

This document expands upon the implementation of the Abilities System as presented in the Frontiers Overview.

It also offers a few Variants and Alternatives for those who want a different version or different resolution system entirely.

Like the core Release document for this version of Frontiers, this Expansion is modular by design. Designers may adopt, modify, restructure, or discard sections as needed to serve their intended genre, tone, and balance goals.

What an Ability Is

An **Ability** is a discrete mechanical feature that allows a character to:

- Produce an effect beyond baseline action.
- Modify existing mechanics.
- Introduce tactical, defensive, or narrative leverage.
- Expand character identity beyond Attributes and Skills.

Abilities are:

- Explicitly defined.
- Mechanically bounded.
- Limited by Action economy, frequency, or Level interaction.

When activating an Ability, compare the Ability's Level to the Level of the Ability's Provider (typically the Archetype Level that granted the Ability).

- If the Ability's Level is equal to or lower than the Provider Level, it costs its listed Energy.
- If the Ability's Level exceeds the Provider Level, the user must pay 1 additional Energy for each Level of difference.

This comparison is always made against the Ability Provider Level, not total Character Level.

Ability Anatomy (Required Structure)

Every Ability must clearly define:

1. **Name**
2. **Level**
3. **Action Cost**

4. **Range**
5. **Target**
6. **Resolution**
7. **Effect**
8. **Duration (if applicable)**
9. **Frequency (if limited)**

Abilities do not list $\nearrow$ Energy cost unless a system explicitly modifies default rules.

Ability Level

Each Ability has a **Level**.

Ability Level indicates:

- Relative mechanical power.
- Intended progression tier.
- Interaction with its Ability Provider.

Default Interaction

When activating an Ability, compare the Ability's Level to the Level of the Ability's Provider (typically the Archetype Level that granted the Ability).

- If the Ability's Level is equal to or lower than the Provider Level, it costs no $\nearrow$ Energy.
- If the Ability's Level exceeds the Provider Level, the user must pay $\nearrow$ Energy equal to the difference between the Ability's Level and the Provider Level.

Examples:

- Archetype Level 3 using a Level 5 Ability → Pay 2 $\nearrow$ Energy.
- Archetype Level 10 using a Level 10 Ability → No Energy cost.
- Archetype Level 10 using a Level 8 Ability → No Energy cost.

If insufficient Energy is available:

- The character may Overspend (per Energy rules).
- If Overspend would exceed the system's defined negative limit, the Ability cannot be used.

Ability Level does not automatically scale effect.

Scaling must be written explicitly.

Action Cost

Unless stated otherwise:

- An Ability costs 1 ♦AP.

If an Ability costs more than 1 ♦AP:

- All required ♦AP must be available at declaration.
- The cost is paid before resolution.

Abilities may be:

- ♦Actions
- ♦Free Actions
- Reactions

If an Ability is a Reaction: - It follows Reaction rules under Flow of Play.

Resolution

An Ability must specify whether it:

- Requires a Resolution Roll,
- Automatically succeeds,
- Modifies an existing roll,
- Or creates a state change.

If a roll is required:

- The governing Attribute must be specified.
- The target (DR or Contested) must be specified.
- Whether Gradient applies must be stated or defaulted.

If Gradient is not mentioned: - It applies normally if the situation meaningfully benefits from deviation.

Duration

If an Ability creates an ongoing effect:

- Duration must be explicitly stated.
- Expiration timing must be clear (start/end of Turn, end of Round, etc.).

If no duration is specified: - The effect is instantaneous.

Frequency Limits

Abilities may include usage limits such as:

- Once per Turn
- Once per Round
- Once per Scene
- Once per Downtime

If no frequency limit is listed: - The Ability may be used as often as Action economy allows.

Gaining Abilities

Abilities are gained through:

- Archetype features
- Level advancement
- Narrative milestones
- System-defined progression tracks

Abilities should be distributed in a way that:

- Lower Levels grant foundational mechanics.
- Mid Levels introduce tactical control or expansion.
- High Levels introduce rule-bending or survivability shifts.

Ability progression defines character identity.

This section defines how to construct balanced Abilities within the engine.

Step 1 — Define Purpose

Clarify what the Ability does:

- Damage
- Defense
- Mobility
- Control
- Utility
- State alteration

Avoid vague intent.

Step 2 — Assign Level

Determine relative impact:

- Level 1–3: Baseline enhancement.
- Level 4–7: Tactical manipulation.
- Level 8–12: Battlefield influence.
- Level 13+: Rule-bending or survivability alteration.

Ability Level should reflect magnitude, not complexity.

Step 3 — Assign Action Cost

Default: 1 ♦AP.

Increase cost if:

- It replaces multiple baseline actions.
- It alters multiple targets.
- It significantly changes positioning.

Step 4 — Define Resolution Clearly

Specify:

- Required roll (if any).
- Attribute used.
- Target.
- Failure outcome.
- Gradient interaction.

