How to Run Chases in DnD 5e

Rules from the Dungeon Master's Guide

There are rules for chases in the Dungeon Masters Guide starting on page 252. They go over how to begin a chase, how to run a chase, how to end a chase, and how to complicate a chase to make it more interesting. These rules are a little bare and you need some considerations when using them. This document hopes to lay out an alternative rule system for chases, that is based off those DMG rules.

Beginning a Chase

Most chases will begin when a creature, known as the **quarry**, tries to run away from another creature known as the **pursuer**. Importantly, the quarry's location is known by the pursuer when the chase starts, otherwise it is not a chase, it is a search.

A quarry may also be trying to run to a **safe haven,** which can protect them from the pursuer. Not all chases have one.

An obvious example of a chase is when a monster tries to flee combat, but a player character follows it, in hopes of landing a final blow. This is a much different situation than if a player character is invisible, makes a bunch of noise, and guards start looking for them.

Setting Up a Chase

Chases, much like combat, have some required setup before they can start running.

- Chase Initiative
- Chase Visual Aid *(Optional, but very useful)*
- Quarry-Pursuer Starting Distances

Chase Initiative

Chase initiative is similar to combat initiative. For combat initiative, which is all about who has the fast hands and quickest reflexes, each participant makes a Dexterity check, and the initiative order is made based on the results.

For chase initiative, which is all about who can sustain a high speed and quickly overcome physical obstacles, **each participant makes a Strength (Athletics) check**, and the initiative order is made based on the results.

You may choose a different check to act as the chase initiative roll for your game. An athletics check is simply what makes the most sense to me.

> **Alternative: Simple Initiative**
>
> If you have multiple pursuers and quarries, chase initiative can be a group roll, to minimize the number of initiatives.
>
> Or instead of chase initiative being determined by an athletics check, it can be determined by a creature's speed. If creatures have the same speed, the tie is determined by their Strength score.

Chase Visual Aid

While everyone rolls their chase initiative, you may think to draw a map for the chase. But this can quickly become a headache for you, due to most maps being the size of rooms, or a single city block, not a football field that a chase might need.

So instead of a map, you should draw a number line. Ohh yeah. A line with numbers on it.

Chases are tracked on a **number line**. The quarry and the pursuer each get their own row on the number line. There can be multiple rows for the quarry or pursuer, if their are multiple participants in either group. The number line also has a row for complications. See "Chase Complications" for more details. As the quarry and pursuer move round by round (r1, r2, r3, etc.), it is tracked on the number line.

Chase Number Line

Location (Feet)
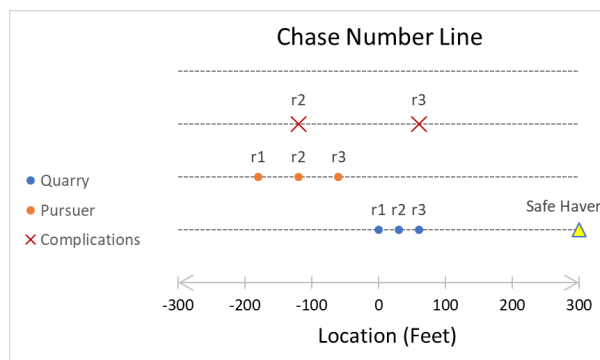
For the example number line above, there is only one quarry and one pursuer. The quarry has a safe haven it is trying to reach to escape the pursuer. The quarry has a movement speed of 30 feet, the pursuer 60 feet. A complication occurred to the pursuer on round 2, and to the quarry on round 3.

Starting Distances

The quarry and pursuer start a chase a certain distance away from each other. This distance is up to you and depends on the chase you are running. If using a chase number line, the quarry should start at location 0, and the pursuer at the location matching its distance from the quarry. This is a negative position, to indicate the pursuer is behind the quarry. If applicable, the quarry's safe haven location should be noted on the number line. This is a positive position, to indicate it is ahead of the quarry. This, along with knowing the movement speeds of the quarry and the pursuer, will give you a rough estimate how many rounds this chase can last.

