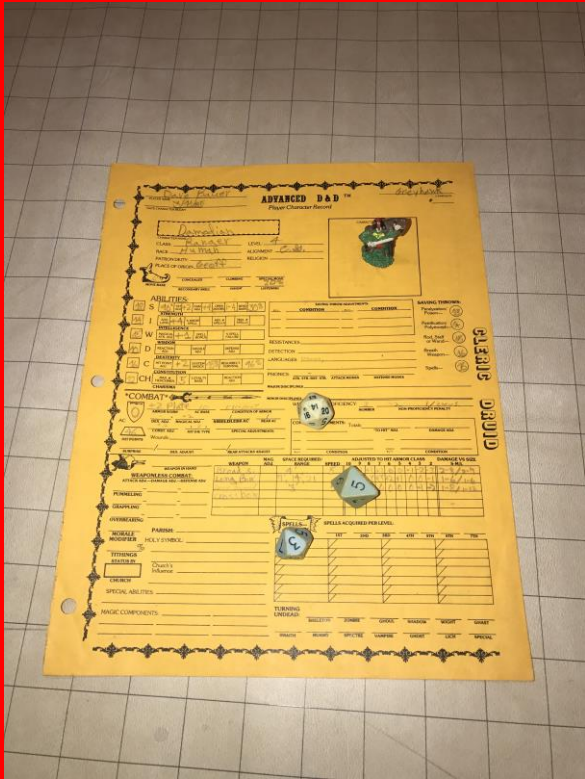


# DUNGEON MASTER



# Tips, Advice, and Philosophical Musings for New DM's from a Lifelong DM



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Welcome to the Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) community and Kudos to you for taking on the challenging role of Dungeon Master (DM)! I began playing D&D in 1978 and have Dungeon Mastered every edition. Looking back, I have realized D&D has been a major, and influential, part of my life. Hopefully I can pass on some pearls of wisdom and you can learn from my experiences (both good and bad!). Much of what is written here is open to interpretation, and others may not agree with every point. But, it is meant as a starting point for new Dungeon Masters and, as such, is kept as streamlined as possible.

This guide supplements the material presented in the Player's Handbook (PHB) and Dungeon Master's Guide (DMG). The material in those books tends to be very generalized and open-ended. It has been my experience that it can be overwhelming for new DM's. Many new DM's just want a clear course of action when they start DM'ing. Once they become comfortable running D&D, the generalized material proves more useful. This guide provides straightforward advice for starting a new campaign and running your first adventure. It also provides tips and tricks to be a better DM.

## **Finding a Group**

Ideally, you already have a group of friends with which to play D&D. If you do not yet have a group, you should question your decision to DM. Most ad hoc groups will prefer to be DM'd by someone with experience. If you are simply seeking to play D&D with the intent of eventually DM'ing, the following are good places to find a group: your local gaming store, meetup.com, or find an online game at sites like [dndadventurersleague.org](http://dndadventurersleague.org)

## **Materials and Supplies**

At a minimum, you should own the Player's Handbook (PHB), Dungeon Master's Guide (DMG), Monster Manual (MM), and at least one set of dice. Players should each have a set of dice and encourage them to each purchase a PHB. Having multiple Player's Handbooks available speeds up character generation and gameplay.

## **Group Size**

The ideal number of players for a D&D group is four. Deviation from that number makes things tougher for the DM and for the group. That being said, three to six players is still a manageable group. Do not go over six players. Running a group greater than six players is a chore on the DM and players tend to have less fun since they have a much smaller share of the spotlight. If you have eight friends wanting to play D&D, suggest someone else also DM a campaign, or run a second campaign yourself.

## **Entire Campaign or One Off**

If you are going to DM, I suggest DM'ing the entire campaign unless it is a single adventure and the characters will no longer be played afterwards (a 'one off'). I am not a fan of groups that rotate DM's. It is harder for players to develop their characters under different DM's and there are frequently inconsistencies with how DM's run their game. For example, one DM may be more liberal in allowing a rogue to hide in the middle of combat, or another DM may give out more powerful magic items.

## **Zero Session**

Before the first session, you should hold a 'zero session'. This is an initial get together where players make their characters and get any questions answered. They can also provide character background details to the DM, which are handy if you are attempting to include character details in your campaign plotlines. This is also a good opportunity to decide which characters may already know each other through their backgrounds. This makes the group deciding to form an adventuring party seem a little less forced.



