



# We Were Wrong About the Future

Reading Worksheet — Level F | [tahricteaches.com](http://tahricteaches.com)

At the 1964 World's Fair, the telephone company AT&T showcased the Picturephone — a device that would let people see each other during calls. Experts confidently predicted it would be standard in every home by 1980. They were partly right about the **technology**, but completely wrong about the form. The device they imagined was a large desktop appliance. The reality turned out to be a palm-sized supercomputer that also plays music, hails taxis, and translates languages in real time.

This is not an isolated mistake. Futurists in the mid-20th century were fascinated by physical technologies: atomic-powered cars, undersea cities, jetpacks, and highways crowded with flying vehicles. Meanwhile, the **disruption** that would actually transform civilization — the internet — went almost entirely **unpredicted**. In 1977, Ken Olsen, founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, stated: "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." Sixteen years later, the World Wide Web went public.

Why are humans so poor at this? Psychologists point to a pattern called **linear thinking bias** — our brains naturally project current trends forward in a straight line. We imagine the future as a slightly better version of today. But genuine technological change is **exponential**: it grows faster and faster, and combines breakthroughs from completely different fields in unexpected ways. Nobody predicted the smartphone because nobody imagined merging a phone, camera, GPS, music player, and internet browser into a single pocket device.

Now we stand at the edge of another such moment with artificial intelligence. As with the internet in 1993, most people cannot yet visualize what AI will look like at scale. Current predictions range from "AI will eliminate 40% of jobs within a decade" to "AI will compress a century of scientific progress into five years." History strongly suggests that both camps are probably wrong in their specifics — and both are underestimating the strangeness of what is coming.

History's lesson is **adaptability**. The most transformative technologies do not arrive looking like what we expected. They arrive looking odd, then become obvious, then seem inevitable. The best response is not to predict the future precisely — that has always failed. Instead, the goal is to develop the capacity to recognize a shift early and change direction quickly. In a world where a new technology can make an entire industry obsolete in a decade, the most valuable skill may not be knowing where things are going, but being comfortable with not knowing.

## A. Vocabulary

---

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1. disruption _____   | a. the ability to adjust successfully to new conditions or changes                   |
| 2. exponential _____  | b. the overturning of an established system or industry by a new technology or idea  |
| 3. bias _____         | c. growing at a rate that keeps getting faster — each step much larger than the last |
| 4. obsolete _____     | d. a tendency to think in a particular, often incorrect way                          |
| 5. adaptability _____ | e. no longer used or needed because something newer and better has replaced it       |

## B. True or False

---

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ___ 1. AT&T's Picturephone was introduced at the 1964 World's Fair.           | ___ 2. Experts correctly predicted that the Picturephone would look like a smartphone.        |
| ___ 3. In 1977, Ken Olsen predicted that everyone would want a home computer. | ___ 4. Linear thinking bias means we imagine the future as dramatically different from today. |

- \_\_\_ 5. The internet was widely predicted before it was invented.
- \_\_\_ 6. Smartphones combined technologies from several different fields into one device.
- \_\_\_ 7. Current AI predictions are likely to be exactly correct in their specifics.
- \_\_\_ 8. The article suggests adaptability is more valuable than precise prediction.
- \_\_\_ 9. Transformative technologies usually arrive looking exactly as predicted.
- \_\_\_ 10. Exponential growth means technology improves at a steady, constant rate.

### C. Fill in the Blanks

---

**Word Bank:** disruption, exponential, bias, obsolete, adaptability

1. A technology that overturns an established industry causes a \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Growth that keeps accelerating — each step much larger than the last — is called \_\_\_\_\_ growth.
3. Linear thinking \_\_\_\_\_ means our brains assume the future will look like a slightly better version of today.
4. When something is no longer used because a newer version replaced it, it is \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The ability to successfully adjust to new conditions is called \_\_\_\_\_.



### D. Comprehension Questions

---

1. What did experts at the 1964 World's Fair get right and wrong about the Picturephone?
2. What does "linear thinking bias" mean, and how does it cause us to make poor predictions?
3. According to the article, what is a better strategy than trying to predict the future precisely?

### E. Discussion Questions

---

1. The article says AI predictions today are probably wrong, just like past predictions. Do you agree? What makes AI different from — or similar to — the internet?
2. Think of a technology that exists today that people from 50 years ago could not have imagined. How would you explain it to them? What does this tell you about predicting the next 50 years?



# Answer Key

## We Were Wrong About the Future

*Teacher Reference Only | tahricteaches.com*

**A. Vocabulary:** 1-b, 2-c, 3-d, 4-e, 5-a

**B. True/False:** 1-T, 2-F, 3-F, 4-F, 5-F, 6-T, 7-F, 8-T, 9-F, 10-F

**C. Fill Blanks:** 1-disruption, 2-exponential, 3-bias, 4-obsolete, 5-adaptability

**D. Comprehension:**

1. They were right that the technology to see someone's face during a call would exist, but wrong about the form — they imagined a large desktop appliance, not a smartphone.
2. Linear thinking bias is the tendency to project current trends forward in a straight line, imagining the future as just a slightly improved version of today. It fails because real technological change is exponential and combines fields in unexpected ways.
3. The article suggests building adaptability — developing the capacity to recognize a technological shift early and change direction quickly — rather than trying to make precise predictions.