



# Barnum Effect

PSYCHOLOGY

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**Alternative Title:** Forer Effect

**Barnum Effect**, also called **Forer Effect**, in psychology, the phenomenon that occurs when individuals believe that [personality](#) descriptions apply specifically to them (more so than to other people), despite the fact that the description is actually filled with information that applies to everyone. The effect means that people are gullible because they think the information is about them only when in fact the information is generic. The Barnum Effect came from the phrase often attributed (perhaps falsely) to showman [P. T. Barnum](#) that a “sucker” is born every minute. Psychics, [horoscopes](#), magicians, palm readers, and [crystal ball gazers](#) make use of the Barnum Effect when they convince people that their description of them is highly special and unique and could never apply to anyone else.

The Barnum Effect has been studied or used in [psychology](#) in two ways. One way has been to create feedback for participants in psychological experiments, who read it and

believe it was created personally for them. When participants complete an intelligence or personality scale, sometimes the experimenter scores it and gives the participant his or her real score. Other times, however, the experimenter gives participants false and generic feedback to create a false sense (e.g., to give the impression they are an exceptionally good person). The reason that the feedback “works” and is seen as a unique descriptor of an individual person is because the information is, in fact, generic and could apply to anyone.

The other way that the Barnum Effect has been studied is with [computers](#) that give (true) personality feedback to participants. Personality ratings given by computers have been criticized for being too general and accepted too easily. Some researchers have done experiments to see if people view actually true feedback as being any more accurate than bogus feedback. People do see actually true descriptions of themselves as more accurate than bogus feedback, but there is not much of a difference.

The Barnum Effect works best for statements that are positive. People are much less likely to believe that a statement applies to them when it is a negative statement, such as “I often think of hurting people who do things I don’t like.” Thus, Barnum Effect reports primarily contain statements with mostly positive items, such as the items listed here. Note that the negative phrases are offset by something positive to end the statement.

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“You have an intense desire to get people to accept and like you.”

“Sometimes you give too much effort on projects that don’t work out.”

“You prefer change and do not like to feel limited in what you can do.”

“You are an independent thinker who takes pride in doing things differently than others.”

“Sometimes you can be loud, outgoing, and a people person, but other times you can be quiet, shy, and reserved.”

“You can be overly harsh on yourself and very critical.”

“Although you do have some weaknesses, you try very hard to overcome them and be a better person.”

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Personality, a characteristic way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Personality embraces moods, attitudes, and opinions and is most clearly expressed in...

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### P.T. Barnum

P.T. Barnum, American showman who employed sensational forms of presentation and publicity to popularize such amusements as the public...

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Horoscope, in astrology, a chart of the heavens, showing the relative positions of the Sun, the Moon, the planets, and the ascendant and midheaven signs of the zodiac at a specific momen...

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