## Group Composition

Some players will arrive at the session already knowing what type of character they want to play and others will arrive with no idea. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition D&D is very forgiving when it comes to party composition, so allow players to play whatever class they want. That being said, the ideal group composition is invariably a tank type, a sneaky type, an offensive spellcaster, and a healer. The minimal overlap of specialized skills gives each player a niche from which to shine. Four rogues might sound cool in theory, but it makes for a tough adventure for both the DM and the players.

## Point Buy for Ability Scores

Use point buy for ability scores. Allowing players to roll their ability scores is more trouble than it is worth. First, you may have to deal with cheaters. Second, having players with godly, or awful, ability scores tends to make things less fun for at least one person at the table.

## Feats

Technically feats are an optional rule, but most DM's allow them in their game. You should be aware that 'Great Weapon Master' (GWM) and 'Sharpshooter' (SS) are considered broken by many DM's. GWM makes it too easy to get a massive damage bonus in a game where bonuses are difficult to come by. Taking a -5 to-hit is generally mitigated by attacking with advantage, using a barbarians 'Reckless Attack' for instance. This effect is most dramatic as lower levels when a single hit with +10 damage will often kill a monster in one shot. As a characters level increase, GWM has less of an impact since overall damage tends to increase and monsters have more hit points.

SS is also problematic. As stated above, combat bonus in 5e are difficult to come by. In addition to the -5/+10 mechanic, SS allows the player to ignore any cover modifiers. That can lead to a large swing in the number needed to hit the target, a 25% greater chance to-hit in the case of  $\frac{3}{4}$  cover.

You may want to consider banning these feats before players begin making their characters. It is easier to do it from the start than to do it after a player has already designed a character around one of these feats. They are not game breaking, I allow them at my table, but my intuition is that they will be adjusted, or removed, if there is every a revision of 5e.

## House Rules and Non-Official Material

Don't do it. As a new DM, stick to the rules as closely as possible. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition is like a finely tuned engine and you, as a new DM, are a monkey with a hammer. Once you get comfortable with the system, feel free to tinker with it. Until then, just play it as it is written. In my own game, I only use one house rule: *If you roll less than the die average for hit points when you level, you make take the average.* It sucks gaining a level and then rolling a 1 on a d12! Even this minor change has a noticeable effect on combat, since characters are able to take more damage before going unconscious. This means I have to adjust slightly each combat if I want it to be appropriately challenging. For a new DM, even this simple change can be difficult.

Player's will sometimes show up with material they have found on the internet and ask to use it in your game. Say 'no'. Much of the time, it is unbalanced and will either overpower their character, make the other players feel inconsequential, or both. Work within the existing rule base as much as possible to minimize game balance issues in cases where you are allowing outside material. For example, if someone really wants to use that macuahuitl (Aztec sword), an easy method would be to treat it as a longsword, using the same statistics and proficiency.

## How Long and How Often to Play

I find four hours of D&D a week to be ideal. It can be one weekly four hour session, or a bi-weekly eight hour session. Much of it will depend on player, and DM, availability. In college, we played about 12 hours each week. Now that I am a (supposed) responsible adult, a single four hour Wednesday evening session seems to work best for everyone involved.

## The First Adventure

Use a published adventure. Continue to use published adventures until you are comfortable DMing. Lost Mine of Phandelver from the Starter Set is a good choice. The published adventure paths (e.g. Hoard of the Dragon Queen, Storm King's Thunder, etc.) will also work but will require more preparation on your part. You should read the adventure all the way through at least twice before running it. It will make it easier to split your time between game mechanics and setting the atmosphere.

## Theater of the Mind versus Miniatures

Theater of the Mind (TotM) is when a DM describes combat verbally and players respond verbally with their characters action.

For example:

**DM:** As you push open the door, you see 4 orcs sitting around a small fire in the center of a 30 foot square room. Piles of debris and filth litter the room and you see the remnants of a large table along the left wall, the legs broken and the surface scarred with deep cracks and gouges. The orcs notice you and immediately jump up with weapons drawn. Roll initiative...

**Player 1** (first in the initiative order): I am going to run inside the room and get behind the broken table, shooting my short bow at the nearest orc.

**DM:** The piles of debris in the room slow your progress (difficult terrain), but you are able to make it behind the table and take a shot at the nearest orc. Roll to hit...

