

Building Magic Decks for Junior Planeswalkers: the Unauthorized Guide

When building a deck from scratch there are some questions we need to ask ourselves:

- What is the main 'Theme' or 'Gimmick' of the deck?
- What colors of magic should I use?
- How many cards should be in it?
- How many cards of each kind should I have?

The Main Theme

Your deck should have a theme that describes the deck and its style of play... something like "Kill the opponent with direct damage while I hide behind walls", or "Burn my opponents creatures against them".

Often, a magic set will have cards that work together to create a theme. For instance, one release had cards that let you take a bunch of cards all at once and put them into your graveyard, and another card that let you take a creature out of your graveyard and put it in your hand. Using these two cards together became a way to look through your deck for any creature you wanted.

Common themes of beginning decks are things like "Creature Rush" - where you try to get big creatures out as fast as possible, or "Pillar Fort" - where you try to have a whole bunch of little creatures out so you can block your opponents attack yet still be able to attack back. Creature decks are great themes for Junior Planeswalkers.

Chances are, you're reading this document with few cards you want to use in a deck. You should start by reading the special abilities of the card, then looking through the rest of the cards in that set to see if there are any combinations that make a powerful theme.

Pro Tip: Choose a Theme for Your Deck and Stick to it.

Every card you consider adding to your deck should be tested against the theme.

The Colors Of Magic

If you've been playing magic for a while, you're probably already familiar with the 5 colors and their relationship to the game:



If you're building your first deck, you should stick to a single color. Green would be a great first choice. Once you have some experience playing with a deck you've built, you should branch out to two colors. Playing two colors gives you a wider selection of cards from the set you're playing, but makes 'tuning' the deck - adjusting it so you get the cards you need when you need them - more complicated.

Pro Tip: Stick to a single color at first.

Even after you've started playing two colors, don't be in a rush to use the multi-color cards. Yeah, they might sound awesome, but they can be hard to get into play.

Pro Tip: Branch out to two colors for a wider card choice, but stay away from multi-color cards for now.

Blue is a powerful color - its the color of control... with blue cards you can turn your opponent's deck against them. But its a hard color for beginners to play with, and even harder to build with, because the cards can change the rules of the game.

Pro Tip: Learn to build with the other colors before you play with blue.

The Size of Your Deck



There are two common sizes of magic decks - 40 cards and 60 cards. While you can build a deck of any size (with at least 40 cards), sticking to these two sizes makes things simpler for now. Think of each deck size as having that many 'slots'. Once you fill up your slots, you have to take one out if you want to add another one... that is, if you're building a 40 card deck, already have 40 cards, and want to add another one, you should look through your deck and decide which card you need to take out. If this is a hard decision, then your deck is in good shape!

Pro Tip: Build a 40 card deck If you want a deck that is fast and predictable, build a 60 card deck If you want a deck that has options, but will play slower.

There is one other limitation on the size of your deck: you cannot have more than 4 of any one card in your deck (besides basic lands). This prevents someone from building a deck that is nothing more than 20 mountains and 20 fireballs, as an example. That deck would probably win most of the time, but it wouldn't be very fun playing with or against.

Why are bigger decks slower?

Bigger decks are slower because of a kind of math called 'statistics'. Imagine if you have 4 fireballs in a 40 card deck... On average, how many cards will you have to draw before you draw a fireball? The answer is 10, because $40/4 = 10$. If you have 60 cards in the deck, how many will you need to draw? $60/4 = 15$, so you'll have to draw 15 cards. That is true for every kind of card in the deck, so the card you're hoping to draw next won't come up as often in a bigger deck.

Why do bigger decks give you more options?

Well, since we are drawing one specific card less often, we must be drawing different cards more often. With 60 cards in the deck, we can have a wider variety of spells, creatures, and artifacts we'll be drawing. Those options can help us keep our opponent on their toes, since our deck might play completely differently from one game to the next. This can be a lot more fun too!

