

# Watson as Servant

The Essential Role of the Assistant in  
Investigative Work



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## A Contract of Times and Cultures

We live in a world today that focuses immense amounts of attention on celebrities and superstars. In many instances, we are fortunate to have such high performing individuals in our midst. In other instances, they represent examples of human character that are not considered to be desirable.

During the days in which Holmes and Watson served their clientele, there were not so many of these high-profile individuals. In that time, the superstars were typically governmental leaders, super wealthy capitalists, and a handful of prominent humanitarians. Included among them were:

- Members of the royal family;
- Harry Gordon Selfridge, the capitalist whose story Americans have recently viewed on *Masterpiece Classic* on PBS - an American businessman who brings a new kind of shopping experience to Great Britain and shakes up that conventional nation's economy;
- Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), who was the pioneer of modern nursing;
- Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), who was a four-time Prime Minister and author.

But we are not all celebrities and superstars. Nor are we meant to be. So, what role exists for us? What role do we take in relation to a consulting detective? In what ways are we able to make significant contributions to investigative work?

Based on the canonical writings of Arthur Conan Doyle, this paper proposes three ways in which we can all assist in direct investigative work, in which Holmes found such great success:

- **Providing Insight and Unique Perspective**
- **Bringing Unique Experiences**
- **Adding and Using New Investigative Skills**

❖ **Insight and Perspective**

- Holmes's sometimes weakness in social skills is well known. Watson provided understanding of people and human interaction in ways that Holmes could/did not.
- Watson learned to observe. He undoubtedly learned from Holmes that "the world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance observes."
- As his observation skills grew, Watson adopted Holmes's motto: "Presume nothing."
- Watson provided emotional comfort to clients – especially females.
- As Holmes said, "The chief proof of a man's real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness." Watson knew the size of his role in cases.

❖ **Unique Experiences**

- Watson brought the knowledge and discipline of his military experience to cases.
- Often, more importantly, he brought his revolver, skill, and courage to use when needed. He could also speedily develop expertise in a new field of study, as in his quick learning of Chinese pottery in "The Illustrious Client."

❖ **Adding Additional and Using New Investigative Skills**

- Watson brought medical expertise to investigation in determining the cause of a victim's death, the length of time since a person had deceased, or some other practical area of medical knowledge. Watson's role as an assistant in cases brought out the best in Holmes's

efforts. As Sherlock said, "It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but that you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it."

- Watson was Holmes's listener. "Nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person."
- Holmes further described him as having "a gift for silence. It makes you invaluable as a companion."
- Watson was a learner – always learning from Holmes – frequently by error: "You've made your mistakes Watson. So have I. And if there's anything that's become apparent during our time together, it is that a great majority of those mistakes are in the past."
- When Holmes said, "You know my methods. Apply them," he was stating his growing confidence in Watson as an investigator.

While those in servant roles are often viewed as having lesser value, Watson's example shows us how a strong assistant can be invaluable in investigative work.



David J. Fields - alias Inspector Tobias Gregson  
Scotland Yard