

A SAHILTAYAL.COM PRODUCTION

Magic *Mode*

Field Guide

Noticing how you get fooled — eight principles, eight days, one honest question each.

RESEARCH MEETS ART

SAHILTAYAL.COM/MAGICMODE

BEFORE YOU START

How to use this guide

This is the take-home companion to *Magic Mode*, a short online course in being fooled at sahiltayal.com/magicmode. The page lets you experience eight tricks. This guide is for the week after: noticing the same principles in ordinary life.

Each principle gets one page with five parts: **the trick** (what it looks like on stage), **what research found**, **where you'll meet it**, **a field exercise** for one day, and **a question to carry**. At the back is an eight-day log, a short code for telling magic from manipulation, and a reading list.

A NOTE ON HONESTY

Every claim is labelled. FACT marks something research has shown, or something that is simply true (like arithmetic). INTERPRETATION marks my reading of what it means. SPECULATION marks a guess. Research summaries here are short and simplified; the originals are listed at the back, and they contain caveats a guide this size can't carry.

A NOTE ON BEING FOOLED

You will catch yourself being fooled this week. That is the point, and it is not a failure. These effects work on attentive, educated people, including the scientists who study them. The goal is not to become unfoolable. It is to notice the frame you are in, and to ask whether you agreed to it.

Rule of the week: don't accuse anyone. Just notice, write it down, and ask the question.

PRINCIPLE ONE

Change blindness

I

THE TRICK

Six cards appear; you memorise one; five come back and yours is gone. In fact every card changed. You only stored your own card in detail and the rest as a gist, so the new row felt "the same".

WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

FACT Daniel Simons and Daniel Levin (1998) staged a real conversation in which a stranger asking for directions was swapped for a different person during a brief interruption. Roughly half of the people giving directions did not notice the swap.

WHERE YOU'LL MEET IT

INTERPRETATION A price that shifts between basket and checkout. Terms of service that change between versions. A shared document or message edited after you read it. A familiar route where something has quietly been added.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 1

Choose one place you see every day: your desk, a street corner, a homepage. Before you look today, write down five specific details from memory. Then look and check. Note how much was gist.

Could I describe exactly how it looked before — or only its gist?

PRINCIPLE TWO

Forcing

II

THE TRICK

You choose any three-digit number. The arithmetic always lands on 1089. Your choice was real, but it sat at a step that could not change the ending.

WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

FACT The 1089 result is arithmetic: the first subtraction always gives a multiple of 99, and each of those plus its reverse equals 1089. FACT In a 2015 study, Jay Olson and colleagues had a magician riffle a deck so one card showed slightly longer; most participants chose that card, and most felt they had chosen freely.

WHERE YOU'LL MEET IT

INTERPRETATION A three-tier price where the middle tier was always the point. A pre-ticked box. "Book any slot this week" when every slot leads to the same sales call. A menu with a decoy dish placed to make another look reasonable.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 2

For every purchase or sign-up today, find the default — the option that happens if you do nothing. Write down whether you kept it, and whether you would have chosen it from a blank page.

Does my choice change the outcome, or only how the outcome feels?

PRINCIPLE THREE

Inattentional blindness

III

THE TRICK

You count a ball's bounces while the box changes colour and a moon drifts across the top. Both were in plain view the whole time.

WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

FACT In Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris's 1999 study, viewers counting basketball passes in a short video often missed a person in a gorilla suit walking through the scene — about half failed to notice it.

WHERE YOU'LL MEET IT

INTERPRETATION A countdown timer that pulls your eyes away from the total. A bold headline above a quiet correction. A presentation slide that holds attention while the important number is spoken quickly. Any task so absorbing that the context disappears.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 3

Pick one screen you use a lot today. Each time you finish a task on it, spend five seconds looking at everything except the part you were using. Write down one thing you had not noticed.

What is this asking me to watch — and what is sitting just beside it?

PRINCIPLE FOUR

The Barnum effect

IV

THE TRICK

A "personal reading" based on your birth month fits uncannily. Every visitor receives the same six sentences; only the heading changes.

WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

FACT In 1949 Bertram Forer gave students what he said were individual personality sketches. All received the same text, assembled from horoscope-style statements, and the class rated it more than 4 out of 5 for accuracy on average.

HOW THE SENTENCES WORK

INTERPRETATION They are flattering, true of most people, or double-headed ("sociable, but needs time alone"). The fit comes from you: you search memory for matching examples and feel recognised.

WHERE YOU'LL MEET IT

Horoscopes, viral personality quizzes, "made for people like you" copy, and some feedback that sounds personal but could be pasted into anyone's review.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 4

Collect three statements today that felt personally aimed at you — an ad, a quiz result, a compliment. For each, write the name of one very different person it would also fit.

Would this be just as true of almost anyone?

PRINCIPLE FIVE

Equivoque

V

THE TRICK

Four objects, two free choices, and you always end with the ring. If your two included the ring, they "stay"; if not, they "leave". The meaning of each choice was decided after you made it.

WHY IT WORKS

FACT Every path through the choices ends at the same object; you can check all of them by hand. INTERPRETATION You only ever see one path, so the instructions feel natural rather than convenient. Magicians call this the magician's choice.

WHERE YOU'LL MEET IT

INTERPRETATION "Shall we book Tuesday or Thursday?" before you've agreed to meet. A survey framed so every answer supports the conclusion. An argument where any response you give is taken as proof of the other person's point.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 5

Notice one either/or question today. Before answering, write down the option it didn't offer — usually "neither" or "not yet" — and ask yourself whether you'd prefer that.

