

Magic: The Gathering Deckbuilding Heuristics and Guidance (ManaTap AI)

Summary

Commander decks use multiple categories of cards to function smoothly. Primary roles include ramp, card-draw/velocity, interaction (spot removal and board wipes), recursion, tutors, protection/hate, lands and win-conditions. Authoritative sources like EDHRec's **Commander deckbuilding guide** recommend roughly **8-12 ramp cards**, **8-10 draw/velocity spells**, **8-10 interaction pieces (at least two board wipes)** and starting with **36-38 lands**, adding more for higher-cost commanders ¹ ². Statistical surveys show typical Commander decks average **12.7 ramp sources**, **7.6 draw spells**, **8.5 spot removal spells**, **2.7 sweepers** and about **3 tutors** ³. Frank Karsten's theoretical curves reinforce that heavy land counts (around **40-42 lands**) and a mana curve concentrated in **two- to four-mana spells** lead to consistent hands; he suggests starting with **42 lands plus Sol Ring**, cutting a land for every two or three cheap mana rocks or every three or four cheap cantrips/mana dorks, and never dropping below **37 lands** ⁴.

Colors and color pairs shape strategy. Each color has characteristic mechanics and weaknesses. For example, Azorius (white/blue) emphasises evasion and defense with flying, flicker and detain ⁵, while Rakdos (black/red) focuses on spectacle, menace and impulsive draw ⁶. Dimir (blue/black) uses deathtouch, mill and surveil to control and sabotage ⁷ but struggles with artifact/enchantment removal ⁸. Understanding these tendencies helps the AI recommend synergetic cards and avoid inappropriate suggestions (e.g., recommending artifact destruction to Dimir when that weakness should be acknowledged).

Popular commanders have predictable themes. EDHRec ranks commanders by deck count and tags each with mechanical themes. The Ur-Dragon leads with dragon tribal and treasure ⁹; Atraxa favours infect, planeswalkers and +1/+1 counters ¹⁰; Krenko focuses on goblins and token aggro ¹¹. Codifying these tags allows the AI to infer appropriate synergies and avoid suggesting off-theme cards (e.g., no lifegain package in Nekusar, which cares about wheels and group slug ¹²).

Banlists vary by format and change over time. As of **10 Nov 2025**, Standard bans cards like **Abuelo's Awakening**, **Heartfire Hero**, **Proft's Eidetic Memory**, **Screaming Nemesis** and **Vivi Ornitier** ¹³; Modern bans include **Fury**, **Grief**, **Nadu**, **Winged Wisdom**, **Up the Beanstalk**, **The One Ring** and others ¹⁴. Pioneer bans numerous combo pieces such as **Felidar Guardian**, **Expressive Iteration**, **Heartfire Hero**, **Inverter of Truth**, **Karn the Great Creator** and **Winota** ¹⁵. Commander uses a separate RC banlist (not reproduced here but should be referenced) and also restricts specific cards in **Brawl** (e.g., **Mana Drain**, **Chrome Mox**) ¹⁶. Integrating banlists prevents the AI from recommending illegal cards.

Common misconceptions hinder new builders and language models. Many decks cut too many lands or ramp spells to make room for exciting cards; guidance recommends maintaining **38-40 lands** and around **10 mana rocks** ¹⁷. Others skimp on interaction or card draw; players should include multiple spot removals, counterspells and board wipes ¹⁸ ¹⁹. Fabled Passage, a fetch land that sacrifices to find a basic land tapped (untapped with four or more lands), **does not generate extra**

mana and should not be counted as ramp ²⁰. Cultivate and similar sorceries are **spell-based ramp**, not “creature ramp”; labeling them accurately helps the AI group cards correctly.

The tables below distill these insights into actionable heuristics, color identity principles, commander archetype profiles, up-to-date banlist data and common misconceptions for use in ManaTap’s inference engine.

