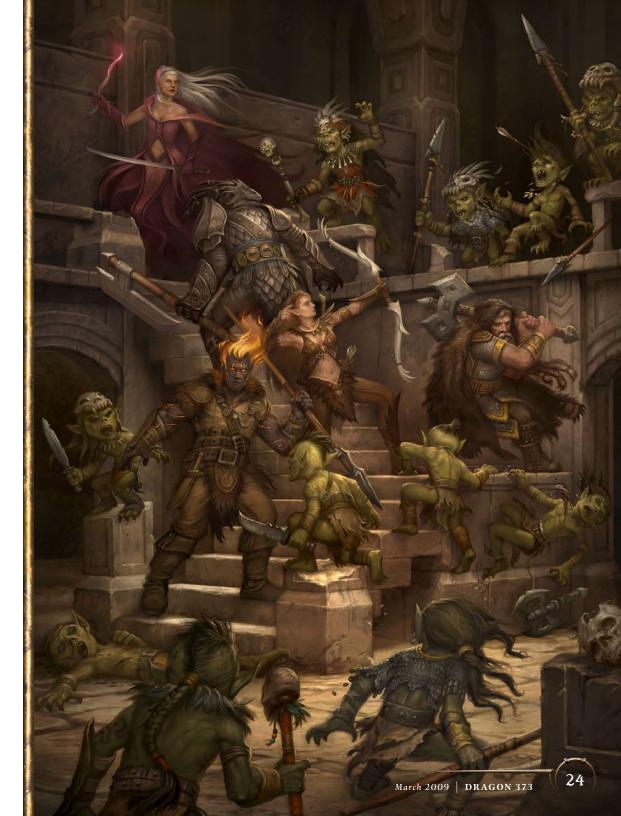# PARTY BUILDING

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A new *Player's Handbook* means new opportunities for character creation and new foundations on which Dungeon Masters can build campaigns. Even in groups still striving toward completing their destiny quests, a new *Player's Handbook* helps shape the game's content by providing different avenues through which players can express their character ideas and discover new tactics to overcome the opposition. Within the crisp new pages, you'll find new classes, new feats, paragon paths, epic destinies, magic items, and much more, all waiting for you to explore.

Much ink has been spent on building characters, from the basic tips covered in the build descriptions to the broad overview described in the opening pages of the *Player's Handbook,* but you can find little on the subject of building the adventuring party. The party is the glue binding disparate heroes into an effective fighting unit and coalition bound by common cause and purpose. A group of heroes might descend into the dungeon together, but they have no chance of surviving unless they work as a team. This idea lives in the heart of this article, and it helps novices and veterans alike to look at character creation in a new way and work together to create a dynamic and capable team built on principles of cooperation rather than on individual whims.

The *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*® game encourages party building already. By assigning each class a role, the game gives you have a good idea about how your character is supposed to contribute to the party. Since there are four roles, it's not a big logical leap to think it's a good idea to have a representative of each role in the party. You don't have to do so, though. You can find plenty of ways to compensate for a lack of one role or another. By accounting for each role, making good class and race combinations, and covering holes, you can turn your expertise into an advantage. It might even give you and your fellows the edge you need to claim victory, attain glory, and ascend into legend.

BASICS

The very first thing you do as a player in a game is create your character. The character is your window into the game world, as well as your means of participation in the story and in the encounters unfolding over the course of game play. Your character choice is important not only for your enjoyment, but also in how you contribute to the team. In a modest-sized game, character choice is often determined by the party's need: with holes represented by a missing role, such as a defender or leader.

In a smaller group, you might not have enough players to cover the four roles, which forces the team to emphasize their class's secondary roles or to broaden their capabilities with multiclass feats. For larger groups, the team's needs aren't as clear. In a seven-player group, is an extra leader more important than an extra defender? Or should you invest in extra strikers? What about an extra controller?

Most gaming groups feel their way through the process of team building, letting it develop organically through game play and personal taste, and that's fine. Five players with three strikers and two defenders can manage well enough, just as could a group consisting of five leaders. But experienced players know that imbalanced parties can make some encounters extraordinarily easy and others disastrously hard. For some groups, careful party balance might not be necessary. But for groups who like to have the tools to take on just about any encounter, approaching the character creation process with an eye toward party balance might be just what is needed to experience the full power of the 4th Edition game.

TWO APPROACHES

There are at least two approaches to party building. One is the bottom-up approach. Here, each player, with minimal consultation, settles on the class and race he or she wants to play and builds the character. A fine approach and one used by many groups, it does, as discussed above, run the risk of imbalance, resulting in absent roles or too many representatives of a specific role. Another is the top-down approach. Before anyone chooses a class or race, or makes any decision about the character, the group comes together to establish the tone and style the group will take. From this perspective, a group might aim for a balanced party by deciding which roles they need to fill and figure out who will fill each one. Of course, a group might decide to jettison any notion of party balance and intentionally build an imbalanced group. This is fine too, especially since the group can always select classes with secondary roles.