Was the meaning of my choice fixed before I made it?

PRINCIPLE SIX

False memory

VI

THE TRICK

Twelve words about sleep — bed, rest, tired, dream… Afterwards, many people are sure "sleep" was on the list. It never was.

WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

FACT This is the Deese–Roediger–McDermott procedure. In Henry Roediger and Kathleen McDermott's 1995 experiments, people often recalled or recognised the missing "critical" word about as readily as words they had actually seen, and many reported vividly remembering it.

WHAT IT MEANS

INTERPRETATION Memory keeps meaning and rebuilds details when asked. A rebuilt memory can feel exactly as vivid as an accurate one, so confidence is a poor test of accuracy.

WHERE YOU'LL MEET IT

Arguments about who said what. Family stories retold until they feel witnessed. Your memory of why you made a decision months ago.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 6

Write down, in detail, a conversation from last week. Then check it against anything recorded — a message, an email, a note. Mark what you added, merged or softened.

Do I remember this, or do I remember the story about it?

PRINCIPLE SEVEN

Choice blindness

VII

THE TRICK

You pick the emblem you prefer. I show you "your choice" — actually the one you rejected — and ask why you like it. Most people start explaining.

WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

FACT Petter Johansson, Lars Hall and colleagues (2005) had people choose the more attractive of two faces, then secretly handed back the other face and asked for reasons. Most swaps went unnoticed, and people justified choices they had not made. Later work by the same group found similar effects with written opinions on moral and political questions.

WHAT IT MEANS

INTERPRETATION We assume reasons come first and choices follow. Sometimes the order runs the other way: we choose, then build a reason that fits whatever we believe we chose.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 7

Before one decision today, write your reason down first. After deciding, write the reason you'd give a friend. Compare the two.

Did I have this reason before I chose, or did I build it after?

PRINCIPLE EIGHT

Hidden information

VIII

THE TRICK

Think of a number from 1 to 63; answer "here" or "not here" for six cards; your number is named. Each card is a binary digit, and its first number is that digit's value.

WHY IT WORKS

FACT Six yes/no answers can distinguish $2^6 = 64$ possibilities; twenty can distinguish more than a million ($2^{20} = 1{,}048{,}576$). Nothing was read from your mind — you supplied the number one harmless-looking answer at a time.

WHERE YOU'LL MEET IT

INTERPRETATION "What was your first pet?" quizzes that echo security questions. Apps that gather small permissions one at a time. Conversations where many small, easy questions add up to something you would not have shared directly.

FIELD EXERCISE · DAY 8

Review the permissions of three apps you use. For each, write what someone could work out by combining them — not what any single permission reveals.

What have I already told it without noticing?

YOUR WEEK

Eight-day noticing log

One line a day is enough. No judgement — just what you noticed and what, if anything, you did differently.

DAY	PRINCIPLE	WHAT I NOTICED	WHAT I DID
1	Change blindness		
2	Forcing		
3	Inattentional blindness		
4	Barnum effect		
5	Equivoque		
6	False memory		
7	Choice blindness		
8	Hidden information		

ETHICS

The honest liar's code

A magician lies to you all evening and you thank them for it. A con artist uses the same principles and you call it fraud.

INTERPRETATION The difference is not the technique but the frame. Four tests:

1. **You asked to be fooled.** Consent comes before the deception — a ticket bought, a game agreed to.
2. **Everyone knows it is a trick.** No claim of real powers. The mystery is about *how*, never *whether*.
3. **Nothing you value is at stake.** Not money, health, votes, relationships or safety. Only a little certainty is taken.
4. **It ends in wonder, not dependence.** You leave more curious and no more reliant on the performer.

WHEN SOMETHING FAILS A TEST

No consent, no frame, something real at stake, or a reason to keep you coming back without looking closely: it is no longer magic. You don't need to prove bad intent to step back. "I didn't agree to this frame" is reason enough to pause.

> *Did I agree to this frame — and does it end?*

SOURCES

Further reading

Real works. The summaries in this guide are my own and simplified; please read the originals for methods, numbers and caveats.

Forer, B. R. (1949). The fallacy of personal validation: a classroom demonstration of gullibility. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*.

Johansson, P., Hall, L., Sikström, S., & Olsson, A. (2005). Failure to detect mismatches between intention and outcome in a simple decision task. *Science*.

Kuhn, G. (2019). *Experiencing the Impossible: The Science of Magic*. MIT Press.

Kuhn, G., Amlani, A. A., & Rensink, R. A. (2008). Towards a science of magic. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.

Macknik, S. L., & Martinez-Conde, S., with Blakeslee, S. (2010). *Sleights of Mind*. Henry Holt.

Olson, J. A., Amlani, A. A., Raz, A., & Rensink, R. A. (2015). Influencing choice without awareness. *Consciousness and Cognition*.

Roediger, H. L., & McDermott, K. B. (1995). Creating false memories: remembering words not presented in lists. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*.

Simons, D. J., & Chabris, C. F. (1999). Gorillas in our midst: sustained inattentional blindness for dynamic events. *Perception*.

Simons, D. J., & Levin, D. T. (1998). Failure to detect changes to people during a real-world interaction. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*.

The 1089 trick and the binary mind-reading cards are long-standing mathematical recreations.



The trick was never the interesting part. The gap between what you saw and what you were sure you saw — that's where the learning is.

Play the eight acts again at
sahiltayal.com/magicmode

Return to the Sahilverse: sahiltayal.com
Write to Sahil: sahil@sahiltayal.com

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