

# Sherlock Holmes Excerpts

Arthur Conan Doyle (1887-1927)

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*Notes by Bob Evelyn  
Wilmore, Kentucky; 2022.*

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Having read “Sherlock Holmes – The Complete Stories” for the second time, I wanted to provide my favorite passages that have relevance to many things in life. I have devoted much of my life to career (sales) and ministry (with a special focus on Bible study), and I see application in the following passages for both of these pursuits. Whatever your path, I hope you will find some benefit in the following. [Note: Page numbers are from “Sherlock Holmes, The Complete Stories” by Wordsworth Library Collection.]

## GATHERING DATA

It all begins with gathering data and knowledge. Adequate data is essential if we are to draw good conclusions.

### The need for data

“[I have] no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgment.” (p. 27 – “A Study in Scarlet”)

“I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.” (p. 431 – “A Scandal in Bohemia”)

“The temptation to form premature theories upon insufficient data is the bane of our profession.” (p. 319 – “The Valley of Fear”)

“Problems may be solved in the study which have baffled all those who have sought a solution by the aid of their senses. To carry the art, however, to its highest pitch, it is necessary that the reasoner should be able to utilize all the facts which have come to his knowledge, and this in itself implies, as you will readily see, a possession of all knowledge, which, even in these days of free education and encyclopedias, is a somewhat rare accomplishment. It is not so impossible, however, that a man should possess all knowledge which is likely to be useful to him in his work, and this I have endeavored in my case to do. If I remember rightly, you on one occasion in the early days of our friendship, defined my limits in a very precise fashion. [Watson replies], It was a singular document. Philosophy, astronomy, and politics were marked at zero, I remember. Botany variable, geology profound as regards the mud-stains from any region within fifty miles of town, chemistry eccentric, anatomy unsystematic, library of sensational literature and crime records unique, violin-player, boxer, swordsman, lawyer, and self-poisoner by cocaine and tobacco. Those I think were the main points of my analysis. [Holmes replies], Well, I say now as I said then, that a man should keep his little brain-attic stocked with all the furniture that he is likely to use, and the rest he can put away in the lumber-room of his library, where he can get it if he wants it. Now, for such a case as the one which has been submitted to us tonight, we need certainly to muster all our resources. Kindly hand me down the letter K of the American Encyclopedia.” (p. 515 – “The Five Orange Pips”)

“Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons with the greatest for the last. (p. 1138 – “The Red Circle”)

## OBSERVATION

Observation is an important means of gathering data. But we must remember that observation is more than just seeing things.

### Observing

"The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes." (p. 196 – "The Hound of the Baskervilles")

### Seeing, but not observing

"You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room. ... How many are there? ... You have not observed. And yet you have seen." (p. 431 – "A Scandal in Bohemia")

## **DELEGATION**

Sometimes we must rely upon others as we gather data. Here we come to the important art of delegation.

### Delegation and making every effort

"I have set other agencies at work and used every means at my disposal." (p. 143 – "The Sign of the Four")

## **ORGANIZING THE DATA**

Let's consider how we store information in our brain.

### The brain is your attic

"I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skilled workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order." (p. 20 – "A Study in Scarlet")

### Keeping the data organized (incidental vs. vital information)

"It is of the highest importance in the art of detection to be able to recognize, out of a number of facts, which are incidental and which vital. Otherwise your energy and attention must be dissipated instead of being concentrated." (p. 751 – "The Reigate Squires")

## **THREE THINGS ARE NEEDED**

We've talked about observation and knowledge, but there is a third thing that is needed to put it all together.

### Qualities needed to be a detective

[Speaking of French detective Francois le Villard, Holmes observes] ... "He possesses two out of the three qualities necessary for the ideal detective. He has the power of observation and that of deduction. He is only wanting in knowledge, and that may come in time." (p. 99 – "The Sign of the Four")

### Observation, deduction, knowledge – three necessities

"Perhaps I have trained myself to see what others overlook." (p. 471 – "A Case of Identity")

## **REASONING AND BEING SYSTEMATIC**

As we comb through data and begin to formulate conclusions, we will employ reasoning. And it will be important to be systematic.

The need for reasoning

"You can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences." (p. 543 – "The Blue Carbuncle")

Accurate and systematic

"How much an observant man might learn by an accurate and systematic examination of all that [comes] in his way." (p. 22 – "A Study in Scarlet")

A "system" of observation and inference

"... those habits of observation and inference which I had already formed into a system." (p. 709 – "The Gloria Scott")

A reasoning and observing machine

"He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen." (p. 429 – "A Scandal in Bohemia")

"There was something in his masterly grasp of a situation, and his keen, incisive reasoning, which made it a pleasure to me to study his system of work, and to follow the quick, subtle methods by which he disentangled the most inextricable mysteries." (p. 437 – "A Scandal in Bohemia")

## **THE PROCESS OF ELIMINATION**

As we consider the data, one valuable approach in formulating conclusions is the process of elimination.

