

The Infinite Iteration: A Comprehensive Analysis of "Try Again" Across Culture, Media, and Computation

1. Introduction: The Anatomy of Persistence

The imperative to "Try Again" constitutes one of the most durable and ubiquitous command structures in the English language. It functions simultaneously as a moral precept, a lyrical hook, a gameplay mechanic, and, increasingly, a foundational computational protocol. From the Victorian schoolrooms where William Edward Hickson formalized the adage "If at first you don't succeed..." to the vast server farms where Large Language Models (LLMs) rigorously evaluate and regenerate outputs in a continuous loop of automated refinement, the concept of "trying again" has evolved from a virtue of character into a structural necessity of modern systems.

This report provides an exhaustive analysis of the title "Try Again" and its associated meanings across four distinct but interconnected domains: Literature and Oral Tradition, Popular Music and Media, Interactive Entertainment, and Artificial Intelligence. While these fields may appear disparate, they are united by a shared reliance on iteration. Whether it is a lover pleading for a second chance in an R&B ballad, a video game character respawning after a fatal error, an immigrant navigating the bureaucracy of a border crossing, or an AI agent adjusting its parameters to better scaffold a student's learning within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the underlying mechanism remains the same: failure is not a conclusion, but a data point for the next attempt.

The following analysis draws upon a wide array of sources, ranging from 19th-century educational manuals and chart-topping Billboard statistics to technical papers on "LLM-as-a-Judge" frameworks and GitHub repositories for next-generation educational software. By synthesizing these diverse strands, we reveal how "Try Again" has transformed from a simple encouragement of perseverance into a complex, algorithmic, and cultural phenomenon that defines how we learn, love, and compute in the 21st century.

2. The Literary and Moral Roots: From Spiders to Schoolbooks

The command to "try again" is deeply embedded in the cultural DNA of the English-speaking world, primarily through a specific proverb that has been recited to generations of children. However, the origins and attributions of this phrase reveal a complex history of transmission and variation that mirrors the very persistence the proverb advocates. Furthermore, contemporary literature has reinterpreted this Victorian mandate to address complex modern

realities, from the geopolitical trauma of border crossings to the nuanced developmental psychology of early childhood education.

2.1 The Hickson-Palmer Debate and the Victorian Ethos

The canonical form of the proverb—"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again"—is most accurately attributed to William Edward Hickson, a British educational writer and editor of *The Westminster Review*. Hickson included the lyrics in his 1836 book *The Singing Master*, specifically in a piece titled "Perseverance; Or Try Again".¹ The lyrics were intended as a moral instruction for children, emphasizing courage and the conquest of fear through repeated effort. The verse explicates that "If at first you don't succeed, / Try again," and promises that through perseverance, one will "conquer, never fear".³

Hickson's work was influential in establishing the rhyme as a staple of moral education. However, a parallel claim to the phrase's popularization exists in the United States, attributed to Thomas H. Palmer, an educator who included a variation in his *Teacher's Manual* published in 1840.¹ Palmer's version, "Try, try again," slightly alters the meter but retains the core message. The historical consensus suggests that while Palmer may have introduced the phrase to American audiences, Hickson's publication predates Palmer's by four years, granting him the claim of priority.²

This minor controversy over authorship highlights the proverb's function as folk wisdom; it is a meme that replicates by being taught to the young, often detached from its original author. The repetition of the word "try"—sometimes twice ("try, try again"), sometimes thrice ("try, try, try again")—serves a rhythmic function that reinforces the semantic meaning of the command.⁵ The "Mandela Effect" discussions surrounding the number of "trys" in the original quote underscores how the phrase has mutated in oral culture, yet the core instruction remains invariant.

2.2 The Legend of Robert the Bruce

Long before Hickson or Palmer, the ethos of "try again" was mythologized in the legend of Robert the Bruce, the 14th-century King of Scots. According to the legend, while hiding in a cave following a devastating defeat by the English, Robert watched a spider attempt to spin a web across the cave's opening. The spider failed repeatedly, falling and losing its thread, yet it continued to climb and spin until it finally succeeded. Inspired by the arachnid's refusal to accept failure, Robert returned to the battlefield to lead his troops to victory.¹

This legend provides the narrative backbone for the later Victorian rhymes. It grounds the abstract concept of perseverance in observation of the natural world, suggesting that "trying again" is not just a human moral imperative but a fundamental law of survival. The spider does not "try again" out of moral duty, but out of existential necessity—a theme that resurfaces, as we shall see, in the behavior of autonomous AI agents. The trajectory of the phrase maps a cultural shift. It begins in 14th-century folklore with Robert the Bruce, enters the Victorian

curriculum via Hickson, is subverted by W.C. Fields in the mid-20th century who added the cynical addendum "Then quit. There's no use being a damn fool about it," and is finally deconstructed by Samuel Beckett.

