
THE STANDALONE CODE

The Diagnostic Code

by **Nick Cason**

*Nineteen rules for finding what broke — the
whole method, with the reason under each.*

This is the Code by itself: every rule of the trade and why it holds, lifted out of the field manual it lives in. It reads in a sitting. If a rule bites, the book behind it has the case that earned it — but the Code stands on its own.

NINETEEN RULES

SEVEN MOVEMENTS

ONE FACULTY

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Recognition, Not Recall

A pattern that presents itself *while you attend to the failure* earns one thing — serious *consideration*, not belief. The supply of patterns you can *go looking for* is endless, and a hunted one clicks because you struck the click yourself; it proves nothing by fitting. So the whole discipline is a stance held before the click even comes: attend to the thing in front of you, let the case be generated by the failure rather than fetched from memory, and let fit and proof decide among whatever your experience supplies.

The one question *Did the failure hand me this — or did I go and get it? And either way: has it survived a test yet?*

I**HOLD STILL**

1 See the Problem First

Your first step is not the first test — it is choosing your instrument, and that choice forecloses. Before you seat yourself at anything, go and let the failure show you where it lives. A fault with no address in the space you sat down in is one you cannot find, however hard you search inside it.

Why Picking your favorite tool is recall choosing the search-space — you decide the answer's address before you know the question. Walk the machine first, and the fault hands you its own coordinates.

2 Hold Still

Accept every hypothesis freely — as a thing to *test*, never a thing to *believe*. A handed-over story is a gift; take all of them. But a story buys a test, not a verdict. Name a thing too early and you lay a familiar word over the gap and stop looking at it.

Why Naming is the fastest way to stop looking. Belief spent early colors every reading after it. Keep the room empty enough that the real pattern can present itself before you fill it with fetched ones.

II

FIND THE LINE

3 The Complaint Is Not the Problem

The reported symptom is a want that failed, not a located fault. “The line is running bad” names a family of machines, not one. Before you can work, convert the complaint into a positive case: not *what it failed to do*, but *what it actually does*.

Why A complaint is an invitation to recall — it points a finger before anyone has looked. You can’t walk the necessary conditions of a negative. The positive case comes only from attending to *this* machine, which is the one place recognition can fire on the thing instead of on your history.

4 Find the First Failed Thing

Before you hunt a cause, find one line: the last thing you can prove is still working, and the first thing you can prove is not. The case begins at that line — not at the complaint, not at the earliest root anyone can name. State the boundary first. Why comes after.

Why An unstated problem has infinitely many causes; a located one has few. You don’t recall where trouble “usually” starts — you recognize where working stops, and the boundary presents itself out of the machine. *Where* before *why* leaves the case half-worked before you’ve theorized anything.

5 Fit Before You Test

Before you spend a real test on any story, fit it — free, in your head — against two things: the *shape* of the failure, and the facts you’ve already proved. A story that can’t make this failure, or argues with a number you already read, is gone before it costs you a minute.

Why Testing is the coin of the trade; fit is free and runs in ten seconds. A story that arrives with the full click of *I’ve seen this* is usually one you fetched from a sister job — fit is how you spend the counterfeit click cheaply, before it buys a test.

6 Keep Your Grades of Proof Straight

Proof comes in grades. *Replication* is the top: you can make it fail on command and stop on command. *Elimination* is the middle: you swapped a known-good part and the symptom left — held in pencil until a full cycle under load. *Circumstance* is the bottom: something broke near the trouble, you replaced it, the trouble stopped. That last is not proof — it’s a bet.

Write every fix in its true grade, and never file a bet as a proof.

Why *Stopped* is an observation; *fixed* is a claim about the cause. Circumstance clicks exactly like recognition — your memory hands you a mechanism the instant the symptom quits — so you leave early, crediting a silence you never watched a mechanism produce.

III DRAW THE MAP, LIGHTLY

7 A Perfect Argument, Wrong Building

Reasoning is only ever as good as the case beneath it. Reason flawlessly from the wrong case and every step will confirm — the whole airtight chain is useless, because it was aimed wrong, not thought wrong. Before you reason, name the building you are standing in.

