

## EVERYTHING IS HIT DICE 2: FREE-FORM NARRATIVE SKILL CHALLENGES

There are often situations in D&D where planning for or resolving every possible solution and interaction takes too long, either at the table or in preparation. These rules, based on an original idea by Rodrigo D. Lopez (see credits) are intended to stretch player's narrative skills to determine an outcome whilst preserving tension and drama.

These rules are intended to work alongside the "Using Ability Scores" section of the Dungeon Master's Guide, beginning on page 237.

### SKILL CHALLENGES

Skill challenges represent another way to determine whether the party have achieved something. Much like individual ability checks, the DM should only ask for them if there is a chance of failure and succeeding in the task is possible for the party in their current state. Likewise, if there is only one way to succeed, and no clear alternative path, then this should be resolved via normal skill checks.

### WHEN TO SET A CHALLENGE

Challenges are a useful tool for a DM when the players have a defined goal, multiple ways to achieve it and available time measured in minutes or longer. The effect is to create a montage or "highlights reel" showing the path to their triumph or failure rather than playing out each interaction in detail.

Skill challenges seldom serve as a direct replacement for combat or time-sensitive scenarios where tracking precise detail is important to determining success. For example, resolving a chase sequence can be based on how far each character can move per round, and whether they use abilities such as Cunning Action or Step of the Wind in order to move further.

Examples of skill challenge set-ups include:

- Escorting an NPC through a hostile environment
- Prosecuting a criminal or civil trial
- Uniting allies against a common foe
- Petitioning a powerful individual
- Determining an enemy's location
- Escaping a natural or man-made disaster

### DETERMINING THE DIFFICULTY

Succeeding on a typical skill challenge for a four-person party requires the following criteria to be met:

**Successes.** The Players must collectively achieve 8 successful skill checks (measured against the DC of the skill challenge).

**Failures.** If the Players fail 3 skill checks, then the challenge immediately ends in a failure.

These values can be adjusted depending on the number of players – adding/subtracting 2 successes and 1 failure per player will ensure that everyone gets at least two chances to act.

Decide how difficult the challenge is and pick the associated DC from the Skill Challenge DCs table. An easy challenge will succeed most of the time by spending minimal resources, whilst a very hard challenge will be almost impossible unless resources are spent on the majority of checks.

### SKILL CHALLENGE DCs

Difficulty	PARTY LEVEL				
	1 – 4	5 – 8	9 – 12	13 – 17	18 – 20
Easy	10	11	12	13	14
Medium	12	13	14	15	16
Hard	14	15	16	17	18
Very Hard	16	17	18	19	20

### STARTING A SKILL CHALLENGE

Each participant rolls for initiative via a dexterity check, as described on p. 189 of the Player's Handbook. Play proceeds in initiative order, with each player taking their turn to create a section of the narrative known as a 'scene'.

### ENDING A SKILL CHALLENGE

There is often no need to create additional bonuses or penalties for resolving a skill challenge – the players simply succeed or fail to achieve their goal and the consequences happen accordingly.

However, as a DM you do have the option of imposing additional effects or allowing the players to succeed at a cost. Examples of these include:

- **Time.** The party gets to the goal first, or the villain does.
- **Recovery.** The party has a safe location to rest due to their success.
- **Energy.** The characters take additional levels of exhaustion/lose hit dice.
- **Possessions.** A gain or loss of gold, magic items or equipment.
- **Damage.** The trap severity by level (Dungeon Master's Guide p. 121) is a useful guide.
- **Conditions.** One or more of the party are poisoned, contract a disease or are cursed.

### EXHAUSTION AND OTHER CONDITIONS

Non-spell effects that imposes advantage/disadvantage or other bonuses/penalties on ability checks (such as exhaustion, poison or inspiration) apply to rolls during skill challenges as normal. The DM decides whether time-limited conditions (such as drunkenness) lose their effect over the course of a challenge.

## PLAYER TURNS

On their turn a player must perform an ability check (this does not require an action) and describe how they use it to advance towards the challenge goal. Skill or tool proficiencies can be applied as normal. The ability used must follow these rules:

- The ability/skill/tool must be suitable for the described task. The DM decides whether this is the case and will ask you to pick a different one necessary.
- You cannot use the same skill/tool as the player on the preceding turn, or re-use the skill/tool you used on your last turn.
- The activity described should extend the narrative developed by the previous player. For example, if the first player describes kicking down a tavern door, the second player could describe what they do immediately upon entering the tavern via the doorway. Alternatively, they could use the distraction to go in via a back entrance.

