

Verbal Duels

Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can crush your spirit. Verbal duels are battles of words rather than swords, in which skilled duelists use facts, wordplay, and rhetorical flourishes against each other to win arguments or sway crowds. This kind of duel typically takes place in front of an audience, but the rules presented below can also be used for private discussions, or even large debates where multiple viewpoints conflict in an arena of opinion.

Many of the following rules assume the duel is between two chief opponents and is conducted in front of onlookers the duelists are attempting to sway—indeed, sometimes a duelist and her allies can improve their odds by discerning the crowd’s biases and playing to them. A verbal duel’s audience might be an angry mob, the members of a ruling council or senate, the jury during a court proceeding, or socialites at a party—anywhere two characters might best each other with wit and cutting remarks.

SETTING THE SCENE

It is important to set the scene of a verbal duel so the PCs participating in it know what is at stake. Sometimes these conflicts are simple, two-person struggles where each duelist attempts to shut down the other’s argument. These can be fun and whimsical affairs—two duelists may engage in an argument about the merits of competing operas or fencing defenses, and the loser has to buy the evening’s drinks. Verbal duels can also be nerve-wracking conflicts in which the participants spar over some serious issue, such as a debate in front of a council of war chiefs on the merits of peace or war.

It is also important to determine whether or not the verbal duel involves an audience that can be swayed. For example, if the duel occurs between the captain of the watch and one of the PCs, the PC could be trying to get a mob to attack the tower of a corrupt high priest, while the captain is attempting to convince the crowd to disperse. Crowds often have their own motivations and predilections, and certain tactics during the duel will have a greater or lesser effect on its members, which can affect the results. Determining the nature of such crowd attitudes and how to affect them can sometimes grant a powerful advantage.

Assessing an Audience

A duelist and any of her allies who have at least 10 minutes to interact with the crowd before a verbal duel begins can attempt a check to determine an audience bias (see below). Succeeding at a DC 15 Sense Motive check allows a duelist or one of her allies to learn one of the crowd’s biases. Sometimes assessing an audience can have a higher DC if the GM feels the crowd is particularly tight-lipped or their biases are

otherwise obscured. Once a character attempts a Sense Motive check to assess an audience's biases, she can't retry that check, even if she has more time to study the audience.

Audience Biases

When a verbal duel features an audience that can be swayed, the GM determines any types of dueling tactics that the audience either favors or disfavors. If a crowd has a negative bias against a particular tactic, duelists take a -2 penalty on the associated skill check when using that tactic. If the audience has a positive bias toward a tactic, duelists gain a $+2$ bonus on the associated skill check when using that tactic. Some audiences may have even stronger biases, imparting penalties and bonuses that range from -5 to $+5$.

In cases where a verbal duel has no audience, there are no audience biases to track.

The GM is free to create whatever biases she would like, but each bias should be both reasonable and fit with the attitudes of the audience. A group of hard-minded wizards might have a negative bias toward allegory but applaud logic, while a rowdy group of tavern-goers could have a very positive bias toward mockery but start booing and hissing at logic. A GM does not need to create biases for all tactics, but having a handful of them can make the debate more interesting and flavorful and allow the duelist's allies to help affect the duel by assessing and seeding the audience.

Seeding an Audience

Once she knows one or more of the crowd's biases, a character can attempt to seed the crowd and gain benefits for her side of the verbal duel. A GM may rule that seeding a crowd is impossible or very difficult. For example, seeding a jury in a lawful society may be very difficult, and is probably illegal or even practically impossible. Audiences that can be seeded allow allies of each duelist to urge the argument in other directions.

To attempt to seed an audience, a character must spend at least 10 minutes with members of the crowd before the verbal duel begins, choose one of the audience's biases she knows, and succeed at a Bluff, Diplomacy, or Intimidate check with a DC of at least 15. The GM may rule that the DC is higher due to the ally's lack of familiarity with the crowd or other factors—as high as the duelist's level $+15$ or 20 for especially challenging situations.

If the character chose to seed a positive bias and succeeds at the check, the duelist of her choice gains an edge (see page 177) that can be spent when that duelist uses the tactic associated with the positive bias during the verbal duel. If the character fails the check, she can't attempt to seed the same audience again.

If the character fails the check by 5 or more, no one can attempt to seed that positive bias again in her duelist's favor.

