

David Jonathan's Creative Process

One of the questions I am most frequently asked is “*How do you come up with this stuff?*”. The truth is there is no direct answer, and what suits me may not work for you. This is because there are different types of learners out there (visual, auditory, read/write, etc.). Our brains work in different ways, and that can impact how we each unlock our creativity. The good news is there is more than one approach to creating an effect! So, I am going to share the four main approaches that I personally use to create an effect. I encourage you to explore all of these and hopefully unearth an approach that resonates with you:

1. **Method** – In this scenario, you have a solution in mind to start with, but no effect or presentation. This can be a concept for a really cool gimmick or a baffling math principle... but what do you do with it? How can you now build an effect around that? From here you will work your way backward to build the effect around the solution.
2. **Concept** – A concept driven approach is the complete opposite of the **Method** style. In this case, you have the effect or presentation in mind, now you need to find a method that will achieve your vision. For Example, you want to vanish a card and have it appear in the box... now how do I do that?
3. **Adaptation** – We all stand on the shoulders of giants, so this is where you take an existing effect or plot and add a new, unique twist to it. This can mean changing the object (doing a coin trick with bottle caps), combining one plot with another (doing a triumph effect but adding in a color change deck kicker), or adding something totally unique to a standard plot. For example, Angelo Carbone took the classic stage illusion of sawing a lady in half, and adapted it to close up with Demi Deck by changing the props and method.
4. **Luck** – Sometimes magic just falls in your lap. We often see things in our everyday lives that are not *magic tricks* but they are *magical* as certain objects have intrinsic magic properties to them. For example, Dan Harlan and I were both inspired to create the SNAPS deck after seeing letter art photography at a home décor store and at a gift shop. There's so much inspiration for magic creations around us every day. You have to condition yourself to actively look for these things, so when you do see something, it doesn't pass you by.

All of these approaches are valid and everyone's creative approach is going to be different. You just have to find what works for you. Personally, I've created effects using all four of these approaches, but I find that **Concept** is the one I use the most, so let's take a closer look at that.

Step 1: Knowledge

If you want to create something really good, you should learn a lot of effects and as many principles and methods as you can. These are going to be the foundation and building blocks for everything that you are going to create. So, it makes sense to be as knowledgeable and well versed in all areas and fields of magic or mentalism, even if they are not your direct interest. For example, I don't do stage illusions or kids shows, but understanding the principles used in those platforms may come in handy. Even in a close-up mentalism piece, this expanded knowledge can help foster out of the box thinking and abstract solutions as you are not limited to exploring only traditional approaches. So it helps to know about black art, flaps, sleight of hand, magnets, adhesives, rough and smooth, thread (elastic, invisible, fishing line), dual reality, stage illusions,

etc. All of these principles will help you along the way. The bigger your toolbox is, the more it will help you problem solve and figure out the best solutions. Once you have built up a solid knowledge base of principles, you're ready to begin.

Step 2: The Puzzle

Creating magic is like solving a jigsaw puzzle. The final image of the completed puzzle is the effect. But when you zoom in for a closer look, you see all the individual puzzle pieces that comprise it. Each one represents a method, and they all come together to complete the illusion of the effect. However, you have to choose the right pieces that align in exactly the right places to solve the puzzle. Because there are many ways to achieve an effect, you have to find the BEST one!

Let's go through an example of creating an effect using the one I mentioned earlier - vanishing a card and having it reappear inside of the card box.

The first piece of the puzzle is the card vanish – how do we achieve that? Let's lay out all the puzzle pieces for different methods to accomplish this: double-stick tape, double facers, mis-indexes, rough and smooth, long and short cards, black art, palming, etc. Which one do I go with? At this point in the conception, it's unclear which to use, so let's put a pin in it and look at the following puzzle piece that has to fit in place next to it.

The card will have to appear inside the box. Do I use a duplicate already in the box? If so, I have to force a card... which means it can't be signed. Hmm, a signed card would be so much better in the context of the routine, so I definitely want it signed. We now just laid out our first bit of criteria, or conditions, for the effect. As we start to walk through the structure, we will keep adding more criteria as these stipulations make the effect stronger. Now that we have set the limitation that the card must be signed, we can revisit the first step of vanishing the card. Looking back at the potential methods, we can eliminate all those that do not work with a signed card. Of the methods we now have left, palming seems suitable, so let's go with that. What happens next in the effect?

