

UNITED WISDOM

Error, Failure, and a Mistaken Hypothesis: Three Different Reasons to Revise an Action

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *“real and living doubt”*

Charles Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” section IV, the paragraph on beginning inquiry, line 371 in the selected version. A short fragment of his own argument. Doubt here concerns an actual question, rather than a requirement to question everything endlessly. Primary text.

What this article is about

A person does what they intended, yet the desired result does not follow. In another situation, the result is achieved but an important condition is violated during the work. In a third, everything appears satisfactory even though the explanation remains unconfirmed. It is easy to call all these cases a mistake. The next step then becomes a vague demand to do better, although different things need to change. Sometimes a chosen action must be carried out more accurately. Sometimes a method that no longer serves the purpose should be abandoned. Sometimes an explanation needs checking before the next step is built upon it. This article distinguishes a breach of a specified condition, failure to achieve a goal, and an insufficiently supported hypothesis. We consider a small example involving a catalogue of family photographs, where originals can be preserved and other people's interests kept safe. Charles Peirce's philosophical discussion of belief and inquiry helps frame the question of checking grounds. Our everyday distinctions and practice remain editorial proposals, rather than a validated method for diagnosing decisions.

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I. One unsatisfactory result, several questions

Lena decided to organize old family photographs. She saved copies in a separate folder, gave the files clear names, and made a small catalogue. A week later, a relative tried to find a photograph of a summer celebration and could not. When Lena saw the message, she immediately decided that the entire job had been done badly. She wanted either to remake the catalogue completely or never return to it. Yet the message supported a much narrower conclusion: one person had not found the required photograph using one search. The cause had not been established. The name might be wrong, the search arrangement inconvenient, or the photograph absent from the copies supplied to her.

It matters here to preserve the difference between an observation and the explanation that follows it. The observation concerns a particular search. The explanation concerns why it did not succeed. Evaluation of the work also depends on what Lena had promised to do. If she promised only to list the files available, the absence of a photograph never supplied to her does not violate that promise. If the catalogue was meant to support searching by event, the difficulty bears on the purpose of the work. If somebody's original folder has meanwhile been renamed by accident, a separate execution error has occurred, even if some photographs can be found successfully.

This distinction is useful beyond the appeal of a tidy classification. It determines the next step. Restoring a folder name, changing the catalogue's arrangement, and finding out which materials were supplied are three different tasks. A person trying to address them through one general reproach directed at themselves gains considerable discomfort and little information about the matter. Naming a specific discrepancy limits the work. A known breach can be corrected without declaring false every idea used in making the catalogue.

However, a narrow description should not become a way to minimize actual harm. If another person's folder has been affected, its owner needs to be told, and further changes should cease until agreed. Successfully finding a different photograph does not cancel the intervention. Distinguishing the cases preserves both a precise conclusion and responsibility for a particular action. It does not remove the person's obligation to answer; it helps establish what requires an answer now.

II. An error requires a specified condition

In this article, an error means an action that departs from a specified condition: an agreement, a checked fact, a restriction, or a chosen rule for carrying out the work. Lena agreed not to alter original materials, but renamed an original instead of a copy. The condition can be identified and the breach demonstrated. This conclusion does not depend on whether relatives will like the new catalogue. An error has already occurred in the action. The discussion begins with the particular file, rather than a broad claim that Lena is incapable of working on family history.

The condition itself may need clarification, however. If two people understood the word “organize” differently, every departure from a later preference cannot automatically count as an error. One expected a table; the other expected themed folders. Their original agreement may have been insufficiently defined. Some of the work then involves establishing what was actually said, and some involves reaching a new agreement. A standard formulated later may be sensible for the next step. Without explanation, it cannot be presented as a rule the other person supposedly broke earlier.

There are also errors of information. A photograph is catalogued as having been taken in 1998, although the back of the original clearly says 1989. This discrepancy can be checked. Correcting the date does not require abandoning the entire naming system. But if the year was reconstructed from an unverified, uncertain recollection, the situation differs: an assumption has been presented as an established fact. Both the particular entry and the way degrees of confidence are shown in the catalogue will need attention.

It therefore helps to ask how definite the grounds for the word “error” are. Is there a known rule? Did it apply in this situation? What exactly departs from it? These questions do not guarantee a fair assessment or replace professional investigation where that is required. In a small everyday task, they help separate correction from a dispute about the standard. A person can agree that an identified breach occurred while declining a further conclusion imposed upon their entire work or character.

