

A character with long hair and a beard, wearing a dark, fur-lined tunic and a hat, stands in a workshop. The workshop is filled with large, glowing blue cylindrical containers, some of which contain glowing blue creatures. The character is holding a long, dark staff or wand. The scene is lit with a mix of blue and purple light, creating a mysterious and industrial atmosphere.

**THE LAZY DM'S**  
**FORGE OF FOES**

**TOOLS AND GUIDES TO BUILD, CUSTOMIZE, AND RUN  
FANTASTIC MONSTERS IN YOUR 5E FANTASY GAMES**

**TEOS ABADÍA • SCOTT FITZGERALD GRAY • MICHAEL E. SHEA**

# THE LAZY DM'S **FORGE OF FOES**

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# INTRODUCTION

Thousands of years before anyone ever rolled a twenty-sided die, monsters fueled people's imaginations and filled us with tales of high adventure. Nearly every culture known to humanity has its own stories of creatures fantastic and horrifying, and of the heroes who face them.

We love monsters. We love them because they exist outside of our world and yet feel real to us. We love how strange they can be. We love the sense of danger that arises when we talk about them. We love how they live in our imaginations.

And when monsters come to life in our imaginations, we love to face and defeat them. We battle dragons and demons and undead—and conquer them in tales we'll remember all our lives.

Within the *Forge of Foes*, we build these monsters. Here in the forge, we'll modify creatures, giving them new attacks and strange new abilities. We'll harden their scales and sharpen their claws. We'll create entirely new creatures from our endless collective imagination, then watch them crawl into the stories of high adventure we share with our friends.

We'll also talk about monsters, including how to run boss monsters, how to run hordes of monsters, and how to choose the right monsters for our adventures and for the fun of our gaming group.

Let us delve into deep caves, beneath rotted and forgotten crypts, and into unholy temple chambers sweet with the iron scent of blood to see what monsters lie within.

## WHAT IS A FOE?

Within the context of this book, a **foe is any physically hostile creature**. It might be an inanimate statue guarding an undiscovered tomb. It might be a knight challenging the characters to a duel. It might be cultists seeking victims for a terrible ritual. It might be the dragon of the frozen mountains, newly awakened and now seeking the treasures acquired by neighboring miners.

Not all foes are monsters, however, and we need to take care throwing around that label lest we apply it to those undeserving of the title. Many beings and creatures commonly labeled as "monsters" can ultimately be dealt with through negotiation, even as many normal-looking NPCs might be secret—or not-so-secret—monsters in their own lives. The cultists cited above might not be monsters at all in their own minds, but only a secluded sect pushed to usher in a new age of enlightenment. That awakened dragon might be driven to violence by suffering—and might ask the characters to help solve their woes.

This book often uses the words "foe," "creature," and "monster" synonymously. But it does so with the understanding that there might be many ways to deal with these foes outside of straight-up combat, and that some apparent monsters might be anything but.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Created by Teos Abadía, Scott Fitzgerald Gray, and Mike Shea (see "About the Authors" on page ##), this book isn't a typical collection of foes. There are already many wonderful books of predesigned monsters GMs can use in fifth edition fantasy roleplaying games. Instead, this book gives you the tools to build your own foes and modify foes from other sources. *Forge of Foes* works alongside your other books of monsters, but it also works well on its own to help you make the monsters you need for your games.

Though part of the Lazy DM series, this book stands on its own. *Forge of Foes* focuses exclusively on monsters—how to make them, how to modify them, and how to run them. Although the concepts presented here work hand-in-hand with those found in *Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master*, *The Lazy DM's Workbook*, and *The Lazy DM's Companion*, you don't need those books to get value out of this one.

Like the other books from the Lazy DM series, this book aims to help you more easily run great games. You're busy. You have friends coming to your table tonight. You have monsters you need to throw into your game right now. *Forge of Foes* can help you build or modify those monsters quickly and easily, with all the details, tactics, and flavor you desire.

## WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book assumes you're familiar with the core rules of the fifth edition of the world's most popular roleplaying game. You don't need significant experience running 5e games to make use of this book, but the more experience you have, the more value you'll get out of it.

This book isn't a substitute for reading the fifth edition core books, however. Take the time to read and absorb the material found in those books to make the most use out of this book and improve your games.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book can serve you in three ways.

First, you can use *Forge of Foes* to quickly build monsters from scratch, and to make those monsters as simple or as complex as you want. Starting with baseline statistics, you can add on templates and features to fill out a monster's mechanics as you desire, and as best fits the story of the monster.

Second, you can use the statistics, templates, and features in this book to modify existing monsters. Doing so can provide you with endless variants of monsters from products you already own.

Third, you can absorb the advice and discussions in this book to think differently about how you prepare and run monsters in your own games.

So whether you run monsters straight from your favorite monster book, customize published monsters yourself, or build monsters from scratch, *Forge of Foes* has you covered.

# BUILDING A QUICK MONSTER

Sometimes you need a monster right now but you don't have the right one handy. Maybe the creature you're imagining doesn't exist in any given book of published monsters, or you simply don't have the time to look it up. Maybe you're in the middle of your game and want some quick statistics for a creature you didn't think you'd need. For all these problems, this section offers solutions.

The core tool for building a quick monster for a 5e game is the Monster Statistics by Challenge Rating table, which offers you a set of statistics that can be used to build and run a quick monster of any challenge rating (CR). You then have two paths for customizing a monster built from these baseline statistics—with flavor and description during the game, or with a refinement of the creature's mechanics.

It's worth your time to review and understand how this table works before you start using it in your game. Read the column descriptions. Understand the relationship between a monster's challenge rating and equivalent character level. Once you've internalized how this table works, you can use it in seconds to build a monster and throw that foe into your game.

This table works hand-in-hand with this book's options for building encounters, including the encounter-building tables on page ## and the encounter-building guidelines on page ##. It also works alongside further customization options such as monster type templates (page ##) and monster powers (page ##), to make your chosen creature more tactically interesting or to better fit the story and flavor they have in the game.

## COLUMN DESCRIPTIONS

The table includes the following columns, which will become more familiar to you as you build your monsters.

**Monster CR.** The challenge ratings presented in the CR column are the baseline measure to determine the relative difficulty of a monster in combat. You'll almost always reference this column first when building a quick monster.

**Equivalent Character Level.** This column describes the roughly equivalent level of a single character facing a single monster of this challenge rating in a hard encounter. This gives you a quick way to determine how difficult this monster will be when facing characters of a particular level.

As you can see from the table, matching character level to challenge rating isn't a simple mathematical process. There are a number of character levels missing from the table where certain challenge ratings represent a large jump in how tough a monster is.

**AC/DC.** This column indicates the typical Armor Class of a monster of the indicated challenge rating. It also describes the typical Difficulty Class if this monster uses a DC for any of their attacks or other features.

**Hit Points.** This column offers the baseline hit points of a monster of a given challenge rating. Feel free to add

or subtract hit points within the suggested range based on the monster's in-world features or physiology, or the pacing you want to maintain during a battle.

**Proficient Ability Bonus.** This column gives the expected bonus for abilities with which the monster is proficient, adding the monster's ability score modifier and proficiency bonus together. This number can be used as an attack bonus, or as a bonus for proficient saving throws and ability checks. (Ability-based modifiers without proficiency are fixed values between -2 and +4, based on the monster's story.)

**Damage per Round.** This column contains the total expected damage that a monster can deal in a round. Higher-CR monsters typically split this total damage among a number of attacks instead of doing one big attack that either deals a tremendous amount of damage or misses completely. If a single effect targets two or more characters, such as a fiery breath weapon, the damage for that effect should be half of the indicated number.

**Number of Attacks.** This column notes the number of attacks a monster of a particular challenge rating typically makes per round. The damage per round from the previous column is divided among these multiple attacks in the following column.

**Damage per Attack.** This column shows the baseline amount of damage a monster deals per attack when using the default number of attacks in the previous column. It includes both average damage and a dice equation.

**Example Monsters.** This column offers example monsters for each challenge rating. This can help you gauge where your monster fits among existing 5e monsters.

## BUILDING A MONSTER

With the Monster Statistics by Challenge Rating table at hand, you can use the following quick steps to build a custom monster from scratch. The first four steps alone let you easily create a monster ready to run in your game. The optional steps that follow then let you fill out the monster's details and custom mechanics as desired.

### STEP 1: DETERMINE CHALLENGE RATING

Begin by determining the challenge rating for your quick monster based on that creature's fiction in the world. When considering the challenge rating of a custom monster, you might compare them to existing creatures on the table, so that if the in-world power of your monster compares well to a skeleton, the monster might have a challenge rating of 1/4. If they're more like a fire giant, they might have a challenge rating of 9. Look at the list of example monsters and ask yourself which monster makes the best comparison to yours. Then assign your creature that monster's challenge rating.

## ALTERNATIVELY, WHAT CHALLENGE RATING DO YOU NEED?

You might also want to choose a challenge rating based on the level of the characters, using the Equivalent Character Level column of the table. If you want an encounter with four monsters who are roughly equal in power to four characters, this column lets you figure out those monsters' statistics. It also helps you build NPCs intended to match a particular character level, such as a knight, a wizard, or a rogue.

## STEP 2: WRITE DOWN THE BASELINE STATISTICS

Once you've determined a challenge rating for your monster, write down their statistics. You might jot them on an index card, in a text editor on your computer, or wherever you keep notes for your adventures and campaigns. You might end up customizing those statistics, though, so be ready to change them.

## STEP 3: DETERMINE PROFICIENT ABILITIES

Next, determine which abilities—Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma—a monster is proficient in, using the Proficient Ability Bonus column on the table. This sets up the bonus a monster has when using any ability with which they're proficient, and is largely based on the monster's story. A big, beefy monster might be proficient in skills or saving throws involving Strength and Constitution. A smart mastermind monster might be proficient in Wisdom- and Intelligence-based skills and saving throws. A fast monster might be proficient in Dexterity (Acrobatics) checks and Dexterity saving throws, while an otherworldly monster might be proficient in Charisma-based skills and saves.

The bonus indicated in the table is what the monster uses for saving throws and ability checks with those proficient abilities. Just remember that the number on the table already includes a monster's proficiency bonus in addition to their ability score modifier.

## STEP 4: DETERMINE REMAINING ABILITIES

Next, you can determine the modifier (either a penalty or a bonus) that a monster uses for their nonproficient abilities. This is for all the ability checks and saving throws a monster isn't great at, and can be determined by asking yourself how strong a monster feels in those abilities. The bonus can range anywhere from  $-2$  to  $+4$ , and is independent of a monster's challenge rating. Even a high-challenge monster might have a lousy Dexterity saving throw. When in doubt, or to speed things up, use a modifier of

$+0$  for these nonproficient abilities. You can always change this during the game if a higher or lower number makes sense.

## YOU'RE READY TO GO

At this point, you have enough information on hand to run your monster in a game, with little else needed. However, you can also continue with a few more quick steps to further customize your monster, making them more distinct.

## OPTIONAL STEP: CONSIDER ARMOR CLASS

Though the Monster Statistics by Challenge Rating table offers a value for Armor Class that increases with challenge rating, you can modify a monster's Armor Class further based on their story. A big beefy titan set up as a CR 16 monster might still be easy to hit—maybe with an Armor Class of 14.

It's easiest to think of Armor Class on a 10 to 20 scale, with 10 being the equivalent of an unarmored opponent with no Dexterity bonus, and 20 being an opponent wearing plate armor with a shield. (Armor Class can go above 20 or below 10, though.)



