

The Psychology of First Impressions

Why We Judge in Seconds — and Why We're Often Wrong

Explore how the brain forms instant character judgements, why first impressions are often biased, and what science says ...

B2 Reading - 35 min - Psychology

1 Before You Read — Reflect & Discuss

Consider the following questions and discuss with a partner or your teacher:

1. Think of someone you met recently for the first time. What was your initial impression? Did it change over time?
2. Do you believe first impressions are usually accurate, or do they often mislead us? Why?
3. How much do you think physical appearance, voice, and body language influence the way people judge you?

2 Reading

The Seven-Second Verdict: How Your Brain Decides Before You Think

It takes approximately seven seconds. In that brief window — shorter than it takes to tie a shoelace — your brain has already formed a detailed **assessment** of the person standing in front of you. Are they trustworthy? Competent? Friendly? Dominant? These judgements happen automatically, largely below the level of conscious awareness, and they are remarkably difficult to reverse once formed. First impressions, psychologists have discovered, are not just social **conventions** — they are deeply embedded cognitive processes that evolved to help our ancestors make rapid survival decisions. The problem is that in the modern world, these ancient **instincts** frequently lead us astray.

The Thin-Slicing Brain

Psychologist Nalini Ambady pioneered the study of what she called "thin slicing" — the ability to make accurate judgements based on very narrow windows of experience. In a famous experiment, she showed students silent 10-second video clips of university lecturers and asked them to rate the

lecturers' effectiveness. Astonishingly, these **snap** judgements closely matched the ratings given by students who had attended the lecturers' courses for an entire **semester**. The implication was striking: in some contexts, a few seconds of observation can be as **informative** as months of experience.

This ability is rooted in the brain's **amygdala**, the same region involved in processing fear and threat. The amygdala evaluates faces in milliseconds — before the conscious mind even registers what it has seen. Research by Alexander Todorov at Princeton demonstrated that people form judgements of **competence** from faces so quickly that increasing the exposure time beyond 100 milliseconds does not change the evaluation. The brain, it seems, has already made up its mind.

What First Impressions Capture — and What They Miss

First impressions are not entirely **arbitrary**. They do capture genuine signals. Research consistently shows that people can accurately detect **extraversion** — whether someone is outgoing and socially energetic — within seconds of meeting them, because extraverts tend to display clear behavioural cues: more eye contact, broader gestures, louder and more varied speech. Similarly, snap judgements about **dominance** and physical attractiveness tend to be consistent across different observers, suggesting that these assessments reflect real, observable qualities.

However, first impressions are significantly less reliable when it comes to deeper **traits** such as honesty, intelligence, emotional stability, and moral character. These qualities require extended observation and contextual understanding to assess accurately. Yet people routinely **conflate** surface signals with deep character — assuming, for instance, that someone who is physically attractive is also more trustworthy, more intelligent, and more competent. Psychologists call this the "**halo effect**" — the tendency for one positive attribute to create a favourable impression of the whole person.

The Power of Bias

First impressions are also shaped by **biases** that have nothing to do with the individual being judged. Cultural stereotypes, racial and gender **prejudice**, and socioeconomic assumptions all influence initial evaluations. Studies have shown that identical CVs receive different responses depending on whether the applicant's name suggests a particular ethnic background. Job candidates wearing expensive clothing are rated as more competent, regardless of what they actually say. Accents, height, weight, and even the firmness of a handshake have been shown to affect hiring decisions, academic evaluations, and legal judgements.

The danger is not that biases exist — they are a universal feature of human cognition — but that people are largely **unaware** of them. Most individuals believe their judgements are **objective** and based on merit, when in reality they are significantly influenced by factors that are entirely irrelevant to the qualities being assessed. This gap between perceived objectivity and actual bias is

one of the central challenges in fields ranging from recruitment to criminal justice.

Can First Impressions Be Changed?

