Magic tricks for the classroom: five-minute brain breaks

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Fourteen maths magic tricks a teacher can do in five minutes, with the maths each one practises and a rough year group, plus how to turn one trick into a short lesson.

The best classroom magic tricks are maths tricks: five minutes, a board and a marker, a trick that works on any numbers the class picks, and real maths underneath that the class meets as a puzzle before anybody names it. The Peabody Magic Shop keeps a table of fourteen of them for teachers, each with the maths it practises and a rough year group. Perform one cold, let the class try to break it, then ask them why it can't be broken.

I built the Magic Shop for my own kids, and the maths tricks turned out to be the ones that travel. Every one of these fourteen has a "why it works" box written in a child's words, and the shop's grown-ups' page has a teachers' table that says which maths each trick is hiding. The table below is that one, with each trick's level, ages and learning time added from its page.

The fourteen

- Trick: The Magic Number 1089 · The maths in it: Place value, and reversing a three-digit number · Rough year group: Years 4 to 6 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 7 to 12 · Learn it in: 5 minutes
- Trick: The Secret Number Cards · The maths in it: Binary: every number built from 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 · Rough year group: Years 4 to 6 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 7 to 12 · Learn it in: 10 minutes
- Trick: The Lightning Calendar · The maths in it: The nine times table, and the middle of a square · Rough year group: Years 3 to 5 · Level: Conjurer · Ages: 8 to 13 · Learn it in: 15 minutes
- Trick: The Heads or Tails Mind Reader · The maths in it: Odd and even, and what one change does to a count · Rough year group: Years 2 to 4 · Level: Conjurer · Ages: 7 to 12 · Learn it in: 10 minutes
- Trick: The Birthday Mind Reader · The maths in it: Multiplying through brackets, and a constant left over · Rough year group: Years 5 to 7 · Level: Conjurer · Ages: 8 to 13 · Learn it in: 10 minutes
- Trick: The Answer Is Always 3 · The maths in it: Doing and undoing: inverse operations · Rough year group: Years 2 to 4 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 6 to 11 · Learn it in: 2 minutes
- Trick: The X-Ray Dice · The maths in it: Opposite faces of a die always add to seven · Rough year group: Years 2 to 4 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 5 to 10 · Learn it in: 3 minutes
- Trick: The Calculator Prediction · The maths in it: Factors, and why 12345679 × 63 does

that · Rough year group: Years 5 to 7 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 6 to 11 · Learn it in: 3 minutes
• Trick: The Countdown Card · The maths in it: Counting on and back to the same place · Rough year group: Years 2 to 4 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 6 to 11 · Learn it in: 5 minutes
• Trick: The Magic Clock · The maths in it: Counting round a dial: arithmetic that wraps · Rough year group: Years 3 to 5 · Level: Conjurer · Ages: 7 to 12 · Learn it in: 10 minutes
• Trick: The Nine Times Fingers · The maths in it: The nine times table, and why the digits of 9 × n add to 9 · Rough year group: Years 3 to 5 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 7 to 11 · Learn it in: 5 minutes
• Trick: The Knuckle Calendar · The maths in it: Months and days, and a pattern you can feel · Rough year group: Years 2 to 4 · Level: Apprentice · Ages: 6 to 10 · Learn it in: 5 minutes
• Trick: The Book Test · The maths in it: Place value again: why every reversal sum lands on 1089 · Rough year group: Years 6 to 8 · Level: Conjurer · Ages: 10 to 13 · Learn it in: 15 minutes
• Trick: The Instant Magic Square · The maths in it: Adding rows, columns and diagonals; working with an unknown · Rough year group: Years 6 to 8 · Level: Conjurer · Ages: 10 to 13 · Learn it in: 20 minutes

The year groups are the shop's, and rough on purpose: a trick is not a scheme of work, and a teacher knows their own class. The ages come from the US grades each trick is written for, the youngest grade plus five to the oldest plus six. Eight of the fourteen are Apprentice tricks, which work the first try; six are Conjurer tricks, which take ten to twenty minutes to learn. The first ten rows are also the shop's Top 10 classroom magic tricks.

Three for the board

If you only learn three, the guide to a magic brain break for the classroom picks these, because each needs a board and a marker and nothing else.

The Lightning Calendar. Draw a month. A child rings any square block of nine dates, and you say the total of all nine before anybody can add them. The why is lovely for a class: the numbers in the block sit evenly around the middle one, so the nine of them come to nine times the middle.

The Instant Magic Square. A child names any number from 30 to 99, and you fill in a four-by-four grid where every row, column and diagonal adds up to it. It takes twenty minutes to learn, the longest of the fourteen, and it is the one older classes argue about longest.

The Answer Is Always 3. Everybody thinks of a number, follows a few steps in their head, and lands on 3. It needs nothing at all, so it works on a walk to assembly as well as at the board.

A five-minute shape

The guide's shape is simple, and it is the one I'd use:

1. Do it cold. No build-up: draw the calendar, ask for the ring, give the answer.
2. Do it again. Different child, different numbers. The class starts to suspect it isn't luck.
3. Let them break it. Pairs try it on each other with their own numbers. It keeps working.
4. Ask why. In words for younger classes, in algebra for older ones. Most can get there with a hint, and the why-it-works box on each trick's page is there for the hint.

Five minutes is enough for one trick and the challenge. A whole lesson fits all three, with pairs trying them in the middle and the explanations at the end.

What you need, and what to leave at home

Three of the fourteen need nothing at all: the Answer Is Always 3, the Nine Times Fingers and the Knuckle Calendar. Six need paper and a pencil or marker, or the board, and one of those, the Book Test, also needs a chapter book. Two use a calculator and one a deck of cards. The Heads or Tails Mind Reader uses six coins and the X-Ray Dice three dice, and both carry the shop's choking note for children under four, which matters more in a mixed-age room or a younger sibling's classroom than in a Year 5 one.

Children performing for the class

A child who learns one of these at home can perform it as a brain break of their own. The guide calls it a short, low-stakes way to speak in front of a room, with a script on the trick page and an out if it goes wrong. Ask them to keep the secret afterwards, so the next performer gets a fresh audience. That is also the first promise of the Magician's Code.

To find a child one to perform, Pick me a trick asks four questions with three boxes each, and "A whole room" is an answer to the last one. The grown-ups' page has the teachers' table, the shop's safety promises and where to start.

Questions grown-ups ask

Does the trick spoil the maths, or the maths spoil the trick?

Neither, in my experience, if they come in that order. The trick goes first, so the class wants to know. The maths goes second, as the answer to a question they asked. All fourteen have their why on the page in plain words.

Which one for the youngest classes?

The X-Ray Dice is written from Kindergarten, and the Answer Is Always 3, the Countdown Card, the Calculator Prediction and the Knuckle Calendar from 1st grade. The year-group column puts most of those at Years 2 to 4.

Is any of this on a screen?

Only if you want it to be. Each trick's page shows the steps as little looping films, but every trick here is done with a board, paper, fingers or a few things from a drawer. The Magic Shop needs no sign-up, 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.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026. For the minutes after the brain break, the library has stories by reading level.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/magic-tricks-for-the-classroom