OR

**DM:** The table is set against the wall, so you would have to use your action this turn to position it between you and the orcs. Is that what you want to do?

TotM relies on a DM giving enough of a description that players form a visual picture in their minds. Players tend to fill in the blanks and this can lead to a more immersive play experience. On the downside, a poor description may lead to players often being told they are unable to do something since the DM's version of the layout does not match the player's version.

The alternative to TotM is to use a battle map and miniatures. Here is the same room described above using a miniature based encounter:





As you can see, everything is much clearer and players can plan their actions with little additional feedback from the GM. On the downside, miniatures can be expensive and you will rarely have the exact miniatures you need. I often substitute goblins for other medium sized creatures on my battle map.

I have run both and I generally prefer miniatures, but only because some of the elements of 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, such as opportunity attacks and hiding, are more easily handled using miniatures. I also use a battle mat with wet erase markers and keep track of hit points by having the nearest player write the total damage next to each monster miniature. It helps take some of the DM load off of me during combat encounters, when a monster gets hit, they tell me the total damage and I let them know if it has died or not.

## Initiative Tracking

Tracking initiative can slow down a session if not done correctly. The best method I have found it to have each character fill out a notecard that is folded in half. On the front (player side) it has their name. On the back (DM side) is their name, AC, and passive perception. I then hang them on my DM screen in initiative order each combat, with additional cards for the monsters. I use a skinny red piece of paper to track where we are in initiative order. This system has the advantage of informing a player how long until it is until their turn. I generally use the same cards over several sessions.



## Dice Rolling and Fudging

As a DM, you have the option of either rolling dice in open view, or rolling them behind the DM screen. Players should always roll dice in full view of the table. For any roll where the result is readily apparent to the characters, I roll in the open. This is usually attack and damage rolls. For rolls where the characters would not know if they succeeded or not, like a monster rolling a perception check against a rogue's stealth, I roll behind the screen.

I am a proponent of 'let the dice fall where they may'. I rarely 'fudge' a die roll. That is, changing the result of a roll. Part of the fun of D&D is the randomness offered by the dice rolls. If I feel the need to 'fudge', I have enough tools in my DM toolbox without needing to change die rolls.

For example, let's say I overestimated the group's ability to take down a group of foes and the combat is going badly. I hate to make players pay for my incompetence (if they are dying due to a stupid plan, that is on them!). Instead of fudging die rolls, I can have monsters take less deadly actions on their turn (i.e. binding an allies wounds, or even binding a dying PC with the intent of saving them for questioning), they may lose confidence and flee, or they may start to deal subdual damage and capture the entire party.

On the rare occasions I do 'fudge' a die roll, it is normally for dramatic, or comedic, effect to make a more memorable adventure. For example, the stinky barbarian propositions the sultry barmaid and she succeeds in resisting his clumsy persuasion attempt. I may fudge and have her fall head over heels for the barbarian, being a comedic thorn in his side until he leaves the town.

Occasionally, you will have to deal with a player who lies about their die rolls. If this occurs, you should get a dice tray, place it in the middle of the table and have all players roll their dice in the tray. If it isn't in the tray, it doesn't count!

## Rulings Not Rules

Don't get bogged down trying to follow the exact rules. Keep the game moving. If you can look something up quickly, spell effects for instance, by all means do so. But, if someone wants to break through a door and you aren't sure how that works, wing it! For example: door has 30 hit points, when they are gone it breaks (or whatever you think is reasonable). Make notes of things you want to research after the session so you will be more knowledgeable next time. Always take the time to research something that will greatly affect the characters. "I don't remember how death saves work, so since you failed that first roll, you are dead" (←-Don't be that DM)

## Your Dungeon Mastering Style

A lot of how you DM will come from your players. Some players are very much into mechanics, they like rolling to hit and figuring damage. Other players are more into the role playing aspect; they enjoy interacting with NPC's or solving mysteries. It is worthwhile to watch videos of other DM's running a game, Matt Mercer on Critical Role for instance. No two DM's are alike and you will eventually gravitate to a style that works for you. If you run published adventures to start, it saves much of the work of describing the setting, as they come with descriptive boxed text. You still have the opportunity to work on your verbal descriptions during combat or when expanding from the written text.

Some DM's use different voices when speaking as NPC's. If you are able to do so, go for it! Think of yourself as half frustrated author and half frustrated actor and you will do great!

