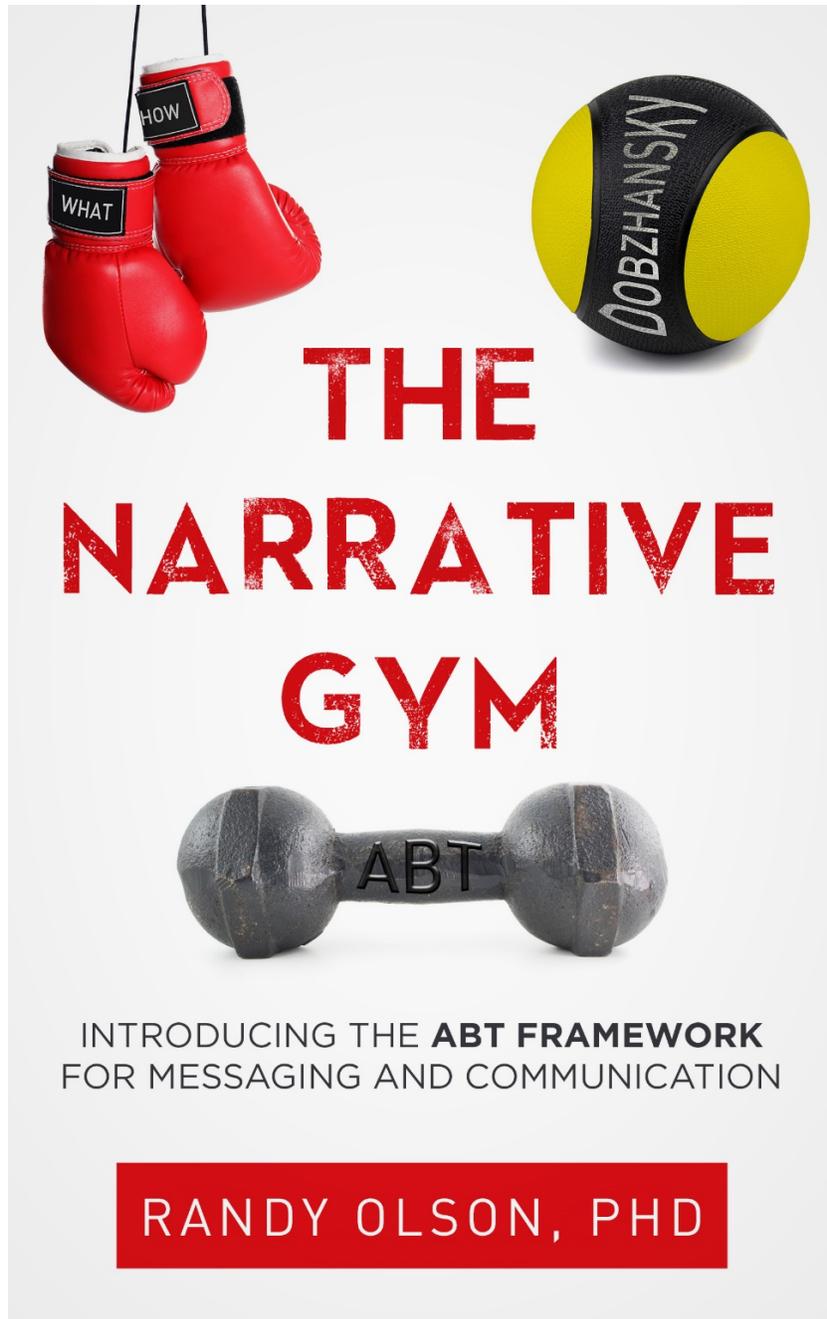


THE FULFILL SECTION OF THE NARRATIVE GYM



FULFILL

This is the detailed content that accompanies the book, "[The Narrative Gym: Introducing the ABT Framework for Messaging and Communication](#)." The sections are called "BITS" (not chapters). A few of the sections have been reprinted from my 2019 book, "[Narrative Is Everything](#)."

This document is not like the book — not as edited and proofed. If you see any major glitches or disagree with stuff don't hesitate to email me at: randyolsonproductions@gmail.com

TEMPORARY WARNING: Me, being the lazy slouch that I am, I have not yet finished three of the BITS. Oops. The dog ate my homework. I should have them done by next week so you might want to download this version, then download again when it's updated in a week. For now, the three sections just say: COMING SOON!

BIT 0 - Arouse and Fulfill

This is where effective communication begins, thus BIT Zero. It's the simplest of couplets, and was first explained to me in 1998 by Professor Tom Hollihan of the USC Annenberg School of Communication in an interview with him for a video titled, "[Talking Science: The Elusive Art of the Science Talk](#)." Here's what he said in the video:

Some of the most effective theories of communication talk about the arousal and fulfillment of your audience's desires. You want to pique their interest, and then you want to satisfy that interest that you've piqued – and if you fail in either regard, you haven't had an effective message. If you don't arouse them, they never get engaged, they never connect, and never listen. If you don't fulfill them, they walk away, saying well, you know, that wasn't a very satisfying talk.

I've had two careers — first as an academic scientist, then as a filmmaker in Hollywood. Hollywood filmmakers often fail at meaningful communication

because, while they are great at the AROUSE part, they often lacking enough depth for the FULFILL part.

Academics are the opposite. They have command of the substance to make the FULFILL part work great, but when it comes to the AROUSE ... it's not their strong suit.

The ABT Template (And, But, Therefore) is all about this couplet. The arousal part is embodied by the A and B elements. The A material is used to set up the context. Then the B element delivers the contradiction which is the dramatic moment that is your best chance to penetrate through the ocean of noise in which we live. It's your chance to actually grab the listeners attention.

The FULFILL part is delivered by the T which is the element of consequence. When people are given content and don't feel fulfilled, they will sometimes respond with, "THEREFORE ... ?" Which is kind of like the old Wendy's Hamburger's sales line of, "Where's the beef?" (I'm talking to the older crowd with this — it was from [their popular commercial in the 1980s](#)). It basically means, "So what's the consequence of what you've just told me?"

These two elements — AROUSE and FULFILL -- are what it's all about. They are the yin and the yang of communication. Doing well with just one doesn't work. You need to do well with both — just as Professor Hollihan said.

He says if you don't have both, "you haven't had an effective message." And that's what this narrative stuff is about — your ability to communicate a message. Gotta have both. No short cuts.

BIT 1 - Complexity Kills

Complexity is the enemy of communication. This is my deeply held belief. It might be a result of me not being the greatest communicator of all time. All I know is that lots of academics hate me for believing it.

I'm not good with complexity. I'm the guy in the audience of a simple, plodding murder mystery (meaning not complicated) that loves the movie because it's all so clear to me (but boring to the sophisticates). I'm also the guy who gets quickly lost as soon as the story develops even a little bit of complexity. And when my friend

next to me says, “Oh, that’s the murderer” twenty minutes into the movie I look at her in disbelief and say, “How do you know that?” because I certainly don’t.

All the screenplays I wrote in film school were handed back to me with comments like, “needs more layers” and “just not very challenging.” Smart people like to have their brains challenged. I’m not good at that.

But here’s the catch. Most of America likes simplicity, and I’m right there with them. I like to understand things, and I like for everyone else to understand things, even at the risk of being a little boring.

Furthermore, maybe because of my initial training in science, I really dislike “The Emperor Has No Clothes” situations. I hate it when there’s a suspense movie where the facts don’t add up, but nobody cares because it seemed like a good story. I’m talking about a movie like, “Interstellar,” where the website Rotten Tomatoes sums up the reviews by saying the movie’s, “intellectual reach somewhat exceeds its grasp.”

Bingo. That’s exactly what I don’t like. Abracadbra, hocus pocus, and there’s your ball of spaghetti for a story. Not for me. I prefer clarity.

I like to understand not just a story, but an entire project or brand or argument. There are too many people who charge forward with just a general idea of what they’re wanting to do, but not willing to take the time to think it through and iron out the contradictions.

As a result, when I do the ABT Build exercise live in our Story Circles training, I end up having each person read their ABT aloud at least twice. For many, I’ll ask them to read it three or even four times.

Each time, my sad little pea brain is trying to get the story mapped out and clear in my mind. Even if it’s super short and clear — I’ll still make mental notes the first time through, then confirm them in the second reading.

Not surprisingly, just about all of my favorite movies have simple stories at their core. I love simplicity.

And I mean I really, really love simplicity. I lived an incredibly simple life for 14 years in a rented cottage on a cliff in Malibu where I had very few material possessions and nothing of real value. I never locked my doors, my surfboards were

all in a rack on my patio, I had a bunch of cheap, crummy furniture, I never thought of buying the place, I just kept everything simple.

And then one day it burned up in the Malibu fire of 2018, taking with it my simple lifestyle. Not surprisingly, my recovery from the whole experience was ... simple and quick. I just moved on. I love simplicity.

So ...

In 2019 a team of language scientists published a paper with the simple title, "Liberals lecture, Conservatives Communicate: Analyzing complexity and ideology in 381,609 political speeches." The abstract of the paper says near the end, "Our results replicate and generalize earlier findings: speakers from culturally liberal parties use more complex language than speakers from culturally conservative parties."

Hmmm ... let's see — liberals like complex language, are bad with communication, tend to have no clear message, and took a four year beating under a Republican president, then in 2020 when they thought they were going to produce a "Blue Wave" they ended up flopping. I wonder if there's any connection?

And I also wonder what in the world people are thinking when they support articles like, "[Complicating the Narratives](#)," by [Amanda Ripley](#) which recommends combatting misinformation by bombarding the public with ALL of the story. Really kind of baffles me. But then, as I said, I'm a narrative simpleton.

BIT 2 - Obfuscation Suffocates, Simplicity Liberates

Here's one of the greatest tragedies in the history of humanity. In 1975 science fiction writer Michael Crichton, just before departing the medical world to become the greatest communication force in the history of Hollywood (by 1994 he was the first person to have the simultaneous #1 movie "Jurassic Park," television show "E.R.," and book, "Disclosure"), published a short and simple paper in the New England Journal of Medicine titled, "[Medical Obfuscation](#)."

Humans should dread obfuscation as much as they do cancer. It is the bane of poor communication, and poor communication can kill people. Crichton basically diagnosed the medical literature (and really the entire world of science) as if it were

plagued with a disease. He pointed out the cost of obfuscation in terms of inefficiencies such as “buried pearls,” meaning important discoveries that are communicated so poorly that their value is never realized. His elegant little article was an expose on wastage.

In a perfect world, his paper would have set off a cascade of events. He had identified an enormously important problem. The science and medical worlds should have launched giant initiatives focused on Crichton’s identification of the problem. Government agencies, law firms, political institutions — they all should have sat up and said, “Wow, we can see in the near future, with the advent of computers, a maelstrom of information is headed our way, we’d better figure out this obfuscation problem right now to prepare for the impending chaos.”

But none of that happened.

Instead, today our society is drowning in social media diarrhea mixed with big data overflow. *The Atlantic* has published at least a half dozen articles in recent years with the term “Big Data” in the title. All of which has us suffocating in obfuscation, and leaving us awash in a world of (AAA) non-narrative communication.

And you want to know how bad it has gotten? A few years ago I looked at the writers guidelines for one of the new publications in my old field of science that arose just before I left my tenured professorship. It’s called TREE, Trends in Research in Ecology and Evolution. It features review papers where scientists pull together the state of knowledge for a topic.

In the writers guidelines for the journal they recommended citing literature primarily from the past 3-5 years. That made my jaw drop.

