

Obsidian

Skill Challenge System Ver. 1.0

By Travis Huston Dunlap

Welcome to a system that takes the basic 4th Edition Dungeons and Dragons skill challenge system to an entirely new level! This system at its core is very different from the standard system, so it is not for everyone.

Consider using the Obsidian System if you believe in the following:

- 1) Players should always be included in skill challenges, but shouldn't always get to use their best skills. A social character should shine in social encounters, and an athletic character should shine in athletic encounters.
- 2) Players shouldn't feel that their participation is actually hurting the party's chances of succeeding at a challenge. Players should always feel that they are helping the challenge, even if it's to a smaller degree than a character with better skills.
- 3) A skill challenge should work as a decent encounter, but be easily scalable to a much longer and epic scale.
- 4) Players should spend more time describing their actions, and less time trying to find ways to use their best skills.
- 5) The skill challenge math should be solid enough to allow DM tweaking without causing problems.
- 6) The standard skill challenge system for whatever reason just isn't for you.

Special thanks to Fredrick Svanberg, who inspired the idea of doing skill challenges in rounds, and to Keith Baker who gave me the idea of using partial victories.

Table of Contents

What Everyone needs to Know	3
The Basic Skill Challenge	3
What the DM needs to Know	4
Setting the Difficulty of a Challenge.....	4
Winning and Losing.....	4
Determining Skills Allowed for a Challenge.....	5
Types of Challenges.....	5
Mental	5
Physical	6
Social.....	7
Awarding XP	7
Advanced Options	8
Optional Rules.....	8
Skill Challenges in Combat	8
Larger Skill Challenges.....	9
Example Large Challenge: ESCAPE FROM JAIL.....	9
Adjusting the Difficulty to your Party.....	10
Frequently Asked Questions.....	11

What Everyone needs to Know

The Basic Skill Challenge

Every skill challenge consists of three segments. Each segment can last as long as the DM desires. For many challenges, a segment will be a single round. In others, it could be an encounter or several hours of work. During each segment:

- 1) Each player describes an action that his character is doing, whether it's tumbling past a guard or talking with a duke.
- 2) The DM and the player work together to decide the right skill check for the action. In general, a player uses a skill that fits the challenge type (see Challenge Types) though the DM is the final judge whether a certain skill can be used.
- 3) If the player gives a particularly good description or role-plays well, the DM can give him a +2 to the skill check.
- 4) All players roll their skill checks versus the DC of the challenge, usually all at the same time. The DM counts all the successes that are made.
- 5) Steps 1-4 are repeated for the second and third segments of the challenge. The DM totals up all of the successes made, and then determines whether the party failed, obtained victory, or only obtained partial victory. See *Winning and Losing* below for more information.

PLAYER NOTE: In the Obsidian system, you can take actions that directly affect the challenge, or that simply help your teammates. Both are considered equally useful to the challenge. Also keep in mind that you won't always get to use your best skills, a social character might not have good skills for a physical challenge for example. That's okay, role-play your actions and do your best while one of your team mates uses his big skills. In the next challenge it will be your turn to use your big skills.

DM NOTE: Increasing or decreasing the number of segments will have a very large impact on the system, and is not recommended. If you wish to have a longer skill challenge, take a look at *Larger Skill Challenges* listed in the advanced options.

Player Options: While engaged in a skill challenge, players can use the following:

Bold Recovery: A player may spend an action point to reroll a skill check they have made, before they might know if the roll was a success or failure. The player must take the result of the reroll. If the skill challenge is particularly long, the DM may grant the players the option to use additional action points.

Critical Success: A natural 20 on a skill check is an automatic success. In addition, the player may reroll the skill check. If he beats the DC with his second check, he receives another success. If a player rolls multiple 20's in a row, he may continue to reroll and gain additional successes.

Primary Skill: For most challenges, the DM assigns one or two skills as the center point of the challenge. Players using that skill receive a +2 to their skill checks. Example: In a negotiation with a Duke, diplomacy would be the primary skill. In a scene where the party sneaks into an orc camp, stealth would be the primary skill. If the players were researching a secret from ancient arcane texts, arcana would be the primary.

DM NOTE: While Primary skills can be useful, you can choose not to have a primary skill for some of your challenges. If you do have a primary, make it known to the players at the beginning of the challenge.

