



Deliberate Practice for Academic Writers

Part 1: What is deliberate practice?

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I played the saxophone when I was a kid, but I sucked. And when I say “sucked,” I mean I wasn’t good at all—I learned how to asphyxiate the instrument just well enough to participate in band concerts, but that was it. The highlight of my career was breathing “Captain! Captain! We’re goin’ down!” into my reed during rehearsal one day. It made a friend laugh, so I did it again, but this time the other students and the instructor happened to all go silent at once, right before I said it. I couldn’t stop myself and it all came out. My reward was the instructor telling me to knock it off and could I please quit acting like a doofus. Charlie Parker I wasn’t.

Now, there’s a good explanation for why I sucked: my practice sessions were terrible. I followed a regimen of my own design, “quick practice,” so called because it allowed me to get outside to play much faster. Here’s how it worked. If I was supposed to rehearse a piece four times, I would play each individual note four times in a row, and then move on to the next one. So if the first two notes in a song were G and C, I would honk out four G’s and then four C’s, and keep doing the same thing for the other notes throughout the piece. If you’ve never tried quick practice, you should! It’s *so* much quicker. This method of practicing cut my rehearsal time by half. Of course, it also guaranteed that I would never improve, but... it cut rehearsal by *half*, people!

Now compare “quick practice” to the approach I took to basketball just a few years later. I played in high school, and we practiced every day after school for two hours. We drilled both individual and team skills, focusing on our weaknesses, and we played *hard*. Coaches watched our technique and

corrected mistakes, and we watched film sometimes to see what else we could learn.

It's no surprise that I got a lot better at basketball in high school. With practice sessions like those, who wouldn't? It would be hard *not* improve. Everything was working in my favor.

In these two childhood activities, saxophone and basketball, we see a spectrum of practice styles. On the crappy end is my practice with the saxophone, which is barely practice at all. Closer to the good end is my team's basketball practices. In between and around these spots on the spectrum lie many other ways to practice. For example, I would have been even worse at the saxophone had I never tried at all. Or I might have just played pickup basketball games at the playground with friends, still working on skills but without coaching. Or I could have hired a personal trainer to refine my three-point shooting technique, and so on.

Deliberate practice

I'm going to divide this spectrum of practice styles into two groups. On the good end we find one group called *deliberate practice*. The other group I'm just going to call *practice*, or *regular practice*. Regular practice includes everything that isn't deliberate practice.

This blog post is the first in a series exploring the idea of deliberate practice for *writing*. I will focus on academic writing, but the ideas will apply to other kinds of writing too. In fact, it was in trying to write fiction that I started thinking about all this in the first place, as I'll discuss later.

In the remainder of this post I'll describe deliberate practice in more detail, saving the connection to writing for other posts. Here we'll find out that deliberate practice isn't just "good" practice—rather, it has specific features that *make* it good. I already mentioned some of these features before, like focusing on weaknesses and receiving feedback. Regular practice tends to *lack* those things. Their absence limits the usefulness of regular practice and sets an artificial cap on your progress.

The key is this: deliberate practice is the best way to make significant improvement at a skill in the long run. That statement holds for saxophone, basketball, surgery, video games, driving, and yes, writing. Writing is a skill, governed by the rules that govern the development of all other skills. When we follow those rules, we improve. When we don't, we stagnate or decline. It's that simple.

Deliberate practice: the basics

Let's learn more about deliberate practice, then. First of all, the term isn't mine. It comes from a research program developed by K. Anders Ericsson and colleagues, who studied expert performance in many domains.¹ Ericsson found

¹See, for example, Ericsson et al., "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," *Psychological Review*, 1993, 100 (3), 363-406. Many authors have discussed deliberate practice and its application to both professional and personal development, including Ericsson in other places (*Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*), Angela Duckworth (*Grit*:

that experts at skills like music, sports, and chess had all spent many years, sometimes multiple decades, engaged in a specific form of practice. More so than innate talent, Ericsson argued, the gateway to high-level performance is that practice over a long period of time.² The researchers called it “deliberate” practice to set it apart from other ways of rehearsing.³

At its core, deliberate practice has three elements:

1. A goal-directed focus on your weaknesses
2. Strenuous, even uncomfortable effort toward the goal
3. Feedback on what went wrong and how to fix it

I’ll discuss each element in a moment. For now, think about how this kind of practice differs from other kinds. Basketball gives an easy example. Most of the time I spent with my high school team was true deliberate practice. We started each day and each session with a goal: to improve the pick-and-roll, our three-point defense, or the team’s full-court press. We chose those goals because we weren’t good at those skills, or we weren’t good enough. Then we went to work, pushing ourselves to do it right. And all the while the coaches were watching, correcting mistakes, and making observations. All three parts are there—we were doing deliberate practice.

