

Why Have a Background?

The Dungeons & Dragons role playing game is, essentially, a two-part game. The first part, as everyone well knows, is centered on combat. Your character can wield dual weapons, cast deadly spells, come flying out of the shadows, and so on. This is the first part of the Dungeons & Dragons experience. The second part is the role playing. Role playing is what your character does when they are not in an encounter, be it fighting an orc, solving an ancient puzzle, or disarming a trap. Role playing is what actually gives your character personality. It breathes that little spark of life into them that makes them more than a sheet full of numbers.

Consider your favorite fantasy novel. Now think about the main characters involved in that novel. As the story unfolds, the characters do much more than fight monsters. They explore their past, talk with each other, and interact with the world around them. Were that novel to be nothing more than back to back combat descriptions, it would probably get pretty boring. You would know nothing about that character. What are their likes? What are their dislikes? What do they do when they're not in combat? What were they like as children? Do they have any talents, aside from fighting? All these things help make a character a memorable one. Instead of telling your friends that your character can deliver 80 damage in one attack, you'll be able to tell them about how your character has overcome adversity in their youth, worked their way up to the status of hero, and are recognized wherever they go as someone who made a difference.

Presented here are a few different methods by which you can flesh out your character. Some are no more than the player writing up a description of their character's past, while others go very in-depth into a character's history, allowing them to hand-pick their family, their interests, their fears, and so on. Players and DMs alike are encouraged to use whatever methods work best for their game. If background history has little bearing on your game, then so be it. However, if having a virtually living, breathing character sounds more interesting, then read on.

Method One: Freestyle

This method is often the one utilized by seasoned players. Those gamers fortunate enough to have played several different editions of Dungeons & Dragons already have a good idea of how their character acts and are seen by the rest of the game world. Newer players might have trouble fully immersing themselves in a role playing game without a few guidelines. This method is for the former. For seasoned gamers, a background is often created before the first die is rolled in character creation. They often already have a good idea of what they want their characters to be like, regardless of what class they choose or how hard they can hit with a sword. The following six steps will help seasoned players to flesh out their characters.

Step one: Personality: What is my character like? Is he a brash, young punk? Is he a grizzled war veteran? Is he the quiet one that sits in the corner, or the friendly one who never meets a stranger? Your character's personality is an essential part of any role playing game.

Step Two: Family History: Was your family poor? Were they rich? Were they well known in the community? Were they lonely farmers? Were they royalty with the respect of an entire kingdom? A good family background can make for fantastic role playing opportunities and plot-hooks as the game progresses.

Step Three: Knowledge: What did your character do before they became adventurers? Were they blacksmiths? Were they scholars? Did they apprentice under a well-known animal-trainer? What your character did before adventuring can be just as important as what they know now.

Step Four: The Bad With the Good: Your character is not perfect. Perhaps they have a few flaws that could hinder them at times. Does your character stutter? Do they have burn scars? Do they have various phobias? Are they horribly indebted to someone? Mixing a few bad things in with the good does more than make for good role playing opportunities; it makes the character more believable.

Step Five: Reasons for Being: Why does your character travel? Why do they engage in dangerous adventures? Why is it that they do what they do, possibly risking their lives? Do they do it for fame and fortune? Do they do it for their own hidden reasons? Finding out why your character chooses to adventure can lead to excellent role play opportunities.

Step Six: The Future: What are your character's goals? Where do they see themselves years down the line? Do they strive for greatness? Do they want to discover long-lost artifacts? Do they seek the knowledge of the ages? Realizing what you want your characters to become as they grow and age will often change the way your character behaves in the present.

Method Two: Cherry Picking

While this method can produce very dynamic backgrounds, it is one that should be approved by the DM after you've made your choices. Not every trait or knowledge might be acceptable in your DM's current campaign. One piece of advice: be flexible. Just because you want every available option to be at your character's disposal, your DM might not agree. Be willing to haggle or compromise with your DM about your character's background. Not only will this make for a smoother campaign, it will eliminate any possible confusion later on in the campaign.

Presented here are many different background traits. Feel free to pick any you wish your character to possess. One thing to think about, though: try to keep a bit of consistency when picking your background traits. A character that came from an extremely poor family will probably not have an advanced background in scholastic matters. Formal schooling was, for the most part, for the elite and wealthy of society. A peasant farmer had little hope of providing his children any kind of formal education. If, however, you can come up with a plausible, thought-out explanation for any inconsistencies, your DM will take them under advisement and make his or her ruling based on it.

