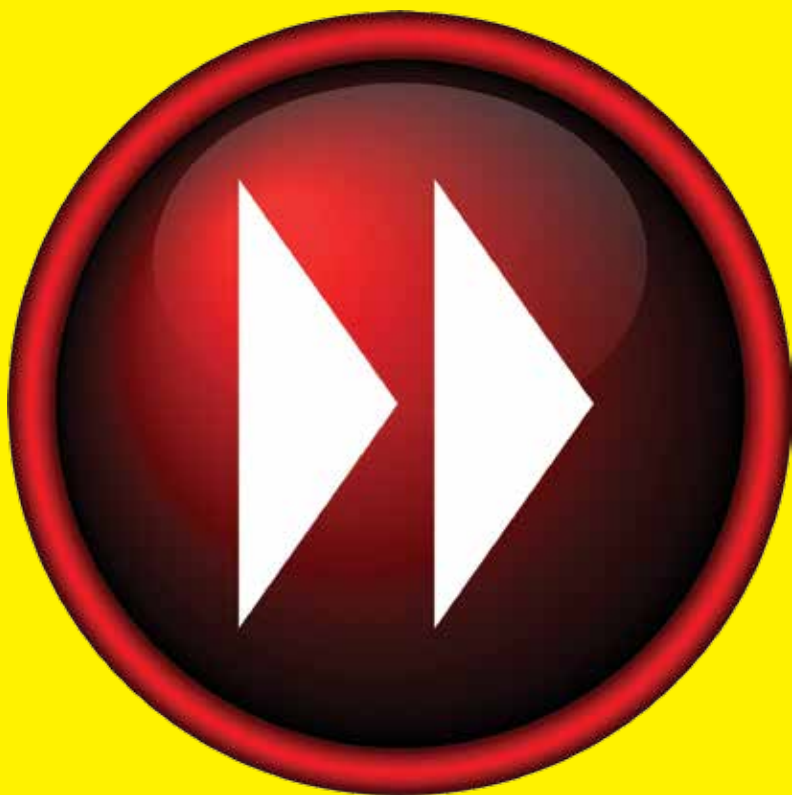


PRACTICE LIKE THIS

**35 EFFECTIVE WAYS TO
GET BETTER FASTER**



JONATHAN HARNUM, PHD

*FOR GARZA,
WHO WAS ASKING FOR IT.*

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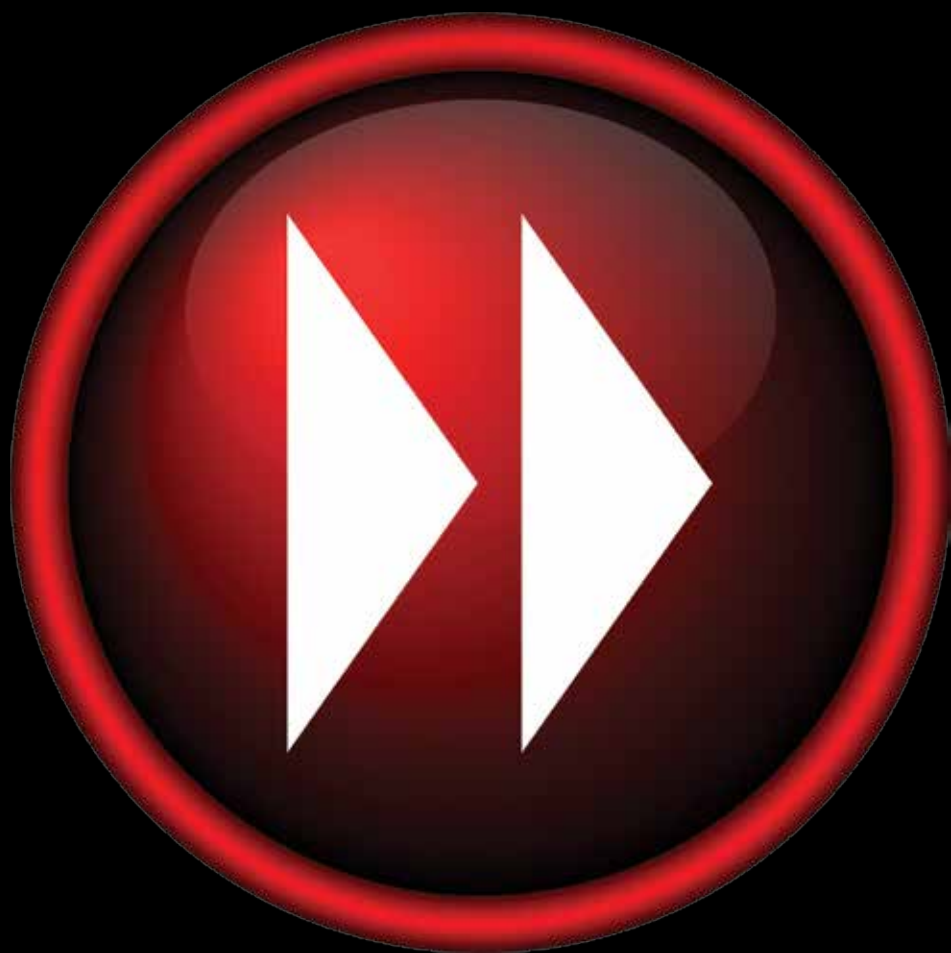
*WE LEARN BY PRACTICE.
WHETHER IT MEANS TO LEARN
TO DANCE BY PRACTICING
DANCING OR TO LEARN TO LIVE
BY PRACTICING LIVING, THE
PRINCIPLES ARE THE SAME.
ONE BECOMES IN SOME AREA
AN ATHLETE OF GOD.*

