

All About Grappling (Part One)

By Skip Williams

Many a **D&D** character has gone down to defeat while writhing in an opponent's grasp. Unfortunately, many a **D&D** game has come to a grinding halt as the DM and players struggled with the **grappling** rules. This article can't do much about the mayhem that ensues when big a monster grabs your character, but it can ease the confusion surrounding the grappling rules.

Grappling Basics

Everyone knows that grappling involves **grabbing** a foe and holding on, but it's a trifle more complicated than that. Here is an overview of the basics:

- A grapple **attack** begins with grabbing a foe.

You can't grapple anything until you get your hands on it first. For most **player characters**, grabbing a foe for a grapple attack requires a successful **melee touch attack**.

The grab provokes an **attack of opportunity** from the foe being grabbed. If the attack of opportunity hits and deals **damage**, the grab automatically fails (see page 156 in the *Player's Handbook*). If the attack of opportunity doesn't hit, or if it hits and deals no damage (as it might if the target has **damage reduction**), it doesn't automatically defeat the grab, but the grab still fails if the melee touch attack fails.

- An opposed grapple check follows a successful grab.

Once you grab someone, you must establish a hold, and you do that by making an opposed grapple check against your foe. The rules say the opposed grapple check that follows a successful grab is a **free action** for you, but it's really not an **action** at all. You make the grapple check as part of the attack you used to make the grab. Likewise, the opposed check your foe makes to resist you is not an action for him.

A grapple check is just like a **melee attack roll**, except that a special **size** modifier replaces your normal size **modifier**. In regular **melee** combat, smaller creatures get both an attack **bonus** and an **Armor Class** bonus. When grappling, the advantage goes to the bigger opponent. Table 7-1 in the *Monster Manual* shows size modifiers for regular and grappling combat. Page 156 in the *Player's Handbook* also shows special size modifiers for grappling.

Because a grapple check is an opposed check, the combatant with the higher total wins the check. If the check is a tie, the combatant with the highest total grapple modifier (base attack bonus + Strength modifier + special size modifier + any miscellaneous that might apply). If there is a tie and both combatants have the same grapple modifier, roll again to break the tie.

If you win the opposed check, you deal unarmed strike damage to your foe (1d3 points of nonlethal damage for most **Medium** characters) and you have your foe in your grasp.

If you lose the opposed check, your foe avoids your grasp.

- You can maintain a hold on a foe from **round** to round.

Once you establish a hold on a foe (by grabbing that foe and then winning the ensuing opposed grapple check) you can keep holding on by moving into the foe's **space**. This movement is free for you (it doesn't count against your **speed** for the current round), but it provokes attacks of opportunity from foes that **threaten** you (but not from the foe you have in your grasp).

You can enter your foe's space even if your relative sizes would normally keep you from ending your move in that foe's space or even passing through that space (see page 148 in the *Player's Handbook*).

- Grappling has consequences.

You're grappling whenever you have a foe in your grasp or vice versa.

When you're grappling, you don't threaten any squares, not even the square you're in.

You lose your **Dexterity** bonus to AC (if you have one) against opponents you aren't grappling. (You can still use it against opponents you are grappling.)

You can't move while grappling unless you first win an opposed grapple check, and even then you have to drag your opponent along with you (see Part Two).

You share your foe's space when you're grappling. If you and your foe are different sizes, use the larger of the two space entries. Any attack that can reach the shared space can hit you. You don't get cover from a foe you're grappling, but any ranged attack aimed into your shared space has an equal chance to strike you or the creature you're grappling. Roll randomly to determine which creature a ranged attack strikes (see note 3 on Table 8-6 in the *Player's Handbook*). If you use a weapon against a foe you're grappling (see Part Two), you don't have to roll to determine the target you actually attack.

- Grappling has size limits.

You can grab a creature of any size, but you cannot establish or maintain a hold on a creature that is two or more size categories bigger than you. For example, if you're a Medium creature, you can establish a hold only on a creature of Large size or smaller. Huge or bigger creatures are too big for you to grapple.

- You make opposed checks many times when grappling.

When someone is trying to do something to you in a grapple, such as establish a hold, deal damage, or use your own weapon against you, you and your foe make opposed checks. An opposed grapple check you make to resist something your foe does is not an action for you, and you can make the opposed check even when you're flat footed or it isn't your turn.

Common Misconceptions about Grappling

You'll find that many of your problems with grappling will vanish if you avoid these common misconceptions:

- You're helpless when a foe has you in a hold, or when a foe has you pinned.

