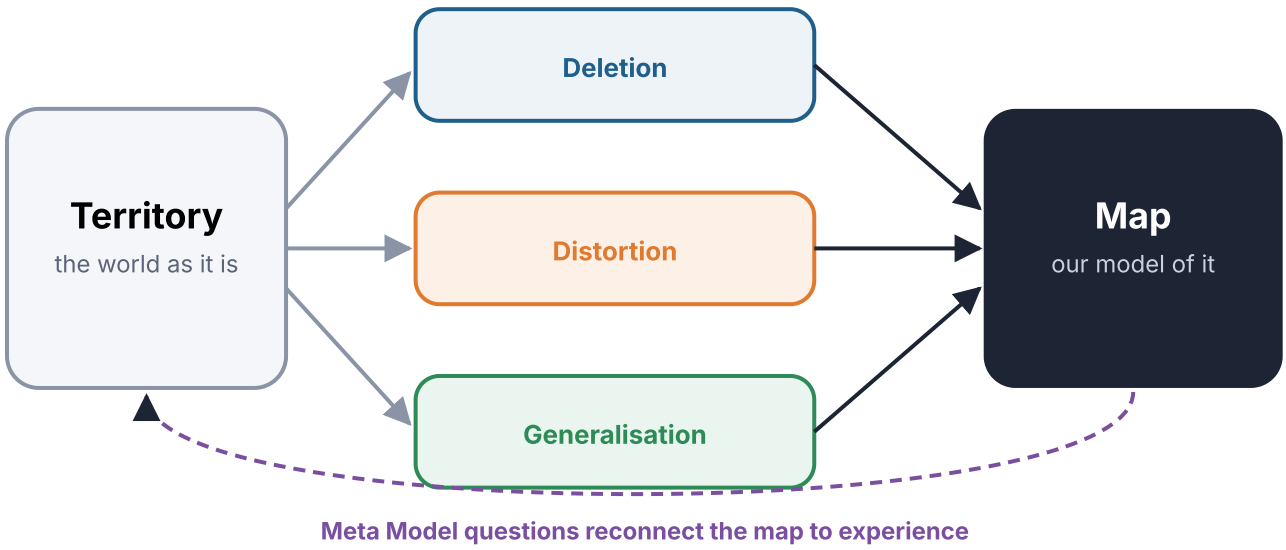
NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING · VISUAL SUMMARY

The NLP Communication Model

How deletion, distortion and generalisation turn experience into a personal map of the world, and how the Meta Model uses questions to recover what the map leaves out.



Covers: map and territory · the communication model · filters and internal states · deletion, distortion, generalisation · surface and deep structure · the 12 Meta Model patterns and their questions · practice, evidence and critique

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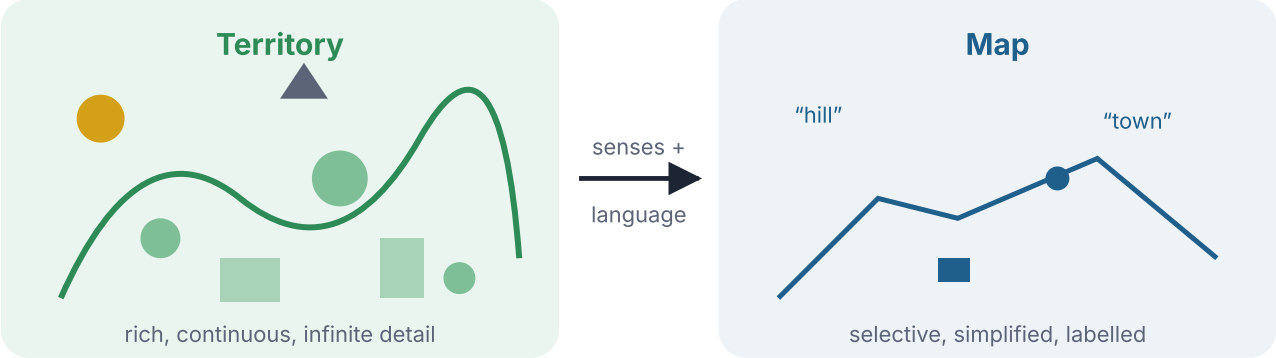
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01 · FOUNDATION

The Map Is Not the Territory

The phrase comes from Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity* (1933). NLP made it a central presupposition: people respond to their **model** of reality, not to reality itself.



Maps are necessary

No one could act in a world of unlimited detail. Simplifying is what lets us notice, learn and decide quickly.

Maps are never complete

Every map leaves things out, bends some things and treats some things as all the same. Problems arise when we forget it's a map.

Different maps, different worlds

Two people at the same meeting can leave with very different “facts” because they filtered it differently.

Maps can be updated

NLP's interest is in enriching limiting maps so people have more choices, rather than arguing about whose map is “right”.