ROLE RECAP

The *Player's Handbook* describes the four roles and their function within the adventuring group, but it's worth examining them a little closer. A role specifies what a character of a specific class is supposed to do within a group, or, if you're a sports enthusiast, it assigns the character a position on the team, not unlike a running back, goalie, or guard. If you leave a position unfilled, the other positions have to work harder. Furthermore, if two characters fill the same position, odds are they'll step on each other's toes. Knowing what your role is supposed to do helps you be a more effective contributor to the party.

CONTROLLER

Druid, Invoker, Wizard
The controller manages the battlefield. Armed with powers capable of striking several targets at once, the controller can handle crowds with ease. Many controllers can create or modify terrain to restrict movement and control the combat's flow. Controllers can bestow harmful conditions or "debuffs," many of which help strikers get past high defenses and hit the targets they hurt the most.

Many Targets, Low Damage: The more targets you can affect with a power, the less damage the power deals. Bursts and blasts are the controller's weapons, so more often than not you're dealing less damage than your counterparts. You are best at wiping out minions and finishing off bloodied enemies.

Artillery: Most controllers are fragile. They lack the defenses and hit points other characters enjoy, meaning a hit costs a controller more than it might a defender. So, you should select powers that hit your enemies at range to make sure enemies can't reach you if they survive the attack. In addition, many of your ranged powers control or restrict movement. This gives you the advantage of maintaining good distance from your opponents. Also, you can keep a target pinned down for the striker or defender to finish off.

Terrain Maker: Many controller powers interact with terrain, either changing existing terrain or creating terrain to hamper or damage enemies. You can control crowds, direct traffic, and maneuver enemies, funneling them into the teeth of a tough defender or aggressive striker.

Toolbox: Your utility powers and access to rituals make you the best at dealing with noncombat challenges. You can gather information, create magic items, and even restore fallen comrades.

DEFENDER

Fighter, Paladin, Swordmage, Warden

The defender is the party's bulwark, the deadly wall containing and destroying anything in reach. Defenders all have some means of keeping their enemies focused on them, at the very least imposing the marked condition, but also instilling another nasty effect to punish opponents whose eyes and attacks wander elsewhere. As a defender, you might work with another character, helping the ally get combat advantage to trigger damage spikes like Sneak Attack, or you might hunker down and protect the controllers and ranged strikers in your group, being the first line of defense against any foe.

Black Hole: Your main job as a defender is to lock down the bad guys and keep their attention fixed on you. You achieve this by marking your opponents. All defender classes provide a little something extra so when an enemy ignores you, you can correct its mistake with a heaping spoonful of damage. You might not take the enemy out—strikers are good at snagging kills—but you can always keep the enemy pinned down long enough for someone else to do the job.

Enabler: Your presence enables other allies to do what they do best. You can help set up a rogue's Sneak Attack, keep a target pinned so a warlock can curse the opponent and fry it with *eldritch blast,* or contain a group of smaller targets so a controller to erase them from the battlefield.

Wall: With a high Armor Class, great hit points, and plenty of healing surges, you are all about containment. You are the insurmountable wall on the battlefield. By blocking movement, marking, and delivering punishing attacks, you make sure few enemies can escape you.

LEADER

Bard, Cleric, Shaman, Warlord

Leaders hold the party together. They keep the defenders defending, strikers striking, and controllers controlling. Leaders can often step into other roles, helping to defend allies against enemy attacks or deliver crippling attacks that allow strikers do their worst.

Booster: When you're around, your allies are the better for it. Many leader powers provide boosts to attack rolls, defenses, temporary hit points, and a slew of other benefits. Sometimes granting these benefits might mean you forgo making an attack, but when it's a chance to deal 1d8 + 4 damage or giving the barbarian a chance to dish out 2d6 + 6 extra damage, it's not a big sacrifice.

Healer: As a leader, one of your main jobs is to keep your allies on their feet throughout the fight. In most cases, you help allies spend healing surges and give them a little extra, too. You might also grant temporary hit points, regeneration, or the ability to make extra saving throws to remove annoying conditions. This aspect of a leader is what makes the role one of the most essential on the battlefield.

Tactician: Finally, you can also act as the tactical leader by creating opportunities for your allies to get in extra attacks, shift, or cover other allies' escape.

STRIKER

Avenger, Barbarian, Ranger, Rogue, Sorcerer, Warlock

The striker is all about taking out the enemy. With a damage spike (Sneak Attack, Hunter's Quarry, and so on), strikers deal more damage than any other role in the game. Most times, this comes from increased damage, but it can also result from greater accuracy.

Artillery: Generally, there are two types of strikers: melee and ranged. Rogues and rangers can do both. As artillery, you fling death at range, picking out targets and hitting them hard. Once they drop, you're ready to take out another foe. If you're artillery, you need to let the defenders and leaders do their thing, while you hang back and pick off the stragglers.

