

A VISUAL SUMMARY

Eye Accessing Cues

in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

What NLP claims eye movements reveal about thinking, how the model is taught and used — and what the research actually shows, including the popular lie-detection myth.

The chart · V · A · K · Strategies · Lie myth · Research · Practice

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SECTION 01

What Are Eye Accessing Cues?

Eye accessing cues are the small, often unconscious eye movements people make while thinking. NLP proposes that the direction of these movements shows which sense a person is using to think — seeing, hearing, feeling or talking to themselves.

Ask someone “What colour was your first bicycle?” and you may notice their eyes flick up, sideways or down before they answer. Richard Bandler and John Grinder, the co-founders of NLP, suggested these movements follow a consistent pattern: **up** for pictures, **sideways** for sounds, **down** for feelings and inner dialogue.

The idea became one of the best-known parts of NLP. It is also one of the most heavily tested — and, as later sections show, research has **not** supported it. This guide explains the model as NLP teaches it, then sets it against the evidence.

Up	Sideways	Down
Visual: images and pictures	Auditory: sounds and voices	Feelings (your left*) and inner dialogue (your right*)

* As you look at the person, for the typical pattern described in NLP.

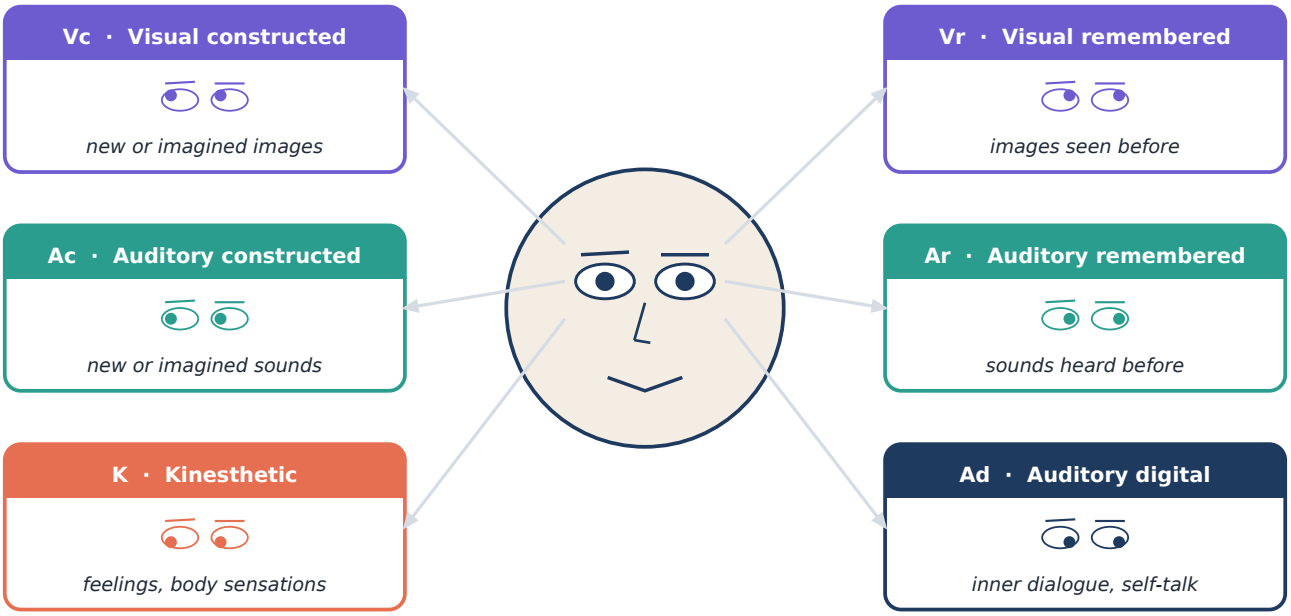


Figure 1. The standard NLP eye accessing chart — as you face the person.

Key message

Treat eye accessing cues as an NLP **hypothesis** about thinking — useful for training attention, but **not** a reliable way to know what someone is thinking, and never a lie detector.

SECTION 02

Origins & History

Eye accessing cues emerged as Bandler and Grinder studied how skilled communicators noticed subtle shifts in clients. They built on earlier research into eye movements and the brain.

