

So You Want to Be an Expert

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Expert:

- Adept: having or showing knowledge and skill and aptitude
- A person with special knowledge or ability who performs skillfully
- Someone with specialist knowledge
- Highest rank of a marksmanship

What is an expert? An expert is someone who is widely recognized as a source of technique or skill for judging or deciding what is right or wise and is accorded authority and status by his or her peers and the public for a specific, well-defined domain. He or she has extensive knowledge or ability in a particular study. Experts are people called on for their respected advice but do not always agree on particulars. An expert is believed by the virtue of his or her training, education, or publications. He or she has superb knowledge of a subject far beyond that of an average person.

It is the expertise that distinguishes an expert from novices in many areas. The only qualities that stand between a novice, an amateur, and an expert are time, ability, and dedication to focus on excellence. I believe that it takes 4 hours per day for 5 days per week up to 10 years and 10,000 hours of dedication and focus to being the best you can be; whether it is in rhinoplasty, breast surgery, becoming a lead guitar player, or becoming an expert engineer or any other profession in which you want to excel. If you want to be the best in the class, that is what it takes. Ability demonstrated over a substantial period of time separates the *novice*, who often becomes a **drop-out**; an *amateur*, who stays at **the same level**; and an *expert*, who keeps pushing himself or herself to **be better every day** (Fig. 1). It is that dedicated focus on excellence and always saying, “There’s got to be a better way to do it” and never being satisfied with the same answer; the goal is not repeating a given level of success, but achieving a higher level every time

you do it. That is why true experts do not find it boring. If you find it boring, you no longer are in the expert category; you then start descending, and there is much information to support this. Conversely, if neuroscientists are correct, you can indeed *create* new brain cells by learning at virtually any age. So let’s get started now. With the advent of functional magnetic resonance imaging, we can now actually see these concentrated focuses activated in the brains of those who concentrate repeatedly in an area of interest—all it takes is just that small little extra focus and concentrated energy.

Often, it is only the extra 1 percent that pushes someone into the world-class category—a true expert; it is a matter of practice. Being even better and not being satisfied with what you do. A **novice** is unhappy with what he or she is doing but does not feel the need to go further. An **amateur** is satisfied with what he or she is doing. An **expert** is never satisfied; he or she is always going on to the next level of excellence. Furthermore, an expert not only is able to analyze the problem but knows its solution as well. People are not self-proclaimed as experts. You are not born an expert; you become an expert by time, ability, focus, expertise, and never relenting in saying that you want to be the best you can be and always learning from a **critical self-analysis** of what you do and how you do it. That is the key element of being an expert (Fig. 2).

How can you become an expert? I think there are repeatable steps in the journey that will help you. The following thoughts will help.

FOCUS

Becoming an expert involves the selection of key things to focus on (positive aspect) and elimination of things not to focus on (negative aspect). Very few people are experts in more than one or two things because there’s not enough

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	NOVICE	AMATEUR	EXPERT
Emotional Outlook	Unhappy	Satisfied	Never satisfied
Outlook Regarding Exploration	Doesn't want more	Keeps doing things the same way	Always new and unique problem solving
Attitude Towards Change	Gives up	No change desired	Change is constant, inevitable, and welcome
Outlook Regarding Training	Trains to become competent	Competent, but not driven	Driven to make changes constantly
Cycle of Self-Review	No self-analysis	Some thoughts about own performance	Very self-critical and analytical

Fig. 1. Characteristics of expert development.

Pathway To Becoming An Expert

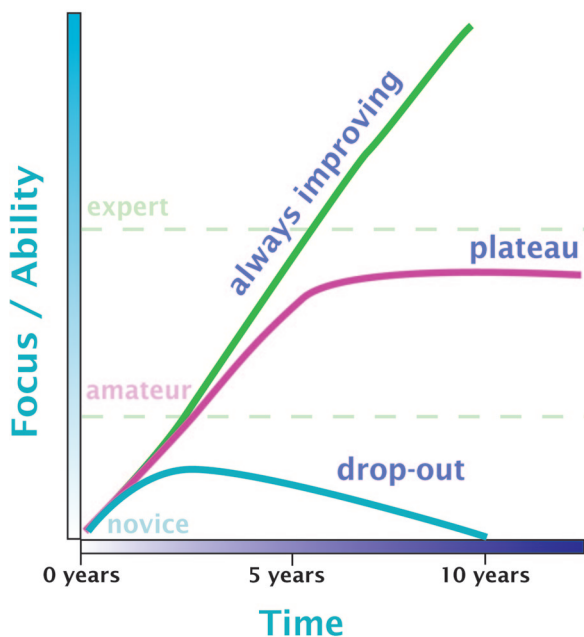


Fig. 2. The novice, amateur, and expert in terms of ability over time.

time in life to do that. Determine for yourself what to be a “generalist on” and the one or two items to be a specialist on. (Focus is an interesting phenomenon. American education has the disadvantage in this regard because it plays to the generalist mentality—educate students broadly on a number of subjects, but deeply on none. In contrast, European—and especially British—higher education provides scant breadth in its education but demands exquisite rigor and

depth into a single topic. The English know what “focus” is.)

