

# GUIDELINES FOR D&D 5E NARRATIVE

## "THEATER OF THE MIND" COMBAT

**T**hese guidelines are intended to help *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition dungeon masters run combat in the "theater of the mind" without the need for a gridded battle map. This style of combat focuses less on specific distances, ranges, and the sizes of areas of effect and instead focuses on the in-game action, the intent of the characters, and what happens in the story.

Narrative combat follows the same framework of other D&D scenes. On each player's turn the DM describes the current circumstances, the player describes their intent, and the DM adjudicates what happens.

This style of combat requires that players trust the dungeon master to describe the situation and adjudicate the results of the character's actions fairly. The DM earns this trust by erring on the side of the players and focusing on sharing an action-packed story.

### SUMMARY GUIDELINES FOR DMs

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- Each turn, describe the character's circumstances.
- Offer options to help players meet their intent.
- Be generous. Give players the benefit of the doubt.
- Use skill checks to help characters try crazy ideas.
- When needed use sketches, abstract maps, or miniatures to show complicated locations and relative positions.

### SUMMARY GUIDELINES FOR PLAYERS

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- Describe what you want to do.
- Use the features of the area.
- Don't worry about specific distances. Describe your intent.
- Try awesome ideas based on the situation.
- Describe your character's actions within the story.

### MOVEMENT, DISTANCE, AND RANGE

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In the beginning of combat, the DM describes the situation, features, distances, and arrangements of the creatures in the area. We can generally assume that any creature can move within 5 feet of any other creature and that every creature is within range of every other creature for ranged attacks. The DM will describe when this isn't true, such as when an enemy is further away or behind a front line of protective allies. Characters with fast movement can often move anywhere they want.

### POSITIONING, OPPORTUNITY ATTACKS, AND COVER

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On their turn, players describe how they intend to position themselves. Examples include moving next to an ally, moving next to two enemies, or staying out of reach while attacking with a polearm.

If a creature is in melee combat with an enemy, it will likely provoke an opportunity attack if it tries to move away from that enemy.

The DM will describe features of the area that may provide cover and to what degree.

### AREAS OF EFFECT

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Page 247 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* offers guidelines for adjudicating the number of creatures within an area of attack. These areas are further abstracted below with the general size of the area, the expected number of enemies within these areas, and example spells that represent the sizes of these areas.

- **Tiny areas:** 1 creature (*cloud of daggers*)
- **Small areas:** 2 creatures (*thunder wave, burning hands*).
- **Large areas:** 4 creatures (*cone of cold, fireball*).
- **Huge areas:** Everyone (*earthquake, circle of death*).
- **Short lines:** 2 creatures (*wall of fire*).
- **Long lines:** 3 creatures (*lightning bolt, blade barrier*).

The DM will describe if more or less enemies happen to fall in the area depending on the circumstances. Abilities like *shape spell* can increase the number of affected enemies, usually by one or two.

### EXAMPLES OF NARRATIVE PLAY

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For liveplay examples of narrative combat, [watch Chris Perkins run the Acquisitions Incorporated games at PAX on Youtube](#) or his [Dice, Camera, Action videos](#).