The Architecture of Tarot

Ad Astra Tarot — Independent Study Guide

Learning the Language, Developing the Reader

A relationship with the deck

Here is how I advise an independent study: choose a deck that speaks to you and begin a relationship with it. Bring your curiosity, your associations, your questions, and the life you have already lived. You are learning to interpret energy through tarot, and your own capacity to notice is part of that study from the beginning.

The meaning is what we are looking for. Definitions give us something to study and return to, but the image is where the encounter begins. There is a whole inner world moving inside a card: something reaching, something receiving, something concealed, something ready to change. Sometimes you recognize that movement before you have the language to explain it. Stay there long enough to notice what has your attention.

1. Choose the deck you want to return to

Your deck does not have to be Rider–Waite–Smith, and nobody has to give it to you. Start with the cards already in your hands, or choose a deck whose visual language makes you curious enough to keep looking.

Some shops have sample decks you can handle, even when the decks for sale are sealed. Online, browse the artwork and notice what you keep coming back to. You may discover that you have saved the same deck twice. There is information in that repetition. Before buying, look for images of the whole deck, including the numbered Minors and the Courts, so you can see whether the relationship continues beyond the cover and a few beautiful Majors. Make sure you are choosing a tarot deck if tarot is what you intend to study.

I think of this as activating your own cellular programming: waking the inner language of recognition you already carry. A story, a character, a memory, or a symbol can open a door. If Yoda brings the wise teacher to life for you, use that association. Notice what he helps you recognize in the card, then return to the image and see what else is there. If an association is meaningful and adds depth, use it.

2. Learn to see the relationships

A symbol does not arrive alone. It lives in a posture, a landscape, a gesture, a relationship. A bird, a cage, and a reaching hand tell a story together that the phrase “bird equals spirit” cannot hold by itself. Is the hand opening the cage, reaching into it, or keeping the bird inside? Are the wings folded or released? Where is the movement, and what is responding to it?

Look at what the figures are doing with what they hold. Sharing, enclosing, receiving, grasping, and releasing tell you how the energy is being expressed. A pleasant face can be holding something too tightly; a frightening image can reveal the moment something begins to loosen. Notice what moves inward or outward, what is illuminated or hidden, and what feels hopeful or ominous. Let those impressions become questions you explore in context.

Other symbolic languages can deepen this conversation. An astrological association, a number, or a familiar myth may reveal another layer. A correspondence opens a door between two languages; it becomes restrictive when we insist that every word in one must have exactly one equivalent in the other. Allow the connection to teach you something without forcing the systems to become identical.

3. Begin reading while you study

Begin throwing spreads right away. You do not have to finish memorizing the deck before you are allowed to listen. Keep the spread simple enough that you can follow what is happening, let your intuition take the wheel, and put words to what you notice. Then study the cards and compare.

Practice with people you know who are willing to participate. Familiar circumstances give you something concrete to compare with your impressions, but be honest about what you already knew and what you noticed through the reading. Knowing someone’s story can help you find your bearings; it can also steer what you expect to see. The point is to become better acquainted with your compass.

4. Read the ecology of the spread

Before you go card by card, take in the whole field. Whatever the number of cards, glance at the spread and notice its tone. Where is there movement, tension, stillness, repetition? Where are the Majors, and what is happening around them? Sometimes you can see that things are FUBAR before you can explain each piece. Clock it, then slow down and look at what gave you that impression.

Notice the direction of the story. A spread that begins with The Tower and moves toward The World has a different progression from one that begins with The World and moves toward The Tower. The surrounding cards and the context help you understand what that movement means. Look for what is developing, what is repeating, and where the energy appears to open or contract.

Now walk through the cards as a sentence. Let one image speak to the next. Notice which card you keep coming back to; it may be a Major or a Minor. That recurring pull can identify a focus worth exploring. A designated center card, a position representing the querent—the person receiving the reading—or a prominent Major may also give you an entry point. Follow the relationship that makes the spread more legible.

5. Make room for the guidance

A general spread gives both you and the person receiving the reading room to see the wider picture. People often arrive fixed on a person of interest or a question they want answered immediately. Their concern matters, but it may be only one part of what is asking for attention. Give yourself enough perspective to see the environment around it.

Read what you see, trust yourself enough to name it, and remain open to clarification. Let the person's questions inform the conversation without allowing a hoped-for answer to dictate the reading. Guidance gives them more room to understand their circumstances and choose how they will respond.

You are going to have to get comfortable with the tricky subjects, too. There is a certain kind of bravery in sitting with someone in their Tower moments with the Devil on their back. You do not have to rush them out of the discomfort or make the imagery more frightening than it is. You do have to be present, clear, and careful with what you say. People come to this work with their most vulnerable material. This is stewardship and sacred work, and it is our duty to treat it with reverence.

6. Give your independent study a rhythm

Move through these studies at a pace your life can hold. The time frame depends on the time you have to give, and practice belongs alongside every stage. You can return to the same cards repeatedly and discover more because you have changed, your attention has changed, or the context has given you something new to see.

Study the Major Arcana

Give the Majors your devotion and study them well. They are the mythic scale of the deck: the archetypal forces of consciousness. Spend time with each image, its symbols, and the relationships within it. Notice what you recognize immediately, what you resist, and what remains mysterious. Then look at the Majors together and consider how the journey changes from one encounter to the next.

Compare the numbered Minors across the suits

Lay out the Twos together, then the Threes, and continue through the Tens. Look for a shared numerical pattern and notice how differently it appears in each suit. What does the number help you recognize? What does the element change? Record the similarities and the differences so that numerology becomes something you can see working through the images.

Walk each suit from Ace to King

Now gather one complete suit and follow it from its Ace through the numbered cards and into the Courts. Begin with the Ace as the elemental intelligence before circumstance complicates it. Watch that intelligence enter the lived moods and situations of the numbered Minors, then notice how it becomes character, agency, and maturity in the Courts. Repeat the walk with each suit and compare the ways its energy develops.

Notice the embodiment of the Courts

Spend time comparing the Pages, Knights, Queens, and Kings. Look at how each figure holds, approaches, or uses the suit's energy. What changes in posture, attention, movement, and relationship? Then compare the same Court across the four suits. You are studying different ways of conducting ourselves and wielding what we have learned.

Practice, reflect, return

Keep reading throughout your study. After a spread, record what caught your attention, what you said, what the context clarified, and what you want to revisit. Bring those observations back to the cards. The study feeds the practice, and the practice gives the study somewhere to live.