What the DM needs to Know

Setting the Difficulty of a Challenge

A standard skill challenge is the same level as the party. Table 1 below gives the DC of a skill challenge at each level. If a DM wishes to change the difficulty, a +1/-1 to DC changes the difficulty of the challenge by about +/- 10%.

Table 1. Skill Challenge DCs for each level

Lvl	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
DC	18	19	19	20	20	21	21	23	23	24	24	24	24	26	26

Lvl	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
DC	27	27	28	28	29	30	31	31	32	32	33	33	34	34	35

Winning and Losing

Once the DM has totaled up all of the successes for a challenge, he compares the total number to Table 2 given below. The table shows how many success rolls the party needs for a partial or total victory. If they get fewer than that, they suffer a failure. The number is based on the number of players that are in the challenge.

Table 2. Successes needed for Victory

Players*	Victory	Partial Victory	Failure
2	5+	3-4	Less than 3
3	6+	4-5	Less than 4
4	7+	5-6	Less than 5
5	8+	6-7	Less than 6
6	10+	8-9	Less than 8
7	12+	10-11	Less than 10

*This is the number of players that are in the challenge, which could be less than your total party.

Failure *Guys, we have a problem.*

The party has failed to acquire the goals of the challenge and/or has suffered a significant setback in the process.

Partial Victory *It's not over yet.*

The party has accomplished most of the goal, but there's still more to be done, or there are loose ends to tie up.

Victory *A job well done.*

The party has completed all of the goals of the challenge, and is ready for a new adventure.

Determining Skills Allowed for a Challenge

In general, the Challenge Type (see Challenge Types) will give you a good guide on what skills to allow for any single challenge. However, in some cases a player may make a very good case to use a different skill. As the DM, feel free to allow new skills, especially for creative, innovative uses.

DM NOTE: In the standard 4e skill challenge system, players are generally able to use some of their best skills in every challenge. This is NOT true in Obsidian. If players are in a social type challenge, they are expected to use social skills for example, even if they aren't the best at it. Feel free to reward creative, out of the box thinking, but don't let players get away with using their best skills all the time. That way, each character gets a chance to shine in different kinds of challenges.

RULE OF THUMB: *Only allow a player to use a nonstandard skill once per skill challenge and only if the player is creative with the skill.*

Example: During a chase scene (a physical challenge) the rogue asks the DM if he can use bluff (a social, not a physical skill) to psych out the guards and escape. He gives a really good description of what he wants to do. The DM allows it, but for the rest of the challenge encourages the rogue to use physical skills (like acrobatics).

Some Skill Notes: DMs can sometimes have trouble coming up with good ways to use the following skills. Here are some helpful guidelines:

Endurance: This skill can allow players to run faster than normal, or jump higher. It can also be useful to aid other players (one player carrying another on his back for example). The skill is very useful in physical challenges.

Heal: Heal can represent medical knowledge, useful in mental challenges. Furthermore, it can be useful to aid other party members as they sustain injury or fatigue in dealing with a physical challenge.

Intimidate: While a social skill, many DMs would see intimidate as ruining negotiations. Keep in mind that intimidate is more than just yelling and screaming, it represents body language that can soften up the enemy's resolve. Example: A noble might try some aggressive tactics to win his argument, but he backs down looking at the face of the party's intimidating fighter.

Streetwise: This skill can be useful for gathering information for mental challenges. For social challenges, streetwise can represent a player's ability to use local slang and accents to fit in better.

Types of Challenges

Every Skill Challenge has a type chosen by the DM: mental, physical, or social. The type determines what kinds of skills are generally appropriate to the challenge, as well as the consequences of success and failure.

DM NOTE: The challenge types are designed to be a guide for you to quickly determine what skills are useful to the challenge and to design the results of success and failures. However, never feel stifled by the challenge types; use them to your own benefit.

Mental

A Mental challenge lets the players use their minds and their senses to gain clues and to find their way around the world. DMs can use Mental Challenges to describe large scales of scenery and give players a chance to work out clues to obtain victory.

Examples: Finding your way through an old forest, determining the secret entrance to the underground city, solving the puzzle of El-Karad, or finding the last ingredient for a ritual in an old library are examples of a Mental Challenge.

Standard skills for a mental challenge include:

Arcana (Int)
Dungeoneering (Wis)
Heal (Wis)*
History (Int)
Insight (Wis)
Nature (Wis)
Perception (Wis)
Religion (Int)
Social (cha)**
Streetwise (Cha)***

*When dealing with anatomy or medical insights.