—MARTHA GRAHAM

*WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE TRYING
TO GET IT RIGHT, SO AIM HIGH,
AND AIM TRUE.*

—VANCE JOY

ABOUT THE BOOK



DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!

This book is designed to be read however you like. Cruise straight through it or skip to a topic whenever your interest or need arises. You'll find lots of cross-references pointing to related information to help with cherry-picking, if you want to jump around.

THE SIX SECTIONS OF THE BOOK

SECTION ONE: What it means to get better, and how it works in the brain.

SECTION TWO: Getting and staying motivated to improve.

SECTION THREE: Covers way your unspoken theories about talent shape your practice, and also how others can help you get better faster.

SECTION FOUR: Tackles time and practice, including how much, what time of day, and how your practice needs change over time.

SECTION FIVE: Where you practice and who you practice with will both increase how quickly you improve.

SECTION SIX: Contains specific strategies, techniques and information to help you squeeze the most juice out of your practice time.

Get Better Faster isn't meant to be comprehensive; these are just the best tips, tricks, mindsets and strategies I haven't seen covered together elsewhere. In many cases, in order to keep things short and sweet, you'll get just a taste, and it'll be up to you to dig deeper. Cool?

PLAN TO SCAN: ONE WAY TO DIG DEEPER

With a smart phone or tablet and a QR reader, you can see, hear, and read more on a particular topic. *Scan* is a great QR reader. You can download the app for free to any phone or device at <https://scan.me/download>.

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ONE
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TALENT PRAC

IN THIS SECTION

*THE 3 TYPES OF PRACTICE,
THE BENEFITS OF THIEVERY,
FAILING WITH PURPOSE, AND
YOUR BRAIN ON PRACTICE.*

18

TICE

IN

DISGUISE

THE THREE TYPES OF PRACTICE

*ACCIDENTAL
PRACTICE*

*PLAY AS
PRACTICE*

*INTENTIONAL
PRACTICE*

THE 3 TYPES OF PRACTICE

Talent is practice in disguise, and practice is more than you think. There are three kinds of practice. One you're probably familiar with, but the other two aren't usually considered practice. They are, I assure you.

"Natural ability" is a convincing illusion. When we see Danny Way jump the Great Wall of China on a skateboard with a broken ankle, it's easy to assume "natural talent" plays a part in his awesome ability because we can't see the thousands of hours of practice (and injuries!) that Danny Way put in to earn such incredible skills.

With very few exceptions (like height in basketball players), a great deal of research has shown that natural ability is mostly an illusion. At the very least, practice plays more of a role than genetics. Two kinds of practice contribute to the illusion of natural talent. I call them "accidental practice" and "play as practice." Talent is practice in disguise.

There are other illusions surrounding practice. One is that practice is boring and tedious. It can be, of course, but I've spoken with dozens of world-class professionals, and *every one of them* says they *enjoy* practice. It's fun! That's not to say practice isn't challenging and difficult, of course. It's all in how you approach practice, and how you define it, too. Speaking of which, let's take a look at the three types of practice.

THERE ARE THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE: THOSE WHO MAKE IT HAPPEN, THOSE WHO WATCH IT HAPPEN, AND THOSE WHO WONDER WHAT HAPPENED.



