



SleuthLab

Meet the Cast

Standard Edition

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 chapter books from the SleuthLab cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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This is Volume 2 of 2 of the *SleuthLab — Meet the Cast* series; each volume is a complete standalone book you can read on its own.

For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

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Introduction

The SleuthLab cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 5 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Seal

SEAL — bag it, label it, log every hand it passes through; a broken chain can't be trusted.



In the evidence room of the SleuthLab academy — really just a tidy back closet with a lot of little bags and a logbook — an otter named Seal was doing the least dramatic and most important job in the whole building.

A breathless mouse from the detective club burst in holding a muddy library card. "Seal! We found it! The card that got left in the reading nook — this proves who was there!"

Seal didn't grab it. Seal held out an open paper bag instead. "Drop it in. Don't hand it to me paw-to-paw. Now — who touched it? Where exactly did you find it? What time?"

"Uh... I picked it up, then Pip held it, then Pip gave it to Bo, then Bo—"

"Then by now," Seal said gently, sealing the bag and reaching for the logbook, "four sets of muddy paws have been on it, and no one can say which mud was already there. A clue is only worth what we can *trust* about it. And trust is a chain — bag it, label it, and write down every single hand it passes through. The moment the chain breaks, the clue stops being evidence and starts being a rumor with mud on it."



Have you ever had something you found get passed around until no one could say where it came from? How did that feel when you needed it to matter?

Seal had learned that lesson the hard way, on the very first case the club ever cracked — or thought it did.

Back then, the club had found a chewed pencil near the spot where someone's science project had been knocked over. It was a real clue. But nobody bagged it. It went from paw to paw around the whole club, "just to look," and someone slipped it in a pocket with their *own* pencils, and by the end of the day no one could honestly say whether the chewed pencil was the one from the scene or one that had wandered in from somebody's bag.

The club was *sure* they knew whose it was. But when Inspector Vex asked the one fair question — "can you prove this is the same pencil you found, and only that pencil?" — the whole room went quiet. They couldn't. And a kid nearly got blamed on a clue that had quietly turned into no clue at all.

Seal, small and mortified in the back, had felt something knot up tight. It wasn't only that they'd lost the pencil's story. It was that their carelessness had almost handed the wrong ending to a real person. *A clue you can't account for isn't neutral*, Seal had realized. *It's dangerous. It looks like proof and isn't*. That was the day Seal started carrying bags and a logbook everywhere.



Seal walked to the SleuthLab academy carrying a satchel that clinked softly with folded paper bags.

Inspector Vex met Seal at the door and asked the question every junior investigator got asked. "What keeps evidence trustworthy?"

Seal didn't answer with a speech. Seal asked to borrow Inspector Vex's own reading glasses "as evidence," then narrated every step out loud: *received from Inspector Vex, 9:02, placed in bag, labeled, sealed, logged, not opened*. Then Seal handed the sealed bag back.

"That," Seal said. "An unbroken chain. If I can tell you every hand this passed through, from the moment we found it to right now, then you can trust what it tells us. If there's even one gap — one 'and then somebody had it for a while' — the evidence has a hole in it, and a good investigator has to admit the hole is there."

Inspector Vex turned the sealed bag over, reading the neat label, and smiled. "You are appointed."



In Seal's tidy closet-workshop, a young raccoon slouched in, unconvinced.

"Seal, this is so *slow*. We all know we found the muddy card in the reading nook. Why do I have to bag it and write a whole logbook entry? We were *there*."

Seal slid the logbook across, open to a fresh line.

"Because 'we were there' fades, and this doesn't. Next week you won't remember if you found the card *on* the chair or *under* it — but the log will. And here's the part that matters most: the log doesn't just help *us*. It protects the person we might accuse. If we ever say 'this card proves it was Rosa,' Rosa deserves to know the card is really the card — that we didn't mix it up, lose it, or let four muddy paws add to it. The chain isn't paperwork getting in the way of the answer. The chain is the thing that lets anyone believe the answer at all. Bag it. Label it. Log every hand. Especially when you're sure."

