

All About Sneak Attacks

By Skip Williams

Sneak Attacks

It seems that some DMs and players out there just can't agree on how the sneak attack ability really works. To be sure, a clever player can deal out a big pile of damage through sneak attacks. A 20th-level rogue fighting with two weapons could deal 40d6 points of damage or more in a single round of sneak attacks, which is enough to make most DMs cry "foul" the first time a PC tries it.

So, let's examine just when sneak attacks are possible, how many sneak attacks characters can make during 1 round, and how the rules for sneak attacks interact with other rules that govern combat.

The Basics of the Sneak Attack

For basic rules governing sneak attacks, look in the rogue class description in Chapter 3 of the *Player's Handbook*. Here's an overview.

Sneak attacks require one of two basic conditions:

- The target must be denied his Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (whether he actually has a Dexterity bonus or not) against the attack.

--or--

- The attacker must flank the target.

If the attacker cannot meet either of these two conditions, no sneak attack is possible. If the attacker can meet at least one of these conditions, a sneak attack is possible, provided that something else doesn't intrude and spoil the sneak attack. Several things can kill a sneak attack, even if the attacker sets up the attack properly:

- Ranged attacks can be sneak attacks only if the range is 30 feet or less.
- The attacker must use a weapon optimally to make a sneak attack. If the attacker takes the -4 penalty to deal nonlethal damage, no sneak attack is possible. (A weapon that normally deals nonlethal damage, such as a sap, can be used in a sneak attack; however, you deal nonlethal damage if you do so.)
- Sneak attacks are possible only against living creatures that have discernible anatomies. Undead, constructs, oozes, plants, and incorporeal creatures are not subject to sneak attacks, and creatures that are not subject to critical hits are not subject to sneak attacks also.
- Sneak attacks require a clear view of the target. Any degree of concealment -- even concealment from fog (a lousy 20% miss chance) foils sneak attacks.
- Sneak attacks are possible only when the attacker can reach the target's vital spots. If you're limited to beating the foe about the ankles, you can't make sneak attacks against him.

Beyond the Basics

So just when do those conditions and counter conditions apply? I'm glad you asked.

Defender Denied Dexterity Bonus

When the rules speak of a defender being denied a Dexterity bonus, they refer to any number of exceptional combat situations in which a creature cannot effectively defend itself by blocking or dodging physical assaults. Creatures that have no Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, or creatures that have penalties are not "denied" a Dexterity bonus in a normal combat situation.

Fortunately for characters who rely on sneak attacks (and unfortunately for everyone else), such combat situations abound. Here's a list:

Being Caught Flat Footed

This happens to almost everybody sooner or later. Anyone who is surprised is flat-footed during the ensuing surprise round. Surprised or not, anyone also is flat-footed during the first round of any combat from the time the combat begins until the creature takes its first turn in the initiative cycle.

Flat-footed creatures have two big disadvantages: They can't make attacks of opportunity and they can't use their Dexterity bonus (if any) to Armor Class. This makes them vulnerable to melee sneak attacks and to ranged sneak attacks (but see the section on uncanny dodge).

Facing an Unseen Opponent

To properly defend itself in combat, a creature must be able to see its foe, or use some ability acute enough to substitute for sight, such as the blindsight special quality (or the uncanny dodge ability; the section on uncanny dodge section is in Part Three).

When facing a totally concealed foe, a creature is denied Dexterity bonus (if any) to Armor Class and the attacker gets a +2 attack bonus as well.

Perhaps the most common form of total concealment is the *invisibility* spell. A regular *invisibility* effect is broken when you attack. If you begin your turn under such an effect and you're making multiple attacks, you'll be invisible only for the first attack and your opponent will be denied Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any) against that first attack.

Just about everyone has total concealment against a blinded creature, and total darkness gives everything total concealment against foes that don't have darkvision. Remember however, that concealment cuts both ways. Sneak attacks aren't possible when the target has any concealment whatsoever.

