Greywulf's Guide to 4e Character Generation *by Hand!*

Generating your first character in any role-playing game is a rite of passage. It's the initial step of commitment to the game, an investment of time and precious brain cells into this wonderful hobby. Before then you may well have played using a pre-generated character, or followed the Choose Your Own adventure in the Red Box D&D Essentials Starter Kit to get started. Or your first character may well be your very first step into the hobby, your gateway to exploring dungeons, ruined keeps and the borderlands.

But this isn't about how to generate your first character. Or the one after that. Or even the one after that. I'm going to assume that you've generated a fair number of characters by now, most likely using the Character Builder. I'm also going to assume that somewhere along the way you've forgotten what character generation *is*.

Of course, you may just have stumbled onto this little tome by accident (or design) and you really are just about to generate your very first character. If that's the case, I welcome you. You are at the beginning of a wonderful adventure.

So whether your next character is your first, or your hundredth, I hope you find something of use within.

Robin V. Stacey, November 2010

We're going to look at how to do one thing, and do it well: how to generate a Fourth Edition Character entirely by hand.

This is, in my opinion, something of a dying art with people moving *en masse* toward generation tools such as Character Builder rather than spending time and care to finely craft their virtual personna. It's the difference between microwaving a meal, and cooking one by hand from the raw ingredients you have available. While both have a place in the kitchen, microwaving teaches nothing about culinary skills – you just set a timer, press a few buttons then waiting for the ping.

Character Builder, like the microwave, is a terrific tool. It's very useful if you want something quick and filling in the shortest time possible. But there's nothing quite like a freshly prepared PC scrawled in your own hand to really hit the spot.

What I aim to do is encourage you to create your next character using nothing more than a pencil and scratch paper. Along the way you'll hopefully learn more about how the Fourth Edition rules really work, what cunning synergies are hidden in the game, and more about crafting the character you really want to play.

It will, I hope you find, be a much more rewarding experience.

What Character Generation is, and isn't

Starting at the very basics, Character Generation is two words. Character, and Generation.

Generation is the act of putting together the numbers. It's what tools such as Character Builder do very well indeed, providing all of the options in a list and automatically calculating all of the numerical values. Generating your Player Character involves running down a checklist of items that every PC needs – attributes, race, class, abilities, feats, skills and equipment – and filling in the blanks.

Character is something much more intangible. Character is what you bring to the table. It is your PC's personality, his backstory and quirks. It is how he (or she) dresses, what food they like and where they were brought up. It's the difference between playing "Justin the 1st level Human Fighter with STR 18" and "Justin Swallowdrake the farmer who had his lands confiscated by the Church of Pelor for failing to pay his tithe due to a failed harvest and is now driven to looting old ruins in the hope of paying off the debt and reclaiming his land".

Character is rarely quantifiable in numerical game terms (though it should guide stat, feat and skill selection – see below), but it is by far the most important but neglected part of Character Generation.

Tools such as Character Builder over-emphasise and simplify Generation, but at the cost of leaving little room for the Character part of the equation to develop. It is possible to create characters with great personality with Character Builder but I'd argue that for every thousand optimised but soulless PCs generated using it, there's probably just one gem of a Character (capital C).

Creating a character by hand switches the emphasis from Character *Generation* to *Character* Generation. By spending time to create the PC, you're getting to know them more fully. Rather than just passing them by in a mouse click or two, Character Generation becomes more like a conversation with your virtual alter ego. Each step along the way you're learning more about them – what their Training in Stealth really means, why they chose *that* Spell or why they favour the Mace over any other weapon.

Creating your first hand-made PC

I'm going to walk you through the steps required to create a fully formed Player Character entirely by hand.

But first, I'll let you into a little secret.

It's really not that hard to do.

What you need

1. *A pencil and eraser*
2. *Paper*
3. *A copy of the Player's Handbook*

What you don't need

1. *A D&D Insider subscription*
2. *A copy of Character Builder*
3. *A computer*
4. *An Internet connection*
5. *Pre-printed character sheets*
6. *Any other sourcebooks or supplements*
7. *D&D Essentials*
8. *Errata*

While additional sourcebooks and supplements are nice to have (and so, for that matter, is a D&D Insider subscription, computer, and a 'net connection), none of them are strictly necessary to generate any kind of character. With very few notable exceptions, I've yet to find any character concept that cannot be expressed in pure PHB terms. Where the sourcebooks and supplements prove their worth is in character advancement where a wealth of options allow your character to grow beyond first level in exactly the way you envisage.

