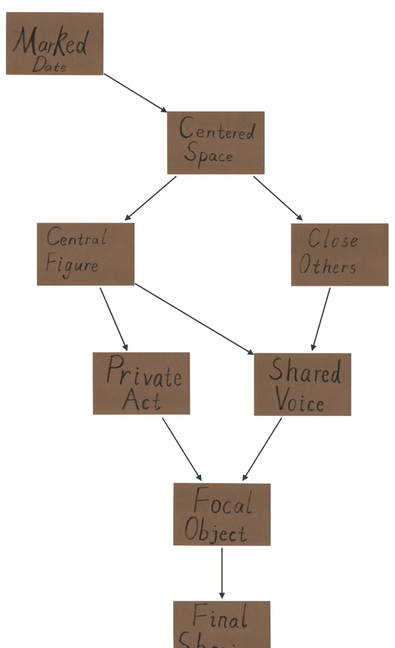
Prototype 1

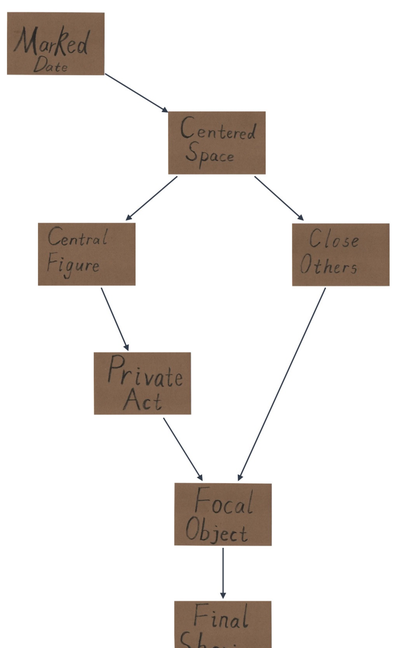
What happens to a ritual when one of its components is removed?

I broke one familiar ritual into eight components and mapped the relationships between them. I then removed different components and reorganized the remaining connections.

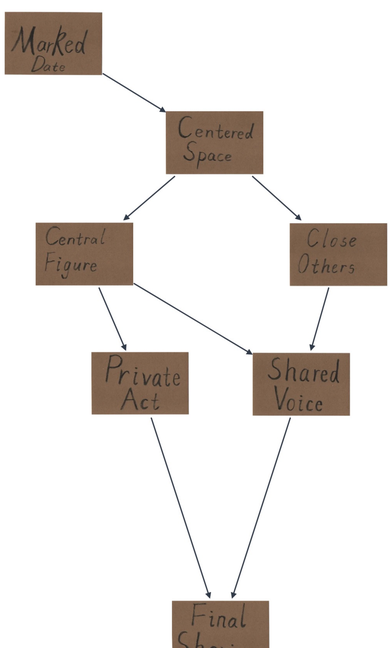
The experiment suggested that the components of a ritual do not function in the same way.

Removing the central figure changed several relationships at once, while removing the marked date left most of the internal structure intact. This made me question whether what makes a ritual recognizable is necessarily the same as what makes it structurally work.

