

Don't Worry Too Much About Specifics

You aren't going to remember every rule, and that's okay. Don't sweat the little stuff. It's okay to make rulings and decide things without looking everything up. If something is going to have a big, lasting effect on your game, you should at least be aware of the facts before you change things, however. The trick is to be able to tell the difference between the key, important stuff, and everything else. If you can't remember what kind of hit dice a class has, you'd best look it up rather than just making a ruling (unless you have a good reason to want it to be something in specific), at least if you're making a PC (for NPCs, it's a bit less crucial, as they can die or live at your whim).

Attribute Checks

Whatever edition of D&D you're playing may or may not even mention them, but attribute checks are your friends. If you can't figure out how to resolve an action, roll a d20 against the most related attribute (strength, intelligence, wisdom dexterity, constitution, or charisma) of the character who is performing the task. If the die result is less than or equal to the attribute score in question, he succeeds. If the task is difficult, give a penalty to the roll (maybe -2 to stat you are rolling against). If the task is easy, give a bonus (+2 to the stat you are rolling against). If it's really easy or really hard, adjust the modifiers accordingly. (Note that old-school role-playing games tend to use the terms "attribute" and "ability" interchangeably, so an ability check is the same thing as an attribute check.)

Task Difficulty	Modifier
simple	+8
very easy	+6
easy	+4
fairly easy	+2
standard	0
fairly hard	-2
hard	-4
very hard	-6
extremely hard	-8
astonishingly hard	-10
legendary	-14
godlike	-18

Negative Hit Points

Some editions of D&D have you die when you reach 0 hit points, but I find it more useful to have you merely fall unconscious at that point. This is a bit more forgiving and reduces the chance of somebody going straight from "acting fine" to dead. Depending on whether you think it's worth the hassle, you may want to have anybody reduced to 0 hit points or below slowly bleed out, losing 1 hit point per round until somebody spends a round tending to their wounds (or they have a heal spell cast on them). Depending on how forgiving you want to be, death can occur when a character reaches -10 hit points, a negative number of hit points equal to their level (so -3 for a 3rd level character) or maybe some fraction of their maximum hit points (so -12 for somebody with 25 hit points at full health, if you're doing half).

Death Check

It sucks to die. The main purpose of including death in your game is to make it more exciting—to make the danger feel real and keep people on their toes. This being the case, the best way to handle death is for it to seem like more of a threat than it actually is. This is where death checks come in. Whenever the rules say a character should die, you can allow him to make a check against his fate. He must roll his death check, or he's dead for real. You could have this scale by level if you like, or it could just be a flat number (seeing as various resurrection spells are available at higher levels). Even if a character passes their death check, you may want to have them suffer a lingering injury for the rest of the adventure (or maybe until they gain a level). This could range from penalizing all their d20 rolls (by -2, maybe), to reducing the maximum number of hit points they can be healed to (maybe 1/2 or 2/3 their normal maximum), to

penalizing or forbidding certain actions (their leg almost got hacked off, so they can't run or jump, and must take the worse of 2 rolls on any checks for actions that heavily rely on their legs).

Even if they only have a 15% chance to fail their death checks, players are going to be sweating when you hand them the dice and say "make this roll or your character is dead". This lets you keep up the tension while minimizing (or at least reducing) the heartbreak of actually destroying a character. This sort of safety net also means that you can be a little rougher on the party without having to worry as much about a total-party-kill if you've miscalculated the danger a bit.

Below is a sample table for death checks. It gives different scores according to whether you want to give the player just one roll, or the better of two (which I prefer, because it makes the check look harder than it actually is). Using the target numbers on the table, the chances of success are roughly the same for both methods (approximately 35% for harsh, 50% for tough, 65% for moderate, 75% for forgiving, and 85% for kind). Just decide how difficult you want death checks to be in your game, and cross-reference this with whether you want to have people roll one or two dice to get the appropriate value. Remember that this is a *check*, which means you're trying to roll low and not high. If you want to convert it to a save (where you're trying to roll high), just subtract the number listed on the table from 21 to produce your death save score (so that a tough difficulty death save on two dice would be 11 or over).