In 1920, developmental biologist Zing Yang Kuo rubbed warm Vaseline over fertilized chicken eggs. Kuo suspected that a chick's ability to peck wasn't genetic, but was a *learned* ability, a radical idea at the time. The Vaseline made the eggshell translucent so Kuo could peep in on the chicks' development. What he found was astonishing.

When the chick's heart began to beat, the tiny bird was packed so tightly inside the shell that its little beak rested directly above its heart. Kuo saw that the thumping heartbeat moved the chick's beak in the "exact same motion" the chick would use for pecking. The chick was *practicing* the motion before it even hatched. This is accidental practice: unconscious practice that takes place because of your surroundings.

In India it's known as *samskar*, or unconscious influence on ability. It's about the only time the word "gift" makes sense when you're talking about skill. Accidental practice is what you absorb unconsciously from your environment, often—but not always—as a child. Extreme skiing legend Shane McConkey started skiing at 23 months. At three years old, he rode in a front-facing pack while his mom skied. His view unobstructed, Little Shane would exhort her to do jumps. That's *samskar*. McConkey was one of the greatest athletes to have walked (and flown) the earth. Check out his epic skills in the excellent documentary of his life at <http://www.mcconkeymovie.com>.



The good news is that *samskar* isn't absolutely necessary if you want to become great at something. Talent is simply practice in disguise. The secret to getting ahead is getting started, the sooner the better.

***START NOW.
IN JUST 2 DAYS,
TOMORROW WILL BE
YESTERDAY.***

PLAY IS OFTEN TALKED ABOUT AS IF IT WERE A RELIEF FROM SERIOUS LEARNING. BUT...PLAY IS SERIOUS LEARNING.

MISTER ROGERS



**PLAY AS
PRACTICE**

There is a deep connection between play and learning. The Latin word *ludus* means “school,” but it also means “play.” The connection isn’t coincidental. Play is often the best way to learn, especially at first.

Babies and animals use play to learn, but you can harness it, too. For some musicians, especially pop, punk, and folk musicians, this is the only kind of practice they use to get better. I’ve spoken with internationally touring musicians who have told me, “I never practice.” It’s not true, though. Their practice is *play*: learning songs, writing songs, playing with friends, performing, messing around, etc. She didn’t say it to me, but Sonic Youth bass player Kim Gordon said it best: “There’s a real art to not learning how to play an instrument and being able to still play it.”

Practice-as-play is how many sports legends have built up tons of practice as kids. You can get very, very good using this method, with the added bonus that it’s fun. Without a bunch of time spent just messing around, Tiger Woods would never be able to do this: <http://is.gd/elixix>.



The fastest way to get better is up next.



INTENTIONAL PRACTICE

Intentional practice (also known as deliberate practice) is the Big Daddy of getting better, and the focus of this book. When you practice—or play—with focused intent on improving, your progress is *much* more rapid.

We're going to dig deeply into all three of these kinds of practice for the rest of the book, but we'll give extra attention to intentional practice, because it's the best way to improve quickly. With these techniques, you'll continue to improve at what you love for the rest of your life.

You ready?

*A CAREER IS BORN IN PUBLIC—
TALENT, IN PRIVACY.*

MARILYN MONROE

RIDE IT LIKE YOU STOLE IT

Steal any idea you can wrap your larcenous mind around if it's going to help you get better. When you steal ideas, you have to ride them hard if you want to tweak them into a shape that fits your particular needs.

Try everything you come across in this book (and anywhere else), but interrogate these ideas. Make them give up their secrets. Discover both how they *will* work for you, and how they *won't*. Here are some questions to ask about any improvement strategy:

- 1 - Does this sound like it'll work for me? How exactly? If it won't work, why not?
- 2 - Do I need help understanding or implementing this? Who can I ask? What does Google have to say about it?
- 3 - How can I tweak this approach to work for me?
- 4 - What's the opposite of this idea?
- 5 - Can I combine this with something else?
- 6 - If I took this approach to an extreme, what would it look like?
- 7 - What's the absolute bare minimum I could get away with, using this approach?
- 8 - Is this an idea and a way of thinking, or is it something I would actually *do*? Does that change how I use it?
- 9 - How can I apply this to what I'm working on and my level of skill?
- 10 - Can I safely ignore this information? Why?
- 11 - Am I thinking too hard about all this instead of just jumping in and getting on with it?

