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This PDF version of Storyteller Tactics was Published in the UK.



Storyteller Tactics®

Volume I

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Pick a card... any card

...as a magician would say. Let's do some story magic!
Here are a few ways to approach the Storyteller
Tactics deck:

a. “Pick a card: any card”

1. Fan the deck, pick a card at random.
2. Make the elements of your story fit the tactic.
3. Pick another card and repeat.
4. Do this three times. See which story you like best.

b. Try our Desert Island Cards ★

If you could only take seven cards from the entire deck, I'd take these. Each one helps you with a different stage of your storytelling process. Each card is the “head of a family” of similar tactics.

- 💡 *The Dragon & The City*
- ✂️ *Story Listening*
- 👤 *Trust Me, I'm an Expert*
- 🎯 *Pitch Perfect*
- 🏠 *Man in a Hole*
- ✂️ *Movie Time*
- 🏦 *Story Bank*



c. Try our 📖 Recipe Cards

Combine different story “ingredients” to solve common problems.

Story Building System

Do you know why you need a story?

No →



Concept

Yes



Do you know where to find your story?

No →



Explore

Yes



Do you know your role in the story?

No →



Character

Yes



Do you know what your story needs to do?

No →



Function

Yes



Do you know how to plan your story?

No →



Structure

Yes



Do you know how to tell your story?

No →



Style

Yes



Do you know how to share your story?

No →



Organise



Concept

Stories shape how we see ourselves and the world around us. Frame your work as an epic adventure.



Explore

Stories help us navigate confusing, unknown and changing situations. Make a map for your way ahead.



Character

Stories connect us to other people. Show us why we can trust you.



Function

Stories are more effective than facts or opinions by themselves. Put your stories to work.



Structure

Stories carry us along thanks to a few basic patterns. Make your ideas flow in a story-ish way.



Style

Stories carry useful information. Make sure people remember yours.



Organise

Stories work, so long as you use them well. Plan how you should tell yours.



Recipe

Stories can change the world. See which problems you can solve by combining different story tactics.



Stories that Sell

Convince people that you can deliver. Stories work better than spreadsheets when it comes to building trust.

Selling is about so much more than price, quality or your “value proposition”. You can’t sell without trust. Can we trust you to understand what we need? Can we trust you to deliver on the promise you’re making about an uncertain future? Selling is a complex human process. Stories help you reach people and win them over.

Stories that Sell

1. Audience Profile

Who is your audience? What kind of problems are you solving for them?



2. Simple Sales Stories

Show how you’ve helped someone they can relate to.



3. Social Proof

Look for trends, prototypes or testimonials that will strengthen your case.



4. Rags to Riches

Try an optimistic story structure, with your customer at its heart.



5. Pitch Perfect

Boil it down to an elevator pitch.






Stories that Motivate


Get people behind you. Persuade us to take a leap of faith and support your idea.

When you want things to change, you'll need to show us a plan: the details of your idea. But that's not enough. We also want to know what's driving you. After all, you're asking us to trust you, to follow you into the unknown.


Stories that Motivate

1.  **The Dragon & the City**
What are you trying to achieve?
Big picture stuff.




2.  **Drive Stories**
What's motivating you? What might motivate us too?




3.  **Three Great Conflicts**
What's stopping you? What barriers must you overcome?



4.  **Innovation Curve**
Reassure us about the risks you're asking us to take.



5.  **No Easy Way**
Give us a realistic idea of the journey ahead.





Stories that Convince

Explain years of experience and hours of research to a non-expert audience. Get them to back your judgement.

It's annoying: you can have all the facts at your fingertips, but still people won't listen. Maybe it's your fault. Are you overloading your audience with data? Have you turned an exciting process of discovery into a dull spreadsheet? Do we know enough about you to trust your judgement?

Stories that Convince

1. ✂ Three is the Magic Number

Put your audience first. How many facts can you expect them to remember?



2. ✨ That's Funny

Share the excitement behind your own insights.



3. ✨ Data Detectives

Handle your facts in a story-ish way.



4. 🗣 Trust Me, I'm an Expert

Show us why we should trust you.



5. 🗣 Hero & Guide

Put yourself in the story as the Expert Guide, helping us on our way.





Stories that Connect

Walk a mile in another person's shoes. Stories are a great way to see things from a different point of view.

How can you make the right product or service for someone if you don't really know them? How can you lead a team if you don't listen to your colleagues? Stories can plug us into other people's thoughts, feelings and experiences. Stories build empathy, and empathy helps you build better ideas.

Stories that Connect

1. ★ Story Listening

Reach out to people by listening to the wisdom contained in their stories.



2. ★ Abstractions

Don't just ask questions. Watch how people behave too.



3. 🍷 Universal Stories

Look for common ground and shared experiences.



4. 🕶 Story-ish Conversations

Start looking for stories in everyday situations.



5. 🍷 Circle of Life

Develop relatable stories based on characters and journeys we all recognise.





Stories that Explain

Bring your strategy to life. Show why those abstract statements matter in the real world.

How many people understand the strategic direction of their organisation? How many care? Most strategy documents sit on the digital equivalent of a dusty shelf. But your strategy is actually an attempt to bring clarity to chaos, to choose your path through a changing world. That sounds like a great story, waiting to be told.

Stories that Explain

1. 🧨 Order & Chaos

Where do you stand in an ever-changing world?



2. 🧨 Good & Evil

Which side do you take in the important battles?



3. 🏆 What's it About?

Why does this strategy matter to your colleagues?



4. 🚗 Rolls Royce Moment

Help us see your strategy in action.



5. 🎣 Story Hooks

Make your strategy sound interesting enough to actually read.





Stories that Lead

Build a stronger team by learning from each other's stories of struggles, triumphs and setbacks.

Does everyone in your team understand the rules of “how we do things round here”? Does everyone appreciate the experience and wisdom among their colleagues?

Your team culture is too important to leave to chance. Make your team more cohesive and inclusive by sharing stories of what “good” looks like.

Stories that Lead

1. **Curious Tales**

Find out what really makes your team members tick.



2. **Man in a Hole**

Frame the work you're doing together as an epic journey.



3. **Emotional Dashboard**

Find stories in the highs and lows of any project.



4. **Thoughtful Failures**

Extract the wisdom of mistakes and setbacks after a project.



5. **Story Bank**

Collect useful stories all the team can learn from.





Stories that Impress

Present your ideas with confidence. Don't bury them under dusty layers of business jargon.

Hook our attention, make your facts flow like a story and master the art of show and tell. You've got an important message: say it with style!

Stories that Impress

1. ✂ Movie Time

Make sure you're actually telling a story, not just giving facts and opinions



2. ▲ Five Ts

Get the beats of your story right with a simple structure.



3. ✂ Story Hooks

Grab your audience's attention from start to finish.



4. ✂ Show and Tell

Don't let your visual presentation bore or confuse people.



5. 🎯 Cut to the Chase

Have a plan in case your presentation falls flat.





The Dragon & the City

Explain your project as if it's an epic adventure. Get people excited about your plan of action.

There's a dragon outside the city walls.

Your world is no longer safe. What should you do?

Escape: find a safer place to live.

Defend: strengthen the city walls.

Attack: take on the dragon before he gets stronger.

Each option has risks and rewards. Just like your project.

Try this version of a story after  **Three Great Conflicts** tactic.

The Dragon & the City

You need to get people excited about your work. Turn your project goals into an epic story about a *City* (the status quo, safe but limited) and a *Dragon* (threatening but full of potential).

1. What is your City?

- What is good and valuable in the status quo?
- What is wrong, unfair or wasteful?
- Who's in charge? Who do you need to persuade to act?

2. What is your Dragon?

- Where is the threat coming from?
- How has it been allowed to get this bad?
- Is there an opportunity here? (Dragons hoard gold!)

3. Escape


- Where would you go?
- What should you take with you?
- What's the cost of abandoning the city?

4. Defend

- What is worth defending in the old city?
- How can you strengthen your walls?
- Walls protect, but they also restrict. What's the cost of staying put?

5. Attack

- What's your best line of attack?
- What are your chances of winning?
- What's the reward and is it worth the risk?

Use  **What's It About?** to bring your Dragon story into the real world.



Three Great Conflicts

Show how your work helps people with life's great battles. Conflict drives your story forward, because we want to know how it resolves.

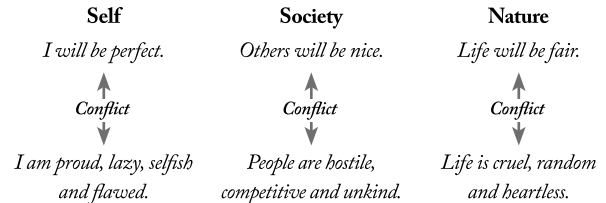
In a perfect world, life would be a dream. You would do the right thing, other people would be nice and life would be fair. Then there's the nightmare: flawed individuals, fighting each other, surrounded by natural disasters and bad luck. Reality is somewhere in the middle, and we get there by resolving lots of conflicts.

Resolve the conflicts that you or your user face with  *Happy Ever Afters*.


Three Great Conflicts

Hollywood loves a good fight. Most movies centre on one of three Great Conflicts:

- **Hero Against Nature:** fighting monsters, animals, disease, weather, accidents and Acts of God. For example; *Jaws* (1975).
- **Hero Against Society:** fighting other people over resources, goals or values. For example; *Black Panther* (2018).
- **Hero Against Self:** we are our own worst enemy, struggling to do what we know is right. For example; *Trainspotting* (1996).



1. What would the *Dream* version of your project look like?
2. What's the *Nightmare* version?
3. Where are the points of conflict between *Dream* and *Nightmare*?
4. Which is the greatest conflict that you - or your user - must fight? This should be at the heart of your story.
5. How could this conflict resolve?

