

**Plain English Role Playing**  
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**Alpha Test Version**

Plain English Role Playing (PERP) was designed with three goals in mind:

- Quick and simple character generation.
- Unobtrusive rules.
- Expandability.

This is the basic rule of PERP: roll a d10, add some factors, and compare the result to either someone else's roll or a target number.

If you understood that, you've already learned half of the basic system.

## **Character Creation**

Most games break characters' abilities into two groups: their natural, in-born abilities and learned skills. PERP does this, too.

### **Traits**

Traits define a character's natural abilities. Any adjective or descriptive phrase can be used as a trait in PERP. Traits can describe a wide range of factors. Strong, quick, frail, short-tempered, and computer literate are all examples of traits.

### **Choosing Traits**

You have a total of four points to spend on positive traits and two points that you must spend on negative traits. Buying traits is simple: choose an appropriate adjective and assign a portion of your total points, positive or negative, to it. Each point assigned to a trait will give you either a bonus or a penalty to any action involving the trait. For example, the trait "strong" will affect your ability to pick up a heavy rock. Note the number of points spent on a trait. The values for positive traits should be noted with a "+" sign. Note negative trait values with a "-" sign.

Example:

Frank is playing in a high fantasy campaign. He decides he wants to play Finnin MacMorris, a suave, sophisticated courtier well versed in the art of courtly intrigue.

Frank sees Finnin as a lady's man, the kind of guy that's good looking and knows it. Unfortunately, he tends to worry about his looks a little too much. Growing up a nobleman has also left him a bit ignorant of life beyond the palace walls. Finnin leads an active lifestyle, both to impress the ladies with his tales of derring do and to keep his handsome figure. Above all, though, Finnin realizes that a man is only as good as his word. Though he may get caught up in impressing others with his looks and charms, he understands that without a good soul, his looks are a shallow facade.

Given that description, Frank chooses these traits:

Positive: Handsome, affable, athletic, honorable (+1)

Negative: Vain, sheltered (-1)

In general, there's no right or wrong way to choose traits. If you don't know exactly what you want, try writing a paragraph or two about your character. Then, go back through your description and pick out words or phrases that define who your character is. Those are your traits, and you're ready to roll!

## Skills

Skills work much like traits in that they modify rolls you make during the game. Some actions require that a character possess the appropriate skill in order to attempt them. You have to know something about cars before you can try to fix one, for example.

Skills define what your character has learned over the course of his life. If you can learn it through practice or study, you can take it as a skill.

### Choosing Skills

Starting character usually have 10 points to spend on skills, though this may be different depending on the nature of your campaign. Check with your GM. Think of a skill that your character has learned and then decide how many points you want to spend on it. Each point spent on a skill gives you a +1 bonus when making rolls related to that skill. A character who wants "Program Computers" as a skill could spend 1 of his 10 points on that skill and get a +1 bonus on rolls related to computer programming, spend 2 and get +2, etc.

There is no skill list in the basic game. However, some GMs prefer to have a list of skills that you must choose from. Check with your GM.

Skills should be described as a complete sentence that briefly summarizes how your character learned the skill and how good he thinks he is at it. Thus, it is possible to have a skill "Finnin learned swordsmanship from his father, Dougal. Finnin is the best swordsman in town (+1)" Remember, that's a personal assessment that should be reflected in role playing. Finnin thinks he's the best swordsman in town. That's not necessarily true. (Just don't try telling Finnin that!)

Example: Frank is now ready to choose Finnin's skills. Based on his conception of Finnin, these are the skills Frank chooses:

Finnin learned swordsmanship from his father, Dougal. Finnin thinks he's best swordsman in town (+1)  
Finnin has spent a lot of time trying to impress and seduce women. Finnin is God's gift to women (+3)  
Finnin has lived at court his entire life. Court etiquette is drilled into his head (+2)  
Finnin often has found himself in sticky situations. He knows there isn't much that he can't talk his way out of. (+3)  
Finnin's Uncle Maxwell taught him the basics of archery. Finnin finds archery boring, but he can hit the target more often than most (+1)

Now that you have an idea of what your character has learned, it helps to break down the descriptions into one word summaries for ease of use during play. If you have a good idea of what skills you want, you can go straight to this part of the process.

Example: Here is how Frank summarizes Finnin's skills:

Swords (+1)  
Seduction (+3)  
Etiquette (+2)  
Fast talk (+3)  
Archery (+1)

### Specialization

Specialization allows you to get an extra bonus when using a skill in certain situations. For example, a character in a fantasy game may have a skill called missile weapons at +1. He can then choose to specialize in the long bow, gaining an extra +1 when using that weapon. To balance this out, the player must choose a missile weapon that he has no knowledge of. The character does not get to use his missile weapons skill bonus when using that particular weapon. You are allowed up to two specializations per skill, though the GM

may elect to reduce or increase this number. You may specialize in 1 skill for every 5 points you initially have to spend on skills. It is possible to use both specializations on the same thing, thus getting a +2 bonus with that specialization. You still need to pick two areas where you have no knowledge to balance things out.