Guerrilla: You might be the other kind of striker—the guerrilla. If so, you skirt around the battlefield, slipping in to hit hard and then dance away before your opponent can respond. Some melee strikers might stick around, hammering at their foes until they fall—the avenger, ranger, and barbarian are all good examples. Even so, you probably want to stay with a defender so when you do hit, your target can't turn around and do you the same favor.

Role Replacement: Many strikers can also fill other roles as needed. A two-blade ranger or rageblood barbarian can easily step into the defender role, while a scourge warlock is almost as good as a controller. If your group is short a role, odds are it will fall to you to pick up the slack.

THE FIFTH ROLE

There's no fifth role, really, but when you have five or more players, some role overlap happens. The "fifth" role is the duplicated role. The role taken by the fifth character helps to determine the party's tactics, but it also can help to shore up weaknesses, patching holes left by challenged characters and novice players.

Extra Controller: Two controllers means the group can address just about any challenge. Control-heavy parties have a tactical edge in combat and are better suited to dealing with larger groups, especially when eight or more minions are involved.

When two controllers work together, they can layer area effects, stack crippling conditions on enemy leaders, and wipe the battlefield of minions and lesser creatures. Although it's tempting to go for the overkill gained from two control-focused characters, a better strategy is to use the second controller to cover a secondary role, ideally a striker. The war wizard or wrathful invoker complement the control wizard or guardian druid, and converts some of the stronger area effects to focused damage attacks useful for bringing an enemy down.

Extra Defender: Two defenders can stop just about anything from reaching soft PCs in the second rank. Controllers and ranged strikers can attack with impunity as the defenders lock down anything near. Defender-rich parties excel at containment and are devastating against smaller numbered opponents such as elites, solos, and small groups of opponents.

When two defenders focus their attacks against a single opponent, unless one defender takes a nasty hit, their marking mechanisms are redundant since a creature can carry only one mark at a time. Defenders should spread out to block flanks and catch enemy groups rather than clump together. A second defender might also benefit from developing secondary role responsibilities, either through multiclassing or choosing powers emphasizing a build with strong secondary role rider effects. The protecting paladin, for example, adds a little extra leader to the group and is excellent support for the great weapon fighter.

Extra Leader: Hit points are never gone for long in a two-leader party. The defender finds he or she never runs out of hit points, can shrug off ongoing damage and conditions, and can withstand the worst attacks as support comes from two directions. Leaders can step up and help defend, since they are often capable warriors in their own right.

Two leaders can keep the PCs going, but if both fill strong supporting roles—an inspiring warlord and devoted cleric for example, the defender might not be enough to block incoming traffic. As with all double roles, use the opportunity a second leader presents to emphasize the common defender aspects one finds in many leader classes. A battle cleric, tactical warlord, or panther shaman can help protect fragile characters.

Extra Striker: Strikers are popular for good reason—they dish out the damage. Having two strikers in the group is perhaps one of the most common five player arrangements since it allows for one ranged striker and one melee striker.

Provided the strikers keep moving, the defender can focus on protecting the controller, while the leader keeps everybody hitting. The only drawback to two strikers is the party has fewer hit points among the members and might have a glass jaw when the defender goes down. But then again, most groups with two strikers can deal enough damage to prevent the enemy from ever coming close enough to cause this sort of trouble.

MISSING ROLES

Ideally, all four roles see equal representation in a party, but sometimes this isn't the case. Adventuring parties can comprise a wide variety of characters, sometimes to their detriment. Missing one or more roles doesn't mean the whole enterprise is doomed. It just means everyone has to invest a little more time in careful character design.

MISSING CONTROLLER

A myth among *D&D* players is that the controller is expendable. Controllers have rituals, toolbox utility powers, and game-changing attack powers capable of shifting momentum from a loss to a victory. Still, controllers can be challenging characters to play and in the wrong hands, what would normally be an asset could very well become a liability.

If no one jumps on the controller role, there are ways to fill the role without having to invest in multiclass feats. One way is to make sure the existing classes have strong controller secondary roles (see page $@@—rather than play a ranger, choose an avenger or sorcerer instead. Alternatively, a player might choose a race with a close or area attack, such as the dragonborn's *dragon breath* attack. Finally, one character should always have access to the Ritual Caster feat.

MISSING DEFENDER

A missing defender is a conspicuous absence. Little stops the enemy from washing over the party, so soft characters—ranged strikers and controllers—are at greater risk. Luckily, groups can invest in leaders to keep everyone above bloodied. Or they can pick up strikers to increase the group's damage output. Sometimes these advantages aren't enough, so other character choices become important.

