



THE NARRATIVE GYM



INTRODUCING THE **ABT** FRAMEWORK
FOR MESSAGING AND COMMUNICATION

RANDY OLSON, PHD

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Introducing the ABT Framework
For Messaging and Communication

By Randy Olson

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II. FULFILL (located at NarrativeGym.com)

This content is only background and reference material. To find it, go to NarrativeGym.com, where you can read it, as well as find a PDF version you can download for free.

WELCOME TO THE NARRATIVE GYM

AND ...

Some day in the future, you'll go to the Narrative Gym **AND**, as you walk in, there will be people in one corner doing ABT Crunches, people in another corner doing Dobzhansky Squats, and, in the center area, there will be a woman performing Superlative Jump-Ups.

BUT ...

There won't be any movement. The names of those exercises are just humorous tributes to physical actions people used to do repetitively. Now their bodies are withered, as they long ago figured out how to get machines to do everything physical they need in life. A thousand years from now, the world will be incomprehensibly complex, yet who wins will still be determined by who can communicate best. And that will come back to mastering narrative structure, which enables you to convert that complexity into simple, widely-understood, ideas.

THEREFORE ...

The Narrative Gym will help you build the narrative muscle you need for the future, which is what this book is about. And at the core of that process will still be the age-old workout equipment known collectively as the ABT Framework.

THIS BOOK IS HOPEFULLY NOT A “TL;DR”

This book is meant to be short, useful, and is intended for absolutely everyone. It’s meant for mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, bankers, lawyers, doctors, taxi drivers, high school students, store clerks, motorcycle riders, astronomers, undergraduates, sports writers, waiters, IT professionals, entrepreneurs, PhD students, construction workers, politicians ... everyone who communicates. Especially those who want to communicate better.

The book is roughly a quarter of the length of any of my previous four books. You know why it’s so short? TL;DR.

Do you know that acronym? It means, “Too Long; Didn’t Read.” It’s used a lot these days—not just by editors, but by people on discussion websites like Reddit. Somebody goes on a lengthy rant in the comment section, and other people reply with “TL;DR” (or “tl;dr”). Someone cites a lengthy book, and people reply with “TL;DR.” Or someone posts a lengthy video, and they get the “Didn’t Watch” variation of it: “TL;DW.”

And that’s fine, BUT ... there’s too much of it happening in our society, especially regarding books. Too many people talking about books of which they’ve only read two chapters. (I’m the worst at that.) Too many people excitedly ordering a book off Amazon but never getting more than a few pages in.

THEREFORE ... I don’t want TL;DR’s for this book. To (I hope) avoid the problem, I’ve structured it in two parts, labeled AROUSE and FULFILL—the age-old couplet for effective communication.

The AROUSE part is short and to the point; everyone needs to read it. It even comes together at the end with the grand synthesis of the two page ABT DEVELOPMENT CARD.

If you want to delve deeper, then you can go to the FULFILL section. You can find it and download it for free at NarrativeGym.com. In fact, you can start by reading about the AROUSE and FULFILL couplet in BIT 0—designated “zero” because it’s the ultimate, fundamental rule for all communication.

I decided to leave the FULFILL material out of the book because I want to retain the ability to update it with time. And why do I need to update it? Because the ABT Narrative Template is only eight years old. We are still exploring, learning and discovering its new facets and properties.

For the FULFILL content, I’ve labeled the sections BITS, not chapters, because I don’t want obsessives thinking they have to read all of that material, too. Which means I hereby give you permission to say, “Yeah, I read the book,” once you’ve consumed only the roughly 15,000 words of the AROUSE section.

The bottom line is that this book is meant to be a quick read. Hopefully, people will blow through it in little more than one sitting. Then they will write in response, “JR;TRI,” meaning, “Just Right; Totally Read It.”

I. AROUSE

CHAPTER ONE - The Power of “But”

IS “BUT” THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE?

Jerry Graff is a senior statesman of the humanities. We became buddies in 2005 when I interviewed him for a documentary. He’s spent a lifetime arguing for the importance of argument. His small book, *They Say, I Say* (2005), co-authored with his wife, Cathy Birkenstein, has sold (rather stunningly) over two million copies as a textbook for college courses in comparative literature or rhetoric. Suffice to say, he knows the English language well.

Recently he emailed to tell me he was reading an editorial that made him think of the ABT (And, But, Therefore) narrative template I’ve been developing for a decade. He said, “Is it not the case that the word ‘but’ is the most important word in the English language?”

It was a coincidence; a year earlier, I had started thinking the same thing. I began asking audiences at my presentations, “What is the most important word in the English language?” I would suggest two

criteria: First, it has to be a word that is commonly used all day by everyone. Second, it needs to have an impact when used.

People would shout out suggestions: “love”—“trust”—“death”—“sex.” I would reply that those are all powerful words, but think about your average person working in an office or doing deliveries or waiting on tables. How often does that person say any of those words in one day?

Others nominated words like “the” or “be.” Yes, in most surveys those are the two most frequently used words in the English language.

BUT ... (oops, just gave away where we’re headed) ... but those words have trivial meanings. They are just props for setting up other words.

My answer is “but.” It’s a word that has power. It’s a connector word that embodies the power of contradiction. And how powerful is contradiction? Neurophysiologists have some insights on this.

BUT AND YOUR BRAIN

For more than a decade, Princeton neuroscientist Uri Hasson and his research team have been using functional MRI (fMRI) to examine how the brain responds to narrative structure. In the simplest of experiments (and you might as well know I am huge fan of simplicity, as you can read in **BITs 1 and 2**), they used MRI to record brain activity when subjects viewed films without narrative structure (basically a

set of facts that lack a BUT) versus films *with* narrative (ABT) structure.

For the non-narrative material, they used video footage of people walking randomly in a park (“there’s a person walking, AND there’s a bus driving by, AND there’s a dog lying down, AND ...”). There was no significant element of contradiction within the material. It’s not like the people were working together on solving a problem. It was just people on a typical day in Washington Square Park in New York City.

For the narrative material, they used a murder mystery movie, which is, of course, filled with contradiction (i.e., at first you think the best friend can be trusted, BUT then that friend pulls a gun). The word BUT is the force of contradiction. It changes things, and it creates drama, and that shows up in brain activity.

They also used other videos with intermediate levels of contradiction, namely an action movie and a comedy. The figure shows you the difference in brain activity.

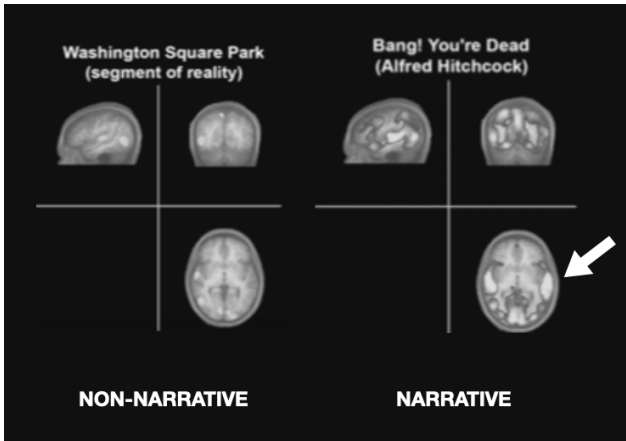


Figure 1. Brain scans of subjects viewing non-narrative video (people walking randomly in Washington Square Park) versus narrative video (an Alfred Hitchcock movie). Note the white regions of activity in the narrative brain scan, which are not seen in the non-narrative brain scan (from Hasson et al., 2008).

This is the power of BUT. Everything is going one way, but then BUT changes the direction. BUT commands attention and initiates the establishment of a problem.

BUT is used all day, every day, by everyone. A store clerk says they'll accept your credit card, BUT they need proof of identity. The news host says it was a good day on Wall Street, BUT stocks are still down for the week. Your mother tells you to have fun

tonight, BUT be sure to come home early. It's a ubiquitous part of communication.

More importantly, it's at the center of narrative structure (the ABT, which I'll introduce you to in a minute), and narrative is how we have communicated for thousands of years. How far back do we know narrative was being used for communication? If you want the answer to this question, then read **BIT 3**.

So that's what this book is about: a one-sentence template called the ABT, and the word at its center that drives it. That word is so important that it is the first place you want to go when you begin engaging in "narrative shaping" of an ABT to make it stronger.

Furthermore, what I'm presenting to you is an argument. I am hoping to convince you that "but" is indeed the most powerful word in the English language. Along the way, I also hope to help you communicate better.

CHAPTER TWO - LET'S GET STARTED ...

This makes me think of one of my all-time-favorite TV shows, *HBO's Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*, which is a showcase of powerful storytelling that draws on the ABT form. Bryant always opens with a few words of introduction, then kicks things into gear with, “Okay, let’s get started.” In his honor, I’m going to begin with that show as the first ABT on my list.

So you’re wondering, “Why is this ABT thing so important? And what, exactly, is it?”

It’s important because it is the most powerful tool in the Narrative Gym. It is the dumbbell that allows you, if you work out with it enough, to begin to develop the ultimate goal of “narrative intuition.”

And what is narrative intuition? It’s the ability to do more than just know narrative structure—it’s the ability to feel it, too. It is only when you’ve achieved narrative intuition that you can really consider yourself to be a skilled communicator.

I derived this term, “narrative intuition,” from what I saw in Hollywood. The great screenwriters talk about “story sense.” What they mean is to do better than just know how a story is told. It’s the ability to sense it—to hear a poorly told story and intuitively be able to fix it.

It’s what Malcolm Gladwell talked about in his book, *Blink*, when the skilled art forgery detective can look at a fake painting and instantly say it’s a fraud

with complete confidence (though he will need a few hours to actually figure out why). It's when the gut instinct (intuition) becomes so much more powerful than just the memorized rules.

As for what, exactly, the ABT is, let's go with one of the core principles of mass communication and filmmaking: "Don't tell us; show us." In that spirit, let's get started simply by showing you what an ABT looks like. I'll be capitalizing the three words we're most interested in (**AND**, **BUT**, **THEREFORE**), though only when they are used in structural roles.

Here are ten ABT's:

1 - **A SPORTS SHOW ABT** (from *HBO's Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*): *There was a little girl born with no legs in Romania who was adopted by a couple in the U.S. **AND** for no clear reason she became obsessed with gymnastics. **BUT** then one day her adoptive mother was watching the Olympics and realized the names of the parents of legendary Romanian Olympic gymnast Dominique Moceanu were the same names as those on her daughter's adoption papers. **THEREFORE** she and her daughter set off on an amazing journey to meet Dominique, who indeed turned out to be her sister. (And thus begins what I think is the most powerful of so many incredibly well-told stories on Real Sports.)*

I've watched countless episodes of *Real Sports* over the twenty five years it's been running. Why do

I remember that one so vividly? Yes, the content is powerful. But there's something more: It has form. It has pure, simple, and powerful ABT form. Narrative form determines whether you can remember things clearly or not.

