



# The Features of Narratives

*A Model of Narrative  
Form for Social  
Change Efforts*



**FRAME  
WORKS**

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# Introduction

Calls for narrative change abound in social change work, but what “narrative” means and how narratives are embedded within particular stories remains hazy. There is widespread agreement that cultural narratives are “patterns of stories,”<sup>1</sup> but thinkers and strategists in the narrative change space—including FrameWorks—generally haven’t explained what *kinds* of patterns qualify as narratives.<sup>2</sup> As a result, it’s no surprise that narrative is frequently conflated with other types of frames, like values, metaphors, and emphasis frames.<sup>3</sup>

This report, sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, develops a model of narrative form for use in social change work.<sup>4</sup> We think delineating the contours of narrative form is the key to unlocking a clearer understanding of narrative change. Focusing on form allows us to identify the types of patterns in stories that comprise narratives. The model identifies a set of features that, taken together, make up the form of narrative.

The model, which was developed and tested by engaging with the rich and varied perspectives of storytellers, activists, scholars, and marketers, among others, is designed to be a practical tool for those engaged in narrative change work. The model can be used to distinguish narratives from other framing strategies, which can help strategists and communicators use narratives where they are needed. It can be used to diagnose existing narratives and emerging ones, which can help those working for narrative change sharpen their responses to the existing context. And most importantly, the model can be used to develop and test new counter-narratives and disseminate them.

This report is intended primarily for narrative strategists, researchers, and others who are already conversant in the language of narrative change. It is meant as a foundational document that provides a deep dive into the model of form, the rationale behind it, and its potential applications. While narrative strategists and researchers should be able to take immediate lessons from this report and begin to use the model straight away, making the model usable for others—including, critically, content creators—will require additional, issue-specific toolkits and other materials. At the conclusion of the report, we briefly review what it will take to put the model into creative practice.



## Research conducted for this report



Interviews with people from a wide range of fields that think about and engage with narrative. This included activists, media makers and artists, applied researchers, communications and marketing professionals, and academic scholars, among others.



Reviews of academic and gray literatures on narrative and narrative change. Literature reviews covered academic scholarship (e.g., literary theory, psychology, sociology, media studies, linguistics, communications studies, cognitive science, philosophy, and history) as well as key materials from narrative and creative strategists, communications and marketing professionals, and applied researchers.



Review of seminal examples of narrative change. After developing a draft model of narrative form, we applied it to the narratives used in seminal examples of narrative change (the death penalty, welfare reform, seatbelt laws, removing Confederate monuments, and #MeToo). This enabled us to see how the model fared in making sense of these narratives. We then revised the model to better fit these real-world narratives.



“Pressure test” interviews. The model of form was pressure tested through interviews with narrative strategists and content creators. Interviews centered on determining how usable the model would be in creating stories and disseminating narratives.

*See the appendix for a list of interview participants from both the initial round of interviews and the pressure test interviews.*

## The report is organized as follows:



### **What is narrative, and why does its form matter?**

After establishing definitions of narrative, story, and narrative change, we discuss why a model of narrative form is needed and what it can help us do.



### **A model of narrative form.**

This section lays out the features of narrative that make up its form, using examples for illustration.



### **The four uses of the model.**

Having outlined the model, we discuss its four uses: *distinguishing* between narratives and other types of frames; *diagnosing* which narratives are in play or could be used; *developing and testing* new counter-narratives; and *disseminating* narratives through the creation of specific stories.



### **Putting the model into creative practice.**

The report concludes with a discussion of what is needed to put the model into practice (e.g., issue- and narrative-specific toolkits that aid in content creation).



# What Is Narrative, and Why Does Its Form Matter?

Narrative has many meanings, which are tied to its many uses. To advertising and marketing professionals, narrative is first and foremost about brand identity.<sup>5</sup> To psychoanalysts, narrative is a means to articulate and externalize internal conflict or trauma so that it can be dealt with.<sup>6</sup> To novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters, narrative provides a way of grappling with human experience and emotionally connecting with and transporting audiences or readers. To a journalist, narrative is one way of conveying information about current events and issues.<sup>7</sup> For those who work for social change, narrative is important because of its role in shaping how we think about and engage with our social world.

