

Behind the Shield:

Skills, Talents & Proficiencies

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As a GM, players who wonder why their PCs can't perform simple tasks like transplanting a kidney or writing Orcish poetry constantly confront me. When I explain that they need to have a certain STP (skill, talent, or proficiency) to be successful, they whine about the difficulty of obtaining STPs after character creation. So, for my own sanity, I am presenting you with suggestions and revealing as much about the STP rules in the GMG as my Oath permits.

I'm also sharing with you some of the extrapolations that GMs have been doing for years in order to cover grey areas in the rules. Some of these rulings can give your PCs new opportunities to thrive. To the extent I am allowed, this article provides an understanding of these extrapolations. By codifying them here in HackJournal, I am guaranteeing that no hardnosed, secretive GM can deny you these boons!

Of course, my GM's Oath requires me to disclose that the new sense of empowerment and potential that this article will bestow upon you will benefit your sadistic GM as well. You see, we GMs get into this racket for the sake of snatching death and defeat from the jaws of your PCs' success. The more enjoyment you derive from your newly enhanced PC, the more psychotic thrills we'll derive from killing him. So, read on...you've been warned.

So How Do I Improve My Skills?

Well, the obvious answer is that you pay for skill training when you level up. This costs you lots of money, but no EPs. You pay the cost, do the time, and then you roll against your character's chance to learn, which is based on Intelligence. Because of this limitation, many players are frustrated by their PC's failure to learn skills during formal training. Of course, if you do succeed, you get an extra skill mastery point for every "tick mark" you earned by rolling under your chance to improve a skill (see Wisdom in the PHB). Given the difficulty in improving skills at leveling time, it's interesting that most players are unaware that it is possible to train skills outside of the normal leveling procedure.

That's right! For a mere 10% of the EPs necessary to reach the next level, you can enroll in skill classes at any time. Of course, this still costs money and maybe a little honor, but it's a great way to build on your STPs while your fellow party members are leveling up, researching spells, or just healing their dragon-burned skins. Think about this

though — a level two fighter has a minimum of 2,001 EPs. He needs to reach 4,001 EPs to go to level three. That's a difference of 2,000 EPs, so our little sword-slinger only has to pay a measly 200 EPs to train in a skill outside his normal leveling!

New Rule

Because a character class represents not just a set of skills and abilities but a way of thinking, characters find certain types of skills easier to learn. This rule provides a limited benefit to characters that are learning skills directly related to the pursuit of their chosen profession. Likewise, characters may receive minor penalties when learning skills that are opposed to their way of thinking.

Generally, the bonus is a -10% to the character's chance to learn a skill, with the penalty being a -10% to their chance to learn. In some cases, a +5% bonus or a -5% penalty is given to skills in the category. Percentages in parentheses (X%) represent modifiers that apply to skills that are unusually appropriate or inappropriate in a given category. For example, a fighter takes the Leadership, Military skill with a +5% bonus. This is an academic skill for which he would normally suffer a -10% penalty, but because the skill directly relates to martial concerns, a fighter gets a bonus instead of a penalty. Similarly, a magic-user would suffer a penalty to learn Military: Battle Sense. These parenthetical bonuses (but not penalties) apply to the prerequisites of a highly class-appropriate skill, so an Assassin gets his learn bonus to Botany as well as Herbalism.

Dual-classed characters only receive the modifiers for their currently active class, but multi-classed characters receive both sets of modifiers. Because they are less attuned to the subtleties of their classes, multi-classed characters only receive the 10% bonus, but suffer both the 5% and 10% penalties.

