COMPANION GUIDE TO ONLINE TRAINING

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INT-01: ANALYSIS OF COMPETING HYPOTHESES
STUDENT COMPANION GUIDE

The Analyst's Field Reference

Cognitive Bias, Hypothesis Construction, Evidence Evaluation, Sensitivity Testing, and Analytical Reporting

Bias | Principles | Matrix | Sensitivity | Indicators | Reporting

Edition v1.0 | 2026

Semper Paratus, Semper Gumby

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ANALYSIS OF COMPETING HYPOTHESES — STUDENT COMPANION GUIDE

Companion Guide to Online Training

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This companion guide requires an active Patreon subscription. It is designed to be used alongside the INT-01 ACH online training series at fortunefavorstheprepared.com/int-01-hub/. The online lessons are the instruction. This guide contains quick-reference tables, field checklists, and decision frameworks only — it does not contain the instructional content. It cannot be used as a standalone document.

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How to Use This Companion Guide

THIS GUIDE IS A COMPANION TO PATREON-GATED ONLINE TRAINING

This companion guide requires an active Patreon subscription. It is designed to be used alongside the INT-01 Analysis of Competing Hypotheses online training series — the online lessons are the instruction. This guide contains quick-reference tables, field checklists, and decision frameworks only. It is not a standalone document.

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What this guide contains

For each of the five online lessons: a condensed reference summary (key concepts only, not instruction), quick-lookup tables, decision checklists, blank worksheets, and field reference cards. The instruction is delivered online — this guide is what you carry during active analysis.

Required workflow — online lessons BEFORE using this guide

ORDER MATTERS

Do not open any section of this guide until the corresponding online lesson has been completed. The condensed summaries here are reference material, not instruction. The sequence below is required, not suggested.

- Step 1 — Subscribe at patreon.com/fortunefavorstheprepared (Operator tier or above)
- Step 2 — Access the online lessons at fortunefavorstheprepared.com/int-01-hub/
- Step 3 — Complete all five lessons including knowledge checks
- Step 4 — Use this guide during active analyses as a field reference

THIS GUIDE IS NOT STANDALONE

The instruction for each lesson is delivered through the online training series. This guide contains condensed reference tables and checklists only. If you have not completed the online lessons, this guide will not teach you the material — it will give you tables whose meaning you do not yet understand.

Guide Map — What to Reference When

When you need...	Turn to...
The failure modes ACH is designed to prevent	Part I — Bias Catalogue
The three principles in condensed form	Part I — Core Principles Reference
A summary of all eight steps	Part II — Eight-Step Process Summary
A checklist for evidence item quality	Part II — Evidence Quality Checklist
A checklist for the hypothesis set	Part II — Hypothesis Set Checklist
A blank matrix to fill in	Part III — Blank ACH Matrix
A worksheet for sensitivity testing	Part III — Sensitivity Testing Worksheet
A worksheet for indicator planning	Part III — Indicator Planning Worksheet
The standard for a complete reported conclusion	Part IV — Reporting Standard Reference
The doctrinal sources behind the method	Part IV — Doctrinal Sources

PART I — ANALYTICAL FOUNDATIONS

Chapter 1: Bias Catalogue

ACH is designed to counteract five predictable failure modes. Recognizing them in your own reasoning is the first step. Each operates largely outside the analyst's conscious awareness, which is what makes it difficult to counter through willpower or self-awareness alone.

Bias	What It Does	Why It Matters in Practice
Confirmation Bias	Filters incoming information to fit an existing assessment. Confirming evidence retained; contradicting evidence minimized or discarded.	The dominant threat. A positive first impression begins filtering everything that follows. You experience the filtering as reasonableness.
Anchoring	Disproportionate weight on the first piece of information received. All subsequent information evaluated relative to the anchor.	In vetting, a strong referral or positive first meeting sets the anchor. Every subsequent interaction is measured against it rather than evaluated independently.
Availability Bias	Overweighting information that is recent, vivid, or emotionally salient.	A local incident from last month feels more analytically relevant than a higher-base-rate pattern that has not produced a recent local example.
Mirror Imaging	Assuming adversaries or unknown actors think and behave the way the analyst does.	The analyst who would never attend a community event for collection purposes assumes others do not either. That assumption is the operational opening a skilled collector exploits.
Groupthink	Suppression of dissenting analysis within a team in favor of consensus.	Unanimous team agreement feels like validation. It is often instead a sign that the dissenting interpretation was socially discouraged rather than analytically defeated.

Chapter 2: The Three Core Principles

If you understand all three, you understand ACH. If you only understand one or two, you will build matrices that look rigorous and still produce biased conclusions.

