



# Why We Make Mistakes: How We Look Without Seeing, Forget Things in Seconds, and Are All Pretty Sure We Are Way Above Average

By Joseph T. Hallinan

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**We forget our passwords. We pay too much to go to the gym. We think we'd be happier if we lived in California (we wouldn't), and we think we should stick with our first answer on tests (we shouldn't). Why *do* we make mistakes? And could we do a little better?**

We human beings have design flaws. Our eyes play tricks on us, our stories change in the retelling, and most of us are fairly sure we're way above average. In *Why We Make Mistakes*, journalist Joseph T. Hallinan sets out to explore the captivating science of human error—how we think, see, remember, and forget, and how this sets us up for wholly irresistible mistakes.

In his quest to understand our imperfections, Hallinan delves into psychology, neuroscience, and economics, with forays into aviation, consumer behavior, geography, football, stock picking, and more. He discovers that some of the same qualities that make us efficient also make us error prone. We learn to move rapidly through the world, quickly recognizing patterns—but overlooking details. Which is why thirteen-year-old boys discover errors that NASA scientists miss—and why you can't find the beer in your refrigerator.

*Why We Make Mistakes* is enlivened by real-life stories—of weathermen whose predictions are uncannily accurate and a witness who sent an innocent man to jail—and offers valuable advice, such as how to remember where you've hidden something important. You'll learn why multitasking is a bad idea, why men make errors women don't, and why most people think San Diego is west of Reno (it's not).

*Why We Make Mistakes* will open your eyes to the reasons behind your mistakes—and have you vowing to do better the next time.

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### Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

#### Book Description

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### A Q&A with Author Joseph T. Hallinan: Which Penny is Correct?

(Click on Image to Enlarge)



Can you pick out the real penny? (Answer Below)

**Question:** We've seen pennies so many times--why is it so difficult to recognize which of these drawings accurately represents a penny?



**Joseph T. Hallinan:** Partly, it has to do with how our memory works. Our long-term memory, even for things we've seen thousands of times, is limited. Most of the time, we recall meaning but not surface details. It's the same reason we remember faces, but not the names that go with them.

**Q:** Are there other real-world examples of this?

**JTH:** Sure. We just watched as Chief Justice John Roberts and President Barack Obama muffed the words to the Inaugural Oath—even though the oath has only 35 words and even though both men no doubt rehearsed it many times. It's actually very hard to remember things verbatim. Take the National Anthem, for instance. You've sung it hundreds of times. But how many of the Anthem's 81 words can you remember without singing it?

**Q:** How does this limitation lead to mistakes?

**JTH:** Because we think our memories are much better than they are, and rely on them more than we should. Consider how many times an eyewitness has mistakenly identified a criminal and you begin to see the significance of this type of error. Basically, we look but don't always see.

**Q:** Alright then, we've waited long enough: which of the pennies above is the real McCoy?

**JTH:** That would be penny A. But when researchers conducted this experiment, fewer than half of the people in the study picked the right one.

(Photo © Andrew Collings)

From Publishers Weekly

A Pulitzer winner for his stories on Indiana's medical malpractice system, Hallinan has made himself an expert on the snafus of human psychology and perception used regularly (by politicians, marketers, and our own subconscious) to confuse, misinform, manipulate and equivocate. In breezy chapters, Hallinan examines 13 pitfalls that make us vulnerable to mistakes: "we look but don't always see," "we like things tidy" and "we don't constrain ourselves" among them. Each chapter takes on a different drawback, packing in an impressive range of intriguing and practical real-world examples; the chapter on overconfidence looks at horse-racing handicappers, Warren Buffet's worst deal and the secret weapon of credit card companies. He also looks at the serious consequences of multitasking and data overload on what is at best a two- or three-track mind, from deciding the best course of cancer treatment to ignoring the real factors of our unhappiness (often by focusing on minor but more easily understood details). Quizzes and puzzles give readers a sense of their own capacity for self-deception and/or delusion. A lesson in humility as much as human behavior, Hallinan's study should help readers understand their limitations and how to work with them.

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From [Booklist](#)

**\*Starred Review\*** What an eye-opener! If you're someone who has trouble remembering the names of people (or common objects), if you seem to forget things almost immediately after you learn them, if your memory of past events frequently turns out to be drastically at odds with the facts, relax: you're not alone. It's a truism that we all make mistakes, but Hallinan is more interested in why we make them, in what quirks of our mental makeup allow—and even frequently encourage—us to misremember important events, forget passwords, mistake strangers for friends, buy more groceries than we actually need, fall for optical illusions, and so on. Turns out these aren't sign of illness. Just the opposite: our minds behave this way because our brains are wired this way. Hallinan cites numerous studies and experts (there is a lengthy bibliography), but he keeps the book from becoming a stodgy recitation of facts and statistics through the frequent use of illustrative examples and snappy prose. He also throws in a few big surprises, such as the revelation that multitasking is a myth (we don't do several things at once—we switch between various tasks without really focusing on any of them). A vastly informative, and for some readers vastly reassuring, exploration of the way our minds work. --David Pitt

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**Guadalupe Baxter:**

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