Basic counts and strategy for a 60 card deck:

Land - 17 in a 40 card deck, 24 in a 60 card deck

If you are building a one-color deck, you might be able to lower this count by a card or two, but land is the 'fuel' for your deck, so don't skimp here! Ideally you're building a two-color deck and should split this count right down the middle... but make sure you look for any 'special' lands that can trick out your deck. For instance, there are plenty of lands that can produce two different colors, but some with some other tradeoff, like coming into play tapped.

Pro Tip: Trick out your deck with special lands that work with the colors of magic your deck is built around

When you start 'tuning' your deck, lands will be one of the first things you'll consider adjusting. Was your game mana-poor at the beginning? Add a card or two. Did you end up with way too much land in your hand towards the end of the game? Drop a card or two and retest for play.

Creatures - 16 in a 40 card deck, 24 in a 60 card deck

Your first decks should be all about creature attacks. While there are a lot of other deck 'themes' out there, this is the basic mechanic of the game on which all other play is built. You should have a mix of small, medium, and large creatures in your deck (see the section below on 'creature mana curve'), and you'll want some of those creatures to have a special ability that gives you an unexpected edge. Flying is a great one, and each magic expansion adds new game mechanics can give you an edge if you master how to use them before your opponent does.

Pro Tip: Use creatures with special abilities to give your deck an extra edge.

Enchantments - 2 in a 40 card deck, 3 in a 60 card deck

Enchantments control the playing field. Since you'll have so few in your deck you won't want to rely on drawing them, but when you do get them into play, they should help your deck while hindering your opponent. Choose enchantments that tilt the playing field to your advantage.

Pro Tip: Use enchantments to tilt the playing field in your favor; but watch out for your opponent's counterspells! Wait until their mana is tapped out before playing one.

Instantants - 5 in a 40 card deck, 9 in a 60 card deck

Instantants are the only cards that you can play during your opponents turn. They give your deck the chance to react to the things your opponent does. You want instantants in your deck to keep your opponent on their toes. You'll also want to leave a little bit of mana untapped to be able to respond during your opponents turn. Nothing ruins a plan like your opponent putting down a card when you weren't expecting it!

Pro Tip: Keep some mana untapped so you can use your instantants when you need to.

Instantants are one of the best ways to change the play of your deck. As you start tuning your deck, pay attention to ways your deck is weak, and then find some instances to help counter that weakness.

When you master how to use instances, you're also ready to start playing the color blue.

what about sorceries?

Unless they are part of the main 'Theme' of the deck, don't include them until you have played with your deck several times and know it's strengths and weaknesses. You might need a sorcery to gain back a little bit of life in order to finish the game, or you might need one to do that last little bit of direct damage to your opponent. Once you know what you need, you'll also know what you can swap out to make space for it.

What about artifacts?

Artifacts are colorless, and that is their major advantage in the game. When you're playing with two (or more) colors, you'll sometimes get a bad draw where, for example, you have a hand full of forests, but only red spell cards. Since artifacts can be used with any color, they can help avoid this. They don't get their own card count in your deck though, because most of the time you'll be using them like one of the other card types. An artifact creature would simply count as a creature. An artifact that generates mana simply counts as a land, an artifact that changes the play field would count as an enchantment, and an artifact that has an ability you can pay to use would count as a sorcery or instant. If they don't fit one of those categories, use your best judgement, but make sure you make room for them by removing a land, creature, or other card.

Pro Tip: Use artifacts to help keep your two-color deck from stalling.

Your Cards and the 'Mana Curve'

Building a great deck is a challenge in resource management. For example, maybe you're tempted to build a deck full of really strong, expensive-to-cast creatures. If you do, you'll draw card after card hoping to get the land to cast them while your opponent picks you apart with little creatures.

To counter this, you'll be tempted to have a bunch of small creatures, but maybe your opponent will be able to put up a wall of medium sized creatures a couple of turns in, and then you'll never get damage in. You need to balance your creatures with small, medium, and large creatures, and you'll want to look for 'special abilities' like flying that can give your deck an unexpected edge.

