

Instant Wisdom

**10 Easy Ways To
Get Smart Fast**

**by
Beth Burgess**

Question Everything

Socrates was famous for a few things: sporting an astonishingly curly beard, rarely bothering with footwear, pondering, and stopping total strangers in the street to quiz them on their beliefs.

The philosopher was also famed for admitting he didn't know anything, except that he knew nothing. This doesn't bode well for a book about wisdom so far, does it?

But context is everything, as we will discover in this chapter, and acknowledging your own ignorance can pave the way to greater wisdom.

On his personal quest for insight, Socrates sought out teachers who he hoped could guide him. But he was disappointed to discover that people who claimed to be wise talked absolute waffle when he met them.

He found that while politicians might 'know' things, it didn't mean they were wise. (I'm with Socrates here; some right nit-wits get into government.) And poets have the power to create verses which move people,

without there necessarily being any meaning to their words. (A bit like some of The Beatles' songs.)

After finding that people who declared themselves to be wise were actually pretty stupid, Socrates thought it better to admit what he didn't know, rather than purporting to be some brainiac.

Although many people do tend to think of Socrates as a wise man, in truth, he wasn't a guru. If he had been, he wouldn't have gone around searching for wisdom.

Socrates was a philosopher, someone whose very job description means they don't have all the answers. When his disciples called him a teacher, he refused the label, because he wasn't giving formal lessons, but trying to figure things out himself.

He did, however, come up with a very clever way for doing just that: the Socratic Method. It is basically a dialogue, where you question beliefs, hypotheses, and assumptions in order to get closer to the truth.

It is important to question everything, because we can all have faulty beliefs and innate prejudices that are so deeply entrenched that we don't even recognise that we have them.

And we often fall prey to cognitive biases and logical fallacies, like thinking that all taxi drivers are lunatics, just because we had one bad ride.

We make generalisations and blanket statements, and imagine that things are simply common sense, when there is often no such thing.

These very human flaws make us assume that certain things must be true or false, even if they aren't. And we rarely even realise that we are basing our opinions and conclusions on false presumptions and beliefs.

For example, when hiring white-collar workers, many employers favour candidates with a degree, especially if it's from a top-class university. Often it doesn't even matter what subject the degree covers. It could be anything from Physics to Parapsychology. (Yes, you too, could become a real-life Ghostbuster – several credible unis in the US and the UK offer this course.)

Employees just assume that graduates must be more disciplined and brighter than people who didn't go to university. That is a massive leap in logic and unfair on people without a degree.

There could be any number of reasons why a genius didn't complete university. They may have had family obligations or struggled to find the time or money to

go. Some may have been prevented from graduating due to unfortunate circumstances, such as ill health or suffering from a bereavement before their final exam. Research shows that many super-smart people hate formal learning. Classrooms can be very stifling and boring if your IQ is higher than the other students'.

And not everyone wants to get a degree or go to the 'best' university, even if they would be quite capable of doing so. I got good enough college grades to get into Oxford or Cambridge. My teachers were stunned that I didn't want to apply. But I hated the atmosphere of over-privilege and the silly, archaic traditions, so I was set on a less hoity-toity University in London.

After all, who wants to parade around singing about ducks or beat a load of stones with sticks on a certain date? Yes, those are genuine Oxbridge traditions that still carry on, and they don't sound very smart to me.

Using the Socratic method of questioning, here is how the philosopher might have handled someone who'd made the sweeping statement that graduates must be cleverer than non-graduates:

Socrates: "Do you not consider the invention of the electric motor, the generator, electrolysis and electroplating to be rather clever?"

Someone: "Yes, they are amazing scientific feats."

Socrates: "Would you deem the inventor of all these things to be intelligent?"

Someone: "Well, obviously."

Socrates: "Do you think this person studied science at university?"

Someone: "For sure."

Socrates: "Have you heard of Michael Faraday?"

Someone: "He was a scientist, wasn't he? I seem to recall now that he invented some of those."

Socrates: "Did you know that Mr Faraday had no formal education at all and worked as a bookbinder?"

Someone: "No, I didn't know that. How did he come up with all that stuff then?"

Socrates: "Forgive me, but did you go to university?"

Someone: "Er, yeah, I did."

Socrates: "And what have you invented?"

Someone: "I invented a drinking game once."

Socrates: "Do you think you are smarter than Mr Faraday?"

Someone: "Look, I haven't really had time to go around inventing stuff, because I've been working at McBurgerHut. I've got a student loan to pay off, and I still owe the bar some cash for damages after that drinking game got out of hand..."

Socrates: "So, we can not assume that non-graduates are not as clever as graduates."

Someone: "OK then, so how did he come up with all that clever stuff?"

Socrates: "He read the books he was binding."

Someone: "Aha, so he was kinda taught then, even if he taught himself. We had to do a lot of reading for ourselves at uni, you know."

Socrates: "Hmm...do you know much about genes?"

Someone: "Yeah, a bit. About DNA and stuff."

Socrates: "Have you heard of Gregor Mendel, who originally discovered genetics?"

Someone: "I'm guessing he was someone else who read a lot, if he didn't go to uni."

Socrates: "No, he was a monk who liked gardening and happened to notice that his baby plants inherited certain traits from the parent plants."

Someone: "Oh."

Socrates: "Well then, we can conclude so far that some non-graduates can be just as clever as a graduate, either by self-education or having an observational mind. Let's carry on then. Have you heard of William Herschel?"

