

Starting Strength

Rest Between Sets

by

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One of the most frequently asked repetitive inquiries on the forum is: “How much should I be resting between sets?” The confusion isn’t limited to the forum, either. Discussions with lifters at our seminars and training camps, as well as in my own coaching practice, very often involve clarifying misunderstandings on the topic. And despite all the forum posts and Rip’s excellent indispensable [“The First Three Questions”](#) article, it’s still an area requiring more overt elucidation for the beginner.

The Concept

The first, most important thing to establish is the understanding that this question is being asked in the context of training for strength: the production of force against an external resistance. Just as it’s as silly to expect training for strength to involve the same parameters as training for interpretive dance, it’s equally silly to expect training for strength would be the same as training for local muscular endurance or other goals that people “go to the gym” to accomplish. You might own a membership to the same facility and use some of the same equipment, but the similarities in what you’re doing are merely skin deep.



When training for strength, the priority is and must be doing things that result in an increase in your ability to produce force. You do that most efficiently for a while by lifting progressively heavier weight every time you train. Your rest period must reflect that priority.

If a shortened rest between sets impedes your ability to lift more weight for the prescribed number of sets and reps because you’re not fully recovered from the previous set, then it’s too short. If your rest is so long that it impedes your ability to lift more weight for the prescribed sets and reps because you’ve cooled down too much, then it’s too long. Whatever is in between those two is just fine.

So the first important thing for you to understand is that the correct amount of rest between sets is not a prescribed amount of time that will be the same every time for every person in every

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circumstance. Instead, it's a concept: you rest long enough to be as ready as possible to perform the next set, but not so long that you lose that readiness.

From Concept to Practice

Now that you understand the concept, let's talk practice. Inexperienced lifters won't have any idea how to translate that concept into actual rest periods at the gym, so they'll need some guidance. However, if you truly understand the concept, you also know that this guidance can only be general in nature and there will be variances between individuals depending on age, sex, training environment, and many others.

Most untrained novices can perform their first few workouts with only a minute or two rest between sets. They're so thoroughly unadapted to training that they aren't able to exert enough force to require much recovery. A minute or two after applying their current maximum effort, they can apply another maximum effort. Deadpool would surely be proud.

After a week or two, some adaptation has taken place and most people are already squatting 25-50 more pounds than they were before. You'll need more rest to recover from more strenuous bouts, and 3 minutes between sets is usually required at this point. After another few weeks, with significantly more weight on the bar than when you began, 3 minutes isn't cutting it anymore. Moving the rest up to about 5 minutes between sets is usually necessary at this point. By the time in the LP that a lifter needs to make the middle day a light day, 5-7 minutes rest between sets is the norm. By the late stage LP when there's a light day and perhaps a top set and two back-off sets, or some triples instead of fives, 7-10 minutes rest is the norm.

I personally find that I cool off with more than 10 minutes rest, but there have certainly been reports of successfully completed late LP or Texas Method volume day workouts with 12, 15, even 20 minutes rest between sets. As mentioned above, this is useful as a general guideline only, and not a specific prescription for every person under every circumstance. If you need to rest *more* than the guidelines above, go ahead – and if you realize during the set that you rested too long and got cold, then you learned a valuable lesson which you can apply to your future training.

The main point for this section isn't that you can't rest more than outlined above. It's that, for heaven's sake, don't rest *less*!

Tell Me: Who Are You?!

I'd really like to end the article right there with an emphatic exhortation to rest more, not less. But unfortunately, here in the real world there are practical considerations that must be taken into account.

With the popularity of strength training on the rise and more people than ever doing Starting Strength, we need to be able to make some subjective judgement calls about when to stand our ground on the one hand, and when not to make the perfect the enemy of the good on the other.

My in-person coaching practice demographic over the last five years correlates pretty well with what our large SSOC data-set tells us: that most people now doing Starting Strength are no longer skinny guys 18-23. They're professionals in their late 20s to mid 40s with demanding jobs and family lives. While a small percentage of this group do go on to be competitive lifters, they are the exception. A higher percentage compete, but recreationally to set PRs and have fun, not to win. And most do not compete at all, though we are working to raise that percentage.

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The point here is that we're helping regular people with busy jobs and demanding schedules get stronger to enhance their lives. We're not primarily dealing with people who already have ambitious competitive aspirations and will do absolutely whatever it takes to optimize strength. Most of our lifters need to fit training into their lives and make a reasonable effort to do so; most of our lifters are not the type who train first, and fit the rest of their lives around their training.

This being the case, as Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend asked forty years ago: "Who are you?! Who who? Who who??" If you're a regular person trying to get stronger, then I think our collective assessment as an SSC corps would be that if you have to finish your workouts in 60-75 minutes, limiting your rest to 5 minutes for the heaviest sets is just fine. Not perfectly ideal, but close enough that you'll still get most of the benefits. On the other hand, limiting yourself to 2-3 minutes rest in all cases, no matter how heavy the weight is, is too far removed from optimal to really be considered a serious stab at strength training.

How did I arrive at these numbers? It's admittedly somewhat subjective, as I previously alluded to, but it's based on the experience I acquired while putting about a thousand people through an LP over the past decade and seeing how they respond. There's not a hard line in the sand where "267 seconds rest between sets is 'close enough,' but 266.9 isn't even worth it." But I'm willing to bet that if you polled the entire SSC corps, almost all would agree with me that if someone can only rest 2 minutes between sets, it's really not worth doing an LP, but if they can take 4 for their heaviest bench and press sets and 5 for squats, that it's still well worth doing and they'll have done an acceptable LP, even if not absolutely 100% ideal and optimal. You can exercise with 2 minutes rest, the [Novice Effect](#) will even allow you to get a little stronger for a while; but you can't seriously strength train this way for a long period of time.

In other words, the marginal benefit gained when you increase rest from 2 minutes to 5 is huge. The marginal benefit gained when you increase rest from 5 minutes to 8 is present, but much smaller.

So what you need to ask is: Who are you? If you have the time to spare, take the 7-10 minutes rest, or even 12 if you need it. Your workouts at the end of your LP will take closer to two hours, but who cares – you have the time, and you're bending your work and life around training.

But if you're a normal person who needs to bend their training around work and life, we can still work with you. You can still train for strength. You will still make enormous gains, even if you can only spare 60-75 minutes, three days a week. You'll rest 4-5 minutes between sets, it won't be perfectly ideal, but it'll absolutely be good enough to be well worth doing. And you won't quit after 10 weeks when your workouts start to take longer than your wife or husband or work schedule or kids' soccer schedule allows you to take.

Don't Confuse The Good with The Perfect

That being said, it's still important not to confuse the common compromise we're willing to make, with the ideal situation. The forum and the internet at large are still chock-full of "5'10" 142 pound teenagers or guys in their early 20s who have all the time in the world. They need to lift heavy, rest 10 minutes between sets, eat more, and do the thing properly. When they ask about not resting more than 3 minutes between sets because something something abs or something something testosterone levels drop after 45 minutes of lifting, they need to be put in their place and told what to do.

But when the legitimately busy professional with 3 kids wants to strength train, we also need to understand that an inordinate burden of three weekly workouts that take two hours each might be an insurmountable barrier to entry whose advantage over three weekly 60 minute workouts is relatively

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marginal for that person's needs. If we need to snip the rest period a bit to allow strength training to occur at all, we will. But at the same time, we won't pretend the situation is perfectly ideal – just the most ideal in the real world we live in.

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