

Tarot for Beginners: A Nightly Oracle Guide

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Welcome

I've been reading tarot professionally for years, and the question I hear most from people just starting out isn't "what does this card mean" — it's "am I doing this right." You are. There's no secret handshake, no gatekept knowledge you're missing. Tarot is a language, and like any language, it gets easier the more you actually use it rather than just study it from a distance.

This book is the beginner's path I wish someone had handed me: where the deck actually came from, how it's built, what a reversed card really means (it's not what you think), a few spreads to start with, and how to build a practice that's actually yours rather than borrowed from someone else's rulebook.

Read it in order if you like structure, or skip straight to the chapter you need. Keep a deck nearby — reading about tarot only gets you so far. At some point you have to shuffle the cards.

Chapter 1: A Brief History of Tarot

Ask around and you'll hear tarot traced back to ancient Egypt, lost libraries, or secret societies guarding forbidden knowledge. It's a good story. It's also not what happened — and the real history is more interesting anyway.

A card game first. In the 1440s, in the courts of Milan and Ferrara, wealthy families commissioned hand-painted decks for a trick-taking game called *tarocchi*, similar in spirit to bridge. These decks added a fifth suit of 21 numbered trump cards, plus a single unnumbered card called the Fool, to the standard four-suit deck already common in Europe. That fifth suit became what we now call the Major Arcana. For roughly three hundred years, that's all tarot was: a game, with no divinatory meaning attached at all.

From game to divination. The turn toward fortune-telling happened in late 18th-century France. In 1781, a Swiss clergyman named Antoine Court de Gébelin published an essay claiming tarot's imagery encoded lost wisdom from ancient Egypt — a theory with no real evidence, but one that captured the public's imagination. Shortly after, a Parisian occultist working under the name Etteilla published the first deck designed specifically for

divination, and is generally credited as the first professional tarot reader. From there, tarot's identity as a fortune-telling tool grew alongside its life as a card game — both uses have coexisted ever since. (Ordinary tarocchi playing decks, with no occult meaning attached, are still made and played with today in parts of Europe.)

The deck most people picture. When someone imagines "a tarot card," they're almost always picturing one specific deck: the Rider–Waite–Smith, published in 1909. It was commissioned by Arthur Edward Waite and illustrated by artist Pamela Colman Smith, whose major contribution was giving every card in the deck — including all 56 Minor Arcana, which earlier decks usually left as plain suit symbols — a fully illustrated little scene. That single choice made the deck vastly easier to read intuitively, and it's why Rider–Waite–Smith imagery, or a close variant of it, still underpins most tarot decks made today.

So is tarot "ancient"? As a card game, yes — nearly 600 years old. As a divination tool, it's closer to 250 years old: old, but not Egyptian-mystery-school old. That doesn't make it any less worth doing. Tarot's value was never really about how far back it goes — it's about what happens when you actually sit with the cards and look at what they show you.

Chapter 2: How the Deck Is Built

Every tarot deck splits into two distinct sets: 22 Major Arcana and 56 Minor Arcana. New readers often treat all 78 cards as one undifferentiated pile, but the deck's two halves were built to describe different scales of life — and once you can feel the difference, a spread starts telling you far more than a single card ever could.

The 22 Major Arcana are the cards with names instead of just numbers and suits: The Fool, The Magician, The Tower, Death, The Star, The World, and so on, numbered 0 through 21. These are the deck's big-ticket cards — archetypal, once-in-a-while life events and turning points, not everyday texture. Traditionally the 22 Majors are read as a single continuous story called the Fool's Journey: The Fool (0) as the innocent setting out, moving through trials, love, loss, and transformation, and arriving at The World (21) as a completed cycle. You don't need to memorize the whole arc to read well, but it's useful context for why Major cards tend to feel weightier than everything else in the deck.

The 56 Minor Arcana are the deck's everyday cards, built almost exactly like an ordinary deck of playing cards: four suits, Ace through 10, plus four court cards (Page, Knight, Queen, King) per suit. Each suit carries its own element and territory:

- **Wands** — fire, ambition, creativity, action

- **Cups** — water, emotion, relationships, intuition
- **Swords** — air, thought, conflict, communication
- **Pentacles** — earth, money, work, the physical and material

Where a Major Arcana card tends to describe a defining chapter, a Minor Arcana card usually describes the day-to-day plot inside that chapter — a conversation, a financial decision, a mood, a small win or setback.

