsters**. A simple reminder such as “important,” “!” or “use immediately,” to more mechanical notes such as “means the monster takes half-damage from melee and ranged attacks” or “means the target is immobilized with more penalties” all work. Experiment with a shorthand approach that works for you.

Rules Mastery Step 5. Note Problem Rules During Games

As you GM, pay attention to rules and game situations that needed rules clarifications. Make a fast note and then move on.

After a session, refer back to your notes and see if you need to review and master any particular rules. Sometimes things sort themselves out during a session, or they seem to be one-time issues. But anything that’s a nagging issue should be given the full treatment above.

Double Benefits

The best part of this rules learning approach? There’s actually two.

First, you teach yourself the combat rules through a steady, manageable diet or reading and notating. You get repetitions, both offline (prep/look-ups) and in the fire (live games), practicing and learning the combat rules at the two most critical and ideal times.

And these reps are relevant to characters and even a few monsters you’re likely to see often. You prioritize your rules knowledge experience by **focusing most on what you’re going to cover and what you actually cover in your games**.

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Second, this simple, quick process not only benefits you as game master, but it benefits the entire playgroup as you save everyone time squandered on rules look-ups during your game.

You and the Rules Are Now One

Well done, you're finding your way. You've learned solid rules reading and study habits, and what's most important when it comes to learning and focusing on combat rules.

In the next section, we'll be talking about getting your players to learn and master the rules, including before and during games, which is essentially more helpful practice and reinforcement for everyone.

There are some great ways to encourage your players to reach a higher level of combat rules knowledge, saving lots of time in actual combat just like you learned to do here.

See you in the next lesson.

Resources

[Newbie DM](#) has taken a lot of new GMs along his journey, and his blog is filled with lots of personal insights and advice for new GMs.

You'll also find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Use Google Documents for Campaign Organization](#) and [GM Binder Tips for the Organized GM](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Winging it in D&D: Is it Back?](#) and [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#).

1.05 Show Players the Way

You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else.” – Albert Einstein

How to Elevate Player Combat Knowledge

Here you'll learn how to encourage and empower your players to study, learn and know the combat rules as well, so you don't feel like you're doing all the work as referee! You'll discover how to best guide players towards a higher level of combat rules knowledge, especially as it relates to their characters.

Why Teach Players the Rules?

Rules ranked high in our Top 10 Reasons why combat slows. Knowledgeable players and GMs make combat faster than a quickling with a Ring of Haste.

Combat has a lot of rules. Characters channel, call upon and break all those rules in numerous and incredible ways.

Practice methods to teach and reinforce rules in your players to create more fluidity in your combats and sessions. There will be fewer pauses due to confusion and rules look-ups, and more execution – and yes, both kinds!

Rules Learning Concepts

Linking and practice offer two powerful ways to acquire knowledge, and it's no different for complex game rules.

Linking

Compare and contrast previous knowledge with new knowledge to make connections or links. This is the learning spiral (according to educational psychologist and learning theorist Jerome Bruner); you can also think of it as a learning stack or visualize it as links in a chain. The more reference points or points of view you have in looking at something, or in stacking or linking it up, the better perspective and understanding you gain.

For example, when you first learned how to attack and hit in combat, how did you learn? Maybe you simply read the rules and remembered them, maybe someone explained the rules to you or maybe someone simply told you which dice to pick up and roll. The GM let you know if you hit or missed. Then you rolled attacks multiple times during a combat, and then many times during a session in new, different combats. The GM and

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your friends helped you along the way and gave you feedback and answered any questions you had.

Combine, stack, or link all these experiences together on how to make an attack roll and you reinforce this new knowledge: you master how to make an attack roll from different, yet linked instances of learning and experience.

Practice

Repeatedly **do** and **be** actively involved in what you're learning. Experience and envision the how-to, value and effect of what you're learning.

As you're about to see, practicing the game rules with your players improves everyone's retention and understanding of the game rules.

How to Reinforce Player Rules Knowledge

Here are practical ways to reinforce player rules knowledge.

Take 5 for Rules Review

Take five minutes at the start of a session to recap the biggest rules issues from last session and some info you learned during that session or since. This becomes a mini rules learning session, every single week, steadily stacking knowledge and lessons learned. It's quick, relevant and clarifies difficult or confusing rules for everyone in the playgroup, especially those who are likely to encounter those rules again.

Return to the scene in your last game where the rules came up to reinforce relevance and understanding. This context, which players actually experienced recently, helps reinforce learning.

Commit to this every week at the top of the session for five minutes to send a message that player rules knowledge is important to you and the game.

Tip – Feeling overwhelmed as GM? Got a rules lawyer already in your group? Delegate the Take 5 Rules Review to that player. (We'll cover delegating tasks in detail later in the fifth and final module of Faster Combat.)

Make sure to hold them to it. If the player starts faltering, offer simple rewards and thanks – in and out of game – to keep him motivated. Anything from "+1 to any roll" reward tokens to picking up the player's favorite dessert before the game.

Example: Stealth Rules

Last session, the party encountered drunken ogre guards posted outside a dragon's cave – the dragon who had stolen a cache of enchanted, talking coins the party was after. It

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was night and a light rain was falling. The cave was surrounded by plenty of trees as well, some with low-hanging leaves and branches.

The trouble started when the party decided they'd try to sneak up on the ogres, and maybe even avoid them. The conditions seemed just right between the ogres being distracted, the rain, tree cover and darkness.

But the rules for stealth and hiding brought the game to a screeching halt. Everyone made guesses about how it worked, how many rolls were needed, and what sort of modifiers should be added to their roll.

Even your eyes glossed over as you decided to look up the game rules on stealth. So you just made a quick ruling to get things moving again, and decided stealth would be part of the Take 5: Rules Review at the top of next session.

Before the next week's game, you set aside a few minutes to read up on stealth until it made sense. You added shorthand notes on the most important procedures and rules for stealth right before your adventure notes. You boiled the rules down into Cliff Notes for the group.

As the next session starts, you review your shorthand notes on how stealth works with everyone. You highlight the main points and procedures for stealth. You re-describe the dragon cave scene, the ogres, the trees and so on, and what you all would have done differently, and correctly, per the rules. Both as a combat advantage in attacking the ogres, and in avoiding them altogether, if that's what they had decided to try to do.

You discuss the rules back and forth for a few minutes, answering questions in the context of your actual session example, until everyone's comfortable with how the stealth rules work.

Now you feel good about the "ah-hah" facial expressions and nods you get as you master a rule that once confused you and your playgroup together.

The 1 Rule Seed

Take a single rule and feature it often throughout a session, especially in the first combat round, encounter or hour. Do the same in the second, and then in the third.

At the end of the session, introduce a complex situation that includes or draws upon all the rules the players have practiced and experienced.

Keep growing rules learning opportunities off this initial seed.

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NPCs and Monsters as Tutorials

Use monsters and NPCs as living rules tutorials together with the 1 Rule Seed. After all, if the PCs see the monster can do something, they will believe and see how they can, too! Briefly mention any bonuses the character or monster gains, giving the players regular exposure to the rules, while simultaneously highlighting their utility and value in-game.

Example: Not Just Basic Attacks

A new group should easily pick up the simplest and most basic attack that every character can make. So a brief, simple encounter with only a few weak monsters is great initial practice and exposure.

But there's other sorts of basic and essential attacks every character is capable of, and you want to teach these as well: opportunity attacks, charges and bull rushes.

Perhaps your group struggles with remembering to use and how to execute these special types of basic or simple attacks. So, you start next session off with a simple combat scene where droves of weak monsters or minions are just running right past them, with the occasional one stopping to fight.

Orcs, perhaps, fleeing from... something far more deadly? Whatever the reason, from a tactical and rules perspective, this is great opportunity attack practice. Give hints such as, "The orc goes roaring and stumbling right by you, out of control."

Then, on the next round, have several orcs charge the characters, setting an example for how charges work. Briefly mention speed bonuses and attack bonuses from their charges as they power right into the characters.

Finally, on round three, have several orcs try to shove a few characters into some burning pyres or pits. Once again, the players start to see how several of these simple attacks can be executed, including their benefits.

You could now have an ambitious orc or two attack from stealth, as well, circling right back to the big problem rule from last session (confusion over stealth in combat). This is a great opportunity to return to and reinforce that rules knowledge and link this newest learning point together.

Eye-Catching Handouts

Another easy way to share and emphasize the importance of knowing certain rules is to photocopy or print rules that prove to be a problem.

Better yet, find a great analysis or helpful discussion of those rules in a blog or forum, and hand it out at the start of the session.

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Use this to supplement the five minute rules review, or quietly say it's something you noticed the group had a difficult time with last time and you found the perfect rules or clarification to help everyone with. This offers:

- Good, brief and relevant reading at the start of the session while everyone's still getting ready to go
- Useful reference sheet for when that rule comes up again
- Helpful reading material during a break or pause in the action

Tip – Keep the handout short and colorful so the learning point stays quick, practical and engaging. Hand out only one or two pages that include images, illustrations, diagrams, charts or some other helpful visual relevant to the rule in question.

Sharpened Minds

Excellent, sensei! You have opened and sharpened the minds of your fellow players by teaching them the rules of combat in manageable and helpful chunks, using review sessions and the game world itself as teaching tools.

You and your players are ready for the final test of combat knowledge: employing strategy and deadly tactics.

See you in the next lesson.

Resources

[Sarah Darkmagic](#) has long been passionate about teaching the game to others, including at major gaming conventions.

You'll also find more at Roleplaying Tips: [GM Delegation](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [The Leonine 12: D&D's Top Blogs & Creative Minds](#).

1.06 Devise Your Strategy, Execute Your Tactics

“Do nothing that is of no use.” – Miyamoto Musashi, The Book of Five Rings

Faster Combat through Brilliant Play

Today, we'll look at critical strategies and tactics you need to apply to speed decision-making and execution of all player turns, GM included. Remember that your own mastery of tactical maneuvers and tactical speed sets an example for the players to follow and learn from. Sound strategy and tactics for any combat situation: that's what you're about to learn.

Why Practice Strategy and Tactics?

Knowing core strategies and tactics to defeat an enemy makes you a more efficient killing machine – whether you're the GM, a PC or a group of PCs. This means combat starts, flows and finishes quickly and decisively.

Look at a party of PC adventurers as an elite strike force, a team of professionals.

Account For Enemy Factors

The party's adversaries might be similar, though you should vary the complexity of their strategy and tactics based on factors such as:

- Goals
- Motivations
- Intelligence
- Ability to communicate
- Origin
- Alignment
- Gameplay variety

The following concepts assume at least modest understanding of tactics on both sides.

Core Strategy and Tactics

Four concepts form the foundation of sound combat strategy and tactics:

- Target identification
- Positioning
- Focus fire
- Resource management

Identify Targets

To properly select and prioritize targets, start by identifying the basic in-game role of each target or combatant on both sides of the battlefield. Figure out what types of threat each monster poses and who the biggest threats are. Then employ the best tactics among the party to defeat each target.

For the party, this means understanding the general role each of their classes play on in the party. Like members of a sports team, each of them has strengths and weaknesses, such as speed or toughness.

Visual description and cues are the strongest way for each side to know who they're dealing with. Cloth-wearers and other lightly armored combatants are usually frail ranged casters or artillery. Heavily armored characters with large melee weapons tend to be tough to punch through.

While you have the advantage of knowing the players' combat roles in advance, keep in mind the importance of painting a picture of the roles their enemies embody. These clues are critical information for proper enemy targeting.

Example: Goblins, Weapons Ready

Which of the following two descriptions at the start of combat is more helpful for the party to hear?

A: *"You see thirteen goblins in the ruined audience chamber, weapons ready."*

B: *"You see thirteen goblins in the ruined audience chamber. Seven file down the stairs with scimitars raised high. Five scramble to the balcony level, longbows in hand. Meanwhile, the one bearing the banner of their clan confidently remains where he is, muttering oaths to his dark goblin gods."*

Though the second description is initially a few seconds longer, it will help avoid questions later from your players about who and what the party is dealing with.

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Eliminate confusion on the types of threats the characters are dealing with as early as possible to save time and increase combat tempo .

Tip – Reinforce verbal descriptions with artwork and matching miniatures or monster tokens. These visual alternatives or supplements to descriptions often include a lot of equipment that immediately communicates the monster’s likely tactical role.

Tip – Encourage PCs to make more perception checks and monster knowledge checks if they don’t feel they have gained enough initial information on the type of threats the monsters pose. As most of these checks take little or no effort, it’s a smart course of action where they feel they need to know a little more to formulate effective strategy and tactics.

Get Into Position

Consider combat movement rates and modes, plus starting encounter distance, so each role can get into optimal position.

Ranged and artillery might be weak, but they are often mobile when needed. In addition, they have the advantage of being able to cover great distances and areas with their attacks. Start ranged attackers at long or maximum range.

Melee defenders and soldiers tend to move slow. On top of that, they often have to spend time just reaching their foes at the beginning of combat. Charge or run with these combatants to close large distances and threaten as many creatures as possible right at the start of battle.

When facing adversaries, try to foil their movement or distance advantages, or amplify their disadvantages. For example, take cover against artillery and casters; walls might give you opportunity for total cover. By the same token, archers might set up behind arrow slits, cutting down the party before they can even reach the gates from their superior cover.

Ideal positioning helps a combatant be as effective in their role as possible.

- Damage dealers flank more often and easier, or otherwise deal more damage and kill enemies faster.
- Defender-types tie up and cut off more monsters from damaging the rest of the party.
- Healers and buffers provide healing and bonuses to as many allies as possible, increasing both party damage and toughness.
- Disabler and controller-types apply damage and negative debuffs to as many enemies as possible, reducing enemy damage output.

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You can't control, debilitate or kill what's too far away or under cover. You can't defend allies when you're in the rear. You can't heal allies out of casting range.

Move for Your Teammates

Be aware of ally positioning needs and distance advantages, and **help them achieve them.**

Help your melee combatants achieve flanks, or move out of the way of a breath weapon or cloud spell to avoid possible friendly fire. Use your own attacks and powers to funnel enemies towards fighters and paladins and into your debilitator's wicked area effects.

Don't skip or waste any opportunities to act or move so it helps an ally, especially if it makes their attacks more effective!

The Value of Initiative Varies

View initiative as a tool to get into position faster to accomplish your role. This varies based on the role and class you're playing.

For example, it's generally a good idea for tough characters like those aforementioned fighters and paladins to get into the fray and lock up their enemies as quickly as possible. Area-damage dealers, controllers and disablers can also wreak havoc by getting the jump on a large force.

By contrast, healers and buffers don't necessarily need to value initiative so highly, as a key part of what they contribute – healing – is reactive.

Melee bruisers can be anywhere on the spectrum. Sometimes a quick, brutal strike is great, yet it can also lead to quickly being surrounded, so you need to consider your mobility and both willingness and ability to take some early punishment.

Tip – You do not need to stay at the mercy of the dice for initiative. Plan foes to act in optimal order through delays. Encourage players to do the same. Just because someone rolls highest does not mean they must act first. Forgoing the opportunity to act right now to go later in the round can increase damage or effectiveness of the group.

Focus Fire

Focusing one enemy with all your attacks and damage, sometimes called “bursting them down” or “nuking” them, is a proven tactic. Focusing your damage output on one enemy at a time is the fastest and most reliable way to defeat an enemy force while taking the least amount of damage yourselves.

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As such, employ focus fire every chance you get, whether you're a monster or PC (with creatures that die from one hit, such as minions, being the lone exception).

Example: 4 x 4 x 4

Imagine 4 monsters with 4 hit points each. If 4 PCs are each capable of dealing 1 hit point of damage with their attacks, should they each attack a different monster during round one? Of course not, you say, nothing will die – or even be close to death!

Exactly right.

But if all 4 PCs focus on one monster in round 1, they kill it, and there will be three instead four monsters attacking and doing damage in round two.

The longer it takes to kill foes, the longer they are up beating on you and taking chunks out of your own hit points.

Manage Resources Wisely

Manage your attack, utility and healing resources well. Identify the threats you're dealing with (see Identify Targets above), to best match up where most attacks, powers and healing will likely be spent.

Damage

Damage bears special mention. You always want to damage as many enemies as possible, as efficiently as possible, with a given attack. A weak single monster doesn't need your most powerful attack. Wasting damage well past what's needed to kill something is inefficient. There's a time and place for every type of attack.

For example, if you've identified a horde of minion creatures, save your rare-use heavy hitter lightning spell or hail of powerfully envenomed arrows for when you're confronted with a large force of standard or tough monsters instead, such as when you finally reach the top of the gnoll tower where the gnoll chieftain and his elite muscle and champions await.

By contrast, use monsters' heavy hitting attacks as soon as possible, within reason, so they're not wasted. Try to find a balance between affecting as many PCs as possible and using the attack within the first two or three rounds of combat. Otherwise, you risk these monsters being killed before they can get their best attacks off, greatly reducing their threat and challenge level.

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Utility Options

If one of your utility options allows you a ton of free movement in an otherwise open field where enemies are already nearby, don't decide to use that option because you can. Look for a better tactical choice and better way to spend your turn and action, even if it's simply a shift to help an ally flank next turn.

Healing

If you need healing, consider all the resources available and their time or action cost. For example, you should lean on the cleric in your party for most healing, but otherwise consider your options through your own feats, utility options or consumables, especially if everyone just took a pounding from enemy artillery.

Sometimes your party's healer is overburdened in a given round or even entire encounter. It's a tactical mistake to rely solely on his healing. Find another option, even if it's a brief strategic withdrawal. Dead characters don't win battles.

Command the Battlefield

Congratulations, General – the battlefield is yours! You've studied and executed efficient and deadly strategies and tactics in your games, and are ready and able to play monsters and enemies to their tactical strengths. Along the way, you've taught your party of adventurers some stark lessons of war – lessons you and the party will take with you into the next hundred battles.

See you in the next lesson.

Resources

Find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Strategy, Tactics and Logistics](#), [8 Tactics for Mooks](#), and [6 Devious Villain Tactics](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Encounter Start: Distance Matters](#), [Initiative: Role Matters](#) and [Strikers: Assassins vs. Bruisers](#).

Chapter 2: Combat By Design



2.01 Size Up the Competition

“It is the rule in war, if ten times the enemy's strength, surround them; if five times, attack them; if double... divide them; if equal, engage them; if fewer... evade them; if weaker... avoid them.” – Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Amplify Strengths and Minimize Weaknesses

Now it's time for you to become an expert at sizing up the opposition – on either side – and then tailor your battles to those very strengths and weaknesses so your combats move at a blinding, exhilarating pace.

Turn Efficiency is the Secret to Fast Combat

When you match best combat qualities of combatants to the weakest combat qualities of their foes you create **turn efficiency**. This is the secret to super fast combats.

Turn efficiency makes combat fast in four key ways:

1. Faster Decisions

You create an environment of clear, smart decision-making for each combatant.

This doesn't mean every choice is simple and obvious. **It means every choice is a good fit for the situation**, and so it resolves more naturally. Players and GMs decide what to do quickly, and resolve it quickly – and feel good about their choices.

2. Rules Lore Improves

When players and GM focus on actions that produce the best possible result, you end up needing to use fewer rules.

As players pound away using their PCs' strengths, they are going to learn those rules through repetition, as are you.

3. Deadlier Combat is Faster Combat

When strengths bear down on weaknesses, the damage flies!

4. Combat Fun Increases

Showcasing strengths and minimizing weaknesses means faster *and* engaging combat. When players learn to leverage character strengths to generate better results, they'll have a lot more fun.

Faster Combat: Double Your Drama and Story in Half the Time

Now it's time for you to become an expert at sizing up the opposition – on either side – and then tailor your battles to those very strengths and weaknesses so your combats move at a blinding, exhilarating pace.

A New Tool At Your Discretion

This lesson boils down to two things: **more hits** and **more damage**.

The caveat here is you might have reasons to put the brakes on this from time to time. Pacing is just as important to combat as it is to story.

You might want to stretch things out so the bad guy lives long enough to fight the PC whose family he killed. Or you might want combat to stretch a little longer to end the session with the final kill. Or you might be stalling for reinforcements to arrive or a special effect to trigger.

There could be other reasons why you opt not to pursue maximum turn efficiency. For example, stupid foes might instinctively work toward their strengths, but be unable to count clever PC tactics. Or you might see a potential TPK coming on and hold back a bit so the PCs survive.

So please keep in mind we are teaching you how to create maximum turn efficiency, but it's just a tool. Use it how you wish to speed up combat when you want. Think of it like a gas pedal in a car. Step on the gas when you need to, but slow down in the school zones.

Identify and Leverage Strengths and Weaknesses

Let's dive into it. Here you will identify and list out character and monster strengths and weaknesses. You'll also learn how to *amplify* the strengths and how to *minimize* the weaknesses in your combats.

How to Calculate Averages

Use <http://anydice.com> to help you calculate the averages of rolls.

- 1) **Replace the 3d4 text** that appears by default in the Output box with your damage dice and modifier. For example, 2d10+13.
- 2) Click the **Calculate** button below the Output box.
- 3) Click the **Summary** button on the right side under the Output box.
- 4) Look at the **mean** value. That's your average roll (round up).

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Step 1: Identify Strengths

What is a strength? **Exceptionally high positive numbers or bonuses** on a character sheet or monster stat block equate to a significant and reliable combat impact. Strengths translate into greater attack accuracy and higher damage, the heart of an efficient turn.

Study the rules of your game to find what an average score or modifier is for a given level. You need these two values as a reference point. If either of these values is a 0, such as the average modifier of an ability score or skill at 1st level, treat the 0 as a 1 instead.

Tony's Tip: The average of 3d6 is 11, the average of a d20 is 11.

Now compare other, higher scores and modifiers to the two average values. A value that is at least 33% higher than those two values tends to be exceptional – a strength.

For example, if 10 is an average ability score at 1st level, a 14 is exceptional. If an average modifier at 1st level is +2, then +3 and +4 are exceptional.

Scan character sheets once each level, and monster stat blocks for each encounter. Note each strength.

If you're still unclear what on whether something is a strength or not, compare this value to similar mechanics in the same category, or across multiple character sheets or similar monsters.

For example, if three of six ability scores are 14's, and the other three are 8's, count the 14's strengths. If one goblin's initiative modifier is +10, and the other six goblins are +3, then the +10 is a strength.

The goal is not perfect mathematical comparisons, but to:

- 1) Identify baseline averages or typical scores, and
- 2) Quickly be able to identify significantly higher values – each creature's strengths.

You want to get in the habit of being able to eyeball mundane values and exceptional values at a glance.

Johnn: Tracking As You Go

For attacks and damage, I actually take notes during games as PC actions take place. This is fast and easy for me. The key reason, though, is pure mathematical calculations do not take into account player tactics.

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For example, if the paladin delays often to get into flanking with a teammate, I learn that through my empirical data, but I would not have spotted that from looking at the pally's character sheet.

Because I track foe health on paper, this system works for me. If you also use scrap paper or a session log book, then you might do the same.

Here's my notation system. Each foe gets a row or line on the paper. As PCs attack I note the AC they hit and damage done:

AC Name Damage

That line is a typical combat entry. It's for a troll with a blue chip under it on the battlemat so I can tell my troll minis apart (the combat had three trolls in it).

- It started with 112 hit points.
- Then Crixus hit AC 22 for 65 points of damage.
- Fane hit AC 26 next for 14 points of damage.
- Xan hit AC 13 and missed.
- Crixus hit next round for 51 damage.

I can go back to this combat entry and see who hit what and for how much damage.

8 Combat Strengths

1. High Ability Scores or Modifiers
2. High Attack Bonuses
3. High Damage Totals
4. High Damage Bonuses
5. Multi-target or Area Effect Attacks
6. High Movement Speed
7. High Attack Modifier
8. High Initiative Modifier

Step 2: Amplify Strengths

With your list of party and their opponent strengths, it's time to amplify their impact to keep turn efficiency high. **Do this by putting each combatant in situations that let them use their strengths as much as possible.**

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The easiest way to do this is look at the general role each combatant fills. Each role consistently exhibits certain strengths.

Refer to the following list of the five core combatant roles for how to amplify the strengths of each combatant.

Be sure to review your combats to ensure all of them contain an opportunity for strong PC matchups. Jot down exactly what they are and when they occur in each combat.

Toughs

Toughs are high hit point combatants. They often have great defenses and ways to mitigate damage. They tend to have high Constitution scores, good attack bonuses, and deal below average damage.

Amplify their strengths by having them fight hard-hitting foes and large groups, where their ability to withstand lots of punishment makes them shine.

Melee

Melee combatants are different from toughs in that their role includes dealing great amounts of damage and hitting more often. They can't withstand all the damage of a tough.

They tend to have good mobility and initiative as well. Match melee combatants up with lots of low hit-point foes, such as ranged attackers or cannon fodder.

They also excel in one-on-one situations against standard monsters, unleashing a large amount of damage to a single target.

Ranged

Ranged attackers tend to be fragile, yet hit accurately and potentially hard from a distance.

Give your artillery plenty of distant enemies, especially slow ones, so they can continue to fire from safety.

Area Effect

Some ranged attackers, and even a few melee attackers, excel at hitting multiple targets at one time.

The wizard or mage is a classic example. Give these combatants groups of enemies, at any range, to rain down death.

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Healers/Buffers

These support-combatants amplify other roles. They take existing strengths of a combatant and make them even greater. This results in big combat impact and turn efficiency.

Step 3: Identify Weaknesses

What about areas where combatants fall short? Weaknesses are areas of combat where combatants are poor – since they don't have the high positive values of strengths, execution will be poor. The classic “bad matchup” will eat excessive amounts of session time when the monster types and numbers magnify your party's weaknesses. Focus on identifying your party's weaknesses only, to minimize and avoid these time-wasters.

To identify weaknesses, scan each character for any negative or very low values in scores or modifiers. It can be trickier to identify a very low value, but look for a value where most of the party scores double that value or more. For example, a party member may have an 8 Strength while three other party members have 16 or higher.

You could also identify average scores and modifiers in your rules to set reference points for identifying especially low scores (see Strengths, above).

8 Combat Weaknesses

1. Low Ability Scores
2. Low Attack Bonuses
3. Low Damage Totals
4. Low Damage Bonuses
5. Few or Zero Multi-target Attacks
6. Low Movement Speed
7. Few or Zero Ranged Attacks
8. Low Initiative Modifier

Step 4: Minimize Weaknesses

You have your list of party weaknesses, so now minimize the amount of times their enemies present them with a bad matchup. You can challenge your party without making every fight and every matchup an uphill battle.

For example, if your party moves slowly, don't make every combat include high numbers of highly mobile ranged enemies. If your party combined has only one or two area

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attacks, repeated large hordes of monsters means they'll face a tough challenge – and worst of all, even if they're victorious, they'll be *slow* victories.

Let's look more closely at each party role and how to minimize each role's weakness. Like strengths, each party role consistently exhibits certain weaknesses.

Like strengths, make a note of planned changes to the combat if you included any PC party weaknesses at encounter creation. Be sure to adjust your encounter when you have identified weaknesses by removing them. Noting and making adjustments such as changing a creature type or role, is a fast and effective approach.

Toughs

Toughs do below-average damage, taking a longer time to kill things. They also tend to have low mobility. Avoid using too many high hit point monsters in one encounter, such as well armored soldiers or bodyguard-types. Also avoid too many mobile opponents.

Melee

Melee's worst nightmare is not being able to close quickly upon their enemy – they can't deal damage if they can't get in melee range. Avoid too many high-mobility and too many ranged attacking opponents.

Ranged and Area Effect

Both of these characters tend to avoid melee because they tend to have low hit points or defenses. Avoid too many battles loaded with hard-hitting or highly mobile melee.

Healers/Buffers

The weaknesses of these characters vary greatly, as by nature they have high utility. However, they deal below average damage like toughs and find their utility severely restricted by heavy or highly mobile melee, similar to ranged and area-attackers. See the roles above which most closely emulate your party's healer/buffer for what to avoid.

Strength in Numbers

You now know how to identify your combatants' strengths and weaknesses. You've learned how to leverage them in combat to encourage faster decisions and keep fights moving quickly.

Next, we'll be talking about ways to speed up combat with a detailed review of alternative combat goals or mission objectives. No more total annihilation – time to fight for a greater purpose!

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Resources

You'll find related ideas at Roleplaying Tips: [Interesting Combats With Themed Skirmish Groups, Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#), [Combat Mastery: Tactical Awareness & Teamwork 101](#), [Initiative: Role Matters](#), [Encounter Start: Distance Matters](#) and [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#). [Dice roll probability calculator](#).

2.02 Do Not Fight to the Death: How to Game to Other Combat Goals

“You must look down on the enemy, and take up your attitude on slightly higher places.” – Miyamoto Musashi, The Book of Five Rings

Top 5 Combat Missions

Do your combats drag on because their purpose is total annihilation? Today you’re going to learn how to avoid this common mistake and instead implement specific, engaging mission objectives that go beyond “kill ‘em all.”

Why Include Other Combat Goals?

Killing everything in sight eats up precious game session time. Making multiple tactical decisions every turn for every character and monster adds up quickly, especially if combat becomes the typical fight to the death.

Change this perception, add variety to your combats, and save time by integrating different, believable objectives. Let real-world tactical operations, monster lore and the purpose of the adventure serve as inspiration.

Failing to achieve combat objectives only opens doors to new ones. Give your party the chance to succeed gloriously or fail miserably in every combat mission. There’s always another fight!

Key Takeaway: Design Interesting Combat

Missions

Combat encounters typically have no explicit goals. The default then is to wage combat until one side is left standing.

It’s not the players’ fault, either. They are gaming in a bit of a vacuum. Adventures tend to focus on the larger goals, so individual encounters are assumed to be about killing the other side to reach those goals. The PCs get loot that makes them better, they gain XP and they find clues. Often they remove a barrier to reaching the next encounter, and the cycle starts again.

Instead, we want you to generate explicit missions per encounter, per combat. The PCs go in with a **goal for that encounter** in mind. This has many cool benefits:

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- **Players experience the game in new ways**, instead of total annihilation each time.
- **Missions offer new tactical challenges**, making the game less repetitive and more challenging.
- **Missions challenge more PC skills and abilities**. This lets characters shine in new ways.
- **Missions provide you perfect hooks** for story-based combat. The Why? of combat generates story as you play!
- Several **fun aspects of combat are amplified**: tactics, whacking, maneuvers, teamwork.
- **You still include the things that make combat great**: foes, drama, treasure, clues, and so on. These do not go away. You are actually packing more into combat with missions.
- **Missions offer you more design options**. For GMs who like design, give me a high five.
- **Combats become shorter**. Once the mission has succeeded or failed, you can hand-wave the final rounds, make foes flee or withdraw, encourage PCs to flee or withdraw, and so on. The mission is the focus, not the last hit point of the enemy.

Tactical Ops, Monster Lore and Adventure Goals

These three ideas form the basis of the specific alternative mission objectives later in this lesson. We'll explore these further in next lesson, where we'll get into specific design questions.

Tactical Ops

History and media are filled with examples of leonine tactics and methods employed by countless cultures and forces, all the way up to and including our modern day armed forces.

Monster Lore

Monster lore includes everything about a monster or NPC's profile: history, habits, intelligence, psychology, ecology and culture.

Monster profiling means learning what creatures value most and helps define the types and complexity of objectives you can expect in combat.

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Adventure Goals

Now drill down to specific adventure-relevant motivations for the party and their adversaries. These motivations are part of the chain of events in the story that leads up to any given combat.

Knowing what drives each group in the current adventure means better execution of engaging combat missions.

Fallout: Mission Failure

When a combat mission fails, decide whether combat continues or whether a narrative resolution makes sense. Either **extend combat towards a different objective**, or save time by **wrapping it up and advancing the story in new directions** – new locations, opponents and encounters!

For example, the party finally tracks down the gang of thieves who stole an enchanted elven tapestry from the party's benefactor. The two sides engage in a pitched battle on the roof of the thieves' hideout: an abandoned mansion on a cliff top overlooking a dangerous, rocky shore below.

After briefly engaging in a fight (3 rounds), the leader of the band of thieves decides to shove the tapestry over the edge of the rooftop where it rested, jumping right along after it.

This failed attempt to acquire a valuable treasure from the thieves doesn't mean the mission or adventure comes to a screeching halt. The fight atop the rooftop might continue, or the party might jump after the escaping thief and the tapestry, taking the battle and mission to the rocky shores below.

Or perhaps the party chooses to stay on the rooftop to finish off, subdue or force the surrender of the remaining thieves. The party gathers more information and eventually gets a chance to acquire the tapestry in a future mission.

The Mission Stat Block

Below we present several combat missions. Each uses a stat block Tony and I designed so you can read, understand and assess missions easier.

Here is the stat block breakdown:

Mission Name: To help you identify, sort and find missions in the future.

Mission Success: The mission objective(s).

Mission Failure: The fail state. What constitutes mission failure?

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Encounter Elements: Things you need to include in the encounter, and things that might make the mission even interesting.

Tactics: GMing advice to help you run the mission well.

Twists: Unexpected elements that will surprise players and will make the mission memorable.

Top 5 Missions

Here are our five favorite combat missions, including a short description and advice on how to include them.

Consider these missions to be templates. You can run the same mission over and over – just change some of the details each time.

For example, the Acquire mission template can be used for quest-style combats several times in an adventure, no problem.

Tip – Time is almost always a factor in missions. Keep typical time limits for mission success to just a few rounds – 1-5 rounds total.

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Mission 1: Acquire

"You have something we want..."

Mission Success: The party locates and seizes a valuable object in the area.

Mission Failure:

- The party is unable to locate or take possession of the object.
- The enemy takes the item from the area or the item was moved from the area earlier.

Encounter Elements:

- Include monsters that hamper or punish mobility, making the acquisition of the object challenging.
- Include enemy escape plans and routes should the party get too close to the object.
- Include treacherous terrain or obstacles such as wards and traps that surround and protect the item.

Tactics:

- Enemies will move and attack to intercept and delay any PC advancing upon the object.
- They will also funnel the party into the most dangerous paths to the item at every opportunity, such shoving the characters into the pool of bubbling acid that surrounds a ghostly treasure chest whose secret contents the party seeks.
- The combat will be dominated by enemy attempts to protect, escape with or even destroy the object.

Twists:

- The object is worn by or grafted to the skin of a creature, making this more than a simple item retrieval mission.
- The item is much larger and heavier than expected, making normal means of taking or carrying it impossible.

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Mission 2: Escape Destruction

"We're not gonna make it!"

Mission Success: The party outlasts or survives an area and time period of massive natural or magical destruction – all while fighting an enemy and competing for safe routes out of the area.

Mission Failure:

- The party is unable to exit the devastated area in time.
- The party is captured by the enemy, or is badly hurt, buried alive, or killed by the devastation.

Encounter Elements:

- Include monsters with multiple movement modes, such as a climbing, burrowing or the ability to ignore treacherous terrain.
- Include treacherous terrain or hazards such as rockslides, avalanches and magical storms.

Tactics:

- Enemies will look to force PCs into dangerous terrain or hazards.
- They will seal off or attempt to block exits they take.
- The combat will be a series of brief skirmishes covering a lot of ground, moving towards exits.

Twists:

- The devastation can be stopped with a spoken magical key word, found in ancient scripts on a wall slab or in a prior encounter.
- One or more enemy creatures may attempt to help the party escape, taking them to a safe area or to a place where they might be able to slow or stop the destruction, such as a mechanism or the ancient script riddle.

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Mission 3: Hold the Line

“We are the 300!”

Mission Success: The party defends a location from enemy attacks for a period of time, protecting a location or chokepoint and preventing enemies from getting past them.

Mission Failure:

- The enemy breaks through the line onto the location.
- The enemy takes control of the location or proceeds past it towards the next target.

Encounter Elements:

- Include monsters with multiple movement modes, such as a climbing, burrowing, the ability to ignore treacherous terrain, and flight.
- Include siege weapons, on both sides, as appropriate.
- Include an opportunity for the party to prepare for an incoming enemy force, using the extra time to manage their gear and resources and identify ideal positioning points in the area. For example, the party fashions make-shift defenses or traps out of their gear and the natural materials and furnishings around them, or position scouts and snipers in high and defensible locations.

Tactics:

- Enemies will attempt to overrun the chokepoint with concentrated attacks, trying to break the line.
- The combat will be a test of endurance, forcing the party to adapt to bolster areas where they are taking heavy damage.

Twists:

- The location is unexpectedly flanked or attacked by an additional force of flying creatures later in the combat, forcing the party to protect more entry points and cover more ground.
- A valuable item (see Acquire) is in the center of the location the party is defending.

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Mission 4: Infiltrate

“Mission impossible...”

Mission Success: The party makes their way to a location by disabling foes quickly and remaining undetected.

Mission Failure:

- The enemy raises an alarm or communicates the presence of intruders to the larger force.
- The party calls too much attention to itself – they don’t avoid enemy detection or dispatch enemies within one round of encountering them.

Encounter Elements:

- Include one small encounter or a series of small encounters with weak monsters that can be knocked unconscious or killed quickly.
- Include terrain features such as pits, cliffs, and bridges where monsters can quickly be eliminated from combat.
- Include mechanisms and items that can be used as mass communication devices such as nearby gongs or signal fire towers, guard dogs or similar loud subservient beasts, carried horns or whistles, or intruder-sensing magical alarms or wards.

Tactics:

- Enemies want to raise the alarm first and fight second.
- Most of the combat consists of small windows of opportunity for the PCs to creatively and quickly thwart the enemies from raising the alarm.

Twists:

- The enemy has been tipped off. They set a trap or ambush at the target location, allowing the party to infiltrate their way there.
- The target location is not what the party expected; illusion magic masks its qualities or the person or item (see Acquire) they expected to find there is no longer there.

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Mission 5: Save the Innocent

“We’re their only hope...”

Mission Success: The party rescues hostages or prisoners, saving their lives and returning them to safety.

Mission Failure:

- The party is unable to save the hostages or prisoners in time.
- The enemy takes them to a different location or kills them.

