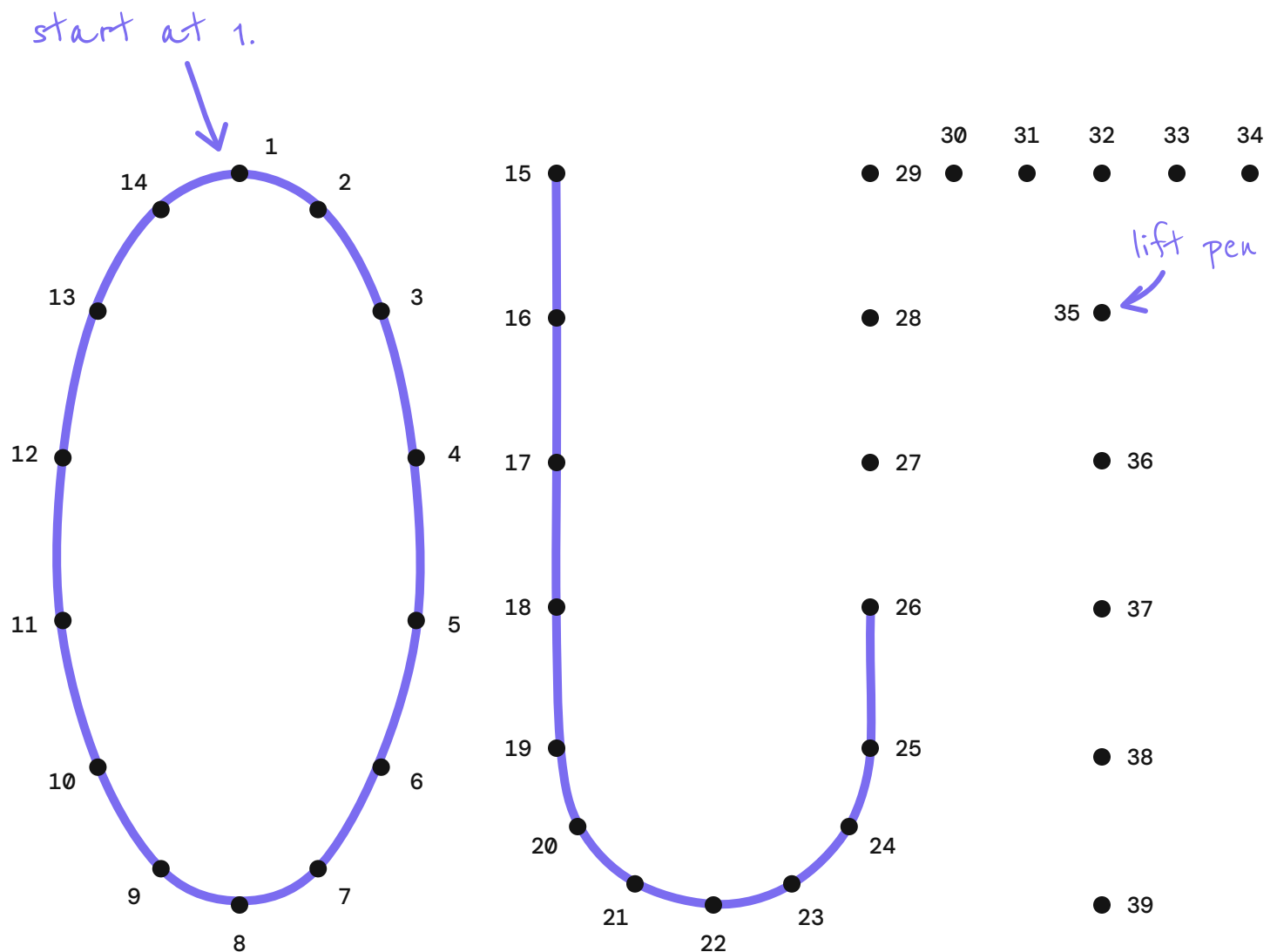


FIELD NOTES FOR FIGURING IT

Tools and exercises to sharpen your critical thinking



Field Notes for Figuring It Out

Tools and exercises to sharpen your critical thinking

Krysta McDowell

2026

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If someone handed you this

It's because they think you're worth the time.

I always wanted someone to hand me something like this. Nobody did, so I learned it the slow way: on job sites, behind a bar, in rooms where I couldn't follow half of what people were saying.

This is everything I wish I'd had. It's not new and it's not hard. It's practice: slowing down, asking why, and thinking one step past the obvious.

Steal whatever helps.

- Krysta

How to use this

Start anywhere. Each tool takes a few minutes and a pen.

Who this is for: interns, early-career operators, and anyone learning to make good calls at work without someone checking every step.

1. **Read "What I see people do with AI" next.** It's short, and it's a big part of why this exists.
2. **Pick a tool and try it on something real.** Every tool has a worksheet: an example filled in, then a blank one for you.
3. **When you want more, do a challenge.** They come in sets. Each one is about a page of thinking.
4. **Grade your own answer** with the Check Yourself pages at the back.

How long it takes: a few minutes per tool. About three weeks per set of challenges, if you do one a week. Do as much as you want, in any order.

There's a one-page short version at the back you can keep at your desk.

HOW I TEACH THIS

I don't hand people answers. When someone brings me half-baked work, I ask questions until they go back and finish baking it. Why do you think that? What happens if...? It's annoying. It works. With my interns, I give tasks with loose instructions on purpose, and never anything that could hurt the business. They can ask me or anyone else questions. We push back with more questions. We never make the decision for them. That's the fun part, and it's where they grow. This book does the same thing: every page asks you something, and the answer has to come from you.

So when you read the intern stories in here, they aren't about anyone failing. The misses were the point. That's how you learn to catch them. The stories are real; names and identifying details are changed.

What I see people do with AI

I use AI a lot. But I see people use it as their entire brain.

And yes, I've done some of these myself.

- Not challenging it.
- Taking everything it says as fact, rather than theory or opinion.
- Not understanding what it can and can't do.
- Using it as a Google and never doing any independent research beyond the AI tool.
- Having no understanding of the cost, time, or quality.
- Using it as their entire brain to think for them, rather than to help them work through their thinking.
- Thinking AI can get something done in five seconds, right the first time, without any context, parameters, or examples to reference.
- Not using their own creative thinking to solve things before depending on a computer to tell them the answer or do it for them.

TRY THIS INSTEAD (10 MINUTES)

1. Pick something small you need to figure out.
2. Write your own answer first, by hand.
3. Then ask AI the same question.
4. Write down what each answer missed. Yours too.

The Priority Matrix

Two questions for everything on your plate. Is it urgent? Is it important?

Do now Urgent and important	Schedule Important, not urgent
Hand off or shrink Urgent, not important	Drop Neither

Hand off means give it to someone else. No one to give it to? Ask if it can wait, get smaller, or go back to whoever asked.

Urgent is usually someone else's deadline. Important is what gets you somewhere. Treat everything urgent like it's important and you're busy all day and still going nowhere.

So what actually counts as urgent and important? At my job, it's usually only the things that drive revenue or have compliance rules attached. Ask your manager what counts where you work. Most everything else can wait, get smaller, or go to someone else.

TRY IT (5 MINUTES)

Write down everything on your plate: tasks, emails you owe, projects, all of it. Draw the four boxes and put each thing in one. Then go back through "do now" and ask whether each one really has to happen today. Move anything that doesn't.

Example: A report your manager needs by 2:00 today: do now. A doctor's appointment you keep pushing: schedule. Important, but not today. A group chat wants everyone to vote on dinner plans right now: hand off or shrink. Reorganizing your camera roll: drop.

"Sometimes when I feel overwhelmed with a lot of different tasks, I will draw that box out for myself and try to fill in those things in the corresponding boxes."

- Intern

THE BOX PEOPLE SKIP

"Schedule" gets ignored because nobody's chasing you on it. Planning, learning, and catching up with people all end up there. Put time on your calendar for it every week, and redo the whole grid weekly.

Often credited to Dwight Eisenhower. Made popular by Stephen Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

The Priority Matrix

EXAMPLE

Do now <i>A report your manager needs by 2:00 today</i>	Schedule <i>The doctor's appointment you keep pushing</i>
Hand off or shrink <i>The group chat vote on dinner plans</i>	Drop <i>Reorganizing your camera roll</i>

YOUR TURN

Do now	Schedule
Hand off or shrink	Drop

Then go back through "do now." Does each one really have to happen today?

Five Whys

When something goes wrong, ask why. Then ask why again about that answer. Do it about five times.

What you see first is just the symptom. Fix only that and the real problem is back next week.

EXAMPLE

The report is late. *Why?* The data came in late. *Why?* The team lead didn't send her numbers on time. *Why?* She didn't know they were due Tuesday. *Why?* The deadline changed and nobody told her. *Why?* There's no way to tell people when a deadline changes.

So the fix is a way to tell people when deadlines change. Chasing the report alone wouldn't have stopped it from happening again.

TRY IT (3 MINUTES)

Pick a problem that keeps coming back. Write it at the top of a page and answer "why?" five times. Then read it from the bottom up. If one answer doesn't actually lead to the next, that link is wrong. Try again from there.

Keep going until you hit something in the process you can fix. "The intern forgot" is almost never the real answer. And if you're asking someone else the whys, ask like you're curious.

From Toyota's manufacturing system.

Five Whys

EXAMPLE

PROBLEM <i>The report is late.</i>
↓ why?
BECAUSE <i>The data came in late.</i>
↓ why?
BECAUSE <i>The team lead didn't send her numbers on time.</i>
↓ why?
BECAUSE <i>She didn't know they were due Tuesday.</i>
↓ why?
BECAUSE <i>The deadline changed and nobody told her.</i>
↓ why?
ROOT CAUSE <i>There's no way to tell people when a deadline changes.</i>

YOUR TURN

PROBLEM
↓ why?
BECAUSE
↓ why?
BECAUSE
↓ why?
BECAUSE
↓ why?
BECAUSE
↓ why?
ROOT CAUSE

Read yours from the bottom up. Does each answer actually lead to the next one? If not, that link is wrong. Try again from there.