**Social skills can be useful to gain clues when other people are near the challenge site, such as using diplomacy to acquire help from the head librarian. Generally allow this only once per challenge per person.

***For navigating urban terrain or gaining information on the street.

Failure: Failing a mental challenge often means you arrive at a different location than the one you had intended, or that you obtain a piece of information...only to later find out it is incorrect.

Partial Victory: You gain some of the information you need, but need more. You successfully navigate the terrain, but are greatly delayed and it causes problems down the road.

Victory: You gain the information you need and solve the puzzle. You navigate the terrain quickly and easily, and perhaps find a treasure along the way.

Physical

A physical challenge often is the most versatile of challenges. It can include subtle stealth or outrageous stunts. Players are encouraged to describe their actions in detail.

Examples: Scaling a great cliff, sneaking past a group of guards, and crossing a raging river are good physical challenges.

Standard skills for a Physical Challenge include:

Acrobatics (Dex)
Athletics (Str)
Endurance (Con)
Heal (Wis)
Stealth (Dex)
Thievery (Dex)
Social (cha)*
Knowledge (int or wis)**

*Social skills can sometimes be useful in physical challenges against other creatures. Using bluff to throw off a group of guards as you make your escape is a good example. Generally only allow this once per challenge per player.

**Knowledge skills can sometimes be useful in physical challenges that involve certain environments. Using nature in a chase scene that involves the jungle is one example. Generally only allow this once per challenge per player.

Failure: Failing a physical challenge usually involves physical fatigue and possibly great peril. The party might each lose two healing surges, or every person in the party loses ¼ of their hit points, and then is forced into a combat.

Partial Victory: The party has overcome the obstacle but may have created new obstacles in the process. For example, the party has to climb a rock wall in a way that leads to other hazardous terrain. Or the party completes the task but suffers fatigue in the form of losing two healing surges each.

Victory: The party overcomes the obstacle, fresh, strong and ready for the next one.

Social

A social challenge generally involves talking and a large amount of role-playing. Players are encouraged to use eloquent words, bold statements, and outright lies to win the day.

Example: A negotiation with the Duke, talking your way past the guards, and convincing an old hero to take up the cause once again are examples of social challenges.

Standard Skills for a social challenge include:

- Bluff (cha)
- Diplomacy(cha)
- Insight (wis)
- Intimidate (cha)
- Streetwise (cha)
- Knowledges * (int or wis)

*In some cases, some knowledge skills can be useful if they are particularly relevant to the challenge. Example: Using religion in a social challenge that involves a priest. Generally only allow this once per player per challenge.

Failure: The party does not get their desired help, and often the other group's opinion of the party has dropped. If the opposing group was already hostile, it may result in combat.

Partial Victory: The party gets what they want, but the other group wants something too. Good examples are a rare treasure, some key information, or a favor. This could lead to another quest.

Victory: The party gets what they want. In many cases the other side will feel greater respect (or awe) for the party.

Awarding XP

Victory: Give the players the same amount of XP as if they had fought a standard combat of their level. For example, a standard encounter for a 2nd level party (5 characters) is 5 level 2 monsters.

Partial Victory: In general, reward the players the same XP as if they secured a victory. Just like in combat, sometimes the party does well and sometimes not, but if they overcome the challenge they should be rewarded. In other cases, give them half or three fourths of the XP, and then reward the rest if they are able to tie up their loose ends.

Advanced Options

Optional Rules

Challenges generate more, not less, Combat: Skill Challenges provide a way for DMs to use encounters other than combat to challenge their party. However, combat can be a lot of fun for players. In some cases, your party may secretly wish it had failed a challenge if it meant getting to fight. For these groups, use skill challenges that will have combats after them regardless of how the party does. Instead, give them a +1 to their attack rolls if they score a victory and a -1 if they score a failure.

Going for Broke: This rule gives players more control over their actions in a skill challenge. During the third (and last) segment of a skill challenge, players can take a -5 to their skill rolls. If they still make the DC, they receive 2 successes. Players must choose whether to go for broke before any players have made their skill rolls. In general this will give the players fewer partial victories and more total victories.

Roll before the Action: In some cases, the DM may desire the players to roll before they describe their actions during a skill challenge. This can be useful in social challenges, as the players can then “act out” the results of their checks.

