

# Does practice really make perfect?

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Credit: Photo courtesy Rice University/ThinkStockPhotos.com

Does practice really make perfect? It's an age-old question, and a new study from Rice University, Princeton University and Michigan State University finds that while practice won't make you perfect, it will usually make you better at what you're practicing.

"This question is the subject of a long-running debate in psychology," said Fred Oswald, professor and chair of psychology at Rice and one of the study's co-authors. "Why do so few people who are involved in

sports such as golf, [musical instruments](#) such as the violin or careers such as law or medicine ever reach an expert level of performance?"

The study, "Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education and Professions: A Meta-Analysis," reviewed 88 previous studies (more than 11,135 total participants) published through 2014 that investigated relevant research on practice predicting performance in music, games, sports, educational and occupational domains.

Within each domain, the researchers averaged the reported results across all relevant studies. They found that "[deliberate practice](#)" – defined as engagement in structured activities created specifically to improve performance in a specific field – explained 26 percent of the variance in performance for games, 21 percent for music, 18 percent for sports, 4 percent for education and less than 1 percent for professions.

"Deliberate practice was a strong overall predictor of success in many performance domains, and not surprisingly, people who report practicing a lot generally tend to perform at a higher level than people who practice less," Oswald said. "However, perhaps the more important contribution of our study is that no matter how strongly practice predicted performance in our findings, there was always statistical room for other personal factors to predict learning a skill and performing successfully, including basic abilities."

Oswald noted that significant amounts of research have already identified basic abilities as also being important to predicting performance, but some researchers tend to minimize them and consider practice as the sole determinant of performance.

The researchers conclude that while practice will not make perfect for all people, it will make almost everyone better.

"Other factors matter as well, but even so, no one says that practice will ever hurt you; but be careful if you are walking tightropes," Oswald said.

The research paper will appear in an upcoming edition of *Psychological Science*.

**More information:** *Psychological Science*,  
[pss.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 97614535810.abstract](https://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97614535810.abstract)

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