

# Control decks in *Magic Online's* five-color format

## Prismatic Control

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It's [Control Week](#) on magicthegathering.com, which happens to be a terrific time to talk about that five-color, 250-card *Magic Online* format known as Prismatic. I mean, just look at this chart:

<b>Prismatic decks</b>	Enjoy spending the early game setting up their mana	Enjoy spending the midgame neutralizing opponent's early threats while gaining card advantage	Enjoy spending the late game deploying brutal game-enders while sitting on a handful of goodies	Enjoy long walks on the beach, 19th Century poetry and raspberry iced tea
<b>Control decks</b>	Ditto	Ditto	Ditto	Ditto!

See? And just like in other formats, playing a control deck in Prismatic can be a good feeling. It's driver side air bags. It's knowing there's pepper spray in your purse. It's having a retirement fund and a trustworthy mechanic all rolled up into one, and knowing that whatever life throws at you, you're prepared.

But playing a control deck can also be an unnerving feeling. It's frantically trying to get your car started while the axe-wielding maniac is lurching toward you. It's knowing that you left that pepper spray at home, but trying to act like you didn't, as you walk down the hoodlum-ridden alley. It's showing up on test day without having studied, or worn pants.

If you're a Prismatic player (and if you aren't, check out the current [deck construction rules](#) below), then chances are you've already tasted the sweetness and the scariness of control. This article explores turning your Prismatic control urges into solid deckbuilding practices and recommends ways to avoid showing up pantsless in the Casual Constructed Room. Plus there's decklists, and a bit at the end about weekly Prismatic premier events going on in *Magic Online*.

### Threats and Answers

"People like control because they think it shows that they're good **Magic** players. Active decks, on the other hand, produce threats, and control decks must have the right answer to the right threat. If not, they're in trouble... while there are wrong answers, there are no wrong threats."

- David Price

Tough love, Mr. Price, tough love.

Thing is, in most cases, he's right.

A threat, in this context, is something that can win the game. Most of the time, that means a creature, the most-used and uniquely-capable repeating damage sources in the game. But a threat could also mean a Honden of Infinite Rage pinging away at you every turn, a Door to Nothingnessthreatening to untap, or a Death Grasp pointed at you, where X is your life total. These are the things that make you, the control player, sad. They're the enemy.

An answer is a something that can neutralize a threat. A Rend Flesh that offs an Arc-Slogger is an answer. So is a Hull Breach that takes out a looming Dragon Roost or a Spelljack that takes the reins of an unfriendly Lava Axe. These are the things that make you, the control player, happy. They're your pretty, glittering tools that you use to dissect your opponent and smile, then do away with him at your leisure.

The problem is that sometimes those glittering tools wait in your hand for an opportunity to be used. The ever-embiggening Prismatic card pool gives your opponent access to more and more difficult-to-remove creatures and other threats that make the your life hard. You have to Edict or Wrath away untargetables like Troll Ascetic. You have to have instant-speed removal to catch Nantuko Monastery when it's a creature, or land destruction when it's not. If you're trying to hit a morph creature and your opponent has land untapped, you may have to be able to kill its flipped form (I've thrown Terrors at Silent Specter and Pyrite Spellbombs at Exalted Angel, all thanks to that tricky *Onslaught* Block mechanic) while dodging Willbenders and Quicksilver Dragons. You have to deal with Keiga, the Tide Star without actually letting it hit the graveyard, lest it steal your Shadowmage Infiltrator; you have to deal with Rotlung Reanimator *and* its pals. You have to have some sort of amazing plan to keep Eternal Dragon and Pyre Zombie and Undead Gladiator off the table, and to keep Genesis from exhausting your removal. You have to have Smothers for the little guys and Reprisal for the big, Reciprocate for the early game and Illuminate for the late, and more and more lately you have to be able to deal with your opponent's entire land pile getting up and coming over as a bunch of angry 2/2s.



And that's just the creatures! There's also the threat of a runaway Mind's Eye leeching off all your card drawing, of a set of Honden cranking out some kind of frown-worthy combination of effects every turn, or of a Keldon Necropolis circumventing every Ghostly Prison and Collective Restraint you can muster.

## Your game plan

As the control player, you react to what your opponent's doing. You try your best to match up the answers you draw to the threats he lobs at your head. A lot of players think of the control player as the one setting the terms, making the rules. That's only true when you're winning. In most cases, the active player's strategy is calling the shots. You, in the control role, have to adapt your strategy to what the guy across the table is doing. In particular, you have to do three things:

1. Fail to die to your opponent's strategy,
2. Find a foil to that strategy and deploy it, and then
3. Take advantage of that position to win the game.

