
**Pre-Reading Journal Entry**

Like many people, you may feel harried and under pressure at least some of the time. Use your journal to reflect on the sources of stress in your everyday life. List several examples. For each, consider the factors leading to this frenzied feeling.

**Life As Type A**

Everyone knows about Type A. This magnificently bland coinage, put forward by a pair of California cardiologists in 1959, struck a collective nerve and entered the language. It is a token of our confusion: are we victims or perpetrators of the crime of haste? Are we living at high speed with athleticism and vigor, or are we stricken by hurry sickness?

The cardiologists, Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, listed a set of personality traits which, they claimed, tend to go hand in hand with one another and also with heart disease. They described these traits rather unappealingly, as characteristics about and around the theme of impatience. Excessive competitiveness. Aggressiveness. "A harrying sense of time urgency." The Type A idea emerged in technical papers and then formed the basis of a popular book and made its way into dictionaries. The canonical Type A, as these doctors portrayed him, was "Paul":

A very disproportionate amount of his emotional energy is consumed in struggling against the normal constraints of time. "How
can I move faster, and do more and more things in less and less time?” is the question that never ceases to torment him.

Paul hurries his thinking, his speech and his movements. He also strives to hurry the thinking, speech, and movements of those about him; they must communicate rapidly and relevantly if they wish to avoid creating impatience in him. Planes must arrive and depart precisely on time for Paul, cars ahead of him on the highway must maintain a speed he approves of, and there must never be a queue of persons standing between him and a bank clerk, a restaurant table, or the interior of a theater. In fact, he is infuriated whenever people talk slowly or circuitously, when planes are late, cars dawdle on the highway, and queues form.

Let’s think... Do we know anyone like “Paul”?

This was the first clear declaration of hurry sickness—another coinage of Friedman’s. It inspired new businesses: mind-body workshops; videotapes demonstrating deep breathing; anxiety-management retreats; seminars on and even institutes of stress medicine. “I drove all the way in the right-hand lane,” a Pacific Gas and Electric Company executive said proudly one morning in 1987 to a group of self-confessed hurriers, led by Friedman himself, by then seventy-six years old. In the battle against Type A jitters, patients tried anything and everything—the slow lane, yoga, meditation, visualization: “Direct your attention to your feet on the floor... Be aware of the air going in your nostrils cool and going out warm... Visualize a place you like to be... Experience it and see the objects there, the forms and shadows. Take another deep breath and experience the sounds, the surf, the wind, leaves, a babbling brook.” Some hospital television systems now feature a “relaxation channel,” with hour after hour of surf, wind, leaves, and babbling brooks.

We believe in Type A—a triumph for a notion with no particular scientific validity. The Friedman-Rosenman claim has turned out to be both obvious and false. Clearly some heart ailments do result from, or at least go along with, stress (itself an ill-defined term), both chronic and acute. Behavior surely affects physiology, at least once in a while. Sudden dashes for the train, laptop computer in one hand and takeout coffee in the other, can accelerate heartbeats and raise blood pressure. That haste makes coronaries was already a kind of folk wisdom—that is, standard medical knowledge untainted by research. “Hurry has a clearly debilitating effect upon the tissues and may in time injure the heart,” admonished Dr. Cecil Webb-Johnson in Nerve Troubles, an English monograph of the early 1900s. “The great men of the centuries past were never in a hurry,” he added sanctimoniously, “and that is why the world will never forget them in a hurry.” It might be natural—even appealing—to expect certain less-great people to receive their cardiovascular
comeuppance. But in reality, three decades of attention from cardiologists and psychologists have failed to produce any carefully specified and measurable set of character traits that predict heart disease—or to demonstrate that people who change their Type A behavior will actually lower their risk of heart disease.

