5E
RETRO MONSTER SCHOOL

RJ Grady

RETRO MONSTER SCHOOL
by RJ Grady

Introduction

This is a guide to converting monsters and NPCs from previous editions of Dungeons & Dragons and the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game, to Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition (referred to here hereafter as 5e). Mostly likely this is because you are either interested in converting older materials for your own 5E games, or you are looking to sharpening your knowledge as a writer or developer.

The goal of this process is to create a monster equivalent in major respects to the original monster. The resulting conversion should be fairly balanced, and hopefully similar to how the original monster appeared. If the original monster was between a hill giant and a stone giant in capability, the converted monster will be. If adventurers would be appropriately challenged by fighting a half dozen of the original monster at level 2, a group of adventurers will be appropriately challenged by fighting a half dozen of the converted monster at level 2. That's the idea, anyway. This guide will get you close to that goal, and after that, you need to decide the final form that satisfies you. Converting a monster is essentially creating a monster, just with a specific goal in mind.

A few terms and abbreviations

5E: Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition

4E: Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition

3E: Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition (encompassing 3.0 and 3.5)

3.5: Dungeons & Dragons 3.5 Edition (the revision of 3E)

Pathfinder: The Pathfinder Roleplaying Game (i.e. Pathfinder 1st Edition)

CR: Challenge Rating, a 3E/Pathfinder term

Challenge: A 5E term

Monster Level (sometimes just Level): A 4E term

DMG: The Dungeon Master's Guide, a 5E book

The conversion guide: the Wizards of the Coast official conversion guide, most recently found
[here](#)

The conversion process follows the following steps, in roughly the following order:

1. Pick a Monster

2. Pick a target Challenge and role

3. Type

4. Basic Statistics

5. Consider the System Assumptions

6. Thematic Fit

7. Revise

Step One: Pick a Monster

I can't tell you what to pick, or why. I can make a few basic suggestions. You might pick something because it's part of a setting you want to use. Maybe you are basing your campaign in Eberron, or Golarion, or your own homebrew full of old school material. Another monster you might pick is something similar to an existing monster, but you need it in another strength. D&D 3e had an ogre, but 3.5 had both a regular and an ogre barbarian. If you want to use the ogre barbarian, you'll need a new stat block. You might pick something because it's in a module and you'd rather convert the monster than invent a new counter. Finally, you might be interested in just converting older edition monsters because you like the monster. Maybe you like a different, older version better than the 5E version. All are valid reasons.

Step Two: Target Challenge

The first part of conversion is to pick a target Challenge. This is primarily because it's better to pick a useful target and miss a little, than to pick nothing and hit it. For 3E/Pathfinder monsters, you might think you'll use the Challenge Rating. I regret to inform you it will not be so simple. In fact, this part will just become more nuanced (and by nuanced, I mean confusing and frustrating) as we go. However, I am not going to leave you high and dry. We will get there!

There are a number of reasons simplistic assumptions don't hold up. In 5E, a monster is rated mainly according to its beatiness (which is a word I probably just made it). To sum it up, whether a creature flies, turns invisible, swings a club like a dedicated moron, or hypnotizes you, ultimately its XP value and appropriate challenge should have something to do with whether its numbers are in the generally expected range for its intended opponents, the PCs. Prior to 5E, some monsters could skirt the guidelines by virtue of having a nasty save-or-die attack or charming people or being mainly a skill or social encounter. Not so in 5e. A lot of "trap monsters" that mainly exist to kill or charm the PCs are going to get a big downgrade, based on the reality that once they do their thing, they are barely a speed bump to defeat. Dryads are high annoyance, not high challenge. Similarly, "beater" monsters may get a downgrade, too. This somewhat unintuitive result derives from the simple fact that if ALL a monster has going for it is some hit points, an appropriate AC, and some attacks that do moderate damage, it doesn't bring enough to the table. A bunch of ogres are going to be surrounded, paralyzed, bombarded with damaging spells, and outmaneuvered.

A note on level range

For the most part, this guide ignores the differences in scale between different editions of the game. I assume, for the sake of simplicity, that 1st through 4th level are roughly equivalent, and that by level 10 or so, characters are extremely formidable, as tough as the toughest characters in swords-and-sorcery novels. However, this can break down at certain points. Up to level 20, I assume characters of equal level are equivalent.

This may not be true for 4E, which incorporates "epic" levels into the standard progression and runs up to 30th level. The official Wizards of the Coast conversion guide suggests a 4th level 4E character is equivalent to a 5th edition character of 2/3 their level. Thus, an 18th level 4E character is equivalent to a 12th level 5E character. It therefore follows that monsters of appropriate Challenge relate in some way to about 2/3 their 4E level. However, the correlation between 4E level and Challenge is not any more direct than 3E CR to Challenge. In some places I accept the official equivalence, but in terms of target Challenge, the numbers need a little more playing with.

Challenge does not always equate exactly to, "This is a good monster for characters of this level to fight." That's not what Challenge is. A lich is going to be more satisfying if it out-levels the party by a bit, making the encounter Hard, or as a memorable all-in final fight of the campaign, Deadly. Conversely, hordes of weaker monsters are much more dangerous than their challenge and basic stats suggest. A Challenge tells you something about a monster's individual stats, and only in its most common encounters.

Number Appearing

The short version is that just because a monster is a CR 10 giant in 3E doesn't mean it's necessarily going to be a Challenge 10 monster in 5E just to challenge a group of 10th level PCs. An important factor is whether a monster appears in groups. 3E dealt with this problem by fiddling with expected numbers, fiddling with the XP scale, and mostly not dealing with it. 4E had a system for building level-appropriate encounters from monsters of appropriate sizes of XP blobs. 5E meets this head on. Medium groups of monsters are about twice as dangerous as a single monster of equivalent XP. If the PCs can peel off a few goblins scouts and kill them for full XP, that's great. But if the PCs blunder into a whole gang of them, you don't want to murder all the PCs just because of how much each goblin scout is worth individually. Eating five cheeseburgers and then not eating lunch for a week is not equivalent to eating one cheeseburger a day for lunch.

Some people balk at this disparity between danger and Challenge (ie. XP) but I think it's a useful approach. You actually do want the PCs to break up encounters into smaller challenges if they have the tactical acumen to do it, and fighting one big monster should not be a completely interchangeable experience with fighting four weaker ones, apart from distributing the damage rolls throughout the round. This approach also acknowledges how great it is to throw some weaker monsters in as minions for tougher ones to amp up the danger and interest.

4E acknowledged this directly with a specific "minion" mechanic but the general idea holds up in any game. The orc warlord may be a match for the PCs themselves, but her throne room absolutely could be guarded by a half dozen, bare basics, common, scaled to 1st level orc warriors, who exist for no greater purpose than to use up the fighter's attacks and maybe crit the wizard. 5E is friendly to this thanks to something called "bounded accuracy," and which generally translates to the idea the numerical differences aren't so great a lucky goblin can't land a hit on the fighter, and a rogue can attack a powerful red dragon feeling confident at least a good number of hits attacks will hit. For convenience, I'm using the term "danger" to refer to a monster's 5E XP adjusted for group size, and Challenge strictly to refer to Challenge, per se.

This is probably one of the first issues you want to tackle with regard to Challenge. Does the monster usually appear solitary? Would it often appear in pairs? Mobs? Is it suitable as a big final battle? If the monster appears in groups to harass and annoy adventurers, and after a first pass on its statistics, you find it dropping to a Challenge half its original CR, that's fine. A dire boar is CR 4 in 3.5, but a giant boar is only Challenge 2 in 5e. There aren't a lot of set pieces that pit adventurers up against a notorious lone boar. If they meet one, it's probably a moderate challenge encounter, and a pack of them is plenty challenging for higher level adventurers. But you'll only ever meet one purple worm at a time, and in normal campaigns, you fight adult red dragons one at a time.

Compared to 3E/Pathfinder monsters, in 5E, solitary monsters and bosses tend to have a Challenge around the original's CR; your basic "here's a nasty monster you have to fight" monsters tend to be Challenge= CR-1, maybe –2; tough monsters often found in groups, like trolls, might slip a little more; and anything routinely found in packs, troops, herds, nests, gangs, and so forth is routinely going to have a Challenge half its original CR. I wouldn't drop Challenge much below that, though. Either beef up some stats in a relevant way, or round up its offense/defense average. Similarly, lots of old school monsters have plenty of Hit Dice that aren't necessarily very challenging for high level PCs. 4E monsters tend to vary a bit, depending on their role.

Basic Beaters Have a Lower Challenge Than You Think

If the monster could be basically described as a big brick of hit points that attacks in melee, maybe with a ranged attack as well, you can plan on its Challenge dropping to about half its original CR in 3E. If it's an older edition monster, its Challenge is probably half of its Hit Dice, if you don't beef it up (and sometimes even if you do). A 4E monster might have a Challenge of half its Level, −1 for being a minion, and +1 for being Elite.

As an example, an ogre in AD&D has 4 +1 Hit Dice (that is, four HD plus a hit point) and has a Strength notable enough for +2 damage with ordinary weapons. An ogre in 3.5 still has 4 Hit Dice, somewhat more hit points, a strength exceeding that of a normal human, and sits in at CR 3 thanks to its decent giant-type features. In 5e, it has 7 HD, a scaled-back strength still above a "normal" human fighter's and sits in at CR 2. The ogre is the most basic of basic beaters, sitting above the ambiguities of lower level monsters, but with little to distinguish it from other monsters of its prestige. A griffon is CR 4 in 3.5, and Challenge 2 in 5E; it is a quintessential flying beater.

