Skill Challenges:

<Adapted from Travis Huston Dunlap’s Obsidian Skill Challenge system originally made for Dungeons & Dragons 4th edition.>

Skill Challenges are to be used when players attempt a task that is too complex or too important to have its success hinged on a single roll, yet not quite important enough to warrant being played out step-by-step or scene-by-scene.

The skill Challenge mechanic provides a structured way of turning such tasks into series of connected tests in which the whole party can contribute.

# Basic Structure:

Any Skill Challenge will have at least the following elements:

* **Intent:** What the players want out of this challenge and how do they plan od achieving that? What happens if they succeed? For that matter, what happens if they fail?
* **Type:** Based on the intent, the GM determines the type of the challenge (Physical, Mental, Social). The provided types aren’t clear cut, so a challenge may lie somewhere in between.
* **Mode:** The GM also determines the mode of the challenge (Solo, Cooperative, Complementary) based on what the players are trying to accomplish. This should be obvious most of the time.
* **Relevant Skills:** Based on the intent and type of challenge, the GM determines which skills can be used to overcome the challenge. That doesn’t mean that the players can’t try to use other skills if they’re creative enough and the table agrees it’s applicable.
* **Difficulty:** Based on the intent and the circumstances surrounding them, the GM determines the DC, Scope and Risk Factor of the challenged, which, combined, make up the overall difficulty of the challenge.

Once all that’s determined (despite its look, it shouldn’t take more than a minute), the challenge is executed in a series of segments until it succeeds or fails. One segment consists of the following steps:

* **Step 1:** Each player describes what their character is doing this round.
* **Step 2:** All players roll skill tests for their actions, if necessary.
* **Step 3:** Depending on the successes of the players’ tests and the mode of the challenge, we determine whether the segment overall is a success or failure. The challenge could end right here, or it could have more segments in which case we carry on from step 1.

Most of the time, the challenge will come down to “get 3 successful segments before you get 3 failed segments”. For a little more detail, read on.

# Challenge Types:

It was mentioned that there are 3 types of challenges – Physical, Mental and Social. Note that these types are more like GM guidelines for determining appropriate skills and consequences of success/failure than hard and fast rules.

## Physical Skill Challenges:

A physical challenge is often the most versatile of challenges. It can include subtle stealth or outrageous stunts. Players are encouraged to describe their actions in detail.

**Examples:** Scaling a great cliff, sneaking past a group of guards, and crossing a raging river are good Physical Challenges.

### Skills:

Skills that are usually relevant to physical challenges are:

* Armour
* Athletics
* Fortitude
* Melee Combat
* Acrobatics
* Ranged Combat
* Stealth
* Reflex
* Ride/Drive
* Artistic
* Skullduggery

**Exceptions:**

Social skills can sometimes be useful in physical challenges against other creatures. Using Sway to throw off a group of guards as you make your escape is a good example.

Knowledge skills can sometimes be useful in physical challenges that involve certain environments. Using Outdoorsman in a chase scene that involves the jungle is one example.

Generally, only allow this kind of out-of-the-box usage once per challenge per player.

### Consequences:

**Failure:** Failing a physical challenge usually involves physical fatigue and possibly great peril. The party might get wounded or forced into combat.

**Partial Victory:** The party has overcome the obstacle but may have created new obstacles in the process. For example, the party has to climb a rock wall in a way that leads to other hazardous terrain. Or the party completes the task but suffers fatigue.

**Victory:** The party overcomes the obstacle, fresh, strong and ready for the next one.

## Mental Skill Challenges:

A Mental challenge lets the players use their minds and senses to gain clues and find their way around the world. GMs can use Mental Challenges to describe large scales of scenery and give the players a chance to work out clues to obtain victory.

**Examples:** Finding your way through an old forest, determining the secret entrance to the underground city, solving the puzzle of El‐Karad, or finding the last ingredient for a ritual in an old library are examples of a Mental Challenge.