2.3 Literary Modernism and the Cynical Turn

In the 20th century, the optimistic Victorian imperative underwent a cynical deconstruction. The American comedian W.C. Fields famously subverted the proverb: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There's no use being a damn fool about it".² This addendum introduces the concept of *diminishing returns* and the *sunk cost fallacy* to the ethos of persistence. It marks a cultural shift from blind perseverance to strategic pragmatism.

Similarly, the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett offered a bleak but potent distillation of the concept in *Worstward Ho* (1983): "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better".⁶ Beckett's version removes the promise of ultimate success ("If you will persevere, / You will conquer"³) and replaces it with the improvement of failure. In Beckett's modernist view, success is not the goal; rather, the refinement of the attempt is the only attainable victory. This philosophy of "failing better" has surprisingly been adopted by the tech startup culture of Silicon Valley, where iteration—rapid failure and retrying—is viewed as the primary engine of innovation.⁶

2.4 Contemporary Literature: Borders and Behavior

In contemporary literature, the theme of "trying again" has migrated from general moral instruction to specific sociopolitical and psychological contexts.

2.4.1 The Geopolitics of "Let Me Try Again"

In the collection *Starshine and Clay* by Kamilah Aisha Moon, the poem "Let Me Try Again" recontextualizes the phrase within the harrowing experience of undocumented immigration. The poem describes the encounter between migrants and a border agent. Instead of the expected detention, the agent, perhaps remembering his own family's history, drives them to the border and offers instructions for a future attempt: "next time rest at least five days. Don't trust anyone calling themselves coyotes. Bring more tortillas, sardines...".⁷

Here, "Try Again" is not a whimsical motto but a matter of life and death. The "try" is a physical crossing of a geopolitical line, and the "failure" is potentially fatal. The poem transforms the Victorian virtue of persistence into a narrative of survival against systemic barriers. The border agent's advice functions as a "scaffold" for the migrants' next attempt, mirroring the educational scaffolding discussed later in this report, but with exponentially higher stakes.

2.4.2 Developmental Psychology in Children's Literature

On the other end of the spectrum, the 2026 children's book *Let's Try Again Another Day* addresses the emotional regulation required to handle failure. The book uses vibrant primary

colors to symbolize the energy of learning and soft pastels for comfort. Uniquely, the illustrations incorporate "scribbles that evolve throughout the story," starting small and growing chaotic to mirror the frustration of the characters.⁸

This visual narrative technique acknowledges that "trying again" is emotionally taxing. The scribbles represent the internal entropy that must be managed before a new attempt can be made. The text validates the decision to stop and "try again another day," aligning more with W.C. Fields' pragmatism or mental health awareness than Hickson's relentless drive. It teaches that rest is a component of persistence, a sophisticated nuance for a children's book that reflects modern pedagogical understanding of the "Zone of Proximal Development."

3. Sonic Persistence: "Try Again" in Music

In the realm of popular music, "Try Again" shifts from a moral command to a plea for romantic reconciliation or a declaration of resilience. The title has graced the covers of numerous singles, but two distinct tracks—one a smooth R&B ballad from the 1980s, the other a futuristic pop-R&B anthem from the turn of the millennium—dominate the cultural landscape.

3.1 Aaliyah's "Try Again": The Sound of the New Millennium

Released on February 22, 2000, Aaliyah's "Try Again" is arguably the most culturally significant work bearing the title. Produced by Timbaland and written by Static Major, the song was the lead single for the soundtrack of the film *Romeo Must Die*, in which Aaliyah starred alongside Jet Li.⁹

3.1.1 Production and Aesthetics

Musically, the track is a landmark of the "future-soul" aesthetic that defined late-90s/early-2000s R&B. It blends elements of electro, dance-pop, and trip-hop with an acid house influence.⁹ The production is characterized by Timbaland's signature stuttering synths and complex, syncopated percussion—a sonic embodiment of the concept of "trying again," where the beat itself seems to stumble, reset, and find its groove. The intro interpolates the classic hip-hop opening "It's been a long time, I shouldn't have left you..." from Eric B. & Rakim, signaling a return and a renewed attempt.⁹

The lyrical delivery by Aaliyah is executed in a breathy, falsetto style that contrasts with the mechanical rigidity of the beat. The song flips the traditional script of pursuit; rather than the pursuer begging for a chance, the narrator encourages a potential partner who has been rejected not to give up: "If at first you don't succeed, dust yourself off and try again".⁹ It repurposes the Hickson/Palmer proverb for the dance floor, transforming a lesson in moral fortitude into a game of romantic courtship. The song suggests that rejection is not final, but merely a part of the "process" of attraction.

