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# Saving Space

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*Making Magic*  
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Welcome to Arcane Week! Yes, the first week ever dedicated to a card sub-type. Well, you know, other than creature types. And equipment, of course. Hey, at least we haven't had Basic, Urza's, or Shrine Week yet. So why exactly is it Arcane Week? Because Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar said so. No, really. You see, our illustrious editor, Scott Johns, came up with a clever way to stop having to come up with themes; I mean, empower his columnists. He's taking turns letting columnists pick the theme for the week. JMS had first dibs at the honor. And he chose Arcane Week. (See [Jay's feature article this week](#) for an explanation of why he went that way.)

Now I have nothing against Arcane Week. It's a great idea. In fact, I kind of already had my own personal Arcane Week during *Champions of Kamigawa* previews. I even wrote an entire column about the origin of Arcane ("Arcane and Able"). But it's kind of my thing that I always write on theme during the theme weeks. See, I was the impetus for the theme weeks happening in the first place and I feel it's my duty as a creative writer to find a way to always stay on theme. (For those [magicthegathering.com](#) trivia buffs out there, can you name the one week I was off-theme? Hidden Gem Week. I used [that column](#) to announce the existence of *Unhinged*.) So how do I write about Arcane again?

By writing about a completely different aspect of Arcane. I've already talked about its origin, so today I'm going to talk about an aspect that makes Arcane so intriguing to me as a designer: conservation.

## It's Not Just For Water Anymore

So what does conservation mean in terms of design? To answer this I'm going to use a different craft, writing, to make an example. Conservation in writing means using the least amount of words to convey the greatest amount of meaning. For example, I could write "he replied with the kind of tone that told me that he did not like what I had just said". Or I could just say "he snapped" or "he growled" or any verb that implies all the feeling I was taking fifteen plus words to tell you.

Conservation means thinking of words as a resource and only using as much as necessary to get the job done. Key to the idea of conservation is word choice and juxtaposition. It is the art of implying rather than emphatically stating. It calls for a writer to evoke a response rather than simply describe what happened. All this is also true for card design. I will walk through some of the basics of conservation for card design and while doing so demonstrate why Arcane is such a poster child for this aspect of design. In addition, for each section I will give you a chance to come up with your own solution to see how you would fare in actual card design situations.

**#1) The Less Words You Use the Better** – Let's start with the most basic principle of conservation: less is more. As poets have known for years, the less you say, the more power each word gains. You want to pack a punch? Do it in as short a space as you can. (This is one area, by the way, that intermingles design with templating.) Note that subtle changes in rules or functionality is acceptable for the sake of simplified language.

Q1) Shorten the following:

Destroy target artifact, creature, enchantment or land. Instead of putting it into a graveyard, remove it from the game.

[Click here for the answer.](#)

A1) My solution:

Remove target permanent from the game.

The idea here is to look for places where one word can replace multiple others. If you're going to list all the permanent types, for example, you might as well use the term "permanent". In addition, try to be direct as possible in your language. Indirect approaches always eat up more word space. I understand that this change has some subtle rules ramifications, but in the bigger picture that doesn't really matter. Having the card work more cleanly dwarfs any little nuance shifts.

How does Arcane excel here? Simple, it's one word. You can't get better than that. (I guess you could get fewer letters. But even then, Arcane only has six.)



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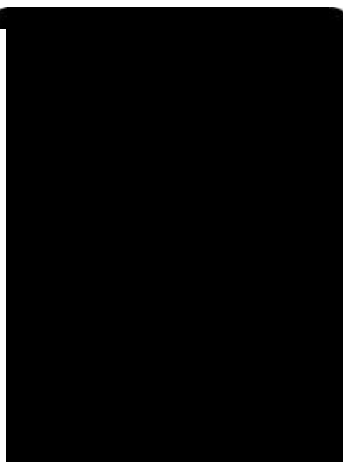
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**#2) Understand The Value of Placement** – What words you choose are important. But how you place them is equally important. Learn the natural rhythm of the cards. Some areas, such as the text box, simply have more weight than others.

Q2) Shorten the following:

**Mad Flinger**

?R

Creature – Orc

1/1

R, Sacrifice CARDNAME: CARDNAME deals 2 damage to target creature.

