


UNITED WISDOM

# A Decision Journal: What I Knew When I Chose

The Person and the Inner World

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## Epigraph

> *“When I deliberated.” — Michel de Montaigne, Essays, III.II, a short fragment of Charles Cotton’s translation, with display capitalisation. The selected discussion concerns the circumstances of an earlier choice as well as its later result.*

## What this article is about

After a failure, an earlier choice can look like an astonishingly obvious mistake. After a success, the same way of thinking can seem reliable and worth repeating. Before the event, however, a person had a different picture: some circumstances were known, some were assumed, and some had not yet arisen. A decision journal can preserve this distinction. Its purpose is neither to prove that we did everything correctly nor to build a case against ourselves. It is a short record of the information, options and reasons that actually entered a choice. A later result is added while preserving when new knowledge became available.

Vera, the fictional character in this article, helps organise a book club meeting. She must choose between a familiar room and a new venue with a better time, where access arrangements are not yet confirmed. She selects the new venue after the organiser provides written confirmation. On the day, access is delayed and the discussion starts late. It is now easy to say that changing venues was wrong from the beginning. A more useful examination asks what Vera knew, what checks she could make, and which uncertainty she accepted. The episode then offers material for learning without making its outcome a complete definition of her ability to decide.

We will examine available knowledge and later information, the quality of reasoning and the consequences of action. Historical texts by Montaigne and Aristotle offer different philosophical perspectives; a study by Jonathan Baron and John Hershey provides a limited experimental example of outcomes influencing evaluations of other people’s decisions. None of these sources establishes a personal decision journal’s effectiveness in improving life. The proposed format remains an editorial way to organise material. It is voluntary, allows incomplete records, and replaces neither necessary help nor professional consultation nor action to address consequences that already require attention.



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## I. A decision exists before its result

A choice has a moment in which the future is not yet a fact. This may be a brief agreement to a proposal, choosing when to speak, or accepting an organisational option. At that moment, a person has a particular deadline, resources and information. A subsequent event can change their significance, but it cannot make new knowledge available earlier. A journal can mark this boundary: when the choice was made and what remained uncertain. There is no need to reconstruct every second. A clear date, or a note that the entry precedes an answer, confirmation or result, is enough.

Vera might record that the venue decision was made on Tuesday, after access was confirmed and before the delay was reported. This short sequence already preserves an important difference. The later inconvenience remains real: people lost time and the meeting needed adjustment. Examination, however, no longer begins by assuming that Vera knew about the delay and deliberately ignored it. If she knew about other venue problems, those should also be named. The temporal boundary serves accuracy rather than convenient justification. It helps reveal genuine constraints as well as a check that might have been missed.

A record made before a decision differs in status from a reconstruction afterwards. Without an earlier journal, previous information can be described from memory, messages or available documents. Such an entry should be labelled as reconstructed. It does not become proof that this was exactly how the person reasoned at the time. Some reasons may genuinely have informed the choice; others may have become persuasive only after the event. This limit can be acknowledged without self-disparagement. For a future small decision, making a note beforehand is possible if it does not interfere with the task or create another obligation.

## II. What was known, and what was assumed?

The word “knew” often combines different things. One condition was confirmed in writing; another seemed likely from experience; a third was something we wanted to believe. When examining a decision, these grounds can be separated. Confirmation is not a guarantee of fulfilment. An acquaintance’s confidence is not an independent check. The absence of a negative message does not always mean that no problem exists. Yet everything without an official document need not be declared unreliable. Ordinary life involves different kinds of sources. It helps to name what supported a particular expectation and how far it was checked under the available conditions.

Vera knows the convenient time and has the organiser’s message confirming access. She assumes that the arrangement will be fulfilled. She does not know who will open the room on the day or what will happen if that person is late. These items need not carry equal weight. An additional question might have been straightforward and reasonable; alternatively, the

organiser might already have taken responsibility for the task. The journal cannot answer on behalf of the circumstances, but it can frame a precise question: was confirmation sufficient for this meeting, or should a contact at the venue have been agreed? This concerns a procedure, not whether Vera is generally too trusting.

Known information can also be unwelcome and therefore given too little weight. Someone heard about recurring delays but expected things to work out differently this time. In that case, the later outcome is not entirely new: it reveals the significance of an existing warning. A record can distinguish this from an unexpected event. Even here, a conclusion needs a suitable scale. One missed signal does not establish an inability to learn, and one successful risk does not make warnings meaningless. We can examine why the message did not affect the choice, which conditions outweighed it, and what check might be added to a similar task. Information availability does not mean that someone must discover everything that exists in the world beforehand. A real opportunity to ask, the question’s recognisable importance, time and personal expertise all matter. Yet not having received an answer does not always remove an obligation to clarify something necessary. Being unable to know differs from declining a straightforward necessary check. This distinction can be considered through particular circumstances, retaining the personal note’s limits and referring to a professional standard where one actually applies.

