

Assume Failure, Hope For Success

Synopsis: A skill challenge mechanic for 4th Edition Dungeons and Dragons. This system is based on a few thoughts:

- Only count successes, this allows everyone to participate regardless of their skill levels.
- Allow for a sliding scale as well as a binary scale of results.
- Allow for required skill checks that can branch the challenge or modify the outcome.
- Allow for results associated with very low skill check rolls to influence the challenge.
- Allow for heroic effort and critical success.

Creating the Challenge –

- I. What is the purpose of the challenge? What problem does it solve, information does it gain?
- II. How much game time does each round of the challenge use up?
- III. What are the skills associated with the challenge? Does it need a general pool, or a pool divided into primary, support, required sections? (These explained later.)
- IV. What is the difficulty of the challenge?

Challenge Purpose –

You need to determine what reason the players have to go through the skill challenge. This could range from trailing kidnappers back to their lair, convincing an authority figure you're not murderers, finding a lost temple, sneaking through a giants' outpost, chasing down a fleeing criminal through a crowded street, to figuring out the answer to a puzzling arcane ritual.

The purposes of a Skill Challenge are myriad and one should be used any time a simple opposed skill check isn't appropriate and should involve the entire party.

Challenge Time –

A skill challenge's length in rounds should be three (3). One round of a challenge can equal one round of combat or one minute, one hour, one week, or whatever time frame works best for the individual challenge.

Appropriate Skills –

The skills that a challenge employs can vary but will typically involve one to two subsets of the three following sets of skills:

- **Physical** – Acrobatics, Athletics, Endurance, Heal, Stealth, Thievery
- **Mental** – Arcana, Dungeoneering, Heal, History, Insight, Nature, Perception, Religion
- **Social** – Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate, Streetwise

The skills that make up a skill challenge can be designated as Primary, Support or Required. These skill roles determine if the skill can be used to add successes to the challenge, support other character's Primary rolls, or are required for the success of the challenge.

- **Primary** – These skill when a success is rolled add 1 or more success points to the challenge total.
- **Support** – Rolling a success on these skills allows the next character a bonus on their chance to succeed.
- **Required** – These skills are required, typically per turn but possibly per challenge and are used to branch the results of the challenge onto different paths. Sometimes these required skill checks are made by the entire party and *do not affect the success of the challenge and do not use a player's turn.* (see sample challenge *Lost in the Woods* for an example of this.)

Challenge Difficulty –

The Difficulty Challenge or DC of the skill checks for a challenge can be set per individual skill or as a general DC for a skill set or the challenge in total. The difficulty typically is set at Medium for most challenges you wish the players to have a good chance to win and a reasonable chance to fail.

DC's can be set individually per skill, per skill set (physical, mental, social), per role (primary, support, required) or per challenge. Typically setting it per skill set should work well enough. A general rule of thumb for a DC is level/2+15. You can also use the DC chart in the DMG on page 42 but be aware it has errata that yields a significantly easier set of numbers to the point of trivialness.

Challenge Results –

For any skill challenge you'll need to set the number of successes the players need to gain to fully succeed at the skill challenge.

You'll typically want this to equal 8 or 9 for a 5 character group. Adjust upwards or down by 1 for each character more or less in the party or to make the challenge easier or harder.

The actual outcome of the challenge can be a simple pass or fail result or you can elect to have varying degrees of success based on when some successes are made but fewer than the required amount for total success. (See example challenges attached later in the document.)

Experience Rewards:

Award experience to the players for their success at the challenge. Experience is awarded based on the level of the challenge using the chart on Page 57 in the DMG using the 5 player chart if using the default formula to compute DC's. Adjust upwards or downwards to adjust for easier/harder DC's.

Mechanics-

1) DM: Determine the conditions of the skill challenges:

- Purpose
- Skills (Primary, Support, Required)
- Difficulty
- Results

2) DM: Present the challenge to the players:

Give the players a descriptive briefing on the challenge, what they're trying to do, what skills they can use, what if any skills are required per round and the possible consequences of failed required skills.

