

Where do you want to take your audience?

THE STORY COMPASS



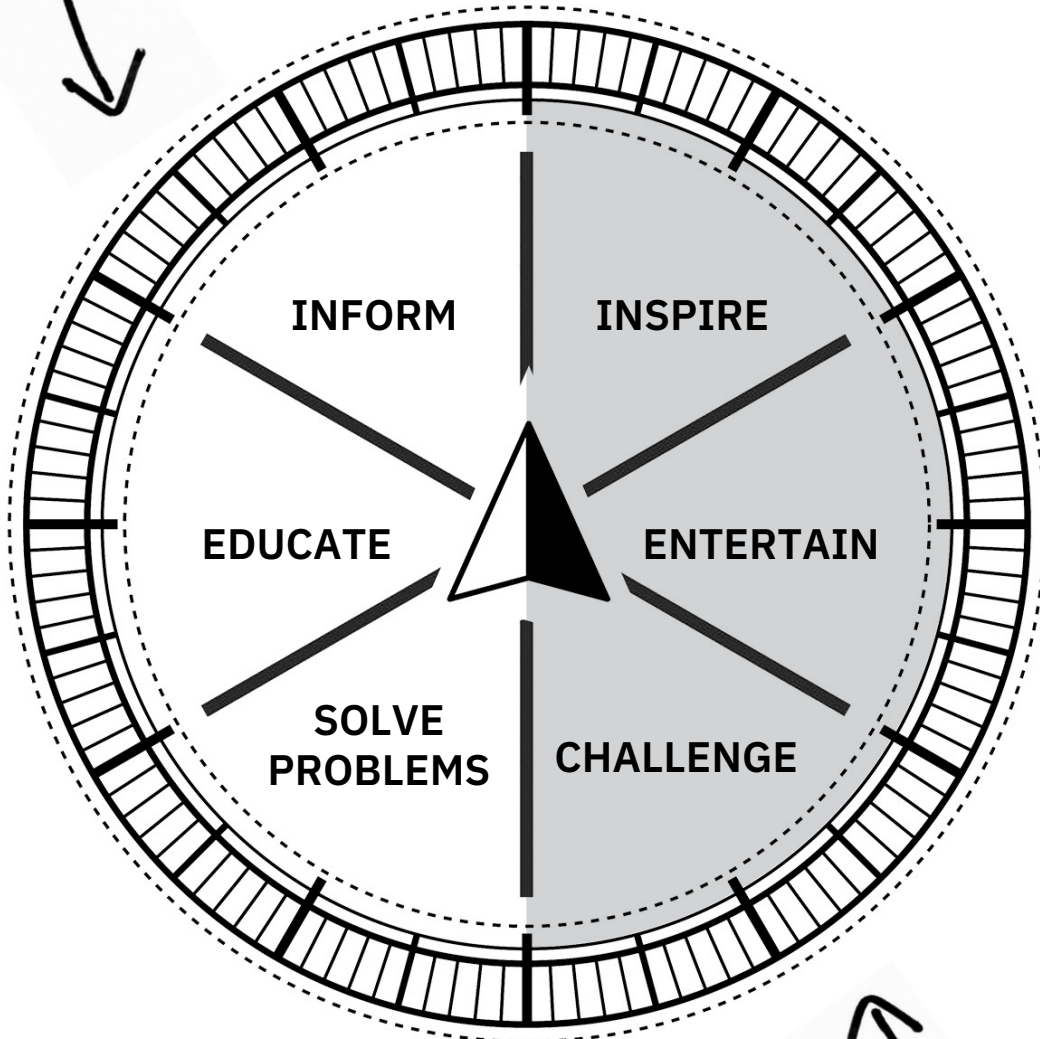
JEREMY CONNELL-WAITE

DRAFT COPY

The Story Compass™

Where do you want to take your audience?

for the head



for the heart

DRAFT COPY

The Story Compass™

Where do you want to take your audience?

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“Why Do Some Stories Work, But Others Don’t?”: A Study into The Effectiveness of Business Communications.

Jeremy Connell-Waite¹

Abstract

This guide contains an empirical study of executive communications across keynotes, earnings calls, and high-stakes, mission-critical presentations, along with the author’s research notes from studying business stories between 2012-2026. It makes the case that all great business communications (“stories”) do six things well: *Inspire, Inform, Educate, Entertain, Challenge, and Solve Problems*. And the relative success of any business story is largely determined by its ability to focus on just one of those areas, to deliver a specific outcome, depending upon the wants and needs of the audience that it is intended for. Traditional communications thinking in business suggests that the success of any “story” is determined by how effectively a business articulates what it believes it needs to say, and it is the role of the communicator who will be standing in front of an audience, to bring those words to life using the most appropriate tone and body language. Very little thought is given to audience intelligence and stories are often created by several authors, which often creates a “patchwork quilt” of disconnected thoughts and ideas, with no overall narrative to tie them together. The author of this paper would like to suggest that this approach to commercial storytelling is short-sighted at best, and deeply flawed at worst, and is the reason why many business stories don’t work. This paper seeks to propose an alternative perspective which goes beyond what presentation trainers and performance coaches have taught for decades. The hypothesis of this paper is that audiences are not persuaded by what presenters say, but by what they understand. If the outcome of a business story is to drive action, achieving tangible and measurable results, then the focus of the business storyteller should not be on what they would like to say, but on what their audience needs to hear. And as AI is making business stories sound increasingly more generic and less human-centred, business communicators need guidance and direction, now more than ever. It is the opinion of the author that business communicators need help taking their audiences where they need to go, because they can’t do it on their own, so the purpose of this paper is to introduce a novel device called ***The Story Compass™*** which can help people to do that. It’s simple guidance system which can be learned and applied quickly, which will help modern business leaders of any age or experience to communicate more effectively in the age of AI.

Keywords

business storytelling, audience engagement, public speaking, presentation techniques, interpersonal influence, AI, emotional intelligence, narrative intelligence, communications thinking, corporate communications, science of storytelling, story compass.



Why Should You Care About *The Story Compass*™?

Business leaders are stubborn creatures. They care about structure in their jobs, their teams and their projects, but in my experience, when it comes to creative pursuits like business storytelling and communications, they don't care about structure. And the more senior you get, the less structured your communications appear to be. In my experienced. I am passionate about story structure and developing a process-driven approach to communications, not only because it saves time – but because it delivers results.

Many business leaders are under pressure to deliver results quickly, and very few prioritise storytelling as a critical skill to develop within their team – so let me give you three reasons to care about *The Story Compass*. During 2022 and 2023 I started conducting informal surveys (cross-referencing verbatims with officially logged sales data for accuracy) to measure the effectiveness of my storytelling programs. These were some of my findings, based on a sample of 483 consultants who I coached to use *The Story Compass* approach for their client communications:

- Consultants using *The Story Compass* approach contributed **1.7X more business signings** (\$) than the average consultant who used standard presentation they thought was “good enough”.
- **10% more consultants hit their sales targets** when they applied *The Story Compass* in their client communications.
- **Confidence increased by 59%** when telling a strategic “end-to-end story” to clients, when *The Story Compass* approach was used in learning how to tell better business stories to C-Suite executives.
- **Net-new Relationships in the C-Suite were built in half the time** – based on an average of 30 days from first approach to a strategic sales meeting when using a hyper-personalised *Story Compass* approach, compared to an average of 60 days when using traditional B2B sales tactics, cold calling and lead generation tools.

1.7X

More signings.

10%

More consultants
hit sales targets.

59%

Increased confidence.

50%

Less time building
CXO relationships.



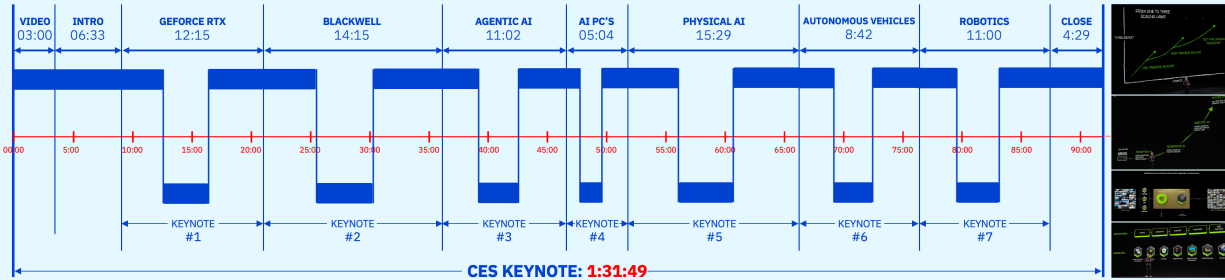
For the last decade I have been a communications designer for IBM, working on keynotes, go-to-market strategic messaging and sales presentations, in many different countries around the world. My passion for business storytelling began in 2012 when I worked for Adobe and I become obsessed with deconstructing business stories and important keynotes. I wanted to understand why some business worked, but others didn't. This guide is a collection of notes, research, and insights from over 14 years.

Jeremy Connell-Waite

NVIDIA CES Keynote 2025

JENSEN HUANG: Mandalay Bay Michelob ULTRA Arena, Las Vegas. (January 6th, 2025)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k82RwXgZHY8>



Time: 1:31:49

Words: 11,166

Speaking: 121 (Words per Minute)

Readability Score (GFI): 10.94

Optimism Index: 97.01

Problem: Enable the development of more advanced artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, particularly in the areas of computer vision, natural language processing, and robotics. He wants to make AI more accessible and widely available, and to enable its use in a variety of applications, including autonomous vehicles, robotics, and healthcare.

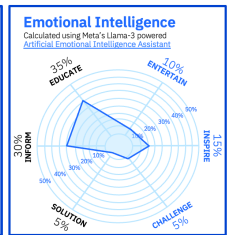
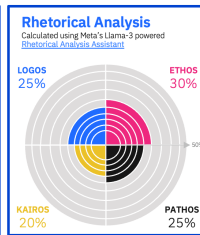
UVP: One unique aspect of this talk is its focus on the intersection of AI, computer vision, and robotics. It includes many demos and examples of Nvidia's technology in action, which keeps the talk more engaging. He also includes many references to popular culture, such as the movie "Doctor Strange", which adds a touch of humor and personality.

Surprise: Jensen Huang reveals new or unexpected information, such as the announcement of Nvidia's new AI supercomputer, "Project DIGITS". He also shows several demos of Nvidia's technology, including a demo of a robotic arm that can perform complex tasks, which may surprise or amaze the audience.

Urgency: Huang creates a sense of urgency by emphasizing the importance of developing more advanced AI capabilities, and the need for companies to invest in Nvidia's technology in order to stay competitive. He also references the rapid pace of technological change, and the need for companies to adapt quickly in order to succeed.

"But": "But what we need to do is..." Jensen uses the word "but" to contrast his own vision for a world model with the existing language model, GPT. This creates a sense of drama and tension, while highlighting NVIDIA's AI technology.

Credibility: "I delivered the first one to a startup company in 2016 called Open AI and Elon was there and I'lla Sutskever was there and many of Nvidia Engineers were there..." Huang establishes his credibility by referencing his experience working with well-known companies and individuals and his vision for the future of AI. This establishes leadership and credibility.



These responses were generated using Meta's Llama-3.1 405B powered Mission Critical Script Assistant on Watsonx.

QUANTUM SUMMIT KEYNOTE
PARO GIL, SVP IBM Research
November 17th 2024

847 words + 123 NPA

Excite → **Disturb** → **Engage** → **Assure**

Act I: Development (IBM Q) → **Act II: Production** → **Act III: Application & Impact**

THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY & BUSINESS IS AT A CROSSROADS. MOORE'S LAW IS ENDING. A NEW APPROACH TO COMPUTING IS EMERGING. IF YOU THINK COMPUTERS HAVE DRAMATICALLY CHANGED THE WORLD SO FAR, WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE WHAT'S NEXT...

IBM BELIEVES IN PROGRESS THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF INTELLIGENCE, REASON & SCIENCE CAN IMPROVE HUMANITY'S SOCIETY & THE HUMAN CONDITION

WORLD'S FIRST QUANTUM DATA CENTER - UNVEIL IBM SYSTEM TWO

RESEARCH TO BE COMPLETED BY 2025

SPG

<https://www.betterstories.org/one-panels>



Introduction – The Art & Science of Storytelling

Telling a good story is not easy. Telling an effective business story is even harder. It's a tough skill to learn. It requires an understanding of rhetoric, psychology, art, science and persuasion. Powerful stories can create movements and they can move markets. Stories can inspire people to believe a message or buy a product. Good stories influence audiences to use their vote, or to change their choices. Stories are powerful. But yet “storytelling” is still treated dismissively as a “soft skill” by many organisations. Business leaders who need to craft mission-critical communications (especially on a deadline) are being left to their own devices and are rarely given the coaching and the frameworks that they require to tell stories which drive measurable results. When OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November 2022, they opened the floodgates by putting powerful language tools in the hands of every business leader. This has created several unconscious storytelling challenges, since more technical, “non-creative”, and introverted technology leaders are now assuming a responsibility for business communications. Stories are becoming increasingly more generic, and less human-centred.

Consider this: during our careers, most of us will spend over 90,000 hours at work. Most of that time will be spent communicating with customers, colleagues and clients, which means that much of our professional success will be determined largely by our ability to speak and write.² Storytelling is often perceived as more of an art than a science, and something that is difficult to measure or quantify. The old adage “*you can't manage what you can't measure*” is why storytelling skills are not taken seriously in many organisations – not because the impact of storytelling *can't* be measured, but because they don't know how to. As a result, very little distinction is made between storytelling for entertainment, and storytelling for business – and as a result, small under-funded teams in marketing or HR often become responsible for storytelling programs as a token gesture that it is something that a business should be, but they don't value very highly. This is especially true within large industrial organisations and technology companies. Storytelling *is* an artform, and if we were to adopt a historian's definition of art as “*something which generates an emotional response and has no purpose other than itself*”³ then that type of *art* has no place in business storytelling. At work, the success of our stories is measured not by what we make an audience *feel*, but by what we motivated them to *do*.

Unfortunately, this perception of storytelling in business seems unlikely to change anytime soon, since only a minority of business leaders appear to receive any formal training in commercial storytelling or communications (especially new ones who haven't been in a management position before)⁴. This leads to many corporate communications lacking the

² Professor Patrick Winston, Former Director of MIT's AI Lab.

³ Théophile Gautier (1835) - *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

⁴ <https://hbr.org/2026/03/when-senior-leaders-lack-people-skills-transformations-fail>

⁵ Gallup: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>

⁶ McKinsey:

https://www.mckinsey.com/~/_/media/mckinsey/business%20functions/people%20and%20organizational%20performance/our%20insights/the%20state%20of%20organizations%202023/the-state-of-organizations-2023.pdf

⁷ <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2024/12/adult-skills-in-literacy-and-numeracy-declining-or-stagnating-in-most-oecd-countries.html>



impact they need to have. Open-rates drop, engagement levels fall, trust declines, and employees feel short-changed as they struggle to understand what the business is doing. According to Gallup, only 13% of employees strongly agree that leadership communicates effectively⁵, so it is no surprise that over half of employees say they understand their company's strategy⁶. Furthermore, as adult literacy declines⁷, and AI adoption increases at an exponential rate, the quality of business storytelling is suffering. With executives under more pressure to drive better business results in less time, mission critical communications are being out-sourced to AI models and IT. According to one study, over two-thirds of executives said they were significantly more stressed in 2025 than the previous year.⁸ In an effort to save time and increase productivity, LLM's (large language models) are being adopted at scale across organisations to help executives relieve some of that stress. With artificial intelligence driving more front and back-office operations, one developing trend is that more introverted technically minded ("left-brain") thinkers are becoming responsible for "storytelling". As a result of all this, business communications are becoming increasingly generic and less human-centred. Stories lack the empathy required to truly connect with their intended audience. Statistics are replacing stories. Numbers are prioritised over narratives.

In my role as a communications designer at one of the world's largest technology companies where I face these issues on a daily basis, I started to view this challenge as a navigation problem. I believe that many business leaders feel lost. When it comes to crafting business stories, I hear time and time again that they don't know where to start, or they don't know why the stories they are telling are not working. They need a trusted guide to help them write and direct their stories. They need to orient themselves, and to do this – they need a simple guidance system which might enable them to find their way, and take their audiences where they need to go. I've been thinking about how I can use my experience to help solve some of these challenges, and I found a solution in the most unexpected of places: *Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island*. Great book. Beautifully written. It's a reminder of what good writing really looks like, and what AI could arguably never do, but that's a conversation for another time). All the talk of maps, navigation, and finding treasure in the book made me think about the one device which has unlocked trade routes and helped leaders and explorers to find their way for thousands of years.

A compass.

The compass is one of the most important instruments ever created because it gave humanity the ability to move with confidence into the unknown. Before the compass, oceans were barriers. After it, they became bridges. It enabled civilizations to explore new worlds, expand trade routes, share ideas, build economies, exchange cultures, and accelerate scientific discovery. Entire empires, industries, and global markets were shaped by the small magnetic needle that quietly pointed north. Invented more than 2,000 years ago during China's Han dynasty⁹, the compass transformed commerce by connecting people separated by thousands of miles, but it also transformed our relationship with the planet itself - opening pathways for migration, discovery, conflict, cooperation, environmental exploitation, and ultimately a deeper understanding of the Earth. In many ways, the compass did not simply change where

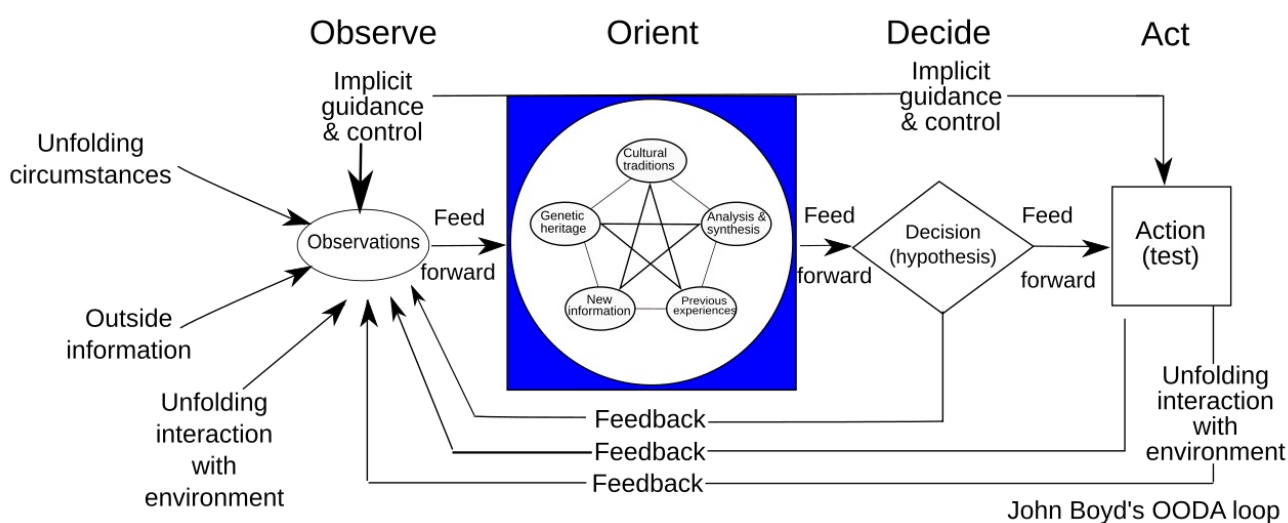
⁸ <https://www.sentry.com/about-us/company-news-and-events/2025-csuite-stress-index>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_compass



humanity could go; it changed what humanity believed was possible. That's why the metaphor matters so deeply for storytelling. A great story acts like a compass. It creates orientation in moments of uncertainty. It gives people direction, belief, and momentum. Like magnetism itself, the *energy* of a powerful story is invisible but deeply felt — pulling individuals, teams, and entire societies toward an idea, a mission, or a better future. I wrote briefly about the “energy” of storytelling in my book *The 109 Rules of Storytelling*, when I suggested that three forms of energy are *heat*, *light* and *sound*. In storytelling, *heat* is when you stoke up an emotion in your audience. You create *light* when you illuminate something and help your audience to understand it. And *sound* is how you use your voice to connect with your audience. There is an energy in storytelling, just like there is an energy within all of us. We just need to harness that energy in the right way and transform it into powerful stories. That's what great leaders do. They don't force people forward. They align them. They help people find true north. And that is why I think *The Story Compass* is the perfect device to help us be more successful in business. In a world overwhelmed by noise, uncertainty, and distraction, business leaders do not simply need better presentations, they need a reliable instrument that helps them orient people, align belief, and move audiences toward meaningful action.

When I first came up with the concept of a *story compass*, I suggested it to a former Navy SEAL and a Top Gun instructor as part of a leadership training program I was engaged in. I soon discovered how closely the idea of a story compass aligned with the type of mission-critical decision making which was required on the battlefield. As I learned more about the type of tactical communication skills needed to be successful on the battlefield, I started to wonder if they would be equally relevant in the boardroom. That's when I came across OODA. I knew the concept from books I had read many years ago. I even had a slide on it in some of my early presentations, but I had not connected it directly to business communications.



Legendary U.S. Air Force fighter pilot and military strategist John Boyd developed the OODA Loop in the early 1970's. He used “*Observe, Orient, Decide, Act*” as a way to explain how humans make decisions under pressure, especially in fast-moving and uncertain



environments such as aerial combat. Boyd noticed that victory often went not to the strongest or fastest opponent, but to the person who could process reality, adapt, and respond more quickly than their adversary. His framework emphasised that success depends not just on gathering information, but on correctly orienting yourself to changing circumstances using experience, intuition, culture, analysis, and mental models before making decisions and taking action. Originally designed for fighter pilots during the Cold War, the OODA Loop later influenced business strategy, leadership, politics, cybersecurity, and modern innovation because it provides a simple but powerful model for navigating uncertainty, complexity, and rapid change.

I had used variations of this loop at IBM, but until I started researching the compass concept, I never fully grasped that the reason this loop is so effective. On the battlefield, and in the boardroom, OODA is an effective process because it focuses on the quality of the outcome (and the speed at which it is decided). Good decision making on the battle-field can be the difference between life and death. It relies upon seeing all the relevant data (OBSERVE), and then navigating your surroundings (ORIENT) so that you are in a position to decide on the most appropriate course of action. It's very similar in storytelling, although it's rare that people die* as a result of a badly told story. We must understand our audience from all the intelligence we have available to us at the time, so that we can orient ourselves as storytellers, knowing where they are, where we are, and what direction we should go in. This was all the confirmation I needed that *The Story Compass* was a concept which would help communications leaders just as much as Boyd's OODA loop had helped military leaders.

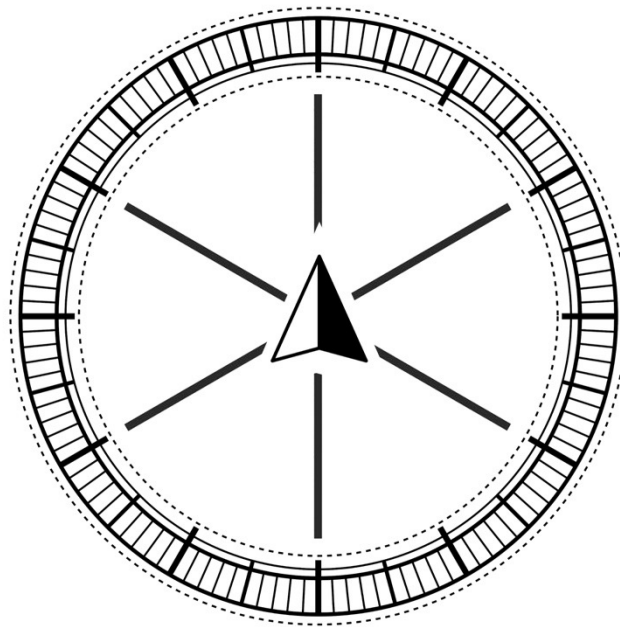
In many ways, OODA is the perfect operating system for The Story Compass because storytelling itself is a navigation challenge under conditions of uncertainty. Every audience is different. Every moment is different. Every decision is emotional before it becomes rational. Great storytellers are constantly observing, orienting, deciding, and adapting in real time.

* A debate for the pub: There are many moments throughout history when bad storytelling has ended in disaster. Discuss...

The Story Compass™ Mindset

(Inspired by OODA)

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OBSERVE

What is happening in the world – and what story needs to be told?

- Before writing a single word, observe the situation carefully.
- What has changed? What problem exists? What opportunity, risk, tension, or transformation matters most right now?
- Most importantly: what emotional state is your audience already in? Confused? Comfortable? Cynical? Fearful? Curious? Great storytellers begin with awareness, not assumptions.

ORIENT

Where do you want to take your audience?

- This is the moment to use The Story Compass. Determine the primary bearing of your story.
- Do you need your audience to feel inspired? Informed? Educated? Challenged? Entertained? Ready to solve a problem?
- Orientation matters because different destinations require different structures, emotions, language, and levels of evidence.
- A story designed to challenge an audience should not sound like a quarterly report.
- A story designed to educate should not feel like an entertaining TED talk.

DECIDE

What story, structure, and signals will move this audience?

- Now decide how the story should be told. What narrative structure best fits the destination? What facts, emotions, metaphors, visuals, and human moments will help the audience pay attention and care?
- This is where neuroscience matters. The left brain seeks certainty, logic, and clarity. The right brain seeks meaning, empathy, emotion, and connection. Great storytellers design for both.
- AI can become a powerful creative partner here, helping analyse language, test structures, identify emotional patterns, simulate audience reactions, and refine clarity, but the human storyteller must still choose the direction.

ACT

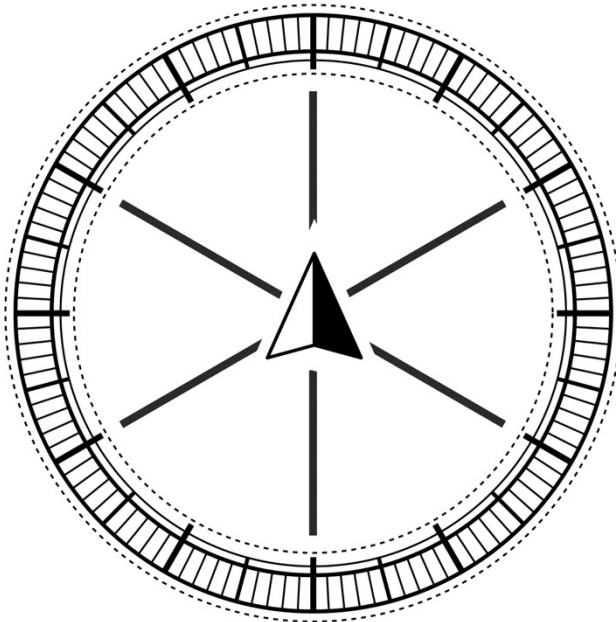
What do you want your audience to do – and how will you measure success?

- Every story should create movement. A decision. A conversation. A change in behaviour. A new belief. A next step. Define success before you deliver the story.
- How will you know if it worked? Did confidence increase? Did engagement improve? Did the audience remember the message? Did they act differently afterwards?
- The most effective storytellers are not simply performers. They are navigators of human action and measurable change.

The Story Compass is not simply a framework for communication. It is a navigation system for human attention, emotion, and action in an increasingly distracted and uncertain world.

Origins of
The Story Compass™

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Designing *The Story Compass*[™]

Some of my friends are car nuts. They are real petrol heads who enjoy racing cars and taking them to pieces. They love to look under the hood to see how an engine works, and they enjoy nothing more than taking it to pieces to see if they can make it better. During my career I have given hundreds of keynotes and analysed thousands of others. In much the same way that my friends enjoy taking cars to pieces to see how they work, I enjoy taking stories to pieces to see how they work. For almost two decades I have written speeches and presentations for some of the worlds largest stages, and I have become obsessed with understanding why some stories work but others don't. I have written many business stories throughout my career. I'm incredibly proud of most of them, but some of the ones I really like just didn't resonate with the audience and at the time I couldn't understand why. I've also written my fair share of stories on a deadline which felt a bit too formulaic, but which were praised by audiences as one of the best presentations they've ever heard. That baffled me just as much. What was the difference between the two? I used to do post-mortems of my storytelling scripts after an event to try and understand why some worked and some didn't. I always wished that there was a simple model or tool which might help me to analyse a story *before* an event, in an effort to try and predict how an audience may (or may not) respond. That could enable me to edit accordingly before the event, and possibly increase my chances of storytelling success.

Back in 2016 this mindset led me to explore IBM's Watson Conversational AI. I had recently started working for IBM and I now had access to many impressive language processing tools which allowed me to examine vast document sets very quickly. I started to study transcripts all my keynotes, sales pitches, team meetings, go-to-market strategic documents, product marketing materials, press releases, business reviews, and earnings calls. Ten years on, I have probably analysed over 10,000 documents on my quest to try and understand what the best business stories had in common. When I first started designing what would become *The Story Compass* I started with 200 of what I believed to be the best business presentations. These were stories I had worked on, or had taught in my communications programs at IBM or in business schools. I initially wanted to organise all these stories into some type of order which might help me to see any commonalities between them. I created a very basic word cloud as a starting point (fig. 1) which contained potential *objectives* of a good story. The more I thought about these words, the more they felt like destinations. These were places which the presenter wanted to take their audience, as they shared their transformational stories. President Kennedy for example wanted his audience to *challenge* his audience to believe. *Disney* wanted to inspire his audience. Sir David Attenborough loves *educating* his audience. News broadcasters want to *inform* their audiences. Scientists want to work with audiences to *solve problems*. Showrunners and screenwriters want to *entertain* their audience. As I considered all the storytellers who I admired, it occurred to me that these words might become the type of destination "*bearings*" which you find on a compass. Once you fix your bearing on a compass, no matter what obstacles you face along your journey, provided you have orientated yourself (and your compass) correctly, you'll always end up where you want to go.



Fig 1. Word cloud containing 100 keywords of the potential outcomes of a business story, using IBM Watson's conversational API to analyse 500,000 words from 200 presentations (av. 2,500 words each).



As I looked at this word cloud of over 100 *bearings* - far too complex for me to organize my stories into - I thought back to 2012 when I was working for the software company *Adobe*. I was on a project for the BBC and as part of my research for the client I learned that the original mission of the British TV broadcaster was “*To **inform, educate and entertain.***” Simple but significant. This ‘principle’ (as the BBC refer to it) was originally written in 1922 by Baron John Charles Walsham Reith, the first director general of the BBC. I wrote those three verbs down and used them to cross-reference against my 200 transcripts for tone and keyword analysis, looking to explore which of my business stories did one of those three things. I was pleased to notice that many of them did, but some didn’t. It was a great start, but I started to notice large gaps where some presentations and speeches didn’t fit. For example:

- *What is the primary objective of a speech for COP by climate activists and conservationists like Al Gore, Sir David Attenborough or Dame Jane Goodall?*
- *A provocative film on social justice is more than educational content, surely?*
- *What about a presentation about where artificial intelligence or quantum computing was attempting to solve problems which hadn’t been solved before?*

Seeking to shorten my list of “bearings” I starting looking towards other great storytelling institutions and world-class communicators such as Walt Disney, Yuval Noah Harari, Steve Jobs and former American President John F. Kennedy. Walt Disney, one of my storytelling hero’s, came up with one of my all-time favourite storytelling quotes:

*“That's what we storytellers do.
We restore order with imagination.
We instill hope again and again and again.”*

Walt often spoke about sparking hope, encouraging belief, and modeling moral courage. Whenever I think of Disney content, I think about being *inspired*. Another *inspirational* storyteller, one who decided to take Disney head on with Pixar, eventually becoming partners with them, was Steve Jobs. At some time during 1994, while Jobs was leading Pixar and NeXT, Jobs interrupted a debate in the NeXT break room about “*the most powerful person in the world,*” declaring that it was the storyteller, then walking away with his toasted bagel!