III. Failure concerns the desired result

Here, failure means not achieving a chosen result. The catalogue was meant to help people find photographs, but the relative could not locate an image that was actually included. Lena might have carefully observed every agreement: using copies alone, transferring dates correctly, and retaining original names in a separate column. This does not make the search successful. Following conditions and obtaining a result are connected, but neither is sufficient evidence of the other. Someone can act carefully and still choose an inconvenient way to present the material.

The extent of the failure also needs specifying. One unsuccessful search does not establish that the catalogue is useless for every person and every request. Perhaps entries are easy to find by year but difficult to find by event. Perhaps the relative did not know the names used for celebrations. Perhaps the table is readable on a computer but too wide for her phone. Each possibility describes a different limitation. That description need not be comforting. It needs to match what was actually checked and leave unknown matters unknown.

The result may be missed because of circumstances outside the person's control. If the required photograph was not supplied, a catalogue cannot show its location among the files received. If someone expected an answer today but a participant became ill and could not inspect the table, the timing goal was missed. That does not prove the catalogue was designed incorrectly. Failure against a chosen criterion can be acknowledged without immediately assigning blame. Otherwise, every unfavorable outcome begins to look like evidence of an improper action.

At the same time, appealing to circumstances should not obscure the work that was possible. Lena did not control another person's free time, but she could have asked in advance which device would be used to open the file. She could not add an absent photograph, but could have identified the limits of the collection received. The next step depends on two questions together: what prevented the result, and which part can reasonably be changed? Failure does not always require another attempt. Sometimes it is more sensible to narrow the goal, choose another approach, or finish while honestly leaving some requests unresolved.

IV. A hypothesis offers an explanation without establishing a cause

After receiving the relative's message, Lena thought that file names had caused the failed search. This is a hypothesis: a possible explanation of the observation. It may prove useful, but the names have not yet been established as the obstacle. Renaming the entire collection immediately would build new work upon an unverified cause. The actual difficulty might be a link opening an old version of the table. Several hours spent renaming files would then leave the situation unchanged. The effort would be real, while its connection to the problem remained uncertain.

A hypothesis differs from a desire in how it relates to information. Lena wants to make a convenient catalogue. But an explanation of the difficulty should allow what happened to be checked. She can ask which search was attempted, which file opened, and which entries were visible. This does not necessarily require collecting personal information or asking detailed questions about family circumstances. One agreed search example using a few neutral copies

may suffice. If the participant does not want to revisit the episode, the lack of new information needs acknowledgment. Refusal should not be turned into confirmation of Lena's account.

An incorrect hypothesis does not always produce an obvious failure. A catalogue can happen to work even when Lena misunderstands what makes searching convenient. Conversely, a reasonable hypothesis may not be supported by the particular material. A successful outcome therefore does not automatically certify every explanation, and an unsuccessful outcome does not refute all explanations at once. New names might help because overly long lines have been shortened, although Lena expected the benefit to come from including the year. Her explanation and the actual change need separate consideration.

This distinction leaves a person free to act with incomplete knowledge while requiring an honest account of the grounds. A particular change can be proposed because one explanation of the difficulty appears likely. That likelihood cannot be offered as an established diagnosis of the situation. Moving from an assumption to a better supported account depends on new information and the quality of comparison. It does not happen merely because the person has repeated their version often or spent considerable time putting it into practice.

V. Confidence in an explanation and checking its grounds

In “The Fixation of Belief,” first published in 1877, Charles Peirce examines connections between belief, doubt, and inquiry. We refer to selected sections of the essay in the collection *Chance, Love, and Logic*, published in 1923. A relevant distinction concerns a person's cessation of doubt and the relation of their reasoning method to its subject. Peirce considers several ways to fix belief, including tenaciously retaining a chosen view. This historical philosophical argument is not experimental support for our everyday classification, but it helps us avoid confusing calm certainty with examination of an explanation.

Lena can convince herself that the relative simply disliked her approach. This explanation is reassuring: nothing needs correcting, and the cause has been placed on the other person's side. She can choose the opposite account and decide that she cannot organize anything at all. Every subsequent difficulty would then confirm a general reproach against herself. In both cases, a sense of having a final answer can arise before particular information has been considered. The feeling of clarity does not itself show which account better describes the unsuccessful search.

