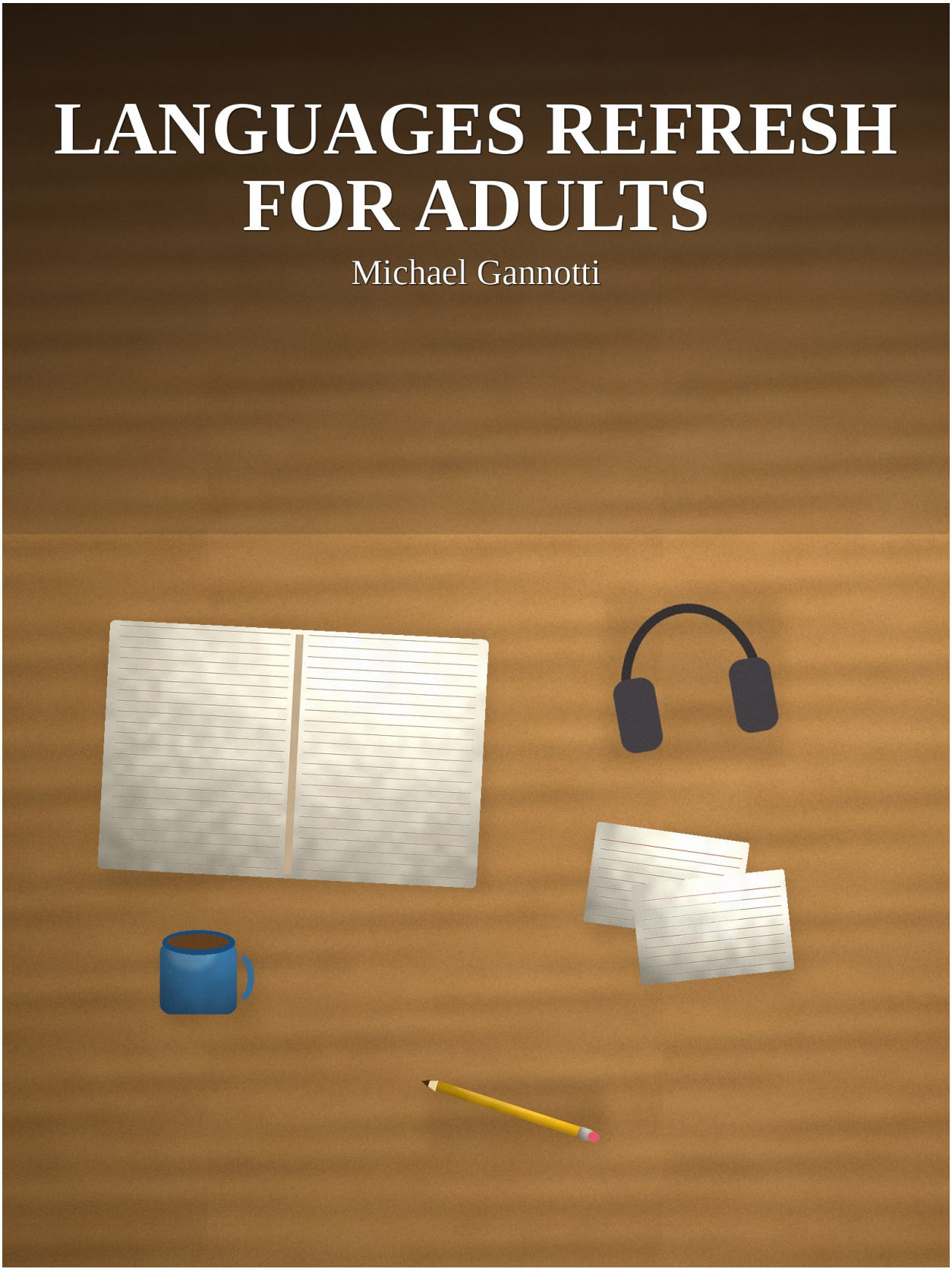
LANGUAGES REFRESH FOR ADULTS

Michael Gannotti



Languages Refresh for Adults

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Illustrated edition, 25 October 2026. Notes run in one series at the back; the superscript numbers link to them. The images are original still lifes, with no people and no brands.

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Welcome

If you're holding this book, there's a language somewhere in your life that you haven't finished with. Maybe it's the Spanish you studied for three years and could once order dinner in. Maybe it's your grandmother's Mandarin, or the French you picked up one summer, or a language you've wanted to learn since you first heard it on a street corner and never got around to. Maybe it's a language that a neighbor, a colleague, a customer or a new member of the family speaks, and you'd like to answer them in it.

Whichever it is, welcome. This is a book for an adult who is the learner: you, with a job, a calendar, a few unclaimed hours, and a good reason.

Why this book

Adults come back to languages all the time, and most of them have the same experience. They get a burst of enthusiasm, buy something, do it for a couple of weeks and miss a few days. Then the whole thing feels like a failure, and it goes back on the shelf with the guitar. This book exists to interrupt that cycle, kindly.

Rust is ordinary. If your language has gone quiet, it isn't gone; it tends to come back in pieces, a word here, a phrase there. False starts are ordinary, too. Nobody gets disqualified from a language for quitting it twice, or three times. You just start again, smaller.

Being an adult is not a handicap, and it isn't a free pass. Here's the plain version, and it's the only time I'll say it this way. Learning grammar by sheer exposure does get harder after the late teens: a very large study of nearly 670,000 English speakers found that the ability stays high until about 17 and then declines steadily.[1] But adults still reach useful levels, even professional ones. The U.S. government trains English-speaking adults to a professional level in other languages, and it publishes how many hours that takes.[2] So you aren't too old to begin. The price is hours, and the fair question is how many you can honestly spend.

No one is promised fluency. Not in three months, not in thirty days, not by buying anything. This book won't say otherwise, and you should be a little suspicious of any book that does. What it offers is a plan small enough to keep, a way to know whether it's working, and a lot of practical moves for the time you actually have.

The focus line

One sentence sits under the whole book:

> **Take in more than you need; use it with real people; check it honestly; keep the plan small enough to keep.**

Here's what each clause means, in a few words.

Take in more than you need. Listen and read in volume, at a level you mostly understand. The most useful hours in language learning are the ones where you take in a lot, so that when you reach for a word you don't have to go far. You'll hear far more than you'll ever say; that's right.

Use it with real people. A language lives between people. Every chapter gives you a way to put what you know to work with a real person, even a tiny one: a sentence to a neighbor, a message to a cousin, a question at a market. At least once a week, a real person on the other end.

Check it honestly. Record yourself. Keep your old pages. Look at them next to the new ones. Use the "I can" statements to say what you can do. Never hand yourself a level; the only real ratings come from certified tests, and you'll learn about those in Chapter 9.

Keep the plan small enough to keep. A fifteen-minute habit that survives your worst week is worth more than a heroic schedule that survives your best. A missed day is just a missed day.

What this book won't do

It won't promise fluency in weeks or any specific level by any specific date. It won't ask you to rate yourself with an official-sounding label. It won't tell you that learning a language will train your brain or keep it young; a large analysis of 152 studies with adults found no evidence of that advantage once it was corrected for publication bias, so this book gives you better reasons: people, work, travel, family and the sheer pleasure of it.[3] It won't rank apps, courses or AI tools. It won't ask you to buy anything, and it won't be a course, a test-prep book or a pile of worksheets. It's a how-to for the one person who runs your practice: you.

How the book is built

There's a short chapter-by-chapter shape that you'll learn once and use throughout.

Four pieces come first. This welcome, a one-page guide to using the book this week, a short list of five things worth remembering, and the **Language Refresh Hour**, the five-step ritual you'll run every time you practice: Set the Target, Take It In, Work With It, Use It for Real, Check and Log. It scales from a fifteen-minute commute session to a ninety-minute weekend sit, and it has a ten-minute daily thread for your busiest days.

Ten chapters follow. Chapter 1 builds your starting point and your plan. Chapters 2 through 6 are the skills: listening, words and patterns, reading, speaking, writing. Chapter 7 is about meeting the world in the language, with a safety box you'll want to read. Chapter 8 is about tools and AI.

Chapter 9 is about keeping an honest record and the tests and credit you can pursue. Chapter 10 is about resources.

The examples rotate between Spanish, French and Mandarin, because they cover three very different kinds of language. If you're learning something else, nothing in the book depends on those three; where it matters, the chapters say how to adapt. The example lines are everyday models, so before you rely on one, check it with someone who speaks the language.

The notes live in one numbered list at the back of the book, so the teaching can stay in plain words.

Where this book sits

This is the fourth and final title in the WisdomForge Languages ladder. The earlier books are for young learners, for pre-teens and for teenagers, with a parent or mentor alongside. This one is different: it's for you, and you run it. If a parent, partner, friend or coworker is learning alongside you, wonderful. Study together, quiz each other, share a card box. But nothing in the book depends on it, and you can do all of it alone.

A word to the person studying alongside

If you picked this up to learn with someone, a partner, a friend, a parent or an adult child, you can keep the same shape: each of you runs your own Hour, and you meet once a week to use the language with each other. Take turns picking the topic. Ask each other questions and then wait. Don't correct each other unless asked. And if one of you gets busy, the other keeps going. Nobody has to be the teacher.

Before you start

Pick up a pen and an index card. You'll want them in the first chapter. And remember that you aren't behind. Wherever you are, that's where you begin.

That's enough to begin.

— Michael Gannotti

How to Use This Book This Week

You don’t have to read this book in order, or all at once. You have to do a little of it this week. Here’s how.

This week, in five steps

1. **Read this page, then the Language Refresh Hour.** Fifteen minutes. The Hour is the five-step routine you’ll run for the rest of the book, and everything else hangs on it.
2. **Do Chapter 1 this week.** It has you make a baseline (a recording, a read, a paragraph and a self-check), a card with your reasons, a cue and a kit, and a one-page plan. It’s the only chapter you must do first.
3. **Add Chapter 2 in the same week, if you can.** Listening is the cheapest hour you have, and you can start it on the first commute.
4. **Run the Hour at the size your day allows.** A fifteen-minute micro session, a thirty-to-forty-minute desk session, a weekend deep sit, and a ten-minute daily thread when the day is full. Three to five slots a week is a good target.
5. **Put one real person on the calendar.** A neighbor, a tutor, a cousin on the phone, a conversation circle. Once a week, someone on the other end. Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 are full of ways to find them.

By Sunday night you should have a dated baseline, a plan on the wall, and a first week behind you. If you managed three slots, that’s a good week.

Where to start: place by your baseline, not by what you studied

Many adults place themselves by history. “I took four years of Spanish, so I must be intermediate.” “I grew up hearing Mandarin, so I’m basically fluent.” “I’m a beginner; I know nothing.” History is a poor guide, and the baseline in Chapter 1 will tell you something truer.

Three starting profiles come up again and again. Find yours, and then let the baseline correct you.

- **You had it in school.** You probably read more than you speak, remember some grammar you can’t use out loud, and have an ear that has softened. Start with listening (Chapter 2) and speaking (Chapter 5), and keep reading going alongside.

- **You grew up around it.** Your ear is likely well ahead of your mouth, and your reading and writing may be close to zero. Start with speaking and reading in small steps, and enjoy how much you already understand. There's no shame in this profile; it's a common and workable one.
- **You're starting from nothing.** Begin with listening and a handful of useful phrases, and meet a real person early. Don't wait until you "know enough." You know enough to say you're learning.

Whichever you are, the book works the same way: the Hour, the small plan, the real person every week.

A planning estimate, as arithmetic

Everyone wants to know how long it will take. Here's the honest answer in arithmetic, not a promise.

The U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute publishes how long it usually expects English-speaking adult diplomats to take to reach a professional level: 24 to 30 weeks for the easiest languages, up to 88 weeks for the hardest, at about 23 class hours and 17 study hours a week.[2] Those are full-time courses with teachers. At 40 hours a week, 30 weeks is 1,200 hours. At five hours a week, that's 240 weeks, or about four and a half years.

That number isn't a verdict on you. Most adults don't need a diplomat's level. They want to talk to a neighbor, follow a film, read a menu, write to a friend: smaller targets, reachable in far fewer hours. Chapter 1 shows you how to choose one, do the sum for your own week, and write down one honest sentence about what a year at your pace buys. Use the estimate for planning. Don't use it for judging yourself.

Banks as menus

The book has about a hundred named try-its, grouped in sixteen "banks" by what they do. About three-quarters need no screen at all. Each has a name, a time, materials, whether it uses a screen, which step of the Hour it belongs to, and a short move.

They're **menus, not calendars.** You aren't meant to do them in order, or all of them, or even most of them. Pick the one that fits the slot you have: an on-the-go card for the commute, a desk card for the lunch hour, a deeper one for the weekend. Every chapter has at least one of each. If a card doesn't suit your language or your week, skip it. If you love one, do it again next week.

A typical week might look like this: three daily threads, two desk sessions, one deep sit, one real conversation, and a strip with a line for each. That's a good week. A thinner one counts.

How each teaching chapter is built

Chapters 1 through 8 each have the same seven headings, so you always know where you are.

1. **Why this matters.** One page on what the chapter unlocks.
2. **Understand it yourself.** Plain language, a few clear pictures, and the wrong turns you'll hear, including from yourself.
3. **How to try it this week.** The week's shape, in three contexts.
4. **Practice that actually builds it.** The named try-its, a worked example, and the talk-to-yourself box.
5. **If it isn't clicking.** The common snags, and what to do next.
6. **Tools, including AI.** What helps, and the one rule that goes with every tool.
7. **What "done enough" looks like.** A short checklist, so you know when to move on.

Chapters 9 and 10 have their own plain headings and end with a short list for the week. At the back of the book, one numbered list of notes gives the sources, so the teaching can stay in plain words.

A word for a partner, friend or parent studying alongside

If someone's learning with you, you can swap try-its and meet once a week to use the language with each other. Each of you keeps your own plan and your own strip. The book works the same either way, and you'll both be glad of a person to talk to.

Where to look when you're stuck

If you're stuck on **what to do today**, run the one-line target and the daily thread from the Hour. If you're stuck on **what to do this month**, go back to your one-page plan and your look-back. If you're stuck on **whether any of this is working**, record two minutes and listen to your baseline beside it. And if you're stuck because the week fell apart, apply the miss-once rule and do the micro version tomorrow. That's all it takes.

If You Only Remember Five Things

Keep this page where you practice. The chapters add moves, materials and questions. They don't replace these. The whole book is one line, **take in more than you need; use it with real people; check it honestly; keep the plan small enough to keep**, and here it is in five.

1. Take in more than you need

Listen and read a lot, at a level you mostly understand. You'll hear far more than you'll ever say, and that's how it should be: the language you've taken in is the language that's there when you reach for it. Don't wait for every word to be known. Aim to understand most of what's in front of you, and let the rest wash by. Narrow listening, easy reading and a daily thread do most of the work, and they fit a commute, a kitchen and a lunch break.

2. Use it with real people

A language lives between people. At least once a week, say or write something to a real person: a neighbor, a tutor, a cousin on the phone, a shopkeeper, a conversation circle. A sentence counts. Be kind to the person on the other end; they're a person, not practice equipment, so ask before you record them and thank them afterward. And one safety rule goes everywhere: never send money or gifts to anyone you haven't met in person.[4]

3. Check it honestly

Record yourself. Date your pages. Keep the old ones and set them beside the new. Use the "I can" statements to say what you can do and mark them "my read, not a rating." Only a certified test can give you a level, and you don't need one to know you're moving.[5,6] A baseline and a monthly look-back are enough to show you the truth, and the truth is usually kinder than the fear.

4. Keep the plan small enough to keep

A plan you follow at four hours a week beats a plan you abandon at ten. Write your target, your hours, your cue, your people, your proof and what you'll drop, on one page. Do the honest sum: a language that takes a diplomat 30 full-time weeks takes the rest of us years at a few hours a week,

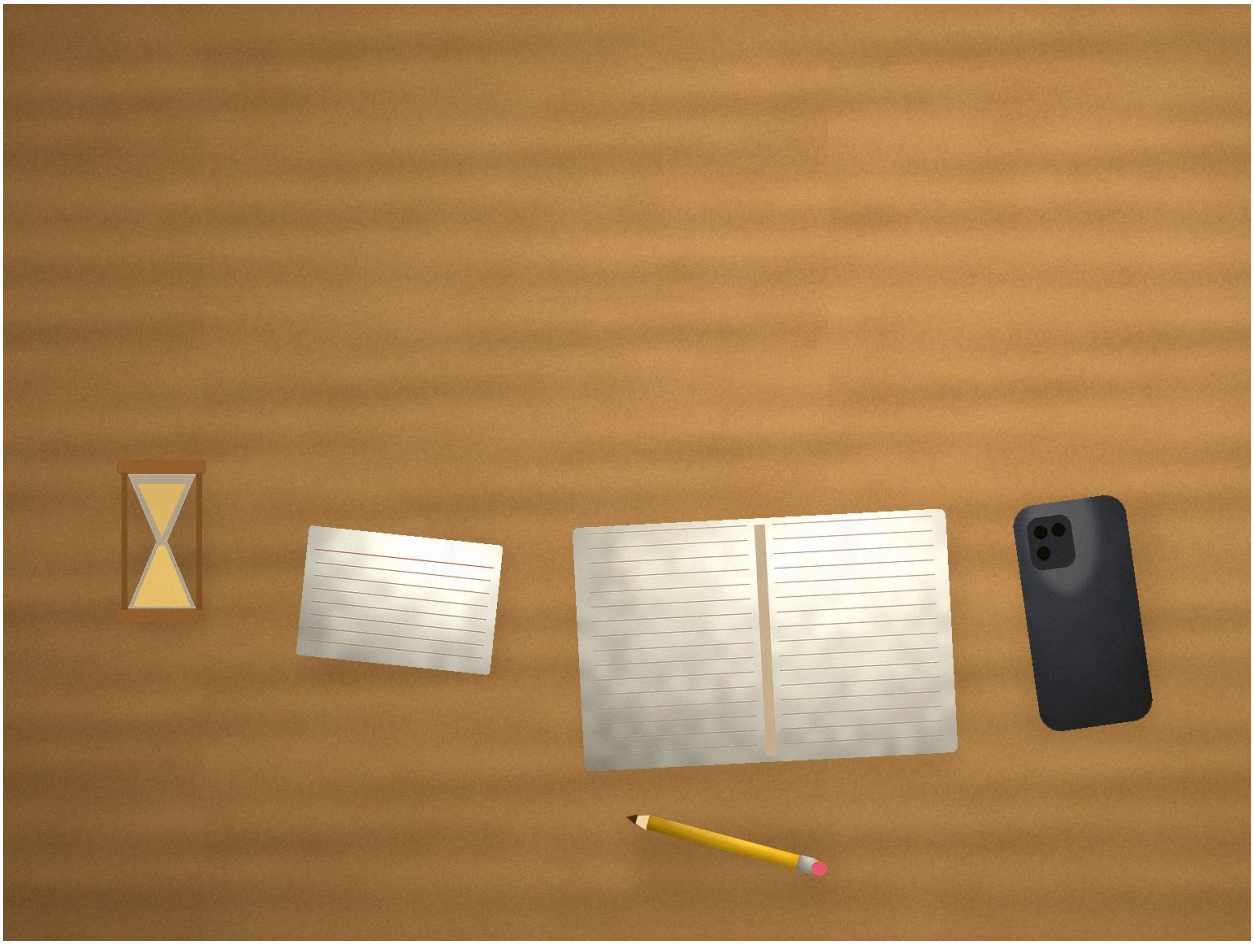
and that's fine, because you aren't aiming at a diplomat's finish line.[2] Choose a target you could show someone in a month, and keep the kit where the cue happens.

5. A missed day is just a missed day

You'll miss days. Everybody does. When it happens, do the micro version tomorrow, and never double up to "make up" for it. In the best-known study of habit formation, the time to reach automatic ranged from 18 to 254 days, and missing one opportunity didn't materially affect the process.[7] Start again, small. The Hour is built to be picked up again.

That's it. Five things. Now go and put the card in your bag.

The Language Refresh Hour



Every session in this book has the same five steps: **Set the Target** · **Take It In** · **Work With It** · **Use It for Real** · **Check and Log.** Learn them once, here. When a chapter says “run the Hour,” this is what it means. The only thing that changes from day to day is what’s on the table and how much time you have.

You run it. There’s no teacher to wait for and no parent to check your work. That’s the design: you’re an adult, you know your own week, and you can decide on a Tuesday morning that today is a fifteen-minute day without asking anyone’s permission.

The whole book rests on one line, and the Hour is how you live it: **Take in more than you need;**

use it with real people; check it honestly; keep the plan small enough to keep.

It's called an Hour because that's the shape at full size. Most days it will be smaller, and that's not a compromise. A fifteen-minute Hour that happens beats a ninety-minute Hour that stays on the calendar.

Here is each step in a sentence, and then the shape of a whole session at three sizes.

Set the Target is where you decide, in one line, what you're trying to be able to do by the end. Not "study Spanish." Something you could show another person: *I can ask for the bill. I can follow the headline. I can say what I did this weekend.* The I-can wording comes from the Can-Do statements that language teachers use for goals, and it works just as well on a train as in a classroom.[6]

Take It In is listening or reading, in volume, at a level you mostly understand. This is the step that gets the biggest share of your time, because input is the cheapest hour there is: you can do it while walking, cooking or riding a bus, and every minute of it feeds the other four steps.

Work With It is where you pick a little of what you just took in and handle it: copy a sentence, say it aloud, shadow a clip, fill in a card, change a word and make a new sentence. This is the step that turns "I understood that" into "I could say that."

Use It for Real is the step most people skip, and it's the one that gives the book its second clause. Real means a person, or at least a real purpose: a message to someone, a sentence said aloud to a shopkeeper, a question put to a neighbor, a voice memo you'll actually listen to next week. On a micro day it may be two sentences. It's still real.

Check and Log is where you look at what happened honestly and write one line down. What was my target, what did I take in, what did I use for real, what will I check tomorrow? That last part matters: you leave a hook for tomorrow's start.

The Hour at three sizes

Step	Micro, commute or lunch (about 15–20 min)	Desk, desk or shift (about 30–40 min)	Deep, weekend sit (about 60–90 min)
Set the Target	1 min	2 min	5 min
Take It In	8–10 min	10–12 min	20–30 min
Work With It	3–4 min	10–12 min	15–20 min
Use It for Real	2–3 min	5–8 min	15–25 min
Check and Log	1–2 min	3–4 min	5–10 min

A good default week has a daily thread most days, two or three desk sessions, one deep sit, and at least one real contact with a person. A thinner week still counts.

Micro: commute or lunch, about 15–20 minutes

The 8:10 train. A parked car at lunch. A bench behind the building, a walk around the block with earbuds in. One ear free if there's traffic. A pocket card, a card box, a notebook the size of your hand.

Set the Target (1 minute). Read the one-line target on the card in your pocket, or write it on the spot, and say it aloud once under your breath. *I can follow the weather report.*

Take It In (8–10 minutes). One short clip or one short text, listened to or read twice. If it's a clip, press play and look out of the window. If it's a page, underline nothing yet; just read to the end.

Work With It (3–4 minutes). Pick one sentence you understood and say it back, copying the tune. Or pull three cards from the box and answer them before you look. That's enough.

Use It for Real (2–3 minutes). Say one sentence to the barista, the colleague, the dog. Or type one sentence to a person who'll write back. If neither is possible today, say it aloud to the window and put "real contact: Saturday" on your list.

Check and Log (1–2 minutes). Tick the card. Write one line on your practice strip: date, minutes, context, what you did, one note. *Tue, 17 min, micro, weather clip, caught the temperatures.*

Desk: desk or shift, about 30–40 minutes

A kitchen table after dinner, a desk at lunch with the door closed, a break room with a thermos. Phone face down or in another room, and a timer where you can see it.

Set the Target (2 minutes). Write the day's I-can line and one small thing you'll watch for. *I can say what I did last weekend, and I'll watch for the past tense.*

Take It In (10–12 minutes). A three-pass listen, or a page or two of reading at a level you mostly understand. You understand most of what's there; a few words are new; none of it is a wall.

Work With It (10–12 minutes). Mine three whole sentences from what you just took in. Copy them. Say each one aloud twice. Cover the language, look at your English gloss, and write the sentence from memory. Then check.

Use It for Real (5–8 minutes). Write three lines to a real person, or record a one-minute voice memo you'll replay, or book the exchange partner. Real purpose beats perfect grammar.

Check and Log (3–4 minutes). Ask the chapter's talk-to-yourself question and one follow-up (the shape is below). Add your line to the strip. Put the kit back where tomorrow's cue will find it.

Deep: weekend sit, about 60–90 minutes

A long table, a library desk, a quiet corner of a café, a porch with a pot of tea. Enough time that you can really settle in, and enough that you'll want a break in the middle.

Set the Target (5 minutes). Look back at the week's strip. Decide on one bigger target for the sit: *I can retell a short program in five minutes.* Gather what you need so you don't hunt for it later.

Take It In (20–30 minutes). A long listen or a long read: a program, a chapter of a graded reader, a film half at a time. This is where the weekend earns its keep.

Work With It (15–20 minutes). The longer handling: re-listen with a transcript, copy the best sentences, update the card box, make five new cards from sentences you really met, retire the ones you've used for real.

Use It for Real (15–25 minutes). The longest real piece of the week. A tutor lesson, an exchange hour, a group at the library, a call to a family member who speaks the language, a visit to a shop where it's spoken. If you can't set up a person this weekend, record a five-minute retelling and schedule the real conversation for midweek.

Check and Log (5–10 minutes). The full talk-to-yourself box. Add your strip line. Once a month, this is also where the look-back happens: you compare this month's recording to the baseline you made in Chapter 1, and you change exactly one thing about the plan.

Which size today?

Choose by the day you have, not the day you wish you had. If you can see a clear half hour and your head is clear, run a desk session. If you're on your feet, short of time or short of sleep, run a micro. If you wake on Saturday with nothing planned and a pot of coffee, run a deep sit, and let it be long. If the day falls apart before you start, run the daily thread and call it done. All four are the Hour. Nobody grades the size, and the strip records it without comment.

The daily thread

Ten minutes. One cue. One short piece in, two sentences out.

You pick one short thing to take in: a thirty-second clip, a headline and its first paragraph, a poem, a recipe card, a voice message from a friend. You listen or read it twice. Then you say or write two sentences about it in the language. *That recipe uses too much salt. The train is late again.* That's the whole thread.

On your busiest days the thread **is** the micro session. It's not a consolation prize. It's the Hour with the dials turned down, and it's what keeps the other days connected. Tie it to something that already happens: after the first coffee, while the kettle boils, when you sit down on the train. The first chapter shows how to choose the cue and where to keep the kit.

The five-box card

Draw five boxes in a row on an index card, one for each step, and tape the card where you practice: inside the lid of the card box, on the fridge, in the back of the notebook. Tick each box as you finish its step. On a micro day you may tick only two or three, and that's a full day. The card is the day's record, and at the end of the week it shows you, at a glance, which step you keep skipping. For many adults it's the fourth.

The talk-to-yourself shape, once

Every teaching chapter has a talk-to-yourself box. You're the teacher and the student at the same table, so you ask and you answer. The shape never changes.

> **Talk to yourself**
>
> "*What was my target, what did I take in, what did I use for real, and what will I check tomorrow?"*
>
> - **Meaning:** What exactly did I understand, and what only sounded familiar?
> - **Evidence:** What's one sentence I could show someone as proof?
> - **Alternative:** What else could I have said, or tried?
> - **Next:** What's the one small thing for tomorrow's first minute?
>
> *What to do with the answer:* write it in one line on your strip.
>
> *In Spanish:* "Mi meta era pedir la cuenta, y lo hice." · *In French:* "Mon objectif était de demander l'addition, et je l'ai fait." · *In Mandarin:* 我的目标是说"请结账"，我做到了。(Wǒ de mùbiāo shì shuō "qǐng jiézhàng," wǒ zuòdào le.)

The opening. Each chapter gives you one exact question. On any day, you can use the one above instead: it's the Hour in a sentence. **Three to five follow-ups.** Pick the ones that help. **A line in the language.** Each box ends with a short sentence you could say or write in your own language, shown in Spanish, French and Mandarin. If you're learning something else, the notes in each chapter tell you how to adapt it, and nothing in the book depends on those three.

How to wait alone. After you ask, look at the page or the card, not at your phone. Count a slow three. If the answer doesn't come, shorten the question. "Did I use it for real?" has a yes or no answer, and that's a fine place to start.

The on-the-go try-it shape, once

Every named try-it in this book lists the same things: **a name, the minutes, the materials, whether it's screen or no screen, and which step of the Hour it belongs to.** Then a safety line if there is one, then the move in a few sentences. On-the-go try-its fit a pocket and a short break. Here's the shape, with the first one you can do today.

The one-line target (3 minutes · an index card · no screen · Set the Target)

Write today's target as an I-can line with a verb you could show someone: "I can ask for the bill," "I can follow the headline." Say it aloud once before you begin. Spanish: *La cuenta, por favor.* French: *L'addition, s'il vous plaît.* Mandarin: 请结账。(Qǐng jiézhàng.) A target with a verb is one you can check at the end of the day.

A try-it that touches a phone, a street or a stranger gets a **Safety** line right after the heading, for example, "Keep one ear free near traffic." If it's marked "none" on the card, the line is left out.

The deeper try-it shape, once

Deeper try-its belong to a desk session or a weekend sit. They use the same fields, with more time and room, and they usually leave something behind: a page, a recording, a plan. Here's the shape, with one you'll meet again in Chapter 1.

Monthly look-back (40 minutes · your log and your recordings · no screen · Check and Log)

Once a month, read your practice strip from start to finish. Replay your baseline recording beside a new one. Notice what's easier, what's the same, and what you stopped doing. Then change exactly one thing about the plan: a cue, a time, a source, a day for the real person. One. You'll be tempted to change five, and the plan will stop being small enough to keep.

Safety spine, once

A few habits make language practice safe and pleasant, and they take almost no time. Keep one ear free when you're listening in traffic. Meet people you've only known online in a public place, and tell someone where you'll be. Never send money or gifts to someone you've never met in person; that's the Federal Trade Commission's plain rule, and a person who asks for it is not a language partner.[4,8] Ask before you record or photograph anyone. Chapter 7 gives each of these in full, including a scam-safety box and a note on why you're not anyone's interpreter. The rest of the book adds only what a given try-it needs.

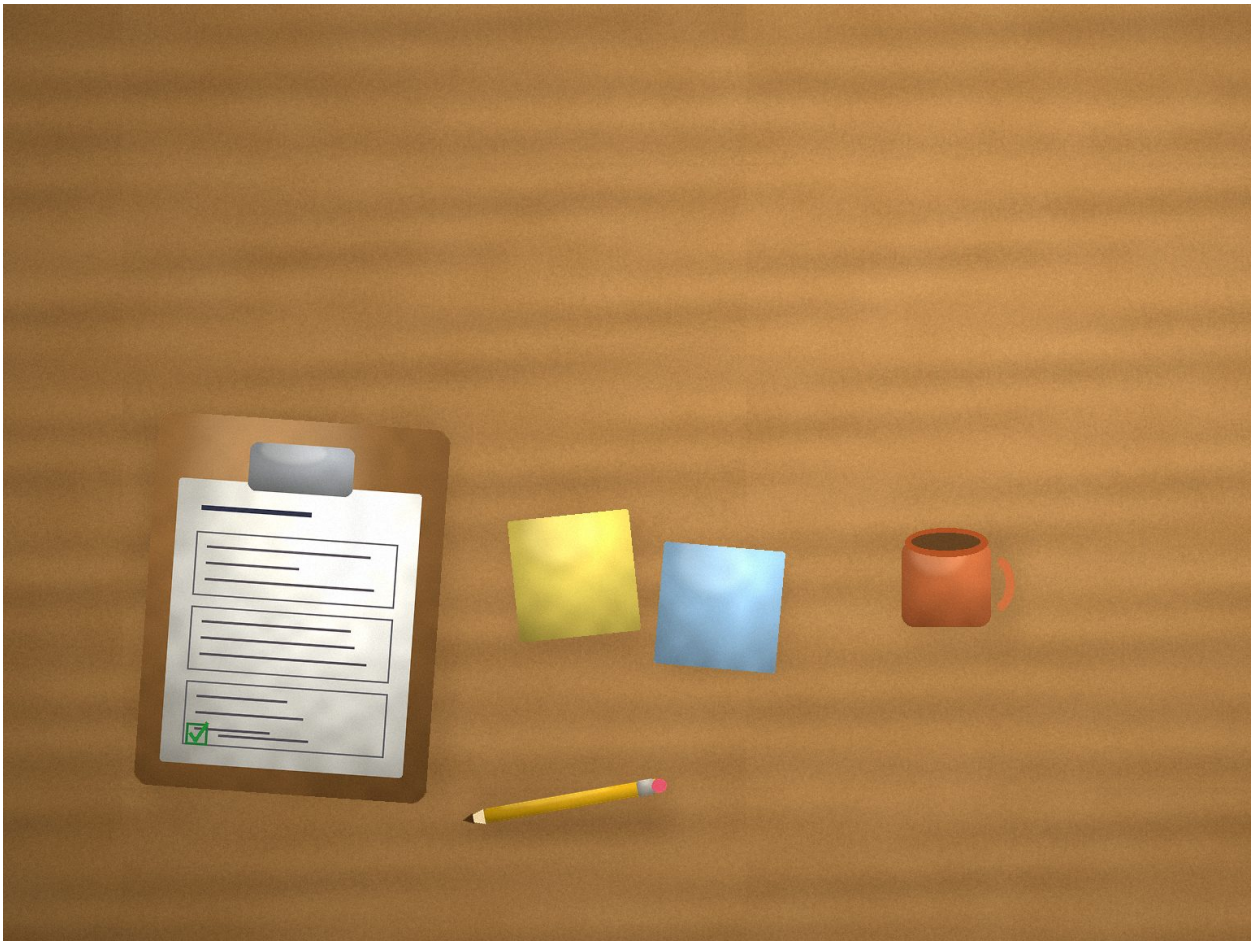
AI box, once

Tools, including AI chat tools, can be good company at eleven at night. Here's the rule that goes everywhere: **you make the first attempt, the tool checks and gives you more practice, and a person checks anything that matters.** AI can sound sure and be wrong, including about where a fact came from: one study of a popular chatbot found fabricated and erroneous citations in what it produced, which is why you open any source it names before you trust it.[9] Don't type passwords, account numbers, other people's private details or your family's names and schools into any tool, and read what a service says it does with what you give it. Chapter 8 gives the full rules; every "Tools, including AI" section in the chapters before it applies them in a move or two.

One last thing about the Hour

If a day ends and none of this happened, that's one missed day. Do the micro version tomorrow. Don't double up to catch up, and don't write the day off as proof of anything. The Hour is there to be picked up again.

Chapter 1 — Coming Back to a Language: Honest Goals and a Plan You'll Keep



Why this matters

You probably know the feeling. You took Spanish for three years in school, or your grandmother spoke Mandarin at the stove and you answered in English, or you spent a summer in a French-speaking town and came home with forty phrases and a sunburn. Years later the language comes back in pieces. A word surfaces at a bad moment. You understand the waiter and can't answer him.

You open an app, do a week of lessons, miss a Thursday, and quietly close it.

That's the ordinary road. Rust is normal, false starts are normal, and nobody has ever been disqualified from a language for having quit it twice. This chapter is for the person standing at the start of that road again, with a job, a calendar and about as many free hours as anyone has, which is not many.

The most useful thing you can do before you buy a single book is decide three things: where you are, where you're going, and what you can honestly give it each week. Everything else in this book depends on those three answers, and most adults skip them. They sign up for the intensive course, buy the big textbook, promise themselves an hour a day, and discover by the third Wednesday that the plan was built for someone else's life.

So this chapter is slow on purpose. You'll make a baseline: a recording, a read, a paragraph and a self-check, dated and filed, so that in three months you can hear for yourself what changed. You'll write a card that says why you want this language and who you want to use it with. You'll look at what the best-known published timeline says about how long a language takes, do the arithmetic for your own week, and come out with a plan that fits on one page. It's an honest plan, which means it's smaller than you'd write on a good day. That's what makes it work on a bad one.

You'll also learn what the evidence says about age, because it's the question every returning adult is quietly asking. The answer has two halves. Both are true, and you need both.

By the end of the week you won't speak the language any better than you do now. You will know your starting line, your target, your hours and your cue, and you will have a small, written reason to open the book tomorrow. Of everything in the next nine chapters, nothing matters more.

Understand it yourself

Where you really are

Most people who say "I used to speak it" are placing themselves by history: what they studied, how long, how well they did. History is a poor guide. The better guide is a baseline, a few small pieces of evidence about what you can do today, collected on purpose and kept.

