

# Writing Effective Rules

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*Note: This article is an excerpt from the forthcoming design book, Games on Paper. It was first written for Ernest's DigiPen design class in 2013. It will likely be updated again before the book is complete.*

If you want to create games, you should be able to write effective rules. Clear rules require a mix of creative and technical writing, explaining the game's backstory as well as its mechanics, in terms that novices can understand, and that experts cannot misread. Rulebooks are often referenced in random order, not always read straight through, so authors should arrange the information to accommodate both types of reader.

To begin, think about your game from the perspective of a new player. Assume that the player knows about games in general, but nothing about your game. It may seem counterintuitive, but the more they already know, the more assumptions your reader may bring, and the more you may have to work to convey the specifics of your game.

People prefer to read information in small chunks. No matter how long your rules are, you should divide them into discrete, easy sections. Don't present an unbroken wall of text. Examples, illustrations, and sidebars can help to break up large blocks. Also, be brief. Too much information can sometimes be more confusing than too little.

Finally, remember that your written rules need testing, as much as the game itself. When you can, you should begin writing and sharing the rules document early in the design process, to get a good sense of how clear and complete they are.

## Format

Rulebooks can have many formats, and different types of games require emphasis on different elements sections, but here's a basic template to start. Note that nearly all of these sections are optional, but you should at least consider each of them when arranging your rules information. In summary, they are:

- **Section 1: Preamble**
- **Section 2: Summary**
- **Section 3: Component List**
- **Section 4: Setup**
- **Section 5: Sequence of Play**
- **Section 6: End of Game**
- **Section 7: Clarifications**
- **Section 8: Examples**
- **Section 9: Strategy**
- **Section 10: Variants**

## **Section 1: Preamble.** Why are we here?

If your game has a story, this is where you tell it. Stories can help set the mood and inform the mechanics and style of play. Abstract games can have a preamble describing the origin or purpose of the game. Thematic games can have a preamble explaining the theme. This section might be just a single sentence in a very simple game, as shown below, or the preamble might require several pages, in a game based primarily on storytelling.

**Example:** *The Lost Pueblo of Doctor Green* is a half-page free game from Cheapass Games. The preamble is:

*Someone has stolen the Pueblo! Can you guess who it is?*

In conjunction with the title, this short introduction serves to set the mood for the game: absurd, playful, and simple.

*Note:* You should shy away from including any actual game rules in the preamble, no matter how long it is, unless you also repeat them later. Many players will skip over the story section, rushing to get into the procedure of the game. This is unfortunate, because the story of the game is often the easiest place to frame the mechanics and explain the mood and goals. Don't waste this section, but be aware that some folks will not read it.

## **Section 2: Summary:** What are we doing?

This section is a brief summary of the mechanics. Like the preamble, it sets the stage and tells players what to expect.

One of the hardest things about the summary is that it can easily mislead players by using terms that sound too precise. Be brief. State the format, the core play loop, and anything else that helps set expectations, but don't confuse the reader with details. You will give all of those in the more formal sections that follow.

**Example:** The Summary for *Lost Pueblo* is actually in the same paragraph as the Preamble, because this is a very short rule set:

*The Lost Pueblo of Doctor Green is a simplistic card-passing game with a strong bluffing element.*

This summary isn't intended to teach any rules. It exists merely to set expectations.

### **Section 3: Component List:** What do we need?

In this section, you will list any physical components of the game, and describe anything special about them. This section helps players verify that they have all the correct pieces. This is also a chance to summarize the function of the pieces.

This is also a place to specify basic game information like number of players, the playing time, recommended ages, and so on. This type of summary often appears on the package as well, helping players decide if they should take it off the shelf. If they want to consult the rules for the same information, it should be easy to find. Sometimes this section appears immediately after the title, as it does for Lost Pueblo.

**Example:** The component list for Lost Pueblo is the first element after the title.

**Players:** 4-10

**Playing Time:** 5 minutes and up

**Equipment:** A small pack of playing cards taken from a standard poker deck.

*Note:* The details of the “small pack of playing cards” are not specified under “Equipment,” because the description would be too long. The intent is that if players have a standard poker deck, they can create the deck for this game.