CHOICE

Choice is a critical component of focus. Before you set off on a path toward excellence, take time to think of the ramifications of that decision. What will the pursuit of being an expert entail on your life? What will you have to give up (and more importantly, what will your family and friends have to give up) in your pursuit of excellence? What will you have to gain (and more importantly, what will the world have to gain) through your expertise? Can the object of your focus and your pursuit of excellence hold your interest your entire life? Is the object of your pursuit rich and deep and compelling enough to captivate you thoroughly? It is good to let many things interest you; let only a very few things enthrall you. Be very intentional about what you decide on because it will become the object of your affection—and loathing—and you will need to be comfortable with the choices you make.

DEDICATION—BECOMING A DISCIPLE

After you decide on what you want to become an expert in, give yourself wholly over to the discipline of the object of your excellence. It is said that the things we pursue in life find us rather than us finding them. Even so, let the thing that finds and captivates you set its own pace. Love should be consuming, and we are talking about love here. Let your object of excellence become the object of your affection, your passion, your love. It will determine you, rather than you determining it; let it do so. Don't fear the discipline or dedication necessary to obtain expert status. Rather, embrace

them. Dedication and learning will undoubtedly reveal areas of weakness. Rejoice when you find such an area! It is a kindness given you to know where you need to work, to know that there is more to learn, to realize there is more beyond your grasp that can eventually be yours.

PROMULGATION—TEACHING THE WORLD AND MENTORING STUDENTS

As mentioned previously, the expert is known and believed because of the demonstration of his or her expertise: through his or her publications, presentations, and students. It is not enough for a person to be an expert in isolation. The expert has an obligation to go beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and skill; the hard-earned acquisition of expertise must be balanced by the dissemination of that expertise to others. Although the pursuit may involve periods of intense isolation, bringing the discoveries of dedication and discipline to light is by definition a community experience. The private joys of discovery and mastery are heightened and made complete through the public joy of telling others, so that they too can marvel and benefit. Knowledge, scientific discovery, surgical skill, the ability to sing or dance or paint—all of the things in life that beckon us to become expert in—must be shared and passed on to the next generation. Without the joy of sharing with others, expertise devolves into rust at best or, worse still, self-worship and idolatry.

CELEBRATION—ENJOYING THE BENEFITS OF EXPERTISE

The cycle of becoming and being an expert is not complete until the benefits of such expertise are enjoyed and celebrated. Hard work and effort should be recognized and rewarded. Too often, people lose heart after accomplishing a major feat precisely because they do not pause to look back, survey what they have accomplished, and enjoy what they have done. Celebration of life and success needs to have its fair and rightful due. If you have dedicated yourself to a pursuit, have mastered it (or rather, have let it master you), and told others its wonders and secrets, you deserve to enjoy what you have done. Let the patent holder reap benefit from his or her creation. Let the athlete bask in the glory of his or her victory. Give the promotion to the deserving associate professor. Enjoy the corner office, and spend some well-earned time off on the beach. This is the reward

given for excellence, and it is necessary to be able to enjoy it. Nonacceptance of such pleasures will rob you of creativity and limit future success.

REAWAKENING—BEGINNING THE CYCLE AGAIN AND ENJOYING A RENAISSANCE OF YOUR OWN

After receiving a good pat on the back and taking some time off, start the process all over again. Reinvent yourself (and your expertise) all over again. You may want to dive into some new area, or better yet, start with a fresh slate on what you have previously learned. You'll be surprised that, having once reached the pinnacle of capability, a fresh look a few years later will reveal how limited and inadequate that earlier level of success will appear to you. New insights will come; new avenues of exploration will make themselves evident to you. Earlier expertise will merely seem like a plateau on a journey toward something much bigger than you ever could have imagined previously. Start anew, and find the field wide open.

The next time someone says that he or she is a self-proclaimed expert or you get an email from someone who tells you he or she is an expert, take a look at what he or she is doing. A great example of that is a concert pianist who practices 3 hours per day for a decade to become the best, or someone who is a professional National Basketball Association player; he or she practices and practices to make himself or herself the best he or she can be or as perfect and consistent as possible. That is what separates the true expert from the novice or self-proclaimed expert. Or a Lance Armstrong who focuses on one thing—being the best he can be and working on his weak spots, specifically, that of beating the best in class in the hardest aspect of the race—the mountain stages of the Tour de France.

Regardless of what you choose to do in your profession or in your life, I urge you to become an expert. Don't let life pass you by without experiencing the challenges, frustrations, sorrows, joys, and successes of expertise in something.

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