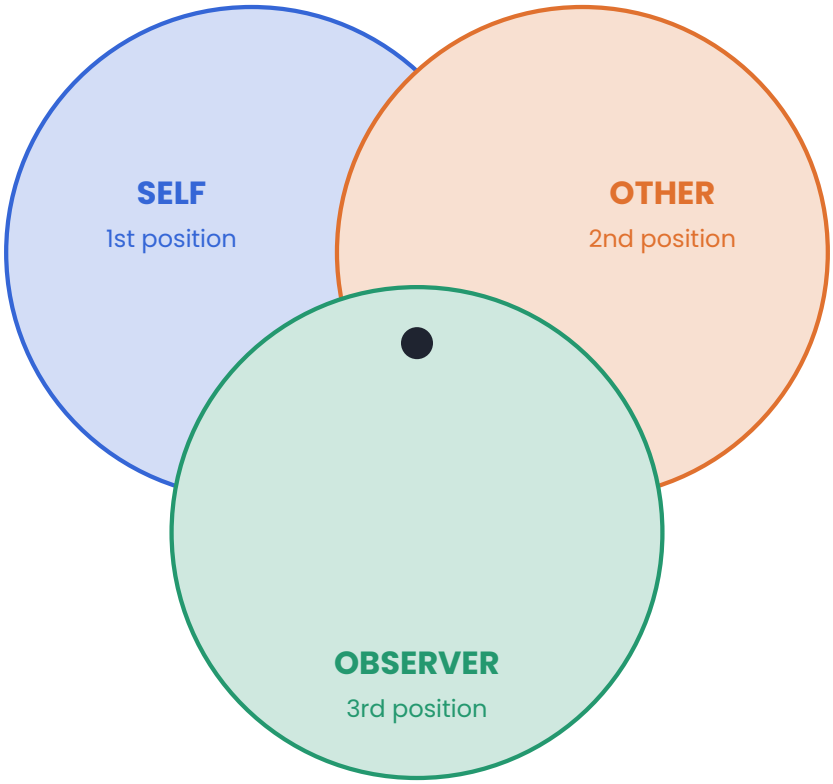


NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING · A VISUAL SUMMARY

Perceptual Positions

Seeing any situation through more than one pair of eyes

Self • Other • Observer • System • Universal

Contents

1 What Are Perceptual Positions? 3

2 Origins and Influences 4

3 The Core Principle: Many Maps, One Territory 5

4 First Position — Self 6

5 Second Position — Other 7

6 Third Position — Observer 8

7 Extended Positions: Fourth and Fifth 9

8 All Positions Compared 10

9 Association and Dissociation 11

10 The Language of the Positions 12

11 Balance: Getting Stuck in One Position 13

12 The Classic Three-Position Exercise 14

13 Setting Up the Space 15

14 The Meta-Mirror 16

15 Aligning Perceptual Positions 17

16 Applications Across Domains 18

17 Worked Example: A Workplace Conflict 19

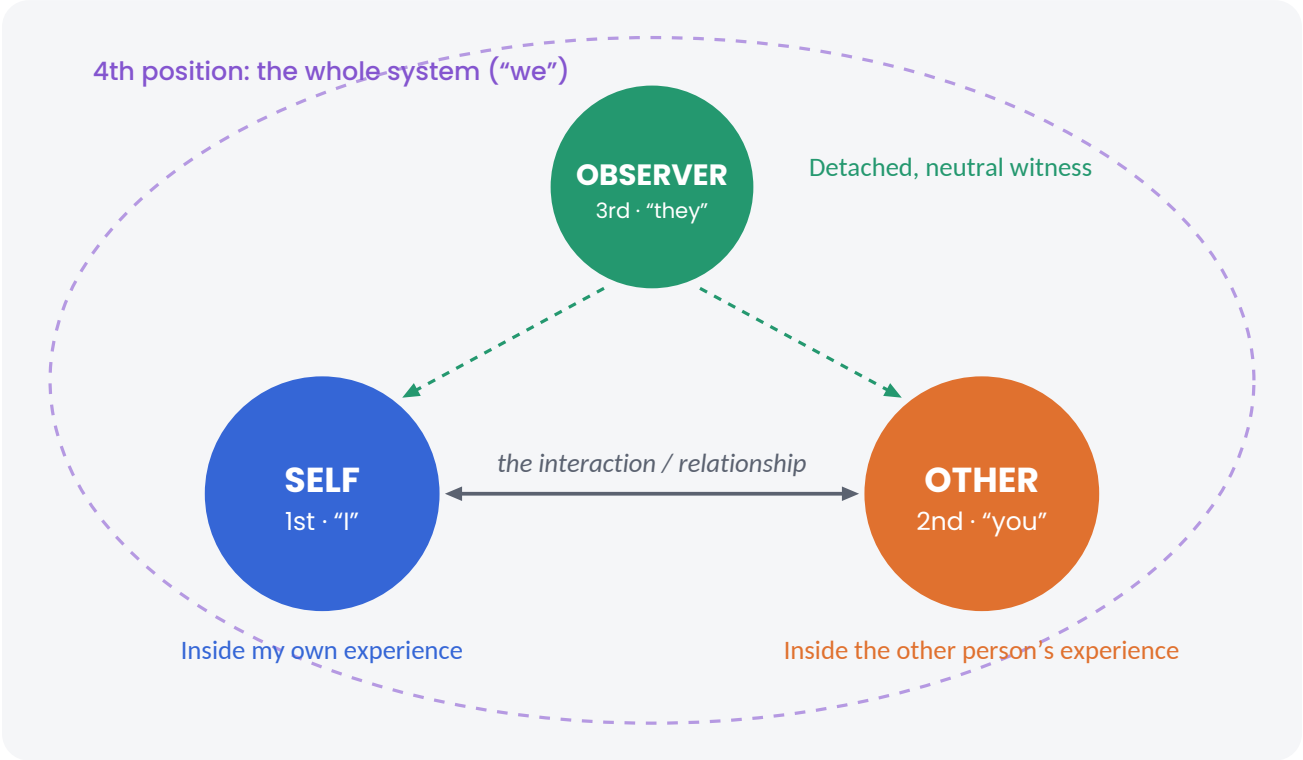
18 What the Research Says 20

19 Common Pitfalls and Good Practice 21

20 Quick Reference and Reflection 22

1 What Are Perceptual Positions?

Perceptual positions are distinct vantage points from which a person can experience the same event. Deliberately moving between them is one of NLP's most widely taught tools for building empathy, perspective and flexibility.



Associated in self

You see through your own eyes, hear with your own ears and feel your own feelings, wants and values.

Associated in other

You step into the other person's shoes: their posture, beliefs, history and intentions as if they were yours.

Dissociated observer