### **Section 4: Setup:** How do we begin?

Describe everything the players must do before they start playing. This can be another opportunity to describe the functionality of the pieces, and you can include more detail here than in a component list. Still, this section should be brief so that players can get started, and general game rules should not typically appear here unless they relate only to setup, or unless they are also repeated later.

**Example:** The Setup in Lost Pueblo is listed under the heading “To Begin.”

**To Begin:** *Build a small deck of playing cards which includes three cards for each player, one of which is the Ace of Spades. (The other cards can be anything.) Shuffle the deck and deal a hand of three cards to each player, face down.*

*Whoever receives the Ace of Spades is the Thief, and knows the hidden location of Doctor Green’s stolen Pueblo. The Thief must keep his identity a secret from the other players, and try to escape; if he is discovered, he loses!*

*Play begins on the dealer’s left and proceeds to the left.*

Note that this setup includes a partial explanation of the game objective, as well as story elements that explain the rules. The goal of the Thief is to protect his identity. These game-specific rules are repeated in more detail later. In some sense, explaining the role of the Ace is a continuation of the story section, since it would have made less sense if it appeared before the setup mechanics.

## Section 5: Sequence of Play: What do we do?

Usually, this section will constitute the bulk of your rulebook. Remember that the rule book, and this section in particular, will often be used as a reference guide, not always read from start to finish. So arrange the information in a logical sequence, and label the sections clearly, to make it easy for players to find what they need. Sometimes this requires repeating a core rule in more than one place, as it might relate to multiple headings.

Describe core rules as clearly as possible, describe any exceptions clearly, and define significant game terms before you use them. Give examples wherever you think the explanation is not clear on its own. If there is a long list of game terms, consider also including a glossary at the end (see Section 7, below).

If you include strategy or flavor elements in the Sequence of Play section, try to make a clear distinction between actual rules, strategy hints, and flavor text. If the story text helps the players remember the rule, it's appropriate to add it here. But blocks of pure story or pure strategy should probably be placed in sidebars or at the very least in their own paragraphs.

Be careful not to state any game rules in sidebars (or in italics), as players will often skip over anything that looks non-essential. (Re-stating a rule is fine; just don't make this the only place it can be found!)

It can be especially hard for a first-time reader to distinguish a strategy hint from a rule. For example, in tic-tac-toe, the sentence "You should put X in the center square" would be a hint, not a rule. But stating it within a thread of rules can be ambiguous. A better phrasing of this strategy hint might be "it's good to control the center of the board," or "for example, you might start by putting X in the center square."

**Example:** In *Lost Pueblo*, the Sequence of Play is labeled "On Each Turn."

***On Each Turn:*** *You must do exactly **one** of the following three things:*

1. ***Hand a card to another player.*** *You can't hand away the Ace of Spades unless it is your last card.*
2. ***Ask another player to hand you a card:*** *Again, they cannot hand you the Ace of Spades unless it is their last card.*
3. ***Accuse a player of being the Thief:*** *If you find the Thief, you win! However, if you are wrong, you must hand that player two cards. Again, you can't hand away the Ace of Spades unless it is your last card.*

As "Sequence of Play" sections go, this one is really short, and it also contains a win condition: Find the Thief. Most "Sequence of Play" sections are several pages or more, but of course I chose this game for these examples because it's short.

**Introducing Game Terms:** Section 5, Sequence of Play, is probably where you will define most of your game terms. Be aware that not everyone brings the same vocabulary to your game.

Depending on what kind of players you have, the terms “deck,” “stock,” and “library” might be synonymous, or one or more of them might be a mystery. Even “deck” might need a definition if you want to be completely clear. However, you must also be willing to give your players some credit, because you literally can’t define every word in your text.

Defining terms as you go can bog down the flow of the rules. Remember that inserting definitions in the running text will force players to read them every time they reread a rule. So unless terms are clearly new or unusual, strongly consider moving definitions like “draw,” “deck,” “hand,” etc., to sidebars, to a definition section in this block, or to a glossary.

