How do magicians do it? The eight secrets behind every magic trick

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Almost every magic trick ever invented is one of eight ideas. Here is what each one is, how it works, and an easy trick for kids to try for every single one.

Magicians have thousands of tricks, and here is the secret about the secrets: almost every one of them is one of eight ideas. Once you can name the eight, you stop watching magic the way an audience does and start watching it the way a magician does — and you know which trick to learn next.

My kids asked me how magicians do it about four times a week for a fortnight, so this week I built the Peabody Magic Shop: twenty-eight real tricks a child can do with a pencil, a coin, a deck of cards or a glass of water, with the secret explained on every page. Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, and the Magic Shop needs no sign-up at all. Sorting those twenty-eight tricks meant putting each one into a box, and the boxes turned out to be the best answer to the question.

The eight kinds of magic trick

- Kind: Vanish · What the audience sees: Something disappears · Where the secret usually is: Hidden in a hand, a fold or a pocket — or it was never where you thought · Try it: The Coin Fold
- Kind: Production · What the audience sees: Something appears from nowhere · Where the secret usually is: It was hidden all along, and revealed at the right moment · Try it: Secret Message Ink
- Kind: Transformation · What the audience sees: Something changes · Where the secret usually is: A switch, a secret ingredient, or science · Try it: The Arrow Flip
- Kind: Transposition · What the audience sees: Something jumps from one place to another · Where the secret usually is: Two identical objects, or a clever count · Try it: The Jumping Rubber Band
- Kind: Levitation · What the audience sees: Something floats · Where the secret usually is: A hidden finger, thumb or support, and a strict angle · Try it: The Floating Pencil
- Kind: Penetration · What the audience sees: Something passes through something solid · Where the secret usually is: The solid thing is not as solid as it looks · Try it: Walk Through a Paper
- Kind: Restoration · What the audience sees: Something broken is whole again · Where the secret usually is: Usually a second, unbroken object · Try it: Thumb Off
- Kind: Prediction · What the audience sees: You knew all along · Where the secret

usually is: Maths that always lands on the same answer, or a forced choice · Try it: The Magic Number 1089

1. Vanish: making something disappear

The object does not go anywhere. It gets hidden in a hand, a fold of paper, a sleeve or a pocket — or, more often than you would think, it was never where the audience believed it was.

The gentlest way into this is the Coin Fold, where a coin is wrapped in paper, everybody gets to feel that it is still in there, and then the paper is torn to pieces and the coin has gone. The secret is that the folds leave one edge open. The reason it fools people is not the fold: it is that they touched the packet.

2. Production: making something appear

The mirror image of a vanish, and often the same trick run backwards. The object was hidden the whole time; the skill is choosing the exact moment to reveal it.

Secret Message Ink is the kindest version for a young child, because the production is a message rather than an object: baking soda dries invisible, and grape juice painted over the top turns it a different colour. It is also, quietly, an acid-and-base lesson.

3. Transformation: making something change

A switch, a secret ingredient, or — the most satisfying kind — real physics. The Arrow Flip takes about two minutes to learn: draw a thick arrow pointing right, stand a glass of water in front of it, and the arrow points left. A round glass of water is a lens, and a lens crosses the light over on its way to your eye.

4. Transposition: making something jump

Two things change places, or one thing turns up somewhere it cannot be. The Jumping Rubber Band is the classic: a band round two fingers jumps to the other two when the hand opens. It takes about fifteen minutes to get smooth, and it is the first trick most children learn that has a real secret move in it.

5. Levitation: making something float

On a stage, floating uses hidden supports, careful lighting and angles that stop you seeing what holds the weight. Close up, it is almost always a finger or a thumb you cannot see from the front — which is why a floating trick works beautifully from one direction and gives itself away completely from the side.

The Floating Pencil is the five-minute version, and it teaches the most important rule in magic along with it: know where your audience is standing.

6. Penetration: passing through something solid

Either the solid thing is not solid, or the hole is bigger than it looks. The Impossible Hole pushes a big coin through a hole the size of a small one, because folding the paper stretches a circle into a slit. Walk Through a Paper does the same thing on a grander scale: a few alternating cuts turn an index card into a ring you can step through, and it is the best finish for a show in the whole shop.

7. Restoration: fixing what was broken

Something is torn, cut or snapped, and then it is whole. Nine times out of ten there is a second, unbroken one involved. The exception is Thumb Off, where nothing is broken at all: two bent thumbs pressed together, and one of them stands in for the other.

8. Prediction and mind reading: knowing the answer

The one that unsettles people most, and the one that needs the least skill. Most prediction tricks are arithmetic. The Magic Number 1089 has a child pick their own three-digit number, do a subtraction and an addition, and land on a number you sealed in an envelope before they arrived — because a three-digit number minus its own reverse is always a multiple of 99, and every one of those plus its reverse is 1089.

The Grey Elephant Prediction is the strange one, because only the first half is maths. Any number from one to ten, times nine, digits added, minus five, is always four, which is the letter D. The rest is not arithmetic at all: it is that almost everybody asked for a D country says Denmark, then reaches for an elephant, then says grey.

The five tools behind all eight

- Misdirection. Deciding where people look, and what they remember afterwards. Not speed — attention.
- Sleight of hand. Secret moves, made invisible by practice rather than by being fast.
- Science. Surface tension, air pressure, refraction, static, fluorescence. The Potion Lab is the whole shelf of these.
- Maths. Number patterns that cannot fail, which is why they are the best tricks for a beginner.
- Storytelling. The words a magician says — the patter — which is what turns "a thing happened" into "that was impossible".

So is magic real?

The powers are not. The wonder is. That distinction matters more than it sounds, because once a child knows a trick is a made thing, they can make one — and that is a much better place to be than believing in it.

If yours wants to start, the Rubber Pencil takes a minute and needs a pencil, and there are thirty more questions about magic answered in plain words. Nothing in the shop needs buying, and what a child learns stays on their own device; the only thing sent is an anonymous count when a trick is marked as shown to somebody.

When the performing is done, the library is next door: there are stories to read about magicians, wizards and tricks, free through the end of 2026 like the rest of Peabody.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-do-magicians-do-tricks