Writing Style

Word Usage

* **Drop the *s*.** Don’t let “towards,” “backwards,” and similar words creep into your narration; use “toward” and so forth.
* **Contractions.** Limit or avoid the use of contractions that end in *s*, such as “who’s” and “he’s,” because the meaning is not always immediately clear.
* **Half.** Make sure that “one-half” does not appear in your work unless you’re referring specifically to the fraction. In other cases, “half” is sufficient.

D&Details

Special requirements apply to the language of the D&D game. To learn how we do things, it’s essential for any writer or editor to be familiar with how the rules in the *Player’s Handbook*, *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, and *Monster Manual* are phrased. Some of the nuances that often get overlooked are summarized here.

* **Class Features.** Capitalize a noun or a noun phrase when it is used as the name of a class feature.
* **Traits.** Similarly, capitalize a noun or a noun phrase when it is used as the name of a racial trait or a trait of a monster.
* **Bold Monsters.** If you’re writing adventure material that relies on monster stat blocks, be sure that boldface is properly applied (along with a cross-reference, when needed) where the reference to the stat block appears.
* **Spell vs. Effect.** If you use the same words to identify a spell and describe its effect, use italic only for the spell name. (The casting of a *fireball* spell produces a fireball.)
* **Plane Speaking.** Check any mentions of planes of existence for the proper preposition. Something is **on** a plane whose name includes “Plane” (such as the Plane of Air), but **in** a plane whose name does not include the word (such as the Abyss).
* **Proficiency.** Locate all uses of “proficient” or “proficiency” in a game-rule context and be sure each has the proper preposition. Someone is proficient **in** a skill, a language, or some other capability, but **with** a tool, a weapon, or some other object.
* **Make it So.** Double-check all rules text and stat blocks where an ability check or a saving throw is mentioned, to be sure that making the check or the saving throw is not treated as equivalent to succeeding on it.
* **Magical Advice.** Be sensitive to the use of the adjective “magic” versus “magical.” The former usually applies to objects or phenomena that have magical qualities (magic item, magic trap, magic aura); the latter is often used in other contexts (magical talent, magical atmosphere).
* **Success or Failure.** Be careful with expressions of success or failure. When players roll dice, characters don’t succeed or fail; their checks and saving throws do. Likewise, characters don’t hit or miss when they attack; their attack rolls do.
* **Advantage.** Look at any uses of “advantage” (or “disadvantage”) as a game rule to ensure that the expressions are properly worded. An attack roll, saving throw, or ability check is made **with** advantage. A creature has advantage **on** the roll, saving throw, or check that it attempts.

Old Habits

If you’re familiar with D&D rulebooks from earlier editions of the game—particularly if you’ve done any writing for those versions—you might have picked up a few ways of expressing things that we have abandoned. These tips will help you determine if those old habits need to be broken.

* **Extra (d) Damage.** In an expression of extra damage, the word “extra” goes in front of the amount of damage. For instance, we don’t say “1d6 extra damage.”
* **No to Points.** In contrast to earlier editions, “points of” does not appear in a damage expression.
* **Yes to Types.** Every effect deals damage of a particular type, such as bludgeoning or fire. The “Damage and Healing” section in chapter 9 of the *Player’s Handbook* has a list of all the damage types in the game.
* **Hit Point Maximum.** This is a new term in the game. Don’t confuse it with “maximum hit points,” which is no longer used.
* **Irregular Plurals.** Several monster names (such as djinni, efreeti, and slaad) form their plurals in nonstandard fashion. In other cases, the singular and plural forms of a monster’s name are identical. Earlier editions treat some of these plurals differently. Consult the word list in the style guide for the proper way to express them.
* **Save.** If you use the word “save” in rules text involving a saving throw, check to be sure that it’s not treated as equivalent to “successful saving throw.” That practice, from earlier versions of the rules, has been abandoned. Also, watch out for “Wisdom save” (and the like), which should always be “Wisdom saving throw.”

Verb Usage

You **cast** a spell.