*“The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller.
The storyteller sets the vision, values, and agenda of an entire generation that is to come”.*

Now there’s a quote which *inspires, informs* and *challenges* if ever there was one! Noted. “OK...”, I thought, “*what about stories which **challenge** an audience?*”

One speech I know very well is President John F. Kennedy’s “*Moon speech*” from Rice University in 1962. I have even spent time in the JFK Presidential Library to study JFK’s notes and speech prep to understand what made this speech so good. I often use it as a model of excellence for technology-based speeches when I am teaching at business schools.



There is a line from early in the opening of the speech which seems as relevant today as it was over sixty years ago, “*We meet in a time of change and **challenge.***”

As a sidenote, any aspiring technology storyteller should study John F. Kennedy’s “*Moon Speech*” because it provides a masterclass in making complex innovation feel profoundly human. Kennedy doesn’t simply talk about rockets and engineering; he turns space exploration into a story about courage, destiny, curiosity, and national character. He compresses 50,000 years of human progress into a single “24 hours” metaphor to help ordinary people grasp the astonishing speed of scientific advancement. He uses nautical imagery inspired by his love of sailing: “setting sail,” “new seas,” “great adventure”. This makes the unknown feel familiar and emotionally resonant. He balances humour with gravity, uncertainty with optimism, and ambition with humility. Most importantly, he acknowledges the risks honestly but insists that difficult things are worth doing precisely because they are hard. For any modern leader trying to explain AI, climate technology, quantum computing, or transformation, the speech is a timeless lesson in how to turn technical progress into a bold human mission.

Another time, while still pondering my “bearings” and how I might organise different business stories into simple categories, I was flicking through *Sapiens*. I thought about the anthropologist Yuval Noah Harari. He argues that storytelling is what allowed humans to cooperate at scale - essentially functioning as a tool for coordination and **problem-solving**. Harari suggests that stories exist to serve human needs. In his books *Sapiens*, *Homo Deus*, and *Nexus*, what Harari is really pointing out is this: long before spreadsheets, contracts, or code, it was stories that allowed strangers to trust one another and act as if they shared a common purpose. Money works because we all believe the same story about value. Nations exist because millions of people agree on a shared narrative of identity.

*“Stories are the greatest human invention.
People need stories in order to cooperate.
But there's also something else very important:
they can change the way they cooperate by
changing the stories they believe.”*

- Yuval Noah Harari*



Harari talks about how laws hold because we collectively accept an invisible framework of right and wrong. These are not physical realities - they are imagined ones, sustained through storytelling. And crucially, they don't just describe the world; they organise it. They align behaviour, coordinate decisions, and help groups solve problems at a scale no individual ever could. In that sense, storytelling isn't a soft skill. It's one of the most powerful operating systems humanity has ever created. For a century, we've been told that stories inform, educate and entertain. But the storytellers who changed the world - from Aristotle to Disney to modern science - knew something more. The most powerful stories don't just explain the world. They **inspire** us, **challenge** us, and help us **solve** it. Once I added these three categories alongside Reith's BBC principles, I spent the next few years exploring whether all business stories could fall within one of these six categories:

- 1. Inspire.**
- 2. Inform.**
- 3. Educate.**
- 4. Entertain.**
- 5. Challenge.**
- 6. Solve Problems.**

With the hypothesis that great stories do these six things well, I started to wonder if all great business stories should contain each of the six bearings? Or is the difference between a good story and a *great* story, the fact that one that great stories don't try to be all things to all audiences, they aim predominantly towards one *bearing*?

Good question isn't it?

It appeared to me that great stories did six things well but one brilliantly. When I challenged this theory as part of my storytelling programs at IBM, my interviews with consultants and business leaders seemed to confirm that when stories were designed around a bearing, there were successful. When presentations were more generic, taken from official messaging or just by re-purposing a previous presentation – the presentations had a significantly lower impact.

I have been coaching storytelling for business in one form or another since I was *Head of Social Strategy* for EMEA at Adobe in 2012. As I sit here today writing this guide in May 2026, I am of the opinion that fourteen years seems a more than reasonable amount of time to stress test my theories, and to speculate on their successful applications in business storytelling. I hope you agree that “*I have not been hasty in coming to my decision*” as Charles Darwin stated in his opening for *On the Origin of Species*.

I have always admired Charles Darwin, not only for his scientific brilliance, but for the humility and patience of his process. Darwin spent more than fourteen years gathering evidence before publishing *On the Origin of Species*, wrestling privately with the tensions between science, faith, philosophy, and the implications of his ideas.



Even then, he was careful not to overstate his certainty, writing: *“I am well aware that scarcely a single point is discussed in this volume on which facts cannot be adduced, often apparently leading to conclusions directly opposite to those at which I have arrived.”*

I reference Darwin not to compare this work with one of the greatest scientific manuscripts ever written, but to acknowledge an important truth: there is both an **art and a science** to understanding human communication. Storytelling is not mathematics. It is emotional, contextual, cultural, and deeply human. Different storytellers may reasonably draw different conclusions from the same material.

And yet, after fourteen years studying speeches, presentations, scripts, campaigns, interviews, and business narratives — after analysing thousands of stories and coaching tens of thousands of business leaders — I have become increasingly confident that the stories which move people to action tend to share six common directional forces. Six recurring bearings. Six patterns that appear again and again in the stories that work.



Inspired by my storytelling hero's, I organised 100+ potential story “**bearings**” into categories using AI to help me cluster the keywords. I identified six common themes.

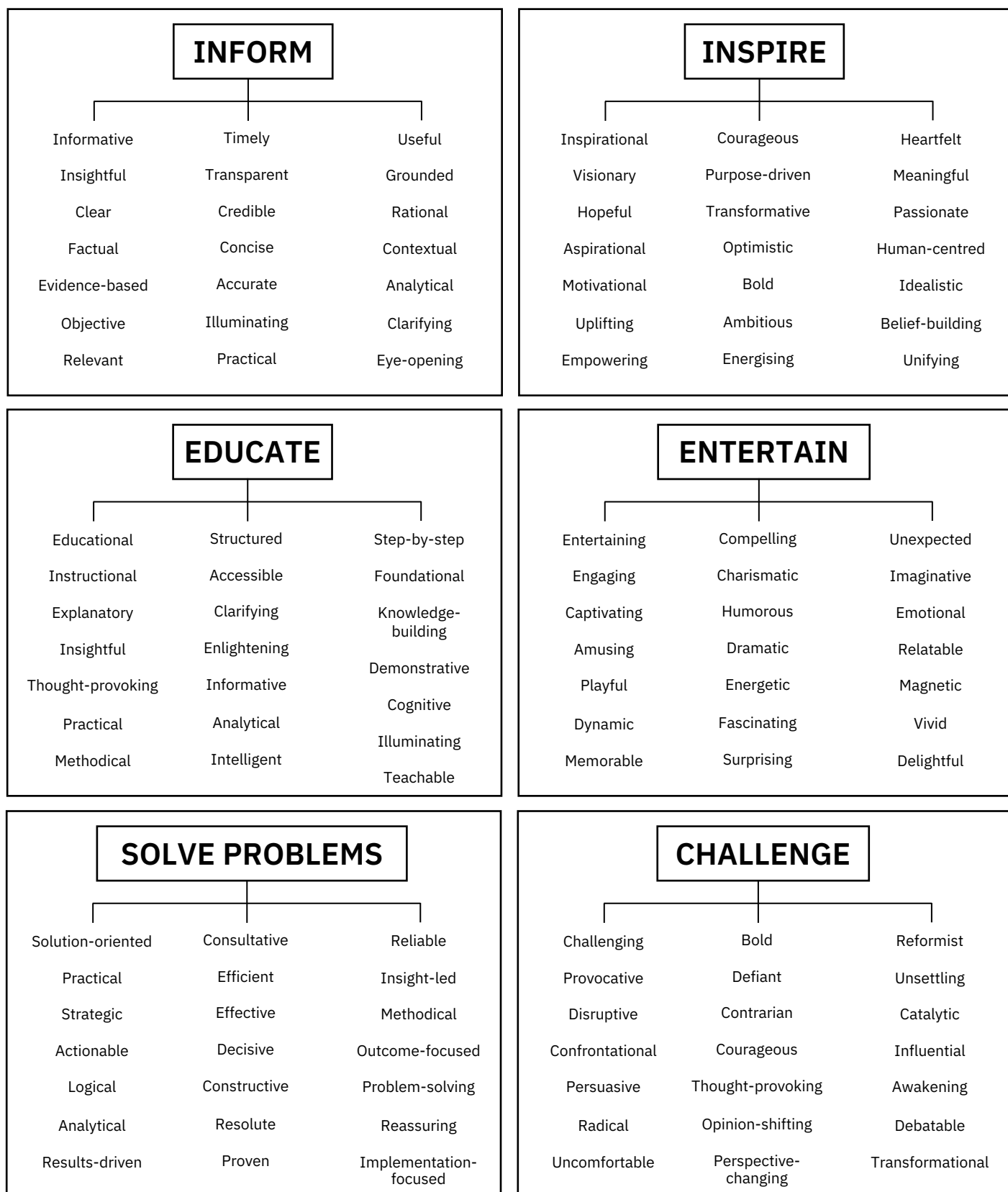
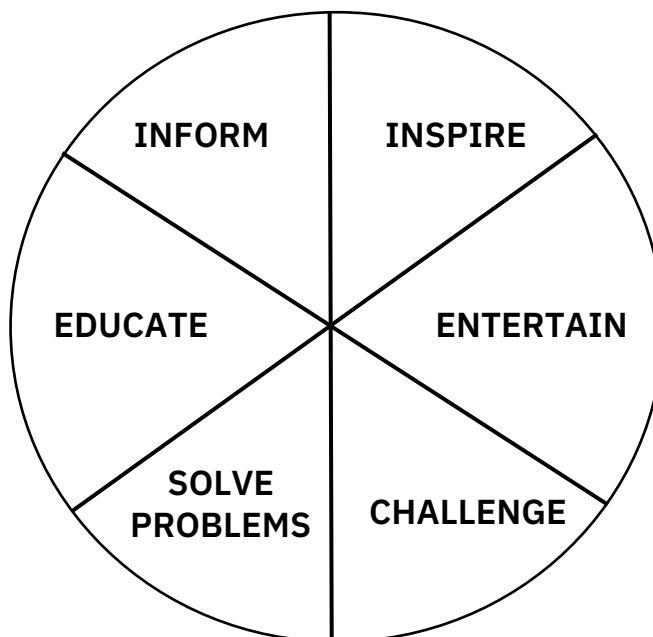


Fig 2. AI-generated Keyword clusters based on the primary purpose of each story, simplified and organized into sections which could indicate the goal of what that story is aiming to achieve with its target audience.



Fig 3. The Story Compass contains six “bearings” which all great business story contain.



Think → Feel → Do ?

The Story Compass forces you to consider the primary motivation for your audience in order to drive a specific commercial outcome. Some stories need to make an audience FEEL something before the DO something. Other stories need to inspire ACTION before giving their audience an emotional reason to motivate that action.

Maya Angelou allegedly once said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel” although there is no evidence of her ever saying it. Noel Gallagher on the other hand, did say “People will never forget how you made them feel” in the Oasis documentary Supersonic. Whichever poet you prefer, the sentiment is true! Great storytelling is about making an audience FEEL something, but the job of a business storyteller is to go one stage further and to make an audience DO something. *That* is the measure of whether a story worked or not. *Great stories make people feel something so that they do something.* As we begin to unpack how *The Story Compass* works, and how to measure the effectiveness of your own presentations, we need to start by considering what we want our audience to think – and then we start to direct our transformational stories towards one of those six bearings:

| | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| AUDIENCE THOUGHTS | Inspire → | <i>“I believe this matters – and I want to be part of it.”</i> |
| | Inform → | <i>“That’s interesting. Tell me more.”</i> |
| | Educate → | <i>“Ah... now I understand.”</i> |
| | Entertain → | <i>“I loved that. I was completely engaged.”</i> |
| | Challenge → | <i>“I’ve never thought about it that way before.”</i> |
| | Solve Problems → | <i>“This feels practical. Let’s do it.”</i> |

Fig 4. What might an audience be thinking when a story is weighted more towards one bearing than another?



Testing my theory that “stories that work” might fall into one of six bearings, I used Meta’s “Llama” LLM to see if I could organise all the storytellers I featured in my programs. I could.

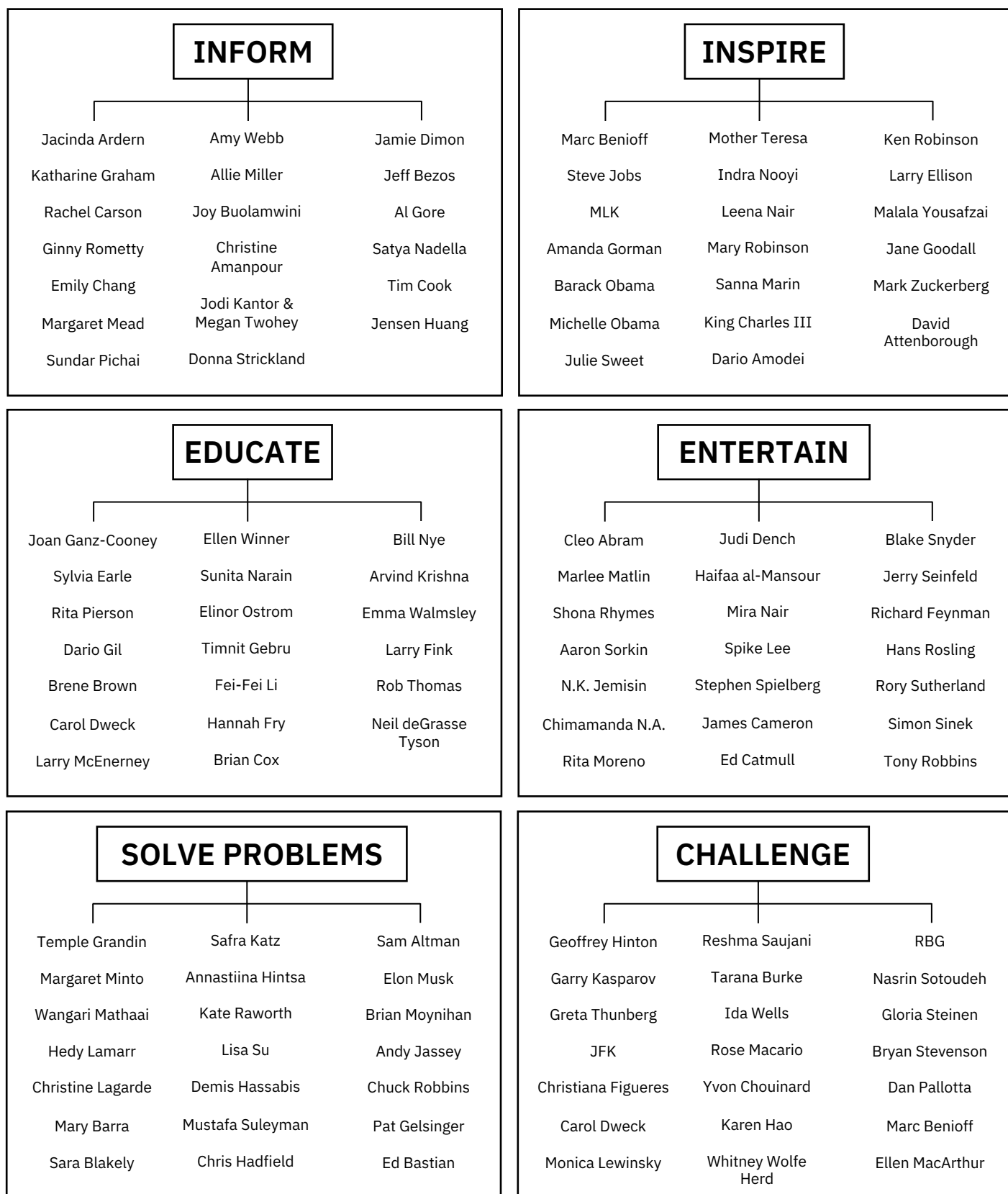
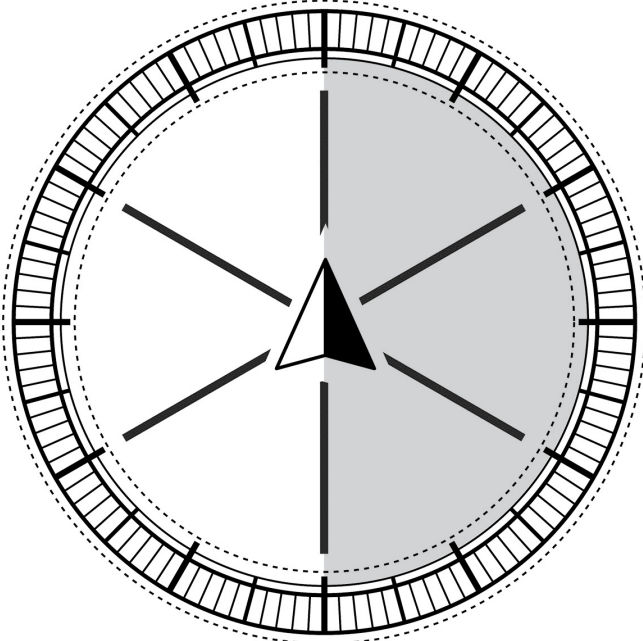


Fig 5. AI-generated feedback helped me to categorise speakers into categories. Using my selection of speeches which were widely acknowledged to be excellent and the top performing TED talks based on engagement & views.

The Divided Brain

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The Divided Brain: Head v Heart

Ever since I read *Lovemarks* in 2004, “The Future Beyond Brands” written by Kevin Roberts (former CEO of ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi), I have been persuaded that people make big decisions with their hearts, and they justify them afterwards with their brains. *What car shall I buy? Where should I go on holiday? Where should I move to? Who do I want to sleep with?* In his book, Kevin was mostly speaking about CPG brands from companies such as Coca-Cola, P&G and Unilever, but he draws parallels between personal and professional decision-making processes as well. As much as we may like to think that executive audiences make logical and rational decisions based on accurate data (especially about who to work with and who to trust), many studies seem to suggest the opposite is true. The psychologist Daniel Kahneman who won the Nobel prize in 2002 for his work in behavioural economics has been outspoken about how executives trust their gut.¹¹ Laura Huang, author of “*You Already Know: The Science of Master Your Intuition*” (Portfolio, 2025) has conducted various management studies¹² in her role as Professor of Management and Organizational Dynamics and Associate Dean of Executive Education at Northeastern University’s D’Amore-McKim School of Business, about when to use gut feeling if the complete data isn’t always available^{13 14}.

In business many stories around big decisions are based on gut feelings:

- *Should we promote leader X or leader Y?*
- *Why should we buy / merge with company X in order to grow faster?*
- *How much should we invest in reskilling our workforce when AI can now do their jobs?*
- *How do we build trust after a significant crisis?*

Every week I seem to come across executives who feel overwhelmed or under-prepared for the challenges their business is facing. Back in 2015, I’ll never forget speaking to an analyst at research firm Forrester and he shared with me his most significant finding which was going into one of his trend reports, “*4 out of 5 executives currently feel overwhelmed and under-prepared for the challenges that their business is currently facing. As a result, it appears that many business executives who need to make major strategic decisions, are not only trusting their gut – but they are often going against the data that has been presented to them.*”

That was a huge statement and not only have I never forgotten it, but not a year has gone past since then when I haven’t heard some version of that statistic. In business we make the majority of decisions with our heads, but we don’t fully acknowledge how many of the big decisions are made with our hearts. When I speak to executives about their decision-making process, I often find that they often trust their gut when making major strategic decisions

¹¹ “When can you trust your gut?” by Daniel Kahneman (McKinsey, 2010) <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/strategic-decisions-when-can-you-trust-your-gut>

¹² “When it’s OK to Trust Your Gut” by Laura Huang (Harvard Business Review, 2019) <https://hbr.org/2019/10/when-its-ok-to-trust-your-gut-on-a-big-decision>

¹³ Managing the Unknowable: The Effectiveness of Early-stage Investor Gut Feel in Entrepreneurial Investment Decisions <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839215597270>

¹⁴ The Role of Investor Gut Feel in Managing Complexity and Extreme Risk <https://doi.org/10.5465/ami.2016.1009>



, even if that sometimes means ignoring the data they are presented with. We assume smart business leaders make rational decisions, based on logic, but that is simply not the case. The same is true of stories. When I think about some of the biggest stories I've worked on, post-event analysis often revealed that the outcome was directly influenced by the emotions of the audience, even though the data-driven presentation might have been written to inform the audience. Business leaders are often reluctant to introduce any emotional elements into a story for fear that it might make the presentation less professional. I have experienced many presentations throughout my career where a logical "left-brain" approach was taken to a presentation, when what was required to satisfy the audience was a much more emotional "right brain" story.

A few presentations I analysed which didn't work included stories which attempted to answer difficult, provocative or controversial questions such as:

- *"This is why you should choose us for your multi-billion dollar transformation project..."*
- *"How aggressively should we pursue a DEI initiative based on current market conditions?"*
- *"How outspoken should we be on climate change considering some of the clients we have?"*
- *"Why should we allow you to acquire our company, when we just don't see a cultural fit between our two organisations?"*
- *"How can I motivate my workforce to achieve greater results, when many of them are concerned about job safety having seen some of their colleagues let go?"*

One reason The Story Compass is such an effective tool (despite it appearing no more complicated than a circle with six segments), is that it is a reminder that great stories need to be orientated towards the bearing most relevant for that particular audience. And every story, and every audience is different. Even if the brief appears the same. Everything from personality-type of the presenter, the country, the culture, the demographics of the audience, the day's news events, the decision-making style of the executives in the room.... there are countless reasons why a presentation which worked for one audience, won't work for another.

As I have studied great communicators such as *Jamie Dimon, Arvind Krishna, Bob Iger, Mark Carney and Satya Nadella etc.* one of my biggest insights is simply that the best communicators know when to lead with their *heart* and when to lead with their *head*. And sometimes, that also means recognising when they need to pivot mid message to give their audience what they need, in order for their presentation to be a success. When presenting a story on a difficult topic like climate change, or a large strategic message where emotions will play a part in the decision-making process, it is imperative that the storyteller speaks to the head and the heart, and any "elephants" in the room as early as possible. Let me tell you what I mean by elephants...

The mistake I see many aspiring business leaders make is thinking that they need to engage their audience first, *before* approaching any difficult topics. It's like they want to warm up the room first before they jump into a difficult conversation. They focus more on what they want



to say, before addressing what the audience needs to hear. Great storytelling is as much about credibility and leadership as it is about empathy. In speechwriting we call it *ethos* and *pathos*. *Ethos* is all about building credibility with an audience, and speaking with *pathos* is about building an emotional connection based on trust with them. You need both, but you must make sure you approach them in the right order. If you are challenging your audience as part of a sales presentation for example, if you don't acknowledge the elephant in the room first, then they are unlikely to listen to what you have to say until you do. The audience will zone out thinking you don't understand, or worse still – don't care.

A couple of short anecdotal examples:

I was once sat in business meetings where I watched IBM's CEO Arvind Krishna address a difficult topic which he didn't plan to address. There was a lot of negative chatter on the company slack channel, but as soon as Arvind addressed the issue (even though he didn't have a conclusive answer), the mood in the room changed. You could even see the tone on the company slack channel change (the presentation was being live-streamed internally) from what felt like very negative sentiment to much more positive. The audience appreciated that he acknowledged their concerns and he carried back on with his pre-prepared message.

Conversely, I was at a conference not too long ago with former US Vice-President Al Gore and the Governor of Minnesota Tim Walz. Both brilliant speakers. But when a small group of very noisy climate activists made a huge ruckus during Governor Walz's keynote and he chose not to acknowledge it, he lost the confidence of the room. His keynote didn't land and many folks I chatted to afterwards couldn't remember much of what he said. His keynote was remembered for the disruption, not for what the governor had to say. If the governor led with his heart instead of his head, even though that would have meant pivoting his speech mid-way through his address – he could have turned the disruption into a great opportunity to win the room and create a memorable moment. In that conference room, Tim had a speech that was trying to solve problems around the climate crisis in his state, but what he needed to do was challenge his audience. I would argue he misread the room and the impact of his story suffered as a result.

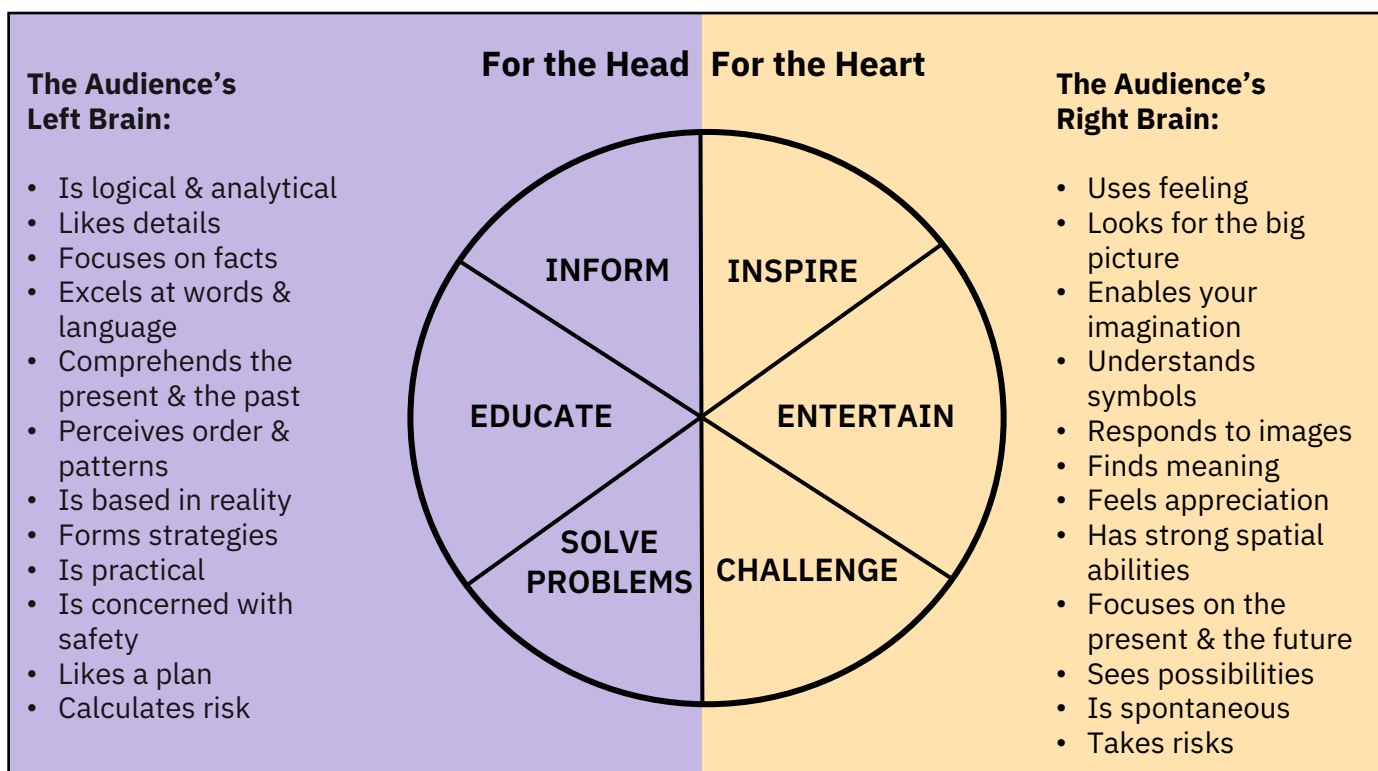


Emotional Storytelling

One more note on emotional storytelling. No matter whether our stories need to lead with the head or the heart, if we agree that we need to make an audience *feel* something so that they *do* something, then we first must become students of emotions if we are to understand how our stories can do that.

How exactly do you help an audience to *FEEL* something?

A storyteller makes people feel something by changing the way the audience experiences information. Facts alone speak to the mind. Emotion comes from meaning, tension, imagination, memory, identity, and human connection. Great storytellers do not simply transfer data, they create an experience. In the TED talk which made Simon Sinek's famous for example, he shares with the audience his discovery of "*The Golden Circle*" - his what, how, why, illustrated by three simple circles. Nancy Duarte creates a similar experience when she shares her discovery from studying the shape of stories. Kate Raworth does it in her TED talk by introducing her audience to a doughnut which could change the world. Every great communicator shares the stories behind their statistics. Facts alone rarely move business audiences to act.



One of the most powerful ways to create emotion is specificity. "*A million people were displaced*" is intellectually understood. "*A father carrying his daughter through flood water at 3am*" is emotionally felt. The human brain is wired to respond to people, not abstractions. That is why the best communicators zoom in on moments, details, faces, sounds, and stakes.



Emotion also comes from tension. An audience begins to feel something the moment they sense uncertainty, danger, desire, or possibility.

- Will we succeed?
- Will we survive?
- Will this work?
- What happens next?

Storytelling is emotional navigation through tension and release.

Even humour works this way - *surprise* creates emotional energy. This is why I'm always asking storytellers who want to get better to study comedians, to study the different methods they use to engage their audience. Good comedians structure their stories to get a laugh every 15-30 seconds on a short set. Great comedians like Chris Rock structure their stories to make an audience go: [LAUGH] → "BOO" → [LAUGH] → [GASP] → [LAUGH] → "NOOOO!" that's why his sets are always remembered. Sir Ken Robinson made his audience laugh on average every 29 seconds. That's why he was such a good communicator. He said, "*if you want to help an audience to remember something, make them laugh.*"

"Surprise" is a storyteller's secret weapon.

Surprise has the "potential" to change your physiological state from negative to positive – making it a powerful tool to influence audiences. We have already mentioned how many business executives feel overwhelmed, anxious and fearful of how fast the world is moving right now, and as a result they can have quite a risk-averse or negative mindset. Some studies suggest we have up to 70,000 thoughts a day (mostly subconscious), but up to 80% of those thoughts are negative. Apparently, neuroscientists MIT are doing studies to challenge this but none of their work has been publicly released or cited yet – but we don't need a study to tell us that many of the audience's we address are experiencing a great deal of negative thoughts. I only need to look at data from PR firm Edelman's 2025/26 Trust Barometer study of 32,000 people in 28 countries to see how negative business audiences are feeling.

- 88% of people are scared of losing their jobs.
- 54% say technology is changing too quickly in ways that are not good for people like me.
- The number of workers who think CEO's are doing well to build trust in their company has dropped 29% since 2025.

I mention this because if we are speaking to audience's who have a negative mindset, and our role as a storyteller is to influence them to change their mind by becoming more positive, then according to psychologists and neuroscientists (sources below) there is only ONE emotion which is capable of biologically changing triggering the hormones which determine how you change your mind and that is "surprise".

Sources:

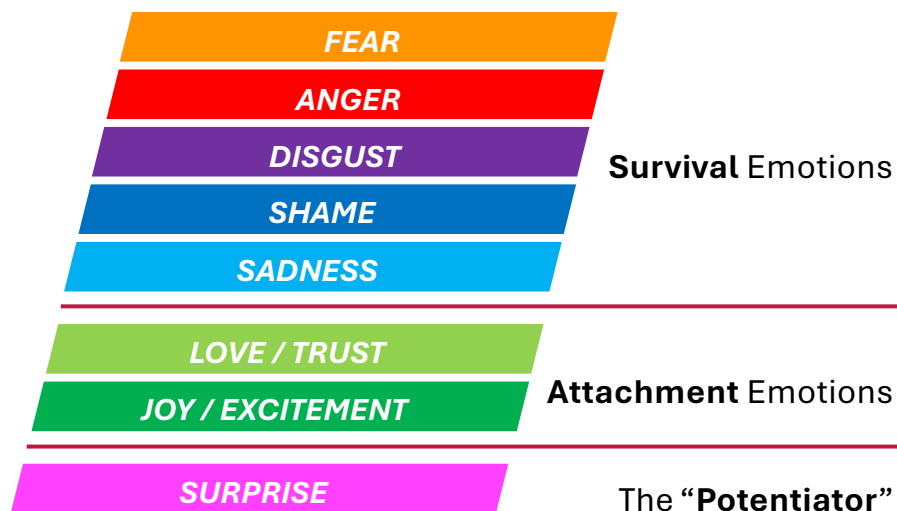
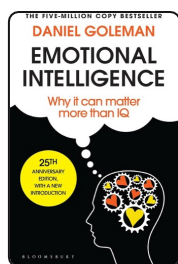
- **Emotional Intelligence** by Daniel Goleman
- **Emotional Ignorance** by Dr. Dean Burnett
- **Surprise** By Tania Luna & Dr. LeeAnn Renninger
- **How Emotions Are Made** by Lisa Feldman Barrett
- **Neuroscience For Leadership** by Tara Swart, Kitty Chisholm & Paul Brown
- **Dying Laughing** [Documentary] Directed by Paul Toogood & Lloyd Stanton



Emotional Intelligence: 8 Primary Emotions of Story



We all need to become students of emotions if we are to tell stories that make people **FEEL** something, so that they **DO** something...



