Personality and Actions

Quick Write

Draw a big circle on a blank sheet of paper. Label the circle “Me.” Inside the circle, write five words that describe your personality. Are you outgoing or shy? Do you like to make plans or just hang loose? Do you try to analyze other people and events, or are you a “live-and-let-live” kind of person?

Learn About

- personality types and traits
- how personality influences actions
- the value of different kinds of personalities

Personality Types and Traits

As you’ve grown, you’ve no doubt become more aware that personality is a big part of who you are. Personality includes your actions, opinions, beliefs, biases, desires, and ambitions. It is the foundation of your attitudes and behaviors. It’s what you are and what you show to others.

Personality determines what you like to do in school as well as in your spare time. It determines what you want to do in life. Your personality is a set of distinctive traits and behaviors that make you the person you are. Just as no two people have the same fingerprints, no two people have exactly the same personality. You are different from every other human being who has ever existed.

Some parts of your personality may change over time, but basically your personality stays pretty much the same throughout your life. Similar situations and challenges tend to cause you to react in similar ways.

Your personality is unique—you are different from every other human being who has ever existed.

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The Theory of Personality Types

Psychologists, who study the mind and behavior, have long known that each person is unique. But these experts also know that people are similar in certain ways. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, a pioneer in the field, believed that experts could categorize people’s personalities based on certain personality types and on the ways in which people describe their own motivations. A personality type is a recognizable set of functions that some psychologists believe can help you understand who you are. You could think of it as a model that people tend to follow in their thoughts and behaviors.

Jung believed that people divide into two basic attitudes: they are either extraverted or introverted. An extravert is a person who draws energy from people, things, activities, or the world outside themselves. An introvert is a person who draws energy from ideas, information, explanations, imagination, or their inner world. Further, Jung thought that the mind has four functions: sensation, intuition, thinking, and feeling.

In the 1940s, Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother, Katherine Cook Briggs, developed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, or MBTI®. They based the MBTI on Jung’s work. They developed a series of 16 four-letter codes to describe people’s personality types. Everybody, they believed, fits into one of these 16 types.

Your personality type is determined by your responses to four key questions, or dimensions:

1. **Where do you direct your energy?** You are either extraverted (E) or introverted (I) as described earlier.

2. **How do you process information?** If you prefer facts and direct evidence, you prefer sensing (S). If you prefer thinking deeply and trusting your inner voice you prefer intuition (N).
3. How do you make decisions?
If you base your decisions on logic and analysis, you prefer thinking (T). If you prefer to decide based on values and personal beliefs, you prefer feeling (F).

4. How do you organize your life?
If you like things well planned, you prefer judgment (J). If you like to stay flexible and take things as they come, you prefer perception (P).

For example, if you preferred introversion (I), intuition (N), thinking (T), and judging (J), your personality would be described with the letter code INTJ. If you preferred extraversion (E), sensing (S), feeling (F) and perceiving (P), you’d be an ESFP.

The Myers-Briggs personality assessment, or test, is quite popular. Tens of millions of Americans have taken it. Many businesses use the MBTI when they’re hiring. They believe it helps them know if there’s a good fit between a job applicant and their workplace. Many schools and universities use the MBTI for career counseling and to help students decide what to major in at college.

Remember, however, that a personality “test” is not something you pass or fail. There are no right or wrong answers. It’s just an instrument to help you understand who you are.

The Theory of Personality Traits

After more research, many psychologists today have adopted a different approach to personality: the theory of personality traits. A personality trait is a characteristic that causes an individual to behave in certain ways. This theory holds that people express personality traits along a spectrum of behavior instead of expressing specific personality types. Different people are located at different points on the spectrum for each trait between the two extremes. These theories wouldn’t label a person an extravert. They would place that person somewhere in a range between extraversion on one end and introversion on the other.

Researchers have put the number of traits at anywhere from 3 to 4,000. But many psychologists now believe that the evidence shows there are five categories.
This approach is often referred to as the Big Five or the Five-Factor Model. The usual labels for the categories are:

1. **Openness to Experience**—This trait includes your degree of imagination and insight. It involves whether you have a broad or narrow range of interests.
2. **Conscientiousness**—This trait includes how thoughtful you are, how much attention you pay to details, and your ability to control your impulses. It involves how organized you are and how oriented you are to achieving goals.
3. **Extraversion**—This trait includes characteristics such as how excited you get, how social you are, and how much you like to talk. This involves how much you assert yourself and how you express your emotions.
4. **Agreeableness**—This trait includes characteristics such as how much you trust others and how much kindness you express. It also involves your affection for others and how concerned you are for others’ welfare.
5. **Neuroticism**—This trait includes your degree of emotional stability and whether you are anxious, moody, irritable, or sad.

Note that in this order, the first letters of the traits spell OCEAN.

Not all researchers agree on the five trait categories. Some have different names for them. Current research supports the idea that these traits are universal across different cultures.

