

Determining Difficulty Checks

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Difficulty Checks (DCs) are a core mechanic used by Dungeon Masters (DMs) to determine the success or failure of various tasks and actions that players attempt during the game. These checks provide a structured way to handle challenges and obstacles that characters encounter, ensuring that gameplay remains fair, consistent, and engaging. For rules on **how** characters make check, checkout Making Skill Checks.

What Are Difficulty Checks?

Difficulty Checks are numerical targets set by the DM that players must meet or exceed with their rolls to succeed in specific tasks. These tasks can range from finding hidden doors and searching a room to climbing a wall or following a trail. The result of a Difficulty Check determines whether the character's action is successful and to what extent.

Why Use Difficulty Checks?

1. **Consistency:** Difficulty Checks offer a standardized method for assessing a wide variety of actions and challenges. By assigning a DC to tasks, the DM ensures that similar challenges are handled in a consistent manner, making gameplay smoother and more predictable.
2. **Challenge and Balance:** DCs help balance the game by providing appropriate levels of difficulty for different tasks. This allows the DM to create a range of challenges that cater to the characters' abilities, ensuring that both simple and complex tasks are appropriately challenging.
3. **Player Engagement:** Difficulty Checks engage players by providing clear, quantifiable goals. Players can use their skills, abilities, and creativity to tackle challenges, making each success or failure meaningful and satisfying.
4. **Flexibility:** DMs can adjust DCs based on various factors, such as environmental conditions, character skills, and creative problem-solving. This flexibility allows the DM to tailor challenges to fit the narrative and the characters' capabilities.

Exceeding Difficulty Checks

When a player character exceeds a Difficulty check by 5 or more, it's an opportunity to provide an additional benefit or boost. This could mean uncovering extra details, discovering additional resources, or achieving a superior outcome. For example, if a character rolls well above the required DC for a search check, they might not only find the hidden object but also uncover useful clues about the room. Using this approach enhances the sense of accomplishment and rewards exceptional performance, encouraging players to

aim for higher rolls and engage more deeply with the game.

Examples of Difficulty Checks

- **Finding Hidden Doors:** To uncover a concealed door, the DM might set a DC based on the complexity of the hiding mechanism and the character's investigative abilities. For example, finding a hidden door might require a DC 15 Search or Wisdom check.
- **Searching a Room:** When characters search a room for clues or items, the DM assigns a DC based on how thoroughly the room is searched and the difficulty of the search. An Average DC of 10 might be used for a basic search, while a Tough DC of 15 might be required for a more detailed examination or a special item.
- **Climbing a Wall:** Climbing a difficult surface involves a Dexterity-based Climb check. The DM might set a DC of 15 for a challenging climb, requiring characters to use their agility and climbing skills effectively.
- **Following a Trail:** Tracking a trail could involve a Survival, Tracking or Wisdom check, with the DC reflecting the difficulty of the terrain and how well the trail has been obscured. A DC of 20 might represent a challenging task in rugged terrain.

Reference Difficulty Chart

When in doubt about how difficult a check is, here are examples of specific tasks or if you are looking for more examples (optional):

Difficulty	Example
Very Easy (0)	Notice something large in plain sight
Easy (5)	Climb a knotted rope
Average (10)	To hear a loud approaching guard
Tough (15)	Rig a wagon wheel to fall off
Challenging (20)	Swim in stormy water
Formidable (25)	Open a good lock
Heroic (30)	Leap across a 30-foot chasm
Nearly Impossible (40)	Track a squad of Orcs across hard ground after 24 hours of rainfall

Dungeon Master's Note: Critical Storyline Checks

There are moments when a skill check is crucial to advancing the storyline, such as discovering a hidden path, finding a key item, or unlocking an essential door. In these cases, failure on the check could stall or derail the adventure, leaving the players frustrated and the narrative stuck.

To ensure the story continues smoothly, consider the following approaches:

1. Automatic Success with a Complication

If the check is vital for the story to progress, you may choose to let the players succeed automatically, but introduce a complication that adds tension or an unexpected twist. For example:

- **Finding the Hidden Path:** The players find the path, but they also disturb a nearby goblin patrol, leading to an immediate encounter.
- **Unlocking a Door:** The door opens, but doing so triggers a trap or a loud creak that alerts nearby enemies.

This approach keeps the story moving while adding an extra layer of challenge or narrative interest.

2. Remove the Check Entirely

Alternatively, if success is essential, and you don't want to risk failure disrupting the story, you can choose to remove the check altogether. Simply narrate the characters' success in finding the hidden path, item, or clue, allowing the adventure to flow seamlessly. This approach is particularly useful when the players have already taken the appropriate steps to find what they need, and the check would only serve as a potential roadblock.

