

WHAT THIS IS FOR

Intent detection is the disciplined practice of reading behavioral trajectory. Not who someone is — what this situation is becoming. The tools in this guide let you do that with structure, so you make fewer false positives and fewer false negatives. They work across contexts: clinical, professional, public space, and personal.

The Three Layers of Intent

Every person you observe is operating on three simultaneous layers. You can only directly see the first. The other two must be inferred — and that inference is where intent detection happens.

LAYER 1

SURFACE BEHAVIOR

What you can see: posture, movement, position, speech, eye contact, timing.

The only layer with direct evidence. Most people stop here.

LAYER 2

EMOTIONAL STATE

What the person is experiencing: fear, anger, calculation, calm. Leaks involuntarily through micro-behavior, vocal quality, and autonomic responses.

LAYER 3

DIRECTIONAL GOAL

What the person intends to do. This is what you're reading toward. It explains why Layers 1 and 2 look the way they do.

The critical rule: Read Layer 1 to understand Layer 2. Read Layer 2 to form a working hypothesis about Layer 3. The gap between what someone is doing and what they want you to think they're doing is where intent lives.

Cognitive Load Tells

Deception is cognitively expensive. Constructing and maintaining a false account while monitoring your own behavior, reading your audience, and suppressing emotional leakage consumes significantly more mental resources than telling the truth. That cognitive burden produces observable byproducts — and they are more reliable than most behavioral tells because they are not fully under conscious control.

- **Blink rate drops sharply** A person under high cognitive load blinks significantly less frequently than their baseline. The opposite of the folk belief that liars blink more. Reduced blinking is a load signal, not a deception signal per se — but deception produces load.

- **Spontaneous movement decreases** Truthful accounts produce natural, spontaneous gesturing that accompanies speech. Under cognitive load, gesturing becomes sparse or stops. The body becomes unnaturally still while the person is working hard mentally.

- **Speech latency increases** Response time lengthens — particularly the gap before answering direct questions. This is distinct from a slow talker. It is a consistent, sudden change from that person's own baseline response rate.

- **Over-controlled delivery** Sentences become slightly rehearsed-sounding, with reduced natural disfluency (the 'uh,' 'um,' slight restarts that characterize genuine spontaneous speech). Paradoxically, too-smooth delivery is a load indicator because it reflects active self-monitoring.

The Science: Cognitive-load approaches to deception detection (Vrij, Fisher & Blank, *Frontiers in Psychology* 2016). Reduced blinking as cognitive load indicator: Harrigan & O'Connell. Strategic self-monitoring in deceptive communication: Buller & Burgoon, *Interpersonal Deception Theory* (1996).

The Synchrony Inversion

This is one of the most counterintuitive findings in deception research — and one of the most field-useful. Common assumption holds that deceivers are stilted, guarded, and fail to mirror naturally. The research says the opposite: people who are actively deceiving mirror and synchronize more than truth-tellers, not less. This is called the strategic synchrony hypothesis.

THE SYNCHRONY INVERSION EXPLAINED

What it looks like: Excessive rapport behavior — nodding too consistently, mirroring posture with unusual precision, maintaining eye contact at a rate slightly above natural comfort, keeping the interaction "smooth" in a way that feels slightly managed. The interaction feels good in a way that is hard to locate.

Why it happens: When a person is deceiving, their primary goal shifts from communicating to maintaining credibility. They are managing the relationship rather than participating in it. Synchrony becomes a tool, not a byproduct.

The field application: If an interaction feels unusually smooth and the other person seems unusually attuned to you — ask the Five Questions (page 3). Excessive social lubrication is a signal worth interrogating, not a reassurance.

The Science: Strategic synchrony hypothesis: Dunbar et al. (2014, 2019, 2020). Objective automated analysis of deceptive vs. truthful dyadic synchrony: *Frontiers in Communication* (2023). Truth-tellers show higher synchrony increases during topic-shift moments; deceivers maintain artificially stable synchrony to preserve rapport.

The Intent Signal Stack

Not all behavioral signals carry equal weight. The Intent Signal Stack organizes signals by channel — from the most easily faked to the hardest to control. Read from bottom to top: the lower the tier, the less conscious control the person has over it.

TIER 4 — VERBAL CONTENT

Most manipulable

What someone says. Easily scripted and rehearsed. Treat as a starting hypothesis, not evidence.

TIER 3 — VOCAL & PROSODIC SIGNALS

Partially controlled

Pace, pitch, breath, hesitation. People can modulate these under stress but leakage is common — listen for the gap between what words say and how they are delivered.

