

Ed Del Castillo's
~Cantrips~
Revisited



Introduction

I've played D&D for 35 years and have designed games of all kinds for about that long. In all that time I never had any interest in the spell-casting classes - mainly because I viewed the system that they operated under as overly restrictive and underly cinematic.

Now that 5e has reframed 4e in a more palatable way, players are embracing the concept that all the classes are spell-casters to some degree. This not only makes the concept of spellcasting pandemic, but it has two additional cascading effects.

First, it puts pressure on the spell lists to be balanced. For the combat spells, this means that the existence of each spell must be arguable in the face of the best spells of that level and ideally should create tactical options for the player and open their mind to opportunities on the battlefield. For non-combat spells, they must immediately spark the player's imagination with possible uses. Players will give up combat spells for noncombat spells but only if they truly believe that those spells will allow their character to be cool in a unique way.

Second, it puts pressure on the list to have more class-focused spells. In all my years, I have yet to see a party where two players ran the same character class. Players want to make a unique contribution to the group effort. I think spells like Vicious Mockery and Druidcraft are great examples of what I'm talking about. Unfortunately, the D&D spell list has a long history, and that legacy calcifies it a bit. It is beyond the scope of this work to address the "every class should have a cool and mostly unique spell list" problem. I hope to address that in future works.

In this work I lend a hand to balancing and redistributing the existing list of Cantrips from the Player's Handbook and the adventure supplements for the sake of enriching play and giving players more tactical opportunities in combat and more coolness out of it.

The Rules and their Effects on Spell Choice

In 5e, the rules, as written, deeply promote specialized characters and spell optimization. The combination of high average bonuses for monsters, restrained point buy character creation mechanics, and saving throws that tend to make the spells all or nothing, put pressure on the caster to have a high spell DC in order to be effective. If you're using the point buy system (which is in my opinion one of the best parts of 5e) this creates a big temptation to build unbalanced characters in order to reach those high spell DC's. Every party I've run in or DM'ed in 5e is loaded with casters who have at least one 8 in their stats so that they could have a high stat somewhere else. I'm not opposed to this when it's a choice. I just don't like players feeling that they have to build this way so they can be effective.

Don't get me wrong, I love the restrained point buy system where it's tough to have an 18 or better at the start. Point buy, in general, removes the temptation to roll three 18's naturally at home when no one is looking."

The problem is that, while they have reset player growth with this and the new magic item system that makes items rarer and caps them smaller, the monsters were all made pretty tough and that sets the saving throw mechanics to be slightly against the player. Couple that with the fact that players usually fight in

outnumbered situations and the player's options become to optimize or to be disappointed session after session.

What that means for spells is that most of the list within the Player's Handbook gets discarded as players seek to fill limited slots with the spells most likely to help the party in clutch situations and make them cool out of combat.

As a DM and a player, I want two things out of the spells in the game. First, I want the spells to be fun. There are lots of "unfun" aspects to the spell list as it stands and this work (and subsequent ones) will try to address them. The second thing I want to address is usability and balance. There are many spells that will simply never be chosen because they are weaker versions of other spells of the same level. The goal here is not to create an overpowered list of spells. What is trying to be achieved is that a player comes to his or her list at each and every level and struggles with which spells to pick because they are all cool and useful.

Understand that, for me, the Golden Rule for all Spells, Powers, items, and Skills is "How much will I (as a player) or my players (if I'm DMing) actually use this."

Bear in mind that I am totally disregarding any thinking along the lines of, "but this class was never intended to be a premier caster." This kind of thinking rots the game. Players want to be cool and make meaningful contributions during play. My only concern is that each and every player be able to create a cool character, with cool spells that make that player feel cool when they are using them.

How to read this work.

This is a differential work. I did not wish to waste your time, or your paper, with reprints of existing material. Below I have listed my comments and changes to each spell.

Each spell is listed by name. Immediately after, I place my comments. *{Which will look like this.}* This is for the benefit of the DM. If you don't agree with my thinking, you can skip the spell and leave it as written in the PHB. After the commentary, I list the changes to the spell.

Cantrips

This work covers cantrips. From my view, cantrips are baseline spells that do more to define the class now than ever before. They seem to come in two main flavors – combat spells and theatrical spells. The first gives a caster a consistent way of adding value in a fight and the latter helps make the character be more vibrant outside of combat.

Cantrips are can also fallbacks; the magic that a caster has when they're "spellspent" (out of spell slots).

