

# Alphabetical disorder

Business



Did you stumble across this essay at the top of a stack or the bottom? Are you reading it fresh or are you tired after reading countless others before it? Your answers to these questions will affect how you read these next 1, 370 words. If my essay was at the top, I can safely assume that you are still reading every word. If it was at the bottom, you are probably losing interest by now and didn't notice that I misspelled "interest" just then. Order matters.

As a general rule, people pay more attention to things (and people) toward the beginning of lists and piles and less to things (and people) toward the end. Unfortunately, with our Western obsession with alphabetical order, when people are arranged that way, the same neglected group finds itself at the end of nearly everything. This is a form of discrimination called alphabetism. About half of the population will probably dismiss this as nonsense, but the other half may be interested to hear what numerous scientists, psychologists, and sociologists have to say about how their position in the alphabet has affected their lives - from buying habits to career success. According to Tony Wright, a former British Member of Parliament, "the phrase 'alphabetical order' should send a chill through everyone in the country.

It sounds fair, it sounds random, what it means is systematic discrimination against those at the bottom of the alphabet" (The ABC of Power). This may seem like an overstatement, but think about it: starting at a young age, schoolchildren are arranged in alphabetical order, and those near the end of the alphabet are last in line when the class eats snacks or tours the building, and last to choose topics and partners for school projects - every time. In

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high school, students are arranged by seating charts, and the same kids sit in the back corner of the classroom, receiving less individual attention, until they graduate, and even then, the audience is usually making ZZZs by the time the last Z receives his or her diploma. In the workplace, when two or more people write a report, their names are listed in alphabetical order, regardless of who did more work. The same principle applies to programs for recitals, lists of conference speakers and job interviewees, and names on ballots. These alphabetized lists disadvantage the same group of people, those at the end of the alphabet.

With a last name that begins with a V, I can attest to this. I didn't know what chocolate milk tasted like until junior high, and I hardly ever got to choose anything at school. I would be stuck with whatever the other kids didn't want. The last one to present to my sleepy class, I always felt that I was somehow inferior because of my position in the alphabet. Numerous beaming teachers told me "last but not least" when they steered me toward the back of the classroom or gave me that last beat-up textbook that every other kid had turned down – but I felt least. Even now, when other factors besides my place at the end of the alphabet determine my fate, I catch myself expecting to be last, letting other people cut in front of me when I try to leave a room or when I get in line for lunch.

As numerous studies show, I am not alone in my submissive tendencies, and I am learning now that they may have been caused by our culture's subconscious treatment of people whose last names fall at the end of the alphabet. "Expectation and Achievement in Lower Alphabet Groups," a study conducted by Professors P. Young and R. Walters, two top sociologists <https://assignbuster.com/alphabetical-disorder/>

at the City University of New York, highlights the long-term consequences of systematic alphabetic discrimination. Observing several hundred children over a 20-year period, they found that those with names toward the end of the alphabet got so used to being last on lists and in lines that they began to see themselves as having low priority and consequently placed a low value on themselves. The study found that in addition they had lower ambitions and expectations for their futures, expecting to get less out of life.

As adults, their salaries were 16 percent below average, they held only a third of top management positions, and they were five times more likely to suffer depression or attempt suicide. These are fairly drastic results of something seemingly so simple and innocent as lining kids up in alphabetical order. It is just an effort to organize, to make our lives a little more predictable, a little easier. Some sympathetic teachers occasionally line students up in reverse alphabetical order or randomize the list. But this is only done on special occasions.

Why do kids at the end of the alphabet need a special occasion to experience the thrill of leading a line, an opportunity to be first, a chance to get first pick, when kids at the beginning of the alphabet are given these opportunities daily? Of course, this is coming from someone who spent her childhood at the back of the class. But think about it - how difficult would it be to mix it up every once in a while? How difficult would it be to keep the kids in alphabetical order but let them take turns in the front of the line or the classroom? If this does not happen, the effects of alphabetism will continue to affect people's behaviors and futures. A concrete example of position in the alphabet affecting long term behavior is found in a study done <https://assignbuster.com/alphabetical-disorder/>

by Kurt A. Carlson, assistant professor at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business, and Jacqueline M. Conard, assistant professor at Belmont University's Massey Graduate School of Business. They conducted four tests, all advertising a "while supplies last" offer, on both students and adults.

In each experiment, subjects whose surnames fell toward the end of the alphabet responded more quickly to these offers than those whose surnames fell toward the beginning. This effect did not hold true with married names, only with the names respondents were born with, indicating that this behavioral pattern has roots in childhood. Carlson and Conard concluded that this happens because "repeated delays imposed on children whose last names are late in the alphabet create in those individuals a chronic expediency motive that is automatically activated." In simpler terms, adults who were sorted toward the back of lines, lists, and classrooms as children are more likely to be suckered into act-now advertising because, growing up, they often experienced delays and can still remember how it felt to miss out on an opportunity. Not only does position in the alphabet affect consumers' buying habits, but it also has a noticeable effect on people's future success in careers, whether business, politics, or economics.

The world's three top central bankers - Greenspan, Duisenberg, and Hayami - along with the world's five richest men - Gates, Buffett, Allen, Ellison, and Albrecht - all have names in the top half of the alphabet, according to an article in *The Economist*. And of the 44 U. S. presidents to date, 31 had surnames in the first half of the alphabet. Liran Einav, an assistant professor of economics at Stanford, and Leeat Yariv, an associate professor of economics at CalTech, found that faculty members with surnames earlier in

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the alphabet are more likely to receive tenure at top economics departments and are even more likely to receive the Clark Medal or the Nobel Prize.

Other disciplines, such as psychology, medicine, and other “hard” sciences, do not rank their authors alphabetically, and, interestingly enough, do not show this same effect found in economists’ papers, writes Timothy Noah in his article “Tyranny of the Alphabet” in Slate Magazine. Although there are some notable exceptions, like Mark Zuckerberg, there is no doubt that position in the alphabet has the ability to affect careers. Alphabetism doesn’t have to exist. It is simply a byproduct of an obsession with order. If children were always lined up by their parents’ income, with the poorest children always at the end of the line, parents would be outraged. But when they are lined up by the first letter of their last names, hardly anyone bats an eye.

Educators, as well as the political and scientific communities, need to be more aware of the effects of consistently arranging children in alphabetical order. Little Lawrence Zyskowski deserves the same chance for success in life as his classmate Phillip Aaberg.