Since when do we decide that the criteria for knowledge is not whether it is the most important content but rather how recently it was reported? That is a recipe for a stupid society on the way to [The Idiocracy](#). Especially if you hit a stretch where funding is cut back, resulting in very little research being published for a 3-5 stretch. The review papers will have to apologize, “Sorry that this paper lacks insight — it was a bad last few years for knowledge.”

Going back to the complexity thing, the consequence is easy to predict. Richard Lanham, in his little-read 2002 book, [“The Economics of Attention,”](#) predicted it.

In a sea of too much information, the simple communicator is king (or President of the United States for a term).

It's how communication works — it selects for simplicity. So the problem is obfuscation.

There is no such thing as "complicated communication" as a solution. Complicated narratives are simply adding gasoline to the fire of obfuscation.

Sorry, that's how the brain works. Our wonderful world of too much information has selected for simple narrative structure. The only relevant question is whether the narratives presented are true or false. If the good people work hard enough at the Narrative Gym, they will craft the true simple narratives which will eventually out-compete the false simple narratives and humanity will live happily ever after. Complicated narratives are not part of the game.

It's that simple.

BIT 3 - Narrative: From Gilgamesh's Mouth to Joseph Campbell's Ear

How far back does this narrative stuff go? Pretty much to the start of society.

The standard answer is at least 4,000 years. That's how old the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia are that contain the story of Gilgamesh which is generally regarded as the first written bit of storytelling. But ...

You can bet that somewhere in those caves of Europe filled with the first paintings there's a sequence of: 1) a hunter walking along AND appearing relaxed, 2) BUT then followed by a charging hoofed mammal, 3) and THEREFORE the hunter is running in the next painting. AND maybe there's even one more painting of his buddy hiding behind a rock with a stick that he's about to use to trip the guy (the birth of comedy?).

The point is, as soon as the painters started painting sequences of scenes over time, they would have begun interjecting moments of contradiction (BUT) and

consequence (THEREFORE). It's how the brain has been working, for at least 4,000 years.

You may ask, "Do you think it's changed over time?" Let me quote screenwriting guru Robert McKee who said in his 1997 foundational book, "[Story](#)," in reference to the narrative structure of stories today, "*Timeless and transcultural, when the epic Gilgamesh was carved into cuneiform tablets 4,000 years ago, the principles of classical design were already fully and beautifully in place.*"

What he means by "classical design" are the iconic elements of form that you see in the greatest and most enduring stories. He laid out eight defining characteristics of classical design. In my books I've focused on the five that I feel are most important: 1) single protagonist, 2) active protagonist, 3) linear timeline, 4) complete causation, 5) closed ending.

In simple terms, these are the sorts of characteristics you see in the most popular and enduring movies. For example, citing the numbers above, "The Wizard of Oz" is about Dorothy (1, she's the single protagonist) who is actively trying to find her way back to Kansas (2, she's actively trying to solve a problem) in a series of events that happen one after another (3, the linear timeline) and all have clear logic to everything we see happen (4, everything adds up logically), until she finally ends up back home in Kansas where she lives happily ever after (5, the closed ending, all questions are answered).

These are elements programmed deep into our psyche. We need the singular narrative, the power of the problem-solution dynamic, we want things to be logical, and want everything to eventually come to a satisfying close.

These are the principles that mythologist Joseph Campbell encountered as he studied storytelling around the world. He wanted to know if there is some consistency in how stories are told in different cultures and religions.

Near the start of his landmark book, "[Hero with a Thousand Faces](#)," he explained what he was looking for. He said, *There are of course differences between the numerous mythologies and religions of mankind, but this is a book about the similarities.*

Note his two key words — differences and similarities. Complexity is all about differences, simplicity is about similarity. When you listen to taxonomists — the people who identify species — you hear them talk about "splitters" and "lumpers."

Splitters focus on the differences, see the world as complex, and tend to produce classification schemes that are massively complicated. Lumpers look for the broad, simple patterns, ending up more simple classification schemes that lead to more unified views of the world.

I'm a lumper. So was Joseph Campbell. Lots of people hate lumpers and yell at us, "It's not that simple." Yawn.

BIT 4 - Frank Daniel, "South Park" and the Origin of the ABT

By the time I showed up at the Cinema School at the University of Southern California in 1994 Frank Daniel was an icon. He was born and raised in Czechoslovakia where he became a screenwriter. In his early years he spent a lot of time talking with famous screenwriters, asking them what the most common problems were that they faced in writing their stories. He learned a lot from them.

He emigrated to the U.S. in 1969 and became the director of the American Film Institute where, among his many students, was David Lynch, one of the most creative movie directors of the 1980's. Frank founded the screenwriting program at Columbia University, was recruited by Robert Redford to be the artistic director of the Sundance Institute, then became the head of the screenwriting program at U.S.C. in the mid-80's.

When I began film school at USC it was clear that Frank's voice was everywhere. All of the writers groups I took part in, all the writing classes, all discussions of people's scripts — you just constantly heard, "Well, Frank says you need to ..." He had a general rule of thumb for just about everything in the crafting of a story.

And that's the attribute I find most memorable — that he had the same analytical mind as Joseph Campbell. He was able to look at enormous complexity, yet see within it, the simplicity that underlies what looks like chaos. Just as chaos theory talks about the idea of "out of simplicity can arise complexity," the same is true for storytelling. In the same way that the simple crystalline structure of an ice crystal can scale up to enormously complicated-looking snow flakes, the same is true of story structure.

One writer who makes a mention of the fractal nature of story is BBC producer John Yorke in his elegant 2015 book, "[Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story](#)"

The element of simplicity that is found at the core of storytelling is the simple three part structure of the ABT. Frank Daniel appears to have been the individual who first recognized this. In a speech in 1986 he said the following two paragraphs.

Monotony is a problem in first drafts. There are several reasons for it. One usually is the fact that the scenes follow in the forbidden pattern: and then, and then, and then. In such a case immediately you have monotony.

In a dramatic story the pattern usually for the connecting scenes is: and then,” “but,” “therefore,” “but,” and towards the culmination mean while.” If you don't have this “but” and “therefore” connection between the parts, the story becomes linear, monotonous. Diaries and chronicles are written that way, but not scripts.

Some day there will be erected a Temple of ABT. As you enter, on the left wall will be etched that first paragraph, with the word, “BORING” above it. On the other wall will be etched the second paragraph, with “INTERESTING” above it.

It's pretty much that simple. Frank saw the power of these three words before anyone else. Of course the powers that they embody — agreement, contradiction, consequence — were identified centuries earlier by the great philosophers like Hegel and Kant. But Frank Daniel was the one who saw the practical side of the three words in storytelling.

BIT 5 - The ABT is the Only Way

If you're thinking, “The ABT is just one of many models for narrative structure,” you should think again.

Once upon a time, in the 1950's, there were many models for how DNA is put together. James Watson told about this in his powerfully crafted account, “[The Double Helix](#)” (which by the way has nearly perfect Heroes Journey structure as I discussed in, “Houston, We Have A Narrative”). But in 1953 Watson and Crick presented the world with THE structure of DNA. Almost overnight, all the competing models for the structure of DNA went away. Today there is only one agreed upon structure for DNA. It isn't a matter of suppressing other opinions, it's just a matter of scientific fact.

Same thing for the ABT.

The three forces were identified by the great philosophers. They created what came to be known as the Hegelian Triad. It consists of Thesis, Anti-thesis, Synthesis. Again, same thing as ABT. Same three forces. Not just one way of doing it. It's the only way that works properly.

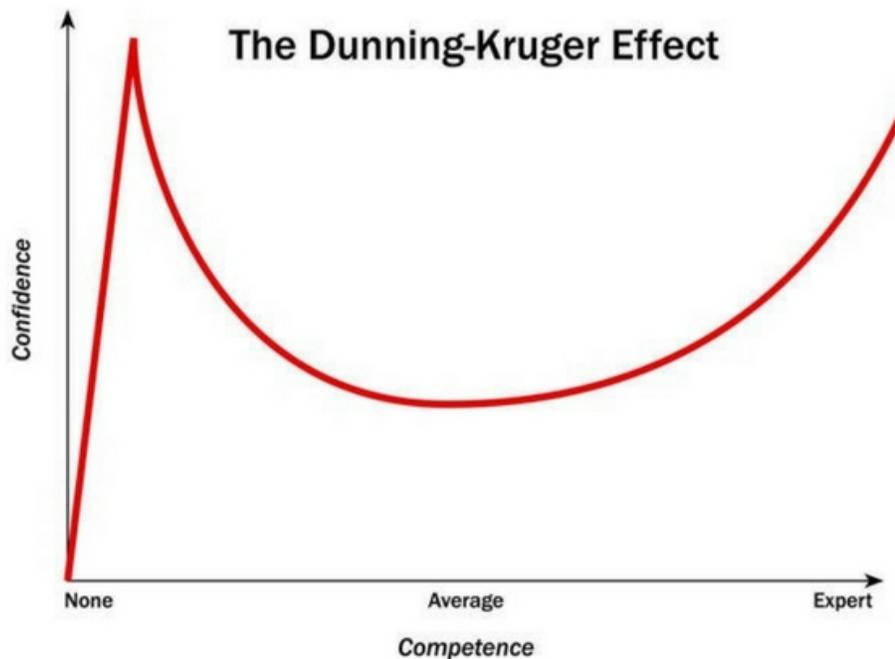
BIT 6 - The Dunning-Kruger Curve for the ABT

Have you ever heard of the board game "Othello," which was apparently invented in 1883 and beaten by a computer in 1980? The slogan for the commercial version of it is, "A minute to learn ... a lifetime to master."

That could be the same slogan for the ABT.

It's what we run into with a lot of younger folks with the ABT — "Hey, what's the big deal, I've learned the three words — and, but, therefore — I'm all set!"

Wrong. You've invested a minute, now it's time to spend your lifetime mastering it. The more detailed form of this dynamic is found in the Dunning-Kruger Curve, which is this:



Notice what the curve shows — that when you learn something new, there's a tendency to think right off the bat, wow, I've got it! If you don't go any further, you end up with the old, "Been there, done that," feeling.

But look what happens if you stick around. You plunge down into the valley of reduced confidence. and for a while you're confidence actually declines as you learn more. BUT ... if you hang in there, you eventually start to climb up the other side of the valley, and that's when it really starts to get fun.

For our ABT Framework course we have a team of eight folks who have been working with me for anywhere from 4 to 40 years. In the beginning they all experienced that first peak and the feeling of, "What's the big deal."

Nowadays they'll tell you what the big deal is. They are all deep into that valley, along with me. With every new round of the course, we — all nine of us — learn new things about the ABT and narrative structure.

Furthermore, a few years ago I was at an event where I met legendary Hollywood screenwriter Eric Roth who won the Oscar for the screenplay of, "Forrest Gump" (and I had his mother, Mimi Roth, for screenwriting at U.S.C.). He had just turned 70. I asked him if, at his age, he felt he had finally mastered the art of narrative. He

chuckled and replied, “Far from it — with every new screenplay I learn something new about how narrative works.”

So even the grand masters don’t see themselves as having perfected it. And yet ... we had one know-it-all in the ABT course who ruined the Chat Window for everyone. As I would be giving a presentation, people would post questions intended for me, but he would type in answers before I could get to them. Eventually everyone developed the feeling of, “Why ask questions for Randy if this guy is going to answer them with his limited knowledge.”

In the questionnaire that his organization administered after the course they asked a standard question of, “Rate your level of knowledge of this subject before taking this course.” He gave himself a 5 out of 5. None of us running the course would rate ourselves at over a 4.

Learning narrative is a life long journey. Read Christopher Vogler’s book, “[The Writer’s Journey](#),” which is now in its third edition (and I discuss in depth in the next Bit). This is exactly what he says in the preface — that it’s an endless process of learning.

