How to Create a Roguish Archetype

Perhaps one of the most popular articles ever on my site (it gets nearly 100 organic visits per day), "How to Create a Roguish Archetype" gives a step-by-step process into creating a new rogue subclass for your own Fifth Edition campaigns. I've now finally got around to putting this into PDF format so you can enjoy it on your own time.

Step-by-Step

Here is the thought process I took for developing a roguish archetype. Hopefully, it will help you build your own, original, balanced roguish archetypes.

Step #1 – Overview of the Roguish Archetypes.

As of this writing, there are seven rogue archetypes. They are arcane trickster, assassin, inquisitive, mastermind, scout, swashbuckler, and thief.

Some things to know about roguish archetypes:

- Rogues select archetypes at 3rd level which offers two or three features once selected.
- At level 9, 13, and 17 rogues get additional features from their archetypes.

Step #2 – Categorizing the Roguish Archetypes

Next, we want to identify the hidden role behind each of the archetypes. Here are my thoughts on each backed up by internet research.

Arcane Trickster. The arcane trickster is a half-caster that boosts its normal roguish abilities with magic. It also has a lot of unique abilities tied to the use of its mage hand. I should note that the arcane trickster feels more like a mage with rogue abilities than a rogue with magic abilities. The biggest drawback it has, though, is that its spell choices are limited only to enchantments and illusions.

Assassin. Assassins have two main parts to their structure. First, they're big-time damage dealers, getting huge boosts to their attacks when they catch opponents by surprise as reflected in their 3rd and 17th level features. Second, they're awesome spies, as they have infiltration expertise and imposter abilities. So not only are they cool in combat, but have a lot of flavor in roleplaying situations as well.

Inquisitive. Inquisitive rogues are great at detecting secrets. Right from the beginning, they're experts at Insight, Investigation, and Perception checks. In fact, it even helps them with their sneak attacks, too, which improves at 17th level.

Mastermind. Masterminds are the archetypical "villain", sort of a Game of Thrones'esque rogue that uses subterfuge and manipulation to get their way. They can sense the mental abilities of others, misdirect attacks on themselves, and trick mindreaders. Of all the archetypes, this is the weakest in combat, although, may act as a party buff when used right. However, I think it's intentionally designed that way.

Scout. The scout is excellent at stealth and survival. At 3rd level, they can move up to half their speed when someone gets near them and at 9th they get another 10 feet of movement. Later, they gain proficiency in nature and survival and become experts in those skills. To round it all out, they can make two sneak attacks per turn, one of which is a bonus action! In my opinion, this is the strongest of all the archetypes.

Swashbuckler. Swashbucklers are fancy fighters and crowd controllers. At 3rd, they avoid opportunity attacks from movement and get to add their Charisma bonus to their initiative. Plus, they get to sneak attack if they are the only creature within 5 feet of a creature. Later, they can charm creatures with their Charisma alone which gives creatures they're up against disadvantage against targets other than you (they "hey, fight me, ya jerk!" power). At 13th, they can use their bonus action to gain advantage on the next Acrobatics or Athletics check they make. And finally, at 17th, if you miss an attack roll, you can roll it again with advantage (usable once per long rest).

Thief. The thief is the classic rogue, capable of breaking into just about damn near anything. One of their strongest powers is their ability to take two rounds during the first round of combat (!!!) which they get at 17th level. They also get a number of boosts to their Stealth and Sleight of Hand skills and can climb fast.

Step #3 – Determine Power Levels for Roguish Archetypes

Now that we've observed all of our roguish archetypes, we need a way to observe their power levels. This part is a little trickier since there are no real rules for class or subclass creation in any of the official Fifth Edition material, yet. However, what we can do is know a few important things about the overall design of classes and subclasses:

- The most important "power" levels are at 5th, 11th, 17th level. Typically, if a class feature falls on one of these levels, it's much more powerful than the others.
- The DMG's rules for monster creation gives us a lot of insight into how the game is balanced. In fact, I believe that pages 273 – 283 of the DMG are effectively "the Rosetta Stone" to how everything in Fifth is balanced.
- Each subclass class comes with an inherent mechanical style that directs the flow of the broader class' "engine." For example, assassins are meant to always have surprise. Thiefs are good at breaking into things. And swashbucklers are one-on-one combatants.