A. Deckbuilding Heuristics (Commander/EDH)

Category	Recommended counts/averages	Key notes (source)
Ramp	~10–12 dedicated accelerants (typical decks average 12.7 ramp pieces ³). EDHRec’s guide suggests 8–12 ramp spells ¹ .	Include a mix of one- and two-mana spells (Nature’s Lore, Cultivate), mana dorks and rocks. Land-based ramp is safest; artifact ramp helps colorless or multicolor decks. Aim for at least 10 mana sources (ramp + lands), cut a land only after adding multiple cheap rocks ⁴ .
Card Draw / Velocity	Roughly 8–10 draw or card-velocity cards ²¹ (average decks run 7.6 draw spells ³).	Mix burst draw (e.g., Return of the Wildspeaker), repeatable draw (Phyrexian Arena) and looting/filtering. Include group-hug draw only if the deck can capitalise on the extra cards.
Interaction	8–10 total removal pieces with at least 2 board wipes ²² . Average decks run 8.5 spot removals and 2.7 sweepers ³ .	Combine single-target removal (Swords to Plowshares, Beast Within) with defensive/protective spells (Heroic Intervention, Counterspell). Flexible spells that answer multiple permanent types improve reliability.
Lands	Begin with 36–38 lands ²³ . Frank Karsten suggests 42 lands plus Sol Ring , reducing one land per 2–3 cheap mana rocks or per 3–4 cantrips/dorks ⁴ .	Adjust upward for high-cost commanders; use a balanced mana base with 40–50 total mana sources (lands + ramp). Avoid dipping below 37 lands unless the curve is extremely low.
Tutors & Recursion	Most decks include 1–3 tutors and a couple of recursion spells ^{24 3} .	Tutors (Demonic Tutor, Enlightened Tutor) help find win-cons or key pieces but should be limited to preserve deck variety. Recursion cards (Regrowth, Eternal Witness) return important permanents or spells.
Protection / Hate	Include a few protection spells (Teferi’s Protection, Flawless Maneuver) and hate cards targeting prevalent strategies (e.g., graveyard hate in meta) ²⁴ .	Focus on versatile cards that offer multiple roles; avoid narrow hate unless facing known meta threats.

Category	Recommended counts/averages	Key notes (source)
Mana Curve & Game Length	Distribute spells mostly in the 2–4 mana range; avoid too many cards costing 5+ mana. Karsten's curves show that for typical 7-turn games, a 2-mana commander deck runs ~42 lands and many 3–4 cost spells ²⁵ .	For short games (ending around turn 5), emphasise one- and two-drops and reduce ramp; for long games (turn 9+), include more 6-drop bombs and extra signets ²⁶ .
Win Conditions	Ensure the deck has clear win-cons (combo pieces, mass buffs, infinite loops). Many players forget to include a way to close the game ²⁷ .	Identify cards that convert board advantage into victory (Craterhoof Behemoth, Revel in Riches) and ensure synergy with the deck's theme.

B. Color Identity Guide – Strengths & Weaknesses

Mono-Color Summary

Color	Mechanical strengths	Weaknesses & vulnerabilities
White (W)	Prevention and life gain, small efficient creatures, protection effects, "taxing" and rules-setting (e.g., Rule of Law), artifact/enchantment removal and mass destruction ²⁸ .	Limited direct card draw and ramp; relies on artifacts/enchantments for draw and mana; often slower to close games without support.
Blue (U)	Card draw and selection, counterspells, flying/evasive creatures, bounce and tempo control, copy and theft effects.	Struggles with creature removal on board and permanent destruction; reliant on spell-based answers; can be resource-intensive.
Black (B)	Creature destruction, discard, tutors, recursion and reanimation; life as a resource.	Weak against artifacts/enchantments; limited life-gain; may pay life as cost; can struggle against wide creature boards without sweepers.
Red (R)	Direct damage, fast aggression, impulsive draw, extra combats, artifact destruction, copying spells.	Minimal card draw outside impulsive effects; difficulty dealing with enchantments; susceptible to running out of gas in long games.
Green (G)	Mana ramp (land search, mana dorks), large creatures, land recursion, artifact/enchantment removal in conjunction with white, combat buffs, landfall triggers.	Limited spot removal; struggles with flyers; dependent on creatures staying alive; weak at counterspells and board control.