2 - **THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS** (paraphrased speech by Abraham Lincoln, full text on pg 87):

*We are a great **AND** mighty nation, **BUT** now we are engaged in a horrible civil war that we cannot allow to destroy this country, **THEREFORE** it is up to us, the living, to make sure that the souls lost in this battle did not die in vain.*

Look at how simple the structure is for that speech. Instead of having children robotically memorize the Gettysburg Address, they should be asked to read it, then boil it down into one sentence using the ABT structure. That would push them out of the robotic memorization mode and activate the narrative part of their brains.

The speech was only three paragraphs. The three paragraphs were simply And, But, Therefore. I don't think there has ever been a simpler demonstration of the ABT narrative structure than this historic speech. Just two hundred and seventy-odd words, but it's on just about every historian's list of the top five most important speeches in the history of the United States. Why? Because of the content? Is it because of the elegant prose, such as the opening "Four score and

seven years ago ...”? Is it because he mentioned the word “dedicate” several times? Or is it because he nailed the three-part form that the human brain seeks and retains? Have historians ever looked at it this way? Ken Burns made an entire documentary about this one speech, yet he never said a word about its narrative structure. Hmmm.

3 - **NURSERY RHYMES:**

*Jack, and his good friend Jill, ascended the hill
AND they were in pursuit of a pail of water. BUT
Jack fell down and fractured his crown,
THEREFORE Jill came tumbling after.*

Yep. Look at almost all nursery rhymes. ABT structure. Little Miss Muffet—you know what she was up to, BUT along came a spider and THEREFORE, you know how it ended. And what about Peter Peter Pumpkin eater? He had a wife, BUT ... according to the rhyme he couldn’t “keep” her? Actually, that one’s a little awkward and dated. Let’s not get into it. BUT trust me, they’re pretty much all ABT-structured, and thus easy to remember.

4 - **BACK TO THE FUTURE (movie):**

Marty McFly is fascinated by Doc Brown AND they’re best buddies, BUT when the terrorists shoot Doc, Marty gets accidentally transported back to

1955, **THEREFORE** he has to find a way back to the present.

Such a great and classic movie. Pure ABT, start to air-tight finish. Same overall structure as *The Wizard of Oz* and so many other stories of being thrown into an unfamiliar world.

5 - “**TO HIS COY MISTRESS**” (classic “carpe diem” poem of the 1600’s):

*The speaker addresses a woman who has been slow to respond to his romantic advances **AND** he wishes he had infinite time to continue his efforts, **BUT** he doesn’t, **THEREFORE** he recommends they get on with things.*

Regarded as one of the greatest “carpe diem” poems of all time, it probably doesn’t play so well in today’s more progressive times, but, at more than four centuries of age, it shows how universal and ageless the ABT structure is. In fact, the original poem is but three paragraphs, with the second paragraph starting, precisely, with “But” and the third paragraph starting, precisely, with, “Now therefore.” The structure couldn’t be more obvious.

6 - **ANTI-GUN-VIOLENCE GROUP** (Mission statement of a non-profit organization; I have replaced their name with “our group”):

*The gun safety movement has spent years combatting gun violence **AND** has made some significant achievements, **BUT** the movement has ended up with a safe, centrist message that dampens enthusiasm among grassroots advocates and makes policy success less likely, **THEREFORE** our group was formed in 2016 in the wake of the Pulse night club shooting to demand bold policies that move the country toward a future with fewer guns (and is now doing the following ...)*

This was the ABT rewrite I recommended to a non-profit organization combatting gun violence. Their mission statement was a jumbled-up-narrative mess. This ABT rewrite makes their case in a way that is concise and compelling — the prime goals of the ABT Framework.

7 - **HISTORY PROFESSOR’S KEYNOTE ADDRESS:**

*The Progressive Era was a time of disorienting change, **AND** reformers responded with vigor and grit to social, political, and economic conditions that troubled them, **BUT** some features of our heritage from the Progressives have proven to be troubling in their own right, **THEREFORE** we are invited to*

reckon with the complex heritage from the Progressives in positive and progressive ways. We can map the escape route from a sense of inevitability and dismay because we are equipped with the necessary skills and alliances to accept this invitation.

In 2016, I gave my good friend, Dr. Patricia Limerick, Professor of History at the University of Colorado and a MacArthur Fellow, a brief tutorial on the ABT. A month later, she opened her keynote address to several hundred historians at a conference by presenting the above ABT on a slide. She read it off the screen, then looked out into the sea of faces. She saw a mix of riveted gazes and slight smiles that seemed to say, “Got it!” Later, at the reception, people said to her, “We’ve never heard a presentation begin with such clarity. It felt like, after one slide, we had your entire message, crystal clear.”

8 - “**CALL ME MAYBE**” (massively popular 2012 song by Carly Rae Jepsen, full text on pg. 96):

*Hey, I just met you **AND** this is crazy, **BUT** here’s my number, **SO** call me maybe.*

One billion viewers can’t be wrong, right? That’s how many views the music video has on YouTube. If we can assume they are all unique viewers, that makes about an eighth of humanity, all trying to get that three-part chorus out of their heads.

9 - “**I HAVE A DREAM**” SPEECH (paraphrase of the famous short speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in August 1963):

*We were made a promise a century ago **AND** we’ve made some progress on it, **BUT** the journey is nowhere near complete, **THEREFORE** we are gathered here today on the Washington Mall to continue the mission.*

It was the equally legendary and inspiring counterpart, a century later, to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. In fact, King even opened by referring to Lincoln, calling him “A great American” and echoing his use of the word “score” in expressing time. This ABT is so deeply resonant that it is the central message of a great many powerful speeches by African-American leaders — all the way up to Oprah Winfrey’s widely acclaimed Golden Globes speech of 2018. It is the core narrative of an entire movement.

10 - **PARENT TO CHILD:**

*You kids have been great all through this trip **AND** you know that I love you, **BUT** if you don’t stop whining tonight, you’re going to be grounded for the entire week once we get home, **THEREFORE** it is with the greatest affection that I ask you ...*

How many parents know that bit of ABT persuasion?

SO WHAT EXACTLY IS THE ABT?

It's "what you want to say."

Ever have someone tell you, "Before you go meet with that group, you better figure out what you want to say?" Or have someone ask, "What are you trying to say here?"

What you want to say *is* the ABT. It's the message, the mission, the movement of what you're doing. It's more than just your story. It's the unifying statement of direction for what you and your group are doing. The ABT is the narrative core of a text. It is also the proverbial "Elevator Pitch" in its strongest possible form, and I tell you all about its origins in **BIT 4**.

It is how we communicate. It's always been how we communicate. And it's not one of many ways to communicate effectively—it's **THE ONLY** way to communicate effectively over the long term. You can learn about that in **BIT 5**.

Okay, now let's "advance the narrative" and dive into how to craft your own ABT.

CHAPTER THREE - The ABT Build

The main purpose of this book is to help you take an existing ABT and strengthen it through what I have termed, in the past, “narrative shaping.” The starting point is to create a one-sentence ABT.

It’s only one sentence you need to craft. That sounds simple, and it is at the start. Kind of like saying, “I went to college for four years.” But take a closer look at those four years, and you know it was far from simple.

Same thing for the ABT. Its simplicity is deceptive. You’ll want to be aware of the Dunning-Kruger Curve, which I tell you about in **BIT 6**. It’s as if the three ABT words create a prism. When you look into it, you see a life-long journey that never ends, as I explain from the perspective of Hollywood narrative guru Christopher Vogler in **BIT 7**.

WHERE DOES ALL THIS ABT KNOWLEDGE COME FROM?

What we know about the ABT has mostly coalesced over the past decade in developing what we’ve termed, “narrative training.” In 2015, I formally proposed it in my book *Houston, We Have A Narrative*. Over the next five years, working with a

dozen or so colleagues, friends and assistants, we developed a program called Story Circles. (Details of the program are in **BIT 8**.)

We've conducted the training with roughly 25 organizations (including: government agencies like the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the NIH, the USDA, and the Army Corps of Engineers; universities like Yale, Tufts, the University of Kansas, and the University of Maryland; and professional societies like the Wildlife Society, the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy, and the Entomological Society of America). It's involved several thousand scientists, environmentalists, and communicators. We ran nearly 100 of the Story Circles (consisting of five people doing 10 one-hour sessions together), which produced over 500 graduates.

As part of the training, we developed a unique exercise that I came to call "The ABT Build." In the beginning, it was little more than having someone read their one-sentence ABT followed by my critique of it on the spot. But in response to the pandemic, we created our first online course for the ABT Framework. It consists of 10 one-hour sessions, during which every participant in the course gets their own 5-minute ABT Build session, with me taking the lead and everyone else tossing out suggestions. It has resulted in our running the ABT Build exercise several hundred times. Through that long-term process of iteration (which, by the way, is the central element for shaping ideas), we have solidified a model

for how to strengthen, or “develop,” an ABT. It is the core of this book.

TIME TO WRITE YOUR ABT

So let’s start to work on an ABT. Here’s the ABT Narrative Template:

____ AND ____ BUT ____ THEREFORE ____.

And here’s a sample ABT I’m going to provide you with. We’ll work on it as we “build” it, meaning as we improve its narrative shape and strength.

There are 50 acres of woods next to my house
AND it’s beautiful property, BUT a developer is
going to turn it into a housing development,
THEREFORE I want to stop the developer.

Okay, there you go—nailed it! Simple problem (threat to woods), simple solution (stop the developer). All done. Guess that’s it for this book. No need to read any further. You’ve got your ABT, it’s nice and clear, time to feel good about yourself!

BUT ... don’t forget the Dunning-Kruger Curve (**BIT 6**). You’re just getting started.

A few more words about BUT. If a friend says to you, “Wow, that’s an awesome shirt AND I love the color AND look at those cool buttons ...” and then goes quiet, but is still staring at you – they’re not done.

You're waiting for one more word. You're waiting for the BUT to drop.

The word BUT changes the direction of conversation.

Saturday Night Live had an opening skit in 2019 showing exactly this. Ben Stiller was playing Michael Cohen, President Trump's lawyer. Kenan Thompson was the senator running the hearing where Cohen was testifying. The senator asks Cohen if he has anything further to say for himself. Cohen begins conceding all the terrible things he's done that have damaged the country: "Maybe I'm not a good person," he says. "Maybe I'm a liar," he continues. After the fourth character flaw, the senator interrupts, "I'm sorry, is there a 'but' coming?" Cohen replies, "No, there isn't. Thank you."

The senator wanted contradiction. He wanted something that might counter-balance all the terrible things. But ... there was nothing—Michael Cohen had only negative things to say for himself.

Contradiction is what activates the brain. It breaks the monotone, the single direction. It's what makes the world interesting (i.e., not monotonous). It's what drives the entire media world. Without it, the brain starts to go numb. The "absence of contradiction" is pretty much the definition of boring. BUT is the word of contradiction in the ABT, which means it's the most important part, and thus the place to start the whole strengthening process.