Don't think of these as sequential steps, necessarily—you'll do a lot of each, back and forth in any order, throughout the game. They're just parts of the puzzle you'll have to build to win. But there is a general, overall flow of them that do correspond to the sequence of many games.

## **Don't die**

Your opponent is a funny duck. She says, "Hello and good luck," then proceeds to mold her deck into a sharp point and repeatedly stab it in your gut, as if "Hello and good luck" meant something like "Have at you," or "Die, unworthy scum." She's going to try to kill you, and while you have some nasty tricks up your sleeve, you have to stay alive long enough for your tricks to come online. So the first category of cards you'll need to consider is cheap, temporary solutions to staying above zero life while getting the goods out.

## **Pinpoint removal**

Most one-for-one removal that costs two or less mana falls in the don't-die category: think Smother, Firebolt, Naturalize. It's designed to rid your opponent of a threat with a minimum of mana or color commitment. It doesn't usually generate card advantage, but early in the game, it blocks your opponent's quick jabs and keeps your life total high while you continue laying lands to prepare for the midgame. Later in the game, cheap pinpoint removal allows you to deal with multiple threats in one turn when the mana is a-flowing and the cards are a-drawing, which can help you turn the tide in your favor.

Choose pinpoint removal that is flexible and cheap. It's your first line of defense—it should be ready at a moment's notice and easy to cast. Eradicate may hit more targets than Terror, but Terror can be cast on turn 2 without finding that second black source. Some pinpoint removal comes with extra bonus effects—watch for those. Chainer's Edict is cheap creature kill early, and comes back around late in the game for another hit. Magma Jet zots a man and sets up your next draw. Echoing Truth bounces a troublesome permanent and has the potential to wreck a token army. Those are good selections.

## **On the defensive**

There are other ways besides removal to get the breathing room you need. You can set up roadblocks or even just speed bumps—creatures designed to trade with attackers, discourage attacking, and advance your strategy just by dying. Try Jungle Barrier for a cantrip wall, or Solemn Simulacrum for a mana-fixing 2/2 your opponent won't want to run down. Try Wirewood Herald as a 1/1 coupon for a free Elf (which can turn into mana in Elvish Aberration or an answer in Viridian Zealot), Fierce Empath (which can turn into a landcycler, a large flying legend, or a Bringer), or Sakura-Tribe Elder, the most suicidal, chump-blocking, mana-fixing snake in the tribe.

You can run spells that pad your life buffer. Consider Renewed Faith—it digs you a card closer to the right answer while spotting you 2 life, or it'll just spot you 6 life if that's what you're really after. Try Stormscape Battlemage or Chastise or even a defensive Armadillo Cloak.

You can also slow down the game with some other cheap tricks. Ice a land during your opponent's upkeep or an attacker before combat. Throw down a Ghostly Prison to keep rushes to a minimum. Stifle a fetchland or a landcycler's effect. Keep your opponent busy with a Honden of Night's Reach while you prepare to deal with his main threat.

These spells give you the time you need to react; the next step is to skewer your opponent's strategy.

## Find a foil

Your opponent is trying to win by swarming you with Grizzly Fate tokens, and you've got a Pyroclasm in your deck—somewhere. Or he's trying to win by knocking you in the head with an inexorable Iridescent Angel, and your deck has a Duplicant ready for it—somewhere. But how do you get to them?

## Control and the Banned List

Prismatic's list of [banned cards](#) matters a lot here. Most of the cards banned in Prismatic are tutors, which help control decks in **Magic** overcome the threat/answer problem. You can see this happening throughout the [recent Extended season](#): Temporary Solution decks use Enlightened Tutor to get control elements like Worship and Engineered Explosives, and Psychatog decks use Cunning Wish for pieces of their decade-spanning sideboards, from Shadow Rift to Hideous Laughter. Tutors smooth out the consistency of control decks and help control players hurl appropriate answers at their opponents' varied threats.

Now imagine if [Shih Chien Chan](#)'s Enlightened Tutors had a 250-card decklist from which to draw appropriate answers. Imagine if Itaru Ishida's Cunning Wishes could grab any instant he *owned* in his online collection—and he were already running five colors of mana. That's a lot of silver bullets! Under those conditions, anyone looking to control the game could regularly tutor up a devastatingly appropriate answer—and control decks would be very powerful indeed.

Well, that was what Prismatic was like before the bannings.