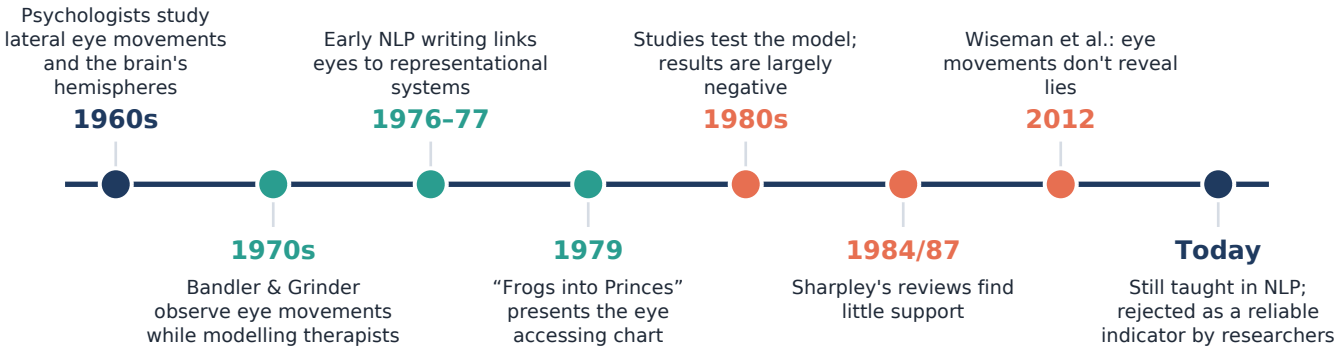


Figure 2. Key dates (spacing not to scale). Teal = NLP development; coral = research testing the claims.

Influence	Contribution
Lateral eye movement research (1960s–70s)	Psychologists studied whether looking left or right reflected activity in the brain's hemispheres. Findings were mixed.
Bandler & Grinder	Proposed that eye direction shows which sensory system a person is accessing. Presented the chart in workshops and in *Frogs into Princes* (1979).
Robert Dilts and others	Expanded the model and linked eye patterns to “strategies” — the sequences people use to think.
Later NLP trainers	Spread the chart widely, often in simplified form, through courses and books.

An important caveat

The founders described the chart as a pattern seen in “normally organised” right-handed people, and stressed that each person should be calibrated individually. Many later popular versions dropped these qualifications.

SECTION 03

The Representational Systems Behind the Model

Eye accessing cues rest on another NLP idea: that we think using the same senses we perceive with. NLP calls these representational systems.

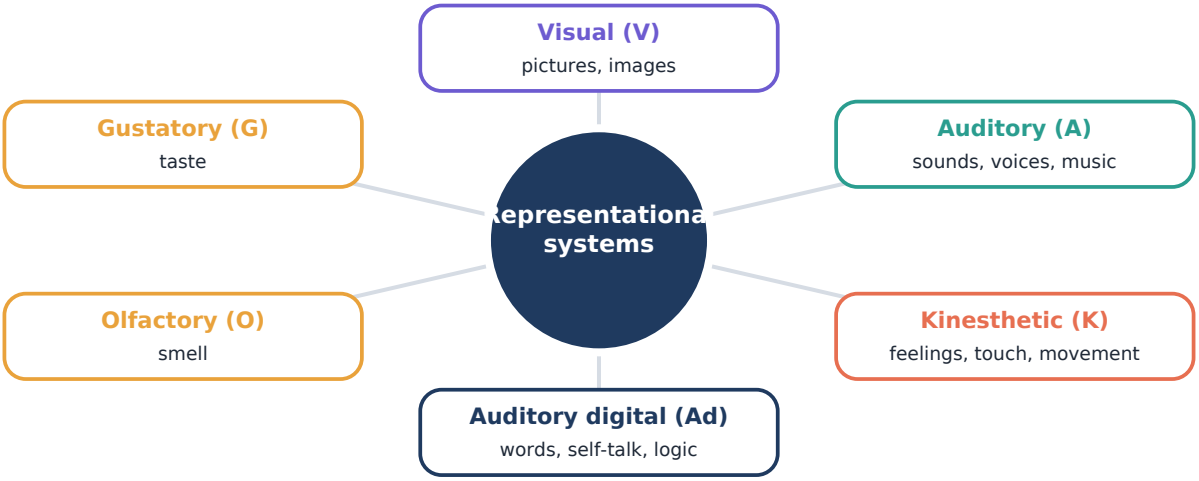


Figure 3. NLP's representational systems (VAKOG plus auditory digital).