Why The sharper the mind, the more convincingly it confirms the wrong building. This is the bifocal twin of Rule 1: the wrong *seat* is out in the room, the wrong *building* is behind your eyes — and you can't reach one from inside the other. You check the case, not just the logic.

8 Name the Function, Then Ask What It Must Have

State the failed function plainly. Then ask one thing: for this to happen, what does it have to *have*? List only those — the conditions the function cannot occur without. Keep them at one height, keep them functions and not parts, and keep the list short.

Why A short list of necessary conditions turns an open hunt into a few doors you can check. Listing functions (not parts) at one height is what makes the descent possible — each proved-failed condition becomes the next floor down.

9 The List Is Theory — Hold the Map Lightly

You never read the machine clean — the instrument hands you readings inside a frame you brought. Your requirements-list is a theory, not the territory. When a reading fights the map, the map is what gives: redraw it, don't defend it.

Why Recall's last trick is refusing to let recognition correct it — you argue with the meter to protect the map. An incomplete list ends the descent on a landing, not the basement. Hold the map lightly, and let the thing redraw it.

10 To Call a Reading Tilted, You Tilt Yourself

To call a reading biased is to hold a level you brought and tilt yourself the other way to cancel its tilt — so *real bias* and *mere opinion* both smuggle a square-from-nowhere that isn't there. What's left is levels, unequal only by which one keeps walking out of the fire. Name yours; put it in the same fire.

Why The bifocal twin of Rule 9: there, the frame you carry into a *descent*; here, the frame you carry into an *accusation* — and the danger flips from holding the map too hard to letting every level dissolve. You pick the fire, not whether your level walks out; and it holds until a rival's actually beats it.

IV TAKE THE STAIRS

11 Don't Reopen a Proved Door Without Evidence

A thing you have proved working stays closed *within the conditions you proved it under*. You do not reopen it because a story wants it guilty — only when evidence hands you a reason. And a change of conditions is such a reason: a thing can pass cold and fail hot, and that gap is itself evidence, and a door.

Why The itch to re-suspect a settled thing is recall, not a reason — a story wants the settled thing guilty because you're the one who wanted it. But cold-pass is not hot-pass: a fresh fact reopens a door that a fresh appetite does not.

12 Test in the Order That Pays

Sequence your tests by information-per-real-cost — the cleanest split you can afford. Weigh, all at once, what a test tells you, whether you can reach it, what it risks, what it costs, and how clean the answer comes back. Not the easiest. Not the cheapest. Not the one that fingers the usual suspect. The one that buys the biggest honest cut of the map for the least you have to spend.

Why The usual suspect is a shape you carry, not a split you earned. Recognition works one level up here — not on *what broke*, but on *which question splits the broken thing fastest*. Order by what a test pays, and you spend the least to learn the most.

13 Halve the Run

When a test is cheap you can afford to walk. When it is expensive, destructive, or irreversible — every probe a hole you can't un-dig — you cannot, and walking is the failure. Confirm the fault at the endpoints first. Then go to the *middle* and ask one question: whichever half fails holds the fault, and one costly test just killed the other half. Halve the bad half, and again.

Why The cost of the test flips the danger. Cheap: the risk is *skipping* a step you didn't check. Dear: it reverses to *refusing to skip* — walking every foot of a run you should have halved, until your rigor becomes the disease. The middle is the only cut that kills half no matter which way it falls.

14 Take the Stairs

Don't leap to the root. Make each proved-failed function the *next* function to diagnose, and step down exactly one floor — only where the last floor earned it. When two functions die together, suspect one thing upstream before you believe in two failures at once.

Why The Fixer stands on the roof and *calls the basement* — names a root on sight because a root is a shape he carries. Descending keeps you receiving: you only ever ask the small honest question, *this failed; what does it need?*, and each floor must show on a meter before you step down. After a fix, re-run the boundary — a moved line means a second fault.

