FIELD GUIDE 001 / THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

THE STORY IS NOT THE FACT.

Narrative Bias Arcade: a pocket laboratory for observing, interpreting and revising the stories we make about other people.

A friend goes silent. A teammate interrupts. A performer adopts a mask. A collaborator misses a deadline. The visible action is real; the explanation that appears in our minds may still be a hypothesis. This guide can be used offline, without an account, device, or private disclosure.

THE CENTRAL DISTINCTION

Observation is what happened. Inference is what we think it means. Response is what we can responsibly do. These three operations are related, but they are not interchangeable.

CREATOR HOME — EXPLORE THE WIDER SAHILVERSE

https://sahiltayal.com/

By Sahil Tayal · 27 October 2026 · Original teaching material and fictional exercises

01 / CONCEPTUAL COMPASS

Read the event. Question the plot.

A heuristic is a shortcut for judging under uncertainty. It can save effort and sometimes produce good judgments. A **bias** is more specific: a systematic tendency to make judgments in a distorted direction relative to an appropriate standard. Fast thinking is not automatically mistaken; slow thinking is not automatically correct.

Attribution refers to explanations of behavior. **Correspondence bias** describes overattributing a person's conduct to stable qualities even when the surrounding situation can account for it. Context is not a substitute for evidence: replacing an unkind explanation with a flattering one can still be guesswork.

Confirmation bias can lead us to select, interpret or remember information in ways that favour what we already believe. Asking what would change our minds is useful because a story that explains every imaginable outcome risks explaining nothing at all.

Narrative construction concerns the ways sequences, goals and turning points become meaningful stories. Jerome Bruner and Dan McAdams offer different research perspectives on narrative and identity. This guide uses **narrative bias** as an editorial umbrella, not as a newly validated psychological category.

FOUR PRACTICES FOR HONEST INFERENCE

1. Describe the camera view.

Write only what a neutral recording, message log, or agreed deadline could show. Replace trait adjectives with observable verbs.

2. Name the added motive.

Write the first story in quotation marks and identify the leap from action to intention.

3. Generate a disconfirming test.

What specific information could make the first story less likely? Consider alternatives without assuming either is true.

4. Decide without mind-reading.

A boundary, invitation, repair request, or change of plans may be justified by behaviour even when private motives remain uncertain.

Verified related world: The Reciprocity Atlas — observation versus inference

02 / OFFLINE ARCADE

Four incomplete scenes.

For each scene, read the observation. Before reading the counterframe, write your first inference. Assign it to the *interpretation* column, not the *fact* column. Circle evidence that could realistically change the conclusion. No numbers or scores are necessary.

CARD 01 / THE SILENCE

A friend sees your message. Two days pass without a reply. You know nothing further.

Possible unverified story: They dislike me. / They must be preparing a surprise.

Counterframe (hypothesis, not fact): Busyness, a need for distance, an unopened conversation, or other circumstances could all fit.

Useful evidence: A direct response, pattern over time or stated boundary.

CARD 02 / THE INTERRUPTION

A colleague interrupts during a meeting before you finish a sentence.

Possible unverified story: They are arrogant. / They are enthusiastic and supportive.

Counterframe (hypothesis, not fact): A missed conversational cue, an urgent detail, or a recurring disrespectful pattern could produce a similar moment.

Useful evidence: Meeting norms, response to a direct request, repeated episodes.

CARD 03 / THE MASK

A performer adopts a villain character and wears a theatrical mask.

Possible unverified story: This proves their private character is threatening. / They must be kind offstage.

Counterframe (hypothesis, not fact): Performance can use invented characters, costume, irony and genre conventions.

Useful evidence: Reliable artistic context and documented information; no need to infer private psychology.

CARD 04 / THE DELAY

A collaborator misses a delivery date and does not provide an update by the deadline.

Possible unverified story: They are lazy. / They care and must have a serious reason.

Counterframe (hypothesis, not fact): Overcommitment, unclear scope, avoidance or unforeseen obligations may be relevant.

Useful evidence: Agreed terms, explanations, repeat pattern and repair.

03 / SHOW YOUR WORK

A debrief, not a verdict.

Illustrative walkthrough: In CARD 02, suppose you select “They are arrogant,” feel highly certain, and possess almost no contextual information. An interpretive debrief could label this a high-commitment storyline: a single interruption has been converted into a stable personality claim. This qualitative label is invented for the exercise; it is not a standardized measure, probability, or diagnosis.

Now change one input: you learn that the speaker accidentally thought your sentence had ended. The original character judgment weakens. Change a different input: several colleagues document repeated interruptions after explicit requests to stop. You may have stronger evidence about an actionable pattern, while remaining uncertain about the private motive. The purpose is to see how evidence can update judgments without requiring certainty about the whole person.