Reading them together. The real skill isn't memorizing 78 separate meanings — it's noticing the *balance* of Majors and Minors in a spread. A reading heavy with Majors is usually pointing at something significant: a real crossroads, a pattern too big to be about just one day. A reading made up mostly of Minors is more often about the ordinary mechanics of a situation — timing, logistics, a specific relationship dynamic — rather than a sweeping life theme. Neither is "better." They're answering different sizes of question, and a good reading usually needs both.

Chapter 3: The Major Arcana

Here are all 22 Major Arcana cards, in Fool's Journey order, with a concise upright meaning for each. Don't try to memorize this list — read through it once, then let repetition with an actual deck do the real teaching.

#	Card	Core Meaning
0	The Fool	New beginnings, leaping without a full map, innocence
I	The Magician	Resourcefulness, having every tool you need already in hand
II	The High Priestess	Intuition, hidden knowledge, quiet inner knowing
III	The Empress	Abundance, nurturing, creativity, fertility
IV	The Emperor	Structure, authority, stability, discipline
V	The Hierophant	Tradition, institutions, shared belief systems, mentorship
VI	The Lovers	Connection, values-based choice, alignment
VII	The Chariot	Willpower, drive, disciplined forward motion

#	Card	Core Meaning
VIII	Strength	Quiet courage, patience, mastering something through gentleness
IX	The Hermit	Introspection, solitude, seeking your own answer
X	Wheel of Fortune	Cycles, turning points, change outside your control
XI	Justice	Fairness, cause and effect, honest accounting
XII	The Hanged Man	Suspension, a new perspective from surrender, pause
XIII	Death	Endings that make room for something new, transformation
XIV	Temperance	Balance, integration, patient blending of opposites
XV	The Devil	Attachment, restriction, unhealthy patterns you can leave
XVI	The Tower	Sudden upheaval, a necessary collapse of something false
XVII	The Star	Hope, renewal, quiet faith after hardship
XVIII	The Moon	Uncertainty, intuition over logic, things not yet clear
XIX	The Sun	Joy, clarity, vitality, straightforward good fortune
XX	Judgement	Reckoning, a call to a higher purpose, reevaluation
XXI	The World	Completion, wholeness, a cycle successfully closed

Notice the arc: innocence (0) through trials, love, loss, and reckoning, landing on completion (21). That shape repeats at every scale — a single reading, a season, a life — which is part of why these 22 cards keep feeling relevant no matter how many times you draw them.

Chapter 4: The Minor Arcana

The 56 Minor Arcana cards are where the day-to-day texture of a reading lives. Four suits, each running Ace through 10, plus four court cards per suit.

Suit	Element	Territory
Wands	Fire	Ambition, creativity, action, passion projects
Cups	Water	Emotion, relationships, intuition, connection
Swords	Air	Thought, conflict, communication, decisions
Pentacles	Earth	Money, work, health, the physical and material

Within each suit, the numbered cards (Ace through 10) trace a loose arc: an Ace is a pure spark of that suit's energy — a new idea, feeling, thought, or resource, still unshaped. The middle numbers (4 through 7) tend to carry the complications: overextension, choices, small setbacks. The higher numbers (8 through 10) bring things toward a head, for better or worse, before the suit's story resets at the next Ace.

The court cards — Page, Knight, Queen, King, in each suit — are often the trickiest for new readers, because they can represent either an actual person in the situation or a way of approaching it:

- **Page** — a beginner's energy: curiosity, a message, someone (or some part of you) just starting to learn
- **Knight** — action and momentum, sometimes impulsive, chasing the suit's goal hard
- **Queen** — mature, inward mastery of the suit's energy — emotional intelligence, quiet competence
- **King** — mature, outward mastery — authority, control, leadership in that suit's domain

A quick way to start: when a court card shows up, ask whether it feels like a person you know (including yourself) before assuming it's purely symbolic. Often it's both at once.

Chapter 5: Reading Reversals

Few things spook new readers faster than a card landing upside-down. That reaction usually isn't warranted — a reversed card is simply one that comes out of the deck upside-down relative to the reader, nothing more mysterious than that. What it *means*

once reversed is where tarot readers genuinely disagree, and it's worth knowing the disagreement exists so two readers giving you different answers doesn't throw you.

Two schools of thought. The older approach treats a reversal as close to the opposite of the upright meaning, or as that meaning blocked, delayed, or turned inward. Under this reading, an upright Ten of Cups (family happiness) reversed might suggest disconnection at home; an upright Strength reversed might suggest self-doubt rather than confidence.