A baseline for a language has four parts. A **recording**: two minutes of you talking about your week with no notes. A **read**: one short real text at the edge of what you can manage, with the words you'd have to look up underlined and counted. A **paragraph**: ten minutes of writing on a familiar topic with no dictionary. And a **self-check** against a list of "I can" statements, marked yes, with help, or not yet. You'll do all four this week. Each is dated and filed, and none of them is a grade.

The point of the baseline is not to find out how bad it is. It's to place you honestly, and then to give you a "before" you can set beside an "after." That comparison is the most motivating thing in language learning, and it only exists if you saved the "before." People who start without one spend a year feeling they haven't progressed, because there's nothing to measure against but a vague memory of how hard it was.

Two kinds of returners deserve a word. If you **had it in school**, you probably have more reading

than speaking, a good stock of grammar you can't use out loud, and a listening ear that has gone soft. Place yourself by what the baseline shows, not by the year of the last class. If you're a **heritage learner** (the language was spoken in your home, or your grandparents', and you understood it more than you spoke it), your ear may be far ahead of your mouth, and your reading and writing may be near zero. That's a real and very workable profile. Your baseline will show a lopsided shape, and the plan you write should follow the shape rather than pretend it's even.

And if you're **starting from nothing**, the baseline is short and cheerful: you record a minute of "I don't know any yet," file it, and in a month you'll be delighted.

Targets in plain words

Teachers and testers use three vocabularies to talk about levels. You don't need to master them, but you'll meet them on every course page and test registration, so here they are in ordinary words.

ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, publishes the proficiency guidelines that U.S. schools and many employers use. They describe what a person can do in four domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The 2024 edition describes performance by what a person can do with the language (the functions and tasks), how accurately, in what contexts and about what content, and with what kinds of text. For speaking, it looks at what a person can do on the spot, not what they've rehearsed.[5] The practical takeaway is that a prepared speech doesn't show your speaking level; a conversation with surprises does. That matters when you plan a speaking check later.

The Can-Do Statements are the part of this system made for you. They're short "I can" sentences: *I can ask and answer simple questions about familiar topics. I can understand the main idea of a short news story.* They're published for setting goals and charting progress. They aren't a checklist where you do each task once and tick it off, and they aren't a way to hand yourself a letter or a number grade.[6] You may be further along in listening than in writing, and the statements are built to let you say so. Use them to write your targets, and use them to notice progress. Nothing more.

The CEFR, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, is the Council of Europe's scale, and it's the one behind most European diplomas and many tests. It has six levels, A1 to C2, grouped in three bands: Basic (A1 and A2), Independent (B1 and B2) and Proficient (C1 and C2). It comes with a self-assessment grid you can read in your own time.[10] You'll see the letters on exam registrations and in course catalogs, and they're good for knowing roughly what a course is aiming at.

Here's the one rule that goes with all three. **Ratings come from certified tests, not from you.** You can say "my read, not a rating" about your own check, and you should. You can't award yourself "Intermediate Mid" or "B2" any more than you can award yourself a driver's license. In one study of 80 university learners of Chinese, self-assessments tracked gains reasonably well but tended to run low, and were least accurate at the Intermediate level, which is a good reason to hold yours loosely.[11] Treat your self-check as a diary entry. It's a good diary. It isn't a measurement. Chapter 9 covers the tests you can sit if you ever want a real rating.

The honest ruler: how long languages take

Here's a number that deserves a careful look. The U.S. Department of State's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) teaches languages to English-speaking diplomats, and it publishes how long that usually takes. The time it "usually" expects is for reaching a level called ILR 3, on a scale used by the U.S. government, where speaking and listening are rated together. ILR 3 is called General Professional Proficiency.[2,12] That's a high bar: a professional working level. FSI's page also says the actual time varies with a person's natural ability, their earlier experience with language learning, and the time they spend in class.

The page groups languages into four categories by how different they are from English:

Category	Examples	Weeks	Class hours
I	Spanish and French (30 weeks), Italian, Portuguese, Dutch and others (24 weeks)	24–30	552–690
II	German, Indonesian, Swahili and others	about 36	828
III	Russian, Hindi, Polish, Turkish, Vietnamese and others	about 44	1,012
IV	Arabic, Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean	88	2,200

FSI's "typical week" is 23 hours in class plus 17 hours of self-study. That's a full-time job: 40 hours a week, for diplomats, with teachers.

Now the honest sum. This is our arithmetic, not FSI's, and it's meant for planning, not prediction.

- A Category I language at 30 weeks of 40 hours is **1,200 hours** of total effort.
- At **5 hours a week**, that's 240 weeks, about four and a half years.
- At **7 hours a week**, it's about 171 weeks, about three and a quarter years.
- A Category IV language is listed at 88 weeks and 2,200 class hours. At 40 hours a week for 88 weeks, that's roughly **3,500 hours** of total effort (a round number, since the page's class hours don't divide neatly into 23 a week). At 5 hours a week, that's about 700 weeks, or roughly thirteen and a half years.
- If you count only the class hours, a Category I language at 690 class hours and 5 hours a week is 138 weeks, a little under three years.

Read the sum slowly. It doesn't say you can't learn the language. It says that the reward the diplomats are chasing, professional-level ease in a language, costs the better part of a thousand hours or more, and that nobody gets it from fifteen minutes in a good month. Learning isn't a straight line, either: the early hours buy a great deal that you can use, and the later ones buy polish.

We can't tell you what a year at your pace will get you in your language, because it depends on things nobody can promise, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something.

Here's what the sum is good for. First, it kills the three-month fantasy kindly, before it can kill your motivation. Second, it tells you that **the target matters more than the clock.** Most adults don't need ILR 3. They need to order dinner, talk with a neighbor, follow a conversation at a cousin's wedding, read a newspaper headline, or write to a colleague. Those are Can-Do targets, and they're reachable in far fewer hours than a diplomat's. Third, it tells you what your **hours per week** really are: a number you'll set honestly in the plan below.

What age does and doesn't do

The question under every return to a language is *Is it too late?* The honest answer has two halves, and you shouldn't skip either.

The first half: it does get harder. A very large 2018 study of nearly 670,000 English speakers, native and non-native, estimated that the ability to learn new grammar from exposure stays strong until about age 17 and then declines steadily.[1] If you're past your teens, and every adult reading this is, picking up grammar "by osmosis" is slower than it was.

The second half: it doesn't stop you. That study measured how easily grammar is absorbed from exposure. It didn't test whether adults can reach a useful or even a professional level, and the plain evidence on that is FSI itself: its adult classes are built to bring English-speaking adults to ILR 3, and they publish the hours they expect it to take. Those adults have hours, teachers, a clear target, and a lot of listening and talking. Adults make up for a slower ear with things children don't have: they can read, plan, choose a method, practice on purpose, and know why they're doing it. Those are exactly the habits this book teaches.

So the useful way to hold both halves is this: *It's a bit harder than it was, it's very possible, and the price is hours.* That's not a pep talk. It's the plan.

Two things this book will not tell you. It won't tell you that learning a language "keeps your brain young" or makes you smarter. A careful analysis of 152 studies with adults found that once you correct for publication bias, no evidence remained for a bilingual advantage on the six executive-function skills those studies measured.[3] Learn the language for people, for work, for travel, for family, for the pleasure of it. Those are real reasons. And it won't tell you "it's never too late" as though it were a scientific result; what it will tell you is what the study found, what FSI shows, and what it costs.

A cue and a kit

The best-known research on habits asked 96 volunteers to choose one simple daily behavior, and do it every day for 12 weeks, each time right after a chosen cue. The time it took for the behavior to feel automatic ranged from 18 days to 254 days. There's no magic number. And missing one opportunity didn't materially affect the process.[7]

Here's what you can take from that. First, **tie your practice to something that already happens**: after the first coffee, when the 8:10 train leaves, when you sit down at your desk, when the dish-

washer starts. That's the cue. Second, **keep the kit where the cue happens**: earbuds, a card box, a small notebook, your one-page plan, all in a pouch that lives in your bag or on the shelf by the chair. You'll never go looking for it. Third, **a missed day is a missed day**. You do the micro version the next day, and you never double up to "make up" for a miss, because doubling up is how a plan turns into a punishment.

Wrong turns you'll hear, including from yourself

- *"I'll be fluent in three months."* The ruler above says otherwise, kindly. A good three months is a start.
- *"Kids pick it up; I can't."* It's harder, and it's possible. Both are true.
- *"I need an hour a day or it's not worth it."* Fifteen minutes on four days beats a two-hour Sunday you skip. The Hour scales for a reason.
- *"I'll start once things calm down."* Things don't calm down. The plan is built for the week you actually have.
- *"I don't know enough to practice with a real person."* You know enough to say "I'm learning." That's the first card in Chapter 5, and it opens more doors than you'd expect.
- *"I studied it for years, so I'm at least intermediate."* Maybe. The baseline will tell you, and it won't be insulted either way.

How to try it this week

This is the one week in the book where the Hour looks a little different, because you're not practicing the language yet. You're laying the groundwork. Think of it as setting the table: it takes a few evenings, nobody eats, and dinner goes better for it.

The week at a glance

Here's the shape. Each piece is short, and none needs more than one sitting.

- **Day 1** (micro): the baseline recording and the why card.
- **Day 2** (desk): the baseline read and the baseline paragraph.
- **Day 3** (desk): the Can-Do self-check, then the cue and kit.
- **Day 4** (micro): the honest-runway sum.
- **Day 5** (micro): the week map.
- **The weekend** (deep): the one-page plan, and the first real contact on your calendar.

If your week doesn't look like that, shuffle it. The order doesn't matter much. What matters is that all of it exists by Sunday night, dated and filed.

Day 1: the voice and the reason

Start with your voice. You'll hear yourself at your rustiest. That's the point, and it's the only time you'll hear this particular version.

Two-minute baseline recording (10 minutes · phone voice memo · screen · Check and Log)

Safety: keep it private, and delete nothing you may want in a month.

Talk for two minutes about your week with no notes, in the language, as well as you can. If you can only manage a minute, or ten words, that's your baseline, and it's perfectly fine. Date the file and name it something plain, like *baseline-oct-2026*. Then don't listen back for a month. You'll want to. Don't. You'll get more out of it when it can surprise you.

If you need a starting sentence: Spanish, *Esta semana trabajé, cociné y vi a mi hermana.* French, *Cette semaine, j'ai travaillé, j'ai cuisiné et j'ai vu ma sœur.* Mandarin, 这个星期我工作，做饭，还见了我姐姐。(Zhège xīngqī wǒ gōngzuò, zuòfàn, hái jiàn le wǒ jiějie.) Each means "This week I worked, cooked, and saw my sister." For another language, any three sentences about what you did will do.

Then do the other half of day one while you're in the mood. Pull out an index card.

Why card (10 minutes · an index card · no screen · Set the Target)

Write three real reasons you want this language, and one person or place you want to use it with. Keep the card where you will see it. Real means specific: not "to be more cultured," but "so I can talk to my neighbor Rosa without a phone," or "because my grandmother's recipe cards are in Mandarin and I can't read them," or "the wedding in Lyon in June." (Those are illustrations, not anyone's real card.) Spanish: *Quiero hablar con mi vecina.* French: *Je veux parler avec ma voisine.* Mandarin: 我想和我的邻居说话。(Wǒ xiǎng hé wǒ de línjū shuōhuà.) "I want to talk with my neighbor."

The card does one job: on the day you don't feel like it, it answers the question *why am I doing this?* in your own handwriting. That's worth more than any slogan I could put in this book.

Day 2: the read and the paragraph

Baseline read (15 minutes · one short real text, printed · no screen · Take It In)

Find one short real text at the edge of what you can manage: a news paragraph, a page from a children's book, a recipe, the back of a product box. Real means written for readers of the language, not for learners. Read it once through. Then go back and underline every word you'd have to look up, and count them. That count is a starting line, not a grade. If you understand most of the words around the ones you underlined, you've chosen well. If almost every line has a gap, pick something easier, and if you underlined hardly anything, pick something harder. Write the date and the count at the top, and file it.

Baseline paragraph (15 minutes · paper, timer · no screen · Work With It)

Set a timer for ten minutes. Write on a familiar topic with no dictionary: your job, your street, what you ate yesterday. Stop when the timer rings, even in the middle of a word. Don't fix anything. Date it and file it. This is your "before." It will be full of mistakes, and in three months those mistakes will be the best evidence you have that you've moved.

Day 3: the self-check and the cue

Can-Do self-check (20 minutes · a printed Can-Do list · no screen · Check and Log)

Print the Can-Do statements for your language and your level, or write ten of your own in the same "I can…" style from the published lists.[6] Mark each one "yes," "with help," or "not yet." Be honest and be kind; there's no prize for scoring low or high. At the top of the page write **"my read, not a rating."** You'll use the same list in three months, and the difference between this sheet and that one is your progress, in your own handwriting.

Spanish: *Puedo pedir la cuenta.* French: *Je peux demander l'addition.* Mandarin: 我会说"请结账"。(Wǒ huì shuō "qǐng jiézhàng.") "I can say, 'The check, please.' "

Then, the same evening, choose your cue and set up your kit. This one is quick, and it's the most important five minutes in the chapter.

Cue and kit (15 minutes · earbuds, card box, notebook · no screen · Set the Target)

Tie practice to something that already happens: after coffee, on the 8:10 train, when the dishwasher starts. Put the kit where the cue happens, so you never go looking for it. Your kit is small. Earbuds. A card box or a stack of index cards with a rubber band. A notebook that fits a pocket, and a pen that's in it. A folded copy of your one-page plan, once you've written it. If the cue is the train, the kit lives in your commute bag. If it's the kitchen, the kit lives in the drawer by the stove.

Day 4: the honest sum

Honest-runway sum (30 minutes · calculator, paper · no screen · Set the Target)

Count your real weekly hours, the ones you can actually promise, not the ones you wish for. Multiply by 52. Set that number beside the FSI ruler for your language's category.[2] Then write one honest sentence about what a year at your pace buys. If you have four hours a week, a year is 208 hours. Spanish in FSI's Category I is about 1,200 hours of total effort for the diplomat's target, so a year at four hours is about a sixth of that road. That sentence might read: *In a year, at this pace, I can reasonably aim for short conversations about familiar topics, not for a professional's ease.* Write yours. It's not a verdict. It's a map.

Day 5: the week map

The week map (15 minutes · planner · no screen · Set the Target)

Look at your real calendar for next week, not the one in your head. Place three to five slots: one deep sit if you can, a couple of desk sessions, a daily thread on the other days. Make one of the slots a real person: a call, a class, a coffee, an exchange. Circle the day most likely to fail. Everyone has one; for some it's Wednesday, for others it's whichever day the kids have practice. Give that day the micro version, and write **micro** in the circle, so a bad day has a plan too.

The weekend: the one-page plan

On Saturday or Sunday, sit down for an hour and write the plan. The next section walks you through it, with a worked example. When you're done, tape it up, put a folded copy in your kit, and send one message to a real person about your first contact. A short one is fine: *Can we talk for ten minutes on Thursday?*

The three contexts, this week

Micro (commute or lunch). The why card and the cue-and-kit setup are micro jobs; so is the miss-once rule below. Keep a card in your bag.

Desk (desk or shift). The baseline read, the baseline paragraph and the Can-Do self-check fit a desk hour. If your desk is a shift, do them in the break room with the door closed, a pen and a timer.

Deep (weekend). The honest sum and the one-page plan want a table and a long cup of something warm. So does your first monthly look-back, a month from now.

Practice that actually builds it

You've set the baseline and made the first plan sketch. Now the work of this chapter is to keep the plan alive: to put the miss-once rule where you can use it, to learn to rewrite the plan without ripping it up, and to hold the monthly look-back as a standing date.

The rest of the toolkit

Miss-once rule (5 minutes · nothing · no screen · Check and Log)

If you miss a day, do the micro version the next day. Never double up to "make up" a day. Say it aloud once, now, so it's yours: *I missed Tuesday. Wednesday is a micro day.* That's the whole rule. It has a good reason behind it: in the study of habits, missing one opportunity did not materially affect how the habit formed, so a missed day is a missed day, not a verdict.[7] Spanish: *Me salté un día; hoy hago la versión corta.* French: *J'ai raté un jour ; aujourd'hui, je fais la version courte.* Mandarin: 我昨天没学，今天做简短的。(Wǒ zuótiān méi xué, jīntiān zuò jiǎnduǎn de.)

Monthly look-back (40 minutes · log, recordings · no screen · Check and Log)

Once a month, read your log, replay the baseline beside a new recording, and change exactly one thing about the plan. Put the date on your calendar now. It's the only meeting in this book, and you're the only person who'll attend. Bring the strip, the baseline recording, and a pen. Replay the baseline first. Then record two minutes about the same topic, and listen to both, one after the other. Write down three differences you can hear. If you can't hear any, don't despair; look at the strip and ask what the plan asked of you. Then change one thing: the cue, the source, the day for the real person. One.

The one-page plan

The one-page plan (45 minutes · one sheet · no screen · Set the Target)

In plain words, on one sheet: your **target**, your **hours per week**, your **cue**, the **people** you will use it with, the **proof** you will keep, and what you will **drop** to make room. Six lines. Not a spreadsheet. Not a goal-setting seminar.

Here's a worked example. It's an illustration, built to show the shape; the person isn't real.

Dana is 41, works shifts as a hospital aide, and took Spanish for three years in school. Her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Ortega, is 78 and speaks mostly Spanish.

- **Target (by the end of three months):** *I can talk with Mrs. Ortega for five minutes about our week, our plants and the weather, and understand most of what she says if she speaks at her usual pace.*
- **Hours per week:** *Two and a half. Three micro days of 15 minutes on shift days, one desk session of 35 minutes on my day off, one deep sit of 75 minutes on Sunday. That's 155 minutes, and I'd rather promise 155 and keep it.*
- **Cue:** *Micro: when I sit in my car on the lunch break. Desk: after the kids are in bed on Thursday. Deep: Sunday afternoon, at the library.*
- **People:** *Mrs. Ortega, ten minutes every other Saturday over her fence. A conversation circle at the library on the second Tuesday, if I can swing it.*
- **Proof:** *Baseline recording, a monthly recording, a practice strip on the fridge, a one-page note once a month about what changed.*
- **Drop:** *The news app and the second streaming show on Sundays. That's where the 75 minutes come from.*

Look at what Dana did and didn't do. She didn't write "become fluent." She named a person and a topic list. She told herself the truth about her hours, and she gave up something real to pay for them. And her target is something the Can-Do statements could describe: sustained conversation on familiar topics. She'll know in three months whether she can do it. Over three months that's about 33 hours: nowhere near FSI's ruler, and exactly right for a small, real target.

Write your plan today. Then read it back and ask whether it's small enough to keep on your worst week of the month. If it isn't, cut something. A plan you follow at 60 percent beats a plan you abandon at 100 percent.

Revising the plan

A plan isn't a promise carved in stone. After four weeks, you'll know what's working. The monthly look-back is the moment to change **one** thing. A few examples of what that looks like:

- *The cue keeps failing.* Move it. Mornings often beat evenings, because by evening you've spent the day's willpower.
- *You're doing everything but the real person.* Put the call on the calendar first, and build the rest of the week around it.
- *The target is too big.* Shrink it to something you could show someone in a month.

- *The target is too small and you've already done it.* Good. Write the next one.
- *You're over the hours.* Lovely. Don't raise the target yet. Raise the real contact.

Using the Can-Do list well

Go back to your self-check page every month and mark it again with a different color. A statement that was "not yet" and is now "with help" is progress. A statement you could say yes to in September and can't in November is information, too: it probably means you stopped doing something. The list works best when you don't hurry it. The statements aren't a checklist of tasks to be shown once; you're looking for a pattern across weeks.[6]

Keeping the honest ruler honest

Return to your sum once a quarter. If your real hours have gone up or down, redo it. Don't be discouraged by the big numbers: they belong to a diplomat's target, and your target is smaller. But don't ignore them either. The ruler is there to keep the plan honest, not to give you a reason to quit.

Talk-to-yourself box

> **Talk to yourself**
>
> "*What do I really want this language for — and does this week's plan fit the life I actually have?*"
>
> - **Meaning:** If I said my target aloud to a friend, would they know what I meant?
> - **Evidence:** What's one thing from this week's baseline that surprised me?
> - **Hours:** Did I count the hours I really have, or the hours I wish I had?
> - **People:** Who is the first real person on my plan, and when will I talk to them?
> - **Next:** What's the one thing I'll change at the look-back?
>
> *What to do with the answer:* write one line on your strip, and if the plan doesn't fit, cut something before you add something.
>
> *In Spanish:* "Mi plan cabe en una página." · *In French:* "Mon plan tient sur une page." · *In Mandarin:* 我的计划只有一页。(Wǒ de jìhuà zhǐyǒu yí yè.)

If you're learning a language other than these three, say the line in yours: "My plan fits on one page." Any language will have a way to say it, and you can look it up in a printed dictionary or ask a speaker.

If it isn't clicking

Almost everything that goes wrong in the first month goes wrong in one of five ways. None of them means you're bad at languages. Each has a next move.

"I keep missing days." Look at the cue before you look at yourself. A cue that depends on a good mood or a free evening will fail. Move it to something that happens whether you feel like

it or not: the first coffee, the engine off in the parking lot, the kettle. Then shrink the daily piece until it embarrasses you: one sentence, aloud, in the car. And apply the miss-once rule without commentary. A missed day is a missed day.

"The baseline was discouraging." It usually is. The recording sounds worse than you remember, and the paragraph looks like a field of red ink waiting for a teacher. That's what a true "before" looks like, and it's the point of having one. If it stings, set it in a folder for a month and do something else small and winnable: copy five sentences from a text you understood, say them aloud, and tick the card. The baseline isn't a verdict on your ability. It's a measurement of where the work starts.

"I can't decide on a target." Go back to the why card. Pick the person on it, and write a target that begins with that person's name. *I can say hello to Rosa and ask about her garden.* The first target can be tiny. You can write a bigger one in a month, and you'll write it better.

"I'm a heritage speaker and I'm ashamed of my gaps." Many returners to a family language carry this. Your ear is probably better than you think, and a lopsided shape (strong ear, weak reading, tentative speech) is the normal profile for someone raised hearing it. Put the shame down. Write a plan that follows the shape: lots of listening, one real person a week, small steps into reading. And when you talk with older relatives, ask them to speak plainly and slowly; most are delighted to be asked.

"Nobody around me speaks it." That's common, and it doesn't stop you. Chapters 5 and 7 are full of ways to find people: tutors, exchange partners, library circles, classes, volunteers. For this week, choose the first one you'll try and put it on the plan. A real person doesn't have to be nearby; a weekly video call counts.

When to slow down, go on, or ask a human. *Slow down* if the plan is crowding out sleep, family or work for more than two weeks. Cut an hour and keep the cue. *Go on* if the plan feels easy and the real contact is happening: lengthen the target, not the hours. *Ask a human* if you can't place yourself after the baseline, or you can't tell whether the target is too big. A tutor or a teacher can look at your recording and your paragraph and tell you, in ten minutes, what you can't see from inside. That's what Chapter 5 is for, and it's what a certified test is for later (Chapter 9).

Tools, including AI

You don't need much here. A calendar and a phone timer set the cue. The voice-memo app is your baseline recorder. A printed list and a pen beat any app for the self-check.

If you want an AI chat tool in this chapter, there's one good use and two to avoid. The good use: **after you've written your why card and your target yourself**, you may paste in the target alone and ask the tool to make it more specific, or to suggest three "I can" sentences in the same spirit. Treat the answer as a draft you edit, not a plan you adopt. The two to avoid: don't ask a tool to rate your level from your recording or your paragraph, because only a certified test gives a rating; and don't type names, addresses or family details into any tool. Chapter 8 has the full rules on both.

What "done enough" looks like

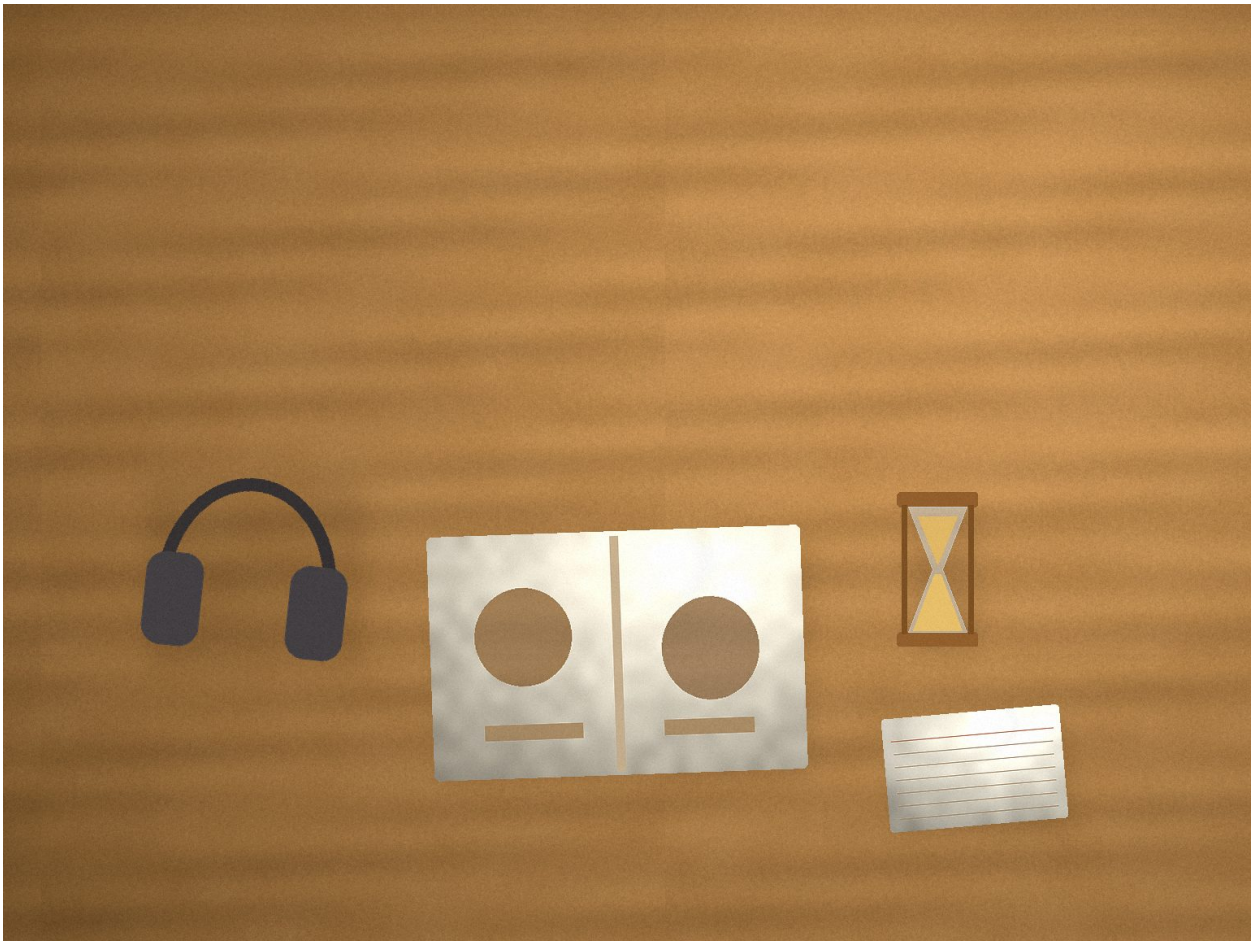
You're done with this chapter when you can check these off.

- A dated **baseline**, all four pieces: a recording, a read with its count, a paragraph, and a Can-Do self-check headed "my read, not a rating." They're filed where you can find them in three months.
- A **why card** with three real reasons and one person or place.
- A **cue and a kit**, and the kit lives where the cue happens.
- Your **honest sum** written down, with one honest sentence about what a year at your pace buys.
- A **week map** with three to five slots, one of them a real person, and a micro version circled for your hardest day.
- A **one-page plan** on the wall, with a folded copy in your kit.
- The **miss-once rule** said aloud, and a date on the calendar for the monthly look-back.

You don't need to have practiced much of the language yet. Chapter 1 is the plan; the practice is next.

Next is listening, the cheapest hour you have. It's where "take in more than you need" starts, and where most of the Hour will live. That's Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 — Listening at Real Speed



Why this matters

Every returning learner knows the moment. You've studied for a while. You can read a menu, write a polite email, follow a slow conversation with a patient teacher. Then you stand behind two people at a bus stop who are talking to each other in the language, or you press play on a show with no subtitles, and it's a wall of sound. You catch a word, maybe two. The rest goes by like weather.

That moment is why listening gets the biggest share of the Hour. Real speech is fast, joined-up and

full of shortcuts that never show up in a textbook. Words run together. Sounds drop out. People interrupt each other, restart sentences and laugh in the middle of them. A learner who has only ever heard slow, careful, studio-clear audio has learned a version of the language that almost nobody speaks to anyone.

The good news is that listening at real speed is a skill, and a trainable one. It grows from three things: a great deal of listening you mostly understand, repeated listening to the same material until it opens up, and a little active work that trains the ear to hear what's really there. None of that needs a classroom. Most of it needs earbuds, a notebook, a bit of patience, and the time you're already spending on a train, a walk, or a sink full of dishes.

This is also where the first clause of the focus line, **take in more than you need**, lives most of the time. The idea is simple and old: the more language you understand, the more of it ends up available to you when you finally need to speak. You don't have to subscribe to any grand theory to see the practical sense of it. If you spend a month hearing only a small circle of words you already know, your ear learns a small circle. If you spend it hearing a wider circle, mostly understood, with a few new things in each clip, your ear learns the wider one. That's the cheapest improvement in this book, and it fits into the cracks of a working life.

Listening is cheap, too. You can do it with your hands full and your eyes busy. A commute that was dead time becomes the best twenty minutes of your day. A kitchen that was silent now has a voice in it. You don't have to find an hour to start; you have to find a tap.

By the end of this chapter you'll have a few sources you can follow most of, a short routine that turns them into learning, and a way to check honestly whether your ear is keeping up. You won't understand everything. You're not meant to. You're meant to understand *most of what you hear*, and to be fine with the rest.

Understand it yourself

What real speech does

If you've been learning from textbooks and apps, the speech you've heard has probably been clear and a little slow, with every word spoken separately. Real speech isn't like that, in any language. A few things happen in all of them.

Words run together. In everyday French, *je ne sais pas* ("I don't know") often comes out as something like *chais pas.* In Spanish, *para* ("for") is often *pa'*, and *estoy* ("I am") is often *toy.* In Mandarin, a word has a tone when it stands alone, but in a stream of speech tones bend: 不 (bù) becomes *bú* before another fourth tone, as in 不是 (bú shì, "is not"). The words are the same ones you studied. They're just sped up, shortened and joined, the way English speakers say "gonna" and "didn't you" without noticing.

Speed varies, and nobody warns you. A teacher slows down for you. A stranger on the train doesn't. People speak faster when they're comfortable, tired, excited, or talking to someone they know. A radio host has a different pace from a grandparent telling a story, and neither is the pace of a learner audio course.

People don't talk in finished sentences. They trail off, restart, correct themselves, say "well," "so," "um" in their own language, and leave out what everyone present already knows. A transcript of real speech looks messier than anything you've studied. Learning to ignore the mess and catch the point is half of listening.

Numbers and names go by fastest. Prices, times, dates, phone numbers and street names are where real speech first outruns almost every learner. They're packed with information, they can't be guessed from context, and nobody slows down for them. French makes it harder with numbers like *soixante-dix* (70, literally "sixty-ten"), *quatre-vingts* (80, "four-twenties") and *quatre-vingt-dix* (90, "four-twenty-ten"). Spanish and Mandarin are friendlier on the page, and still hard at speed. The numbers drill in this chapter is built for this.

Accents and regions differ. Spanish in Mexico City, Madrid and Buenos Aires sounds different; Mandarin in Beijing and in Taipei differs in rhythm and in some sounds; French in Paris, Montreal and Dakar isn't the same. This isn't a flaw in your ear. It's the language being a language. Start with one accent that's easy for you to find, then widen the circle once you're comfortable.

What "understanding" actually means

When people say "I can't understand it," they usually mean one of several different things, and the fix for each is different. It helps to name the job you're doing.

- **Gist:** *What was that about?* One sentence. A good listener gets the gist from a clip they only half catch.
- **Detail:** *What were the facts?* Names, numbers, reasons, who did what. This takes more passes.
- **Sound:** *What did I actually hear?* The raw sounds, before meaning. Dictation trains this.
- **Speed:** *Can I keep up while it keeps coming?* This is the one only volume can build.

On any given day, pick the job you're working on. A commute clip is for gist and speed. A dictation strip is for sound. A three-pass listen walks you through gist, detail and sound in order.

The goal isn't to understand every word. It's to understand **most of what you hear**: enough to follow the thread, enough that the new words arrive in a sentence that makes sense. A rough guide that comes out of vocabulary research is that you should understand most of the words around the new ones, so that the new ones can be guessed and learned from context. You may have seen a precise percentage quoted for this. Careful researchers who tried to repeat the original study could not fully replicate that figure, so this book gives you the working rule and leaves out the number.[13,14] If a clip loses you in nearly every sentence, it's too hard today; pick an easier one. If you understand every word and learn nothing, it's too easy; pick one that stretches you.

Why repetition is your friend

Here's something comforting: you're allowed to listen to the same thing more than once. In fact, it's the whole method.

Narrow listening means choosing a few short clips on one topic, and listening to them several times, or listening to several clips on the same topic. The words and phrases repeat across the clips.

The third listen is easier than the first, and the fifth is easier than the third. You're not memorizing; you're letting your ear settle into one small piece of the language until it stops sounding like noise. A week spent on three clips about the weather will teach your ear the weather, in several voices. That's a real piece of the language learned thoroughly, not skimmed.

Three-pass listening gives that repetition a shape. On pass one you listen for the gist and nothing else. On pass two you listen for details: names, numbers, reasons. On pass three you listen with a transcript, if there is one, and see what you missed and why. Then you listen once more with no transcript, and you hear a clip that, last week, was a wall.

Shadowing is for the mouth and the ear together. You play a short clip and repeat it half a beat behind the speaker, copying the rhythm and the tune before you worry about the words. It sounds odd and feels odd and works well, because the rhythm of a language is half of what makes it understandable, and making a rhythm with your own mouth is one of the quickest ways to start hearing it. Do it where nobody minds, such as on a walk in a park or in the car with the windows up.

Dictation is the slow, honest check: someone reads a sentence twice, you write what you hear, then you compare. It's the one drill that shows you exactly what your ear missed. You'll often find that you understood the sentence but missed the small words: *the*, *of*, *to*, *a*, and the endings. That's valuable information, and it's very learnable.

Sources: types, not rankings

You need real material, made for people who speak the language, at a speed you can partly follow. There's a lot of it, and most of it's free. Think in types:

- **Public broadcasters and their video libraries.** Many countries' public media offer free video and audio with clear, professional speech. RTVE Play, a public broadcaster's streaming library, is one example for Spanish, and a good model for what to look for.[15] For German, DW Learn German is an example of a learner-oriented site run by a public broadcaster.[16] Those are examples of types, not rankings; every language has its own versions.
- **Programs made for learners.** Slow news, graded dialogues, and simple stories can be good first sources. Use them as stepping stones, not as the destination.
- **Children's programs and stories.** They're slower, clear and repetitive, and nobody will mock you for choosing them. Adults who return to a language often find children's programs the perfect bridge.
- **Audiobooks with a matching text.** Volunteers record public-domain books for free, and many have text you can read along with. LibriVox is an example.[17] Hearing a page and seeing it together is excellent for the ear.
- **Podcasts and radio talk.** Everyday conversation, interviews, and local stations are where real speed lives. Start with one voice or two, and one topic you care about.
- **Series and films, with subtitles in the language.** Not English subtitles. The language's own subtitles let your eye help your ear.
- **Voice messages and calls from real people.** A friend's voice message at normal speed is the best listening you'll get, and it's about you.

Whatever you pick, favor clips that run from one to three minutes, that have a clear topic you like, and that come with a transcript or captions if possible. Most players let you slow a clip down a notch; use that as a ramp, and move back to full speed when you can.

If your language is a sign language, the same method applies, with the eyes in the place of the ears: watch short clips again and again, and learn from Deaf teachers and Deaf-led classes. Chapter 7 says more.

Wrong turns you'll hear, including from yourself

- *"I must understand every word or I've failed."* No. Understanding most, and being comfortable with the rest, is the target.
- *"It's too fast. I'll never get it."* It's fast for everyone at first. Narrow listening and shadowing are built for exactly that.
- *"I'll just watch with English subtitles."* That's entertainment, which is fine, but it doesn't train your ear. Use the language's own subtitles, or none.
- *"Background audio is enough."* Passive listening is better than none and worse than attention. Give some of it a few real minutes of focus.
- *"I understood it fine when I read it."* The eye and the ear are separate skills. That gap is normal, and that's why the transcript comes last, not first.

