GUIDE TO SKILL CHALLENGES

Skill Challenges are a fun way to shake up a session. They provide tension with clear stakes, they present an opportunity for every player to creatively use the skills of their characters, and they can provide the base for large, memorable, cinematic moments in a game.

This Supplement is intended to provide rules and guidelines on how to run a Skill Challenge in 5th Edition, since the PHB and DMG provide little to no guidance.

A skill challenge is a special type of encounter. Instead of using combat rules to resolve the situation, players take turns using skill checks to advance the party towards their goal. The Difficulty Class (DC) for each check will be the same, and the players are trying to collectively obtain a determined number of successes before they obtain 3 failures.

RULES FOR THE CHALLENGE

Provide these to players, preferably out-of-game and with enough time to review before being used in a session.

• DM will let players know players that a skill challenge has begun, and also give clues to / clarify the stakes
• DM will let players know how many successes are required to end the challenge with a favorable result, as well as the static DC for the challenge
• Alternatively, the challenge will end with an unfavorable result after 3 failures
• DM will set the tone with at least two simple examples of applicable skills
• Players are strongly encouraged to use skills in which they are proficient (for large groups, this is recommended to be mandatory)
• If a player succeeds with a skill, they cannot use it again; if another player wishes to use it, they must describe a significantly different application (be creative!)
• If a player fails, that skill can be used by someone else in the party, but not again by the unsuccessful member
• Players must provide or narrate an explanation for how the skill helps them in the situation (again, be creative!)
• DM can, of course, overrule impractical explanations
• Results can vary in proportion to rolls, e.g. all success may lead to a bigger reward, or vice versa

EXPANDING THESE RULES

This list is not all inclusive, and you should always feel free to experiment or make a ruling to reward player creativity

• A popular rule is to give a bonus for expending resources
• Example: spending a spell slot grants advantage, or even causes an automatic success depending on level
• Another sample expansion: the next player can attempt to negate a failure instead of trying for a success
• When considering additions, be mindful of loopholes that effectively negate the challenge

RUNNING THE ENCOUNTER

• Use initiative order, an arbitrary order, or just allow the players to select the order
• Don't be afraid to give players narrative control, especially after they succeed a check
• Use failed checks as opportunities to introduce complications and developments

SAMPLE CHALLENGE

A large raiding party of Orcs thunders over the hill, gaining ground on the slow moving wagons of your caravan. Too many to fight at once, quick action is needed to safely reach the city gate. The Town Guard is mobilizing, but not quickly enough. Lives are at stake, and you risk breaching your contract. A Skill Challenge is starting!

Goal: Help caravan to safety / protect until back-up arrives
Requirement: 5 Successes before 3 Failures ("5 before 3")
Difficulty: All checks will be made against DC 12
Example Skills: Use Wisdom (Animal Handling) to keep the oxen calm while urging them toward the city gate. Use Charisma (Intimidation) to draw the ire of attacking orcs and pull their attention away from the caravan
Favorable Result: Narrate how the Town Guard arrives just in time to prevent the wagons from being overrun. At the sight of reinforcements, the raid backs off to regroup.
Unfavorable Result: Narrate how orcs carry off boxes of goods, escaping with loot from ravaged and broken carts. Unfortunate victims are mingled with the fallen orcs; acceptable losses for a raiding party, but not for a caravan.