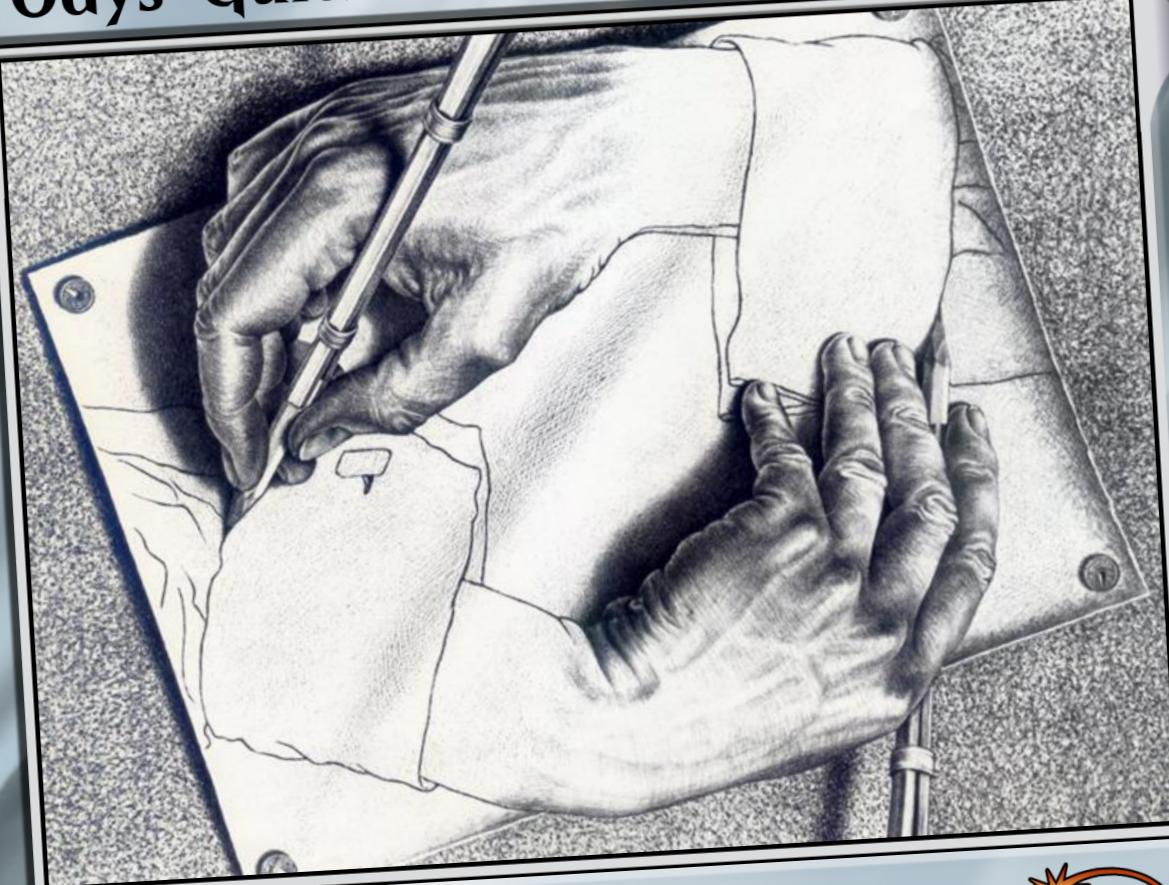


Odys' Guide to Card Creation

1



Legendary Artifact – Handbook



A short guide to best practices, tips and tricks to design and format flawless Magic: the Gathering cards.

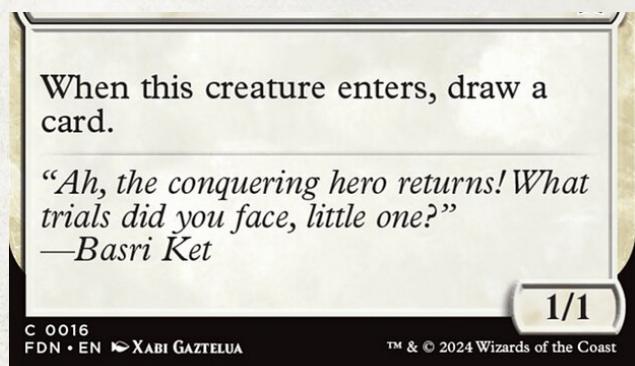
“Fine, I’ll do it myself.”