We have to pick up the card box after the card has vanished. Well, it would be incredible if I could do that with *empty* hands, but we can't do that with a card palmed. Let's weigh if that is another bit of criteria that we want to add... yes it is. That means palming is no longer suitable and I'm apparently back to square one. This is not the time to get discouraged. We have to acknowledge that the more criteria we set, the more challenging it will be to find a solution, but it will result in a superior effect. This can take weeks, sometimes months... but you have to accept that it's part of the process. If you get stuck, just take a break and come back to it later – this is what writers do when they get writers block and the same applies here.

One of the biggest tips I can give is that the best time to come up with ideas is when you are laying in your bed right before you go to sleep. It's dark, quiet and peaceful - just you and your thoughts – no electronics or interruptions. As this is when the ideas naturally flow, I always keep a pad and pen on my bedside table and write my thoughts as they come. Sometimes I get too excited and hop out of bed and get to work!

Say one night the idea finally hits you for the card to box effect. (Let's pretend we're in a reality where David Stone never released *Tool*... and that's the method you thought of, which I'm not going to reveal here as it's not my method to teach, but it's great so buy it if you haven't). We finally did it! We have the method for vanishing a signed card and having it appear inside the

box while showing empty hands throughout. All the puzzle pieces have aligned while adhering to our strict criteria. The effect is now complete!

Step 3: Critical Assessment

I lied. The effect is nowhere near complete. Welcome to the most important phase of the process where we take our new pride and joy and try to rip it to shreds. This is the make or break point where good effects become great effects or where “good” effects hit the market as shit tricks that end up in your junk drawer.

So, first things first - let’s imagine that you didn’t create this effect, but it’s something you just bought with your hard-earned money. Ask yourself, what your initial thoughts would be. Ask yourself if you are happy with it. (If you are reading this, we will assume you are a seasoned magician, or a seasoned magic purchaser, and generally will know right away if this is something that will work for you, or if you are regretting your purchase.) With this viewpoint in mind, you can judge and be critical of your own effect. Identify the negative aspects and the weak points because they do exist – if you think they don’t, you need to check your ego at the door and look harder. No trick is perfect. Every trick that has ever been released has a downside. I can tell you the pros AND the cons of every trick I’ve ever created. So be honest with yourself and identify those negatives... now try to solve them!

Is it angle sensitive? Can I change the handling or modify the gimmick in any way to improve the angles? Does it end dirty? Can I modify the gimmick so maybe it detaches and then I can hand the object out? **Your goal is to eliminate as many of the cons as you can until the remaining ones are conditions you can live with.** An example of a negative condition you can live with is maybe it’s a force so it’s always the same outcome – I might be okay with that if the strength of the routine is so strong it justifies that condition. You will have to identify these acceptable conditions based on what you want to achieve out of the effect.

It helps to sit on an effect for a while and then come back to it with a fresh perspective. You will almost always find a new improvement when revisiting an older effect. Remember that effects only *improve* over time, they don’t get worse, so be patient. Once you are satisfied that you solved the issues, it’s time to jump to the next step.

Step 4: Perform

Perform it as much as you can and learn from your experiences, then revise and adapt accordingly. You are going to identify the negatives in the previous step by performing it live. The trick might fail one night – that’s actually a good thing! We want failures because they are the perfect learning opportunity to improve the effect. If something went wrong, examine where and why it happened, now find a modification so that will never happen again. Embrace failing, because without that happening, you would never have improved the effect to fix that issue.

Maybe after a few performances you see the reactions weren’t what you expected. What else can be changed to make it more impactful? This doesn’t have to be a mechanical fix but an adjustment to the presentation. Perhaps adding a pause at one point, or removing a scripted line can make all the difference.

Essentially you will be jumping back and forth between critical assessment and performing (steps 3 and 4) until finally the effect is what I refer to as **maxed out**. It has been refined to the

point where the negatives that are left are those conditions you can live with and you should be have something to be very proud of!

This is the core process I use to create an effect and it should be more than enough to get you started down the right path. With that said, this is only half of the journey as there's a lot more steps to creating magic that is memorable and stands out from the rest. This includes evaluating your motives, expressing your passions through your magic, learning the best approach to collaborating with others and how to share your ideas. In my [Penguin Live](#), I teach the full creativity crash course where I do a deep dive into the second half of the process, touching on all of the above topics in great detail. If you found this helpful and interesting, you may want to check that out (and learn some killer effects as well!).

You can also get an awesome FREE effect from me just for signing up to my email list [here](#) (I promise I don't spam you). I wish you a happy holidays and a great new year!