Rolling Initiative: In the standard system, players are assumed to describe their actions in whatever order is appropriate and roll simultaneously. However, feel free to have the players roll initiative if it helps you run the challenge.

Total Victory and Total Defeat: In some challenges, a DM may not desire partial victory, instead wanting either complete victory or complete failure. In that case, remove the victory number from the challenge, and just use the partial victory number. From there, feel free to change the DC to suit your desired difficulty.

Skill Challenges in Combat

Sometimes, a DM would like to combine combat and skill challenges into a single encounter. To do so, follow these steps:

- 1) Create a basic skill challenge, and assign it a type. Generally, combat skill challenges are physical or mental ones.
- 2) Each segment of the challenge is now one round of combat, with the challenge ending at the end of the 3rd round.
- 3) Each player can make one skill check for every move action they spend. So a player could make 2 skill checks in a round, or 3 if using an action point.
- 4) Decide failure, victory, and partial victory normally. In general, activate the effects of a partial victory when it happens, and then add in the effects of the full success if/when the party obtains it.
- 5) For XP purposes, treat the skill challenge as a complexity 3 if you were using the standard system.

Optional Rule: No time limit. In some cases, the DM doesn't want failure in the challenge. The players' use of actions is enough of a payment to overcome a challenge. In this case, don't use the standard 3 segment rule, and don't give any penalty for failure. Let players continue to make checks as they desire until they overcome the challenge.

Awarding XP: Treat a combat skill challenge as an elite monster, whose level is equal to the skill challenge level.

Example: The Trap (Physical Challenge)

The party is facing a series of monsters and a metal disk trap that is a serious hazard. They must overcome the monsters but if they don't disable the trap it will become even deadlier.

Primary Skill: Thievery

Failure: The trap ramps up, gaining +2 to its attack and damage rolls.

Partial Victory: The trap is weakened, taking a -2 to its attack and damage rolls (this occurs immediately whenever the

party reaches the required number of successes).

Victory: The trap shuts down completely (this occurs immediately whenever the party reaches the required number of successes).

Using the *No Time Limit Optional Rule*: The trap does not ramp up. It continues to attack the party until the party gets the required number of successes to weaken or disable the trap, or until the party leaves the trap behind.

Larger Skill Challenges

Sometimes, one skill challenge isn't enough! Here are some general times when a DM would like to have multiple skill challenges:

- **Partial Victory.** By their nature, partial victories invoke unfinished work, which could mean another skill challenge for the party.
- **More in-depth challenges.** The DM would like to use skill challenges as a large quest or an epic journey.
- **Mixed Challenges.** A DM wants to use a wider range of skill challenges, including mental, physical, and social challenges all in one.

Building off a Partial Success: Feel free to create another basic challenge for the party, and insert it later in the adventure to tie up the loose ends they have remaining. In this case, you may want to use the *Total Victory and Total Defeat* optional rule listed above so that one way or another, the party will be done after the second challenge.

Building a larger challenge from the beginning: This is very easy in the Obsidian system. Just follow these steps:

- 1) Choose a basic skill challenge, and give it a type.
- 2) If the party fails the challenge, don't give them a standard penalty. Instead, they receive a -1 to all skill rolls involved in the next section of the challenge.
- 3) If the party gets a victory, don't give them a standard bonus. Instead, they receive a +1 to all skill rolls involved in the next section of the challenge.
- 4) If the party gets a partial victory, they receive no additional bonus or penalty, and proceed to the next phase of the challenge.
- 5) Repeat steps 1-4 to add as many sections to the challenge as you like. Feel free to use different types as well.
- 6) For the final challenge, provide failure and success benefits as normal. You may wish to make these grander than normal, as the final result is the effort of many challenges.

Example Large Challenge: ESCAPE FROM JAIL

Section 1: Breakout (Social)

The party is in a high security jail, but one of the guards is sympathetic to their cause. With enough persuasion, the guard might let them out.

Primary Skill: Diplomacy

Failure: The guard is angered by the party's demands and sets a trap to teach them a lesson. The party is released, but many guards are waiting for them. They enter the next challenge with a -1 to all of their skill checks for the next section.

Partial Victory: The guard lets the party out, but only seconds before security is alerted. The party must proceed to the next section with no bonus or penalty.

Victory: The party enlists several guards to help, and manages to escape well before security is alerted. They receive a +1 to their skill checks for the next section.

Section 2: The Chase (Physical)

The party is on the run, being chased by the guards. They must make their way to the exit of the city and escape.