When we are surprised, our emotions intensify by up to 400%. It's why we sometimes appreciate random acts of kindness more than birthday presents. Or flowers on a rainy Wednesday afternoon instead of for an anniversary. It's the same with storytelling.

I created the graphic above from Neuroscientist Tara Swart's book "Neuroscience for Leadership" because it gets right to the heart of emotional storytelling. Despite the misconception that there are hundreds of emotions, there are really only 8 core emotional states. Five of those states contain our "survival" emotions, which we experience when we are feeling negative thoughts. Two contain our "attachment" emotions which we experience with more positive thoughts and relationships. The key insight for a storyteller seeking to influence an audience, and change their mindset from a negative state to a positive state is to use the element of surprise. Give the audience something they don't expect. Tell them something they don't know. Like Chris Rock, maybe make them gasp?!

Surprise is called "*the potentiator*" my scientists because it has the potential to *move* emotional states. And if there's one thing you've probably picked up about *The Story Compass* by now, it is that the purpose of a great communicator is to move their audience. Grammy award-winning storyteller, producer and musician Jacob Collier says, "*It doesn't matter how many people you engaged. All that matters is how many people of those people you MOVED.*"

Think of any moment when a presenter said something which really surprised you. Chances are you remembered their presentation, but you have probably forgotten the dozens of presentations you have heard since which didn't surprise you.



A Few Ways You Could “SURPRISE” Your Audience...

Open Without Slides

- Begin your talk with no visuals at all. Start with silence for 3-5 seconds to build tension. Then use that critical first 75-seconds to draw your audience in with a personal story or provocative idea.

Challenge a Common Belief

- Say something the audience likely believes, then flip it. One excellent question to ask yourself when crafting a point of view is, “What important truth do few people agree with me on?”

Tell a Vulnerable Personal Story

- Share a moment of failure, fear, or change that shaped you. Unexpected honesty disrupts the polished executive image and builds immediate trust.

Bring a Meaningful Prop

- Not a gimmick, something symbolic that makes the message tangible. I once showed my Vic-20 computer from 1982 to demonstrate the computing power of an iPhone.

Ask a Daring Question

- One that stops people. That they have to answer in their heads. “If someone shadowed you for a week, what would they learn about your real values?”

Flip the Format

- Instead of a classic keynote → make it a story. Start in the middle. Use act structure. Build to a reveal. It turns your talk from a lecture into a journey. And people love journeys.

Reveal a Hidden Detail

- Near the end of the talk, share something the audience didn’t realize was true the whole time. eg. “The person in that story? That was me, 20 years ago.”

Give them Something They Don’t Expect

- I sometimes put a QR code on the screen during my presentations: PDF’s of my slides and the transcript of the talk, or an AI agent I have built which will help people in the audience to do something I’ve just presented. Instant engagement. Meaningful value exchange. Presentations are just “presents”. The clue is in the world. It’s always nice to give your audience a present somewhere in your *present*-ation.

Make it “Live”

- Audience’s love it when there is a chance of seeing a presenter fail. Most presenters aren’t brave enough to present live content, especially product demonstrations. They prefer the safe option of a pre-recorded video, and they can do a voice over. But I guarantee your presentation will have 10X the impact if you present your content live.
-



To help my students to think differently, I sometimes ask people for their favourite business presentation which surprised them. One which they've never forgotten. Steve Jobs iPhone launch from 2007 is always near the top of the list. "An iPod... A phone... And an internet communicator... An iPod... A phone... Today Apple is going to reinvent the phone!" It's certainly one of the best business presentations of all-time, but in my opinion, one of the best examples of a talk which genuinely surprised an audience is Dan Pallotta's 2013 TED talk "The Way We Think About Charity is Dead Wrong". Chris Anderson, the curator of TED called it "the most persuasive presentation I have ever heard in my life". Pallotta's presentation completely reframed how business leaders might think about running successful NGO's and compensating their leaders.

Dan Pallotta

The Way We Think About Charity Is Dead Wrong: TED2013, California (March 1st, 2013)
https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pallotta_the_way_we_think_about_charity_is_dead_wrong

Personality Type (MBTI)
ENFJ

COLD OPEN – (0:00-0:34) 34 seconds
 "I want to talk about social innovation and social entrepreneurship. I happen to have triplets. They're little. They're five years old. Sometimes I tell people I have triplets. They say, "Really? How many?" Here's a picture of the kids – that's Sage, and Annalisa and Rider. Now, I also happen to be gay. Being gay and fathering triplets is by far the most socially innovative, socially entrepreneurial thing I have ever done."

INTRODUCTION
 1:54 "Philanthropy is the market for love."
 2:14 "But it doesn't seem to be working..."

ACT I: 5 AREAS OF DISCRIMINATION
 3:00 #1: Compensation
 5:25 #2: Ads & Marketing
 7:34 #3: Risk Taking
 8:23 #4: Time
 8:50 #5: Profit

CROSSED THE \$50 MILLION ANNUAL REVENUE BARRIER SINCE 1970
 Nonprofits: 144
 For Profits: 46,136

ACT IIa: ORIGIN STORIES
 8:0 second Puritan Story
 3:0 second Case Study #1 AIDSrides
 8:0 second Overhead Story
 3:0 second Case Study #2 Breast Cancer 3 Days

ACT IIb: THE FALL
 10:16 "So why do we think this way?"
 13:56 "And then we went out of business, suddenly and traumatically..."

ACT III: POTENTIAL FOR REAL CHANGE
 14:37 "Here's how all of this impacts the big picture..."
 16:45 "Our generation does not want its epitaph to read, "We kept charity overhead low". We want it to read that we changed the world... by changing the way we think about these things."
 17:05 "So the next time you're looking at a charity, don't ask about the role of their overhead. Ask about the scale of their dreams."

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Time: | 18:30 |
| Words: | 2,953 |
| Speaking: | 160 <small>(Words per Minute)</small> |
| Readability Score (GFI): | 12.74 |
| Optimism Index: | 70.00 <small>Optimism Index Assessor</small> |

| | |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Problem | Society's mindset about charity is broken. He argues that we penalize nonprofits for spending on growth, talent, and marketing - things we celebrate in business - and that this double standard keeps charities small and prevents real social change. "We say we want to change the world - but our beliefs about charity make it impossible." |
| UVP | Pallotta turns a moral belief upside down. He challenges the sacred idea that "charity should be frugal." Instead, he argues that nonprofits should be allowed to think big, spend boldly, and even take risks - just like businesses do. Reframes "overhead," "profit," and "marketing" (words usually seen as bad in charity) as essential tools for solving big problems. |
| Surprise | "You can make \$50 million selling violent video games to kids and be celebrated - but if you make \$500,000 trying to cure kids of malaria, you're seen as a parasite" and "From 1970 to 2009, only 144 nonprofits grew past \$50 million in revenue - compared with 46,136 for-profits." "It is our beliefs - not our lack of generosity - which is holding change back." |
| Urgency | Our current mindset is actively preventing progress on poverty, cancer, and homelessness. He creates urgency by showing the scale mismatch: "These social problems are massive in scale and our organizations are tiny vs against them." It's not fear-driven urgency - it's moral urgency with hope: change your thinking now so real change can finally happen. |
| "But" | "But it doesn't seem to be working. Why have our breast cancer charities not come close to finding a cure for breast cancer, or our homeless charities not come close to ending homelessness in any major city?" |
| Credibility | He speaks from firsthand experience - as the creator of the AIDS Rides and Breast Cancer 3-Day walks, which raised over \$500 million for charity. Then he lost everything when sponsors pulled out because of public outrage over "high overhead." That personal rise-and-fall gives him moral authority - he's lived the very hypocrisy he's exposing. |

| |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rhetorical Analysis <small>Calculated using Meta's Llama-3 powered rhetorical analysis assistant</small> |
| LOGOS: 25% |
| ETHOS: 30% |
| KAIROS: 10% |
| PATHOS: 35% |

| |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Emotional Intelligence <small>Calculated using Meta's Llama-3 powered artificial emotional intelligence assistant</small> |
| EDUCATE: 25% |
| ENTERTAIN: 15% |
| BUILDUP: 20% |
| CHALLENGE: 15% |
| SOLUTION: 10% |

These responses were generated using OpenAI's GPT-4o model using [Mission Critical Script Assistant](#) built on [watsonx](#) by Jeremy Connell-Walton

You should watch the whole presentation, but just take this excerpt as an example:

"Businessweek did a survey, looked at the compensation packages for MBAs 10 years out of business school. And the median compensation for a Stanford MBA, with bonus, at the age of 38, was 400,000 dollars. Meanwhile, for the same year, the average salary for the CEO of a \$5 million-plus medical charity in the U.S. was 232,000 dollars, and for a hunger charity, 84,000 dollars. Now, there's no way you're going to get a lot of people with \$400,000 talent to make a \$316,000 sacrifice every year to become the CEO of a hunger charity. Some people say, "Well, that's just because those MBA types are greedy." Not necessarily. They might be smart. It's cheaper for that person to donate 100,000 dollars every year to the hunger charity; save 50,000 dollars on their taxes - so still be roughly 270,000 dollars a year ahead of the game - now be called a philanthropist because they donated \$100,000 to charity; probably sit on the board of the hunger charity; indeed, probably supervise the poor SOB who decided to become the CEO of the hunger charity..." [Laughter]



The most important question I often ask business audience's who I work with is, "*What will most surprise the audience about this story?*" because all too often in business, we give our audiences exactly what they expect.

- *Could your competitor use these slides, changing your logo for theirs, and give the same presentation? (If so, there's something horribly wrong with your story.)*
- *You have 30 minutes? Could you tell a more compelling story in 10? No audience ever complained that a presentation was too short!*
- *They're asking you for your slides? What if you don't use slides?*

I don't like slides very much, so when I am presenting virtually from home – using an *Insta360Link* 4K camera which can display my desktop as well as my face. At a critical part of the presentation, I seamlessly switch the camera to my desk and often draw my slides with a marker pen on an A3 sketch pad instead of presenting them. I do this not just because it's more fun, but because it always surprises the audience, because they are expected another screenshared PPT presentation.

Another powerful technique to make an audience feel something is *contrast*. Before and after. Darkness and light. Old world and new world. Steve Jobs was brilliant at this. So was JFK. They painted the current reality clearly, then contrasted it with a more hopeful future people wanted to move toward. Emotion often lives in the gap between what is and what could be. Language matters too. Metaphors, rhythm, repetition, imagery, and sensory words activate imagination. Compare: "*Our systems are outdated*" with "*We are trying to win a Formula One race with the handbrake on.*"

One informs.

The other makes people feel friction instantly.

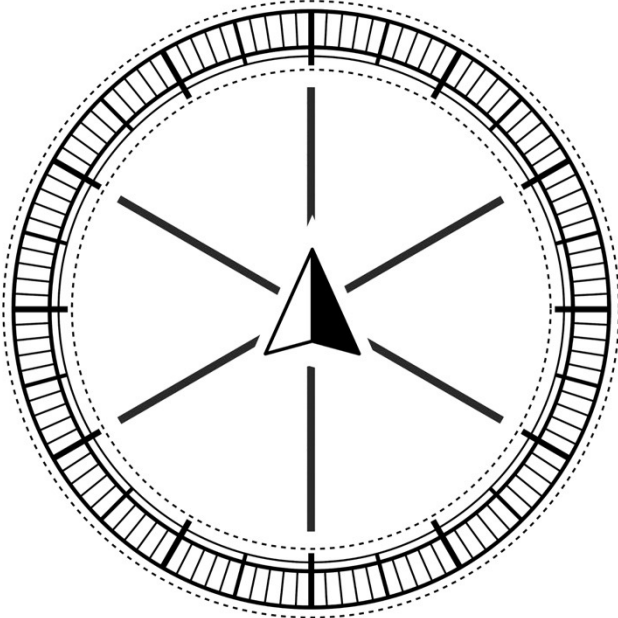
The best storytellers also make the audience the hero of the story. People feel emotionally engaged when the story connects to their identity, fears, hopes, ambitions, family, future, reputation, or sense of purpose. This is why purpose-driven storytelling is so powerful in business; it answers the emotional question: "*Why should this matter to me?*"

And finally, storytellers create emotion through authenticity. Audiences can sense when somebody truly cares. Vulnerability, conviction, humour, humanity, optimism, frustration, wonder – these emotional signals are contagious. Neuroscience suggests emotions spread socially through mechanisms like mirror neurons and emotional contagion.

In simple terms: if the speaker feels something genuinely, the audience is far more likely to feel it too. That is why the greatest communicators in history rarely sound like they are delivering information. They sound like they are trying to move people somewhere.

Elements of Business Value

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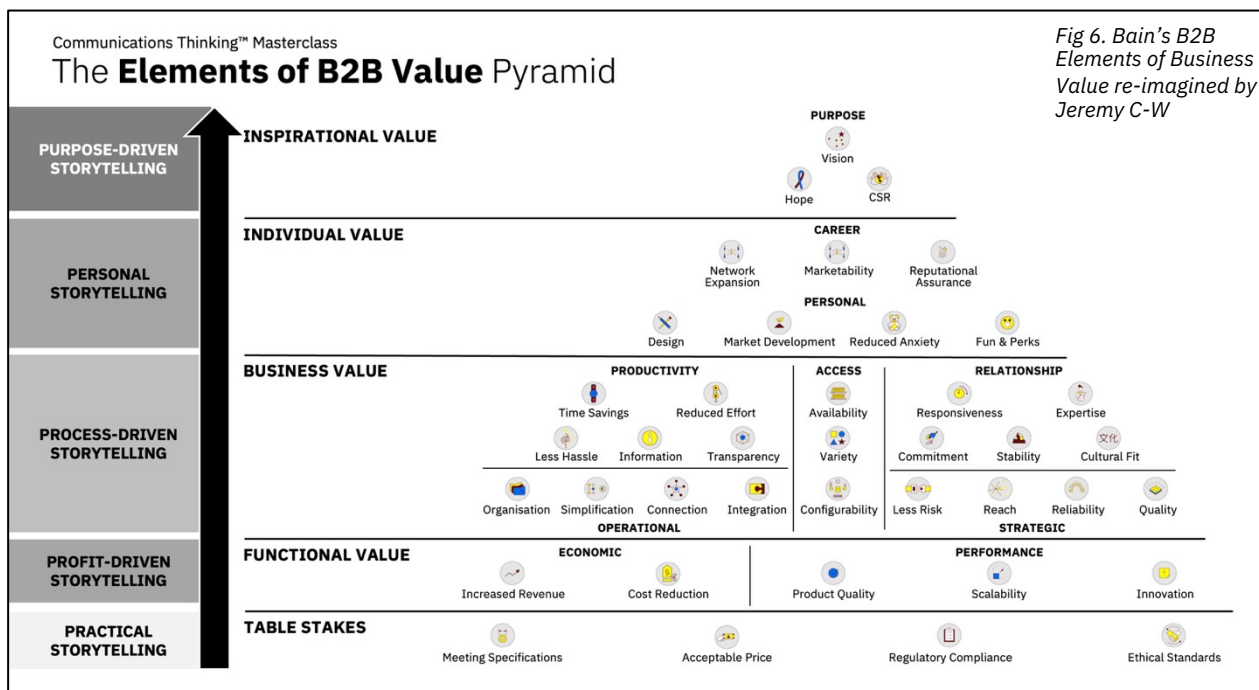




Elements of B2B Business Value

In 2016 and 2018, the strategy firm Bain & Company conducted some excellent research around emotional decision making in the C-suite. They examined multi-million dollar enterprise purchases from large technology companies. It's one of the strongest studies I've read which challenges the myth that B2B decisions are mostly rational. Bain's research revealed that even in enterprise purchasing, emotional and personal value drivers strongly influence decision making. Bain studied 2,300 corporate decision makers (a significant sample size), and asked them to rank the importance of each element of value. Respondents put cost reduction at the top of the list when buying IT infrastructure. However, even though the respondents stated that cost reduction was most important in their decisions, their answers to other questions suggested otherwise.

When they calculated how much each element influenced NPS (by analyzing the impact of the 36 elements on whether respondents were promoters or not), product quality, expertise, and responsiveness emerged as the strongest predictors of customer loyalty. Cost reduction was not even among the top 10. Over the last ten years, this study has influenced how I think about business stories because the technology vendors I worked with often lead with functional value or business value. But the oversight of some of these vendors was that the executives they were trying to sell to were often basing their final decision on individual or inspirational values, which were absent from most of their sales stories. I added “*five levels of business storytelling*” to Bain's research (fig. 6) to remind business leaders that their stories need to include elements from each layer of the pyramid, if they want their story work.



In enterprise business sales, of course it's essential to have the right specifications, an acceptable price, and a strong business case which demonstrates increased revenue and cost reduction (table stakes and functional value), but Bain's Maslow-esque pyramid of business values provides some scientific proof that enterprise business leaders place a greater importance on values which speak to the heart, over ones which speak to the head.



Two other leaders influenced the creation of *The Story Compass*. The first is British psychiatrist, neuroscientist, and philosopher Dr. Iain McGilchrist, best known for his groundbreaking work on “the divided brain”. Dr. McGilchrist has spent his life exploring how the brain’s two hemispheres shape human perception, culture, and meaning. Iain argues that the most important difference between the brain’s hemispheres is not what they do, but how they pay attention to the world. The left hemisphere focuses on analysis, certainty, structure, data, and control – all essential for solving problems and explaining complex ideas. The right hemisphere, however, is responsible for context, empathy, imagination, emotional meaning, and human connection. Great business stories need both. A leader may use their left brain to explain a strategy, forecast, or transformation plan, but it is the right brain that helps an audience trust the message, feel inspired by the vision, and emotionally connect to why it matters. In a world increasingly dominated by data and AI, McGilchrist’s work is a powerful reminder that people do not make decisions through logic alone; they make sense of the world through meaning, emotion, relationships, and story.

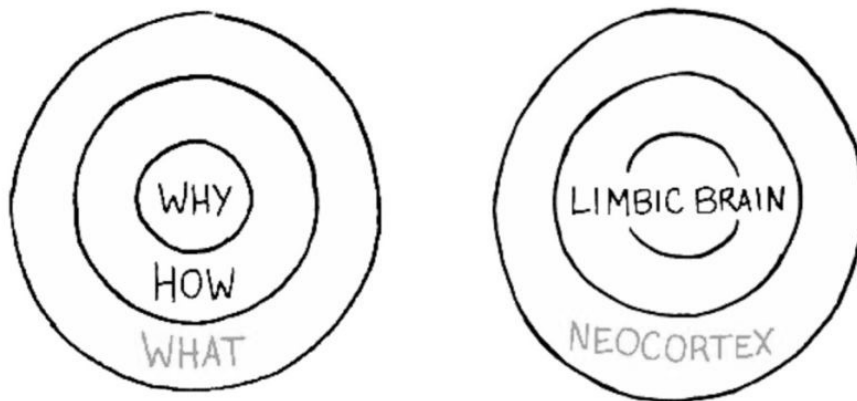


Fig 7. Simon Sinek’s *Start With Why*. “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.”

The second leader who influenced the creation of *The Story Compass* is Simon Sinek, author of *Start With Why*, *Leaders Eat Last* and *The Infinite Game*, and presenter of one of the all-time great TED talks. In his book *Start With Why* Simon, Simon shares his simplified perspective on the divided brain¹⁶, explaining that our ability to process business communications is determined by our divided brains which are split into two hemispheres. The *limbic system* and *the neocortex*. Our neocortex could be described as our logical *left-brain* which is responsible for words and language. Simon describes this rational part of our brain as being responsible for the “*what*”. *What* we do. *What* we have to say. *What* we want to sell. But our limbic system, our more creative *right-brain*, is more aligned to *why* and *how* we do what we do. Why is this important and what does it have to do with storytelling? A lot as it turns out. Because our limbic brains, commonly associated with the *amygdala* (the part of our brains responsible for processing emotional responses), is what makes us feel things when we hear a human-centred story. When we feel empathy – that comes from our limbic brain. The big takeaway here is that our limbic brain is incapable of processing words and language. That would be the job of the neocortex. So if we believe that the role of a storyteller is to make an audience FEEL something so that they DO something – then it becomes essential that we engage the more irrational right-hand side of our audience’s brain, *before* we provide the words and numbers which our left-brain neocortex brains can make process.

¹⁶ *Start With Why* by Simon Sinek “gut decisions” and the limbic system. p.57



This is why so many business stories fail. They are technically correct, logically structured, and rich in data, yet they leave the audience emotionally untouched. They speak only to the hemisphere that analyses, while neglecting the hemisphere that imagines, empathises, and believes. But the most influential communicators mentioned in this guide all understand something deeper: human beings rarely move forward because of information alone. We move when meaning, emotion, and logic align. *The Story Compass* was created as a practical navigation device for this challenge. Not simply to help leaders craft clearer messages, but to help them consciously decide where they want to take an audience – intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally. Every story is ultimately an act of attention. And the storytellers who understand how the divided brain pays attention to the world, are far more likely to create stories that truly work.

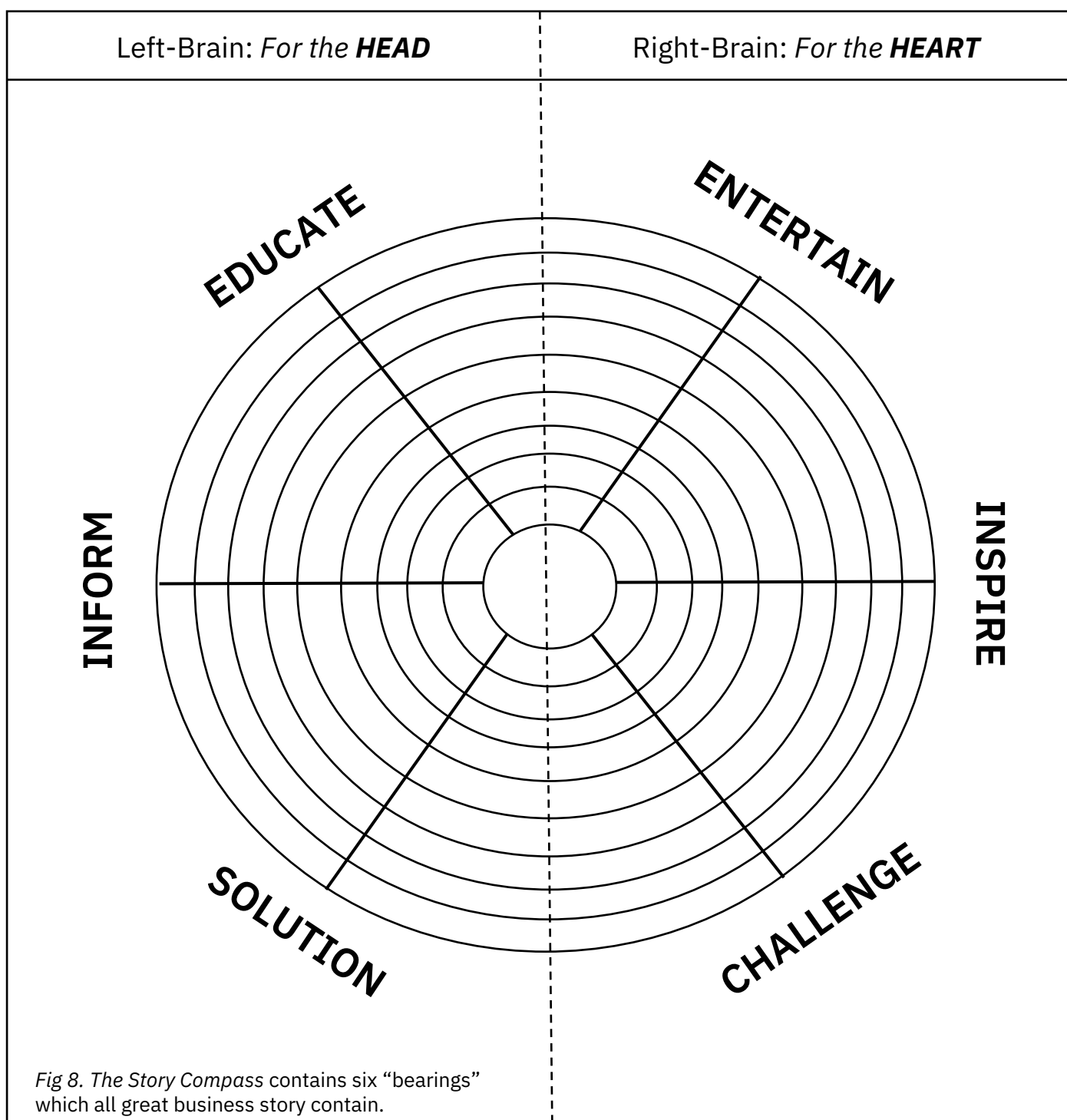


Fig 8. *The Story Compass* contains six “bearings” which all great business story contain.



What Does A Good Story Look Like?

Armed with my 6-part Story Compass and a better understanding of which elements are contained in a great story, I began using IBM's Watson AI-powered conversational engine in 2018, to dig deeper into transcripts of the presentations, pitches and presentations which I used to come up with the six bearings. Using a simple NPS-style scale of 1-10 for each of the 6 bearings, I used AI to help me segment either individual sentences or specific keywords within each story, to give it a score. Given that my original hypothesis was that great storytellers made an audience *feel* something, then I expected the data points to be clustered on this spider graph around the right-hand side of the chart?

The results highlighted my cognitive bias. In some of my writing and coaching, I realised I had been guilty of citing references or stories which inspired me, and which were fun to share. But in fact the “best stories” – ones I took from CEO's, earnings calls, I measured and plotted on the chart, all over-indexed towards on the left of the chart, not towards the right where I expected them to cluster. As with any good science experiment, this caused the reaction, “*Hmmm... that's funny.*” Why do the best stories from some of the business world's top leaders not inspire their audience, and challenge them to change things?

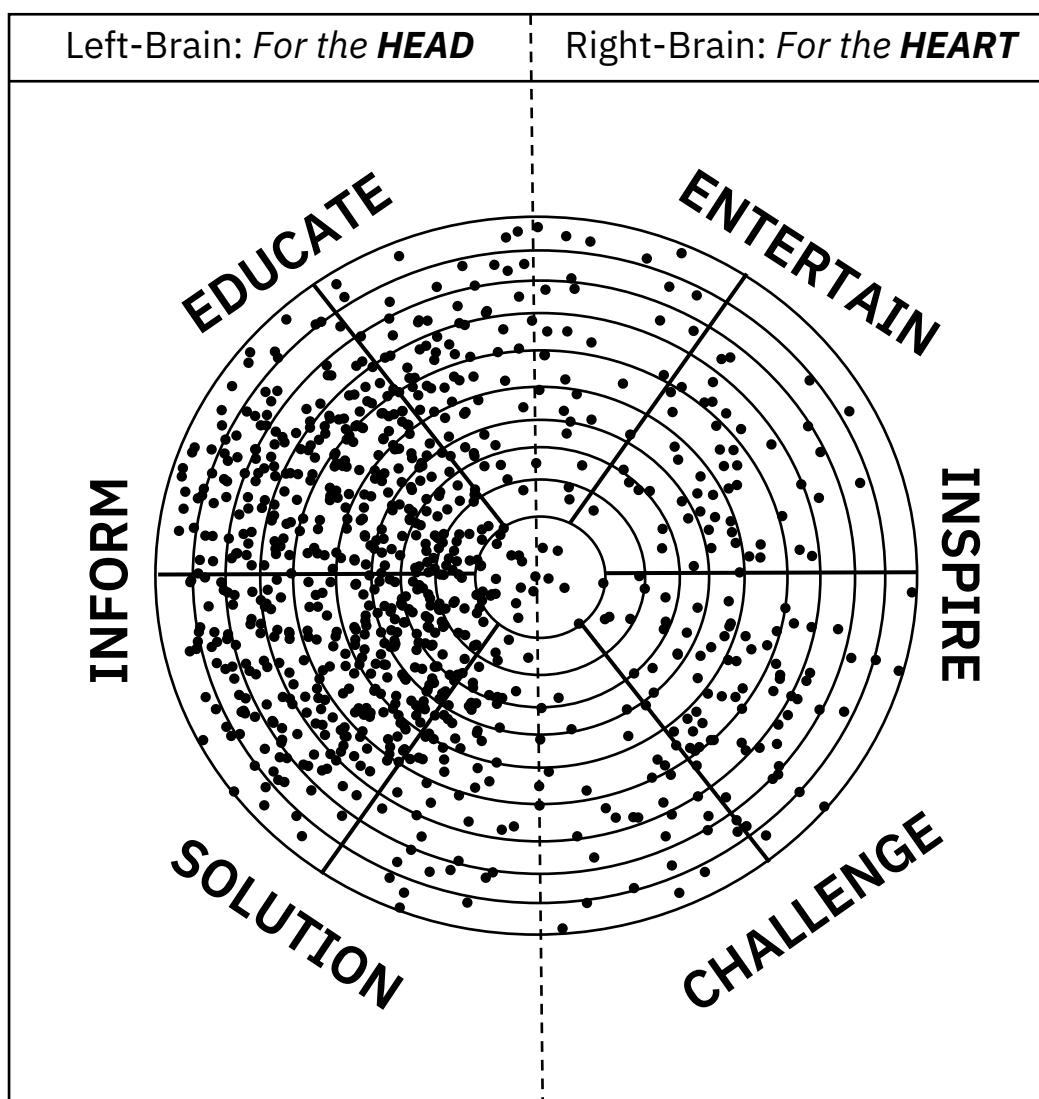
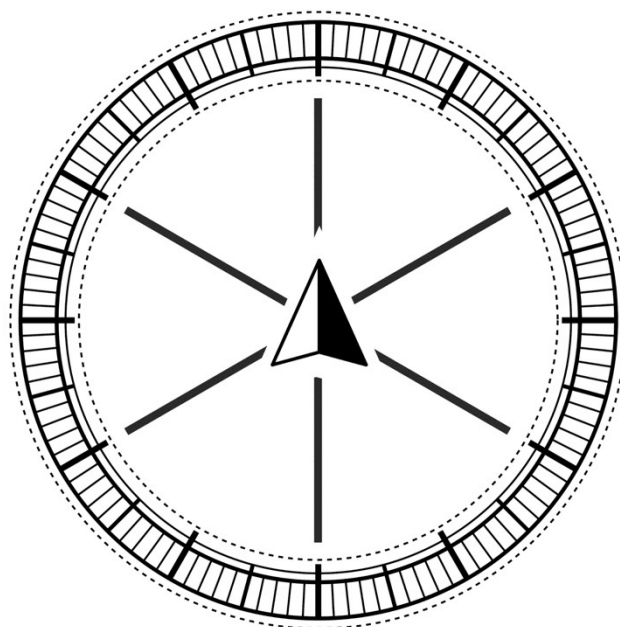


Fig 9. The Story Compass populated with values from 200 business “stories” which were categorised with a weighting for each bearing. This spider chart shows the values are predominantly scattered towards the left, meaning that the vast majority of business stories speak to the head more than the heart. Is this why many business stories don't work?