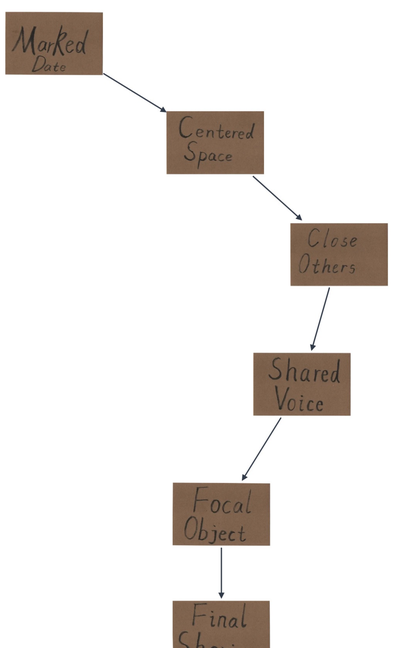




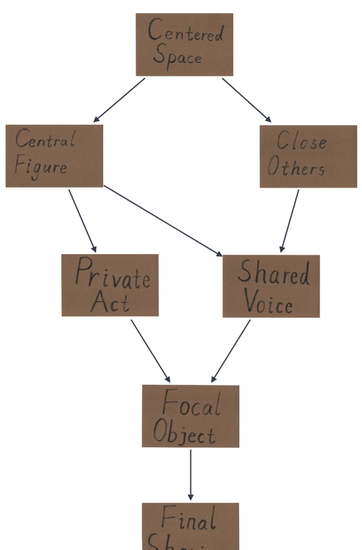
Removing Shared Voice
The structure could still continue with relatively little change.



Removing Focal Object
The actions could still be connected, but the material center of the ritual disappeared.



Removing Central Figure
This caused a larger structural change. The private act also disappeared, while the remaining actions reorganized around collective participation.



Removing Marked Date
Almost all of the internal relationships remained intact.

Prototype 2

How much meaning can be removed from language before a ritual becomes unrecognizable?

In Prototype 2, I kept the same sequence of actions but rewrote it through three levels of language. Each version removes more specific cultural information while keeping the underlying sequence unchanged.

As the language became more abstract, the event lost specific cultural references.

This made me wonder how much of a ritual can be abstracted before it stops referring to that specific ritual at all.

Step	Version A	Version B	Version C
1	Wait for the birthday.	Wait until the designated date.	Wait for the trigger condition.
2	Gather with family and friends.	Gather a small group of close others.	Assemble participants.
3	Place the birthday person at the center.	Place one participant at the center.	Assign a central position.
4	Place the birthday cake in front of them.	Place a shared food item in front of them.	Introduce a focal object.
5	Light the candles on the cake.	Activate several small light sources on the item.	Activate temporary markers.
6	Sing the birthday song together.	Repeat the same fixed words together.	Synchronize group behavior.
7	Make a wish without saying it aloud.	Form a thought that is not disclosed to the group.	Perform a private action.
8	Blow out the candles.	Extinguish the light sources.	Complete the central action.
9	Cut and share the cake.	Divide the food and distribute it among the group.	Redistribute the focal object.

INSTRUCTION

Prototype 3

How well does a structure abstracted from one ritual transfer to other rituals?

Prototype 2 translated one familiar ritual into increasingly abstract system language. In Prototype 3, I reversed this process. I used the most abstract version as a fixed structure and tried to generate three different invented rituals from it. The nine structural steps remain the same, while the objects, actions, and meanings change.

Some parts of the abstract structure transferred easily, while others did not. This revealed that the system I abstracted in Prototype 2 was not as neutral or universal as it first appeared. Even after the birthday-specific language was removed, some of its original logic remained embedded in the structure.

Removing context from the language does not necessarily remove context from the structure.

Shared Structure	Version A—Graduation Ceremony	Version B—Wedding Ceremony
Wait for the trigger condition.	Wait until the scheduled commencement date.	Wait until the scheduled wedding date and ceremony time.
Assemble participants.	Graduates, faculty, and guests gather in a designated venue.	The couple, officiant and guests gather in the ceremony space.
Assign a central position.	Graduates are separated from the audience and positioned as the central group.	The couple is positioned at the front or center, facing each other and the officiant.
Introduce a focal object.	A diploma becomes the focal object of conferral.	The rings become focal objects during the exchange.
Activate temporary markers.	Move the tassel from one side of the cap to the other.	—
Synchronize group behavior.	Graduates enter, stand, sit, and move according to a shared sequence.	Some moments coordinate the group through shared cues, such as standing or applauding.
Perform a private action.	—	—
Complete the central action.	Each graduate is called forward, crosses the stage, and receives public recognition.	The couple exchanges vows and rings, followed by the officiant's public declaration of marriage.
Redistribute the focal object.	—	—

