

A Quick Note on Getting Better at Difficult Things

By Ta-Nehisi Coates
2015

Ta-Nehisi Coates is an American writer, journalist, and educator. Coates is a correspondent for The Atlantic who often writes about cultural, social, and political issues, especially as they relate to African Americans. In this text, Coates discusses how to get better at difficult things and shares his own struggles learning a new skill. As you read, take note of the obstacles that the author encounters and how he overcomes them.

[1] I have been studying the French language, with some consistency, for three years. This field of study has been, all at once, the hardest and most rewarding of my life. I would put it above the study of writing simply because I started writing as a 6-year-old boy under my mother's tutelage.¹ I always "felt" I could write. I did not always "feel" I could effectively study a foreign language.

But here I am, right now, in a Montreal hotel. I spoke French at the border. I spoke French when I checked in. I spoke French when I went to get lunch. I don't really believe in fluency.² If there is such a thing, I don't have it. I mishear words. I confuse tenses. I can't really use the subjunctive. Yet.



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Something has happened to me and the something is this — I have gotten better. I don't know when I first felt it. I didn't feel it this summer at Middlebury,³ despite the difference in my entrance and exit scores. I didn't feel it when I first arrived in Paris in January. I felt, as I always feel, like I was stumbling around in the dark. I still feel like that. But I also feel like I am getting better at stumbling.

I am emphasizing how I "feel" because, when studying, it is as important as any objective⁴ reality. Hopelessness feeds the fatigue⁵ that leads the student to quit. It is not the study of language that is hard, so much as the "feeling" that your present level is who you are and who you will always be. I remember returning from France at the end of the summer of 2013, and being convinced that I had some kind of brain injury which prevented me from hearing French vowel sounds. But the real enemy was not any injury so much as the "feeling" of despair. That is why I ignore all the research about children and their language advantage. I don't want to hear it. I just don't care. As Carolyn Forché would say — "I'm going to have it."

1. support

2. **Fluency (noun):** the ability to speak or write a foreign language easily and accurately

3. Middlebury College is located in Vermont. They offer a 6-week summer graduate school program for students who want to learn French. Students who attend must pledge to speak only French for the entire time they're there.

4. **Objective (adjective):** neutral

5. **Fatigue (noun):** extreme tiredness

- [5] To “have it,” I must manage my emotional health. Part of that long-term management — beyond French — is giving myself an opportunity to get better at difficult things. There is absolutely nothing in this world like the feeling of sucking at something and then improving at it. Everyone should do it every ten years or so.

I don’t know what comes after this. I have said this before, and will say it again: Studying French is like setting in a canoe from California to China. You arrive on the coast of Hawaii and think, “Wow that was really far.” And then you realize that China is still so very far away. “Feelings” come and go. Likely, someone will say something — in the next hour or so — which I do not understand and I will feel a little hopeless again. But right now, I feel high. And one must savor those moments of feeling high, because they are not the norm. The lows are the norm. The Struggle is the norm. May it ever be thus.

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