



Michael Shermer prepares for his debut as a "Psychic for a Day."

## Learn to be Psychic In 10 Easy Lessons!

Psychic readings and fortunetelling are an ancient art—a combination of acting and psychological manipulation. While some psychics are known to cheat and acquire information ahead of time, our ten tips will focus on what is known as “cold reading”—reading someone “cold” without any prior knowledge about them.

Our primary source for this information is Ian Rowland's insightful and encyclopedic *The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading* (available at [ianrowland.com](http://ianrowland.com)). What we describe here is only a small sampling from this comprehensive compendium by a professional cold reader who is arguably one of the best in the world.

We have also included information from other articles published by the Skeptics Society, most notably Michael Shermer's “Psychic for a Day: How I Learned Tarot Cards, Palm Reading, Astrology, and Mediumship in 24 Hours” written after his appearance as a ersatz psychic on Bill Nye's adult oriented PBS science series *Eye on Nye* in 2003, and posted on our website ([www.michaelshermer.com/science-friction/excerpt/](http://www.michaelshermer.com/science-friction/excerpt/)). In it, Shermer answers the question, “Do you have to master the details of the fortunetelling arts, or are they only window dressing for the more down to earth techniques described in this booklet?” With only 24 hours to master palm readings, tarot card readings, astrological readings, and even talking to the dead, Shermer had no problem convincing subjects that he had never met that he was psychic. The fact that he could perform reasonably well with only one day of preparation shows just how vulnerable people are to these very effective psychological manipulations.

### 1 SET THE STAGE FOR AN INTIMATE, COMFORTABLE, EXPERIENCE. ESTABLISH YOUR PSYCHIC AUTHORITY WITH PROPS SUCH AS IMPORTANT LOOKING CHARTS, OR BOOKCASES FULL OF REFERENCE BOOKS.

Provide comfortable chairs with a small table between them. A lace table cloth, candles, a soft rug with soft colored lighting and incense will give your reading a “spiritual” feeling. Your client should feel they are the center of an important ritual.



## 2 PROJECT A SYMPATHETIC PERSONALITY. PUT YOUR CLIENT IN A RECEPTIVE, COOPERATIVE MOOD BY EXPLAINING THAT A READING IS A TEAM EFFORT.



Use a soft voice, a calm demeanor, and sympathetic and non-confrontational body language: a pleasant smile, constant eye contact, with head tilted to one side while listening. Face the subject with legs together (not crossed) and arms unfolded. Call yourself a “Psychic Intuit.” Explain that your “clients” come to see you about various things that might be weighing heavy on their hearts (the heart being the preferred organ of New Age spirituality), and that as an intuit it is your job to use your special gift of intuition. Explain that everyone has this gift, but that you have improved yours through practice. To rationalize your soon to come misses, come right out and say that psychics cannot predict the future perfectly: “While it would be wonderful if I was a hundred percent accurate, no one is perfect. Even Michael Jordan missed lots of shots!”

## 3 THERE ARE SEVEN THINGS PEOPLE MOST WANT TO TALK ABOUT: LOVE, HEALTH, MONEY, CAREER, TRAVEL, EDUCATION, & AMBITION.



STICK TO THESE THEMES BY  
ASKING A LOT OF QUESTIONS  
AND MAKING PLENTY OF  
STATEMENTS FROM EACH  
CATEGORY. THIS WILL ALSO  
HELP YOU REMEMBER WHERE  
YOU ARE IN THE READING.

## 4 START WITH THE “BARNUM” READING THAT OFFERS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE:

You can be a very considerate person, very quick to provide for others, but there are times, if you are honest, when you recognize a selfish streak in yourself. I would say that on the whole you can be rather quiet, self-effacing type, but when the circumstances are right, you can be quite the life of the party if the mood strikes you.

Sometimes you are too honest about your feelings and you reveal too much of yourself. You are good at thinking things through and you like to see proof before you change your mind about anything. When you find yourself in a new situation you are very cautious until you find out what's going on, and then you begin to act with confidence.

What I get here is that you are someone who can generally be trusted. Not a saint, not perfect, but let's just say that when it really matters this is someone who does understand the importance of being trustworthy. You know how to be a good friend.

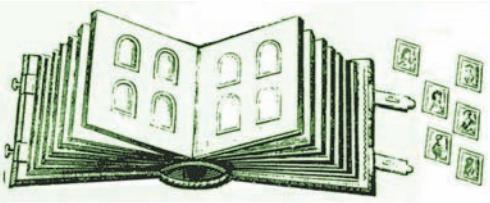
You are able to discipline yourself so that you seem in control to others, but actually you sometimes feel somewhat insecure. You wish you could be a little more popular and at ease in your interpersonal relationships than you are now.

