



The Slow Education of the Tongue

Scientists are learning why the coffee we once found impossible to drink slowly becomes, with age, one of adulthood's quiet pleasures.

Ask any coffee lover to describe their first cup, and most will laugh. The drink that now feels essential once tasted like burnt wood and battery acid. Almost nobody is born loving coffee. The [preference](#)¹ is built, slowly, over years, and the reasons why reveal something remarkable about how the human body ages, and about the strange, quiet negotiation between biology and habit.

Bitterness is detected by specialized cells called taste buds, which are clustered mainly on the tongue. In childhood, these cells are replaced roughly every ten days, keeping the sense of taste sharp and, for many kids, uncomfortably sensitive to strong flavors. This sensitivity likely evolved as a safety [mechanism](#)², since many poisonous plants taste intensely bitter. As people grow older, that renewal process slows down. Fewer new taste cells are produced, and the ones that remain become less responsive to [bitter](#)³ compounds such as caffeine. This is why a flavor that once seemed overwhelming can, decades later, feel pleasant rather than harsh.

Smell plays an equally important role, even though it rarely gets the credit. Much of what we call taste is actually detected through the nose, as aromas travel upward from the mouth while we chew or sip. This process, known as retronasal smell, is also affected by age. Older noses generally register fewer distinct scents, which can soften the sharper, more aggressive edges of a flavor like coffee while still allowing its richer, roasted notes to come through.

Biology, however, is only part of the story. Repeated exposure trains the brain to associate a taste with reward, and coffee offers plenty of reward. Caffeine lifts energy and mood, and the ritual surrounding coffee, the shared break at work, the quiet morning routine, the comforting warmth of the cup, becomes tightly linked to the drink itself. Over time, the brain stops treating bitterness as a warning sign and starts treating it as a signal that something good is about to happen.

Psychologists describe this shift as an acquired taste, and coffee is far from the only example. Dark chocolate, beer, and certain vegetables such as broccoli or kale follow a similar pattern. Children tend to avoid them, while adults, whose taste systems have changed and whose habits have been shaped by repeated exposure, often [seek](#)⁴ them out. Even wine, with its sharp tannins, is rarely loved at first sip, yet it becomes a lifelong pleasure for many.

None of this means everyone will eventually love coffee. [Genetics](#)⁵ still influence how strongly a person reacts to bitterness, and some adults remain [sensitive](#)⁶ to it for life, no matter how many cups they try. But for the millions who once pushed their first cup away in disgust, the explanation lies in a quiet, gradual transformation: taste buds that renew more slowly, a sense of smell that softens sharp edges, and a brain that has learned, sip by sip, to welcome what it once rejected.

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VOCABULARY — KEY WORDS FROM THE STORY

#	WORD	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE SENTENCE
1	preference <i>noun</i>	a stronger liking for one thing over another, often developed over time.	"Her preference for tea over coffee only developed after she moved to London."
2	mechanism <i>noun</i>	a natural process, system, or set of parts that works together to produce a particular result.	"Sweating is one of the body's main mechanisms for cooling itself down."
3	bitter <i>adjective</i>	having a sharp, unpleasant taste, similar to black coffee or unsweetened dark chocolate.	"The medicine tasted so bitter that she needed water right after swallowing it."
4	seek <i>verb</i>	to try to find, get, or achieve something, often deliberately and over time.	"Many new employees seek advice from more experienced colleagues during their first month."
5	genetics <i>noun</i>	the branch of science concerned with genes and how characteristics are passed from parents to children.	"Doctors are studying the role of genetics in certain long-term illnesses."
6	sensitive <i>adjective</i>	reacting strongly, easily, or painfully to something, such as a substance, taste, or situation.	"His skin is sensitive to strong sunlight, so he always wears sunscreen in summer."

COMPREHENSION — ANSWER THE QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1 — MULTIPLE CHOICE

According to the article, what is the main reason many people begin to enjoy coffee's bitterness as they get older?

- A-) They intentionally train themselves to ignore the taste completely
- B-) A combination of biological changes in taste and smell, plus repeated positive experience with coffee
- C-) Coffee companies gradually change their recipes to taste less bitter
- D-) Older people lose the ability to taste bitterness entirely

QUESTION 2 — MULTIPLE CHOICE

Why does the article give special attention to the sense of smell when discussing coffee's flavor?

- A-) Because smell has nothing to do with how food and drink taste
- B-) Because much of what people call 'taste' is actually detected through retronasal smell, and this sense also changes with age
- C-) Because older adults completely lose their sense of smell after a certain age
- D-) Because coffee has no flavor at all without a strong smell

QUESTION 3 — SHORT ANSWER

The article mentions that dark chocolate, beer, and vegetables like broccoli follow 'a similar pattern' to coffee. In your own words, explain what this pattern is and why it might apply to foods beyond coffee.

COMPREHENSION ANSWERS

My score today ___ / 3

Q1 A combination of biological changes in taste and smell, plus repeated positive experience with coffee ✓ Correct (B)

The article states that 'biology, however, is only part of the story,' describing slower taste bud renewal and changes in smell, and then explains how 'repeated exposure trains the brain to associate a taste with reward.' It never claims a total loss of bitterness perception or that recipes change, and the shift is described as gradual and largely unconscious rather than deliberate training.

Q2 Because much of what people call 'taste' is actually detected through retronasal smell, and this sense also changes with age ✓ Correct (B)

The text explicitly says, 'Much of what we call taste is actually detected through the nose... This process, known as retronasal smell, is also affected by age.' It does not claim total smell loss or that coffee is flavorless without smell; those would be exaggerations of the article's more measured claim.

Q3 **Answer:** The pattern is that many naturally bitter foods, such as coffee, dark chocolate, beer, and vegetables like broccoli, are often disliked by children but gradually accepted or even enjoyed by adults. This happens because, with age, taste buds and the sense of smell become less sensitive to bitterness, while repeated exposure teaches the brain to connect bitterness with a reward, such as the effect of caffeine or alcohol, or the satisfaction of eating something healthy. Since this combination of biological change and learned reward is not limited to coffee, the same explanation can reasonably apply to other bitter foods and drinks as well.

Explanation: A strong answer should (1) correctly identify the pattern as bitter foods being rejected by children but accepted by adults over time, (2) reference both explanations the article gives, the biological change in taste and smell sensitivity, and the psychological effect of repeated exposure and reward, and (3) logically extend this reasoning to explain why it could apply to other bitter foods, not only coffee. Answers that simply list the examples without explaining the underlying mechanism should receive partial credit only.

VOCABULARY — TRANSLATION & NOTES

preference

Common collocation: 'have a preference for something.' Often used with 'personal,' 'strong,' or 'growing' before it.

mechanism

Very common in science and psychology writing; frequent collocations include 'safety mechanism,' 'coping mechanism,' and 'defense mechanism.'

bitter

Be careful: 'bitter' can also describe angry or resentful feelings, as in 'a bitter argument.' Here it refers only to taste.

seek

More formal than 'look for.' Common in writing: 'seek advice,' 'seek help,' 'seek out (something).'

genetics

Uncountable noun, always used with a singular verb. The related adjective is 'genetic,' as in 'a genetic trait.'

sensitive

Usually followed by 'to': 'sensitive to something.' Can describe physical reactions (skin, taste) or emotional ones (sensitive to criticism).

YOUR TURN — SENTENCE BUILDING

Mastery comes from practice. Write original sentences using today's target vocabulary.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

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