Tabletop Role Playing Games

All the stuff you need to know

Tabletop role playing games have been experiencing a resurgence in the last few years. This is partly due to podcasts, live streams, and YouTube channels full of groups enjoying the hobby. The largest growing segment in this hobby is women, but people of all ages are joining in. You can find games to play at game/comic stores, online, bars, schools, and libraries. This document will give you the information you need to understand this hobby and how it works perfectly in a library setting.

Here are the basics:

• A tabletop role playing game (RPG) is where you and a group of 4-8 people  
 cooperatively tell a story that you make up as you go along.  
 • You have books with rules to guide your play, dice to help randomize the results of any action you wish to take, and one person who takes the role of the Game Master (**GM**) or Dungeon Master (**DM**), the person who guides the whole process.  
 • The whole thing takes place in the imaginations of the people playing. No, you don’t typically dress up (though maybe on Halloween), and yes, some people use miniatures. All you really need is a rule book, dice, paper, pencils, and a group of friends.

RPGs facilitate all types of learning. Reading is the foremost, but it also helps with math skills, research skills, creativity, leadership, cooperation, and social skills. RPGs are now being used with special needs groups as a type of social therapy. While reading the books required for different game systems, many players discover a love of other subjects like cartography, art, ancient weaponry, and history. This is what makes RPGs the perfect springboard for learning.

First, pick out the genre that interests you most. There are game systems for every genre, and many based off popular TV shows, movies, and book series. There is everything from superheroes to space opera, modern mystery to a Jane Austen inspired system. By choosing your genre first, this will cut down on your list of possible game systems.

Next, you will have to pick the system you want to use. What will make this tricky is how “crunchy” (how many rules and how much math do you have to use) you want your system. Every genre has systems that vary in how crunchy they are. Dungeons and Dragons, for example, is a mid-range crunchy system, while Rolemaster is high level crunch. The best way to figure this out for little to no money is to search for a Quickstart on either [www.drivethrurpg.com](http://www.drivethrurpg.com) or on the system’s website. A Quickstart includes a basic rule set, a scenario, and some pregenerated characters. The longer the rules section and more detailed the character sheet will typically indicate a higher level of crunch. Also, check to see what kind of dice, or randomizer you will need to play the game. Most systems use dice of varying number of sides, noted as D# where the # is the number of sides on the die. Your typical 6-sided Monopoly die would be noted as a D6. You can pick up dice easily at a game store, Barnes & Noble, and online retailers. Some games use other randomizers, like decks of cards.

Now you have all your materials, so you just need to get ready to GM your first game. Most first time GMs are TERRIFIED when they first start. Know that it is alright to not be like those guys on the YouTube videos. Let your group know that you are new to this, and most players will be kind. Make sure that you prepare yourself. If you are using a Quickstart, read through it three times. First to go over the whole thing. Second to find all the rules and terms that need clarification, so you have time to look them up. Third is to highlight what you need to remember during the game session. Take notes, either during or right after your session, so you can keep track of what the players did. It is also handy to write down things that will come back to haunt the characters, ideas that they gave you, and random thoughts you had while running the game. Know that you are in charge. The rules are really guidelines, so change or keep what you want.

Remember, the ultimate goal is to have fun. No one will remember if you got the rules wrong. No one will know if you rewrote the scenario mid-way through the session. All anyone will remember is the fun they had being the good guys, beating the bad guys, and making clever jokes along the way.

