

Name Killers

Nine reasons why a potential card name will never make it into your booster pack.

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Long before **Magic** is a finished product—before it's ready to leap from your booster pack, fully formed and armored out of the forehead of Zeus, as it were—there is serious work to be done. I warn you: today's column is not about **Magic**'s beautiful and sleek exterior, its precisely conceived, multiverse-spanning end result of flavor. It's about ripping off the exoskeleton and looking at **Magic**'s guts, the whys and why nots of making the game itself. If you come to Taste the Magic today looking for in-character monologues and the skinny on the mysteries of Lorwyn, you might want to click away. But if you're interested in rolling up your sleeves and getting your hands dirty, in getting a look under the hood of **Magic**'s creative engine, then you might just stick around.

Today we're talking about card names. Gruesome detail alert.

Few Dos, Many Don'ts

Why do we name **Magic** cards the way we do? Why does a card get its name? What are the rules that tell us what name should go onto a fledgling **Magic** card?

There are actually very few *positive* directives. Very few things tell us, "This is what this card **SHOULD** be named." Sure, there are commonsensical rules about expressing what the card does, getting across what the set's about, and some aesthetic rules about sounding cool, using assonance and consonance, and the like. But very little *pushes* us in any particular direction during the name-creation stage. That's where the fun of our creative jobs (and the occasional terrifying judgment call) comes in. We have free reign to let our own creative impulses drive the creation of candidate names.



However, there are a lot of *negative* rules, a lot of "don'ts," that guide us away from potentially problematic candidates. For every set (except core sets, which have no need for new card names), the team of freelance flavor text writers also submits name candidates for every card. Once all those name submissions are in, we comb through them and weed out every submission that fails on one of the many "don'ts" of **Magic** card naming.

So let's get right down to it. Let's say we're the **Magic** creative coordinator, the person in charge of choosing (and often, creating) card names for an upcoming set. We're staring at the beginning of a list of name candidates submitted by those diligent freelance writers, and we have to decide whether this first submission can measure up. We have to ask ourselves one question now, and take stock of all the possible answers:

Why should we **NOT** use this name on this card?

1. Because we've already used that exact name

The first one's an easy one. I'm often asked things like, "Why can't we name **Magic** cards more simply?" Or, "If a creature is an elf and a warrior, why don't we call it **Elvish Warrior**?" Answer's simple: because there's already a card by that name. The first way a candidate name can go wrong is by conflicting with a past card name.

A **Magic** card's name is its ultimate identifying characteristic. It's how you specify that particular conjunction of game play mechanics that the card represents. When more than one printing of a card share the same name, it's not because they just have a few similarities in common or are roughly interchangeable; it's because they are, in game play terms, the *same card*. Note that Oracle doesn't specify a card's official wording based on which art it has or what set it's printed in—it hinges on the card's exact *name*.



So, names in **Magic** are unique. We don't reuse exact names for functionally different cards. As much as I'd like to, I can't reclaim a great name like **Teleport** and put it on an all-new card; **Teleport** is already the name of a card. Venser's **Teleport**, sure. **Teleport to Safety**, sure. **Rune of Teleportation**, no problem. But not plain old **Teleport**.

At this writing there are just under *ten thousand* different **Magic** card names. That's a lot of potential for name collisions. So this comes up more than you might think.

2. Because we've already used a similar name

Even more common is that a candidate name is too similar to an existing name. It only takes a repeated word or a similar sound for a name to run afoul of this rule, so this case happens so often that it even occurs within a single set. Some words we repeat to make a point—**Surge of Thoughtweft** and **Thoughtweft Trio**, or **Lace with Moonglove** and **Moonglove Winnower**, for example. Those names are *meant* to connect the two cards via their flavor.

But it's pretty common for a word to show up too much. For example, as of *Lorwyn*, I think the word "**Cloud**" has worn out its welcome for a while. It's a great word—it conveys a lot of airy context and has a fantasy feel, while being short as heck and easy to say.



