

Well-Formed Outcomes & Goal Ecology

Five checks for any goal, and the one that matters most

A goal drives behaviour only if it passes five checks. Mark each pass or fail. **Fix the first failing one, then recheck.** Become ecology monsters rather than outcome monsters: the ecology check is the only one that speaks directly to the unconscious mind.

Criterion	Ask	Not this, but this
1 Positive	"What would you rather have than [the problem]?" Chunk up if needed: "What would that get for you?"	"I don't want to be lonely" becomes "I want more friends."
2 Ecology	"If you could have it, would you take it?" Listen for "yes, but..." or a hesitant yes.	A concern, flipped to a positive and added on to the goal.
3 Specificity	"Who, where, when, what, how, specifically?" "Can you see it in your mind's eye?"	"A better life" becomes "The next time I meet someone new I feel good about, I will ask them to dinner."
4 Evidence	"What will you see, hear and feel, inside and outside you?"	"I'll just know" becomes "I'll see them respond with interest, hear them agree a time, and feel a pleasant anticipation."
5 Own part	"Is it within your control?" "What's your first action step?" "Do you know how to do all the steps?"	"I want interesting people to be attracted to me" becomes "I want to make friends with interesting people."

The ecology recycle

1. "If you did have a concern about this, what would it be?"
2. "How would that be a problem for you?" Put it in the negative if it isn't already.
3. Flip it: "What would you want instead of [concern]?"
4. Add it on: "What you really want is [goal] as long as [qualifier]. Is that right?"
5. Recheck. Repeat until the ecology is 100% clean. It rarely takes more than five rounds.

Four wider questions: What will happen if you achieve it? What won't happen if you achieve it? What will happen if you don't? What won't happen if you don't?

What is known. Specific, difficult goals tend to beat "do your best" (Locke and Latham, 2002). Picturing success alone can lower effort, so set the obstacle beside it (Oettingen, 2014). These support parts of the five criteria. They do not validate the NLP list as a whole. Different schools of NLP have different versions of these criteria. Five is the minimum for a thorough job.

Try it now. Write a goal you have carried for three months or more. Mark each criterion pass or fail. Repair the first fail, recycle the ecology check until it is clean, then write your first action step.

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Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2002) *American Psychologist*, 57(9), pp. 705-717. Oettingen, G. (2014) *Rethinking Positive Thinking*. Current. Shaw, D. (n.d.) DSNLP NLP Practitioner course materials: Well-Formed Outcomes handouts and criteria sheet.

YOUR NEXT STEP

NLP: Word Patterns That Hold a Room for an Hour

Tuesday 20 October 2026, 7:00 to 10:00 PM EDT, live on Google Meet, 20 seats. A practice class: you practise each skill twice with a partner and get feedback. Tickets from \$47.

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