

<u>Title of Resource</u>	Letter Preference Effects: A Student-Friendly Paradigm for Teaching Basic Research Methods Concepts
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Brief Description:	This resource consists of a small set of “student-friendly” articles that collectively provide an empirical basis for any number of easily conducted class research projects on the topic of “letter preference” effects. The key article in the set is a study in which the appeal of the letter S led participants to prefer soda in a cup labeled “S” over the same soda in a cup labeled “L” (Woolfolk, Castellan, & Brooks, 1983). The class projects are extensions of this study, designed to determine whether the letter S, as a label, also has positive effects on other dependent variables (e.g., perceptions of people or products; mood; memory, etc.).
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Instructors:

A common and useful approach for teaching the basics of experimental design and APA-style in an introductory research methods course is to have students conduct a simple experiment and write an APA-style research report on the findings. However, in developing such an exercise, it is sometimes difficult to find a background literature that is both interesting and comprehensible to students who have no experience reading published research.

I have assembled a small set of “student-friendly” articles that collectively provide an empirical basis for a number of easily conducted class research projects on the topic of “letter preference” effects. The key article in the set is a study by Woolfolk, Castellan, and Brooks (1983), who found that the appeal of the letter S led participants to prefer soda in a cup labeled “S” over the same soda in a cup labeled “L.” The class projects are extensions of this study, designed to determine whether the letter S, as a label, also has positive effects on other dependent variables (e.g., perceptions of people; mood; memory, etc.).

The paradigm has several benefits, including the fact that students seem to enjoy it; that it is inexpensive and easy for students to carry out on their own; and that it affords an opportunity to teach students about the use of discriminatory terms in published articles, as the background literature dates back to 1959, and includes instances of language bias. Most importantly, however, it gives students an experiential understanding of the basic concepts that underlie the design of a “true” experiment, such as (i.e., independent, dependent, and extraneous variables; randomization, constancy, and counterbalancing; and within- versus between-subject designs. It also provides them with (much needed) practice in deductive reasoning, through a discussion of how to organize the information from the studies in a way that forms a logically coherent basis for the purpose of the study being conducted.

Learning Outcomes – After completing the project, students should be able to:

1. read and summarize a short and simple empirical research article, specifying a) the purpose of the study; b) how it was conducted; c) what the main findings were; and d) how the authors interpreted the findings in the context of existing research;
2. organize a small set of studies in a way that leads logically to the purpose of the study being reported;
3. define and identify independent, dependent, and extraneous variables;
4. define randomization, constancy, and counterbalancing as control techniques, and specify which would be the most appropriate to use in different experimental scenarios; and
5. differentiate between between- and within-subjects designs, noting the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Additionally, because students must write an APA-style research report, they also should be able to demonstrate the many skills that underlie the process of writing of such a report, including the ability to:

1. read, comprehend, and summarize primary source information; analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources; and engage in deductive reasoning in establishing the logical basis for a study (in the Introduction);
2. discriminate between essential and non-essential information (in the Method section);
3. summarize, organize, analyze, and represent quantitative information (in the Results section);
4. integrate new information into an existing framework, and engage in inductive reasoning in considering the broader implications of the study’s findings (in the Discussion);
5. write in a manner that is clear, coherent, concise, and professional (in all sections); and,
6. pay attention to detail (again, in all sections) when formatting for consistency with APA guidelines.

LETTER PREFERENCE EFFECTS RESEARCH PARADIGM

STEP I. Establish the Logical Premise for the Study Based on the Findings Below

THE PREMISE

Letter preferences exist.

1. Nuttin (1985) showed that people like the letters in their own (first and last) name more than they like the letters not in their own (first and last) name. He called this the “name letter effect.”
2. Nuttin (1987) found that the name letter effect exists in 12 European languages.

The letter S is a particularly appealing letter.

3. Mecherikoff and Horton (1959) found that in a paired comparison task, participants preferred the letter S when it was paired with the letters K, G, P, T, and G.
4. Horton and Mecherikoff (1960) asked participants to rank the letters of the alphabet with regard to how much they liked the appearance of the capital letter, and found that the letter S consistently ranked within the top five letters.

The appeal of the letter S can influence the choices we make.

5. Woolfolk, Castellan, and Brooks (1983) found that participants in a taste test preferred the soda in a cup labeled with the letter S over the same soda in a cup labeled with the letter L.

THE CONCLUSION/RESEARCH QUESTION

Does the appeal of the letter S have other effects, for example, on what we think, feel, perceive and/or do?

- Can it influence which candidate we choose to vote for?
- Can it positively affect our mood?
- Can it change the way we experience a food or beverage, for example, by making it taste sweeter?
- Can it make us more interested in buying one product ~~than~~ over another?

STEP II. Design the Study

1. Should the study use a within- or between-subjects design?
2. Which dependent variable(s) will be measured, and how will it(they) be operationalized?
3. What extraneous variables must be controlled, and what control techniques should be used?
4. What procedures will be used to carry out the study?
5. What statistical techniques will be used to analyze the data?

STEP III. Collect and Analyze the Data

STEP IV. Communicate the Results in the Form of an APA-style Research Report

Additional Information:

Students read excerpts from Nuttin (1985) and Nuttin (1987) rather than the full articles (which are 9 and 21 pages long, respectively) because these articles are highly theoretical, consist largely of information that is not relevant to the purpose of the study, and, on judgment, would likely be confusing and intimidating for students to read (thus undermining the “student friendly” aspect of the assignment). Importantly, students do read the full text of the remaining articles, and these are discussed in class.

The background literature can be expanded to include more recent studies, several of which exemplify a “lively debate” among psychological scientists as to the validity of the effects of implicit egotism. These more recent articles are included in the reference list, along with the five articles used in the assignment as described.

One might want to introduce the topic by demonstrating the name letter effect in the classroom, as it is a highly reliable phenomenon. See Lipsitz and Gifford (2003) for instructions on how to conduct this in-class exercise.

Included with this resource is a pdf of the scoring instrument I use to grade the APA-style reports that students write (Greenberg, 2012), along with a copy of the Excel spreadsheet I use to calculate the scores from the instrument scoresheet.

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