You **deal** damage.

You **drop** to 0 hit points.

You **finish** a short or long rest.

You **gain** temporary hit points.

You make an ability check, and it succeeds or fails.

You **make** a saving throw, and it **succeeds** or **fails**.

You **make** an attack (or you **attack**), and your attack **hits** or **misses** (it doesn’t succeed or fail).

You **reduce** a target to 0 hit points.

You **regain** hit points.

You **restore** hit points to a target.

You **score** a critical hit.

You **take** an action, or you **use** your action to do something.

You **take** damage.

You **use** a feature.

Common Pitfalls

Making a Roll vs. Succeeding on One

Don’t mistake making an ability check, a saving throw, or other roll with succeeding on it. The following sentence gets it right: “You must succeed on a DC 15 Strength check to clamber up the wall.” Don’t write, “You must make a DC 15 Strength check to clamber up the wall,” unless that sentence is immediately followed by a description of what happens on a success or failure.

Saving Throws

Save. “Save” can be used as a synonym for “saving throw,” but use it sparingly, preferably only in a stat block or when preceded by “saving throw.” In 4E, we used “save” as a synonym for “successful saving throw.” We have abandoned that practice.

“Must Make . . .” When a creature is subjected to an effect that requires a saving throw, we prefer “the target **must** **make** a saving throw . . .” over “the target **makes** a saving throw . . .”

Rolling a Saving Throw. Writing “roll a saving throw” is redundant, since a saving throw, by definition, involves a throw of a die. You make a saving throw.

Passive Perception

Be sure to use passive Wisdom (Perception) when the check is made passively but use regular Wisdom (Perception) when the check is made actively.

Advantage and Disadvantage

You make a roll **with** advantage or disadvantage, or you have advantage or disadvantage **on** a roll.

Also, an **attack roll**, not an attack, has advantage or disadvantage.

“Result” and Die Rolls

In 3E and 4E, the word “result” was sometimes used as a synonym for “the number rolled on a die.” We have abandoned that practice.

When you need to refer to the number rolled on a die, do so idiomatically. Here are examples: “If you roll at least a 10, you succeed,” “You score a critical hit if you roll a 20,” and “Add the number you roll to any bonuses or penalties.”

“Result” can legitimately refer to the sum of a die roll and any modifiers. “Compare the result to the DC to determine whether you succeed,” for example. We often prefer the word “total” in such a context.

“Magic” vs. “Magical”

We use “magic” as an adjective to describe an object that has magical qualities (a magic item, a magic sword, a magic trap).

The adjective can be used for other things, but we use “magical” more often than “magic” for them. And “magic item” and its variants should never be “magical item.”

Points of Damage

Avoid referring to points of damage. For example, write, “The spell deals 10 fire damage,” not “The spell deals 10 points of fire damage.”

Extra Damage

We write “an extra 1d4 fire damage,” not “1d4 extra fire damage.” We like to **keep the die expression with the damage type.**

Hit Point Maximum

When you write about a creature’s hit point maximum, avoid “maximum hit points.”

Writing in the singular allows **for natural, precise wording,** such as “If the target’s hit point maximum is 25 or more . . .” or “If the target’s hit point maximum is less than 50 . . .”

Proficiency

Here are the rules of thumb for using the right preposition with the words “proficient” and “proficiency”:

* You are proficient, or have proficiency, **in** a skill, language, or other activity that is learnable and repeatable.
* You are proficient, or have proficiency, **with** a tool, weapon, type of armor, or other object.

For example, you might be proficient in Elvish and Arcana, and you might be proficient with longswords and heavy armor.

“At Will” vs. “At-Will”

This compound is open. For example, “You can cast this spell at will.” The compound takes a hyphen only when it appears before a word that it modifies. For example, “That character has three at-will spells.”

“Dungeon Master” Isn’t a Verb

This term is a noun, not a verb. A person is a Dungeon Master. The person doesn’t Dungeon Master. This rule can be broken in an informal context, such as in a blog or a web article that has a conversational tone.