

Roscoe MATHIEU

Petit Perception

Part IV of "Roscoe Learns to Think"

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Petit Perception Course
part of “Roscoe Learns to Think”

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Contents:

Introduction

I. Exercises for Developing Observation

II. Exercises for Developing Concentration

III. Miscellaneous Exercises

Conclusion

Introduction

“*Petit perception*” is a phrase first invented by Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (the father of modern magic and inspiration to Houdini) and popularized by Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. It refers to the preternatural, almost superhuman ability to notice details. Sherlock Holmes (and his imitators) best exemplify the classic idea of *petit perception*.

However, there are real people who have developed this skill for business or pleasure, among them Dr. Joseph Bell (the man Holmes was based on) and the aforementioned Robert-Houdin. In addition to telling you the story of a woman’s life from the smudge on her left shoe, or regaling audiences with memorized decks of cards, *petit perception* lets you catch where the chair is so you won’t stub your toe, find things you have lost, and spot friends in a crowd. This course will help you, like Bell and Robert-Houdin, to develop your powers for *petit perception*.

I have split this guide into three parts. First, developing your powers of observation directly. This is, in the sense of Betty Edwards’s *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, “learning how to see.” Secondly, I have exercises for developing your powers of concentration. This will let you focus on the things in the environment of interest to you, to the exclusion of other things. Third, I have set aside a place for miscellaneous exercises, or supplementary exercises you may find useful.

I ask that you practice these exercises when you are able, at least once a day, and to develop more as you come up with them. If you do invent more, send them to me at roscoe.mathieu@gmail.com or at my blog at <http://rmathieu.wordpress.com>. I will add them to future editions of this guide, with appropriate credits.

Last of all, *good luck!* I’ll see you on the other side.

I. Exercises for Developing Observation

The basis of *petit perception* is observation, the art of seeing. You would be surprised how many people get by on seeing only what they want to see, or only what they expect to see. There is a good deal more going on than you realize, including where your missing keys are. What's more, keen observation will allow you to notice both dangers (such as the smell of leaking gas) and opportunities (such as a tiny announcement on the company bulletin).

Practice these exercises exclusively for the first two weeks or so, then add the concentration exercises to your routine. Practicing the observation exercises get you in the habit of working *petit perception* into your day, and making a habit out of it. The concentration exercises require a bit more in terms of attention and time, and can wait for the moment. When you feel comfortable, do them as well.

With that in mind, try one or all of the following exercises:

1. **Room Survey** – Next time you walk into a room, close your eyes, and mentally name all of the objects (or people) in the room that you can – desks, books, electronics, posters, whatever. Open your eyes and note what you missed. Do this every time you enter a new room or somewhere new to you. This is the foundation on which all the other exercises are built, so practice this one often.
2. **Kim's Game** – This requires a partner. Have your partner arrange small objects (watches, cell phones, cutlery) on a tray or table. Study the tray for as long as you please, close your eyes, and have your partner remove an item. Open your eyes and try to name the item that is now missing. Variations include multiple items, rearranging the tray as well as removing something, and limiting the amount of time to study the tray. I suggest starting with two minutes' study, and working your way down in increments to ten seconds, five seconds, or even one second's glance.
3. **Counting Steps** – When you go up or down a flight of stairs, remember how many there were. You can count as you go, then try recalling without (consciously) counting in the first place.
4. **Layered Listening** – Take a minute to listen to the sounds around you. While you are listening, try to isolate the loudest noise (for instance, the car horns outside your window). When you have it, listen to the next loudest noise, and so on, listening for and isolating quieter and quieter sounds, until you are listening intently to the sound of your own heart.
5. **Window Shopping** – After passing a store front, pause for a moment and try to remember the arrangement of dummies, clothes, computers, signs, etc. hanging in the window. Turn around to double-check and see what you've missed.
6. **Five Will Get You Twelve** – Over breakfast, remember what you did after dinner last night. What did you eat? How did you feel? What did you do? Where did you go?

Remember, in as much detail as possible, three to five minutes of your evening. Over dinner, do the same for breakfast. The idea is to remember about five minutes of time from twelve hours ago.

7. **The Clock** – While you eat lunch, look out the window, or have any other moment to take a break and look over a land- or cityscape, pick some detail in your sight, close your eyes and ‘clock’ them (place them). It could be, for instance, the gender of the people at the next table, or which tables are occupied and by whom, if you’re sitting in a café. It could be the number of lights on in the next building over (and in which windows) or the number of red cars on the road (but you have to be quick with that one!). Dispersion, gender, color, number, anything your mind can stick on is fair game.