A player also has an action on their turn. This can be used to expend effort, cast a spell, help another character or use a class feature. These actions are described below. In addition:

- One bonus action can be used on your turn if a suitable class feature (such as casting a spell with a casting time of a bonus action) is available.
- The player has a reaction, which can only be used to Push Yourself after failing an ability check (also described below).

Actions and spells are generally used to gain advantage on a roll or to allow a different skill to be used. The DM makes the final decision as to what is allowable. Similarly, the DM is free to impose disadvantage to a particular approach as per a typical ability check.

The skill check is rolled after any actions and/or discussion have taken place and the DM narrates the resulting success or failure as a scene with input from the player.

### EXPEND EFFORT

When you take the Expend Effort action, you immediately spend 2 hit dice. If you do so, you gain advantage on your next ability check in this skill challenge.

### CAST A SPELL

Spells which have a casting time of 1 action or a bonus action can be cast as normal during a skill challenge. Spells with a different casting time may be permitted by the DM depending on the narrative. For example, the spell Feather Fall (normally cast using a reaction) may grant advantage on an Acrobatics check whilst escaping a tall building.

Rules on concentration and casting multiple spells on the same turn apply as per the Player's Handbook. For spells that grant benefits/bonuses to ability checks (such as

Enhance Ability or Pass without Trace) this is typically granted as normal. Other spells can be cast to allow a certain skill to be used in a scene and/or to gain advantage.

The DM ultimately determines whether a spell can be cast and what impact it has on the ability check. They also decide to what extent spells continue to impact subsequent turns for you or other players (based on spell duration, area of effect, etc). See "Adjudicating Skills and Spells" for more guidance.

## ADJUDICATING SKILLS, SPELLS AND FEATURES

As a DM, there is a lot to consider when allowing certain combinations of abilities and skills. Only you can decide what is appropriate for the skill challenge, but some general principles are:

- Players will almost always try and describe the situation in such a way as to attempt to use their highest modifier with advantage.
- Remember that every character is proficient in at least 4 skills, and that they can always gain advantage via the Expend Effort action.
- Features that spend a limited resource (such as Monk Ki Points or a magic user's Spell Slots) are usually more effective because they are limited.
- Many spells (and in particular cantrips) are of too limited a duration to have an impact in a skill challenge, where a scene is often longer than a minute.

### HELP

The Help action is used to assist another player who is nearby during the scene. As an action make an additional ability check as per the DC and rules for the skill challenge, but do not count this against the successes or failures for the challenge. Instead, if you succeed, the player you are helping gains advantage on their next ability check.

The DM decides whether you are close enough and able to help another player with your approach.

### USE A CLASS FEATURE

Some classes have features other than spellcasting which can grant advantage or offer an opportunity to use a skill. This action is used for features that take an action to use, while others are used as a bonus action if worded as such.

Some specific Skill Challenge interactions with class features are described in the "Class Feature Abilities" table on the next page. This is not an exhaustive list, but will help guide you through the uses your players may devise.

### PUSH YOURSELF

As a reaction, immediately after failing an ability check, the player may re-roll the check under the same conditions as before. The character then gains one level of exhaustion, regardless of whether they succeed or fail on the second attempt.

