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Dungeon master essentials kit

There is no shortage of books, guides, accessories, figurines, maps, and tools out there for Dungeon Masters looking to up their D&D games. And while many of those supplies can certainly enhance your D&D sessions, not all of them are necessary—especially for a new DM. So what are the real Dungeon Master essentials that you need in order to get started? Putting together your first DM kit may not be as challenging or expensive as you think. Check out my guide on starting D&D as a new player here. Bare-Bones Dungeons Master Essentials If you're worried about the cost of trying your hand at DMing, you can get started without spending a dime. This isn't necessarily ideal, but it's possible. At the very minimum, every DM needs these three things: Dice A copy of the rules Pencil and scratch paper You can get all three of these items for free if you use an online dice roller (like this one) and download the free copy of the basic rules from Wizards of the Coast. Just like that, you could be up and running your first adventure. Going this route is a great option if cost is something you're worried about. You can always buy better, more in-depth supplies later if you decide to keep playing. Of course, your first game might be a little easier to manage with a few more Dungeon Master essentials. I suggest adding these to your DM starter kit as well: Once you're ready to move beyond the basic rules in the free PDF, you'll want to invest in a Player's Handbook. This book includes the full set of core character options, combat rules, basic equipment, spell lists, and more. It will be your go-to reference whenever a question comes up during a game. A DM screen is another handy tool to help your sessions run more smoothly. While you can purchase DM screens with cool art on the outside and helpful information on the inside, you can just as easily create your own with cardboard or filing folders. A DM screen offers a few important advantages: first, you can fudge your dice rolls if necessary (like if the evil villain rolled enough damage to kill one of your players but you don't want that to happen); second, you can use it as a cheat sheet for whatever info you need at a glance, like NPC names or a map of the dungeon. As a new DM, you might not yet have a large dice collection (check out my list of the best D&D dice). If this is the case, I recommend getting bulk dice, particularly a box of d6s (six-sided dice) if you can. Not only are extra dice helpful when rolling damage and tracking other things, but they can also double as markers in combat. Finally, index cards. Add index cards to your Dungeon Master essentials kit. You can get a lot for cheap and their uses are almost endless. In my own games, I use them to track the initiative order (the order in which the players take their turns in combat) by folding them in half and hanging them over the top of my DM screen. On the back of each card (facing me), I have the name of the character and some of their stats like Armor Class and Passive Perception. On the front (facing the players) I write the character name, so everyone can see who's coming up next in the turn order. I've heard of other uses for index cards as well such as spell lists, player handouts, markers for area effects, quick sketches, and more. As you become more comfortable with your own DM kit, you'll likely figure out your own favorite use for them. Dungeon Master Add-Ons Beyond the basic dungeon master essentials, there are a great many tools that can add to your games and make your job easier. However, these tools also generally cost money, which is why I don't always recommend them for brand new DMs. But if you're looking to enhance your DM kit and dive into D&D, then these dungeon master supplies should be at the top of your list. Grid Mat A grid mat is a dry-erase or wet-erase play mat that you can use as a visual aid in D&D combat or exploration. You can draw maps and layouts and place figurines to demonstrate where characters are in relation to enemies, objects, spell effects, and more. Many mats feature a square grid on one side and a hexagonal grid on the other to give you options. I use what's called a "theater-of-the-mind" approach in many of my games as a DM (that is, combat happens in words and descriptions rather than anyone drawing it out). However, I use my grid mat during complex combat encounters such as scenarios with special terrain or a large number of enemies. For some encounters, it might be confusing for players to try to follow all the action without seeing it play out on the mat. That's where my grid mat really comes in handy. D&D Figurines Figurines aren't cheap, and building a large collection of them is a real investment. But it can make combat feel much more intense if your players are able to look at the creature they're fighting, even in miniature form. Likewise, players enjoy seeing their own characters come to life on a grid mat as figurines. I suggest starting with a handful of figurines you think you'll use a lot—common baddies like goblins or zombies. If you have a specific final boss in mind, it might be cool to get a nice figurine for him/her/it as well. As for player characters, you can encourage players to build and print their own if they really want to. D&D Books Wizards of the Coast has published several supplemental rulebooks and adventure modules over the years, and it can be tricky knowing which ones you should add to your Dungeon Master essentials list first. After you've purchased your own Player's Handbook, here is the order in which I would suggest getting your D&D books: Dungeon Master's Guide— This is a guidebook to help DMs enhance the premade adventures they run or create their very own stories. Monster Manual— This book contains information and stat blocks for the vast majority of monsters your characters might encounter in a D&D adventure. Xanathar's Guide to Everything— This supplement contains new rules for players and DMs, and it's written from the point of view of an eccentric beholder named Xanathar. Volo's Guide to Monsters— This book, written from the view of an explorer named Volothamp, adds new monsters, additional lore, and a few new character races to the mix for players and DMs. Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes— This is primarily a lore book (with a handful of added monsters) that provides context for many of the most important events in the D&D multiverse, as recorded by a powerful wizard named Mordenkainen. Each of these books will cost you somewhere in the realm of \$30-50, so collecting them all is quite an investment. I am still working on getting them all myself in fact. But there's no rush, and you can DM a fun game with just the Player's Handbook in your kit. On top of these supplemental books are a number of premade adventures known as modules. Some of the most well-known and well-loved modules are Curse of Strahd and Tomb of Annihilation—as of this writing there are about a dozen published adventures. As a new DM, I recommend getting started with the D&D Starter Set or the Stranger Things D&D Starter Set (based on the Stranger Things story). Both of these kits contain a premade adventure, premade characters, and all the information you need to run a successful campaign. Start Building Your Dungeon Master Kit While all of these supplies will give you a good foundation, over time you'll discover your own DM style and find what your Dungeon Master essentials are. I suggest you read other guides, learn what other DMs do, and constantly test new ideas while you're starting out. Eventually, you'll find things that work for you and things that don't, helping you become a better DM every session. Most people start playing Dungeons and Dragons because a friend has suggested they join their table. From that day onwards, the game takes over and sooner or later you will want to try your hand at being a Dungeon Master. However there are some of us who had no one to help us. We picked up a beginners kit or a manual and studied the rule books page after page, because no one was around to ease us into the game. To those of you who want to learn the game and have no one to help you, these kits can be a godsend, but are they really aimed at true novices, or are you expected to know the rules beforehand? What's In The Box? A good beginners kit for any role-playing game should have a rule book, the items you need, and a clear direction for the narrator to stay on track. Luckily both sets have these qualities, so we are off to a good start. Essential Kit Inside the Dungeons and Dragons Essentials Kit, you will find: 11 Dice 6 Blank Character Sheets A 64 pages rule book Dragon of Icespire Peak Campaign – Preset Adventure Double-Sided Poster Map Dungeon Master Screen 81 Useable Cards (Magic Items, Sidekicks, Conditions, Initiative Numbers, and Sidekicks) Starter Kit Inside the Dungeons and Dragons Starter Kit, you will find: 6 Dice 5 Premade Character Sheets A 32 pages rule book Lost Mine Of Phandelver Campaign – Preset Adventure The Box In Detail Just by looking at the selection above, we can see that the Essentials Kit has way more information and detail than the Starter Kit. But is detail what you need to understand the game? Dice The additional dice given to you in the Essentials Kits isn't exactly "essential." They include an extra 6-sided die, an extra 20-sided die, and what is known as the percentile dice. These dice are barely used in games, and although they can be helpful, they aren't necessary to play the game. Almost none of the mechanic's use those dice. The Starter Kit is made up of one 4-sided, one 8-sided, one 10-sided, one 12-sided, and one 20-sided. They are also blue instead of red. You need every one of these dice to play Dungeons and Dragons. Character Sheets As a new Dungeon Master and a new player, I struggled to understand how to create a character sheet. The proficiency bonuses messed me up, and when I leveled up my character, I left a lot of states on level 1. The premade character sheets in the Starter Kit eliminate the worry about creating a "correct" character. It also shows what a sheet should really look like. The characters themselves are fairly average, so you know you shouldn't be killed off in your first game. If you have already played Dungeons and Dragons before, then you might feel constricted by a premade character sheet. In which case, you should be looking at the Essentials Kit's blank sheet. Their rule books teach you how to build a character from scratch, and suggest what their backstory might be. The builds are still more limited than what the Player's Handbook would give, but when you are new to DMing (Dungeon Mastering) these restrictions can help you stay on track. Now that I know more about the games, I prefer to use DnD Beyond's online character sheets. They do the math for you, level up your characters, and keep all your special features and spell descriptions in easy-to-find locations. I have friends who prefer to play on paper; for them, the character sheets are easy to fill in once you know how proficiency bonus works. Your bonus gets higher as you gain levels, and if your character is good at something (like using a bow), they can add these bonuses to their attacks. When your characters level up, you will need to create a whole new character sheet to adjust these numbers. I think that new Dungeon Masters and new Players should start off with the Starter Kit's premade character sheets to help them understand how to use the sheets and how to build them correctly. Rule Books The Player's Handbook and the Dungeon Masters Guide are the main rule books in D&D for 5th Edition games. 