Encounter Elements:

- Ensure monsters are in position to easily harm or outright kill hostages or prisoners. For example, include a few monsters standing right over helpless or unconscious victims.
- Include physical barriers, such as prison cells, cages and manacles, for the party to have to deal with while trying to rescue the victims as quickly and as safely as possible.

Tactics:

- Enemies will look harm or kill their prisoners or hostages first and directly fight the party second.
- The combat will play out with party prioritizing their efforts on the monsters that most directly threaten the prisoners or hostages.

Twists:

- The prisoners or hostages are in a mobile prison, such as a prison cart, meaning some of the monsters may take off with the cart or send it careening over the nearby cliff edge during the fight.
- Some of the prisoners or hostages are capable fighters, and once freed, help the party kill or drive off their captors.

Faster Combat: Double Your Drama and Story in Half the Time

Mission Successful

Congratulations, you've learned how to change typical total annihilation combats into story-rich missions with alternative combat objectives, creating faster-paced and more engaging combat.

Next, you're going to expand the Top 5 Combat Missions list by designing your own missions. You will learn what questions to ask yourself during the mission creation process. Step-by-step, you'll learn how to design unique combat mission stat blocks – tailored to your very own adventures and campaigns!

See you in the next lesson.

Resources

[Redefining Combat](#) by Boomer of Clan of the Gray Wolf is an outstanding review of real-life inspired combat objectives here. An ex-military gamer, Boomer offers tremendous insights.

You'll also find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Mission-Style Roleplaying](#) and [8 Tactics for Mooks](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), [Encounter as Story: Tiny Encounters](#), and [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

2.03 Fight for a Greater Purpose

“You must understand that there is more than one path to the top of the mountain.” – Miyamoto Musashi, The Book of Five Rings

Create Your Own Combat Missions

Want to design your own combat missions, fully tailored to the people, places and things of your campaign and adventures? Today you’ll learn how to do this, including what design questions to ask and answer along the way. Let total annihilation scenarios take a back seat while you light a fire under your combat creativity.

Why Create My Own Missions?

Ever have your players look up and ask **why** they’re fighting their enemy? A steady diet of “kill ‘em all” scenarios gets repetitive, causes players to lose focus and eats up a lot of session time.

Last lesson, you learned how to re-imagine total annihilation combats by choosing from a list of alternative missions. Now it’s time for you to add to that list by designing your own engaging combat objectives.

Mission Design Questions

When you create your own missions, ask and answer the following questions. This exercise prepares you for the following step: how to fill out your custom Mission stat block.

Refer to the last section for a brief discussion of each of the three core mission design foundations below.

Tactical Ops

- What areas of the battlefield offer key positional advantages?
 - *Examples:* higher ground, cover, magical phenomena that provide damage buffs
- What areas of the battlefield are particularly dangerous?
 - *Examples:* pits, bridges, rockslides, smoldering fires, toxic vegetation or gas clouds

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- What items or creatures on the battlefield are most valuable to either side?
 - *Examples:* prisoners, escape routes, treasure hoards

Monster Lore

- How intelligent is the enemy?
 - Higher intelligence enemies tend to employ more complex tactics. For example, they'll be more mindful of exits in the area and employ focus fire on the most threatening party, such as the most effective damage-dealer, most powerful healer, or leader of the group.
- What is the typical behavior and ecology of the enemy?
 - How do these creatures fit in the world? Even bandits and goblins tend to have some kind of civilized code, while orcs and ogres tend to be more savage and blunt in their approach.

Adventure Goals

- Why is each side fighting?
 - How does this fight tie into quests and adventure goals? What events led to this combat? Why is each side engaging in combat? What do they hope to gain and what do they have to lose?
- Who is each side working for?
 - What benefactors, authority figures or power groups are behind the scenes? How do they treat the party or monsters? How loyal is each group to the cause behind the combat and adventure?

Create Your Mission Stat Block: 6 Steps

Now that you've identified key areas of the battlefield and explored monster and party motivations in the context of your adventure, it's time to translate that information into the Mission Stat Block.

Refer frequently to last section's Top 5 missions for fully detailed examples to guide you throughout the Mission Stat Block creation process.

1. **Encounter Name & Mission Type:** Give your combat a relevant and exciting name that includes reference to your world or adventure's key people, places or things. Identify the specific combat mission with a word or short phrase. Your custom mission type should include an ***action word*** (see below for details) –

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the party must **do** something. More specifically, the party must do something besides kill everything in sight. *Example:* Tergyn's Haunted Shrine: Hold the Line.

2. **Mission Success:** Identify at least one end condition for success. You expand your mission type name or action word here by fully defining it.
3. **Mission Failure:** Identify at least one end condition for a failed mission. Here you make it clear what triggers a mission failure. Failure often means a time limit is reached, such as in the Escape Destruction mission. Failure can also mean the mission has changed or the objective is no longer achievable, such as when monsters with a valuable magic item escape the battlefield in the Acquire mission.
4. **Encounter Elements:** Identify monster types and roles that match up well for your mission. Do the same for features of the area, such as terrain and furnishings. Add as much detail to the opposition as you like to further tailor encounter elements to your campaign, including key NPC names, for example.
5. **Tactics:** Identify the monsters' thought process and priorities in the fight. Summarize how you expect the combat to play out – movement, attack effectiveness, typical actions in combat – given the impact of the Mission.
6. **Twists:** Add at least one surprise or wrinkle to the mission. Borrow ideas from other missions and combine them, or add an event that changes priorities or plans after mission success or failure. You can also refer to your twists in case your current combat encounter is falling flat in actual play. Twists serve as backup plans and surprises to delight your players and keep combat pacing and excitement high.

Mission Action Words

Use the following list of story-rich action words, classic combat objectives and sample Mission types for inspiration to create your own Missions, fully customized for your world and adventures:

- Acquire
- Assassinate
- Breach
- Break or Destroy Item
- Capture
- Commandeer a Vehicle
- Cover another Group

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- Delay an Event
- Deliver
- Disable or Knock Unconscious
- Distract
- Escape Destruction
- Establish Truce
- Escort
- Force Surrender
- Force Withdrawal
- Hold the Line
- Infiltrate
- Protect
- Reach Before Enemy
- Redirect
- Rescue
- Save the Innocent
- Seal Away
- Seal Off
- Secure
- Split Enemy Force
- Steal
- Stop an Event
- Survive
- Trap
- Trick

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Your Combats Now Have Purpose

You've now learned how to craft your own combat missions, fully tailored to your adventures and world.

Next, we're going to delve deeper into how you expect your missions to play out during actual play. You'll learn what makes a solid encounter planning process from start to finish, including time considerations and story structure-inspired combat pacing.

Resources

Find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Mission-Style Roleplaying](#) and [8 Tactics for Mooks](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), [Encounter as Story: Tiny Encounters](#), and [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

2.04 Master Plans: Expand & Upgrade Your Mission Stat Blocks

“The general who wins the battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses makes but few calculations beforehand.” – Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Level Up Your Missions into Complete Combat Encounter Plans

Today you will learn how to expand and upgrade your mission stat blocks into complete combat encounter plans. How will we get there? You'll consider classic story structure, identify how much time your mission will likely take, add expanded tactical information and list the rewards your heroes/combatants fight so bravely and recklessly for!

Why Expand Your Missions?

Every combat encounter or mission is a story, and all stories need fleshing out to draw us in and make sense. In addition, you need to plan for the time cost, the highest priority tactics and the rewards of your expanded mission.

Let classic story structure inspire you as you give your mission stat blocks one last, vital polish, transforming them into full **Combat Encounter Plans**.

Classic Story Structure: Why Study It?

Classic story structure includes intro, rising action, climax and resolution. Sometimes called narrative or dramatic structure, these four key natural stages of a story have been told and written about throughout history.

Why is classic story structure important in creating your Combat Encounter Plan? By knowing what makes a great story, you'll have an easier time generating ideas to polish the story surrounding your mission, your mission stat block, and your final Combat Encounter Plan.

Let's dive into story structure and its individual stages.

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Introduction or Exposition

In the beginning, you learn the answers to three key questions about a story:

- Who are the good guys?
- Who are the bad guys?
- What problem or conflict is the story about?

Rising Action

As the story continues, the good guys and bad guys may clash in minor or brief ways as the conflict intensifies. Stakes rise, and triumphs and setbacks occur.

Climax

Here the rising action reaches a breaking point. In many stories, this might mean a long-awaited confrontation with the ultimate bad guy to once and for all resolve the great conflict. The stakes are at their highest as the two sides clash to win it all!

Resolution

Finally, we arrive at the aftermath or consequences of the climactic scene. Like you'll soon do with your Mission Stat Block in this lesson, the resolution is a last layer of natural polish to the entire story.

How to Use Classic Story Structure

Review your Mission Stat Block with an eye towards story structure. **If a mission feels bland or pointless, chances are there's not enough story structure elements included.**

Here's a list of several story structure elements drawn from the four components above. **Use these elements as inspiration** for your existing Mission Stat Block. If your mission feels like it could use a narrative jolt – or just some seasoning – this is the place to find it.

8 Story Structure Elements

- Distinctive, Memorable Characters or Groups
- Overcoming Challenges
- Suffering Setbacks
- Complications
- Powerful or Sudden Revelations, Discoveries or Events

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- Building Tension or Friction
- Release of Tension or Friction
- Multiple Paths, Solutions or Conclusions

Final Touches: +3 Additions to Your Mission Stat Block

Now we'll add in a few real, administrative GM considerations as well as vital tactical information to your Mission Stat Block. This is the final step that expands your Mission Stat Block into a complete Combat Encounter Plan.

1. Expected Combat Duration

How much time – in rounds and real time – do you expect your mission will likely take?

This prepares you for the reality of GMing: **there are time constraints for session and story progress to manage**. Note what percentage of the session you expect to devote to this combat encounter.

You don't need a perfect number. Your goal is a reasonable guess based on the principles of Faster Combat's first Game Knowledge lesson. Knowing this number helps you be **better prepared to ramp up combat speed and pacing** if you're about to run out of session time.

It also serves as a reminder of any critical time limits for that specific mission. For example, if the party only has 3 rounds to save prisoners from being killed or taken from the area, note the round limit in this section.

2. Critical Tactics

Here is where you expand the Tactics section of your Mission Stat Block. Identify the most critical tactics of the party's opponents by listing out their most devastating one or two specific attacks or tactics.

Your goal here is frontload the enemy party's tactics right at the top of the combat. Pull out the big guns immediately!

As you learned earlier in Design, faster combat also means Turn Efficiency gained through the dramatic impact of accurate and significantly damaging attacks.

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3. Rewards

What mission is complete without acquiring its reward? Ensure your Combat Encounter Plan includes the story rewards (i.e. clues to future or current missions or quests are excellent) and any treasure that comes with mission success.

How to Create Your Combat Encounter Plan

Here's an example of the story-rich "Save the Innocent" combat mission that has been expanded into a complete Combat Encounter Plan.

Note the various opportunities to include and detail the 8 Story Structure Elements in each section. When creating your own Combat Encounter Plans, remember to customize and personalize these sections and elements by using specific names, places and things from your campaign or adventure.

Save the Innocent

"We're their only hope..."

Mission Success: The party rescues hostages or prisoners, saving their lives and returning them to safety.

Mission Failure: The party is unable to save the hostages or prisoners in time. The enemy takes them to a different location or kills them.

Encounter Elements: Ensure monsters are in position to easily harm or outright kill hostages or prisoners. For example, include a few monsters standing right over helpless or unconscious victims. Include physical barriers, such as prison cells, cages and manacles for the party to have to deal with while trying to rescue the victims as quickly and as safely as possible.

Tactics: Enemies will harm or kill their prisoners or hostages first and fight the party second. The combat will play out with party prioritizing their efforts on the monsters that most directly threaten the prisoners or hostages.

Critical Tactics: The enemies open with a volley of Massive Arrow Storm from the artillery, a Massive Leg Sweep from the bodyguard, and a Massive Fireball from their leader.

Twists: The prisoners or hostages are in a mobile prison – a prison cart, meaning some of the monsters may take off with the cart or send it careening over the nearby cliff edge during the fight. Some of the prisoners or hostages are capable fighters, and once freed, help the party kill or drive off their captors.

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Rewards: The enemies are carrying a map to the secret lair of the rogue spellcaster they are seeking on their bounty hunting quest. The enemies are also carrying 1,000 gold worth of gems.

Expected Combat Duration: 45 minutes or 3 rounds; 20% of session.

Masterfully Planned

Well done! You've learned how to expand your Mission Stat Blocks into complete Combat Encounter Plans. You've studied and included classic story structure elements and added helpful sections such as combat encounter duration, specific attacks to frontload the combat with, and the fantastic story and monetary rewards that make mission success so sweet.

Next, we're going to study the best ways to manage and track all the enemy combatant information in front of you.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [7 Plot-Twisting Tips](#), [Mission-Style Roleplaying](#) and [8 Tactics for Mooks](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), [Encounter as Story: Tiny Encounters](#), and [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

2.05 The Monster Profile: Easily Track Monstrous Proportions

*“Where is all the knowledge we lost with information?” –
T.S. Eliot*

Enhance Your Tracking of Monster Stats and Abilities

Today you're going Beast Mode! You will learn how to create your own, more efficient combination monster stat block and monster tracker. You'll go from feeling overwhelmed to being organized by creating custom Monster Profiles.

Why Create Monster Profiles?

Monster stat blocks contain a massive amount of information. **What you really need is monster knowledge.** Monster Profiles help you learn and understand how monsters best function and play during combat, from basic attacks to clever tactics.

Armed with monster knowledge rather than monster information means you create **Turn Efficiency** for the most critical combat turn in the game: the GM's!

How to Create a Monster Profile

Follow the six steps below to create the source of helpful monster knowledge you need to speed with intelligence through your turn. Your Monster Profiles – more efficient monster record sheets – await!

Step 1: Choose Tools

First, consider what tools or technologies you want to use to manage monster information. Consider dice-rolling and combat tracking methods and utilities, including visual aids or props.

Not sure what works best for you? Ask yourself these questions:

- How comfortable am I using technology versus tracking this information on paper? Which basic approach is fastest and easiest for me?
- Which technologies am I most comfortable with for editing and tracking monster information? Word processors, spreadsheets or more dedicated RPG tools (such as dice rollers or full encounter or session planning utilities)?

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- What software or simple offline system helps me roll complex or multiple monster attacks at once? (i.e. several attacks per round with secondary attacks)

Step 2: Transfer Original Stat Block

Now transfer or copy the original monster stat block to your chosen technology or piece of paper, whatever you chose in Step 1.

Review the stat block to gain a basic sense of its strengths, weaknesses, attacks, abilities and potential tactics.

Manually transfer the stat block or copy and paste one or two portions at a time to focus and reinforce your learning in steady, manageable bites.

Step 3: Rewrite Abilities

Edit, add notes to or rewrite confusing or complex abilities. Prioritize doing so with the monster's strengths (see [Design Lesson 2.1](#)).

Once you're comfortable with the monster's strengths, look up any keywords or rules that are unclear. Refer to Game [Knowledge Lesson 1.4](#) for guidance on how to mark up the rules.

Step 4: Add Tactics

Add three rounds of tactics, starting with its most damaging abilities and attacks. More powerful and wide-area attacks create Turn Efficiency, and a script of the monster's first three sets of actions to achieve this is exactly what you are creating here.

Use these highly specific, monster-level tactics as a supplement to the tactics in your Mission Stat Blocks and Combat Encounter Plans.

If you are starting a combat mission from scratch, use these specific monster tactics as inspiration for developing your Mission Stat Blocks and Combat Encounter Plans.

Step 5: Set Up Pre-Combat Tracking

Set up a basic pre-combat tracker to record your monsters' critical statistics. Focus on pre-rolls, pre-calculations and quick reference charts. The idea is to **create a pre-combat tracking framework**.

Following the guidelines in Step 1, decide what methods or technologies work best for your GMing style.

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Stuff You Can Set Up Pre-Combat

Here are examples of things to pre-roll, pre-calculate or chart as part of each Monster Profile. In the immediately following section, we look at tracking remaining resources in detail.

- Initiative pre-rolls or averages
- Attack modifiers chart for a full round or first 3 rounds
- Damage pre-rolls or averages for all attacks
- Results, effects or conditions chart for unique, one-shot or special attacks
- Terrain, weather and visibility modifiers chart
- Power attack versus normal hit and damage grid

Be sure to factor in any certainties in your encounter, such as terrain, hazards, conditions and buffs. Doing this in advance will save you a lot of time.

Step 6: Track Remaining Resources

No Monster Profile survives contact with the enemy! During actual game play, make sure you're comfortable with the method or technology you are using to track changes or remaining resources. This includes all your tracking options and aids, whether digital or physical.

For example, these form the "Big 3" of remaining monster resources:

- Remaining Hit Points
- Remaining Attacks or Powers
- Remaining Effects or Condition Durations

Two Questions for Great Resource Tracking

When in doubt if your monster tracking is sufficient, ask yourself these two questions:

- What's left for this monster to use?
- How can I display the remaining monster options right in front of me?

Create space as needed so the remaining quantities of these resources are clear to you at all times as a combat develops. A quick grasp of remaining resources contributes greatly to turn efficiency.

I've tried everything from paper to electronic spreadsheets and Master Plan software in my years of GMing since Basic D&D, and while they all have their strengths and

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weaknesses, I tend to like the simple and clean look as well as the powerful calculation capability of a good spreadsheet.

What's my favorite stat that a spreadsheet tracks for me? Remaining hit points. I love creating color-coded cells and large fonts to match conditions (i.e. badly hurt = red) and through a simple formula, I count down from maximum hit points by entering in the string of damage taken – the party's attacks. It's straightforward, visual, and quick, and does half the tracking work for me.

Visual Aids & Play Aids

What special visual aids and physical items will you use to supplement your other tools? Consider the following for tracking remaining resources, especially for the durations of effects and conditions:

- [Alea Tools](#) magnetic markers
- [Litko RPG Markers](#)
- [GameMastery Combat Pad](#)
- Hair bands, various colors
- Soda bottle rings, various colors
- Poker chips
- Colored paper clips
- Colored pipe-cleaners
- Colored modeling clay
- Post-It flags and pointed flags

Special thanks to [Seeker95 of the D&D forum community](#) for compiling many of the play aids listed here.

Beast Mode

Congratulations, you've activated Beast Mode! You've learned how to create a detailed, helpful source of monster knowledge for your combats and missions by creating custom Monster Profiles. You've reviewed and selected supporting technologies and play aids to make your monster tracking easier than ever.

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What's Next?

Never choose the wrong monsters for the right fight again! Next lesson, we're going to be talking about all the questions and issues involving monster selection itself. What monsters are best to profile? Which fit best in your combat missions?

You will learn how to choose the most turn efficient monsters for your combats. You will learn how to look at both monster design traits and the components of your Combat Encounter Plan to guide your monster selection process.

Resources

Several powerful technologies beyond word processors or spreadsheets are available to help you create and manage your Monster Profiles and more. Here is a selection of excellent options:

- [D&D 4e Combat Manager](#)
- [D&D Dice Roller](#)
- [D&D Virtual Table](#)
- [Dice Roller](#)
- [DM's Familiar](#)
- [Dungeon Mastering's DM Tools](#)
- [Dungeon Master's Battle Screen](#)
- [Hero Lab](#)
- [Master Plan](#)
- [Power2ool](#)
- [Virtual Combat Cards](#)
- [MyInfo](#)

You'll also find more help at Roleplaying Tips: [9 DM Tools and Integrating Them Into Your Games](#) and [10 Tips For Crafting Adventure-Based Holidays, Part 2](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [D&D 4e Condition Markers & Condition Cards](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#), and [Kilsek's D&D 4e Buff Cards](#).

2.06 Choose Wisely: Monstrous Selection

“Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

How to Select Monsters for Your Combats

Never choose the wrong monsters for the right fight again! Today you will learn how to choose the most turn efficient monsters for your combats. You will learn how to look at both monster design traits and the components of your Combat Encounter Plan to guide your monster selection process.

Why Choose Your Monsters Wisely?

Turn Efficiency starts with picking the right monsters for your combats, before you even get to the rolling dice.

First, you need to understand the complexity level of each monster in your Mission Stat Block based on their role. How difficult are they to manage and track during combat? How much time does executing their turns take?

You also need to eye your Combat Encounter Plans for complexity level. How complex is the mission and all its features, such as encounter elements, tactics and twists?

These two factors – monster role complexity and encounter complexity – require careful monster selection because they directly affect combat speed. Avoid monsters that are a bad match for your combat or mission so you don't contribute to combat grind.

Identify Monster Role Complexity

Each monster role has a degree of complexity, which we call **Monster Role Complexity (MRC)**. This means when you run the monsters as part of your combat, Mission Stat Block or Combat Encounter Plan, you avoid struggling with them on a game management level, eroding your decision-making speed and turn efficiency. You have enough to do as GM!

Below you'll find a summary of complexity by monster role. Refer to Lesson 2.1 for detailed descriptions of each monster role.

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Low Complexity

- **Toughs**
- **Melee**
- **Ranged**

Toughs and melee monsters are low complexity because their standard tactics and design encourage them to wade into and stay in melee, consistently beating down and occupying the attention of their nearest enemies.

Once in position, it's just a matter of using their best melee attacks and withstanding some of the expected punishment that goes along with prolonged fighting in melee.

Ranged attackers are built to take down single targets from a relatively safe distance as fast as possible. Positioning may be an issue, as many combat encounters start with some amount of range to the enemy. Like melee and toughs, attacks are straightforward.

For simpler, faster-moving combats where turn efficiency for your monsters is high, **choose higher amounts of toughs, melee and ranged monsters.**

High Complexity

- **Area Effect**
- **Healers/Buffers**

Monsters wielding several or hard-hitting area effect attacks have more to consider on the battlefield. Positioning of both themselves and their attacks is paramount to striking as many opponents as possible and maximize their attacks.

Similarly, Healers/Buffers must consider every combatant on the battlefield throughout the entire combat when it comes to determining the timing and area of their heals and buffs.

To avoid slogging through monster turns, **choose only small amounts of area effect and healer/buffer monsters.**

Measure Combat Encounter Complexity

Combat encounters also have a level of complexity. To measure the complexity of your Combat Encounter Plan, you will **itemize the features** of each of its components.

Once you have a clear sense of how many “moving parts” there are in your Combat Encounter Plan, you're better able to adjust complexity with simple additions or deletions.

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For example, to lower the negative turn efficiency impact and complexity of tactics or twists, use just one sentence, script or event for each section, instead of three or four.

How do you measure the complexity of your Combat Encounter Plan? You calculate your **Encounter Complexity Rank**.

Encounter Complexity Rank

At the heart of each Combat Encounter Plan is its Encounter Elements, Tactics, Critical Tactics and Twists. To calculate your Encounter Complexity Rank (ECR), do the following:

1. Under the Encounter Elements section of your Combat Encounter Plan, count each discrete sentence, script, event or element.
 - a. Repeat Step 1 for the Tactics, Critical Tactics and Twists sections.
2. Total the four values from Steps 1 and 2 – this is your Encounter Complexity Rank (ECR).
 - a. For example, if your Save the Innocent Combat Encounter Plan has 5 encounter elements, 3 tactical elements, 3 critical tactics and 1 twist, your Combat Encounter Plan has an ECR of 12.
3. Compare your ECR to the ECR Guideline: An ECR **below 10 indicates a low complexity** encounter, while an ECR of **10 or higher indicates a high complexity** encounter. Every 10 ECR indicates a significant jump in encounter complexity and significant decrease in turn efficiency.

Tip – Higher level play means naturally higher ECRs on average. **Stick to small, steady increases in ECR over time** as the party levels.

Tip – Avoid ECRs of 30 or higher as their complexity, time and management costs might consume the entire session!

Complexity Combinations

When you select monsters for your combats, consider the monster roles as well as encounter complexity. Each combination of Monster Role Complexity (MRC) and Encounter Complexity Rank (ECR) impacts monster turn efficiency differently during play.

- **Low MRC + Low ECR = Best Turn Efficiency**
- High MRC + Low ECR = Average Turn Efficiency
- Low MRC + High ECR = Average Turn Efficiency
- High MRC + High ECR = Worst Turn Efficiency

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Lessons from Medusa

In one of my recent campaigns, I had stumbled into the dreaded High MRC + High ECR combination without knowing it. As cool as my medusa and petrification-themed encounter was, the different and complex roles of all the monsters I had selected were hard to track and keep straight, whether in my head or on-screen. Simpler monster roles would have been a huge improvement to my turn efficiency.

The combat encounter itself also had two problems:

1. Its Mission was unclear (and thus defaulted to mostly a Kill 'Em All scenario)
2. It had too many moving parts. Reducing a few terrain features or tactical elements would have increased my turn efficiency as well.

You can read my full story and report in all its painfully insightful glory here: [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

Note of Caution

This lesson gives you tools to reduce combat encounter complexity. These are just options for you to strategically use when needed and when the time is right. We are not suggesting you simplify every combat encounter, replace all complex and cool monsters, and so on.

When appropriate, you can use ECR and MCR to judge encounter complexity and decide if that gels with your goals for the encounter, session pacing and story pacing.

You've Made a Wise Choice

Well done! You've learned how to identify the complexity of both the monsters you choose for your combats as well as the combats themselves. You've learned how to modify combat complexity by changing initially selected monsters and stripping away or adding encounter features that impact turn efficiency.

Next, you will build on your newfound wisdom and skill by learning how to expertly adjust monsters to fit your Faster Combat needs not only before you play but even on the fly.

Resources

Roleplaying Tips: [7 Plot-Twisting Tips](#), [Mission-Style Roleplaying](#) and [8 Tactics for Mooks](#).

Leonine Roar: [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), [Encounter as Story: Tiny Encounters](#), and [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

2.07 Sudden Monstrosities

“The fallen angel becomes a malignant devil.” – Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

How to Tweak Monsters

What if one small change, one little tweak to your monsters made all the difference between a fast-paced fight and a painful slog?

Today you will learn how to make small but impactful changes to monsters that improve their combat speed and effectiveness. You’ll learn to identify problem monster mechanics, learn what some simple and effective monster tweaks are, and finally put it all into practice at the end of the lesson.

Why Tweak Monsters?

Scanning monsters for problem mechanics is important so you can make better monster selections and tweak monsters to make them more **turn efficient** for their role in combat.

Problem Monster Mechanics

Understanding the amount of moving parts between the monsters and combat scenarios in your combats (see Lesson 2.06) is important because it gives you a quick sense of the complexity of both the monsters and the encounter itself.

Beyond those two guidelines, it’s important to look deeper at each monster in your combat. How complex are their abilities and attacks? How many steps, phases, keywords, triggers, conditions and rules are involved in a single power, ability or attack?

Avoid or minimize the amount of monsters with the following problem mechanics:

- Timing issues, including multiple timing checkpoints for saves or special attacks or abilities
- Attacks with multiple components, such as secondary or multiple attacks
- Damage with multiple components, such as condition-based or situational differences
- Complicated auras or buffs, such as multiple sizes, areas, bonus types, conditions and timing
- Multiple or rare defenses or resistances

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- Multiple or conditional movement abilities
- Multiple trigger-based abilities and attacks
- Complicated or multiple applied conditions or debuffs
- Lengthy or multi-phase special abilities or attacks (5+ lines of text)

Turn Efficiency Tweaks

Here's how you can turn up the efficiency on your monsters by role.

Toughs

To keep the feel of toughs but increase their turn efficiency, tweak yours as follows:

- **Increase** defenses, **decrease** hit points
- **Increase** defenses or hit points, **remove** special resistances
- **Increase** defenses or hit points, **reduce** movement and initiative
- **Increase** defenses or hit points, **remove** a complex special attack
- **Remove** opportunity attacks and **add** a bonus of +2 to +5 to attacks and/or damage
- **Add** or **amplify** a vulnerability (increase numbers and/or add negative conditions or effects)
- **Remove** a complex special defensive ability and **add** the ability to halve damage from a single attack once per encounter

Melee or Ranged

Tweak melee or ranged monsters as follows:

- **Increase** attack bonus, **decrease** hit points or defenses
- **Increase** damage, **decrease** hit points or defenses
- **Increase** movement and initiative, **reduce** hit points or defenses
- **Remove** opportunity attacks and **add** a bonus of +2 to +5 to attacks and/or damage
- **Remove** a complex special attack and **add** ability to deal double damage from a single attack once per encounter

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Area Effect

Area effect specialist monsters can be tweaked as follows:

- **Increase** attack bonus, **decrease** hit points or defenses
- **Increase** damage, **decrease** hit points or defenses
- **Increase** area effect size, **decrease** hit points or defenses
- **Remove** a complex area attack and **add** the ability to strike an additional target to the monster's other attacks

Healers/Buffers

And to maintain the feel of healers/buffers but keep decision making and turn speed crisp, tweak them as follows:

- **Increase** attack and damage buffs, **decrease** hit points or defenses
- **Increase** attack and damage buffs, **decrease** healing ability dice or totals
- **Remove** a complex buff, aura, or heal and **add** the ability for the monster to grant a small attack and damage bonus to all allies for one round
- **Remove** a complex buff, aura, or heal and **add** the ability for the monster to heal 33-50% of a monster's maximum hit points once per encounter

Other Monster Roles

Two additional monster roles – cannon fodder and boss monsters – include the weakest and strongest of monsters. How do you tweak them towards greater turn efficiency while fulfilling their special roles?

Cannon Fodder

Weak, minion-like monsters that can be killed in just one or two hits are becoming a staple of many campaigns. By default, they're very efficient. Increasing their number will have only a marginal impact on turn efficiency as their attacks are straightforward and their hit points are poor.

Still, here are a few tweaks where you'll have to less to track and less to roll:

- **Reduce** quantity of cannon fodder
- **Add** flat or average damage to all attacks (if not already included)
- **Remove** complex special attacks and **increase** attack or damage slightly

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Boss Monsters

Named champion monsters significantly stronger than standard monsters are usually featured as the main antagonists and in the most challenging combats of an adventure. They also tend to be more complex in roles than a standard monster.

For example, elite bodyguards, tribal chiefs or shaman, the white dragon that rules the glacial island.

- Use the **suggested tweaks for Toughs**.
- Carefully review the monster's attacks and abilities, and choose **one or two tweaks from the other lists** (Melee or Ranged, Area Effect or Healers/Buffers).
- **Simplify or remove special attacks and abilities** that have multiple parts, steps, triggers or requirements. (See suggested tweaks for all roles above.)

You've Created a Monster!

Well done! You've learned how to make small but meaningful adjustments to monsters that improve their turn efficiency. You've learned what problem monster mechanics you need to look for, and how to tweak them based on monster role and type.

What's Next?

Next, you will learn how to re-use familiar monsters in new and interesting ways. You'll learn how to save both session prep and combat time while adding engaging twists to monsters you've already used in your combats and campaigns.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [6 Tips For Making Monsters Meaner](#), [11 Monstrous Tips](#), [10 Monstrous Tips](#), [7 More Monstrous Tips](#) and [Don't Be Afraid to Modify Your Monsters](#).

And more at Leonine Roar: [Opportunity Attacks: 6 Better Executions](#), [Stop Rolling Your Bonus Crit Dice](#), [Monster Complexity and Selection](#), [Global Encounter Elements](#), [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#) and [Six Ways to Scale Back Immediate Actions](#).

2.08 Bring ‘Em Back Alive

“Werewolf, vampire, ghoul, unnamable creature from the wastes. The monster never dies.” – Stephen King, Cujo

How to Re-Use Monsters

Ever been so short on time you weren’t able to create any new combat encounters for your next game? Or blitz through the night’s adventure and unexpectedly have time for another battle or two?

Today you will learn how to plan to re-use monsters from your current or previous session without spending time on new monster selection or full combat encounter development. You’ll learn exactly how to adjust monsters you already know when you don’t have the right Monster Stat Block or Combat Encounter Plan handy.

Finally, you’ll share exactly how you would approach that exact scenario when your party finally reaches the den of hydra-riding frost giant!

Why Re-Use Monsters?

When you **reuse foes, you benefit because you are familiar with their rules, tactics, pacing and feel in play**. This increases your **Turn Efficiency** and shaves a lot of time from your combats.

Re-Use Approaches

There are two main re-use approaches:

1. Re-skins
2. Signature traits

Re-skinning is the fastest method while signature traits let you flex your creativity while making only a few simple mechanical changes.

Re-Skins

When you perform the simplest of re-skins, you make **cosmetic changes** to monster **descriptors** and **information**, with little to zero mechanical impact.

To re-skin, take an existing monster, rename it and use it as is. Choose monsters from a previous fight in the same session or from previous weeks and adventures.

You can also choose from monsters you’ve yet to use, but keep in mind your turn efficiency will drop because you haven’t had any practice time with those monsters. You

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won't know their abilities or attacks very well, or how well or poorly they actually play in the battlefield.

Re-Skins 2.0

These give you a little more direction on changes to flavor, approach or role:

- Combat Role
- Weapons
- Armor
- Movement modes
- Attacks and Abilities

Re-Skinned Monster Examples

Here are some example re-skins:

- **Kobold to Orc.** Re-skin the kobold javelin-thrower you used from last fight as an orc spear thrower or archer. Use the same hit and damage expressions.
- **Drow to Wolf.** Re-skin an assassin-style mid-level dark elf creature you found as a foe for your low-level party into something more monstrous, like a zombie wolf. Rename the creature and scale the monster's levels (see above).
- **Giant to Dragon.** Re-skin a giant champion from last adventure into a white dragon. Change its creature type to humanoid or giant, add flight, and rename its most powerful attack into a breath weapon.

Signature Traits

You can also create a signature trait, defining quality or trait for monsters you re-use.

Change one to three things about your monster using the list below. This makes them distinct and memorable, whether solo or in packs.

Unlike re-skins, you will define a mechanical change to the monsters. These signature traits allow you to re-create old, familiar monsters and make them fresh and engaging. Also use them to add a **different spin or edge** to a monster – including ones you've re-skinned and decide to tweak further with signature traits.

- Weapons
- Armor
- Equipment or supplies

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- Fighting style
- Finishing move or most powerful attack
- Mobility or quickness
- Strength
- Toughness
- Stealth
- Change damage type (i.e. cold instead of fire, ranged bolt spells instead of arrows)
- Change monster race or type
- Change monster role
- Change or add a keyword (i.e. an undead skeleton takes on shadow qualities)
- Scale monster levels up or down

Tip: Use time-saving automated digital tools whenever possible to scale monster levels, such as the monster utility found in the [D&D Adventure Tools](#) or [Hero Lab](#).

Signature Trait Monster Examples

Here are some example signature trait monster examples:

- **Kobold Tech.** Signature trait kobold javelin-throwers whose shortswords have a pushable button that fire the sword-blade like a thrown dagger or javelin. Perhaps these special javelins have blades at both ends, allowing the kobold to “throw” twice per round, but for dagger damage each, instead of javelin damage once.
- **Drow Brawler.** A drow born with incredible strength and toughness that match his mobility. Rather than use weapons to compliment his drow racial abilities, he instead ambushes enemies and beats them to death with his bare fists and boxing style stance. You increase his strength score and strength based attacks, and then scale his level down to match closer to your party.
- **Wild Dragon Sage.** A white dragon who was born without being able to breathe frost, but after spending a decade with druids, somehow learned to breathe acid instead. The dragon always carries strange “tomes” – collections of magically dried leaves, engraved stones and marked bones.

Over time, the dragon has learned to infuse these items with protective energies that increase the dragon’s resistance to fire and acid damage. You like the shorter list of mechanics to manage for a young white dragon, so you use those as a base instead of an elder dragon, and adjust the young dragon’s level up to match the party.

The Monster Never Dies

Congratulations! You've learned how to re-use monsters without having to spend excessive amounts of time on new monster selection or full combat encounter development. You've mastered re-skinning monsters and how to tweak them by adding distinctive signature traits that keep them fresh and engaging.

Next, you will study and master terrain and combat location design. Creating fantastic and dangerous environments where your combats take place is a critical part of **Faster Combat**.

Resources

More at Roleplaying Tips: [Interesting Combats With Themed Skirmish Groups, Part 1](#), [Interesting Combats With Themed Skirmish Groups, Part 2](#), [6 Tips For Making Monsters Meaner](#), [11 Monstrous Tips](#), [10 Monstrous Tips](#), [7 More Monstrous Tips](#) and [Don't Be Afraid to Modify Your Monsters](#).

More at Leonine Roar: [Fear of Death: Which Monsters Finish Off Dying Characters?](#), [12 Ways to Describe Minions: First, Stop Calling Them Minions!](#), [Monsters That Grab You: Why Grab Stinks](#), [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#) and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

2.09 On Location: Create Your Combatscape

“Think lightly of yourself and deeply of the world.” – Miyamoto Musashi, The Book of Five Rings

Terrain and Location Design Considerations

Ever wish the location of your battles was just as imaginative and fantastic as its beasts and monsters?

Today you will learn how to create your **Combatscape**: compelling and dynamic combat environments, locations and terrain that contribute to **Turn Efficiency**.

You’ll learn what battlefields and environmental features to avoid that contribute to combat slowdown.

Finally, you’ll redesign a specific Combatscape by applying everything you’ve learned.

Why Create Great Combatscapes?

What’s just as important as the combatants in a battle? The fight location and the features of the battlefield.

Like turn-efficient monsters, **turn-efficient combat locations and environmental features enhance combat speed**. Great Combatscapes include significant features of your combat encounter aside from its combatants. They include location or pacing-related threats and interactive features.

Great Combatscapes enhance turn efficiency by presenting new but efficient combat options, such as **increased damage output, increased mobility or increased attack range**. Think of non-combatant features as resources and opportunities to improve major combat elements such as combat pacing, decision-making speed and total combat damage output.

How to Create Great Combatscapes

First, decide and understand the timing of your Combatscape’s features. Then, focus on the four major categories of these features.

