

A Quick-Start Guide to Learning Any Language

Introduction

Here's the deal. I'm not allowed to send out advance copies of my book, *Fluent Forever*, to my backers. That would make my publisher sad. However, if I give you all enough information to start succeeding at your language learning goals before the book even comes out, then you're all going to be psyched about these ideas and pass them on to your friends, and this will make my publisher (and me) very happy. So my goal is to give you everything you need to succeed. This 11-page format is about 3% of the size of the book, so I'll have to skip a lot of fun stories and the science of why it works, but I can get you started with a pretty damn good toolbox.

Overview

I break language learning into four parts: Sound Games, Word Games, Sentence Games, and The Language Game. The idea is that you build a language up from its smallest pieces: you learn the sounds and the alphabet, you learn some simple words, you use those words to learn grammar, and you use grammar to learn to communicate in that language.

Anki

In my book, I have an appendix for folks who wish to learn a language, but *don't* feel comfortable doing it with computer-based tools. Unfortunately, I don't have room to talk about that here. I'm going to assume that you're comfortable using your computer, and therefore, I'm going to explain how to use my favorite memorization software, Anki. Anki is a computerized flashcard-making tool that jams information into your head at a ridiculous rate. It's extraordinary software, and once you get used to it (which may take some work; Anki's interface can be tricky), you'll find that nothing else works nearly as well. To get you through Anki's learning curve quickly, download Anki (at ankisrs.net) and then watch the video series here: fluent-forever.com/chapter2.

Phase 1: Sound Games

I can mostly skip this section. If you're reading this, you saw my Kickstarter, and so you already know what I recommend in terms of building up your ears and learning basic spelling. Other ways of mastering a language's sounds and spellings aren't nearly as fast, so we'll stick with

the apps I'm developing. Still, the apps are taking longer than originally anticipated, and some of you are studying less popular languages that I won't be covering. If you don't yet have access to a pronunciation trainer but are itching to start, this is what I'd suggest:

Get a nice quality textbook. I have some recommendations at fluent-forever.com/language-resources, or you can browse Amazon to find a well-rated book. In a textbook, you'll find a pronunciation guide with example words for every spelling rule in your language (*gn* is for *gnocchi*). Use those example words to make flashcards in Anki. You'll find instructions and demo decks to help you do this easily here: Fluent-Forever.com/gallery. That'll give you enough of a foundation to get started, and later, you can use a Pronunciation Trainer to further refine your ear.

Phase 2: Word Games

You're going to use Anki to learn 625 basic words. These are words that are common in every language and can be learned using pictures, rather than translations: words like *dog*, *ball*, *to eat*, *red*, *to jump*. Your goal is two-fold: first, when you learn these words, you're reinforcing the ear training foundation you're building using my apps, and second, you're learning to think in your target language. Every time you look at an object and immediately think of the corresponding word in your target language, you're practicing the ability to skip translating in your head. This ability will serve you well once you're ready to learn sentences.

We'll learn these words using three games, which you'll play every time you create new flashcards in Anki:

– Game 1: Spot the Differences in Google Images

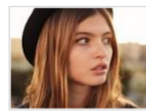
Suppose you were learning the word *devushka* (girl) in Russian, and you decided to take my advice and learn it using a picture, instead of an English translation. So you go to Google Images (or better, Google Images Basic Mode, which gives you captions for each word and more manageably sized images: Tinyurl.com/basicimage), and you search for “girl.” You'll see something like this:



meninasmacombr.blogspot...
Styles Girl
1024 × 768 - 88k - jpg



commons.wikimedia.org
File:Palestinian girl in
Qalqilya.jpg
3008 × 2000 - 3659k - jpg



esquire.com
Not entirely safe for work, but
entirely worth a look nonetheless:
Girl ...
614 × 500 - 75k - jpg



sheknows.com
If you are looking for a modern
and trend-setting baby girl's
name, ...
800 × 600 - 404k - jpg

Google Images search for “girl” (Using Basic Mode: Tinyurl.com/basicimage)

It's exactly what you'd expect. They look like *girls*, and you could pick out a couple of these images, slap them on a flashcard, and teach yourself *devushka* within a few seconds. Unfortunately, you'd be missing out on the most interesting – and most *memorable* – bits of the story.” You already know what a *girl* is. What happens if you search for “девушка” (*devushka*) instead?