1. ANATOMY OF A CARD

A Magic the Gathering (MtG) card can be divided into several elements and sections, as shown below. Before diving into how to tweak these elements in your custom cards, let's take a moment to get familiar with the names and terminologies for each. Of course several types of cards with different elements exist, e.g. planeswalkers with their loyalty counter and abilities, but looking at a standard card will be enough to analyze all the fundamentals.



*The text box can be further divided into two sections: one containing the **rules text** (top) and another for the **flavor text** (bottom), as seen in the example on the right.



2. DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

MtG cards can be designed in two major ways, which are also applicable to proxies and custom cards: Top-down, or bottom-up.

A **top-down** design starts with flavor, which can be a generic concept/idea or a more specific name or even an art piece, and then finds an existing card that fits the concept in terms of color identity, type line, stats, and abilities.

On the other hand, a **bottom-down** design takes a particular mechanic, type line, or ability and then builds the flavor around it, choosing an appropriate alternate name (if any), art, and flavor text.

Let's take a look at one example for each from real cards. Assume we want to represent Edward Kenway from Assassin's Creed: Black Flag as a MtG card; since we are starting from a character concept, we follow a top-down approach. For sure he needs to be a human pirate, so the type line is locked. Given his affinity with the sea, his fierce attitude, and pirate lifestyle, we probably need to look for a card including   and . These requirements are all met by Admiral Beckett Brass, which also has fitting stats and abilities.

Let's now assume we are instead designing a Lord of the Rings commander deck, and we need to include Cabal Coffers. This card doesn't match the theme too well, so we need to change its name and flavor: We opt for a bottom-up approach. Since the card is black land with a strong ability, a fortified location from the setting with strong affinity with death and decay should do the job: Minas Morgul fits perfectly.



3. LEGAL TEXT & CREDIT

First and foremost: **Any custom or proxy MtG card must have no trace of legal text** and holofoil stamp. Both of these are devices to protect copyright and denote authenticity of the cards (the holofoil stamp is an anti-counterfeit measure, just like on banknotes). If legal text and holofoil stamp are placed on a card that is not designed, sold, and distributed by Wizards of the Coast that card crosses the line between being a proxy and being a counterfeit. Cards containing these elements will almost always be rejected by online communities and by printing services for the aforementioned reason.

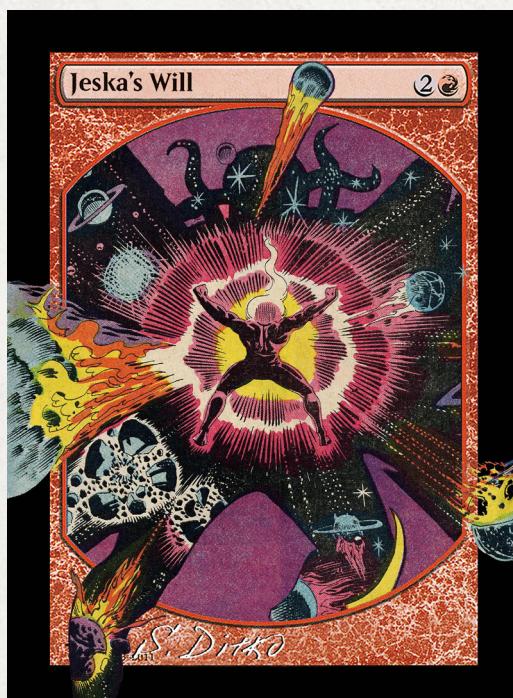


Secondarily, **the author of the art depicted on the card must always be properly credited**.

