

The 13 Golden Rules of Magic



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I've just returned from a Youth Congress in Germany, where I gave four workshops of two and a half hours each, to groups of about twenty people between 10 and 28 years of age, on the subject of "Best of Card College", over two days (yes, quite exhausting). I was pleased at the interest and passion almost all youngsters displayed, but I was also surprised, if not to say a bit shocked, at the discrepancy between the fairly advanced material they were using and their personal artistic immaturity.

I've witnessed for the first time in its entirety and on a large scale what many of you already know, namely that most of those joining magic nowadays do so over the Internet, having learned from "tutorials" on YouTube and similar sources, and they are doing some advanced magic, not always badly, but they are completely lacking in the basics of technique, presentation and theory. They have started to build the house, so to speak, on the third floor, and the slightest earthquake will bring it down, as it lacks a fundamental support.

Although my *Card College* books and DVDs address the issue and provide a remedy, I'm told that the young generation is used to getting information for free from the Web and/or doesn't even have that little money required to buy the basic tools. Both points are debatable. Anyway, I have just created a multimedia course in fourteen lessons teaching the basics of card magic with text, photographs and film clips. At the end of each lesson I have added a Golden Rule. For convenience I have gathered them here in one essay.

I would like to dedicate this piece to the newcomers to magic, but I hope that it will also meet with the approval of more advanced readers, who represent the majority, because they might find their own insights and experience put into words I hope are adequate.

The Thirteen Golden Rules of Magic

Although it is true that there are no rules in Art, it is also true that, to learn a discipline, regardless of what type, following certain guidelines will make the process easier. Inspired by Henri Decremps, who in 1786 wrote down thirteen “principles of magic” in his landmark book *Testament de Jérôme Sharp*, I have reviewed this advice, based on my own experience of several decades as a performing professional and have formulated what I think to be thirteen thoughts that will lead the aspiring magician to success.

Once you have reached the degree of a master in magic, you can safely break any of these rules, but until then I’m confident that for once thirteen will be a lucky number for you.

Golden Rule Number One: Understanding

Before you attempt to present a piece in front of an audience, make sure you fully understand its effect and method.

You should be clear about what the exact effect is and how it will be experienced by the spectators. Also, perfectly understand *how* and *why* the trick works, its mechanics, mathematics, psychology and whatever other principles may be involved.

Golden Rule Number Two: Practice

Never perform a trick that you haven’t thoroughly practiced and rehearsed.

Be sure to know *what to do*, *in which way* and *for what reason*. Practice the parts of the trick depending on digital dexterity several times a day, for several days.

Once you have mastered the mechanics and the complete procedure of the trick, run through it several times, using the complete text and pretending to speak to real people. Do this at least twenty times before attempting to perform the trick for the first time. This is called “rehearsal” as opposed to “practice”.

There is a great temptation to be personally fascinated by the cleverness of a method, which makes you want to perform the trick as soon as possible for anyone around. Resist this first impulse and wait until you are ready.

Golden Rule Number Three: Announcing

Do not announce beforehand what you are about to do.

If your audience knows what to expect, there will be no surprise. They might then watch what you are doing in a different and more critical way.

Announcing an effect also implies an element of challenge, which you want to avoid.

Golden Rule Number Four: Repetition

Avoid repeating the same trick in front of the same audience on the same day.

After you've done a good trick, one of the most common reactions will be, "Do it again!" Well, don't! It is said that the first time the audience looks at *what* you do, the second time at *how* you do it. Once you have attained a certain degree of proficiency, you may respond to the request by doing a trick that looks similar, but really is different, or by doing the same effect, but with a completely different method.

Be aware that you are not a trained dog that needs to do a trick whenever asked. You can say no! at any time. If you don't want to decline directly and be polite, simply say that you never repeat a piece, but that you are going to show them something even better. Then proceed to do another very good trick. Or say that you will be happy to do it again, but later. Then forget about it. Or if you want to give an amusing answer, ask them, "Do you know the Bible?" Regardless of what they answer, tell them, "Therein it says 'miracles only happen once'."

Golden Rule Number Five: Less Is More

Don't try to do too many tricks.

It is better to do a few tricks very well and in an entertaining manner, rather than going on too long and having people think, "Whew, good, but I'm glad it's over."

For centuries entertainers have abided by the rule: *Leave them wanting ~~for~~ more.*

Golden Rule Number Six: Audience Management

Treat your spectators as you would like to be treated by them.

Every performer really gets the audience he or she deserves. It is a good idea to never underestimate your fellow human beings, but rather to treat them the way you would like them to be; and it is an almost certainty that they will behave that way.

The legendary vaudeville magician Nate Leipzig used to say, "The audience enjoys being fooled by a gentleman."