So What?

Ask it about anything on your plate. So what is this for? Why does it matter? What changes if I do it, and who's affected if I don't?

EXAMPLE

You're about to spend an hour formatting a document. So what? If the answer is "so it looks professional when the CEO forwards it to the board," that's real. Keep going. If the answer is "so it looks nicer to nobody in particular," stop.

Same thing at home. You're about to spend Saturday reorganizing your closet. So what? "So I can actually find my clothes and stop being late" is a real answer. "So I feel productive" probably means you're avoiding something else.

TRY IT (1 MINUTE)

Before you start anything that'll take more than half an hour, say out loud what it's meant to solve. If you can't, go ask whoever gave it to you before you start.

On your own work, ask it all the time. With other people, "so what?" can come off rude. "Help me understand why this matters" works better.

So What?

EXAMPLE

The task	<i>Spend an hour formatting a document</i>
What is it for?	<i>So it looks professional when the CEO forwards it to the board</i>
Who's affected if I don't?	<i>The CEO, in front of the board</i>
What changes if I do it?	<i>The board takes it seriously</i>
Verdict	☒ Keep going ☐ Stop

YOUR TURN

The task

What is it for?

Who's affected if I don't?

What changes if I do it?

Verdict ☐ Keep going ☐ Stop

If you can't fill in "what is it for?", go ask whoever gave you the task before you start.

The Construction PM Frame

PM is project management. I did it in construction for seven years, and I still treat everything like a construction project. Measure twice, cut once. Before anything with real moving parts, I ask five questions.

Scope. What am I doing, and what am I not doing?

Sequence. What has to happen first, second, third?

Dependencies. What do I need from other people or things before this can move?

Ownership. Who owns what? Is this even mine?

Done. What does finished look like, and does the person who asked agree?

A REAL ONE

I gave two interns a decision that didn't really matter, on purpose, so they could own it: pick shelves to display shirts in our merch room. The instructions were loose on purpose, and they knew it. They could ask questions anytime. We just didn't make the call for them.

They laid sticky notes out on the floor to measure where the shelves would go. They thought about the floor space. They never thought about the wall. The wall already had art on it, hung there on purpose. So once the shelves went in, the art had to come down and be moved to a new display spot.

It never got moved. It got tossed into the CEO's office as storage, and everybody forgot about it. The job wasn't finished. It just turned into a new task for someone else to find and solve.

Two misses, both in the frame. Dependencies: the wall was part of the plan the whole time. The art had to come down, and it needed a new place to be displayed. Done: done wasn't "shelves up." It was shirts up and the art rehung where it belongs. They never closed the loop.

TRY IT (5 MINUTES)

Take something coming up: an event, a move, a trip, a project. Answer the five questions on one page. Think about the whole thing from start to finish, and every scenario you can come up with. Done is the one people rush, so spend the most time there.

My own simplified version of how construction projects get run.

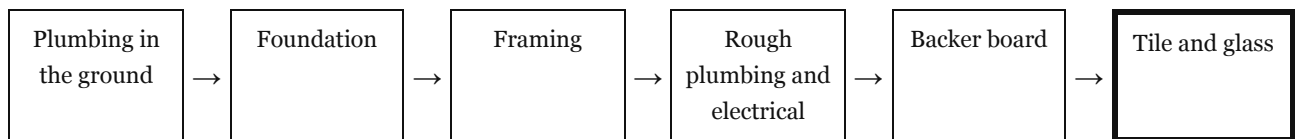
A bigger one

In a high-end custom shower, the tile has to come out as full tiles, with grout lines that line up with something else in the room: the center of the shower head, the window and its trim, the millwork, the countertop. The floor needs the right slope to drain. And most people want frameless glass, which still needs support, so that has to be planned in too.

All of that depends on work that happened months earlier and got covered up. On a slab foundation, the plumbing goes in the ground before or during the pour, before there's any framing at all. Then framing, rough plumbing, electrical, backer board. If the framing is bowed, if the plumbing or electrical is out of line, if the backer board is off by even 1/8", the whole layout gets thrown off.

By the time anyone sees the tile, the mistake is buried under concrete and walls. You can't fix it without tearing it out.

Both stories are the same mistake: a dependency nobody thought about. One left art in the CEO's office for someone else to deal with. The other means ripping out a finished shower.



Each step gets covered by the next one. Check it before it's buried.

The Construction PM Frame

EXAMPLE: THE CUSTOM SHOWER

Scope	<i>Tile the primary shower: full tiles, grout lines aligned to the center of the shower head. Not the vanity or the lighting.</i>
Sequence	<i>Plumbing in the ground, foundation, framing, rough plumbing and electrical, backer board, tile, glass.</i>
Dependencies	<i>Straight framing. Plumbing and electrical in line. A known backer board thickness. Support planned in for the glass.</i>
Ownership	<i>The plumber owns placement. The framer owns straight walls. The tile setter owns the layout. The PM checks it all before it's covered.</i>
Done	<i>Full tiles, aligned grout, the right slope to drain, supported glass, and no tear-out.</i>

YOUR TURN

The project

Scope

Sequence

Dependencies

Ownership

Done

Spend the most time on Done. It's the one people rush.

The Smallest First Step

When you keep putting something off, make the first step so small it's almost silly.

Don't "write the report." Open the document. Don't "have the hard conversation." Send the text asking for a time to talk.

Starting is the worst part. Once you're moving, you keep moving.

It's physics. Newton's first law: an object at rest stays at rest, and an object in motion stays in motion. So get in motion.

One trick at home: keep your shoes on, or put on house shoes. It helps you feel ready to do something instead of settling in to relax.

TRY IT (2 MINUTES)

Pick one thing you've been avoiding. Write down the smallest possible first step, and do just that.

AT WORK

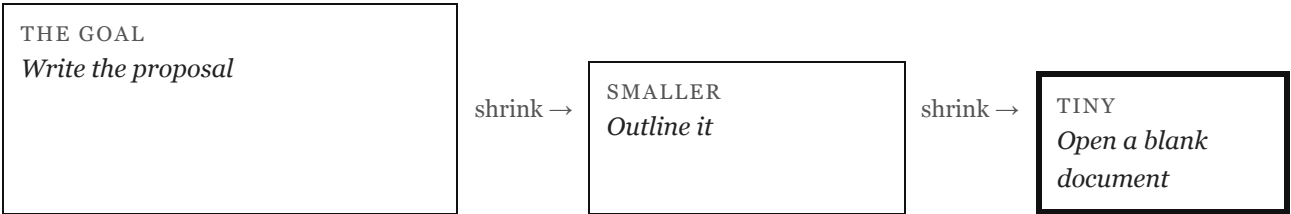
A proposal you keep putting off: open a blank document and leave it on your screen. Feedback you owe someone: put 15 minutes on the calendar for tomorrow. Having the meeting on the books makes you prep for it.

This is for getting started. Once you're moving, take bigger steps.

Similar ideas show up in BJ Fogg's *Tiny Habits* and James Clear's *Atomic Habits*.

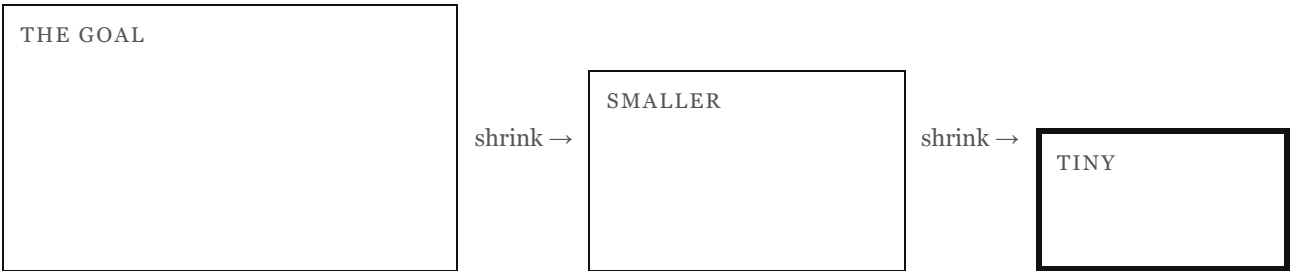
The Smallest First Step

EXAMPLE



When *Right now, before lunch*

YOUR TURN



When

Object at rest stays at rest. Do the tiny one and you're in motion.

Who's Already Solved This?

Before you figure something out from scratch, ask who's already figured it out.

There's usually a tool, an article, or a person one step away from you who's dealt with something like it. Your job is to find them.

A REAL ONE

The pipe for an in-wall tub or shower spout gets set during top-out, the stage when the pipes inside the walls go in, before the walls close. The spout itself goes on at trim-out, after the tile. Once tile, stone, or plaster goes over that pipe, there's no good way to test the finished spout connection. The finishes are expensive and hard to patch, and the fixtures usually have a long lead time, so getting a replacement could take months if a problem isn't caught early.

The connection can leak from something as small as a ding in the threading inside the wall. A leak that small can go unnoticed for years while it damages the framing and studs behind it.

I asked a bunch of plumbers how they handled it. Nobody had a good answer. So I called a friend who manages a pipe-fitting company that makes custom CNC (machine-cut) metal and PVC parts. Together we built a tool to test those connections before anything got covered up. It took a few rounds, with the plumbers trying it and giving feedback, before it worked.

It wasn't a new invention. I just connected the people who deal with the problem every day with the people who could make the part.

