D&D House Rules

A collection of optional rules

Introduction

I recently attended a gathering of Game Masters where we discussed house rules for D&D and D&D-adjacent games. That conversation inspired me to collect rules I have used across multiple editions since I started playing in the early 1980s.

I do not use every rule in every campaign. Choose what suits your setting, your players, and your adventure. My goal is to relieve the burden on the GM and offer players simpler options and meaningful decisions while keeping the fiction at the center of play.

> *"In a sense, the D&D game has no rules, only rule suggestions."*
>
> *— Tom Moldvay, D&D Basic Rulebook (1981), foreword*

This is a collection of optional rules, not a replacement ruleset. Most are aimed at D&D 5e-style games. A few are deliberately setting-specific. Where the exact mechanics remain a GM decision, that is identified rather than silently replaced with a new rule.

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Terms: "HD" means a character's Hit Die or Hit Dice. "AC protection" refers to the armor's contribution above the unarmored baseline, not total AC. "GM" and "DM" are used interchangeably.

Part I

General House Rules

1. The Three Ds of Play

I lean into verisimilitude: the imagined world responds to characters in ways that make sense in its own context, even when magic and monsters are involved. I use the same process in almost any TTRPG.

STEP	AT THE TABLE
Declare	The player explains what their character is attempting in the fiction, not merely which mechanic they want to roll.
Determine	The GM decides the outcome, whether a check is needed, and the difficulty or consequences.
Describe	The GM describes what happens and how the world responds, after any necessary resolution.

Players can begin playing without mastering the rulebook: they tell you what they want to do. Dice come in when needed.

2. Character Creation — Let Fate Decide

Roll 3d6 down the line; then swap any two ability scores.

A low ability score is not necessarily a bad character: it may become a weakness, an interesting personality trait, or a reason to depend on companions. The single swap gives players some direction without erasing fate.

3. Character Flaws

If a character has an ability score of 8 or lower (a negative modifier), the player may select a fitting flaw or invent one with the GM. The flaw is optional and creates no automatic additional penalty.

Cooperative benefit: when a flaw meaningfully complicates a situation and a companion helps, the GM may grant the helping character Advantage on a related check.

The assistance must matter in the fiction. A player is never obliged to portray their flaw. I find that flaws encourage roleplaying, empathy, and teamwork rather than simply optimizing away every weakness.

Suggested Flaws

ABILITY	FLAW	ROLEPLAY SUGGESTION
STR / CON	Dependent	You rely on stronger companions to protect you; feel guilt, gratitude, or both.
STR / CON	Cowardly	Past trauma makes you avoid danger and hesitate when violence begins.
STR / CON	Pacifist	You favor negotiation and may surrender ground or treasure to avoid bloodshed.
STR / CON	Overconfident	You compensate for weakness through bravado and reckless attempts to prove yourself.
DEX / CHA	Awkward	Clumsy in body or speech; you fumble things or say the wrong thing.
DEX / CHA	Self-Conscious	You disguise your shortcomings with humor, silence, or avoidance.
INT / WIS	Gullible	You believe others too readily and miss sarcasm or deception.
INT / WIS	Prejudiced	Unfamiliar customs, faiths, or ideas make you suspicious.
INT / WIS	Skeptical	When something exceeds your understanding, you insist it cannot be true.
INT / WIS	Incompetent	You struggle to follow complicated instructions or plans.
CHA / WIS	Compulsive Liar	You exaggerate to impress others or conceal insecurity.
CHA / WIS	Obsessed	You fixate on a person, belief, or object and see the world through it.
ANY	Superstitious	You find omens in ordinary events, such as a crow, a broken cup, or bad luck.

4. Advancement Through Adventure

When a character gains a level and chooses spells or class features, I ask the player what they are gaining and weave that advancement into the adventure. It need not manifest at the exact moment the level is earned.

- *A cleric receives inspiration after prayer.*
- *A fighter learns a technique from a seasoned traveler.*
- *A wizard deciphers an old spellbook or studies a magical phenomenon.*
- *A warlock performs a private ritual and receives a new power from their patron.*

The player chooses the feature; the GM finds its place in the story. This is meant to support verisimilitude, not to permanently deny earned abilities.

5. Counting Hits Instead of HP

For NPCs and monsters, I often track meaningful hits rather than exact HP. Challenge Rating is the starting point, not a rigid formula: a CR 5 gladiator might take five hits, while a CR 5 hill giant might take eight.

RULE OF THUMB	GUIDELINE
Low-level party	Approximately 5 damage in one attack counts as 1 hit.
Higher-level party	Approximately 10 damage in one attack counts as 1 hit.
Critical hit	Counts as 2
Less than the threshold	The attack lands, but no hit box is checked off.
Minion	Usually defeated with 1 meaningful hit.

