



Book How To Be An Instant Expert

Six Steps to Being an Authority on Any Subject

Stephen J. Spignesi
Career Press, 2000

Recommendation

If you're an exec whose position requires any writing at all, it might occur to you that before you write an article or a speech you should jump on the Internet and do a thorough topic search – an original suggestion from author Stephen Spignesi. Thanks. You might even already know that you have to check reference materials at the library – another handy nugget of advice. But if your background is in technical expertise, not in word crafting, and you find writing as enticing as root canal, then this book is for you. It organizes ideas concisely and simply (Almost too simply: Any sixth grader could use it). While some content appeals only to freelancers (like a talk with a publishing-house acquisitions editor), *BooksInShort* recommends the guidance and direction this book gives to would-be or must-be writers who are uncomfortable with writing. You know who you are.

Take-Aways

- The first step toward writing about anything is to immerse yourself in the subject.
- Only 5,000 people in the United States make their living as professional writers.
- The Internet is an invaluable source of information and is now considered almost mandatory if you're truly trying to research a project.
- Most search engine results are worthless, although you can usually find what you are looking for quickly with Google.com.
- If you are writing an article, always look for an interesting or weird angle.
- Ask yourself the seven questions of who, what, when, where, why, how and weird.
- Dedicate your first book to your editor and read your contract carefully.
- If you're a new writer, you'll have better luck getting published by sending out query letters than you will trying to find an agent.
- Vagueness is the enemy of efficient and targeted research.
- You do not need to be a natural born writer to train yourself to think like one.

Summary

What Is an Instant Expert?

An instant expert is someone who must learn a great deal about a subject in a relatively short period of time (usually under a deadline of some sort), in order to write something about that subject.

The purpose of this book is to help you find what you need to know so that you can write your book, magazine article, speech or term paper, presenting yourself as an authority on the subject - no matter how narrow the parameters of your topic may be. The whole point of this process is that you must come across as an expert on your subject if you want people to take you seriously, be they your readers, listeners, employees, clients or professors.

Six Steps to Authoritative Writing

You have to take six steps to become an expert on any subject and to be able to write about it with clarity and authority. The six steps, which are explained in more detail below, are:

1. Immersion - Find out as much as possible about your subject, to the point of being almost overwhelmed with information.
2. Notes - Find the diamonds in the heaps of rough data you have compiled and then select the best.
3. Review and think - Step back, mull over what you have learned and rethink your original vision for your product. Review your materials and your notes again, and think about what to leave in and what to throw out as you begin to write.
4. Table of contents - Bring order to chaos. Structure your work and see it for the first time with a beginning, middle and end.
5. Chapter by chapter - By doing this step, you will learn how to write each chapter of your book, or each section of your article or speech, with confidence, using your notes, materials, and other sources.
6. Review and polish - Now, after a long pause, rewrite. Even Hemingway and Faulkner wrote second drafts, so don't get too attached to your first version.

Step One: Immersion

The research process is fascinating, but it is actually more of a quest for insight. As a writer, you first must become thoroughly acquainted with the subject you want to write about; find out all you can. Initially, your research results and findings may seem too confusing. You may be looking at too much information, too soon. However, as you slowly work your way through the treasure trove of sources and resources available to you, an awareness of your subject will begin to permeate your consciousness.

This awareness occurs almost at a subconscious level, but it does take place. As you repeatedly hunt down and review Web site descriptions, book titles and magazine articles, you will begin to notice Web sites that keep popping up, books that are referred to repeatedly, author names that keep appearing in bibliographies, articles and interviews that are constantly cited, and certain organizations that are mentioned all the time.

Searching the Web

Begin with an Internet search. If you're not online at home or office, you should be. But for those of you without computers, off-site Internet research can be done at your local public library, your university library or various commercial establishments that lease computer usage by the hour. Almost all libraries are connected to the Internet and they allow free access, though you may have to wait in line for a time-limited turn.

“An instant expert is someone who must learn a great deal about a subject in a relatively short time in order to write something about it.”

Most search-engine results are worthless or confusing, although you can usually find what you are looking for quickly with Google.com.

One huge difference between accessing the Internet from your home instead of at the library or a commercial facility, is that at home

you can download search results and documents onto your hard drive and peruse them at your leisure. With a click, you can "own" the materials you think might be useful.