By using these techniques, you can maintain the momentum of the adventure and ensure that the storyline unfolds as intended, without unnecessary setbacks.

Common Checks

Situational Checks

Searching. 17 or greater.

Searching is used for finding things that are not out in the open. Secret Doors, traps and false floors would fall into this category. Both thieves and elves get additional bonuses

Listening. 17 or greater.

You should always listen carefully while you are exploring a dungeon; you may hear noises that give clues about what lies ahead. To hear anything, all the characters must stop moving and be very quiet. Armor and weapons clank and rattle when you move, spoiling your attempts at listening.

To listen for noise, simply tell the DM that you are doing so. The DM will roll to see if you hear anything. When listening at closed doors, each character can try once. Thieves have better chances than other characters. Undead creatures, like skeletons and ghouls, make no noise at all. At a door by a waterfall, for example, listening is nearly impossible and the DM should adjust the Difficulty up to accommodate the situation, maybe even by adding 10 to the required roll.

Passive Checks

Passive checks are checks made by the DM automatically. Elves, for example, have a passive check to detect secret doors. This passive check is called the Notice and is listed on each character's character sheet.

Save (Special Attack Checks)

A **save** is a roll of dice used to determine whether magic, poison, or various other types of attacks are effective against a character or monster. d20 roll then add your ability bonus – if the result is equal or greater, the save is successful. It is listed as Target VS Ability in the text. ex: DC17 (int) would be a DC 17 vs the player's Intelligence score

Sample Saves:

- Poison ingested or injected – use Constitution Bonus
- Magic and Spells – use Intelligence Bonus
- Death in the event you are reduced to 0 hit points – use Constitution Bonus
- Paralysis turn to stone – use Strength Bonus
- Gas breathed in toxins (i.e.: Dragon's Breath) – use Wisdom Bonus

Difficulty Check for Avoiding Spell Effects

Example: Fireball Attack and Difficulty Check

When a spell caster such as a Wizard casts a Fireball, targets need to make a Difficulty Check to avoid taking full damage from the spell. Here's a detailed example illustrating how this process works:

Scenario

A 4th-level Wizard casts a Fireball, which is a 3rd-level spell. The Wizard's spell casting ability is Intelligence, with a +2 Intelligence modifier and a +2 Ability Focus on Intelligence.

Calculating the DC

1. **Base DC:** The base Difficulty Check (DC) for the Fireball spell is 10.
2. **Spell Level Modifier:** The Fireball is a 3rd-level spell, adding a +3 modifier to the DC.
3. **Caster's Intelligence Modifier:** The Wizard's Intelligence modifier is +2.
4. **Ability Focus Bonus:** The Wizard's Ability Focus in Intelligence provides an additional +2 bonus.

Total DC Calculation:

- Base DC: 10
- Spell Level Modifier: +3
- Intelligence Modifier: +2
- Ability Focus Bonus: +2

Total DC = 10 + 3 + 2 + 2 = 17

Avoiding Damage

To avoid taking full damage from the Fireball, the targets need to make a Dexterity-based skill check against the DC of 17. This represents their attempt to dive for cover or otherwise avoid the brunt of the blast.

Example Skill Check for Targets:

- **Roll a d20:** The player rolls a d20 to determine the result.
- **Add Dexterity Modifier:** Add the character's Dexterity modifier to the roll.
- **Compare to DC:** The total must meet or exceed the DC of 17 to avoid full damage.

Example Calculation:

- **Roll:** 12
- **Dexterity Modifier:** +4
- **Total:** 12 (roll) + 4 (Dexterity) = 16

Since 16 is less than 17, the character does not meet the DC and will take full damage from the Fireball.

Successful Evade (Half Damage)

If the roll had been successful (meeting or exceeding DC 17), the character would take half damage from the Fireball. For instance, if the Fireball deals 30 damage, the character would only take 15 damage due to their successful evasion.

Final Thoughts on Difficulty Checks

Now that you have a clear understanding of Difficulty Checks and how to apply them in your games, you can effectively manage the challenges your players encounter and ensure a balanced and engaging experience. By setting appropriate DCs based on the complexity of tasks and the characters' abilities, you'll be able to create meaningful and dynamic scenarios that

push your players to use their skills creatively.

If you have any questions or need further assistance with setting or using Difficulty Checks, feel free to post in the comments below. I'm here to help and would love to hear how you incorporate these checks into your adventures. Happy DMing!