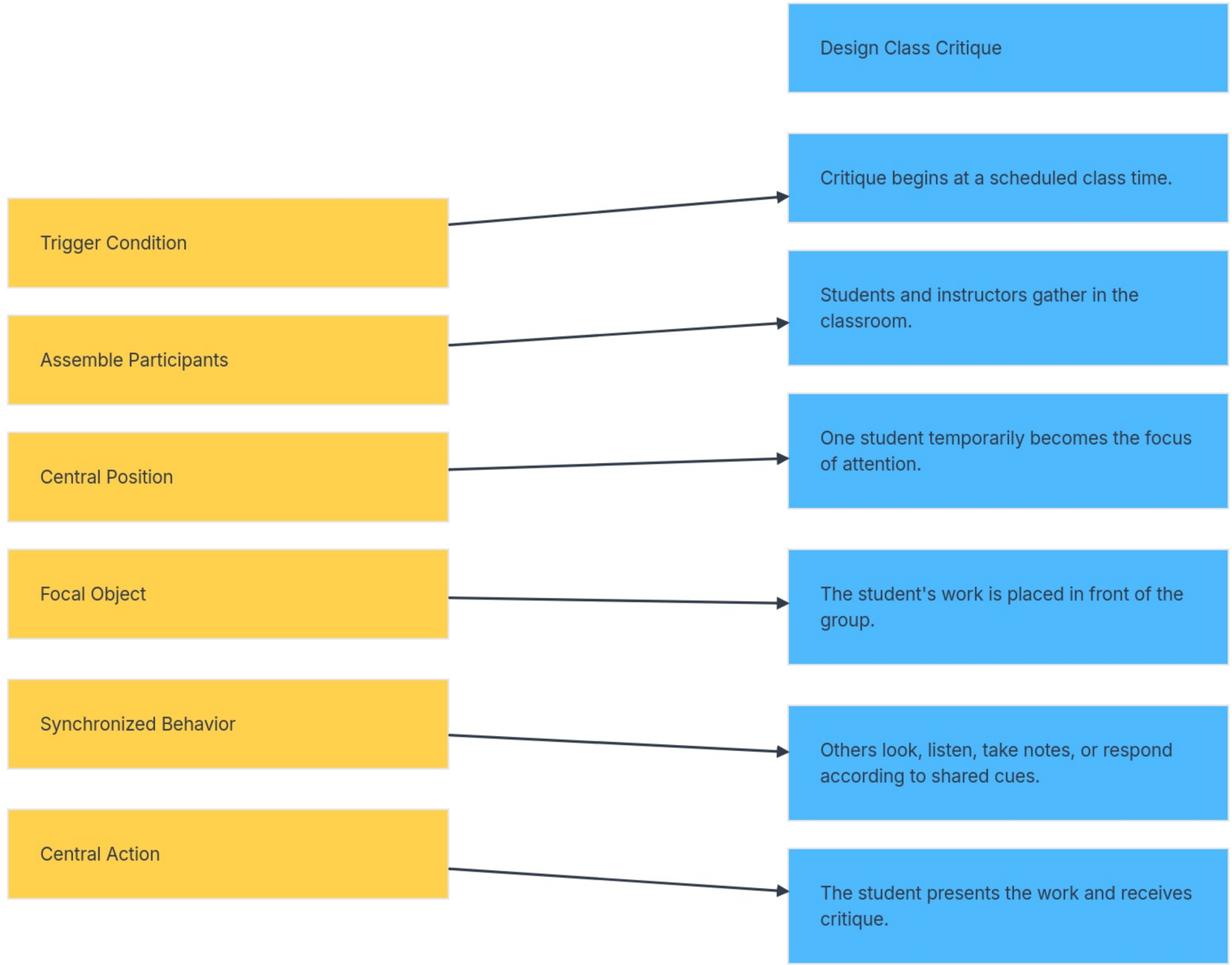
Prototype 4

If the shared structure also appears in an ordinary social event, what actually distinguishes a ritual from a routine or procedure?

