

# BLINK

## Malcolm Gladwell

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Malcolm Gladwell is a distiller of disparate primary sources, and a darned good one. He makes interesting connections among the work of researchers and renders their topics wonderfully readable.

In BLINK he takes on humankind's rapid cognition, otherwise known as snap decisions. He tells us that we make snap decision even more quickly than we acknowledge, that it frequently serves us well, that it can go horribly wrong, and that we can make better use of it.

We come to snap decisions by "thin-slicing." Thin-slicing is our adaptive unconsciousness finding "patterns in situations and behaviors" based on limited exposure. Thin-slicing can go by many other names - instinct, gut reaction, a little voice. It contrasts to the "thick-slicing" of marketing research, pro-con lists, decision matrixes and such.

Often our bodies start to respond (sweat forming, eyes dilating, etc.) to thin-slicing well before our minds have caught up. And when our conscious does catch up, it frequently will deliver an explanation that researchers can prove isn't true. Perhaps this is partly because we don't know all the mechanisms of the adaptive unconscious (Gladwell refers to thin-slicing as happening behind a locked door) and that can make us mistrust it.

Every writer should read about priming experiments. Gladwell tells of test subjects set to seeing how fast they could re-order word jumbles into sentences. But the real experiment was what happened afterward. One group worked with words conjuring aggression, another group had words connected to good manners. Then they were put in a situation to try their patience. Guess which group was more cooperative. None of the subjects were even aware of having been "primed." Talk about the power of words! (Hmm, maybe lots of positive "buying" words worked into proposals?)

Gladwell does explore the dark side of thin-slicing, our unconscious' tendency to make what he calls Warren Harding Errors: the equivalents of assuming tall, dark and handsome also means smart, hard-working and honorable. The Implicit Association Test helps expose underlying automatic associations (take it at [www.implicit.harvard.edu](http://www.implicit.harvard.edu) -- I bet you're surprised and possibly shaken.)

Gladwell uses stories - some barely character sketches, some more meaty - to explore the concepts in BLINK. From researchers, to a general, to an ER doctor, with stops for marriage assessments based on dialogue, tennis, speed-dating and an extended view through the lens of rapid cognition of the police shooting of Amadou Diallo in the Bronx in 1999 - all can inform a writer's thinking.

BLINK can help writers know how our heads operate and gain understanding of our characters. But where I found it most interesting was applying BLINK's concepts to the industry. There's an entire section on marketing called "Kenna's Dilemma." You will understand and empathize with Kenna, a musician struggling with a music company's testing and focus groups, but might also gain insight to editors, booksellers and even marketing.

I do wish Gladwell had addressed more fully overcoming a potentially erroneous thin-slice. He cites a study in which university students viewed film of instructors and rated them as effective teachers. The researcher first used 10 seconds of videotape with no sound, then five seconds, then two seconds, and found that students viewing even two seconds of soundless videotape were in tune with students who rated after a semester of class. Gladwell indicates from this that two-second viewers rated the instructor correctly.

He doesn't address the possibility that students who sat in the class for the semester, in fact, made their decision about the instructor in the first few seconds and didn't let anything that happened afterward affect their view.

The "Notes" section gives enough information to dig up the original studies, an exercise that made me further appreciate Gladwell's talent for distilling.

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