

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

HOW TO SELF-LEARN ANYTHING

Why You're Struggling To Learn

Must-Have Self-Learning Tools To Become An Expert In Anything — Chapter One. About a 12-minute read.

I've always found this one scene from the Disney version of Hercules pretty interesting.

So, if you're unfamiliar with the plot (and the actual legend—as warped as it may be in this adaptation), here's a refresher. Stolen at birth and stripped of his godly powers, young Hercules roams this earth lonely and misunderstood. He doesn't feel like he belongs among the mortals until he realizes he is, in fact, the son of Zeus. Here's that titular scene: He moseys on over to Zeus' temple and asks if he can come home.

His father says no, not until he can prove himself to be a true hero. And so, he seeks out Philoctetes (Phil to friends), maker of kings and trainer of champions. He finishes his training and goes through a series of epic quests known as the twelve labors (of Hercules): defeating the nine-headed Hydra, capturing the Cretan bull, slaying the Nemean lion, stealing the golden apples from the Hesperides, and so on.

He aggressively burns through that to-do list, cementing his heroism. "Zero to hero," proclaim the muses. And so, he's offered a seat among the gods on Mount Olympus.

Now, in literary circles, this type of arc is called "the hero's journey." We all have one, a specific trail we blaze in pursuit of our calling or purpose in life.

And that journey often requires a certain set of skills. For Hercules, it was acquiring brute strength and the sickest of abs. For you, it may involve learning a skill or deepening your knowledge in a specific field. If that's the case, consider this book your ultimate guide, the Phil that walks you through the trials and tribulations that make a hero.

You may have already encountered a fair share of tests on your way to self-learning in the form of self-doubt, frustration, failure to understand or remember the material, or a feeling of helplessness. Maybe you feel like this field of study is not "for you" and that you're just "not cut out for this."

But let me tell you, you're not the problem. Your mind is literally a supercomputer designed to (constantly) learn and expand. You, by definition, can learn any subject you decide to. You just have to know how. And that's probably where you're struggling: how do you approach learning and where do you start?

Well, don't you worry. This book is going to walk you through the whole process, from goal setting and note-taking to reading, evaluating, and staying motivated. We will cover tips and tricks on how to maximize learning, study more effectively, and review and write the "correct" way.

As we dive into the different learning techniques, you'll come to see that people learn differently and you just have to find a system that works for you. We'll delve into the mechanics of the mind (how it decodes and stores information, and how not to work against it).

By the end, you'll have a pretty good idea about what learning modality works for you, what your strengths are, where you need more help or attention, and why you want to pursue these goals in the first place. You can develop powerful learning habits that will see you through any field or topic and solidify your confidence, with just a little bit of practice and self-awareness.

And while the Disney adaptation will have you believe Hercules did all this by himself (as Phil would say, "he's gotta do it on his own"), in the folklore, he had a LOT of help. Every

step of the way, he had a god or oracle give him the lowdown as to how to succeed in his quests. Did he rely on his own wit and grit? Yes. But he had guidance. And so, in that spirit and in keeping with the motif of mythology we got going here, I will be your oracle on this journey.

Now, why me, you may ask? Well, I too, had an uphill trek where I had to self-learn.

While I studied in college, I taught myself psychology, trauma, and somatic healing. It was tough and demanding. There were times when I felt I was in over my head and wanted to quit. I doubted myself, felt like an imposter, and frequently lost motivation.

Now, having discovered the smarter way to learn through the trials and errors of others before me, I was able to master my subject of interest and start my own practice as a developmental trauma coach. And so, I want to pass on this inheritance of knowledge I gathered from teachers, writers, philosophers, and fellow self-learners to you, brilliant minds and future overachievers.

If you're ready to "go the distance," let's begin our training with lesson one: how learning became difficult—a.k.a. how you got here.

Lara Kalenderian

Chapter One: Why You're Struggling To Learn

My earliest memories of school were pretty bad. I remember going to great lengths to fake being sick just to get out of it—forging doctor's notes, calling as my parents, the whole nine yards.

It's not that I hated learning. I just hated school with a vengeance I can only describe as biblical (Old Testament, of course).

But as I grew older and met more people, I realized that I was not the only one who felt that way. Most who go through the assembly line of (conventional) academia seem to come out the other side with a similar experience: disconnected, disillusioned, and disappointed.

So, I wonder. What part of traditional education put us off so much?

To answer that, let's first define the term, traditional learning.

Essentially, learning is considered traditional if it meets these criteria:

- The learning takes place in a physical space.
- The curriculum, resources, and hours are predetermined (usually by the professor or school).
- The student passively receives knowledge (and is evaluated based on how well they can recreate this information in a test).

Ironically enough, the problem with this kind of learning system is that it's not great for learning. It's a dingy, old relic that hasn't adapted to its modern students and the climate they exist in. And so, it makes it hard for them to learn much of anything.

In this chapter, we'll focus on two key reasons traditional learning may be too "old school" to be effective.

Number one, it uses fear to motivate its students.

All students, from the straight A types who take extensive notes to the ones who try just hard enough to get a passing grade, can recall the sheer panic and terror of an upcoming final. There is this crippling level of pressure that goes with trying to do "well." That is an oddly universal experience if we really think about it.

We're all made to believe we have no future if we don't study hard enough and get the best grades. That is a terrifying thought, indeed. But the thing is, fear can only get you so far. There will come a point where that's not much of an incentive anymore*. From a biological perspective, it literally drains your brain of the energy needed to absorb new material and learn something.

