

*A System and Tables for What Happens When Magic-Users Actually Try to Prevent You from Reading Their Magic*

by Logan Knight

<http://www.lastgaspgrimoire.com/cunning-linguists/>

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Every Magic-User develops their own method of writing magical formulae, like some kind of sorcerous cipher, preventing their knowledge from being read by the plebeian unworthy.

Every other Magic-User knows the spell Read Magic, which they can cast and read anything they want.

Wait what? When did deciphering a madman's work become such a throwaway bit of bag of tricks nonsense? If I was a wizard my spellbook would be overflowing with false passages and curses and traps like some kind of nightmare word labyrinth of doom, not presenting itself on a podium for the next first-day-of-magic-school Johnny that comes along. Read MY magic? I fucking think not.

So sure, Read Magic allows you to read magical writings, but that doesn't mean you're going to read it right.

When Reading Magic, save vs. Magic. Your Referee will probably vary the required roll depending on what you're trying to read, and you can apply bonuses by concentrating really hard and using additional Cataclysm points before rolling. The number by which you succeed or fail is applied as a bonus or penalty to the 3d6 roll your Referee now makes in secret.

3d6 *Cunning Linguists*

- 14-18 Success
- 11-13 Success/Librarian's Lament
- 8-10 Librarian's Lament
- 5-7 Chaos Reigns
- 1-4 Tome of Terror

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*Librarian's Lament*

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1d20 (*d10 if the writing isn't in a book*)

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- 1 You birth a wriggling pink rat with a young version of your own face out of your mouth. It scrambles away and out of sight. It will grow to about the size of a pug, it develops translucent flaps of skin to glide on, it keeps showing up to foil your plans.
  - 2 Tiny hideous mouths split open over the surface of the object and begin to scream.
  - 3 Cold pink mist swells up from the object and wafts out in a 30' radius, save vs. Poison or lie down to sleep in a blanket of fog.
  - 4 You read the writing as something utterly different, you have no reason to believe that it isn't right. If it is a spell, the first time you try to cast it a Chaos Reigns roll is triggered.
  - 5 The object bearing the writing bursts into flame like a pile of magnesium.
  - 6 Your eyes snap open wide and fill with churning pink clouds, black at the edges like a storm, dim flashes of light perceivable in their midst.
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You find yourself blind, groping in lurid darkness, until your eyes settle back on the page. Your eyes are permanently ensorcelled, unable to see anything but writing, but able to decipher any written language or cipher without aid of any kind. You may find that there is a kind of poetry in the fibre of the world itself, but learning to read that will take some time.

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7 Get up from the table, go to the nearest bookshelf, close your eyes, pull down a book, flip to a random page, scan down and read the first few lines that catch your eye. For the next 2d4 days save vs. Magic whenever you want to start a conversation or cast a spell, if you fail the only words to come out are those lines over and over again.

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8 *Vow of Poverty.* You just cursed yourself. Precious metals and gems rot within your presence, visibly deteriorating every day, leaving nothing but discoloured muck after a week of being within 15' of you.

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9 Five trails of gently floating green lights appear, wafting into your lungs as they reach you. The lights are leading demoniac hounds with the hands of men and voices of children to you from various directions. Every 8 hours roll a d4 per remaining hound, on a 4 they have come to collect you.

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10 Your nearest companion compulsively stabs you with whatever blade is closest to hand. A copper serpent slithers from the wound and into your hands, its blood-slicked scales are carved with arcane knowledge. (Hand the player the Magic-User spell list, they gain any spells they can legibly write down within 10 seconds. To cast the spell they must ingest a number of copper coins equal to spell level. The spells use Cataclysm as normal but do not need to be written in a spellbook or memorised.) After 10 seconds the serpent will strike out at whoever is holding it, pumping black venom into their veins if its fangs find flesh.

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11 Heat emanates from the page and you absent-mindedly place your hand against it to feel the warmth. The ink burns into your skin like a tattoo. The first lie you tell will become true, and the writing on your hand will change to remind you of that for all time.

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12 The book's cover grows coarse and hairy, legs sprout from the spine and it leaps from your hands, running across the room and up the wall. It points a strange cloaca at you from the base of its spine and expels clumps of bright green mildew at you that burns the skin, flapping away to the other side of the room if you get too close.

