



HOW TO GET INTO A PROGRAMMING BOOTCAMP

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A Personal Letter

I didn't know what I wanted to do after college. Regardless, ten days after graduation I started working full-time as a management consultant. I was basically a glorified excel jockey – it sucked. However, I found pleasure in hacking together VBA scripts to automate my workbooks and make them dance. That was cool.

I dreamed about working as a software engineer. Over the course of the next two years I discovered that learning to code and working a full-time job is hard. After several false starts, I decided to go all-in summer of 2013. I moved to SF and attended [App Academy](http://www.appacademy.io/)¹. A month after graduating I showcased my final project to a random person who just happened to work at a [startup](https://www.quixey.com/)². Another month later, I pushed my first commit to production. I was wide awake, the dream became reality.

Attending a programming bootcamp was one of the best decisions I made in my life. I learned more about code in my first two weeks than the two years combined. I got my dream job and was making over six figures for the first time. Thanks to that job I paid off my tuition and saved enough money to go traveling throughout Asia. It really did change my life.

I had many questions when I was researching bootcamps: What is the application process like? What is a typical day like? How do I know whether the bootcamp is legit? Where are the graduates today? Am I really going to get a job after this? The list goes on.

Aside from a couple of blog posts from former students, there wasn't much information or advice online. To my surprise this still seems to be the case two years later. Since graduating I've spent several

¹<http://www.appacademy.io/>

²<https://www.quixey.com/>

hours guiding friends through the process and coaching them on how to get accepted. After several requests I made the time to write out all the things I wish I knew before starting my journey.

Good luck on your application.

Cheers,

– Joe

Intended Audience

I wrote this guide for people who are exploring and/or seriously considering attending a programming bootcamp. More specifically:

Perhaps you've completed a couple of tutorials and think programming may be right for you. Alas, you don't have a C.S. degree though. But you heard about these bootcamps that teach you enough to get a job. It sounds too good to be true so you want some more information.

Perhaps you've already decided to apply but want more information and tips on the application process.

Or perhaps you've already been accepted to bootcamp but want tips for ensuring success.

If one or more of these accurately describe you, I am confident you will find this guide useful.

What is a Programming Bootcamp?

Programming bootcamps are intense vocational programs. A good one will give you the relevant skills to work as a web or mobile developer after graduating. Programs are typically 9-12 weeks, with some even being as long as six months. Longer programs will cost more and push back your employment start date, but they will be less intense and give you an opportunity to learn more before starting full-time. Nonetheless, a good 9-12 week program will adequately prepare you for work.

Class formally lasts about 8 hours each day. Only 1-2 hours will be lecture. Most of the time will be spent writing code. Including out-of-class time, expect to spend around 8 hours a day coding. If this does not sound appealing I would reconsider working as a programmer.

Similar to learning an instrument, learning to code is largely a function of practice. Lectures are meant to introduce and clarify programming concepts. The bulk of the learning comes from solving actual problems. Each day you will be assigned challenges and projects to complete. You will break into pairs and spend the whole day coding. Several times my partner and I would continue to work after class ended. If we still didn't finish I would continue working alone at home and compare my solutions with my partner the next day. There will also be an aggressive amount of assigned reading. Expect 1-2 hours per day and a couple of whole books to read every other weekend.

As a result of all this work, you will gain significant knowledge and build a marketable portfolio of projects. These will set you apart during the interview process. Having real working code samples

speaks louder than a C.S. degree.

After bootcamp ends, if you worked hard and learned well, you will be ready to enter the industry as a professional developer. But make no mistake, if you are serious about programming, you still have a long way to go. It takes longer than 12 weeks to be a skilled developer. However, a programming bootcamp will make you dangerous enough to start working as a software engineer!

Why Attend a Programming Bootcamp?