Personality trait theory is gaining increasing acceptance. Many personality tests based on it are available on the Web and elsewhere. A sample result of a test using the Big Five model might show a score like this:

- High on the openness scale
- High on conscientiousness
- High on extraversion
- Moderately high on agreeableness
- Moderately low on neuroticism

Again, the point of any personality test, using any model, is not to put you into a box. It’s to help you understand yourself better. The study of personality is an ongoing process. There are theories other than those mentioned here. Further research may lead to new understanding.
How Personality Influences Actions

Understanding your personality isn’t like reading a crystal ball. It doesn’t predict the future. It doesn’t guarantee success or failure. It certainly shouldn’t dictate how to live your life. Nevertheless, personality models can be useful tools. They can help you figure out why you react to events, situations, and other people the way you do, and which areas you might really like or do well in. For this reason, personality testing can help you with important decisions.

For example, if you are extraverted, you might prefer a job where you can be with other people. A job where you are alone most of the time might get you down. If you are introverted, on the other hand, a job with lots of alone time might very well appeal to you. An extraverted person might prefer team sports and big crowds, while an introverted person might prefer artistic activity in a quiet solo setting.

How Personality Affects Interactions

Put another way, your personality has a big influence on how you behave in interactions. An interaction is a situation that involves you with other people in school, at work, at home, and in social life.

Think about how your personality might influence how you behave in some typical interactions. For example, you’ve probably had occasion to say to yourself, “I just don’t fit in here.” Understanding your personality may help you understand better why you felt uncomfortable.

Understanding your personality can give you insight into your own and other people’s motivation, feedings, and needs.

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Now think about some interactions in which you’ve noticed other people’s behaviors. How might those behaviors reflect their personalities? For example, you’ve probably seen instances where someone’s behavior seems inappropriate for the situation. Perhaps you’ve asked yourself, “Why does Jonathan seem so out of touch with the other guys on the team?” But in other cases, you’ve noticed that a person’s interactions seem just right: “Dave seems like a natural-born club president,” you might say. What is it about Jonathan’s and Dave’s personalities that affected their interactions? If the two boys traded places, do you think that your reactions to their behaviors would have been the same? Why or why not?

As you observed Jonathan and David, you were taking note—without even realizing it—of personality in action. In their interactions, people continuously respond to others and others respond to them. You may feel totally comfortable in an environment where someone else is ill at ease, and vice versa. The reasons for these differences lie in your personality.

**How Personality Affects Career Choices**

Understanding your personality can help you make career choices. Say you like clothes—you enjoy everything about them. For the time being, your personality might make you a trendsetter. Your friends might turn to you for fashion advice. So it might be natural for you to think about working as a salesperson or manager in a clothing store, as a clothing designer, a fashion model, or as a buyer for a retail clothing chain. Or if you enjoy sports, you might want to choose a career that would put you close to sports. You could, of course, aim for a career as an NBA pro. But other, more-realistic choices include coaching, owning a sporting-goods store, or being the pro at the local golf course.

You feel comfortable doing what you like. That’s why understanding your personality is useful in choosing a career path. It helps you identify your preferences.

Job counselors have divided careers into several categories to help people understand the interest areas different careers include. One version of these categories is the following:

- Realistic occupations
- Investigative occupations
- Artistic occupations
- Social occupations
- Enterprising occupations
- Conventional occupations

Pairing these with your understanding of your personality and work values—what you want most out of your career—can help you find work that is satisfying and rewarding.
The Value of Different Kinds of Personalities

Once you’re aware of how personality works, you can be aware of how you react to things and how others interact with you—and why. Understanding your personality can help you get along with family and friends. It can give you insight into your relationships with people and help you understand their motivations, desires, needs, feelings, and ideas. That understanding can make you more tolerant of others’ differences and can help you be a better team player—in the classroom as well as on the field.

Because your personality affects the way you process and organize information, it has a direct effect on your learning style. For example, some people learn better by doing hands-on assignments—actually getting their fingers into the work. But other people are more theory oriented and like to think things out in their heads. Some people like to learn on their own; others learn best in groups. Knowing your own personality and how it affects your learning style can help you be a more successful student or employee.

Because it makes you aware of your decision-making and organizational styles, a personality model can also help you understand what kind of leader you would be. It might even help you realize you don’t want to lead at all. Some people are better suited—and more comfortable—working within an organization rather than leading it. The world offers plenty of opportunities for both.
If you recognize the variety of personalities and their powerful effect on everyone’s life, you can understand why some people choose to become artists, writers, or singers while others become doctors, engineers, and scientists; why some choose to teach while others choose to run businesses; why some design and some build; and why some want to make laws and some yearn to defend their country.

What’s the moral of the personality story? Each individual interacts with the world and with other people in a different way. These differences are important. They should be valued and understood, not hidden or brushed aside.

Once you recognize the importance of personality, it’s easy to see why leaders in business, government, and education often use models such as the MBTI or the Big Five. The self-knowledge you can gain and the awareness of “what makes others tick” can give you a deeper appreciation of the wisdom of the old saying, “It takes all kinds to make a world.”
Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What is personality?
2. Who was Carl Jung, and what did he believe about personality?
3. How many personality traits do many researchers believe there are, and what are they?
4. What is the point of any personality test?
5. If you’re an extravert, what kind of job might you prefer? What kind of job might an introvert prefer?
6. Why is understanding your personality useful in choosing a career path?
7. If personality gives you insight into your relationships with people, how does this help you?
8. Why does your personality have a direct effect on your learning style?

**APPLYING YOUR LEARNING**

9. Do you think you are an extravert or an introvert? Why?