You step outside the interaction and watch both people as if they were on a stage or a video screen.

> **Key idea:** no single position holds the whole truth. Wisdom comes from the ability to *move* between them and integrate what each one reveals.

2 Origins and Influences

Perceptual positions grew out of NLP's early modelling of skilled therapists and was formalised in the late 1980s. Later trainers extended the model with additional positions and refinements.

1930s — **Map is not the territory**

Alfred Korzybski's general semantics (1933) argues every perception is a map, never the territory itself — a principle NLP adopted wholesale.

1960s–70s — **Gestalt & family therapy**

Fritz Perls' 'empty chair' work and Virginia Satir's family therapy both asked clients to speak from other people's points of view.

1970s — **NLP modelling begins**

Richard Bandler and John Grinder model Perls, Satir and Milton Erickson, noticing how they shifted clients between viewpoints.

1979 — **Double description**

Gregory Bateson's *Mind and Nature* describes how combining two descriptions yields information neither holds alone.

1987 — **Positions formalised**

John Grinder and Judith DeLozier set out first, second and third positions in *Turtles All the Way Down*.

Late 1980s — **The Meta-Mirror**

Robert Dilts develops the Meta-Mirror, adding a position that observes the observer, and popularises a 'we' or systemic position.

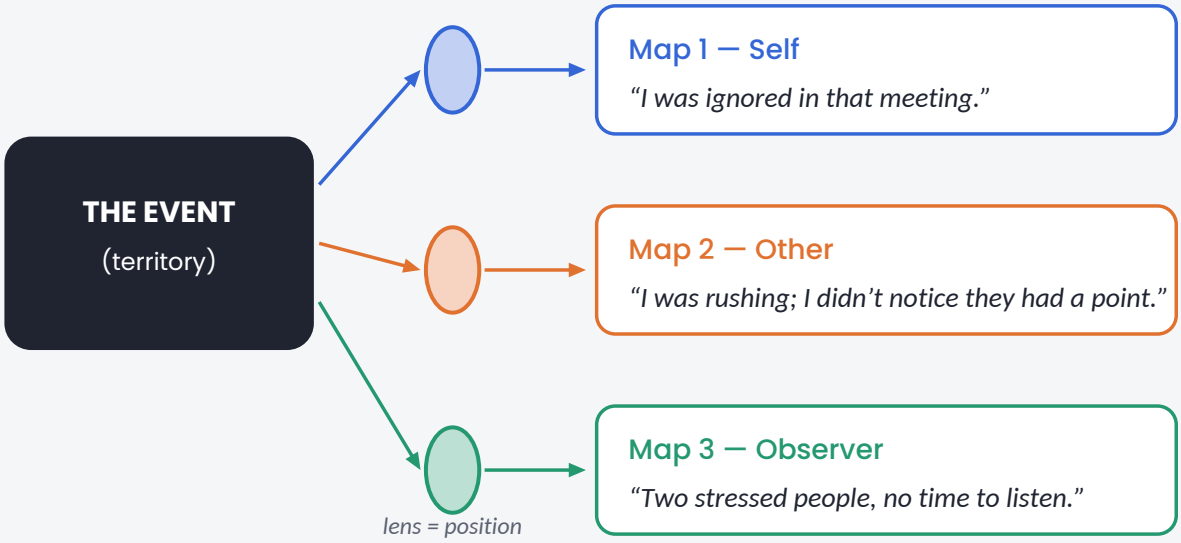
Early 1990s — **Aligning positions**

Connirae and Tamara Andreas describe how to 'clean up' each position so it is purely itself.

