

Chapter 8: Variant Rules

This section details a variety of options that DMs can implement that change the way the game functions at a typical table. Some of these are adjustments to classes or subclasses, aimed at helping improve balance, character identity, or general quality of life improvements. Others can affect more general rules, such as the rules for recharging hit dice after a long rest. A DM may incorporate as many options here as they wish, or they may choose not to implement any.

Artificer Weapon Masteries

Starting at level 2, Artificers can use the weapon mastery property of any weapon they are proficient with if it bears one of their infusions.

At level 3, Battle Smith Artificers can apply this ability to any magic weapon they are wielding, regardless of if it is infused. Armorer Artificers can add the following weapon masteries to their Arcane Armor: *Topple* for Thunder Gauntlets, *Push* for Lightning Gauntlets; an Armorer can use these weapon masteries, even if the weapons lack an infusion.

This rule adjusts Artificers to allow for parity with the weapon mastery feature in the 2024 rules; if you are not using those rules, this rule will not apply.

Barbarian Adjustment

This rule provides some slight adjustments to the Barbarian class.

If you are not playing with the revised 2024 rules, rage damage can now be applied to any strength-based melee damage roll while raging. *Under the 2024 rules, this change already exists, but for those not playing with them, this is a nice quality of life improvement.*

If you are playing with the revised 2024 rules, the Path of the Giant subclass for Barbarians is granted the Thrown Weapon fighting style at level 3. *Many of the features from the Path of the Giant subclass have been incorporated into the base Barbarian class in the revised rules, allowing other Barbarians to use thrown weapons as effectively as the subclass whose identity in part revolved around that. This change allows Giant Barbarians to still be the best thrown weapon Barbarians while not pushing their power into unbalanced levels.*

Additionally, for either version of the Barbarian, you gain proficiency with improvised weapons if you start as Barbarian at level 1. Multiclassing into Barbarian after level 1 does not grant this proficiency. *While this has little actual benefit mechanically, the concept of a raging Barbarian using whatever they have on hand to smash an enemy is incredibly thematic—of all the classes in D&D, Barbarians should have a way to lean into that kind of wild playstyle.*

Monk Buff (Base 5e, not 5.5e compatible)

This rule is based on the version of the rules introduced in 2014; the 2024 remastered ruleset already addresses this pain point, thereby eliminating the need for this rule.

Monks often feel weaker than other martial characters. One way to improve them is to implement the following changes:

Your hit die is now a d10, and your starting hit points are 10 + your Constitution modifier. This helps Monks survive a bit longer on the front lines, as they can feel somewhat fragile.

Increase your number of ki points at any given level by an amount equal to your Wisdom modifier. This helps address the number of ki points available, particularly at low levels. It also adds further reward for increasing your Wisdom score, an important ability for Monks that does not often see enough focus.

Increase your Martial Arts die by one size (d4->d6, d6->d8, and so on). This adds a small damage increase, as Monks often deal less damage than other characters at most levels. This can also be helped using the Agile Striker feat, found in Chapter 4, providing a boost similar to Sharpshooter or Great Weapon Master that Monks can use with their Martial Arts.

If you find that the previous buffs are still not enough, you can improve the 5th-level Stunning Strike feature. It becomes Paralyzing Strike, and as such, it paralyzes an enemy that fails. To balance the increased power, you can only use your Paralyzing Strike once per turn. This may not be a good change for every table, but it helps provide some improved combat abilities outside of strictly dealing damage.

Warlock Improvement (Base 5e, not 5.5e compatible)

This rule is based on the version of the rules introduced in 2014; the 2024 remastered ruleset already addresses this pain point, thereby eliminating the need for this rule.

Among full spellcasters, Warlocks have the most issues with having a limited number of spells known. All other classes have some other way to increase the base number of spells known, either through subclasses or the Wizard's spellbook. An easy way to address this is to allow Warlocks to automatically learn the spells provided to them by their patron. This doesn't lead to a noticeable improvement in their abilities and power, but it is a nice quality of life improvement for them. It also allows the Warlock to have access to their subclass-themed spells without having to decide whether they want to give up their Warlock spells, which may be more effective but less thematic.

1/3rd Caster Improvement (Base 5e, not 5.5e compatible)

This rule is based on the version of the rules introduced in 2014; the 2024 remastered ruleset already addresses this pain point, thereby eliminating the need for this rule.

Traditional 1/3rd casters like the Arcane Trickster and the Eldritch Knight can often feel somewhat clunky when trying to figure out their spellcasting. A way to smooth out the process is to remove the restriction on spells gained by level up, allowing them to learn any spell from their granted spell list, not just the ones belonging to their dedicated schools of magic.

