

# The Essential Guide to a GM's Notebook

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## Forward:

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Held within the pages of this manuscript can be seen glimpses of what some consider to be a true Game Mastering Genius. The sections of this document came directly from the thread found on Enworld's message boards that inspired many of us to become better Game Masters by better organizing ourselves and keeping things simple. The individual topics are exactly as they appeared on the message board with some spelling and grammatical corrections and all related links and documents, including a full set of pages for your very own GM Notebook, simply print them out and place them into your notebook as needed for future references and planning sessions.

This thread is a spin-off of BardStephenFox's excellent "The Fine Art of Winging It" thread. It will be a list of items essential to a GM's notebook. Before I start the process of listing essentials there is a few things in general to address:

1. Why a notebook?

Well, because you need it that's why! Well, seriously, the notebook is nothing more than a GM Survival Guide™ to provide you a place to store all of the game materials essential to the current game plus provide you with prep material to add when the characters do something outside of your plans. Organization will save you every time.

And lets face it; they will do something you didn't plan on. Whether it's going to a merchant you didn't consider they needed, or requiring you to roll a skill check or interact with an otherwise nameless NPC, or if they up and decide to leave the road their on and investigate something not in your story. Trust me, they'll do it.

2. What should I use for a notebook?

I have seen many things used, from index cards to 5 subject notebooks, to graph paper, to 3 ring binders, to laptop computers now days. I recommend a 3 ring binder. It gives you space to add and remove things, the ability to organize it in an order convenient to you, it's economic, and finally, it allows you to print whatever from your computer and add it directly. You want to print some cool things from a website or copy, paste, and print some monsters from SRD, then have at it and add it directly to your notebook.

3. How much should I put into the notebook?

Well, that is up to you. How much time can you donate to preparation? What will help your game? I have a list of at least 12 things I'm going to list and I hope to add a few more, plus others will hopefully add as we go. But only you can decide what you like and don't like.

And now...

## GM Notebook Essentials #1: NPC Names

This is quite the life saver. It may not be the most important to running a game as other essentials might be, but this one covers a subject that is the most annoying. Creating names puts you on the spot and the name you do come up with might end up sounding weird, funny, or the worse of all – invoke a bad pun. Then the verisimilitude of your game is shot, and the players will never let you live it down. And may the gods of role playing have mercy on you if the characters find a reason to keep visiting the NPC. Do yourself a favor; don't consider this essential an "option". You'll be happy you did it, trust me.

Remember when 3E came out and you were so geeked over the rules that you bought everything 3E. Including the first release after the Players Handbook, the now infamous Hero's Builders Guide. You know that book; it's the one with all the dust on it from sitting on your shelf unused. Go get it, flip to the back, and you'll find a treasure trove of names. And even better, they are listed by gender and race! Just copy down the names you like onto your list and add it directly to your notebook. It will make the purchase almost worth it (almost). If you have access to a copy machine, just copy the pages, punch it, and add it directly to your notebook.

If you were one of the players out there who didn't by the book, well that's OK. You can just do the same thing on your own. Start a list of cool names, say them out loud to make sure there is nothing wrong with them (make them PC proof) and write them down. If you can, make a separate list for male and female names, and then a list for the different races your characters are likely to interact with. Don't forget a few monsters with a language in case a crafty mage decides to start negotiating with that Mind Flayer.

If you are stuck for names, do a web search for names and languages. Scroll through a few fantasy novels you liked for more inspiration. Even go through all those RPG books on the shelf and pick out some cool names. You can even "tweak" the spelling to "file off the numbers" if it may be something your players may know. The important thing is, just start looking at names and let the creative juices roll.

Don't forget, if you use a name, check it off so you don't use it again. Make a note in your campaign notes about the NPC and the new name so you'll remember his name once the players try to go back. Consistency is the other reason to have the notebook in the first place.

Now, the next time your players decide to start random conversations with the city guard or visit a merchant or even question that drow bandit they were suppose to kill, you'll be prepared.

Great Links of Names:

[Medieval Names Archive](http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/): (<http://www.s-gabriel.org/names/>) Real names from medieval times

	Human Male Names		Human Surnames		Dwarf Male Names		Elf Male Names		Gnome Male Names		Halfling Male Names
1	Gib	1	Argyle	1	Dorsteinn	1	Alexios	1	Zusto	1	Lothar
2	Thomas	2	Beset	2	Doror	2	Alvantes	2	Zeno	2	Childebert
3	Ian	3	Broune	3	Drobjorn	3	Anthes	3	Zafoni	3	Clovis
4	Willham	4	Boyd	4	Helgi	4	Demetrios	4	Zancani	4	Theuderic
5	Davy	5	Boroundoun	5	Ketill	5	Draganos	5	Viturri	5	Childeric
6	Edward	6	Cambel	6	Grimr	6	Dragos	6	Visconti	6	Dagobert
7	Simon (Sym)	7	Dancort	7	Dorgrimr	7	Ermanes	7	Viadro	7	Sigilbert
8	Amery	8	Dicson	8	Olafr	8	Evangelos	8	Venier	8	Theudebert
9	Maurice	9	Erskyn	9	Baror	9	Eleutherios	9	Utino	9	Charibert
10	Iames	10	Flemyng	10	Asgeirr	10	Gavriel	10	Tuloni	10	Chlodomer
11	Henry	11	Freser	11	Ahalldorr	11	Imbert	11	Trevisan	11	Chlodosind
12	Ingram	12	Bretane	12	Atli	12	Joannes	12	Solario	12	Clodio
13	Phillippe	13	Calion	13	Jorundr	13	Komanos	13	Rizo	13	Corbus
14	Ralf	14	Hennaut	14	Hildir	14	Konstantinos	14	Loredan	14	Grimoald
15	Colyne	15	Ylis	15	Orn	15	Kyriakos	15	Faber	15	Gunovald
16	Fergus	16	Logy	16	Gunnarr	16	Manouel	16	Gardesano	16	Gunthar
17	Giles	17	Lorn	17	Vemundr	17	Mayros	17	Paxe	17	Merovech
18	Hew	18	Loncastell	18	Ozurr	18	Niketas	18	Polani	18	Chilperic
19	Archibald	19	Maknab	19	Jon	19	Pelekaaos	19	Stornello	19	Ingomer
20	Lowrens	20	Macgoulchane	20	Kolbeinn	20	Prousenos	20	Trentavasi	20	Rigunth

	Human Female Names			Dwarf Female Names	Elf Female Names	Gnome Female Names	Halfling Female Names				
1	Ada	1	Nevell	1	Doris	1	Aikaterine	1	Besina	1	Basina
2	Alicia	2	Moffat	2	Helga	2	Arete	2	Colleta	2	Bilichildis
3	Anabella	3	Ogill	3	Dora	3	Cheilous	3	Donata	3	Brunhild
4	Christina	4	Persy	4	Dorkatla	4	Eudokia	4	Flos	4	Clotild
5	Elizabeth	5	Seyton	5	Dorbjorg	5	Kyrakia	5	Gerita	5	Theudechild
6	Ellen	6	Sowlis	6	Steinunn	6	Margarito	6	Helena	6	Aregund
7	Isabel	7	Stewarde	7	Groa	7	Foteine	7	Lucia	7	Chusina
8	Deredere	8	Vallance	8	Halla	8	Merzanna	8	Micola	8	Audovera
9	Eufemie	9	Wardown	9	Ingibjorg	9	Rossa	9	Penina	9	Austrechild
10	Hextilda	10	Webitoun	10	Arnora	10	Semne	10	Pasqualina	10	Deuteria
11	Joan	11	Iohne	11	Asdis	11	Slana	11	Richa	11	Baldschildis
12	Julian	12	Randell	12	Dorny	12	Theofana	12	Zaneta	12	Berchildis
13	Katherine	13	Mobray	13	Kolfinna	13	Tobranna	13	Catarina	13	Ermenberga
14	Mabel	14	Makgullane	14	Gunnhildr	14	Zoranna	14	Bianca	14	Galswinth
15	Margaret	15	Ingerame	15	Dorarna	15	Zoe	15	Agneta	15	Marcatrude
16	Maria	16	Herdclay	16	Hallgeror	16	Velkonja	16	Agnessina	16	Merofled
17	Nichola	17	Fyss	17	Guorior	17	Tobritza	17	Gianeta	17	Veneranda
18	Ysenda	18	Androssane	18	Sigrior	18	Stania	18	Marte	18	Wisigard
19	Muriel	19	Gilbertstoune	19	Herdis	19	Komana	19	Magdalena	19	Radegund
20	Florie	20	Forster	20	Valgeror	20	Nikaia	20	Pencina	20	Nantechildis

## GM Notebook Essentials #2: Names of Locations

Another issue that crops up in games is when PCs go to visit the local merchant. It may be a sage, an armory, a general store, an alchemical shop, or even the local tavern. You can count on a PC to want to visit a tavern in the wrong part of town or to decide that they really want to find a library for the first time ever...

It's the GM's Notebook to the rescue! Just like you did with NPC names, with this addition to your notebook you create lists of names for the various businesses your players will visit. Add a few names for the places they never visit. Why? They will. Eventually.

A useful list of appropriate shops to consider is:

- Inn
- Tavern
- Farm/Food Market
- Merchant Shops
- Libraries, Scholars, and Mage/Cleric Supply Stores (Scroll Depot?)
- Alchemists
- Sages
- Spell casters
- Smiths
- Armories
- Moneychangers
- Jeweler
- Tailor
- Weapon smith
- Stable
- Cartwright
- Leather worker
- Brewer, Baker, Butcher, Cheese-maker, Wine maker

Naturally, names should be appropriate to the business. The Silver Rose makes a great name for a tavern or jeweler shop in a well to-do part of town, but would really stand out as the name of a tavern in a seedy area or the name of a leather worker.

Again, be creative. Go through all those books on the shelves for inspiration. There are tons of name generators running around and sites on the Internet.

Write down all those names onto a list. Popular places like taverns and weapon smiths may need a whole page. Places like the Wine maker may only need one or two names and you can place half a dozen on a single page. If you can find sites on the Internet, all the better! Just print them out, punch 3 holes into the pages, and plop it right into your notebook.

If all else fails, you can always take the easy way out. Look back at your list of NPCs, take a name for the owner of the place, and just add to the name what the shop is. The PCs need to buy a suit of chain mail while visiting a non-nondescript town that was flavor text *before* they arrived and decided to “rest a day or two”. No problem, checking your NPC list you spot the name: Radagar.

Bam: Radagar’s Smithy

They want to stay the night. Check your list and bam: The Old Mill Inn.

They flirt with the waitress. Check your NPC list and bam: Serina

This option is like the NPC list above. Just do it. You really won’t regret it.

Great Sources for Names:

*Dragon Annual #5 (Annual 2000)*: This has many great random generators for many kinds of businesses including a separate article just for taverns.

Great Links for Names:

[Tavern Generator](http://www.wizards.com/dnd/tavern/Welcome.asp): (<http://www.wizards.com/dnd/tavern/Welcome.asp>) Complete with rumors, menu of the day, and the costs are based on the quality of tavern you want! Print tons of places within seconds and add directly to the notebook.