Unless you want your character to be a non-core Class such as the Monk, Barbarian or Druid, or play a campaign-specific race I strongly recommend keeping to the Player's Handbook at first level, and certainly for your first hand-made character. This limits the number of books you need to refer to (no computers here, remember!) yet still provides more than enough options for customization. At later levels you can retrain using the additional supplements for inspiration. Retraining is a great way to show that your character has developed, putting aside older techniques and skills as they grow and explore the world.

About D&D Essentials

The *D&D Essentials* line from Wizards of the Coast is a repackaging of the Fourth Edition D&D line in a form that is designed to appeal to new players of the game. The character options are streamlined so that each class offers just one to three new features at each level. This makes character generation (and advancement) by hand particularly simple. Even more so than the full D&D line, Essentials doesn't need Character Builder at all.

That said, I'm going to ignore the Essentials line entirely, and focus entirely on the original D&D line instead as this is the area where the perception of "needing Character Builder" is all pervading. Hopefully new players to the game who are using D&D Essentials should pick up a few hints and tips along the way.

About the Errata

Errata is a myth, and like all myths it's a pretty big one. Provided you're not playing in a Living campaign or bringing a character to a game

convention (where a consistently agreed upon set of rules between total strangers is necessary), your well-worn copies of the Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide and Monster Manual are just as relevent and up-to-date as they need to be with just one or two exceptions.

I set the DC values (DMG p42) for 1st level at 8/12/19 for Easy/Moderate/Hard (as per the current Rules Compendium) & ignore the footnote about increasing them for skill checks and attacks with weapons.

I also reduce non-minion monster hit points to ¾ (but keep the Bloodied value the same). Only a well-cared for and extremely healthy monster would be at full hit points anyway, and they are very few and far between.

When it comes to the Player's Handbook, I let Wizard players choose whether their spell-caster uses the old Magic Missile (which might miss) or the new one (which doesn't), but beyond that we play directly from the book.

Quite frankly, life is too short to worry about errata.

The Three Stages of Character Generation

1. Initial concept
2. Generation
3. Fine-tuning

Each character begins with a spark, an initial idea of what kind of character you want to play. It can be extremely vague or as well-defined as you can come up with. Many times the vague ones turn out to be the best characters as you take them through the journey of their creation as they're the ones which literally (ok, *virtually* literally) take shape as you fill in their attributes and personal history.

It pays to avoid using Class names when thinking about your concept (unless you *really* want to play a Rogue, for example) as this automatically limits your options at a point where your imagination should be at its most free. Even if there's an obvious Class to match your concept, think about what the other Classes could offer and you might come up with an interesting twist.

For example, if your concept is "wilderness protector" it's tempting to turn straight to the Ranger – but what about a Cleric who is a protector of the wilderness (a Cleric of Melora, perhaps), a Fey Pact Warlock, a Fighter who has been declared an outlaw, a stealthy Rogue who flits from tree to tree or even a Wizard who considers the forests surrounding his tower as being under his arcane protection.

In short, *any Class can fit any concept* and it's the inter-relationship between the class and concept which creates the interesting characters. Don't limit yourself to the obvious!

Here's a handful of initial concepts just to get the brain juices flowing.

- Spy
- Exiled noble
- Victim of identity theft
- Wrongly convicted criminal
- *Rightly* convicted criminal
- Church-sponsored assassin
- Wizard's ex-apprentice
- Amnesiac
- Heir to a fallen empire
- Last of their kind
- *First* of their kind
- Farmer, now adventurer
- State-employed treasure hunter
- Archaeologist
- Compulsive gambler
- On the run
- Haunted
- Dragon stuck in humanoid form
- Clone/identical twin
- Cursed

http://tvtropes.org is a terrific source for concepts, but be warned that the hours will disappear when you hit that site!

Character concepts work best when you combine them. Playing a Spy is good, but playing an Amnesiac Spy is better (just ask Jason Bourne). Likewise, an Archaeologist On the Run is likely

to have quite a story to tell, and an Exiled Noble Compulsive Gambler is going to be a very different character to an Exiled Noble who is Haunted.

The key thing to remember is to be flexible with your initial Concept. It's likely to evolve and refine as you walk through the generation process, but should provide a great starting point on which to base your character. Be prepared for that Exiled Noble Compulsive Gambler to end up as a Paladin whose heritage was lost in a game of cards to the Dark Cardinal and he is now indentured to Asmodeus for the rest of his natural life. Hey, it *could* happen.

Generation

Time to bring out the pencil and paper!

