

9 Ideas I Learned from [The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters](#)

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Tom Nichol's [The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters](#) provides valuable insight on how ordinary humans can dismiss experts by believing they know more than people who have spent decades studying a topic. The ease of information access has caused many people to believe they know more than they really do. Confidence is now substituted for actual knowledge. Egos have grown so large that people are conditioned to attack those they disagree with, rather than try to learn from them. Individuals are becoming more convinced they are right even as their ignorance grows. The book covers several reasons why this occurs. While you can't prevent others from behaving this way, this book is a helpful guide to help yourself identify and correct overconfidence in your knowledge.

The 9 Best Ideas

- We Prioritize Egos and Emotions Over Rationality and Humility
- We Love Information That Confirms Our Beliefs
- Bad Information Crowds Out Knowledge
- It's Not That Experts Are Never Wrong, Just Wrong Less Often Than You
- The Illusion of Explanatory Depth: Knowing Random Facts Doesn't Equal Knowledge
- We Struggle with Uncertainty and Unpredictability and Will Do/Believe Almost Anything to Remove These Feelings
- Objectivity
- We've Conflated Getting a Degree with Being Educated
- We No Longer Want to Do the Deep Work

1. We Prioritize Egos and Emotions Over Rationality and Humility

From *Death of Expertise*:

To reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy, a way for Americans to insulate their increasingly fragile egos from ever being told they're wrong about anything.

The growth of this kind of stubborn ignorance in the midst of the Information Age cannot be explained away as merely the result of rank ignorance. Many of the people who campaign against established knowledge are otherwise adept and successful in their daily lives. In some ways, it is all worse than ignorance: it is unfounded arrogance, the outrage of an increasingly narcissistic culture that cannot endure even the slightest hint of inequality of any kind.

Americans no longer distinguish the phrase "you're wrong" from the phrase "you're stupid." To disagree is to disrespect. To correct another is to insult. And to refuse to acknowledge all views as worthy of consideration, no matter how fantastic or inane they are, is to be closed-minded.

Emotion is an unassailable defense against expertise, a moat of anger and resentment in which reason and knowledge quickly drown. And when students learn that emotion trumps everything else, it is a lesson they will take with them for the rest of their lives.

It's okay to be ignorant. It's not okay to enable your ignorance by prioritizing emotional comfort over a painful reality. Our defense mechanisms get us into trouble. We react with a hair trigger, ready to attack anyone and any idea that disagrees with us. Egos are the root of the problem. We think so highly of ourselves we interpret disagreement as an insult. We then double down on our mistake by relentlessly attacking the other side to prove our superiority, even at the cost of further cementing our ignorance. It's the arrogance. The hubris. The pride. The need to always get our way. These are the problems. Not ignorance.

From *Death of Expertise*:

Be humble. That is, at least begin by assuming that the people writing the story, whatever their shortcomings, know more about the subject than you do. At the least, try to remember that in most cases, the person writing the story has spent more time with the issue than you have. If you approach any story in the media, or any source of information already assuming you know as much as anyone else on the subject, the entire exercise of following the news is going to be a waste of your time.

Every time you encounter a conflicting idea, open your mind to learn rather than gear up to defend. Take a step back and force yourself to listen. Listening doesn't mean blind acceptance of the other view. It's just the first step to learning. You don't have to agree with everything but allow new evidence to conflict with your prior beliefs. Now you at least have a chance to learn.

2. We Love Information That Confirms Our Beliefs

From *Death of Expertise*:

We all have an inherent and natural tendency to search for evidence that already meshes with our beliefs. Our brains are actually wired to work this way, which is why we argue even when we shouldn't. And if we feel socially or personally threatened, we will argue until we're blue in the face. (Perhaps in the Internet age, the expression on social media should be "until our fingers are numb.") Experts are no exception here; like everyone else, we want to believe what we want to believe.

Cultivate your curiosity. Curiosity is a fundamental trait of those open to opposing views. Curiosity suppresses ego by opening the mind to new ideas. It's liberating when you don't have the urge to defend your ego for every single disagreement. Disagreement is a chance to learn. You don't have to go to war every single time views don't align. You don't have to attack flaws in an argument. Yes, discuss the flaws. No, don't attack them. Just use them as an opportunity to learn and build alternative ideas to what you think you already know. Don't make immediate judgement calls. Let the new ideas stew in your mind. The worst thing you can do is to make snap judgements without deliberate contemplation.