The Dunning-Kruger valley is long, deep, and challenging. It’s not clear anyone, ever makes it to the other side. But who cares, it’s a fun and fascinating journey.

BIT 7 - Vogler’s Journey

For my money, over the past three decades in Hollywood, there are two real gurus of story.

The first is screenwriting legend Robert McKee. He is legendary enough to have been made into a character in the animated series, “The Simpsons,” plus a character in the Charlie Kaufman movie, “Adaptation.” His 1997 book, titled simply, “Story,” is the most definitive and enlightened book on screenwriting, I think of all time.

The other is Christopher Vogler. Let me give you my simplistic take on what he accomplished with his iconic book, “[The Writer’s Journey](#).” I hope I get it right.

In 1977 George Lucas created an oddball outer space adventure movie called, “Star Wars.” If you want a wonderful perspective on the genesis of that incredibly

important movie read the big New Yorker feature article. "[Star Wars: Why is the Force Still With Us?](#)" by John Seabrook in January, 1997, written for the 20th anniversary of the movie's release.

Here's a passage from that article, talking about the origins of "Star Wars" in the mind of George Lucas.

*He studied Joseph Campbell's books on mythology, among other sources, taking structural elements from many different myths and trying to combine them into one epic story. One can go through "Star Wars" and almost pick out chapter headings from Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.*

In BITS 10 and 14 I tell a little about Joseph Campbell and that book. So let's look at this as a three point progression.

Point One: Joseph Campbell identified the universality of structure in the telling of stories around the world with a template he called The Monomyth.

Point Two: George Lucas used Campbell's knowledge to create his epic tale and franchise, "Star Wars," that capture the psyche of the entire planet.

Point Three: Christopher Vogler was working at Disney Studios in the 1980's when he wrote an internal memo basically dissecting "Star Wars" and revealing to writers that Campbell's teachings about "The Hero's Journey" was the magical ingredient accounting for the global success of the movie.

Vogler's memo became so widely read and propagated that he turned it into a book in 1992, "[The Writer's Journey](#)," with the title being a play on The Hero's Journey. The book presents the formal treatment of the "Hero's Journey."

What I've always found most powerful and compelling is not so much Vogler's book itself, but rather the Preface he wrote to the second edition in 1998. The entire 14 page essay is beautifully written. Here's my favorite part, which is the second paragraph. I put the last two sentences into bold because they are just incredibly powerful. Please read them slowly, over and over again.

In this book I described the set of concepts known as "The Hero's Journey," drawn from the depth psychology of Carl G. Jung and the mythic studies of Joseph Campbell. I tried to relate those ideas to contemporary storytelling, hoping to create a writer's guide to these valuable gifts from our innermost selves and our

most distant past. I came looking for the design principles of storytelling, but on the road I found something more: a set of principles for living. I came to believe that the Hero's Journey is nothing less than a handbook for life, a complete instruction manual in the art of being human.

BIT 8 - Story Circles Narrative Training Program

“NARRATIVE INTUITION”: THE “THEREFORE”

By the time I was done writing “[Houston, We Have A Narrative](#),” it was clear to me that the central challenge for communication is the need to master narrative structure. In fact, I got my final inspiration on this point from Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the co-creators of the animated series *South Park*.

You may remember that they were the guys from whom I first heard about the importance of the three words (*And, But, Therefore*)—in their 2011 Comedy Central documentary, [Six Days to Air](#). Just as my *Houston* book was coming out, a Hollywood friend mentioned he was buddies with Matt Stone. I had him send an email to Matt with the chapter from my book in which I told of learning the ABT elements from their documentary. Matt wrote back a very nice email, in which he said, “If there’s anything Trey and I work hard on, it’s structure. It’s so important and so, so hard to get right.”

And there it was, from the horse’s mouth, from the mind of the hugely successful duo, with their seven Tony Awards and the massive success of *South Park*. Look at what he said: that structure is “SO” important, yet “SO, SO” hard to get right. Yes, it’s important, but it’s incredibly hard to get right.

Without a grasp of narrative structure, you are doomed to bore or confuse. You can dazzle and excite people in the short term with fun facts and eye-grabbing visuals, but whether you actually convey a deeper message over the long term—that’s dependent upon your grasp of narrative.

Which then takes us back to the two fundamental parts to communication: content (the information you want to convey) and form (how you put it together). Content is the easy part—it’s what you already know—all the facts, and bits of humor and emotion. Form is narrative structure. As Matt Stone says, it’s the hard part—

basically solving the puzzle of how the information goes together to be best understood.

Furthermore, just memorizing narrative templates isn't enough. You need to move that information from your head to your gut. This is what Malcolm Gladwell talked about in his book, "[Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking](#)." It's the development of intuition—the gut feel for something.

In Hollywood, in the best books on screenwriting, they refer to what they call “story sense.” This is the same thing as the intuition Gladwell talks about—developing “a feel” for story dynamics at the intuitive level. When it comes to story dynamics, you need to be able to hear it, see it, speak it, sense it, and ultimately feel it at the gut level.

It was from these sources that I devised the term “narrative intuition” in *Houston*. It is the ultimate goal. Which then begs the question of how to strengthen narrative intuition.

I ended that book by recommending a form of training I called Story Circles. At the start of 2015, we began the development of our Story Circles Narrative Training program. The training is essentially groups of five individuals meeting for 10 one-hour sessions. In the five years since, we've completed nearly 100 circles involving a range of government agencies and universities.

In this chapter I will talk about the inspirations I drew from for the specific elements of Story Circles, how the training works, the “proof” that it works and what we've learned so far.

DESIGN: IMPROV- AND MEISNER- INSPIRED

The starting point for narrative training was my years of working with improv actors in Hollywood and hearing them talk about their own training. Improv actors like to say, “Improv is like a muscle; it has to be conditioned over time.”

That began to resonate with my thoughts on narrative, especially as I looked at the fMRI work of neurophysiologists. They talk about major parts of the brain being involved in narrative—as we would expect, given what a primal element narrative is for humanity itself.

Improv actors end up being like athletes: They know they need to “stay in shape,” and that requires ongoing conditioning. It’s also true for comedians. They, too, have to stay in shape if they are going to succeed at holding the interest of audiences.

I noticed something about comedian Jay Leno in the mid-1990’s matched this. Every Sunday when I was in film school at USC, I would see advertisements that he would be performing at a small comedy club in Hermosa Beach. He was host of *The Tonight Show*, making millions of dollars a year, yet he couldn’t have been earning more than a few hundred a night with that Sunday show (if he even bothered to have them pay him). I used to wonder, why would he waste time on such a financially trivial activity?

I came to realize he did it for “conditioning.” Comedians, actors, athletes—they all know they need this ongoing training. But for some reason most people who communicate to audiences as part of their job don’t seem to grasp this.

And so this became one of the core principles for narrative training—the need for repetitive activity to stay “in shape,” just like physical fitness. As my business partner Jayde Lovell and I set to work creating the training program we began to develop the analogy of physical fitness. We like to say, “You can no more go to the gym for one day and expect to go home buff than you can do a single-day workshop on narrative and think you will master it.” It takes a long-term commitment, and that’s the core philosophy Story Circles is based upon.

IT’S ALL ABOUT REPETITION

The second inspiration for narrative training came from the intensive Meisner acting program I went through in the mid-1990’s, which changed my life. My first book was filled with stories of “the crazy acting teacher” who taught the course. She was the most abusive instructor I’ve ever experienced, yet also the best.

The core principle and goal of the Meisner technique is the need for the development of “intuition” when it comes to acting. You need to get beyond just thinking about the principles of acting; you need to absorb them so deeply you can feel them in your gut. Moving this knowledge from the brain to the gut is achieved through repetition.

Again, this is what Gladwell talks about in *Blink*. He cites professional athletes and performers needing 10,000 hours to achieve the shift. The same thing as building “muscle memory.” This is the same thing Meisner training is about: repetition to

achieve this shift. And again, given how common the concept is, why isn't it seen as a fundamental part of communication?

THE BASIC HOUR SESSION

Each hourlong "workout" consists of two parts. The first half hour is the ANALYSIS of the narrative structure of other people's material using the ABT Template. Everyone is given five narratives, which are either the Abstract sections of published research papers (the first three) or synopses of movies (the fourth and fifth).

You read the samples and score them from 1 to 10. A score of 10 means you felt the sample had perfect ABT structure, versus a score of 1, which means it had almost no narrative structure. You read and score all 5 samples, and then the group discusses each one for three minutes each.

The discussion begins with each person telling what score they gave that abstract. There are frequent outbursts of laughter when someone announces that their score for an abstract is a 2, and then the next person, having read the same abstract, gives it a 9. Those moments are the start of realizing how variable a process narrative can be.

The second half of the hour is spent working on the DEVELOPMENT of the material of one member of the circle. It's sort of like the title of Jerry Graff's book, [They Say, I Say](#). The first half hour is "they say" (other people's material). The second half hour is "I say" (your material).

To keep everything on track we created a CUEING VIDEO, which can play on the laptop of a member of the circle. It's exactly 60 minutes in length, and it cues the various smaller segments to start every 2 to 10 minutes during the hour.

The cueing video turned out to be the heart and soul of the training. Narrative needs structure. So does training. If you just pull people together for an hour of blabbing about story structure, it's not going to work. You'll get the dominant people taking over as the quieter people sit quiet. You need the cueing video to prevent this. I'll say more about it in a bit.

ADDITION OF THE DEMO DAY

In 2015, we started the narrative training program by creating four prototype circles. Each one consisted of participants at different levels: undergraduates, graduates, postdoctoral scientists, professional scientists. Over the next few months the circles met for 10 one-hour sessions, intended to be once a week, but less frequently if there were scheduling problems.

One of many things we learned with the prototype circles was that basically “you have to want it” for the training to work. It’s not designed for short-attention-span, overly busy people who already think they’re great with communication. Nor is it meant for someone who is such a quick study that all they need to know is the three words—and, but, therefore.

Those types of people hear the three words and say, “Okay, I got it, all done.” But no, you don’t got it. Nobody gets it in one day. Trust me on this, we’ve been doing it for a lot of years now. Narrative takes time. There is no way around that. None. Sorry, mister busy guy. It’s all about time.

Because of this I decided there needed to be a “weeding out” step in the form of what we call the “Demo Day.” It’s a single-day event, usually from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., where roughly 40 participants are given a clear understanding of what the training will involve. There’s two hours of lecture in the morning, and then in the afternoon we conduct the standard one-hour session but expand it out to three hours, so there’s time to ask questions and discuss. By doing this no one signs up without knowing the commitment.

At the end of the Demo Day participants sign up for the circles. Over the next few weeks the host institution sorts them into the circles of 5 individuals who will meet for the 10 one-hour sessions.

The sessions take place either in person in a conference room or via teleconferencing. Early on we ran both and determined that the remote sessions are equally effective because there’s so little to the training that’s visual. (It’s not like improv.)

The first session runs for two hours and has one of our people present so everyone can ask questions and clarify details. Then we let the circles run on their own for the rest of the sessions, with no involvement from us. This initially felt neglectful and like a recipe for a disaster until we realized it works great, as I’ll explain.

RESULTS: IT WORKS

ASSESSMENT

It's been five years now, we've completed close to 100 circles, almost every one of them has gone the distance (sadly, a couple didn't make it, but still, it's over 95% success), and we now have countless examples of people applying the ABT Framework. Suffice it to say, it works.

The first question we faced was how to assess how well it works. For the initial four prototypes we performed what was essentially "B.S. metrics." We videotaped all the sessions (4 circles, 10 sessions, one hour each, equaling 40 hours of video), then had them transcribed.