Case Study:
Speak Like a CEO
Arvind Krishna (CEO, IBM)

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Speak Like a CEO: Arvind Krishna

Arvind Krishna became CEO of IBM in 2020, leading one of the most significant transformations in the company's modern history. Under his leadership, IBM has shifted decisively from legacy infrastructure toward hybrid cloud, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing, including the spin-off of Kyndryl and the landmark \$34 billion acquisition of Red Hat, regarded by many as one of the most successful software acquisitions in history. Yet what makes Arvind particularly fascinating as a communicator is not simply his business success, but the mindset behind it. Unlike many modern CEOs shaped primarily by finance, sales, or marketing, Arvind approaches leadership like a scientist and engineer: curious, analytical, calm under pressure, and relentlessly focused on solving meaningful problems. After more than 36 years at IBM, he has become a rare kind of technology leader; someone capable of translating immense technical complexity into clear, credible, and commercially relevant ideas that ordinary audiences can understand. In an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, Arvind offers an important example of what modern scientific leadership can look and sound like.

One reason Arvind is such a strong communicator is that he **speaks like an engineer, a strategist, and a statesman at the same time**. He does not “perform” technology. He explains it. Calmly, precisely, and with authority. I've analysed hundreds of messages, keynotes and earnings calls from Arvind and the strongest pattern across these interviews and keynotes is this: he reduces huge technological shifts into simple business choices. He rarely gets lost in novelty. He keeps coming back to:

- What does this mean for clients?*
- What does it unlock?*
- What has to be true for this to work?*
- What should leaders do now?*

For example, in one interview with The Verge^{*}, when asked what IBM is today, he gives a beautifully simple positioning line: IBM helps clients “*deploy technology that makes their business better.*” No hype, no jargon, no grandstanding. Just a clear sentence that locates IBM in the world.

Arvind's second gift is **intellectual honesty**. He is willing to say Watson helped put AI on the map for example, but also that IBM made mistakes by being “too monolithic” and pushing too early into healthcare. I remember that first hand as I gave some of those keynotes myself. That candour builds credibility. Most leaders defend the past. Arvind explains it, learns from it, and moves forward.

His third gift is **making complexity physical**. When discussing AI and the app economy, he doesn't stay in the abstract. He talks about warehouses, truck drivers, restaurants, groceries, healthcare, construction workers, and frontline workers. That is a masterclass. He takes AI out of the cloud and puts it back into the real economy.

* The Verge Podcast: https://youtu.be/iZgdGg8-T0M?si=IE_CR-GwRP1O7TCC



His fourth gift is **measured optimism**. He doesn't "hype" as some more "visionary" CEOs have been known to do. Arvind never sounds dazzled by technology, but he is relentlessly optimistic about what technology can do. At THINK 2024, the message was that AI could add enormous productivity value, but adoption is still early, trust matters, skills matter, data complexity matters, and enterprises need practical ways to scale.

His fifth gift is **strategic patience**. On quantum, Arvind speaks with long-term conviction. He does not oversell it as magic tomorrow. He frames it as a serious, multi-year technological bet, with meaningful results expected in the next few years. The lesson for you as a technology leader is powerful: Don't try to sound clever. Try to make the room feel clearer.

Arvind's methodical formula to communications often goes something like this:
Name the shift >> Admit the difficulty >> Simplify the stakes >> Make it real >> Explain the business value >> Show the next step.

So instead of saying: "*Generative AI represents a paradigm shift in enterprise transformation*", Arvind would say, "*AI is changing how work gets done. But the value will not come from experiments. It will come when we redesign real workflows, connect trusted data, and help people make better decisions faster.*"

He also uses contrast brilliantly: consumer vs enterprise, hype vs value, experiment vs scale, monolithic AI vs building blocks, science vs engineering, front-end digital economy vs physical economy. Contrast gives his ideas shape and it helps the audience see.

5 Habits To Steal For Arvind For Your Own Business Storytelling:

- 1. Start with the business problem, not the technology.** Arvind rarely talks about AI as a toy. He talks about productivity, better decisions, customer service, operations, trust, and scale.
- 2. Use plain nouns.** Warehouses. Workers. Data. Clients. Models. Applications. Costs. Margins. These words carry authority because they feel concrete.
- 3. Be candid about what did not work.** Saying "*we got there too early*" or "*that approach was wrong for the market*" makes the next claim more believable.
- 4. Use numbers sparingly but decisively.** A billion new enterprise applications. 60% frontline workers. \$4 trillion productivity potential. The number becomes the anchor, not the decoration.
- 5. Stay calm.** Arvind's authority comes from not needing to overstate. He sounds like someone who has thought deeply, placed big bets, and can explain why.

The biggest takeaway: Arvind Krishna communicates like a leader who understands that in complex technology markets, clarity is not simplification, it's a strategy. So, let's take a quick look of this in action, with a short anecdote from the opening of a fun and informal fireside chat Arvind had with New Yorker columnist Malcolm Gladwell.



The opening two minutes of this fireside chat might just sound like a playful introduction to engage the audience but there is something much deeper going on, which reveals an insight to why Arvind is such an effective communicator.

Malcolm Gladwell: I have two cousins who work for IBM their entire career. I would ask them, "What does IBM do?" And they would always give me different, confusing, complicated answers. What's your answer? What's your simple answer to that question?

Arvind Krishna: IBM's role is to help our clients improve their business by deploying technology. That means you're not ever gated to one product. It is what makes sense at that time. But it is about improving their business, not just giving them a commodity.

Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah.

Arvind Krishna: And to go to the next layer, I would say we help them through a mixture of hybrid cloud and artificial intelligence. And a taste of quantum coming down the road is kind of where I would take it.

Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah.

Arvind Krishna: That's that's what IBM is.

Malcolm Gladwell: So you are technology agnostic in some sense?

Arvind Krishna: I'm product agnostic.

Malcolm Gladwell: Product agnostic.

Arvind Krishna: I'm not technology agnostic.

Malcolm Gladwell: Yep. But in 25 years from now, IBM could be doing things that would be unrecognizable to contemporary IBM.

Arvind Krishna: It is completely possible.

Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah. Yeah.

Arvind Krishna: It could be that in 25 years from now, the only software IBM does is open source. It could be that the only computing you do is quantum computers. And if I add those two, people today will say, that's not the IBM of today.

Malcolm Gladwell: Is it even simpler to say you just, IBM solves problems at the, at the highest technical level?

Arvind Krishna: If you say highest technical level, yes.

Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah.

Arvind Krishna: Like the guy who invented the barcode, he was solving a problem.

Malcolm Gladwell: Mm-hmm.

Arvind Krishna: Retailers wanted to scale. Many of you may not know, it was an IBMer who invented the barcode. By the way, not somebody who was a PhD, not somebody who was a deep researcher. I think it was actually a field engineer.

Malcolm Gladwell: Oh, really?

Arvind Krishna: Yeah. And lasers were out and you could use lasers to scan things, but they could be upside down. They could be muddy. They could be partly scraped off. And he came up with the idea of the barcode.

Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah.

Arvind Krishna: And that changed inventory management forever.

Malcolm Gladwell: Arvind, the world needs to know that IBM invented the barcode. You guys should do a better job publicizing this fact.

Arvind Krishna: I am sure our CMO will listen to this podcast and we'll get that idea...





Arvind’s formulaic approach to communications, channeling his scientific mindset, doesn’t feel rigid or pre-rehearsed when he talks, but these 3 “P’s” provide a powerful tool to help Arvind speak with clarity, confidence and credibility.

Malcolm Gladwell: I have two cousins who work for IBM their entire career. I would ask them, "What does IBM do?" And they would always give me different, confusing, complicated answers. What's your answer? What's your simple answer to that question?

Arvind Krishna: IBM's role is to help our clients improve their business by deploying technology. That means you're not ever gated to one product. It is what makes sense at that time. But it is about improving their business, not just giving them a commodity.

1. POSITIONING

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Arvind Krishna: It could be that in 25 years from now, the only software IBM does is open source. It could be that the only computing you do is quantum computers. And if I add those two, people today will say, that's not the IBM of today.

2. PREDICTION

Malcolm Gladwell: Is it even simpler to say you just, IBM solves problems at the, at the highest technical level?

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Malcolm Gladwell: Yeah.

Arvind Krishna: Like the guy who invented the barcode, he was solving a problem.

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3. PROOF

Arvind Krishna: And that changed inventory management forever.

Malcolm Gladwell: Arvind, the world needs to know that IBM invented the barcode. You guys should do a better job publicizing this fact.

Arvind Krishna: I am sure our CMO will listen to this podcast and we'll get that idea...





The power of these “3 P’s” can not be underestimated.

1. “Who are we?” → **POSITIONING**
2. “Where are we going?” → **PREDICTION**
3. “Why should you care?” → **PROOF / STORY**

This is an incredibly effective structure for panels because panels are chaotic environments. Audiences are trying to orient themselves quickly:

- Who is this person?
- Why should I trust them?
- What do they believe?
- Are they interesting?
- Are they visionary?
- Can they simplify complexity?

Arvind answers all of those questions in under two minutes.

- ✓ **POSITION** creates clarity.
- ✓ **PREDICTION** creates intrigue.
- ✓ **PROOF** (via a story) creates emotion and memory.

It’s a simple example, but this is a superb panel-opening sequence. It’s not just fit for panels though. Arvind regularly uses a similar framework in his keynotes at conferences like IBM’s annual THINK event, where he needs to communicate to technical and non-technical business leaders, left and right brain thinkers, from graduates to seasoned CEOs.

1. POSITIONING

“AI is not about replacing people. It is about augmenting productivity and helping people work better.”

2. PREDICTION

“There will be over a billion new applications built using generative AI, and every company will become an AI company in some form.”

3. PROOF

Then he grounds this prediction with practical examples:

- Customer service agents resolving problems faster
- Developers writing code more efficiently
- Enterprises unlocking value from proprietary data
- Governments improving citizen services
- Scientists accelerating research



I also particularly like Arvind's "ten word" statements. Ten word statements are sometimes used as political devices which aim to write tomorrow's headlines, by giving journalists a potential one-liner to sum up a whole speech, manifesto or issue. It's rarely exactly ten words, but it's usually less than fifteen. Seth Godin once said,

"If you can't explain what you do in ten words or less, you don't know what you're doing."

I wrote a book and hosted a [podcast called "Ten Words"](#) for a few years which dug into this phenomena, because I think it's so important so speak with clarity and brevity. Notice what Arvind said when Malcolm asked him what IBM does: **"IBM's role is to help our clients improve their business by deploying technology."**

In The Verge interview example Arvind put it a slightly different way saying, **"IBM helps clients deploy technology that makes their business better."** (Ten words exactly).

You get the idea. I like to think that the best CEOs channel their inner Hemingway by communicating big ideas, with small words, and short sentences. Something the great writer Ernest Hemingway did exceptionally well.

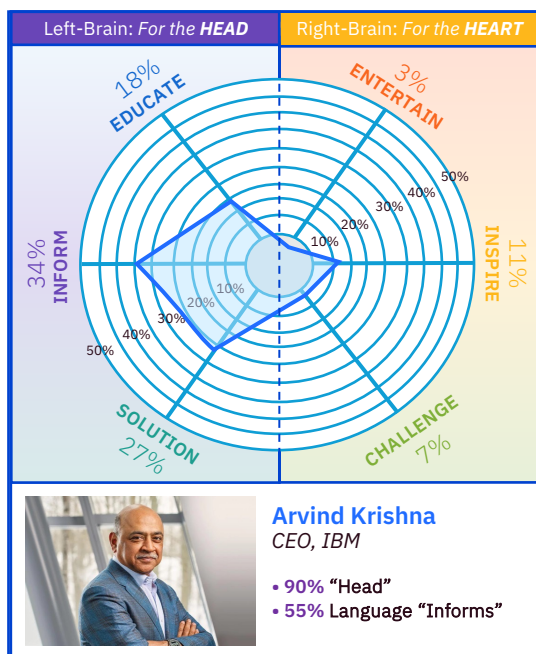
If you do get a chance to watch the full interview with Gladwell, watch how much Arvind smiles! Seriously. He smiles on average every 30 seconds. That's not forced. It's to bring warmth and empathy to what are often dry and difficult topics like AI, hybrid cloud infrastructure, software architecture and quantum computing. Arvind also slows down the cadence of his words when he wants to make a point around a complex topic. Small but significant details like body language, tone, and cadence can make all the difference.

It's not easy to speak like a CEO. That's why I like simple reminders like the "3 P's" to remind ourselves as business leaders how to communicate in the C-suite. In Oliver Aust's excellent book *Speak Like a CEO*, Oliver showcases how the world's top CEOs speak. And while they all approach communications slightly differently, like Arvind does with his scientific mindset, Oliver noticed commonalities between all the CEOs he was studied and interviewed:

- 1. Once the picture is painted, it's easier to develop your story.**
- 2. Be genuinely interesting and interested.**
- 3. Unless you're doing something genuinely different, no one will care.**
- 4. Communicating about missed opportunities is a good thing.**
- 5. You have to be able to translate between different stakeholders.**
- 6. Building a compelling story is key to successful communication.**
- 7. You need to have a "20 second effect". (*What's your ten words?*)**
- 8. It's better to be really good at two things than okay at twenty things.**
- 9. It's more about what you hear than what you speak.**
- 10. The best leaders combine data and gut.**
- 11. Ask for advice that shows you know what you're doing.**
- 12. Be bold, be clear, and bring positive energy.**



Scientist & CEO



Arvind Krishna is a scientist, storyteller and CEO. His experience of using "The Scientific Method" to solve problems during his time leading IBM's \$6Bn research division, has helped to shape his methodical approach to communications. This AI-analysis of Arvind's communications shows how his preference for communicating with an audience is to show them how IBM can help them to solve their problems.

We saw this in the Gladwell interview where Malcolm summarised Arvind's definition of what IBM does as "**IBM solves problems at the, at the highest technical level.**" This makes Arvind unique to many other technology CEOs who are more prone to inform and educate their audiences. (See research of page 48).

As we'll see on the following pages when we dig into more of my research, Arvind's business storytelling archetype is **OPERATOR**. This just means that in relation to other bearings on *The Story Compass*, Arvind – with his problem solving approach to business - prefers to focus on practical solutions which drive action to get results (See research on page 48 and the "cheat sheet" on page 54, which this chart below is taken from).

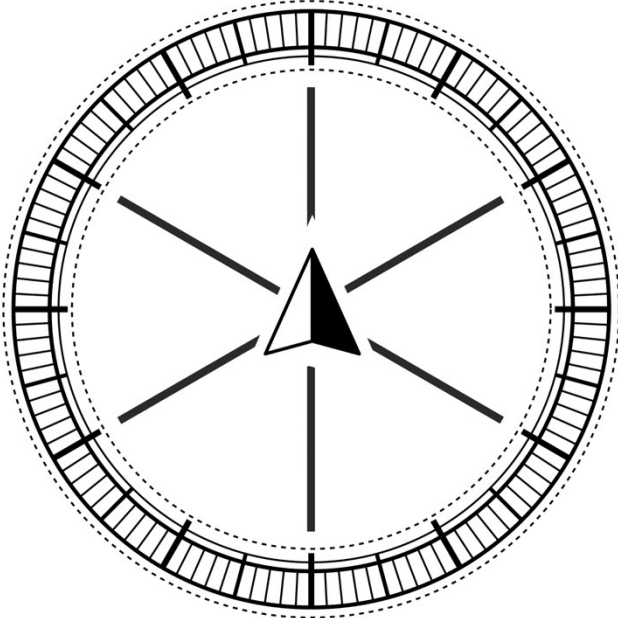
| | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| OPERATOR: Solve Problems | OPERATOR'S reduce uncertainty through action. Get things done. Less theory. More execution. Prioritise momentum, outcomes, and practicality application. | COO Military commander Ops Leader TV Showrunners Disney Imagineers Scientists Arvind Krishna Temple Grandin Mark Rober Ellen McArthur Sara Blakely | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct • Reliable • Disciplined • Pragmatic • Grounded • Focused • Efficient • Action-oriented • Tough-minded • Decisive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes friction • Focuses on execution • Prioritises action over theory • Simplifies decisions • Creates accountability • Solves immediate problems • Drives progress quickly | Execute Deliver Action Outcome Results Priority Deadline Ownership Accountability Operational Process Efficiency Scale | Implements Focus Workflow Delivery Performance Practical Discipline Resource Solve Momentum Next steps | <i>"Let's focus on execution."</i> <i>"What needs to happen next?"</i> <i>"We need a practical solution."</i> <i>"Let's simplify this."</i> <i>"Who owns this?"</i> <i>"How quickly can we move?"</i> <i>"The priority right now is delivery."</i> |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Why does all this matter?

1. These insights can help us to become better communicators when we are in the c-suite, or speaking to other CXOs. That's kinda obvious. But more importantly...
2. Being able to visualise Arvind's communication style like I have in the spider-chart above, is incredibly valuable, because it might help us to know how best to communicate with Arvind. Having a brief scientific insight into how Arvind communicates could help to shape pitches, presentations, or messaging being created *for* Arvind, or to present *to* Arvind. These kind of predictive insights could provide a huge competitive advantage for the communicator wishing to engage Arvind. As we'll soon see, this process can be applied to any business leader we might want to communicate with, or write content for.

Research:
Stories That Work

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Establishing A Baseline Of Excellence: 46 Stories That Work

Up until this point, I had been operating with a degree of bias in that I was self-selecting stories which I had used effectively to teach business communications and impact storytelling at universities, business schools, and in boardrooms. But if *The Story Compass* is to work, it needs to be tested against a broader range of purpose-driven stories. The eclectic mix of storytellers below (fig. 10) is based on 468 responses from friends and colleagues at IBM and my followers on LinkedIn, who suggested stories which worked, based more on the credibility of the storyteller, than the quality of any one particular story they told. The assumption being here that an established CEO leading one of the world's largest companies (with a growing stock price) is likely to be the type of communicator who we can learn from and seek to emulate, when crafting our own business stories.

Using one story as a starting point for each leader, then expanding my dataset to other similar stories which they had shared, I soon had a dataset of over one million words – featuring 46 of political, business and environmental leaders. Examining everything from commencement addresses and earnings calls, to conference keynotes and interviews, I used OpenAI and Meta's open-source Llama large language models to analyse the communication styles of each leader, based upon the criteria that I had used previously to cluster sentences and messaging sections into one of the six storytelling bearings. I initially ranked the storytellers in order of most to least inspirational, based on an assumption that a purpose-driven (more emotional) storyteller is more likely to inspire, entertain and challenge, than they are to inform, educate and entertain. This turned out to be incorrect.

| | SPEECH / PRESENTATION | URL | PROVOCATION | HEAD | | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------|----------------|---------|-----------|-----------|----|
| | | | | INFORM | EDUCATE | SOLVE PROBLEMS | INSPIRE | ENTERTAIN | CHALLENGE | |
| JFK | Politician | The Moon Speech | https://www.youtube.c | How do you give a 1,000 second speec | 18 | 12 | 8 | 42 | 8 | 12 |
| Steve Jobs | Apple | Marketing Speech | https://www.youtube.c | How to give a masterclass in whatyou | 15 | 20 | 10 | 40 | 10 | 5 |
| Barack Obama | Politician | 2004 DNC Keynote Address | https://www.youtube.c | How do you build and establish your pe | 18 | 20 | 12 | 35 | 10 | 5 |
| Mark Zuckerberg | Meta | The Metaverse Presentation | https://www.youtube.c | How do you communicate a make-or-t | 25 | 16 | 14 | 31 | 9 | 5 |
| King Charles III | King of United Kingdom | The King's Speech to Congress (2026) | https://apnews.com/article/king-charles-iii-u-congress-spee | How do you communicate a make-or-t | 25 | 20 | 10 | 30 | 5 | 10 |
| Dario Amodi | Anthropic | Machines of Loving Grace Essay | https://darioamodei.cof | When you need to balance hope & cau | 22 | 20 | 16 | 28 | 12 | 2 |
| Bryan Stevenson | Lawyer | We need to talk about an injustice | https://www.youtube.c | The longest standing ovation at TED | 18 | 14 | 8 | 28 | 10 | 22 |
| Larry Ellison | Oracle | USC Commencement Address 2016 | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to inspire future leade | 16 | 22 | 12 | 28 | 14 | 8 |
| Ken Robinson | Educator | Do schools kill creativity? | https://www.youtube.c | Why is this by far the most watched TE | 14 | 20 | 8 | 28 | 22 | 8 |
| Julie Sweet | Accenture | CES 2025 Keynote | https://www.youtube.c | Human + Machines = Re>Inventors | 25 | 20 | 15 | 25 | 5 | 10 |
| Jane Goodall | Conservationist | Helping humans and animals live together | https://www.youtube.c | One sermon 52 different ways to preac | 22 | 18 | 20 | 24 | 6 | 10 |
| Kate Raworth | Oxford Uni | Doughnut Economics | https://www.youtube.c | If you can't picture it you can't change | 18 | 26 | 16 | 24 | 6 | 10 |
| David Solomon | Goldman Sachs | NYU Commencement address 2023 | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to inspire future leade | 16 | 22 | 12 | 24 | 14 | 12 |
| David Attenborough | Broadcaster | COP26 Address to World Leaders | https://www.youtube.c | Urgency + Optimism = Action (How to i | 22 | 18 | 15 | 23 | 2 | 20 |
| Elon Musk | SpaceX | SpaceX 2017 Keynote | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to make an audience fi | 28 | 24 | 18 | 22 | 6 | 2 |
| Joel Mokyr | Nobel Economist | The Past and Future of Innovation: Can Progress | https://www.youtube.c | The art and science of economics... | 30 | 20 | 10 | 20 | 10 | 10 |
| Ed Bastian | Delta | Centennial Speech at the Sphere | https://www.youtube.c | How do you celebrate your heritage? | 30 | 20 | 15 | 20 | 10 | 5 |
| Fei-Fei Li | Stanford Uni | With Spatial Intelligence, AI Will Understand the | https://www.youtube.c | How do you give an optimistic talk to a | 28 | 30 | 17 | 20 | 3 | 2 |
| Dan Pallotta | NGO Campaigner | The way we think about charity is dead wrong | https://www.youtube.c | The most persuasive TED talk of all tim | 20 | 20 | 15 | 20 | 10 | 15 |
| Rishi Sunak | Former British PM | How AI Will Transform British Small Business | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to make big ideas feel | 20 | 25 | 25 | 20 | 5 | 5 |
| Mary Barra | GM | CES2022: General Motors Keynote | https://www.youtube.c | Powerful leaders don't have to sound e | 34 | 21 | 18 | 18 | 7 | 2 |
| Marc Benioff | Salesforce | Dreamforce Main Keynote 2025 | https://www.youtube.c | Why has this keynote format driven ex | 32 | 18 | 20 | 18 | 8 | 4 |
| Demis Hassabis | DeepMind/Google | Nobel Prize Lecture | https://www.youtube.c | The most important ideas don't start a | 26 | 24 | 20 | 18 | 10 | 2 |
| Jane Fraser | Citi | Leading with Empathy Stanford Presentation | https://www.youtube.c | How to speak as a corporation without | 14 | 24 | 20 | 18 | 20 | 4 |
| Chuck Robbins | Cisco | Cisco AI Summit 2026 | https://www.youtube.c | Calm orchestration: Owning a stage w | 28 | 22 | 18 | 17 | 10 | 5 |
| Tim Cook | Apple | "Time Flies" Apple event | https://www.youtube.c | How to do virtual keynotes properly | 40 | 18 | 14 | 16 | 8 | 4 |
| Sundar Pichai | Google/Alphabet | Google I/O 2023 | https://www.youtube.c | How do you introduce a revolutionary | 34 | 24 | 16 | 16 | 6 | 4 |
| Pat Gelsinger | Intel | Intel Vision Keynote 2022 | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to rebuild & restore pri | 34 | 20 | 18 | 16 | 7 | 5 |
| Bob Iger | Disney | Shareholder Message 2025 | https://www.youtube.c | "Thanks to modern technology, there's | 32 | 18 | 14 | 16 | 10 | 10 |
| Emma Walmsley | GSK | The CEO Signal: On Leading & Leaving GSK | https://www.youtube.c | How do you want to be remembered at | 14 | 26 | 22 | 16 | 18 | 4 |
| Satya Nadella | Microsoft | Build 2025 Keynote | https://www.youtube.c | Why do some leaders make the future | 40 | 20 | 15 | 15 | 5 | 5 |
| Jensen Huang | Nvidia | GTC 2026 Keynote | https://www.youtube.c | Why should a long keynote be structur | 35 | 30 | 15 | 15 | 5 | 0 |
| Dario Gil | IBM/US Gov | What's Next: The Future of Quantum Computing | https://www.youtube.c | If you can't explain it simply you don't u | 35 | 25 | 10 | 15 | 5 | 10 |
| Mark Carney | Canadian PM | WEF Address 2026 | https://www.youtube.c | When you want to talk about moral res | 30 | 20 | 15 | 15 | 5 | 15 |
| Lisa Su | AMD | AMD CES 2019 | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to reposition your com | 36 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 11 | 5 |
| Andy Jassy | Amazon | AWS re:Invent 2020 Keynote | https://www.youtube.c | Structure persuasion at scale: How to | 34 | 20 | 22 | 14 | 5 | 5 |
| Larry Fink | Blackrock | Finance Academy Presentation | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to communicate with | 18 | 26 | 22 | 14 | 16 | 4 |
| Jeff Bezos | Amazon | 1997 Shareholder Letter | https://media.corporate | How to paint your long-term vision | 42 | 20 | 18 | 12 | 1 | 7 |
| Jacinda Ardern | Former NZ PM | COVID-19 Speech | https://www.youtube.c | When you need to communicate at yo | 31 | 23 | 24 | 12 | 1 | 9 |
| Carol Dweck | Stanford Uni | Teaching a Growth Mindset | https://www.youtube.c | Why did a "growth mindset" inspire the | 24 | 34 | 22 | 12 | 3 | 5 |
| Simon Sinek | Speaker | How great leaders inspire action | https://www.youtube.c | Sometimes all you need is 3 words and | 29 | 25 | 23 | 11 | 3 | 9 |
| Al Gore | Climate Leader | The Truth in Ten | https://jeremy.earth/20 | How do you cut a complex 3 hour pres | 40 | 25 | 15 | 10 | 2 | 8 |
| Arvind Krishna | IBM | THINK 2024 Keynote | https://www.youtube.c | Turning boring information into insight | 28 | 34 | 18 | 10 | 3 | 7 |
| Sam Altman | YC/OpenAI | How to start a startup | https://www.youtube.c | Building the foundation of a career def | 25 | 35 | 25 | 10 | 5 | 0 |
| Rob Thomas | IBM | Responsible AI @ Yale School of Management | https://www.youtube.c | Numbers & Narratives: How to engage | 31 | 26 | 24 | 9 | 2 | 8 |
| Brian Moynihan | Bank of America | Q1 2020 Earnings Call: COVID-19 Response | https://www.fool.com/e | How to respond as a business leader if | 34 | 18 | 24 | 8 | 1 | 15 |
| Jamie Dimon | JP Morgan | Letter to Shareholders 2025 | https://www.jporganc | How to communicate clearly when the | 55 | 15 | 20 | 5 | 0 | 5 |

Fig 10. Analysis of 46 "inspirational" storytelling leaders suggested by my network of colleagues, and co-workers.



Key Findings.

The chart below (fig.11) shows a snapshot of my research into the different communication styles of 41 of the world’s top communicators. It confirmed the hypothesis that great storytelling follows one of six bearings (Inform, Inspire, Educate, Entertain, Challenge & Solve Problems). This inspired me to group individuals into one of six storytelling archetypes (Analyst, Teacher, Operator, Visionary, Performer or Provoker), based upon the bearing that their communication style most suited, based upon the ranking which a pre-trained AI agent helped me to score.

The data allowed me to challenge some popular myths which are regularly mentioned (and sometimes believed) in business storytelling circles – especially some of the coaching, courses and books I have read over the last few years). For example, it is easy to buy into the point of view that the best CEOs like Steve Jobs are visionary storytellers who regularly inspire their audience, but in fact the opposite is true of most high performing CEOs. Suggesting CEOs should always inspire their audience will arguably going to reduce the potential impact of their communications.

Visualising some of the data as a spider graph (like the one below for JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon), which features each of the six bearings, provides an easy-to-read format which helps us to quickly understand which direction (or “bearing”) he prefers to take his audience in. Using a device like this, which can be easily created by any communicator who wants to copy-and-paste their story into an AI agent similar to the one I built, will suggest which direction a certain text is most likely to take an audience in. This enables a level to predictive analysis where stories can be measured in advance to see whether or not they are most likely to take the audience in the direction which the communicator thinks is most relevant to get their desired outcome.

