

What's the most important skill to learn as a student? The discipline to say "no" — Quartz

[Lauren Alix Brown](#) November 16, 2017



Reuters/Hasan Shaaban

Back to basics.

Can you code? Speak a second language? How high is your IQ?

There's much debate on what students need most to succeed in an increasingly competitive world. The challenges of automation, globalization, and political upheaval leave out the fact that we're living an age of information overload.

According to CNN's Fareed Zakaria, the one thing that children will need to learn is "intellectual discipline." The ability to recall facts (we have Google) and parrot popular arguments (the canon is dead) has become obsolete.

Students need to wade through the noise, discern the facts, analyze perspectives, and develop their own expertise.

In a panel on “Education in the Post-Truth World” at WISE 2017’s summit for education, Zakaria contrasts how the barrage of media effect how young people take in and process information.

I say this to my kids all of the time, ‘you can graze all these headlines and tweets and blog posts you like—at the end of the day the way you develop real knowledge about a subject still remains that you have to go deep; still remains that you have to actually read books; still remains that you have to talk to experts, travel to countries.

All you do is put yourself at a competitive disadvantage if you don’t handle these things. I think this is one of the great challenges we face.

I don’t mean this to suggest it’s putting down young people. I grew up in India with no television. TV came to India in about 1975, I was 10 years old—One channel, black and white, they would show channels about Indian agriculture that nobody watched. There was one Bollywood movie on Sunday nights.

I read voraciously because that’s what you could do.

If I had a supercomputer in my pocket called an iPhone that could stream all the entertainment in the world all the TV shows, I don’t think I would’ve read that much but I don’t think I would’ve had the career that I have. I don’t know where that takes you.

Children are going to have to learn something that I didn’t have to learn as much which is discipline, intellectual discipline—the ability to say no. There was no choice if I went to a store.

The world my children are growing up in is exactly the opposite an explosion of choice, an explosion of options, an explosion of opportunity.

This ability to focus isn't simply about using fewer apps or reducing the number of [screens kids access](#) at once but applying rigor to the source of the information they take in. In other words, students need to return to the fundamentals of education where you question the information and the source, which allows you to gain a greater understanding.

The majority of teens are accessing news from networks like Twitter and Snapchat where reports from individuals are unverified. A [large Stanford study](#) (pdf) from 2016 found an overwhelming majority of young people, from middle school to high school to the undergraduate level could not: tell the difference between news and sponsored content, source evidence, or evaluate claims on social media.

The report concludes: "Overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*."

Our primary sources of information come from the internet and social media but this, in turn, becomes a minefield for sorting out fact from fiction. We're at an inflection point where paring down and drilling deep into information is going to be a necessity.

The future is always uncertain but what seems clear is that one of the most powerful tools anyone can harness is the single-minded pursuit of mastering how to seek the truth from information.