

Unschooling

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Motivation

I want to learn.

As a human being I am interested in learning, and I don't feel that I'm learning enough in school—or that *what* I'm learning, I will retain. The classes I'm required to take aren't intellectually stimulating.

Take English, for example. I'm fascinated with literature; for my own enjoyment I've read *Animal Farm* and *Brave New World*, *Metamorphoses* by Ovid and short stories by Dostoyevsky. English is a singular example of what I'm good at. I've written four novels for National Novel Writing Month. I'm learning the craft of fiction-writing by experience and reading, and learning editing as a sort of offshoot of that.

The way English is taught in school has been, by and large, an enormous waste of time for me. Last year, in eighth grade, the “vocabulary” words we were required to learn were all words I had picked up simply through reading. Every single one. We also learned English grammar and sentence structure that year, something which a good number of students struggled with, as I could figure out from observation. That level of grammar (the difference between *it's* and *its*) wasn't, and isn't, even close to my level of understanding of the English language.

As far as I can see this sort of education is going to continue upwards, through the higher grades. It's not the actual material of what they teach that gets to me—it's that I'm advancing even more swiftly than I had been before, and as the curriculum continues at a pace which is appropriate for most students, I'm going to go farther beyond it until I learn absolutely nothing at all. I may have reached that point already.

I *can* write an essay at a level far beyond that of a typical ninth-grader. However, because of the way English is taught in high school, I'm virtually restricted from showing my capabilities. I can analyze a book and extract symbolism from it, like liquid from a straw, but that sort of literary criticism is the basic structure of English classes. It's time for me

to move on in my studies, and to work more creatively on my own writing, while continuing to read frequently and independently.

I'd like to study history independently for similar reasons, although I'd say that I don't excel quite as much in history as I do in English. History textbooks are stale (Mr. O'Connor once joked to our class, "Your textbook is excellent bedtime reading"); they further the misconception that history is merely a long list of what happened once upon a time. History can be learnt much more richly—and more excitingly, too—through use of resources which aren't found in school. To spend a single hour at the Museum of Fine Art is infinitely more enlightening than to spend a day hunched over a badly-written textbook.

Like with English, I'm incredibly self-motivated to learn about history, and have been studying ancient history (particularly that of ancient Egypt) by myself for quite a while. In studying history by myself, instead of at school, I go through books much more efficiently and retain much more. History and English are the two subjects for which it's already very clear that I can self-educate. I know this stuff, and I'd assume that you're not skeptical about the thought of me teaching myself English and history independently. The motivations for those two are already apparent to you: I'm just interested. I'm *really* interested. And I've proven, through my library books and my NaNoWriMo novels and so forth, that I'm capable of retaining English and history knowledge without a teacher assigning me anything.

Science and math may present a stickier issue, which I would guess is the main doubt in your mind about unschooling. "But how can anyone learn math without a textbook?" Unschooling math has indeed been discussed in more detail than unschooling any other subject. The humanities are easy enough for someone to pick up on their own—but what about math, with its structure? "School math" is hard enough to break away from.

I'm interested in math as much as I'm interested in any subject. If it's meaningful to me, I want to learn it. The way math is generally taught doesn't work for me, as I've expressed before: I need to know *why* I'm learning it, instead of dutifully working out problems which are thrown at me. I'd prefer to learn math in a more organic context, using and learning it as it appears in my daily life. I'm chiefly interested in the way math

interacts with science, aside from practical math used in bills and the like. Learning math just because it's there, or because "it will help me later on," is almost impossible for me. Instead, I would prefer to study astronomy or programming or calendars, all of which involve plenty of math but also place it in a context. I'd especially like to work with you on incorporating more math into my daily life, which would help me to learn it a lot more easily.

The math work that I'm principally interested in doing would be non-traditional, mostly topographic and logical puzzles. I'd also like to focus on probability. In particular, though, I think that I'd learn math much more quickly by integrating it into science and other subjects. I hope that I've expressed this clearly through my descriptions of math and science study; the descriptions are only surface plans, indeed, and as I delve deeper I expect to find and tackle bits of math all the time.