A five-minute ear warm-up

Before you start, pick any clip, close your eyes and listen for two minutes. Don't try to understand anything. Just count: how many separate words can you pick out? Five? Twenty? Say them aloud, or jot them down. Then listen once more. You'll catch more. That tiny jump, from the first pass to the second, is what the whole chapter is about.

How to try it this week

You don't need a new schedule. You need to fill the spaces that already exist: the commute, the walk, the dishes, the lunch break, one long evening on the weekend. This week, you'll pick a few clips and work them in three sizes.

Pick your clips first

On Monday, spend fifteen minutes choosing. You're looking for **three short clips on one topic**, each one to three minutes long, in a voice you can stand to hear ten times. Weather, a recipe, a short news item, a local sports result: it doesn't matter, as long as it's a topic you'd be curious about in English. Save them in one place, a playlist or a folder, with a note of where each came from. If a clip has a transcript, save that too.

Then pick **one longer piece** for the weekend: a 45–60 minute program, a film, an episode, something you'll enjoy. A show you'd actually watch is better than a "good for you" documentary you'll resent.

The week, in three contexts

Micro (commute or lunch, 15–20 minutes). This is where narrow listening lives. Listen to your three clips in order, then again. Keep one ear free near traffic. On the third listen, say a sentence you caught, half a beat behind the speaker. If you're on a train, you can do it silently, moving only your lips. Finish by saying in one sentence what the clips were about, first in English, then in the language.

Desk (desk or shift, 30–40 minutes). This is the three-pass session. Take one clip, run the three passes, and finish with a dictation strip. If a friend or colleague speaks the language, ask them to read you one sentence twice. If not, replay a recording. Then write your two sentences about the clip: your daily thread.

Deep (weekend, 60–90 minutes). The weekend listen-through. Watch or listen to the first half of your long piece without subtitles and list three things you caught. Then watch the second half with the language's own subtitles, if there are any, and retell the whole thing aloud in five minutes. Then, with the leftover time, update your overheard log and write down five phrases you'd like to hear again next week.

Your first listening week, day by day

- **Monday:** choose your clips and your long piece. Do a five-minute ear warm-up with one of them.
- **Tuesday (micro):** narrow listening on your three clips. Gist in one sentence.
- **Wednesday (desk):** the three-pass listen on clip one. Dictation strip.
- **Thursday (micro):** shadowing walk, with clip two. Overheard log: one phrase you actually heard in real life.
- **Friday (micro or desk):** numbers and names drill, with a friend or a recording.
- **Saturday or Sunday (deep):** the weekend listen-through, then retell it. Add your line to the practice strip.

If you have only three slots, make them Tuesday, Wednesday and the weekend. A thinner week still counts.

Words to say to yourself

When a clip loses you, here's what helps. Say it aloud, quietly, or write it in your notebook. *I don't need every word. What's the topic? Who's talking? What's one thing I caught? Let it go by, and catch the next one.* Then listen again.

For the sentences that matter in real conversations, such as when you're face to face with a person and the speed is too much, there's a tiny set of phrases in Chapter 5. For now, one is enough. Spanish: *Más despacio, por favor.* French: *Plus lentement, s'il vous plaît.* Mandarin: 请说慢一点。(Qǐng shuō màn yìdiǎn.) "Slower, please."

How to fade the help

Help is a ramp. Use it, then take it away. A typical path for one clip, over a week: first listen at a slightly slower speed with the transcript beside you; then at full speed with the transcript; then with the transcript hidden; then with nothing. The next week, with a new clip, start one rung higher. Over a month you'll notice you're skipping the transcript on clips that would have needed it, and that's what progress looks like here.

When to stop

When your attention has gone, stop. Ten minutes of real listening beats forty of drifting. A good rule: if you've lost the thread three times in a row, the clip is wrong for today. Swap it, or stop and log what you did.

Practice that actually builds it

These are the try-its for the chapter. Use them as a menu, not a calendar. Pick one for the micro slot, one for the desk slot and one for the weekend, and shuffle the rest in as the weeks go by.

On the go

Narrow listening (20 minutes · three short clips on one topic · screen · Take It In)

Safety: keep one ear free near traffic.

Listen to three short pieces on the same topic. Words repeat, and the third listen feels easier than the first. If you're on foot, keep your volume low enough to hear a car. If you're on a train, close your eyes for the second pass. After the third piece, say one thing you caught, out loud or silently. Here's what the topic could look like. (An illustration, not a real playlist.) *Three clips about the weather this weekend, from three different speakers, in Spanish: after the third you notice that* lluvia *(rain) and* viento *(wind) turn up every time, and you hear them without thinking.*

Shadowing walk (15 minutes · earbuds · screen · Work With It)

Safety: keep one ear free near traffic; stay aware of your surroundings.

Walk and repeat a short clip half a beat behind the speaker, copying rhythm and tune before words. Start with a clip you've already heard five times, so that you're not working on meaning. Play a sentence, pause, say it back, then try it without pausing. Your mouth will lag; let it. You're matching the music before the words. Mandarin learners: copy the tones as if they were notes in a tune. Spanish and French learners: follow the way the words join. A good test is that, a week later, the clip sounds slower than it did.

Numbers and names drill (10 minutes · a friend or recording, paper · no screen · Work With It)

Hear prices, times, dates and phone numbers at speed and write them down. Numbers are where real speech first outruns you. Ask a friend who speaks the language to read you six numbers, or use a recording. Start small: prices and clock times. Spanish: *Cuesta doce euros con cincuenta.* French:

Ça coûte douze euros cinquante. Mandarin: 十二块五。(Shí'èr kuài wǔ.) All three say "twelve fifty." Then try a time: *Son las tres y cuarto.* · *Il est trois heures et quart.* · 现在三点一刻。(Xiànzài sān diǎn yí kè.) "It's a quarter past three." If you're learning French, spend an extra week on 70, 80 and 90; it pays.

Gist in one sentence (5 minutes · nothing · no screen · Check and Log)

After a listen, say in one sentence what it was about, first in English, then in the language. Don't worry about grammar: *It was about the weekend weather.* Spanish: *Hablaba del tiempo del fin de semana.* French: *Ça parlait de la météo du week-end.* Mandarin: 说的是周末的天气。(Shuō de shì zhōumò de tiānqì.) The English first isn't cheating; it separates *understanding* from *saying*, so you can tell which one is the problem.

Overheard log (5 minutes · notebook · no screen · Check and Log)

Write one phrase you actually heard in real life today, and where you heard it. Real life means a shop, a street, a bus, a call from a relative, a voice in the next cubicle. It doesn't have to be a whole sentence. It might look like this. Spanish, at the market: *"¿Algo más?"* (Anything else?) French, at the bakery: *"Et avec ceci ?"* (Anything with that?) Mandarin, at a restaurant: "还要别的吗？" (Hái yào biéde ma?) (Anything else?) At the end of a month, you'll have a page of phrases that are truly yours, because you met them in the wild.

At a desk

Three-pass listen (25 minutes · one clip, transcript if there is one · screen · Take It In)

Pass one for gist, pass two for details, pass three with the transcript. Then listen once more with no transcript. Here's the shape on paper. (An illustration; the clip is invented for the example.) *A one-minute French clip about a bakery closing early on Sundays. Pass one: "It's about a shop's hours." Pass two: "Closed at one, not at two; something about a holiday; a price, maybe 1.20." Pass three with the transcript: you see "mardi" where you heard "mercredi," and "un euro vingt" where you heard something else. Pass four, no transcript: you hear "un euro vingt" and smile.* The point isn't a perfect score. It's to see, in your own handwriting, which parts of the language your ear is catching and which it's still hearing as noise.

Kitchen radio (20 minutes · radio or speaker · screen · Take It In)

Play real-speed news or talk while cooking. Catch three facts and say them aloud to whoever is home, or to the dish. A public broadcaster's radio or video library is a good place to start; RTVE Play and DW's learner site are examples of the type.[15,16] Don't try to follow everything. Listen for numbers, places and names first, and let the rest wash over you. Afterward, say three things you caught. If someone's at home, tell them in English what you heard, and let them ask you a follow-up question. It's a quiet way to turn input into talk.

Dictation strip (15 minutes · paper; a reader or a short recording · no screen · Work With It)

Have a friend read a sentence twice, or replay a recording. Write it, compare, and circle what you missed. If you have a friend who's a speaker, ask them to read to you at their natural pace, and to read it again slower if you need it. If you're on your own, take a one-sentence clip, replay it as

many times as you need, write it, then check against a transcript. Circle the misses. After a few strips, look at the circles: are they mostly small words? Endings? Numbers? That pattern tells you what to practice next.

Weekend, deeper

Weekend listen-through (60 minutes · one 45–60 minute program · screen · Take It In)

Watch the first half without subtitles and list three things you caught. Watch the second half with target-language subtitles if there are any. Retell it aloud in five minutes. A tip: pick something you'd watch anyway. A mystery, a cooking show, a game. Your attention is the scarcest resource, and an interesting program pays for itself. When you retell it, don't aim for accuracy; aim for the story. The first time, five minutes may feel like forever, and you may run dry at ninety seconds. That's a measurement, not a failure. Do it again next week with a new program and see how long you last.

Talk-to-yourself box

Talk to yourself

"Where did my ear keep up this week, and where did it lose the thread?"

- **Meaning:** What was one clip about, in a single sentence?
- **Evidence:** What did I catch this week that I couldn't catch a month ago?
- **Where it broke:** Was it the speed, the numbers, a word I didn't know, or just tiredness?
- **Source:** Which clip would I happily listen to again, and which one should I swap?
- **Next:** What's one clip or one drill for tomorrow's first ten minutes?

What to do with the answer: write one line on your strip, and swap any clip that lost you three times.

In Spanish: "Entendí lo principal, pero los números iban muy rápido." · *In French:* "J'ai compris l'essentiel, mais les chiffres allaient trop vite." · *In Mandarin:* 我听懂了大意，但数字说得太快了。(Wǒ tīng dǒng le dàyì, dàn shùzì shuō de tài kuài le.)

If you're learning another language, say the same sentence in yours: "I understood the main point, but the numbers went by too fast."

Blocked and mixed practice

When something is new, practice it in a block: the same kind of thing for a few days. Narrow listening to three weather clips is a block. Once it feels easier, mix: one day a clip, one day a dictation strip, one day the radio. Mixing is harder, and it's what makes the skill hold up when you meet something you haven't heard before.

A worked example: one person's listening week

Here's what the chapter can look like in a real, ordinary week. This is an illustration, not a report about a particular person.

Marcus drives forty minutes each way to a job in a warehouse and has an hour on Sunday. He took French in high school and wants to follow a coworker's family conversations at the holiday party in December. On Monday night he picks three one-minute clips about the weather from three different speakers, and a Sunday-afternoon film with French subtitles.

Tuesday, in the car on the way in, he plays the three clips in order, twice, with the volume low enough that he can hear the road. On the ride home, he shadows the second one at red lights, lips only. Gist: "weather, cold, maybe snow." He says it in English, then in French: "Ça parlait de la météo." That's the whole session: 20 minutes.

Wednesday, at the kitchen table after dinner, he does a three-pass listen on clip one. On the second pass he catches "demain" and "moins deux." On the transcript pass he sees "il fera froid" where he'd heard "il faut froid." Then his coworker's daughter reads him three short sentences, twice each, and he writes them. Of the three, he gets one exactly, one with a wrong ending, one not at all. He circles the misses. 35 minutes, and the circles are the most useful thing on the page.

Thursday, in the car again, narrow listening on the same three clips. He notices that he's catching "moins" and "degrés" without trying. He writes on his overheard log: "Et avec ceci ?" (heard at the bakery). Friday he skips; he notes "missed Friday; Monday is micro," and moves on.

Sunday, he watches the first half of the film without subtitles, writes three things he caught (a car, a name, a price), watches the second half with French subtitles, and then retells it aloud to the dog. He runs dry at two minutes. He writes "2 min" on his strip. In three weeks, he'll run dry at four.

Look at what Marcus didn't do. He didn't try to understand everything. He didn't buy anything. He didn't need a teacher or a perfect source. He did four things: he repeated a small amount of material, he checked what his ear missed, he said something aloud after each listen, and he wrote one line down. That's the chapter.

Practice with a real person, in small ways

Listening gets sharper when there's a person at the other end of it. You can do this in small ways. Ask a coworker who speaks the language to say one sentence twice. Call a relative and ask them to tell you what they had for dinner, slowly, then once at normal speed. Listen to a voice message from a friend two or three times before you answer. And if someone speaks to you in the language and you lose the thread, you now have the phrase for it: *más despacio, por favor.* Most people are glad to repeat themselves for someone who's trying. Ask before you record anyone, though. A voice is personal, and the answer is theirs to give.

If it isn't clicking

Listening problems come in a few flavors. Here are the common ones and the next move for each.

“I understand it when I read it, but not when I hear it.” That’s the most common gap, and it’s normal. Your eye and your ear are separate skills, and reading usually gets ahead. The move: listen first, transcript last. Do the three-pass listen with the transcript only on pass three. Use dictation strips for a few weeks, and look at the pattern of your misses.

“Everything sounds like one long word.” It does, at first, because your ear doesn’t yet know where the words begin and end. Narrow listening is the cure: the same few words, in several clips, until your ear learns their shape. Shadowing helps because it makes you produce the joins. Give it two or three weeks.

“I get the words but not the meaning.” Then you’re probably decoding word by word and running out of time. The move is to go for gist: one sentence, in English, after the first listen. Practice catching the topic before the details, and let go of the words you don’t know. You’re not translating; you’re following.

“The numbers get me every time.” Welcome to the club. Do ten minutes of the numbers drill three days a week for a month. Start with the numbers you meet most: prices, times and phone numbers. Write them down as digits, not words. Once the drill is easy at normal speed, ask someone to read them fast.

“I’m too tired.” Then do less. Tired ears hear worse and learn less. A ten-minute daily thread is better than a forced forty. If you’re tired every time you plan to listen, move the slot to a different part of the day.

“I can follow my clips, but real people lose me.” That’s the gap between prepared material and live speech. Real people are faster, messier, and don’t repeat themselves. Use the *más despacio* phrase. Ask them to say it differently, not louder. Put in some real-speed material every week: the radio, a podcast with two people talking, a film. And be patient with yourself; this is the longest gap to close, and it closes with hours.

When to slow down, go on, or get a human. *Slow down* when a clip loses you three times in a row: swap it for an easier one. *Go on* when you can follow a clip’s gist on the first listen: choose something longer or faster. *Get a human* when you can’t tell whether your misses are about sound, vocabulary or speed. A tutor or a teacher can run a quick dictation with you and tell you in fifteen minutes. Chapter 5 shows you how to find one.

Tools, including AI

Listening is one of the places where tools help most, as long as they don’t do the listening for you.

Speed controls. Most audio and video players let you slow a clip by a notch or two. Use that as a ramp for new clips, and go back to full speed as soon as you can. Slowed audio can sound distorted, so it’s a stepping stone and not a home.

Transcripts and captions. Use them on the last pass, not the first. Automatic captions can slip, especially with names, numbers and fast speech, so if a caption looks odd, trust your ear and check a second source or a person.

Playlists and downloads. Save your three clips where you can reach them with no signal. Nothing kills a commute plan like a tunnel.

Voice-memo apps. Good for recording yourself shadowing a clip, and for the retelling at the end of the weekend listen-through.

AI tools. Used well, an AI chat tool can write a short, simple script on a topic you choose, at a level you ask for, and a text-to-speech voice can read it aloud. That makes a decent warm-up when you can't find the right clip. Keep two limits in mind. First, those voices are clear and even, and real people aren't, so treat them as a warm-up and keep your main diet real. Second, if a tool invents a "fact" in the script, you might learn it, so check anything that matters against a reliable source. And don't upload a recording of another person's voice to any tool without their okay. Chapter 8 has the full rules. The short version is the same as everywhere in this book: you listen first, the tool comes second, and a person checks anything that matters.

What "done enough" looks like

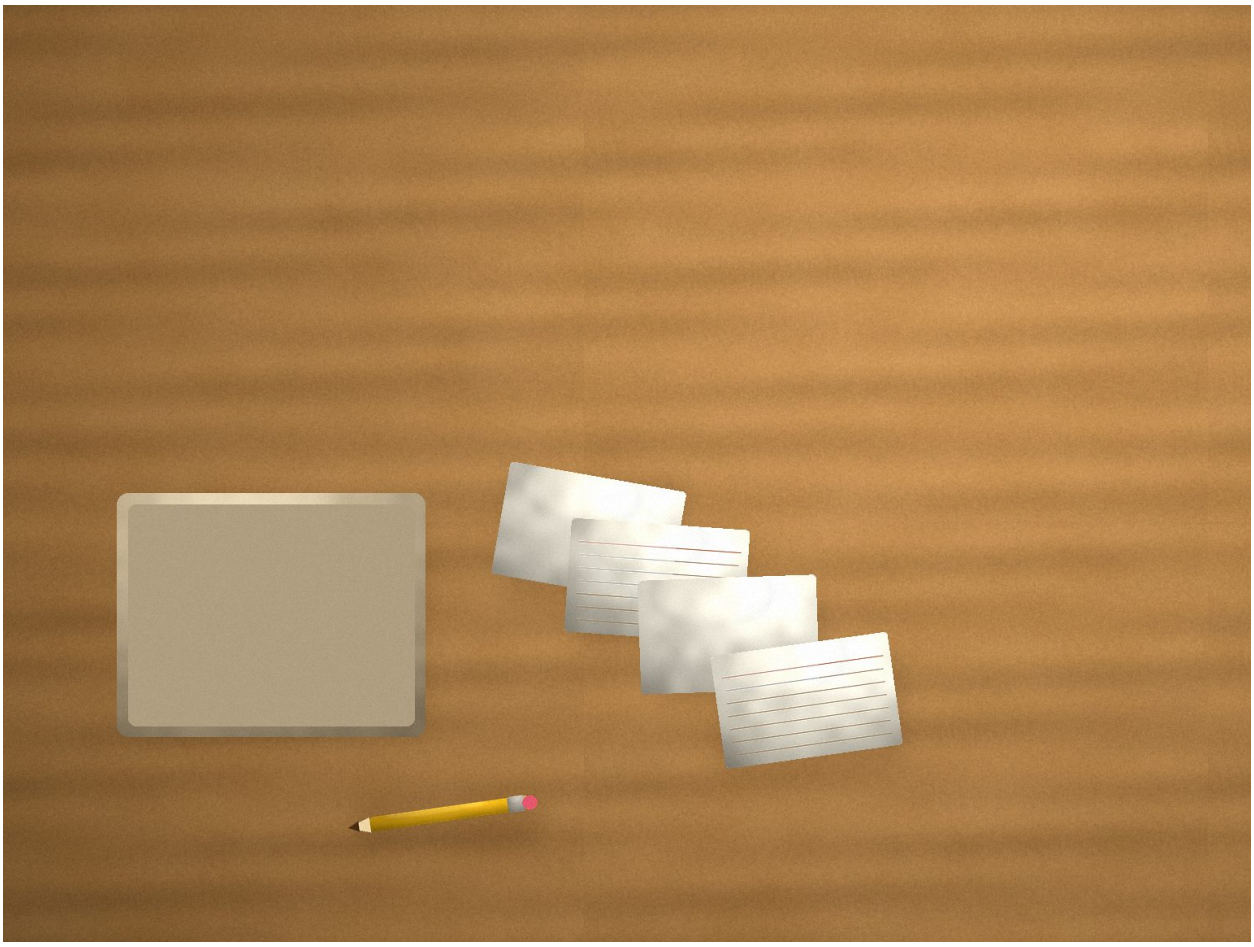
You're done with this chapter, and ready to move on while still listening every week, when you can check these off.

- **Three or four dated dictation strips** with the misses circled, and the circles getting fewer, or moving from big words to small ones.
- **A source or two you can follow most of**, which you couldn't follow at all a month ago: a clip, a program, a podcast, a voice message from a friend.
- **A few lines in your overheard log**, phrases you actually heard in real life, with where you heard them.
- **At least one retelling**, aloud, of something you listened to, even if it ran dry at two minutes.
- **A numbers drill you can do** with prices and clock times at ordinary speed.
- **Gist in one sentence** after most listens, first in English, then in the language.

If you're getting the gist of a clip on the first pass most days, and the details by the third, you're right on track. The target is *most*, not all.

Next, the words and patterns your ear has started catching need to stay. That's Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 — Words and Patterns That Stay



Why this matters

Think of the last time you studied a language list. Maybe it was fifty Spanish verbs, or the days of the week in Mandarin, or a page of French vocabulary from a school binder you found in a closet. You looked at the words, you nodded, and a day later most of them were gone. That's not a flaw in you. That's what happens when words are looked at but never asked to do anything.

This chapter is about the gap between words you have *seen* and words you can *reach for*. It's the

most practical gap in the whole book, because it shows up everywhere. It's why you can follow a podcast but freeze when someone asks you a simple question. It's why a card you've reviewed forty times still won't come out of your mouth at the pharmacy counter. And it's fixable, with small habits that fit around a job and a life.

Here is the whole recipe, and then the rest of the chapter is how to cook it in a real kitchen. A word stays when it arrives inside a sentence you actually understood. It stays when it comes back on a schedule, so you meet it just as it starts to fade. It stays when you pull it out of memory rather than rereading it. And it stays when it gets a real job to do, in a message, a conversation, a shopping list or a sign you read out loud on the street. Patterns, which is what we'll call the small bits of grammar that make sentences work, stay for the same reasons, with one extra step: you notice them, you understand them on purpose, and then you use them until they stop costing you effort.

Nothing about this is exotic. What may be new is the order. Most of us were taught the other way around: here's the rule, here's the list, memorize both, and we'll quiz you Friday. That order works for a quiz. It doesn't work for a conversation.

The focus line of this book is **take in more than you need; use it with real people; check it honestly; keep the plan small enough to keep.** In this chapter, "take in more than you need" means your words come *from* what you listened to in Chapter 2 and what you'll read in Chapter 4, not from a list somebody else made. "Use it with real people" means a word only counts once it has done a job in the world. "Check it honestly" means testing yourself from a blank page, not glancing at an answer and agreeing with it. And "keep the plan small enough to keep" means a handful of cards a day and one pattern a week, which is plenty.

You also bring something to this chapter that a younger learner doesn't: you can think about language. You can notice that a pattern repeats, name it in your own words, test it against another sentence, and decide it's worth a week. Chapter 1 told the whole honest story about age and language learning. For this chapter, one sentence is enough: adults tend to be good at the "understand it on purpose" step, so we'll lean on it.

What you can try today: take three sentences from something you heard or read this week and copy them into a notebook. That's it. That's the first rep of everything else in this chapter.

Understand it yourself

You don't need a linguistics background for any of this. You need five ideas, and each one fits in a sentence you could say to a friend.

Sentences beat single words

A word alone is a fact. A word inside a sentence is a tool. It arrives with its grammar, its usual neighbors and a hint about when people say it.

Take the Spanish verb *pedir*. On a card by itself it means "to ask for." In the sentence *Voy a pedir la cuenta* "I'm going to ask for the check," it also tells you that *pedir* takes a direct object with no

little word in between, that "voy a" plus a verb is a way to talk about what you're about to do, and that this is something you'd say in a restaurant. One card, four lessons.

The French equivalent does the same job: *Je voudrais l'addition, s'il vous plaît* "I'd like the check, please." The Mandarin version of a useful, whole, ready-to-use line might be 请问，洗手间在哪里? (Qǐngwèn, xǐshǒujiān zài nǎlǐ?) "Excuse me, where's the restroom?" Notice that none of these is a single vocabulary word. Each is a piece you could use tonight.

This is why the first habit of the chapter is to copy *whole sentences you understood*, taken from your own input. This book calls that **sentence mining**. The sentences keep their company, and you'll find that you remember "who was with whom" far better than you remember a lonely word.

Pull it out; don't just look at it

Rereading a list feels productive because the words look familiar. But familiar and available are different things. Available means you can produce it with nothing in front of you. The way to build availability is to practice producing: cover the answer, try to recall, then check.

Learning researchers have compared study techniques for years. In the large reviews, practice testing and spreading practice out over time rank among the most useful general techniques,[18] and testing yourself beats simply rereading.[19] The practical version is plain: your review starts with a blank page, not with your cards. It's slightly uncomfortable, because you're bumping into what you don't know. That discomfort is the sound of memory working.

Space it out

The same total time works better spread over several days than crammed into one sitting. If you wait until a word has begun to fade, but not so long that it's gone, the next recall takes more effort, and the usual explanation is that the effort is what makes it stick.[20]

You don't need software to do this. A shoebox with five slots does it on paper. New cards go in slot one. Cards you get right move one slot back; cards you miss go home to slot one. You look at the front slots every day and the back slots once a week. We'll build the box in a moment. Apps do the same thing with a scheduling formula, and some people like them, which we'll get to in the tools section.

Three ways of knowing a word

When you say "I know this word," you could mean three different things, and all three are honest progress.

1. **Recognize it.** You see or hear it and understand it.
2. **Produce it when prompted.** Someone asks, or a card asks, and you can say it.
3. **Use it on your own with a real person.** It comes out in the middle of a real sentence, without you hunting for it.

Most of the progress people feel in the first months is the first level. Most of the frustration people feel is the gap between the first and third. Stop asking "Do I know this word?" and start asking "What can I do with it?" Your talk-to-yourself question at the end of the week asks exactly that.

Chunks are words too

Fluent speakers don't build most sentences one word at a time. They reach for ready-made pieces: "I was wondering if," "on the other hand," "it depends." Every language has them. In Spanish, *depende* ("it depends") and *es que…* (loosely, "the thing is…") do a lot of work. In French, *ça dépend* (sah day-PAHN, "it depends") and *en fait* (ahn FEHT, "actually, in fact") show up constantly. In Mandarin, 我觉得 (wǒ juéde) "I think, I feel that" opens a great many opinions.

A chunk is worth more than its length suggests, because it buys you fluency for nothing. Someone with fifty solid chunks usually sounds and feels more capable than someone with five hundred isolated words. So treat a chunk as one card.

Notice, understand, then practice

Patterns have three stages, and adults are often good at the middle one. First you *notice* a pattern in real input: "Why does this French sentence have *ne* and *pas* around the verb?" Then you *understand* it on purpose, with a short explanation or a rule you write in your own words. Then you *practice* it until you can say it without thinking.

The danger is stopping at the second step. A rule you can recite but never use is a fact about the language, not part of your language. The week's work, therefore, is a loop: find it in the wild, understand it in a sentence, say it out loud, use it with a person.

Prompts beat recasts

One more idea belongs to this chapter, because it's about how to get corrected well. When you say something wrong and a kind person says it back correctly ("Yo sabo." "Ah, *yo sé*."), that's called a *recast*. It's gentle, and it's also easy to miss. You may not even notice you were corrected. A *prompt* is different. A prompt nudges you to fix it yourself: a raised eyebrow, a repeated error with a questioning tone, a "try that again," a "what's the past tense?"

A meta-analysis of fifteen classroom studies, with 827 learners in all, found that corrective feedback made a real and lasting difference, and that prompts did more than recasts. It also found that younger learners got more out of correction than older ones.[21] For you that adds up to a simple instruction: *ask for correction*. Don't wait for it, and ask for the kind that makes you do the work. We'll practice asking in a try-it below.

How many words, then?

You'll see big numbers online about how many words you "need." This book doesn't promise one. The sensible answer for this week is: enough words to do the job you've set yourself, and more of

the same next week. Chapter 4 says how to judge whether a text is within your reach. For now, keep your new cards to a number you can honestly review tomorrow.

How to try it this week

The shape of the week is simple. Words come from your input, go onto paper, return on a schedule, get pulled out of memory before you look at them, and get used with a person. One pattern gets the spotlight for the whole week. All of it fits inside the Language Refresh Hour you already know, and each of your three contexts gets its own version.

Set up the box in twenty minutes

If you only do one thing from this chapter, build the box. Here's how, start to finish, with a pen and an old shoebox.

Take five index cards and label them 1 through 5 as dividers. Slot one is "every day." Slot two is "every other day." Slot three is "twice a week." Slot four is "once a week." Slot five is "every two weeks, or whenever you feel like it." Those are suggestions; adjust them to your life. The point is that the farther back a card goes, the longer it rests.

Now make your first cards. Take one mined sentence and put it on the front with a gap or a prompt, and the full sentence and its meaning on the back. For example, a sentence mined from a Spanish radio program, *Me gustaría reservar una mesa para dos* "I'd like to reserve a table for two." The front might say "I'd like to reserve a table for two," in English, and you try to produce the Spanish out loud before flipping. Or it might show *Me gustaría ___ una mesa para dos*, with the new verb missing. Either way, you're producing, not recognizing.

A French card might read, on the front, "I'd like the check, please," and on the back, *Je voudrais l'addition, s'il vous plaît.* A Mandarin card might show 请问，洗手间在哪里？ on the back and "Excuse me, where's the restroom?" on the front, with the pinyin written small beside it.

Two rules keep the box alive. First, you only add cards from sentences you've actually met, which keeps every card connected to a real memory of hearing or reading it. Second, you add at most the number you can review without groaning, which for most adults on a normal day is three to five new cards. A box with fifteen cards you review daily beats a box with four hundred cards you've abandoned.

The words you need are the words you meet

One more principle for choosing cards. Don't start with a frequency list, a travel phrase book or the first chapter of a textbook unless you have a reason. Start with whatever you actually meet. If you hear "vale" five times in a Spanish series, it earns a card. If a French colleague keeps saying "du coup," that earns a card. If your partner's family says 吃了吗 (chī le ma?) "have you eaten?" every time you visit, that's your first Mandarin card, and a lovely one.

The reason is practical rather than mystical. A word you've met in a real place has an emotional

hook, a sound and a context. Those make it stick, and they make it easier to use when you meet the same context again.

The week, in three contexts

You're not going to do everything on the menu below in one week. You pick, inside your own plan. Here's how three different weeks might look. These are illustrations, not prescriptions.

Micro (commute or lunch, 15–20 minutes). (An illustration.) *Marisol rides a bus for twenty minutes each way and is learning Spanish for her job at a clinic's front desk.* On Monday, during a quiet moment, she mines three sentences from the audio she heard on Sunday and writes them on index cards. On Tuesday through Thursday she starts with recall before review on the back of an envelope, then flips her cards in the five-slot box she keeps in her bag. On Friday she pulls out the box, sorts it, and says three of the sentences aloud to herself. On the days that go sideways, she does the daily thread and nothing else: one short piece in, two sentences out, ten minutes. That's still a week.

Desk (desk or shift, 30–40 minutes). (An illustration.) *Dev works rotating shifts and is learning Mandarin to talk with his partner's family.* He sets Monday's target as "use 我觉得 (wǒ juéde, 'I think') in an opinion twice." He mines five sentences from a short video, adds two to his box, and writes the pattern on a card with five examples from the video and five of his own. On a Wednesday break he does Transform drill with himself: say 我觉得这个很好 (wǒ juéde zhège hěn hǎo) "I think this is good," then change "good" to something else, then change "this" to "that." On Saturday he calls his partner's aunt and tries the pattern once, out loud, with a real person.

Deep (weekend, 60–90 minutes). (An illustration.) *Priya works weekdays and keeps Saturday morning for the hard thinking.* She runs the weekly word audit, finds that she's been using three of her cards for real, and retires them. She does an error pattern hunt across her last three messages, finds that she keeps confusing *ser* and *estar*, writes the rule in her own words, and writes three new sentences. Then she books an hour with a tutor and asks for prompts, not corrections.

All three illustrations use the same moves. They just fit them to the day.

A worked Friday, start to finish

(An illustration.) *It's Friday, you have thirty-five minutes at your desk, and the week's pattern was "ir a + infinitive" in Spanish ("I'm going to…").* Here's how the session might run.

Minutes 1–3: set the target. You write one line in your log: "Use *voy a* twice with a real person today, and retire two cards." A target that small can be checked tonight.

Minutes 4–10: recall before review. On a blank page you write everything you can remember from the week's cards. You get eleven. You flip the box and find you missed four, two of them the same word you missed last week. Those four go back to slot one. The stubborn word gets rewritten as a whole sentence on the spot: *Voy a pedir la cuenta.*

Minutes 11–18: work with it. You do a transform drill with the pattern. *Voy a pedir la cuenta.* Then *Vamos a pedir la cuenta.* Then *Ayer pedí la cuenta* "Yesterday I asked for the check," which

is a different pattern, so you notice it and write it on the back of the card as a thing to look at next week. A good session often hands you next week's pattern.

Minutes 19–28: use it for real. You message your exchange partner: *Hola, Ana. Hoy voy a cocinar sopa. ¿Y tú qué vas a hacer este fin de semana?* "Hi, Ana. Today I'm going to cook soup. And what are you going to do this weekend?" Two uses of the pattern, one real question. It took ten minutes, and it counts as a use for real.

Minutes 29–35: check and log. You put tallies on the backs of the cards that did a job today. Two have three tallies, so they retire. You write one line on your practice strip: *Fri, 35 min, desk, pattern ir a + infinitive, used it twice with Ana; retired two cards; next week the past of pedir.* Then you close the notebook. That's it. That's a whole Hour.

Notice how little of that was "studying" in the old sense. Most of it was making, using and checking. That's the pattern of this whole book, and it's why this chapter is as short on lists as it is.

Practice that actually builds it

Here's the menu. Think of these as dishes you can add to the week, not a schedule to run. Most are screen-free. If a card keeps going wrong, change the card, not your opinion of yourself.

On the go

Recall before review (10 minutes · blank page · no screen · Check and Log)

Before you open yesterday's cards, write every word or chunk from yesterday you can remember, with a mini-sentence if you can manage one. Only then look. Circle what you missed; those cards go to the front of the line.[19]

Paper spaced-review box (15 minutes · index cards and a five-slot box · no screen · Check and Log)

A shoebox or a recipe box with four dividers works. New cards start in slot one. A right answer moves a card forward one slot; a wrong one sends it back to slot one. You review the front slots daily and the back ones weekly, so the box does the spacing for you.[20] Keep it somewhere you'll see it. A box in a drawer is a box you forget.

Talk-it-out labels (10 minutes · no materials · no screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: do it at home or alone.

Narrate what you're doing, out loud, for five minutes while you cook or tidy: "I'm opening… I need…" When you hit a gap, say the English word and keep going; write the gap down later. In Spanish: *Estoy abriendo la nevera. Necesito leche.* "I'm opening the fridge. I need milk." The gap list you collect is tomorrow's mining target.

Digital deck, ten a day (10 minutes · a spaced-repetition app · screen · Check and Log)

Safety: check an app's terms before you put private material into it.

If you like an app, keep two house rules. Only sentences you mined yourself go in, which means no downloaded deck of ten thousand words. And new cards stay at a number you can honestly review tomorrow. The scheduler handles spacing; you handle choosing.[22] Starting on paper for the first month teaches you how the system works before you hand it to software.

Transform drill (10 minutes · you or a partner · no screen · Work With It)

Say a sentence aloud, then change its tense or person on the spot. Spanish: *Hablo con mi vecina* "I talk with my neighbor," then *Hablé con mi vecina* "I talked with my neighbor," then *Hablamos con mi vecina* ("we talk with my neighbor"). French: *Je vais travailler demain* "I'm going to work tomorrow," then *Nous allons travailler demain.* Mandarin: 我昨天和姐姐吃饭了 (Wǒ zuótiān hé jiějie chīfàn le) "Yesterday I ate with my older sister," then swap 姐姐 for 朋友 (péngyou) "friend." Doing it out loud makes it a speaking exercise, which is what it's for.

Grammar in a palm (10 minutes · a sticky note · no screen · Work With It)

Explain one pattern on a note small enough to fit in your palm. If you can't, you don't own it yet, and that's useful to know. A palm note for Spanish might read: "tener que + infinitive = have to. Tengo que trabajar. Tienes que comer. Tenemos que irnos."

At a desk

Sentence mining (15 minutes · notebook · no screen · Work With It)

After today's input, copy three to five whole sentences you understood. Skip single words. Underline the one new word or chunk in each sentence. Choose lines you can picture yourself saying, and leave out the ones you can't. Sentences keep their company, and that's what makes them easy to find again.

Chunk wall (10 minutes · sticky notes · no screen · Work With It)

Post ten useful chunks where you'll see them: the bathroom mirror, the fridge, the monitor edge. Replace three a week with ones you've really used. A good first ten in Spanish might be *depende* (it depends), *a ver* (let's see), *es que…* (the thing is…), *por eso* (that's why), *¿Qué tal?* (how's it going?), *claro* (of course), *más o menos* (more or less), *tengo que…* (I have to…), *me gustaría…* (I'd like…), and *¿puedes repetir?* (can you repeat that?). In French you might start with *ça dépend*, *en fait*, *d'accord* (okay), *je voudrais…* (I'd like…), and *je suis en train de…* (I'm in the middle of…). In Mandarin: 我觉得 (wǒ juéde), 我想 (wǒ xiǎng) "I'd like to," 请问 (qǐngwèn) "excuse me, may I ask," 不好意思 (bù hǎoyìsi) "sorry; excuse me," and 没问题 (méi wèntí) "no problem."