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Step 1: Establish a Global Encounter Elements Initiative Turn

Ever feel overwhelmed by the timing of environmental effects? There's too many of them and they trigger at very different points during the combat. Too late you realize everything has become too difficult to track, and combat becomes a slog.

This is one common problem when creating a Combatscape. While all kinds of engaging terrain, weather and phenomena are exciting, they can also be complex, especially when layered and managed together in the same combat.

The solution: manage global encounter elements timing on a single turn by giving your Combatscape's global encounter elements an **initiative turn at the top of each combat round**. This gives you the most turn efficiency possible; add in more environmental "check points" for the same effect and your turn efficiency drops.

Tip – Some Combatscape features are so interactive that they will function both on their special initiative turn and when certain conditions or triggers are met. It's okay to have one or two of these in a combat – that usually means you have an exciting Combatscape element!

For example, hot geysers fire out of the ground during combat. However, you decide they're also sensitive to motion and nearby weight, so they will not only fire at the top of each round, but also whenever any combatant gets within just a few feet of them.

Step 2: Create Turn-Efficient Encounter Elements

To create terrain-efficient terrain or features, focus on these three concepts:

- Feature increases damage **output**
- Feature increases **mobility**
- Feature increase attack **range**

Apply these three concepts to the four major global elements of your Combatscape. Here are some examples within each category:

1. Dungeon Dressing

- **Fired Up:** Large braziers that deal area fire damage every round
- **That is Not a Bed:** Opened iron maidens
- **Quick, This Way:** Shallow steps or slides to other nearby rooms
- **Just Swinging By:** Rope-like vines hanging from the crumbling tower walls that can be used to either quickly swing down to the ground level where the

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party starts the combat, or up to a slightly higher level where the goblin archers begin the fight

- **I Can See For Miles:** A half-ruined tree-fort, that when climbed, gives a great vantage point for ranged attacks and avoids a significant amount of forest-cover

2. Weather and Natural Terrain

- **Fire Bad:** Bubbling lava flows and pools that deal damage every round
- **Winter is Coming:** Stinging sleet that deals damage every round
- **Go With the Flow:** Mountain pass winds that increase movement speeds by a small amount with or without a successful skill check
- **Take a Hike:** Patches of brambles or newly fallen, sharp and broken tree limbs

3. Fantastic Terrain and Phenomena

- **Entropic Doom:** Pulsing orbs of entropy that deal difficult-to-heal damage every round
- **Giants' Breath:** Ancient giant temple mists that slowly increase the size and strength of each combatant, granting combatants a small damage bonus that increases every round
- **Bathed in Blood:** A pool of boiling demon blood that, if bathed in, increases the range of all attacks by 100%, including melee attacks for the duration of the combat

4. Monster Waves

Though technically not a physical or tangible feature, monster waves are a significant Combatscape element. Use them to enhance combat pacing by creating a variety of threats.

- **Masters, Pets and Neighbors:** Round 1 begins with 6 ogres emerging from a cave. At the start of round 2, the ogres' wolf companions emerge from the nearby forest. At the start of round 3, monstrous centipedes emerge from their nearby burrows, disturbed by the combat.
- **Scouts, Backup and Air Support:** Round 1 begins with a pair of drow scouts on two intersecting rope bridges. At the start of round 2, the rest of their main patrol – another 10 drow – shows up. At the start of round 3, a quartet of giant leaping spiders explodes down on top of the party from above.

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A drow spellcaster also flies in from underneath, hovering over a cliff top about a hundred paces below the bridges.

Monster Waves: Disturbed Centipedes

This week in my arctic tribal campaign, I had a dozen giant frost centipedes burrow up from three holes in the ground after combat started. Disturbed by the commotion of the party fighting dragons above their icy underground lair, and always hungry for fresh meat and freshly spilled blood, these monstrous centipedes joined the battle on round 2.

A few of them lagged in the back and communicated down the hole to their brothers – another fresh batch of frost centipedes burrowed up and joined the battle on round 3.

Though the party made short work of both waves, they added more variety to combat, did some damage, and were quick and easy to manage for me as GM. And fun too – they exploded in a burst of sleet, ice and guts upon death!

Combatscape Features to Avoid

Avoid or minimize the following example problem Combatscape features. In dashes or small areas of a battle location, they can work, but do not let these features **dominate** a battlefield. Don't break the 50/50 rule – more than 50% of a battlefield covered in hampering features reduces turn efficiency.

- **Feature decreases damage output**
 - **I Can't Feel A Thing:** An aura of weakness clings to the **entire** mansion ruin, reducing combatant damage by 50%
- **Feature decreases mobility**
 - **Not-So-Warm Blanket:** Heavy snows and ice **blanket** the village, making movement difficult and sometimes dangerous (reduces speed by 50% and possibility of falling)
- **Feature decreases attack range**
 - **No Soup for You:** The fog is so thick it **surrounds** you, limiting your vision along the pirate-controlled beach to just a few paces

For Monster Waves, avoid:

- Too many toughs or boss monsters
- Too few cannon fodder monsters
- Too many waves (4 or more)
- Too few entry points

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You Made a Scene – and Everyone’s Looking

Congratulations! You’ve learned how to create great Combatscapes: compelling and dynamic combat environments, locations and terrain. You’ve also learned what features contribute to poor Combatscapes and combat slowdown, and how to adjust them.

Next, you will learn how to become a true hit point alchemist by learning and applying a whole host of pre-combat and on-the-fly monster hit point adjustment techniques.

Resources

More at Roleplaying Tips: [Turn Terrain into a Monster](#) and [Monster Features and Terrain Game Changers](#).

More at Leonine Roar: [Monster Complexity and Selection](#), [Global Encounter Elements](#), [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#), [Encounter Start: Distance Matters](#) and [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#).

2.10 Hit Point Alchemy

*“Alchemy is the art of manipulating life... to help it evolve.”
– Jean Dubuis*

How to Adjust Monster Hit Points

Ever wonder how much quicker combat would be if you simply made a few hit point tweaks to your monsters? Today you will learn a variety of turn efficient methods to adjust monster hit points and what methods to avoid.

You'll take your knowledge of these methods and apply your own hit point alchemy in today's monstrous activity.

Why Adjust Monster Hit Points?

We've all been there – big combats with powerful monsters that look exciting on paper and then drag during battle. It's important to create a fast-paced combat experience where monsters pose threats but without excessive life spans. A twelve-round marathon fight may sound exhilarating, but it's not practical for most combats – the combat slog risk and time cost is too high.

Monster hit points are a way of measuring physical and mental toughness, such as health, resolve and morale. Look at monster hit points as a resource you can manipulate to increase combat speed and avoid combat slog.

Top 5 Hit Point Adjustment Methods

Here are the top hit point adjustment approaches that help reduce combat slog and increase combat speed. When monsters are eliminated more quickly, you gain **Turn Efficiency** – and more combat opportunities in the same session.

1. Percentage Reductions

Halve your monsters' hit points and you'll see a noticeable difference when it comes to finishing off monsters.

50% less hit points is common and quick, though other helpful reductions include anywhere from 20-33% or 66-80%.

2. Re-Role

Another way to reduce hit points is to use the hit points of other standard or more powerful monster roles for your monster.

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For example, if you like how quickly your ranged and artillery monsters tend to last in a fight, convert all your toughs in the next encounter to the equivalent hit points of ranged monsters for their level.

Remember that your toughs will still tend to have high defenses, so don't worry about softening them up because they still retain some of their trademark toughness.

Aerial Battle: The Dragonlings

This is exactly what I did in a recent encounter in my tribal campaign. Four dragons joined forces to fight three unique dragons the party had befriended. The fight started mid-air as the party's dragons attempted to get the party to the enemy giant king's castle in the clouds. An exciting and cinematic scene was set, but I realized that four elite or champion dragons would take a long time to whittle through.

So I dubbed the enemy dragons younger, zealous "dragonlings" – that's what the party's friendly dragons called the enemy dragons as they battled. I used the equivalent hit point totals of ranged monsters for their level for the enemy dragons, rather than their normal, significantly higher hit points.

This kept their offensive threat level high while giving them a more modest and manageable amount of hit points for the heroes to deal with, reducing total combat length.

3. One Hit Wonders

Sometimes, it's not worth the time it will take to cut down the last few berserk orcs who are willing to fight to the death. Turn that pair into cannon fodder or weak minions so the next successful attack or source of damage drops them.

4. Event-Based Hit Points

Include a few triggers or features in your Mission Stat Block, Combat Encounter Plan or Combatscape that change the nature of the monster's toughness and resolve.

For example, if the party defeats the leader of the kobolds, all remaining kobolds become one hit wonders. Or perhaps once an undead commander falls, all skeletons in the battle's hit points are immediately halved from their current total. In both cases, you have excellent examples of mental toughness-based hit point reductions.

Tie hit point reductions directly to completing key Mission objectives. When the most critical part of the combat – the Mission goal – is completed, you minimize combat slog by reducing the hit points of all remaining monsters.

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5. Story-Based Hit Points

Similar to events, but on a larger scale, think of how the entire adventure or campaign's ongoing story might impact the monsters.

For example, a plague has been ravaging the land, weakening its creatures. Now you have a great story reason for why all the gnolls' hit points are a percentage less than normal, or why many standard gnolls are now one-hit wonders.

Example Story and Event-Based Hit Point Reductions

- Infection, disease or poison
- Fatigue or lack of sleep
- Insanity or severe distraction
- Nagging or permanent injuries
- Adolescents or “younglings”
- Poor morale or loyalty to master/cause

Timing: Pre-Combat vs. On the Fly

Adjust monster hit points before **and** during combat. You will have many situations where you expect combat slog from too many hit points to whittle through compared to party damage output. You will also have situations where everything seems fine – until suddenly nothing is dying and everyone is missing with their attacks.

Make monster hit point adjustments whenever:

- Session time grows short
- Turn efficiency is low
- Combat has already gone over an hour and there are many monsters or monster hit points remaining

Top 3 Hit Point Adjustments to Avoid

Avoid making these combat slog-inducing monster hit point adjustments in your game. **Don't toughen monsters up to increase the challenge of combat** – engage and test the players in other ways.

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1. Increases

We have all created combat encounters that seemed challenging on paper and then proceed to be a cakewalk for your players. You might be tempted to increase monster hit points on the fly, but unless the encounter is the ultimate one of the adventure, resist this temptation.

Let the players enjoy an easy one. You can always create and use more challenging Combatscapes and monsters in future combats.

2. Temporary Shields

Similar to increasing monster hit points, avoid monsters or Combatscape features that have or provide temporary shields or similar hit point-like buffs. That extra layer of insulation is good for monster survival, but bad for combat pace and length.

3. Healing Options

Like shields, healing is another hit point-like resource that takes awhile to punch through. Avoid monsters or Combatscape features with powerful or multiple healing abilities.

Monstrous Alchemy

Congratulations! You've learned a variety of hit point adjustment methods you can apply to monsters to quicken combat, both before and during play. You've also learned what adjustments to avoid so you don't contribute to combat slowdown.

Next, you will learn how to handle excessive rests. Constant rest periods in the middle of most adventures not only stretch believability, but they also mean every combatant has a full suite of options to think about and pour through on their turn, reducing turn efficiency. You'll learn when and how to best include and manage rests in your adventures.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [11 Monstrous Tips](#), [10 Monstrous Tips](#), [7 More Monstrous Tips](#) and [Don't Be Afraid to Modify Your Monsters](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#), [True Encounter Difficulty: Challenge Your Players](#), [12 Ways to Describe Minions: First, Stop Calling Them Minions!](#), [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#) and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

2.11 They Can Sleep When They're Dead

“I love sleep. My life has the tendency to fall apart when I'm awake, you know?” – Ernest Hemingway

How to Handle Excessive Rests

Ever notice the party stops to rest a little too often – after almost every combat, no matter what's at stake? This leaves you wrestling with the story impact of excessive rests while the party starts each fight with a full suite of tactical decisions to make.

This encourages a time-devouring “kill ‘em all” combat mission mentality.

Today you will learn why excessive rest contributes to combat slog. You'll learn a variety of methods to discourage excessive party rests and a few methods to avoid. Finally, you'll bring it all together by applying these solutions to your game.

Why Manage Excessive Rests?

We've all been there: the party seems to stop whenever it likes to rest and restore its resources, regardless of what's going on in the adventure and campaign world.

The encounters seem to blur like a chain of total annihilation combats, where maximum resources feel like a necessity for the party's success and survival.

When you manage the availability, timing, benefits and costs of rests, you help create different starting conditions for the party for each Mission.

The party's thinking shifts to accomplishing quests and missions with the resources they currently have, rather than forcing rests after every combat, regardless of the situation or potential consequences.

A full suite of tactical options and power might sound good for every encounter, but remember this also means your players **spend more time reviewing, choosing and executing each turn.**

Switch the focus to the benefits of completing Missions and away from prioritizing rests.

Top 4 Excessive Rest Adjustments

Here are the top adjustments you can make to discourage excessive rests and increase combat and adventure pacing in your games – and add a more dynamic storytelling feel to your campaign in the process.

1. Time Matters

Time marches on, both in the adventure and in the world. List events that occur based on certain triggers or at certain times, whether in a dungeon room or across the continent.

- **Clock's Ticking.** Quests and adventures have a time limit. For example, the item the party seeks is poorly guarded for a brief window of time, or the adventure location will be destroyed on a certain day and time. Will the party steal back the Sword of Worldbreaking before the next full shift of arcane guards fills the area? Or what happens atop Spellbreaker Cliff tonight at midnight on the full moon?
- **There's a Whole World Out There.** Similar to Clock's Ticking, think of your campaign's story arc and the campaign world on a larger scale. What events occur that affect the characters in some way downstream? For example, the full moon is coming tomorrow and that gives enemies an advantage the PCs do not want to face.
- **Bigger, Stronger, Faster.** Rivals beat the party, repeatedly, due to all the minutes and hours lost to excessive rests. This reminds the heroes there are others like them, and the early bird gets the worm – or even the artifact. If this happens often, not only have you created recurring enemies or villains, you've also encouraged your heroes to actually keep moving and be heroic!
- **Sleep, Interrupted.** The more often the breaks and the longer they are, the greater potential of a new encounter, combat or otherwise. For example, an Infiltrate Mission falls apart as the party lingers too long in the sewers of a castle, getting into one too many skirmishes and making the fatal mistake of resting in the area after each one of them.

2. Monsters Dynamically React

Include scenes and events that show monsters reacting to the party's actions, including the extra time the monsters have to analyze and prepare to counter the party.

- **Cause of Death = Counter-Tactics.** Monsters react tactically to the evidence and presence of intruders as the party leaves a corpse trail behind. The types of wounds alter monster tactics. For example, zero blade wounds and several spell blast-like wounds indicate a spellcaster-heavy party and the monsters employ tactics to

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specifically counter spellcasters, such as silencing traps and magic of their own, or making spellcasters the primary target for the champion monsters.

- **Curiosity and Reinforcements.** Monsters of all kinds become curious as word and corpses get around. Patrol counts and frequency increase. More scavenging monsters enter and explore there area – there’s now more to eat!
- **Learn and Study:** Foes might post guards, plant spies and saboteurs in the party and watch the party from a distance. For example, this might teach enemies the PCs’ standard line-up so foes know how to attack better. The lightly armored but very perceptive rogue always leads 10’ ahead? Attack the party from the rear as a diversion and then pile up on the rogue to take him out so the party loses its best scout, making future traps deadlier.

3. Rare Safe Areas

Include only a few physical locations and points in time where resting makes sense in the context of the **story**.

If the actions of the characters and their Mission goals have brought them to such a point, that means you’ve done a great job communicating and planning for it in the adventure.

- **Mission: Clear and Secure.** The Mission requires the party to eliminate every monstrous threat in a dungeon section or floor before a rest becomes a reasonable possibility. The nature of the dungeon and its denizens, plus failed attempts at brief rests indicates this. For example, the dungeon area is packed with monsters, such as in a hobgoblin stronghold or undead crypt.
- **Mission Accomplished.** Finally, the adventure’s ultimate villain has been defeated! This is the most natural time for rest and recovery, as the pressure of time and the villain’s antagonistic stream of complications are finally released.
- **A Secret Place.** In a dungeon crawling with monsters and traps, is there a hidden place with a magical pool of minor healing and a flower-covered shrine? Reward PC curiosity, perception and intelligence by including and describing a specific place of safety that takes the party a bit of effort to reach and discover.

4. Mission Variety

Include missions and encounters where resting and having maximized resources isn’t a priority.

Like combat, there are other core RPG experiences to include your games. These examples can pose as little immediate physical threat as you wish. Instead, they create

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temporary complications such as splitting or delaying the party or creating major decision points in the story.

- **Puzzles or Riddles**
- **Traps or Hazards**
- **Social or Friendly NPC encounters**
- **Political or Negotiation encounters**

Top 5 Excessive Rest Situations to Avoid

Avoid these excessive rest-encouraging situations. They encourage a mentality of constant rests where characters are “fully loaded” with tactical decisions and options to weigh and resolve in every single fight, reducing **Turn Efficiency**.

1. Too Many Simple Combats

Don't make every combat a walk in the park filled with cannon fodder and a simple mission like “kill ‘em all.”

Easy encounters are one thing, but easy and simple are a recipe for boredom and going through the motions. Use simple and fast encounters only if they're exciting and engaging.

2. Too Many Very Challenging Combats

Don't include a high amount of extremely challenging encounters either.

If you run five or six encounters in a row that push characters to their limits and nearly kill all of them, you're practically asking them to rest and recuperate as much as possible in between.

The party's mindset switches immediately to survival and the mechanical advantage that a consistent full night's sleep or rest provides becomes a constant goal, regardless of the story ramifications.

3. Very Few Combats

Tired of combat slog from your party unleashing everything they have every fight? When the party rests excessively, they're likely to do this and turns can drag in every fight.

However, don't cut out nearly every combat encounter to compensate. Focus on different Missions, different starting resource conditions, and a variety of Combatscapes.

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4. Rest-Rich Locations

Avoid high amounts of empty rooms and sprawling corridors or sprawling, uneventful tracks of wilderness. Get to the action – the next Mission, even or scene – quickly. Don't use or describe adventure or Combatscape areas that suggest there are safe rest points everywhere.

5. Too Many Restorative Combatscape Features

Don't include too many Combatscapes that provide the benefits of healing, recharging powers or resting. While occasionally this makes for a more creative way to heal and restore party resources, especially when tied to Mission and adventure goals, use it sparingly so you avoid creating an expectation that the party should always look to rest and have maximum resources before every fight.

Talk to Your Playgroup

The above advice aims to solve the problem of excessive rests within the context of the story, including believable and dynamic reactions by local monsters and events.

However, if excessive rests continue to be a problem for you, and your adventures suffer, bring it up and talk about it between sessions or right before your next game.

Be honest about how the rest mechanic impacts you and the story, present some solutions you like or have already tried, and ask for the players' opinions and advice.

You may learn they feel the same way or have excellent feedback to help improve the rules, story or your GMing. Collaborate and come to a reasonable solution and next steps as a playgroup.

For example, try out a new approach, adjustment or house rule and see how it works in your next game.

Ever Onward

Congratulations! You've learned why excessive rest contributes to combat slog.

You now know a variety of GM methods to discourage excessive party rests by understanding why excessive rests contribute to combat slog and identifying methods to handle excessive rests.

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What's Next?

Next, you will learn additional methods for managing the strongest and weakest monsters in your combats.

There are never enough boss monsters or cannon fodder in our adventures. It's important you use these critical monsters well so they make a fast, exciting and memorable impression.

Resources

More at Roleplaying Tips: [Tactical Tips for Overesting PCs](#) and [Over-resting PCs](#).

And at Leonine Roar: [D&D 4e: Top 12 Ways to Stop Sounding So Damn Metagamey](#), [Rest a Moment](#), and [True Encounter Difficulty: Lethality vs. Resource Management](#).

2.12 Delve Deep: Mastering Boss Fights and Cannon Fodder

“What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease.” – Sun Tzu, The Art of War

How to Master Bosses and Cannon Fodder

Ever notice how the most difficult enemies to run effectively are typically the weakest or strongest? Boss or champion monsters and their cannon fodder or minions present special challenges for the GM.

Today you’ll learn advanced methods on how to manage these two key monster types. You’ll learn about their turn efficiency and how to keep your boss monsters and cannon fodder challenging, threatening and engaging throughout combat.

Finally, today’s activity challenges your design skills with these two critical monster types.

Why Master Bosses and Cannon Fodder?

We’ve all ran those combats where the monsters either vex and enthrall the party with their might, tactics or cleverness – or fall completely flat and become nothing more than a boring speed bump.

Boss monsters and cannon fodder run the greatest risk of combat slog, poor turn efficiency and low player engagement.

They represent either the greatest and longest-lasting of threats (bosses) or brief but great threats in numbers (cannon fodder). But how do you maintain their intended impact throughout combat?

Top 3 Boss Fight Qualities

Here are three of the most effective ways to run your boss monsters.

1. Behold My Power

Shows of power get attention and make great foreshadowing for a boss monster’s true power later in the ultimate encounter of the adventure.

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Offer steady clues and brief brushes with villains and boss monsters to serve as excellent teasers that preview the monster's full onslaught in the final battle.

Include the following in your adventures and combats:

- **No, it's True!** Rumors and clues about the might and great influence of the boss monster, such as in overheard conversations or scrawled on scrolls or journals.
- **Shed Light on the Darkness.** Roleplaying scenes, including third-person vignettes, that reveal bits of the boss monster's personality, strength and influence, tied directly to one or more missions in your adventure.

2. I Am Everywhere

Boss monsters and champions are loved, feared and respected by many for their prowess. They are a living legacy of excellence and power, and as such have many protectors, followers, allies and contacts.

They may be able to solo the party, but such fights can quickly degenerate into a boring slog. Use more global encounter elements and surround your bosses and champions with allies and followers.

Monster waves are ideal boss monster extra muscle. Be sure to include the following in your game:

- **Warnings and Shakedowns.** Connected, building encounters with the followers, protectors and allies of the boss monster, eventually leading up to the final encounter with the boss.
- **The Whole Family.** Boss monsters with plenty of loyal minions and bodyguards to deal with at the same time; avoid true solo combats with boss monsters.

3. My Defenses are Many

Boss monsters have many ways out of disaster, setbacks or unwelcome surprises. They have well developed lairs with multiple choke points and emergency exits. And in a fight, they should have a suite of abilities that protects them to at least some degree against the most debilitating controlling effects or similar debuffs.

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Be sure to consider and develop the following:

- **Elite Fortifications.** Well developed lairs, with multiple guards, alarms, traps and well-hidden emergency exits and with one or very few, well-defended entry points.
- **Resist Control.** Boss monsters with defenses that go beyond the basic and familiar. Include abilities that allow them to avoid or recover faster from debuffs that hamper their ability to take their normal set of actions or move normally, such as save bonuses or immunity against stuns.

Top 3 Cannon Fodder Qualities

Here are three ways to make most out of your cannon fodder monsters.

1. We are Quick

Masses of weak monsters tend to be frail but have good mobility. They use their quickness and mobility to surround their enemies or execute hit and run tactics. They minimize their greatest weakness by striking suddenly and as hard as possible before withdrawing.

Make sure your minions' qualities include:

- **Fast and Furious.** High movement speeds, especially for melee. This increases the effectiveness of both hit and run and the ability to engage and pose a threat as quickly as possible.
- **Air and Ground.** Multiple movement types, including burrowing, flight or even elite jumping ability.

2. We are Many

The pack mentality of cannon fodder makes them more confident and stronger as a whole than as individuals.

It also gives them a type of endurance that their individual forms simply do not have. Hordes of monsters keep coming like tidal waves of blood, endless, for the death of a handful means little when there are so many more to replace the fallen.

Follow these guidelines:

- **Tough Odds.** For cannon fodder only combats, use at least three to six times the number of party members.

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- **Multiple Waves.** Use two to three waves of cannon fodder per combat, whether in a cannon fodder-exclusive combat, or mixed in with standard or boss monsters.

3. We are Useful

The quick and frail need not be the quick and the dead. Cannon fodder should also fight and vex parties in other ways besides direct combat.

Have them interact with terrain features or other key items or locations in the battlefield.

An attack isn't always the most dangerous threat, and minion monsters, being weak, make for great helpers for simple tasks. Menial tasks can suddenly become deadly in the middle of combat with other, "real" threats.

Use minions to:

- **Trapmasters.** Set off traps, such as spear traps, sealing off the party with portcullises, or letting a chained monster loose in the midst the party.
- **Thieves.** Pick up and steal away with particular treasure or prisoners that the party is trying to save.

Timing Considerations

Knowing when to use either key monster type is important. You need to either plan well, or be willing to be spontaneous, depending on the pace of the session and what it needs.

Boss Monsters

When running boss encounters, be sure to give yourself plenty of time – pace your session time so you leave yourself at least an hour for the big payoff and ultimate showdown.

This may mean quickening some combats leading up to the final encounter with some on-the-fly monster adjustments.

Cannon Fodder

When the session is moving slowly without much player engagement, a quick cannon fodder-exclusive combat makes for a fast boost of energy for everyone, GM included.

Tie it in with the boss monster of the adventure by including a related clue or twist in the mission.

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Master and Commander

Congratulations! You've learned about how to manage the two most significant and exciting monster types: boss monsters and cannon fodder. You've learned what makes for great missions and combats involving them and looked to your own adventures for ways to improve how you include and use them.

Next, you will be moving into the next module: Launch and learn some of the best Table Rules for Speed. Tired of slow moving turns and poor turn efficiency? You'll learn other ways besides design changes to achieve a lightning fast table of gamers.

Resources

Check these articles out at Roleplaying Tips: [11 Monstrous Tips](#), [10 Monstrous Tips](#), [7 More Monstrous Tips](#) and [Don't Be Afraid to Modify Your Monsters](#).

And these tips at Leonine Roar: [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#), [True Encounter Difficulty: Challenge Your Players](#), [12 Ways to Describe Minions: First, Stop Calling Them Minions!](#), [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#) and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

Chapter 3: Launch



3.01 The Lightning Round: Table Rules for Speed

“Electricity is really just organized lightning.” – George Carlin

How to Use Table Rules for Speed

Today you will learn a host of table rules to create lightning-fast turn efficiency. You'll learn which rules are best to implement for your group. And you can immediately put a few of these into place so table turns go faster and the overall session experience gets even better for you and your friends.

Why use Table Rules?

Managing the game and its players well is important. Good table rules mean better, faster, more exciting turns for everyone. Here is a list of all the benefits good table rules bring:

- Increased leveling rate / XP rewards
- Increased rate of treasure rewards
- Faster story progression and development
- More fantastic locations explored
- More roleplaying opportunities and scenes
- More actions and decisions made during the game and combats
- Shorter wait times between turns

You might want to share these benefits with your players too, so everybody is motivated to try Table Rules out.

So stop wasting your time – and everyone else's – and put these table management rules into place right away for your game.

Top 17 Table Rules for Speed

Here are the very best table rules to help manage your game table and increase turn speed. Before the game or campaign, discuss the ones you want to use with your playgroup and how they will benefit your game.

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1. Speak Up: Ask

Simply ask your players to take their turns faster.

Tell them things appear to be grinding to a crawl and the pace of combat needs to increase so there's less waiting around the game table – and any other benefit from the list above.

Tell the playgroup you'll regularly ask for players to pick up the pace throughout a given session or campaign.

2. No Take Backs

Use the classic chess or board game piece rule: once you've declared an action or moved your miniature, there's no taking it back. Use for playgroups with lots of indecisive or highly tactical players.

3. Dice Rolling Off Table

Don't allow rerolls for players with bad aim. Have them count as a 1. That'll quickly make everyone a lot more careful with their dice. This is especially good for players who are a little careless or who aren't paying enough attention to the game.

4. No Cross Talk or Interruptions

Allow either no or only a small amount of interruption during a player's turn.

Allow only in-character talk, and just brief phrases, replies or an exchange of one sentence each among characters during the brief few seconds a combat turn represents.

Good for playgroups who help each other a little too much in analyzing every possible tactical option during a turn, contributing to severe cases of analysis paralysis for some players.

In most combats, a good option chosen in a few seconds is better than a very good option that took five minutes.

5. Use Clear Language

Require that everyone declares targets, distances, hit rolls and damage totals clearly.

Make sure players point to miniatures or make sure every miniature is labeled so players and GMs can easily call them out throughout a combat.

Add up damage done to a target and say a single number out loud whenever possible.

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6. Snack After Combat

No snacking during turns.

Encourage everyone to eat meals before the game session so players have their full attention on the session and combats, rather than their food.

7. Make Passive Checks

Don't slow down combat with yet more rolls.

Use passive checks or just assume success for certain situations, especially at higher levels of play. Many games already include automatic checks like this (i.e. "Take 10").

8. Seating = Init

Once initiative is set, have everyone sit in initiative order as a visual aid to track initiative.

Then play proceeds clockwise around the table with less time wondering whose turn it is.

9. Stand Up

Ask everyone to stand during combat.

Standing increases energy and attention levels, and in the case of combat, increases focus.

10. No Dice Massaging

Ban dice massaging from your game table.

A second or two is okay, but approaching five+ seconds every time someone rolls dice is an annoying time waster.

11. Announce End Of Turn

When your turn ends, announce it clearly and audibly.

A simple "Done," works, and a "Done, Dave is next," is even better.

And the platinum version? "Done, Dave's next and Andrea's on deck."

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Too Bad: Done Is Done

Similar to no take-backs, when a player announces his turn is done, that's it.

If something was forgotten that was potentially beneficial, it's lost: too bad!

This encourages everyone to pay attention on their turn and make good decisions quickly.

12. Take Turn Immediately

Require an action or declaration of action immediately on a turn.

Don't allow minutes of character sheet review, skills review, attacks review, tactical conversation, stories about the meaning of life, and jokes about the movie about the meaning of life. (Classic, isn't it?)

While you don't want anyone to make rash, silly decisions, you do want everyone to think and act crisply, which brings us to....

13. Decide Actions On Prior Turn

Take the time before your turn – that is, another player or the GM's turn – to plan out most or all of your upcoming turn.

Do your best to split your attention between the unfolding battle and what you can and will do as soon as your turn arrives.

Think before your turn so you can **act on** your turn.

14. Roll Ahead

Some people are the opposite of dice massagers – they like to roll ahead. While many GMs might not like this table rule for players, it can work wonders for GMs and the occasional player who uses many dice or is otherwise slow or poor at rolling and adding dice together.

A sheet of pre-rolled attack rolls alone can save a lot of time, though pre-rolled damage might be the greatest time saver.

15. No Distractions – Digital Or Otherwise

Allow only digital tools and aids that are used to help manage the game.

No one should be playing other games on their cell phone or texting friends back and forth while waiting for their turn.

These tools are distracting to everyone at the game table, not just the user.

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Oblivious or Bored?

If your game is filled with both digital and non-digital distractions, such as players wandering off or regularly not paying attention, ask everyone if they're aware of what they're doing and the negative impact it has on the game.

They might not realize how big a distraction their actions or digital toys are, or perhaps your game isn't quite as engaging as it could be.

The latter isn't easy to hear, but either way, that feedback is important so you can talk about how to improve your game together.

16. Don't Hog Spotlight

Enjoy the witty repartee of your turn and the fruits of your tactical genius – but not for too long.

Others around the game table are waiting to go, and combat needs to move at an exciting pace.

Limit total turn time to a couple minutes or less.

17. Use End of Combat Transitions

Implement clear options for wrapping up an inevitable combat.

For example, encourage players to jump into roleplayed resolution (i.e. surrender, escape, negotiation or jumping forward to the next scene) once the outcome is obvious, and tell your players to expect the same time-saving “fast forward” transition from the GM.

Remember: GMs Are Players Too

Remember, these table rules apply to you, the GM, as well. It's not fair to hold players to one standard or courtesy and then do something different yourself.

If there is good reason for slightly different standards, then discuss with your players first. Tell them why a slightly different rule makes sense for the GM, and how it will help the game.

For example, because you tend to manage a lot more creatures during your turn, you might ask for a little more maximum time on your turns. Discuss this with your players and agree on a fair target number of minutes.

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Round 1: Fight!

Congratulations! You've learned some of the best table rules to encourage turn efficiency and combat speed in your games. You've learned which table rules help manage certain aspects of the game or player traits best.

Next, you will learn to be ready for anything! Creating and going through your Pre-Combat Prep Checklist is on deck. Use this tool to make sure you're ready to run every combat as fast as possible.

Resources

Check this advice out at Roleplaying Tips: [The Rule to Making Good Rules and Other Useful Tips](#) and [Managing Your Group](#).

And more advice at Leonine Roar: [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#) and [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#)

3.02 Be Ready for Anything: Pre-Combat Preparations and Checklist

“If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend six sharpening my axe.”

– Abraham Lincoln

How to Prepare for Combat

Want to be ready for anything? It starts with a rock-solid pre-combat checklist. Today you’ll learn the must-haves of your pre-combat checklist so that you’re ready to run a fight faster than you can say “Roll initiative!”

Why Use a Pre-Combat Checklist?

Ever feel like you’re scrambling to get your bearings at the start of combat? That there’s so much going on you’re not sure you’re ready to begin?

Going through your pre-combat checklist settles and organizes you. It gives you the confidence you’re ready to run your players through a well organized, fast-paced and exciting combat.

The Big 12: Pre-Combat Checklist

Here are the top items to include on your pre-combat checklist:

- **Combat Encounter Plan completed.** The Combat Encounter Plan is the most important item on your checklist. Within it, you have the details of the mission name and type, mission success and failure states, encounter area elements, monster tactics and the script of critical opening tactics, twists, rewards, and your estimated combat duration in minutes, rounds or percentage of the game session.
- **Basic combat rules studied.** Make sure you’ve read up on all the rules you can expect in the coming combat. Know how all basic or special attacks available to any creature work, such as charges or grappling attacks.
- **Monsters researched.** Do the monsters have special qualities or does its type give it any? Do they have special resistances to spells or unusual forms of movement? Do you understand how their special attacks work, including their frequency, range, area and the number of targets? What are the monsters’ tactical roles, strengths and weaknesses?

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- **Rules cheat sheets and references ready.** Have frequently used rules and tables for the game right in front of you or within arm's reach at all times. Party summary cheat sheets and GM screens are especially helpful.
- **Condition cards and markers ready.** Be sure to have condition or debuff cards handy to help understand the impact of both party and monster attacks. This saves rules look-up time during combat. Have matching markers or tokens for each condition ready.
- **Passive senses information ready.** Know what ways the monsters and PCs have to immediately identify each other and help determine starting combat positions. Have brief but important monster knowledge information ready for the players based on their characters' passive skills.
- **Initiative pre-rolled.** To save time, pre-roll or apply an average roll on initiative.
- **Pre-combat advantages applied.** Decide on any ambush or surprise advantage or round ahead of time. Pre-determine and apply any buffs, such as blessings or fortunes, for the start of battle.
- **Monster tracking utility ready.** Have your digital tool or sheet of paper set up and ready to track monster hit points and conditions. Be sure to already have rows or columns with specific monster names and identifying numbers for easy reference during battle.
- **Dice ready.** Have only the dice you need to match the current combat and its monsters' specific attacks available. Avoid wasting precious seconds wading through a large pile of random dice.
- **Battle map ready.** Make sure the posters, tiles, or board you are using for the battle is assembled and populated with terrain, markers and monsters beforehand.
- **Miniatures and monster tokens ready.** Like dice, have only the monster miniatures and monster tokens you need to run the current battle together and, if possible, already on the battle map before combat.

Tip – Pre-packaged combat encounters are a great organizational tool. Take a clear, sealable plastic bag and include all the minis, battle maps or tiles, markers and the exact dice you need to run an encounter.

Faster Combat: Double Your Drama and Story in Half the Time

Dive Right In

Congratulations! You've learned to be ready for anything! When combat is imminent, you have your checklist to ensure you are organized and prepared to run a fast-paced, crisp and thrilling combat.

Next, you will learn how to give great encounter descriptions at the start of combat and throughout the chaos that ensues. Want to make sure the party hears and appreciates all the critical elements of the mission, battle, and area? The next lesson will teach you to masterfully share this essential encounter information in way that grabs your players' attention – and doesn't let go!

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [The Session Checklist: Ingredients to a Successful Game Session Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), and [Know Your Players - Building Your Session Checklist Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Mapping Options Deathmatch](#), [4e DM's Cheat Sheet](#) and [Treasure Cheat Sheet: More Magical Rewards](#).

3.03 Show and Tell

“The soul never thinks without a picture.” – Aristotle

How to Give Great Combat Descriptions

Today you will learn how to give great combat descriptions that improve turn speed. You'll learn the best verbal and visual methods to communicate combat information quickly and clearly. Finally, you'll put these methods into practice and talk about their impact on your own game.

Why Give Great Combat Descriptions?

We've all given combat descriptions that are too short, missing critical information, prompting a barrage of questions from your players. We've also stared at a few too many paragraphs wondering if our players are going to remember or take notes on dungeon room #38's descriptive essay.

Great combat encounter descriptions are concise. They are just the right length, giving just the right amount of critical information without creating too long a pause and overwhelming the players.

With great combat descriptions, player questions are at a minimum as combat unfolds. Decision-making and turn speed improves.

Top 6 Great Description Methods

Here are the top ways to ensure a great combat description.

1. Automatic Knowledge

Passive knowledge is critical. What do characters already know about the battlefield and their foes based on automatic skill checks or other passive sense or knowledge information?

Make sure they get the digest version of all this info right up front. The challenge is to keep it concise. Avoid wordiness.

For example, if some of the characters recognize a magical pulse they've run into a few times already, then avoid going into its history, details of every encounter that include the pulse or fluff details that'll make them guess the obvious. It's enough for the party to know that that same phenomenon is back, and just as dangerous as it always was.

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2. Threat Level

Clothing, equipment, morale, presence, clues in the area, rumors – all of these help relate threat level.

For example, armor craftsmanship of superior, precious or exotic metals is a dead giveaway that the enemy's armor is not only powerful, but so might be the enemy's overall power and wealth. Or perhaps this magical pulse is three times the size of previous ones.