The *patterned* nature of narratives is particularly important in the context of social change. Cultural narratives shape how we think about our social world because they cut across and pervade our discourse; they provide common ways of organizing and making meaning across the different contexts in which we communicate with one another through words and images. This leads to a particular definition of narrative, which is related to but different from story:



## Narratives

Patterns of meaning that cut across and tie together specific stories. Narratives are common patterns that both emerge from a set of stories and provide templates for specific stories.<sup>8</sup>



## Stories

Tales about particular events and people. Stories both give rise *to* and draw *from* narratives.

These definitions derive from common usage within the field of narrative change and borrow from definitions proposed by the Narrative Initiative, among others.<sup>9</sup>

Within the field of narrative change, narrative is sometimes talked about as being located in discourse, and sometimes as being located in mind. In other words, narrative change practitioners sometimes think of narrative as a particular type of talk and at other times as a particular type of thinking. Because the narratives our society tells are so closely related to the narratives we tell ourselves, narrative change work tends not to distinguish between the two.

For clarity, we reserve the term “narrative” for patterns in discourse. When talking about patterns in thinking, we use the term “cultural mindsets.” Distinguishing between the two is valuable for multiple reasons. As we discuss below, the explicit narratives we tell in discourse have a specific form that is tied to the form of stories. The stories we tell each other have a set of features that structure narratives in a particular way. In addition, by distinguishing between narratives and mindsets, we can more clearly articulate the relationship between them. Narratives both reflect and shape the cultural mindsets people hold—the deep, taken-for-granted assumptions about the world that we use to make sense of our circumstances, our experiences, and the communications we receive.<sup>10</sup> Making this distinction helps articulate the purpose of narrative change: because the narratives that circulate within our public discourse shape our mindsets, changing which narratives are dominant can shift how people understand society and their role in it.

Let’s take an example to illustrate the difference between narrative and story and the relationship between narratives and mindsets:



### The Bootstraps Narrative

An individual, down on his luck (could be *her*, but prototypically *his*), struggles to overcome obstacles and tough odds, succeeding through force of will and determination.<sup>11</sup>

The *bootstraps* narrative can be found in all sorts of specific stories, like the TV show *Empire*, which depicts a family that rises from poverty to become CEOs of a successful record label.<sup>12</sup> Individual *bootstraps* stories are about *particular* people, facing *particular* obstacles, who succeed in *particular* ways. The fact that these specific stories share a pattern with other stories is what makes them part of a broader narrative.

The *bootstraps* narrative reflects and reinforces individualism and, specifically, the cultural mindset of *self-made success*—the assumption that people’s success or lack of success is the result of their own effort and determination. The constant flood of *bootstraps* stories on TV and



in film, in our social media feeds, in the news, and in the literature we read makes this notion of being *self-made* seem natural and obvious. This obscures the ways in which everyone's life outcomes are shaped by systems and structures beyond their control, which undermines recognition of the injustices of the current world as well as support for systemic change.

Changing the narratives that reinforce and reflect mindsets that naturalize injustice, like the *bootstraps* narrative, is a critical part of social change. By challenging dominant narratives and fostering alternative ways of talking about and making sense of our experiences, we come to think differently about the social world and can recognize what needs to change to realize justice. This is what narrative change is all about.



## Narrative Change

A change in the narratives that are in wide circulation within public discourse. Narrative change involves the introduction or spread of counter-narratives that disrupt or replace previously dominant narratives. Narrative change can involve a change in the set of narratives in wide circulation (i.e., *which* narratives are used), a change in the relative prevalence of different narratives (i.e., *which* narratives are used more or less frequently), or both.



## Counter-Narrative

A narrative that counters dominant narratives, providing a divergent way of talking about and making sense of an issue. Counter-narratives can be emergent (arising organically from a community's experiences) or cultivated (developed deliberately and strategically by advocates, activists, or other change makers to provide an alternative way of talking about an issue).<sup>13</sup>

As a strategic matter, engaging in a narrative change effort requires identifying the narratives you are trying to counter—the narratives that you want to sideline or transform—and identifying a new or transformed narrative you want to move *into* the center of discourse.