Some special qualities and skills allow creatures a limited ability to locate unseen foes. The scent special quality and the Spot and Listen skills all give some chance of figuring out exactly where an unseen foe lurks. So can cruder means, such as scattering sand or flour all over a dungeon floor when you suspect there's an invisible foe nearby. These measures allow you to locate an unseen foe, and possibly attack her, but they don't negate the foe's total concealment, so they won't keep you from being sneak attacked. It's not enough to know where your foe is. You've got to know when and where the attack is coming.

On the other hand, it's only total concealment that interferes with Dexterity bonuses to Armor Class. Anything that knocks down total concealment to a lower degree makes any Dexterity bonuses to Armor Class available again. A spell such as *see invisibility* or *true seeing* robs an invisible foe of its total concealment, but only for the creature using the spell; the spell user could then use other means to render the invisible foe at least partially visible to allies, however. Splattering an invisible foe with a little flour or paint reduces or eliminates an invisible creature's total concealment, at least for a little while, as does a trusty *glitterdust* or *faerie fire* spell.

The blindsight ability allows its user to discern any unseen creature within range just as though the unseen creature was fully visible (provided the creature with blindsight has line of effect to the concealed creature). A creature with blindsight thus retains its Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any) against an unseen foe and blindsight also negates most kinds of concealment. This means that you can't sneak attack a creature with blindsight unless you have it flanked or catch it flat-footed. Also, a creature with blindsight can ignore any concealment a foe has when making a sneak attack of its own.

A *blink* spell provides the user with some degree of concealment -- and foils sneak attacks -- when the attacker cannot see ethereal opponents. (Both the *see invisibility* and *true seeing* spells reveal ethereal opponents).

An attacker that can see, but not affect, ethereal opponents still has a miss chance (20%) against a target using *blink* because the foe might be ethereal when the attack strikes; however, this does not arise from concealment and does not foil sneak attacks (though a miss is still a miss).

When an attacker is using *blink* itself, it has a 20% miss chance (because it sometimes finds itself ethereal when its attack strikes home). This miss chance also does not interfere with the attacker's sneak attacks. In fact, a blinking attacker strikes as an invisible creature, and its foes are denied Dexterity bonus (if any) to Armor Class and that makes sneak attacks possible. If the blinking attacker's target can see ethereal opponents, that foe retains Dexterity bonus (if any) to Armor Class and cannot be sneak attacked unless flat-footed or flanked. Because a blinking attacker's "invisibility" is actually etherealness, blindsight does not allow a foe to retain its Dexterity bonus against the attacker, and blindsight does not reduce the miss chance for attacks against the blinking combatant.

Immobilized

When you can't move, you can't use your Dexterity bonus (if any) to Armor Class, and you can be sneak attacked even when you're not flanked or caught flat-footed.

Any of these conditions keep you from using your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class: grappled, held, helpless, incapacitated, pinned, or stunned. Immobility is one time when the uncanny dodge ability doesn't foil a sneak attack (see the section on uncanny dodge).

Grappling is worth a special note. When you're grappling, you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any) against any foe that you are not grappling, and that's true no matter who started the grapple -- you're just as vulnerable if you initiate a grapple as you are when a foe grapples you. You retain your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, however, against a foe you are grappling. So, if someone grabs you, you can't sneak attack that foe, but your buddies could.

When you're climbing (ascending or descending a vertical surface or a slope too steep to walk up) you cannot use your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class, which makes you vulnerable to sneak attacks (even if you have uncanny dodge).

Being entangled impedes your movement and reduces your effective Dexterity score, but it does not make you vulnerable to sneak attacks.

Defender Flanked

Creatures become susceptible to sneak attacks when flanked because they must divide their attention between two or more opponents whose relative positions make it difficult to block or dodge their attacks. The situation is something like dealing with an unseen foe, but isn't quite as severe.

