

THE COURT OF UNRELIABLE MEMORY

A reader, a reasoning practice, and an antidote to theatrical certainty

Scent is an invitation. It is not a witness who can be cross-examined.

This field guide accompanies the interactive Court of Unreliable Memory: a fictional legal ritual in which a visitor compares competing, imagined scent accords and is issued a carefully inconclusive memory opinion.

No odor is delivered through the website. No recollection is tested for truth. The numeric changes are openly authored creative rules. Entering a personal memory is optional, and the site does not upload or persist private testimony.

WHAT YOU WILL LEAVE WITH

A vocabulary for separating event, bodily recollection, later explanation, and independent support; two alternative interpretations; 12 research entry points; a source ledger; and questions that remain deliberately open.

THE CORE DISTINCTION: Feeling is data about experience. Corroboration is evidence about events. Neither should be dismissed; neither should impersonate the other.

[Enter the interactive court](#)

[Open the annotated reading room](#)

Three different kinds of knowing.

A RECOLLECTION

What appears when a scene returns to mind. Memory can preserve important information while also including omissions, reconstructions and errors. Avoid the equally simplistic claims that memory is a perfect recording or that it is entirely fiction.

A FEELING

How that recollection appears now: comforting, distant, painful, bright, uncertain, urgent. Feelings deserve precise language; they cannot alone tell us whether a detail happened precisely as remembered.

A CLAIM

A statement about the outer world: what another person said, when something occurred, what someone intended. Claims can sometimes be compared with records or people who were there, while other claims remain genuinely indeterminate.

Illustrative case (fictional): You remember the smell of a stairwell after rain and an abrupt goodbye. The memory feels sharp. You may still be uncertain about the exact phrase spoken or whether the other person intended to hurt you.

The court asks you to preserve both realities: the present experience and the limits of your knowledge.

MY OWN ONE-SENTENCE DISTINCTION

What the odor literature actually asks.

Herz and Schooler (2002) compared the emotional experience of autobiographical memories recalled with odor versus visual and verbal cues in a repeated-measures design. Chu and Downes (2002) used two double-cueing experiments to examine qualitative memory ratings and recalled detail.

Later work explores the age distribution of odor-evoked memories and the role of naming and semantic processing. A 2019 methodological review by Hackländer and colleagues assesses findings, competing explanations and research methods.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The studies motivate a real question: can odors shape how personal memories are retrieved and experienced? They do not validate this website's 11 named-material rules or distinguish a true memory from a mistaken one.

AN IMPORTANT MODALITY GAP

A text label such as "rain" is not physical rain odor. A displayed colour is not a fragrance molecule. Associations prompted by words or abstract textures are a different experience from actual olfactory stimulation; treating the two as equivalent would be a category error.

Further reading: Herz & Schooler (2002); Chu & Downes (2002); Willander & Larsson (2007); Hackländer et al. (2019). See pages 9–10 for direct links.

The three testimonies.

Choose a benign or neutral memory if you wish. The exercise is optional, and you may stop without disclosing or examining distressing material. Do not use the court to make allegations, infer another person's motives, or recover forgotten events.

WITNESS A / WHAT WAS NOTICED

Describe a few remembered particulars without converting gaps into certainty. "There was a blue umbrella" differs from "I must have been betrayed."

Write one observational detail, or leave blank

WITNESS B / WHAT THE BODY ASSOCIATES WITH IT NOW

Describe a current recollection of sensation: perhaps heaviness, warmth or alertness. Do not infer from a present sensation exactly what happened at the time.

Write one present feeling, or leave blank

WITNESS C / WHAT YOU DECIDED THE EVENT MEANT

State the later account in cautious language: "I took it to mean..." rather than "It proved..."

Write a second possible interpretation

Where does this detail come from?

The court gives each of four common claims one of four tags: directly recalled (self-report), inferred afterward, cannot determine, or not examined. None of these is equivalent to independent corroboration.

CLAIM	CURRENT SOURCE STATUS
Exact words	
Sequence / timing	
Another person’s intention	
Setting / surrounding details	

WHY SOURCE MONITORING MATTERS

Johnson, Hashtroudi and Lindsay (1993) describe source monitoring as judgments about where mental content comes from. These judgments can be mistaken, and this exercise does not test them.

An accessible question to keep: How do I know this detail, and what would count as independent support?

Build two honest but competing accords.