There are often multiple existing narratives in circulation on an issue, and activists and advocates frequently try out different counter-narratives as part of their efforts to change dominant narratives. The table below illustrates this point with some familiar examples from recent social change efforts. (This list is meant to provide select examples of each type of narrative, not to identify all of the relevant narratives on any given issue.)

# Examples of Narrative Change

## Issue

## Dominant Narratives

## Counter-Narratives

### Death penalty<sup>14</sup>

#### The Justice Narrative

Our justice system fairly weighs the evidence. When people are executed, we are executing guilty people.

#### The Vengeance Narrative

When we execute people, we are getting retribution for the wrongs people have committed.

#### The Innocence Narrative

Innocent people are being executed for crimes they didn't commit due to flaws in the justice system (especially systemic racism).

#### The Human Rights Narrative

Every execution is a violation of the right to life.

### Immigration

#### The Criminals Narrative<sup>15</sup>

"Illegal" immigrants are criminals—they choose to break the law when they come here, and they don't deserve to be here.

#### The Takers Narrative<sup>16</sup>

Immigrants come and take jobs and social benefits from hard-working American citizens.

#### The DREAMer Narrative<sup>17</sup>

Many children were brought here through no fault of their own. These kids, who are culturally American and driven to succeed, deserve the same chance in life as all kids.

#### The Country of Immigrants Narrative

We're all immigrants. New immigrants are coming here for the same reasons "our" families and ancestors did.

### Economic inequality<sup>18</sup>

#### The Meritocracy Narrative

When people succeed, it is the result of their own talents and hard work.

#### The 99% Narrative

Our country is designed to work for the 1%. We—the 99%—can come together to change it.

The death penalty is a good example of an issue where we have seen narrative change. Advocates have effectively moved the *innocence* narrative into the center of public discourse, effecting a shift away from the *justice* narrative. On immigration, we see an ongoing narrative contest. The *DREAMer* narrative has entered into discourse, but it exists alongside, rather than displacing, anti-immigrant narratives like the *criminals* and *takers* narratives.<sup>19</sup>

Narrative change efforts move back and forth between the level of narrative and the level of stories.



### **From the perspective of narrative change strategists,**

the goal is to identify a counter-narrative to disseminate and then work with storytellers of all kinds to create lots of specific stories that help carry the narrative and get it into public discourse. If strategists aren't sufficiently attentive to what it takes to turn a narrative into stories, the counter-narrative isn't going to make its way into the world.



### **From the perspective of storytellers committed to narrative change,**

the question is whether the specific story they're telling does or doesn't carry a movement's counter-narrative. If content creators aren't attending to whether or not their stories are carrying the narrative, then their specific stories won't actually help to change the narrative.

Narrative change efforts can start at either level. Emerging patterns in the stories that activists are telling can give rise to counter-narratives. In other words, grassroots storytelling might generate a nascent counter-narrative that can be reinforced and amplified through a broader strategy (e.g., the Fight for 15—a coordinated campaign—deliberately amplified and expanded the 99% narrative that emerged from Occupy Wall Street). Alternatively, counter-narratives can initially be crafted by narrative strategists. If narrative strategists are looking to create a new counter-narrative rather than working with an emerging one, they have to make sure the narrative is “tellable”—in other words, that it's usable and flexible for content creators as they tell specific stories.

# Why Do We Need a Model of Narrative Form?

Narrative has *distinctive* effects on how people think and act. To clearly discuss these effects, it is necessary to highlight that narrative can be understood as a particular type of frame.

Frames can be defined as follows:



## Frames

Interpretive packages.<sup>20</sup> They involve choices about how an issue is presented—what is and isn’t emphasized, how it is explained, what connections are made, and which commitments are invoked.

Narratives are a type of frame that, as we’ll discuss shortly, uses the form of stories to package information. Due to this form, narratives differ from other types of frames, though they can encompass other frames—for example, stories may use explanatory metaphors, and values are implicitly or explicitly invoked by narratives.