## MONSTER STATISTICS BY CHALLENGE RATING

CR	Equivalent Character Level	AC/DC	Hit Points	Proficient Ability Bonus	Damage Per Round	Number of Attacks	Damage Per Attack	Example 5e Monsters
0	< 1	10	3 (2–4)	+2	2	1	2 (1d4)	Commoner, rat, spider
1/8	< 1	11	9 (7–11)	+3	3	1	3 (1d4 + 1)	Bandit, cultist, giant rat
1/4	1	11	13 (10–16)	+3	5	1	5 (1d6 + 2)	Acolyte, skeleton, wolf
1/2	2	12	22 (17–28)	+4	10	1	10 (2d6 + 3)	Black bear, scout, shadow
1	3	12	33 (25–41)	+5	12	2	6 (1d8 + 2)	Dire wolf, specter, spy
2	5	13	45 (34–56)	+5	17	2	9 (2d6 + 2)	Ghast, ogre, priest
3	7	13	65 (49–81)	+5	23	2	12 (2d8 + 3)	Knight, mummy, werewolf
4	9	14	85 (64–106)	+6	29	2	15 (3d8 + 2)	Ettin, ghost
5	10	15	95 (71–119)	+7	35	3	12 (3d6 + 2)	Elemental, gladiator, vampire spawn
6	11	15	112 (84–140)	+7	41	3	14 (3d6 + 4)	Mage, medusa, wyvern
7	12	15	127 (95–159)	+7	47	3	16 (3d8 + 3)	Stone giant, young black dragon
8	13	15	136 (102–170)	+7	53	3	18 (3d10 + 2)	Assassin, frost giant
9	15	16	145 (109–181)	+8	59	3	22 (3d12 + 3)	Bone devil, fire giant, young blue dragon
10	16	17	155 (116–194)	+9	65	4	16 (3d8 + 3)	Stone golem, young red dragon
11	17	17	165 (124–206)	+9	71	4	18 (3d10 + 2)	Djinni, efreeti, horned devil
12	18	17	175 (131–219)	+9	77	4	19 (3d10 + 3)	Archmage, erinyes
13	19	18	184 (138–230)	+10	83	4	21 (4d8 + 3)	Adult white dragon, storm giant, vampire
14	20	19	196 (147–245)	+11	89	4	22 (4d10)	Adult black dragon, ice devil
15	> 20	19	210 (158–263)	+11	95	5	19 (3d10 + 3)	Adult green dragon, mummy lord, purple worm
16	> 20	19	229 (172–286)	+11	101	5	22 (3d12 + 3)	Adult blue dragon, iron golem, marilith
17	> 20	20	246 (185–308)	+12	107	5	21 (4d8 + 3)	Adult red dragon
18	> 20	21	266 (200–333)	+13	113	5	23 (4d10 + 1)	Demilich
19	> 20	21	285 (214–356)	+13	119	5	24 (4d10 + 2)	Balor
20	> 20	21	300 (225–375)	+13	132	5	26 (4d12)	Ancient white dragon, pit fiend
21	> 20	22	325 (244–406)	+14	150	5	30 (4d12 + 4)	Ancient black dragon, lich, solar
22	> 20	23	350 (263–438)	+15	168	5	34 (4d12 + 8)	Ancient green dragon
23	> 20	23	375 (281–469)	+15	186	5	37 (6d10 + 4)	Ancient blue dragon, kraken
24	> 20	23	400 (300–500)	+15	204	5	41 (6d10 + 8)	Ancient red dragon
25	> 20	24	430 (323–538)	+16	222	5	44 (6d10 + 11)	
26	> 20	25	460 (345–575)	+17	240	5	48 (6d10 + 15)	
27	> 20	25	490 (368–613)	+17	258	5	52 (6d10 + 19)	
28	> 20	25	540 (405–675)	+17	276	5	55 (6d10 + 22)	
29	> 20	26	600 (450–750)	+18	294	5	59 (6d10 + 26)	
30	> 20	27	666 (500–833)	+19	312	5	62 (6d10 + 29)	Tarrasque

Keep in mind that missing an opponent isn't much fun for a player. Lower-AC opponents, even those with more hit points, are often more fun to fight than high-AC opponents with fewer hit points.

### OPTIONAL STEP: CUSTOMIZE ATTACKS

The table includes a recommended number of attacks for a monster, an attack bonus, and the amount of damage those attacks should deal. If desired, tailor this damage to fit the monster's story. Choose a creature's damage type, such as fire for a flaming greatsword attack or necrotic for a death blast. You can also mix up multiple damage types, so that a CR 10 hell knight might have a longsword attack dealing both slashing and fire damage.

To further customize a monster, you can divide up their total damage per round into a different number of attacks

than indicated on the table, if that makes sense for the monster's story. (As noted above, for attacks that target two or more opponents, use half the indicated damage.)

### OPTIONAL STEP: FURTHER MODIFY STATISTICS

Depending on the story of your monster, you can make general adjustments to their baseline statistics however you see fit. For example, you might lower a monster's hit points and increase the damage they deal to create a dangerous foe who drops out of the fight quickly. However, always consider whether such changes make a combat encounter more fun to play. It might make sense to create a monster with high hit points and a higher Armor Class who deals less damage, thinking that those two things balance out. But fighting such a monster can easily become a slog. Likewise, a monster

with significantly fewer hit points that deals high damage might end up being inadvertently deadly if too many characters roll low on attacks, or could feel pointless if the monster is killed too quickly.

## OPTIONAL STEP: ADD QUICK TYPES AND FEATURES

The “Common Monster Type Templates” section includes a number of monster types you can apply when creating a quick monster. Each monster type includes the most important features of that type, whether corporeal undead, elemental, fiend, and so forth. That section also includes a handful of the most popular powers you might add onto a monster, with features, traits, and attacks greatly expanded upon in “Monster Powers” on page ##.

## USING THE TABLE WITH PUBLISHED MONSTERS

While the Monster Statistics by Challenge Rating table is intended to build monsters from scratch, it can easily be used as a reference to better understand how a published monster might act in combat. If a published CR 4 monster has 30 hit points but deals 35 damage per round, you can see from the table that their hit points are low but their damage is high compared to the creature’s baseline challenge rating. Such a monster hits hard for their challenge rating, but goes down fast when hit themselves.

## COMMON MONSTER TYPE TEMPLATES

This section offers a sampling of monster type templates whose traits you can apply to your quick-build monster, new powers tied specific monster types (including actions, bonus actions, reactions, and additional traits), and advice on how to use those powers. Some templates use the challenge rating of the creature you’re creating to calculate saving throw DCs, damage, and other variables. You can find a greater selection of monster type templates and guidance for using them in “Monster Powers” on page ##.

## ABERRATION

Aberrations generally have high Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma scores, as well as darkvision with either a 60- or 120-foot range. An aberration speaks a language such as Deep Speech or communicates telepathically.

**Senses** darkvision 120 ft.

**Languages** Deep Speech, telepathy 120 ft.

You can further represent an aberration’s nature by giving them any of the following powers.

**Grasping Tentacles (Reaction).** When this creature hits with an attack, they sprout a tentacle that grasps the target. In addition to the attack’s normal effects, the target is grappled (escape DC = 11 + 1/2 CR) and restrained. Until the grapple ends, this creature can’t use the grappling tentacle against another target. This creature can sprout 1d4 tentacles.

This reaction is a fun way to surprise your players. Describe how the tentacles emerge from the foe’s limb or body to grasp a character. You can roll for the number of tentacles or choose a number that reflects the creature’s desired challenge rating.

**Dominating Gaze (Action, Recharge 4–6).** If this creature has the multiattack action, Dominating Gaze can take the place of one of the attacks used in that action. This creature chooses a target they can see within 60 feet of them. The target must succeed on a Charisma saving throw (DC = 12 + 1/2 CR) or be forced to immediately make their most effective weapon attack or at-will spell or magical attack against a target chosen by this creature.

This action communicates the foe’s otherworldly nature. The momentary domination could come in the form of mind control, changing what the target sees, or confusing them. Describing horrid whispers of the beauty of the stars waking to devour the world is optional.

## BEAST

Beasts might have low ability scores if they are mundane creatures, with their strongest scores in either Strength or Dexterity. They might also have medium to high Constitution or Wisdom to represent hardiness and cunning. Beasts typically have darkvision with a 60-foot range, and they don’t speak a language. Beasts often have the ability to climb, swim, or fly, and they might be proficient in the Athletics, Perception, or Survival skills.

You can customize a quick-build beast using one of the powers below, or a power from the “Monstrosity” section.

**Hit and Run (Action).** As part of this action, this creature first takes one of their other actions. After that action completes, this creature can move 30 feet without provoking opportunity attacks. If the creature ends their movement behind cover or in an obscured area, they can make a Dexterity (Stealth) check to hide.

This action allows a beast to act as a predator, attacking and repositioning themselves for maximum effect.



**Empowered by Carnage (Reaction).** When this creature hits another creature with a melee attack and the damage from the attack reduces the target below half its hit points or to 0 hit points, this creature can immediately move up to their speed and repeat the melee attack against another target.

This reaction captures the ferocious nature of the beast, motivated by seeing prey take a grievous wound or meet their end.

## CELESTIAL

As divine beings of the Outer Planes, celestials have high ability scores. Charisma is often especially high to represent a celestial's leadership qualities, eloquence, and beauty. Celestials often have resistance to radiant damage, and they might also have resistance to damage from nonmagical attacks and immunity to the charmed, exhaustion, and frightened conditions. The mightiest celestials possess truesight with a range of 120 feet, speak and understand all languages, and communicate telepathically.

**Damage Resistances** radiant; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

**Condition Immunities** charmed, exhaustion, frightened

**Senses** darkvision 120 ft.

**Languages** all, telepathy 120 ft.

You can also select one or both of the powers below to further enhance a creature's celestial nature.

**Winged (Trait).** This creature has a flying speed equal to their best other speed, and can hover.

Glorious celestial wings might be shaped of feathers, ice, or radiant energy. You can increase the flying speed if you wish the celestial to have more mobility.

**Mirrored Judgment (Reaction).** When this creature is the sole target of an attack or spell, they can choose another valid target to also be targeted by the attack or spell.

A celestial might change their face or armor to become reflective like a mirror, so that an attacking creature can contemplate their actions.

## CONSTRUCT

A construct's strongest ability scores are usually Strength and Constitution, though a construct built for agility might also have a high Dexterity. Constructs typically also have either blindsight or darkvision, and a selection of damage immunities and condition immunities to reflect their nonliving nature. They usually can't speak, but might understand one or more languages.

**Damage Immunities** poison, psychic

**Condition Immunities** blinded, charmed, deafened, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

**Senses** blindsight 60 ft. (blind beyond this radius) or darkvision 60 ft.

**Languages** understands certain languages but can't speak

You can further enhance a construct with one of the following features.

**Armor Plating (Trait).** This creature has a +2 bonus to Armor Class. Each time the creature's hit points are reduced by one-quarter of their maximum value, this bonus decreases by 1, to a maximum penalty to Armor Class of -2.

The high Armor Class of a construct might feel initially frustrating, but as you describe the pieces of armor plating being torn off, players will sense the tide turning. When the bonus to Armor Class becomes a penalty, describe how the rents in the armor allow characters access to the construct's inner workings, speeding up the foe's demise!

**Sentinel (Trait).** This creature can make opportunity attacks without using a reaction.

This simple feature really shines when you describe the construct's sharp eyes zeroing in on the characters, or how the construct swivels part of their body to make an opportunity attack.

## DRAGON

Draconic creatures have high Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution scores, as well as high Charisma scores. A dragon has immunity to any damage type used for their breath weapon, has blindsight and darkvision, and speaks Draconic. They often have proficiency in Perception, and in one or more other skills reflecting their interests or nature.

**Damage Immunities** damage type associated with the dragon's breath weapon

**Senses** blindsight 60 ft., darkvision 120 ft.

**Languages** Common, Draconic

A true dragon or a closely related draconic creature has a breath weapon that is fearsome to behold. You can adjust the area of effect or damage depending on how powerful your draconic creature is meant to be.



**Dragon's Breath (Action, Recharge 5–6).** This creature breathes to deal poison, cold, or fire damage in a 30-foot cone, or breathes to deal acid or lightning damage in a 60-foot line that is 5 feet wide. Each creature in the area of the exhalation must make a Dexterity saving throw against a line or a Constitution saving throw against a cone (DC = 12 + 1/2 CR), taking 4 × CR damage of the appropriate type on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

You might also wish to provide a dragon or draconic creature with an additional power to reflect their nature.

**Dragon's Gaze (Bonus Action, Recharge 6).** One creature within 60 feet of the dragon must make a Wisdom saving throw (DC = 13 + 1/2 CR) or become frightened of the dragon. While frightened in this way, each time the target takes damage, they take extra damage equal to 1/2 CR. The target can repeat the saving throw at the end of each of their turns, ending the effect on themselves on a success.

Dragon's Gaze puts the pressure on a character, and goes well with threats a dragon makes as they promise that the heroes are about to meet their doom.

**Draconic Retaliation (Trait).** When this creature is reduced to half their hit points or fewer, they can immediately use either their breath weapon or their Multiattack action. If the creature is incapacitated or otherwise unable to use this trait, they can use it when they are next able to.

This trait showcases a dragon's fury and might just as the characters appear to gain the upper hand. For a particularly fearsome foe—or particularly strong characters—you can use this trait again when the dragon is reduced to one quarter of their hit points or fewer.

## ELEMENTAL

Elementals generally have strong physical ability scores. They have resistance to damage of the type they are associated with (acid, bludgeoning, cold, fire, lightning, or thunder), and might have immunity to that damage if wholly created from elemental energy. An elemental usually has immunity to poison damage and certain conditions, depending on their nature. They have darkvision and speak the language associated with their element.

**Damage Resistances** damage type the creature is associated with, if appropriate; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

**Damage Immunities** damage type the creature is associated with, if appropriate; poison

**Condition Immunities** exhaustion, grappled, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, prone, restrained, unconscious

**Senses** darkvision 60 ft.

An elemental can be further enhanced with one of the following features.

