

Learning on Steroids:

The Ultimate Training Guide



by Scott Young

The Ultimate Training Guide

This guide is designed to help you get the most out of Learning on Steroids. In particular, it will:

- Help you decide which tactics to train
- Give you choices for how to go about your training, particularly if you don't have a lot of time.
- Explain the most common pitfalls and how to avoid them

Even more, I'll explain the methods you can use to learn any skill in your spare time. So beyond even the learning tactics of the program, this will help you understand what's required when trying to implement anything in your life.

Part One: What Should You Train?

Part of the challenge in getting started is figuring out what tactics to train. More importantly, understanding what skills would be most beneficial to you so that you don't waste time.

Skills Take Time, Choose Wisely

To get good at any of the skills mentioned here, I would recommend at least a month of dedicated practice. To get really good with some of them you would not only need a month of deliberate practice, but also several months using the learning tactic within your studies.

This means deciding which skills to pursue is an important

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decision. Later in this guide, I'll offer several suggestions for training the skills at different levels of time and intensity. However, that doesn't change the underlying fact: **it takes some time to get good at a skill.**

Don't let that discourage you though. If a month of dedicated practice and several months of practice within your studies were the requirement, that would mean you could potentially tackle:

- Using metaphors
- Speed reading
- Visceralization
- Flow-based notetaking
- Using weekly/daily goals
- Following a task-based studying system
- Experiment with a month of total immersion
- Train with the peg and chain method

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...all within one year.

Now, practically there are limits that make mastering such an exhaustive list difficult. However, even being good at 3-4 of the skills above in a year could have a significant impact on your studies.

My productivity went up by almost 2x when I switched over to a task-based approach. Learning speed reading over one month nearly doubled my maximum reading rate. These are skills that can have a huge impact, but you do need to be patient when training them. Results aren't immediate, but do add up over a semester or two of training.

So considering the two key factors: that skills take time, and skills can have a big impact, I think the question of what you should train is important.

How Can You Decide What to Train?

I can't tell you exactly. And emailing me a two-sentence description of your studies won't allow me to answer for you. The fact is you're the only person that knows the details of the challenges you face, your personality and your learning style.

However, I can give you a few rules of thumb that have helped me make decisions in where to put my energies. These models can't entirely answer the question of what to do, but they can give you hints at where you need to work.

The 3 O's

My approach towards productivity is in the 3 O's:

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1. Omit
2. Organize
3. Optimize

These are the three steps to becoming unstressed and accomplished, and they should be pursued in that order.

Omit - First, get rid of any commitments that aren't necessary. If you're a student, cut your extracurricular activities down drastically. The problem isn't having hobbies, it's having too many *commitments*.

A commitment is anything you would still feel pressure to do, even if you didn't want to (i.e. volunteer for an organization, a part-time job or extra classes you've already paid for.)

Learning success means **ruthless focus**, not dabbling.

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Organize - Second, create a productivity system. Weekly/daily goals is my favorite, but fixed-schedule productivity or GTD are great alternatives. The point is that almost any system will outperform the combination of stress, guilt and procrastination most learners use.

Optimize - Finally, start improving your approach to the specific learning tasks. Virtually all the learning tactics of the program fit in here, helping you streamline your reading, note-taking or studying to cut waste and accomplish more.

For the most part, these steps should be completed in order. Being really organized and optimized won't cut your stress if you are committed to far too many things. Similarly, knowing how to speed read or create mind maps isn't too helpful if you don't have a system to manage all your commitments.

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The easiest gains come from omission, with the most challenging gains coming from optimize.

Ask yourself where your weaknesses lie. Can you eliminate some unnecessary commitments? Do you need to get a better productivity system? If you can say yes to those, I'd start working there before training a specific learning tactic.

Of course, if you already have some form of productivity system, and you can't really reduce your commitments, then the only remaining step is to improve how you work on everything else.

Self-Education: Quantity or Quality?

If you're self-educating, your choice becomes more complicated. Unlike a formal education framework which has a

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predefined curriculum and tests, you have the choice as to how much you want to learn.

For example, I'm currently learning to speak French, this is a skill I could invest hours a day on or just a few hours per month. Obviously, the intensity of my pursuit will change how quickly I progress.

My first suggestion with self-education is to focus on quantity over quality. If you're just starting out with a new skill, the most important thing is that you're getting enough practice. For me that meant spending 30 minutes per day reading and listening to French for my first trial. The first step was to establish a basic level of input, only after that can I start optimizing my approach.

If you're teaching yourself, *the specifics won't matter* if you aren't regularly devoting time to learning the subject.

Learning Tactics, Which Do You Need?

I think of holistic learning like a Swiss army knife. There are many gadgets and tools, each designed for specific purposes. Of course, if you know how to use all the gadgets, the Swiss army knife is a great tool.

