How flexible is your brain? Give it a 5 second test: quickly identify the color of each of the above words (don’t read them). Say the colors out loud.

How accurate were you? How long did it take? This task, called the Stroop Test, is much more challenging than it first appears. It’s much harder to identify a color when it’s different from the word than it is to identify when the two match. This challenging test relies on two key cognitive skills, response inhibition and selective attention.
Brief history of the Stroop Test
In 1935, a farmer’s son named John Ridley Stroop became the first to publish in English on the current version of this cognitive task. Developed as part of his dissertation at George Peabody College, his task became the basis for the Stroop Test, which remains a widely used neuropsychological assessment to this day.

How your brain processes the Stroop Test
Because most people’s automatic response is to read a word, the Stroop Test is a classic test of response inhibition. This skill involves responding quickly while avoiding incorrect impulses that may interfere with accomplishing goal-driven tasks. Response inhibition is associated with the brain’s executive function, and brain imaging studies have found that performing the Stroop Test activates brain areas involved in executive function, such as the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.

In fact, individuals with ADHD and depression, whose poor executive function makes them struggle to pay attention and control reactions, often have a harder time performing the Stroop Test.

The Stroop Test also challenges selective attention, or the ability to choose which stimuli to focus on and which to ignore. The mental flexibility required to switch between multiple stimuli is essential: without good selective attention, it can also be easy to make errors.

Try a version of Stroop’s test for yourself
Stroop’s test has long outlived him. Cited thousands of times, his original paper is one of the most famous studies in experimental psychology. Versions of his test continue to be used in research — and you can try a version for yourself by playing Lumosity’s Color Match!

Source: Lumosity
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