

the audition



Imagine all the people, learning for today...

Mr. Smith thinks I'm doing dictation, but I think it's more important for the world to know how to build a database connection using Ruby on Rails.



To read is human, to learn is divine.

You've all read those other books--you know, the huge ones with tiny type that tell you everything you need to know on page 12, and then forget to actually show you why any of the stuff you just memorized matters? At Head First, we believe that learning is more important than memorization, and we use narrative, visual metaphors, a strong sense of flow, and lots of puzzles and exercises to ensure every learner understands even the most complex topics.

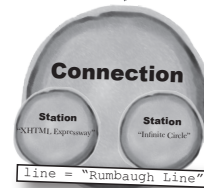
We think of a "Head First" reader as a learner.

So what does it take to *learn* something? First, you have to *get* it, then make sure you don't *forget* it. It's not about pushing facts into your head. Based on the latest research in cognitive science, neurobiology, and educational psychology, *learning* takes a lot more than text on a page. We know what turns your brain on.

Some of the Head First learning principles:

Make it visual. Images are far more memorable than words alone, and make learning much more effective (up to 89% improvement in recall and transfer studies). It also makes things more understandable. **Put the words within or near the graphics** they relate to, rather than on the bottom or on another page, and learners will be up to *twice* as likely to solve problems related to the content.

All of this is represented in a single Connection object.



Use a conversational and personalized style. In recent studies, students performed up to 40% better on post-learning tests if the content spoke directly to the reader, using a first-person, conversational style rather than taking a formal tone. Tell stories instead of lecturing. Use casual language. Don't take yourself too seriously. Which would you pay more attention to: a stimulating dinner party companion, or a lecture?

It really sucks to be an abstract method. You don't have a body.



abstract void roam();

No method body!
End it with a semicolon.

Get the learner to think more deeply. In other words, unless you actively flex your neurons, nothing much happens in your head. A reader has to be motivated, engaged, curious, and inspired to solve problems, draw conclusions, and generate new knowledge. And for that, you need challenges, exercises, and thought-provoking questions, and activities that involve both sides of the brain and multiple senses.

Great software every time? I can hardly imagine what that would be like!



Get—and keep—the reader's attention. We've all had the "I really want to learn this but I can't stay awake past page one" experience. Your brain pays attention to things that are out of the ordinary, interesting, strange, eye-catching, unexpected. Learning a new, tough, technical topic doesn't have to be boring. Your brain will learn much more quickly if it's not.

Touch their emotions. We now know that your ability to remember something is largely dependent on its emotional content. You remember what you *care* about. You remember when you *feel* something. No, we're not talking heart-wrenching stories about a boy and his dog. We're talking emotions like surprise, curiosity, fun, "what the...?", and the feeling of "I Rule!" that comes when you solve a puzzle, learn something everybody else thinks is hard, or realize you know something that "I'm more technical than thou" Bob from engineering *doesn't*.



So you want to write a Head First book...

Head First books are really all about motivation. Why should a learner care about the topic you're teaching? Why does it matter that `doGet()` throws an `IOException`? Why should I bother to learn what the heck a derivative is?

So we thought we'd give you a little quiz to make sure you've got the right motivation for writing a Head First book.

If you can answer "yes" to **all** of these:

- ① Are you **confident** and **experienced** in the subject that you want to teach?
- ② Is your goal to make sure people know how to **use** the material you're teaching them in **practical ways** that help **improve their lives**?
- ③ Have you taught, trained, explained, and helped others overcome stumbling blocks in the subject that you want to teach?

If you can't figure out a way that learning your topic would improve someone's life, you may have trouble motivating us to care about that topic very much.

—then you might be a great fit for Head First.

Who should probably not write a Head First book?

If you can answer "yes" to any **one** of these:

- ① Have you been teaching your topic **the same way** for twenty years, know there's **no other approach** better than yours, and will **die before you experiment** and embrace new ideas and approaches to learning?
- ② Are you the world's **foremost expert** on your subject and want to tell humankind **everything you've ever learned**, along with anecdotes about your time in the Sahara desert contemplating **the meaning of life**?
- ③ Are you **afraid to try something different**? Would you rather have a root canal than mix stripes with plaid? Do you believe it's childish and silly to anthropomorphize abstract concepts and ideas?

Head First books are about the learner, not the author. We really are concerned that our readers feel empowered, not that they've gone to a lecture from the self-proclaimed inventor of a particular technique.

—then you're probably not a good author candidate.

I'm ready! What do I do?

If you think you're good Head First author material, and you're not hung upon doing things your way, you want to be part of a team of creative and passionate authors and editors, and you know there are people who could learn better with your help, then here's what you need to do:

① Read at least 3 Head First books

You're not going to be a Head First author unless you're very familiar with the existing books. Our books have a very distinctive style, tone, and voice. Part of your job as a potential author is to learn what we did in our books, and know at least a few of them inside out.

If you're not sure where to start, we highly recommend you read at least *Head First Java* and *Head First Design Patterns*. Then, if you're doing a certification book, check out *Head First Servlets & JSP* or *Head First PMP*. If you're into software, check out *Head First OOA&D*. Web folks should dig into *Head First HTML with CSS & XHTML*.

