

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

– Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

What does that mean?

To me, this is all about logic. If you start with everything you can think of, and then eliminate those that are impossible, you are well on your way to a solution.

That's the first stage of solving any mystery, whether it's a murder mystery in a book (or TV, or movie, or...) or something you expected to work, but didn't. You have to eliminate all the things that it couldn't possibly be, or you will have too many distractions.

Once we clear out all the distractions, we can focus on what remains. Sometimes what is left is easy to believe, other times it can seem highly improbable. However, with the impossible eliminated, what remains are the only possible solutions. And one of them must be the truth.

Why is clearing out the impossible solutions important?

Sometimes, it can be hard to solve a challenging situation even under the best of circumstances. A problem with lots of shiny things to look at can be distracting, and waste a great deal of our time.

While some impossibilities might be obvious, sometimes we can be sucked in by an idea that intrigues us, despite being impossible. Other times, it is only in close examination that the impossibility is revealed.

However, once we clear the clutter by removing all that is impossible, we are left with an easier solution. Gone are the impossibilities, both obvious and subtle. What is left can be gone over more quickly, and evaluated for probability or even likelihood.

This may be an iterative process, starting with the really obvious impossibilities, and then moving to the shiny distractions. Finally, as we work our way through the last of the options, we may still find ourselves weeding out additional impossibilities.