Tip: shape the ups and downs of your conflict with  *No Easy Way*.



Order & Chaos

Show how your project can impose order on a chaotic mess—or disrupt a system that’s too rigid.

Every story contains three elements: *The Known*, *The Unknown* and *The Hero*.

The Known world is orderly, safe but restricted.
The Unknown world is chaotic, risky but full of potential.
The Hero (that’s you!) must explore both worlds and find the right balance between chaos and order.

Tip: try this tactic from your user’s point of view as well, making them the Hero.

Order & Chaos

1. *Order*: describe the *Known* world: e.g.; the client you’re working with, their existing products and users.

- What’s positive about this world? (utility, predictability, safety)
- What is negative? (boring, incomplete, imperfect)

2. *Chaos*: describe the *Unknown* world; e.g.; competitors, changing technologies, changing user behaviours, Acts of God.



- What is negative about chaos? (threats and unpredictability)
- What is positive? (potential for renewal and opportunity)

3. How does *Chaos* disrupt *Order*?

- How does the *Unknown* world create sudden change in the *Known* world? (for example; a natural disaster)
- What new info becomes available? (anomalies, new patterns)

4. You are the *Hero*. How do you respond?

- Are you helping your client impose order onto a situation that is too chaotic and threatening?
- Are you injecting some much needed new life into a situation that is too stale and rigid?

Turn this insight into a conversational story using  **Five Ts** or a presentation using a *Story Arc* like  **Man in a Hole**.



Concept

Get our attention




Secrets & Puzzles

Make your story stick in our minds: promise a secret waiting to be revealed or a puzzle waiting to be solved.

We are social creatures, always wondering what other people are thinking and doing. And we are curious creatures, always wondering why things work. Put these elements together and you have powerful attention hooks that can keep your audience with you until the end of your story.

Tip: try this tactic to write an intro for your  **Simple Sales Stories**

or  **What's It About?** story.

Secrets & Puzzles

a. Secrets are a powerful form of *information gap*. If you point out something I *don't* know, you are highlighting an information gap, which I naturally want to close. If you “own” the missing information—if it's your secret—then I must pay attention to you.

Exploit a secret in your story:

- what new information did you discover?
- how was it kept secret?
- what price did you pay to find this new information?
- what will your audience gain by acquiring this new information?

Keywords: secret, confidential, insider, exclusive, hidden, restricted, banned, untold, forgotten.

b. Puzzles work because we like to think the world makes sense. When you point out any kind of anomaly, irony or inconsistency, it becomes a glaring information gap that we want to close.

Exploit a puzzle in your story. Can you find a moment in your story where you discovered an...

- anomaly; “this is not normal”.
- irony; “this is not what you'd expect”.
- inconsistency; “this doesn't fit with what went before”.

How did you discover your puzzle? How did you make sense of it? What will your audience gain by acquiring this new information?

Keywords: puzzle, riddle, odd, bizarre, unexpected, ironic, paradox, peculiar, mystery.

Try these keywords in the subject line of an email, the headline of a blog post or the intro to a presentation. But if you promise a secret or a puzzle, you must deliver new information. Otherwise you are just writing clickbait!




Rules, Cheats & Rebels

Tell us a rule, then show someone breaking it. Now you've got our attention: will they be punished or vindicated?

What do Eve, Pandora and Peter Rabbit have in common? They were all given rules—and broke them. Eve eats the apple, Pandora opens the box, Peter Rabbit goes into Mr McGregor's garden. And that's when things get interesting. We all live by rules. So we pay very close attention to stories about anyone who breaks them.

If you're a rule-breaking innovator, try this tactic alongside  **Trust Me, I'm an Expert.**

Rules, Cheats & Rebels

1. Who is the rule breaker in your story? It could be you, the innovator. Or it could be your user, customer or stakeholder.
2. Set out all the possible rules the hero of your story could break. Remember that most of the rules we live by are not written down. ( **Good & Evil** helps you identify unwritten social rules)
3. Now play the story out in two directions:

Your Hero is a Rebel:


- Rebels act selflessly and at cost to themselves.
- Rebels break society's rules in order to obey a higher rule. Think of Rosa Parks or Emmeline Pankhurst.
- Rebels don't hide their actions.

What happens next? We want Rebels to be vindicated. The moral of a Rebel story is: "this rule no longer holds."

Your Hero is a Cheat:

- Cheats act selfishly to avoid cost to themselves.
- Cheats break rules the rest of us have to follow. Think of politicians breaching their own lockdown restrictions.
- Cheats hide their actions.

What happens next? We want Cheats to be punished. The moral of a Cheat story is: "this rules still applies."

*Tip:  **Downfall** shows how we can learn valuable lessons from the story of a punished Cheat.*



Good & Evil

Tap into strong feelings of right and wrong in your audience. Bring a moral conflict into your story.

In a simple story, you set up a battle between *Right vs Wrong* (with you on the side of the angels). But you can also show tough choices: when two *Rights* collide or we must choose the lesser of *Evils*. We love this kind of complex storytelling, which is why *Breaking Bad* won so many awards!

Try this tactic alongside 🧠 *Three Great Conflicts* or before developing a story based on 🧠 *Rules, Cheats & Rebels*.

Good & Evil

Jonathan Haidt identifies six basic moral conflicts:

- care vs harm;
- fairness vs cheating;
- liberty vs oppression;
- authority vs subversion;
- loyalty vs betrayal;
- purity vs filth.

Simple Conflict Story

Which side does your project take in any of these battles? For example, if you're trying to reduce plastic waste, the conflict is between *purity vs filth*.

Complex Conflict Story

The German philosopher Friedrich Hegel said that “genuine tragedy is not a conflict between right and wrong, it is a conflict between two rights.”

Does your project try to balance one competing good against another, or help us choose the lesser of two evils?

For example, if you're developing a way to encourage whistleblowers to report abusive behaviour at work, that involves *care vs harm*, but also *loyalty vs betrayal*.

Use 🏠 *Five Ts* to play around with ways to highlight the conflict at the heart of your story.



Universal Stories

Build your story on solid foundations. Use elements that everyone will recognise.

Humans are wonderfully diverse, but we have more in common than sets us apart. Every society, anywhere in the world and at any point in history, shares certain basic habits and ways of thinking. These universal traits come up time and again in the stories we tell. They are reliable building blocks for your story too.

Universal Stories

Can you tell a story about people involved in your project, based on any of these common traits?

- a. *Free Will*: we see ourselves and other people as free-willed individuals, making deliberate choices. (see **Trust Me, I'm an Expert**)
- b. *Conflict and Cooperation*: everyone is capable of both. We can choose either. (see **Three Great Conflicts**)
- c. *Inconsistencies*: we all have gaps between what we do, say and think. (see also **Abstractions**)
- d. *Fear and Bravery*: we all understand that fears can be overcome. (see **The Dragon & The City**)
- e. *Right and Wrong*: we all understand the difference. We expect fairness *and* judgement from our peers. (see **Rules, Cheats & Rebels**)
- f. *Rites of Passage*: all cultures have childhood, adolescent and adult phases of life. Perhaps you are helping your user or customer grow up in some way? (see **Happy Ever Afters**)



Concept

Explain what drives you



Curious Tales

Tell me what grabs your attention and you're halfway to grabbing my attention too.

You have no control over your own curiosity. Some things fascinate you, others don't. What's intriguing for you might seem weird to me, but I am interested in what makes you tick. So your *Curious Tales* are a great way to give me insights into what drives you forward.

Tip: Try Curious Tales as part of a team building session, along with



Drive Stories.

Curious Tales

When you need to explain what's driving you or your team forward, try one of these *Curious Tales*. You can also use the same questions to discover what's driving your user, customer or stakeholder.

a. **Curiosity** = anomaly + potential benefit

What do you keep noticing about a certain situation? What's new, unusual and *potentially useful*?

- "Eureka!" moment
- Slow hunch that builds up over time.

Go deeper with ★ *That's Funny*

b. **Caution** = anomaly + potential threat

What makes you uneasy about a certain situation? What's new, unusual and *potentially harmful*?

c. **Flow**: when are you so absorbed in a task that time just flies? This is when you're practising your skills *and* learning something new. It's deeply satisfying.

- Where are you, what are you doing, who are you with?
- What does this tell us about your goals and motivation?

d. **Envy**: when have you realised that someone else is doing what you want to do? This is healthy, motivating envy—not the same as envying someone's luxury lifestyle.

- Who do you envy? What are they doing?
- What does this tell us about your goals and motivation?

e. **Sacrifice**: when have you given up something valuable to follow a particular path?

- What did you choose? What did it cost you?
- What does this tell us about your goals and motivation?

Use these insights to develop a character story with 🧑 *Trust Me, I'm an Expert.*



Concept

Create a relatable story



Circle of Life

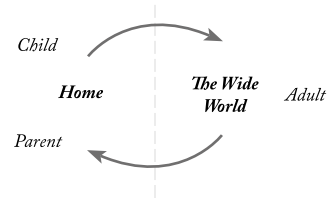
Help us recognise the characters, conflicts and changes in your story. Relate them to universal life stages.

We're born, we grow up, we leave home. We find our way in the world and create a home of our own. We all share stages in life's journey. So we all recognize the same basic characters: roles we adopt or people we meet along the way. Use these *archetypes* to tell a relatable story about your work or your user's journey.

Rewatch The Lion King (with Elton John's brilliant Circle of Life song) for inspiration.

Circle of Life

When you need a relatable story, use *archetypes* that are buried deep in our collective experience.



The Circle of Life takes us from home, into the wide world and back again, to a new home and a new role. At each stage, our archetypal character has good and bad sides.


Child: Innocent, playful - also weak, naive.