Note on dates: NLP's history is largely documented in trainers' own books and seminars, so exact dates for some developments vary between sources.

3 The Core Principle: Many Maps, One Territory

NLP assumes that people respond to their *internal map* of an event, not the event itself. Each perceptual position builds a different map — and each map reveals something the others miss.



Why this matters

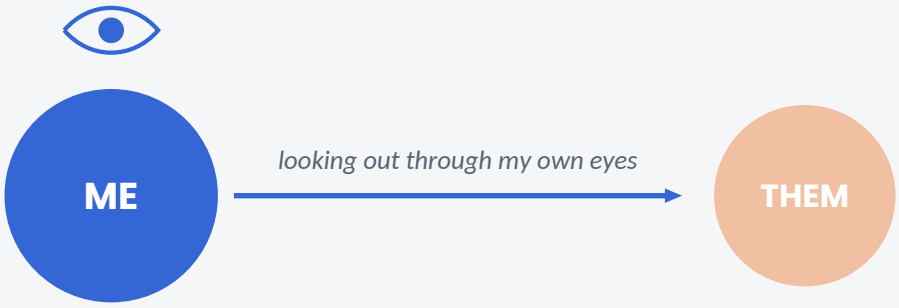
- **Conflict** often comes from two people defending two different maps as if each were the territory.
- **Switching positions** adds information rather than replacing it — Bateson's 'double description' in practice.
- **Choice expands** when you can see more of the situation: options invisible from one seat become obvious from another.
- **Emotion shifts** because each position carries a different degree of personal involvement.

> "The map is not the territory." — Alfred Korzybski. Perceptual positions are a practical way of drawing more than one map before you act.

4 First Position — Self

Experiencing the world from your own point of view: your thoughts, feelings, needs and values, fully ‘in your own body’. It is the home base from which we act.

PRONOUN	CORE QUESTION	EXPERIENCE
“I”, “me”, “my”	**What do I want, think and feel here?**	**Associated, involved, emotionally engaged**



Fully associated · my values, needs and feelings at the centre

Strengths of this position

- Clear sense of identity and boundaries
- Knowing and voicing your own needs
- Energy, motivation and conviction
- Integrity: acting from your values

If overused…

- Self-centred or insensitive to others
- Stubbornness: ‘my way is the only way’
- Poor listening; taking everything personally

If underused…

- Losing yourself in others’ agendas
- Difficulty saying no or deciding

Try it now

Recall a recent conversation. See it through your own eyes. Name one thing you wanted and one thing you felt.

5 Second Position — Other

Imagining what it is like to *be* the other person: taking on their posture, voice, background and intentions so fully that you look back at yourself through their eyes.

PRONOUN	CORE QUESTION	EXPERIENCE
"I" — spoken *as* the other	**How does this look and feel from where they stand?**	**Associated in another; empathic**



Associated in the other · their history, beliefs and intentions as if mine

Strengths of this position

- Empathy and rapport
- Understanding hidden motives and positive intentions
- Anticipating reactions in negotiation or sales
- Better feedback about your own impact

If overused…

- Losing your own needs; people-pleasing
- Being overwhelmed by others' emotions
- 'Mind-reading' — assuming you know

If underused…

- Seeming cold or tactless
- Repeated misunderstandings

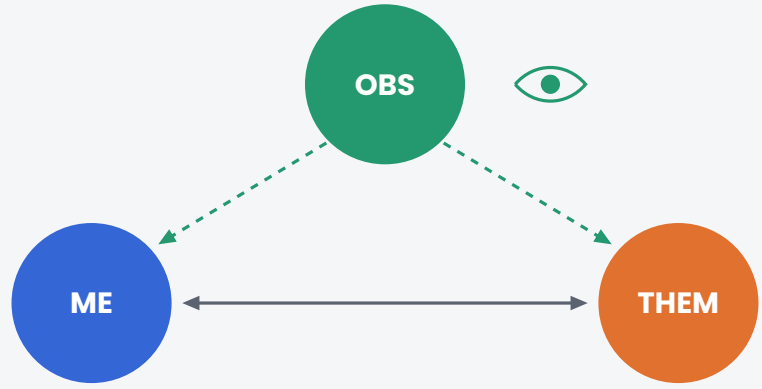
Try it now

Picture the same person from page 6. Become them for a moment. Look at 'you'. What do they notice?

6 Third Position — Observer

Stepping outside the interaction to watch both people from a neutral, resourceful distance — like a fair witness, a director or a fly on the wall.

