

# Framing: Your Most Important and Least Recognized Daily Ment

How you see things affects you more than you know.

A thought experiment: Let's assume you represent America in negotiations with me. I offer you a deal: I'll give you a technological invention, a breakthrough that will increase the country's wealth, make us more efficient, more productive, and make our lives much more fun. The only thing I want in return is that you let me swoop in every year, take 40,000 people at random and kill them. Do you take the deal? If you said no, then you're a bit too late. Because in fact, you have already taken the deal. It's your car. Now that you see it from this perspective, are you willing to give up your car?

There's a battle going on in your life. It has major consequences for you--your health, your wealth, your feelings and behaviors--and yet you aren't even aware of it, even though it's happening mostly right inside your own brain. It's one of the fundamental struggles that define human existence: the framing battle.

It turns out that the meaning of reality--the experiences, events, objects, processes, and facts we encounter--is not set but rather it is dynamic. It's not absolute, it's contextual. It's not passively observed but actively constructed. The construction process involves decisions about what to include in the experience: which parts are relevant? Which are more important? What's the background and what's the foreground? The framing choices you make determine the boundaries, appearance, meaning, and value of your experience.

Framing is a feature of our brain's architecture. Our minds react to the context in which something is embedded, not just to the thing itself. The cover influences our judgment of the book. A line appears longer when vertical than when horizontal. The moon looks large on the horizon but small overhead.

In the 'Shepard Illusion,' the tops of these two tables are identical. But, because of how contextual visual cues are manipulated, they appear to be very different.

Framing is one way the brain finds patterns in chaos (its primary survival function) and creates meaning out of meaninglessness. For example, in the picture below, the dog in the middle exists solely in your brain. The white and dark spots that make up the dog's body are the same dark and white shade as the surrounding terrain.

The principle of framing can be manipulated knowingly by social players--the organization, corporation and individuals around you--to promote their own interests.

**On the national levels, political parties fight over what will become an issue, and then how to frame it.** If enough people buy into the frame of abortions as 'killing innocent babies,' then abortion will be illegal.

Or take the issue of taxes. Are you with Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said: "I like to pay taxes. It is purchasing civilization." Or with Thomas Paine, who said: "What at first was plunder assumed the softer name of revenue."

If enough people buy into the frame of taxes as 'social burden' rather than 'social virtue,' then taxes will be low. You will hence find that anti-taxation people speak of lower taxes as 'tax relief,' implicitly equating 'tax' with 'burden.'

Is drug addiction a 'law and order problem' or a 'public health' problem? The US tends to use the former frame, while other countries, like the Netherlands, opt for the latter, with very different social and political consequences.

Framing can affect you personally in dramatic ways. If you're a slave and feeling unhappy, what is your problem? You could frame it as a 'bad master' problem and that will lead you to look for a better master. Or you can frame it as a 'slavery' problem, such that you dedicate your life to getting free.

Framing the instrument with which he's eating his soup as 'soup spoon,' may keep a prisoner locked up forever. But framing it as 'small shovel' might lead to a Shawshank Redemption-style escape to freedom.

Psychological research on framing, based on the groundbreaking work of Tversky and Kahnemann, has shown how framing affects many realms of decision making.

A '95% effective' condom appears more effective than one with '5% failure rate.'

People prefer to take a 5% raise when inflation is 12% than take a 7% cut when inflation is zero.

Considering two packages of ground beef, most people would pick the one labeled, "80% lean" over the one labeled, "20% fat."

The question: "How do you feel about Obama's policies?" may get very different answer distribution than the question: "Compared to the rule of Satan, how do you feel about Obama's policies?"

Framing can affect our mental state. Is the glass half full or half empty? And that last girlfriend, did you two 'break up,' or did she 'dump you?' Framing of one's mental state itself can affect how we handle it. Tiger Woods, during his glory days said: "If you don't feel nervous, that means you don't care about how you play." Psychotherapy patients are often told to frame 'a crisis' as 'a challenge' or even 'an opportunity.' Research has shown that people who can do that are hardier in the face of stress.

Single words can be used as frames, because they invoke different mental schemas.

Memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus has famously shown how, after watching the same car crash, people who are asked, "How fast were the cars going when they contacted?" remembered slower speeds than those who were asked, "How fast was the car going when they crashed?"

Euphemisms are frames that serve to soothe, distract, or reduce conflict. That's why we didn't 'kill' our dog, but 'put her to sleep.' When I served in the Israeli army many years ago, the word 'retreat' was not allowed in the lexicon. Commanders were taught to order their troops to 'improve your positions backward.'

Framing cannot be avoided. There is no such thing as the view from everywhere; or the view from nowhere. There's always a point of view, and it biases the view by emphasizing or including certain aspects of the situation or experience while omitting or devaluing others. In other words: I am therefore I frame. But we're not helpless against the potential pitfalls of framing.

There's a sucker around every poker table, goes the saying; if you can't spot the sucker, it's you. If you don't see the framing battle, you've already lost it. Thus, the first thing we can do is become aware that framing contests are going on all around, all the time. "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced," said James Baldwin. Awareness shifts you from automatic pilot to manual, putting control back in your hands.

Second, we can develop a habit of 'frame shopping,' where we look for alternative possible frames that may be used to understand our situation and guide our action.

Look ahead: are you an old car, or are you vintage? Are you heading into your twilight years, or your golden years? Look behind; do you see lost innocence, or gained perspective? Mistakes, or lessons? Lost luggage or shed baggage?

Choose your frame wisely, lest you become trapped in it....