Word family tree (15 minutes · paper · no screen · Work With It)

Branch one root into the verbs, nouns and adjectives you've actually met. In Spanish, *escribir* (to write) leads to *escritor* (writer), *escritura* (writing) and *escrito* (written). In French, *travail* (work) leads to *travailler* (to work) and *travailleur* (worker). In Mandarin, the character 学 (xué, study) turns up in 学生 (xuésheng, student), 学校 (xuéxiào, school) and 大学 (dàxué, university). Add a new branch only when you meet it in real input, so the tree stays honest.

Pattern of the week (20 minutes · one card · no screen · Work With It)

On Monday pick one pattern: a verb tense, a word-order rule, a measure word, a particle. Find five real examples in this week's input and copy them onto the card. Then write five of your own. By Friday, use it out loud with a real person at least twice.

Ask for prompts (15 minutes · a tutor or partner · no screen · Use It for Real)

This is your real-person contact for the chapter. Tell your tutor or exchange partner: "When I make a mistake, don't give me the answer. Say 'try that again,' or ask me for the past tense." Then talk for ten minutes about your week. When they prompt, take a breath and fix it yourself. If you don't have a partner yet, Chapter 5 shows you how to find one.[21]

Weekend, deeper

Weekend word audit (40 minutes · your cards and a pen · no screen · Check and Log)

Once a week, go through your cards. Put a tally on the back of any card you used for real that week, in a conversation, a message or a task. A card with three tallies retires to a "used" pile. Rewrite any card that keeps tripping you into a whole sentence. The "used" pile is one of the most motivating objects a learner can own, and it's portfolio evidence for Chapter 9.

Error pattern hunt (40 minutes · your last three writings and a pen · no screen · Check and Log)

Find the mistake you repeat most. Write the rule in your own words, then write three fresh sentences using it. Most learners have one or two favorite mistakes; naming yours takes away half its power. Do it on a quiet weekend, with your last three messages in front of you.

Talk-to-yourself box

Talk to yourself

"*Which of this week's words did I reach for without looking — and which did I only recognize?*"

- **Used:** Which word or chunk came out of my mouth or my pen without a hunt, and where was I?
- **Recognized only:** Which card do I know when I see it but can't yet say?
- **Pattern:** Where did this week's pattern turn up in real life, even once?
- **Stuck card:** Which card keeps going back to slot one: a bad card, or a word I don't need yet?
- **Next:** What will I use for real tomorrow, and which card will I rewrite as a whole sentence?

What to do with the answer: turn one stuck card into a full sentence, and put a tally on every card that did a job this week.

In Spanish: "Usé algunas palabras de verdad, pero otras solo las reconocí." · *In French:* "J'ai vraiment utilisé certains mots, mais j'en ai seulement reconnu d'autres." · *In Mandarin:* 有些词我真的用上了，有些只是认得。(Yǒuxiē cí wǒ zhēn de yòng shàng le, yǒuxiē zhǐshì rènde.)

If you're learning another language, say the same sentence in yours: "I really used some words, but others I only recognized." Run the box on Friday, or right after a real conversation, and add one line to your practice strip.

A pattern of the week, in an illustration

(An illustration.) *Keisha picks "tener que + infinitive" for Spanish.* On Monday she hunts through the podcast she's been listening to and finds three examples: *tengo que irme*, *tenemos que hablar*, *tienes que probarlo.* She copies them onto her card and writes two of her own: *Tengo que trabajar mañana* "I have to work tomorrow" and *Tengo que llamar a mi madre.* On Tuesday she drills the six forms of *tener* aloud on a walk. On Wednesday she says a sentence to herself, then changes the person. On Thursday she messages her tutor: *Esta semana tengo que terminar un proyecto. ¿Y tú?* On Friday she uses it twice in a lesson and puts a tally on the back of the card. It was twenty minutes a day at most. By next week it's one of her chunks.

Digging out the cards that don't work

Every box grows a few stubborn cards. Don't punish them. Look at them with curiosity. A card that keeps returning to slot one usually has one of four problems. It's a single word with no sentence around it. It's two words that look alike and keep trading places. It's a word you've never needed. Or it's a pattern disguised as a word.

(An illustration.) *Tomas keeps missing "embarazada" in Spanish.* He thinks it means embarrassed. It means pregnant, and it's a classic false friend. He rewrites the card as a sentence *Mi hermana está embarazada* "My sister is pregnant" and adds a little note on the back: "Not embarrassed. Embarrassed = *avergonzado/a*." Then he starts a cognate trap list at the back of his notebook. French has its own: *actuellement* means "currently," not "actually," and *librairie* is a bookshop, not a library. A short list of the traps you've personally fallen into stops you tripping on them twice.

What a week of tallies tells you

The tally marks on the backs of your cards are quietly useful data. After four weeks, flip through the box and look at the marks. Cards with many tallies are words you own. Cards with none, after weeks, are words that either don't belong in your life yet or need a better sentence. A card that gets two tallies in a single conversation is a sign that you've found a real chunk, and you should add its cousins.

They also keep you honest in a good way. It's easy to say, "I've learned two hundred words." It's more useful to say, "Forty of my cards have been used for real with a person." The second statement is yours, it's checkable, and it's the kind of evidence you can put in a portfolio in Chapter 9. It's also encouraging in a way that raw card counts never are, because it measures what you can do rather than what you've seen.

If it isn’t clicking

Some weeks the box feels like homework and the pattern of the week feels like a stranger. That’s ordinary. Here are the usual causes and what to try next.

The cards pile up faster than you can review them. You’ve added too many. Pause new cards for three days and only review. When the front slots are calm again, add three a day, not ten. A review you can finish in ten minutes will happen. A review that takes forty won’t.

You recognize everything and produce nothing. This is the gap from earlier in the chapter, and it’s the most common one. Switch your cards so the English or a picture is on the front and you have to say the target-language sentence aloud. Add two minutes of talk-it-out labels while you cook. Recognition grows by itself with input. Production needs to be asked for.

The same card keeps going back to slot one. Don’t just re-read it harder. Turn it into a whole sentence, add a story or a picture, or decide that you don’t need that word yet and retire it with a clear conscience. Retiring is allowed. A box is a tool, not a tally of shame.

The pattern won’t settle. Make it smaller. If you picked the whole past tense, pick one verb in the past tense for a week. Put five real examples on the card and say them aloud each morning. Then try your palm note: if you can’t explain the pattern in a palm-sized note, you’re trying to carry too much.

You don’t have anyone to ask for prompts. Start with a recording. Say a sentence aloud to your phone, listen back, and see if you can hear your own mistake. Then book a trial lesson or find an exchange partner (Chapter 5) and bring the one line that you’d like prompted. A single prompt from a person is worth a week of puzzling alone.

You’re bored. Boredom is a signal. Change what you’re mining. Take sentences from something you actually like, such as a cooking video, a football match, a song or a family voice message, and mine from that. Your cards should sound like a life you want to talk about.

Tools, including AI

The AI box in The Language Refresh Hour holds the rules, and Chapter 8 works through them in full. In short: try it yourself first, then ask a tool, and check what it tells you. Here’s what that looks like for words and patterns.

Spaced-repetition apps. A good scheduling app takes the box off your hands. If you use one, only put in sentences you mined yourself and keep new cards low. Check the terms before you load private material. Duolingo’s terms, for example, say that content you submit is licensed to the company, and that “Activity Materials,” including translated content you generate, belong to Duolingo.[23] That’s fine for a practice sentence about the weather. It’s worth knowing before you type in a letter to your grandmother. Keep anything private or “yours to keep” in your own notebook.

AI as an example-maker, after your own try. Once you’ve written five sentences with this week’s pattern, you can ask a chatbot to write five more at your level, or to explain the pattern in plain words.

That can be a useful second voice. But it can also hand you a confident wrong answer, or smooth over a mistake in your sentence without telling you. So the rule is: your attempt first, the tool second, and a real speaker or a reliable reference for anything you plan to say out loud or write to a person. Never paste family or children's details into a tool.

Dictionaries and conjugators. Reference tools are good for checking a form after you've tried to produce it. Use them as a second step, never as the first. They won't tell you which word a real person would pick.

What "done enough" looks like

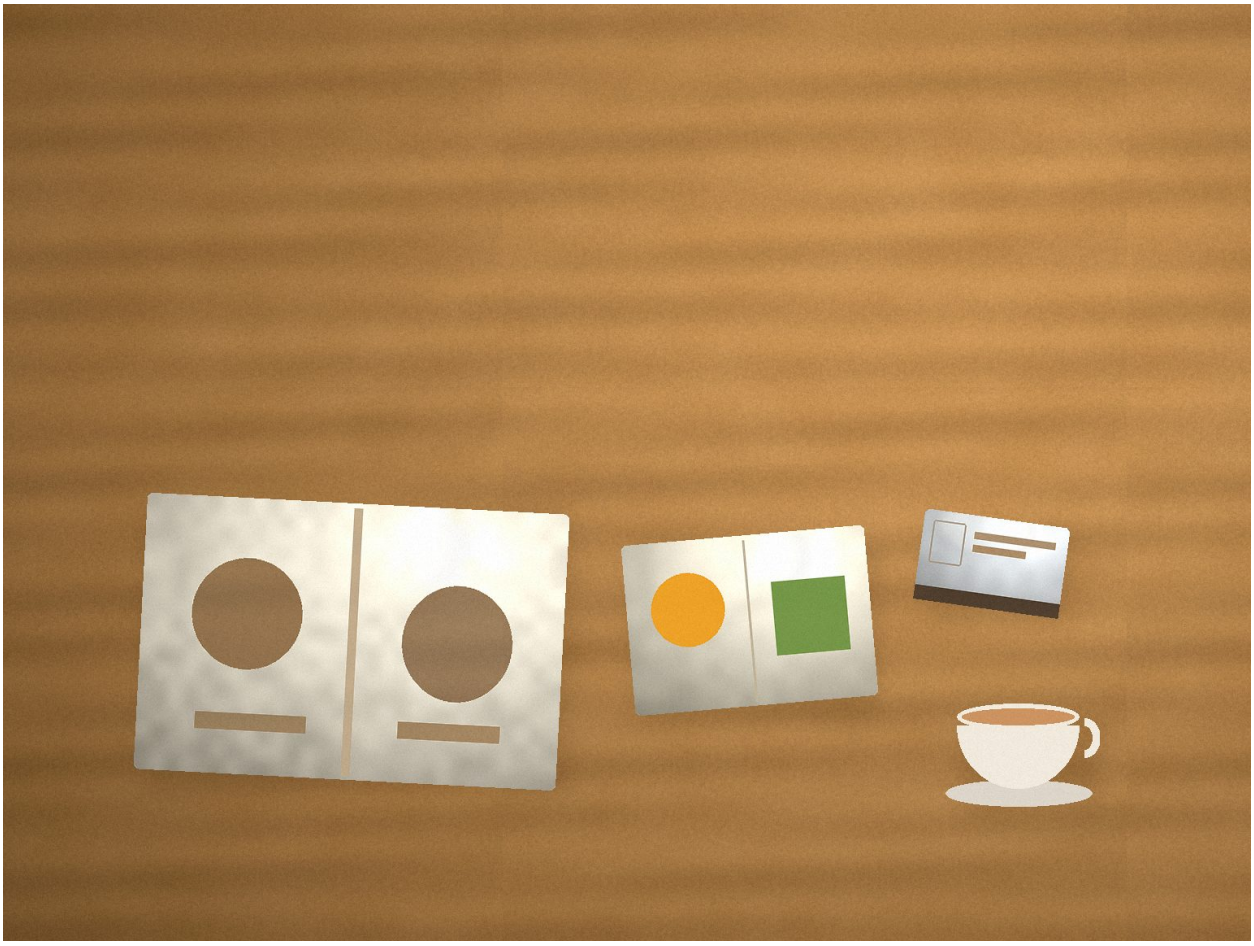
You're done with this chapter, and ready to move on while still mining and reviewing every week, when you can check these off.

- **Whole sentences, not lonely words:** you've mined sentences from your own input on at least four days in a week.
- **Recall before review** run at least three times, starting from a blank page.
- **A box you can review without dread**, on paper or in an app.
- **One pattern of the week**, with five real examples you found and five of your own.
- **Real use:** at least three cards or one pattern used out loud with a real person, with tallies on the backs.
- **Prompts:** you've asked someone for prompts at least once and fixed a mistake yourself.
- **A word audit** run at least once, with at least one card retired to the "used" pile.

If most of those are true, you're right on track. If one is wobbly, give it another week. "Done enough" means ready for the next chapter, not finished with this one.

Next, the words you've been collecting need to meet the page, and some of you will meet a new alphabet. That's Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 — Reading for Real, Including New Scripts



Why this matters

Reading is the kindest input a busy adult can get. A conversation moves at its own speed and doesn't wait for you. A podcast keeps playing while you're still stuck on the third word. A page sits still. You can stop, go back, circle the word, look at it, and try again. If listening is the muscle that keeps up with a speaker, reading is the place where you quietly pick up thousands of words

and patterns at a pace you control.

That matters for the plan you're keeping, because a page fits in the cracks of a day. A paragraph on a lunch break, a story on a train, a sign on a walk, a children's book in a waiting room. None of those needs a partner, an appointment or a quiet house. It needs a little material at the right level and a habit of reading it for the sake of what it says.

"Right level" is the heart of this chapter. Adults often pick up a real newspaper or a famous novel on day one, struggle through half a page with a dictionary open, feel defeated and quit. Or they stay forever in a textbook's tidy sentences and never meet a real page. This chapter shows a middle road: a ladder, with a rung you can stand on today and a next rung when you're ready.

If your language uses a new script, such as Cyrillic, Arabic, Hindi, Korean or Chinese characters, this chapter has a second job. It shows how to take the first steps without drowning. The honest news is that a new script is a small, finite mountain. Most alphabets can be learned well enough to sound out signs in a couple of weeks of ten-minute sessions. Character systems take longer, and they reward patience, but they too can be broken into small steps that fit a day.

The focus line gives you the shape. **Take in more than you need:** read more than the minimum, at an easy level, for pleasure. **Use it with real people:** read a menu aloud before you order; talk about what you read. **Check it honestly:** retell the page in a sentence, with the page closed. **Keep the plan small enough to keep:** one page a day beats one chapter a month.

What you can try today: find one real thing in the language within reach of your hands, a food label, a package insert, a bus sign, a screenshot, and read the first line out loud. If you can't read it yet, that's your next target.

Understand it yourself

You don't need to be a reading teacher for this chapter. You need to understand six ideas well enough to choose what to read tonight.

Read to understand, not to translate

The most common reading habit among adult learners is word-by-word translation: find a word, look it up, write the English above it, move on. It feels careful. But it makes the page into a code to be cracked, and you lose the thread of what's being said. By the end of a paragraph you've decoded every word and understood nothing.

The alternative is to read for the gist first. Go through a short passage without stopping, even if you only catch half. Ask yourself, "Who is this about? What happened? What do they want?" Then, and only then, go back, circle the five words that mattered most, look those up, and read again. The second pass usually feels like a different page. This is the move behind **Gist then dig**, below, and it's the single most useful reading habit in the book.

Two kinds of reading, and you need both

Teachers sometimes divide reading into two kinds. *Intensive reading* is slow, close and short: a paragraph you pull apart to see how it works. It's where you learn a new pattern or a new set of words. *Extensive reading* is the opposite: long, easy, relaxed. You read a lot of material at a level where you meet few unknown words, for the pleasure of the story or the article. It's where reading becomes automatic, and words you've already met keep turning up and sinking in.

A meta-analysis of research on extensive reading found that extensive reading improves learners' reading proficiency.[24] Most adults do plenty of the first kind and almost none of the second. If you add only one thing from this chapter, make it twenty minutes of easy reading a few times a week.

How easy is easy?

You'll hear that you need to understand a very high share of the words on a page for comfortable reading, and sometimes a precise percentage gets quoted as a rule. The idea behind it, from the vocabulary researcher Paul Nation and others, is sound: if you know most of the words around the new ones, you can often guess a new word from context and keep going.[13] A replication in 2023, with 104 adult learners, couldn't fully reproduce the original study's results.[14] So keep the idea and skip the number.

Here's a practical test instead. Open the text and read a paragraph. If you understand most of the words and the overall point, and you meet only a few unknown words per page, you're in the right place for easy reading. If you're circling a dozen words per paragraph, it's too hard for pleasure; save it for intensive reading, or go down a rung. If you're not meeting any new words at all, you're reading something lovely and easy, which is also fine for a lazy Sunday, but you'll want to climb a rung in a week or two.

The reading ladder

Think of reading material as a ladder with rungs, from friendliest to hardest.

1. **Graded readers**: short books written at set levels for learners, with controlled vocabulary.
2. **Children's books**: picture books and early readers, with simple sentences and pictures that give you free clues.
3. **Bilingual books and parallel texts**: the language on one page and a translation on the other.
4. **Magazines and websites on a topic you love**: real language, but with pictures, headings and a subject you already know.
5. **News and articles written in simple language**: for example, plain-language news pages built for learners.
6. **Real news, essays and novels**: the unedited world.

Nobody climbs a ladder in one afternoon, and nobody has to leave the lower rungs behind. Plenty of fluent adults still read children's books and magazines for pleasure. Your job this month is to find the rung where reading is a little bit of a stretch but mostly a pleasure, and to stand on it daily. Next month, you try the next rung with one short text and see how it feels.

Reading aloud counts

Reading out loud is a bridge between the eye and the mouth. It ties how a word looks to how it sounds, and it gives you speaking practice you can do alone. That's why several try-its in this chapter ask you to read aloud. In Spanish, you might read a short paragraph from a magazine slowly, with each word clear. In French, reading aloud helps you hear the silent endings. In Mandarin, reading pinyin out loud with tones is one of the best ways to build the sounds that characters can't show.

New scripts: a small, finite mountain

If your language uses a script you don't know, the first weeks feel strange, and then, almost suddenly, the signs start to say something. A new script falls into one of a few types, and knowing which type helps you plan.

- **Alphabets** have letters for both consonants and vowels. Russian and other languages written in Cyrillic use one (33 letters in the Russian alphabet), Greek has 24, and Korean's Hangul builds syllable blocks from a small set of letters, about two dozen basic ones.
- **Abjads** write the consonants, and readers supply many of the vowels from context. Arabic (28 letters) and Hebrew (22) are the best-known examples. Both are written right to left.
- **Abugidas** are scripts in which each consonant carries a built-in vowel that marks can change. Hindi's Devanagari is one.
- **Character systems** use thousands of symbols that stand for words or meaningful parts of words. Chinese characters are the main example, and Japanese uses characters (kanji) alongside two small syllable scripts (*hiragana* and *katakana*, with 46 basic symbols each).

The size of the mountain differs. An alphabet can be learned in days to weeks, to the point of sounding out a sign, even though reading fluently takes longer. Characters are a long game, but you can read many simple, useful things after a few dozen of them, and sounds and tones come from pinyin, not from the characters.

What matters in a new script

Three things matter more than anything else. First, **sound before shape**: tie each symbol to a sound out loud from the very first day, so the script means something to your ear. Second, **small sets**: five symbols at a time, tested by covering the answer, then five more. Third, **order and direction**: with characters, the stroke order is part of the character, and with right-to-left scripts, your eye and finger need to learn the direction. These are the three ideas behind the five script try-its later in the chapter.

Every example in this chapter is meant as a first step, not a course. If you're learning a script seriously, get a good primer or a class, and check your first characters and letters with someone who reads them.

How to try it this week

The week has one job: put a little real reading in front of your eyes most days, at a level that feels like a stretch but mostly a pleasure, and say something out loud about it. Everything below fits inside the Language Refresh Hour you already know.

Set the target for a reading session

Reading sessions go better with a target the size of a sentence. A few that work: "Read this page for gist and retell it in two sentences." "Find five words with the same root." "Read this menu aloud, then order two things." "Read one page of the picture book aloud, slowly, with the right sounds." You'll know after the session whether you did it. That's the point: a target you can check, rather than a vague plan to "read more."

The week, in three contexts

Here are three ways the week can look. They're illustrations, not prescriptions.

Micro (commute or lunch, 15–20 minutes). (An illustration.) *Hannah is learning Russian for a trip to visit a friend.* She has a pocket card with five Cyrillic letters and their sounds. On the train she writes each letter five times on the back of an envelope and says the sound under her breath. On Thursday at lunch she tries one more rung of the alphabet: she reads a short list of cognates, *кафе, метро, банк* "café, metro, bank," and finds that she already knows what they mean. She's reading Russian. Her reading on the busiest days is just that: five letters and one word.

Desk (desk or shift, 30–40 minutes). (An illustration.) *Omar has a break room, a sandwich and thirty-five minutes, and wants to read French for pleasure.* On Monday he does Gist then dig with a short article in a magazine written for a general reader. On Wednesday he reads for fifteen minutes from a graded reader at a level where he's meeting a few new words per page. On Friday he reads three headlines from a French news site, says what each means in one sentence, and clicks through only one. He keeps a small list of five new words a week, only ones he met in his reading, and puts them on cards for Chapter 3's box.

Deep (weekend, 60–90 minutes). (An illustration.) *Lin keeps Sunday afternoon for reading.* She goes to the library with a tote bag and comes home with five things: a graded reader in Spanish, a children's picture book, a bilingual poetry book, a magazine, and a book on a hobby she cares about, in Spanish. She reads one of them with a pencil in hand and a cup of tea beside her, using the reading ladder: gist, five words, again aloud. Then she reads the picture book simply because it's lovely. By the end she has a list of what to borrow next week.

A worked ladder session

(An illustration.) *It's Sunday afternoon, you have sixty minutes, and you're learning Spanish.* You've picked a graded reader at a level you can mostly follow.

Minutes 1–5. Set the target: "Read one short chapter for gist, then retell it in two sentences out loud." Skim the picture and the title.

Minutes 6–20. Read the whole chapter without stopping. You catch about two-thirds. You notice who the characters are and what they want. You resist the dictionary.

Minutes 21–30. Go back through with a pencil. Circle five words that matter to the story: three nouns, a verb and an expression. Look up those five. Write each in a whole sentence from the text on a card, for the box.

Minutes 31–45. Read it again, aloud, slower. Your voice stumbles on a long sentence, so you read it three times until it flows. The second reading feels a lot like understanding.

Minutes 46–55. Close the book. Say it out loud: *La mujer quiere vender su casa, pero su hijo no quiere* "The woman wants to sell her house, but her son doesn't want to." That's your retelling, and it doesn't need to be beautiful.

Minutes 56–60. Log it: what you read, what level it felt like, what you'll read next week. A sentence in your log, and you're done. That's a ladder session.

Gist then dig, on a tiny real text

Here's how the move looks on a notice you might find on a library door. (An illustration; these notices are invented for the example.) They are short on purpose, so you can see the steps.

French: *La bibliothèque est fermée le lundi. Elle ouvre à dix heures, du mardi au samedi.*

Spanish: *La biblioteca abre a las diez y cierra a las seis. Los domingos está cerrada.*

Mandarin: 图书馆星期一不开门。星期二到星期六早上十点开门。 (Túshūguǎn xīngqīyī bù kāimén. Xīngqī'èr dào xīngqīliù zǎoshang shí diǎn kāimén.)

Pass one: gist. Read the French straight through. You may catch *bibliothèque* (it looks like "library"), *lundi* (Monday) and *dix heures* (ten o'clock). That's enough for the gist: it's about opening hours, and Monday is different. You don't need every word to know when to show up.

Pass two: dig. Circle *fermée* (closed), *ouvre* (opens), *du mardi au samedi* (from Tuesday to Saturday), and the pattern *le lundi*, where "le" plus a day means "on Mondays, every Monday." Look those up. Now read it again. The second reading is quick and almost pleasant.

Pass three: say it. Close the page and say, in any mix of languages you've got: "Closed Mondays. Opens at ten, Tuesday to Saturday." Then say it in French. If you can, you've read it. And you've picked up a little pattern, *le lundi*, you can use in a message tonight: *Je suis libre le lundi* "I'm free on Mondays."

Short real texts like this are everywhere: a bakery's hours, a gym's rules, a note on a neighbor's door, a package label, an airline's baggage notice. They're worth far more than their length, because they were written for a reader who needed something, which is the best reason to read.

Practice that actually builds it

Here's the menu. Pick from it; don't try to do it all. Reading practice grows by doing a little of the right kind regularly, so choose what sounds enjoyable and let the others wait.

On the go

Five-minute headline (5 minutes · a news site in the language · screen · Take It In)

Read three headlines. Say what each means in one sentence. Click through to only one, and read only its first paragraph. Headlines are written in a compressed, newspaper style, so they are harder than they look, and that's fine: this is a five-minute taste, not a test. For example, learners of Japanese can try plain-language news written for learners, such as NHK's News Web Easy.[25] Learners of other languages can choose a local paper or public broadcaster's site.

Ten-minute letters (10 minutes · paper · no screen · Work With It)

For a new script. Write each new letter five times, saying its sound aloud as you do. Do five letters a day, no more. Five a day is a better plan than fifty on Saturday and none after.

Menu and sign reading (10 minutes · a real menu, ad or sign · no screen · Use It for Real)

Read a real menu or a shop sign in the language, out loud, before you order or go in. Spanish: *Pollo asado con arroz y ensalada* "Roast chicken with rice and salad." French: *Soupe du jour* (soop dew ZHOOR) "soup of the day." Mandarin: 出口 (chūkǒu) "exit" and 洗手间 (xǐshǒujiān) "restroom." Then, if you're in a place where staff speak the language, order or ask one thing; Chapter 5 has the full move. This is your real-person contact for the week, even if it's only a thank-you.

Sign-spotting walk (15 minutes · your neighborhood · no screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: keep your eyes up around traffic.

Walk a street and sound out every sign you can find in the new script. Count how many you got. In a neighborhood with signs in Chinese, you might spot 餐厅 (cāntīng) "restaurant," 超市 (chāoshì) "supermarket" and 药店 (yàodiàn) "pharmacy." With Cyrillic: *Аптека* "pharmacy." With Greek: *καφές* "coffee." With Korean: 안녕하세요 (annyeonghaseyo, "hello"). If you live somewhere without such signs, a map app in the language, a food label from an import store, or a screenshot works nearly as well.

Stroke-order grid (15 minutes · grid paper · no screen · Work With It)

Write each character in the right stroke order, slowly. Order is part of the character, so don't skip it. As a general rule, strokes run top to bottom and left to right. 人 (rén, "person") starts with the left-falling stroke and adds the right one. 大 (dà, "big") starts with the horizontal line, then the left-falling and right-falling strokes. 日 (rì, "sun, day") starts with the left vertical, then the top and right side together, then the middle and bottom lines. Use a stroke-order chart or a teacher to check yours.

Direction drill (15 minutes · a printed text in a right-to-left script · no screen · Take It In)

Trace the direction with your finger as you read aloud. Slow is right. In Arabic, مرحبا (marḥaba) "hello" starts at the right and runs left. In Hebrew, שלום (shalom) "hello, peace" does the same. Your finger teaches your eye. After a week, you'll stop needing the finger.

Gist then dig (15 minutes · one page · no screen · Take It In)

Read one page straight through without stopping. Cover any urge to look things up. Then circle five words that seem to carry the meaning, look only those up, and read the page again. Close the page and say in one or two sentences what it was about. If you can do that, you've read it.

At a desk

Easy-level pleasure book (20 minutes · a library book you can mostly follow · no screen · Take It In)

Choose a book where you meet few unknown words. Read for pleasure, and keep going when you hit one you don't know, because the story usually tells you what you need. If it feels like a chore, put it back and choose another. A book you abandon at page ten has done its job: it told you the level was wrong.[24]

Read-and-listen pair (30 minutes · a free text and a free recording · screen · Take It In)

Read a public-domain text while listening to a recording of it. Pause at each paragraph and say what happened. Project Gutenberg hosts free public-domain books in many languages, and LibriVox offers free recordings read by volunteers in many languages too, so check what exists for yours.[26,17] For some languages, a public broadcaster's site has a transcript beside the recording, which does the same job; for German, Deutsche Welle's learning pages are one example,[16] and for Spanish, the public broadcaster RTVE's streaming site offers programs you can pair with what you read, though availability can depend on where you live.[15]

The reading ladder (45 minutes · a graded reader or a short real text · no screen · Take It In)

This is your weekend session. Read for gist once, all the way through, without stopping. Mark five words. Look up only those five. Read the text again, aloud this time. Next week, climb one rung: a slightly longer text, or one from the next step up.[24]

Weekend, deeper

Library haul (60 minutes · a library card · no screen · Set the Target)

Borrow five things: a graded reader, a children's book, a bilingual book, a magazine, and something you actually want to know about. Ask the librarian where the world-language shelf is; many libraries keep one, and a librarian is often delighted to be asked, which makes this one a real-person try-it too. If your library offers a language-learning platform through your card, check that as well: Mango Languages, for example, says your library card may provide free access, and that it varies by library.[27]

Sets of five (60 minutes · cards for the new script · no screen · Work With It)

Learn five symbols, hide the answers, test yourself, add five more. Stop at fifteen or twenty in one sitting. If you try for forty, the first ten will have faded by the time you reach the last. In an hour you can also cycle back and test the earlier sets, which is the part that makes them stay. Think of it as the paper box from Chapter 3, with letters.

Talk-to-yourself box

Talk to yourself

"Where did the page pull me along, and where did I stall — and what did I do about it?"

- **Easy:** Which page or paragraph felt easy, and why: a topic I know, short sentences, a picture?
- **Stalled:** Where did I stall: a word, a long sentence, a pattern I haven't met, or just tiredness?
- **Gist first:** Did I read for the gist before I reached for a dictionary?
- **Retell:** What would I tell a friend this page said, in one sentence?
- **Next:** Is this the right rung for me, or should I go up or down one?

What to do with the answer: pick next session's text by what you wrote. If most pages pulled you along, climb a rung. If most stalled you, go down one and enjoy the ease.

In Spanish: "Entendí la idea, pero me atasqué en una frase larga." · *In French:* "J'ai compris l'idée, mais une longue phrase était trop difficile." · *In Mandarin:* 我看懂了大意，但有一句话太长，卡住了。(Wǒ kàn dǒng le dàyì, dàn yǒu yí jù huà tài cháng, kǎzhù le.)

If you're learning another language, say the same sentence in yours: "I understood the idea, but one long sentence stopped me." Run it at the end of a reading session or on Friday, and add a line to your practice strip, such as *Sun, 45 min, deep, graded reader chapter 3, gist first worked; stalled on one long sentence.*

Script starter notes by type

Cyrillic (Russian and others). Start with the letters that look like Latin letters and sound like them, and add the strangers slowly. Then read cognates, the loanwords that look odd and sound familiar. Within a few sessions, you'll be reading words you already know.

Korean Hangul. Letters stack into square syllable blocks. Learn the basic consonants and vowels, then see how they fit. Read blocks aloud. Hangul is famous for being logical, and many learners can sound out simple words after a short period of steady practice, though understanding them takes vocabulary.

Arabic and Hebrew. Practice with the direction first. Letters change shape depending on their place in a word in Arabic, so learn each letter in a few forms, five at a time. Expect to rely on teacher-prepared texts with vowel marks at the start; they help you tie sound to shape.

Hindi and other abugidas. Each consonant carries a built-in vowel, and marks change it. Learn the consonants and the marks in small groups.

Japanese. Hiragana first (46 basic symbols), then katakana, which is used for many loanwords: コーヒー (kōhī, "coffee"), メニュー (menyū, "menu"). Add kanji slowly, tied to words you already use.

Mandarin characters. Learn pinyin first, with tones. A classic set shows why: *mā* 妈 (mother), *má* 麻 (hemp), *mǎ* 马 (horse), *mà* 骂 (to scold). Then add characters for words you already say, one small group a week, and recognize before you write. Recognizing a character is a much smaller job than producing one from scratch, so do the first before the second.

Reading for your own reasons

The best reading material is the kind you'd read anyway. Adults have an advantage over classroom learners here: you already know what you care about. Someone who loves cooking can read recipes, which are short, repetitive and full of useful verbs: *mezclar* (to mix), *hornear* (to bake), *añadir* (to add) in Spanish, or *mélanger*, *cuire*, *ajouter* in French. Someone who follows football can read match reports, which are formulaic in the best way. A gardener can read seed packets; a parent can read the back of a cereal box. A person who needs a language for work can read the kind of email, notice or short report that turns up on their desk.

Reading things you already know something about is a quiet trick. When you know the subject, you can guess the words you don't know, because you're guessing from what makes sense. That's why a recipe you could almost cook from memory is a better text for a beginner than a short story about something unfamiliar, even though the story is "literature." Choose the page that makes you curious, and the words will arrive on their own.

A small note for the heritage speaker or the returner. If you grew up hearing a language at home but never learned to read it, you have an unusual starting point: your ear is ahead of your eye. Start with things you already know by sound, such as songs, prayers, children's rhymes and family recipes, and connect them to the page. The sounds are already in you; the script is the new part.

Reading with another person

Reading doesn't have to be solitary. When you can, bring something you've read to a real person. A tutor or an exchange partner will gladly spend ten minutes hearing you retell a short article. They'll tell you what they would have said differently, which teaches you something no dictionary will. A conversation group might read a short text together. And a friend who speaks the language can tell you what a sign or message actually says, which is a good moment to ask the question a dictionary can't answer: "Is that something people really say?"

Always ask first if you want to photograph someone's menu, a family letter or a sign on private property. A friendly "May I take a photo of this so I can study it?" almost always gets a yes, and it's good manners either way. Never photograph a person's mail or documents without their okay.

If it isn't clicking

Reading can stall in a few predictable ways. Each has a next move.

Every sentence feels like a puzzle. The text is too hard for pleasure. Go down a rung. Pick something easier, shorter or with pictures. There's no merit in struggling through a page that gives you nothing, and an easy page you finish is worth ten hard ones you abandon.

You understand each word but not the sentence. This usually means a pattern you haven't met, such as a verb form, a word order or a particle. Copy the sentence into your notebook. Look for the same pattern elsewhere. Use your palm note from Chapter 3 and make it this week's pattern. Sometimes it's simply a long sentence, and reading it aloud in chunks helps.

You keep reaching for the dictionary. Try the gist-first rule with a timer. Set it for five minutes and read straight through, writing nothing. When the timer rings, circle five words. Only after that may you open the dictionary. Most people find the dictionary becomes a short, targeted visit instead of a constant interruption.

You read, and the words don't stay. That's normal; reading puts words in front of you but doesn't make them stick on its own. The five words you circle go on cards (Chapter 3), and you test yourself from a blank page. Reading brings the words; the box keeps them.

The new script still looks like scribbles. Make the set smaller. Five symbols, not twenty. Say each sound aloud. Test yourself on the last set before adding a new one. Take a break for a day if your eyes are tired; a script is learned partly while you sleep. If you're stuck on the same letters for a week, find a teacher or a good primer and let someone show you the order.

You're reading, but you don't enjoy it. Pick a different subject. A novel isn't more "real" than a magazine about motorcycles. The point is to read a lot, and you read a lot of what you enjoy.

You haven't got time. Then a headline is enough. Five minutes. Three headlines. One sentence out loud. On the busiest days, the daily thread can be one short piece in, and nothing more.

Tools, including AI

The AI box in The Language Refresh Hour holds the rules, and Chapter 8 goes through them in full. Here's how they apply to reading.

Dictionary and reader tools. A good online dictionary, or a reading app that lets you tap a word, is a real help, especially in a new script, where looking up a word by sound may be your only route in. Use it as step two, after your first pass for gist. Some tools show a word's reading and meaning in a pop-up; they can make you faster, but they can also make you dependent. If you notice you're tapping every other word, put the tool away for a page.

Machine translation. Pasting a whole page into a translator and reading the English feels like reading, but it isn't. You skip the work that builds the skill. If you want to check your understanding, do it after your retelling: read the translation, and see where you were close and where you were off. The comparison is the learning. Machine translation can also be wrong or oddly smooth, so use it as a second opinion, not a verdict.

AI as a graded-reader writer. You can ask a chatbot to write a short passage at your level on a subject you like, or to rewrite a hard paragraph more simply. That can be a useful practice text. But it may use phrases that sound unnatural, or slip in a mistake, and you won't always spot it. A real graded reader or a library book has been checked by people. So treat tool-made texts as extra practice material, never as your main diet, and never paste a private letter or anything with family details into a tool.

Text-to-speech and read-aloud features. Hearing a text read while you follow along can be a help, and it's the idea behind the read-and-listen pair. The voice may be synthetic; for a real accent, prefer recordings by people.

What "done enough" looks like

You're done with this chapter, and ready to move on while still reading every week, when you can check these off.

