D&D Style Guide: Writing and Editing

We have two primary resources for the house style of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS products:

The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition
Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition

Because this guide takes both of those works as its foundation, it focuses on matters of style and spelling that are particular to D&D products, where we depart from or expand on the recommendations of those works.

Using *Chicago*

The Chicago Manual of Style is a gold mine of guidance for writers and editors, but the tome can be daunting. If you aren't familiar with it or have used only an earlier edition, start with the following chapters and sections:

- Section 5.220, "Glossary of Problematic Words and Phrases." Not sure whether to use "alternate" or "alternative"? Feeling as if "indicate" appears a bit too frequently in D&D rules? This section addresses these matters, among many others.
- Chapter 6, "Punctuation." This chapter is the authoritative reference for how to use commas, colons, semicolons, dashes, and other punctuation correctly in our publications.
- Chapter 7, "Spelling, Distinctive Treatment of Words, and Compounds." The whole chapter is worth skimming, but the treasure trove is at the end: section 7.85. That section addresses the many conundrums related to compound words.
- Chapter 9, "Numbers." When to use numerals and when not to—that's the meat of this chapter.

If you are the editor of a D&D manuscript, make sure to look at section 2.77, a useful checklist of things to tidy up before diving into your editing.

References for D&D Lore and Rules

Your main references for D&D lore and rules should be guides that we provide, as well as official products published for the D&D roleplaying game (5th Edition).

Please don't rely on Internet searches to give you the right answer to questions about D&D lore or rules. The Internet contains contradictions, misinterpretations, and outright fabrications. Both Wikipedia and the Forgotten Realms Wiki, for instance, contain some inaccurate information.

Also, beware of relying solely on D&D products from previous editions. They often present conflicting or outdated information.

If you have a question that isn't answered in one of our guides or products, please contact us.

General Rules

The rules in this section apply to all D&D products, whether RPG books, board games, novels, or something else.

Titles and Trademarks

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

In print, set the name of our brand in small caps: DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. The ampersand should be the same size as the capital letters. If the font you are using makes the ampersand smaller, don't set the ampersand in small caps.

On the web and in any other context where small caps are unavailable, just capitalize the brand name: Dungeons & Dragons.

The abbreviation, D&D, is neither set in small caps nor italicized.

Bear in mind that DUNGEONS & DRAGONS encompasses various games, novels, and worlds. The brand name is not synonymous with the tabletop roleplaying game.

That game is the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Roleplaying Game. When you are writing about the current edition of the game, don't refer to the edition, unless you are pointing out a difference between it and a previous edition.

An edition of the RPG is referred to with an ordinal set as a numeral and the word "Edition," so 1st Edition and 5th Edition. Our internal documentation occasionally uses edition abbreviations like 4E and 5E. Such abbreviations should appear only in a conversion document or

in an informal article that discusses differences between editions.

Typographic Treatment of Product Names and Other Trademarks

The name of a product—including a book, a magazine, a board game, a computer game, or a particular miniatures set—is capitalized and italicized. Examples include *Castle Ravenloft* (board game), *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* (book), and *Neverwinter* (computer game).

Any other trademark of ours is just capitalized. Examples include campaign settings, play programs, and product lines, such as Forgotten Realms (setting), D&D Encounters (play program), and D&D Dungeon Tiles (product line).

Symbols

A trademark symbol (™ and ®) appears the first time a trademark appears on packaging, on a cover, or in marketing material.

Trademarks appearing on the web or in the interior of books don't receive trademark symbols. The titles of most recent products are trademarked. A list later in this guide presents some of our trademarks with their symbols.

Issue Numbers

When referring to an issue of a magazine, write the italicized title followed by a numeral that is not italicized. For example, you would write *Dragon* 100, not *Dragon* #100 or *Dragon 100*.

Adventure Codes

Many adventures for the tabletop roleplaying game have codes, such as I6 and DL1. Such a code is not part of the adventure's title and is not italicized. The code is a short way to refer to an adventure and should not be used in a context where the adventure's title has not been stated.