THE 3-STEP DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR THE ABT

So let's start to work at strengthening your sample ABT. You can literally write a one-sentence ABT in much less than a minute (as was the case for my writing that one about the woods). AND ... it will almost certainly not be boring or confusing. You can read it to your friends, and they'll probably say wow, that's seems pretty clear. BUT ... there's always lots more work to be done.

THEREFORE ... here we go, into the 3-step development process.

CHAPTER FOUR - Narrative Shaping, Step 1: “BUT” - WHAT’S YOUR PROBLEM?

It’s time to begin the process of “Narrative Shaping.” Think of this as though you are a sculptor.

You took a big block of marble and roughed it into something that has the vague form of a human head. Now it’s time to do the serious shaping, getting it to the point where we not only recognize whose face it is, we can even be moved by it. We’re going to do the same thing with narrative form using the ABT.

We start with a leap-frog move. There’s obviously three parts to an ABT, but we’re going to jump over the first part (the AND material) and go straight to the BUT.

Why? Because, as I said in the last chapter, BUT is probably the most important word in the English language. You obviously want to start with the most important element in the ABT.

We’ve written our initial ABT. It was *simple*, which is important. When it comes to communication, simple is more than just fun—it is strength. Simplicity is endlessly important in communication. The opposite—complexity and even obfuscation—are deadly (again, see **BITs 1 and 2**).

Our starting point is a simple question. It’s what you’d say to a stranger who walked up to you on the

street and started shouting at you. You would say, “Excuse me, sir, but ...

What’s your problem?”

That’s it.

You’d be amazed at how many people are hard at work on a project, feeling pretty sure they know what they are doing, but when you ask them exactly what problem they are trying to solve, their answer begins with a faraway gaze. They think for a moment, then say, “Well ... I think the problem is ...” And then they start guessing at what, exactly, the problem is that they are working on.

This happens about half the time with the participants in the ABT Build exercise. They are sitting on top of a mountain of information. They have a great deal of expertise, and yet, when you ask them to boil it down to the central problem they are pursuing—that faraway gaze sets in.

It’s a great part of the exercise. You can try it with people you work with. Ask them to write the ABT of the project you’re working on. Now begin your “ABT Build” session by taking away what they’ve written, then asking them to start a sentence with these three words:

“The problem is ...”

When I do this in an ABT Build session, I sometimes like to ask the person to close their eyes. It’s not about re-arranging what they’ve already

written—it’s about drawing from deep inside on what the core problem actually is.

One thing we’ve learned: Verbalizing a problem is the quickest path to simplicity. For some reason, as soon as you start writing, your brain seems to start over-complicating things. I’ve got a lot more on this in **BIT 9**.

WHY IS “THE PROBLEM” SO IMPORTANT?

As I talked about earlier, “The Problem” is what excites the brain. “The Solution” is what quiets the brain.

“The Problem” is arousal. “The Solution” is fulfillment and satisfaction.

This problem/solution dynamic is my whole definition of the word “narrative” (at least in my analytical approach). In my 2015 book *Houston, We Have A Narrative*, I defined the word “narrative” as “the series of events that occur in the search for the solution to a problem.” The narrative part of any text begins when a problem is posed. It ends when it’s solved. I derive this definition from Joseph Campbell’s work on the “Monomyth,” as I explain in **BIT 10**.

So this is where the narrative process begins—with the establishment of the problem. Everything before that is non-narrative. The opening material tends to be more cerebral, more intellectual, not working at the gut level. That is the AND material.

It's super-important material (as we'll get to), but it's not yet the core of narrative. And it doesn't hit you at the gut level. That stuff starts when you get into the problem-solution dynamic.

FRAMING

Problems often have multiple layers and facets. When you start digging, you realize you haven't really thought it through for your problem.

Let's look at our housing development example. I ask you, "What is your problem?" You reply, "I've got a developer who's about to wreck my favorite woods."

Yes, but what is the problem you need to be working on? Is it trying to convince the developer to give up his plans, or is it the need for the city to zone this area as park land so that development is never an issue? Or is the problem at the national level, meaning that all undeveloped lands should be proclaimed sacred and never touched? Or is the problem that you need to seek therapy to figure out how to let go of your childhood affection for those woods? (Things change, deal with it.)

Do you see that those are different "frames" of reference—especially that last one, as it suddenly shifts from them to you?

What we're talking about here is how you set up, or frame, the problem. It's such an important issue that—you guessed it—you can read about it in greater detail in **BIT 11**.

THE SINGULAR NARRATIVE

Now let's imagine you wrote your ABT as this:

There are 50 acres of woods next to my house AND it's beautiful property, BUT a developer who is a convicted felon is going to turn it into a housing development, THEREFORE I want to stop the developer.

We've added a second element to our problem. The developer is now a convicted felon. This becomes a case of two narratives. Which narrative is more important?

Is the problem that the developer is a felon, meaning that if you could get the city to sell the land to a non-felon for development, then you'd be okay with it? Or is it still the case that you just want the woods preserved?

We're going to assume it's the latter. You love the woods; you want to see them preserved. So zoning laws will have to change to make sure they are. Which means the convicted felon bit becomes something that is "off the narrative" and distracting from the central message. It's not that it needs to be dismissed, but it does need to be kept out of the overriding, central, narrative.

The need for the singular narrative is so important that ... you guessed it, **BIT 12** tells you a whole bunch more details about it. In fact, one of the most powerful details I tell about in that section is what I

call The Dobzhansky Template which is a single sentence that helps you find the singular narrative.

The template sentence is: "Nothing in _____ makes sense, except in the light of _____." Many of the participants in our narrative training find it to be the most powerful tool overall because it takes you right to the core of what your narrative is.

"The narrative" is pretty much sacred, and as a result, in the language of screenwriting, everything must serve to "advance the narrative." The convicted felon element is pulling in a different direction, meaning it's not advancing the narrative. THEREFORE ... let's remove the detail about the developer being a felon from the ABT. It's interesting but "tangential," which is a good word for "off the narrative."

CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE

In the end, controlling the narrative is what it's all about, right? Not if you're an artist—then you enjoy having audience members walk away with a completely different idea than what you thought you were presenting. But we're not here to talk about art; we're here to talk about the communication of information.

"Controlling the narrative" is what everyone yearns to do. From politicians to publicists to advertisers to lawyers to scientists, they all want to tell their own story. You want to be known for the things you're proud of, not the mistakes you've made, or that

others say you've made. Publicists get paid huge money simply to control the narrative.

A good word for it is “fidelity.” Old phonographs yearned for “high fidelity”— keeping the signal as strong and clear as it was when it was created. We're talking about the same thing. In fact, why not have an entire section about it?! I do! It's **BIT 13**.

So how do you control the narrative? By having solid ABT structure. The closer you can get your message to matching this ageless, idealized structure, the better the odds are that nobody messes with your message.

Now let's review where we are with our narrative.

We decided our problem is this:

“The problem is ... we need to change the zoning laws of my community.”

This is different from the initial problem as stated in the BUT portion of the original ABT (which was, “BUT a developer is going to turn it into a housing development”). What we now have is:

There are 50 acres of woods next to my house AND it's beautiful, BUT the zoning laws of our community are severely outdated, leaving those woods unprotected, THEREFORE I want to find a way to change the zoning laws.

We've now reframed the problem. Instead of going after the individual developer, we're taking a more

systematic approach, which will hopefully stop not just one developer but all developers.

That's a good enough shot at defining the problem for now. It's time to proceed to Step 2.

CHAPTER FIVE - Narrative

Shaping Step 2: “AND” - Back to the Start

Okay, you’ve done a first round of revising the BUT. Now we’re headed backwards, back to the previous element: the AND material. Why?

REWRITING THE FIRST CHAPTER

“It is the beginning of a work that the writer throws away.”

That’s what Pulitzer Prize-winning author Annie Dillard said in *The Writing Life*.

Every good novelist knows that the first thing you do is write your entire novel. (“Don’t get it right, get it written.”) Then, once you have a completed first draft, you throw out the first chapter and rewrite it. At least theoretically.

Maybe you don’t if you somehow nailed it on your first attempt, but writers almost never do. Things change during the writing of the first draft. When you’re finally done with it, the opening chapter usually feels different. You now know what you need to present in that first chapter, and, more importantly, you know what you DON’T need to present.

Basically, you know “your narrative” and what is needed to “advance the narrative.”

It's the exact same thing with the ABT because it's the most condensed version of your narrative core.

So we know our BUT statement (the problem), at least for now. This means the next step is to go backwards to the AND material and work out how to introduce your audience to the subject, setting them up efficiently for you to have the desired impact.

THE TWO ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR YOUR “AND” STATEMENT

All else being equal, in starting a narrative with your AND material, there are two main things you want to cover. Your AND statement needs to present, basically: 1)What, and 2) why do we care?

Here are more details on this.

A) THE ORDINARY WORLD

This term was developed by famous mythologist Joseph Campbell. There's a huge body of knowledge that goes with it, which we don't want to step into here (but I do in **BIT 14**). In simple terms, the Ordinary World, at least in the way we want to use it for the ABT, refers to the overall “world” of your material. It is just the initial set-up of the narrative.

The Ordinary World is characterized by peace. There are no major problems in the Ordinary World—those will come soon. The Ordinary World is not

dramatic. Its major force at work is simply agreement.

Think in terms of a standard murder mystery. It begins in a calm “world”—maybe a family home, maybe an office setting, maybe a typical train trip. Everything is calm and ordinary, until it’s not.

The three ABT words encapsulate The Three Forces of Narrative, which are: agreement, contradiction, consequence (read about the forces in **BIT 15**). We want to open on material that absolutely everyone can agree on.

In our example, it’s the first part:

There are 50 acres of woods next to my house.

You’re just telling us “the world” in which this narrative is going to take place. There’s nothing in that phrase that we can disagree or argue with (assuming the land actually is exactly 50 acres and is next to your house).

I like to talk about this opening bit to environmentalists by saying, “This is material that even a climate skeptic would agree with you about.”

B) WHAT’S AT STAKE

Once we know what we’re talking about with the Ordinary World, we want to know why it’s important. The standard Hollywood term for this is, “What’s at stake?” (which I delve into in **BIT 16**).

Another way to put this is, “Why do we care?”

We're still in the AND material. This is still just the set up that comes before "THE PROBLEM" which will start with the word BUT. Before getting to the problem, we want to lay the groundwork for the impact of the BUT by first making clear how important this subject is. To put this simply, imagine if I tell you, "I have 17 vacuum cleaners in my house, BUT one of them is broken." That doesn't sound like much of a problem.

On the other hand, if I tell you, "I have only one vacuum cleaner in my house, BUT it's broken," well, that's definitely more of a problem. This is the basic dynamic we're talking about here: How important is this message you're giving me? You need to make this clear, and the best place to do it is just before the BUT.

Putting it a little more specifically, if our BUT statement is going to be "BUT you have no iron in your diet," it's not going to have any impact if you have no idea why iron is important. However, if you can precede the BUT by saying, "Iron is essential for producing hemoglobin for oxygen distribution in the body, BUT you have no iron in your diet," then it's kind of obvious, and thus the impact is much greater. This is all part of "laying the groundwork" so that your narrative resonates.