Never leave these implicit.

Step 5 — Define Scaling (Optional)

Abilities do not scale automatically.

If scaling exists, define explicitly:

- “Damage increases by +2 at Level 8.”
- “Range increases at Level 10.”
- “Duration extends by 1 Round per 5 Levels.”

Scaling must be written.

Step 6 — Define Boundaries

State:

- What the Ability cannot do.
- What it does not stack with.
- Whether it overrides other mechanics.

Clear boundaries prevent unintended exploitation.

These examples demonstrate Level progression and mechanical diversity. They assume no inherent Energy cost. Energy applies only if used above the Ability Provider’s Level.

Level 1 — Focused Impact

Cost: 1 ♦AP

Range: Melee or Short

Target: One creature

Resolution: Roll governing Attribute vs □Physical Defense

Gradient: Applies

Effect: On success, deal standard damage.

If Gradient is: - Minor Positive: +1 damage. - Major Positive: +2 damage. - Minor Negative: -1 damage (minimum 1). - Major Negative: -1 □Physical Defense until start of your next Turn.

Level 3 — Defensive Reflex

Cost: Reaction (1 ♦AP)

Trigger: You are targeted by an attack.

Range: Self

Effect: Gain +2 □Physical Defense against that attack.

If the attack misses: - Move 1 □Unit without spending »MP.

Once per Round.

Level 5 — Displacement Surge

Cost: 1 ♦AP

Range: Short

Target: One creature

Resolution: Roll □Finesse vs □Physical Defense

Gradient: Applies

Effect: On success: - Move target up to 2 □Units. - Target falls prone.

Major Positive Gradient: - You may move 1 □Unit.

Level 10 — Field Collapse

Cost: 2 ♦AP

Range: Medium

Target: All creatures within 2 □Units of a point

Resolution: Roll governing Attribute vs DR

Effect: On success: - Moderate damage. - Affected targets suffer -2 to next Resolution Roll before end of their next Turn.

On failure: - Half damage.

Major Negative Gradient: - You gain 1 □Fatigue.

Once per Encounter.

Level 15 — Final Refusal

Cost: ♦Free Action

Trigger: You would be reduced to 0 ☸HP

Effect: Instead of gaining a □Wound:

- Remain at 1 ☸HP.
- End one ongoing negative condition.
- Gain 1 □Fatigue.

Once per Downtime.

The following rulings clarify ambiguous or high-impact Ability interactions.

These apply unless a specific rule explicitly overrides them.

1. Ability Level vs Provider Level Timing

Energy cost for using an Ability above its Provider Level is determined at the moment of declaration.

If an Ability Provider's Level changes mid-Encounter:

- Already-declared Abilities are unaffected.
- Future Ability use uses the new Provider Level immediately.

Level comparison is always calculated at declaration.

2. Energy Payment Timing

If an Ability is above the character's Level:

- ✂Energy is paid immediately upon declaration.
- If insufficient Energy is available, Overspend rules apply.
- If the Ability is interrupted after declaration, Energy is not refunded unless explicitly stated.

If an Ability is canceled before declaration is complete: - No Energy is paid.

3. Ability Interruption

If an Ability is interrupted:

- Any ⬆AP cost remains spent.
- Any ✂Energy cost remains spent.
- Effects that have already resolved are not undone.
- Unresolved portions do not occur.

If interruption occurs before resolution begins: - The Ability fails without effect.

4. Multiple Abilities in a Turn

A participant may use multiple Abilities in a Turn if:

- They have sufficient ♦AP.
- No frequency limits are violated.

There is no inherent limit to the number of Abilities used in a Turn beyond Action economy and frequency restrictions.

5. Passive Abilities

Passive Abilities:

- Do not require ♦AP.
- Do not require declaration.
- Are always active unless suppressed.

If multiple Passive Abilities modify the same value:

- Apply additive modifiers first.
- Apply multiplicative modifiers afterward.
- If a direct conflict exists, the GM determines precedence unless the rules specify otherwise.

6. Stacking Effects

Unless an Ability explicitly states it stacks:

- Identical named effects do not stack.
- Different named effects stack normally.

If two Abilities modify the same statistic for the same duration:

- Apply both unless one specifies replacement.

7. Ability Duration Overlap

If the same Ability is activated again before its duration expires:

- The new duration replaces the old duration unless the Ability explicitly states that durations stack.
- Effects do not compound unless stated.

8. Ability and Skill Interaction

If an Ability requires a Resolution Roll:

- Skill Benefits apply normally unless the Ability states otherwise.

If an Ability modifies a roll:

- Skill Benefits apply to the underlying roll before Ability modification unless explicitly reversed.

9. Ability and Gradient

If an Ability requires a roll and does not specify Gradient behavior:

- Gradient applies normally if deviation meaningfully affects the outcome.

