



YES, YOU CAN LEARN IT FROM A BOOK

Three Superb Books On Ancillary Subjects To Help The Marketer

Head First Statistics – A Brain-Friendly Guide. By Dawn Griffiths. O’Reilly, Sebastopol, CA. 677 pp. Paperback, \$34.99. To order click [here](#)

Head First Physics – A Brain-Friendly Guide. By Heather Lang. O’Reilly, Sebastopol, CA. 895 pp. Paperback, \$29.99. To order click [here](#)

Statistics in a Nutshell, by Sara Boslaugh and Paul Andrew Watters. O’Reilly, Sebastopol, CA. 452 pp. Paperback, \$34.99. To order click [here](#)

There is nothing to make you feel more ignorant, no matter how smart you think you are, than coming face to face with two scientific subjects -- statistics and physics. To feel further inadequate, you should lack the gene that governs proficiency in math.

All this is what makes welcome any book that brings subjects like statistics and physics down to their lowest possible simplicity is fine for me, which is why I welcome these three books from my favorite computer and science publisher, O’Reilly. I’m sure O’Reilly was thinking of me when he started the *Head First* series – books on computer programming, science or mathematical subjects designed for absolute beginners but sophisticated enough for seasoned professionals. Dipping into them is like a first taste of a strange new but delicious flavor of ice cream. And a heck of a lot more nutritious they are, too. O’Reilly calls them *Brain-Friendly Guides*, and indeed they are.

The trick is to start with brilliant specialists in each field, illustrate with practical drawings, take each step of explanation in turn and simple, and build from that. It works.

When I had a biology class in junior high school, I would walk into the classroom to see a complex cell drawing on the board, developed for a previous class. It was frightening. Then the teacher would erase the figure, and start with a simple outline of the cell. As he explained each step, and added to the drawing, we came to understand. By the time the drawing was finished, we knew about the structure of the cell. This is the approach of the *Head First* book.

Head First Physics begins with a delightful discussion of how to think like a physicist, and a discussion of what physics really is. More than that, it offers a rational and understandable way to think about physics. The next chapter deals with measurement. If you don’t understand measurement, you don’t understand a lot more than physics. When you finish this chapter, you’ll understand measurement. This chapter alone is worth more than the price of the whole book. Subsequent chapters deal, in order, with numbers, the language of physics, equations (made understandable for even the most math challenged), two dimensional vs. real life, and so forth. Each chapter serves as a foundation for the next, until by the end of the book, you understand a lot more than you thought there was to understand. The author, Heather Lang, has both a physics degree and an immunology Ph.D.. This book is a masterpiece in education, as are, it seems, the other *Head First* books.

Head First Statistics uses the same techniques of simplified but substantial step-by-step exposure to the arcane subject of statistics – both the complex mathematical kind, and the answer to what the

pollsters have been talking about during this recent election. Statistics are the most elastic of arts, in that they can say a great deal, or sound like they're saying a great deal without saying anything worth saying. Statistics are ubiquitous, from Wall Street to baseball, and from science to gaming. In fact, not to have a foundation of understanding of physics is dangerous in today's world, leading to mistakes such as misreading the facts leading to the current economic crisis. This book can lead you to the pure preventative medicine that comes from understanding – a medicine needed in today's world of chicanery.

Like its sister publication, it starts with the simplest concepts of visualizing information, then to measuring, to calculating probabilities, and step by step, to the complexities distributions, sampling, correlation and regression, with each step serving as a foundation for understanding the next one. The author, Dawn Griffiths, is a mathematician with significant credentials.

I don't mean to imply that the books in this series (most of the others in the series deal with computer and software design and theory) are beach reading. They require motivation – you really have to want to know this stuff – concentration, and patience. But they are more than worth the effort, and in the end, you have the satisfaction of really understanding some of the most important concepts in the universe. If that matters to you, these books are worth a king's ransom.

If, on the other hand, you are more comfortable with the subject of statistics and want to understand the subject in greater detail, O'Reilly has published *Statistics in a Nutshell*, part of his fabulous *Nutshell* series. More than a textbook, this is a desktop reference, covering the basic concepts of statistics, starting from a more sophisticated point. It assumes a foundation of basics, for which this is both a refresher and a guide to filling in the blanks the reader may have about the subject. As is the case with all *Nutshell* books, it is clear, focused, and comprehensive. It is, perhaps, more sophisticated than the *Head First* version, but still covers the basics. This includes a discussion about measurement, concepts of probability and data management, and every step along the way to sophisticated concepts such as regression analysis and more. Here then is a worthy companion piece to the *Head First* version. The authors, Sara Boslaugh and Paul Andrew Watters, are both Ph.D.s, Ms. Boslaugh a statistician, and Mr. Watters a university professor in Australia.

Statistics, particularly in marketing, is a sensitive subject. So many marketing decisions are made based upon statistics – market analysis, demographics, marketing tools preference, competitive intelligence, and more – that success in marketing often depends upon understanding both the art and science of statistics. Without understanding sources and methodology, vast ranges of activities, and large sums of money, are wasted on the misuse of statistics. Too much of statistical analysis is superficial, and rooted in neither fact nor understanding. That's why these books are so important.

A word here about O'Reilly. With the advent of the computer some decades ago, I was probably one of the first writers to review books on computers and computing written for the lay user. What appalled me then, and still does, is that instead of time making the computer more user friendly, they continue to become less so. Thus, unfortunately, the need for how-to books. Over the years, most of them were as obtuse as the computers themselves. There have been, of course, exceptions, the most notable of which are the publications by O'Reilly. I'm not in a position to judge his books on the more technical aspects of programming, although those who are tell me his books are the best. But the O'Reilly books designed to make the ordinary user's life easier do exactly that. The company has grown quite large, and O'Reilly himself is doing some marvelous pioneering work in stuff like Web 2.0. But his books for the ordinary user, like the three reviewed here, continue to be works of art.

For which I am truly grateful.

[HOME](#)