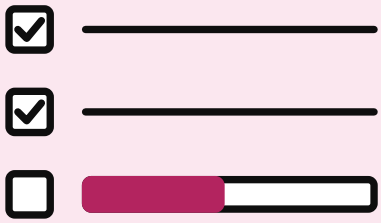
Concept

Zeigarnik effect

The idea that we remember interrupted tasks better than finished ones. Replications do not confirm it in general, but they do show we tend to resume what was left unfinished.



In Spanish
Efecto Zeigarnik

Origin
Zeigarnik (1927)

What problem it addresses

It explains why design shows progress and pending tasks to invite people back, and why it is wise not to overstate what that achieves.

An example

An illustrative example: a five-lesson online course that you leave half done.

No visible progress



Just the list of lessons. **You can't see what is left.**

Visible progress



Three of five done and the next one marked. **What is pending is visible and easy to resume.**

The indicator forces nothing: it makes what is left visible, and that makes coming back easier.

Why it happens

1 

When we start a task, we intend to finish it.

2 

If it is interrupted, that intention stays open.

3 

So we tend to resume it, rather than remember it better.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Show how much is left and what the next step is, so resuming a task is easy.

Avoid

Leaving tasks open on purpose or inventing pending items so people can't disconnect.

Don't fall for it

If a half-full bar makes you uneasy, ask whether that step serves you or only whoever designed the app.

1.9 → 0.99

What the research says

In Zeigarnik's study (1927), with 32 participants, people recalled on average 1.9 times more interrupted than finished tasks. Pooling 38 publications, that ratio was 0.99 (Ghibellini and Meier, 2025).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** In other words, there is no general memory advantage. What does recur is that we resume what was interrupted: 67% of the time, against 50% by chance (the Ovsiankina effect).

Connections

Related to

- Gamification
- Goal-gradient effect
- Deceptive patterns (dark patterns)

Authors and works

1927	**Bluma Zeigarnik**	Compared how many interrupted and how many finished tasks people remembered.
2025	**R. Ghibellini and B. Meier**	Pooled the replications in a meta-analysis. They found no memory advantage, but did find a tendency to resume what was interrupted.

Sources

Original sources

- Zeigarnik, B. (1927). Das Behalten erledigter und unerledigter Handlungen. Psychologische Forschung, 9, 1–85.

Academic reviews

- Ghibellini, R., & Meier, B. (2025). Interruption, recall and resumption: A meta-analysis of the Zeigarnik and Ovsiankina effects. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 12. View source (https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05000-w)

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