Think of it from the active player's perspective. You'd be happily plunking down your pre-Kamigawa Block threats—Hystrodons, Cromats, Mahamoti Djinn—and your opponent would cast Diabolic

[Top 8 decks from Grand Prix Singapore](#)

Tutoror Burning Wish on an empty board, and you'd groan. His board is nothing but lands, you've got tons of fatties, and *you'd* groan! You'd even groan if you had an exotic threat like a Genesis in the grave or a Riptide Replicator set to crank out 3/3 black Ooze tokens—you knew that fun time was over, and that you were about to start losing the game. Conventional tutors in Prismatic were *that powerful*.

What started happening, then, was that even beatdown players loaded *Gone, Daddy, gone.* their decks full of Wishes, because games were generally won by the player who cast the tutors, the earliest and most often. And what's a better name for a beatdown deck that wins by tutoring up a backbreaking answer to the opposing deck's threats? A control deck, ladies and gentlemen. With five luscious colors of answers to choose from, and plenty of ways to search for and cast them, there sort of weren't any non-control decks. Control was just about always the best strategy to try.

So then came the new Prismatic banned list in the [Fall of 2004](#). They were good. They said, "Prismatic is about tall, inconsistent decks that do crazy things at crazy times, not about sleek control or combo decks that win the same way every time." They set aside a list of tutors—basically any card in Online Extended that could efficiently search your deck or your collection for a wide range of cards—and made playing the format about wild topdecks again. But wait—we're control players. So what do we do now?

### **Mana and cards**

Look at my [chart](#) at the beginning of the article again. As the chart shows, a lot of things a Prismatic deck does make it well-suited to playing control. You're already setting up your mana just to overcome the inconsistency of playing a five-color 250-carder, and that's great. Choose cheap spells that accelerate your mana as well as fix it – I'm talking your Rampant Growth, Wayfarer's Bauble, Kodama's Reach, and Sakura-Tribe Elder over spells like Lay of the Land, Mana Cylx, or Gaea's Balance.

And once we have mana, we draw. We draw like there's no tomorrow. We draw cards with Night's Whisper, Thirst for Knowledge, Counsel of the Soratami, Concentrate, Inspiration, Fact or Fiction, Deep Analysis, Etched Oracle, Allied Strategies, Opportunity, Skeletal Scrying. We filter the bad out of our hands while drawing into the good with cards like Serum Visions, Opt, Sleight of Hand, Worldly Counsel, Compulsion, Merfolk Looter and Thought Courier. Sometimes we fuel enormous Read the Runes with Mirari's Wake. Sometimes we cast and protect Arcanis the Omnipotent. Sometimes we stick that Mind's Eye in our foreheads and let it show us the way to rampant card advantage.

And we cycle. Oh, do we cycle. We fill our decks with landcyclers, cycling lands, cycling removal, cycling counters, cycling threats and even cycling card-drawers. Hey, mister threat-generating player? At the end of your turn, we have things to do. By the time we untap we'll have a whole new hand, much more likely to contain the exact combination of answers for your little nasties.

### **Powerful, flexible answers**

The power of an answer, more than any other kind of card in **Magic**, is tied to its appropriateness for the situation. The way an answer does its job is by showing up at the right time, reacting to just the kind of strategy your opponent is trying to advance, and blasting big round holes in his game plan.

So, what's his game plan? What is your opponent trying to do, and therefore what should you prepare for to stop him?

Prismatic is about creatures, so mass creature removal is your first stop. These are the flashy, expensive spells that your now nicely-fixed mana is begging to cast for you. Starstorm. Final Judgment. Decree of Pain. Good old Wrath. Don't forget the permanent-based options in Bane of the Living, Pernicious Deed, Oblivion Stone, or Night of Souls' Betrayal, to name a few. This is the point in the midgame where you're taking control because your spells gain card advantage by trading with two or more of your opponent's threats.

Flexible removal—the kind you'll never be sad to draw, and is welcome at any party—is your next stop. Who doesn't like drawing a Vindicate? Who doesn't have something they'd like to Confiscate? What doesn't die to a Rend Flesh? You're looking for cards that are rarely dead — tools that don't sit in your hand, glittering uselessly.

Of course, removal attached to a creature has its own special benefits. Nantuko Vigilante, how many times have you flipped up your little green head for me and smashed something nasty on your way to dealing 3? How many times has some Flametongue analogue (Nekrataal, Faceless Butcher, Thornscape Battlemage, Duplicant, blah blah you know the bunch) or saccable spirit (Hearth Kami, Kami of Ancient Law, Pain Kami) knocked out a threat when I needed it while providing a warm body? How many times have I bounced Mystic Snake with a Crystal Shard?