3. Character Point of View-Based Descriptions

Consider descriptive language through the lenses of character classes or themes. Give warriors and fighters more military-flavored descriptions of certain battlefield features or enemy roles. Give wizards more arcane or mythic descriptions of certain features or foes. Provide druids, rangers and barbarians information with a nature and wilderness spin.

For example, in a swamp filled with monstrous crocodiles, a sudden rainstorm starts blasting the area. Based on automatic knowledge, briefly tell the barbarian he recognizes the storm began as natural, but it has recently been empowered in a way he doesn't quite understand. Then tell the wizard that she recognizes the recent infusion of raw elemental magic into the storm, specifically from the storm elementals they had been hunting.

4. Visual Aids

Match your miniatures, tokens, markers and map features to your spoken descriptions.

Be sure to motion or point to certain critical miniatures or map features during your spoken descriptions or otherwise mark or highlight them so players can easily find these critical elements and foes.

Avoid using stand-ins for important NPC or monster foes or important interactive features of the Combatscape such as a ballistae or a magical cauldron.

5. Player Questions: Reloaded

What questions did players ask in the last fight about the combat? Make note of them and have them answered ahead of time in the next battle.

What questions seem to come up most often, even if you've answered them? This might indicate your descriptions or visual aids need to be more clear and concise. Establish default rules or representations for visual aids and markers that are likely to come up again.

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For example, if players are always asking you what all the terrain on the map means, are you constantly changing what similar-looking terrain indicates from encounter to encounter? In this case, be consistent – rocks are difficult and blocking terrain, and use different markers to indicate high, impassable rubble.

6. Combat Description Cheat Sheets

Create a cheat sheet of creative yet informative ways to describe special attacks, hits, misses, crits, saves, killing blows, glancing blows.

Consider the types of weapons used and the types of injuries they would inflict. This keeps your descriptions of the ongoing action in combat fresh.

If the majority of your playgroup puts in the extra effort to roleplay their actions, it creates a more engaging combat.

Like automatic information, **the key is creative precision**. Balance the spectacle of the action with useful information that identifies the action and its impact.

For example, describe a crit with a mace as bone-crushing and echoing, or a crit or multi-round damage with a sword or axe leaving a gaping wound that continues to gush waves of crimson.

Caution: Information Overload

Parse out information throughout round 1. Include as much critical information as you can up front, but offer too much and players are waiting on a long, time-consuming GM description and holding up the action.

Don't sacrifice a great combat pace for information overload. Don't start with three straight minutes of dictation that requires note-taking when twenty seconds of the highlights would do.

One approach I use often is giving each PC a new bit of sensory-based information on their turn over round 1.

For example, perhaps only the shaman heard the strange whispers in the giant tongue coming from the rusted belt resting on top of the maggot-filled iron maiden. As interesting as that may have been in the initial Combatscape description, it's also a bit long when you consider there's an entire Combatscape worth of features and foes to describe. Mentioning a rusty belt everyone notices at the top of round 1 is plenty at encounter start.

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A Picture's Worth

Congratulations! You've learned how to give great combat descriptions that improve turn speed by understanding what descriptive methods and visual aids improve turn speed.

You've learned how to balance information and flavor to create engaging, helpful combat descriptions.

Next, you'll never have to ask "Who's Next?" again. You will learn a variety of efficient ways to track initiative and ensure everyone is ready to act as soon as they're next. No more wondering, no more waiting – learn to take the initiative like never before and jump right into the action!

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [7 Ways To Be A More Entertaining GM](#), [Colorful Combat Descriptions](#), and [Enter The Combat Swipe File Contest – Deadline Feb 27](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [12 Ways to Describe Minions: First, Stop Calling Them Minions!](#), [Global Encounter Elements](#), [Magnificent Indeed: A Review of Mordenkainen's Magnificent Emporium](#) and [Bullets for Our Pastime](#).

3.04 Who's Next?

“The essence of strategy is to fall upon the enemy in large numbers and bring about his speedy downfall.” – Musashi Miyamoto, The Book of Five Rings

Create a Highly Visual Initiative Tracker

Ever notice how “Who’s Next?” is one of the most asked questions during combat? Tracking initiative smartly and efficiently means less waiting for everyone between turns and less confusion as to whose turn it is. Here, you’ll learn how to create and use a simple, organized and highly visual initiative tracker.

Why a Visual Initiative Tracker?

We’ve all been there, in the thick of combat, chomping at the bit to go. A player or the GM scribbles down initiative somewhere and the combat starts. A few turns later, a character or monster suddenly drops, and the tension jumps.

Everyone starts looking around. The person tracking initiative is looking something up, making other notes, or focused on wrapping up their turn. Some turns take so long that even after a few rounds, you forget the initiative order of both the characters and monsters. No one knows who’s up, much less who’s on deck.

Here you’ll learn how to avoid this time-wasting disorganization in your game. You’ll learn the value of visually communicating initiative at all times, so your playgroup can plan better between turns and act immediately on your turns.

Initiative Tracker Must-Haves

A great initiative tracker must be visual, simple to use and reusable.

Visual

- Be in plain view of all players and game master
- Include visual cues, such as full color imagery, art, markers and tokens for fast and eye-catching communication of information
- Text should be large and legible from any location at the gaming table
- Include simple and intuitive color coding schemes

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Simple to Use

- Quick and easy to set up on the gaming table
- Uses common and familiar gaming tools and materials
- Quick and easy for one player or the game master to manage
- Current and upcoming turns are visually tracked using a type of marker or token
- Visual representations or names of characters and monsters are quick and easy to add to or move up and down on the initiative order

Re-Usable

- Re-usable for multiple encounters
- Most markers, tokens and other components of the initiative tracker should be re-usable to reduce or eliminate extra setup or tracking time for future encounters

How to Create a Visual Initiative Tracker

First, you'll need the following:

- White printer paper
- Character and Monster Tokens (representing the characters and all encounter monsters)
- Colored beads, dice OR similar markers or tokens (preferably green and yellow green)
- White AND Colored Index Cards – (i.e. multicolor pack of at least five different colors)
- A volunteer to set up and use the initiative tracker each combat (a player or the GM)

Next, follow these steps to create your highly visual, simple to use and re-usable initiative tracker. Images of what an initiative trackers looks like in actual play follows.

1. Place a blank sheet of white printer paper next to your battlemat in plain view of all players and the game master. The white paper serves a high-contrast background for initiative information, improving visibility and readability.
2. Place the matching character/foe token or miniature for the highest initiative at the top of the sheet.

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3. Place a current initiative turn marker next to the token. Use a green die, bead or similar marker next to that combatant's visual representation. Green is a color often associated with "go" – a simple visual cue or signal so everyone can see whose turn it currently is.
 - a. *Tip:* 4-sided dice are ideal because of their unique pyramid shape and wide base, which means greater ease in sliding the dice up and down the tracker and less chance of accidentally rolling them across the table. You can also position the 4-sider like an arrow or pointer towards tokens as yet another visual initiative cue.
4. Place a colored nameplate* with the combatant's name or type to the right of the current initiative turn marker and character/monster token or initiative.
5. For the second-highest initiative, repeat steps 3 and 4, replacing the green die, bead or similar marker with a yellow one. Yellow typically serves as a "caution" visual cue color, letting everyone who is on deck, or next up after the current "green" turn.
6. Repeat steps 3 and 4 for all remaining initiative rolls, excluding any additional current or next turn markers.
7. As turns continue during each round, move the current/green and next/yellow markers down along the initiative track.
8. For any characters/monsters whose initiative changes, erase and slide nameplates up or down on the sheet as needed.
9. Remove nameplates for any characters/monsters permanently removed from combat.
10. For the following encounter, remove all markers, tokens and nameplates and repeat steps 1-9.

*To create a colored name plate, cut a white or colored index card in half the long way, creating two nameplate-like strips. On the unlined side, write the character's name or the monster's name or general type (i.e. Brogos, Icys, orcs, goblinoids, caster, leader).

Tip: Use different colors of nameplates to color-code and represent the characters of your party. For example, primal characters use green nameplates, while divine characters use yellow nameplates. For monsters, use white index cards and nameplates so monsters visually and immediately stand out from the player characters.

Tip: On index card nameplates, use different and contrasting color marker or ink for player characters (i.e. black) and monsters (i.e. red) as yet another way to differentiate both quickly and visually.

Simple Substitutions

Some practical ways to further customize your initiative tracker:

Large Party or Many Different Monsters?

Cut your index cards into thirds instead of halves so the nameplates are narrower. Use two sheets of white printer paper to create a longer and larger initiative tracker backdrop next to your battlemap.

Very Limited Table Space?

Remove the index card-based nameplate component. Tuck at least half of the white printer paper underneath the battlemap, or alternatively fold or cut the white printer paper sheet in half or thirds vertically. Use only the character/monster tokens as well as the current and next turn tracking markers.

Want to Use but Limit Text?

Use initials, abbreviations, classes or roles instead of full names. For example, use a “cleric” and “ranger” or “CLR” and “RGR” or “C” and “R”. Use “B” for Brogos, “I” for Icys or “G” for goblinoids. Instead of creating nameplates, write down and manually erase classes or initials during combat.

Don't Have Monster Tokens?

Replace character and monster tokens with miniatures for a three-dimensional visual cue.

This means having two copies of each miniature or using tokens on the battlemap and miniatures on the initiative tracker.

Alternatively, use token-sized squares cut from blank index card nameplate strips, marking each square with initials or an abbreviation (see *Want to Use but Limit Text?* above).

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Ready to Go

Congratulations, you've now learned how to create a simple and highly visual initiative tracking tool to speed up your combats! With this simple initiative tracker alongside your battlemaps and Combatscapes, you and your players shouldn't ever need to ask "Who's Next?" again. You'll focus on what's most important: the combat itself.

What's Next?

With initiative order set, you'll next learn how to make faster decisions in combat.

How do you prepare yourself to make lightning quick decisions?

What are the questions you need to ask to quickly decide and execute your actions and attacks?

Come both ready to run the fight and ***think*** the fight next section.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Taking the Initiative: 4 Methods](#), [Running Faster Combats](#) and [9 DM Tools and Integrating Them Into Your Game](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Initiative: Role Matters](#), [Group Initiative in D&D 4e: What We Learned](#), [+17 Group Initiative Feats](#) and [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#).

3.05 And... Action!

*“The quality of decision is like the well-timed swoop of a falcon which enables it to strike and destroy its victim.”—
Sun Tzu, The Art of War*

How to Make Faster Decisions

Today you will learn how to make faster decisions in combat.

You’ll learn three key elements of the decision-making process, and how to view them through the lens of your RPG combat.

Finally, you’ll put these methods into practice and talk about their impact on your own game.

Why Make Faster Decisions?

Focus on how to make faster and better decisions and your combats become thrilling, dramatic scenes. Faster decisions keep combat pace high and the action moving.

Faster decisions keep turn speed and efficiency high and give your playgroup more time for additional encounters and adventures. You accomplish more and more at every game session!

Be Decisive: 3 Questions for Every Combat

We make hundreds of decisions during combat without realizing it, both as combat begins and on each turn.

In combat, the decision-making process comes down to three core questions. The players and GM must ask themselves these questions throughout combat:

1. What is the Mission?

What is most important? What is the objective, goal or mission of this combat?

Know this, and you have a guide for your options. Don’t know this, and you risk information overload and analysis paralysis.

Make sure the mission is clear to GM, players and characters.

Encourage your players to not be lazy – **react to cues** in the Combatscape description, from foes to furniture.

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As a GM, don't waste time by making the mission confusing or secret. For more complexity, choose instead to do it with twists later in the combat.

Remember, the PCs' foes have missions too. Use their mission as a guide to their specific tactics. For example, if the heroes are trying to infiltrate a stronghold to free the monsters' prisoner, be sure the monsters' strategy is defensive in nature. It makes little sense to open the castle gate and send a large force rumbling towards the PCs when the monsters have the terrain advantage of the castle – plus the target of the PCs' mission held securely in a prison cell.

2. What are My Options?

Character sheets and monster stat blocks deliver a host of focused options on every turn of combat.

Master the game system's general combat rules, or play at higher character levels, and your world of options increases exponentially.

How do you organize all this information and keep it at your fingertips for use in actual play?

Organize Your Combatspace

- Make sure your character sheet, cards, notes and rules cheat sheets are all in front of you and easy to read.
- Spread them out instead of stacking them.
- Display all the information you need “at-a-glance.”
- Use as much table space as reasonably possible to avoid physically fumbling or paging through information.
- Keep regularly used basic attacks or favorite maneuvers closest and easy to understand.

Constantly looking up pieces of information during combat is a huge time waster, so make it as easy to access, see and read as possible.

3. What is the Risk vs. Reward?

Don't stop at identifying your options – many of us do. **What are the rewards and risks for each of your options?** Analyze the pros and cons of each of your options.

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In each combat and on each turn, identify and analyze these four key tactical components of combat:

- Targets
- Time and Distance to Targets
- Combatscape Features
- Allies

Now identify potential outcomes surrounding these. Here are some example questions to consider:

- Does this attack actually help or hurt the mission?
- Will your attack strike one or many targets?
- How many actions or turns will it take you to get into melee, artillery or spell range?
- What features of the environment may delay or eliminate some of your options?
- How will you and your allies' positioning or vulnerability to counterattack be impacted?
- How can you put yourself and your allies in the best position to help as many as possible to succeed?
- What happens to your targets after your first turn's worth of attacks or decisions?

Get into the habit of envisioning outcomes or end-states to your actions before you act.

- What will the end of the round look like?
- What will the end of combat look like?
- More importantly, how do you **want** the outcome of your actions or combat to look like?

With a clear Mission goal in mind, these questions are easier to answer.

Why Good Decisions are Better than Perfect Decisions

One rule of thumb we use in my playgroup is that a good decision made in 10 seconds is better than a perfect decision made in 10 minutes. Who wants to sit through 10 minute

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turns every combat? Time for organization and tactical analysis is essential – but not at the cost of all **turn efficiency** and combat pacing.

Timing: When to Make Decisions

Since your turn time is precious, learn to take advantage of the time between your turn, before combat, and even before the game session.

Use these three windows of opportunity to organize your Combatspace, identify your preferred attack routines, and assess risk vs. reward.

For example, **write down or draw a flowchart of common scripts** or attack and movement combinations you like in certain combat situations.

Remember to be flexible to the specific tactics on your turn, but stay committed to your plan and strategy. The most important thing is that you have planned ahead and are able to execute your actions efficiently.

Best of all? Over time, your decision-making speed will naturally increase thanks to all your practice!

Decisive Victory

Congratulations! You learned how to make faster decisions in combat, including the three key elements of the decision-making process, and how to apply them in your combats to keep the pace exciting and turn efficiency high.

What's Next?

Next, you'll learn how to make faster calculations for your attacks and actions.

What approaches save the most time when it comes to rolling dice or calculating important values and modifiers in combat? Get your favorite dice ready because you're about to find out!

Resources

More at Roleplaying Tips: [Strategy, Tactics and Logistics for GMs](#), [Prep Faster, Breathe Easier + City Encounters Contest](#) and [Running Faster Combats](#).

And more at Leonine Roar: [Sailing the Seas of Tactical Mastery](#), [Not So Immediate Actions](#), [D&D 5e: The Complexity Slider Approach](#), [Opportunity Attacks: 6 Better Executions](#), and [Tabletop Deathmatch: Dragon Age vs. D&D](#).

3.06 Calculate the Chaos

“I can calculate the motion of heavenly bodies, but not the madness of people.” – Isaac Newton

How to Make Faster Calculations

Today you will learn how to make faster calculations in combat. You'll learn the top methods for faster, simpler math. Finally, you'll put these methods into practice and talk about their impact on your own game.

Why Make Faster Calculations?

Faster calculations mean faster turns and more time for what really matters – the dramatic combats and scenes of your adventure!

Like faster decision-making, faster calculations keep turn speed and efficiency high and give your playgroup more time for additional encounters and adventures.

Faster calculations are also about **courtesy**. Don't make others wait for you to do math on every single one of your attacks. We've all been there – those painful calculation pauses where someone adds numbers out loud while staring up at the ceiling for what seems like an eternity.

These pauses are not only annoying and immersion-breaking, but they waste a lot of turn and game time.

Use the following methods and get more math done faster.

Top 10 Faster Calculation Methods

Here are the very methods to help manage the math of combat. These approaches are an excellent supplement to the 17 Table Rules for Speed.

Before the game or campaign, discuss the ones you want to use with your playgroup and how they will benefit your game.

1. Roll and Code Your Dice at the Same Time

For both single and multi-target attacks, roll all your attack and damage dice at once. This means you have the results of your entire turn's worth of dice in front of you, ready for calculation.

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Be sure to code them for multiple targets. I like to use the left-to-right or clockwise method for my die results, matching them left-to-right against the miniatures on the map.

Alternatively, color code your dice for each target, so that both attack and damage dice for Orc #3 are the red dice, and Orc #4 uses the blue dice. Code your dice consistently dice from session or campaign start.

2. Calculate Modifier First, then Add Die Roll

You usually just use a few attack dice on your turn or one. Damage dice are similarly a low number.

However, the number of modifiers to your attack or damage rolls can be numerous.

Perform this more complex step first, because it often means you need to search multiple sections of your character sheet.

Calculate these modifiers first and **then** add the simpler attack and damage die results.

For example, say you have a +2 attack bonus from flanking, a +1 attack bonus from charges and a +2 bonus from your party's clerical buff spell. Have this +5 bonus calculated **before** you even pick up and roll your attack die (and preferably, before your turn).

This way, you reduce the amount of numbers you need to add together on the last step of your attack roll calculation.

3. Fill Out a Cheat Sheet

Take your pre-calculated modifiers and write them down, especially for common situations or scripts, such as "When I charge, my attack bonus is +5," or "When I flank, my attack bonus is +4, and my damage bonus is +6."

Create a short list of these common battle situations where multiple modifiers are involved. Have them labeled and pre-calculated on your cheat sheet so you don't have to do the math every time.

4. Ask for Help: Get a Calc Buddy

Some of us have a talent for math, some of us don't. That's okay, because there's usually someone at your game who loves or is at least good at math – or just plain wants to help.

Ask someone to help you double check or even do part of your math for you.

For example, if one of your multi-target attacks requires a lot of attack and damage rolls, ask your Calc Buddy to total up all your damage dice while you provide the GM the attack results.

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5. Reveal Monster Defenses

Reveal monster defenses early through information checks or after a round of attacks. This adds transparency and saves time verifying with the GM whether every attack hits. Once a defense is known, display it so everyone can see, or ask everyone to write it down.

For example, once your group figures out a foe's AC, write it where everyone can see it so players do not need to keep asking about it each round. Another example is damage reduction. You might broadcast that early so players can make the calculation for you, to help simplify things for you behind the screen.

6. Create Combat Stat Tents

Similar to revealing monster defenses, use index cards or sheets of paper to create stand-up stat tents or sheets.

Add images or write down monster names on these index cards or sheets and prop them up next to the battle map as the fight continues.

Make sure there is information displayed on both sides of the tents so that every player and the GM can see the combat stats.

7. Use a Calculator

I have an accountant friend who admits he is slow and prone to errors when doing math in his head. We tease him about it, but he doesn't let it slow his turn down. He turns to a classic: the calculator!

Digital or hand-held, a calculator is a simple and useful tool throughout all tiers of play. It becomes almost essential during large battles or in the highest levels of play.

8. Track Visually

Colored beads, coins, tokens, numbered markers – use small, physical objects to track certain modifiers to attacks and damage. Code these to match certain modifiers so you create visual reminders.

For example, a green bead might indicate a +2 combat advantage or flanking bonus. Put this bead on your character sheet's portrait section or right next to your character's miniature.

If a player has a particularly complex and dynamic set of modifiers, you might consider creating a paper grid for him. When a modifier is in effect, the player puts a dice in the "active" column beside the modifier. The dice shows the amount of modifier.

"Haste + Enlarged + Bless + the sword bonus + Power Attack...."

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The player then just needs to total the column for attacks or damage or defenses to quickly get his overall modifier.

9. Avoid Attacks or Abilities with Modifiers

One way to faster calculations is prevention. Avoid attacks with lots of conditional modifiers or riders.

For example, don't choose an attack or ability that has many possible variations, such as one bonus when flanking, a different bonus when charging, and yet a different bonus when badly wounded. Choose simple, reliable attacks.

10. Avoid Multi-Target and Multi-Roll Attacks

More area-effect attacks mean more attack roll and damage roll calculations.

Avoid attacks, abilities, roles or classes that specialize in multi-target or secondary attacks.

Choose single-target melee or ranged specialists, such as a fighter or archer instead.

Cool and Calculating

Congratulations! You've learned some of the best calculation approaches to encourage turn efficiency and combat speed in your games.

Next, you will learn about different ways to implement and manage turn time limits. What are the best methods for your playgroup's personalities and play style? You'll learn to manage your combat time wisely with these turn time limit rules and suggestions.

Resources

More advice at Roleplaying Tips: [The Rule to Making Good Rules and Other Useful Tips](#) and [Managing Your Group](#).

Plus more at Leonine Roar: [Stop Rolling Your Bonus Crit Dice](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#), [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#).

3.07 Time's Up

“We didn't lose the game; we just ran out of time.” – Vince Lombardi

How to Establish Turn Time Limits

Today you will learn how to establish smart turn time limits for your playgroup. You'll learn the top methods for faster, simpler turns. You'll then put these approaches into practice and talk about their impact on your own game.

Why Have Turn Time Limits?

Like good table rules for speed or methods for faster calculations, good turn time limits encourage a faster pace to your combats so you can save time for more and better combats and adventures.

Enforce turn time limits and everyone will learn to pick up the pace to where it should be – lightning-fast and dramatic!

Decision vs. Execution

There are two important types of time costs that everyone has to manage well on their turn:

1. Make good decisions on your turn
2. Execute them smoothly

Player Tips

Remind your players that a good decision in ten seconds is better than a perfect one in ten minutes when it comes to RPG combat.

Also:

- Avoid making the other players wait
- Decide on your actions between turns
- Do whatever you need to do to be **ready to act immediately**

They should plan and organize **before** their turn – and the game session – so they make good, quick decisions, and execute them quickly.

Charts, calculators, extra color-coded dice: all of these and more will help players roll and calculate the success and failure of every action they take faster.

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Another thing to remind your players: they ***don't*** have all the time in the world! Other people want to play, including the GM, so turn times need limits and you need to enforce those limits consistently and fairly.

(Tip for GMs: have your cheat sheets ready as well, and keep your Combatspace organized and highly visual.)

Top 9 Turn Time Rules

Here are the best ways to manage turn time and establish turn time limits. These approaches are an excellent supplement to the 17 Table Rules for Speed and 10 Faster Calculation Methods.

Before the game or campaign, discuss the ones you want to use with your playgroup and how they will benefit your game.

3. Use Timers

Sand or egg timers, digital or otherwise, are useful visual – and sometimes audio – tools for tracking turn time. Use them on the GM side of the screen if you want to focus on monster turns, or use a timer for everyone's turn.

You can find several fantasy-themed hourglass timers online too, such as ones that literally breathe fire on the offending player when their turn time is up. (Kidding! Although I know a few of you want that one now!)

4. Display Turn Times

A running written or digital display of turn durations is a great way to track what combats and which players take little or a lot of turn time. The knowledge is useful as a “live” reporting tool, and sharing everyone's patterns with the group increases everyone's awareness.

5. The Start Talking Rule

Require an immediate declaration of at least one action as soon as someone's turn is up. If the player isn't ready, that character or monster delays or faces some other consequence (see below). It won't take long for everyone to have their first action ready!

6. Countdown – One Hand

Use your hand as a simple visual countdown tool. To simulate a six second combat turn, hold up an open hand or fist, counting that as the sixth second, and then use your fingers to visually count down to the end of the turn.

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7. Role/Class-based Countdowns

Create a countdown based on roles or classes in the party, or based on PC mental stats or ability scores.

For example, perhaps fighters get five seconds, but wizards get ten due to their long list of spells.

In RPGs where roles and classes have more equal footing when it comes to attack options, base the number of turn seconds on one or more of the character's mental statistics.

For example, characters have a number of seconds to start or even complete their turn equal to a percentage or multiplier of their intelligence or wisdom scores. A cleric with Wisdom 18 might have 6 seconds (33% of 18) to declare his first action, 18 seconds (100%) to declare all their actions, and 36 or 54 (200% or 300%) seconds to execute and complete their actions.

8. Delay Turn

Players who aren't ready to have their character act immediately, or after a few designated seconds, delay and can act later. This encourages readiness on turns without it costing actions – a good way to start.

9. Make Basic Attack

Players who aren't ready to have their character act immediately or after a few designated seconds make a basic attack instead. This increases the cost of not being ready but still allows an attack.

This is a middle-ground option compared to a delayed or skipped turn. Good for players who aren't at the table when their turn is up.

10. Skip Turn

Players who aren't ready to have their character act immediately or after a few designated seconds are skipped – they lose their turn. A tough penalty takes away all actions, but if delays or basic attacks don't get the message across, this is another option.

Like the basic attack, skipping the turn is also a good option for players who aren't at the table when their turn is up.

11. Timed Missions & Story Impact

In time-sensitive missions and adventures, have developments in a combat or adventure quicken to match slow-developing or time-consuming turns.

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If the princess is going to be boiled in demon blood at midnight and the party has only minutes left to reach the Cauldron of Talking Bones at the top of the tower, then the party hears the princess scream more often to match every delay or long player turn.

Or the moat of lava surrounding the dungeon room rises faster when player turns degenerate into a lot of disorganization, indecision or long minutes of sloppy resolution.

This approach weaves in the Combatscape features, mission goals and story consequences to help enforce turn efficiency. It's a great way to at least get your playgroup thinking about the consequences of taking too long to make decisions and act in combat.

Caution: Don't Be Too Pushy

Be discrete with brand new players or characters. Everyone needs time to get used to the game or their new characters.

Some player personalities also don't respond well to pressure in a game. And some players enjoy carefully considering every tactical option. So use some of the gentler options above first (i.e. delay instead of basic attack or skipped turn), explaining the time-saving game benefits of establishing turn time limits.

However, as your group gains experience – or if it's already a veteran group – then enforce increasingly challenging time limits over time until combat turns get to a duration that's just barely comfortable.

Turn time should feel tight, but not too short either. Experiment with different turn time limits to see which are most effective for your group.

Nick of Time

Congratulations! You've learned some of the best turn time limit approaches to encourage turn efficiency and combat speed in your games.

In the next lesson you will learn about different ways **reward** faster play.

Resources

Roleplaying Tips: [The Rule to Making Good Rules and Other Useful Tips](#) and [Managing Your Group](#).

Leonine Roar: [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#), [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#) and [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#)

3.08 Ride the Lightning: Speed Rewards

“What am I doing here? Flash before my eyes. Now it's time to die!” – Metallica, Ride the Lightning

How to Reward Fast Action

Today you will learn how to reward fast action in your playgroup. Keep pacing and drama high in your combats by encouraging quick, decisive action on both sides.

You'll learn a variety of situations where rewarding fast action makes sense as well as what makes for a good reward. Finally, you'll implement these rewards in your game and share your experiences here.

Why Reward Fast Action?

Table rules for speed and faster calculations take time, practice and commitment – so make sure those efforts are rewarded. Doing so encourages good habits towards efficient, crisp combat and a fun adventure and game session.

Speed Rewards

Use the following fast action achievements and rewards. Feel free to create similar turn efficiency-based achievements and rewards of your own for a given turn, combat or entire session.

Speed Achievements

- **First Strike** – announces damage total within 5 seconds of providing the attack roll
- **Clarity of Purpose** – declares all actions immediately when initiative is called
- **Lightning Execution** – executes and completes all actions for the turn in under 60 seconds
- **Reference Ready** – rules for complex actions displayed in plain view of everyone, ready to cite
- **Dice Perfection** – no dropped dice and rolls all hit and damage together the entire session
- **Precise Steps** – no move action “take-backs” the entire round by the party
- **Here, Here** – no delays or skipped turns do to players missing at the table for any turn

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Speed Rewards Table

| d12 Result | Speed Reward |
|------------|--|
| 1 | Hit bonus |
| 2 | Damage bonus |
| 3 | XP bonus |
| 4 | Bonus minor action |
| 5 | Bonus move action |
| 6 | Bonus attack |
| 7 | Bonus minor treasure |
| 8 | Bonus minor offensive ability or attack power |
| 9 | Bonus minor defensive ability or utility power |
| 10 | Bonus temporary hit points or minor healing |
| 11 | Encounter difficulty reduced – enemy morale is damaged by your sudden, strategic assault |
| 12 | Encounter won – enemy morale is destroyed by your sudden, strategic assault |

Tip – To keep the rewards minor, roll a d10 instead. To include a small chance of saving time by reducing the difficulty of a given combat as a direct result of fast play, roll a d12.

Reward Tokens

When generating or using rewards from the table above, remember to use +X reward tokens that can be turned in any time and applied to any single roll – even after the roll.

Reward tokens aren't just for great roleplaying and other moments of player or character greatness during your game, but can also be used to reward fast action.

Consistently reward people for scene-stealing RP brilliance and for blazing, well-organized turn speed and you'll help create a culture of both game engagement and efficiency.

Timing

Apply speed rewards immediately on the current action or the following action or turn. This keeps their benefits focused on the present – on what's going on **right now** in combat.

Alternatively, apply them when the entire playgroup accomplishes a fast round together – perhaps with the GM included (see below).

Finally, you can also give out rewards on a combat-by-combat basis, as a way to reward a good, fast combat, or at the end of a session packed with lightning-fast combats.

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Reward the Monsters

Be sure to test your GM turn execution by making rewards available to monsters and enemy NPCs – just make sure to let your players know before the game. This benefits you and your playgroup in many ways:

- Combat just got a lot more challenging and dangerous for the players
- You get to practice turn efficiency and be rewarded for it, just like the players
- You get to set an example as GM, setting the turn pace for and teaching the entire playgroup

Symphony of Destruction

Congratulations! You've learned when to give out rewards for players who take fast turns and what kinds of rewards make sense.

What's Next?

Next, you will learn about the dynamics of team play with a focus on striking swiftly as a team. What things can you do or encourage your playgroup to do that encourage team speed? You'll learn exactly what it takes for a team rise to greatness.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Alternative Forms of Character Rewards](#), [The Rule to Making Good Rules and Other Useful Tips](#), [Managing Your Group](#) and [Running Faster Combats](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Alternative Awards: Superior Temporary Hit Points and More](#), [Reward Moments of Greatness: 'I Attack the Darkness!'](#), [Treasure Cheat Sheet: More Magical Rewards](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#), [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#) and [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#)

3.09 As One: Team Play for Greatness

“Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” – Vince Lombardi

Why Play as a Team?

Synergistic team play means team speed and increased combat success. A team of heroes can take on far more challenges than a single individual in an adventure – from games to sports to tactical missions.

Over time, your playgroup **and** your campaigns’ heroes become well-oiled machines, knowing each other so well that sometimes only a single word or glance instantly sets a brilliant plan into action. There’s less hesitation, confusion and arguing – and more turn efficiency, impressive feats and victories!

3 Core Team Play Pillars & Key Questions

- **Roles** – Does everyone understand what their strength or role in the party is, in and out of combat? Who are the playgroup’s leaders and **when**, besides the GM?
- **Chemistry** – Does everyone complement at least a few other players’ personalities **and** characters well? Does everyone understand at the least the basics of their allies’ strengths and weaknesses?
- **Execution** – Does everyone understand how to best execute their strengths and how to **help** put their allies in positions to be successful with their own skills and talents?

6 Critical Team Building Actions

1. Set Clear Expectations

Before the start of a campaign or adventure, be sure everyone understands the expectations for the playgroup. Everyone games for different reasons, but there are always a few common threads.

Discover what those are by talking openly and honestly about them, from **preferred play style** to **preferred combat role** to **favorite class**. These three preferences provide huge insight in what you can expect from each player.

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2. See the Big Picture

Be sure everyone understands what sort of high-level situations, stories, goals or themes your campaign or adventure revolve around.

Many game systems have a default or “understood” theme, like swords and sorcery, high fantasy or dark fantasy, but it’s important to have this discussion with the GM and all players so there’s no surprises on the style or flavor of game you’ll be playing together.

3. Be Passionate, Be Committed

Do your best to establish a culture of passionate, committed players who **want** to be and are **able** to be at the game table every time there’s a game.

Our hobby is full of passionate players, but not everyone can or wants to commit to a certain type of game or certain duration or time frame of gaming.

Not everyone is willing to make a sincere effort to play well with others in a group game. And nothing crushes team spirit more than players who obviously aren’t trying or regularly show up late or not at all.

4. Know Your Power

Be sure everyone understands what the game’s rules are, including any house rules or a custom campaign or adventure “ground rules” cheat sheet that clearly lists out any additions or limitations.

Give everyone plenty of encouragement, choices, opportunity and freedom to craft their characters and create a synergistic team of heroes.

5. As One

Give everyone a chance to get familiar with each other, both as players and characters, before the game begins.

Encourage the playgroup to create **backstory connections to at least two other characters** in the group, either before the game or right at the start of the first game session when the excitement of a new game and adventure is at its peak. How do they know each other? Did they help one another in the past?

Finally, ask players to **exchange and pass around character sheets** so everyone can get a quick peek at each character’s unique and most powerful or notable features.

This simple technique allows everyone to look for whatever they find most exciting or memorable about a character, from crunch to flavor and everything in between.

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This is just one fun, simple, quick way to begin building team chemistry – something great sports teams are always talking about as critical to their success.

For example, if you notice most of a character's attacks require combat advantage to deal maximum damage and apply bonus effects, now you know to look for opportunities in combat to help your ally flank enemies.

And you figure this out on your own before the first battle is even fought!

Imagine how delighted your fellow player and character will be that he or she didn't even have to ask.

6. Speak Up

Follow the advice in "As One" and you're well on your way to creating an open and communication-rich environment for your players.

Encourage and remind everyone to speak up about concerns, both in and out of the adventure.

From logistics to attitudes to in-story risks and plans, everyone should feel comfortable and confident when it comes to offering a polite opinion or sharing a reasonable observation.

It's a game, it's entertainment, and you're among friends – communicating ***should*** be good, open and easy!

4 Bonus Team Play Considerations

1. Decision Involvement

Are your players involved in campaign or adventure selection? Are all characters involved in major party decisions as the adventure unfolds? Do they each get a say or vote?

2. Discussion Management

Is every player involved in logistics discussions? Rules discussions? As GM, be sure to keep these discussions focused and brief. Gather opinions, make a decision and move on to the fun part – the game! – as quickly as possible.

3. Other Group Activities

What other game activities would be a fun break for you and your playgroup?

My playgroup occasionally plays a D&D board game now when a key person or two can't make the week's scheduled game. It's a fun diversion, and still very RPG in flavor.

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I've also hosted special weekend or all-day events, such as a summer BBQ game session. Grilled food and outdoor gaming go great together!

Throw in a round of bocce or some other simple, quick lawn sport to mix things up and keep energy levels high.

4. Healthy Relationships

Supportive attitudes and kindness go a long way. Treat your playgroup with respect and get to know them on a personal level. What are they like and what do they like away from the game table?

Whether it's just a few minutes of social time before each game session or calling each other to talk about the last game, all of these simple things add up to create a positive and enthusiastic gaming environment – suddenly really helpful when everyone's dying and you need to crit that orc ***right now!***

A great team gently pushes and cheers for each other, no matter the odds!

All for One and One for All

Congratulations! You've learned all about the immense value of team play, including how to create a team-oriented environment and how much speed it brings to the table.

What's Next?

Next, you will learn about hit point and damage tracking techniques and options to speed up your combats. Ever feel overwhelmed when tracking monster hit points and communicating their condition without giving too much away? You'll learn how best to manage hit points, damage and more in this lesson.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Managing Your Group](#) and [Running Faster Combats](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Combat Mastery: Tactical Awareness & Teamwork 101](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#) and [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#).

3.10 Make a Tracking Check: How to Track Damage

“There is no safety in numbers, or in anything else.” – James Thurber

How to Track Damage

Ever feel overwhelmed tracking monster damage, especially in the big, important fights?

Today you will learn a variety of organized and time-saving ways to track damage.

You'll then apply your knowledge of these methods in your games and share your damage tracking experiences in today's activity.

Why Track Damage Efficiently?

Tracking damage can become an administrative nightmare. Poor damage tracking reduces the fun of GMing and slows the exciting pace and flow of combat for everyone.

Who wants to suffer through a combat that takes twice as long due to poor damage tracking organization and execution?

Look at damage tracking like you do hit point adjustments – it's an important tool you use to create and adjust the pace and flow of combat. So anything you can do to better organize how you track damage will increase the speed of your combat turns as GM.

Top 7 Damage Handling Methods

These damage handling and tracking methods will reduce combat slog and increase combat speed.

When you deal with damage in a clear and organized way, you gain **Turn Efficiency** – and more combat opportunities in the same session.

1. Reduce Hit Points, Increase Damage

Reduce monster hit points and bump monster damage and you naturally decrease the amount and duration of damage tracking you need to do.

For example, have monsters deal full damage, but reduce their hit points by a percentage, such as 20%-50%.

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2. Increase Damage Organically

As we've seen throughout Faster Combat, finding multiple ways to increase damage is a good thing.

Give monsters and enemy NPCs offensive magical items and make sure monsters use the Combatscape in clever ways to "attack" the party.

Coat weapons with poison, have monsters try to bull rush PCs off ledges and bridges, have cannon fodder monsters trigger traps, and so on.

3. Add, Don't Subtract

Add damage done, counting up towards monster hit point maximums. It's easier to add than to subtract.

I no longer track damage the "old way" – subtracting damage dealt from a hit point total – which I used to do for years, on paper or digitally.

I now have a simple formula in a spreadsheet add up all the instances of a damage done to a monster along the given monster's row, and keep a running remaining hit point total. I highlight the total when it gets to the half-way mark, and then hide or gray out the row when the monster is defeated or otherwise removed from the battle.

