

How to Get Smarter

Optimize learning with a bit of experimentation and distributed practice.
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Several times already in this school year, I've been confounded by my daughter's homework. Once I didn't even understand the directions for the task.

She's seven. Which means we've got a ways to go. So, I need to step it up if I'm ever going to get through second grade -- again. Course she's teaching me and I do have a growth mindset which means that I believe with hard work, learning, and practice we can all get smarter.

That belief alone is one reason our brains do expand, according to researchers like Carol Dweck, from Stanford University. People who believe that they can learn what they need to know tend to do things that develop their brains. They are also more [resilient](#).

It used to be we thought [intelligence](#) was fixed. You were either smart or you weren't. Now we know better. The [brain](#) is constantly rewiring and reconfiguring itself. When used, when exposed to changes in behavior or [environment](#) – like a new view, or walking route – and other factors, neural pathways and synapses grow and expand.

How to Get Smarter

The first step then, is to adopt a growth mindset. Simply believing you can get smarter will prompt you to do the things that will make you smarter.

Then, get thinking. You can take on new challenges, try brain teasers or crosswords, learn an instrument or new language, or for some of us, apparently, complete second grade homework.

How you prepare and practice matters too.

Staying up all night perfecting the presentation or cramming for the final is definitely not the best strategies – though I used to swear by this technique.

Another popular technique, highlighting – using the bright colored marker to identify meaningful facts or details – isn't going to help you either, according to a report that looked at the effectiveness – or not -- of some of the most common study practices.

Highlighting actually prevents you from soaking up needed knowledge because it limits your focus to individual facts rather than helping you connect to the overall idea, according to the [research led by Kent State University professor, John Dunlosky](#).

So what will help you absorb the knowledge you need? Distributed practice.

What is Distributed Practice?

Distributed practice is the fancy phrase for Not Cramming. Instead of filling you head full of material all in one night, you “distribute” (get it?) your study sessions. When we load up on info in a single session, most of that is lost after a few days. When we study the material over time, we tend to retain it.

Practice also makes a difference when it comes to learning – but not necessarily if we repeat the same steps over and over.

[In a study led by Tom Stafford, of the University of Sheffield,](#) the people who improved the most while playing an online game were the ones who spaced out their practice sessions (though both groups had practiced the same amount of total time) or explored different aspects of game play early on. By experimenting a bit in the beginning and distributing their practice time, they were able to optimize learning.

Plan out your practice time, take some breaks, and play with ideas, techniques, and solutions early on and you might just boost your brain power. I'm hoping these strategies will help just enough to get me through the second grade homework