You lose your **Dexterity** bonus to Armor Class (if any) when grappling (even when it's you doing the holding), but you're not helpless. If you've been pinned (see Part Three), you have more troubles, but a pinned character isn't helpless, either.

Because a grappling or pinned creature is not helpless, it is not subject to the **coup de grace** special attack action.

- If you lose an opposed grapple check while holding on to a foe, your foe automatically escapes.

It is true that you must win an opposed grapple check to establish a hold right after you've grabbed a foe. Once you've established a hold, however, you keep holding on until you release your foe or your foe escapes. When you begin your turn with a foe in your grasp, you can make an opposed grapple check to accomplish many things, including damaging or pinning your foe (see Parts Two and Three). If you fail the opposed check, you don't accomplish whatever you were trying to do, but your failure doesn't release your foe.

- If you win an opposed grapple check while a foe is holding on to you, you escape.

If you begin your turn in a foe's grasp, you can escape by making and winning an opposed grapple

check. If you fail, you don't escape. During your foe's turn, you might have to make additional opposed grapple check to resist whatever your foe tries to do to you. Winning such a check merely foils whatever the foe was trying to do, but you don't escape unless you use an action on your own turn to escape.

Grappling Requirements

The rules don't go into much detail about when you're capable of making grapple attacks. Common sense, however, suggests a few minimal requirements.

Because grappling involves grabbing and holding a foe, you need both hands to do it.

Since most shields in the **D&D** game are strapped to your forearm, you can let go of the shield and use your shield hand for grappling. You can grab or hold a foe with a buckler strapped to your arm at no penalty. A light shield imposes a -1 penalty on grapple checks you make offensively. A heavy shield imposes a -2 penalty. You can't initiate a grapple while using a tower shield. Your shield doesn't affect any grapple checks you make defensively (such as check to escape a foe's hold).

Creatures that lack manipulative appendages can make grapple attacks if they have body parts they can wrap around foes or some means of clamping down on a target. For example, a snake can grapple by biting and wrapping its body around a foe.

Your Options When Grappling

As noted in Part One, you're grappling whenever you have a foe in your grasp or whenever you're in a foe's grasp. When you begin your turn involved in a grapple (no matter who started the grapple), you have several options, as noted on pages 155-157 in the *Player's Handbook*. Here's a review, with a few additional comments.

Many of these maneuvers take the place of an **attack** (rather than being **standard actions** or **move actions**). If your **base attack bonus** allows you multiple attacks, you can attempt one of these maneuvers in place of each of your attacks, but you use successively lower attack **bonuses** to resolve any required opposed **grapple checks**.

Many of these maneuvers require you to win an opposed grapple check before you can perform them. If you fail the check, you cannot perform the maneuvers and the **action** (or attack) you used to perform the maneuver is wasted.

Activate a Magic Item: You can activate most kinds of magic items except items with a **spell completion** trigger (such as scrolls). In most cases, activating a magic item is a standard action.

Attack Your Opponent: You can make an attack with an **unarmed strike**, **natural weapon**, or **light weapon** against another character you are grappling. You take a -4 **penalty** on such attacks.

You can't attack with two weapons while grappling, even if both are light weapons. If you have multiple natural weapons, however, you can use all of them while grappling. In many cases, though, you're better off making an opposed grapple check to damage your opponent rather than making an attack with a natural weapon (see the section on damaging your opponent for details).

Cast a Spell: You can attempt to **cast some spells** while grappling, or even while **pinned** (see Part Three). The **spell** you cast while grappling (or pinned) must have a **casting time** of no more than 1 standard action. The spell cannot have a somatic component, and you must have in hand any material components or focuses you might need for the spell. To cast the spell, you also must succeed on a Concentration **check** (DC 20 + spell level) or lose the spell.

The Still Spell metamagic feat can prove useful for casting spell while grappling, provided that using the feat doesn't increase the spell's casting time to more than 1 standard action (as it would for a **bard** or **sorcerer**).

A **spell-like ability** has no verbal, somatic, material, focus, or **XP** components, so you can use one while grappling. To do so, you must succeed on a Concentration check; the DC for the check is exactly the same as it would be if you were casting a spell. [See Rules of the Game](#) for more information on spell-like abilities.

Damage Your Opponent: You can make an opposed grapple check to deal damage to your opponent when grappling. If you win the opposed check, you deal **nonlethal damage** equivalent to an unarmed strike (1d3 points for **Medium** attackers or 1d2 points for **Small** attackers, plus **Strength** modifiers). If you want to deal **lethal damage**, you take a -4 penalty on your grapple check.

