

# WORDS MATTER: IN HOW WE SEE OTHERS

The primacy effect is a cognitive bias. We tend to better remember the first piece of information we encounter over the information we receive later on. It is the theory behind first impressions.

If a friend describes the person you are about to meet for the first time as untrustworthy, you may be predisposed to view that person as untrustworthy, regardless of the person's actual level of trustworthiness. The single word "untrustworthy" creates a filter, or primacy effect, that predisposes you to view the person you are about to meet as untrustworthy. Thereafter, you will tend to compare everything that person says or does against your definition of untrustworthy.

Conversely, if before meeting a person for the first time, a friend tells you that the person you are about to meet is friendly, then you will likely view that person as friendly, regardless of the person's degree of friendliness. If you meet the "friendly" person several times and do not experience friendliness, then you will tend to excuse away the unfriendly behavior. Such excuses might include: "He must be having a bad day," "I must have caught her at a bad time," or, "Everybody has a bad day once in a while." An unfriendly person initially described as friendly gains an advantage from positive primacy because we tend to allow the unfriendly person multiple opportunities to demonstrate friendliness despite numerous displays of unfriendly behaviour.

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## WHY OUR BRAINS TAKE THE EASY ROUTE

The primacy effect happens for several reasons. The main reason is because it is easier to remember what we are exposed to first, compared to what we experience in the middle or last part of our interactions. Our brains are often busy, tired, stressed, or a combination of all three and we can not put in the cognitive effort to dismiss perception and focus on reality in the moment. We rely on first impressions when we meet someone to allow us to short cut the mental effort in future interactions with them.

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## WHY WE NEED TO CHALLENGE OUR THINKING

This effect needs to be taken into account anytime a series of people, objects, or ideas are presented to us to reduce the importance of the first ones compared to the others. Early traits lead us to form an initial expectancy about the people we meet, and once that expectancy is formed, we tend to process information in ways that keep that expectancy intact.

The primacy effect can also affect our decision-making ability. The **anchoring bias** describes our tendency to rely on initial information to anchor subsequent judgments and interpretations. The primacy effect partnered with the anchoring bias results in us relying too heavily on the first piece of information we receive, and then neglecting any subsequent information learned. This mix of cognitive biases can be especially problematic, as it prevents us from learning and leads to damaging stereotypes.

Unfortunately, once we have developed a bias through these affects, it becomes very difficult to change it.

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## HOW TO AVOID THE COGNITIVE SHORTCUT

The primacy effect is influential because it is what we use to form a first impression that defines an individual. This cognitive short-cut can be overcome by taking the time to challenge our impressions and to avoid using descriptive words that lock people into our first impression.

The next time you conduct an interview, read a media report, or meet a new client, think about how you form your opinion about that person. Try to avoid stereotyping individuals into categories like difficult, angry, victim or uneducated.

**Words cannot change reality, but they can change how people perceive reality. Words create filters through which we view the world around us.**

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