PRONOUN	CORE QUESTION	EXPERIENCE
“he”, “she”, “they”, “those two”	**What is happening between these people?**	**Dissociated, calm, objective**



Dissociated · watching both people ‘over there’, calm and curious

Strengths of this position

- Seeing patterns and dynamics, not just content
- Emotional calm; reduced reactivity
- Generating options and strategy
- Giving balanced feedback and coaching

If overused…

- Detachment: seeming aloof or clinical
- Analysis without action or feeling
- Avoiding intimacy and commitment

If underused…

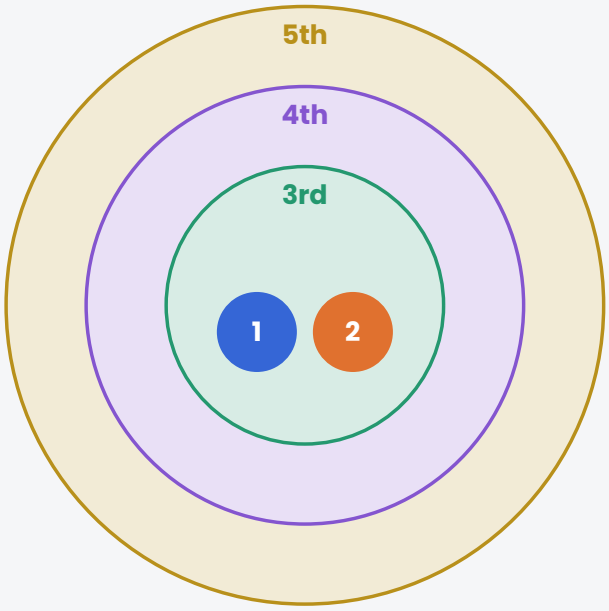
- Getting caught in emotional loops
- Missing the bigger pattern

Try it now

Imagine watching that interaction on a screen. What advice would you give the person who looks like you?

7 Extended Positions: Fourth and Fifth

Later trainers added positions beyond the original three. Their names and definitions vary by school, but two are widely taught.



3rd — Observer
Watches the people in the interaction.

4th — System / "We"
Identifies with the whole team, family or organisation.

5th — Universal / Meta
A wider, almost timeless view of the whole field.

Fourth position — the System

Associates into the **relationship or group as a whole**, speaking as "we". Often linked to Robert Dilts.

Asks: What does this team, family or system need to stay healthy?

Useful for: leadership, organisational change, family dynamics, 'win–win' agreements.

Watch for: 'groupthink' — losing individual needs inside the collective.

Fifth position — Universal / Meta

A highly detached, expansive perspective: the event seen across time, cultures or 'from above'. Some schools call this the meta or spiritual position.

Asks: In the bigger picture, what matters here? What will this mean in ten years?

Useful for: meaning-making, values, life decisions, letting go.

Watch for: spiritual bypassing — skipping the practical work.

8 All Positions Compared

A side-by-side reference for the five positions. Most practice focuses on the first three; the fourth and fifth add systemic and long-range perspective.

	1st · Self	2nd · Other	3rd · Observer	4th · System	5th · Universal
Pronoun	I, me, my	I (as them), you	he, she, they	we, us, our	all, the whole
Perspective	Own eyes	Their eyes	Outside both	The group as one	Beyond time and place
Association	Fully associated	Associated in other	Dissociated	Associated in group	Highly dissociated
Key question	What do I want?	What do they want, and why?	What is happening between us?	What does the whole need?	What truly matters?
Main gift	Clarity, drive, boundaries	Empathy, rapport	Objectivity, options	Alignment, cooperation	Meaning, perspective
Risk if stuck	Selfishness, rigidity	Losing self, enmeshment	Coldness, inaction	Groupthink	Detachment from reality
Typical users	Advocates, founders	Carers, salespeople	Mediators, coaches	Leaders, facilitators	Mentors, elders

Reading the table

Read across a row to compare positions on one dimension, or down a column for a full profile. Notice that every gift has a matching risk: the skill is not to live in any one column, but to visit each deliberately and return to first position with what you learned.



