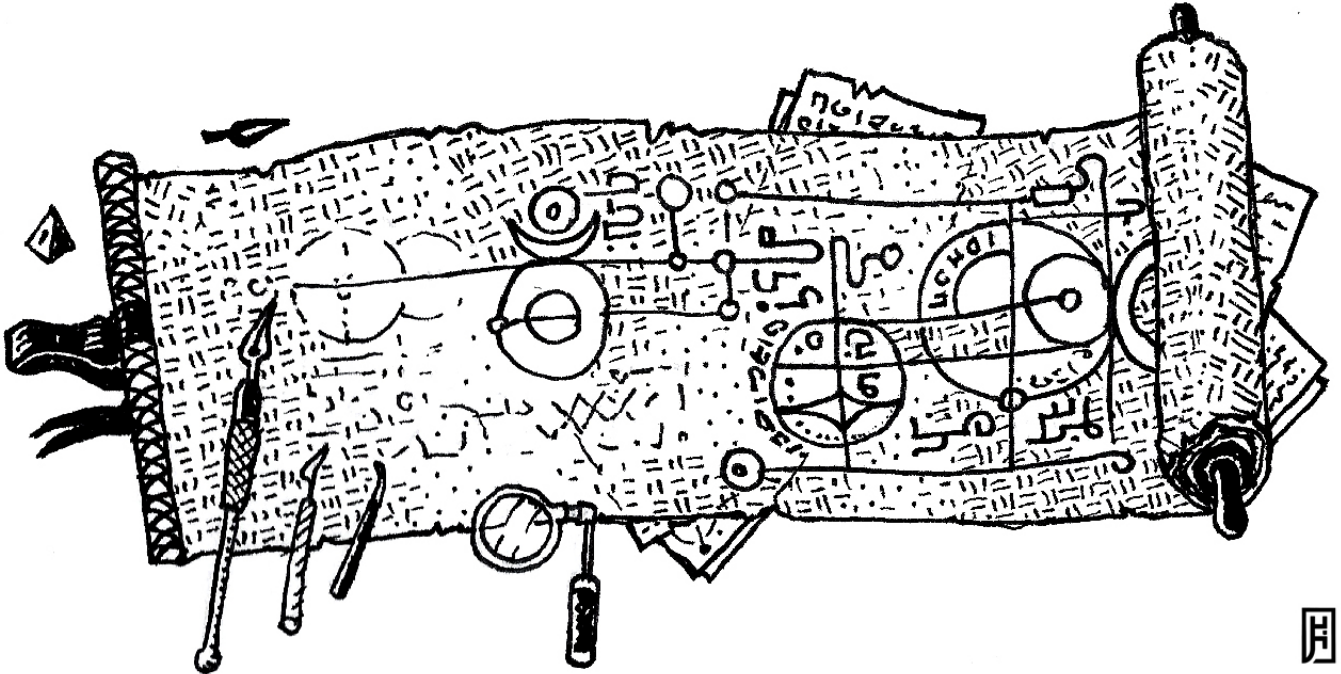This is a primer article on writing new spells for DCC.

Judge AMP's
Primer for Spellwrights

Description: I've written a number of spells for DCC and other systems as well during my career as a Judge and a GM. This is a sort of a checklist I've made for writing spells for DCC, along with reference notes on some rules details to save time. This article started as a list I made for personal use, but I've added some commentary and examples[1] for the benefit of the reader. This is obviously my subjective process for writing up a spell, and you should feel free to do whatever works for you.

General Spell Design Structure:

1. Spell Basics – Effect, Potency and Source
2. Spell Core – Caster Class, Spell Level and General Description
3. Spell Effects – Result Structure
4. Spell Details – Range, Duration, Casting Time, Save & Disclaimers
5. Finishing Touches – Manifestation, Corruption and Misfire

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1   I'll use *Animal form* spell published previously on KitN (available here) as a reference example where appropriate.

1. Spell Basics – Effect, Potency and Source

Obviously before anything else can happen, you need to know what you want the spell to do, in general terms. You also should have an estimate about the potency of the spell. For example, a spell that shoots fire can vary wildly in potency, generating a flame dart, a fireball or a flaming inferno. So start by figuring out what the average desirable result of the spell should be. This is DCC of course and the spell result system can make things wildly swingy, but I usually start with an idea of the average result and go from there.

At this point it can be useful to consider where the spell gets its power from as well. The basic distinction is between divine and arcane: is the spell a gift from a god, or an ancient secret wrested from a forgotten civilization? Or put even more simply, are you writing a cleric or a wizard spell? The difference is mostly ephemeral as the spell lists overlap to begin with, but the source bears consideration at this point nonetheless, particularly if you're writing up a patron spell or a spell for both casting traditions.