	Desired Difficulty of Death Check				
	harsh	tough	moderate	forgiving	kind
one roll	7	10	13	15	17
better of 2 rolls	4	6	8	10	12

Talent

Talent points give the players more control over their rolls, letting them focus their efforts on particular tasks. Give each character a base number of talent points according to what class they are in: 2 for a full caster (like a cleric, magic-user or druid), 3 for a partial caster (like a bard, Basic edition elf, or multiclass fighter/magic-user), and 4 for a noncaster (like a thief or fighter, or a class like paladin, which is just barely a caster). Use your best judgment when it's not clear which category a character fits into, defaulting to "partial caster" if you can't make up your mind.

Before any d20 roll a character makes, their player can spend a point of talent in order to get a +2 bonus, or two points of talent to get a +3 bonus. After any d20 roll their character makes, a player can spend a single point of talent (and no more) to improve the result by 1. In general talent can't be used with spells or special rolls that are much more powerful than a standard action like a melee attack, but use your best judgment. You may wish to allow talent to be used on thief skill checks, in which case each +1 bonus is equivalent to +5% (so if you spent 2 talents before a roll, you'd get a +15% bonus).

You can decide when to replenish talent, but I think a good way to do it is by chapter, which is normally defined as "a battle and any adventuring that comes before it". This would allow people to restock their talent at the end of every battle. Of course, if the party is able to rest up, or spends a long period of time exploring without a fight, you may want to arbitrarily replenish their supply.

Another benefit of talent is that it can help to balance out your attributes. In old school D&D, certain scores are more important than others. Strength gives you bonuses to melee attack and melee damage, while intelligence does little more than give you additional languages. Similarly, charisma does relatively little, unless you're bringing a lot of hirelings and henchmen along with you (and in my experience, very few gaming groups are looking for that kind of adventure). So I have both intelligence and charisma both modify talent. So if you're a noncaster (base of 4 talent points) with a -1 intelligence modifier and a +2 charisma modifier, you'll end up with 5 talent points. Regardless of your modifiers, you can never end up with less than 0 talent points (and you might want to consider always letting characters have at least one).

So that people don't end up hoarding their talent points just in case something bad happens (and making the game less interesting in the process), I let people who have run out of points borrow them from the future, whenever they feel it's necessary. Just mark down a negative number for their current number of talent points, and subtract this number from the points they receive when their talent is next replenished. (They can never borrow more than their maximum number of talent points.)

Because people would always end up spending talent on them anyway, you might want to rule that life-threatening saving throws (saves vs. poison, being petrified, etc.) always get the better of two rolls, but can never have talent spent on them. This has the added bonus of making lethal saves easier than nonlethal saves, which I think is how it should be. You should never allow talent to be used on death checks.

Fixed Hit Points

It sucks to have a couple bad hit dice rolls and know that they are going to stick with your character, weighing him down forever. So instead of rolling, you can assign a fixed number of hit points per level (modified by your constitution, as normal), depending on your hit dice type. Typically, you assign the hit points for an average roll, which leaves you with the choice of whether to be conservative (rounding down to the nearest whole number) or liberal (rounding up to the nearest whole number). Generally speaking, the liberal approach probably works better, as it's a little too easy for a magic-user to end up getting only 1 hit point per level under the conservative approach.

Size of Hit Dice	Conservative Approach	Liberal Approach
d4	2 hp per level	3 hp per level
d6	3 hp per level	4 hp per level
d8	4 hp per level	5 hp per level
d10	5 hp per level	6 hp per level

Recalculated Hit Points

If you don't want to use fixed hit points, you can still make it so that a bad roll won't forever burden your character. Using this method, roll all your hit dice every time you gain a level, and use the new number only if it's higher than the old one. For instance, a 5th level cleric, who has 23 hit points, gains a level, reaching 6th. He now rolls 6d8 (and adds in 6 times his constitution modifier), to produce a result of 21. Since that's lower than what he had before, he gets to stick with 23. (If you want to, you could rule that a character always gains at least 1 hit point, so that the cleric in our example would end up with 24 hit points.)