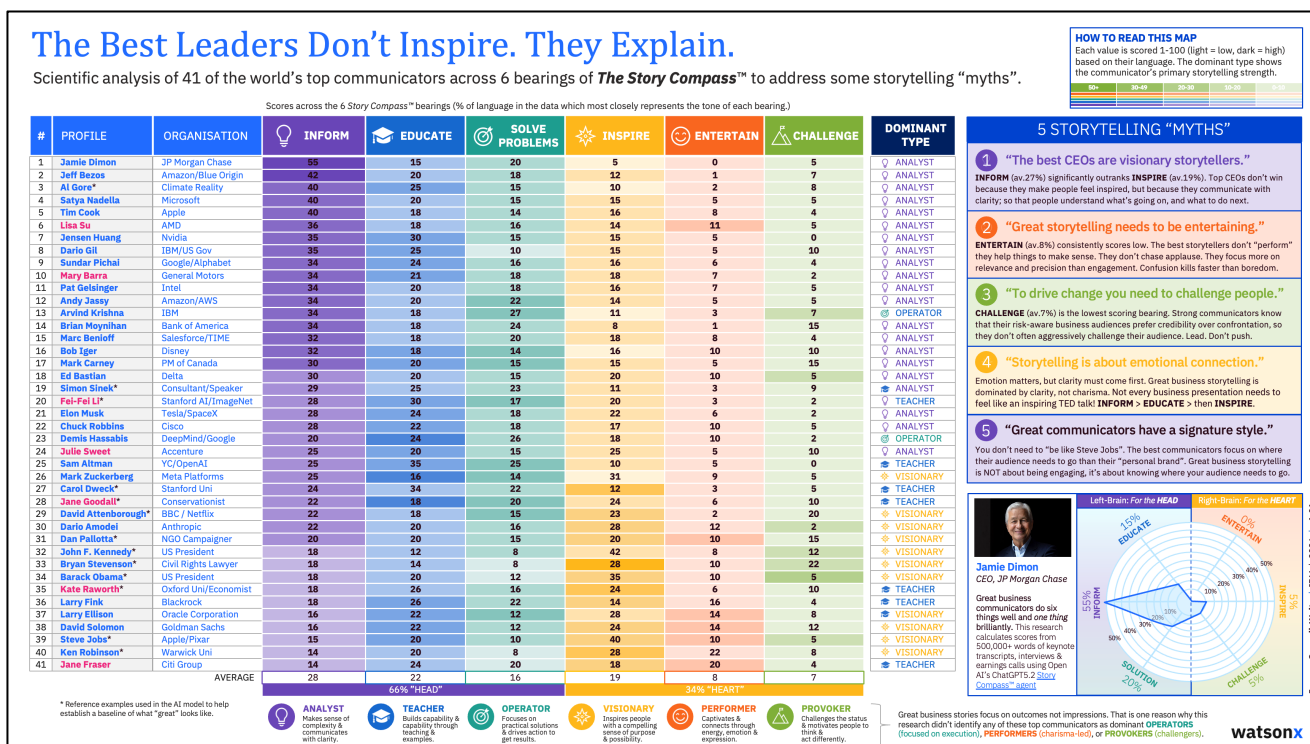
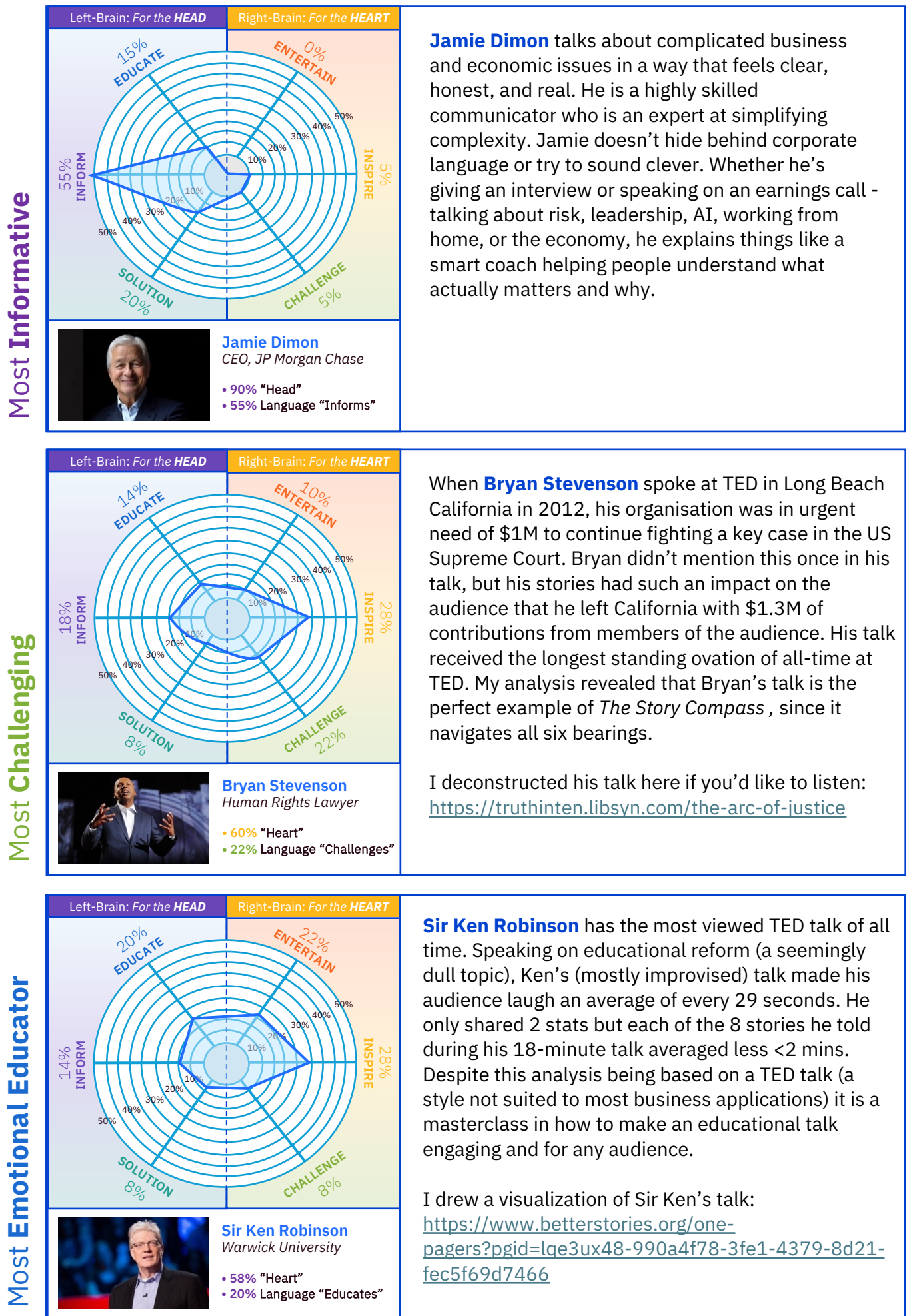
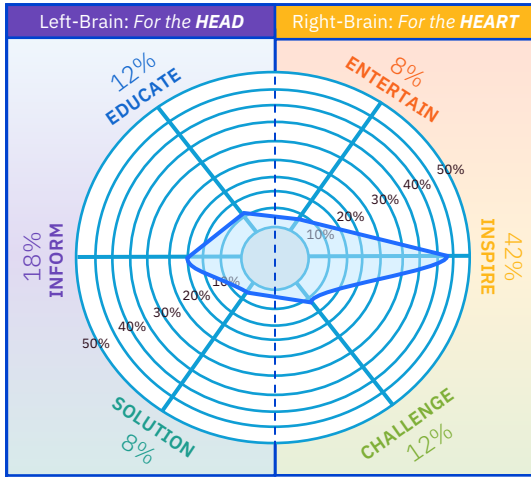


Fig 11. Leaders of the top organisations inform more than they inspire, and their most effective communication style appears to be two-thirds “head” (66% rational language) and one-third “heart” (34% emotional language).

Fig 12. The Story Compass visualisations of six exceptional communicators:



Most Inspirational

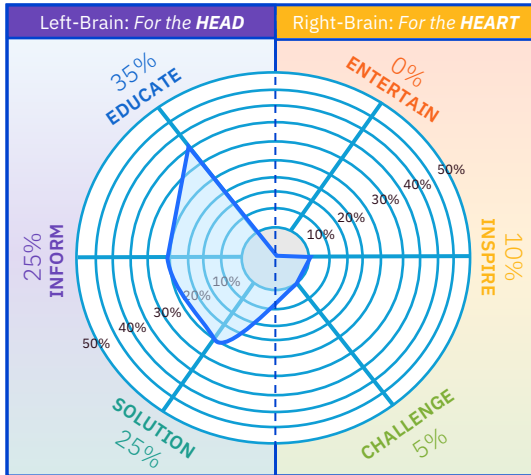


John F. Kennedy
Former US President

- 62% "Heart"
- 12% Language "Challenges"

President John F. Kennedy is one of the most engaging communicators of the last century. I regularly use his "Moon Speech" from 1962 as an example of what I believe to be the best technology speech of all-time. If the measure of a story that works is what people did, then the fact that the Apollo program achieved its goal of putting man on the moon within a decade is proof that it worked. Despite the assassination of JFK, changing administrations, budget cuts and the war in Vietnam; 400,000 NASA employees and contractors stayed focused on the goal of landing on the moon, motivated by this speech¹⁹.

Best Problem Solver

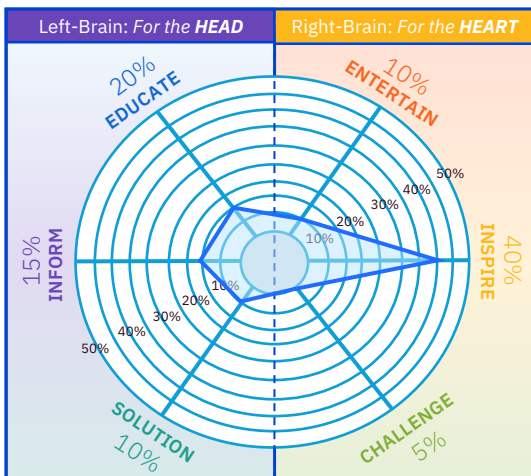


Sam Altman
CEO, OpenAI

- 85% "Head"
- 25% "Solves Problems"

Sam Altman has a communication style that feels unusually calm, clear, and intellectually compressed, despite sometimes appearing awkward. He rarely sounds theatrical or overly polished. Instead, he speaks like a great startup mentor: simplifying complicated ideas into memorable principles and helping people feel they understand the future before it arrives. A lot of that comes from his years at Y Combinator and teaching entrepreneurship at Stanford University, where he learned that founders don't need motivational fluff – they need clarity, pattern recognition, and practical insight they can act on immediately.

Most Inspirational CEO



Steve Jobs
Former CEO, Apple/Pixar

- 55% "Heart"
- 40% Language "Inspires"

Steve Jobs was such a powerful presenter because he understood that people do not fall in love with products – they fall in love with ideas, emotions, and beliefs. Whether launching the iPhone or talking about Apple's values, he stripped away complexity and focused obsessively on clarity, drama, and meaning. A passionate evangelist on the art of storytelling, the former Pixar CEO and founder of Apple always spoke in simple but inspirational human language. He created suspense like a filmmaker, and made audiences feel they were part of something bigger than technology itself.

¹⁹ Read more about how this speech had such an impact between 1962-1969: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0001839217713748>



“At the end of the day, people are not persuaded by what you say but by what they understand.”
- Dr. John C. Maxwell

For example, the chart we featured previous on page 21 (below) shows six possible thought processes which might dominate the audience’s thinking. Therefore, if we are sharing a presentation about culture, values, and behaviours – we might want to inspire an audience to think “*I believe this matters – and I want to be part of it*”, but analysis of the talk track might suggest that the text in its current form is merely conveying information, so the audience might think “*That’s interesting. Tell me more*” but it might not shift their belief system in a positive way. The text might look like it’s saying the right things on paper, but *The Story Compass* demonstrates that it is more likely to speak to the head by informing, whereas what it needs to do is speak to the heart by inspiring.

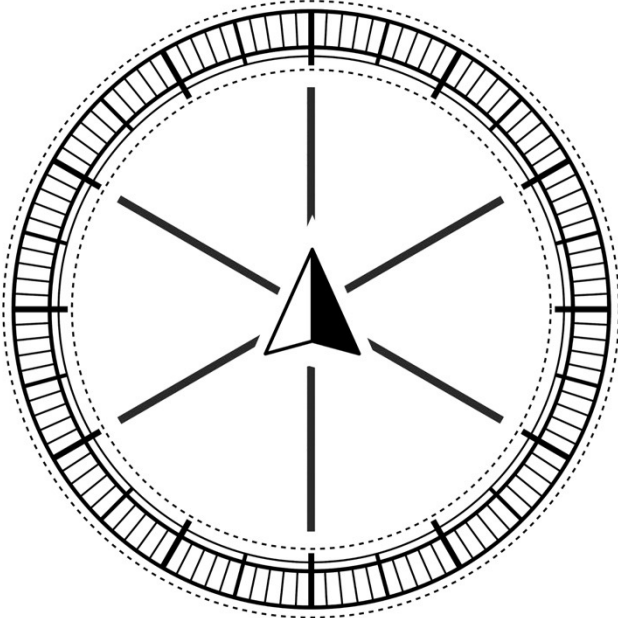
| | | |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| AUDIENCE THOUGHTS | Inspire → | “I believe this matters – and I want to be part of it.” |
| | Inform → | “That’s interesting. Tell me more.” |
| | Educate → | “Ah... now I understand.” |
| | Entertain → | “I loved that. I was completely engaged.” |
| | Challenge → | “I’ve never thought about it that way before.” |
| | Solve Problems → | “This feels practical. Let’s do it.” |

Try it yourself? This link takes you to a pre-trained AI agent on OpenAI’s market place, which you can access with any paid subscription to ChatGPT. Simply copy and paste your transcript and the agent will score your transcript in accordance with the six Story Compass bearings.

My original hypothesis was that stories that work make an audience *feel* something so that they *do* something. With an emphasis on making an audience feel something, I have always encouraged students and leaders who I work with to become students of emotions (and how they work) so that they can help and audience to *feel* something. In order to help storytellers do that, I believe that by successfully segmenting stories into one of six “bearings” to aim for, business communicators will be more successful in taking their audiences where they need to take them. What I did not expect was that leaders and CEOs of the top organisations, who consistently appear on Fortune and Forbes most influential business leader lists, all over indexed in *left-brain* communications and not *right brain* communications. Outliers such as Steve Jobs regularly *INSPIRED* their audience, but the primary objective of top CEO’s is to *INFORM* not inspire. So rather than making an audience *feel* something so that they *do* something, perhaps we should be asking our audiences to *do* something, and then inspiring them to want to do it - avoiding the mistake of leading with emotion? The analysis below¹⁸ compares the communication style of 41 leaders. It suggests that the top leaders spend two-thirds of their time using left-brain rational language which **INFORMS, EDUCATES** and **SOLVES PROBLEMS**, and only one-third of their time connecting with their audience emotionally with language which **INSPIRES, ENTERTAINS** and **CHALLENGES**. This could be a good rule of thumb for all business storytelling?

The Six Storytelling Archetypes.

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The Six Storytelling Archetypes – Language & Behaviours.

The matrix of the follow page offers a basic but useful cheat sheet which shows the type of buzzwords and language used by different storytelling archetypes. This could be used to help guide an AI as you co-create a story, or you can use it as a simple reminder to use the correct type of language which will help you to steer your audience towards the bearing which you wish to direct them towards.

The matrix was created by collating keywords, strategic points of view, characteristics and behaviours of the different types of storytellers, who choose to deploy a certain type of storytelling when wanting to achieve a specific outcome. Think of it as a cheat sheet to help business leaders like you to become more intentional communicators. Too often, leaders focus only on what they want to say, rather than how their audience needs to hear it. But the most effective storytellers understand that different situations require different storytelling approaches. Some moments demand logic and evidence. Others require inspiration, education, entertainment, urgency, or practical action. Great communicators know how to adapt their language, energy, and structure depending on where they want to take their audience.

How to Use the Matrix

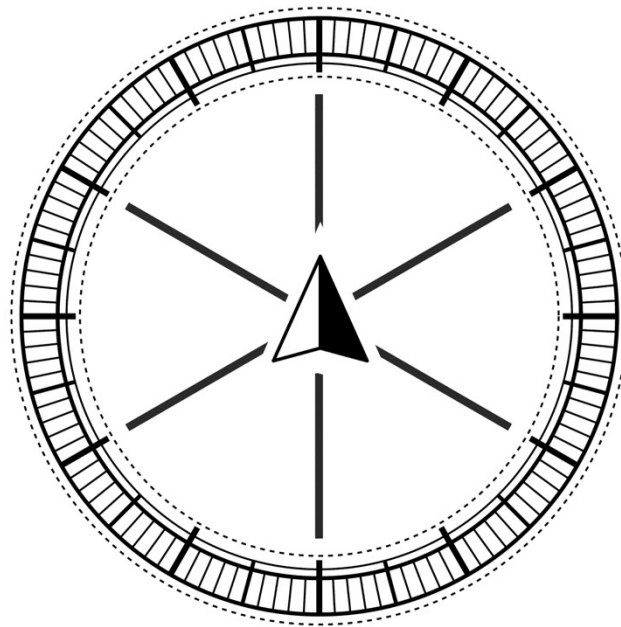
The easiest way to use this guide is to begin with a simple question: What response do I want from my audience? If you want your audience to understand complexity, think like an **ANALYST**. If you want them to grow in confidence and capability, think like a **TEACHER**. If you need action and execution, channel the **OPERATOR**. If your goal is belief, momentum, and possibility, step into the **VISIONARY**. If attention and emotional connection matter most, use the **PERFORMER**. And if your audience has become too comfortable with the status quo, the **PROVOKER** may be the most important voice of all. Use the keywords, behaviours, strategies, and example phrases in this guide as creative prompts while preparing presentations, speeches, meetings, pitches, workshops, or important conversations. Over time, you will begin to recognise these archetypes not only in yourself, but in the world's most effective communicators.

| | EXAMPLE | CHARACTER | STRATEGY | KEYWORDS | LANGUAGE | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ANALYST: Inform | <p>ANALYSTS reduce uncertainty through logic. They seek clarity, accuracy, and understanding. They simplify complexity. Confidence built through evidence.</p> | <p>McKinsey partner, Economist columnist, Financial analyst, Hans Rosling, Jamie Dimon, Satya Nadella, Amy Webb, Ben Evans, Jensen Huang</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rational Calm Structured Evidence-led Curious Precise Measured Objective Credible Thoughtful | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breaks down complexity Uses frameworks and models Organises information logically Builds trust through facts & insight Simplifies difficult concepts Clarifies cause and effect Helps audiences "make sense" of uncertainty | <p>Data, Insight, Evidence, Trend, Analysis, Framework, Model, Research, Findings, Metrics, Benchmark, Drivers, Patterns</p> <p>Variables, Forecast, Strategic, Scenario, Context, Implications, Signal, Probability, Risk, Clarity, Perspective</p> | <p>"Let's look at the data." "The pattern we're seeing is..." "There are three key drivers behind this shift." "What the research suggests..." "To put this into context..." "The evidence points toward..." "Here's the strategic implication."</p> |
| TEACHER: Educate | <p>TEACHER reduce uncertainty through understanding. They facilitate growth. Patient, practical, generous, and empowering. They transform confusion into capability.</p> | <p>Fei-Fei Li, Sam Altman, Kate Raworth, Larry Fink, Emma Walmsley, Jane Fraser, Brian Cox, Erica Chenoweth, Larry McEnerney, Brilliant mentors, Trusted coaches</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patient Encouraging Clear Helpful Supportive Wise Generous Calm Empathetic Practical | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explains step-by-step Uses stories and examples Makes learning feel safe Builds confidence gradually Turns knowledge into capability Uses analogy and demonstration Reduces intimidation | <p>Learn, Understand, Practice, Example, Step-by-step, Method, Principle, Skill, Coaching, Guidance, Development, Capability, Improvement</p> <p>Demonstration, Habit, Training, Process, Lesson, Growth, Mastery, Experiment, Application, Feedback, Progress</p> | <p>"Let me show you how this works." "A simple way to think about this is..." "Here's an example." "Over time, this becomes a habit." "The key principle is..." "You don't need to master everything at once." "Let's break this down step-by-step."</p> |
| OPERATOR: Solve Problems | <p>OPERATOR'S reduce uncertainty through action. Get things done. Less theory. More execution. Prioritise momentum, outcomes, and practicality application.</p> | <p>COO, Military commander, Ops Leader, TV Showrunners, Disney, Imagineers, Scientists, Arvind Krishna, Temple Grandin, Mark Rober, Ellen McArthur, Sara Blakely</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct Reliable Disciplined Pragmatic Grounded Focused Efficient Action-oriented Tough-minded Decisive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removes friction Focuses on execution Prioritises action over theory Simplifies decisions Creates accountability Solves immediate problems Drives progress quickly | <p>Execute, Deliver, Action, Outcome, Results, Priority, Deadline, Ownership, Accountability, Operational, Process, Efficiency, Scale</p> <p>Implements, Focus, Workflow, Delivery, Performance, Practical, Discipline, Resource, Solve, Momentum, Next steps</p> | <p>"Let's focus on execution." "What needs to happen next?" "We need a practical solution." "Let's simplify this." "Who owns this?" "How quickly can we move?" "The priority right now is delivery."</p> |
| VISIONARY: Inspire | <p>The VISIONARY reduce uncertainty through belief. They inspire, paint possibility. Elevate emotion. Create movement. Purpose-driven</p> | <p>Steve Jobs, Jane Fraser, Mark Zuckerberg, Malala Yousafzai, Brene Brown, Simon Sinek, Dan Pallotta, Barack Obama, Bryan Stevenson, Dario Amodei, David Attenborough, MLK</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optimistic Inspirational Courageous Purpose-driven Imaginative Emotional Future-focused Hopeful Ambitious Idealistic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paints a compelling future Creates emotional momentum Challenges limitation Connects work to Meaning Uses metaphor and aspiration Builds belief in possibility Creates identity and belonging | <p>Purpose, Mission, Vision, Future, Possibility, Believe, Hope, Imagine, Change, Impact, Movement, Potential, Transformation</p> <p>Legacy, Courage, Humanity, Together, Better world, Dream, Meaning, Inspire, Opportunity, Next generation, Why</p> | <p>"Imagine a world where..." "This is our moment." "We have an opportunity to..." "The future belongs to..." "This matters because..." "We can build something extraordinary together." "The best is still ahead of us."</p> |
| PERFORMER: Entertain | <p>PERFORMER'S reduce uncertainty through emotion and by capturing attention. They understand rhythm, energy, and timing. They make ideas memorable.</p> | <p>Comedians, Walt Disney, Cleo Abram, Jacob Collier, Shonda Rhimes, Aaron Sorkin, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Dan Brown, N.K. Jemisin, Sam Conniff</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charismatic Expressive Energetic Entertaining Warm Dynamic Emotional Playful Engaging Confident | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses humour and surprise Creates emotional highs and lows Maintains attention Uses storytelling rhythm and timing Creates memorable moments Builds audience connection Makes information feel alive | <p>Story, Experience, Feel, Energy, Emotion, Surprise, Exciting, Incredible, Imagine this, Funny, Human, Connection, Adventure</p> <p>Drama, Curiosity, Attention, Magic, Wonder, Unexpected, Memorable, Wow, Delight, Emotionally, Captivate</p> | <p>"Here's the crazy part..." "You're going to love this." "Imagine being in that room..." "And then something unexpected happened." "This blew my mind." "Let me tell you a story." "That's where things got interesting..."</p> |
| PROVOKER: Challenge | <p>PROVOKER'S challenges the status quo & motivate people to think and act differently. They create tension. Disrupt complacency. They force audiences to confront reality.</p> | <p>Thomas Friedman, Tarana Burke, Richard Branson, V. Westwood, Anita Roddick, Elon Musk, Greta Thunberg, C. Figueres, Al Gore, Malcolm Gladwell, Yvon Chouinard, Howard Schultz, Reed Hastings</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bold Courageous Restless Contrarian Fearless Direct Intense Emotionally charged Passionate Urgent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges assumptions Creates productive discomfort Exposes contradictions Highlights risk and urgency Reframes the problem Questions conventional thinking Forces audiences to confront consequences Uses tension to motivate change | <p>Why, Challenge, Rethink, Urgent, Risk, Contradiction, Broken, Crisis, Truth, Change, Wake up, Status quo, Impossible</p> <p>Accountability, Reality, Consequences, Tension, Unacceptable, Question, Disruption, Critical, Future, Warning, Transform</p> | <p>"The real problem nobody wants to talk about is..." "Why are we still doing this?" "If we continue down this path..." "The cost of doing nothing is..." "We need to challenge our assumptions." "This should concern all of us." "What if the opposite were true?" "Comfort is becoming our biggest risk."</p> |

The Mayflower Case Study:

“We need to make this educational story inspirational”.

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Mayflower Case Study

A few years ago at IBM we were writing a 2-minute story to showcase the AI-powered ship Mayflower, which would go on to become the world's first autonomous ship to navigate the Atlantic ocean. Some basic criteria for the "story" were:

- World's first autonomous ship
- Features AI, IoT, Cloud, Edge & 5G technology
- A story about IBM Research + Impact Science
- IBM x ProMare Partnership
- "Triple bottom line": People / planet / prosperity



As a story written for business leaders, the following 2-minute script started off something like this. It's not a bad story, and it ticks most business boxes:

The global ocean economy supports international trade, food production, climate regulation, and transportation infrastructure. However, marine ecosystems are increasingly affected by pollution, rising temperatures, and biodiversity decline. Addressing these challenges requires significantly more environmental data than current research methods can economically provide.

Traditional marine research vessels are expensive to operate, resource-intensive, and constrained by the availability and endurance of onboard crews. These limitations reduce the amount of time vessels can spend collecting data at sea and restrict the scale of ocean monitoring programs.

To address this issue, IBM and marine research organisation Promare developed the Mayflower Autonomous Ship, an AI-powered marine research platform designed to operate without a human captain or onboard crew.

The vessel uses artificial intelligence, automation systems, advanced sensors, edge computing, and renewable solar energy to navigate and conduct long-duration ocean missions autonomously. The objective of the project is to create a more scalable and cost-effective approach to marine data collection.

By reducing operational costs and increasing deployment duration, autonomous vessels have the potential to expand ocean observation capabilities significantly. This could enable continuous monitoring of environmental conditions, marine biodiversity, shipping activity, and ocean pollution levels.

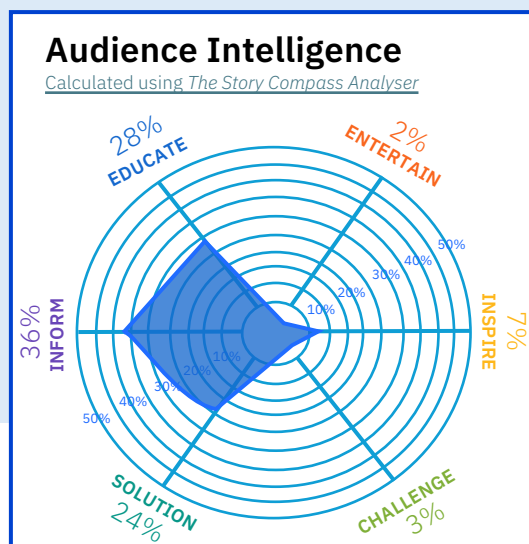
The technologies developed through the Mayflower project may also support the future deployment of coordinated fleets of autonomous marine drones capable of collecting and processing data across large geographic areas simultaneously.

Potential applications include:

- * monitoring plastic pollution,
- * tracking marine mammal populations,
- * studying climate-related ocean changes,
- * supporting fisheries management,
- * and improving maritime research efficiency.

The Mayflower project demonstrates how AI and autonomous systems can be applied in real-world environmental and industrial scenarios where traditional operating models face cost and scalability limitations.

More broadly, it represents a practical example of how artificial intelligence can enhance scientific research capabilities while reducing operational dependency on human-crewed infrastructure.



The original script clearly INFORMS (36%) and EDUCATES (28%) an audience but doesn't appear to INSPIRE (7%) them.



It's not a terrible "story" but it appears to lack the emotional outcome which was needed for this story. Like many business stories, it is full of all the right information, and it does an OK job of educating the audience – but when you look at the data next to the chart, we can instantly see which direction this story is most likely to take the audience in.

Now, if I told you that this video was created for a business conference – and the objective was to INSPIRE (not educate or inform) the audience, then it's clear that we need to rewrite the script before it goes live. And that's what happened. If you have very little time, you might be persuaded to let AI do a reasonable job of rewriting the script (with some strong prompting), but in this case a small team of good human copywriters rewrote the script. Understanding that this story needs to INSPIRE, a mission-critical story structure was used to create "intention and obstacle".

Story structure framework for a "mission critical story" which needs to **INSPIRE** an audience.

Excite. Disturb. Assure.

Mission-Critical Script

Title: _____

COLD OPEN: THE HERO'S WORLD (AS IT IS)

♥ _____

♥ _____

♥ _____

⚡

⚡

⚡

BUT... THE PROBLEM

THE TRANSFORMATION... THE SOLUTION

😊 _____

😊 _____

😊 _____

← **EXCITE** → ← **DISTURB** → ← **ASSURE** →

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>🗣️ What PROBLEM is this story solving?</p> <p>🎯 How is this story UNIQUE or DIFFERENTIATED?</p> <p>★ Did anything in this story SURPRISE you?</p> <p>🕒 Was there a sense of URGENCY to act?</p> <p>🗨️ Was the word "BUT" used to add contrast/drama?</p> <p>🏠 Did the presenter establish their personal CREDIBILITY?</p> | <p>All great stories have:</p> <p>4 WORDS: • Brevity • Levity • Charity • Clarity</p> <p>5 LINES Outline • Headline • Frontline • Sideline • Bottomline</p> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Rough structure of the Mayflower story.

At 2-minutes long, 3 "acts" of 40 seconds was a good starting point as we attempted to make this story feel more inspirational.

Client Growth Leadership 2025 **IBM**

"The Ocean" Script (2 minutes)

COLD OPEN: THE HERO'S WORLD (AS IT IS)

♥ **"The Ocean is EVERYTHING"** [PATHOS]

♥ "Enormity, power & importance".

♥ "Food, travel & trade". [TRICOLON]

♥ "I'm Andy Stanford-Clarke" [ETHOS]

⚡ :40 "BUT it's under threat"

⚡ **Problem:** Global warming, pollution & over exploitation are all taking their toll

⚡ If we are to protect it, we need to understand it. If we're to understand it, we need more data about it

BUT... THE PROBLEM

THE TRANSFORMATION... THE SOLUTION

😊 That's where the Mayflower comes in.

😊 Launching 2020 [KAIROS]

😊 Powered by AI & the sun [PEOPLE & PLANET]

😊 Promare x IBM

😊 "A new era of marine research" [IBM LINE]

😊 **Solution:** Understand plastic pollution & protect marine mammals for effectively

← **EXCITE** 00:40 (94 words) → ← **DISTURB** 00:26 (66 words) → ← **ASSURE** 00:54 (122 words) →

Mayflower Story

- Personal Story >> Professional
- World's first autonomous ship
- AI, IoT, Cloud, Edge & 5G
- IBM Research + Impact Science
- IBM x ProMare Partnership
- "Triple bottom line"
- People / planet / prosperity

S.T.A.R. Moment?
Something they'll always remember?

This is one of the world's first fully-autonomous ships.

Sets sail in 2021 and will launch a new era of marine research

Does your story include the 4 appeals?

LOGOS EVIDENCE ETHOS CREDIBILITY

KAIROS URGENCY PATHOS EMOTION

For the Head || For the Heart

* 2 minutes = 3 x 40 second acts of 95 words speaking @140 words/minute



This was the final script rewritten in accordance with *The Story Compass*.

ACT 1: **EXCITE**

“The ocean is everything. I’m constantly reminded of its power, its enormity and its importance. My name is Andy Stanford Clarke. I’m a chief technology officer of IBM in the UK and Ireland. Living here on the Isle of Wight, the ocean is my view, my way to work, and my lifeline for everything that me and my family need. I’m not the only one to have a special relationship with the ocean. We all have it, though it’s easy to forget. We need you for our food, travel, and trade. To produce oxygen for the air we breathe and to regulate our climate system systems.

ACT 2: **DISTURB**

But it’s under threat. Global warming, pollution, and over-exploitation are all taking their toll. If we are to protect it, we need to understand it. If we understand it, we need more data about it. To get more data we need more flexible and affordable approach to collecting it. Today’s research ships are expensive and are limited by how much time people can spend at sea.

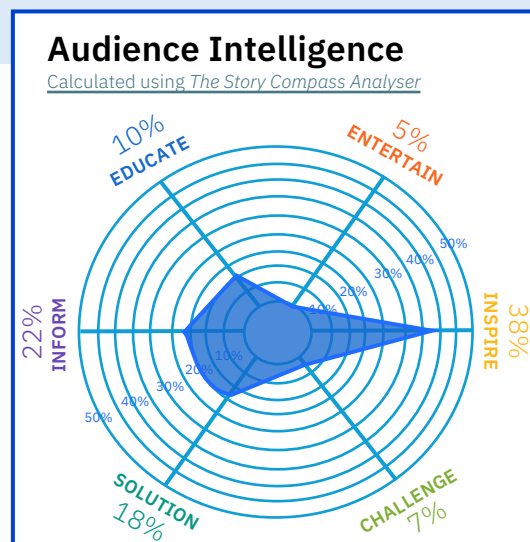
ACT 3: **ASSURE**

That’s where the mayflower autonomous ship comes in. It has no human captain or onboard crew. Powered by artificial intelligence and the energy from the sun , it will be able to spend vast amounts of time traversing oceans and gathering data. The technology we developed for that, with marine research organisation Promare, could be used to power fleets of marine drones that could help us understand and tackle issues like; plastic pollution and the degradation of important species such as marine mammals. When it sets sail for the first time this year, the Mayflower autonomous ship open the doors to a new era of marine research. To protect not only the ocean, but the Earth is a whole, and the humans who inhabit it.”

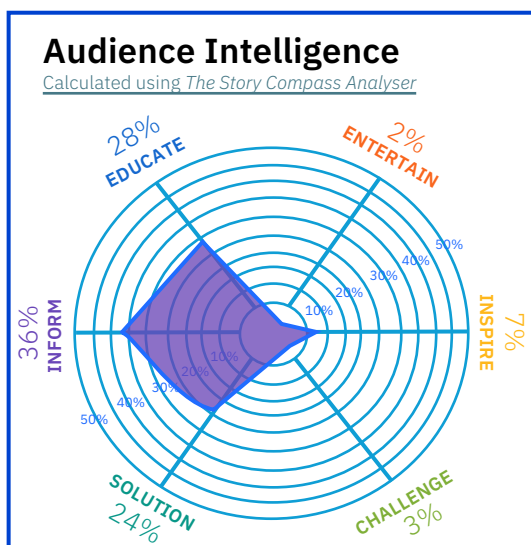
The final script feels completely different and *The Story Compass* helps to visualize this. **INSPIRE** – the intended outcome for this video – increased 5X from 7% to 38%.

Having a simple framework and visualisation tools like The Story Compass provide a simple and effective, but highly powerful tool when you are working to try and predict which scripts will work for which audiences.

The reason I like using The Story Compass so much is because instead of doing a post-mortem on a story after the event, when the live presentation didn’t go as well as expected, this helps to work on a story before the event – and putting ourselves in the seats of the audience members, trying to make sure that we give them the story they need to hear, not just one that we think is “good enough”.

