

## ***Conventional Wisdom: What It Means And When To Use It***

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In his 1958 book, *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith used the term "conventional wisdom" to refer to predictable, commonly accepted ideas. The term had been used before to describe commonplace knowledge in positive or neutral terms. For Galbraith, conventional wisdom was something that interfered with the adoption of new ideas. So, what is conventional wisdom, exactly, and are there times when it's helpful?

### **Definition Of Conventional Wisdom**

Conventional wisdom refers to all the commonplace ideas and expert opinions that are commonly accepted as true. This is the wisdom that most people agree on and use to make everyday decisions about their lives. When new ideas are introduced, they're usually compared to conventional wisdom on the subject before they're considered to be true.

### **Generally Accepted Ideas**

Generally accepted ideas are ideas that most people think are true. This public aspect of consensus often keeps people committed to conventional ideas. Most people don't want to be labeled as being unreasonable or downright foolish, which they might be if they go against what the majority think.

### **Expert Opinions**

Expert opinions can also be called "conventional wisdom" if they refer to long-established ideas generally accepted within a field of study. New ideas don't come easily within most major institutions, yet experts may have new ideas or cling to old ones. It's the expert's education and experience in the subject matter that lends credence to their ideas and puts them in the category of conventional wisdom.

### **Is Conventional Wisdom Accurate?**

Conventional wisdom is generally accepted, but it may or may not be accurate.

Conventional wisdom may be generally true but not true in specific instances, too. You may say that politicians lie, and that may be true very often. However, politicians also tell the truth, so that bit of conventional wisdom isn't enough to tell you what's really happening in the political sphere.

### **Is Conventional Wisdom Consistent Over Time?**

Conventional wisdom is usually very slow to change. However, as research, expert opinions, and public opinions change, it eventually adds up to progress in the course of conventional wisdom.

There was a time when conventional wisdom said a woman's place was in the home, however, over the course of long decades, change has happened. Now, it isn't unusual to see a man taking care of the household, and women are now well-established in the workplace.

Sometimes, change comes faster, though. Consider the treatment of juvenile diabetes before the use of insulin. Conventional wisdom said that the disease was a death sentence. Yet, when doctors began using insulin, children with the condition got better and could often live a long, relatively healthy life.

## **Where You Can Find Conventional Wisdom**

You can find conventional wisdom no matter where you go. In your everyday life, you rely on conventional wisdom when you're making all the countless decisions of an ordinary day. Imagine what it would be like to consider new ideas each time you moved or had a thought! You probably wouldn't get much accomplished with that kind of overthinking.

You can also find conventional wisdom in all major areas of human inquiry. No matter what you study, you have to learn the long-held knowledge before you can understand the new ideas that aren't yet established. While people in higher education spend a lot of time refuting conventional wisdom, their whole system relies on the body of generally agreed-upon knowledge.

All the institutions rely heavily on established ideas that have seemed to stand the test of time. Ordinary knowledge is used extensively in politics to appeal to ordinary people. In economics, the force of common perceptions about what is true has a strong bearing on what actually happens. Religion and even family are usually very firmly rooted in tradition and convention. Any industry or business has its own conventional wisdom that makes up a large part of their unique body of knowledge, as well.

## **Examples Of Conventional Wisdom**

Here are some examples of conventional wisdom in everyday life within the major institutions of society. As you look through this list, remember that it's a list of commonly accepted ideas and not a list of truths. Truth is usually much more difficult to discern, and some of these may ring true for you while others don't. Also, remember that what's conventional wisdom one day may be outdated thinking the next.

### **Government, Politics, and Legal System**

- The purpose of government is to serve the people.
- Politicians lie.
- Laws keep people honest.
- The courts protect people from injustice.

### **Education**

- Children should do homework every night.
- Teachers are responsible for their students' success.
- Boys are naturally better at STEM subjects than girls are.

- Students must study to make good grades.
- The textbook is always right.

### **Economic**

- Everyone should save money for retirement.
- A major economic loss is always unacceptable.
- When you buy stocks is more important than what stocks you buy.
- Something you pay for is more valuable than something you receive free.

### **Family**

- Parents shouldn't divorce.
- Children should be protected from all risks.
- A clean home is a happy home.
- Family vacations bring family members closer.

### **Religion**

- Those who sin are doomed.
- You must believe the written word of the religion literally.
- Feeling guilty makes you a better person.

### **When Is Conventional Wisdom Helpful?**

Conventional wisdom isn't always helpful, but it can be beneficial in certain ways. Here are some of the situations where it might be the best wisdom to rely on:

- When you don't have time to come up with or learn about new ideas.
- When you need everyone to agree.
- When you've considered many ideas and found the conventional idea to be truest.
- When you need to get something done in an institution that's resistant to change.
- When your need to fit in is greater than any other need.

### **What's The Alternative To Conventional Wisdom?**

The general public has certain ideas that everyone mostly accepts. You can go with those ideas and get along fairly well in most cases. However, thinking for yourself may bring its own rewards. You may be able to do something no one thought you could. You might be able to live a better, more fulfilling life if you push the boundaries of what others consider as acceptable. Who knows, you may even make a change in society's institutions and create a new conventional wisdom.

There are three main alternatives to conventional wisdom: new ideas, unpopular ideas, and irrational ideas. If you like new ideas, you can follow research and current theories about the subjects that interest you.

Perhaps you feel an old idea has been passed over without proper consideration. You can read what experts say about it and think about why the public has dismissed the idea to come to your own conclusion.

Sometimes, though, irrational thinking disguises itself as innovating or reconsidering old ideas. You may think you're onto a magnificent truth that no one else understands. The truth is that could happen. However, more likely, you simply aren't approaching the subject logically.

Illogical thinking can happen when you're desperate for a better solution than conventional wisdom offers you. It can also happen when your emotions are extreme. Or, you may have a mental condition that keeps you from thinking clearly.

### **What To Do When Conventional Wisdom Seems False**

Conventional wisdom, as mentioned before, may or may not be true, yet when you go against conventional wisdom, you may suffer consequences that may include social ostracism, job loss, fractured relationships, and more.

Once you examine your thoughts clearly and rationally, you may find that conventional wisdom makes more sense to you than it did before. You may discover the value of your unique ideas. Or more likely, you may find that truth lies within a large body of knowledge that contains both innovation and conventional wisdom.