3) Players: At the start of a round decide order, skill and role:

Players determine each round in what order they go and what role they participate in. Each player determines the skill they'll be using from the ones assigned to the skill challenge along with a verbal description of how they're using it or by acting the skill check out. Some skills may be given a bonus to the checks if they are particularly pertinent to the challenge. A rule of thumb is +2 for this.

NOTE: Players may have ideas on other skills that might be applicable and if they come up with valid or simply cool uses for a skill then it is recommended that they be allowed to do so.

Each player will participate as either a Primary or Support role during the challenge. Primary participants add toward the total successes, Support participants add bonuses to the Primary players to help them succeed.

4) Required Skill Check(s) –

The challenge may require one or more skills to be successful per round or per challenge. These checks may apply toward total successes or they be a part of the overall challenge and be required **in addition to the rolls per player per round** to determine success. In addition failing at a required skill check may end the challenge prematurely or change the results or branch to a different story path.

Example:

Tom, having been told that the challenge requires a successful Stealth check per round says, "Okay I'm going to keep an eye on everyone and try to minimize their noise, make sure they don't step into the open or skyline themselves and point out the best way to make the least disturbance." Tom now rolls a d20 and adds his Stealth levels to help keep the party from being detected while they're in pursuit of a band of kidnappers. The challenge states that on a round with no successful stealth check the kidnappers will become aware of the party and attempt an ambush.

Minimum Skill Check(s): The challenge might have penalties associated with especially low skill rolls. This will usually add a penalty to rolls of the same skill but can extend to penalties associated with the challenge.

Example:

The DM has ruled that a skill check that's DC-10 or lower on a History check causes the player to offer information that is wrong but that appears correct which adds a -2 to all related checks for the challenge until corrected with a successful check.

Skill Checks: As the players make primary skill checks their successes are accumulated (see below) and the challenge is over at the end of three rounds of checks or they've gotten enough successes to meet the challenge requirements.

Primary Role: If successful a primary skill check the party adds the following to their total based on the below:

- Critical Success – Roll of a natural 20 which adds 2 successes
- Major Success – A roll of 10 or more over the DC which adds 2 successes
- Normal – A roll that equals or beats the DC but not by more than 10 adds 1 success.
- Failure – No direct impact other than it's not a success

Support Role: If successful a support skill check allows the next rolling player to add bonuses to their primary check. A primary check must follow a support check.

- Critical Success – Roll of a natural 20 which adds +4 synergy bonus to the next primary check.
- Major Success – A roll of 10 or more over the DC which adds +4 synergy bonus to the next primary check.
- Normal – A roll that equals or beats the DC but not by more than 10 adds +2 to the next primary check.
- Failure – No impact unless a minimum skill check penalty is associated with the challenge.

Special: The *party* may spend one action point per round to allow a re-roll of one skill check.

5) Challenge End –

Once the players have accumulated enough successes or the time limit to succeed has ended, the DM will end the challenge. In some cases a challenge may end prematurely based on any failed required skill checks or minimum skill check results that might be associated with the challenge.

The total successes are computed and then compared to the results chart for the challenge. This may be a binary pass/fail, yes/no answer or it might have a variable result based on the number of successes.

Award experience for a successful result and partial experience for a challenge that has partial results based on a percentage of how many successes were earned compared to the total required.

Examples of Skill Challenges for 1-3rd Characters

Skill Challenge – Lost in the woods

Challenge: Get not lost.

Time: 3 rounds of 4 hours each.

Skills:

Primary: Nature, Perception, History

Secondary: None

Required: None

DC: 10+

Successes: Requires 8 successes

Results:

- 0-2 successes – Party has blundered into a standard encounter suitable for the area, roll for surprise. Retry challenge after encounter is resolved at +3 DC.
- 3-4 successes – Party has managed to get even more turned around and can retry challenge again at a +3 DC.
- 4-7 success – Party has managed to enter area they're somewhat familiar with. Retry challenge again at -5 DC
- 8 successes – Party is back in familiar territory and located at one of such locations of their choice within 15 miles.