Crafting: cooking
Crafting: artwork
Crafting: stonework
Crafting: woodwork
Crafting: metalwork

Family: destitute
Family: poor
Family: middle-class
Family: rich
Family: wealthy

Performing: speaking
Performing: music
Performing: acting
Performing: dancing
Performing: singing

Popularity: unheard of
Popularity: heard of
Popularity: famous
Popularity: well known
Popularity: known

Outdoors: navigating/sea
Outdoors: navigating/land
Outdoors: hunting
Outdoors: fishing
Outdoors: farming

Education: little to none
Education: knowledgeable
Education: basic schooling
Education: well-learned
Education: scholarly

The above background traits are, of course, only examples. Feel free to create any of your own, and pass them by your DM for review. You as the player are the reason for the game, after all. Your input is not only invited, it is necessary to ensure the game is fun for everyone. Whatever DM you have, or whatever world you play in, if you're not having fun, it's no longer a game.

Method Three: Point – Buy

Perhaps the easiest, most fair method for newer players, the Point-Buy system incorporates all of the background traits listed in the Cherry Picking method, but assigns them a point value and allows players to “purchase” them. This way, no one character can have a vastly more outstanding background than another, but allows plenty of flexibility to allow for rich, flavorful histories for your characters.

To begin with, all players have 16 points in which to purchase background traits. The first option for players is to pick flaws if they choose to have them. By picking flaws, players can earn more points to spend on positive background traits. This kind of give-and-take system can create some very dynamic character backgrounds. Not only does it showcase the character’s positive traits, it brings to light some things the character might not want known to others. This can lead to good role play opportunities and possible campaign plot-hooks throughout the game. It is suggested that DMs not allow players to select too many flaws simply to gain points to use on positive traits. If a player selects flaws, they are expected to role play them, for good or bad.

Character Flaws:

Phobias: arachnophobia (spiders), necrophobia (dead), acrophobia (heights), claustrophobia (enclosed spaces), agoraphobia (crowds), hemaphobia (blood), noctiphobia (night), phasmophobia (ghosts), ultraphobia (magic)

Physical Flaws: warts, scars, stuttering, excessive body hair, extra digit on either a hand or foot, bad body odor

Family Flaws: murderer in the family, insanity in the family, criminal in the family

Behavioral Flaws: excessively neat, excessively sloppy, extremely sarcastic or cynical, extremely quiet, extremely loud, excessively rude/crude, sexist, racist, bullying

Trait:

Point value:

Acrophobia: the fear of heights	2
Agoraphobia: the fear of large crowds	2
Arachnophobia: the fear of spiders	1
Claustrophobia: the fear of enclosed places	2
Hemaphobia: the fear of seeing blood	1
Necrophobia: the fear of the dead	1
Noctiphobia: the fear of the dark	2
Phasmophobia: the fear of ghosts	1
Ultraphobia: the fear of magic	2
Warts: excessive, unsightly body warts	1
Scars: cuts, burns, or other large scars	1
Stuttering: usually when speaking to strangers	1
Excessive Body Hair	1
Extra Finger or Toe	1

<u>Trait:</u>	<u>Point Value:</u>
Murderer in the family	1
Insanity in the family	1
Criminal in the family	1
Excessively neat	1
Excessively sloppy	1
Extremely sarcastic or cynical	1
Extremely quiet	1
Extremely loud	1
Excessively rude or crude	1
Sexist	1
Racist	1
Bullying	1

The next step is to calculate how many points you now have to purchase background traits with. Add the original 16 points to however many points you have accumulated through picking your character's flaws. This is the total number of points you can use to purchase background traits.

***Example:** I picked the flaws Excessively Sloppy, Necrophobia, and Scars. That gave me an additional 3 points. Added to my original 16 points, I now have 19 points to spend on my other Background Traits.*

The first set of Background Traits to purchase from is known as Background Knowledge traits. They include three separate categories: Crafting, Performing, and Outdoor. These three categories include five traits each. The player is to choose a trait, then select a level of knowledge in that trait from 1: knowledgeable, to 5: masterful. The knowledge level picked equals how many points that trait costs.

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1- Knowledgeable | 4- Professional |
| 2- Trained | 5- Masterful |
| 3- Skilled | |

Background Knowledge:

Crafting: cooking
 Crafting: artwork
 Crafting: stonework
 Crafting: woodwork
 Crafting: metalwork

Performing: speaking
 Performing: music
 Performing: acting
 Performing: dancing
 Performing: singing

Outdoors: navigating/land
 Outdoors: navigating/sea
 Outdoors: farming
 Outdoors: hunting
 Outdoors: fishing

