

**The Structural Patterns of Change:  
(A reorganization of reframing patterns)**

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*Note: I have revised this presentation repeatedly since I first offered it several years ago, trying to make it clearer and more “user-friendly.” It is an attempt to summarize what I presented in my two-volume book, [Six Blind Elephants](#) (578 pp.) but which I failed to provide in those books. So it inevitably leaves out a lot of detail—and almost all of the examples. Please consider this a “work in progress” to be further refined in the future.*

Reframing is usually thought of as a relatively small part of NLP, originally divided into content reframing and context reframing, and later further divided into the 14 “sleight of mouth” patterns. However, I think that *all* change can be usefully described using one or more patterns of reframing, and all of these different patterns derive from only three variables. Every change of experience changes one or more of the following:

1. A *scope* of experience in *space* or *time*,
2. The *categorization* of a scope,
3. The *logical level* of categorization.

### **What is a Scope?**

NLP is often defined as “The study of the structure of subjective experience.” The main difficulty in describing the structure of an experience of scope is that usually a scope is immediately categorized, and that nearly all the words we have to use to describe a scope indicate categories (except for proper nouns such as “John Smith” or “New York City”). Scope is what is experienced (seen, heard, felt, smelled, or tasted) *before* it is categorized or identified.

An example of this is hearing someone speaking a language you don’t understand; you can hear the sounds perfectly well, but you don’t know how to punctuate the stream of sounds into separate scopes of sounds, or what those scopes indicate. Or think of a time when you didn’t know what you were seeing or hearing; you could see it or hear it, but you couldn’t immediately categorize it. Usually an experience of this kind is immediately followed by a vigorous effort to identify what it is, because that is so useful in responding appropriately.

For simplicity, let's first explore scope in a moment in time, as if the flow of time were stopped:

1. **Modality.** Each of the five sensory modalities is a *process* that is sensitive to certain aspects of our experience, providing a *scope* of raw data or information of a certain kind. A useful metaphor for a sensory process is a pipeline or conduit that transports some content, such as water or electricity. Awareness is a process that is always aware of *something*, *before* it is categorized as a particular something. A modality is not a scope, but it is a conduit for a scope. For instance, the auditory modality is not a scope, but a particular sound or set of sounds is a scope.

Each modality provides information that is different from the other modalities—though there is some overlap, such as location. (If there were no overlap, we wouldn't be able to integrate the scopes from the different senses into the unitary experience we usually enjoy.)

2. **Submodality.** Each submodality is a subdivision of each modality, a smaller conduit that is sensitive to a narrower aspect of a modality and offers a certain scope of raw data or information. A large image carries more information than a small image, and a color image carries more information than a black/white image. A submodality is not a scope, but it is a conduit for a scope. For instance the submodality "color" is not a scope, but a particular color or set of colors is a scope.

3. **Submodality Part/Whole.** A submodality may only apply to a *part* of an experience, rather than the whole. Part of an image may be larger, closer, clearer, more colorful, more in focus, etc. "Figure/Ground" is the simplest example, in which the "figure" is seen as somewhat closer than the rest of what is seen, emphasizing the "figure."

Every still image will have submodalities, but only some will have partial enhancement that "highlights" one (or more) aspects of an image, drawing attention to it. This effect is often a factor in internal representations of importance or values, which are motivating (toward or away from) and if out of balance, may result in compulsions or addictions.

4. **Time.** All the factors described above presuppose an unchanging scope in space, as if time did not exist. However, a still image is an artificial (though often useful) representation of the flow of events, whether external or internal, or both. In reality, the flow of events is a changing movie, not a static momentary snapshot, even when changes are very small, as in "boredom."

Even the shortest movie changes the scope of time, and this usually changes the scope of space. We typically punctuate our experience of time into segments of different length, with somewhat arbitrary beginnings and endings. The span of an "event" can vary from a "split-second" to days or months, or

even a lifetime, before categorizing it, as in “That was a tough interview,” or “He had a good life.” A longer scope in time provides a larger context, similar to that provided by a larger context in space, the “bigger picture.” However, a larger context in either space or time usually makes it harder to notice the smaller details, unless you “zoom in” to magnify a part of the image.