We set about analyzing the transcripts and eventually found that, yes, the participants did say the words "and, but, therefore" more by the end than at the start, but so what? The increase was slight, and it wasn't even clear what that would mean. That was clearly bullshit. Here's what was much more significant ...

THE PROTOTYPE CIRCLE OF USDA RESEARCH SCIENTISTS

Of the four prototypes, the one that came to life immediately and worked best was the one with research scientists at the USDA. That circle was organized by Mike Strauss, the long-time head of their Office of Scientific Quality Review (who subsequently became the most important member of my Story Circles team). At the end of that circle I videotaped interviews with all the participants, asking them to share the details of the experience, eagerly anticipating their raves about how it had changed their lives.

What I got was disappointing. They said the training was "interesting," but ... they couldn't tell yet whether it was definitely worth the time. I went away a little jilted. We had invested a lot of energy in developing the circles, and all my intuition told me it should work, but they weren't sure it was worth it?

But ... (time for the ABT twist) ... a year later we ran a Demo Day at USDA. At lunchtime we had two members of the prototype circle take part in a lunchtime panel to discuss their experiences. I braced for the same equivocal message, but what I heard that day was the opposite.

One of them said, verbatim, “Over the past year—as we’ve put the training to work—it has changed how we talk, write and even think about our science.”
That was the golden moment. That was the day I knew we were on the right track.

OUR FIRST SURVEY OF STORY CIRCLE GRADUATES

In the spring of 2019, after nearly five years of developing the program and completing over 50 circles with around 300 graduates, we finally decided to run our first survey of graduates.

We assembled a short, very focused set of six questions, plus three blanks for them to tell us any examples of how they have put the ABT Framework to use for their own work or with others. We sent it to 120 recent graduates, hoping for a 10% response rate.

The first shocker was the response: We got 101 replies in just 10 days. Many of them thanked us for making it so short and to the point. It wasn’t the shotgun questionnaire we did for the prototypes, which was so useless. This one was very focused.

The two specific points we found were that the majority of graduates did not feel that the length of training needed to be fewer than 10 sessions, and when asked if they thought it should be compressed into just three weeks, an even larger majority said no.

But the most powerful part of the surveys was what the graduates entered into the blanks for their stories of applying the ABT Framework. We posted 130 of their accounts of applying the knowledge to a huge range of activities, including proposal writing, presentations, press-release writing, staff training, video scriptwriting and lots of other situations, including even using the ABT to help their kids with college applications.

There is an old adage for effective communication: “Don’t tell me, show me.” Having a number that says 80% of recipients found the training valuable tells you it’s important, but having 130 specific stories of the graduates using the training in the real world shows you how important it is.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR ABOUT NARRATIVE TRAINING: NARRATIVE TAKES TIME

I can't say this enough. Therapists have a favorite expression for patients: "You can't rush the river." They use it when patients come to them with major psychological problems that they want to fix overnight. I first heard it from a therapist when I was getting divorced, and then I heard it again years later from a therapist trying to help my sister deal with the death of her daughter.

You can't rush the river—in life or with narrative. It takes time. There's no getting around that. None.

Of course you can try rushing it and end up with poor quality. There's that. But if you want to communicate effectively, you have to grasp narrative structure, and if you want that, it's going to take time.

And this is why I have gravitated to the basic policy of "One-day workshops don't work." There is no "one and done" pathway. Sorry.

THREE MYTHS BUSTED: YOUNG PEOPLE, OLD PEOPLE, AND ACADEMICS

Let me now share a few more realizations we've come to after five years of running Story Circles.

1) YOUNG PEOPLE

In the beginning, we heard one thing over and over, and we believed it ourselves: "It's today's kids who are so good with communication with all their social media. They're the ones who are gonna take to this training so well."

Nope. Wrong.

Let me give a simple explanation of why this didn't happen, which is that you don't want to provide solutions to people who don't think they have a problem.

This is an age-old problem of the environmental movement. I've watched so many environmentalists come up with big solutions to environmental problems only to

find that the public (for whom the solutions were intended) doesn't think there is a problem and thus isn't likely to listen.

Same thing for young students. They don't know yet that they have any problems with communication. The first thing we saw with the prototype circle of undergraduates was that they were the most enthusiastic participants ever, but ... they didn't get it. When we got to the last three sessions, where we shift from analyzing abstracts to rewriting them, it became clear they were totally lost on what the ABT really meant and how you use it.

A year after the prototypes we ran a Demo Day with Master's students in a program for forestry and environmental studies. They were new students, not yet involved in writing papers and proposals or giving major talks. Of the 50 students, 26 signed up to join circles.

But a week later the head professor emailed to say he couldn't even find enough students for one circle. Most had signed up just to make us feel good. They didn't really intend to do the full training; they couldn't see the value of it because they didn't feel they had any serious communications problems.

And then the biggest realization hit us when a university with a conservation biology master's program added Story Circles to the first-semester orientation course for new students. They formed two circles, but by the seventh session they were ready to mutiny.

I conducted an hourlong conference call with them. They said they "got it" on the three words the first day. They couldn't understand why week after week they had to work with the same three words. Instead, they wanted classes on how to write proposals and papers—skills they had not even begun to acquire.

And that's when it hit me—you have to have a problem for Story Circles to work. You need at least some experience with failed communication in order to see why the training is valuable.

We got the confirmation of this in 2019 with the three circles of upper-level graduate students from U.C. Davis. They were 5th- and 6th-year PhD students who had already written proposals, published papers, given talks and produced videos. They had a context in which to apply the training. They did the full 10 one-hour sessions and emerged deeply appreciative of the experience and with a clear understanding of how to apply the knowledge.

So this is firming up into one of our basic realizations. Story Circles is not meant for young students. The participants need to have enough practical experience for the training to be meaningful. Otherwise it just becomes boring working with the ABT template week after week but not understanding what it's for.

2) OLD PEOPLE

You ever heard that expression that you can't teach an old dog new tricks? The flip side of what we heard about young people (above) was what people warned us about older participants: they wouldn't get the ABT Framework.

Wrong again. And this is important at a deeper level because it addresses the misconception that, "Some people are meant to be communicators, but others are hopeless." I firmly believe everyone can get better with narrative structure.

The fact is, giving a presentation that has AAA structure is fine, so long as it is accurate. But there exists a higher level of achievement with the ABT structure. If this has never been pointed out to you, there's probably a lot of improvement that can be accomplished right off the bat.

A prime example of this is Liz Foote, an environmental activist who wrote to me in 2014 about using the ABT. She had spent years giving talks that were just AAA in structure. But after hearing about the ABT she tried using it for the first time for a talk.

She experienced three things for the first time: 1) the talk was easier to rehearse, 2) during the talk she could feel that the audience was more engaged than usual and 3) after the talk she saw people on social media regurgitating her core message exactly as she had presented it.

The whole experience made her such a believer that she's been one of our main Story Circles trainers ever since. In fact, I've taken to calling this, "The Liz Moment," meaning that one experience where instead of being told how great the ABT is, you actually put it to work and experience it for yourself. That is when the ABT is truly transformative.

Oh, and one last note, Liz wasn't exactly a kid when she had this experience. Everyone, regardless of age, can make immediate, rapid improvements in their communication simply by shifting from AAA to ABT structure.

3) ACADEMICS

This one taps deep into my programming long ago as an academic snob. In my younger years I spent time around a lot of academic superstars, both as an undergraduate in the Zoology Department at the University of Washington, then as a graduate student at Harvard.

When you're not yet 25 years old, your brain is still being heavily programmed by your environment. When you hear very bright professors and graduate students constantly saying that government-agency scientists are second-rate, you begin to absorb that as a core belief. And it can stay with you for a lifetime.

As a result, when I began creating Story Circles at age 60, I warned my group that the "second-rate" government scientists probably wouldn't be bright enough to grasp what we were saying, but that the brilliant scientists of academia would take the ball and run with it.

Wrong for a third time.

Numerous academics chewed up and spat out Story Circles at universities, starting with the University of Chicago. We ran two of our prototypes there (grad students and postdocs). Some of their faculty felt they already knew how it worked, so they didn't hesitate to change several basic aspects of *our* training program to suit their ideas.

This started with them doing their own questionnaire of their participants, not at the end of the 10 one-hour sessions, but instead on the first day, after we ran the orientation sessions and left. They asked the participants five questions that basically implied that we didn't know what we were doing with the training. They sent us the results.

By the time they were done running the circles they had misconstrued so many things and bent so many of the basic rules, even letting one participant quit (the only person to quit in the first four years of the program, and part of why we eventually added the whole element of the Demo Day), that I wanted to pull the plug on them. They

sent us a pile of criticism on how to actually do Story Circles, but in the meanwhile the prototype at USDA ran perfectly, so we knew the basic model was fine.

Since then I've had a number of other run-ins with academics who: A) feel they are great communicators (their students tell them that every day) and B) think they know how to teach narrative just fine their own way. Whatever.

What we know right now, after five years, is that my brain was programmed completely wrong back in the 1970's. The government-agency folks have proven to be the ones most capable of listening, implementing and learning. And as a result, they have been a joy to work with.

My experiences with academics have frequently circled back to the first two chapters of my first book, which were titled, "Don't Be So Cerebral" and "Don't Be So Literal Minded." Such is the bane of academics when it comes to communication.

And actually, the last laugh on the University of Chicago came at a final lunch there, where it was clear they had made a mess of the training and as a result no one was enjoying it. As I shook my head in confusion, the graduate student sitting next to me quietly said, "Don't you know the nickname of this university? It's called the place where fun comes to die."

Yikes. It's true. Search it. Worst place ever for Story Circles.

BIT 9 - Speaking Simple, Writing Complex

There is so much power in simplicity. We saw it in our very first Story Circles Demo Day. It was 50 scientists from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Everyone wrote their one sentence ABT for the projects they were involved with, then took turns reading them aloud to the group. Having had no advance coaching on how to craft an ABT, they were all on the long side and packed with scientific details.

People were beginning to get a little worn down. Then suddenly a woman stood and read hers which was roughly (as I recall), "We've been catching fish with weirs for a century AND they're okay, BUT they SUCK!" At which point the entire room erupted in wild laughter, cheers and applause. All 50 people knew exactly what she meant. The same message delivered with the same number of words as the others would have evoked little response.

Shakespeare knew this in 1609 when he had Polonius say, “Since brevity is the soul of wit and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief.”

Concision is so important in today’s world. And what’s even more important to realize is that concision is different from “dumbing down.” I’ve been saying this for two decades now in dealing with the fears of those who think I’m advocating destroying intellectualism.

The fact is, the same amount of information can be stretched across different amounts of text. The goal is to find your way to the smaller amount of text without losing a significant amount of the information.

The process I developed in my 2015 book, “Houston, We Have A Narrative,” is the creation of three versions of the ABT. When it comes to creating an ABT, you are working with two forces that oppose each other. You want our ABT to be CONCISE, yet you also want it to still be COMPELLING.

To be concise you need it as short as possible, yet if you cut out too much information it will no longer be compelling. So this becomes the fundamental shaping process — pruning and trimming, trying to get it to just the right length that optimizes the two elements.

Here’s a reprinting of the section from “Houston.”

FINDING YOUR WAY TO THE IDEAL ABT VERSION

1. THE INFORMATIONAL ABT (iABT)

It may seem a little overstated, but I’m going to label these three versions of the ABT with lower case letters. It feels like I’m trying to emulate messenger RNA (mRNA), transfer RNA (tRNA), mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and other incredibly important components of the beginnings of life itself. Actually, why not?

As I’ve said, the ABT is the DNA of story.

Our starting point is the Informational ABT (iABT). This is a first version where you don't worry at all about being concise. Our only interest is to include all the compelling information.