Learning Spells

Old-school D&D tends to be a bit harsh when it comes to the number of spells it divvies out to those classes that have to learn spells (like magic-users/mages, or Basic elves). You gain something like 1 spell per level you gain, and have to pick up the rest from scrolls, which can be a severe problem if you don't give out much magical treasure and don't have places the characters can freely purchase scrolls (or whatever adventure they are on has them far away from civilization). So I like the idea of characters automatically learn 3 spells each time they gain a level, chosen somewhat at random (either giving them a choice between two different options for each spell, or giving them 5 random spells and having them choose 3. These spells can be of any level they have access to, though they'll typically want to choose the highest level. (You could institute a rule whereby they get to pick which specific spell they want to learn if it's not of the highest level they have access to—or maybe it has to be two levels lower than their highest, so that a magic-user with access to 3rd level spells could select to learn magic missile from 1st level.)

When starting out, it makes sense to give a character 3 spells plus read magic (assuming you don't dispense with read magic and let this sort of thing be done without expending a spell). All of this assumes that scrolls aren't very

abundant, and that people will pick up very few spells from them. If they are more plentiful, you might want to reduce the number of spells automatically learned to 2 per level (and start people off with 2 and read magic).

Spell Books

Fuck spell books. They're obnoxious and it's absolutely crippling when they get lost or destroyed. I just dispense with them entirely, and treat it as if all spells that somebody learns are contained within their head, but that "memorizing" them is more like meditating on them and readying them for use.

Memorizing Lower Level Spells in Higher Level Slots

Whether or not whatever version of D&D you're playing specifically endorses this as a possibility, I think it's a good idea. Usually it isn't beneficial to waste a 3rd level slot on a 2nd or 1st level spell, but sometimes it can come in handy, and I see nothing wrong with allowing it.

Limited Rests

If you want to let casters regain some of their spells while on adventure, but don't want to give them the benefit of a full night's sleep (which would give all their spells back to them), you could implement rules for a limited rest of somewhere between 1 and 4 hours (whatever seems right to you). This would allow the memorization of a total number of spell levels equal to the top level of spells you can cast. So if you can cast 3rd level spells, you could memorize one 3rd level spell ($3 = 3$ levels of spells), or a 2nd level spell and a 1st level spell ($2 + 1 = 3$ levels of spells), or three 1st level spells ($1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ levels of spells). These spells can fill empty slots (that you've already depleted), or can replace ones that you currently have memorized. The main advantage to the limited rest is that it allows spell casters to replenish themselves a bit (which may mean the difference between continuing the adventure or not), without completely doing away with one of their biggest limitations and effectively allowing infinite spells. However, limited rests should still be used sparingly. If they happen after most battles, there should either be consequences (wandering monsters, monsters reorganizing, etc.), or you should reduce the number of spells a limited rest gives you (maybe a number of spell levels equal to half your highest level of spells, rounded up). You could also rule that there are only so many times you can effectively rest and meditate, and allow no more than 1 or 2 limited rests between full sleeps.

Healing

Natural healing is a bit pathetic in D&D, at least when compared to the more magical means at your disposal. If you want people to spring back quicker without the aid of a cleric, you could up their healing rate. One way to do this is to introduce a "healing factor" which equals $1 + 1/10$ the maximum hit points a character has (rounded down). After a battle, if you have the opportunity to rest and bandage yourself, you regain a number of hit points equal to your healing factor. Additionally, whenever you have the opportunity for a full sleep, you regain a number of hit points equal to $1d4 \times$ your healing factor under relatively desirable conditions. If conditions are less ideal, subtract 1 or even 2 from your d4 roll (before multiplying it by your healing factor—it's up to you whether people can actually lose hit points this way, or if the worst that can happen is that they don't get any better). This means that on average, a character at 0 hit points will be fully healed after 4 nights of sleep under desirable conditions.

Bonus Experience

Old-school D&D gives you bonuses to earned experience if you have a high score in whatever attribute your class's prime requisite is. I find this to be obnoxious, so I drop it entirely. Instead, I give casters a bonus to the spells they learn based on their prime requisite's modifier (see the chart below). I also give thieves a bonus to their thieving skills based on their prime requisite (at least if I'm not playing AD&D, which already has thieving bonuses for high dexterity). I add their dexterity modifier to their level when determining how good their skills are. So a 1st level thief with a +2 dexterity modifier would have the thieving skills of a 3rd level thief. Most other classes already get a big enough bonus from having a high score in their prime requisite that they don't need special rules (a fighter with high strength inflicts more damage, etc).

