

# SUMMARY

# PEAK

ANDERS ERICSSON  
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# **Summary of Peak by Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool**

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Learn about the science that will help you to unlock  
your full potential.

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# Introduction

We've all been there-- that moment when we watch gifted kids like Gabby Douglas win Olympic gold medals at the age of 16 or read news stories about kids like Michael Kearney, who graduated college with a B.A. in Anthropology at the age of 10. We look at these stories and feel almost instantly deflated, and we might say things like, "When I was 10, my biggest accomplishment was microwaving a frozen dinner!" As a result, we might occasionally find ourselves lost in a moment of self-pity as we wonder why some people appear to be more special than others. We might feel despondent or ordinary.

But what if I told you that talents aren't always innate? What if you could simply develop the skills you want to have? What if you could unlock the potential that you always imagined to be off-limits? The authors believe that you absolutely can, so over the course of this summary, we're going to explore the science behind our talents and learn how you can train your brain to reach your peak potential.



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# How to Develop Special Kids

If we consider the examples we used in the introduction-- Olympic gymnast Gabby Douglas and child prodigy Michael Kearney-- you'll notice that each of these people has a "thing" or an area in which you can say that they have special talents. Gabby, of course, is especially gifted in gymnastics while Michael is incredibly intelligent and proficient in academic study. Because of their incredible accomplishments and their young age, our first assumption is that they must have been born with exceptional talents. But the authors argue that that's not necessarily the case. In fact, according to their research, anyone can develop new skills and discover a knack for them if they simply practice hard enough, especially at a young age.

To prove this, the author cites the example of a seven-year-old kid who shocked the world. His name was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and he was so musically talented that, at an age when most kids are learning to tie their shoes by themselves, he was the solo headline act of his very own European concert tour in 1763. Mozart was remarkable, of course, because of his ability to play the piano but also because he possessed "absolute" or perfect pitch, the ability to identify any note played on any instrument at any time. The author remarks that, at the time, this talent was considered so incredibly rare that only one in every 10,000 people was said to possess the ability. You can guess the result: everyone around him took the combination of these skills as proof that Mozart was a rare breed of genius.

But according to the authors, perfect pitch isn't necessarily an innate ability. While it's true that there are some people who are born with the rare ability and who never have to work to develop it, current research demonstrates that it is in fact possible to acquire this skill. To prove it, Ericsson examines the 2014 case study of a class of children in Tokyo. In the context of this study, Japanese psychologist Sakakibara assembled 24 children between the ages of 2-6 and taught them to identify the 14 different chords on a piano. Sakakibara worked with the children multiple times a day over a period of several months, teaching them in accordance

with the Suzuki piano method. At the end of the experiment, Sakakibara was able to proudly report that each of the children could identify every note of the piano when they heard it. As a result, it could be said that the children had been taught perfect pitch.

Although this is hardly the same as being able to identify any note from any instrument without even having heard it before, this experiment is an example of how some talents can be acquired with enough diligence and practice. It therefore stands to reason that if you put sufficient time and effort towards acquiring a certain skill, you could also learn to acquire a type of perfect pitch, even if you're not necessarily Mozart. So, while the author isn't trying to say that Mozart wasn't talented or that some people aren't predisposed to be good at a certain thing, he is trying to say that it's possible to develop new skills if you work at them hard enough. And according to the author, our ability to acquire new talents is entirely based on our brains' performance and their relationship with repetition through practice. We'll take a closer look at how this works in the next chapter.



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# You Can Literally Make Your Brain Bigger

There are more than 25,000 streets in London. And London taxi drivers have memorized them all! If that sounds like an almost superhuman feat, you're right-- and yet it's both possible and true for every single London cabbie operating today. In fact, if you were to go to London right now and tell a taxi driver, "Take me from Piccadilly Circus to Paddington Station," they could get you there without once looking at a map! So, how do they do it? And how come you haven't memorized every single street in your city?

Well, it all has to do with the brain's ability to adapt. Because London taxi drivers are required to complete a readiness test certifying that they had memorized all the streets, they've basically been giving their brains a workout. As is the case with any muscle, when you strengthen it over a prolonged period of weight lifting, it's going to get bigger. And that's exactly what happened with our London cabbies! In fact, a neuroscientist named Eleanor Macguire decided to test this theory through a study conducted with the University College London. By contrasting the brains of London taxi drivers with those of average people in other professions, she found that cabbies have larger, more developed hippocampi than other people! As you've probably already guessed, the hippocampus is the part of the brain that helps you memorize new information, process your awareness of spaces and places, and navigate directions!

But taxi drivers aren't just a special breed of people with unusually large hippocampi. Macguire discovered this by expanding her study to encompass an analysis of people who were training to become taxi drivers-- that is, average Joe's who hadn't been taxi drivers all their lives-- and contrasting them with her earlier control group of other people who aren't taxi drivers. When she conducted this portion of her study, she found that the brain scans were almost identical; the budding taxi drivers didn't have larger hippocampi at all. But when she examined that same sample of new taxi drivers four years later-- after they had completed their training and started working in London-- she found that their hippocampi matched that



of her original sample of drivers and were significantly larger than those of the control group. This proved her theory: that your hippocampus can grow and develop with intensive training!

