

How to build an EDH Deck

A starting point

Who is this guide for?

This guide was written for EDH players who are looking to build their first few decks. We will discuss commanders, a basic deck building template, and some food for thought in building your own commander deck. This is for you if you have some cards you think are cool and you want to play with them, but you want the deck to be mechanically functional. This will teach you enough of the basics so you can play with the cards you want.

Who is this guide not for?

While everyone is more than welcome to read and provide feedback, this guide will not help you create high power cEDH decks. It will not discuss zero budget optimizations, building winning lines, combo packages, and little if no gameplay advice.

A word about templates

This is intended as my understanding about deck building based on hours of podcasts, video's, and trial and error. It is by no means an authoritative document. There will always be corner cases in which every one of my suggestions would be incorrect or inefficient. This is intended as a rough guide for newer players who are at square 1.

Much of this information can be found in podcasts/videos from....,

- [The Command Zone](#)
- [The Nitpicking Nerds](#)
- [Tolarian Community College](#)
- [EDHRec Cast](#)
- [Tomer's Deckbuilding Checklist](#)

Websites that will be super helpful

1. [Moxfield](#) is my preferred deck building website.
2. [Scryfall](#) There is a bit of a learning curve but it is the best/ most powerful card search engine.
3. [Commander Spellbook](#) EDH combo database that is searchable by many different parameters.
4. [EDHREC](#) Should be a good GUIDE, do not pull too strongly from this at the beginning.
5. [MTGAssist](#) is a hit-or-miss search engine. I use it mostly for the "cards like this feature"

Color, Theme, and Gameplan

There are several ways to build a deck. Most people either start with a top down approach or a bottom up approach. Top down will usually begin with a commander and an idea, then add synergy cards to get to your 99. A bottom up approach will usually start with a group of cards that you like or find interesting, then working to build a deck around them. This is the core identity of the deck, you should be able to answer the following questions.

1. What does my deck want to do?
2. How does it win?

Your game plan should be like a 30 second elevator pitch. If you try to cram too many things into the deck, it dilutes the identity of the deck and you wind up doing a bunch of things poorly.

Examples

[Jarad, Golgari Lich Lord](#)- Ramp out big threats, fill the yard, drain out opponents by sacrificing large creatures.

[Meren of Clan Nel-Toth](#)- Set up a sacrifice draw engine, win the game with a combo.

[Gisa and Geralf](#)- Leverage self mill effects and generate a game winning position with a mass reanimation spell.

[Alesha, Who Smiles at Death](#)- Play stax pieces early, break parity, win with combo.

Picking Your Commander

When picking a commander there are a few things to generally look for, **Mana Value**, **Scalability**, and **Synergy**. Obviously you can play whatever you like, but these are the three areas in which I have had success.

Mana Value- I prefer commanders who have a mana value of maximum 4. This is the sweet spot between ability to cast more than once per game and fitting very well into a ramp package. If your commander is 5+ mana chances are that if they are removed once, it will be very difficult to get them back in play due to the commander tax. If your game plan involves casting a ramp spell on turn 2, then you have access to 4 mana on turn 3 and have the ability to cast your commander.

Scalability- When evaluating a commander consider the impact they can have on the game on run 4 vs turn 10. Ideally, you want the commander to have a larger and larger impact on the game as the turns progress. As your deck is doing what it wants to do, your commander should be enhancing the gameplan and getting more effective the longer the game goes. Consider [Krenko, Mob Boss](#), the more tokens you have the better he gets. He scales well with the game. Considering [Gisa and Geralf](#), they never get any better, they always mill the same number of cards, and are hard capped on the number of creatures they can cast each turn. They do not scale well.

Synergy- Synergy is generally wide open. Some questions to ask....

1. Does my commander give me access to an ability or effect that is necessary to win the game or get ahead on resources? Sacrifice, card draw, ramp, etc.
2. How many other cards get better when used in conjunction with my commander?
3. How independently powerful is the effect that my commander is providing?