The nearer accord is a frame that makes the narrative feel close. The stranger accord is a frame that unsettles the familiar explanation. In neither case is “nearer” a reward or “stranger” a punishment.

YOUR NEARER ACCORD

Select up to four names: citrus, smoke, soil, paper, metal, rain, skin, spice, flowers, resin or wood. What associations might pull the telling close?

Four imagined materials

YOUR STRANGER ACCORD

Select a different combination. What happens when the familiar story is surrounded by unfamiliar cues?

Four imagined materials

THE FAIR WARNING

No actual odor is emitted. Imagined accords are not formulas or material recommendations. None of the eleven labels has a universal emotional meaning, and the court cannot predict what any blend would smell like.

The coefficients, exposed.

Every accord starts with intensity 50, felt distance 50 and felt confidence 50. Each chosen named material contributes fixed, hand-authored values. Sum these and clamp each final axis to 0-100. Maximum four materials per accord. No randomization changes material effects.

Material	Intensity	Distance	Confidence
Citrus	+9	−12	+3
Smoke	+15	+14	−9
Soil	+8	−8	+2
Paper	−7	+10	+8
Metal	+11	+16	−11
Rain	+13	−7	−4
Skin	+14	−19	+5
Spice	+17	−6	−6
Flowers	+10	−13	+7
Resin	+6	+12	+8
Wood	−3	+6	+11

EXAMPLE: citrus + skin = intensity 73, distance 19, felt confidence 58. This is arithmetic over a fictional palette, not a psychological reading.

The court refuses a verdict.

Compare your two accords across the same three axes. A difference records the authored model's response to different material selections, not a measured change in the memory itself.

WHAT INTENSIFIED FEELING?

The opinion names selected materials with positive intensity coefficients. These are programmed associations, not observations about your nervous system.

WHAT IS UNSUPPORTED?

The opinion reports the source tags you supplied and distinguishes "directly recalled" from "independently verified." The court has no access to physical records, other witnesses or external data.

WHAT ELSE COULD BE TRUE?

A memory can matter even when a specific interpretation remains unsettled. The court offers competing readings but cannot know which is accurate. Alternative interpretations should not become new false certainties.

A vital limit: absence of corroboration is not proof of falsehood. Equally, intensity and insistence are not corroboration. An opinion is an invitation to reason carefully, not an instruction to confront or disclose.

My one sentence of appropriate uncertainty

Five field exercises without mind-reading.

01 / LABEL THE MEDIUM

Next time a photo, song, word, place or real odor triggers recollection, write down which kind of cue it actually was. Avoid treating a word for a smell as a physical odor.

02 / EXPLORE A COUNTER-CUE

Consider a different, non-distressing cue or reframe. Does the telling shift? A subjective shift does not make either version true or false.

03 / ASK WHERE THE DETAIL CAME FROM

Was the detail perceived, imagined, learned afterward, repeated in a group, or seen in a photograph? "I do not know" is a legitimate answer.

04 / DISTINGUISH CARE FROM AGREEMENT

Someone can recognize that you had a powerful experience without pretending to know the unseen intentions of everyone involved.

05 / DO NOT FORCE CLOSURE

Not every memory needs public disclosure, a diagnosis or an explanatory master narrative. Some questions can remain open while ordinary life continues.

Use this booklet as a creative reflection tool. If a memory is distressing, participation is unnecessary; the guide is not a therapeutic technique.

The olfactory dossier.

Herz & Schooler (2002). A naturalistic study of autobiographical memories evoked by olfactory and visual cues.

Compared how odor, visual and verbal contexts shaped the emotional experience of recalled memories; does not establish accuracy for an individual memory.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Chu & Downes (2002). Proust nose best: odors are better cues of autobiographical memory.

Two double-cueing experiments examined emotional ratings and recalled details after different cues. Results concern physical odors, not imagined materials on a screen.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Willander & Larsson (2006). Smell your way back to childhood: autobiographical odor memory.

Examined age distributions and subjective qualities of memories cued by odors, words and pictures in older adults; results are population- and design-specific.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Willander & Larsson (2007). Olfaction and emotion: the case of autobiographical memory.

Found odor labels and semantic knowledge matter, complicating the assumption that naming a smell is psychologically neutral.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Larsson & Willander (2009). Autobiographical odor memory.

A review of odor memories through age distribution, phenomenology and the influence of semantic processing.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Larsson, Willander, Karlsson & Arshamian (2014). Olfactory LOVER: behavioral and neural correlates of autobiographical odor memory.

