

How to use First Principles Thinking

What it is

Break a problem down to the basic facts you're sure are true, then build your answer back up from there instead of copying what everyone else does.

When to use it

When you're stuck following 'that's just how it's done' and want a real answer instead.

Steps

1. **Name the problem.** What are you trying to solve or figure out?
2. **Break it down.** What do you know for certain is true here, with nothing assumed?
3. **Question the assumptions.** What are you treating as true just because it's normal or expected?
4. **Rebuild your answer.** Starting only from the facts, what's the best solution?

Common mistake

Stopping at 'this is just how it's always been done' instead of asking why.

Pairs with

Occam's Razor and Circle of Competence.

Example: why the grocery bill keeps rising

Date: Wed, Feb 3

The problem

Why my grocery bill keeps climbing every month

What's actually true here

I buy roughly the same basic list most weeks

Prices on staples like eggs and meat have gone up at my usual store

Assumptions worth questioning

That I have to shop at the same store every time

That name brands are worth the price difference

Your rebuilt answer

Switch to a discount grocery chain for staples and buy generic brands. Should cut the bill by a real chunk.

First Principles Breakdown

Date: _____

The problem

What's actually true here

Assumptions worth questioning

Your rebuilt answer