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Spelling It Out

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

I got an email this week that posed a series of questions, each of which is a big doozy. Just thinking about the questions formed even more questions in my mind. I even questioned whether or not I'd respond to them. The questions revolve around a particular area of **Magic** flavor that is not very well-defined—really deep-delving, high geek-factor stuff. There may be no unifying theory that can explain it all, no explanation robust enough to please the deep-delving Turbo-Vorthos and still simple enough for the casual card-flipper.

So I am going to put it off until we can come up with a wholly satisfying theory on this unnamed subject. In the meantime, let's dig into a simpler subject that will help us have an intelligent conversation about the high geek-factor stuff once we put it all together. First, we rewind to a very simple and fundamental question that has yet to be discussed here at Taste The Magic; what is a spell?

What is a spell?

Did I say, "very simple?" Oh my god, what am I getting myself into? *What is a spell?* Not a simple thing at all. Nevertheless, let's take a whack at it. Mind you, I am looking at this strictly from a flavor perspective; a "spell" means something very specific in the **Magic** rulebook and I am not going anywhere near that bag of lead. Flavorfully speaking, a spell is an effect of a ritual that involves mental activity and a varying amount of physical activity and the channeling of mana. Great, that explains a lot. I agree, it doesn't explain anything, but it gives us a starting point. From here we can begin to expand from the general definition into more specific and concrete details.

A Spell Is Not A Ritual—Well... Sometimes It Is

In my mind, a spell is not a ritual, but rather the effect of that ritual. The whole dog and pony show that leads up to the effect of the spell is different from one wizard to the next. One wizard might cast a spell by concentrating, channeling mana, then whistling a particular tune. Another could cast the exact same spell by cutting the belly of a squirrel while meditating on the vast greatness of the forest. The ritual that leads to the spell is not the spell. To make things more confusing, there are spells with names like **Dark Ritual**, **Brightstone Ritual**, and **Cabal Ritual**. These names are derived from the *casting* of the spell rather than the spells themselves. They are not ritual spells. To confuse us further, a spell like **Ritual of Subdual** is a ritual. Whatever chants and gesticulations a mage performs to cast this spell are irrelevant, what matters is the continued attention and channeling of mana that maintains the effect of the spell. The ritual is part of the effect, not the casting.

Another thing to consider with regard to the ritual of spellcasting is that it can vary from nothing more than a thought and a wink to an elaborate dance complete with music, mana, and more. A young mage could expend tremendous energy to cast the same spell that a skilled wizard could cast by simply saying "Pong." There was a guy named Jimmy Woody on my high school football team who could throw a football 30 yards while sitting down. I'd have to be standing and take a full wind-up to throw it just as far. Same with wizards—more skill equals less effort. Jimmy could also heave the ball over 70 yards while standing. I, on the other hand, can't throw the ball that far, ever. I would need to construct some sort of giant slingshot to do it. Same with wizards—some need to really lay it on thick with their spellcasting rituals just to keep up; using extra mana sources, sacrificing goats, employing spells previously cast to make the projectile launch spell easier to manage. Jimmy went on to play Division I college ball, the only guy from our team to do so. He was a mage among tricksters.

Brains Required

Flavorfully speaking, a spell is the effect of a ritual that involves mental activity and a varying amount of both physical activity and the channeling of mana



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Magic, and **Magic**, are thinkers' games. No matter how raging and bloodthirsty a barbarian shaman is, no matter how brain-dead a zombie necromancer is, there is always some sort of mental work going on when casting spells. The mind is the conduit between imagination and reality. It's the pipeline that connects to the mana sources and processes mana into magic. Very basically speaking, you have to think of a spell in order to cast it.

Cannon Arm Not Required

You do not, however, have to work physically to cast a spell. Jimmy Woody had to do a lot less physical work to throw a 30-yarder than I did. Waldwurt the Telekinetic doesn't have to do any. Some spells are so simple that they require very little of any spellcaster. **Brainstorm**, for example, usually requires little more than a thought. Coincidentally, the spell itself does nearly the same thing.

Mana Usually Required

Unlike physical involvement, mana is almost always involved in spellcasting. Mana is the fuel of the spellcaster, the mystical clay with which she forms magic. Mages cultivate their connections to the land, searching the pathways and channels of their minds to find the straightest and clearest routes through which to filter mana into their magic. An experienced mage can quickly transport herself mentally to a particular land, recognize the mana patterns there, and channel them effortlessly through her mind. Her apprentice, however, struggles to clear away the pressures and visions of the real world to commune with the land. Even then, once the apprentice has channeled the mana, it gets wrung through a clouded mind like a chocolate shake through a silly straw. Maybe, if the apprentice can hold his concentration, a spell might result.



Mana use does not always follow this pattern. Some mages do not trust their connection to the land and bolster their mana supply with artifacts and other mana-channeling spells, like **Sky Diamond** or **Channel The Suns**. Others might just be looking for ways to cut corners or take a break from especially taxing spell rituals. They seek out spells that can be cast without using any mana at all. Some spells are simple enough to be cast using only the mental energy provided by a wizard. For corner-cutters who also don't trust their connection to the land, spells like **Mox Jet** and **Lotus Petal** do the trick. Got time to spare, use **Lotus Bloom**. If you don't need the mana and you just want some easy company, **Ornithopter** and **Phyrexian Walker** are just your speed.

