

Part One: Read the article. In one sentence, summarize the main point of the article.

I've always been considered a good writer and a terrible singer. I pick up sports quickly but draw like a 2-year-old. My talents seemed pretty set by the time I was in my late teens.

Most of us think of talent as an ability we're born with and have fairly little control over. But increasingly, experts are questioning the notion that genes limit how far we can go.

"We're at a very interesting moment in this discussion, where new science is giving us insight into what lies beneath great performances," said Daniel Coyle, author of *The Talent Code*. "A lot has to do with genes, but more doesn't."

This sounds like the familiar nature-versus-nurture arguments — how much of us is what we are born with and how much is due to our environment. But scientific research shows that the interplay between environment and genes is far more intricate than that.

"I don't like thinking about the words nature and nurture as two distinct things," said David Shenk, author of *The Genius in All of Us*. "They are completely intertwined." According to Shenk, talent needs to be seen as a process rather than as a thing that we either have or we don't. "I see this as the beginning of a more nuanced conversation," he said.

Why does **this** matter? Because if we think of talent as more or less immutable, then we're selling ourselves and our children short.

K. Anders Ericsson, professor of psychology at Florida State University, is one of the leading researchers in the field of expertise. He has spent years studying what makes people great at what they do, from violinists to chess players. In his research, he said, there appears to be very little evidence that talent is linked to individual genetic differences, with the one exception of height. It's difficult, for

example, to be a professional basketball player if you're too short or an Olympic gymnast if you're too tall.

But, according to Ericsson, it does not necessarily follow that everyone can become great, or even really good, in a given field. First of all, you need to have parents willing to put in an intensive amount of resources and time in helping you excel. In fact, research has shown that most people who are really outstanding in their domain don't come out of nowhere. Top-notch musicians are usually born into families where music plays a dominant role. The same is true with sports or any other endeavor.

In addition, by studying those who have excelled, Professor Ericsson has found that they engage in something he calls "deliberate practice." **This** involves spending hours a day in highly structured activities to improve performance and overcome weaknesses.

The practice is not necessarily enjoyable and requires someone willing to put in thousands of hours over at least 10 years. From his observations, it takes a minimum of a decade of deliberate practice to excel in any field. But he is not talking about practicing every day, all day. Four hours a day is usually the maximum that anyone can do to really get the most out of the effort, he said. After that, exhaustion sets in.

"Most people wouldn't be able to engage in deliberate practice for even a few weeks," Professor Ericsson said. And **that's** one of the biggest reasons why more of us don't get to — or even near — the top levels in a field.

Not everyone agrees with Professor Ericsson that genes play such a minimal role in talent. Dean Simonton, professor of psychology at the University of California, who has also studied this area for many years, argues that genetics influence how quickly and how well a person can master the expertise necessary to perform at world-class levels.

Moreover, the very process of acquiring that expertise requires tremendous drive and determination. But where does that exceptional motivation and energy come from? Is it learned or inherited — or another combination of nature and nurture?

While, for example, we may not inherit a music or a writing gene, Professor Simonton said, our openness to experience is partly attributed to genetic influence, and “that trait is correlated with achievement in all domains that require exceptional creativity.”

So what’s the point of this? That it’s awfully hard to become great at something? We probably all know that. And the reality is that most of us are not going to be Picassos or Shakespeares. But these concepts are still important. Because even if we accept the idea that hard work will make us better, it’s awfully hard to overcome the belief that we’re born a certain way and there’s not much we can do about it.

“Most of us are far from our potential,” said Angela Duckworth, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. “Conventional wisdom has always been that talent is the most important determinant of achievement; however, our focus in the next millennium is turning to all those things that unlock talent, including grit, self-discipline and confidence.”

Grit is what Professor Duckworth calls perseverance or, as she defines it, “the capacity to sustain effort toward a very long-term and challenging goal.” Her studies have shown that grittier individuals thrive in extremely challenging situations, and that grit is quite distinct from talent.

But it’s dangerous for parents to think that if talent is much more malleable than we used to believe, we can somehow make our children into great ballplayers or artists. Those of us who have tried know you can’t force your children to become interested in something.

Or you could probably push your children to excel in an area by parenting in a way few would advocate — withhold love and affection and trade it for achievement. As the memoir by the tennis star Andre Agassi shows, that recipe can produce a highly accomplished yet very unhappy adult.



“I want my kids to aspire to greatness,” Mr. Shenk said. “I want them to work hard and to have the deep satisfaction of striving. But I don’t want them to have a two-dimensional life.”

What we can do is teach ourselves and our children that we have far more ability to develop our skills than we think we do, but that it doesn’t come easily, said Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*.

Pink believes that a lot of parents are obsessed with cognitive skills, like reading or mathematics, but they are not good at teaching non-cognitive skills, like sticking with something when the work gets tough or understanding that failure and disappointment are part of success.

“Are we establishing a generation familiar with perseverance?” he asked. “After all, what’s more satisfying than getting something and mastering it?”

With all this talk about talent, it’s easy to forget one thing. While I love watching someone who is terrific at what they do, and I also know the great feeling of accomplishing something difficult, it’s too easy to let admiration of such skills overshadow less visible attributes — like kindness and generosity. While I may marvel at great achievers, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t want to live in a world full of them.

Part Two: Comprehension and Critical Thinking

A. Use the article to support the following views. Which of the people mentioned in the article would support each statement. Give specific passages from the text for each. There may be more than one possible answer:

1. Genetics plays a significant role in one’s potential to excel at an activity.
2. It is important that we change the way we perceive talent.
3. Determination is the key to reaching our potential.

4. Parents can have a significant influence on their child's success.
5. Top-level athletes require a level of discipline that the average person does not possess.

1. David Shenk
2. K. Anders Ericsson
3. Dean Simonton
4. Angela Duckworth
5. Daniel H. Pink
6. The Author

B. Answer the following questions with a partner:

1. Find the following pronouns in the text. To what do they refer?
 - A. **This**
 - B. **this**
 - C. **This**
 - D. **that**
2. The author uses tennis player Andre Agassi as an example. What is he an example of?
3. How would you summarize the author's final point in the concluding paragraph?