TIER 2 — POSTURAL & PROXEMIC SIGNALS

Difficult to suppress

Foot orientation, body angle, weight shift, distance management, hand concealment. The body commits to a direction before the conscious mind announces it. Navarro documented foot orientation as the single most reliable intent signal.

TIER 1 — TEMPORAL & CONTEXTUAL PATTERNS

Cannot be faked

Timing, repetition, pattern across interactions. Does this behavior fit this context and moment? Is it consistent with what came before? Temporal patterns reveal intent that snapshot observation never can.

The Science: Foot orientation as primary intent signal: Navarro, FBI Behavioral Analysis Program. Universal vs. culturally-specific behavioral indicators: Van Horne & Riley, Left of Bang (2014). Temporal patterning as superior predictor: Meloy, threat assessment literature.

The Proxemic Contradiction

A person with genuine hostile intent does not behave like a pure aggressor approaching a target. Research shows they display a specific mixed proxemic signature: simultaneous approach and avoidance behavior. They position directly in front of their focus — but make frequent, deliberate gaze aversions. They close distance — then arrest it. They orient toward — then create a plausible reason to be there.

APPROACH SIGNALS

- Direct frontal positioning toward target
- Gradual distance reduction over time
- Body angle oriented toward, not away

AVOIDANCE SIGNALS (simultaneous)

- Frequent gaze aversion when proximity is close
- Pausing, arresting approach, finding reasons to stay
- Contextual justification for presence

What to look for: Someone who keeps finding reasons to stay near you or near a specific person, who approaches and arrests, who is oriented toward but looking away. Pure aggressor behavior looks different. This mixed signature is specifically associated with premeditated rather than reactive intent.

The Science: Proxemic imaging and approach-avoidance mixing during hostile intent: von Mohr et al., PLoS ONE (2015). High-punisher proxemic signature: positioning directly in front of target while increasing gaze aversion. Proxemic behavior is relatively automatic and less conscious than self-report (implicit, not deliberate).

The Five Questions

When you have a behavioral cluster that needs a working judgment, run these five questions in sequence. They move from surface to deep, from behavior to goal. This is an original SENTINEL analytical tool — it synthesizes JACA and C5 into a field-usable format designed for real-time use, not post-event review.

Q1: What does this person want me to believe about them?

Name the performed identity. Friendly, harmless, confused, authoritative. Then ask whether the rest of their behavior is consistent with it — or inconsistent in ways that are small, repeated, and hard to explain.

Q2: What are they not saying or showing?

Omissions are data. What topic was redirected? What emotion is absent that should be present given this situation? The absence of expected behavior is often more significant than the presence of unexpected behavior. Grief without distress. Threat awareness without any alarm.

Q3: What is changing over time?

Intent has direction. A snapshot tells you where someone is. A sequence of snapshots tells you where they're going. Has their affect shifted since the interaction began? Is their body orientation different than it was ten minutes ago? Are they closer or further from an exit?

Q4: What would make this behavior make sense?

Run the benign explanation first. Genuinely try to construct it. If you cannot produce a reasonable innocent explanation after real effort, that is itself meaningful data — not confirmation of threat, but an indicator that the assessment deserves weight.

Q5: What is their relationship to this space?

Are they here for the same reason everyone else is? Does their behavior — what they're doing, where they're positioned, what they're attending to — fit the context? Contextual incongruence is one of the most consistent pre-incident indicators across every threat typology in the research.

The Thin-Slice Protocol

Nalini Ambady's research established that 6-second behavioral observations predict outcomes as accurately as 30-second observations — and that adding verbal content to the observation reduces accuracy rather than improving it. The implication for field practice is specific and counterintuitive.

THE THIN-SLICE PROTOCOL (ORIGINAL SENTINEL TOOL)

The Protocol: Before you engage or speak, give yourself a minimum of 6 seconds of silent visual observation of the person and their spatial context. Do not initiate conversation. Do not allow your analytical mind to start forming sentences. Watch the full person — not the face. Movement, position, orientation, spatial relationship to others and exits.

Why this works: The moment you engage verbally, verbal content begins competing with behavioral data. Your cognitive system prioritizes language processing. Silent observation before contact lets your pattern-recognition system do its work without interference from what the person is saying.

The application: Arriving at a scene before making contact. Observing a waiting room before entering. Watching someone approach before they reach you. 6 silent seconds of observation gives you a working behavioral read that verbal engagement will then confirm, complicate, or disconfirm — but it gives you a baseline the conversation cannot erase.