### Skills:

Skills that are usually relevant to mental challenges are:

* Perception
* Lore
* Outdoorsman
* Reason
* Science
* Artistic
* Composure
* Concentration
* First Aid
* Investigate
* Scrutiny
* Skullduggery
* Tinker
* Willpower

**Exceptions:**

Social skills can be useful to gain clues when other people are near the challenge site, such as using diplomacy to acquire help from the head librarian.

Generally, allow exceptional usage only once per challenge per person.

### Consequences:

**Failure:** Failing a mental challenge often means you arrive at a different location than the one you had intended, or that you obtain a piece of information… only to later find out it is incorrect.

**Partial Victory:** You gain some of the information you need but need more. You successfully navigate the terrain but are greatly delayed and it causes problems down the road.

**Victory:** You gain the information you need and solve the puzzle. You navigate the terrain quickly and easily, and perhaps find treasure along the way.

## Social Skill Challenges:

A social challenge generally involves talking and a large amount of role‐playing. Players are encouraged to use eloquent words, bold statements, and outright lies to win the day.

**Example:** Negotiations with the Duke, talking your way past the guards, and convincing an old hero to take up the cause once again are examples of Social Challenges.

### Skills:

Skills that are usually relevant to social challenges are:

* Perception
* Lore
* Reason
* Composure
* Concentration
* Scrutiny
* Command
* Consort
* Sway
* Willpower

**Exceptions:**

In some cases, some knowledge skills can be useful if they are particularly relevant to the challenge. Example: Using religion in a social challenge that involves a priest.

Generally, only allow this once per player per challenge.

### Consequences:

**Failure:** The party does not get their desired help, and often the other group’s opinion of the party has dropped. If the opposing group was already hostile, it may result in combat.

**Partial Victory:** The party gets what they want, but the other group wants something too. Good examples are a rare treasure, some key information, or a favor. This could lead to another quest.

**Victory:** The party gets what they want. In many cases the other side will feel greater respect (or awe) for the party.

# Challenge Mode:

The Mode of a Skill Challenge is less concerned with how the players are going to go about it, and more with the nature of the task at hand. With that in mind, we have several different types of modes:

## Solo:

Due to the nature of the challenge, one character must do it alone. Sometimes, for example during a surgery, other characters may help indirectly, but ultimately, it’s up to the doctor to patch the sorry patient up. Other times, for example, during an arm-wrestling match, you’re completely on your own.

**In Game Terms:**

* Choose one character to be the Challenge Leader.
* The whole segment of the challenge is represented by a single test of his.
* Other characters can Aid him, as per the usual rules.

## Complementary:

In challenges like these, the whole endeavor is successful even if only one of the characters is successful. When tracking bandits across a desert, it does not matter if one tracker misses them if the other spots them, or when deciphering an ancient script, if one adventurer translates it successfully, it does not matter if the others can’t understand it.

**In Game Terms:**

* Choose any number of characters to be the Challenge Leaders.
* The whole segment of the challenge will be successful if any of them succeed on their test.
* Other characters may Aid them as per the usual rules.

## Cooperative:

These types of challenges are often the most difficult – the party does not advance unless everyone does their part well. Consider climbing a mountain: Ignoring the option of leaving somebody behind, the party can’t press on unless they all reach the top. Same goes for sneaking into an enemy encampment. However, more experienced characters can help friends if they’re having a tough time.

**In Game Terms:**

* Everybody rolls the appropriate skill test and the challenge segment is successful only if all tests are successful.
* To represent the party members helping each other, each character gets an Advantage to his test if there is anyone in the party who rolls more dice than him (not counting dice gained from this rule).
* Players with extra successes may give them to less successful players. For purposes of skill advancement, this counts as one extra die for the receiver, but not as one die less for the giver.

# Challenge Difficulty:

This section will give basic guidelines that help the GM set the difficulty of the challenge. The overall difficulty consists of the Scope, DC and Risk Factor of the challenge.

## Determining DC:

In general, DC is determined the same as for singular Skill Tests.

