

ASK THE ALEXANDRIAN #9: ADVANCED RULINGS IN 5E

by Justin Alexander - December 12th, 2022



C. writes:

Someone on Twitter posted a meme suggesting that players can't do anything creative in D&D because the DM won't allow it. What's your reaction?



DND Memes
@MemesDnd

...

This is what I think about whenever I see someone tell a martial player to just "be creative"



credit to: ReallySillyLily36

Player: Can I light my sword on fire?

DM: No, that's not a rule.

Player: Ok, so what if I try to knock over that bookcase over there, trapping the bandit underneath?

DM: No, that's not a rule.

Player: Can I aim for the weak parts of the monster? Like stabbing it in the eye?

DM: No, that's not a rule.

Player: So what CAN I do to "**BE CREATIVE**"?

DM: You can describe your attacks slightly differently every turn.

Player: *[Screams of complete VICTORY ensue].*

Okay, so the hypothetical GM in this meme is clearly a bad GM. Anyone who has had anything remotely resembling a positive experience playing an RPG can look at that dialogue and know instantly in their gut that there's something deeply wrong about it.

The more interesting question, I think, is exactly *why* this GM is bad. Where did they go wrong? And what should they have done?

Player: Can I say "Hello" to the barmaid?

DM: No, that's not a rule.

If you think a PC can't do anything unless there's an explicit rule allowing you to do it, then you have misunderstood the core identity of an RPG and also misapprehended the primary function of the GM, whose mechanical role at the table is at least [90% making rulings](#) about stuff not explicitly covered by the rules.

That's the first place they went wrong.

The second place is the most *prima facie*: Their first reaction to player creativity is shutting it down. If all you're interested in are players interacting through rigid mechanical structures, play a boardgame or a wargame. RPGs literally exist for the sole purpose of NOT doing that. There's a reason that [Default to Yes](#) is a fundamental principle of effective GMing.

And it's not like this is some kind of big secret. The 5th Edition *Player's Handbook* explicitly tells the DM that this is what they should be doing:

IMPROVISING AN ACTION

Your character can do things not covered by the actions in this [Combat] chapter, such as breaking down doors, intimidating enemies, sensing weaknesses in magical defenses, or calling for a parley with a foe. The only limits to the actions you can attempt are your imagination and your character's ability scores...

When you describe an action not detailed elsewhere in the rules, the DM tells you whether that action is possible and what kind of roll you need to make, if any, to determine success or failure.

(PHB, p. 193)

And, in addition to ability score checks, 5E gives the GM some very powerful tools for making rulings. Despite this, I am continually amazed at the number of people running the game who ignore:

1. Group checks (PHB, p. 175)
2. Contests in Combat (PHB, p. 195)
3. Improvised advantage/disadvantage (PHB, p. 173)
4. Improvised damage (DMG, p. 249)

With these tools in hand, let's take a quick look at how our hypothetical GM could have easily resolved these proposed actions.

SHOVING BOOKCASES

Let's start with the easiest one:

Player: Ok, so what if I try to knock over that bookcase over there, trapping the bandit underneath?

This is pretty obviously a contest in combat. It's going to be some kind of Strength check for pushing over the bookcase (probably Athletics) opposed by some sort of Dexterity check by the bandit (probably Acrobatics or a Dexterity saving throw).

What effect would this have if successful? Well, the bandit would obviously be knocked prone and I'd probably rule that they need to succeed on some kind of Strength check to shove the bookcase off before they could get up.

Alternatively, if the PC was going to try to actively hold them down (perhaps standing on the bookcase), I might instead resolve the whole thing as a grappling attempt with the bookcase granting advantage on the check.

LIGHTING SWORDS ON FIRE

Player: Can I light my sword on fire?

This one is a bit trickier, but that's mostly because we don't have enough information. So I'd start by asking them exactly how they were planning to "light their sword on fire."

For the sake of argument, let's say that the player has some oil and they want to douse their sword with it and then light it on fire with their torch.

Our ruling will again boil down to **resolution** and **effect**.

I don't think any kind of check is actually required here. So, in terms of resolution, the pertinent question is really: How long does it take? Well, this is an object interaction: Dousing the sword is one interaction. Lighting it is another. Your first object interaction on your turn is free; your second costs an action.

And then what's the effect of lighting the sword on fire? Well, this seems to boil down to two questions:

- How long does it burn for?
- How much damage does it do?

In terms of duration, I'd say 1d6 rounds. Maybe you'd say 1d4 or 1d8 rounds. But it's not like a sword is really designed to hold a lot of oil, right?

And how much damage does it do? Well, we could look at the *Improvising Damage* table (DMG, p. 249) and figure that this is pretty similar to "burned by coals," in which case it would deal 1d10 fire damage. On the other hand, we might consider the fire to be equivalent to an improvised weapon, which would suggest 1d4 fire damage. Something in that range feels reasonable.

For more on burning oil, check out [Running the Campaign: On the Efficacy of Burning Oil](#).

STABBING PEOPLE IN THE EYE

Player: Can I aim for the weak parts of the monster? Like stabbing it in the eye?

Adjudicating this one requires some subtlety. The player is requesting a called shot here, and I discuss these in more detail (and give a framework for resolving them) in [Untested 5th Edition: Called Shots](#), but here's the short version.

First, if their primary goal is to “stab them where it will do the most damage,” then we have a mechanic for resolving that: It's the attack roll. Literally any time you make an attack in D&D, you're trying to hit your target in a vulnerable spot and deal the most damage possible.

Second, when making combat rulings like this, something you should double check is whether or not there's a reason that the PC wouldn't do it every single time.

- Our book case ruling passes this test, because you can only do it when there's a bookcase.
- Lighting your sword in fire for some extra damage is nice, but you have to pay for the oil (in both gold and encumbrance), plus our ruling included an action cost to get the sword lit in the first place.

But “I stab 'em in the eye for more damage” fails this test because there's no reason you wouldn't just say that every time you make an attack.

With all that being said, however, if the player has some other goal in mind than just dealing damage – e.g., they want to temporarily blind the monster – then there are ways to handle that (and you can check out the article linked above for more details on that).

DESCRIBING YOUR ATTACKS

Ain't nothing wrong with that.

In fact, [letting players describe their successes](#) is a great technique that can be developed in a lot of different ways. You may find it profitable to set it as the expected outcome at your table, or you may find it most appropriate when applied as a spice for significant moments (e.g., “Describe how you finish off this bandit!”)

You can even take this a step further by decoupling 0 hit points from death and instead, when that threshold is met, prompting the player to tell you what the defeat of the NPC means. Do they

- Kill the?
- Take them prisoner?
- Knock them unconscious?
- Send them fleeing for their lives?

But at this point we're probably drifting a bit off-topic. What are your favorite examples of players getting creative at the table, and how did you resolve them?