

So you want to become a magician...

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You probably saw a magician performing magic at a local event or on television. Perhaps it was at a corporate event, a birthday party, or one of the Gathering for Gardner meetings. Did you ever go back home thinking how nice it would be to be a magician? Studying magic, professionally, is not an easy task. Unlike most other performing arts, there really is no obvious way of studying magic. Contrary to common wisdom, this has nothing to do with secrecy. Definitely not these days, where even the government's top secrets seem to be freely accessible online. It is probably still true that most magicians would love to consider their craft as something one can only learn by belonging to a secret society (a society that would never let *you*, the outsider, join its ranks). The reality couldn't be any different.

There are many publically available resources for studying magic. This does not mean that everything is freely available. Magic is an expensive hobby and an even more expensive profession. Still, almost any secret can be purchased. It is only a matter of price. With books, videos, magic stores, magic clubs, magic conventions, online resources, etc., it looks as if everything is accessible. Or is it really? Facing an overwhelming number of resources for studying anything online, from quantum mechanisms to lock picking, the situation is no different with magic. Yet being able to access the information does not necessarily mean that the road to becoming the next Penn and Teller or David Copperfield is obvious.

So what should you do if you want to seriously engage in studying the art of magic? What follows is a collection of ideas that will hopefully help you achieve your goal.

#1: Doing a magic “trick” is not performing magic. Mastering the workings of a magic effect does not necessarily mean that you can *perform* magic. Clearly, being able to execute the technique is critical for a successful magic show, but that is not enough. Performing magic is not only doing an effect. Performing magic is how one effect connects to another effect; it is what you say, how you look, where you look, what you feel, what you project, and what emotions you create in your audience. Study the effects, but *think* about *performing* magic. Measure your success not only by how “clean” your routine is from a technical point of view, but by the overall impact your show has on your audience, that is, by the magical experience you create.

#2: The most important secret. This may sound silly, but there really is no way to perform magic without *performing* magic. Perform as much magic as you possibly can. Do it everywhere and do it at every opportunity. Performing magic helps you understand what to do when something goes wrong. Converting mistakes or mishaps into a magical moment

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is a skill that every magician must possess. You should think about pitfalls in your show and plan for them in advance, but the best practice comes with experience, and experience comes with performing magic.

#3: What is your target audience? It is likely that when you start thinking about magic you have no target audience. However, if you intend to consider magic seriously, it is best if you figure out sooner than later what kind of magic you would like to perform, or at least figure out your target audience. You should not spend your money on buying big illusions if you expect to perform in living rooms. Do not expect to be able to perform every kind of magic. The principles of magic can be studied using items you may not ever use in an actual show. For example, one of the classical items that is widely used for studying magic is sponge balls. You should probably not count on performing any sponge balls routine in an actual magic show (though some magicians still think it is a good idea). But studying how to vanish an object, how to hold the attention of the audience, misdirection, patter, creating a routine, all these can be done using simple objects (and a lot of practice). That will be a good way to start.

#4: Should I read a book or should I watch a video? Both. With so many magic DVDs out there, it is quite tempting to study by watching videos only. There are some great benefits to watching videos: it is wonderful to be able to feel as if you are learning directly from the great masters. The ability to pause, repeat, and watch in slow motion, are all very valuable. Books, on the other hand, are generally more difficult to process. The difference between videos and books is not just in the visual aspects. Think about the difference between watching a motion picture and reading a book. Good magic requires imaginations. It is important to learn from the masters, but it is equally important to spend time *thinking* about magic, and thinking about magic comes naturally when you read a magic book and are forced to think about what the effect will look like. An unclear technique might force you to come up with your own variation. Creativity is highly sought after, and I believe that reading books helps in that respect.