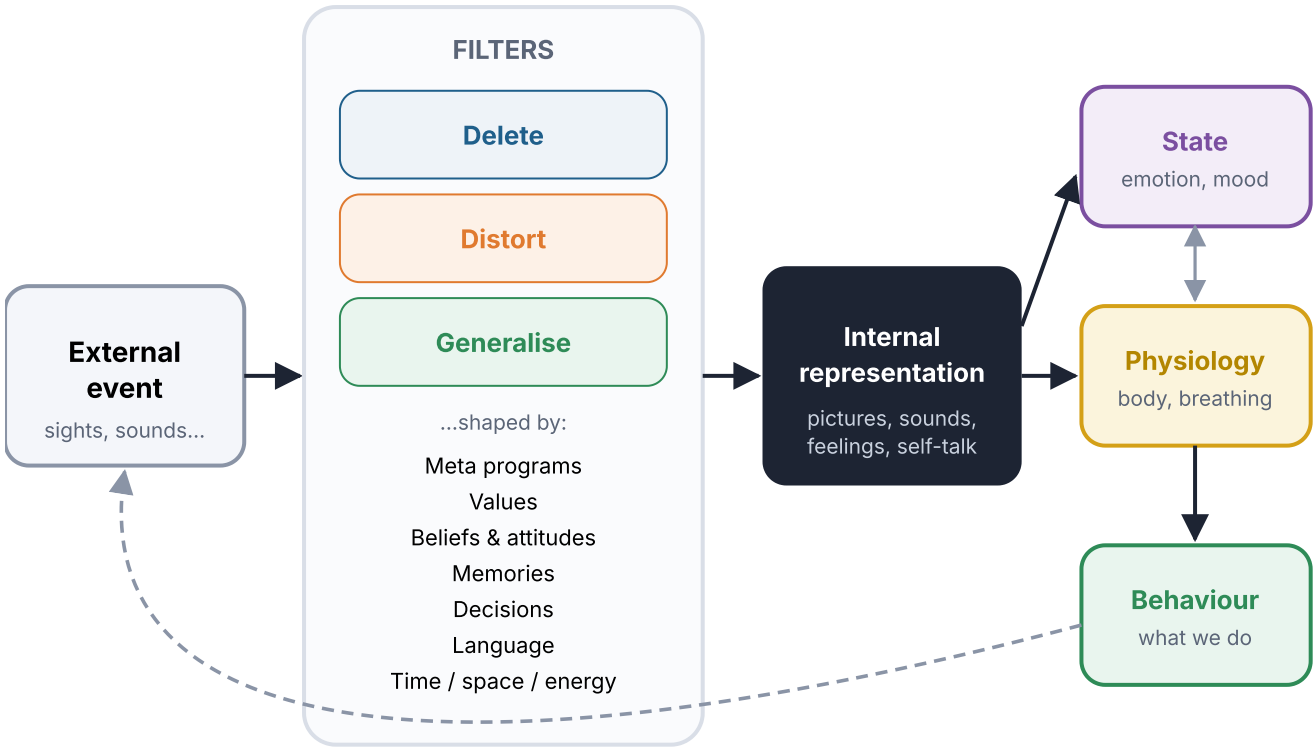
Two levels of modelling

Level	What is being mapped	Main NLP tool
First-level map	Sensory experience → internal representation	The Communication Model
Second-level map	Internal representation → words spoken	The Meta Model

02 · THE MODEL

The NLP Communication Model

The model shows how an external event becomes behaviour. Its widely taught form comes from Tad James and Wyatt Woodsmall's *Time Line Therapy and the Basis of Personality* (1988), building on Bandler and Grinder's earlier work.



feedback: behaviour changes the outside world and what we notice next

Input

Raw sensory data arrives through the five senses.

Processing

Filters delete, distort and generalise it into a usable internal picture.

Output

That picture shapes state, physiology and, in turn, behaviour.

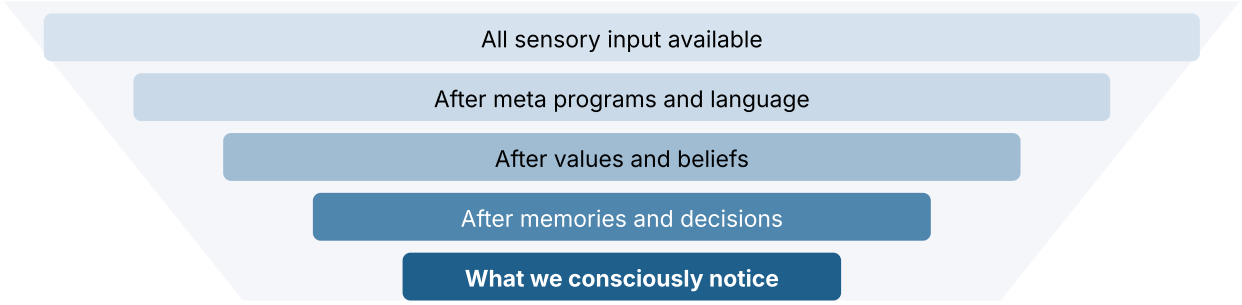
03 · FILTERS

The Filters

Deletion, distortion and generalisation are the three **processes**. The filters below decide *what* gets deleted, distorted or generalised for a particular person.

Filter	What it is	Example of its effect
Meta programs	Habitual sorting patterns, e.g. “towards vs away-from”, “big picture vs detail”	A detail-sorter notices the typo; a big-picture sorter notices the overall plan
Values	What matters most; criteria used to judge good or bad	Someone who values security notices the risks in a job offer first
Beliefs	Generalisations held as true about self, others and the world	“I'm bad with numbers” → spreadsheets look harder than they are
Attitudes	Clusters of values and beliefs about a topic	A sceptical attitude to change filters for problems in any new idea
Memories	Past experiences used to interpret the present	A past bad interview colours how a new one feels
Decisions	Earlier conclusions, often made young, that still guide filtering	“I decided I'm not creative” → creative chances go unnoticed
Language	The words and categories available to describe experience	Having a word for a feeling makes it easier to notice and name
Time, space, matter, energy	Practical limits on what can be perceived at once	Tiredness narrows what we take in

