

# The Two Things

*compiled and organized by Glen Whitman*

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## The Story of the Two Things

A few years ago, I was chatting with a stranger in a bar. When I told him I was an economist, he said, "Ah. So... what are the Two Things about economics?"

"Huh?" I cleverly replied.

"You know, the Two Things. For every subject, there are really only two things you really need to know. Everything else is the application of those two things, or just not important."

"Oh," I said. "Okay, here are the Two Things about economics. One: Incentives matter. Two: There's no such thing as a free lunch."

Ever since that evening, I've been playing the Two Things game. Whenever I meet someone who belongs to a different profession (i.e., a profession I haven't played this game with), or who knows something about a subject I'm unfamiliar with, I pose the Two Things question. I also posed the Two Things question on my blog, where it elicited many responses in the comments section and on other blogs. This page is a collection of responses to the "Two Things" question, collected from various pages on the web, with credit given when possible.

## The Two Things about the Two Things

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1. People love to play the Two Things game, but they rarely agree about what the Two Things are.
2. That goes double for anyone who works with computers.

## Business

### **The Two Things about Accounting:**

1. The trial balance must balance.
2. There's a lot of "grey area."

*-abdabs*

### **The Two Things about Managerial Accounting**

1. The "cost" of any item depends on what you need the information for.
2. Since managerial accounting information is used for decision-making, it should be relevant rather than verifiable.

*-Shahid Ansari*

### **The Two Things about Being an Executive Assistant:**

1. The boss is always right.
2. The boss is always wrong.

*Comment: Any secretarial type will immediately see exactly what I'm talking about*  
*-speedwell*

### **The Two Things about Human Relations:**

1. We serve the company's, not the employees', interests.
2. Compliance, compliance, compliance.

*-Babylon Sister*

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### **The Two Things about Innovation:**

1. Innovation is inversely proportional to organizational strength.
2. Organizational strength increases with time.

*-Steverino*

### **The Two Things about Project Management:**

1. The schedule will slip.
2. It's about how you manage the schedule slippage.

*-Nicola O.*

### **The Two Things about Industrial Automation:**

1. Electricity
2. Control

*-Lori Dee*

**The Two Things about Non-profits:**

1. You have to look like money to get money
2. Everything is mission-critical

*-RainCityChick*

**The Two Things about Quality Assurance Systems:**

1. Plan and document what you need to do.
2. Document that you did it.

*-Sakti*

**The Two Things about Trading**

1. Buy low.
2. Sell high.

*-Anna Trueblood*

**The Two Things about Investment Management (or Portfolio Management):**

1. It is not about returns, it is about following rules
2. If you don't get returns, you will have no assets by which to follow the rules.

*-Garth*

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**Micawber's Two Rules of Finance**

1. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness.
2. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.

*-Nicholas Kronos*

**The Two Things about Marketing:**

1. Know existing customers.
2. Recruit more customers.

*-Racehorse*

**The Two Other Things about Marketing:**

1. Find out who is buying your product.
2. Find more buyers like them.

*-Racehorse*

**The Two Things about Marketing:**

1. Identify who you are trying to reach (target audience).
2. Don't just reach them, grab them by the balls (market penetration with compelling message).

*-winger*

**The Two Things about Marketing, Redux:**

1. Say it clearly.
2. Say it often.

*-winger*

**The Two Things about Advertising:**

1. Get people's attention
2. Overwhelm them with charm.

*-Milty*

**The Two Things about Wireless Communications:**

1. There is no "added value," only the perception of added value.
2. If it has bells and whistles, and your end-users want it, BUY IT, regardless of whether or not it actually provides coverage where you live, work and play.

*-Jim N*

# Computers

## The Two Things about Binary Systems:

1. One: 0
2. Two: 1

*-Saxdrop*

## The Two Things about Computer Science:

1. Any computing device is functionally equivalent to any other (the Church-Turing thesis).
2. Abstraction allows us to manage complexity.

