

We're all experts these days...or so we think. After all, all it takes is a laptop and an internet connection, and the answers to all life's questions are seemingly poised at our fingertips. Need to learn how to tie a Windsor knot before your cousin's wedding reception? There's a YouTube video for that. Need to settle a debate over who won the 1978 World Series? Just grab your cell phone and ask Siri. Confused about the right way to ask where the bathroom is in Spanish? You get the idea. We live in the information age, and the knowledge we seek is only seconds away, so who needs an expert anyway?

Yet, when confronted with some of life's most important issues, we often look not to the internet or books, but to a professional with expertise in a particular field of study, such as a doctor, lawyer, or education professional. Why? Not every problem is solved by simply finding a factual answer to a question. Sometimes we are overwhelmed with information, and need to carefully sort through it before trusting our sources. Other times, the help we seek is not purely information-based: the data is a factor, of course, but the issue is too complex to be reduced to a series of facts, figures and formulas. Finally, in other cases, experts can simply help us save time by conferring to us the benefit of their thousands of hours of experience.

To start with the obvious, there are occasions in life where, due to the urgency of the situation, a "do-over" is simply not an option, and so we need experts (and their expertise) in order to prevent a tragic outcome--when it's time to administer CPR to a choking patient, for example, we don't want to leave one's fate in the hands of someone who has to look up instructions on his/her phone. Rather, we want someone who has administered CPR over 1,000 times. When we hop on a plane, we are not comforted merely by the fact that our plane has a powerful autopilot computer system; we are also grateful to know that pilots must themselves undergo rigorous training programs before ever being allowed to fly a passenger plane, like the famous "Sully" Sullenberger, who saved a full plane of passengers with a water landing on the Hudson River after a near-catastrophic double engine failure. Or, if we are charged with a crime, then we will not take the chance at defending ourselves--we will hire a qualified lawyer instead, so long as we can afford one. Many experts have over 10,000 hours of experience in their field, which has exposed them to nearly every variable and allows them to adjust to changing circumstances in critical situations without panic or doubt.

In addition, experts can help us save time, and avoid being misled by faulty information from the many so-called experts who dispense faulty advice, often intentionally and for their own gain (take global warming, for example, or suspicious Amazon reviews). A trusted expert can help us "cut through the fat" and separate truth from fiction, because there are thousands of opinions out there on the internet, and sometimes it's hard to know which ones to trust. In fact, it could be argued that even in the age of nearly limitless information, expertise itself is just as important as it used to be. It's just that experts are even better informed, and the relevant information is much easier for the average person to find.

Although we live in an age of unprecedented access to the gates of knowledge, it can still be extremely helpful to have a wise tour guide to show us the way. We can't just Google the

answer to every question and expect to get a simple answer--we also need to engage our critical-thinking skills to separate the facts from the “alternative facts.” Yet our critical thinking skills can only take us so far when we are in uncharted waters. The more complicated the question, the more likely we will need the help of an actual expert to sort it all out...and access to information is not the same as mastery of that information.

For example, I have worked for the past 20 years as a full-time test-prep tutor, teaching SAT and ACT to high school students all over the country—and all over the world—via Skype. As a tutor, I have embraced the information age, using it to point my students toward the very best learning resources available, including official tests I have collected and materials I have created myself, so that my students and I can dedicate the majority of our time to discussing the strategies and techniques needed for succeeding on the test, instead of simply memorizing lists of tips, tricks, facts, and formulas.

On one hand, these outside resources can be a huge help. On the other hand, the sheer number of test-prep books can be overwhelming to the average student, which is why I take it upon myself to first read, evaluate and curate such materials before recommending the most helpful and most relevant information to my students. My expertise allows my students to study more efficiently, and without worrying that they are taking the wrong approach, since I serve as a filter for the surfeit of test-prep guides that have flooded the market, many of which are flawed and unnecessary. My decades of experience as a tutor allow me to distinguish between what is important, and what is not, and to draw upon my intuition to make connections / identify patterns that others with less experience would be unlikely to notice. And beyond that, as an actual human being, I can form personal connections with my students, which allows me to earn their trust and help propel them toward success in whatever manner I deem most appropriate.

We do not yet live in an age when information can simply be uploaded to our brains: no matter how easily we can access knowledge, the process of becoming an expert is still slow and deliberate, and nearly all people learn best when there is a real, live person with years of experience to guide them. Just ask Socrates, Plato and Aristotle: there is no form of learning better than one-to-one instruction. An unscripted, dynamic conversation between a teacher and a student can accomplish something that no book, website or video can do, and not all knowledge can be condensed into a list of facts on the internet.

In conclusion, expertise may be easier to access than ever before, but it's no less important than it used to be. Even in the information age, we need expertise to address urgent issues, to understand complex issues, and to make our lives more efficient.

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