> *Example:* With *Animal Form*, I started with the old trope of witches and wizards shapeshifting into animals. I wanted the spell to mainly be a personal effect on the caster and to primarily allow shapeshifting into mundane animals: this was to be a utility spell, rather than something used to win battles. As I wanted the spell to play out well with the druid[2] class we published last spring I figured that the source of the magic is simply a primal connection between living things. So at this point we have a shapeshifting spell of fairly mediocre potency, keyed with arcane and primitive casters in mind.

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2. Spell Core – Caster Class, Spell Level and General Description

The second step starts with choosing a caster class for the spell: this should be easy, since we know what the spell does, how powerful it generally is and where the power comes from. We want to choose the class now so that we can do benchmarking and compare our spell concept to others on the class spell list. Comparing the spell to others in the rulebook allows us to figure out the desired level of our spell and assures us that we actually need to write up a spell in the first place. I for one don't want my new spells to overlap too much with stuff that's in the core rules as you can get pretty far by just tweaking and reflavoring the existing spells if needed.

Since we should have a general level of potency in mind from our previous contemplation, now that we have decided on a caster class and a spell list we can figure out the level of our spell. First thing to do is to check out for similar spells on the spell list, as you don't really want two spells that do the same thing on the same spell level. The second step is to estimate the level of your spell based on its potency when compared to others in the book.

Finally, it makes sense to write down the general description of the spell at this point, as the next step is to start working on the specific spell check results, and it's good to have a baseline written down before that.

> *Example:* With *Animal form,* we basically chose the caster class during the initial description of the spell: its a wizard spell, and should be compared against that list (although I'll certainly allow it for cleric's of Ildavir and druids). Comparing it to the wizard list, the closest functional parallel is *Polymorph* at level 4, which can generally target others and can transform creatures into any other

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2   Available here on KitN.

creatures, not just animals. Scanning down, level 3 is already making magic swords and turning things into stone, and that doesn't seem like a good benchmark, so we go further down to level 2. *Invisibility* is quite a powerful utility spell, so we'll use that as a benchmark for potency. After this step we've settled on a level 2 wizard spell, with the general description of "*Using powerful magics, the caster transforms into an animal.*"

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3. Spell Effects — Result Structure

This part is obviously where most of the work goes in when writing a spell. See the below tables (A and B) for spell result ranges for each level for wizard and cleric spells. These are copied from the DCC rulebook for reference, so that I can copy and paste the result range into the spell base document. Note that the spell result ranges for both lists are very similar, and vary only very slightly at a few points.

Remember that there's nothing stopping you from tweaking the result ranges to better suit whatever spell you're building. There's two things I tend to pay attention to when tweaking the success ranges. First, the lowest successful result and the ultimate success result should remain level appropriate. Secondly, there usually are eight success levels to a spell (5th level cleric spells being the exception). Tweaking the number of success levels down makes the spell more reliable, and increasing it makes the spell more random; adding or removing one success level generally has very little effect on the overall functionality of the spell, but may ease writing up the spell considerably.

Obviously, the particulars of the spell being made affect this portion of the process the most, and it's hard to give out concrete advice on how to figure out spell results exactly in a general primer like this. Low and minor results pretty much do what the spell is supposed to be doing, but clearly not to its full potential. Mediocre results should be solid and acceptable, and the greater the success is the more additional value can be tacked on to the result.

Ultimate results are often gamebreaking and voluminous, and many of the rulebook examples call for heavy arbitration from the Judge as to the final effect Either the spell succeeds beyond all expectation, or perhaps the caster has invoked powers far beyond their control to a disastrous effect. I generally view the ultimate results of spells as a chance to break the general functionality of the spell, as you can read in the *Animal form* example below.

At this point it is useful to consider the variables that are affected by the spell as dictated by its general function, and formulating a gradual increase of effect based on the spell check result chain. Variables tend to be simple things such as damage, armor, spell duration, or number of targets, but can also be harder to define and leave space for table negotiation and Judge's discretion. All this ultimately depends on what type of a spell you're building, and at this point it is generally useful to refer to the benchmark spells already found in the rulebook to work out the specifics.

Wizard spell fumbles are of special note here, as the results vary slightly between levels. Refer to the table below for examples (Table C). Also note that *Invoke patron* results generally follow the result progression for 1st level wizard spells, but are the results are generally much more varied than the results of basic spells.