I adjust freely for the fiction. The players still roll damage normally; they need not know I am counting hits. When an enemy is down to one or two hits, describe it as bloodied, limping, weak, desperate, or retreating. Exceptional damage and fractional CR creatures remain GM rulings.

6. Encounter Balance — Action Economy First

I balance encounters by looking first at meaningful actions, not HP. Four PCs usually produce about four main actions, and I round up by one to account for bonus actions. For an ordinary encounter I aim for roughly comparable enemy actions, plus or minus one or two.

A boss with only two or three actions against five PCs can be swamped. I would rather add one-hit minions, battlefield complications, or tactical choices than inflate its health. This is a rough design tool: one dragon breath is clearly not equivalent to one goblin attack.

7. Dying — Escalating Constitution Checks

At 0 HP, a character falls unconscious and begins dying. At the start of each turn, make a Constitution check, starting at DC 8.

Roll	Result
Success	Mark 1 success; DC stays the same
3 successes	Stabilized, remaining unconscious at 0 HP
Failure	DC increases by 1 for the next check
Natural 20	Critical Success: awaken and stabilize at 0 HP
Natural 1	Die at the start of your next turn unless saved.
Failure at DC 10	Die at the start of your next turn unless saved.
Further Damage	Die immediately while dying.

8. Pushing a Roll

A player may reroll any d20 roll or damage roll, but gains 1 level of exhaustion after making the reroll.

The cost applies regardless of the new result. This is a choice to push beyond one's limits when a bad check, save, attack, or damage roll really matters. For repeated pushes on the same roll, decide your table's limit before play.

9. Critical Hits — Maximum Plus a Roll

On a critical hit, maximize the normal damage dice, then roll those dice once more. Add flat damage modifiers once.

For example, a longsword dealing 1d8 + 3 normally deals 8 + 1d8 + 3 on a critical hit. This raises the minimum critical damage without changing its maximum. The rule works for enemies, too. Decide before play whether bonus dice such as Sneak Attack or Smite are included in the maximized dice.

10. Sacrificing Armor & Shields

A character may choose to damage their armor rather than take damage from a blow. Reduce the armor's protective AC by 1 and negate the attack's damage. On a critical hit, the character may instead sacrifice all their armor or their shield to negate all damage: the item is destroyed and cannot be repaired.

Track the armor's protective contribution, not the character's total AC. For example, ordinary armor providing AC 16 may begin with six points of protection above an unarmored AC of 10. If the protection falls to zero, the armor is destroyed and irreparable. The GM decides how magical AC bonuses and unusual armor are tracked.

Repairing Damaged Armor

- Leather armor requires an appropriate leatherworking background and tools; metal armor requires blacksmithing knowledge and smith's tools.
- With the kit and a successful relevant check, repair 1 point of lost AC in approximately 1 hour, including during a rest.
- A failed repair check restores nothing. Damaged armor can also be repaired by paying a suitable craftsman in town.
- Destroyed armor and sacrificed shields cannot be repaired.

The ordinary-hit shield option is not defined here; the stated shield sacrifice applies to a critical hit. A shield's normal AC bonus still functions until it is sacrificed.

11. Short & Long Rests

I prefer a middle ground between the slow recovery of early D&D and the generous recovery of modern 5e.

Short Rest — Another Character Must Help

CIRCUMSTANCE	HEALING
Another character uses a Healer's Kit	Recipient spends 1 available HD, heals that die's result + their CON modifier. No Medicine check needed.
No kit; companion succeeds on Medicine	Recipient spends 1 available HD, heals that die's result + their CON modifier.
No treatment, failed check, or no available HD	Recover HP equal to CON modifier, minimum 1. No HD spent.

Only another character may administer the treatment; self-treatment does not qualify for Hit Die recovery. A Healer's Kit use is consumed when used. The GM sets the Medicine DC according to circumstances (DC 10 is a suggested starting point). The ordinary small recovery still applies when treatment fails.

Long Rest

- Spend any number of remaining Hit Dice to regain HP, adding the CON modifier once to the total.
- After spending HD, regain half of the character's total Hit Dice, rounded down.
- Recover exhaustion levels equal to the character's CON modifier, minimum 1.
- Do not recover above maximum HP or maximum HD.

A 5th-level fighter with five d10 Hit Dice and CON +2 could recover up to 5d10 + 2 HP if all five HD remain, then recover two HD after spending them. This rule replaces standard automatic long-rest HP restoration.

12. Healer's Kit & Medicine

Mundane healing is handled through the short-rest treatment rule above, rather than as a separate unlimited healing action. A companion with a kit heals without a check; without a kit, they can attempt Medicine and describe what they do in the fiction. Magical healing works normally. This gives characters a practical reason to carry supplies and develop medical or crafting skills.