Adult: Adventurous, clever - also rebellious, cynical

Parent: Wise, supportive - also dominant, judgemental

Which life stage is your user at? Which archetypal role are they playing? Can your story focus on:

- Conflict:** are you helping them with a conflict between people at different life stages? Are you helping them navigate the good and bad elements within their archetype?
- Change:** are you helping your user with a crucial rite of passage from one archetype to another? Do you help him/her to grow up in some way?
- Character:** are you helping your user to fit into the Circle of Life, or fight against it? For example, children can be dominant, parents can be adventurous.

Develop your user's *Circle of Life* story with  **No Easy Way** or

 **Hero & Guide.**



Shock of the Old

We can get so hooked on imagining the future that we forget to look for inspiration in stories from the past.

Never forget just how hard it is to make anything truly innovative. History has some harsh lessons for us.

“Most new things fail. Objects or actions which survive for generations must be good at serving some hidden purpose... they correspond with something deep in our nature.” — *Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Antifragile*

Tip: use this tactic to get stories from users. Or practice by taking a field trip to a museum (or junk shop).

Shock of the Old

1. Watch your user closely. See what old objects they use and ask yourself “What story is this object telling me?”

- What obvious purpose did this have?
- What hidden purposes could it have?
- Who owns it, who uses it, who adapts it?
- How does it make us feel?
- Does it have a symbolic or ritualistic power?
- Does it correspond to something deep in our nature?

2. Can you find the deep wisdom contained in the stories of how we relate to these old objects? How can you relate this wisdom the story you’re trying to tell?

For example...

- Dogs have been with us for a very long time.
- Obvious purpose: guarding, hunting, companionship
- Hidden purpose: connect us to nature, take us for walks
- Who in the family owns a dog? Does the dog own us?
- Feel: responsible, loved, trusted
- Symbolic power: obedience
- Deep in our nature: we are still animals at heart.



Story Listening

Listen to other people's stories when you need their wisdom or support. Don't just talk at them!

If you want to be an innovator, you need to be a story-listener as much as a storyteller. You need to gather information as well as explain your idea. The wisdom you need is out there: it's in other people's stories. Just listen—and ask the right questions.

Watch and Listen! Add the ✶ *Abstraction* tactic for an immersive approach to story-gathering.

Story Listening

Prof Gary Klein has spent years interviewing firefighters, pilots, nurses and soldiers about life-or-death decisions, made under extreme pressure. He looks for teachable moments: stories of how people deal with change and new information.

This approach is inspired by Prof Klein's methods. What happens when you listen like this to your users, colleagues or stakeholders?

1st listen: Is this a memorable story?

- Why does this story stick in your subject's memory?
- What's the strong emotion attached to this story?

2nd listen: Create a basic timeline

- What were you trying to achieve?
- What happened?

3rd listen: Add key decisions to the timeline

- What were your options as the situation unfolded?
- What if you'd tried something else?

4th listen: Identify the expertise

- Where might a novice have made mistakes if they'd been dealing with the same situation instead of you?
- What might someone with different expertise have missed that you spotted?

Turn the teachable moments into a story using ▲ *No Easy Way* or ▲ *Man in a Hole* story arcs.



Emotional Dashboard

Look for strong emotions when you need to find a story.
What made you feel that way and what happened next?

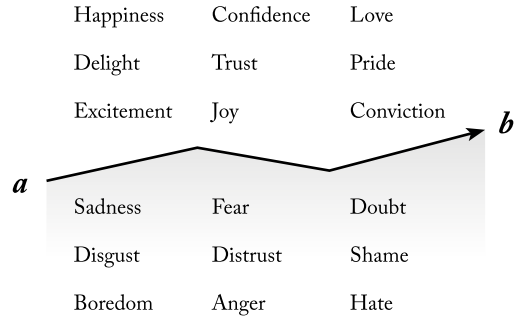
Emotions are our dashboard indicators, flashing red if we're being thwarted, glowing nicely if it's all going to plan. We constantly monitor other people's feelings, because emotions can bind our group together or tear it apart. So when you find a strong emotion—yours or someone else's—you know you're onto a good story.

Tip: Use this alongside ✶ **Abstractions** when you are researching customer or user behaviour.

Emotional Dashboard

Every project is a journey from *a* to *b*, from where you are now to where you want to be. When you move closer to your goal, you feel positive emotion. Get knocked back, you feel bad.

1. Which of these emotions have you felt on your project?



2. Write sentences turning each strong emotion into a story moment.

"I felt... [strong emotion]"

"When I realised... [change or new information]"

"Because I wanted... [original goal]"

"And so I... [reaction or lesson learned]"

3. Try the same exercise but from your customer or user's point of view.

- Which of these strong emotions is your user experiencing?
- How is your product helping them get what they wanted?

Tip: use ✶ **Movie Time** to turn a strong emotional moment into a visual story.



Data Detectives

Wrap your key facts up in a story if you want people to remember them.

You can get great insights from data, but you can also tell great stories about it too. Many people struggle to understand data, even when it's beautifully visualised. But they'll remember a few key facts if you tell them in a story-ish way.

Try this alongside 🧐 **Hero & Guide**. Imagine your ability to understand data is a magical power that lets you help your user. What kind of story would that be?

Data Detectives

Run this workshop once you've got your data in. Here are three ways to turn your work into different types of story:

The Data Zoomer

1. Start by zooming out to show the big picture. What are the most important trends or correlations you've found? What is the overall story that the data is telling?
2. Now zoom in. Show us the little picture—a single, vivid example that is typical of the trend or correlation you've discovered.
3. Tell a story that goes from big to little picture: "We've found this trend [*zoom out*]... for example [*zoom in*]."
4. Or tell it the other way round: "Here's an interesting thing we found [*zoom in*]... it's typical of a much wider trend [*zoom out*]." Repeat for your main findings.

The Data Detective

Think of your research as a detective story:

- You find a body on the floor (this is the problem you're trying to solve).
- You search for evidence (your data sources).
- It's confusing at first, but then you find the vital clue (your insight).
- You follow that lead and identify the killer (the solution to your problem).

The Data Sceptic

Data can give the illusion of certainty. But acknowledging gaps in your data can make your story seem more solid.

- How might we be wrong with our data?
- What alternative conclusions could we draw?
- What matters, but can't be measured?

Try 📖 **Stories That Explain** to develop your *Data Detective* stories




Thoughtful Failures

Every time you fail there's a story to tell—and plenty of people ready to listen.

Nobody likes to make mistakes. But we rarely make them deliberately. Most of our failures come after much careful thought. There's a lot of wisdom to be extracted from what Google call "thoughtful failures" (which is why they reward staff who make them). Failure is only a tragedy if you cover it up or refuse to learn from it.

Compare this to  **Epic Fail** stories that entrepreneurs tell about their business disasters.

Thoughtful Failures

1. What went wrong? Get as wide a range of views as possible. Focus on thought processes, decisions, actions and communication. Try not to assign blame or criticise people.
2. Now see what the failure might tell you about:
 - Goals:* were we aiming for the right things?
 - Assumptions:* how was our knowledge incomplete?
 - Insights:* when did we realise we were going wrong?
 - Skills:* do we need to improve or learn new ones?
 - Communication:* where and when did it break down?
3. Ask "what could we do differently next time?"
4. Ask "who else needs to hear this story, so they don't repeat the same mistake?" As Laszlo Bock at Google says: "Find the moral in the mistake, then teach it."
5. Craft this thoughtful failure into a story with  **No Easy Way**.



That's Funny

You can tell a great story about your project by finding “That’s funny...” moments in your work.

The sci-fi genius Isaac Asimov once said that the most exciting phrase to hear in science is not “Eureka” but “That’s funny...” This is the sound of unexpected insights, snagging in your brain. Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar, either way these moments are gold-dust for your story!

Funny moments can emerge as old systems break down. Check

✧ **Order & Chaos** for signs of change.

That's Funny

Look back over your project. Did you have any of these “that’s funny...” moments?

Funny ha-ha

Laughter is the emotional reward for discovering our own misconceptions. It’s the sound of our brains rapidly rebuilding a conceptual model to make sense of the world. For example: “My dog’s got no nose.” “How does he smell?” “Awful!”

- What made you laugh about your project (a belly laugh, a contemptuous snort or just a wry smile)?
- What made other people laugh?
- How did your conceptual model of the world change?

Funny peculiar

When have you found something strange or odd as you’ve worked through this project?

- Contradictions. Either your data or your assumptions are wrong. Which old model of the world should you question when things don’t fit?
- Coincidences. Finding unexpected connections is like joining the dots. What new model of the world might you need to build if this is not just random?

Acting funny

Is someone acting out of character?

- What does this say about your expectations about them?
- Do you need a new model to explain this behaviour?
- Use 🧠 **What’s My Motivation?** to go deeper into character.

Use ✧ **Data Detectives** to tell the story of your insight.



Abstractions

Don't just ask questions, observe people in action. We often understand much more than we can explain.

Imagine you're watching a group of five-year-olds playing a made-up game in the playground. Take one kid aside and ask her to explain the rules of the game and why she's taking part. How useful do you think her answers will be? Explanations are an abstraction. Real knowledge lies much deeper, in action and stories.

Tip: if you're planning a field trip to observe your users, take this card along with ✧ *Emotional Dashboard*.

Abstractions

Watch your users in action. See how many levels you can discover, starting with action and working up to rationalisation.