The difficulty of a test does not vary according to the skill of its user. The difficulty is set, and the user must muster his skill and advantages to overcome it.

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| --- | --- |
| DC | Description |
| 1 | A simple act done with little thought |
| 2 | An act performed routinely at your job |
| 3 | An act you can accomplish if you concentrate |
| 4 | A risky act |
| 5 | An act that requires expertise |
| 6 | An act that requires a heroic effort |
| 7 | An improbable feat |
| 8 | An act requiring preternatural ability or a lot of help |
| 9 | An act deemed nearly impossible |
| 10 | A miracle |

In general, once the DC is determined it stands for the challenge, though various Disadvantages may increase it in some segments (and the GM shouldn’t forget to give out Advantages where appropriate).

**Exception:**

From time to time, the party will be opposed by other characters – former examples of arm-wrestling or negotiating are good examples of this. In that case, the DC won’t be static, but will rather be determined by the opposition’s tests (the wrestler tests his Athletics, the negotiator tests his Willpower etc.), separately for each segment.

When this is the case, simply meeting the opponent’s roll isn’t enough – you have to beat it. In the case of a tie, if it can’t be broken, the segment counts as null.

## Determining Scope:

We can loosely define the scope of the challenge as the number of steps required to complete it. Something like the granularity of the challenge.

It was mentioned that a standard challenge requires 3 successful segments before 3 failed ones to be successful on the whole. When the GM is changing the scope, it actually means that he’s shifting these numbers. It’s not recommended to reduce them below 2 or increase them to more than 5.

Requiring an equal amount of successes and failures (be it 2, 3, 4 or 5) before the challenge itself is successful or failed does not immediately it easer or harder. While longer challenges may tax the party’s resources, they reduce the impact of bad luck for an experienced, well-equipped party (maybe they’ll get unlucky once or twice – but 4 times?). On the other hand, a shorter challenge can be just the opposite: a single stroke of misfortune could ruin the whole endeavor, but it also represents a better opportunity if the party is counting on getting lucky a few times.

However, changing the number of required successes and failures disproportionally will change the difficulty of the challenge – getting 2 successes before 4 failures should, for obvious reasons, be much easier than getting 5 successes before 3 failures.

Unfortunately, there aren’t any guidelines for determining scope properly. It’s up to the GM to do it somewhat arbitrarily, based on how he wants to frame the scene.

## Determining the Risk Factor:

What.

# Result of the Challenge:

A completed skill challenge always results in one of the 4 possible outcomes:

* **Complete Success:** The party has completed all the goals of the challenge and is ready for a new adventure.
* **Partial Success:** The party has accomplished most of the goals, but there’s still more to be done, or there are loose ends to tie up, or a complication is introduced.
* **Partial Failure:** The party hasn’t achieved what it was aiming for, but at least something good has come of it.
* **Complete Failure:** The party has failed to acquire the goals of the challenge and/or has suffered a significant setback in the process.

A successful challenge with no failed segments is always a Complete Success. The GM may also grant the same result with one failed segment. Otherwise, a successful challenge is a Partial Success.

A failed challenge is a Complete Failure if there was at most one successful segment, and a Partial Failure otherwise.

# Other Considerations:

## Ignore ETP:

A player may take 1 point of Stress in order to choose one Skill that normally suffers from Encumbrance Test Penalty (Acrobatics, for example). For the rest of the skill challenge, he may ignore ETP for that skill. He may also take additional Stress to select more skills.

## Automatic Successes and Failures:

In some cases, a power (coming from an item, spell, species etc.) may replace a skill test entirely (such as using fly to replace an athletics test to jump). In these circumstances, the GM may reward players with automatic successes.

On the other hand, the GM also shouldn’t be afraid to “reward” players with automatic failures for doing something stupid.

## No Partials:

If the GM and the players agree that the nature of a skill challenge is very binary (you either do it or you don’t), they could say that all partial outcomes count as their complete counterparts instead.