> **Alternative: Simple Distancing**
>
> The distance between the quarry and pursuer is on a 1 to 10 scale, starting the chase at a distance of 1d6 + 4. If the pursuer is faster than the quarry, the distance is reduced by 1 each round. If the quarry is faster, it is increased by 1 each round.

Running a Chase

Once the chase starts you can run it just like a combat, but with one key difference.

Movement During a Chase

In combat, it is fine for a character to run up to a wolf, hit it with an attack, and then for the wolf on its turn to move 30 feet away. But when everyone is running in the same direction, you don't want people getting super close together on one turn, then super far apart on the next, all while moving at the same pace. It doesn't feel right and can mess up a lot of the ranged based effects like spells and weapon attacks.

Instead, chase participants can act as normal on their turn, but cannot move until the end of the round. Then **at the end of the round all chase participants move forward their full movement speed simultaneously!**

This stops characters from rubber banding like in a glitchy video game turn to turn.

Spells similar to teleport, such as misty step, can be resolved on the turn they were cast, instead of at the end of the round, due to them being instantaneous movement.

Dashing During a Chase

If a chase participant takes the dash action on their turn, that movement will be included in their end of round movement.

Taken from the DMG:

> ### Dashing
>
> During the chase, a participant can freely use the Dash action a number of times equal to 3 + its Constitution modifier. Each additional Dash action it takes during the chase requires the creature to succeed on a DC 10 Constitution check" important to note check not save "at the end of its turn or gain one level of exhaustion.

You may supplement the flat DC 10 Constitution check of the above rule with a mounting DC Constitution check. Instead of the DC being 10, the **DC is 10 + 2 for every additional dash a chase participant makes**.

> ### Alternative: Simple Dashing
>
> During a chase a chase participant can Dash a number of times equal to 3 + it's Constitution modifier.
>
> If using Simple Distancing, the pursuer decreases the distance between themselves and the quarry by 1 every time they dash.
>
> The quarry increases the distance between themselves and the pursuer by 1 every time they dash.
>
> If both the pursuer and quarry dash on any given round, make a contested Strength (Athletics) check. If the pursuer wins, the distance between themselves and the quarry is decreased by 1. If the quarry wins, the distance between themselves and the pursuer is increased by 1.

Random Complications

Without complicaitons, a chase is just a bunch of people, in order, running.

A random complication is an obstacle that arises during the chase that needs to be overcome. The nature of the random complication will depend on where the chase happens. See "Random Complication Tables" for an example table.

Only one random complication can occur in a round, either at the start of the quarry's turn, or at the start of the lead pursuer's turn.

A complication always occurs in any given round, unless the chase is already too intense for a complication to be added. At the start of the quarry's turn, roll on the random complication table to see if a complication occurs. If one does not occur, a complication automatically occurs at the start of the lead pursuer's turn.

A complication does not disappear once someone has overcome it, unless it was an instantaneous effect. This means complications the quarry overcomes, now become obstacles the pursuers have to deal with, and complications the lead pursuer survives are still a threat to all the pursuers behind them. To keep track of this, simply mark on your number line the location the complication occurred and keep track of any participants that pass through that location. You may rule it is easier to get past a complication once someone else has run through it.

Proactive Complications

The quarry can use their action to make a complication for the pursuer at their current location, such as knocking over a cart of pots or releasing caged animals. It is up to you as the DM to decide, what is required to over come this complication and what the consequences of failing to overcome it are. Some example effects are:

- Failing a check to climb over a complication causes the target to move only half their movement speed at the end of the round.
- Failing a check to smash through a complication causes the target to not move at the end of the round.
- Failing a save to avoid a complication causes the target to take damage.

> ### Alternative: Simple Complications
>
> A target that fails a complication does not move at the end of the round.
>
> If using Simple Distancing, a quarry that fails to overcome a complication causes the distance between themselves and the pursuer to decrease by 1. A pursuer that fails to overcome a complication causes the distance between themselves and the quarry to increase by 1.

Random Complication Tables

The complication tables in the DMG on page 254 can be used in a chase, but they do not perfectly align with the mechanics laid out in these rules. Use with caution.