The raccoon looked at the blank log line, then picked up the pencil. "...And if the chain already broke? Like the pencil?"

"Then you say so, out loud, honestly," Seal said. "A break you admit is a lesson. A break you hide is a lie."



Think of a time you kept careful track of something important. What did that steady, on-top-of-it feeling do for you?

The raccoon filled in the log line — slowly, carefully — and something in their slouch straightened out.

"That actually feels kind of good," the raccoon admitted, surprised. "Like — I don't have to *worry* about whether we can trust it later. It's just... written down. Handled."

"That's the feeling I chase," Seal said warmly. "Not the big thrill of 'we caught them.' The quieter one — the calm of knowing there's no hole in what we've got, no soft spot where a mistake could sneak in and hurt someone. When the chain is unbroken, you get to sleep easy, because you know that whatever the evidence says, it's really *the evidence* saying it, and not your own muddy paws." Seal capped the pen and set it down, neat. "Careful isn't the boring part of this work. Careful is the part that lets you trust yourself."

The raccoon sealed the bag with a satisfying little press, and for the first time the slowness didn't feel slow — it felt solid, and steady, and safe.

Sketch

SKETCH — record the scene before anyone touches it; the scene only tells its story if you capture it first.



At the edge of the school garden, where a row of seed trays had been knocked off a shelf overnight, a heron named Sketch stood very still, not touching anything, drawing.

Sketch's notebook filled quickly: the trays where they'd fallen, the exact scatter of the spilled soil, a single clear boot-shaped gap in the mud where no soil had landed, the open gate, the direction the watering can had rolled. Measurements down the margin. A little compass rose in the corner.

The detective club crowded in behind, hands already reaching. "Let's pick everything up and look for clues!"

"Wait," said Sketch, wing out. "Once you pick it up, the scene is gone forever. The way things fell *is* the clue — the gap in the mud, the direction of the roll, what landed where. Move one tray and you've erased a sentence you can't get back. So we record it first. Draw it, measure it, photograph it — capture the whole scene *exactly* as we found it. *Then* we're free to pick things up, because the scene is safe in the notebook now."



Have you ever wished you'd taken a picture of how something looked before it got moved? What did that lost-it feeling remind you of?

Sketch had learned this from a case the club solved wrong — twice — because the scene got tidied before it got recorded.

It was the mystery of the classroom hamster's escape. The club had rushed in, scooped up the tipped cage, straightened the chewed corner, wiped the little muddy tracks off the desk to "clean up" — and *then* started asking how the hamster got out. But by then the answer had been mopped away. The tracks would have shown the direction. The exact angle of the tipped cage would have shown a push versus a slip. The chewed corner, before it was straightened, would have shown whether the hamster chewed out or someone opened the latch. All gone. All erased by helpful hands.

Sketch, young and frozen at the back, had felt something ache. It wasn't the club being careless, exactly. They'd been *trying* to help. That was almost worse — the scene's whole story had been destroyed by good intentions moving too fast. *A scene is a page that can only be read once*, Sketch had understood then. *And most of the time, someone tidies it before anyone thinks to read it.* From that day on, Sketch drew first and touched second, always.



Sketch walked to the SleuthLab academy with a notebook already soft at the corners from use.

Inspector Vex met Sketch and asked the question. "How do you keep a scene's story?"

Sketch answered by asking Inspector Vex not to move, and then quietly sketching the office exactly as it was that moment — the tilt of the desk lamp, the three books left open, the chair pushed back at an angle — and writing the time at the top.

"There," Sketch said, holding up the page. "Now, whatever gets moved in this room in the next hour, we can always come back to how it *truly* was. A scene doesn't wait for us to be ready. It starts disappearing the second someone walks through it. So the first job — before any theory, before any touching — is to make the scene permanent on paper."