Someone: "Er, I would Socrates, but I think I'm going to be late for my shift..."

Update Your Opinions

As Socrates proved, there is nothing quite so unwise as claiming you know things to be true, when they could easily be untrue. It makes you look really daft.

If you cannot wholly prove or disprove something, you should always be open to shifting your opinion about it. Every view you hold should be up for debate if you truly want to be wise. When fresh information comes along, consider it – no matter how long you have held onto your old beliefs, nor where they first originated.

When attempting to carry out a task, have you ever been interrupted by some busybody who totally takes over while claiming in true Mr Punch fashion “*That’s the way to do it!*”?

It is both frustrating, and somewhat infuriating, when someone thinks that their way of doing something is the only way that works. But people do it, fooled by familiarity and blind to other solutions (that actually might be better).

Whoever came up with the quite disturbing saying: “There is more than one way to skin a cat” was much wiser than the person who said: “The only way out is through” – and I don’t care that it was super-poet Robert Frost, who did say some other, more sensible things. It just isn’t true.

We can find ways around, over and across things, or we can avoid them completely. I think the idea of 'the only way' should be banished from our thoughts.

We pick up our ideologies and opinions in all sorts of ways: from our parents, teachers, politicians, friends, and the media. Often we believe something because of our own experience – without noticing how very limited our experience actually is.

I am someone who has 'lived a little', which means that I know a bit about the wilder (and harsher) side of life. But my personal knowledge is still restricted by my age, location, gender, class – and more. I have no idea what it would be like to be a homeless, old addict in China. I haven't a clue how it feels to be an agoraphobic boy raised in a Brazilian Favela.

It is only logical to admit, as Socrates did, that I don't know anything for sure, even if I have had experience of 'similar' things myself. Not acknowledging this leads to narrow-mindedness and jumping to false conclusions.

You can instantly become wiser just by opening your mind and accepting that you don't know much for certain. This attitude leaves you free to explore more possibilities and learn in a more comprehensive way.

You can use the Socratic method with others or on your own. All you have to do is question things, so that you move further away from generalisations and fallacies and nearer to the truth. The truth may be hard, multi-faceted, complex and tricky. But, life is often messy like that. Things don't always fit into a neat little box.

Lose The Labels

Be open-minded about others, too. It makes me smile when people say of behaviour they don't expect: "That's not like him". A rigid opinion of who a person *is* can blind us to other parts of their personality.

No-one has a totally fixed character. We all have the capacity to change. And we sometimes act in different ways to adapt to various contexts.

Do you have a 'telephone voice' like I do? I talk more clearly on the phone than I do when I'm kicking back with my mates. Does that mean the 'telephone voice' is fake? No, it's just contextual. It's the same as not effing and jeffing in front of little children, while not minding your manners as much in front of friends.

Another example. You probably wouldn't walk buck-naked into a restaurant (I'm sorry if I have assumed that, and it happens to be your favourite hobby), but you may well wander about your bedroom in your birthday suit. Neither being nude nor wearing clothes are your fixed behaviours. They change, depending on what circumstances you are in.

Do you see how much context matters? Acts, words and people can vary enormously under different sets of conditions.

The same goes for groups. Just because some people in the Netherlands like to chase Edam down a hill, it doesn't make all Dutch people 'crazy cheese-rollers'. And despite what satirical cartoons may depict, I've lived with a real, live Frenchman and can confirm that he didn't wear a necklace of onions, nor carry a baguette everywhere while spitting at ze English.

So, if you have made assumptions, generalisations, or held rigid views about anyone, remember that people aren't sheets of paper. They have many dimensions. By clinging fast to one opinion, you may have missed other aspects to someone's character and overlooked different qualities that they possess.

By questioning everything, we can root out our errors to help us avoid making unfair, unwise, or wrongful

judgments. As we get ever closer to the truth, we are less likely to make mistakes.

But that is not the only value of the Socratic method. While at first, it may feel uncomfortable to dive into uncertainty, it is ultimately liberating. While certainty may give you a comfort blanket, sometimes that very blanket can smother you.

When you are open-minded, you are freer. You can explore exciting new ideas, find fresh solutions, and make better choices.

When your mind does not hold fast to rigid thoughts and ideologies, a type of serenity becomes available to you. And it comes in the form of equanimity.

If you are not bothered about being right and sure all the time, it is far less stressful if things turn out to be different than you originally imagined. When you are equanimous, you can brush off your errors without distress and accept new realities with ease.

The question comes to mind: “Would you rather be right or happy?” Of course, Socrates would have called out that question, as you can be both or neither. The two states do not have to exist in opposition to

one another. But for our purposes, I think you know what I mean.

By the way, I wouldn't necessarily do as Socrates did, which was stopping random strangers in the street to practice the Socratic method. You might be called a pedantic weirdo or have the police called on you for harassment. I did mention that Socrates wasn't always that wise.

But always question things in your own mind. Query what you have been told and things you have just assumed to be true.

Avoid thinking in black and white, presuming that "everyone always does X", that "all Ys are like this", or that what is true for the moment must be true and fixed forever.

Through ditching preconceptions and being open to new knowledge, you will become fairer, wiser, more flexible, and less stressed if things change.

And the very act of questioning things gives your brain a boost, making you instantly smarter than you were before.