Scholarship across disciplines has identified a set of specific benefits of narrative—effects that narratives are distinctively capable of producing, in comparison to other types of frames (e.g., values or explanatory metaphors) or the forms of discourse to which they belong (e.g., argumentation, description, and explanation).<sup>21</sup> Compared to these other forms of communication, narrative more consistently:



**resonates with people emotionally and engages their attention.** These effects can make narratives especially effective in motivating action.<sup>22</sup>



**transports people, enabling them to imagine what life is like in others’ shoes or in different situations.**<sup>23</sup> This leads to temporary suspension of disbelief in a way that makes it easier for people to reconsider how they think about others and, in turn, about social issues.<sup>24</sup>



**shapes how people understand themselves, their relationships to others, and the contexts in which they live.**<sup>25</sup> Narratives play a central role in building our understanding of our social relationships and our place in community and society.



**transmits and facilitates memory of complex facts or ideas.** By “chunking” complex information into easily digestible pieces, narratives help people process and remember complex ideas.<sup>26</sup>

These effects of narrative are tied to its relationship to stories. The reason narratives connect to people emotionally, transport them, define their social identity, and help them process complex ideas is that *narratives are built from stories and bear the form of stories*.<sup>27</sup> Narratives aren't just any patterns, but patterns *in stories*—patterns in characters, plot, setting, point of view, and other familiar features of stories. To return to the example of the *bootstraps* narrative, the stories that share this narrative don't just communicate similar ideas; they do this through common story features—for example, they have similar protagonists and a similar arc. In other words, it is a mistake to try to identify narratives by looking to the ideas they communicate, to the takeaway or moral. If we move too far away from the features of stories, we miss what makes narrative distinctive and what gives it power.



**Narrative are  
built from stories  
and bear the  
form of stories.**

In building a model of narrative form, we take seriously the grounding of narrative in story. The model articulates how the features of stories work at the level of narrative. As we discuss below, there are plenty of features of stories that don't make sense when we move up a level, to narrative. For example, storytelling devices, like flashbacks and flashforwards, are particular to individual stories, not something we'd expect to be shared by all stories that carry a common cultural narrative. Yet there *are* features of stories that make sense at the level of narrative—types of characters or plots, for example. By understanding these features of narrative form, we refine our understanding of what is held in common by stories that share a narrative.

This is not just a matter of academic interest, but rather has real practical utility. A model of narrative form can facilitate the movement back and forth between the levels of narrative and story. As narrative strategists work to find or develop counter-narratives and to disseminate them, they can use the model to make sure that the narrative is tellable and that particular stories actually carry the narrative.

More specifically, the model has four related uses:



### **Distinguish.**

By specifying the features that narratives have, the model can help distinguish between narratives and other types of frames (e.g., values, metaphors, emphasis frames). This can help those engaged in narrative change work sharpen their efforts by matching the strategy to the situation. Understanding what is and isn't narrative is critical for knowing whether the change needed is a change in narrative or, if the dominant discourse *isn't* narrative in form, other framing strategies are more appropriate.



### **Diagnose.**

The model can be used to identify dominant narratives in circulation as well as new narratives that are emerging in public discourse. It can help identify narratives that are emerging organically through imitation and echoing (e.g., on social media) or through more deliberate strategies that others (e.g., political leaders or other activists or advocates) are employing.



### **Develop (and Test).**

A clear understanding of the features of narrative can aid in the development of new counter-narratives. Having these features in mind can make it easier to think about how existing narratives could be changed or replaced, and clarity about features makes it easier to properly test narratives.



### **Disseminate.**

The model can help strategists and creators make content that disseminates a counter-narrative. By clarifying what needs to be common across particular pieces of content, the model can help ensure that stories truly are spreading a shared narrative.

Each of these uses requires more explanation, but first we need to outline the model. In the next section, we sketch the model of narrative form.

# A Model of Narrative Form

Having settled on the idea that a model of narrative form should be grounded in an understanding of the features of stories, fleshing out this model becomes a relatively straightforward, if by no means simple, enterprise. Between those who study stories and those who create them, there is a rich understanding of the form that stories take. We can arrive at a model of *narrative* form, rather than story form, by looking to this knowledge and considering which aspects of stories make sense at the level of narrative. This means leaving behind features that are specific to individual stories—their author, for example. It also means leaving behind features of stories that are too closely tied to the specific way in which stories are told, like their medium or genre. Once we arrive at a set of features that make sense for narratives, we have to consider how the move from the level of story to the level of narrative transforms the meaning of each feature.

