

MEMORY COURT

Two recollections. One record. No shortcut to certainty.

A portable companion to the interactive Memory Court exhibit at memorycourt.sahilwho.online. This PDF is built for reading, printing, conversation, and use when JavaScript or internet access is unavailable.

What is here: a grounded introduction to reconstructive memory; definitions and research debates; three complete fictional case dossiers; a manual comparison rule; a worksheet for everyday memories; ethical safeguards; a source library with canonical links.

Important boundary: the fictional evidence records are invented for teaching. No result is a clinical, legal or scientific measurement of truthfulness, eyewitness reliability or personal memory ability.

EVIDENCE / INTERPRETATION / SIMULATION

Evidence: published studies, institutional reports, and the documented Ronald Cotton exoneration.

Interpretation: this guide explains their relevance and limitations. **Simulation:** Crosswalk, Gallery and Station are fictional. **Unknown:** “unresolved” means the available imaginary record does not settle the proposition.

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RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS / 01

A recollection is not a replay

Memory allows us to navigate the world. Yet it is usually reconstructed from what we attended to, encoded, retained, and retrieved. What feels vivid may be well supported; it may also contain inferences and detail acquired after the event. The lesson is not that witnesses lie or that remembering is worthless. It is that each specific claim deserves the right kind of evidence.

Four mechanisms worth separating

Selective encoding. During an event, attention privileges certain cues; the unseen or unnoticed cannot later be recovered with certainty. **Retrieval cues.** The words used in questions influence which information feels relevant. **Post-event information.** Reading, discussion and suggestion can affect later reports. **Source monitoring.** People sometimes confuse a detail learned later with one personally witnessed.

What laboratory evidence demonstrates

Loftus and Palmer (1974) altered wording in questions about films of vehicle collisions and observed changes in reports. Roediger and McDermott (1995) showed that participants can report associated but unrepresented words in a list-learning task. These controlled results reveal possible mechanisms; they do not independently establish why a given person reported a given real-world event.

Why confidence needs conditions

A person can be sincerely certain and wrong. But the claim that eyewitness confidence is always useless also overstates the evidence. Wixted and Wells (2017) distinguish initial confidence, captured promptly after a fair and uncontaminated identification, from later confidence affected by feedback or repeated exposure. The National Research Council (2014) recommends improvements in identification procedures and research. The right question is not just “how certain?” but “how, when, and under what conditions was certainty measured?”

The Ronald Cotton case, correctly framed

Ronald Cotton was wrongfully convicted in North Carolina and spent more than ten years in prison. DNA testing excluded him, identified another perpetrator, and led to the dismissal of charges on 30 June 1995. Jennifer Thompson-Cannino, whose eyewitness identification was part of the investigation, later became a reform advocate with Cotton. This documented history shows the stakes of identification safeguards. It does not entitle us to infer anyone’s concealed motive.

Primary case record: innocenceproject.org/cases/ronald-cotton/

MANUAL EXPERIMENT / 02

How to compare accounts on paper

For each dossier, read the five neutral claims and their fictional independent records. You can use the default accounts, or replace each witness answer with your own Yes / No / Unsure. Record confidence as a self-report only; do not change the result because someone feels certain.

Supports event	Aligned	In tension	Unresolved
Contradicts event	In tension	Aligned	Unresolved
Open / incomplete	Unresolved	Unresolved	Unresolved

Optional evidence-scope rule: count strong records only, and relabel every provisional record as unresolved. With all records included, a supported or contradicted provisional record can enter the same rule, but this merely changes what the toy model includes. It does not scientifically weigh evidence.

Count: for witness A and witness B separately, tally aligned, in tension and unresolved. Each of five answers produces exactly one label. Never add confidence values to the tally. Claims are being compared with records; people are not being scored.

Three questions after every comparison

1. Which answer changes if provisional evidence is excluded? 2. Which “no” relies on affirmative evidence of absence rather than a gap in documentation? 3. How might a leading question, a later conversation or a repeated identification alter the account without implying deception?

A limitation that matters

These fictional dossiers treat some imaginary records as strong and complete for clarity. Real-world video can lack context; clocks can be wrong; documents can be manipulated; independent sources can share an origin. Your job is to ask how a record was authenticated, what it covered and what remains unknown.

FICTIONAL DOSSIER / 01

Crosswalk / the suggested bag

A later question included a suggested “yellow bag” before one account was taken. Does later mention of the bag mean it was seen? The invented video record lets you compare claims without assigning motives.

08:12:01	Cyclist entered crossing.	SUPPORTS: Continuous wide-angle recording shows entry.
08:12:04	Van stopped before line.	SUPPORTS: Clear frames show wheels at rest.
08:12:06	Crossing light was red.	OPEN: Signal obscured; one later suggestion.
08:12:07	Cyclist carried yellow bag.	CONTRADICTS: Uninterrupted close-up shows no bag.
08:12:09	A horn sounded.	OPEN: Audio unavailable.

Competing recollections / initial cards

1	Yes	Yes	A: _____ B: _____
2	Yes	No	A: _____ B: _____
3	Yes	Unsure	A: _____ B: _____
4	Yes	No	A: _____ B: _____
5	Yes	No	A: _____ B: _____

Confidence (hypothetical): A: _____ / B: _____. Do not use these numbers to decide whether the memory is correct.

Question for the jury of readers

Which claim is contradicted by positive coverage? Why is absent audio not proof that no horn sounded?

My evidence-scope choice: ☐ All available records ☐ Strong records only

What remains unanswered? _____

FICTIONAL DOSSIER / 02

Gallery / the borrowed detail

One detail appeared in a museum newsletter after a visit. The witness might remember the idea without recalling the source. The case is invented to illustrate source monitoring, not to mimic a particular real witness.

