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HOW TO BE AN Independent Intellectual

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GUIDE 1.0 HOW TO BE AN INDEPENDENT INTELLECTUAL

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of the Internet has made it increasingly feasible for people to consider a career as an independent intellectual: an intellectual - meaning someone whose service or output consists of ideas (whether they are delivered in books, blog posts, YouTube videos, public lectures, or other forms); and independent - meaning an intellectual who is his or her own business entity or “brand name,” rather than being a professor tied to a university or a Senior Fellow who works exclusively for a particular institution. In short, an independent intellectual is a self-employed dealer in ideas.



In this guide I will offer my advice for a newcomer who is considering entrance into this intriguing arena. I will draw largely from episodes in my own experience to illustrate certain points; moreover, much of the wisdom I hope to share has been earned the hard way—by my *not* following all of the tips I give below.

WHY BE AN INDEPENDENT INTELLECTUAL?

The advantages of being an independent intellectual flow from both components of the phrase. First of all, it's great to be self-employed: You can set your own hours and you have the opportunity to leverage your abilities to make more money than if you had a standard, salaried position. For example, in most colleges or Think Tank environments, you can't say to the people in charge, "Hey, I'll produce twice as much as my colleagues, so I want to get paid twice as much." But if you're selling your "product" directly to individual customers, then the only limit on your income is how much you're willing to work.

Secondly, there is a special virtue to being your own boss if you are an intellectual. If you produce ideas for a living, it can be awkward to be a component of another organization, as opposed to your own brand. It raises special ethical dilemmas (I will elaborate on some specific examples later on) when your ideas carry not only your name, but the name of your employer as well. To illustrate: If you are a cook for a restaurant, and the boss tells you to dole out very particular portions for each dish in order to control costs, nobody would infer from this that you personally are "endorsing" such an outcome as the right way to serve such dishes. Everybody knows that you are preparing the dishes in that precise way because that's what your boss told you to do, and hardly anybody would fault you for it.

If you are an intellectual, you are actually supposed to believe the things you write. For this reason, the more independent you can be, the less pressure you will experience to adjust the way you discuss certain topics. The ideal situation for an intellectual, therefore, is to gain such acclaim that you can support yourself in the act of promoting the ideas that you truly believe.

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IS GRAD SCHOOL A NECESSITY?

Our environment is very fluid, with the importance of “official” schooling declining all the time. Regardless, for the foreseeable future I still think it’s important to go to grad school to become an independent intellectual. This doesn’t necessarily mean getting a PhD, but it does mean enrolling in a serious graduate program.

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The reason I recommend grad school is not that it provides a formal piece of recognition that you can put on your resume (or “CV” in academia). Indeed, part of the allure of being an independent intellectual is that it’s often possible to bypass traditional hierarchies and sell your product directly to a client base who won’t care whether some college professors signed off on your thinking.

Instead, the reason I recommend grad school is that it will expose you to a more rigorous program with more rigorous expectations from the type of people you should understand if you are going to be a professional thinker. There are many things to learn from working in a factory, on a farm, in a cafeteria, in an office, and so forth—but there are also things to learn as a graduate student, in terms of how these personalities interact with each other at that level. Even if your plan is ultimately to transcend the narrow confines of academia, you will be able to do so with more credibility and authority once you go through it yourself.

Indeed, in my area of economics, I benefit immensely from the fact that I went through a highly ranked New Keynesian program (at NYU) with a particular focus on game theory. This allows me to really get inside, say, Paul Krugman’s “wonkish” blog posts and to understand exactly what is going on in Ben Bernanke’s technical analyses of the Great Depression. It also allows me to take the verbal insights of

the Austrian School and translate them into a language that mainstream economists can grasp.

Ideally, you should be able to express the ideas of your intellectual opponents well enough so that they themselves would endorse your statement. Going through a graduate program is ideal for developing this type of skill.



However, there is a real danger in throwing yourself into a mix of intellectuals, in that these are generally people (students and professors alike, but most especially the professors) who derive their self-esteem from being considered smart. The environment can be surprisingly combative and depressing. It's useful to remember that a lot of people are fundamentally dishonest: They will walk around "blowing up" rival viewpoints with utter confidence, when actually they have no idea what they're talking about. The focus is more on disproving others than proving their own ideas.