Our editorial application of this question is modest: an explanation should meet information that could change it. If everything is declared confirmation of the same account, its connection with observations becomes opaque. The relative found the photograph, so the system is good; she did not find it, so she searched badly. This defence of the catalogue can continue indefinitely,

but it offers little knowledge of what needs improving. It is more useful to specify a limited question whose answer can distinguish at least two possible causes.

Inquiry does not require a person to doubt every action endlessly. The catalogue can be used provisionally with its known limitations stated. Some entries can retain an uncertain date. A reasonable stopping point is needed when further clarification is too costly, does not affect an important decision, or lacks the participants' permission. Stopping means completing the present check within stated limits. It does not make the chosen hypothesis irrefutable or turn a temporarily acceptable method into a final standard for every similar task.

VI. Correcting execution can obscure the question of method

Suppose two incorrect dates are indeed found in the table. Lena corrects them and feels the problem has been solved. Yet the relative still struggles to find a photograph by the name of an event. Correcting particular entries was necessary, but did not answer the question of search arrangement. A familiar substitution occurs here: an identifiable error absorbs all attention because it is easier to demonstrate and remove. The wider question of whether the approach is suitable remains unexamined. An inconvenient table can be maintained impeccably and still fail to serve its purpose.

The opposite substitution is also possible. Lena decides to create an entirely different system, although one broken link caused the difficulty. She changes the folder structure, adds fields, and asks relatives to describe the photographs again. A local correction becomes a large revision affecting other people's time. The new system may be convenient, but the difficulty found does not yet justify the scale of the revision. A call to rethink everything does not become more reasonable merely because it sounds more serious than fixing a link.

It helps to distinguish two levels of change. On one, compliance with a known condition is restored: a date is corrected, the original folder's name reinstated, or an incorrect link replaced. On the other, we decide whether the method suits the purpose: whether a table is needed, which information supports searching, and who can use the format. Both levels may require work together. However, each needs its own stated grounds. Correcting an entry is then not offered as evidence that the system is convenient, and changing the system is not used to avoid answering for a condition already breached.

Some situations do not permit a leisurely examination of the method after an error is found. If the safety of another person's materials is affected, risky actions must first cease and restoration be agreed. A small task involving copies was chosen here precisely because it allows questions to be separated without creating new harm. Its sequence cannot be transferred to medical, technical, or legal decisions without the relevant professional

requirements. The permissible scope of a check depends on consequences and competence, rather than the curiosity of someone who wants to understand a failure at last.

VII. A new comparison should differ from repetition

Lena offers the relative two small catalogue variants: one supporting searches by year, the other including a separate event index. By agreement, they use several neutral copies and one request chosen in advance. Such a comparison can reveal a limited difference between the variants under these conditions. It does not provide a universal assessment of all catalogues. But it is more useful than simply repeating the same attempt if the purpose is to choose between two accounts of the difficulty. The essential point is knowing which question the comparison can actually clarify.

If names, folder order, table appearance, and the selection of photographs are all changed at once, a successful search will not show which change helped. Sometimes this sort of revision is needed for a practical purpose, and a rigorous causal analysis is not the priority. The honest conclusion then concerns the result: the search succeeded under this new combination of conditions. It cannot be enlarged to say that a specific cause of the earlier difficulty was proved. Obtaining a working variant and explaining its operation are different achievements, although conversation often treats them as one.

Even a small comparison may be inappropriate if it requires participation that has not been agreed. The relative is not obliged to become a catalogue tester because Lena finds it hard to remain without a final explanation. Lena can check the link herself, inspect the table on her own device, and note unknown conditions. She can leave the question unresolved. Another person's refusal to take part in an additional check limits the available information. It proves neither indifference nor hostility nor the convenience of the existing format.

After comparison, the original question needs to remain visible. If searching has become easier, the new variant can be accepted without a long account of who was right from the beginning. If the cause remains unclear, that does not invalidate a limited improvement. If both variants are inconvenient, it may help to return to the purpose and ask whether the family needs a detailed catalogue at all. Repetition has value when it adds an available distinction or addresses a practical task. When it only reproduces the same uncertainty, stopping can preserve time and the participants' relationship.