II. Exercises for Developing Concentration

As you may have noticed, several exercises in the previous section required your exclusive focus for up to five or six minutes. If you’re anything like me, your mind wanted to jump all over the place much, *much* quicker than that. The second part of *petit perception* is concentration, the ability to focus with laser-like intensity for as long as necessary. By analogy of a film camera, if you try to take five different shots on the same film, the picture will come out all blurry. However, if you focus and expose the film on a single picture, you will get a very clear picture. These exercises will help you focus, so you can get a clear image of something you want to notice and take in, whether it be a lover’s face or an income statement.

1. **Memorizing Poetry** – Memorizing poetry, in bite-size chunks, is an excellent way to develop your powers of concentration. Take some poem or poems (I don’t recommend songs for this) you’ve always liked, sit down, and memorize four lines today. Then, memorize four lines tomorrow. It will take some effort and require your attention, but only a little bit of time.
2. **Mental Math** – Take any two two-digit numbers (37 and 42, for instance) and multiply them in your head, no cell phone, calculator, computer, or pencil and paper (The answer, incidentally, is 1554). When you think you’ve got the answer, *then* pull out the tools to check your answer. Then, try multiplying three-digit numbers. As this becomes easier, divide instead of multiply.
3. **Logic Problems** – Develop a habit of looking up a logic problem, logic puzzle, or lateral thinking problem and solving it once a day. Don’t peek at the solution until you feel you have one of your own. For instance, “a baby fell out of a 24-storey building, and lived. How is this possible?” Google is filled with plenty more. I also recommend the game *MindTrap*, as it’s built around logic problems and enormous fun, to boot.

4. **Memorizing Lists** – The kings of England, the American states, and the countries and capitals of Asia would be good starts, but pick any ordered list you like. Memorize seven, or ten, or however many items you can comfortably remember by the end of the day.
 5. **Five Will Get You Twelve** – See the entry under “Exercises for Developing Observation.”
 6. **Listening to the Violin** – Think of any song or piece you please. Now hear a violin playing it. Not a voice, not a trumpet, a violin. Concentrate on the violin playing the music for at least one minute. At the end of one minute, switch to another instrument, for instance, an electric bass. Concentrate on hearing the bass play for one minute. Finally, switch to another instrument, like a Moog synthesizer.
 7. **Faces in the Crowd** – When you’re sitting in the cafeteria for lunch, or walking down the street, pick a face out of the crowd. Look intently at this face, then look away and study it in your mind for a minute or more. Try to understand the person under that face. What are they feeling? Where are they going? What motivates them on a superficial level? On a fundamental level?
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II. Miscellaneous Exercises

These exercises are more supplementary to the ones above. You can begin immediately with the observation exercises, or wait to add them (or never do them at all). However, I have found them helpful, and I hope they can help you.

1. **Eye Exercise** – This is especially important if you do detail work or sit at a computer all day. Every hour or every few hours, look out a window, and pick the most distant feature you can. Focus on it for thirty seconds. Relax your eyes. Now cross them, and focus on the tip of your nose for thirty seconds. Relax your eyes, so your peripheral vision increases (you can test this by holding your fingers straight out for your body and relaxing your vision until you can see both at once). Hold this for thirty seconds. If you can’t manage thirty seconds, hold for twenty, or even ten seconds.
2. **Taste Test** – Get two, three, or four different samples of your favorite drink (tea, wine, coffee, even cola). Pour them into identical cups, close your eyes, and sip one. Note what it tastes and feels like. Sample the next one. Note how it is different, and how it is similar, to the first. Proceed in this fashion. As you develop your sense of taste, use more and more similar beverages (both red wines, then both French red wines, then both French Merlots, then both French Merlots from the same winery in different years, etc.).
3. **Meditation** – practice *anapana*, or sitting and watching your breath. If you prefer, you can count 1-2-3-4 or “in, out, in, out” instead. As other thoughts arise, let them go without following them, and come back to the breath. Practice for ten minutes or longer, daily.

4. **Learning to Draw** – Learning to draw from life is probably one of the best ways to learn how to see. I recommend some of the exercises in *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, especially copying an upside-down drawing.

Conclusion

This concludes my short course on *petit perception*. Some of you are asking, “how long will this take?” To which the traditional answer is “how long do you plan to live?” This is less a course to get through than a practice to begin, to notice and observe the world around you. After three months, I think, you can dispense with the formal exercises, but whenever you have a spare moment, close your eyes and ask what you see, or solve a quick logic puzzle. Keep in practice, that’s the key.

And as you come up with variations and other exercises, I’d like to again ask that you send them to roscoe.mathieu@gmail.com or to my blog, Innerspace, at <http://rmathieu.wordpress.com>.

See you soon.

- Roscoe