



THE NARRATIVE GYM

FOR BUSINESS



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

RANDY OLSON, PHD
AND PARK HOWELL

**THE NARRATIVE GYM
FOR BUSINESS**

THE NARRATIVE GYM FOR BUSINESS:

Introducing the ABT Framework For
Business Communication and Messaging

By Randy Olson and Park Howell

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Park Howell

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WELCOME TO THE NARRATIVE GYM FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

AND ...

Some day in the future, you'll go to the Narrative Gym for Business Communication **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 in business, as with life in general, 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, persuasive business communication.

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, which this book introduces.

THIS BOOK IS HOPEFULLY NOT A “TL;DR”

The business world moves fast.

In business, you can't afford to get bogged down in parenthetical comments or go off on tangents. You need to focus and get to the point.

That's what the ABT is for. It's a storytelling tool to help you focus and get to the point. Which means that it's only fitting that this, the essential book for the ABT, is also focused and gets to the point.

This book is short, useful, and intended for everyone in the world of business. It's meant for sales people, marketers, content creators, business developers, HR professionals, risk managers, IT professionals, chief marketing officers, chief revenue officers, chief executive officers, and receptionists.

The book is only about 75 pages long.

You know why it's so short? TL;DR.

That 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.” 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: “TL;DW.”

And that's fine, BUT ... there's too much of it happening in our society, especially in the fast-paced world of business. Too many people talking about books of which they've only read two chapters. Too many people excitedly ordering a book off Amazon but never getting more than a few pages in.

THEREFORE ... we don't want TL;DR's for this book. We've kept the content to the bare minimum you need to get you up and running with the ABT Framework.

If you want to go deeper into the weeds, then get a copy of the original non-business version of *The Narrative Gym*, which will steer you to the website, NarrativeGym.com.

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."

CHAPTER ONE - The Power of “But”

Wait! Did we instantly turn you off with the title of this chapter? Have you been advised, somewhere along the line, to avoid using the word “but”?

Maybe you’ve heard it from couples’ therapists, who say, “the word ‘but’ negates whatever precedes it and creates a sense of defensiveness.”

Maybe you’ve heard it from improv acting instructors, who are trained to avoid “negating” and thus not to use the word “but.”

Maybe you’ve heard someone who works in diplomacy, a field that trains its people to simply never say the word “But.”

There are good reasons for all of those recommendations, BUT ... (there’s the word, no escaping it) the word “but” is at the heart of all that is human. And you want to be human, right?

The word “but” is also at the core of the ABT Narrative Template that this book is built around. What’s the ABT, you ask? It’s this one-sentence template:

____ AND ____ BUT ____ THEREFORE ____.

It's an incredibly simple tool that takes you right to the core of communication, and communication is what being human is all about.

THEREFORE ... let's look at why you actually do want to use the word "but"—but in the right way. We need to do this up front just to make sure you're on board with all we're going to dive into.

“BUT” AND YOUR BRAIN: USE IT OR LOSE IT

Let's begin by talking about “narrative structure.” At the simplest of all levels, content comes in one of two forms:

It either has narrative structure, which means it's built around a problem. Or it doesn't have narrative structure, meaning it's not built around a problem.

Here are a few examples:

A list of all the different types of socks in my dresser drawer is non-narrative content. The project you're going to do this weekend to fix your crooked dresser drawer is going to produce narrative content.

The description of the family who lives next door to me is non-narrative. The account of figuring out who murdered their father is very much narrative.

The list of products your company sells and how great they are is non-narrative. The challenge your customers face in designing their new patio and how your company can design it for them better than any other company ... that is definitely narrative.

Are you getting any sense for this divide yet? We define the word “narrative” as “the series of events that occur in the search for the solution to a problem.”

Non-narrative content can be connected with the word “and.” As in, “Your new patio will have chairs AND a table AND a barbecue grill AND ...”

In contrast, designing narrative content requires something more to connect words than just that one word “AND”. It needs the three words of the ABT—as in, “You have dreamed about your new patio and want to impress your neighbors, BUT you don’t have much room or money. THEREFORE you need to hire us because we know how to make it all work beautifully.”

That is content that has narrative structure. It has the setup (And), the problem (But), the solution (Therefore).

So to review—non-narrative is And, And, And (AAA). Narrative is And, But, Therefore (ABT).

Now let’s talk about what narrative does to the 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 we are huge fans of simplicity), they used MRI to record brain activity when subjects viewed films without narrative structure (basically just information alone) 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 place within the material that needed a “but.” It’s not like the people were working on solving a problem.

For the narrative material, they used a murder mystery movie, which is of course narrative and involves a “but” (“a woman sits alone at night in her living room, BUT then a masked stranger bursts in”). The word BUT is the force of contradiction. It changes things, it creates drama, and that shows up in brain activity.