**Elemental Attacks (Trait).** This creature's weapons or limbs are infused with energy of the type they are associated with (acid, bludgeoning, cold, fire, lightning, or thunder), dealing that damage type instead of their normal type.

This is a basic feature to communicate the nature of an elemental monster. Reinforce this through roleplaying, describing the foe's form and appearance. Are they a being

of fire? Are they wielding weapons that they ignite with fire?

**Elemental Aura (Trait).** This creature radiates an aura of elemental energy of the type they are associated with. Any creature who moves within 10 feet of this creature for the first time on a turn or starts their turn there takes 5 damage of the selected energy type (10 damage if this creature is CR 12 or higher).

Does your elemental monster radiate extreme cold? Do sparks fly from them, or does a cloud of stones encircle them? An elemental aura communicates a creature's nature clearly, and presents a tactical challenge for melee-focused characters. For an alternative approach, have this trait activate only when the creature drops below half their hit points, as their elemental essence leaks out of their body.

## FEY

Fey creatures can vary greatly in their traits and actions, but often have high Charisma and Dexterity scores and moderate-to-high Wisdom scores. Fey usually speak Sylvan or Elvish in addition to Common, and many speak giant. Most fey have darkvision, and proficiency in the Deception, Perception, or Persuasion skills.

**Senses** darkvision 60 ft.

**Languages** Common, Elvish, Sylvan

A fey creature can be further enhanced with one of the following features.

**Teleporting Step (Bonus Action).** This creature teleports a number of feet up to their walking speed to an unoccupied space they can see.

This option makes a fey creature a master of mobility, which you can richly describe in a number of ways. Does the creature summon, then step through portals? Vanish into shadow? Move from one plant to another? Transform into wind and appear in another location?

**Beguiling Aura (Trait).** An enemy of this creature who moves within 25 feet of them for the first time on a turn or starts their turn there must succeed on a Wisdom saving throw (DC 10 + 1/2 CR) or be charmed by this creature until the end of their turn.

Representing the enigmatic and compelling nature of many fey, this aura can force a character to change their tactics during their turn. It's especially effective on a foe you wish to protect, making it harder for melee characters to engage that foe, and incentivizing those characters to pick other targets first. You can vary the nature of the charm effect, whether the fey is adorned in the finest clothing, can change their appearance to look like a friend, or weaves ancient words to beguile their enemies.

## FIEND

Ability scores for fiends favor their physical characteristics, though many also have moderate or higher Charisma scores. Devils hoping to entice mortals

into deals also often have proficiency in the Deception skill. Fiends typically have resistance to nonmagical attacks, and might have one or more elemental resistances. Demons speak Abyssal, while devils speak Infernal. Both usually have telepathy up to 120 feet.

**Damage Resistances** elemental resistances; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical attacks

**Damage Immunities** poison

**Condition Immunities** poisoned

**Senses** darkvision 120 ft.

**Languages** Abyssal or Infernal, telepathy 120 ft.

In addition, you can add any of the following features to enhance the fiendish capabilities of a foe.

**Empowered by Death (Trait).** When a creature within 30 feet of this creature dies, this creature regains CR × 2 hit points.

What makes this feature interesting is that the foe's allies dying also triggers it. Give this trait to a fiendish boss so that they can gain hit points as their minions die. They might even kill one off just for fun.

**Relish Your Failure (Trait).** When a creature within 50 feet of this creature fails a saving throw, this creature gains 1/2 CR temporary hit points. If this creature already has temporary hit points, they instead regain 1/2 CR hit points, up to their hit point maximum.

The fiend calls out any character's failure, mocking them and drawing strength from their demise. This trait works best when your foes have actions or spells requiring saving throws.

## GIANT

Giants have Strength and Constitution scores as formidable as their size, but their Dexterity scores are typically lower. Some giants only speak Giant, while others might speak Common, Goblin, or other languages.

**Forceful Blow (Reaction, Recharge 4–6).** When this creature hits a target with a weapon attack, roll 1d4 + 1. The target is pushed 5 times that many feet away from this creature.

You can alter the size of the die to reflect the type of giant, or assign a fixed value for the distance if you feel that would work better. Sending characters flying is rewarding. Try not to enjoy it too much.

**Shove Allies (Action).** This creature can shove any adjacent allied creatures that are smaller in size than this creature. Each shoved ally moves up to 15 feet away from the foe, and can make a melee weapon attack if they end that movement and have a creature within their reach.

Roleplay the giant as they shove smaller creatures around them, forcing them to fight for their lives. Players might enjoy the tactical nature of this approach, since defeating enough of the giant's smaller allies makes this trait less effective.

## HUMANOID

Ability scores for humanoids can reflect both their role and their species. The wide variety of humanoid types and the range of standard NPC stat blocks that can represent humanoids makes it difficult to create templates for

specifically humanoid features. Instead, you can select from the powers found in the “Common Monster Powers” section below, choosing those that enable your specific concept.

## MONSTROSITY

Monstrosities often have high Constitution and either a high Strength or Dexterity. Their Intelligence and Charisma are often low. Many monstrosities lack a language, and might have skill proficiency in Athletics, Perception, or Stealth. A burrow, climb, or swim speed might be appropriate.

The following powers can be used to show off a truly monstrous monstrosity. For monstrosities such as centaurs and doppelgangers who are decidedly less monstrous in their appearance and outlook, you can use the powers in the “Common Monster Powers” instead.

**Devour Ally (Bonus Action).** This creature swallows an adjacent allied creature smaller than itself. This creature regains CR × 3 hit points and the devoured ally is reduced to 0 hit points.

This power works well for a massive monstrosity paired with smaller, weaker creatures that it can slay at will—or even swallow whole. This forces the characters to choose between focusing on the larger foe or killing off the weaker ones to prevent the boss from healing.

**Lingering Wound (Reaction, Recharge 6).** When this creature hits a target with an attack and deals damage, the target takes a lingering wound. At the start of each of their turns, a target with a lingering wound takes the same damage dealt by the original attack. The target can attempt a DC 10 Constitution saving throw at the end of each of their turns, ending the effect on a success. A successful DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check made as an action by the target or a creature within 5 feet of them also ends the target's lingering wound.

Wounding strike can be described as blood loss from jagged fangs or claws, and can heighten a monstrosity's terrible nature.

## OOZE

Oozes almost always have low mental ability scores, and often have either low Strength or Dexterity scores based on their nature. Oozes might be proficient in the Stealth skill if they sneak up on opponents, or have transparent bodies or forms that blend into their environment. Oozes typically lack a language, and rely on blindsense to sense creatures in close proximity. They often have immunity to multiple conditions.

**Condition Immunities** blinded, charmed, deafened, exhaustion, frightened, prone

**Senses** blindsight 60 ft. (blind beyond this radius)

Many oozes have the ability to slip through small openings, which can be represented by the following trait.

**Malleable Form (Trait).** This creature has advantage on checks to begin or escape a grapple, and can move through a space as if they were two sizes smaller than their size without squeezing.

You can alter the malleable trait to reflect just how small a space an ooze creature can move through, with some

oozes able to move through a space as small as 1 inch wide without squeezing.

Additionally, you can choose any of the following powers to represent a creature's ooze nature.

**Oozing Passage (Trait).** This creature can move their normal speed through the space of other creatures of their size or smaller without provoking opportunity attacks. When they do so, each creature whose space this creature moves through must succeed on a Strength saving throw (DC 10 + 1/2 CR) or be restrained until the end of their next turn.

It can be fun to describe the moment when an ooze passes over and around a character. This can be a strong feature if the ooze moves through several characters, so you might alter tactics as needed to reflect the desired challenge rating. You can also remove the restrained effect to simply provide an interesting form of mobility.

**Elongating Limbs (Trait).** This creature can increase the length of their limbs or other appendages at will, increasing their reach by 5 feet. A creature moving out of this creature's reach or within their reach provokes an opportunity attack.

This trait is the surprise that keeps surprising. A monster can lengthen a limb to attack a foe, then use it later for a reaction attack. Describe the way the limb elongates in as grotesque a way as desired.

## PLANT

Plant creatures have extremely low mental attributes and low Dexterity scores. Many are stationary, or might have a slow walking speed of anywhere from 5 to 20 feet. Some plant creatures have darkvision, while others have blindsight out to a range of 30 or 60 feet. Some have resistance to bludgeoning and piercing damage, some have resistance to cold, fire, or poison damage, and some have immunity to conditions such as blinded, deafened, exhaustion, and prone. A few plants have vulnerability to fire.

You can add any of the following powers to a creature with a plant-like nature.

**Poison Thorns (Bonus Action, Recharge 5–6).** The next time this creature hits a target with an attack and deals damage, the attack deals extra poison damage equal to half the damage originally dealt, and the target gains the poisoned condition until the end of their next turn.

You can describe the thorns growing along the plant creature's appendages when they take this bonus action. Those thorns might be a bold color such as bright red or blue, and could drip poison.

**Grasping Roots (Trait).** When a creature attempts to leave a space within 5 feet of this creature, the moving creature must succeed on a Strength saving throw (DC 12 + 1/2 CR) or be restrained until the start of their next turn.

You can surprise players with this power, which reveals itself as a network of roots surrounding the plant, hidden beneath the soil or spreading along the cracks of a stone floor. When a character attempts to move away from or around the plant, the roots emerge and try to hold them fast.

## UNDEAD

Undead creatures typically have immunity to poison damage and the poisoned condition, and they do not need to eat or breathe. Some undead have immunity to the charmed and exhaustion conditions, and skeletal undead might have vulnerability to bludgeoning damage. Although some intelligent undead can speak, many undead lack the ability to speak even if they can understand language.

**Damage Immunities** poison

**Condition Immunities** exhaustion, poisoned

**Senses** darkvision 60 ft.

**Languages** understands all languages they knew in life but can't speak

You can also add any of the following powers to an undead creature.

**Undead Resilience (Trait).** If damage reduces this creature to 0 hit points, they must make a Constitution saving throw with a DC of 2 + the damage taken, unless the damage is radiant or from a critical hit. On a success, this creature drops to 1 hit point instead.

Add this trait to undead creatures that can withstand blows that would kill a living creature. Describe a successful save as the undead creature getting back up or refusing to fall, despite missing body parts or other terrible wounds.

**Stench of Death (Trait).** Any creature who starts their turn within 10 feet of this creature must succeed on a Constitution saving throw (DC 10 + 1/2 CR) or become poisoned until the start of their next turn. On a successful saving throw, the creature is immune to this creature's stench for 24 hours.

You can alter the effect's radius based on the ... uh, flavor you wish to impart.

## COMMON MONSTER POWERS

This section offers a selection of common monster powers you can apply to any quick-build monster to give them a stronger mechanical flavor, make them more tactically interesting, or reinforce their behavior in the story of your game.

**Damaging Aura (Trait).** Any creature who moves within 10 feet of this creature or who starts their turn there takes CR damage of a type appropriate for this creature.

Reskin this aura to meet your needs based on the damage type. A fire elemental can radiate an aura of fire, while an undead might radiate necrotic damage. You can also describe this effect as a magical aura dealing force damage, a holy aura dealing radiant damage, or even have a many-armed creature wielding swords to create an aura of slashing damage.

**Damaging Weapon (Trait).** This creature's melee weapon attacks deal an extra CR damage of a type appropriate for the creature.

As with Damaging Aura, this trait can be customized for many types of creatures by choosing a thematic damage type. A warrior might wield a greatsword that deals extra fire or lightning damage as a boon bestowed

by their god. A mini-boss undead could deal necrotic or cold damage to represent their innate supernatural power.

**Defender (Reaction).** When an ally adjacent to this creature is targeted by an attack or spell, this creature can make itself the intended target of the attack.

This is an excellent feature for minions who can intercept damage intended for a boss, or for a high-hit-point monster who can act as a defender of other more strategically important monsters.

**Delights in Suffering (Trait).** When attacking a target whose current hit points are below half their hit point maximum, this creature has advantage on attack rolls and deals an extra CR damage when they hit.

This trait makes a monster extremely dangerous in a tough fight, and encourages the characters to use healing resources.

**Frenzy (Trait).** At the start of their turn, this creature can gain advantage on all melee weapon attack rolls made during this turn, but attack rolls against them have advantage until the start of their next turn.

In addition to providing a combat boost for a foe, this trait can help accelerate a fight that's gone on long enough, by letting the characters hit the last remaining foes more often.

**Goes Down Fighting (Reaction).** When this creature is reduced to 0 hit points, they can immediately make one melee or ranged weapon attack before they fall unconscious.

Your monsters can get one last attack in when they have this trait.

**Lethal (Trait).** This creature has a +CR bonus to damage rolls, and scores a critical hit on an unmodified attack roll of 18–20.

This simple trait is a default you can use to increase the damage dealt by any monster.

**Mark the Target (Trait, Recharge 3–6).** When this creature hits a target with a ranged attack, allies of this creature who can see the target have advantage on attack rolls against the target until the start of this creature's next turn.