If the character chose to seed a negative bias and succeeds at the check, the duelist of her choice gains an edge that can be spent when that duelist counters the tactic associated with the negative bias. If the character fails the check, she can't attempt to seed the same audience again. If the character fails the check by 5 or more, no one can attempt to seed that negative bias again in her duelist's favor.

Both sides can attempt to seed the audience before the duel begins and can even seed the same biases, but a given duelist can only benefit from a single successful seeding of a particular bias.

Edges

Edges are gained either by seeding a bias, using some trick of a verbal dueling tactic, when an opponent decides to end an exchange, or due to some other effect. A duelist can spend an edge to reroll an associated skill check for a verbal duel tactic. Sometimes you are limited as to when you can spend an edge. For instance, edges gained by seeding positive biases can only be spent when using the tactic associated with that bias.

Gaining Edges From Skill-Modifying Abilities: Only effects and abilities that modify an ability score, modify ranks, or specifically affect a tactic apply directly to the associated skill check in verbal duels. However, effects that increase the modifier of an entire associated skill (not just circumstantial uses of the skill) grant edges instead. For instance, the spell glibness neither adds to the associated skill check nor grants edges because it only grants a bonus to some cases in which Bluff can be used, and does not increase the skill's general modifier.

For spells and effects that do apply to a verbal duel, such as a circlet of persuasion or Skill Focus, instead of the normal modifiers to skill rolls, they grant a number of edges equal to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total bonus they would otherwise grant. For example, a character with Skill Focus (Diplomacy) and 10 ranks in that skill would gain two edges instead of a +6 bonus. Total up all such bonuses before dividing by 3. All edges gained in this way are limited to the particular tactic associated with the skill.

In many cases, using magic to enhance one's verbal dueling skills is often considered gauche or even illegal. The more official the verbal duel, the more likely the chance magic will be restricted or even banned. This is often particularly true during the course of duels in a legal setting.

DUELING WITH WORDS

Often, how a duel starts and which duelist goes first is determined by the particulars of the scene. For instance, if the dueling PC is the defendant in a court case, she may be on the defensive, being forced to counter in the first exchange after the prosecution opens the duel. A PC trying to elicit the duke's help may open the duel, asking for favor and presenting the case for why granting aid is in the duchy's best interest. A playful battle of wits during a dinner party might start when the party's host chooses a guest to begin the first exchange.

At the start of a verbal duel, each duelist gains a pool of determination. Determination is a mix of personal magnetism, native intelligence, the ability to gauge and react to an opponent's tactics, and any other mitigating factors pertinent to the duel. As the verbal duel progresses, exchanges take place and the stakes increase. A duelist loses determination equal to the exchange's ante (see page 180) each time she either concedes or loses an exchange. Other factors may also decrease a duelist's determination. When a duelist's determination is reduced to 0 or lower, the verbal duel ends with her defeat.

Determination: A duelist's base determination is the average (rounded down) of her Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma modifiers (minimum 0) + her total Hit Dice.

Adjusting Determination: Circumstances and effects might increase this pool of determination points, at the GM's discretion. For instance, for a particular type of verbal duel, it might make sense to use a single ability modifier rather than the average. For a longer verbal duel, especially at low levels, it might make sense to use the highest of a character's three mental ability modifiers or even add two or all three together.

One of the main ways to adjust determination is to consider if one of the characters has a social advantage or disadvantage. While the GM is free to determine the particulars of a character's social advantage or disadvantage in a situation, the four default categories are extreme advantage, significant advantage, significant disadvantage, and extreme disadvantage. A character at an extreme advantage multiplies her determination by 2 and gains 5 edges. A character with a significant advantage multiplies her determination by 1.5 and gains 3 edges. A character at a significant disadvantage multiplies her determination by 3/4. Finally, a character at an extreme disadvantage multiplies her determination by 1/2 and loses 3 of her starting edges (minimum 0).

Tactics

Tactics are the weapons of verbal dueling. At the start of each duel, each duelist can assign her skills to tactics that have those skills associated with them. A duelist can only assign a given skill to a single tactic, so if a duelist assigned Perform (oratory) to allegory, she couldn't also assign it to emotional appeal. For the purpose of a verbal duel, a character calculates her associated skill bonus by adding her ranks in the

skill (including the +3 bonus for having ranks in the skill if it is a class skill) and her Charisma modifier (regardless of which skill she chooses, unless she has the Ironclad Logic feat; see page 85). If she has other modifiers to the skill, they grant her edges (see above). The bard's versatile performance ability allows two skills to use the bonus from a Perform skill, and a character with that ability can assign all three of those skills to different tactics, even though he technically might only have ranks in the Perform skill.

