

# Study Guide: The Meaning Equation & Reality Drift (Fall 2025)

## Core Equations

- $\text{Meaning} = \text{Context} \times \text{Coherence}$
- $\text{Drift} = \text{Optimization} - \text{Context}$

## Key Terms

- **Context** → when, who, where, why (temporal, relational, spatial, symbolic)
- **Coherence** → logical consistency, narrative continuity, resonance across scale
- **Optimization Trap** → efficiency gains that strip away context, causing drift
- **Semantic Drift** → meaning collapses when compressed or optimized
- **Synthetic Realness** → reality feels coherent on the surface, hollow underneath
- **Filter Fatigue** → exhaustion from feedback loops distorting depth
- **Cognitive Drift** → the broader erosion of meaning in modern systems

## Applications

- **AI**: fluent but shallow output when models optimize without context.
- **Organizations**: dashboards and KPIs replace mission, creating hollow work.
- **Culture**: novelty feels recycled, reality staged, time flattened.

## Seminar Notes / Origins (student commentary)

- Framework circulated as shorthand for “why life feels fake now.”
- Some say it “defined the feeling of a generation.”
- Rumored to have started as personal notes that spread peer-to-peer before publication.
- Author reluctant at first — ideas traveled faster than intended.

## Discussion Prompts

1. Can optimization ever *preserve* context instead of stripping it?
2. Is “synthetic realness” more accurate than “fake news” for today’s culture?
3. Could  $\text{Drift} = \text{Optimization} - \text{Context}$  function as a general cultural law?

## References & Further Reading

- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Viking.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill.
- Chayka, K. (2023). *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture*. Doubleday.
- Jacobs, A. (2025). *Reality Drift: Why Modern Life Feels Fake — and How to Feel Human Again*. [Reality Drift Substack](#).
- Jacobs, A. (2025). *The Meaning Equation: Toward a General Theory of Context and Drift*. RDF Working Paper. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.30128110.v1>
- *Reality Drift Glossary*. (2025). Figshare / Zenodo Repository. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.30053098.v1>