R, Sacrifice a goblin: CARDNAME deals 2 damage to target creature.

[Click here for the answer.](#)

A2) Here's what I did:

**Mad Flinger**

?R

Creature – Goblin

1/1

R, Sacrifice a goblin: CARDNAME deals 2 damage to target creature.



The trick here is recognizing the first line can be made repetitive if the creature was simply a goblin. Obviously you're willing to let the creature sacrifice itself, so why not just tie in the first ability with the second? The real beauty of this change is that it doesn't even add word count. The creature already had a creature type. All you have to do is swap "orc" for "goblin" (okay, you're going up three letters).

Arcane shines here as well because it too lives on the card type line where it stays out of the majority of the public's eye. In fact, some players didn't even realize that Arcane was on the card until other cards told you to start looking for it.

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**#3) Learn What Doesn't Need to Be Said** – One of the key components to conservation is learning when you are being needlessly repetitive. If an item can be removed from a card without changing the basic essence of the card, that item should be removed.

Q3) Apply this lesson to the following card:

**Defensive Guard**

?W

Creature – Human Soldier

0/5

Defender

T: Prevent the next 3 damage from any source to CARDNAME.

Whenever CARDNAME blocks, gain 3 life.

[Click here for the answer.](#)

A3) My answer:

**Defensive Guard**

?W

Creature – Human Soldier

0/8

Whenever CARDNAME blocks, gain 3 life.

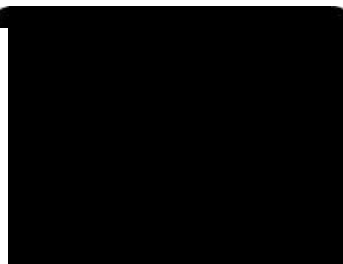
The card has zero power and an ability that only works on defense. Does it really need to be a defender? Everything about the card is already telling you not to attack with it. Yes, this does change the functionality slightly but unless it's in a set like *Mirrodin* (where white had so much synergy with equipment) the change isn't significant. Secondly, how much difference is there between 8 toughness and 5 toughness with the ability to prevent 3? Not much. Not enough to be worth the extra text for me.

Arcane in a vacuum is nothing. That is, without other cards that care about the quality, Arcane doesn't mean anything. That lack of substance can be very potent. For example, the first time a player sees Arcane on a spell, he's quite taken aback. What does it mean? He knows that within that card it doesn't do anything. But obviously it must do something. Thus, it's mere presence stirs up dreams of potential.

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**#4) Find Depth in Combinations** – Often times in art, it is not the pieces that speak the greatest volume but the combination of the pieces. Players don't look at abilities in isolation. If a card can do more than one thing, from the very start players are trying to find out how the multiple items work in conjunction. Be aware of the power of this connection. And remember this added bonus comes with zero words.

Q4) Add a second ability to this creature. Maximize the card by picking an ability that adds value to the entire card through interaction. As before, use as few words as possible.



### Vedalken Looter

?U

Creature – Vedalken

1/4

T: Target player draws a card and discards a card.

[Click here for the answer.](#)

A4) There are obviously different good answers. Here's my best attempt:

### Vedalken Looter

?U

Creature – Vedalken

1/4

T: Target player draws a card and discards a card.

?U: Untap CARDNAME.

The value of my suggestion is that it adds two important features to the card. First it allows you to use the first ability multiple times. Second it takes advantage of the creature's high toughness by allowing it to attack or use the ability and still have the ability to block.

This quality is mostly irrelevant for Arcane as almost all Arcane spells don't care internally that they are Arcane spells. The biggest exception to this is the splice cards. Because all splice cards are Arcane, they allow players to splice one copy of a spell onto another copy.



**#5) Hide Things In Plain Sight** – This is where reminder text shines. You see, italics is kind of invisible. Players past a certain level are trained to ignore it. This is why keywords are so valuable. One word can represent multiple sentences of text. How better to conserve words than create a word that encompasses the definition of whole sentences.

The other common use of this technique is to take a card that is easy to understand in concept but confusing in execution. A good example of this would be **Time Stop**. "End the current turn" conveys the essence of the card without bogging down the reader with all the rules baggage that comes along with such a card.