Let a monster apply pressure to a specific target with this power, especially if that target is wounded or in a vulnerable position. Make the foe's action obvious, so that the players know to react to it and can help the targeted character survive the ensuing focused fire.

**Not Dead Yet (Trait, 1/day).** When this creature is reduced to 0 hit points, they drop prone and are indistinguishable from a dead creature. At the start of their next turn, this creature stands up without using any movement and has hit points equal to  $2 \times \text{CR}$ . They can then take their turn normally.

This trait can represent a clever combatant playing dead, a warrior with incredible resolve, or a creature such as an undead or an ooze that refuses to die.

**Parry and Riposte (Reaction, Recharge 6).** This creature adds +3 to their Armor Class against one melee attack that would hit them. If the attack misses, this creature can immediately make a weapon attack against the creature making the parried attack.

This power works well for clever foes, especially those who are experts in the use of the weapons they wield.

**Quick Recovery (Trait).** At the start of this creature's turn, they can attempt a saving throw against any effect on them that can be ended by a successful saving throw.

This power can protect vulnerable combatants and bosses from being shut down by spells. It can represent magical mastery, divine favor, luck, or a specific quality of the creature. As a variant, using this trait could require the foe to take damage equal to  $2 \times \text{CR}$  if the new saving throw is successful, representing the exertion made to overcome the effect.

**Refuse to Surrender (Trait).** When this creature's current hit points are below half their hit point maximum, the creature deals CR extra damage with each of their attacks.

This trait works best when used on a single important foe, and when you describe the monster's refusal to surrender despite their many wounds. This lets the players know they can focus fire to finish the creature off, minimizing their damage potential.

**Reposition (Bonus Action, 1/Day).** Each ally within 60 feet of this creature who can see and hear them can immediately move their speed without provoking opportunity attacks.

Place this trait on a boss monster to allow their minions to quickly reposition, especially when it's useful for those minions to move through characters ready to attack.

**Sneaky (Trait).** This creature has advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks.

Foes fighting in obscured areas or behind cover can benefit from this trait, which can represent natural camouflage or well-practiced skill.

**Spell Fuel (Reaction).** When a target this creature can see (including themselves) either succeeds or fails on a saving throw against a spell or other magical effect, this creature can expend a spell slot to force the target to reroll the saving throw.

Appropriate for a powerful spellcaster, this power represents mastery over magical forces in its ability to enhance or weaken a spell's effect.

**Telekinetic Grasp (Action).** This creature chooses one creature they can see within 100 feet of them weighing less than 400 pounds. The target must succeed on a Strength saving throw (DC  $11 + 1/2 \text{ CR}$ ) or be pulled up to 80 feet directly toward this creature.

When characters like to hang back from the action, this power can draw them right into the heart of combat. It can represent psionic ability, a spell, or mastery over wind and air. You can also adjust the power to be a teleportation effect if that fits a monster's concept.

**Vanish (Bonus Action).** This creature can use the Disengage action, then can hide if they have cover.

Creatures accustomed to fighting from cover gain a formidable edge with this power. Consider pairing Vanish with the Sneaky trait (above) to create an unstoppable ambusher.

# RESKINNING MONSTERS

Of all the tools Gamemasters have at their disposal, few are as powerful as reskinning monster stat blocks. Reskinning a monster's stat block lets us take the time, energy, and money invested in professionally designed monster statistics and turn them into just about any monster imaginable, quickly and easily. This brings incredible value to every book of monsters a GM owns.

To reskin a monster, select an existing stat block and describe it as a completely different monster in the story and lore of the game. For example, the stat block of an ogre might be described as a powerful humanoid warrior or the thick-necked bodyguard of a local guildmaster. At its simplest, reskinning takes little more effort than finding a stat block and describing it as something else.

There are layers to reskinning, however, some of which go deeper than a simple surface-level description change. This section explores those layers and the benefits that each provides.

## CHOOSING RESKINNABLE STAT BLOCKS

As powerful as reskinning is, the process always starts with a GM finding the right stat block to reskin. An ogre stat block might be perfect for any tough and powerful humanoid, but it won't work as well for a tentacled horror bursting out of the darkness. However, a giant octopus stat block does the trick for that horror nicely.

Simpler stat blocks—those of humanoids, NPCs, animals, and giants—often work well when reskinning secondary monsters or groups of monsters. For example, the fire giant stat block easily becomes a powerful tomb-guardian knight. When looking to build a custom boss monster, though, think about reskinning the stat blocks of more powerful and complicated creatures—including legendary creatures. An adult red dragon stat block is a great stand-in for a powerful fire-based sorcerer boss who slashes with fiery blades (reskinned claws and bite) and huge blasts of pyro-energy (the dragon's breath weapon).

**Reading your favorite monster books offers tremendous dividends for your games.** Not only does it help you identify which stat blocks will work best for reskinning, but it also fills your imagination with the lore of numerous monsters, giving you a sense of how they might fit into or help you build your adventures.

## COMMON RESKINNABLE MONSTERS

The table below presents a list of common reskinnable monsters for standard non-boss creatures at several challenge ratings. The stat blocks of these creatures focus on simple mechanics, with the intention that you'll reskin their descriptions with the flavor of the monster you create. ("General-Use Stat Blocks" on page ## contains

a number of monster stat blocks built specifically for reskinning as well.)

To use the table, look down the CR column to find the baseline challenge rating of the monster you need. The Example Monster column for that challenge rating lists a few easily reskinned monster stat blocks. The Reskinned Role column then shows you what monster role this stat block can most easily be reskinned into, broken out by tier of play and the monster's role in combat (see below).

The tiers of play break down into the following tiers and levels:

**1st Level:** Though standard 5e includes 1st level in tier 1, 1st-level characters are delicate enough that they really belong in their own tier of play.

**Tier 1:** 2nd through 4th level

**Tier 2:** 5th through 10th level

**Tier 3:** 11th through 16th level

**Tier 4:** 17th through 20th level

The monster roles that these stat blocks can easily reskin into are defined as follows:

**Artillery:** Ranged combatants who often attack with spells, and who typically have lower hit points, Armor Class, or both.

**Brutes:** Monsters with high hit points and relatively low Armor Class, and which hit hard.

**Soldiers:** Creatures with high Armor Class and other defenses, and which deal moderate damage.

**Strikers:** Low-defense creatures which often deal high damage, and which have superior mobility.

("Monster Roles" on page ## has more information on breaking down monsters by role.)

CR	Example Monster	Reskinned Role
1/8	Bandit	1st-level strikers
1/4	Goblin, skeleton	Tier 1 strikers
1/2	Black bear, orc, thug	Tier 1 brutes
1	Animated armor, brown bear, spy	Tier 1 soldiers, brutes, and strikers
2	Bandit captain, cult fanatic, ogre	Tier 1 soldiers, artillery, and brutes
3	Knight, minotaur, veteran	Tier 2 soldiers
5	Gladiator; air, earth, fire, or water elemental; shambling mound	Tier 2 brutes
6	Mage	Tier 2 artillery
7	Giant ape, stone giant	Tier 3 brutes
8	Frost giant	Tier 3 brutes
9	Fire giant	Tier 3 soldiers
10	Stone golem	Tier 3 controllers
11	Horned devil	Tier 3 strikers
12	Archmage	Tier 3 artillery
13	Storm giant	Tier 4 strikers
16	Iron golem	Tier 4 soldiers

You need not limit yourself to the stat blocks above, of course. These simply work well as straightforward creatures easy to reskin, suitable when you need several monsters or minions to support a more powerful boss.

## MODIFYING FEATURES

Often, you don't need to make any other changes to reskin a stat block into a new monster. Sometimes, though, you'll want to add more details, whether you do it before or during the game. Powerful tomb guardians (reskinned fire giants) clearly have the undead type. But unless they're hit with poison attacks or abilities such as Turn Undead, you can worry about adding the features associated with undead creatures as needed.

You might start off by writing down those features on an index card, on a sticky note, or in whatever digital tool you use to take notes. The "Common Monster Type Templates" section of "Building a Quick Monster" on page ## breaks down features and traits for undead and many other monster types. Additionally, the more experienced you become, the easier it gets to improvise these sorts of features on the fly.

If you're changing saving throws, adjusting attacks or abilities, or changing the scope of magical effects in a stat block, you might want to write those changes down as well. You're only taking these notes for yourself, though, so they don't have to be pretty. You're the only one who needs to understand these shortcuts.

## ADDING FEATURES

Instead of—or in addition to—modifying the features of your reskinned monster, you can add new features to an existing stat block to give a creature new mechanical flavor over and above the baseline reskinned monster. For example, you might add some fire damage onto a reskinned veteran's longsword attack, or give a fire giant reskinned into an undead guardian an aura that deals necrotic damage to creatures who hit the guardian with melee attacks.

("Building a Quick Monster" on page ## collects dozens of cool and interesting features you can add to your monster of choice.)

## ADD SPELL EFFECTS AND MAGIC

Adding spell effects and other magical abilities to reskinned monsters is a fantastic way to customize them, granting access to hundreds of predesigned thematic sets of mechanics that can be easily applied to your monsters.

You can change up any creature by giving them one or more uses of a particular spell. The reskinned giant octopus playing the part of an otherworldly horror as described earlier will be much more thematic if they can cast *darkness* or *black tentacles*. However, when adding

new magical features, ensure these are features your new monster needs and can actually use.

Monsters are often limited by the numbers of actions they can take, so that magic used as a standard action might simply replace the thematic actions that define a creature. As an example, *spiritual weapon* is a good spell to give an assassin reskinned as a priest, because it's only a bonus action to cast. As such, it won't interfere with the assassin's ability to make shortsword attacks fueled by their signature Sneak Attack and Assassinate traits. ("Understanding the Action Economy" on page ## has more information on this topic.)

The table below sets out a list of spells that work well as add-ons to any monster, organized by level and indicating whether the spell is focused on dealing damage, on defense, or on control. When needed, use a spell attack bonus of 4 + 1/2 CR for the monster using the spell, and a spell save DC of 10 + 1/2 CR.

Spell Level	Spell	Type	Action
1	<i>Burning hands</i>	Damage	Action
1	<i>Guiding bolt</i>	Damage	Action
1	<i>Hellish rebuke</i>	Damage	Reaction
1	<i>Inflict wounds</i>	Damage	Action
1	<i>Shield</i>	Defense	Reaction
1	<i>Sleep</i>	Control	Action
2	<i>Acid arrow</i>	Damage	Action
2	<i>Darkness</i>	Control	Action
2	<i>Invisibility</i>	Defense	Action
2	<i>Misty step</i>	Defense	Bonus action
2	<i>Scorching ray</i>	Damage	Action
2	<i>Shatter</i>	Damage	Action
2	<i>Spiritual weapon</i>	Damage	Bonus action
2	<i>Web</i>	Control	Action
3	<i>Counterspell</i>	Control	Reaction
3	<i>Dispelling magic</i>	Control	Action
3	<i>Fireball</i>	Damage	Action
3	<i>Lightning bolt</i>	Damage	Action
3	<i>Spirit guardians</i>	Damage	Action
4	<i>Blight</i>	Damage	Action
4	<i>Fire shield</i>	Damage	Action
4	<i>Greater invisibility</i>	Defense	Action
5	<i>Cone of cold</i>	Damage	Action
6	<i>Chain lightning</i>	Damage	Action
6	<i>Circle of death</i>	Damage	Action
6	<i>Disintegrate</i>	Damage	Action
6	<i>Harm</i>	Damage	Action
7	<i>Finger of death</i>	Damage	Action

You might consider changing the type of action required to activate spells normally cast as a standard action. Letting a creature activate such a spell as a bonus action, or as one of several attacks they can make with

their Multiattack action, helps them use these abilities without reducing what else they can do. Just be careful that doing so doesn't increase a creature's damage output significantly. ("Building Spellcasting Monsters" on page ## has more information on this topic.)

## MASHING UP MULTIPLE MONSTERS

One further level of reskinning involves mashing together two monster stat blocks. You can think of this process as something like using one monster stat block as a template for another.

This process works best when using the more complicated stat block as a baseline, and modifying it with traits from another simpler stat block. For example, if you want a fire giant death knight, use the death knight stat block first (the more complicated of the two) and add fire giant features like Huge size and immunity to fire damage. If you're feeling nasty, you might also bump the damage the death knight deals with their longsword attack from 9 slashing damage to the fire giant's 28 damage.

Knowing that the fire giant is significantly bigger means that the fire giant death knight probably has more hit points than the baseline death knight. But instead of doing a lot of math to calculate new hit points with a d12 Hit Die instead of a d8, just increase the death knight hit points by 50 percent. Always remember that you're building a one-off monster, not a creature you plan to publish. Rough changes save you time better spent elsewhere in your preparation.