To flank an opponent, two allies must be on opposite sides of that opponent, and they both must threaten the opponent (Chapter 8 in the *Player's Handbook* has some handy diagrams that explain flanking). You threaten an opponent when you can make an armed melee attack against that opponent. You're "armed" when you use a manufactured weapon, natural weapon, the Improved Unarmed Strike feat, or the monk's unarmed strike ability. You don't actually have to have a weapon that can hurt an opponent to threaten that opponent. If you and your buddy have no silver weapons but find yourselves on opposite sides of a werewolf, you still flank the werewolf (but see the final section of this article series).

You can flank with any melee weapon, including a reach weapon, but you cannot flank with a ranged weapon.

You get a flanking bonus from any ally your foe can see (and who is in the correct position to flank). If your foe can't see you, you don't provide a flanking bonus to any ally. You literally cannot flank a blind creature; however, a blind creature loses its Dexterity bonus to Armor Class against your attacks (so you can sneak attack it), and you get a +2 to attack it to boot. Creatures with the blindsight ability effectively "see" within blindsight range and can be flanked.

The improved uncanny dodge class ability can prevent a creature from being flanked (see the next section).

Uncanny Dodge and Sneak Attacks

The uncanny dodge class ability is just about the nastiest sneak attack breaker in the game. Only immunity to critical hits offers more absolute protection against sneak attacks. So, uncanny dodge gets a section in the article all to itself.

The uncanny dodge ability allows a flat-footed creature to retain its Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any) and it foils sneak attacks when in does so.

The uncanny dodge ability also allows a creature to use its Dexterity bonus (if any) against unseen foes, so an unseen foe must find some other way to make sneak attacks against creatures with this ability.

Uncanny dodge does not allow a creature to keep its Dexterity bonus to Armor Class (if any) when it physically cannot move. If you're grappled, held, helpless, incapacitated, pinned, or stunned, you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class. If you're attacked while climbing, you also cannot use your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class. Uncanny dodge doesn't allow you to retain your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class in any of these cases.

The improved uncanny dodge class feature can keep a creature from being flanked, except by a rogue who is four or more levels higher than the target. An attacker with sufficient rogue levels can flank the defender simply by having an ally opposite the defender, if that ally cannot flank the defender himself, provided that the defender can see or perceive

your ally (see the section on flanking). In such a case, the ally gets no benefit for being in a flanking position, but the rogue gets full benefits.

When determining who can flank whom, start by counting the target's levels, and count only those levels in classes that provide the uncanny dodge class feature. Then count up the attacker's levels, counting only levels in classes that provide the sneak attack class feature. For example, a 10th-level rogue could not flank a 5th-level barbarian/5th-level rogue but the same character could flank a 5th-level barbarian/5th-level bard. Likewise, a 7th-level rogue/7th-level assassin could flank a 5th-level barbarian/5th-level rogue.

Damage from Sneak Attacks

The bonus damage from a sneak attack is expressed as extra dice and it is not multiplied with a successful critical hit, or when an attack otherwise gets a damage multiplier. For example, a rogue charging with a mounted lance can make a sneak attack, but the damage multiplier for the mounted charge doesn't apply to the sneak attack.

A successful sneak attack increases the damage dealt. When you make a sneak attack against a foe with damage reduction, roll the sneak damage and add it to the damage from the hit before applying the effects of damage reduction.

Sneak attack damage is always the same type of damage as the weapon used to make the sneak attack. For example, if you make a sneak attack with a sword (a slashing weapon), all the damage from the sneak attack is slashing damage (also see the Spells as Sneak Attacks section in Part Four).

Number of Sneak Attacks

Provided it is possible for you to make a sneak attack at all, you can make multiple sneak attacks when you use the full attack action. For example, if you have a higher initiative result at the beginning of an encounter, your foe is flat-footed and every attack you make is a sneak attack. The same is true if you flank your foe.

Anything that allows you to make extra attacks during the full attack action gets you extra sneak attacks as well: fighting with two weapons, the *haste* spell, and the monk's flurry of blows are the most common ways of getting extra attacks.