*GOOD ARTISTS COPY;
GREAT ARTISTS STEAL.*

STEVE JOBS



FAIL BETTER

Become familiar with failure. If you're like most people, this will be one of the more difficult challenges you face on your path to awesome. Nobody likes to fail. Nobody. But what separates the masters from the mediocre is their attitude toward failure.

Without a keen awareness of your failures—however big or small they might be—you won't know what needs work. Punk rock legend Mike Watt said it like this: “You need bad things to make good things. It's like with farming—if you want to grow a good crop, you need a lot of manure.” For a healthy dose of inspiration, check out some of the world's greatest “failures” at <http://is.gd/ceyapi>.



When we care deeply about doing something well, failure can be a blow, but with the right attitude, it's a blow that will propel you forward, not crush you. We'll get to why that is and how you can adopt the right attitude later in the book.

Masters in every field treat mistakes as useful feedback. Jazz trumpet legend Dizzy Gillespie's horn was bent upwards accidentally, but Dizzy *liked* it that way. It's an iconic image along with his giant puffed cheeks. Dizzy quipped, “I decided I liked the horn bent because I can hear a note the minute I hit it. This way I can hear my mistakes faster.”

If failure ever makes you want to quit, think of it like “dying” in a super fun video game: sure, it's annoying, frustrating, and sometimes even embarrassing or infuriating, but are you going to let that stop you from finishing the level, defeating the boss? Of course not. You reboot and rally. You find a way.

An important fact that's easy to forget is that if it were easy, it would be boring. The obstacle *is* the path. Make that your mantra.



*THE MASTER HAS FAILED MORE
TIMES THAN THE BEGINNER
HAS EVEN TRIED.*



*SUCCESS IS MOVING FROM ONE
FAILURE TO ANOTHER WITH
NO LOSS OF ENTHUSIASM.*

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

SO NOW WHAT DO YOU DO?

- 1 - **LOOK FOR FAILURE!** Seriously. You have to actively seek out your weaknesses, your failures, so you can correct them. Nobody's perfect, so you *do* have these flaws, even if you're not trying to find them. Find them! Get help from someone better than you who can perceive errors you can't see.
- 2 - **DON'T BEAT YOURSELF UP**, and don't take the failure (or yourself) too seriously. Failure is a learning opportunity. If you have a hard time with this one, learn why starting on page 45.
- 3 - **HOW DO YOU FEEL, AND WHY?** It's normal to feel embarrassed, angry, hurt, and a whole range of other not-so-pleasant emotions when you fail. Don't shrink back from those emotions, they're a sign you care. Explore them. Those powerful feelings help you identify what needs work. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.
- 4 - **WHAT HAPPENED?** Take a good, long, unflinching look at what happened. Who or what was the reason for the failure? For help, see *The Blame Game* on page 61.
- 5 - **WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?** A failure is great, because it gives you a concrete goal to work on. Draw up a battle plan to attack the reasons behind the failure, and don't be shy about getting help in any way possible: YouTube, Google, or best of all, someone with more experience than you who is a good teacher or coach. Learn more about the right kind of teacher for you on page 73.
- 6 - **REMINDE YOURSELF THAT THE OBSTACLE IS THE PATH.** Obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off the goal. Michael Jordan said, "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And *that* is why I succeed."

STRATEGY VS. TECHNIQUE

A strategy is an approach anybody can use. A technique is the skill necessary to get the most juice out of a strategy. Let's use the example of failing better in your practice to explain the difference between a strategy and a technique.