Filling the defender's role is tricky since few other classes can lock down their enemies. Instead of marking opponents, other characters must threaten foes by dealing considerable damage, or by putting themselves in harm's way to protect the party. The barbarian deals enough damage and has plenty of hit points to keep an enemy's attention, while the battle cleric and bravura warlord can make strong melee attacks and use enabling powers. A scourge warlock has the hit points to soak a few extra attacks, while a two-blade ranger can deliver punishing attacks almost equal to those used by the barbarian.

Other characters should invest in feats and powers that provide escape routes, such as free shifts, teleportation, or pushing enemies away. Furthermore, consider high hit point classes or classes with close blast and burst powers to drive off enemies who come too close.

MISSING LEADER

Even though every character can use second wind, going without a leader is risky and puts more pressure on the rest of the group. Characters might have to resort to potions, sacrifice valuable actions to use second wind, or take extended rests more frequently.

A good mix of secondary leaders can replace an actual leader. A paladin can bolster allies if need be and an invoker can protect overwhelmed allies if the battle turns south. The barbarian and druid can help here, too.

Outside of these choices, the party can adjust by embracing the best defense is a good offense mentality. As long as the party can outstrip their enemies' ability to deal damage, the party should be able to emerge from a battle intact. To this end, the group should invest in extra melee strikers such as a brutal rogue and a two-blade ranger. Working together, they can dispatch most enemies before they cause trouble.

Of the characters, the defenders are the ones who suffer the most. Without a leader to buttress their defense, they can easily be overwhelmed when locking down several enemies at once. Defender players might choose races with boosts to Constitution, such as the dwarf, goliath, minotaur, or warforged, or at the very least, pick up the Durable and Toughness feats.

Missing Striker

A rarity to be sure, given the sheer number of striker classes available, missing a striker means that the group has reduced damage output and their flexibility to handle different sorts of encounters. Since the striker is not present to spike the group's damage, the burden of dispatching enemies falls to the defenders and controllers, and sometimes the leaders. Combats sometimes take longer, but the group is likely more resilient with the added benefit of an extra defender or leader.

The obvious choice to fill this hole is the druid. A druid can function as a controller in humanoid form and a striker in beast form. Aside from the druid, the swordmage is good too, since the class can use its mark to maneuver around the battlefield. A tactical warlord can increase the amount of damage a defender deals, granting extra attacks or boosts to attack rolls. Finally, adding either an invoker or wizard can increase the party's damage output.

Multiclassing Solutions

Multiclassing feats provides a way to diversify character options, allowing characters to dabble in a mixture of powers within the same role, such as a fighter who also dips into the paladin class. It can also help characters cover absent roles. Multiclassing is tricky, since it requires a heavy feat investment to realize all the benefits, while diminishing the character's general effectiveness within his or her primary role.

Complications

Every multiclass character faces the same challenges. The first is accuracy. Unless your primary class's powers and your multiclass's powers use the same ability score for attacks, your multiclass powers are always inferior to your primary class powers. For example, if you are a wizard and you want to fill the striker role too by dabbling in warlock, you can expect a 1- to 3-point drop in accuracy when using your warlock spells.

The solution here is simple: restrict your multiclass choices to classes whose attack ability matches that of your primary class—wizard/swordmage, cleric/paladin, fighter/ranger, and so on. Alternatively, rather than invest a score into the secondary ability needed for your primary class, slip it into the attack ability for your multiclass. This is where non-optimized class-race combinations are often strongest. So, if you were building a wizard/warlock, you might choose the drow race, and place your 18 in Intelligence, 14 in Charisma, 11 in Dexterity, 10s in Constitution and Wisdom, and your 8 in Strength. After ability score adjustments, you'd have Str 8, Con 10, Dex 13, Int 18, Wis 10, and Cha 16. Your Dexterity can still give you a boost when using Wand of Accuracy, but *darkfire* also helps you hit high-defense targets with your warlock powers. Furthermore, you're only 1 point behind in accuracy when using your warlock powers.

There's also the issue of weapons and implements. You have only so many magic items at your disposal, so is it worth sacrificing a high-level neck slot item or armor for an extra implement to use with a handful of powers?

Again, the solution is apparent. Choose a class that uses the same tools, weapons, or implements. When it comes to implements, look for identical implements. You might not get the full benefits of the property when using the implement with your multiclass powers, but the enhancement bonus still applies.

| Class | –Recommended Multiclass by Role– | | | |
	Controller	Defender	Leader	Striker
Avenger	Invoker	Swordmage	Cleric	–
Barbarian	Druid	Warden	Warlord	–
Bard	Wizard	Paladin or Swordmage	–	Warlock
Cleric	Invoker	Paladin	–	Avenger
Druid	–	Warden	Shaman	Avenger
Fighter	Druid	–	Warlord	Barbarian
Invoker	–	Swordmage	Cleric or Shaman	Avenger or Warlock
Paladin	Invoker	–	Cleric or Warlord	Barbarian
Ranger	Druid	Fighter	Warlord	–
Rogue	Druid or Wizard	Fighter	Warlord	–
Shaman	Druid	Swordmage	–	Avenger
Sorcerer	Wizard	Paladin	Bard	–
Swordmage	Wizard	–	Warlord	Barbarian
Warden	Druid	–	Warlord	Barbarian
Warlock	Wizard	Paladin or Swordmage	Bard	–
Warlord	Wizard	Fighter or Paladin	–	Ranger
Wizard	–	Swordmage	Bard	Avenger