These are great qualities for a term that shows up in names. But it's all over *Standard*, which can make it feel stale. We would never stop using such a good word permanently, but sometimes it's good for a word to take a rest for a while, so it can feel fresh again later. Consider it benched.

There's a confusion issue when very similar-sounding card names hit print, so we try to catch them before they do. **Clickslither**, **Quick Sliver**, and **Quicksilver Dragon** were all in *Onslaught* block (and **Clickslither** and **Quick Sliver** were in the *same set*). Luckily they're very different cards—hard to confuse them if you've actually looked at them—but from a name-only standpoint, that's pretty rough.

The tribal theme of *Lorwyn* was difficult for this reason. There are twenty-three Goblin creatures in *Lorwyn*. Almost without exception, they are small, nonflying, red and black creatures, so naming each one in a distinct way—especially when the rest of **Magic** already had another 160+ of them—is tough. That's part of the reason that goblins often get a new name in a new setting (mogg, akki, boggart)—to keep those card names good and distinct.

3. Because it contradicts the card's creature type

I get goobish, slightly masochistic pleasure out of exploring the flavomechanical labyrinth that is the creature type system. Its dark corridors were thoroughly plumbed recently by Mark Gottlieb, Brady Dommermuth, and a team of other daring subtype spelunkers in the [Grand Creature Type Update](#). As Mark mentioned back in September, one of the principal criteria for a creature getting a new subtype in that update was the card's name. **Dwarven Warriors** became a **Warrior** in addition to a **Dwarf**, and **Elvish Archers** gained the **Archer** subtype.

This works the other way, too—when a card is getting its name, it shouldn't be named something that contradicts its creature types. If a creature has the type **Kithkin Soldier**, it can't be called **Goldmeadow Scout**, because **Scout** is a supported creature type that the card doesn't have. If it's an **Elemental**, it shouldn't be named **Crasher Beast**. Some of the greater elementals in *Lorwyn* cut it pretty close to the bone on this rule—**Wispmare** doesn't have the **Horse** type, for example. Note that changelings could have all kinds of creature types in their names, according to this rule. **Changeling Berserker**? No problem!



Of course, it's okay to call a card **Zaphod the Dragon Hunter** without it being a Dragon. It's okay to call a card **Giant Albatross** without it being a Giant. These names don't really contradict their creature type just because they have the words in them—they don't claim that the card is one of those types the way "Goldmeadow Scout" does.

4. Because it conflicts with the card's type

Now I mean *card* type, not creature type. This takes more thinkin' than the creature type issue. It's rare for a candidate card name to actually have the wrong card type buried in it—the writers know better than that (names like **Artifact Mutation** aside). This is more of a feel thing. What should a sorcery sound like? What constitutes a good name for a piece of equipment?

This comes up a lot in enchantment naming. Enchantments are usually conceived (given art descriptions) much like instants or sorceries; they often depict a mage casting a spell or a magical effect affecting a creature or area. But in game play they stick around. So we shy away from enchantment names that sound like one-time actions (like **Crib Swap** or **Fodder Launch**) and instead use names that sound like extended events (**Boggart Shenanigans**) or states of being (**Favor of the Mighty**). Auras are often named as new skills or magical potential (**Triclopean Sight**, **Battle Mastery**), so that you get the flavor of the enchanted creature gaining that new quality.

There are corner cases and judgment calls. **Oblivion Ring**, for example, actually sounds like an artifact to many people at first blush. If you read it off a decklist, and you hadn't seen the white-colored frame or the art of a glowing ring of magically restrictive powder, you might think of it as the kind of ring you wear on your finger. We came around to this sense of "Ring" partly as a replacement, because we had originally wanted to use the word "Circle" in the name. Which brings us to the next reason why not to use a card name.

5. Because it contradicts an established convention in Magic card naming

Ten thousand cards is a lot, but it's easier to become an expert in the patterns of **Magic** card naming than a new player might think. That's because naming conventions arise around terms in card names, and subsequent names reinforce those conventions.

