



First Time DM

If you're not scared, you should be...

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Introduction

Before diving into my advice for first-time Dungeon Masters, let's start with a fundamental question: *Why do you want to DM?*

If your motivation sounds something like this, you might need to rethink your approach:

"I've devoted the last two years to crafting an expansive world of my own design, complete with detailed locations, races, languages, new monsters, a host of unique magical items, and even fourteen distinct recipes for cooking owlbear. My world is ready to burst into action, with players destined to dethrone gods and ascend to their celestial seats . . ."

The reality is, many people find themselves in the Dungeon Master's seat not out of choice, but by default – simply because no one else was willing to take on the role.

If you, like me, became a DM under these circumstances, this guide is for you.

Enjoy!

Christopher

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My Top 30 Tips

Tip #1

Find someone else to do it.

If you're unable to find a willing volunteer, then brace yourself and ~~continue reading for some~~ essential guidance.

Tip #2

You need to know the basic rules.

You don't need to know the rules for adventuring in the Outer Planes.

But you do need to know how initiative works.

Read the Player's Handbook.

Much of the information in the ~~Dungeon Master's Guide~~ can wait.

Tip #3

Don't expect much of ~~your~~ first session.

Problems will occur, ~~you~~ can count on it.

In my experience it's often technical issues with your VTT (assuming you're using one) such as sound, microphones, dynamic lighting and token settings.

Do a 'dry run' before you gather to ensure these problems don't find you.



Tip #4

Delegate, Delegate, Delegate.

Use your players, put them to work.

If you have a player who is referred to as a 'rules lawyer,' use them. Ask them to look up information for you in-between their turns.

Give your players roles/jobs:

- **Scheduler:** Consider delegating one of your players to organize your group's sessions. This may seem odd, but I can promise you one thing, 90% of the pain of being a DM is arranging the social lives of your friends. Get someone else to do it!
- **Accountant:** Have one player keep track of 'party loot' and experience points.
- **Shot Caller:** Having one player make most of the mundane decisions for the party can speed up play. If you do appoint one of these, consider rotating the position so others get a turn.
- **Artist:** One of my players loves to draw sketches of our adventurers in between her turns. It turns out to be the highlight of most sessions.
- **Chronicler:** One of your players might enjoy creative writing and be prepared to keep a campaign journal. If so, use them. If not, consider writing one yourself.
- **The Gofer:** The Gofer, working in conjunction with the Accountant, is the player that shops for the party. Trust me, it's far better dealing with the Gofer than each of your players wanting to buy a few mundane items.

Tip #5

You'll be anxious and that's okay.

This is quite normal, particularly if you're playing with strangers.

In fact, avoid DM'ing for strangers on your first game if possible.

Play with friends if you can.

Be open and tell your players you're nervous; they are probably feeling similar emotions.

Tip #6

Over-prepare your first few locations/encounters/NPCs.

Use all of your senses.

When your players set foot in that sewer you've been preparing, think of what they:

- *See*
- *Smell*
- *Hear*
- *Feel*
- *Taste . . . yuck!*

“You see a ten foot corridor heading west.” BAD

“This place smells like rotten eggs. Your eyes sting and start running. The stone floor is ankle deep in mucky water covered in some kind of slime; your boots are probably ruined! You hear the scratching and squeaking of small animals down the dark passage ahead. It's cold, your teeth start to chatter.” GOOD

Tip #7

Do not over-prepare beyond your current session.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but most campaigns and even groups don't last long.

You know all that preparation you did for the Yuan-ti swamp temple when they reach level 10? . . . It's not likely to happen . . .

Don't waste your time. Prepare only what you think you'll need for your next session, and maybe the one after that.



Tip #8

You're not their mother.

Your players need to carry their own weight.

You know your friend playing the paladin? ***He*** needs to know what Divine Sense is.

Tip #9

Don't home-brew your first game.

Use a published adventure if you have one.

At least when the dragon eats them, you can blame Christopher Perkins.

