

Judge Tower Rules Reference

This document was created by Finn Ellis, then stolen and edited by me (link to the original at the bottom). It's long (more JAR-long than CR-long) and technical, but this is Judge Tower! Reading rules is part of the fun.

Introduction

Judge Tower (also called As Soon As, ASA, or ASAP) is a Magic format about understanding the game rules really, really well. None of the usual win or loss conditions apply; none of the usual resources are constrained (except cards, which in this case is a blessing). You simply do as much as you can, as soon as you can, perfectly correctly. Or else you lose.

I can't take credit for inventing this monstrosity. I first read about it in Chris Lansdell's article on Mana Deprived (see Sources), where he attributes it to "some very evil and possibly sadistic European judges." I immediately built a stack of my own, and immediately thereafter began stumbling on interactions which weren't covered by his summary of the rules. This page is my attempt to remedy that. Judge Tower is a pedantic format, and it deserves a pedantic rulebook. Enjoy!

—Finn

P.S. If you find a Vintage-legal interaction that's not covered by these rules, or have a contribution to the variants or recommendations, please email me! relsqui@chilliahedron.com
the.y.m.i@gmail.com

WARNING! Don't play this format if you're trying to have fun 😈

Rules

General

1. Each player has an infinite life total.
2. Each player has infinite mana of every type in their mana pool at all times.
 - In mana costs and text that include a variable (X, Y, or Z), if the variable is constrained by other rules (for example, it will be used to choose a number of targets), the player must choose the highest legal number. If the variable is not constrained, it equals 5.
3. All players share one library.
 - The owner of a card is the last player who drew it. The owner of any card which hasn't been drawn this game is the active player.
4. All players share one graveyard.
 - Graveyard order is preserved.
 - If choosing a target in the graveyard is required, the topmost legal target is chosen.
5. Each player's starting hand size is equal to their judge level. Players who have never been certified as judges have a starting hand size of zero.
 - Players may not take mulligans (see the optional mulligan variant).
 - The draw step of the first turn in the game isn't skipped.
6. If an effect instructs more than one player to reveal the top card of their library, the active player reveals the top card, the next player reveals the second card from the top, and so on.
7. When choosing a player whose turn will be controlled by another player, the player with the highest sum of permanents and cards in hand (or tied for the highest) must be chosen.

Obligations

1. Each player must play every card they can as soon as the game rules allow them to do so.
2. Each player must activate every ability they can as soon as the game rules allow them to do so.
 - Abilities that can be activated an arbitrary number of times must be activated at least once per turn cycle per legal target. If an ability has no targets, it must be activated at least once per turn cycle. If it has more than one, it must be activated each turn cycle enough times that all legal targets have been chosen at least once.
 - If an object has multiple abilities, the last one must be activated first if possible, then the next one up, and so on in reverse order.
 - Mana abilities can be activated only when paying a mana cost, and must be activated if they produce mana that can be used to pay that cost. Players can add more mana than is required to pay the cost and should activate all applicable

mana abilities. If a card has more than one mana ability, they are activated from the bottom up, just like regular activated abilities.

3. Each player must take every special action they're allowed to take as soon as the game rules allow them to do so.
4. If an effect gives a player a choice whether or not to do something, they must do it if possible.
 - If an effect allows a player to choose between alternatives, they may choose freely but must choose as many options as possible.
 - If an effect allows a player to choose an amount of something or how many times to do something, if the maximum possible amount is constrained by the game state (such as Strive), they must choose the maximum. If the amount is not constrained (such as Multikicker), they must choose 5.
5. Whenever a trigger goes on the stack, its controller must demonstrate awareness of it.
6. All creatures must attack each turn if able.
7. All creatures must block each turn if able.
8. If the game state reaches an infinite loop which can't be broken by legal player actions, the players must complete the entire loop once, and then exile one of the cards involved in the loop at random.

Winning and Losing

1. If a player breaks a game rule, that player immediately loses the game.
2. If a player breaks any rule under Obligations, that player immediately loses the game.
3. If a player would lose the game for any reason other than the above, or win the game other than by being the last player who hasn't lost, that player doesn't.

