

THE GAP

between

KNOWING & DOING

A humane field guide to intention, friction,
and the next observable step.



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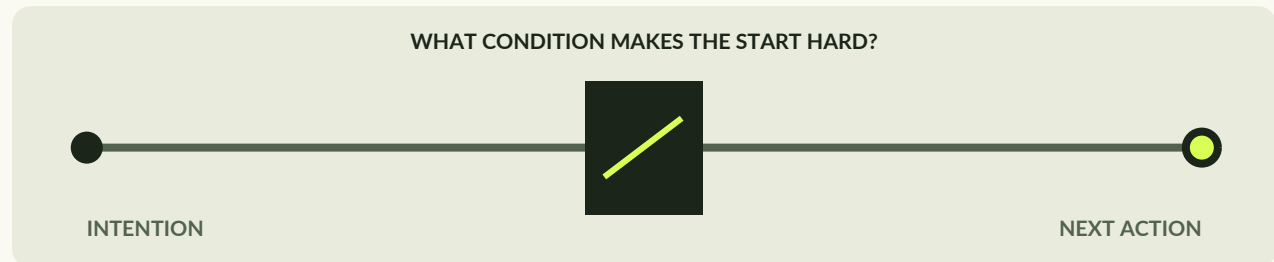
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THE READING EDITION / FICTION, EVIDENCE, INTERPRETATION

About this field note

The opening scene is fictional. Where research-based frameworks are introduced, their sources are numbered and documented at the end. The “Identity–Action Gap” is used here as an exploratory conceptual lens, not as a scientifically validated scale, diagnosis or predictive theory.



01 / FICTIONAL SCENE

The page that stays blank

At 8:17 a.m., a person sits down with tea, a notebook and a plan: spend ten minutes writing a letter to an old friend. Nothing urgent is in the way. The friend matters; the letter would matter too. A sentence forms in the mind. The hand does not move. Instead, the person straightens a stack of receipts, glances at a message, and decides that the tea needs reheating.

By lunch, the notebook is still open. The easiest explanation is also the cruelest: *I must not care enough*. But that verdict arrives without examining a single condition. Perhaps the first sentence feels too consequential. Perhaps the kitchen table also hosts bills and interruptions. Perhaps writing would invite grief, or an expectation to explain a long silence. Or perhaps the letter is a lovely idea that has ceased to be a genuine priority. These are different situations. Calling all of them laziness conceals the difference.

This morning is invented, not evidence about any particular person. The puzzle is real: why can an intention remain vivid while its associated action never begins? The answer may be more useful as an investigation of circumstances than as a trial of character.

02 / EVIDENCE + INTERPRETATION

An intention is not a switch

Wanting an outcome does not automatically arrange the conditions for a behaviour. In the research-based COM-B framework, capability, opportunity and motivation interact in producing behaviour. Capability includes what someone can do or understands how to do; opportunity includes physical and social conditions; motivation includes reflective aims and more automatic processes. A missed action therefore does not point uniquely to weak desire. [1]

BJ Fogg's behaviour-design model offers another practical vocabulary: motivation, ability and a prompt need to come together at the moment of action. It is a model for analysing behaviour, not a device that can read a person's mind. Consider the letter: the person might be motivated but face an unclear first move, an absent cue or an emotionally expensive situation. Raising the volume of "try harder" does not necessarily repair any of those. [2]

I use the phrase **Identity-Action Gap** for the distance between the kind of person someone wishes or believes themselves to be and the actions that appear in daily life. Here it is a proposed conceptual lens, **not a scientifically validated scale, diagnosis or established predictive model**. Its value is modest: it asks us to notice a mismatch without assuming that the mismatch reveals a person's essence.

03 / PRACTICAL MAP

Four tollbooths on the way to starting

First is **uncertainty**. "Work on my research" is an admirable intention and an almost unusable instruction. "Open the paper and underline one question" is a visible move. The gap between them is not necessarily willpower; it may be that the mind has been handed a project instead of an action. Calling the first move "small" does not make the whole project small. It simply makes the beginning identifiable.