### **A note on your removal mix**

Control decks have a special advantage when facing creatures. Your combination of mass removal (Wrath, Akroma's Vengeance, Pyroclasm) and pinpoint removal (Smother, Chainer's Edict, Flametongue Kavu) gives the beatdown deck fits. Does he flash back Call of the Herd immediately, to get ahead of your pinpoint removal, and risk letting both of them go down to a single mass removal spell? Or does he let it sit in his graveyard, letting you Wrath his threats one at a time, but risking giving you time to set up your more powerful later-game spells? It may be true in many ways that there are "no wrong threats, only wrong answers"—but the threat-player has to keep in mind the kinds of removal he might be facing and play out his threats accordingly.

Prismatic has a wealth of answers for any strategy. But now what do you do, once you've kept alive long enough to turn your opponent's strategy on its ear?

### **Win the game**

Wow, we get to play threats too!

It's true. In fact, since you're a Prismatic control deck, you get to play the *biggest, nastiest threats in the format*. You've got time to cast Myojin. You've got the budget to afford a hard-cast Akroma. You've got the lands—and possibly an optional Mirari's Wake or Heartbeat of Spring—to cycle up a really big Decree of Justice, lob a really big Fireball, or give your opponent a *really* big (say it with me now) Rude Awakening.

Or you can plink your opponent to death with the utility and removal you're already running—your Horden of Infinite Rage. Your face-up Bane of the Living. Your unsacced Etched Oracle. Your Krosan Tusker that you actually cast because it didn't need to cycle up a land for you this time. Your Eternal Witness that already fetched a second round of Flesh Rending. Your now-active Nantuko Monastery.

Winning the game is almost a side note to this article, because it's almost a side note to a control deck. You've dissected your opponent. Now you get to smile, relax, and win at your leisure.

## **The mission of Prismatic control**

As we've seen, a Prismatic deck is well-suited to playing a control role. Although the banned list makes it hard to tutor your way out of the threat/answer problem, running solid, flexible, general-purpose cards and their analogues to make sure those wild topdecks happen in your favor. The mission of a Prismatic control deck is the same as the mission a control deck in any format—stay alive, turn the tide through card advantage and superior spells, and then convert that advantage into a game win. But you get to play all five colors of spells to do it.

## **A few decklists**

A decklist is worth a thousand words, no? Here's a budget-minded Prismatic control deck with *no* rare cards.

Prismatic Control Lite

### **Prismatic Control Deck**

Still losing to that beatdown deck? If your collection is up to it, then try this instead:

Fully Loaded Prismatic Control

### **Prismatic Control Deck**

Here's a bonus decklist, for contrast. Hey, control decks aren't the only ones that can bring the bling.

Fully Loaded Prismatic Beatdown

### **Prismatic Beatdown Deck**

### **Prismatic Premier Events**

Ready to test out your new, shiny, teched-out Prismatic deck? **Magic Online** runs weekly Prismatic premier events on Sundays at 10 AM Pacific, with 2x prizes. Check out the [Magic Online events schedule](#) for more information.

Also of note to Prismatic players: Qualify for the [Invasion Block sealed tournament](#) for a chance to open some of those sweet *Invasion* Block rares!  
rules

## Appendix: Prismatic Deck Construction Rules

Prismatic is a casual [Magic Online](#) format for fans of big, fun, five-color decks. Prismatic has special deck construction rules and a special mulligan rule.

- **Big deck:** Your deck must be at least 250 cards,
- **Five colors:** Your deck must contain at least 20 cards of each color (multicolor and split cards count as one of their colors),
- **Prismatic banned list:** Your deck cannot contain any of the following cards (banned in Prismatic):
  - Battle of Wits
  - Bribery
  - Bringer of the Black Dawn
  - Buried Alive
  - Burning Wish
  - Cunning Wish
  - Diabolic Tutor
  - Eladamri's Call
  - Entomb
  - Fabricate
  - Gifts Ungiven
  - Insidious Dreams
  - Living Wish
  - Quiet Speculation
  - Skullclamp
  - Sterling Grove
  - Sundering Titan
  - Tooth and Nail
  - Wild Research
- **Special mulligan rule:** If your starting hand has 0, 1, 6 or 7 lands in it, you can take a "big deck mulligan" for free; that is, you can get back a fresh hand of seven cards. After that, you may mulligan as normal if you don't like your hand. Note that if you take a "big deck mulligan," your opponent has the opportunity to take one too, for "free." Same goes for you if your opponent takes a "big deck mulligan."