Once you establish a specific game term, you should use it consistently. That doesn’t mean “exclusively”; there is room for variance in your vocabulary. But it does mean that when you use a word to mean a specific thing, it needs to mean that same thing each time you use it. For example, it’s quite confusing to have several different things that are all called “points.”

This can be tricky in some places, since language is strange. In card games, a “hand” can refer to the cards in your hand, or a specific collection of cards, or a round of play, or the meaty fingery blob at the end of your arm. But in many cases, you must give some credit to your readers, because over-explaining something can be as bad as not explaining it at all.

Often this comes out when you have new players learn from your written rules, which again is why you should be testing these drafts early. Usually players don’t really have trouble distinguishing the various meanings of “hand,” but it never hurts to make sure.

If your game uses a mechanic that’s public knowledge, but not everyone knows it, like the order of poker hands, you can include a sidebar listing and defining those terms, for players who don’t already know. But again, stripping them into the running text makes that section harder to read, every time through.

## **Section 6: End of Game:** How does the game end? How do I win?

If your game is simple, this section might just reiterate the victory conditions from the Summary. If it’s more complex, you may have to go into more detail. This level of detail might only make sense once players understand the rest of the rules. For example, “Reduce your opponent’s health to zero” is fine for the summary for the rules of *Magic: the Gathering*, even though there are other ways to win. But the End of Game section must cover the rest of those ways, within reason, and explain how to end the game.

**Example:** In *Lost Pueblo*, this information is divided into two sections: Dropping Out, which is a loss condition that doesn’t end the game for everyone, and “Winning,” which describes all possible endgame conditions. (It could be argued that “Dropping Out” is a part of the “Sequence of Play” section rather than the “Victory Conditions” section. It appears right between them.)

**Dropping Out:** *If any player other than the Thief runs out of cards, they lose, and drop out of the game.*

**Winning:** *If you are not the Thief, you can win in one of two ways. You can win by finding the Thief, or you can win by collecting six cards.*

*If you are the Thief, you win by running out of cards. When you give away your last card, the Ace of Spades, you have escaped, and the stolen Pueblo remains lost! Whatever that means.*

At the end, notice that a little of the story is incorporated into the mechanics to help reinforce them, and to remind players that this game is to be taken lightly.

## **Section 7: Clarifications**

If there are numerous game terms to define, strange exceptions to the rules, corner cases to be explained, or unanswered questions that don't fit into the main body of the rules, you can call them out in a section like this. Sometimes this is done in the form of a FAQ.

**Example:** There is one questionable case in Lost Pueblo, in which the Thief hands away his last card to a player who now has six cards, which up until this point would be inferred to be a simultaneous victory for both players. It is listed as a "Note."

**Note:** *If two players achieve their victory conditions at the same time, it's because the Thief handed their last card to someone else, who now has six cards (or more). In this case, the Thief wins.*

This double-win case is not specifically covered in the Victory Conditions section, so this additional rule follows immediately after it. One could argue that it is part of the End of Game section, but it clearly functions as a corner case explanation.

## **Section 8: Examples**

Small examples of play can be used throughout Section 5. But if necessary, complete sample turns or sample games can be presented after the end of the main rules. This type of in-depth example can help players get a better sense for the flow of the game.

## **Section 9: Strategy**

Strategy hints can help players jump into the game on the first play, or they can help advanced players refine their technique. In some simpler games, a strategy section might reduce the fun of learning the game. But in most cases, this kind of section helps new players get a better sense of what to expect. It can often be incorporated into Section 8.

## **Section 10: Variants:**

If you want to present other ways to play the game, you should save those options for their own section. In general, you should not describe alternate rules in the Sequence of Play,

because you need to give a clear basic game flow for new players. Listing variant options in the main game section just creates confusion about which is the canonical version of the game.