Gender

We expect gender neutrality whenever the gender of a person is unknown or irrelevant. We also assume that our readership includes both men and women.

Achieving Gender Neutrality

See *Chicago* 5.225 for tips on achieving gender-neutral language. Use "he or she" sparingly, and avoid "he/she" and "s/he" altogether.

Don't use "they" or "their" as singular pronouns, except in an informal context like dialogue. And don't alternate between "he" and "she" in an attempt to be inclusive.

In rules text, we often achieve gender neutrality by writing in the second person.

Gender and Fantasy Races

"Man," "woman," and their plurals are reserved for describing humans only. For example, we write "female dwarf," not "dwarf woman" or "woman dwarf."

This rule can be broken in dialogue and first-person narrative.

Inline Subheads

The lowest level of our heading hierarchy is the inline subhead. It functions as our heading 4.

Contrary to past D&D usage, this subhead should be followed by terminal punctuation, not a colon. Use a period, an exclamation point, or a question mark.

If you are using the 5E Template in Word, apply the Inline Subhead style to the subhead (including the terminal punctuation). If you don't have access to the style, set the subhead in bold italics to distinguish it from text that is simply bold.

Here's an example of doing it correctly:

Keen Senses. You have proficiency in the Perception skill.

Here's an example of doing it incorrectly:

Keen Senses: You have proficiency in the Perception skill.

Don't confuse an inline subhead with the bolded title of a stat block entry or other data field. Such an entry rarely contains a complete sentence. The entry takes the form of a bolded variable name, sometimes a colon, and then the variable's value. Here are examples:

Speed 30 ft.
Child Names: Ara, Bryn, Del, Eryn, Faen, Innil, Lael, Mella
Range: 60 ft.

Spelling and Punctuation

We use American style for spelling and punctuation. The word list later in this guide lists unusual words and variant spellings that appear in D&D products.

When *Webster's* and *Chicago* provide no guidance on how to spell something, we refer to the *New Oxford American Dictionary* (installed on all recent Macs) as a backup resource.

The Serial Comma
We require the serial comma. Here's an example: "The apprentice expressed gratitude to his parents, Mystra, and Elminster." We don't write, "The apprentice expressed gratitude to his parents, Mystra and Elminster," unless Mystra and Elminster are the apprentice's parents.

Variant Spellings
Please refer to the "Variants" section in *Webster's*, page 11a, for basic information on variant spellings.

If a word has two equal variants, we use the one printed first (regardless of alphabetical order), except as noted in the D&D word list. This principle holds when referring to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

Compounds and Hyphenation
See *Chicago* 7.77–85 for extensive guidance on using compounds—open, closed, or hyphenated. When in doubt, lean on the multipage table in 7.85, an especially valuable resource.

Although *Chicago* says that "compounds formed with prefixes are normally closed," our use of "non-" is often an exception to this rule. The prefix is hyphenated in front of many of our fantasy races: non-elf, non-dwarf, non-orc, non-drow (but nonhuman, as in *Webster's*).

Contractions
We encourage the use of contractions formed with "not," such as "don't," "can't," and "wasn't" (see *Chicago* 5.103). Use other contractions with care, especially any contraction that can be misread. For example, "who's" can be read as "who is" or "who has."

Possessives for Words Ending in *S*
Use the possessive *s* even with a word ending with an *s* (see *Chicago* 7.17 and 7.21). We write "Asmodeus's lair," not "Asmodeus' lair."

Words Used as Words
Our style for words used as words is to enclose them in quotes if the words are English (see *Chicago* 7.58). For example, "The alchemist's favorite word was 'pumpkin,' so he knew exactly what to name his golem: Pumpkin."

A non-English word, whether from the real world or a D&D world, is italicized when used as a word. For example, "She whispered the word *ebrath*, Elvish for 'friend.'"

In contrast, a letter used as a letter is set in italics (see *Chicago* 7.59–63).

Vertical Lists
When you create a vertical list—whether it has bullets, numbers, or no ornamentation—introduce it with a complete sentence ended by a colon (see *Chicago* 6.124).