14:00	Visitor held blue programme.	SUPPORTS: Dated entrance photo.
14:03	Painting label was missing.	CONTRADICTS: Close-up images show label in place.
14:06	Guard approached plinth.	SUPPORTS, PROVISIONAL: One staff note only; no video.
14:09	Alarm chime sounded.	OPEN: Sound monitor unavailable.
14:12	Painting was moved.	CONTRADICTS: Continuous view of wall shows it in place.

Competing recollections / initial cards

1	Yes	No	A: _____ B: _____
2	Yes	No	A: _____ B: _____
3	Yes	Yes	A: _____ B: _____
4	Yes	Unsure	A: _____ B: _____
5	No	No	A: _____ B: _____

Confidence (hypothetical): A: _____ / B: _____. Do not use these numbers to decide whether the memory is correct.

Question for the jury of readers

Which claim might have come from a later source? What changes when provisional evidence is removed?

My evidence-scope choice: ☐ All available records ☐ Strong records only

What remains unanswered? _____

FICTIONAL DOSSIER / 03

Station / two confident commuters

Both fictional commuters report high confidence about a delayed train. Compare the precise movement log with the gaps in sound and video coverage. Confidence is a statement, not a calibration.

17:04	Train departed at 17:04.	SUPPORTS: Validated movement log.
17:06	Platform change announced.	SUPPORTS, PROVISIONAL: Incomplete staff transcript.
17:07	Red suitcase at bench.	OPEN: Bench outside camera view.
17:08	Person crossed safety line.	CONTRADICTS: Complete overhead view of line.
17:09	Inspector waved at door.	OPEN: No independent record.

Competing recollections / initial cards

1	Yes	Yes	A: _____ B: _____
2	Yes	No	A: _____ B: _____
3	Yes	No	A: _____ B: _____
4	No	Yes	A: _____ B: _____
5	Yes	Unsure	A: _____ B: _____

Confidence (hypothetical): A: _____ / B: _____. Do not use these numbers to decide whether the memory is correct.

Question for the jury of readers

Where does the evidence settle a narrow claim? Can the record decide whether either commuter is generally reliable?

My evidence-scope choice: ☐ All available records ☐ Strong records only

What remains unanswered? _____

FIELD PRACTICE / 03

The everyday evidence ledger

Choose a non-sensitive shared event. Before consulting your phone or another person, write four details. Separate directly seen, later learned and inferred information. Then identify which independent record, if any, could check each detail. Preserve your first notes; do not silently correct them afterwards.

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Debrief in ordinary language

What did you remember accurately? Which detail changed? What stayed unresolved because the record was incomplete? Did finding one correct detail make other recollections feel more secure? These are reflection questions, not a test of intelligence, honesty or mental health.

Ethical guardrails

Avoid using the exercise to challenge painful or legally sensitive personal memories. Do not accuse a witness of lying merely because accounts differ. A person can be mistaken in one detail and accurate in others. For real allegations, seek appropriate qualified procedures and legal expertise. Memory Court is an educational simulation, not a diagnostic, investigative or legal tool.

Documented vs invented

Loftus and Palmer (1974), Cotton (1995 exoneration), Talarico and Rubin (2003), and the research summaries cited here are documented. All five-slot timestamps, witness answers and imaginary recordings in the three dossiers are fictional teaching materials. No witness scoring algorithm has been validated.

READING ROOM / 04

Sources and further reading

These primary publications, institutional reports and public records were checked against online scholarly or institutional records during preparation. DOI links may lead to abstracts, paywalls or institution-dependent access. Descriptions are original short summaries.

01. National Research Council (2014). *Identifying the Culprit: Assessing Eyewitness Identification*. Broad scientific synthesis and recommended safeguards.

<https://doi.org/10.17226/18891>

02. E. F. Loftus & J. C. Palmer (1974). *Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction*. Foundational manipulation of question wording.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371\(74\)80011-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(74)80011-3)

03. E. F. Loftus (2005). *Planting Misinformation in the Human Mind*. Review of post-event misinformation effects.

<https://doi.org/10.1101/lm.94705>

04. M. K. Johnson, S. Hashtroudi & D. S. Lindsay (1993). *Source Monitoring*. How remembered material is assigned a source.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.114.1.3>

05. H. L. Roediger III & K. B. McDermott (1995). *Creating False Memories*. Gist-based intrusion errors in word-list memory.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-7393.21.4.803>

06. J. M. Talarico & D. C. Rubin (2003). *Confidence, Not Consistency, Characterizes Flashbulb Memories*. Vivid confidence versus stability of recall.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.02453>

07. J. T. Wixted & G. L. Wells (2017). *The Relationship Between Eyewitness Confidence and Identification Accuracy*. Qualified case for interpreting initial confidence.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100616686966>

08. National Institute of Justice (1999). *Eyewitness Evidence: A Guide for Law Enforcement*. Practical procedures for collecting eyewitness statements.

<https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/eyewitness-evidence-guide-law-enforcement>

09. Innocence Project (case record). *Ronald Cotton*. DNA exoneration and eyewitness identification case history.

<https://innocenceproject.org/cases/ronald-cotton/>

10. National Registry of Exonerations (case record). *Ronald Cotton*. Independent register and chronological account.

<https://exonerationregistry.org/cases/10358>

11. U. Neisser & N. Harsch (1992). *Phantom Flashbulbs*. Historical study of vivid yet changing public-event recollections.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511664069.003>

MORE WORLDS / SAHILVERSE

Return to the canonical universe: <https://sahiltayal.com/>. Ask a question or suggest a correction: sahil@sahiltayal.com.

Memory Court Field Guide. Original educational writing and fictional scenarios by Sahil Tayal / Sahilwho, part of Sahilverse. October 2026.