On the other hand, compare that practice to how I “practice” basketball *now*, as a working adult with three kids. If I’m lucky I’ll make it down to the Y to play once per week. I’m lazy and want to look good in front of the other players, so I stick only to moves I’m already good at. I don’t even get to use those moves much because there are so many other players. Through it all I don’t try very hard, because again, why? And there’s no feedback, either, unless you count my teammates not giving me the ball after I miss too many shots. There are no coaches watching my technique and pointing out where I can improve.

It’s clear which kind of practice will lead to improvement. And you can see how modifying deliberate practice could make it even more effective. I would improve more, for instance, with a personal trainer than with a team, because I would get many more reps and the trainer could concentrate on me alone. Each action and each observation would help me improve.

Deliberate practice is about quality time, not total time

In comparing kinds of practice, though, we must realize that we aren’t just talking about the *amount of time* spent playing. We are talking about the *quality* of that time. I could spend the same time now playing ball that I used to in high school by going down to the Y six days a week for two hours. But I still wouldn’t improve much, because the kind of practice I’d be doing is inferior. I

The Power of Passion and Perseverance), James Clear (*Atomic Habits*), Cal Newport (*So Good They Can’t Ignore You*), among others.

²Researchers within the psychology of expert performance disagree about the weights of deliberate practice versus innate talent, the exact amount of deliberate practice needed to be an expert, and other matters. Those disagreements matter little here.

³I’ve synthesized my discussion of deliberate practice from the sources listed above, and from my own experience.

could play eight hours a day for weeks but if I didn't implement at least one of the elements of deliberate practice then I wouldn't improve a lot. I would improve, but I wouldn't improve *a lot*. And experts are people who improve *a lot*—and they keep improving, even after they could dominate all the guys at the Y in a game of one-on-one.

That leads me to the fundamental point behind all these blog posts. I'll spell it out later, but here it is: most people write like they are playing pickup basketball. As a result they almost never improve. If you want to improve your writing, you have to write like you're playing on a competitive basketball team. Even better, write like you've got a personal trainer. More on this later.

Let's look at the three elements of deliberate practice in detail.

Element 1: A goal-directed focus on your weaknesses

The first element of deliberate practice is a goal-directed focus on your weaknesses. Let's start with weaknesses. Basketball players, writers, concrete workers, archers, and many others all have hard jobs. Their jobs require them to perform many different tasks. But their skills don't distribute evenly across all those tasks.

Remember Shaquille O'Neal? He played basketball with a few teams, including the Los Angeles Lakers. O'Neal was a giant with enormous strength and great footwork. These skills made him almost impossible to guard near the basket. But O'Neal was *terrible* at shooting free throws. I mean he was really bad—he was Bryce-saxophone-level bad from the foul line. He was so terrible that a whole counterstrategy developed around his weakness, called the "Hack-a-Shaq," where other teams would foul O'Neal before the Lakers even took a shot. They would let him miss one or two free throws and then get the ball back. It was a dubious strategy, but it sometimes worked, because he couldn't shoot well from the line.

So as prodigious a talent as O'Neal was, his skills didn't distribute evenly across all the tasks he had to perform. He had strengths and he had weaknesses. And my brother, a concrete worker, is the same way at his job—some things he's good at, and other things he isn't as good at. And the same goes for *you*, as a writer. You are good at some aspects of writing and weak in others. You might be good at structuring paragraphs, for example, but bad at writing sentences of manageable length.

The first element of deliberate practice is a goal-directed focus on whatever your weaknesses are. Instead of just doing what you already know, you concentrate on what you *don't* know, or aren't good at. And you keep working on those things until they aren't weaknesses any longer, or at least have improved.

This next bit seems obvious, but it's important to remember: to do deliberate practice, you first have to be *aware* of your weaknesses! You have to know what you aren't good at. This awareness ties back to feedback, the third element, but with many skills you don't need much feedback to get started. You just have to be honest with yourself about your shortcomings, and then start focusing on those.

Element 2: Strenuous, even uncomfortable effort toward the goal

The second element of deliberate practice deals with how we work on those weaknesses: *hard*. You have to make a serious effort—you have to expend some real energy in addressing your weaknesses.