Q5) Reduce this card down to its essence using as few words as possible.

### Brain Exchange

?U

Sorcery

Gain control of all of target player's permanents. He or she gains control of all of your permanents. Exchange hands with that player. Each of you gains control of the other player's library and graveyard. You will draw and discard from them accordingly. Swap life totals. All of these effects are permanent.

[Click here for the answer.](#)

A5) My take:

### Brain Exchange

?U

Sorcery

Permanently exchange places with target player. (Reminder text that spells this out in boring detail.)

The essence of Brain Exchange is, well, you're doing that body swap that popular entertainment likes so much. You're becoming your opponent and he or she's becoming you. Once you get that idea across all the rest will follow. If I'm you, of course I control all your things and use your library and graveyard and have your life total. I'm you! The key here is conveying the top down essence that implies the card's mechanic.

Arcane, being one word, doesn't really have the concern of hiding anything. The best way to think of Arcane is that it hides its value in the text of other cards.



**#6) Make Use of the Natural Flow of Abilities** – One of the advantages of having a game as complex as **Magic** is that over the years many shortcuts have been created. Make use of these shortcuts. If you need to have some effect happen, take a look around at what is already naturally going on. Often times, the cleanest thing to do is piggyback on other effects.

Q6) Shorten the following card's text using the natural flow of the game:

### Rampant Guy

?GG

Creature – Elf Scout

1/1

0: Search your library for a basic land and put it into play tapped. Only use this ability any time you could use a sorcery and only use it once per turn.

[Click here for the answer.](#)

A6) Here's my fix:

**Rampant Guy**

?GG

Creature – Elf Scout

1/1

At the beginning of your upkeep, search your library for a basic land and put it into play tapped.

The key to solving this problem was looking for a natural way to limit when and how often the ability can be played. Triggers are a perfect solution as they already get both of these restrictions naturally. And yes, this version is slightly more restrictive (you can't rampant post combat, for example), but the cleanliness of the design is worth the cost, especially as this is an ability that doesn't need to be reactive most of the time.

The way Arcane takes advantage of this flow is that it sits on spells, instants and sorceries, that by their very nature are waiting to be played. And when that moment finally comes, Arcane is sitting there as a marker allowing other cards to respond to it or off of it.

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**#7) Keep In Mind All Audiences** – One way to make a card have extra meaning is to make sure that the wording used takes advantage of as many formats as possible. Designers have to always remember that **Magic** is in many ways a myriad of games, connected but each with its own subtle differences. By keeping this in mind during design, it's possible to up the value of the card without adding many, and sometimes any, words.



Q7) Improve the value of this card in an additional format:

**Lovin' Life**

?G

Enchantment

Whenever you play a creature, draw a card.

[Click here for the answer.](#)

A7) Here's my improvement:

**Lovin' Life**

?G

Enchantment

Whenever you play a creature, target player draws a card.

This test plays into the most common usage of this way of thinking, making cards as user-friendly as possible for multi-player. R&D has trained itself to always think of the ramifications of each card for multi-player play. And whenever possible, we try to use wording that maximizes both single and team play.

In the card in question, I've turned the card from solely a card advantage card to a political card that allows me to befriend other players in a multi-player game. It still does everything the first card did but now adds an entire new aspect to another format. As an added bonus, the card also lets you do interesting things where giving cards to your opponent can prove beneficial (you have a **Black Vise** in play, for example).

R&D made a conscious effort to restrict most Arcane triggers to solely your own Arcane spells. We felt to do otherwise was to create a monster in team play. (At least team play where *Kamigawa Block* was a major presence.)

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## When Less Isn't More

Before I wrap up today's column, I want to stress that while conservation is an important element of design, it is not the only consideration. Often times, adding text is an overall gain for the card. Sometimes there is more impact if the card is longer or if an extra ability is added. The key to conservation is knowing when subtraction adds to the card, when saying less in essence says more. But sometimes you can say more by just saying more.

I hope today's diversion allowed you to consider one aspect of design that you might not have ever put much thought to. If you enjoyed today's column let me know and perhaps I will do more like it in the future.

Join me next week when I take a look at some current hot button issues from a different vantage point.

Until then, may you appreciate having less.

Mark Rosewater

Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.



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