Principle 1: Hunt for Contradictions, Not Confirmations

> Evidence consistent with your hypothesis does not prove it — the same evidence is often consistent with competing hypotheses simultaneously. Evidence inconsistent with a hypothesis does something decisive: it weakens or eliminates it.
>
> **ACH does not ask:** *which hypothesis has the most supporting evidence?*
>
> **ACH asks:** *which hypothesis has the fewest serious inconsistencies?*

Principle 2: Read Across the Rows, Never Down the Columns

> Take one evidence item at a time and evaluate it against every hypothesis simultaneously. Column-reading — building a case for one hypothesis at a time — is confirmation bias with a structured format wrapped around it.
>
> **The diagnostic test:** Does this evidence behave differently across hypotheses? If yes, it discriminates. If no, it is non-diagnostic and belongs in the discard pile.

Principle 3: Build a Hypothesis Set Without the Answer Missing

The matrix can only find the correct explanation if that explanation is in the set. Two hypotheses are almost always omitted:

The deception hypothesis: Include it whenever an actor has the capability and motivation to deceive. Do not wait for evidence of deception before adding it.

The null hypothesis: The innocent explanation. Without it, the matrix has a predetermined direction and the false positive risk receives no formal testing.

PART II — PROCESS REFERENCE

Chapter 3: The Eight-Step Process

Reference summary. The full reasoning behind each step is in the online course lessons.

Step	Name	Key Actions and Failure Modes
1	Identify the Hypotheses	Frame the question to invite competing explanations. Generate 3–6 hypotheses. Include the deception hypothesis and the null hypothesis. Actively search for an explanation your set does not contain.
2	List the Evidence	Compile all relevant information including assumptions and the absence of expected evidence. Label assumptions explicitly. Specific wording only — no interpretations embedded in evidence items.
3	Build the Matrix	Grid: hypotheses across the top, evidence items down the side. Mark each cell C (consistent), I (inconsistent), or N/A. Work across the rows — one evidence item against all hypotheses before moving to the next.
4	Refine the Matrix	Identify evidence marked C or N/A for every hypothesis. Re-examine markings. Remove or deprioritize non-diagnostic items. What remains does real analytical work.
5	Draw Tentative Conclusions	Count inconsistencies. Leading hypothesis = fewest serious inconsistencies. Assess the strength of each I mark — one strong inconsistency outweighs several weak ones. Conclusion is tentative until Step 6 is complete.
6	Test Sensitivity	For each key evidence item: what happens if it is wrong? If it has an innocent explanation? If it was planted? For each assumption: if false, which cells change and how does the conclusion shift?
7	Report Conclusions	Report ALL surviving hypotheses, not only the leading one. State confidence level, key assumptions, driving evidence, and conditions for revision. Include the matrix or a documented summary as an auditable record.
8	Identify Indicators	Define specific, observable events that would strengthen or weaken each surviving hypothesis. Define indicators for the leading hypothesis AND the strongest competing hypothesis. Re-run the full process when significant new evidence arrives — do not amend.

Chapter 4: Evidence Quality Checklist

Apply to every evidence item before adding it to the matrix. Items that fail the checklist must be revised or removed.

- ☐ The item describes observable behavior, not an interpretation of that behavior
- ☐ Two independent observers given this description could agree on whether it is consistent or inconsistent with each hypothesis
- ☐ The item is specific enough to be marked clearly — not vague enough to produce different markings depending on who reads it
- ☐ If the item describes an absence, it explicitly states what should be present if a specific hypothesis were true
- ☐ If the item is an assumption, it is labeled as such and flagged for sensitivity testing in Step 6
- ☐ The item has not been worded to embed a conclusion ("candidate was evasive" vs. "candidate redirected three direct questions about prior affiliations")
- ☐ The source and reliability of the item are noted and will be considered when weighting inconsistencies

Chapter 5: Hypothesis Set Checklist

Apply before building the matrix. A weak hypothesis set produces a rigorous-looking analysis of the wrong questions.

☐	**Framing**	The analytical question invites competing explanations and does not embed an interpretation or point toward a conclusion
☐	**Completeness**	The hypothesis set contains every realistic explanation, not only the convenient or expected ones
☐	**Deception hypothesis**	Included if any actor has both the capability and motivation to deliberately mislead the analysis
☐	**Null hypothesis**	The innocent explanation is included and will be tested with the same rigor as every other hypothesis
☐	**Distinctiveness**	Each hypothesis describes a meaningfully different situation, not minor variations on the same explanation
☐	**Overlap awareness**	Where hypotheses partially overlap, the overlap is noted and will be accounted for in sensitivity testing
☐	**Missing explanation search**	A deliberate effort was made to identify an explanation the current set does not contain

PART III — WORKING WORKSHEETS

Chapter 6: Blank ACH Matrix

INSTRUCTIONS

Enter hypotheses in the header row (H1–H4). Enter evidence items in the left column (E1–E8). Mark each cell C (Consistent), I (Inconsistent), or N/A. Work across each row before moving to the next. After completing all rows, identify and remove non-diagnostic items (all C or all N/A). Count I marks per column to identify the leading conclusion.