With the following power level lists, I analyzed the archetype features and determined whether or not it gives the rogue a defensive bump, offensive bump, or if it was just pure utility. I use the term "CR bump" a lot, referencing the boost certain features affect monsters' challenge ratings.

Power Levels for the Roguish Archetypes

Arcane Trickster

3rd – Spellcasting. Arcane Trickster's spellcasting mostly adds utility. However, it does give it access to two powerful defensive spells: shield (an effective Defensive CR bump of 2 levels) and mage armor (allows the rogue to go without armor to get a base 13 armor class).

3rd – Mage Hand Legerdemain. This is strictly utility and doesn't move the needle too much in terms of CR. 9th – Magical Ambush. This is mostly situational. However, it does give a bit of an offensive advantage on your spells. If the rogue had more damage dealing powers in its repertoire, I'd say that it warrants a boost in offensive CR, but I'm going to say it keeps things stable.

13th – Versatile Trickster. Now, it might seem like it's a bonus to your action economy since it allows you to use this power as a bonus action, it actually takes away from the rogue's greatest power, which is its Cunning Action feature. Regardless, it's perfect for letting you get in a sneak attack. I don't believe it really changes things too much for the rogue since it's just giving it a new way to use its bonus action to give itself advantage.

17th – Spell Thief. This one is pretty excellent, basically giving the rogue a free use of counterspell (a 3rd-level spell) and then gets to use the spell within the next 8 hours without the expenditure of a slot. This has the potential of being extremely devastating. However, it's crazy situational and can only be used once per long rest. But I'd say it warrants a single shift in overall CR.

Assassin

3rd – Bonus Proficiencies. Both of these are mostly utility but factor heavily into the assassin's later abilities. However, the assassin is likely to use a lot of poison (or at least should).

3rd – Assassinate. This is probably the most devastating of all the assassin's abilities. If the assassin wins initiative, it gets advantage on attack rolls against any creature that hasn' taken a turn. Plus, it gets a crit on surprised creatures. Combine all this with its sneak attack, any poison it uses, etc. and you're looking at at least 2 levels worth of offensive CR bump. Keep in mind, though, this power is only usable in situations where assassins win initiative (I'd highly recommend they take the Alert feat to get that sweet, sweet +5 initiative bonus) and its most effective during the surprise round, which only happens once per encounter.

9th – Infiltration Expertise. This is mostly roleplaying utility but really adds some cool dynamics to the game.

13th – Imposter. Again, this is pure utility to add some interesting storytelling hooks to the game.

17th – Death Strike. Swinging back to the other end of the assassin's repertoire, death strike lets you double the damage of your attack against surprised creatures on a failed saving throw. Again, this is another significant boost in damage output, warranting a big fat offensive CR bump. Once more, it's totally situational and probably unlikely to occur each and every combat.

Inquisitive

3rd – Ear for Deceit. Utility here.

3rd – Eye for Detail. More utility.

3rd – Insightful Fighting. Another cool way of gaining advantage against creatures (instead of having to constantly hide), which arguably, is more useful than hiding since it lasts for 1 freakin' minute. Definitely a double rank bonus to offensive CR on this one.

9th – Steady Eye. Advantage to Perception and Intelligence if you move no more than half your speed. Useful, but probably not enough to warrant a CR bump.

13th – Unerring Eye. You can use your action to see through illusions. It has limits though (which, with its action economy cost seems kinda pricey) weighed against your Wisdom modifier (making the rogue more MAD) which you gain back after long rests.

17th – Eye for Weakness. A big damage bump, giving an average of 10 (3d6) more damage when using the Insightful Fighting feature. Another bump in offensive CR rank.

Mastermind

3rd – Master of Intrigue. Some cool utility powers here for the rogue.

3rd – Master of Tactics. You can use Help as a bonus action, plus your range for Help extends to 30 feet. This is cool and ends up offering your pals bumps in offensive CR.

9th – Insightful Manipulator. Very similar to the Battlemaster's "Know Your Enemy" power, you can get a bead on an opponent, but instead of its physical skills, you can read its mental abilities. Still, this is mostly for utility's sake.

13th – Misdirection. You can misdirect attacks so long as you're hiding behind another creature. Seems a little situationally awkward, unless you mostly use it to make your teammates take the hit. And since you're already getting a +5 bonus from cover, it's really not that different from a defensive standpoint.