In conclusion:

I believe that, from the material listed under "Areas of learning," I can acquire a full and well-rounded education based on the sorts of study I plan to undertake. I'd like to begin working with this set of goals, and leaving high school permanently, as soon as I can. Probably, it'd be best to begin my course of study with a trial period of several weeks (a month, maybe?) for you to observe my learning, and to judge whether you're comfortable with letting me continue in that vein.

Grace Llewellyn, the author of *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*, suggests that a prospective unschooler take a short vacation from formal study before beginning to learn in depth again—a sort of detox from school. I think that this would be ideal for me, although I leave it to you to determine the length of the vacation, if that option seems good to you. (Watching told me "I don't think you'll need to detox, though. Seriously. You learn all the time and I don't see you as sitting around absorbing nothing for a while.")

I also ask that you don't base your answer (i.e. "Yes, you can leave school for a trial period/No, you can't") on my grades or the timing of school. The state of my grades fluctuates, I know, and for a student in high school this situation is not necessarily ideal.

However, my unsatisfactory grades are often indicative of problems that unschooling could help with: lack of motivation, procrastination, or lack of comfort with the speed of the school schedule. These flaws are personal problems *and* school problems, but if school is taken away, the personal problems will be easier to battle. Please don't use reasoning like "if you get all As in all your classes for the rest of the year, you can unschool." My performance in school, bad or good, will have little effect on the sort of education I can achieve while unschooling. I'm sorry for the relatively cold tone I strike here! I don't mean to sound harsh! I'm pretty concerned about this, though, and further tension regarding the state of my grades wouldn't be beneficial.

If I leave school and embark on this educational plan, I promise to you that my motivation will be continual and strong; our battles about homework will vanish, and my interactions with you will be less stressful, gentler. It'll be more comfortable for me to discuss what I'm learning, share it with you, and have you take a role in my education. I'll learn voraciously. I will keep myself challenged.

And, ultimately, I do believe that all of us will be happier.

My desire to unschool is very important to me. Please consider my request with seriousness and thought. I realize that you'll have questions and doubts which may tug at your mind as you read this; as I ask for your genuine consideration of this plan, I will in turn respond to your concerns genuinely. I've created this plan over only a few weeks; it's only scratching the surface of my goals. I think that it'll serve as a reasonable introduction, though, and as a solid basis on which you can form your decision.

Areas of Learning

A quick note about this “areas of learning” thing. This is a list of the stuff I plan to learn, and this specific list would take me about a school year to study. The goals specified in certain areas, like “learn the ancient Egyptian language,” may be technically unreachable—that is to say, the attaining of the goal can’t be measured by a particular yardstick. Others are definable, and I might surpass them sooner or later than I think.

I don’t intend to set aside certain blocks of time for studying certain subjects, or following a schedule that’s much like school. One of the cool things about unschooling is that there’s no boundary between education and real life. I can learn how to cook by making and eating lunch, or Spanish by reading Pablo Neruda’s poems and then comparing them to the translations.

I’ll also note that the subjects tend to blend together, and some of what I wrote could apply to virtually any subject, not just the one I listed it under. Again, another brilliant feature of unschooling. The simple act of growing a garden is a combination of science (identify plants and what conditions they grow best in), aesthetic design (decide where things go, make sure it’s both pretty and functional), math (calculate schedules for when to plant what). I will, however, also use books and online courses.

Linguistics

- Memorize, or at least have a thorough understanding of, two systems for phonetic notation: the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and the Extended SAM Phonetic Alphabet (X-SAMPA).
- Read *Describing Morphosyntax* by Thomas E. Payne and *The Languages of the World* by Kenneth Katzner.
- Regularly hang out in the linguistics section of the library with a notebook.
- Develop my conlangs:
 - ♦ Write a grammar for each which includes phonology/phonetics, writing system, verb and noun grammar, derivational morphology, and basic sentence structure. The grammars should be quite long, 50 pages or so each, and this is what I'll spend most of my time working on.
 - ♦ Create a dictionary, and provide derivation for each word.
 - ♦ Practice Leipzig Glossing Rules by writing short poems or descriptions in the languages, and then glossing it line by line.
- Be able to identify all types of morphemes, principally free and bound, and distinguish between the two. Distinguish between phonemes and allophones, tone and intonation and pitch-accent.
- Review the history and principles of descriptive and prescriptive linguistics.
- Use the online textbook "The Syntax of Natural Language," and complete some of the exercises.