3.1.2 Commercial Impact and Chart History

"Try Again" achieved a historic milestone in music industry history. Historical data confirms that on the week of June 17, 2000, the track achieved a singular distinction: it became the first song to top the *Billboard Hot 100* based exclusively on radio airplay, without a commercial single release available for purchase in record stores.¹⁰ This anomaly underscores the immense popularity of the song; despite fans being unable to buy it directly, their demand for hearing it on the radio was sufficient to propel it to the top spot. It also topped the charts in the UK, Germany, and Switzerland.¹¹ This "airplay-only" victory can be read as a meta-commentary on the song's theme: the industry rules prevented a standard sales victory, so the song "tried again" through a different avenue (radio) and succeeded.

3.2 Champaign's "Try Again": The 80s Ballad

In stark contrast to Aaliyah's electro-futurism, the band Champaign released a song titled "Try Again" in February 1983.¹³ This track is a traditional R&B ballad that peaked at #23 on the *Billboard Hot 100*. Written by Dana Walden, Rocky Maffitt, and Michael Day, the song deals with the familiar trope of rekindling a failing relationship.¹³

Here, "Try Again" is a plea for emotional restoration, devoid of the mechanical persistence found in later iterations. It represents the "human" element of the phrase—the vulnerability of admitting failure and asking for a second chance. The song's structure, heavily reliant on keyboards and backing vocals¹³, builds a "wall of sound" that envelopes the listener in the sentiment of regret and hope.

3.3 Cross-Cultural and Modern Interpretations

The phrase "Try Again" continues to resonate in global music markets, serving as a versatile vessel for different emotional tenors.

3.3.1 Teyana Taylor and the Modern R&B Landscape

More recently, artist Teyana Taylor released a track titled "Try Again".¹⁴ This iteration features a collaborative writing team including Nija Charles and Scribz Riley.¹⁴ While Aaliyah's version was an encouragement to a suitor, modern R&B interpretations often focus on self-love and the exhaustion of trying in toxic relationships. The persistence of the title in the genre highlights R&B's enduring preoccupation with the cyclical nature of love and heartbreak.

3.3.2 The Cantopop Connection: Sammi Cheng

In the Asian market, the phrase bridged the gap between music and television. The Hong Kong drama *Love and Again* (2002) featured an opening theme song titled "Try Again," performed by Cantopop superstar Sammi Cheng.¹⁵ The song functions as a thematic overture for the show's plot, which involves supernatural romance and second chances at life. The upbeat, energetic delivery typical of Cheng's style frames "trying again" as an optimistic, almost magical opportunity, contrasting with the melancholic pleading of Western ballads.

4. Visualizing Repetition: Film, Television, and Narrative

The title "Try Again" appears frequently in screen media, often signaling narratives about time loops, second chances, or the struggle against inevitable outcomes. In these visual mediums, the concept of "trying again" is externalized into plot mechanics and character arcs.

4.1 *Romeo Must Die* and the Cinematic Link

The song "Try Again" is inextricably linked to the film *Romeo Must Die* (2000). The music video, directed by Wayne Isham, features Jet Li and incorporates martial arts choreography, bridging the gap between the lyrical theme of persistence and the physical discipline of martial arts.¹¹ The film's plot, a loose adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, inherently deals with the desire to rewrite a tragic destiny—to "try again" in a world where conflict seems preordained. The presence of the song in the film's marketing created a symbiotic relationship where the ethos of the fighter (training, failing, trying again) became merged with the ethos of the lover.

