


# Human history: What's most distinctive about humans as a species, viewed collectively?

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## What's most distinctive about humans as a species, viewed collectively in human history? Penelope J. Corfield from the Royal Holloway, London University explores this critical question

One fascinating question, when studying our fellow humans, is how we view ourselves collectively. Long ago, in 1758, the Swedish botanist- cum-biologist Carl Linnaeus (1707-78) proposed the flattering Latin tag 'Homo sapiens' [the wise or thinking human]. Incidentally, Linnaeus used 'Homo' as the species name for all humans. So he was not making a gender-based claim about men as opposed to women. Thinking is a generic [human characteristic](#).

### Characteristics of humans as a species when viewed collectively

Linnaeus was the first to devise a systematic taxonomy of all living creatures, and his classification, with minor adjustments, remains accepted to this day. Humans are defined as primates – sociable and relatively large-brained mammals – and further classified, among the primates, as members of the Great Apes or 'Hominidae' [Hominids].

Great Apes are prehensile creatures, with powerful grips. They also process the world around them chiefly by reliance upon sight rather than upon their sense of smell. And, most notably, Great Apes have a higher brain-to-body ratio than do all other primates. Hence, the species defined as *Homo sapiens* constitutes the most 'thinking' species within the 'brightest' branch of the primates, which are the 'brightest' branch of the vertebrate mammals.

Little wonder that humans accept that flattering classification. All species have their own specialist know-how. But over time, humans have emerged, by dint of generating, sharing and applying a vast stock of collective knowledge, as the world's predominant species (to date). But what about other characteristics? What about *Homo faber*? The tool-making human?

Many species globally use some form of implements to aid them in their daily tasks. (The precise definition of 'tool' remains debated). For example, chimpanzees use sticks as flails, deploy specific leaves as sponges to soak up water, and throw rocks as weapons. Nonetheless, no other species has generated anything like the range of mechanical and non-mechanical tools that humans have assembled over millennia. So yes, *Homo faber*!

And what about *Homo loquens*? The speaking human? Again, other species on land and at sea communicate by a myriad of means –including visual signals and many distinctive sounds. But how many have complex languages, with developed syntactical structures, an ever-expanding vocabulary and a written record of the same? None other than humans. Between us, we have developed over 6,500 different languages. Estimates vary because of classification problems – and because some minority languages are dying out. Linguistic systems are not static. So, dynamically, yes: *Homo loquens* too!

Or what about something jollier? How about *Homo ridens* – the only species that laughs? Again, there are qualifications. Not all humans have a sense of humour, to say the least. And some animals do make laughter-like sounds. For example, chimpanzees and gorillas (close biological relatives of humans) will laugh if tickled or play- chased. Moreover, some orangutans in captivity have been seen to laugh at the denouement of human conjuring tricks.

## **The human sense of humour within the natural world**

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Well, it's good that the natural world is not simply a combative scene of 'nature red in tooth and claw'. Again, however, the capacity to laugh, when tickled, is not the same as the human sense of humour. We laugh at visual humour, performative humour, and verbal humour alike. No other animals do anything like that. By the way, try this joke: What kind of laughter gets you a prison sentence? Answer: Manslaughter. The joke is far from rib-tickling, but it's still intended to raise a smile. So, smirking somewhat, yes: *Homo ridens*!

Moreover, these alternatives by no means exhaust the list. Some 70+ Latin tags have been invented – some more seriously than others.\* What about *Homo ludens* – the games-player? Or *Homo religiosus* – the prayerful? Or *Homo socius* – the sociable? Or *Homo economicus*, the rational economic calculator? These traits can be found in some or many humans, although not all.

One proposed name is engagingly silly, following the advent of remote-control zappers for today's TV and other devices. Someone in 2006 suggested that *Homo sapiens* be renamed as *Homo zappiens*. Brilliant!

## **Our propensity for fighting**

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After such jollity, however, it's notable that humans have one more distinctive quality that has not yet been mentioned. And that is our propensity for fighting – not just with wild animals – but also with one another.

Many species fight, especially to secure their food supplies. (Other species, conversely, specialise in running away and hiding). Yet some 60% of all mammalian species do not act violently toward members of their own kind. Those that do include lions, wolves, spotted hyenas and... humans. Furthermore, humans do not just fight spontaneously when provoked. We also fight in organised armies, which are paid, drilled and kept in readiness for cool and deliberate deployment against a perceived enemy.

This capacity for bellicosity has prompted the label: Homo ferox – the human fighter. Again, there are qualifications. Some humans – and some entire cultures – are more bellicose than others. Humans also have a marked capacity for group cooperation. Yet that same capacity can be – and manifestly is to this day – used in warfare as well for peaceful projects. So yes: Homo ferox is part of the equation!

## Are humans a tricky species?

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There's no doubt that humans are a tricky species. They have many contradictory qualities. They lie and deceive, but also speak the truth. They create but also destroy. They fight one another but also cooperate. As a result, we always need to keep our eyes open, our senses alert, and our minds clear when dealing with our fellow humans.

One-faced? Two-faced? No, multiple! Humans are those thinking beings who are at once creative, versatile and tricky. So here we are! Humans constantly strive to cope with our own complexities. It's a big task. But we have to stick with it positively.

### Footnotes

- Penelope J. Corfield has written more on these themes in Time-Space: We Are All in it Together (Austin Macaulay: London, 2025).
- \* For the suggested 70+ classificatory terms for humans, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names\\_for\\_the\\_human\\_species](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_for_the_human_species)

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