Again, it's easiest to think of this strenuous effort in terms of athletics. Suppose you're like Shaquille O'Neal and your weakness is free throw shooting. You decide you want to improve—yay! That's the first element of deliberate practice!

Just determining your weakness and wanting to improve isn't enough, though. You have to go out there and put in some real work. You can't just shoot thirty shots in an hour and think you've made progress. Strenuous effort from the foul line would have you shooting hundreds of shots in an hour in many circumstances—when you're fresh, when you're winded, or when a hard foul just knocked you to the floor. Only by exerting yourself at that level will you see serious improvement. Casual shooting for a while might help you get a little better, but deliberate practice is about getting *much* better.

As you can see, the second element of deliberate practice requires you to push out of what is easy for you and into a zone of discomfort. You enter this zone by deciding to work on your weaknesses in the first place, but then you *stay* there by working hard. In fact, you'll sometimes work so hard that you put forth an uncomfortable amount of effort—you stop enjoying the thing you're doing and want the practice to end. Playing basketball isn't as much fun when you're doing deliberate practice and not just hooping with buddies at the gym.

In fact, the founders of the deliberate practice research program recognized this. They found that you need to give a *lot* in order to get a lot. Just trying a little, or giving a bit of effort over a long session, isn't enough.

When you reach the point where your mind and body tell you to stop doing something, you can be sure they are stretching. And they cannot grow without stretching—you cannot make significant improvements without feeling like you are going past your capacities into a difficult place of struggle. That's the discomfort zone, and we need to get comfortable being there.

Like we said before, it's easy to think of this effort in terms of athletics. But how does the second element of deliberate practice manifest in knowledge-based professions? I'll have more to say about this in a later post, but the easiest way to begin giving this effort is to increase the number of words per day that you write. If your normal goal is to write 500 words per day, then up your expectation to 750; if you go for 1,000, then try shooting for 1,250.

And if you aren't writing at all right now, then set a goal and start! Start right now! You can finish this blog post later. Close your browser, get a blank page on the screen, and write 300 words on whatever you have been procrastinating. You will feel the effort, but you will begin to improve at the skill of writing regularly.

Have you thought of that before, that *writing regularly* is a skill in itself, distinct from writing well? It is. And you can improve at it with deliberate practice.

Element 3: Feedback on what went wrong and how to fix it

The third element of deliberate practice is specific feedback about what went wrong in your performance, and how to fix it.

The more targeted the feedback, the better. If a basketball coach is working with a team of ten players, then she may only be able to give each player general feedback. But if you've got a personal coach who only watches you, then all the feedback you get will be specific to what *you* are doing and how *you* can improve.

This feedback ties into the first element, about focusing on your weaknesses. Sometimes it takes another set of eyes on our work to show us what we lack. Feedback can uncover weaknesses for us that we had no idea were there. But the third element is also just about improving technique, even when you already know what you aren't good at.

There's another point here which might seem obvious but is worth making explicit. Most of the time, getting the feedback you need for deliberate practice requires you to *seek out someone who is better than you*. You have to find a person who *already has the skills you want*, because most of the time only a person like that will be able to give you useful feedback. Shaq doesn't need me to go out there and show him how to shoot better; he needs a professional trainer with years of experience.

With the third element of deliberate practice you can see a cycle developing. You first select a weakness to work on, and design a plan to address it. Then you work as hard as you can to improve. Then, after you get feedback on what you didn't do well, you return to your weakness, tweak your plan, and go again. Then you go again and again and again. And that's the cycle of deliberate practice. In time, the cycle will lead to major improvements in your skills.

Summary: What is deliberate practice?

Deliberate practice is more than just spending time doing the activity you want to improve. It involves a targeted plan, carried out with great effort and modified by useful feedback.

Practice that lacks either a focus on weaknesses, effort, or feedback can still be practice. It might even be effective. But it isn't deliberate practice, and it's unlikely to offer the same benefits. Remember, the purpose of deliberate practice is significant improvement—major gains in how well you are able to do something. Not all forms of practice give the same benefits.

Of course, practicing this way requires more than just the three elements I've laid out. For one, it takes both humility and grit to receive tough feedback and keep going. Those are also hard things to do. But they aren't a part of deliberate practice itself.

And that's deliberate practice. The point of this series is deliberate practice *for writers*, though, so in the next post, I'll suggest a way to divide up the skills used to produce academic writing. The division will help us see that we can improve our academic writing in multiple ways. After that, in the third post,

I'll combine the first two to see how deliberate practice applies to academics.
The fourth will finish with some practical suggestions.