Before we present the model, it may be useful to quickly define what we mean by narrative form.



## Narrative Form

The shape or structure of a narrative, understood as a set of features and the relationships among them. The formal features of a narrative are shared by the stories that instantiate the narrative.

For academic readers, it's worth mentioning that in focusing on the form of narrative, we are not embracing a structuralist or formalist conception of narrative that asserts a universal structure for all narrative or that reduces the meaning of narrative to the relationships among its formal features.<sup>28</sup> The model of form presented here was developed by drawing on understandings of stories that make sense in the context of contemporary US society, and it is intended for this and similar contexts. Moreover, we fully acknowledge that there are aspects of narrative and its meaning that can't be captured or understood through an analysis of form.

Most importantly, how particular narratives will be received depends on their content and on the cultural and social context; organizing this content into a formal structure does not yet tell us how people will respond to the narrative.



**Effective  
storytelling  
requires space  
to breathe.**

In developing the model, we have sought to balance the competing demands of *commonality* and *flexibility*. In order to be useful in specifying common narratives, the model has to identify a relatively robust set of features that stories must share to be thought of as carrying a narrative. If the model is too thin—too sparse in terms of the features it includes—then it will allow stories or patterns of talk that don't hold much in common to be lumped together as sharing a common narrative. That would lead to a false sense that a common narrative is appearing in discourse when, in reality, the stories have too little in common to structure meaning in a consistent way.

At the same time, effective storytelling requires space to breathe. If the model is too thick—it has too many features or articulates features in too-specific terms—then it will be practically useless for creating stories. The model can't provide a rigid template for narratives, as this would cramp the art, creativity, and personal authenticity of storytelling. In order to be usable, the model must provide a flexible structure that storytellers can use and adapt as they look to create engaging stories in different media for different audiences.

As we lay out the model, we provide examples to illustrate how it applies in practice. These examples clarify what the features of the model involve. They also show how the model illuminates common narratives while leaving lots of room for flexibility in the particulars of the stories that instantiate them. While we hope and believe our uses of examples are apt, their purpose is to illustrate the model and show that it is useful in illuminating narratives. If our interpretations miss the mark on occasion, we hope readers will forgive these misunderstandings and recognize they don't invalidate the model.

It is worth noting that the features of the model are quite familiar—things like character, plot, and point of view. What's new about the model is that it takes these features of stories and moves them up to the level of narrative. This shift in level leads to a transformation in what these categories entail and, in turn, provides a new perspective for understanding narrative and narrative change. The examples show how taking these familiar features of stories and reconceptualizing them for narratives helps us understand narratives in new ways.





## The Model: Formal Features of Narrative

The model includes three dimensions: what happens in the story world, how the story is told, and how it is received. These dimensions each include multiple features.

Each feature of the narrative involves a certain *type of pattern* shared by the stories that carry the narrative. The features of narrative must be specified at a relatively high level of generality—they involve types rather than specifics (e.g., a character type rather than specific characters). When we talk about the story world and how the story is told and received, we are talking about *types of features* shared by stories rather than the specifics of any given story.

### What Happens in the Story World



#### Characters

Narratives involve stock characters.<sup>29</sup> While the characters of specific stories are individuals with distinctive backstories and personalities, at the level of narrative, character involves a profile—a *type* of person. This profile can include a range of types of characteristics. Characters can be evaluated in a certain way, as heroes and villains, for example. They can occupy a particular role or situation (e.g., their job or position within a family), or have a particular social identity (gender, race, class, etc.). The profile might include certain personal characteristics or motivations (e.g., drive or laziness).

To provide an example, the narrative of the *pathology of Black urban poverty*—a narrative that emerged in the 1960s, reworking familiar racist ideas and tropes—introduced the character of the “welfare queen.”<sup>30</sup> This character was initially grounded in a caricature of a specific woman—Linda Taylor—but quickly expanded to become a *type* of character in stories about poverty in urban Black communities. The profile of the “welfare queen” is defined by identity (a Black woman, typically a single mother), situation (on welfare and in poverty), and characteristics and motivations (lazy, looking to exploit the system).