From *Death of Expertise*:

I'm used to people disagreeing with me; in fact, I encourage it. Principled, informed arguments are a sign of intellectual health and vitality in a democracy.

...I wrote this because I'm worried. We no longer have those principled and informed arguments. The foundational knowledge of the average American is now so low that it has

crashed through the floor of “uninformed,” passed “misinformed” on the way down, and is now plummeting to “aggressively wrong.” People don’t just believe dumb things; they actively resist further learning rather than let go of those beliefs.

Be ecumenical. Vary your diet. You wouldn’t eat the same thing all day, so don’t consume the same sources of media all day. When I worked in national politics, I subscribed to a half-dozen journals at any given time, across the political spectrum. Don’t be provincial: try media from other countries, as they often report stories or have a view of which Americans are completely unaware. And don’t say you “don’t have the time.” You do.

The most effective way to counteract your ignorance is to seek information that disagrees with your current beliefs. That’s it. There’s no magic. No 10-step plan. Just the willingness to suspend your ego and wrestle with ideas that will provoke intense discomfort. If you persist you will start to empathize and rationally consider the argument at hand, rather than react with emotion and rage. It’s a simple but difficult process to execute.

Argue the other side better than the other side can argue it. This idea is from Charlie Munger, who advocated taking the other side, crafting a compelling argument why they (and not you) are right, and only then have you earned the right to argue your side.

You probably won’t do this. You’ll claim you don’t have the time. You’ll be lazy. You’ll claim the other side is wrong. These are the reasons the ignorance cycle continues. You don’t even realize you might be wrong and won’t invest the time to prove it.

3. Bad Information Crowds Out Knowledge

From *Death of Expertise*:

These are dangerous times. Never have so many people had so much access to so much knowledge and yet have been so resistant to learning anything. In the United States and other developed nations, otherwise intelligent people denigrate intellectual achievement and reject the advice of experts. Not only do increasing numbers of laypeople lack basic knowledge, they reject fundamental rules of evidence and refuse to learn how to make a logical argument. In doing so, they risk throwing away centuries of accumulated knowledge and undermining the practices and habits that allow us to develop new knowledge.

A kind of intellectual Gresham’s Law is gathering momentum: where once the rule was “bad money drives out good,” we now live in an age where misinformation pushes aside knowledge.

Facts, as experts know, are not the same as knowledge or ability. And on the Internet, “facts” are sometimes not even facts. In the various skirmishes in the campaigns against established knowledge, the Internet is like artillery support: a constant bombardment of random, disconnected information that rains down on experts and ordinary citizens alike, deafening all of us while blowing up attempts at reasonable discussion.

Part of the problem is we no longer distinguish the quality of information. It’s a jumbled mess too hard to disentangle. We rely on shortcuts to navigate the informational maze. But these shortcuts tend to be sources of information that we already agree with. So we’re just compounding our bad ideas by seeking out more of what we already like.

We must be our own fact-checkers. It’s a tough job. It’s exhausting. But if you really want to understand something, you need to put the work in. It’s a recurring theme in this paper: put the work in to have an

opinion. Putting the work in doesn't mean collecting random facts, tweets, or one-liners on an idea. These are dangerous shortcuts. It's pseudo-knowledge. You sound like you know something, but there's no foundation. Real knowledge means spending consistent time over long periods on an idea. It means continuing to subject your ideas to conflicting theories, never satisfied with what you know. At this point, most people will object – I don't have the time for this! You probably are right, which is why you need to admit your ignorance and find experts on both sides on an issue to help do the work for you.

4. It's Not That Experts Are Never Wrong, Just Wrong Less Often Than You

From *Death of Expertise*:

At the root of all this is an inability among laypeople to understand that experts being wrong on occasion about certain issues is not the same thing as experts being wrong consistently on everything. The fact of the matter is that experts are more often right than wrong, especially on essential matters of fact. And yet the public constantly searches for the loopholes in expert knowledge that will allow them to disregard all expert advice they don't like.

