

Dungeons and Dragons is a very personal experience and, not to spook you out, it is very dependent on the DM and group a player has. If you have a good DM and group, it will be the best experience. If you have a bad DM and group, it might taint how you look at D&D altogether. I have heard many stories of players having a bad experience in one group and they've been completely turned off D&D. It's up to you as the DM to establish ground rules, assess the group's gaming needs and retain a consistency that will keep your players cooperative, fulfilled and coming back each week. Although this sounds like a huge undertaking, it's not actually that bad because once you've established your rules and how you to plan to run things, it's all up to the players whether they wish to play in your campaign or join a different one if they feel your style won't jive with theirs.

The first thing you want to do once you have chosen your players and which campaign you're running is host what is called a "session zero". It's called this because if you were to count all the sessions your group has, this would be zero because you're not actually *playing* during this session, but you did still all get together. A session zero is incredibly important, ESPECIALLY if you're gaming with people who you haven't gamed with before, it is your first time DMing or you're playing with people you haven't even met previously. There are four main aspects to a session zero:

- Player introduction
- DM introduction (including house rules)
- character choices and campaign discussion
- character creation

The very first thing you want to do with your new group is introduce your players to each other. This may sound a little like something you would do in elementary school but there's a reason we do it in school too; we spend A LOT of time with those people. It's the same thing with D&D. If you're going to sit at a table for HOURS with someone, it's good to at least have some idea of who that person is. It also gets the group comfortable with speaking in front of each other. Let's be honest, we didn't get into the gaming community because of outgoing, charismatic qualities. It's intimidating enough to talk with strangers let alone role play in front of them, so I find having your players break the ice a little before playing, really helps everyone feel comfortable. At my session zeroes, I ask my players to say their name, how long they have been playing D&D for (or if they haven't played before - what types of other RPG games they like Zelda, Final Fantasy, Skyrim, etc.) and what their favourite type of role or class to play is. This gives the players and the DM an idea of what to expect from their new companion.

The DM introduction is arguably the most important aspect of a session zero. Your players are not only spending A LOT of time with you, but they are putting a lot of trust in you on a daily basis. Start off by telling your players your name and how long you have been playing and/or DMing D&D. You can talk about your favourite character you've had or campaign you've run. If you're new to D&D altogether, you can talk about what other RPGs you've liked. After you've introduced yourself, introduce your DMing style. Share things with your players like:

- Your role play style (do you do voices and accents? Do you prefer a lighter role play style?)
- House rules you have (we'll get to those a little later)
- Any components you like to add to the game (music, whiteboard/chalkboard, miniatures, etc.)
- What you expect from your players (Always stating natural 20s and critical failures, informing you of sessions they'll miss, swearing, etc.)

So, what exactly are "house rules"? These rules aren't just what someone screams out when they grab \$500 for landing on Free Parking in Monopoly. In D&D house rules are things the DM in *this* group may do differently from the DM in *that* group. You may be thinking "what the heck is the point in

having rules if the DM can change them?” Well, D&D is a bit different in that it has rules, but they are more like guidelines. In the very front of your Dungeon Master's Guide it reads “The D&D rules help you and the other players have a good time, but the rules aren't in charge. You're the DM and *you* are in charge of the game” meaning you have the power to change rules where you see fit. Be warned though, once you begin changing rules, you absolutely **MUST** keep those changes consistent: do the same thing in every situation, with every player. So why? Why would you go through all this trouble and change rules? Well, depending on your group dynamic, some aspects of the game can actually be more disruptive than helpful. As an example I'll share with you some house rules I make for my campaigns and why I uphold them.