The question of, "Why should we care?" can feel pretty heartless. Think about it in relation to our sample ABT. Why should we care about the 50 acres of woods next to your house?

What our draft says right now on that issue is:

"AND it's beautiful."

That may be why you love those woods, but to most people it's not enough to get worked up over. Let's see if we can strengthen it bit.

What if we say, "AND they generate \$2 million a year in local business"? Now the economic community is interested in the woods.

So let's take a look at these two versions, the sort of BEFORE and AFTER comparison:

VERSION 1: There are 50 acres of woods next to my house AND it's beautiful, BUT ...

VERSION 2: There are 50 acres of woods next to my house AND they generate \$2 million a year in local business, BUT ...

Feel the difference?

Oh, wait, now you're asking, "Does everything have to come down to money?" No.

Let's try this:

"AND their beauty inspires me every day as I walk past them to the hospital where I work with cancer patients."

That's a powerful non-monetary answer to the question, "Why is this important?"

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING RESTS IN THE SPECIFICS

This calls up one of the very most important principles of narrative: The Power of Storytelling Rests in the Specifics. If you don't provide specifics, your narrative isn't going to be very strong.

You can see this principle at work whenever you watch the interrogation scene on a cop show. The cop asks, "Who was with you?" The suspect replies, "Some friends." The cop wants something more powerful and so goes after specifics with, "Who? We need you to name names." The specific names are the specifics that will make the story powerful.

So, getting back to the AND material, the bottom line is that you want to tell us why this particular Ordinary World is important, and you want to make it powerful using information that is as specific as possible.

SUPERCHARGING THE STAKES AND DRAWING ON THE POWER OF THE FUTURE WITH THE "IF/THEN" TOOL

Let's continue a bit more with the "Why should we care?" question. Yes, it's potentially obnoxious (nothing worse than people telling you they don't care about your problem), but it's the real world. You have to face up to it if you want people to be interested in your narrative. Here's a little example:

A few years ago, I was working on a short video about the most interesting person I've ever known:

my mother. I showed the video to an assistant. When I asked him what he thought, he said, “Why should we care about this old lady?” He was the nicest kid, and he meant his question in a completely innocent way, but I wanted to smash the computer screen over his head. How dare he ask such a cold and dispassionate question about a topic I cared so much for?

It took me a few months of having others express the same sentiment to finally realize that his point was valid. Another even more heartless way to put this basic principle is embodied by what a co-instructor used to tell writing students when they told their personal stories. She would say, “Just because it happened to you doesn’t make it interesting.”

It’s cruel. It’s heartless. But it’s what you need to hear, and attend to, if you want a strong central narrative. More often than not, the fuel to make the narrative powerful is sitting right there; it just needs you to realize that others won’t know it unless you make it clear.

DRAWING ON THE POWER OF THE FUTURE

In the struggle to motivate people, you have the obvious elements of the past and the present. You can draw on the past (“Studies have shown that destroying nature has damaged our quality of life”), and you can draw on the present (“A quarter of our population is now depressed because of what we’ve done to

nature”). But what might not occur to you is that you can also draw on the future.

You can do this by using the age-old logical clause “If, then ...” You’re setting up a scenario (“If this happens,”) and looking at the consequences (“then this will happen”). It’s potentially very powerful and can be used in two ways: either positively (“If we do this, then good things will happen”) or negatively (“If we don’t do this, then these terrible things will happen”).

These two directions are tapping into the two main motivating elements in good stories—hope and fear. Both are about the future. Characters HOPE to achieve their goals, but they FEAR they will fail. The IF/THEN clause can be used in either of these directions. Let’s start with the positive direction.

THE POSITIVE IF/THEN

The origin of my realizing the power of the IF/THEN clause was my helping a student. I stumbled upon its power with Marissa Metz, a PhD candidate in biomedical science at Colorado State University. She contacted me asking for help in shaping the narrative of her dissertation on the neurophysiology of opioid addiction. I had her first send me her attempts at the one-sentence ABT for each chapter.

One of her chapter ABT’s was:

The neurons involved in opioid production are located in one part of the brain AND are involved in

both pain and pleasure, BUT we don't know which neurons are involved in which, THEREFORE this chapter is about trying to figure this out for individual neurons.

My first question to her was, “Is this important research?” Her reply sounded almost astonished: “Of course!”

Like an annoying little kid, I pushed her with, “Why?”

She instantly flipped into, “Well, *if* we can figure out which individual neurons are involved with pleasure and distinguish them from the neurons involved with pain, *then* we can work on mechanisms to activate only the pain-relieving neurons, which would bypass the pleasure part of the effect and thus reduce addiction.”

Well ... as the doorman to the Emerald City once said, “That’s a horse of a different color.” Suddenly we can see how this entire project has the potential to change the lives of literally millions of people impacted by the tragedy of opioid drug addiction.

So why didn’t she put this in her ABT from the start? It’s the assumption, “Well, EVERYBODY knows that,” when, in fact, everybody doesn’t.

The problem comes from the fundamental divide between your two main audiences. This is a tiny bit technical, but it’s so deep and important that I’m going to address this bit of detailed information right now and not force you to read about it in a BIT.

YOUR INNER AND OUTER CIRCLES

Every elementary communications training program will tell you boldly, “Know your audience,” as if that were magical advice that instantly solves the challenge of communication for you. But I’ve never seen any of them give you a simple, *analytical* way to look at the problem. That’s what we’re going to do right here.

You have two basic audiences: the people who know your world well (your INNER CIRCLE) and everyone else on the planet (your OUTER CIRCLE). Here’s an enormously complicated diagram to help you visualize this:



I’ve got some good news and bad news for you when it comes to this diagram.

The good news is: Think of all those people in that inner circle. They don’t need any of this ABT stuff

we're talking about. They don't need the mighty power of narrative. Their interest in everything you have to say is already aroused. They don't need a BUT to activate their brain. They're fine with the normally boring And, And, And (AAA) structure.

They are members of your family, your office, your research team, your legal team, your small start-up company, your super-specific Facebook Group, or maybe even people you owe money to. They're all dying to hear whatever it is you have to say. They're your fan club!

BUT ... here's the bad news. How big is your real fan club? Specifically, are you certain you're not deluding yourself by thinking it's much larger than it actually is? The sad truth is that for most people and most topics, the INNER CIRCLE is probably pretty, pretty, pretty small.

This is the mistake lawyers make. ("Gosh, everybody is interested in Dignitary Torts Law.") This is the mistake Waterloo, Iowa, baseball fans make. ("Gosh, everybody is interested in the Bucks.") This is the mistake YouTube makeup tutorial fans make. ("Gosh, everybody is interested in Zoella.")

Well, actually, no, I'm afraid most people really aren't that interested in any of those topics.

So that's your bad news. The Outer Circle needs the ABT, and most of the world is in that group. Which takes us back to Marissa and her opioids dissertation.

She wrote the first ABT's for her dissertation after inadvertently assuming that everyone who would eventually read it would be as clued in on the subject

as the small group of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows working in her laboratory would be. But that isn't the case. The dissertation needs to be written for a much larger audience—especially when it comes to providing the summaries of each chapter.

And, actually, once she spelled out in her own words her simple “IF/THEN” statement, we both paused and said, “Oh, wow, THAT is powerful!” It was sitting right there in her mind; she just needed me to push her to communicate beyond her Inner Circle. And that's actually a crucial part of strengthening your narrative: you need other people to push you. You can't do a good job of developing narrative structure by yourself at your desk. You need a group. Thus, our Story Circles model (**BIT 8**).

The IF/THEN element now gives us this more detailed configuration for the general structure of the ABT Template:

(Ordinary World) AND (What's At Stake, maybe even using the IF/THEN structure), BUT ___ THEREFORE ___.

Let's return to our sample ABT and try inserting it.

There are 50 acres of woods next to my house, they generate \$2 million a year in local business, AND IF we can prevent it from being developed, THEN we can use it as a model for larger-scale conservation efforts, BUT the zoning laws of our community are severely outdated, leaving the woods

unprotected, THEREFORE I want to find a way to change the zoning laws.

THE NEGATIVE IF/THEN

The IF/THEN clause can be powerful in your AND material, BUT ... it can be equally powerful in the opposite direction. We can also use IF/THEN in the direction of fear by inserting it into the BUT statement.

For our sample ABT, we could say in the BUT material:

BUT the woods are unprotected, and IF something isn't done to protect them soon, THEN they will be developed, which will send a message to the entire region that no property is above exploitation.

That is digging into the fear side of motivation. You can use either, both, or none. You just need to add them and see how it feels.

THE MAIN CHARACTER

Using the ABT does not mean turning your material into a Hollywood story. Yes, it is the world of Hollywood, which, over the course of a century, cracked the nut of simple narrative structure (the academic world tends to prefer non-simple narrative

structure), but, as I've said from the start, the ABT dynamic underpins all effective communication. I just use examples from Hollywood a lot because they are broadly relatable. And here's another one:

I like to use the blockbuster movie *Titanic* for this element. The basic ABT of that movie was, "*Titanic* was a majestic ship they said was unsinkable AND it was halfway across the Atlantic on its maiden voyage with over three thousand people on board, BUT then it encountered an iceberg and sunk, THEREFORE so much for grand claims of invincibility."

As you know, the star of the show, Leonardo DiCaprio, appears in the movie all the way from the opening scenes. But imagine if he didn't appear until after the BUT. Imagine that the ship hits the iceberg, a cabin door flies open, and we see Leo for the first time as he says, "Hey, everybody, what just happened?"

You could have made that movie. It would have worked fine. Nobody would have been bored or confused, BUT ... it wouldn't have reached deep down inside of people if Leo and Kate hadn't gotten the chance to kindle their romance in the first third of the movie (during the AND part of the story).

This is what you're doing in the AND part of your ABT: You're setting things up so that, when the drama begins, there will be an impact. If you "cut to the chase"—if we don't even get to know Leo and Kate until after the ship starts sinking—we're not going to feel much for them in the final scenes. (Of course some of my friends never felt anything for them from the start, but that's just them.) You want to

introduce your main character up front. (I also go into some detail on cutting to the chase in **BIT 17**.)

This ends up being a common mistake in people's ABT's. They provide a set-up (the AND material), identify the problem (the BUT), then offer a solution. But when we get to the solution, they bring in something out of the blue for the first time, which is often the thing they have really wanted to communicate the whole time.

Here's an ABT from a participant in our ABT Framework course that shows what I'm saying:

In Asia, freshwater fish provide food for millions of people AND healthy fish populations depend on healthy ecosystems, BUT freshwater habitats are severely threatened due to hydropower, urban expansion, pollution, and agriculture, THEREFORE, establishing sanctuary zones that protect fish habitats is vital for the future of sustainable fisheries.