Balancing encounters can be tricky for a new DM.

Tip #10

Time sink.

Preparing your sessions takes a considerable time investment, even published ones!

If you're not prepared to put in the time and work, you're already doomed.

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Tip #11

Don't be afraid of character death.

Don't roll behind a screen or pull your punches.

Your players shouldn't name their characters until they are 3rd level.

Player death is part of the game.

Fear of loss is what makes the game exciting, not to mention rewarding.

Bilbo Baggins said it best: *"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door."*

I keep a cemetery page on roll20 like the one below.

Each time we have a character death I mark one of the stones with something like this: *Here lies Boromir, heir of Denethor II, Steward of Gondor, slain by many orcish arrows in Parth Galen.*

Tip #12

The small things matter.

Make stuff up.

I recently had a session where one of my players broke the seal on a dwarven sarcophagus. In the module, the sarcophagus was empty. I wasn't having that.

"You crack the lid and peek inside. Dust escapes from the sarcophagus, swirling into the vague form of a humanoid. As you gasp in shock, the dust is sucked into your nose and open mouth!"

Next, I asked the player to make a Constitution saving throw. He rolled a 2. I shook my head and wrote a note, passing it to him across the table. It read:

"In your head you hear these words: 'We are now one.'"

I have no idea what any of this meant, but my players are convinced their friend is now possessed by the spirit of a long dead dwarf. In fact, the rest of the session was spent by them talking animatedly as to how to handle the scenario.



Tip #13

Give your players what they want, within reason.

My players are hack and slashers. If they haven't killed something within 10 minutes of starting, they get bored.

Adjust accordingly.

Tip #14

Know what your players don't like and avoid/minimize it.

My players hate Fairs. Drinking games, pie eating contests and archery competitions drive them nuts! Guess what? I avoid them like Yersinia Pestis.

In case you didn't know, Yersinia Pestis is the Plague.

Tip #15

Take their stuff.

Nothing motivates players more than stealing their stuff.

This can be the basis of a recurring villain.

Tip #16

DM burnout is real.

Preparing session after session can be draining. Consider:

- Rotating DM now and then
- Skipping sessions when you're not feeling 100%
- Running 'seasons' of play to give yourself longer breaks



Tip #17

Expect anything.

Linear gameplay (aka, railroading) is generally a negative experience.

Don't expect your players to stay on the road you expected them to take.

Don't be scared to say: "*I think we should call the session here; I didn't anticipate that you'd want to go and see the elves so early.*"

Tip #18

Allow a natural pace.

This feeds into tip #13.

If your players appear happy discussing the intricacies of dwarven architecture in a ruin, run with it. Don't push them along, let the game progress naturally.

Also, don't talk over your players.

Tip #19

Be miserly with magical items.

5th edition characters scale rapidly in power, particularly after levels 5-7 when more potent spells come online.

If you add in too many magical items, you're asking for strife.

Your players need to be challenged, and you'll have increasing difficulty doing this as they progress.

Be careful.

If you end up giving your players too many magical items, introduce creatures that destroy them. Rust monsters are too predictable, try a Lava Cube (from the book: *Fiery Denizens*).



Tip #20

The thin, red line.

Never tolerate:

- Bullying
- Racial or sexual abuse (or any form of abuse for that matter)
- Repeated tardiness
- Cheating (call it out if you see it immediately)
- Consider banning mobile phones and other distracting devices (this can be a sore point, make this kind of decision as a group)

Tip #21

Admit when you're wrong.

It's going to happen, accept it and move on.

I give my players a small amount of experience if they catch me making a mistake.

Tip #22

Find a use for gold.

In 5e there aren't a lot of uses for gold in later levels, so find some.

Consult your players first.

- Buying property to set up a base of operation
- Run a shop
- Become an alchemist (I write my books with just this in mind, focusing on the ecology of creatures and how magical items can be made from their parts)
- Build a castle (there are resources for this)
- Open a fighting pit and hire gladiators
- Build a dungeon and populate it with monsters



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Tip #23

Maps.