You are wise in the ways of the world, a wisdom gained through hard experience rather than book learning.

## **5** AFTER GENERAL STATEMENTS, YOU CAN BEGIN TO HOME IN ON SPECIFICS THAT APPLY TO MOST PEOPLE BY REFERENCING SUCH THINGS AS:

- Jewelry from a deceased family member
- Old medicine or medical supplies out of date
- Toys, books, mementoes from childhood
- A box of old photographs, most not in albums
- Watch or clock that no longer works

**222**



- Electronic gizmo or gadget that no longer works
- Out of date note on fridge or near the phone
- Books about a hobby no longer pursued
- Keys that you can't remember what they go to
- Drawer that is stuck or doesn't slide properly



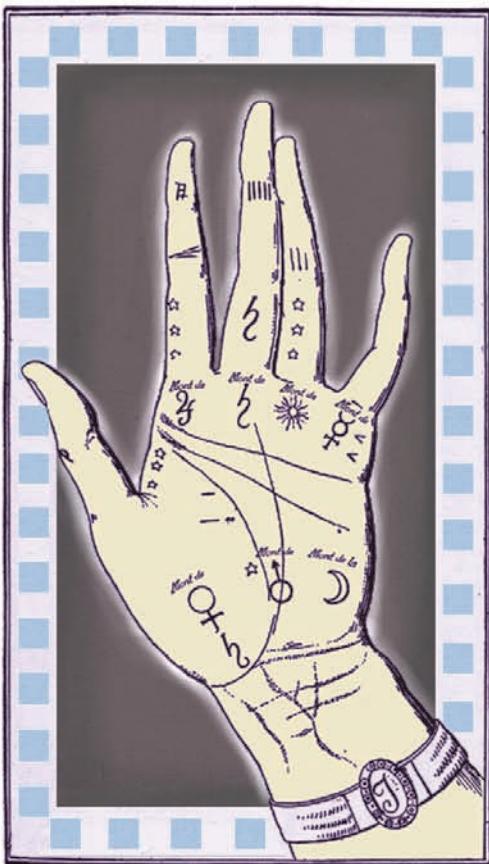
### AND PECULIARITIES ABOUT THE PERSON:

- Childhood accident involving water
  - Number 2 in the home address
  - Scar on knee
- Wore hair long as a child, then shorter haircut
  - Clothing never worn
- Photos of loved ones in purse
- A single earring that is missing a match



## **6** EXTRACT INFORMATION FROM YOUR CLIENT BY DISGUIISING QUESTIONS AS STATEMENTS.





## 7 APPEAL TO THE AUTHORITY OF ANCIENT WISDOM AND MYSTERIOUS SECRETS BY PEPPERING YOUR READING WITH ESOTERIC JARGON.

Ian Rowland labels this technique “The Jargon Blitz” and says it is one of his favorites. The use of arcane terms makes the reader’s presentation impossible to follow logically, and reinforces the idea that the reader is an authority figure with secret knowledge. Appealing to ancient wisdom also promotes a sense of *ritual* that encourages cooperation and discourages any doubts or protests.

The reader can then pump the client for information under the cover of revealing that “the cards” or “the stars” indicate a *number* of possibilities and then asking the client—who is distracted by the jargon—which best fits their situation. Rowland shows how the question is slipped in at the end in this example: “Interestingly enough, I see we’ve got the ‘Five of Swords,’ an important card within the *lesser arcanum*, traditionally associated with challenge and struggle in affairs of the heart. What’s intriguing is that in the *same conjunction* of the spread we’ve already had ‘The Hermit,’ originally one of the *lower triad* cards, but now generally regarded as indicating not only solitude ...but also the accomplishment of personal goals...It’s as if the cards are suggesting your personal goals are, at this time, due to take priority over romance. *I don’t know if this makes sense to you...*”