As a result, cantrips are a bit of an anomaly. They aren't really "0 level" spells anymore. In a fight, cantrips serve as the caster's base weapon, much like a battleaxe or longsword would for a fighter. The rest of their spells become situational special abilities in the same way that Rogues have Uncanny Dodge or Sneak Attack. Out of combat, cantrips provide flavor to the character and the campaign. For example, I have a caster with Mending that goes around finding and repairing everyone's arrows after the fight so that they don't have to be constantly buying new ones or run out in a protracted session.

Regardless of which category they fall into, each and every cantrip should express an action or evoke imagery that the player would want for their character. It should be difficult to pick cantrips based on min maxing. They should all be good, and picking the “right” one should come from the flavor the player wants for his character. Otherwise, what tends to happen is that players pick the best spell because it is “the best spell” rather than because it suits their origin, background or desired style of play. Nothing is better than having the right out-of-combat spell to give your role playing a meaningful flourish, and nothing is worse than begging the party to leave the adventure for 8 hours because your spells spent and can’t effectively contribute.

I’ve taken some time to reconsider the entire list of cantrips and here are my changes.

Cantrip Spell List

Acid Splash

{As is, the spell can’t compare with the other go-to attack cantrips like Firebolt, even with its ability to target two adjacent creatures. I’m not in to the water balloon projectile and I don’t understand why Druids and Warlocks don’t get this.}

Usable by: Druid, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard

New Description: You create a “slosh” of acid in a 10-foot square area. Everything in that area must make a Dexterity saving throw or take 1d6 in acid damage.

The spell’s damage increases by 1d6 when you reach 5th level (2d6), 11th level (3d6), 17th level (4d6).

Blade Ward

{This spell is virtually useless at it stands. Spend a round so that you take half damage from the mundane damage types the round after? Great if you’re a character in a video game fighting a boss with timed attacks, but otherwise there are just too many other, better choices. One simple tweak and this cantrip and it not only becomes cool, but makes it a real party helper. I was deeply tempted to make this castable as a Bonus Action, but I think it’s cool enough with the changes below.}

Usable by: Bard, Cleric, Warlock (remove from all other spell lists)
{Wizard and Sorcerer lists are much longer than those of Bards, Clerics, and Warlocks, which for me, is an indication that they were a bit of an afterthought. It’s beyond the scope of this work to create spells (which I think the Warlock especially deserves) so I’ve created a bit of uniqueness for these classes by redistributing the cantrips a bit.}

Range: 30’

{The spell can now be used on others}

Chill Touch

{This is a fine spell. Just one small tweak.}

Usable by: Cleric, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard

Control Flames

{This is what I call a nuance spell. It’s something that is created to do something specific in the game but is a shade too close to other spells and thus doesn’t really

justify picking it up as one of your few known cantrips. It seems like an expansion on Druidcraft or Prestidigitation to me. I don't see how anyone would be able to justify taking this cantrip given its deeply situational and limited nature.}

Usable by: Druid, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard

New Name: Firecraft
{wait for it...}

Create Bonfire

{In college, this "spell" required the wood palette material component and little else. I've combined Control Flames and Create Bonfire into a new spell, which is better. I originally merged both of these into Druidcraft but it seemed to dull the flavor of the Druids that overused it. Creating a single "fire bender" cantrip allows for more interesting and dedicated character options.}

Remove this spell and add its functionality to Firecraft.

Dancing Lights

{This is a fine spell. Just one small tweak.}

Usable by: Bard, Sorcerer, Wizard

Druidcraft

{This is a fine spell. Just one small tweak. Since this is a theatrical spell, making it easier to cast allows for more creative uses.}

Casting Time: 1 Bonus Action

Eldritch Blast

{This is a fine spell. I have nothing to add here, other than another example of how to

get creative with spell effects. I have a character that has defined the different "rays" of the Eldritch Blast as daggers made of magical energy, which he hurls at his enemy. Very cool.}

Firebolt

{This is a fine spell. I have nothing to add here. This and Eldritch Blast are the gold standard of combat cantrips, in my view.}

Friends

{Great cantrip. Job well done. It makes early and good use of the advantage mechanic in a fun and roleplaying focused way. Just don't understand why 'everyone' gets it and it has to end badly.}

Usable by: Bard, Sorcerer, Warlock only
(remove from all other spell lists)

New Description: For the duration, you have advantage on all Charisma checks directed at one creature of your choice that isn't hostile toward you. When the spell ends, the creature realizes that you used magic to influence its mood. A creature prone to violence might attack you. The target of the spell should react according to the DM's discretion based on the situation, circumstances, and the nature of the interaction.