How filters stack



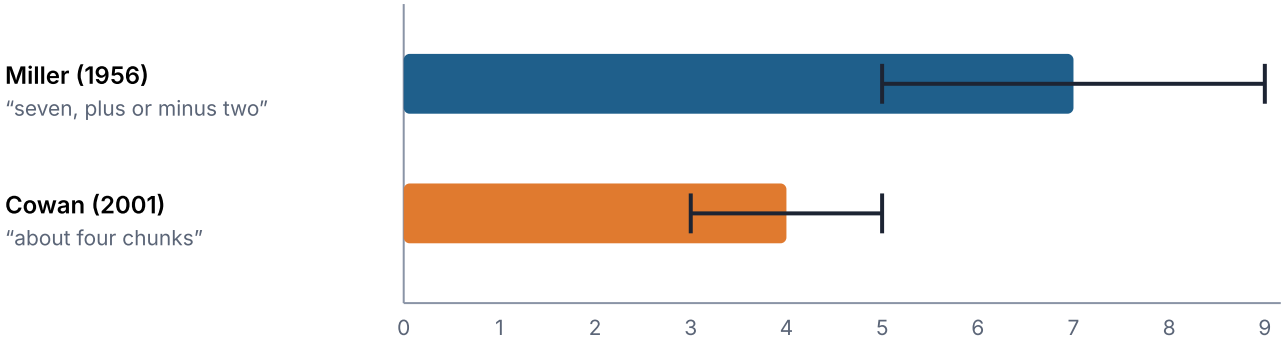
Conceptual diagram: bar widths show the idea of narrowing, not measured quantities.

04 · WHY FILTER?

Why We Filter: Limited Attention

Filtering isn't a flaw. Conscious attention and working memory hold only a small amount at once, so most incoming information has to be dropped, compressed or grouped.

Working-memory capacity estimates



Items (chunks) held in mind at once · bar = central estimate, whiskers = range

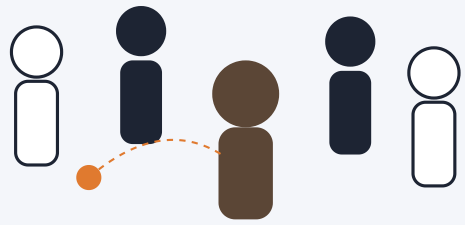
Chunking

We get round the limit by grouping. “F-B-I-C-I-A” is six letters but two chunks (FBI, CIA). Generalisation is a form of chunking.

Selective attention

We notice what is relevant to current goals and miss the rest, a well-studied effect sometimes called *inattentional blindness*. This is deletion at work.

A famous demonstration



Players passing a ball, and a person in a gorilla suit

In Simons and Chabris's 1999 “invisible gorilla” study, many viewers counting basketball passes failed to notice a person in a gorilla suit walking through the scene.

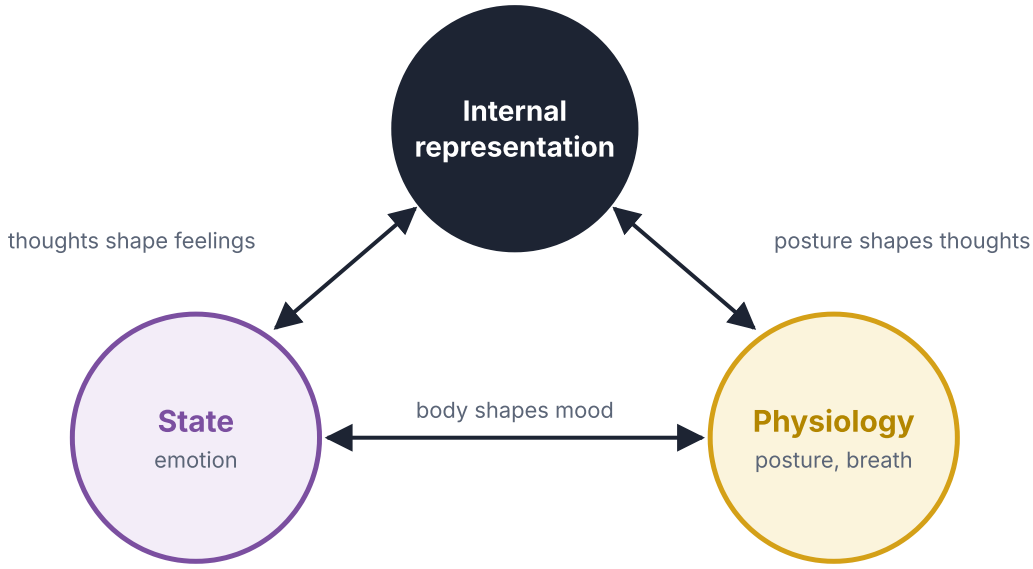
It shows deletion directly: when attention is aimed at one task, even striking information can be filtered out.

NLP trainings often quote figures such as “2 million bits per second in, 134 bits processed”. These numbers have no clear research source and are best treated as illustration, not fact.

05 · INNER EXPERIENCE

Internal Representation, State and Physiology

The filtered result is an **internal representation** made of images, sounds, feelings and words. It works in a loop with emotional **state** and body **physiology**, and each influences the other two.



Same event, two maps

	Person A	Person B
Event	Manager says: "Can you come to my office at 3pm?"	
Filter	Belief: "Surprise meetings mean bad news"	Memory: last such meeting was a promotion
Representation	Pictures a stern face; self-talk "What did I do?"	Pictures a smile; self-talk "Maybe the project"
State	Anxious	Curious, upbeat
Physiology	Shallow breathing, tense shoulders	Relaxed, upright
Behaviour	Can't focus all afternoon; arrives defensive	Prepares notes; arrives open

Key point: the event was identical. The difference came from what each person deleted, distorted and generalised, which is why NLP works on the map rather than the event.

06 · PROCESS 1

Deletion

Deletion is selectively paying attention to some parts of experience and leaving others out. It is how we avoid overload, and also how we miss things that matter.



