

A large white question mark is positioned on the left side of the image. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly asphalt, with several yellow pencil marks or streaks extending from the right side towards the center. The text is overlaid on this background.

The First 20 Hours

Secrets of Rapid Skill Acquisition

Josh Kaufman

I'm willing to wager there's something in the back of your mind you've always wanted to learn how to do.

Maybe you want to learn how to speak a new language. Maybe you want to draw or paint. Maybe you've always wanted to be able to fly an airplane, execute a spinning karate kick, or scuba dive. Maybe you'd like to cook a dish or bake a pastry, or maybe taking great photos is your style.

Perhaps the skill you're interested has a professional use, like learning to code, design, speak in public, or pull off a complex statistical analysis: something that would make your coworkers consider you with awe, and make your employer want to shower you with raises, promotions, and other benefits.

I'm also willing to wager you feel you don't have enough time to learn this particular skill. You're overworked already, and time is tight. You have work to do, family to take care of, friends to hang out with, and too many responsibilities as it is. By the time your work and family obligations are satisfied, you're tired: after you eat dinner and watch a little TV, it's time to call it a day.

So much to do, and so little time.

If that wasn't enough, you've probably heard that it takes 10,000 hours to get good at something. You don't have that much time, so why bother?

It's easy to feel that you'll never have time to learn that thing you've always wanted to learn. Maybe in a few decades, after you retire...

The Truth About Skill Acquisition

I have good news for you: picking up new skills is way easier than you think. Believe it or not, you can pick up the fundamentals of any new skill in about 20 hours.

20 hours of practice is possible with even the most harried of schedules: it's roughly 40 minutes a day for a month. If you're willing to postpone watching TV for a few weeks, you can finally pick up that skill you've always dreamed of learning.

There's absolutely nothing stopping you, aside from your own fears, doubts, and insecurities.

That's the real barrier to rapid skill acquisition, really: sitting down to learn something new is always scary at first, and the first hours of practice are always frustrating. That's why it's important to have a plan—with a bit of preparation and strategy, it's much easier to persist long enough to reap the rewards of your effort.

Let's examine a few simple ideas that will help you learn new skills in record time.

1 Who you become in the future depends on the skills you choose to acquire today.

"I am always doing that which I can not do, in order that I may learn how to do it."

—PABLO PICASSO

Your future, as the saying goes, can be predicted by the five people you choose to spend the most time with. I'd like to add an additional predictor to that statement: the skills you acquire today will profoundly influence the life you live in the weeks, months, and years to come.

If you want to grow in your career, you need to practice the skills you'll need NOW, so you can perform well in the future. No one is born knowing how to lead a team, build a product, attract attention, sell to prospects, or manage money. These aspects of day-to-day business life are all skills, and you can improve your performance to the extent you choose to practice. Improve any one of these skills, and you can't help but improve your career.

“I have good news for you: picking up new skills is way easier than you think.”

Likewise, how you spend your time out of work will be heavily influenced by what you can do. It's easy to sit in front of the TV or surf the internet, so that's what most people do. With a bit of practice, however, you can be doing things other people only dream of: playing music, wood-working, creating art, or exploring other cultures.

Practice new skills today, and your opportunities expand. Many of the most rewarding experiences you can have in life are reserved for the people who are willing to put in the time and effort required to develop the skills necessary to enjoy them.

② **If you're working on a new skill, forget the "10,000 hour rule."**

"If people knew how hard I worked to gain my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful."

—MICHELANGELO

You've probably heard of the "10,000 hour rule"—the idea that it takes around 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to develop a skill to mastery.

That's quite intimidating to think about when you're just getting started. You're lucky to have an hour or so of spare time each day, right?

Here's my advice: ignore the 10,000 hour rule. It doesn't apply to you.

Here's why: Dr. K. Anders Ericsson of Florida State University was the source of that theory. He studied world-class performers of every kind: professional golfers, violinists, chess grandmasters, etc. In essence, he found that the top performers in these fields put in around 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to achieve their mastery. The more time a person spent practicing, the higher the probability they'd reach the upper echelons of their particular field.

That's true, as far as it goes. The "10,000 hour rule" isn't wrong, per se—it just doesn't apply to you, unless you really are trying to become a top contender in a narrowly-defined, strictly-ranked, ultra-competitive performance field.

That's probably not the reason you're interested in picking up this particular skill.

Here's the truth: you don't have to aim to be first chair for the New York Philharmonic in order to pick up the violin, or any other musical instrument. You don't have to play in the PGA Tour to enjoy golf, or win a Pulitzer to benefit from writing. You're playing a different game, so you can choose to play by different rules.

When you're just getting started, any amount of practice is better than zero.

Leave the 10,000 hours to the professionals. You can reap the rewards you care about in far less time.

③ **Setting aside time for deliberate practice is the key to rapid skill acquisition.**

“Deliberate practice has three key components: setting specific goals; obtaining immediate feedback; and concentrating as much on technique as on outcome.”