The basic question of "What's your problem?" is pretty clear: The fish are losing their habitats. So I begin by asking this simple question:

Who is your MAIN CHARACTER?

As written, the main character might be "freshwater fish." Or might it be "millions of people"? But it turned out that what the author was working on and was interested in communicating about was the solution to the problem: "sanctuary zones."

So this is a case where the main character was introduced at the end.

Think again of *Titanic*. This is like having Kate Winslet near the end of the movie, running around on the deck of the sinking ship, then in this version we suddenly see Leo for the first time. As Kate runs into him, she looks him in the eye and seductively asks “Well ... who are *you*?”

That could work, but, again, we wouldn’t be feeling much twenty minutes later when he’s shivering in the water and trying to hold onto the door. It’s not that this version is wrong, only that it’s less effective.

You generally want your main character to be part of your Ordinary World. So the fisheries ABT might be something like:

Sanctuary zones have the ability to protect habitats AND are credited with saving \$X billion in fisheries’ resources, BUT in Asia they are not being implemented despite the widespread destruction of freshwater fish habitats due to hydropower, urban expansion, pollution and agriculture, THEREFORE we need to institute a program to begin creating sanctuary zones.

Notice that we’ve changed the “frame” of this narrative. The great thing about the ABT is that it gives you a clear understanding of this potentially complicated term, “framing.” You can see where you set the frame and how just a slight tweak up front can completely change the dynamics downstream.

SHAPING YOUR ABT: THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE RIGHT JOB

So you're getting a feel for what sort of work needs to be done on the first third of your ABT. Here's one more fine-scale attribute: You need the right words.

There's an age-old saying, especially for carpenters: "The right tool for the right job." Every tool has its proper purpose. When you use the right tool for the right job, the task is easier.

Same for narrative.

What this means is that you have words, which are your tools, and they have specific jobs. Some words work for agreement, some words work for contradiction, some words work for consequence. (And as I've said, see **BIT 15**.)

What you don't want is to have those tools in the wrong place. You want to follow the sequence of Agreement, Contradiction, Consequence. If you put words of contradiction into the Agreement section, you're going to cause noise. Same thing if you put words of consequence there. Doing that is fine for artistic expression, but not for basic communication of information.

For example, in our narrative training, we use one sample of text that shows "how not to do it." It is a scientific research abstract beginning with the words, "Contrary to previous research ..."

"Contrary" is a word of contradiction (both words even start with "contra-"). If you start your ABT with a word like "contrary," the narrative part of the reader's brain is immediately lit up with the thought

of, “Contrary to what?” You haven’t even begun sketching out the Ordinary World, so we don’t know what the subject of this ABT will be, yet already we’re headed off in a direction different from whatever existed before.

What this means is that, all else being equal, you don’t want the wrong words in the wrong place. You don’t want to activate the narrative process early. You don’t want words of contradiction in the AND material (but, despite, however, yet, contrary to, etc.). You also don’t want words of consequence in the AND material (therefore, thus, as a result of, in conclusion etc.)

What you do want is for the AND material to be peaceful—no drama, no contradiction, no consequence. Just plain, simple facts that everyone can agree on. You’re just trying to start things off clearly before the drama begins. And, of course, it’s the “drama” that is your only hope of breaking through the noise.

IT’S BASICALLY DOUBLE NEGATIVES

The need for consistency of forces is also true for the BUT material. When it’s time to start the contradiction, ideally, it should happen only once. You want to start it with the one word of contradiction (most commonly BUT). This ties into the same principle as the need for the SINGULAR NARRATIVE. The word BUT establishes your problem, which is your singular narrative.

Adding a second word of contradiction, like but, however, despite, yet, suddenly establishes a second narrative. That just dilutes and confuses things, ultimately leading to the DHY (Despite, However, Yet) form that represents too many narrative threads (which of course is part of the Narrative Spectrum reviewed in **BIT 18**).

In fact, weren't we all taught back in elementary school to avoid using "double negatives" like, "I haven't ever won nothing"? Now you start to see why. You're sending the audience in two directions when you only want to make the one point: that you have never won anything.

For our sample ABT, you don't want something like this:

BUT a developer is planning to destroy the woods,
BUT some of the woods may be spared,
THEREFORE ...

Can you see how confusing that is?

MAINTAINING FOCUS ON THE HOME STRETCH

Lastly, on this principle of the right tool, the same is true for the THEREFORE material. Once you get to your solution, your story ought to be on the home stretch. At this point, you don't want to suddenly fire up another whole narrative. Which means you don't

want to revert back to more problems with words of contradiction.

One classic example of achieving this singularity on the home stretch is Martin Luther King, Jr's famous "I Have A Dream" speech. If you look at his use of the ABT forces, you see not only that he opened the speech with perfect ABT structure in his first major paragraph of text (presented in detail in **BIT 19**), but also that he spent almost the entire second half of the speech in THEREFORE mode.

You can see this by putting the word THEREFORE at the start of every sentence in the second half. It works, over and over again. He says, "[THEREFORE] I have a dream ... [THEREFORE] This is our hope ... [THEREFORE] Let freedom ring ..."

He doesn't suddenly jump back to a bunch of And, And, And background details. He doesn't start any new narrative directions with any words of contradiction.

The result of that structure was a clear and singular message of action (meaning consequence) for the entire second half of the speech. There is only one BUT in the second half of the speech, and it's not a structural use of the word but rather just a modification as he talks about all the states where he hopes that "freedom" will soon "ring." It's when he mentions the southern states (since his audience might have doubted that freedom could ring there, too). He begins with, "But not only that" and then adds those states to the list.

So this is what needs to happen in working with the ABT. You need to develop a sensitivity to the narrative forces of the various connector words. Eventually you can feel when and where the force at work should be agreement, versus contradiction or consequence. Forming this sensitivity is a major part of developing the almighty goal of “narrative intuition.” When you finally achieve narrative intuition is when you’re truly drawing on the full power of narrative.

In our narrative training programs we are constantly asked, “Okay, I see how the ABT works for structuring a one paragraph synopsis, but what do you do when it comes to writing a 10 page essay?” The answer is one word: intuition. It’s like the game of chess. There are lots of websites that can teach you the opening first few moves for a good game of chess, but at some point you have to switch from your memorized opening moves to your intuition of how the game works and where to go from there. The ABT can guide you for one paragraph, but for the bigger picture, it’s all about intuition.

Now it’s time for the third and final step in strengthening your narrative.

CHAPTER SIX – Narrative Shaping, Step 3: “BUT, THEREFORE” - Your Two Big Moments

THE POWER OF THE MOMENT

Time for the third and most important part of the ABT—the two moments. Moments are everything in communication. Here’s a bit of perspective on this.

In early 2020, former U.S. Senator Al Franken was discussing the Senate on his podcast with his guest, MSNBC commentator Lawrence O’Donnell. Regarding how to communicate effectively in the Senate, he said the following:

I had a performing background and knew how to create a moment, and ... I feel like my former colleagues don’t. It’s about creating a moment that gets on TV.

Moments are everything in narrative. Franken, a former comedian, television writer, and author of best-selling books, knows it well. Let’s give this some thought.

What's your favorite movie? Maybe *The Wizard of Oz*? If so, what SPECIFICALLY comes to mind when you think of that movie?

Maybe the moment when Dorothy, joined by the Tin Woodsman, the Cowardly Lion, and the Scarecrow, begins singing, "We're Off to See the Wizard" as they skip down the yellow brick road? Or maybe the moment when the Wicked Witch says to Dorothy, "I'll get you, my pretty"? Or maybe the final moment, when Dorothy is sitting in bed with Toto and says to everyone, "There's no place like home"?

Those are moments. They tend to be what you remember from stories. Not the entire story. Just singular moments. In the same way that we've talked about the importance of the Singular Narrative, what I'm talking about here is that your brain also retains the singular moments of entire stories. You don't remember 14 moments all at once. You remember the SINGLE moment.

You remember Marlon Brando as the Godfather saying, "I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse." You remember Bette Davis saying, "Fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy night"—and sometimes just the lines from the moments — "We're gonna need a bigger boat" — "I'll have what she's having" — "Avengers! Assemble!"

Remembering stories is all about moments. So is effective communication. As Franken says, it's about breaking through the fog of noise that shrouds our information-overloaded world to create the one moment that will stay with everyone and be picked up

by the media. It is ultimately how we remember everything.

Where were you the moment you got the news of the attacks of September 11, 2001? Almost everyone who was old enough to be shocked by it remembers clearly that moment when they got the news.

Moments are the most important part of both communication and the ABT. There are two of them in the ABT. Time to examine them.

MOMENT #1: THE PROBLEM

We've already talked about this a bit in the first step by addressing the question, "What is your problem?" The problem is the first chance you have to create a moment that will stay with everyone.

The more singular and instantaneous the moment, the more powerful and lasting it will be. For example, you turn on the evening news and there's the footage of a 40 story building, demolished in a single explosive event causing it to go from towering building to pile of rubble in less than a minute. Wow. Dramatic. And yet ... if the building had instead been disassembled over the course of three years ... it wouldn't make such compelling viewing. Unless of course there were time lapse footage that condensed the three years back into ... less than a minute.

Do you see any parallel with the need for the Singular Narrative? And also, do you see the parallel with the power of storytelling rests in the specifics?

Narrative is at its most powerful with “the number one.” It is also maximized as a function of contrast.

What this means is, stretch the change out, and the perceptual impact is minimized. Make the change huge in a short time span, and the impact is maximized. The more the transition goes instantly from very low to very high, the more powerful and memorable the moment is.

Recall that the BUT moment is the transition from the quiet, peaceful Ordinary World into the Special World. It is the transition from calm to the state of excitement, arousal, uncertainty, and often fear. The quicker this transition takes place, the better the chance of capturing attention.

MOMENT #2: THE SOLUTION

There eventually comes a second moment beginning with the word THEREFORE. It produces the unwinding of everything that the first moment cranked up. If it is done well, it will produce a feeling of satisfaction. If it is done really well, it will be memorable.

This second moment is the opposite of the first. Instead of going from the Ordinary World to the Special World, it is the transition from the excitement of the Special World back to the relaxed, satisfying, and ultimately livable Ordinary World.

This second moment, if done well, has just as much potential to be memorable and cut through the noise as the first. In fact, it can be even better because it

brings with it an element of satisfaction that's missing from the first moment.

THE POWER OF CHANGE

What both of these moments are built around is change.

In our perception of the world, change is the most powerful element. You stare out into a field for an hour. Nothing changes. You start to lose interest as you grow bored. Your mind is idling. BUT THEN ... something moves in the grass, and you see it—a mountain lion, sitting right there—apparently invisible until it moved. It was the change that activated your brain.

Change is so powerful that there is an entire branch of science dedicated to its study: evolution. That's what evolution science is: the science of change—how things evolve over time.

We deal with change on a moment-by-moment basis, but change can be scaled up all the way from individual moments to millions of years. It is all the same process, and it has two basic ways of occurring—either gradually or instantaneously. As expected, the former tends to be hard to notice, while the latter becomes unavoidable. When you live with children who change from day to day, it is hard to notice, but when you see other people's children every few years, the change stuns you.