Frostbite

{This is Vicious Mockery for the non-Bard. I've changed this spell to separate it from VM a bit.}

New Description: You cause numbing frost to form on one creature that you can see within range. The target takes 1d4 cold damage, and must make a Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, it has disadvantage on the next

weapon attack roll it makes before the end of its next turn.

Guidance

{Good spell. Just needs one tweak. I get that in trying to keep things simple, the designers just used the Concentration mechanic to prevent these buffs from being stacked up. The problem is that concentration also locks up the Cleric on too tiny a spell and makes it possible for the spell to go away if the cleric gets hit in combat. All this creates a spell unlikely to be cast. The small change of making it "fire and forget" allows the cleric to help multiple allies over the course of the battle and still retain full casting ability.}

Duration: 1 minute.

Add a 2nd and 3rd paragraph to Description: A target under the effects of a Guidance spell does not gain any benefit from a second one cast upon them.

The spell's effect increases to 1d6 when you reach 5th level, 11th level (1d8), 17th level (1d10).

Gust

{Ugh, once I'm done pretending to be an airbender, what in the Forgotten Realms is this doing on any list?! The answer is that it's part of the four elemental cantrips that are introduced for flavor in Elemental Evil. So, if you do that storyline, allow the cantrip for NPC's but otherwise... }

Spell removed from all lists and functionality added to Magecraft (formerly Prestidigitation), Divine Wonder (formerly Thaumaturgy), and Druidcraft.

Light

{This is a fine spell. Just one small tweak.}

Usable by: Bard, Cleric, Druid, Sorcerer, Wizard

Mage Hand

{A wonderfully situational cantrip which is just not as good as others around it, unless...}

Change Paragraph 3 in Description: "The hand can't activate magic items, or carry more than 10 pounds. "

Add Paragraph 4 to Description: "The hand may attack as an unarmed strike (a slap or a punch) and, at the DM's discretion, with a light, one-handed weapon.

Magic Stone

{This is a fine spell. Just on small tweak.}

Usable by: Bard, Cleric, Druid, Warlock

Mending

{This is a fine spell. Just one small tweak.}

Usable by: Bard, Cleric, Druid, Wizard

Message

{Too limited to be a serious choice as it currently stands, and I think it's time we grew out of the "magic works like radiation" thing.}

Usable by: Bard, Cleric, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard

Duration: 1 hour

New Description: By touching your fingers to you throat you can whisper a message to a creature within range. Only

the target hears the message and can reply with a whisper only you can hear.

You can cast this spell through solid objects if you are familiar with the target and know it is beyond the barrier. The spell can connect to any familiar target within range.

Minor Illusion

{This is a fine spell. I have nothing to add here.}

Mold Earth

{This spell borderline, but it does have some creative uses.}

Poison Spray

{I think the short range of this spell is enough of a disadvantage so I softened the saving throw.}

Usable By: Druid, and Warlock only.

New Description: You project a puff of noxious gas towards a creature you can see within range. The gas does 1d12 damage, unless the target makes a successful Constitution saving throw in which case it only takes half damage.

This spell's damage increases by 1d12 when you reach 5th level (2d12), 11th level (3d12), and 17th level (4d12).

Prestidigitation

{This spell's name is possibly the hardest thing to say in the whole game. The point of this spell is to give casters some flavor and make them feel, well, more magical. I let players really go to town with this as long as it's all theatrics. Any spell that encourages creative manifestations is

really great for play both in and out of combat.}

Change name to: Magecraft
Casting Time: 1 Bonus Action

Produce Flame

{I have never understood the whole "druids who save nature by burning things down" thing but that requires a rewrite of the spell list rather than reconsideration. For now, I just go with it because all casters seem to have a little Tim in them. Right now this spell is a weaker Firebolt – less damage and much less range – and for what? So that I can walk around with a flaming fist? Ok, maybe, but let's open this up a bit.}

New Description: A flickering magical flame of a color you choose, appears in or on your hand. The flame remains there for the duration and harms neither you nor your equipment. The flame sheds bright light in a 10-foot radius and dim light for an additional 10 feet. The spell ends if you dismiss it as an action or if you cast it again.

