

THE THINKING PRACTICE

A 30-day program to rebuild deep thinking in the age of AI, one exercise a day, no talent required

How this works

Thirty days, four weeks, one exercise per day. Most take 15–20 minutes. Each week trains one capacity: attention, understanding, articulation, and making. The exercises compound, week three assumes the muscles of week one, so do them in order.

You'll need: a paper notebook, a pen, and the willingness to feel slightly stupid for the first week. That feeling is the illusion of understanding leaving your body.

Rules: AI is allowed only where an exercise says so. Skipped days don't reset the count, resume where you stopped. At the end of each week, fill in the review page.

Week 1, Attention

You cannot think about what you cannot hold in view. This week rebuilds the holding.

Day 1 • The baseline, Read one longform essay start to finish, phone in another room. Note every urge to switch away, just a tally mark. The number is your baseline, not your verdict.

Day 2 • The slow read, Same exercise, but halve your reading speed deliberately. Write three sentences afterward: what did the author actually argue?

Day 3 • The recall walk, After reading, take a ten-minute walk and reconstruct the argument from memory. No notes. Where it goes fuzzy is where your attention slipped.

Day 4 • Unclaimed time, One hour, no screen, no plan, no podcast. Boredom is the feeling of your own thoughts asking for a turn. Let them have it. Write down whatever showed up.

Day 5 • The single task, Pick your hardest work task. Do it in one 45-minute block, nothing else open. Note how long until the discomfort faded.

Day 6 • The estimate, All day, before looking anything up, a fact, a number, a route, spend thirty seconds producing your own guess first. Score yourself in the evening.

Day 7 • Review, Fill in the Week 1 review page. Re-run Day 1's exercise and compare tallies.

Week 2, Understanding

The explanation test, applied daily. This week is where the illusion of explanatory depth gets dismantled by hand.

Day 8 • The zipper test, Pick an everyday object you're sure you understand. Write out how it works, step by step. No looking anything up until you're done. Then check, and write down what you'd missed.

Day 9 • Your own field, Same test, but on a concept from your own profession, the thing you'd claim expertise in. (Expect this to hurt more, not less. In 2016 Fisher and Keil found experts overestimate their explanations most.)

Day 10 • The borrowed opinion, Find one opinion you hold that you've never personally examined. Trace where you got it. Write the strongest case against it in good faith.

Day 11 • The AI audit, Take an AI answer you recently accepted. Verify every claim in it yourself, from sources. Note what was right, wrong, and unverifiable.

Day 12 • Explain to a child, Take yesterday's topic and explain it in words a ten-year-old would follow. Simplicity is the final exam of understanding.

Day 13 • The five whys, Take any belief about your work and ask 'why is that true?' five times, writing each answer. Most chains break by the third why. Note where yours does.

Day 14 • Review, Week 2 review page. Which explanation collapsed fastest? That topic is your assignment for week 3.

Week 3, Writing to think

Joan Didion said she wrote entirely to find out what she was thinking. This week you use the blank page as a diagnostic instrument.

Day 15 · The ugly draft, Write 300 words on the topic that collapsed in week 2. No editing, no deleting, no AI. The clumsiness is data.

Day 16 · The rewrite, Rewrite yesterday's draft. Cut 30% of the words. Notice that the thinking improves as the words fall away.

Day 17 · Write before you prompt, Today, every substantial question you'd normally hand to AI: write your own three-sentence answer first. Then prompt, and compare. Mark where the machine genuinely beat you and where it just sounded confident.

Day 18 · The argument, Write 300 words arguing for something you believe. Then 300 arguing against it, as honestly as you can. Note which was harder and why.

Day 19 · The letter, Write to one specific person explaining the most useful thing you've learned this month. Specific audiences force clear prose. (Sending is optional. Writing it isn't.)

Day 20 · AI as editor, not author, Take your Day 18 piece. Ask AI only for critique, weakest sentence, missing objections, structure. Rewrite it yourself. This is the collaboration pattern to keep.

Day 21 · Review, Week 3 review page. Reread Day 15's ugly draft. Measure the distance.

Week 4, Making

Recognition hands you opinions for free. Making is the price of real ones. The final week takes the voice that says *I could've made that* completely at its word.

Day 22 · Choose the thing, Pick something small you've claimed you could make: an essay, a tool, a design, a plan. Define 'done' in one sentence. Ambition is the enemy this week; completion is the win.

Day 23–27 · Build it, One session a day, 30 minutes minimum. Keep a one-line log each day: what you did, where you got stuck, what surprised you. The surprises are the curriculum, each one is something recognition had hidden from you.

Day 28 · Ship it, Show the thing to one real person. Not for praise, for contact with reality. Write down their first reaction and your first excuse.

Day 29 · The audit, Reread all four review pages and your build log. Write 300 words: what did you believe about your own understanding on Day 1 that turned out to be false?

Day 30 · The keep-list, Choose the three practices from this month you'll keep. Schedule them. A practice without a schedule is a memory of a practice.

Weekly review page

Copy this into your notebook at the end of each week, or print this page four times.

Question	Your answer
Which exercise was hardest, and what does that tell you?	
Where did you catch recognition posing as knowing?	
What did you produce this week that didn't exist before?	
Distraction tally / focus block length (this week's numbers)	
One sentence: what do you understand now that you only recognized before?	

Questions, or want to tell me what Day 9 did to you? Email me: sonam@spelden.co · weekly essays at spelden.substack.com