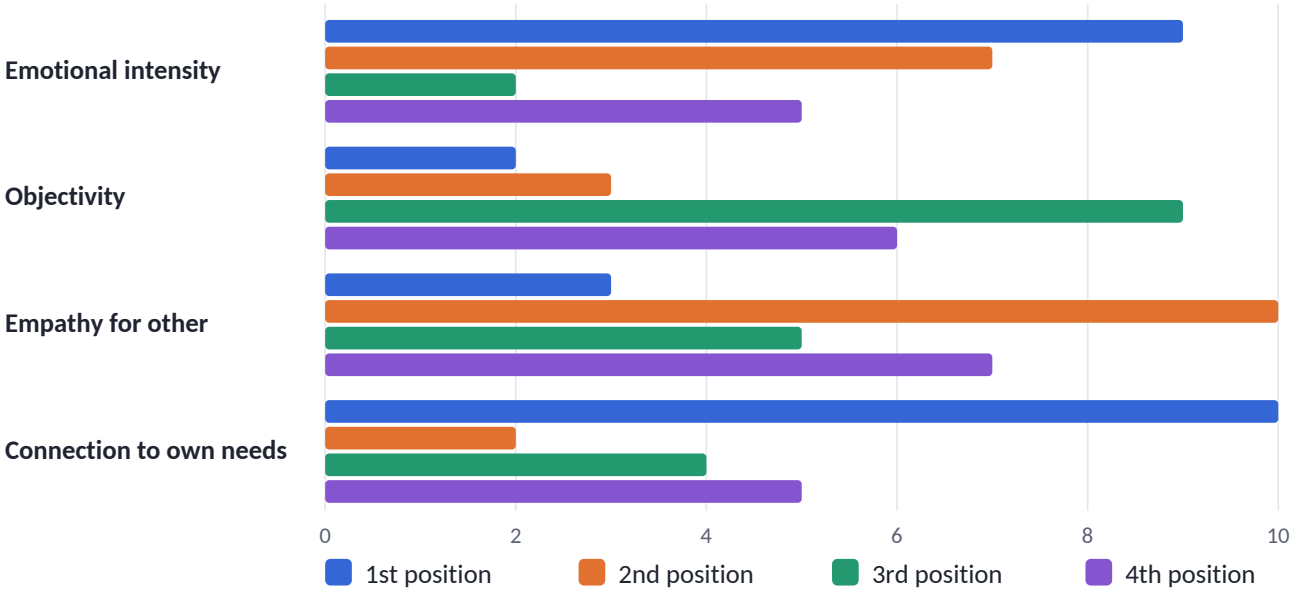
9 Association and Dissociation

Each position sits somewhere on a spectrum between being fully ‘inside’ an experience and watching it from outside. This is why changing position changes how strongly you feel.



Conceptual profile of each position

Illustrative ratings (0–10) for teaching purposes — these are not measured data.



Associate when you want to…

- feel motivated and energised
- enjoy or savour a good memory
- connect warmly with someone
- rehearse a confident performance

Dissociate when you want to…

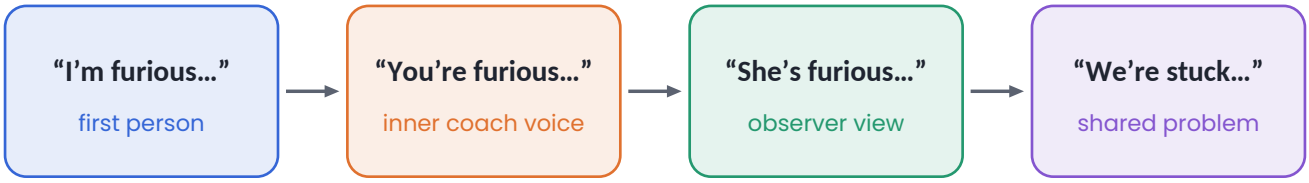
- calm a strong emotional reaction
- learn from a difficult experience
- plan, analyse or give feedback
- see the pattern, not just the moment

10 The Language of the Positions

Pronouns and phrasing are reliable clues to which position someone is speaking from — and a practical lever for moving into a different one.

Position	Language cues	Example: a missed deadline
1st · Self	I, me, my; 'I feel', 'I need'	"I'm frustrated. I worked late all week and I needed that input on time."
2nd · Other	'I' spoken as the other; 'you' addressed to self	"I had three managers chasing me. You never told me yours was the priority."
3rd · Observer	he, she, they; names; 'those two'	"They both want the project to succeed, but neither has said what 'on time' means."
4th · System	we, us, our team	"We don't have a shared way of setting priorities. Our process is creating this."
5th · Universal	always, in time, the bigger picture	"In a year this will be a lesson in clear agreements, not a crisis."

Pronoun shifting as a technique

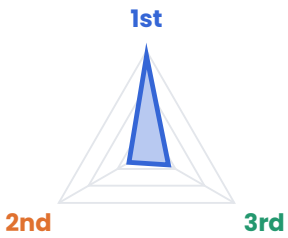


Simply restating a troubling thought in the second or third person tends to put distance between you and the feeling. Psychologists study a similar move as **'distanced self-talk'** — referring to yourself by name or as 'you' — which has been linked in experiments to calmer reasoning under stress.

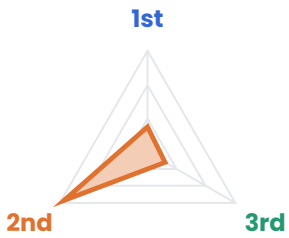
> **Listening tip:** when someone says "you just feel awful when that happens" about their own experience, they may be partially dissociating. When they say "we", check whether they mean the whole team or just themselves.

11 Balance: Getting Stuck in One Position

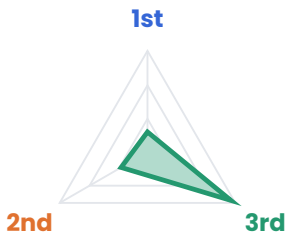
Most people have a habitual ‘home’ position. Problems arise when it becomes the *only* one. The profiles below are illustrative archetypes, not diagnostic categories.



