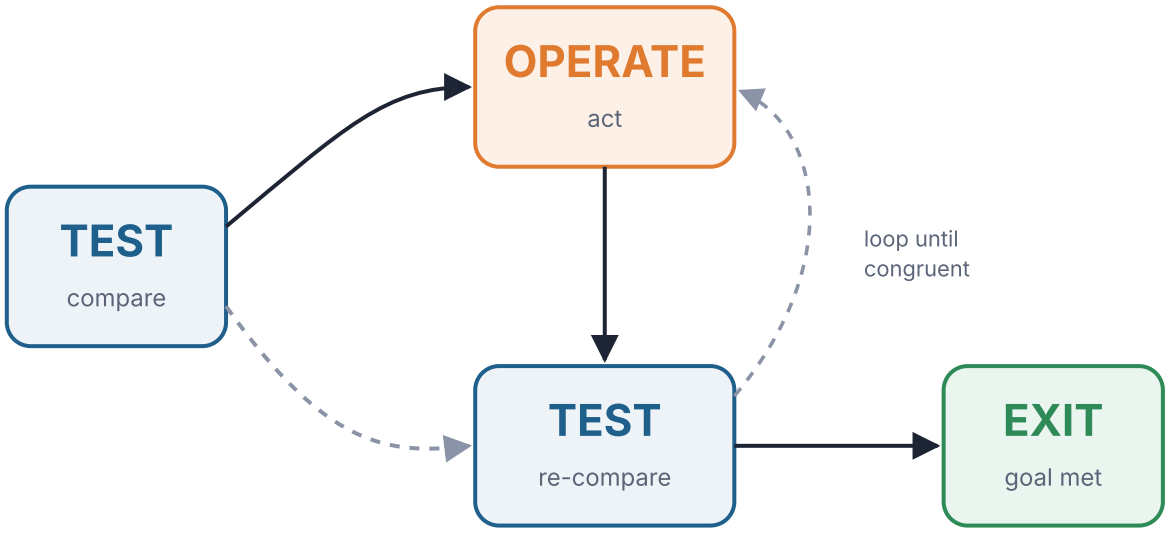
NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING · VISUAL SUMMARY

Strategies and the TOTE Model

How NLP describes the inner sequences behind skilled behaviour, and the Test–Operate–Test–Exit feedback loop used to map, elicit and redesign them.



Covers: what a strategy is · representational systems and notation · origins of TOTE · nested loops · eliciting, designing and installing strategies · classic examples · evidence and critique

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01 · FOUNDATIONS

NLP at a Glance

Neuro-Linguistic Programming was developed in the 1970s by Richard Bandler and John Grinder at the University of California, Santa Cruz, by modelling the language and behaviour of effective therapists.

Neuro

Experience reaches us through the senses and the nervous system

+

Linguistic

Language codes, orders and gives meaning to that experience

+

Programming

Habitual sequences of thought and action that produce results

Strategies sit in the "Programming" part: the repeatable inner sequences.

Key presuppositions behind strategies

The map is not the territory

People respond to their internal representations of the world, not to the world itself.

Behaviour has structure

Skills and problems both follow sequences that can be described and, in principle, learned or changed.

Modelling excellence

If one person can do something well, their strategy can be mapped and taught to others.

Every behaviour has a purpose

Even an unhelpful strategy does something for the person. Redesigns try to keep that purpose.

Timeline



02 · CORE CONCEPT

What Is a Strategy?

In NLP, a **strategy** is the ordered sequence of internal and external representations a person runs to get a particular result: deciding, spelling, getting motivated, feeling convinced, being creative.



Same content, different order or sense → a different result

Sequence

Order matters. Feeling before seeing a clear picture can produce a different decision than the reverse.

Sensory

Each step happens in a sense: seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling or tasting, inside or outside.

Mostly unconscious

Strategies run fast and automatically. Elicitation slows them down so they can be seen.

Everyday examples

Strategy type	Typical question it answers
Decision	How do I choose between options?
Motivation	How do I get myself to start something?
Convincer	How do I know something or someone is right or trustworthy?
Learning / memory	How do I take in and recall information?
Creativity	How do I produce and refine new ideas?
Reassurance / love	How do I know I am valued or cared for?

03 · BUILDING BLOCKS

Representational Systems

Each step of a strategy uses one of the five senses, which NLP calls **representational systems** and abbreviates **VAKOG**.



V · Visual A · Auditory K · Kinaesthetic O · Olfactory G · Gustatory

System	Internal example	External example	Typical predicates
Visual	Remembering a friend's face; imagining a new room layout	Reading a page; watching a demo	see, clear, focus, picture, bright
Auditory tonal	Replaying a song or a tone of voice	Hearing a colleague speak	hear, sounds, rings a bell, tune in
Auditory digital	Self-talk, reasoning in words, lists	(words as information)	think, logical, makes sense, process
Kinaesthetic	Gut feeling, emotion, sense of rightness	Touch, temperature, movement	feel, grasp, solid, pressure, handle
Olfactory	Recalled smell of a place	Smelling coffee	smell, fishy, fresh
Gustatory	Recalled taste	Tasting food	taste, bitter, sweet, savour

Submodalities: the fine detail

Visual

Brightness, size, distance, colour, movement, framed or panoramic.

