



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## BEFORE READING

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# It's Not Talent; It's Just Work

An Essay by  
**Annie Dillard**

### ABOUT THE ESSAY

**"It's Not Talent; It's Just Work"** is an essay that challenges readers to rethink the idea of "talent." The author notes that many people use hard work and discipline to hone their abilities and achieve greatness. She invites the readers to do the same, and suggests that it is not talent that causes success. Read to find out more.

### MAKE CONNECTIONS

What motivates you to do your best?

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### ANALYZE LITERATURE: Supporting Details

**Supporting details** are minor ideas and details that provide support to the main ideas, or key topic, in a written work. As you read, locate basic facts and determine the importance of certain details on the essay.

## USE READING SKILLS: Main Idea

The **main idea** is the central thought of a written work. It is a brief statement that the author wants the reader to think, feel, and understand. The main idea is stated in the first or last paragraph of a passage in most cases, and sometimes the reader has to infer the main idea. As you read, enter the important details in the essay into the Main Idea Map below.

Paragraph	Main Idea

## PREVIEW VOCABULARY

<b>Key Words and Phrases</b> Read each key word and rate it using this scale: ① I don't know it at all. ② I've seen it before. ③ I know it and use it.	<b>Words and Phrases in Context</b> Read to see how the key word or phrase can be used in a sentence.	<b>Definition</b> Write down what you think the word or phrase means. Then use a dictionary to check your definition.	<b>Practice</b> Practice using the key words and phrases by completing the following sentences.
<b>queasy</b> quea · sy (kwe' ze) <i>adjective</i>  ①    ②    ③	The boat's movement is making Dana feel <b>queasy</b> .		Horror movies make some people feel <b>queasy</b> because...
<b>alienation</b> a · li · e · na · tion (a le ə na' shən) <i>noun</i>  ①    ②    ③	Because they have lived far apart for four years, all Harley can feel is <b>alienation</b> for Haruka.		<b>Alienation</b> happens between friends when they...
<b>off the hook</b> <i>idiom</i>  ①    ②    ③	For admitting quickly that he broke the lock, Sanjay is <b>off the hook</b> .		To get <b>off the hook</b> , the first thing you must do is...
<b>regimen</b> reg · i · men (re' jə mən) <i>noun</i>  ①    ②    ③	Uncle Jeremy's fitness <b>regimen</b> is very effective when done every day.		An athlete's daily <b>regimen</b> includes...
<b>masochism</b> mas · och · ism (ma's ək izəm) <i>noun</i>  ①    ②    ③	Katie, who hates Math, thinks that Math professors are known for their <b>masochism</b> .		Sports that seem to promote <b>masochism</b> are...
<b>perpetual</b> per · pet · u · al (pər pə' chə wəl) <i>adjective</i>  ①    ②    ③	Leon jokes that his mother is in <b>perpetual</b> motion because she is always moving around the house.		Time is <b>perpetual</b> , which means...

# It's Not Talent; It's Just Work

An Essay by

**Annie Dillard**

It's hard work, doing something with your life. The very thought of hard work makes me **queasy**. I'd rather die in peace. Here we are, all equal and alike and none of us much to write home about and some people choose to make themselves  
5 into physicists or thinkers or major-league pitchers, knowing perfectly well that it will be nothing but hard work. But I want to tell you that it's not as bad as it sounds. Doing something does not require discipline; it creates its own discipline—with a little help from caffeine.

10 People often ask me if I discipline myself to write, if I work a certain number of hours a day on a schedule. They ask this question with envy in their voices and awe on their faces and a sense of **alienation** all over them, as if they were addressing an armored tank or a talking giraffe or Niagara Falls. We want to believe that  
15 other people are natural wonders; it gets us off the hook.

Now, it happens that when I wrote my first book of prose<sup>1</sup>, I worked an hour or two a day for a while, and then in the last two months, I got excited and worked very hard, for many hours a day. People can lift cars when they want to. People can recite  
20 the Koran<sup>2</sup>, too, and run in marathons. These things aren't ways of life; they are merely possibilities for everyone on certain occasions of life. You don't lift cars around the clock or write books every year. But when you do, it's not so hard. It's not super-human. It's very human. You do it for love. You do it for love  
25 and respect for your own life; you do it for love and respect for the world; and you do it for love and respect for the task itself.

