

Theories of Emotion at a Glance

Body first, brain first, label first, or appraisal first?

Every emotion has a bodily reaction, a feeling, and a thought. The theories disagree about which comes first.

Common sense view: stimulus → feeling → body. All four theories below reject this order.

Four Classic Theories Compared

James-Lange

Body first

William James & Carl Lange, 1880s

Stimulus → body → feeling

You feel afraid because you tremble.
Each emotion has its own bodily pattern.

Exam cue: perceiving bodily changes;
specific physiological pattern

Criticism: Different emotions share very
similar arousal.

Cannon-Bard

Brain first, in parallel

Walter Cannon & Philip Bard, 1920s

Stimulus → thalamus → feeling +
arousal

The thalamus sends two signals at once.
Neither one causes the other.

Exam cue: simultaneous; at the same
time; thalamus

Criticism: The thalamus is a relay, and
the model ignores thinking.

Schachter-Singer

Label first

Stanley Schachter & Jerome Singer, 1962

Stimulus → arousal → label →
feeling

Arousal is generic. How you explain its
cause decides which emotion you feel.

Exam cue: two factors; cognitive label;
misattribution

Criticism: Many emotions arrive too fast
to wait for a label.

Cognitive Appraisal

Appraisal first

Richard Lazarus, from the 1960s

Stimulus → appraisal → feeling +
arousal

You judge what the situation means for
you, often in a split second.

Exam cue: appraisal; evaluates the
situation; can I cope?

Criticism: Some reactions start before
any appraisal (Zajonc).

The Modern Verdict

No single winner. Fast fear pathways in the brain, parallel signals, bodily feedback, and interpretation all play a role, often within the same second.