## CLASS FEATURE ABILITIES

Class	Feature	Ability
Barbarian	Rage	Expend a use as a bonus action to grant advantage on an athletics or strength check on your turn.
Bard	Bardic Inspiration	Can be given to other characters as a bonus action on your turn and used as normal. The DM adjudicates whether you are close enough and when time has passed for the die to be lost.
	Wild Shape	Expend a usage and use your action on your turn to transform and gain the appropriate benefits/restrictions to skill checks/interactions going forward. Transform back via bonus action as normal.
Fighter	Action Surge	Expend to take an additional action on your turn. You can take the same action or a different one.
Ranger	Natural Explorer	If the skill challenge takes place in a ranger's favored terrain, they gain a bonus to Intelligence and Wisdom checks, as described in the Player's Handbook p. 91
	Exceptional Training	As a bonus action, your animal companion grants you advantage on one ability check appropriate to the companion's abilities. At the DM's discretion, this can also help other characters.
Rogue (Investigative)	Eye for Detail	If the DM determines the skill is appropriate, you may make a Perception/Investigation check on your turn as a bonus action. Success/failure is added to the total for the skill challenge as normal.
Rogue (Investigative)	Steady Eye	Grants advantage as normal if the DM agrees you are moving at half speed or less for the duration of the scene.
Rogue (Mastermind)	Master of Tactics	The player may take the help action (see previous page) as a bonus action on their turn. The DM should take into account performing this action at a distance when allowing/disallowing help.
Rogue (Swashbuckler)	Elegant Maneuver	Can be used as per the rules as a bonus action on your turn to grant advantage on an Athletics or Acrobatics check. The DM determines if these skills are appropriate for the scene as normal.
Sorcerer	Quickened Spell	Allows you to cast a spell as a bonus action on your turn as normal.

## EXAMPLE OF PLAY

The Rowdy Four are a 5th level party consisting of Portia (Barbarian), Avrel (Bard), Teg (Cleric) and Vitan (Warlock). They have arrived at the state banquet of King Mynos III to confront their enemy, the villainous merchant and con artist Brewster Spark. Unfortunately, he has been tipped off, and now they must prevent Brewster from leaving without drawing weapons or otherwise causing a scene.

**Difficulty:** DC 13 (Medium, Party level 5-9).

**Goal:** Apprehend Brewster without getting the guard involved or otherwise bringing the banquet to a halt.

**Initiative:** Avrel, Portia, Teg, Vitan

*DM:* Across the crowded hall from you, Brewster gets up and starts to leave. There are people performing elegant courtly dancing in the centre for the king, surrounded by long banquet tables. The Royal Guard have been posted at the doors and balconies but their job is to protect the king and ensure the party is not disrupted - not arrest alleged counterfeiters. The hall is full of the upper and middle class of Haleport, along with servants and courtiers scurrying back and forth.

*Avrel:* I want to follow him in a subtle way - can I join the dancing and move from partner to partner?

*DM:* Roll performance, or acrobatics at disadvantage.

*Avrel:* Definitely performance in that case - I'll also nod at Portia and say "try to be subtle, like a snake giving feedback on a script" (gives one inspiration die as a bonus action) Now let's roll some dice... 15! (1 success)

*DM:* You move elegantly through the dancers, skilfully catching the eye of your next partner whilst keeping Brewster in your sights. He's not heading for the main entrance, looks more like the South courtyard.

*Portia:* I don't think shoving my way through is going to work super well, at least not yet... I summon all of what I've learned of the city folk so far, and step through the crowd with a "EXCUSE ME. SO SORRY. COULD I JUST SQUEEZE PAST." (Uses the Expend Effort action to gain advantage). Avrel has clued me in to where he's going, so I'm trying to head him off, or at least keep him from doubling back.

*DM:* Make a Persuasion check for me

*Portia:* 3... and an 11... ah, but I have the inspiration die ... that's a 2! I just make it (**total of 13 means the party now has 2 successes**).

*DM:* Brewster's eyes go wide as he sees you approach through the crowd. He turns and walks briskly into the courtyard. As you follow, you see that this is a more open area; there are three obvious exits, other than the door you came through. A couple of market stalls have been set up, and there is a fire-eater giving a performance to some children.

*Teg:* Let's keep him contained - I want to summon my Illusory Duplicate and move it as a bonus action. Trying to reduce his choices to one exit.

*DM:* Roll me a Deception check - I won't give you advantage since you're using your power at a distance.

*Teg:* Fair enough... 11 (**Party is on 2 successes and 1 failure**)

DM: Brewster knows about your tricks from a previous encounter with him. He brushes through your illusion with a smirk on his face and heads towards the garden door.

Vitan: He must have a plan if he's picked a direction... is the fire-eater in his path?

DM: Just about, slightly off to one side.

Vitan: Great, I'd like to use Control Flames to make his torches flare up in Brewster's direction. Can I do that?

DM: There are children nearby, and it's only a cantrip... but I'd let you roll it as a straight Intimidation check. You'll also have to move slightly into the courtyard to be in range for the spell.