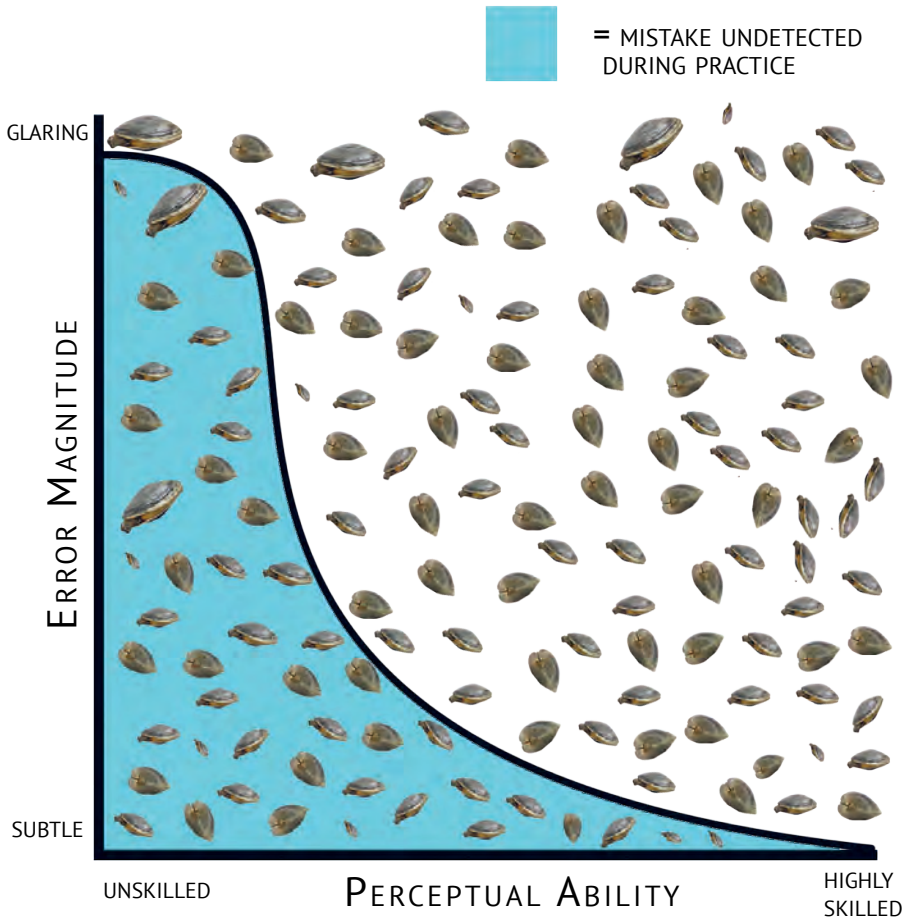
Failing better means correcting errors the moment you notice them during practice. That's the strategy: correcting the error as soon as you notice it. Anybody can do it. The *technique*—the skill the strategy requires—is being able to *spot* the error. If you can't see the error, or hear it or smell it or taste it or whatever, you can't fix it.

This concept is illustrated in the highly unscientific “clam graph” to the right. Why clams? In some circles, a clam is slang for a mistake. These clams, however, do *not* taste good, even when deep-fried.

The greater your ability and awareness become, the finer your error-detection skills will be, and the more clams you'll catch.

Superb athletes, musicians, writers, and others, no matter how advanced their skills, are always on the lookout for errors. Nobody's perfect. Perceiving error is a skill. A glitch Derek Jeter might see in his swing is probably a detail that almost nobody else would catch. Get it?

No matter what skill level you're at, from beginner to expert, strive to detect more and more subtle errors in what you're doing. Then find the right strategy and get rid of those clams. Permanently.



YOUR PLASTIC BRAIN

Your brain is plastic in the good sense of the word, meaning it changes based on its surroundings. Myelin is one thing that changes in the brain when you learn a new skill. Whether you're swinging a club, throwing a ball, fingering a fiddle, crafting a succulent bouillabaisse, sculpting clay, or doing *any* physical activity, you need myelin to perform that task well.

Myelin—first described by Rudolph Vicrow in 1854—is a fatty insulator that coats the axons connecting the millions of neurons used to perform any action. Myelin allows neurons to fire with greater precision, speed, and efficiency. Special cells—Schwann cells—deposit myelin on axons that receive regular use. Accomplished violin players have more myelin surrounding the neurons that control their left hand, making that part of their brains significantly bigger than non-violin players.

There are two important things to know if you want to harness the power of myelin to get better faster. The first is that Schwann cells deposit myelin *very* slowly, like growth rings in a tree. It's gonna take time. Channel the tortoise. The second thing to know is that myelin is a mindless process. Those little Schwann cells will deposit myelin on a neuron *even if what you're doing is wrong!* That's the crucial detail.

When you're learning a new skill, you *have* to go slowly enough to perform the skill well, because you have to build the connections that reinforce accuracy. Careful practice makes perfect. You *must* stay alert for errors and fix them immediately so you don't encode bad habits. Schwann cells that deposit myelin inside your brain are mindless and mechanical, so you have to be smart. This is the essential difference between the brain (the mechanical jelly in your head) and the mind (your consciousness).

