

How to be Smart: A Simple Approach

by Winston Sieck - November 20, 2012

<https://www.globalcognition.org/how-to-be-smart/>

Smart is in...

And that's intimidating.

Most thinking people quietly belittle their own great brains.

They envy the geniuses around them, wanting to know how to be smart like "those guys"?

There's currently a lot of confusion about how to be smart, what it means to be smart, and whether being smart is even something you can learn at all.

Some argue that you are born with a certain [level of intelligence](#), and there's not much you can do to change it. You either have it or you don't. (They're wrong).

Others suggest that you can be smart by training your brain with simple, controlled drills. Their idea is to go to the "brain gym" and do many reps of [working memory exercises](#) to boost your general mental power.

It's not at all clear how well abstract memory exercises really work. And there's way more to mental life than innate general intelligence. For example, grit is just as important to your long-term intellectual achievement.

What, then, can we say about how to be smart?

The simplest, most direct way to be smart is to build deep knowledge about things you care about.

Building knowledge of an area improves your memory, thinking, and decisions about that topic. As you apply the principles below to acquire pockets of knowledge about various matters, you will find that you both know more and learn new things more easily. This happens in part because background knowledge serves as a catalyst when you employ [learning strategies](#) to tackle new topics. That is the real essence of being smart.

Several sites share interesting ideas about how to be smart. The first is my favorite, and the rest are in no particular order:

- [Steve Carell on How to Act Brilliant](#)
- [How to be Smart: 24 steps](#)
- [How to be Smart by Dumb Little Man](#)
- [How to be Smart – Tips on How to Become Smart](#)

Although these all have useful tips, none really gives a straightforward process that's easy to remember and follow. I offer below a simple approach for how to be smart.

1. Pick something to be smart about - follow your passions

Some will suggest that the answer to the question of how to be smart is to choose great literature, mensa puzzles, foreign languages, classic art works, or technical topics to learn about. Then force yourself to digest, just after downing your Brussels sprouts.

Any of those areas may be a great pick, just so long as you are truly eager to be smart about them. But if they are not really the kinds of things you are interested in, then you will be hard pressed to devote time and effort to learn much.

In terms of gaining smarts, your pick is really not so important. It's what you do with it that counts. With time, your interests will shift around so that you find new topics that you'd like to be smart about. That's just fine.

2. Read a few things slowly

One thing that most seem to agree on is that reading is near the core of how to be smart. At one point, speed reading was the hot deal. The idea was to absorb more information from the world by getting through all of it faster. The problem is you are likely to leave with a shallow and temporary grasp of what you just read.

There's certainly nothing wrong with skimming passages. Surveying material to get the big picture or find the most relevant parts can be quite useful.

If you want to be smart on a topic, do allow yourself to read more slowly. Get more out of each passage that you take in. As related ideas spring to mind, pause and reflect on them before continuing. Look out of the window from time to time. Think through it more deeply.

3. Explain it to yourself

What does it really mean to "think through it more deeply" anyway? It can mean a few things. One important deep thinking activity is to pause periodically and [explain the material to yourself](#). Put the book or article aside, and refashion the ideas in your own words.

With the source material close by, practice explaining your new-found knowledge for later conversation at the dinner table.

Self-explaining helps you with how to get smart. It does a few things for you. One is that it gives you direct practice at retrieving the information from memory. Another is that putting things in your own words helps you [find out what you don't really understand](#).

When you skim through text or casually watch a video, you can easily feel like you just get it all. It all

makes sense. Then when you try to explain it yourself....oops.

Try explaining on your own. If you get stuck, look back at the source and try again. Get it right for showtime later. You can learn and practice specific methods to read and explain deeply in our [study skills course](#).

4. Teach it to others

You've practiced on your own, now you are ready for the spotlight. A routine to build in to your "how to be smart" program is to tell others about what you've learned. Explain your new understanding in different contexts....at dinner with the family, or with friends at a bar, or in chats and comments on the web.

Try to explain in a way that's simple, clear and interesting for the different audiences you engage. In addition to more of the same "self-explanation" benefits above, you'll also have a chance to get outside feedback on what you're saying.

Your kids may need the simpler story. Teaching them can force you to rephrase and rethink your understanding again. Your coworkers may challenge your explanation, bringing in other perspectives or facts you were unaware of. It may well happen the other way around, too.

Just forget about your ego here. The point is not to show off how smart you are. It's to learn more by engaging others, share some of your interests with them, and occasionally help the people you interact with learn something new.

If you get surprised that your friend contradicts you, or your kid shares an important fact you didn't know, don't get upset. Try to listen carefully, embrace the surprise and [ask them questions to learn more](#). Healthy discussion and debate will only deepen your knowledge, as long as you don't take it too personally.

5. Make a habit of these routines

Take your time with these ideas. This is no overnight solution to the question of how to be smart. You can be smart in the long run by making a habit of following the above routines. Each is useful, engaging, and rewarding in its own right, so it doesn't have to be a constant struggle continuing down this path.

Find other ways to elaborate and embellish your process. Drawing pictures or making graphs can be a great addition to explaining with words. In the spirit of teaching others, help your kids or friends understand and develop similar "how to be smart" habits.

Image credit: [maveric2003](#)

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