## DM/Player Relationship

Dungeons and Dragons is cooperative storytelling. One participant, the Dungeon Master, describes and controls all aspects of an imaginary fantasy world with the exception of the player character's (PC's) whom are controlled by the other participants. Many people believe the players move through the DM's story. In fact, the players are telling their stories in the DM's world. The difference is subtle, yet profound. How your view the player/DM dynamic will have a great impact on your game.

There should NEVER be an oppositional relationship between the DM and players. You are not their enemy. In designing adventures and encounters, there should always be a path to success for the players.

You should avoid having a specific NPC that your view as your character. Often players will perceive bias, whether it exists or not, and it makes the game less enjoyable. Plus, one of the benefits of being a DM is you can develop and control as many NPC's as you desire, an amazing outlet for your creativity.

When running encounters, you act as moderator, applying the rules and rolling the dice. In my experience, characters normally die after making a series of bad decisions. On rare occasions, they will die to a string of awful die rolls. Characters should never die because they have been placed in an unwinnable situation through no fault of their own.

## The Fun/No Fun Test

Most people play games for enjoyment. D&D is a game. As a DM, your goal is to make the game enjoyable for the players. DM'ing can also be enjoyable, but in a different way (covered below). A mistake newer DM's often make is to run a 'Monty Hall' campaign, giving out excess experience and magic items. Do not equate easy with fun. Players want to be challenged. They want to tell their characters story. That is what makes D&D fun.

**Fair.** Try to keep the game fair. Players should all have equivalent opportunities for character development. Rules should be applied as uniformly as possible. Nothing will ruin a game quicker than a player who feels they get treated unfairly.

**Freedom of Action.** Players should have the illusion of complete freedom of action. I say 'illusion' because this involves an inherent suspension of disbelief on the part of the players. They know you have an adventure in front of you. They know their characters will most likely work their way through that adventure during the play session. Players who purposefully avoid going down an adventure path are just being jerks and you should probably make them find a new DM if they remain overly oppositional.

However, players do not want to feel railroaded. 'Railroading' means forcing players to do a specific action. In a more general sense, it is the concept that player choices have no meaning. Players should feel that their actions have consequences, both good and bad. Therefore, on a macro level player's options are limited in that they can only play what you have prepared (although, in all honesty, some of the most memorable events from my campaigns have been off-the-cuff). On a micro level, within an adventure, players should feel they have total control of their characters actions.

**Challenging.** Players will have the most fun when they feel challenged. One challenge players must overcome is combat with monsters. This is probably the easiest to DM. Use the CR tables to find appropriate encounters and roll some dice. Some DM's also use Kobold Fight Club (<http://kobold.club>) to design appropriate encounters.

The second way to challenge players is through problem solving. Typical problem solving challenges include simple tasks such as acquiring an item in a city, solving a puzzle or riddle, or navigating around a trap. I also like to include moral dilemmas in my adventures. That is, scenarios that have not clear-cut right or wrong answer. This often heightens tension and provides opportunity for character development.

DM initiated challenges should be reasonable and always have a path to success. Sometimes players will undertake a challenge of their own accord. As a DM, always try to incorporate player-initiated content into your adventure whenever possible. It makes the game more fun for the players. This is the 'Yes and...' technique drawn from improv comedy. Always try to feed off whatever the players are offering. The player likely will not succeed if attempting the impossible, but it is a great opportunity for good story telling and role-playing.



## Common problems for DM's

**One of my players wants to be evil.** Don't let them. Experienced role players can often play an evil character well enough to not have it self-destruct and adventuring party, but in most cases allowing an evil player will just wreak havoc and end up with the characters fighting amongst themselves.

**All my players want to be evil.** Again, no. Think about the acts we consider evil. Do you really want to simulate doing those things four hours a week? If so, you and your players may be able to get a group rate on counseling. It is possible to run a 'Robin Hood' type campaign successfully. Basically, the players act outside of the law because the law is evil. For example, it would be possible to run a group of assassins who are trying to destroy an evil cult. But I would argue that the players are not really 'evil' in those circumstances and probably tend more toward Neutral, Chaotic Neutral, or Chaotic Good.

**One, or more, of my players act like Murder Hobo's.** 'Murder Hobos' are players who tend to kill anything they run across so they can take their stuff. Anti-social behavior has consequences, even in D&D. For example, if your players kill a shop keep, the town guard would respond. If they elude the town guard, a bounty might be put on their heads and a skilled bounty hunter may begin to track them down.