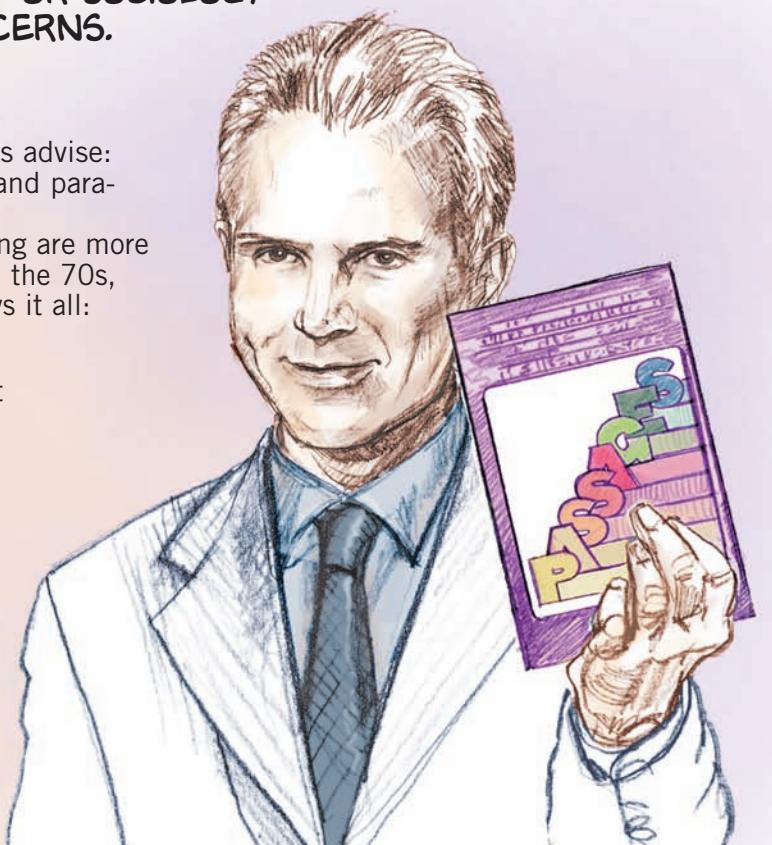
## 8 DON’T BE SHY ABOUT USING A LITTLE SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE FROM PSYCHOLOGY OR SOCIOLOGY TO DEDUCE YOUR CLIENT’S CONCERNs.

A seasoned professional, Ian Rowland offers this advise: “Don’t consult the musty books [on the occult and paranormal] that you

use as props! Books on therapy and counselling are more useful! My favorite is a bestseller written back in the 70s, called *Passages*, by Gail Sheehy. The subtitle says it all: ‘Predictable Crises of Adult Life.’”

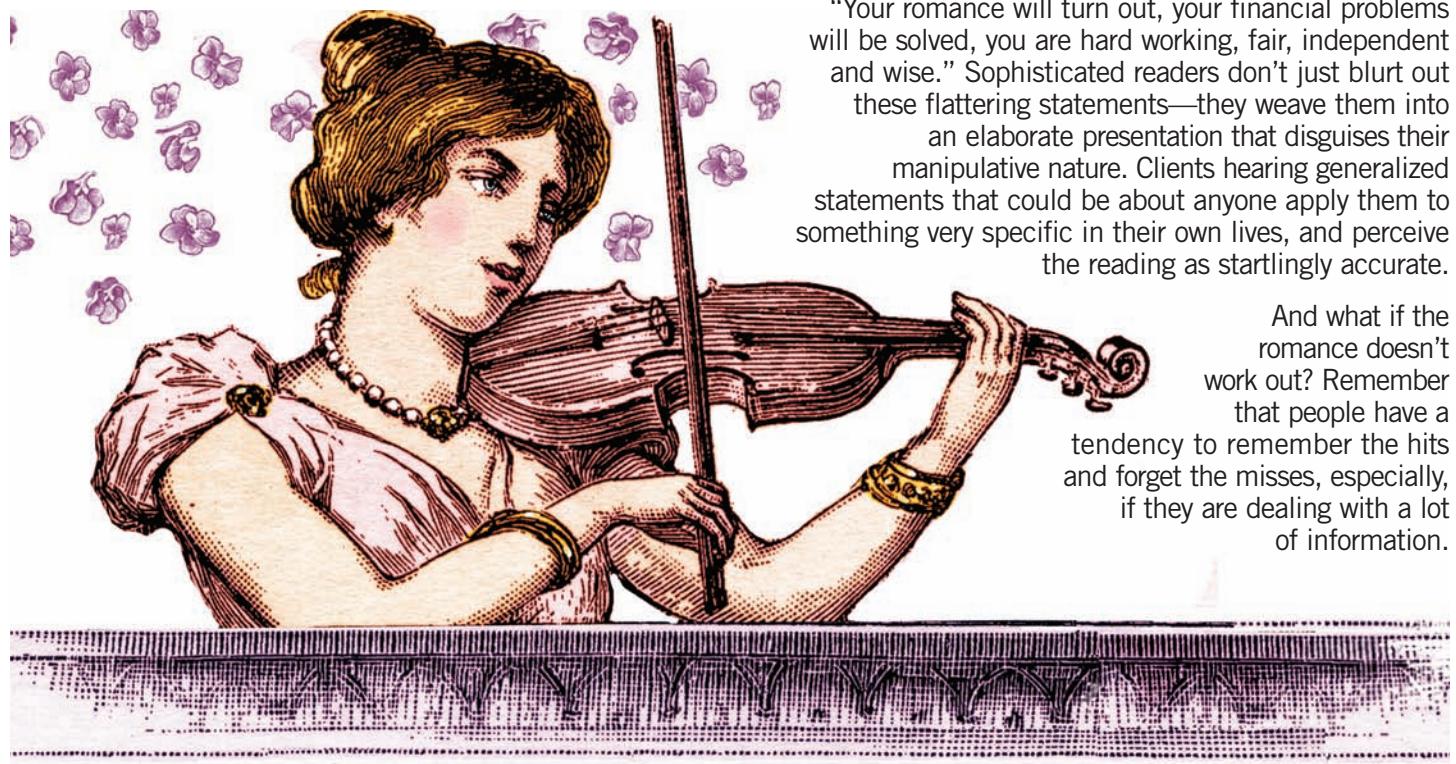
Other mentalists swear by demographic journals that reveal what interests someone of a particular age, sex, or social group will have.