13. Exhaustion — Simple, Cumulative Penalties

Each level of exhaustion applies a cumulative −1 to d20 rolls, including attacks, checks, and saves. At 10 levels, the character enters the Dying condition. This is a modified rule, not the official 2014 or 2024 exhaustion progression.

EVENT	RESULT
1–9 levels	−1 per level to d20 rolls (for example, level 4 means −4).
10 levels	Enter Dying.
Short rest	Remove 1 level of
Long rest	Remove exhaustion equal to CON modifier (minimum 1).

GM note: Short rests remove one exhaustion level, as in the earlier exhaustion rule; the revised long rest removes CON modifier levels (minimum 1). At 10 exhaustion, determine how stabilization interacts with remaining exhaustion.

14. Mana — Simpler Magic

Instead of spell slots, I use a simple Mana pool inspired by the old DMG Spell Points variant. It is not the official DMG conversion table. Cantrips cost 0 Mana.

RULE	AMOUNT
Maximum Mana	(2 × character level) + spellcasting modifier (negative modifier treated as 0).
Cast a spell	Spend Mana equal to the level at which the spell is cast (cantrips cost 0).
Upcast	Spend +1 Mana for each spell level above its normal level.
Short rest	Recover Mana equal to half character level, rounded up. Only twice between long rests.
Long rest	Recover Mana equal to character level + spellcasting modifier (minimum 1). Reset the short-rest recovery allowance.
Limits	Recovery cannot exceed maximum Mana; accessible spell levels still follow class progression.

Example: A 3rd-level wizard with INT +1 has 7 Mana. They can cast seven 1st-level spells, or three 2nd-level spells with 1 Mana left. Each of the first two eligible short rests restores 2 Mana; a long rest restores 4 Mana. A 4th-level spell costs 4 Mana, and upcasting it to 5th level costs 5 Mana.
Higher-level spells, half-casters, pact magic, and multiclassing need table rulings.

15. "Click!" — Interactive Trap Resolution

When a trap triggers, rather than immediately asking for saves or rolling damage, the GM announces "Click!" Each affected player gets to declare one immediate physical reaction, without knowing the full nature of the trap.

"I dive backward!" "I raise my shield!" "I shove the wizard aside!" "I drop to the floor!" Then resolve the trap, considering placement, timing, cleverness, and the fiction. A reaction may avoid danger, alter a save, reduce damage, save someone else, or unintentionally make matters worse.

This is the Three Ds in miniature: Declare the reaction, Determine the consequence, Describe the result. Reactions are immediate; there is no time for lengthy investigation or elaborate planning.

Part II

Gothic Horror House Rules for Legends of Barovia

These setting-specific options were developed to reinforce dread, death, and the trapped souls of Barovia. They work best with agreement about horror themes at the table.

16. Revenant Characters

A PC who dies in Barovia may return as a revenant to defeat Strahd or avenge themselves upon the creature that killed them. The return is a curse rather than a free resurrection.

The Revenant's Curse

When the Mists came to Barovia, darkness swallowed the valley and trapped the souls of the dead. Before his execution, Sir Vladimir Horngaard swore vengeance upon Strahd and those who abandoned the Order of the Silver Dragon. His hatred drew his fallen knights' souls from the Mists. The dead rose to battle Strahd's minions, and when struck down, returned in other corpses. The cycle has continued for centuries. Defeating Strahd may finally grant these souls rest.

Revenant Resurrection

After a character dies, their soul enters a humanoid corpse 1d20 hours later, chosen by the GM—perhaps a body in a cemetery or on an abandoned battlefield. The revenant has only the gear found with the corpse. It keeps the deceased character's background features, class features, and ability scores, but loses original racial traits and gains the following traits.

Trait	Effect
Size	Small or Medium according to the inhabited corpse.
Creature Type	Undead
Darkvision	60 feet; darkness appears in shades of gray.
Languages	Retain languages from life; also speak Abyssal.
Undead Flesh	Resistance to necrotic damage; immune to poison damage.
Regeneration	Bonus action: regain HP equal to your proficiency bonus; regain use after short rest.
Turn Immunity	Immune to effects that turn Undead
Vengeful Tracker	Sense the distance and direction of the creature responsible for your death; know when it dies.
Unsightly Appearance	Disadvantage on Persuasion, Animal Handling and Performance; Advantage on Intimidation.
Touched the Grave	Advantage on Fear and Horror checks. After each long rest, DC 10 Wisdom save or relive your death and roll on Nightmares.
Replenish	No food or water required, but still need long rests and suffer exhaustion normally.
Death	At 0 HP, die immediately rather than rolling dying checks; become a ghost controlled by GM.

Introducing a Revenant

Consider keeping the possibility of revenant resurrection a surprise. Run a private interlude if useful: the character awakens in a new body, searches for equipment, and struggles to reunite with the party. Animals panic; dogs bark; horses refuse riders; villagers barricade their doors and hang useless talismans.