Modifier	Effect
0	none
1	+1 spell per day of the second-highest level of spells you have access to
2	+1 spell per day of the highest level of spells you have access to
3	+1 spell per day of the highest and second-highest levels of spells you have access to

Attributes: Generation and Modifiers

At the end of this pdf, I have appended a table designed to generate random but fair attributes. I highly recommend you use it. Below is a table delineating attribute modifiers that tries to balance the power of the attributes. If you want to be very careful to preserve balance, you might want to have a low strength reduce melee damage too (a hit always inflicts at least 1 point of damage). You could similarly penalize low intelligence by first taking a language away (at -1 modifier), and then the ability to read and write (at -2 modifier).

Generic							
Attribute	Modifier	Strength	Dexterity	Intelligence	Wisdom	Charisma	Constitution
3	-3	-3 melee to-hit	+3 AC, -3 ranged to-hit	-3 talent	-3 saving throws	-3 talent, -3 reaction	-3 hit points per level
4-5	-2	-2 melee to-hit	+2 AC, -2 ranged to-hit	-2 talent	-2 saving throws	-2 talent, -2 reaction	-2 hit points per level
6-8	-1	-1 melee to-hit	+1 AC, -1 ranged to-hit	-1 talent	-1 saving throws	-1 talent, -1 reaction	-1 hit point per level
9-12	0	—	—	—	—	—	—
13-15	+1	+1 melee to-hit & damage	-1 AC, +1 ranged to-hit	+1 talent, +1 language	+1 saving throws	+1 talent, +1 reaction	+1 hit point per level
16-17	+2	+2 melee to-hit & damage	-2 AC, +2 ranged to-hit	+2 talent, +2 languages	+2 saving throws	+2 talent, +2 reaction	+2 hit points per level
18	+3	+3 melee to-hit & damage	-3 AC, +3 ranged to-hit	+3 talent, +3 languages	+3 saving throws	+3 talent, +3 reaction	+3 hit points per level

Note that this table assumes that you are using descending AC (like old-school D&D uses). If you do not, then you should reverse the AC modifier imparted by dexterity (so that 18 dexterity yields a +3 AC).

Generic			
Attribute	Modifier	Thief's Dexterity	Spell-Caster's Prime Requisite
3	-3	treat thief skills as if 3 levels lower	can't cast spells
4-5	-2	treat thief skills as if 2 levels lower	-1 spell per day to the highest and second-highest levels of spells you have access to
6-8	-1	treat thief skills as if 1 level lower	-1 spell per day to the highest level of spells you have access to
9-12	0	—	—
13-15	+1	treat thief skills as if 1 level higher	+1 spell per day to the second-highest level of spells you have access to
16-17	+2	treat thief skills as if 2 levels higher	+1 spell per day to the highest level of spells you have access to
18	+3	treat thief skills as if 3 levels higher	+1 spell per day to the highest and second-highest levels of spells you have access to

When a thief has a dexterity penalty, you'll have to extrapolate his skills when he first starts off, using the change in scores between 1st and 2nd level as your guide. In Moldvay Basic, for instance, a 1st level thief has a 15% chance to pick locks, while a 2nd level thief has a 20% chance. This means that 1 level is worth 5% in that skill. So if a first level thief has a -1 dexterity modifier, he'd have a 10% chance to pick locks.

Thieving Skills

Thief skills start off at such ludicrously low levels that they really can't be expected to do much of anything without receiving a large bonus. So they need to get one, whether the rationale is that they're dealing with a shoddy lock, or that sneaking up on a low-level goon is a lot easier than sneaking up on a high-level monster. With this in mind, below is a quick-and-dirty guide to scaling things so that thieves can be effective. The levels are based on Moldvay Basic and may need to be adjusted a little for other editions. They also assume a dexterity bonus improves your thieving skills (as it does in AD&D and the house rules detailed above); if it does not, you might want to increase the task adjustment by +10% for each category, with a new category starting at level 10 that gives no adjustment.

Task Adjustment	Appropriate Levels
+30%	1-3
+20%	4-5
+10%	6-7
—	8+

These modifiers should not be applied to picking pockets, climbing sheer surfaces, or hearing noises, which should generally not scale according to level.