Not all character profiles are as thickly defined as the racist profile of the “welfare queen.” To return to the *innocence* narrative on the death penalty (see table above), the central characters in the narrative are an innocent person on death row (prototypically a Black man) and a heroic lawyer committed to fighting the system. These general profiles hold across stories, but other aspects of characters’ identities, roles, characteristics, and motivations differ across stories.



## Plot<sup>31</sup>

The plot of a narrative is a pattern in what happens. Every story has a beginning, middle, and end, and over the course of a story, a complication—a problem characters must deal with—is introduced and then resolved. While the events of individual stories are particular—specific things that happen to particular characters—these happenings are *similar in kind* across stories with a common narrative. In other words, stories with the same narrative share a *type* of arc. Narratives involve patterns in complications and resolutions; stories that share a narrative involve a certain *type* of problem that characters grapple with and address in the same general way.

A narrative’s plot includes a pattern of causality—a patterned understanding of how events are causally linked.<sup>32</sup> To return to the example of the *bootstraps* narrative, the claim that hard work brings about success is part of the narrative’s plot.

Let’s consider a couple of other examples. The #MeToo movement involves a narrative with a common plot:

A man in power sexually assaults a woman (prototypically a woman, though this can be a person of any gender). He tries to keep her silent by using his power (e.g., through threats or by removing her from her job). She tells the story of the violence committed against her and in doing so claims power. (*The woman’s act of telling the story of assault is itself the resolution of the complication.*)

Specific #MeToo stories, which involve different people and vary in all sorts of specific ways, repeat this basic plot.

The campaign for seatbelt laws included a *tragic death* narrative with the following plot and imagined alternative plot.

Someone or some group was driving and got into an accident. They weren't wearing a seatbelt, so they died, leaving behind loved ones. This was avoidable: if they had been wearing a seatbelt, they would have survived.

Specific stories in the campaign were, of course, stories about particular people and particular accidents. But the pattern or type of plot cut across all the particular stories.



## Setting

A narrative's setting is the type of context within which stories take place. The setting is the social world within which the characters act and the plot happens. While setting can include time, since most cultural narratives are set in the current moment, narrative setting tends to focus on a certain *type of place* where things happen (in contrast to the specific places where particular stories happen). The setting of a narrative includes certain types of influences that constrain, enable, or motivate the characters to act.

Sometimes, a narrative's setting is simple and straightforward. To return to the *tragic death* seatbelt narrative, the setting in this case is a community in which there isn't (yet) a seatbelt law and, specifically, a road where an accident happens. In the *#MeToo* narrative, the setting is a private space—typically, a workplace—where the assault happens.

At other times, a narrative's setting is multi-layered. Take, for example, the narrative contest around Confederate monuments. On one side of this contest is the *lost cause* narrative, in which Confederate monuments are described as a tribute to heroes who fought valiantly for Southern heritage, and in which those who are fighting to protect the monuments are cast as inheritors of this heroic legacy. On the other side is a *reckoning with racism* narrative, which challenges this account by highlighting how these monuments were created to legitimize Jim Crow. This narrative explains how the erection of the monuments was designed to buttress white supremacy and calls for taking them down as part of the broader effort to dismantle it. The settings of these narratives include history (the Civil War and Jim Crow), the South as a region, and the sites of monuments. In these narratives, setting isn't the backdrop for action but the focus of attention and action.

## How the Story Is Told



### Point of view

The meaning of point of view transforms significantly as we move from the level of story to the level of narrative. In a particular story, point of view refers to particular characters—the story adopts the perspective of one character or another, or perhaps different characters at different moments. In a narrative, point of view refers to particular social groups—the narrative adopts a particular group’s perspective. In other words, while stories are told from the perspective of particular characters, narratives are told from the perspective of a particular social position.