Auditory

Volume, pitch, tempo, location, whose voice.

Kinaesthetic

Intensity, location in the body, temperature, weight, movement.

In strategy work, submodalities often explain *why* a test passes or fails, for example a picture that must be “big and bright” before it feels motivating.

04 · NOTATION

Strategy Notation

NLP writes strategies as short formulas: a sense letter, plus superscript-style tags for direction and time.



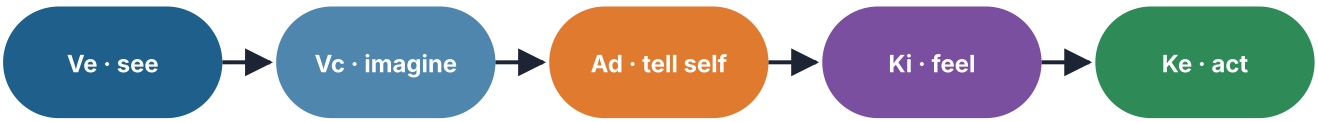
Symbol	Meaning
V	Visual
A^t	Auditory tonal
A^d	Auditory digital (self-talk)
K	Kinaesthetic
O / G	Olfactory / Gustatory

Tag	Meaning
e	External: from the outside world
i	Internal: generated in the mind
r	Remembered (recalled)
c	Constructed (imagined)
→ / ⇄	Sequence / test-comparison

Reading a full strategy

$V^e \rightarrow V^c \rightarrow A^d \rightarrow K^i \rightarrow K^e$

See the item in the shop (V^e) → imagine using it at home (V^c) → say “that would be useful” (A^d) → get a good feeling (K^i) → pick it up and buy it (K^e).



A simple buying strategy, read left to right

05 · HISTORY

Origins of the TOTE Model

TOTE comes from cognitive psychology, not NLP. George A. Miller, Eugene Galanter and Karl H. Pribram introduced it in *Plans and the Structure of Behavior* (1960).

The problem they were solving

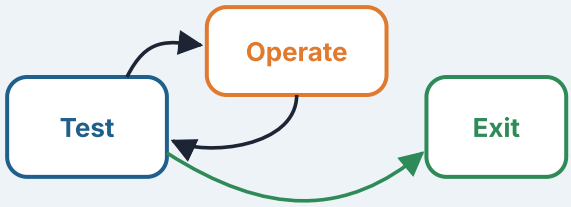
Behaviourism described action as a simple **stimulus → response** reflex arc. Miller, Galanter and Pribram argued that purposeful behaviour is better described as a **feedback loop** guided by a plan: the organism keeps comparing its current state with a goal and acts until the gap closes. This drew on cybernetics and early computing.

Reflex arc (S → R)



One-way. No check on whether it worked.

TOTE feedback loop



Circular. Acts until the test is satisfied.

What NLP borrowed

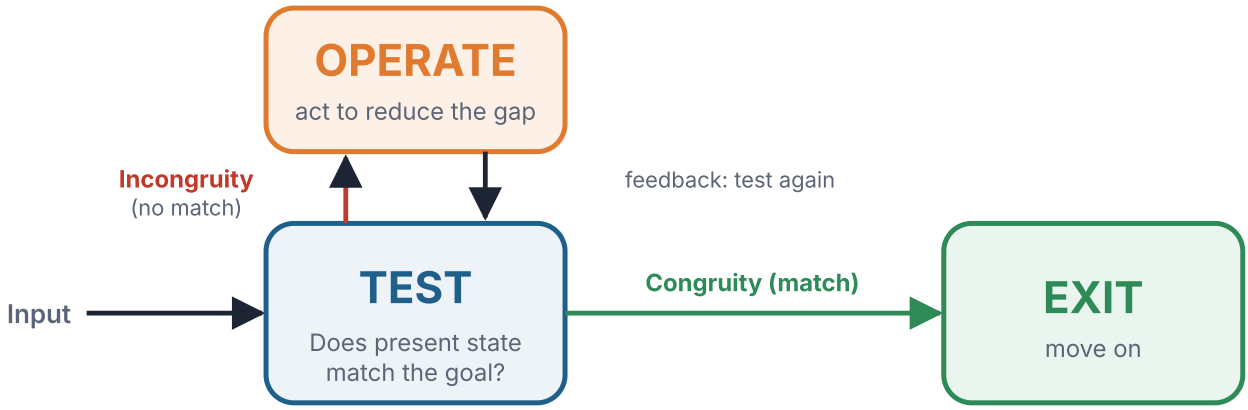
Original idea (1960)	How NLP used it (late 1970s on)
Behaviour is organised by plans and feedback	Skills are organised by **strategies** made of sensory steps
Test = compare state with a standard	Test = compare an internal representation with a sensory criterion
Operations can contain smaller TOTEs	Strategies are nested: big outcomes contain many sub-strategies
A unit of analysis for psychology	A practical template for **modelling, eliciting and redesigning** behaviour

The NLP adaptation was set out by Robert Dilts, John Grinder, Richard Bandler, Leslie Cameron-Bandler and Judith DeLozier in *Neuro-Linguistic Programming: Volume I* (1980).