What this produces is a massively long, clunky "sentence" that you hopefully would never try to speak in public. It's just the whole enchilada as a starting point, meant to include all the potentially compelling and interesting information, yet still narratively structured using the ABT words.

As an example here's an iABT from Katelynn Faulk, a graduate student from the University of North Texas who took part in my workshop at the American Physiological Society meeting in 2014:

iABT: In my lab we model moderate sleep apnea in rats with a chronic intermittent hypoxia protocol in order to investigate the physiological mechanisms of sustained diurnal blood pressure, BUT we have realized the importance of molecular pathways within the central nervous system contributing towards blood pressure control, THEREFORE we have begun exploring novel molecular pathways that develop as a result of our sleep apnea model.

Okay, whew, that's a mouthful. Katelynn wouldn't want to be caught dead saying all that at a cocktail party if someone asked her what she does. But don't worry. It's just a starting point.

2. THE CONVERSATIONAL ABT (cABT)

Now we go to the other end of the range, creating an ABT that takes concision to its extreme. The Conversational ABT (cABT) is a much more interesting configuration of the ABT for a couple of reasons. First, it reveals the core argument being made, and second, it provides the chance for "narrative relatability," which I will explain shortly.

The first challenge in creating the cABT is to strip the sentence of all of the compelling information and context. Put the ABT into the most generic form possible. I know this is going to read as funny, but trust me, this is what you want to uncover beneath all the words in the iABT.

Here's what I helped Katelynn arrive at (I say this so you can blame me if you think it sounds pretty dumb):

cABT: We were looking at one way but realized there's another way therefore we're looking at that way.

Yep. Sounds pretty dumb. But it's what we want—and it's actually not dumb, just totally generic and free of context.

The first thing you gain from this exercise is the realization of what it is, at the very core, you are saying. This is your story in its simplest form. This is what you can say when someone asks you, “What exactly are you trying to say?” You must be sure to always have an answer to that question—which, too often, participants in my workshop do not. Here Katelynn can answer, “Basically we were doing things one way but found out there's a better way to do it, which is what we're working on now.” That is the core of the “story” she wants to tell.

Now let's pause our Goldilocks ABT discussion to talk about why this is a powerful element. In our Connection Storymaker workshops, the idea that our improv instructor, Brian Palermo, advocates most is the need for “relatability.” At the start of our book *Connection*, each of us offered up a one sentence summary of our main message. Brian's sentence is “Make your story relatable.”

This is yet another aspect of taking the communications burden on yourself, which takes time and energy but is important. Brian is saying that if all you do is tell people a bunch of facts about your life, they may or may not find it interesting. But ultimately, they're probably going to wonder, “So what does this have to do with me?” because they simply can't relate to what you're saying.

Brian recommends finding some way to shape what you have to say into a form that your audience can relate to. If you're speaking to a group of golfers about the physics of space flight, see if you can present some of the challenges in terms of the physics of golf. Any thing you can insert that they will recognize from their world will make it easier for them to relate to what you have to say.

We can call that “character relatability”—using character material that bears direct similarity to their world. This is powerful and important. But by following the ABT process, it's also possible to connect through what we can call “narrative relatability.” This is a new distinction I've begun to make. I don't see anyone talking about narrative this way in the books on story structure published so far, but I think it has the potential to be powerful.

Say you are speaking to a group of people who have absolutely no background or interest in your field. You might still connect with some of them for at least a moment if you have a narrative structure they can recognize and relate to.

Suppose you begin by saying, “Let me tell you what I’ve been up to in my lab lately. We’ve been doing things one way but recently realized there’s another way to do them, so now we’re looking into that.”

It’s entirely possible that one person in the group is a realtor and is suddenly thinking to herself, “Wow, that’s just like me—I’ve been using one listing service for years but recently found out about a new one and now am trying the new one.”

For that one instant that person will be thinking she’s got some thing in common with you. You will have opened a channel of communication by offering up something relatable.

Now if you go on to say, “It all began when my new assistant offered up a suggestion,” it’s entirely possible that the realtor will think, “Wow—that’s also how it began for me. I hired a new assistant and he told me about this other listing service.” Once that happens, she is going to track you down later, tell you about how much you have in common, and you’ll be buddies for life.

But in contrast, if you started your talk by saying, “Let me tell you about the chronic intermittent hypoxia protocol I’ve been using in my laboratory . . . ,” the realtor as well as all the other nonscientists will instantly disconnect. Your communication possibilities will be over.

Keep in mind that the relatability has to come first. A woman told me about a dinner she attended in Australia where she sat across from the CEO of a big mining company. She immediately began lecturing him about global warming and he shut down. She asked how she might have taken better advantage of the opportunity. I told her she could have begun with some character relatability. If she had been able to Google the guy and find out he was, say, an avid tennis player, she could have begun by talking about her favorite tennis players. Basically she just needed something, anything, to provide common ground and open up the channels of communication.

But you have to lead with the relatable material. It’s not going to work to get into a spat about environmental practices with the guy, then later try to change the subject by saying, “So, did you happen to catch the Australian Open?” Nope. That won’t work at all.

3. THE KEEPER ABT (kABT)

The Keeper ABT (kABT) is your finished product. The length will be somewhere in between the other two ABT versions. You get to it by adding back some of the information you stripped out, bit by bit, while maintaining a balance between retaining concision and making it compelling. The cABT was too vacuous to be of use in presenting your story publicly, but you don't want to slip back to something as clumsy and huge as the iABT.

This was my suggestion for Katelynn's kABT:

kABT: In my lab we're studying sleep apnea using rats as our model system, AND we've been focused on physiological mechanisms, BUT lately we've realized the real controls may lie at the molecular level in the central nervous system, so AS A RESULT we've begun exploring novel molecular pathways.

This version is short enough to roll off her tongue yet includes compelling pieces of information that tell her basic story. This is roughly what she'll want to say when that VIP in the elevator asks, "So what sort of research do you do?" Her reply: "Well, thanks for asking. I study sleep apnea. Yeah, I know, kind of wild. In my lab we actually use rats as a model system and for a while we've been focused on physiological mechanisms as the controls, but *recently* we've realized the real answers are probably at the molecular level in the central nervous system, so now we're changing directions and looking at molecular pathways. And that's my story—a shift from physiological to molecular levels."

It's simple, clear. It moves right along toward an overall point. It's the sort of statement that won't bore or confuse. In fact, for many it will arouse their interest. Such is the power of narrative.

One point more. Sometimes people ask, "How do I know how many words an ABT should be?" My answer is simple—intuition. There is no set length. It will be different for every story. You will probably even want to come up with more than one ABT for whatever project you're presenting, as well as different ABTs for different audiences. You'll want one that is light on the jargon for the broadest audience, but then one for your colleagues that has a little more technical language. But when it comes to the length, that's where you need to have the narrative intuition that is the goal of all of this. That is your only hope for the long term—to be able to just feel how many words you need rather than working toward a set number, because there is no set number.

BIT 10 - Joseph Campbell and the Definition of “Narrative”

In 2011, my improv-instructor buddy Brian Palermo began making a bit of a noodge of himself in our workshops. I would use the words “story” and “narrative” liberally. He finally asked, “What’s the difference?”

I scoffed, obfuscated (the very thing I complained about back in BIT 2) and said, “You can’t separate them.” I told him the terms are too broad and all-encompassing to parse. He said “Nonsense.”

We had that exchange enough times that I began to think about what he was saying. He was right. I was being lazy. So I put the same question to a senior communications professor at USC who had been a huge help over the years. He scoffed, obfuscated and dismissed me, saying, “You can’t separate them.” I wanted to say nonsense.

By 2014, I had figured out what I feel is an effective set of working definitions for the two terms which I presented in *Houston, We Have a Narrative*. It’s now five years later. I not only stick with the definitions, I also think they are important, and that most people using these terms are just being lazy in not thinking this through.

We live in an information-overburdened world. We know that narrative structure is at the core of what we have to say. But you can sense the two words (narrative vs story) are not identical just by how people respond to them. Story has a sense of human warmth to it, while narrative is more cold and analytical. So here are my analytical definitions of the two.

THE MONOMYTH-BASED DEFINITIONS

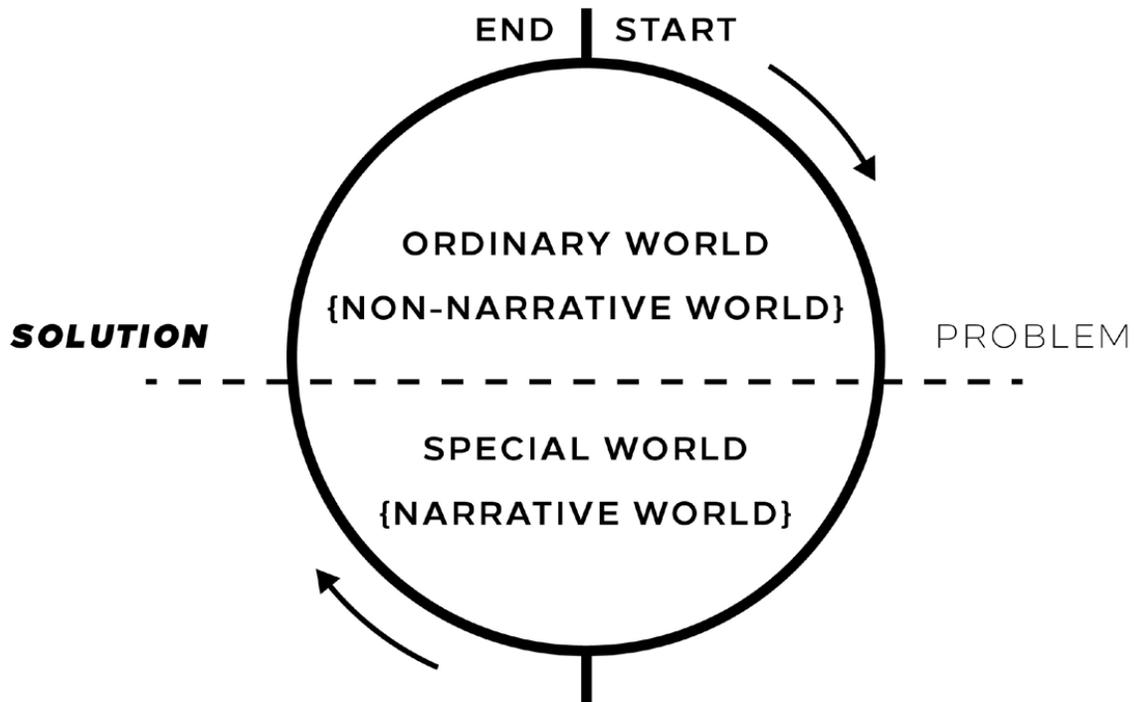
Famed mythologist Joseph Campbell did a comparative study of storytelling among the various religions and cultures of the world and found that their stories follow a basic common form, which he called “the monomyth.”

JOSEPH CAMPBELL’S MONOMYTH MODEL FOR A STORY.

A “story” is this entire diagram. “Narrative” refers to just the bottom half— the problem-solution part of the journey—which is the driving force of a story .

He defined the structure of a story as a circular journey that begins and ends at the same place. Along the way, it passes through three phases:

THE MONOMYTH



- 1) **THE ORDINARY WORLD (NON-NARRATIVE)** - The first phase is what he called the "Ordinary World." I would re-label this the "Non-Narrative World." This is the initial part of the story, which is usually called "exposition." It is largely intellectual. Information is presented, but there has yet to be a problem encountered, which means that the problem-solution part of the brain has not yet been activated. This is the A material in the ABT template. If it goes on for too long it will become the AAA template and bore everyone. We've all seen movies that left you wondering, "When is this going to start to get interesting?"
- 2) **THE SPECIAL WORLD (NARRATIVE)** - The second phase begins when the problem is encountered. This is usually referred to as, "When the story begins." The

common expression in Hollywood is, “A story begins when something happens.” This is where that something happens. Before this we weren’t really telling a story.