4. Pool Damage

Rather than track damage dealt to each individual monster, create a single damage pool and deduct damage dealt as the combat unfolds.

For example, if ten orcs have 20 hit points each, use a pool of 200 hit points. Whenever twenty points of damage are dealt, kill off an orc. The first orc drops at 20 hit points of damage received, the second drops at 40, the third at 60, and so on.

This gives the illusion that the monsters all have slightly different hit points, which gives the combat's monsters a more organic feel as the party slices and blasts through them.

5. Share Resistances and Vulnerabilities

Decide whether you want to share the exact values of monster resistances or vulnerabilities with players. Perhaps PCs learn this information when they first encounter the defense through one of their attacks, or maybe not until after a couple of rounds of "watching and learning" as they fight the monster.

This becomes one less damage tracking statistic for you to calculate and worry about as GM, and in the case of vulnerabilities to certain types of damage, players are more than happy to tell you their fireball hit for 40 instead of 25!

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6. Ask for a Damage Tracking Helper

If you have a player who's considering taking a turn a GMing, this is a good opportunity for that player to sit in as the GM's Helper for a game and see what goes on behind the scenes.

Small tasks like assisting with damage tracking or roleplaying a couple of NPCs not only help the new GM learn the ropes, but add a fresh set of eyes and voice to the night's game for the entire playgroup.

Alternatively, consider asking one of your players – particularly one who enjoys tracking body counts or is otherwise good with tracking numbers – to help you track damage dealt. Select a particular foe or set of foes with similar combat roles and delegate them to this player for tracking.

While this does remove some of the mystery and breaks immersion, it's an option to consider when you're simply overwhelmed by damage tracking, which can happen in complex or large fights with a great number of combatants.

With this option, you have a couple of choices for removing dead foes:

1. Tell the tracker player how many hit points a foe has so he knows when to remove them from the battlefield (fastest option – and ask them to come up with compelling death scene descriptions to help you add flavor!)
2. Have the player report to you on new damage total and you advise when a foe has died (slower option but preserves more mystery)

7. Use Visual Aids and Tools

Here's a summary of just some of the options available to you to keep damage tracking organized and quick, whether your combats takes place on graph paper, dungeon tiles, or poster maps.

For detailed tips on how to use these and more, see lesson [3.02: Be Ready for Anything](#).

- Minis
- Markers
- Stickers
- Whiteboards
- Wet-erase battle grids
- Spreadsheets and Formulas
- Digital Tools

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- Sharpies
- Color Codes
- Beads
- Chits
- Coins
- Poker Chips

Communicate Damage Dealt

A common question in combats from PCs is, “How bad does he look?” Players want a sense of how badly hurt an enemy is, especially a tough or deadly one that’s taken a beating from the PCs.

While some game systems do a good job of describing one or two critical wound states for monsters, you can always use more descriptors – especially when your PCs keep asking you for a monster status update in a critical combat!

Using descriptive language keyed to damage taken provides the party critical information about their opponents’ toughness. This information – often just a word or two – helps the PCs make faster combat decisions.

Use the follow example descriptors based on the remaining percentage of hit points for your monsters. Customize the table further by condensing or adding new current hit point percentage ranges and moving or adding descriptors of your own.

| Current Hit Points | Descriptor 1 | Descriptor 2 | Descriptor 3 |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| 100% | Healthy | Unhurt | Fresh |
| 99% - 61% | Scratched | Bruised | Roughed Up |
| 60% - 41% | Bloodied | Hurt | Wounded |
| 40% - 21% | Badly Hurt | Badly Wounded | Beaten Up |
| 20% or less | Severely Hurt | Critical | Last Legs |

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Use Random Starting Hit Points

Session time running low? Want to get through more combats more quickly? Or simply want a more organic status for your monsters, especially in deadly areas or in certain circumstances, such as in war time or inside a collapsing volcano?

Randomly determine each encounter's monsters' current hit points at the start of combat.

Roll d100 for current hit points and adjust the monsters' hit points or hit point pools down accordingly. Use the descriptors above at the start of combat to clue the PCs in immediately.

The Damage is Done

Congratulations! You've learned a variety of efficient damage tracking methods you can use to quicken combat. You've also learned how to best communicate damage done to monsters by the PCs to help the party make better, faster combat decisions.

What's Next?

In the next lesson you will learn how to manage complex attacks with a focus on spells.

Many games feature complicated spells and other attacks, especially at high levels. These actions quickly become unwieldy and slow combat to a crawl.

You'll learn how to avoid this trap and have your most complex and mighty attacks take center stage – without devouring chunks of session time!

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [11 Monstrous Tips](#), [10 Monstrous Tips](#), [7 More Monstrous Tips](#), [Don't Be Afraid to Modify Your Monsters](#), [Poker in RPGs](#) and [9 DM Tools and Integrating Them Into Your Game](#).

And at Leonine Roar: [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#), [True Encounter Difficulty: Challenge Your Players](#), [12 Ways to Describe Minions: First, Stop Calling Them Minions!](#), [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#), [Monster Complexity and Selection](#) and [D&D 4e Markers and Condition Cards](#).

3.11 With Great Power: Managing Complex Spells and Powers

“Before we acquire great power we must acquire wisdom to use it well.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

How to Manage Complex Spells and Powers

Today you will learn how to manage complex spells and powers so you can make faster and better choices with your monsters’ most powerful abilities.

You’ll learn what to prioritize when it comes to understanding and organizing these complex attacks.

Finally, you’ll put what you learn into practice and talk about the impact on your own game.

Why Manage Complex Spells and Powers?

The nature of monsters’ most powerful attacks is they are a source of both challenge and slog. These trademark abilities are intended to provide the characters with an impressive obstacle or attack to overcome or survive.

However, these attacks or abilities also tend to have the most moving parts, slowing your decision-making and turn execution – and thus the whole combat encounter – down.

So how do you avoid the risk of slog when dealing with these complex spells and powers?

Four Simple Steps to Complex Ability

Management

Here are four ways to ensure faster and better understanding, organization and selection of complex spells and powers.

1. Get Familiar

No, not *a* familiar, but *get* familiar! Make sure you avoid having to look up any rules keywords for your monsters’ complex abilities during combat.

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Read, study and commit critical rules and keywords to memory **before** the game, especially for a session where you expect a boss monster combat or any combats with monsters that have at least three complicated abilities with a lot of “moving parts.”

Walk through a few attacks. Roll dice and track damage, for as much as a full round. This helps you get used to the execution of complicated abilities and get an idea of where the greatest risk of slog will be for you and your monster.

You’ll get an immediate preview of which abilities you need to spend more time on to improve your in-combat execution of them, from decision to resolution.

2. Sort by Range

Time and distance, movement and range: these are basic criteria for efficient target selection.

Mark or note the ranges of your monsters’ most complex attacks.

Imagine being able to quickly scroll through a list of complex powers and spells labeled with “short, medium and long” ranges. At a glance, you can quickly rule out what attacks do or don’t make sense as the monster starts its turn.

3. Sort by Number of Targets

The most powerful attacks and abilities demand efficiency. They need to challenge the party. And that means maximum target selection whenever possible. Fireballs shouldn’t hit just one target, for example, but monsters should work together to ensure their orc sorcerer’s fireballs singes every single one of the five heroes.

How? Start with something like what you learned in Step 2: a simple, at-a-glance label. Go through the list of complex attacks and abilities and label each with “single, low, medium or high” number of maximum targets.

4. Create Custom Spell and Power Sheets

Create a custom spell, power or attack sheet with columns for all of an abilities’ basic stats, a brief description (a one line-summary, like many games include things like spell descriptions), range, maximum targets, usage limits and any other key statistics that would help you understand and decide to either use or not use an ability as quickly as possible.

For example, I like to use custom spreadsheets to analyze, sort and rate very complex enemy NPCs the party might face in a boss showdown.

By having a critical review and summary of their complex attacks, spells and other powers in front of me, I can run this boss monster more efficiently from a tactical

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perspective. This lets me better continue to keep combat pacing and any roleplaying during the fight flavorful, dramatic and exciting.

Even if I go through the 4 steps just once with a key enemy NPC personality, I've already saved myself so much tactical decision-making and execution time when his or her first combat turn begins.

Help Your Players

Remember the above principles and methods apply for players of complex characters as well.

Spellcasters tend to be more complex thanks to the greater number of options when it comes to targeting and area alone.

However, some game systems have more even playing fields where even high-level warriors have dizzying, sophisticated and impressive maneuvers and strikes on par with classic high fantasy sorcery.

Whatever system you play, help your players by offering some the tips here when you see them struggling with complex powers, spells or attacks. Fumbling through these awesome but complex powers should never suck the life out of a fast-paced combat – don't let that happen!

Great Responsibility

Congratulations! You've learned how to best manage complex spells and powers, challenge your playgroup to new heights of organization and tactical execution.

Next, you'll learn how to create your own Battlesheet or Combat Tracker – a dashboard of highly organized combat information to keep the execution of your combat turns fast and deadly.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [11 Monstrous Tips](#), [10 Monstrous Tips](#), [7 More Monstrous Tips](#) and [Don't Be Afraid to Modify Your Monsters](#) and [Managing Your Group](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [True Encounter Difficulty: Challenge Your Players](#), [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#), [Monster Complexity and Selection](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#), [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#), [Faster Combat: Encounter Triggers Checklist](#) and [4e DM's Cheat Sheet: Be Ready for Anything!](#)

3.12 Enter the Matrix: Create Your Combat Tracker

“True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous and conflicting information.” – Winston Churchill

Why Create a Combat Tracker?

Today you will learn how to create your own custom Combat Tracker. Whether you build one from scratch using the suggested Excel example here, or take the concepts and apply them through a more advanced digital application, a whiteboard, index cards or tokens, you'll create a tool that helps you quickly find, communicate and update critical information throughout combat.

The Combat Tracker Triple-Threat

A great Combat Tracker helps you reference and track three major encounter components:

1. Core combat rules
2. Party statistics
3. Encounter (i.e. area and monster) information

Let's explore each of these Combat Tracker sections, including specific advice and the value of including each component in your own custom Combat Tracker.

1. Core Rules

- **Color Code and Highlight** – Colored fonts and highlighted cells are instant visual communicators. If your game includes a critical monster state at half hit points (i.e. bloodied), then color or highlight that field red, for example. Or gray out or hide the lines of defeated monsters.

Also color code major areas of your combat tracker – make sure its three core sections of basic rules, part info and encounter info stand out.

Do the same for different members of the party by theme, role or class. For example, tribal characters might be highlighted green, while martial or melee characters might all be highlighted brown.

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- **Page Reference** – Include page references to your rulebooks throughout your Combat Tracker, at least for complex or frequently referenced combat rules.
- **Encounter Start Distance** – Include the basic rules that determine starting encounter distance. A small table that displays starting weather or visibility conditions and typical distances makes an excellent, simple and consistent reference.
- **Monster Readiness** – In the upcoming encounter and adventure, are the monsters going to be on high alert? Intoxicated? Somewhere in between? If your game has rules on monster readiness or alertness levels at encounter start, include a small table of this info as well.

Even if there's no strict rules on this for your game, a quick one-word note for each encounter (i.e., high alert, drunk, etc.) gives you a sense of how much of a jump the party might have once they encounter the monsters.

- **Knowledge DCs** – What does the party know as far as automatic knowledge of the monsters they are facing? You'll need a short table or listing of the standard difficulty or difficulty classes (DCs) for this type of information in front of you.
- **Skill Check DCs** – How about for all other non-combat checks, talents, knacks and knowledge? Keep a standard skill check DC reference on your Combat Tracker as well, as many of these secondary abilities come into play in combat (i.e., acrobatics, diplomacy, intimidation, trap disarming, etc.).

2. Party Intel

- **Party Senses** – What level and quality of vision does each member of the party possess? Can they see in the dark? Can they see in the earth beneath their feet? There may be rare information about the combat only certain heightened or special senses bring out.
- **Party Languages** – Not every combat need be prolonged or even come to fruition. A witty or sharp tongue can end a battle before it begins or at least change the odds. Know what tongues your party speaks, as languages – especially uncommon ones – can occasionally make for great parlay options.
- **Party Defenses** – List out all the core defenses of your PC party.
- **Key Party Skills** – List out the party's special talents, knacks and knowledge. Know their specialties and be ready for their creative inclusion and application in the context of the encounter.

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- **Skill Bonuses** – Just how good is someone at disarming traps, recalling the history of ruined sites, or imposing their charms on a simple-minded guard? List out the specific bonuses of your characters' top three to five skills.

3. Encounter Intel

- **Encounter Name** – Give your encounter a memorable name, similar to many published adventure modules. Focus on a single theme, emotion, place, monster or event. Give your encounter this pillar of personality for you to use as a flavor and improv tool from start to finish!
- **Encounter Features** – What important mechanically impactful features of the area exist in this encounter? Note them all and optionally list the relevant skills and DCs (i.e. Listen/Spot 20, History 25).
- **Initiative Scores or Modifiers** – Decide whether you want to track pre-rolled or average initiative modifiers or scores. I typically go with average init scores or modifiers, saving the time of rolling for separate monsters or groups of monsters.

I also like how an average initiative result approach yields a consistency of more realistic and immersive role-based quickness through an entire campaign's worth of combats. Monstrous insects tend to always act faster than slow-moving giants, for example.

- **Monster Max and Conditional HPs** – The most critical hit point totals are 1) maximum, 2) half-maximum and 3) zero. For 4E GMs especially, make sure you have a column that displays the first two easily and visually. Often, new abilities or attacks in 4E trigger at half and zero monster hit points, so it's important to have these two numbers in front of you so you don't forget those triggers. For PFRPG and GMs of other systems, just have one column for starting hit points.
- **Monster Defenses** – List out all the core defenses of your monsters.
- **Damage Done** – Use a simple Excel formula to total up damage done, or add up the damage manually in a single cell. I've come to prefer the former method lately, actually listing out each instance of damage in nearby cells in that monster's row.

This way I have a detailed blow-by-blow history of damage dealt to the monster and a simple automated formula that steers the value ever closer to key half-hit point or zero values as the combat unfolds.

- **Conditions Applied** – In addition to visual aids (colored rings, beads, etc.) on the miniatures or tokens atop n the battlefield, map or tiles, I like jotting down a

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few notes of the conditions that now plague my monsters thanks to those meddling PCs!

- **Notes** – A space for any observations, ideas or other inspirations that hit you as the combat develops is helpful. Improvising or wrapping up sooner rather than later might just come out of your scribbled thoughts here.
- **Treasure** – Why do your PCs do all this insane stuff like battling giants, demons and evil gods anyway? For knowledge, good, honor and glory, certainly – but also for the shiny, enchanted treasure! Write down the encounter's magical and monetary rewards.

Example Combat Tracker

Here is a screen shot of a Combat Tracker that includes nearly all of the elements above. This particular snapshot was taken from my recent tribal campaign in the frigid north – a campaign that just wrapped up this very weekend!

| Combat Tracker | | | | | | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|--|---|-------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| | | | Monster Knowledge: Origin, Keywords | Monster Knowledge (RC, pp. 129-130; 127-128) | L7 DCs: 11 -- 16 -- 23 | | |
| | | | Arcana (4): Constr, Elem, Fey, Shadow | Mod DC of Monster's Level | L8 DCs: 12 -- 16 -- 24 | | |
| | | | Dungeoning (1): Aberrant | (5) name, origin, type, keywords, typical temperament | L9 DCs: 12 -- 17 -- 25 | | |
| | | | Nature (1): Natural | Hard DC of Monster's Level | L10 DCs: 13 -- 18 -- 26 | | |
| | | | Religion (2): Immortal, Undead | (3) powers' capabilities, resistances, vulnerabilities | L11 DCs: 13 -- 19 -- 27 | | |
| | | | | | L12 DCs: 14 -- 20 -- 28 | | |
| | | | | | L13 DCs: 14 -- 20 -- 28 | | |
| STR | Senses (Passive) | | Who | Monster Knowledge (Passive) | | | Other KeySkills |
| A | Perception 21 -- Insight 16 | | Garthen (Dave) - <i>low-light vision</i> | Arcana 14 -- Dungeon'g 23 -- Nature 21 -- Religion 14 | | | Heal +8 |
| A | Perception 16 -- Insight 14 | | Holistyn (Ray) - <i>normal vision</i> | Arcana 14 -- Dungeon'g 14 -- Nature 21 -- Religion 14 | | | Acrobatics +10 -- Athlet |
| A | Perception 26 -- Insight 19 | | Hytruk (Bouche) - <i>low-light vision</i> | Arcana 14 -- Dungeon'g 21 -- Nature 24 -- Religion 14 | | | Athletics +8 -- Enduranc |
| Init | Max | Bloodied | Defenses AC/F/R/W | Monster Name (Origin/Keyword) | | Character | Dmg Done |
| | | | Std (1,950 XP); Treasure: 1,100/1,500 gpv | 1: Dinner by Moonlight | | | |
| | | | Monster Surprise: n/a | | | | |
| | | | PP 12: All of you see a black velvet sack poking out of the torn pack on the body. | | | | |
| | | | PP 17: Garthen and Hytruk see a trail of gold coins falling out onto the snow out of a black velvet sack on the body carried | | | | |
| | | | PP 25: Hytruk sees the end of a gem-studded leather handle of a large steel weapon poking out of the sack. | | | | |
| | | | PMK x: | | | | |
| +6 | 212 | 106 | AC 20; Fortitude 19, Reflex 18, Will 17 | Owlbear #1 | | A x B | 206 |
| | 212 | 106 | AC 20; Fortitude 19, Reflex 18, Will 17 | Owlbear #2 | | | 203 |
| | 146 | 73 | Wave 2 (these monsters appear on r2) | Fleshcarver | | B B | 169 |
| | | | | Features of the Area | | | |
| | | | | Moonlight [dim light] (illumination/obscurement) | | | |
| | | | | Snow (difficult terrain category) | | | |
| | | | | Large Boulders (diff terrain, cover terrain, climbable) | | | |
| | | | | Small Boulders | | | |
| | | | | Treasure | | | |

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Fast Alternative: GM's Cheat Sheet

A quick alternative when you're short on set up time and table space is a simple GM's Cheat Sheet.

The focus of my half-page Word cheat sheet is on party statistics, to give me a quick sense of what they can handle plus a leg-up on inevitable points where I need to improvise the encounters and adventure based on the party's inevitably surprising actions. After all, they're the stars of the story, right?

This cheat sheet doesn't include detailed encounter area or monster information, so I track that in my session notes or in the margins of monster stat block printouts, for example.

Here's an example of a recent time- and space-saving GM's Cheat Sheet from my tribal frozen lands campaign – fresh from the cataclysmic campaign finale!

| <u>Name</u> | <u>AC</u> | <u>F</u> | <u>R</u> | <u>W</u> | <u>MHP</u> | <u>MHS</u> | <u>HSV</u> |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|------------|------------|------------|
| <u>Araga</u> | 36 | 46 | 40 | 48 | 179 | 13 | 44 |
| <u>Holistyn</u> | 44 | 42 | 40 | 36 | 209 | 14 | 52 |
| <u>Hyrtuk</u> | 37 | 48 | 37 | 48 | 183 | 17 | 57 |
| . | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| . | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |

| NAME · RACE · CLASS | LANGUAGES | VISION | P-PIER | P-INS | P-MONSTER KNO |
|-------------------------------|--|--------------|--------|-------|-----------------|
| Araga · rzcrlw shifter shaman | abyssal, dp spch, draconic, dwarf, elven | low-light | 37 | 37 | Arc 34 · Dgn 37 |
| Holistyn · goliath barbarian | giant, goblin, primor, supernal, cmn | darkvision** | 28** | 26 | Nat 33 |
| Hyrtuk · dwarf druid | dwarven, giant, cmn | darkvision** | 46* | 39 | Nat 38 |

| DCs by Level | Easy | Med | Hard |
|------------------|------|-----|------|
| 30 th | 24 | 32 | 42 |

| Lvl | Low DC | Med DC | Hi DC | Low dmg | Med dmg | Hi dmg | HLnd | dmg | Misio | dm |
|-----|--------|--------|-------|---------|---------|--------|-------|-----|-------|----|
| 30* | 24 | 32 | 42 | 46+15 | 48+20 | 48+30 | 48+29 | | 19 | |

Treasure 30th (pHB, pp. 248-250 or RC, pp. 300-301); 4 for 3 PCs = 11, 13, 16, 13 = c. g. 30, nil

Treasure 30th (pHB, pp. 248-250 or RC, pp. 300-301)

Metrics & Monsters

Well done! You've learned how to create your own custom Combat Tracker including what critical information should be included and how best to track it. Arm yourself with a dashboard of fantastic but well-organized combat data and watch as your combats take off!

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What's Next

Next, we're going to focus on managing your maps, miniatures and monster tokens. How can you save time and quickly get organized? You'll learn the answer to that and more in the next lesson.

Resources

Roleplaying Tips: [9 Tools and Integrating Them Into Your Game](#), [The Session Checklist: Ingredients to a Successful Game Session Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), and [Know Your Players - Building Your Session Checklist Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

More at Leonine Roar: [4e DM's Cheat Sheet](#), [D&D 4e Condition Markers and Condition Cards](#), [Faster Combat: Combat Triggers Checklist](#), [Mapping Options Deathmatch](#), and [Treasure Cheat Sheet: More Magical Rewards](#).

3.13 Potent Props: How to Best Use Maps, Miniatures and Monster Tokens

“The battlefield is a scene of constant chaos. The winner will be the one who controls that chaos, both his own and the enemies.” – Napoleon Bonaparte

Why Use Maps, Minis and Monster Tokens?

Maps, miniatures and monster tokens are the tangible, visual feast for your combat encounters. They communicate important tactical and environmental information visually, and thus instantly, in battle.

Efficiently organize and ready your maps, miniatures and monster tokens **before** combat and you’ll save time before and during play.

Master the Battlefield

Great map organization means understanding how best to make use of the three most common, physical and reasonably affordable map options: poster maps, dungeon tiles and erasable battlemats.

Use these core battlefield props wisely to speed up your game.

Poster Map Advantages

- + Easy storage
- + Zero prep time
- + Usually stays in place
- + Easy to see the action
- + Full color
- + Themed to location or environment
- + Easy to enlarge or minimize by folding or adding more maps to the table
- + No confusion over the details of the Combatscape: location and positioning are clear

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Tile Advantages

- + Easy to see the action
- + Full color
- + Themed to location or environment
- + Highly customizable Combatscape size
- + Highly customizable and easy-to-blend themes

Erasable Map Advantages

- + On-demand, fully customizable Combatscape creation
- + Stuff

Things to Avoid with Poster Maps and Dungeon Tiles

- Avoid letting the map or tiles silently describe the entire environment. Visuals and detailed art are fantastic and quick ways to communicate the Combatscape, but make sure you highlight the most important features and highlight the location's theme and atmosphere
- Avoid maps or tiles whose theme is a poor fit for the current Combatscape. Use coins, similar tokens or paper to create fog of war, fold the map in half, or add small decorative dungeon tile dressing to your poster maps as a combined solution

Things to Avoid with Erasable Battlemats

- Avoid drawing every Combatscape on-demand – its great versatility doesn't mean you should waste time pausing the action and creating the combat area every time a fight breaks out
- Avoid complex Combatscapes with many terrain features. Images and features drawn by hand are less clear and readable compared to poster maps or tiles.

Tips for Poster Maps and Dungeons Tiles

- Place your poster maps or tiles on the table **before** play: stack expected earlier encounter location maps on top, and later encounters underneath
- Use thin sheets of felt or cloth, found in craft stores, to prevent movement of maps or tiles
- Use cut-to-size thin plexi-glass sheets to protect maps and tiles, keep them in place, and still see the grid

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- Use sheets of white (or any color) paper between poster maps to hide larger Combatscapes below, or create a “fog of war” on the top map or set of tiles

Tips for Erasable Battlemats

- Draw out your encounter area as much as possible before play
- Use multiple pre-drawn battlemaps stacked on top one another to speed along to the next Combatscape
- Clean yours regularly and often so it stays clear and reusable
- Watch for and limit smudging on the map, your hands, any sheets and other surfaces

Miniatures & Monster Tokens

Like the three common map choices you have, minis and monster tokens present you with a tough choice as well. Which are easiest to use for their intended purpose of quickly identifying your Combatscape monsters?

Miniatures Advantages

- + 3D, typically full color monster and NPC representation
- + Huge available selection, both plastic and metal
- + Easy to handle and move, similar to chess pieces
- + Easy to physically add condition markers, rings or stickers
- + Combat is easier to learn for people who play board games or miniature war games
- + Excellent for GMs and players who are visual learners
- + No confusion over the details of the Combatscape: location and positioning are clear
- + Easy to adjudicate visibility, line of sight, cover and ranges

Miniatures Disadvantages

- + Overuse and excessive handling of miniatures, especially in non-combat situations
- + Time- and space-consuming to store, organize, find, carry and set up
- + Cumbersome and heavy for the mobile GM to carry

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- + Might hamper both GM and player improvisation: “If it's not on the map, it doesn't exist”
- + Risk of constant questions or concerns in games where facing matters
- + Risk of slower combat due to time spent physically moving miniatures
- + Encourages a wargame or board game atmosphere rather than an RPG atmosphere
- + A collection of miniatures is expensive to build
- + Requires a significant amount of space to store and set up, especially with larger monsters
- + Requires a table or similar large, solid surface for proper display and balance

Monster Tokens

A more recent lower-cost and lower-encumbrance alternative to miniatures is the illustrated, full-color cardboard monster token.

Some games use the same art from their bestiary sourcebooks for a nice, unified and integrated touch. This makes the tokens easier to find and match to the monsters you want to use.

The only significant drawback is the 2D vs. 3D models that miniatures offer.

Remember you can make use of coins of different sizes, poker chips, small pebbles or stones or other similarly sized tokens or markers in a pinch to represent Combatscape features and monsters.

I've used pennies for minions, to extend or cut off cave tunnels on a poster map or set of tiles, and to outline an airship's deck. And I've used quarters for that same ship's cannons or to indicate large rocks, pits or double-doors in other encounters – creating a Combatscape in a pinch!

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Cover the Earth

Congratulations! You've learned some of the best ways to take advantage of maps, tiles, miniatures and tokens in your game to save set up and combat time. You've also learned what time-wasters or drawbacks to avoid when using them.

Next, you will learn what it means to roleplay for tactical advantage! Chapter 4 is here, and you're ready to learn new ways to finish your combats faster – and it starts by learning to “attack” with your social skills!

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Mapping Tips: Planning Your Map Saves Time](#), [Dungeon Tile Mastery: 9 Ways To Get The Most Out Of Your Tile Collection](#) and [27 Great Prop Ideas To Enhance Your Games](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Mapping Options Deathmatch, D&D 4e Condition Markers & Condition Cards](#), [The Monstrous Vignette in 8 Quick Steps](#), and [D&D 4e: Top 12 Ways to Stop Sounding so Damn Metagamey](#).

Chapter 4: Finish



4.01 Face Time: Roleplay for Tactical Advantage

“Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.” – John F. Kennedy

How to Roleplay for Tactical Advantage

Ever notice how in books and movies there is plenty of conversation between both parties before – and during – battle? Such words can be used to gain an advantage in the battle, and perhaps the entire adventure.

Know who your enemy is – their strengths and weaknesses – and what they want or value most. Figure this out, and roleplaying for tactical advantage comes easily, adding rich and flavorful options to your game.

Why Roleplay for Tactical Advantage?

When used wisely at the start of an encounter, the rewards for role-played conversation, negotiation and intimidation can be great.

Want to delay, distract, surprise or escape your opponent? Add theater to your game and use your social skills as weapons!

Top 4 Goals and Rewards of Tactical Roleplay

The following goals or rewards are appropriate for great roleplay at the start of an encounter. At the GM’s distraction, consider altering the starting conditions of an encounter based on the roleplaying exchange between the parties and how well each party’s parlay achieves the roleplay’s goal or reward.

For example, reposition PCs or NPCs with “free” movement just before initiative is rolled, reduce the number of opponents, grant a free surprise round, or allow one side to move the location of, delay or even escape the encounter thanks to outstanding roleplay used for tactical advantage.

- + **Avoid.** Your roleplaying is intended to avoid confrontation. Whether you’re outnumbered, badly hurt, in a rush, or don’t think the fight is for the right reasons or worth the time and risk, you’re using your wits and tongue to stop the battle before it begins.

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- + **Delay.** Your roleplaying buys time for allies to move into better tactical positions, such as finding cover, moving to higher or more defensible vantage points for ranged attacks, or moving closer to exits.
- + **Distract.** Your roleplaying confuses or distracts the opposing party, allowing options similar to delay tactics, but also creating an opportunity to gain the jump on the enemy – a moment of surprise – should battle break out.
- + **Surprise.** Your roleplaying is a ruse, with the words, details and dialogue intended to trick or hide a different, significant, perhaps hidden threat. Think along the lines of the twist in your **Combat Encounter Plan**. A great surprise as battle breaks out gives that group a great advantage.

Top 4 Ways to Parley

There are many ways to roleplay for tactical advantage. Coercion, persuasion, proposition and negotiation are all options to consider. Similarly, intimidation, threats, taunts and insults can provide you an edge over your opponent.

Have your NPCs and monsters employ the following roleplaying approaches for tactical advantage, and encourage your PC party to do the same, rewarding them appropriately (see above).

1. Small Talk

Description: Not all conversation need be about the quest or conflict at hand. Chat about everyday concerns or desires like the weather, food, family and lovers, and you might just set the other party a bit more at ease – whether you're doing so honestly or want to catch them off-guard.

Goals/rewards: Avoid, delay, distract, surprise.

2. We're the Same, You Know

Description: Just a step beyond small talk is finding some common ground between the two parties. How are we alike? Are we after the same things? Do we believe in similar ideals? Do we have similar callings and duties? Appeal to that sense of being more alike than different – as is often the case.

Goals/rewards: Avoid, delay.

3. We Can Help One Another / We Will Reward You

Description: Combining forces rather than fighting sometimes makes sense. Not every party has the means to achieve its current goal or duty and a wise party

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may offer their help or a reward for their cooperation – whether that cooperation is to fight together or simply vacate the area peacefully.

Goals/rewards: Avoid, delay.

4. I Know Your Weakness / You Cannot Win / You've Already Lost

Description: There are also darker approaches to *negotiations*. Threats, insults and intimidation, especially when wrapped in truths, facts and numbers surrounding either party's deeds and misdeeds. All these can give the informed party an upper hand, breaking enemy morale.

Goals/rewards: Avoid, delay, distract, surprise.

Honorable Leaders

Two important points when it comes to your NPCs and their roleplay for tactical advantage involve identifiable leadership and honorable behavior.

First, ensure intelligent foes who lead an opposing party are easily identifiable. Give the PCs plenty of clues from appearance, mannerisms, ecology, history or rumor that help the party clearly identify leaders who are willing to talk.

Establish this willingness to parley from enemies early in a campaign so the PCs understand not every encounter need come to blows and death – especially ones involving intelligent foes.

Second, ensure most of these intelligent foes the party roleplays and negotiates with keep their word. Like identifiable leadership, establish a pattern of honor and consistency among intelligent adversaries who want more than a good fight and blood on their hands.

Like the PCs, intelligent NPC leaders are ambitious. Nothing will sour this new layer of rich storytelling scenes and opportunities in your campaign more than NPCs who constantly backstab and go back on their word. A few liars and traitors are good, but avoid them early on in a campaign.

Words as Weapons

Congratulations! You've learned how to use roleplay for tactical advantage for your encounters. You've learned how to gain specific advantages regardless of whether a fight breaks.

You've also learned how and what roleplaying styles and approaches fit best for the edge a combat party seeks when using words as weapons.

What's Next?

Next, you will learn specific ways to include and manage surrender, escape, flight and retreat options in your game.

These story-rich options are great time-savers, but they can be difficult to execute in a satisfying way.

Want these options to become exciting and memorable? Learn how to do just that by flipping the page.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Take Ten: Bluff](#), [Lessons from the LARP](#) and [Manage NPC Guides Carefully](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), and [Adding Character to Your Character](#) and [Trained Skills Need Stage Time](#).

4.02 Always a Way Out: Surrender and Escape

“The greatness of a man's power is the measure of his surrender.” – William Booth

How to Include Surrender and Escape

Options

Ever wish your combats included dramatic yet practical surrender and escape options? It's easy to get caught in fights to the death, but that's not always sensible or satisfying.

Some opponents and missions lend themselves to more sophisticated tactics that avoid or minimize the fatalities of combat.

Today you'll learn how to weave these options into your missions and combats, making them real and dramatic options in your adventures.

Why Surrender or Escape?

When used wisely, a timely surrender or withdrawal furthers a mission or adventure in exciting ways. Toe-to-toe combat will still come at some point, so be sure to mix things up. Enrich your games by emphasizing the following story-rich options that go beyond total annihilation.

Top 4 Surrender and Escape Options

Here are four engaging ways to include surrender and escape options in your games. Note that each option includes both PC and NPC or monster perspectives and story branches.

Option #1 – Surrender

PCs: To get as close to the *real* enemy as fast as possible, the party gives themselves up to the real enemy's weaker minions. The party recognizes the minions as little threat themselves, making this option appealing. These flunkies act as a time-saving escort for the party to confront the true threat.

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NPCs & Monsters: The patrol, guards or mercenaries don't want to die for their cause. Perhaps they're underpaid, malnourished or treated poorly by their masters.

They might even be swayed to go beyond surrender and even help a savvy party that puts their social skills to good use, providing the party with information, supplies, a bribe or more.

Option #2 – Capture

PCs: The party wants to avoid killing out of honor, law or practicality. The party may be taking prisoners for information or acting as agents of the law and bringing in criminals. Or perhaps the wet work is time consuming compared to taking them prisoner by force, traps, trickery or through parlay.

NPCs & Monsters: The party's adversaries have been instructed by their masters to take the party alive.

Or the party finds itself in a rare situation: they are outmatched by their foes, who decide to capture them and use them as food, slaves or hostages.

Option #3 – Escape / Withdraw / Retreat / Flee

PCs: The party either learns the fight isn't worth the time and risk or they're overmatched. They decide it's more important to move on or survive rather than engage or continue an already-grim battle.

Perhaps the combat environment itself is deadly or growing more dangerous with each sword swing or spell strike – a collapsing prison (with the PCs as prisoners, of course!) or erupting volcano quickly shifts priorities.

NPCs & Monsters: Like the party, the monsters know or learn the battle will be costly, or that the greater threat is the combat location itself. Also a superior option to surrender, as the NPCs and monsters still have a chance at freedom.

Option #4 – Chase

PCs: The party decides to give chase to fleeing enemies. They alert more guards or more powerful enemies and monsters.

Or they come back to haunt the party, something every group I've GMed seems to be sure of – and terrified of – happening!

Maybe instead of killing the fleeing enemy, the party wants to capture the enemy for information or to use as an escort or guide.

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NPCs & Monsters: The monsters decide to hunt down the party, either to finish them off or to capture them for information, food, prisoners or slaves.

Home field advantage is something NPCs and monsters usually enjoy from invading adventuring parties, increasing the odds of the chase's success.

What Do They Want?

Keep the goals of enemy monsters and NPCs in mind at all times. This is especially true with **intelligent and civilized enemies who tend to want more complex things**.

Be consistent with this approach throughout your adventures and campaigns and you will create a rich, believable and immersive story and world.

The Unwritten Rules of War

Similar to roleplaying for tactical advantage in the last lesson, be sure your monsters and enemy NPCs follow a consistent code of honor or rules of engagement in battle.

A rare deviant is fine and expected, but it's especially important that intelligent, civilized enemies fight fair. If they usually don't, then your playgroup will not see any value in non-violent options, especially high risk ones like surrender.

For example, "The Boiling Nine are known to keep their word and follow through on the grisly jobs they are hired for. Their honor is not to be mistaken for weakness, for it is widely known they boil in acid any who cross them and then prop up and display what's left of their burned, bloated corpses in the middle of the town square."

When you do include vile or dishonorable NPCs, make sure that information is clear to the party. Describe what they know and see in clear, black-and-white context. Be sure they understand their foe can't be trusted.

For example, "Kareena, the exiled princess now known on the streets as The Kiss of Death, is famous for her high-stakes deals with adventurers. If you hire her, she will slaughter whatever you like with an ease and cockiness you've never seen – but don't let this vixen open her mouth at camp or during a meal, never mind a negotiation. Everyone knows how much she loves the cheap thrills of wild rumors and lies. More than once, her expertly wicked tongue has made adventurers turn on one another."

Knowledge is Power – and Choices

Weave surrender and retreat options into your story and combat narratives. Be sure passive knowledge checks or senses glean the clues to their possibilities in the current mission or adventure.

If the party doesn't know their enemy is willing to surrender or that they're honorable, what are the chances the party doesn't just start tearing them apart?

Or if the numbers of a "large" army aren't clear, give them teeth through numbers.

For example, "A thousand orcs swarm from the five tunnels towards the flickering purple portal in the shallow pond where you now lie, just below the oval hole in the cavern ceiling from where moonlight streams in." This gets everybody's attention – and lets the party know there's seven ways out of the place.

Share these important aspects of the opposition and environment with the party, especially if the party asks follow-up questions or makes successful active checks to learn more about potential surrender, capture, escape, chase and similar alternatives to all-out combat.

Let's Get Out of Here

Congratulations! You've learned how to include surrender and retreat alternatives in your combats and missions, and all the rich story branches they add to your game.

You've learned to consider the opposition's goals, their code of honor or reputation, and how to share this critical information about the behavior and goals of NPCs and monsters with the party.

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What's Next?

Learn how to use other effective and popular Combat Closers, expanding upon those here.