Some elements are kept; the rest are simply not represented

Useful deletion

- Hearing one voice in a noisy room (the "cocktail party effect")
- Concentrating on study and ignoring background noise
- Not noticing the feel of your clothes all day

Limiting deletion

- Hearing only the one critical comment in a positive review
- Not noticing progress because only the gap is in view
- Missing a partner's attempts to help

Deletion in language

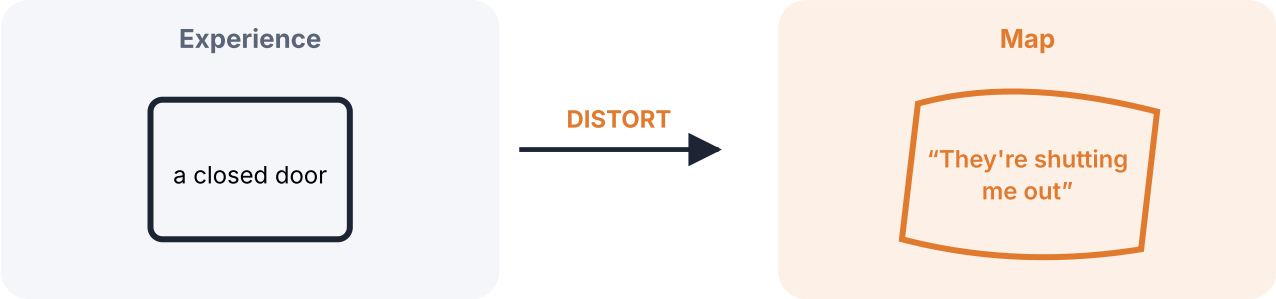
Statement	What's missing	Recovering question
"I'm upset."	About what? With whom?	"Upset about what, specifically?"
"It's better to wait."	Better than what?	"Better compared to what?"
"They don't listen."	Who exactly?	"Who specifically doesn't listen?"
"She hurt me."	How?	"How, specifically, did she hurt you?"

Question to ask yourself: *"What am I not noticing here?"*

07 · PROCESS 2

Distortion

Distortion is changing how we represent experience: adding meaning, shifting emphasis, imagining, or assuming causes and intentions. It powers creativity and planning, and also misunderstanding.



The fact stays the same; the meaning given to it changes

Useful distortion

- Imagining a building before it exists (architecture, design)
- Fiction, art, humour and metaphor
- Rehearsing a talk in your head
- Seeing a setback as a learning opportunity

Limiting distortion

- Mind reading: "He thinks I'm stupid"
- Assuming causes: "You make me angry"
- Catastrophising: imagining the worst outcome as certain
- Hearing criticism in a neutral remark

Forms distortion takes

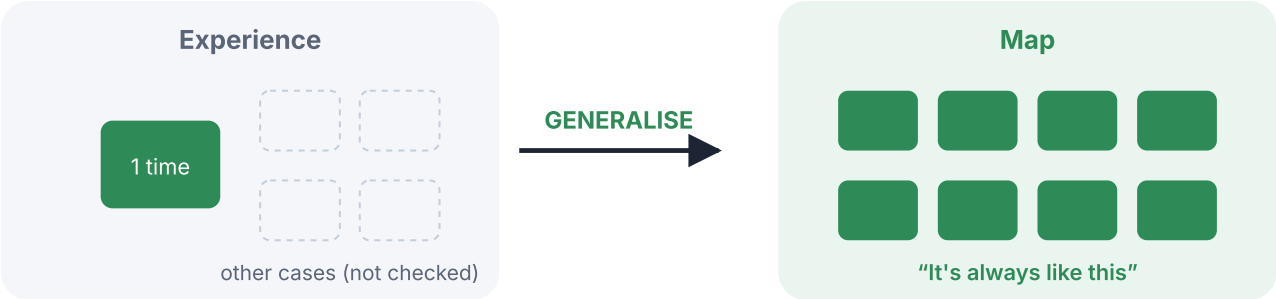
Form	Example
Meaning-making	"Being late means you don't respect me."
Cause and effect	"The weather makes me lazy."
Assumed intention	"She did that on purpose to annoy me."
Turning process into thing	"Our *communication* is broken" (as if it were an object)
Construction	Vividly imagining next week's presentation going well, or badly

Question to ask yourself: *"How else could this be interpreted?"*

08 · PROCESS 3

Generalisation

Generalisation is taking one or a few experiences and treating them as representing a whole category. It is the basis of learning, and the source of rigid rules and stereotypes.



One example becomes a rule for every case

Useful generalisation

- Learn to open one door → can open almost any door
- Touch a hot stove once → careful with all stoves
- Grammar rules learned from a few sentences

Limiting generalisation

- "I always mess up interviews" after one bad one
- "Nobody ever helps me"
- "I can't speak in public"
- Stereotypes about whole groups of people

Generalisation words to listen for

always · never · everyone · nobody · all · every · must · should · have to · can't · impossible · need to

Statement	Challenge that tests the rule
"I **always** mess up interviews."	"Always? Has there ever been one that went OK?"
"I **can't** say no to my boss."	"What would happen if you did?"
"I **should** be further along by now."	"According to whom? What stops you?"