No one is arguing, however, that experts can't be wrong (a subject we'll discuss in this book). Rather, the point is that they are less likely to be wrong than nonexperts. The same people who anxiously point back in history to the thalidomide disaster routinely pop dozens of drugs into their mouths, from aspirin to antihistamines, which are among the thousands and thousands of medications shown to be safe by decades of trials and tests conducted by experts. It rarely occurs to the skeptics that for every terrible mistake, there are countless successes that prolong their lives.

As critics of expertise rightly point out, in those days we were trusting the people who landed Neil Armstrong in the Sea of Tranquility, but who also landed a lot of less famous American men in places like Khe Sanh and the Ia Drang Valley in Vietnam. The public's trust, both in experts and political leaders, was not only misplaced but abused.

Be more discriminating. If you see something in a major media outlet that doesn't seem right to you, finding some half-baked website isn't the answer. Websites that are outlets for political movements, or other, even worse enterprises that cater specifically to zealots or fools, will do more harm than good in the search for accurate information.

There's an unrelenting urge to point out experts' mistakes and conclude they know nothing. It's not about perfection. It's about batting average. Experts will be right more than you. You should listen to them. However, experts can have other agendas which may tarnish their advice. They may speak outside their area of expertise. They may have an off day. And so on. It's not about blind obedience to experts. It's about aggregating views across a group of diverse and independent experts. A group of uncorrelated experts offsets the effects of bias and bad intent.

5. The Illusion of Explanatory Depth: Knowing Random Facts Doesn't Equal Knowledge

From *Death of Expertise*:

Knowing things is not the same as understanding them. Comprehension is not the same thing as analysis. Expertise is a not a parlor game played with factoids.

The Illusion of Explanatory Depth is an idea formalized by Leonid Rozenblit and Frank Keil. It's a simple but profound idea: we think we have a deeper understanding of an idea than we really do. We think we know something until we are asked to prove it. Then our incompetence shows because we can only cite superficial, vague information, not a complete understanding of the idea. Our ego tricks us into thinking we know more than we do. It feels good to "know". It feels good to claim knowledge. But when pressed to apply or explain that knowledge, our ignorance is revealed.

From Death of Expertise:

Karl Taro Greenfeld, a novelist and writer, described this kind of anxiety in a meditation on why people attempt to "fake cultural literacy." What we all feel now is the constant pressure to know enough, at all times, lest we be revealed as culturally illiterate. So that we can survive an elevator pitch, a business meeting, a visit to the office kitchenette, a cocktail party, so that we can post, tweet, chat, comment, text as if we have seen, read, watched, listened. What matters to us, awash in petabytes of data, is not necessarily having actually consumed this content firsthand but simply knowing that it exists—and having a position on it, being able to engage in the chatter about it. We come perilously close to performing a pastiche of knowledgeability that is really a new model of know-nothingness.

Because there's no longer a barrier to information access, we've confused access to information with knowledge. There's the expectation to have an opinion on everything, no matter how little work we've done on a subject. Society prefers immediate soundbites and clicks to substantive research. You can't prevent others from doing this, but you can stop yourself. Resist the urge to pontificate on every issue. Just say you don't know. Or don't have an opinion. Or that you haven't done the work. It's refreshing to hear someone admit they don't know because they haven't done the work.

6. We Struggle With Uncertainty and Unpredictability And Will Do/Believe Almost Anything to Remove These Feelings

From Death of Expertise:

More important and more relevant to the death of expertise, however, is that conspiracy theories are deeply attractive to people who have a hard time making sense of a complicated world and who have no patience for less dramatic explanations. Such theories also appeal to a strong streak of narcissism: there are people who would choose to believe in complicated nonsense rather than accept that their own circumstances are incomprehensible, the result of issues beyond their intellectual capacity to understand, or even their own fault.

There's a military term known as VUCA: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. The idea is humans struggle to think and decide under these conditions. It applies well in any complex, high-pressure environment. Humans desperately try to eliminate or remove themselves from these conditions. If they can't, humans create explanations to try to make sense of the unknowable. As a result we grasp ridiculous theories and unproven ideas to provide a sense of order and structure in these stressful situations. It doesn't work. Accept that some things are unknowable and be comfortable that is reality.

