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What is a stereoscope?

In 1838 Charles Wheatstone gave the instrument a name, and described two mirrors at a right angle.

His paper was “Received and Read June 21, 1838.” In it he wrote: “The frequent reference I shall have occasion to make to this instrument, will render it convenient to give it a specific name, I therefore propose that it be called a Stereoscope, to indicate its property of representing solid figures.”

The official story	Official wording
The mirrors	“A A' are two plane mirrors, about four inches square, inserted in frames, and so adjusted that their backs form an angle of 90° with each other.”
The biography	Encyclopaedia Britannica gives Wheatstone’s dates as 6 February 1802, Gloucester, to 19 October 1875, Paris, names the concertina and the stereoscope, says the stereoscope is still used in viewing X-rays and aerial photographs, and says he was knighted in 1868. That biography does not give 1832 or 1838.
A later viewer	Official Library of Congress wording: in 1859 the physician and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes designed a hand-held viewer for stereoscopes.
What this sheet does not add	A day for the making of the first instrument, or a 1 January 1838 date taken from a catalogue placeholder. A museum record’s “c. 1850” and “1845-1855” are official dates for one later object, kept apart, and are not used as the year of the name.

A short quiz

1. Why, in Wheatstone’s wording, did he propose the name Stereoscope?
2. At what angle, in his wording, are the backs of the two mirrors set?
3. Does the official Britannica biography give the year 1838?

Answers. To indicate its property of representing solid figures. 90°. No — the 21 June 1838 date comes from the paper itself.

Wording from Wheatstone, 1838, and Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Sir Charles Wheatstone,” re-checked 18 November 2026. stereograms.illusions.im is independent of both. Typographic sheet: no photographs inside.