System	Example of thinking in it	Typical words (“predicates”)	Claimed eye position
Visual	Picturing your front door	see, look, clear, bright, focus	Up
Auditory	Recalling a friend's voice	hear, sound, tell, rings a bell	Sideways
Kinesthetic	Feeling sand under your feet	feel, grasp, solid, heavy	Down (one side)
Auditory digital	Talking yourself through a decision	think, understand, logical	Down (other side)

Two separate claims

The eye model combines two claims: that people think in specific senses, and that eye direction reveals which sense. Even if the first is partly true, the second can still fail — and research suggests it does.

SECTION 04

The Standard Eye Accessing Chart

NLP's chart lists seven positions. Each is said to accompany a particular kind of thinking. Below they are shown as you look at a person with the typical pattern.

Position	Name	What it's said to show	Example question to elicit it
 Vr	Visual remembered	Recalling images seen before	“What colour was your first car?”
 Vc	Visual constructed	Creating new images	“Imagine a purple elephant with yellow spots.”
 Ar	Auditory remembered	Recalling sounds	“What does your phone's ringtone sound like?”
 Ac	Auditory constructed	Creating new sounds	“Imagine your voice as a cartoon character.”
 Ad	Auditory digital	Internal dialogue	“What do you say to yourself when you're stuck?”
 K	Kinesthetic	Accessing feelings and sensations	“What does it feel like to stand in warm rain?”
 Vd	Defocused	Visualising (either kind), often straight ahead	Often seen during day-dreaming

Up
visual: Vr / Vc

Level
auditory: Ar / Ac

Down
Ad and K

Ahead
defocused visual

Remembered vs. constructed

For the typical pattern, **remembered** positions are on the person's **left** (your right as you face them) and **constructed** positions on their **right** (your left).

SECTION 05

Observer's View vs. the Person's View

Most confusion about the chart comes from left and right. Charts are usually drawn as you face the other person — the mirror image of their own left and right.

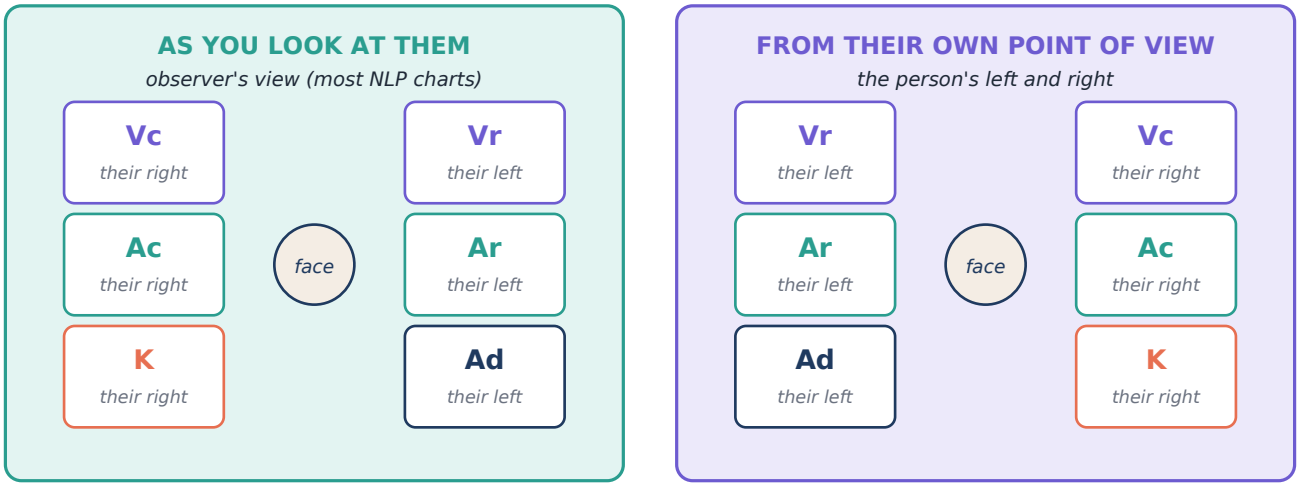


Figure 4. The same pattern drawn from the observer's side (left) and from the person's own side (right).

Description	From the person's view	As you face them
Visual remembered (Vr)	Up to **their left**	Up to **your right**
Visual constructed (Vc)	Up to **their right**	Up to **your left**
Auditory remembered (Ar)	Level, to their left	Level, to your right
Auditory constructed (Ac)	Level, to their right	Level, to your left
Auditory digital (Ad)	Down to their left	Down to your right
Kinesthetic (K)	Down to their right	Down to your left

Quick way to remember

Look in a mirror and think of a memory. The direction you see your eyes move in the mirror matches the observer's chart, not the person's own left and right.