Two-Color “Guild” Combinations (Ravnica)

Guild (colors)	Key mechanics & strengths	Notable weaknesses / archetype notes
Azorius (WU)	Emphasises evasion and control – flying creatures, flicker/blink, detain and addendum (instants during your main phase) ²⁹ . Often plays tempo-control with bounce and taxing.	Limited ramp and creature power; wins through incremental advantage rather than burst damage; can be slow and vulnerable to fast aggro.
Dimir (UB)	Focuses on secrecy and manipulation; uses deathtouch, mill, surveil, looting and evasion ⁷ . Controls the board with counterspells and removal, and sabotages opponents with discard and mill ³⁰ .	Weak at dealing with artifacts and enchantments ⁸ ; inconsistent ramp; creature quality is low; may struggle to close games without specific combos.
Rakdos (BR)	Aggressive and destructive; mechanics include spectacle, menace and impulsive draw ⁶ . Plays fast creatures, removal and sacrifice themes; thrives on chaos and self-damage ³¹ .	Runs out of gas in long games; limited card draw beyond impulsive effects; vulnerable to enchantments.
Gruul (RG)	Combines green’s growth with red’s ferocity; emphasises riot, trample and landfall ³² . Plays ramp into big creatures and uses direct damage or fight effects.	Weak at card draw and control; little interaction outside creature combat; susceptible to board wipes.
Selesnya (GW)	Seeks harmony; builds wide boards with tokens and buffs; mechanics include populate and convoke ³³ . Plays enchantments and auras to pump creatures.	Susceptible to board wipes and targeted removal; limited instant-speed interaction; can be slow without ramp.
Orzhov (WB)	Blends lifelink and extort with death triggers; focuses on incremental advantage and draining life ³⁴ ³⁵ . Utilises afterlife and taxation.	Vulnerable to early aggression before engines start; may lack burst damage.
Izzet (UR)	Spell-focused; uses haste, overload, jump-start and spell copying ³⁶ . Decks revolve around instants and sorceries, prowess and spells-linger.	Limited access to lifegain or hard removal; heavy reliance on non-creature spells; can run out of steam if key cards are removed.
Golgari (BG)	Embodies life and death; mechanics include dredge, scavenge, undergrowth and self-mill ³⁷ . Uses graveyard recursion and sacrifice to generate value ³⁸ .	Weak to graveyard hate; may be slower; limited answers to flyers and enchantments.
Boros (RW)	Righteous army focused on combat; uses equipment, mentor, battalion and tokens ³⁹ . Builds an army of small creatures to attack quickly ⁴⁰ .	Card draw and ramp are minimal; struggles in long games; reliant on combat damage; removal can stall the strategy.

Guild (colors)	Key mechanics & strengths	Notable weaknesses / archetype notes
Simic (GU)	Combines green ramp with blue card draw; mechanics include landfall, adapt, evolve and graft ⁴¹ . Plays big creatures and disruptive spells while drawing cards and ramping.	Few direct removal spells; may struggle versus wide boards; can lack answers to artifacts/enchantments without splash colors.

Tips for Using Color Pairs

- Leverage strengths:** Build around the primary mechanics of the color pair; e.g., Rakdos decks should include plenty of sacrifice outlets and fast creatures, while Azorius decks benefit from blink enablers and defensive spells. Avoid forcing strategies that conflict with the color's identity (e.g., playing heavy land-destruction in Simic).
- Mitigate weaknesses:** Include off-color staples or artifacts to patch holes, such as artifact/enchantment removal in Dimir (Nevinyrral's Disk, Cyclonic Rift), card draw in Boros (Tome of Legends, Sunforger engines) or ramp in Orzhov (Wayfarer's Bauble, Pearl Medallion).
- Balance synergy and answers:** Even tribal or combo decks need interaction; following the recommended counts above ensures the deck functions despite color-specific limitations.

C. Top Commander Archetype Profiles

The table below lists EDHRec's top 20 commanders (past two years), their deck counts, popular mechanical tags and notes on what to recommend or avoid. Tags represent recurring themes; focusing recommendations on these themes helps the AI provide on-point suggestions.