Table HJ23-1: Penalties/Bonuses per class

Skill Type	Fighter	Magic-User	Thief	Cleric
Weapon Proficiencies	+10%	-10%	0%	0%
Arcane Skills	-10%	+10%	0%	0% (+5%)
Academia	-10% (+5%)	+10% (-5%)	0% (+5%)	+5%
Languages/Communication	0% (+5%)	+5%	+10%	+10%
Musical Instrument Skills	0%	-5%	+10%	+5%
Tasks, Mundane	+10%	-10%	0%	0%
Tasks, Combat Procedures	+10%	-10%	-5% (+5%)	+5% (-5%)
Tasks, Artisan and Perform.	0%	-10%	+10%	+5% (-5%)

Tasks, Sophisticated	-5% (+10%)	+5% (- 5%)	0% (+10%)	+10%
Social Interaction Skills	0% (+5%)	-10% (+5%)	+10% (-5%)	+10%
Skills, Tools	+5%	+5%	-5%	+5% (-5%)

As a player, you probably also know that PCs can level up without paying for training if they pay double the EPs to increase their level. This type of “auto-leveling” can be an important tool for PCs who are in the deep wilderness or who are just plain broke. When you self-train, you only get skill improvements sometimes, so it might pay to take STP classes right after you level up. Otherwise, you have to pay the EP penalty I mentioned above.

New Rule:

According to GM extrapolation, an odd side effect of the auto-leveling rules allows a character who can’t (or won’t) attend skill classes to use tick marks to do so. An active PC can pay 20% of the cost of their next level to attempt to self-train in a single skill. In order to prevent players from abusing this rule, we GMs have limited this method so that only one skill improvement attempt can be made per 20% penalty.

Also, said skill must be one in which the PC has an unused “tick mark” for rolling low on a skill use attempt. Finally, a character can only attempt to improve one skill per game session. However, if you’re desperate to up your Art of Seduction before sneaking into Ahk’Tang’s harem, this might be the tool you need.

On Tick Marks:

As you can see, getting those tick marks is vital to improving your character’s skills. To get them, though, you need to roll really low on an important attempt to use the skill. Have you noticed that your GM has you roll fewer skill checks the higher your PC’s mastery of the skill? Many players think this is because the rules tell him not to have you roll. Not so! While the GMG says that highly skilled PCs need not roll for every little thing, skill rolls are actually made at your GM’s discretion. When he says, “you don’t have to roll” he’s actually trying to keep you from acquiring tick marks! He knows that his chances of screwing your PC based on a failed check are low, so the cost to benefit ratio is weighted towards you. Rather than give you a chance to get a tick mark, he’d rather give up his tiny chance of wiping that silly grin off your PC’s face.

So, what can you do? Take the initiative — offer to roll skill checks any time your character is doing something dramatic or important to the adventure. Sure, he might turn you down some of the time, but you’ll still get more opportunities than you would if you left the ball in his court. Remember, a passive player means a wimpy character. Of course, if you slow the game down too much, you’ll get a smackdown, so try to use your judgment.

New Rule:

As a further extrapolation of the pay-double rule, active PCs are allowed to trade two tick marks for a single skill mastery point without training. Both tick marks must be in the skill that is being improved and only one mastery point can be added by this method to any given skill — during a single game session. Improving multiple skills is allowable. Only skills that the character already knows can be improved in this way, so this method does not allow for the acquisition of new skills.

In addition, no skill may be improved using this method by more points than the maximum result (before penetration) of the skill’s mastery die. Successfully completing a formal training class resets this total. Therefore, a character could improve a skill with a 1d4 mastery die by four points before he has to take a class. Once he passes that class, he can again use tick marks improve that skill by up to four points before he must train once more. NPCs who are not adventurers actually use this as their primary method of improving their survival, life, and professional skills. As such, they need not train when using this method.

How Can I Increase the Chances of Actually Improving My Skills?

Well, aside from using mulligans to re-roll a failed skill improvement check, you don’t have a whole lot of obvious options. That said, why are you taking classes from the first teacher that happens to cross your path? Schools, teachers, class sizes, even instructional equipment can affect your character’s chances of learning a skill. It might cost a bit more, but you should insist on top schooling anytime your PC lays out cash for a class.

Shop around! In any large town or city, there are usually a number of training options. You don’t have to take every skill class from the same school if they’re within easy walking distance. Ask your GM about the class sizes, the equipment, and anything

Excerpt