We begin each list item with a capital letter. Use closing punctuation in an item only if the list is composed of complete sentences.

Numbers and Math

Numerals versus Words
We follow the general rule for numerals that is presented in *Chicago* 9.2. In short, we spell out whole numbers from zero to one hundred, as well as numbers that are formed by adding "hundred," "thousand," or "hundred thousand" to one of those numbers.

Exceptions to the Rule. Chapter 9 of *Chicago* spells out many exceptions to this rule, instances when numerals are used even when a number is less than 101. The exceptions that are most relevant to our work are summarized here:

- Percentages {45 percent, 53%}
- Abbreviations and symbols used as units of measure {6'3", 5 gp, 3 lb.}

- Parts of a book or other work {chapter 2, part 3, page 34, scene 6, table 9, encounter 9, area 4}
- Volume and issue numbers {volume 3, *Dragon* 125, *Dungeon* 75}
- Currency {$15, £4}
- Dates {1299 DR; Marpenoth 12, 1113; October 31}
- Times {10:15 a.m., 12:30 p.m.}, but use "noon" and "midnight"

Numerals in Rules. In rules writing, we use numerals more often. See "Numerals in Rules Text" later in this guide.

Mathematical Symbols
When a mathematical symbol appears, we expect the correct mathematical character to be used.

+	Plus sign
−	Minus sign (Unicode 2212, not a hyphen or an en dash)
÷	Division sign
×	Multiplication sign (Unicode 00D7, not the letter *x*)
=	Equals sign

Fractions
Spell out a simple fraction, such as two-thirds, but when you combine a simple fraction with a numeral, use the appropriate fraction symbol, as in $4\frac{2}{3}$.

¼	One-fourth
⅓	One-third
½	One-half
⅔	Two-thirds
¾	Three-fourths

Percentages
Use the word "percent," rather than the symbol %, to express a percentage ("5 percent," for example). You can break this rule in a table, as well as in a list where space is tight.

Also, the abbreviation we use for percentile dice is d100, not d%.

Halving
When halving a quantity or game statistic, write "half," not "one-half." So, you would write "half your level," not "one-half your level."

Cross-References

Use cross-references judiciously. They are useful tools that can be easily overused.

Chapter References
When you refer to a chapter, use its number. If referencing a chapter's title would increase clarity, include the title in quotation marks. But chapter number alone usually suffices. Here are examples:

- See chapter 2 for how to make your character.
- Chapter 8, "The Rules of Magic," explains how spellcasting works.
- Consult chapter 3 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for further advice on adventure creation.

Subsection/Table References
When you refer to a subsection, including a sidebar, use its title in quotes. A table title is not enclosed in quotes. Here are examples:

- The "Roleplaying the Dragon" sidebar gives tips on how to bring the dragon fully to life in the story.
- See the "Actions in Combat" section for more examples of things you can do in battle.
- The Cleric table lists the features your cleric gains at each level.

As in those examples, make sure a reference is clear about what it's referring to—whether it's referring to a sidebar, a section, or a table, for instance.

Page References
We avoid page references as much as possible. They are labor-intensive (they must be added by hand during galley review), and they invite error.

A page reference is usually superfluous if it points to text in an alphabetized section (a monster in the *Monster Manual*, for instance).

Referencing a particular page in another product is especially ill-advised; that product's pagination could change in a reprint or a new edition.

Include a page reference only if the text you want to reference doesn't appear in a product's index and can't be referred to by chapter or subsection.

Before galley review, write a page reference as "page xx."

Unspoken Discourse

In D&D fiction, authors are free to use italics, quotation marks, or no distinguishing typography to present a character's thoughts or psionic communication between characters (see *Chicago* 13.41). Aesthetics and clarity should dictate appropriate usage. (This is a change from our previous policy.)

High Fantasy
A typical D&D story or adventure is part of the high fantasy subgenre of fantasy fiction, with the epic scope characteristic of that subgenre.