Actual Animals

If the creature is an actual living animal, a dinosaur, or something of the sort, I suggest a fairly naive conversion of its basic stats. Compare it to other listed animals and adjust it in the hierarchy of strength, speed, and toughness. Then let the final Challenge fall where it may. Unintelligent, non-magical animals are not going to be high-level threats in 5E. You don't have to worry about fiddling with the proficiency bonus, since unless it's a Large or Huge apex predator, it's Challenge will certainly be under 5. An allosaurus is Challenge 2, an elephant is Challenge 4, and a killer whale is Challenge 3 (and let's be honest, probably only in the water). To hit CR 8, you are looking a *T. rex*.

If a monster acts kind of like a real world animal, but more monster-y, and especially if it travels in packs and attacks low to mid-level adventurers, the same advice can apply. Death dogs are Challenge 1 and flying snakes are Challenge 1/8. A death dog encounter is like a wolf encounter, but with more heads and more evil. It's okay for them to have relatively small numbers of hit points and mediocre attacks.

The Theoretically Untenable But Practical Concept of a General Monster

If it's kind of a basic beater, but it has other stuff going for it, like a paralyzing gaze, fire breath, or natural haste, it probably falls into this category. A good target Challenge for a 3E monster is it's

original CR, minus 1. Keep an eye on this one. For an old school monster, you might shoot for its HD, minus 1, with the notion of changing some stats, or its Challenge, at a later time. For a 4E monster, a good ballpark is half its Level as Challenge, up to Challenge 10, and then +1 Challenge for every +1 Level after that. Solitary monsters should probably shoot high, whereas things that attack in groups should be allowed to freely drop in Challenge according to their basic stats, to a floor of about half your original target Challenge. A chimera is CR 7 in 3.5, and Challenge 6 in 5E.

Iconic Monsters With a Lot Going On

Things like dragons and balor demons usually get to keep their high Challenge, as they are intended to go toe-to-toe with adventuring parties. A good target for these monsters is actually their CR for 3E monsters, or for old school monsters, their Hit Dice. A good starting place for a 4E solo monster is their Level (yes, monsters can go up to Challenge 30 in 5E). You are more likely to upgrade weak stats than downgrade their Challenge, to preserve their iconic challenge and to keep them suitable as solitary opponents or bosses in published adventures. Some monsters get to enjoy this status for thematic reasons. A purple worm is really just a basic beater than occasionally swallows something. But in keeping with its "oh, crap, we got attacked by a purple worm!" status, the fact that it's solitary, and not being an actual real world animal, it gets to be high Challenge. In AD&D it's a 15 HD monster; in 5e it's still a 15 HD monster, with a d20 for hit dice, more damage, and a better AC. From 3.5 to 5e, the purple worm actually lost a HD, but went from CR 12 to Challenge 15, equal to its Hit Dice. Apart from the obligatory high challenge beater, most of these monsters have significant powers in addition to just fighting. All but the most minor fiends go here, since they are supposed to be scary, and are good for mobs of monsters to send against really high level characters.

The Aforementioned Monsters Who Are More Like Traps

Monsters that charm the PCs aren't really monsters in the classic sense, they are really more like walking traps that make the PCs attack each other. Similar, a medusa is a trap that turns people to stone and shoot arrows, not something that is really meant to deliver, or take, a beating. The Challenge on this monsters can go way, way down. Lower than that. Keep going, my friend.

You might be, right now, staring at the CR of a scary undead in 3.5 or Pathfinder that mostly just drains a few hit points and scares/paralyzes/kills people, and noticing that 5E is not impressed. And that's fine! They don't actually need artificially high DCs to fill this role, especially with 5E's relatively low, static saves. You could put a Challenge 5 monster in a room full of level 12 PCs, with a DC 13 ability that kills someone, and that's still a real danger to the PCs. But danger is not quite the same thing as Challenge. Short of giving it 40 HD, there's not much you can do with that basic type of undead to make it require much of the PCs to deal with. These monsters get the benefit of the doubt on Challenge, especially for low hit points, but they don't get to coast on the coat-tails of merely having a high DC for their special attacks. It's fine if their main DC is a point or two higher than the stated average given in the DMG; you can even lower it, if you want.

So what is that Challenge 2 monster with a gaze attack doing hanging out with a Challenge 7 boss monster? Making things interesting, that's what. That's partly the reason for the split between encounter design and monster Challenge itself. A gang of dryads are just going to get their butts kicked, but a few dryads sprinkled in with some elven warriors and a couple of brown bears is interesting.

Monsters Who Cast Spells, Spellcasters Who Are Monsters

Monsters and NPCs that throw around wizard or sorcerer spells and both deal damage and other stuff like paralyzing foes usually have about as many Hit Dice as they have caster level, and have a Challenge of 2/3 their spellcasting level (rounding down). Monsters who are casters might have more Hit Dice than this, and NPCs should have appropriate ability scores so their spellcasting DC is appropriate and their defensive values are somewhat reasonable. But this is a good baseline assumption, probably more fruitful than trying to estimate how much damage they will do with optimal spell use. Adding a few monster powers, some more hit points, and Challenge-appropriate melee or ranged attacks won't significantly change Challenge. Doubling their Hit Dice and giving them melee capabilities that threaten front-line opponents may well bump up the Challenge by roughly +1. Something like a spellcasting drider isn't really in this category; it's a general monster with spellcasting in line with its existing Challenge.

You might be thinking, is a bard or a cleric really a monster? But when the players run face to face with a 7th level cleric, here we are. A lot of support spells aren't direct damage dealing, and healing is hard to equate to damage. At the same time, you don't want to entirely discount the huge advantages having a cleric provides. Looking at the Monster Manual, the designers seem to have largely shrugged, given the clerics HD equal to their spellcaster level +1, and given them a Challenge of half their caster level (rounded down). It's not a bad approach, overall. Most support characters have at most a Multiattack of two attacks, or just make single attacks with a damage bonus. Mostly, they serve in a support role or they are the designated boss to be taken down.

Casters converted from 4E are probably casters of 2/3 their 4E Level. Then, follow the above guidelines for 3E or old school monsters.

Finally, I'll throw out some caveats. 5E has mostly assigned monsters within the Challenge hierarchy with some respect to previous editions, particularly 3.5. But 4E monsters are more all over the place, and there are some traps. For instance, compared to earlier editions, 5E swapped specters and wraiths in the Challenge hierarchy.

Step Three: Type

This tends to be fairly straightforward. Sometimes you will have to make a hard decision, or you will have to go with your own in-game reasoning, if there's a hard choice. The 3.5 to 5e types are primarily like this:

3.5 type	5E type
Aberration	Usually aberration, sometimes monstrosity
Animal	Beast - always
Construct	Construct
Dragon	Dragon
Elemental	Elemental
Fey	Fey
Giant	Giant
Humanoid	Humanoid
Magical Beast	Usually monstrosity, but might be a beast
Monstrous Humanoid	The most varied, could be a monstrosity, might be a humanoid, and depending on its origin it might be a fey
Ooze	Ooze
Outsider	Aberration (if from the Far Realms), celestial, elemental, or fiend
Plant	Plant
Undead	Undead
Vermin	Beast

There are some trickier cases. You really want to take into account a creature's origin. If an outsider isn't associated with the lower or higher planes, isn't an aberration from the Far Realm, and doesn't have a strong element affinity, it might just be a humanoid or monstrosity. In the case of monstrous humanoids and outsiders, to decide between monstrosity and humanoid, you might ask, is this a creature that uses weapons and armor and has just a few special abilities? Or is this a creature that uses primarily natural attacks or numerous special powers? In the case of creatures with strong ties to the fey realms, a fey type is appropriate even if its appearance suggests something else, like a blink dog. A lot of aberrations in 3.5 became monstrosities in 5E, because they were merely unnatural or unearthly, not because they were from bizarre realms or had ties to strange powers. If something isn't a real world animal but isn't a mind-bending, incomprehensible thing from the Far Realm or a weird dweller of the Underdark, it might be better typed as a monstrosity.

For older edition monsters, you can pick something according to your judgment. The Rules Cyclopedia/BECMI rules categorized monsters extensively, and most of them have obvious 5E equivalents. Some humanoids would be fey or giants in 5e. Planar Monster should be treated similarly to 3E outsiders, and "Monster" similarly to a magical beast or aberration.

Step Four: Basic Statistics

Now we get to the exciting part. Here is were we talk about how to get some good, basic numbers.

5E is pretty flexible. If you wanted, you could just pick some average values and call it a day. Part of the fun, though, is working within the system to come up with numbers that make sense in the overall game. It's kind of cool when a longsword's damage has something to do with the longsword in the book. In AD&D, an ogre's attack did 1-10 points of damage, or if you wanted to give it a specific weapon, the regular damage for that weapon plus 2 points. Chiefs did 4-14 damage, or you could give them a higher damage bonus than a regular ogre. The latter approach is generally more satisfying to me.

On the first pass, I recommend a fairly naive conversion. Just follow the numerical guidelines below, stare at what you have, and see what might need to be harmonized. By a naive conversion I mean the numbers are based almost entirely on the original numbers, without making much adjustment.

