

**This booklet is a collection of notes intended to aid a dungeon master in their efforts to construct and run an engaging game of dungeons and dragons. It draws from a myriad of sources and consists of notes most applicable to the style of game I wish to run myself. That is, a game striving for gritty and epic fantasy. That is not to say I adopt the official D&D style of “gritty” wherein casters must rest a week to regain their spells. I aim instead for a tale like Steven Erikson’s Malazan Book of the Fallen: a setting still imaginary and a world filled with shades of grey and flawed characters. There are few true heroes and gallant knights in such a world; the party must rely instead on themselves and the established powers in order to advance.**

**General tips:**

1. **Plan wide – include multiple paths to explore and then plan thin.**
2. **Roleplaying shall ever take precedence over adventuring.**
3. **Address the characters, not the players.**
4. **Be dramatic in the telling of events, and give chances to recover from failings.**
5. **Milk everything that your players give you and ensure they drive the story.**
6. **Game type is important: decide promptly upon roleplaying/heavy combat/open world/strict plot.**
7. **Drive the story with greed > curiosity > fear.**
8. **Good NPCs have motivations, be realistic and empathise with them.**
9. **Traps need to be interesting.**
10. **What is the single sentence for this campaign or quest?**
11. **Make reference to the Adventure and Encounter checklists.**
12. **Establish a ritual that encourages creativity.**
13. **In combat tell one person it's their turn as well as whomever is next.**
14. **Small skill challenges are fun and focused.**
15. **If using music, think about having PCs choose a theme song. When it plays, they act next and gain an advantage (i.e. extra action, crit. range 19-20, etc.).**
16. **Keep a cheat sheet to hand.**
17. **Reskinning is a great tool, NPCs, monsters and even environments.**
18. **Level characters when it makes sense, use the milestone variant for experience.**
19. **Make good use of filtered random tables.**

**DM Principles:**

***Rule 0:*** The purpose of the game is for everyone at the table (Including the DM) to have fun.

***Rule 1:*** Everyone should be on the same page about what they want out of the game before anyone rolls any dice. Learn what your characters prefer, RP or Combat & if there's a general preference with them lean that way in your games. Set expectations!

***Rule 2:*** Don't break the social contract. If the Dwarf's response to the King's greeting is to draw his hammer and attack him, to the horrified gasps and groans and insults of the other players, that's a player breaking the previous rules.

***Rule 3:*** Stamp out toxic behaviour immediately and in no uncertain terms. The number one cause of D&D games going bad is because someone at the table is a poison pill and is breaking rule zero.

***Rule 4:*** Always be willing to throw out your carefully laid plans and just go with the flow of the game.

**Clarity of Mechanics:**

* A solid understanding of all the classes and how they function is a must.
* Know what items do.
* Know what feats do and how they function.
* Check character sheets.
* Bottom of Form
* Know what the players should not roll for. NPC deception > PC insight. If the player asks to use insight that's when you roll the NPC's bluff behind the screen. The player increases insight to increase their passive score.

**Checklists:**

***Adventure Checklist:***

1. Outline the adventure.
2. Use decision forks.
3. On average, a 4 hour game will consist of 5 main segments.
4. Build combat and non-combat encounters that are detailed, purposeful and interesting.
5. Manage experience and any loot gained.
6. Prepare NPCs: note their key traits (drivers, flaws, race, etc.).
7. Prepare tokens/stat blocks, separated by encounter.
8. Plan your skill challenges, considering the skills players might use: note DC and bonuses.
9. Have read-aloud text to describe the environment PCs will experience.
10. Prepare quest cards: physical reminder of current quests, possible hand-outs.
11. Design puzzles: a break from standard mechanics.
12. Prepare music: proper use can be immersive and memorable.
13. Prepare table materials: any extras, hand-outs, marking rings, etc.

***Encounter Checklist:***

1. The map: what does the battle environment look like?
2. Monsters: how are they related to the map?
3. Traps and hazards: what threatens the PCs? Do the threats make sense with the above?
4. Evolving terrain and conditions: change the environment during a fight if it makes sense.
5. The “out”: what alternative victory conditions exists?

***Building Exciting Maps for PCs:***

1. Build physically interesting environments.
2. Write remarkable read-aloud text: imagine the scene before combat details.
3. Include “fantastic terrain”: terrain or objects that are dangerous or interesting for creatures.
4. Find inspiration in all things, be it movies, books or art.