—STEVEN LEVITT & STEPHEN DUBNER, SUPERFREAKONOMICS

I wish there was a Matrix-style method of uploading new skills into the human brain. I'd be the first to sign up.

Unfortunately, that's not how skill acquisition works. If you want to develop any new skill, physical or mental, you have to practice.

No practice, no skill acquisition. It's as simple as that.

The type of practice that results in rapid skill acquisition is deliberate practice: focused, intelligent effort that attempts to improve the most critical parts of the skill in question. No distractions, and no nagging doubts: just the task in front of you.

The reason most people don't acquire new skills very quickly is simple: they don't spend much time in deliberate practice. They dabble for a bit, get frustrated or distracted, then do something else.

If you can set aside the time to practice whatever you want to learn for at least 20 hours, and you sit down and focus on the practice, that alone will easily put you in the top 1% of the human population in terms of knowledge, skill, and experience.

Your brain is a system built to learn: that's what brains do. Practice, and your skills will improve extremely quickly. Make the time, and do the work.

④ Decide what you want to be able to do when you're done.

"In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high."

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

The first step of rapid skill acquisition involves deciding what you want.

I call this your target performance level. Defining your target performance level is a way of answering these fundamental questions:

- How good do you want or need to be?
- What are you going to be able to do as your skills increase?
- What does "done" look like?

You set your own target performance level—it's whatever you decide is attractive, desirable, and reasonable. It has nothing at all to do with what other people think, or how good other people might be. What's important to you?

Your target performance level doesn't have to be your final destination: it's just your first stop, a waypoint along the path. It's a marker that lets you set a direction, as well measure your progress.

Once you set a target performance level, it's easier to make a plan about how to practice. If you don't know what you want, it's impossible to get started in any meaningful way.

Decide what you want, then proceed.

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5 Commit to at least 20 hours of deliberate practice.

“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, the providence moves too.”

—W. H. MURRAY

Here’s a useful litmus test to decide what to learn first: ask yourself if you’re willing to rearrange your schedule to complete at least 20 hours of deliberate practice in the next 30 days.

Sit down, take out your calendar, and do the math. When are you going to practice? What are you going to give up or reschedule to make the time?

If you “don’t have time,” or aren’t willing to accept the necessary tradeoffs to make the time, I have news for you: you don’t really care very much about acquiring that particular skill, and as a result, practice will be a constant struggle.

There’s no shame in that: quite the contrary. If the skill isn’t a true priority, there’s no sense in pursuing it—by being honest with yourself, you’re saving energy and frustration on a project that, most likely, won’t be a success.

If you're not willing to commit to at least 20 hours of practice, then drop the project and learn something else. Life is short.

On the other hand, if you're willing to invest at least 20 hours of focused effort, precommitting to putting in that time is a very effective strategy. Once you start, you have to keep going until you either (1) develop the level of skill you want, or (2) complete at least 20 hours of practice.

That precommitment is an extremely effective way of completing the frustrating early hours of practice. You can precommit to yourself, or tell others about what you're doing. Add consequences to dropping the practice if you feel you need an extra push: whatever keeps you practicing.

By precommitting to at least 20 hours, you're ensuring you'll practice long enough to see results.

“If you're not willing to commit to at least 20 hours of practice, then drop the project and learn something else. Life is short.”

⑥ Deconstruct the skill into smaller subskills.

“Of each particular thing, ask: what is it in itself, in its own construction?”

—MARCUS AURELIUS

Most of the things we think of as “skills” are actually bundles of smaller subskills.

Take golf for example—in the course of a single game, you do many different things: driving off the tee, selecting clubs, chipping out of bunkers, and putting on the green. Each of those activities is a skill in itself.

Instead of being overwhelmed by the complexity of the activity, just break down the skill into more manageable parts, and practice one at a time. Not only will the practice feel less frustrating, you’ll be able to track your progress more effectively.

⑦ Practice the most important subskills first.

“Do not believe that it is very much of an advance to do the unnecessary three times as fast.”

—PETER DRUCKER

Once you break down a large skill into smaller subskills, it makes sense to practice the most important and frequently used subskills first.

For example, when learning a language, it's useful to know that languages follow a power law distribution called "Zipf's Law" – a small handful of words are used the vast majority of the time. In English, the 25 most common words account for over 33% of usage.

Most skills follow a similar pattern: a few subskills are critical, while the remainder are rarely used or contribute less to the end result. Learn the most important subskills first, and you maximize your overall rate of skill acquisition.

It's usually not very difficult to identify the most important subskills: just pick up a few books or training resources, and spend an hour or so skimming them. You'll see the same techniques and methods mentioned over and over again—a strong signal that they're important to know.

⑧ Jump in over your head.

"The education of circumstances is superior to that of tuition."

—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Once you've decided what you're trying to accomplish, it's in your best interest to jump right in and get your hands dirty as quickly as possible.

In the early stages of practicing something new, it's tempting to be conservative. Failing at anything is uncomfortable, so we usually try to protect our egos by attempting things we're pretty sure we can do.

