

# Framing Your Decision

*How to frame a decision well - a guide to Step 1 (Frame the Decision) of the Decision Cycle*

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The options you consider, the information you gather, and the trade-offs you weigh are all defined by how you frame the question. A poor frame produces a well-executed answer to the wrong thing. This guide explains how framing works, six techniques for testing and improving your frame, how to recognise when a frame is right, and how to write a clear decision statement. Use it alongside Step 1 (Frame the Decision) of the Decision Cycle questions.

## PART 1 Why the presenting question is rarely the right frame

Every decision arrives with a frame already attached, and it lives in the words that were first put to you. "Should I retrain for a new career?" "Should I move house?" "What do I do about my neighbour's extension?" These are presenting questions. They feel like the decision, but they are usually a starting point, not the question itself.

A "presenting question" is the decision needed before you have examined it. It carries hidden assumptions about scope, constraints, and what kind of answer is expected. They are influenced by whoever framed the question first (a colleague, a situation, a deadline) and that framing may not reflect what really needs to be decided. Accepting it without testing it is the most common framing error.

Research on framing effects (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981; McNeil et al., 1982) shows that how a question is posed directly influences what options seem available and what trade-offs feel acceptable, even when the underlying situation is identical. Chapter 9 of LIFE: Our Uncertain Experiment gives a medical example. Noticing the frame and deliberately testing it is not optional. It is the foundation of everything that follows.

## PART 2 Six techniques for testing and improving your frame

### 1 Broaden

Ask what decision this question is part of. Many presenting questions are too narrow. They address one aspect of a larger choice.

Broadening does not mean making the question unanswerable. It means making sure you are not solving a symptom while the real decision goes unaddressed.

*Example: "Should I take this job offer?" broadened becomes: "How do I want my working life to develop over the next five years, and does this offer fit that direction?"*

### 2 Narrow

Ask what specifically needs to be decided right now. Some presenting questions are so broad they cannot generate options.

A question that cannot generate specific options is not ready to enter the Decision Cycle. Narrow it until it can.

*Example: "What should I do about my relationship?" narrowed becomes: "Should I raise the issue of how we spend time at weekends, and if so, when?"*

### 3 Restate as an opportunity rather than a threat

Most decisions arrive framed as problems to solve or threats to manage. Restating the same situation as an opportunity changes what options become visible.

*Example: "How do I respond to my manager's criticism?" restated becomes: "How do I use this feedback to work on something I have been meaning to address?"*

### 4 Shift perspective

Ask how this question looks from the point of view of the people most affected by it. Then ask how it looks to someone who disagrees with your instinct.

Perspective-shifting does not require you to adopt another view. It reveals assumptions in your own frame that you might otherwise miss.

Example: “Should I ask my adult son to move out?” from his perspective becomes: “What pressures is he already living with, and what does this decision mean to him?”

## 5 Remove a constraint

Take one of the constraints the question assumes (e.g. time, budget, authority, policy) and ask what you would decide if it were removed.

If removing the constraint produces a completely different answer, the constraint is doing significant work in your frame. Test whether it is fixed or simply accepted by convention.

Example: “I cannot afford to retrain”. Remove it: “If money were not a constraint, what would I decide?” Then ask: “is the money constraint really fixed, or has it simply not been challenged?”

## 6 Work backwards from the desired outcome

Ask: what outcome am I ultimately trying to achieve? Then ask whether that outcome is something you need or something you want. Needs are usually non-negotiable; wants leave more room over whether, when and how. State the answer, then derive a decision question from it.

Working backwards bypasses the constraints and assumptions that come with the presenting question and often produces a cleaner, clearer frame.

Example: Outcome: “I want my elderly parent to be safe and as independent as possible.” Decision question derived: “Which of the available care arrangements best preserves their independence while providing the oversight they need?”