**Quick Guide to Spellcasting:**

Almost everybody has the option to cast spells, not just the classics like Clerics and Wizards. Fighters and Rogues can get a spell list if they pick the option to do so at the appropriate levels. There are even feats to pick up cantrips and rituals if you want just a touch of spellcasting to your character. Even if you don’t go down a path with a spell list, other character options get abilities that work like spells. That may be a part of your racial abilities or part of the character class.

**Barbarians** don’t cast spells. You’ll just have to settle for raging.

**Bards**, **Rogue** Arcane Tricksters, and **Fighter** Eldritch Knights have a limited number of spells, which are all always prepared, and they have a certain number of slots per level to cast them.

**Clerics** have all the cleric spells to choose from when deciding what to prepare, plus their domain spells which they always have prepared, with a limited number of spell slots per level to cast them.

**Druids** operate similarly to Clerics, but use circles instead of domains.

**Paladins** cast spells like a Cleric.

**Rangers** cast spells like Druids.

**Sorcerers** have a limited number of spells, which are all always prepared, and they have a certain number of slots per level to cast them. They also have spell points to regain spells or use other abilities, and they can burn spell slots to gain more spell points.

**Warlocks** have a limited number of spells, which are all always prepared, and a limited number of slots (all cast at the highest level). Warlocks regain spell slots during either a short or long rest. They also are likely to get a number of other spells from their pacts, invocations, and so on.

**Wizards** have a limited number of spells in their spellbook, from which they prepare which spells they have access to for the day, and they have a certain number of slots per level to cast them.

***Concentration is Important:***

* You can only concentrate on one spell at a time.
* Whenever you take damage while concentrating on a spell, you must make a Constitution saving throw to maintain concentration. DC equals 10 or half the damage taken, whichever is highest. Damage from multiple sources requires a separate saving throw for each source of damage.

***Spell Attack vs. Spell Saving Throw:***

* **Spell attacks** **are rolled by** the caster, using their spell attack bonus against the target’s AC. Spell attack modifier = your proficiency bonus + your CHA/INT/WIS modifier. You can benefit from Advantage and you can crit.
* **Saving throws** **are rolled by the target**, who is trying to beat your saving throw difficulty class number. For spells that require a saving throw, then the save DC is 8 plus your spell casting ability modifier (CHA/INT/WIS) plus proficiency bonus (varies according to PC level).

**Villainous Tactics:**

***Numerous, Non-Lethal Attacks:***

* Use minions to destroy weaker allies (i.e. those 0 level villagers the characters seem to love so much).
* Attack the henchmen so the party must carry its own stuff.
* Prevent the PCs from getting rest (and therefore healing) at night (e.g., strange noises, ambushes, forest fires).
* Have minions target equipment, such as sundering weapons and armour and breaking potions
* Use of the Bestow Curse spell.

***Expected Surprise Attacks:***

* Bribe immoral villagers and friends to betray the PCs.
* Spread nasty rumours about the characters so they cannot convalesce in nearby villages or towns (e.g., they carry the plague, murderous troublemakers, seeking young daughters for wives).
* Send sneaky minions to poison the PCs’ food.
* Endear herself to the PCs’ friends and family.
* Planting cursed magic items where the PCs will find them and think they’ve won the jackpot.

***Make the PCs Do Things They Don’t Want To:***

* Block paths and roads with fallen trees.
* Flood the PCs’ village by damming a nearby river.
* Make the PCs check all food and provisions for tampering.
* Save the Princess or the innkeeper’s daughter – but not able to do both.

***Create an Annoying Itch Afterwards:***

* Imagine how you would feel if your worst enemy performed some heroic deed and saved the day, and all you heard afterwards is how “so and so is such a great person” and how “so and so is so brave and beautiful”?
* What would you do if you found your trusty steed has been permanently marked or branded with insults about you?
* It wouldn’t take much for my villain to cast a single spell and shape the stone of a local mountain into a likeness of herself to remind everybody how great she is.

**NPC Tactics:**

***Avoid Contractions:***

* It can be more immersive and dramatic to say “it is your misfortune”, “do not think to presume” and “you cannot understand my woe” than “it’s”, “don’t” and “can’t”.

***Avoid Swearing:***

* Decide what the “bad words” are in your world and consciously use those instead. Even if they sound funny at first, everyone will get used to them – and by Crom they’re much better flavour-wise than using modern ones!

***It is Arrogant to Assume:***

* When playing arrogant NPCs start making assumptions! For example, the classic assumption is big and strong people are stupid.