Inspector Vex studied the little drawing, and the accuracy of it, and nodded slowly. "You are appointed."



In Sketch's workshop, a young fox fidgeted, itching to act.

"Sketch, drawing takes *ages*, and my theory is right there! Can't I just grab the boot-print tray and match it while it's fresh?"

Sketch handed the fox a pencil instead of the tray.

"Here's the trap: the moment your theory feels right is the *most* dangerous moment to start moving things. Because now you'll only see what fits your theory, and you'll tidy away the parts that don't — not on purpose, just because you're excited and not looking anymore. Recording the whole scene first, *before* you have a favorite answer, is how you protect the clues that might change your mind. Draw everything, even the boring parts, even the parts that don't fit — *especially* those. The scene you capture with no theory yet is honest. The scene you capture after you've decided is just your theory wearing a costume."

The fox took the pencil, still restless. "But what if I record the boring parts and none of them matter?"

"Then you've lost five minutes," Sketch said. "Skip them and pick up the wrong tray, and you might lose the whole answer — or worse, find a wrong one and believe it."



Think of a time slowing down to really look paid off. What did noticing carefully feel like in your body?

The fox started to draw — grudgingly at first, then slower, then really *looking* — and something in the fidget went quiet.

"Huh," the fox said after a while, pencil pausing. "I didn't even see that second set of prints until I had to draw them. I would've stepped right on them."

"That's the secret nobody believes until it happens to them," Sketch said, warm. "Drawing isn't the slow part getting in the way of noticing. Drawing *is* noticing. Your hand makes your eye go where it skipped." Sketch tapped the page gently. "And there's a feeling that comes with it — that settled, unhurried focus, when the whole loud rush to *solve it* goes still and you're just seeing what's actually there. That calm is where the real clues live. The fast, excited part of you runs right past them. The slow, seeing part of you catches them."

The fox looked down at the two sets of prints they'd almost trampled, and felt the steadiness of having *seen*, and kept drawing.

Tick

TICK — put every event in order on the clock; the sequence is where the answer hides.



On a long strip of paper pinned across the clubroom wall, a mouse named Tick was writing times, left to right, like beads on a string.

8:15 — library opens. 8:20 — Bo returns the atlas. 8:40 — the atlas is found torn. 8:45 — Rosa arrives at school.

The detective club was already pointing. "Rosa's new, and nobody likes the torn atlas, so it was probably—"

"Look at the string first," Tick said, tapping the paper. "The atlas was found torn at 8:40. Rosa didn't arrive until 8:45. Rosa was still on the bus when the atlas tore. Whatever we *feel* about who did it, the clock says Rosa couldn't have. That's the whole magic of a timeline: it isn't about who you suspect. It's about what was *possible*. Put every event in order, and some suspects clear themselves without saying a word — and the real order of things points somewhere you weren't even looking."