TRY IT (5 MINUTES)

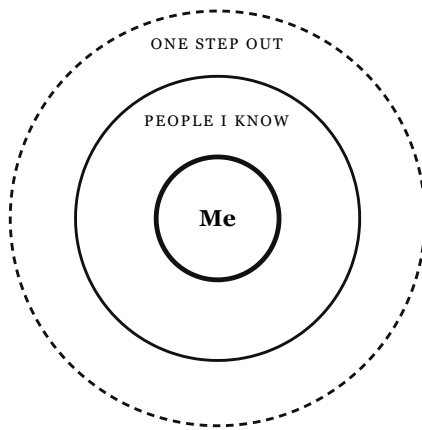
Before you lose an hour googling, ask yourself who you could just ask. Write down one person and one place you could look. Ask or look first. Afterward, write down who helped and what you learned. You'll start to notice how much help you already have around you.

Don't share anything confidential when you ask someone outside your company.

Ask people. It gets you moving faster. But you still have to make the call yourself.

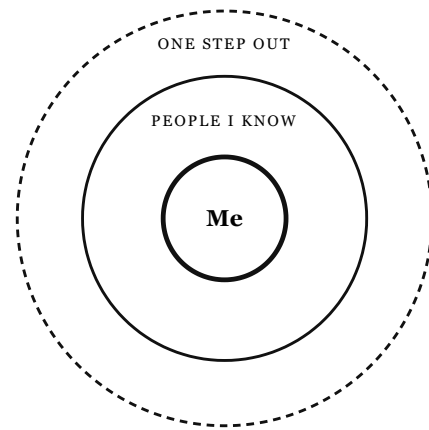
Who's Already Solved This?

EXAMPLE



The problem	<i>Testing in-wall spouts before tile, stone, or plaster covers them</i>
People I know	<i>The plumbers on our jobs</i>
One step out	<i>A friend who manages a custom pipe-fitting shop</i>
I'll ask	<i>The plumbers first, then my friend</i>
I'll look	<i>His shop's CNC and PVC capabilities</i>
What I learned	<i>Nobody had a fix, so together we built a test tool</i>

YOUR TURN



The problem	
People I know	
One step out	
I'll ask	
I'll look	
What I learned	

Fill in names before you start researching.

The Three Reach-Out Anchors

What I remember when I need to use the muscle to reach out and ask for something.

The worst someone can say is no.

They don't pay my bills.

Those who don't ask don't receive.

Why these work: a lot of chances get lost because nobody asked.

TRY IT (5 MINUTES)

Think of something you've been nervous to ask for: an intro, a favor, a raise, a meeting. Write the ask in two sentences. Read the anchors. Send it today.

WHEN TO SLOW DOWN

"They don't pay my bills" works for strangers. Your boss or a client is different, so think about the timing and wording first, or have someone read it before you hit send. And if someone already told you no or asked for space, leave it alone. Don't reach out to clients, executives, or press on your company's behalf without checking with your manager first.

The Three Reach-Out Anchors

EXAMPLE

Who I'm asking	<i>Someone I admire in operations. We've never met.</i>
Stranger, or boss / client?	☒ Stranger ☐ Boss or client (slow down)
My ask, in two sentences	<i>Would you be open to a 15-minute call next week? I'd love to hear how you got started.</i>
The anchors	☒ The worst someone can say is no. ☒ They don't pay my bills. ☒ Those who don't ask don't receive.
Send by	<i>Today</i>

YOUR TURN

Who I'm asking	
Stranger, or boss / client?	☐ Stranger ☐ Boss or client (slow down)
My ask, in two sentences	
The anchors	☐ The worst someone can say is no. ☐ They don't pay my bills. ☐ Those who don't ask don't receive.
Send by	

Narrate Your Thinking

When someone brings you a problem, don't hand them the answer. Think out loud so they can hear how you'd work it out. Then let them try the next one while you listen.

HOW I DO IT

I ask questions to get them to reason out loud. Why do you think that? What happens if...? Most of the time they go back and finish it themselves.

IF YOU'RE THE ONE BEING ASKED

When your boss asks how you got your answer, walk them through it: what you noticed, what you ruled out, and why.

TRY IT (5 MINUTES)

Next time someone asks you how to do something, answer with how you'd figure it out, not just what you'd do. Then ask what they would try.

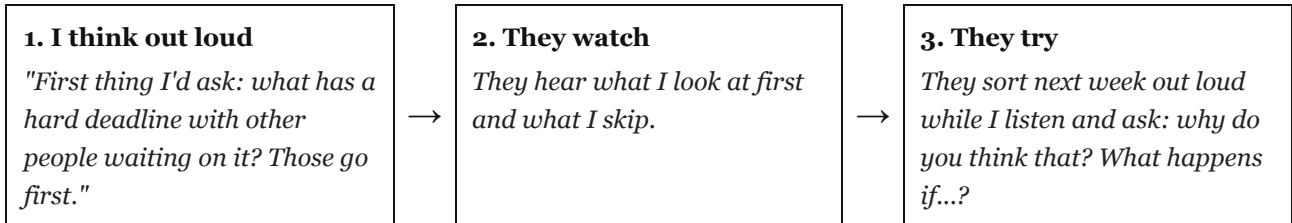
It takes longer than giving the answer, so save it for when you're helping someone learn. If they just need it done, give them the answer. And ask before you launch into it.

Narrate Your Thinking

EXAMPLE

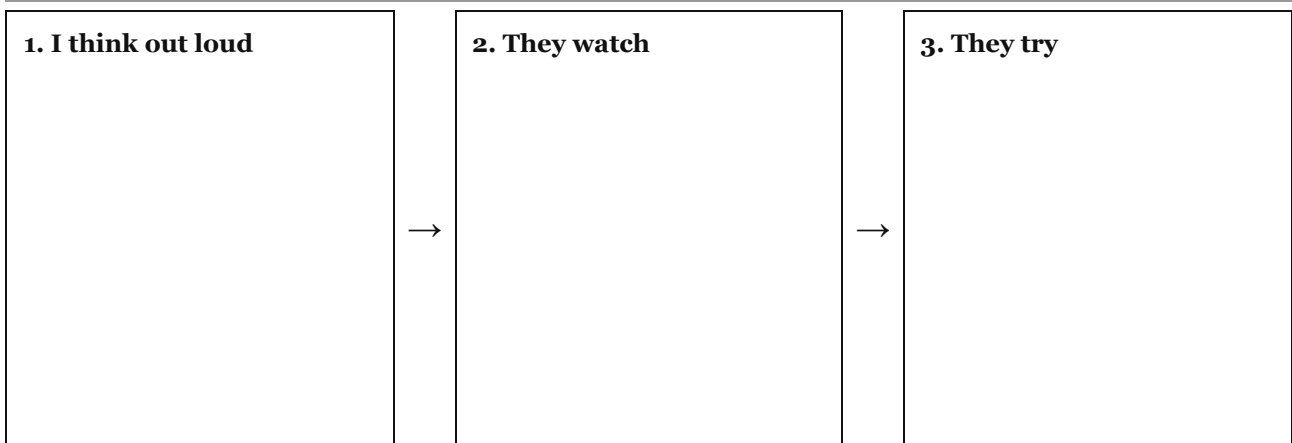
The problem

"How do I prioritize my week?"



YOUR TURN

The problem



Questions to keep handy: Why do you think that? What happens if...?

Do It by Hand First

Before you hand something to a tool, whether that's AI, Google, a template, or an automation, do a rough version yourself so you actually understand it.

A REAL ONE

I asked an intern to research email deliverability and give me a manual: all the settings and tips to follow to boost our deliverability score. I wanted him to tell me what to do and what not to do. The ask was loose on purpose. That's how I give interns tasks: room to figure it out, help when they ask.

Instead he gave me analytics of what we already had and templates for writing the emails. He never got into the settings on the platform we use, or what actually affects deliverability.

He got a task but didn't fully understand what the task was meant to solve, and went straight to automating something instead of understanding something.

TRY IT (10 MINUTES)

Next time you're about to ask AI, grab a template, or set up an automation, stop. Do a rough version by hand first. Write your own answer, or sketch the steps. Then use the tool and compare.

AT WORK

Build the spreadsheet formula yourself once before you copy one. Draft the email before you grab a template. Figure out every step of a process before you automate it.

Once you understand it, use every tool you've got.

Do It by Hand First

EXAMPLE

The task

A manual for improving our email deliverability

MY VERSION, BY HAND FIRST	WHAT I GOT BACK
Look up what actually affects deliverability. Check the settings on the platform we use. List what to do and what not to do.	Analytics of what we already have. Templates for writing the emails.

What each missed

The analytics and templates never touched the settings. The by-hand version still needs real numbers from our account.

YOUR TURN

The task

MY VERSION, BY HAND FIRST	WHAT I GOT BACK

What each missed

The Three-Question Debrief

After anything you finish, ask these three questions, in this order, every time.

1. What did I consider that I wouldn't have a week (or a month) ago?

2. What did I miss?

3. What would I do differently next time?

When a project ends, everyone just moves on to the next thing. These make you stop and see what you actually learned. After a while you start asking them on your own.

TRY IT (3 MINUTES)

End of the week, or the end of any project. Write a sentence or two for each. Then put one miss at the top of next week's list so you check for it.

PICK YOUR TRIGGER

The questions are easy. Remembering to ask them is the hard part, so tie them to something that already happens: a 15-minute block on your calendar every Friday called "Debrief," or the moment you send the final file on a project. Pick one and stick with it.

"It made me realize that I need to think about all the different factors that play into setting up a project, event, or any large-scale task."

- Intern, on the 5K challenge

Always start with question one. If you jump to what you missed, you'll just beat yourself up and stop doing it.