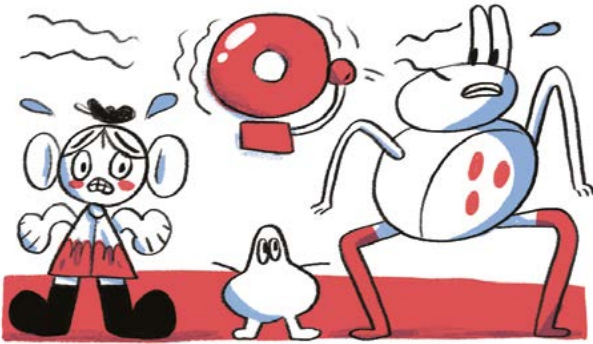
- *Action*: what is your user doing?
- *Imitation*: who are they modelling their behaviour on?
- *Ritual/Play*: what patterns/rules are they following?
- *Narrative*: what kind of story do they tell?
- *Rationalisation*: how do they explain why they do this?

Try ✧ *Story Listening* when asking questions.

Look for contradictions between what people say and do, as these can reveal new angles for your project. Use ✧ *That's Funny* to help.

Use 🧐 *Secrets & Puzzles* or 🏆 *What's My Motivation?* to explain your insights.






Social Proof

You're in a busy room. Suddenly a fire alarm goes off. What do you do?

You don't calmly pick up your stuff and head for the fire exit. You look at other people. If everyone's heading for the door, you will too. If nobody moves, you'll assume it's just a drill. In uncertain situations, we watch other people. Stories about other people's behaviour act as "social proof" when you're trying to influence someone else.

Social Proof

a. Trends:

- What data can you present showing that lots of people are acting in a certain way?
- Is there an *Early Adopter* who could be worth watching? (see  *Innovation Curve*)
- Remember: *Zoom Out* to show the big picture, then *Zoom In* to show an individual example (see ✦ *Data Detectives* for more)

b. Prototypes:

- What kind of tests and trials have you run with your project? How did people react?
- Remember: don't just get verbal reactions, watch how people behave. (check out ✦ *Abstractions*)

c. Testimonials:

Five star reviews are great, but testimonials are better. Trouble is, we don't like asking for them (it feels a bit needy). And people write pretty bland stuff like "good service." What you need is a little story. So try asking these questions:

- Was there one thing you really liked about [x]?
- Was there one moment when you thought "yes, I made the right decision working with these folks."?
- What would you say to persuade a friend to work with us?



Trust Me, I'm an Expert

Win my trust. Tell me a story that shows your character and values *in action*.

Imagine you're an expert immunologist. You have all the facts to show why vaccination is a good idea. Then we find out you haven't had your own kids vaccinated. Should we believe a word you say? Your facts haven't changed, but your actions let you down. You haven't lived up to the values we expect from the character of *The Expert*.

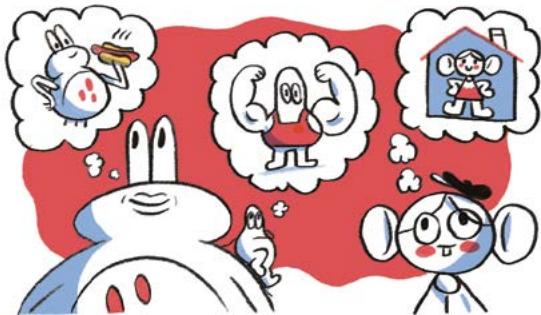
Try this tactic to develop your own "expert" story ahead of  **Pitch Perfect**

Trust Me, I'm an Expert

What kind of *Expert* are you? What are your values? Tell us a story so we can see your character *in action*.

- What matters more than money? Which parts of your project would you work on even if you weren't getting paid?
- What kind of projects would you never work on, no matter how much you were paid? What kind of work would you be embarrassed to share with people you respect?
- When have you done the right thing, even though it cost you time, money or reputation?
- Imagine your project fails. Write an obituary that includes the line "at least we..." For example, the boss of Kodak might say "our company failed, but at least we gave people millions of memories."
- What have you sacrificed for the greater good?
- What values do you share with your client or user? When have you actually done something (not just posted a "like" on Facebook) that they would admire?

Use  **Movie Time** or  **What's It About** tactic to help.



What's My Motivation?


How will your user or customer respond to your idea? It helps if you know what's driving them.


When we want to achieve anything, we need other people's help. So we're constantly trying to figure out what people want and—as a result—how they might respond to us. This is why actors ask “what's my motivation?” when they take on a character in a story. Understanding your user's motivations will help you too.

Tip: If you're not sure whose motivation you're investigating, use

 **Audience Profile.**

What's My Motivation?

1. Make a list of the key “actors” in your project. This could include the client, a range of users or stakeholders.
2. Now apply the Method Acting approach pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavski to each character separately.
 - *Who am I?*
 - *Where am I?*
 - *When is it?*
 - *What do I want?*
 - *Why do I want it?*
 - *How will I get it?*
 - *What must I overcome to get it?*
3. As a final stage, draw connections between your key actors with two headings for each connection:
 - Co-operation: why might one actor help another reach their goal?
 - Conflict: why might one actor hinder another?
4. Use  **Good & Evil** to explore different ways your actors might co-operate or clash with each other.

Develop a story of what motivates you, your team or your user. Show how you can overcome barriers with  **No Easy Way.**



Drive Stories

Why do you work? For the money, yes. But what really drives you? These stories build a better team culture.

If you want innovation you need inner motivation. Let's face it: change means a lot of hard work for an uncertain reward. Money by itself won't motivate you—or your team—if you feel frustrated, bored or uninspired. So, find stories that show a different way of working: with autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Drive Stories

Explore your team's positive and negative experiences of working with autonomy, mastery and purpose.

- a. *Autonomy*: a sense that you have control over the way you work. e.g.: the time and place you work, the tools you use, the people you work with or the direction you follow. This can give you “how we work together” stories.
 - Positive: “Here's a moment when I felt I had enough autonomy:... Here's what happened... Here's how it felt...”
 - Negative: “Here's a moment when I didn't have enough autonomy:... Here's what happened... Here's how it felt...”
- b. *Mastery*: a sense that your skills are steadily improving. This can give you “how we grow” stories.
 - Positive: “Here's a moment when I felt I'd mastered the skills I need:... Here's what happened... Here's how it felt...”
 - Negative: “Here's a moment when I didn't have the skills I needed:... Here's what happened... Here's how it felt...”
- c. *Purpose*: a sense that you are doing worthwhile work, serving a greater good. This can give you “why we do it” stories
 - Positive: “Here's a moment when I could see how my work contributes to a greater good... Here's what happened... Here's how it felt...”
 - Negative: “Here's a moment when I couldn't see the bigger picture... Here's what happened... Here's how it felt...”

You can develop these experiences into teachable stories by using

 **Five Ts** or  **Cut to the Chase**.



Hero & Guide

Stop talking about yourself. Make your user the Hero of your story. You play a supporting role: the *Expert Guide*.

For every Luke, there's a Yoda. And as the little green fella might say "Hero of every story not you are." Tell us what your *Hero* is trying to achieve. Then show us how you guide them on their journey and what special gift you offer them along the way.

Hero & Guide

Get a fresh perspective on your user's journey and how they might respond to your ideas.

1. Map your user's journey: where are they now? What is their problem? Where do they want to be?
2. Where do you come in to their journey as an *Expert Guide*?

The Explorer

You value: new experiences

You say: "leave your comfort zone"

You give: map or compass

The Rebel

You value: disruption, radical change

You say: "break the rules"

You give: crowbar or lock pick

The Sage

You value: wisdom, knowledge

You say: "educate yourself"

You give: book and crystal ball

The Defender

You value: safety, security

You say: "protect your treasures"

You give: armour and padlock

The Muse

You value: creativity, imagination

You say: "express yourself"




You give: paint and canvas

The Warrior

You value: putting things right

You say: "fight the good fight"

You give: weapons and tactics

3. Use the story arc cards:  **Rags to Riches**,  **Man in a Hole** or  **No Easy Way**—to develop your *Expert Guide* story.




What's it About?

Me: “So what are you working on?”

You: “Umm... well... er...” Don't be that person.

How can it be so hard to answer this simple question? Sometimes you're so absorbed in your idea, you don't know where to start explaining it to someone new. It's called “the curse of knowledge” and some experts get it really bad. But don't worry, you escape the curse with a well-told story.

If you're starting out on storytelling, use this card first along with

 **Audience Profile.**

What's it About?

When you need an elevator pitch or a short summary of your work for an email, CV or online profile, try any of these approaches:

Change

We don't pay attention to things that stay the same.

We notice change. Are you:

- Responding to an external change/threat
- Initiating a change/opportunity

Go deeper with  ***The Dragon & the City.***

New information

We are knowledge seekers, alert to new things in case they benefit or harm us. Tell us:

- You've realised something new
- You've spotted something isn't right


Go deeper with  ***Curious Tales.***

Personal benefit

No matter how abstract or technical your work is, somewhere down the line there's a person in the real world who benefits.

- “Ultimately I'm trying to help [X] achieve [Y]”
- “This is part of the wider problem I'm solving *for you.*”

Go deeper with  ***Audience Profile.***

Now you know you can get to the point, try  ***Story Hooks*** to make your story more intriguing.



Cut to the Chase

Oh no, you're losing your audience! Their mind's are wandering. Quick, get their attention back on you.

"Thou shalt not be dull" is a golden rule of storytelling. You know when you're losing people: they start to look restless or uncomfortable. Let's be honest, it's annoying to listen to a boring story. So it's time to quit the back-story and cut to the chase: give us action, emotion or meaning.

Tips: this works with face-to-face storytelling. But it applies to online stories too. Assume we get bored easily. How can you tweak our attention throughout your story?


Cut to the Chase

Think of this tactic like an emergency escape plan. If your well-prepared story is going badly, bail out in one of these ways:

a. Cut to the action:

Take us to the moment that the story hinges on, especially if it's an abrupt change and/or a crisis.

- "So, basically, what happened was..."
- "Suddenly..."
- "The worst moment was..."

Plan your escape:  *Five Ts*

b. Cut to the emotion:

Take us to a moment of maximum emotional impact, either positive or negative.