Chase Over Ice Complications

This table assumes the chase occurs on top of a river covered in ice. If anyone falls into the icy water, they should immediately make a DC 10 Constitution saving throw, taking a point of exhaustion on a failed save.

d20	Complication
1	The ice is slick here. Anyone that moves through this area must make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw or slip, reducing their speed by half until the start of the next round.
2	The ice is thin here. Anyone that moves through this area causes the ice to crack underneath them. They must use the dash action on their turn, or risk falling into the bone chilling water.
3	A cold wind blasts either the pursuer or quarry! The target must make a DC 10 Constitution save or become blinded until the start of the next round as their eyes water.
4	Wide cracks in the ice are just ahead! Anyone that moves through this area must make a DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check, or fall into the water.
5	This area is covered in snow. It counts as difficult terrain for anyone that moves through it on foot.
6	The ice here has detached from the rest and is a floating island! Anyone that moves through this area must make a DC 10 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check or fall into the water.
7	Wind has thrown shards of ice into the air! Everyone in the chase must make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw, or take 1d4 of piercing damage and 1d4 of cold damage as shards of ice stab into them.
8	There is a hole in the ice here. Anyone that moves through this area that has a passive Wisdom (Perception) less than 10 falls into the hole, reducing their speed by half until the start of the next round.
9	An ice elemental roams this area. The first creature each round that moves through this area must contest the elemental's grapple check or become grappled by the elemental.
10	An ice mephit has appeared here! The first creature each round that moves through this area is attacked by the ice mephit.
11-20	No complication

Enjoy!

From the Green DM

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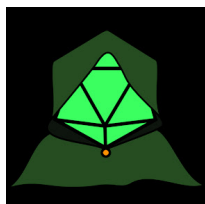
Ending a Chase

There are at least four ways a chase can end:

- The quarry stops, thus being immediately caught.
- The pursuer stops, thus the quarry immediately escapes.
- If either party dies, the chase ends.
- The quarry escapes, either by reaching a safe heaven or slipping into hiding.
- The pursuers catch up to the quarry and capture them

The first three endings are self explanatory, though the quarry or pursuer reaching 5 levels of exhaustion is an obvious way for them to occur.

The Quarry Escaping

If you had a **safe haven for the quarry** laid out from the beginning of the chase, reaching it will most likely mean they are safe and the chase is over. That does not mean they are safe forever, just the moment. Ducking into a gang hideout doesn't mean the pursuers can never catch the quarry, it just means they now have a mini dungeon to explore. The chase is over, but perhaps a combat or exploration encounter begins.

As for the quarry escaping by slipping into hiding, it's a gamble. **Instead of running for a turn, they need to use their movement and action to try to hide.** This check automatically fails if they are in sight of the lead pursuer. A Dexterity (Stealth) check can work for this, but if the quarry is trying to blend into a crowd, a Charisma (Stealth) check is a good alternative. That check is then compared to the passive Wisdom (Perception) of the lead pursuer, or several pursuers if they are all close to the lead pursuer. Again, even if the quarry successfully hides, that does not mean the pursuers give up completely. It just means the chase is over. A skill challenge may start, where the quarry tries to find a good place to bunker down until the pursuers give up their search.

The Quarry is Captured

This is straight forward. If the pursuer can get close enough to the quarry to grapple them, cast the *hold person* spell, or reduce their speed to 0 in some way, the quarry is captured. A struggle might commence, and the quarry might get free. This would start another chase, though one that will most likely be much shorter.

Alternative: Simple Endings

When the pursuer gets within 5 feet of the quarry, the quarry is captured. If the distance between the quarry and the pursuer is ever more than 5 times the pursuers speed, the quarry escapes. This only works for chases that start with the quarry and pursuer close together.

If using Simple Distancing, if the distance between the quarry and the pursuer reaches 10, the quarry escapes. If the distance is reduced to 1, the quarry is captured. The quarry can attempt to slip into hiding when the distance between themselves and the pursuer is 7 or more.