Race	Optimal Multiclass Combinations
Deva	Avenger, Cleric, Druid, Invoker, Shaman, Swordmage, Wizard
Dragonborn	Bard, Fighter, Paladin, Sorcerer, Warden, Warlock, Warlord
Drow	Bard, Ranger, Rogue, Warlock, Wizard
Dwarf	Avenger, Cleric, Druid, Invoker, Shaman
Eladrin	Ranger, Rogue, Swordmage, Wizard
Elf	Avenger, Cleric, Druid, Invoker, Ranger, Rogue, Shaman
Genasi	Fighter, Ranger, Swordmage, Warden, Warlord, Wizard
Goliath	Barbarian, Fighter, Ranger, Warden, Warlord
Gnoll	Ranger, Rogue
Gnome	Bard, Swordmage, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard
Half-Elf	Bard, Sorcerer, Warlock
Half-Orc	Fighter, Ranger, Rogue, Warden, Warlord
Halfling	Bard, Ranger, Rogue, Sorcerer, Warlock
Human	–
Minotaur	Barbarian, Fighter, Ranger, Warden, Warlord
Longtooth Shifter	Avenger, Cleric, Druid, Fighter, Invoker, Ranger, Shaman, Warden, Warlord
Razorclaw Shifter	Avenger, Cleric, Druid, Invoker, Ranger, Rogue, Shaman
Tiefling	Bard, Sorcerer, Swordmage, Warlock, Wizard
Warforged	Barbarian, Fighter, Ranger, Warden, Warlord

Good combinations include fighter/barbarian, cleric/paladin, ranger/warlord, wizard/warlock, avenger/cleric, and druid/shaman.

For more details on multiclassing, consult the tables here. The first describes ideal multiclass combinations and accounts for similar attack abilities, matching implements (where possible), and ease of entry based on typical ability score arrays. The second table defines which races are best at picking up multiclass feats for specific classes. Putting the two together, you can identify good combinations for race and class when building a multiclass character.

SIZE MATTERS

A typical adventuring group features five characters. Smaller groups (three or fewer players) have to go without certain roles, while larger groups (seven or more players) see role overlap. There are no hard and fast rules about what types of roles should be present in a small or large group, but the following tips should help you avoid the pitfalls that might arise.

SMALL GROUPS

In a small group, you must sacrifice at least one role. A group without a leader means it's up to the PCs to see to their own healing, while a group without a controller might find itself overwhelmed by minions and unable to take control over the battlefield. Sacrificing any role is tough in a small team, so the way around this problem is to pick classes with strong secondary roles.

The barbarian, for example, is a striker, but it can also fill in as a defender or leader. An invoker is a controller, but the preserving build offers a few leaderlike prayers. See the following table for secondary roles.

Example: Short on players, Tom, Bob, and Joe sit down to create their party. Tom wants to play a leader and Bob's interested in a striker. Joe opts for a defender. Since the group lacks a controller, Bob decides to play a sorcerer. To help Bob's character, Tom chooses the shaman, which has some striker elements. Finally, Joe chooses a paladin so he can fill in as a leader if need be. So the party consists of Tom's panther shaman, Bob's chaos sorcerer, and Joe's protecting paladin.

Class	Role	Secondary Role
Avenger	Striker	Controller
Barbarian	Striker	Defender or Leader
Bard	Leader	Controller
Cleric	Leader	Defender
Druid	Controller	Leader or Striker
Fighter	Defender	Striker
Invoker	Controller	Leader or Striker
Paladin	Defender	Leader
Ranger	Striker	Defender
Rogue	Striker	Controller
Shaman	Leader	Defender or Striker
Sorcerer	Striker	Controller
Swordmage	Defender	Striker
Warden	Defender	Controller or Striker
Warlock	Striker	Controller
Wizard	Controller	Striker

Large Groups

Large groups can cover each role, but it's not always clear which roles should apply to the sixth, seventh, or eighth characters. Since encounters swell with party size, the result is usually extra enemies to face on the battlefield. So a group with only one defender is less likely to stop a flood of foes, one controller might not be enough to contain a slew of minions or manage the battlefield, and a striker can't deal enough damage to keep the enemy in check.

One way to look at building a party for a large group is to split the team into two groups. For a group of six, split the party into two groups of three. For seven players, divide into one group of four and one group of three. For eight players, split it into one group of five and one group of three. Build each group separately, but be sure to cover each role at least once between both groups. Use secondary roles to cover those roles that have less representation within the group.