*-Tim Lee*

## The Two Things about Computer Programming:

1. Idiocy increases faster than idiot-proofing.
2. All compiling errors boil down to a missing semicolon.

## The Two Things about Computer Programming:

1. The data structure should model the data.
2. The algorithm should encapsulate KISS (keep it simple, stupid).

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## The Two Things about Computer Programming:

1. Maximize code reuse.
2. Real programmers use Lisp.

*Comment: The second rule has the corollary that most programmers, including me, are not real programmers.*

*-Tim Lee*

## The Two Things about Computer Programming:

1. Code with a mind to reusing as much as possible
2. Build early and often

*-Lorelei*

## The Two Things about Computer Programming:

1. The only way to idiot proof software is to take away their computers.
2. Simple is better.

*-Lee*

### **The Two Things about Software Engineering:**

1. Pick two, and only two: stable, feature-complete, on-time.
2. One great coder is better than two good coders, except when not.

*-Matt*

### **The Two Things about Software Engineering:**

1. Nothing about the code (size, speed, elegance, conformance to standards, etc.) is important if it doesn't actually work.
2. Whatever you don't have automated tests for probably doesn't work (and if it happens to work now, it will inevitably stop working at some point in the future without your noticing).

*-Joshua*

### **The Two Things about Software Engineering:**

1. There is no such thing as bug-free software.
2. Adding manpower to a late project makes it later.

*-Tim Lee*

### **The Two Things about Web programming (as it is mostly done in the real world):**

1. Control-C
2. Control-V

*-tikibar*

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### **The Two Things about Information Security:**

1. People are stupid (the "Andy principle"); alternatively, people are gullible.
2. Standard: deny, Exception: allow (the "simple security principle")

*-Todd Grotenhuis*

### **The Two Things about Artificial Intelligence:**

1. "Real" AI is very, very hard.
2. As soon as a branch of AI has practical applications, it ceases to be AI.

*-Tim Lee*

### **The Two Things about Computer Maintenance:**

1. Disk scan, defrag, virus scan, update drivers, wait 30 days, repeat.
2. Never download Kazaa.

*-TheLetterM*

### **The Two Things about Graphic Design**

1. Gestalt Principles of Perception
2. Visual Hierarchy

*-Dina*

### **The Two Things about Graphic Design:**

1. Elements of Design: Line, shape, texture, value & color, space
2. Principles of Design: Movement, balance, emphasis, unity

*-Dina*

### **The Two Things about Computer Game Design**

1. In 999 cases out of 1,000, simple is better than complicated.
2. Immersion (when the player forgets he is in the real world and thinks and acts entirely as if he is in the one you have created) is the ultimate goal of all game design.

*Comment: Most difficulty in game design comes from reconciling #1 and #2.*

*-Ananda Gupta*

### **The Two Things about Database Administration:**

1. Backups are life. (Comment: You can screw up anything you want, miss deadlines on projects, or whatever and it likely won't get you fired, but if you don't have backups in a crisis or an audit you're done.)
2. Premature optimization is the root of all evil. (From Knuth, via ESR, and it applies to database administration as much as Unix Programming.)

*-rocket scientist*



## Humanities

### **The Two Things about History:**

1. Everything has earlier antecedents.  
Corrolary: all culture, including religion, is syncretic; there is nothing purely original.  
Second Corrolary: there's no question that a historian can't complicate by talking about what led up to it.
2. Sources lie, but they're all we have.  
*-Jonathan Dresner*

### **The Two Things about Teaching History:**

1. A good story is all they'll remember, not the half hour of analysis on either side of it.
2. They think it's about answers, but it's really about questions.  
*-Jonathan Dresner*

### **The Two Things about Art Criticism:**

1. If it isn't novel, critics aren't interested.
2. If it is novel, no one else is interested.  
*-TheLetterM*

### **The Two Things about English Literature:**

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1. The text is really about writing.
2. Writing is really about sex.  
*-Marya*