- "I was amazed... shocked... surprised..."
- "I was so disappointed... stressed..."
- "We were so relieved... elated..."

Plan your escape:  *Emotional Dashboard*


c. Cut to the meaning:

Take us to the lesson you've learned, then rewind back to the moment that brought you the new information.

- "That's when I realised..."
- "I'd always thought..."
- "I'll never forget..."

Plan your escape:  *Thoughtful Failures*

d. Alternatively, stop talking and ask your audience a question. Turn the situation from a "story download" to a two-way exchange using

 *Story-ish Conversations.*





Pitch Perfect

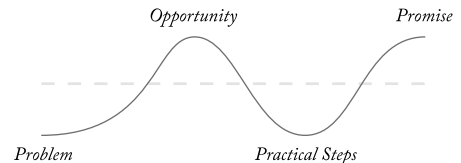
Convince me to back your idea. Show me: what have you got that I need? And why should I trust you to deliver?


Maybe you're an entrepreneur pitching for investment. Maybe you're asking your boss to back a project. But maybe you're the tenth pitch they've heard that day. You need at least one—maybe two—stories to bring your pitch to life and make it stick in their minds.

Tip: Use  **Audience Profile** to prepare for your pitch.

Pitch Perfect

1. Write a top-line version of your idea. (Use  **What's It About** if you can't do this in one sentence)
 - a. *Very Basic Pitch*—aka your “Elevator” pitch. But don't ever pitch to someone in the lift, that'd be weird.
 - What's the problem you're solving for me?
 - How do you solve it?
 - Why should I trust you? (try  **Trust Me, I'm an Expert** here)
 - b. *Add some POPP to your Pitch*. Set out your pitch like a story arc, accentuating the negative and positive stages for maximum drama.



- Problem: what needs fixing right now (negative)
 - Opportunity: also available to us now (positive)
 - Practical Steps: if we do this, it won't be easy (negative)
 - Promise: but if we get it right, it will be great (positive)
2. Use  **Show & Tell** if you need to create a visual pitch document or presentation.



Simple Sales Stories

Convince new customers to buy into your idea by telling stories about existing customers or users.

“Someone *like you* buys this product.” Or... “Someone *you like* buys this product.” These simple stories work because we’re constantly monitoring other people, looking for wisdom in the crowd. Plus, other people are acting as beta-testers of new products, lowering the risk for us

Try this tactic after developing an  **Audience Profile** and alongside  **Social Proof**.

Simple Sales Stories


a. “Someone *like you* buys this product.”

Moral of the story: “we’ve solved their problem, we can solve yours too.”

- Who are we trying to sell to?
- Who have we already helped who is like them? If not a similar customer, what about a similar sector or market? Maybe we’ve solved a similar problem.
- Which previous customers can we ask for a testimonial?

b. “Someone *you like* buys this product.”:



Moral of the story: “you value this person’s opinion. They trust us. Maybe you should too.”

- Who are we trying to sell to?
 - Who are they influenced by?
 - Why do those people trust us?
- (check out  **Trust Me, I’m an Expert**)

c. Old, Regular and Tricky Customers

Moral of the story: “these guys like us, we must be doing something right”.

- Old customer: “we sold one to this guy 10 years ago, and it still works.”
- Regular customer: “she bought one, then came back for more.”
- Tricky customer: “they complained, but we put it right.”

Now, develop a sales story presentation with  **No Easy Way** or  **Pitch Perfect**.








Story-ish Conversations

Find the insights buried beneath everyday conversations with your colleagues, customers or users.

You don't need a captive audience or PowerPoint slides to tell a story. Make stories part of your daily conversation. Next time you feel a discussion or meeting is going nowhere, try to make it more story-ish by teasing out new information about people and change. What happens when you are the most story-ish person in the room?

Try this tactic after a session developing your  **Audience Profile**.

Story-ish Conversations

1. Find the vivid moments you need to create a visual story:
 - That's an interesting idea, what might it look like in action?
 - Is there an example of how this has worked in the past?
 - Go deeper, with  **Movie Time**.
2. If the conversation is still vague and abstract, get right down into the who, what, where and when:
 - Where were you when this happened? Who else was there?
 - What happened next? And then?
 - Go deeper with  **Story Listening**.
3. Look for the emotion within the story:
 - What's the strongest feeling you remember from that time?
How did you feel in the beginning and by the end?
 - Go deeper with  **Emotional Dashboard**
4. Find the inevitable conflicts that make a good story tick:
 - Who did you need to win over (or work around)?
 - How did you resolve this conflict?
 - Go deeper with  **Three Great Conflicts**
5. Finally, all stories are about change and new information:
 - What happened that forced you to change?
 - When did you realise you'd found something new?
 - Go deeper with  **Five Ts**



Icebreaker Stories

Get your team thinking in a story-ish way.

Stories need to be visual, emotive and dramatic. Warm up your story muscles by inventing fantasy tales based on random images. Cut lots of photos out of magazines or download them from a free online image bank.

Tip: You can do these icebreakers by yourself or with your team.

Icebreaker Stories

a. Photo Story: arrange lots of random images. Ask participants to choose three images they like. Then tell them to arrange them into a simple story structure:

- Before: this is how things used to be
- During: this changed suddenly
- After: this happened as a result

b. Love and Hate: split your team into two groups. Give each group the same photo of an object—for example, a stone.

1. Tell the first group “You *love* this stone. It makes your life complete.” Tell the second group “You *hate* this stone. It’s ruining your life.”
2. Ask each group to invent a story explaining why they feel that way about their stone.

Here are my examples, both loosely based on real stories:

- Love: “I’m the grandson of a Cornish tin miner. My company has found lithium in the same rocks he mined. We can bring wealth and pride back to these communities.”
- Hate: “I’m trying to build a lighthouse on a godforsaken rock in the stormy north Atlantic. This granite is so hard, it’s ruining our drills. My men could die out here, but sailors will die if we fail.”



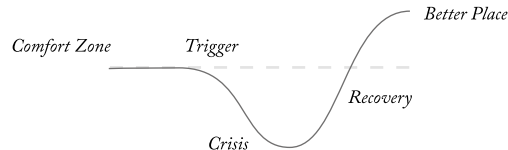
Man in a Hole

**This is the story of your first day at school or your first job.
It's every fear you faced and every lesson you've learned.**

You're doing OK minding your own business. Suddenly, something takes you out—a pandemic strikes, you lose your job or get divorced. You pick yourself up and carry on, a little older and wiser. Anyone can fall into a hole, but you can't fall out. You've got to climb. This is where you show your strength.

Man in a Hole

American novelist Kurt Vonnegut said “nobody ever lost money telling the story of a man in a hole.” It has five basic beats:



- *Comfort zone*: this is not a bad place but something is missing, some potential is going to waste.
- *Trigger*: something knocks you down. Either you were unlucky or you weren't paying attention.
- *Crisis*: you're down in a hole, but in stories we find treasure in the dark. This is where you find or learn something valuable.
- *Recovery*: you put what you've learned to good use and start climbing back.
- *Better place*: you are older and wiser, you won't get knocked down so easily next time.

Think about your own project in these terms.

What's your version, as innovators?

What's the version you could tell about your user?

For example, can you tell a 2020 story about the pandemic, using Man in a Hole?



Rags to Riches

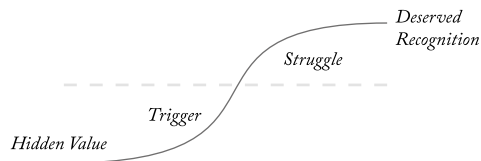
**Cinderella, Rocky or Steve Jobs—it’s the same story.
The rise to success from humble beginnings.**

We love success stories because we hope to follow them. The moral of this optimistic tale is “you can do it!”. It also makes a great sales story: you’ve got a problem, we can make things better. But you don’t have to promise wealth to tell a Rags to Riches story. These tales are not about money—they’re about value.

If this story sounds “too good to be true“, move on to  **No Easy Way.**

Rags to Riches

A Rags to Riches story arc hits these beats:



Beginning: *Hidden Value*


The hero of the story is in a bad place (physically, emotionally or socially). But there is something inside them or their situation which is valuable, even though nobody else can see it. Think of Cinderella, a loving child treated badly; or Rocky, a small time boxer in slums of Philadelphia.

Middle: *Trigger and Struggle*

Something happens that makes the hero want to change. Cinderella hears about the Ball, Rocky gets a shot at the Championship. They get outside help at first, but ultimately they’re on their own.

End: *Deserved Recognition*

Cinderella wants to find love, not just live in a fancy palace. Rocky actually loses his Championship fight (sorry, spoiler). But now everyone can see their hidden value: Cinderella is kind and loving, Rocky is a fighter.

- If this is *your* story, what’s the hidden value that drives you onwards?
- If this is your *user’s* story, what role do you play? (Hint: you might be the Fairy Godmother). Use  **Hero & Guide** to develop this story further.



No Easy Way

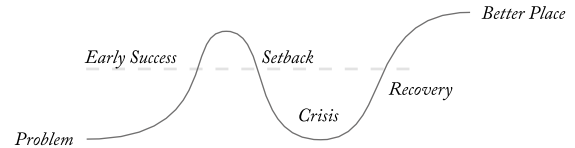
Nothing good is ever easy. If something was good *and* easy, we'd be doing it already.

Think of all the miracle diets and fitness fads that promise a six pack in six weeks, or a beach-body by the summer. Do you believe a word of it? Well, the part that longs for a quick fix might be taken in. But you're not trying to con your audience. They deserve a more realistic story. They need to hear about setbacks as well as successes.

No Easy Way

This story arc is the ultimate rollercoaster ride. We love the rise and fall of fortunes in a story—they are addictive.

