



# Bias Bite #7: The Pygmalion Effect

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## Overview

This mini-lesson is designed to help your students recognize and better understand the Pygmalion effect. It is a cognitive shortcut in which high expectations boost motivation and lead to improved performance while low expectations create a negative self-fulfilling prophecy and underperformance.

The following activities will guide students in an exploration of the way the Pygmalion effect works, when it happens, and most important, how to recognize it in themselves. By developing this self-awareness, students can become more open to different perspectives and engage in more thoughtful, civil discussions both in and out of the classroom.



## Driving Question

Why do other people's expectations of us affect our performance?

## Objectives

- Explain the bias.
- Provide examples of the bias in practice.
- Construct strategies for overcoming and dealing with the bias.

## Materials Needed

- "The Power of Expectations" video
- Mental Notes graphics organizers for students

## Bias Description

The Pygmalion effect, also known as the Rosenthal effect, describes the phenomenon in which high expectations placed upon individuals positively affect their performance. This gain occurs because our expectations influence our behavior, which in turn affects the behavior and performance of those around us. Conversely, low expectations can lead to poorer performance.

### PROS AND CONS OF THE BIAS

#### Pros

- High expectations can boost motivation and lead to improved performance.
- High expectations can create a positive self-fulfilling prophecy, where a person internalizes these expectations and strives to meet them.

#### Cons

- Low expectations can create a negative self-fulfilling prophecy, where someone can internalize these expectations and underperform.
- The Pygmalion effect can lead to unequal treatment of others on the basis of one's expectations rather than on a person's actual abilities or needs.

### REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF THE BIAS

- A coach who expects a team to win creates a more positive and energetic practice environment, motivating the team to work harder and ultimately achieve better results.
- Someone who is repeatedly cast in the "background" roles of a play may not be motivated to develop the acting skills needed to play a more prominent role.

## Learning Activities

### OPEN

Have students write the name of the day's bias and the driving question on their Mental Notes graphic organizer.

### ACTIVATE

Watch the video, "[The Power of Expectations](#)."

#### Ask

- What stood out or surprised you?
- What are you reminded of?
- What biases might be at play?

### EXPLAIN

- Tell students why the Pygmalion effect occurs. Explain that in 1968, Robert Rosenthal was the first to examine the Pygmalion effect. This bias is the idea that if someone expects you to do well, like a teacher, coach, or parent, you're more likely to live up to those expectations. You try harder because people with high hopes for you treat you differently, and that changes how you feel and act. For example, when teachers believe in their students, they create a warmer, more encouraging atmosphere, give more challenging work, call on students more often and push them to show what they know, and give extra, positive feedback. All these little things together make students feel more confident and motivated to work hard, so they actually do better in school.
- Tell students that they can effectively deal with the Pygmalion effect in the following ways:
  - Challenge negative stereotypes.
  - Be skeptical of strong group identifications.
  - Ask yourself challenging questions to counter lower levels of motivation.

### DISCUSS

Divide students into groups and have them discuss the following questions:

- In what situations can the Pygmalion effect be helpful? Harmful?
- When have you seen this bias in action?
- When are people most susceptible to this bias?
- How can people recognize when they are being affected by this bias?
- What are some ways to overcome and deal with this bias?
- What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what ways can our awareness of this bias improve our relationships with others?

A faint, light gray background graphic consisting of a network of interconnected nodes and lines. The nodes are represented by circles of varying sizes, and the lines are thin, creating a complex web-like structure that spans the entire page.

### **SYNTHESIZE AND CLOSE**

Ask each group to share what they discussed for at least 1 of the questions. Revisit the driving question and make sure each student has responded to the driving question in their Mental Notes for the day..