

# DYNAMIC INITIATIVE

**Dash, Disengage, Dodge**

**1**

**Movement**

**+2**

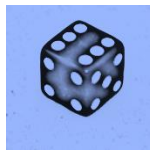
**Spell**, 1 component (V, S, or M)

**Unarmed Strike attack**, medium or smaller

**Weapon attack**, LIGHT



**Any action not listed** (+1d6 if change weapons)



**Spell**, 2 components (V,S)(V,M)(S,M)

**Unarmed Strike attack**, large or bigger

**Weapon attack**, any not listed



**Spell**, 3 components (V,S,M)

**Weapon attack**, HEAVY, LOADING, OVERSIZED



**Incapacitated** (earliest you can act if incapacity ends, lose all ties)



**Declare Action.** Choose the **type** of Action you will take (PHB 192) each round, specifically naming the spell, feature, or item(s) that might be in use, and roll the die for that action. Add +2 if you want the option to Move. Bonus actions are NOT declared. The DM counts up from 1 until all have taken a turn. Ties are broken by highest Dexterity or Intelligence score, then a d20 roll. On your turn you may freely substitute your declared Action for Dash, Dodge, or Disengage.

**Modifiers.** Features that improve or penalize initiative alter the die a step up or down. The worst a die can be is d20 and the best d3. Like advantage, features do not stack. Advantage operates normally.

**Duration.** “Your turn” effects are tracked from the initiative number on which they occurred. Reactions renew at the start of each round.

# DETAILED RULES

Initiative remains an “ability check” insofar as classes that have a feature that improves initiative improve their die roll (e.g. bard, champion, swashbuckler if Charisma modifier positive).

**Monsters.** Monsters, no matter the action, roll their **Hit Die** for initiative and add +2 if they want to move. They do not use player rules but do have declared actions (e.g. orc will use bow, wizard will cast *cone of cold*). Lair Actions occur on Initiative 1 (loses ties, MM 11).

**Declare Action:** A declaration reserves the right to act in a particular way and must be specific as to what is being interacted with or used, but not how it will be carried out. For example, a weapon must be named (attack with dagger). If retrieving an object, one must state from where (my backpack, the sack on the table). If casting a spell, the specific spell must be named and the level it is cast at (*magic missile* in a 3<sup>rd</sup> level slot). If dual-wielding, the highest die of weapons you may use is rolled, even if you later opt not to use that weapon. *You are reserving the right to use both at the same time.*

In the event a player can as a feature, or is forced to, change weapons, such as a Fighter with Extra Attack who throws a javelin then wants to draw out a great axe, or someone who is disarmed, on their turn they add 1d6 to their initiative. This becomes their new initiative to use that weapon. *This avoids abuse of a player declaring a dagger attack to get the quicker d4 roll then picking up/drawing a great sword.*

Substitute Actions such as Grapple, Shove or Ready operate normally and thus need not be declared. Subject to DM discretion, other unlisted Actions might reasonably be substituted, such as escaping a grapple when one declared a weapon attack but was caught by sentient vines. *The DM should lean towards rulings that allow a player to act.*

Spell dice do not change if a feature removes a component, such as *subtle spell*.

The DM counts up from 1 until all have a turn. **Tip:** *count in groups (e.g. 1-3, 4-6, 7 or higher).*

**Ties:** Highest Dexterity or Intelligence score breaks a tie. Otherwise, roll a d20.

**Modifiers:** Advantage/disadvantage and a feature that alters the die step stack, but multiple features do not (e.g. a bard with the Alertness feat would only improve the die 1 step, not 2).

**Player Turn:** A player decides where to move and how to carry out actions. Resources such as spell slots, ammunition, and item charges are only consumed if the Action is actually carried out.

**Durations:** “Your turn” effects are tracked from the initiative number on which they occurred as they are intended by design to last 1 round. *For example, the advantage feature for a guiding bolt spell cast on Initiative 3 would last until the “end of Initiative 3 next round.”* However, features that cease to end when you take another Action, such as Dodge or casting another Concentration spell, end as stated. Effects that trigger on the target’s turns operate normally. *Errata: monk stunning strike now reads “target is incapacitated for 1 round and loses the ability to act on its next turn.”*

**Incapacitated:** You still declare an Action in the hypothetical that if freed from the status, you will take the Action. The d12 roll is the *earliest* a player can act. If you roll a 3 but are not restored until Initiative 6, you act on Initiative 6 (you lose all ties). **Tip:** if a player knows his team lacks ability to end the incapacity, there is little need to roll this initiative die.

## Gameplay & Playtest:

This system has been play-tested with 2 different D&D groups over a period of 4 years (2016-2019, and 2019-current) with players varying from experienced to brand new to D&D. All had prior experience with the d20 system.

It is inspired by a combination of Mike Mearls, Matt Colville, and a decade of AD&D play using a “declaration” system, along with player feedback. It is meant to (1) make combat more interesting by introducing variable turns, (2) make initiative meaningful by putting the choice in the players’ hands, (3) speed up play, and (4) stay simple, a 5E staple.