SECTION 06

Visual Cues: Remembered & Constructed

According to the model, upward eye movements accompany visual thinking. The side indicates whether the image is being recalled or created.

Position	Description	Example questions
 Vr	Recalling something seen before: places, faces, objects, written words	“What does your bedroom look like?” · “What was the colour of your school uniform?”
 Vc	Building an image never seen before, or altering a memory	“Imagine your house painted bright orange.” · “What would you look like with blue hair?”
 Vd	Defocused, staring ahead: visualising without strong eye movement	Often seen when people are absorbed in a mental picture

Visual signals that often go with it (NLP claims)

Signal	Description
Breathing	Higher and shallower, in the chest
Posture	Head and shoulders up; sitting forward
Voice	Faster tempo, higher pitch
Gestures	Hands pointing upwards or sketching pictures in the air
Language	“I see what you mean.” “It looks good.” “Picture this…”

Caution

A question that sounds “visual” may not produce visual thinking. “What colour was your first car?” could be answered from a remembered fact (“It was red”) with no image at all.

SECTION 07

Auditory Cues: Remembered, Constructed & Internal Dialogue

Sideways movements are linked with sounds, and a downward movement to one side with talking to oneself — what NLP calls “auditory digital”.

Position	Description	Example questions
 Ar	Recalling sounds, voices or music heard before	“What does your favourite song's chorus sound like?” · “How does your mother's voice sound?”
 Ac	Creating sounds never heard before	“What would a duck sound like if it could sing opera?” · “Imagine your name said backwards.”
 Ad	Internal dialogue: talking yourself through something, reasoning in words	“What do you say to yourself before an exam?” · “Recite a poem silently.”

Auditory signals that often go with it (NLP claims)

Signal	Auditory (Ar / Ac)	Auditory digital (Ad)
Breathing	Even, mid-chest	Even, sometimes with sighs
Posture	Head tilted (the “telephone” position)	Head down; hand on chin
Voice	Rhythmic, melodic	More monotone, precise
Language	“Sounds good.” “I hear you.”	“It makes sense.” “Let me think.”

The “telephone” posture

Bandler and Grinder suggested that touching the face (chin, cheek, mouth) often accompanies internal dialogue. This is an observation, not a tested finding.

SECTION 08

Kinesthetic Cues & Defocused Gaze

Looking down to one side is said to accompany feelings — physical sensations and emotions. A defocused gaze is linked to visualising without eye movement.

Position	Description	Example questions
 K	Accessing feelings, sensations and emotions	“How does it feel to wrap yourself in a warm blanket?” · “What does disappointment feel like?”
 Vd	Gazing straight ahead, unfocused; often while visualising	“Picture your favourite place…” (people sometimes stare rather than move their eyes)

Kinesthetic signals that often go with it (NLP claims)

Signal	Description
Breathing	Deeper and slower, in the belly
Posture	Relaxed, heavier; head down
Voice	Slower, lower and softer, with pauses
Gestures	Touching the chest or stomach
Language	“It feels right.” “I can't get a grip on it.”



Figure 5. Kinesthetic, auditory digital and defocused positions, as you face the person.

Many reasons to look down

Looking down is also common when people feel shy, sad, ashamed or are simply avoiding eye contact — and is strongly influenced by culture. Down does not mean “feeling” in any reliable way.

SECTION 09

Eye Patterns & Strategies

NLP describes thinking as a sequence of steps — a “strategy”. Practitioners use eye movements as one clue to the order of those steps.