Here are a couple of good practices when writing artist credits:

- If possible, credit the artist by their full name or initials and/or surname.
- If a name is not found, look on other art pieces and social media for a nickname.
- If neither a name or nickname are available, use the username they go by on the website where you took the image from.
- If the image is part of a larger entity and can't be linked to a specific artist (e.g., a screenshot from a video game), credit the creator of said entity.
- If the image was generated by an AI, credit the engine used.

Remember that while credits must be placed on the card, both their placement and their style can be adjusted to meet your unique card design. Below are a couple of examples of non-standard artist credits.



Design by zan3gar on Reddit
also @oddities_alters on Instagram



Design by MetaLumpenproletaria on Reddit

4. CARD ELEMENTS

Now that we know the terminology, the design philosophies, and how to avoid legal troubles, we can delve into the design each element of a card to create a good proxy or custom card.

4.1 NAMES AND NICKNAMES

Choosing a name for your card may seem obvious, but there are a couple of things to pay attention to. Firstly, always remember that if you are making a proxy and you want to change the name of the card, you must do two things:

1. Add an additional bar below the card name showing the original name of the card.
2. Update the rules text (and flavor, if necessary) so that they reference the new name of the card instead of the original one.

Then, if you are naming a legendary card, beware of the use of the ‘,’ in its name. Assuming we have a card with a name structure of the type ‘X [the] Y’, a comma should be put between X and Y only if Y is a title, a role, or a nickname; if Y is a descriptor, no comma is required.

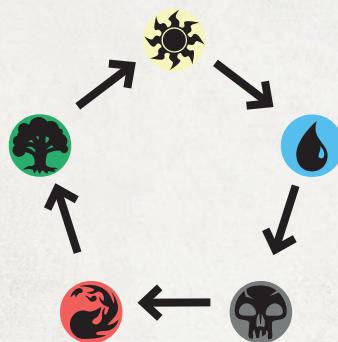
While all this discourse about commas might seem pointless, there is a mechanical implication to it. In fact, legendary cards with a ‘,’ separating their name from a title can be referred to in the rules text by the short name only. To give a quick example, if a card is named Settra the Imperishable, an enter-the-battlefield ability must state ‘When Settra the Imperishable enters’; if the card is instead named Settra, Chosen of Ptra, the same ability can use the short name and read ‘When Settra enters’. This is very relevant for designers playing around with names and a useful tool to clean up cards reducing the amount of text. An example with official cards for each case is shown below.



4.2 COLORS

This subsection tackles how colors are ordered on MtG cards and how to properly recall color orders without having to constantly double-check existing cards. If you are not interested or are making a proxy (hence the colors are already established) feel free to skip to S. 4.3 on the next page.

The five colors of MtG are ordered according to the ‘color pie’, starting with white at the top and going clockwise; this is commonly known as **WUBRG order**. As an additional definition, given one color, the two adjacent colors are known as ‘ally’ colors and the two opposite colors are known as ‘enemy’ colors. For white, for example, green and blue are allies and red and black are enemies.



- Costs of 1-color cards are trivially indicated with either , , , , or .
- Costs of 2-colors cards are ordered in WUBRG order but the starting color is determined by the **principle of minimum distance**, i.e. the first color is the one which minimizes the ‘distance’ in the WUBRG order between the two colors of the pair. For example, a card which is blue and red will be ordered as since the distance between blue and red in the WUBRG order is 1 while the distance between red and blue is 2. Similarly, a card which is blue and green will be marked as because now the distance between blue and green is 2 while the distance between green and blue is 1.
- Costs of 3-colors cards are ordered differently depending if the colors are allies or enemies.
 - ◊ For ally colors, the idea is the same as for color pairs: WUBRG order starting from the color minimizing the distance between the colors of the triplet. For example, a blue, black, and red card will simply be .
 - ◊ Enemy colors still follow the WUBRG order but in such a way that the ‘main’ color (the one for which the other two are enemies) is in the middle, irrespective of any distance between the colors. For example, a white, blue, and red card has red as main color and will therefore be ordered as .
- Costs of 4-colors cards are the same as 2-colors cards, so a card with all colors except blue will be .
- 5-colors cards are trivially .

