

## **First Impressions Are Hard to Beat**

Human beings can only process so much information at a time. When presented with a series of things to consider, our attention peaks with the first items, then fades as the list grows longer, and peaks again when we hear the last item. Thus when memorizing a grocery list or trying to recall a talk we are most likely to remember the first and last items presented. Now a group of Canadian and U.S. psychologists has demonstrated how serial order affects our preference for things.

In this experiment the researchers recruited 142 college students and members of the local community to participate in a wine tasting exercise. Each subject was presented a series of two, three, four or five glasses of either white or red varietals, and asked to select their favorite wine. What the participants didn't know was that all of the wines sampled came from the same bottle, so they were comparing the same wine with itself in every case. Can you guess the overwhelmingly favorite glass of wine? If you guessed the first one, you were right. After the first glass, each succeeding glass fell precipitously in the taste test. The researchers then divided the participants into two groups of knowledgeable wine tasters and naïve wine tasters and performed the same experiment again. All of them continued to show the same preference for the first glass, but by the fourth glass those more experienced with wine began showing some preference for the last glass of wine, although they still rated the first glass best. The authors concluded that wine connoisseurs are more persistent in holding out for a possible better tasting glass of wine when given a series of glasses from which to choose.

The implications of the study go beyond wine tasting. The results provide yet another example of people being favorably biased toward first things experienced in a series. This may be why memories of your first rock concert, first hunting trip, first trip to Disneyland, or first meal at your favorite restaurant tend to stand out as more enjoyable than later examples of the same experience. Hmmmm, maybe this study should be repeated with speed dating.....

Mantonakis, A.; Rodero, P.; Lesschaeve, I.; & Hastie, R. Order in choice: Effects of serial position on preferences. 2009. *Psychological Science*, Vol. 20, Pp. 1309-1312.