Google Images search for “девушка” (Using Translated Basic Mode: Fluent-Forever.com/chapter4)

Russian *devushki* tend to be 18-22 year old sex objects. *Devushka* is not a word you'd use to describe your Russian friend's 3-year-old daughter.¹ And while knowing the difference between *girl* and *devushka* may keep you out of trouble with your Russian friend, it's also a thousand times more *interesting* than simply memorizing “*devushka* = *girl*.” When you spot the differences between a new word and its translation, you'll find that the new word suddenly becomes memorable.

Devushka is not some random exception; it's the rule. Nearly every new word you encounter will be subtly (and sometimes, not-so-subtly) different from its English counterpart. French *grandmères* are different from English grandmothers, and German *Hünde* are different from English dogs.² So your first step when learning a new word is to search for it on Google Images, look through 20-40 images, and try to spot the differences between what you see and what you *expect* to see. This experience is the learning process for your word. It's the (often exciting) moment when you discover what your word actually *means*. Once you've had that experience, you'll grab 1-2 images and put them on a flashcard to remind you of what you saw.³ You'll find a guide to building those flashcards here: Fluent-Forever.com/gallery.

¹ You'd use *devochka* – the diminutive form of *devushka* – for your friend's little girl.

² *Hünde* are stockier, and they occasionally wear hats (tinyurl.com/pswvmw8).

³ This is why I can't make your Anki decks for you. You'd be missing the learning experience, and the flashcards wouldn't work, because they're not reminding you of anything you previously experienced.

– Game 2: The Memory Game – Making your words more memorable through personal connections

There's a difference between learning that *devushka* is the Russian word for “young female sex object” and learning that *devushka* is the *exact* word that our new office intern, Susie, would use to describe herself if she spoke Russian. The former is memorable; it's linked to concrete images and a fun learning experience. But the latter is much *more* memorable (50-100% more, according to the research), because it's linked to your *own* life experiences.

When making your first vocabulary flashcards, try to find a personal connection for each of your words – a memory of an event or a person that somehow connects to the word you're learning. If you can find one, choose a short reminder (a name, a date, a location), and stick *that* on your flashcards as well. Generally, I try to keep those reminders as short and devoid of English as possible, so instead of “Susie would probably call herself a *devushka*,” I'll just write “Susie,” and instead of “I am TERRIFIED of *araignées* (spiders)”, I'll just write “☹.” These little notes will be enough to help me recall my personal connections when I review my flashcards.

– Game 3: The Mnemonic Imagery Game

I'm going to cover this in depth in the webinar, but I'll give you the mini-version here.⁴ First, some background: Languages are full of obnoxious irregularities that you “just have to remember.” In German, for instance, every noun is either masculine, feminine or neuter, and those genders have little or nothing to do with the *actual* gender of the noun. Memorizing gender in German (or French, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Hebrew and Arabic) can be a royal pain in the ass, and a similar memory challenge shows up in the form of “counter words” in Chinese, Japanese and Korean. How do you memorize this sort of abstract nonsense efficiently?

Use imagery. Instead of trying to remember that German books, maidens and chickens are all neuter, you can assign a particularly vivid verb to each gender or counter word – all neuter nouns *explode*, for instance – and then use that image to help you memorize the gender of each noun. Once you're done cleaning up the bloody pieces of maidens and chicken guts off of the walls of your mind, you'll find that those images stick a *lot* better than abstract concepts like grammatical gender. As you make your flashcards, take a moment to imagine your books *exploding*, or your dogs *melting*, and you'll find that grammatical gender will become relatively easy to remember.

⁴ If you don't have access to the webinar, I'll be live streaming a full workshop at CreativeLive.com on May 22-24 (<http://tinyurl.com/Gabe-CL>).

– *What to do*

Get a list of 625 starter words. If you purchased a word list from me, use that. If not, grab an alphabetical English list from my website (Fluent-Forever.com/appendix5), pull out a small dictionary (the Lonely Planet phrasebooks are the perfect size) and translate the words in alphabetical order. Then play all three games while creating your flashcards in Anki (Fluent-Forever.com/gallery). *If you're an intermediate learner, don't re-learn words you know already, even if you only have their translations memorized. Just skim through the 625-word list and learn whichever words are new to you.*

Phase 3: Sentence Games

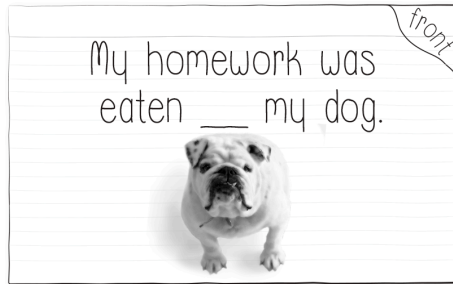
Once you've learned your first 625 words, you will have a solid foundation in the sounds of your target language, and you'll know a bunch of extremely important, extremely common words. Now it's time to start on grammar.