Terminology/Glossery

The Basics

* In every game system there is always a basic rule book. Some are referred to as just that, “Basic Rule Book”. This will have the most basic version of the rules that players should know or need to reference during a game. It can be called a Player’s Guide, a Player’s Handbook (**PHB**), a Core Rulebook, or several other terms. It is always the first book any system will tell you to purchase.
* The next most important book for a system is the book for the person running the game. It can be called the Dungeon Master’s Guide (**DMG**), the Storyteller’s Guide, the Game Master’s Guide, or other. There are systems that do not have this type of book, instead they have a section in the basic rule book that is for the Game Master (**GM**) or **Storyteller**. Players aren’t supposed to read it, but they always do. Who doesn’t want to tell their own story?
* The next most important item is a GM or DM screen. This is a 3 or 4 paneled screen that unfolds and can be stood up on a table. This screen has art on one side and game system information on the other. This blocks the players’ view of what the GM has on the table. This lets the GM keep notes and dice rolls private. You can purchase one that goes with your system or make your own and put the rules that you find most important on the GM side of the screen. I use one all the time because I like to keep my rolls secret so I can alter, or “fudge”, my rolls to the players’ advantage. I am also not above rolling dice and making a face just to make my players worry.
* After this, there are sourcebooks and modules. Sourcebooks have information on a specific subject for the game, such as information about the setting or books full of monsters. Modules are prewritten adventures that the GM can use to run their game, instead of making everything up themselves. This is a time and sanity saver when running a library RPG club.
* Make sure you pay attention to what edition of the system you are using. Most of the time, different editions are compatible, but some conversion will be required. Often, it is noted with an “e” after the edition number, like D&D 5e.

Character sheet anatomy

* **Attributes** – These are a numeric value for a character’s ability in a natural born statistic. They can also be called Statistics or Abilities. These are things like Strength, Constitution, Intelligence, and more. Typically, the higher the ability score, the better the character is. They can be modified by things in the character creation system, like race or background, but that is specific to the system.
* **Skills** – These are learned abilities, normally modified in some way by Attributes. They can also be called Focuses or other terms. An example of this in the Fantasy AGE system would be as follows: a character has an Ability score in Fighting of 3, which makes them pretty skilled naturally. Because they have Focus in Spears, they get to add 2 to any roll involving spears. So, when they fight with a spear, this character would start with a total of 5 (Fighting + Spears) before they even roll dice.
* **Advantages** and **Disadvantages** – This where any special bonuses or minuses your character gets through the character creation process are typically recorded. This can also be called Talents, Quirks, Limitations or any number of other terms. These can add or subtract to different tests, give you an advantage in certain circumstances, or just cover a natural ability. An example of a disadvantage in Champions 6e would be a character with a Strong fear of heights. Every time this character gets near a ledge, they would have to make a roll against their EGO statistic to see if they have the mental strength to not clutch the nearest support poll and refuse to let it go. An example of a natural advantage in Dungeons and Dragons 5e would be Darkvision, which is the ability to see 60 feet in dim light like it is bright light and in darkness as if it was dim light.
* **Hit Points** – This is a character’s ability to take damage, mental and physical. This can be subdivided into several categories, depending on the system, such as Stun and Fatigue. The higher the score, the more damage you can take in that category.
* **Defense** – This reduces the amount of damage you take. This can be armor, natural defenses, force fields, a bonus for a high Dexterity Attribute, or many other things. This can be a straight score from character creation, or can be calculated from Attributes, Skills, and other Advantages or Disadvantages.
* **Weapons** – This will be where a character has their attack and defense skill and damage written down for each weapon they can use. This will typically include a spot for range for things like bows or guns.
* **Equipment** – There is always a place to write down your stuff. A character acquires a lot of stuff along the way. Money, armor, a weird piece of fungus that you found in a cave that you want to research later, and any number of other things that you pick up will add to what equipment you get from character creation. I always tell my players “Write down your stuff or you don’t have it.” I am always losing things in real life, so players can lose stuff too.

Resources

Of Dice and Men: the story of Dungeons & Dragons and the people who play it by David M. Ewalt

[Dragons in the Stacks: A Teen Librarian's Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing (Libraries Unlimited Professional Guides for Young Adult Librarians Series)](https://www.amazon.com/Dragons-Stacks-Librarians-Role-Playing-Professional/dp/1610692616/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=dragon+in+the+stacks&qid=1566922136&s=gateway&sr=8-1) by Steven A. Torres-Roman

FATE Accessibility Toolkit – Evil Hat Productions (at [www.drivethrurpg.com](http://www.drivethrurpg.com))

Robin’s Laws of Good Game Mastering – Steve Jackson Games

Consent in Gaming – by Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain (www.montecookgames,com)

[www.ennie-awards.com](http://www.ennie-awards.com)