### **What is a Category?**

A category is a group of two or more scopes selected according to one or more criteria that they all possess, and represented by a “prototype” that represents the category. In humans this category is often indicated by a word. If I say the word “chair,” the image that appears in your mind is your prototype for that category. Any comparison creates a category, because even though it focuses on differences between the experiences compared, that presupposes that the two are similar (“comparable”) in some way.

### **What is a Logical Level?**

The sensory-based experience of a “chair,” *before* it is categorized, is a scope, which becomes an example of a basic category, such as “chair,” or “furniture,” or “household belongings,” or any other category. A sensory-based scope example is arbitrarily designated logical level 0.

A category like “chair” that includes a group of sensory-based scopes is called a basic level category, at logical level 1.

However, the category “chair” could be included in a more general category “furniture,” including tables, beds, desks, etc. A category whose members are also categories (rather than sensory-based scopes) is at logical level 2

The category “furniture” (at logical level 2) could be included in a yet more general category like “household belongings,” along with other level 2 categories such as “clothes,” “clocks,” “shoes,” etc. A category whose members are categories at logical level 2 is at logical level 3.

However, the category “chair” could also be divided into more specific basic level categories at logical level 1, such as “antique chairs,” “modern chairs,” “lawn chairs,” etc. In that case, the category “chair” would be at logical level 2, rather than 1.

If “antique chairs,” “modern chairs,” “wooden chairs,” were not basic level categories, but were further subdivided into yet more specific categories, then they would be at logical level 2, and “chairs” would be at logical level 3.

From the foregoing it should be clear that *logical levels are not fixed, but reflect how someone categorizes*, a way to track how someone categorizes, which has many uses. One is that the prototype image for a higher logical level

will be less specific (more abstract) than the prototype image for a lower level. This has both advantages and disadvantages.

A major advantage to making a change in a more abstract behavior like “honesty” is that it will generalize much more widely (to more contents and contexts) than a more specific behavior, such as “speaking in a loud voice.” This makes it possible to predict—at least in a general way—how widely a change will generalize. Some behaviors (like sex) are usually more useful if they are somewhat narrowly contextualized, while others (like being observant) are useful in a much wider range of contexts.

A major disadvantage of working at a more abstract level is that the prototype for a behavior like “honesty” is much less detailed and sensory-specific than “speaking in a loud voice,” which is much less ambiguous. That makes it hard to know what specific behavior constitutes “honesty” in a given situation—intellectual honesty, emotional honesty, financial self-disclosure, etc.? The highly abstract category indicated by the words “collateral damage” doesn’t include vivid images of screaming, bleeding, burning flesh.

Knowing this trade-off between wide generalization and specificity can sensitize us to the likely consequences of working at different logical levels, and makes it possible to choose the logical level at which to make an intervention. *A general principle is to work at the most specific logical level that will get the desired outcome.* For instance, if a client is distressed because they can’t spell well, teaching the successful spelling strategy will be more useful than teaching them “how to feel comfortable about making mistakes.”

Each of these is a pure process intervention that changes what a client attends to, and that elicits a different (and hopefully a more useful) experience and response. The different reframing patterns provide a familiar window for understanding how these three fundamental processes underlie *all* change work. This greatly simplifies the task of characterizing a client’s experience, and also indicates what kind of intervention will be most useful.

Most of the reframing patterns below are content-free processes, meaning that the therapist doesn’t introduce content into the client’s experience. However, as the client shifts attention in response to an intervention, they will attend to different content out of their own experience, and this will often change their response.

This reorganization helps you understand how all the different reframing patterns are related, what kind of change of experience will result from using each, and points out ambiguities in earlier presentations of reframing patterns.

Whenever a pattern has previously been named (for instance in Robert Dilts’ “sleight of mouth” descriptions) that name is used. Dilts lists 14 different

patterns; the list below contains 24, but some are different names for the same kind of scope/category/logical level distinction, and some differ only in content. The number of fundamental patterns is not written in stone; that depends on how specific you make distinctions in creating categories.