The process of elimination

"Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth." (p. 100 – "The Sign of the Four")

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." (p. 122 – "The Sign of the Four")

"It is an old maxim of mine that when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." (p. 632 – "The Beryl Coronet")

## **FOCUSED REASONING**

Sometimes solitude is needed as we reason through the data. And sometimes a specific place might be helpful in providing us with inspiration.

The need for solitude

"I knew that seclusion and solitude were very necessary for my friend in those hours of intense, mental concentration during which he weighed every particle of evidence, constructed alternative theories, balanced one against the other, and made up his mind as to which points were essential and which immaterial." (p. 195 – "The Hound of the Baskervilles")

Drawing inspiration from a place

"I shall sit in that room and see if its atmosphere brings me inspiration. I'm a believer in the *genius loci*." (p. 349 – "The Valley of Fear")

Singular focus

"I am turning my mind upon Baron Gruner.' When our visitor had left us, Holmes sat so long in deep thought that it seemed to me that he had forgotten my presence." (p. 1237 – "The Illustrious Client")

## **DON'T RUSH TO CONCLUSIONS**

As we work toward developing theories, we must be sure not to rush to a hasty conclusion. And we must be sure to avoid bias.

### Drawing conclusions before adequate data is available

“I never guess. It is a shocking habit – destructive to the logical faculty.” (p. 101 – “The Sign of the Four”)

### Avoiding bias when drawing conclusions

“It is of the first importance not to allow your judgment to be biased by personal qualities. A client is to me a mere unit, a factor in a problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning.” (p. 105 – “The Sign of the Four”)

“I approached the house, as you know, on foot, and with my mind entirely free from all impressions. I naturally began by examining the roadway, and there, as I have already explained to you, I saw clearly the marks of a cab.” (p. 91 – “A Study in Scarlet”)

### The need for time

[Speaking of his most challenging and dangerous adversary, Moriarty] ... “I don’t say that he can’t be beat. But you must give me time – you must give me time.” (p. 426 – “The Valley of Fear”)

## **PEOPLE ARE PUZZLES**

When dealing with people, we must remember they are puzzles. We are very often dealing with probabilities. And we must be careful not to jump from general data to specific conclusions.

### People are a puzzle / Probabilities

“While the individual man is an insoluble puzzle, in the aggregate he becomes a mathematical certainty. You can, for example, never foretell what any one man will do, but you can say with precision what an average number will be up to. Individuals vary, but percentages remain constant. So says the statistician.” (p. 151 – “The Sign of the Four”)

### Balancing probabilities when creating theories

[We are coming] “into the region where we balance probabilities and choose the most likely. It is the scientific use of the imagination, but we have always some material basis on which to start our speculation.” (p. 201 – “The Hound of the Baskervilles”)

### Specific, not general

“Never trust to general impressions but concentrate yourself upon details.” (p. 477 – “A Case of Identity”)

## **REACHING CONCLUSIONS**

Now comes the time when all data has been gathered, reasoning applied, and our systematic investigation has been concluded. We may begin with a working hypothesis.

### A working hypothesis

“We can adopt it as a working hypothesis and then see how far our difficulties disappear.” (p. 333 – “The Valley of Fear”)

## **RE-EXAMINING**

At times, after we believe we have things figured out, it is necessary to re-evaluate.

### The need to re-evaluate conclusions

"When a fact appears to be opposed to a long train of deductions it invariably proves to be capable of bearing some other interpretation." (p. 52 – "A Study in Scarlet")

## **CONVINCING OTHERS**

One thing about Holmes – he did not lack self-confidence. But he could be confident since he had gathered data and knowledge, he took every precaution against bias or reaching conclusions prematurely, he carefully and systematically analyzed and reasoned, and he reached his conclusions carefully and thoughtfully. So when it came time to convince others, he was prepared and had no need to lack confidence.

### Convincing others

"You must come round to my view, for otherwise I shall keep piling fact upon fact on you until your reason breaks down under them and acknowledges me to be right." (p. 449 – "The Red-Headed League")

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

Now I beg for indulgence, as I'll conclude with a couple of references that don't fit into the above categories, but I just like the way the author turns a phrase.

### An introduction

"Sir James Damery presents his compliments to Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and will call upon him at 4:30 tomorrow. Sir James begs to say that the matter upon which he desires to consult Mr. Holmes is very delicate, and also very important. He trusts, therefore, that Mr. Holmes will make every effort to grant this interview, and that he will confirm it over the telephone to the Carlton Club." (p. 1234 – "The Illustrious Client")

### The game is afoot

"The game is afoot." (p. 1046 – "The Abbey Grange")

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