- I do not allow ANY evil alignments (unless EVERY PLAYER is evil). I find that having a mixture of good and evil alignments causes a great deal of friction between players and their characters. I end up being more of a Dungeon Mediator than a Dungeon Master and arguments are almost a daily guarantee.
- I do not allow my players to steal from one another. This one seems pretty obvious. How would you feel if your character just fell asleep and one of their companions sneaks into their bag and steals something. You fail your perception check and don't notice. In the morning, that person passes their deception and your character never finds out...but YOU as a player know that the person sitting across the table just stole from you when they're supposed to be a companion. The lines between a character and a player can get blurred sometimes and that's a bad thing, but in these situations, it would be ridiculous to expect a player to not get upset. So, I bypass the whole issue by just simply stating there is NO stealing from each other PERIOD.
- I do not allow my players to cast offensive spells on each other without that player's verbal permission. Fireball is the biggest reason for this rule. I typically play front line fighters and barbarians which is great for damage...but it also means I'm in the wizard's way a lot when he wants to cast an area of effect spell like Fireball. By making players give permission, it prevents the front line classes from being unexpectedly damaged while they are trying to do what they do best, but it also gives the front line classes the option to say “Go ahead, Wiz. I can take the hit and these guys need to go down!”. This is a great role playing opportunity for everyone and prevents players from taking their companions fate into their own hands.
- Same goes for attacking. I do not allow my players to attack each other because I'm far more interested in playing D&D than moderating fights between characters.
- I always go with either the preset ability scores or the point buy system both of which are described on page 13 of the PHB. By eliminating the chance element from character creation, it gives your players more control in customizing their characters. When you roll d6 for character stats, you run the risk of one player rolling all high numbers or all low numbers. Of course, being the DM, you can adjust those numbers but if you're going to even things out, what is the point of rolling randomly at all? Giving the players an even starting ground is especially important when dealing with a group who doesn't know each other well.
- I have all my players fill out Adventure Log Sheets to keep track of their gold, XP, magical items and story line and I have them show it to me after each session. This way I can double check their math, make sure they haven't forgotten an item and keep tabs on who is at what level. Also their story recaps are more often than not, absolutely hilarious.
- I also don't allow any content from the Unearthed Arcana. For those of you who aren't familiar with it, the Unearthed Arcana is content posted online that IS Wizards of the Coast official but isn't published in an actual book. The reason I don't allow it is because it's not fully accessible to everyone in the group. Some people don't have printers, or computers, or Internet or whatever. I want my players and of course myself to be able to reference the spells or abilities a player is using and having a digital copy is a pain in the butt. Even if the player prints out the

information, I still want everyone to be able to access it easily. I also have a few newer players in my group and the Unearthed Arcana tends to be a bit more convoluted than the character choices in the published books.

Most of my rules are focused on player interaction and keeping the peace, but there are some spells that can get a little ridiculous that you may want to keep an eye on. For example: A 4th level spell that Druids have access to at level 7 is called “Conjure Woodland Beings” where the character can summon one of these options: one CR2 fey creature, two CR1 creatures, four CR1/2 creatures or 8 CR1/4 creatures. It sounds pretty harmless when you read the spell, it's similar to conjure animals...until you realize that one of the CR1/4 fey they can summon are Pixies. Pixies have access to the spell *polymorph* and the spell *fly*, which they can only cast either one once a day. That doesn't sound too bad at first glance until you realize they can summon EIGHT pixies at once. So, four pixies make four of the characters flying, while the other four pixies transform them into Giant Apes and then all the pixies fly off. So now we have four flying giant apes all dealing up to 44 damage each turn. Oh, and they stay that way for up to an hour. And THAT is why I don't allow pixies to be an option for the Conjure Woodland Beings spell. It is just entirely too over powered and a complete headache for any DM.

You can choose whatever house rules you want for your campaign, the important thing is that your players are 100% informed and understand all the rules before the campaign begins.

Another thing you might want to go over with your group before you start, is everyone's style of role playing. This is obviously something you'll find out rather quickly once you start playing so it's not 100% necessary to discuss it ahead of time, but definitely pay attention to it. Each person will role play in D&D differently. Some people like to always speak in character, some will create an accent or funny voice for their character. Some people prefer to not speak or act in character and are much more reserved about their role playing. Your job is to assess where each player is at with their role playing and adjust accordingly. For example, if you are a heavy role player and want your players to always speak in character, but you have a player or two that seem really uncomfortable with public role playing, perhaps think about lifting that rule of always speaking in character. Through time you can encourage your players to role play more, but forcing it from the get go is a sure fire way to have players leave your group. Same goes for the reverse situation: if you have a player that loves to speak in an accent and fully act as their character but you're a more reserved role player, don't ask them to stop role playing so heavily (unless the voice they have chosen is grating on EVERYONE'S nerves). Forcing anyone into a role playing mold is not only nearly impossible, but it's sure to make everyone feel uncomfortable in one way or another. There may be times when role playing is critical to a situation, especially when diplomacy is involved, but that doesn't necessarily mean you need your players to fully act out the situation. Say your group is trying to convince a royal family member to grant the party access to a restricted area. That NCP may have a lower DC for the diplomacy check if the party brings up certain plot points or uses some of the NCP's personal information as leverage. In this situation, instead of asking your more reserved players to give a grand speech, you can simply ask them to tell you specific things their character would say. This gives them the opportunity to say “Okay, my character will tell the royal family member that if he lets us into the restricted area, we will find a remedy to cure his daughter of her strange illness”. No heavy acting is needed but they can get their full intention across. Again, this is YOUR group and if you want a group of all heavy or all light role players, that is something you can do, but make sure to set that up when you choose your players for the group, rather than after they've joined.