Creative Writing

- Read. In general. Read science fiction, urban fantasy, “the classics,” YA literature, realistic and humorous fiction. Any kind of fiction will do.
- Write stories and novels; edit old NaNoWriMo novels, and participate in NaNoWriMo yearly as well.
- Actively look for ways to learn how to edit. Is there a small press locally which would be interested in teaching me? Or any freelance editors with whom I could work?
- Submit pieces to small magazines and maybe publishers, at least once a month or so if all goes well.
- Write essays, both short and long, for all subjects. They can be fairly colloquial. Add references which are cited properly.

(N.B.: From the small amount of criteria, it looks as though I won't be doing that much creative writing. Don't be fooled—I want to do a *lot*. But the only way to learn how to craft a good story is by writing all the time, reading all the time, and getting and responding to feedback all the time.)

Science

- Learn to identify major constellations which show up in the local skies throughout the year, as well as individual important stars and planets. Watch meteor showers or interesting events in the sky whenever possible.
- Acquire a good pair of binoculars, and possibly a telescope later on, for further astronomical study. Possibly also look into sky photography.
- Watch sunsets and note the variation in colors from season to season, day to day.
- Cultivate a small garden, maybe in the backyard; grow small herbs and flowers like mint, lavender, chives, catnip, or basil.
- Read up on local trees, fungi, wildlife, and wildflowers so I can learn to identify them.
- Take slow hikes and stop to look at what I don't recognize or am curious about. Take small samples, and bring a sketchbook as well, with several hardnesses of pencil to sketch or make rubbings.
- Find rocks to identify and tumble, add to my collection, or make into mosaics.
- Do Andy Goldsworthy-esque art with whatever I can find. Keep to his approach as much as possible: do it the natural way. Identify which materials are easiest to work with and why.
- Visit the Science Museum and Discovery Museum as regularly as possible.
- Go to the beach and find shells to identify.
- Color *The Anatomy Coloring Book*, as well as some of the others in that series (there are several!): *The Zoology Coloring Book* and the biology one would be great too. I'll write down vocabulary or concepts I want to learn more about in a notebook.
- Write a long and well-sourced paper about leopards: their behavior and their archetypical role in African and Asian culture.
- Visit the Arnold Arboretum and the woods with the small bridge near our house. Note changes in the land; find certain small patches of land and visit them regularly. Take samples of the river-water, leaves, and mud.
- Use the Kamana Naturalist Training Program (kamana.org) and take the eCourse at natureskills.com. The Kamana program can count for college credit.

- Take the Open Learning Initiative physics course as well. (It's free!) The URL for the Open Learning Initiative in general is <http://www.cmu.edu/oli/>, and it provides courses for all kinds of things.

Math and Engineering

- Find examples of math in nature and art.
- Buy a book of logic puzzles and complete them all. When done, go on a (small) shopping spree, preferably at a store with sales, and calculate the price for what you buy or see.
- Draw tessellations.
- Create origami.
- Study the various calendar systems used around the world, ancient and modern, lunar and solar, and create a possible calendar for the Moon or an alternate planet.
- Create Rube Goldberg machines and long strings of dominoes to topple. Time them; figure out what makes them efficient or inefficient.
- Learn how to play cat's cradle and make other string figures. Then learn the mathematics behind them.
- Solve disentanglement puzzles—those little bits of metal locked together which you have to pull apart—and a Rubik's cube.
- Learn one or more programming languages, possibly starting with Python.
- Learn to do basic arithmetic, quickly, and without pencil and paper.
- Buy a basic algebra textbook from the publisher Saxon—the kind which they specify as being “for homeschoolers.” Go through it *very* slowly and *very* thoroughly.
- Read up on the history of algebra, from Egypt and the Babylonian period on to the Hindu and Arabic mathematicians.
- “Get Euclid's Elements and work through it,” Swift suggested to me. She showed me a couple of free online resources which have the entire text. She also said, “You could combine a study of Ancient Greek and Geometry by learning to read Euclid in the Ancient Greek,” which sounds like a good plan as well.
- Work through the Beginning Algebra Topics at purplemath.com. Do the same for Math for Morons Like Us, another similar website.
- Learn about the principles on which sundials function; build and design one, possibly as a piece of mosaic/ceramic art, as well.

