

Awareness of Abilities

If there's one thing I've learned with seven years of *World of Warcraft* under my belt, it's that anyone can play decently enough to quest through the world, but the difference between a *kick-ass* player and a not-so-kick-ass player lies in how well they know how (and when!) to use their abilities. That kind of seems like a no-brainer, I know, but let me explain what I mean.

In the original version of WoW, also known as "Vanilla", I raided primarily as a hunter and my preferred specialization was Marksmanship, which was also *the* raiding spec for a hunter. In *Burning Crusade*, I started to raid primarily as my holy paladin, but I knew that the primary raiding spec for hunters had become Beast Mastery. Let us be clear: I hated Beast Mastery. I hated buffing my pets with my talents instead of *me*. I just never enjoyed the playstyle, either. (Heck, I still hate Beast Mastery.) However, on some nights, the raid group would have eight or nine healers available while missing some ranged DPS. This was back before *dual specialization* existed, so it was often a lot easier for someone to just hop on to another character to fill a gap. Since my hunter had some crafted gear from my Leatherworking profession, my hunter was one of the best-gearred non-raiding characters in the guild. Plus, I actually knew how to play the character, since I'd raided extensively on the hunter in Vanilla. So, on more than one occasion, since we had a bunch of healers online, I'd make the swap to my hunter for the evening and would always respect to Beast Mastery, because I knew that was *the* spec to be. One such evening was the night that my raid group killed Teron Gorefiend in Black Temple. Despite being behind on gear, because I'd kept up on how to *play* as a Beast Mastery hunter (even though I hated it), I performed within the top ten DPS on the fight and we succeeded in downing Gorefiend, going 4/9 in BT.

But success does not just come from knowing the spec, although that's a big part of being effective as a player. Success comes from knowing the abilities that come with your chosen specialization. In many cases, this also means *tracking* a lot of ability use.

Tracking Cooldowns

The default *World of Warcraft* user interface shows no numbers to notify you when you can next use various abilities. Instead, the icon representing the ability is darkened and, in a clockwise movement, slowly brightens again. When the ability is fully brightened, usually accompanied by a flash of sorts, you can use the ability again.

This is not remotely efficient. Sometimes you really need to know *exactly* when that ability is going to be available again, such as group buffs like Heroism

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(Blood Lust, Time Warp) or an in-combat resurrection, like a druid's Rebirth, a death knight's Raise Ally or a warlock's Soulstone. So how do raiders get around this limitation of the default user interface? Many choose to use addons that serve as cooldown and ability timers. My personal choice is OmniCC (<http://www.curse.com/addons/wow/omni-cc>) but there are a variety of other options, including, but not limited to, DoTimer (<http://www.curse.com/addons/wow/do-timer>), ForteXorcist (<http://www.curse.com/addons/wow/fortexorcist>) and WeakAuras2 (<http://www.wowace.com/addons/weakauras-2/>). Bear in mind that DoTimer, ForteXorcist and WeakAuras2 all also have a variety of other uses and purposes and I do highly recommend them for other reasons. As for OmniCC, this is the major difference you'll see:



Once your cooldown hits five seconds, the numbers OmniCC puts on top of the abilities turn red, to indicate things are almost off their cooldowns. However, things that go on cooldown for longer than a minute don't get 120s or 300s countdowns, they get something that looks like this:

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So you can see that my Guardian of Ancient Kings (a five-minute cooldown) had four minutes left, as did Hand of Protection, while Lay on Hands had eight minutes left before I could use it again and Divine Favor had just two minutes remaining. And Divine Plea was at 35 seconds before I could use it again.

Knowing, down to the second, when you can hit a button again is key. The absolute best example I can personally think of again comes from the heroic-mode Majordomo Staghelm encounter in the Firelands. There was a moment in which the tank was supposed to take an insane amount of damage from one of Staghelm's abilities, Flame Scythe. Normally, this kind of damage wouldn't be survivable without a ridiculous amount of external cooldowns from other players, but a paladin tank could use their Ardent Defender ability to take that much damage. That gave the raid group precious extra seconds to damage the boss before we had to spread out. Using both boss mod timers and personal ability timers allowed the paladin tank to let me know if Ardent Defender, which was on a three-minute cooldown, would be available for the next Flame Scythe or not, which, in turn, allowed me to make an informed decision as to whether the raid should stay in for the Scythe or run out. Staying in was, as mentioned, beneficial, because it allowed us to get another ten or so seconds of damage on the boss without running out, thereby losing damage time on the boss. The enrage timer on Majordomo Staghelm was tight, to be sure. It was a 10-minute enrage and, on our first kill, we killed him with 23 seconds to spare. Granted, it wasn't the cleanest of kills, but what first kill ever is?

Apart from cooldown tracking, though, what about the various abilities that have a duration appended to them? A kick-ass raider needs to keep an eye on *those*, as well.

Tracking Durations

Back during *Wrath of the Lich King*, I was playing my holy paladin and realized I needed *something* to track some of my abilities because I was constantly

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forgetting to refresh them. These abilities were Beacon of Light (which, at the time, had a glyphed duration of 90 seconds!), Sacred Shield (60 second duration) and Judgements of the Pure (a buff gained each time I judged that lasted 60 seconds).