Second is **environment**. The instrument is in another room. The desk is occupied. The bus route is unreliable. A household member needs care. A group's unwritten rules make asking for help awkward. Some obstacles can be rearranged with a cue, a

prepared surface or a conversation. Others require resources, policy changes or people with power to cooperate. A good account of behaviour has room for both.

Third is a **competing reward**: a familiar feed, an easy chore, a task with a quick visible finish. Habit research shows how repeated behaviours can become cued by familiar contexts, sometimes without fresh deliberation about current goals. This does not prove that every distraction is a habit; it suggests asking what the setting is inviting next. [4] Fourth is **emotional cost**: embarrassment, boredom, uncertainty, grief, the prospect of disappointing someone or even the pressure attached to an exciting ambition. These four buckets are working categories for this page, not an exhaustive taxonomy of human behaviour.

04 / INTERPRETATION

Put the situation on trial, not the person

“I am undisciplined” sounds like an explanation, yet it predicts little about what to change at 8:17 tomorrow. Compare it with: “When I begin at the kitchen table, I stop at the question of how to greet my friend.” The second statement can be checked. A different greeting, a different place or a conversation about the awkwardness might change the result. If it does not, the observation still teaches something: that particular guess did not explain enough.

This is not an argument that personal responsibility vanishes. Choices matter; promises can matter deeply to other people. But responsibility becomes more useful when it concerns decisions one can examine rather than a permanent adjective attached to a whole person. One can acknowledge missed commitments and still refuse an unearned character verdict.

A helpful distinction is between *description*, *hypothesis* and *judgment*. “I did not begin” is a description. “The first step was unclear” is a hypothesis. “I am a failure” is a judgment that the first two statements cannot support. Making these distinctions does not solve the problem by itself. It changes which questions are available.

05 / EVIDENCE + PROPOSED PRACTICE

Move one gate, observe what changes

Instead of asking for a new personality, choose one obstacle that might be adjustable. If the action is vague, write down a two-minute beginning: “At 8:20, I will open the notebook and draft only the greeting.” Research on *implementation intentions* studies plans that connect a specific situation to a specific response—often in an “if this situation occurs, then I will do that” form. A meta-analysis reported beneficial average effects on goal attainment; that is evidence for a strategy, not a personal guarantee. [3]

If the setting is unfriendly, put the notebook by the kettle tonight or ask for ten undisturbed minutes. If another reward keeps winning, change which activity is easiest to reach at the relevant moment. If the emotional cost is high, consider drafting a deliberately imperfect sentence or seeking appropriate support. These are **candidate experiments**, not treatment advice; they should be safe, proportionate and optional.

Then make the guess falsifiable. “If the missing greeting is my main obstacle, choosing a first sentence in advance should make it easier to begin at least once under similar conditions.” If the start still does not happen, resist calling the experiment a moral failure. The original explanation may be incomplete. Change the hypothesis, ask what was missed, or stop. One attempt cannot prove a theory about a human life.

06 / COUNTERPOINT + CONTEXT

Some doors should stay closed

There is an important possibility the language of friction can obscure: the goal itself may not deserve pursuit. A person might want the image of being fluent in five languages but not the daily experience of studying them. A friendship may be maintained by obligation rather than reciprocity. An old ambition may belong to a former season of life. In these cases, perfecting a starting ritual could amount to becoming more efficient at ignoring one’s own changed priorities.

Ask what the action is for, whom it serves, and what will be lost if it is postponed. There is no universal rule that a deferred goal must be rescued. Sometimes the wise experiment is to revise the goal, give it away, negotiate an obligation honestly or let it

end. Rest is not merely a technique for future output; it can be a legitimate good in itself.