***Um, a Classic Error:***

* Avoid all the stalling and hesitation words: um, so, like, you know, ah... Everyone uses these words, but in the game they dilute the great effects of your parley (just like they impair effective speaking in public).

***Pose Choices and Problems Instead of Making Decisions:***

* Instead of reaching a decision quickly and decisively, they flounder, worry about all the bad things that could go wrong with any choice and would rather suggest more choices than just choose.

**Useful Tools:**

***5 Room Dungeons:*** whenever you make a dungeon, give it 5 notable features.

1. ***A guardian.*** It could be a difficult enemy, finding the hidden door, or negotiating passage.
2. ***A puzzle or role-playing opportunity.*** This one is designed to bring every character in; they need to debate trying to free prisoners or figuring out a way to climb a 50 foot high chimney.
3. ***Setback/Unexpected twist.*** The guide betrays the party, they accidentally set off the alarm system, or an earth quake shook the foundation and now the buildings coming down or the party simply got caught by surprise by the person they were following.
4. ***Fight!*** This is the last room, the lich fight, the stopping the cultists from summoning the mad god fight, the 'I've been taken prisoner by this warlord and now he's about to kill me' fight. It doesn't always have to be combat, it could be a political fight, or a negotiation or sneaking around the kings private chambers trying not to wake him up. It's designed to be intense.
5. ***Treasure… or another twist!*** Information, spells, gold, weapons, honour, or even another betrayal. Whatever your evil DM heart desires.

**Example scenario:**

“The party is traveling along a road that sees little traction. They've been tasked to rendezvous with the Wizard Pendragon and bring him to the king. On the way the party comes across a large ravine guarded by a bridge troll. He ensures the bridge is taken care of and in return is paid by the capitol. This troll hasn't been paid in weeks and refuses the players passage unless he is paid his dues (15g each). Next, the party will come across a wagon of the dead. With proper investigation, the party can rationalize that they were attacked by Wild Elves, which is uncommon in this region. The wagon is looted but they only took provisions, horses and supplies, the gold remains. After this, the party notices the weather, which has been dreary all day, start to take a turn for the worse. There should be a town up ahead about an hour, or they can rest hear. If they go to the town, they'll notice it's suffered the same fate as the wagon, all pardon for Wizard Pendragon's tower. Before they can get to the tower, they'll be set upon by a wild elf raiding party. If they succeed they should have no more trouble until they get to Pendragon."

***3 Sense Descriptors:*** whenever you describe something important, using 3 different senses.

"You spot the fortress the goblin informant told you about**. It looks centuries old**, fallen into disrepair long, long ago. You can't see it, but **you can hear the unmistakable sound of goblins’ grunts** and screams that they call a language. **You smell smoke** and burning meat from somewhere inside.”

***Or…*** "The Elven blacksmith hands you the newly crafted sword. It’s silver with white and red designs, and a green jewel in the base by the handle. The metal is **cold to the touch** and numbs your fingers when you press them against the blade edge. **You swing it through the air** and **you hear a hum** not dissimilar to a tuning fork."

**Break each adventure hook into the following categories:**

***A one sentence pitch:*** Either a question or declaration: “What happened to x…” or “Find x…” Enough to guide you if the players grab onto it.

***Challenges:*** Monsters, environment. What main problem would the PCs have to overcome?

***Interested parties:*** Potential allies and enemies. NPCs that could be involved in this hook (one sentence describing interest).

***Outcomes:*** How will the story move forward if the PCs succeed or fail?

***Potential trouble:*** What complications might arise? Ethical and moral grey areas, tough decisions, lesser of two evils, etc.

***Opposition’s agenda:*** What are the goals of NPCs that are opposed to the PCs?

**Example scenario:**

The PCs have completed a series of 4 game sessions:

* Half-orc paladin hired to escort tiefling bard to sing a funeral dirge at a drow settlement.
* Tiefling bard unwittingly opened a hellhole at the bottom of drow burial mound.
* Two formerly dead party members get resurrected in the chaos.
* Party rallied around nearby flying fortress where orcs and undead fought for control.
* Recently resurrected PC sorcerer is part-time guardian for the Prince of Shadows’ vaults. Got whisked from party at an unfortunate time.
* Party defeated keep’s undead leader, handed control over to Orc Lord troops.
* Party secured artefact that can protect a whole region against the fortress.
* Party (minus sorcerer) teleported onto the back of a Koru Behemoth emerging from water.
* Amnesic sorcerer found in a halfling village on back of the Behemoth… she’s showing multiple, strange lacerations.