As if that wasn't enough, when Patch 3.2 (Call of the Crusade, so Tier 9) came out, if paladins cast Flash of Light on a target with Sacred Shield on them, it would heal them for the amount of the Flash of Light, but *also* add a 12-second heal-over-time (HoT) to that character, that would heal for the total amount of the Flash of Light. In other words, if I cast Sacred Shield on you and then threw a Flash of Light on you for 12,000 health, you would get a 12 second HoT on you for 1,000 health every second. Generally, this particular quirk was regarded as useless, until you got the 4-piece Tier 9 armor bonus, which *doubled* the HoT. So now, even if my Flash of Light hit you for 12,000 health, the HoT would then heal for an *additional* 12,000, so that one Flash of Light would heal you for 12,000 up front and then another 24,000 at 2,000 per second for 12 seconds. Suddenly, this became very interesting, particularly in fights where single targets were taking a lot of damage.

As such, there was a time in WoW where I wanted to see how long I had left on:

- Flash of Light HoTs
- Beacon of Light
- Sacred Shield
- Judgements of the Pure

That's when I found out about **clcbpt**

(<http://www.curse.com/addons/wow/clcbpt>). Here's what I configured it to look like, in a position on my screen where I could actually see it easily.



This shot shows that I have two Flash of Light HoTs up on Damione (6 seconds remaining) and Danny (10 seconds remaining). It shows that I have 40 seconds remaining on Damione's Sacred Shield and 73 seconds left on Danny's Beacon of Light. Also, I have 56 seconds left on my Judgements of the Pure buff.

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In order to play *optimally*, I needed to cast Flash of Light on both Damione and Danny at least once every 12 seconds. I needed to make sure Damione's Sacred Shield was always up in order to absorb as much damage as possible. I needed to ensure that Danny's Beacon of Light was always up so that he was receiving copies of all the heals I was throwing at Damione. Finally, Judgements of the Pure shouldn't ever drop off, so it was important to see how long I had on the buff there, too. (Incidentally, if you're wondering how I had *two* Flash of Light HoTs, the answer is simple: another paladin had cast Sacred Shield on Danny.)

Using ***clcbpt*** changed how I played to a ridiculous degree. It's not that I didn't have things like Beacon of Light, Sacred Shield and even the Flash of Light HoT on my Grid (more on Grid and raid frames later!), but they existed on my Grid and then would be gone when they expired. I couldn't easily look at my Grid after 40 seconds and go "crap, *when* does Sacred Shield expire?". As such, I'd refresh it (among other abilities) prematurely, wasting time *and* mana. And Judgements of the Pure? My uptime was abysmal if I didn't focus on judging regularly. Given how important the buff was for us at the time, that meant I wasn't playing amazingly.

Tracking stuff in a cool like ***clcbpt*** meant that I could *plan* stuff. And that, my friends, is the real game-changer.

As an example, let's use the heroic Deathbringer Saurfang encounter in Icecrown Citadel, from the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion.

Holy paladins were pretty godly for this encounter, because, at the time, the Beacon of Light target would receive 100% of all healing done to anyone else in range by the casting paladin. Saurfang's major ability was the Mark of the Fallen Champion, which essentially caused physical damage to various marked raid members every time Saurfang performed a melee attack against the tank. Each time he caused damage to someone, he would gain "blood power" and as Saurfang gained more blood power, his physical damage to the marked players would rise. At 100 blood power, he'd throw out another Mark to someone in the raid, resetting his power to 0 for the time being. As such, the damage people were taking would rise, rise, rise, then fall and start rising all over again.

Paladins were ideal for handling the Marks because of Beacon of Light. One paladin could be expected to handle two Marked targets on their own. So when the first Mark went out, I would cast a Beacon on the first target and continue healing the tanks and keeping various buffs going and all that. Another paladin would generally get the second Mark, beaconing that person, while I would take the third, healing them directly.

At that point, planning became extremely important. I *had* to keep both Beacon of Light and Judgements of the Pure up. If I didn't, one of my targets was going

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to die and if they died, Saurfang would heal and it would basically be a wipe. Everything else was secondary, including Sacred Shield, because all of these abilities would activate the Global Cooldown (GCD) of 1.5 seconds. Often, the damage was so intense that even refreshing one of my necessary abilities at the wrong time *could* cause one of my targets to die.

The best time to cast any non-healing spell (like refreshing Beacon and Judgement) was right *after* a Mark came out, because the damage Saurfang was putting out would drop substantially, for a little while. Once both of my Marks were out, my GCDs were reserved to:

- Holy Light
- Beacon of Light refreshing
- Judgement (refreshing Judgements of the Pure)
- Divine Plea (used with an offset, as this used to cause you to heal for 50% less while active, so I'd pop Avenging Wrath or a trinket or something to beef up my spell power for this period of time)

By being aware of exactly when buffs were expiring, I could carefully weave in refreshes of these buffs in between my mad holy light spamming. It was beautiful and I wouldn't have been nearly as good at my job without the awareness of how long my buffs were lasting.