- (1) **Unpredictability makes combat more interesting.** This goes without saying. In the d20 system, everyone somehow omnisciently knows when the monsters and other players will act, leading to illogical decisions (abandoning healing or protecting an ally because you know the cleric will act before the troll does). Combat becomes more dynamic because you may not get to your friend in time to bandage them before the orc brings his spear down.
- (2) **Player choice matters.** In a d20 system, player choice has zero impact. This system makes Initiative and choices matter, empowering players. Dexterity, which already dominates the stage, is mostly removed from the equation, in favor of choice.
- (3) **Speed up play.** Having used, AD&D (@15 years), this system (4 years), and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> edition’s d20 systems (10 years), I can compare and hands-down gameplay is lightning quick. Why? Because 90% of decision-making for players and the DM is occurring at the same time rather than one at a time. After a few sessions, players tend to say nothing to one another unless it were to impact the group (e.g. “stay close to me, I’m casting *bleed*.”) *This does rely on player honesty if you go silent, but in doing so, combats will run even quicker. Anecdotally, the time it takes for all players and the DM to declare actions is about the same as it previously took for 1 player to pick spells, or agonize over whether to give a comrade a healing potion or attack.*
- (4) **Stay Simple.** We needed to keep this at 1 die. That’s simple.

## Changes and Fixes:

- **Bonus actions.** Originally we had these declared with the highest die of all actions rolled, but that slowed play (e.g. a rogue attacks with a light weapon, d4, but wants to use Cunning Action to disengage, originally a d6 action). In gameplay, most players already had a good idea what bonus actions they would take with their character and these weren’t impacting declarations. So, we switched to only declaring the primary Action.
- **Spells.** This has gone through several edits. It started at a random variable based on spell level (too complex), then a generic d10 for any spell, d6 for cantrips, and in v2.0 a d4+ 1 per spell level (which looks a bit like the original). Version 2.1 proposes (credit @dnd4vr) spells go based on the number of components they originally require. *I like the idea as it tiers spells logically, given all spells no matter their level are expected to be cast in a 6 second timeframe.*
- **Natural attacks and Monster initiative.** This has been subject to several revisions. Originally, we tracked by weapon damage die. Over time, natural attack damage seemed more based on size as it was illogical a medium creature would get slower the more deadly its attack got. For nearly 1 year, we used a variable on size for unarmed attacks (e.g. medium or smaller a d4, large a d6...) The revision sought to make this simpler and bring into line the idea that monsters’ bodies are

their weapons, and they don't suffer the physics that use of a tool does (e.g. the weight of a maul).

At low levels monsters ran fine. However, at higher levels, tracking monsters like PCs became a chore. For example, I ran a battle with 4 enemies with different Actions. Like a madman, I was tracking monster #1 with a d8 weapon (d8), monster #2 with a racial feature (d6), monster #3 with a spell (d10), and monster #4 with multiple actions, the highest a d12 axe (d12). Players began waiting on me in those situations. This defeated the "stay simple" and "speed up play" goals. *This was aptly picked up on by @Morrus, who asked in 2019 what happens if I'm adjudicating 14 different monsters.* If it's 14 goblins all attacking with spears, or even 7 with spears, 7 with bows, an easy response. If it's like above (many complex enemies to track in a round), not so easy.

Colville proposed a few years back to make life simpler, have monsters use their own system. No matter what they do, they roll their Hit Die. Since nearly all monsters have far less abilities to figure out than players, this has been extremely appealing and simple. This may give some advantage to monster spellcasters, so I'll see how this plays out long-term.

- **Loaded Weapons, Power Words.** V2.1 is treating this as an optional rule: 1 initiative for a loaded weapon on round 1, or a power word spell. Not worth the space as a full set rule.

### DM Notes:

My long-running D&D group, which consisted of two AD&D players, jointly concluded the d20 initiative system slowed play (mostly due to "analysis paralysis" and going one at a time). We had 1 gamer who, at times, used to fall asleep at the table waiting for his turn. In 3.5 and Pathfinder, it could take over 5 minutes to get from 1 player's turn to another with a 4-5 person group! Unacceptable!

Some were familiar with AD&D, which had "weapon speed" initiative, so we tried the DMG's weapon speed option as, anecdotally, this felt like a quicker style of play to declare actions in advance. However, it ended up largely inconsequential (a 10% variance on the d20 roll), even if we were speeding up play by having everyone at once decide what to do at once. Then, we saw Greyhawk Initiative. It was a step in the right direction, but too many dice. The system needed to be simpler yet meaningful. *And, remember, like any rule, a few sessions and players will understand it. Even so, I wanted this at 1 die, simple, yet meaningful.*

So, I homebrewed an alternative version based off Mearls and Colville, and then we played it, and we revised it. A new job took me to another state, where I started with another great group. Like my prior group, they liked the concept, and they provided some fresh insights (e.g. unarmed attack speeds).

Lastly, I'll comment on the #1 theoretical forum complaint to a Declaration system:

**I don't like to miss my turn, is this a problem?** No. It's extremely rare in play, likely due to the fact players have incentive to pay attention to the battlefield and pick actions accordingly. That's all I have to say about that.