

STORY-BASED STRATEGY 101

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.



Conflict

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



Characters

Subjects, protagonists, and narrators of stories



Imagery

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



Foreshadowing

The ways that a story provides hints to its outcome



Underlying Assumptions

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

1 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.

2 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.*

3 PUT YOUR AUDIENCE IN THE FRONT ROW

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

- **Imagine the audience(s) for your story as specifically as possible.** Who are they? What kinds of jobs do they work? Education? What hopes, dreams, fears, and biases do they hold? What movies, shows, books and entertainment do they consume?

See your work through the eyes of your audience.

The meaning of words and images are determined NOT through your eyes, but through the eyes and hearts of your audience.

- **Is your audience INSIDE our movements?** Sometimes we take action to help move our movement organizations and communities on an issue. The questions above still apply.

4 CRAFT YOUR STORY

The point of SBS is not to simply tell a good story. You take serious risks when you tell an entirely new story instead of changing the story. If the story is too radically different from where people are now, you can come off as arrogantly handing out answers. People can only go somewhere that they have already been in their minds, so take them there.

Our Story has to meet your audience where they are. It must challenge the opposition story’s underlying assumptions – taking care to never accidentally reinforce them. Your story must uplift your underlying assumptions and reflect your values and the future you envision.

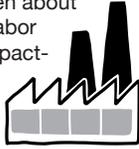
- Which **conflict** allows you to move your audience to a clear decision/choice?
- Who needs to be introduced, explained away, taken out, renamed, subsumed or broken out, amongst our field of **characters** in order to reinforce your conflict frame?
- What is the **imagery** (props, settings and vignettes) 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?

TO #CHANGETHESTORY, YOU’LL NEED TO DECIDE HOW TO INTERVENE IN THE OPPOSITION STORY.

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5 CHOOSE *WHERE* TO INTERVENE *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.*

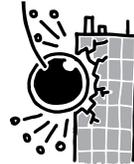
Production - A place where things are made. Factories, crop lands and schools. The realm of strikes, picket lines, crop-sits, etc. Interventions here are often about leveraging labor power or impacting profits.



Consumption - Places where people are in the role of customer. Stores, restaurants, online spaces, TV/movies etc. Sometimes the only place that an audience has a physical interaction with systems we are changing. The realm of consumer boycotts and markets campaigns.



Destruction - A place where something is destroyed. Dumpsters, mines, clearcuts, landfills, jails, etc. Interventions here are often about stopping the bad.



Decision - Anywhere there is decision making. Corporate HQ, polling places, townhalls, city council meetings, slum-lord's office, etc. Interventions here are often about challenging the assumption of who is a legitimate decision maker.



Assumption - Challenging underlying beliefs/control mythologies. Could also be actions tied to cultural moments or pop culture trends. Or prefigurative actions such as actualizing alternatives.



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.

6 CHOOSE *HOW* TO INTERVENE *How do your actions and visuals take advantage of your chosen POI to tell your story? Action Logic is the explicit or implicit narrative that is illustrated by a specific action; how an action makes sense politically to an outside observer.*



Now that you've picked a POI to intervene in, you need to develop **Action Logic** – the relationship between your story and your POI. Your audience should be able to understand the conflict, target, demands and other key pieces of your story at a glance or from a distance.

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 protestors are the only ones against them, then the action logic of a small sign-holding protest is vulnerable to reinforcing that story.

Your POI is a setting for a chapter in your story. What is happening in that setting?

- How does your Action Logic make your story's conflict obvious? Your actions, signs, and details need to make this clear.
- How might Action Logic set up your opponents as outsiders and your heroes as belonging?
- Which ONE assumption is your choice of POI and Action Logic challenging? (more is fine, but one is harder than it seems)

7 CHECK YOUR WORK **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 = FRAME THE ISSUE

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

R = REFRAME OPPONENT'S STORY & REINFORCE OUR FRAME

Make sure your message is not just reiterating your opponent's frame. Reframing 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?

#CHANGESTHESTORY

#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.*

#SHOWDONTTELL

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.