When I was in grad school I noticed an interesting pattern during the seminars when outside academics would come to present papers: The NYU faculty would ask questions that fell into two camps. One type of question was merely a clarification, such as, "You said your proof assumed such-and-such, but why couldn't we use a weaker condition?" The other type of question was a more direct trip mine, designed to denigrate the presenter and show everyone how smart the person asking the question was. The pattern I noticed was that the professors whom I knew were really sharp typically fell into the first category, while the professors who were bluffing—throwing around a lot of fancy terms, but I knew they didn't really know the literature that well—were the ones falling into the second category.

If you think about it, this pattern makes perfect sense. The really top-rate professors went through their lives with an attitude of curiosity and an open mind, trying to absorb new insights from others who may have stumbled on a better way of analyzing an issue. Consequently, these people were always learning, and that's why I recognized them as seriously deep thinkers in their fields of expertise. In contrast, the mediocre professors spent their careers trying to impress people, and that often involved refusing to seriously consider someone's new way of thinking about a problem. As a result, these professors were basically stuck with the knowledge they had established when they were 25.

Even though it's not essential to get a PhD, it undeniably confers benefits. There are certain outlets that will be much more likely to hire you for work on a project if you have such qualifications. (If one of your fall-back options is to teach at the college level, then a PhD is an absolute must if you want a decent living.) However, as with every choice you make, it's not enough to focus solely on the benefits; you need to consider the opportunity costs as well. Depending on the program, it might take anywhere from five to eight years to get a PhD. There's a lot of work and life experience you can gain (not to mention accumulating more savings) during such a stretch if you were to instead opt to go to work rather than continue formal schooling.

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If you do decide to go for a PhD, I must stress that you think long and hard about your choice of dissertation topic. This is something that will define you professionally for years to come. In my case, for example, I picked a topic (capital & interest theory with an emphasis on the work of Austrian economist Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk) that was very esoteric. At the time I wanted to be a college professor for my career, and I found it quite difficult during job interviews to explain myself. In retrospect, doing something more topical—perhaps “The Importance of Real Factors in the Business Cycle”—would have been more marketable.

Fortunately, an independent intellectual is not as wedded to his or her graduate work as a more conventional academic. Even so, I would stress that doctoral candidates think through the career implications of their dissertation topics, rather than simply diving into a project for its own intrinsic beauty.

GETTING PAID TO DO WHAT YOU LOVE

The single biggest obstacle to being an independent intellectual is convincing people to voluntarily give you money in exchange for your thoughts. On the one hand, it's outstanding that such a phenomenon occurs, but on the other hand, we all know that ideas rule the world - if we pay actors to make movies and farmers to grow food, it also makes sense to pay intellectuals to think ideas.

In practice, what will probably happen is that you will start working in a more conventional post, and will gradually build up your income from various projects in your capacity as an intellectual. For example, someone might be a college professor who begins making enough from speaking engagements and book sales that he

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can quit his teaching position, take a modest post at a think tank to have a formal affiliation, and devote himself full time to his independent ventures. Or there may even be someone who has a totally unrelated “day job” that pays the bills until she develops enough popularity with her YouTube channel that she can afford to quit it.

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Because the landscape is evolving so quickly, it would be pointless for me to offer more specific tips on how to find clients. As with any entrepreneurial venture, you will have to look at the successes of others, then figure out how to seize opportunities yourself.

It is important for you to decide what moral and ethical criteria to apply when considering potential ventures. For example, as an economist I would never be on the actual payroll of the federal government, but I do testify to Congress on the few occasions when they invite me to hear my thoughts. Furthermore, I won’t act as a “hired gun” for a consulting project that would likely be used to influence government policy in a way that diminishes freedom. Yet beyond such general rules, it’s still true that I have to follow the lead of the market. I can’t write on whatever topic suits my fancy

that month; I need to go out and find clients who have specific desires that it’s my job to fulfill. It’s true that there is a lot of freedom in my career compared to many others, but ultimately I have to focus my energies on areas that are the most lucrative use of my scarce time.

Either because of ethical reasons or the availability of more lucrative options, you will eventually be in the pleasant position of having to turn down offers. Obviously you should do so with the utmost tact, not only in case this particular outlet later on becomes suitable, but also because the group making the offer may talk to others.

REMEMBER YOU’RE RUNNING A BUSINESS

One of the biggest challenges in being an independent intellectual is the business management aspect. Yes, there is great joy in having the freedom to take the day off in order to stay home with your sick kid, but on the other hand there is great terror in not knowing exactly how you will pay your bills in six months.