	Towns	Type		Tavern	Type		Inn	Type
1	Brier Creek		1	Fish Eye		1	Emerald Bed	
2	Hillstone		2	Foaming Mug		2	Fair Inn	
3	Denmont		3	Grinning Gnome		3	Comfortable Gargoyle	
4	Japacoke		4	Brews 'n' Stews		4	Brave Bow	
5	Waxtown		5	Raging Goblin		5	Emerald Sword	
6	Cliffside		6	Dancing Raven		6	Captain's Cabin	
7	Blightridge		7	Oaken Barrel		7	Hammer Mill Inn	
8	Tarrasque		8	Whiskey Hero		8	Old Mill Inn	
9	Forsyth		9	Fair Fisher		9	Cinzano Inn	
10	Stone Walk		10	Fair Bow		10	Wilmcot Inn	
11	Sky Walk		11	Lovely Jug		11	Hall's Croft	
12	Roake		12	Massacared Brewery		12	Shottery	
13	Shadowmarch		13	Gray Warrior		13	Verdmont Inn	
14	Ventis		14	Goodly Warrior		14	Watford Inn	
15	Fyza		15	Sad Gnome		15	Lighthouse Inn	
16	Ah Mun Su		16	Adventuring Dragon		16	Jade Tiger Inn	
17	Saagersberg		17	Happy Feind		17	Dueling Gentleman	
18	Ghalfaen		18	Laughing Tavern		18	Dolly's Dive	
19	Indracca		19	Weary Maiden		19	Bee's Hive	
20	Everrock		20	Devil's Brewery		20	Papisan Retreat	

	Spell Shop	Type		Market	Type		Library	Type
1	Scrollery		1	Voleen's Bakery		1	Boomcast's books	
2	Floating Eye		2	Herb Jar		2	The Concordium	
3	Tricks & Treats		3	Emporium		3	The Oracle	
4	Repository		4	Galliway's Trading Post		4	Arcane Science	
5	Arcane Arbor		5	Maile's Exchange		5	The Academy	
6	Spell Depot		6	Harbor Cache		6	Brooklilly Books	
7	Mind's Eye		7	Wholesaler Annex		7	The Great Archive	
8	Tradewind Sages		8	Kaboombables		8	Celestial Archive	
9	Perfunctory Philosopher		9	Dark Bargains		9	Library of Lore and Legend	
10	Wards of Greenblood		10	Consortium of Scales		10	Hall of History	
11	Brood of the lost tongue		11	Trader's Holiday		11	Amalgam of Knowledge	
12	Mystical Sage		12	Coalition of Trade		12	Halls of Song	
13	The Flying Pig		13	Magic Oven		13	Historian's Keep	
14	Portals & Pockets		14	Herbs & Spices		14	Nature's Knowledge	
15	Sight & Sound		15	The Pirate's Booty		15	Arcane Knowledge	
16	Subjective Summons		16	Hidden Treasures		16	Mystical Science	
17	Silver Spells		17	Odds 'n' Ends		17	Keepers of Lore	
18	Acid Burn		18	One Stop Shop		18	Shadow Library	
19	Fire & Ice		19	Cornicopia		19	War Annals	
20	Doom & Darkness		20	Twik's Roving Market		20	Mystic Annals	

	Church	Religion	Jeweler	Type
1	Raging Spirit		1 Sparkling Gem	
2	Harmony Song		2 Eye of the Ruby	
3	Breckenridge Abbey		3 Crystal Bull	
4	Celestial Temple		4 Jewelery Box	
5	Temple of Life		5 Treasure Box	
6	Hall of Thunder		6 Pheonix Eye	
7	Siren's Song		7 Gems and Stones	
8	Echoes of Destiny		8 Precious Things	
9	Heralds of K'lorn		9 Nature's Beauty	
10	Sanctuary		10 Baubles 'n' Bubbles	
11	Dawning Light		11 Lucy's Charms	
12	Cathedral Of Light		12 Tiger's Eye	
13	Marble Chapel		13 Gold Chain	
14	Temple of St. Cuthbert		14 Fonkin's Gallery	
15	Temple of Pelor		15 Humble Hummels	
16	Corellon Larethaian's Keep		16 Pure Things	
17	Collosium of Kord		17 Arcane Accessoies	
18	Moradin's Keep		18 Bracelets & Circlets	
19	Heironeous' Abbey		19 Symbols 'n' Such	
20	Ehlonna's Sactuary		20 Beautiful Bones	

	Tailor	Type		Smiths	Type
1	Clothspinners		1	Glowing Anvil	
2	Leather & Lace		2	Bleeding Talon	
3	Exotic Fabrics		3	Ringing Hammer	
4	Silk & Suede		4	Steel Furnace	
5	The Tannery		5	Golden Scabbard	
6	Sacks & Pouches		6	Call to Arms	
7	Cloaks & Capes		7	Irontoe Forge	
8	Skins & Hides		8	Eventide Hammer	
9	King's Closet		9	Iron Grip	
10	Linen Works		10	The glowing Blade	
11	Fancy Fur		11	Gurb's Anvil	
12	Togas and Tunics		12	Hammer & Anvil	
13	Shirts & Skirts		13	Scrap Iron	
14	Adventurers Clothing		14	Swords & Blades	
15	Stitch & Seam		15	Plate & Chain	
16	The Tireless Loom		16	The Flying Flail	
17	Hardened Hides		17	Mithril Menders	
18	Leatherer		18	Scale & Mail	
19	Leather Masks		19	The Armorers	
20	Satin Sheets		20	The Armory	

### GM Notebook Essentials #3: In Game Treasure List

Ever have a player get to town, want to sell an item, and suddenly realize that the item in question was from an adventure months ago. “Ah... was that the gem from the ‘Old Tower in the Woods’ or the gem from the ‘Dungeon of Anguish’?” “No, I think that was the gem I stole from Serina at the Old Mill Tavern 3 months ago”.

Having a simple spreadsheet can save you a lot of time and hassle with just a little organization. I’ve provided mine as an example. You can adjust it from there to fit what you need or create your own that suits your style. If you change the spreadsheet, remember to adjust the printer settings for the page so everything fits.

Using the spreadsheet:

Just print and add to your notebook.

During the game, when the players get a magic item or an object they wish to save do to an unknown value (like gems or art), then add it to the list. First the name, then the description, then where it came from (in case you need to look it up later), then the date (sometimes relevant in my game, YMMV), the real value, what the appraisal skill tells the PC, then finally any side notes you may need later.

Real Game Example: The players find a longsword. Under #1 I would write:

1. Longsword.....+4 undead bane.....Tower of Madness.....10/31..... <GP value>..... (blank) .....Hilt is covered to hide a phylactery for the Beholder Lich

I tell the players to write a “1” next to the long sword. Later, when they cast identify on the longsword labeled #1, I tell them it’s a plus 4 weapon and lightly put a slash through the +4. Now I know what parts of the weapon have been identified and which parts are still a mystery. If I need more info, then I can always look up my notes from the “Tower of Madness” adventure.

If the players find a gem, I would write:

2. Gem.....Amethyst.....Bandits on the “Road of Kings” .....12/25..... 500 GP..... (blank) ..... Good quality. Rosy coloration.

If the players make an appraised check, I make a roll and write down the “players perception” of 400 GP as I tell the player the result. Now I know what he thinks of the Amethyst and keep that consistent. When he sells it, he tells me he’s selling the Amethyst labeled #2, I know the base it 500 GP for the Gem Cutters appraisal roll.

I guarantee, even though the sheet starts out empty, you'll quickly fill it up with magic items, gems, jewelry, art, and other odd-and-ends. And when the players finally get around to needing to know more about all that loot, you'll be happy you have it on hand at a moments notice in the notebook, with all the info ready to roll.

			Where Item			Players	
	Item	Properties	Was Found	Date	Value	Appraisal	Additional Notes
1							
2							
3							
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## GM Notebook Essentials #4: Maps

Maps are the great joy of being GM. Come on, how many of you reading this open up a new adventure and immediately flip to look at the map? I bet it's most of you. I know I do. Maps are just plain cool. Be they maps of a dungeon, a tower, a castle, a ship, a city, or an entire continent, it doesn't matter: They're cool. Ravenloft was a great 1E adventure. It was the first real integration of dungeon crawl, plot, and horror into a D&D adventure. But what blew me away was the 3D map of the castle. That map just rocked.

Maps are cool. They are also essential to running a game. They also happen to be the most time consuming and a biggest pain in the dice bag to design on your own.

When drawing a map, it can quickly go nowhere, become pointless, or worse, you get "writers block" unless you spend lots of prep time to know everything you want out of the map and the adventure. Designing a cool map to include everything needed plus extra cool stuff you want is beyond this thread, but suffice to say the prep work is time intensive.

Then you need to draw the map. And then you need to finish that map. Finally, you're a GM, which means you are a creative assertive type who knows what the "vision" is of your map/adventure/campaign. If you're like me, you're not always happy with how things look. Thus starts the fun process of redoing the map. "I'll only tweak it a bit!" Wash, Rinse, Repeat...

Time that would be better spent on adventure design and world creation; you don't have to be Tolkien and create the elven language just to write your version of Lord of the Rings!

The last five paragraphs are nothing more than me dramatizing a point made very subtly in the other three posts. The notebook is a time saver, but save yourself even more time by getting the work pre-done for you when possible. Someone has spent the time making lists of medieval names, or generators of inns, or has created spreadsheets for you to use. A lot of people with the skill, time, and access to great equipment have also made some great maps. Remember, that's why we love to flip to the map first when we buy an adventure. Someone got paid to make that map and odds are it's really cool!

That map is just waiting for you to use it. Just because your characters are not going to adventure in "Under mountain" anytime soon doesn't stop you from copying parts of that bad boy, mark a few changes, and then send your characters into *your new* adventure "Sea Caves of the Kuo-Toa". They'll never know they are really walking through downtown Skull Port on the 3RD level of Under mountain...

If you have been playing a while, you probably have tons of books on the shelf just ready to be cannibalized for the cause. If you are new to the game, there is plenty of used bookstores out there with old discount adventures waiting to be mined and the internet will become your best friend. If you're a real gamer geek, then you've already abused all three options.

There are TONS of websites with maps. Maps of medieval Europe, castles, catacombs, tombs, ships, towers, and on and on. If it interests

you, then it interested someone else even more, and they most likely put it onto the web. But it gets better, there is plenty of gamer sites out their with maps also. Just check out the link to the Wizards site for some great old adventures free for downloading. Tons of maps are just waiting for you to turn them into modern masterpieces.

This advice goes beyond the notebook. This advice is going to be a real time saver across the board in adventure design, campaign creation, and dungeon delving. Get copies of maps, whether it's downloads or copies of things lying around on the shelf, but get those maps. Copies are good so you can change them without ruining the original. You can always make another copy later if you muck up the current one or expend it on an adventure.

Take all those maps and place them in a folder. Next time you need a map or two for an adventure, just open the folder and go shopping. Don't be afraid to alter the map, that's why they are copied. Heck, change the entrance. Fill in corridors that go off the page or add rooms. Change anything. Flip it upside down if you want. It's yours.

You can still make your own maps, they are great fun to do, or you may need to if you are missing something in particular, but odds are you can find most of what you want if you look around.

Now how does this all relate to the Essential GMs Notebook? You are going to want to keep some maps at the ready in your notebook. What kind of maps will you need? Here's a short list of great maps to have "just in case":

- Inns
- Taverns
- Temples
- Warehouses
- Ships
- Towers
- Castles
- Catacombs
- Tombs
- Small Dungeons
- Small hamlets
- Random buildings

Take a minute to think about the kind of games you run and were the PCs are like to go. You may realize that wilderness travel is a big part of your games so you may want a few wilderness sites or bandit camps available. Or you may realize your players get into a lot of trouble in towns, and decide to add a few extra merchant shops or government buildings \*cough\* jails \*cough\*

Once you have your list, these are the maps you will want to place in your notebook. That way the next time your players surprise you by starting a fight in an inn, or you decide to drop an assassin on the players while they sleep, or some old flavor text suddenly gets a vote to be explored, you're ready to roll.