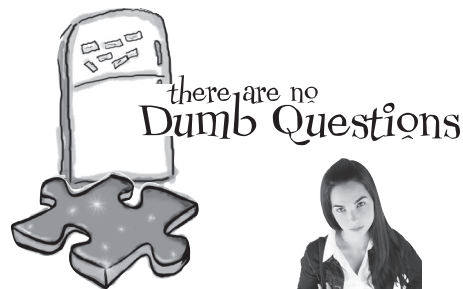
[note from marketing:] This is great, people will buy more books now, right?



② Figure out WHY we did what we did

When you're reading our books, take notes. Why do we use stories and scenarios in our books? What do the different elements, like **There Are No Dumb Questions** and **Sharpen Your Pencil** and **Fireside Chat**, do? When is a **Brain Power** appropriate, and when should you just give the learner an answer? Why are there so many fonts used?

The more you understand about how we structured the books, the better you'll do when it comes to writing your own audition.



What do all of these mean? Why are they used, and WHEN are they used? What LEARNING is occurring?

③ **WRITE** your audition

Choose the topic you want to write your book on. We've got a current list of ideas we're interested in on the web site where you downloaded this PDF, but if you think you've got a really important idea or topic not on our list, feel free to run it by us and see if we're interested.

Now put together about 10 pages of material that teaches us one micro-portion of your topic, in the Head First style. Your audition should look similar to a Head First book in tone, flow, and style.

We use InDesign CS2 for all our books, and you can download a 30-day trial from the Adobe web site. Or, you can use PageMaker, Microsoft Word, even PowerPoint if you like. Just teach us something in an engaging way!

We'd hate for you to spend two weeks on an audition for a topic we know we'll never publish, so if you've got a wild idea, please run it by us first, OK? We're always around at auditions@headfirstlabs.com

So it sounds like you're more interested in how well the learning works than how good a designer I am, right?

We can help with design, but the **LEARNING EXPERIENCE** is up to you.

Exactly. We're looking for GOOD LEARNING.

If you teach us something in a fun way, we'll be hooked. That's what we look for: auditions that keep us engaged and learning.



Don't worry too much about fonts and high-resolution graphics.

We know you don't have access to all of the fonts we use, or to graphics libraries with thousands of images. Your book should have the look and feel of Head First, but just do the best you can with fonts and images. It's OK to use watermarked images, or your own system's fonts.

there are no Dumb Questions

Q: How do I know what the Head First style is, so I can get that right?

A: The best way to get the Head First style is to read our books. Although each author in the series has a slightly different voice, approach, and favorite set of tools and elements, learners comment that each book in the series seems to mesh with the others.

We'll also be telling you much more about the Head First style and learning theory after you pass your audition, so it's OK if you're doing a bit of guesswork and reverse engineering at this stage. We want to see what you come up with on your own, and how you execute on your ideas.

Q: Am I supposed to be creating production- or camera-ready pages for my audition?

A: No. Although we do all the Head First series camera-ready—meaning that the pages are created in the format that they go to the printer in—we have a talented team of designers and production folks to help with the finer points of printing.

However, you should be handling the graphic selection and layout on your own. For the audition, we know you will be using free or downloaded graphics, so concentrate on an effective learning experience, and at least getting the basic layout you'd want on each page down.

Q: I don't have any graphics, and I want to put my best foot forward. What should I do?

A: E-mail us at auditions@headfirstlabs.com, and let us know what you are

auditioning for. Assuming you're proposing a topic we're interested in, we'll get you a small set of graphics you can use for your audition, and an InDesign template to use.

Q: Do I have to use InDesign for my audition?

A: Nope, although about half of our potential authors do, since that's the program we ultimately use for writing the books. If you want to use InDesign, you can download a trial from Adobe, and we'll give you a template to start with.

If you'd prefer to use another program, feel free. We don't penalize you for using another program, and some of our best auditions have been in Microsoft Word. You also can use PowerPoint, or OpenOffice, or whatever else suits you. Just try and make things similar to the existing books, so we get a sense that you've studied our style and look.

Q: How will my audition be judged?

A: Auditions are reviewed by the series editor and the rest of the Head First team. We focus on the learning experience, and whether the audition fits into the Head First style. Particular things we look for are compelling narrative, characters, and story; graphics and images that are integral to the learning, and not there just to "be funny"; that concepts are represented visually; and that we were shown things, rather than told things.

If you get most of these down, you'll almost certainly get a positive response. If your audition is more about clip art and telling jokes, then you probably won't. Ultimately, we want to learn something in an engaging way, and that's the spark we look for in every audition we receive.

Q: What happens once I submit my audition?

A: We take about two weeks to review most auditions. If it's been longer than that since you sent something in, feel free to write us and ask what's going on. We don't mind, we promise.

Auditions that seem promising usually are sent back with some feedback, and we like potential authors to take one more pass. This lets us see how you respond to feedback, how you incorporate general and specific critiques, and helps us get a feel for what you thought about as you were writing, and why you made some of the choices you made. Auditions that we think are way off the mark receive a polite, "No thanks!" and our best wishes for your next project.

Q: So if I do well on the second pass, too, then I get signed?

A: Usually, that's true. There are always things that can change, like market conditions, budgets, or life situations, but we sign almost everyone who auditions on a viable topic and does well on both passes. We'll talk to you a lot more about what's involved in that process when you get there.

So what are you waiting for? Start writing!

Wouldn't it be great if I could learn in a way that actually made sense, and mattered in the real world? Not just some reference book that loaded me up with details that I didn't really need... I guess it's just a fantasy.



Good luck... and once you're done, send us your audition at auditions@headfirstlabs.com. We'll be waiting!