Read-Aloud:

You wake in absolute darkness, choking on dirt. Your hands break through the soil, then your head. Cold mist curls above an unfamiliar grave.
Looking down, you see bone and rotting flesh. Memories return—a quest, your friends, your death. Your soul has found no rest. You are undead, trapped in a body that is not your own.

The former companions may not recognize the revenant and must be convinced. A Horror or Despair check may suit the moment.

17. Fear

When characters face a threat, they believe they cannot overcome, call for a Wisdom saving throw. On failure, they become Frightened for 1 minute. Possible triggers: a monster whose maximum HP exceeds the party's combined HP, or one that could kill a PC with a single attack or spell. A suggested DC for these examples is 10 + the creature's CR. Use sparingly and with regard for the fiction.

18. Horror

Horror is revulsion and anguish, not merely fear of immediate danger. When someone witnesses an appalling scene or learns a terrible truth, ask for a Charisma saving throw against a DC suited to its magnitude. Failure gives short- or long-term madness according to the madness rules your table uses.

Examples include discovering a mutilated body, witnessing a creature devour someone, learning an unbearable truth, or watching an ally die horribly.

19. Despair

Barovia's melancholy erodes hope. Call for Despair after a rest is interrupted in an unsafe location, after the loss of a companion, after a lingering injury, when an ally suffers severe madness, or following a major setback. A PC makes a DC 10 Wisdom save; failure means roll on the table. Never require more than one Despair check per character per day. A new effect replaces a previous one.

1d6	EFFECT	RULE & CHARACTER FLAW
1–3	Apathy	Disadvantage on death saves and Dexterity initiative checks. "I don't believe I can make a difference to anyone or anything."
4–5	Dread	Disadvantage on all saving throws. "I am convinced that this place is going to kill me."
6	Insane	Disadvantage on INT, WIS, and CHA checks and saves. "I can't tell what's real anymore."

After a short rest, a character may make a DC 15 Wisdom save to end Despair. Calm emotions, lesser restoration, greater restoration, and other suitable magic can also end it. If using escalating CON checks instead of death saves, let Apathy apply to those checks when appropriate.

20. Nightmares

If a character begins a long rest with less than half maximum HP or any exhaustion, make a DC 10 Wisdom save. On failure, roll 1d6 on the Nightmare table. The character regains only half the HP otherwise recovered by the long rest and suffers the effect until the next long rest (subject to the madness-duration ruling below).

1d6	NIGHTMARE	EFFECT
1	Horrid Dreams of Death	One random long-term madness effect.
2	Fear of Failing	Initiative is set to 1 in all encounters.
3	Defeated by a Monster	No critical successes on a natural 20.
4	Scared of the Dark	Disadvantage on Fear checks.
5	Horrific Vision	Disadvantage on Horror checks.
6	Despair	One random effect from the Despair table.

GM note: Determine whether the first result's long-term madness follows its normal duration or ends at the next long rest. Decide whether "no critical successes" applies only to critical hits or also to special natural-20 effects (such as the dying rule).

Appendix

Official 2014 DMG Variants Worth Revisiting

The following are existing optional rules from the 2014 Dungeon Master's Guide, not original Pyram King house rules. Their complete mechanics remain in the original book. The 2024 DMG reorganized, revised, or omitted some options; use the version that suits your campaign.

Diseases: Cackle Fever, Sewer Plague, and Sight Rot add consequences tied to infection, unsanitary environments, or supernatural illness. These diseases are found in the 2014 DMG. They give characters reasons to carry supplies, seek treatment, and care about where they travel and rest.

Additional Combat Actions (2014 DMG)

OPTION	WHAT IT LETS A CHARACTER ATTEMPT
Disarm	Knock a held weapon or object from an opponent's grasp.
Mark	Keep pressure on a melee foe and make an opportunity attack against that target more effective.
Overrun	Force your way through a hostile creature's occupied space using strength.
Shove Aside	Push a foe laterally rather than directly away.
Tumble	Slip through an opponent's space with agility.
Climb Onto a Bigger Creature	Clamber onto a much larger opponent to cling to it or fight from that position.

These actions encourage tactics beyond repeated attacks. See 2014 DMG pp. 271–272 for the original procedures. They should still be governed by the circumstances in the scene.

Background Proficiency (2014 DMG)

This optional variant replaces the standard set of skill and tool proficiencies with proficiency tied to a character's background and training. A former sailor can apply their experience to seamanship or navigation; a blacksmith can judge metalwork and maintain armor. The player describes why the background applies; the GM rules whether proficiency is appropriate.

Important: The 2014 variant is an alternative to the regular skill/tool proficiency framework, not an automatic additional bonus on top of it. Refer to 2014 DMG p. 264 for the original rule.