Remember the earlier note about *invisibility* effects, however. If you're relying on *invisibility* to set up a sneak attack, you'll only have the effect for the first attack you make during your turn. You'll still get all your extra attacks, but only the first will be a sneak attack. You don't have this problem if you're using a *greater invisibility* effect.

Volley Type Attacks

Sometimes, you make multiple attack rolls as part of the same attack, such as when you use the Manyshot feat. When you do so, only the first attack in the volley can be a sneak attack.

Weapons and Armor Used in Sneak Attacks

You can make sneak attacks with any weapon you can wield. The weapon does not have to be on the rogue weapon list. As noted earlier in this article series and in the rogue class description, you cannot make a sneak attack if you take the -4 penalty to make a weapon that deals lethal damage deal nonlethal damage (or vice versa), because you're deliberately not using the weapon in the optimal way. You can make a sneak attack, however, when you're not proficient with a weapon -- nonproficient use isn't exactly "optimal" but is close enough for a sneak attack.

Likewise, the armor you wear has no effect on your ability to sneak attack, though any combat penalties you suffer for nonproficient armor or shield use still apply to your attacks.

Spells as Sneak Attacks

Any spell that requires an attack roll and deals damage can be used in a sneak attack. In this case "damage" is normal damage, nonlethal damage, ability damage, or energy drain. You can sneak attack with a *Melf's acid arrow* spell, but not with a *magic missile* spell.

Ranged spells are effective as sneak attacks only at ranges of 30 feet or less (just like any other ranged sneak attack).

A successful sneak attack with a weaponlike spell inflicts extra damage according to the attacker's sneak attack ability, and the extra damage dealt is the same type as the spell deals. For example, a 10th-level rogue who makes a successful sneak attack with a *Melf's acid arrow* spell inflicts 2d4 points of acid damage, plus an extra 5d6 points of acid damage from the sneak attack (note that continuing damage from this spell is not part of the sneak attack). Spells that inflict energy drains or ability damage deal extra negative energy damage in a sneak attack, not extra negative levels or ability damage. For example, a 10th-level rogue who makes a successful sneak attack with an *enervation* spell deals 1d4 negative levels plus an extra 5d6 points of negative energy damage.

If the sneak attack with a weaponlike spell results in a critical hit, the damage from the spell is doubled but the extra sneak attack damage is not doubled (as with any sneak attack).

With spell effects that allow you to make multiple attack rolls, such as the *energy orb* spells or the Split Ray feat from *Tome and Blood*, you must treat the effect like a volley -- only the first attack can be a sneak attack.

A Totally Unofficial Rule for Dealing with Foes Trying to Flank You

Jonathan Tweet (co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd edition game) and I have had many opportunities to ponder the tactical aspects of flanking and what you might be able to do about it if you find yourself flanked. After one extended discussion not long ago, Jonathan proposed the basics of the following rule, and I present it here, with some tweaks:

You can disregard attacks from an opponent flanking you. When you do, that opponent doesn't get the +2 flanking bonus when attacking you and that opponent does not provide a flanking bonus to any of its allies. Ignoring a flanker, however, provokes an attack of opportunity from that flanker, and you lose your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class against that flanker. You do, however, continue to threaten that flanker.

If the flanker is out of attacks of opportunity, you can ignore the flanker (and deny the flanking bonus) with impunity.

If you can't see (or locate) the flanker, you disregard the flanker by default, and you provoke the attack of opportunity.

You must make the decision to disregard a flanker as soon as the foe moves into a flanking position. You can change your decision as a free action on your turn. (You still must disregard a flanker you can't see.)

Designer's Notes: This rule gives certain creatures the option to ignore flankers when they don't pose any real danger to them. Lycanthropes facing foes that aren't armed with silver weapons, as well as characters with very high Armor Classes facing much weaker foes, can soften the effects of being surrounded. Many other creatures can use the rule to limit sneak attacks against them, but at the risk of extra attacks of opportunity from other foes. This rule also means that you often cannot provide a flanking bonus to your allies if you're out of attacks of opportunity (though foes may have a hard time determining exactly when that situation occurs).