VIII. An unfavorable outcome does not rewrite earlier knowledge

Now imagine Lena choosing the format before the first search. She knew which photographs had been supplied, but did not know how relatives would formulate requests. Making a table could have been a reasonable limited attempt given the information available. The later difficulty adds information. It does not establish that Lena should have known every future request in advance. Evaluation of the original decision should consider what could then be established, which limitations were apparent, and what participants had been told.

This does not mean that every poor outcome can be justified by appealing to uncertainty. If Lena knew the table would not open on the relative's phone but presented it as an accessible format anyway, the problem already existed when the decision was made. The new message merely made its consequences explicit. Distinguishing lack of knowledge from disregard of known information matters precisely because responsibility matters. Otherwise, honestly stated uncertainty and a concealed limitation receive the same assessment, leaving a person unable to see what needs changing in the next agreement.

A favorable outcome likewise does not retroactively correct a breached condition. The relative might happen to find the photograph although Lena changed original names without permission. The success does not make that intervention agreed. Restoration and a discussion of acceptable working methods are still required, even if the chosen goal was achieved. At the same time, there is no need to call every part of the catalogue unsuccessful. A good result, an execution error, and an untested explanation can coexist in one episode without cancelling each other.

A more precise language of revision becomes possible. We can acknowledge that the original attempt had understandable grounds but now needs changing. We can acknowledge a successful result alongside a method that breached a restriction. We can acknowledge that some causes remain unknown although one particular entry is clearly incorrect. Such formulations do not always resolve a dispute. They do reduce the need to defend or reject the past as a whole. A person changes a particular part of the action while preserving the difference between what was known earlier and what became available only after the outcome.

IX. Another person's assessment can clarify the subject

The message “the catalogue is inconvenient” can be a useful beginning, but remains too broad to guide correction. Lena can ask what the person was unable to do. The question should not become a demand that someone prove their right to be dissatisfied. One specific example can be calmly invited. If the person declines, the lack of detailed information can be acknowledged. The assessment then remains testimony about their experience of use. It does not automatically become a complete technical description, and it does not cease to matter because they do not want to examine it point by point.

The request for clarification needs to be distinguished from defending one's dignity. If Lena responds to every observation with a detailed account of the evenings she spent on the catalogue, the relative may stop reporting difficulties. Her search experience does not depend on how difficult the catalogue was to produce. Equally, Lena's work does not give anyone a right to demand endless revisions. Clarifying the subject makes both boundaries discussable: the user's actual difficulty, and how much further work the author is willing to do. Continuing remains a separate agreement.

Sometimes another person calls a difference in purposes an error. The relative wants to find photographs by person; Lena has arranged them by trip. Neither principle must be the only correct one before the catalogue's common purpose has been specified. A second index may be needed, or one type of request may remain outside the task. This discussion differs from acknowledging an incorrect date. Priorities and acceptable scope need agreement, rather than a verdict about who misread an existing fact.

Finally, another person's confident account of the cause can also be a hypothesis. The relative believes names explain everything, but opened an old link herself. Her explanation deserves consideration alongside Lena's, rather than unconditional acceptance or automatic rejection. An adult discussion allows both participants to report their experience accurately while misunderstanding its cause. Agreeing on a next step does not require identical explanations of everything. It requires an understandable task, permitted participation, and an honest account of what the step can show.

X. Revision can be precise and finite

After several clarifications, Lena finds an incorrect link and two mistaken dates. She restores the link, corrects the entries, and adds a short explanation of the collection's contents. The selected photograph is found. This supports a limited report: specified errors have been removed, and one request has been fulfilled in the current version. The cause of every earlier difficulty has not been established. Lena does not have to turn the remaining uncertainty into a large research project if the practical task is resolved and further participation has not been agreed.

This outcome differs from the claim that every failure necessarily teaches a lesson. Failure itself does not supply an explanation. Sometimes more information becomes available afterward; sometimes there is only the fact that the goal was missed. Sometimes a person learns that the chosen method no longer suits them without establishing a single cause. Value arises from particular work with the available material, rather than unpleasantness in itself. There is therefore no requirement to be grateful for the difficulty or repeat it for the sake of promised development.

Distinguishing error, failure, and hypothesis does not require emotional detachment. Lena can feel upset about the unsuccessful search and still describe it more precisely. She can feel relief after correction and remain cautious about explaining the cause. Experience belongs to the person; examination addresses a particular question. Neither needs to stand in for the other. If the conversation becomes too difficult, it can be postponed without treating the pause as proof that the other person's position is false or that one is incapable of understanding the work.