Question to ask yourself: *"Is this true in every case?"*

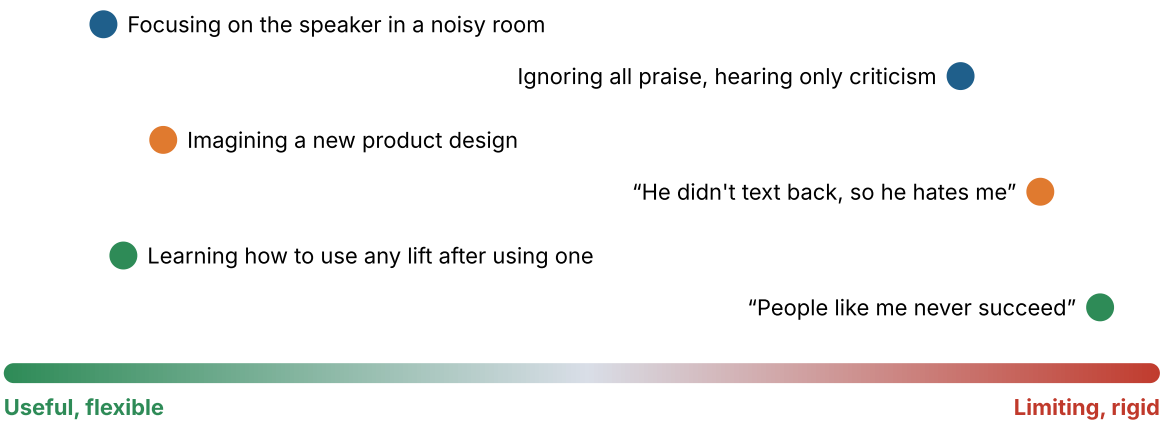
09 · COMPARISON

Comparing the Three Processes

All three run at once and constantly. None is good or bad in itself. The question is whether the result is useful in context.

	Deletion	Distortion	Generalisation
Core action	Leaves things out	Changes or adds meaning	Turns one case into a rule
Key question	What's missing?	Is that the only meaning?	Is that always true?
Helps with	Focus, avoiding overload	Creativity, planning, imagination	Learning, efficiency, prediction
Can lead to	Missing information, one-sided view	Misunderstanding, worry, blame	Rigid rules, stereotypes, limits
Language sign	Vague nouns and verbs, missing comparisons	Mind reading, “X makes me Y”	“Always”, “never”, “must”, “can't”
Self-check	What am I not noticing?	How else could I see this?	Where is the exception?

Where each process sits on the useful–limiting scale



Illustrative placement of examples, not measured data. Blue = deletion, orange = distortion, green = generalisation.

Overlap

“Nobody cares about me” deletes the people who do, distorts their actions and generalises to everyone.

Context

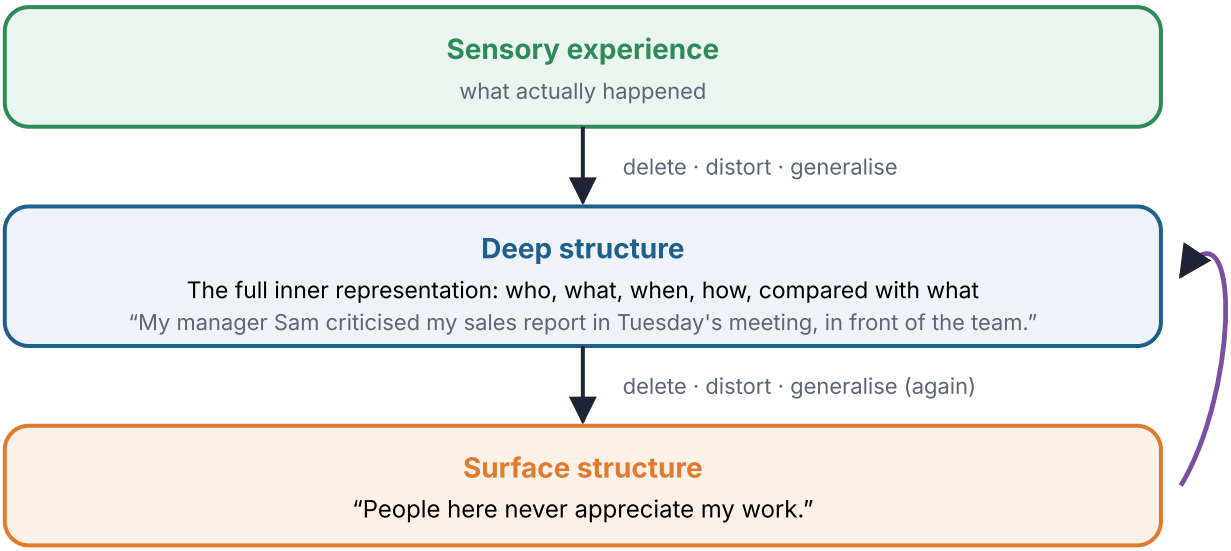
The same generalisation (“fire is dangerous”) is wise in a kitchen and unhelpful if it stops you lighting a candle.

Aim

NLP aims for a **richer** map: more detail, more interpretations, more choices.

Surface Structure and Deep Structure

Bandler and Grinder borrowed these terms from Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar. In *The Structure of Magic, Vol. I* (1975) they argued that the same three processes that shape experience also shape the words we use to describe it.