So, what's the point of this study and what can we take away from it? The author asserts that this example is significant because-- just like the story of the children in Tokyo-- it illustrates that our brains are basically plastic. They can be molded and shaped if we train them and that training can help us to achieve incredible things! It also proves that seemingly rare abilities aren't always the result of talent alone, as we often assume. Instead, they can often be achieved by deliberate and intensive training for your brain.



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# The Relationship Between Training and Talent

So, now that we've taken a look at the things your brain can accomplish with careful training, let's consider how that works in practical application. Because while examples about perfect pitch and memorizing 25,000 streets are interesting, they're probably not the talents we're all hoping to develop. So, what about more mainstream abilities like excelling at performing arts? This example is probably relevant to everyone because even if we can't carry a tune in a suitcase, pretty much everyone has dreamed of being a superstar or seeing ourselves on the big screen. However, we typically assume that the realm of movie stars and singing sensations is exclusively inhabited by those who possess significant talent. But the author posits that talent isn't always the only factor.

As we've mentioned earlier, it is true that some people possess natural abilities for certain things. But talent only gets you so far. The rest of your success is determined by discipline, hard work, and determination. And funnily enough, those are the same habits that are required for developing new skills! The author calls this technique "purposeful practice" and we're going to take a closer look at how it works in this chapter. Purposeful practice hinges on the development of three key skills:

- Establishing clear goals
- Branching out from your comfort zone
- Getting consistent feedback

So, if you want to develop your skills as a singer, actor, or musician, these are the core training techniques you want to keep in mind. That's because it's not enough to say, "I want to be the next Taylor Swift." In addition to being ambiguous and vague, this goal doesn't really lay out any clear steps that will help you get there. But if you establish a clear goal, like saying, "I want to master the guitar," that's a great starting point that will help you reach your overall goal of becoming a singer/song-writer. However, you can't set those goals without being willing to branch out from your comfort

zone. Learning new things always involves taking risks and being open to the possibility of failure. So, even if you're afraid of looking silly or making mistakes, it's important to open yourself up to that opportunity so you can learn and grow! And last but not least, it's critical that you get consistent feedback.

Just as it's dangerous for us to bottle up our emotions and avoid sharing them with others, it's also unhealthy to avoid feedback on our new ventures. For example, if you think you sound just like Taylor Swift, but everyone else thinks you sound like a dying cat, it might be best to get that feedback before you try out for American Idol. But feedback can serve other helpful purposes too. Someone who cares about you and has your best interest at heart-- and who (ideally) is also an expert in what you're trying to master-- will be able to tell you how you're doing. They can encourage you to keep trying and coach you in the areas where you need to improve. They can help you identify your strengths and weaknesses. And you'll benefit from having a sounding board to help you judge your progress! But this feedback needs to be consistent because we never stop growing, never stop learning, and never stop needing support. So, when we have that system of guidance and support in place, we can flourish!



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# From Good to Great

What's the difference between a good and a great performance? That's what we want to know, isn't it? Because after all, this book isn't called "unlock your slightly above average performance" or "learn how to do an okay job." Instead, it's about unlocking your peak potential. So, what does that look like? And what makes the difference? The answer lies in taking your purposeful practice to the next level through something called "informed practice." It's also known as "deliberate practice" and this sums up a big part of the difference because it requires you to be intentional about meeting your goals. Let's take a look at how that works.

A well-developed field is one necessary ingredient for informed practice. That means that you're pursuing a skill in a field that has been around for awhile, been the subject of considerable study, and has a few established experts. This is necessary for the second vital part: finding an expert mentor who can guide you. As you can see, these elements build on the tenets of informed practice and take them one step further. And the best part is that you can apply them to pretty much any field! Whether you hope to become an actor, a singer, a best-selling author or a leading scientist, most of the fields you could want to go into are already established and have a number of talented, credible experts.

Experts are crucial for deliberate practice because their experience can provide you with an action plan for becoming an expert yourself. To put it in context, just imagine what an aspiring basketball star could learn if his coach was Michael Jordan! The advice and encouragement of a mentor who is an expert in your field will be so much better for you than a sounding board comprised of ordinary people who don't know much about what you're trying to do. For example, if your grandma thinks everything you do is awesome and always encourages you no matter what, she's probably not going to be as helpful as a coach with fifty years of experience who can skilfully evaluate your progress. And to top it all off, a knowledgeable coach can also serve as a springboard for launching your dream career because

they'll be able to give you insider info on how to step up your game. After all, why waste your time reading "How to Write the Great American Novel (For Dummies)" when you could get firsthand tips from Stephen King?



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## Final Summary

While it's true that some people are innately talented, talent isn't the key to success-- deliberate practice is. Although we often assume that the realm of success is populated only by those who were born with superior talents, the author wants you to know that that's simply not true. Talent doesn't account for success, but practice, determination, and hard work can. That's because being good at something can only get you so far. Without developing your skills and investing time and effort, no amount of talent can help you achieve success.

Instead, deliberate practice is the key to unlocking your peak potential and you can do so by following a few key strategies. As we've seen through the examples of the children in the Tokyo music school and the London cabbies, our brains are malleable. And if we devote ourselves to establishing clear goals, branching out from our comfort zones, and getting consistent feedback from an expert in our field, we can develop new skills and make the transition from good to great.



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