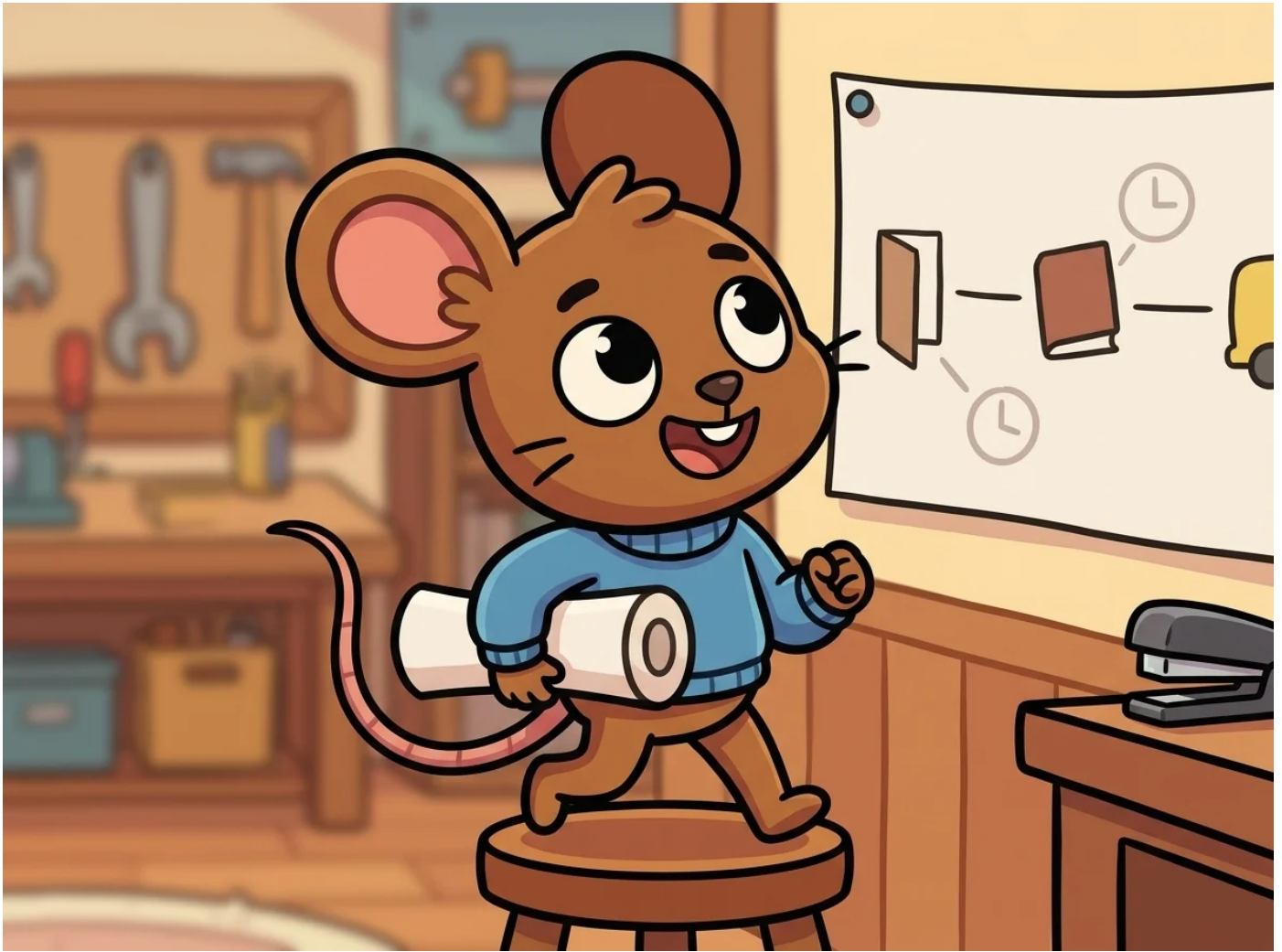
Have you ever been blamed for something that happened when you weren't even there? What did it feel like to know the times didn't add up?

Tick had cared about the order of things ever since being on the wrong end of a jumbled one.

Long before the academy, young Tick had been blamed for knocking over a paint jar in art class. Everyone "remembered" it happening right when Tick walked in. But the paint had actually spilled minutes *earlier* — Tick had walked in and simply been the first face people saw near the mess. Nobody had lined up the times. They'd just grabbed the nearest explanation and stuck the moment to it, backwards.

It took a careful teacher, and a class schedule, to untangle it: the spill matched the *previous* group's cleanup time, not Tick's arrival. Tick was cleared — but only because someone finally put the events in order instead of trusting the fuzzy feeling of "it was right about then."

Tick, small and stung, had felt something settle into a lifelong habit that day. It wasn't anger at being blamed. It was the strange, cold clarity of realizing how easily *when* gets mixed up — how a memory says "right as you came in" when the truth is "a while before" — and how much can ride on the difference. *People are sure about order*, Tick had learned, *and people are wrong about order all the time*. So Tick started writing the clock down.