Example: [Jarad, Golgari Lich Lord](#). His first ability gives him a power/toughness boost as more and more creatures go into the graveyard. His sacrifice ability can be a win condition if your creatures are large enough. His recursion ability for 2 lands makes him very hard to deal with. He will have synergy when you fill the graveyard, have large creatures, and care about lands in the graveyard.

The Numbers

I do not believe that any deck can fit to hard and fast numbers for ramp, card draw, or removal. However, these are a good starting point to consider as you rough out your ideas.

Ramp	10-16 Majority should be Mana Value 1-2
Card Draw	4 Repeatable/ 6 Single Use
Removal/ Interaction	7 Single Target Removal/ 3 Board Wipes
Lands	36 as few tap lands as possible How to build a manabase part 1 How to build a manabase part 2
Synergy	The rest

Ramp- Ramp is one of the most important parts of EDH. Games of commander are won, generally speaking, by creating a resource advantage that overwhelms your opponents. Ramping efficiently gives you more resources earlier. Acceleration that costs 2 mana strikes a good balance between affordability and efficiency which can lead to massive resource advantage if you are able to pair multiple 2 mana plays in the first few turns. If you have 2 pieces of 2 mana acceleration you can spend up to 30% more resources by turn 4.

[Budget Ramp Suggestions Commander's Quarters](#)

Turn	No Ramp	Amount of mana you can produce at end of turn
T1	1	1
T2	2	3 (Ramp)
T3	3	5 (Ramp)
T4	4	6+
Total Mana Spent	10	15

Card Draw VS Card Advantage- The core of card draw can be broken down into card selection, card advantage, and cantrips. Many card draw options will have a mix of both of these

Card Selection- Cards and abilities that give you the option of multiple cards with some going to hand and others going to graveyard/bottom of library	Impulse, Grisly Salvage, Brainstorm, Outpost Siege, Ransack the Lab, Vessel of Nascency,
Card Advantage- Cards and abilities that give you access to more cards than you would normally have.	Mentor of the Meek, Consecrated Sphinx, Divination, Read the Bones, Phyrexian Arena, Combustible Gearhulk, Reforge the Soul, Return of the Wildspeaker, Elemental Bond, Soul of the Harvest
Cantrip- The card only replaces itself	Shelter, Shatter the Sky, Opt, Frantic Search, Faithless Looting, Tormenting Voice, Elvish Visionary, Veil of Summer

Drawing cards will smooth out your curve, allow you to hit land drops, and gain a resource advantage. Shoot to have your card draw mirror your curve with most under mana value 3. Card draw will typically be a mix of the following repeatable/ single use and conditional/unconditional. Of the 10+ card draw effects try to have a good mix of repeatable card draw and unconditional card draw. Also keep in mind how efficient the rate is.

Questions to ask yourself

1. Is this repeatable?
2. Is it conditional?
3. Does this have synergies with my deck?
4. When in the course of the game is this good, or bad? If I am ahead, behind?
5. How easy is this to cast?
6. How efficient is this card? Cards divided by mana value.

[Examples](#)

Removal/Interaction- Removal and interaction can be roughly grouped into 3 categories single target removal, counterspells, and board wipes. As the game has gotten faster and more efficient, so must our answers. Most of your removal should be as low-costed, broad in what it can answer, and promote synergy in your deck. It is difficult to find a perfect fit for a removal spell so do not be afraid to compromise efficiency for synergy.

Look for gaps in your gameplay, can you deal with problematic artifacts or enchantments? Use your interaction to cover the gaps in other areas in your deck. In general, the higher power your metagame the more interaction you should be running. Lower power metas you can

[Sample Removal Suite](#)

Mana Curve

Efficiency- The more spells you can play every turn the faster you can snowball. Low mana curves allow you to double spell earlier, lets you get more things in play and use your mana efficiently. Opponents are less likely

to counter your 3 mana spell than they are you 7+ mana spell. Try to keep your mana curve on average around 1.8-2.3 with lands.

Questions to ask yourself...

1. What does my X mana investment get me?
2. What synergy does this card type or effect have with my deck?
3. How does this card further my gameplan?
4. If your card draw spell only replaces itself, it needs to be a low of a mana cost as possible.