You can also attack with the flame, although doing so ends the spell. When you cast this spell, or as an action on a later turn, you can hurl the flame at a creature within 30 feet of you. Make a ranged spell attack. On a hit, the target takes 1d8 fire damage on that turn and 1d4 fire damage on your next turn, unless it or someone next to it spends an action to extinguish the flame prior to that. Any effect that extinguishes normal flames will also end the effect.

This spell's damage increases by 1d8 when you reach 5th level (2d8/2d4), 11th level (3d8/3d4), and 17th level (4d8/4d4).

Ray of Frost

{Less damage and range than a Firebolt for a measly debuff. Frost wizards shouldn't have to cast gimpy spells to play in character.}

Usable by: Druid, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard

New Description: A frigid beam of frost streaks toward a creature within range. Make a ranged spell attack against the target. On a hit, it takes 1d8 cold damage. In addition, the targets speed is reduced by 15 feet until the start of your next turn. A successful Strength saving throw negates this effect.

The spell's damage and speed reduction increase by 1d8 & 5 feet when you reach 5th level (2d8 & 20'), 11th level (3d8 & 25'), and 17th level (4d8 & 30'). *{I understand that this means that a 17th level mage can stop a speed 30 character dead in their tracks... unless they make their save. A 17th level caster should be able to do at least that.}*

Resistance

{As per Guidance.}

Duration: 1 minute.

Add a 2nd and 3rd paragraph to the Description: A target under the effects of a Resistance spell does not gain any benefit from a second one cast upon them.

The spell's effect increases to 1d6 when you reach 5th level, 11th level (1d8), 17th level (1d10).

Sacred Flame

{This is the Clerics "bread and butter" attack cantrip. Using Firebolt as the gold standard, sacred flame comes up short - half the range, less damage, and 0 damage on a save. There is the advantage of ignoring cover and not needing a to-hit roll to consider but it's not enough.}

New Description: Flame-like radiance descends on a creature that you can see within range. The target takes 1d8 radiant damage (Unless they make a successful Dexterity saving throw in which case they only take half damage.) The target gains no benefit from cover for this saving throw.

The spell's damage increases by 1d8 when you reach 5th level (2d8), 11th level (3d8), and 17th level (4d8).

Shape Water

{Not going to touch this spell, but have to talk about it. This Cantrip comes to us from the Elemental Evil Player's Companion. It seems in line with other elemental cantrips that are there for flavor, as they have no combat application. Normally I'd bundle this with Druidcraft or make a Watercraft spell and add more cool stuff you could do. There are some creative uses for this especially when travelling by water or when wanting to extinguish something safely, so it's good enough to remain unchanged for now.}

Shillelagh

{I like this spell a lot. It's full of good color. There's just a couple of things about the new version that bothers me...}

Usable by: Cleric, Druid

Change last sentence in Description: While the spell is active, any club or

quarterstaff that the Druid is wielding gains these properties, even if the weapon is released and subsequently reacquired or a new weapon is wielded.

Shocking Grasp

{The spell has potential, and lots of cool imagery enters the mind when you hear the name, but it doesn't deliver. Putting a caster in melee is a grave decision and just doesn't make sense given the existence of such distance damagers as Firebolt. I know, I know, Firebolt this and Firebolt that, but there has to be a yard stick.}

Usable by: Bard, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard

Duration: Instantaneous or 1 minute.

New Description: Lightning crackles in your hands or legs (and hair and eyes if you like) and you can deliver a shock to a creature that you touch, or hit with an unarmed strike. Make a melee spell attack against the target. You have advantage on that attack if the target is wearing armor that is more than 50% metal. On a hit, the target takes 1d8 Lightning damage and can't take reactions or bonus actions on its next turn.

On a successful hit, the target takes damage from the spell and the strike if one was delivered.

Shocking Grasp is controlled by the caster, who may freely touch creatures and things without releasing the spell or damaging them.

The spell's damage increases by 1d8 when you reach 5th level (2d8), 11th level (3d8), and 17th level (4d8).

Spare the Dying

{Pretty weak unless you're out of spells and everyone is dying around you. If this is happening you should be running away or giving your final speech before charging into battle.}

Usable by: Cleric, Druid

Casting Time: 1 Reaction

New Description: You touch a living creature that has 0 hit points. That creature becomes stable. If the target receives healing within 1 minute, the healing effect gains a bonus equal to the spell modifier of the caster who cast Spare the Dying. This spell has no effect on undead or constructs.