The Three-Question Debrief

EXAMPLE

What I finished	<i>The 5K challenge</i>
1. What did I consider that I wouldn't have a week ago?	<i>Who else gets affected besides the runners: neighbors, commuters, local businesses.</i>
2. What did I miss?	<i>I never planned for rain.</i>
3. What would I do differently?	<i>Ask "what could go wrong?" before I book anything.</i>
One miss to check next time	<i>Weather backup</i>
My trigger	<i>Fridays at 4:00, 15 minutes</i>

YOUR TURN

What I finished

1. What did I consider that I wouldn't have a week ago?

2. What did I miss?

3. What would I do differently?

One miss to check next time

My trigger

Books as Tools

Instead of telling someone "read this book," give them the one move from it they can use this week.

"Read this book" does nothing. They won't read it, or they'll read it and never use it. One thing they can try tomorrow does more. And if you can't name the one thing, ask yourself what you actually got out of it.

BOOKS I PULL FROM, AND THE MOVE I TOOK FROM EACH

- **How to Win Friends and Influence People, Dale Carnegie.** Be a good listener, and get people talking about themselves. Talk in terms of what the other person cares about.
- **Influence, Robert Cialdini.** Give first, and people feel pulled to give back.
- **The Let Them Theory, Mel Robbins.** Let them. Control your own response.
- **Don't Take the Last Donut, Judith Bowman.** Small etiquette details shape how people see you at work.
- **The 5AM Club, Robin Sharma.** Protect the first hour, before the distractions start.
- **Sell or Be Sold, Grant Cardone.** Everything in life is a sale, including you and your ideas.
- **Rich Dad Poor Dad, Robert Kiyosaki.** Financial literacy matters more than income.
- **You Are a Badass, Jen Sincero.** What you believe about yourself shapes what you do.

These are my takeaways, not endorsements.

TRY IT (3 MINUTES)

Think of the last useful book you finished. Write the one thing you're going to do differently because of it.

Books as Tools

EXAMPLE

BOOK	THE ONE MOVE	WHERE I'LL TRY IT	WHEN
<i>Influence</i>	<i>Give first</i>	<i>Send something useful before I ask for a meeting</i>	<i>This week</i>

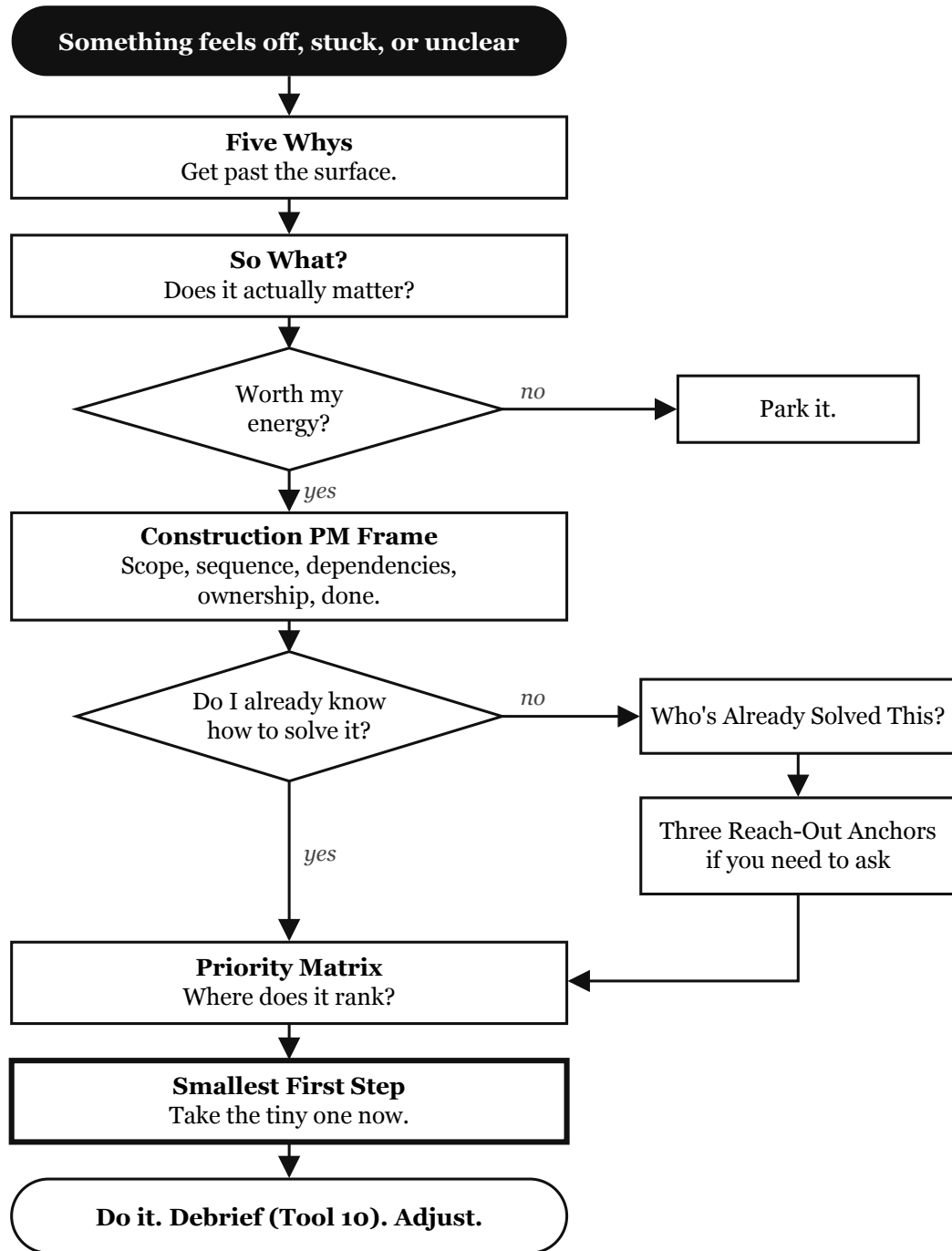
YOUR TURN

BOOK	THE ONE MOVE	WHERE I'LL TRY IT	WHEN

If you can't fill in "the one move," ask yourself what you actually got out of the book.

When something feels off

How the tools fit together when something feels off, stuck, or unclear.



The Challenges

The challenges come in sets. Each one is about a page of thinking. They train you to think through the whole thing, start to finish, every scenario, before you act. You can do them on your own. Nobody has to check your work. Not sure where to start? Set A, Challenge 1.

- **Challenge 1, Ripple.** Think through everything a task touches before you start.
- **Challenge 2, Pre-Mortem.** Pretend it already failed and work backward to why. It's a debrief you do before the thing happens.
- **Challenge 3, Reverse Engineer.** Look at something that already works and figure out why it was built that way.

PICK A SET

- **Set A, General.** A 5K, a client gift, a hotel check-in. Everybody has enough context for these. Start here if you're not sure.
- **Set B, Executive and operations support.** A client visit, a VIP dinner, how a vendor gets paid.
- **Set C, Finance and remote.** A virtual offsite, a board meeting model, a 10-K. These assume some basic finance. If "10-K" is new to you, do Set A first.

You can mix them. Challenge 1 from Set A, then 2 and 3 from the set closest to your work, is a good way to go.

Go 1, then 2, then 3. One a week works well. The deadline is how long you get once you start: two days for Challenge 1, the end of that day for Challenge 2, and a week for Challenge 3.

READ THE WHOLE SHEET FIRST

Some teachers used to give a quiz where the instructions said to write your name and turn it in. The entire purpose was just to read the instructions, and most people didn't. Read the whole sheet before you start.

THE RULES

- About a page. By hand, or typed if that works better for you.
- While you're writing: no AI, no Google, no asking anyone for answers. Working with a partner is fine on the ones that say so, and so is pulling up anything the challenge tells you to look at, like the 10-K, or using your own real process when it says to.
- Put a "why" next to everything. On Ripple challenges, done items are the one exception. If you don't know something, write that down.
- If something isn't spelled out, write down what you assumed.
- When you're done, go to Check Yourself, then do the debrief in Tool 10.
- If you run these with someone else, they're practice, never a test. Let people type, give them time, and let them prep.

Plan a 5K Run Event

You have been asked to plan a 5K run event. It will happen 8 weeks from now. About 200 people will take part. You are in charge of everything.

Before you start planning, write a one-page pre-work document. Then run it through the check below, or show it to someone.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, three sections:

- **Dependencies.** What has to happen before other things can happen? In what order?
- **Ripple effects.** Who or what gets affected by this event that isn't the runners themselves?
- **Definition of done.** What does a successful event look like the day after, not just during?

Put a "why" next to every dependency and ripple. Done items are your finish line, so they don't need one. If you don't know something, write that down.

CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU PLAN

- Does every dependency and ripple have a "because"?
- Did you name at least three people or groups, outside the people at the center of it, who are affected?
- What could make your date impossible, and where is that in your order?
- Did you write down what you assumed?
- Does "done" describe the day after, not just the day itself?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Any time someone hands you something that sounds simple, like "can you set up the event?", and it turns out to be way bigger.

Client Gift Launch: Pre-Mortem

A company is sending a premium curated gift box to its top 25 clients for the holidays. The budget is \$200 per box. It ships by December 15.

The launch failed. *Something went wrong. Maybe several things. Your job is to figure out what. Do this with a partner if you have one. If you don't, do it alone.*

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, two sections:

- **Failure modes.** At least 10 things that could have gone wrong. Be specific. Not "shipping issues." Something like "the wrong address was used for two clients and the boxes were returned."
- **Ranking.** Pick the five with the worst realistic outcome. Next to each, mark how likely it is and how bad it would be (low, medium, high). For how bad: High means someone gets hurt, a relationship is badly damaged, or the whole project fails. Medium means it hurts, but you can recover. Low means it's an annoyance. Then put them in order: High, then Medium, then Low. Within the same level, put the one that's harder to undo first. If it's still a tie, make the call and say why. Likelihood tells you where to spend effort preventing it. It doesn't set the order. Add one line on why each one sits where it does.