Golden Rule Number Seven: Keep the Secret

Never ever tell anyone how your tricks work.

Maybe the question you will be asked most often is, "How did you do that?" As a beginner you might believe that by telling the secret of your little miracle you will gain the admiration of your interlocutor. However, quite the contrary is true. By telling the secret you will not only lose the recognition gained, but you will also reduce a fascinating piece of magic to the level of a puzzle, a mere curiosity. Your audience will say, "Oh, that's how it's done! I didn't think it was so easy!" Of course they don't know of the hours, days, maybe weeks and years of thought and practice you have put into a particular trick, they have no idea of its beautiful internal complexity, of its ingenious implications, of the wonderful ideas generations of magicians from different cultures have put into what you just did.

Revealing the secret is like opening a piano for somebody who is ignorant of how a piano works, and showing him that little hammers are striking cords because you hit several keys, and the person says, “Oh, that’s how easy it is to play the piano.” They mistake “easy” with “simple”. Although the “secret” is the least important thing in magic, still don’t tell them; they won’t understand.

Once you are a master, they will no longer ask, “How did you do that?” but will exclaim, “That was beautiful!”

Golden Rule Number Eight: Vary Effects and Methods

If you perform several tricks, make it a point to use various categories of effects, as well as different methods - avoid using the same procedures or principles.

Combine tricks that demonstrate a different phenomenon, such as productions, vanishes, transformations, predictions, etc. As for methods, do a trick that depends on sleight-of-hand, and when your audience starts to look for some kind of manipulation, use a trick based on a mathematical or a psychological principle. Your spectators will then eliminate one by one their possible solutions and experience true wonderment.

Golden Rule Number Nine: Art of Conversation

Whenever you are using a particular presentation, be able to converse intelligently about the subject after the performance.

If you use facts and names in your presentations, have at least a basic knowledge of them. Also know something about the history of magic, some of its most important representatives and an anecdote or two about them, as well as why magic works. Can you, for instance, explain why an intelligent adult can be deceived by a relatively simple magic trick?

What you say before and after a performance will have an influence on how the spectators with whom you talk perceive you as a person and artist, as well as on how they perceive and remember your performance in particular, *and magic in general*. That’s a responsibility that goes far beyond yourself, so be prepared.

Golden Rule Number Ten: Be Original...and Good

Always strive for originality in your performance, but never let originality kill the magic effect.

Sir Isaac Newton said, “I can see further because I’m standing on the shoulders of giants.” Be aware that you are building on a legacy that has been created over centuries by innumerable brilliant inventors and performers. Respect this and don’t ignore the brilliance contained in what has been brought to you; but at the same time constantly strive for some degree of personal originality in method and presentation.

However, remember: Good is better than original. The more experience you acquire, and the more thought and practice you put into your magic, the better you will be able to balance these two ingredients.

Golden Rule Number Eleven: Magic Is Not Paranormal

Contribute more to the edification of people than to their ignorance.

Don't claim paranormal powers, even though some of your "miracles" might appear to be just that to some people. Occasionally you will have gullible members in your audience who are desperate to use your performance pieces to confirm some exotic belief. Be thoughtful, but by all means don't encourage them, as nothing can be gained from this. Make it clear that you are a "theatrical illusionist", no more, no less.

Golden Rule Number Twelve: Magic Is an Art

"Magic is the performing art of wonder."

This is in my opinion the best definition I've found of what a conjuror does. It implies the use of complex artifices on the part of the performer to stimulate the spectators' imagination – their intellect and emotions - to create the live fiction of impossibility. The artifices are based mostly on principles from natural science (physics, chemistry, hydraulics, electronics, mathematics), psychology, drama and sleight-of-hand.

You might not be an artist when you start out, but having the *vision* that magic is an art form will lead you on the royal road to magic.

Golden Rule Number Thirteen: Enjoy and Share

Ask yourself: "Why do I want to be a magical performer?" Then enjoy being one and share your enjoyment with your audience.

The question above is a difficult one, and not just for a beginner. Whatever your answer is, I believe it should contain the element of personal joy. You have put time, effort and a certain talent into the study and practice of your magic. When you are ready to bring it before an audience, its performance becomes an act of sharing, a very personal moment of human interaction that will be unique and won't happen again in exactly this form. It will be only as good as the sincere excellence and enthusiasm you put into it. Whatever art is, it will always be communication, too.

Last Words

These thoughts are admittedly basic—but that also means they are fundamental and important. Therefore, I hope they have forced you to think about your own views on the topic. Maybe this has led to some new or at least additional insight, which is as important as a false shuffle, a control, a force, a top change and a palm. If you teach magic to others, I authorize you to use my "Golden Rules", if you find them useful. (I only ask you to put my name and that of Decremps somewhere, and not alter the text without my permission.)