**My players don't role play.** Many newer players have difficulty role-playing their characters. It is best if you set the example during interactions with NPC's. Often players will say something like "My character asks the barkeep if there are rooms available". Rather than responding, "The barkeep has two rooms available", you should roleplay the barkeep with something like "Aye, we got rooms, but I don't rent to dark elves!" In my experience, players will eventually follow suit and begin to role play their characters.

**The party rogue always wants to split off from the party.** Some splitting of the party is inevitable. It is often a good idea to send a stealthy scout ahead of the group. The problems arise when it begins to take up a large share of game time, and others are forced to sit and watch rather than play an active role. If it becomes an issue, one method to limit split parties is to jump back and forth between the two groups every couple of rounds. The inactive party will usually lose patience and begin to take actions, eventually causing the group to rejoin. In cases where one player just wants to do their own thing, they should quickly end up in over their head. Challenges should be balanced for an entire party, so a single player should be quickly overcome once discovered. Then that player gets to sit and wait for the others to rescue them. Sort of a D&D time-out for not playing well with others!

**My players are always distracted during play.** The number one cause for distracted players is because the players are not active enough in the game. Try to keep all the players engaged as much as possible. If players remain distracted, usually due to cell phones in my experience, just ban cell phones at the table. In the rare cases where a player is just totally unable to focus on the game, you can either be patient and gradually try to get them more interested or you can remove that person from the group.

**My players take too long to act during combat.** Players should have their action ready when their initiative comes up, especially if you use the system outlined above as they will always know how long it is until they act. It is normal that players may need to re-evaluate their planned action based on changing circumstances, but don't forget a combat round is six seconds. Their characters won't have a lot of time to make decisions. If players are consistently taking too long to act, inform them they have ten seconds to act or they lose their turn and start a ten second countdown. They will quickly get the idea and take their action more quickly.

**One of my players always telling other players what their characters should do.** It is best to direct your questions to the active player, i.e. "What are YOU doing?" and remind the kibitzing player that they may act on their turn. If it continues to be a problem, inform players that they should have their action ready when their initiative comes up and use a countdown to minimize table talk if necessary.



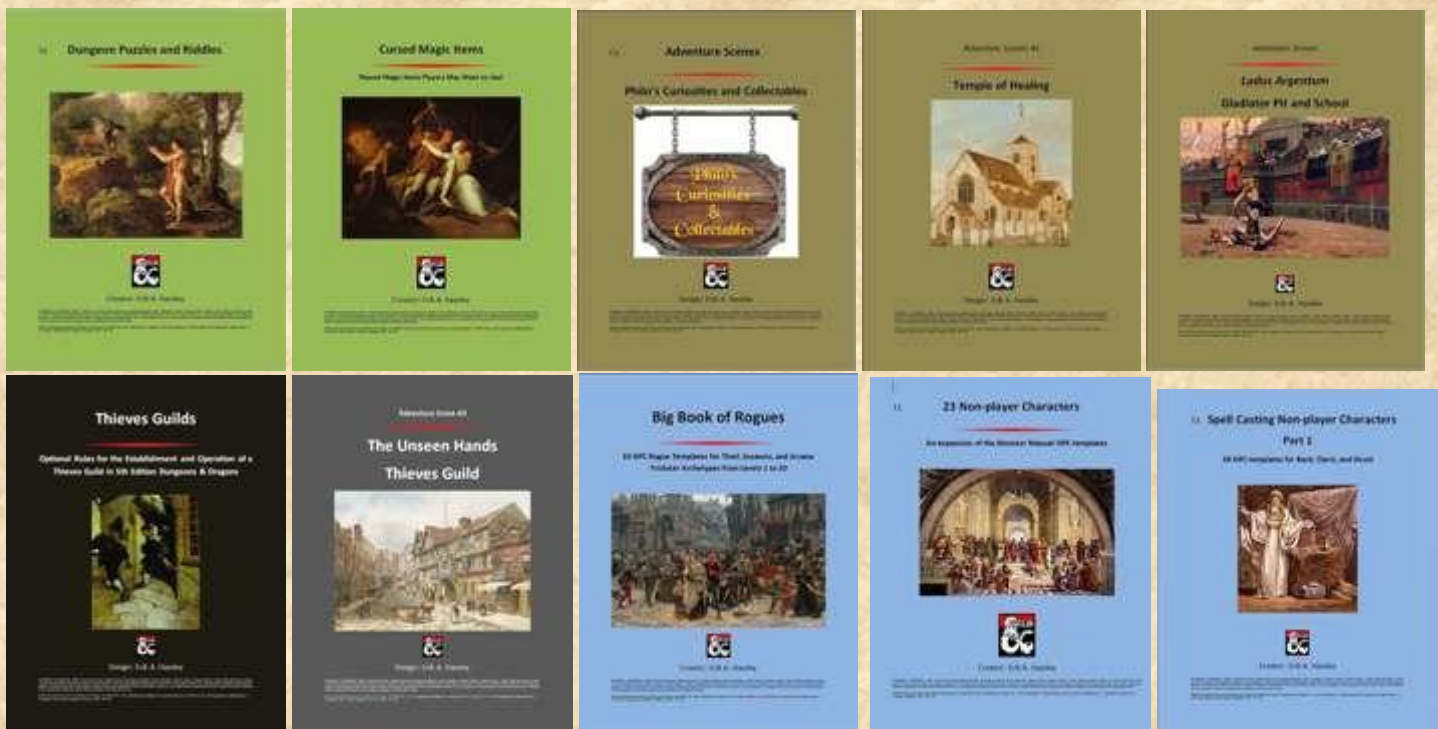
**There is interpersonal conflict at my table.** This covers a myriad of scenarios, from boyfriend/girlfriend problems to personality conflicts. A D&D group is no different from any other social group, and it should be dealt with in the same way. The issue should be addressed in an honest non-confrontational manner and resolved. It should not be allowed to fester. If there is no possible resolution (as if often the case in cases such as two married players getting divorced) then the group will probably need to be reformed, excluding one or more players.