A simple sentence stem is used to exemplify each intervention, to make it easy to distinguish the different patterns listed (sometimes this restriction results in somewhat awkward sounding sentences).

## **1. Change of Scope:**

### **A. Space**

*Expand frame* (larger scope) “And the larger context around that is. . . ?”

*Shrink frame* (smaller scope) “And part of that is. . . .”

*Change frame* (different scope) “And something entirely different than that is . . . .”

*Perceptual Position (self, other, observer)* “And how s/he would see this is. . . ?”

### **B. Time**

*Prior cause* (earlier scope) “And that’s because. . . ?” Notice that “And what happened before that was. . . ?” is much subtler because it implies prior cause (causality), rather than presupposing it.

*Consequence* (later scope) “And the result of that is. . . ?” Notice that “And what happened after that was. . . ?” is much subtler because it implies consequence (causality), rather than presupposing it.

*Expand frame* (larger scope) “And if that still picture were expanded into a movie to include what happened before, and what happened afterward. . . .” Often a traumatic memory is seen as an unchanging still image “frozen in a moment in time.” Seeing that horrible moment of peak emotion in the longer context of a movie is a powerful intervention that provides a larger perspective, while presupposing that the static moment will change into something else.

*Shrink frame* (smaller scope) “And a part of that event is. . . .”

*Change frame* (different scope) “And a very different period of time is. . . .”

## **2. Change of Categorization: (at the same logical level)**

*Redefinition or Redescription* “And a different way to describe that is. . . ?”

## **3. Change of Logical Level of Categorization:**

### **Lower Logical Level.**

**Eliciting a more specific category or an example (scope):**

*Category to more specific category* “And that is what kind of. . . ?”

*Category to scope* And an example of that is. . . ?”

**Counterexample category** (Category to specific category with negation) “And an example of when that isn’t true is called. . . ?”

**Counterexample scope** (Category to scope with negation) “And an example when that isn’t true is. . . ?”

### **Higher Logical Level**

#### **Eliciting a more general category:**

**Meta-frame** The prefix “meta” alone has been used ambiguously in the past to indicate *either* a larger scope or a more general category. Since “Expand frame” already describes a larger scope, I will use “meta-frame” to mean a shift to a more general category that includes the original scope or category. “And that is an example of. . . ?”

There are *many* such meta-frames, and many specify content. Some of the more useful and familiar ones that have been described previously are listed below:

**Positive Intent** “And the positive intent of that is. . . ?” Positive intent creates a category of which this experience is an example. (“I did that to make you happy.”)

**Model of the world** “And so the way *you* see it is. . . ?” This creates an implied category of “the ways other people see this,” and the way “you” see it is one example in this category, which is implied. The question shifts focus to another scope/example within this category, at the same logical level, but now we’re also aware of the whole category.

**Learning** “And what you learned from that is. . . ?” elicits a more general category of “learnings.”

**Curiosity** “And what was most interesting to you about that is. . . ?” elicits a more general category of “interesting things.”

**Hierarchy of criteria** “And what is more important to you than that is. . . ?” elicits a more general category of “things that are important.”

**Metaphor/Analogy** “And that is like what. . . ?” Metaphor elicits a category that an experience is “like,” in some way or ways, meaning that it satisfies one or more (but not all) criteria for inclusion in the category.

**Self-reference** elicits a category that *includes itself* as an example) These patterns are seldom applicable, but *very* useful when they are, because they are logically “airtight.” Both of these loop between logical levels;

**Apply to self** (applying a category to itself) “And is what you just said an example of itself? . . . ” “You said that you hate complaining; is what you said a complaint?”

**Paradox** (apply to self with negation) “And is what you just said not an

example of itself? . . . ” “You said, ‘I won’t communicate with you,’ but what you said is also a communication.”

**Ambiguous Reframing Patterns** (in addition to *meta-frame* (described above) Each of the categories below is an example of one of the previous categories described.