06 · THE MODEL

The TOTE Model Explained

TOTE stands for **Test – Operate – Test – Exit**. It describes the smallest complete unit of goal-directed behaviour.



Read it as a loop:

Input arrives → Test against a standard → if it doesn't match, Operate → Test again → ...
... repeat until it matches → Exit to the next TOTE.

Test

A comparison between what is (sensory input or an internal representation) and a criterion or goal. It needs **evidence**: how will you know?

Operate

Whatever is done to change the current state: external behaviour, or internal acts such as recalling, imagining or self-talk.

Test (again)

The result of the operation is checked. This feedback is the defining feature that separates TOTE from a one-way reflex.

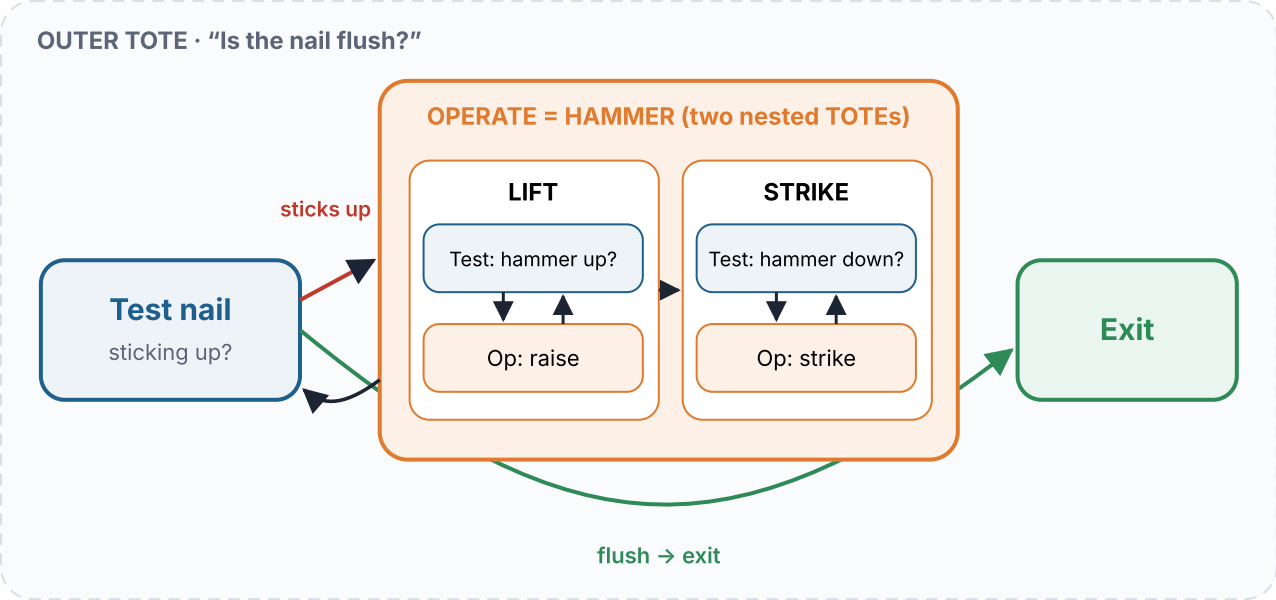
Exit

When the test is satisfied, control passes on to the next unit of behaviour. Without a clear exit, a strategy can loop forever.

07 · WORKED EXAMPLE

Classic Example: Hammering a Nail

Miller, Galanter and Pribram used hammering a nail to show how TOTE works and how one TOTE can sit inside another.



Loop: test nail → lift → strike → test nail → ... → flush → exit

Adapted from Miller, Galanter & Pribram (1960)

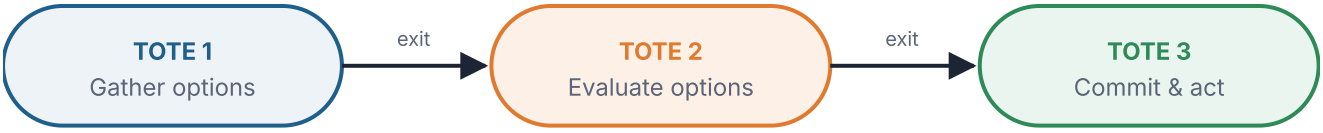
Phase	Test (evidence)	Operation
Outer	See / feel whether the nail head is flush with the wood	Hammer
Lift	Feel whether the hammer is raised high enough	Raise the arm
Strike	Hear / feel the hammer make contact	Bring the hammer down