A duelist might apply bonuses or penalties to a tactic's associated skill check due to the audience's bias, as well as from the following considerations.

Last Tactic: It's often considered bad form and awkward to counter with the last tactic used against you. When you do so, you'll take a –2 penalty on the associated skill check for the tactic. For instance, if your opponent uses mockery against you, countering with a mockery tactic is possible, but you take the –2 penalty on your associated skill check when you do.

Repetition of Tactics: Using the same tactic over and over again is not an effective way to win verbal duels. Over the course of a duel, each time you win an exchange with a particular tactic, you take a cumulative –2 penalty on all associated skill checks when you use the tactic again. At that point, the audience and your opponent have both seen some of the best you had to offer with that tactic.

Tactic Interaction: Some tactics are not as effective at countering other tactics. Others are more effective at countering specific tactics. For instance, it is harder to counter a logical argument with mockery, and most tactics have a hard time foiling a verbal trap set by baiting. Most tactic descriptions feature an "Interaction" entry detailing that tactic's conflicts and synergies.

Allegory

You use a fable or parable featuring an underlying message to frame the debate. While it is sometimes difficult to use allegory in the heat of an exchange, it makes a very effective opener.

Associated Skills: Knowledge (history), Knowledge (religion), Perform (act), Perform (oratory)

Interaction: You take a –2 penalty on the associated skill checks when using allegory as a counter.

Special: If you use allegory to open an exchange, and your opponent chooses to end the exchange rather than attempt to counter your allegory, increase the exchange's current ante by 2 (before your opponent's determination is reduced) instead of gaining an edge.

Baiting

You hurl taunts and barbs, or level false dichotomies, goading your opponent into a trap. Baiting works best when the stakes are already high, since in that case backing down can be even more damaging than blundering into your trap.

Associated Skills: Bluff, Intimidate, Perform (comedy), Sense Motive

Interaction: A duelist using a tactic other than presence takes a –2 penalty on the associated skill check when countering baiting.

Special: Baiting cannot be employed to open an exchange. If your opponent ends an exchange rather than counter your baiting, your baiting doesn't suffer the normal –2 penalty on future associated skill checks for winning an exchange.

Emotional Appeal

You make an argument appealing to the emotional desires of your opponent or audience. This tactic is particularly useful against an opponent with an advantage in status or knowledge; raising the emotional stakes can be rewarding, but it can also be dangerous.

Associated Skills: Bluff, Perform (oratory), Sense Motive

Interaction: You gain a +2 bonus on the associated skill check when using an emotional appeal to counter logic, presence, and rhetoric.

Special: Successfully countering with an emotional appeal increases the exchange's ante by an additional 1.

Flattery

You ingratiate yourself to your opponent, causing him to either let down his guard or to gain some other advantage. While usually deceptive and manipulative, this tactic also covers the actions of characters who are genuinely likeable and friendly.

Associated Skills: Bluff, Diplomacy, Knowledge (nobility)

Interaction: You take a –2 penalty on the associated skill check when using flattery to counter mockery. You gain a +2 bonus on the associated skill check when using flattery to counter presence.

Special: If you win an exchange with flattery, reduce the ante of the exchange by 2 (minimum 0) and gain an edge that can be used with any skill check in a verbal duel.

Logic

When you use logic, you present facts, figures, and expert testimony. While logic can still be used to mislead your adversary or the audience, unlike most other tactics, it still requires a strong understanding of the subject matter to do so.

Associated Skills: Knowledge (any pertinent); occasionally, other skills will apply instead, such as Appraise (for a verbal duel involving barter or haggling) or Profession (for a verbal duel involving knowledge or practice of that profession's skill set, such as Profession [barrister] during a trial)

Interaction: You gain a +2 bonus on the associated skill check when you use logic as an opener. You take a -2 penalty on the associated skill check when you use logic to counter baiting, emotional appeal, mockery, red herring, or wit.

Special: When you win an exchange with logic, you gain 1 edge that you can only use with logic

Mockery

You use personal attacks, mudslinging, or creative insults to belittle your opponent. Mockery works best when you capitalize on your opponent's use of an unpopular tactic.

Associated Skills: Bluff, Intimidate, Perform (comedy)

Interaction: You take a -2 penalty on the associated skill check when you use mockery to counter logic and wit.