### **The Two Things about Life:**

1. Beauty is truth.
2. Truth is beauty.  
*-Erik*

### **The Two Things about Writing:**

1. Include what's necessary.
2. Leave everything else out.  
*-Nicholas Kronos*

### **The Two Things about Editing:**

1. Know the rules.
2. Pay attention.  
*-Stephanie D.*

## International Relations

### **The Two Things about International Relations:**

1. Enlightened self-interest
2. Weinberger Doctrine

*-Lizzie T.*

### **The Two Things about National Security:**

1. Bring overwhelming force to bear.
2. Let them hate, so long as they fear.

### **The Two Things about World Conquest:**

1. Divide and Conquer.
2. Never invade Russia in the winter.

*-Tim Lee*

# Law

## **The Two Things about Law:**

1. You are responsible for the foreseeable costs of your wrongful conduct.
2. Law protects the reasonable expectations of the parties.

*-Melanie Williams*

## **Two Things about Trial Lawyering:**

1. 90% is just showing up (borrowed from Woody Allen's philosophy of life).
2. When you are winning, keep your mouth shut.

*-Joe Macaluso*

## **The Two Things about Government Lawyering:**

1. You hold all of the cards and the deck is stacked in your favor;
2. Give your adversary an "out," and they will settle.

*-Gino*

## **The Two Things about Litigation:**

1. Don't ever admit to having an original thought. Precedent is everything.
2. Principle expressed in the following Q&A:

Q: What's the difference between a federal judge and people like you and me?

A: A federal judge can say, "It is so ordered," and you and I can't.

*-Deborah Quest*

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## **The Two Things about Practicing Law in the Real World:**

1. Billable hours.
2. Deep pockets.

*-Glen*

## Natural Sciences

### Physics:

1. Energy is conserved.
2. Photons (and everything else) behave like both waves and particles.

*-Tim Lee*

### The Two Things about Doing Physics:

1. Draw a diagram.
2. Get the dimensions straight.

*-Eric Schafer*

### The Two Things about Biology:

1. Evolution is the process through which genetic structures that are better equipped to reproduce viable copies will tend to proliferate.
2. Except for the Platypus.

*-TheLetterM*

### The Two Things about Biology:

1. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (that's a complicated way of saying that the development of a single organism reflects that organism's evolution from previous species).
2. Change is driven by natural selection.

*-GregD*

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### The Two Things about Neuroscience:

1. Neurons strengthen or weaken signal strength between connected synapses.
2. If you think you've found the part of the brain that controls \_\_\_\_\_, you're probably wrong.

*-TheLetterM*

### The Two Things about Science:

1. Artifactual data proves nothing.
2. All data is artifactual.

*-Eustacia*

# Philosophy

## **The Two Things about Philosophy:**

1. You can't always believe anything you like; sometimes you have to choose between beliefs.
2. Philosophy is ultimately based on common sense.

*-Ananda Gupta*

## **The Two Things about Philosophy.**

1. Plato was wrong.
2. Wittgenstein was right.

*-Greg Ransom*

## **The Two Things about Studying Philosophy:**

1. Nobody was right.
2. Everything is relative.

*-Doug B*

## Professions

### **The Two Things about Medicine:**

1. Do no harm.
2. To do any good, you must risk doing harm.

*-Dennis*

### **The Two Things about Medicine:**

1. Germ theory. Hygiene prevents disease.
2. Placebo effect. If you think it'll work, it actually might.

*-Lorelei*

### **The Two Things about Engineering:**

1. It's all about tradeoffs.
2. The tradeoffs are all about money, time, and quality.

*-doctorfixit*

### **The Two Things about Civil Engineering:**

1. Dirt + Water = Mud.
2. You can't push a rope.

*-Todd Grotenhuis*

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### **The Two Things about Chemical Engineering:**

1. What goes in plus what gets made must equal what comes out plus what gets destroyed.
2. What comes out should be more desirable than what goes in.