Commander (Rank & decks)	Primary themes (EDHRec tags)	Guidance for AI
The Ur-Dragon (#1, 40,563 decks) ⁴²	Dragons (13.1K), Shapeshifters (986), Treasure (976), Flying (868) ⁹	Prioritise dragon tribal cards (Utvara Hellkite, Dragon Tempest), ramp (Sarkhan's Triumph for tutoring), treasure generation (Smaug Raid), and shapeshifter support. Avoid recommending off-tribal creatures or lifegain synergies.
Edgar Markov (#2)	Vampires, token/aggro themes (not captured due to cookie popups)	Build around vampire tribal with haste and +1/+1 counters; emphasise low-cost vampires and cards that create tokens when vampires enter (Bloodline Keeper). Avoid non-vampire tribal strategies.

Commander (Rank & decks)	Primary themes (EDHRec tags)	Guidance for AI
Atraxa, Praetors' Voice (#3) <small>42</small>	Infect (7.9K), Planeswalkers (4.8K), +1/+1 Counters (3.2K), Phyrexians (2.8K) <small>10</small>	Choose a primary theme (e.g., superfriends or infect) and build accordingly; include proliferation effects (Contagion Engine, Tekuthal). Avoid mixing incompatible plans (e.g., combining infect with a planeswalker control shell).
Krenko, Mob Boss (#4) <small>42</small>	Goblins (11.8K), Tokens (1.7K), Aggro (1.4K), Combo (581) <small>11</small>	Focus on goblin tribal, token multiplication (Impact Tremors, Purphoros), and fast aggro. Avoid high-cost spells or off-tribal tribes; ensure enough haste enablers.
Kaalia of the Vast (#5) <small>42</small>	Flying (3.6K), Angels (2K), Demons (862), Aggro (834) <small>43</small>	Include high-impact angels/demons to cheat into play (Avacyn, Rune-Tail); add protection for Kaalia (Swiftfoot Boots). Avoid low-impact creatures; focus on creatures with game-ending abilities.
Pantlaza, Sun-Favored (#6) <small>42</small>	Dinosaurs (10.6K), Discover (1.3K), Ramp (753), Blink (628) <small>44</small>	Build dinosaur tribal with ramp (Ranging Raptors), discover effects and blink synergy; emphasise cost-reducers and enrage triggers.
Sauron, the Dark Lord (#7) <small>42</small>	Zombies (4.7K), Reanimator (885), Wheels (606), Amass (560) <small>45</small>	Focus on amass and zombie tokens, wheel effects (Windfall, Dark Deal) and reanimation strategies; include The One Ring synergy. Avoid generic control packages unless supporting wheels.
Yuriko, the Tiger's Shadow (#8) <small>42</small>	Ninjutsu (11.3K), Ninjas (3.2K), Tempo (546), Aggro (540) <small>46</small>	Build around ninjutsu and cheap evasive creatures, top-deck manipulation (Sensei's Divining Top) to maximise trigger damage. Avoid high-CMC spells and non-ninjas.
Lathril, Blade of the Elves (#9) <small>42</small>	Elves (9.9K), Tokens (1.3K), Aggro (484), Ramp (418) <small>47</small>	Emphasise elf tribal, token production (Elvish Warmaster), and mana generation; include overrun effects. Avoid off-tribe creatures and spells that do not produce tokens.
Kenrith, the Returned King (#10) <small>42</small>	Birthing Pod (1K), Politics (769), Group Hug (754), Legends (571) <small>48</small>	Use Kenrith's versatile activated abilities for reanimation, haste and draw; build around politics or combo (Birthing Pod). Avoid narrow tribal themes unless supported by other cards.