Mana Value	Approximate number	Notes
1	13	Your bread and butter, these are your mana dorks, incremental card draw and premium interaction. Birds of Paradise, Stitchers Supplier, Sol Ring, Skull Clamp, Swords to Plowshares, Swan Song, Mystic Remora, Vandal blast, Nature's Claim, Viscera Seer, Pongify, Caustic Caterpillar
2	16	More utility creatures/spells, mana rocks, ramp spells, interaction. You are looking for aggressively costed high effect cards. Sakura-Tribe Elder, Arcane Signet, Three Visits, Signets, Blood Artist, Drannith Magistrate, Blind Obedience, Impact Tremors, Cryptolith Rite, Delay, Arcane Denial, Abrupt Decay
3	15	Some ramp creatures/spells, begin to look at engine pieces or repeatable card advantage, Top end of single target interaction. Beast Within, Chaos Warp, Wood Elves, Grim Haruspex, Azusa, Lost but Seeking, Mentor of the Meek, Rhystic Study, Guttersnipe, Dualcaster Mage, Eternal Witness
4	9-10	High impact abilities and big synergy pieces, engine cards, board wipes. Parallel Lives, Aetherflux Reservoir, Birthing Pod, Guardian Project, Pitiless plunderer, Fact or Fiction, Smothering Tithe, Purpheros, God of the Forge, Archomancer, Wrath of God, Pernicious Deed, Oblivion Stone
5	4-5	Cards that when used in synergy can win you the game. Gray Merchant of Asphodel, Tatiovia, Benthic Druid. Doubling Season, Cathars Crusade, Coat of Arms, Kiki-Jiki, Mirror Breaker.
6	3-4	Cards that will win the game if left unanswered- Bolas's Citadel, Etali, Primal Storm, Consecrated Sphinx
7	1-2	This needs to win the game on the spot. Expropriate, Avenger of Zendikar, Craterhoof, Elesh Norn, Nyxbloom Ancient.

Issue	Suggestion
I have a hand full of spells I never get to cast	Lower your curve, check if you are low on ramp
I have a million mana but nothing to do with it.	Add unconditional card draw, lower number of ramp spells
This card feels bad, I am never excited to draw it.	Cut it. Look for a similar card that has the effect you want with a lower Mana Value. Add more card draw or Ramp

Tips and suggestions

It is a process- When building an EDH deck keep in mind that it is a process. You are working to get 100 single cards to work together. Your list will probably change 5+ cards every time you work on it. I am a big advocate of using color printed proxies, this will save money, and you will not make deckbuilding choices based on cards available.

The importance of goldfishing and reflection- When I build a deck I am goldfish the first 6-7 turns frequently. While this does little for testing ratios for interaction it will let you get a feel for the amount of ramp, color fixing, and card draw. If you find that you keep drawing cards that you are not happy to see, cut them. If you find that you are taking turns off and have nothing to do, make changes, lower your curve, increase card draw.

Nothing is set in stone- Every card can be cut.

Cash is not king- You can throw money at a deck and the power level will increase, but a satisfactory feeling of synergy will not.

Avoid powerful card tribal- Your first step should not be to jam every powerful card in your collection into your first draft of a deck. It makes the deck very generic and reduces the identity of your commander and strategy.

This card is so good when....- If you find yourself thinking about 2 card interactions in your deck and there is no other overlap, ways to find them, and one of the cards is not your commander, it won't happen consistently. Exquisite Blood and Sanguine Bond are dope cards, but if your deck does not actively want to be gaining or draining life they should not be included. The same goes for Urborg, tomb of Yawgmoth and Cabal Coffers. If you do not have a 75+% swamp count or a way to efficiently and consistently find the pieces. It becomes inefficient.

Look for card overlap and synergy- In my [Meren of Clan Nel-Toth](#) deck almost all of the ramp is creature based, with a preference given to those that need to sacrifice themselves. This can provide a repeatable ramp effect, give counters to Meren, and when paired with a draw engine can give card advantage. Guide to [Synergy](#)

Stay off EDHRec for the first draft- EDHRec is an aggregation of all decks for a given commander. It is very likely that if you make a deck based solely on those recommendations, it will lack clear direction and will not have a solid game plan.