While you're at it, take a minute to grab a piece of graph paper and scribble random squares, circles, and lines connecting them. This advice has been written in the Wizards core rulebook II and it has worked real well for me. Don't get fancy, just some flowchart type diagrams. They don't have to go anywhere or serve anything right now. These little diagrams make great little maps in a pinch. I've used them for maps of sewer systems, trails through swamps, a forest game trail, and even a pocket dimension once! They serve in a pinch for something minor you don't need to blow a "good" map on. The players "see" your flavor text, you see the diagram.

Not only will having a variety of maps ready to go be a lifesaver, but also prepping all those maps ahead of time will inspire many adventures to come.

Now, the next time the players decide to start a fight in some small shop or go explore some cave. Don't pull out your hair. Just pull out your trusty notebook, look them in the eye, and say, "Of course you do..."

Great Links:

[Classic Adventures \(http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/dnd/downloads\)](http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/dnd/downloads)

[Map of the Week \(http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/mwa/archive2004\)](http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/mwa/archive2004)

[Free Small Adventures \(http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/oa/20030530b\)](http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/oa/20030530b)

[Phineas' Dungeon Maps o' the Week \(http://www.enworld.org/showthread.php?t=73423\)](http://www.enworld.org/showthread.php?t=73423)

## GM Notebook Essentials #5: NPC Stats (Part 1)

We have discussed NPC names. Now it's time to look at the rest of the NPC: The stats. One of the most time intensive parts of developing an adventure is stating out the monsters and Non-Player Characters the party is going to encounter. With the d20 rule system, you need to apply many factors to rounding out a monster/character: feats, bonuses, skills, different weapons, magic, and so forth.

Don't get me wrong. I love the d20 system and all the options it gives me. In fact, I own a lot of third-party OGL books do to the extra rules and options they give me. But it doesn't change the fact that stating out encounters is time consuming, not to mention a little intimidating for the new GM. More importantly, for our discussion, what do you do when the players decide to start interacting with NPCs that were "flavor text" one minute ago? Stopping the game to stat out a bunch of NPCs is not an option. You would lose the players to drinking, a game boy, or a game on TV long before you finished the details. You need stats now before you lose the action.

That is why you have your GM Notebook. It will be stocked full of NPCs ready to go. This part will discuss the higher-level NPCs you may need. The next part will cover all those 1st level NPC types that are encountered everywhere, but don't necessarily deserve the attention or need for development.

There are three rules to NPCs that will make your life easier.

### Rule Number 1: There are two types of NPCs.

The first type is a reoccurring character that the players will meet at least more than once. They are either integral to the story or serve as a bridge for the players to interact with your game world. The evil bandit, his thugs, and his spy at the Old Mill Inn are part of the story. The innkeeper and his daughter don't serve the plot (unless they are the spies!) but do interact with the players and thus serve the game by creating verisimilitude. They make the world believable to the characters. The reoccurring NPC is usually important enough to be stated out.

The second type of NPC is what movie producers call "an extra". They are part of the background, and if the players interact with them it will most likely be for one time, a sort of cameo appearance only. For purposes of this article, we'll call them "disposable" NPCs, or DNPCs for short. The DNPC is "on screen" for a brief moment and then gone.

### Rule Number 2: Recycle Disposable Non Player Characters

I was watching Babylon 5 several years ago and noticed that the starship commander highlighted on that episode was the same actor that played Worf's brothers on Star Trek. When I pointed out this fact to my wife, she reminded me that he also appeared on Hercules and some other shows. It's amazing how these actors have found their way into a sort of fantasy/sci-fi "actor's circuit" through the different shows and characters.

Your DNPCs need to do the same thing. In this case, you do not recycle the actors (the description), but the stats. They are called disposable for a reason. When they are done, they are gone. Stating them out is a complete waste of time if you only roll one dice and put the sheet away never to be used again. Like actors who appear in one episode of a show then on one episode of a different show, your stat blocks can appear during different sessions of your game as different characters.

### Rule #3: Generators are Good

OK. You knew this. At the end of this article is a link to a great online generator. There are many others out there also. Book mark them. Let them do the work for you and save the hard work for the major NPCs of your world.

Putting it all together to build an NPC army!

First and foremost, use those generators. Go to the link or do a search for one you like, but go to a generator and start whipping up some “generic” NPCs. A lot of these generators will give you a name, but don’t worry about it (or better, add the name to your name list!). If the NPC needs a name then he isn’t disposable and needs to be filed separately as a reoccurring NPC.

Reoccurring NPCs should have their own folder so they are available when you need them. If you like doing stats, then this type of NPC should be your focus. They are the important NPCs and deserve the time.

Disposable NPCs, however, should be quick and clean. Use the generator to print out copies of different classes at different levels. Don’t bother with 1st level NPCs; we’ll address those later. Don’t forget the NPC classes (most NPCs should belong to an NPC class). You will want some variety of each type, but you don’t need to go crazy. Just a few for each class at different levels will work. Don’t be afraid to regenerate a character that doesn’t look right to you. With generators, change is only a click away. Print up all those NPCs and add them directly to your notebook.

If something really catches your eye, say the generator punched out something cool or above average, then just place it into your important NPC folder. You can never have enough of those.

Now if the PCs spot some shady NPCs in an ally and decide to roll initiative, you can just pull out several rogues of the appropriate level and jump to combat. When the players dispose (literally) of the DNPCs you can just put the stat blocks back into the notebook for next time. If they follow the rogue’s trail back to a warehouse and get the jump on more shady characters, you can just pull out the same rogue stat sheets. The characters will see several new rogues with new descriptions and only you will see the same stat sheets again. They will remember an exiting “alley crawl” were they took out two individual groups of “guild goons”. You’ll be the only one who knows they *technically* (at least on paper) fought the same rogues twice.

Just watch out for high level NPCs. Most generators will include magical equipment into the character. As always with magic, be careful.

That magic item could very easily wind up on the players treasure list. Not to mention, they may be suspicious if the third fighter they killed that week has a +1 long sword. In other words, you may need to change out high level NPC stats more often to keep things "fresh".

Finally, don't bother with 1st level DNPCs. In part 2 of "Essentials #5: NPCs" I'll post what I call the "NPC Matrix" for 1st level characters. It will give you everything you need for the most numerous members of your world on one single page.

Great Links:

[NPC Generator \(http://www.aarg.net/%7Eeminam/npc2.cgi\)](http://www.aarg.net/%7Eeminam/npc2.cgi)

## GM Notebook Essentials #5: NPC Stats (Part 2: The NPC Matrix)

First and foremost, here are some simple, quick, and dirty numbers for NPCs:

Poor:.....-2  
Average:...0  
Good:.....2  
Superior:...4

Remember those numbers and you'll be able to handle a lot of odd situations with your NPCs. Allow me to explain...

What is the biggest problem with instant NPCs? The biggest problem is the need to generate ability scores. Ability scores, after all, determine a lot of bonuses. And for a 1st level character, ability scores can impact a d20 roll greater than his class scores! Odds are a city guard will get a better bonus out of his strength than his one level of warrior.

So the real question is, what to do about ability scores when you need stats ASAP?

Shhh... I'm going to let you in on a dirty little secret in the d20 rule system. Don't tell anyone.....

Ability Scores don't matter.

You heard me right. For you, the DM, ability scores do not make an ounce of difference to the rules. If you were a player, they have two uses of relevance. First, they are required as prerequisites for some feats. Two, they determine the highest-level spells a spell caster can cast.

"But Nightcloak", you say, "Ability scores give us modifiers to armor class and to hit bonuses and spell DCs and... and... dude, you're on crack." The answer is no on both accounts. Ability scores do not do that, *technically*. Ability score *bonuses* do that, and that is the only thing we really care about at the end of the day. You don't need to create a bunch of ability scores when the only thing you are going to do is just look at it for bonuses anyway.

As a DM you can waive the other two uses for ability scores. If you want an NPC to have a feat or be able to cast spells of a level, well then it simply is. Like you would really build a wizard that couldn't cast his highest-level spells.

That's what the chart above represents in a pinch. Ability score bonuses of some DNPC you need to know...now.

When you need to determine a bonus for an average 0 level NPC. Just ask yourself, "Would this NPC have poor, average, good, or superior abilities at doing [the task]?" If it is something that the NPC should be good at, then the ability score is "good" (a +2 modifier). A warrior

working for the city guard probably has a good strength score but an average charisma (a +0 modifier). Why? If he was better at his social skills, then odds are he would be working for someone else other than the city guard. Remember, this isn't detailed or reflects all possibilities. It's called quick and dirty for a reason. It is a quick number based on averages. If you want a highly sociable city guard, then that is cool too. But I'd make a note of it and detail such a character better since you've already invested the time in the concept.

On that note, don't give out a superior to too many NPCs, if they are that good at something then they are worthy of making a side note and fully fleshing out later. Most commoners have a NPC class for a reason: They're common. First level NPCs with player classes suffer from the same basic restriction. Again, that is the statistical average.

That brings us to the NPC Matrix.

I have attached it below. Feel free to use it or create your own.

The first part shows you the base bonuses for a 1st level character. If you need to know a score for a DNPC, just consult the chart and pull the number you need.

You'll notice I categorized the skills. When you are in the middle of gaming, I have found it easier to broadly categorize the skills and just run with them, simplicity in effect. I do believe they are self-explanatory. The class skill category is a catch all for a skill any one class would obviously have. Wizards are going to have spell craft, rogues are going to have tumble, and clerics will have heal. Some skills can be covered in more than one category, and that's fine, this is a quick reference that covers the bases so you can get back to the action. Remember, quick and dirty – the players will likely never see this NPC again. Some skill categories are half represented by the class, so I reduced the possible skill ranks to reflect that fact.

**Important Legal Statement:** I cannot say this enough. This form is not 100% accurate. A rules lawyer can pick it apart. It is assuming probabilities and will require some old fashion GM judgment calls. This chart assumes a few rolls and then the NPC is off stage.

The charts for the higher levels is included in case you need something quick. "L" represents "Level", or the NPCs level, and all fractions are rounded down per the core rules. This is little math heavy, but a lot quicker than pulling out a whole character (unnecessary for a character that is a "one roll wonder"). When you get use to doing it, you can pump out info without blinking.

This chart is good for base info but is certainly not optimum for higher levels. The higher level you go, the more feats and magic an NPC should have that would need to be added into the bonuses, and thus the more lacking the numbers really are. For encounters with high-level NPCs, see part one of this article. Or, if you have a 3.0 copy of Core Rule Book II (DM's Guide), there are some great charts that do reflect all levels and crunched numbers. The reason I invented this sheet was that I wanted everything in one book and didn't want to flip through a dozen pages for one roll. But for detail, that is the way to go (and I do get some great use out of those charts when necessary). However, if you need one quick skill bonus then this chart will save you more time, even for high level characters.

In case you do have combat; I've included a few common weapons with room to add a few of your own. That way everything is on one page.

Putting it together.

OK. Now that I've turned over the table on conventions, lets put it together in a few examples.

Example #1:

Our PCs follow a road to a walled city and need to pay a tax to enter the city. It's a mere silver piece each. Unfortunately, they are wanted in some parts of the country due to a missing gem incident at the Old Mill Inn several villages ago. So they decide to bluff their way past the guards (1st level warriors) and the tax collector (3rd level expert).

City guards are 1st level warriors that have a +0 for social skills but I'll say his stats (wisdom) is "good" due to the fact he is assigned to watching the gate. "Good" is a +2 bonus added to his skill bonus of +0. You can safely roll a d20 and add +2 to his Sense Motive check. The players have a good chance of pulling one over on him.

The tax collector, however, is another story. His social skills at 3rd level are 3+3 (L+3) or 6. It can be safely said that he also has good stats for wisdom. +6 skill bonus to a "good" stat (+2 bonus) is a bonus of +8! Roll d20 and add +8 to the roll. Now things get more interesting!