## III. Options must have been available then

After an event, it is easy to imagine an excellent third option that nobody possessed at the time. A different room, time, participant or format might have been chosen. Some alternatives were genuinely available; others emerged later or required resources that did not exist. A journal concerns real alternatives: what could have been done within the deadline, with the available authority and resources. This does not prevent looking for new approaches afterwards. They can simply be described as future possibilities rather than proof that the past choice made no sense from the outset.

In the selected passage from Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle connects choice with prior consideration and the means of reaching an end. This is historical philosophy, not a modern decision-quality scale. Its distinction has a limited use here: what someone wishes for and what they regard as an available action do not automatically coincide. A contemporary examination can also reconsider the end itself, although the selected Aristotelian passage focuses on means. It does not follow that effort can overcome every constraint. Nor do ancient medical and social examples become instructions for personal practice.

For Vera, the alternatives might have been the familiar room at a less convenient time and the new venue at a suitable hour. If the familiar room was already booked, however, it was not an available alternative, however reliable it appeared after the delay. Postponing the meeting

might also be noted if participants could agree. Sometimes there are few options and each has a drawback. A journal need not invent an ideal possibility to make an attractive entry. As a way of organising material, it keeps constraints visible. Future work can then concern expanding the available choices rather than merely improving reasoning within the old boundaries.

## IV. A reason for choosing is not certainty about the outcome

A justified decision need not feel calm. Someone can understand why an option was selected and still be troubled by uncertainty. Conversely, confidence sometimes arises without adequate consideration of conditions. A journal can distinguish the reason from the experience: what I hoped to achieve, why the option suited that aim, and what I felt while choosing. An emotional response may be important material, but it is not the sole certificate of correctness. Anxiety need not be suppressed to earn permission to decide. The absence of doubt is not proof of good preparation; sometimes a relevant question has simply not been noticed.

A criterion is also clearer when stated specifically. Rather than “it was better,” ask in what respect: more accessible to participants, consistent with an agreed deadline, preserving a necessary opportunity, or requiring less effort. A decision can involve several criteria that do not fully align. Choosing the convenient time, Vera accepts some organisational uncertainty. Another person might prefer the familiar venue and accept an inconvenient hour. The difference does not automatically make one reasonable and the other unreasonable. It shows which tasks and constraints received greater weight. Whether that weighting was discussed with participants is another significant circumstance.

Numerical precision is not always necessary. For an ordinary organisational choice, a person can describe which risk seems small, which is unacceptable, and what supports the distinction. There is no need to invent a probability because a table looks more convincing with a number. If a task requires professional calculation, a personal note does not replace it. Without such a calculation, an honest verbal estimate is preferable to false measurement. Returning to the entry, we can ask what “small risk” meant: a short delay, a need to postpone, or being unable to meet. Uncertainty gains content without being turned into supposed knowledge.

## V. A good result does not validate all the reasoning

Sometimes an important check is plainly missed, but circumstances work out well. The meeting takes place, an agreement is fulfilled, and no difficulty arises. Success is welcome and has real value for those involved. It does not make the absent check completed. If the same procedure creates a substantial risk next time, it can be changed without dismissing the current good result. This matters when fortunate circumstances easily become confidence that an approach is always reliable. A journal allows both recognition of the outcome and identification of a weakness in preparation that deserves separate examination.

The abstract of Baron and Hershey's 1988 study describes five studies in which undergraduates evaluated others' decisions under uncertainty. The scenarios concerned medical matters and monetary gambles. Favourable outcomes were associated with better evaluations of reasoning or the decision maker's competence. This is limited experimental evidence of outcomes affecting evaluation; it does not show that everyone always makes this error. The full article and data have not been read here. The source also does not establish that keeping a personal decision journal removes the effect. That would require separate research on the proposed practice.

Evaluating a decision through its outcome and believing that the outcome was obvious beforehand need not be the same phenomenon. Someone may understand that success was hard to predict and still rate the decision highly because it succeeded. A failure may seem predictable despite inadequate earlier information. This article does not use a journal to label a particular person as cognitively biased. It offers a smaller possibility: separate what happened, which reasons existed at the time, and what now appears obvious. These remain different subjects of examination even without a confident explanation of the psychological mechanism involved.