Here are the beats of a No Easy Way story:



- **Problem:** a bad place, where danger lurks or potential is unrealised. (Think: Harry Potter living under the stairs.)
- **Early Success:** the Hero takes an opportunity and things start to change. (Harry goes to Hogwarts)
- **Setback:** the Hero's own weakness, or hostile reaction of others, make things turn bad (Harry encounters Dementors, Death Eaters and Slytherins)
- **Crisis:** it gets so bad, maybe the Hero would've been better off not trying to change (no one was trying to kill Harry at the Dursleys!)
- **Recovery:** the Hero learns where true strength lies (Harry relies on friends and the power of love)
- **Better place:** danger is averted, potential is realised. (Harry becomes a Wizard, Voldemort is defeated)

Think about your own project in these terms:

- What's your version of No Easy Way, as innovators?
- What's the version you could tell about your user?
- If it's your user's journey, at what point do you join them? Are you Dumbledore to your user's Harry?




Pride & Fall

**This is one of the oldest stories we know.
Icarus, Frankenstein and Titanic all follow its arc.**

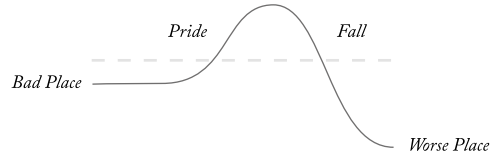
Pride and Fall is the favourite story for our inner sceptic. Its moral is “this sounds too good to be true”. It’s the story your clients or users might be hearing, even though you’re telling them Rags to Riches. Use this story arc to get ahead of their scepticism and win them round.

Tip: Flip a failure story into a tale of “hard lessons learned” by using

 ***Man in a Hole.***

Pride & Fall

Pride and Fall stories hit five main beats. Think of the Icarus story as an example.



Bad place: Icarus is imprisoned on an island.

Pride: Daedalus builds him some wings out of wax and feathers. Icarus can defy gravity and nature.

Warning: “Don’t fly too close to the sun.”

Fall: Icarus ignores the advice, flies too close to the sun and the wings melt.

Worse place: instead of imprisoned, the boy drowns in the sea.

Now imagine you need to convince a sceptical user or client that your project is not heading for a fall.


What’s their bad place: the problem you’re trying to solve?

What might sound proud, like you’re trying to fly too high?

Which warnings might you be ignoring?

How might you fall?

How could this leave your user/client worse off than they started?

See if you can reassure the sceptics with  ***No Easy Way.***



Downfall

Macbeth, Harvey Weinstein and Nokia: they all had a hidden flaw that brought them down.

How the mighty have fallen! We love a good Downfall story almost as much as Rags to Riches. This is partly Schadenfreude—taking joy in another’s misfortune. But Downfall stories are also instructive: “let’s not make the same mistake they did!”

Try *Downfall* as a part of a *Post-mortem* session on a failed project:

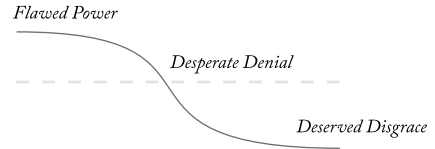
pipdecks.com/postmortem

Downfall

You can use a Downfall story in two ways:


- Defend*: you are the “mighty” one, you’re trying to hold onto your position.
- Exploit*: you are the upstart, you want to take customers from a big rival.

Either way, the beats of the Downfall story are the same:



- **Flawed power**: with Macbeth it was ambition, Weinstein—vile abuse, Nokia—complacency. There’s always a flaw, it is always selfish and hidden.
- **Desperate denial**: flaws begin to show, but the tragic hero covers up and doubles-down, rather than change.
- **Deserved disgrace**: flaws are fully exposed, the tragic hero comes crashing down, to everyone else’s relief.

Defend Against Downfall:

- What are your flaws and weaknesses? How might they be exposed?
- What can you learn from criticism? How might you change?
- If you do come crashing down, what benefits might there be to others? What kind of story could you tell? (See  *Epic Fail*)

Exploit Another’s Downfall:

- What are your rival’s flaws? How can you expose them?
- How can you show your target customers that they deserve better?
- How can you show your values in a positive light by comparison?
- How would the world be a better place if all your rivals flaws were exposed?



Epic Fail

When your plans go wrong, you can play the blame game. Or you can make sense of the failure with a story.

A study of failed startups found people told different types of story to explain what had gone wrong. Some people blamed themselves. Some found a villain to blame. And others blamed external factors. When you're working on a risky project, understanding *Epic Fail* stories can help you deal with inevitable setbacks.

Epic Fail

You'll hear one of these six basic stories after any failure or setback. Use them as a way of thinking differently about what went wrong.

a. Catharsis: suffering and rebirth

- You say: "that was my fault, and I've learned from it"
- Pros: shows humility and an open mind
- Cons: have you learned the right lessons?

b. Hubris: collective overconfidence

- You say: "we tried to run before we could walk"
- Pros: puts the focus on team failings
- Cons: less emphasis on personal responsibility

c. Betrayal: blame someone close

- You say: "he let me down" or "she wasn't up to it"
- Pros: shows skills gaps in the team
- Cons: gets very personal and accusatory

d. Mechanistic: impersonal or organisational failure

- You say: "our system let us down"
- Pros: puts focus on complex causes
- Cons: minimises personal failings

e. Zeitgeist: the spirit of the age

- You say: "everyone was doing the same"
- Pros: puts the failure into wider context
- Cons: other people's actions are no excuse

f. Nemesis: someone deliberately brought you down

- You say: "they had it in for us"
- Pros: identifies bad relationships
- Cons: assumes bad intentions



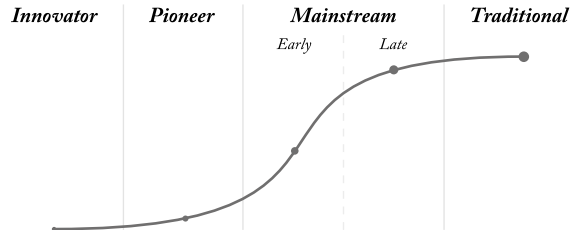
Innovation Curve

Make your bold new idea seem less risky.


People will say “No!” to your new ideas if they feel the risk is too high for them. But each person you meet has a different setting on their risk “thermostat”. You can try slightly different stories about your project, depending on whether you’re talking to a Pioneer, Mainstream or Traditional audience.

Try this tactic as part of an  **Audience Profile** workshop or to develop  **Simple Sales Stories**

Innovation Curve



Innovators: this is you and your team.

- Tell them: stories about team culture (see  **Drive Stories**).

Pioneers: are your first customers. They are adventurous with a high tolerance for risk. They may beta-test your idea with you.

- Hopes: this is new and exciting
- Fears: “innovator tax” i.e. the costs of being first
- Tell them: stories about your process, breakthroughs and prototypes

Early Mainstream: open to new ideas but aware of the pitfalls. They can be great “influencers” on later buyers.

- Hopes: this is new but has been tested
- Fears: reputation damage if I endorse a flop
- Tell them: you can grab a lead in a niche market

Late Mainstream: want to buy a fully developed product, off the shelf.

- Hopes: this is ready and recommended by others
- Fears: cost of disruption to business-as-usual
- Tell them: it works in a niche market, now it’s ready for mass market

Traditional: regard all innovation as high risk, they need to see other mainstream adopters to feel safe.


- Hopes: don’t want to miss out
- Fears: there are costs to being left behind
- Tell them: everyone is doing it, we’ve made it easy



Voyage & Return

Put adventure and the ties of home at the heart of your story. This will keep us hooked til the end.

From Homer's *Odyssey* to *Alice in Wonderland*, we love a voyage into the unknown. Our hero stumbles or leaps into a strange new world. They will learn a lot before they see home again. Their voyage changes everything. The hero is different when they return—and so too is home.

Try  **Order & Chaos** to explore the Known and Unknown worlds in this journey.

Voyage & Return

You can try two versions of *Voyage and Return*. In the first, you are the hero and this is your innovation journey. Or in the second, your customer is the hero and you help them on a journey to solve a problem.

Home: safe, but dull.

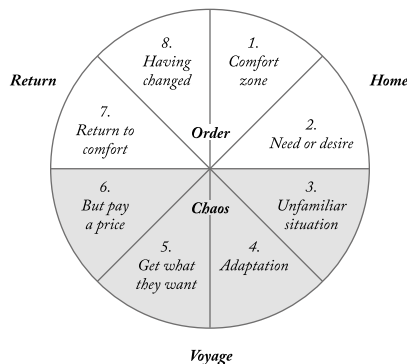
- How is Home less than it could be?
- Why is your Hero anxious for adventure? What do they want?
- What kind of new world is out there? (This could be a strange world in physical, social or psychological terms)

Voyage: into the strange new world.

- How does the journey begin: a deliberate choice, forced or accidental?
- What are the dangers here? What are the opportunities?
- How does your Hero feel the pull of Home?
- What lesson does your Hero learn here?

Return: to the old world, but different

- How has the Hero changed on the voyage?
- How does Home look different on the Hero's return?
- How will the Hero make Home better?





Happy Ever Afters

We're suckers for a happy ending. Life is no fairy tale, but you can always give your story a satisfying end.

Stories show us what it means to grow up and find our place in the world; how to fit in with others and how to do the right thing. Does your Hero achieve these things by the end of your story? If not, can you at least hold out the hope of a happy ending to lift our spirits?

You might start at *The End* when writing your story, then show us how you got there. See △ **Five Ts** for a *Timeline* approach.

Happy Ever Afters

This tactic lets you finesse the ending to a story you've already prepared. Happy Ever After = Your Hero Changes by:

a. Growing Up. Luke starts out a farm boy and ends up a Jedi. Harry goes to Hogwarts and becomes a Wizard.