The trouble with that approach is that it slows your rate of gaining experience with the important elements of the skill. By preserving your pride, you're diminishing the results you get for your effort.

It's useful to jump in as quickly as possible, even if you're horrible at first. Your early failures (as long as they don't harm or kill you) give you useful feedback about what's really important.

One of the things I learned how to do this year was windsurfing. Instead of over-analyzing books and resources, I figured out how to rig up my sailboard, then spent as much time as I could on the water.

The first time I tried to windsurf, I was horrible: I fell in every possible way. Maintaining balance was a constant struggle. I couldn't move, or steer, so I was at the mercy of the wind. I drank gallons of nasty lake water.

I also learned a ton about what not to do, as well as how to deconstruct the process into smaller subskills. Forty-five minutes of temporary frustration accelerated the rest of my learning considerably.

By failing fast, and laughing off your early mistakes, you'll be able to learn much more per unit of time. You are strong enough to handle a few mistakes, so get out there and try.

9 **Figure out what you DON'T want to avoid preventable errors and risks.**

*“Before I do anything I ask myself ‘Would an idiot do that?’
And if the answer is yes, I do not do that thing.”*

—DWIGHT SCHRUTE, THE OFFICE

That's not to say you should try to make preventable errors. Often, a few minutes considering what you don't want is time well spent—if you can find a way to avoid or prevent bad things from happening, that's a win.

“It's useful to jump in as quickly as possible, even if you're horrible at first. Your early failures give you useful feedback about what's really important.”

Many skills have safety considerations, which should always be taken into account. Windsurfing, for example, carries the risk of drowning, injury, and hypothermia. Securing a good helmet and wetsuit was necessary to alleviate these risks.

I wouldn't recommend jumping into an airplane as a beginner, starting the engine, and attempting to take off without a significant level of training. "Failing fast" doing something that could injure or kill you is just stupid: better to spend a few hours in a flight simulator instead.

Identify the major risks, then prevent, minimize, or mitigate them. Define what you don't want, then work to prevent those things from happening.

10 Practice by the clock in short bursts.

"The greatest things in the world are brought about by other things which we count as nothing: little causes we overlook but which at length accumulate."

—GEORG CHRISTOPH LICHTENBERG

You don't have to set aside huge blocks of time to practice every day: an hour or so is fine. Splitting that block of time into smaller chunks—15 to 20 minutes—helps you maintain focus as you practice. Focusing for 20 minutes is way easier than focusing for eight hours at a stretch.

This practice strategy makes it easier to get started—“it’s only 20 minutes!”—and easier to track how much time you’ve invested.

Using a simple countdown timer to track your practice is essential—the human brain isn’t very good at estimating time. Set the timer, and practice until it goes off—no distractions. Take a short break, then repeat.

II Eliminate low-value time sinks to make time for practice.

*“I have consider’d well his loss of time /
And how he cannot be a perfect man, /
Not being tried and tutor’d in the world: /
Experience is by industry achieved /
And perfected by the swift course of time.”*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA

Want to supercharge your rate of skill acquisition? Unplug your TV. Disconnect your internet. Put away the games. Set aside the frivolous time sinks. I’m not a luddite or puritan—I’m not about to say that these things aren’t fun or worthwhile every now and then. My recommendation is based on simple math: minutes spent doing these things are minutes you’re not spending improving your prime skill.

If you feel that you have more than enough time to watch TV or play video games AND put it your practice time, then fantastic. Otherwise, something has to give—I recommend eliminating the TV time.

Time is not “found,” in the sense of discovering some bonus block of extra time, like finding a misplaced \$20 bill in your coat pocket.

If you want to get better at whatever you care about, you must make time for practice: there is no other way. That means choosing not to do other things, and the easiest things to eliminate are the activities that provide the least value.

It’s tempting to think of these sorts of schedule rearrangements as making a “sacrifice.” It’s actually quite the contrary: you’re trading a cheap amusement for a more valuable, long-term treasure.

*“Want to supercharge your rate of skill acquisition?
Unplug your TV. Disconnect your internet. Put away the games.
Set aside the frivolous time sinks.”*

In the same way you wouldn't hesitate to trade a dime for a dollar, you can choose to stop spending so much time on disposable activities, and start spending that time building skills that you find deeply meaningful.

It's your choice.

The only time you can choose to practice is TODAY.

"At every moment of every day I must decide what I am going to do the next moment; and no one can make this decision for me, or take my place in this."

—JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

Here's a simple truth: the only time you can choose to practice is today.

Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not next month or next year. Today.

When you wake up in the morning, you have a choice. You can choose to invest your time acquiring skills that will make your life more successful, enjoyable, and rewarding... or you can squander your time doing something else.

What will you do today? 📅

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Josh Kaufman is the bestselling author of *The First 20 Hours: How to Learn Anything... Fast!* and *The Personal MBA: Master the Art of Business*, both published by Penguin/Portfolio. Josh's research helps people make more money, get more done, and have more fun. He lives in Colorado.

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