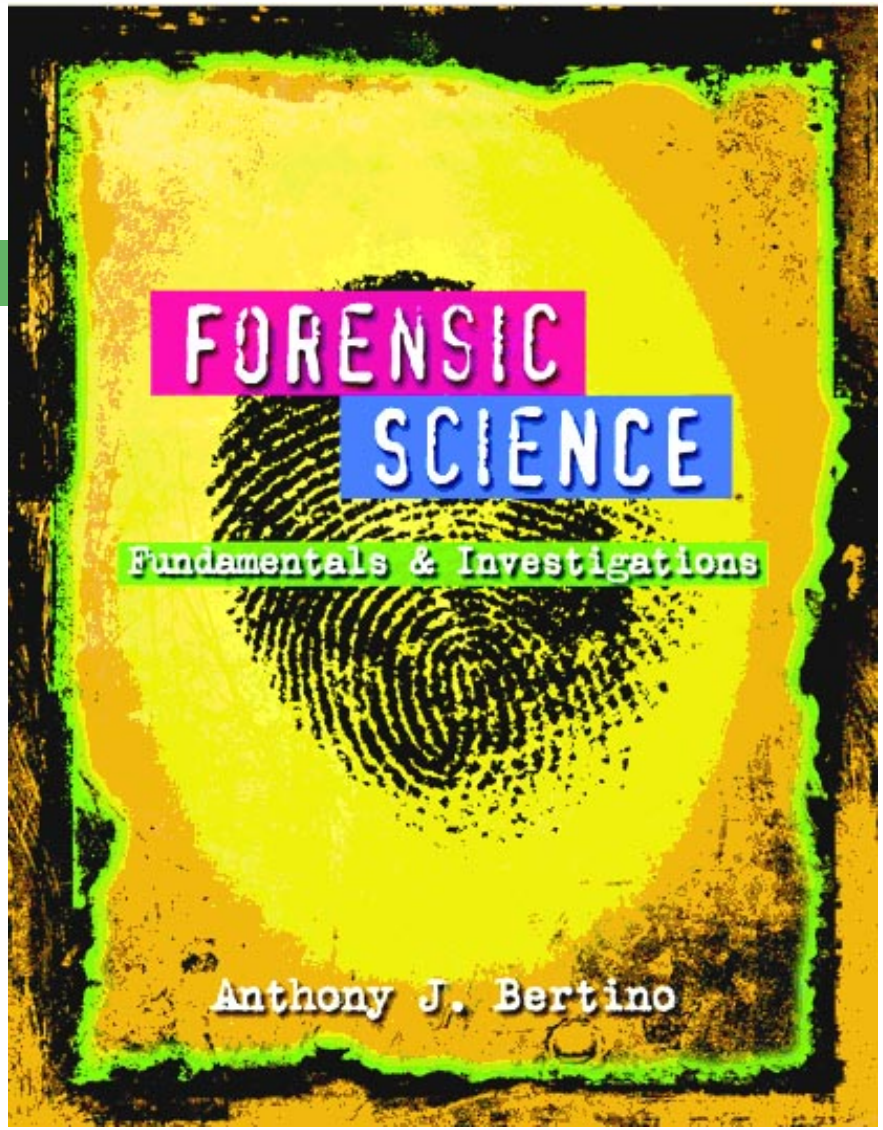


Chapter 1 ***Observation Skills***

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- Define *observation* and describe what changes occur in the brain
- Describe examples of factors influencing eyewitness accounts of events
- Compare the reliability of eyewitness testimony with what actually happened

Chapter 1 ***Observation Skills***

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- Relate observation skills to their use in forensic science
- Define *forensic science*
- Practice and improve your observation skills