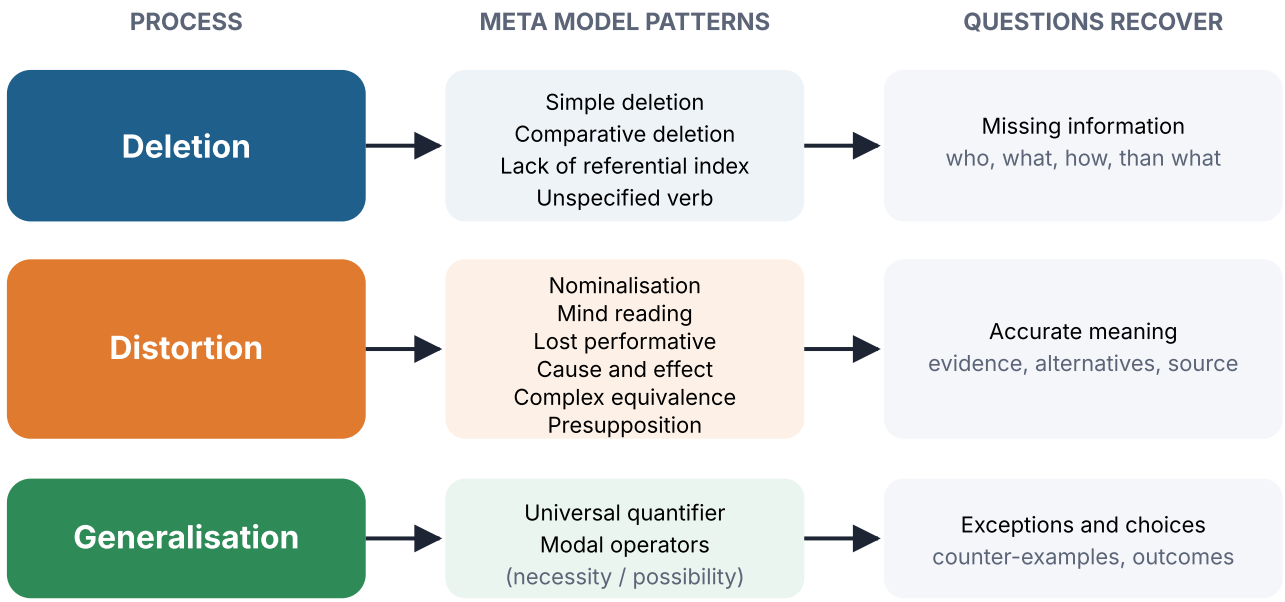
The Meta Model works upward, from surface back towards deep structure and experience

Part of surface sentence	Process	What the deep structure had
"People"	Deletion	One person: Sam
"never"	Generalisation	One event, on Tuesday
"appreciate"	Distortion	Specific criticism of one report, read as lack of appreciation
"my work"	Generalisation	One sales report

Note: Chomsky later dropped "deep structure" from his own theory (the Minimalist Program, 1990s). NLP keeps the terms as a practical metaphor, not a linguistic claim.

Introducing the Meta Model

The **Meta Model** is a set of language patterns and questions, first set out in *The Structure of Magic* (1975). It was modelled on how therapists Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir questioned their clients. It is the most direct link between the Communication Model and everyday conversation.



Gather information

Get specific facts behind vague statements.

Clarify meaning

Check that you understand what the person really means.

Open up limits

Loosen rules and assumptions so more options appear.

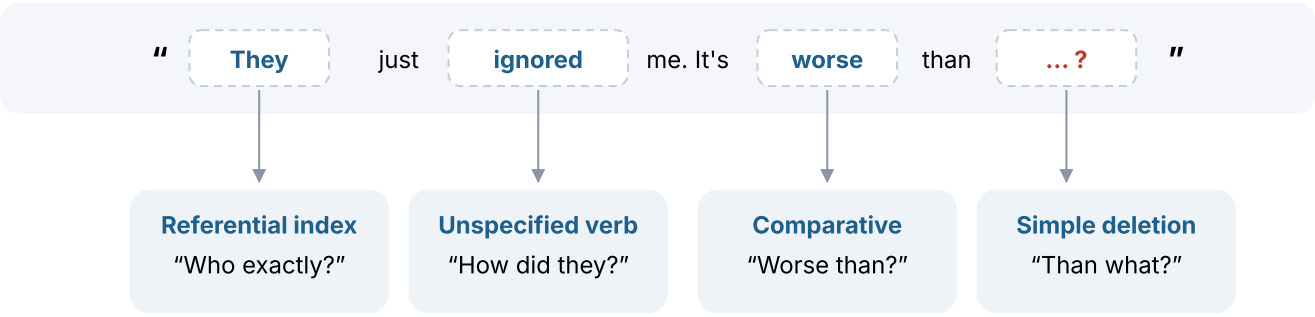
This page uses the grouping from *The Structure of Magic*. Some later trainers place nominalisation under deletion and add further patterns; the core 12 are shared.

Meta Model: Deletion Patterns

These patterns leave out part of the information. The challenge asks for what's missing.

Pattern	Example	Challenge question	Recovers
Simple deletion	"I'm uncomfortable."	"About what, specifically?"	The missing object or person
Comparative deletion	"That was the best option." "She's better."	"Best compared to what?" "Better than whom, at what?"	The standard of comparison
Lack of referential index	"They won't let me." "People are rude."	"Who specifically won't let you?"	The specific person or thing
Unspecified verb	"He rejected me." "I'll improve things."	"How, specifically, did he reject you?"	The actual process or action

Deletion at a glance



When to use

When you need facts to act on: problem-solving, briefs, feedback, project scoping, or understanding what someone actually wants.

Watch out

A string of "specifically?" questions can feel like an interrogation. Pick the one deletion that matters most.

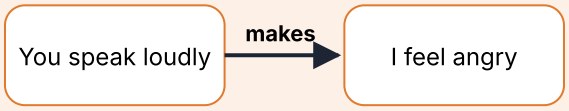
Meta Model: Distortion Patterns

These patterns change meaning, assume what can't be known, or freeze a process into a thing. The challenge asks for evidence or other interpretations.