Grammar gets a bad rap in language learning because it often seems complex and tedious. Terms like “present perfect indicative” and “pluperfect subjunctive” tend to produce a great deal of eye glaze. Yet we *need* this complexity. We have complex thoughts, and we need a way of conveying those thoughts to others. Grammar helps turn “ME EAT HAMBURGER NOW!” into “Would anyone like to go to Five Guys for a burger?”

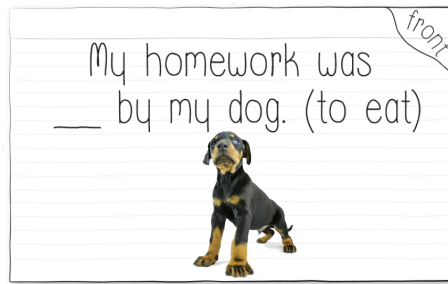
So I'm not going to claim that grammar is simple; it's not. But when you look at the *structure* of grammar – how it conveys all that complex information – you'll find that that structure is ultimately *extremely* simple. In every sentence in every language, grammar conveys information through some combination of three basic ingredients: New Words, New Word Forms, and Word Order.

I'll show you what I mean with an example from English: “My homework was eaten by my dog.” There's a lot going on in this sentence. We have three characters and one action: a homework assignment, a dog, me (it's *my* dog and *my* homework assignment, after all), and eating. And grammar is doing all sorts of complex things: not only is it telling us what happened, but it's even telling us what's *important* within the story. This isn't “*My dog ate my homework*” – a story about a bad dog – it's “*My homework was eaten by my dog*” – a story about a very sad homework assignment.

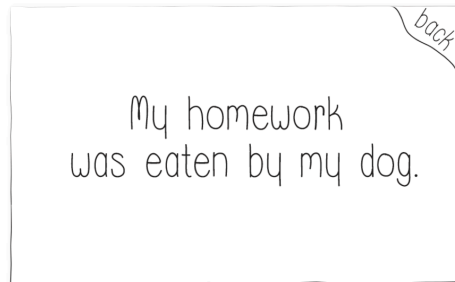
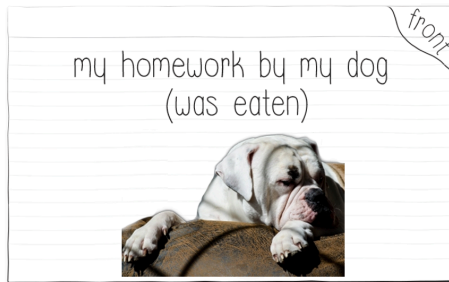
All of this complexity is stored in three basic ways: through the order of the words (it's not 'My dog was eaten by my homework'), the use of added function words ('by' and 'was'), and the use of new word forms ('eaten' instead of 'to eat', 'my' instead of 'I'). And you can learn all of these little pieces of grammar using three flashcard designs:



New Words



Word Forms



Word Order

To learn any grammatical form in your target language, all you need to do is find a good example sentence, understand the story behind that sentence (this is where the translations in your grammar book come in handy), and then ask yourself three questions:⁵

- Are there any new words here?
- Are there any new word forms here?
- Is the word order surprising to you?

Then make flashcards for any information you'd like to learn.

To do this, you'll need a bunch of quality example sentences. You have several good options:

⁵ I warned about the dangers of translations in the book excerpt I sent out, but here I'm recommending them. What gives? Translations don't capture every nuance of a word or a sentence, but they do a good job of giving you the gist of a story. I don't have a problem with using them for that purpose, provided you follow one rule: *If it's on your flashcards, it's exclusively in your target language.* If you follow that rule, you're going to be memorizing your target language in a way that will build fluency and stay memorable.