An overview of distinctive qualities sometimes reported for odor-evoked memories; a theoretical lens, not a calibration table.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Hackländer, Janssen & Bermeitinger (2019). An in-depth review of the methods, findings, and theories associated with odor-evoked autobiographical memory.

A methods-focused review that identifies open explanations and challenges; useful before turning the Proust effect into mythology.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

The counterweight: fallibility and method.

Johnson, Hashtroudi & Lindsay (1993). Source monitoring.

A framework for judging where remembered information originated, including confusions between perception, imagination and later information.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Loftus (2005). Planting misinformation in the human mind.

Reviews evidence that post-event misinformation can alter recall; a caution against treating an emotionally vivid account as independently verified.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Finley & Brewer (2024). Accuracy and completeness of autobiographical memory: evidence from a wearable camera study.

A design using everyday-life records to examine omissions, errors and accuracy; usefully avoids the simplistic claim that all memory is fiction.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Luminet (2022). Towards a better integration of emotional factors in autobiographical memory.

Argues for treating emotion as more than a single intensity variable, and separating accuracy, consistency, vividness and confidence.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Herz (2004). A naturalistic analysis of autobiographical memories triggered by olfactory, visual and auditory stimuli.

Compares cue modalities in a naturalistic repeated-measures setting and highlights how experimental design affects claims.

[PubMed / source record ↗](#)

Bibliographic descriptions are concise editorial summaries. They do not substitute for reading the full papers, evaluating their samples, or comparing their methods.

Ten related Sahilverse doors.

The Olfactory Cathedral / LIVE

Separates conceptual note arrangements from actual sensory observation. Its material journal is a useful antidote to treating imagined scent as physical evidence.

<https://olfactorycathedral.sahiltaval.com/>

Emotion Alchemy / LIVE

Translate a feeling into colour and rhythm without confusing the metaphor with psychological measurement.

<https://emotionalalchemy.sahiltaval.online/>

Emotional Literacy / LIVE

A close sibling: the feeling can be described without treating your first explanation as settled fact.

<https://emotionalliteracy.sahiltaval.com/>

The Hearsay Department / LIVE / COUNTERPOINT

Watch testimony become institutional certainty; a second court where the problem is what happens when stories travel.

<https://hearsay.sahiltaval.com/>

The Reciprocity Atlas / LIVE / COUNTERPOINT

Challenges the tendency to promote personal hurt or warmth into knowledge about what another person intended.

<https://reciprocityatlas.sahiltaval.com/>

The Meaning Lab / LIVE

The past may be part of a good life without demanding one final, grand explanation.

<https://meaning.sahiltaval.com/>

SYNAPSE / LIVE

Explore what happens when separate ideas are linked; a helpful counterbalance to confusing an elegant synthesis with proof.

<https://synth.sahiltaval.com/>

Emotional Literacy — COMPLETE dossier / ARCHIVE DOSSIER

A catalogue coordinate, distinct from the published Emotional Literacy essay.

<https://complete.sahilverse.online/#project=s22>

The Wound Is the Lab — COMPLETE dossier / ARCHIVE DOSSIER

A referenced record in COMPLETE: an invitation to investigate what lived difficulty can teach, not proof of a particular history.

<https://complete.sahilverse.online/#project=essay107>

Sahilverse — The Other Entrance / LIVE

A question-led introduction to linked work about making, feeling, agency and learning.

<https://sahilverse.online/>

A method worth keeping.

This is where the court ends: not with a score, but with a set of questions that remain better separated than they were at the beginning.

WHAT HAPPENED

A browser-only, deterministic literary simulation let you compare two frames for a memory, a source ledger and an expressly inconclusive opinion. It did not emit scent or adjudicate historical facts.

PROVENANCE

Archive: linked COMPLETE dossier records, not reproduced as verified live pages. Remix: legal ritual, sensory witness metaphor, competing accords. New writing: the guide, questions, annotations and editorial opinion. Simulation: 11 fictional additive vectors with fixed bounds.

WHAT REMAINS OPEN

Which claims would require outside evidence? Which alternative explanation deserves space? Which feeling deserves language even if no narrative closes it?

Privacy: the website keeps private testimony in volatile in-tab memory. It never transmits it, and excludes it from opinion downloads unless deliberately included. The field guide itself contains no visitor memory.

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