## VI. Failure neither removes responsibility nor establishes all of it

Separating process and outcome can become a convenient defence: I reasoned sensibly, so the consequences do not concern me. Participants waiting for a meeting need information and a response, however, rather than only proof of the organiser's good faith. A person can recognise that a choice used available grounds and still help address its consequences. Breaking an agreement, missing a necessary check or concealing an important condition also remains a matter of responsibility. A journal provides no general exemption. It can help establish more precisely what needs answering for and which change relates to the difficulty that arose.

In the selected later passage of Montaigne's chapter on repentance, earlier deliberation is considered in the circumstances of its own time, distinct from later events. This is the author's

personal philosophical account. Only that temporal distinction is used here, without adopting all his views on blame, advice or fortune. Its resemblance to a contemporary question about decision evaluation does not turn the essay into experimental psychology. Nor does it allow us to declare every choice of our own reasonable in advance. The comparison leaves open examination of what was genuinely available and which grounds could reasonably have been clarified.

After the delay, Vera has several distinct tasks: tell participants when the venue will open, decide whether to wait or change the format, and discuss arrangements for the next meeting with the organiser. The choice procedure can be examined later. Analysing her own motives need not be completed before taking those actions. If consequences extend beyond an ordinary delay and involve safety, health, rights or significant obligations, suitable professional work is required. A private note neither replaces it nor determines legal liability. An external need remains external while a person is still deciding how to evaluate the earlier choice.

## VII. What did the result actually add?

When returning to a decision, it helps to ask not only whether an expectation was met but what new information emerged. A result can reveal a previously unknown feature of a process. It can show that a known risk was underestimated. It can also be a single event that does not yet support a conclusion about an entire approach’s reliability. These cases call for different findings. If every outcome merely receives a “good” or “bad” label, there is little material for learning. We can name which connection is now visible and what remains unestablished. New knowledge need not immediately become a universal rule.

One delay does not prove that the new venue is always unreliable. It does give Vera a specific reason to clarify the access procedure. If the responsible person received the wrong time, the further finding concerns agreeing times and contacts. If the cause remains unknown, an accusation of indifference should not replace it. Vera can state that access was delayed and request a relevant clarification. A suitable change might involve confirmation on the day or a different venue. That depends on the information obtained and participants’ actual needs. The journal preserves material for this conversation without reading the organiser’s mind.

Later information sometimes changes the criterion itself. Vera may have regarded a half-hour delay as acceptable, then learnt that a participant had a strict time constraint. This does not mean that she knew about it on Tuesday. It has now become relevant to the next choice. She can recognise the inconvenience, clarify what is needed, and change the procedure while preserving an honest sequence of knowledge. There is no need to decide which of the two perspectives is permanently “real.” One concerns earlier information; the other concerns the expanded situation. Practical learning changes a future action rather than rewriting the past. The new criterion can be discussed beforehand rather than silently attributing the same

tolerance for delay to every participant. Asking about significant meeting conditions is enough. Personal circumstances need not be explained if someone prefers to name only the available time window. The next choice can accommodate a necessary constraint while preserving the other person’s right to disclose no more. The changed procedure responds to the difficulty rather than turning ordinary meeting arrangements into a collection of detailed personal histories.

## VIII. Reading a series without putting oneself on trial

Several entries can reveal repetition, but their number alone does not ensure a reliable conclusion. A journal may contain only failed choices or only those that were easy to describe. Decisions may differ greatly in deadlines, information availability and consequences. Before reaching a general finding, we can examine what is genuinely comparable. If several organisational episodes lack an agreed contact, that is a specific recurrence. It differs from declaring that a person always chooses badly. A large personal database is not obligatory. A small procedural change may need only a few observations whose boundaries are clearly stated.

The opposite danger is using successful entries as proof of being consistently right. Good preparation for one event does not transfer automatically to another, particularly when conditions or the required expertise change. A journal should not become a collection of arguments against every comment from others. If someone points to a missed circumstance, it can be examined independently of how persuasive the old entry looks. A recorded reason has value as evidence of an earlier view, but it does not become untouchable. A reasonable procedure allows questions about its own material. This requires neither public disclosure of the entire journal nor agreement with every outside assessment.

Not every choice needs extended analysis. Rereading can cease to yield information and become endless reconsideration of a completed episode. A person can stop, retain a limited finding, or approach a suitable interlocutor if another kind of expertise is needed. There is no duty to reach complete reconciliation with the past before attending to present tasks. Regret may remain alongside a clear practical change. The entry should not promise to remove it. It may be enough to know what one is prepared to change and which questions remain open without requiring a further action.

## IX. One voluntary entry before a small choice

For a safe trial, select an ordinary organisational decision that involves neither medical intervention nor substantial monetary risk nor legal consequences nor a dangerous test of relationships. Before choosing, briefly note the date, task and deadline. Name available options, a few important facts and one significant unknown. Add why an option is preferred: what it should satisfy and which constraint is being accepted. This is an editorial recording format, not a validated decision-training programme. It may be shortened, drawn, dictated privately or left unused. There is no need to create uncertainty deliberately to produce interesting material.