V

STOP HONEST

15 Know How Deep the Job Goes

There is no single root stone at the bottom of every chain. Causes nest — each *why* has a *why* under it, all the way down, and every one is true. So the depth you stop at is set by *what the job is for*. Stop when the cause you’ve reached explains the evidence and holds the fix you actually have to make — not at the first part you can name, not forever chasing the reason behind the reason.

Why Too shallow, and it comes back with your name on the close; too deep, and you spend their money on your curiosity — and going deeper *feels* like rigor, which is how recall seizes a depth. And the grade of proof drops a rank with every floor you leave the metal: name the certainty honestly as it thins.

16 Stopped Is Not Fixed

“The symptom is gone” is an observation you can prove. “Fixed” is a claim about the cause, and you have to earn it. Never invoice one as the other. When the clock runs out, name the exact floor you stopped on — in writing — and hand over what you proved, what you guessed, and the test you still owe. And if the powers that be call it done and you don’t believe it, you have one duty left: say so, before you walk.

Why The deadline is real, but it belongs to the environment, not your reasoning — you reason toward the fault, you’ve just been given less clock. You stop because your license to keep touching the machine ran out, not because the case closed. Cut clean, for the next hand — who might be you tomorrow.

VI

WHAT YOU INHERIT

17 You Never Inherit a Clean Machine

You inherit a machine *plus* its repair history, and that history is doped into the case — bypassed faults, wires routed wrong last time it was open, a scrap left behind by a job that closed years ago. Before you trust any part of it, ask what the last hand did here, and what state their attempt left you standing in. Including your own hands: a test that disturbs is you doping the case.

Why The drawing is the cleanest shape in the drawer, it fires instantly, and it is wrong — the real machine is design-plus-history. A change everyone signed off on can be quietly holding your whole case up. Read the actual thing, scars and all.

VII GET GOOD

18 True the Gauge — You Are the Last Instrument

Every reading needs an instrument, and the last one in the chain is you. An unmaintained instrument doesn't go blank — it goes wrong *quietly*, and reports the wrong number in the same steady voice it used when it was right. This rule doesn't ask whose fault the drift is; the number's bad either way. You may not own the schedule. You always own the reading — and the last honest measurement on any job is knowing the hour past which it isn't yours to make.

Why A drifted gauge still shows a number — that's the danger, not that you read nothing but that you read something, confidently, and it's false. You can't check your own calibration with the thing that's out of calibration, so this is the one loop the method can't read from inside, and the only true reading left comes from outside you: a second man, a hard clock. Bifocal twin of Rule 17 — don't disturb the machine you're measuring; don't disturb the instrument doing the measuring.

19 Study the Failure Cold, After the Win

When a case is finally closed, go back to it — not to fix anything, it's fixed. Go back with the pressure off and study the closed case as one object: walk the map you actually drew, and see where you drew it wrong and how the machine told you so.

Why An unstudied win files itself under the story you told while exhausted — and later you *hunt* with it. A win studied cold files by the machine's own teaching, so it *fires* on its own when the real one comes. That is the whole difference between twenty years and one year twenty times.

THE SEQUENCE

ONCE A MACHINE IS IN FRONT OF YOU

1. Walk it. See the actual failure before you choose a tool.
2. Convert the complaint into a positive case.
3. Find the boundary: last-proved-working to first-proved-failed.
4. Fit the candidates against shape and known facts.
5. Name the failed function and the short list it must have.
6. Choose the test that splits the map hardest for the least cost.
7. Descend one proved floor at a time; halve the run when a test is dear.
8. Re-draw the boundary after every fix.
9. Stop at the depth the job pays for.
10. Grade what you can claim, honestly — stopped, or fixed.
11. When it's over, study it cold.

And under every step: the reading is only worth the instrument. You are the last one, and the one you can't see drift from inside — so know the hour past which the number isn't yours to make.

*One question runs under all of it:
did this shape present itself from the machine, or did I go and fetch it?*

The full field manual — nineteen cases that earned these rules, and the same shapes traced through medicine, law, code, and a life — is The Diagnostic Code, at diagnostic.codes.

THE DIAGNOSTIC CODE

RECOGNITION, NOT RECALL

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