- **Gist first:** you've read for gist before looking anything up, at least three times, and retold what you read in a sentence or two.
- **Your rung:** you've found a text you can read for pleasure with only a few unknown words per page, and you've read some of it on most days of a week.
- **Something borrowed:** you've taken a book from the library, or found a free text, and read it for fun.
- **Out loud:** you've read something real aloud, such as a menu, a sign or a short paragraph, and, if you could, used it with a person.
- **If you have a new script:** you can sound out a simple sign or word, and you've tested yourself on at least fifteen symbols from a hidden-answer set.
- **Words that travel:** you've moved five words from your reading into your Chapter 3 box.

If most of those are true, you're right on track. If one is wobbly, stay with it another week. Your rung will keep rising for as long as you keep reading.

Next, the reading you've been doing needs a voice and a listener. That's Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 — Speaking with People



Why this matters

Speaking is the part of a language that everyone wants and most adults put off. You can read quietly, listen in private, fill a notebook with sentences, and nobody ever has to know how you sound. Speaking is the first skill that needs another human being in the room, or on the line, and that's exactly why it matters. Language is a thing people do together. Until you've used yours with a person, it's rehearsal.

If that sentence made your stomach tighten, you're in good company. Nearly every adult learner has a speaking story: the waiter who answered in English, the blank that came down in the middle of a sentence, the accent that felt like a costume. Those moments are ordinary, and they're survivable. This chapter is about making them smaller, less frequent and less frightening, not by willpower but by design. You'll climb a ladder from sentences you've prepared, to sentences you've half-prepared, to sentences you make up on the spot. You'll carry a small card of repair phrases that turn "I've lost the word" into "I'm still talking." And you'll find people who are glad to hear you, whether they're paid tutors, exchange partners, a table at the library or a shopkeeper with thirty seconds to spare.

There's an extra reason to take speaking seriously in a book that tells you to keep your plan small. Speaking is where small plans pay off the fastest. Ten minutes of real talk with a person gives you more feedback than an hour alone: you find out what you can say, what you can't, and what the other person understood. A single "order for real" at a counter, with one sentence, teaches you more about your actual level than a week of apps.

The focus line shows up here at full strength. **Take in more than you need:** listen to how people really say things before you try to say them. **Use it with real people:** this chapter is the one. **Check it honestly:** record yourself, replay it a week later, and count one thing that's better. **Keep the plan small enough to keep:** one real exchange a week is a good plan, and it can start at thirty seconds.

What you can try today: say one sentence in the language out loud to a person who will hear it, even if it's only "thank you" to a cashier, and notice that the world didn't end.

Understand it yourself

Six ideas will carry you through this chapter. Each one can be said in a sentence, and each is good news.

Prepared, semi-prepared, spontaneous

Speaking comes in three flavors, and they're a ladder.

Prepared speech is what you've rehearsed: a short introduction, a self-intro for a class, the order you'll place at your favorite café. You wrote it, you said it three times, and you know where it's going. It builds confidence and gives your mouth practice with real sounds.

Semi-prepared speech has a skeleton and some freedom. You know the topic and a few chunks, but not the exact sentences. "Tell me about your weekend" is semi-prepared if you've thought about what you did. Most of life, in a new language, is here.

Spontaneous speech is what happens when someone asks something you didn't expect. It's the hardest and the most rewarding, and it's what real conversations are made of. You can't rehearse it, but you can train for it by getting more and more comfortable at the other two levels, and by learning what to do when you lose your way.

The ladder isn't a race. Spend as long on each rung as you need. Many adults feel pressure to leap

to spontaneous too soon; the prepared two-minute talk is not a beginner's trick. It's how you teach your mouth the shapes of your own sentences.

Repair beats perfection

The skill that matters most in conversation isn't accuracy. It's repair: what you do when you lose a word, mishear, or can't finish a sentence. Fluent-sounding speakers aren't people who never stumble. They're people who recover without stopping the conversation.

You can learn five repair moves in an afternoon: ask someone to repeat, ask them to slow down, ask how to say something, correct yourself with "I mean…", and tell them you're learning. Add one more, which is to describe around the word: explain what you mean using words you do know. These six moves are your pocket parachute. The next sections give you the lines for Spanish, French and Mandarin, and a try-it to carry them.

Nerves are normal, and they're not a verdict

Many learners feel anxious when they speak a second language. Research on second-language anxiety and achievement has found that the two tend to travel together: people who are more anxious tend to do somewhat less well.[28] That isn't a reason to worry about worrying. It's a reason to make speaking feel safer, and the methods here are built for that: prepared steps first, small stakes, a kind partner, and a ladder you build yourself.

The **nerves ladder** below puts that into practice. You list the situations that scare you from least to most, choose the next rung, and plan one small step. Nobody asks you to leap to the scariest rung. Many people find the next rung is less scary than they feared, and the top rung looks smaller once the lower ones are done.

Your ear is a check, not a rating

How do you know whether you're improving? The honest answer is to listen. A one-minute voice memo, recorded now and replayed a week or a month later, will tell you things no feeling can. You'll hear a smoother phrase, a word you couldn't say before, or the same stubborn sound still there. This book asks you to use your ear as a check, and not to hand yourself a level. In one study of 80 university learners of Chinese, self-assessments tracked gains reasonably well but tended to run low, and were least accurate at the Intermediate level, so treat yours as a diary entry and not a measurement.[11] A real rating comes from a certified test; Chapter 9 shows where to get one. Until then, your log of what you did, and your replayed recordings, are honest evidence.

Ask for the correction you want

When you talk to a tutor or partner, you can decide how you're corrected. Left alone, many kind people won't correct you at all, or they'll quietly repeat what you said with the right form, which is easy to miss. As Chapter 3 explained, corrective feedback works, prompts that nudge you to fix it yourself tend to work better than quietly recasting it.[21] That same review found smaller effects for

older learners, which is our reason, not theirs, to ask for correction on purpose. So say so up front. "Please correct me on one thing at a time. If you can, give me a hint and let me fix it." That's the house rule you'll write below.

Accents, courtesy and switching back

You'll have an accent. So does everyone who has ever learned a second language, and so do native speakers from other regions. It's not a flaw to be erased; it's the sound of someone who's learning. Aim to be understood, not to sound like someone else.

Two courtesies help, especially when you try your language on a stranger. Be ready to switch back. If a shopkeeper is busy, or answers in English, say "Gracias" and carry on in English; you've had your reps. And treat people as people. A shop worker, a heritage speaker or a neighbor is not practice equipment. They're doing their job, or being kind, and a short, warm exchange is a gift both ways. Ask before you record anyone, and never press someone to keep speaking with you when they're trying to get on with their day.

How to try it this week

The week has one aim: say something real, out loud, to at least one person, and record yourself once. Around that, you carry five repair phrases, rehearse one short talk, and plan your next small step on the nerves ladder. Everything fits inside the Language Refresh Hour you already know.

The week, in three contexts

Here are three ways the week can look. They're illustrations, not prescriptions.

Micro (commute or lunch, 15–20 minutes). (An illustration.) *Sofia works at a hospital reception and is learning Spanish.* On Monday she writes her five repair phrases on a card and keeps it behind her badge. On Tuesday, at the corner café, she does Order for real with one sentence. On Wednesday she records a one-minute voice memo on the bus: *Hoy trabajo hasta las cinco y después voy a casa* "Today I work until five and then I go home." On Friday she plays it back and counts one thing better than her last one: she said *después* without stopping. That's a speaking week. It cost her under fifteen minutes a day.

Desk (desk or shift, 30–40 minutes). (An illustration.) *Jamal has a break room and a headset.* On Monday he writes house rules for his tutor (below) and books a trial lesson for Thursday. On Tuesday and Wednesday he spends twenty minutes rehearsing his two-minute talk in French and records it once. On Thursday, in the lesson, he gives the talk, and the tutor tells him what they heard. On Friday he writes three things to practice next, and puts the file in his dated folder.

Deep (weekend, 60–90 minutes). (An illustration.) *Yan has a Saturday free and a language exchange partner.* They meet by video for an hour: thirty minutes in Mandarin, thirty in English. Yan has prepared five questions. At the end, each shares one thing learned about the other. Yan writes a note for her log and notes two sentences she wants to say better next time. Later that day she walks to a library group she's been meaning to try, arriving early, with one question prepared.

The first thirty seconds of a conversation

The start of a conversation is the most predictable part, which makes it the best part to rehearse. Nearly every exchange opens with a greeting, a "how are you," and a small answer. If those come out smoothly, you've bought yourself time and confidence for everything after.

Here's the same opening in the trio.

- Spanish: *Buenos días. ¿Cómo está? · Bien, gracias. ¿Y usted?*
- French: *Bonjour, comment allez-vous ? · Très bien, merci. Et vous ?*
- Mandarin: 你好，你最近怎么样？(Nǐ hǎo, nǐ zuìjìn zěnmeyàng?) · 还不错，谢谢。你呢？(Hái búcuò, xièxie. Nǐ ne?)

In English (formal): Good morning, how are you? · Fine, thank you, and you?

Say them aloud a few times in the shower or on the walk to the bus, until they come without thought. Then add your own second line: "I'm learning Spanish," "I'm visiting my friend," "I work near here." That's the whole opening. After it, the other person will usually take the conversation somewhere, and you'll have your repair phrases to hand.

A word on formal and informal. Many languages have a polite "you" and a friendly "you": *usted* and *tú* in Spanish, *vous* and *tu* in French, 您 (nín) and 你 (nǐ) in Mandarin. When you're meeting a stranger, an older person or someone serving you, the polite form is the safe choice. If a friend or a partner says *tutéame* or *tu peux me tutoyer*, they're inviting you to use the friendly form.

A worked trial lesson

(An illustration.) *It's Thursday evening.* You've booked a forty-five-minute trial in French.

Before: you send three house rules. You decide your one goal: "I want to talk about my weekend and my work without stopping."

Minute 0–5. The tutor says hello and asks about you. You use your prepared talk: *Je m'appelle Chris. J'habite à Denver. Je travaille dans un hôpital.* They smile and ask a follow-up: *Et qu'est-ce que vous faites le week-end ?* "And what do you do on weekends?" That's semi-prepared speech. You use a chunk from your card: *Le week-end, j'aime…*

Minute 5–30. You talk about weekends. You lose a word, *randonnée* (hiking), and use Describe-around: *une longue promenade dans les montagnes.* The tutor says, *Ah, une randonnée!* You say it back twice. They prompt you once on *j'ai allé*: *Essayez encore. Quel verbe auxiliaire?* You pause and find *je suis allé.* You write it down.

Minute 30–40. The tutor asks you a question you didn't prepare for. You freeze for three seconds, say *Pardon, pouvez-vous répéter, plus lentement ?* and manage a short answer.

Minute 40–45. You ask your two closing questions. They say you were clear and that you ask good questions. They suggest you practice the past tense. You write it in your log and plan your next step.

That's a good lesson. You said things, you were corrected on one point, you repaired mid-sentence, and you left with the next target.

Your first month of speaking

A month is long enough to feel progress and short enough to start tomorrow. Here's a four-week arc, to adjust.

Week one. Make your repair card. Use at least one phrase aloud each day, even if only to yourself. Prepare your two-minute talk and say it three times. Do Order for real once.

Week two. Record your talk once and listen. Write your house rules and book a trial lesson, or find an exchange partner. Make a nerves ladder.

Week three. Have your first ten-minute conversation with a person. Ask for prompts, not recasts. Run topic cards for two topics. Log what you tried and what you want to try next.

Week four. Replay your week-one recording, and count one thing that's better. Take one new rung on the nerves ladder, such as a group or a phone call. Write a sentence in your log for each of the four weeks. Then decide what the next month looks like, and make it a little bigger, or keep it the same.

At the end of the month, you won't be fluent. You'll be someone who speaks the language with people every week, who can repair a conversation, and who has a recording to prove it. That's a good place to be.

Practice that actually builds it

Here's the menu. Pick from it. Nobody does all of this in a week.

On the go

Repair phrases card (10 minutes · a pocket card · no screen · Work With It)

Carry five: "say that again," "slower please," "how do you say…?" "I mean…" and "I'm learning." Use at least one aloud today, even if you're talking to your cat. Here they are for the trio.

- Spanish: *¿Puede repetir, por favor? · Más despacio, por favor. · ¿Cómo se dice…? · Quiero decir… · Estoy aprendiendo.*
- French: *Pouvez-vous répéter, s'il vous plaît ? · Plus lentement, s'il vous plaît. · Comment dit-on… ? · Je veux dire…* (zhuh vuh DEER) · *J'apprends le français.*
- Mandarin: 请再说一遍。(Qǐng zài shuō yí biàn.) · 请说慢一点。(Qǐng shuō màn yìdiǎn.) · …用中文怎么说? (…yòng Zhōngwén zěnme shuō?) · 我的意思是…… (Wǒ de yìsi shì…) · 我在学中文。(Wǒ zài xué Zhōngwén.)

For another language, ask a speaker for the same five and write them down with the sounds. The card is the whole point: a phrase on paper in your pocket is a phrase you'll actually reach for.

Order for real (10 minutes · a shop or restaurant where staff speak the language · no screen · Use It for Real)

Order or ask one question in the language. Say thank you. Be ready to switch back if they're busy. Spanish: *Quisiera un café con leche, por favor.* "I'd like a coffee with milk, please." French: *Je voudrais un café, s'il vous plaît.* Mandarin: 我想要一杯咖啡，谢谢。(Wǒ xiǎng yào yì bēi kāfēi, xièxie.) This is a real-person try-it that takes under ten minutes and costs you a coffee you were going to buy anyway.

Voice-memo check (10 minutes · a phone voice memo · screen · Check and Log)

Record one minute on a familiar topic, such as your morning or your street. A week later, replay it and count one thing that's better. Your own ear is a check, not a rating. Keep the files with dates in the same folder; in a month you'll have a strip of evidence you can hear.

Describe-around (10 minutes · no materials · no screen · Work With It)

Pick a word you don't know and explain it with words you do. Say it aloud as you would to a stranger. For a spoon, in Spanish: *la cosa para tomar sopa* "the thing for eating soup." In French: *le truc pour manger la soupe*. In Mandarin: 喝汤用的东西 (hē tāng yòng de dōngxi) "the thing you use for soup." Someone will usually give you the word, and now you remember it. This is the single best way to turn a lost word into a kept one, and it's the skill that keeps a conversation going.

Nerves ladder (15 minutes · paper · no screen · Set the Target)

List speaking situations from least to most scary. Pick the next rung and plan one small step toward it this week. Here's an illustration, not a real person: *Ruth's list, from easiest to hardest:* say "good morning" to the neighbor in her language; order coffee; ask a shop worker where something is; join a conversation group; have a call with her partner's mother; give a short toast at a family dinner. This week's step: order coffee, one sentence, on Tuesday. Next week, if that goes fine, she asks where the milk is in the store. Nobody sees this list but her. Reaching the toast is a matter of months, and she doesn't need to decide that now.[28]

At a desk

Prepared two-minute talk (20 minutes · a notes card · no screen · Work With It)

Prepare a two-minute talk about yourself or something you care about. Rehearse it three times. Record it once. A skeleton for Spanish: *Me llamo… Vivo en… Trabajo como… Los fines de semana me gusta…* (meh YAH-moh… BEE-boh ehn… trah-BAH-hoh KOH-moh… lohs FEE-nehs deh seh-MAH-nah meh GOOS-tah…). For French: *Je m'appelle… J'habite à… Je travaille comme… Le week-end, j'aime….* For Mandarin: 我叫……。我住在……。我的工作是……。周末我喜欢……。(Wǒ jiào… Wǒ zhù zài… Wǒ de gōngzuò shì… Zhōumò wǒ xǐhuan…). Fill in the blanks with your own life, and add two more sentences each time you give the talk.

House rules for a tutor (15 minutes · paper · no screen · Set the Target)

Write three rules: what to correct and when, how much of the time you'll speak, and a short topic list. Send them before the first lesson, or say them at the start. Here is the shape:

1. “Correct one thing at a time, and give me a hint first so I can fix it myself.”
2. “I’d like to be speaking at least two-thirds of the time.”
3. “Topics: my job, my street, my family, and what I did last weekend.”

Tutors are used to this, and most appreciate it, because many learners say “just correct everything,” and nobody can use everything at once. If the tutor leans toward long explanations, say, kindly, “Could we say more of it out loud first, and talk about the rule at the end?” That’s a normal request.

At the end of each lesson, ask the two questions from the trial lesson: what did you hear, and what should I practice next? Write the answers in your log. A tutor’s answers are the best source of your next target.

Trial tutor lesson (45 minutes · headphones and a tutor platform · screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: italki and Preply are platforms for adults 18 and over; keep your payment and your chat on the platform.

Book one trial lesson. Tell the tutor your one goal. At the end, ask two things: what they heard, and what to practice next. Both platforms’ terms describe their services as being for adults, and Preply allows ages 13 to 17 only with parent or guardian supervision.[29,30] Choose a tutor whose profile fits your goal, such as conversation, a work-related topic or a particular dialect, and don’t worry about booking the “perfect” one. A trial lesson is a trial.

Weekend, deeper

Language exchange hour (60 minutes · an exchange partner · screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: Tandem is for people 16 and over, and it doesn’t monitor messages or calls. Never send money or gifts to someone you haven’t met in person; see the scam box in Chapter 7.

Half the hour in each language. Prepare five questions. Close with one thing each of you learned about the other. Tandem’s own terms say users must be 16 or older and that the company doesn’t monitor messages or calls, so you could encounter abuse; the app includes a report button.[31] The Federal Trade Commission’s plain rule for online friendships and romances applies here too: never send money or gifts to someone you haven’t met in person. If anyone asks, stop contacting them and report it at ReportFraud.ftc.gov.[4]

Five questions for the trio, each simple and certain:

- Spanish: *¿De dónde eres?* · *¿Qué haces los fines de semana?* · *¿Qué comida te gusta?* · *¿Cómo se dice ‘neighbor’ en español?* · *¿Puedes repetir eso más despacio?*
- French: *Tu viens d’où ?* (tew vyahn DOO) · *Qu’est-ce que tu fais le week-end ?* · *Quelle cuisine tu aimes ?* · *Comment dit-on ‘neighbor’ en français ?* · *Tu peux répéter plus lentement ?*
- Mandarin: 你是哪里人? (Nǐ shì nǎlǐ rén?) · 你周末做什么? (Nǐ zhōumò zuò shénme?) · 你喜欢吃什么? (Nǐ xǐhuan chī shénme?) · “Neighbor” 用中文怎么说? (“Neighbor” yòng Zhōngwén zěnme shuō?) · 请再说一遍，慢一点。(Qǐng zài shuō yí biàn, màn yìdiǎn.)

In English: Where are you from? · What do you do on weekends? · What food do you like? · How do you say “neighbor” in Spanish (or French, or Mandarin)? · Can you repeat that more slowly?

A good exchange has a rhythm. Keep time: when the half-hour ends, switch, even if you're mid-story. Take turns correcting, and ask your partner what they'd like to be corrected on, too. Both of you are learning; both of you are guests in each other's language. If the chemistry isn't there after two or three tries, it's fine to look for another partner. Not every match fits.

Conversation group (75 minutes · a library, café or cultural center group · no screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: meet in public places.

Go to an open conversation group, or ask the library if one exists. Arrive early and plan one question to ask someone. Groups come in different shapes: some are for beginners, some mix levels, some are held in cafés. A librarian, a community college, a cultural center or a local club can usually point you to one. Chapter 10 lists the types. Arriving early helps: there's time for a small, easy hello before the group fills up, and you can introduce yourself with your prepared talk.

For your first group, plan only your introduction and one question. You can leave after forty minutes if you're tired. Next time, you'll know who is there, and you'll stay longer.

Talk-to-yourself box

Talk to yourself

"When I lost the word mid-sentence, what did I try next?"

- **The moment:** Did I stop, switch to English, or keep going in the language?
- **The repair:** Which repair phrase or workaround did I use, and did it work?
- **The helper:** What did the other person do that helped me most?
- **The missing sentence:** What's one sentence I wish I'd had? Can I write it and say it three times now?
- **Next:** What's the next rung on my nerves ladder, and what's the smallest step toward it?

What to do with the answer: write down the one sentence you wished you'd had and put it in your box for tomorrow. Next time you meet the same moment, you'll have it.

In Spanish: "Perdí la palabra, pero seguí hablando." · *In French:* "J'ai perdu le mot, mais j'ai continué à parler." · *In Mandarin:* 我忘了那个词，但是我继续说下去。(Wǒ wàng le nàge cí, dànshì wǒ jìxù shuō xiàqù.)

If you're learning another language, say the same sentence in yours: "I lost the word, but I kept talking." Run it after a conversation, a lesson or a recording, and add a line to your practice strip, such as *Thu, 45 min, desk, trial lesson in French, lost the word for hiking, described around it.*

Semi-prepared practice: topic cards

The middle rung of the ladder is where most of your growth lives, and the best way to practice it alone is a deck of topic cards. On six cards, write six topics from your life: my morning, my family, my work, my street, food, my weekend. Under each, jot three chunks, not full sentences. Draw a

card, set a timer for one minute, and speak about it aloud, using your chunks as a skeleton. Record it if you like.

Here is the topic "my morning," with three chunks in each language.

- Spanish: *Me levanto a las seis. I get up at six.* · *Tomo el autobús. I take the bus.* · *Llego al trabajo a las ocho. I arrive at work at eight.*
- French: *Je me lève à six heures.* (zhuh muh LEV ah see ZUHR) · *Je prends le bus.* (zhuh prahn luh BEWS) · *J'arrive au travail à huit heures.*
- Mandarin: 我六点起床。(Wǒ liù diǎn qǐchuáng.) · 我坐公交车。(Wǒ zuò gōngjiāochē.) · 我八点到公司。(Wǒ bā diǎn dào gōngsī.)

In English: I get up at six. · I take the bus. · I arrive at work at eight.

Run the same card three days in a row. On day one you'll stumble. On day two you'll find the word you were missing. By day three, you'll add a sentence you hadn't planned. That's semi-prepared speech growing into spontaneous speech, and you did it alone in your kitchen.

Phones and video calls

Speaking on the phone is harder than speaking in person, in any language, because you lose the face, the hands and the setting. If you're going to take a call, a video call is kinder than audio, and a short, planned call is kinder than an open one. Before an important call, write your first two sentences and your repair phrases on a card in front of you. If you can't follow, say so quickly and politely, and ask them to slow down or repeat. Most people are glad to.

Don't use a phone call as your first spontaneous test of a very important matter, such as a medical appointment, a legal question or a bank issue. For those, ask for help from a qualified interpreter or an organization that offers language access, and see Chapter 7. Your language practice is real and valuable; it isn't a substitute for professional help when the stakes are high.

When it goes sideways: three small rescues

Everyone has a conversation that goes wrong. A few small rescues will carry you through most of them.

You lose the word. Say the sentence up to the gap, then describe around it or point, and keep going. If you're stuck, say "How do you say…?" in the language and the English word, and let the other person supply it. Then say the whole sentence again with the new word in it, which is the repetition that makes it stay.

You lose the thread. Stop, smile and say "I'm sorry, I lost my place," or its equivalent: *Perdón, perdí el hilo* in Spanish, *Pardon, j'ai perdu le fil* in French. A pause is a normal part of a conversation. Nobody counts the seconds as carefully as you do.

You get a reply you can't follow. Don't nod. Nodding tells the other person you understood, and the conversation moves on without you. Ask for a repeat, slower, and if it's still blurry, ask for one key word: *¿Qué significa…?* "What does… mean?" You can also say what you think they said

and ask whether you're right: *Entonces, ¿necesito traer mi pasaporte?* "So, do I need to bring my passport?" Checking back like that is a skill fluent speakers use, too.

How to ask someone close to you for help

Many adults have a speaker in their circle: a friend, a coworker, a partner's family member, a neighbor. It can be tempting to ask them to be your teacher. A kinder approach is to ask for something small and specific. "Could I practice ordering with you for five minutes?" "Would you read this sentence and tell me if it sounds natural?" "Could we speak only in Spanish while we cook, and you tell me the word if I'm stuck?" People are generous with specific, time-limited requests. They can feel worn down by an open-ended one.

If the person is a heritage speaker, someone who grew up with the language at home, keep in mind that they may feel their own complicated feelings about it, perhaps shyness about their grammar or a history with the language. Ask kindly, offer something in return, such as a coffee or a favor, and accept a "not today" gracefully. They're a person, not practice equipment, and a warm relationship is worth more than any amount of speaking time.

If it isn't clicking

Speaking is where the "it isn't clicking" feeling is most common, and most fixable.

You freeze. Freezing is nearly universal. Build your first line ahead of time: one sentence you can say without thinking, like *Un moment, je cherche le mot* or *Un momento, estoy buscando la palabra.* A prepared first line buys you time and lowers your pulse. Go back to prepared speech for a week, and use the nerves ladder.

You understand them, but can't answer. Listening has run ahead of speaking, which is common. Add semi-prepared practice: choose a topic, jot three chunks, and say a minute about it into a voice memo. Then try with a person.

People switch to English. It's often a kindness, or the quickest way to finish the transaction. Say, kindly, *¿Puedo practicar un poco?* or choose settings where the language is the point: a tutor, an exchange partner, a conversation group. Chapter 7 has more ways to find them.

Your tutor corrects everything, or nothing. Go back to your house rules. Say them again. A different tutor is also a fair choice; fit matters.

You don't understand the reply. That's what repair is for. *¿Puede repetir, más despacio?* is a complete, polite sentence. Two repeats are allowed; if it's still muddy, ask them to write it down, or smile and say, *Gracias, entiendo un poco.*

Your recordings sound worse than you feel. Almost everybody dislikes the sound of their own recorded voice, in any language. Listen for one thing getting better, not for perfection.

You can't find a partner. Start with a tutor, which is the easiest way to get a first real conversation. Then try an exchange app, or ask the library about groups. Heritage speakers in your own circle may be glad to chat if you ask politely and don't turn them into your teacher.

Tools, including AI

The AI box in The Language Refresh Hour holds the rules, and Chapter 8 goes through them in full. In short for speaking:

Voice tools and speech practice. An app that listens and checks your pronunciation can be useful for practice between conversations, but it can't tell you whether a person understood you. Treat it as warm-up, not as a rating.

AI as a rehearsal partner. After you've tried a sentence yourself, you can ask a chatbot to play a shopkeeper or a coworker and let you practice a short dialogue. That's low-risk and can build your nerve. It may be too polite, too fast or subtly wrong, so check anything you plan to say to a person with a fluent speaker or a reliable reference. A chatbot never replaces a real person, and never tells you your level. Keep personal details, family information and anything private out of the conversation.

Recording tools. Your phone's voice memo is the best tool in this chapter. It's free, private and honest. Keep recordings of other people's voices only with their okay.

What "done enough" looks like

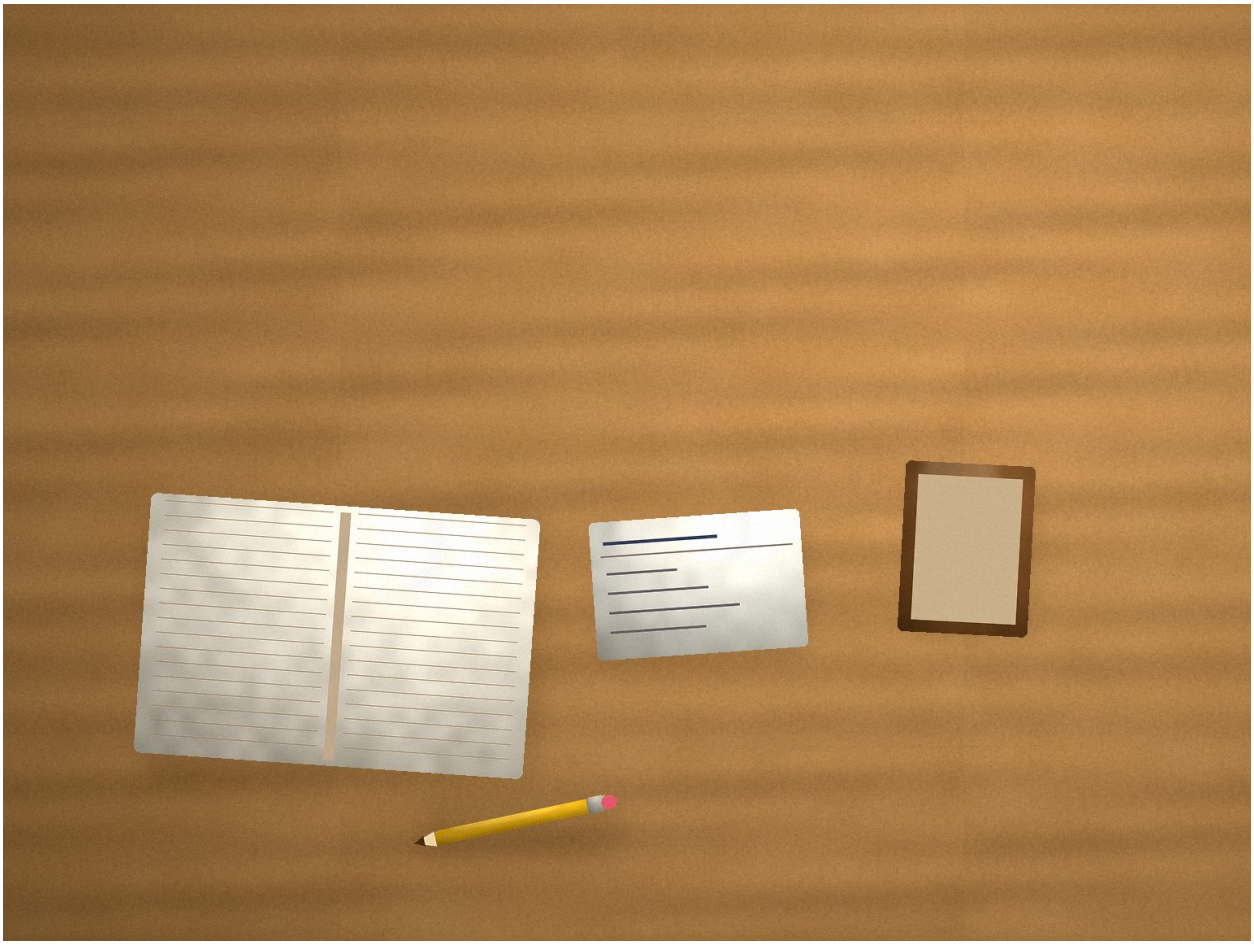
You're done with this chapter, and ready to move on while still speaking every week, when you can check these off.

- **Five repair phrases** on a card, with at least two used out loud with a person.
- **One real order or question** in the language, with a thank-you.
- **A two-minute talk**, prepared, rehearsed and recorded once.
- **A real conversation of ten minutes or more**, with a tutor, an exchange partner or a group.
- **House rules** written for a tutor or partner, and correction requested on one thing at a time.
- **A voice memo** replayed a week later, with one thing better.
- **A nerves ladder** written, with the next step on it taken.

If most of those are true, you're right on track. If one is wobbly, stay with it another week. You'll keep speaking for as long as you keep learning, and it gets easier to start.

Next, you'll put the same words on paper for a reader who can't ask you what you meant. That's Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 — Writing That Connects



Why this matters

Writing is slow speaking, and that's its gift. When you talk, the other person is waiting and the sentence is gone as soon as you've said it. When you write, you have time. You can think about which verb you want, look up the word you can't remember, reread what you wrote, and fix it before anyone sees it. For an adult learner with a busy day and a nervous mouth, that makes writing one of the kindest ways to use a language for real.

It's also one of the most useful. Most of the real-world language that adults need is written: a message to a neighbor, a note to a coworker, a reply to a landlord, a card for a relative, an email asking about a class, a form that needs filling in. You may not be giving a speech in your target language this year, but you may well be sending a text. Writing is where many learners first feel the click of "I said something, and someone understood me," and it happens quietly, at a kitchen table.

Writing has another benefit that's easy to miss. It shows you your own gaps. When you try to write a note to a friend and get stuck on how to say "I'm running late," you've found a precise, personal, useful hole in what you know. That hole is tomorrow's flashcard. A speaker can mumble past a gap; a writer sees it on the page.

This chapter keeps writing human-sized. You won't write essays for a teacher. You'll write three lines a day, a message to a real person, a reply to a note, a short opinion, a request in three tones, and a list. You'll keep your drafts with dates so you can see how far you've come, and you'll learn how to get corrected in a way that actually helps you improve.

The focus line is easy to see here. **Take in more than you need:** read before you write, and borrow the phrases real writers use. **Use it with real people:** write to someone who'll read it. **Check it honestly:** get a correction and rewrite from scratch. **Keep the plan small enough to keep:** three lines a day beats a long essay once a month.

What you can try today: write three lines in the language about your day, what you did, what you ate or saw, and one plan for tomorrow. It will take five minutes, and you'll have something to improve on.

Understand it yourself

Six ideas will carry you through this chapter.

Write for a reader

The question that makes writing better is "Who is this for?" A text to a friend, a note to a boss and a form for an office all use different words, different greetings and different levels of politeness. Writing without a reader tends to drift; writing for a particular person stays clear. So the first habit of the chapter is to name the reader before you write: "This is for Ana, my exchange partner," or "This is for the clinic, to move my appointment." Your talk-to-yourself box at the end of the week asks, "Who was I writing for — and would they have understood me?" Aim to be understood. Elegance can wait.

Short and clear beats long and fancy

Learners often reach for long sentences because they sound more advanced. They're also the sentences most likely to go wrong. A short sentence with a verb you know well will always beat a long one where you're guessing. Write the plain version first. Then, if you want, add a connecting

word: “and,” “but,” “because,” “so.” *Pero* (but), *porque* (because) and *entonces* (so, then) in Spanish; *mais*, *parce que*, *alors* in French; 但是 (dànshì, but), 因为 (yīnwèi, because) and 所以 (suǒyǐ, so) in Mandarin. Short sentences joined by simple connectors are how most real messages are written, in any language.

Registers: friend, coworker, official

Register is the word for how formal or casual your language is. Most languages have at least three that matter: how you write to a friend, to someone at work, and to an official or a stranger. The differences show up in the greeting, the closing, the verb forms, and sometimes in what you can leave out.

A friend might get *Hola, Ana:* and *Un abrazo.* A stranger at an office might get *Estimado señor López:* and *Atentamente.* In French, *Salut Léa*, and *À bientôt* for a friend; *Madame, Monsieur*, and *Cordialement* for an official. In Mandarin, a message to a friend can be short and warm, while one to an official uses the polite 您 (nín) and ends with 谢谢您 (xièxie nín, “thank you”). Learning the greeting and closing for each register is a quick win. They’re a fixed bit you can reuse every time. The try-it **One request, three registers** shows how much changes.

Conventions and keyboards

Every language has its own writing habits, and small ones can make your text look more natural. Spanish opens questions and exclamations with an upside-down mark: ¿Cómo estás? ¡Qué bien! French puts a space before question marks, exclamation points, colons and semicolons: *Tu viens ?* Mandarin uses its own full-width punctuation: the full stop 。, the comma ， and the enumeration comma 、. And all of them have accents or letters your keyboard may not show by default.

The easy fix is to set up your keyboard once. On most phones, holding down a letter shows its accented versions, and in your settings you can add a keyboard for the language. On a computer, you can add an input method. For Mandarin, you’ll usually type pinyin and choose the characters from a list, which also teaches you to recognize them. Ten minutes of setup saves you months of typing “e” for “é” and wondering why your messages look odd.

Corrected copy, then rewrite

Here’s the most powerful writing habit in the book. When a tutor, partner or friend corrects your writing, don’t simply read their version and nod. Put it away. Then rewrite the piece from scratch, without looking at their version, and compare. You’re pulling the right forms out of your own memory, which is what makes them stay. Chapter 3 gave the reason: producing beats recognizing. And corrective feedback itself makes a real, durable difference, especially when it prompts you to fix it yourself.[21]

You can ask your corrector for this. “Could you underline what’s wrong and give me a hint, without writing the fix? I’ll try to fix it myself.” Many people find that easy to do, and it makes the correction work much harder for you, in the good way. When you can’t fix it, ask for the answer,

write it in your notebook with a short sentence, and move on. This is a normal and kind way to be corrected.

A draft file is a mirror

If you keep everything you write, with a date, you can see your own progress in a way no feeling can match. In a month, redo the oldest piece from scratch, as you'd write it now, and compare. Most learners are surprised. Words you struggled over come easily. Mistakes you made all the time have vanished, and new ones have taken their place, which is progress too. A dated folder is the cheapest, most motivating tool in this chapter. It's also evidence you can show a tutor, a class or a test center.

Writing in a new script

If your language has a new script, writing by hand is part of learning it, and it may be slow at first. Write by hand to learn the shapes, with stroke order for characters and direction for right-to-left scripts, as Chapter 4 described. Then type to communicate. Your hand teaches your memory; your keyboard gets your message sent. When you write a note in a new script, it's fine to add a line in the Latin alphabet underneath for the first few weeks. Many learners fade the scaffolding out on their own.

