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# A Mind For Numbers: How To Excel At Math And Science (Even If You Flunked Algebra)

*a*(MIND)  
for  
**NUMBERS**



**HOW TO EXCEL AT  
MATH AND SCIENCE**  
(Even If You Flunked Algebra)

BARBARA OAKLEY, Ph.D.



## **Synopsis**

Whether you are a student struggling to fulfill a math or science requirement, or you are embarking on a career change that requires a higher level of math competency, *A Mind for Numbers* offers the tools you need to get a better grasp of that intimidating but inescapable field. Engineering professor Barbara Oakley knows firsthand how it feels to struggle with math. She flunked her way through high school math and science courses, before enlisting in the army immediately after graduation. When she saw how her lack of mathematical and technical savvy severely limited her options - both to rise in the military and to explore other careers - she returned to school with a newfound determination to re-tool her brain to master the very subjects that had given her so much trouble throughout her entire life. In *A Mind for Numbers*, Dr. Oakley lets us in on the secrets to effectively learning math and science - secrets that even dedicated and successful students wish they'd known earlier. Contrary to popular belief, math requires creative, as well as analytical, thinking. Most people think that there's only one way to do a problem, when in actuality, there are often a number of different solutions - you just need the creativity to see them. For example, there are more than three hundred different known proofs of the Pythagorean Theorem. In short, studying a problem in a laser-focused way until you reach a solution is not an effective way to learn math. Rather, it involves taking the time to step away from a problem and allow the more relaxed and creative part of the brain to take over. *A Mind for Numbers* shows us that we all have what it takes to excel in math, and learning it is not as painful as some might think!

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Dr. Oakley does a masterful job in introducing the science of learning to readers in a way that is very engaging, practical, infectious and liberating. Her work provided me with a functional "User's Manual" to this magnificent gift that I have called my brain. For years I operated under the cloud of misconception regarding my own learning abilities causing me to shy away from many subjects/careers because I thought I was just not good enough. Now, I realize those moments of "confusion" or what appeared to be my inability to grasp a subject, was a result of my uninformed approach to learning and my lack of understanding in how my brain actually processes information (i.e. focused / diffused mode of thinking, chunking and top-down thinking etc..). "A Mind for Numbers" has given me a renewed passion for learning and released my pent up thirst for knowledge and self-actualization. I highly recommend Dr. Oakley's book. It "empowers ordinary people to do extraordinary things" through the power and gift of learning!!!

If you have been struggling trying to learn and remember any subject besides math and science, this book is for you. If you need to study to pass a certification test this book is for you, or if you just try to keep a sharp mind, this book is for you. Dr. Oakley in an incredible easy way explains to you why many common ways to learn or memorize just don't work, and offers a better way to learn which help you to achieve your goals.

This is an excellent little book that teaches you the most valuable skill in the world: learning how to learn. I went through, and was somewhat traumatized by, the traditional school system. It wasn't that I was a bad student (I was valedictorian actually), but that it taught me terrible habits that didn't serve me in real life. I left school with a rigid fixed mindset that made learning laborious at best and impossible at worst; and even though I hated the traditional classroom environment with its handholding and hoop-jumping, I was utterly paralyzed outside of it. I think on some deep emotional level, I didn't believe I could learn anything new. (Hence the fixed mindset. For those who don't know what I'm talking about, google "fixed vs. growth mindset", and for heaven's sake, embrace the latter!) I have struggled for years to retool my mental habits, and I'm finally getting to the point where I feel free and agile again. This book was incredibly helpful and would have been even more so had I read it earlier in my journey. Even now, it taught me a lot, mostly the science behind the techniques I'd already discovered but also a few new tricks too. This book (or something like it) will be required reading for my kids, and I'm planning on structuring their entire education around these skills (we're homeschooling). To me, it's way more important than any math concept or classical piece of literature, because if you know this, you can go get that at any time. This book is no doubt

helpful for school, but I would argue that it is even more essential for your career. Today, continued learning, both on the job and in your spare time, is becoming ever more critical for long-term career success. In IT, things move so fast that you should expect your skills to be outdated by the time you graduate! If you can't keep learning and fast, you're nowhere. I did have a couple of gripes with the book: Structurally, I felt like it sort of went in circles. Topics were brought up again and again, each time going a bit deeper into it. It sort of goes along with the theme of spaced recall, but I like my books more linearly organized so that \*I\* can do the jumbling. :) The other is that it's very academically focused with most of the examples drawn from college students. That makes sense as the author is a college professor. However, for most people, college is but a short chapter in the story of life, and I would have enjoyed reading more examples drawn from real world careers and industry. (See above paragraph.) Okay, enough talking ... go buy it!

As education devolves from teaching the three R's to the three P's (Political-Pedantic-Proctoring), this book is a must have. Transition from elementary/middle school education to high school is not easy for some. Part of the problem is the change from recitation to critical thinking isn't taught. Those that have an innate talent go forward, those that can't are mostly left behind. I have purchased three copies of this book, for each of my children, to help them make a smooth transition to college life as it approaches (also as an inoculant). Highly recommended to women and girls who developed a mental block for math and science in high school or college.

I would recommend this book to any aspiring scientist, engineer or mathematician. I wish I had this book a few years back because it would have made my undergraduate work a whole lot easier. Simple but impactful advice such as focus more on the process and not necessarily on the end product. You know, the journey, as opposed to the destination. That struck a chord with me but there is much more to this book than that particular instance.

I'm a math hater. I love science but I have no idea how math eluded me. Turns out, I'm my own worst enemy. This book does help all those open minded people who want to change. I want to change how I study and feel about math. It made me realize how much I failed myself on purpose D: I'll probably fail my math class but the second time around I atleast will have practice enough to pass. This was therapeutic.

I took both Barbara Oakley's courses on Mook and loved them tremendously because they were

so inspirational. However, when I bought the book I thought it would help me with improving my math ability by being able to put the tricks I learned into practice. Yes, I was very impressed that Barbara became an engineering professor although she was a failure in math in her early days. So, it was probably reasonable to think that I would get some good hints from her experience. Well, this book was a repetition of the courses and it talked nothing about numbers. So, I decided it would be better to go to the Mathematics for dummies series. A total disappointment!

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