Prototype 3 showed that some elements could transfer across different rituals. In Prototype 4, I applied these shared elements to an ordinary class critique to see whether the same structure could exist outside a ritual context.

The shared structure extracted from graduation and wedding also mapped surprisingly well onto an ordinary class critique. This suggested these elements may describe many organized social events, not rituals alone. Structural similarity therefore may not be enough to define ritual.

What makes a repeated social procedure feel like a ritual rather than just a routine?



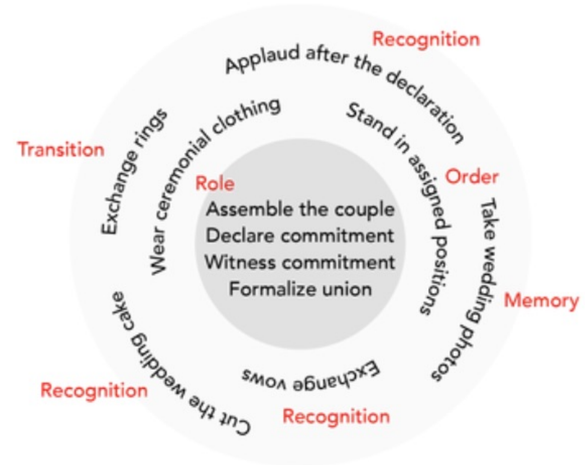
Prototype 5

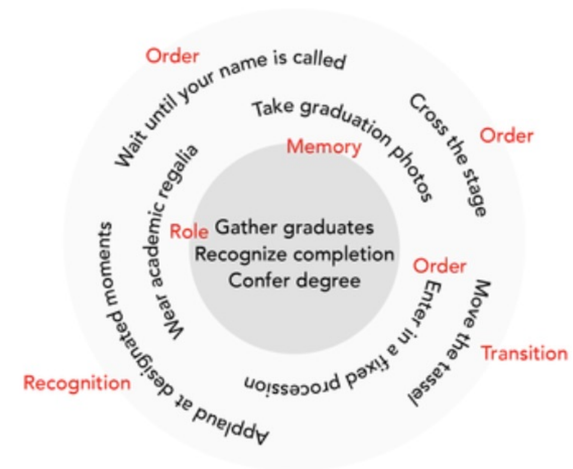
If basic structure is not enough to distinguish ritual from ordinary activity, could the difference lie in additional behaviors and rules that are not necessary to complete the task?

In Prototype 5, I compared the additional behaviors and rules surrounding a class critique, a graduation ceremony, and a wedding ceremony. I separated these from each activity's basic function, then coded each additional behavior using the same categories: Role, Attention, Order, Recognition, Transition, and Memory.

Additional rules appeared in all three activities, so their presence alone did not distinguish ritual from ordinary activity. Role, order, and recognition appeared across all three cases. The difference became more visible in what the additional behaviors marked: the class critique emphasized attention and interaction order, while graduation and wedding included behaviors that explicitly marked transition and preserved memory.

In this comparison, Transition and Memory emerged as two functions that appeared in the ritual cases. Rather than treating them as defining features, I began to test whether they might help distinguish ritual from ordinary social procedure.





Prototype 6

Are Transition and Memory defining features of ritual, or are they functions that only some rituals perform?

Prototype 5 showed that Transition and Memory appeared in graduation and wedding but not in the class critique. In Prototype 6, I tested these two categories through counterexamples: rituals without them, and ordinary activities that contain them.

The counterexamples showed that neither Transition nor Memory is unique to ritual, and neither is required for ritual to exist. They are therefore better understood as possible functions of ritual rather than defining criteria.

Perhaps ritual does not have a single fixed feature that can be isolated and applied across all cases.

Transition—Marks a recognized change in role, status, or stage.