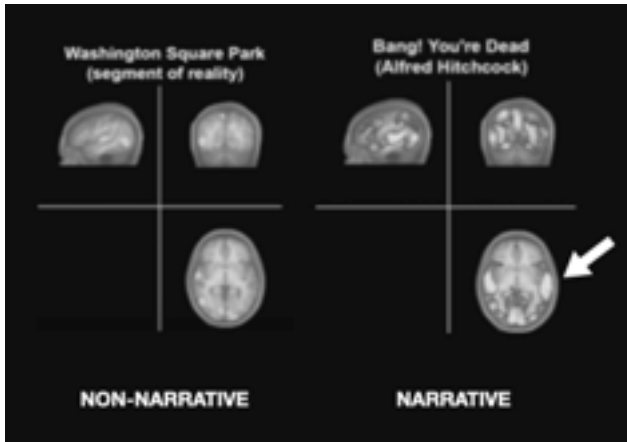


Figure 1. Brain scans of subjects viewing non-narrative video (people walking randomly in Washington Square Park) on the left, versus narrative video (an Alfred Hitchcock movie) on the right. Note the white regions of activity in the narrative brain scan, which are not seen in the non-narrative brain 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, as it initiates 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.

More importantly, it's at the center of narrative structure, and narrative is how we have communicated for thousands of years. How far back? At least four thousand years, if you read the written Epic of Gilgamesh, but probably tens of thousands of years, when you look at a cave painting of someone chasing a bull with a spear (trying to solve the problem of "what's for dinner tonight?").

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'll go when you begin engaging in "narrative shaping" of an ABT to make it stronger.

Now here are a few words on how we managed to come together to write this book.

THEREFORE: INTRODUCING THE RANDY AND PARK SHOW

Randy Olson is a scientist-turned-filmmaker. Park Howell is an advertising expert. Randy wrote and published the original version of this book, *The Narrative Gym*, in November 2020. It was built around the 3-Step Development Model that emerged out of the ABT Framework Course we ran seven times during 2020, with roughly 40 participants in each round. One of us (Randy) formulated the course, while the other (Park) was an instructor.

We met in 2013, when Park first learned of the ABT from Randy's book of that year, *Connection: Hollywood Storytelling Meets Critical Thinking*.

At first, like all of us, Park was skeptical of whether something as simple as the ABT could be so powerful. More bluntly, he thought, “If this thing is so great, why wasn’t I told about it long ago?”

The answers to these two questions are: first off, yes, it definitely is that powerful, and, second, nobody figured it out because of ... time.

Only in 1986 did screenwriting legend Frank Daniel first identify “THE PROBLEM”: the unfortunate tendency of all of us to start by being a little on the boring side. He noted that first drafts of scripts tend to use “the dreaded ‘and then, and then, and then’” structure.

We realized that what he was talking about isn’t just for scripts. It’s what happens with the creation of essays, reports, presentations, proposals, pitches—pretty much all of communication.

Let’s face it, we were all born boring. When’s the last time you heard a fascinating story from a newborn?

Frank Daniel also realized “THE SOLUTION”: it’s in the revisions, where you replace the “and’s” with “but’s” and “therefore’s” as you change your boring laundry list of facts, scenes, details, and information into an actual story. More specifically, when you make those revisions, that’s when you tap into the power of narrative structure.

A quarter-century later, in a Comedy Central documentary, the co-creators of the animated series *South Park* revealed their “Rule of Replacing,” which is a modified version of this. They said that after writing the first draft of an episode script, they go

through it, and every time they encounter the word “and,” they ask themselves if they can replace it with “but” or “therefore.” They said, “Every time you can replace an ‘and’ with a ‘but’ or ‘therefore,’ the storytelling gets better.”

When Randy heard them say that, he saw the power of its sheer simplicity. He formulated the ABT Narrative Template, co-authored his book *Connection*, and then Park read about it and began spotting it in the world around him. He realized the iconic Gettysburg Address is the ultimate ABT speech—just three paragraphs that embody each word. As far as we can tell, he was the first to ever spot the structure in this landmark piece of American history.

Since then, we’ve been on a magical ABT mystery tour—using it, teaching it, studying it, and constantly spotting it throughout our culture. Nursery rhymes are ABT-structured, the best television commercials are ABT-structured, Carly Rae Jepsen’s billion-views song “Call Me Maybe” is ABT-structured. Basically, wherever you see effective mass communication, you’ll see the ABT at work.

In the fall of 2020, our ABT Framework course gave rise to the book *The Narrative Gym*. Now we’re focusing it on the business world to help you be more influential and persuasive. Park has been teaching the ABT framework to his clients since he first recognized its power of simple, compelling communication. We’ll show its many uses in Chapter 7.

Furthermore, what we're advocating with the ABT Framework is the idea that all of your thinking begin with the structure of narrative. It's not a matter of the medium you use to present your message, it's a matter of how you structure the information you're presenting. Even the most successful business leaders need to realize this. Including this guy ...

