

# CAML Dungeon Master's Guide

## *From Notebook to Narrative*

### *Introduction*

*CAML, the Campaign Adventure Markup Language, offers a structured and modular approach to building and running tabletop RPG adventures. By replacing lengthy prose and boxed text, the CAML notebook introduces interconnected tools such as node networks, role cards, encounter gates, quest ladders, and session logs. These elements empower Dungeon Masters to orchestrate dynamic, player-driven stories while maintaining coherence and pacing.*

*This guide provides clear instructions for translating CAML structures into engaging table play. Here, you will learn to interpret node networks as spaces of narrative possibility, track evolving world-state through tags and consequences, gate encounters to balance player agency and order, apply core 5E mechanics with consistency, and improvise confidently while preserving the campaign's structure. CAML is designed to be flexible, reacting to player choices and evolving along with*

your campaign. Treat your notebook as a living system that grows with the adventure.

## *understanding CAML*

### *Nodes & Narrative Networks*

CAML adventures are constructed from nodes, each representing a distinct location, situation, or narrative state. These nodes are interconnected by directional links, illustrating how players can progress through the story. The network diagram should be viewed as a map of narrative possibilities rather than a geographical map. When players leave a node, consult its outgoing connections and use current tags and consequences to determine which paths are available.

At the table, treat each node as a scene kit, complete with sensory details, non-player characters (NPCs), tensions, and opportunities. When players take action, update the relevant tags and check for new available connections. If players attempt something unexpected, select the node that best fits the new circumstances and shift the narrative accordingly.

## *Tags & State Tracking*

Tags function as the campaign's state variables, describing important facts about the world such as *town\_on\_fire*, *faction\_A\_hostile*, *npc\_B\_trusts\_party*, or *artifact\_recovered*. Whenever players create meaningful change, update the tags to reflect the new state. These tags influence which encounters are triggered, NPC behavior, and open up new narrative branches.

Best practices include updating tags immediately when consequences occur, recording every change in the Session Log, and allowing tags to shape future scenes so that players feel their actions have real impact.

## *Gates & Encounters*

In CAML, encounters are gated and only trigger when specific conditions are met. Gates may check for required tags, node order, NPC attitudes, unresolved quest rungs, or environmental states. This system prevents narrative overload by presenting content only when it is appropriate. Content is not missed; instead, players determine when and how it appears.

## *NPC Roles*

NPCs are defined by roles such as ally, rival, questgiver, or antagonist. Each role card lists motivations, pressure points, likely reactions, consequences of death or alliance, and the influence of tags on behavior. NPCs are dynamic, and their attitudes and availability should be updated as tags change.

## *Quest Ladders*

Quests in CAML are structured as ladders, with each rung detailing what must happen, possible player approaches, and resulting tags or consequences. Players can climb these rungs in various ways or skip them entirely. If a rung is bypassed, apply any tags that would have been set and incorporate them into later encounters.

## *The Session Log*

The Session Log serves as the campaign's memory, recording node transitions, tag changes, NPC state changes, new story threads, and unresolved consequences. Consistent logging ensures continuity, supports improvisation, and keeps the game world reactive.

## *Core 5E Mechanics*

*This section summarizes the essential rules most often used during CAML adventures.*

### *Ability Scores & Modifiers*

*Ability modifiers are calculated as follows:*

*Scores of 10–11 are considered average. Higher scores provide bonuses, while lower scores result in penalties.*

### *Proficiency Bonus*

*Add proficiency when a character is trained in a skill, tool, weapon, or saving throw.*

### *Ability Checks*

*When a character attempts an uncertain action:*

- 1. Determine the relevant ability.*
- 2. Add proficiency if applicable.*
- 3. Roll a d20 and add modifiers.*
- 4. Compare the result to a Difficulty Class (DC).*

*Typical DCs:*

- 5 – very easy*
- 10 – easy*

- 15 – medium
- 20 – hard
- 25 – very hard
- 30 – nearly impossible

### *Attack Rolls*

Roll a d20 plus the ability modifier and proficiency if proficient.

- Natural 20: critical hit (double damage dice).
- Natural 1: automatic miss.

