



CHALLENGE

Story structure: **Donald Miller's StoryBrand Framework**

Donald Miller's StoryBrand framework is one of the most practical storytelling structures a business leader can learn because it recognises a simple truth: people only change when they feel the problem personally. The framework positions the audience as the hero of the story, a character who wants something badly but faces an obstacle too difficult to overcome alone. That is where the storyteller steps in, not as the hero, but as the trusted guide. The guide understands the challenge, offers a clear plan, and calls the audience toward action. This makes *StoryBrand* especially powerful for stories designed to challenge an audience. Great challengers do not simply criticise the status quo. They create tension between where people are and where they could be. They help audiences see the cost of inaction and the possibility of transformation. For business leaders trying to inspire change, create urgency, or rally people around a mission, *StoryBrand* offers a simple but deeply human structure for helping people believe that a better future is possible, and that they can help build it.

CHALLENGE
STORIES.THAT.WORK

Donald Miller's StoryBrand

BEGINNING

ACT 1

MIDDLE

ACT 2 – Part 1 ACT 2 – Part 2

END

ACT 3

A Character

Has a Problem

Meets a Guide

Who Gives Them a Plan

And Calls Them to Action

That Ends in Success

...OR
Helps Them Avoid Failure

Context:

The StoryBrand framework is a messaging tool created by marketer **Donald Miller** for his book "Building a StoryBrand". He designed the 7-stage framework to help business leaders to clarify their message while making it more "customer-centric". The framework is built upon the premise that that customers don't always buy the best products; they buy the products that communicate the clearest.

Business Application:

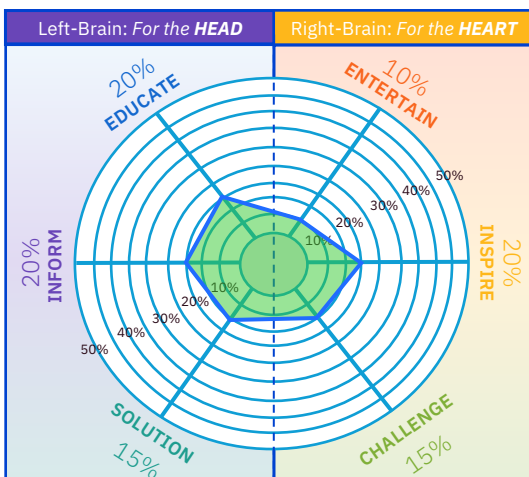
StoryBrand treats the customer as the hero ("a character") and focuses the story around the question "*What problem are you solving?*". This encourages business professionals to you communicate how they'll solve that problem by structuring their response in the form of a simple but effective customer journey. It's as easy framework to learn and is ideal for client success stories and short presentations.

Learn More:

Miller's StoryBrand

Jeremy Connell-Waite (July 2024)

Example: **The Way We Think About Charity is Dead Wrong** by **Dan Pallotta** (2013)



Chris Anderson (curator of TED) called this talk "*the most persuasive presentation I have ever heard in my life.*" And he's heard thousands. The talk is so good it was made into the movie *Uncharitable*. Dan's talk is a masterclass in the "Challenge" bearing because it does not merely share information, it de-stabilises certainty. By the end, the audience is almost forced to re-evaluate its beliefs, values, and assumptions about capitalism, charity, and fairness.



https://www.ted.com/speakers/dan_pallotta



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Neuroscience Notes:

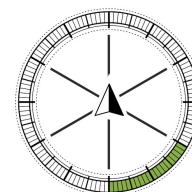
When a storyteller challenges an audience, they are deliberately creating productive psychological tension. The audience is being asked to confront a gap between who they are now and who they may need to become. That tension can feel uncomfortable because the brain is naturally designed to conserve energy, avoid risk, and protect familiar patterns of behaviour. Change, even positive change, often registers neurologically as uncertainty or threat. Scientifically, challenging messages can activate the brain's salience and threat-detection systems, including the amygdala and anterior cingulate cortex, particularly when the story exposes danger, failure, contradiction, missed opportunity, or moral urgency. This creates heightened attention. The audience becomes alert because the brain senses that "something important is at stake." Stress hormones such as cortisol may increase temporarily, sharpening focus and emotional intensity.

But effective challenge is not simply fear or pressure. If the audience only feels threatened, they may shut down, become defensive, or retreat into denial. The most powerful challengers balance discomfort with hope, efficacy, and direction. Neurologically, this matters because human beings are more likely to take action when the brain believes change is both necessary and possible. The storyteller must therefore create enough tension to disrupt complacency, while also activating motivational systems associated with agency, purpose, and future reward. This is why great challengers — from political leaders to activists to transformative business communicators — often create a feeling of constructive urgency. They help audiences emotionally rehearse a different future. They raise the emotional cost of staying the same. In doing so, they push people beyond passive understanding into adaptive action. From an evolutionary perspective, challenge is deeply connected to growth and survival. Human beings evolved through stress adaptation — learning, innovating, and cooperating under pressure. Challenging stories activate that adaptive machinery. They wake people up. They force re-evaluation. And when done skillfully, they can become the catalyst for profound personal, organisational, or societal change.

Examples: *Christiana Figueres COP speeches, Al Gore's "Truth in Ten" presentation, JFK's "Moon Speech", Bryan Stevenson's TED talk on social justice, Brian Moynihan's COVID earnings call, Mark Carney's speech at WEF (Davos 2026), Dan Pallotta's TED talk's, David Solomon's NYU commencement speech, Bob Iger's 2025 shareholder address.*

Does your audience need to be CHALLENGED?

- Are they too comfortable?
- Are they underestimating the risk?
- Are old assumptions blocking progress?
- Is inertia the real enemy?
- Does the audience need discomfort before movement?



References: **Scientific Studies Relevant to the Neuroscience of Storytelling**

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"Cognitive Dissonance Theory", Leon Festinger (1957)
 "Adaptive Gain Theory", Aston-Jones & Cohen
 "Amygdala Activation During Threat Processing", Joseph LeDoux