## DESCRIBING RESKINNED MONSTERS

The key to making a reskinned monster work is how you describe your new creature in the game. You'll want to lean heavily on your narrative, focusing your descriptions on the parts of the monster you've reskinned most directly. Describe the aura of necrotic horror surrounding the undead fire giant. Add the details of the tattoos the thick-necked bodyguard of the guildmaster wears. Lean in heavily on the description to make a new monster come alive.

Do the same thing with your narration of the reskinned creature's attacks. If an adult-red-dragon-turned-sorcerer



attacks with the dragon's breath weapon, describe how the sorcerer's body erupts with burning veins, and how she unleashes a blast of fire hotter than any natural source as she extends her hands toward the characters.

How we narrate our monsters is critical to helping the players think past those monsters' game mechanics. As such, it's particularly crucial when we reskin one monster to incorporate the mechanics of another.

# CHOOSING MONSTERS BASED ON THE STORY

Rather than building combat encounters based on the level of the characters and the difficulty of the intended challenge, consider choosing monsters for your adventure based on the story and the situation in the world around the encounter.

This idea isn't always easy to understand, and it departs from a common approach toward preparation for fantasy RPGs—building adventures as a set of encapsulated and predefined scenes or encounters, with a bit of exploration, some roleplaying, and (usually) a lot of combat.

As an alternative, write down a list of the monsters who might be encountered in a larger area depending on the situation taking place during the game. The seventh step of preparation from chapter 9 of *Return of the Lazy DM* describes how to abstract lists of monsters from the scenes and situations in which they might appear during an adventure. This lets GMs “cook at the table,” dropping in monsters who fit both the scene and the situation—and which make for the most fun in the moment as the GM improvises encounters based on what happens during the story and the game.

## UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

Which monsters make sense given a particular story, situation, and location isn't always clear. We must first understand the story of our adventure, which we can do by asking the following questions:

- Where does it take place?
- Who would inhabit this location?
- What types of allies, followers, or symbiotic relationships exist alongside these primary inhabitants?
- In what numbers do these inhabitants typically gather?
- Do they wander alone? Do they travel in pairs or groups?

As an example, red dragons are usually solitary creatures as regards living among other dragons—but they could certainly have allies. Some might have fire elementals who serve them unerringly, or hordes of kobold worshippers to do their daily menial work. They might have sworn knights or priests who serve them on far-reaching quests, or who protect the dragon as bodyguards and advisors. A particularly powerful red dragon spellcaster might summon and bind a demon to their service—a demon eager for a chance to break their bonds.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MONSTERS

It always helps to have a deeper understanding of the lore behind monsters, whatever its original source. You might seek out this lore from old folktales and stories from thousands of years ago. You might take monsters from popular fiction. The many monster books available

for fifth edition fantasy games offer excellent summaries of each of their creatures, including lore, environment, behaviors, and allies. When considering monsters to add to your adventure, start first with your favorite book of monsters.

Many monster books and Gamemaster guides include lists of monsters by ecology, often sorted by challenge rating. These lists show what monsters typically reside in which environments, including forests, deserts, ruins, cities, and more. The challenge ratings in such lists are useful guides, but don't be afraid to include weaker monsters to let higher-powered characters show off their skills. Likewise, you might choose a monster who's technically too powerful for the characters, but you can give them a chance to see the creature from afar so they don't simply wander in and get killed.

(“Monsters by Adventure Location” on page ## features lists of monsters keyed to specific locations. “Bosses and Minions” on page ## offers suggestions on which monsters might serve other more powerful creatures, all keyed to environment.)

## REALISM AND FUN

When considering what monsters might inhabit the locations of our adventures and in what numbers, consider the issue from two angles. What makes sense in relation to the fiction and location of the world? And what best entertains your players? Instead of balancing both ideas at the same time, though, consider focusing on realism first. What makes sense for the fiction of the game?

If the characters delve into the ruins of an ancient crypt, all sorts of undead come to mind, including skeletons, specters, wights, wraiths, ghosts, mummies, vampires, and lichs. But many other types of foes might also work in such a location, including cultists, necromancers, grave-robbing bandits, or black puddings feasting on the flesh of the dead.

Any such creatures can easily feel realistic given the location. So when preparing a game set in a crypt, list the various undead and other monsters who might show up in an encounter. Then when running the game, choose the type and number of monsters that feel like the best fit for the fun and pacing of the game.

Since the inhabitants of a location can move around, you can decide what quantities and combinations of monsters might reside in or travel through any given area moment by moment. Did the party just finish a big battle with hard monsters? Maybe it's time for a couple of weaklings to wander through. Have the characters been having an easy time so far? Maybe they stumble into a group of heavy hitters. Either scenario still makes sense given the larger story and situation, but you can choose

the scenario offering the right beat and the right element of pacing for the game.

Such variability helps tremendously in pacing a game. You don't ever have to throw your hands up and run an encounter as is just because it's written that way. By choosing the number and types of monsters, you can easily tweak encounters toward what brings the right pacing and feeling to the overall game.

## WHAT ABOUT ENCOUNTER BALANCE?

If we're choosing monsters strictly by what makes sense for the scene, location, and situation, then improvising the number and combination of monsters during play, how do we ensure encounters are balanced? There's one simple answer:

We don't.

Other sections of this book discuss multiple ways to build and benchmark groups of monsters to challenge characters. But a story-focused approach toward encounters means not worrying about encounter balance. Instead, you can focus only on being aware of when an encounter might become inadvertently deadly (see "The Lazy Encounter Benchmark" on page ##).

## CHOOSING TOKENS AND MINIATURES

Whether you play in person or online, this free-flowing way of choosing monsters might challenge you if you make extensive use of tokens or miniatures. However, there are a few easy ways to make sure you can still use those tools even while running flexible story-based encounters.

### SELECT A SUBSET OF TOKENS OR MINIATURES

If you know you're going to be running an adventure in a crypt and you have an idea of the types and numbers of monsters who dwell there, you can sift through your collection and set aside the tokens or miniatures you might need. This can be a little time consuming, and you might not use every mini you pull out. But having them all on hand means you can pick what you need when you need it.

For online play, you don't have to worry about the number of tokens—just the style. You can keep a separate folder with the tokens you think you might need given the scenario, then copy and paste as many of those tokens as you need.

### USE GENERIC TOKENS

A set of generic tokens is a fantastic lazy tool for online or in-person play. A generic token is either a physical or digital token with an abstract representation of various types of monsters, rather than specific art for only one

type of monster. These abstractions might include a skull, a grim-looking humanoid, a wolf, a slime, a dragon, or any other general representation of creatures in the game.

Numerous examples of generic tokens can be found online, which can be purchased or constructed at very low cost. Some virtual tabletops even include generic monster tokens built in. For others, you might have to import the tokens into your VTT, but having a set of generic tokens on hand means never having to worry about having the exact right token at the exact right time.

### ORGANIZE FOR EASY RETRIEVAL

When you organize your tokens or miniatures, either in-person or online, spend the time to organize them so you can easily find the ones you need when you need them. Find the right categories that make it easier to dig out the right ones. Keep your most-used tokens or miniatures close at hand, and let your least-used tokens or miniatures fall to the bottom of your organizational system.

### FIND A FAST METHOD FOR ONLINE TOKENS

A number of online tools let you build a token from any image quickly and easily. Some virtual tabletops have built-in token making software. Find these tools and practice using them to quickly build tokens from the many monster images made available for purchase or free download online. Get good and fast at this process, and you'll be able to build any monster token you need even in the middle of your game.

### CRAFT GENERIC TOKENS FOR IN-PERSON PLAY

For playing in person, you can build a set of generic tokens with a little bit of crafting. Start by printing out black-and-white silhouettes of monsters, skeletons, knights, and other images. Search for royalty-free game icons online. Pick the ones you like and print them out at just under 1 inch in size. Then punch them out with a 1-inch hole punch. Use 1-inch magnets for the base of the token and 1-inch clear epoxy stickers for the top. You can put together a couple of dozen such tokens for under \$20.

### BUILD SITUATIONS AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS

By abstracting monsters from encounters and choosing monsters who fit the scenes, story, locations, and situations in your adventures, you give yourself the freedom to let those adventures follow whatever directions they might take in the game. Keep these tools and guidelines in mind to help you facilitate the adventure—moving where the action takes you, and freely adjusting the pace to fit the fun of the table.

# BUILDING THE STORY TO FIT THE MONSTER

In many cases, we can choose monsters to fit the story of our adventures (as discussed at “Choosing Monsters Based on the Story” on page XX). Story matters the most in the long run, so it typically makes sense to start with a larger premise and stock our adventures with monsters who reinforce that story. But there are times when it’s even more fun to do the reverse. We start with monsters who excite us, then we build the story to fit them.

## MONSTERS FIRST

While paging through any of the many monster books available for 5e games, you come across an amazing monster. Filled with excitement, you wish that creature could appear in your campaign. Or maybe a player mentions a type of monster during a game session, saying, “I’ve never fought one of those before!” Or you might have long had an idea for a fun encounter with different types of unusual creatures, but those creatures don’t fit the current locations in the campaign.

In these and other similar situations, it makes sense to think about the monsters first and then build a story to validate their presence.

## VERISIMILITUDE

Players have more fun when they can immerse themselves in a world that makes sense. They know that every aspect of the game’s setting is imaginary, but they can suspend that disbelief when it makes sense to do so. As such, it’s important to make monsters and their presence in the game make sense.

Start by asking yourself whether a particular monster fits the environment and setting. A monster’s lore often includes rich information on the types of environments they favor, as well as the role they play in such environments. So as fantastic as creatures like water elementals are, they make the most sense when they’re encountered near a lake or other body of water. If you place a water elemental in the middle of a dungeon corridor with no explanation for why they came to be there, the players will likely find that jarring, making them less likely to enjoy the session.

You also want to take care when combining different types of monsters, to make sure it makes sense for them to work together. GMs should select monsters for encounters the way a chef selects ingredients: choose a few skirmishers, add a beefy monster to take some hits, and done! But even though a squad of goblins fighting with a water elemental might be tactically sound, that combination will inevitably be jarring in the game.

## ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

When choosing monsters first and then selecting the story, you want to find a story that establishes verisimilitude. For some monsters, minor explanations can suffice. Players and their characters will likely believe that brigands have hired a bugbear from a nearby forest. Minor details such as the bugbear wearing a too-tight uniform can reinforce this already plausible story.

Even the goblins and the water elemental can work, if at the start of the encounter, the goblins are arguing over who should use a magic item. When they see the characters, one of the goblins takes the item and uses it... to cause the water elemental to appear!

## FISH OUT OF WATER

There are times when it can be fun to use monsters who don’t fit the situation, or monsters who shouldn’t be working together. Strange combinations can be surprising and intriguing, as long as you take some care to make the fish-out-of-water scenario plausible.

When a monster is a figurative fish out of water, you’ll need to work a bit harder to establish verisimilitude. In this case, you want to explain how the monster came to be in its present environment, and make that a key part of the encounter. Start by asking yourself the following questions:

- Where did this creature come from, and how could it have ended up here?
- What would it take for this creature to be comfortable in this location?
- In what ways is the creature changing or impacting the location? In what ways is the location impacting the creature?
- What would this foe need or want to allow them to remain in this location? How could someone else keep the creature here?
- How do the answers to the previous questions impact the current story and the other creatures in this location?
- What can the characters notice or learn that explains the story of this monster?

## LORE AND STAT BLOCKS

A monster’s stat block tells us a lot about them, as discussed in “Reading the Monster Stat Block” on page ##. Likewise, the lore that accompanies a stat block can provide ideas useful for thinking through a monster’s nature and what their story might be.

As an example, wolves fight in packs, and they hunt prey. Their desire for prey could force them into a village. Maybe the first thing the characters see at night is a bush

moving. When they investigate, a deer bounds out from shelter. Moments later, the wolves that hunt the deer show up.

Kobolds have a reputation for liking traps, so you can showcase their traps up front to foreshadow their presence in a location. You might also leave related clues in the form of notes written in Draconic. You can then set up a fun encounter where kobolds are trying to create or repair a big trap, with the final encounter reinforcing the earlier discoveries and providing confirmation for players who guessed what unseen foes they were facing.

Novels and movies can also provide narrative ideas that can be combined with monster lore to set up plausible scenarios for a fish-out-of-water creature. A construct or undead could have escaped from their creator, creating a scenario that works with the expectation that players are familiar with the story of *Frankenstein*. Depending on how much you borrow from the novel, the players and characters might end up asking who is the true monster and villain in the story.

## EXAMPLE STORIES

Like our larger campaign story, the story we create for our monsters is just a starting point. The real narrative is the one created by the intersection of the characters and that initial tale. A great monster story is therefore one that helps the characters engage with the scene as fully as they can, creating a fun adventure that the players will want to talk about for years to come.

This section presents several types of stories that can explain the presence of a monster you want to use in an unusual environment or location. Use any of these setups and the example stories that come with them as is, or use them as starting points that you can alter as needed to fit your own game.

