

On Autodidact

An autodidact is someone who is self-educated. Many famous intellectuals were autodidacts, including the American inventor Benjamin Franklin. Today, many people are exploring self-education through materials designed for quick learning. Critics say that these shortcuts will never lead to intellectual expertise, while proponents claim they are valid ways to gain knowledge in a busy world.

Many popular books are on the market for people motivated to learn quickly on their own. Titles such as *Japanese for Busy People*, *Learn Plumbing in a Month*, and even *Seven Days to a Great Marriage* cover a wide range of diverse subjects. These books summarize complex subjects such as Buddhism in the simplest terms, and teach the most basic principles of feng shui in less than a day. These books sell easy access to knowledge.

The best-selling *For Dummies* series got its start in 1991 as a single volume about the DOS computer operating system. For the first time, a computer manual was available that put difficult technical terminology into layman's terms. Initially, bookstores were skeptical, citing the book's title as an insult to their customers. However, the book became a runaway success and now the series covers a wide range of subjects. The series is translated into 39 languages and can be bought in more than 40 countries.

Serious autodidacts complain that teach-yourself-quickly books are merely dumbed-down overviews of complex subjects for people with little patience. In this modern world of hustle and bustle, people cannot slow down long enough to learn things thoroughly. Instead, they buy the abridged versions of the teachings of famous philosophers or the companion texts that summarize the plots of Shakespeare's plays, missing out on the experience of reading the complete works in the process. These disgruntled critics say that today's young adults suffer from an ever-shortening attention span. With the Internet becoming more and more a part of people's lives and advertisers competing for attention with ever-louder-and-shorter messages, people have become used to things being finished almost before they start. Critics of the teach-yourself-quickly phenomenon say that the books play to the modern student's inability to concentrate.

These books are immensely popular, however, especially with those who lead busy lives. Some proponents think that critics of these teach-yourself-quickly books are intellectual snobs. There are many different ways to learn, they say, and studying a subject in depth for years in order to become an authority is but one method. Another is to learn about topics of interest on a more superficial level and at one's own pace. Either way, they insist, it is up to the learner to determine his or her needs and level of interaction with the subjects they are learning.