

How to Become an Expert at Just About Anything

The way we learn things — anything really, is fascinating. But did you know you can be more efficient in your learning? The way our brain gathers, stores, and recalls information can vary widely depending on the topic and your interest in it. In his book "Learn Better: Mastering the Skills for Success in Life, Business, and School, or, How to Become an Expert in Just About Anything," Ulrich Boser discusses the six forms of learning. These are: value, target, develop, extend, relate, rethink. Each convention tends to build on the previous, and each has been proven to help understand how we learn, and why some approaches within these behaviors work better than others.

If you want to learn more, better, Boser's book helps you do just that. Be forewarned though; there's no free lunch. Learning requires action and effort. "In the bluntest of terms, there's simply no such thing as effortless learning. To develop a skill, we're going to be uncomfortable, strained, often feeling a little embattled." (Boser, Loc. 1727)

Let's dive in...

Value

Have you ever tried to learn something that you just didn't care about? Maybe it was high school French. When are we ever going to need to use French if we don't plan on going to France? If you don't see and appreciate value, it's hard to find motivation.

On the other hand, maybe you had dreams of being a rockstar so wanted to learn to play guitar. Practicing an hour a day or more was fun. You learned chords and notes and worked your way through "Three Blind Mice" and up to more complicated tunes. Even if your musical dreams eventually gave way to other dreams, you still remember playing your instrument fondly.

It's near impossible to learn if we don't want to, and even harder to justify the effort unless we can visualize benefits.

Target

If you have a measurable outcome, your ability to learn increases. Set interim goals and milestone targets, especially at the start.

Do you remember learning to ride a bike? Your first bike may have been one of those plastic three-wheelers that let you mob around your driveway. Next, you stepped up to a "real" bike, complete with training wheels. Eventually, you were ready to take the trainers off. Learning to ride was a process — there were milestones to achieve, targets to acquire.

Before you start a new project, ask yourself, “What skills do I need to acquire? Does this field have some foundational concepts that I need to master?” (Boser, Loc. 1065)

Taking it one step at a time can help avoid disappointment and frustration.

Develop

In the development stage of learning, practice makes perfect. But some forms of practice that are more helpful than others. To hone skills, you’ll want to “take dedicated steps to improve performance.” (Boser, Loc. 255)

Tests are an active form of learning, and they’ll help you on your journey. Don’t worry about giving yourself a grade — just use the results to find and focus on areas for improvement.

Feedback is crucial. If you’re learning a new language, an instrument, or how to write code, weekly tests can go a long way in helping you to recall and learn information.

Use these tests as building blocks to improve upon your knowledge. Alternatively, if you hire a tutor, their personal feedback can be a gauge for what’s sticking and what’s not.

Consider someone learning to scuba dive. Safe diving requires a set of skills and techniques that any good teacher will make their student repeat. Students tackle one

stage at a time. Learning to scuba dive requires skill training in the classroom, in shallow water, and in water in depths up to 40, 60, 80 feet or more, depending on your current skill level, and what you're trying to achieve. For example, before diving without an instructor, a student is tested in water up to 40 feet deep to use a partner's air, remove their mask, make an emergency ascent, and much more. Of course, you'll practice and learn in shallow water first, and before that in the classroom. Also, a diving student doesn't show that they know these skills only once. They make repetitive dives with an instructor until all the skills are performed flawlessly. Each evaluation helps the instructor pinpoint exactly what the student needs to work on.

Extend

Think about the last time you read an article and then told a friend about it. This is an example of a learning expansion. When you relate the article to another person, you tend to think about what the article means and how it relates to other things that you know. By recapping the main points, you're cementing your own understanding.

“...take summarizing, or the act of putting an idea into our own words. The learning activity pushes us to ask ourselves a series of questions: 'What's important? How can we rephrase this idea?' These queries are important. Because by summarizing the most valuable idea, we're extending our grasp of that particular idea, we're making it meaningful, and the practice shows clear and positive effects on outcomes.” (Boser, Loc. 2127)

Similarly, when we describe new concepts to ourselves, in that third person voice, we're likely to come away with a much better understanding of the topic. Boser argues, "In this regard, extending an area of knowledge is a lot like being able to explain an area of knowledge, and studies show that people gain a lot more when they ask themselves explanatory questions as they learn." (Boser, Loc. 2127)

When you learn something new, ask yourself: Can I put this into my own words? Can I clarify this? Also remember that confusion is okay. If you're confused about something, that means you're trying to make connections, but may still have some learning to do. Embrace the fact that you don't yet know everything.

"Ask a lot of questions to make connections. Make sure to apply what you know so you have a keen sense of the material and its complexity. Try and teach mastery to others so you really know what you know." (Boser, Loc. 2542)

Relate

Questioning, coming up with hypotheticals, and framing "what ifs" can help someone relate to an idea and increase their learning. When considering, for instance, the ocean, the author argues that we should ask ourselves questions like: "What happens to the ocean if the level of salt goes up? What's the difference between oceans and lakes? How do reefs impact ocean currents?" (Boser, Loc. 2612) There's probably a million questions you can ask yourself, and they all help you relate your learning.

The next time you need to figure out something difficult, stop and ask yourself questions. “What if we used a different material? What if we went west instead of south? What if we had more money and resources?” Exploring and investigating can “shed light on how a problem comes together as a system.” (Boser, Loc. 2727)

Rethink

We all are victims of our own overconfidence. We think we know more than we do.

Sometimes confidence is a powerful tool. Without it, we may never try something we’ve always wanted — say, running a 5k. But it can also be detrimental. OK, you’ve run a 5k and you’re now ready to take on a marathon. Overconfidence may make you think that you can show up on race day without training. What you’re really setting yourself up for is injury, frustration and disappointment.

“Overconfidence is particularly harmful to engaging in more challenging forms of learning.” (Boser, Loc. 3127) Why? Because when we think we know something, we’re apt not to take the sometimes-difficult steps of relating ideas, or extending what we know. When we think we know a topic, we don’t do enough deliberating, reflecting, and internalizing. The best learners rethink what they know.

To avoid overconfidence and master a field, we need to examine the way we think.

“We need to review our learning because we’re often more robot than human, more droid than deliberate. The issue is not that we misjudge something; it’s that we don’t even judge in the first place.” (Boser, Loc. 2172)

Questions can help you perfect many different types of skills. For example, a copy editor might always be asking themselves questions when reading text. “Will our audience get this? What seems confusing? What do I know or not know? How will that affect what the reader learns or doesn’t learn?”.