For each failure mode, add one short sentence on **how** it would actually happen. Trace the chain.

A traced chain looks like this: The address list came from last year's file, so two clients had moved, so their boxes went to old offices, so they came back after December 15.

With a partner, you both have to agree on what makes the list. If you disagree, talk it out.

Write down any assumptions you made.

CHECK YOURSELF

- Can you trace each failure step by step, from the first slip to what went wrong?
- Does each chain end in a consequence, not just a situation?
- Is each one specific enough that someone could have prevented it?
- Where two are equally bad, did you put the harder-to-undo one first, and say why?
- Does your order match your own ratings?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Before you send, launch, or host anything. It takes ten minutes to think through what could go wrong first.

Hotel Check-In: Reverse Engineer

You have checked into a hotel before. You've watched the person at the front desk take your ID, take your card, program a key, tell you about breakfast and Wi-Fi, and send you to your room.

That whole ritual is a system. Someone designed it. Every step is solving a problem.

Your job: figure out what problems it's solving, and why the steps are in the order they are.

You'll work on this alone. If a partner is doing the same one, work separately and compare after you both finish. If not, compare with the Check Yourself pages.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, three sections:

- **The steps.** List every step of hotel check-in in the order it happens.
- **The why.** For each step, what problem is it solving? Not for you as the guest. For the hotel. What could go wrong if the step didn't exist?
- **The tradeoffs.** Pick two steps that could be done differently. What would the hotel gain? What would it lose?

Use your own memory and thinking. Don't ask a hotel worker. The order can vary by hotel. Any order you can defend is fine.

Then pick two steps next to each other and say what breaks if you swap them.

CHECK YOURSELF

- For each step, can you say what breaks if it disappears?
- Pick two steps next to each other. What breaks if you swap them?
- Do your tradeoffs name both what's gained and what's lost?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Anything you've done a hundred times and never asked why. Once you know why, you can explain it or make it better.

When you compare, talk about what one of you caught that the other missed.

Host a Client Visit

Your company is hosting 15 clients visiting from out of town for two days. It happens three weeks from now. You are in charge of everything.

Before you start planning, write a one-page pre-work document. Then run it through the check below, or show it to someone.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, three sections:

- **Dependencies.** What has to happen before other things can happen? In what order?
- **Ripple effects.** Who or what gets affected by this visit that isn't the clients themselves?
- **Definition of done.** What does a successful visit look like the day after, not just during it?

Put a "why" next to every dependency and ripple. Done items are your finish line, so they don't need one. If you don't know something, write that down.

CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU PLAN

- Does every dependency and ripple have a "because"?
- Did you name at least three people or groups, outside the people at the center of it, who are affected?
- What could make your date impossible, and where is that in your order?
- Did you write down what you assumed?
- Does "done" describe the day after, not just the day itself?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

When your boss says "can you handle this?" The job is almost always bigger than the sentence.

VIP Dinner: Pre-Mortem

Your company hosted a private dinner for 12 key clients and partners. The CEO was the host.

The dinner went badly. *Something went wrong. Maybe several things. Your job is to figure out what.*

Do this with a partner if you have one. If you don't, do it alone.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, two sections:

- **Failure modes.** At least 10 things that could have gone wrong. Be specific. Not "seating issues." Something like "two guests with a history were seated next to each other and one left early."
- **Ranking.** Pick the five with the worst realistic outcome. Next to each, mark how likely it is and how bad it would be (low, medium, high). For how bad: High means someone gets hurt, a relationship is badly damaged, or the whole project fails. Medium means it hurts, but you can recover. Low means it's an annoyance. Then put them in order: High, then Medium, then Low. Within the same level, put the one that's harder to undo first. If it's still a tie, make the call and say why. Likelihood tells you where to spend effort preventing it. It doesn't set the order. Add one line on why each one sits where it does.

For each failure mode, add one short sentence on **how** it would actually happen. Trace the chain.

A traced chain looks like this: The RSVP form didn't ask about allergies, so the restaurant didn't know, so one guest had a reaction and left for urgent care.

With a partner, you both have to agree on what makes the list. If you disagree, talk it out.

Write down any assumptions you made.

CHECK YOURSELF

- Can you trace each failure step by step, from the first slip to what went wrong?
- Does each chain end in a consequence, not just a situation?
- Is each one specific enough that someone could have prevented it?
- Where two are equally bad, did you put the harder-to-undo one first, and say why?
- Does your order match your own ratings?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Any event where the people in the room matter. Thinking through what could go wrong ahead of time is how you avoid an awkward night.

How a Vendor Gets Paid: Reverse Engineer

Your company pays vendors every week. Before the money leaves the account, an invoice usually goes through several steps. Someone asks for the work. Someone approves it. Someone checks it against what was ordered. Someone sends the payment. Someone records it. That's the short version. Real answers have more steps.

Someone designed this on purpose. Every step is there for a reason. Find the reason.

Your job: figure out what problem each step is solving, and why the steps are in the order they are.

If you handle payments at work, use your real process. If you don't, use how you'd expect a company to do it. Work alone. If a partner is doing the same one, compare after you both finish. If not, compare with the Check Yourself pages.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, three sections:

- **The steps.** List every step in the order it happens.
- **The why.** For each step, what problem is it solving, for the company, not for you? What could go wrong if the step didn't exist?
- **The tradeoffs.** Pick two steps that could be done differently. What would the company gain? What would it risk?

Write down any assumptions you made.

Then pick two steps next to each other and say what breaks if you swap them.

CHECK YOURSELF

- For each step, can you say what breaks if it disappears?
- Pick two steps next to each other. What breaks if you swap them?
- Do your tradeoffs name both what's gained and what's lost?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Any process you run every day but didn't set up. Knowing why each step is there means you can fix it when it breaks.

When you compare, talk about what one of you caught that the other missed.

Plan a Virtual Team Offsite

You have been asked to plan a two-day virtual team offsite for 20 people across 4 time zones. It happens 6 weeks from now. You are in charge of everything.

Before you start planning, write a one-page pre-work document. Then run it through the check below, or show it to someone.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, three sections:

- **Dependencies.** What has to happen before other things can happen? In what order?
- **Ripple effects.** Who or what gets affected beyond the 20 participants?
- **Definition of done.** What does a successful offsite look like the day after, not just during it?

Put a "why" next to every dependency and ripple. Done items are your finish line, so they don't need one. If you don't know something, write that down.

CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU PLAN

- Does every dependency and ripple have a "because"?
- Did you name at least three people or groups, outside the people at the center of it, who are affected?
- What could make your date impossible, and where is that in your order?
- Did you write down what you assumed?
- Does "done" describe the day after, not just the day itself?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Any work with people in different places and time zones. Do this one before the finance ones. The topic is neutral, so it's all about your thinking.

The Board Meeting Model: Pre-Mortem

You built a financial model for the CEO to present at Tuesday's board meeting. It's a three-year projection with bull, base, and bear cases.

The board meeting was a disaster. *Something in the model, or in how it was used, went wrong. Maybe several things. Your job is to figure out what.*

Do this with a partner if you have one. If you don't, do it alone.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, two sections:

- **Failure modes.** At least 10 specific things that could have gone wrong. Be concrete. Not "formula errors." Something like "the tax rate assumption changed halfway through the model and one year still used the old rate."
- **Ranking.** Pick the five with the worst realistic outcome. Next to each, mark how likely it is and how bad it would be (low, medium, high). For how bad: High means someone gets hurt, a relationship is badly damaged, or the whole project fails. Medium means it hurts, but you can recover. Low means it's an annoyance. Then put them in order: High, then Medium, then Low. Within the same level, put the one that's harder to undo first. If it's still a tie, make the call and say why. Likelihood tells you where to spend effort preventing it. It doesn't set the order. Add one line on why each one sits where it does.

For each failure mode, add one short sentence on **how** it would actually happen. Trace the chain.

A traced chain looks like this: The tax rate changed in year two, but one year still used the old rate, so net income was off, so a board member caught it and stopped trusting the rest of the model.

With a partner, you both have to agree on what makes the list. If you disagree, talk it out.

Write down any assumptions you made.

CHECK YOURSELF

- Can you trace each failure step by step, from the first slip to what went wrong?
- Does each chain end in a consequence, not just a situation?
- Is each one specific enough that someone could have prevented it?
- Where two are equally bad, did you put the harder-to-undo one first, and say why?
- Does your order match your own ratings?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Anything someone else will rely on: a model, a report, a spreadsheet. Before you send it, think about how it could go wrong in their hands.

Reverse Engineer a 10-K Income Statement

Pick a public company you know reasonably well. Pull up its most recent 10-K and look at the income statement. If you can, pick one that shows a gross profit line. If there's no operating income line, interest still sits after all the operating costs. Say so.

A 10-K is the annual report a public company files. The income statement in it shows revenue, costs, and profit for the year.

Somebody decided how that statement is laid out. Every line item, every grouping, every classification was a choice. Your job is to figure out what was decided and why.

Work alone. If a partner is doing the same one, compare after you both finish. If not, compare with the Check Yourself pages.

WHAT TO WRITE

About a page, three sections:

- **The structure.** How is the income statement organized? What are the major sections? What order are they in?
- **The why.** For each major structural choice, what does it accomplish? Why is cost of goods sold separated from operating expenses? Why is interest expense below operating income? What question is each section designed to answer?
- **The tradeoffs.** Pick two decisions that could have been made differently. What did the company gain by choosing what it chose? What could a critical reader argue is being obscured?