Commander (Rank & decks)	Primary themes (EDHRec tags)	Guidance for AI
Giada, Font of Hope (#11) <small>42</small>	Angels (8.9K), Lifegain (4.4K), +1/+1 Counters (1.3K), Flying (907) <small>49</small>	Play angel tribal with lifegain synergy; include angels that benefit from entering with counters (Bishop of Wings). Avoid non-angel creatures; ensure enough ramp to cast expensive angels.
Jodah, the Unifier (#12) <small>42</small>	Legends (7.6K), Historic (914), Cascade (740), Planeswalkers (418) <small>50</small>	Build legendary-tribal with cascade; include legendary permanents and historic spells; avoid non-legends filler cards.
Miirym, Sentinel Wyrm (#13, 25,731 decks)	Dragons (8.8K), Clones (1K), Treasure (975), Tokens (883) <small>51</small>	Combine dragon tribal with cloning effects to copy dragons; include treasure generators; avoid non-dragon synergies.
The Wise Mothman (#14, 25,563 decks)	Mill (4.6K), +1/+1 Counters (3.4K), Mutants (2.4K), Rad Counters (446) <small>52</small>	Focus on milling opponents and yourself; include proliferate and mutant synergies; avoid unrelated tribal themes.
Nekusar, the Mindrazer (#15, 24,846 decks)	Wheels (10.4K), Group Slug (718), Card Draw (572), Discard (523) <small>12</small>	Build around wheel effects (Wheel of Fortune, Reforge the Soul), damage punishing opponents for drawing cards (Underworld Dreams) and group slug. Avoid lifegain packages or board-centric strategies.
Y'shtola, Night's Blessed (#16, 24,400 decks)	Control (1.3K), Spellslinger (693), Lifegain (534), Burn (354) <small>53</small>	Focus on casting non-creature spells that trigger Y'shtola's damage/lifegain; include control and burn spells. Avoid creature-heavy strategies and instead emphasise low-cost spells.
Isshin, Two Heavens as One (#17, 24,295 decks)	Aggro (1K), Samurai (1K), Equipment (1K), Extra Combats (952) <small>54</small>	Build around attack triggers doubling ability; use creatures with attack triggers, samurai tribal, extra combat spells and equipment. Avoid slow control cards; ensure consistent token production.
Hakbal of the Surging Soul (#18, 22,751 decks)	Merfolk (9.4K), +1/+1 Counters (2.4K), Explore (583), Aggro (378) <small>55</small>	Emphasise merfolk tribal, +1/+1 counters and explore; include unblockable or islandwalk effects. Avoid generic green ramp spells without synergy.

Commander (Rank & decks)	Primary themes (EDHRec tags)	Guidance for AI
Ulalek, Fused Atrocity (#19, 22,664 decks)	Eldrazi (8.4K), Big Mana (830), Sacrifice (801), Pinglers (291) ⁵⁶	Build around colourless Eldrazi spells; include mana rocks, sacrifice outlets and pinger effects; avoid coloured spells except ramp fixers.
Ms Bumbleflower (#20, 22,291 decks)	Wheels (2.3K), +1/+1 Counters (1.9K), Group Hug (1.7K), Cantrips (1.6K) ⁵⁷	Focus on card draw and group-hug wheels; use +1/+1 counters and token generation; avoid control-only packages or tribal synergies not supported by the deck.

D. Banlist Data (10 Nov 2025 update)

Format	Recent banned cards & notes	Source
Standard (BO3)	Abuelo's Awakening, Cori-Steel Cutter, Heartfire Hero, Hopeless Nightmare, Leyline of Resonance (Best-of-One), Monstrous Rage, Proft's Eidetic Memory, Screaming Nemesis, This Town Ain't Big Enough, Up the Beanstalk, Vivi Ornitier ¹³ .	Official Banned & Restricted list, 10 Nov 2025.
Modern	Long list including Fury, Grief, Nadu, Winged Wisdom, Up the Beanstalk, The One Ring, Oko, Thief of Crowns, Golgari Grave-Troll, Birthing Pod, Chrome Mox, Sensei's Divining Top and others ¹⁴ .	Wizards' banned list; no changes to Modern from Nov. 2025.
Pioneer	Banned cards include Amalia Benavides Aguirre, Balustrade Spy, Expressive Iteration, Felidar Guardian, Field of the Dead, Geological Appraiser, Heartfire Hero, Inverter of Truth, Jegantha, the Wellspring, Karn, the Great Creator, Kethis, the Hidden Hand, Leyline of Abundance, Lurrus, Nexus of Fate, Oko, Once Upon a Time, Polluted Delta, Sorin, Imperious Bloodlord, Teferi, Time Raveler, Undercity Informer, Underworld Breach, Uro, Veil of Summer, Walking Ballista, Wilderness Reclamation, Windswept Heath, Winota, Wooded Foothills ¹⁵ .	Pioneer banned list as of Nov 2025.
Legacy & Vintage	No new changes in Nov 2025; Legacy bans Entomb and Nadu, Winged Wisdom ; Vintage restricts many cards but none newly added ¹⁶ .	Wizards update.
Brawl / Commander	Brawl bans Strip Mine, Mana Drain, Chrome Mox, Ancient Tomb , plus cards banned in Standard ¹⁶ . The Commander Rules Committee maintains a separate banlist (not reproduced here) forbidding cards like Hullbreacher, Leovold, Paradox Engine, Coalition Victory , etc.	Use RC's latest banlist for EDH; ensure AI references up-to-date list.