As per the Player's Handbook (p14) there are nine steps to generating a character in Fourth Edition D&D:

1. Choose Race
2. Choose Class
3. Determine Ability Scores
4. Choose Skills
5. Select Feats
6. Choose Powers
7. Choose Equipment
8. Fill in the Numbers
9. Roleplaying character details

The PHB makes it clear (just above this list) that these can be tackled in any order, but that's something easily missed by most players. It doesn't matter whether you generate your ability scores first, leave your Race selection to the end or write down that one Feat you really want before you do anything else.

While nine steps sounds like a lot, this list could really be shortened down to:

1. Determine Ability Scores
2. Select Race & Class
   1. Choose Skills
   2. Choose Feat(s)
   3. Choose Powers
3. Choose Equipment
4. Check your math!

That's more like it. While the options can be tackled in any order, I tend to generate the ability scores first because the initial concept generally suggests what kind of attributes the character should possess. At this stage, the attributes describe the character's physical build, intelligence and force of personality before the Race and Class are considered. This is him (or her), "in the raw".

Going back to our Wilderness Protector as an example and using the Standard Array (10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16) I envisage him like this:

STR	14
CON	16
DEX	12
INT	11
WIS	13
CHA	10

He's healthy, well-built, reasonably self-assured but more likely to fade into a crowd than be the centre of attention – all a sign of good living in the Wilderness.

By creating stats based upon your Concept (rather than the needs of the Class), your character is going to be much more interesting though less optimal than your typical Character Builder created build. That's not necessarily a Bad Thing as playing a less-than optimal charater is **much** more fun! So saying, it's worth considering the kind of Class that a person with those attributes is most likely to take. Let's face it

– a high-Intelligence guy is most likely to find himself at the door of the Wizard's Academy, and a high-Wisdom gal will be shown the directions to the nearest Temple. Consider the best Class for the stats, which in turn you've generated based upon your initial Concept. Or ignore all that and pick the Class which would be the most fun. It's up to you.

Looking at our Wilderness Protector's stats, the obvious choice would be to make him a Fighter. With his healthy living and well-built form he could be a Greatclub wielding outlaw who stands vigilant against the encroachment of civilization. He could also make a passable Cleric or Paladin, though his skills as a Rogue or Bard would be marginal at best!

It's worth considering Race & Class together as a whole as a Race could well open up Classes otherwise limited by your starting stats. Make our Wilderness Protector an Eladrin and he could make a pretty good quarterstaff-wielding Wizard!

Let's let him play to his strengths (so to speak), and be a Human Fighter and use that +2 to boost his STR. I'm already picture him as a giant of a man hefting a Greatclub with a broad smile on his unwashed face.

While we're at it, let's give him a name too.

| Raedryn Copseguard, Male Human Fighter-1 |

STR 16 +3	HP	
CON 16 +3	Init	
DEX 12 +1	AC	
INT 11	Fort	
WIS 13 +1	Ref	
CHA 10	Will	

Jot down the Racial bonuses and abilities, then head into the Class write-up and do the same. Calculate your Hit Points and Defences but bear in mind these might change due to your Feat selection. Write them faint and keep the eraser handy.

By now, your character should be taking shape nicely.

Background Options

One of the best rules in Fourth Edition D&D came in with Player's Handbook 2, and I recommend their use for all characters. Background Options provide a choice of either a +2 bonus to one skill (out of a choice of two) or the addition of a new Class Skill to the list available to take Training in at 1st level. This is a free one-time bonus given for providing a small background story hook for your PC. You can take as many Background Options as you want (6 is set as a reasonable maximum) but only one – the primary – confers a bonus.

There's currently a huge list of Background Options available in print, in the Character Builder and in the online Rules Compendium though I'm happy if a player makes up a Background Option of their own and we agree the benefit (either a +2 or a new Class Skill added to the list). For example, for Roedryn I make up the Background Option "Forest Dweller" and add Nature to his list of Class Skills. This takes up a Training skill slot but as he's got 4 (3 for the Class plus 1 for being Human) and neither Intimidate nor Streetwise appeal, it fits the character concept perfectly.

Background Options are a terrific way to fine-tune a Class to fit your concept, either by boosting an existing Skill to emphasize a speciality (an Archaeologist Wizard taking a +2 to History) or push the Class into unusual areas (a magic-hating Fighter gaining Training in Arcane in order to best understand his enemies).

In short, Background Options are wonderful.

Use them, and use them well.

Feats

Feats provide further opportunity to fine-tune your character. Generally speaking, they fall into two categories – *Persistent* Feats which apply all the time, and *Situational* Feats that apply only in certain circumstances.

From the perspective of a Games-Master, Situational Feats are Evil and should be avoided as they slow down the game while players (especially at higher levels) constantly scan their character sheets to see which Feats apply this round.