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In this vein, one of the earliest lessons you learn is the difference between cashflow and income. As I heard one guy put it, “Cash is fact – income is opinion.” More precisely, you can line up a bunch of clients for three months out, and on paper you will be bringing in enough money for that three-month period. But if there is a lag between when you do the work and when you actually get a check for it, that can pose all sorts of problems because your bills (of course) won’t wait. The obvious solution here is to build up a comfortable cushion of savings. But for younger people just starting out, it can still be difficult to adjust to the lack of a guaranteed paycheck coming at regular intervals.

In the interest of making your projections a reality, you need to guard your time. Rather than feeling as if you are on “company time,” being self-employed gives you the temptation to whittle away the hours when you really should be producing. It may seem corny to do so, but something as obvious as writing out a list in the morning of what you want to accomplish is a great tool to make sure you don’t fall behind.

However, it’s also important to truly take a break from working. One of the benefits of being self-employed is that you can blend your work into your normal life, but the other edge of this sword is that this means that you’re never truly relaxing. For me, I try to—as a rule—never work on Sundays. Knowing that this is the deal upfront, it forces me to get everything done during the other six days. Paradoxically, I actually produce more per week by taking at least one day completely off than if I allowed myself to work on Sundays as well. The reason is that if you are “always working” you will actually figure out ways to take little breaks anyway, perhaps to check your Facebook account or go grab a coffee. Building in official days off is important for recuperating and staying productive during work hours. In conclusion, the key to “running your own business” is keeping yourself motivated.

SELF - PROMOTION

As I mentioned earlier, a crucial component to becoming a successful independent intellectual is creating a “name brand” in yourself. You have to decide what that

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Once you get established, focus on people who are more successful, and figure out what they are doing. It may be that you don’t want to pursue such avenues—“I don’t want to get bigger doing that”—but you should at least figure out exactly how the system works to make an informed decision.

Even though I’m recommending that you look to others as role models, this is only to serve as inspiration for the creation of your unique brand. An analogy with music may help. Successful musicians can say who their “influences” were, but it’s still the case that they are their own artists, and they have their own fan bases. To be a successful musician, or intellectual, you need to decide what your brand is, and then build a fan base accordingly. If you admire the way such-and-such performs, by all means try to learn from him, but you can’t completely be him—you need to be your own, brand new creation.

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brand really is: what is the theme underlying all of your work, and how do you want people to think of you? When you answer those questions, you will have a better sense of how to market yourself. As your career unfolds, and as you respond to market forces, you may tweak or occasionally totally redefine your brand. Every business has to do it to succeed, and you are your own business as an independent intellectual. Even so, it’s a good idea to occasionally take stock of what you’re doing and make sure all of the components fit together.

One way of getting your brand out into the world is to provide free content, whether in the form of blog posts, videos, podcasts, speaking engagements, or even emails. Ultimately, you will have to charge for what you do if you want this to be your livelihood, but your credibility should be established first through free content before anybody will pay to hear your ideas. As always, check the market to see what the going rates are for people doing things similar to you.

Write plainly.

TIPS ON WRITING

Write plainly. Being an intellectual, you are already writing on difficult subjects. Don’t make it harder by using “cute” phrases that really only serve to show how much you’ve read on a subject. When you read really deep thinkers, who made



immense contributions in their particular fields—I have in mind Richard Feynman and Fischer Black—they could write in a very down-to-earth manner that the layperson could grasp. This makes you enormously more accessible to the public and far more effective in creating this fan base for yourself.

Having said this, don't commit the opposite mistake and bluff as if you're just one of the guys, rather than being an intellectual. If you don't watch sports, then you shouldn't use sports analogies. For a personal example, I remember in grad school I was warning about the growing State and wrote that the politicians were seeking to "take our guns." But I was bluffing; I have never owned a gun. The point I was making was perfectly fine, but I was trying to be somebody else in the style I used to get the point across.

If your writing involves government policies, don't rely on conventional news stories to get the facts. Learn to navigate the government websites and parse the documents (such as reports from the Congressional Budget Office) yourself. Very few people have the ability or stamina to read

beyond the Executive Summary in such documents. The media may be covering something in a particular way, even though the "official" government studies actually say the exact opposite if you know how to read them.

Writer's block is real.

The same warning applies to media coverage of a new academic or scientific report. Reporters will often botch the details, not out of malice, but simply because they don't understand statistical reasoning or because they make some other mistake. Read the originals—or the very least, long quotations from the study authors themselves—rather than trust what a journalist tells you the study "found."