Language Learning

Spanish

- Read and translate poems by Pablo Neruda.
- Watch movies in English with subtitles in Spanish, or watch movies in Spanish with English subtitles. (Or without subtitles at all...)
- Check out books from the Spanish section of the library, particularly magical realism and poetry, and read them.
- Write short stories in Spanish.
- Translate English essays or poetry into Spanish, looking up the more complex grammatical features as I encounter them, and learning them then.

Latin

- Listen to medieval music sung in Latin. Try to puzzle out the words, both from the song itself and the written lyrics.
- Find words in English, Spanish or French which are etymologically related to Latin words.
- Get some textbooks from the library and finish learning the basics of Latin grammar. When done, read:
 - ♦ *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* and *Commentarii de Bello Civili* by Julius Caesar
 - ♦ Catullus' poetry
 - ♦ The *Catiline Orations* by Cicero
 - ♦ The *Harrius Potter* books, translations of Harry Potter into Latin
- Translate English essays or poetry into Latin, looking up the more complex grammatical features as I encounter them, and learning them then.

Ancient Egyptian

- Use my ancient Egyptian book to learn basic grammar, syntax and vocabulary.
- Read and/or translate the following texts:
 - ♦ *The Story of Sinuhe*
 - ♦ *Papyrus of Ani*
 - ♦ *Papyrus Anastasi I*
 - ♦ More?

I know this doesn't seem like much, but the papyri are real, and the language is difficult!

Other possibilities

- I want to get around to learning the basics of these languages, and may take up a longer study of them, after talking to you about it:
 - ♦ Russian (no reason, really)
 - ♦ German (a lot of good Egyptological writing is in German)
 - ♦ French (same reason as German)
 - ♦ Irish Gaelic (if I listen to music in that language, I might as well know what they're saying)
 - ♦ Old English (historical interest)

History

- Read Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*.
- Study ancient Egyptian religion further, culminating in the writing of a paper about the role of feline gods in Egypt.
- Read the Egyptian *Book of Coming Forth by Day* (Book of the Dead) in several translations. Eventually translate it myself.
- Read up on ancient history in general, in a semi-haphazard way, going around the world in roughly chronological order. The list I provide should last me for quite a long time. This is a very rough schedule, although not a timetable (I may spend more time on one period, less on another, or skip some):
 - ♦ Egypt
 - ♦ Etruscan civilization
 - ♦ Mesopotamia and Sumer
 - ♦ Carthage and a little Phoenicia
 - ♦ Greece
 - ♦ Rome
 - ♦ India
 - ♦ China
 - ♦ Japan
 - ♦ Aztec Empire
 - ♦ Inca Empire
- Visit museums when possible, although most of my history learning will be through an assortment of books. The MFA Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, or the Salem Witch Museum are all fun places to spend a day: I could just be dropped off and spend several hours there, looking at art or exhibits, sketching or getting a bite to eat.

Legal Issues

Schooling at home is legal in Massachusetts, and for the most part isn't unusually difficult. The road's already been paved by court cases which took place a long time ago. The law allows school districts to ask for the following, although it doesn't require any of this:

- A description of the educational plan which includes information about the subjects studied, the teaching materials, and the grade level of the child's learning. These are usually required yearly if the school district requires them at all. Sometimes they also ask for regular assessments of learning.

I don't know whether Newton has any specific regulations on this; if there are, I can write one up myself.