The short answer is: yes, but with difficulty. Psychologists have identified a phenomenon called **anchoring** — the tendency for initial information to disproportionately influence subsequent judgements. Once a first impression is formed, the brain tends to seek **confirmation** of that impression rather than evidence that contradicts it. This is known as confirmation bias, and it means that new information is filtered through the lens of the original judgement. If you initially perceive someone as unfriendly, you are more likely to interpret their neutral behaviour as cold, and their friendly behaviour as **insincere**.

Overcoming first impressions requires what psychologists call "**effortful** processing" — deliberately slowing down, questioning initial reactions, and seeking additional information before reaching a conclusion. In professional contexts, structured interviews, blind CV reviews, and standardised assessment criteria have been shown to reduce the influence of first impressions and produce more accurate evaluations.

The Takeaway

First impressions are powerful, fast, and often useful — but they are not the final word. Understanding how they work, recognising their limitations, and developing the **discipline** to look beyond them is essential for making fairer, more accurate judgements about the people we meet. In a world that moves fast, the ability to slow down and reconsider may be one of the most valuable skills we can cultivate.

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Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
assessment	an evaluation or judgement about the nature or quality of something	Your brain forms a detailed assessment within seven seconds.
conventions	widely accepted practices or customs in a society	First impressions are not just social conventions — they are cognitive processes.
instincts	innate, automatic patterns of behaviour in response to certain stimuli	Ancient survival instincts still shape how we judge strangers.
snap	done quickly and without careful thought; instantaneous	Snap judgements closely matched semester-long evaluations.
semester	a half-year term in an academic calendar	Students who attended lectures for an entire semester gave similar ratings.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
informative	providing useful or interesting information	A few seconds of observation can be as informative as months of experience.
amygdala	a brain structure involved in processing emotions, especially fear and threat	The amygdala evaluates faces in milliseconds.
competence	the ability to do something successfully or efficiently	People form judgements of competence from faces almost instantly.
arbitrary	based on random choice or personal whim rather than reason	First impressions are not entirely arbitrary — they capture some real signals.
extraversion	the quality of being outgoing, socially confident, and energetic	People can accurately detect extraversion within seconds.
dominance	power and influence over others; assertive control	Snap judgements about dominance tend to be consistent across observers.
traits	distinguishing qualities or characteristics of a person	Deeper traits like honesty require extended observation to assess.
conflate	to merge or combine two different things, often mistakenly	People conflate surface signals with deep character.
halo effect	a cognitive bias where one positive quality influences overall perception	The halo effect makes attractive people seem more trustworthy.
biases	systematic tendencies to think in certain ways that can lead to inaccurate judgements	Cultural biases shape first impressions regardless of individual qualities.
prejudice	preconceived opinion not based on reason or experience; unfair bias	Racial and gender prejudice influence initial evaluations.
unaware	having no knowledge of a situation or fact	Most people are unaware of the biases that shape their judgements.
objective	not influenced by personal feelings or opinions; based on facts	People believe their judgements are objective when they often are not.
anchoring	the tendency for initial information to disproportionately influence later judgements	Anchoring makes first impressions resistant to change.
confirmation	the action of confirming or verifying something; in psychology, seeking evidence that supports existing beliefs	The brain seeks confirmation of its initial impression.
insincere	not expressing genuine feelings; pretending	If you see someone as unfriendly, you may interpret kindness as insincere.
effortful	requiring considerable mental or physical effort	Overcoming bias requires effortful processing — deliberately slowing down.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
discipline	the practice of training oneself to behave in a controlled and deliberate way	Looking beyond first impressions requires intellectual discipline.

