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Being a Know-It-All

You can *know your way around*, *know a thing or two*, *know the ropes*, and *know your stuff*. A *know-it-all*, though, is someone who puts on airs over his self-importance, especially a person whose instructive-type conversational style is meant to show off his superior knowledge.

Famous know-it-alls include God, Hypocrites, Julius Caesar, and Mr. Know-It-All, aka Bullwinkle J. Moose. Deities, philosophers, and cartoon characters aside, know-it-alls are easily identifiable by what they say. If you hear, “I told you, but you didn’t listen!” or “Yeah, I already knew that.” you’re probably talking with one.

These run-of-the-mill garden-variety know-it-alls, sometimes referred to as smart alecks, know everything about everything at all times—or so they would have you believe. They’re typically thought of as bombastic, opinionated, and bad listeners. Know-it-alls can pontificate ad infinitum on any subject. It drives some people crazy.

To be fair, know-it-alls sometimes have lots to offer and, like most people, they’re generally competent. But, they can’t stand to be contradicted or corrected. A know-it-all lacks the humility to say, “I don’t know enough about that to have an opinion” or “You may be right.”

As communicators, know-it-alls are good at giving and bad at receiving. They don’t take input well. Their rambling treatises have the effect of putting people down. By implication, if they know everything, you know nothing. Or at least that’s how it can make you feel.

For a little fun the next time you’re suffering at the hands of a know-it-all, ask them this question and see if they know the answer: *According to the Heisenberg Indeterminacy Principle of quantum mechanics, what two properties of a system cannot be simultaneously determined with arbitrarily small uncertainties?* And—drum roll—the answer is: *position and momentum*. Okay, we admit that’s a juvenile way of dealing with know-it-alls. Instead, consider these dos and don’ts.

Know-It-All Dos and Don'ts

- Always have the facts when engaging a know-it-all in conversation. Assumptions, estimates, and hunches don't carry any weight with them.
- Be specific when asking questions of a know-it-all, lest they go off on a frustrating and counterproductive tangent.
- Avoid directly challenging a know-it-all's facts or interpretation of the facts. Best to just listen and move on—or simply excuse yourself and leave.
- Remember that know-it-alls don't know everything and that you can contribute, too.
- Look yourself in the mirror. If you're a know-it-all, fess up, and change.

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