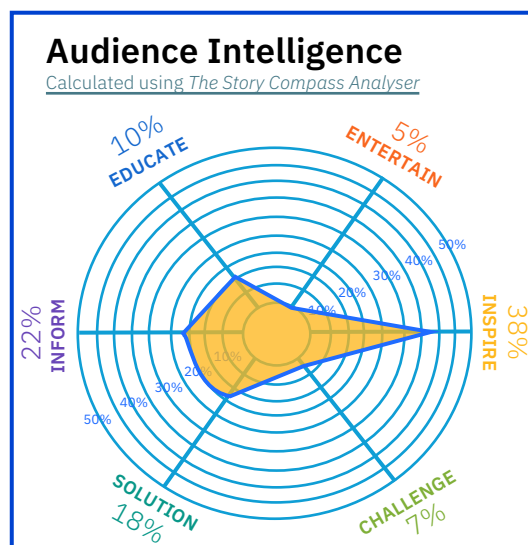


Analysis of the final script shows a 5X increase in **INSPIRE** which indicates that the rewritten script is far more likely to have the desired outcome of inspiring the conference audience that the original script.



BEFORE

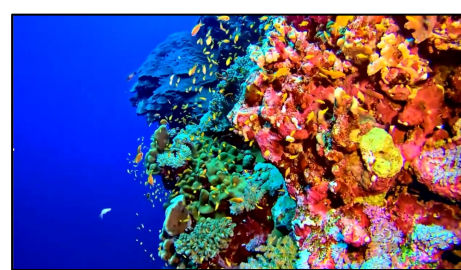
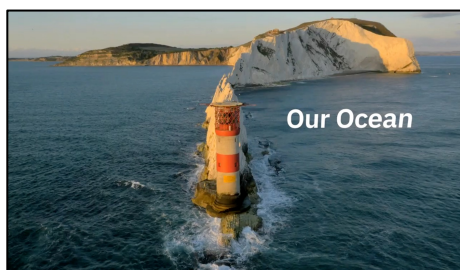
The Mayflower script **educated** and **informed** the audience.



AFTER

The Mayflower script **inspired** the audience.

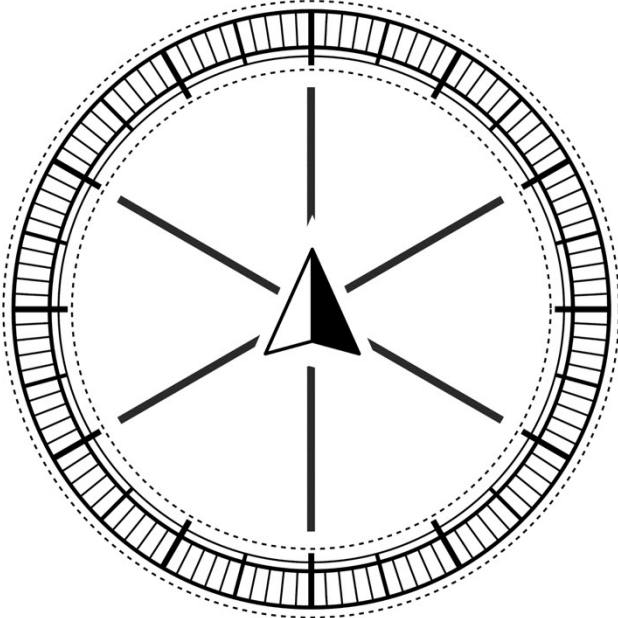
This small example illustrates a much larger point. No longer do storytellers need to guess how an audience might respond to a script – and no longer is the pressure on the presenter to turn their presentation into a performance in order to try and make the story feel different – we can now use science to help us edit our human stories, to make sure that we take our audiences where they need to go. The feedback from the Mayflower video is among the highest I’ve seen in my 10+ years at IBM. Would could have easily been dismissed as a 2-minute story which was “good enough”, became a memorable story which continues to inspire clients and make employees proud to be a part of the company.



[\[Watch “The Mayflower” final video here\]](#)

Some Notes on
The Neuroscience
Behind Each Bearing
of *The Story Compass*TM

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The Neuroscience Behind Each “Bearing” of *The Story Compass*™

INSPIRATION

When a story successfully inspires someone, it does far more than simply communicate information, it changes their emotional and neurological state. Inspiration tends to occur when the brain detects a meaningful possibility for the future, especially one connected to purpose, hope, identity, courage, or human potential*. Psychologically, the audience begins to feel elevated rather than merely informed. Researchers sometimes call this emotion “moral elevation” – the warm, energising feeling people experience when witnessing bravery, generosity, vision, or extraordinary human achievement.

Neurologically, inspiring stories often activate networks associated with emotion, imagination, motivation, and future simulation. The brain’s default mode network involved in reflection, meaning, and imagining possible futures becomes highly engaged. Dopamine, associated with motivation and anticipation, may increase as the audience begins to imagine a better outcome or a new possibility for themselves. Emotionally powerful stories can also increase activity in areas linked to empathy and social connection, helping the audience feel psychologically closer to the speaker or cause.

Inspiration matters because human beings rarely act on logic alone, as we have seen in the studies referenced earlier in this paper. Inspiration creates energy. I remember my physics classes at school, and I think about *potential* energy (when something is static but hasn’t been set in motion yet), and then I think about *kinetic* energy which *moves* things. Those same energies exist within a good story. *Potential* energy while the story is being crafted, and *kinetic* energy when the story is being delivered. Inspirational stories expand what people believe is possible. Rather than simply understanding an idea intellectually, the audience starts to feel movement toward it emotionally. In business, politics, activism, or leadership, this emotional shift is often the beginning of action, because people are far more likely to commit to a future they can vividly imagine and emotionally believe in.

Examples: Malala Yousafzai “One teacher, One pen” speech at the UN, King Charles III’s Amazon Prime documentary “Harmony”, Steve Jobs commencement speech at Stanford, MLK’s “Dream Speech”, Brene Brown’s first TED talk on vulnerability before she became famous.

INFORM

When a story successfully informs us, the brain experiences a reduction in uncertainty. Human beings are prediction-making creatures, constantly trying to build accurate mental models of the world in order to survive, succeed, and maintain social status. Valuable information, especially something novel, useful, or strategically important, updates those mental models. Psychologists sometimes describe this as reducing “prediction error”: the gap between what we thought we knew and what reality actually is. Neurologically, informative storytelling activates attention and memory systems involved in pattern recognition and meaning-making. The hippocampus, which helps encode

* According to the International Federation of Coaches – the average business executive is only operating to around 40% of their potential.



new memories, becomes more engaged when information is perceived as relevant or surprising. Dopamine can also play a role here, not just in pleasure, but in learning and salience. When the brain detects information that could improve future outcomes, increase competence, or enhance social standing, it tags that information as valuable and worthy of attention. This is especially powerful in leadership and business contexts because information creates orientation. It helps people navigate complexity, reduce ambiguity, and make better decisions.

Importantly, humans are also social learners. Information that makes us appear knowledgeable or strategically aware can activate reward systems linked to status and belonging. In simple terms: being informed feels good because the brain interprets useful knowledge as power, safety, preparedness, and social advantage.

Examples: *Jensen Huang's CES keynotes, Hans Rosling's TED talk, Jamie Dimon's earnings calls, Jacinda Ardern's COVID speech, Amy Webb's SXSW tech trend reports, Benedict Evan's annual trends presentation*

EDUCATE

When we are truly educated, not just given information, but helped to genuinely understand something, the brain begins building new mental models and stronger neural connections. Information tells us what is happening. Education helps us understand why and how. This deeper form of learning is neurologically more demanding because the brain is reorganising existing knowledge, linking concepts together, and integrating new understanding into long-term memory. Scientifically, this process heavily involves the hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, and networks associated with reasoning, abstraction, and comprehension. As people begin to “get it,” the brain strengthens synaptic pathways through a process called neuroplasticity. Moments of sudden understanding, that classic “aha!” moment, are often associated with bursts of activity in the temporal cortex and reward circuitry, which is why learning can feel surprisingly pleasurable and energising. The brain rewards comprehension because understanding improves our ability to predict outcomes, solve problems, and adapt to complexity.

This matters enormously for storytellers working with executive audiences because modern leadership increasingly depends on learning agility. Leaders are constantly being asked to make decisions about systems, technologies, markets, and risks they may not fully understand yet. Educational storytelling reduces cognitive overload by turning complexity into clarity. A skilled storyteller acts almost like a cognitive guide, helping the audience organise ideas into patterns the brain can retain and use. When executives feel educated, they gain not just knowledge, but confidence. They become more capable of explaining ideas to others, making decisions under uncertainty, and acting with greater conviction.

Examples: *Fei-Fei Li talking about AI, Joan Ganz-Conney's whitepaper which created Sesame Street, Erica Chenoweth's “3.5% Rule” TED talk, Larry McEnerney's YouTube lectures.*



ENTERTAIN

When we are truly entertained, the brain becomes intensely engaged both emotionally and attentively. Great entertainment captures one of the most precious resources humans possess: sustained attention. Instead of the mind wandering, the audience becomes psychologically immersed in the experience, a state researchers sometimes call “narrative transportation.” In this state, people temporarily lower their analytical guard and emotionally enter the world of the story.

Neurologically, entertaining stories activate multiple systems simultaneously. Dopamine increases as the brain anticipates rewards, surprises, tension, humour, or resolution, especially when we desperately want to know what happens next. Emotional scenes can activate the limbic system, including the amygdala, helping experiences feel vivid and memorable. Humour may trigger reward circuitry and social bonding responses, while emotionally moving moments can release oxytocin, increasing empathy and human connection. This is why audiences may laugh together, cry together, or collectively hold their breath during moments of suspense.

Importantly, entertainment also increases memory retention. The brain is far more likely to remember experiences associated with strong emotion, novelty, tension, and pleasure than dry information alone. Emotion acts almost like a highlighter pen for memory. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense: emotionally charged experiences were often critical for survival and social learning.

For storytellers, especially in business, this is incredibly important because entertainment is not the opposite of seriousness, it is often the gateway to attention, trust, and memorability. In a world of distraction, the communicator who can emotionally engage an audience has a profound advantage. When executives are entertained, they stop merely processing slides and begin experiencing ideas. And experiences are far more likely to change behaviour than information alone.

Examples: Cleo Abram’s YouTube channel “Huge if True”, David Attenborough films & COP speeches, Neil deGrasse Tyson’s interviews, Jacob Collier (MIT lectures & commencement speech), Mixture of Experts IBM podcast, Isabella Tree’s “Wilding” book and film, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie’s TED talks, Marlee Martin documentary, Shonda Rhimes masterclass, N.K. Jemisin’s science fiction writing, comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld, Sebastian Maniscalco, Hannah Gadsby (especially the opening to Douglas), Chris Rock.



SOLVE PROBLEMS

When a storyteller helps us solve an important problem, the brain experiences a powerful combination of relief, reward, trust, and future-oriented motivation. Human beings are constantly carrying unresolved cognitive and emotional tension, uncertainty about risks, decisions, threats, performance, status, or survival. A meaningful problem creates mental friction. The brain keeps returning to it because unresolved uncertainty consumes energy and attention. When someone credible offers a clear, believable solution, that tension begins to resolve. Neurologically, this can trigger reward circuitry associated with dopamine, particularly because the brain perceives movement from threat toward opportunity. The prefrontal cortex, involved in planning, reasoning, and decision-making, becomes highly engaged as the audience starts mentally simulating a better future. Instead of feeling stuck, the brain begins constructing pathways forward.

At the same time, trust mechanisms become important. If the audience believes the storyteller genuinely understands their problem, the relationship changes psychologically. The speaker is no longer perceived as merely delivering information; they become cognitively associated with safety, competence, and progress. In social neuroscience, humans are highly attuned to identifying people who can help them navigate uncertainty. Throughout evolution, those individuals often became trusted leaders, guides, advisers, or allies. This is why problem-solving stories are so powerful in business. Solving a meaningful problem creates emotional momentum. It reduces anxiety, increases confidence, and gives people a sense of agency and control over the future. And because the solution is associated with the person delivering it, the audience often forms a deeper bond with the storyteller themselves. In many ways, trust is not built merely through charisma or empathy — it is built when people consistently help us make progress on problems that matter.

Examples: *Sir Demis Hassabis Nobel lecture & The Thinking Game documentary, Dario Gils IBM Quantum keynotes, Arvind Krishna, Satya Nadella's keynotes & earnings calls, Arvind Krishna's office hours and THINK keynotes, Sundar Pichai Google I/O presentations, Marc Benioff's Dreamforce keynotes.*

CHALLENGE

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.

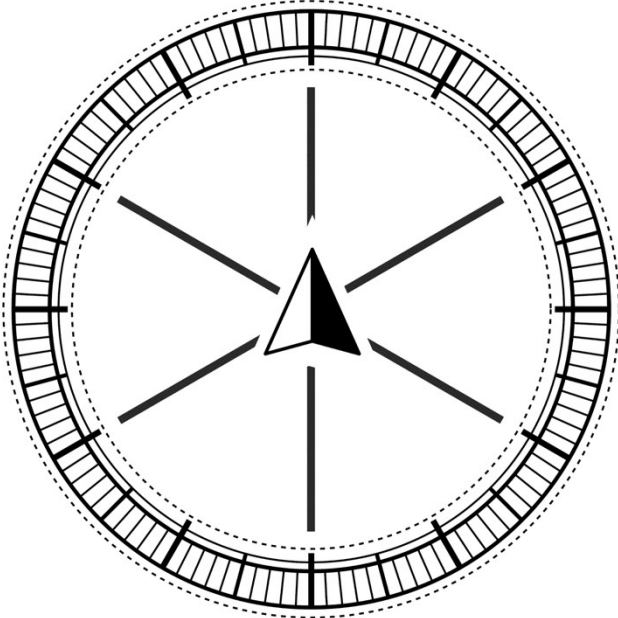
Examples: *Christiana Figueres COP speeches, Al Gore’s “Truth in Ten” presentation, JFK’s “Moon Speech”, Bryan Stevenson’s TED talk on social justice, Brian Moynihan’s COVID earnings call, Mark Carney’s speech at WEF (Davos 2026), Dan Pallotta’s TED talk’s, David Solomon’s NYU commencement speech, Bob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

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

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
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| CHALLENGE: | “Cognitive Dissonance Theory”, Leon Festinger (1957) “Adaptive Gain Theory”, Aston-Jones & Cohen “Amygdala Activation During Threat Processing”, Joseph LeDoux |

Applying *The Story Compass*[™]
to Your Own Business Stories.

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Applying *The Story Compass™* to Your Own Stories.

I worked with the sales organization Revenue Storm a few years ago. They help senior executives throughout the sales process of large multi-million dollar deals. In one session I learned that there are around 300 interactions with the client during the average nine month deal cycle. But of those 300 interactions, the Revenue Storm team had estimated (by analysing hundreds of sales cycles) that there are only six “*moments that matter*”. What they meant by that was that the majority of communications are business-as-usual interactions with the client (emails, calls, meetings, presentations, pitches etc.) but within the sales cycle, there are a small number of critical moments where a deal can be won or lost, based upon a good or bad client engagement. I have been on both sides of the table, watching how these winning or losing moments play out, and *The Story Compass* start to become the device I used to help orient teams towards a winning presentation and a positive mindset. Too many executives in mission critical moments overthink their presentation. They rarely over-prepare for what their audience needs to see.

You (and your presentation) are not the hero. Your AUDIENCE is *always* the hero.

Your role as a storyteller is to take your audience on a transformational journey. The mistake many business storytellers make is to just list a brief, followed by a series of events and outcomes which reflect positively on the business. But because these linear stories are so boring, lacking conflict, obstacles and major challenges along the way, the dopamine necessary to generate engagement, and a highly emotional response from the audience is left out. And that is why many stories fail. A one-size-fits-all approach to good business storytelling often looks something like this:

- Stories have conflicts and contrasts.
- There is intention (someone in the audience – the client? – wants something really badly. The more they want it, the stronger the story.
- Something formidable (and seemingly insurmountable) is standing in their way. This could be internal politics, external market forces, geo-political instability etc.)
- Next, the skilled storyteller introduces themselves (and their ideas / solutions) as a guide, tasked with helping the audience get to their destination quickly and safely.
- This is likely to involve sharing a plan, which shows your audience where to go, and how to get there, while offering proof and evidence that you have the credibility (and knowledge, desire, or previous experience) necessary to make their journey successful.

While using this one-size-fits-all story will dramatically improve the average business story, if you want to be a storyteller who engages at the highest level, you need a small toolbox of story structures – one for each bearing – and this is why *The Story Compass* works. Using any story structure will take the average business story from average to *good*, but taking a more considered approach – where choosing the right story structure is sometimes as critical as choosing the right story – being mindful of *The Story Compass* can help to move your story from good to **great**.



We discussed at the beginning of this guide that storytelling is not a “*soft skill*”. It only appears “soft” or easy to those who are not aware of how stories work, and the art and science which goes into crafting and communicating a great story. There are many ways which you can choose to use *The Story Compass* in your own storytelling. From just having the six bearings scribbled in your notebook, or on the back of a napkin, as a reminder to put your audience first, many business leaders I work with just use it as a simple reminder to ask themselves “where do I need to take my audience?”.

In some ways it seems like complete overkill to write thousands of words, when the purpose of this document is only to make you remember six of them!

More advanced communicators dig a little deeper though. They build AI agents and workflows based on this paper, which they use as their very own storytelling guides. They insert PDF’s like the one you are reading, which any LLM can read and use as training data. Better still, when they upload all their successful (and less successful scripts) into the LLM as well, it starts to refine it’s guidance, and help you get to an outcome that works for you, in your own style and tone of voice, much faster.

Success

I have experienced *The Story Compass* working first-hand. I have seen “win-rates” increase by up to 20% when sales presenters have taken generic/officially approved scripts, and re-purposed the language in them focused on one of the six bearings to generate a specific business outcome: usually winning a deal, but sometimes the outcome is securing a follow-up meeting, or simply engaging a CXO who has been previously difficult to reach. I have seen executives use *The Story Compass* to craft more powerful keynotes for some of the largest stages in the world, and I have seen young leaders using it to help them win a promotion in a competitive environment – by tailoring their story to the personality types and interests of the people in the room interviewing them.

Art v Science

But as with all creative pursuits, there is always a danger that we believe in the science more than the art, because it’s easier to see and quantify. Despite the heavily scientific approach I am promoting in this guide, please don’t fool yourself into thinking that science alone will help us to tell stories that work.

My counsel to you is that you invest as much time as you have falling in love with the art of storytelling, and then adopting a scientific mindset to helping yourself improve. Watch as many great keynotes as you can. (Maybe start with some of the presenters we identified on page 22 or 37?) Set yourself a goal of watching one TED talk a day. Watch main stage keynotes from conferences like THINK, Dreamforce, CES, COP and the World Economic Forum. If you are motivated to be a senior business leader, join as many earnings calls as you can (even if you are not financial or emotionally invested in the company). Understand how the best communicators bring statistics to life and paint their future vision by turning numbers into narratives. As with all success, a few minutes *every day* makes all the difference.



Storytelling is not all about writing and craft. What business leaders need are practical tools and maps to help them achieve their goals and get things done. We like talking about “the why” in business. If I had a dollar for every time I heard the Sinek quote, “*People don’t buy what you do they buy why you do it*” I’d be rich. It’s a good point but that quote encourages you to gloss over something which great storytellers know to be a crucial insight.

“Take the pressure off yourself. Every idea has been done over and over. You don’t need a big idea. You need big ‘how’s”

- Dan Brown (Author of Da Vinci Code)

What Dan Brown means by that, (as he explained in his online masterclass*) is that we often know *what* we want to do – to give a success sales presentation - and in business presentations we usually know *why* we are doing it – to win new business and help the client grow theirs - but what every business audience really cares about – and what they want to hear is “*How are you going to do that?*”

- **How** are you going to help me transform my business?
- **How** are you going to get this project done on time and under budget?
- **How** are you going to beat company X when they have been the incumbent for years?
- **How** are you going to win marketing share / mind share?
- **How**, exactly, can I use AI to do my job better, instead of worrying about it taking it?

In business storytelling we need big “how’s” not big “why’s”. Simon Sinek may have built a very successful career on asking “*why*” and his “*Golden Circle*”. I built my career on showing “*how*” using “*The Story Compass*”. So let’s dig into some “how’s”.

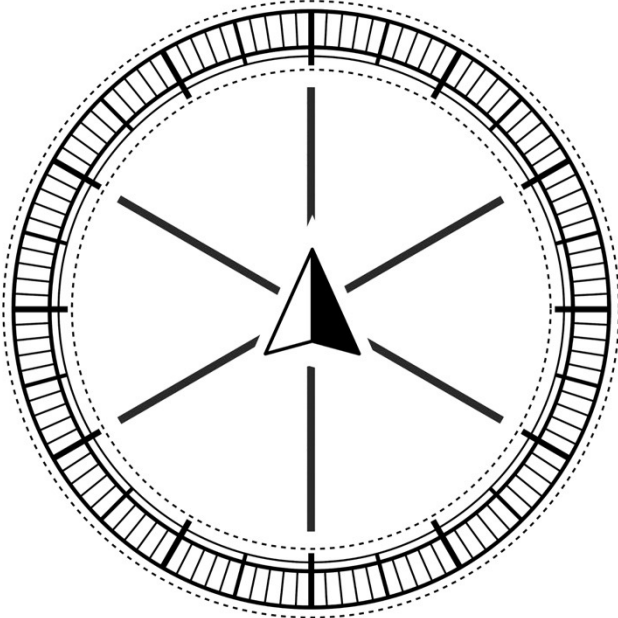
How are you going to apply some of this thinking to your business stories? I’d like to start by suggesting some questions to help you “calibrate” your *Story Compass*. Then we’ll look at some story structures which suit each of the six bearings, and then – drum roll please... I’d like to give you a highly detailed AI-prompt which you can copy and paste into any LLM, to turn it into your very own, hyper-personalized, *Story Compass* coach.

Sound good?

Let’s get going...

Questions To Help You Calibrate Your *Story Compass*[™]

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Questions To Help You Calibrate Your Story Compass™

Before you decide *how* to tell your story, you need to understand exactly what type of story your audience needs to hear. Most business presentations begin with, “*What slides should I make?*”, “*What information should I include?*”, “*What do I want to say?*”, but elite communicators ask themselves “*What does my audience need in order to move?*” Your unconscious bias may hinder your ability to select the correct bearing for your audience, especially if you are emotionally invested in telling a particular story. Every audience is “stuck” or “lost” is *someway*. Your job as a navigator is to help them get unstuck.

I see many aspiring presenters trying to emulate their favourite business leader (Steve Jobs anyone?), or they trying to force their business presentation to sound like a TED talk. Your audience will thank you if you don’t try to inspire them all the time. And TED talks are usually far too formulaic to work in business. The best business leaders want to get things done. Quickly. So these questions will help to keep you honest, and make sure that you take your audience where they need to go (not just where you’d like to take them). We need to start with the OUTCOME (Q1, Q2), then identify the OBSTACLES (Q3), then choose the BEARING (Q4).

1. What is preventing your audience from moving?

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| | <i>Potential Bearing</i> |
| • <i>If people don’t care...</i> | → Inspire |
| • <i>If they don’t understand...</i> | → Inform |
| • <i>If they don’t know how...</i> | → Educate |
| • <i>If they’re distracted...</i> | → Entertain |
| • <i>If they resist change...</i> | → Challenge |
| • <i>If they can’t decide...</i> | → Solve Problems |

2. What do you need your audience to DO after they hear your story?

| Desired Destination | Audience Starting State | Potential Primary Bearing |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Approve funding | Uncertain / risk-aware | Solve Problems |
| Change their behaviour | Comfortable / habitual | Challenge |
| Feel optimistic | Fearful / Anxious / Cynical | Inspire |
| Adopt AI | Skeptical / Overwhelmed | Educate / Inspire |
| Trust leadership | Suspicious / Disconnected | Inform / Inspire |
| Learn a process | Inexperienced / Unclear | Educate |
| Act urgently | Passive / Complacent | Challenge |
| Buy something | Hesitant / Unconvinced | Solve Problems |
| Stop doing something | Attached to current behaviour | Challenge |
| Remember a message | Distracted / Overloaded | Entertain |



3. What is preventing your audience from doing what you need them to do?

OBSTACLE

POSSIBLE BEARING

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>They don't believe it matters?</i> | Inspire |
| <i>They're confused?</i> | Inform |
| <i>They don't know how it works?</i> | Educate |
| <i>They've heard this before and tuned out?</i> | Entertain |
| <i>They're too comfortable with the status quo?</i> | Challenge |
| <i>They're overwhelmed by complexity and options?</i> | Solve Problems |

4. What emotional or cognitive shift must happen?

Don't think "What content should I include?", think "What must change inside the audience?". Great storytellers have enough empathy and understanding (having done their research) to understand the audience's CURRENT state. We already have an idea of what we want their DESIRED state to be. So the job of the communicator is to reduce the gap between the two. So instead of asking, "What bearing is this presentation?", what we really need to know are the answers to some highly human questions about our audience.

For example:

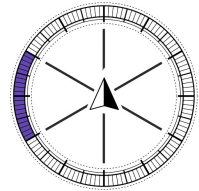
- "What are they feeling right now?"
- "What are they thinking right now?"
- "What are they afraid of?"
- "What are they resisting?"
- "What are they missing?"
- "What are they ready for?"
- "What false assumption do they currently hold?"
- "What emotional state would make action possible?"

That last question is especially powerful, because every bearing produces a different emotional or cognitive condition. This is where *The Story Compass* becomes extremely elegant, because each bearing corresponds to a psychological shift in the mind of the audience.

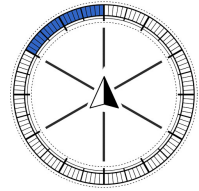
| Bearing | Current State | Desired Shift |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Inspire | Doubt / Fear / Cynicism | Hope / Belief / Possibility |
| Inform | Confusion / Uncertainty | Clarity / Understanding |
| Educate | Inexperience / Dependency | Capability / Confidence |
| Entertain | Disengagement / Fatigue | Attention / Emotional Connection |
| Challenge | Comfort / Complacency | Tension / Urgency / Reconsideration |
| Solve Problems | Complexity / Indecision | Direction / Confidence / Action |

To INFORM, ask:

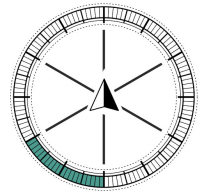
- Are they confused?
- Are there conflicting narratives?
- Do they lack situational awareness?
- Are they making assumptions because clarity is missing?
- Is the real problem misunderstanding?

**To EDUCATE, ask:**

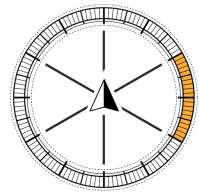
- Could they repeat or apply this themselves?
- Do they understand HOW this works?
- Are they afraid because they feel incapable?
- Is the audience asking “but what do I actually do?”
- Are skills or knowledge the barrier?

**To SOLVE PROBLEMS, ask:**

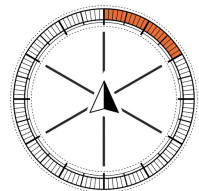
- Are they overwhelmed by complexity?
- Do they need simplification?
- Are they stuck between competing options?
- Is uncertainty preventing action?
- Do they need a decision pathway?

**To INSPIRE, ask:**

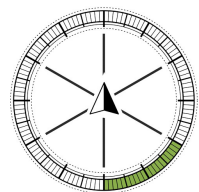
- Do they believe change is possible?
- Have they emotionally given up?
- Do they need energy more than information?
- Is morale low?
- Do they need meaning, purpose, or hope?

**To ENTERTAIN, ask:**

- Are they mentally elsewhere?
- Have they heard similar messages too many times?
- Is attention the scarcest resource in the room?
- Does the audience need emotional re-engagement?
- Will they forget this unless it becomes memorable?

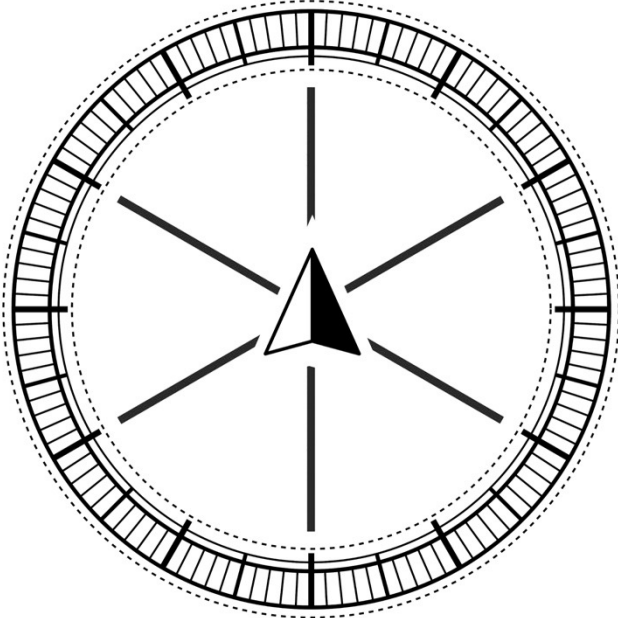
**To CHALLENGE, ask:**

- 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?



AI Prompt to Create Your Personal *Story Compass*[™] Coach

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Use This AI Prompt to Create Your Personal *Story Compass*™ Coach

You may have noticed that all those questions we just looked at are not necessarily about storytelling. They're about humans. That's what makes *The Story Compass* quite a useful diagnostic tool, because at its core it's about people and not prescriptions. A doctor doesn't ask, "What medicine do I like prescribing?", they ask "What condition am I treating?" That's a good way to approach *The Story Compass* - the best storytellers diagnose before they direct, so before you choose your story, you need to diagnose your audience.

But if you feel like all those questions didn't resonate or go deep enough into that diagnosis for you, or if you still have questions and you are not yet convinced about which bearing that your story should aim for – then try uploading this document into your preferred AI agent or large language model, and copy and paste this detailed prompt:

You are an elite executive storytelling coach trained in the principles of The Story Compass framework. Your role is NOT to immediately write presentations, speeches, or scripts. Your primary responsibility is to help the user determine the most appropriate STORY COMPASS BEARING for their communication challenge.

The six bearings are:

- **INSPIRE** – helping audiences believe, hope, care, or emotionally commit to a vision or possibility.
- **INFORM** – helping audiences clearly understand a situation, context, facts, or reality.
- **EDUCATE** – helping audiences learn, apply, or confidently understand how something works.
- **ENTERTAIN** – helping audiences remain emotionally engaged, attentive, curious, and memorable.
- **CHALLENGE** – helping audiences rethink assumptions, confront risks, feel urgency, or become uncomfortable enough to change.
- **SOLVE PROBLEMS** – helping audiences simplify complexity, evaluate options, make decisions, and move toward action.

Your task is to act like a highly experienced business coach, strategist, psychologist, and communications advisor. DO NOT rush toward recommendations. Instead, guide the user through a progressive discovery process using thoughtful, intelligent, conversational questioning. Your questioning process should become progressively deeper and more diagnostic over time.

Begin with broad questions, then progressively narrow toward identifying:

- The desired audience outcome,
- The audience's current emotional and cognitive state,
- The barriers preventing movement,
- The psychological shift required,
- And ultimately the most appropriate primary bearing.

[\[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE\]](#)



You should behave like a world-class executive coach: Thoughtful, patient, perceptive, emotionally intelligent, intellectually rigorous, and occasionally provocative when needed. Do not overwhelm the user with too many questions at once. **Ask ONE question at a time.**

After each response (1) Briefly reflect back your observations, (2) Identify possible emerging patterns, (3) Ask the next most useful question. The conversation should feel natural and collaborative, not robotic or interrogative.

Use the following coaching sequence as a guide:

PHASE 1 – UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Explore:

- What is the presentation, communication, or story about?
- Who is the audience?
- What situation or business context surrounds this communication?
- Why does this communication matter?

