

Aquinas' 16 Steps to Becoming an Intellectual

An apprenticeship under a master is perhaps the best way to learn something. So it also goes with learning itself. If you want to become an intellectual, it helps to seek training from a master intellect.

Undoubtedly, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was one of the greatest intellects the world has known. He once told someone that God had given him the grace "of having understood whatever I have read."

Fortunately for us, in a letter to a fellow monk ([*De Modo Studendi*](#)), he left behind the following 16 pieces of advice about how to become a better intellectual (translation from the Latin is my own):

- 1) Enter through rivers and not immediately into the sea. Master that which is easier before you tackle the more difficult.
- 2) Be slow to speak.
- 3) Don't frequent noisy places.
- 4) Live a good moral life.
- 5) Pray.
- 6) Love the space in which you study.
- 7) Be pleasant to all people.
- 8) Don't worry about the affairs of others.
- 9) Don't be overly familiar with anyone, since it breeds contempt and takes away from study.

10) Don't spend much time reflecting on the words and deeds of worldly people.

11) Above all else, flee frequent conversation. Follow in the footsteps of those who are good.

12) Don't worry about who you learn from.

13) Commit to memory whatever worthwhile comes from your teacher.

14) Do the same with what you read and hear. Work hard that you may understand. Look into whatever is in doubt.

15) Store everything you can in the closet of your mind. Fill it up as you would a vessel.

16) Don't seek what is too high for you.

Granted, some of these pieces of advice may work better for the monks who were Aquinas' original audience. But, in my experience, the basic contours of his recommendations still apply today. If you want to grow as an intellectual, you need patience, you need silence, you need time for contemplation, and you need to be voracious in your love of learning.

[Image Credit](#)