Writer's block is real. There is a vicious circle in which you can fall behind in your work, then become utterly disgusted at anything you produce. Oddly, the solution to this is not to give yourself a pep talk, but rather to remind yourself that you're not that important. People skim through an amazing amount of material hourly, and consequently your agonizing is misplaced. It may be perfectly true that your blog post could be improved if you worked on it another day, but then that's one fewer blog post you will make in your lifetime. There's obviously a proper place in the tradeoff between quantity and quality, but when someone is suffering from writer's block it's because he's lost his sense of perception and is exaggerating the harms of an inadequate piece of writing.

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itly condone what “your teammate” is doing, or you will have to “throw him under the bus” and appear self-righteous (in the obnoxious sense) to most observers. You can minimize such awkwardness if it’s clear that you yourself are a fair person, and always restrict your criticisms of others to factual, objective complaints.

The other danger with joining sides with a particular team—rather than remaining independent—is that you are more likely to go along with the particular way the issue is being argued by the existing partisans. It’s possible that the two sides are talking past each other, or that neither side is isolating the truly fundamental issue at stake. I would much rather have 100 independent intellectuals discussing an issue than 50 people on Team A trying

Don’t be afraid to cite others. In fact, one of the most important things you can do is point newcomers to the classic works in your field. There is no shame in being a “second-hander” in this respect. Think back to how you yourself got sucked into the liberty movement. You may say, “Oh, it’s because I read Giant Thinker X, and that’s what I want to be.” But if you think more carefully about it, there was probably some lesser writer or radio host who pointed you to Giant Thinker X. So while you toil away on your masterpiece, don’t forget to remind people of the basics and point them to the classic, introductory works.

Finally, I would encourage you to avoid factionalism. Especially in political/ideological affairs, there is an obvious tendency to “join a team,” picking allies and enemies. I do not deny that this is a quick way to gain a following with a larger group of readers: You convince the current leaders of one team that you are one of them, and then they promote you to their existing support base.

The problem with this approach is twofold. First, there will always be people on “your team” who step over the bounds of decency or honesty, from your own vantage point. This then puts you in an awkward position, where you will have to either implic-

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to convince the public that the 50 people on Team B are evil idiots. Partisanship leads to discrediting the other side more than proving your side's argument. (Look to the government for an excellent example of

TIPS ON PUBLIC SPEAKING

As with just about every other endeavor in life, confidence is essential to successful public speaking. If someone walks in front of a crowd knowing that they are going to love his talk, he will be right.

To this end, you need to be excited about the material. If you think the topic is boring, and you know it better than the crowd, why should your audience doubt your judgment? In contrast, if you are brimming over with enthusiasm because you relish the chance to share these amazing insights, then the crowd will be drawn in. Incidentally, if you don't know why it's important for you to be standing in front of a crowd and talking to them, then you shouldn't be standing in front of a crowd talking to them.

Save as much as possible so that you have the financial freedom to pursue the career path you desire.

For a small- to medium-sized group, consisting of 50 or fewer people, interaction with the audi-

ence is a good way to keep people focused and prevent them from nodding off. This can be relatively light, such as asking for someone in the crowd to yell out an obvious answer, or it can be intense, such as walking into the crowd with the microphone and putting it up to specific people. I've found that tactic to be especially effective in waking people up because they're terrified the speaker might approach them, and also because it's suddenly interesting to see what will happen when the speaker approaches someone else.

First, maintain an attitude of humility and respect for everyone.



Another thing that is helpful in speaking is using humor: people always appreciate humor in a public talk, particularly if the subject is dry. Some people think that this means, “You should open with a joke,” and that’s sometimes effective, but it doesn’t mean you go in with a canned joke along the lines of, “Hillary Clinton dies in a car crash and approaches St. Peter at the pearly gates...” Rather, the jokes in your talk should flow naturally from the material being discussed. (Consider that even the great standup comics don’t go up and “tell jokes.” Rather, they discuss issues in a hilarious fashion.) But important as humor is, it doesn’t fulfill the purpose of your talk alone. Unless you’re literally a standup comedian, your function isn’t to make people laugh, but rather to change the way they think.

CONCLUSION

Becoming an independent intellectual is not for everyone, but for those interested in a life of ideas, I urge you to seriously consider it. You will reap the joys of being self-employed and you will be much freer to voice your true opinions.

My final two pieces of advice are these: First, maintain an attitude of humility and respect for everyone, even people with whom you strongly disagree. This may cost you in the short term by missing out on easy potshots at your opponents; but in the long run it will benefit you tremendously, because you will learn from everyone. Lastly, save as much as possible so that you have the financial freedom to pursue the career path you desire. Someone with a great idea and \$100,000 in liquid assets is in a much better position to change the world than someone with a terrific idea and no means to spread it.



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¹<http://consultingbyrpm.com/>