Figure-Ground Perception Encyclopedia Article

Figure-Ground Perception

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Figure-Ground Perception

The ability to visually differentiate between a sensory stimulation and its background.

A person's ability to separate an object from its surrounding field is referred to as figure-ground perception. Visual figure-ground perception is the ability to distinguish an object from the background field. Auditory figure-ground perception is the ability to hear the voice of one speaker over the background noise (conversations, music, air conditioning) of the environment. The object that a person focuses on is called the figure; everything else is referred to as background, or simply ground.

Children who are easily distracted are often unable to focus on one object while ignoring or blocking out the background. Children with **attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder** or attention span difficulties often benefit from a learning environment that minimizes background distractions. While a classroom with lots of visual and auditory stimulus may be exciting to some students, the easily distracted child finds it overwhelming. He or she is unable to focus on any one aspect of the environment, and spends all his or her time processing the stimuli. This student is unable to distinguish the important stimuli for learning from all other sensory inputs.

To study figure-ground discrimination ability, psychologists have created different kinds of assessment stimuli. Some stimuli involve simple ambiguous figures, like the famous face-vase figure that can be interpreted as two faces looking at one another or as one goblet, depending on what aspect a person focuses on. Complex stimuli, such as the so-called "Magic Eye" pictures that became popular in the 1990s, can also be used to demonstrate figure-ground relationships. These complex pictures require concentration and control to relax the muscles of the eyes to see a three-dimensional figure emerge from the background.

Psychologists have also demonstrated figure-ground principles with auditory stimuli, and have developed exercises for students to improve their ability to hear a speaker above background noise.

For Further Study

Books

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