Odds are, my players would attempt a bribe at this point so I would give them a +2 to +4 circumstance bonus to their bluff check.

Example #2:

The players fail the bluff check. I inform the players the tax collector is honest and identifies the characters to the guards. Initiative is rolled and now I have combat on my hands for several 1st level warriors and one 3rd level expert that were window dressing 5 minutes ago.

Checking my chart, I see warriors have 8 hit points, a +1 bonus to hit, and a +0 bonus to reflex if the Wizard decides to make them do the fireball dance. City guards warrant a good stat to strength so they get a +2 bonus to hit and damage for a +3 total bonus to hit.

3rd Level experts have 12 hit points (level -1 x 3 + 6), a +2 bonus to hit (3 x .75 rounded down), and I figure he has an average strength (that is why he is an expert and stuck out at the gate). No strength bonus means he keeps the +2 to hit bonus.

The warriors have spears and the expert has a longsword so I know what the weapons stats are by my chart also. We are ready to roll!

Final thoughts.

Checking a base number and applying an ability bonus *is* the crux of the d20 system. Sure, at higher levels, other bonuses do apply from feats and magic, but how many disposable NPCs are going to specialize with feats or have magic? You only need to know those two numbers and your set. The matrix gives you the first and a quick judgment call will give you the second.

It may take a little getting use to, but when you do, you won't miss a beat on the action.

	Hit					Awareness	Class	Knowledge	Physical	Profession	Social
Class	Points	Combat	Fort	Ref	Will	Skills	Skills	Skills	Skills	Skills	Skills
NPC Classes : 1st Level											
Adept	6	0	0	0	2	0	4	4	0	4	0
Aristocrat	8	0	0	0	2	4	4	4	0	0	4
Commoner	4	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	4	4	0
Expert	6	0	0	0	2	4	4	4	4	4	4
Warrior	8	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	2
Player Classes : 1st Level											
Barbarian	12	1	2	0	0	0	4	0	4	0	0
Bard	6	0	0	2	2	2	4	4	2	0	4
Cleric	8	0	2	0	2	0	4	4	0	4	4
Druid	8	0	2	0	2	2	4	2	2	4	4
Fighter	10	1	2	0	0	0	4	0	4	2	0
Monk	8	0	2	2	2	4	4	2	2	4	2
Paladin	10	1	2	0	0	0	4	2	0	2	4
Ranger	8	1	2	2	0	4	4	2	4	4	0
Rogue	6	0	0	2	0	4	4	4	4	4	4
Sorcerer	4	0	0	0	2	0	4	4	0	4	0
Wizard	4	0	0	0	2	0	4	4	0	4	0
	Hit					Awareness	Class	Knowledge	Physical	Profession	Social
Class	Points	Combat	Fort	Ref	Will	Skills	Skills	Skills	Skills	Skills	Skills
NPC Classes : Advanced Levels											
Adept	$(L-1) \times 3 + 6$	$L \times .75$	$L / 3$	$L / 3$	$L / 2 + 2$	0	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	0	$L + 3$	0
Aristocrat	$(L-1) \times 4 + 8$	$L \times .75$	$L / 3$	$L / 3$	$L / 2 + 2$	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	0	0	$L + 3$
Commoner	$(L-1) \times 2 + 4$	$L / 2$	$L / 3$	$L / 3$	$L / 3$	L	0	0	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	0
Expert	$(L-1) \times 3 + 6$	$L \times .75$	$L / 3$	$L / 3$	$L / 2 + 2$	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	$L + 3$	$L + 3$
Warrior	$(L-1) \times 4 + 8$	L	$L / 2 + 2$	$L / 3$	$L / 3$	0	0	0	$L + 3$	L	L
Player Classes : Advanced Levels											



## GM Notebook Essentials #6: Price Lists (Part 1)

This one is quick, easy, and another great time saver. Just the title probably got your mind running and putting the pieces together.

Players go shopping. It's a fact. I've seen guys spend enormous amounts of time equipping their characters, planning for every little detail, and working every ounce of encumbrance they can out of the weight charts. In fact, they spend more time doing this than have done real shopping in real life...

It seems I have spent whole game sessions with the player's handbook popped open to the equipment chapter with occasional page flipping through the magic prices in the DM guide. If you are like me, you've included additional cool items from other sources; items from the Arms and Equipment Guide, weapon templates from Arcana Evolved, ideas from Dragon articles, and on and on. This is great for individualizing the game, but gets real annoying and time consuming flipping through umpteen books every time a player asks a question about an item.

Of course, it's the GM Notebook to the rescue. We are going to put all those cool things you want or need from many sources into several pages. At the bottom of the page is a link to the SRD. There you will find everything you need to get you started.

First and foremost, get comfortable at the computer and open a word document (or your equivalent). Then open the link to the SRD and go to the equipment section; you now have access to 21 pages of equipment information already formatted into tables. Just remember, the SRD is for your personal use. If you tried to circulate this information without following the Wizards legal requirements you could get into trouble.

### 1. Weapons

First, copy the weapons table and paste it direct to your word document. You can shrink the table down to fit on the page better if you like. You don't need to bother with the actual weapon descriptions unless you think you might need them, then I would copy them and place them after all of your other price charts.

The neat thing about the table is, you can just click where you want to add some cool weapons from another book, go to Tables>Insert>Row Above (or Row Below) on the menu bar and bam, instantly formatted space to add the cool weapon of your choice. For example, if you like Elven Thinblades then you can add it into the Exotic Weapon Table under One-Handed Melee Weapons.

Repeat for any other weapons and soon you will have a truly complete weapon chart from all of your sources on one or two pages!

### 2. Armor

Do the same thing you just did for the weapons. Also, if it applies to your game, copy the Armor for Unusual Creatures table (for those characters who equip horses with barding).

### 3. Weapon & Armor Templates

Here is your pricing and details for masterwork items and special materials (like mithral or dragon hide). This is also your chance to add extras from other sources, like the dire weapon template from Arcana Evolved.

### 4. Goods and Services

Same thing. Copy and add any odd things you want from those extra books. You'll most likely add to the Tools section or the Special Substances and Items table. However, cut out the section on food, drink, and lodging. That, in my honest opinion, deserves its own section and will be covered next in part 2.

### 5. Spell Casters

List simple spells your players may need to pay someone to cast for them (or on them). The cure series, identify, contact other plane, heal, lesser restoration, resurrection, and anything else common to your game. Take a minute and think about what your players may need, then add it to the list.

### 6. Common Magic Items

Same thing but with magic items: Potions of healing, lesser restoration, and scrolls, that kind of thing. You will probably add to this list as your players advance in level and find new things they commonly want to buy.

The reason to make your own tables in a document is the ability to save and edit as need be. If a month later you remember a cool weapon or buy a book with some great new armor all you have to do is update your document and print a new copy.

When you are done you will have all the prices in one easy place. No more wasting time flipping through multiple books to get the information you need. As a bonus, the weapon and armor tables have all the stats for easy access in a pinch.

Great Links:

[On Line SRD \(http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=d20/article/srd35\)](http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=d20/article/srd35)

## GM Notebook Essentials #6: Prices Lists (Part 2) - Food, Drinks, and Lodging!

During the discussion on price lists, I mentioned that you should remove the price list for Food, Drinks, and Lodging and save it for later. Later is now. This little table is going to be a fun exercise in creative campaign development. Of course, you could just leave this list alone and move on. There is nothing wrong with that option.

But trust me, you won't regret taking it to the next level. I guarantee it.

First, paste the Food, Drinks, and Lodging table into a document. But more importantly, start adding extra rows immediately to each of the three parts. Your job is to add more to the list than the plain old beverages and sleeping accommodations listed. The idea is to add colorful and detailed items to the list for you players to use. Just as you wouldn't develop a campaign with the only armor options being "poor", "good", and "excellent", nor should you offer "good" wine or "excellent" sleeping accommodations.

Part of a character feeling alive in the imaginations of everyone is the choice of weapons and armor. You have "Dashing rogues with rapiers versus thugs with clubs versus knights with massive two-handed swords versus barbarians with axes." That sounds interesting compared to: "Dashing rogues with good weapons versus thugs with poor weapons versus knights with good weapons versus barbarians with good weapons". And of course, every player would only have a "good" weapon. Who in their right mind would pick a "poor" weapon unless the rules forced the issue? The same principle can apply to mundane services.

Why am I spending all of this time for you to add some basic services to these mundane prices? Swords are great, but drinks?

Well, I think this is a great way to enhance the flavor of the game. This is where you can add all kinds of new drinks and other services unique to your world.

The best way to explain how much fun you can have with this is by an example. Lets assume an in-game moment: There is you (the DM), a player who has been playing in your game for a while, and a new player to your game:

First Scenario:

DM: "The waitress asks what you want to drink."

PC (long time player): "I'll just take an ale."

PC (new to your game): "Yea. Me too."

Second Scenario:

DM: "The waitress asks what you want to drink."

PC (long time player): "I'll see if they have any Dwarven Hammer and Anvil."

PC (new to your game): "Hey! What's that?"

PC (long time player): “It’s a top dwarven dark stout ale. It gets its name from how you feel in the morning if you drink to much of it.”

PC (new to your game): “How’s that.”

PC (long time player): “You feel like there is a small army of dwarves in your room hammering your head like an anvil.”

PC (new to your game): “Cool. I want one!”

In the second example, the players are into your game and they are not even slicing anything open. For them, the game is unique and fun before they roll the dice. More importantly yet, they are into *your* game. They can’t go across the street or even to Gen Con itself and have their characters order a “Dwarven Hammer and Anvil” or a “Blood Orc Brew”.

So have fun and create some unique ale, wines, rums, meads, or any other drink you want. Racial drinks (Dark Elf Ale), regional drinks (Breeland Brew), and magical drinks (Sorcerers Stout) flesh out your game world wonderfully. New foods are great too and can add a lot of flavor. Unique lodging is harder but still good: “Hey, we just killed a dragon. I’m going to spoil myself and get the ‘Kings Suite’ in Capital City. In room bath, food service, pages to run errands, and free armor cleaning! It’s expensive, but I deserve it after that battle.”

Maybe assassin vines in your world have seeds that make expensive but yummy nuts when dried (or berries that make an exotic wine!). Or dried basilisk meat makes a jerky that is far superior in taste to plain old rations. Who pays 50 gp for a bottle of apple juice? Probably your PCs when they learn that *Woodshire Apple Juice* made by the Halflings is so good and so full of nutrients that anyone who drinks a cup gets a +2 bonus to spot and listen checks for an hour.

Of course, all these unique items cost more in most cases. A nice way to: A) Unload extra gold from rich characters and B) Make the players feel good about their characters. A player may not spend his gold on things like an extra magic weapon “Just in case I need a cold iron weapon”, but most will offload their gold and brag how they could afford the *Kings Suite* for a month.

If you play your cards right, certain items will develop a reputation (like the dwarven ale above). If your players associate *Dark Elven Ale* with shady taverns full of cutthroats (a hive of scum and villainy!) and *Kobold Kettle* with cheap dives, then your world is suddenly alive for you and the players.

The price list of services is important to have. Placing it into your notebook will save you time and hassle. But open up that list to your world. Make it your own and bring your world alive.

It will make that price list priceless.

## GM Notebook Essentials #7: Rules

The Third edition of Dungeons and Dragons has been a huge success. By simple streamlining of the rules, and opening up the game license, the hobby has enjoyed a remarkable resurgence in popularity. One cornerstone of the d20 rule system is the many quantifiable rules that are now available to resolve numerous situations. The good news, for GMs, is that you have access to rules to resolve many situations without a need to “wing it” and make a judgment call. This is also a benefit to players as they can plan for the probable success of an action. The down side is the sharp end of the d20 sword: all those rules.

