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Deckbuilding 101: Five Tips for Better Deckbuilding

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This article was posted a couple of months into my run on Building on a Budget, and it really provides some great guidelines for deckbuilding. I get hundreds of e-mails each month from people asking for help on their decks, and a lot of the problems players are having with their decks can be solved by following the five tips in this article.

Plus, this column has BoaB, the evil non-budgetary robot. BoaB has become a celebrity in and of his own right, and gets almost as much fan mail as I do! Maybe one day they'll let BoaB guest-write a column for me....but only if you tell them to!

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Welcome back to Building on a Budget! I hope everyone had a great Memorial Day weekend. Everyone was busy submitting decks for me to play deck doctor with, that's for sure! I've received a ton of decklists, but instead of delving straight into doctoring one particular deck, I'm going to take a look at the Building end of this column.

Before I get started, I want to thank everyone for sending in their decks. There were a ton of great ideas out there, and I'll be doctoring several individual decks in the weeks to come. Today's column deals with the five pitfalls that people fall into when deckbuilding. If I use your deck in today's column, *please please please* do not be offended. This does not mean your deck is bad – it simply means that it is a good example of a particular problem I want to discuss.

"But Ben," I bet several of you are going to e-mail me, "why didn't you just get straight to the decks?" The reason is twofold. First, I've never really laid down any deckbuilding rules outside of the "on a Budget" part of this column. Before I tinkered with other people's decks, I thought it would be nice to show some of the rules I use when building my own decks. Second, there were several fundamental problems that reared their ugly heads repeatedly across multiple decks. By explaining these problems en mass, I can help the greatest number of people tune their decks.

Anyhow, on to the rules!

RULE #1: Fix Your Mana Base

The mana base in your deck serves a very important purpose – it enables you to cast your spells for the game. Without a good mana base, your deck will not perform. Let's look at three separate decks that were submitted in the forums.

Goodship01 G/W Angels		
Main Deck 60 cards		
10 Plains	1 Serra Angel	4 Rancor
10 Forest	1 Angel of Retribution	4 Ancestral Mask
1 Elfhame Palace	1 Voice of All	2 Defense of the Heart
	1 Radiant, Archangel	2 Serra's Embrace
21 lands	1 Akroma, Angel of Wrath	2 Urza's Incubator
	1 Reya Dawnbringer	2 Disenchant
	1 Platinum Angel	2 Naturalize
	2 Thicket Elemental	2 Humble
	4 Llanowar Elves	2 Reprisal
	2 Priest of Titania	
	2 Quirion Elves	22 other spells
	17 creatures	

First up is Goodship01's G/W Angels deck. This deck runs only 21 lands, with eight alternate mana producers (4 Llanowar Elves, 2 Priest of Titania, and 2 Quirion Elves) and one mana reducer (Urza's Incubator). Meanwhile, the business spells in this deck start at five, and curve all the way up to nine! With eight elves in the deck, Goodship01 can expect to see one Elf per opening hand (eight in sixty cards), and a land about one



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in every three cards (twenty-one out of sixty). It will be a rare game when Akroma, Reya, or a kicked **Thicket Elemental** will be cast.

Make sure your deck has enough lands and mana sources to support the spells you want to cast. There is a huge temptation to try to cut lands to get more spells into your deck, but this makes the deck prone to getting mana screwed. Imagine running a deck with sixty good spells and no lands – you'd lose every game! Sure, your draw would look amazing each game – but without the ability to cast any cards in your hand, it'd be over for you. In the case of this deck, I'd cut a couple of the support cards (**Humble**, **Ancestral Mask**, **Serra's Embrace**) for more Elves (to capitalize on **Priest of Titania**) and for more lands. Adding three **Elfname Palaces** and four Elves to this deck would do wonders to stabilize its mana base.

The flip side of not enough mana sources is too many mana sources.



ChedderCommando: Rakdos		
Main Deck 60 cards		
12 Mountain	2 Daggerclaw Imp	3 Cruel Edict
12 Swamp	4 Dark Confidant	3 Phyrexian Arena
4 Blood Crypt	2 Frenzied Goblin	4 Unholy Strength
28 lands	4 Drekvac	4 Hit/Run
	2 Kill-Suit Cultist	14 other spells
	4 Rakdos Augermage	
	18 creatures	

This deck ends curving at three mana – and the average cost of the spells in this deck is only two mana. Twenty-Eight lands in this deck are way too many – that's about 50% land! This deck can expect to draw a land every other turn during the game, meaning that ChedderCommando would only see seven to eight spells and seven to eight lands by turn 7 of the game. Those excess lands would be useless, because none of the cards need to get past three mana.