08 · STRUCTURE

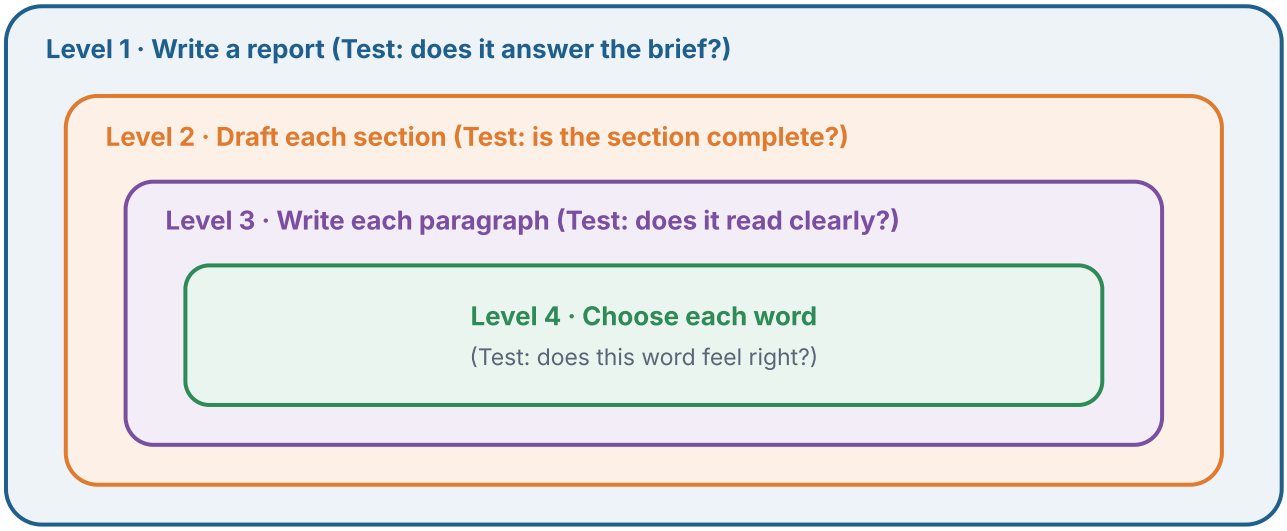
Nested and Sequential TOTEs

Real strategies are rarely one loop. TOTEs connect in two ways: **in sequence** (one exits into the next) and **nested** (an operation is itself a TOTE).

Sequential: a chain of loops



Nested: loops inside loops



Why nesting matters

A problem may live at one level only. Someone may write fine sentences but have no test for whether the whole report meets the brief.

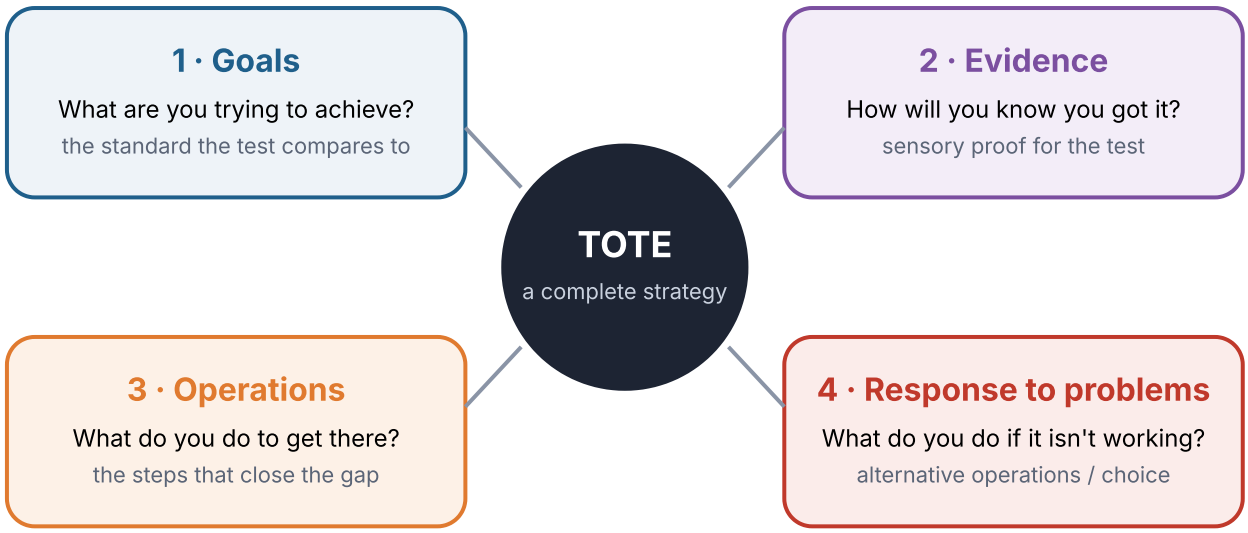
Chunking up and down

Elicitation moves between levels: “What is that step *for*?” (up) and “How exactly do you do that step?” (down).

09 · APPLICATION

TOTE in NLP Practice: The Four Questions

Robert Dilts turned TOTE into a practical checklist. A full strategy needs a clear answer to each of four questions.



Component	Weak version	Strong version
Goal	“Get fit”	“Run 5 km without stopping by June”
Evidence	“I'll feel better”	“My running app shows 5.0 km, no pauses, and I can still talk at the end”
Operations	“Run more”	“Three runs a week following a beginner interval plan”
Response to problems	Give up after a missed week	“If I miss a run, repeat the previous week's session rather than skipping ahead”

Diagnostic tip: When a strategy fails, check which of the four is missing or vague. Unclear evidence is a frequent cause of endless looping or never feeling finished.

10 · ELICITATION

Eliciting a Strategy

Because strategies run largely outside awareness, NLP practitioners elicit them by asking the person to re-live a specific example while watching for verbal and non-verbal clues.

