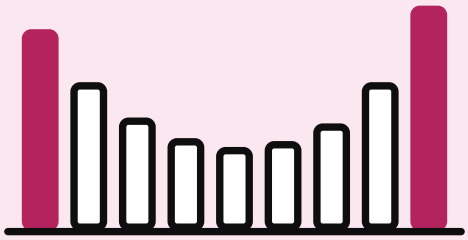
Concept

Serial position effect

In a list, we remember the first items (primacy) and the last ones (recency) better than those in the middle.



In Spanish
Efecto de posición serial

Origin
Murdock (1962); Glanzer and Cunitz (1966)

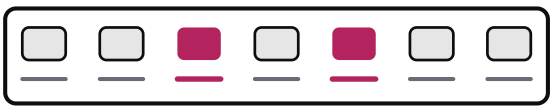
What problem it addresses

It explains why what sits in the middle of a list, a menu or a presentation is forgotten more, and where to put what matters.

An example

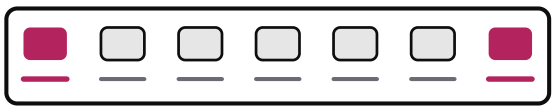
An illustrative example: a navigation bar with seven sections, two of which are used the most.

The important ones in the middle



The key sections sit among other similar ones. **They fall in the zone that is remembered least.**

The important ones at the ends



One key section at the start and another at the end. **They take the places that are remembered best.**

The sections are the same. What changes is which ones land where memory works best.

Why it happens

1

What comes first is rehearsed more and moves into lasting memory.

2

What comes last is still fresh in immediate memory.

3

What sits in the middle has neither advantage.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Put what matters most at the start or end of lists, menus and presentations.

Avoid

Hiding a condition people need to know in the middle of a long list.

Don't fall for it

Before deciding, look again at the options in the middle of a long list.

30 seconds

What the research says

Counting aloud for 30 seconds before recalling a list wiped out the advantage of the last words, but not that of the first ones (Glanzer and Cunitz, 1966).

●●● **Solid evidence.** That suggested two separate mechanisms. Murdock (1962) had already measured the U-shaped curve with lists of 10 to 40 words. Today the debate is whether recency needs a separate store, not whether the effect exists.

Connections

Used in

- Information architecture

Related to

- Von Restorff effect
- Miller's law
- Peak-end rule

Authors and works

1962	**Bennet B. Murdock**	Measured the curve with lists of different lengths and presentation rates.
1966	**Murray Glanzer and Anita R. Cunitz**	Showed that the advantage of the start and that of the end can be separated.

Sources

Original sources

- Murdock, B. B., Jr. (1962). The serial position effect of free recall. Journal of Experimental Psychology, 64(5), 482–488. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045106)
- Glanzer, M., & Cunitz, A. R. (1966). Two storage mechanisms in free recall. Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 5(4), 351–360.

Last reviewed: October 30, 2026

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