Indeed, the study that started it all—Friedman and Rosenman's "Association of Specific Overt Behavior Pattern with Blood and Cardiovascular Findings"—appears to have been a wildly flawed piece of research. It used a small sample—eighty-three people (all men) in what was then called "Group A." The selection process was neither random nor blind. White-collar male employees of large businesses were rounded up by acquaintances of Friedman and Rosenman on a subjective basis—they fit the type. The doctors further sorted the subjects by interviewing them personally and observing their appearance and behavior. Did a man gesture rapidly, clench his teeth, or exhibit a "general air of impatience"? If so, he was chosen. It seems never to have occurred to these experienced cardiologists that they might have been consciously or unconsciously selecting people whose physique indicated excess weight or other markers for incipient heart disease. The doctors' own data show that the final Group A drank more, smoked more, and weighed more than Group B. But the authors dismissed these factors, asserting, astonishingly, that there was no association between heart disease and cigarette smoking.

In the years since, researchers have never settled on a reliable method for identifying Type A people, though not for want of trying. Humans are not reliable witnesses to their own impatience. Researchers have employed questionnaires like the Jenkins Activity Survey, and they have used catalogues of grimaces and frowns—Ekman and Friesen's Facial Action Coding System, for example, or the Cook-Medley Hostility Inventory. In the end, nothing conclusive emerges. Some studies have found Type A people to have lower blood pressure. The sedentary and obese have cardiac difficulties of their own.

The notion of Type A has expanded, shifted, and flexed to suit the varying needs of different researchers. V.A. Price adds hypervigilance to the list of traits. Some doctors lose patience with the inconclusive results and shift their focus to anger and hostility—mere subsets of the original Type A grab-bag. Cynthia Perry finds that Type A people have fewer daydreams. How does she know? She asks them to monitor lines flashing across a computer screen for forty painfully boring minutes and finds that, when interrupted by a beep (1000 hertz at 53 decibels), they are less likely to press a black button to confess that irrelevant thoughts had strayed into their minds. Studies have labeled as Type A not only children (those with a tendency to interrupt and to play competitively at games) but even babies (those who cry more). Meanwhile, researchers interested in pets link the Type A personality to petlessness; a National Institutes of Health panel reports: "The description of a
Gleick  Life As Type A  453

coronary-prone behavior pattern,’ or Type A behavior, and its link to the probability of developing overt disease provided hope that, with careful training, individuals could exercise additional control over somatic illness by altering their lifestyle. . . . Relaxation, meditation, and stress management have become recognized therapies. . . . It therefore seems reasonable that pets, who provide faithful companionship to many people, also might promote greater psychosocial stability for their owners, and thus a measure of protection from heart disease.” This is sweet, but it is not science.

Typically a Type A study will begin with researchers who assume that there are some correlations to be found, look for a wide variety of associations, fail to find some and succeed in finding others. For example, a few dozen preschool children are sorted according to their game-playing styles and tested for blood pressure. No correlation is found. Later, however, when performing a certain “memory game,” the supposed Type A children rank somewhat higher in, specifically, systolic pressure. Interesting? The authors of various published papers evidently think so, but they are wrong, because if their technique is to keep looking until they find some correlation, somewhere, they are bound to succeed. Such results are meaningless.

The categorizations are too variable and the prophecies too self-fulfilling. It is never quite clear which traits define Type A and which are fellow travelers. The doctors, and, assert, and methodologists are employed to confirm that. Categorizations are used to confirm the categorizations. At the end, people to difficulties the various the list and shift to grab Nelsons. How computer upted by lack but: Studies interrupt y bore. y to petition of a
If the Type A phenomenon made for poor medical research, it stands nonetheless as a triumph of social criticism. Some of us yield more willingly to impatience than others, but on the whole Type A is who we are—not just the coronary-prone among us, but all of us, as a society and as an age. No wonder the concept has proven too rich a cultural totem to be dismissed.

Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection’s thesis? Locate the sentence(s) in which Gleick states his main idea. If he doesn’t state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.