JEFF BEZOS WAS WRONG (OR, DON'T SHOOT "THE MESSAGE MEDIUM")

In 2019 Inc. magazine ran an article titled, "Jeff Bezos Banned Power Point and It's Arguably the Smartest Management Move He's Ever Made." This title makes it sound like the communication medium of Power Point is the bad guy, but it isn't.

What Bezos needed to ban was "non-narrative presentations of ALL sorts." He needed to ban non-narrative emails, non-narrative speeches, non-narrative phone calls, non-narrative job evaluations, non-narrative sales and marketing campaigns, non-narrative quarterly reports ... just plain all non-narrative communication.

Narrative is an entire way of life.

The Inc. article bemoaned the worst forms of communication, suggesting the very worst might be, "For-the-love-of-god-will-you-please-get-to-the-damn point?" presentations. That is indeed what we're talking about with narrative: getting to the point.

And that is exactly what the ABT helps you achieve — to get to the point.

So let's get to the point now and **THEREFORE** start learning this better framework for business communication.

CHAPTER TWO - LET'S GET STARTED ...

This title makes us think of one of our 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, we're going to begin with that show as the first ABT on our 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 storytelling dumbbell that allows you, if you curl it every day, 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 a skilled communicator.

The term is derived from Hollywood, where great screenwriters talk about "story sense." What they mean is the ability to sense structure—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, with complete confidence, that it's a fraud (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. We'll capitalize 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 as the names 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 we think is the most powerful of so many incredibly well-told stories on Real Sports.)*

There are countless episodes of *Real Sports*. Why does this one stand out? 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.*

As we mentioned, spotting this was Park's finest hour as an amateur historian. Look at how simple the speech's structure is. In fact, instead of having children robotically memorize the speech, as they've been forced to do for generations, they should be shown this simple three-part structure, given four speeches, with one of them being the Gettysburg Address, and asked which one has the structure. Even elementary school kids could spot it.

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.

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 accidentally gets 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 ever, it probably doesn’t play so well in

today's more progressive times, but, the main point is that, 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 - THE ICONIC APPLE 1984 TV COMMERCIAL:

*An auditorium full of Orwellian-like zombie workers stare at a screen **AND** seem to accept the blather of the droning speaker, **BUT** then a woman bursts in and hurls a hammer into the screen, obliterating the image, **THEREFORE** Apple says 1984 won't be like 1984.*

It was the "Commercial of the Decade," according to *Advertising Age*. It aired during the 1984 Super Bowl. The commercial was pure, simple ABT structure. The advertising world was never the same.

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, Dr. Patricia Limerick, Professor of History at the University of Colorado, a MacArthur Fellow, and one of the instructors in the ABT Framework course, first learned about 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?" Or how about a judge asking a lawyer, "Where are we going with this?"

That's all narrative, and narrative *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.

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.

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

CHAPTER THREE - “The ABT Build” Process

So the ABT is your central narrative for anything and everything. In business, it’s your company identity, your current campaign, or your sales pitch for a new product or service.

The main purpose of this book is to help you take an existing ABT and strengthen it through what we call “narrative shaping.” In our training program, we call this exercise “The ABT Build.”

The starting point is to create a one-sentence ABT. It’s only one sentence, which 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. For starters, you’ll want to be aware of the Dunning-Kruger Curve. It’s the idea that people often think they learn something quickly, but when they try to put it to use or explain it to someone, they hit a moment of, “Whoa ... maybe this isn’t so simple after all.”

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.

TIME TO WRITE YOUR ABT

So let's start to work on an ABT. Here's the template:

____ AND ____ BUT ____ THEREFORE ____.

And here's our sample ABT we're going to set to work on. We're going with the simplest of statements—just what you'd tell your team about your product called “gizmos” if they asked, “So what are we doing here?” We'll work on it as we “build” it, meaning as we improve its narrative shape and strength.

We manufacture a gizmo AND people like it, BUT there are numerous competitors eroding our market share, THEREFORE we need to differentiate our offering to increase sales.

Okay, there you go—nailed it! Simple problem (gizmo competition), simple solution (differentiate). 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 ... the truth is, you're just getting started.

Let's begin with 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. "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. So let the build begin.

CHAPTER FOUR - The ABT Build Process, Step 1: “BUT” - WHAT’S YOUR PROBLEM?

Time for “narrative shaping” through what we call “The ABT Build.” Think of this as if you’re 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 where we not only recognize whose face it is, we can even be moved by it.

There are ultimately lots of aspects to the ABT structure that we can work on, but for this introductory exercise, we’re just going to explore a few.

We start with a leap-frog move. There are 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 we 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 is *simple*, which is important. When it comes to communication, simple is more than just fun—it is strength. The opposite—complexity and even obfuscation—are deadly.

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 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 in our course. 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 an ABT of the project they are working on. Now begin your "ABT Build" session by taking away what they've written, then ask them to start a sentence with these three words:

"The problem is ..."