E. Common Player Misconceptions & Pitfalls

- **Cutting too many lands or ramp:** Many players reduce land count to fit more exciting spells, leading to mana-screw. Recommendations emphasise playing **38–40 lands** and around **10 mana rocks/ramp spells** ¹⁷. SaffronOlive notes that nearly every Commander deck should have **37–40 lands** and **50 total mana sources** ⁵⁸.
- **Neglecting interaction and card draw:** Decks often lack sufficient removal or card-advantage spells. Guidelines call for **8–10 interaction pieces** ²² and multiple draw engines ²¹; TheGamer stresses that players should include “counterspells, single-target removal and board wipes” ¹⁸ and not skimp on card draw ¹⁹.
- **Forgetting win-conditions:** Some players build elaborate engines but lack a way to win. Ensure the deck includes finishers like Craterhoof Behemoth or combos ⁵⁹.
- **Over-committing to theme:** Building 100% tribal or theme decks can leave no space for removal, ramp or draw; aim for about **75 % thematic cards** and leave room for utility ⁶⁰.
- **Mislabeling cards:** Fabled Passage and other fetch lands **do not create additional mana**; they simply fix colors. Fabled Passage’s text shows it searches for a basic land and puts it onto the battlefield tapped (untapped only if you have four or more lands) ²⁰ —it should not be counted as ramp. Similarly, **Cultivate** is a sorcery-speed land search, not a “creature ramp” spell; miscategorizing it can skew curve analysis.
- **Ignoring banned lists:** Recommending banned cards undermines legality; always cross-check with current format banlists ¹³ ¹⁴.
- **Choosing the wrong commander or theme:** Selecting a powerful commander that does not align with your deck’s strategy leads to incoherence. TheGamer notes the importance of matching commanders to theme and personal play style ⁶¹.
- **Striving for perfection:** New builders may delay finishing a deck by chasing an ideal list or expensive mana base; TheGamer advises accepting compromises and having fun ⁶².

Source List

All information used in this report comes from official or reputable MTG sources, including:

- **EDHRec deckbuilding guide and statistics:** Recommendations for ramp, draw, interaction and land counts ¹ ² ³.
- **Frank Karsten’s Commander mana curve analysis** (TCGplayer): Theoretical curves and land/ramp counts ²⁵ ⁴.
- **TappedOut guild playstyle descriptions** and **DraftSim color-combination article**: Color pair mechanics and archetype tendencies ³⁵ ⁶³.
- **Hipsters of the Coast** primer for Dimir: Strengths and weaknesses of UB decks ⁸.
- **EDHRec commander pages:** Top commanders and their mechanical tags ⁹ ⁵¹ ⁵² ⁵⁷.
- **Wizards of the Coast banned & restricted announcements** (Nov 10 2025) ¹³ ¹⁴ ¹⁵.
- **Draftsim and TheGamer articles on common Commander mistakes** ¹⁷ ¹⁸.
- **MagicArena (Arena Tutor)** and **Hexdrinker’s Arena Tutor**: Clarifying Fabled Passage’s effect and unconventional ramp ²⁰ ⁶⁴.
- **MTGGoldfish “Brewer’s Minute”**: Emphasising land counts and mana sources ⁵⁸.

These citations ensure the AI’s reasoning is grounded in authoritative, up-to-date sources.

¹ ² ²¹ ²² ²³ ²⁴ How to Build a Commander Deck | EDHREC

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