Example: Frank decides that Finnin should be a better swordsman. He also realizes that Finnin most likely has trained with fencing weapons, rather than massive, inelegant two handed swords. Frank decides to specialize in the rapier at the expense of any skill in two handed swords. Frank adds this to Finnin's character sheet:

Swords (+1)  
\* Rapier (+2)  
\* Two handed swords (0)

### Zero Level Skills

Zero level skills represent general knowledge of a skill that falls short of giving your character a bonus to any rolls. Some actions require some sort of training before they can be attempted. For example, you need at least some knowledge of mathematics to attempt a calculus problem. Zero level skills help you broaden your character's knowledge without making him unrealistically well trained. Beginning characters may choose 3 zero level skills. Your GM may have a list of zero level skills that you must take in place of or in addition to your 3 free ones.

Frank decides that Finnin had several tutors growing up. Unfortunately, Finnin spent more time flirting and daydreaming to pay attention to his studies. Still, he learned some useful knowledge by osmosis. In addition, Finnin learned the basics of horseback riding during summers at his Uncle's manor. These are the zero level skills he chooses:

Read and write (0)  
History (0)  
Horseback riding (0)

### Negative Skills

Negative skills represent areas of knowledge where your character's knowledge is incomplete or incorrect. Like negative traits, negative skills hurt your chances at success. Beginning characters may spend up to 4 points on negative skills. Like negative traits, negative skills subtract from your die roll.

Example: Given Finnin's sheltered upbringing, Frank decides to reflect Finnin's ignorance of the outside world through his negative skills. Finnin has heard plenty of half-truths about the "terrors" of the slums, and he's likely to get lost if he was placed a half mile away from the palace. These are the skills he takes:

Street wise (-2)  
Geography (-1)

Note that Frank spent only three points on negative skills. You may spend up to 4 if you wish, but don't have to spend any if you do not want to.

### Hit Points

Hit points represent the amount of physical punishment your character can absorb before dying. When your character is injured, he loses hit points. When your hit points reach 0, your character is knocked unconscious.

Characters can have from 1 to 20 hit points at the start of the game. Make a reasonable decision in this area. An elderly sage will not have 15 hit points! Here is a table to help you decide how many hit points to give your character:

**Hit Points Description**

1 - 5	A small child, a sickly elderly person.
6 - 10	A small to average person.
11 - 15	A noticeably large or well conditioned person.
16 - 20	An obese or massively built person.

Example: Since Frank gave Finnin the trait "athletic", he reasons that Finnin should have somewhere between 11 and 15 hitpoints. Finnin is more durable than the average person, but he does not have a body builder's physique by any means. Frank settles on 12 hit points for Finnin.

**Using Your Skills and Traits**

As was written above, all random rolls in PERP work like this:

$d10 + \text{Traits} + \text{Skill} = \text{Result}$

That's it! This is called a test.

**The Golden Rule of Skills**

While a character may use more than one trait to modify a die roll, only one skill may be used to modify any single die roll. You may never use the bonus or penalty for more than one skill at once.

Example: Finnin has the seduce and fast talk skills. If he wants to talk his way past a female guard, he can either seduce her or fast talk his way by her. He can't use both skills on the same die roll. Finnin decides to use fast talk, since he has more than enough spiteful women in his life already!

**Tests: Opposed v. Unopposed**

Opposed skill tests are exactly what they sound like: someone or something is actively trying to prevent you from successfully completing a task. In this case, both parties roll a test. High roll wins. In some cases, the difference between the two rolls may give the winner some sort of advantage. This is at the GM's discretion. Combat, for example, uses this difference to compute damage.

Unopposed skill tests involve a character and a non-active obstacle. For example, a character trying to pick a lock would make an unopposed test. In this case, the GM assigns a secret target number that the player must roll above. If the player beats the target number, he is successful.

The typical unopposed test looks like this:

"The storeroom is barred shut. The door is a rank-7 test to batter down."

Here is a sample list of target numbers to help GMs decide what numbers to assign to tasks:

1 to 3: A very simple task that requires a bare modicum of ability. In general, if you need to use a target number this low, consider allowing the character to succeed automatically.

4 to 6: These are tasks of average difficulty. An untrained character with no special aptitude can often succeed in tests with this target number.

7 to 10: These are target numbers that only a trained or talented person can usually hit. Unskilled characters need to rely solely on blind luck.

11+: These are checks that are impossible for untrained characters and possible only for highly trained experts.