Alternate Thieving Skill System

This system simplifies thieving, makes it function in a similar fashion to attribute checks, and pads out the lower levels, taking away the need for the scaling level adjustments discussed in the previous section. Simply roll a d20 and get equal to or lower than your thieving score to succeed. In order to represent "climb sheer surfaces", which has a much greater chance to succeed than all the other thieving skills, simply take the best of 3 die rolls when rolling against your thieving skill. Everything else is close enough to equivalent that you won't lose much by lumping them together. And yes, you can use your thieving score for "hear noise" as well.

Level	Thieving	Backstab
1	9	x2
2	10	x2
3	11	x2
4	12	x2
5	12	x3
6	13	x3
7	14	x3
8	15	x3
9	15	x4
10	16	x4
11	17	x4
12	18	x4
13	18	x5
14	19	x5
15	20	x5
16	21	x5
17	21	x6
18	22	x6
19	23	x6
20	24	x6

In most circumstances, a roll of 20 indicates a failure, regardless of your score. However, having a score of 20 or higher can still be useful in offsetting situational modifiers.

If you want to make this system a bit more sophisticated, you can divide "thieving" into the following categories: tinkering, stealth, agility, and awareness. These skills all progress at the same rate, but are tied to different attributes.

thieving skill	modified by	covers
tinkering	dex, int	open locks, remove traps, etc.
stealth	dex, wis	move silently, hide in shadows, conceal item, etc.
agility	dex, str	climb sheer surfaces, acrobatics, etc.
awareness	int, wis	hear noise, notice hidden things, etc.

Thus, your tinkering is modified by both your dexterity and your intelligence. This means if you had a +2 dexterity modifier and a -1 intelligence modifier, you'd end up with a +1 modifier to your tinkering skill. I haven't included "pick pocket" because I find it disruptive and tend to remove it from my games. If you include it, you might want to have it be either tinkering or stealth, whichever is lower. Below are some examples of thief superpowers available (at a -10 penalty) when each individual category reaches 20 or above (after being modified by your attributes).

tinkering — jam or disarm traps and locks just by banging on the wall (the Fonzie maneuver)

stealth — hide in plain sight, walk silently across dried autumn leaves a foot thick

agility — run along walls, climb upside down, roll out of a fall of any distance without being hurt

awareness — determine what somebody is carrying from the way they walk, determine exactly what people are saying from their body language (even if you don't speak their language).

Multiple Attacks

If you're playing a version of D&D that doesn't allow fighter-types to make multiple strikes, like AD&D does, it's well worth introducing rules for it. In the table below, lesser warriors are classes like elf, dwarf and hobbit in Basic D&D. When "3/2" is indicated, you get 2 strikes on the first round of combat and 1 on the second, alternating back and forth.

Fighter Level	Lesser Warrior Level	Strikes per Round
1-5	1-7	1
6-10	8-13	3/2
11+	14+	2

Generating Random But Fair Attributes For Old School D&D

Old school D&D relies on randomly-generated attributes. Without this element of chance, a system can often be both exploitable and boring—exploitable because any rule imbalance related to your attributes can be manipulated at will when you make a character, and boring because sub-optimal distributions will see little to no play, majorly reducing the diversity of characters in the game (if strength does little to help a wizard, the vast majority of wizards will be given little strength). But there are tradeoffs. When you randomly generate attributes, your ability to plan ahead and construct the precise character you had envisioned is severely curtailed by the whims of the dice. On top of this, somebody who gets lucky and rolls well can end up with much higher scores across the board, creating an imbalance of power within the party, and making somebody who rolled comparatively poorly feel cheated. While there's not much that can be done to mitigate the first issue without correspondingly increasing the dangers of exploitability and boringness, the system can be made a bit more consistent and fair by giving every character roughly equivalent stats that are allocated to your attributes in random order (so the question isn't how high you'll roll, but whether your highest stat will go into strength or dexterity).

Roll a d20 on the table to the right to determine which array of stats you will be using for your attributes. Write those numbers down on a piece of paper and then pick one of them to place. Then, and only then, roll a d6 to determine which attribute it will represent:

- 1 Strength
- 2 Dexterity
- 3 Intelligence
- 4 Wisdom
- 5 Charisma
- 6 Constitution

Once you've done that, pick another number and roll to see where that one goes, repeating the process until you have assigned all of your stats. Anytime you roll an attribute that already has a number beside it, you have a choice to make. You can either leave the original number where it was, and place the new one in the next open slot, or you can substitute the new number and move the original one to the next open slot. (The end of the list wraps back around to the beginning, so that Strength comes after Constitution.)