## PART 3 How to recognise when your frame is right

| Signal                                                                                                        | What it means                                                                      | What to do                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>You cannot yet identify any specific options</b>                                                           | The frame is too broad. The question needs narrowing before options become visible | Narrow the scope. What specifically needs to be decided right now?                                    |
| <b>Answering the question would not resolve the situation that prompted it</b>                                | The frame is too narrow. It addresses a symptom, not the real decision             | Broaden. Ask what decision this question is part of.                                                  |
| <b>You feel a strong pull towards one option before you have examined the others</b>                          | The frame may be designed to protect a preferred outcome                           | Test. Restate the question neutrally. Does that change which options look legitimate?                 |
| <b>The same constraint appears in every option you are considering</b>                                        | The constraint may be assumed rather than real                                     | Remove it. Ask what you would decide if that constraint did not exist. Then test whether it is fixed. |
| <b>You can state specific options, the question resolves what prompted it, and the scope feels manageable</b> | The frame is working                                                               | Write it as your Step 1 decision statement and carry it into Step 2                                   |

## PART 4 Writing a clear decision statement

Your Step 1 decision statement gives the decision in one sentence. A clear decision statement has three qualities:

1. it states what is being decided (not how it will be decided or what the answer is);
2. it is specific enough to generate options; and
3. it could be understood by someone who was not present when the decision arose.

| Better frames                                                                                                                                                      | Frames that need more work                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ✓ Should I leave my current job and take the role at X?<br><i>Specific, testable, states the choice</i>                                                            | X What should I do with my life?<br><i>Too broad. Cannot generate specific options</i>                           |
| ✓ How should I divide my spare time between training for the half-marathon and studying for the course?<br><i>Specific scope, clear decision type (allocation)</i> | X How do I sort out my time?<br><i>Vague. What aspect of my time? What kind of decision?</i>                     |
| ✓ Should Dad move into sheltered housing or stay at home with daily care visits?<br><i>States the options under consideration</i>                                  | X What do we do about Dad?<br><i>Undefined. Is this a care decision, a housing question, or a cost question?</i> |

## PART 5 Testing your assumptions

Every frame rests on assumptions, the things you are taking for granted about your situation, your context, or your constraints that you expect to hold true while the decision plays out. If a key assumption is wrong, even a well-constructed frame will lead you in the wrong direction. Before carrying your decision statement into Step 2, identify the assumptions it depends on and assess whether each is fixed or simply accepted.

| The assumption (what I am taking for granted) | Fixed or flexible? | If wrong, the impact on the decision would be... |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|                                               |                    |                                                  |
|                                               |                    |                                                  |
|                                               |                    |                                                  |
|                                               |                    |                                                  |
|                                               |                    |                                                  |

Key question: Which of these assumptions, if wrong, would most change your decision? How confident are you that it will hold?

## PART 6 Common framing mistakes

### ACCEPTING THE PRESENTING QUESTION WITHOUT TESTING IT

The most frequent error. The presenting question feels like the decision and carries enough urgency that testing it seems like delay. It is not delay. It is the single most efficient step in the process. A decision well-framed at the start saves far more time than one that is reframed halfway through.

### FRAMING TO PROTECT A PREFERRED OUTCOME

A frame that makes one option look like the only reasonable answer is not a neutral frame. It is a conclusion dressed as a question. The test: can you state the question in a way that makes at least two options look equally legitimate? If not, the frame may be doing the deciding for you.

### CONFUSING A PROBLEM WITH A DECISION

If the situation still needs diagnosis, if you are not yet sure what is wrong, then framing it as a decision produces options that address symptoms. Resolve the problem-solving first, then frame the decision. (See also: Individual Decision Support Guide)

For use with Step 1 (Frame the Decision) of the Decision Cycle questions · See also: Stakeholder Discovery Worksheet · Individual Decision Support Guide

## Sources

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice. *Science*, 211(4481), 453-458.

*The foundational demonstration of framing effects, showing reversals of preference depending on whether outcomes are described as gains or losses.*

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1984). Choices, values, and frames. *American Psychologist*, 39(4), 341-350.

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McNeil, B. J., Pauker, S. G., Sox, H. C., & Tversky, A. (1982). On the elicitation of preferences for alternative therapies. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 306(21), 1259-1262.

*The survival-versus-mortality framing example used in Chapter 9 of LIFE: Our Uncertain Experiment.*

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

*Provides an accessible account of framing, anchoring, and the influence of presentation on judgment. Relevant to why the presenting question must be tested before being accepted.*