Example: Climbing a 10' tall chainlink fence might be a rank-4 test. Climbing a sheer, 100' tall cliff face might be a rank-10 test.

### **Closed Tests**

Some unopposed tests are considered closed. These tests can only be successfully completed by a person with the right tools or with the proper training. For example, no matter how smart a character is, he has little chance to analyze a chemical sample unless he is trained in chemistry and has the proper tools. Closed tests are marked with a C and a note explaining what equipment and skills are needed to attempt it.

For example: Breaking into the computer controlling the power systems requires a rank-9 (C:Hacking or computer use related skill) test.

In this example, the character must have some experience with computers in order to break into the system. If the character lacks the proper skill, he cannot attempt the test. Note that a character with the appropriate negative or zero level skill may attempt the test.

In general, use common sense in determining whether a test should be closed or not. If the character needs special training to do something, its a closed test.

## **Combat**

Combat always requires a lot of specialized rules. PERP tries to keep these to a minimum, within reason.

### **Time in Combat**

Combat is broken up into three second rounds. Each character can make one attack during a round. Other actions will either require a predetermined number of rounds (such as casting a spell) or the GM must make a common sense ruling on the spot. Don't worry too much about time in combat. Pacing and drama are much more important than an obsessive attention to time keeping.

### **Hand to Hand Combat**

Basic hand to hand combat involving two combatants works just like an opposed test. The only wrinkle is that the difference between the two rolls is the number of hit points in damage the loser takes.

### **Weapons**

For simplicity, PERP divides hand weapons into three classes:

Small Weapons: Dagger, knife, sling stone, hatchet, club, staff. These do +1 damage.

Medium Weapons: Broad sword, battle axe, mace, flail. These do +2 damage.

Large Weapons: Claymore, glaive, most two handed weapons. These do +3 damage.

### **Shields**

A character using a shield gets a +1 bonus to his attack roll. Some characters may also take a shield use skill. As per the Golden Rule of Skills the character may use either their weapon skill or shield skill in any given combat round. If a character wins a round of combat using his shield skill, use his weapon's damage bonus. Assume that the character used his shield to place his opponent in a vulnerable position.

### **Parrying**

Sometimes, a character may opt to take a solely defensive stance, striving only to block his opponent's blows. In this case, resolve combat as normal, except for the damage phase. If the parrier wins the combat, he does

no damage. If the attacker wins, the parrier is allowed to subtract his weapon's damage bonus, his weapon skill and any appropriate traits which were not used to modify the attack roll from the damage done to him.

Example: Pierre and Finnin are involved in a duel. Finnin knows that he's outclassed, so his player declares that Finnin is parrying. Finnin has rapier skill of +2 and the athletic trait (+1). He rolls a 4 and adds 3 for a total of 7. Pierre gets a total of 10. Normally, Pierre would do 5 points of damage with his sword, but since Finnin parried, he does 1 point of damage. Pierre beat Finnin's roll by 3, +2 for using a medium weapon, -2 for Finnin's blade, -2 for Finnin's skill, equals 1. Note that Finnin could not use his athletic trait to modify Pierre's damage because he already used it to modify his attack roll.

In general, parrying will cancel out most attacks if the two combatants are close in skill. Of course, if both fighters parry, no one takes any damage no matter what the result of the dice.

## Ganging Up

Sometimes, two or more characters will attack a single target at once. In this case, you have three choices:

- **Cinematic Rules**

No matter how many people gang up on a character, the character is allowed to roll his skill against each attack separately.

- **Moderately Cinematic Rules**

The character takes a -1 penalty for each person he is fighting at once, but is still allowed to roll against all opponents. A character fighting three people at once rolls against each but takes a -3 penalty to each roll.

- **Realistic but Brutal Rules**

Roll d10 for each attacker, adding each die's result. Now add the highest individual skill from among all the attackers. Compare this to the lone character's combat roll. If the group of attackers wins, add the damage bonus of the most common weapon used by the group. If there is an even split between two or more different weapon types, use the modifier for the most skilled attacker's weapon.

If the lone warrior wins, he may elect to split his damage among several attackers or inflict all of the damage on one target.

In general, the tone of your campaign will determine which of these three rules you will use. When in doubt, use the Moderately Cinematic Rules. This rule penalizes the outnumbered character without overwhelming him.

## Missile Combat

Missile combat is a little different from melee. First, only the defender can take damage. Second, the defender does not use his weapon skill to make his test. Instead, he uses any dodge related skills and physical traits, plus any modifiers for cover (see below). The rest is like melee: if the attacker rolls high, resolve damage the same as you would for melee. The difference lies in the weapons. Primitive missile weapons act like melee weapons: they add to the winner's damage total. firearms MULTIPLY the attacker's margin of success.