Nor is every barrier individually adjustable. Money, safety, health, access, exhaustion, caregiving, unfair organisational conditions and discrimination may make even a tiny action costly or unavailable. It would be glib to recommend a better checklist where what is needed is time, accommodation, resources, protection or collective change. The question “What is the friction?” should expand compassion and clarify responsibility, never relocate society’s problems onto a solitary person.

07 / A USEFUL ENDING

A question you can carry home

Return to the notebook. Perhaps the person places one possible greeting on the page. Perhaps they ask their friend whether a short call would be kinder than a letter. Perhaps they discover that today is not the day for either and close the notebook without turning the decision into a biography. Each ending reveals more than the verdict “lazy” did. The original mystery was not necessarily a hidden defect; it was an unexamined set of conditions, meanings and choices.

Here is a reusable mental model: **name the next observable action; name one likely gate; change one condition; look for the result; keep, revise or release the goal.** The gate might be practical, emotional or structural. More than one can exist. An experiment may fail. A decision to rest or change direction may be sound. The model is a way of asking better questions, not a command to optimise every hour.

So when knowing and doing part company, start somewhere more precise than self-accusation: **“What prevents the next step, and can I change that condition?”** And allow an equally human answer: *perhaps the step, or even the destination, is no longer mine to take.*

THE OFFLINE FRICTION LAB / PRINTABLE COUNTERPART

One possible gate, one observable test

The website offers a private, optional goal field and buttons for four possible obstacles plus a fifth choice to reconsider the goal. That field is not saved, tracked, exported, or included in this PDF. Here is the same exercise on paper: choose a hypothesis, change one condition if appropriate, and specify what would challenge your explanation. An imagined open gate is not evidence that success will follow.

Step 1 / Decide whether you want to name a goal at all

Optional: write a concrete next action; leave it blank if you prefer. You do not need to share this sheet with anyone.

Step 2 / Select ONE gate—or choose to change the goal

UNCLEAR NEXT ACTION · Hypothesis: the first move is vague. Trial: name a two-minute start and a cue. Challenge: if the move is clear but starting is no easier, uncertainty may be an incomplete explanation.

ENVIRONMENTAL OBSTACLE · Hypothesis: access or conditions block the start. Trial: prepare an item, change location, request time, or ask for help. Challenge: removing that obstacle makes no difference.

COMPETING REWARD · Hypothesis: another available activity wins the moment. Trial: make that diversion less immediate and the chosen step easier to reach. Challenge: the changed arrangement does not affect what begins.

EMOTIONAL COST · Hypothesis: uncertainty, fear, grief, shame or boredom makes starting costly. Trial: reduce the stakes, draft privately, or seek appropriate help. Challenge: the gentler version is no easier or does not feel safe.

MAYBE I DO NOT WANT THIS GOAL · Hypothesis: the destination no longer fits my values or commitments. Trial: reflect or have an honest conversation about revising, pausing or releasing it. Challenge: the goal remains important after reflection.

Step 3 / Record a genuine observation

If the predicted change does not occur, do not call the person defective. The proposed explanation may be incomplete, the conditions may differ, or more support may be needed. Some structural barriers require resources or action from institutions; some actions should not be pursued. This exercise is not a treatment or diagnostic instrument.

BLANK SELF-EXPERIMENT CARD

Print, fill in, keep private—or leave blank

A question is only useful if it leaves room for an honest “no,” “not now,” or “this condition cannot be changed by me.”

NEXT OBSERVABLE ACTION _____	ONE SUSPECTED GATE _____
ONE CONDITION TO CHANGE _____	WHEN / WHERE I COULD TRY _____
WHAT OBSERVATION WOULD CHALLENGE THE GUESS? _____	KEEP, REVISE, REST, ASK FOR HELP, OR RELEASE? _____

When you finish: keep the experiment, revise the hypothesis, request support, rest, or release the goal. There are no points to earn and no obligation to continue.

EVIDENCE DESK / LINKS & LIMITS

Established ideas, clearly distinguished

The following sources support separate established ideas: COM-B, a behaviour-design model, implementation intentions, and context-cued habits. None validates this field note’s four buckets or the proposed Identity–Action Gap framing as a single instrument.