### **Overall Hints:**

**Clarity:** Be thorough, but be clear. It takes attention and practice to write a rule in a way that is both thorough (airtight; covers all cases) and clear (can be understood on first reading). You can often detect sloppy wording by trying to deliberately misinterpret your own phrasing. But there's no substitute for putting the rules in front of a new player and watching that player try to play the game. Those things you thought were obvious, such as definitions of core terms, may not be obvious to everyone.

A classic example from *Magic: the Gathering* is the playtest card "Starburst," which read "Opponent loses next turn." This truncated phrasing felt efficient, but lacked clarity. The intended meaning of the rule was "Your opponent loses their next turn" but it was easily misread as "Your opponent loses on their next turn," which is significantly more powerful. The card was published as "Time Walk," which reads "Take an extra turn after this one."

Like the dumpster labeled "EMPTY WHEN FULL," any phrasing that can have multiple interpretations makes rules much more difficult to parse. In the examples above, the Magic card and the dumpster, it's still possible to guess what the designer intended, but it's also quite possible to argue the other interpretation, given the information presented.

**Brevity:** It's important to know when enough is enough. Your rules actually **do not** have to cover all possible cases, if covering those cases would add too much to the length of the rules. It's nice if your game simply doesn't have any corner cases. But even if the rules are airtight, people can still make mistakes that lead to strange situations. Do you need a rulebook that covers what happens when players break the rules? No, and it's basically impossible.

Core rules are never complete. That's what tournament rules are for. The official tournament rules for Texas Hold 'Em are incredibly complex. They explain what to do in hundreds of corner cases, including player mistakes, dealer errors, irregularities in the deck, and other extremely rare situations. If your core rulebook tries to accomplish this, it's too long. Here's an example from the Poker Tournament Director's Rules, Sept 22 2011:

#### **42: Pot Size & Pot-Limit Bets**

Players are entitled to be informed of the pot size in pot-limit games only.  
Dealers will not count the pot in limit and no-limit games. Declaring "I bet the pot" is not a valid bet in no-limit but it does bind the player to making a bet.

Do you think you will ever need this rule? Probably not; I bet you didn't even know that verbal declarations were binding. So until there is a Tournament Directors Association for your game, or a big-money tournament that requires actual judges, you don't need your rules to be this detailed.

However, this doesn't mean that you can be *sloppy*. Your rules should cover all normal cases by being clear, not by being detailed. "Players take turns" is enough to cover questions like "what if two players try to go at the same time?" Until it happens at the World Championship.

Here's an example of sloppy language from *Lords of Vegas*, a game I designed with Mike Selinker. The publisher added this phrase to the first edition rulebook:

*"Players may take any of the following actions in order to manage their properties."*

The problem wording is "in order." The intent, which is explained elsewhere in the rulebook, is that this list of actions can be performed in *any* order. This editor inserted the phrase "in order to" meaning "with the intent of," but unfortunately it can be misinterpreted that the list of actions must be performed *in the order listed*.

One playtest could have found that problem, but unfortunately that test happened after the game had shipped.

In a similar vein, clarity and detail are not the same thing. "Clarifying" text can often lead to unwanted complications. Too much detail can obscure the point of a simple idea. Here's an example of too much detail for tic-tac-toe:

***Each Turn:*** *On your turn, you must make your mark in one of the empty spaces. You can't make a mark outside the board. You can't make a mark on a line. You can't make two or more marks in the same space. You can't make your opponent's mark, or any other mark besides your own.*

Did any sentence beyond the first add anything useful? No. Instead, each of those extra rules opens up more questions. Like, "wait, can I make one and a half marks? It says I can't make two or more..."

### **Student Exercises:**

**Analysis of Form:** Choose a rules sheet from a game you own. Describe how the elements of the rules fit (or don't fit) the pattern given here. Explain how the rules format is appropriate, or inappropriate, for the game.

**Analysis of Clarity:** Read the rulebook or written components of a game you own, and point out phrases that are unclear, incomplete, or open to misinterpretation.

**Practice:** Write the rules to an imaginary game, using the format defined above. Don't worry if your game is fun or even playable; just work on the format.

**Practice:** Write the rules for a game that you know, and then give it to players who do not know that game. See if they can learn to play the game correctly from your rules.