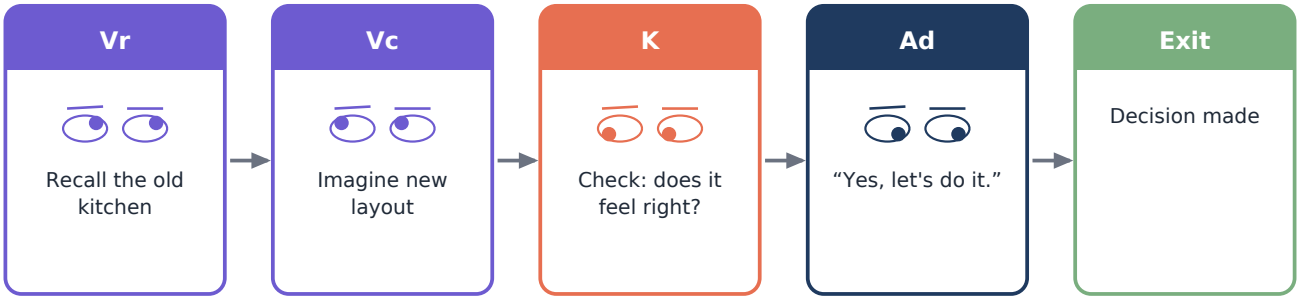


Figure 6. An example decision strategy for redesigning a kitchen, as NLP might map it from eye movements and words.

Term	Meaning in NLP
Strategy	The internal sequence of representations that leads to a result (e.g. deciding, spelling, motivating oneself).
Lead system	The system that first “goes looking” for information, sometimes shown by the first eye movement.
Primary / preferred system	The system someone is said to use most, sometimes inferred from predicates or eye movements.
Synesthesia pattern	Two systems that fire together, e.g. seeing an image and feeling it at the same time (V/K).
TOTE	Test–Operate–Test–Exit: the loop structure strategies are said to follow.

Evidence note

Mapping a strategy from words and actions can be a useful coaching exercise. Relying on eye direction to do it is not supported by research, so check by asking: *“What did you do first, inside?”*

SECTION 10

The Spelling Strategy

The best-known application of eye accessing cues is NLP's “spelling strategy”, based on the observation that good spellers seem to visualise words.

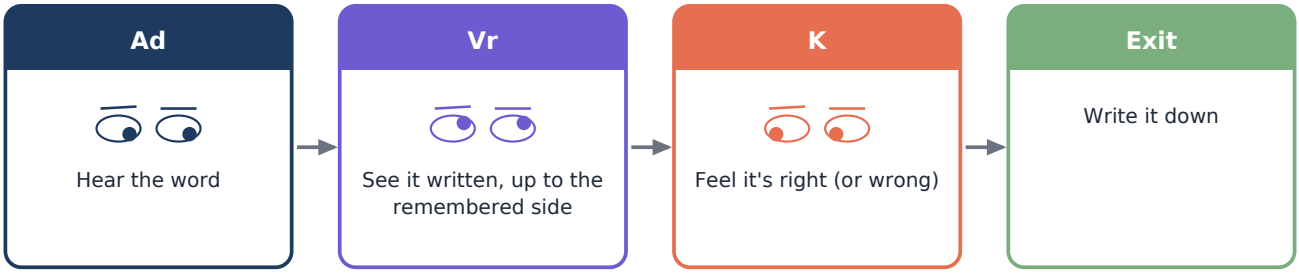


Figure 7. The NLP spelling strategy as usually taught.

Step	What the learner does	Practitioner's role
1. Feel good	Gets into a relaxed, confident state	Remove pressure; build rapport
2. Look	Looks at the correctly spelled word	Hold the card up to the learner's remembered side
3. Picture	Looks up and pictures the word; makes it bright, coloured	Suggest colours or chunks for long words
4. Check	Spells it from the image, forwards and backwards	Encourage; repeat until easy
5. Write	Writes it and checks with the original	Celebrate success

Does it work?

Some small studies have reported gains with visualisation-based spelling methods, but the evidence is limited, and it doesn't test the eye-position claim itself. Visual memory strategies are also part of mainstream spelling teaching, so any benefit doesn't depend on NLP's eye model.

SECTION 11

Eliciting & Observing Eye Patterns

NLP trainings teach students to ask questions designed to trigger each type of thinking, and to watch for the eye movements that follow.

Target	Example question	Watch for (typical pattern, observer's view)
 Vr	“What was the colour of the front door of your first home?”	Up to your right
 Vc	“What would your car look like if it were covered in feathers?”	Up to your left
 Ar	“Can you hear the sound of your alarm clock?”	Level, to your right
 Ac	“What would your voice sound like underwater?”	Level, to your left
 Ad	“What do you say to yourself when you make a mistake?”	Down to your right
 K	“What does it feel like to jump into cold water?”	Down to your left



Figure 8. An observation routine.

Why observation is hard

Eye movements are often tiny and fast, and a question may trigger several kinds of thinking. Observers tend to see what they expect, so recording observations before interpreting them is essential.

