Elements of Story

Story-based strategy (SBS) is a way to think about our words and actions as two parts of a whole. This is more than just “good messaging”.

We use five Elements of Story to analyze our opposition’s stories and to write our own.

1. Conflict
   This is the backbone of narrative, what defines the drama, point of view, and makes the story interesting.

2. Characters
   Subjects, protagonists, and narrators of stories.

3. Imagery
   Words to capture imagination with metaphor, anecdote, and descriptions that speak to the senses and make the story tangible.

4. Foreshadowing
   The ways that a story provides hints to its outcome.

5. Underlying Assumptions
   Unstated parts of the story that must be accepted in order to believe the narrative is true.

Goal audience

Target constituency

Break down the power

Start by getting specific about goals, audiences, targets, and constituencies to ensure that the stories and strategy we develop are grounded in the day-to-day realities of power around our issues.

The Cornerstones of our work:

- **Goal:** What specific change are you trying to achieve?
- **Audience:** Who are the specific groups of people that you most need to reach and persuade?
- **Target:** Who is the decision-maker that can make this desired change happen?
- **Constituency:** Who is your base? The organized groups of people or communities who you already work with, represent or share common interests with.

Break down the opposition’s story

Break down the opposition’s story into its component five elements of story. Understand the story you are aiming to change:

- How does the story make existing outcomes possible or inevitable?
- How does conflict in the opposition story prevent us from talking about our desired solutions?
- What do we have to believe, in order to believe their story is true?
- What foundational myths are being activated by this story? (i.e. American exceptionalism or the “invisible hand” of the market.)

* Often the opposition’s story is really just the Status Quo story, the one widely-accepted as reality.

Put your audience in the front row

Who are the people that you need to reach and persuade? Hint: the answer is never “the general public”.

Craft your story

The point of SBS is not to simply tell a good story.

- Which conflict allows you to move your audience to a clear decision-choice?
- Who needs to be introduced, explained away, taken out, renamed, subsumed or broken out, amongst our field of characters in order to reinforce your conflict frame?
- What is the imagery (props, settings and vignettes) that support your conflict frame and reinforce your assumptions?
- What negative foreshadowing, can illustrate the cost of not siding with you?
- Cost to a constituency (agitational)
- Or cost to a target (threat)
- What assumptions can you uplift and claim that close the window on policies and outcomes you are against and open the window to outcomes you desire?

Change the story, you’ll need to decide how to intervene in the opposition story.

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A Point of Intervention (POI) is a place in a system — physical system or a system of ideas — where action can be taken to interfere with the story in order to change it. A POI can literally be a place, or it can be a setting for a message or story.

Choose POIs based on where the underlying assumptions of the opposition story are being reinforced and/or on where your key audience(s) will be.

Look for fissures. Fissures are cracks in the opposition story — POIs where the opposition’s story is particularly vulnerable, already in the process of changing, or extra-valuable as leverage.

Plan action that furthers your story, not just your values. Make your characters clear. Choose imagery that furthers your story. Be careful, it is always possible to have an amazing message, and an exciting POI, but to have action logic that undermines your story or, worse, reinforces your opponent’s story. A common example: if the opposition’s story is that a marginal group of protesters are the only ones against them, then the action logic of a small sign-holding protest is vulnerable to reinforcing that story.

F.R.A.M.E.S. is a useful acronym representing 6 quick tests to use before moving a message from the drawing board out into the world. Use F.R.A.M.E.S. on your entire action/event plan, not just your top-level messaging.

F = FRAMING

Does it reinforce the vision and values that you are promoting? Framing means defining the problem, who will be broadly impacted, and the solution.

#ChangeTheStory, because just telling a totally new story too-easily assumes people are empty vessels waiting for you to pour your story in. Pin down the story you need to change, and then take action to transform it. So while this work is infused with imagination, it is grounded in your analysis, and your strategic assessment. Transforming the opposition stories takes time, but it’s essential to creating a world where the goals and futures you imagine are possible or inevitable.

If you tell me, it’s an essay. If you show me, it’s a story. — Barbara Green

Show Don’t Tell, because unfortunately the facts often do not speak for themselves. Instead, we need to use images, metaphor, visualization and the five senses to illustrate what is important in the story as if we were painting a picture with our words. While the veracity of your claims is essential, facts only serve as the supporting details of the story, not the hook that makes the story compelling.

R = REFRAIN OPPONENT’S STORY & REINFORCE OUR FRAME

Make sure your message is not just reiterating your opponent’s frame. Re-framing means changing the terms of debate on the issue.

A = ACCESSIBLE TO THE AUDIENCE

Who is your message trying to persuade? Be as specific as possible about the audience and ensure that the message is crafted in terms of language, context, and values that will be appealing to them.

M = MEMORABLE

The message has got to be memorable, easy to spread and “sticky.” How can you encapsulate your message in a symbol, slogan, or metaphor that captures the essence?

E = EMOTIONAL

People don’t swing into action because of a pie chart. An effective message should speak to people in terms of values, and deliver some emotional impact. Trigger emotional responses with themes like tragedy, hope, anger, frustration, and don’t forget joy!

S = SIMPLE & SHORT

This means to get to the core essence of the issue. What is the most important point of the issue? What is it that makes it matter to your audience?