When we do this in an ABT Build session, we 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.

WHY IS “THE PROBLEM” SO IMPORTANT?

As we 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.

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.

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 gizmo example. We ask you, "What is your problem?" You reply, "We're losing market share."

Yes, but what is the problem you need to be working on? Is it increasing your market share? Is it downsizing your company? Or is the problem that you shouldn't even be making gizmos? (I.e., "I make gizmos, but they're killing the planet, therefore I need a new job.")

Do you see that those are different "frames" of reference? Look at the last one in particular. It shifts the problem from them to you. This is what "framing" is about. It's what happens in the AND material, which we'll get to.

THE SINGULAR NARRATIVE

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

We manufacture a gizmo AND people like it, BUT there are numerous competitors eroding our market share and our company suffers from a shortage of sales personnel, THEREFORE ...

We've added a second element to our problem: We're now both losing market share and suffering from a shortage of sales personnel. This becomes a case of two narratives. Which narrative is more important?

You might answer that they are equally important. Well ... there's your problem.

Turns out there's an entire 2013 bestselling book entitled *The One Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth behind extraordinary Results,*” by Gary Keller and Jay Papasan, which will tell you why you need to choose one or the other.

This is the challenging thing about narrative—it is at its strongest with the number one. More is not more. More is too much; less is more.

So is our problem that we're losing our market share? Or is our problem that we're short on sales personnel?

We're going to assume it's the former.

The lack of sales people might also be important, but it is “off the narrative” and thus 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.

In the wise words of our colleague Kathleen Hapeman, it's “a side bar.” She is fond of saying, “If it's a side bar, then put it in a side bar.”

And by the way, why do we like that piece of advice? Because it's so simple!

ONE WORD: THE DOBZHANSKY TEMPLATE

The need for the singular narrative is so important that Randy developed an entire tool for it in his *Connection* book. It's called The Dobzhansky

Template, and is a single sentence that helps you find the singular narrative.

The Dobzhansky Template is:

Nothing in _____ makes sense, except in the light of _____.

Many of the participants in our narrative training find this to be the most powerful tool overall because it takes you right to the core of what your narrative is.

Why so powerful? Because “the narrative” is pretty much sacred. It’s what you’re working to convey clearly. The rule that screenwriters adhere to is that *everything* must serve to “advance the narrative.”

For our gizmo narrative, the one word might be “uniqueness.” Which means the Dobzhansky Template would be: Nothing in selling our gizmo makes sense except in the light of uniqueness.

Being different is essential to market share, and thus “on the narrative.” Sales personnel, not as much, and so that’s “off the narrative.” It’s just not as important in this particular ABT.

The narrative is everything, which means your ultimate goal is to have it come across in the same way you perceive it. Which means you want to engage in ...

CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE

In the end, controlling the narrative is what it's all about, right? You want to tell the public a story about your product, then have them spread that story around. You don't want them telling the wrong story about your product. Which means your challenge is to control the narrative.

Of course, if you're an artist, it's not that big of a deal. Many artists enjoy having audience members walk away with a completely different idea than what they thought they were presenting. But we're not here to talk about art; we're here to talk about commerce.

“Controlling the narrative” is essential for business. You want your company to be known for the things you're proud of, not the mistakes you've made, or the ones 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.

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.

Okay, we've locked in our problem for now. It's time to proceed to Step 2 of our 3-Step Development Model.

CHAPTER FIVE - The ABT Build Process, Step 2: “AND” - Back to the Start

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.

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 OF 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) WHAT - THE ORDINARY WORLD

This term was developed by famous mythologist Joseph Campbell. There's a huge body of knowledge that goes with it, arising from his Monomyth model for storytelling.

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 before anything happens to change it.

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 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: Agreement, Contradiction, Consequence. We want to open on material that absolutely everyone can agree on.

In our example, it’s the first part:

We manufacture a gizmo,

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.

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?”

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

We’re still in the AND material. This is still just the setup 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,” then the impact will be much greater when you add, “BUT you have no iron in your diet.” The impact is much greater. This is all part of “laying the groundwork” so that your narrative resonates.

Getting back to the question of, “Why should we care?” — it can feel pretty heartless. Think about the question in relation to our sample ABT. Why should we care about gizmos?

What our draft says right now on that issue is:

“AND people like it,”

Why do people like it? Time to strengthen this element.

What if this part says, “AND our gizmo helps people save 50% in their water usage”?

Now we have at least some idea of why gizmos are important. That is important. That’s what’s at stake for your customer, and by mentioning it, you just made your argument a lot stronger.

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

VERSION 1: We manufacture gizmos AND people like them, BUT ...

VERSION 2: We manufacture gizmos AND our gizmo helps people save 50% in their water usage, BUT ...

Feel the difference?