#5: What books should I read? Many books have been written on almost every aspect of magic. While most books cannot be bought in your neighborhood bookstore, many books are available from online magic dealers (and in magic stores). If I had to choose one book series to read, I would still go for the Tarbell Course in Magic. Even though the Tarbell series was written many decades ago, all eight volumes contain invaluable information. There are many contemporary books, but I am still a big believer that it is better to start with the classics. And when it comes to classics, books that should be on your reading list are “The Royal Road to Card Magic” by Jean Hugard and Frederick Braue and “The Five Points in Magic” by Juan Tamariz. Do not read books only for the “secrets”. Many books focus on other aspects of performing magic, such as creating a routine, managing the audience, the experience of magic, and many other elements of a successful magic show.

#6: What videos should I watch? After making the attempt to convince you that watching videos should not necessarily be your #1 priority, I would still like to provide some specific recommendations. L&L Publishing has compiled a series of DVDs under the title of “World’s Greatest Magic”. These are relatively inexpensive DVDs, which can be purchased from

many magic dealers, including from L&L Publishing directly (www.llpub.com). It is gradually becoming a collection of encyclopedic proportions. Specifically I recommend to take a look at the “professional rope routines”, “Sponge balls”, and “Cups & Balls” videos, but take a look at the other volumes as well. Check also the Michael Ammar and Jeff McBride videos. These videos are an excellent source for students of all levels.

#7: How much should I practice? This is probably one of the easiest questions to answer: as much as you need to. Remember that performing is also a form of practice, but you do not want to perform magic without sufficient practice. The more you practice the better you get. You should practice enough so that you will not have to think about the technique during the performance. Enough to be able to devote all your attention to creating a magical moment, so that you can pay enough attention to the audience, without having to think about what to do next. That part should be fully automated. If you plan on speaking during your show, write down your text and practice. If you plan to involve more people, make sure that everyone knows what to do and when to do it. If you use music, make sure you know the order of the songs, their timing, and how to control your audio system... Practice in front of a mirror, practice in front of a video camera (and watch yourself!), practice in front of people. Once you already have a show and you want to check new effects, it is best to try one new effect at a time. See if it works. See how it is received. Mixing new and old material in one show helps to smooth out any glitches that might happen with material you try out for the first time.

#8: A common mistake of beginners. Students of magic of all ages make many mistakes. It is good to make some mistakes. After all, this can be a great way to learn. However, some mistakes can and should be avoided. One of the most common mistakes you can make is buying every magical prop you see. It is likely that most of the stuff you buy, will never be used. Sometimes you may think that a prop is great, but you should always pause and think: is it going to fit my show? Isn't it too big (or too small)? Can I actually build a routine that makes use of the object? Do I really need to spend all this money on an effect that will hardly take three minutes to perform? A good example is gaffed playing cards. There is nothing wrong with gaffed cards. Amateurs and professionals use them alike. But there is so much wonderful card magic that can be done with plain playing cards. So do you really need to run and buy the expensive stuff? Does it add anything to your show? It might. All I recommend is to *think* about it in advance.

#9: Study others but do not copy. Your goal should be to perform magic that will represent who *you* are and what *you* can do. No one wants to see additional clones of generic magicians or clones of existing magicians. You should develop your own personality and find ways of reflecting your *self* in your magic show. This does not mean that you should not learn by watching other magicians. In some sense, watching other magicians is the best way of learning magic. Study others but do not copy their work.

#10: The magical experience. You want to be able to create a *magical moment* for your audience. This is the ultimate goal of every magician. It is not to “fool” the audience. It is not necessarily to make the audience laugh or to scare your audience. As a magician you want your audience to emerge from your show thinking: “WOW”. How do you get there?

There really is only one way to do it: you should *think*. Think, think, and think again about your show. Not only from where you see it, but also from the point of view of the audience. Beyond that? Watch other magicians. Good magicians and bad magicians. Try to understand the difference and to transform the better points into your act.

Epilogue:

If you would like to consider magic at a level that is beyond a plain hobby start from the beginning. Build a proper foundation for your show. Plan everything and rehearse everything. Think about *all* the aspects of your show and analyze them. Most importantly – do not hesitate to ask questions. One of the biggest secrets of the profession is that most magicians actually like to teach and to give advice. All that they want to see is that the question is being asked by a *serious* student of magic. Good luck!