Here's how that works. A part of your brain, the seasoned amygdala, is responsible for survival*. You may have heard of it as the fight, flight, or freeze response. This is a reaction that flares up any time your brain perceives trouble. So, when you're told you might fail,

your brain flags this as a threat. "Code Red!" it warns the body, which prepares you to take action in the form of fighting, fleeing, or freezing.

The mind can't differentiate between a hypothetical scenario, a thought, or an actual event. So, the mere suggestion that something terrible might happen is enough to set off the alarms in your brain. And we only have an X amount of energy per day. So, if we're spending it all on stress and worry, we have none left to learn.

You know the saying, "worry is a poor use of imagination"? Well, it's also a poor use of brain power.

Number two, the curriculum is too narrow and restricting.

At some point in history, back when the individual wasn't much of a priority over the group, it made sense to have a one-size model that everybody would have to follow. It was the most efficient way to educate the greatest number of people. But as we evolved and learned just how different people are, we realized we need more than one size.

And yet, traditional systems haven't gotten with the program. They still carry on the same way they always have, creating curriculums and programs that see students as one homogenous lump, not a collection of individuals with unique needs. It is a system that students must fit into, not one that fits its students.

That is why traditional curriculums are standardized and largely focused on repeating facts and memorizing words from a textbook. While self-learning courses, as we'll soon see, take into account the learner's needs and preferences. What potential questions could you have? What obstacles block you from understanding the course material? And so on.

It doesn't help that traditional learning is confined by a time limit, whether in schools, online institutes, or universities. A professor can only cover so much information in a few months. Compare that to the endless time a person has learning on their own.

But still, that doesn't excuse the fact that the traditional way is very unaccommodating to the diverse needs of its student body. That is why a lot of people have sour memories of

their schooling experience. Many of us struggled to connect with the material we were told we needed to learn. We found it hard to understand, remember, or even care about those subjects.

Self-Learning: A Brave New Frontier

Let's contrast the old system with the new one. How does self-learning update and modernize the tried-and-true model most of us grew up on?

To set the scene, it's the height of the pandemic. With our physical spaces gone, students and teachers are forced into the foreign arena of distant learning. Online courses are popping up left and right.

We don't quite know what to do with all these changes. But one thing's certain: there's no going back. We have entered the age of self-learning. And amid all the confusion and frustration, slowly but surely, it has started to take shape.

Now, let's be honest. Self-learning isn't a "new" concept. But thankfully, it has gained wider mainstream recognition. More people can enjoy the benefits of an approach that learns from its predecessor and picks up the slack. Because let's face it, the old model doesn't work, at least not for everyone. It can help people breathe easier to know they have other options outside the narrow, traditional way.

So, in that light, the first major correction that self-learning offers students is the choice to explore a subject as deeply as they'd like.

Traditional schools don't have the luxury to do that because they're pressed for time. They have to squeeze in what they consider crucial into a semester-long curriculum. Whereas, if you're learning independently, you don't need to box yourself in. You decide your (learning) goals and how you want to approach them.

Not only that, but you can also go at your own pace, depending on your level of discipline and drive. You decide what parts are relevant for you and what aren't, how quickly, or slowly

you want to go through the material, and what level of difficulty you're comfortable with. All of the choices are yours to make. That's how customizable the whole thing is, and why you're more likely to stick with it.

You can also use any resources you want. You're not restricted to material your professor hand-picks or approves for you. In a traditional setting, everything from the question, the (desired) answer, and how you're expected to get there are predetermined. Best case scenario, you don't learn anything. Worst case scenario, it mows down your creativity and interest in the subject matter*.

For that reason, self-learning allows you all the leeway and creative liberties you need to immerse yourself in the material. Want to do your research and investigate the topic firsthand? You absolutely can. Want to choose your reading material and assignments? No problem! It's very flexible that way.

The difference this makes is enormous. Where traditional classrooms focus on dispensing information to their students, self-learning encourages critical thinking and the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in real life. One might offer a shallow understanding of the study material that likely expires with the semester, while the other can embed the data in a truly long-lasting way.

And the final attribute that cements self-learning as the superior choice is its use of desire, not fear, as motivation.

Since we already established that fear is short-lived, unsustainable, and bad for brain functioning, self-learning does away with it. It instead focuses on the desire to learn.

The self-learner, or autodidact, is motivated by this deep wish to improve, grow, create, and share knowledge. This is the make-it-or-break-it element that determines whether we achieve our goals or not. So, to consistently show up and work, we must have a vital "why" element.

Action Steps

1. Organization exercise: List what you want to learn. What topic(s) drew you to this self-learning book? What are you interested in learning?
Tip: I would personally recommend not exceeding four topics at a time, so as not to overwhelm yourself with too many interests/pursuits.
2. Journaling prompt: How deeply do you want to dive into your chosen topic? For example, if you're studying mechanics, would you like to be able to take apart an engine and reassemble it? Or would you want to know how to fix it if it broke? And so on.
3. Journaling prompt: Are there any fears holding you back? List as many as you can think of. For example:
 - "I am afraid people will think less of me if I don't know how to—."
 - "I'm afraid I'm behind my peers in my academic/business path, so I have to catch up to them."
 - "I'm afraid of failing or coming across as a failure."
 - "I'm afraid people will catch on to the fact that I'm not as good as them." (the infamous imposter syndrome)

Identifying these potential fears will help you disarm them and feel less burdened.