Elephants have a sixth sense from their whiskers

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Zoologists in Germany have uncovered a previously unknown sensory faculty in elephants. It explains why the giant beasts' trunks are so dexterous. The scientists found that the whiskers at the tip of the trunk are sensitive enough to detect the smallest, most delicate objects. The scientists are from the Haptic Intelligence Department at the Max Planck Institute for Intelligent Systems. They say the incredible sensitivity of the whiskers compensates for the elephant's poor eyesight. The whiskers are essential for navigating, locating food, and social communication. The researchers say the whiskers are "smart" and give the elephant an added sense of intelligence.

Scientists believe the insights from their research will assist in advancing robotics and neuroscience. Study co-author Dr Andrew Schulz said: "Each whisker on elephants' trunks acts as a tactile sensory organ." This allows an elephant to pick up something as delicate as a potato chip without breaking it. The research could help increase dexterity in robots. Dr Lena Kaufmann is excited about how the research could advance neuroscience. She said her findings "contribute to our understanding of the tactile perception of these fascinating animals". She says the study will increase our understanding of "neuronal computation" — how the brain's neurons process information to think, feel, and act.

Sources: phys.org / *popsci.com* / *smithsonianmag.com*

Writing

We all need a sixth sense. Discuss.

Chat

Talk about these words from the article.

zoologists / elephants / giant / trunks / whiskers / sensitive / scientists / intelligence / insights / robotics / neuroscience / tactile / help / potato chip / perception / neurons

True / False

1) The trunk of an elephant is dexterous. T / F
2) It is difficult for elephants to detect very small things. T / F
3) Elephants use their whiskers for social communication. T / F
4) The article says elephants get more intelligence from more whiskers. T / F
5) This research could help in moving robotics forward. T / F
6) Elephants always break potato chips when they pick them up. T / F
7) A doctor said elephants were fascinated by neuroscience. T / F
8) Neuronal computation is how the brain processes information to feel. T / F

Synonym Match

(The words in **bold** are from the news article.)

1.	**uncovered**	a.	making progress
2.	**faculty**	b.	conclusion
3.	**dexterous**	c.	ability
4.	**detect**	d.	captivating
5.	**compensates**	e.	notice
6.	**advancing**	f.	found
7.	**delicate**	g.	sort out
8.	**findings**	h.	fragile
9.	**fascinating**	i.	deft
10.	**process**	j.	balances

Discussion – Student A

a) What do you think about what you read?
b) What do you think of elephants?
c) How much might studying elephants help in advancing robotics?
d) What would having increased dexterity allow you to do?
e) How much might studying elephants help neuroscience?
f) What do you think are the most fascinating animals?
g) What other animal behaviour could we study to help us?
h) What questions would you like to ask the researchers?

Phrase Match

1. uncovered a previously unknown
2. It explains why the giant beasts' trunks
3. the whiskers at the tip
4. sensitive enough to detect the smallest,
5. the incredible sensitivity of the
6. insights from their research will assist
7. pick up something as delicate as
8. her findings contribute
9. these fascinating
10. the brain's neurons

a. most delicate objects
b. animals
c. sensory faculty
d. process information
e. to our understanding
f. are so dexterous
g. whiskers
h. in advancing robotics
i. of the trunk
j. a potato chip

Discussion – Student B

a) What do you know about elephants?
b) What do you know about elephants' trunks?
c) How dexterous are you?
d) How intelligent are elephants?
e) What do you think when you see an elephant?
f) What extra sense would you like to have?
g) Why do cats and dogs have whiskers?
h) What three adjectives best describe an elephant?

Spelling

1. sensory lcftayu in elephants
2. the giant beasts' trunks are so todrxeeus
3. ietvseins enough
4. detect the smallest, most ltdeieac objects
5. the elephant's poor tgysihee
6. ieealstsn for navigating
7. a etactil sensory organ
8. help increase yxeitrdet in robots
9. the research could advance enccnoereuis
10. rtopienecp of these fascinating animals
11. our understanding of neuronal ttanmpoouic
12. the brain's nenruso

Answers – Synonym Match

1. f	2. c	3. i	4. e	5. j
6. a	7. h	8. b	9. d	10. g

Comprehension Questions

Listen to / read the news article. Answer these questions. (Answers are on p. 27 of the 27-page PDF.)

1.	What field of science are the scientists who uncovered something?
2.	What part of an elephant's trunk can detect the smallest of objects?
3.	What does the sensitivity of an elephant's whiskers compensate for?
4.	What do the elephant's whiskers help it to find?
5.	What do the whiskers give an elephant an added sense of?
6.	What might insights from the research help to advance?
7.	What is an elephant able to pick up without breaking?
8.	How does Dr Lena Kaufmann feel about the research?
9.	What does Dr Lena Kaufmann think of elephants?
10.	What does the brain process via neuronal computation?

Speaking – Super Senses

Rank these with your partner. Put the best senses at the top. Change partners often and share your rankings.

- Seeing in the dark
- Long-distance sight
- Super smell
- Amazing hearing
- 360° awareness
- Sonar communication
- Magnetic navigation
- Ultraviolet vision

Answers – True False

1	T	2	F	3	T	4	F	5	T	6	F	7	F	8	T

Answers to Phrase Match and Spelling are in the text.