If an Ability modifies damage or effect magnitude:

- Gradient modifies the final result unless explicitly stated otherwise.

10. Simultaneous Ability Activation

If two Abilities are triggered simultaneously:

- Resolve per Action Timing Priority rules.
- Reaction chains follow reverse chronological order.

11. Suppressed or Lost Abilities

If an effect suppresses Abilities:

- Passive Abilities are disabled.
- Active Abilities cannot be declared.
- Ongoing Ability effects remain unless the suppression effect explicitly ends them.

If an Ability is permanently lost (narrative or mechanical):

- Ongoing effects immediately end unless specified otherwise.

12. Ability Without Explicit Frequency

If an Ability lists no frequency limit:

- It may be used as often as ♦AP allows.
- It may still be constrained by narrative plausibility.

13. Using an Ability at Negative $\nearrow$ Energy

If a character uses an Ability above their Level while already at 0 $\nearrow$ Energy:

- Overspend applies normally.
- Each use triggers its own Overspend roll.

Ability activation does not fail solely due to being at negative Energy unless the negative limit would be exceeded.

Variants modify how Abilities behave while preserving the core structure:

- Abilities have Levels.
- Action economy governs activation.
- Energy is tied to Level difference.

Energy Surcharge Variant

Modifies: Energy interaction.

Instead of paying Energy equal to the exact Level difference:

- Pay a flat 1 $\nearrow$ Energy when using an Ability above your Level.
- Or pay half the Level difference (rounded up).

This softens Energy pressure while preserving the Level gate.

Impact: - Increases frequency of high-Level Ability use. - Reduces harsh scaling spikes. - Makes Energy more tactical and less restrictive.

Recommended for higher-powered or heroic systems.

Strict Level Lock Variant

Modifies: Above-Level use.

Characters may not use Abilities above their Level under any circumstances.

$\nearrow$ Energy cannot bypass this restriction.

Impact: - Simplifies balance. - Removes Overspend tension from Ability use. - Makes Level progression more rigid and gated.

Recommended for tightly balanced or competitive systems.

Scaling Core Variant

Modifies: Scaling expectation.

Under this Variant, Abilities automatically scale with character Level.

Example implementations: - Damage increases by +1 per 2 Levels. - Duration increases by +1 Round per 5 Levels. - Range increases at Level milestones.

Scaling must be standardized across all Abilities.

Impact: - Reduces need for explicit scaling text. - Makes Abilities feel evergreen. - Requires Difficulty recalibration at high Levels.

Ability Refresh Variant

Modifies: Frequency limits.

Instead of frequency limits such as “once per Scene,” Abilities refresh:

- At the start of each Encounter.
- After Short Rest.
- After Downtime.

Energy interaction remains unchanged.

Impact: - Creates clearer pacing structure. - Reduces tracking complexity. - Emphasizes Encounter-based play.

Passive-Focused Variant

Modifies: Ability type distribution.

Encourage most Abilities to be Passive or triggered, with fewer active activations.

Passive Abilities: - Modify core mechanics continuously. - Rarely require Action declaration.

Impact: - Reduces Turn complexity. - Speeds Encounter flow. - Shifts character identity toward build design rather than activation timing.

Alternatives substantially restructure how Abilities function in the engine.

Adopting these requires recalibration of pacing, Energy, and Action economy.

No Energy Alternative

Remove ↗Energy interaction from Abilities entirely.

Abilities are limited only by:

- ♦AP cost
- Frequency limits
- Cooldowns

Using an Ability above your Level is either: - Prohibited, or - Allowed with no additional cost.

Impact: - Removes endurance tension. - Increases reliability. - Shifts pacing pressure to positioning and frequency instead of resource depletion.

Suitable for fast, low-resource systems.

Cooldown-Based Alternative

Replace Energy scaling with cooldown timers.

Each Ability defines:

- Cooldown duration (Rounds, Scenes, etc.)

Using an Ability above your Level: - Increases cooldown instead of costing Energy.

Example: - Ability Level 5 used by a Provider at Level 3 → Cooldown increases by 2 Rounds.

Impact: - Creates predictable pacing. - Removes Energy volatility. - Encourages planning over resource gambling.

Talent Slot Alternative

Replace Level gating with “Talent Slots.”

Characters may equip a number of Abilities equal to their Level or a derived value.

Abilities outside equipped slots cannot be used.

Energy is removed or optional.

Impact: - Encourages build customization between Encounters. - Emphasizes preparation over improvisation. - Requires strong slot-balancing structure.

Narrative Authority Alternative

Reduce mechanical Abilities. Replace high-Level Abilities with narrative authority mechanics.

Example: - Spend a narrative token to alter the scene. - Declare environmental advantage. - Reframe consequences.

Energy may be replaced with narrative currency.

Impact: - Strongly narrative-forward. - Reduces mechanical complexity. - Best suited to story-focused systems.