However, you need to know for which task each gadget is for. If you tried to whittle a stick using the corkscrew, you wouldn't get very far. Similarly, if you tried opening a bottle with the scissors, you'd just make a mess.

The same is true for holistic learning. It helps to know where a tactic works best before deciding whether it is right for your subject.

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For many of the learning tactics we'll cover, the area of focus is defined, right in the implementation guide. With the Chain Method, I explained that this tactic was mostly for remembering lists of arbitrary information. That's a pretty clear-cut case.

For others, the tactics are broader so it can be harder to see whether they apply. However, here are some questions you might want to ask yourself:

Is my problem understanding the material, or remembering later?

If your problem is understanding tactics such as *active reading*, *deep linking* and the *5-year old method* are better skills. If your problem is remembering, *metaphor* or *visceralization* will probably be more effective.

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Do I need to remember lots of easy facts or a few difficult concepts?

If you need to remember lots of facts, *diagrams* and *flow-based notetaking* can help you quickly connect large groups of ideas. If you have to remember a few, difficult concepts, *metaphors*, *visceralization*, *deep linking* and the *5-year old method* are more useful.

Do I need to do a lot of reading remembering only the broader concepts, or a smaller amount of reading but every detail must be retained?

In the first case, *speed reading* or *flow-based notetaking* are my weapons of choice. For the latter, active reading and *mneumonics*, *metaphor* and *visceralization* are more useful concepts.

Summary of Picking Your Trial

If you're still not sure exactly what tactics you should train I would go with **weekly/daily goals**. This is a skill that is fairly easy to implement, works for any academic subject and, unless you already have a great productivity system, will probably have the biggest performance gains.

I won't explain the tactic in detail, but if you want to know what it is and how to put it into place, you can read my article about it [here](#).

Part Two - How to Train a New Tactic

Once you've picked your skill, now comes the part that requires sweat—**actually training the tactics**. There are many different training regimens you can focus on. But for the purpose of the ass-kicking emails, I'm going to focus on just three:

30-Day Trial

7-Day Experiments

Stopwatch Challenges

30-Day Trials

In the introductory guide and many of the ass-kicking emails my focus will be on the first method. The 30-Day Trial is my favorite of all these methods for building skills.

The 30-Day Trial is simple:

1. **Choose** your tactic.
2. Break training it down into a **daily increment** (listed at the end of many of the implementation guides)
3. Complete that daily increment *every day* for **30 consecutive days**.

Mostly, these trials embody for me the distinction between hard work and hard to-do work. A 30-Day Trial, on a daily level is

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hard work. Spending half an hour making metaphors or twenty minutes of speed reading requires hard focus. However, 15 minutes isn't exactly hard to do. (Thanks to Cal Newport for offering this distinction)

So, by working under the 30-Day Trial framework, you can get in a lot of focused practice, without needing to exhaust yourself every day.

There are disadvantages to this approach, however. For one, a 30-Day Challenge can be difficult to adhere to. I don't think this is a valid reason for not pursuing them, but it does mean that, if you aren't used to the method, you may fail once or twice before finally completing one.

Second, this approach doesn't allow you to explore tactics before committing to them. If you were undecided between 2-3

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different tactics, you may not want to spend an entire month pursuing one if it turns out to be unhelpful in your particular studies.

Finally, this approach forces you to do the same work, every single day. That may be impractical for some people's schedules, as they prefer to do all their work on the weekend, or only on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Common 30DT Pitfalls (And How to Avoid Them)

#1 - Not Having a Daily Amount of Practice

There are two ways you can form a trial. By a daily amount or by a routine that already happens daily. For example, if you want

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to practice active reading, you could set aside 15 minutes per day to practice or you could decide to use the tactic on your reading material for classes which you do roughly every day.

However, it's a mistake to set a goal like, "practice metaphors" or "work on speaking Mandarin" if those goals don't have a daily level of practice. That's a recipe for failure since it doesn't push you to practice a specific amount.

#2 - Trying to do Too Many Things

A good 30DT focuses on **one** skill or **one** practice for **one** month. Setting a trial to do, "weekly/daily goals, speed reading for 15 minutes per day, metaphors *and* exercising," is a mistake. Most people underestimate the difficulty of a trial, so keeping it simple is important.

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#3 - Trying to do Too Much

If you're picking a trial based on time volume, a good level of practice is 20-45 minutes per day. Any more than that and it will be difficult to sustain over an entire month. If you're working on a routine (like using flow-based notetaking in your classes) this problem is reduced, but *it's better to have a trial that's too easy than too hard.*

#4 - Forgetting to Run Your Trial

If you already have a productivity system like weekly/daily goals, then this shouldn't be a problem. Just add the trial practice every day to your daily goals and make a reminder of it in your weekly goals. I did that for my latest trial and I'm at Day 26 without missing a single day.