You're about ready to start your first session in the story, but you need to establish with your players why their characters are on this adventure in the first place. Setting up character “plot hooks” is not

only a way to have the story make a little more sense, but it's another opportunity for your players to deepen their back story and interact with each other. Some of the published adventures, such as the Tomb of Annihilation, has character hooks already made up for you based on the character's background, class or race. For example, the Acolyte of the group has been summoned to Chult to investigate the Death Curse as all Cleric's across the land have been finding their resurrection powers are ineffective. Each character in the story should have some sort of hook like this. It can either be a hook you write yourself, given to you by a campaign book or something the player can write themselves. Ultimately it's up to you to decide how the hooks will happen. Sometimes a hook could even just be that the party members were all individually looking for work and responded to the same call or that they all met in a tavern one night and bonded over a tankard of ale. If you're not a heavy role playing group and just like to roll dice, this may suit you more but personally, I like a little more story than that. Having character hooks also gives the players an opportunity to write each other into their own back stories (which is why this is best done in session zero rather than session one). For example, you have two wizards in the group who were both contacted by their mentor to investigate a strange magical power emanating from a village. The players could then decide their characters went to the same wizarding college at the same time and have a small reunion upon arriving in the village. These characters now already have an established bond of trust and a reason to adventure together. If you have two players choose the same race for their character, then can choose to have their characters related somehow or if they're a particularly rare or out of place race given the setting, they can bond over simply finding other of their kind. Having characters bond and trust from the first session really helps to keep the story moving rather than dealing with group conflict about who trusts who.

The only thing I **STRONGLY** caution against is having characters be in love with one another. That gets awkward awfully quickly for everyone. And no one really wants to see anyone role play that out. Having a character fall in love with an NPC is less uncomfortable but even still.....be wary of romance in D&D. It can add great motivation for a character (especially if something awful were to happen to the NPC) but players must be careful to be respectful to their DM and party.

If you're choosing to include character plot hooks in your game, you may want to think about sharing a piece of the story of the adventure they'll be running through. Not enough to give any spoilers, but enough to get them excited for the first session. It may also be very important at least one character in the party has a particular trait that will prove imperative to the party's success. For example, when I ran Storm King's Thunder, I told my players at least one person in the party should choose Giant as one of their languages they can speak and understand. This may be considered a little bit of a spoiler as now the party know they will likely be encountering giants during the adventure, but honestly, they could have looked at the cover of the campaign book and figured that one out. It may also be more your style to share **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING** about the story with your players and have them go in completely blind, but I have found most players like to have at least some idea of what they're heading into.

Now it's time for your players to choose their race, class and background. This is something I really prefer my players do together at one table. When everyone is together, they can balance the party much more easily than everyone making characters at home only to find everyone chose the same class. What a balanced party means, is that you ideally have no overlapping classes, a wide range of skills and have the main types of character covered. For a balanced party you'll want these fields covered (roughly):

- One front line melee tank (Barbarian, Fighter, Monk, Paladin)
- One dedicated healer (Cleric, Paladin, Druid)
- One arcane caster (Wizard, Warlock, Sorcerer)

- One sneak (Rogue or a class with a sneaky background)
- At least one of these skills is represented by a character:
 - Arcana (to interpret magical sources and types)
 - Investigation (to find loot and clues)
 - Perception (to see ANYTHING)
 - Religion (to interpret undead activity)
 - Survival (to find suitable campsites while on the road)
 - One of the diplomacy skills like deception, intimidation, persuasion (so the party can SOMETIMES get their way)

Although ticking all these boxes makes for the ideal party, your party by no means has to look like this. There are enough customization options available to classes after 3rd level that whatever they chose can probably be tailored later on to fit another role. Also, if your players want to have a party of six rogues, they can totally do that. That just means a little more creative thinking on your behalf to get the party through the campaign. For example let's say there's a part of a dungeon that requires an arcana check to identify and disable a magical rune trap. You can make sure the party is able to continue by introducing an arcane NCP a little bit earlier in the story that can temporarily join the party, make the trap deal less damage so when they inevitably trigger it the whole party doesn't die, or you can simply change that part of the story to include an obstacle the party will be able to deal with and take the arcane trap out. If my ridiculous group has taught me anything, it's that there is NEVER one way to do anything. The DM is responsible for presenting multiple options to the group or allowing more options to be created by the players' creative thinking.