**Outcome** “And the outcome of that is. . . ?” An outcome can be either a *scope* of experience (a specific new car) or a *category* of experience (status). Asking about an outcome could shift from one scope to another scope, one category to another category, from a scope to a category, or a category to a scope (four possibilities). Notice that an outcome could be in the past (“What I wanted to achieve”) the present (“My outcome is”) or the future, (“What I hope will happen is”).

**Another Outcome** Just as an outcome is ambiguous, another outcome could also yield the four possibilities listed above.

**Meta-outcome** (outcome of the outcome) Again, asking about a meta-outcome could also yield the four possibilities listed above. When the prefix “meta” a used in other ways, it is also ambiguous in regard to scope and category.

**“Chunk down”** can mean either going to a smaller scope or to a more specific category, or to a specific example (scope) included in a category.

**“Chunk up”** can mean either going to a larger scope or to a more general category, or from a scope to a category.

**Reality Strategy** asks for the evidence (the epistemological basis) for their experience. “And the way you know that is. . . ?” The responder may tell you a category (“That is one of the things my parents told me.”) or a scope of experience (“I saw it happen,” or “It’s in the Bible.”).

### ***Practicing and using this information***

There are many ways to use the information in this very brief outline; here are just a few:

You can examine the individual steps in any standard NLP intervention (such as the Meta-Model questions, change personal history, or the phobia cure) and notice which reframing pattern occurs in each.

You can write down examples of what you have said to clients, and discover which patterns you typically use. The ones that you don’t use indicate where you can expand your range of skills and flexibility.

You can think of things clients have said to you that you found difficult or confusing, and find out what patterns they exhibit. How does that suggest to you how you might respond the next time a client says something like that?

Better yet, make a transcript of a short recorded segment of a session with a client, and notice which patterns you use, and which patterns your client use in response. Do they respond appropriately to the pattern in what you said, or not? If not, did you repeat what you said, or did you accept their inappropriate response?

You can do the same with transcripts of different therapies, to notice how they are biased, and how this limits what they can accomplish. For instance, psychoanalysis mostly asks for an earlier scope of time (“prior cause”) and the tired old, “How do you feel about that?” asks for a higher category, what is often called “meta” (All emotional feelings are categories that include the experiences they include and evaluate.) directing attention *away* from practical problem-solving.

You can practice using different patterns together for greater effect, for instance: “When you see the larger context around that memory, how else could you describe that situation?” first asks for an expanded scope, and then for a recategorization of the larger scope. “Give me an example of that, and tell me how you responded?” first asks for a specific scope included in a category, or a smaller category, and then asks for a report of the consequences later in time.

As an exercise, pick any two patterns at random, and create a sentence that uses both; then notice how hearing that sentence changes your experience.

You can say to a client, “Tell me more about that,” which is ambiguous, and notice which patterns they use in response. That will tell you something about how they are processing a problem or outcome—or how a previous therapist has trained them to respond in the therapy context.

This article has described verbal interventions, but the same principles apply to the nonverbal aspects of a communication. For instance, if you ask, “How else could you describe that situation?” while gesturing broadly with both arms expansively, that is an invitation to expand the frame in space to include a larger context, and then to recategorize it. Using a gesture in which both hands move together indicates a smaller context, a smaller scope of space, instead of a larger context. If you ask the same question with a sweeping horizontal gesture, that’s an invitation to expand the scope of time to include what happened before and after an event, while a shorter gesture invites attending to a smaller scope of time. Asking the same question while raising a hand vertically is an invitation to think of a more general category at a higher logical level, while a downward gesture would invite the client to think of a more specific category. These are only broad generalizations of course; utilizing the gestures a client spontaneously uses to indicate these kinds of shift will be much more dependable.



***A friendly challenge:***

In this short article I'm claiming that *every* intervention that changes subjective experience—whether officially designated as “NLP” or not—can be usefully described using this set of reframing patterns, which are based on only three fundamental process variables—*scope*, *categorization*, and *logical level*. As you experiment in the ways I have suggested above, if you find an communication that you have difficulty characterizing (or you think you have found an example of a pattern that isn't listed above) read my two-volume book, [\*Six Blind Elephants\*](#), which provides much more detail, and many more examples.