Want to quickly end the grind in a combat that's already decided? That's exactly what you'll learn in the next lesson.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Villainous Escapes: How to Help the Bad Guy Live to Fight Another Day](#), Jail Break series: [Part I](#), [Part II](#), [Part III](#), [Part IV](#), [Take Ten: Bluff](#), [Lessons from the LARP](#) and [Manage NPC Guides Carefully](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Great Escapes: 8 Ways to Help Villains Get Away](#), [Fight the Power... Groups!](#), [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), and [Trained Skills Need Stage Time](#).

4.03 Always a Way Out: More Combat Closers

“If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course on where you stop your story.” – Orson Welles

How to Close Combat Faster

Ever wish your combats ended faster? Ever wonder why the clean-up stage lasts so long and how you can fix it?

There are other ways to close combat besides surrender and escape options, and it's important to know when to use them.

What should you look for to indicate it's time for a Combat Closer? And what makes a great Combat Closer? You'll learn that and more today.

Why Use Combat Closers?

First, you need to know when it's best to use a combat closer. Then, decide which combat closer fits based on the story, adventure, relationships and any tactical or environmental considerations.

Combat Closers save you time and resources so you can focus on keeping the adventure's pace high and combat smooth and exciting. Avoid the slog when the outcome looks decided: use Combat Closers.

Top 5 Combat Closer Checkpoints

Here are five signals, triggers or events to look for during your combats that indicate it's time to close combat quickly.

These are the signs you want to look for that suggest an **uninspiring grind or slog is on the way** – unless you're already mired in it!

Steer clear of the mire: learn to watch out for and react to these warning signs with a Combat Closer.

Checkpoint#1 – Morale Shifts

Suddenly, either the monsters or PCs decide the fight isn't worth their time: it's too dangerous or otherwise too risky or a waste of time.

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Or perhaps new information has come up during the battle, suggesting the monsters might stop their assault – or even help or join forces with the party.

Maybe a powerful NPC or monster leader or champion arrives or is badly hurt or defeated, sending ripples of renewed or shattered morale throughout the group.

Checkpoint #2 – Heavy Damage and Casualties

One side starts taking heavy damage or suffering casualties.

Maybe all the PCs are some combination of being down or at single digit hit points, and the monsters barely have a scratch, or vice versa.

Checkpoint #3 – Slog: Fumes & Boredom

This often happens against tough monsters: boss, leader, champion or elite monsters take a while to bring down.

That means the party's best attacks and abilities are spent by the time the enemy starts to show concern, leading to heavy use of simple or uninspiring attacks and tactics.

Checkpoint #4 – Running Out of Time

The most practical reason to use a combat closer is when you're running out of session time.

There's not much worse than putting the pause button on a climactic battle between game sessions.

Close out the combat on a high note, not with an extended pause.

Checkpoint #5 – Challenge: Too Easy or Too Hard

Some battles end up being huge wastes of time because their challenge level in actual game play ends up on the extremes.

A rare "too easy" or "too hard" encounter is fine, but when they become a pattern, that's a huge time-waster.

Wrap things up quickly instead with a Combat Closer and move on to more engaging combats.

Top 5 Combat Closers

Here are some of the best ways to close combat fast. Add a clear note to your Combat Encounter Plan that indicates achieving any of the following objectives immediately ends combat.

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Combat Closer #1 – Leader or Champion Defeated

A major NPC, boss or otherwise important monster takes a enough damage to bring its hit points to half or lower, or is simply cut down.

Wrap the combat up by having its minion monsters surrender or withdraw – or narrate or ask for the PCs' help to narrate how the party finishes the remaining leaderless enemies off.

Example: *The patrol captain stares at the gash in his side, blood pouring out like a rushing river. His eyes roll to the back of his head, and he collapses, his dark god's amulet clanging loudly against the floor. The rest of the motley crew, suddenly not so eager to fight, throw down their unholy maces and raise their arms in surrender.*

Combat Closer #2 – Location Reached

Enemies stand in the way of the party reaching a safe haven, exit or reinforcements. With the more important mission of reaching a significant location complete, close combat quickly.

Example: *With streams of lava oozing from their rotten skin, the zombies pursue you even as you finally reach the Blade-Throne of Utter Frost. Rushing to its enchanted seat, a wave of chilling water and icicles roars and blasts outwards, obliterating the lava zombie hoard in a chorus of violent, steaming hisses.*

Combat Closer #3 – Time Limit Reached

Some missions and battles have a time limit before a major event occurs. Once time runs out, close the combat with the major turn of events, resetting the environment and mission. Add an engaging twist and move the timeline forward hours, days or years, creating a whole new adventure!

Example. *You've learned the magically empowered earthquake will level the cavern complex in just minutes. You know each section is collapsing, coming down like a great wave of earth, starting from the north.*

Before you have time to wonder if you will escape Cultists of the World's End foul earthquake in time, the earth groans around you, exploding and burying you alive. When you awaken, your limbs are broken, and your body is cut, bruised and raw, but you are somehow still alive. Priests and priestesses mill about excitedly. But all is not right – it is the cultists of the World's End who saved you!

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Combat Closer #4 – Item Seized/Activated/Destroyed

An important and powerful treasure hangs in the balance. Once the party recovers, uses or destroys it, close combat. Have the item quickly change the tide of battle and narrate the turn of events that leads to a sudden and clear victory.

Example. *You reach the Tendril Star, dousing and searing it with the vials of empowered draconic acid. The mass of flesh and psychic energy thrashes violently, once, twice and then explodes.*

The mindless slaves clumsily defending the star suddenly stop, control of their minds returned to them. The slave army breaks off their attack, instead running for the freedom they had once forgotten.

Combat Closer #5 – Enemy Negotiates / Flees / Surrenders

Sometimes an enemy doesn't wish to fight at all and wants to negotiate, flee or surrender from the start, thanks to the party's actions up to that point or because you're running out of session time.

Similar to a leader or champion being defeated, close the combat quickly by focusing on the intentions of the monsters to end the encounter peaceably.

Weave in other monster motivations and possible missions in these scenes, giving the PCs richer choices.

Example. *The ogre with one blue eye and one green looks at the five of you, sighing and shaking his head in exasperation. "I no want fight. No want kill. Uk just hungry. You have food? Uk let you pass bridge, no trouble, for good meat or cheese. Maybe you kill Uk master for Uk, too? He mean boss. He no pay Uk much, and no give Uk food when guard bridge. Job stink. Boss stink more. Uk miss home."*

Planned vs. Improvised

Practice planned and improvised combat closers. Prepare some encounters with them in mind, whenever you anticipate a speed bump or slog in combat.

At the same time, if you prefer winging your games, have your list of combat closers close by for inspiration when things bog down and need a jump.

Every game session has opportunities to quickly close out low quality, low engagement and high time-cost combats with the narrative approaches above.

Faster Combat: Double Your Drama and Story in Half the Time

Pay attention to when you're losing the pace and excitement of combat. Chances are it's time for a combat closer! Let them be your bridge to better combats and encounters.

Include Narrative Combat Scenes

Sprinkle in brief narrative descriptions of battles the party blitzes through easily. These “backdrop” combats subtly add pace and atmosphere to your adventures, making your party feel heroic and powerful, heightening the excitement and anticipation of combats you play out.

It's especially good to add brief mentions of combat where the party steamrolled the opposition in the case of large numbers but otherwise weak or low-level monsters.

For example, “For hours, you battle through the maze of corridors, cutting down dozens – no, hundreds – of mind-controlled goblins and orcs until finally their master, a six-horned demon-dragon, looms before you, smiling wickedly.”

Close Out Games

Congratulations! You've learned how to recognize opportunities for Combat Closers and how to implement them.

You've learned how Combat Closers can quickly end boring or slow combat, and push the pace of combat, missions and the adventure ever forward to more exciting scenes.

Next, you will learn how to use monster waves in unique ways that save combat time – and add surprising twists!

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Villainous Escapes: How to Help the Bad Guy Live to Fight Another Day](#), Jail Break series: [Part I](#), [Part II](#), [Part III](#), [Part IV](#), [Take Ten: Bluff](#), [Lessons from the LARP](#) and [Manage NPC Guides Carefully](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [A Year Has Passed... How to Include the Passage of Time in Your Campaigns](#), [Great Escapes: 8 Ways to Help Villains Get Away](#), [Fight the Power... Groups!](#), [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), and [Trained Skills Need Stage Time](#).

4.04 Ride the Wave: Let Them Come!

“You can judge a leader by the size of the problem he tackles. Other people can cope with the waves, it's his job to watch the tide.” –Antony Jay

How to Manage Monster Waves

Want to send hoards of monsters the party's way without sending the game into the slog zone? Or speed up and liven up a stale combat?

Today you will learn how to save time and heighten the pace and excitement of your combats and adventures at the same time.

Why Include Monster Waves?

Use monster waves like the narrative and combat-influencing tools that they are. A smartly deployed wave of monsters will up the pace and excitement instantly – and save you time throughout your game sessions.

Top 5 Monster Wave Options

Here are some of best ways to use monster waves in your game. Choose the method that works best while you plan your next game, or add monster waves to a dull or overlong combat that needs a spark.

Third Party

Send a third party in to reduce original enemy numbers. This story-rich option heightens dramatic tension and opens up many potential combat outcomes.

Have these new monsters attack **everyone**. However the party wants to view the new arrivals – somewhere between allies, neutrals or enemies – ensure these new foes fill the role of reducing the original enemy faction's numbers.

Example: *The dozen ogres are steadily beating you down – weapons and spells are flying, but the lumbering brutes simply won't fall. Suddenly, the patrol of minotaur you managed uneasy truce after a brief scuffle appear over the ridge.*

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This time, a red-robed minotaur leads them, his body covered in tattoos and jewelry that depict its demonic masters. Suddenly they're upon you both – you and the ogres alike!

Dessert

Use monster waves as a sudden combat closer. Turn all your normal monsters to cannon fodder, or send a cannon fodder-only battle the PCs' way. Especially good options if the party is bored or you're running out of time. Also good as a quick combat connected to any loose ends the party left behind.

Example: *While you catch your breath from the last fight, the remaining goblins that fled earlier pop out one by one around you from behind the trees. One laughs wickedly as he orders the group to fire. "We got you this time, leetle humans! Right place, right time! Fire! And this time, don't miss, keel them!"*

Appetizer

Similar to the dessert option, some adventures just need a quick, simple battle to get everyone engaged and in the right state of mind for more difficult or complex standard combats to come.

Example: *A swarm of dried-out monstrous beetle husks with beads of eerie red light for eyes animate before you. They clatter and crack as they right themselves and find their new legs. The dead insects of the dusty tomb live again.*

Story

As discussed in the last lessons, include a few narrative combats – and few are more satisfying to hear from the GM than the party overcoming incredible odds.

Example: *The awful battle through the twisting forest goes on for hours. Herd after herd of twisted beasts are culled by your weapons and spells. By sundown, the last of the lich's hundreds of cursed, mindless animal guardians are mercifully put to rest. Finally, reaching into the night sky like a bony claw, looms the Tower of the Damned, the sentient fortress of Zar-koth the lich lord.*

Aftermath

Another story-rich and narrative option is the aftermath wave. Describe the party coming up the scene of widespread carnage. Include massive casualties on one or both sides. Then, immediately launch an assault with a swarm of either side of those creatures – or both, for a twist on the Third Party approach.

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Aftermath scenes lend themselves as great foreshadowing tools and get the party thinking about the motivations and reasons behind the carnage, immersing them in both the related combat and adventure.

Example: *The dock ward alleys near the Drunken Fish are littered with the bodies of the thieves' guild's grunts – and orcs. You count about a dozen each – a recent, bloody good fight. A blood-drenched sewer plate sits atop a crushed human skull. Suddenly, you spot snipers lying on the roof and crouched behind the alley crates – more orcs!*

Swarm! Swarm!

Congratulations! You've learned how to influence the tides of battle by deploying monster waves. Whether you use them as combat closers or as quick combat scenes, monster waves add an efficient and engaging element to your sessions.

Next, you will learn the best ways to make tough judgment calls during your game. When confusing or problematic actions, scenarios or rules bog your combats down, it's time to make a judgment call and keep your game moving at a fast and exciting pace.

Resources

Roleplaying Tips: [Mission-Style Roleplaying](#), [8 Tactics for Mooks](#), [11 Monstrous Tips](#), [10 Monstrous Tips](#), [7 More Monstrous Tips](#) and [Don't Be Afraid to Modify Your Monsters](#).

Leonine Roar: [Encounter as Story: Tiny Encounters](#), [Attack With Your Social Skills!](#), [Fight or Flight? Run Away!](#), [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#), [True Encounter Difficulty: Challenge Your Players](#) and [12 Ways to Describe Minions: First, Stop Calling Them Minions!](#)

4.05 Spiritual Hammer: How to Make Great Judgment Calls

“A mistake in judgment isn't fatal, but too much anxiety about judgment is.” – Pauline Kael

How to Make Judgment Calls

Tired of rules disagreements and arguments getting in the way of a great combat?

Today you'll learn how to make quick, good judgment calls in your games so the rules don't get in the way.

You'll also learn when and how to make good judgment calls when players surprise you with creative play.

Why Make Judgment Calls?

Making fast and reasonable judgment calls keeps the pace of combat moving. Don't let rules, arguments or unexpected surprises grind your combats and adventures to a halt.

The Big 3 Judgment Call Scenarios

Below are three scenarios where good judgment calls will benefit your game. Each scenario includes simple and specific solutions to get your combats and adventure back on track.

Scenario 1: Rules Issues

Rules issues come up regularly because someone – sometimes the GM! – doesn't know them or disagrees with how they work or how they're intended.

Ignorance or disagreements can escalate into arguments, wasting a lot of time and putting a dark cloud on game night.

Wrap up these conflicts quickly, especially if they occur during or near the end of combat.

Solutions

Make an on-the-spot ruling. Rather than waste time discussing the rule in painstaking detail, arguing, or just staring at each other without a clue, make a quick ruling on the spot.

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If it's some sort of advantage or disadvantage, use a simple, small situational bonus of +2/-2.

Alternatively, consider allowing a reroll or forcing a second roll and taking the lowest result of both.

Make a note of the ruling for research between sessions if it's still contentious.

Look up the rule immediately together. If your group likes – or needs – to learn on the fly through repetition (like mine), set the expectation that whenever a rules question comes up that can't be immediately answered, everyone jumps in to look it up together.

First one to find the rule text calls out the book and page number. This is a great way to learn the rules together in manageable chunks.

Encourage off-turn players to look up the rules to not interrupt the current player's turn further.

This also gives off-turn players something constructive and helpful to do while waiting on their turn.

If the rules look-up doesn't happen quickly enough, it's time to make a ruling and look it up later.

Look up the rule after or between sessions. If your group slogs enough as it is, a rules look-up during the game isn't recommended.

Instead, alter that table rule: controversial or unknown rules are to be looked up and discussed in detail only after or between sessions.

Set aside five minutes at the end or start of sessions for this, or encourage your playgroup to post the relevant rules text and discuss it on your campaign's website or blog.

Scenario 2: Complex Monster Abilities

Complex monsters can be overwhelming and are a common source of judgment calls as well. Sometimes you just need to do what's best in the interest of time and pacing. Once again, lean on these solutions during and especially near the conclusion of combat.

Solutions

Simplify. As shown in lesson 2.07: Sudden Monstrosities, tweak, simplify or remove complex abilities.

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Re-skin. As shown in lesson 2.08: Bring ‘Em Back Alive, re-skin the more complex monster as one more familiar to you, applying one or more signature traits as desired.

Narrate mistakes and disadvantages. Rather than spend time making mechanical changes, narrate the choices the monsters make as errors or drawbacks they’re dealing with.

For example, perhaps the monster simply forgot or chose not to make a certain complex attack (or make it correctly) out of weariness or distraction caused by an honest mistake, fatigue, a disease or a curse.

These narrative reasons make the monster more real (no one’s perfect) and might also lead to new missions and adventures.

Scenario 3: Improvisation

Not all judgment calls are needed because of rules issues. Sometimes, players will surprise you with their improvisation skills and come up with creative attacks, approaches or solutions – and you might do the same for the NPCs and monsters as GM!

Sometimes, these actions and ideas are impressive and memorable moments in the game, powerfully reinforcing a character concept or quirk of personality for example.

How do you handle and reward these delightful surprises?

Solutions

Award a situational bonus. If it’s some sort of advantage, use the simple, small situational bonus of +2. Consider allowing even greater bonuses, as high as +5, or allowing a reroll.

Award automatic success. If the action or idea is so brilliant and creative, consider awarding automatic success.

Skip the fates of dice here for the sake of roleplaying and storytelling greatness. The awarded player and entire playgroup will thank you for it – and you’ll all have a great story to tell for years to come.

For example, in my recent Free RPG Day playtest game, I decided to have my knight-cleric use his influence as a noble knight to ask for proper accommodations from other knightly brothers. Sounds reasonable, right?

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Difference was, we were invading a lair of monsters that included their tribe and a rival goblin tribe, and those “knights” were actually the plate-armored elite kobold guard of the kobold chieftain. The “accommodations” in that cave lair weren’t anything noble, that’s for sure!

But the GM loved the creative way I tried to use my station as a knight as I roleplayed my “right of station” to the kobolds. So he awarded me an automatic success!

Actually, no, that’s not true. I wished he had, but he didn’t. Instead, he let me roll after my roleplaying bit, letting the dice decide – which I was honestly quite happy with as a resolution. Until I rolled a 4!

But if you had been my GM, you may have handled it differently, right? Please? Come on!

Case Dismissed

Congratulations! You’ve learned when and how to make judgment calls, including specific solutions for each common scenario. You’re ready to make the right call on problem rules and improvisation.

Your adventures and combats will now move and close at a faster, smarter pace than ever before!

Next, you will learn how to become a true master. You’ll learn how to track, sustain and improve your game, starting with how to keep a quality rules log.

Resources

You’ll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [8 Deadly Combat Tips](#), [Know Your Players 2: Build Your Session Checklist](#), and [The Rule to Making Good Rules and Other Useful Tips](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [D&D 5e: The Complexity Slider Approach](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#), [Balance in All D&D Things: Rules & Atmosphere](#), [Tabletop Deathmatch: Dragon Age vs. D&D](#), [Faster Combat: Rule of Three](#), [Not So Immediate Actions](#) and [Monster Complexity and Selection](#).

Chapter 5: Mastery



5.01 Rule the Game: Keep a Great Rules Log

“A library implies an act of faith.” – Victor Hugo

How to Create and Maintain a Great Rules Log

Ever wish your game had a custom reference or FAQ to cover all those rules that slow you down during play? Especially the rules questions that seem to crop up repeatedly?

Today, you will learn how to create a rules log for your game and playgroup. You'll learn best practices for recording the questions and answers and how to create a custom rules log that will help you throughout your campaign.

Why Keep a Rules Log?

A good rules log helps keep your game smooth. Combats move more quickly, rules arguments become speed bumps or disappear altogether. A detailed, well-managed rules log makes you active about learning and sharing the rules to keep the action moving.

Choose Your Weapon

First, choose the tool or format you will use for your rules log.

Simple is best here. You don't need a complicated record tracking tool, but use whatever technology level or utility you and your playgroup are comfortable with. Here are some straightforward example options:

- Word document
- Excel sheet
- Playgroup message board or website
- Cell phone texts or notes
- A private Twitter account
- A log book ([Moleskin](#) books are luxurious)
- Index cards

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Within these options, there are templates you may find helpful to use or modify for your rules log.

For example, you could use and modify a [meeting minutes Word template](#) to keep a record of your rules questions and answers, including specific action items.

Rules Log Components

Consider recording any of the following components in your rules log. Tracking each field brings unique advantages.

1. The Question

When a rules issue comes up, **work with your players to phrase it into a clear, concise question.**

Record the question on your rules log. Assign the question a short-form topic or heading, as well.

This first step is critical. Without a clear, easy-to-understand question, you will have a difficult time finding a clear and easy-to-explain answer in the rules.

Consider posting the question to the game's official rules forums. I tend to do this a lot early on with a new edition of an RPG, for example.

2. The Known Rules

Decide whether your rules look-up table rule means you're okay with looking up rules on the fly, only some on the fly (i.e., easy, "what's the definition of this keyword?" type of questions), or whether you only do rules look-ups between sessions.

Write down the relevant rules. Then write the book and page number reference. Or, if using a rules forum, post the link into your rules log and then add your summary of the responses.

Now you have the rules spelled out exactly as they are in the rulebooks for everyone to view, plus a handy reference so anyone can go right to the source at any time.

3. The Temporary Solution

Log rulings and solutions at the time of the rules issue. Whether the DM made a quick decision or you all came to an agreement, make sure that solution is written down.

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By recording what you did at the time, you now have a house rule option to use for the future in case the actual rules are confusing or lacking.

Sometimes the rules in a RPG just aren't up to par to capture what's intended. In these cases, give your house rule a serious look, or find common ground between the actual rules and your house rule going forward.

4. The Full Rules

During, after or between sessions, look up and record the rules in your log. Do not shorthand the rules or omit sentences. Often, one sentence in a paragraph makes a huge difference in the reading and interpretation of rules, so be sure to hyperlink to write out the entire excerpt.

When you use the 5 Minutes for Rules Review at the start of your sessions (see lesson 1.05: Show Your Players the Way), you will have a single and powerful resource – all the problem rules specific to your campaign and playgroup will be right in front of you.

Also, if you posted your question to the game's rules forums, include feedback from responses in your log.

5. The Answer

Clearly identify the actual solution, whether it's the full rules as is, a house rule or a hybrid solution.

Between step 4 and step 5, you're now officially completing your custom FAQ for your campaign or playgroup.

Keeping an electronic record means your rules database becomes a useful, searchable resource – whether you simply use Ctrl-F on your keyboard, search engine on your website or a sorting method.

Rules Log Example

Combat often brings out more specific questions than any other part of a tabletop RPG.

Here's an example question from an actual game and campaign I recently GM'ed, with a few minor modifications to make it template-friendly for any tabletop RPG.

I recorded all the rules questions and answers in a Word document.

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Meet the Resistance

- **Damage Reduction and Applied Conditions**
- **Question:** Do applied conditions, additional effects or riders apply if damage reduction or resistance reduces an attack's damage to zero?
- **Ruling at the Time:** We didn't know any of the rules on this at the time. We decided no riders affected the target if damage was reduced to zero. We decided to look up the rule between sessions, post the question to the game's rules forums if the rules were unclear, and then share the info at the start of the next game during the 5 minute rules review.
- **Rules:** The rules are on p. 42, Game Master's Manual, column 1, paragraph 3. They're a little unclear on the instance of zero damage point, but the rules forum clarified it (see below).
- **Discussion Forum:** Posted question on official RPG site rules discussion forum on 3/16. <http://community.RPGname.com/rules.forum-over9000.com>.
- **Forum Responses:** So far looks like yes, added effects are treated separately. Resistance and damage reduction applies to damage only, ongoing or otherwise, and it doesn't matter if the damage is reduced to zero.
- **Answer:** Yes, applied conditions, additional effects and riders do apply even if damage reduction or resistance reduces an attack's damage to zero.

Help and Delegation

Ask for help looking up the rules between sessions, especially if you ended up with a long list of issues that came up from the last game.

Alternatively, delegate rules look-up to the rules lawyer or rules master of your group – it may be a bit of work, but it's work they enjoy and it'll benefit the entire playgroup!

Consider delegating or rotating the responsibility of being the “rules guy/girl” by campaign or even every session.

For example, if you have a fan of a particular campaign setting who's read many of that world's novels and game supplements, consider asking that player to take on the go-to rules person mantle for the duration of the campaign – it only adds to their expertise of the world!

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Rules to Play By

Congratulations! You've learned how to create and maintain a great rules log for your game.

Following the steps and example template above, no rule – no matter how complex or murky – will ever slow you or your combats down for long! Your custom library of well-researched and organized rules will add helpful knowledge and speed to your entire session.

Next, you will learn how to identify patterns with your playgroup's rules issues – what keeps coming up in your rules log? You'll learn what to do with this information, including different methods to organize and share what you've learned with your playgroup.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [8 GM Binder Tips for the Organized Gamemaster](#), [The Rule to Making Good Rules and Other Useful Tips](#), [The Care And Feeding Of Your GM](#) and [Maintaining an Online Game](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Winging It in D&D: Is it Back?](#) and [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#).

5.02 (Un)breaking All the Rules

“Principles and rules are intended to provide a thinking man with a frame of reference.”

– Karl Von Clausewitz

How to Fix Rules Problems

Today, you will learn how to identify patterns with your playgroup’s rules issues – what keeps coming up in your rules log?

You’ll first learn how to identify rules problems on both sides of the table, and then how to prepare for them for when – not if! – they come up during the game.

Why Fix Rules Problems?

Sometimes the spirit of a rule gets lost in the rule as written. Needless complexity destroys a part of the game that should be thrilling and fun. Don’t let this happen to your games.

Instead, plan ahead: know where you might stumble, and prepare to move past rules problems wisely and smoothly.

Capture Your Players’ Problem Rules

Ask yourself these questions whenever rules discussions or disagreements bog down your combats – or any part of your game. Record your answers and build a short rules list to research and reference later.

- What part of the game consistently causes players to **look up the rules** during the game?
 - Is it a broader area, like aerial or 3D combat, or a more specific element, like charge rules?
- What rules are consistently **confusing** – even after the players read them before or on their turn?
 - Is the problem vague wording, lack of clarification, or complex or excessive language?
- What rules consistently create **complex situations** when the players use them?

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- Is it a simple rule that falls apart in only certain situations, or is the rule itself heavy with language or steps?
- What rules consistently **magnify the players' weaknesses** or go against their preferences when they use them?
 - For example, which rules break suspension of disbelief for your players – and perhaps even seem silly or ridiculous the way they're executed?

Capture Your GM Problem Rules

Ask yourself these same questions whenever rules bog you down as GM, whether in pitched combat or prepping between game sessions.

Be specific and list the problem rules. Write down every aspect of a rule that troubles or confuses you, including any commentary or opinion you have of how it works, and how you think it ***should work***.

Like the players' problem rules, build your bullet list so you research the rules between sessions and keep them as a handy reference.

Tip: Johnn uses [PFSRD](#) and hyperlinks. He also pastes rules in [MyInfo](#).

Expect and Prep for Rules Problems

Don't expect every game to run perfectly. Expect a rules hiccup here and there like every gaming group – especially with a new group, campaign or game system.

For example, even my veteran playgroup's first Dragon Age RPG sessions had more than their share of rules questions. Don't fight it. Don't expect yourself or your players to be immediate rules masters. Learn together as you go – but always plan ahead.

Here is a list of the key ways to do just that, between, after or during your games. A few of these top tips you've already discovered along your Faster Combat adventures. All of those and more are collected here for easy reference:

- **Mark.** Flag or bookmark problem rules in rule books for quick reference.
- **Read.** Look up and read the rules – aloud sometimes too, both to yourself and your playgroup.
- **Teach.** Take 5 minutes for rules review as a playgroup at the top of every session.

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- **Gather.** Keep a GM binder/campaign organizer with a running campaign-specific FAQ.
- **Remind.** Hand out status, condition or index cards with rules summaries, key words or other reminders.
- **Show.** Create a flow chart for complex rules, especially complex subsystems (i.e., grapple rules) or create a mind map (free!).
- **Summarize.** Create GM or player cheat sheets.

The Faster Combat Mind Map

Have you explored our Faster Combat Mind Maps yet? Now is a great time to open up this lesson's free mind map for your first "look and feel" experience.

Use the mind map structure in this or any lesson as a starting point in building your own custom mind maps – for problem rules, combat phases, campaign arcs, and more!

Rule Wisely

Congratulations! You've learned how to fix rules problems in your game. No matter how complex, they won't stop the epic, heroic machine that is your playgroup and campaign. Your new tips, tricks and tools won't let that happen.

Next, you will learn how create your own custom GM screen or cheat sheet. Tired of not having everything you need in front of you to run exhilarating Faster Combats? In the next section you'll learn how to build a GM screen or GM cheat sheet that best fits you and your game.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [8 GM Binder Tips for the Organized Gamemaster](#), [The Rule to Making Good Rules and Other Useful Tips](#), [The Care And Feeding Of Your GM](#) and [Maintaining an Online Game](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Winging It in D&D: Is it Back?](#) and [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#).

5.03 Create Your GM Cheat Sheet

“Luck is a matter of preparation meeting opportunity.” – Lucius Annaeus Seneca

How to Create Your GM Cheat Sheet

Next, you’ll learn how to craft your own custom GM cheat sheet.

First, you’ll learn about several useful components to consider to increase your combat speed and decision-making.

Then you’ll create your own recipe – one that works for you – from all the helpful ingredients.

Why Have a GM Cheat Sheet?

Your GM cheat sheet is there to help you move the game along fairly and quickly, through combat, exploration or roleplay, whether it’s the rules or an occasional lack of inspiration bogging you down.

Top 25 +1 Cheat Sheet Ingredients

Here are some of the best bits of information to include on your personal cheat sheet.

1. **XP.** The XP chart and standard and unusual XP awards (such as for memorable improvised moments of roleplaying or tactical greatness).
2. **Average Damage.** Average damage at every level is a great barometer for you to go to for any dangerous situation, either in a surprise encounter or to gauge against easy or hard encounters.
3. **Supplies.** What can you readily buy in the campaign world? What does a typical adventurer carry into the wilderness or dungeon?
4. **Leveling Rules.** An extension of XP, especially useful if you want more organic leveling during gameplay. A bulleted summary of these rules will save a lot of page-turning.
5. **Encounter Distance.** What are the typical distances in feet, squares, yards or hexes for encounters? Let them reflect lighting, weather and terrain to add more realism to your game.

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6. **Monster Readiness.** Are there rules for how much an enemy is expecting a fight? Different levels of alertness and what each state means tactically when combat breaks out?
7. **Combat Actions.** Lists of common combat actions help you speed through monster turns while making the most of them – and provide you with a way of making suggestions to slogging PCs.
8. **Combat Modifiers.** High ground? Surprise? Flanking? Almost every combat system has minor bonuses and penalties in combat. Use them not only for info but to inspire a dull combat.
9. **Skills and Non-Combat Actions.** *What can I do?* That’s my favorite question in RPGs because the answer is: *Anything!* These two encourage outside-the-fight creativity and solutions.
10. **DCs and Target #s.** Like average damage, a list of standard target scores for succeeding at a variety of non-combat checks and tests is invaluable, rounding out your game experience.
11. **Conditions and Debuffs.** It’s critical to know exactly how the common conditions, debuffs and penalties associated with attacks work. Go beyond cheat sheets to “cheat cards” if you like, too.
12. **Fall, Drowning and Suffocation.** Other heroic (and not so heroic) ways besides sword and spell to take damage, go unconscious or die.
13. **Lighting, Weather and Terrain.** Visibility, stealth, surprise, cover. These combat basics stem from the big 3 of lighting, weather and terrain. They’re the first things I ask about as a player.
14. **First Aid, Healing and Rest Rules.** You can’t fight all the time, right? How do players – and monsters – recover? A common question, and an important one to have in front of you.
15. **Unconsciousness and Death Rules.** Unconsciousness, dying and death – they happen to the best of us! And the rules should be within easy reach for these dramatic scenes.
16. **Monster Knowledge.** How does common knowledge work? What do the heroes already know going into a fight or encounter? And what else might they know with a good roll?
17. **Perception and Social Skills.** A special focus on the “senses” skills is usually a good idea. Similar to monster knowledge, what do the heroes already see, hear or know going into a situation?

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18. **Search DCs.** Some things are not so easily found, and require effort. Canvas the room or comb the desert – your choice! A staple of any RPG, with varying complexity and amount of hidden...
19. **Treasure.** Who doesn't love treasure? Common treasures, similar to common supplies, make good treasure in their own right, or add a touch of grit and realism to any hoard.
20. **Dungeon Dressing.** There's nothing like a brief, but telling description of a dungeon room in the Prisons of Bile or a clearing in the Forest of the Damned. Focus on one or two details or items.
21. **Important NPC Faces, Places and Things.** Remember, it's a ***role playing*** game. There's a story in there somewhere, and something's at stake. List out the core NPCs, places and things.
22. **NPC Traits.** When's the last time you had to conjure up an NPC right on the spot? Whether it's a guardsman, commoner or comic relief, a personality quirk or two helps bring any NPC to life.
23. **Combat Closers.** Cheat sheets aren't just for rules. They're for combat and session slog solutions! List out your favorite ways to close out combat quickly, saving everyone time.
24. **Party Member Basics.** Name, race, class and languages known are what I like to know and have in front of me at all times. Core identity – plus conversation-starters both in and out of combat!
25. **Party Member Defenses.** A critical ingredient. Time-saver as you roll attack dice, and a barometer of your party's actual toughness. Add max hit points and related stats as desired.
26. **Party Member Motivations.** Like Combat Closers, breathe more life into your combats and adventures by focusing on advancing scenes for ***good story reasons***. What fires up your heroes?

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Sort Your Ingredients

Consider the following when you're putting together your cheat sheet, whether it's on a piece of paper or it's a digital display:

- **Crunch.** Do I want to list only hard rules-oriented rules and numbers or include narrative tools?
- **Complexity.** Do I want to list only low-complexity rules, only high-complexity, or a mix?
- **Usage.** Do I want to list or prioritize rules by frequency of use, usefulness or utility first?

Everyone has a different approach – some like to see the complex things figured out in front of them at all times, some just want the numbers, and some want the more balanced sorts of solutions and “cheats” like a short list of Combat Closers and Party Motivations.

A good rule of thumb to get started on your cheat sheet? Decide which area you want the most help when you're running the game, and start with those ingredients. Modify your cheat sheet as you go.

GM Cheat Sheet Example

Here's an example cheat sheet I used in a recent high-level campaign:

| <u>Name</u> | <u>AC</u> | <u>F</u> | <u>R</u> | <u>W</u> |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <u>Garthen</u> | — | — | — | — |
| <i>Oelyndra</i> | — | — | — | — |
| <u>Holistyn</u> | — | — | — | — |
| <u>Hyrtuk</u> | — | — | — | — |
| <i>Varkhus</i> | — | — | — | — |

| NAME · CLASS | LANGUAGES | VISION | P-PR | P-INS | P-MONSTER KNOWLEDGE | TRAINED SKILLS |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|------|-------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Garthen · dwarf warden | dwarven, cmn | low-light | 25 | 20 | Nat 25 · Dgn 27 | Heal |
| Holistyn · goliath barbarian | giant, dwarven, cmn | low-light | 20* | 18 | Nat 25 | Acro · Athl · Endu |
| Hyrtuk · dwarf druid | giant, dwarven, cmn | low-light | 31 | 24 | Nat 29 | Athl · Endu |

DCs by Level **Easy** **Med** **Hard**
16 **16** **22** **31**

[Treasure](#)
(DMG, pp. 240-250 or RC, pp. 300-301); -4 for 3 PCs

[Treasure](#)
(DMG, pp. 240-250 or RC, pp. 300-301); -4 for 3 PCs

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Cheat to Win

Congratulations! You've learned how to create your own GM cheat sheet to keep your game fair, crisp and moving through any scene or situation, in and out of combat.

Next, you will learn how to create Player Cheat Sheets. How does a player's cheat sheet differ from the GMs? What should players focus on and how do you encourage players to use their own cheat sheets to improve their level of play? You'll learn that and more in the next section.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [The Session Checklist: Ingredients to a Successful Game Session Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), and [Know Your Players - Building Your Session Checklist Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [4e DM's Cheat Sheet](#) and [Treasure Cheat Sheet: More Magical Rewards](#).

5.04 Create Player Cheat Sheets

“You were born to win, but to be a winner, you must plan to win, prepare to win, and expect to win.”

– Zig Ziglar

How to Create Player Cheat Sheets

Learn how to teach players to craft their own cheat sheets, and how you can create them for some or all your players – whoever you think would benefit from a quick, short reference during games to help them make faster and better decisions.

Like the GM Cheat Sheet, first you’ll learn about several useful components you might include in your player cheat sheet to improve combat speed and decision-making. Then you’ll create your own recipe – one that works for you or your playgroup – from all the helpful ingredients.

Why Use Player Cheat Sheets?

Player cheat sheets help you move your turn fast, smart, and with creativity. Whether looking at a deadly combat, mysterious exploration or heated, high-stakes roleplay, you’ll find a bullet list or summary of **your** character-specific rules and reminders invaluable.

Top d20 Player Cheat Sheet Ingredients

Here the best bits of information to include on your players’ personal PC cheat sheets. Choose the right mix for your gaming style and for each player.

1. **Supplies.** What key supplies and mundane adventuring gear do you carry? From unusual weapons to odd tools, jot down any that have a little MacGyver in them – because you never know!
2. **Most Useful Treasure.** Who doesn’t love treasure? Common treasures, similar to common supplies, make good treasure in their own right, and many magical treasures carry all kinds of MacGyver-esque possibilities. Be creative with that Green Fireball Lantern, in and out of combat!
3. **Attack Range.** What are the typical ranges in feet, squares, yards or hexes for your weapons, spells and other attacks and abilities? You need to know how much space and time you have at the start of an encounter to make basic

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tactical decisions, such as weapon or attack selection and how much time to spend maneuvering around, toward or away from the enemy.