Pattern	Example	Challenge question	Recovers
Nominalisation	"Our *relationship* is failing."	"How are you two relating that isn't working?"	The ongoing process behind the noun
Mind reading	"She thinks I'm lazy."	"How do you know what she thinks?"	The actual evidence
Lost performative	"It's wrong to change your mind."	"Says who? According to whom?"	The source of the judgement
Cause and effect	"You make me angry." "The rain ruins my day."	"How does what I do cause you to choose anger?"	Choice and the link between them
Complex equivalence	"He's late, so he doesn't care."	"How does being late mean not caring? Have you been late and still cared?"	Whether X really equals Y
Presupposition	"Why can't I ever get it right?"	"What leads you to believe you never get it right?"	The hidden assumption

Two shapes of distortion

Cause → Effect



X **causes** Y: removes personal choice

Complex Equivalence



X **means** Y: one meaning fixed

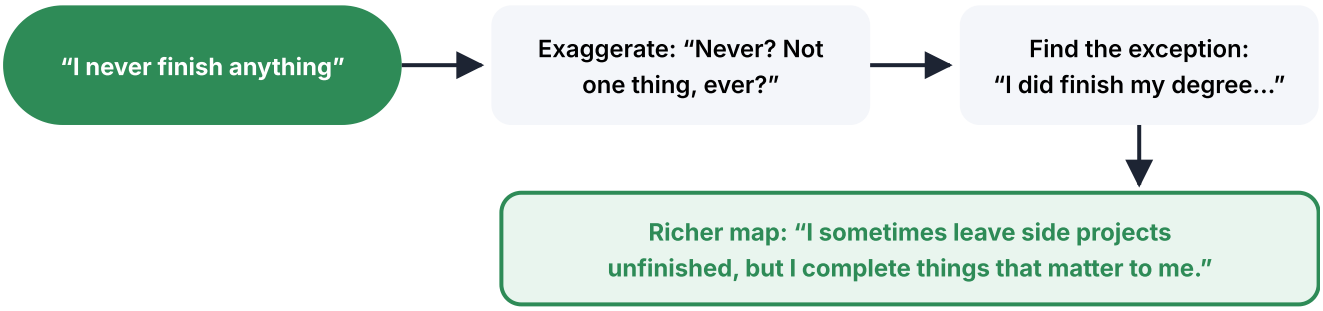
Spotting nominalisations: try the "wheelbarrow test". If you can't put it in a wheelbarrow (*decision, respect, failure, communication*), it's probably a process frozen into a noun. Turn it back into a verb: "What are you deciding?"

Meta Model: Generalisation Patterns

These patterns state rules and limits as if they had no exceptions. The challenge looks for counter-examples and consequences.

Pattern	Example	Challenge question	Recovers
Universal quantifier all, every, never, always, nobody	"Nobody ever listens to me."	"Nobody? Ever? Has anyone ever listened to you?"	Counter-examples
Modal operator of necessity should, must, have to, need to	"I have to please everyone."	"What would happen if you didn't?"	Consequences, the rule's purpose
Modal operator of possibility can't, unable, impossible	"I can't tell him how I feel."	"What stops you?" / "What would happen if you did?"	The block and possible ways round it

Challenging a universal quantifier



Modal operators shape what feels possible

Necessity: "should / must"

Creates rules. Asking "What would happen if you didn't?" brings out the consequence the rule protects against, which can then be weighed openly.

Possibility: "can't"

Creates limits. Asking "What stops you?" locates the specific barrier, which is often smaller or more solvable than the blanket "can't".

Tip: "can't" sometimes really means "won't" or "don't know how yet". Offering those alternatives lets the person choose the most accurate one.

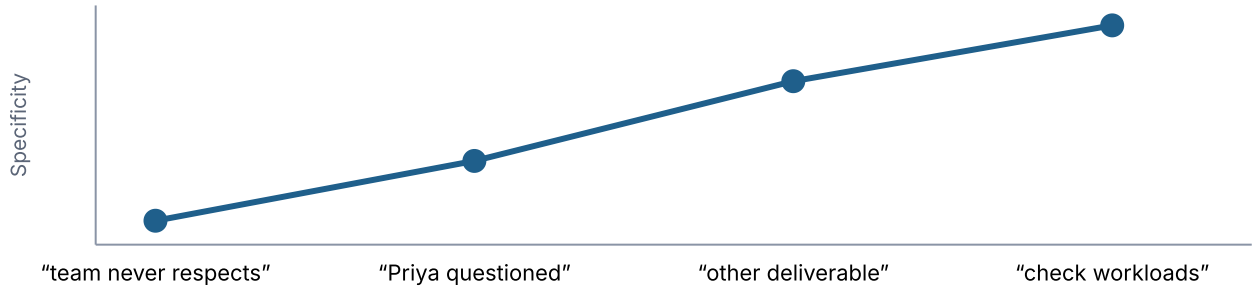
15 · IN PRACTICE

The Meta Model in Practice

A short coaching exchange showing how a few well-chosen questions turn a vague, limiting statement into something specific and actionable.

#	Dialogue	Pattern spotted	Process
1	**Client:** “My team never respects my decisions.”	Universal quantifier; nominalisation (“decisions”); unspecified verb (“respects”)	Gen. Dist.
2	**Coach:** “Never? Which decision are you thinking of?”	Challenges the quantifier and asks for one example	
3	**Client:** “Last week, Priya questioned the deadline I set.”	Now specific: one person, one event	Del. recovered
4	**Coach:** “How does questioning the deadline mean she doesn't respect you?”	Challenges a complex equivalence	
5	**Client:** “Well... she said she had another deliverable due the same day.”	New information appears	Dist. loosened
6	**Coach:** “So what would you like to happen next time?”	Moves from problem to outcome	
7	**Client:** “Check workloads before setting deadlines.”	Specific, actionable	Richer map

How specificity increased



Illustrative: shows the direction of change, not a measurement.

Notice: the coach asked only about four questions. Picking the pattern that most limits the person matters more than challenging every pattern.