[1] Michie, van Stralen & West (2011)

The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3096582/>

Introduces COM-B: capability, opportunity, motivation and behaviour.

[2] Stanford Behavior Design Lab

Fogg Behavior Model

<https://behaviordesign.stanford.edu/resources/fogg-behavior-model>

A design model that focuses on motivation, ability and prompt.

[3] Gollwitzer & Sheeran (2006)

Implementation Intentions and Goal Achievement: A Meta-analysis of Effects and Processes

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)38002-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38002-1)

Reviews evidence on if–then planning; does not guarantee success for an individual.

[4] Wood & Neal (2007)

A new look at habits and the habit–goal interface

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17907866/>

Explains how context cues can initiate habitual responses.

A BETTER QUESTION

Not: "What is wrong with me?" Instead: "What condition makes this step hard?"

INTENTION $\neq$ ACTION

A sincere goal can coexist with a missed action. The missing step is an observation, not a verdict about character. Capability, opportunity and motivation can all matter. The practical task is to investigate without pretending a single story explains everything.

A SIX-STEP INVESTIGATION, NOT A SIX-STEP OBLIGATION

01 Describe only what happened

"I did not open the document this morning" is observable; "I am a fraud" is an interpretation.

02 Ask whether the goal is still yours

Change, pause and withdrawal are legitimate options. Consider promises made to others.

03 List more than one explanation

An unclear first move, inaccessible conditions or high emotional costs may coexist.

04 Pick one reversible change

Choose a small, feasible alteration; do not assume all obstacles are yours to remove.

05 Name disconfirming evidence

Decide what result would weaken your favourite explanation, not just support it.

06 Observe and keep options open

Keep, revise, seek support, rest or release. One trial rarely settles a causal question.

Scope: These exercises are educational reflection tools. The Identity-Action Gap and Friction Lab are an exploratory author synthesis, not an established psychological scale, clinical assessment or prediction engine.

FIVE GATES, NOT LABELS

Suspect a condition. Try to distinguish hypotheses. Leave room for structural reality.

01 / UNCLEAR FIRST STEP

Possible clue: A project is named, but no specific starting action.

One possible trial: Try naming an observable two-minute move and ordinary cue.

Limit: Clear instructions alone may not repair missing access or competing commitments.

02 / PHYSICAL OR SOCIAL CONTEXT

Possible clue: Tools, time, privacy, transport, permission or help are missing.

One possible trial: Try changing access or asking for help if it is safe and realistic.

Limit: A structural obstacle is not personal weakness.

03 / COMPETING DEFAULT

Possible clue: An easier immediate activity wins at the decision moment.

One possible trial: Make the intended action easier to reach for one trial.

Limit: Preferences may be legitimate; change the goal if appropriate.

04 / EMOTIONAL COST

Possible clue: An action carries uncertainty, grief, rejection or pressure.

One possible trial: Lower stakes or ask for appropriate support; do not force distress.

Limit: This does not diagnose an emotion or mental-health condition.

05 / RECONSIDER THE GOAL

Possible clue: The destination no longer fits obligations or values.

One possible trial: Pause, negotiate, redesign or release it deliberately.

Limit: Not pursuing something can be an intelligent decision.

REMEMBER: MULTIPLE GATES CAN BE PRESENT. NONE IS A PERSON TYPE.

SIX DIFFERENT STORIES

All cases are fictional. Compare an easy verdict with alternative hypotheses.

CASE 01 / THE UNWRITTEN LETTER

Easy verdict: I must not care about my friend.

Other explanations: The first sentence feels heavy; the relationship is changing; a call may be kinder.

One cautious trial: Draft a rough sentence or ask if a short call is welcome.

What it cannot prove: A sent sentence does not prove reciprocity; silence does not prove indifference.

CASE 02 / THE UNGIVEN FEEDBACK

Easy verdict: My colleague is a coward.