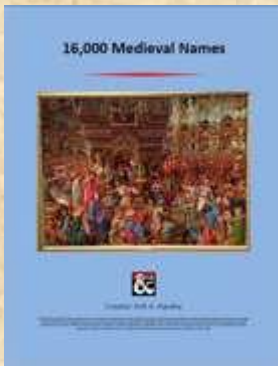
**One of my players is a 'Meta-Gamer' and is always looking up monsters or knows the adventure.** Re-skinning is your friend. If you want to include mind players in your adventure, change their appearance so it is not readily apparent that is the monster the party is facing. You can also change a creatures attacks and abilities, but be careful to retain game balance.

**My players are too powerful.** Many new DM's will give out too many magic items, messing up the power curve and making it hard to properly challenge the party, especially with published adventures. As a DM, there are several tools you can use to restore the balance. Items might be destroyed though magic or environmental effects. They might also be stolen from the players. The prior owner of a magic item may appear and reclaim it. A needed ally may demand an item as payment for a required service, such as raise dead. Players might be taken captive and stripped of their belongings and only be able to recover a portion of them. Another option is to add monsters to encounters. I am a fan of a 'second wave' technique. If the party is roflstomping an encounter, I will have a second wave of monsters join the combat, just to make things a little more challenging.

**One of my players has 'My Guy' syndrome.** 'My Guy' Syndrome is when a players allows themselves to take actions that ruin the game for other players because it is what 'my guy' would do. The classic case of 'my guy' is a rogue stealing large amounts of treasure from the party. When people play D&D, there is an unwritten social contract that the players won't purposefully ruin the other players enjoyment of the game. 'My Guy' Syndrome breaks this contract. To be clear, this is a meta-game concept. The player hiding behind 'my guy' is clearly within his rights and possibly is correct in that it IS what his character would do. That does not excuse the behavior and it should be dealt with at a meta-game level, through a conversation with the players as a group. Again, it should be honest and non-confrontational. Often, once the issue is out in the open, the player will reign in the actions that ruin the game for the other players.

I hope you find this information useful and be sure to check out my offerings on [dmsguild.com](http://dmsguild.com)!





#### USEFUL RESOURCES:

<http://dnd.wizards.com/>

[www.enworld.org](http://www.enworld.org)

[dmsguild.com](http://dmsguild.com)

reddit - /r/DND, /r/DUNGEONSANDDDRAGONS, /r/DNDNEXT, /r/DNDBEHINDTHESCREEN

Facebook Groups – Dungeons & Dragons 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, D&D DMs Only