

UNKNOWN OCEANS · FREE SAMPLE: SESSION 1 OF 3

How do we know?

A curiosity night in three sessions. For friends and families with teenagers, about ninety minutes, no expertise needed.

SESSION 1 · SEEING · 25 MIN

Why do we miss what is in front of us?

This sample is the complete first session: an evening's opening, an activity, what is known and argued, and seven cards. Every exploration it draws on is free at unknownoceans.com.

The full Explorer Pack adds sessions 2 and 3, their cards, the evidence cards and the connection map: unknownoceans.com/curiosity-night

FOR THE HOST

Running the evening

This is an evening for three to ten people, adults and teenagers from about thirteen, around a table. It takes about an hour and a half. You need no expertise: every fact you will need is printed here, and every one has a source you can look up together.

The theme is a single question asked three ways. How do we know what we saw? How do we know what we remember? And how does anyone know where the gold in a ring was made?

Your job

- Read the boxed text aloud, or hand it to someone who likes reading aloud.
- Run the short activity at the start of each session. They are home versions of real experiments, not experiments, and they may not work on your table. When one does not, ask why. That is a good conversation too.
- Deal the cards and keep time. Nobody has to answer a card, and "I don't know" is a good answer.
- When someone says "I read that...", look it up together. The links and QR codes in this pack go to the free explorations and to the sources behind them.

Before people arrive

- Print the pages you need (the low-ink edition is made for it) and cut out the discussion cards and the four evidence cards.
- For session 1, choose one "visitor" in secret before everyone arrives and brief them from the host box in session 1. Have a hat or a scarf ready.

Plan

0:00	Welcome. Read the marks aloud (below).
0:05	Session 1: seeing
0:30	Break

Read this aloud first: the four marks

Every statement in this pack, as on the site, is marked as one of four things. Keeping them apart is the point of the evening.

● KNOWN: Understood well, with strong evidence.

◑ UNCERTAIN: Real evidence, and real disagreement about what it shows.

◌ UNKNOWN: Nobody has the answer yet, and says so.

⊙ POSSIBLE: An idea worth taking seriously, not yet an answer.

With care

- The session 1 visitor should do something ordinary and quiet, never anything startling.

SESSION 1 OF 3 · SEEING · ABOUT 25 MINUTES

Why do we miss what is in front of us?

READ ALOUD

Tonight we test three things we usually trust: our eyes, our memory, and what we think we know about where things come from.

We start with the eyes. Vision feels like a window. The explorations suggest it is closer to a reconstruction, and that what we are not looking for often does not make it in.

Try it: The count · 8 MIN

You need: A book or article to read aloud, a hat or scarf, and one person briefed in secret.

HOST ONLY, BEFORE THE SESSION

Brief your visitor before the session, away from the others: "When I tap the table, stand up quietly, walk slowly behind everyone, put on the hat, and sit back down. Say nothing."

1. Tell everyone else: "I'm going to read for about a minute and a half. Count every time I say the word 'the'. Keep the count in your head."
2. Read at an even pace. About halfway through, tap the table once.
3. Stop. Ask for everyone's count.
4. Then ask: "Did anything else happen while I was reading?" Let people answer before anyone explains.
5. Reveal what the visitor did.

AFTERWARDS

This is a party version, not the study. A few people in a lit room, all in the same place, may well notice. If everyone did, ask what made it easier than a video of a basketball game. If someone missed it, ask them to describe the moment, not the hat.

Read these after the activity, or hand them round. The marks matter: keep what is known apart from what is argued.

● KNOWN What was found

- In a 1999 study, 192 people watched a video of two teams passing basketballs and counted one team's passes. Partway through, a person in a gorilla suit walked through the game, on screen for five seconds. In other versions it was a woman with an umbrella.
- Across both, 46 per cent did not report the unexpected event. For the gorilla alone, 56 per cent did not. Shown the video again, they were consistently surprised.
- It depended on the task. Watching the team in black, 58 per cent noticed the black gorilla. Watching the team in white, 27 per cent did.
- For most of them it was not the eyes. Twenty of twenty-four radiologists searching lung scans did not report a gorilla more than forty-eight times the size of the average nodule they were hunting, and eye tracking showed most of those who missed it had looked directly at where it was.

Sources: Simons and Chabris (1999); Drew, Võ and Wolfe (2013)

◑ UNCERTAIN What is still argued

- Whether the gorilla went unseen, or was seen faintly and never reported. Ward and Scholl had people report anything unexpected the moment they saw it, and some still missed an event that broke the pattern they expected, which they read as a failure of seeing rather than of memory. In 2025, five experiments with more than 25,000 online participants, using lines and shapes on a screen rather than a gorilla, found that people who said they had noticed nothing could, as a group, report the colour or shape of what they had missed slightly better than chance.
- How often this happens in ordinary life. In one staged test outdoors, people running after someone and counting his head-touches passed a staged fight: at night seven of twenty noticed it, in daylight nine of sixteen. Nobody can count what they did not notice, so the everyday rate is not known.

Sources: Nartker, Firestone, Egeth and Phillips (2025); Ward and Scholl (2015); Chabris and others (2011)

Talk about it

Deal the session 1 cards (numbers 1 to 7). Take turns reading one aloud. Nobody has to answer, and it is fine to leave a card unresolved.

Go further, free

This session's exploration: Why do we miss what is in front of us?
unknownoceans.com/explore/why-are-we-blind-to-what-we-are-looking-at

- How much of what you see is invented?
- Does the language you speak change what you see?

ASK SESSION 1 · 1

Before the reveal, how sure were you that you would have noticed? What made you sure?

ASK SESSION 1 · 2

The radiologists were experts searching their own kind of image. Does expertise protect you from this, or make it worse?

ARGUE SESSION 1 · 3

If you looked straight at something and cannot report it, did you see it?

TRY SESSION 1 · 4

Name one moment in your week when missing something unexpected would really matter. What would help?

ARGUE SESSION 1 · 5

Someone says they ran past a fight and did not see it. What would it take for you to believe them?

WONDER SESSION 1 · 6

Nobody can count the things they did not notice. How could anyone measure how often this happens?

WONDER SESSION 1 · 7

Is attention a spotlight you point, or a filter you cannot see?

SOURCES

Where every statement comes from

Each fact in this pack is taken from a free exploration on Unknown Oceans, where every sentence is tied to its source and can be inspected claim by claim. The exploration pages list more sources than these.

1. Simons and Chabris (1999). Gorillas in our midst: sustained inattentional blindness for dynamic events. Perception. doi.org/10.1068/p281059
2. Drew, Võ and Wolfe (2013). The invisible gorilla strikes again: sustained inattentional blindness in expert observers. Psychological Science. doi.org/10.1177/0956797613479386
3. Nartker, Firestone, Egeth and Phillips (2025). Sensitivity to visual features in inattentional blindness. eLife. doi.org/10.7554/eLife.100337
4. Ward and Scholl (2015). Inattentional blindness reflects limitations on perception, not memory. Psychonomic Bulletin & Review. doi.org/10.3758/s13423-014-0745-8
5. Chabris and others (2011). You do not talk about Fight Club if you do not notice Fight Club. i-Perception. doi.org/10.1068/i0436

ABOUT THIS PACK

Edition, corrections and terms

Edition 1, 24 September 2026. Found a mistake? Write to support@unknownoceans.com with the page and the sentence. Corrections go into the next edition; this file will not change after you download it.

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Set in Newsreader and IBM Plex (SIL Open Font License). QR codes generated locally.

The explorations this evening draws on, and everything else on Unknown Oceans, are free to read at unknownoceans.com.