Light Weapons: Dart, thrown dagger, sling stone, boomerang. (+1)

Medium Weapons: Self bow, javelin, spear, throwing axe. (+2)

Heavy Weapons: Long bow, crossbow. (+3)

Small Guns: Light pistol, hunting rifle (X2)

Medium Guns: Medium fire arm (X3)

Big Guns: Machine guns, big pistols and rifles (X4)

### **Rate of Fire**

Some weapons (particularly firearms) allow characters to take more than one shot during a turn. This is represented by the weapon's rate of fire. The character is allowed to make one shot per point of rate of fire. The character may shoot separate targets with each shot, but must take a -1 penalty for each target he tries to hit. Thus, a character that tries to hit three different targets with three shots must take a -3 penalty to each shot. Obviously, a character can take all three shots at one target without penalty. Players must declare who they are shooting with each ROF factor before rolling.

### **Cover**

Light cover: This is any cover that cannot actually stop the projectile. The defender depends on the cover to obscure his location, not stop projectiles. The attacker takes a -1 penalty if the defender is half covered, -2 if the target is fully covered. Of course, a character can only target someone in 100% soft cover if he knows the target is there.

Hard cover: Hard cover can stop a projectile, rendering it harmless. The attacker takes a -1 penalty for each quarter of the target that is behind hard cover. Obviously, a shooter cannot target someone completely behind hard cover.

### **Damage**

Whoever rolls high in combat has managed to inflict damage on his opponent. In case of a tie, no one takes any damage and the round of combat is considered a draw. The amount of damage is modified by any appropriate traits and by the attacker's weapon. Do not use any combat skill bonuses to modify damage, as these should have been added to the initial attack roll. Only use skills that are explicitly used for damage. No single skill or trait may modify the attack roll AND damage total.

Subtract the high roll from the low roll. Next, add any bonuses due to the winner's weapon and subtract any effect's of the loser's armor. The remaining total is subtracted from the loser's hit points. Remember, the defender cannot do damage in missile combat.

### **Armor**

Armor subtracts from the amount of damage taken by a character. Armor is also heavy and can give a character penalties to any roll related to agility and quickness. Here are some example of common armor types:

Leather Armor: -1 damage; hot (-1)

Chainmail: -2 damage; cumbersome, hot, stuffy (-1)

Platemail: -3 damage; very heavy (-2), cumbersome and hot (-1)

Powered Armor: -12 damage; When powered: Servomotor strength enhancements (+3), image magnification (+2), thermal vision (0). When unpowered: Immobile (-12)

### **Hit Points and Death**

When a character hits 0 hit points, he immediately falls unconscious. He will then lose d6 hit points per minute until he reaches -20 hit points, at which point the character dies.

### **Healing**

Characters can heal 1d6 points of damage per week due to natural healing, modified by any appropriate traits. In addition, any character with a medical related skill can attempt to tend the characters wounds. The

character must have the proper tools (clean bandages, thread and needle for stitches) in order to treat an injured person. The character then makes a test using his medical skill. The patient's traits may modify this roll. Divide the result by three and drop any fractions. The result is how many hit points the patient regains over the course of a week in addition to the 1d6 of natural healing for that week. This is not the most realistic rule in the game, but it does help keep characters involved in the game rather than in bed recovering from their last adventure.

## Conclusion

That's it for the basic rules! The basic PERP rules were not designed with any special setting in mind. You'll note that there are no rules for magic, technology, or insanity. I strongly believe that a rules set must be tailored to reflect the campaign world. Magic, for example, is radically different in Fritz Leiber's Lankmar than in Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea. These unique characteristics are what make worlds, and thus games, interesting.

You'll also notice that there are no rules for experience, either. This, too, is intentional. Each setting will have different story goals and measures of success. For that reason, experience rules should be tailored to each setting.

## Designer's Notes

These rules are the result of almost two decades of reading and examining RPGs. In no particular order, I wish to thank the following people for inspiration: John Tynes and Greg Stolze, for Unknown Armies; everyone at Chaosium for Call of Cthulhu, Elric!, RuneQuest, and Basic Role playing; Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax for AD&D everyone at TSR/WOTC for keeping AD&D vital over the years; Steffan O'Sullivan for FUDGE; everyone at [www.gamingoutpost.com](http://www.gamingoutpost.com) for interesting and enlightening conversation. Finally, I'd like to thank Doug Niles, Dave Cook, Margaret Weiss, and Tracy Hickman for building the AD&D products that provided my gaming groups with so much fun during my formative years. Without Dragonlance, Horror on the Hill, and the Isle of Dread, I never would have learned just how fun creativity can be. Thanks!

Comments, criticisms, and grammatical corrections are always welcome. Send them along to [Mike Mearls](#).