SECTION 12

Individual Differences & Calibration

Even within NLP, the chart is meant as a starting point. Practitioners are told to calibrate each person rather than assume the standard pattern.

Variation	What NLP says	Implication
“Reversed” organisation	Some people show a mirror-image pattern	The chart can't be applied without testing
Left-handedness	Left-handed people are said to be more likely to be reversed	Handedness is a weak guide
Mixed patterns	Some people are reversed for only one system	Each system must be checked separately
Minimal movement	Some people barely move their eyes at all	No pattern to read
Context	Lighting, objects in the room and social rules affect gaze	Movement may have nothing to do with thinking

A personal eye map

	Your left (as you face them)	Centre	Your right
Up			
Level			
Down			

Figure 9. Record what one person's eyes did in response to each type of question.

A logical problem

If the standard pattern needs so many exceptions that every person must be mapped individually, it can no longer tell you anything in advance. This is one reason researchers regard the model as untested at best.

SECTION 13

Uses Claimed in NLP Practice

NLP practitioners use eye accessing cues in several ways. Each claimed use is shown here alongside a more evidence-based alternative.

Claimed use	How it's applied	A more reliable alternative
Building rapport	Match the person's system (e.g. use visual words if they look up)	Use their actual words; listen and reflect
Strategy elicitation	Use eye movements to map the order of thinking	Ask: “What happens first, inside, when you…?”
Learning & spelling	Hold material in the “visual remembered” position	Evidence-based spelling and memory techniques
Coaching / therapy	Notice when a client accesses feelings vs. self-talk	Ask how they're experiencing it
Sales & persuasion	Present information in their “preferred” system	Ask what information they need
Detecting lies	Look for “constructed” movements	None — eye direction does not reveal lies

Useful
Watching people closely trains attention

Limited
Eye direction is a weak, unreliable signal

Better
Asking beats guessing

Where value may lie

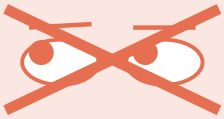
The real benefit of eye accessing training may be that it makes people **pay closer attention** to others. That benefit comes from attention itself, not from the chart being correct.

SECTION 14

The Lie Detection Myth

The most widespread misuse of eye accessing cues is the claim that eye direction reveals lying. NLP's founders didn't make this claim, and research directly contradicts it.

THE POPULAR MYTH



"If they look up to their right (your left), they're constructing — so they're lying."

WHAT'S ACTUALLY TRUE

- NLP's founders never presented eye cues as a lie detector
- Three studies (Wiseman et al., 2012) found no link between eye direction and lying
- Imagining is not lying; remembering is not truth
- Overall, people detect lies at little better than chance

Figure 10. The myth and the evidence.

Study (Wiseman et al., 2012)	What they tested	Finding
Study 1	Recorded eye movements of people lying or telling the truth in a lab	No difference in eye direction
Study 2	Taught one group the NLP eye cues, then asked them to spot lies	Training did not improve accuracy
Study 3	Analysed footage of people making public appeals, some later shown to be lying	No link between eye movements and lying

Why the logic fails

Even with the chart, imagining isn't lying (people construct images to explain things truthfully), and remembering isn't honesty (people can recall a false story they've rehearsed). The logic fails even before the evidence.

SECTION 15

What the Research Says

Eye accessing cues are among the most-tested NLP claims. The overall verdict from researchers is clear: the claimed link between eye direction and sensory thinking has not been supported.

Claim	Status	Comment
People move their eyes when thinking	Well supported	Especially during memory retrieval (Ehrlichman & Micic, 2012)
Looking away helps hard thinking	Well supported	Gaze aversion reduces distraction (Glenberg et al., 1998)
Eyes return to where information was seen	Well supported	“Looking at nothing” research (Richardson & Spivey, 2000)
Eye direction shows V / A / K thinking	Not supported	Early tests and reviews found no reliable pattern (Sharpley, 1984, 1987)
Eye cues reveal a preferred system	Not supported	Preferred representational systems themselves lack evidence
Eye direction reveals lying	Not supported	Three studies found no link (Wiseman et al., 2012)

