NLP presuppositions

- **If you go on doing what you’re doing now you are very likely to go on getting the same results as you are getting now**
  
  **Commentary:** The pre-supposition here is that we are each responsible for our own lives. Though we may not be able to control what goes on in the world around us, we can always control how we respond to those events. If we always act/respond in the same way then the most likely result is that we will maintain the status quo. This is why making a decision on the basis that “that’s the way we’ve always done it” is often the prelude to disaster.

- **If you want something different you must do something different, and keep varying your behaviour until you get the result that you want**
  
  **Commentary:** The second pre-supposition is that there’s a solution to every situation if you’re prepared to keep on looking until you find it.

- **The person with the greatest number of choices in a given situation is likely to get the best outcome**
  
  **Commentary:** This is related to the idea of the BATNA (best alternative to non-agreement). If you go into a negotiation session with only one outcome in mind - and you don't achieve that particular outcome then you’re up a dead-end street. If, on the other hand, you have several outcomes in mind (prioritised from “most preferred” to “least preferred”, of course) then it is likely that you will achieve at least one of your outcomes.

- **You cannot not communicate**
  
  **Commentary:** People often imagine that they can avoid personal responsibility by simply saying nothing. This pre-supposition points out that we are constantly communicating, by what we do say, by what we don't say, and by a host of non-verbal signals. 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.

- **The meaning of your communication is the response that you get**
  
  **Commentary:** The pre-supposition here is that people will respond to what they think you mean, which may be an accurate or inaccurate interpretation of your intended meaning. (Please note, a “communication” is the ‘whole’ message - not only what you said but also all of the accompanying non-verbal signals.) The value of this pre-supposition is that it points out that if we want people to respond appropriately to what we say then we need to talk to them rather than at them. That is, we need to be constantly aware of other peoples’ responses to what we’re saying, and adjust our communication accordingly, rather than just assuming that they will have understood what we meant them to understand.

- **Everyone has all of the resources they need**
  
  **Commentary:** This is the presupposition which doesn’t really mean what it appears to say. What Erickson actually said was that every client already had all the resources they needed to be able to deal with their "presenting problem". That is to say, at some level they already knew how the problem had come about and therefore already knew all they needed to resolve the problem. Which isn't quite the same as saying that we all have whatever resources (or capabilities) we need to enable us to automatically cope with every situation. In practical terms, it is more accurate to say that we already have many of the resources we are ever likely to need. And we usually know how to get hold of the resources we don't have - by going on a training course/by reading a book/by getting trained in the necessary skill(s)/by getting the help of someone who already has the necessary skill(s) and so on.
Every behaviour has a positive intention
Commentary: This is possibly the most controversial of the NLP presuppositions, since it is so open to misinterpretation.

What we actually mean is that every behaviour has a positive intention, as far as the person exhibiting the behaviour is concerned. This does not mean that the behaviour is the best possible choice (from an objective point of view). Nor does it mean that the behaviour will have positive benefits for anyone else. A classic example of what we might call the inverted positive intention is the behaviour of the bullying manager who gains re-assurance from hitting on the people under him/her.

The solution to this kind of inappropriate behaviour is to find a way of satisfying the intention by more acceptable means. A way, for example, of giving the manager re-assurance in such a way that he no longer needs to bully his employees to get it.

Every behaviour is appropriate in some context
Commentary: Another way of putting this is: if we adopt a certain behaviour it’s because once upon a time it worked. The trouble is that we often go on singing a certain behaviour even though it is manifestly no longer appropriate. Having said that, if we accept this presupposition then we also realise that the most effective solution is to find a new, more appropriate behaviour rather than holding a lengthy, pointless post mortem over the old behaviour (which is more likely to re-enforce that old behaviour rather than driving it out).

A map is not the territory it depicts; words are not the things they describe; symbols are not the things they represent
Commentary: This may well be the single most important pre-supposition in the whole of NLP (originally developed by Alfred Korzybski, the founder of General Semantics).

In very simple terms it means that we are always slightly separated from ‘reality’. We draw maps, but the map is not actually the place it depicts and we need to be responsive to what is actually happening around us rather than complaining that things aren’t as they “ought to be”. Similarly, we need to understand that words are only a kind of shorthand for the things they describe. To get an inkling of what this means in practice, just look at the words on a banknote. What exactly does “promise to pay the bearer” really mean? What would an actual pound or dollar look like, as distinct from a coin or bank note which represents or symbolises some financial value?

Your mind and your body are indivisible parts of the same system
Commentary: The notion that our body and our brain/mind are separate entities was a developed within the medical profession around the 1930s and 1940s. If there was something wrong with your body - from a snuffle to malignant cancer - the only solution was some kind of physical treatment. Despite its position (literally) at the head of the central nervous system, in mainstream medicine it was received wisdom that, for all practical purposes, the influence of the brain/mind stopped at the neck.

Somewhat ironically, this came about at the very same time General Semantics was investigating the idea that mental activity had a direct correlation to physiological activity. Only in the last couple of decades has practical, scientifically verifiable evidence come to light that shows beyond reasonable doubt that the immune system, for example, is integrally linked to brain activity so that, for example, mental stress can inhibit the performance of the immune system and thus lead to lowering of general bodily health.

If one person can do something, anyone else can learn to do it
Commentary: One of the key activities in NLP is the modelling of people who are recognised (by their peers) as being excellent in some field of activity in such a way as to identify what they do that gives them such remarkable results.
When these differences have been identified they can be communicated to other people who can then learn to perform with a similar level of skill and excellence.

Having said that, the person learning the skill must have the necessary aptitude, and be willing to carry out the necessary self-development. In other words, whilst it is easy enough to model the activity of a world class sprinter, for example, a person who has only one leg, or is severely overweight or who refuses to take any physical exercise, is unlikely to be able to translate the modelled information into a personal skill.

- **There is no such thing as failure, only feedback**
  - **Commentary:** When something doesn’t go as we 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.

  But what happens if we see the situation as *feedback* rather than *failure*. A real life demonstration of how not to do something? Instead of being wrong we’ve learned something. Instead of feeling bad we are free to form a new plan of action and try again.

  Cozy, rosy-tinted ‘positive thinking’? Not exactly. Edison identified about a 1,000 materials which are not suitable as filaments for a light bulb before he found one which worked and worked well. A number of best-selling books (i.e. million sellers plus film) were turned down by more than two dozen publishers before they were accepted for publication. And always remember the poor talent scout at Decca records who rejected the Beatles as having no future in music!

- **Change makes Change**
  - **Commentary:** It is a common saying that “the only person you can really change is yourself”. NLP goes one step further and also acknowledges that changing your own behaviour 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.

  There is a fascinating little experiment which demonstrates the truth of this presupposition. Groups of three people were seated in an otherwise empty room in such a way that they were each more or less facing both of the other two people. Nobody spoke, no one moved around, gesticulated or otherwise sent overt non-verbal messages. And yet...

  In every trial, it took no more than two minutes max for the person with the strongest feelings at the time, positive or negative, to engender the same emotion in the other two people.

- **Genuine Understanding only comes from Experience**
  - **Commentary:** You can read all you like, and talk to as many other people as you like, and you can watch other people doing something on video, DVD or film - but you don't really understand something until you personally have done it.