Example: Everyone shows up to make characters and, to the DM's dismay, there are seven players. Being veterans, the group sits down to build their party. Splitting into two groups, one of four and the other of three, the larger group fills out the four roles and the smaller group decides on a controller, leader, and defender. Since the whole group is a bit low on strikers, one player chooses the predator druid for his controller, while another player selects the control wizard to make sure the group has at least one strong controller. For defenders, one player opts for the great weapon fighter and the other chooses the earth warden. An inspiring warlord, trickster rogue, and cunning bard round out the rest of the group.

The Role of Race

Settling on the group dynamic, what class each player wants to play, the players then generate their characters. A close look at the race and class combinations reveals opportunities and challenges for strong party-building tactics.

Any race can be any class, but even a cursory look at the racial information reveals some classes are better suited for specific races and vice versa. While you could play a gnome fighter, a human fighter would be more effective, and a goliath fighter would be even more effective still. Unless you want the challenge of playing against type and all the disadvantages doing so entails, your race and class combination is the most important decision you will make.

To simplify the process, you can determine how well a race functions with a class by comparing the ability scores the race boosts to those ability scores needed for the class. What a class needs in terms of ability scores falls into two types: A-shaped and V-shaped. An A-shaped class needs one high primary score and at least a good score in one of the two secondary scores. Examples of an A-shaped class would be the avenger, barbarian, fighter, and wizard.

A V-shaped class has two primary abilities and usually one secondary ability. When building a character, you really need only one or the other ability, but having both gives you the broadest range of powers the class can offer. Examples of V-shaped classes include the cleric, paladin, ranger, and warlock.

Other ability scores are important, but they are not as vital as primary and secondary scores. So, the way a race's ability score bonuses line up with the class's primary and secondary ability scores is the clearest indication of a strong combination. Building against type requires the character to invest expensive scores in the primary abilities, thus diminishing the character in other areas. Even with a strong race-class combination, you might overly specialize, such as a goliath fighter with a 20 Strength, and thus leave your other abilities to suffer, but typically, the most effective characters have a high primary ability, good secondary ability, and balanced abilities to keep their defenses at workable levels.

To simplify the process of determining which races are appropriate for which classes, you can divide all possible combinations into four categories: Optimal, Advantaged, Standard, and Disadvantaged.

An optimized combination means the race provides a boost to the class's primary and secondary abilities. An advantaged combination indicates the race provides a boost to the class's primary ability, but not to its secondary ability. A standard combination means the race provides a boost to the class's secondary ability, but not its primary ability. Finally, a disadvantaged combination means the ability score boosts apply to a tertiary score or none of the abilities most important to the class.

Race	Classes
Deva	
Optimal	Avenger, Invoker, Shaman, Wizard
Advantaged	Cleric, Druid, Swordmage
Standard	Bard, Fighter, Paladin, Ranger, Warden, Warlock, Warlord
Disadvantaged	Barbarian, Rogue, Sorcerer
Dragonborn	
Optimal	Barbarian, Paladin, Sorcerer, Warlord
Advantaged	Bard, Fighter, Ranger, Warden, Warlock
Standard	Cleric, Rogue, Swordmage
Disadvantaged	Avenger, Druid, Invoker, Shaman, Wizard
Drow	
Optimal	Rogue, Sorcerer
Advantaged	Bard, Paladin, Ranger, Warlock
Standard	Avenger, Barbarian, Cleric, Druid, Fighter, Warlord, Wizard
Disadvantaged	Invoker, Shaman, Swordmage, Warden
Dwarf	
Optimal	Druid, Invoker, Shaman
Advantaged	Avenger, Cleric, Warlock
Standard	Barbarian, Bard, Fighter, Paladin, Ranger, Swordmage, Warden, Wizard
Disadvantaged	Rogue, Sorcerer, Warlord
Eladrin	
Optimal	Wizard
Advantaged	Ranger, Rogue, Swordmage
Standard	Avenger, Bard, Druid, Fighter, Invoker, Shaman, Sorcerer, Warlock, Warlord
Disadvantaged	Barbarian, Cleric, Paladin, Warden (any)
Elf	
Optimal	Avenger, Druid
Advantaged	Cleric, Invoker, Ranger, Rogue, Shaman
Standard	Fighter, Paladin, Sorcerer, Warden, Wizard
Disadvantaged	Barbarian, Bard, Swordmage, Warlock, Warlord
Genasi	
Optimal	Swordmage, Warlord
Advantaged	Barbarian, Cleric, Fighter, Paladin, Ranger, Warden, Wizard
Standard	Avenger, Bard, Invoker, Rogue, Shaman, Sorcerer, Warlock
Disadvantaged	Druid
Goliath	
Optimal	Barbarian, Fighter, Warden
Advantaged	Cleric, Paladin, Ranger, Warlock, Warlord
Standard	Bard, Druid, Invoker, Rogue, Shaman, Sorcerer, Swordmage
Disadvantaged	Avenger, Wizard

The table here identifies the various race and class combinations and their categories for all the current races and classes available in the game. Some race-class combos might actually perform quite well even though they are in advantaged or standard categories. Take the classic dwarf fighter. Although his racial boosts to ability scores bump Constitution and Wisdom—secondary and tertiary fighter scores—the Dwarven Weapon Training feat grants access to superior axes and hammers and jumps up the damage. Add to this the dwarf's immovability, and you get a powerful great weapon or battlerager fighter who can hold a line and rip through enemies to great effect. So, use the table as a starting point and a way to help you frame a character concept in a strong and effective manner, but remember to look for exceptions.