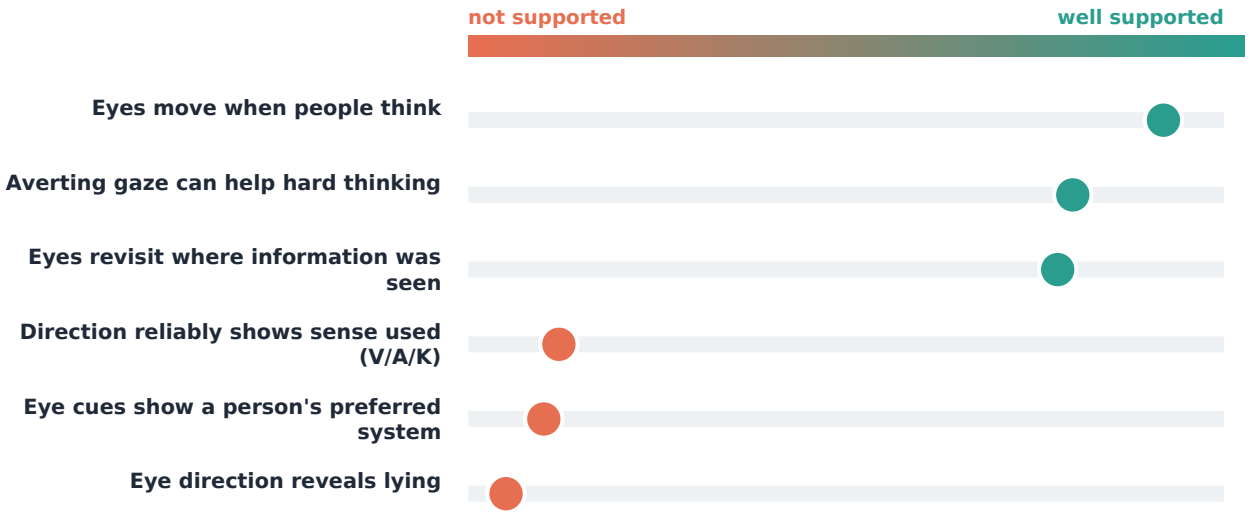


Figure 11. Where each claim sits on the evidence scale (author's summary of the studies cited).

Broader reviews

Reviews of NLP more broadly (e.g. Heap, 1988; Witkowski, 2010) reach similar conclusions: core NLP claims, including eye accessing cues, have little scientific support.

SECTION 16

Why Do Eyes Move When We Think?

Eye movements during thinking are real — the question is what they mean. Mainstream research offers different explanations from NLP's.

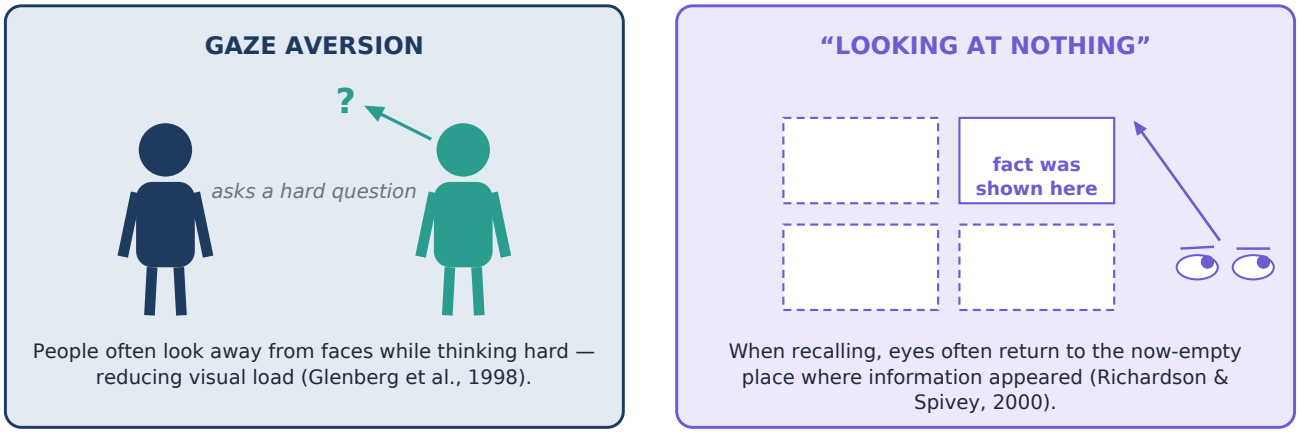


Figure 12. Two well-supported findings about eyes and thinking.