Tracking Your Offensive Spells

The trouble with being a damage-dealer, or DPS, is that something like Serpent Sting, for example, doesn't have a *cooldown* on it. You can use Serpent Sting on every single GCD if you want. It has a *duration* of 15 seconds, however, so why would you use Serpent Sting at every opportunity? You don't want to do that. It's a waste of your focus and is taking up time during which you should be using other abilities, not to mention that if you keep re-applying a debuff, like Serpent Sting, you don't give it a chance to tick, meaning it won't ever actually do damage.

Throwing Serpent Sting up means knowing that your target is going to have that debuff on them for 15 seconds. That means that your target is, therefore, taking damage from your Serpent Sting every few seconds for 15 seconds. That means that you have up to 15 seconds to *do other stuff* and then you can worry about making sure Serpent Sting doesn't fall off. (Either via Chimera Shot as a Marksmanship Hunter or Cobra Shot as a Beast Mastery or Survival Hunter.)

Of course, *tracking* Serpent Sting is a bit of a pain, right? The default debuffs shown on a mob, well, they kind of suck. By default, only your debuffs on an enemy target are shown, but really, all that's being shown is the icon of the spell and it's ticking down in that same clockwise manner that is generally

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shown on your action bars – before you install and use OmniCC. Here's an example of a warlock's Corruption and Unstable Affliction on a level 11 spider in Loch Modan.



Just looking at this screenshot, you have no idea when Corruption or Unstable Affliction will fall off. In real-time, it's a little easier because they'll both be actively ticking down, but what a giant pain that is, being forced to watch tiny little icons tick down in order to decide when it's about to fall off. For debuffs like DoTs (and buffs, like HoTs), you don't want to recast them constantly, since they won't ever actually tick if you keep re-applying them, as I mentioned before. The ideal time to refresh a DoT or HoT is around the point of its last tick. Any sooner and you're losing damage (or healing). Any later and your uptimes will be lacking (and uptimes are really important in terms of maximizing your damage or healing).

And if you alter the settings to show *other people's* debuffs, too?



There I can see my Corruption debuff (the first one on the left), but also four other debuffs and what looks like a buff on this monk. Yes, this is a monk, not a rogue, and that's ascertained by the fact that there's a buff on him. It's the Tiger Palm buff, which causes their attacks to ignore 30% of enemies' armor for 20 seconds. Anyhow, the point is – sure, you can see the Corruption up there,

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but it doesn't really stand out much against other debuffs (although it is slightly larger) and it's not particularly helpful in letting us know for how much longer it's going to tick.

What I've always been a fan of is the Quartz addon. All it *used* to do (and this was the primary reason I used it) was change your cast bar so that you could see roughly where you could typically start casting *again*. Due to the way latency works, you could often start a cast just as the last one was ending. Here's a couple of screenshots of what the cast bar looks like when I cast Divine Light.



While that's very helpful (showing the cast time remaining, showing you where your latency should allow you to hit that button again), that's not all that Quartz does. It also tracks buffs and debuffs.

Here's what my hunter sees when I have Hunter's Mark, Serpent Sting, Black Arrow up, along with my bear pet's Demoralizing Roar.



At a glance at my UI, I know my debuffs are up and I know exactly how much time is left on them. I know that I have plenty of time to hit other buttons before I need to refresh Serpent Sting with my Cobra Shot, that Black Arrow was just put on the target and that the target will be afflicted by Demoralizing Roar for another 8.4 seconds.

I also like to show the debuffs on the target frame itself, which I use ShadowedUF to achieve. Here's a look at that whole part of my UI while I defend my farm from a Squatting Virmen.

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So on the left, you see my player frame (Kurnmogh), showing my health and focus (and that I'm in combat). Just above my frame, you see my pet's stats, along with his name. In the middle, you see my Quartz debuffs on my target. On the right, you see my target with all their debuffs above their frame – complete with timers! I don't *particularly* need all that info doubled again over the target frame, but my background is that of a raid leader, so I always liked to have the ability to see that the correct debuffs were up. It's certainly more useful in group content than in solo play, of course. Here's a look at what it looks like in an LFR.



Here, you can see that I've got Black Arrow and Serpent Sting up, with Explosive Shot just about to expire. If you look at the other debuffs, you see *another* hunter's Hunter's Mark is up, you see 3 Sunders, you see Faerie Fire, another Serpent Sting and a variety of other debuffs. Like I said, this is much more useful if you're a raid leader, but I'm always a fan of gathering as much information as possible about a situation.

Please note that my UI is, in a word, cluttered. This whole bit is not about making a pretty UI, but rather one that works for you and *shows you what you need to see*. As a raid leader, I needed to see debuffs from all classes. As a hunter, I need to know how long my debuffs are going to last. As a healer, I'm sure I'd like to know how much longer Rejuvenation, Riptide or Eternal Flame is going to last.

In short, make your UI work for you, but make sure you have all the necessary information you need at your fingertips. Whether that means using Quartz and ShadowedUF or other options for buff/debuff tracking and unit frames is up to you, but those are the options that work best for me as a hunter.