The “something” that initiates the problem can be finding a dead body, having the ship hit an iceberg, or having a tornado take a little girl to a new world. The corresponding problems are: whodunnit, how are we going to save everyone on the ship, and how is the little girl going to get back home?

All of these problems activate the narrative process, which activates the narrative part of the brain. Joseph Campbell called this part of the journey the “Special World.” I would rename it the “Narrative World.”

3) RETURN TO THE ORDINARY WORLD (NON- NARRATIVE) - The third part of the story starts when the problem is solved. The murderer is found, the people are saved, and the little girl returns home. This allows the narrative part of the brain to relax (mission accomplished) and return to a resting state. The final part is similar to the first part—i.e., more intellectual—now synthesizing and philosophizing about what was learned in the course of the journey.

So this becomes the distinction. “Story” is the entire package. It’s the whole journey, from start to finish. It consists of both narrative and non-narrative material. It’s warm, human and multi-dimensional.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Ronald Reagan was a storyteller. He would take the time to set up a story, providing human details to make it relatable. Then he would end it with some element of how the story relates to our world.

Donald Trump is not a storyteller. He hates small talk, which is what he would call the details of the Ordinary World (the intellectual part—not his strength). He prefers to just “cut to the chase,” by starting with the problem.

THE DEFINITIONS

So here is how I roughly define the two terms:

NARRATIVE - The series of events that occur in the search for the solution to a problem.

STORY - The complete circular journey from non-narrative to narrative, then back to non-narrative.

What this means is that “a series of events” that never gets out of the And, And, And mode of the non-narrative world is not, technically speaking, a story. This means that a resume or chronology is not a story. A series of events doesn’t become a story until a problem is established, which sets up the narrative part of the journey, which is the heart of the story.

BIT 11 - Framing “Framing”

In advance of the 2004 presidential election, a fascination arose in the Democratic Party with language and the belief that there might be magical words that could, almost by themselves, produce victory. It wasn’t totally crazy thinking; there were nuggets of truth at the center of the idea. Labels like “tax relief” obviously change the public’s perception of taxes from a fundamental need for society, to a burden that needs to be fought. But there are limits to the power of words, just as there are limits to the power of the ABT.

One voice leading this trend was pollster Frank Luntz who, in the 1990’s, had established himself with the right-wing campaigns of Pat Buchanan, Ross Perot and Newt Gingrich. He developed an obsession with the power of individual words and their ability to shape perception. He would eventually write a bestselling book in 2007 called *Words That Work: It s Not What You Say, It s What People Hear*.

Parallel to the popularity of Luntz on the right, the Democrats began an infatuation with U.C. Berkeley cognitive linguist and philosophy professor George Lakoff. He ventured out of the ivory tower and began applying to the political world the principles of his academic books. In the 1980’s he had written the non-political book *Metaphors We Live By*. A decade later, he translated that thinking to the political world with his 1996 book *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*.

Then in 2004, he published his most broadly influential book *Don t Think of An Elephant*. He presented ideas from intellectuals and academics, including from the field of psychology. His central topic was the role of “framing” in argumentation. Lakoff’s work made for great conversation at dinner parties. I was involved in the issue of ocean conservation at the time and began to hear all the communications directors of the big NGO’s in DC suddenly talking about “the need to frame the issue.” It became a popular fad.

But there was a problem. Lakoff's ideas were so heavily laced with complexity that they probably did more to confuse Democrats than help them. John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign was a major loss. By 2006, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker publicly dismissed Lakoff's ideas as "a recipe for electoral failure." I agree with Pinker wholeheartedly.

The problem was good intentions (addressing framing) but a lack of practical specifics on how to implement those intentions. The fact is, the simple idea of establishing the "frame" (as in the "frame of reference") is important. The problem Lakoff and others ran into was that their approach was too vague and intuitive, not analytical.

The ABT is the analytical tool they lacked.

The ABT provides the analytical starting point for the challenge of framing. Here's an example of how it allows you to boil down a problem. The issue of smoking can be addressed with two different frames of reference.

Frame 1—"Death": Smoking may be seen as cool, AND nicotine provides pleasure, BUT smoking causes cancer that will shorten your life, THEREFORE you should quit smoking.

Frame 2—"Health": Smoking may be seen as cool, AND nicotine provides pleasure, BUT smoking will cause your skin to dry out, your teeth to rot, your hair to fall out and leave you looking like a zombie, making your life miserable, THEREFORE you should quit smoking.

This is a shift of frame that was established long ago by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Telling people smoking will shorten their life is not that effective in reducing smoking, but telling them it will make the life they live miserable is.

For intellectuals, this comparison seems so obvious as to be trivial. But for the less intellectual grassroots, hometown, smaller-scale campaigns and campaign workers, the ABT provides the more structured tool to work on the idea of framing. It provides an analytical way to approach the message, breaking it down into the three elements (context, problem, solution), guiding you to the frame that needs to be adjusted.

Some messages can be reframed by changing the A (context/setup), some can be reframed by changing the B (the problem, as with smoking), and some can be reframed by changing the T (the consequence/action to be taken).

Given the enormous amount of arm-waving that has traditionally accompanied the topic of framing, the ABT at least provides a systematic approach to the subject. It helps get beyond the gobbledygook that psychologists produce in their lengthy TL;DR books (remember that abbreviation? hope so!) when they get involved with communication, such as with the issue of gun control, as follows.

GUN CONTROL: BEWARE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS BEARING GIFTS

Americans are obsessed with the quick fix. Years ago, I was invited to speak at an NIH symposium on obesity prevention. The opening presentation said basically that today in America there are three main approaches to combatting obesity: pills, surgery or behavior change. You can get all the funding you want to study the first two—the quick fixes—pills and surgery. The last one is simpler and cheaper, but it involves hard work. Very few agencies or foundations want to fund it.

The problem is that nobody wants to do hard work. That was basically the message of the presentation. It's similar to the field of clinical psychology today, in which doctors prefer to quickly write prescriptions for pills than to spend hours talking to patients in therapy.

So the same thing happens with political messaging. There is this belief in the silver bullet of “the right language”; that somehow, if you land on exactly the right term, suddenly the gates of receptivity open up for you, and you don't have to do any hard work.

At a deeper level, there is the idea that we are “hardwired” for certain things. The thinking is that if we can somehow “decode” that hardwiring, then bingo— we're home free.

The only problem is a little group called “neuro-skeptics.” They are a kind of neuro police, constantly pointing out how journalists like to take one obscure experiment conducted on the brains of rats and scale it up into a whole essay about how “we are hardwired for ...”. Adam Gopnik gave a great review of this trend in his incisive 2013 *New Yorker* article, “Mindless,” and the Neuroskeptical blog on the website of *Discover Magazine* is constantly on the job questioning unjustified conclusions.

And I love how Ed Yong at *The Atlantic* and John Oliver on his HBO show ripped apart celebrity scientist Paul Zak over his extrapolation of a tiny observation of rat behavior into a supposed principle that the brain chemical oxytocin is “the love drug.” Our society is awash in such nonsense these days; thank goodness for the few neuroskeptics out there trying to fight the tide.

So the more you read from neuroskeptics, the more you begin to see how much overreach arises from the believers in the decoding dream.

A prime example of this can be seen with the issue of gun control. In 2007, the mass shooting at Virginia Tech produced an outcry for gun control legislation, but congress did nothing. It became clear that the National Rifle Association had a death grip on Congress, preventing all action.

In response to this, the psychologists went to work on the language, deciding that the word “control” did not sit well with the public, which generally wants messages of freedom. They devised alternative terms, tested them, and then many settled on “gun safety” as the way to talk about the issue.

But as was pointed out in *The Atlantic* in 2013, the term “gun safety” sounds more like a training course on ... gun safety. It doesn’t directly address the issue, and it feels like caving into the aggressive voice of the NRA by being less confrontational.

As a result, the gun issue continued to stall in Congress, with no legislation passed for more than two decades. But that all changed in 2018 with the Parkland school shooting. Overnight a group of teenagers took control of the mass messaging. They didn’t do any polling, they didn’t consult any academics, they just acted from their gut feelings. They used the more direct, confrontational and traditional term “gun control” widely. And they succeeded in prompting passage of the first national gun legislation since the 1990’s.

At the moment, the exact label for the issue is straddling both terms. You now see many politicians saying, “gun control and gun safety”—using the former term to connect all the way back to the original Gun Control Act of 1968 and the latter term to supposedly play to those who prefer it. But that’s not good because, as we’ll see in a bit with what Nicholas Kristof discusses, narrative is always at its strongest when it is singular. Having two terms for an issue just dilutes the effort. But, of course, psychologists don’t care about that, as they are more fond of nuance than power when it comes to communication.

BIT 12 - The Singular Narrative

Nicholas Kristof is the three-time Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist from *The New York Times*. In 2009, he published a stunningly simple and powerful essay in (of all the unlikely places) *Outside Magazine*.

The title is, "Nicholas Kristof's Advice for Saving the World." The subtitle is, "What Would Happen If Aid Organizations and Other Philanthropists Embraced the Dark Arts of Marketing Spin and Psychological Persuasion Used on Madison Avenue? We'd Save Millions More Lives."

Kristof and his wife worked on a health issue in Africa for many years. Over the years they watched many public-health education campaigns come and go. Most were failures; a few succeeded. Out of what they saw he crafted the article, delving into what worked.

There are many gems of wisdom in his article, but the one that addresses the need for a simple, singular message is one of the best parts. He says you need to keep the message about just one thing. Not even two things. Just one.

He says, "Storytelling needs to focus on an individual, not a group." He illustrates this point by citing a classic experiment in which people are asked to donate to help fight hunger in Africa. They are asked to help one little girl named Rokia. Now, wouldn't you think that if they were presented with the suffering of two little girls, they would be twice as motivated? But then what about five, or ten, or a thousand?

Of course it goes in the opposite direction. Narrative is at its strongest with the one, singular subject. He quotes the age-old adage, "The death of one person is a tragedy; the death of a million is a statistic."

This is such an infinitely powerful and central property of narrative. It's so fundamentally important that it was the focus of an entire bestselling book in 2013, called *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*, by Gary Keller and Jay Papasan. And I will talk about it in depth in the fourth chapter, when I explore the communication handicap of the science world.

DAVE GOLD: TRUMP HAD A CHRISTMAS TREE, HILLARY HAD A BOX OF ORNAMENTS

The other super-important article comes from Dave Gold, a long-time strategist for the Democratic Party. Just three months after Hillary Clinton's defeat he published

a simple, concise and powerful article in *Politico* called, “Data-Driven Campaigns Are Killing the Democratic Party.”

He delved into the fundamental problem of the Democrats failing to grasp narrative dynamics. He talked about the importance of finding the singular narrative at the core of a campaign, and he mentioned a great metaphor he had learned from one of his professors long ago.

The idea is to think of the central theme of a good campaign as “the Christmas tree” upon which all the issues of the campaign, the “ornaments,” are hung. This Christmas tree metaphor is incredibly powerful and dovetails with Kristof’s emphasis on the singular narrative.

Trump had an obvious Christmas tree: Make America Great Again. He was able to hang every issue on that tree. He said we need to reduce immigration to make America great again, we need to have a tax cut to make America great again and we need to ban Muslims to make America great again. On and on, with everything supporting the one overarching theme of making America great again. The approach was mind- numbingly simple to Democrats, but it worked for Trump with his followers, and it continues to work.

