

AP Psychology

Key Definitions

AP Psychology rewards precision, not length. A free-response point is earned by defining the term correctly AND applying it to the scenario – a definition alone scores nothing, and a application without the term scores nothing either. Learn each sentence below, then practise finishing it with “in this case, ...”.

Biological bases of behaviour

- Neuron – a nerve cell; the basic building block of the nervous system
- Synapse – the gap between the axon terminal of one neuron and the dendrite of the next, across which neurotransmitters travel
- Neurotransmitter – a chemical messenger released at a synapse that crosses to the next neuron and excites or inhibits it
- Myelin sheath – a fatty layer around an axon that speeds up the transmission of the neural impulse
- Action potential – the brief electrical charge that travels down an axon, fired only when the threshold is reached
- All-or-none principle – a neuron either fires at full strength or does not fire at all; a stronger stimulus does not produce a stronger impulse
- Plasticity – the brain’s ability to change and reorganise, especially after damage or through new experience
- Hippocampus – the brain structure that processes conscious, explicit memories for storage
- Amygdala – the brain structure involved in the processing of emotion, especially fear and aggression
- Circadian rhythm – the body’s roughly 24-hour biological clock, governing sleep and wakefulness

Sensation, perception and cognition

- Sensation – the process by which receptors detect stimulus energy from the environment
- Perception – the process by which the brain organises and interprets sensory information so it has meaning
- Absolute threshold – the minimum stimulation needed to detect a stimulus 50% of the time
- Encoding – the process of getting information into the memory system
- Working memory – the limited-capacity store that actively holds and manipulates information for a short time
- Long-term potentiation – the lasting strengthening of a synaptic connection after repeated stimulation; the neural basis of learning
- Schema – a mental framework built from experience that organises and interprets new information
- Heuristic – a mental shortcut that allows a fast judgement, at the cost of being sometimes wrong

- Confirmation bias – the tendency to search for and favour evidence that supports what one already believes
- Functional fixedness – the tendency to see an object as having only its usual function, which blocks a novel solution

Development and learning

- Classical conditioning – learning in which a neutral stimulus, paired repeatedly with an unconditioned stimulus, comes to trigger a conditioned response
- Operant conditioning – learning in which behaviour is strengthened by reinforcement or weakened by punishment
- Reinforcement – any consequence that makes the behaviour it follows more likely to happen again
- Punishment – any consequence that makes the behaviour it follows less likely to happen again
- Shaping – reinforcing successively closer approximations of a target behaviour until that behaviour is produced
- Observational learning – learning by watching and imitating the behaviour of others
- Attachment – the strong emotional bond between an infant and its caregiver, shown by seeking closeness and distress on separation
- Assimilation – interpreting new experience in terms of an existing schema
- Accommodation – changing an existing schema so that it fits new experience

Social psychology and personality

- Fundamental attribution error – over-estimating personality and under-estimating the situation when explaining another person’s behaviour
- Cognitive dissonance – the discomfort felt when actions and attitudes conflict, which motivates a change in the attitude
- Conformity – adjusting one’s behaviour or thinking to match a group standard
- Obedience – complying with the direct command of an authority figure
- Groupthink – the desire for harmony in a group overriding realistic appraisal of the alternatives
- Social facilitation – improved performance on a simple or well-learned task when others are present
- Self-efficacy – a person’s belief in their own capability to carry out the actions a task requires
- Defence mechanism – in psychoanalytic theory, an unconscious strategy the ego uses to reduce anxiety by distorting reality

Research methods and assessment	
Reliability	– the extent to which a measure gives consistent results when repeated
Validity	– the extent to which a measure actually measures what it claims to measure
Standardization	– defining meaningful scores by comparison with the performance of a pretested group
Operational definition	– a statement of the exact procedures used to define and measure a variable, so the study can be replicated

Mental and physical health	
Stressor	– an event or condition that a person appraises as threatening or challenging
Resilience	– the capacity to adapt and recover after significant adversity
Tolerance	– needing progressively larger doses of a drug to obtain the original effect
Withdrawal	– the discomfort and distress that follow stopping an addictive drug