***Hook #1 The Monstrous Menace:***

1. Pitch: What the hell happened to the sorcerer and where do the lacerations come from?
2. Challenge: Investigate wounds and surroundings. Discover sorcerer was assaulted by something from another world, and it’s nearby.
3. Interested parties: Prince of Shadows (vault), Elf Queen (what’s in the vault?) or High Druid (protect the natural world from beyond).
4. Outcome: PCs discover Behemoths are used as secure, mobile vaults. PCs discover Behemoth is “infected”.
5. Potential trouble: PCs manage to take something from vault they aren’t supposed to, which means dealing with the Princes’ ire.
6. Opposition’s agenda: If vault is opened, faction attacks to get something they want! If vault left alone, faction attacks the village (see Hook #4).

***Hook #2 What About the Keep?***

1. Pitch: Should we inform someone in power about the existence of Skullforge Keep?
2. Challenge: Influence someone powerful to do something about it before bad things happens.
3. Interested Parties: Archmage (Magical menace to Empire), The Three (A source of power?), Emperor (Military menace of orcs), Orc Lord (New toy is MINE).
4. Outcome: Expeditionary force mounted, PCs invited in overpowered environment again.
5. Potential Trouble: Diplomatic/political incident. PCs caught as scapegoats.
6. Bad Guy Agenda: Lich King and Orc Lord have agents that don’t want this to become public knowledge.

***Hook #3 Hell’s Bells!***

1. Pitch: Inform someone about the Hellgate forming under the Drow settlement.
2. Challenge: Get anyone except the Crusader to care.
3. Interested Parties: Diaboless, Crusader, Elf Queen, Priestess.
4. Outcomes: PCs asked to go back and purify/secure the site.
5. Potential Trouble: Multiple factions fighting. Drow civilians caught in the middle, Diabolist’s plan glimpsed at.
6. Bad Guy Agenda: Diabolist, Crusader, Elf Queen or Lich King agents clash for control or safeguard of area.

***Hook #4 Tentacles and Colons:***

This hook was default if PCs didn’t settle on another.

1. Pitch: Horrors raid the village to kidnap halflings, leaving strange gems behind.
2. Challenge: Find where the monsters come from, identify weird gems.
3. Interested Parties: The Archmage (menaces from beyond), The High Druid (something’s screwing with the Behemoths) The Prince of Shadows (Gems? Traders from another world?).
4. Outcomes: PCs discover an incomprehensible strange slave-for-alien-gems trading ring.
5. Potential Trouble: Characters must explore some very gruesome elements of Behemoth biology.
6. Bad Guy Agenda: Too alien to understand (actually, I’m keeping this one secret as it’s a huge reveal in my game).

**Adventure Preparation:**

***Title:*** One-glance summary of the whole stack. It should list one liners for each key element of the adventure.

***Summary:*** This is the adventure’s elevator pitch and should provide a synopsis of what’s going on and what the characters are likely to accomplish.

***Background:*** The context of the adventure. The dungeon’s history, the local political situation, or about that war brewing in the region.

***Factions:*** Aim for 3 factions. If the adventure is a dungeon crawl or set in the wilderness, factions are likely to be the various sentient creatures that work together for the same goals, like goblins, kobolds, drow, or even beholders with their mind flayer servants. In urban settings or civilized lands, factions can be groups of humanoids (and allies) bound together by common purpose. Guilds, political factions, noble houses, anything goes. Break down each faction card as follows:

1. Agenda: What the faction seeks to do in the time frame of the adventure.
2. Leader: Name and short one liner of the faction leader.
3. What it wants: Beyond or complimentary to the faction’s agenda, what it lacks/needs.
4. What it can offer: things the players or other factions may find useful.

***The Main Villain:*** This is where you describe them.

1. Name: A villain needs to be named.
2. Plan: What are they trying to accomplish?
3. Outlook: The villain’s main personality trait.
4. What they want: Usually related to the plan, but complex villains may want something else.
5. What it fears: This is great roleplaying and improvisation fuel.
6. Stats: Use the back of the card or put a reference to where the stats can be found.

***Big Threats:*** We’re talking wandering monsters, dragons, hordes of undead, etc. Anything that’s dangerous regardless of the rest of the adventure.

***Interesting Locales:*** refer to appendices for “1000 of…”

***Events:*** You could template cards as such:

1. Setup: Short description of what’s happening.
2. People: Who is present?
3. Conflict: A scene worth running requires conflict, combat or not.
4. Likely outcomes: Where things may go from here.