Hillary had no Christmas tree—only a box of ornaments. She is not remembered for any clear message. At all.

In a few pages I will present the Dobzhansky Template for finding the one-word theme at the center of a narrative. It is essentially the same thing as the Christmas tree. If you can figure out that central theme, you will have conquered the hardest part of the challenge of narrative.

And if you think you can just ignore it ... well, look what happened with that election.

BIT 13 - Fidelity: Controlling the Narrative

Remember the old Rumor Game you played in elementary school where everyone was in a circle, the teacher whispered something in the ear of the first student who then whispered it in the ear of the next student as it was passed around the circle.

When it came full circle the last student said it aloud to the group, then the teacher told the group what the original version was.

Usually the core of the message would get “lost in translation” ending up with something that bore no resemblance to the starting message. We can call that group a “low fidelity system.” The message lost its integrity along the way. If each student had a recorder that they used each time to record and play it back to the next student then you would end up with a “high fidelity system” that retained the message in its original form.

Now let’s talk about the same circle of whispering kids and the difference between whether the structure of the initial message is AAA or ABT. I guarantee you if you start with AAA you’ll end up with something that gets drastically changed along the way. But if you start with ABT, there’s a good chance the end product will still sound close to the original.

How am I so sure of this? Let me tell you about a couple of similar instances.

THE LOCKED NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The first is from the filmmaking world. One of my film school classmates edited a documentary that ended up premiering at major film festivals and is currently on Netflix. During the editing process he came up with an opening graphic of text that referred to a group of characters in a criminal gang. His first draft had ABT structure. It was basically, “These characters were this AND this AND this, BUT they were never this, THEREFORE ...”

He proudly read the first draft to me over the phone from the editing suite one night. Then, over the next year, as a constant string of producers, researchers, the director, and even characters in the documentary all got the chance to look at the film and offer suggestions, his opening graphic got rewritten, over and over again. Along the way, the words AND, BUT and THEREFORE all were deleted. And yet, the structure never changed.

The final draft of the screen basically said, “These characters were this. They were this. They were this. (pause, then fade in final line) They were never this.”

Every word had been changed, BUT ... it was still ABT structure, and as a result, it still told the same opening vignette, just with different words. Because of the ABT structure, the content retained structural fidelity.

So that's one example. Here's another.

Liz Foote, who works in ocean conservation and has been part of our Narrative Training group since 2014, attended an ocean conservation conference where she was asked to write a first draft of a statement about a marine park that was being created. Of course, being a loyal ABT fan, she wrote the statement as an ABT.

She ended up with the same experience as my film editor friend. Over the week of the conference, a variety of members of the group backing the marine park put their fingers into the editing of the statement. By the end of the week, just like the film graphic, the statement had been entirely rewritten. And yet ... the ABT structure remained untouched.

The bottom line is that once you land on the ABT structure, it's very hard to go away from it. It's hard to go from narrative to non-narrative. And as a result, ABT material tends to retain its fidelity better than non-ABT.

BIT 14 - THE ORDINARY WORLD

Okay, speaking of things that are hard to let go of, let's talk about the Ordinary World in some detail.

The Ordinary World is something everyone loves, and as a result, everyone yearns to never leave. I introduced it in the book in Chapter Four when I mentioned Joseph Campbell's Monomyth template and connected to BIT 10 where I provided an overview of the Monomyth. Now let me try and give you a little more in-depth feel for it.

The Ordinary World is basically "nirvana." I'm not talking about the 90's rock band. I'm talking about that ultimate state of ecstasy that everybody longs for. Here's what Wikipedia says about nirvana: All Indian religions assert it to be a state of perfect quietude, freedom, highest happiness as well as the liberation from or ending of *samsara*, the repeating cycle of birth, life and death.

Doesn't that sound like a great place to be?

Let's look at that last bit — the "repeating cycle." That is the eternal three part circle of life. It's the same thing that legendary author Kurt Vonnegut outlines in his extremely simple four minute encapsulation of story structure. If you've never seen his little lecture, take four minutes right now and [watch it the master storyteller at work.](#)

The third curve that he draws he says is, "the most popular story in our civilization." In the longer version of his lecture he identifies that curve as the story of, "Birth, Death, Rebirth." Sound familiar? It's the same thing as agreement, contradiction, consequence.

It's all the same basic pattern, over and over again. Ordinary World (birth), Special World (death of being consumed by a problem), return to the Ordinary World (rebirth in the solving of the problem).

Now let's round this off to the simplest of levels.

EXPECTED VS OBSERVED

The pursuit of scientific knowledge is all about these two elements: How we EXPECT things to be, based on prior experience, and what we actually OBSERVE. If they are the same, there's no contradiction, and thus no narrative dynamic. But they are rarely the same, and that's where the power of narrative starts to kick in.

This then guides us in the construction of an ABT statement. As I laid out in Chapter 5 (which is about STEP TWO of the model), the opening material of an ABT consists of two main elements — the Ordinary World (the world before a problem arises), then followed by addressing the question of, "What's at Stake?"

The Ordinary World is our vision of how we expect things to be. In fact, it is most powerful if we can lay it out in our mind by starting with the phrase, "In a perfect world ..."

Because the Ordinary World is about essentially nirvana, the more perfect our vision of the Ordinary World is, the more powerful it is. Given that our whole goal

with narrative structure is to evoke a response, this means that the best way to do it is to present a picture of what you most want (nirvana/perfect world), then take it away.

You start the taking away with the word BUT. The way you take it away is by following this Ordinary World (this EXPECTED world) with the harsh news of the OBSERVED world. Basically:

Here's your dream, but now here's your ugly reality.

Just about every murder mystery conforms to this. We go to a happy small town, AND we get to know a bunch of happy people, BUT then one of them is found dead. Happy world, to ugly real world.

It's that simple. The Ordinary World is where we want to be, the Special World is not. The Special World may be exciting (we've got a problem to solve) but it's also exhausting. The truth is you just want to get back to that peaceful Ordinary World. Again, like a murder mystery. We watch the movie to engage in the solving of the mystery, but the entire time, deep inside, we just want to solve it so we can relax (then search for the next mystery).

The movie, "The Wizard of Oz," actually appears to be the opposite of this sequence. On the surface it looks like Kansas is a horrible place, while Oz is wonderful. But deep inside, it turns out Kansas, despite it's dullness, is about as close to nirvana as one can hope to get ("There's no place like home") while Oz, despite it's bright colors and excitement, is actually a lonely and unfulfilling place because ... it's not home.

Which means that at a deeper level, the movie conforms to the same pattern — the ideal world (home), overturned by a tornado that takes Dorothy into an inferior place (not home).

That may all sound like Hollywood silliness, but it's the same thing with your ABT whether it is about a new brand of popcorn, or about funding for a water conservation project. To communicate about it most powerfully and effectively, you want to tap into this divide.

First tell us how the world should be, then tell us how it is. For popcorn ...

“Popcorn ought to put a smile on your face and help you enjoy every movie ever made, BUT most popcorns fall short by being too dry or tasteless, THEREFORE you need to try our brand which never suffers those problems.”

or water conservation ...

“An effective water conservation plan guarantees protection from droughts AND creates sustainable income, BUT there is no conservation plan for the Anderson Valley water district, THEREFORE we are now seeking funding to establish one.”

The central element for setting up the EXPECTED WORLD is to lay out “what we know to be true.” That’s what expectations are build upon. For this, there’s a perfect character to turn to for help.

DR. WENODIS

Okay, it may be one of the dumber characters that Saturday Night Live has come up with in recent years AND I don’t really see people falling in love with (the brilliant) Kate McKinnon character “Dr. Wenodis,” (a pipe smoking medical expert who likes to explain the pandemic), BUT it’s just the character we need, THEREFORE let’s talk about Dr. Wenodis (as in “We Know This”).

I happen to love the character because for years, in the middle of heated arguments, I’ve always been fond of forcefully saying, “Look, we know this ...” Suddenly when they showed how dumb that bit of phrasing sounds, I am infatuated with [Dr. Wenodis on SNL.](#)”

So there’s your simple tool for starting your ABT. See if it makes sense to begin by establishing the EXPECTED WORLD by laying out what we know. It turns into the perfect bait and switch: Here’s how perfect we know the world can be, BUT here’s how imperfect it is.

Basically, “We know dis, dis and dis, BUT ...”

Give it a try. You’ll say to me, “I works!” And I’ll reply, “Wenodis.”

BIT 15 - The Three Forces of Narrative

THE THREE FORCES OF NARRATIVE

When you search the three words of the ABT, you come to realize they are connector words. They are not verbs, not nouns, not adjectives—they are words that connect other text.

“And” connects pieces of information that are in agreement— like, “We went here AND we went there AND we went there ...”

“But” connects text that contradicts itself—“She was happy, BUT she was also sad ...”

“Therefore” connects text with its consequence—“He was sick, THEREFORE he stayed home from school.”

Now you see the three fundamental forces of narrative at work. They are:

AGREEMENT - the setup, what we can all agree upon

CONTRADICTION - the problem, what we’re confronting

CONSEQUENCE - the actions being taken, or the solution itself

This is how we communicate, all day, every day. We talk about things we agree upon. We hit points of contradiction.

Then we resolve the contradiction with the consequence.

Furthermore, we work these three elements at different scales. This is what good storytelling is about: small-scale stories, medium-scale stories, and overarching stories, all overlain on each other to make a seemingly complicated whole story.

You'll get to see this in Chapter 2 in Oprah Winfrey's wonderful Golden Globes speech that *The New York Times* called "a story of stories."

These three forces are so powerful and ubiquitous that I've taken to format-coding them (blue, red, green) as a way to analyze the narrative structure of texts. Also, for black and white text, I use plain, bold and italics for the three forces. To see the breadth of their application in our language in a wide range of material, check out the examples in Appendix 3.

Truly effective communication requires all three forces, used in the right measures and in the right sequences. This is what the ABT is—a little bit of agreement for the setup, the contradiction that states the problem, then the consequence as either the action towards solving the problem or the solution itself.

BIT 16 - What's at stake/why should we care?

This question is the very essence of whether what you have to say is interesting. It applies both in the world of storytelling and the non-fiction real world of problem solving. Let me start with a little anecdote to show how universal it is.

When I was a scientist I ended up with the first few research proposals I submitted to the National Science Foundation being rejected. After about the fourth one of these rotten experiences (it takes about three months to write the massive proposals then six months for them to be reviewed and deliver the bad news), I finally had a phone call with the program officer who was in charge of giving feedback to the scientists who get rejected.

The program officer said to me, "Why should we care about how the larvae of starfish manage to undergo metamorphosis?" I found the question exasperating. The answer was obvious to me. This is knowledge we don't have. We need to know it. End of story. And end of funding possibilities.

One of the deeply satisfying aspects of leaving my career as a scientist was the knowledge of never having to answer this question of, "Why should we care ..." for the rest of my life. BUT ...

It wasn't more than about three months after I arrived in Hollywood that I found myself in the office of a group of producers to whom I was pitching my idea of a documentary feature film about the undersea habitat I had spent a week living in back when I was a marine biologist. The film would follow four scientists for a week living in the habitat. One of the producers said to me, verbatim, "Why should we care about four scientists living in an undersea habitat?" I wanted to jump across the table and throttle him.

But that's how it goes. It's one of the worst handicaps of the INNER GROUP — that you hang out with a bunch of people with whom you don't have to answer the question of "Why should we care?" to because they already value the subject matter you're working with.

It's good to get out of the INNER GROUP frequently, and it's good to be humbled from time to time by being forced to answer that annoying question, whether you feel above it or not.