Before moving on, it’s worth observing that exceptions for flavor purposes are occasionally allowed (although they should be kept to a minimum). Recently, for example, Captain America, First Avenger has been printed as instead of .

4.3 FRAMES AND BORDERS

Frames and borders are probably the most relevant graphical element on a card except for the art and they offer many degrees of freedom for customization.

Official cards with borders of different colors exists, although the standard is now the black border. So, except for very fringe cases like a retro card style, a custom or proxy card will have either a black border or be borderless.

As for frames, the graphics of them is really up to the designer, being them chosen from one of the several official old, new, standard, extended, and showcase ones, or completely custom made. What is important, however, is to regardless respect some basic rules:

- If the card is legendary, a **crown** must be placed on the top.
- If the card has one color, the entire frame must be of the **same color**. Additionally, if the card is an artifact, a vehicle, or is still colorless (e.g. Eldrazi with devoid), the frame border (not to be confused with the card border) shall remain the standard one of the corresponding type.
- If the card has two colors, the frame must be **golden** but its pinline and text box background must be of a **gradient corresponding to the card colors** in the same order as the mana cost. The same exceptions for artifacts, vehicles, and colorless cards of the previous case still apply.
- If the card has three or more colors, the entire frame must be **golden**. The same exceptions for artifacts, vehicles, and colorless cards of the previous case still apply.



The card on the left has the wrong frame: Its missing the crown on top (since it's legendary) and although the golden frame is correct for multicolored cards, this one has only two colors, hence it should have the blue-red gradient pinline and text box background, as shown on the real card on the right side.



Note how even the showcase frame on the left still respects the general rules of a golden base and border (look at the wood carvings) with a blue-red pinline on top. On the right, an example of a card which does the same but retains the frame border typical of vehicles.

4.4 ART

No particular rules apply to art, apart from choosing an image which fits the card theme, name, color identity, type, and/or mechanics. However, one note must be made for images with a pop-up effect, where the art extends beyond the frame and spills over text and other graphical elements. While of great impact, this has to be done sensibly and with moderation. The art extending outside the frame **should never obscure critical information** of the card (like hiding part of the mana cost) or making parts of the rules text or type line unreadable.



4.5 TYPE LINE AND TEXT

Similarly to the art, very few rules in terms of formatting apply to the type line and the text box. As a general principle, **readability** should always be kept in mind: Fonts too small, bad capitalization and grammar and wrong punctuation should always be avoided. For the rules text, it is important to highlight the card keywords (e.g. flying, haste, etc.) by putting them at the start of the text and on their own line(s) if possible. Abilities should also be separated and starting on their own line for clarity.

The flavor text is separated by a short line and is always in **italic**. For contrast, if a word would normally be in italic in a regular text, for emphasis or other reasons, it should be regular within the italic font of the flavor text.



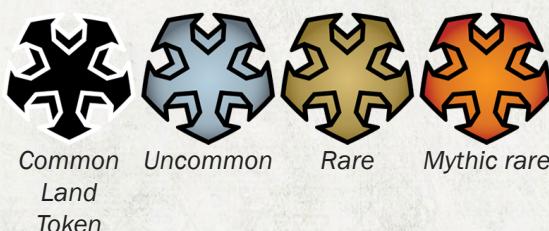
Finally, although a very rare occurrence, it may be of interest to note that the text on a card can be in any language, even fictional and constructed ones.

4.6 SET SYMBOL AND COLLECTOR INFO

Both on custom cards and on proxies, the collector info and set symbol **are completely optional** and can be omitted unless a specific reason exists to show the card rarity, like playing a pauper format.

However, should you want to include them to make a realistic card or just for completeness, please respect the following rules:

- The card number and rarity should be in the format **X 0000**. All four digits are shown for the number, so card number 21 is written 0021. The rarity is denoted by a single letter as follows: **C** (common), **U** (uncommon), **R** (rare), **M** (mythic rare), **L** (land), **S** (special), **T** (token), **H** (helper card), **E** (planeswalker emblem), and **F** (substitute card).
- The set symbol color must correspond to the rarity in the collector info (see below).
- Set code/symbol and card number **should never conflict with a real card**. Making card 0021 of the MTG set is allowed, as it is making card 9999 of the FDN set. Making card 0021 of FDN, however, results in a conflict and must be avoided.
- The language code must indicate the language of the card, even if fictional or constructed.
- If you are making a proxy of a card which has been printed in different rarities over the years, use the rarity of the most recent printing.