Playing with Numbers

One you have your basic numbers, you can play with them a bit to improve the stat block. The purple worm gets its humongous (+9) Strength bonus to its bite attack, but doesn't add its proficiency bonus. The Strength makes sense, and we imagine the purple worm isn't all that accurate. But the numbers are all yours to command. You can use Dexterity instead of strength for an agile attacker, or just stick with Strength if you don't want to strengthen the offense too much. You can add the proficiency bonus but no ability (rarely used), or add the ability but no proficiency (often used, especially for animals and creatures with massive ability scores). You can add neither (cats just aren't that formidable to armed humans, let's just say +0 and call it a day). You could give a brute some hide armor to wear, or just assign it natural armor, if the hide doesn't really add much value. All of this creates the illusion that the final monster is based on some internal consistency, which is a good goal for a conversion.

The Numbers

Armor Class

If a creature is wearing armor, it gets whatever armor class that would give it. If it's a brute who wears bearskin, you might give it natural armor instead and ignore the paltry armor bonus of hide. The official conversion guide suggests that for 3E, averaging AC and touch AC is a good idea. This has the advantage of basically halving large numbers, removing some wrinkles 3e has concerning size bonuses and its tendency to assign humongous natural armor to Large creatures, and removing the emphasis on being hit as the main measure of toughness. This is also conveniently preserves the Dexterity bonus to AC, which we want to retain. There are some other unwritten rules: creatures of flesh, even very tough ones, rarely have AC higher than 19. Even nearly invulnerable creatures like animated metal or powerful fiends rarely go beyond 21. Incorporeal creatures don't have natural armor or "deflection" bonuses; just use whatever AC the Dexterity you have chosen would give them. Sometimes the AC value you will get suggests some adjustments you can make to Dexterity.

For old school monsters, 19 minus the original AC is a pretty good guess. For AD&D monsters, you might go one higher, since AC starts at 10 in those rules. There are some places to be cautious there, though. In 5E, small winged monsters don't get a boost for their speed, they just have whatever Dexterity bonus you gave them. You can either base their Dexterity on their AC, or less the AC fall a little, or compromise in the middle (you should probably compromise if you find the numbers are weird). Generally speaking, Small or Tiny average creatures in 5E have about a Dexterity of 15 and

an AC to match. If the original monster was an artful dodger, you may find the monster's Challenge plummeting. Which is fine. Little winged pixies and such probably shouldn't be flying tanks.

For 4E monsters, natural armor is going to be a bit trickier. For Large and larger monsters that are tough, a rough guess might be a bonus half its original Level. For creatures who are not as tough as giants or as scaly as a dragon, natural armor +1 or +2 might be sufficient, and the same for Medium creatures with tough bodies. Small creatures rarely have natural armor, unless they have an actual shell (+1 to +3 natural armor). I suggest at looking at similar monsters, and bending toward those examples. You can also glance at the average AC for a creature of the target Challenge for ideas, taking into account Dexterity.

Generally speaking, AC should not exceed 19. You can go up to 21 if you want. Beyond that, as a rule of thumb, ACs over 20 should not exceed the monster's Challenge.

Hit Dice

From 3E/Pathfinder, I like to start by giving it the same number HD it had before and seeing where that lands. By the time we apply Constitution, size differences in HD, and so forth, the number of hit points may change. We may leave it where it was, if that feels good, or move the Hit Dice up or down. We might also play with Constitution (probably just 2 points in one direction or the other). If you are trying to make a beater that appears solo or in pairs, you might go ahead and plan on doubling the HD at this point. Similarly, NPCs based on fighters, paladins, and barbarians should probably double the HD, while other characters, apart from full spellcasters, might get an increase of about 1/4 (minimum plus one HD). You may also compare it to other monsters. For instance, if the original was a bear that had more Hit Dice than a brown bear, the converted monster should probably have one more HD than the 5E brown bear.

For old school monsters, I would start with the same number of HD. Again, if the original was like a fighter or if it was a solitary monster, I might go ahead and double those HD now. For formidable but not necessarily solo monsters, like the ogre, I'd increase the HD by about 1/4.

For 4E monsters, Level +1 as HD is not a bad guess. For a minion, I might spitball its Level −1. For an elite, Level x 1.5 is not a bad guess, and for a solo, Level x3.

Most "normal" NPCs top out at about 150 hit points, most Large monsters at under 200, and monsters in general rarely exceed 350 or so. A few dragons exceed 500 hit points.

Ability Scores

For 3E/Pathfinder monsters, we need to tame those ability scores. Pathfinder and 4E scores tend to climb even faster, but my approach normalizes this. Basically, if an ability score is about 14, halve it and add 7. You might notice some Large monsters having their Strength score drop nearer to 18, or even below, by this process. That's usually fine. If Conan could wrestle it, it makes sense for its Strength to be under 20. You can definitely mess with those scores later, especially to harmonize melee damage or spellcasting DCs.

Giants were singled out in 5e to remain exceptionally strong. A giant's strength is probably 10 + 1/2 the original's Strength, and you should compare the final result to other giants. You can give this treatment other creatures, too, like if it's an elemental that looks like a giant triton and uses a giant spear.

For really fast monsters, things with feats like Dodge, Lightning Reflexes, Improved Initiative, and so forth, especially more than one, you might give it back 2 points of Dexterity if you penalized a high score. Don't do this with real world animals if that would put it beyond a Dexterity of about 15.

"Mindless" 3E/Pathfinder monsters need Intelligence 1 and Charisma 1, and Wisdom probably isn't great, maybe around 6 (for an ooze) to about 12 (for a dangerous predatory arachnid).

As for old school monsters, well, this is what you pay me for. Basically, we have to infer some things from a monster's basic power level (HD) as well as a handful of traits and bonuses. Overall, monsters tend to become more formidable as they go up in HD. Here we go:

Old School Monster Ability Score Guessing

Strength: If it's a Medium creature, it probably has Strength 10. If it's primarily a beater, go ahead and raise that to 12. On top of that, if it has a bonus to hit or damage in melee, add twice that bonus to what you have so far. So your basic humanoid monster with 1 or 2 HD who attacks with a spear and gains +1 to damage for its strength probably has Strength 14 in 5E. If it's a Large or larger Creature, I think it's not a bad idea to start with just 14 + half the original's HD. If it has bonuses to hit or damage, double that bonus and that in, too. So a "small" red dragon with 10 HD would get Strength 19, and a "large" one with 15 HD and +2 to hit would get Strength 25. In 5E, an actual Young Red Dragon of Large size has a Strength of 23 and an Adult Red Dragon has a 27.

Strength should probably cap at around 20 in a lot of cases unless it's Huge or Gargantuan, although some decidedly unnatural beings bight have higher. At some point you should find an equivalent giant and dragon and see if you want to pick a value in that neighborhood. My preferred value for "pretty much the strongest thing you can imagine, almost unstattable, but it's not literally a demigod or island-sinking monster" is 29. I wouldn't use 30 except for creatures that are just unfathomably strong, like a titan or a walking mountain.

If something is noted as having a carrying capacity, like it's used as a riding beast or beast of burden, it's not a bad idea to bump Strength by about 2 and mentally making a note for later to maybe not to add its proficiency bonus to attacks.

For Small creatures, you kind of have to just pick a number. If the creature still has formidable melee abilities, that number is probably 8. If it's a little pipsqueak, it's 6. If it has unreasonably large number of HD for its size, it might actually have Strength 10 to 12.

For Tiny creatures, it has a Strength between 1 and 4. I think a good number is probably about 1 point per foot it is long, plus 1 if its a predator, so a cat gets a 3.

Dexterity: If the monster is Small or smaller size, or the entry mentions its AC is because of its fast speed, its Dexterity can be calculated from its AC. If it has an AC of 7 in the original, it has AC of

12 in 5E, and its Dexterity is 14 or 15. If a monster has some kind of stealth or surprise ability, its Dexterity is at least 14. If it uses weapons and it saves as a thief, it probably has Dexterity of at least 10 + half its HD, but no more than 18. If it always wins initiative, that's Dexterity 20. If it's an animal, compare it to the stats for other real world animals. If it's an ooze, it probably has a Dexterity of 5 (Large or larger) or 6 (Medium or smaller). Sometimes you'll just want to retroactively calculate Dexterity after setting its natural armor value.

Constitution: For Large or larger creatures, or for undead, 12 + half its original HD is not a bad starting place. For Medium or smaller creatures, if it saves as a fighter, it probably has a Constitution of at least 12. Anything with regeneration can probably add the points of regeneration per round to the Constitution.

Anything with "+" hit points after the Hit Dice should probably get 2 more points of Constitution.

Undead are kind of a special case; they almost all hover between 14 and 18 Constitution, with the more formidable rare types maybe having a 20. So following that is a good guideline. Giants are usually tougher than the basic guidelines suggest, usually around 2 points higher. Constitution rarely exceeds 18 for a natural creature, or 20 for most creatures at all; dragons and giants can go higher. As always, compare the results to creatures that are related according to their relative power.

If it has less than a full Hit Die, Constitution is 8, or 6 if it has a single hit point.

Intelligence: Except for the oldest editions, most monsters actually have an Intelligence score listed. Pick an intermediate value if there is a range. Insects and other nearly mindless creatures have Intelligence 1. Creatures that cast spells like wizards have whatever Intelligence they need to set their spellcasting DC.