Tick scurried to the SleuthLab academy with a roll of timeline-paper under one arm.

Inspector Vex met Tick and asked the question. "How do you tell what really happened?"

For an answer, Tick pinned up a strip and asked the office helpers to each say when they'd last seen the missing stapler. Ordered on the clock, the answers made a clear gap — the stapler was present at 1:00, gone by 1:10, and only one person had been in the room in that window. Not an accusation. Just an order.

"The sequence found the window," Tick said. "I didn't decide anything. I just put the times in a line and let the line show us where to look next."

Inspector Vex traced the strip with one claw and nodded. "You are appointed."



In Tick's workshop, a young crow paced impatiently.

"Tick, we already have a suspect that *feels* right. Why waste time writing out every little when-did-what?"

Tick handed the crow a marker and a blank strip.

"Because 'feels right' has no clock in it. The suspect that feels right might have been three rooms away when it happened — and you'll never know unless you lay the times out. Here's the rule: put down *every* time you can pin, even the ones that seem boring. Then look for what each moment makes *impossible*. A timeline doesn't tell you who's guilty. It tells you who *couldn't* have been, and it puts the events in the order that shows cause and effect. Half of solving a puzzle is crossing out the answers the clock forbids. What's left is small enough to actually check."

The crow uncapped the marker. "And if I don't know the exact times?"

"Then you write 'sometime between 1 and 1:30,' honestly, and you keep the fuzziness *visible*," Tick said. "A guessed exact time is worse than an honest fuzzy one. The fuzzy one tells the truth about what we know."



Think of a moment when putting events in the right order suddenly made everything make sense. What did that click feel like?

The crow laid out the times, slow at first, then faster as the strip filled — and stopped, staring.

"Oh," the crow said quietly. "Our suspect was at band practice the whole window. It *couldn't* have been them. I would've been so sure, and I would've been wrong."

"That's the click," Tick said, warm. "That satisfying *snap* when the events slide into their real order and the whole thing suddenly makes sense — and sometimes clears someone you'd already half-blamed. That feeling is worth more than the rush of a quick accusation, because it's the feeling of getting it *right* instead of just getting it *fast*." Tick smoothed the strip flat. "There's a relief in it, too. You didn't pin the wrong moment on the wrong person. The clock kept you honest, and honest feels good to stand on."

The crow looked at the cleared suspect's name and felt the quiet relief of a mistake un-made, and started a fresh strip for the times that were left.

Branch

BRANCH — for every clue, ask "what else could explain this?"; test each branch before you pick one.



On the clubroom whiteboard, a squirrel named Branch had drawn a clue in the middle — *muddy pawprints leading to the open supply cupboard* — and then, spreading out from it like the limbs of a tree, several different explanations.

Someone took supplies. OR someone was returning supplies. OR someone chased the class rabbit in there. OR the window leaked and someone tracked mud checking on it.

The detective club groaned. "Branch, it's obviously a thief! Why are you drawing all these other branches?"

"Because the first explanation that pops into your head isn't the answer — it's just the *fastest* answer," Branch said, adding one more limb. "Every clue could be caused by more than one thing. The muddy prints don't say 'thief.' *We* say 'thief,' because it's the story that jumps to mind. My job is to ask 'what *else* could explain this?' and hang each answer on its own branch — then go test them. The true one survives the testing. The rest fall off. If you only ever draw one branch, you'll defend it even when it's wrong, just because it's the only one you drew."



Have you ever been sure you knew why something happened, then found out it was something totally different? How did the sure feeling and the real answer compare?

Branch had learned to draw more than one branch after watching a single-branch answer hurt someone.

Long ago, the club had found the class fish tank cloudy and a new kid standing near it, and the club had drawn exactly one branch: *the new kid did something to the tank*. They didn't ask what else could cloud a tank. They didn't test anything. They just followed the one branch, straight to the new kid, who hadn't touched it and now cried at their desk.