And by the way, Hollywood lives and dies on its ability to address the question. It is the central challenge of screenwriters — making the audience care about the story and characters they are presenting, without resorting to having everyone's life in danger at every moment.

Here's a quote from [an article in Script Magazine](#) by Hayley Mackenzie.

Making the audience care about your characters' struggle when no one's life is in danger takes great skill, but when done well, these kinds of stories, of struggles we recognize as reflecting our own lives, can deliver an emotional intensity to match any death scene.

BIT 17 - The Shallowing: Cutting to the Chase

In 2011 Nicholas Carr published, "[The Shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains.](#)" The message was pretty much that we're turning into shallow, short attention-spanned zombies, slowly but surely. It was widely discussed in the academic world where they pretty much just said, "Yup."

You can see it everywhere these days, including in movies. In my "Houston" book I presented this figure showing what has been happening to the first act of movies. I didn't have the time and energy to gather a huge data set, but I think we all know this is the general pattern — people have lost their ability to sit through lengthy amounts of AAA material, which is what the first act of a story is.

In the years since I wrote about that, the pattern has gotten worse. Three prime examples are "Mad Max: Thunder Road," "Dunkirk," and "1917." All of them take about three minutes to get through the first act, then the rest of the movie is all second act — a relentless sprint.

For Mad Max, a few quick things happen, then they are off on the chase. For Dunkirk, the "A" and the "B" are set up by the opening text that says Hitler had the British troops surrounded at the start of World War II up against the coast in Dunkirk. It opens on a soldier running frantically in the streets of Dunkirk AND he's trying to find his way to the beach to escape AND he runs down an alley that puts him on the beach BUT then he sees massive numbers of troops, all waiting to be taken back to Britain, THEREFORE the rest of the movie is about them trying to get back to Britain before being killed — just a nonstop series of ABTs around ships and planes and boats and on and on. All action, no time for any character development, which was the one critique of the movie.

Same story for "1917." It takes about three minutes for a soldier to be told to grab a friend and come to the general's tent where they are told troops are out on the front BUT the communication lines to them have been cut, THEREFORE the two soldiers must risk their lives to take them a message AAAAAAND, we're off and running for the next 90 minutes with the same structure, nonstop ABTs, one after another as they dodge bullets and knives and whatever. Same thing, no character work, very much like a video game.

The bottom line of all this is what did these movies show us about human nature. Pretty much nothing. No more than what you would learn on an entertainment park ride, which is what they are. And that’s what you get when you “cut to the chase.”

You sweep up the mass audience and it’s fun, but there is no dramatic impact. To achieve that, you have to have the blue material at the start — the And, And, And set up sequence.

In our decade long journey with the ABT this is one of the deeper lessons we’ve learned. In the beginning, we thought the “A” material is the boring stuff that you want to minimize. But then you start to see that if you cut it too short, you have no impact.

Which means this is the true art of communication. Do you have enough charisma to engage the audience in a lot of AAA material at the start without them getting bored. If you do, you can weave a yarn that will cause audiences to cry their hearts out or laugh their heads off. But if you don’t, you’ll end up with something that will have zero impact in the long term.

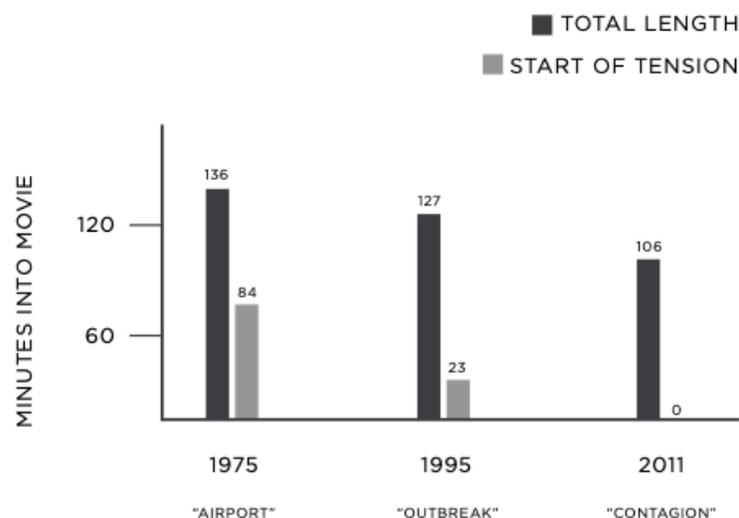


Figure 4. First Act Length Is Changing. This is not a scientific sample, but it is undoubtedly reflective of what we all know is happening as people’s attention spans have waned. In 1975, audiences would give you an hour to start your story. Today, Contagion started its story in the first frame of the movie.

BIT 18 - The Narrative Spectrum

EXPANDING THE ABT INTO THE NARRATIVE SPECTRUM

Earlier I mentioned *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. One of my favorite lines is when Brad sings to Janet, “There’s three ways that love can go. That’s good, bad or medioooooore ...” (It took me years, in the pre-internet era, to figure out that second line.)

Same thing for communication. Sing along with me, “There’s three ways that communication can go. That’s interesting, boring or confuuuusing ...”

The element that determines which of those three outcomes you have is the central element: contradiction. People like to talk about how the media is “conflict-driven,” which is true. But conflict is just one of many potential sources of contradiction, including suspense, mystery, inquiry—they are all possible driving forces for narrative. The key thing is that the overall category is contradiction.

There are lots of words that are used to establish contradiction (such as “despite,” “however,” “yet”) but the most commonly used word is “but.” You can find a number of websites that list the most commonly used words in the English language. “And” is always in the top 3. “But” is usually around 15 to 25. None of the other words of contradiction are even in the top 100. So that’s why we choose to focus on “but”—the most common word for the most powerful part of narrative.

You need the contradiction for the narrative process to begin. If there’s just a lot of facts with no contradiction, you end up with the AAA structure (And, And, And), which is non- narrative and boring.

It’s the contradiction that activates the brain. There’s now starting to be substantial neurophysiology research on how narrative activates the brain. I talked about this in detail in my science-oriented *Houston* book.

We can talk about a happy family (non-narrative so far), living in a happy town (still non-narrative and starting to get boring), and every day is happy for them (totally

non-non- narrative and definitely boring), *but* then the father is found dead (yes! Now we have a story because we have contradiction; the narrative part of the brain is activated and we're in the narrative world with a "whodunnit" problem to solve).

So you need some contradiction, but ... on the other hand, if there's too many elements of contradiction ("but we didn't want to leave, but they said we had to, but nobody heard them, but we were busy watching television, but ...") you end up with confusion. Rather than call this particular structure the BBB, I opted to use some other words of contradiction (there's lots of them). I call it DHY for "Despite, However, Yet."

THE ABT WALK OF LIFE. We're born boring, we die confusing.

DHY ends up being the kind of speech you hear from academics who are very smart and like to challenge themselves by speaking on multiple planes. They speak parenthetically, they go on tangents, they do anything to make things complex, challenging, and, for most average people ... confusing.

They say, "Immigration is an important issue **DESPITE** the tendency of politicians to neglect it, **HOWEVER** some issues are so neglected they are never even talked about, **YET** when it comes to politicians, some can never stop talking ..." You can see this structure leads to randomness and confusion. Your brain locked onto immigration, but then we led you to politicians, and then to talking—like a treadmill of thoughts.

And, But, Therefore!



So if you want to be truly engaging, understandable, compelling—all of which add up to interesting—then your goal is the ABT. It has just the right mix of: agreement to set up the context, contradiction to pose a problem that activates the narrative part of the brain, and consequence to point to the solution to the problem.

These three structures come together in the Narrative Spectrum. It is the central tool for our Story Circles Narrative Training program.

BIT 19: The First Major Paragraph of MLK, Jr's "I Have A Dream" Speech

Some day there will be genes (or a gene) identified that are responsible for "narrative aptitude." Some people will have a double dose of it, causing them to see too many stories in the world and become paranoid schizophrenic. Others will lack the gene entirely, causing them to fail to see why "facts are not enough" as they spew out mountains of pure information.

In fact, I bet it will even be visible morphologically in the brain such that histologists (or MRI technicians) can recognize brains that are more narratively

endowed (towards the DHY end of the Narrative Spectrum) versus non-narrative brains (at the AAA end of the narrative spectrum).

Furthermore, the divergence will probably even be identified in children, by about five years old. From an early age some kids are able to talk in a way that “sounds very mature,” and others can’t. A lot of that perception of maturity is the ability to set up context (AND), identify problems (BUT), and talk in terms of consequence (THEREFORE). Years later, those kids are adults and are referred to by friends as, “a natural born storytellers.”

THE “I HAVE A DREAM” OPENING — PURE ABT

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Abraham Lincoln both had a natural gift for narrative structure which is visible in their greatest speeches. Both of them were known not just for their one great speech (“I Have A Dream” and the Gettysburg Address, respectively) but for lots of speeches. When you look at their scores for the [Narrative Index](#) (the BUT/AND ratio) they both have exceptionally high averages. They knew narrative.

Perhaps the greatest demonstration of the depth Dr. King’s narrative intuition can be seen just by looking at the first major paragraph of his, “I Have A Dream” speech of 1963. It is the complete embodiment of ABT structure as I shall now reveal in detail.

His first paragraph was just pleasantries about, “I am happy to join with you today.”

It’s the second paragraph where he got down to business, and did so with nearly perfect ABT form. Here’s my dissection of that paragraph.

1 ORDINARY WORLD (drawing on “time”) - He begins by establishing the Ordinary World of his narrative, and does so by drawing on the most powerful element in narrative: time. He connects himself with “a great American” (Lincoln) and echoes Lincoln's use of the word “score.”

2 WHAT’S AT STAKE? He mentions what was at stake a century earlier (“millions of Negro slaves”) and even shows his grasp of the fundamental rule of “The power of storytelling rests in the specifics,” in assigning a number (millions)

rather than just saying something vague like “many.” Notice also his sequence. He didn’t begin with WHO (the slaves), he began with the WHAT (emancipation). This is the same as the WHAT/HOW dynamic I’ll address in a bit.

3 OPENING STATE OF TOTAL AGREEMENT - There is no drama in his opening AND statement. Everything is peaceful — a story with the happy ending of, “It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.” It is so perfectly crafted. The story is over. He has told a tale of complete victory, success and the whole story appears to be over with. Except for the next word is ... BUT. Which means, “Not so fast, folks.”

4 BUT - There’s the word. He didn’t soften the blow with words like, “However,” “Yet,” or “Although.” No, he went right to the most powerful word in the English language. Boom. And then he followed it with the WHAT of his problem (not the HOW). He could have said, “But the Negro suffers the manacles of segregation, the chains of discrimination, lives on a lonely island of poverty, etc.” No, he went directly to the headline — “But the Negro is still not free.” That was the broad, over-arching WHAT of the problem, then he elaborated.

5 THE “HOW” OF THE PROBLEM - Once he’s established the WHAT, then he went into the HOW in repeated detail. In fact, what he did was elevate the dramatic impact by reiterating the problem — four times he began phrases with, “One hundred years later ...” All that material is the HOW — the ways in which they are still not free.

6 THEREFORE (SO) - Look at the last sentence of the paragraph. He doesn’t start with “Therefore” — it’s too clunky of a word most of the time. No, he begins with, “So,” which is the more conversational form. And then he makes his statement of consequence — the actions that are about to take place as a consequence of the problem. He said, “So, we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.”

And there you have it. Near perfect AND, BUT, THEREFORE structure at the opening of one of the greatest speeches in the history of this country. The ABT is an object of beauty, and offers a new and different way to appreciate the greatest of speeches by looking analytically at their narrative structure.

BIT 20 - Dramatic Impact

COMING SOON!