17th – Soul of Deceit. Interestingly, this is one of the weakest 17th level archetype features there are as it is purely roleplaying related (with the exception of a few spells that could potentially affect you in combat). The lack of offensive or defensive abilities here makes me think that Mastermind is the most "roleplaying-ish" of all the archetypes. If anything, it's a support role.

Scout

3rd – Skirmisher. Not only does this increase your action economy by giving you a cool reaction, but it also keeps you from getting hit with opportunity attacks when you move. Obviously, it's worth a couple of bumps in defensive CR.

3rd – Survivalist. Expertise in two new skills (Nature and Survival), of course, equals utility.

9th – Superior Mobility. An increase in your movement speed is cool, but overall utility. However, when combined with skirmisher, can be quite powerful.

13th – Ambush Master. Advantage on initiative rolls, plus you and all other allies have advantage on attacks against the first creature that you hit until the start of your next turn. I'd lean towards an offensive CR bump, but it only lasts for one turn. At most, it might be worth one offensive CR bump.

17th – Sudden Strike. If you hit, you get an extra attack as a bonus action. Plus, that attack gets Sneak Attack. Not only do you get a boost to action economy here, but you can use Sneak Attack twice in a round which you otherwise would not normally be able to (just not against the same target)—worth 2-3 offensive bumps. For my money, this one feature plus Skirmisher makes the Scout archetype by FAR the best archetype for combat.

Swashbuckler

3rd – Fancy Footwork. On a hit, you avoid attacks of opportunity. Good, but not as good, as say, the scout's Skirmisher feature. 3rd – Rakish Audacity. Here's the good 3rd-level combat power. While it might be tough to clear out creatures within 5 feet of you, once you do, you get to make auto Sneak Attacks. Definitely worth a bump of offensive CR.

9th – Panache. This one isn't so hot for combat, but could be fun for outside of combat. Basically, you can charm creatures using Charisma (Persuasion) alone. Otherwise, it eats up your action economy.

13th – Elegant Maneuver. You can use a bonus action to give yourself bonuses to Athletics and Acrobatics. Somewhat situational and much more useful outside of combat than in.

17th – Master Duelist. This is probably the deadliest of all the abilities a Swashbuckler has as it effectively allows you to roll THREE dice and keep the best to make an attack. However, it's only usable once per short or long rest. Probably worth at least one offensive CR bump, but I can't imagine much more than that as its usefulness is far too limited. However, this is for sure the power you break out when fighting a BBEG.

Thief

3rd – Fast Hands. You get to use Dexterity (Sleight of Hands), thieves' tools usages and Use an Object action as bonus actions. This is primarily utility.

3rd – Second-Story Work. More utility, giving you better jumping distance and faster climbing.

9th – Supreme Sneak. A big boost here as you have advantage on Dexterity (Stealth) checks if you move no more than half. I'd say that's worth at least one rank of defensive CR since this will mostly be used to hide to get the jump on hostile creatures and get sneak attack.

13th – Use Magic Device. Another really cool one that is hard to quantify, this feature allows you to use any magic item you want. It all comes down to what your GM gives you, of course.

17th – Thief's Reflexes. This is the biggest and best feature for Thieves as it allows you to take two turns during the first round of combat. That in itself warrants 1-2 ranks worth of offensive CR bump.

Analysis of Power Levels

So what did we learn from looking at these seven archetypes? Here's what I saw:

- 3rd level always offers one or two utility/flavor powers, and then one power to boost combat, typically no more than 1 rank in either combat or defensive abilities. 9th and 13th level rarely offer anything more than utility. The only exception being maybe the Thief, which doesn't give any CR bumps at 3rd (unusually) and instead does so at 9th.

- 17th level is always the big power and it tends to lean towards offensive. Only the Mastermind gets the shaft with its 17th level power, but I think that's because it's more of a "roleplaying" archetype than one used for combat.

Step #4 – Create a New Roguish Archetype Concept

My patron requested a roguish archetype that relied heavily on Stealth. Therefore, that's what I'm going to do. Interestingly, none of the other archetypes really double down on Stealth. Certainly, they all use it in interesting ways, but there's no actual stealth expert among the bunch.

I think I'll call this roguish archetype the Unseen. Mostly 'cause it sounds cool AF.