Wisdom: If a creatures saves as a "Normal Man," its Wisdom is definitely 10 (if not lower). Oozes pretty much always have a Wisdom of 6. Something that saves as a cleric could have a Wisdom of 10 + half its original HD, adjusted later to whatever you need to set its spellcasting DC. Predators, alert prey animals and the like usually have Wisdom 12. Guards, knights, warriors, thugs, and the like usually have 10 or 11.

Charisma: Things that don't really interact at all, like oozes, have a 1. Charisma can be the most subjective. If it has magical powers, and you feel basing them on Charisma makes sense, Charisma can be set to whatever you need to set the appropriate DC. However, most creatures don't have Charisma as high as 18, and Charisma 20 would be high even for powerful undead or fiends. Most NPCs and humanoids can just have a 10, whether they seem likable or not. Surly named NPCs can have an 8, and charming leader types can have a 12. Things with a fear-causing ability might use Charisma to set their DC as well; it tends to be a point or so lower than typical for their Challenge, but not much lower. Mercantile beings, spies, liars, and charmers can have a 12 to 14. Creatures with formidable personalities, like dragons, might have a score around their Intelligence, maybe 2 or 3 lower if they are surly or 2 or 3 higher if they are majestic or beguiling (red dragon, nymph).

Saving Throws

Saving Throw proficiencies might be one of the most inconsistent things about 5E stat blocks. First, I'll note that most creatures don't have any, and that's always a safe position to fall back to. Any monster, of any challenge, might not have Saving Throw proficiencies if it just doesn't need them. Even NPCs based on PC classes don't always have saving throw proficiencies; some NPCs get one just to shore up a modest Wisdom if they are likely to deal with PC enchantments (like a merchant). Giants and dragons usually have several, but not at all. Animals rarely have them, but large, powerful ones occasionally get Wisdom and Constitution to emphasize their intractability. A few generalizations:

Plants and undead: Some but not all plants and undead have proficiency in Constitution and/or Wisdom saving throws to reflect that they are generally less vulnerable to things that affect humans. But some don't.

Dragons: Strength is rare, the rest are all over the place.

NPCs: If a character is not just a run-of-the-mill NPC, but has a name, you might want to give them proficiencies similarly to a class they resemble. A generic cleric might not have saving throw proficiencies, but an Archpriest or Assassin might. 3E creatures with feats like Iron Will might warrant an additional proficiency, but are often just filler to shore up the creature's stats; how high is the total bonus, relative to its CR and to the other saving throws?

Normal Men and animals: If you are converting an old school monster and it saves as a Normal Man, it definitely has no saving throw proficiencies. Real world animals, and those that save as a fighter half their level, almost never have saving throw proficiencies.

Saves, Features, and Condition Immunities: Things with lots of immunities, or Legendary Resistance, don't need as many saving throw proficiencies. Things with magic resistance may not, as well.

A few data points:

Killer Whale (Challenge 5 beast): No saving throw proficiencies

Priest (Challenge 2 humanoid, casts as a 5th level cleric): No saving throw presidencies

Knight (Challenge 5): Con and Wis, which doesn't correspond to any class

Archmage (Challenge 12 humanoid, casts as a 19th level wizard): Int and Wis, like a wizard

Troll (CR 5 giant): no saving throw proficiencies

Roc (CR 11 Gargantuan monstrosity): Dex, Con, Wis, Cha

Fire Giant (Challenge 9 Huge giant): Dex, Con, Cha

Adult Blue Dragon (Challenge 16 Huge dragon): Dex, Con Wis, Cha

So as you can see, common beasts and humanoids generally don't have saving throw proficiencies. However, powerful, almost PC-like creatures like the Archmage do, and it's okay to cheat a little if you want to make your monster tougher (like the Knight). For big monsters like the Roc, it's more common to have proficiency in its lower values, to bring them up, than to add to already large values. But the fire giant and the adult blue dragon already have impressive Constitution saves. Higher Challenge monsters probably have, on average, more proficiencies, but not gratuitously so. This may be partly because not all high Challenge monsters warrant very high AC and ability scores, but they need some defenses. Very high saving throws aren't the same as immunities, but they can have similar effects. A fire giant, for instance is very unlikely to succumb to being poisoned.

Skills

In general, the default assumption in 5E should be no skill proficiencies. However, solitary monsters are almost always going to need Perception, predators and prey animals may need Stealth, grapplers need Athletics, and so forth.

As far as converting from 3E/Pathfinder, I would look at higher values, and think about what a monster needs to be effective. Let's say this intelligent, spellcasting creatures has a few ranks of each in Bluff, Diplomacy, and Intimidation; that doesn't necessarily mean they need those proficiencies in 5E. Ask yourself, with a fairly high Charisma, can't it play those roles anyway without a cluttered skill list? It isn't obligatory to give a monster skill proficiencies just because it was obligatory to spend skill ranks in 3E.

NPCs sometimes have skills. A Guard, for instance, has Perception, so it can detect, well, not very stealthy characters. A guard isn't a guard without Perception. For NPCs who are based on a specific NPC class, you can start with an assumption they might have 4 to 6 skills (like a PC), although they can have less. The cleric-like Priest, for instance, only has three, while the ranger-like Scout has only four. But the Spy has seven: this simple writeup can be used for a variety of spy-like characters. There are no rules! When converting from 3E to 5E, look for higher skill bonuses, related Feats, and consider how thematically relevant certain skills are.

With old school monsters, you are mostly creating skill proficiencies according to what you consider appropriate.

Expertise means double the proficiency is added to the ability score, like the rogue feature.

Athletics: Grapplers likely have this. If not, escape DC is still calculated as though they do. Large and Huge monsters don't routinely get this, but ones that are particularly physical do. Athletics makes a monster not just powerful, but agile. An ogre, which struggles to catch a wily halfling, and probably looks awkward climbing, does not get this proficiency. A storm giant, which apart from being strong can probably pull down a small boat, does.

Perception: Creatures with scent, low-light vision and other traits that don't directly translate to advanced senses in 5E will usually have Perception proficiency, at least. Old school creatures that are rarely surprised definitely get double their proficiency to Perception, for sure. Anything with lots of weird stuff in 3E/Pathfinder like blindsense or a nearly maxed Spot/Perception is a good candidate for expertise. A natural tracker, like a wolf, has at least basic proficiency in this.

Stealth: Undead often have this, but rarely expertise, unless they are incorporeal. Stalking predators have this. Anything with camouflage... don't get complicated, just give it Stealth, maybe with expertise. Monster writeups kind of assume monsters are encountered in their habitats, so they don't need a lot of conditional bonuses PCs sometimes have, or that are written into 3E and earlier edition writeups. Specialized bonuses are better handled as features, like Camouflage or False Appearance.

Survival: Rare, unless it's an intelligent creature known as a tracker.

Natural Attacks

There is nothing wrong with using the original's base attack dice. If you do want to fiddle with the numbers a bit, there are some things you can do. Medium/Large/Huge usually corresponds to one, two, or three dice of damage for an attack, but bites sometimes do one less, maybe of a different type. If you aren't sure what to use, 1d6/2d6/3d6 usually works good. A bigger attack uses d8s, whereas a weaker attack (like a secondary bite) might do 1d4/1d8/2d6 or 2d8.

In the case of old school monsters, you can use the original damage values and then apply Strength (or Dexterity) as applicable and you should get into the right neighborhood.

You might be inclined to translate one bite and two claws into Multiattack with one bite and two claw attacks. That is not usually the thing to do. For one thing, real world animals and similar beasts rarely get Multiattack. A special pounce or goring charge option is more common. For another, monsters don't typically bite one creature, then claw two other different creatures. Thus, a tiger or a ghoul has a Claws attack, not a Multiattack for using its claws twice. Just add the base damage dice together; this will sometimes reduce the overall damage, since you only add ability scores once, but is usually a better choice. So instead of two claws for 1d6, it has Claws for 2d6. You can change or combine the dice if it looks weird to you. Really dangerous creatures might Multiattack with their bite and then their claws.

There are reasons to make individual attacks. For instance, some creatures are really fast and vicious, like maybe a swift-moving undead, and might attack several opponents. Creatures that can grab multiple foes probably need multiple attacks. If it uses all its tentacles to grapple one foe, Tentacles is fine, but if it has four tentacles and can grapple four human-sized foes, you need a Tentacle attack is can use four times. Large boss monsters might have individual Claw attacks just to spread the pain.

Tiny creatures may have a natural attack. If they have a fairly weak Strength and use Strength on a 1d4, you should get the right base damage. But if it's really weak, or it uses Dexterity to hit, you

might go ahead and make the attack do a flat 1 point of damage. You can take away the proficiency bonus of things that are fairly harmless and domesticated (like a typical cat), more strong than dangerous (like a horse), or just particularly clumsy (like a purple worm). You can also take away the ability score bonus, if you don't think the attack should really be a threat to an armored foe (cats are quick, but are their claws really going to tear through leather or chain?).

Step Five: Consider the System Assumptions

This is the part where you take the previous work and trash it. Just kidding. Somewhat. The goal is to create something faithful to the original but that works in 5E. It should have good numbers, and it should have the right aesthetics. This is another part where I do more lecturing and let you figure out what is the right decision for you.