Monks (and a few other characters), deal more damage with unarmed strikes than other characters, and the damage is lethal. However, a monk can choose to deal their damage as nonlethal damage when grappling without taking the usual -4 penalty for changing lethal damage to nonlethal damage.

If a creature has natural weaponry, it deals lethal natural weapon damage with a successful opposed grapple check (its natural weapons are just like unarmed strikes). A creature with natural weaponry can choose to deal nonlethal damage in a grapple by taking a -4 penalty.

Draw a Light Weapon: You can draw a light weapon while grappling as a move action. This requires a successful grapple check.

Escape from Grapple: You can escape from an opponent's grasp by winning an opposed grapple check in place of making an attack. You can make an Escape Artist check in place of your grapple check if you so desire, but this requires a standard action. If you choose to make an Escape Artist check, your foe still makes a grapple check to oppose your check.

If more than one opponent is grappling you, your grapple check result (or Escape Artist check result) has to beat all their individual check results to escape. (Opponents don't have to try to hold you if they don't want to.) If you escape, you finish the action by moving into any **space** adjacent to your opponent or opponents. This movement is part of the attack or standard action you used to escape the grapple. The movement provokes **attacks of opportunity** from foes who **threaten** the space you leave, but the movement doesn't count against your **speed** for the current **turn**.

Move: You can move half your speed (bringing all others engaged in the grapple with you) by winning an opposed grapple check. This requires a standard action, and you must beat all the other individual check results to move the grapple. Even if you win the opposed check (or checks) you must be strong enough to drag the combined weights of all the creatures you're moving. Your movement provokes attacks of opportunity from foes that threaten you. Likewise, the creatures you drag along also provoke attacks of opportunity from foes that threaten them when you move them.

If you have pinned your foe and nobody else is involved in the grapple (see Part Four), you get +4 bonus on your grapple check to move the pinned opponent.

Retrieve a Spell Component: By using a **full-round action**, you can produce a spell component from your pouch while grappling.

Pin Your Opponent: You can hold your opponent immobile for 1 round by winning an opposed grapple check (made in place of an attack). Once you have an opponent pinned, you have a few new options available to you, but there are a few things you can't do (see Part Three).

Break Another's Pin: If you are grappling an opponent who has another character pinned, you can make an opposed grapple check in place of an attack. If you win, you break the hold that the opponent has over the other character. The character is still grappling, but is no longer pinned.

Use Opponent's Weapon: If your opponent is holding a **light weapon**, you can use it to attack him. Make an opposed grapple check (in place of an attack). If you win, make an attack roll with the weapon (doing this doesn't require another action). You have a -4 penalty on the attack roll.

You don't gain possession of the weapon by performing this action; you simply turn the weapon against your foe for one attack.

Other Options when Grappling

The grappling options presented in the *Player's Handbook* cover most things you'd want to do while grappling, but here are a few more (strictly optional) possibilities.

Break Another's Hold: This works just like breaking another's pin, except that you use it against a foe that merely has a hold on another character. If you win the opposed check, you free the character you're helping.

Throw Your Foe to the Ground: This works just like a trip attack except that you don't make an initial **touch attack** (because you're grasping your foe already) and you and your foe make opposed grapple checks to resolve the trip attack. If you win, you and your foe fall **prone** in the space you both share, but you're still grappling. At your option you can take a -4 penalty on the opposed check; if you win you break your foe's hold on you and you throw your foe to the ground in a space adjacent to the space you formerly shared. (You stay on your feet.) Your foe's movement does not provoke attacks of opportunity, nor does it count against her movement for the current turn (or her next turn).

If you lose the opposed check, your foe gets a chance to trip you by making an opposed grapple check, just as described above.

Release Your Hold: Curiously, the *Player's Handbook* says nothing about voluntarily relinquishing your hold on a foe, so here's a rule to cover that. You can release your foe as a **free action**. You are still considered to be grappling, however, unless your foe also decides to release you at same time. If your foe does not want to release you, you can escape by winning an opposed grapple check that you make instead of a melee attack.

When you and your foe release each other, one of you must go to a space adjacent to the space the two of you once shared. The movement provokes attacks of opportunity from foes who threaten the space the character leaves, but the movement doesn't count against the character's speed for the current turn. If you made a successful opposed grapple check to end the grapple, you decide who moves. If you both decide to release each other, make an opposed grapple check and the winner decides who moves.