### *Advantage & Disadvantage*

Roll two d20 and take the higher roll for advantage or the lower roll for disadvantage. Multiple sources of advantage or disadvantage do not stack.

### *Saving Throws*

Saving throws are triggered by spells, traps, or sudden dangers.

Roll a d20 plus the relevant ability modifier and proficiency if applicable.

### *Damage & Healing*

- Roll damage dice and add the relevant ability modifier.

- Critical hits double all damage dice.
- Healing restores HP up to the maximum.

### *Combat Flow*

1. Determine surprise
2. Establish positions
3. Roll initiative
4. Take turns in order
5. Repeat rounds until resolved

Each round lasts approximately six seconds.

### *Actions in Combat*

Common actions include:

- Attack
- Cast a Spell
- Dash
- Disengage
- Dodge
- Help
- Hide
- Ready
- Search

- use an Object

### *Cover*

- Half cover: +2 AC and Dexterity saves
- Three-quarters cover: +5 AC and Dexterity saves
- Total cover: cannot be targeted directly

### *Running the Adventure*

#### *Preparing to Play*

- Read the node network to understand the narrative flow.
- Identify likely nodes and encounters.
- Review NPC role cards.
- Decide on the session's tone, such as mystery, heist, horror, or intrigue.
- Prepare blank pages for the session log.

#### *Opening the Session*

Begin with sensory cues from the location sheet and ask players what actions they take. Use ability checks to resolve uncertain actions and consult NPC role cards to determine motivations and reactions.

## *Moving Between Nodes*

1. When players leave a node, check outgoing connections.
2. Determine available connections based on current tags.
3. Narrate the transition.
4. Apply any encounter gates.

If players attempt to bypass a gate, set a Difficulty Class and adjudicate the outcome.

## *Adjudicating Rolls*

Apply core mechanics consistently. For contested checks, both sides roll. For group checks, at least half the group must succeed. Reward creative play with advantage or reduced DCs.

## *Tracking State*

Update tags whenever significant events occur. Record transitions, NPC changes, and consequences in the Session Log. Review logs between sessions to prepare the next starting state.

## *Improvising*

CAML is designed for flexibility to accommodate player surprises. Move encounters to later nodes if skipped, recontextualize scenes for new circumstances, add rungs to quest

*ladders when players devise new solutions, and update tags to reflect consequences.*

### *Ending a Session*

*Conclude on a cliffhanger or decision point. Record the current node, active tags, and unresolved story threads. Between sessions, update NPC off-screen actions using their role cards.*

### *Mathematics & Rolls*

- *Ability Check Formula:  $d20 + \text{ability modifier} + \text{proficiency (if applicable)}$*
- *Attack Roll Formula:  $d20 + \text{ability modifier} + \text{proficiency (if applicable)}$*
- *Saving Throw Formula:  $d20 + \text{ability modifier} + \text{proficiency (if applicable)}$*
- *Damage Formula: Damage dice + ability modifier (roll all dice twice on a critical hit)*

## *DM Tools & Tips*

### *Escalation & Tension*

use CAMEL pressure dials—political, environmental, or supernatural—to pace the story. Escalate pressure when players linger, fail, or ignore threats.

### *If Players Stall*

Introduce a time-sensitive gate, such as a rival faction taking action, a countdown beginning, an NPC escaping, or new information surfacing. CAMEL is tolerant of failure; setbacks simply open new narrative routes.

### *Handling Character Death*

If an NPC dies, consult their role card's "what breaks" sidebar and retag the world accordingly. If a player character dies, offer resurrection quests or introduce new characters connected to existing tags.

### *Adapting to Any Genre*

CAMEL is system-agnostic and can be adapted to various genres:

- Fantasy: use magical tags and arcane instability
- Horror: employ sanity tags and fear-based gates

- Heists: treat each obstacle as a node with multiple solutions

The underlying mechanics remain constant; only the flavor changes.

### *Inspiration & Reward*

Award inspiration for creativity, roleplay, or embracing flaws.

Inspiration allows a reroll with advantage. Reward meaningful engagement with loot, information, or new connections.