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If you don't have a productivity system set up (which I recommend implementing first) then you should have some means to remember to do your trial. Trying to do your trial work at the same time every day (for example, when you wake up each morning, or at lunch) can make it more memorable. Or, making a calendar where you cross off days that you successfully complete the trial can also help.

What if You Miss a Day?

My goal when running a trial is to go 30 days consecutively without missing a single day. However, I've been using the 30DT approach for several years, so I have a good idea of how it works and how to avoid the pitfalls.

My suggestion is to go for 30 days without missing more than two days in a row, and without missing more than 3-5 days in

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total. With skills, as opposed to routine habits, missing a day isn't a failure. If you do the trial for 29 days but screwed up on Day 13, you'll still have almost the same level of practice with the tactic as if you were training for 30 days consecutively.

However, if you find yourself missing a lot of days, you may want to switch to the 7-Day Experiment method or Stopwatch Challenge as an alternative.

The 7-Day Experiment

The 7-Day Experiment works on the same principle as a 30DT, except it is only for 7 days. Here the goal isn't to master a technique or even become good at it. The point of this goal is to decide whether the tactic is right for you. If you get through seven

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days and the tactic doesn't mesh with how you feel you should be studying, you can drop it and try something else.

I hesitate to say one week will be enough to fully experience the power of a tactic. However, with new tactics coming through the program every single month, I don't think you should need to commit to something if it doesn't click with you. There will be other approaches you can try.

With the 7DE you can spend more time per day on practice, because the commitment period is smaller. You might want to focus for an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes every day for a week on a particular skill to give you a brief, but intense exposure to it.

I recommend this approach also if you aren't sure on what tactics to train. You could spend your first month on 2-3 7DEs and then pick your favorite for a full 30DT the following month.

The Stopwatch Challenge

While the previous two training methods focus on a minimum daily level, this next tool ignores that completely. With a Stopwatch Challenge your goal is to log enough time, regardless of whether you do it on a particular day.

So, for example, you could set a Stopwatch Challenge to do 15 hours working on metaphors. Then all you need to do is keep a spreadsheet on your computer or paper on your desk logging whenever you spend time deliberately practicing the technique. When you finish your 15 hours you're done.

You can also use this method on a particular volume of practice units. Such as, making 200 metaphors or 150 visceralizations. This approach works the same way except time isn't the unit you're trying to measure, output is.

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The main reason I dislike the stopwatch challenge is that it doesn't establish the training as a ritual. As a result, it requires a lot more deliberate focus to finish the trial and move on. Whereas if you have a 30DT which has a daily level of work, you can finish the trial just by remembering to show up every day, willpower isn't as important.

However, this method is helpful if you felt constricted by the 30DT approach, and I recommend it as an alternative.

How to Train on a Tight Schedule

Some students complained that the work of the program was too much for them. They joined because they were already overworked, and now they need to do more!

I understand this frustration. Unfortunately many other parts of life have this similar paradox. When you want to improve your finances, for example, that often requires saving more of your income. However, if you were overspending before, spending less than you earn can be even more difficult.

I have a few suggestions for students who wish to pursue the program but don't have a lot of time:

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#1 - Start with a Productivity Tool

If you don't already have a productivity system that you use reliably, that should be your first step. A productivity tool pays itself back in saved time almost immediately. Whereas learning tactics can take a few months to become good at and they usually pay off in terms of better grades or increased understanding.

#2 - Integrate Practice into Your Existing Studies

Make practice a part of how you already study. So if you normally spend 2 hours a day studying, spend 30 minutes of that time applying one of the learning tools to your subject. Even if you aren't great at metaphors or the 5-year old method, for example, this approach won't cause you to lose time.

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#3 - Keep the Daily Increment Small

Start with 20 minutes per day. I doubled my reading rate with only 15 minutes per day of deliberate speed reading practice. Small amounts can add up over time, so don't make the mistake of thinking that you need to spend an hour a day practicing in order to see results.

#4 - Focus on the Biggest Wins

Think about where you spend most of your time studying. Chances are there is a particular subject or type of task that uses up most of your time. Then try to apply one of the techniques towards it. If you aren't sure what technique can help, you can always email me and I can do my best to offer suggestions.

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For me, my weak point was memorizing article numbers for a law exam. There were dozens of them, all arbitrary and difficult to remember. However, I needed to know them to pass the test. So, my solution was to create a tactic to memorize the numbers. I worked on a combination of the link method and mnemonic devices to remember these facts with less time.

#5 - Train Intermittently

I rarely do 30DTs month after month. The point isn't to be training constantly, but to train at least some of the time, so you can improve. When you're in a crunch, just read about the ideas and try to apply them when you are learning. When you have more time, set aside 30 minutes or so each day to practice deliberately.

Good luck with your trials, experiments or challenges and don't hesitate to email me if you get stuck!