Example: I've decided to allocate my stats in order from high to low. I've already rolled twice and placed a 16 into Constitution and a 14 into Strength. I now roll to see where my 13 goes. I get a result of 6, which indicates Constitution. However, since a value has already been assigned for Constitution, I need to move either the 13 or the original 16 to the next open slot, which is Dexterity (since Strength already has a number beside it, it is not "open", and is skipped over).

While having a large element of luck to keep things interesting, this method nevertheless gives you some ability to shape your character by choosing which stat to keep and which stat to move when you roll an attribute that has already been assigned a value (a decision you will get to make 2 or 3 times on average). This system is not about going in with a clear-cut idea of what your character will be like, but rather seeing what you can make out of what you get, as was customary for old school D&D. It's a different mindset, but you can end up with some very interesting characters that you would never have made on your own, and I believe that the game is ultimately enriched by the process.

This table will give you stats roughly equivalent to what you would get using 3d6+1 to roll your attributes (and capping them at 18), which is a compromise between the unforgiving and frequently dull 3d6 method, and the overly-generous 4d6, drop the lowest die method. Every character will end up with a balance of +2 when the modifiers for all their attributes are totaled. Characters with particularly high stats will end up with a few less attribute points overall, to compensate for the fact that being focused is usually to your advantage, but the difference is relatively minor. The system presented here is appropriate for any old school edition of Dungeons & Dragons (OD&D, Basic, or AD&D) or retroclone (Swords & Wizardry, Labyrinth Lord, Castles & Crusades, etc.), regardless of what method the game officially endorses, though it is highly recommended that you use the standardized system of modifiers for all attributes that is pictured to the right. This system is not recommended for modern editions of Dungeons & Dragons (3e, 3.5e, 4e, or Pathfinder), as those are built around using a point-buy and have a different scale for modifiers.

d20 Resulting Stat Array

- 1) 16, 14, 12, 11, 9, 7
- 2) 17, 13, 12, 10, 9, 8
- 3) 16, 15, 11, 10, 9, 8
- 4) 16, 13, 12, 12, 10, 6
- 5) 15, 13, 13, 12, 10, 8
- 6) 14, 14, 13, 12, 11, 7
- 7) 15, 14, 13, 11, 11, 7
- 8) 15, 14, 12, 11, 10, 9
- 9) 15, 13, 12, 11, 10, 10
- 10) 14, 13, 12, 12, 11, 9
- 11) 13, 13, 12, 12, 11, 10
- 12) 16, 14, 13, 11, 10, 5
- 13) 17, 16, 10, 10, 8, 7
- 14) 18, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8
- 15) 16, 14, 13, 10, 8, 8

16-20) roll below:

- 1) 17, 12, 12, 10, 10, 9
- 2) 16, 12, 12, 10, 10, 10
- 3) 17, 12, 11, 11, 10, 9
- 4) 18, 16, 10, 10, 7, 5
- 5) 17, 15, 13, 10, 9, 5
- 6) 16, 16, 11, 9, 8, 8
- 7) 17, 14, 14, 9, 8, 7
- 8) 16, 15, 14, 10, 7, 7
- 9) 17, 14, 13, 11, 8, 6
- 10) 14, 13, 13, 12, 11, 8
- 11) 17, 17, 10, 10, 9, 5
- 12) 17, 16, 11, 10, 9, 5
- 13) 16, 16, 11, 10, 10, 5
- 14) 18, 13, 10, 10, 8, 8
- 15) 18, 14, 10, 10, 8, 7
- 16) 18, 16, 9, 8, 8, 7
- 17) 18, 13, 10, 9, 9, 8
- 18) 15, 15, 14, 13, 8, 6
- 19) 15, 14, 13, 13, 8, 8
- 20) 16, 16, 14, 9, 8, 5

Attribute Modifier

3	-3
4-5	-2
6-8	-1
9-12	—
13-15	+1
16-17	+2
18	+3