Sources of Information

Your research targets include:

- An exhaustive Internet search for Web sites, books, articles, organizations and other resources accessible online.
- A review of the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature at your local public or university library, followed by a review of pertinent findings.
- A search of the New York Times Index (if available), or of other indexes that are pertinent to your topic or general enough to be inclusive and helpful.
- A search of Lexis-Nexis (if available) or other online research services that are relevant to your particular field or profession.
- A review of the library's catalog (usually a computerized version of the old card catalogues) for relevant books in circulation.
- A meeting with one of the library's reference librarians for referral to important, relevant reference materials.
- A bookstore trip (if necessary).
- Interviews with local experts.

"You do not need to be the natural born writer to train yourself to think like one."

Notes Selective topics for note taking may have occurred to you as you read through the books, magazine articles, Web site documents and other research materials you acquired during your initial immersion. To help you find all the information you need, you'll need to ask yourself the seven questions of who, what, when, where, why, how and weird.

Some writers dictate their notes at this stage of a project and then have them transcribed for later review and modification. Other writers type everything into their computers and avoid as much as possible ever writing anything by hand. Whichever system helps you compile the information you need as efficiently as possible is the right system for you.

Review and Think

Review your selectively culled compilation of notes, go through every item on your list one by one and make a decision as to whether or not this note topic is something worth pursuing and including in your work. Take an objective look and think through your new data.

"Vagueness is the enemy of efficient and targeted research and, by extension, it is the enemy of interesting and effective writing. And perhaps worst of all, vagueness is boring."

Useful criteria for narrowing down your topic and for determining what to incorporate and what to leave out include:

- Is this critical information necessary to making my project as comprehensive as possible?
- Will I be able to track down the information I need efficiently and in a thorough enough manner so that I will be able to write confidently about this topic?
- Is the topic interesting?
- Am I personally interested?

"Immersion means plunging head-first into your subject, to the point of being overwhelmed by information. But data immersion is not information overload for the sake of information overload."

If you apply these questions to your master list of notes, you should be able to pick and choose appropriately, with the ultimate result being your working table of contents.

Table of Contents

The table of contents structure can be applied to many writing projects, not just books.

A table of contents can be accurately, justifiably compiled for everything from articles, interviews and essays to letters and speeches. The technique is a good way to visualize a clear, logical, chronological outline of the material you want to cover in the piece you are writing.

If you force yourself to create a working table of contents immediately after your "review and think" selection process, you will be able to move headlines and complete sections around within that framework. It will allow you to rearrange features, delete items and manipulate the individual components of the book, speech or article easily and quickly. Plus, the table of contents outline gives you - at a glance - a one or two page blueprint of your project, which you will find extremely useful in keeping you focused.

Chapter by Chapter

This step has a very straightforward mandate: Create a structure and begin writing your work.

“One of the first steps in assembling your research materials - regardless of the subject you are writing about - should be an Internet search.”

By this stage of the game, you have read through all your materials and made copious notes. You have reviewed these notes and refined them into a working table of contents. The magic will now take place as a joint effort of your conscious and subconscious minds working together to make the words flow.

“It cannot be overemphasized how important it is to step back for a time before you review and polish your work. A change occurs in your writer’s mind that allows you to see your writing through a different set of eyes. What was once brilliantly composed may perhaps seem clumsy and in need of tweaking.”

This part of the process is all about you. Your readers or listeners want to hear your voice. Yet, heed one note of caution as you proceed - Do not try to write what you think they want to hear or what they expect. Instead, write what you want them to know, and do it one chapter at a time.

Review and Polish

As the chapter-by-chapter step is all about the writer in you, the review and polish step is all about the reader in you. You want to do the work to make your manuscript readable.

This final step of the six-step approach to research and writing is important because it is your last chance to get it right. Before you edit anything, print out a copy of the manuscript, if at all possible. When you hold 10 or 20 pages of copy in your hand to read and edit, the piece comes to life and the necessary revisions become more apparent. All writers do revisions and rewrites as part of the process of writing.

Eliminate Mistakes

One of the quickest and easiest ways to identify clumsy construction and bad flow is read your work aloud, preferably in private.

“A writer is a channel, an interpreter and a filter.”

Be on the lookout for sentences that don’t seem to make sense, split infinitives, redundancies, cliches, misspelled words, excessively long paragraphs and the passive voice. Eliminate these stumbling blocks to help your readers understand and enjoy the work you have created.

About the Author

Stephen J. Spignesi specializes in popular culture subjects, including television, film, contemporary fiction and historical biography. His many books include *JFK Jr.*, *The Complete Titanic*, *The Lost Works of Stephen King*, *The Beatles Book of Lists* and the *Italian 100*. The author says he has written many nonfiction books about subjects that he admits he knew nothing about before he

got the book assignments.