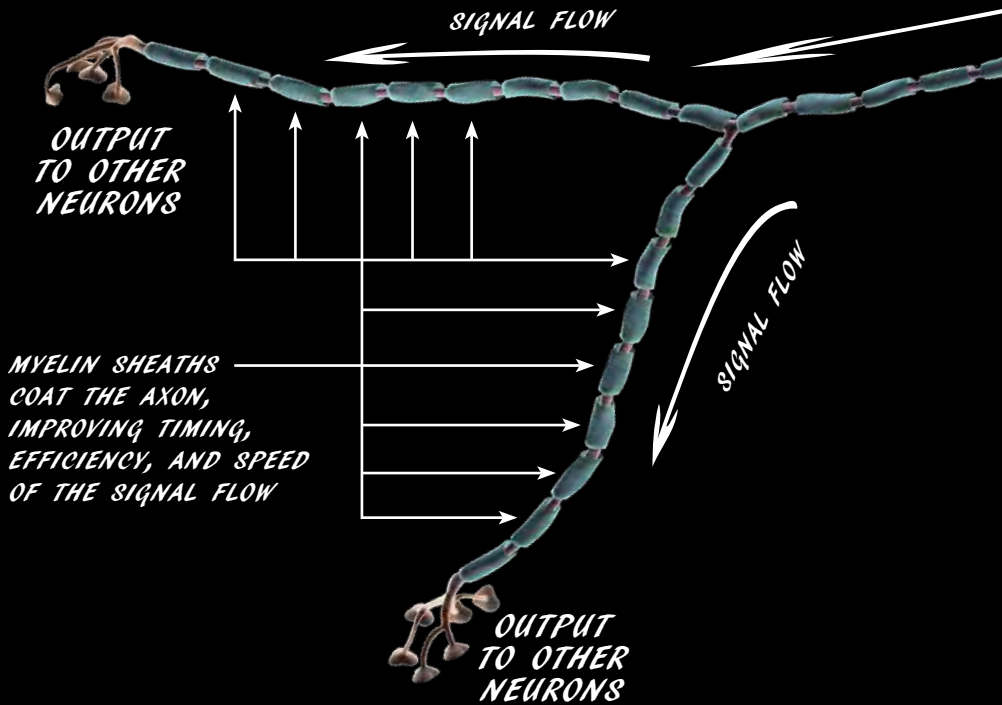
Check out this colored image of a myelinated nerve taken by Steve Gschmeissner with a scanning electron microscope. On the Web at <http://is.gd/imowep>.



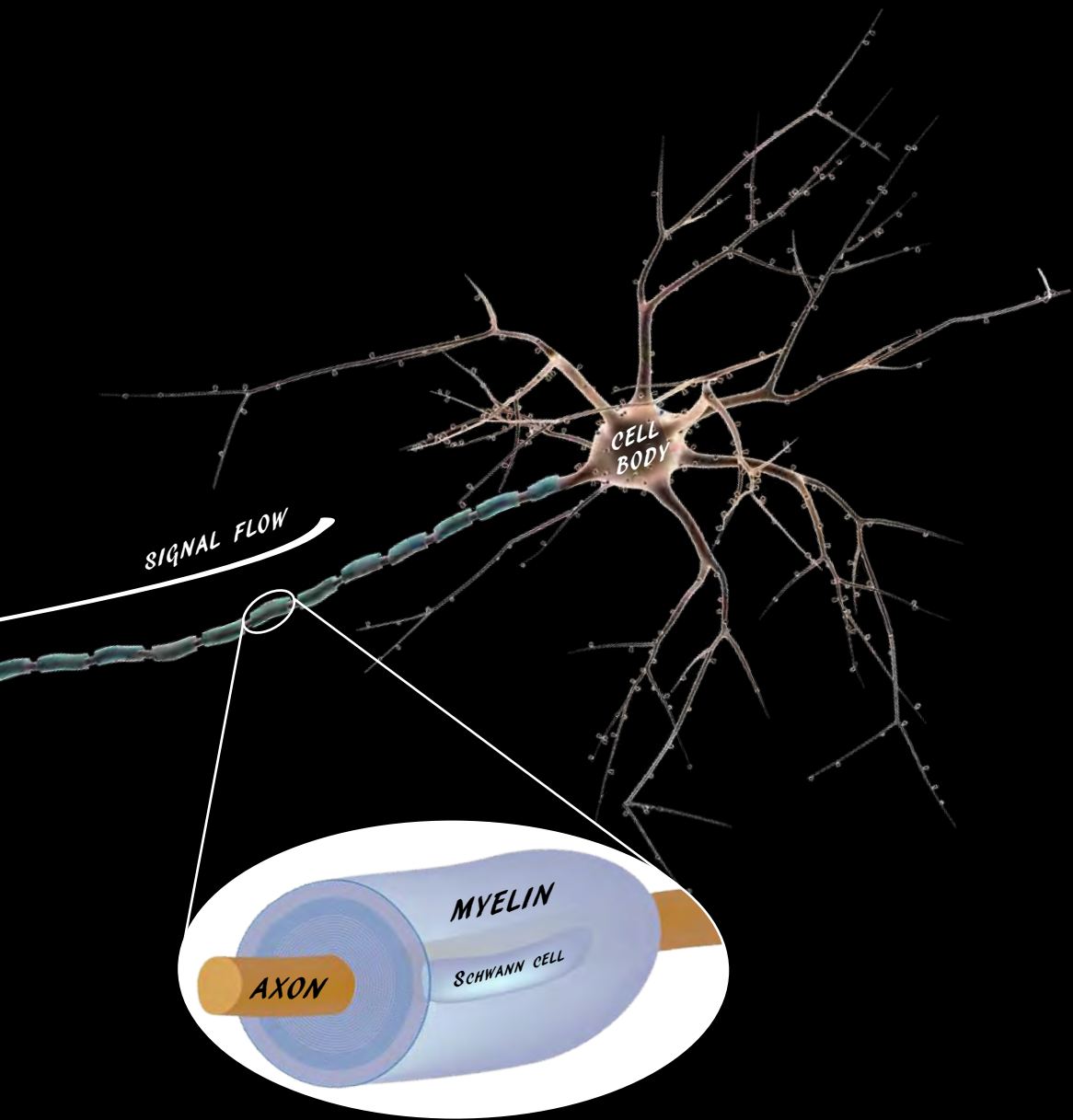
The diagram on the next page will help you understand myelin better.