This 'balancing act' is true for all of the card types, not just creatures.

To fix this, let's talk about the 'mana curve'. Every card has a cost... the number of lands (of any color, including the main one) you have to tap to cast it. We'll want a good mix of cheap, medium-cost, and expensive cards in our deck.

People much smarter than us have run millions of computer simulations to come up with the suggestions below, but they are only suggestions. Use them to construct your deck initially, but then feel free to 'tune' based on your own play experience and the cards you choose.

Some cards have special abilities that alter this advice. For instance, "Search through your deck and find any basic land to put into play" will make your deck 'faster', and you might be able to get away with less land. "Resurrection" will mean you'll need fewer creatures. These abilities aren't just cool, hopefully you see how they can free up extra 'slots' and speed up your mana curve.

We're going to give several counts here... based on whether you are build a 40 or a 60 card deck, and whether you're optimizing for speed or strength.

Pro Tip: Decks optimized for speed are better at going first, decks optimized for strength are optimized for drawing first.

The counts here don't say whether these are creatures, instants, enchantments, or other cards; that depends on the theme of your deck, and where in the game you want to be able to play them.

60 Cards:

optimized for speed

24 Land

9 at one, 8 at two, 8 at three, 11 at four

optimized for strength

25 Land (notice, we're adding a land here!)

8 at one, 7 at two, 6 at three, 5 at four, 9 at five

40 Cards

optimized for speed

17 Land

6 at one, 5 at two, 4 at three, 4 at four, 4 at five

optimized for strength

17 Land

5 at one, 4 at two, 4 at three, 4 at four, 6 at five

Tuning your Deck

All the advice in this book so far has been about the amount of land, the amount of different card types, the size of creatures, etc. If you follow all this advice, you'll build a great deck.

But, every deck is different, and will contain cards that changes this advice. Only you can know how to improve your deck, and you can do this by 'testing' it to see how it behaves.

The Initial Deal Test

Once you have built and shuffled your deck, deal the entire deck into 7-card piles. Look at each pile and decide if you'd like to get that deal in a real game. If you would, great! If not, decide why not. Was it land-poor? Did it only have big creatures and you needed a little one? Did you only have land of one color and cards of another? Write all of these reasons down. Shuffle the cards and do it again. Then do it a third time. You'll now have a list of the kinds of things that are wrong with your initial deal. Look through the things you wrote down and see if there are *small* tweaks you can make to fix it. "Would removing a forest and putting in a mountain help my mana distribution? Would taking out one big creature and putting in a smaller one help?" and so on.

Pro Tip: Don't change more than 3 cards in a 40 card deck, or 5 cards in a 60 card deck without actually play testing your deck.

The Playtest

Either by yourself or with a friend, playlets your deck in a real match (a match is 3 games). How did it do? If you write down your thoughts after every draw and gather them up at the end, you'll see things you can do to improve your deck.

Pro Tip: Pre-made decks are great for testing your deck.

Vary the playtest. How do you play against a deck made of the same colors? How do you play against a deck without any colors in common? How do you play against a deck of a different size? Every question you ask can lead to an insight that can help improve your deck.

Pro Tip: Don't playtest two decks against each other. As you both make changes, you won't know if you're really improving anything, or just reacting to each other's changes.

On To PlaneWalker Mastery

Once you master the rules in this book, you'll be well on your way to being a master deck builder! Just remember, it takes practice, a knowledge of the basics, and most importantly, real game time in order to improve your play.

Nothing in this book is sacred: if you want to build a 50 card deck to try to balance both options, go right ahead! If you want to build a 100 card deck so all your favorite cards can be in there, be my guest! If you want to build a three-color deck so you can play some awesome combo using a legendary card, well that's what they are there for. But just like any other sport or hobby, you should know the rules, and know why they are there, so you know when and how to bend and break them.

**Pro Tip: Every pro-tip here is a rule meant to be broken,
but don't break too many at once.**

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