If you are concerned about them becoming too strong, then you can instead allow the player to pick two schools of their choice to replace the two officially chosen schools. This would likely be unnecessary, as 1/3rd casters are inherently weaker with spellcasting than those whose classes are built with spellcasting in mind, but this option remains for those situations where a DM may decide it necessary, either mechanically or thematically.

Hit Dice Recharge Rate (Base 5e, not 5.5e compatible)

This rule is based on the version of the rules introduced in 2014; the 2024 remastered ruleset already addresses this pain point, thereby eliminating the need for this rule.

Using this rule, creatures regain all expended Hit Dice after completing a long rest.

In the core rules, you regain half your maximum Hit Dice when you finish a long rest; for instance, a 4th-level character regains 2 Hit Dice after finishing a long rest. This makes tracking Hit Dice more complicated, turns them a scarcer resource, and pushes a singular mechanic to function differently than most other mechanics in the game, which reset on a long rest. Many players and DM's aren't even aware that Hit Dice recharge in this way. A DM can choose to implement this rule if they do not like the version used in the core rules.

Shield Variants

(teehee, sneak peak for those paying close attention!)

This rule modifies the standard shield rules to add additional types of shields. In standard 5th edition D&D, there is only one kind of shield (outside of magic items). By adding additional shields as mundane equipment, it opens additional considerations and strategies for characters when deciding whether or not they should use a shield. The following variants of shields are added as mundane equipment, and standard magical variants (+1, +2, +3) are added for those that do not have them already.

Light shields. Light shields, known typically as bucklers, are smaller shields intended to be used alongside larger weapons or wielded as a lightweight alternative to larger shields. Proficiency with a light shield can be gained automatically by having proficiency with both light armor and either martial weapons or standard (medium) shields; if you have proficiency with heavy shields, you automatically gain proficiency with light shields as well. Bucklers (the standard light shield variant) cost [] gp and weigh [] lbs. Functionally, they differ from medium shields by []

Medium Shields. Medium shields are the standard shield currently in D&D. Whenever a feature mentions a shield without a type, it can be assumed to be referring to medium shields; at the DM's discretion, the effects of those features can be extended and potentially modified to apply to heavy and

light shields. Proficiency with both medium armor and martial weapons automatically grants proficiency with medium shields; gaining any shield proficiency also grants medium shield proficiency as well.

Heavy Shields. Heavy shields typically refer to tower shields; these are massive shields that provide substantially more cover than smaller, lighter variants. You can gain proficiency with heavy shields by having proficiency with both heavy armor and either martial weapons or standard (medium) shields; gaining proficiency with heavy shields automatically grants proficiency with light and medium shields. Tower shields (the standard heavy shield) cost [] gp and weight [] lbs. Functionally, they differ from medium shields by []

Spell Scroll Adjustment

Using this variant rule, spell scrolls can be written in a decipherable manner that allows any creature capable of reading the language (typically Common) to be able to read and cast the spell located within the spell scroll. If the player does not have access to the appropriate level of spell that the scroll is at, the character must succeed at a successful Arcana check equal to $10 + \text{the spell's level}$.

A character can be taught by someone who can cast a given spell how to use a scroll imbued with that particular spell, automatically succeeding on Arcana checks to cast that spell. For instance, if a Fighter was given a scroll of *Revivify*, a Cleric of at least 5th-level could instruct the Fighter on how to activate a scroll of *Revivify*, allowing the Fighter to succeed on Arcana checks to activate those kinds of scrolls.

In the core rules, spell scrolls can only be used by casters, and only if the given spell is on their spell list. They must then succeed on an ability check if the spell is too high level for them to cast. This limits the amount of scrolls a DM can give a party and provides more power to spellcasters. By using this rule, the power can be more evenly distributed in a party through allowing martial characters access to some spells via spell scrolls. It also allows a DM to provide characters with certain spells that they may not normally be able to access without specific magic items, which can help promote party diversity. Many tables feel it is necessary to have a Cleric or Druid at the table as a support player, but a party with consistent access to potions and scrolls of Revivify may feel free to play whatever they want instead of being pushed into filling a party role for the sake of maintaining a balanced party.

Unarmed Strikes as a Weapon

When any feature refers to using a melee weapon, you can substitute the melee weapon with an unarmed strike. This does not apply to any feature that mentions the use of specific weapons or weapons with a specific trait, unless the unarmed strike meets those requirements explicitly.

Natural weapons you may have are also considered as unarmed strikes, though you do not have to use your natural weapons when you make an unarmed strike.

Throughout the core rules—and likely this document as well—there are many features that refer to making an attack with a melee weapon, or making a melee attack with a weapon, or any other number of variations. Often, there is no discernable reason that an unarmed character could not use unarmed strikes for these same features, aside from semantics. This rule seeks to clarify and provide some consistency for these features, while also providing some nice quality of life improvements for those who decide to forgo using a traditional weapon.

