

The Psychology of First Impressions

Why 7 Seconds Matter

The science behind the snap judgements that shape our lives

■ B1 Reading ■ 30 min ■ People & Relationships

Level	B1 (Intermediate)
Skill	Reading
Topic	People & Relationships
Duration	30 minutes
Age Group	Teens & Adults

Learning Objectives

- ◆ Read and understand a text about the psychology of first impressions
- ◆ Learn 15 key vocabulary items related to psychology and social behaviour
- ◆ Understand the halo effect and how bias shapes our perceptions
- ◆ Discuss cultural differences in making first impressions
- ◆ Write about a time a first impression was wrong

1 Before You Read — Snap Judgements

Think about how you judge people and discuss:

1. Have you ever changed your mind about someone after getting to know them better?
2. What is the first thing you notice about a new person — their face, clothes, voice, or something else?
3. Do you think first impressions are usually accurate, or are they often wrong?

2 Reading: The 7-Second Verdict

The 7-Second Verdict: How First Impressions Shape Our Lives

You walk into a room and see someone you have never met before. Within seven seconds — before they have even finished their first sentence — your brain has already formed a detailed opinion about them. Are they trustworthy? Confident? Intelligent? Friendly? Dangerous? These **judgements** happen so quickly and so automatically that you are barely aware of making them. Yet these instant assessments can shape the course of relationships, job interviews, business deals, and even entire lives.

First impressions are among the most powerful psychological **phenomena** in human behaviour. They are fast, they are surprisingly difficult to change, and they influence virtually every social **interaction** we have. Understanding how they work — and how to manage them — is one of the most practical skills you can develop.

Speed: The Brain's Shortcut

Why does the brain form opinions so quickly? The answer lies in **evolution**. For thousands of years, our ancestors needed to make rapid decisions about strangers: Is this person a friend or a threat? Can I trust them, or should I run? The brain developed a system of lightning-fast **shortcuts** — processing facial features, body language, tone of voice, and appearance in milliseconds — to keep us safe.

Modern life is very different from the savannah, but our brains still use the same ancient software. When you meet someone new, your brain **scans** two things above all else: warmth ("Is this person friendly?") and competence ("Is this person capable?"). Research shows that warmth is evaluated first and carries more weight — we would rather deal with a warm but slightly **incompetent** person than a cold but highly skilled one.

The Halo Effect

Once a first impression is formed, it creates a powerful **bias** known as the "halo effect." If your initial impression of someone is positive, you tend to interpret everything they do afterwards in a positive light. If they make a mistake, you forgive it. If they say something **ambiguous**, you assume the best. The opposite is also true: a negative first impression creates a "horn effect" where subsequent behaviour is viewed more critically.

This is why first impressions are so sticky — once formed, they act as a **filter** through which all future information is processed. Changing a bad first impression is not impossible, but studies show it requires between eight and twenty positive encounters to **override** a single negative one. The deck, as they say, is heavily stacked in favour of that first seven seconds.

What Shapes a First Impression?

Research has identified several key **factors** that influence first impressions. Appearance matters more than most people would like to admit — studies show that people who dress smartly and maintain good grooming are consistently rated as more competent and trustworthy, even before they speak. Eye contact is crucial: too little suggests nervousness or dishonesty, while too much can feel aggressive. A genuine smile — one that reaches the eyes — is the single most effective tool for creating a positive first impression.

Voice also plays a major role. People who speak at a moderate pace, with a warm tone and clear **articulation**, are perceived as more intelligent and trustworthy than those who speak too quickly, too quietly, or in a monotone. Even your handshake matters — a firm (but not crushing) handshake creates an impression of confidence and warmth.

Cultural Differences

First impression rules vary across cultures. In the United States, a strong handshake and direct eye contact are essential. In Japan, a respectful bow and more **restrained** body language are preferred. In many Middle Eastern cultures, personal warmth and hospitality are valued above professional appearance. What creates a good impression in one culture can create a bad one in another — making cultural awareness an essential part of global communication.

Regardless of culture, however, one principle is universal: **authenticity**. People are remarkably good at detecting when someone is trying too hard to impress. The most effective first impression is not a performance — it is a genuine expression of who you are, delivered with confidence, warmth, and respect for the person in front of you.