Offense and Defenses balance

Monsters in 5E are usually more defensive than offensive, because you want them to last long enough to be interesting, but not do so much damage as to easily kill the party. This balance can change significantly for solitary monsters, which are supposed to hurt but probably won't last more than two or three rounds. If they have low damage, they won't even make an impression. But big boss monsters, particularly those with Legendary Actions, tend to be fairly balanced, or maybe shifted a little more toward defense. Those kinds of fights are intended to drag out, a little bit.
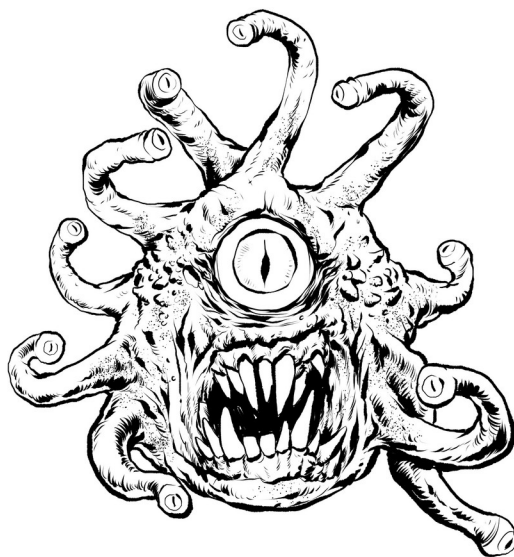
Innate Spellcasting, A Hard Look

Innate spellcasting exists in 5E, and is a valid replacement for spell-like abilities. One question to ask is, is this creature really casting a spell? Does it concentrate? Can it be dispelled? Does it have multiple spells, or really just one or two magical powers it depends on? With some exceptions, most demons and undead have had their spells replaced with features, not spells. Very few monsters have innate *dispel magic*, unless that's a specialty of theirs. When you look at the succubus and dryad you see they have customized abilities, not spells. If you look at the storm giant, it has some innate spellcasting, but rather than a spell, it has a powerful lighting bolt attack with a long range, commensurate with its high Challenge.

Spell-like abilities in 3E/Pathfinder were a great way to flesh out monsters quickly, but in 5E we usually want more specific abilities that really hone in on a theme. It's a fact, some previous edition monsters had more spell-like abilities than they needed. Plenty of old school monsters leaned on a description of *charm person* with various caveats, when a unique writeup would really answer more questions that might come up in play. Unless a monster literally concentrates and uses a spell-like

power, I think you are generally better off, for instance, stating an action affects the target "as the spell *confusion*, with a 1 minute duration" rather than making it innate spellcasting with a variant duration.

As another note, Concentration in 5E is part of a duration, so if you specify a spell has a duration of 10 minutes, or whatever, you are removing the concentration aspect unless you say "Concentration, up to 10 minutes." That is actually very useful. However, it's also a pitfall if you didn't mean to do that.

Speed, A Section We Will Move Past Quickly

5E tactical movement is a lot more rational than 3E/Pathfinder. It also is generally in a narrow range of movement speeds. Something faster than a normal human gets 40 feet; something really fast, like a racing animal, gets 50, maybe 60 ft. Watch out especially about giving out higher movement rates to monsters with Legendary Actions that can move repeatedly. A lot of fliers have much lower speeds in 5E; compare the creature to dragons and other fliers for some benchmarks. Considering whether a creature can reach high speeds when casually flying across the valley is not a major consideration in 5E. The focus is more on how far a creature can move in less than ideal conditions, while turning and banking. Hovering is also a part of movement in 5E; if a creature is incorporeal, floats like a balloon, or maybe flies like a hummingbird, don't forget to note it can hover.

KISS

The acronym is Keep It Simple, Stupid. While there is plenty of room in 5E for complex, interesting abilities, you should definitely simplify anything you don't want to pay a lot of attention to. NPC conversions are not generally done as full PC writeups (although you can). Rather, the NPC is distilled to a few basic traits. The Priest just casts spells, and has a smite-like melee enhancer (which is both simpler and more potent than equivalent abilities of some Domains and kind of more like a paladin's smite). The Gladiator has Brave, and rather than a bunch of fighter-like traits, just gets Brute which simply adds a die of damage to its melee attacks. The Orc Warlord could get a bunch of fiddly abilities to make him more dangerous, but it's just simpler to add a 1d8 to the damage of all its weapon attacks. A lot of bonus actions that would come from class abilities or wielding two weapons should just be rolled up into Multiattack.

Get Weird with Multiattack

One of the best things you can use to distinguish a monster is the creative things you can do with Multiattack. A dragon uses Multiattack, allowing it to use its Fearsome Presence, and then attacks. This means you don't have to assign a bonus action to its presence, or put it up in general traits instead of actions, and if an ability isn't relevant or recharged, you can just ignore it. The goblin boss can attack twice with its scimitar... but the second attack is at Disadvantage. The little guy is maybe trying too hard, and it reminds us that goblins generally aren't as formidable as heroic fighters or scary hobgoblins. It also creates an intermediate level of threat between one attack, and two attacks.

The Veteran doesn't repeat all the rules for fighting with two weapons, it just notes if it has a weapon in its off hand, it gets another attack with that weapon. Maybe you are converting a ranger who has Cleave or maybe you just like the Horde Breaker Hunter feature; make a note the ranger can make an additional attack against another opponent it hasn't attack this turn. Maybe you want to create an eldritch knight, who attacks once, and then casts a cantrip. Maybe a monster can combine two signature attacks, but it has to commit to something like a breath weapon or a special charge.

Use Actual Armor and Weapon Stats

There is nothing preventing you from writing an attack that has nothing to do with the standard equipment writeups. If you want a hobgoblin hoplite to do 3d6 with its pike, you can. As a stylistic choice, I like to work with the weapons as written. Official 5E material sticks very close to base weapon states. This approach also removes any ambiguity what the PCs find if they scavenge a weapon off a corpse. In some cases you will be dissatisfied with a piece of equipment's performance. Hide, as armor, tends to particularly underwhelm, with its +2 armor bonus, and even Huge spears, at 3d8 in melee, aren't all that powerful. You can add special features that enhance a creature's use of certain equipment, you can boost other areas, you can accept slightly lower numbers in some areas than you would like, or you can boost the monster's overall power by changing other traits (like adding an extra attack to Multiattack, or adding more Hit Dice to a monster with a low AC). For a Medium-sized enemy, stealing a Gladiator's Brute or an orc's Fury will do. When a creature uses a weapon too big for a PC, it's okay to depart a little more from standard rules, but a Large weapon should usually do a base of double the original damage and a Huge weapon should do triple.

As far as hide armor goes, for giants and other powerful beings, using natural armor instead is permissible. But don't feel like you need to drive up the AC if it doesn't really make sense. Maybe more hit points or a stronger offense is a better option.

Natural Armor

Natural armor is a simple and accepted way of boosting AC, but one thing to think about is this: is this really weird? Is it normal for a human-like being to have skin as tough as plate? For creatures that are simply "tough," like giants or Large beasts, I like natural armor to line up with its Constitution bonus, if they are in the same neighborhood. But even weaker creatures may have tough shells or bones. A balor demon and an adult silver dragon have an AC of only 19. 19, in fact, seems to be the place where a lot of the toughest monsters rest, equivalent to *+1 plate*.

Old school monsters often had AC that was arbitrarily high (because it was a high HD monster) or low (because a lot of monsters that weren't technically armored just got AC 6 to 8). 3E somewhat continued that trend, but started a trend of pushing natural armor bonuses very high just based on CR. 5E pushes back against that a little. AC shouldn't get silly, unless the creature is silly invulnerable for a discernible reason (maybe it's a golem made from a crashed spaceship, or a literal suit of magic armor that has been animated). Similarly, big dangerous monsters, especially things that aren't natural animals, can have a little more natural armor bonus if its makes thematic sense. A cloud giant isn't literally hard as steel, but good luck chopping off one's hand or stabbing it with a dagger.

My suggestions for 4E, above, are looser. But here, again, you could play with the numbers. Sometimes monsters were given really high AC without much explanation.

Inflicted Conditions

5E monsters tend to be more conservative about inflicting things like stunned, which makes a character vulnerable. A lot of abilities and effects that in 3E might make a character stunned or paralyzed, instead make a character incapacitated. Stunned or paralyzed should be reserved for things that make a character actually immobile, like a statue. Older editions don't usually have pre-coded, stern penalties of this sort. For pseudo-conditions, look at *confusion* and *irresistible dance* as examples.

5E rarely has a single saving throw take out a character unless they are exceptionally weak against that ability. The medusa's petrification in 5E is both more balanced and more exciting because it doesn't take full effect all the time. The banshee's wail doesn't automatically kill, it takes a character to the brink so the other PCs get a chance to rush over and say, "Don't die on me! Don't you do it!"

Reactions

Reactions aren't common, but they do serve some specific purposes. Sometimes things that happen when a monster is hit, like splitting our counterattacking, work better as reactions than automatically affecting a PC. Because NPCs wear regular armor, maybe with magic, defense can be low; the Parry reaction is found in some variation on a lot of monsters, allowing them to add their proficiency bonus to AC against the triggering attack. This forces the PCs to attack with more overwhelming force to be sure of hitting.