Explanation	Idea	Evidence
Reducing visual load	Looking away from faces and busy scenes frees attention for thinking	Gaze aversion improves performance on hard questions
Memory search	Eye movements may help search long-term memory	Movements increase during retrieval; direction varies
Spatial indexing	We link memories to locations and look there when recalling	Eyes revisit locations where information appeared
Social signalling	Looking away can signal “I'm thinking, don't interrupt”	Gaze patterns vary across cultures and situations
Hemispheric activity	Left/right movements linked to brain hemisphere use	Early findings were inconsistent and not well replicated

Bottom line

Eyes do move with thinking, but the **direction** isn't a reliable code for the **type** of thinking. What NLP noticed was real; the explanation it gave wasn't confirmed.

SECTION 17

Common Mistakes & Responsible Use

If you use or teach eye accessing cues, treat them as a prompt for curiosity, not as a reading of someone's mind.

Mistake	Why it's a problem	Better approach
Treating the chart as fact	Research doesn't support it	Present it as a historical NLP model
Using it to detect lies	No link with lying; risk of false accusations	Never use eye direction to judge honesty
Mixing up left and right	Observer's view and person's view are mirrored	Always state which view a chart shows
Labelling people (“she's visual”)	Stereotypes people and narrows communication	Use varied language; ask what helps them
Over-interpreting single glances	Eyes move for many reasons	Look for change and context; ask
Staring at someone's eyes	Uncomfortable and breaks rapport	Observe naturally and briefly

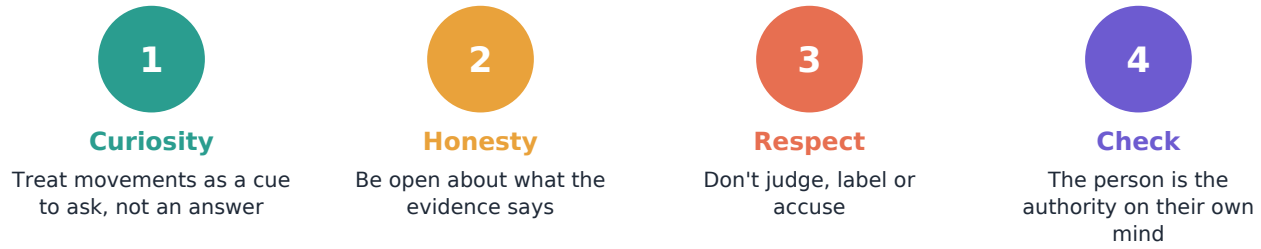


Figure 13. Four principles for responsible use.

SECTION 18

Practice Exercises

These exercises let you test the model for yourself. Record what you actually observe — you may find it doesn't match the chart.

#	Exercise	Purpose
1	Ask a friend 12 questions (2 per system) and record the first eye movement for each, before checking the chart.	Test the chart honestly
2	Repeat with three different people. Compare their patterns.	Notice individual differences
3	Ask the same questions again a week later. Are the patterns the same?	Check consistency
4	Watch a video interview on mute and note when people look away. What was happening?	Observe gaze aversion
5	Notice your own eye movements in a mirror while recalling and imagining.	Self-observation
6	Ask “What happened inside when you answered?” after each question.	Compare eyes with self-report

Observation log

Question type	Question asked	First eye movement	Matches chart?	What they reported
Vr				
Vc				
Ar				
Ac				
Ad				
K				

SECTION 19

Cheat Sheet, Glossary & Further Reading

Position	Name	As you face the person (typical pattern)
 Vr	Visual remembered	Up, your right
 Vc	Visual constructed	Up, your left
 Ar	Auditory remembered	Level, your right
 Ac	Auditory constructed	Level, your left
 Ad	Auditory digital	Down, your right
 K	Kinesthetic	Down, your left
 Vd	Defocused	Straight ahead, unfocused

Term	Meaning
Representational system	A sense used for thinking (V, A, K, O, G, Ad).
Predicate	A sensory word in speech (see, hear, feel).
Strategy	A sequence of internal steps leading to a result.
Gaze aversion	Looking away while thinking — well documented.

Further reading

Work	Why read it
Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1979). *Frogs into Princes*.	Original presentation of the chart
Sharpley, C. F. (1987). *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 34(1).	Review of research on NLP claims
Wiseman, R. et al. (2012). *PLoS ONE*, 7(7).	“The Eyes Don't Have It” — lie detection
Ehrlichman, H. & Micic, D. (2012). *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 21(2).	Why eyes move when we think
Witkowski, T. (2010). *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 41(2).	Critical review of NLP research