If you don't have a 4-year C.S. degree, attending a bootcamp is the fastest way to learn the basics of modern web/mobile development. You can try to learn the basics on your own, but it will be difficult. Modern web development is a complicated mess these days. There are several technologies and concepts you need to learn. HTTP, Databases, Authentication, Authorization, MVC, SQL, Python/Ruby/JavaScript, XSS, SQL-Injection, Caching, Deployment... the list goes on.

It can be overwhelming to try to learn all these on your own. Where do you start? What are the best resources for learning? How do all these concepts fit together?

Having an organized curriculum removes these burdens and allows you to start learning immediately. There is a lot to learn and it's pretty complicated, the less confusion and friction the better it is for you.

Another major benefit of attending a bootcamp is that you will be surrounded by a group of similarly-motivated peers. This will keep you disciplined and honest. Spending 8+ hours a day, 5 days a week, for 3 months straight, learning to code is not an easy feat. Try doing this by yourself for two weeks, you'll soon understand what I'm talking about.

Having other people nearby will help you during the hard times. Sometimes you feel exhausted. Your peers will inspire you to press forward. Sometimes you can't get your code to run. Your peers will help you hunt bugs. Sometimes you just feel stupid and not cut out to be a programmer. Your peers will feel the same way, and together you will cheer each other on.

Having others supporting you makes a huge difference. When you're in that room, surrounded by all those determined people, the energy is amazing. Personally, I think this is the biggest asset of an in-person bootcamp.

Another major benefit is having knowledgeable instructors and TAs. Bugs in your code can be very frustrating. What should have been a straight-forward five minute task can unexpectedly balloon into a two hour head-scratching session.

It can be very demoralizing to get stuck and not know how to proceed. Having an experienced eye diagnose the problem is a huge boon. Instead of wasting hours, you may lose only a few minutes. Furthermore, if the bug is not a simple syntax error, the instructor may be able to clarify a concept you misunderstood. Watching a more experienced developer debug is a lesson in itself. Next time you encounter a similar issue you will know a few extra tricks to diagnose the problem. Knowing how to debug is an important skill for a developer. Watching an experienced developer is one of the best ways to learn this skill.

Finally, attending a bootcamp is certainly going to be a unique experience. You will learn so much so quickly. I learned more in my first two weeks than in two years of on and off self study (while working full-time). Furthermore, you will make great friends who will also be your colleagues in the industry.

I don't think it's an exaggeration to claim that going through a programming bootcamp will change your life. Here's an anecdote about a guy in my cohort, we'll call him Jeff (not his real name).

Jeff was a smart, hard-working and all-around great guy. He was a family man too – married and father to a toddler. He worked for a research lab before attending bootcamp. Despite his advanced degree and research experience, he was barely making above minimum wage. In any case, he saved up his money for our bootcamp. For three months he was away from his wife and son. Jeff was making a huge bet.

He was the first person in our class to get a job. \$120k, benefits, relocation bonus, the works. We were all stoked for him. As of this writing he still works for the same company and still enjoys code. He moved his family up to San Francisco and they are living a much more stress-free life. There's no doubt in my mind that bootcamp changed Jeff's life.

Honestly, it changed mine too. There's a good chance it would change yours as well.

The Application Process

The application process is fairly straight-forward. It contains a few parts. First you respond to a questionnaire and maybe submit a video. These are meant to introduce yourself and indicate your interest in the bootcamp.

Next you will be invited to complete a timed programming assessment. This will gauge your understanding of basic programming concepts. All of which can be learned free of charge on the web.

If you pass the coding challenge, you will be invited for a live coding challenge over Skype. The problems will be harder so make sure you're prepared. You may have to do multiple interviews before getting accepted.

Finally, you may have to complete some pre course-work before being officially accepted. This means you're pretty much in. Finish the assigned work and feel free to celebrate – you've been accepted!

The turn-around from initial application to conditional acceptance (being assigned pre course-work) is typically 1-2 weeks. However, you can push this back if you feel like you need additional time between steps. This part of the guide focuses on each step in greater detail.