Playing Against Type

Distilling a class choice down to its mechanical advantages is admittedly soulless. If you're only looking for optimization, you're bound to miss some of the most interesting character concepts. While an eladrin cleric might not be as effective as a dwarven cleric, it can be just as much fun to play and roleplay. It's from these unusual combinations some of the most memorable characters are born, and you should never dismiss an interesting combination just because it's harder to pull off mechanically.

Party Themes

The final consideration for building your adventuring group is to think about its theme. The theme might describe the general character, a common tactic, or some element to unify the group. Picking a theme isn't necessary, but doing so helps the group respond best in battle and also helps to make good decisions about the party composition.

Gnoll		
Optimal	–	
Advantaged	Ranger, Rogue, Warlock	
Standard	Avenger, Barbarian, Bard, Druid, Fighter, Invoker, Shaman, Sorcerer, Swordmage, Warden, Wizard	
Disadvantaged	Cleric, Paladin, Warlord	
Gnome		
Optimal	Bard, Warlock	
Advantaged	Paladin, Sorcerer, Swordmage, Wizard	
Standard	Avenger, Barbarian, Cleric, Invoker, Rogue, Shaman, Warlord	
Disadvantaged	Druid, Fighter, Ranger, Warden	
Half-Elf		
Optimal	Bard	
Advantaged	Paladin, Sorcerer, Warlock	
Standard	Barbarian, Cleric, Druid, Fighter, Invoker, Rogue, Shaman, Swordmage, Warden, Warlord	
Disadvantaged	Avenger, Ranger, Wizard	
Half-Orc		
Optimal	Fighter, Ranger, Rogue	
Advantaged	Barbarian, Cleric, Paladin, Warden, Warlord	
Standard	Avenger, Druid, Sorcerer, Swordmage, Wizard	
Disadvantaged	Bard, Invoker, Shaman, Warlock	
Halfling		
Optimal	Rogue, Sorcerer	
Advantaged	Bard, Paladin, Ranger, Warlock	
Standard	Avenger, Barbarian, Cleric, Druid, Fighter, Warlord, Wizard	
Disadvantaged	Invoker, Shaman, Swordmage, Warden	
Human		
Advantaged	Any	
Minotaur		
Optimal	Barbarian, Fighter, Warden	
Advantaged	Cleric, Paladin, Ranger, Warlock, Warlord	
Standard	Bard, Druid, Invoker, Rogue, Shaman, Sorcerer, Swordmage	
Disadvantaged	Avenger, Wizard	
Longtooth Shifter		
Optimal	Cleric, Warden	
Advantaged	Avenger, Barbarian, Druid, Fighter, Invoker, Paladin, Ranger, Shaman, Warlord	
Standard	Rogue, Sorcerer, Swordmage, Wizard	
Disadvantaged	Bard, Warlock	

Classic

Controller, Defender, Leader, Striker, Striker

The classic party is probably the most balanced. With one of each role represented, the group can fill the extra slot with an extra striker. One becomes the melee striker, working with the defender to take down enemies, while the other functions as a ranged striker, picking off enemies from afar.

   Sample Party: Cleric, fighter, ranger, rogue, wizard

Battle Management

Controller, Controller, Defender, Leader, Striker

The control party emphasizes battlefield dominance, restricting enemy actions, herding foes into masses, and then wiping them off the map. While the two controllers establish the tone, they need heavy hitters up front to keep the occasional enemy from reaching them. Aside from the defender, a tough leader or melee striker can add extra insurance.

   Sample Party: Bard, druid, swordmage, ranger, wizard

Tanking

Controller, Defender, Defender, Leader, Striker

Placing all the emphasis on containment, a tanking party puts up two heavy defenders in the front ranks with the support of a leader with a strong emphasis on defender as a secondary role. Since the party tends to operate in tighter formations, a controller and ranged striker can work behind the front ranks and pick off skirmishers, lurkers, and artillery without fear of reprisals.