7. Objectivity

From *Death of Expertise*:

That's why one of the most important characteristics of an expert is the ability to remain dispassionate, even on the most controversial issues. Experts must treat everything from cancer to nuclear war as problems to be solved with detachment and objectivity. Their distance from the subject enables open debate and consideration of alternatives, in ways meant to defeat emotional temptations, including fear, that lead to bias. This is a tall order, but otherwise conversation is not only arduous but sometimes explosive.

As the philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote in a 1928 essay, laypeople must evaluate expert claims by exercising their own careful logic as well. The skepticism that I advocate amounts only to this: (1) that when the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be held to be certain; (2) that when they are not agreed, no opinion can be regarded as certain by a non-expert; and (3) that when they all hold that no sufficient grounds for a positive opinion exist, the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgment.

Objectivity and rationality are paramount to understand the world and make better decisions. Here's a few steps to build objectivity:

- **The less you strive to be right all the time and the more you can say "I don't know," the better you are able to view ideas with less bias and emotion. As soon as you start defending your reputation by reacting to someone challenging you, you've eliminated the ability to stay calm and rational, and therefore, learn.**
- **Seek out multiple expert opinions, especially from those you disagree with. Don't keep confirming what you know, no matter how comfortable. Have the intellectual courage to entertain opposing arguments. It's like working out - uncomfortable at first but easier and more enjoyable as you persist. The world won't end if you consider opposing views.**

8. We've Conflated Getting a Degree with Being Educated

From *Death of Expertise*:

Today, attendance at postsecondary institutions is a mass experience. As a result of this increased access to higher education, the word "college" itself is losing meaning, at least in terms of separating educated people from everyone else. "College graduate" today means a lot of things. Unfortunately, "a person of demonstrated educational achievement" is not always one of them.

Part of the problem is that there are too many students, a fair number of whom simply don't belong in college. The new culture of education in the United States is that everyone should, and must, go to college. This cultural change is important to the death of expertise, because as programs proliferate to meet demand, schools become diploma mills whose actual degrees are indicative less of education than of training, two distinctly different concepts that are increasingly conflated in the public mind. In the worst cases, degrees affirm neither education nor training, but attendance. At the barest minimum, they certify only the timely payment of tuition.

20 or 30 years ago, getting any college degree was valuable. Degrees confirmed learning which allowed graduates to do and earn more. Today that relationship is gone. Getting a degree has no bearing on

whether you actually know how to think, decide, communicate, manage, etc. The hard sciences like engineering and physics are less affected since the technical demands force learning on the student. It's the soft "sciences" – psychology, business, sociology, history, etc where it's not obvious if graduates know anything relevant.

It's not the degree that matters. It's not the certifications, titles, or pedigrees. It's what you can do, provide, and produce in the real world that matters. Actual results, not theoretical.

9. We No Longer Want to do the Deep Work

From *Death of Expertise*:

The deeper issue here is that the Internet is actually changing the way we read, the way we reason, even the way we think, and all for the worse. We expect information instantly. We want it broken down, presented in a way that is pleasing to our eye—no more of those small-type, fragile textbooks, thank you—and we want it to say what we want it to say. People do not do "research" so much as they "search for pretty pages online to provide answers they like with the least amount of effort and in the shortest time."

Sometimes the errors are trivial and amusing. In the great "chocolate helps you lose weight" hoax, for example, the hoaxers never thought they'd get as far as they did; they assumed that "reporters who don't have science chops" would discover the whole faked study was "laughably flimsy" once they reached out to a real scientist. They were wrong: nobody actually tried to vet the story with actual scientists. "The key," as the hoaxers later said, "is to exploit journalists' incredible laziness. If you lay out the information just right, you can shape the story that emerges in the media almost like you were writing those stories yourself. In fact, that's literally what you're doing, since many reporters just copied and pasted our text."

It's easy to form an opinion and call it a day. It's harder to keep doing the work to develop a deep understanding. Perhaps because of our short attention spans or the need to receive novel stimulation every few minutes, we're losing the ability to focus on one issue for hours at a time. And repeat that process daily for several months, if not years. We want an immediate payoff, so we conclude we know something and stop the work. It's not fun spending several months on the same idea because we are conditioned for immediate novelty and reward. We've lost the appreciation for the process of the work and the insights that are uncovered when you struggle with ideas over long time periods.