Keep the distinction between explanation and response: You can say “I want to finish my thought before we move on” immediately. You can also judge whether a collaboration works based on its actual conditions. Neither decision requires proving arrogance or benevolence.

WHEN A PERSON PLAYS A CHARACTER

Documented fact: NPR describes MF DOOM (Daniel Dumile) performing behind a metal mask and using comic-book and supervillain imagery, with several artistic aliases. The Victoria and Albert Museum documents David Bowie's on-stage personae including Ziggy Stardust and the Thin White Duke. These are historical/cultural observations about public performance.

Interpretation: Public personae show how an artist can invite an audience into constructed worlds. They do not permit complete inference about character, intentions, or private conduct. Stagecraft is not itself evidence of dishonesty or illness.

Fictional thought experiment: A listener mistakes a supervillain performance for literal biography and declares they know the artist's everyday morality. Another listener assumes all provocative art must hide a gentle true self. Both interpretations exceed the cited facts.

Ethical note: Artists and strangers deserve the same distinction between documented actions and stories supplied by observers. Critique the work rigorously while treating private claims with proportionate evidential caution.

Verified related world: Main Character, Shared Universe — several inner worlds

04 / SOURCE DESK

Eight doors into the evidence.

01. Amos Tversky & Daniel Kahneman (1974). “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases.” Science.

https://doi.org/10.1126/science.185.4157.1124

02. Jerome Bruner (1991). “The Narrative Construction of Reality.” Critical Inquiry.

https://doi.org/10.1086/448619

03. Dan P. McAdams (2001). “The Psychology of Life Stories.” Review of General Psychology.

https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100

04. Raymond S. Nickerson (1998). “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises.” Review of General Psychology.

https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.2.175

05. Daniel T. Gilbert & Patrick S. Malone (1995). “The Correspondence Bias.” Psychological Bulletin.

https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.1.21

06. American Psychological Association. “Fundamental Attribution Error.” APA Dictionary of Psychology.

https://dictionary.apa.org/fundamental-attribution-error

07. NPR (2020). “MF DOOM, Intricate And Enigmatic Rapper And Producer, Dead At 49.”

https://www.nprillinois.org/generationlisten/2020-12-31/mf-doom-intricate-and-enigmatic-rapper-and-producer-dead-at-49

08. Victoria and Albert Museum. “David Bowie: Images of an Icon.”

https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/david-bowie-images-of-an-icon

All eight research and cultural URLs were located or accessible through public web checks on 27 October 2026. DOI/publisher pages may restrict full-text access. These sources support relevant concepts and historical facts, not the validity of this invented arcade interface.

05 / DETACHABLE WORKSHEET

Pause the narrator.

Choose one fictional scene, or a minor non-sensitive real-life event. Keep identifiers off the page. Let each prompt have space for several possible answers.

A / Camera view: what happened, without a character adjective?

B / First plot: what motive or meaning did I add?

C / Alternatives: two competing accounts, both explicitly hypothetical.

D / What exact evidence would weaken or strengthen each account?

E / Action: what question, boundary or decision remains fair without mind-reading?

Final check: “I may be uncertain about motives and still be entitled to a reasonable boundary.” This page is a thinking aid, not a checklist for enduring harm.

06 / ETHICS & EXPLORE MORE

Keep the hypothesis revisable.

A careful narrative is not automatically the most flattering one. Context does not cancel accountability. Repeated misconduct and safety concerns can justify protective action without a complete model of another person's motivations. This guide should never be used to pressure someone into forgiving, disclosing, staying in a harmful situation, or explaining boundaries they do not wish to debate.

Nor does serious interpretation require absolute skepticism. Some explanations are better supported than others. When evidence accumulates, update the judgment. When evidence stays thin, describe the limits of what is known. The ethical objective is a proportional claim, not endless speculation.

Finally, do not make identities out of single scenes. People may be contradictory, learning, pressured by institutions, or intentionally performing. A performer's stage character is not a clinical file; a colleague's mistake is not automatically a personality; and another human being is never entirely available as a tidy plot.

VERIFIED CONNECTED WORLDS

https://reciprocityatlas.sahiltayal.com/

The Reciprocity Atlas — discern observation, inference and choice in relationships.

https://maincharacter.sahiltayal.com/

Main Character, Shared Universe — you are the protagonist; so is everyone else.

https://identityaction.sahiltayal.com/

The Identity–Action Gap — context, intention and what actions can tell us.

DISCOVERY DOORS — VERIFIED 27 OCTOBER 2026

https://sahilverse.online/

https://sahiltayal.online/

RETURN TO THE SAHILVERSE / CREATOR HOME

https://sahiltayal.com/

Write to Sahil about this exercise: sahil@sahiltayal.com