In contrast, Persistent Feats are the GM's friend – they simply provide a direct fixed bonus that can be factored into the character sheet during generation, and you're done. For that reason, Persistent Feats are your friend too, and for your first character, I suggest looking closely at them too. It's one less thing to think about mid-game.

Persistent Feats such at Alertness, Durable, Improved Initiative and Toughness are always a good choice – *provided they fit your concept.* In the case of my Wilderness Protection, both Alertness and Toughness are a good fit so I take those and save myself some work at the game table during the game.

That's not to say Situational Feats are bad though. They're evil, not *bad*. Many of them (such as Elven Precision if you're an Elf) are well worth taking, while others sound cooler than they really are. Wintertouched, I'm looking at you.

At first level, save the Situational Feats for later unless they fit your concept perfectly.

Multiclass Feats

These are a third group of Feats which open up a whole new range of options for your character. Multiclass Feats gives your PC a little bit of the flavour of another class, all for the price of one Feat slot. Perhaps they were a Warlord before they became a Cleric, or your Rogue was once a Wizard's apprentice but couldn't quite master the more complex magics (or stole something Really Important). Multiclass Feats are a terrific way to give your character a previous life that occassionally comes to the surface, and that's character concept pure gold.

For extra funkiness, play a Half-Elf and you can effectively be playing a *Triple-Classed* character at 1st level thanks to their Dilettante ability! (And don't get me started on Hybrid Classed Half-Elves with the Multiclassed Feat. Just..... don't.)

Each Multiclass feat is made up of three features:

- The character counts as being a member of that class for the purposes of taking additional Feats and qualifying for Paragon Paths

- They gain Training in one skill from the class's Skill List

- Use of one of the class's abilities once per encounter

If you're considering taking a Skill Training Feat, it is almost always worth considering the equivalent Multiclass Feat (provided your concept fits, of course).

For the same cost you get the Training, another per Encounter Power and the option to raid another class's Paragon Tier at a later date.

What's not to love?

Skill	Equivalent Multiclass Feat
Acrobatics	Warrior of the Wild
Arcana	Pact Initiate, Arcane Initiate
Athletics	Student of the Sword, Warrior of the Wild, Student of Battle
Bluff	Pact Initiate
Diplomacy	Student of Battle
Dungeoneering	Warrior of the Wild
Endurance	Student of the Sword, Warrior of the Wild, Student of Battle
Heal	Student of the Sword, Warrior of the Wild, Student of Battle
History	Pact Initiate, Student of Battle, Student of Battle
Insight	Pact Initiate
Intimidate	Student of the Sword, Pact Initiate
Nature	Warrior of the Wild
Perception	Warrior of the Wild
Religion	Initiate of the Faith, Pact Initiate
Stealth	Warrior of the Wild
Streetwise	Student of the Sword, Pact

	Initiate
Thievery	Sneak of Shadows, Pact Initiate

Going back to our example character, Raedryn the Wilderness Protector takes *Athletics*, *Endurance*, *Heal* and *Nature* (thanks to his Background Option) as his Class Skills, and the *Alertness* and *Toughness* Feats.

Add in his class abilities & jot down that he's going to be wearing Hide Armour when we get to equipment, and he looks like this:

Raedryn Copseguard, Male Human Fighter-1

STR 16 +3	HP 36/18	Surges 9x12/day
CON 16 +3	Init +1	Speed 6
DEX 12 +1	AC	Hide armour
INT 11	Fort +6	
WIS 13 +1	Ref +2	
CHA 10	Will +2	

Languages: Common, Elven
Background: Forest dweller
Athletics +8, Endurance +8, Heal +6, Perception +3, Nature +6
Alertness, Toughness

Combat Challenge: Mark an attacked enemy until end of next turn, melee basic attack on Marks who shift or attack someone else
Combat Superiority: +1 to opportunity attacks
Two-Handed Weapon Talent: +1 to hit

Powers

A character's Powers are, in my opinion, the least interesting part of the character sheet. What you have created up to this point is a reasonably feature-complete character that should (hopefully) fit your concept.

Powers do just one thing: they describe how your character fights.

They aren't designed for out-of-combat use at all (though cunning players are guaranteed to find a way!) but are instead made to be used when the action shifts into round-by-round bullet time.

They help answer the question "what does your character do when there's an Ogre in front of him?". Do they let out a roar and charge forward? Leap into battle with paired scimitars? Dive into the nearest shadows and draw their hand crossbows or make arcane gestures in the air? A large part of the answer to this question comes from the character's Class, but the Powers let you further fine-tune (there's those words again) the answer further, and give each character a choice of replies on a round-by-round basis.