D&D is about small bands of characters embarking on adventures together. Teamwork and friendship are a huge part of what makes D&D distinct as a brand. The lone knight fighting a dragon is less characteristic of D&D than an adventuring team fighting a dragon. People on their own get into trouble; a team that works together can triumph.

Elements of humor or tragedy are fine, so long as they are true to the facts of the brand and don't overtake the general tone. When in doubt, think about properties like the Lord of the Rings or Game of Thrones. If a situation would seem out of place there, it probably doesn't belong in D&D. For instance, there are moments of humor with the hobbits, but ring wraiths aren't used for gags.

Style Rules for the RPG

The following style rules apply to the tabletop roleplaying game and to products based on it.

When it comes to familiarizing yourself with the game's terms and customs of wording, there is no substitute for reading the rules of the game themselves.

Formatting Game Terms

In the RPG, certain terms receive special typographic treatment. Examples here are given in curly brackets.

Terms to Capitalize
Ability scores {Strength, Intelligence}
Armor Class

Artifacts {*Axe of the Dwarvish Lords*}
Class features {Sneak Attack, Rage}
Difficulty Class
Dungeon Master
Feats {Loremaster}
Languages {Common, Dwarvish, Elvish}
Planes of existence {the Abyss, the Nine Hells, the Ethereal Plane}
Skills {Arcana, Perception}
Traits in races and monsters {Aquatic, Keen Senses}

Terms to Italicize
Artifacts {*Axe of the Dwarvish Lords*}
Magic items {*flame tongue*}
Spells {*magic missile*}

The italicized terms are treated as titles, even when they don't use title capitalization. Don't confuse one of these titles with an effect it creates (see *Chicago* 8.172). For example, the *wall of fire* spell produces a wall of fire, not a *wall of fire* (the latter would imply an infinite loop).

Numerals in Rules Text

Use numerals for points, scores, damage expressions, and any game trait with a numerical value.

- Anyone who touches the orb regains 3 hit points.
- Someone with a speed of 25 feet will not be able to keep up.
- A character must have an Intelligence of at least 13 to understand the script.
- The cursed glyph deals 10 necrotic damage to anyone who touches it.

Use numerals for units of time that quantify the duration of a game effect, a condition, or a state of affairs in a tactical situation.

- The spell lasts for 1 round.
- For the next 10 minutes, no one can use the door.

But:

- After winning the fight, the characters slept for six hours.
- For three days, they wandered aimlessly in the forest.

Use numerals for units of distance that quantify the size or extent of game effects.

- The attack has a range of 30 feet.
- The protective circle extends 5 feet beyond the doorway.

Use numerals for dimensions and distances in the game world on a tactical scale, including height and weight.

- The room is 20 feet square.
- She stands 6 feet tall and weighs 150 pounds.

But:

- The two cities are fifty miles apart.
- The tower is nearly three hundred feet tall.

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** 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.

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."

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 4th Edition character has three at-will powers."

"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.

Avoid "Week" and "Month"

The lengths of weeks and months vary in different D&D worlds. A week is ten days long in the Forgotten Realms, for instance, and is called a tenday.

Because of this fact, don't express durations or other lengths of time in weeks or months when you're writing rules. For example, say a game effect lasts for 7 days, not 1 week.

The length of the year varies as well, but you may use years for durations and the like.

Word List

aarakocra (singular and plural)
adamantine (a noun and an adjective that refers to a special material in the worlds of D&D)
a.m. (not AM or A.M.)
axe (sec. var.)
bladesinger
councilor (sec. var.)
dao (singular and plural)
djinni (singular; plural djinn)
doppelganger
dragonfire (fire produced by a dragon's breath weapon)
dragonkind
drow (singular and plural)
dryly (sec. var.)
duergar (singular and plural)
dwarven (adjective)
dwarves (not dwarfs)
Dwarvish (language)
ebook
efreeti (singular; plural efreet)
eladrin (singular and plural)
elven (adjective)
Elvish (language)
email
erinyes (singular and plural)
forward (adverb, not "forwards")
foulspawn (singular and plural)
genasi (singular and plural)
giantkind
Gnomish (language)
goblinkin
hell-spawned (adjective)
hellspawn (noun)
larva (singular; plural larvae)
lizardfolk (singular and plural)
lock pick (noun)
lorekeeper (by extension from gamekeeper, bookkeeper, goalkeeper, etc.)
magic-user
merfolk (singular and plural)
merrow (singular and plural)
mithral (not mithril)
multiverse (not capped)
oni (singular and plural)
packmate
pickaxe
p.m. (not PM or P.M.)
roleplay/roleplaying
sahuagin (singular and plural)
scry/scries/scried/scrying/scryer (one who scries)