Special: You gain a +2 bonus on the associated skill check when you use mockery to counter a tactic with a negative audience bias, and if you win the exchange with mockery against such a tactic, increase the ante by 1. You take a -2 penalty on the associated skill check when you use mockery to counter a tactic with a positive audience bias, though if you succeed, reduce the ante by 1.

Presence

You make a show of confidence or true nobility or you simply put on airs, and an opponent's claims slide off and bounce back against him, leaving you unscathed. This tactic works to deflect baiting and mockery but is less effective against other tricks.

Associated Skills: Intimidate, Knowledge (nobility)

Interaction: You gain a +2 bonus on the associated skill check when you use presence to counter baiting or mockery. You takes a -2 penalty on the associated skill check when using presence to counter allegory, emotional appeal, or red herring.

Special: If you win an exchange with presence, you regain 1 determination (to a maximum amount equal to your starting determination).

Red Herring

You use this tactic to distract your opponent or the audience from the heart of the debate, avoiding the danger of the current exchange. While a red herring can't be used as an opener, it can be used to quickly end an exchange that is getting too dangerous to continue.

Associated Skills: Bluff, Perform (oratory)

Special: You cannot use red herring as an opener. When using a red herring as a counter, you can choose to gain a +4 bonus on the associated skill check. If you do so and succeed, instead of continuing and escalating the exchange as normal, you reduce the ante to 0 and automatically win the exchange. Unlike normal, you start the next exchange.

Rhetoric

You use versatile debating tactics, applying advantageous rhetorical devices to squash your opponent's arguments. Most of the verbal maneuvers included in this tactic are simple and forthright linguistic devices; deceptive debating gambits are often included as part of other tactics such as baiting, emotional appeal, mockery, or red herring. Rhetoric is a multipurpose tactic that lacks some of the dangers of other tactics, but doesn't offer any significant rewards either.

Associated Skills: Diplomacy, Linguistics, Perform (act), Perform (oratory)

Special: Since rhetoric involves subtle word choices that most audiences don't notice consciously, it is very rare for an audience to have a negative bias toward rhetoric.

Wit

You use humor or cleverness to gain an advantage over your opponent, but the tactic can backfire if your jokes and jibes fall flat.

Associated Skills: Linguistics, Perform (comedy)

Special: When using wit, you can choose to gain a +2 bonus on the associated skill check. If you do so and fail the associated skill check, decrease your determination by 1. If you fail by 5 or more, you take a -2 penalty on wit's associated skill checks for the rest of the duel.

Verbal Exchanges

Verbal duels are fought in a series of exchanges. Each exchange is an argumentative back-and-forth in which each duelist attempts to gain the upper hand over her opponent and decrease the opponent's determination to continue the debate. The end of an exchange might signal the end of the verbal duel or mark a change in the flow of the debate's conversation.

At the start of each exchange, one of the duelists chooses a tactic as an opening, makes his associated skill check for that tactic, increases the ante of the exchange from 0 to 1, and sets the current exchange DC to the result of his check. The ante of the exchange is an ever-changing (usually increasing) value within an exchange; the duelist who either loses the exchange or decides to end the exchange reduces his determination by an amount equal to the exchange's ante.

At this point, the opponent must decide whether to counter the opening or end the exchange. If she still has 1 or more determination remaining, she can then choose to open a new exchange or concede the duel.

If she decides to counter the opening, she first increases the ante by 1, then chooses a tactic, and attempts the associated skill check. If that skill check exceeds the current DC of the exchange, the exchange continues. That roll sets the new exchange DC for the original duelist to counter if he decides not to end the exchange. If the countering duelist's check does not exceed the current DC of the exchange, she loses the exchange (reducing her determination as appropriate), though she can spend one or more of her edges to reroll the associated skill check, potentially multiple times. If she decides to end the exchange, she reduces her determination by the exchange's ante, and her opponent gains 1 edge.

Duelists repeat this cycle until one decides to end an exchange, a duelist fails to counter her opponent's tactic, or the duel otherwise ends. When a duelist decides to end an exchange or fails to counter her opponent's tactic, her determination is reduced by an amount equal to the current ante of the exchange. Whichever duelist ends an exchange or fails to counter her opponent's tactic can either open a new exchange or concede the verbal duel if she still has determination remaining.