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING RESTS IN THE SPECIFICS

This increase in strength calls up one of the most important principles of narrative:

The Power of Storytelling Rests in the Specifics.

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 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.

SUPERCARGING 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 what you are trying to say 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 logic 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 was the assumption, “Well, EVERYBODY knows that,” when, in fact, everybody doesn’t.

The problem comes from the fundamental divide between your two main audiences. Let’s take a look at it using a very complicated figure.

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 our 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, the Story Circles model (5 people working in a group) that we’ve developed over the past decade in our narrative training program.

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.

THE NEGATIVE IF/THEN

The positive 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:

We manufacture a gizmo AND our gizmo helps people save 50% in their water usage, BUT there are numerous competitors eroding our market share and IF we don't double our sales in the next six months THEN we're going to have to declare bankruptcy, THEREFORE we need to differentiate our offering to increase sales.

That is digging into the fear side of motivation. You're telling your employees their entire future is on the line. Yikes.

THE MAIN CHARACTER

Using the ABT does not mean turning your material into a Hollywood story. Yes, it comes from 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, plus, by the way, this is a sidebar to what I'm saying here.) You want to introduce your main character up front.

Not introducing the main character up front ends up being a common mistake in people's ABT's. They provide a setup (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 the ABT Framework course. It's from the world of science, but is pretty simple and shows what we're 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 we 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 was a case where the main character was introduced at the end, which happens a lot in ABTs.

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 so that it now focuses on the writer's main character, sanctuary zones. 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.

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, "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.

You don't want to activate the narrative process early. You don't want words of contradiction (but, despite, however, yet, contrary to, etc.) in the AND material. You also don't want words of consequence (therefore, thus, as a result of, in conclusion, etc.) in the AND material.

What you do want is for the AND material to be peaceful—no drama, no contradiction, no consequence.

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 (such as but, however, despite, yet, suddenly) establishes a second narrative. That just dilutes and confuses things, ultimately leading to the DHY (Despite, However, Yet) form, which represents too many narrative threads. (This is all laid out in detail in my book *Houston, We Have a Narrative*.)

In fact, weren't we all taught back in elementary school to avoid using "double negatives" like, "I have *never* 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 ... there are increasing numbers of competitors eroding our market share, BUT they are using new techniques beyond our capabilities, THEREFORE ...

Can you see how confusing that is? And it gets back to the overall need for the singular narrative.

MAINTAINING FOCUS IN 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 in 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 in 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, 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 what we

mean in developing the almighty goal of “narrative intuition.”

Narrative intuition is your only goal for the long term. People ask us all the time: “I see how the ABT works for a single paragraph, but what about a ten-page essay?” That’s where you have to shift from using a template to having the narrative intuition that gives you the ability to synthesize narrative structure yourself. When you finally achieve narrative intuition is when you’re truly drawing on the full power of narrative.

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.

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

CHAPTER SIX - The ABT Build Process, 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. 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 bridge, demolished in a single explosive event that caused it to fall to a pile of rubble in less than a minute. Wow. Dramatic. And yet ... if the bridge 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 concept that 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.

We've talked about the Ordinary World. Now we're talking the moment of transition, which then begs the question of what do you transition into? The answer, in the terminology of Joseph Campbell, is the Special World.

That's what he called the world in which you now have a problem that needs to be solve. I would call it the transition from the Non-narrative world to the Narrative world. In the Ordinary World things were calm and quiet with no problems to consume your brain, now they are the opposite.

The Special World is exciting. You now have a problem to focus on. And yet, no sooner do you have a problem than you find yourself consumed with wanting to solve it. Which takes you to the second moment.

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 as the first to be memorable and cut through the noise. 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.

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.

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, BUT YOU WANT TO 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 the number of our competitors has increased in recent years, reducing our market share, THEREFORE ...

This example begins with all the details (the HOW) that lead to the overall effect (the WHAT), which is "wasteful." This is the slow build that loses people in a short-attention-span world.

Here is what you want:

BUT our market share has been reduced because of the increase in competitors in recent years, THEREFORE ...

This version begins with the WHAT (market share reduced), and then it goes into the details of HOW the reduction has 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 going to find a new slogan to differentiate our brand.

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're going to differentiate our brand by finding a new slogan.

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 NarrativeGym.com 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:

We manufacture a gizmo AND people like it, BUT there are numerous competitors eroding our market share, THEREFORE we need to differentiate our offering to increase sales.

Here’s the AFTER version:

We manufacture a gizmo AND our gizmo helps people save 50% in their water usage, BUT our market share is eroding due to increasing competition and IF we don't double our sales in the next six months THEN we're going to have to declare bankruptcy, THEREFORE we need to differentiate our offering to increase sales.

There you have it. We've now given you all you need to stop reading/thinking and just get to work. This is often the simple advice given to actors: "Stop THINKING and get to work!" It's actual experience that builds the muscle, not just thinking and theorizing about experience.