Sources of information

Words

Sensory predicates: "I **saw** it", "it **clicked**", "it **felt** right".

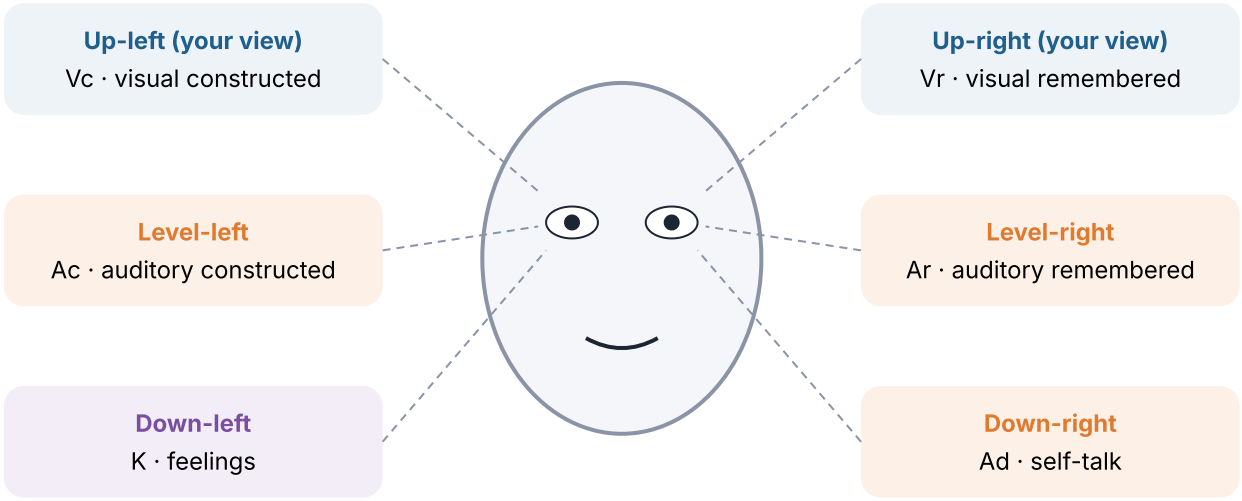
Body

Breathing, posture, gestures and voice tone shifting as each step runs.

Eyes

NLP's "eye-accessing cues", which are claimed to show which sense is being used.

NLP eye-accessing cues (as described in NLP literature)



Person facing you (typical right-handed pattern)

Evidence warning: Controlled studies have not supported eye-movement patterns as reliable indicators of thinking style or of lying (e.g. Wiseman et al., 2012, *PLoS ONE*). If used at all, treat eye movements as a prompt for questions, never as proof.

11 · METHOD

The Elicitation Process Step by Step

A typical NLP elicitation follows the TOTE structure: find the trigger, map the operations, identify the test and locate the exit.

1. **Choose a specific, recent instance**
   “Think of a particular time you made a decision you were happy with.” General answers hide the sequence, so a concrete memory is needed.

2. **Associate into the memory**
   Ask the person to step back into it: see what they saw, hear what they heard. Strategies show up more clearly when re-lived than when described.

3. **Find the trigger**
   “What was the very first thing that let you know it was time to decide?” This is the input to the first TOTE.

4. **Map the operations**
   “What happened next? And then?” Note the sense and direction of each step (V^{c}, A^{d}, K^{i} …).

5. **Identify the test**
   “How did you know it was the right choice?” Find the criterion and how it is checked.

6. **Locate the exit**
   “What let you know you were finished?” Missing exits explain procrastination and over-thinking.

7. **Check and calibrate**
   Play the strategy back in the person's own words and order, and watch whether it fits. Elicit a second example to confirm the pattern.

