

Introduction to NLP Presuppositions

The “presuppositions” are central principles of NLP. They form a guiding philosophy about life—a set of principles to live by. These principles are not claimed to be true or universal. You do not have to believe they are true. They are called presuppositions because you can presuppose them to be true, **act as if they were**, and achieve behaviors that are constructive and positive. They do not have to be true to produce useful results.

There are a variety of presuppositions in the literature, so you will most likely find many different versions in your research. We have chosen and organized the most common presuppositions and those that we believe are most useful for coaching.

1. A map is not the territory; words are not the things they describe; symbols are not the things they represent.

The way we represent the world reflects our perception of reality but is not reality itself. We don’t actually respond to reality—we respond to our internalized map of reality which is derived from our own interpretations and filters.

2. People already have the resources they need.

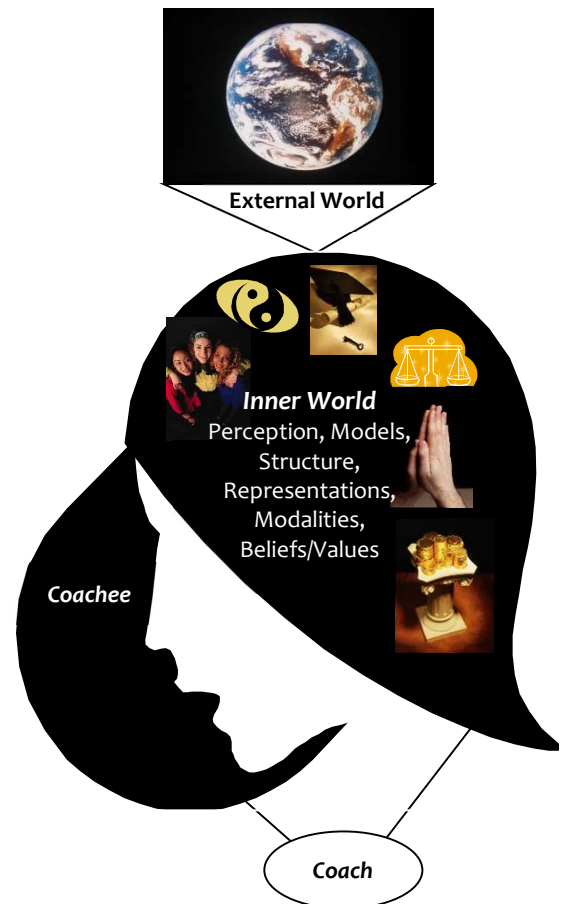
This presupposition is about having the resources needed to deal with a “presenting problem.” At some level, people already know how a problem has come about and therefore already know what they need to resolve the problem. They may, however, not be consciously aware of it. Often people have resources that they haven’t considered or are available in other contexts. Resources mean the internal responses and external behaviors needed to get desired results. Our most basic resource is our ability to learn.

3. People work perfectly.

No one is broken. People function perfectly even if what they are doing is ruining their life. All behavior has a structure. When you understand the structure, you can change the outcome into something more desirable.

4. The meaning of communication is the response you get.

Communication is not about what you intend or mean to say. It's about the experience you create or the response you receive from the listener. People will respond to what they think you mean, even if it's an inaccurate interpretation of your message. The “real” communication is reflected in what they “heard” or understood. We often think that if someone misunderstands us there is something wrong with him or her.



5. Underlying every behavior is a positive intention.

NLP separates the intention or purpose behind an action from the action itself. People want to achieve something that they value, and which benefits them. This may be the anticipation of pleasure or avoidance of pain. While a behavior may be harmful or seem “bad”, there is always a positive intention or purpose behind the behavior for the person exhibiting the behavior. Throughout the literature, this presupposition is expressed in several other ways:

- Everyone is doing the best they can with the resources available to them.
- Every behavior is useful in some context.
- Everyone is always doing what they believe is right.
- People always make the best choice(s) available to them given the circumstances as they see it.

The key is to appreciate the positive intention of the other person's behavior. This does not mean that you view the other person's behavior as positive. On the contrary, you may find it quite distasteful. You just need to recognize there is some kind of purpose behind their behavior.

6. There is no such thing as failure, only feedback.

When something does not go as planned, we tend to see that as failure. Depending on the seriousness of the situation we might then get angry, irritated, sad, depressed, worried, guilty or whatever. None of which serves any useful purpose

If you can see such a situation as feedback rather than failure, you recognize that you've learned something and can do something differently next time. Feedback is helpful and sets direction. This kind of attitude toward “failure” produces results that allow you to improve. Results are the means by which you measure your progress and adjust your behavior in order to achieve your desired outcomes. Every experience offers positive learning, one from which we can grow intellectually or in terms of emotional intelligence. Living is learning, even if you “lose,” you don't lose the learning.

7. We are all responsible for creating our own experience.

While it is good to rely on others for support, it is important to remember that we are in control of charting our own course. Even the events we face that are out of our control, we are responsible for our responses to them. Typically, however, we have much more control than we think we have. It is our responsibility to take this control and tailor our reactions in an appropriate manner. Another way of stating this presupposition is that “We consistently create our own environment” through our beliefs, filters, capabilities and behaviors.

8. Choice is better than no choice. The more choices, the better.

Not having a choice can be a “default” response. It causes people to feel victimized, limited, and powerless. Choices, however, give you the freedom to select the one that will be most useful in a particular circumstance. The more choices you have personally, socially, and professionally, the more control you have over your reality. Thus, the person with the greatest number of choices in any situation is likely to get the best outcome and have a more positive attitude.

9. The person or element in a group or system with the most flexibility will have the most influence.

This is the *Law of Requisite Variety* from systems theory. It means the person with the most options and behavioral choices will control the system. Any time you limit your behavioral choices you give others the competitive edge. If you are able to respond to any situation in a variety of ways, you are more likely to get your outcome.

10. You cannot not communicate.

We are constantly communicating, by what we do say, by what we do not say, and by a host of non-verbal signals. Even the absence of a response—silence—is information. On this basis it may be obvious that there is more to be gained by accepting responsibility for one's actions, than by trying to stay aloof.

11. People always make the best choice available to them at the time. (though often there are better ones).

Whether a choice made is negative or positive, it is the best choice available to them given the circumstances they are in at that time. If offered a better choice, they will take it. They make their choice based on their own unique personal experiences. With their own map of the world, they perceive it to be the best choice they are faced with at that moment.

12. Change makes change.

It is a common saying that "the only person you can really change is yourself". NLP goes one step further and acknowledges that changing your own behavior inevitably has an effect on the people around you. The underlying notion, derived from the field of cybernetics, is that when one element within a system changes, the whole system must change in whatever way is necessary to adapt to that change.