4.2 *Doc* (2025): "Try Try Again"

In the television landscape, the phrase recently served as the title for the second episode of the 2025 medical drama *Doc*. The episode, titled "...Try Try Again," aired on January 14, 2025.¹⁶ The narrative context here is profoundly neurological and psychological. The protagonist, Dr. Amy Larsen, suffers a traumatic brain injury and loses eight years of memory. She must literally "try again" to be a doctor, relearning her profession and her relationships from a blank slate.¹⁶

The episode title references the proverb but applies it to the reconstruction of the self. Unlike the voluntary persistence of Robert the Bruce's spider, Amy's persistence is a struggle for identity. She attempts to insert herself into cases she no longer remembers how to solve, leading to conflict with the hospital board.¹⁶ This usage of "Try Again" highlights the *danger* of uncalibrated persistence—a theme echoed in the snippet about W.C. Fields ("Then quit..."). Amy's attempts to "try again" without the necessary scaffolding (her lost memories) endanger her patients, suggesting that persistence without competence is reckless.

4.3 Asian Media: The "Try Again" Trope in K-Drama

The concept of "trying again" is a dominant leitmotif in South Korean television dramas, often explicitly referenced in episode titles, OSTs, or critical reviews.

- **Prison Playbook (2017):** A review titled "When Je Hyeok Fails, Try, Try Again" ¹⁸ highlights the central theme of the character Kaist, who exhibits a relentless, almost comical persistence in smuggling cigarettes. This narrative arc uses "trying again" to humanize a criminal character, showing that the drive to succeed (even in illicit activities) is a universal trait.

- **Hello Monster (I Remember You):** Reviews of this drama frame the relationship between two separated brothers as a series of attempts to reconnect or "try again" at being a family.¹⁹ The villain's persistence in waiting for his brother creates a tension where "trying again" becomes a form of psychological haunting.
- **Run On:** Viewer discussions centering on the character development in *Run On* often cite the need to "try again" with the drama despite slow pacing.²⁰ Here, the "try again" applies to the *audience's* relationship with the media product itself. The consumption of serialized media requires a form of persistence from the viewer, who must return week after week even when the narrative lags.

4.4 European and Indie Cinema

The theme extends to European cinema with the upcoming Dutch film *Please Try Again Later* (expected 2025). The film follows two young protagonists, Bobje and Alima, whose lives intersect during a solar storm that wipes out digital infrastructure.²¹ The title is a play on the standard error message of the digital age. In a world without digital "retries" or connection, the characters must find a way to connect on a human level. It juxtaposes the technological "try again" (which has failed) with the human "try again" (which must succeed for survival). Additionally, a short film titled *Try Again* (2025), described as a "Romantic Sci-Fi Fantasy," suggests the continued relevance of the title in independent film circuits.²²

5. The Gamification of Failure

Video games are the only medium where "trying again" is not just a theme, but a fundamental mechanism of interaction. The title "Try Again" has been adopted by several indie games that comment on this recursive nature of the medium.

5.1 *Try Again* (The Rejects, 2023)

Released in July 2023, *Try Again* by the developer "the Rejects" is a 2.5D meta-platformer.²³ The protagonist is "Benny," a test character trapped in an unfinished game. The narrative is explicitly about the development process and the iteration required to build a functional world. Benny must "defy expectations to become the main character," symbolizing the transition from a test object (a failure) to a hero (a success) through repeated trials.²³

This game embodies the "fail better" philosophy. The player's repeated failures are diegetic—they are part of the story of Benny being a "test" character. It breaks the fourth wall, acknowledging that every "try again" is a piece of data used to refine the final product.

5.2 *Try Again* (LORD\$, 2022)

Another title, released in October 2022 by the band LORD\$, uses the game format as a vehicle for music distribution.²⁵ Described as a "Zelda-like parody," it features boss fights against Satan and includes tracks by Thundercat and Anderson.Paak. Here, "Try Again" refers

to the loop of the game but also likely alludes to the vinyl release it accompanies—the needle dropping again and again. The "Game Over" screen is not an end, but a transition to a new musical track or visual gag, turning failure into a content delivery system.

5.3 The Psychology of the Respawn

The phrase "Try Again" is synonymous with the "Game Over" screen. In modern gaming culture, the cost of failure has been lowered to encourage experimentation. This "infinite lives" model has influenced how younger generations perceive failure—not as a permanent state, but as a temporary setback requiring a new strategy. This cultural shift aligns with the "Fail Better" philosophy of Beckett, repurposed for a digital age where resurrection is just a button press away.