Vitan: I remark "Better a singed child than a debased currency," to no-one in particular, step forward and cast the spell. Let's see, intimidation... 20! **(3 successes, 1 failure)**

DM: A brief but alarming burst of fire immediately results in screaming children and angry parents converging on the unfortunate entertainer. Brewster freaks out and looks around, clearly panicked by everything that's going on. He changes direction and dashes through the tower door across the courtyard from where Teg is standing.

Avrel: I emerge from the banquet hall wiping lipstick from my cheek. I'll tell Teg "The man is a cretin - that was a great performance" (gives one inspiration die as a bonus action). Seeing people move towards the fire-eater I run across the courtyard as fast as I can.

DM: There's plenty of space and you're aiming for speed - this is Athletics rather than Acrobatics.

Avrel: I was afraid of that... OK I'll expend effort as well. Rolling... 7 and 13... but I have a minus one so 12, damn! I'm determined to catch him, so I'm going to push myself. (Uses reaction after rolling to take one level of exhaustion to re-roll) 13 again... and a 17, so 16 overall! **(3 successes, 1 failure)**

DM: The rest of the group see you sprint across the space and into the tower. You see Brewster heading up the spiral staircase and give chase. Everyone else sees the shadows as the two of you pass by the windows of the tower.

Portia: Hmm, I can't use Athletics because Avrel just did, and I can't ask people for help because I used Persuasion last turn. Can I use Perception to try and work out where you could get to from the top of the tower and head in that direction?

DM: Sounds good to me

Portia: OK, I'd also like to drag Vitan along with me, so he's in a good position on his turn - I can't use Athletics, but I can still use Strength... and I'll expend a use of rage given that there's a bit of chaos here. I push my way through the angry crowd with Vitan, keeping my eyes on the castle structure as I work out where to go.

DM: Yep, strength check with advantage to help Vitan, followed by a Perception check for your actual check.

Portia: Strength... 14 and 16 no problem. Perception... 15 **(4 successes, 1 failure)**

DM: The tower staircase seems to connect to a long gallery on the right-hand side. Big windows, but seems to

be dark inside at the moment. You head towards the other end of the gallery, via a different upwards staircase.

Teg: I want to go after Avrel, I'll run for his staircase... but I also want to make sure the guards don't get involved. I'll shut the door behind me and try to keep everyone focused on the fire eater... can I use Stealth and cast Silence as my action to grant advantage?

DM: That seems pretty appropriate, and the area affected by the spell works well for this location.

Teg: 11 and 19... definitely worth it **(5 successes, 1 failure)**

DM: The guards converge on the fire-eater, and you have the gallery all to yourselves... **(The DM could continue to resolve the escape attempt as a skill challenge, or switch to a combat/detailed chase in the gallery).**

## DESIGN NOTES

1. Rules as written, Barbarian rage only lasts for one minute and up until 15<sup>th</sup> level is dependent on constant damage or attacking. My view is the rules here grant Barbarians a feature to use when they will otherwise have little to offer in a skill challenge. Decisions on if damage resistance etc grant a bonus are up to individual DMs.
2. Remember that Constitution checks are a valid ability check to call for in certain circumstances and can be thought of as analogous to the "Endurance" skill found in 4th Edition D&D.
3. As this system is based around ability checks, it assumes that proficiencies in saving throws are irrelevant. This can be altered if you wish, and may be appropriate for skill challenges in hazardous or otherwise damaging situations.
4. Rogues, in particular the Mastermind subclass, become extremely powerful in skill challenges at higher levels due to a combination of Expertise, Reliable Talent and Cunning Action. This means that the party can succeed at harder skill challenges, so raise the difficulty and rewards accordingly rather than restricting their abilities.

## CREDITS

As noted in the introduction, the original idea for this type of challenge derives from D&D 4th Edition, specifically the house rules developed by Rodrigo D. Lopez of the Critical Hit podcast, summarized by him here:

<https://magicturtle.tumblr.com/post/160713389899>

These were then further developed by my 4<sup>th</sup> Edition DM Myles Nester and our group, and I have exported them to 5<sup>th</sup> edition whilst adding additional rules that utilize this edition's rules around ability check DC, hit dice, exhaustion, spellcasting and class features.

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