Now that we know what a spell is, there's something we can cover. How do spellcasters acquire their spells? Why, they buy booster packs, of course! No silly rabbit, booster packs are for players. Spells are for wizards, and, thankfully, there is no corny booster pack analogue in the world of **Magic's** magic.

The way I see it, there are two ways spells can be acquired by spellcasters. The most common way is good old-fashioned study. The village elder passes on her **Story Circle** spell through example and repetition, and her subjects watch intently, listen, and imitate until, maybe, they get it. The secluded sage sweats out long hours in dusty libraries poring over written accounts, tutorials, and transcribed spells. Someday, maybe, the old goat will learn an **Ovinize** spell.

I am going to break away here to clarify one quick thing before I get to spell acquisition method #2. All magic is not spellcraft. For example, through some magical means probably connected to their reanimation, Nim zombies (**Nim Lasher**, **Nim Devourer**, **Nim Grottesque**, etc.) gain power from the artifacts around them. They are not using spells to do this. It's magic, but it's inherent in them. **Hunger of the Nim**, however, is a spell meant to seize upon or imitate the power of the Nim.

OK, back to acquiring spells. The second way is a much rarer and sexier way. It's for powerful wizards, prodigies, and planeswalkers. I call it "Assimilation." To explain what it is, I'll describe a scene:

Jaya Ballard is a planeswalker with a fiery temper—the disposition, not the spell. (Jaya Ballard the spellshaper is a pre-planeswalking pyromage from the past.) After a long skip across a series of the outer planes, she has come to Dominaria. There is much talk throughout the multiverse of what is going on there at the heart of it all. She mostly stays hidden, traveling in the form of a brume of light smoke. She sees all manner of flora and fauna, creatures and constructions. Little interests her, even the flame-spitting dragons she sees (fiery dragons, old news.) Some time later, she witnesses a duel between mages. One employs a **fire spell** upon which he piggy-backs another **fire spell**—at the minor cost of a fragment of his sanity. Jaya got a sparkle in her eye. As the second spell was cast, Jaya sees the duel as only great wizards can. She sees the scene overlaid with flowing mana paths, ley lines, and mystical matrices. She sees mana flow through the dueling mage and the systematic activity of his mind. She sees it all in slow motion, and commits it all to her memory. "Sanity is for cowards," she thinks to herself, and blinks away with a new spell assimilated into her repertoire.



This illustrates the great power some wizards have—to see magic and make it their own. I have a buddy in Seattle named Jeff Angell who is a freakishly gifted musician. He can hear any rock and roll song and instantly know how to play it on his guitar. No sheet music, no tabs, no rewinding the tape to hear it again. He's a prodigy, like Jaya. He recognizes the key, chord progression, and picking the same way she instantly recognizes mana requirements, physical and mental requirements, and spell scope.

The cool thing about assimilation is that the spell being assimilated doesn't have to be an actual spell yet. Let's say Jaya visited *Mirrodin* and was interested in the Nim and wanted to assimilate their artifact empowerment ability and use it herself. She would go about it much the same way, watching the Nim, seeing them in wizardvision. I imagine this looks like some turbocharged combination of Neo's Matrix vision, the Terminator's adaptive text information view, the Predator's dynamic visual lenses, the mad geometric scribbles of Euclid himself, all overlaid in shimmering color on top of the subject being watched. Awesome. Jaya ingests all the information she sees and uses her own experience and intellect to determine what the optimal mana paths would be and what physical and mental actions she would have to take to recreate the Nim's ability in the form of **Hunger of the Nim**. Of course, this would never happen, because Jaya likes to serve it up hot, not greasy.

Not everybody can be as gifted as Jaya or Jeff. Those poor souls have to go about it the long way—reading books, studying with mentors, trial and error. Lucky for you (this means you, reader) you are a planeswalker. You assimilate spells all the time. In fact, you assimilate 15 of them every time you open a booster pack. You assimilate them every time your opponent flogs you down with a card you've never seen and then you go pick yourself up a play set. This is what makes planeswalkers so much more powerful than other wizards (well, other than being able to blip from one dimension to another). They, you...We can travel from *Mirrodin* to *Ravnica* to Dominaria watching, absorbing, and assimilating all the stuff we think is cool.

And you know what's even cooler? I have used my keen planeswalker senses to detect the coming of a great time rift, one that will allow us all to observe and assimilate magic and spells from multiple worlds all at once. Witness the primitive power of the Muraganda, the magical knack of the Dweldians, the twisted necromancy of the Yixlid, and engineering marvels from Telchor. Experience all of this magic and more, without hurling yourself into the blind eternities. All can be assimilated this weekend at the [Future Sight Prerelease](#)

*Matt Cavotta has always been a fantasy goober. At various points in his gooberhood, he has used his nerdy knowledge to become a professional goober. He went from scribbling pictures of his own **D&D** characters to illustrating books and cards for his two favorite games; **D&D** and **Magic**. Then he channeled his inner 7th level Illusionist/3rd level Bard and landed himself a job at Wizards as a writer. He continues to cast his illusion spells each morning, lest they find out he's just another goober.*



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