Legendary Actions and Legendary Monsters

Legendary Actions aren't fundamentally about making monsters stronger, but about changing them. Not all boss monsters have legendary actions, although almost all legendary monsters count as boss monsters. Probably the most significant distinction about a legendary monster is that meeting it is purposeful, or relates to a certain setting. While you might heroically slay a young adult dragon just because it's bothering you, heading into the lair of ancient red dragon is an excursion of interest and purpose. You meet a unicorn because you enter a blessed forest. You encounter a vampire because you have poor judgment when it comes to real estate.

Adding legendary actions makes a monster, in general, more adept at fighting multiple opponents in a dynamic environment. A legendary monster can have fewer minions or none at all, and still hold its own. However, legendary actions still need to be factored into its Challenge. If a monster can use three legendary actions to attack with its main melee attack, then its damage output is four times the damage of its attack.

Most legendary monsters have 3 legendary actions, but 1 or 2 is fine. Most of the time, they have about three possible choices, but some have two, and some have more. If you want to give a creature a movement boost, that can be a legendary action. If you don't want it to zoom all over the battlefield, make the movement cost 2 legendary actions; it won't use it all the time, but the option is there if needs it. A weapon attack is often a solid basic choice, as is Detect (make a Perception check), but sometimes this is an area you can focus on more unusual actions, like a unicorn's self healing. Keep in mind that anything you designate as a legendary action could be used a lot. If you think a monster biting four times in a round is too much, don't do it. Maybe make that bite cost 2 actions, perhaps adding another function to it to make it appealing. One cute method is to give it one attack as a legendary action, like a claw, and make its dangerous bite or a Multiattack its preferred action on its turn.

There is nothing that states a monster needs to be legendary and have legendary actions to have Legendary Resistance, but all the examples that have Legendary Resistance do. If you wanted to put one or two uses of Legendary Resistance on a non-legendary monster, you may or may not want to give that feature a new name.

Not every boss monster needs to be a legendary monster. Note that the balor demon is a perfectly useful boss monster, without any legendary actions. High level characters might even battle 1d4 balors. But if you wanted to create an arch balor, you could take a regular balor and add them, boosting its Challenge appropriately, with few other changes. For low level characters, something like an ogre or a troll works just fine without needing a special action economy. It may not last more than a few rounds, but there is always the chance it could kill someone in one critical hit, so that's interesting, too.

Resistances and Immunities

Consider getting rid of some of these. These are just a lot less common in 5E. For another thing, they often suck. It's just not usually fun when a character's main attack isn't effective. If this happens sometimes, but not all the time, it can add tactical interest. But if there's not a strong rationale for a resistance or immunity, it can make it seem like a PC is just being picked on.

Rather than thinking, does this make sense for this monster?, ask yourself, is there anything about this monster that says it really needs this resistance? Maybe you think your rock monster should resist lightning, but does it really need that distinction? Surely a rock monster can just have lots of hit points and still be rocky, without resisting lighting. If a creature isn't closely tied to an element, it shouldn't have an elemental immunity. Red dragons are fiery, and a fire elemental is literal fire, but for your monstrous humanoid with fire immunity in 3E, that is also resistant to a lot of things, and dwells underground in caves, that doesn't necessarily make sense. Change it to a resistance, or if literally nothing in its description mentions that immunity, drop it. For demons and devils and other things of a subtype, you can look at existing creatures and see how these creatures look in 5E and copy that.

Incorporeal undead are often immune to necrotic, and corporeal undead are often but not always resistant to necrotic, depending on how evil and cursed they are. Undead are immune to poison. For a basic set of condition immunities for an incorporeal undead, look at the wraith. For a basic set of ooze immunities, look at the black pudding. A literal clockwork is logically immune to psychic.

Classed Creatures

This is given as an option in the DMG, and it's definitely an option. Building a monster as an NPC can be a lot of fun, and has some advantages in terms of quickly customizing an encounter. However, it's rarely done for several reasons. First, it breaks the Challenge/proficiency bonus relationship. Second, you will still have to calculate Challenge based on your estimation of its damage, hit points, and other abilities. Third, it's more time consuming. Fourth, a lot of PC abilities and choices are fiddly, things will rarely make a difference in an adventure, much less a pitched battle. Honestly, if you forgot to give a bard Perform, would it matter that much? But I'm not saying never do it. Just do it with conscious intent. "I'd like to make the chief an orc with three fighter levels" is a clear and intelligible concept maybe worth exploring. "I need some orcs, I'm going to stat each one as a 6th level barbarian with PC class levels" is probably time-consuming as well as ineffective.

The alternative is to make the NPC a "monster." Older editions defined an NPC as a creature built like a PC but who wasn't one. This concept decayed a bit in 3E with NPC Classes, for less heroic characters. By 5E, the term basically means a named character or extra of a common humanoid type with abilities similar to PCs. Usually spellcasters can just a class's progression, but they rarely have extra spells for Domains and such; just pick any spells you want to match their purpose in the adventure. A lot of NPCs, even casters, have "something sweet on top," like the Archmage's Magic Resistance or the Gladiator's Brave. Maybe the executioner you are lifting from the Rules Cyclopedia needs the ability to treat its axe as a weapon of Sharpness, or even Vorpal. Things like Sneak Attack

make an NPC seem like a spy or rogue, and provide a reasonable offense for a character using light weapons without a lot of attacks. You can always cherry-pick from class features, and even use features from one class to add to an NPC with a somewhat different concept.

To make an NPC seem like they belong to the same class as a PC, relevant spellcasting, an appropriate number of attacks, a few special features, and class-appropriate saves will make an NPC seem very class-like. Maybe a PC gladiator would be a fighter with a Fighting Style and maybe Improved Critical or maneuvers, but the NPC version just has Brute, Brave, and a shield bash, and works just fine. We can tell the Gladiator is fighter-y, even though its stats are very simple. The assassin bypasses all the complexity of the poison rules and just does poison damage, but isn't that perhaps easier to use in play? As a rule of thumb, primarily martial characters usually need double the number of Hit Dice of their level, to make a Challenge of half their level. Most "experienced" martial characters have Multiattack, even if a PC of that level wouldn't have an Extra Attack yet. Multiattack usually starts at two attacks (for scouts) and goes to four attacks, for a very experienced character wielding two weapons.

Copy, Steal, Modify

Probably the best way to stay close to the design assumptions of 5E is to copy existing abilities and text. Why re-invent the wheel? It's easier to modify an existing ability in small ways than to build something new that works perfectly with the other parts of the system. Certainly customize it. If nothing else, a cute name change can make a feature feel thematic.

This is particularly good technique when you are not sure how to handle something. Shadows, wraiths, and wights all produce undead spawn, but in different ways. If you want to create an undead that creates undead spawn, you might look at which of those creatures is closest to what you had in mind.

Keep in mind that if you are writing for publication, you can't copy and use text you don't own. For instance, if you are writing a third-party book under the Open Gaming License, you can only copy text that is itself open gaming content and not Product Identity. Of course, while text can be copyrighted, no one really owns an idea. If you find something that works for you but isn't available to swipe, you can use the concept as an inspiration, while writing completely new text to describe it.

Naturally, you will want to consult a lawyer, and your employer, if you have any questions related to copyright questions.

Step Six: Thematic Fit

You could get to this point, picking good starting numbers, massaging them to fit the system, and trimming the fat, and still not have a coherent monster that plays well and is fun. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, and a monster is more than a bunch of stats filtered through a few basic assumptions of the game and the story. At some point, you have to ask, "What does this do?"

Let's look at the lowly 5e ogre. As a basic melee beater with little or no special treats, it doesn't seem to have much going for it. But an ogre is a good "general" monster encountered singly or in pairs in a dungeon, and a decent boss fight for low level adventurers. It can enhance a mid-level encounter as muscle, and in higher level encounters, can serve as cannon fodder the same way goblins do in low level games.

Let's look at the succubus. At Challenge 4, it can hold its own in a fight. It's a powerful fiend! But it's not going to go toe to toe with angry barbarians and zealous clerics if it can help it. The fundamental point is to trick PCs and ambush them. Compared to previous editions, the 5E succubus is a lot less battle-ready. Which is actually useful. You can use the same succubus with 2nd level characters as you can with 9th level characters, and it works fine. At CR 7, the 3E succubus is not all that useful. It's much too dangerous to send against low level characters, but at the same token, having high-level players PCs fight a half dozen succubi in an alley doesn't make sense. That's not what a succubus is for. At low levels, the succubi does something deceitful or treacherous, and moves on. If attacked, it does some damage and leaves. At high levels, the succubus can call in some guards or lackeys to do the heavy fighting while it hangs back. The succubus has a life drain, but its main abilities are changing shape and charming creatures. Charm can be a big deal even for high-level characters!

Get Rid of Excess Baggage

Dispel magic doesn't make a lot of sense for an innate spellcaster. What about a creature would make it innately able to specifically counter spells and not other abilities? So dispel magic should generally go, unless it's part of a creature's identity or tactics. The original had Sense Motive through the roof and you don't know why? Get rid of it. It's a glowing magical being that resists acid? Why does it resist acid, exactly? Do you notice some enhanced senses or immunities that come purely from its 3E Type? Get rid of it! Not every monster needs darkvision. Unless it's subterranean, nocturnal, or particularly renowned for its keen senses, it doesn't need darkvision. Constructs and insectile beasts don't just automatically get a bunch of condition immunities; if something shouldn't work on a mindless creature it's better to put that into the feature itself, rather than making lots of assumptions. I mean, can't a spider be confused? Couldn't a wooden mock person become frightened?

