

# Champions of Psychology: Elizabeth Loftus

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*In an ongoing series in which the APS Student Caucus talks with highly recognized professors, Elizabeth Loftus recently shared her advice for facing challenges in graduate school and achieving professional success. Loftus is a Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Irvine. Her research examines how memory can be influenced by things we are told. Specifically, she investigates how facts, ideas, suggestions, and other forms of post-event information can modify our memories. Loftus has been called to testify about eyewitness testimony in many trials. She is an APS Past-President and has received both APS lifetime achievement awards: William James Fellow Award for contributions to basic science and the James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award for outstanding achievements in applied research.*

**APSSC:** *Your research concerns the malleability of memory. It seems that the influence of outside information can change — either positively or negatively — how we believe events transpired or alter our attitudes about healthy and dangerous things. What can we do in our lives to minimize the negative impact?*

**LOFTUS:** Research has shown that warning people before they are exposed to misleading information can help them fend it off. But these warnings have to be at the forefront of our conscious minds to be effective.

**APSSC:** *Your expertise has enabled you to have a direct impact on the legal system and public affairs. Many students have similar aspirations — to not only impact legal and public affairs, but also politics or educational programs. What advice would you offer these students?*

**LOFTUS:** A key event that helped me have access to the legal field was the publication of an article about how psychological science related to a real world problem. In my case, the article focused on how eyewitness research could help us understand various aspects of a legal case. That piece appeared in Psychology Today magazine, which then had a circulation of over a million, so lots of people in the legal field read it. That opened up doors for me to interact with members of the legal profession.

**APSSC:** *Being involved in public affairs calls for tough decisions. When participating in court cases, it must be hard to know if the side that hired you is in the right. This problem can also arise in research when data suggests a phenomenon that you do not uphold. How have you reconciled the need to be objective with the need to do what's right?*

**LOFTUS:** Sometimes I have found results that I wish were different. For example, one study on the eyewitness capability of women and men showed that women paid attention to different things — and were thus more accurate and less suggestible about those things. But the things happened to be women's clothes, while the men were more interested in vehicles. I hated that result — such a stereotype — but felt that I had to publish it anyhow.

**APSSC:** *What led you to choose psychology as a career?*

**LOFTUS:** I was a math major as an undergraduate at UCLA, and took introductory psychology as an elective. I got hooked on the fascinating subject matter. [Editors note: See Elizabeth Loftus' essay on why she studied psychology at [www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/loftus.cfm](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/loftus.cfm).]

**APSSC:** *What were the most and least rewarding aspects of graduate school for you?*

**LOFTUS:** The most rewarding was when I discovered that I could do an experiment —start to finish — all by myself (with the guidance of a collaborator, of course). Another very rewarding aspect of graduate school was the friendships that began, many of which have lasted to this day.

The least rewarding aspect was the exams. Geoff Loftus and I had a one-day honeymoon so I could get back to study for comps [comprehensive examination].

**APSSC:** *What common mistakes do you see graduate students make?*

**LOFTUS:** Time management seems to be a problem for many graduate students. This is understandable. Some activities have time deadlines. For example, the test is Wednesday, or the papers you are grading must be done by Friday. Writing research articles gets pushed to the bottom of the pile. And yet, at least for academic job hunting, those publications will matter a lot.

I find that I need “blocks” of time to get work done on an article. Usually that means a chunk of Saturday or Sunday. I “reward” myself in the evening with a good meal or glass of white wine or both. Students might try to develop a habit of taking a chunk of time on a weekend day to work on those publications. Find some “reward” that is meaningful or fun for you.

**APSSC:** *What suggestions do you have for choosing a mentor?*

**LOFTUS:** Finding someone who publishes high quality work — with student co-authors — seems like a good beginning. But life is more interesting if that work happens to be something you're also interested in.

**APSSC:** *If you could design the ideal program for training graduate students, what would it be like?*

**LOFTUS:** University of California-Irvine's psychology program encourages students to work with more than one faculty member. So, our students get opportunities for diversity of work, and up-close looks at different labs. Some other universities do not encourage this, but I think it is good for students. So, my ideal program would include this feature.

**APSSC:** *What advice would you give to undergraduate students who are applying to graduate school or preparing to do so?*

**LOFTUS:** Spend time working in a research lab. The letters of recommendation that can describe research experience are more meaningful. Also, worry about the GRE scores. They contribute a great deal to the admission decision. Take a prep course if need be.

**APSSC:** *What do you see as the future of psychology?*

**LOFTUS:** I see more interdisciplinary work in the future. The lines between traditional areas will continue to blur. Already we have Social Cognition, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Social Neuroscience. We haven't begun to see the unexpected ways in which new marriages of once-discrete areas will be made. Time will tell which of those marriages are made in heaven.