

## Pros and cons

Perhaps the most common "formal" approach to making a choice among alternatives is to list the pros and cons of each alternative. Certainly it would be wrong to calculate the net number of pros over cons for each alternative and then select the alternative with the largest net number, because the relative importance of the pros and cons differ. How then can one proceed?

Benjamin Franklin considered this problem over two hundred fifty years ago. In a letter addressed to Priestly, Franklin explained how he analyzed his decisions. Considering alternatives, for example, Franklin would look for the pros of one alternative that were about equal in importance to those of the other alternative, and for each such pair, eliminate them from the lists. He did the same thing for the cons. He then looked for a pro of one alternative that seemed to be equal to two pros of the other alternative – and, if found, remove all three from the lists. He proceeded until he could go no further, at which time he would be left with a hopefully small list of pros and cons from which he could make the decision.

Franklin's insights were far beyond his time. He sensed that the human brain is limited in the number of factors that can be kept in mind at any one time. Psychologists discovered this in the mid-twentieth century. Franklin knew enough not to rush an important decision, but to devote several days to the study of the pros and cons, attempting to make trade-offs based on relative importance. And he tried to develop a "moral or prudential" algebra, recognizing that some way of measuring qualitative as well as quantitative factors was necessary in the decision process. Not only was Franklin far ahead of his time, but his decision process is superior to that used by the vast majority of today's decision makers who fool themselves into thinking that they can make a good decision after a few hours of unstructured discussion and some "hard" thought.

Although Franklin was able to reduce the number of factors (pros and cons) under consideration by a process of cancellation, he could not complete a decision analysis because of his inability to "measure" the remaining factors. We have had significant advancements in the meaning and use of numbers and measurement since Franklin's time. However, our use of numbers and measurement can sometimes be misleading or even wrong as discussed in [Levels of Measurement](#).

Today, pros and cons are useful for checking objectives for completeness. Brainstorming the pros and cons of alternatives and mapping them to objectives can help identify objectives that may have been overlooked.

Next: [Structuring](#)

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