Too much mana will limit your options in the deck, and will subject you to mana glutting later in the game. There's a real temptation to stuff your deck with too much mana, especially if you're paranoid about not being able to cast your spells each game. However, just like in the deck with too little mana, having too much mana will seriously impact your chances to win the game. If you're going to run twenty-eight lands in a sixty-ish card deck, have a good reason for it – such as running a Genju deck and expect the lands to die, or playing a control deck where you can reasonably expect to win if you hit your land drop each and every turn. If you're running an aggressive deck with a low curve and no use for excess lands, cut down the lands in your deck until you reach a more comfortable number – usually 21-23. In this deck's case, I'd add in more creatures and/or burn spells in place of the extra 5-7 lands.

The last example involves having too few colored lands in your deck.

Zamm: U/B Nim		
Main Deck 60 cards		
2 Darksteel Citadel	4 Dross Prowler	4 Bonesplitter
4 Seat of the Synod	3 Myr Retriever	4 Cranial Plating
4 Swamp	3 Nim Lasher	4 Guardian Idol
4 Unholy Grotto	4 Nim Shrieker	4 Leonin Scimitar
4 Vault of Whispers	4 Ornithopter	4 Veil of Secrecy
18 lands	4 Roofstalker Wight	20 other spells
	22 creatures	

I goldfished all three of the above decks a dozen times, and Zamm's gave me the most troubles of the three. I drew enough lands each game, but they were often of the wrong colors. **Unholy Grotto**, **Guardian Idol**, and **Darksteel Citadel** all produce colorless mana. This leaves only eight sources of Black mana for fifteen black spells (not including the double-Black activation on **Cranial Plating**, or the single-Black activation cost on **Unholy Grotto**) and only four sources of Blue mana for four Blue cards (not counting **Roofstalker Wight's** activation cost).

This is just as problematic as the above two problems, because often this deck will be caught unable to cast spells in hand due to the lack of a colored mana source. With only eight available, you do not have



acceptable odds of drawing a black mana source in your opening hand with this deck. Without a Swamp, this deck has a very hard time winning.

The *Veil of Secrecy/Seat of the Synod* issue is even more problematic, as there are only four Blue sources (one out of every fifteen cards in the deck) for four Blue cards (one out of every fifteen cards in the deck). This means it's a complete crapshoot as to whether or not this deck can draw both a *Seat of the Synod* and a *Veil* in the same game.

Make sure that the colored mana in your deck can support the spells you have in your deck. This can be helped through mana-fixing, as well as diversifying your mana base. For instance, this deck's mana base could be helped in any number of ways. Zamm could drop the *Veils* completely, and replace them with *Whispersilk Cloak*, adding another artifact to the deck, and taking away the problem with Blue cards/not enough Blue mana. Other solutions include running mana-fixing artifacts (*Chromatic Sphere* leaps to mind), dual lands (*Salt Marsh* could replace the *Unholy Grottos*, which would bring the Black mana count to twelve and the Blue mana count to eight), or mana-producing artifacts (*Talisman of Dominance*).

RULE #2: Keep Close to 60 Cards

It's tempting to try to cram as many cards as possible into your deck. However, the further you go past sixty cards, the less chance you have of drawing any one particular card in your deck. You can only have four of any given non-basic land card in your deck (please, no talk of *Relentless Rats*), and the further you get from sixty cards, the less chance you have of seeing these cards.

Let's say you're running four *Shocks* in a deck.

In a sixty-card deck, *Shock* will be one out of every fifteen cards.

In an eighty-card deck, *Shock* will be one out of every twenty cards.

In a one-hundred-card deck, *Shock* will be one out of every twenty-five cards.

In a sixty-card deck, you have pretty decent odds of seeing *Shock* before the game is over. It's not guaranteed that you'll see a *Shock*, but your odds are much better than if you're packing one-hundred cards.

Yesterdays Fate		
Main Deck 80 cards		
14 Island	3 Dwarven Patrol	3 Compulsive Research
3 Izzet Boilerworks	4 Gelectrode	2 Curiosity
9 Mountain	2 Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind	4 Dream's Grip
	3 Razorfin Hunter	1 Ensnaring Bridge
26 lands		2 Kraken's Eye
	12 creatures	2 Memory Lapse
		2 Obsessive Search
		4 Opt
		3 Psionic Gift
		3 Quicksilver Dagger
		2 Remand
		2 Reminisce
		2 Rewind
		2 Rites of Refusal
		4 Toils of Night and Day
		1 Trade Routes
		3 Twiddle
		42 other spells

From Yesterdays Fate's post: "The deck is over 60 [cards], but with purpose. The old version of this deck could go through half of its old 90 card library in just two or three turns once it hit the mana to start off the combo with *Dwarven Patrol*."