Then the caretaker mentioned, offhand, that the tank filter had broken two days earlier and been on the repair list. The cloud was a broken filter. The new kid had simply been the nearest face to a story the club had already decided to tell.

Branch, young and quiet in the corner, had felt something twist. It wasn't only that they'd been wrong. It was watching how *good* it had felt to be sure — how the single branch had felt like clarity when it was really just a shortcut — and how a real kid had paid for that shortcut with a morning of tears. *One explanation isn't investigation*, Branch had realized. *It's just a guess wearing a badge*. From then on, Branch drew every branch it could think of before choosing any.



Branch climbed to the SleuthLab academy with a whiteboard marker already worn to a nub.

Inspector Vex met Branch and asked the question. "What do you do with a clue?"

Branch answered by taking one clue from Inspector Vex's desk — a coffee ring on a report — and spinning out four explanations on the spot: *Vex set a cup down. OR a visitor did. OR it's from yesterday. OR someone moved the report onto an old ring.* Then Branch said which quick test would sort them.

"See? One clue, four branches, and now I know what to check next instead of what to *assume*. The clue didn't tell me a story. It offered me a question."

Inspector Vex looked at the four branches and the single worn marker, and smiled. "You are appointed."



In Branch's workshop, a young beaver huffed, arms folded.

"Branch, this is exhausting. If I have to doubt *everything* and draw a hundred branches, I'll never solve anything. Isn't it fine to just go with the obvious one?"

Branch drew a small tree with just two branches, not a hundred.

"It isn't doubting everything. It's giving each answer a fair hearing before you pick — usually two or three branches is plenty. And here's the part that matters: the branch you're most tempted to skip is the one that clears the person you'd otherwise wrongly blame. The 'obvious' answer is obvious because it's *familiar*, not because it's *true*. Ask 'what else?' just enough times to catch the innocent explanation before you accuse someone. Then test. The strongest branch, the one that survives every test, is the one you can stand behind — not because it came first, but because it's the last one still standing."

The beaver unfolded their arms a little. "So I don't have to doubt forever. Just... long enough to be fair."

"Exactly long enough to be fair," Branch said. "Then you follow the branch that earns it."



Think of a time someone gave you the benefit of the doubt instead of assuming the worst. What did that fairness feel like?

The beaver drew a second branch on their own case, then a third, and something in the huff softened into thought.

"When I was new," the beaver said slowly, "everyone assumed I broke the class globe because I was closest. But my friend said 'wait, what else could've knocked it?' — and it turned out the shelf bracket was loose." The beaver looked up. "I never forgot that friend. They gave me a second branch when everyone else only saw one."

"That's the whole reason I do this," Branch said, warm. "It's not really about being clever. It's about being *fair* — making sure the person nearest the clue gets the same second branch your friend gave you. There's a good feeling in it, a kind of open, curious calm — the opposite of that tight rush to accuse. When you ask 'what else could explain this?' you're not just solving better. You're being the friend who doesn't assume the worst." Branch capped the marker. "Go draw someone a second branch."

The beaver looked at their little tree, felt the warm steadiness of having been fair, and went to find the branch no one else had drawn yet.

Account

ACCOUNT — ask open questions and listen; memory is fragile, and a confident witness isn't always a correct one.



In a quiet corner of the SleuthLab clubroom, a rabbit named Account sat across from a nervous first-grader who'd seen the recycling bins get tipped, and asked, very gently: "Just tell me what you saw. In your own words. Take your time."

The rest of the detective club leaned in, impatient, and one whispered loudly, "Ask them if it was the tall fox! It was the tall fox, right? You saw the tall fox?"

Account raised a soft paw. "No. Don't hand them the answer and ask them to agree. If I say 'did you see the tall fox,' a nervous kid who wants to be helpful might *start* to see a tall fox in their memory — even if what they really saw was a shape in a hurry. Memory isn't a photograph you look up. It's more like a drawing the mind re-sketches each time, and a leading question adds lines that were never there. So I ask open: *what did you see?* And then I wait, and I don't fill the silence with my own guess."