1. **A grammar book:** Someone has spent a great deal of time picking out good examples for you, so you might as well take advantage of them. Go through a grammar book, grab any sentences you find interesting, and break them down into flashcards.
2. **Google Images:** Remember how you used Google Images to learn about Russian *devushki*? You can use Google Images to provide you with example sentences with pictures and translations for basically any word in your target language. You'll find details for setting that up here: Fluent-Forever.com/chapter4
3. **Lang-8.com:** When you write your own sentences – whether example sentences for vocabulary words or lengthier journal entries about your life – you'll find that those sentences become *extraordinarily* memorable. But you will make mistakes when writing in a foreign language, and so you're going to need corrections. Lang-8.com lets you get those corrections for free, in exchange for correcting someone else's writing in your native language. Turn those corrections into flashcards.
4. **A monolingual dictionary in your target language:** These are dictionaries that give you definitions in your target language, rather than English translations. You won't be able to use them in the beginning, but after you reach an intermediate level, these dictionaries become an essential source of example sentences and input. One of the limitations of the methods we're discussing is that you need *quality* example sentences to learn abstract words. You can't easily learn a concept like "honesty" from a sentence like "He is a/an ___ man." There's just not enough context to tell you much about the missing word. But if you add a definition – "He is a/an ___ man. – *Adjective: You don't lie, cheat or steal*" – you can give yourself all the context you need to learn the word.

– **What to do:** Go through the first few chapters of your grammar book, and start making flashcards for any sentences you find interesting. If your grammar book has a hundred boring drills for the plural form of nouns, pick your two favorite ones, and skip the rest. Conversely, if your book has only *one* good example sentence for a grammatical construction – *She is a nurse* – and then throws a declension chart at you – *I am, you are, he is, she is, it is, we are, they are* – then use Google Images and Lang-8.com to provide you with more interesting example sentences. Use pictures from Google Images on every flashcard you make, even if those pictures are only vaguely related to the words you're learning. They'll make your words and grammatical constructions *much* more memorable.

Phase 4: The Language Game

After you've spent some time in Phase 3, you'll find that you have the ability to easily memorize any word or grammatical concept you'd like to learn. Now you need some direction in terms of what to learn, when to learn it, and how to turn all the data you're cramming into your head into a useable language. Welcome to The Language Game.

– Finishing up your foundation

Learn the first half of your grammar book. The second half may contain specialized topics – reported speech, special word forms you'll encounter in literature, etc. – which you may or may not need now, but the *first* half is a slam dunk. Start there, and if you need more examples of any particular words or grammatical concepts, get them through Google Images and Lang-8.

Next, get a Frequency Dictionary (resources here: fluent-forever.com/language-resources/). These dictionaries contain a list of the most common words in your target language, and they help you use your study time more efficiently. *Learn the top 1000 words in your target language*, with the help of Google Images and Lang-8. By the time you're halfway through, you should be able to start using a monolingual dictionary to supplement your studies. Do that, too. And if you see a word, but can't seem to find a good example sentence, just skip it. At this stage, you're just trying to expose yourself to a lot of vocabulary and sentences; it's not essential that you know *every single word*. As your vocabulary grows, you'll find that tricky words will get easier and easier to learn, so later, you'll be able to go back and learn any words you've skipped.

Once you've finished with those top 1,000 words, *go back to your grammar book and skim through the second half*. Make flashcards for any grammatical constructions you find interesting. Once you're done, you're going to be in a pretty good place: you'll have a nice foundation in vocabulary and grammar, you'll be able to express yourself in writing (through your practice on Lang-8), and you'll be able to read most texts without a major struggle.

– Customizing your language to fit your needs

Now you can start customizing your language learning to fit your individual needs. In some ways, this phase is simple, even obvious: if you want to have a bigger vocabulary, then learn more

vocabulary. If you want to be more comfortable reading, read books, and if you want to speak, then find native speakers and talk with them. There are more and less efficient ways of going about this, so I will walk through each facet of your budding language and show you how to improve it effectively.

Vocabulary: If you want to boost your vocabulary, you have a couple of good options. You can learn the next 1,000 words on your frequency list, and that would be a good use of your time. Still, at some point, you're going to want to fit your vocabulary to your individual needs. Get a 'Thematic vocabulary book,' a book that lists vocabulary by theme (food, travel, music, business, automotive, etc.). Go through it, check off the words that seem relevant to your interests and where you expect to use your language. Then learn those words using Google Images, Lang-8, your monolingual dictionary and Anki.

Reading: To improve your reading comprehension, you'll want to read a book. For your *first* book, choose a popular (e.g. readily available) title in a genre that you enjoy. I'm a big fan of the Harry Potter translations. If possible, read the text of that book *while you listen to its audiobook*.⁶ The audiobook will force you through the text at a rapid clip, and prevent you from stopping all the time to look up definitions. You'll find that the first few chapters will be challenging, but as you continue, you'll begin to forget that you're reading a book in a foreign language. By the end of the book, you should be *substantially* more comfortable with reading in your target language, and as a bonus, you'll have just exposed your ears to 15-20 hours of audio input.

