



# Describing a psychological study

**This skill applies to all topics**

**This activity will help you to...**

- Understand how a psychological research study is conducted and reported
- Identify the features of a good description of a study
- Construct a mark scheme for assessing student descriptions of studies
- Assess your own study descriptions

## Research studies

Research studies are the evidence on which scientific psychology is based. To be useful as evidence they have to be planned, carried out and reported in a very specific way. You will discover much more about this as you progress through your course but for the moment, let's stick to the basics. All psychological research studies have these features:

- **Aim** – the purpose of carrying out the study; a question to which the study is supposed to supply the answer.
- **Procedure** – the things that the researchers did to carry out the study and collect their data.
- **Results** – the things that the researchers found as a result of carrying out their study; the data they collected (or a summary of these).
- **Conclusion** – the things that the researchers learned as a result of doing the study; often (but not always) an answer to the question around which the aims were constructed.

## Questions about research studies

Questions on psychology exams often ask students to describe a study or studies. The quality of these answers can vary quite considerably, so this is an important skill to work on.

On the other side of this sheet are some answers to an exam question about psychological studies. Read the question, then read through all the answers. Working in small groups, come up with some answers to the following tasks & questions:

- Which is the best answer and which is the worst? Rank the answers in order from the best (1) to the worst (5).
- Why have you ranked the answers in the way you have? What features are present in each answer that makes it better or worse than another answer? Make a list of the features of each answer that affect its quality.

## Make a mark scheme

When the examiner marks your AS or A-Level papers, she will use a marking scheme which tells her the features to expect in students' answers and the marks to award for answers of different standards.

We will be having a discussion in which we come up with our own mark scheme for assessing descriptions of studies. You will then be using it to guide you when answering some question and later in assessing your own and each others' answers.

**Describe Asch's study of conformity (majority influence).****Answer 1 Rank:**

Asch carried out a study to find out how people responded to social pressure and if they would conform. Participants were put in a room with a group of confederates. They were given a line matching task where they had to say which of three lines matched a comparison line. The confederates had been instructed to answer incorrectly. The participant went along with the confederates about a third of the time. This shows that people will go against their own judgement in order to fit in with the majority.

**Answer 2 Rank:**

Asch carried out a study in which confederates were instructed to give a wrong answer in a colour matching task. There were two confederates and four naïve participants. When the confederates were consistent in their wrong answers, the participants went along with them about 8% of the time but when they were inconsistent this dropped to around 1%. This showed the importance of consistency when trying to change majority opinion.

**Answer 3 Rank:**

Asch's (1953) study of majority influence aimed to test whether people would go against their own judgements in order to fit in with majority opinion, even if the majority opinion is definitely wrong. Asch recruited participants from university students studying social sciences. The participants were shown into a room, in which there were several other people who they were led to believe were participants but who were actually confederates who were following the experimenter's instructions. They were given a line matching task where they were asked to say which of three lines A, B or C was equal in length to a comparison line X. Sometimes the confederates gave the right answer but on critical trials they all gave a wrong answer. The participant conformed in 37% of the critical trials. Not all the participants conformed. Some did not conform at all, some conformed every time and the rest conformed at least once. Asch's study showed that people will conform with a wrong answer in order to fit in with the group because following the group norm is more important to them than getting the answer right.

**Answer 4 Rank:**

Asch did a study of conformity where participants were asked to match lines. The participant didn't know that the other participants were confederates. When the confederates gave the wrong answer the participant did too. This showed conformity. The participants conformed.

**Answer 5 Rank:**

Asch's (1953) study of majority influence aimed to establish whether participants would conform to a majority whose opinion was clearly wrong. This was in contrast to previous studies where more ambiguous situations had been used. Asch placed naïve participants groups of confederates who had been instructed sometimes to answer incorrectly in a series of line matching task. Asch found that participants would follow the incorrect majority response in 37% of critical trials, although there was considerable individual variation with 20% never conforming and 5% always conforming. Asch's study showed that people will conform to an incorrect majority but for different reasons. For some people fitting in with the group is more important than being publicly correct (i.e. they comply as a consequence of normative influence) although others may genuinely doubt their own judgement in the face of majority pressure (informational influence).