In the study of evolution, the rate of change is one of the most important elements. Scientists devote their

entire lives to trying to determine whether species have changed gradually to the point of imperceptibility over time, or whether the changes occurred in brief, almost instantaneous episodes.

I've spent a lot of my life getting to know this basic dynamic. I spent several years producing media as part of an ocean conservation campaign to promote awareness of the term "shifting baselines," which was coined in the 1990's by a scientist. I published an editorial in *The Los Angeles Times* in 2002 entitled, "Slo-Motion Disaster beneath the Waves." The essay explained this new term and helped give rise to an entire body of literature that now exists on shifting baselines. Today, the term is in wide use.

The term "shifting baselines" basically refers to "losing track of the past." If change happens too slowly, we fail to notice it. If it happens rapidly, not only do we notice, it can have a dramatic impact.

This basic problem was presented in Al Gore's climate-change movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*. He talked about the "frog in the boiling water" problem. The idea is that if a frog is in a pot of water that is warming slowly, the frog won't notice and will eventually be cooked. But if it warms quickly, the frog senses it and jumps out.

The bottom line is, change needs to happen quickly to be perceived. Perception is your goal with your ABT. The two moments of major change—the BUT and the THEREFORE—are your two chances to cut through the noise of today's communications landscape. You achieve this through "dramatic impact," which I discuss more in **BIT 20**.

BEFORE/AFTER COMPARISONS

Here's a final aspect to underscore how we perceive change:

We've all seen the basic weight-loss photos: the man who is obese in the BEFORE photo, then goes on a diet, turning into the slender and healthy-looking individual in the AFTER photo. Or images of hurricane devastation: the satellite photos showing all the houses BEFORE, then all the foundations left behind AFTER the destruction.

The greater the change, the greater its chance of gaining your attention, and thus the more likely you are to remember what you just saw and tell others about it. This is the same dynamic we're dealing with in narrative structure and the ABT. It's all about maximizing these BEFORE/AFTER moments.

So how do we do it?

YOU WANT THE “WHAT/HOW” RATHER THAN THE “HOW/WHAT”

Highly analytical people tend to dislike drama. They have a tendency to want to “let the data speak for itself.”

One way of achieving this is, first, to tell how things were done (the HOW), and, then, tell what has been learned (the WHAT). This is the way scientists, for example, prefer to be fed their information. Their thinking is, “Don't tell me WHAT is going on; tell me HOW you have studied things, and then I will tell you

WHAT I think is going on.” They like the basic rule of, “Don’t TELL me; SHOW me first, then I will draw my own conclusions.”

In a scientific paper, this is exactly how the author is required to report the information. There is the section titled “Methods,” followed by the section titled “Results.” Scientists, at least in theory, are not that concerned about grabbing your interest. They’re more concerned with making sure you understand everything clearly. This is a fundamental part of what makes them simultaneously trustworthy and yet so bad at communication in a world of too much information.

SCIENTISTS INFORM, JOURNALISTS COMMUNICATE

So here’s a major problem for our society. When it comes to communicating moments to the broader, less interested audience (the OUTER CIRCLE), the most effective process is the opposite of what scientists do.

First you want to capture interest by telling your audience *what* has occurred (the WHAT), and only then, once you’ve got the audience interested, do you want to clarify things by telling *how* this occurred (the HOW). Journalists do this and like to call it “The Inverted Pyramid.” They start with the headline (WHAT just happened), and then they eventually work their way into the details (HOW it happened).

It's the same dynamic for the ABT. Let's take a look at just your BUT statement in an ABT. Here's how you don't want to write it:

BUT over the past fifty years trees have been cleared, pollution has increased, and parts of the forest have been sold, leaving it severely degraded, THEREFORE ...

This example begins with all the details of things that have happened (the HOW) that have eventually led to the overall effect (the WHAT, which is "severely degraded"). This is the slow build that loses people in a short-attention-span world.

Here is what you want:

BUT the forest is now severely degraded due to fifty years of tree clearing, increased pollution, and the sale of portions of the forest, THEREFORE ...

This version begins with the WHAT (the forest is degraded), and then it goes into the details of HOW it happened.

This then becomes the challenge — getting the WHAT/HOW sequence straight. And it's the same dynamic for the THEREFORE. Here's the wrong way:

THEREFORE we're now working with politicians, we're starting petitions, we're organizing

a non-profit, and we're running advertisements, all of which will lead to a change in the law.

That's the same mistake—bogging the communication down with a lot of details before finally getting to the bottom line. What you want is:

THEREFORE we are changing the law by working with politicians, starting petitions, organizing a non-profit, and running advertisements.

First the headline, then the details.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Now it's time for the grand synthesis of this rather short book. It's time for two BEFORE/AFTER comparisons. First, our BEFORE and AFTER versions of the ABT.

BEFORE:

___ **AND** ___ **BUT** ___ **THEREFORE** ___

AFTER:

(Ordinary World) AND (What's at stake?, maybe even use the IF/THEN), BUT (WHAT, HOW), THEREFORE (WHAT, HOW)

The entire detailed model is presented at the end of this book in the section titled, “The ABT DEVELOPMENT CARD.” That is the item you’ll want to print out at the NarrativeGym.com website and have sitting on your desk as you shape the narrative of your project.

Now, here’s the second comparison—the BEFORE/AFTER of our sample ABT, the one we have worked through.

Here’s our BEFORE version:

There are 50 acres of woods next to my house AND it’s beautiful property, BUT a developer is going to turn it into a housing development, THEREFORE I want to stop the developer.

Here’s the AFTER version:

There are 50 acres of woods next to my house AND they generate \$2 million a year in local business, BUT the woods are unprotected, and IF something isn’t done to protect them soon, THEN they will be developed, meaning no property is above exploitation. THEREFORE we are changing the law by working with politicians, starting petitions, organizing a non-profit, and running advertisements.

There you have it. I’ve now given you all you need to stop reading/thinking and just get to work.

This is actually the shocking thing I learned 30 years ago. I made the decision to shift from the intellectual world of academia to the more experiential world outside the Ivory Tower. I did it by leaving my tenured professorship and becoming a filmmaker.

There was a simple book I bought way back at the beginning of that process that explained how to make a film, long before everyone owned video cameras. The very first sentence of the book said, “If you really want to learn how to make a film, you need to put this book down, get a camera, and start shooting your first film. It is an experiential medium. The only way you can learn it is to experience it.”

I was subjected to the same approach when, after moving to Hollywood, I took an intensive two-year Meisner acting program. The (insane) acting teacher would shout at us, “Stop THINKING and just do the work!” Again, it’s actual experience that builds the muscle, not just thinking about experience.

Same thing for communication in general. Put down the books. Get out of your ivory tower. Go out into the world where there are real people leading real lives and use the ABT structure to communicate effectively with them.

Will the ABT lead you to perfect narrative structure? Who knows? We get this question a lot in our training—especially from scientists. They look to us with earnest eyes after reading their ABT and say, “Is it right?” We answer, “What do you think?”

There’s a famous expression from some renowned writer (no clue who; you know how hard it is to track

down quote sources these days, even with the internet) who said a novel is never finished; it is only orphaned. What that means is there's no clear finish line, you just have to decide for yourself, "It's done." There's only the hope that you've developed enough narrative intuition yourself to have the confidence to say, "Yep, all set." When you're finally there, then you're ready to go communicate clearly and confidently.

Okay, and now for the final chapter, which gives you a few specific applications of the ABT.

CHAPTER SEVEN - That's It, You've Got Your ABT, Now Go Communicate

NARRATIVE IS LEADERSHIP

Why is the ABT so important? Because narrative is leadership. People do not follow leaders who bore or confuse. They follow leaders who have the intuitive ability to establish context (the AND), present the problem (the BUT), and offer up the solution (the THEREFORE).

One important thing to note when it comes to leadership: the ABT is not about right versus wrong, true versus false, accurate versus non-accurate or information versus misinformation. Those divides are mostly about content. The ABT is only about form, which is the same for either side of these divides.

There's nothing inherently wrong with the form And, And, And (AAA). If you sit through a presentation that is just fact after fact after fact—and you're thinking all along, "Why do we need to know all of this?"—you don't need to tell the person they did it wrong. Just know that they probably did the bare minimum amount of work and chose the easy route for communication, which put the whole burden on you to make sense of it.

So long as all the content is accurate, it's fine. Sort of. It's just sub-optimal.

The problem is that it's not the way that a good critical mind works. And thus it's not characteristic of effective leaders.

The ABT is the way to avoid that. So now that you know how to dive into the process of Narrative Shaping using the ABT Framework, get to it. Here are just a few of the ways to put the ABT to work:

APPLICATION #1: THE ELEVATOR PITCH

The business world in particular is fond of the age-old concept of the Elevator Pitch. The idea is to shrink the description of your entire project down to few enough words that you could explain it to someone in the time it takes to ride between a few floors in an elevator.

By now you know what the problem is with the Elevator Pitch: If it's AAA, you're still going to bore the listener. If it's DHY (Despite, However, Yet), you're still going to confuse the listener. Boring or confusing material is still boring or confusing material, even if it's shorter.

In fact, one of the popular activities many professional organizations have devised for their annual conferences is "lightning presentations," for which the speaker only gets two or three minutes, total. A friend of mine spoke to the organizer of one such event, pointing out that an AAA list of facts—even if it's only three minutes—is still going to be dull (or confusing, if it's DHY-structured).

The person's reply: "Yep, but, at least you know it's gonna be over with quick!"

The simplest of rules for the Elevator Pitch or short presentation, which you should commit to your heart, is just, "Get to the BUT quickly."

That should be programmed into your mind. "Am I getting to the BUT as quickly as possible?"

However, let me be clear here: I'm not talking about "cut to the chase" (**BIT 17**). That is not what you want to do. Because then you'd be throwing away the entire AND section of your ABT.

Doing that results in content that fails to connect/resonate/land/move/motivate/engage—all of that. You can't just delete the AND material and expect any impact.

APPLICATION #2: MESSAGING

Politicians, for starters, have to have a message if they want to succeed in the long term. The ABT is their tool to figure out the core of their message.

The African-American community has had more than a century of "staying on message." Their core message is easily presented in ABT form: "We were made a promise of civil rights AND we've made some progress, BUT we're not there yet, THEREFORE the struggle must continue." From Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to civil-rights leader Barbara Jordan, to the PBS series "Eyes on the Prize," and beyond, they have benefitted from consistent, powerful leadership because their narrative has been so clear.

To this end, the ABT helps guide a movement. It gets its members to understand that if they want to achieve unity, they need to start with Step One: What's your problem?

Barack Obama did this by identifying a clear and simple problem, the need for hope and change. His successor, whether you like him or not, also managed to find a simple problem to unify his followers around: the need to make the country great again.

It may seem overly simple/reductionist/analytical/inhuman/brainless, BUT ... it is the way the masses (but not necessarily the academic crowd) think and communicate.

