



## The Fuzzy Meanings of Time

Have you ever said something to a friend like, “I’d love to meet up next week! It’s been **forever** since we got together”? Obviously, if this person is a friend, it hasn’t been “forever,” but we all have a tendency to exaggerate or conflate time, which can be the source of misunderstandings between friends, families and nations.

### Version 1: Try this experiment:

Here’s a quick experiment you can do with your friends. Get together with at least two other people and take two minutes to write down your idea of what percent of time each of the words below expresses, and then compare your answers with the other people. For example, does, “almost always” mean 75% of the time? 95%? Something else? There are no wrong answers, just varying perceptions.

1. Often \_\_\_%
2. Always \_\_\_%
3. Sometimes \_\_\_%
4. Never \_\_\_%
5. Usually \_\_\_%
6. Rarely \_\_\_%
7. Frequently \_\_\_%
8. Seldom \_\_\_%
9. Most of the time \_\_\_%
10. Occasionally \_\_\_%



In any group that represents a variety of ages, interests and cultures, your answers are likely to be widespread and fascinating. We perceive time differently. And we persist in saying things like “never” even when virtually all of us have learned the truth at some point in “Never say never.” Can you use your answers to communicate more effectively?

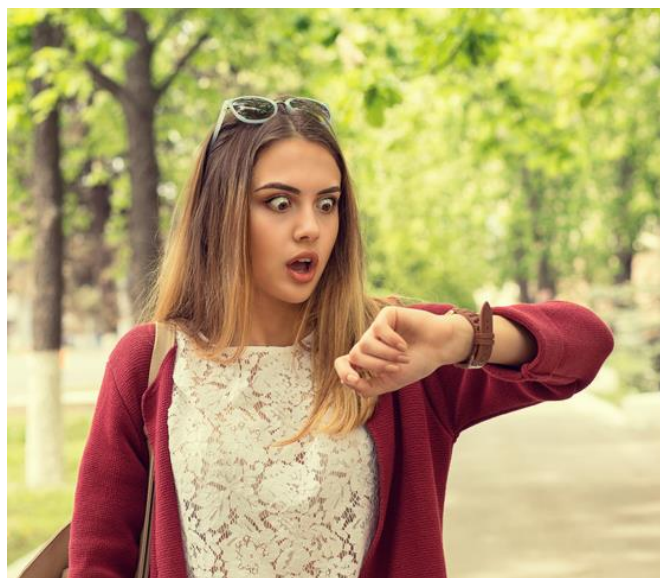


## Version 2: Now try this experiment:

Young children are often driven to tantrums when parents say something is happening “soon,” because for children it’s never soon enough. For some of us the weeks and years seem to be racing by as we age. For all of us when we are worried about or eagerly anticipating an event, clocks can move agonizingly slowly.

Imagine an event. It might be a train due at the station or the time until lunch. How many minutes (or hours, if you prefer) do the following expressions represent?

1. Anytime now \_\_\_\_\_
2. At once \_\_\_\_\_
3. Before long \_\_\_\_\_
4. Immediately \_\_\_\_\_
5. In a little while \_\_\_\_\_
6. Just a little bit longer  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Now \_\_\_\_\_
8. Soon \_\_\_\_\_



And if it arrived “a short time ago,” exactly how long ago was that?

As with the previous experiment, answers are likely to vary widely, but may help us to understand one another better.