### SUMMONED, HIRED, OR CAPTURED

A creature who doesn't fit their environment could have been deliberately brought to that environment. Magic or other threats might bind the creature, or they might serve willingly in exchange for something.

**Bound Air Demon.** An evil sorcerer binds an air demon, convincing the fiend to stay by constructing an area that has tall ceilings, many ledges, and is filled with smoke. The demon can speak of this as they attack, explaining why they deign to serve a mere humanoid.

**Water Guardian.** A water creature could be bound to a fountain, cistern, or moat. The characters might meet an NPC carrying buckets of water, with the scars along their arms a sign of the dangers of reaching into the water. Runes of binding are hidden under the water's surface,



visible to a character who carefully peers over the edge, or could be noticed during battle.

**Oops, We Hired Swamp Creatures!** A group of lizardfolk working as laborers in a village have been hidden away by the merchant who hired them, and have flooded the basement of the merchant's home trying to make themselves comfortable. When the characters discover them, it's clear that the lizardfolk are being taken advantage of, and pointing this out could turn the laborers against their employer.

**Spider Pet.** Goblins feed giant spiders in a side tunnel near their lair, and the arachnids no longer attack creatures providing food. In an adjacent cavern, the goblins raise pigs, and are trying to drag one out of a cage to feed the spider when the characters happen by.

### SURPRISING PLAYERS

Scott notes that intentionally using a fish-out-of-water scenario can sometimes work better than making use of monsters who are the perfect fit. Players expect goblins in the goblin tunnels, and might be less engaged when they see still more goblins in a larger cave. However, add another creature who doesn't seem to belong, and the players become intrigued. They'll still want to know why the monster is in a strange location, or why two seemingly incompatible creatures are working together, but those questions now tie to the encounter rather than undermining it.

## BREAK AWAY FROM STEREOTYPES

Mike notes that the act of building a story around an out-of-place monster pushes us away from stereotypical situations. The very act of having to explain the weird occurrence of a creature's existence forces a GM to come up with a creative explanation that they might never otherwise have come up with. Truly memorable encounters can arise from this process.

## MINI-BIOME

A broader location might contain a small area where an out-of-place monster fits in, even when the rest of the location is not a typical lair. Magic can always be used to explain a mini-biome, though this might feel forced or trite. A more natural reason for a mini-biome usually works best.

**Localized Swamp.** Lizardfolk and their pet giant frog dwell in a cavern where an underground river has eroded the rock, creating swamp-like conditions.

**Brackish Waters.** A sea creature is attacking settlements along a freshwater river. A village elder tells the characters that during heavy rains, the sea floods the estuary and the waters turn brackish, explaining how a marine predator has found a new home.

**There Must Be a Volcano.** A biome can sometimes be foreshadowed. Setting up the appearance of a fire elemental and magma mephits in a dungeon can be accomplished by first creating a chamber where crude drawings of volcanoes and fire creatures cover the walls. When the characters later come across a river of magma, the presence of fire creatures makes sense.

## ON A MISSION

Intelligent monsters might intentionally travel to an unfamiliar location, becoming explorers just like the characters. The reason for the monsters being there can be just as interesting as the monsters themselves.

**Give Us the Artifact!** A band of drow seek a rumored artifact or lost lore. Their mission is vital, so they might negotiate with the characters to gain what they seek—or fight the characters if their mission is opposed.

**What Dug This Hole?** A burrowing creature has broken into a dungeon or city basement, seeking or escaping something. The broken wall or floor explains how the creature came to trade its former environment for a new one.

## A STORY WITHIN A STORY

We can make the presence of a monster believable by telling that creature's story and explaining how that telling fits into our larger story. Though discovering an explanation for a monster's presence after the monster has been encountered sometimes works, providing at least a partial explanation up front can make the actual moment of meeting the monster feel more plausible.

**Inventor Lost Control.** To make use of some awesome clockwork monsters within a larger dungeon, you can place a door barred from the inside with a "Keep Closed" warning sign. The door leads to a mini-lair for a gnome inventor. The first of three rooms holds her notes, indicating that her clockwork creations have gone out of control. The second and third rooms contain the aggressive creatures, and the third room also has the bound inventor. If freed, she can help turn the tide of battle.

**Long Cold Winter.** You can establish that it's been an unusually harsh winter in town, and that the townsfolk are afraid. This sets the players and characters up nicely for a yeti attack, which seems entirely plausible.

**They Have Eyepatches and Say Yar.** To make use of some great bandit-type stat blocks while the characters are in a port town, simply reskin them as pirates. For extra fun, place wanted posters for the pirate captain that the characters can find before the encounter.

**They Scuttled Off That Way.** A remorhaz is a fun monstrosity, but doesn't quite fit a dungeon milieu. So set up a scene where the characters can overhear two ogres by a fire in a cave, talking about how a rock broke open and something nasty came out. Investigating the fire pit shows that some of the rocks around it appear to have cracked open like eggs. Later, the characters can encounter a young remorhaz—perhaps chewing on the remains of another dungeon denizen they surprised.

# BUILDING ENGAGING ENCOUNTERS

An engaging encounter is one that makes the players take notice. They lean forward in their seats. They talk to each other excitedly. They come up with plans, interact with scene elements, and stay focused as the scene develops. But how do we achieve this?

This section looks at the types of elements in an encounter that can serve as sources for engagement. It then discusses the types of engagement we can tie to those elements, evoking in the players a desire to take action.

## WHAT DOESN'T ENGAGE?

Many aspects of a fantasy roleplaying game are fun but not necessarily engaging. This is especially true of the many repetitive elements of the game. A spellcaster attacks with their cantrip. A rogue hides. The dwarf fighter attacks with her axe. Players can do these things, have fun, and be disconnected from play at the same time. A player might roll their dice, then go back to their phone.

Similarly, an encounter element can fail to engage. A trap fires an arrow, but the players smartly conclude that it isn't a priority and agree to ignore it for a time. That's fine if the role of the trap was solely to add a bit more damage. But it's lackluster if the trap was supposed to engage the players. Likewise, a GM might imagine an encounter with a pack of gnolls as fearsome, but can clearly see that the players aren't on the edge of their seats. Monster concepts, and even monsters with fun stat blocks, are sometimes not enough engagement on their own.

## ENCOUNTER ELEMENTS PROVIDING ENGAGEMENT

To create an encounter to which the characters can fully respond, it's good to break the encounter down initially into its component parts. Think about which elements can fit your encounter concept—but be aware that you don't want to overwhelm the encounter with too many engaging elements. Rather, look for the specific elements that match the feel of the encounter best.

## ENCOUNTER PREMISE

The premise of an encounter dictates from the start how significant it is for the players. An encounter with goblins might or might not be engaging. An encounter with the goblins who attacked the caravan from a previous scene? Much more engaging.

## FOES

Certain monsters and types of monsters can provide engagement in their own right. They might have surprising features, story importance, interesting roleplaying potential, or other compelling aspects.



## ACTIONABLE FEATURES

Encounter features that can be manipulated catch the eye of players and characters alike. The more the interaction feels rewarding, necessary, or interesting, the greater the engagement.

A rewarding feature is one that provides a benefit in combat. A statue might look obviously unstable as it looms over a foe—inviting the characters to topple it onto that foe. An enemy spellcaster lobs spells from a raised platform, but a block-and-tackle can allow a character to reach the top of the platform. Archers fire on the party from an unreachable position, but furnishings can be turned on their sides to provide cover. The clearer the payoff of a feature, the more likely the engagement.

Necessary features are ones that the characters immediately understand they must make use of during an encounter. For example, planks next to a ravine must be turned into a bridge to get to the other side to reach enemies. Magical pillars must be interacted with to bring down a force field protecting a spellcaster. A vial of liquid labeled “Sleep Potion” appears near a huge monstrosity that appears impervious to spells and weapons.

Interesting features are those that are as much fun for the players to figure out as for the characters—or sometimes even more so. If an angry beast is held in

a cage and the key is in the lock, it isn't clear whether letting the beast loose will help the party—but it sure is interesting! A lever on a wall bears a sign saying: "Pull when in danger." An unlabeled potion sits on a table halfway between the foes and the characters, and the foes appear intent on seizing it first.

## **LOCATION AND TERRAIN**

The location of an encounter can easily drive engagement. A battle across a ravine filled with molten lava tends to wake the players up. A choice between using a swaying rope bridge to cross a ravine or take a longer but safer path around it forces a decision.

## **BENEFITS AND TREASURE**

The presence of an obvious benefit engages players. To reach the golden chest, the foes must first be defeated. A noble shouts a promise of a reward if the characters save them from an imminent threat. A foe fights with a glowing sword that promises unusual power to the character who claims it.

## **TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT**

As you consider sources of engagement for your encounters, also consider what types of engagement those encounter elements can provide.

## **STORY RELEVANCE**

Story relevance ties one or more encounter elements to the arc of the adventure or the campaign. This relevance is often tied to the encounter premise, but it can link to other encounter elements as well. During a battle with ruffians in a city, a character notes a foe's tattoo—a symbol associated with the secretive cult the party has been trying to find. Suddenly, the foe has story relevance. Similarly, a battle on the edge of a ravine filled with molten lava can take on story relevance when a character spots an important item they need sitting perilously close to the edge of the ravine.

Story relevance can be an important add-on to random encounters, even beyond what such encounters can tell the characters and players about the world. Players pay attention when a random encounter features a direct connection to the villain they've been chasing, a clue they need to obtain, or an NPC they care about who is in peril.

## **PERSONAL OR GROUP GOALS**

An encounter has greater engagement when it ties to goals the players and their characters care about. A specific player might have a backstory to which an encounter

## **START STRONG**

Especially for experienced players with a wide knowledge of what standard monsters can do, Scott likes to have monsters who play against type or immediately show off unusual traits or abilities. This strong start can dial up the engagement in a hurry.

element can be tied. A long-lost journal, information about a missing sibling, or a clue to the location of a treasure they once lost can all engage individual characters.

The characters might also have goals as a group. Needing to earn the trust of a city's rulers might be necessary to gain permission to build a keep in the area. So if the characters happen upon a spy who just murdered one of those rulers, the stakes are that much more engaging.

## **AN ADVANTAGE OR OPPORTUNITY**

Encounters can provide clear boons the characters can utilize or turn to their advantage. A barrel of lamp oil is discovered, one room away from an enormous troll. A chandelier has a rope tied to it, ready for someone to swing across the area. A cavern features only sleeping foes, who will stay that way if the characters can cross the debris-strewn floor without making noise.

## **THE UNEXPECTED**

An encounter can grab everyone's attention when an encounter element is surprising or unusual—especially the encounter premise. Approaching a guardroom, the characters hear goblin and human guards having a heated argument that threatens a fight. In response, the players can discuss how to use the conflict to their advantage as they try to sneak past—or to goad the two sides into fighting each other.

Surprises can also be revealed during an encounter. A young kraken might molt, shedding their skin and becoming larger and more capable as you add several new features to their stat block. Or an earthquake might strike underground, threatening to throw all the characters into a lava-filled ravine. In a dungeon, a foe pulls a lever and a wall begins to drop, closing off access to the treasure in 2 rounds unless the characters can reach it or stop the wall's descent. Foes can also provide surprises by revealing information as they fight. What does the paladin do when an assassin says she's tired of serving evil and offers to follow them?

## **MYSTERIOUS OR INTRIGUING**

A mysterious encounter element is a promise that something will be revealed during the encounter, often in exchange for interaction and engagement. When a skeleton on the ground has an arm stretched toward one of three levers sticking out of the wall, the characters and players can discuss what this means. They can seek out clues to tell them more, and hopefully learn enough to make the exercise feel rewarding.

When facing creatures made of shadow, interacting with a glowing source of light in the center of the room is likely to interest the characters. Likewise, when fighting an invisible foe in a chamber full of looking glasses and spectacles, the characters should be quick to suspect that

## FORESHADOWING VILLAINS

Mike likes to let characters hear tales of particular villains ahead of time. The characters might encounter a captive, who tells of the fearsome gnoll captain Argvon the Black Foot. When the characters later encounter a fearsome gnoll with one black foot, they excitedly anticipate a challenge!

interacting with those objects might let them discover a way to reveal that foe.

## TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

Characters and players can have fun interacting with a situation that feels like an obvious setup. The players might second-guess themselves and trigger the setup anyway, or they might find clever ways to turn the situation against others. For example, a dungeon doorway leads into an open-air garden, the warm sun visible overhead. That can't be possible, and the characters know it. Or an enemy on the far side of a room might flip a lever that activates a trap. Another lever near the characters has an inscription on the wall above it that reads, "Turn Off Trap"—but the characters might suspect that pulling that second lever will only make the trap worse.