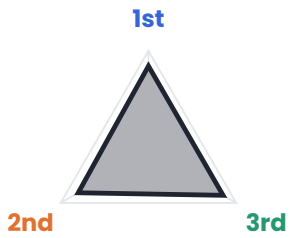
Stuck in 1st



Stuck in 2nd



Stuck in 3rd



Flexible / balanced

Profile	How it shows up	Typical cost	Position to practise
Stuck in 1st	Strong opinions, quick to judge, ‘my needs first’	Others feel unheard; repeated conflict	2nd (empathy) then 3rd
Stuck in 2nd	Over-accommodating, absorbs moods, can’t say no	Burnout, resentment, unclear identity	1st (needs, boundaries)
Stuck in 3rd	Analytical, calm but distant, ‘it’s interesting’	Seen as cold; slow to act or commit	1st (feeling) and 2nd
Flexible	Moves fluidly, then integrates and decides	—	Keep practising all three

Quick self-check

- ☐ Do people often say I don’t listen? — Possible over-reliance on 1st
- ☐ Do I agree to things I later regret? — Possible over-reliance on 2nd
- ☐ Do people call me hard to read or detached? — Possible over-reliance on 3rd
- ☐ Do I lose sight of what the team needs? — Possible under-use of 4th

12 The Classic Three-Position Exercise

The standard way to practise perceptual positions is to physically move between three marked spots while re-experiencing a real interaction. Allow 15–30 minutes.

1. **Choose a situation**
   Pick a real interaction with one person that you want to understand better or handle differently. Start with something mildly challenging.

2. **Mark three spots**
   Place three chairs or floor markers: 1st and 2nd facing each other, 3rd a few steps back, equidistant from both.

3. **Step into First Position**
   Sit in your own spot. See the other person opposite. Re-live the interaction: what do you see, hear, feel and want?

4. **Break state**
   Stand up, shake it off, look around the room or say your phone number backwards. This clears the previous position.

5. **Step into Second Position**
   Sit in their spot and adopt their posture and voice. Speak as 'I', being them. Look at 'you'. What do they want and believe?

6. **Break state**
   Leave their perspective fully behind before moving on.

7. **Step into Third Position**
   Stand at the observer spot and watch both people. What do you notice about the pattern? What would help?

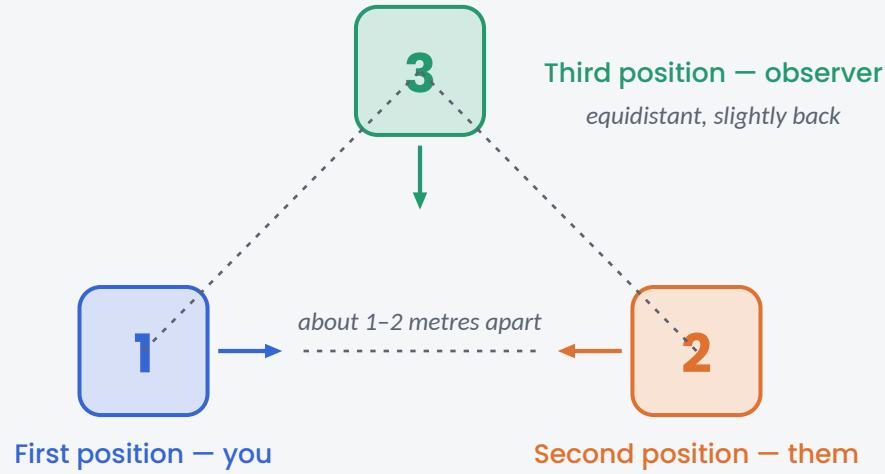
8. **Return to First Position**
   Bring the insights back. How does the situation feel now? What will you do differently?

> **Optional loop:** repeat steps 3–7 two or three times. Each pass usually reveals new information, and the first-position feeling tends to become more resourceful.

13 Setting Up the Space

Using physical locations — ‘spatial anchoring’ — helps keep each position clean. The body, voice and breathing change with each spot, and those changes reinforce the shift in perspective.

Floor plan (view from above)