Put simply, thanks to the Powers system each Rogue can be different, and what each Rogue can do every round can be different too. Never again will you hear the words "I hit it". Unless they name a Power "I Hit It", that is.

Your character's choice of Exploits, Spells, Prayers or whatever should say something about their nature when the going gets tough.

Don't choose the Powers which are the "best" mechanically, but instead select the ones that are in keeping with the concept and personality of your character. Fourth Edition D&D **is** a role-

playing game – but if all the players do is suck the soul out of it by breaking it down to numerical advantages, that role-playing nature dies. Oddly enough, all too often the people who over-optimise their builds are the ones who complain 4e D&D isn't a role-playing game. Strange, that.

For Raedryn I picture him with a 6'3" wide-shouldered frame who wields a Greatclub like a small tree-trunk, swinging it around and knocking his foes to the ground. For his At-Will Attacks I choose *Cleave*, *Reaping Strike* and *Sure Strike*. These are the attacks he can use time and again without breaking sweat – a mighty swing that hits multiple foes, a blow where he whirls all the way round if he misses to hit the second time around and a more careful swoop that's bound to hit all but the most agile foes.

For his per Encounter Attack I choose *Spinning Sweep* – a mighty blow that's enough to knock even a Giant off his feet and his Daily is an all or nothing *Brute Strike*. Opportunity to open up with these attacks don't come every time, but when they do, Raedryn yells out a whoop and lets rip!

Cleave/w, +6vAC 2d4+3, Adjacent:3
Reaping Strike/w, +6vAC 2d4+3, Miss:3
Sure Strike/w, +7vAC 2d4
Spinning Sweep/e, +6vAC 2d4+3 & prone
Brute Strike/d, +6vAC 6d4

Incidentally, notice how I've got all the relevent information about the Attacks on a single line each. Who needs Powers Cards, really?

Equipment

Your character's equipment can say as much about them as their attributes do. If your hero is wearing the finest well-maintained Plate Armour and he's standing against a fellow Paladin in tarnished and battered Plate, that will say more about them that if one is STR15 and the other STR 16.

Choose equipment to fit the concept, and (if you're so inclined) go beyond just writing "Longsword" on the page. There's no mechanical benefit to having "Ancient and well-worn Longsword" or "Shiny new Longsword of Elven design" but it helps define your character just that little bit more.

If your GM expects your character to buy equipment to a strict budget of 100gp, it might be worth noting down a wishlist of future purchases. You might not be able to afford full Plate Armour a Greatsword and a Crossbow right now, but let the GM know these are on your wishlist and he might just include them to be discovered in the first adventure. Maybe.

Check your math!

It is always worth going back over the sheet one more time just to make sure that the numbers add up and there aren't any missing details. Check you have given your character an Alignment, noted down their Speed and any special Vision features. Even if your character doesn't have Perception as a Trained Skill it's worth jotting that down too as it's frequently used in-game. I tend to leave out the non-Trained (or non-Feat modified) skills as they're easy enough to calculate directly from the attributes.

This is also your chance to ensure that the character you've generated fits the concept (even though that concept might well have changed during generation). Does the character fit your idea of a Half-Elf Spy Exiled Noble Cleric, or would his Morningstar be better as a dashing Rapier? Now is the chance to make these final alterations.

Putting it all together

When you've done you should end up with a character who you know much better than if he were one built on a computer. You'll not only know *what* features and abilities he (or she) has, but also *why*. You will know more of their backstory, more about their origins, dreams and goals.

And (hopefully) more about the rules too.

Thanks for listening.

Raedryn Copseguard, Good Male Human Fighter-1

STR	16 +3	HP	36/18	Surges 9x12/day
CON	16 +3	Init	+1	Speed 6
DEX	12 +1	AC	14	Hide armour
INT	11	Fort	+6	
WIS	13 +1	Ref	+2	
CHA	10	Will	+2	

Languages: Common, Elven
Background: Forest dweller
Athletics +7, Endurance +7, Heal +6, Perception +3,
Nature +6. Alertness, Toughness
Adventurer's Kit, Bear Hide Armour, Oak Greatclub

Combat Challenge: Mark an attacked enemy until end of
next turn, melee basic attack on Marks who shift or attack
someone else
Combat Superiority: +1 to opportunity attacks
Two-Handed Weapon Talent: +1 to hit

Cleave/w, +6vAC 2d4+3, Adjacent:3
Reaping Strike/w, +6vAC 2d4+3, Miss:3
Sure Strike/w, +8vAC 2d4
Spinning Sweep/e, +6vAC 2d4+3 & prone
Brute Strike/d, +6vAC 6d4