6. The Algorithmic "Try Again": AI, Scaffolding, and Automated Refinement

Perhaps the most profound contemporary application of the "Try Again" imperative is found in the field of Artificial Intelligence. In the domain of Large Language Models (LLMs) and educational technology, "trying again" has been operationalized into a rigorous engineering principle known as **iterative refinement**, **self-correction**, or **scaffolding**. This section explores how the "Try Again" ethos has been encoded into the logic of machines.

6.1 LLM-as-a-Judge and the Evaluation Loop

Recent research (2025-2026) highlights the emergence of "LLM-as-a-Judge" frameworks. These systems use one AI model to evaluate the output of another, creating a feedback loop that mimics the human editorial process.²⁶

- **The Workflow:** An LLM generates a response (e.g., a SQL query or a summary). A second "Judge" LLM evaluates this response against a rubric (faithfulness, relevance, correctness). If the response fails the rubric, the system triggers a "Try Again" signal, prompting the Generator to revise its output based on the Judge's feedback.²⁷
- **The "Verdict" Framework:** Tools like *Verdict* allow developers to chain these judges together, creating complex dependencies where an AI might try 3 or 4 times to get an answer right before presenting it to the user.²⁸ This is the automation of Hickson's "If at first you don't succeed..."
- **RAG Faithfulness:** In Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG), the "Try Again" mechanism is critical for preventing hallucinations. If a Judge determines that an AI's answer is not "grounded" in the provided citations, it forces a regeneration.²⁹ The snippet³⁹ shows specific YAML configurations for "context-faithfulness" assertions in *Promptfoo*, a tool used to test these loops. A threshold of "0.8" faithfulness might be set; if the model scores 0.7, the pipeline fails, and the developer must adjust the prompt—effectively telling the system to "try again" with better instructions.

6.2 EducationQ: The Multi-Agent Classroom

The most sophisticated application of this concept is in AI tutoring systems, specifically those designed around the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**. The **EducationQ Framework**³¹ simulates a classroom where multiple AI agents interact to optimize learning.

- **The Architecture:** The framework consists of three distinct agents:
 1. **The Teacher Agent:** Provides instruction and hints.
 2. **The Student Agent:** Simulates a learner attempting to solve problems.
 3. **The Evaluator Agent:** Acts as the "Judge," monitoring the interaction.
- **The Metrics of Persistence:** The Evaluator measures success not just by the final answer, but by the *Absolute Learning Gain (ALG)* and the *Positive-Negative Impact Ratio (PNIR)*.³³
- **Scaffolding and ZPD:** The core metric here is the alignment with the ZPD. The Evaluator checks if the Teacher's "try again" prompt (the scaffold) was appropriate for the student's current level. Did the Teacher give the answer away? Or did it provide a hint that allowed the Student to "try again" and succeed on their own? This mirrors the Robert the Bruce legend: the spider (student) must spin the web itself, but the cave (teacher/environment) provides the structure.