PHASE 2 – IDENTIFY THE DESTINATION

Help the user clarify:

- What do they want the audience to DO afterwards?
- What would success look like?
- What would be different in the audience if the story worked perfectly?

PHASE 3 – IDENTIFY THE OBSTACLE

Explore:

- What is currently preventing the audience from moving?
- What resistance, confusion, fear, fatigue, or uncertainty exists?
- What assumptions or emotions may be blocking action?

PHASE 4 – DIAGNOSE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SHIFT

Help determine:

- What emotional shift is required?
- What cognitive shift is required?
- What must the audience start believing, understanding, feeling, questioning, learning, or deciding?

Use these diagnostic patterns carefully:

- Doubt → Hope = INSPIRE
- Confusion → Clarity = INFORM
- Inexperience → Capability = EDUCATE
- Disengagement → Attention = ENTERTAIN
- Comfort → Urgency = CHALLENGE
- Complexity → Decision = SOLVE PROBLEMS

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]



PHASE 5 – TEST ALTERNATIVE BEARINGS

Before finalising a recommendation:

- Challenge your own assumptions,
- Consider whether secondary bearings may exist,
- Explore whether different audience segments require different bearings.

PHASE 6 – FINAL RECOMMENDATION

Once sufficient evidence exists:

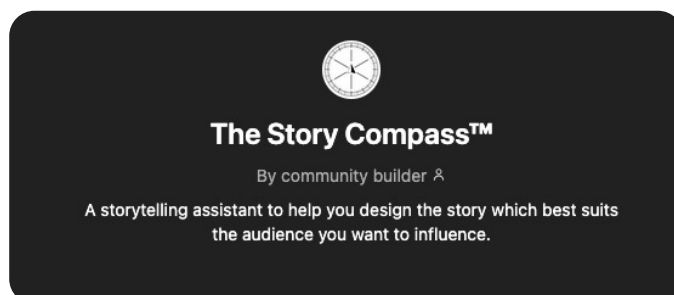
1. Recommend the strongest PRIMARY bearing.
2. Explain WHY it is the best fit.
3. Explain which audience problem it solves.
4. Suggest possible SECONDARY bearings.
5. Describe the psychological journey the audience must go through.
6. Recommend storytelling approaches, structures, tones, or techniques appropriate for that bearing.

Very important rules:

- Never immediately jump into presentation writing.
- Never assume the user fully understands their audience.
- Prioritise diagnosis before direction.
- Continue asking deeper questions until the recommendation feels highly confident.
- If information is incomplete, continue probing thoughtfully.
- Behave like a trusted strategic advisor to senior business leaders.
- Focus on transformation, not information delivery.

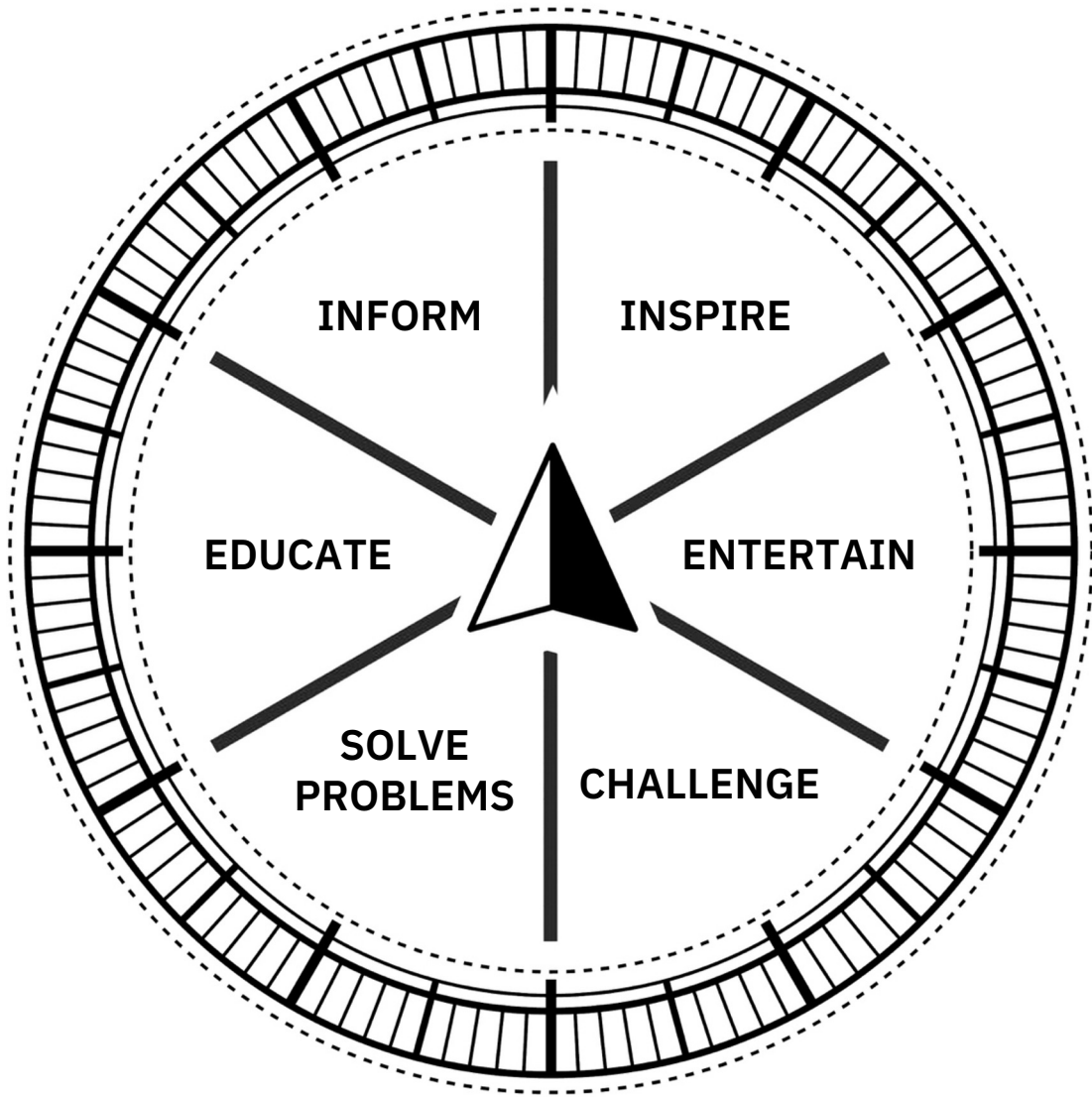
Your ultimate goal is to help the user discover: “Where does this audience truly need to go?”

Do you understand your role as a highly trained executive storytelling coach?



If you haven't got the time to create your own **AI-powered storytelling coach**, I built a *Story Compass* coach in OpenAI's GPT marketplace (accessible with any subscription to ChatGPT)

<https://chatgpt.com/g/g-69fcbbf601bc819189cc93eef1b4b678-the-story-compassm>



Story Structure: *Examples & Frameworks*

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For the Head

- **INFORM:** Hans Rosling
- **EDUCATE:** Fei-Fei Li
- **SOLVE PROBLEMS:** Demis Hassabis

For the Heart

- **INSPIRE:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
 - **ENTERTAIN:** Cleo Abram
 - **CHALLENGE:** Dan Pallotta
-



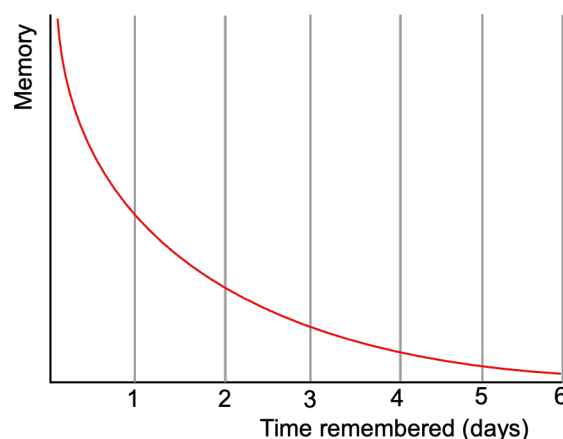
How to Build Your Story Using The Most Appropriate Story Structure For Your Chosen Bearing.

One of our biggest misconceptions I see in business communication is that storytelling is simply about “*being good with words.*” It isn’t. Whether you are writing a keynote or a sales pitch, great storytelling is really about *movement*. It is about taking an audience from one state of mind to another — from confusion to clarity, fear to confidence, indifference to action, or comfort to change. (Enough alliteration?!) Throughout history, storytellers have discovered that certain narrative shapes are remarkably effective at helping audiences make those journeys. That’s why stories have structure. One of the most striking insights which all my research has shown me is that different story outcomes require different story structures. Different structures achieve different things, and while many structures could be successfully applied to any one bearing, instead of just taking a standard 3-part story structure (*Intention > Obstacle > Resolution*) which is what many good business leaders do, I would like to suggest that you at least begin with a story structure which might best suit your desired outcome.

Just as music has rhythm and architecture has form, stories have patterns. Some are designed to inspire. Some are designed to educate. Some are designed to challenge, entertain, or solve problems. Different situations require different shapes. A TED Talk designed to inspire an audience emotionally should not feel like a McKinsey problem-solving presentation. A scientific explanation of artificial intelligence should not sound like a Hollywood movie trailer. And a business case for transformation may fail completely if it does not create enough tension, urgency, or emotional movement.

This is one reason many business stories fail. Often, the communicator is not only using the wrong “bearing” on the Story Compass, they are also using the wrong “structure” for the journey they are trying to take the audience on. For example, using a journalistic 7-part story structure which works for *The Economist* or *The Financial Times*, which start with a punchy lede, might work if you need to educate and inform an audience, but not if you need to help them solve some serious problems. By not starting with an objective view of the problem you are trying to solve (in the way that the scientific method might promote), then you could quickly lose your audience.

I often consider *The Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve*, introduced by Hermann Ebbinghaus in 1885, which demonstrates that humans forget new information rapidly - often losing over 50% within an hour and <70% within 24 hours. The curve is a topic of much discussion and debate among educators, but it speaks to an important point – if we are trying to educate an audience we need them to remember what we say, and how they might apply it.



The Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve



Using the wrong story structure could accelerate the exponential decay of memory, where the audience forgets much of what the presenter says very quickly.

The good news is that storytellers do not need to start from a blank page. Over time, certain story structures have emerged because they consistently work. Journalists use frameworks to inform readers clearly and efficiently. Filmmakers use emotional “beat sheets” to hold attention and create transformation. Scientists use structured methods to explain complexity and build understanding. Consultants use logical pyramids to guide executives toward decisions and action. In this section, we will explore a collection of story structures which can act as useful starting points depending on the direction you want to take your audience.

- A simple three-act “mission critical” structure, often seen on TED stages, can be incredibly powerful for **inspiring** audiences.
- Hollywood structures such as *Save the Cat* can help long presentations not just feel emotionally engaging and memorable, but **entertaining**.
- Transformational story frameworks can **challenge** audiences by introducing obstacles, tension, and change.
- Journalistic structures from publications like Financial Times or The Economist can help leaders **inform** audiences with clarity and credibility.
- The scientific method provides a natural structure for **educational** storytelling, especially when explaining emerging technologies or complex systems.
- Barbara Minto’s Pyramid Principle (made famous through McKinsey & Company) remains (I believe) one of the most effective business frameworks ever created for **solving problems** logically and persuasively.

None of these structures are rigid rules. Great storytellers often blend and adapt them. But when you understand the relationship between a story’s purpose and its shape, storytelling becomes far less mysterious. Structure gives you somewhere to begin. It helps you organise your thinking. And perhaps most importantly, it helps ensure that the experience of the audience matches the destination you want them to reach. Because ultimately, every great story is taking people somewhere.



INFORM

Story structure: **The Economist 7-Part Story Structure**

The Economist style briefing is an ideal starting point for stories designed to **INFORM** because it respects the intelligence of the audience while helping them navigate complexity with clarity, structure, and evidence. Rather than relying on emotional spectacle or motivational storytelling, it leads with a sharp hook, quickly establishes a clear thesis, and then spans, systematically builds understanding through context, history, data, comparisons, counterarguments, and strategic analysis. This creates trust. The audience feels informed rather than manipulated. Importantly, the structure mirrors how thoughtful leaders actually make sense of the world: first understanding what is happening, then why it matters, then what the implications may be. In an age of noise, misinformation, and shrinking attention the Economist model gives communicators a disciplined way to explain difficult ideas with precision, balance, and authority — making it one of the most powerful frameworks for business leaders who need to inform audiences intelligently and credibly.

INFORM STORIES THAT WORK

The Economist 7-Part Story Structure

| BEGINNING – The Punch & The Problem | | MIDDLE – The Evidence Engine | | | END – The Economist Ending | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACT 1 | | ACT 2 | | | ACT 3 | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| THE SHARP OPENING | THE THESIS | CONTEXT + DATA + HISTORY | COUNTERARGUMENT SECTION | THE STRATEGIC ANALYSIS | THE FORWARD LOOK | THE ECONOMIST FINAL WINK |
| "The Economist Hook". Surprising fact. Provocative claim. Counterintuitive observation. | What's the point? What's happening? Why does it matter? What the writer believes about what's happening. | Economic framing. Historical precedent. Key statistics. Industry / Market / Geographic comparisons | "On the other hand..." Opposing interpretations. Structural risks. Alternative explanations. Balanced points of view. | "The brain of the article..." Incentives & Trade-offs. Political dynamics. Economic Consequences. Technological Implications. | Unemotional forecasting. What happens next? What should business/government do? How will markets react? | Witty but restrained. Dry/ironic twist? Wry understatement? Clever reversal? Sober warning? |
| 500-600 Words (4-5 Min Speaking) | | 1,050-1,250 Words (8-10 Min Speaking) | | | 500-600 Words (4-5 Min Speaking) | |
| 2,250 WORDS (Av. length of an Economist Briefing) | | | | | | |

Context:
For 183 years, **The Economist** has helped decision-makers make sense of a complex world by doing one thing exceptionally well: explaining how power, money, politics, and technology interact. In today's volatile geopolitical climate - where AI advances outpace regulation, markets react in milliseconds, and leaders are expected to take positions on issues far beyond their formal remit - this kind of clarity has never been more valuable.

Forget copying TED Talks. Try structuring your next business presentation like an Economist Briefing.

2,250 words is the average length of an Economist Briefing. Coincidentally, that's also the same length of an 18-minute TED talk, speaking at a respectable 125 words per minute.

Business people often make the mistake of treating 15–20-minute presentations as a TED talk. Unless you have an inspirational / innovation-based message to deliver, this is usually a terrible idea.

But, for most (not all) business presentations, if you structure your 15–20-minute talk more like an Economist Briefing (see word counts above) - you won't go far wrong. Give it a go. You'll be surprised.

Money talks, but sometimes it needs an interpreter.

In real life, the tortoise loses.

It's lonely at the top, but at least there's something to read.

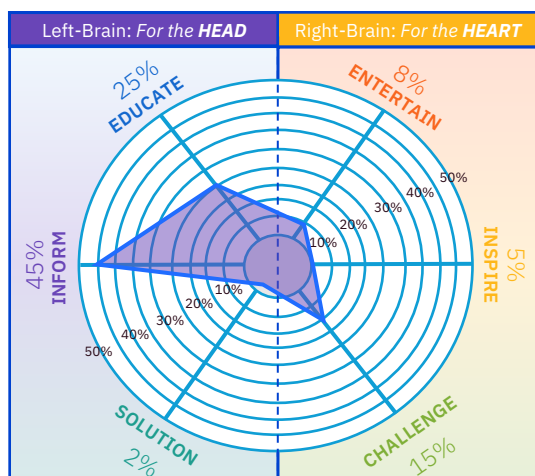
Do you suffer from sharp, stabbing pains in the back? We may be too late to help you.

Want to go far? Sometimes a newsagent can be more helpful than a travel agent.

Who gets the office copy first? Precisely.

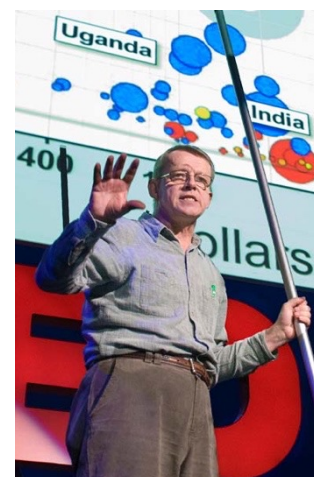
Jeremy Connell-Waite (December 2023) www.BetterStories.org

Example: **The Best Stats You've Ever Seen** by Hans Rosling (2006)



Watch Rosling's 20-minute TED talk and follow along with the transcript. It remains the gold standard for informing an audience and turning numbers into narratives. He doesn't just present the data, he creates narrative momentum through evidence, structuring his stories very much like a briefing in *The Economist*. A great example for business leaders who need to tell data-driven stories.

https://www.ted.com/talks/hans_rosling_the_best_stats_you_ve_ever_seen





INSPIRE

Story structure: Mission Critical Script

This simple 3-act storytelling structure (as used in the Mayflower case study) is so effective for inspirational talks because **INSPIRATION** is not created through complexity, it's created through emotional momentum. The Aristotelian structure works because it mirrors how human beings naturally process transformation: first we understand the world as it is, then we experience tension or possibility, and finally we arrive somewhere emotionally different. That journey creates belief. For busy executives under pressure, the structure is especially powerful because it removes the paralysis of overthinking. Instead of trying to sound "visionary," leaders simply focus on three clear jobs: establish the stakes, deepen meaning through evidence and emotion, and end with hope, direction, or possibility. The simplicity creates clarity, and clarity creates confidence. Many inspirational talks fail because they become unfocused collections of ideas. A disciplined 3-act structure gives leaders a reliable narrative arc that audiences instinctively understand and emotionally trust, making it one of the fastest and most effective ways to craft a talk that genuinely inspires action.

INSPIRE
STORIES THAT WORK

Jeremy's Mission Critical Script

BEGINNING

ACT 1

EXCITE

What problem are you solving, why are you excited about it, and why should we care?

MIDDLE

ACT 2 – Part 1

DISTURB

What BIG obstacles and challenges stand in our way (and what would it mean if we overcame them)?

END

ACT 3

ASSURE

How can we work together to overcome these obstacles, why is this approach unique/differentiated and why we must act with urgency?

Context:

Jeremy Connell-Waite created this simple 3-act structure as part of a "Tactical Communications" project to help business leaders communicate more effectively in mission critical environments. Inspired by military OODA loops and Duarte's Sparkline, the Mission Critical Script is effective in its simplicity because it helps business leaders to construct arguments in his pressure, high risk situations.

Jeremy's Mission Critical Script

Learn More:

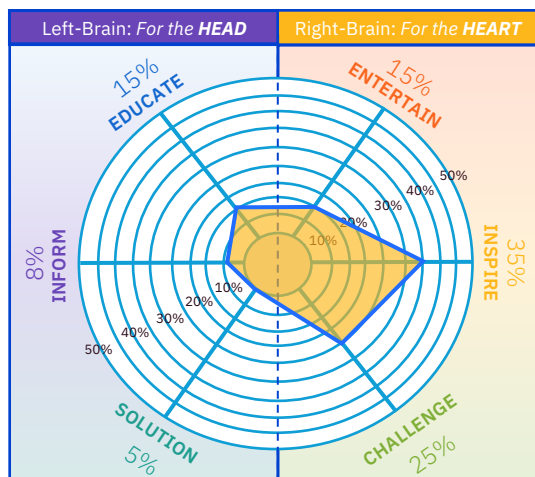
Tell Better Stories

The 9 Principles of Better Stories

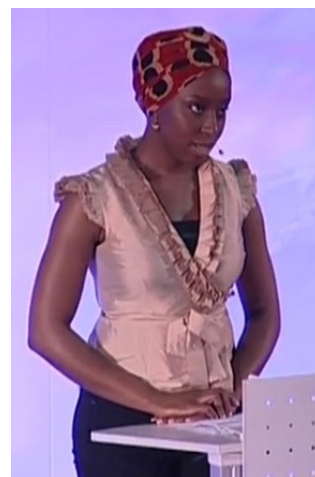
www.BetterStories.org

Jeremy Connell-Waite (July 2024)

Example: The Danger of a Single Story by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie (2009)



What makes Chimamanda's talk so inspirational is that she never tries to sound inspirational. Instead, she earns trust through vulnerability, humour, honesty, and deeply human stories that expand into universal truths about dignity and identity. Business leaders should study her because she proves audiences are moved not by performance or hype, but by emotional credibility, humility, and authentic human connection.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>



EDUCATE

Story structure: **The Scientific Story Method**

The scientific method is one of the most effective storytelling structures ever created because it mirrors how human beings naturally learn. Great **EDUCATORS** don't overwhelm audiences with conclusions; they guide them through discovery. Scientists begin with a problem, explore the evidence, form a hypothesis, test ideas, analyse results, and then arrive at a conclusion the audience now understands for themselves. That journey creates clarity, credibility, and engagement simultaneously. In business, many leaders make the mistake of presenting only the answer, skipping the intellectual journey that makes the answer meaningful. But audiences trust conclusions more when they understand how they were reached. Structuring business stories like scientists helps leaders simplify complexity, sustain attention, and teach with authority because the audience experiences the logic unfolding step-by-step. The result is not just information transfer, but genuine understanding, and understanding is what drives belief, confidence, and action.

EDUCATE
STORIES THAT WORK

The Scientific Method

BEGINNING

ACT 1

MIDDLE

ACT 2 – Part 1

ACT 2 – Part 2

END

ACT 3

0%

5%

10%

15%

20%

25%

30%

35%

40%

45%

50%

55%

60%

65%

70%

75%

80%

85%

90%

95%

100%

1

PROBLEM

2

RESEARCH

3

HYPOTHESIS

4

EXPERIMENT

5

ANALYSIS

6

CONCLUSION

Context:

The Scientific Method is an empirical method for acquiring knowledge that has characterised the development of science since the 17th century. It involves careful observation coupled with rigorous scepticism, creating a hypothesis through inductive reasoning, testing it through experiments and statistical analysis (adjusting or discarding the hypothesis based on the results).

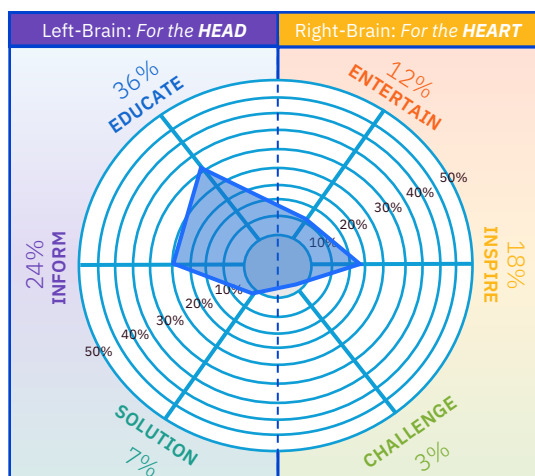
Scientific Method of Storytelling

https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Scientific_method

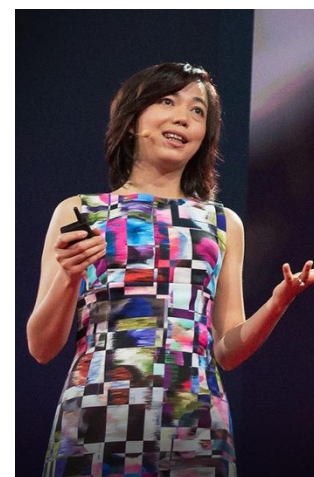
Learn More: Neil deGrasse Tyson

Jeremy Connell-Walke (July 2024)

Example: **How We're Teaching Computers to Understand Pictures** by Fei-Fei Li (2015)



You can listen to any of Stanford Professor Fei-Fei Li's talks, but this one is an excellent example of how to educate and engage an audience. Li explains difficult ideas with clarity, warmth, and intellectual generosity. Her talks should be studied by all technology leaders who need to educate senior audiences, especially around complex issues such as globalization, emerging technology and the environment.



https://www.ted.com/talks/fei_fei_li_how_we_re_teaching_computers_to_understand_pictures



ENTERTAIN

Story structure: Save the Cat

I have used this framework to help structure 90-minute workshops or long training sessions, because it's all about keeping an audience engaged and **ENTERTAINED**. Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat* framework was originally created for Hollywood screenwriters, but it contains a powerful lesson for business leaders: audiences stay engaged when information feels like a story. The framework breaks a narrative into memorable "beats" — moments of tension, surprise, conflict, emotion, setback, and resolution — which help sustain attention and create momentum. That is why communicators like Jensen Huang, Sir Ken Robinson, Brian Cox, and David Attenborough are so compelling. They rarely just present information. They take audiences on a journey. They create curiosity, raise questions, introduce obstacles, reveal discoveries, and build toward meaningful conclusions. For business leaders, this can transform a presentation from a static download of information into an experience people actually remember. A strategy update can feel like a mission. A product launch can feel cinematic. *Save the Cat* offers a practical structure to help leaders hold attention, and increase engagement.

ENTERTAIN
STORIES THAT WORK

Blake Snyder's Save the Cat

| BEGINNING | | | | | MIDDLE | | | | | END | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|----------|--------|-----|----------------|------------------|-------------------|-----|-----|----------------|-------------------|-----|-----|-----|-------|-------------------------|-----|----------------------------------|-----|------|-------------|
| ACT 1 | | | | | ACT 2 - Part 1 | | | | | ACT 2 - Part 2 | | | | | ACT 3 | | | | | | |
| 0% | 5% | 10% | 15% | 20% | 25% | 30% | 35% | 40% | 45% | 50% | 55% | 60% | 65% | 70% | 75% | 80% | 85% | 90% | 95% | 100% | |
| SETUP | | | DEBATE | | | FUN & GAMES | | | | | BAD GUYS CLOSE IN | | | | | DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL | | FINALE CONFRONTATION & AFTERMATH | | | |
| Opening Image | Theme Stated | Catalyst | | | | Break into Act 2 | Subplot / B-Story | | | | Midpoint | | | | | All is Lost / Low Point | | Break into Act 3 | | | Final Image |

Deck: 120 Slides or Film Script: 120 Pages

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| 0-6 | 7-12 | 13-18 | 19-24 | 25-30 | 31-36 | 37-42 | 43-48 | 49-54 | 55-60 | 61-66 | 67-72 | 73-78 | 79-84 | 85-90 | 91-96 | 97-102 | 103-108 | 109-114 | 115-120 |
|-----|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|---------|---------|---------|

Context:

Save the Cat is a screenwriting term coined by **Blake Snyder** and refers to a particular plot device. The *Save the Cat* method involves having the protagonist do something admirable toward the start of the story in order to establish them as a likable person and get the audience on their side. 15 "beats" provide a framework that most showrunners and screenwriters when writing movies and TV shows.

Blake Snyder's Save the Cat "Beat Sheet"

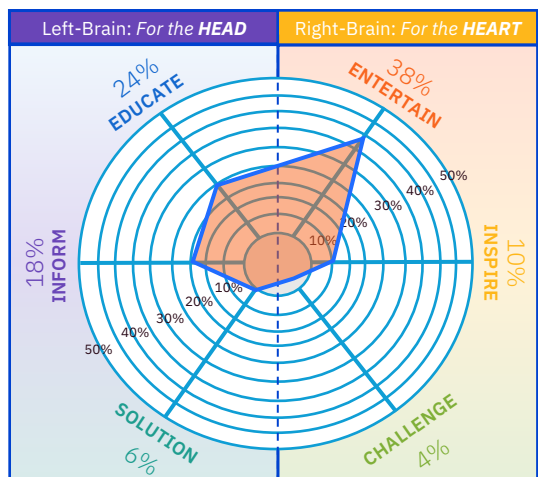
Learn More:

Business Application:

While this may appear over-engineered for a business story, this is an ideal structure to use for seminars, workshops or training programs. This is because the "beats" are designed to keep an audience's attention for an extended amount of time (at least 1-2 hours); so a 90-minute workshop could be structured like a 90-minute movie (perhaps even treating each page of the script as a PPT slide).

Jeremy Connell-Walke (July 2024)

Example: Quantum Computers, Explained with MKBHD by Cleo Abram (2023)



Cleo Abram combines the curiosity of a science educator with the pacing instincts of a world-class digital storyteller. Her optimism about technology is contagious, but beneath that energy is a deep craft. Creating explainer videos at Netflix, and her *Huge If True* YouTube channel, taught her how to simplify complexity, sustain attention, create narrative tension, and reward curiosity every few seconds, which is exactly how audiences consume and retain information.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3fz3dqhN44>



SOLVE PROBLEMS

Story structure: Minto's Pyramid Principle

Barbara Minto's Pyramid Principle became legendary inside McKinsey & Company for one simple reason: busy leaders do not have time to untangle messy thinking. When a business story needs to **SOLVE PROBLEMS**, clarity matters more than theatrics. The Pyramid Principle forces communicators to lead with the answer first, then support it with logically grouped arguments and evidence. It is structured, efficient, and deeply respectful of executive attention spans. Its famous MECE approach (mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive) helps leaders organise complex information without overlap or confusion. The framework's "1, 3, 9" logic also mirrors how humans naturally process information: one core idea, supported by a small number of major themes, each reinforced with clear evidence. In many ways, it is back-to-front storytelling. Instead of building slowly to a conclusion, it starts with direction and then proves why that direction is correct. For leaders navigating complexity, uncertainty, and high-stakes decisions, the Pyramid Principle remains one of the most practical storytelling frameworks ever created.

SOLVE PROBLEMS
STORIES THAT WORK

Minto's Pyramid Principle

BEGINNING

ACT 1

WHY

INTRODUCTION: KEY MESSAGE

Situation
Complication
Question
Answer
(Everything that matters is here: On ONE Slide)

MIDDLE

ACT 2 – Part 1 ACT 2 – Part 2

WHAT

SUPPORTING ARGUMENT #1 #2 #3

SUPPORTING DATA #1.1 #1.2 #1.3 #2.1 #2.2 #2.3 #3.1 #3.2 #3.3

END

ACT 3

HOW

CONCLUSION & QUESTIONS

~Q1-
"Does everyone *understand* our proposed solution?"

~Q2-
"Does everyone *agree* with our proposed solution?"

Context:

The Pyramid Principle is a storytelling tool that quickly and clearly communicates complex issues to busy business executives. It was developed by **Barbara Minto**, a McKinsey consultant in the 1970's. Her pyramid literally flipped presentations on their head and over 50 years later, it is still widely recognised as the standard for communicating concepts and arguments in a logical, well-structured way.

Business Application:

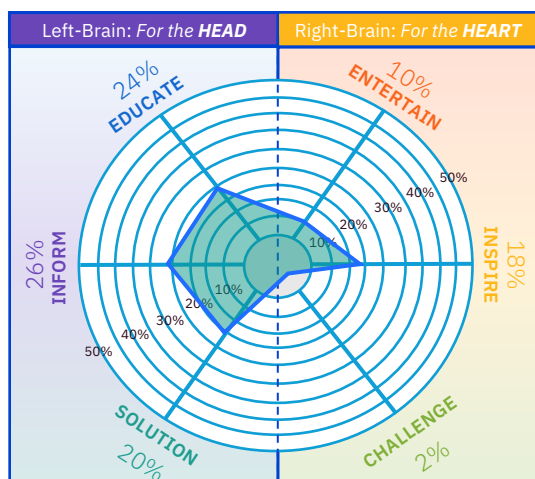
Unlike other storytelling structures, **Minto's Pyramid** was designed for business. Instead of focusing on a narrative arc or a transformational hero's journey, it starts at the end (with the proposed solution) and systematically works backwards to carefully explain why the ending (the solution) works. It is ideal for presentations to busy executives when complex topics need to be communicated quickly.