If you're home-brewing, look up a guy called Dyson Logos – he offers hundreds of free maps. You'll find a map for just about any scenario.



Tip #24

Boxed information in modules.

Don't read it out verbatim.

Instead, paraphrase and add your own creativity.

Tip #25

Beware the DM hog.

This is the player that demands 95% of your time and talks over the other players.

Every player at your table deserves an equal share of your attention.



Tip #25

Foreshadow.

This one you'll learn with experience.

If my players are approaching a roper at low levels, I'll be sure to drop hints that a challenging encounter is coming. If they're low on hit points and resources, it's okay to let them take that long rest you hate so much.



Tip #25

Avoid random encounters. Or, if you do use them, make them feel like they're anything but random.

Example:

"You see three orcs coming down the passage, roll initiative." BAD

"You hear guttural voices and heavy footfalls echo from the passage to the west! A trio of orcs round a corner, the lead one holding up a tattered vellum map. The orcs stop dead when they see you. The one with the map begins stuffing it in its mouth!" GOOD

Tip #26

Use dialogue. Allow your sneaky players to overhear dialogue, and prepare for it.

Here's an example of a ettin-like creature called a Sagebrute. The heads can be overheard arguing with one another . . .

Sage Head: *"Ponder the vast dominion of the intellect. With but a spell, I can decipher the universe's secrets or warp the very fabric of existence to my desire."*

Brute Head: *"Yo, all that jabber ain't worth spit. Gimme somethin' solid to bash."*

Sage Head: *"Oh, my simple sibling, your understanding is as shallow as a puddle. It is the mind, not muscle, that truly rules."*

Brute Head: *"Talk fancy all ya want. Ain't nothin' like the feel of somethin' breakin' 'neath your hands."*

Sage Head: *"Your narrow view blinds you. Magic, the artful application of intellect, can turn the fiercest adversary into the meekest creature."*

Brute Head: *"Or I could just smash it real good. Done and dusted, no fancy finger-wavin' needed."*

Sage Head: *"You're overlooking the essence of power. It is wielded through strategy, knowledge, wisdom."*

Brute Head: *"And you're overlookin' the buzz of droppin' a foe with one good hit. That's power ya can feel in your bones."*

Sage Head: *"You epitomize the preference of brawn to brains. But what will you do when brute strength alone is insufficient?"*

Brute Head: *"Then I'll chuck somethin' at 'em! Muscle always finds a way."*



Tip #27

Be creative.

I write lots of books, but I try to follow one rule: Every creature, encounter, and NPC must have a unique twist that I introduced or created.

Here are a couple of examples:

1. Imagine being swallowed and regurgitated by a behir . . .

“The behir regurgitates you onto the ground.” BAD

“The behir belches loudly and vomits a great gush of stomach fluid onto the cavern floor! You emerge covered in the remains of its last meal, your eyes and skin burning as if on fire! Oh, and by the way, you now look like this . . .” GOOD

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2. The sneaky mimic . . .

We all know what a mimic looks like, or do we?

A Rucksack Mimic from the book: *Frozen Denizens*



Tip #28

Let your players do the work.

You are not the one solely responsible for the game and the group's enjoyment.

The best story is the one told by your players. NOT YOU.

If this resonates with you, many worthy things are foreseen in your future.

Tip #29

Be consistent.

This is important.

If you bend the rules, which of course is fine, make sure you're consistent with the bending.

Tip #30

Don't sweat the detail.

If you need to check a rule mid-combat, that's fine. Just say you need a moment. If it's a tough one and needs more time, make a ruling and move along. You can always research it later.

The exception here is when your decision is likely to have a serious impact on the game or a player's death. In this case, stop and be make sure you've got it right; it's hard to backtrack in some places.

Final Word

Let's end with an ancient Chinese proverb from the Tang dynasty:

“Many small steps make a grand campaign, but it is the first step that sets the course.”

I made that up.

Remember, the DM has the final say . . .