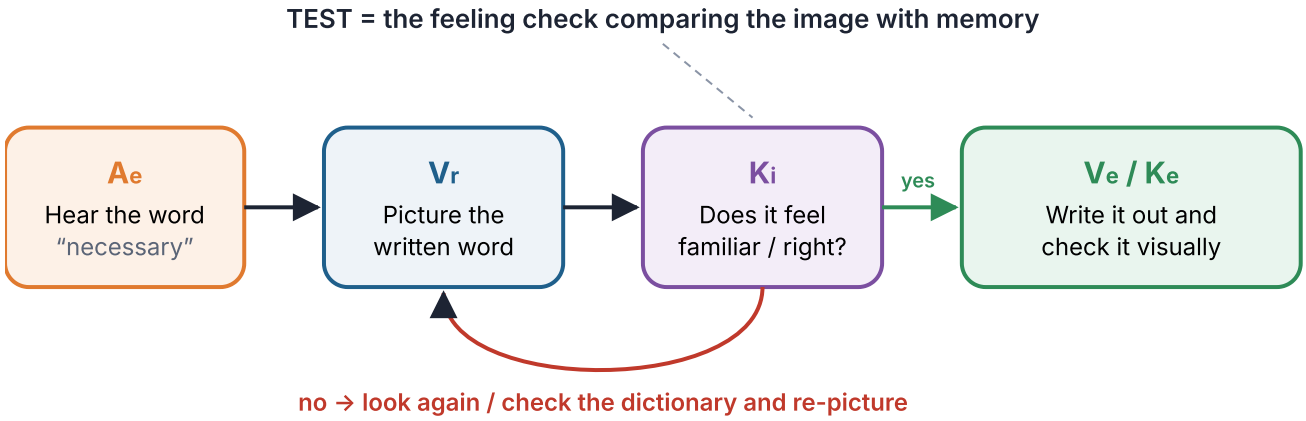
Useful questions by TOTE element

Element	Sample questions
Trigger	When do you start? What sets it off? What do you notice first?
Operate	What do you do then? Do you picture it, talk to yourself, or feel something?
Test	How do you know that it's right, good enough or done? Compared with what?
Exit	What tells you to stop? What happens if the test isn't met?

12 · EXAMPLE STRATEGY

Example: The Spelling Strategy

The best-known NLP strategy, popularised by Robert Dilts. It describes how many good spellers are said to work: they **see** the word rather than sound it out.



Phonetic approach (common difficulty)

$A^e \rightarrow A^d$ (sound out) $\rightarrow K^e$

Works for regular words but fails on irregular English spellings such as "yacht" or "colonel", and there is no visual test.

Visual strategy (as taught in NLP)

$A^e \rightarrow V^r \rightarrow K^i \rightleftarrows V^r \rightarrow V^e$

Builds a stored image of the word and a feeling-based test of whether the image is right.

How it is usually taught

- Show the word written clearly; the learner looks at it, then closes their eyes and pictures it.
- Make the image memorable using submodalities: a favourite colour, larger letters, tricky parts highlighted.
- Spell it forwards from the image, then **backwards**, which is hard to do by sound alone and checks that a picture is being used.
- Write it down and compare with the original.

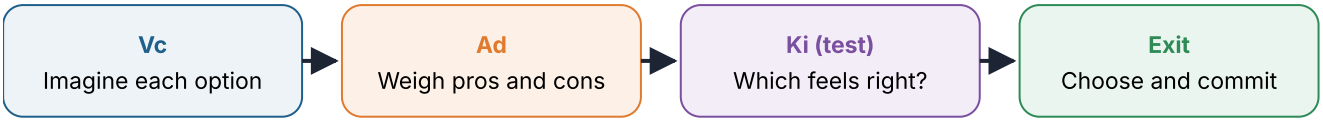
Claims for the spelling strategy rest mainly on practitioner reports. Controlled research is limited; visual-orthographic memory is one of several routes good spellers use, alongside phonics and morphology.

13 · EXAMPLE STRATEGIES

Decision, Motivation and Convincer Strategies

Three frequently elicited strategies. Each is a TOTE with a different test.

Decision strategy



Common problem: no exit criterion, so the person keeps generating options (indecision).

Motivation strategy

"Away-from" style

V^c (bad outcome) → $K^{i}-$ → act

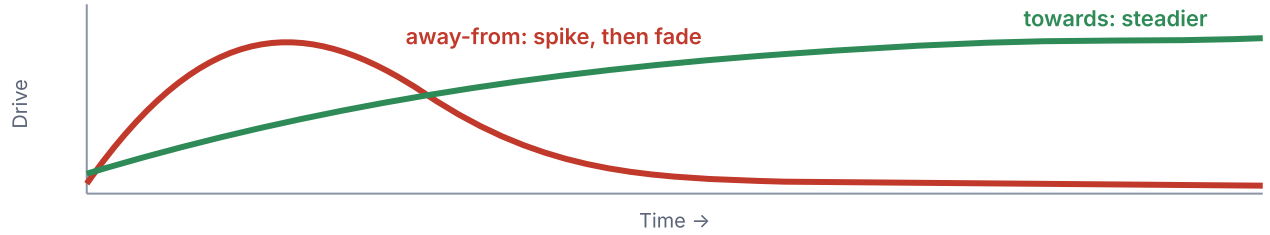
Pictures what happens if nothing is done. Effective in short bursts but motivation fades once the threat recedes, and can feel stressful.

"Towards" style

V^c (goal achieved) → $K^{i}+$ → A^d plan → act

Pictures the desired result, feels pulled towards it and makes a plan. Tends to sustain effort longer.

Illustrative pattern only (conceptual, not measured data)