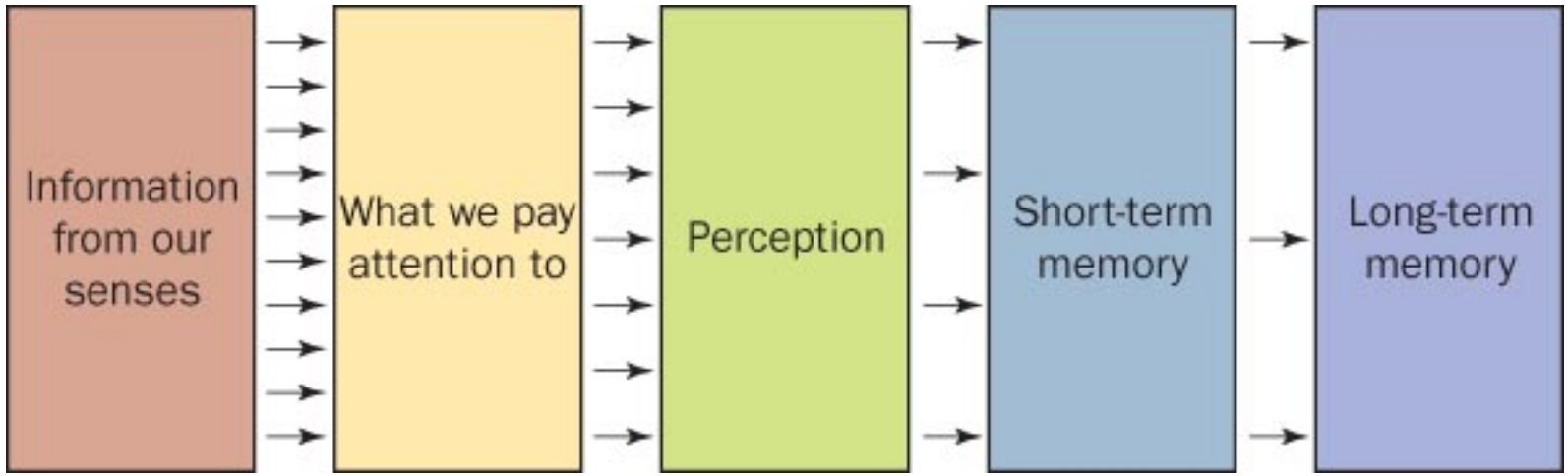
Introduction

The forensic examiner must be able to

1. **find**—identify the evidence
2. **document**—record the evidence
3. **interpret**—accurately determine the significance of the evidence

What Is Observation?

How information is processed in the brain



What Is Observation?

Our brains fill in gaps in our perception

- In order to make sense of what we perceive, our brains often enrich with detail what we see, taste, hear, smell, or feel
- After an event, we can believe things were part of the background even though they were not

Observations by Witnesses

Observations are affected by:

- Their emotional states
- Whether they were alone, part of a group, or near others
- What type of and how much activity was going on around them

Eyewitness Accounts

- Crime-scene reports often vary, due to:
  - level of interest
  - stress
  - concentration
  - amount and kind of distractions present
  - prejudices
  - personal beliefs
  - motives
  - any lapse in time since the event

The Innocence Project

- Barry C. Scheck and Peter J. Neufeld Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law,
- Beginning in 1992, used DNA to examine post-conviction cases
- Faulty eyewitness identifications accounted for up to 87% of the wrongful convictions

How to be a Good Observer

Observe systematically

- Start at one part of a crime scene and run your eyes slowly over every space
- Look carefully at details of each piece of evidence
- Do not assume you will remember everything

How to be a Good Observer

Turn off filters

- Consciously pay attention to all details
- Do not pay attention to just what you *think* is important
- All details are potentially important

How to be a Good Observer

Collect Information first, interpret data later

- Look for patterns and make connections
- More information yields better interpretations
- Prejudices exist everywhere—
  - eyewitness accounts
  - your own thinking processes

How to be a Good Observer

Documentation,
Documentation,
Documentation

- Write down and photograph as much information as possible
- Be aware that memory is faulty
- Remember that our brains tend to fill in gaps in our perceptions

Observations in Forensics

- Study situations
- Find clues in ordinary details
- Work backwards from the evidence to what led up to the crime
- Be patient
- Practice

. . . . . Summary . . . .

- The environment and our natural sensory filters affect our ability to observe
- Eyewitness reports can be correct, faulty, or a little of both
- Acquiring good observation skills takes practice and training

Summary

- Forensic scientists:
  - Find and Document Evidence
  - Evaluate and Interpret
  - Provide expert testimony to courts