Analytical question: _____

Date: _____ **Analyst:** _____

Evidence Item	H1 : _____	H2 : _____	H3 : _____	H4 : _____
E1 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
E2 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
E3 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
E4 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
E5 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
E6 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
E7 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
E8 _____	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A	C / I / N/A
Total Inconsistencies (I)				

C = Consistent **I** = Inconsistent **N/A** = Not applicable

Chapter 7: Sensitivity Testing Worksheet

Complete after Step 5. For each evidence item driving the conclusion, work through the questions below. Flag fragile conclusions explicitly in the reported product.

Conclusion as of Step 5

Leading hypothesis	
Surviving alternatives	
Key assumptions	

Sensitivity Test — Key Evidence Items

Evidence item E___ :	
If this item is wrong or false...	
If it has an innocent explanation...	
If it was deliberately planted...	
Conclusion change?	

Evidence item E___ :	
If this item is wrong or false...	
If it has an innocent explanation...	
If it was deliberately planted...	
Conclusion change?	

Evidence item E___ :	
If this item is wrong or false...	
If it has an innocent explanation...	
If it was deliberately planted...	
Conclusion change?	

Chapter 8: Indicator Planning Worksheet

Define indicators for Step 8. Indicators must be specific and observable. Define for both the leading hypothesis and the strongest competing hypothesis.

Analysis date	
Next review date	
Leading hypothesis	
Primary competing hypothesis	

Indicators — Leading Hypothesis

Observations that would strengthen the leading hypothesis if observed:

#	Specific Observable Indicator	Who Monitors / How
1		
2		
3		

Indicators — Competing Hypothesis

Observations that would shift the conclusion toward the competing hypothesis if observed:

#	Specific Observable Indicator	Who Monitors / How
1		
2		
3		

PART IV — REPORTING AND DOCTRINAL SOURCES

Chapter 9: Reporting Standard Reference

A complete ACH reported conclusion contains all seven elements below. Omitting any of them degrades the product in a specific and predictable way.

Element	What It Contains and Why It Is Required
Leading hypothesis	The hypothesis with the fewest serious inconsistencies after the refined matrix is read. State it specifically — not "the threat hypothesis" but which hypothesis and why it leads.
Surviving alternatives	All other hypotheses that remain viable. If two hypotheses cannot be distinguished by current evidence, state that explicitly. Do not force a single conclusion where the evidence does not support one.
Confidence level	"With high confidence" (strong evidence base, few inconsistencies, sensitivity testing held up). "With moderate confidence" (credible base, at least one alternative survives, at least one sensitive item). "With low confidence" (limited evidence, multiple alternatives survive with similar counts, key items unverified).
Key assumptions	The unverified assumptions the judgment rests on. List each and state what would happen to the conclusion if the assumption were false.
Driving evidence	The two or three evidence items most responsible for the conclusion — the ones the sensitivity test identified as carrying the most analytical weight.
Conditions for revision	The specific observations that would change the conclusion. Not "if new evidence emerges" — the specific indicators defined in Step 8.
Auditable record	The matrix or a documented summary of the evidence and cell markings. Without it, the conclusion cannot be checked and cannot be cleanly updated when new evidence arrives.

THE RE-RUN RULE

When significant new evidence arrives, re-run the full process from Step 1. Do not amend the prior conclusion. The prior conclusion now functions as an anchor — evaluating new evidence against it is the confirmation bias process ACH was designed to replace. The prior conclusion may survive intact. It survives because the fresh analysis supports it, not because it was already there.

Chapter 10: Doctrinal Sources

Source	Publisher	Relevance
Psychology of Intelligence Analysis	Richards J. Heuer Jr., CIA, 1999	The source document for ACH. Required reading. Free PDF from the CIA website.
A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis	CIA, 2009	Catalog of structured techniques including Key Assumptions Check and What-If Analysis — companion techniques to ACH.
Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards	ODNI	Governs probabilistic language and confidence standards used in this guide.
FM 2-0: Intelligence	Department of the Army, 2014	Army intelligence doctrine including the IPB process that frames where ACH fits in a structured analytical workflow.
FM 2-22.3: HUMINT Collection Operations	Department of the Army, 2006	Source for human intelligence collection doctrine referenced throughout the INT-series curriculum.

> *ACH is not about guaranteeing the right answer. It is about making the best possible analytic judgment with the information available, while minimizing bias and leaving a record others can check. In intelligence, that is often the difference between foresight and surprise.*
>
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