I don't mean conventions that connect to creature type. **Shades**, **Trolls**, and **Specters** have mechanical conventions—Shades pump +1/+1 until end of turn, Trolls regenerate, and Specters fly and have a discard "saboteur" ability. But creature type issues are usually decided at conceiving time, before candidate names are submitted. By the time writers decide what to call a card, it already has an art description telling the artist to go draw us a Troll, so they don't have much choice about whether to call it a Troll or not.

I mean conventions like Looter. **Merfolk Looter** has the same "draw one and discard one" mechanic as **Cephalid Looter**, **Artful Looter**, and **Looter il-Kor**. Those creatures are all different races, but they're all Looters. If a creature was shown ransacking a treasure chest but *didn't* have the "draw a card, then discard a card" mechanic, we would steer clear of calling it a Looter, to preserve that convention.

Circle is a similar example. Everybody knows what a Circle is in **Magic**—it's a white global enchantment (so far so good, **Oblivion Ring**!) with a defensive flavor (almost there!) that has an activated ability that prevents damage of a certain type (ohh, so close). For the number of Circles there have been (fourteen) and the specificity of the tradition, that is a surprisingly consistent convention. Despite having a protective circle in the concept and art and a generally defensive flavor, **Oblivion Ring** just wasn't close enough mechanically to other Circles in **Magic** to be called a Circle.

6. Because it makes confusing reference to a keyword

A card shouldn't use a keyword in its name without good reason.

Time Spiral block was especially tough for this, because it had so many returning (and, as of *Future Sight*, new) keywords. **Riftmarked Knight** was going to be **Riftshadow Knight**—it named the white / black duality of the card nicely, and gestured at a cool concept of the shadowy flipside of a time rift. But it was just too confusing that the card doesn't have shadow, which quite a few creatures in that block, including several small white creatures like **Riftmarked Knight**, do have.

We came upon what I call the Call It What It Is Dilemma a lot in *Time Spiral* block. When a card is mostly defined by its keyword mechanic, the decision of whether to put that keyword in the card name is a difficult one. **Dragonstorm** is perfectly named—it's a spell that creates a flavorful storm of summoned dragons while telling you exactly what the card does mechanically (it's a storm card that gets you Dragons). We name cards this direct way when possible. But when there are a lot of cards with a keyword mechanic, the names sound repetitive and tiresome after a while, and it becomes hard to remember which name is attached to which card. **Wing Shards** wasn't named **Shardstorm**, and **Tendrils of Agony** wasn't named **Tendrilstorm** (or **Agonystorm**). Also, names like that can get a little on-the-nose, too mechanical and flavorless. A 3/3 trampler wouldn't



usually get a name like Trampling Elephant, usually because it wouldn't get a concept or art of a trampling elephant. But even if it did, we would usually try to convey more flavor of the setting or more of the creature's creative identity rather than name it straight-up by its one keyword. We would at least hit a thesaurus on the way to Namebase.

Those issues taken together form the first horn of the Call It What It Is Dilemma: you don't always use the keyword in the names of cards that *have* the keyword.

The other horn of the Dilemma is that you can almost *never* use a keyword in the name of a card that *doesn't* have the keyword. It's too confusing to call a creature Trampling Elephant without it having trample, or to name an artifact Ring of Protection without it granting some sort of protection ability.

So the Dilemma strands keyword words sometimes. We can't use a great word like "storm" on most non-storm cards, and we can't even put it on that many storm cards. (This is why we have to be very careful about selecting keywords, but that's a tale for another column.)

Sometimes we can get creative. One of my favorite naming stunts in *Future Sight* is **Storm Entity**—it doesn't actually have the storm mechanic, but it has an ability very similar ability to storm, and **Storm Entity** goes naturally into decks full of storm cards. I like that if you search Gatherer for "[storm](#)" (assuming you leave the default settings of searching card name and rules text), you get back **Empty the Warrens**, **Ignite Memories**, and **Storm Entity**, all of which can play well in the same deck, even if they don't all have the actual keyword.