Lets face it. There is a lot to remember. This can be quite intimidating, a little nerve racking, and seem like an enormous mountain to climb for the new GM.

Buying a GM Screen is a good beginning. It hides your notes and maps from curious eyes plus a good screen holds rule information to help you out. But GM Screens usually contain the most common information used in a game, not necessarily what you will need to know in a game. It also doesn't include details on *how* to handle the rules. For example, a GM Screen will have the most common modifiers in combat, but most won't tell you the proper order of resolving a grapple and how the size modifiers work during the grapple (which happens to be different from the size modifiers for combat). When your PCs hit mid to high level, they will start to fight the big dogs, things with tentacles or jaws the size of a 75 dodge, then you will need those grappling rules.

Once again, it's our good friend the GM Notebook who must carry the burden of a smooth game.

Why pull out the rulebooks every time a grapple situation pops up, when you can make your own rules sheet with all the odd rules you need. As a bonus, you can re-describe something if you don't like how the book describes it and add notes to help you remember how the rule works. Come on, how many of you had to read the 'Attack of Opportunity' rules several times before you understood it, then still asked someone else. I know I did. Clarify those rules in a way you will keep it straight when you add it to your rules sheet. While you're at it, also write down the book and page number. That way if you need to reference the original (or if a player wants to read the AoO rules to see it for himself), then you can go straight to it.

Any odd, difficult, or extensive rule is perfect for this page. Also, don't forget the #1 theme of the notebook – condensing rules from multiple sources. So save yourself the trip through all the rulebooks and include them here. Some good rules to include that are generally not covered by a GM screen:

### Players Handbook

Grappling

Attacks of Opportunity

Withdraw vs. Run

Disabled Characters

Tactical Movement (Difficult Terrain, Obstacles, and Squeezing)

Charging

Feinting

Disarming

Overrun

Sunder

Mounted Combat

Trip

Turn Undead

Two-Weapon Fighting

Delay and Readied Actions

Encumbrance

Movement and Distance

Light Sources and Illumination

### Dungeon Masters Guide

Special Abilities (Extraordinary Ability vs. Spell Like Abilities vs. Supernatural Ability)

Environment Effects

Disease and Poison

Etherealness and Incorporeal

Hiding and Spotting

Anti magic

Ability or Energy Drain

Fast Healing vs. Regeneration

Gaze Attacks

Scent

Spell Resistance

Taking 10 vs. Taking 20

### Monster Manual

Size and Facing

DC for Special Attacks/Abilities

Game rules for creature types

This list is by no mean complete. It also may be way more than you need. The question is, what would be useful to you? If you have run enough undead that you have the ethereal and incorporeal types memorized, you don't need to have them handy. If you can't keep the rules

straight for when characters can “Take 10” and “Take 20” then it would be good idea to jot it down. In other words, this list should be shortened and added as needed to suit your needs.

Last note: Don't forget the link to the SRD above. The rules you need are there, done for you, and just waiting to be copied for ease onto your rule sheet.

So don't let rule specifics bog the game down. Flip to the rules page of your notebook and move on with the action!

## GM Notebook Essentials #8: House Rules

Every game has them, but they are different for each GM. They can be big or small, common or just your specialty. They can be something you like because it's cool or just necessary do to an issue you have with a specific rule.

They are house rules. Specific game rules that are different from the Core Rules but are available/enforced in *your* game.

They may be common options from the Dungeon Master's Guide or Unearthed Arcana (variant armor class roll or taint scores), or options from alternative d20 rulebooks like Arcana Evolved (hero points or the opposed tumble skill rule), or something old (the weapon size rules from 3.0) or even something new to your game (the dodge feat gives a continuous +1 bonus, no more "use it or lose it").

Whatever, it's changes to the rules that exist at your table. What better place to accumulate all this divergent information spread through many books? I think you know the answer by now...

Time to roll up the sleeves and type up those rules into a document. If you are lucky, you can find some on PDF or websites and paste them into the document. But most likely, you have to put some time into typing them out. It will be worth it. This will serve multiple functions:

1. You will have everything at your fingertips, easy to find and rule on.
2. You will be able to print multiple copies to give to your players so they have access to your house rules. This is important. Nothing will frustrate a player like new rules they don't understand or forget about. If you give them a copy, then they can learn it and look at it when they need to.
3. Edit. Sometimes new rules just don't work in play as well as they look on paper. Just add/change/delete the house rule on your document and print.

House rules are fun and can individualize a game. They serve to fix particular details you may not like about the edition you play. Finally, they allow you to customize your game and give it a unique flavor all its own.

As an example, here is a short list of a few I have used on and off. This list is no were near complete or covers all the options available, and is provided just as an example and to hopefully inspire you:

1. The Dodge Feat gives a continuous +1 dodge bonus to AC except in circumstances where the player would lose his dexterity bonus.
2. The Skill Focus Feat gives a +3 bonus to a skill (3.0 house rule).
3. Players start play with 1 hero point at 1st level. Players may earn more hero points for good role playing or completing a story/adventure. No player can have more hero points than 3 plus their Charisma modifier (negatives do reduce the maximum). A player may spend a hero point at any time before an action is resolved (the affects given) to add +10 to a D20 roll or a +10 to their AC or spell DC.
4. A naturally rolled "1" on a D20 roll to hit is a critical failure. Another roll is made to confirm the failure. If the second roll would result in

a miss then the player “slips” or botches his attack in some way and provokes an AoO from his opponent.

5. Feats and Prestige classes from books X, Y, and Z will be allowed as SOP. The GM must review anything else for approval.

6. All complaints on rules and adventures must be hand written and mailed to the official R&D department of Nightcloak’s campaign world. The address is ### XXX, GR, MI, #####.

As a side note on that last one. When I did do this, it was an address for one of the other player’s home addresses. He liked to give me some fun grief over a few of the adventures so I decided to turn the tables. We had a lot fun with this little joke – including the player showing up one week with fake “complaint letters” the he supposedly “received in the mail”.

In essence, the notebook is designed to make your life easier by organizing all the little details that can slow play down. This part not only does that, but also allows you to make the campaign *your* campaign by giving you the opportunity to personalize the rules a little. The rules can do as much to create a “tone” or “feel” to adventures as much as and flavor text.

You want a horror based game. Try implementing the madness rules.

You like action/high adventure. Action Points may fit the bill.

You want magic to be more prevalent. The rituals from Mystic secrets may be a nice touch.

You are going to run a “dark age” campaign. Cut the treasure awards in half (and adjust the CR of monsters at higher levels up – this one is tough to pull off but still fun).

The point is, let the rules to help you develop the campaign world. Or as one poster says it best, the rules serve the game. And when you do this, make your own mini-guide and place it in the notebook so it is available at a glance.

## GM Notebook Essentials #9: Monsters - Part 1

### Part 1: Monster Encounters

You've taking the time to prepare your NPCs. You've also spent pages preparing possible DNPCs (Disposable Non-Player Characters). Maybe you copied the NPC advancement chart or bought some of the wonderful third party products out there to fill in the gaps. Heck, you've even gone so far as to create lists of names for every encounter.

But that is only part of the battle. And by battle, I mean what the PCs will be fighting. While NPCs are incredibly important and the most immediately useful to a GM, and thus detailed earlier in these posts, they are only one part of the picture and up to now we have glossed over a significant portion of the available encounters.

NPCs are generally humanoids. But there are other types also, namely monsters. Be they aberrations or undead or animals or dragon types, they are categorized as monsters. Monsters are the stuff legends are made of, and the heart of a standard D&D game. Lets face it, the players will probably get bored quickly if the game had no monsters.

Further, most GMs have tons of monster books filling the shelves and probably at least several PDFs on the computer. Everyone loves a good monster book and nothing is quite as fun as surprising players with something new. Come on folks, lets see a show of hands, how many of you have more monster books than you will probably ever need.

\*Raises Hand\*

I know I do.

A quick count shows I have 11 monster manual type books (like MM1), 6 books with significant amounts of monster information or are about monsters (Draconomicon), and one book of templates (Advanced Bestiary – very cool). I also have several PDFs on the computer. Wow, I'm horrified a little. This is the first time I've bothered to count them and I can think of *many* more that I want.

Back to the point: If you are like me, and I have reason to believe so (based on years of reading these boards), then you have as many books if not even more. Obviously you'll never get around to using all of those critters. At least you won't unless you make an effort to do something about it now.

You have two concerns to address.

One: An in game concern, listed at the beginning of this post – the need for encounters that are not an NPC, usually on a moments notice.

Two: An out of game concern – all those monster sitting on the shelves.

It's the Notebook to the rescue.

You have two problems that are a marriage of mutual self-interest. Time to pull down those monster books and go through them. Go through each one, but look for things that you like (Hey! That's cool) but never get around to placing in an adventure. The game is for you to have fun also, so pull out those beasts that you like and write them up. Jot down the stats and make a note of the CR and environment they can be found. A couple of descriptive words might be helpful also to jog your memory later. Write down whatever you may need in combat, but don't over do it or you'll be buried in work.

Speaking of work. Do your self a favor and just download the SRD of monsters so you can print them up and save yourself the hassle. PDFs are also wonderful as you can just print the appropriate parts also.

The moral of the story is:

1. You need to have prepared monster encounters for the players. Just like the NPCs, you may need to have monster encounters on the fly. Get monster encounters into the notebook just like you did the NPCs. It will save you time and hassle later.
2. You probably have tons of monsters you think are cool but never get around to using. Well, just start to use them. Write them into you list of prepared monster encounters. That way, the next time you need something on the fly, you'll open your notebook and hopeful have an "Oh Yea!!!" moment as you pull out something cool and original.

My advice is that you put each monster on its own page, and then sort the pages by challenge rating. That way, when you go to this part of your notebook, you can easily flip to the challenges of the level you need.

Now, the next time your players go to that old tower that was flavor text, not only will you have a map of it (if you followed these article and prepared your maps ahead of time) but now you will have a monster to place in there as well. Thanks to a well-prepared notebook, you suddenly have several hours worth of adventure ready to roll at a moments notice. Your players will be amazed that you have prepared for so much adventure, or at least they would be amazed if they weren't too busy having fun due to the non-stop action.



## GM Notebook Essentials #9: Monster Encounters part 2

*It's Alive!* – Dr. Frankenstein

You may have noticed a trend in these articles. Sometimes I take a subject and break it out into a second part to highlight something specific. I basically take a point and provide an option to take it to the next level. Sometimes it is just to be specific, like the NPC matrix, while other times it is a chance to “Kick it up a notch” and run wild with an idea, like I did with the food prices. This episode of part two does the later. It takes the monster encounter idea and kicks it up a notch.

Monsters are the number one encounter in most games, which is why it is so important to be prepared. Having extra monster encounters in your notebook goes a long way towards not only guaranteeing that you will be prepared. But also, if you followed the advice in part one, it allows you to have fun by inserting all those cool monsters you have been collecting on the shelf but just never seem to use.

But why stop there?

Kick in the door on the many options available in d20 and really go to town with those monsters. Time to personalize some of that monstrous goodness and make your PCs go wide-eyed with amazement. When I say personalize, I mean make them your own.

Lets look at two options to make new monsters:

### 1. Templates:

Templates are something amazingly wonderful the creators of 3E came up with. You no longer have a vampire, you have a vampire that use to be a... well, lets hope it wasn't something nasty like a 18th level necromancer or a dragon. Templates allow you to add a *concept* to an existing creature and make it not only something so much more challenging, but unique and interesting. A beholder is an interesting and scary encounter. A beholder ghost is just plain wrong, and will definitely freak out your players.