Thaumaturgy

{Another needlessly complex word that forever curses a very imaginative spell. I like a name that allows for it to be "verbed" as in, "I Magic Missile it." Clericcraft seemed a bit too blah.}

New Name: Divine Wonder

Casting Time: 1 Bonus Action

Thorn Whip

{Love this spell every time the Druid whips it out everybody in the group thinks it's the best. Just all the same criticisms here – small damage, small range, puts caster ever closer to combat – but I applaud the creativity on this one.}

New Description: You create a long, vine-like whip, covered in thorns that lashes out at your command towards a creature in range. Make a melee spell attack against the target. If the attack hits, the creature takes 1d8 piercing damage and if the creature is Large or smaller, you can move the creature up to 10 feet in any

direction so long as it is within the range of the spell.

This spell's damage increases by 1d8 when you reach 5th level (2d8), 11th level (3d8), and 17th level (4d8).

Thunderclap

{I think if you ever have to cast this, you're hosed. Most adventures I've played or ran there was never a benefit to making noise that could be heard 100' away. To make this worthwhile, you would have to have at least three enemies within 5 feet of you. As a spell caster you never want that. You're giving up a lot for this desperation cantrip so I adjusted the positive effects to balance the negative. }

Usable by: Bard, Cleric, Sorcerer, Warlock, Wizard

New Description: You create a burst of thunderous sound, which can be heard 100 feet away. Each creature other than you within 5 feet of you takes 1d6 thunder damage and must make a Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the creature is deafened and has disadvantage on its next attack.

At Higher Levels: The spell's damage increases by 1d6 when you reach 5th level (2d6), 11th level (3d6), and 17th level (4d6).

True Strike

{Giving up an attack to gain advantage on your next attack is a losing proposition. It makes this spell difficult to justify. Add that you have to maintain concentration on it and there's no way a savvy player would take this as is. }

Usable by: Bard, Cleric, Warlock

Range: 60'

Duration: 1 minute

New Description: Your magic grants Target A brief insight into another Target B's weaknesses. While the spell lasts, Target A gains advantage on their first attack against Target B.

A target under the effects of a True Strike spell does not gain any benefit from a second one cast upon them.

{Cast this on someone to give him or her advantage with one attack against someone else. }

Viscous Mockery

{Because saving throws are skewed and this is a signature Bard spell, I feel it necessary to soften the role of the saving throw and shift it away from the overused Wisdom saving throw, so that caster's don't feel like their efficacy is totally up to luck. }

New Description: You unleash a string of insults laced with subtle enchantments at a creature you can see within range. If the target can hear you (though it need not understand you), it has disadvantage on any attack roll it makes before the end of its next turn. Further, it must succeed on a Charisma saving throw or take 1d6 psychic damage. Half damage on a failed save.

This spell's damage increases by 1d6 when you reach 5th level (2d6), 11th level (3d6), and 17th level (4d6).

Cantrip Spell Lists

Bard

Blade Ward
Dancing Lights
Friends
Light
Mage Hand
Magecraft
Magic Stone
Mending
Message
Minor Illusion
Shocking Grasp
Thunderclap
True Strike
Vicious Mockery

Cleric

Blade Ward
Chill Touch
Guidance
Light
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Resistance
Sacred Flame
Shillelagh
Spare the Dying
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Druid

Acid Splash
Druidcraft
Firecraft
Frostbite
Guidance
Light
Magic Stone
Mending
Mold Earth
Poison Spray
Produce Flame
Ray of Frost
Resistance
Shape Water
Shillelagh
Spare the Dying
Thorn Whip

Sorcerer

Acid Splash
Chill Touch
Dancing Lights
Firecraft
Firebolt
Frostbite
Light
Mage Hand
Magecraft
Message
Minor Illusion
Mold Earth
Ray of Frost
Shape Water
Shocking Grasp
Thunderclap

Warlock

Acid Splash
Blade Ward
Chill Touch
Firecraft
Eldritch Blast
Friends
Frostbite
Mage Hand
Magecraft
Magic Stone
Message
Minor Illusion
Poison Spray
Ray of Frost
Shocking Grasp
Thunderclap
True Strike

~ End ~

Wizard

Acid Splash
Chill Touch
Dancing Lights
Firecraft
Firebolt
Frostbite
Light
Mage Hand
Magecraft
Mending
Message
Minor Illusion
Mold Earth
Ray of Frost
Shape Water
Shocking Grasp
Thunderclap

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EDC's Weapons & Armor Revisited
EDC's Feats Revisited