The website of the Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts (AHEM) advises that showing the specific teaching materials isn't too much of a problem. In one court case regarding Mass. homeschooling, a statement was made that "... some of the most effective curricular materials ... may not be tangible. For example, travel, community service, visits to educationally enriching facilities and places, and meeting with various resource people, can provide important learning experiences apart from the four corners of a text or workbook." The AHEM website goes on to say that, if the school board is insistent upon seeing the teaching materials beyond just a list of books, it's a good idea to tell them that your education will incorporate a lot of those intangible experiences. This prevents them badgering you about textbooks, I suppose.

The website also says that an assessment of learning doesn't have to be a standardised test: dated samples of work should be sufficient, or a progress report. Either of these are easy to provide. I've got no particular preference for either, although the work samples might be less time-consuming.

- A 180-day school year.

In response to the 180-day year requirement, I can say honestly that I want to be learning 365 days a year, although I'm sure the work will become more casual and less time-consuming in the summer when I go to CRCAP. (CRCAP is a way better "school" than Newton North, anyway, in terms of how much I learn that's useful. I've learned how to use a hammer or a screw-gun there; I can paint very neatly and well thanks to camp; it was there where I really learned to act. In contrast, the stuff I learn in school is barely ever applicable to my real life, unless I'm interested in the concepts themselves.)

- The qualifications of the parents.

The parents are, by law, supposed to be "of competent ability and good morals." But they're not required even to have college degrees, which is needed in some other states. None of this is a problem for us. I'm honestly not sure how much of a role you want to play in my education—you both work, after all, and I do believe I can be competent on my own. But I'd love to work with you. After years of unhappiness on all our parts about homework and lack of motivation on my part, it'd be great to see us working and learning together without the frustrations that school has brought.

- Education in "orthography, reading, writing, the English language and grammar, geography, arithmetic, drawing, music, the history and constitution of the United States, the duties of citizenship, health education, physical education and good behavior."

I don't really know what the "duties of citizenship" are, so I can't say whether I'll learn them or not, but I figure you know already that I have a sense of morals. I already know orthography, because I can write; I'm of course going to continue studying reading and writing, and the English language and grammar!

Geography and arithmetic I'll work on, as well as US history, but not devote lots of time to. See my "areas of learning" section. Physical education will be covered with climbing and walking; I plan to do lots of those.

I'll listen to music, and maybe learn to play an instrument.

It's kind of odd that drawing is a required course, but I *will* be practicing that too. That also goes for good behavior.

I'm reasonably well educated in health—I assume that's a euphemism for sex education and basic self-care (nutrition, et cetera).

Kids schooled at home are *not* required, and do not need, to do any of the following:

- Take MCAS.
- Get a lawyer. Legal problems related to this are quite unlikely in Massachusetts.
- Attend school, or have any dealings at all with the school board and such, after age 16.
- Provide a daily, weekly, or hourly schedule of their learning. If someone asks, the following quote from a Massachusetts court case is helpful:

“While following a schedule may be an important consideration in a public school where preexisting schedules need to be maintained and coordinated, the perception and use of time in a home school are different. The plaintiffs can observe and accommodate variations (from child to child, subject to subject, day to day) in the learning process and teach through a process that paces each student.”

- Have a curriculum which is equal or even near-equal to that taught in schools. Home education is supposed to be “equal in thoroughness and efficiency” to the stuff in school, but that doesn't mean being the same. Furthermore, a school district isn't allowed to “intrude unnecessarily on family privacy” or “dictate the manner in which [subjects] will be taught.”

Before beginning to unschool, it'd be an excellent idea to consult with local people who are interested in that form of education, and preferably have some experience with it. You may want to join the Massachusetts Home Learning Association (MHLA) mailing list at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/masshomelearningassoc/>. The unschooling forum at <http://www.unschooling.info/forum/> is also quite active. Both groups are

relatively large, and host parents who know a lot about education, if you'd like to talk to them as well as to me about your questions.

Be careful of the organization Massachusetts Homeschool Organization of Parent Educators (MassHOPE)—they're Christian-oriented. Similar precautions go for the HSLDA, the Home School Legal Defense Organization.