4. **Damage Range.** Be sure to have your *final* damage dice expressions spelled out and in plain view for all of your favorite attacks. Add every normal modifier so you only have two numbers to add together: your actual dice total and one modifier. This damage range also makes a quick barometer for your character's offense.
5. **Simple Combat Actions.** Lists of common combat actions help you speed through your turn whenever you're stalling out of indecision or lack of rules knowledge. Help your GM and be kind to your playgroup – choose a simple combat action from your cheat sheet and avoid the slog.
6. **Favorite Attacks.** List your top 3-5 attacks. They can be your favorites for several reasons: ease of use, speed of use, high maximum damage, high number of targets, large area effect and so on. What matters is they're front and center with specifics so you're always ready to choose them.
7. **Favorite Attack Combos.** Amp your Favorite Attacks to another level by creating scripts or combinations for an entire round, a couple of rounds, or even routines that span a whole encounter. The most fun part may just be exploring combinations as you go and updating your cheat sheet with your latest brilliant "5 star" combo.
8. **Combat Modifiers.** High ground? Surprise? Flanking? Almost every combat system has minor bonuses and penalties in combat. Use them not only for info but to inspire interesting combat. Bonus tip: if there's a modifier you always get because of the character you've created, be sure to always include it in your damage ranges (see # 3).
9. **Skills and Non-Combat Actions.** *What can I do?* That's my favorite question in RPGs because the answer is: *Anything!* These two action categories encourage outside-the-fight creativity and solutions.
10. **Conditions and Debuffs.** It's critical to know exactly how the common conditions, debuffs and penalties associated with attacks work. Go beyond cheat sheets to "cheat cards" if you like, too.
11. **Lighting, Weather and Terrain.** Visibility, stealth, surprise, cover – these combat basics stem from the big three of lighting, weather and terrain. They're the first things I ask about as a player.
12. **First Aid, Healing and Rest Rules.** You can't fight all the time, right? How do players – and monsters – recover? A common question, and an important answer to have in front of you. List all the healing options you have, as short-hand as possible, next to your hit points.

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13. **Unconsciousness and Death Rules.** Unconsciousness, dying and death – they happen to the best of us! And the rules should be within easy reach for these critical, dramatic scenes. If these rules confuse or elude you, shorthand the highlights right next to your hit points.
14. **Monster Knowledge.** How does common knowledge work? What do the heroes already know going into a fight or encounter? And, what else might they know with a good roll? List any skills you have special training or bonuses in, and look to them also as roleplaying talking points during social scenes.
15. **Perception and Social Skills.** A special focus on the “senses” skills is usually a good idea. Similar to monster knowledge, what do the heroes already see, hear or know going into a situation? Once again, use your highlighted skills for crunchy information as well as roleplaying reminders.
16. **Important NPC Faces, Places and Things.** Remember, it’s a ***role playing*** game. There’s a story in there somewhere, and something’s at stake. List out the 3-5 NPCs, places and things most critical to your character’s past, present or future.
17. **Character Basics.** Name, race, class and languages known are what I like to know and have in front of me at all times. Core identity – plus conversation-starters both in and out of combat.
18. **Character Defenses.** A critical ingredient. Time-saver as you roll attack dice, and a barometer of your party’s actual toughness. Add max hit points and related stats as desired.
19. **Character Motivations.** Breathe more life into your combats and adventures by focusing on a ***good story***. What fires up ***your*** hero? What drives your hero crazy? What do they want more than anything?
20. **Character Quirks.** A personality quirk or two helps bring your character to life. From physical quirks like tattoos or scars, to strange accents, voice pitches, or stutters, to credos or battle cries, choosing to come up with just one of these can make your character unforgettable.

Sort Your Ingredients

Like the GM cheat sheet, consider the following when putting together player cheat sheets, whether it's on a piece of paper or a digital display:

- **Crunch.** Do I want to list only hard rules-oriented rules and numbers or include narrative tricks, like my character's signature habit, wisecrack or battle cry?
- **Complexity.** Do I want to list only low-complexity rules or attacks or abilities, only high-complexity, or a mix?
- **Usage.** Do I want to list or prioritize rules, attacks or abilities by frequency of use, usefulness or utility first?

Just like every GM, each player has a different approach. Some like to see the complex things figured out in front of them at all times, some just want the numbers, and some want the more balanced sorts of solutions and “cheats” like a short list of favorite attacks alongside a bullet list of one-line character goals.

A good rule of thumb to get started on your cheat sheet? Decide which area you want the most help with when you're playing, and start with those ingredients. Modify your cheat sheet as you go.

Cooking for New Players

Running a game for players brand new to the hobby? Or for players brand new to a RPG rules system?

Consider creating *starter* player cheat sheets for your players. Review the ingredients list above and choose the most impactful ones for your new game. Keep the number of ingredients lower than usual for these situations – a good rule of thumb is a dozen ingredients or less.

Not only does this exercise reinforce the rules set for you, you also help the new players ease into the new game or rules system. You give them quick confidence and lower the risk of player slog in your “first ever game.”

Player Cheat Sheet Example

Here's an example cheat sheet built from a sampling of the many ingredient options above:

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CANEN Tor'Ehl

half-dragon barbarian 8

Quirks: hates rudeness, loves cake and pie

Motivations: wants to replace the corrupt baron, wants to become a dragon-rider and build a personal elite bodyguard of them

AC 23 // Defenses 20 // Hit Points: 50/50 // Healing: First aid kit, bandages (8)

Favorite Actions: Charge attack +12, burst through doors, search, listen

Favorite Attacks: Overwhelming Charge +12, Thundering Slam +14, Crushing Blow +10

Favorite Combos

- 1) Bow shot + Quick Draw to 2-Hand Sword + Charge attack
- 2) Charge attack + Flank + Action Point + Thundering Slam

Key Skills: Diplomacy (speaks Dwarven, Giant and Dragon), Intimidate, Bluff

Key Treasure: Green Fireball Lantern, Crystal Skeleton Key

Cheat to Win

You've learned how to create player cheat sheets to help your players play quicker, faster and better on and off the battlefield, in shadowy alleyways or at the royal masquerade.

Next, you will learn a host of multi-tasking techniques to maximize your entire playgroup's efficiency. Tired of feeling overwhelmed or seeing your players overwhelmed? What are some two-for-one solutions? You'll learn that and more in the next lesson.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Creating Basic Character Personalities](#), [1,000 NPC Traits](#), [The Session Checklist: Ingredients to a Successful Game Session Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), and [Know Your Players - Building Your Session Checklist Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Adding Character to Your Character](#), [Got Character? Give Them Pain and Suffering](#), [Trained Skills Need Stage Time](#), [4e DM's Cheat Sheet](#) and [Treasure Cheat Sheet: More Magical Rewards](#).

5.05 Juggle This: Smart Ways to Multi-Task

“Multitasking? I can't even do two things at once. I can't even do one thing at once.”
– *Helena Bonham Carter*

How to Multi-Task

Next, you'll learn how to do a couple of things at once. There's a fine line between doing too much at the same time and wasting time doing one thing too slowly.

Today we highlight areas of the game ripe for multi-tasking. Make these key approaches habit and watch your turn efficiency soar.

Why Multi-Task?

There are many opportunities to save time and increase turn efficiency during your game. It's important to multi-task whenever it makes sense. Save your entire playgroup time and be more productive on your turn rather than grind through each step of an action or decision.

Top d6+1 Ways to Multi-Task

Here are some of the best ways to multi-task during your games, for both GMs and players:

1. Run Multiple Characters on Same Initiative

Roll initiative once for multiple characters or groups of monsters. Use a single roll with an averaged initiative modifier, then decide the order of each individual character on the turn.

Group types of monsters together by role: traps and hazards, pets and familiars, toughs, artillery or casters, for example.

2. On-Deck Action Declaration While Waiting for Rolls

While Jim's barbarian is rolling attacks, damage or checks, get action declaration from Jen's rogue. This is especially important as characters gain levels, more choices and more complexity.

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Remember that some turns boil down to simpler or more narrative actions, where tactics aren't the focus. Sometimes, you just want to study that riddle on the copper hellhound statue more closely, making a few skill and knowledge checks.

As GM, discover these actions early and speed through these turns using on-deck action declaration.

3. Pre-Calculated Rolls

Make attack and damage rolls ahead of time. You can do this one of two ways: **pre-session** or **pre-turn**.

A list or grid of attack rolls and damage totals – or simply averages – pre-session saves a lot of dice rolling and calculation time during actual gameplay.

If you aren't keen on that approach, go with the 1-turn ahead pre-roll rule. If a character or monster already knows their actions, have them make their rolls while waiting for other character action declaration and resolution on the prior turn.

4. Simultaneous Attack and Damage Rolls

A simple, excellent habit every game table needs. Make attack and damage rolls together. Use extra dice. Code your dice by color, so your attacks are green dice and your damage is red dice.

Even if you miss, it's ok because the damage dice are ready to be added up whether you need them or not.

5. Apply Targeting, Attacks and Damage Left to Right

Always read left to right when applying attacks and damage to multiple targets – left to right on your dice, and left to right on the battle map as you go through your hits and misses with the GM.

As GM, assume players target the nearest enemy or the left-most to you if they do not specifically call out a target for their attacks, or in the case of area of effect attacks.

Don't waste time by asking "This one? Or this one?" repeatedly, waiting for the player to acknowledge your targeting questions while they're in the middle of a bunch of calculations.

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6. Treasure Already in Shares

Eliminate bookkeeping surrounding new treasure. Hand out treasure already apportioned in right shares, split evenly.

Assume the party will divide shares as evenly as possible when it comes to “splittable” treasure such as coins, gems, jewelry and precious art.

For common and universally useful magic items, such as healing potions, include a count that matches the party size.

7. Wrap Up Encounters Quickly – Right Back Into Action

Two scenes are better than one. Hand out treasure quickly, introduce a new clue or piece of information quickly, and close out the current scene. Your next sentence should indicate a passage of time or distance and a new, significant scene or location in the adventure.

Move from scene to scene, development to development, action to action fast, always keeping in mind the evolving story and how the party’s actions have impacted it.

For example, *“With the corrupt baron’s cruel tax collector dead, you recover a fair amount of the suffering citizen’s wealth. Only the fearful baron remains, sealed up in his tower, news of your righteous deeds quickly reaching him. You now stand in the shadows of the dying oak trees outside his black tower, observing a stir of nervous activity as the corrupt baron’s mercenary guards prepare for the worst. They know you’re coming and you can smell their fear.”*

Ask For Ideas & Keep It Simple

Ask your players for ideas on where it’s best to multi-task. Tell them at the time or once you see a pattern, what’s taking too much time or effort, and that there’s too much waiting or too many steps involved.

Ask, what can be changed? What can you reasonably juggle together as a group?

And remember – don’t multi-task everything. The goal is to save time by combining a couple of manageable tasks. Do not overwhelm yourself. Stick to a rule of thumb of combining a maximum of two simpler aspects or rules of the game.

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Better Together

Congratulations! You've learned how to get more done during your games by multi-tasking. You've learned both GM and player tips for improving turn efficiency while carefully and smartly grouping a couple of simpler, smaller or related tasks.

You've learned the benefits of making these multi-tasking options healthy gaming habits for your playgroup.

Next, you will learn how to masterfully delegate many different aspects of your game. Tired of feeling like you need to manage every aspect of the game? Get a little help from your friends! You'll learn how to do that and more in the next section.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [How To Multi-Task Better During Your Games: 6 Tips, Part I](#), [How To Multi-Task Better During Your Games: 5 Tips Part II](#), and [The Session Checklist: Ingredients to a Successful Game Session Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [How to Make Hit Points = Morale](#), [Monster Complexity and Selection](#), [4e DM's Cheat Sheet](#) and [Treasure Cheat Sheet: More Magical Rewards](#).

5.06 Extra Helping: How to Delegate

“When in doubt, mumble; when in trouble, delegate; when in charge, ponder.” – James H. Boren

How to Delegate

Next, you’ll learn when and how to delegate the many game management tasks that come with GMing. There’s a lot to do in and out of combat, and if you don’t delegate some tasks, your game can grind to a halt while you struggle to get back on track.

Realize you don’t have to manage everything for a smooth, fast game. Get help from your players.

Why Delegate

When you delegate tasks, it frees you to concentrate on other important aspects of the game, such as narrating the action in combat or sharing important character knowledge or announcing the results of other character actions.

Delegating also keeps players more involved in the entire game. This is especially good for players who feel like they wait too long for their turn to come up.

With a little help from your players, you create a more cooperative environment and encourage a smoother game.

Top d10+1 Ways to Delegate

Here are some of the best things to delegate – including tips on *how* to delegate them – in your games:

1. Do the Monster Mash

Ask a knowledgeable player to help you move the monsters on the battlefield. Designate this before the game and have them do all the movement, or call for their help as you need it.

Add simple instructions or weave movement into your combat narrative or play-by-play and ask the player to pay attention to movement cues and do their best to match what you say.

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For example, “The dragon flies towards the elf and dwarf, landing just behind them atop the pile of bones.”

This lets you concentrate on the narrative, dice rolling and sharing results.

2. My Little Monster

Delegate monster-running responsibility by assigning monster control to one or more players. Have them track the monster’s hit points, movement, conditions and initiative.

3. Who’s the Bad Guy Now?

Let players completely manage monsters – beyond doing the Monster Mash or basic monster tactics. Give them stat blocks, preferred tactics and encounter or adventure goals. Let them GM in combat and roleplaying scenes.

For some great fun and a real challenge, challenge the player to have the Big Bad Evil Guy escape from the party! (See Resources for more ideas on this.)

Consider delegating this only occasionally to keep things fresh and give players a peek behind the GM screen. Who knows, this may steadily help you develop more interested GMs in your playgroup’s GM rotation!

4. We’re All Storytellers

Either cooperatively describe PC actions and results, or whenever possible, delegate it.

You can also designate a game component for storytelling delegation, such as skill checks and results. This lets players practice and sharpen their roleplaying, storytelling and improvisational skills.

5. Combat Task Master

Instead of delegating monsters, delegate critical combat components. For example, assign one more players to track monster hit points, monster conditions, monster initiatives and so forth.

6. Rules Guru

Delegate rules questions to the Rules Guru player. Remain the final arbiter for rules interpretations and final rulings in murky situations, but ask the player to handle the majority of rules questions.

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Choose your rules lawyer, power gamer or most voracious book collector or reader for this. Enlist their help when you need a rule looked up or clarified on-the-spot or between sessions.

7. Initiative Announcer

Have one player track initiative and give updates, such as, “Character X is up, Character Y is on deck and Character Z is in the hole.”

In my games, I prefer to announce the up and on deck players only, but do what works best for your playgroup.

This task is a great fit for players who are organized, are quick on their turns or are always asking “Who’s Next?”

8. RPG Key Grip

Have one or more people be in charge of collecting, placing and sharing markers, area of effects templates, conditions, dice, miniatures and even background music.

Organizational and atmospheric support: that’s why you want an RPG Key Grip.

9. Medi-Tech

Have one player track player hit points, healing surges and other healing resources (first aid kits, bandages, healing potions, healing spells) at the party level.

While each player is still responsible for tracking his own specific resources, this additional larger-view of healing is useful information for the party’s best healer, support character or leader, and makes for a great fit for these player-characters to track.

10. Time Keeper

Delegate time tracking and time limit standards and enforcement to one player. Consider waiving your turn time limits however, as GM turns are often more complex and dynamic.

After a few sessions using a turn timer, players will get used to it and turns will be more brisk, better simulating the speed of combat while decreasing combat slog.

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11. Google Other Earth

Designate or ask for volunteer to be the group's map creator and all-around travel guide. Got questions about destinations, distances, or maps? That's what this player will handle for the group.

Great for classic map-drawing players, doodlers, folks who love to travel or those who get a kick out of ecology or culture articles and trivia.

Caution: Don't Delegate Everything

Similar to multi-tasking, remember that delegation in moderation is wise. As GM, you set the tone for the gameplay and storytelling. So you maintain the greatest degree of responsibility for a great game.

Use the list above as a starting point to identify what specific tasks you struggle with most. What do you feel costs you too much time, attention or energy as a GM that could be better spent elsewhere?

Then, based on what you know about that player's personality and game style (see Module 1) choose the most sensible player to ask for help on that task.

The right helping hands create a more enjoyable game.

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Helping Hands

Congratulations! You've learned how to run a faster, smoother game by delegating key tasks.

You've learned what key game management tasks contribute to a better game and the specific steps for delegating each task.

Next, you will learn how to make the most impactful use of props, game aids and media options.

Ever feel like narration doesn't add enough to the presentation and delivery of your game? Want more visual aids? Open your players' eyes and ears and amp up the atmosphere by mixing things up with the right sight or sound. You'll learn how to do that and more next.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [How To Multi-Task Better During Your Games: 6 Tips, Part I](#), [How To Multi-Task Better During Your Games: 5 Tips Part II](#), and [The Session Checklist: Ingredients to a Successful Game Session Part 1 and Part 2](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [The Monstrous Vignette in 8 Quick Steps](#), [Great Escapes: 8 Ways to Help Villains Get Away](#), [D&D 4e Condition Markers & Condition Cards](#), [Mapping Options Deathmatch](#), [Monster Complexity and Selection](#) and [4e DM's Cheat Sheet](#).

5.07 Just Add Atmosphere: Props, Media & More

“Expectancy is the atmosphere for miracles.”
– Edwin Louis Cole

How to Add More Atmosphere

Now you'll learn how to evoke an atmosphere of high adventure and excitement through creative use of props, media and other tools.

Want to get your players' attention? Go beyond classic GM narration or miniatures and win the crowd with these tips.

Why Add Atmosphere?

Ghost stories are best told at night around a campfire – everyone leans in, eyes wide, waiting to hear what happens next. Like a good ghost tale, if you create the right atmosphere for your adventures, then your players will be more engaged and focused on the story and its exciting encounters.

Top d8 Ways to Add Atmosphere

Here are some ways to heighten the atmosphere, mood and theme in your games, with a focus on props, media and more:

1. Sound Bites and Effects

Got a critical scene or encounter coming up? Queue up a couple of atmospheric sound bites or sound effects.

For example, simple cricket or other night insect sounds are great for when the party camps the night in the wild. Or fire up a Halloween sound effects soundtrack when the party gets trapped in a haunted castle or wanders into a zombie-filled graveyard.

2. Music

The right music for your game world and adventure amplifies the tone and atmosphere of the campaign. It also gives you a simple cue that tells everyone it's time to play – be sure to switch to it right at game start.

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Of the many options available, I recommend looking at your favorite fantasy or superhero movies' soundtracks (i.e., Conan, Gladiator, Braveheart, Lord of the Rings, Batman, Thor, Avengers) or fine-tuning your favorite internet radio sites, like Pandora, Grooveshark or Jango (my current favorite).

3. Video

In the Dragon Age campaign I play in, my brother does a great job of mixing in a few classic video scenes of the Dragon Age video game series to enhance specific events in our adventures. These high quality scenes include tremendous graphics, intense dialogue and stirring musical scores.

There are many excellent fantasy (and other genre) game videos you can find right now on YouTube!

Think of it as adding a slice of the big screen experience to your sit-down tabletop RPG.

4. Art

There are countless artists out there whose fantasy, sci-fi and genre-bending artwork truly captivates. Find your favorite style or artists and look up more of their work online. Order some posters or portraits to decorate your game room.

Go old school and put those monster manuals to use during the game: put their art on display at key moments. Or use your iPad or notebook to show your players exactly what the monster or NPC they're encountering looks like.

5. Card and Dice Games

Going into the local gambling den? Then break out the cards or dice. Play a simple game of poker or spades during a critical roleplaying encounter where the PCs are trying to get information as discreetly as possible. Or break out fantasy-style card games an adventurer might just be playing at the local tavern, like Three Dragon Ante.

6. Board Games

Board games are another great game within a game option. Have a portal suck the players into another plane where they must navigate their way out of Castle Ravenloft for most of the session. Or have the war in your campaign influenced by the results of a high-stakes game of Conquest of Nerath. The winner gains a bigger foothold in the campaign world: perhaps a major battle victory or tide-changing event hangs in the balance.

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7. Props

Think small, think simple. Use props that are easy to find, handle and display. For example, scrolls and scroll cases, small statuettes, decorative glasses, boxes, or other containers. Some jewelry or foreign coins in a cloth or leather pouch or small decorative treasure box are simple, easy props for when the party loot is well-deserved treasure. Or, like Johnn, just wear a funny hat!

8. Lighting

Dimming or suddenly turning off the lights at the right time is something you see in cinema and theater all the time. A great attention-getter, especially surrounding any surprise event or twist during your game.

What Artists Do You Play With?

Think about which players in your playgroup are inspired most by fantasy art, a great fantasy movie, or classical music. For example, who loves to find and collect the best soundtracks for game night? Which player already is a YouTube fiend – finding or creating great videos all the time? Who is an artist – painter, actor, writer and so on?

Think about what types of media or props would excite or inspire your playgroup based on how they like to learn and play games and their creative skills and hobbies – and remember, that includes you, the GM!

Make an effort to add in the right mix – even just a dash here and there – and watch your game's atmosphere and engagement levels soar.

A Good Mood to Be In

Congratulations! You've learned how to heighten your game's atmosphere. You've learned what sorts of media, props and other options contribute to a smoother, more exciting and more enjoyable game.

Next, you will learn how to analyze and discuss encounters – especially ones that go awry or the way of the TPK (Total Party Kill) – by conducting a good post-mortem.

What are the right questions to ask when you go back and look at the facts of a poor encounter? What killed it? You'll learn how to do that and more in the next section.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [5 Tips to Create Game Room Atmosphere](#), [Dark and Gritty Gaming Tips](#), [Hands On Props: Great Prop Ideas From Ed Bradshaw](#), [27 Great Prop Ideas To Enhance Your Games](#) and [I Smell Props](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Music for Your D&D Game: Jango](#), [Heroes on Holiday: While You Were Away...](#), [What is Atmosphere? Not What, But Whom](#), [Balance in All D&D Things: Rules & Atmosphere](#), [Romancing the Party](#), [Adding Character to Your Character](#), and [Got Character? Give Them Pain and Suffering](#).

5.08 Post Mortems: How To Analyze Encounters

“Not even analysis, by itself, can transform you. You must still do the changing yourself.” – Natalie Wood

How to Analyze Encounters

Next, you'll learn how to break down encounters and figure out what went right – and more importantly, what went wrong. Want to finally understand where you ziggled instead of zagged? Or figure out why that surprise TPK destroyed everyone's night? You'll learn how to do exactly that today.

Why Analyze Encounters?

Bad encounters are like crime scenes – you want them investigated with a magnifying glass and solved. **The nature of great GMing is learning by doing**, and sometimes you will run a bad encounter – and that's ok. The important thing is to learn from it.

What made it a terribly slow, boring, confusing or lethal encounter?

Once you have these answers you can keep improving your craft step by step, NPC by NPC, combat by combat. You learn to stay focused on your next great encounter.

The Encounter Analysis Pyramid

There are three core parts of the encounter:

1. What worked?
2. What was unremarkable?
3. What didn't work?

Divvy up your analysis among these three cornerstones. Here's how:

The Good

What elements of your encounter went well? What got the PCs' attention? What got them excited and engaged?

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Identify the specific NPC personality or dialogue, monster, monster tactic, monster ability, CombatScape feature, trap, hazard, adventure hook, story or combat twist, treasure, and so on.

Remember to refer back to player and character styles discussed earlier in *Faster Combat*. You need to know what types of encounters, and then what specific elements in those encounters, engage your players' personalities or styles.

For example, did the foul-mouthed, rude, but pretty councilwoman get everyone laughing or put them off? Did they want to keep talking with and make an NPC ally out of her – or could they not wait to get out of that dreadful teatime meeting with her?

Pay special attention to your group's reactions to certain NPCs, monsters and CombatScape features. Note which ones the party interacted with and enjoyed. For example, many players love furniture or other “movable pieces” in a fight that they can use for cover, positioning or even as a weapon. If you see this, count it as a win.

The Okay

Often, you'll have many elements that fit and aren't remarkable – that's ok. For example, monster tactics are often believable but not spectacular, especially with common ranks of goblins, orcs, wolves and the like.

So why bother identifying these pedestrian elements? Because **they become a pool of ideas you can draw upon for improvement later.**

For example, maybe that rabble of orcs needed a champion, a memorable individual among them, to make the entire encounter memorable.

Going back to your “just okay” list helps you recast encounters in a more engaging way, preparing you for next time.

Think of it as an ingredients list you can choose from and reshape for future encounters.

The Bad

This may be your longest list, especially if everyone fell asleep, rolled their eyes, or – unfortunately – found themselves rolling up new characters. Character death happens, but there needs to be good reason and better execution: **characters should die heroically, spectacularly and meaningfully.**

That is, common orc rabble shouldn't slaughter two of them. But if that rabble is led by the infamous half-orc, half-demon scourge of the land known as Orgros the

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Demon, Ender of Men, and it is Orgros who not only kills them, but beheads or snaps their backs in half doing it – now you've got something.

List out any mechanics that were troubling. What rules or combat mechanics took too much time or effort and not enough imagination to use and enjoy effectively in battle?

Some CombatScape features may fail. Were they too simple, complex, or not interactive or obvious?

Note every observation you can from both your and the party's perspective. If the party obviously avoided a certain CombatScape feature, figure out why. Ask yourself and ask them what made it a poor encounter element. Ask what would have made it more memorable, easier to use and more engaging.

Choose Your Problem-Solving Weapon

You've identified the positive, neutral and negative aspects of your encounter. But what tool or method do you use to represent them?

The three best methods are **notes**, **lists** and **visuals**. Pick the one you find easiest to use and helps you track problems better.

Perhaps a combination works best for you? You make a few notes, turn them into a checklist, and add them to a mind map of encounter tips you've accumulated.

Decide which method or combination of methods works best for you when **solving** problems. For example, you might find the Freemind MindMap tool we use here at Faster Combat useful when collecting the facts and tracking the steps of an encounter that didn't quite go well.

Finally, don't forget the human equation. Bouncing off ideas about what went wrong and what to do better next time with a fellow GM or your playgroup is an excellent option, whether in person, on a discussion board, on a gaming website or even over Twitter.

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Problem Solved

Today you learned how to analyze your encounters to improve them for next time. You've learned the three areas of each encounter to target when conducting your analysis and how to record and study them to improve your game.

Next, you will learn how to GM with style and consistency. Ever wonder what the secret is for those GMs who have been gaming for decades? What keeps them excited and gets their creative gears turning and games exciting year after year? You'll learn that and more in the next section.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [How to Fix Botched Encounters in Mid-Game](#), [3 Tips for Writing and Running Adventures](#) and [Top 5 Ways to More Compelling Encounters](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [A Great Evil Stirs... The Waiting Returns](#), [Monster Complexity and Selection](#), [D&D 5e: The Complexity Slider Approach](#), [Not So Immediate Actions](#) and [Faster Combat Encounter Triggers Checklist](#).

5.09 Style and Consistency: Master Your Game

“To me, style is consistency.” – Adam Ant

How to GM with Style and Consistency

Next, you’ll learn how to run your games with style and consistency. Want to truly understand your own GMing style and learn what it takes to consistently be great with your GMing style? Let’s find out how to do exactly that today.

Why GM with Style and Consistency?

Why do you love to GM? And why do players enjoy playing with you when you do?

Like players, every game master has strengths that define their style. Know your strengths and use them to your advantage to run great games that will have your players excited for more adventure after every session.

But knowing and applying the strengths of your style isn’t enough. You need to be consistent with your GMing style, from crunch to flavor and everything in between.

Focus on running great games consistently and you’ll create a gaming experience you and your playgroup can’t wait to get back to.

The GM Style Pyramid

There are three components of GM style:

1. Storyteller
2. Combat referee
3. Game manager

You play each of these roles at every game.

You are probably more comfortable with certain aspects of one style over the others. That’s okay. **Read on and rate yourself (strength, weakness or average)** so you become more aware of your GM style strengths.

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Storyteller

- How much do you enjoy the heroes and villains of a good story?
- How much do you enjoy the twists and turns as an adventure unfolds?
- How much does high fantasy or epics appeal to you?

If you score yourself high on this dimension, then don't get bogged down in the details of every combat mechanic or tactic. Don't spend a lot of energy managing your players, turns and weekly session statistics.

Why? Because to you, story matters most.

If the adventure hook or location is dull, then you're not up for it. If the campaign setting or events of a module aren't wondrous or compelling, don't play it. Combat too long or complex? Try a different game. Figuring out who's coming and when every week, or just tracking initiative more a nuisance than anything? Ask your players for help.

Combat Referee

- How much do you enjoy a big, tactical, complex battle?
- The use of miniatures and multiple terrain or other CombatScape features?
- How much would you rather focus on big and little combats over other types of encounters (traps, hazards, riddles, puzzles, roleplay, intelligence gathering)?
- How important is it to you to make a good, fair, quick – if not perfect – ruling?

If it's battle you crave as GM, be sure to elevate your combats into epic chapters of your game. Memorable tactics, interactive terrain, mighty elite or champion foes, named recurring villains – these are your bread and butter.

If you enjoy managing combat most and using combat rules to make the most of every monster's actions, then be sure you select compelling monsters and create a gauntlet of high-stake spectacular combats. And be sure to treat yourself with your own created monsters!

Finally, as you've learned in Faster Combat, remember that every combat's mission can be for something greater besides the simple challenge of a fight and thrill of victory. Even a tactical mind mired in monstrosities enjoys a simple layer of capture the flag or a rescue on top of a furious fight.

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Game Manager

- How much do you enjoy the social event of the game itself?
- How often do you prefer to host games at your place?
- Is making sure everyone has plenty of food and drink – or bringing over a snack yourself as a visiting GM – important to you?
- How important is it to you that you start and end on time, and have a regular, weekly game?
- How about initiative tracking – pain or part of the job?

If you rate yourself highly here, you enjoy using your organization skills to help run a smooth, regular game.

If organizing social activities like game night don't appeal to you, once again, ask your players for help. Chances are good at least one of them has a knack or is willing to help out here.

Consistency

Now that you understand where you rate yourself as a storyteller, combat referee and game manager, how do you consistently deliver high levels of performance in those areas at every game?

You're already more aware of your GMing style, so the next step is clear: focus and practice – especially at those low points that inevitably occur in any game.

Slog, confusion, boredom – watch for them, and then act based on your GM style's strengths.

For example, if you know you're biggest strength is storytelling, then whenever you get stuck or feel the game slipping, immediately inject a big personality or incredible adventure-jolting event.

Don't hesitate – you **know** this will work because it's part of what makes you a great GM.

If combat's your favorite, and one of them is starting to make its way to Snoozeville, inject a new wave of monsters. Unique ones you created. Frankenstein the new arrivals and delight yourself and your players.

And if keeping the game organized and smooth is most important to you, as soon as everyone starts leaving the room randomly or showing up late, start offering incentives for them to stay or show up on time. From a simple, but helpful

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merchant with useful rumors to bonus XP to playing fantasy themed music as soon as it's session start time, create cues and incentives to keep your game solid.

Let your GM style pyramid light the way out of the darkness whenever your game goes off the rails. Let your roles and stylistic strengths as GM guide you and your playgroup back and forward to a great scene, combat, adventure or session every time.

You've Got Style

Today you've learned how analyze and apply the strength of your GMing style to consistently improve your game – one scene, one combat and one session at a time.

Next, you will learn how to take the next and final step in the Faster Combat course. (That's right, you're almost finished!) You'll learn specific ways to lead by example.

Want to develop your players so they're more proactive and engaged? It starts with you setting the example as the leader of your game and playgroup. You'll learn how to do this and more in the next section.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [How to Think Faster on Your Feet While You GM](#), [D&D GMs: How to Solve Problem Players Once And For All – Without Messy Confrontations](#) and the GM interview series where you can pick up all sorts of big and small tips on GM and playgroup styles (e.g. [Roleplaying Tips GM Interview – Eli Smith](#)).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Win the Crowd: Play to Everyone's Style](#), [Balance in All D&D Things: Rules and Atmosphere](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#) and [D&D 5e: The Complexity Slider Approach](#).

5.10 Game Time: Lead by Example

“A great leader's courage to fulfill his vision comes from passion, not position.” – John Maxwell

How to Lead by Example

Next, you'll learn how to lead by example, fueling an atmosphere of creativity and engagement in your games.

Want to keep players excited and hungry to come back to your game every week? You'll learn how to do exactly that today.

Why Lead by Example

A great game starts with you, the GM. You are the host, storyteller, combat referee and game manager.

You set the tone for the session, the adventure and the campaign. You are the foundation of the game. It's a lot of responsibility, but it's a fun responsibility!

Lead the way. Show your players how. Involve them and celebrate the quirky characters and players that they are.

Lead by Example: 3 Key Windows

Master the example techniques below at three key points – before, during and after your sessions – to establish how you want your game to develop, grow and thrive.

Pre-Game

The pre-game is about preparation. It's where you create a comfortable gaming atmosphere – one that promotes a smooth game and immediately gets everyone's head in the game as soon as they show up.

- **Schedule Your Game Wisely.** Regularly check in with everyone on session frequency, length and changes in their availability. **Talk about adjustments well before having to make sudden changes or cancellations.** Play at a regular time each week and use a website to communicate about any logistical questions. Even something simple like a Yahoo Group (which I've used for years) goes a long way.

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- **Be a Good Host.** Remember, it's a social event. Start on time, but don't force it. It's okay if everyone's taking a few minutes to be sociable – that's natural. Also, buy, make or share food, snacks or refreshments. Be generous as the host and encourage the players to bring a snack or dessert themselves. Make a point of thanking everyone who brought goodies for the group.
- **Eat and Sleep Before the Game.** This pre-game technique may sound funny, but it's important. Public speaking, managing people, performance – all of these are components of RPG sessions, and that means being physically ready to run a game. So make sure you've gotten enough sleep – sneak in a nap if you need. Eat before the game, make sure it's nutritious, and have some healthy snacks and water within reach at all times. And, yes, it's also okay if you have a Mountain Dew!
- **Ready the Game Room.** Make sure wherever you game is clean, comfortable, well lit and spacious enough for a few books, maps, minis, tokens, dice and so forth. On the table or nearby, I like to have my encounters “bagged” or otherwise sorted separately, ready to go. I also like to stack tiles and maps with later encounters on the bottom, and then simply “peel away” as the adventure continues. And on the walls, I like having some fantasy art to help enhance the atmosphere. Sometimes, I even put up world maps of the fantasy setting – but only if they're huge! And... don't forget the music. It's just not game time for me without a great fantasy soundtrack starting as the game begins.
- **Ready Your GM Space.** Take special care in readying your GM space. Remember your style and strengths and have your space reflect it. For example, if storytelling is your favorite, be sure you have story notes with you that include a rich list of unusual names, places and things. Or keep some GMing advice right in front of you, like Johnn's *How to Think Faster on Your Feet While You GM*.
- **Last-Minute Adventure Review.** Review your adventure. Note the most compelling characters, events and locations. Visualize the main story branches, sketch them out in clouds, a chart or an outline. Think of this as a quick way to ready your mind for the game that's about to start.

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In-Game

Now that you've established a great gaming environment, it's time to lead the way in-game. It's an RPG, so managing a fine balance of rules and roleplaying is what in-game leadership is all about.

Get Into Character

Roleplaying games are unique because they have this human, theatrical aspect to them. A scared or angry goblin needs to sound like a scared or angry goblin. You don't need to win Academy awards, but you do need to make a great effort to sound convincing.

Think of the worst actor you've ever seen in movies. They come off false, rigid and simply don't sound real, right? Don't be them. Embrace the roles you play as GM, from man to monster.

Make lots of eye contact. Use accents, vary voice pitch and pace, and use a host of strong facial expressions. That's the first and greatest step to getting the same effort and energy back from your players. **It shows them you're not self-conscious at all about some roleplay, so they don't need to be either.**

Rule Fair and Fast

Brief discussion and soliciting opinions from your players (especially your power gamer or fellow GM, like I do) are good. Long diatribes or minutes of rules look-up and reading are not. Poll your players briefly, or if you already feel like you have enough information to make a quick ruling, make it and move on. Do the best you can. Be reasonable. Assure your playgroup the rule will be checked after the session and can be discussed further then – and do it.

Keep Moving, Stay Focused

Whether an encounter or scene goes well or poorly, keep moving the story and action along. Provide clues and information when characters get stuck.

Don't spend five or ten minutes on itemizing treasure if there are more pressing matters at hand, like saving a group of hostages from being dipped into a black dragon's boiling cauldron. Focus on the story – because without it, you got nothin'! – and the bookkeeping will naturally catch up. Focus on a great adventure.

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Post-Game

Congratulations, another great game session is behind you. Everyone seemed to have a great time – you included. But you’re not done yet!

Celebrate Moments of Greatness

Every game has highlights (and funny or dramatic lowlights), so bring up one or two favorites with the group here. Talk about why they were epic, funny or brutal. Give props to a player for a brilliant move or roleplaying scene. Let them know where and how they made the game awesome for everyone.

Ask for Feedback

Ask your playgroup what they enjoyed most, and what they enjoyed least – especially if you had suspicions earlier in the game. You need to know with clarity what works, what doesn’t work and why for your playgroup.

Sometimes you’ll get specifics (rulings, how well certain new house rules or table rules are working, etc.), and that’s great. Yet other times “Good game!” or “That was fun!” alone is a joy to hear. You need to know your players enjoyed the game, so if you’re not sure or simply need to hear it, just ask.

Thank Everyone

Thank everyone for their time, tell them they also played a good game, and thank them again for bringing any snacks or refreshments. If you were on the road, thank the host for use of their place for the game. You can never be too courteous when it comes to spending time with friends and enjoying a game together.

Remember to Play Too

Finally, any great leader understands they wouldn’t ask anyone to do something they wouldn’t do. In a sit-down RPG context, this means you should look for opportunities to be a player. The perspective you gain is critical. It makes you a more informed, understanding, patient and better GM.

For example, I used to GM over 90% of the time for many years and D&D editions, but in recent years I’ve had the opportunity to play more, in both D&D and Dragon Age. Now I know exactly what it’s like to prepare my character for an RPG today. I know what it’s like to wait for my character’s turn. I know what it’s like to figure things out with a group and agree on a plan.

There are hundreds of little lessons and insights you can add to your GM skills and style from the other side of the screen. So be sure to find opportunities to explore them.

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Lead the Way

Today, you've learned how lead by example in all phases of game night: pre-game, in-game and post-game. You've learned how to create the perfect atmosphere and light the way towards your vision of a great gaming experience for everyone.