Vera's note might include the meeting time, two available rooms, access confirmation, the unknown contact at the venue, and her preference for a convenient hour. A clarification still worth making before a final choice can be recorded separately. The journal should not encourage deciding immediately when necessary information is missing. If a reasonable check is possible, it is better to make it than record ignorance and declare preparation finished. Not every unknown can be removed within the available time, however. Its significance for the decision and the corresponding boundary can then be named. With substantial risk, that boundary may mean declining a personal trial or seeking professional help.

After the event, add a separate date, the actual result and what became known later. Three short questions can sit beside it: what helped in preparation, what was available but missed, and what could not reasonably be foreseen then? Answers may remain incomplete. A future change should match the material: for example, agree a contact rather than abandon every new venue permanently. Avoid unnecessary personal information about others. Do not replace the initial entry with a more polished explanation after the fact. If a correction is needed, mark it separately so that the difference between the earlier and later view remains visible.

## X. Learning can proceed without a final verdict

A decision journal preserves two times and two subjects of evaluation. At one time, a person chooses on available grounds; at another, consequences are visible and new information arrives. Examining both requires neither declaring results irrelevant nor making them the sole measure. Someone can attend to participants' inconvenience, improve a procedure, and recognise that some circumstances were genuinely unknown. A missed check can also be noticed when everything ended well. The work remains specific. It concerns the next decision and its conditions rather than a final judgment of whether the person deserves trust in every area of life.

The proposed record's usefulness to a particular person must be assessed through actual experience, without promising that the format necessarily improves decisions. It may help

prepare questions; it may take too much time; a conversation, working list or agreed procedure may better suit the task. The approach can be changed or stopped. Important checks, necessary action and attention to consequences remain available without a personal journal. It serves a task only when it helps preserve a significant distinction between knowledge, expectation and a later finding. An orderly entry does not itself establish the quality of the choice that was made.

## What this means in practice

Before a small, safe decision, a brief snapshot can be kept: when I am choosing, what I aim to achieve, which options are available, what is confirmed, what is assumed, and which unknown matters. Make an additional check if it is necessary and possible; a note does not replace information. Invent neither precise probabilities without grounds nor a requirement to list every thought. When reconstructing an old decision, state that the entry was made later and distinguish available documents from approximate recollection. That is enough to begin examining material while preserving its limits and not presenting reconstruction as an earlier record.

Later, add the result and new information as a separate layer. Consider preparation and consequences separately while retaining responsibility for available necessary action. Name one proportionate future change, or note that information is still insufficient. Failure need not become a general verdict, nor success proof of infallibility. A private record can remain closed and unfinished; it can be stopped. Important medical, financial and legal matters require suitable professional work. The journal’s result is smaller: what was known when choosing, what appeared later, and which question is worth carrying into the next episode become visible.

## Key quotation

> *“After deliberation.” — Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, III.3, a short fragment of W.D. Ross’s translation, with display capitalisation. The selected context connects choice with prior consideration of means; it offers a philosophical perspective rather than a measure of personal decision quality.*

## Connections between traditions

• **Montaigne, *Essays*, III.II:** earlier deliberation’s circumstances differ from the later situation. The temporal distinction removes no responsibility and does not establish that every former decision was reasonable.

• **Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.2–3:** selected means, a desired end and prior consideration. A contemporary record also allows reconsidering an end; ancient examples do not become everyday exercises.

• **Baron and Hershey, experimental psychology:** a limited example of outcomes influencing evaluations of others' decisions. It establishes neither journal effectiveness nor identity between outcome-based evaluation and later certainty about predictability.

• **Editorial approach:** preserve earlier information, available options, reasons and a later addition separately. These perspectives are compared while retaining different subjects and ways of supporting claims.

## Sources

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3. Jonathan Baron; John C. Hershey. *Outcome bias in decision evaluation*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1988, 54(4):569–579. PubMed 3367280; DOI 10.1037/0022-3514.54.4.569. The complete official indexed author abstract and metadata were read; the full article, detailed methods and data were not. The article's reuse licence was not established. No direct scientific quotations are used; the source abstract is neither imported nor embedded nor used for training.

## Tags

decision journal, choice, information, knowledge, uncertainty, result, consequences, reasons, options, criterion, deadline, verification, assumption, expectation, responsibility, error, fortune, regret, learning, later knowledge, process evaluation, outcome evaluation, private record, voluntary practice, limits of knowledge, proportion, Montaigne, Aristotle, experimental psychology, self-inquiry, addition, available possibilities

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