It's the ABT. You don't have to comply with it, but you really should at least understand it.

APPLICATION #3: PRESS CONFERENCE OR DEBATE

Politicians routinely get caught like a deer in headlights at press conferences or debates. All you have to do is look at Michael Bloomberg's stand up/sit down attempt to run for president in 2020. In his first debate, he was hit with completely predictable questions about his past problems with sexual harassment. There was a simple ABT he should have been ready with—the simple and confident reply of, “Yes, there have been accusations AND I take such things seriously, BUT they have already been dealt with through negotiation, THEREFORE I won't be talking about that subject.”

That was the ABT his team should have rehearsed with him, but clearly they didn't. The questions came up, he flubbed his answers, he waffled, and the media chewed him up and spat him out.

Anyone who routinely speaks to the public has to deal with Q&A sessions. There inevitably arises a list of predictable questions you know you can expect. You need to have solid, well-thought-out answers to those predictable questions, and the best form for your answer is the ABT structure.

Bottom line: Figure out your ABTs, then rehearse, rehearse, rehearse them.

APPLICATION #4: CONSISTENCY

I was invited to speak to the top five heads of global branding for a sportswear company. At the end of my talk, I had them individually write what they felt was the ABT of their brand.

When it comes to branding, the ABT is the core dynamic. A "brand," at its heart, is little more than, "We make a product AND we have lots of competitors, BUT none of them do this one thing we do, THEREFORE buy our product."

They wrote down their ABTs then read them aloud. Guess what? All five were completely different. One person said the company is about about "authenticity," another said, "fashion and design," another, "celebrities," and two said different versions of, "youth culture."

That's not good. If you're head of a team, you constantly want to make sure that "we're all on the same page." The ABT is your simple tool for testing this.

So keep it in mind. It's not too much to ask people to write down an ABT on the spot. Everyone can do it. Don't let anyone tell you, "Well, I need some time to think this through." No, you don't. Not for a first draft.

When you do this exercise, everyone ought to end up with just about the same ABT. If they don't, you've got a messaging problem. The ABT is the analytical tool you need to ferret out this sort of inconsistency.

APPLICATION #5: TABLE OF CONTENTS

Let's say you want to write a book about something like weaving baskets. You can make a list of chapters, and they can be just one long AAA laundry list: chapter one, the origins of basket weaving; chapter two, the materials used; chapter three, designs; chapter four, shapes of baskets; chapter five ...

That's just basically, "Everything you ever wanted to know about weaving baskets."

Think about the Frank Daniel quote (in **BIT 4**). He said we always start first drafts with the dreaded "and then, and then, and then" structure. That's the same structure our basket weaving chapter list has.

As Frank said, it's in the revisions that we replace the ANDs with BUTs and THEREFOREs. You don't have to do it for the structure of your book (or presentation or proposal or wedding vows or eulogy), but it can work a lot better for everyone if you do.

I know this because my first book, *Don't Be Such A Scientist*, was originally just ten chapters that were my Top Ten Most Common Mistakes in Communicating Science. But once I created that first structure, I began to realize how dull it was. In the fine tradition of Frank's advice, I eventually found at least a little bit of structure: a sequence of only four chapters, all of which echoed the title, "Don't Be ...," then a fifth chapter that reversed direction with positivity and encouragement.

The overall ABT was basically "Don't do this AND don't do this AND don't do this AND don't do this, BUT IF you can avoid all those things, THEN you can really help the world in a good way, THEREFORE do the following and get to work!" (Notice the positive IF/THEN clause in the usually negative BUT!)

That simple observation of Frank's is so important that I'm going to make it the first of my final three points in this book.

REMEMBER FRANK DANIEL

Frank Daniel had a very analytical mind. His Sequence Paradigm for screenwriting is a model that provides the specific, analytical scaffolding for the

creation of a story built on sound logic. It is not surprising that a mind like that found its way to the three key words of the ABT.

Always remember, at the simplest level, his two simple and extremely general paragraphs that appear to be the origin of ABT thinking (and presented in **BIT 4**). He basically said that it's okay to write a first draft in the "dreaded" (as he called it) AAA structure of "and then, and then, and then."

Then, in his second paragraph, he talked about the need to push further. He essentially said, "There's gold in them thar hills," if you can just push yourself to start replacing the "and then's" with BUT or THEREFORE.

He's the guy who spotted the ABT. But he was deeply ensconced in the world of screenwriting, with no incentive or pathway to take that knowledge to audiences outside Hollywood.

Instead, he handed it down to students, and they in turn handed it to people like the *South Park* co-creators. Those guys could have put together a mission to share that knowledge with the world, but that would have left less time for side projects like their play, *The Book of Mormon*, which won seven Tony Awards.

Which would you rather do: become a preacher for narrative structure or dominate Broadway?

So it's fallen to me to try and break this bit of analytical knowledge out of Hollywood. Thus this book. But do keep in mind, it all began with the brilliance of Frank Daniel.

REMEMBER ANNIE DILLARD

I wish I could say I've read a lot of her books—I haven't. But I did, many years ago, read her book *The Writing Life*, and I found that little gem, "It is the beginning of a work that the writer throws away."

That is so well-put. You need to dive into the ABT process with a quick first draft, then go backwards to fix the opening. There's something very deep to this dynamic—the idea that you don't really know what you want to say at the start until you're done. Almost like life itself—if only I could go back and relive my childhood, now that I know what's important in life.

Actually, all of this stuff is deep. Which can be a problem. Don't get too caught up in the thinking—the world is moving too fast these days. Keep advancing the narrative.

REMEMBER LONGFELLOW

Lastly, I need to close with this greatest of all quotes. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the great American novelist and poet of the 1800's, upon finishing his epic poem "Evangeline," sent it to his best friend for reading. His friend wrote back, saying he absolutely loved it, in part because "it was so easy to read." Longfellow replied, "Evangeline was easy for you to read because it was so hard for me to write."

That is the essence of all I'm saying here about the ABT: This stuff is not easy. At all.

Yes, you can write an ABT in one minute, but it can take you a lifetime to develop and refine it into being “the right ABT.” You can spend months figuring out exactly what the question is, what exactly is at stake, what’s the proper frame to set it up with, and how you can tighten up the two moments to have maximum impact.

Out of so much simplicity can arise so much complexity. You must respect that about narrative. And know that people spend entire lifetimes trying to master it. In fact, no one—and I mean absolutely no one—ever truly masters narrative. Especially in the moving-target/short-attention-span/frantic/internet-driven world we have created.

Yes, you can show me a “master storyteller” from the highlands of Scotland who can weave a yarn that’s comparable to the greatest tale of seafaring mariners of centuries gone by, BUT ... put that old goober in front of a bunch of young hipsters in a club in New York City, and he won’t be able to get a word in edgewise.

Nobody masters narrative. Everyone can get better, and there’s only one way. It’s what Longfellow was pointing to. Hard work.

THEREFORE ...

BACK TO THE NARRATIVE GYM

Get thee to the Narrative Gym. Start your workout with ABT crunches.

I learned this mindset from the improv actors I've worked with from Hollywood's Groundlings Improv Comedy Theater. I've cast them in my films and hired them to teach improv in my workshops—about 25 of them over the course of 15 years. They say, “Improv is like a muscle that has to be built up over time and maintained through constant conditioning.”

What they mean is that an improv actor can't just jump up on a stage and do a performance without being in shape, any more than a marathon runner can sit around watching television for a year then suddenly enter a race and expect to do well. You have to maintain your fitness.

It's the same with narrative structure. I've watched it over the 25 years since I attended film school at USC. There were so many kids in my class, recent graduates from Ivy League universities, who were terrible at telling stories. They had almost no narrative intuition.

But they worked hard, began to learn how to condense a complex story down into a few sentences that would light a room of producers on fire, then continued to hone their craft over the years. I see them now at Hollywood parties, and they tell their stories in a completely different manner from how they did it back then. They now have the ability to get right to the heart of the ABT dynamic, then hold your interest as they delve into the depths of the complete story.

These people have their own narrative gyms in their homes and apartments. They do their ABT crunches all day long. They end up narratively buff.

And most important of all, they acquire the ultimate gift, narrative intuition.

You can do the same, because you know where the Narrative Gym is located? It's in your mind.

The ABT DEVELOPMENT CARD

ABT DEVELOPMENT

The 3 Step Process for Strengthening an ABT

REFERENCE CARD

Step One - BUT: What is your problem?

SINGULAR NARRATIVE - don't want multiple narratives

CORRECT SOURCE — is the problem pollution killing fish in a river, or is it laws that allow for pollution?

WHAT'S PREVENTING A SOLUTION - if the problem is pollution, then why isn't it stopped?

Step Two - AND: Go back and fix your set up

The AND material is two main elements: The WHAT and the WHY.

ORDINARY WORLD (WHAT) - simple opening description, such as, "Management of caribou herds in Alaska has been studied for over a century, AND ..."

WHAT'S AT STAKE (WHY) - this is the "Why should we care?" element. For example, "... AND caribou are a major source of Alaska's \$126 million annual income from tourism"

NOTE: Always keep in mind: "The power of storytelling rests in the specifics." Try to make the What's at Stake element as specific as possible — not just "caribou are important," but actually how they are important (tourism) and if possible a dollar or aesthetic value.

Step Three - BUT, THEREFORE: The Two Moments

The two moments of transition are the best chances to break through the noise and capture attention. You want to maximize CONTRAST, going from calm to excited. You want to go from the WHAT to the HOW (not the reverse).

WHAT - the overall statement
HOW - the processes that cause it

RIGHT WAY: "BUT caribou are now threatened with 90% population loss in the next year from habitat loss, pollution, and hunting."

WRONG WAY: "BUT habitat loss, pollution, and hunting now threaten caribou with 90% population loss in the next year."

THE DETAILED ABT

(Ordinary World) **AND** (What's At Stake, maybe even using the IF/THEN structure),
BUT (WHAT), (HOW), **THEREFORE** (WHAT), (HOW)

The opening of Martin Luther King, Jr's "I Have A Dream" speech is a model of ABT excellence at work.

Five score years ago,¹ a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. (AND)² This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves² who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.³ **BUT one hundred years later,**⁴ the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. So (THEREFORE)⁶ we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.⁵

1 - Opens with TIME, the most powerful aspect of narrative, 2 - gives a SPECIFIC number for "what's at stake", 3 - ends opening with peaceful/end of story feeling, 4 - begins contradiction with WHAT the problem is, 5 - follows with the HOW of the problem, 6 - ends with "So," the alternate form of THEREFORE

FIVE CLASSIC ABT EXAMPLES

The ABT is ubiquitous throughout our culture, but sometimes it's more visible and obvious than others. Here are five of my favorite ABT sightings along with our system of "format coding" we use to identify the three forces of:

AGREEMENT - blue/normal

CONTRADICTION - red/bold

CONSEQUENCE - green/italics

1) Nursery Rhymes

Could there be a much simpler starting point? Most nursery rhymes fit the ABT mold. Here's five popular ones. I've added the ABT words in parentheses to help show the structure.