## IMPENDING DOOM

An obvious problem that gets worse over time creates pressure and begs for action. An hourglass secured to a wall rotates, the sand slowly running out—but what must the characters do in response? A shadowy form pushes against a membrane, threatening to break through at any moment. A gang of kobolds are assembling a huge trap or weapon, and will be able to use it against the heroes in just a few rounds. Such clear signs of impending doom provide a clarion call to action.

## FORESHADOWING

When the characters have heard of a particular monster or dungeon feature ahead of time, finally reaching that foreshadowed element makes a big impression. A torn journal in a dungeon corridor might record the account of other adventurers who barely survived "the deadly scythe room." Several rooms later, the characters find a chamber filled with swinging scythes, making that encounter feel more engaging and less random because of the earlier warning.

## PROVOCATION OR CHALLENGE

A villain appears in court and whispers a challenge, daring the characters to strike them down. An ogre bellows that no foe has ever forced her to yield. A band

of goblins wear shirts saying "Unbeatable Goblin Fight Club." Such provocations demand responses from the characters, and make a scene more memorable.

## HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

An encounter with no engagement can be boring. An encounter with too much engagement can be overwhelming. When thinking about encounter elements that can create engagement, try to think through the perspective of the players when their characters first enter the encounter. How much information is presented initially? How much additional information is presented as the encounter progresses? Is needing to process that information likely to help the characters during the encounter? Or will it cause the players to become disengaged because they can't keep track of everything going on around the party?

As a rule of thumb, select no more than two or three types of engagement for an encounter, and apply them sparingly. One goblin warlord issuing a challenge can create a memorable scene. But that scene loses engagement if the characters are already trying to swing on a chandelier, disarm a trap, and save a beloved NPC. Similarly, if every goblin in the war band issues a challenge to different characters, the engagement becomes repetitive and harder to track. Less is more!

Engagement can also be overwhelming for you as a GM. When GMs have to track too many variables, it can become harder to also look after all the other parts of the game, including roleplaying the foes, remembering character backstory, and running monsters tactically. Using whatever level of engagement you're able to run most effectively will help make that engagement fun for you too.

As you create encounters and try out different methods for increasing engagement, also keep an eye on what works for your group. Some players like a simpler game, while others will embrace complexity and enjoy trying to track all the things they can do in an encounter. Over time, you can modify your approach to find the best common-ground fit between your preferred style and that of your players.

# BUILDING ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Engaging environments are ones in which the terrain, features, layout, and other elements excite players and characters alike. In this section, we take a look at the locations we choose for our battles, and the art of encouraging the characters to interact with the environment.

## REINFORCING STORY

When designing an encounter, consider the natural habitat of the foes in that encounter. The right environment can reinforce the theme of the encounter and enhance the story by creating a more realistic and engrossing setting.

For example, in an encounter with several giant apes, it's almost mandatory for the encounter area to include trees and vines from which the apes can swing down and attack. Such an environment provides engagement as the characters deal with the apes' ability to climb out of reach and move from branch to branch.

Even if an expected or ideal environment isn't available, you can play off the baseline concept. Giant apes in a canyon could climb rocky pillars and navigate narrow rock ledges, providing the same advantages and attack options outside of a forest environment, and helping the story resonate with and engage the players.

However, when selecting an environment, make sure that what fits the story doesn't hinder the fun. An encounter with giant frogs in pools or a swamp makes great sense. But if the pools are so deep that the characters can't easily approach the frogs, the encounter could become frustrating. Adding giant lily pads increases engagement and reduces frustration, while still presenting the thematically appropriate challenge.

## TACTICAL ENGAGEMENT

An environment that provides a tactical advantage almost always creates engagement. This can be true regardless of whether the environment favors the foes, the characters, or both. When providing a tactical advantage, think of the benefit and how it might be countered, as with the examples below. (You can find additional ideas for engagement in "Building Engaging Encounters" on page ##.)

## FORMATION

What the characters see when an encounter starts informs how they approach the encounter. If ten kobolds are in the center of a room, the characters might opt to initially engage with area spells and effects. Melee characters lacking those options will rush forward, engaging the closest foes.

But if five of the kobolds are in the center of the room and five are farther back using bows, the tactics change. Area spells are still useful, but the characters might want

to divide their tactics, with some going after the kobold archers. Likewise, spreading all ten kobolds around the room, perhaps in groups of two, forces the characters to split up. This could leave them open for a surprise the kobolds have planned, such as getting ready to use nets or standing on the far side of concealed pit traps.

For all these options, needing to decide what to do can engage the players, encouraging them to develop strategies and communicate with each other.

## MOVEMENT

An excellent skill to develop as a GM is understanding how an encounter drives, facilitates, or impedes movement. Consider an encounter with interesting features, but in which the monsters quickly run up to the characters and the fight ends up centered on the doorway into the area. To avoid this, consider the width of the entrance and the distances between the door, the foes, and the engaging aspects of the environment.

Moving foes back from the entrance allows characters to get fully inside an encounter area. In many cases, it can be advantageous to start an encounter without obvious foes, making it more likely that the characters will enter the area—after which combat can begin. Gargoyles might wait until characters start to explore the interior of an old temple before revealing themselves. A group of gnolls can enter a great hall from another door once the characters reach the center of that area.

Once an encounter is underway, provide incentives to entice characters to move. An engaging environment can help, but think through all the lines of travel that exist in an area. Are there bottlenecks where fights will impede movement? Are there enough ways to reach key areas of the encounter? How many 30-foot moves are required to reach those key areas? You don't necessarily want to remove all elements that impede the characters, but providing ways to speed up travel or bypass bottlenecks can encourage movement.

Forced movement can also provide good engagement. A monster who can use telekinesis, grasping tentacles, or some other means of dragging characters closer to desired locations (including closer to themselves) ensures that the characters will interact with the environment, whether as

## STACK THE DECK

Scott notes that GMs can easily entice players to take a particular course of action by giving their characters a tangible benefit if they do so. Characters might not be inclined to take the time to navigate stairs to reach a boss monster—unless the stairs also provide half cover against attacks from the boss's minions, creating an environmental benefit that makes that route a more attractive option.

## UNREALISTIC SIZES ARE OKAY

Scott points out that the goals of facilitating roles and enabling movement often require larger encounter areas than would be found in real life—and that this is fine. A 30-by-30-foot chamber is large in our world, but might work perfectly with the backstory of a fantastic location to allow for monsters and characters to interact properly.

Similarly, Teos points out that a 5-foot-wide corridor works just fine for real people walking, but can be too narrow for the combat-focused reality of the game. This is because moving through a space containing an ally requires twice the movement. As such, a 5-foot corridor can hinder any attempts for characters or monsters to reposition or move tactically, and should generally not be used anywhere that combat might take place.

a result of forced movement or of trying to stay out of the reach of a creature who can move them.

## FACILITATE ROLES

Even though monsters in 5e games don't have defined roles (controller, striker, and so forth), you can always think about the effect a monster's stats have on the role it plays in combat, then use the environment to facilitate that role.

A monster with high hit points or Armor Class should go to the front, drawing the heroes' attention and soaking up the damage that would otherwise reach more important monsters. A chokepoint forces heroes to work through these combat-focused foes first. Monsters who deal high damage, especially those with high mobility, can engage key heroes in the middle or rear party ranks and then move away to safety.

The environment facilitates this approach to monster roles when it provides ways for monsters to reach their intended targets. Likewise, monsters who hide should be given cover so they can maximize their potential for ambush. And monsters who can boost allies or attack at a distance should be given enough space to do so while maneuvering to stay away from the characters.

(For a look at how to more formally apply monster roles to your game, see "Monster Roles" on page ##. "Reskinning Monsters" on page ## also makes use of monster roles.)

## ELEVATION AND COVER

Even easily defeated foes such as kobolds and goblins become harder to take on if some of them are placed on higher ground and behind cover. Similarly, providing characters with the benefits of elevation or cover can allow them to take on stronger foes or additional waves of weak foes.

When adding elevation, consider how one or both sides can use it, and how creatures can reach elevated areas. Stairs or other means of access that are difficult terrain might require several rounds of movement. Many players would rather have their characters stay below and make inefficient ranged attacks than spend 2 or more rounds

to reach their foes. But there are also times when placing foes out of reach works well, as doing so can let ranged and spellcasting heroes shine.

If melee characters are expected to try to reach the high ground, set up ways for them to do so in 1 round, and don't create a scenario where they spend most of the combat running from foe to foe. Even risky ways to move, such as making an ability check to ascend to a warehouse balcony using a pulley, work better than spending successive rounds on movement.

Both elevation and cover are excellent ways to boost survivability. Because spellcasting foes often have fewer hit points and can be easily pinned down in open terrain, allowing spellcasting foes to begin combat hidden behind cover causes characters to focus on other targets initially. Once the spellcaster takes their actions, the heroes can change tactics to respond to the newly revealed threat. And whereas needing to spend 2 rounds to reach a goblin is usually frustrating, spending 2 rounds to reach a dangerous spellcaster might be a worthwhile option for a melee hero.

Cover is also a boon to any foes or characters who benefit from stealth. A rogue always appreciates environments allowing them to hide, just as foes who work best as lurkers or skirmishers can benefit from cover and being able to fall back to hard-to-reach places.

## ENGAGING ELEMENTS

Specific elements in the environment can help engage the players during an encounter, especially when the source of engagement gives the characters an edge. When designing encounters, look for opportunities to add dynamic elements that fit the location and reward interaction.

## DAMAGING OR HINDERING TERRAIN

In a forest frequented by fey creatures, the vegetation might grab at characters, slowing or restraining them. A fight atop a volcano might feature pools of glowing magma that damage any creature moving through them.

When selecting such terrain, consider where to place it in an encounter. Think through the likely routes creatures will take during combat, and how to create or break up obvious movement patterns to generate options or force particular behavior. Pools of lava might force melee characters to spend time reaching foes, or might encourage them to focus on high-AC foes in front of them, helping to protect vulnerable foes farther away.

When hindering or damaging terrain is obvious, the players can freely discuss options when the encounter begins. Terrain can also be revealed during play when it impacts a creature, though it's often more effective to hint at the terrain's unusual nature and encourage ability checks that can reveal its effects. "The vegetation is moving, as if blown about by a wind you can't sense" can inspire a player to ask if they can learn more, followed by an Intelligence (Nature) or Wisdom (Survival) check to determine the terrain's effects. If the check fails, the

## LEVEL MATTERS

Damaging and hindering terrain can be exciting, but Scott notes that they often have a disproportionate impact on lower-level characters, who often lack ways to mitigate hindering terrain or come up short on the hit points needed to weather continued damage. At the same time, high-level characters might see such terrain as little more than a resource tax, requiring a couple of relatively low-level spells or readily available class features to deal with. As such, setting up engaging terrain at lower or higher levels often requires additional work to maintain the story and the challenge.

character must decide whether to risk crossing the area to learn what it does the hard way.

To create damaging terrain, you can use magic of a level the characters or their foes might use as inspiration, including spells such as *spike growth*, *entangle*, *grease*, or *sleet storm*. You can also use the guidelines in the 5e core books for creating traps, using the tables to determine how much damage terrain might deal.

## FACILITATING OR DENYING MOVEMENT

Swinging from a chandelier is great fun, and is more likely to become part of a scene when you point out the chandelier and the rope attached to it in an encounter area. Characters are more likely to cut a rope bridge the monsters are using when you describe how old the bridge looks and how its ropes are fraying.

Likewise, adding elements that make movement easier increases the dynamic nature of the encounter environment. Bridges, ropes, teleporters, slides, and ramps can all add interest and engagement, helping facilitate the use of the entire encounter area.

Such environmental elements can also change the tide of an encounter. The foes might start with the advantage of higher ground, but heroes who can pile up a number of convenient crates can reach those foes. Or an area could feature ladders or even a trampoline the heroes can utilize. When foes are attacking from a hayloft, a barrel of torches can allow characters to turn the tables, lighting the loft on fire and forcing the creatures above to descend.

## ATTACKS AND POWER-UPS

An encounter environment can include elements that provide or boost offensive capabilities. A siege weapon might add a potent way for characters to damage a giant, or provide the means to tear down cover. In a bar fight, broken bottles can serve as improvised weapons, and alcohol spilled on the bar's surface might be lit on fire.

Such elements can be even more fun when they initially favor foes but can eventually be used by the characters. Spellcasting foes might benefit from an arcane circle boosting their spells, until the heroes drive them back and make use of the circle's magic themselves. A table in an alchemist's laboratory might hold potions that any

creature can drink to gain a benefit, a fact the characters learn while observing their foes.

Providing an obvious element meant to boost foes can also be interesting if the characters are allowed to prevent its use. If kobold brigands begin an encounter near a siege weapon but their ammunition is some distance away, the characters have the ability to prevent the kobolds from loading the weapon.