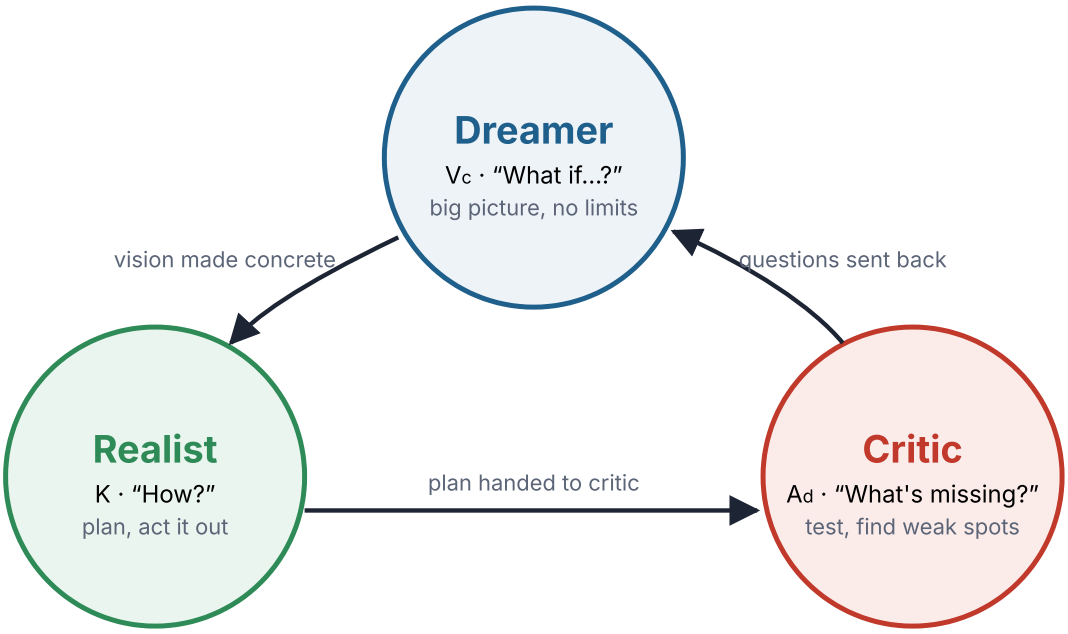


Convincer strategy

Channel: how evidence is taken in	Mode: how often / how long before convinced
See it (demo, chart) · **Hear** it (testimonial) · **Read** it (report) · **Do** it (trial)	**Number of times** (e.g. 3 examples) · **Period of time** (e.g. a month) · **Automatic** (instantly) · **Consistent** (never fully convinced)

The Disney Creativity Strategy

Robert Dilts modelled this from accounts of how Walt Disney developed ideas, presenting it in *Strategies of Genius, Vol. I* (1994). It cycles between three distinct positions.



Loop until the Critic's test is passed → EXIT with a workable idea

Position	Physiology (as taught)	Key questions	TOTE role
Dreamer	Head and eyes up, relaxed, open posture	What do we want? What would it look like at its best?	Sets the goal
Realist	Head and body forward, centred	How will we do it? What are the steps, who, when?	Operations
Critic	Eyes down, head tilted, more analytical	What could go wrong? What's missing? Who is affected?	Test

Practical rule: keep the positions separate, often using three physical spots in the room. The Critic comments on the *plan*, not on the Dreamer, so idea-generation and evaluation don't block each other.

Analysing Strategies

Once elicited, a strategy is checked for efficiency and well-formedness. Dilts' **R.O.L.E. model** is the standard framework.

R
Representational systems
Which senses are used, and which are missing?

O
Orientation
Internal or external? Remembered or constructed?

L
Links
How steps connect: in sequence (→) or at once (synesthesia).

E
Effect
What each step does: trigger, operate, test or exit.

Features of a well-formed strategy

Feature	What to look for
Clear goal and evidence	A positive, sensory-based outcome and a specific test.
All three main systems	V, A and K each appear somewhere, giving richer information.
External check	At least one step tests against the real world, not just inner imagery.
Minimal steps	No unnecessary steps that slow the strategy down.
Choice points	More than one operation is available if the first fails.
A clean exit	It stops when the goal is met and passes to the next action.

Common faults and fixes

Fault	Symptom	Typical fix
Looping	Over-thinking, perfectionism, indecision	Add an explicit exit criterion or a deadline
Missing test	Acts impulsively, rarely checks results	Insert a check against a picture or feeling of the goal
Wrong system	e.g. spelling by sound alone	Swap in a system better suited to the task
Negative test	Only moves when things feel bad	Reframe the test towards a desired outcome
Too long	Slow, effortful, tiring	Remove or merge redundant steps

Designing and Installing Strategies

NLP offers three broad routes for changing a strategy: **utilise** an existing one, **redesign** it, or **install** a new one, often modelled from someone who already does the task well.

Utilise

Present information in the order the person's existing strategy already uses

Redesign

Add, remove or reorder steps; fix the test or the exit

Install

Model a strategy from an expert and teach it as a new sequence

Installation steps

1. **Model the target strategy**
   Elicit it from someone who gets the result reliably. Check several examples and several people where possible.
2. **Check ecology**
   Does the new strategy fit the person's values and context? What does the old one do for them that must be kept?
3. **Anchor each step**
   Link each step to a cue such as a touch, gesture or word so the sequence can be triggered in order.
4. **Rehearse**
   Run through the steps, slowly at first and then faster, until the sequence becomes smooth and automatic.
5. **Future pace**
   Have the person imagine a future situation where the trigger occurs and the new strategy runs.
6. **Test in the real world**
   Apply the strategy for real and check the evidence. That is the final TOTE on the change work itself.

Utilisation example: to a customer whose convincer is “see it three times”, show three visual examples rather than one long verbal pitch.