Write down any assumptions you made.

CHECK YOURSELF

- For each section, can you say what question it answers?
- Did you explain why the sections are in this order?
- Did your tradeoffs say what a critical reader might think is being hidden?

WHERE THIS SHOWS UP IN YOUR REAL JOB

Any report you read or build. Somebody decided what to show and what to tuck away. Learning to spot that helps in any job.

Check Yourself

Nobody's grading you. Grade yourself, honestly.

STEP 1. TEST YOUR ANSWER BEFORE YOU LOOK AT ANYTHING

Each challenge sheet has its own quick check. Start there. Then:

1. **Circle every dependency, ripple, or failure that has no real "because."** Those are guesses. Add a reason or cross them out.
2. **Pick three items and ask: what happens if I skip this?** If you can't answer, you don't understand that item yet.
3. **Say it out loud without looking.** Tell it to a friend, or record a voice memo. Mark where you freeze or say "I think."
4. **Check that you wrote down your assumptions.** If something wasn't spelled out and you didn't say what you assumed, add it.

STEP 2. COMPARE

Only after you've finished writing, you can ask an AI the same question and write down what each answer missed, yours too. Then look at the pages that follow, which list what strong answers often include. They're examples, not a checklist. Mark what you missed in a different color, so you can see what you caught and what you didn't. Fix it after, if you want. The lists cover the whole project, so for a Challenge 1 pre-work page, ask whether your dependencies, ripples, and definition of done would have caught them.

STEP 3. DEBRIEF

Answer the three questions from Tool 10. Then add one more: where could this show up in my real work this week?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Reasons	Weak: a list of nouns.	Strong: each item has a "because" that fits.
Specifics	Weak: "shipping issues."	Strong: "the wrong address was used and the box came back."
Beyond the obvious	Weak: only what's in the prompt.	Strong: who else is affected, and what happens afterward.
Honest about gaps	Weak: hides what you don't know.	Strong: "I don't know" and what you assumed.

Hit the minimum each challenge asks for, then judge every item by whether it has a real reason.

What strong answers often include

Only look after you've written your own. These are things to check for. Your answer should have the because.

PLAN A 5K RUN EVENT

Permits and road closures. Insurance and liability. Water stations. A timing-chip vendor. Medical or first aid. A weather backup. Portable toilets. Parking. Volunteers. A registration platform. Sponsors. Race packets. Start and finish setup. A cleanup crew. Communication before the race and on the day.

Ask yourself: What happens the week after the race? What if it rains? Who is liable if someone gets hurt?

CLIENT GIFT LAUNCH

Wrong addresses. Damage in transit. Allergies or dietary issues. One client gets a lesser version and notices. Vendor delay. Budget overrun. Arrival timing off. Packaging that feels cheap or off-brand. Someone forgotten. A cultural sensitivity issue. Tax or gift-reporting rules. Someone's assistant intercepts the gift. Damaged in the warehouse.

Ask yourself: For each of mine, can I trace how it would actually happen, step by step?

HOTEL CHECK-IN

Steps, in order: greeting, ID, find the reservation, loyalty lookup, card for incidentals, sign the registration card, assign the room, program the keys, breakfast and Wi-Fi info, directions to the room.

At most hotels:

- The ID check is fraud prevention and legal compliance.
- The card hold covers incidentals and damage. No-shows are handled earlier, when you book.
- Key programming is security. Old keys are deactivated.
- Mentioning breakfast and Wi-Fi keeps the guest from calling back 20 minutes later.
- Room assignment is inventory management.
- A loyalty lookup is an upsell and a way to keep the guest.
- Signing the registration card is a legal agreement.

Why this order: ID comes first, then the reservation, so the hotel knows who you are and what you booked before anything else. The card and the registration card come before the key, so the hotel is covered before you get access. Info and directions come last, once you're checked in.

Sample tradeoff: mobile check-in moves the ID check and the card to an app. Faster for guests, but the hotel loses a face-to-face ID check and the chance to upsell.

Ask yourself: What could a guest do to cheat the hotel if this step didn't exist?

A full sample: Plan a 5K Run Event

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own. Done items and assumptions are outcomes and notes, so they don't need a "because."

DEPENDENCIES

- *Lock the route and check how long the permit takes against the date, because the city may need more than 8 weeks.*
- *Get insurance early, because the permit usually needs proof of it, and registration will collect waivers.*
- *Get the permit and road-closure approval before announcing anything, because the city can say no or move the route.*
- *Set up registration before promoting it, because people need somewhere to sign up when they see it.*
- *Have a weather plan before you promote, because rain changes the route, the setup, and who shows up.*
- *Book timing, water, toilets, and medical once we have a headcount estimate, because they price by headcount and book up fast.*
- *Recruit volunteers a few weeks out, because water stations and turns need people standing there.*

RIPPLE EFFECTS

- *Neighbors and commuters on the route, because roads close that morning. They need notice.*
- *Businesses along the route, because customers can't get to them. They could also be sponsors.*
- *Police or the city's traffic team, because they have to staff the road closures.*
- *Our own team's weekend, because someone has to be there before sunrise.*

DEFINITION OF DONE

- *No one got hurt, or anyone who did got care fast, and it's written up.*
- *The route is cleaned up and the roads reopened on time.*
- *Vendors paid, volunteers thanked, results posted.*
- *A short list of what to change next year.*

WHAT I ASSUMED

- *The city requires a permit for road closures. I'd confirm.*
- *There's a budget, but I don't know what it is.*
- *I don't know if the course needs to be certified. Writing that down.*

A full sample: Client Gift Launch

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own.

FAILURE MODES, WITH THE CHAIN

WHAT WENT WRONG	HOW IT HAPPENED
<i>Wrong addresses</i>	<i>The list came from last year's file, so two clients had moved, so their boxes went to old offices and came back after December 15, so those two got a late gift.</i>
<i>Late shipping</i>	<i>The vendor was booked late, so boxes shipped after December 15, so holiday delays put them after offices closed.</i>
<i>Over budget</i>	<i>The \$200 was supposed to cover everything, but nobody priced in shipping, so the total hit about \$240, so someone pulled items last minute and some boxes looked thin.</i>
<i>Allergy</i>	<i>Nobody asked about dietary needs, so the box had nuts, so one allergic client got a gift they couldn't touch.</i>
<i>Uneven boxes</i>	<i>The vendor ran out of one item and swapped in something cheaper, so two clients compared notes, so one felt like a lower-tier client.</i>
<i>Forgotten client</i>	<i>The list wasn't checked against current accounts, so a new top client was left off and heard about it from someone else.</i>
<i>Gift rules</i>	<i>One client's company caps gifts at a set amount, so the box had to go back, so there was an awkward call.</i>
<i>Damaged in transit</i>	<i>Nobody tested the packaging, so a glass item broke, so the first impression was a mess.</i>
<i>Off-brand</i>	<i>Nobody approved a sample box, so the packaging looked cheap and didn't match how the company wants to come across.</i>
<i>Intercepted</i>	<i>Boxes were addressed to the company, not the person, so an assistant kept one and the client never saw it.</i>

TOP 5, WORST FIRST

FAILURE	HOW LIKELY	HOW BAD	WHY IT RANKS HERE
<i>1. Allergy</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Someone gets hurt, and that can't be undone at all.</i>
<i>2. Late shipping</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>The whole project fails, and nothing can be fixed after December 15.</i>
<i>3. Over budget</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Recoverable, but it's baked into every box once they ship.</i>
<i>4. Wrong addresses</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Recoverable: reship to the right address, just late.</i>
<i>5. Forgotten client</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Recoverable: send their box late with a personal note.</i>

Allergy and late shipping are both High and both can't be undone, so they tie. I made the call: a person getting hurt comes before a late gift. Why the rest missed: uneven boxes, off-brand packaging, damage, gift rules, and an intercepted box all hurt less or hit fewer people, and each can be fixed with a replacement or a call.

What I assumed: The \$200 is the all-in budget per box, shipping included. The brief didn't say. "Failed" means clients didn't get a good gift on time.

A full sample: Hotel Check-In

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own.

THE STEPS AND THE WHY

STEP	WHAT IT'S FOR	WHAT BREAKS WITHOUT IT
1. Greeting	Opens the transaction and catches wrong-name or no-booking problems before a line builds.	Problems surface at the key step, with a line behind them.
2. ID	Confirms who you are, for the law and to stop fraud.	Someone checks in under another person's reservation.
3. Find the reservation	Matches you to the room and rate you booked.	Wrong rates and double-booked rooms.
4. Loyalty lookup	Lets the hotel reward repeat guests and sell upgrades.	Repeat guests drift to other hotels, and upgrade money is lost.
5. Card for incidentals	Covers the minibar, room service, or damage.	The hotel eats the cost when something's broken.
6. Registration card	You agree to the hotel's terms.	No record of what you agreed to.
7. Assign the room	Matches clean, ready rooms to guests.	Guests get sent to dirty or occupied rooms.
8. Program the keys	Only you get in, and old keys stop working.	The last guest's key still opens your door.
9. Breakfast and Wi-Fi	Answers the top questions up front.	The front desk phone rings all night.
10. Directions	Gets guests to the right room without a staff member walking them.	Guests wander or come back to the desk.

WHY THIS ORDER

ID comes first, then the reservation, so the hotel knows who you are and what you booked before anything else. The card and the registration card come before the key, so the hotel is covered before you get access. Info and directions come last, once you're checked in. The order can vary by hotel. ID and the card before the key are the fixed rules.

A swap: program the keys before assigning the room, and you'd be making a key for a room that isn't ready, or isn't theirs.