How to try it this week

You don't need a new schedule or a new notebook. You need a few small pieces of writing in the week, one of them for a real reader, and a place where the drafts pile up with dates on them. Three lines on a bus count. A message at your desk counts. A slow Sunday paragraph counts. Here's how to set up Monday, and then how the week can look in your three sizes.

Pick your reader and your keyboard first

On Monday, spend fifteen minutes choosing. First, **choose one real reader** for the week: an exchange partner, a tutor, a neighbor, a coworker, a relative, or a friend who reads the language. Write their name at the top of the page you'll use for your message. You won't send anything today. You're only naming the person, so that by Wednesday the question "Who is this for?" already has an answer.

Second, **set up your keyboard.** Add the language's keyboard to your phone, and an input method to your computer if you use one for writing. Spanish and French mostly need accents and a few marks: hold down a letter to see them. For Mandarin, choose a pinyin input and type a few words to see how the character list appears. Then type your reader's name and one greeting. If it takes ten minutes, that's ten minutes you won't spend again.

Third, **make a folder** called "drafts," on paper or on your device. Every draft goes in with a date. That folder is the quiet hero of the chapter.

The week, in three contexts

Pick one move from each context below, not all of them. A thinner week still counts.

Micro (commute or lunch, 15–20 minutes). This is where the three-line note and the list live. Write three lines about your day, then read them aloud under your breath. If you're on a train, you can type them into your phone's notes app. Add one new connecting word, such as *porque* or *mais*, if you feel brave. (An illustration.) *Grace takes the tram forty minutes each way and is learning French for a cousin's wedding in the spring.* On the tram she writes three lines: what she did, what she ate, one plan. On Wednesday she writes her shopping list in French. On Friday she reads the week's lines and underlines one sentence she'd be proud to say. That's about ten minutes a day, and it's a week.

Desk (desk or shift, 30–40 minutes). This is the message session. Write a short real message to your named reader, ask them one question, and send it. Then reply to something real: a note, an ad, a card, or the reply you get back. If you have a person who can correct writing, send them a piece and ask for hints instead of fixes. When it comes back, rewrite the whole thing without peeking. (An illustration.) *Tariq works in a call center and writes to his language partner, Camille, in French between calls.* On Tuesday he drafts three sentences about his weekend and sends them. On Thursday he answers her reply and asks one question. On Friday, he rewrites Tuesday's message with her corrections tucked away, and checks his version against hers. The rewrite is the part that stays with him.

Deep (weekend, 60–90 minutes). This is the longer piece. Write an opinion paragraph with one claim, two reasons and one example, then walk away. The next day, rewrite it with your best sentence first. Then do the three-registers exercise: the same request to a friend, a coworker and an official. Finish by putting both pieces in the drafts folder with the date and your reader's name. (An illustration.) *Noor works weekdays and keeps Sunday morning for slow things.* She writes her opinion paragraph in Spanish about walking to work, sleeps on it, and on Monday evening trims it to three clear sentences. Then she writes the same request three ways, and sees at once that the greeting and the closing do most of the work.

Your first writing week, day by day

- **Monday:** pick your reader, set up your keyboard, make your drafts folder. Write your first three lines.
- **Tuesday (micro):** three-line note. Add the date and put it in the folder.
- **Wednesday (desk):** write a short message to your reader and send it, with one question.
- **Thursday (micro):** write your list in the language. Reply to something small and real, like a note on a card.
- **Friday (desk):** answer your reader's reply. If someone corrected an earlier piece, rewrite it from scratch now.
- **Saturday or Sunday (deep):** opinion paragraph, then rewrite it the next day. Add your line to the practice strip: *Sun, 60 min, deep, opinion paragraph, claim and two reasons; first draft too long.*

If you have only three slots, make them Tuesday, Wednesday and the weekend.

Words to say to yourself, and a few to write

When you freeze at a blank page, here's what helps. *Short. One idea. A word I know. Then the next one.* Say it aloud or write it at the top of the page. A blank page is almost always a topic that's too big, and the fix is a smaller topic, not a better sentence.

It also helps to have a few ready-made starters for messages. Here are some that are simple and useful. *I wanted to ask you something.* Spanish: *Quería preguntarte una cosa.* French: *Je voulais te demander quelque chose.* Mandarin: 我想问你一件事。(Wǒ xiǎng wèn nǐ yí jiàn shì.) *Thanks for your message.* Spanish: *Gracias por tu mensaje.* French: *Merci pour ton message.* Mandarin: 谢谢你的消息。(Xièxie nǐ de xiāoxi.) And for when you didn't follow something someone wrote: Spanish: *Perdona, no entiendo bien.* French: *Pardon, je n'ai pas bien compris.* Mandarin: 不好意思，我不太明白。(Bù hǎoyìsi, wǒ bú tài míngbai.) Copy the ones you like onto a card. They're the writing version of the repair phrases from Chapter 5.

How to fade the help

Help is a ramp. On the first week, use your dictionary, your starters and a model message you borrowed from a real writer. In the second, write the message first and look things up only for the gaps. In the third, write the whole thing without looking anything up, circle the words you're unsure of, and check only those afterward. Over a month you'll find you're skipping your starters on messages that would have needed them in week one. That's what progress looks like on the page.

When to stop

When your attention has gone, stop. Ten minutes of real writing beat forty of staring. If you've started the same sentence three times, the sentence is too big. Cut it in half, write the first half, and let the second half wait. Put the draft in the folder with a note about where you left off.

A worked example: one person's writing week

Here's what the chapter can look like in an ordinary week. This is an illustration, not a report about a particular person.

Elena is a pharmacy technician who works four ten-hour days. Her husband's family speaks Spanish at home, and she has a standing Saturday video call with her sister-in-law, Rosa. She wants to be able to write Rosa a real message and understand the answer.

Monday evening, at the kitchen table, she names her reader, Rosa, and sets up the Spanish keyboard on her phone. It takes her twelve minutes, mostly figuring out where the upside-down question mark lives. She writes her first three lines: "Hoy trabajé mucho. Comí pasta. Mañana voy a descansar." She adds the date and puts it in a folder called "drafts."

Tuesday, on her lunch break in the car, she writes her three lines again and adds a connecting word: "Hoy trabajé mucho, pero estoy contenta." Wednesday, at her desk in the back room, she writes Rosa: "Hola, Rosa. ¿Cómo estás? Hoy trabajé mucho y estoy cansado." She reads it aloud twice,

fixes a missing accent, and sends it. Thursday, Rosa's answer arrives with one friendly correction: since Elena is a woman, it should be "cansada," not "cansado." Elena writes the corrected line in her notebook with its meaning.

Friday, she rewrites Wednesday's message from scratch with the correction put away. She writes "cansada" without thinking, gets two sentences right from memory and misses one accent. She circles it. On Saturday morning, she writes a short paragraph about her week, and on the call that afternoon, Rosa says she understood all of it. Elena puts a mark on the practice strip: "Fri, 25 min, desk, rewrite of message to Rosa, two sentences from memory."

Look at what Elena didn't do. She didn't write an essay. She didn't buy anything. She didn't aim for elegance. She did four things: she wrote small and often, she wrote for a named reader, she rewrote after a correction, and she kept every draft with a date. That's the chapter.

Practice that actually builds it

Here's the menu. Pick from it; nobody does all of it in a week. Most of these are short, on paper and screen-free, and the best ones end with someone else reading what you wrote.

On the go

Three-line daily note (5 minutes · notebook · no screen · Work With It)

Write three lines every day: what you did, what you ate or saw, and one plan. Date it. Don't edit, and don't look anything up unless you're stuck. If you're stuck, write the gap in English and keep going; the gap list is tomorrow's flashcard. Here's a day's lines in the trio. Spanish: *Hoy trabajé hasta las cinco. Comí sopa. Mañana voy a llamar a mi madre.* French: *Aujourd'hui, j'ai travaillé jusqu'à cinq heures. J'ai mangé de la soupe. Demain, je vais appeler ma mère.* Mandarin: 今天我工作到五点。我喝了汤。明天我要给妈妈打电话。(Jīntiān wǒ gōngzuò dào wǔ diǎn. Wǒ hē le tāng. Míngtiān wǒ yào gěi māma dǎ diànhuà.) "Today I worked until five. I had soup. Tomorrow I'll call my mother." After a week, the three lines will begin to feel like a small habit rather than a task.

Lists in the language (5 minutes · a pen · no screen · Use It for Real)

Write your shopping list or your to-do list in the language today. A list is the smallest honest piece of writing: it has a real purpose, and nobody needs it to be elegant. Spanish: *leche, pan, huevos, manzanas*. French: *du lait, du pain, des œufs, des pommes* (dew LAY, dew PAN, dayz UH, day POM). Mandarin: 牛奶、面包、鸡蛋、苹果 (niúnǎi, miànbāo, jīdàn, píngguǒ). "Milk, bread, eggs, apples." When you're in the shop, use your list. The words you looked up for it have a reason to stay, because you needed them in a real place.

Dated draft file (10 minutes · a folder · no screen · Check and Log)

Keep every draft with a date, and put your reader's name on the ones that were meant for someone. Don't throw out the clumsy ones; they're the proof. After a month, take the oldest piece, put it face down, and write it again from scratch as you'd write it now. Then compare the two. Most learners

are surprised by how much has changed, and by which mistakes are gone. Ten minutes on the first Sunday of the month is plenty. If you use a phone or computer, a folder named "drafts" with files named by date does the same job.

At a desk

Message to a real person (15 minutes · a message app or email · screen · Use It for Real)

Write a short real message to someone who reads the language, and ask them one question. This is your real-person contact for the chapter, and it's the most useful try-it in it. Choose the reader first, then the register, then write. Keep it short: a greeting, one or two sentences about you, a question, a closing. Spanish: *Hola, Ana. ¿Cómo estás? Hoy llego tarde. ¿Podemos hablar a las seis?* French: *Salut Léa, ça va ? Je suis en retard aujourd'hui. On peut parler à six heures ?* Mandarin: 小李，你好！我今天会晚一点。我们六点聊，好吗？(Xiǎo Lǐ, nǐ hǎo! Wǒ jīntiān huì wǎn yìdiǎn. Wǒmen liù diǎn liáo, hǎo ma?) "Hi. How are you? I'm running late today. Can we talk at six?" Read it aloud once before you send it, and notice what you'd change. If you don't have a reader yet, a tutor will do. Chapter 5 shows how to find one, and Chapter 7 covers where to look. If you write to someone you've only met online, keep the plan simple: the Federal Trade Commission's plain rule for online friendships is never to send money or gifts to someone you haven't met in person, and you can report a request like that at ReportFraud.ftc.gov.[4]

Reply to a real note (15 minutes · a short ad, note or card · no screen · Work With It)

Take a short written thing and write a reply as though it were meant for you. A shop notice, a flyer, a card, a message from a friend in the language: anything short and real. Your reply doesn't have to be sent. It has to be a reply, which means it answers something, and answering is a different muscle from describing. For example, a note in Spanish says *Estamos cerrados el lunes.* ("We're closed Monday.") A reply: *Gracias por avisar. Nos vemos el martes.* "Thanks for letting me know. See you Tuesday." In French, a note says *Le cours de yoga est annulé jeudi.* ("The yoga class is canceled Thursday.") A reply: *Merci de me prévenir. À la semaine prochaine.* "Thanks for letting me know. See you next week." In Mandarin, a note says 明天下午三点开会。("Meeting tomorrow at three.") A reply: 好的，谢谢。我三点到。(Hǎo de, xièxie. Wǒ sān diǎn dào.) "Okay, thanks. I'll be there at three."

Corrected-copy rewrite (20 minutes · a piece corrected by a person · no screen · Check and Log)

After a tutor or partner corrects a piece of your writing, rewrite it without looking at their version. This is the habit from "Understand it yourself," and it's where the correction becomes yours. Print the corrected piece or keep it on a separate screen, then set it aside. Write the whole piece again, from your own memory of what the corrections taught you. Then lay the two side by side. Where you matched, notice the pattern and tick it. Where you didn't, write the right form on a card with a short sentence of your own. If you ask for hints, not fixes, you've done half the work already. Many learners find it among the most useful twenty minutes of the week.[21]

Weekend, deeper

Opinion paragraph (40 minutes · paper · no screen · Work With It)

Write a claim, two reasons and one example, in the language, about something you have a view on. Rewrite it the next day with your best line first. The structure carries you: the claim tells the reader where you're going, the reasons give them a reason to care, and the example makes it real. Spanish: *Creo que caminar al trabajo es una buena idea. Primero, es gratis. Segundo, me ayuda a pensar. Por ejemplo, ayer caminé veinte minutos y me sentí bien.* French: *Je pense que marcher est une bonne idée. D'abord, c'est gratuit. Ensuite, ça m'aide à réfléchir.* Mandarin: 我觉得走路上班很好。第一，不用花钱。第二，可以想事情。(Wǒ juéde zǒulù shàngbān hěn hǎo. Dì-yī, bú yòng huā qián. Dì-èr, kěyǐ xiǎng shìqing.) "I think walking to work is good. First, it's free. Second, it helps me think." The next day, ask: what is my best sentence? Put it first.

One request, three registers (45 minutes · paper · no screen · Work With It)

Write the same request to a friend, a coworker and an official. Notice what changes. Take one request: moving a Tuesday meeting to Thursday. Write it three times, and underline what changed: the greeting, the verb form, the closing. Spanish. Friend: *Hola, Ana. ¿Podemos vernos el jueves en vez del martes? Un abrazo.* Coworker: *Buenos días, Luis. ¿Podemos mover la reunión del martes al jueves? Gracias.* Official: *Estimado señor López: Quisiera cambiar mi cita del martes al jueves, si es posible. Atentamente,* French. Friend: *Salut Léa ! On peut se voir jeudi au lieu de mardi ? À bientôt.* Coworker: *Bonjour Paul, on peut déplacer la réunion de mardi à jeudi ? Merci.* Official: *Madame, Monsieur, je voudrais déplacer mon rendez-vous de mardi à jeudi, si possible. Cordialement,* Mandarin. Friend: 小李，我们能不能把周二改到周四？(Xiǎo Lǐ, wǒmen néng bu néng bǎ zhōu'èr gǎi dào zhōusì?) Coworker: 老王，我们可以把周二的会议改到周四吗？谢谢。(Lǎo Wáng, wǒmen kěyǐ bǎ zhōu'èr de huìyì gǎi dào zhōusì ma? Xièxie.) Official: 您好，我想把周二的预约改到周四，可以吗？谢谢您。(Nín hǎo, wǒ xiǎng bǎ zhōu'èr de yùyuē gǎi dào zhōusì, kěyǐ ma? Xièxie nín.) In English: "Can we change Tuesday to Thursday?" in three levels of politeness. If you can, ask a speaker which of your three feels right. You're not looking for a grade; you're listening for the difference.

Talk-to-yourself box

Talk to yourself

"*Who was I writing for — and would they have understood me?*"

- **Reader:** Who was this for, and did I keep them in mind from the first line?
- **Clear:** Which sentence would I read again if I were them, and which one would puzzle me?
- **Register:** Did my greeting and closing fit the person: friend, coworker or official?
- **Rewrite:** If someone corrected it, did I rewrite from scratch, or only read the fix?
- **Next:** What's one sentence I want to be able to write tomorrow without looking?

What to do with the answer: date the draft, put it in the folder, and add the one sentence you want next to your starters card.

In Spanish: "Le escribí a Rosa, y creo que el mensaje estaba claro." · *In French:* "J'ai écrit à Léa, et je crois que le message était clair." · *In Mandarin:*

> 我是写给小李的，我觉得写得很清楚。(Wǒ shì xiě gěi Xiǎo Lǐ de, wǒ juéde xiě de hěn qīngchu.)

If you're learning another language, say the same sentence in yours: "I wrote it for Rosa, and I think the message was clear." Run it on Friday or right after you've sent something, and add a line to your practice strip.

Blocked and mixed practice

When something is new, write it in a block: the same kind of piece for a few days. Three days of three-line notes is a block. Once those feel easy, mix: a note on Monday, a message on Tuesday, a reply on Wednesday, a rewrite on Friday. Mixing is harder, and it's what makes writing hold up when someone asks you for something you've never written before.

Writing with a real person, in small ways

Writing gets better when someone is on the other end of it. A few small ways to build that in. Send your reader one question, not a letter. Ask a friend who speaks the language to read a message before you send it, and to underline one thing, not twenty. Swap short messages with an exchange partner: you write in their language, they write in yours, and each of you corrects one thing. Ask a tutor to end each lesson by correcting a three-line note instead of a long essay.

Ask first before you share someone else's writing, such as a family letter or a message from a friend. A written message belongs to the person who wrote it, and keeping to that is part of being a good guest in someone's language. If you're writing to a heritage speaker, such as a parent or grandparent who grew up with the language, keep in mind that their way of writing may be different from the textbook's. It's their language too, and it's a gift to be corrected by them. Ask which spelling or which form they'd use, and write down both.

If it isn't clicking

Writing stalls in a few predictable ways, and each one has a next move.

"I stare at the blank page." The topic is too big, or the sentence in your head is too grand. Shrink it. Write the plainest sentence you can: *I'm tired. It's raining. I like coffee.* A page that has one true, plain sentence on it is no longer blank. Then add one connector: "and," "but," "because." That's the whole engine.

"I know what I want to say, but I don't know the words." Write the gap in English and keep going. When you finish the draft, look up only the gaps, and put them on cards with a sentence. Don't stop in the middle to hunt. A draft with holes in it is a perfectly good draft, and the holes tell you what to learn.

"My sentences sound like translations." They do, at first. Go back to the sentences you've seen real writers use: a message from a friend, a shop notice, a note on a card. Borrow their openers and

their closings and fit your content into them. That's how everyone learns to sound natural, and it's what the starters card is for.

"I make the same mistake every time." Good: now you know what to practice. Write the right form on a card inside a whole sentence, and put the card in your Chapter 3 box. Then write three new sentences with it this week. One repeated mistake is a pattern, and patterns are fixable.

"Nobody corrects me." Then use a tutor for ten minutes of the lesson, a partner for one sentence, or a friend for one line. Ask for one thing, with a hint, not a rewrite. If you truly have nobody yet, rewrite an old draft a month later and compare. That won't replace a person, but it shows you what you've learned, and you can bring it to one when you find them.

"The correction is a wall of red." Ask for less: "Could you mark just the three most important things?" Everyone who corrects writing has a hundred opinions, and most are glad to be asked for the ones that matter. If a correction feels like criticism, remember that it's about the page and not about you.

"I don't have time." Then write the three lines and call it done. Three lines on a bus count. A week of three-line notes is worth more than a Sunday essay you never get to.

When to slow down, go on, or get a human. *Slow down* when your drafts keep coming back with the same pattern wrong: go to Chapter 3's pattern of the week. *Go on* when your three-line notes feel easy and your messages get quick, clear replies: add a connector, a longer message, or a new register. *Get a human* when you're not sure whether something is polite, correct or natural. Ask a tutor or a native speaker, not a tool.

Tools, including AI

The AI box in The Language Refresh Hour holds the rules, and Chapter 8 goes through them in full. Here's how they apply to writing.

Keyboards and input methods. Add the language's keyboard to your phone and computer once. It saves you from typing "e" for "é," and for Mandarin it teaches you to recognize characters as you choose them from the list. Give it a try before you need it.

Dictionaries. A good online dictionary gives you the word, an example sentence and often a recording. Look at the example sentences. A word with no sentence is a word you won't be able to use. Check the dictionary after you've tried the draft, not before.

Spelling and grammar checkers. Built-in checkers catch typos and missing accents, which is useful, and they sometimes flag something that's fine or miss something that's wrong. Use them as a second pair of eyes, and when one suggests a change you don't understand, look it up or ask a person before you accept it.

Machine translation. Pasting your English into a translator and sending the result teaches you very little, and you can't tell whether it said what you meant. A better use: write your own version first, then translate it back into English and see whether it still says what you wanted. If it doesn't, find the sentence that went wrong.

AI as an editor, after your own try. Used well, an AI chat tool can act as a patient editor. Write your piece first. Then ask it to underline what's wrong and give you a hint, without rewriting it, so you can fix it yourself. Or ask it to point out which sentence is hardest to follow. Treat what it says as a suggestion. An AI tool can sound sure and still be wrong about a form or about what's natural, so check anything that matters against a dictionary or a person. And keep private details out of it: don't paste in addresses, account numbers, medical details or other people's messages.

Text-to-speech. Have a tool read your draft aloud. If your own message sounds odd when it's spoken, you'll hear where it stumbles, and you'll hear whether your accents and punctuation do their job. It's a cheap way to turn writing back into speaking.

What "done enough" looks like

You're done with this chapter, and ready to move on while still writing every week, when you can check these off.

- **A drafts folder** with at least four dated pieces in it, and at least one you've rewritten from scratch a month later.
- **Three-line notes** on most days of a week, even short ones.
- **One real message** sent to a real reader, with one question in it, and an answer received.
- **One corrected piece, rewritten** without looking at the fix.
- **The same request in three registers**, and a sense of what changed: the greeting, the closing, the verb form.
- **Your keyboard set up**, so accents and marks come without a hunt.

If most of those are true, you're right on track. If one is wobbly, give it another week. "Done enough" means ready for the next chapter, not finished with writing.

Next, you'll take the language out of the book and into the street, the shop and the town. That's Chapter 7.

Chapter 7 — Out in the World



Why this matters

Most learners can name the moment. Someone who lives in the language understood them, answered, and kept talking, and not out of kindness to a student. The conversation was simply worth having. A neighbor explained how she really makes the soup. A shopkeeper laughed at the right place in a joke. A Deaf volunteer at a community event fingerspelled your name back, slowly, and then said something faster with a grin you could read without a single sign. No workbook produces that feeling, and once you've had it you'll want it again.

This chapter is about getting to that moment on purpose, and then to the next one, safely. It's the second clause of the focus line at work: *use it with real people.* Everything else in the Language Refresh Hour feeds it. Taking in more than you need builds your ear and your stock of words. Working with it builds control. But a language lives between people, and a learner who only ever practices alone ends up with a language that works beautifully in their head and goes quiet at the counter.

Here's what's different for you as an adult. Nobody arranges the contact. There's no teacher setting up the pen pal, no parent booking the session. That's freedom, and it's also the hurdle: the hardest step is often just choosing a door and knocking. You have a job, a schedule, perhaps a family, and a very good excuse for each week. So this chapter keeps the doors small. A five-minute purchase counts. A two-line message counts. A volunteer shift counts. If a friend, a partner or a parent is studying alongside you, you can walk through most of these doors together, and it's often easier that way; nothing in the chapter depends on it.

The chapter covers the people you can meet (neighbors, shopkeepers, heritage speakers, the Deaf community, tutors and exchange partners, volunteer settings), how to be a good guest with each, and the safety rules that make all of it possible. Those rules live here and nowhere else in the book. The Hour pointed you to this chapter for them, and every other chapter points back.

The aim isn't to collect conversations like stamps. It's to treat people as people, learn something from them besides vocabulary, and come home with a language that's a little more alive than it was that morning.

Why the struggle is worth it. The first real conversations are awkward. You'll mishear, be misheard, freeze, and slide into English more than once. That discomfort is the sound of a language moving out of the notebook and into life. Every learner who ever became comfortable with real people went through exactly this, and the only way past it is through it, a small step at a time, with good guardrails around you.

Understand it yourself

The everyday picture: a good guest. Think about the last time someone invited you into their home for a meal you'd never shared before. You arrived on time. You watched before you acted. You tried what was offered. You asked about the food because you were curious, not to fill the silence, and you thanked people properly. You didn't treat your hosts as an exhibit. That's the posture for nearly everything in this chapter. You're a guest in other people's language, and guests get invited back.

The precise picture: five kinds of real contact. It helps to sort real-world practice into kinds, because each has its own rules.

1. **Everyday contact.** Shopkeepers, neighbors, coworkers, the person at the next table. Free, local, brief. The rule: be short and warm, because they're working or living their day, not teaching.
2. **Heritage and family contact.** People for whom this is a home language: a relative, an older neighbor, a friend's parents. The richest contact there is, and the easiest to get wrong. The

rule: ask, don't test.

3. **Community contact.** Library circles, cultural centers, classes, heritage schools, Deaf community events, festivals. The rule: find out whether guests are welcome, then behave like one.
4. **Arranged practice.** Paid tutors, conversation classes, exchange apps. Structured and reliable. The rule: read the terms, set your own house rules, and keep the conversation about language.
5. **Service.** Volunteering through an organization. The rule: go through the organization, not around it.

Heritage speakers are people, not practice equipment. A neighbor from the country whose language you're learning isn't a quiz machine. Asking her to "say something in Spanish" for your benefit, or correcting a regional word because your textbook prefers another, turns a gift into a chore. These languages carry family history and identity, and the people who speak them deserve respect for the language they actually speak, not the one in your textbook. If you'd like to read more about heritage languages and the people who study and teach them, the National Heritage Language Resource Center is a good place to start.[32] So you ask about a recipe, a town, a song, a job. You listen. You thank them properly. The practice happens inside a real conversation, and the vocabulary you pick up is the vocabulary of someone's actual life.

If you're a heritage returner yourself, the picture flips in an interesting way. You may understand a great deal and speak less, or speak fluently at the kitchen table and freeze when you meet a form to fill in. That's common and nothing to be embarrassed about. Community heritage-language schools exist in many cities, and some welcome adults; ask before you assume.[33]

ASL is a full language, and the Deaf community is a community. American Sign Language has its own grammar, its own humor and its own culture. The National Association of the Deaf says so plainly, and it suggests starting with a class (community colleges, universities, libraries, organizations of the Deaf and other places run them) and then practicing with people who are deaf or hard of hearing and know ASL.[34] It also offers a useful reality check: individual signs are relatively easy to learn, but learning enough to communicate comfortably can take a year or more, and everyone learns at their own speed.[34] Two things from the same page are worth carrying around. People who know ASL are generally patient with new signers and will slow down and repeat. And facial expression and body movement are part of the grammar, so signing with a still face gives a mixed message.[34] Signs also vary by region, much as accents do, and that's normal rather than a sign that someone is "wrong."

At a Deaf event you're a guest. Introduce yourself honestly as a learner, sign or write rather than talking at people, watch how people get one another's attention before you try it, and ask before you film or photograph anyone. Learn from Deaf instructors whenever you can, and don't treat Deaf people as free tutors. Being able to sign is also not the same as being an interpreter; interpreting is a profession with its own training, and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf is the place to start if you're curious about it.[35]

Tutors and exchange partners: read the terms, then set your own. Paid online tutoring is among the most reliable ways to get regular speaking practice, and it's where the fine print matters most. Two large marketplaces are plain about age. italki's terms describe a platform for individuals 18

and older who can form binding contracts.[29] Preply's terms set 18 as the rule for adults, with 13- to 17-year-olds allowed only under a parent's or guardian's supervision.[30] The free exchange app Tandem asks users to be 16 or older, and its terms say it doesn't monitor messages or calls, so you could encounter abuse; it asks you to use its report button.[31] Terms change, so read the age and safety sections of any platform's current page before you sign up, and treat an unclear rule as a no until you've found a clear one.

That Tandem line carries a point of its own, offered here as the book's judgment rather than a rule from any source. Because the app admits 16- and 17-year-olds, an adult may find a teenager on the other end of an exchange. Keep the conversation to language and public topics, and report any contact that turns personal. Chapter 5 covers how to run a good lesson or exchange once you're in one; this chapter keeps you safe getting there.

The house rules page for exchanges and tutors. Put these on one index card, in your own words, and keep it where you keep your login:

- Language practice happens on the platform until I know the person's real-world context.
- No money, no gifts, no "help with a visa," ever.
- A video call before anything more personal, and in my own home or a public place.
- If a conversation turns romantic and I didn't want that, I end it, report it, and tell my someone.
- My address, workplace and daily schedule stay off my profile and out of my messages.

Most tutors and genuine exchange partners will find these rules entirely normal. The good ones will appreciate them.

> **If someone you've met online asks for money, or won't meet**
>
> Language exchange is for language. The Federal Trade Commission describes how online romance scams usually go, and a language app is one more place a stranger might start one.[4]
>
> - **Watch for three signs.** The person can't meet you in person (they're abroad, offshore, in the military, with an international organization). They need money for a medical bill, a plane ticket, a visa or a fee, or they offer to help you "get started" in cryptocurrency. They tell you how to pay: a wire transfer, gift cards, a money-transfer app, or cryptocurrency, which are all hard to reverse.
> - **The rule that never changes:** never send money or gifts to a sweetheart you haven't met in person.
> - **If you suspect it:** stop communicating. Talk to someone you trust. Search the person's claimed job plus the word "scammer." Run a reverse image search on their profile picture.
> - **Report it** at ReportFraud.ftc.gov and to the app or site where you met.[8] If you've already paid, contact your bank or the company you paid with right away.
>
> Being fooled isn't a character flaw. These stories are built by professionals to work on careful people. The only mistake is staying quiet about it.

Meeting in person. If a language partner from a class, a program or a community group becomes someone you'd like to meet in person, meet in a public place first, tell someone where you'll be

and when you expect to be home, and leave when something feels off. Real friendships survive that arrangement easily. Anyone who objects to it has told you something useful.

Service through organizations. Volunteering is one of the best ways to use a language for something that matters to someone else. Libraries and adult-education programs often run English conversation tables where a bilingual neighbor helps newcomers; food banks, resettlement offices and community centers sometimes need help too. Find these through an organization: a library, a faith community, a nonprofit, a volunteer-matching service such as VolunteerMatch.[36] The organization screens, trains and sets the limits. Ask what languages they need, what training they give, whether there's a background check, and what you'll be asked to do and not do. You're a volunteer, not someone's private interpreter, and you never arrange a one-to-one meeting with a person you met through volunteering, away from the organization.

You are not the clinic's interpreter. Every bilingual or half-bilingual adult should know this rule. Federal nondiscrimination rules for health programs, at 45 CFR 92.201 as the eCFR showed them on 25 October 2026, say a covered clinic or health program must take reasonable steps to give meaningful access to people with limited English proficiency, free of charge, and must offer a qualified interpreter.[37] The same section says the clinic must not require a patient to bring their own interpreter or pay for one. It can't rely on an adult who isn't a qualified interpreter, apart from two narrow exceptions (a temporary emergency measure while a qualified interpreter is found, or a case where the patient specifically asks, in private, with a qualified interpreter present, and the adult agrees and it's documented). And it can't rely on a minor child except as a temporary measure in an emergency.[37] This is a plain-language summary, not legal advice. If you need to know what a particular clinic must do, ask the clinic and read the official text.

Why does this matter to a language learner? Because the better you get, the more likely someone will ask you to step in: a neighbor at a doctor's visit, a relative at the pharmacy, a stranger in a waiting room. Medical interpreting is a profession, with training and certification for good reason. One wrong word about a dose isn't a vocabulary slip. The Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters and the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters are two bodies that certify medical interpreters,[38,39] and court interpreting has its own professional association.[40] You can be kind and helpful and still say, "I'm not the interpreter, but you can ask for a qualified one. Let's ask." That sentence is a gift to the person, not a refusal. If you're drawn to interpreting as work, wonderful; those professional bodies are where to begin, and Chapter 10 points to them.

Five sentences that should make you pause. Learning to hear a wrong turn before you take it is half of safety.

1. *"I'd love to meet, but I'm stuck overseas right now."* Usually means the person can't or won't meet, which is the first of the three signs.
2. *"Could you just help me with a small fee, and I'll pay you back?"* Usually means money is the point of the conversation, not language.
3. *"Let's move to a private app so we can talk more freely."* Often means leaving the platform's reporting tools behind. It's not always sinister, but it's a good place to slow down.
4. *"You're the only one who understands me."* Strong feelings arriving unusually fast, in a language exchange, deserve a pause and a friend's opinion.
5. *"Can you come to the appointment and tell the doctor what I mean?"* From a kind person in

real need, this is a request for the wrong help. You can offer a better one: help them ask for a qualified interpreter.

A five-minute warm-up before you go out. Choose the one door you'll knock on this week. Say aloud, in English, what you'll ask for ("I'd like to visit a conversation circle on Thursday"). Write the single sentence in the language that gets you through the first minute: *I'm learning; may I practice with you?* Then name your someone, the person you'd tell if anything felt off. That's the whole warm-up. It takes five minutes and it makes the rest of the week easier to start.

How to try it this week

Start with safety, then go out. Safety first isn't because the world is scary. It's because a learner who knows the rules can say yes to a lot more. The first four try-its take about thirty minutes in total, and you'll only do them once.

Moves by context. You have three kinds of week, and each gets its own moves.

- **Commute or lunch (micro).** Cards you can do in five to twenty minutes, mostly on foot: Pick your someone, the Not the interpreter card, Market hour, Travel phrase pack.
- **Desk or shift.** A bit more room, usually a screen and a message: Find one local door, Work-language ten, Profile and privacy audit.
- **Weekend deep sit.** One real outing: a story hour with a relative, a visit to a class, a volunteer shift.

Whatever the week looks like, aim for at least one real contact. The minimum is a purchase made in the language. The bonus is a conversation you'd remember.

Your first week, day by day

- **Day one:** the safety frame. Pick your someone, the Not the interpreter card, the Three-signs check and the Profile and privacy audit take about half an hour together, and you'll only do them once.
- **Day two:** the first real contact. Market hour or Find one local door, matched to your town and your week.
- **Day three:** your own words. Work-language ten, and a Travel phrase pack if a trip is coming.
- **Days four to seven:** pick one of the weekend try-its if you have the time, then log it: who, where, how long, and one thing you did in the language. One line per contact on your practice strip is enough.

Practice that actually builds it

A single conversation is a story. A pattern of conversations is learning. What turns real contact into progress is preparation before, attention during, and a few honest lines afterward.

Before: prepare the language, not a script. Write the four or five lines you'll need and two or three questions you're really curious about. Say them aloud during the Work With It step of your

Hour, while you walk or do the dishes. Don't memorize a monologue. A script breaks the moment the other person says something you didn't plan for, and that's exactly the point of talking to a person.

During: listen for one thing. Go in with a single listening target: a word you don't know yet, how this person says a familiar phrase, how they greet and say goodbye. You're not trying to catch everything. You're trying to catch something. If you lose the thread, the repair phrases from Chapter 5 are for exactly this moment; "Could you say that again, more slowly?" is a complete and respectable sentence.

After: three lines. Write what you said, what you heard, and what you'll try next time. That's the Check and Log step for real-world contact, and it's the difference between an outing and a lesson.

Every try-it for this chapter is below, grouped by the kind of time it needs. Pick one from each group and you have a week.

On the go

Pick your someone (5 minutes · none · no screen · Set the Target)

Choose now the person you'll tell if an online contact asks for money. Write their name on the back of your house rules card. Never send money or gifts to someone you haven't met in person. Choosing in advance is the point: nobody makes a good decision about a stranger's emergency at eleven at night, so make the decision when you're calm.

Not the interpreter card (5 minutes · index card · no screen · Set the Target)

Write one sentence on an index card: *I'm not a qualified interpreter. May we have one?* Keep it with your appointment cards. Say it aloud once so it's easy later. In the languages this book uses for examples:

- **Spanish:** *No soy intérprete. ¿Podemos pedir un intérprete calificado, por favor?* — "I'm not an interpreter. May we ask for a qualified interpreter, please?"
- **French:** *Je ne suis pas interprète. Pouvons-nous demander un interprète qualifié, s'il vous plaît ?* — "I'm not an interpreter. May we ask for a qualified interpreter, please?"
- **Mandarin:** 我不是口译员。可以请一位专业口译员吗? (Wǒ bú shì kǒuyìyuán. Kěyǐ qǐng yí wèi zhuānyè kǒuyìyuán ma?) — "I'm not an interpreter. May we ask for a professional interpreter?"

For another language, ask a speaker, a teacher or a good reference for the same two sentences, and check them before you rely on them.

Three-signs check (5 minutes · none · no screen · Check and Log)

If someone you've met online won't meet in person or on video, asks for money or gifts, or tells you how to pay, stop and tell your someone. Run the check once a week as part of your log: any of the three this week? "None" is the usual answer, and it's a good one to write down.

Market hour (20 minutes · a market or grocery of the community · no screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: Staff are working; keep it short and warm.

Shop at a place where the language is spoken. Ask one question, buy something you can name, and say thank you in the language. If the shopkeeper switches to English, you can smile and say you're learning and would like to try; if they'd rather keep it in English, that's their right, so thank them and try again another day. Some lines that work:

- **Spanish:** *¿Cuánto cuesta esto?* — "How much is this?" And: *¿Qué me recomienda?* — "What do you recommend?"
- **French:** *C'est combien, s'il vous plaît ?* — "How much is it, please?" And: *Qu'est-ce que vous me conseillez ?* — "What do you recommend?"
- **Mandarin:** 这个多少钱? (Zhège duōshao qián?) — "How much is this?" And: 您推荐什么? (Nín tuījiàn shénme?) — "What do you recommend?"