When you went through all of those monster books, I hope you noted some cool templates to use. If not, you may want to revisit them real quick. Templates are nothing more than monsters waiting to be finished – *by you* . And that is the key. Did I say you should “kick it up a notch”, like the famous chief? Well, it aptly applies to being a GM in this situation. You are a chief, and it's your job to mix the ingredients to make something new and interesting.

So brush up on those templates and start adding them to a few monsters. With all of those books, you should have a few templates lying around you haven't used. The classics can be fun also when added to something original. The key here is to have fun! Go for it and release your imagination. Werewolf template: Hmm... Been there, done that. A humanoid werewolf has been done to death. Sure, the halfling were-bear is fun once (look ma, a teddy bear!) but it is all pretty mundane unless you are lucky enough to have a good GM in a gothic

centered campaign (but that is a completely different kind of advice column). I don't even now when the last time I used one. So skip the humanoids and move on to something new and original. Maybe a were-wolf ettin encounter in the woods will get their attention, or go for broke and just slap that template onto a troll and make the players life interesting.

Note there is no rule that says you have to stop with one. Use two templates to make something completely new. Orcs can become mundane after several levels, but a one-time encounter with a fiendish draconic orc will be remembered. Give him a few levels of barbarian and watch the players sweat. That takes us to the next idea...

## 2. Prestige Classes:

Prestige classes are highly abused and over produced. But there is a reason for that – they are cool. They are so ritually abused by players it is easy to forget that you can use them too. Time to rectify that:

Step 1: Pull a few NPCs from your DNPC encounter section of the notebook and choose a few prestige classes for them. The oracle prestige class is kind of simple, but throw it onto an expert and suddenly you may have an interesting sage or priest for some future encounter. Never got around to using some of those creepy prestige classes from the Book of Vile Darkness. No problem, mix a few in with the NPCs and you suddenly have really interesting encounters for your notebook (heck, you may wind up with a great story arc!) Won't your players be surprised when that old tower they run into actually has a diabolical priest hiding in it!

Of course, you need to be careful. Don't just slap a prestige class onto a PC without making sure the character can actually qualify for it. Otherwise you may end up with something whose power level is all whacked out. You don't need to necessarily make sure that every skill point or odd feat choice is exact, but make sure the level range for hitting it is right and your close on everything. Seriously, missing several skill points or one feat won't break the bank. Just don't fleece the character of anything essential, something like arcane casting or feats with a theme. Do make sure base attack bonuses or save bonuses do match as they help insure the monster is at a good level.

Step 2: Pull some monsters from your encounter section of your notebook Time to add prestige levels to those monsters to really shake things up. As an example, I once took a Thri-Keen and gave him 2 levels of fighter and 8 levels of the tempest prestige class. Four arms with all of those two weapon fighting feats made for an awful lot of attacks. The look I got was priceless. The players ended up calling it the "Chainsaw".

So open up your monsters to prestige classes and all of those wonderful powers that come from class abilities. An assassin is an interesting prestige class. Making a cool NPC from an unusual race is even better; say an elf or a goblin. Put that class onto a doppelganger and you have one exciting encounter.

This also applies to regular classes for that matter. And there are a lot of new classes on the market. An Illithid Enchanter can be fun, but an Illithid Warlock is better and original. That'll wake those PCs up.

Now some monsters do not have advancement by character class. This brings a minor problem to the scenario, fortunately you have access to the final judge of the rules: You. If you want a non-standard monster to advance in a class, then it simply is. It's your campaign, so have at it. My only advice is to watch the combos you come up with. The rules were not play tested for dragons that can do a 'flurry of blows' or ghosts that 'smite good' so you may want to take a trial run with the beast and see if the CR needs to be increased. Odds are it will. Dropping you players is no way to learn that something is too powerful. The point is flavor, not the wholesale slaughter of the PCs when you figure out that a wraith with sneak attack damage may be too powerful at the current level.

Hmmm... Incorporeal sneak attack, must remember that one...

Note: Don't abuse these ideas or insert them regularly into your game (at least without a good story reason). You'll risk them becoming common and old hat. You want these encounters to be memorable, not a flavor of the week scenario that becomes as mundane as dire rats at 8th level.

And of course, as a final note, these ideas can be mixed also. But I'm sure I didn't need to point that out. Your mind is probably already racing with some horrifying combo.

However, when your players cry fowl, don't blame it on me, from here on out it's your monster... 

## GM Notebook Essentials #10: Prepared Treasure List - part 1

All right. You have maps for adventures, NPCs to engage your players, and Monsters for your players to fight. You have names ready to go, rules at the ready, and your d20 waiting to roll some criticals. You are ready to roll on anything and not miss the action. But what happens when the action is over? If your players are like mine, then you hear the same war cry after the dice stop rolling: “We loot the Dead!”

Yes. Treasure. The great score card of how players measure their characters and the memento of the adventures they complete. Treasure, as a concept, is a corner stone of the d20 game: Players *are required* to gather treasure if they hope to survive at higher levels. Just like the NPCs and monsters you may need on the fly, you will also need some prepared treasure. It may be for some mark your rogue pickpockets, or a random NPC that gets the business end of the player’s sword, or a monster the players stumbled into; but in the end, the players are going to turn to you with those bright big eyes and wonder what exciting bounty they will receive for their work.

You better have an answer.

If you don’t have the answer, then you’ve dashed the player’s hopes for a big payoff, figuratively and literally, after all the hard work they have done. But we’re not going to let that happen. The notebook is filling up but there is plenty of room still!

Be it generators on your computer or online websites (the site with the NPC generator also has some great treasure generators), or an old fashion flip through the DM guide, or even some random dice rolls – you need to start generating some treasure and prepare for the players when they learn the pointy end goes into the monster. Always remember to “Rule 0” something that you don’t like or has the potential to bring trouble to your game.

If you have the luxury of always knowing the level of your players, like a weekly campaign, then you can periodically scale the list to the range of your players. Otherwise you might as well get a few at each Challenge Rating. Either way, you will want some extra low-level treasure prepared for rogues to pickpocket or other DNPCs the players may end up searching.

But don’t stop there! As I pointed out in the post about monsters, the average GM has tons of books lying around. Time to rifle through them for treasure goodness also. Just like the monsters that never get used, so is it easy for treasure to get overlooked. Especially magic items. How many times have you flipped through a new book and have said, “That’s cool” but yet only ended up using a few items that were relevant to your game at the time. I suffer from this problem, especially since I can go through streaks of buying new books and quickly forget one book after scavenging a few details for a current campaign (damn Ebay and it’s book lots!)

Revisit those literal treasure troves of information and find a bunch of cool items to add flavor and fun to encounters. Those wide eye looks you get will turn to wonder when you surprise them with something new and interesting. It’ll be like Christmas morning as far as the players are concerned.

As always, the operating principle is to open up the game and have fun. Take each treasure type and run with it to its full potential.

Here is checklist of things to cover to spice up the treasure mix:

1. Coins. This one is easy to give out. It is the most numerous and available treasure to choose from. It should be the default choice of treasure. But that doesn't mean it has to be boring. Give out odd numbers of coins, say 358 silver pieces instead of 300. Or large amounts of a coin that is of a lesser value, say 10000 copper pieces instead of 100 gold pieces. Some unusual coins, say an ancient empire had square coins. Or even introduce a new metal, like a mithral coin being worth 100 gold pieces.
2. Gems. Another common type of treasure. The key here is to remember that you can have various types from 1 gp all the way to a million gp if you want. 10 small gems worth 10 gp each is more interesting than a bag of 100 gp. What really brings gems alive, however, is the type. Don't just tell the players they have found a gem, but describe a clear but milky shaded crystalline stone with sharp edges. A quick appraisal score will reveal it to be a smoke-quartz.
3. Mundane Items. There called mundane because they are not magical, but they are still more interesting than another bag of gold coins! Holy water and alchemist fire is great at low levels, while anti-toxin is always useful. Masterwork items come in handy, say a masterwork lock-pick set or healing kit. An exotic and well-described pair of masterwork daggers is more interesting than 600 gp any day of the week.
4. Commodities. Very common in the world at large but rarely used by players, commodities are the preeminent mundane item, but can certainly be more interesting than a few gold pieces. Plus you can get adventure miles out of these. Defeating some bandits could yield a treasure haul that is nothing more than a bunch of stuff they have stolen: Silk, salt, tobacco, or even cattle! Those kegs of ale may be worth a lot if you can deal with getting them to market. Imagine the conundrum of your players when they can either cash in the exotic keg of *Hammer and Anvil Dwarven Ale* or brag how they drank it instead!
5. Art. This is a pretty broad category. Art can be anything from paintings to vases to statues to something exotic, like a song. Art is all over the spectrum. It is interesting and can inspire lots of role playing as the players try to figure out what something is worth, try to ship it somewhere, and sell it off. The real difficulty with art is in the GM being inspired to come up with interesting items. Start a list now, and don't be afraid to use books for inspiration. If you jot a few ideas down occasionally then you will have a list in no time. If you ever have time, tune in to *The Antique Road Show* on PBS and end up with tons of art and antique ideas.
6. Jewelry. Close to gems, but a category all its own. Jewelry is wealth that you can actually wear. Metal, gems, and art combine to make the ultimate treasure. It can be a ring, necklace, broach, belt (buckle), earrings, or even a bracer. Why give the players 1000 gp when you can give them a platinum necklace with a medallion crafted like a phoenix and set with ruby eyes.
7. Potions and scrolls. These are the most common magic items and should be used frequently. Of course, intelligent monsters will attempt to get mileage out of these when they can. But don't let your players find yet another potion of *cure light wounds*. Just as you searched other

books for interesting magic items, you should look for interesting spells that you can introduce by way of scrolls and potions. There are tons of new spells out there waiting to be introduced to your players. Instead of a potion of *Spider Climb*, how about giving them a potion of *Location Loresight*. Plus you give wizards the fun of deciding whether to use that scroll or save it and copy the new spell into their spell book.

8. Armor and weapons: Specific types. There are a slew of special types of armor and weapons out there. You don't need to keep piling abilities onto a standard suit of chain mail to make it interesting. Specific armors and weapons are rare but are underused and can add lots of flavor. Players will remember that shield with the lion's head that would bite their enemies long after they found that +3 shield, used it for a few levels, and sold it. Heck, they may even keep it instead of selling it off later!

9. Armor and weapons: Abilities. Lots of books have additional abilities for weapons and armor written up, and they are in-line with the DMG system of an "equivalent bonus modifier" for calculating the price of magic items. Why give a war hammer the same old +2 bonus for the "Flaming Burst" ability when you can flip open the *Magic of Ferune* and give it the Thundering quality for the same +2 bonus.

Creating lists of treasure will keep you prepared for a multitude of situations. It is just as necessary as having prepared NPCs and monsters. You will eventually need it. But don't just settle for the usual. Spice up those hauls with a little TLC and watch your players excitement in your game continue to grow.

Treasure is the last point of an encounter, like the punctuation at the end of a sentence. Make it an exclamation point!

On-Line Resources:

[Great On-Line Treasure Generator](http://www.aarg.net/%7Eeminam/treasure2.cgi) (<http://www.aarg.net/%7Eeminam/treasure2.cgi>)

			Where Item			Players	
	Item	Properties	Was Found	Date	Value	Appraisal	Additional Notes
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## GM Notebook Essentials #10: Prepared Treasure List - Part 2

*"Even gleaning a fraction of the power I harness on a daily basis would drive you MAD" - Vaarsuvius from OOTS*

Now that your notebook has treasure prepared and ready to roll, time to throw one extra caveat to the whole program. Making the magic of your world yours! You just did it with monsters, time to carry that thought over to treasure and really kick the doors open...