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. They look at 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 into the world of business.

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

NARRATIVE IS LEADERSHIP

Why is the ABT so important? Because narrative is leadership.

In today's business world, noise and confusion levels are driving "management malaise" to epidemic proportions. Management is leadership, and at its core is narrative.

People don't 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 inaccurate, 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, "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, thus putting 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 a good critical mind doesn't want to hear fact after fact after fact. That's not how it works. And so the AND AND AND model of communication is not characteristic of effective business, marketing and sales leaders.

The ABT avoids this. Use the ABT, do the work, and your followers will love you.

So now that you know how to dive into the process of narrative-shaping using the ABT Framework, get to it.

For this final segment, to apply the ABT specifically to the world of business, we'll hand it over to our business expert, Park Howell, to speak to you directly.

PARK HOWELL: MY APPLICATIONS OF THE ABT FRAMEWORK TO BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

I've been working in advertising for over three decades now AND I thought I'd heard most of what I need for effective communication, BUT that changed for me in 2013 when I first learned of the ABT Framework, THEREFORE let me share here a few examples of how I've applied it in recent years.

“OKAY, PARK, WE’VE GOT IT ON THE THREE WORDS, WHAT’S NEXT?”

This is the line that came up early on during a workshop I was doing with the internal sales team of a large North American retailer. Each of their attendees took my short online course, *The ABT’s of Selling*[™] prior to our first LIVE virtual session. About ten minutes into my presentation to the whole group, as I was diving deeper into the ABT, their coordinator interrupted me and said, “Okay, Park, we’ve got the three words from your course. I bet now you’re going to tell us what’s next, right?”

Wrong.

Let me explain why this is wrong.

Here’s what I need you to really, really “get me” on, regarding this point: Learning the ABT Framework involves this simple formula:

S + R = Mastery

The S is for SIMPLICITY. The R is for REPETITION. Mastery is what you seek.

Take a look at the cover of this book. You see that dumbbell? That’s the ABT.

You want to drive a golf ball 300 yards? Without muscles, it’s not going to happen. BUT ... with muscles, you’re going to be able to do a lot more than just drive golf balls.

Same thing for narrative. Work out your brain with the ABT enough, you will become narratively strong, and with that, all kinds of new things will

happen for you. You will no longer be THINKING to yourself, “how do we communicate this message?” You’ll be FEELING it. That’s what the ABT Framework gets you.

So that was my answer to him—what’s next is more ABT. Lots more ABT, just like reps at the gym.

We built four of their ABTs on the spot. Predictably, some of the elements were out of sequence. For some, they started with the problem in the AND statement (which everyone should be able to agree on). Most of the ABT’s were also super general (not yet grasping that the power of story rests in the specifics). And eventually, when I spoke with the coordinator after that session, he said, “Man, now I see how our initial ABT’s were wordy and confusing.”

“Exactly,” I replied. “ABT’s take practice. Simplicity plus repetition equals mastery.”

Your job is to make the complex simple, which by definition becomes compelling. Here are a few ways for you to put the ABT to work:

The ABT bridges the gap between general marketing messages and specific sales conversations. It’s a remarkable “story listening tool” that enables you to connect your customer’s problem with your immediate solution. The ABT does so much, including bridging cultural divides.

But most of all, as we said at the start, narrative is leadership. People don’t follow leaders who bore or confuse. Just like prospects don’t buy boring and confusing pitches. Think about it: When was the last time you were bored into buying anything?

APPLICATION #1: THE ONE-FLOOR ELEVATOR PITCH

You no doubt have been coached to create an elevator pitch for your product or service. These often end up being high-rise AAA structures (And, And, And, meaning no narrative form) or DHY structures (Despite, However, Yet, meaning too much narrative form). These pitches have your captive audience more bored or confused in less time than they had ever imagined possible.

BUT ... (our favorite word by now), it's time for you to dream of an ABT elevator pitch that can be given in under 15 seconds and will captivate your elevator audience in the time it takes to reach the first floor.

For example, Weslyne Greer, a sales consultant for the STEM industry, refined her convoluted elevator pitch with the ABT. Following one of the fundamental rules of sales that I teach, she placed her client at the center of the story. Then she established what's at stake in the AND part of her ABT. Then she defined *their* problem and presented her unique solution.

Here's her ABT:

“You are a CEO of a STEM company AND you have tremendous opportunity for growth, BUT sales have stagnated because your underperforming sales leader has the wrong skillset to ensure predictable revenue. THEREFORE, you can up-skill your people to hit quota monthly through my sales leadership

blueprint, developed from my knowledge of the scientific process specifically designed to help STEM companies grow.”

The clarity and power of Weslyne’s ABT led to her unique value proposition, which differentiates her from tens of thousands of sales consultants: “The Science of Selling STEM.” The ABT structure makes it clear in a single sentence. And more to the point, this particular ABT took me all of 23 seconds to read aloud. (Btw, how’s that for the power of specifics—just 23 seconds!)