- How has your hero grown?
- What life-stage transition have they achieved? (see 🍷 *Circle of Life*)
- How are they older and wiser?
- How have you helped?

b. Finding Home, Love or Respect. Odysseus makes it home to Penelope. Beauty tames The Beast.

- How does your hero find a place in the world? Has "home" changed after the journey they've been on? (try △ *Voyage & Return* to develop this story)
- How is your hero more worthy of love?
- How have they earned the respect of those who matter?
- How have you helped?

c. Doing the Right Thing. Ripley fights an Alien queen. Rastamouse is here to "make a bad thing good."

- What's the bad thing your hero faced? (check with 🍷 *Three Great Conflicts*)
- How did they put the bad thing right?
- What did it cost them?
- How did you help?



Five Ts

Keep these Ts in your back pocket in case someone puts you on the spot and you need to tell a story *right now*!

Timeline: beginning, middle and end.

Turning Points: realisation, decision and change.

Tensions: anxious moments and conflict.

Temptations: easy way out or do the right thing?

Teachable Moments: the moral of your story.

Five Ts

Timeline: Beginning, Middle and End.

- “At first...” [problem]
- “Then we tried...” [action]
- “And now we...” [result]

Or even simpler: Before and After:

- “We used to do/think...” [status quo]
- “But now...” [new order]

Turning Points: key moments in the timeline.

- “We realised we had a big problem when...”
- “We made a breakthrough when...”
- “We knew we had to act when...”
- “Everything changed when...”

Tensions: Start with the moment of maximum conflict or anxiety, then tell us how it works out. For example, “At the start of the Covid pandemic, I lost all my clients in a week...”

Temptations: Was there a moment when you could have been lazy, told a lie or taken the easy way out, but instead you did the right thing?

Teachable Moment:

- “So I guess my point is...”
- “I’ll never forget...”
- “What this taught me is...”

Which version do you feel most comfortable telling? This matters, because we can sense when you’re “putting on a show” rather than speaking “naturally”.



Movie Time

Tell me a story and a little movie starts playing in my head. I literally “see” what you mean.

Your brain processes language by running a visual simulation. Abstract concepts, theories and data are hard to visualise because nothing actually happens. What’s the movie playing in your head when I say “sustainability” or “accessibility”? There isn’t one. Give me a moment that brings those abstracts to life.

Use ★ **Emotional Dashboard** or 🍷 **Good & Evil** if you’re struggling to find a movie moment in your story.

Movie Time

1. Start with the key concept or main point you want to get across. Find a movie moment that helps me “see” what you mean. 🧠 **What’s It About?** could help you if you’re struggling to find a single story moment.

a. **“ACTION!”**

- Where are we?
- What is happening?
- What happens next?

b. **Emotion**

- Who is involved?
- What is at stake?
- How does it feel?

2. Once you’ve set the scene with *Action* and *Emotion*, we’re ready to listen to the point you’d like to make.

c. **Meaning**

- What has changed, what have we learned?
- Why does this matter?
- What do you want us to think or do differently now?

Get into the habit of movie-checking your own writing. At the end of a paragraph, ask yourself “what’s the movie playing in their heads now?” If the answer is “none”, you’re not telling a story.

Develop stories for visual presentations or video content using ✂ **Show & Tell**.



Story Hooks

Craft a compelling hook at the start of your story. It will keep us listening til the end.

You might have the best story in the world, but it's no use if you can't get people to listen, to click on your link or open your email. You need a hook: something that makes us want to find out more. Shall I let you into the secret?

Story Hooks

I looked at 1,000+ TED talks to see how their titles hook our attention. I spotted some themes: TED's **QUIRKS**. Which could you use to hook us into your story?

- a. Questions: What happens when you ask a question? We try to answer it in our heads, then we stick around to hear your answer.
Story Hook: can you start your story with a Big Question?
- b. Unexpected: when everyone zigs, you zag. "Why you'll fail" is an attention-grabbing take on a "How to succeed" story.
Story Hook: surprise your audience (but still make sense).
- c. Ironies: If something ain't what it should be, we want to know why. TED's top talk "Schools kill creativity" reeks of irony.
Story Hook: tell us something is wrong.
- d. Relatable: Writing about You, We and Us makes your reader feel more involved. "Is this you in this video?" is a guaranteed attention hook (and classic phishing con).
Story Hook: make it sound personal.
- e. Knowledge: Your expertise, made simple.
Story Hook: rules, explainers, listicles, life-hacks and secrets all suggest expertise + insider status.
- f. Superlatives: Biggest, fastest, newest all inspire wonder; while smallest, slowest, oldest provoke curiosity.
Story Hook: connect to something bigger, better or unusual.



Three is the Magic Number

Choose the most important parts of your story, then use these tricks to fix them in your audience's memory.

Little pigs, wise men and magic wishes all come in threes. There's a reason for this. We can't hold many ideas in our heads at once. That's why shopping lists were invented. So what are the most important things you want people to remember when you've finished telling your story? (Hint: there's only three!)

Tip: try this card alongside  **Data Detectives** to present three key facts from your research.

Three is the Magic Number

Happily, there are three different types of three you can use when you're telling a story:

Attention Three: James Bond

One of Bond's adversaries delivers a great line about suspicious activity: "Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time is enemy action." We don't believe anything repeats three times by accident: it feels deliberate. That's why we pay attention.

What core message can you repeat three times to get our attention?

Reversal Three: Little Pigs

Straw and sticks are weak. But a house made of brick? huff and puff away, Big Bad Wolf. This pattern gives you a set up (1 and 2) followed by a reversal (3). It is so effective that people can almost see it coming, but are still pleased when it does.

What are your set ups? What's your reversal?

Moderate Three: Goldilocks

This porridge is too hot. This porridge is too cold. But this porridge is just right. Set up two extremes then finding the middle ground.

What are your two extremes? What's your moderate way?



Rolls Royce Moment

“Cruising at 60mph, the loudest noise inside the Rolls Royce comes from the electric clock.”


Rolls Royce ran an advert with this headline in a US magazine in 1960. Next year, Ford spent millions on an ad campaign promising cars “as quiet as a Rolls Royce.” In 1980, my dad told me the Rolls Royce story—and I still remember it today. Why was this ad so memorable and how can your story have a Rolls Royce moment?

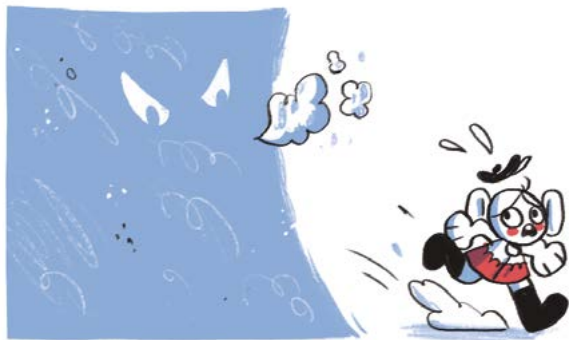
Try this tactic alongside  **Data Detectives** to bring your research to life.

Rolls Royce Moment

David Ogilvy, the British advertising genius, wrote the ticking clock headline for Rolls Royce after spending days trawling through engineers’ reports. His lesson for storytellers: do your homework. Here’s why the advert worked:

- a. *It’s a vivid moment.* In just a few words, Ogilvy gave us a rich, sensory movie we could play in our heads.
 - What’s the vivid moment you can describe, something we can hear, see, taste, smell or feel?
- b. *It’s exemplary.* This one small moment stands for the whole. It tells us that Rolls is a precision engineering company that pays attention to details.
 - What’s the single fact or detail that tells us everything we need to know about your product?
- c. *It’s widely relatable.* I’ve never driven in a Rolls, but I can tell you my Talbot Horizon (1992–1994) made a hell of a racket cruising at 60mph. So I can imagine how good Rolls Royce quality feels.
 - How can you make your Rolls Royce moment relatable to something your audience will understand?

Tip:  **Secrets & Puzzles** make great Rolls Royce moments.



Leave it Out!

Tell us you've left something out and we will work hard to fill in the gap. And then we feel like it's our story too.

How big is the dragon on the front of this box? Waaay big! How do you know, you can't see him? Sometimes what we don't see is the best part of the story. Horror movies give us a hint of danger, and we imagine the rest. Ernest Hemmingway told the saddest story in just six words: "For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn."

Leave it Out!

When you've got a first draft of your story or presentation (or you're trying to freshen up an old one) try this:

- What could I leave out that my audience is expecting to hear?
- How could I hint at what's been left out?
- What gaps would people try to fill for themselves?
- How can I make them ask "What happens next?" or "How did we get here?"
- How could I leave them wanting more?

And for a test worthy of Hemmingway—how could you write your presentation in just six words?

Mind the Gap

We don't like gaps in our knowledge, but we tend to fill them with assumptions and prejudices. So it's worth doing a sense-check with your audience:

- Have they filled in the gaps in the way you expected?
- If not, what does this tell you about your assumptions and theirs?



Show & Tell

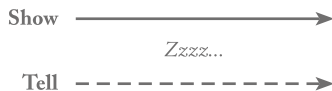
Keep people's attention *on you* while you make a presentation. Make your *Show* and *Tell* work together.

There are two ways to get show and tell wrong. Tell us exactly what you're showing us. Or show us one thing while telling us about another. You leave your audience bored or confused. Control their attention instead, by treating your *Show and Tell* like a washing line.

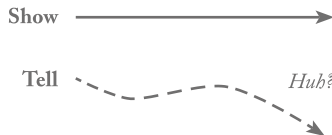
Show & Tell

Draw a timeline for your presentation. Above the line is Show (your images); below the line is Tell (your script).

Boring: If your script follows your images too closely, we're bored. When you put 50 words of text on the screen, then start reading it out, we're thinking "yeah, I know, I've read it already!"