Finally, some spells allow the caster to select a lower result after successfully casting, or may allow or force the caster to default to a low result instead of triggering a higher one. These are most often utility spells with varied effects (such as *Force manipulation* and *Ropework*) or have other special limits for casting (such as *Dispel magic*). This is generally a feature found on wizard spells, and makes the spell more reliable to cast while at the same time allowing it to have unexpected or extremely varied effects under the right conditions.

Table A: Wizard Spell Result Ranges					
Result	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
Fumble.	1	1	1	1	1
Failure & loss.	2-11	2-11	2-11	2-11	2-11
1st level: Lowest success. All others: Failure, spell is not lost	12-13	12-13	12-15	12-17	12-17
Low success.	14-17	14-15	16-17	18-19	18-19
Minor success	18-19	16-19	18-21	20-23	20-23
Mediocre success.	20-23	20-21	22-23	24-25	24-25
Mediocre success	24-27	22-25	24-26	26-28	26-28
Great success.	28-29	26-29	27-31	29-33	29-33
Great success.	30-31	30-31	32-33	34-35	34-35
1st level: Ultimate success. All others: Great success.	32+	32-33	34-35	36-37	36-37
Ultimate success.	–	34+	36+	38+	38+

Table B: Cleric Spell Result Ranges					
Result	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
Failure.	1-11	1-13	1-15	1-17	1-19
Low success.	12-13	14-15	16-17	18-19	20-21
Minor success.	14-17	16-19	18-21	20-23	22-25
Mediocre success.	18-19	20-21	22-23	24-25	26-27
Mediocre success.	20-23	22-25	24-26	26-27	28-29
Great success.	24-27	26-29	27-31	28-33	30-35
Great success.	28-29	30-31	32-33	34-35	36-37
5th level: Ultimate success. All others: Great success.	30-31	32-33	34-35	36-37	38+
Ultimate success.	32+	34+	36+	38+	–

Example: At this point we know that *Animal form* is a 2nd level wizard spell, the primary function of which is to allow the caster to shapeshift temporarily into an animal. I copied the result ranges for 2nd level wizard spells, and fleshed out a rough outline of effects based on the spread. The core variables for this spell are function and time: what the caster can change into, and how long does the transformation last.

I decided that I wanted the lowest result to be a partial success, which would allow the caster access to a single feature of an animal they desire and decided that the caster can always default to this result should they desire. This allows for guaranteed utility for a successful casting, and averts potential disaster later on: should the caster roll a result shifting them into a lizard while in a snowstorm for example, they can revert to the lowest result instead of instantly freezing to death due to all of a sudden being ectothermic.

I then divided the following results between mammals, lizards and amphibians and birds: these are the core desired results for the spell, allowing shapeshifting into useful forms in many situations. For the great success range I decided to allow for greater choice in animal, and included magical beasts as options. At this point I figured that the spell didn't really benefit from all of the granularity of the basic success chain, so I removed one level of success from the top end, and redivided the range so that the low and mediocre results became more likely. Comparing the spell to *Polymorph*, it seemed obvious to further limit target range with CL and target animal's HD.

To round things off I decided that the ultimate result of the spell should allow the caster to affect other targets with the spell as well. Since the spell is only 2nd level, I limited this to willing targets within a fairly short range to curb the use of the spell as a combat trick.

Duration I decided to simply tie to caster level. Casting the spell already requires a fair bit of negotiation and discussion between the player and the Judge (what animal features function how when transplanted on a human, what is a 4 HD lizard, what are the stats and abilities of a mongoose, and so on…). I decided to eschew spending table time on an additional die roll just to make the spell run a little smoother.

Table C: Wizard spell fumble effects	
Level	**Fumble effect**
1	Lost, failure and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; 1-2 corruption; (3+) misfire.
2-4	Lost, failure and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1-2) corruption; (3) patron taint (or corruption if no patron); (4+) misfire.
5	Lost, failure and worse! Roll 1d6 modified by Luck: (0 or less) corruption + patron taint + misfire; (1-3) corruption; (4) patron taint (or corruption if no patron); (5+) misfire.

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4. Spell Details – Range, Duration, Casting Time, Save & Disclaimers

This part of the process should be fairly easy. After figuring out the spell results you should already have an idea of the various details of the spell. Range is largely defined by the spell's potency, and may vary within the result structure as well; refer to benchmark spells when in doubt. This applies to the spell's duration as well. If the spell applies these as variables within the result structure you've already hopefully figured them out during the previous step.

Casting time usually varies between 1 action and 1 round; spells with longer casting times are generally summoning magics, or have a ritual component as part of their result structure. These should be figured out based on the potency and utility of the spell; using benchmarks is useful here as well.