Numbering cards is a topic that falls more into set design than single card design; however, for completeness, below is the order in which cards within a set or a deck should be numbered. Within each category and subcategory cards are ordered alphabetically.

1. Colorless nonland nonartifact
2. White
3. Blue
4. Black
5. Red
6. Green
7. Multicolored
8. Other colorless nonland
9. Nonbasic lands (with subdivision per color: colorless, then WUBRG, then multicolor)
10. Basic lands (with subdivision per color as above)
11. Special cards (e.g. alternative frames, with subdivision per color as above)
12. All other extras (tokens etc., with subdivision per color as above)

5. PRINTING

Once your custom cards and proxies are ready, you may be interested in printing them. Several printing services are available, but regardless of the one you choose, they will always need to be provided with cards with an extra border around it, called ‘bleed’. This is necessary to ensure that when the cards are cut (or rather, punched) out of the sheet, there is no risk of having a white line around them due to a possible misalignment of the cutting tool.

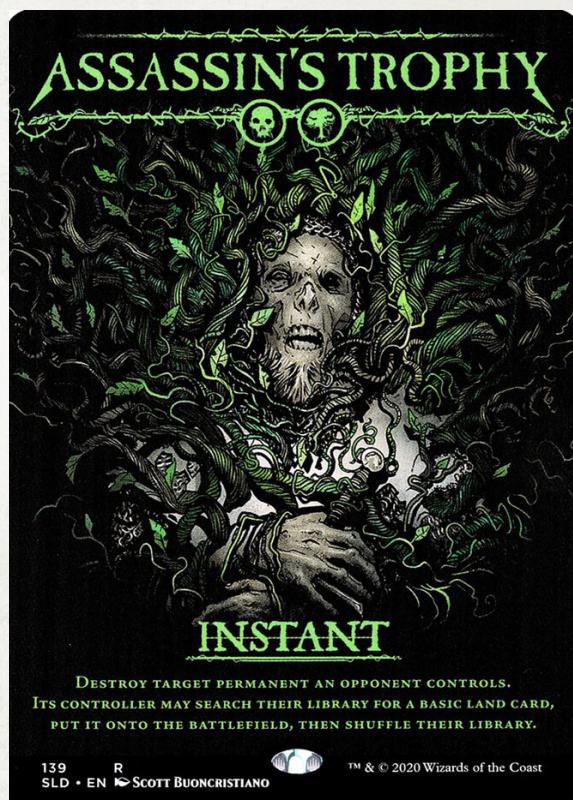
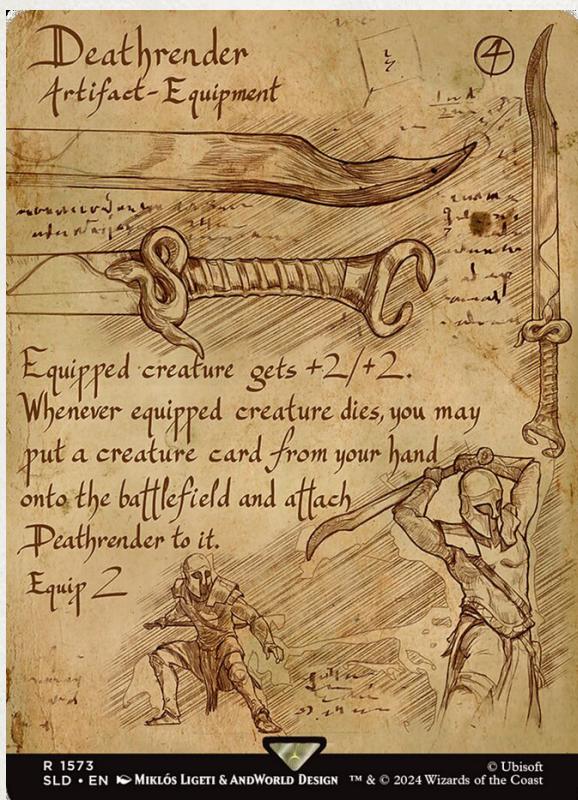
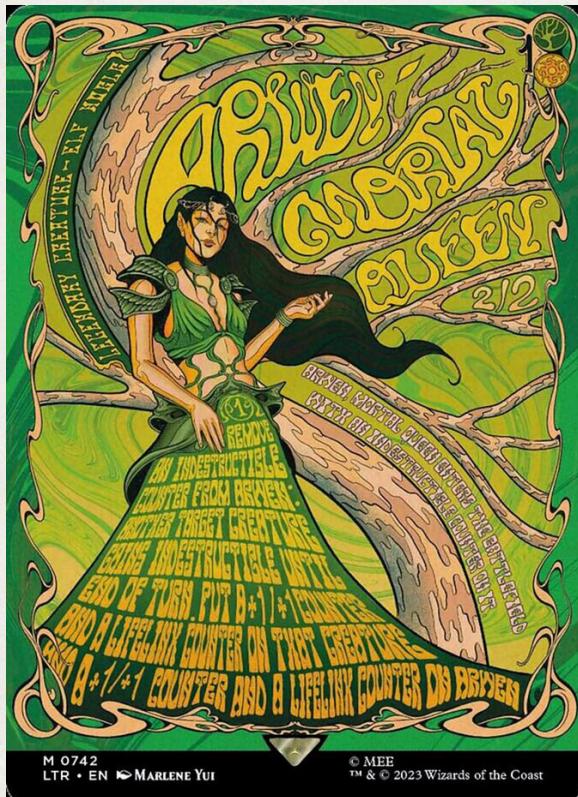
For the same reason, printing with a bleed can be convenient also if you plan to print and cut the cards yourself. Below you can see how a card with an added bleed of 1/8" (right) looks compared to a normal card without bleed (left).