Travel phrase pack (20 minutes · phrase card · no screen · Set the Target)

Choose ten phrases for your next trip: greetings, directions, food, help. Say them aloud before you go. A starter set to adapt:

- **Spanish:** *Disculpe.* "Excuse me." · *¿Dónde está la estación?* "Where is the station?" · *¿Puede hablar más despacio?* "Could you speak more slowly?" · *Necesito ayuda.* "I need help."
- **French:** *Excusez-moi.* "Excuse me." · *Où est la gare ?* (oo eh lah GAHR) "Where is the station?" · *Pouvez-vous parler plus lentement ?* "Could you speak more slowly?" · *J'ai besoin d'aide.* "I need help."
- **Mandarin:** 请问。(Qǐngwèn.) "Excuse me / may I ask." · 车站在哪里? (Chēzhàn zài nǎlǐ?) "Where is the station?" · 请说慢一点。(Qǐng shuō màn yìdiǎn.) "Please speak a little more slowly." · 我需要帮助。(Wǒ xūyào bāngzhù.) "I need help."

Before you travel, check your own government's current travel advice for where you're going. That's the one piece of travel safety this book leaves to the official source.

At a desk

Profile and privacy audit (15 minutes · your profile on an exchange app · screen · Check and Log)

Safety: Keep your home address, workplace, and schedule off your profile.

Read your profile the way a stranger would. Take out anything you wouldn't put on a noticeboard. Find the report button and look at what it does, so you'll know where it is on a bad day.

Find one local door (30 minutes · library bulletin, web search · screen · Set the Target)

Safety: public place first; ask whether guests are welcome before you show up.

Find one in-person group that uses the language: a library circle, a cultural center, a class. Send one message asking about visiting. The National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages is a useful place to start if your language isn't widely taught near you.[41] A short message works:

- **Spanish:** *Estoy aprendiendo español. ¿Puedo venir a ver una clase?* — "I'm learning Spanish. May I come and watch a class?"

- **French:** *J'apprends le français. Puis-je venir voir un cours ?* — "I'm learning French. May I come and see a class?"
- **Mandarin:** 我在学中文。我可以来旁听一节课吗? (Wǒ zài xué Zhōngwén. Wǒ kěyǐ lái pángtīng yì jié kè ma?) — "I'm learning Chinese. May I sit in on a class?"

Work-language ten (15 minutes · notebook · no screen · Use It for Real)

List ten words from your day job in the language. If your job is a shift behind a counter, they'll be the words you use all day; if it's an office, they may be words about meetings, files and deadlines. Use two of them with a real person this week: a colleague who speaks the language, a customer, a friend. Ten words is plenty; the point is to bring the language into a part of your life that's already full.

Reverse-image check (10 minutes · a profile photo · screen · Check and Log)

When a new contact on an exchange app has a profile picture, run a reverse image search on it. A different name attached to the same photo elsewhere, or mismatched details, are warning signs worth telling someone about. The check takes ten minutes and you'll do it rarely, but you'll be glad you knew how.[4]

Weekend, deeper

Family-story hour (60 minutes · a relative or older neighbor, a recorder · screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: ask before you record.

Ask someone to tell you a story in the language and ask follow-up questions. Record it with permission, and keep the recording for your own study unless they say otherwise. Good open questions are small and specific: how did they cook that dish, what was the town like, who taught them that song?

- **Spanish:** *¿Me puede contar cómo era su pueblo?* — "Can you tell me what your hometown was like?"
- **French:** *Pouvez-vous me raconter comment était votre village ?* — "Can you tell me what your village was like?"
- **Mandarin:** 您能给我讲讲您的家乡吗? (Nín néng gěi wǒ jiǎngjiang nín de jiāxiāng ma?) — "Could you tell me about your hometown?"

Visit a heritage school or class (90 minutes · a call or email first · no screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: ask first; many are volunteer-run.

Contact a community heritage school or cultural club and ask whether adults can visit or join a class. The Coalition of Community-Based Heritage Language Schools is a place to learn about schools of this kind.[33] Offer to help carry chairs or set out snacks. A learner who turns up with a willing pair of hands is rarely turned away.

Deaf-led ASL class or event (90 minutes · a local class or Deaf community event · no screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: ask before filming or taking photos.

Find a class taught by a Deaf instructor, or a community event open to visitors. Learn the etiquette and watch before you sign. The National Association of the Deaf's learning page lists the usual places to look, from community colleges to organizations of the Deaf.[34] Before you go, practice three things: introducing yourself as a learner, fingerspelling your name, and what you'll do when you don't understand. You can ask someone to repeat or slow down, or you can write it down. Attention-getting is part of etiquette, too: a wave in someone's line of sight, a light tap on the shoulder or a flick of the lights are the usual ways, and watching what others do will tell you which fits the room.

Volunteer through an organization (120 minutes · an organization's volunteer page · no screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: go through the organization; never meet someone alone off-site; you are not their interpreter.

Contact an organization that needs your language. Ask what training they give and what you will and won't be asked to do. A good first shift is often unglamorous: setting up chairs, sorting donations, sitting at a conversation table. It's still a real reason to be in the same room as people speaking the language, and being useful before you're fluent is a lovely way to learn.

Home immersion evening (120 minutes · phone, radio, notes · screen · Take It In)

One evening, switch your phone, radio and music to the language. Keep paper and a pen handy for anything you want to look up later. Stop if it stops being fun. This one isn't contact, but it's the best preparation for it: an evening of the language going by at its own speed gets your ear ready for the way real people sound when they aren't being careful for you.

Talk-to-yourself box

Talk to yourself

"*Who did I meet in this language this week, and what did I learn from them besides words?*"

- **Meaning:** What's one thing they said that I'd never have found in a book?
- **Evidence:** Where did I understand without translating in my head?
- **Where it broke:** When did I switch to English, and what would have helped me stay in the language?
- **Comfort:** Was there anything that made me uncomfortable? I ask lightly every week, so it's normal.
- **Next:** Who would I like to meet next, and what's the smallest door?

What to do with the answer: write one line on your practice strip, and let it choose next week's door.

In Spanish: "¿A quién conocí esta semana en español, y qué aprendí de esa persona, además de palabras?" · *In French:* "Qui ai-je rencontré cette semaine en français, et qu'ai-je appris de cette personne, à part des mots ?" · *In Mandarin:* 这个星期我用中文遇到了谁？除了词语，我还从对方身上学到了什么？(Zhège xīngqī

> wǒ yòng Zhōngwén yùdào le shéi? Chúle cíyǔ, wǒ hái cóng duìfāng shēnshang xuédào le shénme?)

If you're learning another language, say the same sentence in yours: "Who did I meet in this language this week, and what did I learn from them besides words?"

Worked examples

An illustration: a first month of contact. *This is an invented example to show the shape, not a report of a real person.* Imagine Beth, a project coordinator in her forties who studied French at school and wants it back for visiting a cousin in Lyon. Her weeks are crowded, so she builds the month in small steps.

In week one she does the safety frame in half an hour: she names her sister as her someone, writes her *Je ne suis pas interprète* card, and takes her address off an exchange profile she'd made two years ago and forgotten. In week two she does a market hour at a bakery run by a family from Tunisia, asks *C'est combien ?*, buys a loaf and says *merci, bonne journée*. The baker answers in English, so Beth says she's learning; the baker laughs and says the next loaf is a good time to practice. In week three she sends one message to a library conversation circle asking whether visitors can come, and she's invited. In week four she goes, listens for one thing (how people say goodbye), and writes three lines in her log afterward.

Notice what Beth didn't do. She didn't wait until she felt ready, she didn't try to hold a long conversation in week one, and she didn't turn the baker into a practice partner for the next hour. Every contact was short, public and low in stakes, and every one was logged. By the end of the month she had a circle she could return to, and a baker who recognized her.

An illustration: asking a neighbor. *Also invented.* Imagine Walt, a bus mechanic in his fifties who picked up a little Spanish from coworkers over the years and wants to learn it properly. He asks an older neighbor from Colombia if she'd tell him about the food she grew up with. She talks for an hour about her mother's *sancocho*. He understands perhaps half, asks her to repeat the names of the ingredients, and writes them down. Afterward he writes three lines of what he said, what he heard, and what he'll ask next time. He never calls it practice. He brings her a jar of something he made the next month, and she corrects his pronunciation of *sancocho* with a smile. That's what asking, not testing, looks like.

Rotating across the kinds of contact. Over a season, aim for a mix: a handful of everyday contacts, a run of tutor or exchange sessions if you choose them, one community visit, and perhaps one volunteer role. A season with a few of each is a rich season. Some weeks you'll have only a five-minute purchase. That still counts, and on your busiest weeks it's the right amount.

Out-of-the-house try-it this week: pick *Market hour* or *Find one local door*. Both are short, local and real.

If it isn’t clicking

Three things go wrong most often with real-world contact. Each has a next move, and none of them is a verdict on you.

“I can’t find anyone nearby.” Many places don’t have a conversation circle on every corner. Widen the net before you give up. Ask the library; ask a coworker who speaks the language; look at a heritage school’s page; try Find one local door with a different kind of door (a class, a market, a festival, a faith community that welcomes guests). If your language is less commonly taught, an online tutor or an exchange partner under the terms above is a perfectly respectable bridge while you look. And remember the smallest version: a purchase in the language counts.

“I freeze, or they switch to English.” Both are normal, and neither means you’ve failed. Freezing means you tried to do too much at once. Cut the plan back to one question you’ve rehearsed. When someone switches to English, they’re usually being kind or being efficient. Say, warmly, in the language, that you’re learning and you’d like to try, and see what happens. If they’d still prefer English, thank them and move on. Not every shopkeeper wants to be your teacher at lunchtime, and that’s their right.

“Something about a contact feels off.” Trust it. You don’t need proof. Stop replying, tell your someone, report the account if it’s an app, and leave the room if it’s in person. Go back to the three signs and the five sentences earlier in the chapter, and ask whether any applied. Nothing in this book asks you to stay in a conversation that makes you uncomfortable in the name of practice.

If real contact stays hard for several weeks, step back to Chapter 5 and rebuild with a tutor or a small group. Contact with a patient professional is real contact, too, and it can be a very good bridge.

Tools, including AI

Chapter 8 holds the full rules for tools and AI. Two moves apply here.

Rehearse with a tool, then go to a person. After your own attempt on paper, an AI chat can play a shopkeeper or a receptionist at your level while you practice ordering or asking directions. Then do the real one. The role-play is practice, not a substitute for the market hour.

Keep other people out of the chat. When you rehearse, don’t type a relative’s name, a neighbor’s story or a clinic appointment into any tool. And never use a tool, or yourself, as the interpreter for medical, legal or immigration matters; if a person needs interpreting at a clinic, the right move is the card in your pocket. A translation app is fine for a menu and risky for anything that matters, which Chapter 8 explains.

What “done enough” looks like

You’re done enough with this chapter when you can say yes to these:

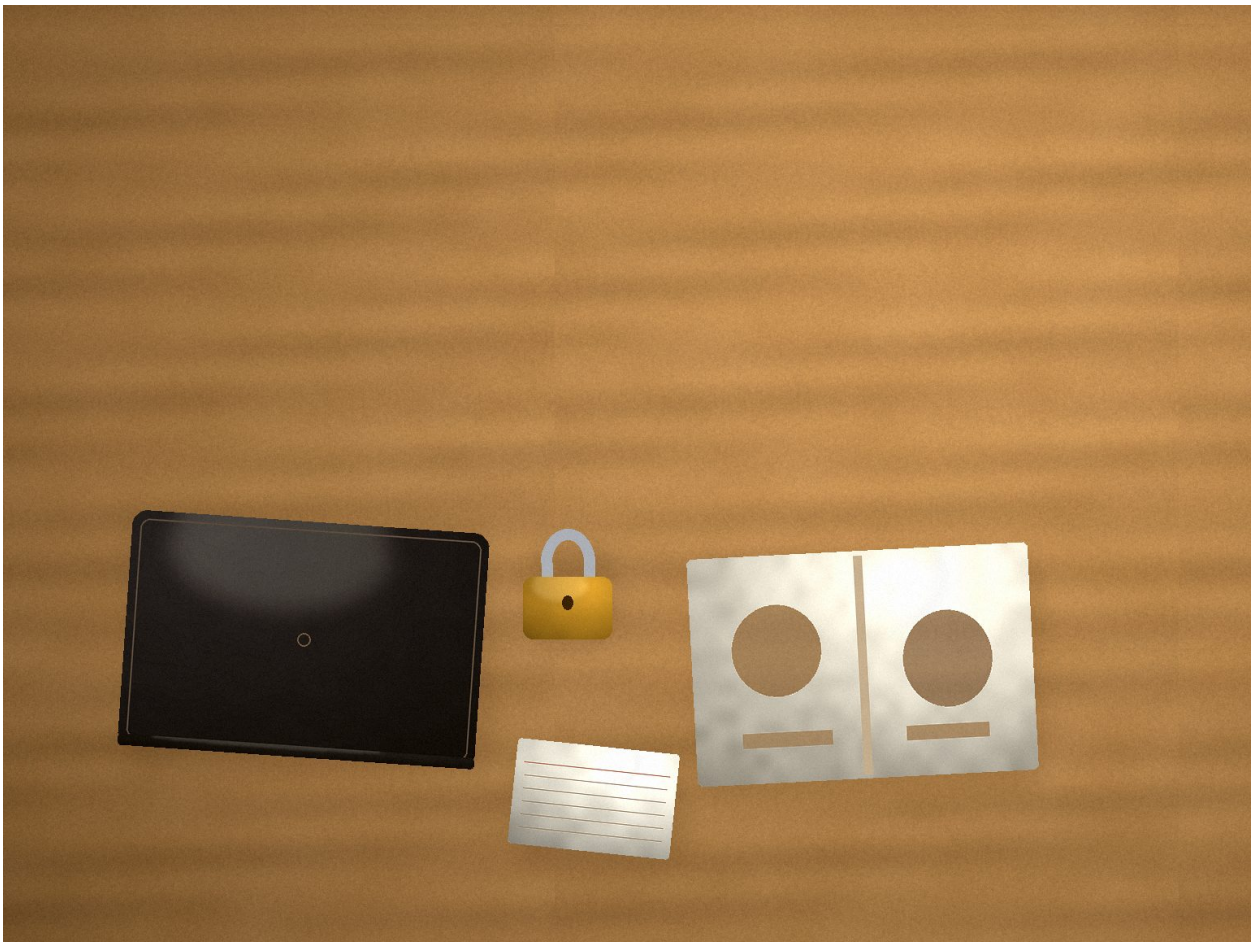
- I’ve chosen my someone and written the house rules card for exchanges and tutors.

- I can say, in English and in the language, that I'm not the interpreter and that we can ask for a qualified one.
- I know the three signs and I know where the report page is.
- I've had at least one real contact this week, even a five-minute one, and I logged it in three lines.
- I know one door I can walk through next week.
- My online profile has no address, workplace or schedule on it.

Nothing here asks you to be fluent, popular or brave. It asks you to keep showing up, politely, in small ways, with a safety net under you. That's enough to keep a language alive.

Next, the tools you'll lean on, and the habits that keep them honest. That's Chapter 8.

Chapter 8 — Tools and AI



Why this matters

You carry in your pocket a dictionary in every language, a tutor who never sleeps, a translator for any sign you meet, and a deck of flash cards that schedules itself. Twenty years ago a learner would have paid a fortune for any one of those. That's a real gift, and this chapter is mostly in favor of it.

It's also a gift with an odd property: the easier a tool makes the hard part, the less of the language ends up in your head. The hard part of learning is the moment you reach for a word and it isn't there.

The moment you try to say something and it comes out wrong. The moment you check, honestly, and find the gap. A tool that fills that gap for you before you've felt it hasn't taught you much. A tool that waits until you've tried, then shows you what you missed, is one of the best study partners you'll ever have.

That's the whole chapter in one line: **try first, then ask.** It's the third clause of the focus line, *check it honestly*, applied to your phone. You do the first attempt, on paper or out loud. The tool checks, explains and gives you more practice. It never writes for you, never speaks for you, and never stands in for the proof of what you can do.

There's a second reason this chapter matters, and it's about you rather than the language. Tools have terms. They keep your data. They renew your subscription while you're not looking. They may own what you write in them. None of that is sinister; it's how software businesses work, and a calm ten minutes with the settings page can keep it from surprising you. You'll do that in this chapter, once, and then enjoy the tools with your eyes open.

The aim isn't to make you suspicious of technology. It's to make you the sort of learner who gets the best of it: more of the language, more often, and more people, because every tool in this chapter is at its best when it sends you toward a real person and a real page rather than away from them.

Why the struggle is worth it. Typing a question into a chat window is easy. Writing three clumsy lines first, and then asking what's wrong with them, is harder and feels slower. It isn't slower. The clumsy attempt is where the learning happens, and the tool's answer lands in a mind that has just been wondering about it, which is the best moment for an answer to land.

Understand it yourself

The everyday picture: a spotter at the gym. A good spotter doesn't lift the bar for you. They stand behind you while you lift, and they step in only when the bar is truly coming down. Lifting with a spotter lets you try heavier weights with less worry. Handing the spotter the bar and watching them lift it gives you nothing, however strong they are. A language tool is a spotter. You do the lifting.

The precise picture: six kinds of tool, and one job each. It helps to sort tools by what they do rather than by name, because names change every year and jobs don't.

1. **Memory tools.** Paper card boxes and spaced-repetition decks. Their job is to bring a word back just as you're about to forget it. Paper first, digital second (Chapter 3 explains why). If you go digital, the manual for one widely used free deck program is a good, plain read on how scheduling works.[22]
2. **Listening and viewing tools.** Audio and video players with speed control, public-media sites, podcasts. Their job is to put real speech in your ear.
3. **Reference tools.** A dictionary in the language, a grammar reference, a thesaurus, a keyboard for your script. Their job is to settle a question you've already tried to answer.
4. **Library and course software.** Many public libraries give you free access to language-learning software with a library card; the details vary by library, so ask yours.[27] Their job is structure and a gentle path.

5. **Machine translation.** Fine for the gist of a menu or a notice. It has no idea what's at stake, and its mistakes can be fluent and wrong.
6. **AI chat.** A conversational program that can role-play, explain, quiz and write. Its job, for you, is practice at odd hours and explanations after your own attempt. It's the most useful tool on this list and the easiest to misuse.

Why a fluent answer can still be wrong. AI chat tools are built to produce fluent, plausible text, and fluent isn't the same as correct. A grammar explanation can sound authoritative and be wrong. A date, an idiom or a rule can be invented from whole cloth. The clearest published example is about references: a 2023 study in *Scientific Reports* looked at citations generated by ChatGPT and found that fabricated and erroneous bibliographic citations were a problem.[9] The lesson for you is practical and calm: any rule, quotation or source an AI gives you is a claim to check, in a grammar reference, a dictionary or with a speaker, before you trust it. And never trust a source an AI names until you've opened it yourself.

What an AI chat is good for. Used well, it earns its place. It's patient at eleven at night when no tutor is awake and no partner is free. It will play a pharmacist or a ticket seller as many times as you like and never sigh. After you've written something, it can explain why a sentence went wrong in plain English and give you two more examples. It can turn a list of words you know into a short text at your level, which is hard to find ready-made. And it's a safe place to say a sentence badly before you say it to a person. All of these have the same shape: *you* produced something first, and the tool responded. That shape is the thing to protect.

An AI chat is not your proof. However good a conversation with a chat tool feels, a transcript isn't a credential and isn't a measure of your level. Levels are assigned by people trained to assign them. The Interagency Language Roundtable, for instance, states that a skill level is assigned to a person through an authorized language examination.[12] Chapter 9 covers what real tests look like and what to ask for. The short version: use AI to practice, use a person or a test to measure.

What the terms actually say. Three sets of terms are worth reading once, because they show the kinds of questions to ask of any tool. All three were read on 25 October 2026, and all three can change, so open the current page before you rely on anything below.

Language-learning app terms (Duolingo). The terms, revised on 8 September 2025, say that content you submit to the service is licensed to Duolingo on broad terms (perpetual, worldwide and sublicensable). They describe "Activity Materials," meaning the data and materials generated from your use of the educational activities, including translated content you generate, as owned by Duolingo, with you assigning your rights in them. Subscriptions renew automatically, and payments are non-refundable except where the law requires.[23] None of this is a reason to avoid an app. It is a reason to keep your own original writing, such as letters, family stories and journals, in your own files, and to know when a subscription renews.

ChatGPT data controls (OpenAI). On personal Free, Plus and Pro accounts, sharing your conversations to improve the model is on by default. The setting called "Improve the model for everyone" can be turned off while you keep your history. A temporary chat isn't used for training and may be kept for up to 30 days for safety. If you give a conversation a thumbs up or down, the whole conversation may be sent for training. Memory is a separate control.[42]

Gemini Apps Activity (Google). Activity auto-deletes after 18 months by default, and you can change that to 3 months, 36 months or never. A setting controls whether your data is used to improve Google's AI. Human reviewers look at some data, and reviewed conversations can be kept for up to three years even if you delete your activity.[43]

Look at what the three have in common. Each tells you who can keep what you type, for how long, and how to change it. Those are the questions to ask of every tool you use, and a settings page is where the answers live. Using a privacy mode is an option, not a guarantee, so the safest content is content you'd be comfortable seeing in someone else's hands.

What to keep out of any tool. Passwords, account numbers, a diagnosis, a child's name and school, other people's private details, a family story that someone told you in confidence. If you want to practice a conversation about a clinic appointment, invent the appointment.

Machine translation: gist, not guarantees. Use it to read a menu, a sign or a news headline, and to get a first idea of a message. Don't use it alone for anything where a mistake costs you: a lease, a medical form, a legal notice, an immigration document. For anything like that, find a qualified person. Chapter 7 explains why clinics themselves are expected to offer qualified interpreters rather than rely on a family member or a stranger.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear. Five sentences, and what each usually means:

1. *"The AI said it, so it's right."* It said it fluently. Check it in a reference or with a speaker.
2. *"It corrected my sentence, so I learned it."* Not yet. You learned it when you can write the corrected version tomorrow without looking.
3. *"It's just me and a chat window, so it's private."* Check the data controls and keep private details out.
4. *"I translated it into English and back, and it matched, so it's right."* It may only mean the tool made the same mistake both ways. The translate-and-back try-it below shows how to use the trick properly.
5. *"The app is free, so it costs nothing."* Free may mean you pay in data, in time, or in an auto-renewing plan you've forgotten. Look at the terms and your statements.

A five-minute warm-up before you use any tool this week. Pick one tool you use at least weekly. Open its terms or settings page and find three facts: who owns what you submit, how long it keeps your activity, and how renewal works. Write the three answers on an index card. If a fact isn't there, that's an answer too: write "didn't find it" and move on. You've just done more than most users ever do.

How to try it this week

This week's shape is simple: do your own attempt first, every time, and spend one sitting getting your settings in order. The settings work is a one-time job. After it, tools become a pleasure.

Moves by context.

- **Commute or lunch (micro).** Try first, then ask on paper; read one app's terms for five minutes.

- **Desk or shift.** Walk through your privacy settings; run one ten- or twenty-minute AI role-play; fact-check one answer.
- **Weekend deep sit.** Audit your apps and your statements; once a month, take a screen-off day with a person in it.

Day by day. Here's one way to spread this week's tools over a busy week:

- **Monday (10 min):** Try first, then ask, on paper, with one sentence from your day.
- **Tuesday (10 min):** Five-minute terms read, with the answers written on your card.
- **Wednesday (20 min):** Privacy-settings walk.
- **Thursday (20 min):** AI conversation partner, with the check.
- **Friday (20 min):** Fact-check one answer you've kept from the week.
- **Weekend:** App audit or a screen-off day, whichever fits.

You can compress or skip. A week with just Monday and Wednesday is a good week.

If your language isn't Spanish, French or Mandarin. Everything above works the same way; only the reference changes. For Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Russian and other languages with their own scripts, add a keyboard for the script to your phone early, so that your own attempts can be typed or handwritten in the real letters and not in a romanized stand-in. For German, any dictionary that gives gender and plural with each noun is worth its weight. For ASL, a written or typed chat tool isn't the right practice partner at all, because the language is visual; the better tools are video from Deaf instructors and Deaf-led classes, and the real practice is with Deaf people, as Chapter 7 describes. In every case, the rule is the same: the tool checks, the person teaches, and your own attempt comes first.

Practice that actually builds it

The best use of any tool is a loop: you try, the tool shows you something, you check it, and you try again without the tool. Everything below is a way of running that loop, and each one ends with you producing something by yourself.

Every try-it for this chapter is below, grouped by the kind of time it needs. Pick one from each group and you have a week.

On the go

Try first, then ask (10 minutes · paper · no screen · Work With It)

Write your own attempt before you check a tool, a dictionary or an AI. Say you want to tell a coworker that you'll be late: write your sentence first, even if it's wrong. Then check. The ten minutes include the checking. If the tool shows a different version, circle the difference and write one line on why it differs. If you can't tell why, that's your question for the next step.

Five-minute terms read (10 minutes · an app's terms · screen · Check and Log)

Read who owns what you submit and how renewal works. Pick the app you use most. You're looking for three facts: who owns what you type or record, what happens when you stop paying,

and how and when it renews. Keep your original writing in your own files, such as a notes app or a notebook, and paste into a tool only what you'd be happy to see kept. Ten minutes is plenty for the three facts. Terms pages are long, but the headings tell you where to look.[23]

At a desk

Privacy-settings walk (20 minutes · your AI and app settings · screen · Set the Target)

Open the data settings of each tool you use. Turn off model training where you can, and set auto-delete. For ChatGPT, the control is "Improve the model for everyone," and a temporary chat is another option.[42] For Gemini, the activity settings let you choose how long activity is kept and whether it's used to improve Google's AI.[43] Write down, on the same index card as your terms facts, what you changed and the date. Next time a tool updates, you'll know where to look.

AI conversation partner, ten minutes (20 minutes · an AI chat tool · screen · Use It for Real)

Safety: don't type private details; turn off training and set auto-delete.

Ask it to role-play ordering or booking at your level and to wait for you. Then ask it to list your mistakes. Check one of its corrections in a reference. The twenty minutes include the check; skip it and you've only practiced at a screen. A first message could be, in English: *"Play a restaurant host. Speak simply, in short sentences. Wait for my reply each time. After five exchanges, list my mistakes."* Your own first line might be:

- **Spanish:** *Quiero reservar una mesa para dos personas, por favor.* — "I'd like to reserve a table for two, please."
- **French:** *Je voudrais réserver une table pour deux personnes, s'il vous plaît.* — "I'd like to reserve a table for two, please."
- **Mandarin:** 我想订两个人的位子。(Wǒ xiǎng dìng liǎng ge rén de wèizi.) — "I'd like to reserve a table for two."

Fact-check an AI answer (20 minutes · a grammar reference or dictionary · screen · Check and Log)

Take one grammar rule or example an AI gave you and verify it in a reference book or with a speaker. Note what it got wrong or smoothed over. Smoothing over means it quietly fixed your meaning, made your sentence fancier than you wrote it, or gave a confident rule with the exceptions left out. The goal isn't to catch the tool out. It's to build the habit of checking, so that checking is automatic and the tool becomes a useful assistant rather than an authority.[9]

Translate-and-back test (15 minutes · two translation tools · screen · Check and Log)

Translate a sentence with one tool, then translate it back with another. See what drifts. Never use machine translation alone for anything that matters. Start with an English sentence that has an idiom in it, such as "I'm swamped this week," and see what each tool does. Where the round trip comes back different, you've found a place where meaning slips. Where it comes back the same, it might be right or the tools might share a blind spot, which is why the test is a way to notice drift and not a proof of accuracy.

Weekend, deeper

App audit (30 minutes · your phone's app list and bank statements · screen · Check and Log)

List each language app, what it costs and how many hours you've spent in it. Cancel auto-renewals for any you haven't used in a month. The statements matter as much as the phone: a subscription that renews quietly each month is easy to forget. You may find one you love and use daily, which is a good reason to keep paying, and a few you meant to use once. Subscription terms vary, and some apps renew automatically and don't refund payments except where the law requires, so it's worth knowing the date of your next renewal before it arrives.[23]

Screen-off day (120 minutes · paper, a radio, a person · no screen · Take It In)

For one day each month use print, a radio and a person. Notice what you remember best. Read a page of a real book. Listen to the radio while you cook. Spend an hour talking, by phone or in person, with someone who speaks the language, or with a friend learning it too. The point isn't to give up tools. It's that the best minutes of the Hour are talking and listening, and screens are for connecting and checking, not for scrolling. Many learners find that the half-hour with a person is the part they remember a week later.

Talk-to-yourself box

> **Talk to yourself**
>
> *"What did I try on my own before I asked a tool — and what did the tool get wrong or smooth over?"*
>
> - **Meaning:** Where did I reach for a tool out of habit when I didn't need to?
> - **Evidence:** What did I check in a reference, and did it agree?
> - **Where it broke:** What did I type that I'd rather not have typed?
> - **Source:** Which tool earned its place in my kit this week, and which one can go?
> - **Next:** What's one thing I can do tomorrow without any tool?
>
> *What to do with the answer:* write one line on your practice strip, and pick one habit to tighten this week.
>
> *In Spanish: "*¿Qué intenté por mi cuenta antes de preguntarle a una herramienta, y en qué se equivocó o qué simplificó la herramienta?" · *In French:* "Qu'ai-je essayé moi-même avant de demander à un outil, et où l'outil s'est-il trompé ou a-t-il simplifié les choses ?" · *In Mandarin:* 在问工具之前，我自己先试了什么？工具又答错了什么，或者含糊带过了什么？(Zà wèn gōngjù zhīqián, wǒ zìjǐ xiān shì le shénme? Gōngjù yòu dá cuò le shénme, huòzhě hánhu dàiguò le shénme?)

If you're learning another language, say the same sentence in yours: "What did I try on my own before I asked a tool, and what did the tool get wrong or smooth over?"

Prompt shapes that keep you in charge. These aren't magic words. They're ways of asking a chat tool to behave like a good practice partner. Adapt them to your level and language.

- **The waiting role-play.** *"Play a pharmacist (or a ticket seller, or a neighbor). Use short sentences at a beginner level. Ask one question at a time and wait for my answer."* The word *wait* does a lot of work. Without it, the tool will happily play both sides.
- **The three questions.** *"Ask me three questions about my weekend, one at a time, in simple language. Don't correct me until I say 'done.' "* You get speaking practice without a running commentary.
- **The after-the-fact explanation.** *"Here is my sentence and your correction. Explain, in simple English, why mine was wrong, and give me two more examples of the same pattern."* This only works once you've tried the sentence yourself.
- **The graded text.** *"Write a four-sentence paragraph about a trip to the market, using only the words in this list."* Paste in a list of words you know. Then read it aloud and mark anything you couldn't have written.
- **One target at a time.** *"Only correct my verb tenses. Ignore everything else."* Corrections on everything at once are discouraging; corrections on one thing are useful.

Notice what's missing: *"Write my email for me."* There's a time for that, and it isn't practice time. If you ever send a message in a language you don't read well, ask a person to read it first, especially if it matters.

An illustration: a twenty-minute session. *This is an invented example, not a report of a real person.* Imagine Nadia, a nurse who works three twelve-hour shifts a week and is learning Spanish so she can chat with a neighbor, Marta, who brings her bread. On a day off, Nadia writes her own three-line thank-you note first:

> *Hola, Marta. Gracias para el pan. Estuvo muy rico. ¿Quieres venir a mi casa el sábado?*

She then pastes it into a chat tool (with Marta's name removed) and asks only for corrections, with reasons. The tool says *gracias por el pan*, not *gracias para el pan*, because you thank someone *for* something with *por*. Nadia checks that in a grammar reference and finds the same rule. She writes the sentence out three times by hand.

Then she makes a mistake that most of us make: she asks the tool to "make it better." What comes back is a florid, formal note that thanks Marta profusely for her generous gift. It's grammatical and a little too much. Nadia can see that it isn't her voice and it isn't her level, and she can't have said it out loud. She keeps her own version with the one correction, puts the tool's fancy phrase *"le agradezco"* on a card as something to learn later, and takes the note next door that evening. What went right: her attempt came first, one correction was verified, the tool's polish was a source of ideas, not a replacement, and the note that reached Marta was hers.

Diagnose this: two confident answers. *Both of these are invented examples of the kind of reply a chat tool might give.* Read each and say what's wrong before you read the answer.

1. A learner asks about French nouns and is told: *"The word problème ends in -e, so it's feminine: la problème."* In fact *problème* is masculine: *le problème*. A rule of thumb ("-e means feminine") was stated as if it had no exceptions.
2. A learner asks about Spanish nouns and is told: *"The word mapa ends in -a, so it's feminine: la mapa."* In fact it's masculine: *el mapa*. Same kind of slip: a pattern with exceptions,

presented as a law.

Neither answer is silly, which is the point. Each is fluent, confident and wrong, and each sounds like the beginning of a rule you'd actually remember. A dictionary entry would have caught both in ten seconds.

An illustration: three kits for three kinds of week. *These are invented examples of how a kit can look.* Imagine three learners, each with a different life.

Imani commutes forty minutes by train each way and studies Mandarin. Her kit is an index-card box she keeps in her bag, a podcast player with a speed control, and a notes file where she keeps her own sentences. On the train she says each new sentence aloud under her breath, then looks it up only if she's stuck. Her one tool decision is turning off the training setting on the chat tool she uses on Sundays.

Tom works a desk job and studies French over lunch. His kit is a graded reader borrowed from the library, a free dictionary he trusts, and a weekly tutor lesson booked on a marketplace. Once a month he audits his subscriptions and has already cancelled two. He uses an AI chat only after he's written his weekly paragraph.

Aisha works rotating shifts and is learning Spanish so she can talk with her in-laws. Her kit is a pocket phrase card, a shared audio playlist her sister-in-law made her, and a Sunday call with her mother-in-law. On the busiest weeks that call is the whole Hour. She leaves the apps alone on those weeks and doesn't feel she's behind.

Each kit is small, none depends on the newest tool, and each one points toward a person. That's the pattern to copy, whatever your languages are.

Choosing a kit: three questions. If you're not sure what belongs in yours, ask these in order. What's the one part of the language I most want to improve this month? What's the smallest tool that helps with exactly that? And does it move me toward a person or away from one? If a tool can't answer the second question and the third, it's not in the kit this month. You can always bring it back.

Which tool, for which part of the Hour. A quick map:

- **Set the Target:** paper and an index card. A tool isn't needed.
- **Take In:** a player with speed control, library software, public media.
- **Work With It:** your own attempt first; then a reference, a deck or a chat tool for checking.
- **Use It for Real:** a person. A chat role-play can be the rehearsal before it.
- **Check and Log:** your own strip, your recordings, and a reference to settle a doubt.

You may notice the tools sit in the middle of the Hour and not at either end. That's deliberate. Start with a target you chose and end with something you can show, and let the tools help in between.

A five-step check before you trust a tool's answer. Run it on any rule, translation or example you plan to keep.

1. **Say what the claim is** in one sentence. ("The tool says French *problème* is feminine.")
2. **Find a second source:** a dictionary in the language, a grammar reference, a teacher or a speaker.

3. **Compare.** Same answer? Keep it. Different? Trust the reference and your speaker over the tool.
4. **Test it on a new sentence** of your own, without looking.
5. **Log it.** One line: what the tool said, what the reference said, which was right.

Do this a dozen times and you'll start to feel which kinds of answers tend to be solid (common words, simple patterns) and which tend to need a second look (idioms, rare forms, anything with a date, a number or a source attached). That feel is worth more than any rule about AI.

When machine translation is the right tool. It's the right tool when you want the gist of a notice at the bus stop, a first read of a menu, the general mood of a message from a friend, or a quick look at a headline before you read the real thing slowly. It's the wrong tool alone when someone's health, money, housing, papers or feelings depend on an exact meaning. The dividing line is simple: *what does it cost if it's wrong?* If the answer is "a funny dinner," go ahead. If the answer is "a missed dose," ask a person.

If it isn't clicking

Three things go wrong most often with tools. Each has a next move.

"I keep asking the tool first." This is the commonest slip, and it's human. The tool is right there and the answer is instant. Make it physical. Keep a sheet of paper next to your phone, and don't pick up the phone until the sheet has your attempt on it. If you're on a commute, say the sentence aloud before you look anything up. After a week or two the order becomes habit and it stops feeling like effort.

"I don't trust anything it says now." That's the opposite slip, and it throws away something good. A tool that's right most of the time on simple things is still a good partner, as long as you check anything that matters. Use the five-step check and let your trust follow your evidence.

"I'm spending more time managing tools than learning." If you have four apps, two decks and a chat window, you may be spending your best minutes switching. Go back to Shelf of five in Chapter 10: one to listen to, one to read, one for speaking, one for practice, one for proof. Drop the rest, at least for a month. A small kit you use beats a big kit you admire.

