

# How to Seek Advice

—Ulf Kintzel

Because of my many years of writing articles for *Farming Magazine* and *Small Farms Quarterly* and because of my farm's Facebook page, where I strive to educate the thousands of followers, I have become somebody people turn to for advice. Although I am already almost 40 years in the business of raising sheep, I still look at it with astonishment but have accepted that role. When asked, I have always shared what I learned and experienced. I don't hold back. I don't keep secrets. Why? Because I was fortunate enough to have had—and still have—several mentors, who willingly shared their knowledge with me. Time to give some back.

Turns out, giving advice is not as easy as it seems. In fact, it has gotten harder with time. Or have I gotten less patient? It is often also unpleasant. So if you want to seek my advice one day, hear my three wishes.

The first common theme that I detect when people ask about a specific topic is that they seek a short and all-encompassing answer for an issue that is often a lot more comprehensive. Questions like “When do you let the sheep back into a particular grazing cell after grazing?” or “How often do you deworm?” are not questions that I can answer with one sentence. I cannot even answer it in several sentences. So what is my answer? “It depends.” The actual answers often fill pages and very often that is exactly what I did when I wrote articles on the topics about which I am being asked. Instead of being able to give a short answer, I always point to my website where all my articles I wrote are compiled in one convenient section called “Articles” <https://whitecloversheepfarm.com/prl-articles.htm>.

Quite often I get some pushback from plain folks, my most frequent callers, who say they don't have Internet access. Yet, I know of several Amish customers who enlisted an English person to print out the articles (or did so at the library) and then they put them in a folder and now have their own little book. In fact, my seemingly biggest fan, let's call him Fan A, not only printed them out; he also put each page in a sheet protector for a three-ring binder and put all my articles in that binder. Now

that's dedication to knowledge! And yes, he is Amish. (If that is what you will now attempt to do, please offer the person printing the articles out some payment, though. The toner/ink costs quite some money.) These articles are likely going to cover many topics you had questions about. Winters can be long and there is no nicer excuse to stay inside on a day with dreadful weather than to say that you must educate yourself and do some research. If I haven't addressed the topic you are researching, feel free to let me know. Many articles I wrote were triggered by questions from people who sought my advice.

My first wish is this: Understand there are no short answers, no silver bullets, no quick fixes to comprehensive topics. Be prepared that I will not be able to answer your question in one sentence. I will not be able to be your convenience. Instead, be prepared to be diligent and read up on the topic. I can let you know what to read when you call or e-mail me.

Another common theme I encounter that people who ask a question don't actually want to hear what I have to say. Instead, they put forth something they heard somewhere and want me to confirm it. Here are some examples: “I was told I should file a lamb's teeth when it damages the udder of its mother.” No. Instead, let's examine the reasons for a lamb damaging the udder, such as the ewe having too little milk, leaving a hungry lamb stealing milk from the udders of other ewes and from behind when the sheep eat at the feeder after it abused the mother's udder time and again. “I heard that alfalfa hay is too rich for sheep, and I should not feed it to ewes with lambs.” No. There is no such thing as hay being too rich (whatever that means, by the way) for ewes when they nurse. If you lose lambs or ewes, you want to examine whether you have vaccinated your sheep against Enterotoxemia (also known as overeating disease). In many cases, it was fair for the caller to address the topic in the first place. However, let's not circle back time and again to such a misconception and spend considerable time on something that is not real, but the caller wishes to have confirmed. I am giving the answers as I know it. I am not going to answer for what other people have said, at times without any deeper knowledge.

A somewhat similar approach is that people have an idea and wish to discuss this idea with me, often in length. The idea is often conceived without having any or at best rudimentary knowledge about the subject. Here is one example: “I want to lamb on pasture, not in the barn” without ever having raised a single sheep. Okay, do you know the skillset needed to lamb outside and what factors to watch to avoid heavy losses? If not, perhaps you want to read my article about pasture lambing versus

lambling in the barn with all the pros and cons I have experienced over several decades. However, the caller wants me to focus on his or her idea and not so much on what I suggest.

So, my second wish is this: Have an open mind when you call or e-mail me. Don't ask me to confirm what others said, which often seem to be off-the-cuff remarks. Furthermore, don't have a preconceived opinion. That entirely defeats the purpose of asking a question. You are not likely to truly hear what I have to say.

I am often asked to comment on what other people have written in articles or said in speaking engagements. That is a very thankless job because I am asked to waste my time refuting the attention-seeking slogans others use, like "in-sync with nature," "hands-off approach," "tall grass grazing" or "mob grazing," often used without offering any clear definition. Thus, these slogans mean different things to different people because everyone gets to fill in the blanks the way they want. Perhaps it is even meant that way by some of the people using these terms. Some of these phrases gained popularity in reaction to the previously practiced high-input and high-labor practice of raising sheep. Whoever is promoting the opposite extreme is in my view just as

wrong as the ones who promoted the high-input way of doing things. Any extremes are rarely the answer. I even suspect these slogans are at times not even meant to provide solutions. They are meant to grab the headline, to get attention, to do name branding. Although they often don't offer real solutions, beginners or young folks still try to make things work according to these approaches, where ideology comes first, and facts that don't fit are dismissed at a high financial cost for those who follow them.

My third and last wish is, please don't ask me to comment and elaborate on a catchy slogan disguised as a grand idea. If it fits on a bumper sticker, it is likely something you don't want to follow. Just assume that the topic at hand is far more detailed and comprehensive. I will gladly point you to some reading that will spell out a comprehensive answer.

Now you know my three wishes, so perhaps asking me or someone else for advice will be more productive. And oh, by the way, I am hopeful you would be someone who will say thank you afterwards. In most cases (yes, most) after having answered all questions, the next thing I hear is this sound: click. The caller hung up the phone.



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