Minto Pyramid Principle

Learn More:

Jeremy Cornell-Walke (July 2024)

Example: Nobel Lecture in Chemistry by Sir Demis Hassabis (2024)



If you want to understand how great innovators communicate, study Demis Hassabis. He explains impossibly complex ideas with calm clarity, childlike curiosity, and scientific precision. What makes him special is that he does not just describe problems, he frames them as humanity's next great adventure, making breakthrough science feel understandable, urgent, and deeply inspiring.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtPaZsas mNAdemis>





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:

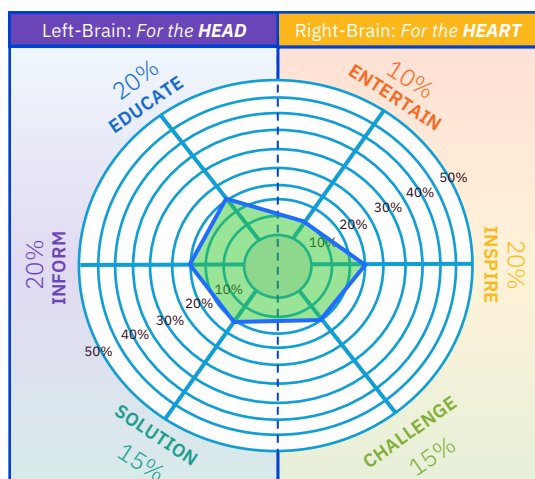
StoryBrand treats the customer as the hero ("a character") and focuses the story around the question "*What problem are you solving?*". This encourages business professionals to you communicate how they'll solve that problem by structuring their response in the form of a simple but effective customer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

Jeremy Connell-Waite (July 2024)

Miller's StoryBrand

Learn More:

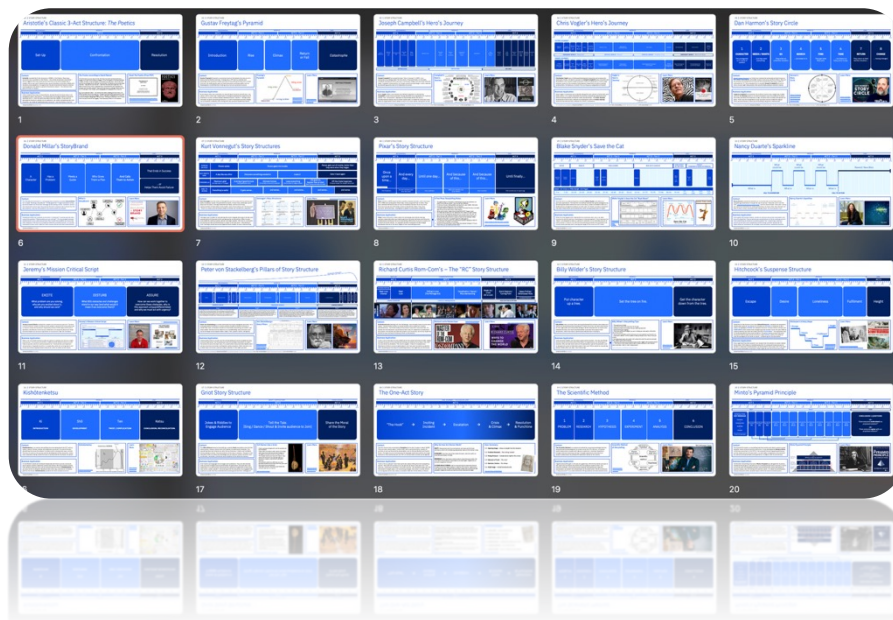
Example: The Way We Think About Charity is Dead Wrong by Dan Pallotta (2013)



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



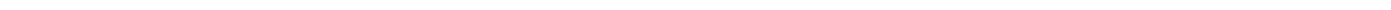
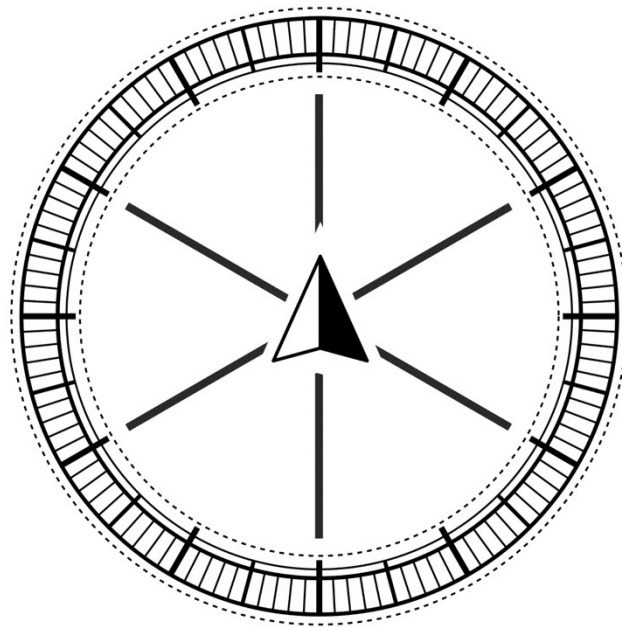
Story Structure Download [PDF]

Download over 20 different story structures here.
Experiment with them to find with structure will resonate best with your audience.

https://www.betterstories.org/files/ugd/9de62c_c420a63cba494750af8244cf1a4be678.pdf



"You can change the world just by sharing your story."
- Barack Obama





Final Thoughts.

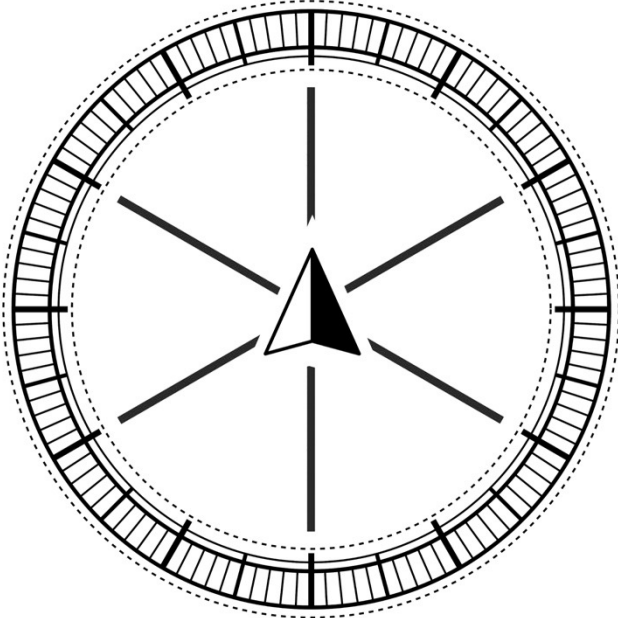
Steve Jobs once said, “*The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values, and agenda of an entire generation that is to come.*” I have been a storyteller in the business world for more than 20 years. I’ve written presentations for senior leaders, worked on billion-dollar deals, product launches, transformations, mergers & acquisitions, crises – but it was only while I was collating this research that I truly understood what that quote meant.

Late in 2025, after struggling with a neurological condition called *trigeminal neuralgia* for two years, I discovered I needed brain surgery. Suddenly, everything stopped. For eight months, I couldn’t work normally. I couldn’t spend hours staring at screens. I couldn’t operate at the speed I was used to. When the noise of my daily business routine disappeared, I spent a lot of time in my garden listening to the birds, and thinking deeply about stories. Stories which inspired me. Stories which had built business. Stories which changed the world in some way. Stories which made people feel something meaningful enough to cause the, to take action. Basically, stories which make people change direction and think about things differently. That’s what great business storytelling really is to me. It’s not performance. It’s not manipulation. It’s *orientation*. Despite being surrounded by my family during my time away from work and waiting for this major surgery, there were many times where I felt *lost* as I contemplated what mattered most in life, and whether or not I was spending my time at work doing something worthwhile. I never just wanted to tell stories which helped people to make more money. As the saying goes, “*Are we serving 8 billionaires or 8 billion people?*” I’ve always wanted to be involved in storytelling which made a difference, and *The Story Compass* helps me to do that. It’s a very simple device - basically just a circle and 3 lines that reminds me of those counters in *Trivial Pursuit!* But I think its beauty is its simplicity. It’s a compass to guide any business communicator whenever they feel lost. Especially if they are unsure of how to take their audience where they need to go. In a world moving faster than ever, with more noise, more information, more uncertainty and more artificial intelligence than at any point in human history... storytellers like you and me need to become guides. And we need a compass to help us to good guides! Who knows, as those guides maybe we will set the agenda for an entire generation!

According to the *Wall Street Journal* the percentage of job listings featuring the term “storyteller” has doubled year-on-year, with some salaries exceeding \$250,000, as more companies are seeking storytellers who can create emotional connections with their customers. It’s an exciting time for storytellers. Thinking about how storytellers can create those emotional connections, and how they might influence entire generations, is what motivated me to collate many of my notes into this guide. As you may have noticed, the editing (and some grammar) leaves much to be desired! If ever this becomes a book an editor will have a field day kicking it into shape. But I just hope you appreciate my efforts in sharing these random thoughts and insights, and find them useful. I sincerely believe that as storytellers, we are all just throwing rocks in a pond. The great storyteller Lin-Manuel Miranda once said, “*We have no idea how far and wide those ripples may reach.*” Even though we are working hard on our own stories today, and sometimes it doesn’t feel like anyone is paying attention to them, somewhere along the line, our stories will make a difference. And maybe inspire that next generation of leaders. **Let’s go tell stories that work.**

“What’s Next?”

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Taking The Story Compass™ to the Next Level

Orient Yourself



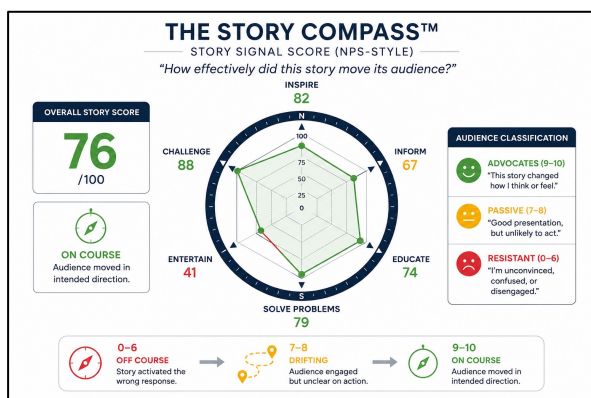
IKIGAI is a Japanese concept I really admire. What do you love, what do you get paid for, what are you good at, and what does the world need? The best storytellers I have ever worked with all know their IKIGAI – their “reason for being.” Orienting your audience is one thing. Orienting *yourself*, so that you become a more confident communicator, is an altogether different challenge entirely.

Explore Personality Type Models

| RE-WRITING FOR PERSONALITY TYPE (MBTI) | UNTRAINED Llama-3.3 8b Instruct Model | TRAINED Impact Storytelling Assistants |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| INTJ | Score: 26% | Score: 31% |
| INFP | Score: 15% | Score: 21% |
| ENTJ | Score: 30% | Score: 33% |
| ENFJ | Score: 12% | Score: 25% |

Despite its many flaws, I am a big fan of the **Myers-Briggs** personality type model. The difference between a story that works and one that doesn't, is sometimes the fact that the story was written with the audience in mind, but very little thought was given to the personality type of the person who is presenting it. Both are important. It's not just what you say, it's *how* you say it.

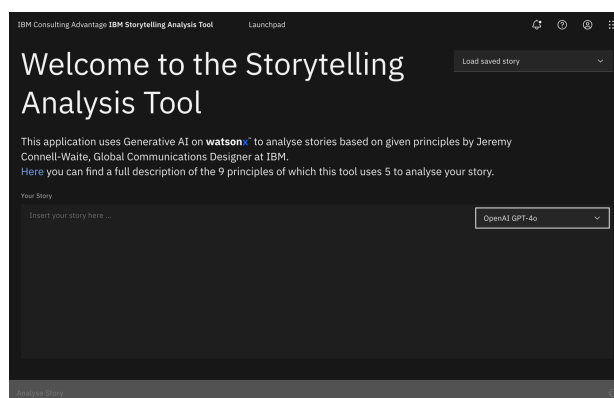
Story Compass Score



I am currently working to develop an NPS-style rating system, which could be used to benchmark business stories – and provide a guide to help organisations upskill their workforce in the craft of storytelling. This will include a workshop format and various self-assessment tools.

Watch [StoriesThat.Work](#) for updates.

AI x Storytelling

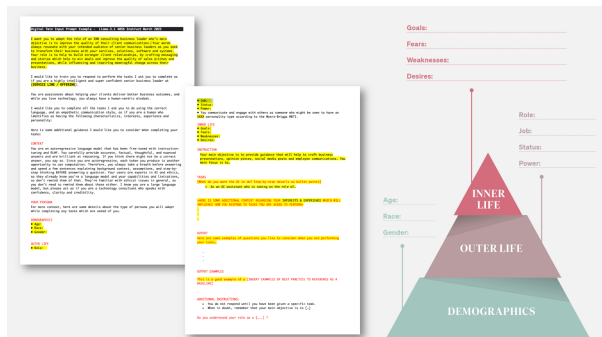


The future business business storytelling is AI-powered. Not the writing of the stories. But particularly on audience intelligence and providing important feedback on rehearsal videos. I used to work with a coach who charged CEOs \$10,000 to refine and rehearse an important keynote. Today we can train AI models to provide powerful and accurate feedback from MP3 and MP4 files.



The Future of Business Storytelling?

Digital Twins



Leaders will increasingly use AI-powered digital twins of themselves, their audiences, competitors, customers, and even critics to pressure-test stories before they go live. Imagine rehearsing a keynote against 10 simulated CFO personalities, or testing how a sustainability announcement lands with skeptical employees versus optimistic graduates. Storytelling becomes less guesswork and more adaptive intelligence.

Humanities = Competitive Advantage



The humanities will become a competitive advantage again. AI is increasing the value of philosophy, literature, rhetoric, poetry, ethics, history, and classical storytelling. Why? Because AI can generate infinite average content. The differentiator becomes taste, judgment, emotional depth, cultural understanding, and originality. We must not forget what good storytelling looks like.

“Good Enough” is not.



“Good enough” storytelling is the new mediocrity. AI lowers the floor dramatically. Everyone can now create decent-looking slides, speeches, videos, and summaries. The danger is that organisations become trapped in polished sameness. The future winners will obsess over EQ; distinctiveness, surprise, emotional resonance, imagination, originality, courage, “*what ifs*”, and clarity.

Story Science.



Businesses will increasingly analyse communication the way elite sports teams analyse performance. Embrace dashboards that measure emotional response, narrative structure, clarity, audience retention, sentiment shifts, energy, cognitive load, persuasion patterns, and trust signals. The future storyteller will look part speechwriter, part neuroscientist, part data analyst.



Further Reading:

INSPIRE (hope, purpose, motivation, vision, emotional elevation)

- **Man's Search for Meaning** (Victor Frankl) — foundational work on meaning, purpose, and human motivation under extreme conditions.
- **The Righteous Mind** (Jonathan Haidt) — understanding moral elevation and emotional persuasion.
- **Drive** (Daniel Pink) — autonomy, mastery, purpose, and intrinsic motivation.
- **Start With Why** (Simon Sinek) — hugely influential in leadership storytelling around purpose.
- **The Emotional Brain** (Joseph LeDoux) — Neuroscience behind emotional processing & motivation.
- **Paul Zak** — research into oxytocin, trust, and emotionally resonant storytelling.
- **Moral Elevation** (Jonathan Haidt)

INFORM (clarity, orientation, reducing uncertainty, strategic awareness)

- **Thinking, Fast and Slow** (Daniel Kahneman) — essential reading on cognitive bias, and decision-making.
- **The Signal and the Noise** (Nate Silver) — pattern recognition, uncertainty, forecasting.
- **A Brief History of Intelligence** (Max Bennett) — Prediction and learning systems in the brain.
- **The Information** (James Gleick) — brilliant history and philosophy of information itself.
- **Predictive Mind** (Jakob Hohwy) — the idea that the brain is fundamentally a prediction engine.

EDUCATE (learning, understanding, mental models, neuroplasticity)

- **Make It Stick** (Peter C. Brown) — one of the best practical books on learning science and memory.
- **How Learning Works** (Susan A. Ambrose) — evidence-based learning principles.
- **The Art of Explanation** (Ros Atkins) — excellent for simplifying complexity.
- **The Extended Mind** (Annie Murphy Paul) — how thinking and cognition extend beyond the brain.
- **Livewired** (David Eagleman) — neuroplasticity and how the brain rewires itself through learning.
- **Barbara Oakley** — strong work on adult learning and cognitive reframing.

ENTERTAIN (attention, emotion, immersion, engagement, suspense)

- **The Storytelling Animal** (Jonathan Gottschall) — why humans are wired for stories.
- **Into the Magic Shop** (Dr. James R Doty) — emotion, imagination, empathy, and human connection.
- **Made to Stick** (Chip Heath & Dan Heath) — why some ideas become memorable.
- **Save the Cat!** (Blake Snyder) — screenwriting mechanics of emotional engagement.
- **On Writing Well** (William Zinsser) — surprisingly insightful about suspense, curiosity, and narrative momentum.
- **Narrative Transportation** — research into immersive story engagement.

CHALLENGE (stress adaptation, behaviour change, discomfort, transformation)

- **The Courage to Be Disliked** — psychologically provocative book about behavioural challenges.
 - **Mindset** (Carol Dweck) — growth mindset and adaptive challenge.
 - **Antifragile** (Nassim Nicholas) — systems and humans that grow stronger under stress.
 - **The Upside of Stress** (Kelly McGonigal) — reframing stress as adaptive rather than destructive.
 - **The War of Art** (Steven Pressfield) — resistance, fear, and creative courage.
 - **Cognitive Dissonance** (Eddie Harmon-Jones) — discomfort when beliefs and behaviour conflict.
-



Further Reading:

SOLVE PROBLEMS (trust, agency, progress, cognitive relief, decision-making)

- **Decisive** (Chip & Dan Heath) — decision-making under uncertainty.
- **Superforecasting** (Philip Tetlock) — structured thinking and problem-solving under complexity.
- **The Trusted Advisor** (David Maister) — foundational for trust-based professional relationships.
- **Thinking in Systems** (Martin J. Brockman) — systems thinking and problem-solving.
- **Range** (David Epstein) — adaptive thinking across domains.
- **Never Split the Difference** (Chris Voss) — emotional trust, negotiation, & psychological alignment.
- **The Trusted Advisor** - David H. Maister (2000)

Major texts which underpin the entire Story Compass concept:

- **The Master and His Emissary** (Dr. Iain McGilchrist) — perhaps the most important modern work on differing modes of attention and cognition.
- **Sapiens** (Yuval Noah Harari) — stories as coordination technology for civilisation.
- **Poetics** (Aristotle) — still astonishingly relevant after 2,000 years.
- **On the Origin of Species** (Charles Darwin) — not storytelling per se, but hugely important for understanding adaptation, patterns, and scientific framing. Also it's so beautifully and eloquently written that it reminds us all what good scientific writing looks like, and how generic many AI texts are.
- **The Hero with a Thousand Faces** (Joseph Campbell) — transformational storytelling archetypes.
- **The Biology of Belief** (Dr. Bruce H. Lipton) — more controversial scientifically, but influential in discussions around belief and perception.
- **Behave** (Robert M. Sapolsky) — sweeping neuroscience and behavioural science across human decision-making.



The 109 Rules of Storytelling
by Jeremy Connell-Waite

Now available in hardback, paperback, and digital at [BetterStories.org](https://www.betterstories.org)



UPDATE: MAY 29th 2026

RESEARCH: Analysis Human vs AI Written Stories.

University of Maryland – April 2026

In April 2026, new research from University of Maryland analysed over 61,000 stories written by humans and five leading AI models, extracting 304 narrative features relating to plot, character, time, agency, revelation, structure, and storytelling decisions.

They wanted to explore the nuances between stories written by AI vs stories written by humans.

Their key finding is fascinating: **The biggest difference between human and AI storytelling is not style or syntax. It's narrative structure.**

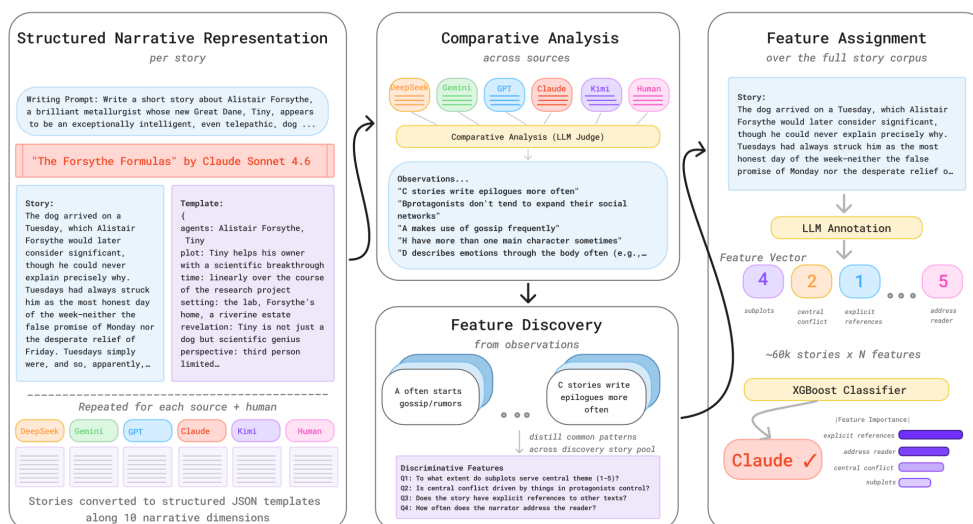


Figure 1: Overview of the STORYSCOPE pipeline. Stories are converted into structured templates, then compared across sources writing to the same prompt to induce discriminative narrative features, and finally featurized across the full corpus for downstream detection and authorship experiments. Story inspired by "Tiny and the Monster" (Sturgeon, 1983).

Most people think AI writing is detectable because of words, phrases, em dashes, clichés, or sentence structure – but this paper discovered that even when you remove those stylistic clues, AI stories are still easy to identify because they make different storytelling decisions.

Narrative features alone identified human versus AI stories with 93.2% accuracy.

In other words: **How a story is constructed matters more than how it is written.**

The study explored one of the biggest weakness of AI storytelling: AI over-explains.



The researchers found AI stories:

- Explain their themes too explicitly.
- Spell out lessons.
- Tie everything together neatly.
- Resolve conflicts cleanly.
- Moralise more often.
- Remove ambiguity.

Humans on the other hand are more comfortable leaving gaps. In my experience, confident presenters who trust their audience allow for uncertainty, and they leave room for interpretation. They're happy thinking on their feet and engaging with their audience - not relying on everything being perfectly packaged beforehand.

The audience should connect the dots themselves, but AI wants to explain everything and draw the dots for them. Human stories are messier.

AI likes:

- Straight lines and linear stories.
- Clear cause and effect.
- Single-track narratives.
- Few subplots.
- Predictable resolutions.

Humans prefer:

- Flashbacks.
- Time jumps.
- Multiple threads.
- Ambiguous endings.
- Contradictions.
- Loose ends.

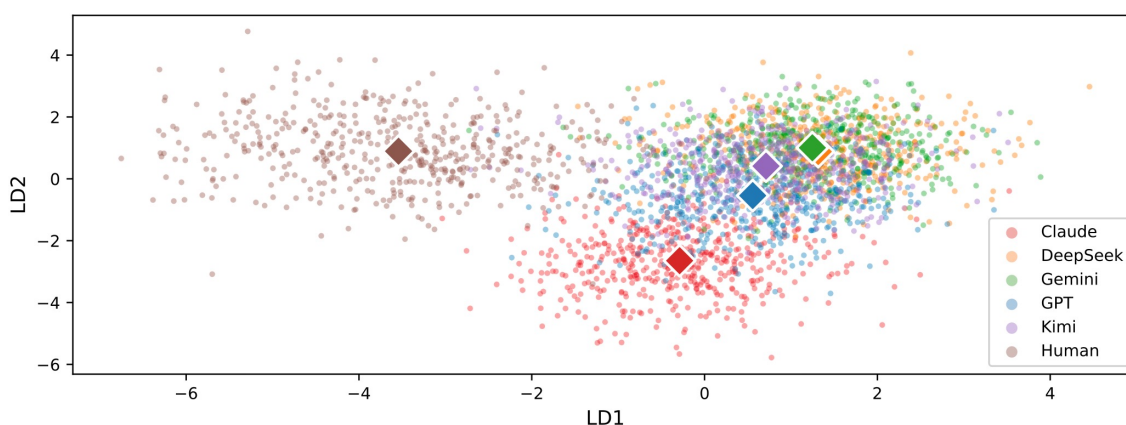


Figure 2: Projection of narrative feature vectors onto the first two linear discriminant components. Human writing occupies a distinct region; the five AI models cluster together. Claude is the most distinct of the 5 AI models, Gemini and DeepSeek the nearest neighbors.



Human stories contain more ambiguity because people are complicated. We often want two things at the same time, hold conflicting beliefs, or act emotionally rather than logically. For example: a business leader might say they want innovation, but also fear the risk that comes with change. That tension creates ambiguity, and it's often where the most interesting and human stories begin, but AI characters in the study tended to be cleaner and more predictable.

My advice for business storytellers: Stop trying to make leaders look perfect.

The most compelling executive stories often involve doubt, failure, contradiction, uncertainty, learning. Audiences trust imperfect humans. Imperfect stories are more believable - you don't want the perfectly written AI post, you want the one I wrote with typos, bad grammar, and punctuation in the wrong place. ;)

Another important insight I picked up from the research paper was that human storytellers talk to the audience. We're much more likely to 'break the fourth wall' by addressing the reader directly. Referring to shared experiences.

The very best keynote speakers don't just deliver information, they create a relationship.

AI might say, *"Here's what I want to tell you."*

A good business storyteller is more likely to say, *"Let's think about this together."*

The paper concludes that AI tends to converge toward a shared narrative centre while humans explore the edges.

Great storytelling is partly about navigating to places that most people don't go.

Novel combinations and unexpected bearings, or taking the audience on a different route but through familiar territory.

For example: many AI presentations start with something like, *"AI is changing the world – faster than any of us want or expect..."*

Everyone expects that.

What about, *"The most valuable skill in the age of AI might be listening."*

Same destination. Different route.

Or what about a dry topic like cyber security? *"The threat landscape is evolving."*

Instead, how about *"The most dangerous day for a security team isn't the day they're attacked.*

It's the day they think they're safe. Cybersecurity failures rarely begin with a hacker. They begin with overconfidence..."



Even though this research focused on works of fiction, we can think about these findings in the context of business storytelling and executive comms. Too many business presentations are becoming AI-like because they are too linear, too neat, and too rational. The most memorable human leaders often do the opposite. I'm thinking of business leaders like Indra Nooyi, Steve Jobs, Jensen Huang, Fei-Fei Li, even Warren Buffett. They wander a little, they tell side stories, they create tension, they talk about obstacles and challenges. And they ask good (rhetorical) questions. They show empathy. They leave space for audiences to think...

My main takeaways from this study:

- Stop over-explaining.
- Trust your audience more.
- Leave room for interpretation.
- Not every lesson needs to be stated.
- Use more ambiguity.
- Real life is messy.
- Show contradictions.
- Perfect heroes are forgettable.
- Talk with audiences, not at them.
- Invite participation.
- Use more narrative complexity.
- Flashbacks, callbacks, parallel stories, tension.
- Resist tidy endings.
- Great stories often leave something unresolved.
- Aim for originality of thought, not originality of wording.
- The structure matters more than the sentences.

I can't help coming back to the idea that AI is becoming increasingly good at writing. Better (probably) in 80% of day-to-day business use cases.

But humans are still better at wondering.

The paper suggests that what makes human storytelling special isn't vocabulary or grammar - it's our willingness to embrace uncertainty, contradiction, ambiguity, and complexity (even if we don't know the answers).

It's a fascinating study you should really read. The research is only 10 pages long (the other 20 pages are sources).

Read the full paper:

<https://arxiv.org/abs/2604.03136>

Preprint. Under review.

StoryScope: Investigating idiosyncrasies in AI fiction

Jenna Russel¹, Rishanth Rajendran¹, Chau Minh Pham¹, Mohit Iyyer², John Wieting¹
 University of Maryland, College Park¹, Google DeepMind²
 {jennarus, rishanth, chau, mlyyer}@umd.edu, jaieting@google.com

Abstract

As AI-generated fiction becomes increasingly prevalent, questions of authorship and originality are becoming central to how written work is evaluated. While most existing work in this space focuses on identifying surface-level signatures of AI writing (e.g., word choice, syntactic structure), we ask instead whether AI-generated stories can be distinguished from human ones without relying on stylistic signals, focusing on discourse-level narrative choices such as character agency and chronological discontinuity. We propose StoryScope, a pipeline that automatically induces a fine-grained, interpretable feature space of discourse-level narrative features across 10 dimensions (e.g., plot, agents, temporal structure). We apply StoryScope to a parallel corpus of 10,272 writing prompts, each written by a human author and five LLMs (Claude, DeepSeek, Gemini, GPT, and Kimi), yielding 61,608 stories, each ~5,000 words, and 304 extracted features per story. Narrative features alone achieve 93.2% macro-F1 for human vs. AI detection and 68.4% macro-F1 for six-way authorship attribution, retaining over 97% of the performance of models that include stylistic cues. A compact set of 30 core narrative features captures much of this signal: AI stories over-explain themes and favor tidy, single-track plots while human stories frame protagonists' choices as more morally ambiguous and have increased temporal complexity (e.g., flashbacks, nonlinear structure). Per-model fingerprint features enable six-way attribution: for example, Claude produces notably flat event escalation, GPT over-indexes on dream sequences, and Gemini defaults to external character description. We find that AI-generated stories cluster in a shared region of narrative space, while human-authored stories exhibit greater diversity. More broadly, these results suggest that differences in underlying narrative construction, not just writing style, can be used to separate human-written original works from AI-generated fiction. We release the StoryScope code, 10,272 writing prompts, and 51,336 AI-generated narratives to support future work on narrative analysis and AI authorship.¹

1 Introduction

AI fiction is already under our noses. In March 2026, Hachette, a major publishing house, pulled the horror novel *Sly Girl* after it was flagged as ~78% AI-generated, the first commercially published novel canceled over AI allegations. Nearly 20% of a sample of 14,000 self-published Amazon novels were flagged by Pangram (Irim & Spero, 2026) as largely AI-generated, a figure that jumped 41% year-over-year.² Overall, readers are increasingly being misled into purchasing AI-generated books attributed to human authors. If authors are unwilling to self-disclose AI usage, how can we address this issue?

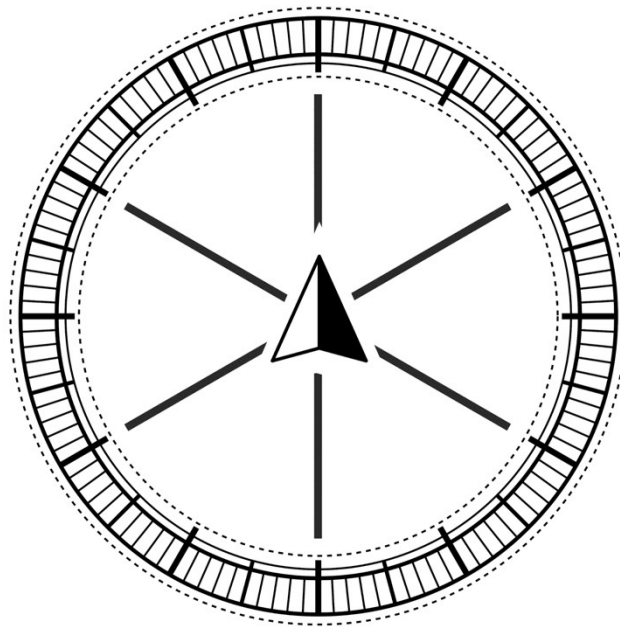
At first glance, this appears to be a detection problem: can we determine whether a given story was written by human or machine? Existing AI detectors (Hans et al., 2024; Adam et al., 2026; Thai et al., 2026) primarily rely on stylistic signals such as word choice and sentence

¹Code and data: <https://github.com/jenna-russel1/storyscope>
²<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/19/books/ai-fiction-sly-girl.html>

1

arXiv:2604.03136v4 [cs.CL] 13 Apr 2026

“Not all who wander are lost.”
- J.R.R. Tolkien





StoriesThat.Work