TRY THIS SIMPLE EXERCISE: Write your one-floor elevator pitch, which is really your brand-positioning statement. Try it in this order...

1. Identify your #1 customer, what they want AND why it’s important to them.
2. BUT why don’t they have it (what problem are you solving for them)?
3. THEREFORE, specifically detail how you solve their problem differently and more distinctively than your competitors.)

APPLICATION #2: BRANDING

As demonstrated above, the ABT is also the ideal tool to capture your brand story, because at the simplest of all levels, every brand is in the business of solving problems.

Randy actually got a dose of this when a sportswear company asked him to speak with their five heads of global branding. At the end of his presentation, he asked each of them to write what they thought was the ABT for their brand.

In a perfect world, all five ABT's should have been almost identical, but what came out was less than perfect — each one was completely different. If they had been Dobzhansky one-word terms, they would have been: authenticity, youth, celebrities, fashion, and “edginess.”

They were all over the map. Which is not what you want for clear, consistent messaging. The ABT gets you to the single foundational brand story that everyone can buy into.

Which means that instead of asking the team, “So, are we all on the same page?” the ABT gives you a way to actually test this: “Okay, everybody write down what you think our ABT is.”

Here's an example of the ABT in action from one of my clients: Prêt, Auto, Partez, Quebec, Canada's largest used-car dealership for credit-risk buyers. While most dealerships prey on desperate car buyers, Prêt, Auto, Partez says its mission is “to help customers repair their credit with the purchase of their car.”

I brought them the ABT Framework, we dug in, and this is the ABT we ended up with:

You want the convenience of owning a car AND the freedom it provides. BUT you have bad credit. THEREFORE, Prêt, Auto, Partez will place you in a car you can afford to begin repairing your financial standing.

The ABT also led to their powerful unique value proposition: *Prêt, Auto, Partez: Your Vehicle to Financial Freedom*. This is the foundation for their entire brand story, which has quadrupled their growth. They are now expanding throughout North America with their customer-first business model.

TRY THIS SIMPLE EXERCISE:

1. Teach your leaders the ABT,
2. Have each of them write one about your brand story.
3. Compare their versions, then
4. work together to craft *one* ABT that becomes the launch pad for your growth.

APPLICATION #3: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SALES AND MARKETING

Historically, the marketing department doesn't communicate very well with sales. Marketing is often stuck in the non-ABT world, with general messages that are more chest-pounding than problem-solving. These messages don't resonate with customers or sales. Yet, 90 percent of salespeople struggle to create setup/problem/solution messages that work in our modern short-attention-span buying process.

The ABT can bring these two worlds together. Here's how you evolve from a general sales and

marketing message into a specific sales story using the ABT:

A trucking-products firm that I worked with had a landing page, pre-ABT, that read like this ...

We are the Cargo Control People, and we are here to help truckers and fleets alike get back control over their cargo. Give us a tie down problem, and we'll give you the ideal solution to make the securement job a smooth and effortless process. From Straps to Winches to Ropes to Hooks, we have everything you need to help you securely tie down your important cargo.

Let me begin my ABT Build for this one by making a very important overarching point that is more about content than form, but is essential in marketing.

The point is this:

THE CUSTOMER IS THE HERO

I could write a couple chapters right now about this one extremely important point, BUT ... we want to keep this book short and sweet, THEREFORE if you have any doubts about this core principle or want to study it in depth, you'll find my detailed treatment of it in my 2020 book, *Brand Bewitchery*.

For now, please just accept it as a core property of sales these days.

So our cargo company covers everything they need in the marketing copy, but it's in the wrong order and presents the brand as the hero when it should be conveying that the customer is the hero. You can feel how much more powerful it is using an ABT with the setup-problem-resolution structure:

Your cargo is gold AND it's critical to ship it as safely as possible. BUT there are many potholes along the road to a successful delivery. THEREFORE, secure your valuable load with the straps, winches, ropes, and hooks from the Cargo Control People at (the company).

Now the marketing and sales folks have a solid ABT that both departments can use to great effect.

TRY THIS SIMPLE EXERCISE:

1. Go to one of your landing pages.
2. Rewrite it as an ABT. It doesn't matter if you're in marketing or sales; you'll make it much more compelling and probably sell more product in the process.
3. Then give a big Kumbaya hug to your nemesis in that *other* department.

APPLICATION #4: ABT'S IN ALL OF YOUR MESSAGING

The ABT definitely delivers a punch with your sales and marketing messaging. But don't discount it for your seemingly mundane communications, like emails.

While teaching sustainable storytelling in a master's program at Arizona State University, I coached my students into using the ABT in their emails. What they realized immediately is that it made their emails shorter, clearer, and with a more compelling call-to-action.

Emails are actually a great place to practice your ABT's. It's the concept of Habit Stacking. You have to write emails daily, so why not make them a proving ground for your ABT skills?