3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
judgements	opinions or decisions formed after thinking or evaluating	The brain forms judgements about strangers within seven seconds.
phenomena	remarkable events or facts that can be observed	First impressions are among the most powerful psychological phenomena.
interaction	a situation where people communicate or act together	First impressions influence every social interaction we have.
evolution	the gradual development of species over millions of years	Our snap judgements developed through evolution to keep us safe.
shortcuts	quick, easy methods used instead of longer ones	The brain uses mental shortcuts to assess strangers in milliseconds.
scans	examines quickly to find important information	Your brain scans for warmth and competence when meeting someone.
incompetent	lacking the skill or ability to do something properly	People prefer warm but slightly incompetent over cold but skilled.
bias	an unfair preference for or against something	The halo effect creates a positive bias after a good first impression.
ambiguous	having more than one meaning; unclear or uncertain	If someone's words are ambiguous, we interpret them based on our bias.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
filter	something that changes how you see or interpret things	First impressions act as a filter for all future interactions.
override	to cancel or reverse a previous decision	It takes many positive encounters to override a bad first impression.
factors	things that contribute to a result or outcome	Appearance, voice, and eye contact are key factors in first impressions.
articulation	the ability to speak clearly and express ideas well	Clear articulation makes people seem more intelligent and confident.
restrained	controlled and not excessive; calm and moderate	Japanese culture values more restrained body language.
authenticity	the quality of being genuine, real, and true to yourself	The most powerful first impression comes from authenticity.

4 Useful Collocations

first impression · snap judgement · body language · eye contact · facial expression · tone of voice · personal appearance · job interview · social situation · build trust · make an effort · come across as · put someone at ease · cultural awareness · self-confidence · lasting impression

5 Reading Comprehension

1. How long does it take to form a first impression?

- a) About 1 second
- b) About 7 seconds ✓**
- c) About 30 seconds
- d) About 2 minutes

2. What two qualities does the brain assess first in a new person?

- a) Intelligence and beauty
- b) Warmth and competence ✓**
- c) Age and nationality
- d) Wealth and status

3. What is the 'halo effect'?

- a) A type of lighting that makes people look attractive
- b) A bias where a positive first impression colours all future perceptions ✓**
- c) A religious concept about good behaviour
- d) A special effect used in photography

4. How many positive encounters are needed to override a bad first impression?

- a) About 2-3
- b) About 5-7
- c) About 8-20 ✓**
- d) About 50+

5. What is the single most effective tool for a positive first impression?

- a) An expensive suit
- b) A firm handshake
- c) A genuine smile that reaches the eyes ✓**
- d) Speaking very quickly

6. What does the text say is universal across all cultures?

- a) A strong handshake
- b) Direct eye contact
- c) Formal business clothing
- d) Authenticity — being genuinely yourself ✓**

6 Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks

Complete the sentences with the correct word from the box:

judgements · bias · shortcuts · filter · override · factors · authenticity · articulation

1. The brain forms instant _____ about new people within seven seconds.
2. A positive first impression creates a _____ that colours all future interactions.
3. Our brains use mental _____ developed through evolution to assess strangers quickly.
4. Once formed, first impressions act as a _____ for all future information.
5. It takes 8-20 positive encounters to _____ a single bad first impression.
6. Appearance, voice, and eye contact are the key _____ in first impressions.

7. The most powerful impression comes from _____ — being genuinely yourself.
8. Speaking with clear _____ makes you seem more confident and intelligent.

7 Answer Key

■ Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. judgements
2. bias
3. shortcuts
4. filter
5. override
6. factors
7. authenticity
8. articulation

8 Speaking & Writing Tasks

■ Speaking Task: Discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Do you think you are good at making positive first impressions? Why or why not?
- Is it fair that people judge us so quickly? Should we try to change this?
- How do first impressions work differently in your culture compared to others?
- Think of someone you misjudged at first. What changed your opinion?

■ Useful Phrases for Describing People

- **My first impression of her was that** she seemed very confident and friendly.
- **At first, I thought he was** cold and unfriendly, but I was completely wrong.
- **What struck me about her was** how warmly she smiled when we met.
- **He came across as** very professional and well-prepared.
- **I think first impressions are** important but not always reliable.

 **Writing Task: A First Impression That Was Wrong**

Write a paragraph (120–160 words) about this topic:

"Describe a time when your first impression of someone turned out to be completely wrong. What did you think at first? What changed your mind? What did this experience teach you about judging others?"

Use vocabulary from this lesson. Tell the story clearly and reflect on what you learned about the power of first impressions.