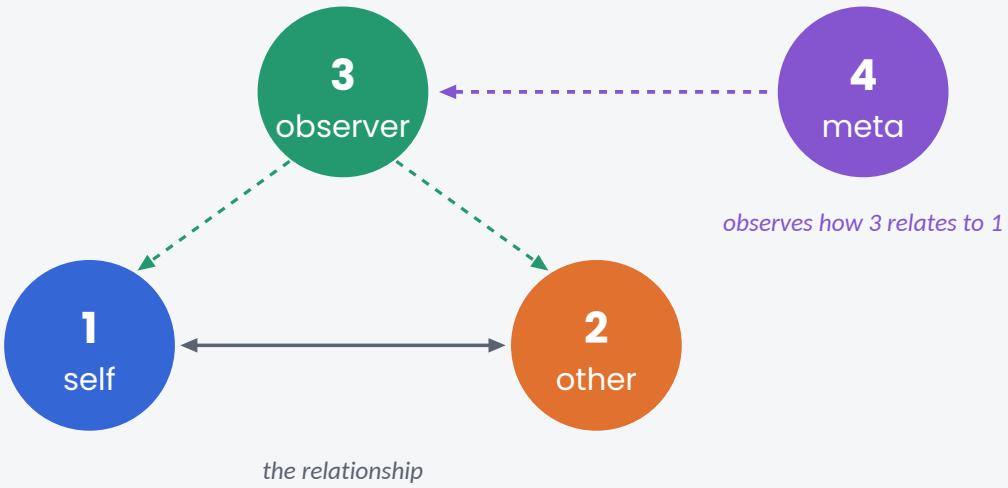
Some practitioners add a 4th spot outside the triangle for the system (“we”) perspective.

Physiology shifts that support each position

	1st · Self	2nd · Other	3rd · Observer
Posture	Your natural posture	Mirror their typical stance and gestures	Upright, balanced, relaxed
Breathing	Your own rhythm	Match their pace	Slow and even
Voice	Your usual tone	Their tone, tempo and phrases	Calm, neutral
Eyes	Looking at them	Looking at ‘you’	Taking in both
Inner feeling	Your emotions	Their likely emotions	Curious, unhooked

14 The Meta-Mirror

Robert Dilts' Meta-Mirror extends the basic exercise with a fourth position that observes how *you, as observer*, relate to yourself. It is often used for persistent relationship difficulties.



Step	Position	What you do
1	First	Associate into yourself facing the other person; notice your thoughts and feelings.
2	Second	Become the other person; experience the interaction from their side.
3	Third	Observe both. Notice especially how 'you' are responding to 'them'.
4	Fourth (meta)	Step further back. Notice how your observer-self thinks and feels about your first-position self.
5	Switch	Often the insight is that the observer's attitude toward 'me' mirrors the problem. Try swapping the 3rd-position response into 1st position.
6	Return	Re-enter first position with the new resources and test the interaction again.

> **Why it helps:** people are often far wiser and calmer when watching someone else's conflict than their own. The Meta-Mirror borrows that wisdom from the observer and transfers it into first position.

15 Aligning Perceptual Positions

Connirae and Tamara Andreas noticed that positions are often *mixed*: for example, hearing a critic's voice while supposedly in first position. Alignment means checking each sensory channel and moving stray elements back where they belong.

	1st position	2nd position	3rd position
Seeing (V)	✓ Through my eyes	✓ Through their eyes	✓ From outside both
Hearing (A)	✓ My voice / sounds	✓ Their voice	✓ Both voices, distant
Feeling (K)	✓ My feelings	✗ Critic's feelings leak in	✓ Calm, neutral
Self-talk	✗ Their voice in my head	✓ Their thoughts as 'I'	✓ Observer's commentary

Example grid: two misalignments (marked in red) — a critic's voice heard in first position, and the other's feelings mixed with 'my' feelings in second. Each needs to be moved to its proper place.

Alignment steps

- **Check each channel** in each position: where are the images, voices, feelings and self-talk coming from?
- **Notice intruders** — elements that belong to another position (e.g. a parent's voice inside first position).
- **Relocate them** with respect: imagine moving that voice or image over to the person or position it belongs to.
- **Strengthen each position** so it is fully itself: first fully you, second fully them, third fully neutral.
- **Test** by revisiting the situation. Aligned positions typically feel clearer, lighter and more resourceful.

> A clean first position gives a stable sense of self; a clean second position gives accurate empathy rather than projection; a clean third position gives genuine neutrality rather than cold judgement.

16 Applications Across Domains

Because almost every human problem involves more than one viewpoint, perceptual positions show up in a wide range of settings.

Conflict resolution

Each party explores the other's position and the observer view before discussing solutions; mediators use it to soften entrenched stances.

Negotiation & sales

Preparing by 'becoming' the counterpart reveals their interests, likely objections and what a good deal looks like for them.

Coaching & feedback

Coaches invite clients into 3rd position to see their own patterns; managers rehearse difficult conversations from both sides.

Leadership & teams

Leaders shift into 4th position to see what the organisation needs, balancing individual and collective interests.

Personal relationships

Partners, parents and friends use 2nd position to understand behaviour that seemed baffling or hurtful.

Therapy & self-help

Related techniques (empty chair, psychodrama) help clients process grief, anger or unresolved conversations.

Creative writing

Authors inhabit characters (2nd) and step back to see plot and structure (3rd).

Design & customer experience

Teams walk through a product as the user would, then step back to map the whole journey.

Which position does each application lean on most?

Application	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Conflict resolution	●	●●●	●●●	●●
Negotiation & sales	●●	●●●	●●	●
Coaching & feedback	●●	●●	●●●	●
Leadership & teams	●	●●	●●	●●●

17 Worked Example: A Workplace Conflict

Maya, a project lead, is frustrated with Tom, a developer who keeps missing deadlines. She works through the three positions before their next one-to-one. (A fictional, illustrative case.)