Retrieve a Stored Item: You can use a full-round action to grab an item you're carrying. The stored item must be fairly accessible -- that is stored in a bandoleer, belt pouch, sleeve, pocket, or other location within easy reach.

The Effects of Being Pinned

As noted last week, a pinned character is held immobile (but not helpless) for 1 **round**. While you're pinned, you take a -4 **penalty** to your AC against opponents other than the one pinning you. At your opponent's option, you may also be unable to speak.

Your Options While Pinned

You can speak while pinned only if your opponent has not chosen to keep you from speaking. If your foe allows you to speak, you can **cast a spell** with a verbal component, provided that the spell does not have a somatic component, provided that the spell has a **casting time** no longer than one **standard action**, and provided that you have any required material or focus components in hand. You must make a Concentration **check** to cast the spell, as noted in Part Two. You cannot use a **full-round action** to retrieve a spell component you need as you can when merely grappling. The Still Spell and Silent Spell metamagic feats can prove useful for casting spells while grappling, provided that using the feat doesn't increase the spell's casting time to more than 1 standard action (as it would for a **bard** or **sorcerer**).

A **spell-like ability** has no verbal, somatic, material, focus, or **XP** components, so you can use one while pinned. To do so, you must make a Concentration check; the **DC** for the check is exactly the same as it would be if you were casting a spell. See [Rules of the Game](#) for more information on spell-like abilities.

As you might expect, you can't move out of the **space** you share with a foe that has pinned you. You cannot take any other actions except to make an opposed grapple check to escape the pin in place of an attack. You can make an Escape Artist check in place of your grapple check if you want, but this requires a standard action. If you win the opposed check, you escape the pin, but you're still grappling. If your **base attack bonus** allows you to make multiple attacks, you can attempt to escape the pin multiple times (at successively lower attack bonuses). If you escape the pin, you're still grappling with your foe, but if you have still have attacks available, you can keep right on grappling, as noted in Part Two.

Your Options While Pinning an Opponent

Holding another creature immobile takes quite a bit of effort, so your options while pinning another creature are pretty limited, but you do have an advantage over a foe you have pinned. Pages 156-157 in the *Player's Handbook* describe what you can and cannot do when you have a foe pinned.

You cannot can't draw or use a weapon (against the pinned character or any other character), escape another's grapple, retrieve a spell component, pin another character, or break another's pin while you are pinning an opponent.

You can attempt to damage your opponent with an opposed grapple check, use your opponent's weapon against him, or attempt to move the grapple (all described in Part Two). You also can cast a spell as described above.

Pinning a foe makes some new grappling maneuvers available to you:

Snatch Items: You can use a disarm action to remove or grab away a well-secured object worn by a pinned opponent, but he gets a +4 bonus on his roll to resist your attempt (see the Disarm action on page 155 in the *Player's Handbook*). Because your pinned foe can't attack, your attempt to disarm your foe doesn't provoke an **attack of opportunity** from that foe.

Release Your Foe: When you have a foe pinned, you're more or less in control of the situation. You can voluntarily release a pinned foe as a **free action**; if you do so, you are no longer considered to be grappling that character (and vice versa).

Once released, your foe must go to a space adjacent to the space the two of you once shared. The movement provokes attacks of opportunity from foes who threaten the space your foe leaves, but the movement doesn't count against the foe's speed for the current turn.

Other Options While Pinning an Opponent

Here are a few optional maneuvers for use against a foe you've pinned.

Throw Your Foe to the Ground: Make an opposed grapple check as a **melee attack**. If you win, your foe winds up **prone** in any **square** adjacent to the square you and your foe formerly shared. The movement provokes attacks of opportunity from enemies who **threaten** the space your foe leaves, but the movement doesn't count against the foe's **speed** for the current **turn**. You stay on your feet in the space you formerly shared with your foe and you and your foe are no longer grappling.

Toss Your Foe: Make an opposed grapple check as a **melee attack**. If you succeed, you can literally pick up your foe (provided you can lift your foe's weight). Make a **Strength** check; if your result is at least 10, you toss your foe 5 feet. For every 5 points your Strength check result exceeds 10, you toss your foe another 5 feet, to a maximum of 25 feet.

Move Your Foe: Make an opposed grapple check as a melee attack. If you win, you shift your foe into any square adjacent to the square you and your foe formerly shared. You must be able to carry or drag your foe's weight to move your foe.

You can stay in the space you and foe formerly shared; if you do, you release your foe and are no longer grappling. You also can choose to move along with your foe; if you do, your foe remains pinned. The movement provokes attacks of opportunity from enemies who threaten the space you or your foe leaves, but the movement doesn't count against you or your foe's speed for the current turn.