THE TRADEOFFS

- Mobile check-in moves the ID check and the card to an app. Faster for guests, but the hotel loses the face-to-face ID check and the chance to upsell.
- Charging the whole stay up front instead of a hold. Less risk for the hotel, but guests hate it and some book elsewhere.

WHAT I ASSUMED

- A regular hotel with a front desk, not a self check-in place.

What strong answers often include

Only look after you've written your own. These are things to check for. Your answer should have the because.

HOST A CLIENT VISIT

Strong answers include things like: checking the date risks first, like hotel availability and the executive's travel. Ground transportation from the airport, because the visit starts when they land. A hotel block, because one room short ruins the tone. Dietary and accessibility needs, because it's easier to ask now than to fix at dinner. Who has to be in each session, because the right person is often traveling or booked. A backup if a flight is cancelled the night before. Who covers regular work while the team is busy with the visit. A thank-you and next steps within two days, because that's when the visit actually pays off.

Ask yourself: What happens if a flight is cancelled the night before?

VIP DINNER

A dietary restriction or allergy was missed. A guest's name or title was wrong. A guest was left off or added late. The host ran late. The private room was double-booked. Too loud to hold a conversation. Someone was overserved. The bill or payment was handled awkwardly. Seating put someone in a status slight or next to a rival. A guest couldn't eat anything on the fixed menu. No plan for getting guests home. No follow-up afterward. The host wasn't briefed on a sensitive topic with one of the guests.

Ask yourself: Who would notice first, and what would they do in the moment?

HOW A VENDOR GETS PAID

Steps, in order: someone requests it, it gets approved, it's ordered, it's received, the invoice comes in, the invoice is matched to the order and what was received, the payment is approved, it's paid, it's recorded.

- The person who asks for the work usually isn't the person who pays. Splitting those jobs, often called separation of duties, makes it harder for one person to cause a mistake or commit fraud alone.
- Approval limits scale with the amount.
- The invoice gets checked against what was ordered and received. This is often called a three-way match.
- A check for duplicate invoices.
- Changes to a vendor's bank details get verified another way, such as a call to a number you already have.
- Payments have cutoff times and often take days to clear, so the order affects when money moves.
- Records, for taxes, audits, and disputes.

Why this order: approval comes before ordering so nobody commits money first and asks later. Receiving comes before paying so you only pay for what showed up. Recording comes last because it captures what actually happened.

Sample tradeoff: skipping approval on small purchases. Faster, but small amounts of fraud or waste can add up without anyone noticing.

These are common practices in general, not any one company's rules. If you handle payments, add what you actually see.

A full sample: Host a Client Visit

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own. Done items and assumptions are outcomes and notes, so they don't need a "because."

A thin answer would be: *Book hotel. Book dinner. Make agenda. Success is clients are happy.*

DEPENDENCIES

- *Check the date risks first: is a hotel block still available, and is the executive in town? Three weeks is tight, and either one can kill the date.*
- *Confirm the dates and who's coming, because travel, rooms, and the agenda all hang on it.*
- *Lock a hotel block next, because rooms sell out and rates go up.*
- *Decide who has to be in each session before setting the agenda, because the right people are often traveling or booked.*
- *Set the agenda and who presents before booking meeting rooms, because the agenda decides what space we need.*
- *Ask about dietary and accessibility needs when people RSVP, because dinners and venues depend on it.*
- *Set up ground transportation after flights are booked, because pickups follow arrival times.*
- *Have a backup for cancelled flights, like who calls the client and how the agenda shifts, because with 15 people, one usually happens.*

RIPPLE EFFECTS

- *Our team's regular work, because the people hosting can't do their normal jobs those two days. Who covers?*
- *Other teams, because they lose the meeting rooms for two days.*
- *The executive's calendar, because they need prep time before each session.*
- *Reception and building security, because 15 visitors need a sign-in or badges.*

DEFINITION OF DONE

- *Every client got home on schedule.*
- *Thank-you notes and next steps went out within two days.*
- *The budget is reconciled.*
- *A one-page note on what each client cared about, for follow-up.*

WHAT I ASSUMED

- *The clients are booking their own flights. The brief didn't say.*
- *One group dinner per night is expected.*
- *I don't know the budget.*

A full sample: VIP Dinner

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own.

FAILURE MODES, WITH THE CHAIN

WHAT WENT WRONG	HOW IT HAPPENED
<i>Allergy missed</i>	<i>The RSVP form didn't ask, so the restaurant didn't know, so one guest had a reaction and left for urgent care.</i>
<i>Name or title wrong</i>	<i>It came from an old list, so the place card had an old title, so the guest corrected the CEO in front of everyone.</i>
<i>Room double-booked</i>	<i>The reservation was only confirmed by email, so the restaurant gave the room away, so the group got squeezed into the main dining room.</i>
<i>Host late</i>	<i>The CEO had a meeting ending at the start time, then traffic, so guests waited 30 minutes with no host, so the night started late and the host spent the first round apologizing.</i>
<i>Seating rivals</i>	<i>Nobody checked who knew whom, so two competitors sat together, so one left early.</i>
<i>Too loud</i>	<i>The venue was picked from photos, so on a Friday night nobody could talk business.</i>
<i>Overserved</i>	<i>Open bar with no plan, so one guest got loud, so the host had to step in and calm it down.</i>
<i>Awkward bill</i>	<i>Payment wasn't set up ahead, so the check came to the table, so a client reached for their wallet at a dinner meant to thank them.</i>
<i>No ride home</i>	<i>Nobody planned transportation, so a guest who'd been drinking had no ride, so they drove themselves and got a DUI on the way home, after the company's dinner.</i>
<i>No follow-up</i>	<i>Nobody owned next steps, so no thank-you went out, so the dinner had no business result.</i>

TOP 5, WORST FIRST

FAILURE	HOW LIKELY	HOW BAD	WHY IT RANKS HERE
<i>1. Allergy missed</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>A health risk that can't be undone once the food is served.</i>
<i>2. No ride home</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>A safety risk. If it goes wrong, it can't be undone.</i>
<i>3. Seating rivals</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Can't be undone either, but it's a relationship, not someone's safety.</i>
<i>4. Host late</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Recoverable with a real apology, but the first impression is already set.</i>
<i>5. No follow-up</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Recoverable and the easiest to fix: follow up late.</i>

All three High items can't be undone, so they tie. I made the call: the two safety risks before the relationship, and allergy before the ride home because it happens at the table with no warning. Host late and no follow-up are both Medium and recoverable, so they tie too. I made the call: host late first, because it happens in front of the guests. Why the rest missed: the wrong name, someone overserved, a double-booked room, a loud room, and an awkward bill can all be handled on the night.

WHAT I ASSUMED

- The dinner is at a restaurant, not the office.
- The company is paying.

A full sample: How a Vendor Gets Paid

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own.

THE STEPS AND THE WHY

STEP	WHAT IT'S FOR	WHAT BREAKS WITHOUT IT
0. Vendor setup	Tax form and bank details on file and verified.	Paying a fake vendor, or the wrong account.
1. Request	Someone needs the work, so spending starts from a real need.	People buy things nobody asked for.
2. Approval	A manager OKs it before money is committed.	Anyone can commit the company to a cost.
3. Order	The price and quantity are set in writing.	Arguments later about what was agreed.
4. Receive	Someone confirms it showed up or got done.	Paying for things that never arrived.
5. Invoice	The vendor asks to be paid.	No record of what's owed.
6. Match	The invoice is checked against the order and the receipt.	Wrong amounts and duplicate bills get paid.
7. Payment approval	Someone other than the requester signs off.	One person could order and pay themselves.
8. Pay	Money goes out, timed around cutoffs and cash on hand.	Late fees, or cash runs short.
9. Record	It's entered in the books.	No trail for taxes, audits, or disputes.

WHY THIS ORDER

Approval comes before ordering, so nobody commits money first and asks later. Receiving comes before the match, because you can't match a bill to something you can't prove arrived. The match comes before payment approval, so the approver signs off on a clean bill. Recording comes last because it captures what actually happened. Many companies record the bill when it comes in instead. If yours does, defend that order.

A swap: put payment approval before the match, and someone signs off on a bill nobody has checked.

Most companies pay in a weekly run. An approved bill waits for the next run, so missing the cutoff means the vendor waits a week.

Built into these steps: approval limits that rise with the amount, a duplicate-invoice check during the match, and a phone call to verify any change to a vendor's bank details.

THE TRADEOFFS

- Skip approval for purchases under a set amount. Faster, but small amounts of waste or fraud add up without anyone noticing.
- Pay on a two-way match, the invoice against the order, without waiting for proof it arrived. Vendors get paid faster, but you might pay for something that never showed up.

WHAT I ASSUMED

- A mid-size company that pays by bank transfer and uses purchase orders.

What strong answers often include

Only look after you've written your own. These are things to check for. Your answer should have the because.

PLAN A VIRTUAL TEAM OFFSITE

Holidays and busy periods in each location. Agenda design. Fairness across time zones. Technology setup. Ways to keep people engaged. Breaks. Whether anything is shipped to people's homes. Pre-work for attendees. Follow-up afterward. What happens if someone can't attend one session. How you'll know it worked.

Ask yourself: What if two people can't attend day two at all?

THE BOARD MEETING MODEL

Growth assumptions with nothing behind them. A bear case that isn't really bearish. Cash runway or loan covenants not shown. The model left on the wrong scenario when it was sent. An assumption the CEO couldn't defend. Historical numbers that don't tie to audited statements. Hardcoded numbers that should be formulas. Broken formulas or circular references. Headcount that doesn't match the revenue plan. Links to other files that break when someone else opens it. The wrong file version sent.

Worst first, usually: growth assumptions with nothing behind them, and the model left on the wrong scenario. Both change the whole story the board hears. A broken formula is bad, but it's usually one number.