Have you ever "remembered" something clearly and then found out it didn't happen that way? What did it feel like to learn your own memory had shifted?

Account had learned to ask carefully after watching a leading question invent a memory whole.

Long ago, the club was sure a certain kid had knocked over the paint shelf, and they'd interviewed a witness by asking, again and again, "you saw them do it, didn't you? The one in the red coat? By the shelf?" And the witness — trying to be helpful, wanting the askers to be happy — slowly, honestly came to *remember* a red coat by the shelf. Except the accused kid didn't own a red coat, and had been in the library the whole time. The red coat had been *sewn into* the witness's memory by the questions themselves.

Account, small and listening from the side, had felt something go cold and careful. The witness hadn't lied. That was the frightening part. They'd *believed* the red coat, felt sure of it, because certainty and truth aren't the same thing, and a memory can feel bright and solid and still be partly built by the person asking. *You can lead someone into remembering wrong without either of you meaning to*, Account had understood. From then on, Account asked the openest questions it could, and never handed a witness the answer.



Account hopped to the SleuthLab academy with a notebook of questions that all started with "what" and "tell me."

Inspector Vex met Account and asked the question. "How do you take a witness's story?"

Account answered with a small demonstration: Vex described a scene, then Account asked one club member "was the umbrella *blue*?" and asked another "what color was the umbrella?" The first, led, said blue. The second, open, wasn't sure — and it turned out there'd been no umbrella at all. The leading question had grown one.

"Open questions let the memory speak for itself," Account said. "Leading questions make it say what I want. I'd rather have an honest 'I'm not sure' than a confident answer I put there myself."

Inspector Vex considered the two very different results and nodded. "You are appointed."



In Account's corner-workshop, a young owl frowned, skeptical.

"Account, if memories are that shaky, and confident people can just be wrong — why interview anyone at all? Can we ever trust what a witness says?"

Account set down the gentle notebook.

"We can — if we're careful how we ask, and if we *check* what we hear against the other evidence instead of taking it as final. Here's the discipline: ask open, never leading. Let silences sit. Write down their exact words, not your summary. And treat even a very sure witness as *one* clue among many, not the whole answer — because certainty is a feeling, and feelings can be wrong with total conviction. A witness isn't useless. They're precious. You just have to hold their words gently enough not to reshape them, and honestly enough not to over-trust them." Account tapped the notebook. "The goal isn't to catch people lying. Most witnesses aren't lying. The goal is to keep from accidentally *teaching* them a memory."

The owl's frown eased. "So it's less like squeezing the truth out, and more like... not spilling it."

"Not spilling it," Account agreed. "Exactly that."



Think of a time someone let you tell your side in your own words, without putting answers in your mouth. What did being heard like that feel like?

The owl thought about it, and something behind the skepticism went quiet and a little tender.

"When the paint thing happened to me," the owl said, "everyone kept asking 'why did you do it,' like it was already decided. Nobody once asked 'what happened.'" The owl's voice dipped. "The first grown-up who just said 'tell me, in your own words' — I almost cried. I finally got to be a person telling a story instead of a suspect nodding along."

"That's the feeling I try to give every witness," Account said, warm and low. "That safe, unhurried feeling of *someone is actually listening to me, not steering me*. It's a kind of respect — trusting a person to tell their own story without you writing it for them. And the funny thing is, it's also how you get the truest account. People remember better when they feel safe and unled. Kindness and accuracy turn out to be the same skill." Account slid the gentle notebook toward the owl. "Go listen to someone like that. Watch how much more they can tell you once they're not being pushed."

The owl took the notebook, feeling the warmth of having been heard once and getting to pass it on, and went to ask someone, gently, *what did you see?*

About Spark & Anvil

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- **SynaForge** — sensory-affirming creative tools through Lull, Soften, and the Quiet that is Also Creating

Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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