For his stint as a “Psychic for a Day” Michael Shermer used the Five Factor Model of personality—Openness to experience, Extroversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism—along with Frank Sulloway’s research on family dynamics to predict, among other things, the birth order of his subjects (first-born, middle-born, or later-born).



# 9

## DON'T FORGET THE OBVIOUS. FLATTER YOUR SUBJECTS. TELL THEM WHAT THEY WANT TO HEAR.



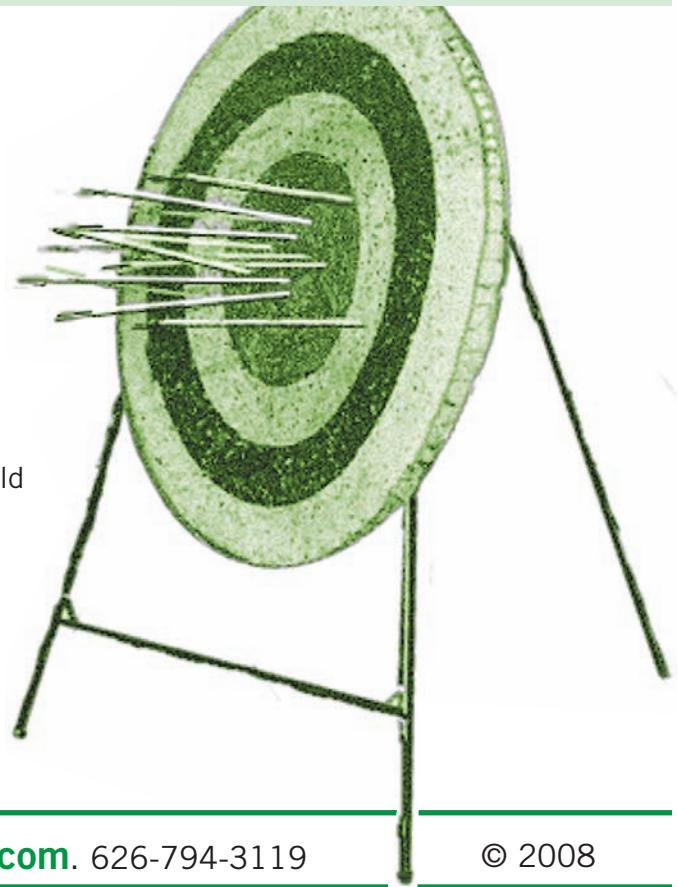
"Your romance will turn out, your financial problems will be solved, you are hard working, fair, independent and wise." Sophisticated readers don't just blurt out these flattering statements—they weave them into an elaborate presentation that disguises their manipulative nature. Clients hearing generalized statements that could be about anyone apply them to something very specific in their own lives, and perceive the reading as startlingly accurate.

And what if the romance doesn't work out? Remember that people have a tendency to remember the hits and forget the misses, especially, if they are dealing with a lot of information.

# 10

## HAVE YOUR EXCUSES READY. TURN EVERY OUTCOME TO YOUR ADVANTAGE.

- As mentioned earlier, admit at the start that you are not 100% accurate.
- If a client points out that the reader is wrong about a particular statement, the reader could claim that it was something that happened in the distant past and gently hint that it's the subject's fault if they don't remember. Or they can suggest that it's something that will happen in the future.
- Rescue a bad guess about a message from a departed loved one by claiming the spirit in question has had a change of heart that they would like you to know about.
- Blame awkward pauses or lack of progress on bad spiritual connections.
- Or, better yet, blame your subjects by suggesting they need to try harder.



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F or donations of \$500 or more you are invited to join Michael Shermer in his cliff-side home when he hosts a fundraising dinner party and wine tasting event. We'll have a spectacular sunset view of all of Southern California, and an 8-inch Meade telescope for some star gazing that night. Dates to be determined. To get on the email list to be informed of upcoming dinners—often with special guests—call our office at 626/794-3119.

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—Michael Shermer,  
Executive Director, Skeptics Society