4 Useful Collocations

first impression · snap judgement · body language · eye contact · halo effect · confirmation bias · cognitive bias · job interview · facial expression · social perception · unconscious bias · hiring decision · initial evaluation · non-verbal cues · surface-level · deep character

5 Reading Comprehension

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

- a) About one minute
- b) Approximately seven seconds ✓**
- c) At least thirty seconds
- d) It varies too much to measure

2. What did Nalini Ambady's experiment demonstrate?

- a) That students cannot evaluate lecturers accurately
- b) That 10-second silent video clips produced ratings matching those of semester-long students ✓**
- c) That first impressions are always wrong
- d) That lectures should be shorter

3. Which personality trait can people detect most accurately from first impressions?

- a) Honesty
- b) Intelligence
- c) Extraversion ✓**
- d) Emotional stability

4. What is the 'halo effect'?

- a) A lighting technique used in photography
- b) The tendency for one positive quality to create a favourable impression of the whole person ✓**
- c) A type of confirmation bias specific to job interviews
- d) The tendency to remember only negative qualities

5. Why are first impressions particularly dangerous in professional contexts like hiring?

- a) Because employers always hire the most attractive candidate
- b) Because biases related to appearance, accent, and background influence decisions despite being irrelevant to competence ✓**
- c) Because first impressions are always accurate
- d) Because professional contexts do not involve face-to-face meetings

6. What is 'anchoring' in the context of first impressions?

- a) The tendency to change one's mind frequently
- b) The tendency for initial information to disproportionately shape all subsequent judgements ✓**
- c) A negotiation technique used in business
- d) The brain's ability to forget first impressions quickly

7. According to the text, how can the influence of first impressions be reduced?

- a) By avoiding all social contact
- b) Through structured interviews, blind reviews, and deliberately slowing down to question initial reactions ✓**
- c) By trusting gut feelings more
- d) By forming impressions even faster

6**Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

assessment · instincts · competence · arbitrary · conflate · biases · unaware · objective · anchoring · discipline

1. Within seconds, your brain forms a detailed _____ of a new person's character.
2. Ancient survival _____ still drive the way we evaluate strangers today.
3. People judge _____ from faces so quickly that extra time does not change the evaluation.
4. First impressions are not entirely _____ — they do capture some genuine behavioural signals.
5. People often _____ physical attractiveness with deeper qualities like intelligence and honesty.
6. Cultural _____ significantly shape first impressions regardless of an individual's actual qualities.
7. Most people are completely _____ of the factors that influence their snap judgements.
8. We tend to believe our judgements are _____ and rational when they are often shaped by irrelevant factors.
9. The _____ effect means that first impressions are disproportionately difficult to change.
10. Looking beyond surface-level judgements requires intellectual _____ and deliberate effort.

7**Answer Key**

Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. assessment
2. instincts
3. competence
4. arbitrary
5. conflate
6. biases
7. unaware
8. objective
9. anchoring
10. discipline

8

Grammar Focus — Key Structures in the Text

B2 Grammar: Result Clauses, Comparatives & Hedging

Result clause (so... that): People judge competence **so quickly that** extra time does not change the result.

Comparative + qualifier: First impressions are **significantly less reliable** when it comes to deeper traits.

Hedging: The brain, **it seems**, has already made up its mind.

Passive with agent: Hiring decisions **are significantly influenced by** factors that are entirely irrelevant.

Concessive: First impressions are powerful and often useful — **but** they are **not** the final word.

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Speaking & Writing Tasks

Speaking Task

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Can you think of a time when your first impression of someone turned out to be completely wrong? What happened?
- The text describes the halo effect — the tendency to assume attractive people are also smarter and more trustworthy. Have you ever noticed this in real life?
- Should employers use blind CV reviews to reduce bias? What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- In the age of social media, first impressions are increasingly formed online. How does this change the dynamics described in the text?

Useful Phrases for Discussion

What I found most surprising was how quickly and unconsciously the brain forms detailed character assessments.

The text highlights an important tension between the speed of snap judgements and the complexity of human character.

While first impressions can be useful in some situations, they clearly have serious limitations in contexts like hiring.

It could be argued that awareness of our biases is the first step towards making fairer judgements.

Writing Task

Write a structured opinion essay (180–230 words) on the following topic:

"First impressions are unreliable and should never be trusted." To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Your essay should include an introduction with a thesis, arguments for and against, and a conclusion with your personal view. Use vocabulary and evidence from the text.