Unfortunately, it's that much harder to get to the combo to begin with when running eighty cards instead of sixty. Once one of the combos gets going (especially *Niv-Mizzet* plus *Curiosity*), you should be able to win the game immediately – you won't need the extra cards. It's tempting to stuff the deck with extra cards that you like (in this deck's case, cards like *Rites of Refusal*, *Obsessive Search*, and *Ensnaring Bridge*), but it keeps you from drawing the pieces you need to get your deck humming.

We might be seeing more of this deck again soon....

RULE #3: Focus your goals, but don't be a slave to your theme



hyperwebman		Main Deck 60 cards	
20 Forest	1 Elvish Pioneer	1 Alpha Status	
20 lands	1 Eternal Witness	1 Blanchwood Armor	
	3 Fierce Empath	2 Dragon Fangs	
	1 Krosan Drover	1 Explosive Vegetation	
	2 Moss Kami	1 Horned Helm	
	1 Sakura-Tribe Elder	1 Journey of Discovery	
	4 Tangle Golem	1 Joyous Respite	
	4 Traproot Kami	1 Kodama's Reach	
	17 creatures	1 Loxodon Warhammer	
		1 Neurok Hoversail	
		4 Nourish	
		2 Predator's Strike	
		1 Rampant Growth	
		1 Serpent Skin	
		1 Sprouting Vines	
		2 Strength of Cedars	
		1 Vorrac Battlehorns	
		23 other spells	

From hyperwebman's post: "The strategy is really easy, even for beginners: Use mana acceleration to play 5/4 Tangle Golems for 0 (!) on turn 4, and then boost them so on turn 5 you can have a 12/11 trample flying common ready to attack!"

In order to fulfill this goal, this deck needs to be focused more. If the goal of the deck is to get a Tangle Golem into play quickly, focus on that theme – add in more cards that can ensure you draw a Tangle Golem (such as a fourth Fierce Empath, or Weird Harvests), add in more acceleration (such as bringing the Rampant Growth total up to four), and cut cards that don't help you achieve your goals (Vorrac Battlehorns won't matter if your Golems are already trampling because of Loxodon Warhammer, Horned Helm, or Dragon Fangs).



Try running four-of the best cards in your deck, when possible. If Fierce Empath is important to your deck, run four of them. If you need your Golems to trample, run a higher count on Horned Helms, and cut out cards like Alpha Status and Serpent Skin. Remember, once you decide a deck's goal, focus your deck on achieving that goal. The more focused your deck becomes, the more likely you are to have your deck perform as intended.

In this deck's case, I would definitely bring the mana-acceleration cards up in number to four-ofs (such as Sakura-Tribe Elder and Kodama's Reach), drop many of the one-ofs that don't help get Tangle Golem into play or help acceleration mana, and add another Drover and some Weird Harvests.

On the flip side, don't be a slave to your theme. Just because you're focusing on a certain theme does not mean that you have to include suboptimal cards to meet that theme.

Toshi Umezawa		Main Deck 60 cards	
4 Blinkmoth Nexus	4 Arcbound Slith	3 Doubling Season	
20 Forest	4 Arcbound Stinger	3 Fists of Ironwood	
24 lands	4 Arcbound Worker	3 Grafted Wargear	
	4 Clockwork Beetle	9 other spells	
	4 Fangren Firstborn		
	4 Llanowar Elves		
	3 Tangle Golem		
	27 creatures		

Clockwork Beetle is pretty bad unless you get several counters onto it – but for the most part, it will only get one counter upon the death of Workers, Stingers, or Sliths. This slot might be better served by something higher on the mana-curve (such as Clockwork Dragon or Triskelion), or by a non-counter artifact creature (Juggernaut, Lodestone Myr, and Thermal Navigator come to mind).

Doubling Season will come down after most of the creatures in the deck are already in play. While I appreciate the +1/+1 counter theme, having a five-drop enchantment that will come into play after your hand is nearly empty does not forward the deck nearly as much as a similar card that can affect the board as it stands – such as Energy Chamber or Dragon Blood.

RULE #4: Have a curve

As a general rule of thumb, the higher the mana-cost, the more powerful the effect. You're going to get more out of [Decree of Pain](#) or [Plague Wind](#) than you are out of [Terror](#) or [Rend Flesh](#). However, if your deck runs too many high-cost cards, you run the risk of being unable to cast any spells before you get run over. You need to make sure that your deck is capable of either casting spells all throughout the game, or surviving until late enough to cast your business spells.