Webshows worth watching that won’t take up all your spare time

Titansgrave: Ashes of Valkana – with Wil Wheaton

Force Grey – with Matthew Mercer

Relics and Rarities – with Deborah Ann Woll

Game systems in the CADL catalog

Fantasy

Dungeons and Dragons 5e

Player’s Handbook

Dungeon Master’s Guide

Monster Manual

Acquisitions Incorporated

Guildmaster’s Guide to Ravnica

Mordenkainen’s Tome of Foes

Xanathar’s Guide to Everything

Sword Coast Adventurer’s Guide

Volo’s Guide to Monsters

Curse of Strahd

Princes of the Apocalypse

Waterdeep Dragon Heist

Waterdeep Dungeon of the Mad Mage

Dungeons and Dragons 4e and 3.5e

Adventurer’s Vault

Adventurer’s Vault 2

Dark Sun Campaign Setting

Dark Sun Creature Catalog

Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide

Forgotten Realms Player’s Guide

Draconomicon: Chromatic Dragons

Dungeon Delve

Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead

Revenge of the Giants

Dragonlance Campaign Setting

Pathfinder

Pathfinder Core Rulebook

Pathfinder Playtest Core Rulebook

Heroes of the High Court

Crownfall

Monster Hunter’s Handbook

Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Bestiary 6

The Dark Eye

The Dark Eye Rules

The Dark Eye: Aventuria Almanac

Hackmaster

Hackmaster Player’s Handbook

Hacklopedia of Beasts

Fantasy AGE

Fantasy AGE Rulebook

Blue Rose

Titansgrave: Ashes of Valkana

Earthdawn

Earthdawn: Player’s Guide

Familiars of Terra

Anthro Adventures

Dungeon Crawl Classics

Legend of the Five Rings 4e

Legend of the Burning Sands

Secrets of the Empire: Naishou Provence

Sword and Fan

Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying

Science Fiction

Starfinder

Starfinder Core Rulebook

Alien Archive 2

The Expanse

Modern

Modern AGE

The Dresden Files

The Dresden Files: Your Story

The Dresden Files: Our World

The Dresden Files: Paranet Papers

Lucha Libre Hero

Monster Hunter International

Horror

Call of Cthulhu

Call of Cthulhu

Alone Against the Dark

Cthulhu Confidential

Penny Dreadful: Fire in the Sky

Universal

Cortex Plus Hacker’s Guide

FATE

War of Ashes: Fate of Agaptus

The Aether Sea

Romance in the Air

Other

1879

Mutants and Masterminds

Doctor Who

Recommendations for different age groups

Here are some recommendations for systems by age group. The chief considerations are crunch level and subject matter. The decisions are made by erring on the side of a fun, light game. Assume that anything in the younger group is appropriate for the older groups. Games included in the list are in print and are available in the CADL system.

Kids 7-12

Familiars of Terra

FATE

Fantasy/Modern AGE core system

Dungeons and Dragons – particularly Anthro Adventures

Teens 13-18

Pathfinder/Starfinder

Mutants and Masterminds

1879

Earthdawn

The Dark Eye

Adults only

Blue Rose (Adult subject matter, gender identity, dark themes. Could be modified for the right group of teens.)

Lucha Libre Hero (Adult themes, horror.)

The Expanse (Adult subject matter and dark themes. Could be modified for the right group of teens.)

A Song of Ice and Fire (The Game of Thrones RPG. Self explanatory.)

Sample letter requesting donations

Hello!

My name is Christine Martin-Resotko and I am a Library Assistant at the Mason branch of the Capital Area District Libraries ([www.cadl.org](http://www.cadl.org)). I currently run the teen chapter of our CADL Adventurers Club RPG group. I am writing to ask if your company would be willing to donate some items to our system to further this program.

Physical donations will be cataloged, to make them available to our patrons. PDF donations will be added to our intranet, for staff use in supporting our programs. Any other swag donated will be passed out to our patrons during our programs.

I am very passionate about this program and the skills that role playing games can give to people in our community. I would appreciate any support you can give this effort. If you have any representatives in our area, they are welcome to drop in and see what we are doing in our community. If you have any questions for me, please feel free to e-mail me at [resotkoc@cadl.org](mailto:resotkoc@cadl.org), or call me at our branch.

Thank you for your time.

Christine Martin-Resotko

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