Potential saving throws against the spell should be obvious from the spell's functionality: mind affecting effects should grant a Will save, attack spells should allow for a Ref save, and bodily effects should allow for a Fort save.

The spell is now almost complete, so it's useful and polite to make sure that the function of the magic is clearly stated in the description. Usually this means extending the general description of the spell to include additional notes on the casting, and including clarifying statements on the spell's intended function. These disclaimers are primarily intended to save the Judge's time by covering potential loopholes in the spell's design, and pointing out key rulings on specific uses of the spell. Special conditions for casting the spell should be noted now as well, such as material components or environmental bonuses and limitations.

> **Example:** *Animal form* already has it's range and duration defined in the spell result table. Save is obvious as well, since the spell can only be cast on the wizard or a limited number of willing targets, and anyone affected by the spell can end the effect at will.
>
> For casting time, I decide on 1 action, as I want the spell to have the function of acting as a possible escape in a tight spot, or a surprise move against the enemy. A quick casting time means that the caster can change into a bird and fly away from enemies, or turn into a rhino to surprise them.
>
> I know from experience that this sort of a spell allows for a lot of interpretation, so I add some disclaimers. I decide that the hit points of whatever shape the caster assumes become their hit points, and if they drop to 0 HP while transformed, they should suffer the consequences. This does have the niche effect of making it possible for a caster to heal themselves by shifting to an animal with a ton of hit points and shifting back, but that's mitigable as wizards have such low HP pools to begin with (and I think that these sort of interpretational loopholes are part of the beauty of how DCC spells are generally designed). I also add a note in the general spell description about caster's being free to choose the lowest successful result, and a suggestion on limiting potential targets to those the caster has some knowledge of.
>
> Looking at the results, I come to the conclusion that the partial transformation result could do with a little clarification. This has to do with the level and potency of the spell: it is not intended as a direct replacement for *Fly* or *Waterbreathing*, although it can achieve similar goals.. I solve this by making the transformation a replacement effect: lungs transforming into gills allows for underwater breathing, but removes the ability to breath air and arms changing into wings may allow flight, but should likely remove the ability to cast spells as gestures and somatic components become impossible without fingers. Further calls are left to the Judge's discretion, but the intention of the spell is clarified.
>
> As a final note, I add a footnote considering Judge's discretion and magical beasts. Fantasy worlds and interpretation vary so much that this is necessary: for example, I'd consider a drake a magical beast,

while a dragon would be something different and outside of the intended scope of the spell due to its sapience.

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5. Finishing Touches – Manifestation, Corruption and Misfire

At this point, the spell is functional and could be taken to the table, but we're still missing the ever important flavour elements. Manifestation applies to both wizard and cleric spells and describes the specific effects which occur when the magic is cast. Generally, spells have 1d4 manifestation options, although some simple spells have less. Alternately, some spells have the manifestation tied to spell check results and a couple allow the caster to describe the spell's manifestation each time. These elements are mostly cosmetic, although very important to the theater of the mind.

Wizard spells have the additional element of corruption and misfire, both of which can be replaced by generic effects from the rulebook (pgs. 116-120). Corruption effects alter the caster in some permanent fashion ranging from cosmetic to debilitating, at rare times producing niche beneficial results. The number of corruption options ranges from 1d4 to up to 1d16 or so, and the roll is sometimes weighed towards certain results. Generally, corruption effects are somehow related to the spell's intended function.

Misfire results are usually immediate calamities occurring in the vicinity of the caster: a misfire is a spell gone wrong. Spells usually have 1d3 to 1d6 misfire options ranging from comical to downright lethal. Again, misfire results should have something to do with the spell's intended function.

Generally, when coming up with these three elements you should feel free to be as imaginative and surprising as you like. Also, there's quite a bit of leeway ironing these elements out: manifestations are cosmetic so the gameplay effect is always mitigable, and both corruptions and misfires happen rarely enough that extensive and detailed write ups are counterproductive, especially as Judge's are likely to tweak the results to their own ends anyway. Providing fuel for interaction and imagination is the key here.

> ***Example:*** *Animal form* is a wizard spell, so I'll need to come up with all three elements to finish the write up. It's getting late, so I decide on a shortlist of three manifestations. The corruption effects are fairly easy to come up with as the spell itself deals with transforming the caster's body, and for precisely that reason I make the call to include the dangerous major and greater corruptions as options here. Meddling with your natural form should have the risk of turning yourself into a pile of tentacles! Finally, I add an average number of 1d4 misfire results, comprised of half comedy and half added danger.