

The 13 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 (1746-1826), who in 1786 published his thirteen “Principes généraux - General Principles” in his landmark *Testament de Jérôme Sharp*, and which would influence the future of magic, we have reviewed this advice, based on our own experience as a professional performer, author and teacher, with the hope that it may lead the aspiring magician to success. Once you have reached the degree of master of magic, you can safely break any of these rules, but until then we are 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, how to do it, and for what reason. Practice the parts of the trick that rely 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, and 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 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 your spectators, “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 than to go on too long and have people think, “Whew, good, but I'm glad it's over.”

For centuries entertainers have abided by the rule: Leave them wanting 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 never to 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.

The question you will perhaps 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 inquisitor. However, quite the opposite is true. By revealing 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, you still should not reveal it; they won't understand.

Once you are a master, your spectators 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 a series of tricks, make a point of using various categories of effect, as well as different methods - avoid using the same procedures or principles.

Combine tricks that demonstrate different phenomena, 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 psychological principle. Your spectators will then eliminate their possible solutions one by one, and will experience true wonderment.

Golden Rule Number Nine: The 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 you, 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, "If I have seen further, it is by 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. Be aware that doing something very well is already quite original (in interpretation)!

Golden Rule Number Eleven: Magic Is Not Supernatural

Contribute more to people's edification than to their ignorance.

Don't claim supernatural powers, even though some of your "miracles" might appear to be paranormal to some people. Occasionally, you will encounter gullible audience members 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 the best definition we've been able to come up with of what a conjuror does. It implies the use of complex artifices on the part of the performer to stimulate the spectators' imagination, intellect and emotions to create the live fiction of impossibility. These artifices are based mostly on principles from natural science (physics, chemistry, 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 artistic 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.

This question is a difficult one, not just for beginners. Whatever your answer is, we believe it should contain an 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.

Lest I forget...

These thoughts are admittedly basic, but that also means they are fundamental and important. Therefore, we 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. And last but not least, remember, "The exception confirms the rule," and, "To break the rules, it's more fun if you know the rules."

(This essay first appeared in 2012 in *Roberto Giobbi's Introduction to Card Magic*, a multimedia course, in fourteen lessons, that teaches the basics of card magic with text, photographs and film clips.)