Next, we discuss alternative character rewards. Not all roads are paved with gold, but some can be.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [How to Think Faster on Your Feet While You GM](#), [The Care and Feeding of Your GM](#), [Managing Your Group](#), and [General GM Advice: No Winners, No Losers in Roleplaying](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Top 12 Ways to Stop Sounding So Damn Metagamey](#), [Win the Crowd: Play to Everyone's Style](#), [Balance in All D&D Things: Rules and Atmosphere](#), [What is Atmosphere? Not What, but Whom](#), [Faster D&D 4e Combat: Top Tips](#) and [D&D 5e: The Complexity Slider Approach](#).

Chapter 6: 1d6 Extras



6.01 Something More: Top 6 Alternative Character Awards

“A gift consists not in what is done or given, but in the intention of the giver or doer.”

– Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Here are some of the best alternative treasures to award the party. Tired of gold, gems and run-of-the-mill magic items? Weave some story into your treasure instead!

Why Use Alternative Awards?

Gold, gems, jewelry and some magic items become too commonplace as part of the treasure the party earns and discovers. Want treasure to carry more meaning? Bring their treasure and the campaign world to life by sprinkling in a helping of unusual treasures.

Top 6 Alternative Character Awards

These six alternative awards to standard treasures will elevate your adventures and campaign world, creating more engaged PCs alongside living, breathing NPCs. Make these wondrous surprises part of your next adventure's rewards.

1. Titles

Titles can be real or honorary, bestowed upon one or more party members by their benefactor, often a person of influence and power. Did the party save a VIP or community? Did they aid a known power group, such as a council, guild or more unusual faction? If so, award a title.

You can make a title heroic and exaggerated (Destroyers of the Nine Demon Lords, Saviors of the Free World), or down to earth and personal (Honorary Lord Guardsman, Honorary Professor of the Magic Arts).

The title should bring a small, practical benefit along with it, such as free meals at a certain favorite tavern of the power group or NPC, or free or discounted equipment from the guild's smith.

Weave this available benefit of resource access or discounts into your adventures. And make sure the PCs know they have access to it.

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2. Favors

Sometimes related to titles, accruing favors never hurt anyone. Help out a stranger and you'll be surprised who they turn out to be and how much they want to reciprocate your generosity and effort.

Beyond the obvious favor of an NPC benefactor, one excellent trick here is to award the favor of an ally of an NPC the party assisted. This makes the world feel more real – “someone is always watching.”

NPCs have trusted allies who need help too, after all. So why wouldn't they reach out to the PC party for aid – or aid the party in need thanks to their friend in common.

Try to give each NPC ally a specialty. Experts are whom you call upon for favors, plus a specialty makes it easier for the party to remember the NPC. Tie their specialty or profession into goods and services adventures can use and respect – smith, innkeeper, trapmaker, investigator, town guard and so forth.

3. Land

Awarding land is excellent for adventures where the party is sent to clear frontier land, ruins or haunted areas for local rulers. Do the job spectacularly, and a portion of the land is gifted to the party. They become landowners!

The best part about this award is that then the PCs need to decide what they're going to do with it. Will they patrol and protect it from trespassers and monsters? Build defensive structures on it? Or encourage others to move in and build homes on it? Or will they decide to just sell it or give it away?

Whatever their decision, the party is forever tied to the land they liberated – and all the people who move into or through its borders.

4. Mounts and Vehicles

Instead of another sack of coins and gems, gift the party with new horses, giant lizards, giant spiders or giant eagles they can ride. (For exotic mounts, be sure their deeds are worth such a precious gift.) The party can never have enough mounts. After all, we know any time the PCs tie them up and leave them, monsters **will** find and eat them.

By the same token, consider unusual vehicles as rewards. For example, an adventure that takes place on the high seas may end with the party being awarded the very ship they were manning and protecting through storms and sea monsters, the captain thankful – and ready to retire.

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5. Homes and Buildings

While awarding land can have an amusing effect on the party's decision making, awarding them a house, tower, mansion or castle is more specific and straightforward. Every party loves a home base, especially one they found, cleared and claimed.

Consider that some vehicles can double as a mobile home base, such as ship or a large caravan. Or perhaps a shrine, temple or store is temporarily assigned to the care and protection of the party.

Not only does this type of award mean not having to worry about saving coins for buying one, it also means delicious built-in adventure hooks – defending the property from invaders and thieves. This makes for a refreshing switch for the PCs who are usually the ones doing the raiding and pillaging.

6. NPCs

Unlike contacts earned through favors, awarding an NPC as treasure is more direct and personal. Think personal bodyguards or assistants, actual fighting party allies, or an addition to one or more of the PC's families – through marriage or childbirth.

For example, if one of the PCs particularly impresses upon the elf maiden the party rescued from the pirate-slavers, perhaps she announces her desire openly to join the party and fight alongside them – while secretly (and not so secretly) making advances upon that particular PC. Once more, the world feels more real, this time thanks to a dash of romance. I've done this before, and years later, everyone *still* remembers the NPC's name – probably thanks to an embarrassing but good-natured scene or two!

Gifts for Everyone

Finally, consider all sorts of gifts and charity in the real world and how they might fit into your adventures. Donations, all-expenses paid vacations, tickets to a show, dinner out – these are all easy to translate into your fantasy world. Watch your players' faces light up when they receive these gifts, courtesy of the family, friends and benefactors. It's the thought that counts, isn't it?

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A Time for Giving

Congratulations! You've learned how to include alternative treasure awards for your adventures, including their potential for rich and memorable impact on the party and the story.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Alternative Forms of Character Rewards](#), [Minor Rewards Ideas](#) and [5 Meta-Game Tips About Rewards](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Magic Items: Surprise Me](#), [Treasure, Wish Lists and Low Level Magic Items](#), [Quick Wish Lists: 3 x 3](#) and [Treasure Cheat Sheet: More Magical Rewards](#).

6.02 Weird: 50 Monster Quirks

*“We are a very, very unusual species.”
– Richard Dawkins*

Next, you’ll learn how to use and create quirks for NPCs and monsters.

Want to bring your motley cast of foes to life? Let’s dive in!

Why Use Quirky Monsters?

Quirky creatures mean memorable ones. Quirks help players (and GMs) remember a certain NPC or monster better. Quirks are also built-in cues and clues for how best to interact with a certain monster.

Quirks encourage and enrich your adventures with more than just some humor or wonder – they give your players more ideas and options when they encounter them.

50 Monster Quirks

Use the following 50 quirks in your games or as inspiration to create more. Select from the list whenever an opportunity comes up, or roll d100 and divide by two. Mix and match multiple quirks as desired. Let cool and serve fresh to players immediately!

1. **Limp.** Walks with a right leg limp during the day but a left leg limp at night.
2. **Pet.** Always has a pet on a leash nearby, constantly has short side conversations with it.
3. **Breakfast.** Usually smells like breakfast – especially eggs, bacon, waffles and coffee.
4. **Book.** Carries an enormous book (with a lock), strapped to back like a backpack.
5. **Journal.** Always pulling out and scribbling down thoughts in journal, but only in red ink.
6. **Dance.** Breaks out into dance, even while traveling, whenever it rains or snows.
7. **Song.** Sings at camp, on the road or during meals, rhyming often.

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8. **Up.** Loves to climb up or jump into trees, walls, furniture – and even creatures in combat.
9. **Giggles.** Loves telling crude jokes and laughs hysterically at inappropriate moments.
10. **Wordsmith.** Often uses eloquent language and large, sophisticated words, especially adjectives.
11. **Bumblng.** Trips over own feet, falls often, runs into door frames and bumps into others.
12. **Doom.** Always professes doom and gloom for every decision or action, glass is always half-empty.
13. **Faces.** Doesn't say much, instead uses sharp and strong facial expressions to communicate.
14. **Affectionate.** Strong handshakes, bear hugs and plenty of kisses for friends and loved ones.
15. **What?** Constantly distracted, absent-minded, bored or lost in daydreams.
16. **What Not to Wear.** Wears incredibly mismatched clothing, poorly combining colors, styles and even different shoe or boot types.
17. **Hear Me Now.** Speaks in slow, low, deep tones when at rest, but at a significantly higher pitch and pace when excited.
18. **Fruits and Vegetables.** Carries and snacks on several pounds of fruits and vegetables at all times, carried in a few special containers, such as a cornucopia.
19. **How Rude.** Curses and hurls crude insults at everyone, friend or foe, especially in combat.
20. **Skin.** Prominently displays unusually colored and styled face and body paint, brands or tattoos.
21. **Firestarter.** Plays with fire at every opportunity and carries a host of fire-based weapons, such as flasks, grenades or arrows that can be lit.
22. **Startled.** Jumps, calls out or screams at the slightest surprise or sound, especially in combat.
23. **Mechanical.** Carries and uses strange, mechanical devices, such as a wind-propelled chariot or a portable waterclock strapped to forearm.
24. **Klepto.** Allies and friends' prized possessions and equipment often go missing, especially during combat.

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25. **Sleeptalker.** Talks in sleep, often complaining about or praising friends and enemies by name.
26. **What's That Horrible Sound?** Tries to play an instrument to relax and entertain. Tries. It sounds horrific. Every time.
27. **Tall Tales.** Recounts stories, especially among allies and friends, with great embellishment.
28. **Looker and Stinker.** Attractive or shapely but smells horrible, like rotten meat or garbage.
29. **Keeps Score.** Records transgressions against him or her by allies and enemies in a journal, on a long piece of parchment, or on a wall.
30. **Gentle Giant.** Looks fierce, strong or ugly but is actually a skilled conversationalist and pacifist, more interested in company over tea or a meal.
31. **Gamer.** Offers to resolve any conflict, even combat, through a game of dice, cards or riddles instead.
32. **Doesn't Fit.** Wears extremely tight or extremely loose clothing, uncomfortably or comically emphasizing or hiding certain features.
33. **Throws Things.** Fights with unconventional weapons, preferring to throw coins, food, equipment, tools, appliances and even furniture.
34. **From Above.** Is actually a curious deity or other powerful immortal being, taking the form of a typical creature to learn more about its daily life – or learn more about the PCs.
35. **From Below.** Is actually a curious devil or other evil immortal being, taking the form of a typical creature to learn more about its daily life – or learn more about the PCs.
36. **Who Am I?** Has sudden amnesia and doesn't understand why it's fighting or talking to the PCs. May be the effect of a curse or spell triggering.
37. **Filthy Rich.** Not shy about wearing all the jewelry, gems and other extravagances on his or her person, including piercings, multiple coin pouches or chests, fine silks and gold-capped teeth.
38. **Just Filthy.** Dirty, smells bad, and wipes nose and sneezes on others.
39. **Shy.** Stutters around the opposite sex, unable to hold a conversation with them.

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40. **Flower Power.** Carries a variety of flowers and gives them to anyone he or she comes to like.
41. **For a Price.** Demands at least a copper for every single question asked it – even mundane or rhetorical ones.
42. **Wings.** Has feathery or bat-like wings, something never heard of for that particular creature.
43. **Glowing Scars.** Has battle scars, but they all glow with an eerie, ever-changing light, glowing bright in combat and dim when at rest.
44. **KO.** Faints or falls asleep often during parley or combat.
45. **Sunrises and Sunsets.** Never misses a sunrise or sunset, taking extreme measures to be there, including magical means such as teleport scrolls.
46. **Collector.** Takes trophies from foes, such as noses, fingers or ears, then tries using them as currency, slips them into others' food and drink and leaves them around as special surprises.
47. **Still Eating.** Eats or drinks while fighting, keeping one hand free to grab more ale, biscuits or haunches of meat.
48. **I Challenge You.** Challenges a PC to a fair non-lethal duel instead of an all-combat. Offers to provide information or treasure if the PC wins and wants the same in return if it wins.
49. **I Hate Those Guys.** Mocks, berates, curses or insults its own profession, race or species at every opportunity.
50. **Flatterer.** Goes out of his or her way to complement the party's looks, conversation skills, or even fighting style in the middle of combat.

Add a Twist

Quirks begin with a unique or unusual trait:

- Sight
- Sound
- Smell
- Belief
- Value
- Some other quality or fact

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Then, like a spider web, expand quirks much as you like. Develop a quirk a step or two further or add a twist.

One way to do this is to ask, “So what?” Think about the consequences of the quirk, either to the monster who’s lived with it for some time, or to those subjected to it. Then make an interesting consequence idea a constant quirk feature.

Just like twists make Combat Missions feel richer and more real, you can do the same with one of the quirks above or with one of you design.

For example, say you like the idea of #44: KO, but opt to add this twist: you decide the ogre only faints or falls asleep at the mention of the words battle, quest or adventure. Perhaps the ogre is unaware these are the keywords behind his strange condition (some spell or curse?), and unknowingly knocks himself out right in the middle of parley and battle.

Over time, the party might figure out the strange puzzle that is the ogre as he continues to suddenly faceplant at the mention of any of the trigger words!

Another trick is to think about what caused the quirk and to bring that into play. For example, a traumatic event might have caused the ogre to get #44: KO when the words battle, quest or adventure are said. Then the PCs find another ogre with the same condition and then another. They’ve got a plot on their hands now, plus a secret weapon against afflicted ogres.

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Weird is Good

Congratulations, you've learned how to create and use monster quirks in your adventures, including how to expand upon these quirks and add your own unique twists.

Next, let's look at some cool places to fight!

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [7 Quirk Tips & 40 Quirks For Your Reference](#), [5 Ways To Make Your Npcs Better & More Memorable](#), [1,000 NPC Traits](#), [Talking the Talk: NPC Speech Patterns](#), [Easy GMing With One Sentence NPCs](#) and [One Sentence NPCs: Part 2](#) .

Also, be sure to check out this fantastic NPC generator: [One Sentence NPC Generator](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [How to Write Great In-Character Posts](#), [Guys, Girls & Minions](#), [Got Character? Give Them Pain and Suffering](#), [Fear of Death: How To Smoothly Manage Character Death](#), [Companion Characters: Gather Your Allies!](#) and [Romancing the Party](#).

6.03 Fantastic Locations: 20 Cool Places to Fight

*“Any landscape is a condition of the spirit.”
– Henri Frederic Amiel*

Next, you’ll learn how to include and create fantastic combat locations in your game. Want to heighten the atmosphere and wonder of your combats? Set your fight scenes in awesome, fantastic places. You’ll learn how to do exactly that today.

Why Fight in Cool Places?

A fantastic location, which we call the CombatScape, infuses energy and excitement into a fight. It makes combats rich and memorable. Long after the battle’s conclusion, your players will still be talking about how they sailed into the night sky to chase down the Third True Evil, severing its heads atop the Clouds of Shifting Time before incinerating its form inside the white-hot fire of the First Star.

d20 Cool Places to Fight

Use the following 20 fantastic locations in your games or as inspiration to create more. Select from the list whenever an opportunity comes up, or simply roll a d20. Then take a deep breath and make sure everyone enjoys the view!

1. **Volcanic Iceberg.** A massive iceberg breaks off the rocky shores while the party is fighting some abominable snow beast. Why did it suddenly break? A lava lake has exploded to life at the heart of the iceberg, sending deadly streams of lava and toxic clouds of ash all over the ice.
2. **Floating Castle: Crash Landing.** A castle in the sky, manned by giants and powered by storm magic, loses its magical connection to nature’s power and begins to fall. Oversized furniture, debris, clouds obscuring vision, and fighting at awkward angles – all while plummeting to the frozen earth. (Yeah, that was one fun adventure! A scene in the primal, nature-focused campaign I GMed last year.)
3. **Tilting Alchemy Lab.** Imagine a dome-shaped mad scientist lab, with plenty of Frankenstein-ian monster parts everywhere to go along with the equipment. Now picture winged monsters there until, at one point, the lab begins to *tilt*. It actually flips over completely, dumping us below the

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- floor, cutting the party off from the airborne monsters. The dome-shaped room is actually sphere-shaped, like a globe. My brother ran this mad encounter once, and sure, we were trapped and took a bunch of falling damage – but wow, was it fun!
4. **Storm-Tossed Sinking Ship.** Nothing like adventure on the high seas! Drowning, getting lost for days or months on end, running aground, getting marooned – and all that’s done without any monsters yet! Add in a shifting, sinking ship thanks to sea monsters or violent storms or both and you’ve got one unforgettable battle. (And don’t forget to add pirates and a cannon or two!)
 5. **Flooded Sewer.** Never mind the dangerous, confusing, and uncomfortably tight sewer system under the city – that’s a good combat location by itself. But it’s time to turn on the hoses or send magical streams of water to clean out the place – maybe the annual check has arrived. Fight scoundrels, monsters and more while trying to stay afloat, stay on your feet, not vomit, and find a way out. Makes for a great place to chain encounters back-to-back as a new flush of water ungracefully blasts the party ever forward.
 6. **Avalanche.** Best used for any mountains or cliffs the party needs to climb. A storm moves in, or monsters, or both. The mountains shake and suddenly an avalanche is coming down, all around them and their feeble climbing gear. Mix in a few recesses and caves – maybe even a cave complex – the party can duck into with the right checks. Then they can try to dig out or find a different way out of the caves.
 7. **Oh, that’s a Behemoth Under Us.** When is a desert not a desert? Or an island not an island? Or a cliff face not a cliff face? When it’s a gargantuan behemoth or giant! Now the monster becomes an ever-shifting, attacking combat location. Always a delightful surprise. Well, that perspective might vary. ☺
 8. **Inside the Belly of the Beast.** Sometimes you’re swallowed whole by a behemoth or enter a slimy cavern that was actually some enormous beast’s maw. Once again, the beast becomes the combat location, except this time, the creature’s body and natural defenses mean the victims (or visitors) have precious time left to live before they are disintegrated or crushed by organs and acids.
 9. **Inside a Giant Brain or Hive.** I’ve used the giant living brain “dungeon” before, and that was a blast. No telling what you might run into there, or what is real or isn’t. Even pain doesn’t feel right sometimes...weird! Another slimy vacation spot for unsuspecting

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- adventurers. If you go with a hive, don't forget all the worker bees. And what exactly is the **honey** in this particular hive?
10. **Gears and Clocks.** A highly mechanical, compact area with lots of moving parts. Include traps, gears, pipes, clocks and more. Think Magic Factory from Hell. Every step should make a strange sound or cause some dangerous piece of machinery to activate or explode.
 11. **Atop the Clock Tower.** While we're on the subject of clocks and gears, fighting atop a great clock tower in town is always exciting. Fall to your death risk? Check. Twelve deafening strokes at midnight? Check. Lots of cover? Check. Use the bell as cover OR a weapon? Perfect.
 12. **Elemental Storms and Motes.** Think the natural world gone wild and raw. A primal place where electrified lava rains both up and down onto spinning, airborne chunks of snow-covered rock – rock that can be “piloted” magically by making the right nature checks so you avoid losing a game of Bumper Cars to the Death.
 13. **Skyfall Puzzle Box.** The home, the rooms, the furniture – it all looks like an overgrown puzzle box – because it is. But then gravity reverses, making it even weirder. Now the party must navigate through a bizarre collection of upside-down debris and obstacles and get out of the box.
 14. **Inside a Music Box.** A giant magical music box creates strange rules where music and song are more powerful than weapons and equipment. The party is able to grab onto and (poorly) use musical instruments, sing written poetry and lyrics, and so on, which empowers their weapons or spells.
 15. **Inside the Sun.** Epic campaigns demand incredible feats. Here, the only way to destroy an artifact or evil deity is by battling it and cleansing it by the fire and light of the sun – while magically sent and (partially and temporarily) protected inside it.
 16. **Are You Not Entertained?** A gladiatorial arena, complete with traps, hazards and surprising opponents, both man and monstrous. Perhaps the PCs must even battle each other. A classic. For good reason!
 17. **Among the Treetops.** An archer or wizard's dream battle: keep your distance and hurl things. The party must swing from tree to tree using vines and branches while being chased through the treetops by artillery-using enemies. Lots of make-shift spears available – broken-off tree branches. The ground below is filled with more monsters than the party can handle – or, lots of fire is always good. And trees tend to burn....

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- 18. Labyrinth.** Another classic. Sprinkle with minotaur, puzzles and riddles. I like talking faces (trapped souls) in walls of bone, constantly whispering confusing warnings and directions the party has to decipher. It's amazing they got out of there in one piece, minds intact, finally reaching the eccentric lord's tower. That was by far one of my favorite mazes ever – loved creating and running that whole location. What a cool place!
- 19. During a Mass Prison Break.** A large dungeon or prison's security is completely compromised, releasing all sorts of criminals and monsters at once. The party throws some back in lockup as they fight and navigate their way out – careful to avoid getting tricked and locked up themselves.
- 20. Just a Dream.** And then you wake up. One last classic for you, the dream sequence or “fake” encounter is a great technique just about anytime, any place. Choose places the characters and players absolutely love (i.e., favorite fantasy landscapes or meaningful campaign world locations) and their reaction will be even stronger. Man, does this work in Dragon Age, let me tell you. My brother and GM has gotten us good a couple of times – it's awesome!

Create Your Own

When creating your own fantastic CombatScapes, start with a theme or two, imagining a rich landscape, structure or some other location. You want a strong image to form in your mind.

Look to the internet and books and you'll find an endless supply of extraordinary images and art for inspiration. Natural and fantasy landscapes alone will provide you with many ideas for breathtaking fight locations.

Make a list (like the cool one above!), add a descriptive line or two, and then flesh the location out later with details. That's usually plenty to get you started on specifics of the whole CombatScape. If you like, sprinkle in a story twist or event that is important to the location and encounter.

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Look All Around You

Congratulations! You've learned how to create and use fantastic locations in your adventures, including how to get inspired and expand upon using themes, art and images.

In the next section, we look at how to use traps effectively.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Monster Features and Terrain Game Changers](#), [120 Benign Wilderness Encounters](#), [Wilderness Encounter Ideas](#) and [9 Ways You Can Use Fiction Books as a GM Tool](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Global Encounter Elements](#), [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#), [Encounter Start: Distance Matters](#) and [Campaign Endings: Destroy the World](#).

6.04 Hazard Warning: It's A Trap!

“The real purpose of books is to trap the mind into doing its own thinking.” – Christopher Morley

How to Use Traps and Hazards Effectively

Next, you'll learn how best to include traps and hazards in your adventures, enhancing the excitement of your game with the unique challenge and deadlines they bring.

Want to keep players on their toes during a fight – beyond just battling monsters? Just set a trap! You'll learn how to do exactly that today.

Trap and Hazard Mastery 101

Effectively including traps and hazards in your game takes a bit of planning. The fun part is you get to revisit – and sometimes re-imagine – your story as you plan.

Step 1: Trap Sense

First, make sense of your trap or hazard:

- How does it fit?
- What's its story?
- How or why was it created?
- Why is it in that location?
- What does it protect – or what could it potentially destroy when triggered?

One trick I use to help answer these story questions is to imagine an old adventure (i.e., time travel back a few years or a generation) and think about why those traps or hazards were created or existed in the first place.

For example, perhaps the Wheel of Iron Maidens trap was created by a gambling den owner who was successful until a couple of his biggest customers suddenly lost big one day and stiffed him. The gambling den owner's bitterness and anger eventually drove all his customers away, especially when rumors of missing people and murders connected to his name and those customers kept coming up.

So he became a recluse, rebuilding a private gambling den in a mountainside. Combining his contempt for his unreliable customers and his for love of games

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since he was a child, he took the idea of the gambling wheel in his den and expanded upon it – to dark ends. He attached iron maidens to the giant wheel's faces. A series of spokes acted as leavers controlling the opening and closing of each spiked maiden.

Finally, he propped the wheel up directly across the double doors and long tunnel leading to the main den hall. With just the pull of a single wall lever, the wheel will release and bound towards the doors, down the tunnel, crushing, trapping and skewering any invaders on its way. This time, anyone who crossed the gambler would pay – grimly and spectacularly.

Though not every trap or hazard needs an exhaustive backstory, sometimes a line or two is all you need to understand its purpose and run it effectively.

Step 2: Supporting Actors or Stars?

Second, decide whether it's going to be a complementary part of the encounter or whether it's going to be the encounter's dominant feature.

Supporting Actors

This approach means you're using the traps and hazards to:

- Amplify a monster strength
- Amplify a terrain or other CombatScape feature
- Minimize a monster weakness
- Hide or protect a CombatScape feature or treasure (or similar reward)

Think encounter themes when using traps and hazards as supporting pieces.

For example, one of the orc archers on the balcony in the dining room of a ruined mansion might cut the ropes to the two massive chandeliers above the party. Taking it a step further, have these two falling chandeliers be the means of cutting off easy access to the balcony of orcs. The chandeliers crash onto the steps, creating debris that's difficult to move through.

Now taking that yet one step further, the crash of the chandeliers creates rock slide hazards: the crumbling walls and stairs of the ruined mansion fall apart.

A word of warning: careful not to include too many traps or hazards in a single encounter, or ones that simply have too many moving parts, phases, triggers or are otherwise too complex. You risk drastically limited "safe" movement options as well as analysis paralysis, both of which contribute to the thing we hate most: **slow turn time!**

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No matter how you use traps and hazards, remember **turn efficiency** is still king!

Stars

This approach means you're using the traps and hazards to (or as):

- The biggest threat in the encounter, as much or more than the monsters or any other CombatScape feature
- A significant tone setter (i.e., the first or final encounter of an adventure)
- Hide or protect a significant reward (i.e., the most valuable or game-changing treasure in the adventure, often directly related to the story)

Trap gauntlets are a great introduction to a dungeon, for example. Gauntlets also make for a great penultimate encounter in the adventure. The villain is the “prize” on the other side – if the party survives!

Once again, be careful not to overuse “death traps” (like the Iron Maiden Wheel above). Not only are they more core to the story, they tend to be more complex and deadly than complementary traps.

If you do use too many traps, the party may have a very tough time feeling or being strong enough to take on other encounters.

Weave in Riddles and Puzzles

A great complement to traps is a riddle or puzzle. Traps and hazards are already unique monsters, so anything like a riddle or puzzle that engages the mind further creates an unusual and cerebral challenge.

Use riddles and puzzles as part of a trap or hazard's identification, avoidance, triggering or reset. This way the stakes and dramatic tension surrounding the trap or hazard stay high.

For example, only translating a wall filled with magical runes carved in six different languages will stop the arced lightning bolt trap from firing every round.

Or perhaps two sets of figurines – animals and deities – need to be physically paired correctly to prevent a hidden snake pit (out of the frying pan...) from filling up with acid (into the fire!).

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That Was Close!

Congratulations! You've learned how best to include and create traps and hazards in your game, focusing on their role in the story, including mixing in riddles in puzzles as complimentary pieces.

In the section, you will learn about how to handle split parties, ever the curse of harried GMs.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [10 Ways To Use Traps To Enhance An Adventure, Part I](#), [10 Ways To Use Traps To Enhance An Adventure, Part II](#), [Combat Hazards and You](#), [Combat Hazards I](#) and [Combat Hazards II](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Global Encounter Elements](#), [Encounter Design: Podcast Tips](#), [What's Your Poison?](#), [True Encounter Difficulty: Lethality vs. Resource Management](#), [True Encounter Difficulty: Challenge Your Players](#) and [Higher Encounter Damage 101](#).

6.05 Scout Ahead? Never Split the Party!

*“A Scout is never taken by surprise; he knows exactly what to do when anything unexpected happens.”
– Robert Baden-Powell*

How to Scout Ahead Effectively

Next, you’ll learn how to scout ahead effectively. Want to make sure a stealthy monster gets the jump on the party, or returns to its master in one piece with critical information? Or maybe you’d like to show your players through friendly NPC suggestions or actions that scouting and splitting the party **can** sometimes work? You’ll learn how to do that today.

Why Scout Ahead?

We’ve seen excellent scouting scenes in movies or read about them in our favorite books. They add realism and a unique dramatic element to the story. Risk versus reward at its best.

Yet pulling off a successful scouting mission in RPGs is a dicier proposition. There are more moving parts in RPGs to manage, taking some luster away when compared to fiction and cinema’s many well-crafted and executed scouting scenes.

Let’s change that right now. You **can** create great scouting scenes and make them memorable and exciting part of your games. Here’s how.

3 Keys to Great Scouting

Good monsters and enemy NPC scouts have the same three critical qualities and goals as PC scouts:

- Natural mobility to more easily get in and out
- Equipment to do the job right
- A way to communicate critical information they learn back to their allies or masters

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Mobility

Good scouts start with above average mobility. Look for high agility or dexterity and high movement rates thanks to racial qualities or little or no heavy armor. Small and quick are even better.

Closely related to movement and quickness is stealth. Is the monster or NPC good at hiding – or at least good at making an effort to camouflage its skin, clothing, movements or location? For example, a glowing immortal from the heavens might have difficulty scouting and tracking a foe in the middle of a dark forest, no matter how large or small it is.

A final component of mobility is knowing the scout's surroundings. What are the best entry and exit points? Where and what features of the terrain or rooms provide cover for improved stealth?

Tools

Be ready for anything! A variety of gear for any situation is critical to being good scout.

Armor should be light and quiet, weapons should be easy to handle, quiet, and especially good at two ranges: long range and close quarters. Think knives, daggers, short swords plus bows and crossbows rather than noisy and messy hammers, maces or spears.

With weapons and armor taken care of, what other adventuring gear is essential for a good scout? Start with any rogue-friendly tools and equipment. Thieves' tools, lock picks, locks, manacles, bandages, chalk, caltrops, and spyglasses are essential.

Anything that enhances or masks mobility or stealth, helps tracking or helps gather information is what you're looking for.

For example, a scout might want to bring a few smoke bombs or camouflage kits to further decrease their chances of being caught or identified. Distractions can be helpful, as can additional face paint or clothing to blend into an otherwise well lit or mostly bare area. Better to have a sometimes-helpful piece of gear to scout effectively than not have it when you need it most.

Communication

Finally, good scouts know their communication options, including – and especially – their timing. When is the scout supposed to return to the party, its

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allies, or its master with the information he or she learned? How deep into enemy territory is too deep? When or what is the next rendezvous point, time or trigger?

Good scouts remember why they're out scouting in the first place:

- Carefully and discreetly gain as much information as possible about an unknown or dangerous location or enemies
- Return safe (and often fast) to their allies or masters to share this information. After all, compromised or dead scouts aren't much good, are they?

Almost Never Split the Party

We all know as gamers that splitting the party is often risky because it reduces party strength. But it also makes for a game management headache as the GM and players must split their attention back and forth.

Scouting, however, is as close as you can get to a party split without going all the way. Avoid the complications that come with true RPG party splits and mix in an occasional scouting scene using the concepts and methods above instead. Balance believability and dramatic tension with a smoothly running game. ***Almost*** never split the party.

Advanced Scout

Congratulations! You've learned what it takes to be a better NPC or PC scout. You've learned how and when to best include dramatic, believable and (hopefully!) successful scouting missions in your adventures.

So what's the point of all this combat? Story, that's what. And in the next section, we'll discuss how to add more story to your combats.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [Tips for Dealing with Stealthy PCs, Brawn and Stealth – Oil and Water?](#), [12 Steps to an Epic Campaign, Part 2](#), [Building & Playing A More Unique & Memorable Character](#) and [6 Methods or Making Dungeons More Interesting](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Strikers: Assassins vs. Bruisers](#), [Encounter Start: Distance Matters](#), [The Art of the Backup Weapon](#) and [Fight or Flight: Run Away!](#)

6.06 Story Matters: Add More Story

“We are the hero of our own story.” – Mary McCarthy

How to Add More Story

Next, you'll learn how to craft better stories and story-based missions in your adventures, creating richer options and twists for your party that go beyond swinging weapons or flinging spells in pitched battle.

Want more ways for the party to advance in your adventures besides destroying everything in sight? Want to turn mission success and failure on its head, creating rich story branches and unexpected conclusions? You'll learn how to do that today.

Why Add More Story?

When you add more story to missions or encounters, you focus on problem solving skills and actions that go beyond combat. You feature the ongoing story: motivations, visions, dreams, and the people and values that matter most to the PCs.

Sure, sometimes you just want to kill some orcs like RPG designer Robert J. Schwalb has often said in recent years. But sometimes, we want more than that, don't we? Much more.

The Story Web: Success vs. Failure

Great stories have vivid characters, twists and turns, stakes and consequences. Every fight, every word, every action has consequences. Often the ramifications are simple and clear: success or failure.

But what if we blur success and failure? That's often where the best stories come from.

Let's take a closer look at the three facets of the story web.

Success

Success is easy to picture and execute in-game. The story mission requires saving a prince imprisoned in a tower controlled by an evil necromancer.

Sure an undead dragon may block the way, but should the party slay the dragon in battle, that's just another +1 success along the road to total success.

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These direct, straightforward story missions are classics – mainly because they work. Everyone understands what's at stake, what they need to do, and what they need to overcome. The conditions of victory are crystal clear.

Failure

Continuing with our imprisoned noble story, it's just as easy to imagine the party failing spectacularly. Perhaps they're devoured or ripped apart by the dragon or necromancer before they even reach the noble.

But death is too easy, isn't it? Failure can still be clear yet more complex. So perhaps the party is captured by the necromancer and absorbed into his army – dead or alive, or... some curse or magic in between that they may be able to fight and escape from in the future.

Or perhaps the party does reach the prince, but then the dragon reaches out with its claw, grabs hold of the noble, and then, high above the chasms, simply lets go. Just when the party was about to rescue the prisoner, the noble was sent to his death right before the party's eyes.

Which naturally brings us to....

Partial Success & Partial Failure

Here's where it gets really interesting. Qualified successes and failures are story-rich, drama-intensifying opportunities. You've heard of the expression: a pyrrhic victory? Victory can come – but at a cost, sometimes great cost. **Success and setbacks don't have to be mutually exclusive occurrences.**

Think through this lens when it comes to your story missions and all related checks and dialogue. And then watch as your players' engagement in your stories rises to whole new heights.

For example, the prince is rescued by the party – but is not what he seems. Illusion magic masks the noble as one of the necromancer's countless minions. Where is the noble? Is he or she actually dead? Or worse – part of the necromancer's undead army?

The party may now fight the necromancer, and defeat him and his army...but may never learn the true fate of the prince. In fact, you decide as GM the necromancer will never divulge the truth during their climactic battle, no matter how hard the party tries.

Or perhaps the party does find clues and learns the truth: the noble and the necromancer were lovers long ago, before the necromancer became a monster. In

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anger and despair over being rejected a second time, the necromancer hurled the real prince into the abyss of the chasm days ago.

The noble's fake was created only as a lure. A lure that has helped the necromancer continue to enslave the fools who pursued it, allowing him to steadily build his army day after day, week after week.

Either way, the party wins...and loses, all at the same time. The necromancer may be destroyed, or negotiated with or otherwise dealt with by a more unusual party. But the prince is still lost. The story is richer and more engaging.

When to Fight, When Not to Fight, and When to Do Both

A great adventure includes all three of these opportunities. Variety is the spice of life – and great RPGs! Sprinkle in plenty of combat in your games and plenty of roleplaying encounters as well. Hack and slash and a good negotiation or otherwise tense conversations are all classic and entertaining RPG elements.

Now use what you've learned in this lesson to combine these types of encounters.

For example:

- Did what seemed like a simple negotiation between tribes turn into one side declaring war on the other due to an unintentional cultural insult during the celebratory meal?
- Did a battle between the party and a host of savage ogres suddenly stop when the first one was slain because its true nature as a cursed friend of the party was revealed?
- Perhaps the last tradition of signing a treaty requires a duel between champions (one or more of the PCs of course!) appointed by each faction? You know your playgroup would enjoy this little surprise!

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Happily Ever After?

Congratulations! You've learned how to add more story to your by creating a rich and memorable mix of success and failure to engage your players.

Resources

You'll find more at Roleplaying Tips: [7 Plot Twisting Tips, Part I](#), [Story Sparks Part I: New Ways To Begin An Adventure & Bring The PCs Together](#), [Story Sparks Part II: More Ways To Begin An Adventure & Bring The PCs Together](#), [How To Create Powerful Plot Hooks, Part I](#), [How To Create Powerful Plot Hooks, Part II](#) and [Use Logic Puzzles to Develop Plots and Stories](#).

And even more at Leonine Roar: [Encounter as Story: Tiny Encounters](#), [A Year Has Passed... How to Include the Passage of Time in Your Campaigns](#), [What is Atmosphere? Not What, But Whom](#), [Balance in All D&D Things: Rules and Atmosphere](#) and [D&D 5th Edition is Coming!](#)

Parting Shots

Last Shot from Johnn

Whew! There's been a ton of advice packed into these 52 lessons of Faster Combat. I don't know about you, but I can't possibly keep all this stuff top-of-mind at once. Between sessions, I go back and revisit sections. You should consider doing that too, until you've mastered them all.

I think my favorite lessons are the ones on CombatScapes and Combat Missions. I have proved many times during games that making the environment exciting makes the combat exciting (think back about the boring drow corridor story I told in the introduction). CombatScapes provide the perfect tool for hairy and crazy action sequences.

Combat Missions are tough to master because they work best when you integrate them with your plots. But when done well they bring a whole new dimension to your fights. Now the players are fighting with purpose and bigger stakes. Combat Missions add a double scoop of story to your fights.

The best way to learn is by doing. Keep running games and putting this advice into action. Hats off to you for the time, effort and passion you bring to this awesome hobby!

Last Shot from Tony

My players now understand how much time we can save one other by finding ways to be more efficient on our combat turns - without costing us the all-important story aspect of our games.

Lessons 1.06 and 3.09 talk about practical battle tactics, including team tactics. There are so many little things, so many basics you can start using today to make yourself a lightning quick and effective team player.

4.03 and 6.06 are story-focused lessons, and great storytelling is just as important to me as crisp, exciting combat. Those four lessons – and the ones related to them in our d6 Extras lessons, like 20 Cool Places to Fight – are ones I like to go back to often to re-inspire myself.

I want to thank Johnn Four for the opportunity to work on such a unique project – we're the first to create an online coaching course that teaches GMs how to master combat and thus master their game, and I couldn't be more appreciative or proud.

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I also want to thank our wonderful, creative members for all their participation and our conversations in the lesson activities. It's been a joy to see everyone's imagination and minds at work (or should I say at play?), sharpening their skills and talents for when they host their next game for their family and friends. Thank you!