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Understand. Be understood.

Expert or Student? How you see yourself can make all the difference



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Do you want to be seen as an expert in your field?

Of course you do!

Experts get attention and respect. The world seeks experts for their knowledge and wisdom.

We all listen to what they say.

Who doesn't want that?

But the better question is "Expert or Student: how do you see yourself?"

To achieve the high level of excellence that distinguishes an expert, I believe we must view ourselves as students.

By defining ourselves as learners, we can super-charge our expertise.

To illustrate my point, I'll tell you my personal story.

You see, for years I thought of myself as an expert writer.

I'd already had paid writing gigs when I entered university.

I studied English Literature for over a decade, right up to the PhD.

Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Tennyson,

Dickens—I could quote them all.

Grammar? I knew all about that. In fact, I taught grammar.

Big words? No problem. I have a massive vocabulary.

You name it, I did it: freelance journalism, speech writing, teaching, editing, public speaking.

I thought I was pretty darn good at what I did. In fact, I thought I was...yeah, you guessed it.

That E-word.

Then something happened which blew my thinking out of the water.

I decided to make a living from my writing.

But wasn't I doing that already? No, not exactly.

I'm not talking about the corporate work I had done for others—the press releases, reports, and speeches.

I'm talking about writing in the way that most of us think about it: fiction, poetry, blogging, and so on.

Easy enough, right? I mean, I was an expert!

So I did what an expert does. I started a blog, and I wrote every day. I worked really hard.

I wrote for newspapers, too.

And I figured if I just worked and worked and worked, my writing would find an audience.

A year later, and I had little to show for my daily labors.

Two years later, nothing much had changed.

I was discouraged, depressed and defeated.

How was it that an expert writer couldn't make a living at writing?

I even started to think that maybe I wasn't such a good writer after all.

The voice in my head was saying I was a bad writer. And a failure, too.

Now, here's the point of my story: my problem was that I was thinking of myself as an expert, and not a student.

And that one little detail colored everything. It almost led to me giving up on my dreams and goals.

You see, an expert looks at the world through a filter.

The filter keeps out a lot of information, and anything that gets through is judged according to the rigid standards and norms which the expert has developed over years of study and practice.



At least, that's how it was for me.

Years of intensive study in English Literature departments had taught me the correct way to read and write.

And what I ended up confronting was the cold, hard fact that the world does not read and write that way.

That's a huge problem for an expert.

But now think about the approach of a student.

Students don't make the assumption that they know everything, or even a great deal, about a topic.

They come to a subject with open minds. If they are keen students, they have an insatiable appetite for knowledge.

They want to discover and grow and question.

There is no filter to keep out the information that is not up to the expert standard and expectations.

A student is willing to look at things in a new way, and to revisit a fact, interpretation or approach that is not working.

The student changes her way of thinking as new facts come in.

Sure, an expert can do these things, too. But can isn't the same as will.

Fact is, an expert will do just about everything before changing how he thinks.

Like dismissing information that he deems unimportant, going immediately into critic mode, and trying to shape the facts to suit his settled way of thinking.

I know this because I used to be an expert.

As an expert, I knew the best way to do my job, and that's how I did it.

As a student, I'm eager to explore new ways of solving old problems.

As an expert, I spent most of my time criticizing the work of others.

As a student, I understand that I can learn from others—even people much younger than I, who have been writing for far less time.

In expert mode, I expected the world to come to me.

In student mode, I am going out to meet the world on its terms.

That's a revolutionary difference.

And I was almost 50 years old when I undertook this transformation.

Today, I am a student at my life-long craft.

No longer do I resist new and unfamiliar ways of doing things, simply because they are not the way I learned to do things. The expert's way.

After 30+ years working as a writer, I've gone back to school.

I devour books on writing, blogging, marketing, business and entrepreneurship.

At age 50, I see the vast enticing prospect of a world that wasn't getting through my expert filter.

I am working some near-atrophied writer's muscles that languished for decades.

But let's be very clear about one thing: it hasn't been easy.

I hated every step of the change. And if you try it, you will too.

When you've spent decades thinking of yourself as the expert, it takes a life-changing event to turn you back into a student.

You have to hit bottom.

Maybe it's a divorce, or financial stress, or an illness.



For me, it was looking in the mirror and seeing a middle-aged man who was a failure at something he thought he did well.

But you know what? How well you do something isn't the issue.

Or, rather, it's not the issue I care about any longer.

Of course I want to do things well. I'm not saying you should slack, or produce shoddy work.

But expertise is the expert's focus, and I've learned that this focus can suck all of the joy out of your work and your life too.

The expert asks, "What is the expert way to do this?"

But the student asks, "How can I do it better than I did it yesterday?"

One is looking backward, the other forward.

It was a dark time in my life when I accepted the fact that I had no idea how to build an audience for my writing. The light only arrived when I realized something simple, but also powerful.

I can learn.

And I probably would have learned if I hadn't started out thinking like an expert.

Instead, I failed.

The good news is that there's no failure when you are a student. There is only learning.

The student understands she will sometimes get it wrong, and it's not a big deal.

She won't take failure personally, because she's not burdened by the ridiculous notion that she's fashioned, once and for all, the tools of her trade, and that her only job is to ply them.

And the expert?

Oh, you can spot one of them with ease.

Experts speak more than they listen. They are obsessed with the correct, expert way of doing things.

Much of their effort goes into the maintenance and enhancement of their expertise.

I know what you're thinking.

"I see myself as an expert, and I don't do any of that!"

Really? Think hard before you answer.

If nothing I have written so far applies to you,

congratulations. You're different from 99% of the experts I've known.

Including me, when I thought of myself as an expert at writing.

And you know something, for a long time I didn't even realize this was how I saw myself.

Our human minds can be subtle.

I mean, it's not like I introduced myself at parties as Wayne, The Expert or strutted down the hall with a sign hanging around my neck.

But I did get pretty comfortable in my work. At a sub-conscious level, I saw my job as applying all the things about writing I had learned.

The idea that I still had things to learn about writing never occurred to me.

I looked into the future, and I saw myself using the expertise I had developed in my 20s.

Oh, sure. I would have told you there were things for me to learn. But I never thought I would be starting over at this point in my life.

Now that I'm a student, I look at the future as an opportunity to reinvent myself.

When something new comes along, I don't



feel that immediate defensiveness I once felt. I'm willing to give it a try.

If it works, great. If not, I try something else.

What does it mean that my writing works? It means I've found a new way of expressing myself that connects with readers.

For you, as a student, "it works" might mean something completely different.

What I hope it doesn't mean is that you've done something 100% according to the rigid standard of expertise that you've upheld for 30 years.

You can do better than that. If you're a student, doing better is your mission statement.

It's sad, but also human nature, that as we get older our focus shifts from "doing it better" to "doing it the way I learned."

In other words, we become experts, with all the good and bad that this entails.

Don't underestimate the subtlety and power of your own thoughts.

You know, that script in your head which can either liberate or limit you in your work and life.

You may not even be conscious of it, but it's there. And once you are aware, you have choices to make.

So I ask again: how do you see yourself? As an expert, or as a student?

How you answer that can make all the difference.



- Wayne K. Spear is the Founder and President of Spear Communications.