sellsword
shapechange/shapechanger
shapeshifter (avoid "shapeshift")
slaad (singular; plural slaadi)
spell duel
spell scroll
spell trap
spell ward
spell-shield
spellbook
spellcaster/spellcasting (but not "spellcast")
spellcraft (noun)
stablemaster
staffs
sunrod
svirfneblin
swordmaster
swordsmith
tavernkeeper
thri-kreen (singular and plural)
war band (not warband)
weaponsmith
worshiped/worshiper/worshiping (secondary variant in
    Webster's)
xorn (singular and plural)
yuan-ti (singular and plural)

Forgotten Realms Terms

Goodman/Goodwoman (a title or form of address, usu.
    capped)
godsforsaken (established in the Realms, but not
    necessary in other polytheistic settings; "godforsaken"
    has no necessary connection to monotheism)
goodsir (a form of address, not capped)
magecraft (noun)
magelight
magelord
magesight

Editions of the Tabletop RPG (AD&D)

1st Edition
2nd Edition
3rd Edition
3rd Edition (v.3.5)
4th Edition
5th Edition

Abbreviations

Abbrev.	Brand or Product
D&D	DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
PH	*Player's Handbook*
DMG	*Dungeon Master's Guide*
MM	*Monster Manual*
v.3.5	version 3.5

Abbrev.	Ability Score
Str	Strength
Dex	Dexterity
Con	Constitution
Int	Intelligence
Wis	Wisdom
Cha	Charisma

Abbrev.	Coin
gp	gold piece(s)
ep	electrum piece(s)
cp	copper piece(s)
sp	silver piece(s)
pp	platinum piece(s)

Abbrev.	Die
d4	four-sided die
d6	six-sided die
d8	eight-sided die
d10	ten-sided die
d12	twelve-sided die
d20	twenty-sided die
d100	percentile dice

Abbrev.	Other Term
AC	Armor Class
DC	Difficulty Class
DM	Dungeon Master
XP	experience points
HD	Hit Die/Dice
hp	hit points
NPC	nonplayer character

Trademarks

The titles of most recent publications are trademarked.
Refer to a product to see if it was trademarked. In
addition, refer to this list.

AD&D®
Advanced Dungeons & Dragons™
Alternity®
Blackmoor
Castle Ravenloft®
Chainmail®
D&D®
D&D Encounters™
D&D Insider™
D&D Miniatures®
D&D Dungeon Tiles®

d20 Modern™
d20 System™
Dark Sun®
DCI®
Dragon®
Dragonlance®
Dungeon®
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®
Eberron®
Forgotten Realms®
Gamma World™
Greyhawk®
Lords of Waterdeep®
Neverwinter™
Planescape™
Ravenloft®
RPGA®

quarterstaff (pl. quarterstaffs)
shortbow
shortsword
unarmed strike
war pick
warhammer

Armor and Weapons

The following quick-reference list details house preference for open and closed compounds.

Armor and Shields
chain mail
dragon leather
dragon scale
hide armor
leather armor
mithral plate
mithral scale
mithral shirt
padded armor
ring mail
scale mail
studded dragon leather
studded leather armor

Weapons
battleaxe
blowgun
greataxe
greatclub
greatsword
hand crossbow
handaxe
heavy crossbow
light crossbow
light hammer
longbow
longsword
morningstar
polearm