Primary Skill: Athletics, Endurance

Failure: The party manages to escape the city, but is terribly winded from the chase, and the guards are not far behind. They receive a -1 to all skill checks for the next section of the challenge.

Partial Victory: The party escapes the city, but the guards are not far behind. They proceed to the next section of the challenge with no bonus or penalty.

Victory: The party is well ahead of the guards. They receive a +1 on their skill checks for the next section.

Final Section: Forest Race (Mental)

The party must navigate the forest of M'ral, which surrounds the city, with the guards on their heels and patrols in the woods. They must find the quick ways through the dense forest, or be overtaken by the patrols.

Primary Skill: Nature

Failure: The party is surrounded by guards and asked to surrender. The encounter is extremely difficult for the party, and may result in several deaths. The players can fight or surrender. If they surrender, they are taken to the city magistrate.

Partial Victory: The party escapes most of the patrols, but one lies between them and freedom. Set up a standard encounter for the party. If they succeed, the party is free, but tightened security will make it extremely difficult to enter the city again.

Victory: The party makes it by all of the patrols, and escapes without incident. In addition, they manage to find a dropped report that gives detailed information about the security of the city, which would assist if the party decides to return there later.

Adjusting the Difficulty to your Party

The Obsidian System assumes that for most challenges, a 5 player group will have the following:

- 1) One good skill user, who has a high stat (18 or 20 at 1st level) and training in a skill useful to the challenge.
- 2) Two average skill users, who have skill training, but a lower stat (12 or 14 at 1st level, or an 18 with an armor check penalty of -2).
- 3) Two poor users. These guys have no training and a low stat (8-14) in the skill.

With such a party, the system gives around a 20-30% failure rate, a 30-35% partial victory, and a 40-45% total victory rate for an equal level challenge (so 70-80% of the time the party is winning something).

Adjusting DCs to alter difficulty or to fit your party

- A +1/-1 to the DC of a challenge will change the difficulty by about +/- 10%.
- If a player has a +5 to their skill over the expected normal, the challenge gets easier by about 10% (the equivalent of a -1 to the DC). A +1 to the DC will give you the standard challenge for such a change.
- Note: Don't change the DCs too dramatically; a +1/-1 is usually enough for most groups.

Adjusting the Total Victory Number

In some cases, a DM will want to leave the failure rate the same, but change how often the party gains partial or total victory. In that case:

- Adjust the total victory number by +1/-1 without changing the partial victory number. This will change your partial victory rate by about +15%/-15%, and alter your total victory rate by the same amount.

Frequently Asked Questions

- 1) *Sometimes I would rather help my party members than drive the action. Can I do that in Obsidian?*

In Obsidian, all actions are considered equally important. Whether you are engaging in active diplomacy with the noble or just whispering helpful suggestions to your fellow player, your actions help to win the challenge. Feel free to describe your actions in whatever way you like. Mechanically, helping your party is the same skill check as taking a more active role.

- 2) *You mention in Obsidian that players aren't always supposed to use their best skills. I actually like it when my players all get to be great all the time. Can I still do that and use Obsidian?*

You can, though it will take a little adjustment. In general, your party will succeed far more often than a normal party would, so the difficulties will need to be tweaked to keep things in line. As a start, add +2 to your DCs and increase the partial and victory success numbers by 1. From there, feel free to make further adjustments as you see fit.

- 3) *How often will my party succeed using the Obsidian System?*

For a standard challenge, the system assumes you have one guy who's really good at a skill, two guys who are okay, and two guys who are bad at those skills. With that in mind, you will get a partial victory about 30-35% of the time, victory 40-45%, and failure 25-30%. So in general your party will accomplish something 70-80% of the time. Check out *Adjusting the system to your party* in the Optional Rules for more information about adjusting the win rate to where you like it.

- 4) *Your DCs seem to scale up at about the same rate as my party increases their skills. Doesn't that mean that an epic level skill challenge will be just as mundane as a 1st level one?*

Mechanically, the DCs are set so that a party will get a good consistent win rate at any level. However, feel free to raise or lower the DC in order to give your players a particularly hard or easy challenge. Further, Obsidian is designed to encourage flavor over mechanics. At epic levels, encourage your players to think epic when they are describing their actions. A successful acrobatics roll is balancing on an invisible razor thin thread. An arcana check might be cracking a wizard's code....in a language that's been dead for a thousand years.