16 · SKILL

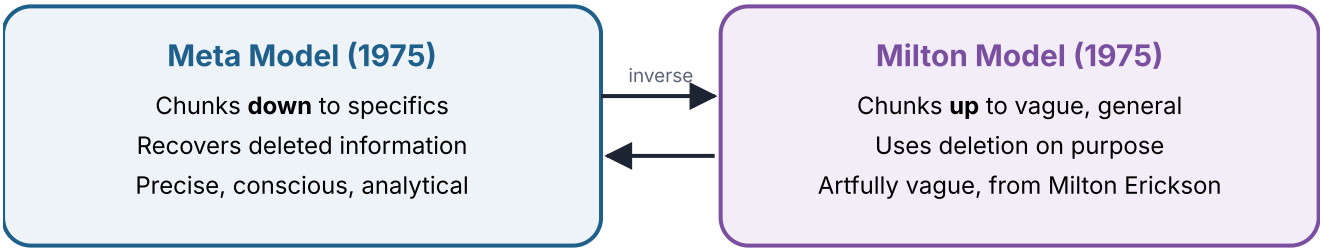
Using It Well

The Meta Model is precise and can feel blunt. Its originators stressed using it inside **rapport** and towards a clear **outcome**.

Guidelines

1. **Know your outcome**
   Ask only what helps reach the goal of the conversation: clarity, a decision, a fix.
2. **Build rapport first**
   Match pace and tone and show you've heard the person before you question their words.
3. **Soften the question**
   “I'm curious, who in particular...?” or “I wonder what would happen if...” sounds less like a challenge.
4. **Prioritise**
   Generalisations and distortions that limit choice usually matter more than small deletions.
5. **Notice the response**
   If the person becomes defensive, step back to rapport before going on.

Meta Model vs Milton Model



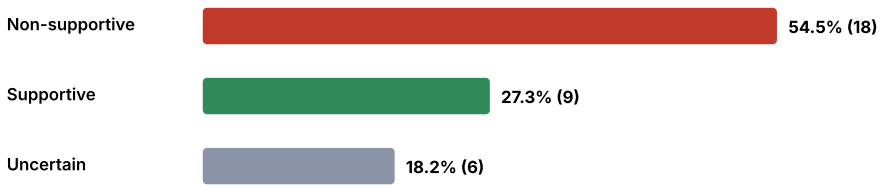
Common pitfalls

Pitfall	Better approach
Interrogating every sentence	Choose one or two key patterns
Using “why?”	“Why” invites justification; prefer “how”, “what” and “who specifically”
Correcting people (“That's a generalisation!”)	Ask with curiosity; let them find the exception
Ignoring emotion	Acknowledge feelings before analysing language

Evidence, Critique and Related Approaches

The core idea, that perception is selective and constructed, is well supported in psychology. NLP's specific models and claims have little direct research, and reviews of NLP overall are largely negative.

Outcomes of empirical NLP studies



33 empirical studies of NLP in credible journals, by outcome. Source: Witkowski (2010), *Polish Psychological Bulletin*. These studies tested NLP broadly, not the Meta Model specifically.

Well-supported ideas

- Attention is limited and selective (Miller 1956; Cowan 2001; Simons & Chabris 1999)
- Memory is reconstructive and can be distorted
- People overgeneralise from few examples

Weaker points

- Little controlled testing of the Meta Model itself
- Relies on a linguistic theory (deep structure) that linguistics has largely moved on from
- Claims of rapid personal change are mostly anecdotal

Close relatives in evidence-based therapy

Many Meta Model patterns resemble the “cognitive distortions” used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Beck, 1960s; popularised by Burns, *Feeling Good*, 1980), which has a substantial evidence base.

Meta Model pattern	CBT cognitive distortion	Shared idea
Universal quantifier	Overgeneralisation; all-or-nothing thinking	One case treated as always
Mind reading	Mind reading (jumping to conclusions)	Assuming others' thoughts
Modal operator of necessity	“Should” statements	Rigid rules
Complex equivalence	Labelling	One behaviour = fixed meaning
Deletion of positives	Mental filter; discounting the positive	Selective attention to negatives

Summary and Quick Reference

The Communication Model

- Events pass through **filters** (values, beliefs, memories, meta programs...).
- Filters **delete, distort** and **generalise** to create an internal representation.
- That representation shapes **state, physiology** and **behaviour**.

The Meta Model

- The same three processes show up in **language**.
- 12 patterns, each with a **challenge question**.
- Questions move from **surface structure** back towards experience, giving a richer map with more choice.

Meta Model cheat sheet

Process	Pattern	Sounds like	Ask
Deletion	Simple deletion	"I'm confused."	About what?
	Comparative deletion	"It's better."	Compared to what?
	Lack of referential index	"They say..."	Who specifically?
	Unspecified verb	"She upset me."	How specifically?
Distortion	Nominalisation	"The decision..."	Who is deciding what, how?
	Mind reading	"He's angry with me."	How do you know?
	Lost performative	"That's wrong."	Says who?
	Cause and effect	"You make me..."	How does X cause Y?
	Complex equivalence	"X means Y."	How does X mean Y?
	Presupposition	"When will you stop...?"	What leads you to believe...?
Generalisation	Universal quantifier	"Always / never / all"	Ever? Any exception?
	Modal of necessity	"I must / should"	What would happen if you didn't?
	Modal of possibility	"I can't"	What stops you?

Key sources

Korzybski, A. (1933). *Science and Sanity*. · Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1975). *The Structure of Magic, Vol. I*. · James, T. & Woodsmall, W. (1988). *Time Line Therapy and the Basis of Personality*. · Miller, G. A. (1956). The magical number seven, plus or minus two. *Psychological Review*. · Cowan, N. (2001). *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. · Simons, D. & Chabris, C. (1999). *Perception*. · Burns, D. (1980). *Feeling Good*. · Witkowski, T. (2010). *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 41(2).