A NEURON

(ONE OF BILLIONS IN YOUR BRAIN)



NEURONS THAT FIRE



MYELIN SHEATH CLOSE-UP
(NOTE THE "GROWTH RINGS")

TOGETHER, WIRE TOGETHER.

SO NOW WHAT DO YOU DO?

- 1 - **CAN YOU GO SLOWLY**, even with a skill you do well? It might be harder than you think. How slowly are you able to perform the skill accurately? You'll probably find that going *that* slowly is a challenge at first. Do it. You'll get better.
- 2 - **ARE YOU PERFORMING ALL THE ACTIONS** necessary to make what you're doing correct? This can cover a *lot* of details. Musicians and actors must consider tone quality, emotion, and tempo, to name a few specifics. Are you nailing *all* the details necessary for accuracy and artistry? If not, go slower until you can.
- 3 - **SIMPLIFY**. Perhaps you're trying to do too much at once (as in #2). Can you isolate one single aspect of the skill, maybe a particular motion (or emotion). Practice *only* that at a very slow speed until you can execute that one thing without error. Gradually add complexity.
- 4 - **WATCH A MASTER PERFORM** the same skill very slowly. Live is best, but slowing down video will work, too. Study it.
- 5 - **STARE WITH ALL YOUR SENSES** to avoid errors. This relates to #2 above. When you're practicing slowly like this, especially if it's a complex task, it will help to record yourself now and then. When an error crops up, attack it immediately and persistently until it's gone. If the error happens again, you're probably going too fast. Slow down more.
- 6 - **GET SOME HELP** from a teacher, coach, or some other highly qualified person who knows what they're doing and will give you useful feedback. Even a knowledgeable friend can give you useful feedback.

*YOU'LL NEVER MAKE A MISTAKE
IF YOU NEVER MAKE A MISTAKE.*

JULIUS BAKER

TWO



MOTIVA

18

IN THIS SECTION

*MOTIVATION HACKS: TIPS,
TRICKS, AND MINDSETS TO
KEEP YOUR HEAD IN THE
GAME & GROWING SKILLS.*

TION

LIKE

BREATHING

(IT'S REQUIRED)

ARE

UNIQUE

(AND SO IS
EVERYBODY ELSE)

FOUR



TIME!

IN THIS SECTION

TIME AND PRACTICE: COVERS NOT ONLY HOW MUCH, TIME OF DAY, AND HOW LONG, BUT ALSO HOW GOOD PRACTICE CHANGES OVER TIME.