Confusing: If your script strays too far from the image you're showing, we're confused. Should I be looking at that or listening to you?



Engaging: Here's how to do Show and Tell like a washing line. Show us an image, tell us what it is, then you can tell us stuff we can't see. Then, introduce a new image. Refer to it immediately, to renew our focus on what we can see. You are "pegging" our attention back to the image—like pegging washing to a line. Repeat to create an engaging presentation.





Story Bank

Keep track of your stories—and the information behind them—if you don't want to lose our trust.

When you've got a good story, you're the centre of attention. But if you bore us or break a confidence, you'll lose our trust. You need a collection of useful stories (think of them as your data). But you also need information about those stories (meta-data) if you don't want to mess up. You need a *Story Bank*.

Tip: put your *Story Bank* into a collaborative online space so you can share stories across your team.

Story Bank

We mess up when we tell stories that are:

- Boring: tell the same story twice to the same person
- Disrespectful: wasting the audience's time
- Gossipy: repeat a story we were told in confidence
- Stolen: pass someone else's story off as our own
- Stale: a story that's past its sell-by date

You need a *Story Bank* to avoid these pitfalls. Use a notebook or spreadsheet with these headings:

- What's the story? (keywords are usually all you need)
- Why would I tell this story? What's the point?
- Who might find this story useful?
- Who have I told this story to already?
- Whose story is it? Is it OK for me to share it?
- Is this story still up to date?

If you create an online *Story Bank*, you can link to posts, articles and shared documents that give the full story.



Big, Small, Inside, Outside

You might have a **Big Story** to tell the world. But you'll spend more time telling **small stories** to colleagues.

Big stories: rehearsed explanations of “why we do this” or “what’s coming next,” usually delivered one-to-many.

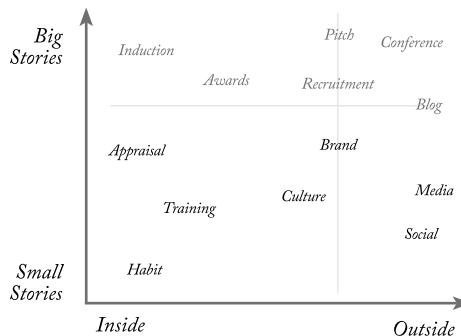
Small stories: spontaneous examples of “how we do things round here,” usually told in conversation.

Inside: you tell to people you work with.




Outside: you tell to everyone else.

Try this alongside  **Audience Profile** to start planning your stories.



Big, Small, Inside, Outside





Small Story, Inside:

- Habit/Training: use  **Emotional Dashboard** stories with colleagues.
- Appraisal: use  **Story Listening** to explore skills and expertise.
- Culture:  **Thoughtful Failures** define “how we do things round here”.




Small Story, Outside:

- Blog / Social:  **What's It About?** gives you small, practical examples of what you do.
- Brand:  **Hero & Guide** stories bring your brand values to life.

Big Story, Inside:

- Induction:  **Drive Stories** show new staff what you expect.
- Awards: find a  **Rolls Royce Moment** you can all celebrate.

Big Story, Outside:

- Pitch: make your next bid for funding  **Pitch Perfect**.
- Recruitment: try  **Curious Tales** to see what makes candidates tick.
- Conference: get your presentation right with  **Show & Tell**.



Audience Profile




Know your audience. You can't tell the right story if you don't know what your audience needs.

Don't fall into the trap of assuming that, because you find something interesting, your audience will too. This is selfish and a surefire way to bore people. Any time spent getting to know your audience is never time wasted.

Go deeper into how your audience might react to your ideas with

 **Innovation Curve.**

Audience Profile

1. Create a profile of the audience for your story:
 - Basic info: name, age, gender, income, job role
 - Problems: what are you going to help them with?
 - Positives: what are their hopes, values and ambitions that might make them view your idea in a good light?
 - Negatives: what are their fears and anxieties that may put them off your idea?
 - What do they do or say already about your idea?
2. Can you connect with your audience by telling a story about someone else like them? ( **Simple Sales Stories**)
3. Who should tell your story? Who would you trust: the boss who says "my product is great" or the customer who says "this product is great"? (Go deeper with  **Social Proof**)
3. Is it OK for you to tell someone else's story? There are two ways to see this:
 - No, this is a form of stealing. You can't speak authentically without lived experience.
 - Yes, we are empathetic creatures. Stories allow us to walk a mile in another person's shoes.
4. Don't assume either way. How hard is it to say "I'd like to tell your story about X to Y. Is that OK?" Use your  **Story Bank** to keep track of whose story you are telling to which audience.

About the author, Steve Rawling.

Thirty years ago, as a young TV journalist, I pitched dozens of stories a day to frantic news desks and noisy editorial meetings. I'd watch my colleagues' reactions.

Sometimes, they'd lean in: "Yeah, yeah! Great story."

Sometimes they'd lean back: "Hmm, nah. Boring."

But nobody ever explained why some stories worked and others didn't. They were great storytellers, but they didn't really know: they just felt it in their bones.

After twenty years of researching, pitching and telling stories, I felt it in my bones too.

I left journalism to start my own business. I had a gut feeling that we all need to tell real, human stories about our work.

But you can't teach a gut feeling. So I started reading. I read literature and science. I listened to authors and psychologists. I tested ideas and methods on thousands of clients.

And now? Well, here's why I think some stories work: Storyteller Tactics. These are the tricks great storytellers use.


This is how you make people lean in when you tell your story.

Thanks to my family, friends, colleagues and clients for their support all these years.

Thanks to Asma, my first reader. Also to Tash Willcocks, Jim Clarke, Tamsin O'Brien, Barbara Metcalfe, Anu-Mall Naarits, Marge Piblapuu, Linda Green, Eloise Cook, Dr Francine Morris, and Peter Knight.



People who made this deck possible... Aaron Booth, Abhilash Palandurkar, Abhinab Shakya, Aishwarya Chandran, Amanda Christensen, Amit Shrivastav, Amy Rogers, Andrew Godfrey, Andrew Norton, Andy Davies, Anne Lofts, Anthony Palmer, Anushree Deshpande, Ari Zelmanow, Ashish Pant, Ashley Simpson, Asim Varol, Ayisha de Lanerolle, Basheera Khan, Benjamin Parry, Ben Seymour, Brendan Nisbet, Carla Abiraad, Carmen Broomes, Carson Mulholland, Charlie Budgen, Charly Dalby, Chris Burns, Chris Gibbons, Colin Farquharson, Connor McDonough, Dan Goodwin, Dan Howarth, Daniel Hollands, Danielle Lanthier, Daniel Powell, Daniel Sims, Daryl Meier Fahmi, David Anderson, David Cunningham, David Oswald, Declan, Dom Aldred, Donald Kerper, Elane Beer, Eleanor Campbell, Elene Ghelagutashvili, Elizabeth Roche, Emina Aghasi, Gaetan Cotton, Gareth Evans, Gavin Cooke, Georgette Sullivan, Gowtham Kethineedi, Graham Dobie, Greg Harrod, Greg Stewart, Gunjan Singh, Gunjan Surbhi, Hannah Beech, Hannah Deans, Hanna Nissinen, Harri Kilpiö, Hegle Sarapuu-Johanson, Helen Dibble, Hendrick Reese, Holly Donohue, Ian Johnson, Ibrahim El Badawi, Ivan Chong, Izzu Rata, Jackie Niro, James DiRito, Jamie Homer, Jamie Meredith, J C Hoot, Jeremias, Jevgenij Zuravliov, Jin Mei, Joanna Spencer, Jonathan Bannister, Jonathan Garner, Jonna Ervasti, Juan Mendoza, Julia Kiener, Junior Godoi, Kellie, Kellie Liang, Kerry Utton, Kieron Faller, Kimberly Bennett-Eady, Konstantinos Stavrakis, Kristin Knillmann, Kristin Nillmann, Lacey Heriford, Laura Puiggali Gonzalez, Laura Yarrow, Lee Button, Leli Lelo, Leo Barnard, Leonie Harter, Linh Nguyen, Luanda Iwai, Lucas Terra, Madalina Galie, Madeline Ferguson, Margo Manning, Markus Karlsson-Jones, Mark Walker, Matt Harris, Matthew Cocker, Matthew Morek, Maurizio Pesce, Michael Smith, Mireille Beumer, Nabal Chin, Nadine Grant, Nathan Langley, Nathan Williams, Nelly Peters-Campbell, Nick Hurley, Nicol Kosky, Nic Simpson, Nija Ukele, Paul Smith, Paul Wilshaw, Peter Boersma, Petra Lewis, Philip Twine, Pius Camenzind, Rachel, Rafe Blandford, Ram Rao, Ranti Williams, Rebecca Harvey, Rebecca Heapy, Rebecca Z Harvey, Richard Cowell, Richard Fonteneau, Richard Pearson, Richard Stout, Rick Benetti, Robert MacDonald, Robert Partridge, Robert Philcox, Rob Read, Ruby Speechley, Ruth Perrin, Safullah Khan, Sam Dengler, Sarah Ann Jump, Sarah Dowd, Satpal Philora, Sean O'Callaghan, Siim Esko, Simon Douglas, Simon O'Regan, Simon White, Simon Witton, Sonya Rooke, Spagnolo Amedeo, Stephen Coates, Steve Perry, Sumant Badami, Suna Yokes, Tanaya Joshi, Terry Hogan, Tess Robinson, Theola DeBose, Thomas van Zuijlen, Tim Arisz, Tim Davidson, Tom Bradley, Tom Fern, Tom Gray, Tom Jepson, Tori Woolley, Tricia Conyers, Uvie Pereira, Victoria Mitchell, Will Morley, Yasin Erdal, Zara Karschay, Łukasz Tyrała

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