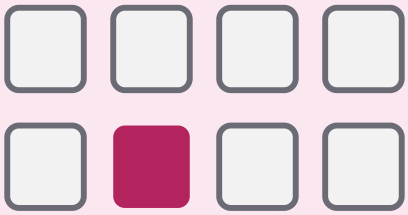
Concept

Von Restorff effect

Among similar items, we remember the one that is different better.

In Spanish
Efecto von Restorff

Origin
von Restorff (1933)



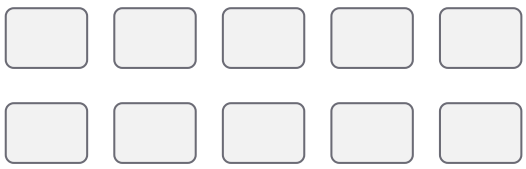
What problem it addresses

It explains why highlighting an item makes it more visible and memorable, and why highlighting too many doesn't work.

An example

Imagine two lists of ten items that you look at for a few seconds.

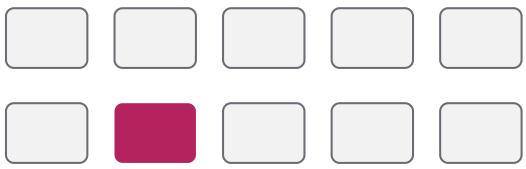
All alike



Ten similar items

You remember a few, **in no clear order.**

One different



One different item among similar ones

The different item **is remembered better.**

Difference works because it is an exception. If everything stands out, nothing stands out.

Why it happens

1 

What is different breaks the pattern,

2 

is perceived as distinct from its surroundings

3 

and is stored more strongly in memory.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Highlight just one thing per screen: the main action or the key figure.

Avoid

Highlighting the option that suits the company by making the others go unnoticed.

Don't fall for it

When something catches your eye, check whether it is important or just different.

1933

What the research says

Hedwig von Restorff showed that, in a list of similar items, the isolated item is remembered better.

●●● **Solid evidence.** The key is not that something is unusual in itself, but that it stands out from what surrounds it (Hunt, 1995).

Connections

Used in

- UI design

Related to

- Serial position effect
- Gestalt principles of perceptual organization
- Peak-end rule

Authors and works

1933	**Hedwig von Restorff**	Described the effect in memory experiments with lists.
1995	**R. Reed Hunt**	Reviewed what the original study actually showed.

Sources

Original sources

- von Restorff, H. (1933). Über die Wirkung von Bereichsbildungen im Spurenfeld. Psychologische Forschung, 18(1), 299–342. View source (https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02409636)

Academic reviews

- Hunt, R. R. (1995). The subtlety of distinctiveness: What von Restorff really did. Psychonomic Bulletin & Review, 2(1), 105–112. View source (https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03214414)

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