The Science: Thin-slicing research: Ambady & Rosenthal (1992, meta-analysis, Psychological Bulletin). 6-second vs. 30-second observation equivalence confirmed. Key finding: ratings based solely on nonverbal behavior were as accurate as ratings including verbal behavior — and in some conditions more accurate.

The Asymmetry Read

Genuine emotion is bilaterally symmetrical. When a person feels something authentically, the left and right sides of their face move together, at the same time, at the same intensity. Constructed or suppressed emotion — the mask over the state — produces asymmetric facial movement. This is not a subtle signal; with practice it becomes clearly visible.

- **Asymmetric smile** The controlled 'everything is fine' expression often lifts one side slightly before the other, or holds one side at a different intensity. Genuine smiles are symmetrical and involve the orbital muscles around the eyes — Duchenne markers.
- **Asymmetric fear flash** Fear that is being suppressed rather than concealed often appears briefly and asymmetrically — typically on the left side of the face first, vanishing in under half a second. This is distinct from ambient anxiety and is specifically associated with high-stakes concealment.
- **Timing offset** Genuine emotion appears and fades in proportion to the stimulus. Constructed emotion tends to arrive slightly after the moment that should produce it — and stay slightly too long after the moment passes. The timing is managed rather than spontaneous.

The Science: Facial asymmetry in deceptive vs. truthful expression: biorXiv (2021), Frontiers in Psychology (2021). Leakage theory (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Ekman, 2003): high-stake deception produces involuntary fear microexpressions of shorter duration and greater asymmetry than truth-telling conditions. Fear asymmetry confirmed across high-stake game-show paradigms.

The Energy Burst

One of Meloy's eight warning behaviors — and the least discussed. An Energy Burst is not an escalation in severity. It is an acceleration in rate. The frequency or variety of concerning behaviors suddenly increases. The person doing the same things faster, or doing more different things in a shorter window, is moving toward action.

ENERGY BURST — THE ACCELERATION SIGNAL

What it looks like: A client making low-level boundary tests (indirect questions, proximity probing, information gathering) suddenly does several of these in a single interaction rather than spread across weeks. A person who has made one or two concerning statements begins making several within the same conversation. The pattern compresses.

Why it matters: Acceleration is a threshold indicator. It suggests the person has moved from ideation into something closer to planning — not necessarily imminent action, but a qualitative shift in their relationship to the behavior. The Trajectory Test applies: if this rate continues, where does it end?

SENTINEL application: Track rate, not just severity. One concerning behavior over three weeks is different from three concerning behaviors in three days, even if each individual behavior is identical. The compression is the signal.

The Science: Meloy et al. (2011, 2012) — eight warning behaviors typology: pathway, fixation, identification, novel aggression, energy burst, leakage, directly communicated threat, last resort. Energy burst defined as increase in frequency or variety of warning behaviors. Associated with all major intended-violence typologies.

The Four Reading Errors

Appearance Substitution

Replacing behavioral evidence with demographic or aesthetic inference. Produces high false-positive rates in low-risk populations and high false-negative rates when the actual threat does not match the expected profile.

Politeness Override

Dismissing a genuine signal because acting on it is socially uncomfortable. People override accurate threat perception to avoid seeming rude or paranoid. The signal is real. The discomfort is a social reflex — not a correction.

Recency Bias

Weighting the most recent behavior too heavily. A person hostile for forty minutes who is now cooperative is often assessed as cooperative. Read the trajectory, not the current frame.

Confirmation Lock

Forming an early assessment and filtering subsequent data to confirm it. Once you've decided someone is fine, you stop processing contrary signals. A read is a working hypothesis — not a verdict.

Quick Reference

✓ Thin-Slice first

6 sec silent observation before verbal contact

✓ Establish baseline

First 90 sec: rate, rest position, response latency

✓ Watch Cognitive Load

Blink drop, stillness, latency increase, over-smooth delivery

✓ Check Synchrony

Excessive rapport is a signal, not reassurance

✓ Read proxemic signature

Approach + avoidance together = premeditated pattern

✓ Run The Five Questions

Identity → omissions → trajectory → context fit

✓ Apply Asymmetry Read

Genuine emotion is symmetrical; constructed is not

✓ Watch the rate

Energy Burst: compression of frequency is the signal

✓ Name the reading error

Appearance sub, politeness override, recency, confirmation

✓ Hold the read loosely

A read is a working hypothesis — update it