Grappling with More than One Foe

Sometimes, you'll find it helpful to join a grappling contest that's already in progress, such as when a big monster **grabs** a key ally.

Joining an Existing Grapple: When your chosen foe is already grappling, you can use a **melee attack** to grab him and establish a hold just as described in Part One, except that the target doesn't get an **attack of opportunity** against you, and your grab automatically succeeds. You still have to make a successful opposed grapple check to become part of the grapple.

If multiple opponents are involved in the grapple, you pick one to make the opposed grapple check against. In this case, you don't have to randomly determine which foe your grab attack strikes (see Part One). If that seems overly generous to you, you can require a **full-round action** to choose your target. As part of that **action**, you make the grab and the ensuing opposed grapple check to try and establish a hold.

Ganging Up in a Grapple: Up to four combatants can grapple a single opponent in a given **round**. Creatures that are one or more **size** categories smaller than you count for half, creatures that are one size category larger than you count double, and creatures two or more size categories larger count quadruple. For example, eight halflings (size **Small**) can grapple one human (size **Medium**).

When Your Foes Gang Up on You: When you are grappling with multiple opponents, you usually choose one opponent and make an opposed check against that opponent. If you attempt to escape from the grapple, however, you must make grapple check against every foe that has hold of you. You make one check and compare it to your foes' check results. If you win all the opposed checks, you escape from all your foes. The rules don't say so, but it's reasonable to assume that if you don't win all the opposed checks, you don't escape from any of them (the holds you don't break keep you in place). According to the rules, escaping from multiple grapplers is the only time you have to beat all your foes' opposed rolls. Common sense suggests that moving multiple grapplers (see Part Two) also requires you to beat all their opposed grapple checks.

Monsters and Grappling

The rules don't say much about how monsters conduct grappling combat.

It's easiest, however, to allow a monster one grappling attack per **natural weapon** it has, provided that the natural weapon can hold on to the target in some fashion. The monster uses its listed grapple bonus when attacking with a primary natural weapon (or weapons) and its listed grapple bonus -5 for any secondary natural weapons. If the monster's grapple attack deals damage to a foe, the damage is **lethal** (unless the monster takes a -4 penalty to deal **nonlethal damage**) and equal to the damage rating for the natural weapon. For example, a troll grappling with a claw has a grapple bonus of +14 and deals 1d6+6 point of damage with the attack.

A slightly more complex method for handling grappling monsters is to allow the monster one grapple attack for every 5 points of base attack bonus it has. If the monster has natural weaponry, it deals lethal damage from one natural attack. The monster can use each natural weapon only once during its turn. If the monster's base attack allows it more grapple attacks than it has natural weapons, it must deal normal unarmed damage for any extra attacks.

Improved Grab: The improved grab special attack allows a monster to make a grab attack as part of a regular melee attack with a particular natural weapon (usually a bite or claw). If the attack hits, the natural weapon deals damage normally, and the monster immediately makes an opposed check to establish a hold. The attack doesn't provoke an attack of opportunity. Since the attack already dealt damage when it hit, a successful hold deals no extra damage. Each successful grapple check the attacker makes during successive rounds automatically deals the damage indicated for the attack that established the hold. (This works just like making a grapple check to deal damage.)

A creature with the improved grab special attack has the option to conduct the grapple normally, or simply use the part of its body it used in the improved grab to hold the opponent. If it chooses to do the latter, it takes a -20 penalty on grapple checks, but it is not considered grappled itself; the creature does not lose its Dexterity bonus to AC, still threatens an area, and can use its remaining attacks against other opponents. This is handy for really big monsters, such as giant squids and krakens.

When a creature gets a hold after an improved grab attack, it pulls the opponent into its space (rather than entering the foe's space). According to page 310 in the *Monster Manual*, the grabbed creature's involuntary movement does not provoke attacks of opportunity. A creature with the improved grab special attack and reach drags a grabbed foe a considerable distance.

A creature with the improved grab special attack can move without making an opposed grapple check, provided it can drag the opponent's weight. The creature's movement and the involuntary movement by anyone it drags along provokes attacks of opportunity normally.

Constrict: Creatures with the **constrict** special attack deal extra damage when grappling. Most creatures with this attack usually also have the improved grab special attack. A creature deals extra constriction damage when it first grabs a foe and establishes a hold. If the creature later makes a grapple check to deal damage to a creature in its grasp, it deals damage from the natural weapon it uses in the attack (if any) and extra constriction damage as well.