Does a monster have too many features that do the same thing, or worse, a bloated list of spells? Get rid of the excess. If a creature can already cast suggestion and make something irresistibly dance, the fact that it can also charm woodland creatures seems redundant. Decide: when this creature encounters the adventurers, is it going to charm their horses, or use suggestion on them? Unless a creature's whole thing is mind control, you want to keep the thematic overlap to a minimum.

Does a creature gain a Stealth bonus in marshy areas? Just give it Stealth, and if you think it's useful to call out its natural camouflage, give it advantage in swamps and temperate forests to use Stealth. But honestly, does knowing a white polar bear can hide in snow add anything? The Monster Manual doesn't think so.

Does a monster throw hand axes, and also daggers? Why? Is that important? Pick one. Do you understand clearly in your mind why this creature has fast healing instead of just more hit points?

Does it have an elaborate Multiattack, and legendary actions? Why? Do some of those actions belong in one category and not the other?

Put Something Sweet On Top

A lot of creatures have one little cherry on top that distinguishes them from other monsters. Look at the Archmage, master of arcane magics. Magic Resistance doesn't directly relate to any class feature of the wizard or sorcerer. However, it just makes sense to say, look, this person is the best spellslinger in the county, so she is just going to make more saving throws because I don't want her going down like a chump to *hold person*. Most ordinary brutish warriors don't have much in the way of skills, but orcs and thugs are particularly known for bullying, so they get Intimidation. A knight could just be some heavy in plate armor with a sword, but Leadership makes that knight a useful NPC to lead a small cohort, or to travel in small groups, boosting each other. The Priest doesn't need anything but spells, but their Divine Eminence means they will get in maybe one good hit before being taken down by uncouth scoundrels. Goblins can get a bonus action Hide or Disengage, orcs to close to melee range. You don't even have to use the same feature on different creatures of a similar type. Maybe this one goblin doesn't get the bonus action, but gets a berserker's Reckless Attack instead.

In general, 5E lets the thematics speak for themselves. But if you can think of one little feature that really speaks to a creature's theme, it's worth doing.

Go Nuts

When all is said and done, you can make BIG changes. From the Rules Cyclopedia to the Mystara supplement to the Monstrous Compendium, we learned that drakes are fey or elementals, depending on the variety of drake. In one move that bugs me more than it should, someone decided in 5E that wraiths and specters should swap places in the hierarchy. It makes sense. People associate wraiths with very dangerous, almost unique undead in Lord of the Rings, whereas specters are really just "ghosts you can fight" so why do they need to be immensely powerful? But it makes it hard to run older modules that use one or both; if the descriptions aren't important, you can just swap them out, but if they do, you have to customize the monsters or change the presentation of the encounters. That's an example of choices you have to make about presenting a monster.

The disenchanter has gone through many changes over editions, with various authors trying to make it either less silly or sillier, more dangerous or more annoying. Mummies used to be positive-energy charged. Orcs used to be lawful evil. Blink dogs were once a type of beast or monstrosity, but since their ability is now defined as being related to the Feywild, they are now fey.

Of course you have permission to change any lore, description, or ability, for your own game. But even if you plan on sharing something, or perhaps publishing it, there may be very good reasons to just change stuff. Maybe it never made sense for that monster to have two glaive attacks but not a lot of Hit Dice. Maybe when a monster migrated to 3E and became a sorcerer, it didn't need a high Intelligence any more. Maybe an "ugly" monster with low Charisma is now associated with being a sorcerer or warlock, and actually warrants a high Charisma. Maybe despite its weird appearance, you just can't convince yourself something isn't a monstrosity but really just a beast. Maybe this 12 foot tall morningstar-wielding brute, despite its horns and taking into account its magic powers, really seems like it might be a giant. Or maybe a giant, that is so monstrous it doesn't even use weapons, is really more like a monstrosity. While converting your monster, take the opportunity to fix anything about it that just rubs you the wrong way. Note that 5E doesn't require related creatures to be the same type; the green hag is a fey, but the night hag is a fiend.

Is its set of abilities just too complicated? Can you break it down? A lot of complicated grab/swallow/follow-up attack operations in 5e have been reduced to a single feature, like the purple worm's bite (with the ability to swallow) or a vampire's blood drain. If something is supposed to be A, then B, see if you can write it that way, using defined actions and triggers. Maybe the target is "helpless or charmed creature" or "helpless or grabbed creature." Maybe a nasty follow-up can be a bonus action, or happen on a critical hit. If you are struggling to define how the actions work, that is probably a sign to redesign from the bottom up using the same concept. This can be a good opportunity to steal things from other monsters, like grabs, constriction, gore, pounce, poison, and so forth.

Do its abilities function in a way that's entertaining and not hard to run? One monster that makes PCs run away can be a challenging encounter. A dozen such creatures are just going to be a march of misery as the PCs struggle just to stay in the battle, bordering on farce. Is it supposed to be a mob

monster, but triggers lots of recurring saves? Maybe a shorter duration would be better, or maybe straight poison damage instead of conditions.

Step Seven: Revision

Remember where I joked about trashing your work and starting over? Well, here's the step where you might basically do that. Now, see what you have you can use. But you may find yourself staring at something, nodding with the growing realization I pointed out, above, good reasons to change it, and here you are.

Challenge

Did this change? Did this change a lot? Look at the DMG and do the calculations and see where you are. Is this creature currently workable in its current state? Can you leave some really off values alone, or do you need to find a way to bolster them? Is its average damage out of control after you give it four tentacle attacks that all add Strength to damage? With the way Challenge works in 5E, it's okay to go down a notch or two, but going up by more than +1 usually means something has gone weird. If a CR 12 monster turns into a Challenge 14 monster, adding its young or a minion could send it wildly out of balance compared to the basic assumptions of the game. The DMG has some suggestions about handling resistances and effective hit points. Moving a creature up or down can change those assumptions, a lot. Do you need to compromise on a number in between? Flatten it out? Built it up to meet the higher CR?

Abilities, AC, Attacks

Do you need to play with the numbers a bit? Are you ready to say, you know what, my Large brutish creature really deserves Strength 20 and that will fix its soft offense? Will increasing Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma by 2 allow me to rationalize the feature or spellcasting DCs of this creature? Does this creature's 3E Intelligence of 18 seem weird, unimportant, or maybe unbelievable based on its description? If the creatures is wolf-like, does it have similar abilities to wolves?

Hit Points

Here's where we get into the nitty gritty, as 5E hit points are probably the biggest change from earlier editions. With few exceptions, 5E monsters have the same or more hit points, sometimes much more. You can address this a few ways. You can increase HD by half, or even double them, if you want. You can increase Constitution by 2 or even 4. Maybe you need to trim off a HD or 2, because your Gargantuan creature now has way too many hit points. It's okay for things to change a little. Let's say, though, that you really feel it's best if it the hit points match the original, or maybe you want to hit a middle-of-the-target number of Hit Points based on its Challenge.

The average of a die roll is half the maximum value, plus 0.5. So a creature with d8 Hit Dice and Constitution 14 gets an average of 4.5 + 2 = 6.5 hit points per Hit Die (round down).

As the cheat of last resort, you can just pick the hit points, and divide by the average hit points per Hit Dice, and there's your Hit Dice. I don't do this often, but it's sometimes the only way to deal with monsters who simply won't work in 5E as intended because their stats assume a lot of things based on their original system. I call it a cheat, but really this is just a technique you will use from time to time as an expression of your realization that sometimes you need to move beyond naive assumptions about conversions. Sometimes there is no Point A to Point C, and you just need to pick the number that is right. No matter how much you want to follow conventions for spellcasting NPCS, if you have an NPC that casts as a 12th level cleric, and you really, truly, need to get to around Challenge 10, you are going to have shovel on the hit points, in addition to shoring up offense.

Proficiency Bonus

Don't forget to update this as you go. And if you find a monster on the cusp between Challenge 4 and 5, or 8 or 9, where the proficiency bonus goes up, this is an opportunity. You may be able to split the difference and go with a higher Challenge, or round down and let this monster be a little humble. Sometimes the difference will cause the monster to fluctuate like some weird quantum construct between those Challenges, shooting up in some areas if you go higher, and dropping down and going lower. You might end up picking weird intermediate values that don't quite match the DMG.

But at the end of this process, you will be satisfied the monster looks and feels right, meets the basic assumptions of the game system, and usefully serves in its intended role. Compare the numbers to a very similar monster and see if it seems off; if it's better or worse in nearly every way than a matching Challenge monster, that can be a red flag. Although, let's be real, not all the official monsters quite live up to their Challenge.

Did You Go Too Far?

Maybe you cut loose and had some fun, you're realized all your big changes aren't going to work. Maybe your undead with its own special pool of "blood points" is just a pain, and you can handle how it charges its abilities in a simpler, better way. Maybe making a monster Gargantuan has broken too many things, and you think it's better going back to Huge and just looking big because of the camera angle.

Once you've thought about your revisions, give the creature a pass from the beginning. One thing that can definitely happen is that you make a succession of changes, until you get to the end, and realize the chain of alterations you have made significantly changes the creature's Challenge, danger, or behavior in ways you don't like.