Here's a rough idea of how I'll balance the Unseen roguish archetype:

- The Unseen will have a 3rd level utility power that boosts it while it is hidden or using Stealth.
- Its other 3rd level power will give it advantages while it is hiding, or at the very least, make it easier for it to hide.
- At 9th level, it will have a non-combat related stealth power to give it some more interesting options outside of fighting. We need to be careful not to duplicate the Supreme Sneak power for Thieves (which would have worked perfectly).
- Also, at 13th level, it will have a power that lets it use its Stealth in situations away from combat.
- Finally, at 17th level, its archetype feature will allow it to deal more damage with its stealth than normal. I'm thinking it might be cool to completely vanish (ie turn invisible) until you make an attack. To build on this stealth class, we have to understand a number of things about hiding and stealth, too, which has kinda wonky rules in Fifth Edition.

Here is everything you need to know about Stealth in Fifth Edition (as it pertains to Rogues):

- It normally requires an action to Hide during combat. However, Rogues of 2nd level or higher can Hide as a bonus action.
- Normally, the DM decides the circumstances for hiding.
- Hide checks are Dexterity (Stealth) checks contested by Wisdom (Perception) checks. You can't hide from a creature that can see you clearly, and you give away your position if you make a noise.
- An invisible creature can always try to hide. Signs of its passage might still be noticed, and it does have to stay quiet.
- In combat, if you come out of hiding and approach a creature, it usually sees you unless it's distracted.
- Most Stealth contests are made versus a creature's passive Perception. Passive Perception is adjusted up by 5 when a creature has advantage and down by 5 when it has disadvantage.
- During overland travel, adventurers must move at half their speed in order to do so stealthily.
- When a creature targets you while you are hidden and it can't see you it does so with disadvantage to its attack roll.
- In addition, the creature must guess your location, which means it could automatically miss you.

- When a creature can't see you, you have advantage on attack rolls against it.
- Whenever you make an attack, you give away your location when the attack hits or misses.

Step #5 – Create the 3rd-level Utility Feature

First up, we need to figure out what the utility feature is that the Unseen gains at 3rd-level. We want this to be a total stealth machine. Of course, any self-respecting rogue is going to have Stealth as one of the skills they are proficient in and probably use their 2nd-level Expertise to boost it. So we can cross both those out.

I think the best use for the 3rd-level ability is to allow the rogue a feature similar to the ranger's Natural Explorer ability where if you are traveling alone, you can move stealthily at a normal pace. But let's take it one step further and allow it to do so at a fast pace, too.

Step #6 – Create the 3rd-level Combat Feature

The first idea I got to help out our stealthy rogue was to make it so making attacks from hiding wouldn't reveal its position. Some might argue that doing it just like that might seem overpowered. However, I would rebut that it isn't. And here's why: Insightful Fighting uses a bonus action to make Wisdom (Insight) checks contested by a target's Charisma (Deception) check. If you succeed, you get to use your Sneak Attack against that target even if you don't have advantage. That's huge! The only weakness is that it doesn't rely on Dexterity to use it, making it somewhat MAD. So that's where the balance comes in.

But the thing about Insightful Fighting is that it is leveraged against a skill that you're obviously going to be an expert in versus a skill that rarely pops up on monster stat blocks (Deception). Whereas, Perception comes up quite a bit in stat blocks.

I think the only limit I'll give it is that its attack must be ranged (like a sniper).

Step #7 – Create the 9th-level Utility Feature

For the 9th-level power, I want to make it so that if a Rogue uses its bonus action to Search an area, it automatically gets advantage on its next Hide check. This is good inside or outside of combat as its sort of a way to set up surprises against creatures that are on the way. It could also be helpful to put the rogue in a position where they could spy on an enemy.

Step #8 – Create the 13th-level Utility Feature

Next, I think that it would be cool to have a stealth power that's always functioning. Kind of like a "passive Stealth." And this plays in well to the Reliable Talent feature that you pick up at 11th level.

You no longer have to use your action or bonus action to take the Hide action; you are always considered hidden and your Stealth is 10 + your Stealth modifier.

Of course, this is pretty freakin' potent so I would say that you probably need to be in at least a lightly obscured or heavily obscured area for this feature to work. And just because you're in Stealth mode doesn't mean you're optimally hidden either.

However, the rule would be that your passive Stealth is the lowest you could get for your Stealth checks (which is already the case with Reliable Talent anyways).

Step #9 – Create the 17th-level Combat Feature

Finally, we have our "capstone" archetype feature at 17th. Before I decide what I want this to be, let's take a look at our build here from 1st level to now.