The possibility of revising an action retains its meaning through boundaries. A particular condition has been breached; a particular result has not been obtained; a particular explanation still requires grounds. Each can have its own next step, or the acknowledgment that a step is currently unavailable. Sometimes correction is needed, sometimes a new agreement, sometimes an end to further attempts. A person need not pass a final judgment on themselves to change one entry, one search method, or one confident account of events. Answering the question that actually arose is enough.

What this means in practice

Choose a small completed episode that can be considered without altering other people's materials, disclosing personal information, or creating obligations. It might involve your own note or a search in a folder containing copies. If revisiting the episode feels unpleasant or unsafe now, skip the practice. It is not intended for examining traumatic events, professional accidents, or relationships in which discussion brings pressure. You do not need to involve anyone else or secure their agreement with your assessment.

Write down one observation about the result. Separately name any action condition defined beforehand, the desired result, and the proposed explanation. Any line can remain empty: missing information does not need a confident guess to fill it. Consider whether the discrepancy concerns a breached condition, a missed result, or an unsupported explanation. One episode may concern several lines. Choose just one that you want to address now.

If a safe local correction is available, describe it without promising to resolve the entire situation. If another person's participation is needed, note a possible request and leave them free to decline. If the explanation is unknown, identify it as such. Do not undertake an additional check merely to complete the exercise, and do not change original materials to obtain a more convincing outcome.

Stop after this short description. The limited result of the practice is to distinguish grounds for one next step or acknowledge their absence. It does not prove the cause of events, the quality of your character, or the effectiveness of any future decision. You can keep the note private, delete it, or choose not to continue the task. Stop the exercise if there is a threat or coercion; you do not need to explain your refusal.

Key quotation

> *“external permanency”*

Peirce, the same essay, section V, line 411: a short phrase from the search for grounds of belief beyond arbitrary preference. It belongs to a philosophical argument about method, rather than promising that one everyday check will establish a cause. Primary text.

Connections between traditions

Peirce examines methods of fixing belief; Darwin describes his own treatment of contrary information in an autobiographical recollection. These are different kinds of text. Our distinction between action, outcome, and explanation is not derived from them as a validated common method.

Comparison	Shared question	Substantial difference
Peirce ↔ our discussion of hypotheses	What connects a confident explanation to its subject?	A philosophical argument about inquiry does not test a family catalogue.
Darwin ↔ the availability of objections	Does information inconvenient to a chosen explanation disappear?	A researcher's recollection does not establish a universal rule about memory.
Peirce ↔ Darwin	How does belief encounter what could contradict it?	Reasoning about methods and autobiographical testimony have different grounds.
Execution error ↔ failure of outcome	What specifically needs changing?	Compliance with a condition and achievement of a goal are examined through different questions. This is our editorial distinction.
Correction ↔ examining an explanation	Is a new result sufficient to establish a cause?	A working variant can be obtained without proving why the earlier one did not work.

Sources

• Charles S. Peirce. Chance, Love, and Logic; The Fixation of Belief. Essay 1877; collection 1923 edited by Morris R. Cohen. Metadata, contents, and selected continuous sections III–V, lines 355–423, were read, alongside separate neighboring passages of II. This is a selected scope, not the complete book or complete section VI. The editor's introduction and Dewey's supplement are not treated as Peirce's prose. The historical philosophical argument does not establish the practice's effectiveness.

• Charles Darwin. The Autobiography of Charles Darwin. Francis Darwin's edition with stated omissions; recollection 1876 with an 1881 addition, published 1887, Gutenberg 2010. Metadata and selected 306–321/360–367/377–383 passages were checked, including paragraph 309 on contrary information. This is not the complete autobiography or the restored 1958 edition. Only paraphrase is used for a limited comparison here; this article adds no Darwin quotations.

Peirce's quotations are short fragments of his own English argument, with editorial Russian translations. The contemporary scene is fictional. Online availability does not establish universal reuse permission; direct quotation is restricted by the current shared reservation for the underlying work.

Tags

error, failure, hypothesis, action, result, condition, revision, decision, belief, doubt, inquiry, explanation, information, cause, catalogue, photographs, goal, correction, comparison, uncertainty, responsibility, agreement, search, examination, refusal, stopping, Peirce, Darwin, philosophy, authorship, practice, United Wisdom

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