7. Because it uses up a good word we want to preserve

We intend for **Magic** to be around forever. By my calculations, that means we'll need... (*counts on fingers*) a *lot* of card names. Words in card names like Circle and Looter can easily become precedents for naming conventions, so we have to be careful not to foul up future naming efforts by using a word in a way that might create an unwanted convention. For example, we intentionally held off on using the word Harbinger in *Future Sight* so as to have a good naming convention for the tribal Harbingers in *Lorwyn*. (**Llanowar Empath** was going to be named Llanowar Harbinger for a short time.)



We're not soothsayers around here, though, so we can't always look into the future for potential naming requirements like this. So sometimes collisions can happen whether we like them or not. Sometimes a card just wants a certain name and damn the torpedoes. And anyway, it's not the end of the world when two very different cards want access to the same unique word in their names, especially when there's a few years between them. But there are definitely some words that we keep close at hand, protected from the elements, waiting for their day in the sun, so that their impact can be all the greater when they finally see print.

8. Because it conflicts with the details or feel of the setting

For me, one of the most powerful factors in naming is the flavor of the world where the card is set. The setting's style guide helps a lot here—it's not only a guide for the artists, but also for the creative text writers who come up with card names. The style guide sets up backstory and world detail about the setting to flood the writers with words to use in names and flavor text, and to give them a sense of what names they make up on their own would be appropriate or not.

Lorwyn has a particularly lighthearted, storybook tone, so names like **Boggart Shenanigans** or **Hurly-Burly** are more appropriate here than they would be elsewhere. In contrast, names like **Helldozer** or **Shrieking Grotesque** would just feel wrong. They're great names, but they don't match the vibe of the setting we're trying to create, so they're struck down. An example of a card name on the fence might be **Deathrender**. It's pretty "metal" for a *Lorwyn* card name, but it's one of few places that the word "death" could still fit. I liked how it brought a little bit of badass to the one magical sword in the set.

9. Because it's too unpronounceable or obscure

I list this one last because it's the least constraining rule on the list. Certainly we back off of names that are straight-up impossible to say, or that use words that would be totally meaningless to the reader. But every year we nudge these boundaries a few times, and basically any word we can find in some dictionary is potentially fair game (see the Lexicon series of **Magic** Arcanas for examples of obscure words in card names). *Lorwyn* has "**reejerey**", a Welsh word meaning "knight" or "king," and "cenn" and "clachan" on kithkin cards. These are non-English words, but the average

person would have a good shot at pronouncing them on the first try, so we gave them a pass.

Still, there were some words that crossed the line. The placeholder name for **Timber Protector** was Noble Taoiseach, from an Irish word for "chief" or "leader" (and the term for Ireland's prime minister). "Taoiseach" is a beautiful word, but most English-speaking **Magic** players wouldn't have a chance of pronouncing it right (it's pronounced something like "tee-shok" or "tee-shek"—please forgive my poor American diction). Most people probably wouldn't even be able to come up with a workable incorrect pronunciation. The informal test is whether we think a person would *hesitate* in the process of saying, "I cast [card name]." If they would, that indicates that that card name candidate is probably too hard to pronounce, and should probably be tossed.

Again, though, we like stretching **Magic's** boundaries with little-known words. I've gotten a lot of mail saying that you guys enjoy the broadness of **Magic's** vocabulary, and that it's even come in handy in English classes and standardized testing. I know I didn't start using the word **Extirpate** in casual conversation until we put it into *Planar Chaos*. "Looks like the owners of the property next door finally extirpated the last bit of concrete from the old foundation."



The Home Stretch

Once a candidate name survives all of these "don'ts," it has a chance to get finalized as the card's official name. Even when we approve it and let it pass on from our team, it's still not guaranteed that the name will show up in your booster pack; there's still one or more editing passes, once it leaves my team's hands, that could get the name killed and force us to find an alternative. But these rules are the main ways that a name candidate will die.

If you'll excuse me, I have to go watch the grim executions of a few hundred name submissions for a future set.