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13 The edges of the book slice your fingers open before it drops to the floor, leaving tiny rows of perfect bloodless papercuts. They will never heal, and from this moment forth you will bleed prose. It is not for me to know what secrets may be found in your blood.

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14 The book decomposes into hundreds of tiny paper mite crabs, they swarm over your arms, digging into your flesh, searching for orifices. If more than 50% of them find their way inside you, gain a spell of a random level, but you can no longer eat anything other than paper, mumbling incoherent script when you are hungry.

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15 The page splits horizontally and unfolds, then vertically and unfolds, then horizontally.. again and again until the page is 15' wide. In the centre is a sketched doorway, the handle is so realistic you feel that you could reach out and grab it. If you open the door roll 1d6. The door leads you..  
1. Into the chambers of a disrobed person of note who does not take kindly to the

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intrusion.

2. Into a room piled high with glittering treasures. Anything you take will immediately adhere into your skin, and it will take part of you with it if torn away. Opening the door will lead you back into the room where the book lay.

3. Into the lair of a great black serpent, slumbering after feeding. Shapes like hands push out the skin of its distended belly and you hear far-off whimpering. If it wakes, its yellow cut-glass eyes flash with hate and it will regurgitate its meal before attacking, bathing them in a hot flush of digestive juices that melt their limbs and prevent escape. Otherwise, it intends to digest them slow, they may yet survive, you have but to release them.. (Within the snake's belly is: 1-2. The person who originally wrote the words. 3. A buxom lass sacrificed to the serpent, *sacrificed for consorting with devils*. 4. A foolhardy adventurer brought here in search of a sacrificial hoard, collected over centuries. 5-6. A mewling litter of children, they imprint on the first person they see as their mother with animal intelligence, they are stronger and more agile than they look)

4. Into a dimly lit subterranean room, connected by secret stair to the lavish home above. Yellow wax drips from walls and altars, icy fingers caress your spine as the light flickers over strange stains, a hand-written tome rests on a dais, dedicated to the glory of the Yellow Queen.

5. Back where you just came from. You watch yourself move towards the book, attempting to read its secrets, watching it unfurl into a doorway, stepping inside.. The more you allow things to progress as they were the more of you there are, watching yourself watching yourself in neverending sequence until you stop yourself from reading the book, at which point every you that stepped through the doorway is un-happened, sucked back out of reality in pockets of agony.

6. Into your chrysalis deep below the earth. There you will sleep for years to come, until the changes are complete, until your terrible maniacal glory can be loosed upon the world.

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16 The book shrieks and tears itself in half, blood falls to the floor instead of paper fragments, the missing half regrows, the books tear themselves in half, blood falls to the floor..

The books continue to replicate in this way until there are several hundred, shrieking in a pool of blood.

The blood tastes like learning.

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17 Tendrils snap out from the crease of the book, penetrating your chest and belly, churning as some drain and others pump.

Your organs liquefy and drain out with your blood, and in its place your body fills with fluid like liquid golden light.

You glow like a pinkish-gold beacon, and take a -5 penalty to saves vs. Magic, but cannot be poisoned and gain a d4 bonus to Cast the Bones and Conduit of the Cosmos rolls.

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18 You read the words aloud and all who hear them age d20 years. Save vs. Magic, if you fail you continue to read. Repeat.

Anyone who reaches the age of 90 during this time falls apart like disintegrating paper.

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19 Violet light flashes from the pages, in your temporary blindness you can hear the resonance of your own thoughts. When you look back at the book you are staring at your own placid face, when you cry out it is the face in the book that opens its mouth and screams, not the featureless mess of words plastered around your swollen eyes.

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20 The pages of the book begin to flip back, growing faster, pulling at the air around you, the flurry of paper flipping between the covers of the book consists of more pages than the book could possibly have contained.

The pull at the air around you grows stronger, small objects begin to lift from the floor and disappear between the pages, your feet begin to shift..