## DEFENSES

Encounter elements offering a defensive benefit can likewise provide solid engagement. If heroes are attacked by ranged weapons, they might be in trouble if they have no cover. But a nearby clockwork fan has a large crank that can be turned to create a wind that blows away incoming arrows, and forces the foes to approach with melee weapons.

Defenses can be interesting when they have a limited duration or a means to disable them. An arcane shield might protect an enemy spellcaster until special runes can be removed from four pillars in the area. The fell undead in a ruined temple regenerate all damage until a corrupted relic is restored by bathing it in holy water. The trick is to provide ways the characters can discover this. If the relic or the runes pulse with magical energy whenever a foe would have taken damage, that can provide a clear indication to the heroes of what kind of power is in play.

Mundane defenses can work just as well for creating engagement. A ritual is being conducted behind a closed door that the characters must get through, but monsters stand in the way. A pack of undead is on the move, but the adventurers can loosen and drop a rusted portcullis to slow the horde's approach. If ranged combatants stand on the other side of a ravine, the characters might topple a tree or move wooden planks to create a bridge. And if a red dragon breathes fire from above, the characters can hide in one of two ruined homes—but each time the dragon breathes, that home will burn, preventing it from being used as cover a second time.

## CHARACTERS ACT DEFENSIVELY

Mike notes that players often have their characters act defensively by default. As a result, giving the characters more defenses can cause play to become less dynamic if those defenses provide an incentive to hunker down in one place. To counter this, consider ways for additional defenses to eventually break down, as with a monster tearing through cover or a magic circle in the process of fading out. Alternatively, create reasons why the characters can use the defenses only periodically.

Scott likewise points out that providing defensive-minded characters with alternative—as opposed to additional—ways to defend themselves can help with this problem, especially if those additional means of defense require or encourage movement.

## FIFTEEN ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Presented below are fifteen examples of environments containing elements meant to engage your players and their characters. You can use any of these examples as-is, or as inspiration for creating your own environments.

### SLIP AND SLIDE

Frost-covered terrain features ramps shaped of ice, letting foes or heroes quickly move across a battlefield that would otherwise be difficult terrain.

### ALCHEMY LAB

In an alchemist's laboratory, any missed attack causes bottles to break and spill, creating a range of short-term hazards.

### VERTICAL ACCESS

Within a wizard's tower, each level contains a narrow circular ledge beneath open ceiling along the inside wall, creating a space from which the other levels can be seen. Teleportation alcoves on each ledge allow the fight to span several levels at the same time.

### SHIFTING FLOOR

A construction site features automated clockwork cranes that move sections of the floor during a battle, and which suddenly bring different areas of the encounter together or move them apart. The characters understand that they can learn to manipulate the cranes, giving them control over the battlefield.

### STEP LIGHTLY

While exploring a swamp, the characters quickly discover that what seems to be solid ground is actually a sleeping tentacle beast. Missing with an attack or moving without care causes the beast to strike.

### CRYPT SHORTCUTS

A battle unfolds in an abandoned crypt filled with secret passages. The passages allow rapid maneuvering from one side of the fight to the other, but a few of them contain undead that dislike being disturbed. The presence of undead is random, and either side might trigger their appearance.

### DOWN TO EARTH

Enemies start the fight atop a wooden platform, letting them attack with ranged weapons from cover. However, the heroes can cut the supports, causing their foes to take falling damage as they crash down to the characters' level.

### WHITE WATER

A battle takes place on rafts heading down a river. Each round brings a new threat from the environment, such as low branches forcing all creatures to duck or take damage, or fast-moving rapids requiring an ability check to navigate.

## CONTROLLED MOVEMENT

In a dwarven fortress, a central chamber set with levers allows foes to open and close different sections of narrow corridors, enabling dwarf guards to attack the characters and then retreat. Once the heroes reach the central chamber, they can take control and dictate the conditions of the battle.

### FIRE BRIGADE

During a battle in a burning building, in addition to their normal actions, each creature can attempt to either prevent the fire from approaching them or cause it to spread toward their foes.

### STAY DRY

While the characters fight in a sewer canal, it suddenly begins to fill with water. Ramps and other devices can be climbed to keep the fight going.

### MARKETPLACE BRAWL

A marketplace erupts in an exciting battle. Errant blows might knock over stacks of crates to hinder the characters or their foes, sacks of flour might split open to create obscuring and flammable clouds, or angry merchants could enter the fray to demand that the characters pay for damaged goods.

### PIT PUSH

Multiple pits are set into the floors of a chamber where the walls shoot inward each round, potentially knocking creatures into a pit. It's possible for the characters to determine which walls will move next, and how far, so as to find a safe place to fight.

### KING OF THE HILL

A battle takes place along the outside of a pyramid, with those atop the pyramid gaining a bonus to attack and damage rolls, whether from magic or from the cheers of a crowd below. The uneven top of the pyramid has space for only four creatures, and creatures on the top can be pushed off with successful blows, leading to constant change at the top.

### GEYSER RIDES

Geysers erupt in a cavern at unpredictable intervals, sending creatures flying upward and spraying them with scalding water. However, riding a geyser also allows creatures to reach the mushrooms growing on the cavern ceiling, which provide magical benefits.

# BUILDING SPELLCASTING MONSTERS

Magic is a cornerstone of most fantasy RPG campaigns, and nothing helps bring the magic of a world to life better than having foes pound the characters with spells and other magical attacks during combat. Many of the game's creatures already pack a magical punch, but adding spellcasting to foes who don't already have it can be great fun. However, the baseline power of spellcasting means that doing so requires some planning.

A creature's general level of challenge for a party can be assessed in many different ways. But when adding spellcasting to existing stat blocks, the mechanics to focus on are damage per round, followed by what conditions can be imposed by a spell. After you've chosen magic for a spellcasting creature, the "Running Spellcasting Monsters" section on page ## has great advice for working with that magic.

## SPELL DAMAGE

Alongside hit points, damage output per round is the most significant factor in determining the relative challenge of combat-focused creatures. (This can be seen in many NPC stat blocks, where spellcasters slinging high-damage evocation magic can have a higher challenge rating than diviners or enchanters, even when casting at the same level.) When building a spellcasting foe from an existing stat block, start by assessing the foe's damage output (perhaps with reference to the Monster Statistics by Challenge Rating table in the "Building a Quick Monster" section on page ##). Then think about how to best rework that output in spell form.

## DAMAGE AND TARGETING

Every combat-focused creature deals a certain amount of damage per round with their best attacks—often the sum total of all attacks in the Multiattack action. When adding spellcasting to a creature, you want to focus on that total damage-per-round number, choosing spells that deal roughly that same amount of damage to all their targets. For example, a doppelganger's Multiattack lets them deal an average of 14 damage with their Bite and Claw attacks, so giving them spellcasting that deals 14 damage makes a nice surprise for the characters and doesn't change the doppelganger's threat level.

If a creature has only one primary attack per round or deals relatively low damage with Multiattack, a single-target spell is a great fit. But if a creature's damage-per-round output is high and is spread out across multiple attacks, look for a spell that allows multiple targets or deals damage to creatures in an area. A CR 2 gargoyle dealing a relatively low 10 damage per round is equally fine with an area spell or a single-target spell dealing 10 damage. But a CR 2 centaur hits harder with 20 damage per round, so is better with an area-effect spell dealing that much damage in total to all its targets. Using a



single-target spell that deals the same damage as all of a high-damage creature's weapon attacks can skew a monster's effective challenge by making them more likely to drop a character with one attack.

## SAVE VS. ATTACK

A key component to calculating creature challenge ratings is that attacks, spells, and special features are always assumed to deal full average damage. A monster's attacks are always assumed to hit, and the characters are always assumed to fail their saving throws against a monster's spells and special features. But one area where you want to keep an eye on this is spells that deal half as much damage on a successful saving throw. Replacing a creature's weapon attacks with spells that deal partial damage on a failed save is akin to deciding that those weapon attacks deal partial damage on a miss. So be careful that dealing default damage round after round doesn't make a creature a bit too sweet in combat.

## AREA EFFECTS

For spells that deal damage in an area, assumptions need to be made about how many targets those area-affect spells will hit. A good general guideline is to assume that most areas of effect will target two creatures on average. Extra-large areas such as the 60-foot radius of a *freezing sphere* or *sunburst* spell will target three creatures.

## CHOOSING DAMAGE-DEALING SPELLS

For characters, the damage output of spells can sometimes be a complex curve, tying into caster level and the level of

the spell slot used to cast. When building spellcasting foes for combat, you can usually focus on baseline damage—5 (1d10 damage) for *eldritch blast* or *firebolt*; 10 (3d6) for *burning hands*; 7 (2d6) for each *scorching ray*; 28 (8d6) for *fireball* or *lightning bolt*; and so on.

That said, when trying to pick a spell appropriate to a creature's normal damage output, don't forget that adjusting that damage is just as easy as adding the spell in the first place. Want to build an inferno ettin who casts *fireball*? Look at the ettin's normal damage output of 28 points, then make sure their *fireball* spell deals about 14 damage (4d6 or 3d8) to each of its two expected targets.

## SPELL CONDITIONS

In most cases, conditions in combat make the creatures dishing them out more effective in a fight, by reducing the effectiveness of the characters while those conditions hinder them. Adding spells that impose conditions to existing stat blocks is thus a slightly less straightforward process than swapping weapon damage for magical damage.

The effectiveness of a particular condition can vary drastically depending on what type of character it's imposed on, and on how enemies might take advantage of the condition's effects. A fighter who's been poisoned takes a big hit in combat as disadvantage penalizes their attack rolls, even as their wizard ally casting spells that require saving throws can all but ignore the condition. Likewise, *sleep* is a 1st-level spell, and so might seem an easy option to add to any relatively low-CR creature. But a foe who casts *sleep* in order to run away from the characters is a very different threat than one who does so to let their melee-focused allies run in and start auto-critting unconscious foes.

## CONDITIONS AS THREAT

When looking at spells that impose conditions, think about those conditions as a kind of sliding scale of threat, from least to most significant. For the purpose of this approach, ignore grappled as a condition of its own, focusing instead on the restrained condition that being grappled typically imposes. Also ignore exhaustion, which is a special-case condition that should generally not be imposed during combat.

**Charmed, Deafened, Poisoned, and Prone.** These three weakest conditions are the easiest ones to make use of for spellcasting monsters. Each has the ability to take a fight in an unexpected direction by hindering characters, but none is powerful enough to upend a battle on its own because none can take a character completely out of the fight.

**Blinded, Frightened, and Restrained.** These conditions are a stronger threat, representing a greater ability to hinder characters in combat. All can limit the actions or movement of characters, even as they also penalize combat rolls.

**Incapacitated, Paralyzed, Petrified, Stunned, and Unconscious.** At the apex of the hierarchy of how badly

conditions can mess with characters, these four stand alone. Each can take a character completely out of a fight, shifting the overall balance of an encounter for a number of rounds—or even for the entire battle.

**Conditions and Duration.** When assessing any spell that imposes a condition, consider the different feel of spells that do so for 1 round or that allow a repeated saving throw to end the condition, as compared to spells whose imposed conditions have a long duration and no repeated save. Long-duration conditions with no automatic opportunity to end them can be vexing for players if they cause characters to sit out multiple turns. Even low-level spells such as *charm person* or *sleep* can feel very different when it's the characters using them to turn the tide against a mob of foes, and when it's a single spellcasting monster using them to make multiple characters sit on the sidelines during a fight.

## CONDITIONS AS REVERSE BENEFITS

The way combat changes across a broad range of character levels makes it impossible to come up with any hard-and-fast rule for how much damage a particular condition is equivalent to in a fight. So instead, think about conditions imposed by spells as granting benefits to the enemy side akin to turning the dials on a creature before combat.

For example, conditions that impose penalties on characters' attack rolls decrease their chances of hitting foes. So giving a creature a spell that imposes the frightened or poisoned condition is effectively the same as dialing up the Armor Class of the foes in an encounter. Conditions that limit characters' actions have the same general effect on the action economy in a fight as giving the enemy side additional actions, so think of spells that impose the charmed or stunned condition as equivalent to adding extra attacks to the enemy side.

At the high end of the condition hierarchy, being able to render characters incapacitated in any way can be thought of as akin to having more foes on the enemy side, working with the idea that a character taken out of the fight for a round is the same as a character spending that round fighting an additional "virtual foe."

## CHECK SPELLCASTING ABILITY

As a final step in building spellcasting creatures, have a look at a stat block's spellcasting ability scores. The math underlying a creature's relative challenge in combat makes the assumption that a creature is using one of their best abilities for their go-to attacks. So if you add spellcasting to a creature whose Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma are all low compared to the Strength or Dexterity fueling their weapon attacks, bump up one of those mental abilities so the creature's spell save DC and spell attack modifier aren't lagging behind their other attacks.

Alternatively, you can easily create a house rule stating that creatures known more for brawn than brains who channel spell magic innately can use Constitution as their spellcasting ability.