- At 1st level, the rogue gets Expertise, Sneak Attack, and Thieves' Cant. As an Unseen Rogue, it will have maxed out Dexterity and double proficiency in Stealth, giving it an effective +7 to its Stealth skill.
- At 2nd level, the Unseen rogue picks up Cunning Action, which allows it to Hide as a bonus action.
- Upon hitting 3rd level, the rogue can move overland at full speed while practicing Stealth. In addition, it does not reveal itself when it attacks from hiding.
- At 4th level, the Rogue gets a bump to Dex, giving its Stealth skill a +8. Then, at 5th it gets another +2 to its Stealth, thanks to the proficiency raise. Fast forward to 8th level, and the Rogue gets another ASI, maxing out its Dex. It now has a +11 to its Stealth ability.
- At 9th level, the Unseen Rogue can use its bonus action to search an area. If it gets a 10 or higher, it can make its Stealth check with advantage. Plus, the rogue also gets another proficiency bump at 9th level. So this is an effective +18 to Stealth for the rogue. At this point, the Rogue is damn near invisible when it hides.
- At 11th level, the Unseen Rogue picks up Reliable Talent. That means that the rogue can never have less than a 23 on its Stealth checks.
- Then, at 13th level, the Unseen Rogue gets passive Stealth. This means that the rogue never has to use its action or bonus action to hide. It automatically hides with a 23 Stealth check. This is pretty damn potent stuff, so this is limited to only situations when it is in lightly obscured or heavily obscured areas.
- And that brings us to level 17. What to get the hidden rogue that's already totally invisible? Seriously, at this point, not even Greater Invisibility is as good as the rest of its skills. And if you remember from my analysis of the power levels for each of the rogue subclasses, the Unseen Rogue needs to get at least two ranks worth of CR-boosting goodness at 17.

Looking back at the stealth and hiding rules from above, here are the few limited drawbacks that this rogue will have:

- If a creature can see you clearly, you can't hide from it.
- If you make a noise, you reveal your position.
- Although you are effectively invisible, signs of your passage may be noticeable.
- If you come out of hiding and approach a creature, it notices you.

All of these could easily be swept away with one last buff, but that doesn't really give us the boost we need. I think maybe we take care of all these abilities and then also give the Unseen Rogue some bonus damage at 17th, probably equal to 3d6 similar to the Inquisitive's Eye for weakness.

Step #10 – Putting it All Together

At 3rd level, a rogue gains the Roguish Archetype feature. The following Unseen option is available to a rogue, in addition to those normally offered. You can see the entire Unseen subclass in the descriptive block below.

And that's it!

Hope you enjoyed this article. Stay tuned for more details on how to create your own cool classes, subclasses, and races and more on DMDave.com. Also, if you want PDFs of all my content, **be sure to become a patron**. Tiers start at only $1 per month.

The Unseen

You are a myth. A rumor. A ghost. Your presence rarely goes detected. The only trace you leave is the whisk of a crossbow bolt fired from a location unknown. Even those that are close to you may have trouble perceiving you as you spend your entire life in the shadows.

Sniper

Beginning when you select this Roguish Archetype at 3rd level, whenever you make a ranged attack from hiding, you do not give away your location when the attack hits or misses.

Swift Stalker

At 3rd level, if you are traveling alone, you can move stealthily at a normal or fast pace.

Concealment Evaluation

When you reach 9th level, you can perform a quick search to find the best place to hide. As a bonus action, you can Search the area that you're in. When you do so, make a Wisdom (Perception) or Intelligence (Investigation) check (your choice) against a DC 15. On a success, your next Dexterity (Stealth) check used to hide in that area is made with advantage. This effect lasts until the end of your next turn.

Passive Stealth

Starting at 13th level, hiding comes so naturally to you that you are always considered to be hidden. As long as you are in a lightly or heavily obscured area, you can use your Dexterity (Stealth) skill passively. Your passive Dexterity (Stealth) equals 10 + all modifiers that normally apply to the check. You may still choose to use your action or bonus action to use the Hide action in order to get a higher result.

Vanisher

At 17th level, your mastery of stealth makes you nearly invisible. You gain the following benefits:

1. You can hide even when a creature can clearly see you.
2. When you make noises, you do not reveal your position.
3. While moving using stealth, you can't be tracked by nonmagical means unless you choose to leave a trail.
4. If you come out of hiding and approach a creature, it does not notice you until you attack it or make a noise.
5. Attacks that you make from hiding deal an extra 3d6 damage on a successful hit.