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*Tome of Terror*

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1d20 *(d10 if the writing isn't in a book)*

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- 1 Bronze threads burst from the walls, roof, even the object, and sew into your flesh. If you move more than a few inches parts of your body start to tear away. If anyone touches you or the threads, even more threads appear to knit them in place.

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  - 2 The object bearing the writing slops to the floor in grotesque strands of vibrant colour, like spilling paint left in the open air.  
Its touch leaves a stain and tears knowledge from your bones.  
Save vs. Magic when touched, if successful you momentarily forget who you are and what you're doing and spend the next round in an existential crisis. If you fail roll d6.
    1. You permanently lose a random spell. If you can't cast spells one fills your mind, but you can only use it once and take a d6 penalty to your Cast the Bones roll.
    2. You lose all memory of a random companion apart from a lingering feeling of loathing towards them, and considering the hideous thing in front of you they must have been conjured by it.
    3. Your body forgets how to control the release of excrement. That's going to be fun.
    4. You forget language. No more reading or speaking.
    5. You forget your bravery in the dark, it encroaches on you like a beast and leaves you shrieking.
    6. You forget your perception of your own evolution and crawl in the dust like a protoplasmic beast.

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  - 3 If inside; the walls seem to grow coarse and hairy, closing in and wheezing like labouring overweight beasts of burden.  
If outside; the ground around you curls up into a bowl, plant roots protruding like spikes, flowers laughing at you as it curls in ever tighter over your head.  
The object bearing the writing grinds and spirals until its matter has been sucked in unto itself, leaving a yawning opening into non-space.  
The world inside is brighter and more terrifying than it seems, a playground death maze of absurdity at the centre of which dwells the Maleficar who set the trap, caught within his own creation, self-appointed lord over the maze's more malleable denizens, grown quite mad during his imprisonment.

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  - 4 The words seem to drive themselves through your pupils, expanding from within and showering your companions with optic fluid, in place of your eyes remain two rolling black orbs, words and phrases wafting from them like smoke.  
Somehow you remain able to see, and much hidden knowledge can be learnt by anyone studying your eyes. However, if you spend time looking at your own reflection you must save vs. Magic every 10 minutes after the first 20 or gain a random Insanity. If you fail you must roll under your Wisdom to avoid staring back into your swirling orbs for another 10 minutes.  
Even if you never glimpse your reflection, there is a 5% chance every week that the words of the orb will waft back into your brain, subtly changing who you are. Roll on a personality or character quirk table.

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  - 5 The floor begins to move, slowly but surely twisting into thousands of blood-red worms that sucker to your skin like leeches, injecting whatever it is that waits inside them into your body before the spent skins fall away back to the floor.  
Anyone that spends more than 2 Rounds on the floor will be exposed to enough worms to be overtaken, running away screaming to find a dark place to gestate.  
*(The dark bulges that mar your body swell and churn, your eyes adapt to the dark, your*
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*bones contract and crumble, your jaw rots away and searching pink tubes like lampreys squirm out of the folds of flesh that used to be your neck and head, you excrete the substance that darkens your skin and causes crippling burning pain to anything that touches you, your lanky arms and legs deform to something in-between both, you are ready to hunt by the 6<sup>th</sup> night)*

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6 Vines emerge from the surface of the object, growing lush and dense as leaves and fleshy flowers sprout from them. There are enough vines to fill a 30' room, and the flowers bloom to reveal a glistening red interior filled with shivering barbs. Anyone shot by the barbs immediately begins screaming *Feeblemind* at the nearest living thing.

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7 Shadows thicken behind you, whispering as they gain density, reaching out, grasping at your heels.  
The room swells with vicious shadow, breathing limbs reach into your body and twist your veins, the door is shut and covered in a thick layer of quiet loathing.

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8 Fragrant mud pools within the letters and begins to spill down the object, crabs with voices like angels emerge from the pooled muck and beseech to be allowed within you. They're actually quite persuading.  
Save vs. Magic or allow the angelcrabs inside your mouth, and eyes, and various other orifices. They eat their fill and excrete muddy gold in their wake to excavate a home, causing d12 damage directly to Flesh.  
If you survive the experience the angelcrabs will live in symbiotic harmony within your body, imparting alien wisdom when they deem it appropriate.

