

THE INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLING SERIES

THE RULES OF THINKING

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RULES
OF
THINKING

before. Otherwise we're forever going over old ground and where's the point in that?

Expanding your knowledge is as important as learning new skills. Pick a subject you're interested in and learn all you can about it. You don't have to become a world authority (unless you want to) but it's really not that hard to reach the point where you know way more than your friends or your average person in the street. I have lots of friends who have areas of knowledge (outside their work) about which they know significantly more than anyone else of my acquaintance: medieval weaponry, typeface design, political history, wild flowers, modern art, twentieth-century computing, eco-friendly building techniques . . .

What are the things people call you up about to say, 'I wanted to pick your brains . . .'? The topics about which if anyone knows, it will be you? That's not the point of learning – you're doing it for your own edification to exercise your mind and keep it healthy – but the answer might give you a clue to how far down this path you are. Loads of people don't ever get those calls or texts. Maybe their specialist subject is so niche no one else ever wants to know about it. Or maybe they have just never taken their knowledge of anything to a higher level.

**HUMANS THRIVE ON
CHALLENGE – YOU, ME,
EVERYONE**

No one likes to be incompetent

I don't like to bang on about psychological theory (I'm certainly not knocking it – I just like to stay firmly focused on the practical). There is one piece of theory however that you might find helpful. It relates to how you feel when you're learning a new skill, and says that there are four stages to learning:

1. *Unconscious incompetence*:* that's when you don't even realise that you can't do a thing. For example, before you start learning to drive you have no idea what's involved.
2. *Conscious incompetence*: which is when you are aware that you're not good at it. You start driving and discover you can't steer properly, or you always brake too slowly, or you keep stalling.
3. *Conscious competence*: you can do it and you know you can. Your test isn't far off and you revel in all those new skills, like your ability to do an emergency stop or a three-point turn.
4. *Unconscious competence*: you're so good at it you don't even notice. You've been driving for years and barely have to think about it, it's so instinctive.

This process applies whether you're learning to drive, or cook, or program computers. And it also applies to less tangible skills like learning to laugh at yourself, or being self-aware, or more organised.

The reason I'm expounding this bit of theory, despite the long abstract words, is because it's helpful to be able to think through

* Yeah, it's all those long words. That's what puts people off theory. Experts need to be as specific as possible, which makes sense, so they use the most accurate words possible to describe things – but most of the rest of us don't care for the long and abstract ones.

your own learning process. And the thing you really need to understand is that one of these four stages isn't very nice. Nope, you won't enjoy stage 2 – conscious incompetence. No one does.

Conscious incompetence (I'm inclined to rename it 'you're-rubbish-and-you-know-it') is the place where your confidence is shot to pieces, you keep focusing on your mistakes, you think everyone else is better than you, and you may doubt that you'll ever be able to learn this thing.

And that's the point at which to remember this Rule. This is normal. It's part of learning. Whether it's a new job, being a parent, practising the Rules, playing the violin, or learning to drive. When you start feeling despondent and incompetent, think to yourself, 'Aha! Rule 26. I'm *supposed* to feel this way. I'm at you're-rubbish-and-you-know-it. That's all right then. I'll just persevere and before too long I'll arrive at you're-good-and-you-know-it, or whatever that other long forgettable term was.' And after that you'll be only a stone's throw from 'you're-so-good-you've-forgotten-how-good-you-are' and things will look rosy again. And you'll have a new skill solidly embedded in your repertoire.

**IT'S HELPFUL TO BE ABLE TO
THINK THROUGH YOUR OWN
LEARNING PROCESS**

Practice makes progress

I'm guessing that if you're reading this book, you're one of those people who enjoys learning new skills. That's good news – you'll get far more out of life with that attitude. Mind you, I enjoy learning some things more than others. I learnt a new language a few years ago and I really enjoyed that. I'm far from fluent but I can communicate, which is what I wanted. The lessons were fun and, even though I-was-rubbish-and-I-knew-it to begin with, I could tell I was steadily improving.

I hated learning the violin as a child though. It's a shame, but not only did I not see myself improving (because back in those days I wasn't watching), I also hated how my arm ached for 30 minutes holding the thing in position, and I just longed for every lesson to finish so I could finally drop my arm down to my side and rest it.

The thing about learning is the '-ing' at the end of it. It's an ongoing process, not a magic wand. And your enthusiasm won't last unless you enjoy doing it. It's almost impossible to be sustained solely by the beacon of what you'll finally be able to do at the end of it. Months of miserable, gruelling, time-consuming, horrible training you hate, just so you can run a marathon at the end of it? I don't think so. You have to enjoy going for a run, enjoy the challenge, enjoy setting a new personal best, enjoy feeling fitter, enjoy your training partner's company.

If you enjoy learning for its own sake, it stands to reason that you won't be nearly so bothered about how long it takes to reach you're-good-and-you-know-it, because you're having fun in the meantime. And that positive frame of mind will help you to be realistic about setbacks or sticking points or timeframes and not to feel inadequate when you don't master everything instantly. Forget 'practice makes perfect'. Progress is all you need.

If you choose to learn a thing and then you don't enjoy the process, see if you can find a more fun approach to learning it.

Maybe in a class with other people, or at a different time of day, or with an app, or a change of teacher, or alongside a friend, or on a crash course.

The other thing that makes learning more fun is to think about how you're progressing. However aware you might be that you're-rubbish-and-you-know-it is normal, you still want a sense that you're on your way to the next stage. So monitor your progress within that stage, check back to see how much ground you've already covered, and focus on what you've achieved so far. Some people like to keep a progress diary of some kind, so try that if you think it might work for you. The important thing is to think about your learning and to recognise and correct any tendency to focus on mistakes. They're briefly useful to highlight learning points, and that's it. You gain nothing by dwelling on them. Much better to count your successes, however small.

**IT'S AN ONGOING PROCESS,
NOT A MAGIC WAND**

Turn off the action replays

Don't you hate it when you can't stop going over something in your mind endlessly? A problem you can't solve, or an irrational fear, or a situation you wish you'd handled differently, or something someone has said to you. You keep going back to it again and again, however hard you try to stop, until it feels as though your thoughts are controlling you instead of the other way round.

This obsessing, or overthinking, feels very negative and often leads to stress, anxiety, depression. Indeed it is often associated with these conditions but all of us, regardless of our underlying mood, can fall prey to it from time to time. At its worst it can make you feel physically ill and can leave you exhausted and unable to function effectively.

One of the most frustrating ironies of replaying incidents, worries or problems in our heads is that you focus more and more on the problem. What you should be focused on is the feelings it causes. It's much more productive to address the fact you are prone to anxiety, than to address your fear of flying without dealing with the underlying anxiety. And even if you did successfully sort out your feelings about your upcoming plane journey, you still won't have tackled your broader tendency to feel anxious. It will just find an outlet elsewhere.

So what you want is to stop brooding. Ah, but that brings its own problems. If I say 'whatever you do, don't think about little white polar bears', what's the first image that comes into your head? If you actively try not to think about a thing, that can be counter-productive. It's easier to acknowledge that the thoughts will start running through your head from time to time and then decide what you'll do when it happens. Prepare a positive thought to counter the negative one. When you catch yourself thinking