

Scott H. Young



LESSON THREE: DON'T ASK FOR ADVICE. EXTRACT IT.

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This lesson was written by [Cal Newport](#).

The Colored Folder Pitfall

I became a professional writer a month shy of my 21st birthday when I signed with my literary agent. Later that summer we sold my first book to Random House.

Because of this early start, I was still quite young when I learned what turned out to be one of the most important lessons of my now decade-old career as a how-to writer: people are bad at giving advice.

The setting in which I learned this lesson was the early research phase for my book on [how to study in college](#), which occurred while I was still an undergraduate myself. My task seemed simple on paper: I planned to interview fellow students who had high GPAs and ask them how they did it.

But this turned out not to work so well.

The answers I received were largely useless. Many of the students, put under pressure to offer concrete suggestions, would latch on to the first interesting or unusual study habit that came

to mind — most of which were clearly idiosyncratic quirks and not the foundation of consistent high grades. I remember, for example, one young woman who talked about her use of multicolored folders.

Other students somehow managed to use the question to launch into heated opinions on any number of loosely related, and often highly personal issues. I learned, for example, that if the subject was under a lot of parental pressure (of the “you’re never doing enough to satisfy me” variety) they tended to use their answers to emphasize how hard they work — as if trying to convince a parent to get off their back.

The explanation for these low value responses is straightforward. When you ask someone to give sage advice, you’re putting them on the spot. Social convention demands that they respond quickly (to fill the awkward silence), and this tends to send the brain into a scramble to find anything coherent to say.

Over the years I’ve spent writing advice, I’ve learned that the careful, objective, systematic processing of experience needed to generate practical insights does not come naturally to most people. You shouldn’t expect this of others.

Adventures in Advice Extraction

This reality turned out to be a problem in the early pilot sessions Scott and I conducted for our Top Performer course. A key component in our curriculum is the idea that it’s hard to figure out which skill you should improve, so we spend multiple weeks helping the students conduct research to identify objectively what’s actually valuable in their field.

Part of this research involves interviews with successful individuals. The students in the early pilots reported that they were not receiving useful responses. They were asking, more or less, “what’s your advice for me?”, and getting back the same jumbled answers I encountered as an undergraduate writing my book on study habits.

What’s the solution to this problem?

When it came to uncovering effective study strategies I soon learned to stop asking students for their advice. Instead, I began to ask them about their experience. In particular, I developed a questionnaire in which I had the subject walk through their study process, step-by-step, for the last test on which they scored a good grade, and then walk through their research and

writing process, step-by-step, for the last paper on which they scored a good grade.

After gathering this data from many students, I sorted through the responses to extract the patterns that seemed meaningful.

In other words, I did not place the burden of making meaning of experience on the interview subject. I instead used them as a source of data on which I could later extract the insights that matter.

This general strategy has served me well on every piece of advice writing I've done since. It served our Top Performer students well in learning from experts in their fields. And it can serve you well in almost any circumstance in which you're trying to gain insights from other people.

Don't ask for advice. Ask for experiences. Then extract the insights yourself.

This technique will almost always get you better information, and, more importantly, it'll save from you from a ten minute lecture on the magic of colored folders.

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ABOUT SCOTT

I'm a writer, programmer, traveler and avid reader of interesting things. For the last ten years I've been experimenting to find out how to learn and think better. I don't promise I have all the answers, just a place to start.

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