If I had a little baby, it would be hard for me to rise up and feed that little baby in the middle of the night. It would be hard but certainly wouldn't be a discipline. It wouldn't be a **regimen**  
30 I imposed on myself out of **masochism**, nor would it be the flowering of some extraordinary internal impulse. I would do it,

1. **prose**. A broad term used to describe all writing that is not poetry, which includes fiction and nonfiction

2. **Koran**. Holy book of the Islamic faith

## DURING READING

### Analyze Literature

**Supporting Details** What details does the author use to support the idea that hard work is not as bad as it sounds?

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**quea • sy** (kwe' ze) *adjective*,  
nauseated; uneasy

**a • li • e • na • tion** (a le ə na' shən) *noun*, distance or separation because of great differences

### Build Vocabulary

**Idioms** As you find words or phrases you do not know, try to guess what they mean. Then, discuss your answers with another student. What does the idiom *off the hook* mean?

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What gets people *off the hook* from hard work?

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### Read Aloud

Read lines 20–26 aloud. According to the author, what gives people the ability to do extraordinary things?

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## DURING READING

**reg • i • men** (re' jə mən) *noun*,  
regular course of action, especially  
strenuous training

**mas • och • ism** (ma' sə ki zəm)  
*noun*, pleasure in suffering

### Use Reading Skills

**Main Idea** Identify the important details in the essay and place these on the Main Idea Map.

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**per • pet • u • al** (pər pə' chə wəl) *adjective*, continuing forever

grumbling, for love and because it has to be done.

Of course it has to be  
35 done. And something has  
to be done with your life  
too: something specific,  
something human. But  
don't wait around to be



40 hit by love. Don't wait  
for anything. Learn something first. Then, when you are getting  
to know it, you will get to love it, and that love will direct you  
in what to do. So many times when I was in college, I used to  
say of a course like seventeenth-century poetry or European  
45 history, "I didn't like it at first, but now I like it." All of life is  
like that—a sort of dreary course which gradually gets inter-  
esting if you work at it.

### Think and Reflect

How does the author's view about life compare to your views?

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I used to live in **perpetual** dread that I would one day  
read all the books that I would ever be interested in and have  
50 nothing more to read. I always figured that when that time  
came I would force myself to learn wildflowers, just to keep  
awake. I dreaded it, because I was not very interested in wild-  
flowers but thought I should be. But things kept cropping up  
and one book has led to another and I haven't had to learn  
55 wildflowers yet. I don't think there's much danger of coming to  
the end of the line. The line is endless. I urge you to get in it, to  
get in line. It's a long line—but it's the only show in town.



If people love to do something, is it really work? Why?

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**READING CHECK**

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. According to the author, which of the following is not required in doing something?
  - A. love
  - B. respect
  - C. discipline
2. How does the author write her works?
  - A. She writes an hour every day.
  - B. She sets a number-of-pages goal.
  - C. She writes when she is inspired to write.
3. Why do we want to believe that others are naturally talented?
  - A. It frees us from criticism.
  - B. It protects us from sorrow.
  - C. It spares us from heartaches.
4. What does the author say she will do when she has nothing left to read?
  - A. She will write books with other authors.
  - B. She will learn about something else, like wildflowers.
  - C. She will go back to teaching at universities.
5. The essay mentions that we must learn something first. What happens when we know something and learn to love it?
  - A. The love completes our lives.
  - B. The love directs us what to do.
  - C. The love encourages more dreams.

**VOCABULARY CHECK**

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. The thought of hard work makes some people *queasy*. This means they feel
  - A. sick.
  - B. unhappy.
  - C. exhausted.
2. The actor feels a sense of *alienation* from his fans. He felt that there was
  - A. a distance between them.
  - B. a close and lasting bond.
  - C. a friendship and following.
3. A *regimen* is something that you must do
  - A. happily.
  - B. regularly.
  - C. suddenly.
4. Disciplined people do not practice *masochism* as most people imagine. They don't enjoy
  - A. working.
  - B. pleasing.
  - C. suffering.
5. Living in *perpetual* dread can be tiring because it
  - A. stops frequently.
  - B. pauses occasionally.
  - C. continues constantly.

**ANALYZE LITERATURE: Supporting Details**

The supporting details on the essay add weight to the main idea that the author wants to share. From what does the author base the majority of her supporting details?

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