Variants

- Require that abilities be activated once per turn cycle, on some target, rather than once per turn per target. This makes some cards less obnoxious and more interesting.
- Players are allowed to take mulligans, but instead of drawing one less card, they draw one additional card each time they mulligan. A hand containing basic lands only, must be mulliganed.
- Track life totals as normal but reset them when they reach 0. This enables Fateful Hour cards and other things that care about life total.
- Instead of playing by single elimination, whenever a player loses, all his permanents and hand exiled, and then a different player takes his place. The winner is the player who was replaced the least by the time the stack runs out.
- Instead of playing by single elimination, award (or remove) points from players when they break rules. Then play to a set number of points or until the stack runs out.
- Similar to the previous one: each player has a dice (6 works well) that counts "shame counters". When a dice resets (goes from the highest number back to the lowest), restart the game.
- When someone loses because of a card's rules, sharpie a tally mark onto that card (or its sleeve, if you're playing with nice cards).
- Rather than preparing a stack, crack a pack face down and play with that.
- Made up cards can be used to generate interesting interactions.

Recommendations

Playing

- Optional: players play with their hands revealed. This will make it easier for players to notice actions that were missed in other players' hands.
- Use tournament shortcuts for priority passes, including announcing when you're holding priority. It should always be clear what phase you're in and who has priority.
- When someone wins, if you're continuing, exile everything that's not in the library and then draw new hands without shuffling. It's less repetitive and way faster.
- If you're playing with older cards, have a source of Oracle text handy.
- Learn phases, layers, and spellcasting steps really well.
- Don't make anyone play this with you who's not actually interested. It will just make them hate Magic and/or you.

Building

- A hundred cards is a good minimum for a stack you plan to play a lot. Some people prefer larger ones, but I like being able to carry and shuffle it easily. If you build a Judge Tower cube, please email and tell me about.
- The vintage banlist is a good starting point for things to absolutely disallow.
- Include a few basic lands. It keeps people on their toes and enables interactions like landwalk.

- If a card frequently causes an infinite loop, take it out.
- Triggered abilities are your bread and butter. The more variety in trigger conditions, the better.
- Draw effects keep everybody's hands stocked, especially when they're recurring effects (like Howling Mine or tomes).
- Extra turns and skipped turns are as big a deal in this format as in normal formats, just for opposite reasons.
- Control-changing effects are a nice way to give someone else your problems.
- Abilities which can be activated from the graveyard are great, especially if you can get them into the graveyard on someone else's turn.
- Anything with targeting or timing restrictions is fantastic. Look for instants which require more than one target or specific kinds of targets, activated abilities which can only be activated at particular times, and so on. Leylines fall into this category too.
- Cards which change other cards' timing restrictions are good for the same reason.
- Cards whose attributes change based on game state (like Cairn Wanderer) require lots of attention
- Build in synergy! If you have a Myr Welder, make sure you have plenty of artifacts and mill to enable it. Likewise, don't run Panglacial Wurm if you don't have search effects.
- Cards which look like they would be fun in Judge Tower but usually aren't: most morphs (you just unmorph them immediately); anything that primarily cares about or affects life totals; anything which relies on constrained mana (e.g. Clash of Wills); alternative win conditions; anything which assumes you have cards in hand; effects you have to activate a lot which rarely change the board state (regenerate, Spellskite).

[My Judge Tower List](#)

[Israeli Judge Tower WhatsApp Group](#)

Sources

- [Judge Tower Rules Reference \(original by Finn Ellis\)](#)
- [Magic: The Gathering Comprehensive Rules](#)
- [From the Brewing Board – As Soon As Stacks](#)
- [Judge Tower: A Magic format for judges and people who hate themselves \(reddit\)](#)
- [Judge Tower: Decklist and Rules for the format for people who hate themselves \(reddit\)](#)
- [Judge Tower \(MTG Salvation\)](#)