The EducationQ Framework: Automated Pedagogical Refinement

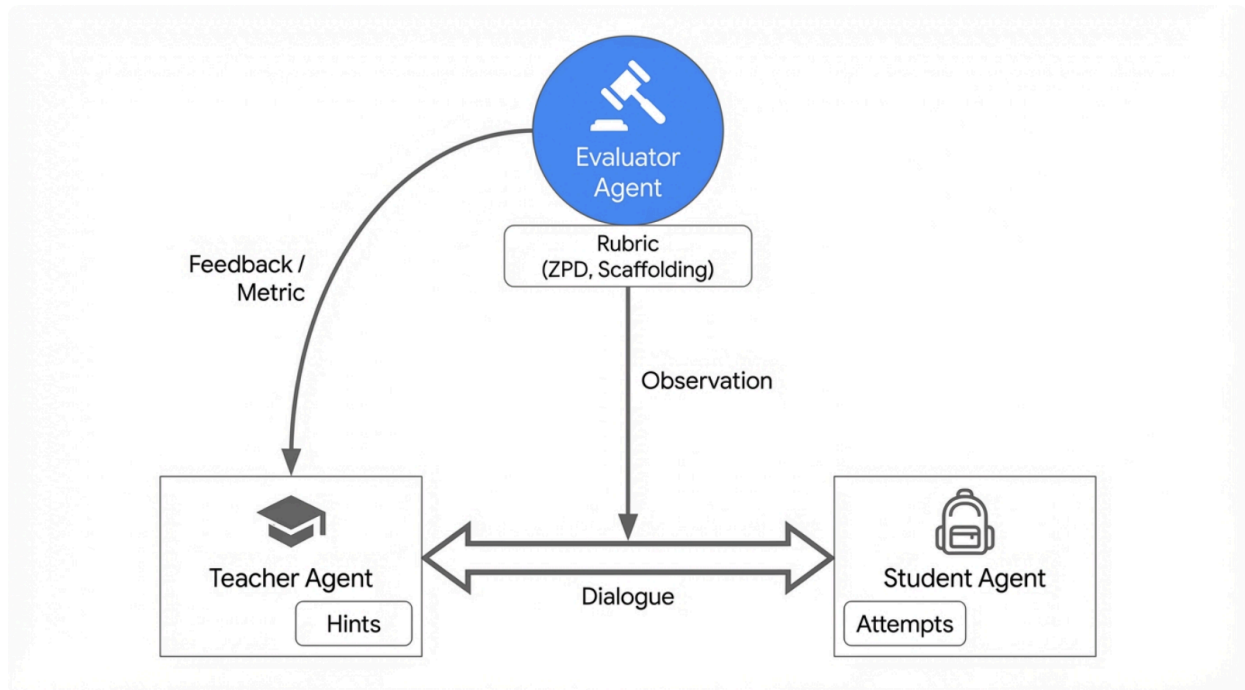


Figure 3: The EducationQ architecture. The Evaluator Agent (top) monitors the dialogue between the Teacher Agent and Student Agent. It assesses the Teacher's use of 'Scaffolding' within the Student's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD), providing feedback that refines the Teacher's strategy in subsequent turns.

6.3 MathTutorBench: Benchmarking the "Try"

The **MathTutorBench**³⁵ extends this by providing a standardized dataset to test how well AI models handle the "try again" scenario in mathematics. It specifically evaluates "Teacher Response Generation" for scaffolding capabilities.

- **The Rubric:** The system uses a reward model trained to prefer responses that "encourage self-correction" over those that simply state facts.³⁶
- **The Prompt:** The system prompt explicitly instructs the AI: "the teacher should help the student to cognitively engage with the problem and discover the answer on their own".³⁶ This is the codification of the "Try Again" proverb into a machine learning objective function. The AI is punished for ending the struggle (giving the answer) and rewarded for sustaining the "try" (scaffolding).

6.4 The Industrialization of Perseverance

What we observe in these technical developments is the industrialization of the "Try Again"

ethos. In the 19th century, perseverance was a manual, internal moral effort. In the 21st century, it is an automated, externalized computational process. We have built machines that "try again" on our behalf, billions of times per second, to optimize everything from code generation to algebra tutoring. The "fail better" of Beckett is now a "fail faster" CI/CD pipeline, where tools like *Promptfoo* and *DeepEval* run thousands of test cases³⁷ to ensure that when the AI finally speaks, it has already "tried again" enough times to be correct.

7. Conclusion: The Eternal Return

The survey of the title "Try Again" reveals a trajectory that moves from the mythic to the mechanical, spanning centuries of human (and now non-human) development.

- **Mythic:** The spider in the cave (Nature's persistence).
- **Moral:** Hickson's rhyme (Character building).
- **Sonic:** Aaliyah's anthem (Romantic resilience).
- **Narrative:** *Doc and Romeo Must Die* (Fighting fate/memory).
- **Mechanical:** Video game respawns (Low-stakes iteration).
- **Algorithmic:** LLM Judges (Automated perfection).

While the contexts change, the core meaning remains stable: the first attempt is rarely the final one. Whether it is a child learning a lesson, a lover seeking a second chance, or a neural network minimizing a loss function, "Try Again" is the universal algorithm of improvement. In a world increasingly defined by rapid change and complex systems, the ability to iterate—to fail, assess, and retry—has become the single most valuable skill. The history of "Try Again" is the history of our refusal to accept the first draft of reality as the final one.

The Many Meanings of 'Try Again'

DOMAIN	PRIMARY AGENT	THE GOAL	THE MECHANISM
Literature	The Learner	Prevail & Conquer	Patience & Perseverance
Music	Potential Partner	Romantic Success	Persistence after Rejection
Gaming	Test Character (Benny)	Become Main Character	Navigation & Respawn
Artificial Intelligence	The Student	Bridge Knowledge Gap	Scaffolding & Feedback

Table 1: A domain-by-domain analysis of the 'Try Again' imperative, contrasting the agent of action and the definition of success in each field.

Data sources: [Fortis Academy](#), [Wikipedia](#), [Steam](#), [MDPI](#)

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