DiabloWong			Main Deck 64 cards	
11 Forest	3 Body of Jukai	4 Blanchwood Armor		
9 Island	2 Carven Caryatid	3 Commune with Nature		
20 lands	4 Grozoth	4 Counsel of the Soratami		
	4 Llanowar Elves	4 Kodama's Reach		
	2 Myojin of Life's Web	4 Strength of Cedars		
	4 Sakura-Tribe Elder	3 Wildsize		
	3 Wood Elves			
	22 creatures	22 other spells		

This deck has a sound premise – accelerate to nine mana to get [Grozoth](#), which in turn lets you play [Myojin of Life's Web](#) for a bazillion power worth of creatures. There isn't much the deck can do between three and nine mana though, which is a problem – unless you get to [Grozoth](#), chances are [Llanowar Elves](#), [Sakura-Tribe Elders](#) and [Wood Elves](#) are not going to win the game, even when augmented by [Blanchwood Armor](#). The deck jumps straight from three-mana creatures to nine-mana creatures without anything in between, leaving the deck extremely vulnerable early-to-mid game.

The [Strength of Cedars](#) and [Wildsize](#) seem like they are extraneous in the deck, and would be better served as mid-range creatures. If you drop 50+ power worth of creatures after casting [Grozoth](#), you won't need those creature pumps. If you can't get to nine mana in the current configuration, [Strength of Cedars](#) and [Wildsize](#) aren't going to win the game on the backs of 1/1 creatures and 2/5 defenders. I might suggest adding in [Indrik Stomphowler](#), [Maro](#) (which will get large the turn you [Grozoth](#)), or [Ursapine](#) in place of those cards. They present a much more compelling mid-game scenario. The [Stomphowler](#) is a 4/4 body that can kill opposing enchantments or artifacts, [Maro](#) can beat down, stays large thanks to [Caryatid](#) and [Grozoth](#), and can kill in one turn post-[Grozoth](#), and [Ursapine](#) gives you an outlet for all that excess Green mana before you hit the magic number nine.

RULE #5: Enchant Creature cards are not your friends

[Mark Rosewater](#) and I have both written about some of the inherent disadvantages to playing with Aura – Enchant Creatures – or specifically, those that are beneficial to your own creatures. I highly suggest you check out those two articles.

Long story short, Auras – Enchant Creature set you up for massive card disadvantage. If you have a creature that has [Fencer's Magemark](#), [Infiltrator's Magemark](#) and [Moldervine Cloak](#) on it, and your opponent casts [Terror](#) on that creature, they've killed four of your cards in exchange for one of theirs. Self-beneficial enchant creature cards are not generally useful without a creature in play, leaving them dead in your hand if you are sans creature.

This is not to say that you should avoid enchant creature cards at all costs. Detrimental enchant creature cards can be highly useful (see [Pillory of the Sleepless](#), [Pacifism](#), [Paralyze](#)), and should be employed freely. However, decks that depend on enchanting their own creatures should be approached with extreme caution. The reason that [Thran Golem](#) decks tend not to work out is because if the Golem dies, your deck dies – and the cards you have in your deck to support the Golem are there to enhance him, not to keep him alive.

Unless you're getting a very powerful trade-off for the effect ([Moldervine Cloak](#), [Blanchwood Armor](#)) or can avoid losing the Aura – Enchant Creature easily to creature kill ([Rancor](#), [Flickering Ward](#)), try to avoid using them. They will end up costing you cards, and losing cards means lost opportunities, which means less chance to win the game.



Rule #6: Feed BoaB your expensive rares! BoaB grows more powerful, humans!

BoaB's odor-sensor equipment detects the delicious smell of high dollar rares! BoaB analyzed the decks

for doctoring, and foolish Bleiweiss will not touch decks with twelve Ravnica Shocklands.

Foolish Bleiweiss!
Foolish Foolish Bleiweiss!

BoaB will rebuild to be stronger and faster. BoaB will take the decks left behind by puny Bleiweiss-fleshling and will assimilate a horde of **Dark Confidants**. BoaB will refinish his armor-exoskeleton with dozens of **Chrome Moxen**. Boab senses a Rakdos deck with fifteen money rares nearby. Boab will now go to feast...



Uh-oh. I warned you folks about posting those non-budget decks in the forums! Let's hope that BoaB doesn't get too out of hand. I don't know about you, but I'm going to bed with a stack of **Rare-B-Gone** underneath my pillow tonight.

See you next week, when the deck doctor will be in for surgery!

- Ben

*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



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