D&D as a game has specific conventions in place regarding magic. These are universally expected and bind the participants in common knowledge. This is good as it binds the rules and gives a common ground for new players to learn the magic system and a guide for spell casters in the creation of magic items. These conventions are:

1. Armor and weapons are either specific (Elven Chain mail) or conventional with its bonus build system (+2 Flaming Sword = +3 weapon).
2. Wondrous items are thematically tied to their powers by common sense (Wings of Flying) or legend (Carpet of Flying).
3. Rings are unique and overall powerful with dramatic effects (Ring of Wishes) or continuous effects (Protection).
4. Wands and Staffs have charges of existing spells
5. Rods provide a specific and powerful effect.
6. Potions are essentially spells that anyone can cast (by drinking the potion) but limited by level.
7. Scrolls are spells another spell caster can finish.

This list is well known by experienced gamers, and accepted. You've experienced it a thousand times and know it intuitively probably without giving it much thought.

Time to throw it out the window!!!

Just because the rules say it is one way doesn't mean that it has to work that way in your campaign. Spell casters are usually loners, with massive powers, who live in towers after all. Why would a loner like that follow standard and expected ideas on what a magic item should do or look like? Because that is how the "laws of magic" work? Bah I say. Wizards are supposed to use magic to change reality and make wondrous things happen!

How about a hat of protection +2? Or how about a broach (a very unused space on the character according to the magic placement rules) that has 10 charges of spell in it. Or maybe a 20,000 gp necklace that has 1 charge – a wish spell – but you have to break it (consume it like a potion) to use it. Now that is interesting, do your players take a chance on the wish or sell the necklace for the sure thing – the 20,000 gps.

Or you can just have loads of fun and decide that ages ago a female noble paladin had a set of beautiful diamond tear drop earrings enchanted like a *Belt of Giant's Strength*. She wanted to be prepared at court and formal settings. Now imagine the conversation between your players:

Player 1: “Gee Orgak. Your barbarian looks just precious in those earrings!”\*Snicker\*

Player 2: “Hey man, they are +6 to strength! I can’t pass on that!

Player 1: “I understand. You just look dashing with the battle axe, the beast scale armor, and the diamonds!” \*Choke\* \*Chortle\*

Player 2: “I feel a rage coming on!”

Player 1: ROFL

Here is the standard items re-listed, but this time by function and not item:

1. Spell Completion: Scrolls have it now, but any item can realistically do it: Coins, statuettes, jewelry, or even a pair of gloves (a spell on each). Instead of a scroll with many spells on it, how about a necklace with lots of charms on it or maybe a shield with runes inscribed on the edges.

2. Items with Charges: Anything can have charges. Some items that are not a wand or a staff already have charges (like the Ring of Wishes or the Necklace of Fireballs). How about a wizard’s hat, or a pair of boots enchanted with *expeditious retreat* , or even a potion (look, it’ll refill 10 times).

3. Continuous Items: The combos within the continuous affect category are endless:

I. No reason for a wand or staff to have a continuous enchantment on it. Just pick a staff and roll a random wondrous item, say a Staff of Defense +2.

II. Weapon and armor are not safe either. How about a Shield of Flying. Does your player go into those sea caves the +3 Plate or the Plate of Water Breathing!

III. Wondrous items can be mixed and match in endless combos. Boots of Protection, Gloves of Archery, Robe of Holding (Type II), or even the dreaded Horn of Wonder! The fun is endless; you can even roll them random if you want. Just roll on the charts twice. Once for the item and once for the power. I’d watch out for silly combos, however. A portable hole of flying will just cause a lot of blank stares at you from across the table.

4. Rods: They provide continuous powerful effects normally. Sounds like a staff in classic sword and sorcery to me! How about a Staff of Absorption instead. Or a ring that gives the powers of meta magic feats.

5. Combat - To Hit and Damage: Weapons are the standard to have these bonuses, after all – they do the actual hitting and damage. But why? How about a ring that gives your weapon +3 to hit and damage and makes it a ghost touch weapon as well. Or a belt that is +1 AC and gives weapons the keen ability. Of course, for pricing reasons (i.e. balance) these bonuses don’t stack with normal magical weapon bonuses.

That's OK, it makes the game interesting when the player has to decide if he would rather wear a Ring of Protection +3 or his ghost touch ring of +3 to hit/damage. Sure, the +3 is meaningless since he already has a +3 weapon, but there is also the fact that the current dungeon is below a graveyard... You don't need to go crazy, just a few new items to shake things up. Another note on pricing and balance. If you do this, figure in an extra +1 to the cost modifier. Your creating powers that can be transported from weapon to weapon. That is a real nice ability and should cost extra. That way it won't be abused at low levels. At higher levels, the difference at that level of play is more negligible – especially when compared to the higher bonuses a standard item would give vs. the versatility of the lower powered item.

6. Combat - Defensive: Same as weapons. Why let the armor and shields have all the defensive fun? How about a helmet that gives you a +2 to AC and the fortitude ability. Or bracers that give you +1 to AC and fire resistance. Don't go crazy with combos but just think of a few new and interesting items to add flavor to the game. To price properly, they can't stack with other bonuses from armor, but again that makes things interesting. The same pricing bump of a +1 modifier should be used.

Why have a continuous stream of magic items that the players will just sell off. Magic should be, well... magical. Not another commodity the players crunch numbers on to insure their character is set for the next level and tricked out to maximize his potential.

Break open the doors and go to town on those conventions. It may take some consideration to insure balance and pricing, but it is well worth the effort. Players love to brag and show off what their characters can do and the stuff they have. Just as they will describe that one "killer combat" for years to come so will they remember the cool magic items their characters had.

Make magic *magical* again and an adventure onto itself!

	Magical Item	Properties	Where Item is located	Value	Additional Notes
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## GM Notebook Essentials #11: The In Game Log

This one is simple and easy to set up. Just put a sheet of graph paper in your notebook and label it “Game Log”.

That is it. You’re done.....

I guess I better explain that...

Most essentials require lots of work to set up. This one requires your input after you set it up, or in game more specifically. It is a combination quick note section of things you say or events in the game. It is also a handy means of tracking information or timed effects.

I basically use the left side of my graph paper for in game notes and the right for tracking timed effects. You can even draw a line down the middle to help.

Tracking Time:

On the right hand side of the graph paper, you can use the grids to track any effect that is timed. Torches, lanterns, 3.0 buff spells, etc...

I just write down the numbers 1 to 12 twice. And check off the boxes next to the number as the hours go by in game. If I write the word "Lantern" next to the first 8, for 8 in the morning, then I now have a way of measuring when the fuel burns out.

Time is an important element of the game but an incredible pain in the dice bag to deal with. Many GMs just skip tracking time and run on instinct, “Your spell runs out now” or “Just mark off two vials of oil per day if you are using your lantern”. There is nothing wrong with that. But some things, like spells need to be tracked in case there is an eventual issue with them. Not to mention it will do wonders to keep the players on their toes.

When a player casts a spell or uses something with a time effect, I make a note next to the checked off boxes when the effect started. No, I don’t track the hours to the minute, that would be suicidal, but I do track an average hour and check off the box as time passes. If a spell or some other effect expires then I can inform the players.

This easily modifies down to smaller effects like spells that last for only ten minutes or even one minute per level.

The simplicity is the fact that the game notes page should be readily available since you are already making notes as the game goes along. There is usually enough room for me to also use the grids to track initiative. It also allows me to write down odd things like poison or disease that will need to have a save at a later time plus make notes on any long term effects in the note section.

Notes:

As it suggests, the left side of the grid is for notes as the game progresses: Note days of the week, minor and major events, encounters with NPCs that may be useful later, or even a DNPC that may need to be fleshed out more for a return appearance later. Don't try to copy every detail down. You'll go crazy and have no fun. But any action the players do is fair game – if you think it is relevant or may be useful in the future.

As an example, all through these articles I have used an example of a barmaid from the *Old Mill Inn* who had a gem stolen by the PCs. This story has been built slowly over the many posts I have made. This is an example of a GM's Notebook in action. It went from a location and a DNPC who ended up needing a name to building a story of how the PCs somehow took a gem from her. Perhaps over many sessions I made little notes each week to the effect of:

- Week 1: "Old Mill Inn"
- Week 2: "Tana Northern the barmaid"
- Week 4: "Bard seduces Tana. Realizes she is in on the local problems. Swipes the gem from the necklace she wears – she is asleep at the time. The bard sneaks away to let her awaken alone"
- Week 9: "Players end up dueling with local guards when a tax collector spots them as marked men for the gem theft."

As you can see, each note spurs an event later on as I bring back the information. And that connection is the whole point of keeping notes.

Continuity.

Continuity is what separates adventures from campaigns. It is what makes a campaign more than a sequential procession of modules. It is the glue of a campaign that is in effect more properly called "The Story".

As you make little notes on facts, you increase your ability to remember these bits of history to use later on. Some times it is something little, and other times it is important.

Little Details:

If it is something little, as example the bard mentioned above likes to get into trouble with barmaids, then you have a fun detail to use again. Maybe this becomes a trend in the game (The barmaids always seem to like the bard) or an inside joke (every time the bard hits on someone, it turns into a problem). Little details can add lots of flavor and make the game come alive for the players.

Warning - Story Alert

The first time a player asked me “Hey! What is the room number I have at the Inn we are staying at?” I just blinked a little and said, “Ah... Room 13”. One of the longest running gags of those early games was born at that moment. Every time that player got a room, it was room 13. Soon players were paying extra to sleep separate, just in case. That character even stayed in the palace, where rooms were not numbered, and sure enough he had the 13th suite on the left (and of course the right was an open window). Once, the players came to a town where two wizards got drunk and burned the Inn down – except one room. You guessed it, room 13.

The point is; little facts can take on a life of their own if you get the chance to revisit them. I don’t think you need to start writing down every detail like room numbers, but basic events will go a long way towards adding flavor to your campaign.

Important Information:

Now if it is something important, essential to the main characters or ongoing story, then it is critical to make notes. Blowing a story or forgetting something you said would either get you jeers at best or frustrated players at worse. Nothing kills the mood like someone needing to remind the GM that “Last week you said the henchman was human, not a half-orc”. If you need to detail extra campaign information off the top of your head, like a name of an NPC or a location (from your lists of course!) then you better make a note to include this information later on. If you forget something then the continuity of your game is broken. This is the number one reason to keep game notes.

If you do only one thing I have suggested in all these articles, this is it. Period.

Keep notes on important story related information and any details you create about you world. You won’t be sorry. Seriously, this *is the number one essential* of your notebook. If you botch continuity then your players are all over you. Trust me. Don’t let this happen. They can smell mistakes a mile away.

But the rewards are worth it. Having a game of consistency will make the world become real. Your players will become more and more involved in your game. And as your notes grow and you tie the past into the future, you will have a game so real the players can feel it. You’ll never be able to buy a game like that off the shelf, for a game like *that* is priceless. And it will be your game.

## Notebook Essential #12: Campaign Planner - Part 1

The master plan, the story-arc itself, and the great outline of your game as it will be. This is the crème-de-crème of the campaign as it is in effect the bare-bones outline of your game.

### Set Up:

Well, I had a lengthy set up description for a spreadsheet. But then I decided it would be easier on everyone if I just uploaded one instead. You may use the one I have provided or easily make your own that suits your needs. Essential items you will want is one column for each point of the outline, and one for numbering each point in order.

You will notice the extra TABS on the spreadsheet are labeled as EXAMPLES. These are examples I put together to demonstrate what I'm saying.

### Filling it in:

First:

Start from the top, or the beginning and fill in each space with a note about the story arc: Information about the story, events, characters, the BBEG, or even effects of things the characters or bad guys have done. For an example of what I mean, click on the TAB "EXAMPLE 1" on the spreadsheet. Note on how it is just a dry bare bones description of a basic adventure arc. That is all you need to start. It should be sequential as with any outline. Start from the beginning and make notes on towns, events and reasons for adventures (if any) or at least what the BBEG is doing at the beginning.