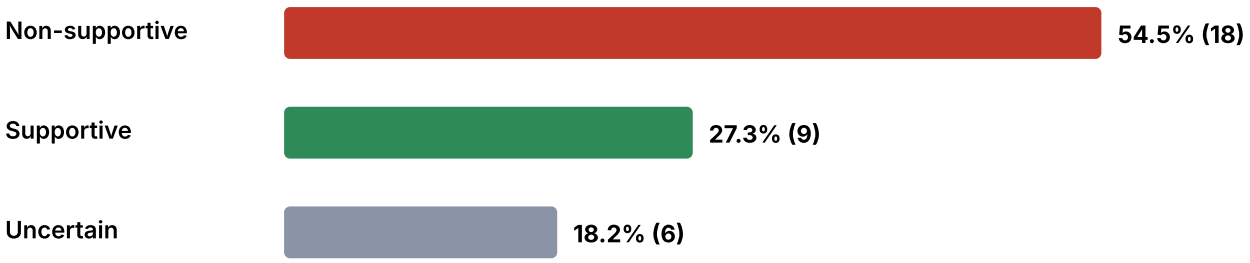
17 · CRITICAL VIEW

Evidence and Critique

TOTE is a respected idea in the history of cognitive psychology. NLP's broader claims, however, have weak empirical support, and many researchers regard NLP as a pseudoscience.

What a major review found

Tomasz Witkowski (2010, *Polish Psychological Bulletin*) screened the NLP research database and analysed **33 empirical studies** published in credible journals.



Share of 33 empirical studies by outcome. Source: Witkowski (2010).

Reasonable, useful ideas

- Behaviour as feedback loops (the TOTE itself)
- Breaking skills into steps for teaching
- Asking for clear goals and evidence
- Separating idea generation from critique

Claims lacking support

- Eye-accessing cues reveal thinking (not supported)
- Matching "preferred representational system" improves rapport (not supported in reviews)
- Fast, lasting therapeutic change from strategy installation

Other reviews

Study	Finding
Sharpley (1984, 1987)	Little support for preferred representational systems or predicate matching
Sturt et al. (2012), *British Journal of General Practice*	Systematic review: insufficient evidence that NLP improves health outcomes
Wiseman et al. (2012), *PLoS ONE*	Eye movements did not indicate lying as NLP practitioners claim

A fair reading: treat NLP strategies as a **descriptive and coaching vocabulary** for breaking down skills, not as an evidence-based treatment.

Summary and Quick Reference

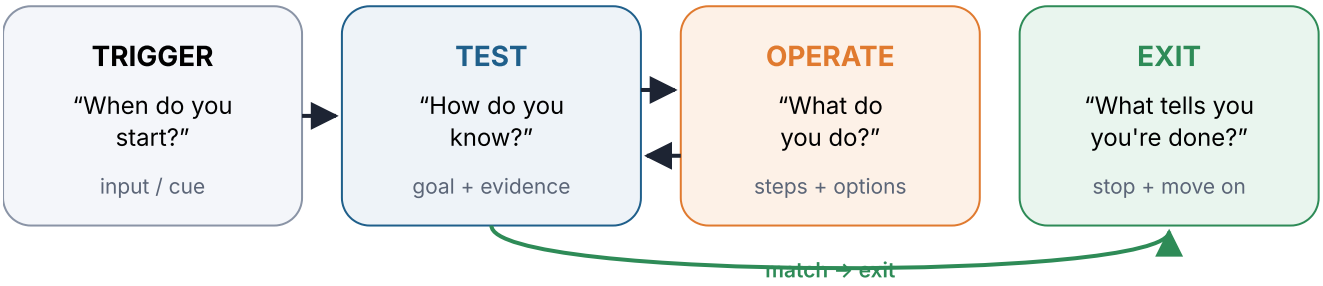
Key ideas

- A **strategy** is an ordered sequence of sensory representations that produces a result.
- Steps are written in **VAKOG** notation with direction (i/e) and time (r/c).
- **TOTE** (Miller, Galanter & Pribram, 1960) frames each strategy as a test-and-act feedback loop.
- TOTEs chain in **sequence** and **nest** inside one another.

Practical use

- Check every strategy for **goal, evidence, operations** and **response to problems**.
- Elicit from a specific, re-lived example.
- Fix loops with clear exits; fix impulsiveness with a test.
- Treat NLP-specific claims (eye cues, rapid cures) with scepticism.

One-page TOTE cheat sheet



Glossary

Anchor	A cue linked to a state or step so it can be re-triggered.
Ecology	Whether a change fits the person's wider life and values.
Elicitation	Drawing out a strategy through questions and observation.
Future pacing	Mentally rehearsing a new strategy in a future context.
Modelling	Mapping how an expert achieves a result, so others can learn it.
Submodality	A quality within a sense, such as brightness, volume or warmth.

Key sources

Miller, G. A., Galanter, E. & Pribram, K. H. (1960). *Plans and the Structure of Behavior*. · Dilts, R., Grinder, J., Bandler, R., Cameron-Bandler, L. & DeLozier, J. (1980). *Neuro-Linguistic Programming: Volume I*. · Dilts, R. (1994). *Strategies of Genius, Vol. I*. · Witkowski, T. (2010). Thirty-five years of research on NLP. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 41(2). · Sturt, J. et al. (2012). *British Journal of General Practice*. · Wiseman, R. et al. (2012). *PLoS ONE*.