The more common approach among modern readers treats a reversal as the *same core meaning* as the upright card, just experienced differently — weaker, delayed, more internal, or showing its shadow side rather than its opposite. Under this reading, a reversed Strength card isn't "the opposite of strength" — it's strength that's quiet, private, or still being built rather than outwardly visible.

Or: not bad cards at all. A significant number of tarot readers, including many professionals, don't read reversals at all. They reinterpret every card upright and let its position in the spread — past, present, future; what's helping, what's working against you — carry the nuance instead. This is a completely valid choice, not a shortcut.

If you're just starting out, pick one approach — opposite meanings, softened/internalized meanings, or no reversals at all — and stay with it for a while before switching.

Consistency teaches you more than constantly changing systems. And whichever you choose, the most useful habit is asking what a reversal is *adding*, not what it's taking away. A reversed card is rarely a verdict; it's usually a prompt to look closer.

Chapter 6: Simple Spreads to Start With

A spread is just a layout — a set of positions, each asking a specific question, that you fill with cards. You don't need an elaborate spread to get something useful out of a reading. Start small.

The single card draw. Ask one clear question, shuffle, pull one card. This is the best spread for building fluency, because it forces you to sit with one card's full meaning instead of splitting your attention across several. Pull one most mornings and you'll know the deck cold within a couple of months.

The three-card spread. The most flexible spread in tarot, because you can assign the three positions however the question calls for: Past / Present / Future, or Situation / Action / Outcome, or Mind / Body / Spirit. Decide what the three positions mean *before* you draw, not after — otherwise you'll unconsciously bend the cards to fit whatever story you already expected.

The Celtic Cross. The classic ten-card spread, and worth knowing even if you don't use it often. It covers the present situation, the immediate challenge, the conscious and subconscious influences, the recent past and near future, your own approach, outside influences, hopes or fears, and a final outcome. It's a lot to hold at once as a beginner — don't reach for it until the single card and three-card spreads feel comfortable. When you're ready, this site's tarot table has all three spreads built in, so you can practice without dealing physical cards until you're ready to.

Whatever spread you use, write down what you drew and what you thought it meant at the time. You'll be a more accurate reader in six months than you are today, and the only way to notice that improvement is to have a record to look back on.

Chapter 7: Building Your Own Practice

Reading tarot well isn't about memorizing 78 fixed definitions — it's a skill you build the same way you'd build any other: repetition, reflection, and a bit of ritual to mark the difference between "just flipping cards" and actually paying attention.

Keep a journal. Even a few lines per draw — the question, the card, what you noticed — does more for your fluency than any book, including this one. Patterns you can't see day to day become obvious a few months in.

Build a small ritual around it. You don't need candles and incense unless you want them (though there's nothing wrong with wanting them). Even just shuffling somewhere quiet, taking a breath before you ask your question, and putting the deck away with intention afterward is enough to signal to yourself that this is a different kind of attention than scrolling your phone.

Reading for yourself vs. reading for others. Reading for yourself is harder than it looks, because you already know what answer you're hoping for, and it's easy to bend a card toward it without noticing. Reading for someone else is often more revealing precisely because you have no stake in the outcome. If you want to test how you're really doing, practice on a friend who'll tell you honestly whether it landed.

Knowing when to book a professional reading. Your own practice will take you far, but there's real value in an outside reader sometimes — someone with no personal investment in the answer, more spread experience, and the ability to ask a question from an angle you're too close to see. That's true even for people who read for a living themselves; every reader benefits from being read for occasionally. If you ever want that, a live reading is always available through The Nightly Oracle.

Closing

A short glossary of terms that come up constantly once you start reading more widely:

Term	Meaning
Arcana	Latin for "secrets" — the deck's two card groups, Major and Minor
Spread	A layout of positions, each with its own meaning, that you fill with drawn cards
Upright / reversed	A card's orientation as drawn — right-side up or upside-down
Court card	Page, Knight, Queen, or King — the four "people" cards in each Minor suit
Significator	A card chosen ahead of time to represent the querent (the person being read for)
Querent	The person a reading is for — yourself or someone else

Where to go from here. This book covers the essentials, but there's more depth on thenightlyoracle.com whenever you want it — deeper guides on the individual arcana, moon rituals, crystal work, and a weekly blog covering whatever's shifting in the sky and the cards. There's also a free tarot table on the site if you want to practice a draw without a physical deck in hand, and a newsletter if you'd like the next post to find you instead of the other way around.

However far you take this — a once-in-a-while curiosity or a daily practice — the cards reward the same thing they always have: actually paying attention. Shuffle often.