



A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis - Cognitive and Perceptual Biases, Reasoning Processes

By Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

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This primer highlights structured analytic techniques—some widely used in the private sector and academia, some unique to the intelligence profession. It is not a comprehensive overview of how intelligence officers conduct analysis. Rather, the primer highlights how structured analytic techniques can help one challenge judgments, identify mental mindsets, stimulate creativity, and manage uncertainty. In short, incorporating regular use of techniques such as these can enable one to structure thinking for wrestling with difficult questions.

Using the analytic techniques contained in this primer will assist analysts in dealing with the perennial problems of intelligence: the complexity of international developments, incomplete and ambiguous information, and the inherent limitations of the human mind. Understanding the intentions and capabilities of adversaries and other foreign actors is challenging, especially when either or both are concealed. Moreover, transnational threats today pose even greater complexity, in that they involve multiple actors—including nonstate entities—that can adapt and transform themselves faster than those who seek to monitor and contain them. Finally, globalization has increased the diversity of outcomes when complex, interactive systems such as financial flows, regional economies or the international system as a whole are in flux.

The first hurdle for analysts is identifying the relevant and diagnostic information from the increasing volume of ambiguous and contradictory data that is acquired through open source and clandestine means. Analysts must also pierce the shroud of secrecy—and sometimes deception—that state and nonstate actors use to mislead. A systematic approach that considers a range of alternative explanations and outcomes offers one way to ensure that analysts do not dismiss potentially relevant hypotheses and supporting information resulting in missed opportunities to warn.

Cognitive and perceptual biases in human perception and judgment are another important reason for analysts to consider alternatives. As Richards Heuer and others have argued, all individuals assimilate and evaluate information through the medium of "mental models" (sometimes also called "frames" or "mind-sets"). These are experience-based constructs of assumptions and expectations both about the world in general and more specific domains. These constructs strongly influence what information analysts will accept—that is, data that are in accordance with analysts' unconscious mental models are more likely to be perceived and remembered than information that is at odds with them.

Mental models are critical to allowing individuals to process what otherwise would be an incomprehensible volume of information. Yet, they can cause analysts to overlook, reject, or forget important incoming or missing information that is not in accord with their assumptions and expectations. Seasoned analysts may be more susceptible to these mind-set problems as a result of their expertise and past success in using time-tested mental models. The key risks of mindsets are that: analysts perceive what they expect to perceive; once formed, they are resistant to change; new information is assimilated, sometimes erroneously, into existing mental models; and conflicting information is often dismissed or ignored. Intelligence analysts should be self-conscious about their reasoning processes. They should think about how they make judgments and reach conclusions, not just about the judgments and conclusions themselves.



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Erica Futch:

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