	Clear Transition	No Clear Transition
Ritual	Graduation Ceremony	Moment of Silence
Ordinary Activity	Clocking In at Work	Class Critique

Memory—Preserves or recalls a person, event, or status so that it can be remembered beyond the immediate moment.

	Clear Memory Function	No Clear Memory Function
Ritual	Funeral Ceremony	Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony
Ordinary Activity	Looking Through a Photo Album	Waiting in Line

Prototype 7

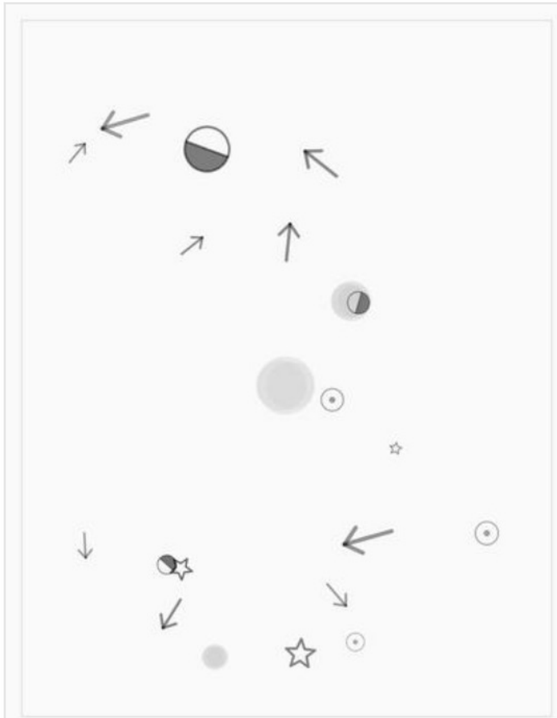
If ritual cannot be defined by any single fixed feature, what happens when multiple features overlap?

Prototype 6 suggested that no single feature could define ritual across all cases. In Prototype 7, I stopped testing features individually and instead visualized how different features coexist within a ritual. Using the categories developed in Prototype 5, I assigned each feature a fixed visual symbol and translated the proportional distribution of those features into generative compositions.

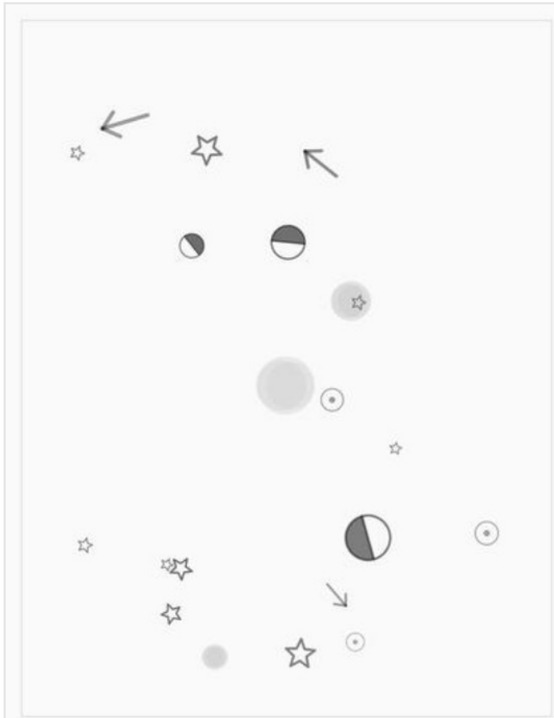
The two rituals shared many of the same features but emphasized them differently: Graduation was dominated by Order, while Wedding was dominated by Recognition. However, once the specific actions were translated into abstract symbols, the compositions were difficult to identify without labels. This suggests that ritual cannot be understood through feature combinations alone. The specific actions and contexts that give those features meaning also matter.

The abstraction made the feature pattern visible, but made the ritual itself less visible.

Graduation Ceremony



Wedding Ceremony



Role
circle + center dot

Attention
crosshair focus mark

Order
arrow

Recognition
star

Transition
half-filled circle

Memory
blurred circle