Mary had a little lamb, it's fleece was white as snow.
(AND) everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go. (AND) It followed her to school one day, **BUT that was against the rules.**
(THEREFORE) it made the children laugh and play to see a lamb at school.

Rock-a-bye, baby, in the tree top
(AND) When the wind blows the cradle will rock
(BUT) When the bough breaks the cradle will fall
*(THEREFORE) Down will come baby, cradle and
all*

All around the mulberry bush,
The monkey chased the weasel.
(BUT) The monkey stopped to pull up his sock,
(THEREFORE) Pop! goes the weasel.

Peter, Peter pumpkin eater, had a wife,
BUT couldn't keep her.
*(THEREFORE) He put her in a pumpkin shell and
there he kept her very well.*

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
**(BUT) Along came a spider
Who sat down beside her**
And (THEREFORE) frightened Miss Muffet away.

COMMENTARY:

Over and over again, the same basic pattern — set up, twist, consequence. It's eternal, and you were raised on it. Note that each one ends with an action that is the consequence of what happened. Think about how old these are — some handed down for hundreds of years, retaining the same basic story over the ages. That is what hitting the ideal ABT form does — it retains fidelity.

2) The Gettysburg Address

Historians have some minor disagreements over the exact words Lincoln delivered at Gettysburg in November, 1863, but there's general agreement it was just over 270-some words total. Here is one version.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

(BUT) Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war.

(THEREFORE) We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here

gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

(THEREFORE) It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

COMMENTARY:

It was only three paragraphs. It might be the single greatest demonstration of the ABT dynamic ever.

The first paragraph begins in the past. It establishes the Ordinary World which is devoid of problems and contradictions. The contradiction (the problem) is introduced at the start of the second

paragraph. You can see how dropping in a BUT would have worked fine right there.

It ends up being two ABTs. The first one is for the “here and now” addressing why they were assembled. The second one is the bigger picture, reaching into the future.

By the way, imagine if school teachers, instead of having their students robotically memorize this speech, asked the students to find the two ABTs in the speech. It’s extremely simple, yet leads to a much deeper analysis of what the speech says. People dream of teaching critical thinking — this is how you actually do it.

3) Oprah Winfrey’s 2018 Golden Globes Speech

In February, 2018 media mogul Oprah Winfrey delivered this speech at the Golden Globes Awards banquet in Los Angeles that was instantly hailed as a classic.

Thank you, Reese. In 1964, I was a little girl sitting on the linoleum floor of my mother’s house in Milwaukee watching Anne Bancroft present the Oscar for best actor at the 36th Academy Awards. She opened the envelope and said five words that literally made history:” The winner is Sidney Poitier.” Up to the stage came the most elegant man I ever remembered. His tie was white, his skin was black—and he was being celebrated. I’d never seen a black man being celebrated like that. **(BUT) I tried many,**

many times to explain what a moment like that means to a little girl, a kid watching from the cheap seats as my mom came through the door bone tired from cleaning other people's houses. But (THEREFORE) all I can do is quote and say that the explanation is in Sidney's performance in Lilies of the Field: Amen, amen, amen, amen."

In 1982, Sidney received the Cecil B. DeMille award right here at the Golden Globes and it is not lost on me that at this moment, there are some little girls watching as I become the first black woman to be given this same award. It is an honor—it is an honor and it is a privilege to share the evening with all of them and also with the incredible men and women who have inspired me, who challenged me, who sustained me and made my journey to this stage possible. Dennis Swanson who took a chance on me for A.M. Chicago. Saw me on the show and said to Steven Spielberg, she's Sophia in 'The Color Purple.' Gayle who's been a friend and Stedman who's been my rock.

I want to thank the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. **We know the press is under siege these days.** We also know it's the insatiable dedication to uncovering the absolute truth that keeps us from turning a blind eye to corruption and to injustice. To—to tyrants and victims, and secrets and lies. I want to say that I value the press more than ever before as we try to navigate these complicated times, which brings me to this: what I know for sure is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all

have. And I'm especially proud and inspired by all the women who have felt strong enough and empowered enough to speak up and share their personal stories. Each of us in this room are celebrated because of the stories that we tell, and this year we became the story.

But it's not just a story affecting the entertainment industry. It's one that transcends any culture, geography, race, religion, politics, or workplace.

So I want tonight to express gratitude to all the women who have endured years of abuse and assault because they, like my mother, had children to feed and bills to pay and dreams to pursue. They're the women whose names we'll never know. They are domestic workers and farm workers. They are working in factories and they work in restaurants and they're in academia, engineering, medicine, and science. They're part of the world of tech and politics and business. They're our athletes in the Olympics and they're our soldiers in the military.

And there's someone else, Recy Taylor, a name I know and I think you should know, too. In 1944, Recy Taylor was a young wife and mother walking home from a church service she'd attended in Abbeville, Alabama, when she was abducted by six armed white men, raped, and left blindfolded by the side of the road coming home from church. They threatened to kill her if she ever told anyone, but her story was reported to the NAACP where a young worker by the name of Rosa Parks became the lead investigator on her case and together they sought justice. But justice wasn't an option in the era of Jim Crow. The men who

tried to destroy her were never persecuted. Recy Taylor died ten days ago, just shy of her 98th birthday. She lived as we all have lived, too many years in a culture broken by brutally powerful men. For too long, women have not been heard or believed if they dare speak the truth to the power of those men. **But their time is up. Their time is up.**

Their time is up. *And I just hope—I just hope that (THEREFORE) Recy Taylor died knowing that her truth, like the truth of so many other women who were tormented in those years, and even now tormented, goes marching on.* It was somewhere in Rosa Parks' heart almost 11 years later, when she made the decision to stay seated on that bus in Montgomery, and it's here with every woman who chooses to say, "Me too." And every man—every man who chooses to listen.

In my career, what I've always tried my best to do, whether on television or through film, is to say something about how men and women really behave. To say how we experience shame, how we love and how we rage, how we fail, how we retreat, persevere, and how we overcome. I've interviewed and portrayed people who've withstood some of the ugliest things life can throw at you, **but the one quality all of them seem to share is an ability to maintain hope for a brighter morning, even during our darkest nights.** *So I want all the girls watching here, now, to know that a new day is on the horizon! And when that new day finally dawns, it will be because of a lot of magnificent women, many of whom are right here in*

this room tonight, and some pretty phenomenal men, fighting hard to make sure that they become the leaders who take us to the time when nobody ever has to say Me too again.”

COMMENTARY:

First off, notice how she cycled through several ABT loops. There's lots of exposition (AND material) setting up each turn of contradiction followed by consequence.

In my 2015 book, *Houston, We Have A Narrative*, I talked about the fractal nature of narrative structure and introduced the idea of “nested ABT’s” to describe what this speech embodied. Oprah had an overarching ABT (that “we were made a promise AND we’ve made progress, BUT the dream is not yet fulfilled, THEREFORE we must continue the struggle”). Then, as you can see from the formatting, there were smaller scale ABT’s at work.

The day after her speech the New York Times offered up a better, broader description of the structure by calling her speech, “A story about stories.” That shows you the literary difference between the New York Times, and me :(

4) HIPPOLYTA TELLS THE HISTORY OF THE AMAZONS IN “WONDER WOMAN”

This part of the screenplay for the blockbuster superhero movie, *Wonder Woman*, begins with the directions, “Hippolyta slowly unfolds the large TRIPTYCH, revealing an elaborate PAINTING illustrating the history of the Amazons.” It is followed by her giving this narration.

HIPPOLYTA: Long ago, when time was new, and all of history was still a dream... the gods ruled the Earth, Zeus king among them. Zeus created beings over which the gods would rule -- beings born in his image -- fair and good, strong and passionate. Zeus called his creation... man. And mankind was good.

But one grew envious of Zeus 'love for mankind -- and sought to corrupt his creation. This was Ares. The God of War. Ares poisoned men's hearts with jealousy and suspicion, vengeance and rage. He turned them against one another.

And war ravaged the Earth.

So the gods made us, the Amazons, to influence men's hearts with love and to restore peace to the world.

For a brief time, there was peace, even a unity among the world, as the gods and man fought side-by-side against a great evil.

But it did not last.

Ares refused to give up his hold on mankind. Tightening his grip, he turned them against us.

When Zeus led the gods to our defense, Ares killed them, one- by- one... until only Zeus himself remained.

While Zeus used the last of his power to stop Ares... striking him such a blow, the God of War was forced to retreat. With Zeus 'dying breath, he created this island to shield us from the outside world. Somewhere Ares could not find us.

But in the event he did, *Zeus left us a weapon, one powerful enough to kill a God... to destroy Ares before he could destroy mankind... and us... with an endless war.*

COMMENTARY:

You can see with this bit of classic storytelling how the ABT is the primal form. I first heard this narration in a movie theater. As everyone else was engaged in the movie I wanted to speak up — “Is everyone hearing how ABT all of this is?” Yeah, I know — the ushers would have escorted me out, saying, “Sir, please put down your Narrative Spectrum refrigerator magnet and return to just living life instead of analyzing everything for ABT structure.”

5) Carlie Rae Jepson's "Call Me Maybe"

Come on. Could there be any better anthem for the entire ABT theme? Let's all go back to the summer of 2012 and sing along to this melody that people couldn't get out of their heads.

I threw a wish in the well Don't ask me I'll never tell
I looked at you as it fell And now you're in my way

I trade my soul for a wish Pennies and dimes for a
kiss I wasn't looking for this
But now you're in my way

Your stare was holding Ripped jeans
Skin was showing
Hot night

Wind was blowing
Where you think you're going baby?

Hey I just met you And this is crazy
But here's my number *So call me maybe*

It's hard to look right at you baby

But here's my number

So call me maybe

Hey I just met you And this is crazy
But here's my number *So call me maybe*

COMMENTARY:

One billion Youtube viewers can't be wrong.

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THE NARRATIVE GYM

Introducing the ABT (And, But, Therefore) Framework for crafting ... a message, essay, strategy, novel, campaign, proposal, presentation, screenplay, argument, joke, ballad, report ... pretty much everything.

The ABT Narrative Template embodies the simple problem/solution dynamic that drives the brain. This book provides the first detailed presentation of the new 3 Step Development Process for strengthening a narrative. The material arises from the first 7 rounds of the ABT Framework online course taught by Dr. Randy Olson and his team of a dozen co-instructors who have been developing the ABT Framework over the past decade.

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USDA Office of Scientific Quality Review



RANDY OLSON is the 2020 recipient of the John P. McGovern Award for Excellence in Biomedical Communication from the American Medical Writers Association. He is a scientist-turned-filmmaker who left a tenured professorship of marine biology (PhD Harvard University) to attend USC Cinema School, then work in and around Hollywood for 25 years. He has written and directed a number of acclaimed films including, "Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus" which aired on Showtime.

BOOKS BY RANDY OLSON

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