

# Brief

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## *Mastermind: how to think like Sherlock Holmes*

**This book by psychologist Maria Konnikova will probably not help you solve murders but will help you think, focus, remember and make decisions better.**

Conan Doyle's hero continues to prove his appeal with the recent Robert Downey Jnr. films, the BBC's *Sherlock* and CBS's *Elementary*. Konnikova shows that Sherlock Holmes offers more than just a way of solving crime. It is an entire way of thinking. He is an ideal model for how we can think better than we usually do, as a matter of course. His explanations, methodology and approach to thinking predict psychology and neuroscience findings of a hundred years later. The book is a clever, engaging way to summarise the latest thinking on the mind.

**The Holmes way of thinking:** In a nutshell the Holmes method is: clarify the objective, evidenced-based observation and insight; understand and frame the problem; hypothesise (or imagine); test and decide; and repeat. He is deliberately sceptical and inquisitive towards the world. Nothing is taken at face value. Everything is scrutinised and considered. This is not the instinctive way our minds are built to work, so we need to build new habits and skills.

**Thinking fast and slow:** Psychologists agree that our minds operate on a two-system basis. One is intuitive, fast, reactive – it doesn't require much conscious thought and is a 'status quo' autopilot. The other is slower, more deliberate, more thorough, but also harder work and doesn't step in unless necessary. Holmes has learnt when and how to control the switch into conscious mode – which takes mindfulness, motivation and a lot of practice.

**Managing memory:** Holmes said, "a brain is like an empty attic. Stock it with such furniture as you choose." Recent research on memory, retention and retrieval supports this analogy. Our brains are wired for quick judgements, so if we notice and remember everything, our world would become too complex too quickly. Holmes is much more deliberate than most in choosing to remember what is most likely to be useful. There are ways to practice how to do this better - the Holmes way.

**Avoid jumping to conclusions:** Holmes shows how we can rewire our mind to avoid those instant reactions that prevent a more objective and thorough judgement of our surroundings. It's called the effect heuristic: how we feel affects how we think. A happy and relaxed state makes for a more accepting and less guarded world-view. And the easier it is for us to recall something, the more confident we are in its applicability and truth. Holmes can teach us to be more sceptical.

**Increasing attention and focus:** Attention is a limited resource. Paying attention to one thing will be at the expense of another. We cannot focus on many things at once and expect to function at the same level as it would were we to focus on just one. Or worse, we will have no focus and all will be but degrees of noise. Holmes chooses to focus on only the most essential things at any one moment, excluding all others.

**Knowing when to step back, be mindful and even meditate:** It can seem counterintuitive to step back from a problem. But psychological distance helps reflection, improves cognitive performance, and leads to decisions that stand the test of time. After a walk, we are better at solving problems and persist longer at difficult tasks. Holmes is no monk, but he understands that meditation is an exercise to clear your mind, and he also chooses when to smoke a pipe, play the violin or go out to the opera to refresh his mind.

**Creating good habits, breaking bad ones:** it's good to keep learning: it keeps our minds sharp and alert. Here's the odd thing: the more we've learned, the more powerful the urge to make it habit. The more we know, the more likely we are to overestimate our own ability. We need habit as it frees us to think of broader, more strategic issues. On the other hand, habit is close to mindlessness. Holmes chooses habits (like the violin) that do not interfere, and keeps learning to avoid overconfidence.

Konnikova urges us all to find our inner Sherlock Holmes and make more of our minds. Very timely advice in our complex and unpredictable world.