1st · Maya

"I feel let down and embarrassed in front of the client. I need reliability. I'm starting to think Tom just doesn't care."

FEELING

Frustration, worry, judgement

2nd · as Tom

"I'm juggling support tickets nobody else sees. Maya changes the scope every week and never asks how my workload is. I do care — I'm drowning."

FEELING

Overwhelm, defensiveness

3rd · Observer

"Two committed people. She sees missed dates; he sees moving targets. Neither has made the hidden workload visible. They talk about blame, not capacity."

FEELING

Calm, curious

What each position added

Position	New information	Shift
1st	Her real need is reliability for the client — not punishing Tom.	Clarity on the goal
2nd	Unseen support work and shifting scope are driving the delays.	Empathy replaces judgement
3rd	The pattern is a missing capacity conversation, not a character flaw.	Problem reframed as a system issue

Maya's new plan (back in first position)

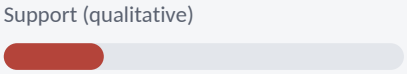
- Open the conversation with curiosity: "Walk me through everything on your plate this week."
- Agree a single visible list of priorities, including support work.
- Freeze scope changes mid-sprint unless both agree.
- State her own need clearly: early warning when a date is at risk.

18 What the Research Says

NLP as a whole has weak scientific support, but perspective-taking and self-distancing — the mechanisms behind perceptual positions — are active areas of mainstream psychological research.

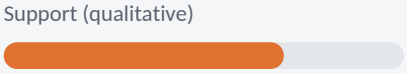
NLP-specific claims

Systematic reviews (e.g. Sturt et al., 2012; Witkowski, 2010) found little rigorous evidence that NLP techniques work as claimed.



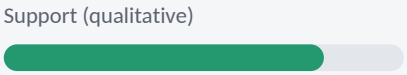
Perspective-taking

Experiments (e.g. Galinsky et al., 2008) found that considering a counterpart's thoughts helped negotiators find better joint deals.



Self-distancing

Studies by Kross, Ayduk and colleagues link viewing one's experience from a distance with less emotional reactivity.



Solomon's paradox

Grossmann & Kross (2014) found people reason more wisely about a friend's problem than their own — and distancing narrows that gap.



Bars are an editorial, qualitative summary of how strong the supporting literature is — not a measured statistic.

An important caution: perspective-taking has limits

Research by Eyal, Steffel and Epley (2018) found that simply *imagining* another person's view rarely made people more accurate about what that person actually thought. What did improve accuracy was **'perspective getting'** — asking them directly. Second position is therefore best treated as a source of hypotheses, to be checked in real conversation.

Reasonable to say

- Shifting viewpoint can reduce emotional intensity
- It can widen options and soften judgement
- It fits well-studied ideas about empathy and self-distancing

Not supported

- That second position gives you access to what others truly think
- Claims of rapid, guaranteed change
- NLP's underlying neurological claims

19 Common Pitfalls and Good Practice

The exercise is simple, but a few predictable mistakes can undermine it. Use this as a checklist before and during practice.

✗ PITFALL	✓ GOOD PRACTICE
Rushing through the positions	Spend enough time in each to genuinely feel the shift.
Staying 'half' in first position while in second	Change posture, voice and name; speak as 'I', being them.
Using second position to prove you were right	Look for their positive intention, not their mistakes.
Making the observer a judge	Keep 3rd position neutral and kind to both people.
Skipping the break state	Shake off each position before entering the next.
Treating guesses as facts	Check second-position insights by asking the real person.
Starting with a traumatic memory	Begin with mild issues; seek a qualified professional for trauma.
Ending in third position	Always return to first position to decide and act.

> **Safety note:** perceptual positions is a reflective tool, not a substitute for therapy. If a memory brings up intense distress, stop, ground yourself in the present, and consider working with a qualified mental health professional.

20 Quick Reference and Reflection

A one-page summary to keep beside you while practising.

1st · SELF

I

What do I see, hear, feel?

What do I want?

What matters to me?

2nd · OTHER

YOU

What is it like to be them?

What do they want?

What's their positive intention?

3rd · OBSERVER

THEY

What pattern do I see?

What does each need?

What would help both?

4th · SYSTEM ("we")

What does the relationship, team or family need to thrive? What would a fair outcome look like for all of us?

5th · UNIVERSAL

Seen from far above or far in the future, what really matters here? What will I be glad I did?

The 60-second version

Notice your reaction → **Swap** into their shoes → **Step back** and watch → **Widen** to the whole → **Return** and choose

Reflection prompts

- Which position do I naturally live in? Which do I avoid?
- Think of someone who puzzles you. What might their positive intention be?
- Recall a recent argument. What would a kind, neutral observer advise both of you?
- Where in my life would a 'we' perspective change how I act this week?

Key takeaway: perceptual positions is less a technique than a habit of mind — the willingness to see a situation from more than one place before deciding what to do.