Appendix A: Basic Statistics Summary

General Stuff

Armor and Weapons: Use the actual AC and damage dice of weapons as a starting place. Large, Huge, and Gargantuan weapons do x2, x3, and x4 as much base damage. Giants and tough humanoids who wear hide or leather armor, but aren't all that agile, should maybe just let their AC reflect their natural armor instead.

Natural Attacks: Start by using the original's damage dice, and change as needed. For a lot of monsters, combine multiple attacks into one attack unless you see them believably dividing their attacks among groups; in that case, add multiple dice together.

Spellcasters: Offensive casters like sorcerers or wizards are usually going to have a Challenge of 2/3 their level of spellcasting. Support casters like bards and clerics are usually going to have a Challenge of 1/2 their level of spellcasting, and have one more Hit Die than their caster level.

Old School Monster (eg. Dungeons & Dragons Rules Cyclopedia, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons)

Challenge: Start with its Hit Dice. Halve it if it's a basic beater. Look at maybe −1 or −2 for a general monster. Stick with just straight Hit Dice for boss monsters and solitaries. It's okay for Challenge to up to about your original target +1 for solitary creatures, or down to about half for non-solitary creatures.

Size: Pick something based on its size. Most large creatures are Large or Huge, and most small creatures are Small or Tiny.

AC: 19 - original AC. Monsters from Castles & Crusades can just use their AC (which is ascending). Incorporeal creatures just get Dexterity; typically, you can average this number with 10 to get an idea where to set their AC and Dexterity.

Hit Dice: Use the original Hit Dice. Double for humanoid fighters and solitary creatures. Maybe increase by about half for more elite beaters, like ogres and stuff.

Ability Scores

Strength: For Large and larger, maybe start with 14 + 1/2 HD. For Medium and smaller, maybe 10 or 12. Add double any to-hit bonuses or damage bonuses due to Strength. For Small, probably 6, maybe 8 for something scrappy, and 10 or 12 for ridiculously dangerous beasts. For Tiny, 1 to 4 is good. For incorporeal creatures, this will be a low number, probably half that of a typical creature of its size.

Dexterity: Whatever justifies their AC for beasts and a lot of monsters. For agile beaters, 12; for swift predators or prey, maybe 14 or 15. For things with initiative bonuses, 18, and for things that always win initiative, 20.

Constitution: Probably 12 for anything that saves as a fighter of any level, or 10 if it saves as a normal man. Large or larger creatures might have 10 + half their original Hit Dice. Undead tend to be similar, hovering around 14 to 18, with some having a 20. Add points of regeneration to their Constitution. Add +2 for "+" hit points.

Intelligence: Use the listed Intelligence. For creatures that cast wizard spells, adjust so the spellcasting DC is appropriate. For really old-school monsters with no listed intelligence, make a best guess.

Wisdom: If a creatures saves as a "Normal Man," its Wisdom is definitely 10 (if not lower). Oozes pretty much always have a Wisdom of 6. Something that saves as a cleric could have a Wisdom of 10 + half its original HD, adjusted later to whatever you need to set its spellcasting DC. Predators, alert prey animals and the like usually have Wisdom 12. Guards, knights, warriors, thugs, and the like usually have 10 or 11.

Charisma: Things that don't really interact at all, like oozes, have a 1. Most NPCs and humanoids can just have a 10, whether they seem likable or not. Surly named NPCs can have an 8, and charming leader types can have a 12. Things with a fear-causing ability might use Charisma to set their DC as well; it tends to be a point or so lower than typical for their Challenge, but not much lower. Creatures with formidable personalities, like dragons, might have a score around their Intelligence, maybe 2 or 3 lower if they are surly or 2 or 3 higher if they are majestic or beguiling (red dragon, nymph).

Speed: 30 ft. is standard. Increase it to 40 ft. if it's fast, or 50 ft. if it's as fast as a horse. Fly is usually going to be 40 ft. to 60 ft., but compare to similar creatures. C&C monsters can just use the listed value.

Regeneration and Fast Healing Scaling: For creatures with regeneration, 1 hit point/point a round is probably equivalent to 1 or 2 points/round, 2 hit points/round is probably equivalent to 5 hit points per round, and 3/round is equivalent to 10 hit points per round in 5E.

3E (including Dungeons & Dragons 3.0 and 3.5, and the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game, aka Pathfinder 1E)

Challenge: Use CR. Basic beaters are probably going to be about half that. General monsters might be CR −1 or −2. Boss monsters and solitaries get to keep their Challenge. This could go up to about CR +1 for solitaries, and as low as half their CR for anything that gathers in groups or is characterized more by its special powers or skills than by its toughness in a straight up fight.

Size: The same, but 5E tops out at Gargantuan

AC: Average Armor Class and touch AC. Real world animals and similar beasts just use their Dexterity plus an intuitive natural armor bonus. Incorporeal creatures just get Dexterity.

Hit Dice: Use the same. Maybe double for solitaries. Increase by about 1/4 for things that might be encountered solitary or in small groups, like ogres.

Ability Scores: For scores over 14, take half the score and add 7. Giants tend to be stronger; their Strength might be 3 points higher and their Constitution 2 points higher. "Mindless" creatures get Intelligence 1 and Charisma 1. Undead get whatever Constitution they need for their hit points; considering using their original Charisma to estimate their Constitution.

Speed: Usually the same. However, if a creature has a high land speed, consider scaling it back to 40 ft., maybe 50 ft.; something as fast as a fast horse can have 60 ft. Fly speeds can be a little lower, too; compare similar creatures. Creatures with perfect flight or that can hover "can hover" in 5E.

A Note on Natural Attacks: Some Pathfinder monsters have a "bleed" quality. Just add twice the number of dice to their attack. For instance, a claw that does 1d6 damage, plus 1d6 bleed, does 3d6 damage. A bite that does 2d8 damage, plus 2d6 bleed, does 6d8 damage. Bleed expressed in single points is probably just one more die. Bleed in Constitution damage is probably about four times as much; in that case you might want to make it a rider that allows a save against the damage. Similarly you might want to look at special qualities that boost an attack, and consider aggregating them into an overall increase of 1 die of damage. For a creature with Vital Strike and so forth, you might consider bolstering the creature's attacks by that much rather than giving it Multiattack.

Regeneration and Fast Healing Scaling: For creatures with fast healing or regeneration, probably add 5 to its 3E value. Not all creatures in 3E games have a clear rationale for fast healing or generation; consider adding more Hit Dice instead.

Dungeons & Dragons 4E

Challenge: Typically half its Level, until Level 20/Challenge 10, then +1 Challenge for every level after that. A creature's spellcaster level if it's a wizard or cleric is usually 2/3 its Level, and its Challenge is typically 2/3 of its wizard level or 1/2 its cleric or bard level. Challenge could go as high as Level +1 if you are converting a Solo, and as low as half its Level for a basic beater or a a minion.

Size: The same, but 5E tops out at Gargantuan

AC: For a Large or larger creature with natural armor, one wild guess is half its level as a natural armor bonus. For a less heavily armored creature or a Medium or smaller creature, maybe a natural armor bonus of +1 to +2, or +3 or higher if it has a shell or carapace. A lot of creatures in 5E, especially real world animals or more agile beasts, don't have natural armor. Incorporeal creatures just get Dexterity.

Hit Dice: Maybe its Level. Subtract one if it's a minion, multiply by 1.5 if it's Elite, and triple if it's Solo.

Ability Scores: The same as 3E. For numbers over 14, consider halving and adding 7. Giants might have +3 Strength and +2 Constitution or so.

Speed: Usually equivalent, with one square being 5 ft. Some 5E monsters have a slightly reduced ground speed, compare to similar creatures. Flight should be compared to similar creatures.

Multiattack: Usually, a 4E creature's Multiattack can be used as the basis of its 5E Multiattack.

Appendix B: Giant and Dragon Benchmarks

Giant	AD&D HD	3E HD	5E HD	3E CR	5E Challenge	3E Strength	5E Strength
Hill	8 + 1-2	12d8+48	10d12 + 40	7	5	25	21
Stone	9 + 1-3	14d8+56	11d12 + 55	8	7	27	23
Frost	10 + 1-4	14d8+70	12d12 + 60	9	8	29	23
Fire	11 + 2-5	15d8+75	13d12 + 78	10	9	31	25
Cloud	12 + 2-7	17d8+102	16d12 + 96	11	9	35	27
Storm	15 + 2-7	19d8+114	20d12 + 100	13	13	39	29

Young Adult Dragon	Basic HD	3E HD	5E HD	3E CR	5E Challenge	3E Strength	5E Strength
White	6	15d12+45	14d10 + 56	8	6	19	18
Black	7	16d12+48	15d10 + 45	9	7	19	19
Green	8	17d12+68	16d10 + 48	11	8	23	19
Blue	9	18d12+72	16d10 + 64	11	9	23	21
Red	10	19d12+95	17d10 + 85	13	10	31	23
Gold	11	20d12+100	17d10 + 85	14	10	31	23

Ancient Dragon	Basic HD	3E HD	5E HD	3E CR	5E Challenge	3E Strength	5E Strength
White	12	30d12+180	18d20 + 144	18	20	33	26
Black	14	31d12+186	21d20 + 147	19	21	33	27
Green	16	32d12+224	22d20 + 154	21	22	35	27
Blue	18	33d12+231	26d20 + 208	21	23	35	29
Red	20	34d12+306	28d20 + 252	23	24	39	30
Gold	22	35d12+315	28d20 + 252	24	24	43	30