Trait:**Details of Background Knowledge:**

- Cooking:
- 1- You know how to cook meat without burning it, but little more.
 - 2- You know how to be self-sufficient when it comes to cooking.
 - 3- You can prepare several-coarse meals with little trouble.
 - 4- You are known by many as an excellent cook.
 - 5- You are a master chef. You could own your own restaurant.
- Artwork:
- 1- You can make simple drawings, such as crude maps and figures.
 - 2- You can paint a simple landscape, or sketch a diagram.
 - 3- You can create realistic but simple works of art.
 - 4- You could paint portraits for a living.
 - 5- You create masterpieces. Your work is held as treasures.
- Stonework:
- 1- You can create crude sculptures, or perform basic masonry work.
 - 2- You could be employed as a stone or brick mason.
 - 3- You could sculpt a realistic statue, or build a stone house.
 - 4- You could create realistic statues for a living.
 - 5- You are a master sculptor or a master stone or block mason.
- Woodwork:
- 1- You could create a simple box.
 - 2- You could create bookcases and shelving.
 - 3- You can create well-made furniture.
 - 4- You could build your own house and furnish it with your own works.
 - 5- Your works could sell well enough to keep you happily employed.
- Metalwork:
- 1- You could make simplistic metal sculptures.
 - 2- You can make simple knives, arrow-heads, and so on.
 - 3- You could make your own sword, given enough time.
 - 4- You can create armor and weapons with great skill.
 - 5- Your works are masterful and commissioned from very wealthy clients.
- Speaking:
- 1- You could read a letter to a small crowd without being nervous.
 - 2- You could act as a trained messenger.
 - 3- You could give a speech to an interested crowd.
 - 4- Your speaking is charismatic, and people earnestly listen to you.
 - 5- You could rally troops with your powerful speeches.
- Music:
- 1- You have the basic understanding of a musical instrument.
 - 2- You can play an instrument with a level of skill.
 - 3- You could play in a travelling musical band for a living.
 - 4- You are talented with several different instruments.
 - 5- You could hold your own concerts for hundreds of fans.
- Acting:
- 1- You can act small parts in plays believably.
 - 2- You could star in a major part in a play.
 - 3- You could do improvisational theater.
 - 4- You captivate audiences with your performances.
 - 5- You could headline an all-star performance.

- Dancing:
- 1- You know some folk dances.
 - 2- You could couples-dance well.
 - 3- You could do a solo dance performance.
 - 4- You could dance professionally.
 - 5- Royalty requests you dance for them.
- Singing:
- 1- You have a pleasant singing voice.
 - 2- You could perform well for a crowd.
 - 3- You are asked to sing at events.
 - 4- You could sing for royalty and be well received.
 - 5- You can move people to tears with the beauty of your voice.
- Navigating Land:
- 1- You can easily identify which direction you're going.
 - 2- You can pick easier routes to places without direction.
 - 3- You could lead an expedition easily.
 - 4- You seldom need a map to assist you.
 - 5- You can navigate by the stars and without a map.
- Navigating Sea:
- 1- You can easily identify which direction you're going.
 - 2- You know helpful currents and trade routes from memory.
 - 3- You could captain a vessel.
 - 4- You seldom need a map for referencing your position.
 - 5- You could navigate a terrible storm with ease.
- Farming:
- 1- You know the basics of agriculture.
 - 2- You could easily grow a small garden.
 - 3- You could manage acres of crops with ease.
 - 4- You manage to grow things others cannot.
 - 5- You could probably grow crops in a desert.
- Hunting:
- 1- You are a casual game hunter.
 - 2- You could set a simple snare.
 - 3- You could hunt very elusive game with ease.
 - 4- You can set complicated traps and snares.
 - 5- The blend with nature and the animals never know you're there.
- Fishing:
- 1- You know all the basics of simple fishing.
 - 2- You know what species of fish are native to the area you're in.
 - 3- You can easily catch enough fish to feed your group.
 - 4- You manage to catch fish when others cannot.
 - 5- You could probably catch a fish in a mud-puddle.

The second set of background traits you may pick from is called your Inherent Background. These traits are background information on your family status, your popularity, and your former education. Unlike with Background Knowledge traits, Inherent traits are ranked on a simpler scale. While it is still a 1 – 5 range for point-spending, the options are spelled out for you.

Inherent Background:

- 1) Family: destitute
- 2) Family: poor
- 3) Family: middle-class
- 4) Family: wealthy
- 5) Family: rich

- 1) Popularity: unheard of
- 2) Popularity: heard of
- 3) Popularity: known
- 4) Popularity: well known
- 5) Popularity: famous

- 1) Education: little to none
- 2) Education: basic schooling
- 3) Education: knowledgeable
- 4) Education: well-learned
- 5) Education: scholarly

Your family background explains the financial status of your family. It denotes how wealthy (or poor) your family was before you left to begin adventuring.