Listening: As a natural next step after improving your reading comprehension, start to refine your listening comprehension. Find a TV series to watch in your target language without subtitles. Most popular American TV series have been competently dubbed into a wide variety of languages, and they're extremely entertaining. As with your first book, it will be challenging for the first few episodes, but as you get deeper into the series, you'll feel more and more comfortable. To help speed up this process (and to make those first episodes easier), read episode summaries ahead of time in your target language. They'll help you understand what's going on, so you won't panic if a few incomprehensible words slip by. You can often find episode summaries in your target language's Wikipedia page for each TV series. For instance, you can search for Lost, Season 1 (in

⁶ That's why you want a popular book – it increases your chances of finding it as an audiobook. You'll be able to find some on Amazon.com, but in general, you'll need to search for audiobooks through foreign stores online. By this phase, you should have sufficient language skills to search for "audiobook" in your target language, find a few online options and navigate their payment screens.

English), then click on the ‘Français’ button on the bottom left to find French episode summaries: (Lost: Les Disparus, Saison 1). The translation links on Wikipedia turn out to be a nice way of figuring out what the *title* of a given TV series turns into when translated. The French title of “The West Wing,” for example, is “À la Maison-Blanche” (“At the White House”). You can use these titles to help you search for a TV show for online streaming or purchase.

Speech: If you’ve ever played the game Taboo, you’ve practiced the central skill in speaking a language fluently. For those of you who haven’t played it, Taboo is a party game. You pick up a card, and read something like “Painkiller – head, ache, hurt, medicine, drug.” You then attempt to make your team members say the word “Painkiller” without using any of the words on the card. “It’s a ... pill! You take it when you...don’t feel good...in your brain. When your brain hurts, you take this.” Then, hopefully, one of your team members shouts “Painkiller,” and you win the point.

Taboo is fluency training in the form of a party game. When you learn a foreign language, you *won’t* know all the words you need. You’ll want to ask your German friend for a painkiller, but you might not know the words for headache, pain, or medicine. You then have two options. You can switch into English, and he’ll probably understand. You’ll get your painkiller, but you won’t get any better at German. Your second option is more challenging: you stay in German and play Taboo. You use the words you *know* to talk about words you *don’t*, and as a result, you take a step forward towards fluency. So if you’re trying to learn to speak fluently, and you want to do it as efficiently as possible, you need to put yourself in situations that are challenging, situations in which you *don’t* know the words you need. Then you play Taboo as often as you can. There’s one rule you need to remember: *Only speak your target language*. If you adhere to that rule whenever you practice speaking, you’ll be playing Taboo all the time, and you’ll reach fluency at a steady, brisk pace.

To play Taboo, you’re going to need practice partners. Locally, you can find friends, colleagues, private tutors (Craigslislist.org) and large language practice groups (Meetup.com). You can also find practice partners on the Internet. iTalki.com is a website designed to put you in touch with a conversation partner or tutor for free (if you’re willing to chat in English for half of the time), or for \$4-12/hr (if you don’t want to bother with English). It’s a tremendous and affordable resource.

If you have some time and money on your hands, travel is a nice way to immerse yourself in the culture (i.e., the food!) of your target language and practice speaking at the same time. Be aware that most people are eager to practice English, so you’re going to need to be insistent about sticking

to your target language if you want to improve your fluency. If some locals insist on speaking English, tell them that you're Albanian. No one speaks Albanian.

Last, consider a summer immersion program like those at Middlebury College (middlebury.edu/ls). There, English is expressly forbidden, and as a result, you get to play Taboo *all the time*. You learn very fast. Financial aid opportunities show up in late October and tend to dry up by December, so apply early if you need help affording it.

The Language Game: Learning a foreign language is a fluid process; you're building a lot of different skills that meld into each other. The more vocabulary you learn, the easier it will be to speak about a wide variety of topics. The more you practice speaking, the easier it will be to watch foreign TV and movies. So rather than be strict and methodical about this ("*My reading comprehension skills are lacking; I must read 15 books to maximize efficiency!*"), just do what you find most enjoyable. If you like writing about your day on Lang-8.com and making flashcards out of the corrections, then keep doing that. If you like to chat with your tutor on iTalki, do *that*.

There's a very simple way to figure out if you're spending your time well: if you're *enjoying yourself in your target language*, then you're doing it right. In the end, language learning should be fun. It *needs* to be fun; you retain information better when you're enjoying yourself, and the journey to fluency takes too much time to force yourself through using willpower alone. So enjoy yourself, and play around with new ways to think about the world. I'll see you on the other side.