Other explanations: Power, uncertainty, role boundaries, retaliation risk or missing evidence may matter.

One cautious trial: Write the observation and question, then check whether it is safe to raise.

What it cannot prove: One conversation cannot make an unsafe workplace safe.

CASE 03 / THE ABANDONED EXERCISE PLAN

Easy verdict: I should just make the time.

Other explanations: Caregiving, access, recovery, cost and exhaustion are real constraints.

One cautious trial: Investigate a feasible enjoyable option—or choose rest.

What it cannot prove: A smaller plan cannot solve every structural or health constraint.

MORE THAN WILLPOWER

The same observable delay can admit several explanations.

CASE 04 / THE STALLED RESEARCH IDEA

Easy verdict: I am not a real researcher.

Other explanations: An unbounded question, missing skills, lack of collaborators or weak methods can stall action.

One cautious trial: Name a falsifiable question and request informed criticism.

What it cannot prove: A clear hypothesis is not validation; failed pilots may teach.

CASE 05 / THE NEVER-SENT APPLICATION

Easy verdict: I must lack ambition.

Other explanations: Eligibility, unpaid assessments, rejection costs, access and role fit all matter.

One cautious trial: Check actual criteria and time costs; choose whether applying is worthwhile.

What it cannot prove: One acceptance or rejection says little about someone's worth.

CASE 06 / THE CANCELLED COMMUNITY EVENT

Easy verdict: Nobody really cares about community.

Other explanations: Transport, uneven labour, poor access, unclear purpose and competing priorities intervene.

One cautious trial: Co-design a smaller event around participants' stated needs.

What it cannot prove: Low turnout cannot establish apathy; the idea may need changing.

CHALLENGE THE FIRST STORY

A good hypothesis can be revised. A plan does not need to be performed.

EXPERIMENT A / FIRST STEP MAY BE UNCLEAR

Observation: "I haven't started my essay."

Hypothesis: Perhaps "work on essay" is not an observable first move.

Change: Open the document and write one provisional question after breakfast.

Counter-evidence: If this is specific and feasible but the start still stalls, vagueness is not the whole account.

Next choices: Investigate opportunity, rest, get help, or revisit whether the essay matters.

EXPERIMENT B / MAYBE THE GOAL ITSELF CHANGED

Observation: "I have delayed enrolling in a course repeatedly."

Rival ideas: The signup is confusing; funds are short; the course no longer fits.

Change: Compare one credible syllabus with time and cost, then discuss alternatives.

Counter-evidence: If the course remains appealing and genuinely accessible, reconsidering the goal may not explain the delay.

Next choices: Enroll, request support, choose a different course, or decline without self-accusation.

THREE INTERPRETIVE TRAPS

Mind-reading: inferring why someone else acted from a single behaviour. Trait leap: converting a delayed action into a permanent identity. Confounding: changing three conditions at once and claiming one caused the result.

Evidence is not a courtroom verdict. Results can be ambiguous. Repeat observations only where safe, ethical and genuinely useful.

ONE GATE. ONE TRIAL.

Use a pen. Nothing you enter on the website is embedded in this PDF.

01 / OBSERVABLE ACTION

What, specifically, would someone see happen?

02 / SUSPECTED CONDITION

What is one possible obstacle? What else might explain it?

03 / ONE REVERSIBLE CHANGE

What could I change, ask for, or decide not to do?

04 / OPPORTUNITY / CUE

If I choose to test it, when and where?

05 / DISCONFIRMATION

What result would challenge my first explanation?

06 / OPEN ENDING

Keep, revise, ask for support, rest or release?

Evidence desk: Michie et al. (2011) COM-B · Fogg Behavior Model (Stanford Behavior Design Lab) · Gollwitzer & Sheeran (2006) on implementation intentions · Wood & Neal (2007) on habit. The original framework and exercises are illustrative, not validated instruments.

Full references: thegap.sahiltayal.online/#sources · sahil@sahiltayal.com