Second:

Any description that is relevant to the story should be added in the row following the one that describes the item. Add new details as you go. This is the time to get creative and add what the whole outline is with relevant details of persons, places, things, and events.

This is what makes spreadsheets wonderful – you can just inset rows as you go (don't forget to update the numbering sequence as you go. So add away and change your now descriptive outline as needed!

EXAMPLE 2 on the spreadsheet shows how I did this with the sample story outline from the previous example. The "x" is next to the items I added. As you can see, the story and details develop more at this point.

On details, you don't necessarily have to add lots of details to events that will take place in the far future. You have time to develop them

later, plus it will save you a little work if something changes (read: the players botch your plans) or a key character dies.

Third:

Go back and give it a once over again. Look for little details you may have missed. Maybe a few adventures to add levels between events, or something cool you have read and would like to add. Maybe it's some unrelated event that you want to add for flavor – like a local war or maybe a plague breakout. Basically, you are adding a little filler and looking for missing details.

Click on EXAMPLE 3 to see how I decided to fill in few details. Develop a few ideas from the last example, and fill in space to advance the players a few levels.

Don't knock yourself out, you can always add to the list later if you missed something. Double checking now just makes it easier to plan for anything big.

Purpose:

Now you have a complete outline with descriptive information for your campaign. Anytime you need information or even a quick reference: Bam! There it is in the back of your notebook. Further, as your campaign unfolds, you can judge what important NPCs are doing or how they may react to events that effect their plans. You can also logically see how the PC's actions may change events and what the impact of those events might be. When this happens, you just update the campaign notes to reflect what has happened. You can even put an "x" or something in the little box I added to indicate where the players are if you need a guide.

If your players cast one of those wonderful spells that allow them to learn critical information or use their Gathering Information skill, you will be prepared to offer information. The campaign notes will be ready to give you information as needed – just don't give away too much!

One of the many Laws of Role Playing(TM) goes "No plan survives contact with the players". You will need to update the notes, so that leads us to...

Evolving Campaigns:

As events happen, update your notes. As you add details, update those notes. As your players change the story through their actions, change the story arc to reflect the changes. This will allow your campaign to be an adventure versus a written story the players feel they have been railroaded through. Your player's actions will matter and the events of the campaign will reflect that.

As you go, new story arcs may appear or new NPCs may accidentally become featured. Just add them to the planner and find ways to incorporate them into the game. By reviewing your campaign notes you will be able to see ways your unfolding story can incorporate the

new personalities or events. Your players will believe that their actions matter and be amazed at the depth of your campaign.

In EXAMPLE 4, I decided to show a frequently used example in these articles. When the players took the gem from the Barmaid at the inn, I also added the event with the tax collector and city guards with possible latter events. A simple act of not killing the spy now turns into a new plot hook as she becomes involved in the intrigues of the Lady Vaxia!

The essential thing to remember is, don't be afraid to update your notes or change them to suit what happened. Or in other words, what happens simply happens. If your players blow a hole in your plans, just role with it and move on; change the unfolding story to reflect what your players have done. Don't worry about the ruined plans or god forbid try to shoehorn things back into the original plan. It won't work well and you'll just frustrate your players.

Let the adventure unfold for your players. They will have a blast. And while you are at it, let the adventure unfold for the forgotten player at the table: You. And you will have a blast as well.

Next time – Part 2

Where we reveal the real purpose of numbering every detail on your campaign planner...

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## Notebook Essential #12: Campaign Planner - Part 2

Now that you have the Campaign Planner ready to rock and roll, it's time to look at those numbers at the side. Besides the obvious sequencing of events in order, which is by no means still important, there is also another reason rooted in game planning.

Before I continue, this I must point out is not an original idea of yours truly; it is actually adapted from an old article in Dragon Magazine from back in the days of second edition. It was the original Dungeon Craft and the series was excellent. I recommend it whole heartedly. Anyways, back to the topic...

Those numbers is the means to not only opening up your game to the true sense of story telling, but it will also push you out of your comfort zone when planning your game.

The trick is real simple, after you have your planner filled out (my example from the last post [TAB 3] has 55 lines of detail), you then need to assign a dice to roll that matches your numbers. In this case I'll decide that a d6-1 for the tens and a d10 for the singles with a result of 56 or higher being a re-roll will suffice. Those dice rolls are a little convoluted, and if you want an easier bunch of dice just add some more details to your planner! Your campaign can never hurt for more details and planning.

Now when ever you spend some time creating an important detail, be it a major NPC, or a setting, or whatever then just roll those dice and come up with a secret to attach to that important detail. If you are going to spend all of that time creating a NPC, or stating a monster, or fleshing out some inn, then roll the dice and give it a secret.

When you have the piece of information to add, DO NOT just throw it out there for everyone to see. I'm calling it a secret for a reason. You want to try to work it into the picture in a creative way; a way that will not reveal what it is without the players investigating the information or at least asking questions (i.e. Roll Playing). But more importantly, if the secret is some fact that would not normally be available for sometime yet (say you are at line 5 of your planner and you roll a 40), then you want to disguise the secret in layers of hints. This is the key to foreshadowing.

Why a random secret? Well, I'm glad you asked. First, a secret adds detail to the encounter. Second, it adds depth to your campaign. Third, it adds a story element of foreshadowing if the players connect the dots.

Detail:

If you are going to spend some time detailing an important part of your campaign, then it deserves an extra shot of detail to make it three dimensional. The more vivid the information you give, the more your players will see the adventure as less a game and more of an adventure.

Depth:

This is detail that turns an adventure in a campaign. It ties places, people, and things together in the detail that only a story can deliver. When places and people become tied forward and backwards throughout the campaign, your players can only believe in the completeness of your world. It will be a story they will remember.

Foreshadowing:

This is depth with a big payoff that every reader enjoys in a story when they get that “Oh!” moment of realizing they have known part of the story all along but didn’t know it until the author finally told that lynch-pin piece of information. It’s that wonderful little trivial piece of information you don’t think about much until it hits you over the head several books later.

Pushing your comfort zone:

The big problem with writing adventures is that it is easy to repeat yourself. Everyone has themes that they like and they naturally gravitate towards. I became aware of this when one of my players took over GMing for a while, during an adventure, a crack was made by another player about undead to which the GM mentioned, “Nope. No undead. Nightcloak has the covered enough.” What I realized then is that I was getting stuck on monster themes, so now I watch it and try to add more variety.

The same thing can happen to a GM when it comes to descriptions or even game style. By randomizing the results, then trying to stick to those results, it will force you into stretching out beyond your comfort zone with new ideas and descriptions. It is easy to always focus only on destinations in dreams or images of bad guys, but wracking your brain to describe those Ghost Touch Chimes of Opening will push in a creative direction. It will add variety to your game and grow you as a GM.

Let’s put it together with two examples.

Example 1:

I’m stating out the barmaid who is our secret spy. I’ll give her a secret to complete her character, so I pull out my not so lucky six-siders (you’ll understand if you ever watch me roll up a character, I have not had a natural 18 since second edition!) and roll a ...

28: Tower is full of half-fiends from an experiment during the war gone wrong

Well... That is interesting. Let’s see if we can work that into the details of our barmaid/spy. I’m going to give her a severely scarred left hand; something noticeable. She tells those who ask that she use to be an adventurer who explored the woods far to the west. Her band of adventurers stumbled onto a tower that was reputed to be filled with magic. But inside things went horribly wrong. They were attacked by

some kind of fiends that demolished her party and she barely escaped with her life. The horrible damage done to her hand killed her adventuring career and she has stayed domesticated ever since...

Now that is true up to the part where her career was ended. The reality is that her group ran into the BBEG and his demon cronies, who did destroy her group. She was hurt in the fight, but she also turned on the group to save her own neck when the party cleric couldn't heal the unholy vile damage done to her hand during the fight. She panicked and helped the BBEG. Now she works for him and hopes to somehow get by long enough to make some money and get out of the region.

Now the nice thing about all of this detail is that it gives you a complete picture of the spy and what her motivation is. It also tells you how treacherous and devious she is. Further, when the bard steals the gem from her, we now can easily see what her course of action will be: She has to get that gem or the BBEG will finish what he started in that tower!

Next, your players will be rewarded with an interesting story that will have tons of extra meaning. All they have to do is roll play a little. They will see the barmaid as so much more than a typical barmaid. And further, when the players are dealing with her trying to hunt them down it will mean so much more since she is already "alive" to them.

Finally, the foreshadowing of the demon filled tower in the forest. You didn't tell them what forest or what tower, you focused on her plight. But someday they will need to go to that forest to find a tower with a map they need. It is several adventures away in your time line, which could mean months of game time. But the look on your players faces when one of them speaks up and says, "Hey! Didn't the barmaid mention that her hand was burned by fiends in some tower in a forest!" will be oh so priceless.

Example 2:

I'm detailing the inn for possible fights and the eventual gem theft. So I roll my dice for a secret...

36: Portal is hidden in sunken castle in the "Howling Swamp"

!?!? Uh oh - That is a pretty big secret that I really don't need to let loose. It will just bury the evolution of the story and ruin any pre-tense of adventuring. When you roll something game breaking like this, it is time to get extra creative and really bury the information in layers and glimpses. Never re-roll. Otherwise you'll just start to re-roll all of the time and lock yourself into patterns. Besides, if you pull it off, the rewards are even greater. So let's work it in to a detail of the inn...

The main tap room of the inn has an ancient picture of dubious worth above the fireplace. It is a bit shaded from the smoke over the years. The picture is of two knights, who oddly wear the same armor, fighting each other on the parapets of a castle while a tidal wave of water crashes over those parapets. It's hard to tell really do to the age and fading, and the inn owner brags how it was painted by a famous bard, or so he had heard from the guy who traded it to him to clear his bar tab.

OK. Let's see - no mention of portals or demons or even the howling swamps. Just a snap shot at the sinking of the castle during the insurrection from the corrupted knights. But even that information is a lot of research and time away from the players. Assuming they even think about it much after this adventure is over. But hopefully the old picture and their first inn will resonate when they are 12th level and learn that the portal is in a castle that sunk into a swamp. When they learn of the details of how the castle sunk, hopefully they will realize how much forethought you put into the campaign to foreshadow such an event!

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Secrets are fun and can add a lot of depth to a game when used properly. You will wow your players with the complexity of your game and the planning of the campaign. You already put tons of work into the game, now it is simply time to put all of that work *to work* for you.

You are the referee, the judge, a cast of thousands, and the writer of the whole experience. Time to be a writer and write a story that ties the whole campaign together; from beginning to end with the whole seeming continuous and interrelated. Further, you need to write a story that the players may up and change on you not only at any moment, but most likely several times throughout the entire campaign. Your story needs to foreshadow details and hooks, not a story itself for that is railroading and not an adventure or a game. The game is a story the writes itself by the act of the players and the details of your planning. And if you can take all of that variety and chance, and still write a story that is continuous and tied from front to back, then you are indeed more than a writer...

*You are the Essential GM!*

Addition made by Catavarie:

## Traps

All dungeons have some sort of trap set somewhere within their walls, whether it is intentionally set by the BBEG or its something which has occurred naturally over time is completely up to the GM. Traps can be intricate and delicate mechanical contraptions involving weights and levers and springs and bearings, or could be as simple as a trip line holding back a landslide, the options are endless, anything which the GM can imagine can become reality in the game world. I find that simple sketches can often help me to create traps that are not only “functional” in the game world but are also feasible. But sometimes all you need is some tree limbs stretched across a pit.

	Trap Type	Damage	Range	Trigger	Active (Yes/No)	Disarm DC	Magical?
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