Here's an amusing story about the players creating alternate options. So my party and their iron golem companion named "Benny" had gotten themselves into quite a pickle and initiated combat with three fire giants when they were all injured and low on spells. Being left with few options, the ranger decided to chuck an iron flask containing the Primordial Flame Maegara at the giants. The flask of course opened and Maegara was unleashed, positively demolishing the giants.....aaaaand two of the party members. If you've ever tried to re-bottle a sentient, chaotic Primordial Fire, you'll know they don't just scoot back in politely. And if you've ever had a party member die, you'll know you need at least SOME remains to bring to a cleric for resurrection. So the party needed to get into the room to retrieve the ashes of the party members they had just immolated, but couldn't get close enough to Maegara (or the Iron Flask to trap her) to get them. It was at this point that we took a 10 minute break so the player and I could separately try to figure a way out of this mess. My players returned after about 10 minutes and said "Okay, we have 12 and a half percent of a plan". Knowing only pure gold would stream out of their mouths, I humoured their plan....especially since I still had no clue how they would get their lost party members back. I was sure they would have to leave them behind. "We want to command Benny to go in and bring back the Iron Flask." I was absolutely stunned. I rifled through my Monster Manual and lo-and-behold, Iron Golems are completely immune to fire damage....the only type of damage Maegara dealt. Benny was able to safely retrieve the Iron Flask, the party re-bottled Maegara and scooped up the ashes of their companions. They got the ashes to a Cleric within a few hours and managed to revive the barbarian and cleric.....with only a minor mix up of the ashes resulting in the barbarian gaining a tiefling tail and the cleric growing wild, long hair. Moral of the story: always expect the unexpected from your players!

Alright, the last thing that you need to do with your group is actually create the characters. This part will be mostly hands off for you except for enforcing your house rules, double checking the completed character sheets and moderating stat rolls. For rolling stats there are a few different options and every

DM prefers a different format. These three formats are the most common:

- Use the standard array stats on page 13 in the PHB (15, 14, 13, 12, 10, 8)
- Use the “Point Buy” system on page 13 in the PHB
- Roll 4d6 and drop the lowest die (you roll 4,3,5,2. Drop the 2 and add the rest together making a total stat of 12 before any race modifiers are added)

You may choose to use one of these options or customize one to suit your desires. If you decide to go with rolling 4d6, I strongly suggest making sure all your players do the rolling at the same table at your Session Zero. This way you can ensure everyone is doing it correctly and that all rolls are legitimate.

The only other part of character creation you may have to be an active part of is shopping. Every background and class a player chooses for their character will come with gear that suits the chosen background and class. Most players will use this gear and not bother with the other option you can present to your group: shopping à la carte which means the players can purchase each individual piece of gear for their character. In place of the starting equipment listed with their class in the PHB, page 143 has a table showing how much gold each class will get to spend. Again, if you're choosing the à la carte option, make sure it's done at a Session Zero in front of you to make sure it's done correctly and legitimately. This is a time consuming process and MOST players will just go with their starting gear.

After your party has been assembled, take a few minutes to go around the table and have each of your players introduce their characters to the group. They can choose to withhold information like their alignment, faction, background or even lie about their true name or gender, but at the very least sharing their class, race and a physical description is needed.

Now you're all set to jump into your first real session of your adventure!

Aspects of a Session Zero

- Player Introduction
 - Their name
 - Experience with D&D (or other RPGs)
 - Favourite class or role to play

- DM Introduction
 - Your role playing style
 - House rules
 - Additional components you use
 - What you expect from your players

- Character Choices and Campaign Discussion
 - Balancing the party
 - Character plot hooks

- Character Creation
 - Rolling/assigning stats
 - Sharing details and back story