2. What is Gleick’s opinion of the study Friedman and Rosenman conducted? List at least two elements of the study that Gleick uses to support his assessment.

3. In paragraph 7, Gleick observes that the concept of Type A has changed since Friedman and Rosenman’s study first chronicled it. How has it changed? What accounts for this change?

4. According to Gleick, how do Friedman and Rosenman define the Type B personality? Why does Gleick find fault with their definition of this personality type?

5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: coinage (paragraph 1), harrying (2), canonical (2), circuitously (2), sanctimoniously (4), overt (5), incipient (5), sedentary (6), hypervigilance (7), correlations (8), strident (9), staccato (9), foil (10), and totem (12).

Questions About the Writer’s Craft

1. The pattern and other patterns. In their work, Friedman and Rosenman use a description of Paul to define “canonical Type A” behavior (paragraph 2). Why do you suppose that Gleick, who criticizes Friedman and Rosenman’s research, quotes their portrait of Paul at such length?

2. The pattern. Gleick uses a sequence of three fragments when discussing (in paragraph 2) how Type A has been defined. Identify these fragments. What effect do you think Gleick wanted the fragments to have?

3. Locate places where Gleick uses the first-person pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our.” What do you think Gleick’s purpose is in using these pronouns?

4. In paragraph 1, Gleick sarcastically refers to the phrase Type A as “magnificently bland.” Find other places in the essay where he uses sarcasm. Why might he have chosen to employ such language?

Writing Assignments Using Definition as a Pattern of Development

1. Write an essay offering a fuller definition of the Type B personality than Gleick’s essay provides. Rather than defining Type B through negation, as Friedman and Rosenman do, marshal convincing evidence that illustrates the validity of the Type B phenomenon. Brainstorming with friends, family, and classmates will help you generate strong examples of this personality type. At some point in the essay, you might offer a brief personality sketch of the “canonical” Type B as well as discuss the factors that shape the Type B personality as you define it.
2. Gleick notes that, like Type A, stress is an ill-defined term. Brainstorm with others to identify as many examples of different kinds of stress as you can. Review the brainstormed material, and select a specific type of stress to focus on. Then write an essay providing a clear definition of that particular stress. Possibilities include "dating stress," "workplace stress," "online stress," "fitness stress." Near the end of the essay, you might provide concise hints for managing the stress you define. Your essay may have a humorous or a serious tone—whichever seems appropriate to your subject. Reading Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner’s "What Is the Quarterlife Crisis?" (page 463), an essay that examines a particular kind of stress, might help you generate ideas.

Writing Assignments Combining Patterns of Development

3. Write an essay contrasting situations in which being Type A would be beneficial with situations in which it would be counterproductive. Under what circumstances would Type A characteristics be desirable? Under what circumstances would they be undesirable? Drawing upon your own experiences and observations, reach some conclusions about the advantages and/or limitations of the Type A personality. Along the way, you should explore the effects of Type A behavior in the circumstances you’re addressing.

4. Gleick observes that "hurry sickness" is a trait induced by society at large. Identify a trait of yours that you think is also a reflection or effect of the society in which you live. You might discuss your tendency to be aggressive or nonassertive, materialistic or idealistic, studious or fun-loving. Write an essay illustrating this character trait at work in your everyday behavior. Explain whether you think this trait works to your advantage or disadvantage. For additional insight into how personal traits can affect one’s daily life, read Barbara Ehrenreich’s “What I’ve Learned from Men” (page 215).

Writing Assignment Using a Journal Entry as a Starting Point

5. Gleick claims that the Type A phenomenon is pervasive in our society. Write an essay of your own illustrating the extent to which your life reflects this phenomenon. Draw upon the most dramatic examples in your pre-reading journal entry. At the end of the essay, describe steps that you or anyone with similar pressures could take to slow down the frenetic pace of everyday life. Gathering information in the library and/or on the Internet might be helpful when you develop the final section of your paper.