THE MOST

VALUABLE

THING

YOU

SPEND

FIVE
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WHERE

IN THIS SECTION

*WHERE YOU PRACTICE
AFFECTS IMPROVEMENT, AND
SO DOES THE SURROUNDING
ENVIRONMENT. LEARN HOW
TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF BOTH.*

You

AT?

SIX
◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Do

IN THIS SECTION

LEARN WHAT GOOD PRACTICE IS: ITS STRUCTURE AND HOW IT WORKS BEST.

ALSO LEARN USEFUL HACKS TO GET BETTER FASTER.

IT
IT
IT

*IN THEORY, THERE IS NO
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEORY
AND PRACTICE. IN PRACTICE,
THERE IS.*

YOGI BERRA



AT THE BUZZER

We all have different challenges, different goals, and different life experiences. This means you'll probably find that some techniques in this book work great, and some, not so much. Like the advertisement says, "Your results may vary." No matter what you're learning, always seek other sources. I won't be jealous, I promise.

As you start using and experimenting with the ideas in this book, keep in mind these wise words from everybody's favorite martial arts master:

*ABSORB WHAT IS USEFUL,
DISCARD WHAT IS NOT. ADD
WHAT IS UNIQUELY YOUR OWN.*

—BRUCE LEE

Whatever skills you're trying to master, you have my best wishes for your continued (and continuous) improvement. Come say hello online over at: www.HowToGetBetterFaster.com.

—Jon

OTHER BOOKS BY JONATHAN HARNUM

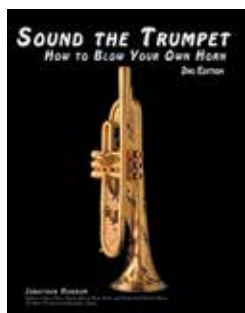
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Basic Music Theory

How to Read, Write, and Understand Written Music (4th edition)

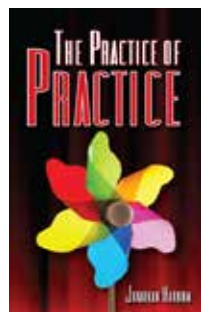
What do all those lines and squiggles and dots mean? *Basic Music Theory* takes you through the sometimes confusing world of written music with a clear, concise style that is at times funny and always friendly. Includes comprehensive chapter and section reviews and hundreds of online examples (226 pages).



Sound the Trumpet

How to Blow Your Own Horn (2nd edition)

Packed with information no trumpet player should be without. Learn to master basic skills like lip slurs, buzzing, and breathing. Covers more advanced skills like double- and triple-tonguing, transposing, cool sound effects, how to play high, endurance, and many other helpful skills. Includes hundreds of online examples and freebies (274 pages).



The Practice of Practice

How to Boost Your Music Skills

This book tackles music practice specifically. The stories and the science inside were drawn from Harnum's in-depth interviews with world-class musicians in multiple genres of music and published research on practice. While much of the information is similar to what you've read in *Get Better Faster*, concepts are explored more fully, and include music-specific strategies and techniques for getting better (274 pages).

SIX SECTIONS, 35 HACKS



TALENT IS PRACTICE IN DISGUISE

LEARN THE 3 KINDS OF PRACTICE, THE BENEFITS OF THIEVERY, WHY TALENT IS PRACTICE IN DISGUISE, AND HOW YOUR BRAIN IS REWIRED WHEN YOU LEARN NEW SKILLS.



MOTIVATION IS LIKE BREATHING (IT'S REQUIRED)

YOUR DEEPEST, UNSPOKEN BELIEFS PROFOUNDLY AFFECT YOUR MOTIVATION TO IMPROVE, YA FILTHY ANIMAL.



YOU ARE UNIQUE (AND SO IS EVERYBODY ELSE)

LEARN WHY YOUR REACTION TO DIFFICULTY MATTERS, AND WHY TEACHERS AND COACHES MATTER ALMOST AS MUCH.



TIME: THE MOST VALUABLE THING YOU SPEND

FORGET THE 10,000-HOUR RULE. PRACTICE TIME ISN'T WHAT YOU'VE BEEN LED TO BELIEVE, NOR IS IT OTHERWISE.



WHERE YOU AT?

WHERE YOU PRACTICE AND WHO YOU'RE WITH WILL AFFECT HOW FAST AND HOW MUCH YOU IMPROVE. WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?



Do it To it!

SOME OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE PRACTICE STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES: USED BY PROS, TESTED BY SCIENCE!

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