Ask yourself: Can I walk through how each one would happen, step by step?

10-K INCOME STATEMENT

The structure, top to bottom, at most companies: revenue, cost of goods sold (or cost of revenue), gross profit, operating expenses, operating income, interest and other items, taxes, net income, earnings per share.

- **Why cost of goods sold is separate from operating expenses:** it shows what it costs to make what you sell, apart from what it costs to run the company. That's how you see how profitable the product itself is.
- **Why interest sits below operating income:** how a company is financed, and what it earns on its cash, is a different question from how well the business runs. Operating income shows the business.
- Taxes come after both, and net income is what's left at the bottom.
- Optional: if you look at the company's earnings release, compare its adjusted numbers to the official ones. They show what the company wants you to focus on.

Sample tradeoff: one combined "selling, general and administrative" line is easy to read. A critical reader can't see how much goes to marketing versus overhead.

Names vary: "cost of sales," "gross margin," and "other income (expense), net" are common. Match your company's lines to these sections.

Some companies, especially software and services, say "cost of revenue" or don't show a gross profit line at all.

Ask yourself: If I wanted this company to look better than it is, what could I do within the rules?

A full sample: Plan a Virtual Team Offsite

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own. Done items and assumptions are outcomes and notes, so they don't need a "because."

DEPENDENCIES

- *Week 6: get the budget and the goal approved, because the platform, shipping, and agenda all depend on them.*
- *Week 6: check holidays and busy periods in all four locations, because one conflict breaks a day.*
- *Week 6: find the hours that work across all four time zones, because that sets how long each day can be.*
- *Week 5: pick the video platform and test it, because breakout rooms and screen sharing have to actually work.*
- *Week 4: ship anything physical, because shipping takes longer than people expect.*
- *Week 1: send pre-work, because people need time to do it.*
- *Plan to record every session, because someone will miss one, maybe a whole day.*

RIPPLE EFFECTS

- *Customers and other teams, because they lose these 20 people for two days.*
- *Their managers, because they lose people at odd hours, not just during the workday.*
- *People's home setups and families, since everyone joins from home.*
- *IT support, because setup problems will happen on the day.*

DEFINITION OF DONE

- *Decisions and owners are written down and sent out.*
- *Anyone who missed a session has the recording and the notes.*
- *A short survey on what worked.*
- *Follow-up dates are on the calendar.*

WHAT I ASSUMED

- *Everyone has a laptop and decent internet.*
- *It runs during work hours for everyone, even if some hours are odd.*
- *I don't know the budget for shipping anything.*

A full sample: The Board Meeting Model

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own.

FAILURE MODES, WITH THE CHAIN

WHAT WENT WRONG	HOW IT HAPPENED
<i>Growth with nothing behind it</i>	<i>Growth was set at 40% because last year was good, so there was no real reason, so a board member asked why and the CEO had no answer.</i>
<i>Wrong scenario</i>	<i>The switch was left on the bull case, so the file went out that way, so the board saw the best case labeled as the plan.</i>
<i>Bear case not bearish</i>	<i>The bear case only trimmed growth a little, so the board saw no real downside, so they asked for a tougher downside case before deciding anything.</i>
<i>No cash runway</i>	<i>The model showed profit but not cash, so the board asked how long the cash lasts, so nobody could answer in the room.</i>
<i>History doesn't tie</i>	<i>Last year's revenue was typed in by hand, so it didn't match the audited statements, so credibility was gone in five minutes.</i>
<i>Hardcoded number</i>	<i>A growth rate was typed into a cell instead of linked, so changes didn't flow through, so a board member caught two numbers that contradicted each other and the CEO had to stop and explain.</i>
<i>Old tax rate</i>	<i>The tax rate changed in year two but one year kept the old rate, so net income was off, so a board member caught it and asked for a corrected version.</i>
<i>Headcount mismatch</i>	<i>Revenue doubles but headcount stays flat, so the board asked who's doing the work, so the plan looked made up.</i>
<i>Broken links</i>	<i>The model pulled from a file on the analyst's laptop, so the board's copy showed error codes, so the CEO couldn't walk through the numbers live.</i>
<i>Wrong version</i>	<i>Two files had similar names, so last week's went out, so the numbers didn't match the slides.</i>

TOP 5, WORST FIRST

FAILURE	HOW LIKELY	HOW BAD	WHY IT RANKS HERE
<i>1. Growth with nothing behind it</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>The plan's anchor number has no basis, so it can't be fixed in the room.</i>
<i>2. Wrong scenario</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>The board saw the best case labeled as the plan. They can't unsee it.</i>
<i>3. History doesn't tie</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Trust is gone for the rest of the meeting, but a corrected file can rebuild it later.</i>
<i>4. No cash runway</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Badly damages the meeting, but you can send the answer the next day.</i>
<i>5. Wrong version</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Recoverable: the content is still the plan, just an old copy. Resend it.</i>

Why the rest missed: the old tax rate, a hardcoded number, broken links, a headcount mismatch, and a soft bear case are real, but each can be fixed with a corrected file after the meeting.

What I assumed: The board gets the file ahead of the meeting. The CEO presents it, not the person who built it.

A full sample: 10-K Income Statement

One good answer, not the only one. Only look after you've written your own. Names vary by company: you might see "cost of sales" or "gross margin," and interest is often folded into "other income (expense), net." Some companies show no operating income line at all. Match your company's lines to these sections.

THE STRUCTURE AND THE WHY

SECTION	QUESTION IT ANSWERS	WHY IT SITS HERE
<i>Revenue</i>	<i>How much did we sell?</i>	<i>At the top, because everything else is subtracted from it.</i>
<i>Cost of goods sold</i>	<i>What did it cost to make what we sold?</i>	<i>Right under revenue, so you see the product's own profit first.</i>
<i>Gross profit</i>	<i>Is the product itself profitable?</i>	<i>The first test, before any overhead.</i>
<i>Operating expenses</i>	<i>What does it cost to run the company?</i>	<i>The cost of running the company, like office and sales salaries, rent, and marketing, rather than making each product.</i>
<i>Operating income</i>	<i>Does the business make money doing what it does?</i>	<i>Shows the business before how it's financed.</i>
<i>Interest and other</i>	<i>What did borrowing cost, and what did our cash earn?</i>	<i>Below operating income, because how a company is financed is a separate choice from running the business.</i>
<i>Provision for income taxes</i>	<i>What's this year's tax expense?</i>	<i>After the business and financing results.</i>
<i>Net income</i>	<i>What's left?</i>	<i>The bottom line.</i>
<i>Earnings per share</i>	<i>What did each share earn?</i>	<i>At the very bottom, for investors.</i>

THE TRADEOFFS

- One combined "selling, general and administrative" line is easy to read. A critical reader can't see how much goes to marketing versus overhead.
- What counts as cost of goods sold versus an operating expense, like shipping or depreciation, is a choice. Putting more into operating expenses makes gross margin look better.

WHAT I ASSUMED

- A company that sells physical products and shows a gross profit line.
- A regular company, not a bank. Banks treat interest differently.

KEEP THIS AT YOUR DESK

The short version

1. Priority Matrix	Urgent or important? Sort it. Protect the "schedule" box.
2. Five Whys	Ask why about five times, until you hit something you can fix.
3. So What?	What is this for? Ask before you start.
4. Construction PM Frame	Scope. Sequence. Dependencies. Ownership. Done.
5. Smallest First Step	Make the first step almost silly, then do it.
6. Who's Already Solved This?	One person to ask, one place to look.
7. Three Reach-Out Anchors	The worst someone can say is no. They don't pay my bills. Those who don't ask don't receive.
8. Narrate Your Thinking	Why do you think that? What happens if...?
9. Do It by Hand First	Understand it yourself before you hand it to a tool.
10. Three-Question Debrief	What did I consider? What did I miss? What would I do differently?
11. Books as Tools	One move per book, used this week.

BEFORE YOU ASK AI

Write your own answer first. Then compare.

MEASURE TWICE, CUT ONCE

Think through the whole thing, start to finish, before you act.

Where these come from

Here's what I can credit by name.

- **Priority Matrix.** Often credited to Dwight Eisenhower. Made popular by Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
- **Five Whys.** From Toyota's manufacturing system.
- **Pre-Mortem.** Made popular by the psychologist Gary Klein.
- **Smallest First Step.** Similar ideas in BJ Fogg's *Tiny Habits* and James Clear's *Atomic Habits*.
- **Books as Tools.** The books listed on that page, by their authors.
- **Construction PM Frame.** From seven years of construction project management. My own simplified version.
- **So What?, Who's Already Solved This?, Narrate Your Thinking, and the challenge formats.** Common ideas I've picked up along the way, in my own words. *Narrate Your Thinking* is close to what teachers call think-aloud.
- **Three Reach-Out Anchors, Do It by Hand First, Three-Question Debrief.** Mine, from experience. You may find them elsewhere in other forms.

ABOUT ME

I'm Krysta. I build the systems, software, and people that let small teams run like big ones. I've done it in construction, in oil and gas, and behind a bar. Now I run operations at an oil and gas company and co-run Operations Architecture, a fractional COO practice in Austin. This book is the people part.

I've wanted a mentor since high school and never quite found one. This is me trying to be the person I needed at that age.

See what I build: krystamcdowell.pages.dev

I'll keep adding to this.

IF SOMEONE HANDED YOU THIS

It's because they think you're worth the time.

I always wanted someone to hand me something like this. Nobody did, so I learned it the slow way: on job sites, behind a bar, in rooms where I couldn't follow half of what people were saying.

This is everything I wish I'd had. It's not new and it's not hard. It's practice: slowing down, asking why, and thinking one step past the obvious.

- Krysta

A WORKBOOK. BRING A PEN.



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