*-abdabs*

### **The Two Things about Filmmaking:**

1. Money makes the industry and the films.
2. Intelligence and talent mean nothing next to cost projections.

*-John*

### **The Two Things about Being a Reporter:**

1. There is no such thing as objectivity.
2. The end of the story is based on your deadline.

*-Lindsey*

### **The Two Things about Child Welfare:**

1. If they don't get it when the kids are taken away, they ain't gonna get it.
2. Err in favor of the child.

*-Kate Carmichael*

### **The Two Things about Public Relations:**

1. There's no such thing as bad press.
2. But you can always make it better.

*-bellasera*

### **The Two Things about Public Relations**

1. Perception is reality.
2. Perception is rarely reality.

*-pepper*

### **The Two Things about Theatre:**

1. Don't forget your lines.
2. Don't run into the furniture/set.

*-RainCityChick*

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### **The Two Things about Piloting an Airplane:**

1. Airspeed is life.
2. Think ahead.

Comment: Anything other than an airspeed problem you have time to think about, but if you've thought ahead, you're ready.

*-Qov*

### **The Two Things about Dental Lab Technology:**

1. Real teeth are better than fake teeth.
2. When buying fake teeth, you get what you pay for.

*-Janey Garnet*

### **The Two Things about Building Code Enforcement**

1. Our way or
2. No way

*-theDiva*

### **The Two Things about Working with Building Materials**

1. It's all about the wood.
2. Don't giggle like a 12-year-old when the L is not pronounced in caulk.

*-Dina*

### **The Two Things about Sex Education:**

1. Some, many, most.
2. It depends.

*-Andrea*



## Social Sciences

### **The Two Things about Economics:**

1. Incentives matter.
2. There's no such thing as a free lunch.

*-Glen*

### **The Two Things about Linguistics:**

1. You already know more about the grammar of your native language than could ever be taught in a class. (synchronic linguistics)
2. Language change is inevitable, and neither bad nor good. (diachronic linguistics)

*-Neal Whitman*

### **The Two Things about Research Psychology**

1. Find a good paradigm.
2. Use that paradigm as much as possible.

*-Ase*

## Miscellaneous

### **The Two Things about Blogging:**

1. Everyone who runs one is a kook.
2. Everyone who comments in one is a kook.

*-Josh*

### **The Two Things about Hairdressing:**

1. Texture
2. Balance

*-Damasque*

### **The Two Things about Being a DJ:**

1. A DJ is only as good as his or her record box.
2. Mixing is only 25% of the skill.

*-Dingel*

### **The Two Things about Boxing:**

1. Hit.
2. Don't get hit.

*-Josh*

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### **The Two Things about Dormitory Food:**

1. Everything is cold, except what should be.
2. Everything is greasy, including the corn flakes.

*-Steverino*

### **The Two Things about Star Trek:**

1. Don't beam down in a red shirt.
2. You can always talk evil computers into destroying themselves.

*-Tim Lee*

### **The Two Things about Being a House Husband:**

1. That can wait until tomorrow.
2. That can too.

*-j. ross*

### **The Two Things about Creativity:**

1. God is in the details.
2. The devil is in the details.

*-Nicholas Kronos*

### **The Two Things about Pornography:**

1. Cable guy, oral, oral, doggy, ass, facial. Next scene, repeat.
2. No matter how weird, someone will have a website dedicated to your fetish online.

*-TheLetterM*

### **The Two Things about Video Games:**

1. If there's a pit, there is inevitably spikes, lava, or radioactive sharks.
2. Princesses always get captured by villains stupid enough to leave flamethrowers lying around their castle.

*-TheLetterM*

### **The Two Things about Playing a Guitar:**

1. Learn the G, D, Em, C progression.
2. Get a capo.

*-Greg Osisek*

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### **The Two Things about Driving:**

1. Don't hit anything.
2. Don't let anything hit you.

*-Lorelai's friend's uncle*

### **The Two Things about the Ten Commandments**

1. Love God with your total being.
2. Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

*-Rich Casebolt*