   Sample Party: Druid, fighter, warden, warlord, warlock

Razorclaw Shifter		
Optimal	Avenger, Druid	
Advantaged	Cleric, Invoker, Ranger, Rogue, Shaman	
Standard	Fighter, Paladin, Sorcerer, Warden, Wizard	
Disadvantaged	Barbarian, Bard, Swordmage, Warlock, Warlord	
Tiefling		
Optimal	Bard, Warlock	
Advantaged	Paladin, Sorcerer, Swordmage, Wizard	
Standard	Avenger, Barbarian, Cleric, Invoker, Rogue, Shaman, Warlord	
Disadvantaged	Druid, Fighter, Ranger, Warden	
Warforged		
Optimal	Barbarian, Fighter, Warden	
Advantaged	Cleric, Paladin, Ranger, Warlock, Warlord	
Standard	Bard, Druid, Invoker, Rogue, Shaman, Sorcerer, Swordmage	
Disadvantaged	Avenger, Wizard	

LIVING FORTRESS

Controller, Defender, Leader, Leader, Striker

A resilient party uses attrition to defeat their enemies. Since they can regain hit points easily or at least accumulate temporary hit points at a rapid rate, they can outstrip the amount of damage their enemies deal and outlast their foe. Doubling up on leaders and supporting them with classes that have leader as their secondary roles gives the party an almost unlimited reserve of resources.

Sample Party: Avenger, cleric, paladin, invoker, warlord

RAINING DEATH

Controller, Defender, Striker, Striker, Striker

A risky composition to be sure, this group invests in two ranged strikers and one controller, leaving it up to a tough defender and a melee striker to keep the enemies at bay. Without the leader, the group has a glass jaw, but with a protecting paladin and preserving invoker, the group can beat the enemy down before they close, giving themselves a fighting chance when the battle switches to melee.

Sample Party: Barbarian, paladin, sorcerer, warlock, wizard

SHOCK AND AWE

Defender, Leader, Striker, Striker, Striker

Rather than hit enemies from afar, a shock-and-awe party engages quickly, smashing through their enemy ranks and delivering staggering amounts of damage. Since the party closes, a controller will likely have a tough time using his bursts and blasts, so it's best to invest in another striker to keep damage output high.

Sample Party: Barbarian, cleric, fighter, ranger, rogue

POWER SOURCE THEMES

You can also build parties along power source themes, so each member would have classes from the same power source. An arcane party is a bit disadvantaged in defending, but they do have impressive artillery support.

A divine party has hit points in abundance, but their ranged attacks suffer, placing the burden on the invoker's shoulders to deal with artillery.

Martial parties dispense with the controller and either pick up an extra fighter—a tempest fighter or

battlerager fighter are good—or another warlord. The rogue and the ranger are versatile enough to handle melee and ranged combat, giving the group a wide range of tactics.

Finally, a primal party is all about dealing damage. With a predator druid working alongside a rageblood barbarian, there's little to stop this powerful group. The shaman can increase the party's numbers with his spirits, either to attack from afar or to boost allies' attacks.

Sample Arcane Party: Bard, sorcerer, swordmage, warlock, wizard

Sample Divine Party: Avenger, avenger, cleric, invoker, paladin

Sample Martial Party: Fighter, fighter, ranger, rogue, warlord

Sample Primal Party: Barbarian, druid, druid, shaman, warden

RACIAL THEME

Perhaps the most challenging theme is the racial party. In this theme, each party member has the same race. While an interesting experiment, and sometimes successful, certain roles are considerably weaker than they might be in an otherwise mixed party. For example, an all-eladrin party is good in control (wizard), solid in striking (archer rangers and rogues), and can even field a good defender (swordmage), but its leaders are weak by comparison.

When assembling a single-race group, work carefully with the other players and review the advice throughout this article to ensure your group makes up for its weaknesses. A specialized character built against type might surprise you and make for a fun and interesting character. Even if the character is a bit on the weaker side, your group can pitch in with multiclass feats or choosing classes with secondary roles to make up for the disadvantaged character. And if you find it's just not worth taking on a disadvantaged role, you have plenty of ways to fill the gap.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When you pool your resources and place the party's interests over your personal inclinations, you can create a more effective, streamlined, and deadly team. A party filled with optimized characters works well together and can devise devastating strategies to handle just about any challenge they come across. While an optimized party might be successful, it works only if everyone around the table has the same interest in this approach. If a player really wants to build a character that doesn't fit within the party model, don't worry about it. The point of this game is to have fun. Just because you don't have the perfect balance of characters and roles doesn't mean you can't survive combats, navigate skill challenges, and, above all, have a good time. In fact, it's the narrow victories and the close calls you remember most. ↻

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb contributed design to such books as the *Forgotten Realms® Player's Guide, Draconomicon I: Chromatic Dragons, Manual of the Planes, P2: Demon Queen's Enclave, Martial Power, Player's Handbook 2, Eberron® Campaign Guide, Eberron Player's Guide, Divine Power, Adventurer's Vault 2, Draconomicon 2: Metallic Dragons, Primal Power,* as well as numerous articles for *D&D Insider.* Robert lives in Tennessee.