Special:

Each party member must make an Endurance check at DC 10 or lose a healing surge until an extended rest is gained.

Skill Challenge – Hot Pursuit Urban

Challenge: Catch fleeing pickpocket

Time: 3 rounds of 20 seconds each.

Skills:

Primary: Athletics, Acrobatics, Endurance, Perception, Streetwise

Support: None

Required: None

DC: 15+

Successes: Requires 8 successes

Results:

- 0-5 successes – Goblin has gotten away.
- 6 successes – Goblin is cornered by PC's. Resolve imitative as normal.

Special:

On any round that a player does not make a successful skill check they suffer a cumulative +5 DC penalty on the next round as they fall behind and try to catch up again. This penalty is removed upon a successful check result by that player.

The party can elect to stay together as a group and each will suffer the accumulated DC on their next round henceforth designate a penalty round. The group penalty is removed upon a successful check in the next round by *any* player and subsequent checks during that penalty round are without penalty.

Any player that has failed a success check on ending round of successful challenge result success is not present when the pickpocket is caught.

Skill Challenge – Hot Pursuit Wilderness

Challenge: Catch fleeing goblin

Time: 3 rounds of 60 seconds each.

Skills:

Primary: Athletics, Acrobatics, Endurance, Nature, Perception

Support: None

Required: None

DC: 10+

Successes: Requires 6 successes

Results:

- 0-5 successes – Fleeing goblin has gotten away.
- 6 successes – Party corners goblin. Resolve initiative as normal.

Special:

On any round that a player does not make a successful skill check they suffer a cumulative +5 DC penalty on the next round as they fall behind and try to catch up again. This penalty is removed upon a successful check result by that player.

The party can elect to stay together as a group and each will suffer the accumulated DC on their next round henceforth designate a penalty round. The group penalty is removed upon a successful check in the next round by *any* player and subsequent checks during that penalty round are without penalty.

Any player that has failed a success check on ending round of successful challenge result success is not present when the pickpocket is caught.

On each round the goblin will make a Stealth check against the highest passive perception of the continuing pursuit. A success adds a +5 DC cumulative penalty on the next round. This penalty is removed by a successful Perception or Nature check.

Skill Challenge – Solve Arcane Mechanical Puzzle Lock

Challenge: The party needs to figure out how to open an intricate locking mechanism on an old tomb door that is comprised of both mechanical and arcane components. Failure means they cannot attempt the challenge again without an extended rest and no more than two attempts in total without advancing in skill or knowledge.

Time: 3 rounds of 15 minutes each.

Skills:

Primary: Arcana, Insight, Perception, Thievery
Support: Dungeoneering, History
Required: None

DC: 15+

Successes: Requires 9 successes

Results:

- 0-3 successes – Defenses of the lock are triggered generating a Burst 5; +10 vs. Reflex; 2d12+5 lightning damage. This seals the lock for 8 hours.
- 4-6 successes – The party is no closer to a solution than when they started.
- 7-8 successes – One half of the lock has been defeated. The party can attempt the challenge again after an extended rest at DC 10.
- 9 successes – The lock opens.

Special:

There are no special components of this challenge.

Skill Challenge – Convince local authority of party’s innocence of accused crime

Challenge: The party has been accused of committing a serious crime. They have been brought before a figure of authority and must convince them of their innocence.

Time: 3 rounds of 10 minutes each.

Skills:

Primary: Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate
Support: Insight, Perception, History
Required: None

DC: 10+

Successes: Requires 9 successes

Results:

- 0-3 successes – The authority is convinced of the party’s guilt and orders them thrown in jail to await sentencing.
- 4-6 successes – The party is allowed to put up bail until their sentencing.
- 7-8 successes – The party has opened reasonable doubt in the authority and a ruling is remanded until further evidence or accusations come to light.
- 9 successes – The party has convinced the authority of their innocence.

Special:

No special components for this challenge