How Information Works


Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

Who we trust as an expert depends on why we need the information & who’s doing the trusting.

Authority exists because a community gives it to someone. Beware: sometimes authority comes mostly from “privilege” that can drown out other voices.

Good thinkers consider information skeptically, but keep an open mind.

An expert can use any medium to communicate their ideas. Information is increasingly built socially, and formats will continue to change.

Actions: Novice ➞ Expert Information users

Novice information users use standards given to them by others to make judgements; experts recognize other markers of quality from experience.

Novice information users repackage the ideas of others; experts know they have a voice, too -- and understand that makes them responsible for their influence on others.

Attitudes: Novice ➞ Expert Information users

Novice information users believe a specific number of sources will answer the question; experts understand even authorities disagree, and information about a topic can be infinite. Expert researchers come to love that challenge.

Novice information users think they can achieve objectivity; experts understand they have to constantly challenge their own biases.
**Information Creation is a Process**

The way information is shared changes the way it is created, and v.v.

Good information can come in any format. Every format has its benefits and drawbacks, including assumptions about quality and authority that may or may not be true.

Formats are changing fast, and researchers have to keep up with how these new formats work so they can understand the information that comes out of them.

**Actions: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

Novice information users tend to trust known formats; experts know formats can be forged, or unusual formats can allow breakthroughs.

Novice information users are just learning how different formats come into being; experts understand traditional processes and investigate new ones.

Novice information users create in traditional formats; experts create new media, and watch how that changes meaning and purpose – and their responsibility for its uses.

**Attitudes: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

Novice information users believe format equals authority; experts embrace ambiguity.

Novice information users are unaware of many formats for information; experts know the wide range of unusual places to find good information.
Information Has Value

Information is worth money. It can be bought and sold.

It is valuable because seekers learn from it & use it to influence others.

Economic, legal, and social forces influence how it is created, used, packaged & traded.

**Actions: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

Novice information users write citations when they quote things; experts see how ideas morph from user to user and exploit the process.

Novice information users create for traditional markets; experts understand the market is skewed and flawed, and can be political about where they publish.

Novice information users do not consider security on the internet; experts know their personal information is a commodity, and change what they do online on purpose.

**Attitudes: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

Novice information users underestimate the time and skill that goes into creating a product; they see themselves as consumers. Experts see themselves as producers, and value the work & time it takes.
Research is Inquiry

Research is seldom a straight line with an answer at the end. It is a spiral of deeper questions that arise as understanding grows.

The more a researcher works, the more skill and perspective they gain about the process itself.

**Actions: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

Novice information users ask simpler questions and expect to use one skill to find an answer; experts ask surprising, complex, difficult questions that may not have an answer. They break down complex tasks into many small tasks and use many different skills to work on each task.

Novice information users use a handful of sources and report what they find; experts synthesize information from many different kinds of sources, reorganize it in useful ways, and make conclusions based on the data.

**Attitudes: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

Novice information users hope their question has an easy answer; experts enjoy the exploration & ambiguity, nurture, ask for help when needed, and admit when they are wrong.
Scholarship is a Conversation

Researchers talk to one another, even across the centuries, gathering new ideas into old questions. The interplay creates new things.

There may be many answers to a single question.

A researcher may have to earn the right / learn the rules to speak in a given conversation, depending on who / what is already “in the room.” It might not be fair.

When someone adds a new idea, they must say whose ideas they gathered to get that far.

**Actions: Novice ➔ Expert Information users**

Novice information users have a hard time finding where they may join the conversation; experts use the subtleties of different venues to tell the right story in the right place and time.

Novice information users can discuss one idea set in one timeframe; experts conceive the scope of information in the field, and the place of every argument across time.

**Attitudes: Novice ➔ Expert Information users**

Novice information users quickly judge an argument; they think of the conversation as having a correct end. Experts suspend judgement until they understand the context. They seek out other voices and listen to them. Conversations are ongoing.
Searching is Strategic Exploration

Searching is a skill set: search mechanics matter.

The mental flexibility to ask a question in many different ways of many different kinds of sources - and learn as you go – is also necessary.

Who you are affects how you search. Learn to stretch.

Searching can get convoluted; stay organized.

**Actions: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

The novice information user uses one information system in one way. The expert considers many kinds of sources and approaches and chooses the most efficient.

The novice information user believes “everything is on Google”; the expert understands the strengths and weaknesses of many information systems, and how deep searching is done in each.

**Attitudes: Novice ➞ Expert Information users**

The Novice Information User loses patience because they have not allowed for the time and skill good research takes. The expert exhibits tenacity, flexibility, humility, and serendipity – and enjoys the process.

The novice information user believes they should be able to do this alone; the expert asks for help from many people, and offers his own.

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In both actions and attitudes, and for each of these ideas separately, a researcher moves along a continuum from novice to expert. Their path to Expert Information User is just as convoluted and recursive as the research they are doing.