Your popularity background explains how well-known you were. It denotes how much social status you had before leaving to start adventuring.

Your education background explains how much formal education you had. It denotes how versed you were in scholastic matters before leaving to start adventuring.

After You've Picked:

Now that you have picked your flaws, background knowledge traits, and inherent background traits, it's time to put them in a way that can be utilized in the game. Presented on the next page is a sample Background Page that can be added to your character's portfolio.

***Example:** I picked the flaws Excessively Sloppy, Necrophobia, and Scars. That gave me an additional 3 points. Added to my original 16 points, I now have 19 points to spend on my other Background Traits. I chose to spend 3 points in Metalwork, 2 points in Music, 2 points in Navigating/Land, 2 points in Navigating/Sea, 3 points in Family, 3 points in Popularity, and 4 points in Education. That used all 19 of my points.*

Character Name _____ Player Name: _____

Background Knowledge

Trait: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Trait: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Trait: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Trait: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Trait: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Inherent Background

Family Status: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Popularity: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Education: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Character Flaws

Phobia: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Phobia: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Physical Flaw: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Physical Flaw: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Family Flaw: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Family Flaw: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Behavioral Flaw: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Behavioral Flaw: _____ Value: _____ Notes: _____

Other Background Information

Reasons for Adventuring: _____

Future Plans: _____

Other Notes: _____

Using Background Traits In-Game:

The background traits presented can make for good role-playing opportunities. However, without a solid base to work off of, the traits mean little more than good conversation topics. Presented here are the methods to use your background knowledge traits on a regular basis while adventuring.

Knowledge Trait: Skill:	Related
Cooking	Nature
Artwork	Bluff
Stonework	Endurance
Woodwork	Endurance
Metalwork	Endurance
Speaking	Diplomacy
Music	Bluff
Acting	Diplomacy
Dancing	Acrobatics
Singing	Bluff
Navigating Land	Nature
Navigating Sea	Nature
Farming	Nature
Hunting	Nature
Fishing	Nature

On all of the above traits, simply add the trait score you have to the related skill check whenever an attempt is made to utilize your selected trait. For example, if I have the Dancing trait with a score of 4, I will have to make a Diplomacy check with a +4 bonus whenever I attempt to dance for the duke to gain his favor.

Making Armor and Weapons:

If you have the Metalworking background trait, you can make your own metal armor and weapons. The kind of armor and weapons you can make will be based on your level, as explained by the following table.

Level:	Weapon Type:
1-10	Simple Melee / Simple Ranged
11-20	Military Melee / Military Ranged
21-30	Superior Melee / Superior Ranged

Level:	Armor Type:
1-5	Shields / Chainmail
6-10	Scale Armor
11-15	Plate Armor
16-20	Masterwork Chainmail
21-25	Masterwork Scale Armor
26-30	Masterwork Plate Armor

Inherent Background Traits

Like Background Knowledge traits, Inherent Background traits can play a constant part in your campaign. Consult the following table to determine how to apply your Inherent traits.

Inherent Trait: Skill:	Related
Family Background	Bluff
Popularity Background	Diplomacy
Education Background	History

Inherent background traits add permanent bonus points to the related skills they are associated with. The catch is, the bonus only applies to the area where you are originally from, or the area where you have lived since obtaining the Inherent traits.

For example: I am from the city of Burden's Peak. I come from a middle-class family, am well-known, and have a scholarly education. The +3 Bluff bonus I get from being middle-class only applies when I am encountering individuals from Burden's Peak and the immediate surrounding areas, within 25 miles. The same applies to the +4 Diplomacy bonus I receive for being well-known in my area. The +5 History bonus I receive for having a Scholarly education only applies to the history of Burden's Peak and the surrounding areas, up to 50 miles.

Phobias and Flaws:

Just as the various background traits add bonuses to different skill checks, phobias and flaws add penalties to other skill checks.

Phobias impose a penalty to any skill checks made when presented with whatever phobia you happen to have until you are no longer in the presence of it. The penalty is equal to the point value of the flaw.

For example: I have acrophobia, or a fear of heights. While my character is making his way across a high, narrow rope-bridge, I will have a -2 penalty to all skill checks made while on the rope bridge. When I am away from the bridge, my skill checks return to normal.

Physical flaws also impose penalties to certain skill checks. Whenever you make a skill check that requires Diplomacy or Bluff, your flaws impose a -1 penalty for each flaw.

Family flaws impose a -1 penalty to Diplomacy, but only if you are within the area you live or the surrounding areas (25 miles).

Behavioral flaws impose a -1 penalty to any Charisma-based encounter checks (does not apply to weapon and attack abilities that rely on Charisma).