6. ABOVE AND BEYOND

The design train ends here. But before saying goodbye, I will leave you with some of my favorite card designs, both official, from amazing creators I admire, and of my own making. I hope this will inspire you to break every rule I detailed in the previous pages, to explore newer, cooler, bolder designs, and above all, have some great fun doing so.

— Odys

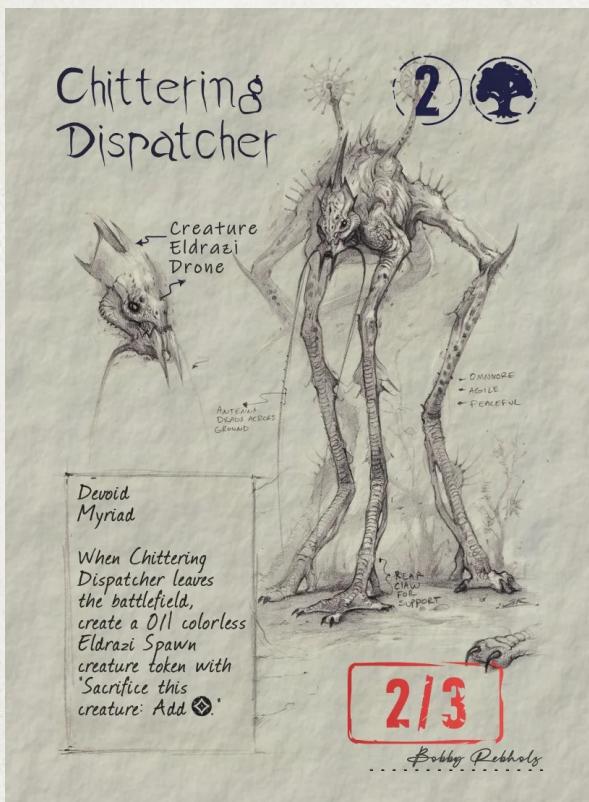




Design by Ody5 on Reddit
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Design by Ody5 on Reddit
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Design by Nekotou on Reddit



Design by mafonso and zan3gar on Reddit

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