Ending a Duel

At the end of any exchange, either duelist can call to end the duel, and set the terms for ending the duel. When they do this, it can be considered a tie if both sides agree, or one side can call for the other to concede. A verbal duel ends immediately if one duelist's determination is reduced to 0 or lower. In these cases, the other duelist wins. In either case where there is a victor, the victorious duelist achieves some social advantage from his success, usually defined by the scene of the verbal duel. A victory or a defeat in a verbal duel might also lead to unexpected complications. For instance, a duelist may enter a verbal duel with her rival, a corrupt advisor. After succeeding, she may not only convince the duke that his advisor was plotting behind his back, but also inadvertently catch the eye of the duchess, who invites her to a secret tryst.

MULTIDIRECTIONAL DUELS

In unusual circumstances, a verbal duel might involve more than two independent duelists. In this case, the rules work the same with the following modification.

First, when a duelist opens an exchange, she selects one of the other duelists and the exchange continues between the two of them. When that exchange's winner is determined or the exchange ends, the winner must then start an exchange with a different duelist. This goes on until only one duelist remains.

TEAM DUELS

Team duels are a versatile option that can represent a variety of situations where there are several or many people representing one side of a debate, from a team of adventurers attempting to reason with a mob of angry peasants to a legislative body attempting to deliberate on a new bill. Team duels are particularly useful in adventures because they involve the entire party, rather than just the character with the most social skills.

In general, team duels work best when both sides have at least three participants, unless the outnumbered side possesses a significant advantage in skill against the other, such as in the case of adventurers and a mob of peasants. While a multidirectional team duel is possible, it is not recommended. Team duels generally don't have an audience because often the audience participates as one of the two teams instead.

In a team duel, each team shares determination among all members, based on the best determination among members of the team. Since this gives some advantage to a team with a single powerful duelist, the GM can choose to multiply the determination of a particularly large group with a strong common belief or opinion by two or more (depending on the size) to represent the difficulty of swaying their unified resolve.

In a solo duel, when a duelist wins an exchange with a given tactic, that tactic takes a cumulative -2 penalty for the rest of the verbal duel. In a team duel, when a duelist wins an exchange, that character takes a -2 penalty on skill checks associated with all of her tactics instead. Hearing many different voices, even if they have similar opinions, lends credibility to a team's arguments.

AN EXAMPLE DUEL

Lem has discovered that Meligaster is manipulating a group of nobles, and he hopes to expose his brother's evil schemes. He calls his brother out for a verbal duel in front of the nobles. Meligaster, who knows he has a significant advantage and knows the nobles well, eagerly accepts the duel, seeding the nobles' positive biases toward wit and flattery. Because of his significant advantage, Meligaster starts with 12 determination to Lem's 8 determination, and Meligaster also possesses 3 edges from his advantages, as well as edges to use in each of wit and flattery.

Lem starts the duel using logic, with a result of 20 on the associated skill check, starting the ante at 1. He rationally and factually explains some of the ways that Meligaster has been manipulating the nobles for his own devious profit.

Meligaster responds by making an emotional appeal to the nobles' pride and honor, raising the ante to 2 and redirecting the conversation away from the facts successfully with a 28 (including the bonus from countering logic with an emotional appeal).

Lem decides to continue the exchange, raising the ante to 3. He tries to use rhetoric to expose Meligaster's trick, with an initial result of 18 due to a low roll. He uses an edge he gained from his circlet of persuasion to reroll and manages 30, just enough to counter Meligaster.

Meligaster knows that 30 is going to be tough to beat. He decides to raise the ante to 4 and uses flattery as his tactic, obsequiously singing the nobles' praises. The nobles are positively biased toward it, he seeded that bias for an edge, and he chose to associate flattery with Bluff, so he gained an additional edge from his consummate liar class feature. Meligaster has to use both edges to reroll twice, but his third roll is a natural 20, for a result of 36, so he counters Lem.

Lem realizes that he would be hard-pressed to beat that result, so he knows he's about to lose the exchange. He has to choose how to lose it, though. Because Meligaster used flattery, when Lem loses, the ante will decrease by 2 and Meligaster will gain an edge. That means Lem has to decide whether to simply end the exchange, giving Meligaster a total of 2 edges and losing 2 determination, or raise the ante to 5 and try a skill check, losing 3 determination if he fails (thanks to his brother's flattery), but allowing Meligaster to gain only 1 edge. In the end, since Lem only has 8 determination, he feels he can't risk losing 3 all at once, so much to his dismay, he surrenders the exchange to Meligaster.

Now Lem has 6 determination left. He can open a new exchange against Meligaster and try again, and at least Meligaster suffers a -2 penalty on future uses of flattery, so Lem doesn't have to worry about beating another 36.