5th Edition is the current edition of Dungeons and Dragons. You do not need to know the other editions to play. In total, they are around 640 pages long. The 64-page rule book in the Essentials Kit has picked out the essential rules from these books, so you can learn the basics of the game without being confused by the flare of lore. But the rule book in the Starter Kit has been massively watered down and changed. This elementary version of the rules is way easier to understand than the Essentials Kit. It basically holds your hand as it walks you through the rules, and it has stripped away the lore and confusion that new players often get overwhelmed by. However, the Essentials Kit gives you a lot of information (granted, not 640 pages worth) and keeps all of the terminology and lore attached to the rules. New Dungeon Masters will find the Essential's rule book overwhelming, and when you think you've wrapped your head around it, you forget that the Wizards should have been "preparing" their spells all along. Players who are not fresh off the page won't find the Essential's rule book a mind field. They have already played campaigns that touch on details like proficiencies and lore, so they might find the additional information helpful and insightful. Preset Adventure The Essentials Kit adventure gives a kind of "Monster of the Week" vibe. I won't go into too much detail, as our detailed review explained the ins and out of the campaign. First-time Dungeon Masters will have a hard time managing this story, as there are many NPCs (non-player characters) with unfinished backstories and desires just waiting around the game doing next to nothing. If you already know how to weave this type of dangling information into the story, then you won't have a problem with these background characters, but most new Dungeon Masters will tie themselves into a knot trying to create a story for them to fit into. The Starter Kit, however, is designed for the 5 premade characters the kit already gave you. The story is relatively short and doesn't exceed level 5, and the game itself doesn't go too far off track. There are some dangling NPCs that you should be wary of, but not so many that you'll trip over your own creation. Double-Sided Poster Map The poster map is only available in the Essentials Kit, and although (again) it is not essential to play the game, it is a fun addition to draw you into the story. The map shows the adventure location and the zoomed-in drawing of Phandalin, the main town. The quality is excellent, but the map and the books don't explain how long it will take your characters to get from one side of the map to the next. The math isn't hard, but the kit doesn't explicitly tell you how far your characters can move in a day. Instead, I will explain it here. On page 242 of the Dungeon Master's Guide and page 32 of the Essential's Rule Book, it is explained that "Characters can walk about 24 miles a day". The map's key says that 1 hexagon equals 5 miles. This means that each character can move between 4 and 5 hexagons a day. You can be creative here. Maybe it takes 4 hexagons to travel the roads, 4.5 to travel the grassland, and 5 to travel through the rivers, forests, and mountains. It's this creativity that I want to avoid giving to a new Dungeon Master. Ideally, new DMs should understand the basics before being asked to fiddle with the rules like this. Dungeon Master Screen The DM Screen is a Dungeon Master's best friend, and it is a big shame that the Starter Kit doesn't include one. It has all the basic and quick answers you might need while playing the game, including a size chart, a difficulty chart, condition descriptions, and much more. You can put the screen up, so your players cannot see your dice to allow the tension to grow, or you can stick helpful notes to the screen to remind you of those rules to just keep forgetting. 81 Useable Cards Because most of my players use DnD Beyond, we didn't find a need for physical handouts. We started playing in lockdown too, so my one paper-based player couldn't receive her Potion of Healing card when she found it. If you are playing in person and would like a physical handout, then these cards will be super helpful. They explain everything the item does, and they can fit into typical card holder pockets, thereby making searching for your items in physical form super easy. Although I like to play online, I do think these physical handouts are a lot of fun and super useful, so it's a shame that the Starter Kit does not include it as standard. Can They Be Used Together? Both the Starter Kit and the Essential's Kit are based around Phandalin. They are not explicitly designed to be used together as the character levels will not match, however that doesn't mean it's impossible! If you were to start off with the Starter Kit's premade 5 characters and finish the campaign on level 5, you could start the Essentials Kit's campaign and add in a couple of extra monsters to make the quests a little more challenging. If you wanted to play the campaigns at the same time, this wouldn't be a problem either. The stories mix well with each other, and this way, you don't need to mess up the monster numbers to balance the encounters. However, mixing two campaigns like that might be a little complicated for a truly new Dungeon Master. This idea might be better saved for someone who has had a little more experience. Which Beginner's Pack Should A New DM Buy? If you are a genuinely new Dungeon Master and you have never even played before, then the answer is obvious. You should pick the Starter Kit. It has just enough information for you to learn the game, but not so much that you get confused by all the nitty-gritty details. The premade character seems complex enough to be exciting but not so overwhelming that you'll disconnect from the character or be unable to learn their actions. You get given all the equipment that you need and not a drop more. If you have Dungeon Mastered before, or are an experienced player, then you should pick up the Essentials Kit first. The added Dungeon Master screen, the additional rules, the fleshed-out lore, and the ability to make up your own character sheets are enough to feel like you aren't being babied. You already know a lot of the information on playing the game, so you don't need a super watered-down version. You could argue that the Starter Kit would still be an excellent kit for anyone to start with, but because of the missing screen and lack of handout cards, you will be missing out on a lot of fun and useful equipment. More knowledgeable beginners can benefit from those extras. Whichever one you pick first, you should definitely buy the second kit after. The campaigns are great for every level, and they will fit perfectly into the world you and your players have already created. And who doesn't love an extra set of dice!

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