If none of these fits and the tools still aren't helping, set them down for a week. Take a screen-off day, use paper and a person, and see what you notice. You may find the problem wasn't the tools at all.

Tools, including AI

This is the chapter that holds the rules, so here they are in one place. Every other chapter's "Tools, including AI" section points back here. Copy the box onto an index card if you like.

The tools card

1. **Try first, then ask.** Your own attempt, on paper or out loud, comes before any tool.
2. **Verify.** A rule, example or source from an AI is a claim until a reference or a speaker confirms it. Open any source it names.
3. **Not the writer, not the speaker, not the proof.** AI can practice with you and explain after your try. It doesn't write what you send as yours, speak for you at a clinic, or measure your level.
4. **Keep it private.** No passwords, account numbers, diagnoses, children's names and schools, or other people's private details. Use the data controls; they're options, not guarantees.
5. **Know the terms.** Who owns what you submit, how long it's kept, how it renews. Keep your original writing in your own files.
6. **Machine translation is for gist.** For anything where a mistake costs, find a qualified person.
7. **A screen-off day each month,** with a person in it.

Where the rules show up elsewhere. In the listening and reading chapters, the rule is usually the first one: listen or read first, then check a transcript or a dictionary. In the writing chapter it's the third: your own draft goes to a person or a tool for correction, never the other way round. In the speaking chapter, an AI chat can rehearse, but a tutor or partner is who you're really practicing for. And in Chapter 7, rule three has a very specific meaning: a tool isn't the interpreter at a clinic.

What "done enough" looks like

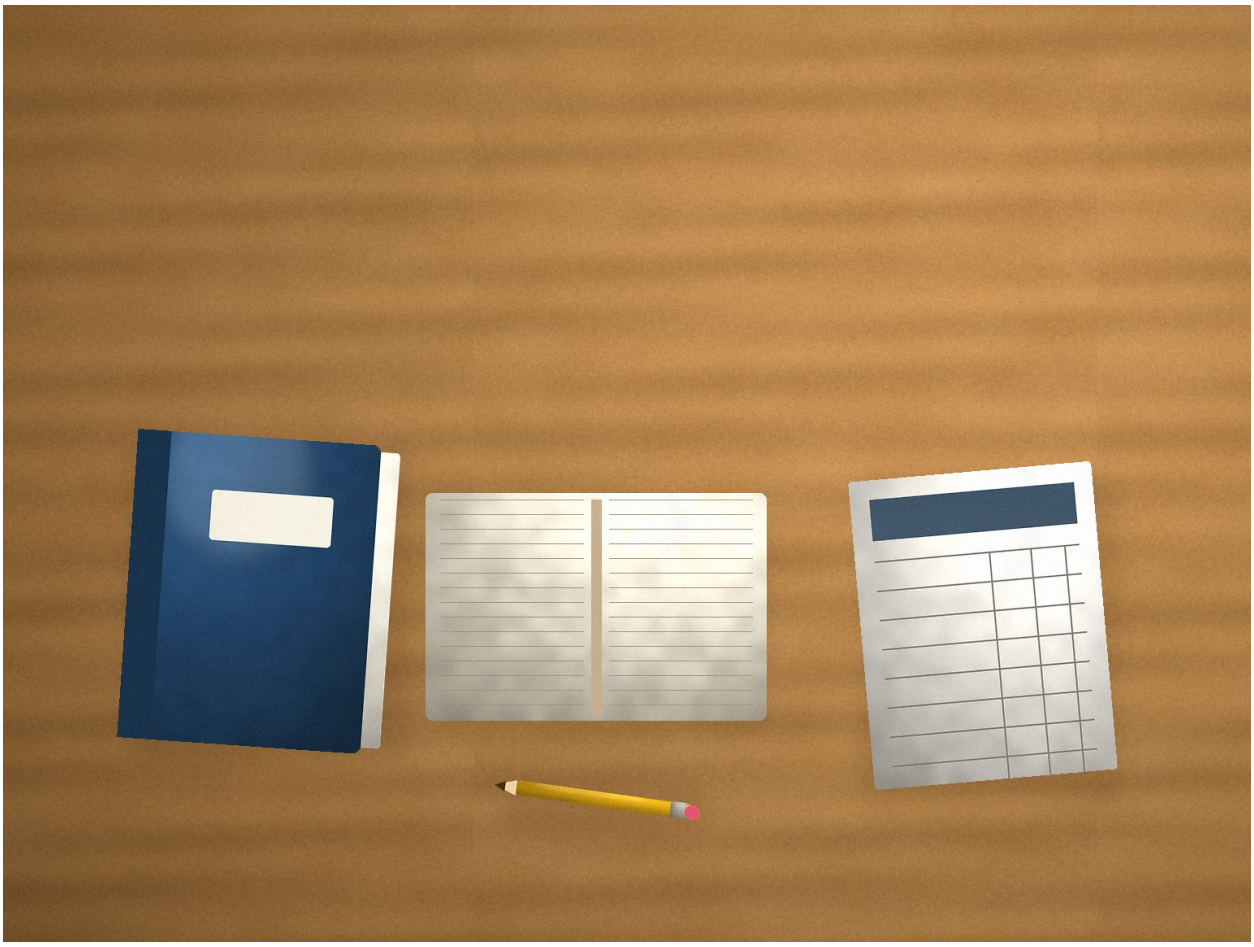
You're done enough with this chapter when you can say yes to these:

- I write my own attempt before I check a tool, most of the time.
- I've read, once, who owns what I submit to my main language app, and I know when it renews.
- I've looked at the data settings of the AI tools I use and I've chosen them on purpose.
- I've checked one answer from an AI in a reference, and I know what it got wrong or smoothed over.
- I know what I'd use machine translation for, and what I wouldn't.
- I have a kit small enough to use: no more than five things.
- Once a month, I'm off the screen for a day and a person is in it.

None of this makes you a technology expert. It makes you a learner who uses good tools without handing them the part of learning that has to happen in your own head.

Next, how to keep an honest record of all this, and what proof is worth sitting for. That's Chapter 9.

Chapter 9 — Records and Proof



Keeping an honest record

Somewhere in your future there may be a person who asks, “How good is your Spanish?” It might be a hiring manager, a registrar, a volunteer coordinator, a relative, or you at two in the morning. A good record answers that question with something better than “pretty good.” It also does something quieter: it shows you, on the days you feel you’ve gone nowhere, how far you’ve actually come.

This chapter has two jobs. The first is the record you keep for yourself, which is small, dated and

honest. The second is proof you can show other people: the tests, credits and certificates that exist for adult learners, and what each of them does and doesn't mean. Take them in that order. A record costs almost nothing. A test costs money and time, so it's worth sitting one only if someone will use the result.

The ground rule: a record is evidence, not a rating. Ratings come from certified tests, and only from them. A level you've given yourself ("I'm probably B1") is a hunch, and a hunch is fine in your notebook as long as it's labeled as one. What belongs in a record is what you can show: a dated recording, a dated piece of writing, a certificate from the people who issued it. Next to those you may write what you believe you can do, in plain words, as *my record*. Never write a made-up certificate, a course name that doesn't exist, or a title like "Advanced Spanish Certificate." List every class by its real provider and real dates.

The practice strip. The easiest record in the world is one line a day.

Practice strip (3 minutes · calendar or card · no screen · Check and Log)

One line a day: date, minutes, context, what you did, one note. Context is micro (commute or lunch), desk (desk or shift) or deep (weekend sit). A line might read *Tue, 15 min, micro, card box and a shop question, said "gracias" without thinking*. Don't write more. A paper calendar on the fridge works, and so does an index card in your pocket. A missed day is a blank square, not a failure; the strip's job is to tell you the truth, not to scold you. At the end of a month, count the lines you wrote and put that number at the bottom. It's the most honest progress report you'll own.

The recording shelf. Your voice is the best evidence you have, and it's the one most learners never keep.

Recording shelf (10 minutes · phone recordings · screen · Check and Log)

Once a month, record one minute of yourself and store it with its date in a folder you can find. Say whatever you'd say if you met someone new: who you are, what you did this weekend, what you'd like to learn. Keep it to one minute. A year from now, you'll play the first one beside the twelfth, and you'll be surprised. Only record yourself. If someone else speaks in a recording, such as a tutor or a friend, ask first, and keep other people's personal details out of what you save.

The quarterly baseline redo. In Chapter 1 you made a baseline: a recording, a read, a paragraph and a self-check, dated and filed. Every three months, you set it beside a new one.

Quarterly baseline redo (60 minutes · your first baseline pieces · no screen · Check and Log)

Redo the baseline recording, read and paragraph and set them beside the originals. Write down what changed. Use the same prompts you used the first time, so you're comparing like with like. Note one thing that's easier and one thing that's still hard. Then decide what the next quarter's small plan is. That last step is the point: the redo isn't a test you pass. It's the way your plan stays honest.

A record for your own use, not a performance. Keep these in a folder you can find in a minute, labeled with plain dates. You don't need software. A folder on a computer, a binder, or a shoebox with a calendar on the lid will do. The test of a good record is that you could hand it to a stranger and they'd understand what they were looking at.

Tests you can sit

A test is a measuring tool, not a goal. Before you pick one, ask the question this whole chapter is built on: *who will use this result, and what will they do with it?* If a college, an employer or an organization will use it, a test is worth the time and the fee. If the answer is "no one, but I'd like to know," a good record and a conversation with a patient speaker will tell you most of what you want.

Pick a yardstick (40 minutes · printed test information · no screen · Set the Target)

Choose one: OPI, DELE, DELF/DALF, HSK, JLPT, or CLEP. Read what it measures, what it costs and when it's offered. Decide whether anyone you know would use the result. Print the information page and write on it. Forty minutes is enough to choose, and to put the decision on a calendar or drop it with a clear conscience.

Here's what each one is, as the organizations describe themselves. Tests, fees, formats and dates change, so every item below ends with the same advice: read the current page before you register.

ACTFL OPI and OPIc, through Language Testing International. The Oral Proficiency Interview is a live, 15-to-30-minute conversation by telephone with a certified tester, and it's rated against a proficiency scale. The OPIc is the computer-delivered version. Individuals can order a test, and it can be taken remotely, with a computer that has a webcam and a phone call to a U.S. number; the caller pays any phone costs. The OPI has also been reviewed for college credit, though each college decides what to do with that.[44] Language Testing International offers other tests as well, and its site lists the current ones.[45] This is the place a learner gets an ACTFL rating: from a certified tester, never from yourself.

DELE (Spanish). The Instituto Cervantes runs the DELE, the official Spanish diplomas. The general exams run from A1 to C2, though not every level is offered at every sitting, so look at the exam calendar before you plan.[46]

DELF and DALF (French). These are diplomas of the French Ministry of Education, designed by France Éducation international. DELF covers A1 to B2, DALF covers C1 and C2, all four skills are tested, and the diplomas are valid for life.[47] Pass requirements are set by the issuing body, so read the current rules for the exam you're considering.[48]

HSK (Chinese). The HSK has been changing editions, so check which edition is current before you buy a book or register for a sitting.[49]

JLPT (Japanese). The Japanese-Language Proficiency Test has five levels, N1 to N5, and tests language knowledge, reading and listening. It has no speaking or writing section. It's generally offered twice a year; overseas dates and locations differ, so check yours.[50]

TOPIK (Korean). The Test of Proficiency in Korean has its own site. Read it there for the current format and dates.[51]

Others. Many countries run diplomas of their own for their languages, and the same questions apply: who issues it, who recognizes it, what does it cost, and will anyone use it?

A word about the CEFR and ACTFL labels. Several of these tests report results on the Common

European Framework's A1–C2 scale, and others on ACTFL's scale. Both are descriptions of what people can do with a language, laid out in levels.[10,5] A certified result is a rating. Your own sense of "about B1" isn't, and shouldn't be written in a record as if it were.

Mock under real conditions (60 minutes · a sample test, timer, quiet room · no screen · Check and Log)

Sit a practice test with the timer on and no help. Note which part held you up. Don't take the real one yet if you can't yet pass the practice. This is the kindest thing you can do for your budget. It also tells you which Hour step to spend extra time on for a month, which is far more useful than a score on its own.

Three cases, to show how the question works. *These are invented illustrations.* Imagine three learners.

Lena wants college credit for the French she half-remembers. Who will use the result? A college registrar. So she writes to the registrar first, and only then looks at CLEP French. She has the answer in writing before she spends a dollar.

Samir is learning Spanish so he can volunteer at a clinic's front desk. Who will use a result? Nobody asked for one. The coordinator wants to hear him say a few things. Samir keeps a record, asks the coordinator for a ten-minute conversation, and doesn't sit a test at all.

Grace wants a certified proof of her Japanese for a job at a company that works with partners in Japan. She asks the hiring manager which result, if any, they'd value. The manager names the JLPT level they'd look for. Grace now has a target, a date to aim at, and a mock to sit first.

The three of them did different things, because they had different audiences. That's the method: find the audience, then choose the proof.

What a test can't do. A test is a snapshot of one day. It can't tell you whether you'll hold a conversation with your neighbor next Tuesday or whether you can read a lease. For that, the record and the real contact in Chapter 7 are better evidence. And a test doesn't expire your language: a low score today is information about today.

College credit

College credit is the proof people most often assume works one way and finds it works another. Two things are true at once. There are real routes by which an adult can turn language knowledge into credit. And the college, not the test and not this book, decides whether it counts.

CLEP. The College Board's CLEP exams are designed so that a person can show what they already know and, at a college that accepts the result, skip the course. Two language exams are worth a look for the languages in this book's Spanish and French trio:

- *CLEP French Language, Levels 1 and 2.* The exam measures what's typically learned in two to three semesters of college French. The American Council on Education recommends credit for a Level 1 score of 50 (6 semester hours) and for a Level 2 score of 59 (9 semester hours).[52]

- *CLEP Spanish with Writing, Levels 1 and 2.* ACE recommends credit for a Level 1 score of 50 (6 semester hours) and for a Level 2 score of 65 (12 semester hours).[53]

Both pages carry the same plain caution, and it matters more than anything above: each institution sets its own credit policy, which may differ from ACE's recommendation. A score of 59 might earn nine hours at one school, fewer at another, and none at a third. Fees and exam details change, so read the College Board's current pages before you register.[54]

The oral interview and credit. The OPI described earlier has been reviewed by ACE for credit recommendations, and, as with CLEP, institutions decide what to do with that.[44] If credit is your goal, ask the college first.

Ask the college. That's the whole technique, and it takes one email.

Ask the college (20 minutes · an email · screen · Set the Target)

Write to the registrar or the language department of a college you might attend: *Do you grant credit for CLEP or an OPI? For which languages, how many credits, and at what score?* Add: *Is there a placement test, and can I take it as an adult returning to the language?* Ask for the answer in writing, and put it in your folder. Each college sets its own rule, and the best way to find yours is to ask.

For Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic and other languages, the same email works with the exam names changed. Don't assume the credit exists; ask whether it does.

Classes you take, and what to keep. A class at a community college, an OLLI, a cultural center or a library circle can be real evidence, even when it doesn't carry credit. OLLI programs, which Chapter 10 describes, offer non-credit courses. Non-credit means exactly that, so a letter showing you completed a course is evidence of effort and time, and an honest line in a record. It isn't college credit.

Class records folder (15 minutes · a folder · no screen · Check and Log)

Keep the syllabus, the hours, and any completion letter from every class you take: community college, OLLI, cultural center. Put them in one folder, labeled by class and date. Write the real name of the provider on each. Fifteen minutes is enough to start: pull what you have from your email and your drawer.

Seals and certificates

You'll see the word "seal" in a few places, and it's easy to confuse them.

The Global Seal of Biliteracy is an independent credential. It's free to apply for, though the cost of the qualifying test isn't included; it has no age or grade requirement; and it has three levels: Functional, Working and Professional Fluency. To earn one, you submit scores from an approved test, such as one reported on the ACTFL or CEFR scales, and in the United States one of the two languages must be English. Each certificate carries a serial number that can be verified online.[55] It's a credential from the organization that issues it. It isn't a state award and it isn't a college credit, and whether any employer or school values it is a question you can ask them.

State seals of biliteracy. Many states have their own seal, and most are built for graduating high-school students, so they're mostly beyond a returning adult's reach. Some give adults a route, though. Michigan's adult-education version, for example, is described as granted "upon the attainment of the secondary credential."[56] It's the state education department that tells you who is eligible, so if you're curious, ask yours whether adults can earn one and how.[57]

Certificates from classes and organizations. A certificate of completion states that you finished a course. A certificate of proficiency states that you were tested and reached a level. Those aren't the same thing, and a record should say which one each paper is.

One honest page brings these together on a single sheet.

One honest page (40 minutes · one sheet · no screen · Check and Log)

Write what you can do in Can-Do words, and beside each line put a dated piece of evidence. *I can introduce myself and say where I work: recording, 12 September. I can read a short notice at the clinic: the read, 3 October.* Use "I can" statements in the style of the Can-Do Statements published by NCSSFL and ACTFL, which describe what learners can do with a language at each level; if you quote their wording, credit them.[6] Don't put a level name on the page. Leave out anything you can't show. The result will be shorter than you hoped and more convincing than you'd think.

Career reality

Many adults come to this book hoping the language will do something for a job. It can, though the way it does so is more modest and more specific than the advertising suggests.

Employers vary, and they decide. Some employers care that you speak a language, some want a certified result, and some want neither: they want to hear you do the job's work in it. You can find out which by asking, and the answer will save you a great deal of money. Ask a manager or a recruiter what they'd want to see. If it's a test result, ask which test. If it's an interview, ask whether it's conversational.

Speaking a language isn't interpreting. If you hope to interpret or translate professionally, that's a separate profession with separate certification. Medical interpreters are certified through bodies such as CCHI[38] and NBCMI.[39] Judiciary interpreters and translators have NAJIT,[40] and the federal courts have a page on their court interpreter program.[58] For ASL, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf is the place to start.[35] Each requires training and testing well beyond what this book teaches. The reason is about people: in a clinic or a courtroom, a mistake lands on someone who can't catch it. Being bilingual, even very well, doesn't make you an interpreter, which is the point of Chapter 7's not-an-interpreter card.

Be wary of any promise about pay. This book doesn't quote salary figures, because they differ by place, field and year, and a number printed here would be out of date by the time you read it. If someone sells you a certificate with a promise about your income, ask them for the source, then ask an employer who would hire you.

What a language does reliably. It lets you help someone in your own community; it lets you read something in its original language; it makes a trip, a friendship or a family reunion richer. If a

career use comes along, you'll have a record of real, dated evidence ready.

Your portfolio

At the end of a year you'll have a lot of small things. A portfolio is the act of choosing twelve of them.

Portfolio of twelve (60 minutes · a folder or binder · no screen · Check and Log)

Pick twelve dated pieces: recordings, writings, certificates. Label each with the date and what it is. Aim for a spread across the year: three recordings, three writings, a class or tutor record or two, a note from a conversation partner if they're willing to give one, and your redo of the baseline. Put the baseline at the front. If one of the twelve is a certificate or test result, label it with the issuer's real name. Add a one-page index and your *One honest page*. A stranger who opens the folder should understand in five minutes what you've done, and you will, too.

An illustration: one year, twelve pieces. *This is an invented example.* A learner called Kofi begins in January with a baseline. He fills in a practice strip most weeks. He records a minute each month and has twelve recordings by December, plus the baseline's two-minute one. In April and again in October he redoes the baseline, and sets the paragraphs side by side. He keeps the syllabus and completion letter from a spring community-college evening class. In summer, a conversation partner writes him three honest sentences about what they talked about. In November he chooses his twelve: the baseline, the October redo, four recordings, three paragraphs with his corrections shown, the class letter, and the note from his partner. He puts it all in a folder with a one-page index. It took one afternoon, and every piece was already sitting there.

What to keep, and what to leave out.

- *Keep:* dated recordings, dated writing with your corrections shown, class records, completion letters, certified test results, and a short note or letter from a real person who heard you speak and agreed to say so.
- *Leave out:* anything you can't date, anything you can't explain, and anything that gives a level or a title no one awarded you.
- *Privacy:* don't include other people's personal details or recordings of others without their permission.

How the record and the portfolio fit the Hour. The practice strip lives in your daily life. The recording shelf is a ten-minute job once a month. The baseline redo is a quarter's hour. The portfolio is one weekend a year. If that sounds like a lot, notice how little of it is weekly: this is the *Check and Log* step of the Hour, kept small enough to keep.

You try this week

Choose one from each column.

- **On the go: Practice strip** (3 minutes). Start the line today.
- **At your desk: Class records folder** (15 minutes) or **Ask the college** (20 minutes).

- **A deeper sit: Pick a yardstick** (40 minutes) or **One honest page** (40 minutes). If you've kept your baseline for three months, do the **Quarterly baseline redo** instead (60 minutes).

Later in the quarter, add the **Recording shelf**, the **Mock under real conditions** and, once a year, the **Portfolio of twelve**.

A closing question for your notebook: *What evidence do I have of what I can do, and who would use it?*

Chapter 10 — Resources



How to choose

You don’t need more resources. You almost certainly have too many already: a few apps on the phone, a couple of bookmarked sites, a textbook in a drawer and an offer from a friend of a friend. What you need is a short list that fits your week, your budget, your language and the part of the Hour you’re working on.

This chapter doesn’t rank anything. A ranking is a verdict about the average learner, and you aren’t

the average learner; you're you, with a particular commute and a particular tiredness. Instead, the chapter sorts resources by *type* and tells you what each type is good for, what to ask before you commit, and how to spot a poor fit. Where it names a particular place, the name is an example to show you the type, never a recommendation over another one. And everything is arranged free-first, because the free options are good enough to build a real habit, and you'll learn what you need from them before you ever spend a dollar.

Five questions that do most of the choosing.

1. **Which step of the Hour is this for?** Set the Target, Take It In, Work With It, Use It for Real, Check and Log. A resource that doesn't serve one of them is a distraction, however nice.
2. **Which context will it live in?** Commute or lunch, desk or shift, or weekend sit. A two-hour course doesn't fit a commute. A podcast doesn't fit a desk where you can't wear earbuds.
3. **Does it put a person in the picture?** The best resource for most adults is one that leads, sooner or later, to a real conversation. If it never does, it isn't wrong, but it's incomplete.
4. **What does it cost, including the cost of quitting?** Read the renewal terms. Chapter 8 covers this one in detail.
5. **Will I use it on a tired Tuesday?** If the honest answer is no, it isn't the right fit for you, and the fault isn't in you.

A cost ladder. It helps to think of resources in rungs, and to climb only when the rung below has told you something.

- *Free:* the library, public media, public-domain books, a notebook and cards, a neighbor, a conversation circle. Start here and stay as long as it works.
- *Low cost:* a used textbook, a graded reader, a non-credit class, a single tutor session to hear what you sound like.
- *Paid and regular:* a weekly tutor, a term at a community college, a subscription you've read the renewal terms of.
- *Paid for proof:* a test or an exam. Chapter 9 explains why this rung comes last, and why you should only climb it if someone will use the result.

Your language matters. If you're learning Spanish, French or Mandarin, you'll find classes, circles, tutors and public media in most places, and your problem will be too many choices. If your language is less commonly taught, your problem is the opposite: fewer doors, and each one matters more. In that case, say yes to almost anything real (a class, a group, a single tutor, a relative on the phone), and use the library and your own records to fill in. If your language is a signed one, your best resource is the Deaf community, and the rest follows from it.

A fit-not-rank test. When you're torn between two things, don't ask which is better. Ask which one you'll still be using in a month. Then choose it, and give the other a rest.

Free first

Start where the money is already spent. Much of what follows is paid for by your community, and it's sitting there waiting for you.

Your library. A public library is the best first stop for most adult learners. Many keep language materials (dictionaries, graded readers, audiobooks, children's books in other languages), and many host conversation circles. Some libraries give your card access to language-learning software, such as Mango Languages, which says on its site that you can find it through participating libraries.[27] Whether your library does is a phone call away, and the call also tells you what else they have.

Library card walk (20 minutes · your library card · no screen · Set the Target)

Ask the library: What language materials do you have? Are there any conversation circles? And does my card open language software? Take the card with you and borrow one thing before you leave, such as a graded reader, a children's book or an audiobook. Write what they told you on an index card, and keep it with the card. Twenty minutes is enough, and it's the single most useful errand in this book.

Public media. Public broadcasters in many countries offer free video, audio and news, usually with clear professional speech. A few examples to show the type: RTVE Play for Spanish,[15] Deutsche Welle's Learn German site,[16] and NHK News Web Easy, which offers news written for learners of Japanese.[25] Chapters 2 and 4 show how to use things like these. Look for the equivalent for your language, and expect it to exist.

Free books and audiobooks. Volunteers record public-domain books for LibriVox, and the recordings are free.[17] Project Gutenberg offers free ebooks of public-domain texts.[26] Public-domain means older, so the language can be formal or dated. They're wonderful for reading with an audio recording alongside, and not the way to learn what people say at a bus stop.

Free notes from you. A notebook, a stack of index cards and a phone's voice recorder are free, and they're the heart of the Hour. If you only have those, you have enough.

What "free" can hide. A free app usually costs something else: attention, data or a push to upgrade. That's fine to know. It isn't a reason to avoid one, just a reason to read what it asks of you. Chapter 8 walks through the terms of a few.

Classes by type

A class gives you three things a solo learner lacks: a schedule that doesn't depend on your mood, a teacher who can hear what you miss, and a room of people in the same boat. It costs money and a time slot, so try it before you sign.

Community college. Many community colleges offer language courses for credit, and some offer non-credit continuing-education courses. Credit courses are slower to start and can count toward a degree. Non-credit courses are usually shorter, less formal and cheaper, and they don't carry credit. Ask which kind you're looking at. Chapter 9 covers what to ask about credit.

Cultural centers and institutes. Many communities have a cultural center, a language institute tied to a country, or a club for people who share a heritage. They often run classes and conversation evenings, and they're often the best place to meet people who actually speak the language at home. Look for one near you and ask what it offers adults.

Heritage language schools. These are community-run schools for families who want to keep a language alive, and some welcome adults to visit or join. The Coalition of Community-Based Heritage Language Schools is a place to learn about schools of this kind.[33] For research and resources on heritage languages, the National Heritage Language Resource Center is a good place to read.[32] Ask first; many of these are volunteer-run and some are for children only.

Lifelong-learning programs for people 50 and over. The Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes are a network of 125 programs, with at least one in every state and in the District of Columbia, offering non-credit courses for people 50 or older. Language offerings vary by campus.[59] If you're 50 or older, it's worth a look, and the non-credit format means no grades.

Less commonly taught languages. If your language isn't on every college's list, you'll need to look harder. The National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages is a place to start.[41] Some languages are taught mostly through community organizations, online programs or tutors, so widen the net before you decide there's nothing.

ASL. For American Sign Language, the National Association of the Deaf notes that signs can be easy to pick up but feeling comfortable can take a year or more, that signs vary by region, and that facial expression is part of the grammar; it also says Deaf people are often patient with learners.[34] Look for classes taught by Deaf instructors and for Deaf community events. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf is the place to start if your interest is in interpreting as a profession, which is its own path.[35]

Sit in before you sign. This is the rule that saves the most money.

Sit in before you sign (60 minutes · a call or email first · no screen · Set the Target)

Visit one class or group once before you pay. Community college, a cultural center, or an OLLI if you're 50 or older. Call or write first and ask whether visitors may sit in. While you're there, watch for three things: Is the teacher speaking the language most of the time? Do the students get to talk? Would I come back on a tired Tuesday? Write the answers down on the drive home, while they're fresh.

Questions to ask before you pay. Ask them by phone or email, and keep the answers.

- What level is this class, and how do you decide whether I belong in it?
- How much of each session is spoken by learners?
- What is the total cost, including books, and what's the refund or withdrawal rule?
- Can I sit in on one session first?
- Will I get anything in writing at the end, and what would it say? (A completion letter is evidence of attendance. It's not a test result, and Chapter 9 explains the difference.)

A good provider answers those without fuss. If the answers are vague or hurried, that's information too.

What a good class looks like from the back row. The teacher uses the language and checks that people understand. Learners speak more than the teacher does, at least some of the time. Mistakes are treated as information. And the pace suits adults, who learn a lot from explanations and need real topics. If a class is all worksheets and silence, it's a poor fit for the goal this book has, however good it is on its own terms.

People and groups

Chapter 7 is the long answer to this section. Here's the short version, with the types.

Conversation circles and meetups. Libraries, cultural centers and community groups often run free conversation circles. They're informal, they suit the Use It for Real step, and they're the easiest door to try. Go early and ask whether guests are welcome.

Language exchange. In an exchange you help someone with your language and they help you with theirs. It works best when both people prepare, and when you agree on rules at the start. Free exchange apps exist, and they come with their own safety questions.

Paid tutors. A tutor gives you regular speaking practice with someone whose job is to help you. Many marketplaces let you compare several tutors before you commit, so check what a first lesson costs. A tutor works best when you arrive with a plan: three things you want to practice, and a request to be corrected on one.

Terms worth knowing, because they differ. italki's terms describe a platform for people 18 and older.[29] Preply sets 18 as the rule for adults, with 13- to 17-year-olds allowed only with supervision.[30] Tandem asks users to be 16 or older, and its terms say it doesn't monitor messages or calls.[31] These are things to know, not reasons to skip any of them. They're reasons to set your own rules: public topics, no money, no personal details, and a report button you've found in advance.

Volunteering. Organizations that need your language often need your time too, and a volunteer role is a regular, structured reason to use it. VolunteerMatch is one place that lists volunteer openings.[36] A volunteer isn't an interpreter, and a good organization will say what you will and won't be asked to do.

Family and neighbors. The most underused resource is the person next door, or the one at the other end of the Sunday phone call. Ask them for ten minutes. It's free and it's kind, and they'll usually say yes.

Tools by type

Tools are here after classes and people on purpose. Chapter 8 covers them at length. This is the short map by type.

- **Flashcards with spaced review.** For Work With It. A paper card box does the job, and apps do the scheduling for you. Anki, for example, has a manual that explains how its review works.[22]
- **Dictionaries and reference.** For checking. A good dictionary is a tool you'll use for years. A grammar reference is the same.
- **Audio players with speed control.** For Take It In. Free ones are usually enough.
- **Language apps.** For a daily nudge. Pick one at a time, read the terms and the renewal date, and don't count the app's streak as proof of anything.
- **AI chat tools.** For practice and explanation after you've tried first. They make mistakes that sound confident. Chapter 8 has the rules.

- **Recording and note tools.** Your phone's voice recorder is the best of these. It feeds the recording shelf in Chapter 9.

An illustration: one learner's shelf. *Invented, to show the shape.* Imagine Elaine, an accountant in her fifties who wants her high-school Spanish back for a trip and for her new neighbors. On a Sunday she spends forty minutes with a sheet of paper. For *listening*, she chooses a public-media podcast she can play on her commute. For *reading*, a graded reader from the library. For *speaking*, a weekly conversation circle at the branch. For *practice*, a box of index cards she already owns. For *proof*, a one-minute recording on the first of each month. She crosses off the two apps on her phone she hadn't opened since spring, and the three bookmarked sites she'd never visit again. The shelf cost her nothing. She didn't spend a minute choosing between apps, because she hadn't added one. A month later she swaps the podcast, because it ran too fast, and the sheet stays on the fridge.

What a tool can't be. A tool can't be a person, and it can't be proof. If a tool is the only thing in your kit, you've got a gap where a human should be.

Matching types to the Hour. Here's the whole chapter on one screen, so to speak.

- **Set the Target:** the library walk, a call to a class, a conversation with a relative about what you'd like to be able to say. Mostly free, mostly people.
- **Take It In:** public media, audiobooks, graded readers, podcasts. Mostly free.
- **Work With It:** index cards, a notebook, a dictionary, a flashcard program if you like one. Free to low.
- **Use It for Real:** a circle, an exchange, a tutor, a class, a volunteer role, a neighbor. Free to paid, and always people.
- **Check and Log:** the practice strip, the recording shelf, a reference, and now and then a test. Free, except for the test.

If a step has nothing on your shelf, that's the gap to fill first. Most learners who say "I'm stuck" are missing the fourth line, and the fix is rarely a new app.

When to drop something. Dropping isn't failing. Drop a resource when you haven't touched it in three weeks, when it makes you feel worse and not better after a fair try, when it only repeats what you already know, or when the terms changed in a way you don't like. Drop it without ceremony, and cross it off the sheet. A shelf that never loses anything has stopped being a shelf and become a pile.

If money is tight. The first two rungs of the ladder are enough for a long time, and they include real people: the library, the circle, the neighbor, the volunteer shift. Pay for something only when you can name what it will do that the free option can't, such as regular feedback from a teacher.

If time is tight. Choose resources that live in the minutes you already have: audio for the commute, a card box in your bag, a ten-minute call on Sunday. Don't add a class to a week that has no room for it. A small plan you keep beats a large one you abandon, and that's the focus of this whole book.

If you're shy. Start with the doors that ask the least of you. A library circle where nobody expects you to talk much, a class where the teacher sets the pace, or a written exchange with one patient person. Then go one step further than is comfortable, and no more. You'll find that most people on the other side of these doors are glad you showed up.

Safety help

Most of this book's safety rules are small and sensible, and you'll rarely need more. But it's worth knowing where to go if something goes wrong.

Scams and money. If someone you met online asks you for money or gifts, stop. Tell your someone. If you've lost money or been targeted, the Federal Trade Commission's ReportFraud.ftc.gov is where to report it in the United States.[8] Chapter 7 has the three signs.

Language access. If you're ever on the other side of the table, needing an interpreter yourself for health care, benefits or services, Chapter 7 covers the federal rule on language assistance in health programs. LEP.gov is a federal site about language access, and a place to read more.[60]

An app or a person that makes you uncomfortable. Leave. Report. You don't owe anyone a reason, and you don't owe anyone a conversation. A good group or tutor will understand.

The earlier titles

If you share your life with young people, three earlier titles in the Languages series may help you with them. Each is its own book, and this one doesn't repeat them.

- *Languages for Little Thinkers* is the title for children from about 5 to 10.
- *Languages for Young Minds* is the title for ages 11 to 14.
- *Languages for Emerging Adults* is the title for ages 15 to 18.

If there's a child or a teenager in your life who'd like to learn alongside you, the one for their age is where to look.

You don't need them to use this book. They're here because language often runs in families, and because one of the best things an adult learner can do for a younger person is to be seen learning.

You try this week

Choose one from each column.

- **On the go: Library card walk** (20 minutes). Take your card and ask three questions.
- **At your desk: Sit in before you sign** (60 minutes). Write or call first, then go once.
- **A deeper sit: Shelf of five** (40 minutes). Choose one resource to listen to, one to read, one for speaking, one for practice and one for proof, and drop the rest.

Shelf of five (40 minutes · a sheet of paper · no screen · Check and Log)

Choose five resources: one to listen to, one to read, one for speaking, one for practice, one for proof. Write them on a single sheet and put it where you'll see it. Drop the rest. Write beside each one which step of the Hour it serves and which context it lives in. A month from now, look at the sheet again. If one is untouched, swap it. The sheet is meant to change.

A closing question for your notebook: *Which five things will I still be using in a month?*

A Note on Sources

Studies, standards, government pages and company terms named in the chapters are listed in Notes, in one series at the back, so the teaching pages can keep a plain, practical voice. When the same source comes up in several chapters, it has one note, and every mark that cites it carries that note's number. A Bibliography follows the Notes. Web pages were read on 25 October 2026, and each note gives that date.

Much of the research on language learning studies school classrooms, laboratories or college students, not adults fitting a language into a working week; this book borrows it carefully and treats it as guidance. Test formats, fees, dates, program rules and company terms change often, so check the current official page before you pay for or rely on any of them. The hours quoted from the Foreign Service Institute are the State Department's own planning figures, and the sums built from them in Chapter 1 are this book's arithmetic, not a promise.

The five-step Language Refresh Hour, the try-its, the context bands, the safety rules and the records plan are this book's own teaching design, not research findings. The people in the worked examples are illustrations, not real people. Nothing here is legal, medical, tax or immigration advice.

Some things I could not confirm, so the book says only what I could:

- The Spanish, French and Mandarin example lines are everyday models. They were checked with language tools, but a fluent speaker has not reviewed them, so ask someone who speaks the language before you rely on one.
- Several programs and organizations are named as places to look, and I did not read their pages in detail: TOPIK, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters, the federal courts' interpreter page, LEP.gov, the heritage-language organizations, VolunteerMatch and the free listening and reading sites named as examples.
- For some studies (Dunlosky and colleagues, Roediger and Karpicke, Cepeda and colleagues, Nakanishi) I confirmed the title, authors and journal, and the book describes the findings in general terms; read the paper before you quote a number.
- I did not state the minimum age for some chat apps or for OpenAI's service, because I could not read those terms on the date above.

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