

WRITING ADVENTURES

By Chris Perkins

A D&D® adventure can be location-based, event-based, or both.

A location-based adventure, in its simplest form, is a room-by-room description of a dungeon, which in D&D terms can be any self-contained adventure location. Most dungeons are subterranean, but we also use the term “dungeon” when referring to surface locations such as castles and ruins. The location in large part defines what’s memorable and exciting about the adventure, and some of the most memorable D&D adventures ever written featured distinctive, memorable dungeons.

The simplest event-based adventure presents a sequence of events that are programmed to occur one after another. More sophisticated event-based scenarios have “branches” built into them so that players can make choices that affect the outcome, creating a less linear experience. That’s not to say that event-based scenarios don’t have locations to explore—quite the contrary! However, the locations generally take a back seat to the unfolding narrative.

In truth, many adventures that are location-based have programmed events built into them, and many event-based adventures include room-by-room descriptions of important locations.

Regardless of an adventure’s type, level, length, or setting, keep these principles in mind:

1. A D&D adventure follows the rules of good storytelling (which I won’t belabor here). One important thing to remember: The player characters (PCs) are the heroes, not mere spectators, and they’re looking for quests that matter. Gathering animal pelts for a lazy merchant might be a tolerable MMO quest, but it makes for an underwhelming D&D experience.
2. An adventure needs a credible threat — one worthy of the heroes’ attention. The threat might be a singular villain or monster, a villain with lackeys, an assortment of monsters, or an evil organization. The antagonists, whoever they are, should have logical goals that the heroes can uncover and thwart in the course of the adventure.
3. An adventure should blend familiar D&D tropes with clever twists. It might seem stereotypical to build an adventure around dragons, orcs, and insane wizards in towers, but these are staples of the D&D experience. It might also seem trite to begin an adventure in a tavern, but again, it’s an idea that’s very true to D&D. Clichés are okay, as long as the adventure can still surprise and delight players. Avail yourself of everything the game has to offer, but try to put your own clever “spin” on it. For example, the mysterious figure who presents adventurers with a quest on behalf of the king might, in fact, be the king in disguise. The crazy wizard in the tower might be a projected illusion created by a band of greedy gnome thieves to guard their loot.
4. An adventure is about the here and now. A little bit of history might be needed to set things up, but the less of it, the better. Instead of dealing with what happened in the past, an adventure should focus on describing the present situation, what the bad guys are up to, and how the player characters get involved in the story.
5. An adventure must allow the players’ actions and decisions to matter, not control the outcome of encounters to the extent that players’ actions and decisions become meaningless. The adventure isn’t a novel or a novella; it needs to allow for more than one preset outcome. Otherwise, players will feel “railroaded” by the plot. For example, if the major villain shows up before the end of the adventure, the text needs to account for the possibility that the heroes might slay or capture the villain. In a D&D game, weirder things can happen!
6. An adventure needs to present information in a logical order, so that a DM reading it for the first time isn’t confused. For example, make sure that an NPC is properly introduced before casually mentioning the NPC by name in running text. Also, the adventure shouldn’t conceal or bury important information that the DM needs to understand what’s really going on. The goal isn’t to keep the DM in suspense, but rather to organize all the information the DM needs in the most logical and intuitive way.
7. An adventure should strive to present information as concisely as possible, to ease the burden on the DM. However, there are certain elements of an adventure that deserve special attention, namely NPCs, dungeon dressings, and treasure hoards. You can add character to any NPC by describing his or her distinctive physical features, mannerisms, and quirks (which the DM can then use to roleplay the NPC effectively). A striking

dungeon feature (such as a mural or carving) or interesting bit of treasure (such as an art object or piece of jewelry) can also benefit from a splash of descriptive text.

8. An adventure needs to appeal to a variety of player and character types. Some players prefer combat and exploration, while others relish intrigue and roleplaying. Some characters have selfish motives, while others are more altruistic. An adventure needs to cast a wide net and draw as many PCs into the story as possible. When plotting out an adventure, it's always good to ask questions such as, "Does this adventure work if the party includes a barbarian?" or "Is there anything here for the player who enjoys roleplaying?"

9. An adventure needs to rise above the humdrum. Any DM can throw a bunch of monsters in a room for the heroes to fight. A good adventure strives to make the DM sit up and say, "Wow, that's a really clever idea!" or "Wow, I can't wait to run this encounter!" or "Wow, I wish I'd thought of that!" Elevating an encounter beyond the norm can be accomplished with odd monster pairings, unusual terrain, environmental hazards, traps, unexpected reinforcements, red herrings, atypical monster tactics, ruses and other deceptions, NPCs with complex motives, and the occasional plot twist.

10. An adventure needs thoughtfully constructed, neatly labeled maps. Most DMs are visual people, and a good map not only invites them to run the adventure but also gives them an idea of what the adventure is about. A dull, uninspired map has the opposite effect. Nonsymmetrical, nonlinear dungeon layouts are better than symmetrical or linear ones, since they allow players to make choices while keeping the dungeon unpredictable. Spend as much time on your maps as you spend on your text, and Dungeon Masters will love you for it. For the writer who can't draw or doesn't like drawing, there are lots of mapmaking software options to choose from.

To write good novels, you need to read good novels, not only to see what other people have done but also to learn the tricks of the trade. The same is true for adventures. The more good D&D adventures you read, the easier it will be to write good D&D adventures of your own.

For rules on grammar and punctuation, please see *The Chicago Manual of Style* (16th edition) and the D&D House Style Guide.

About the Author

Chris Perkins started his career in the gaming industry as a freelancer, writing adventures for *Dungeon*® magazine. He joined Wizards of the Coast in 1997 as the magazine's editor. Over the years, he's written, developed, and edited hundreds of D&D adventures and read thousands more. He's seen the good, the bad, and the mediocre, and writing adventures remains his first and foremost passion. Not surprisingly, he has a few things to say on the topic.