Also, emails aren't the only platform ripe for an ABT. After I introduced him to the ABT on his podcast, legendary Silicon Valley marketer Christopher Lochhead tried it out on Twitter. He received the most engagement of any Tweet he'd ever before posted:



#1Apple Podcaster | #1 Author "Play Bigger" 🎙️ @lochhead · 17h

60,963

Most #Entrepreneurs would love to design a new category and build a billion \$ business. But there is so much #startup bullshit on twitter it's hard to know who to listen to. Meet @DavidSacks he knows a few things.
bit.ly/3bXuDCm pic.twitter.com/TjibN9j0OK

[View Tweet activity](#)

Craft your ABTs for:

- LinkedIn outreach messages
- Instagram post descriptions
- Facebook updates

- Tweets
- Introduction and follow-up emails to prospects
- Opening a virtual session to get everyone on the same page
- Launching into that five-minute meeting with your boss; and
- When your prospects have given you little time for your pitch.

TRY THIS SIMPLE EXERCISE: Following every Business of Story training session, I encourage my attendees to do the Three, Two, One ABT exercise to build their storytelling muscles:

1. Write three emails that begin with an ABT (Every day).
2. Teach two people about the ABT (Because you don't know what you know until you teach it).
3. Craft one ABT for a social post and see what happens.

APPLICATION #5: SALES PRESENTATIONS

We believe our product or service “solution” will solve a host of problems for our prospect AND it may well be true. BUT ... we lose the deal because we overwhelm our buyer with innumerable features and benefits.

We can call this the “Enthusiasm Trap.”

You know the adage that when you try to appeal to everyone, you appeal to no one. The same is true with your sales message. The ABT, with its singular narrative framework, makes you focus on the *one* problem you are there to solve.

THEREFORE ... start every sales presentation with your overarching ABT that has a singular problem/solution theme to it. Follow with a real-world anecdote that illustrates the premise of your ABT to make your business point for you. (You can leave the data and NUMBERS for later if needed.)

Then, every time you have another support point in the form of a product feature or function, introduce it with its own ABT. But make sure this content is in service of the singular narrative you've created with your initial overarching ABT. This enables you to introduce two or three salient features while maintaining the singular narrative your buyer's primal brain loves. It is in the primal brain that all of their real buying decisions are being made.

In fact, you want to see what was one of the best ABT sales pitches ever? Take a look at the job John F. Kennedy did in selling America on the Apollo space program in the early 1960's.

While space exploration had many facets, JFK focused on the singular narrative of:

We choose to go to the Moon in this decade AND do the other things, not because they are easy, BUT because they are hard; (THEREFORE) because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one

that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win, and the others, too.

I added the THEREFORE, which you can see slots right in. The BUT and AND were his.

That pitch led to \$24 billion in funding, which eventually produced one small step for man and one giant leap for technology and other industries that were launched because of Apollo.

You can have the same impact. But only with the singular narrative a powerful ABT provides.

TRY THIS SIMPLE EXERCISE: Revisit one of your sales presentations and re-write the opening as an ABT to identify your singular narrative: the one problem you are solving for your customer. Then, every time you introduce a major support point, craft an ABT for the point that supports your overarching ABT.

It's worth restating. The ABT is your narrative dumbbell. Curl it every day to build your business storytelling muscles. Your goal is to apply this intentional messaging framework to grow your narrative intuition. You'll quickly develop as a more confident and compelling communicator growing your people, impact and profits.

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 that we're losing market share or that we need to get out of the gizmo business?

WHAT'S PREVENTING A SOLUTION - if the problem is losing market share then why aren't we addressing this?

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, "Gizmos are a standard household item..."

WHAT'S AT STAKE (WHY) - this is the "why should we care" element, "... AND surveys show that 38% of American households have at least one gizmo,"

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 "gizmos are important," but actually how they are important in terms of a specific number (i.e. 38% of households).

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 we are losing market share due to an increasing number of competitors."

WRONG WAY: "BUT the number of our competitors is increasing which is causing us to lose market share."

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) This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves² who had been scarred 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," which 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 are five popular ones. I've added the ABT words in parentheses to help show the structure.

Mary had a little lamb, its 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 could'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—setup, 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 have been 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 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 cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot 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 at Gettysburg. 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. It 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 prosecuted. 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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RANDY OLSON was a scientist (Harvard PhD in evolutionary biology) before becoming a filmmaker who formulated the ABT Framework in 2011. His 5 books include, *"Houston, We Have A Narrative"* (Univ Chicago Press, 2015) which gave rise to his Story Circles Narrative Training program. He is the 2020 recipient of the John P. McGovern Award for Excellence in Biomedical Communication from the American Medical Writers Association.



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BOOKS BY THE AUTHORS

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*Brand Bewitchery: How to Wield the Story Cycle
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