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9 As you mutter the incantations, fingers creep up from your throat and curl around your lips, gripping your face as they struggle to wrench the bile-covered body of a lithe young woman and of your expanded jaw.  
She slops to the ground, unconscious, unaware of what happened when she recovers. She has no name, she is fearful but trusting, she will gain your confidence and compassion and devour everything you hold dear before smearing you from the face of existence.

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10 Beads of amber sweat begin to swell and glisten over the object's surface, it begins to look more pliant, more organic, its bulk starts to heave in laboured breaths, sections split away in mockery of limbs, pools of flesh swirl inwards forming gaping circular mouths, their inner surface full of quivering jelly-like teeth. The hunt begins.

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11 The ink swells into the centre of the book, leaving the page and forming a black bulbous idol. Tendrils of negative-space waves curl lazily at its edges, from any angle it looks like a flat image, it is an absence given form.  
Any organic material that touches it disappears, painless, sucking in further than you expect before you realise that your hand is gone.

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12 Blood seeps from your veins and into the page, etching your image in despair, gilding its edges with floral borders, signing your death at the bottom.  
The book contains many such illustrations, but you may find a page whose borders are empty, bearing the name of the blood witch Nephtharia Jans. Whether she will help you is another matter.

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13 Silvery strands curl out from the bottom of the book's spine and penetrate into your wrists. The knowledge of the book floods into your mind, as does its will.  
You will dance like a puppet, you will assault your allies with dark magics, if you are freed you will retain all of the book's knowledge.  
Among other things the book contains the spells *Feeblemind*, *Gaseous Form*, and *Shadow Monsters*.

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14 The ink drains off the page into a pool at your feet, the pool forms a hole, the hole leads

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down a winding tunnel, you tumble and fall down its depths into the yawning chasm at the end.

The bulbous thing hunched over the lectern with quill in hand in the centre of the dripping cavern defies mention, it looks up at you and asks from something not a mouth, "Knowledge or your life? My quill will be fed."

Anything told will be recorded and forgotten, you will be released after you have provided information with power roughly equivalent to a 6th level spell or something cripplingly embarrassing.

Until that time the creature makes a sound like a dozen churning stomachs as it inches toward you if you are silent for more than 30 seconds.

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- 15 The words on the page begin to quiver, the ink contracts and swells and forms drops of dark rain which fall up from the book. Soon the paper itself is raining away, while the book's cover becomes ever more heavy in your hands. After the rain the inner cover clears to reveal a glimmering night sky, full of constellations you've never known. They swirl and dance and you step into the vastness of their glory, held by their cosmic light in an eternity of tormenting discovery.

The rain falls back down in a torrent, replacing pages and letters and phrases until the book slams shut.

If the book is opened you will return, but you will not return the same as you once were. Save vs. Magic or gain insanities equal to your failure, save vs. Poison or gain mutations equal to your failure. Regardless of your saves, you do not return alone, the star spawn's seed rests in your belly and in your mind, waiting.

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- 16 The words snake off of the page and across your skin, circling around your limbs and across your chest until your entire body bears the contents of the book. You fall to the floor in agony as the tiny circlets of writing brand into your flesh. The deathless librarians of the Mausoleum de Lettres cannot help but seek and catalogue the Living Word, and they always know when a new one has been created.
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- 17 The book was a prison, and you just turned the key. Result as *Summon*.
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- 18 The ink begins to take on a greenish hue, eventually raising from the page until the mould breaks out of its lettered boundaries and spreads across the page, falling to the floor in clumps, colonising everything it touches, spreading across 30' every minute, covering a 300' area if left unhindered.

The mould shivers and whispers, it deflates as you step on it, releasing spores that swirl in a thousand colours, dancing before your eyes as they lead you back deeper into the fold, back to the book grown strange and hungry.

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- 19 *Curse of Life*. You cannot die. You cannot be healed. Your flesh does not regrow. You cannot die.
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- 20 After you shut the book, the cover creaks back open and oily dripping creatures begin to pull themselves from a portal within. Their form is myriad and shifting, they merge and split and far-off tittering fills the air.

To close the portal you have only to shut the book again, but the floor is crawling with flesh like oil.

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