Hegemonic narratives—narratives that justify and naturalize the existing social order—often appear to adopt a third-person omniscient point of view. They seem to be told “from nowhere.” But in reality, they embody the point of view of socially dominant classes or groups (e.g., white men, corporate elites, or legal authorities).<sup>33</sup> These narratives are told from an interested perspective but mask this reality. Instead of presenting themselves as coming from a particular, interested perspective, they present themselves as neutral descriptions of reality. In doing so, they preempt questions about whether their account of reality is right or just. Hegemonic narratives’ ability to hide their interested perspective is a source of their distinctive power. By hiding their point of view, these dominant narratives don’t need to make the case for the status quo at all—they simply normalize it, placing it outside the need for justification.

What do we mean when we say that a narrative adopts a social group’s point of view? This can be understood as a combination of two things: (1) the social group’s experiences generally comport with the narrative, and (2) the narrative serves the group’s interests. This understanding of point of view is critical but, in the abstract, can easily be misunderstood. Let’s walk through an example of a dominant narrative and several examples of counter-narratives to clarify what a narrative’s point of view involves in practice.



### An example of a dominant narrative: meritocracy.

The *meritocracy* narrative (see table above) is a useful example of a hegemonic narrative that seems to have no point of view but in fact does. The narrative purports to offer a simple picture of success in America: protagonists in the narrative work hard and are talented, and the narrative implicitly attributes their success—and other characters’ failures—to effort and talent.<sup>34</sup>

This narrative implicitly adopts the point of view of the upper and upper-middle classes (i.e., owners of capital and the professional managerial class). For these classes, the narrative generally comports with experience. People in these classes typically have the opportunities and resources they need to succeed if they work hard and are talented (or even, sometimes, if they don't work hard or aren't that talented). Since their own hard work and experience tends to translate into success, for these classes, the *meritocracy* narrative generally holds true. In addition, the narrative serves their interests, as it legitimizes their income and wealth as earned and deserved and undercuts demands to change the status quo by blaming those who are struggling for their own challenges.

In suggesting that the *meritocracy* narrative adopts the point of view of the upper and upper-middle classes, we are not suggesting that people from other classes don't tell and believe *meritocracy* stories. This speaks to the hold of the narrative within our public discourse and culture and the way in which the narrative hides its point of view. The narrative doesn't *seem* like an interested one.

For many people, the narrative speaks to some aspects of or truths about their experience. There is, of course, for most people some link between effort and talent and success, even if these factors don't actually account for success or failure on their own. The narrative obscures how limitations in resources and opportunities constrain people's ability to succeed, but precisely *because* the narrative is so established and familiar, its imperfect fit with people's experiences isn't always obvious to them based on experience alone. People can interpret their experiences through the narrative and fit them into its categories without necessarily recognizing what's missing.



### **Counter-narratives: making point of view explicit.**

Shifting point of view is critical in disrupting existing power relations. By adopting *different* points of view, counter-narratives highlight that dominant narratives come from a particular, contestable point of view. By shifting point of view, effective counter-narratives puncture dominant narratives' claim to neutrality and create space for questions to be asked about how society really works:

**The Race-Class Narrative**—a well-known and influential counter-narrative developed as a way of talking about the economy and race—adopts the point of view of a multiracial coalition of workers.<sup>35</sup> It highlights how corporate and political elites use racism to divide workers and calls for class solidarity across race to push for a better future. It provides a redescription of American society that better comports with workers' experiences, across race, and looks to advance workers' interests.

**The innocence narrative.** While it might seem like this narrative adopts the point of view of people on death row, we would suggest it adopts the point of view of lawyers. The narrative focuses on the flaws in the machinery of the justice system and its fallibility in identifying guilt. The narrative comports with lawyers' experience of the flaws in the system and centers lawyers' professional interest in reforming the system to better determine guilt and innocence and to arrive at sentences that are warranted.

**Climate counter-narratives—scientists or youth?** The traditional climate change narrative is told from scientists' point of view. It's a narrative about what scientists have found and what science tells us will happen in the future. The narrative comports with scientists' research, first and foremost, and reflects their interest in decision-making that centers scientific expertise. In recent years, as youth activists like Greta Thunberg have taken center stage, we're seeing a new narrative from young people's point of view. This narrative treats scientific findings as background and focuses on young people's future and right to a say. It comports with young people's experience of exclusion and their interest in both representation and action to address climate change.<sup>36</sup>

For counter-narratives like these, there tends to be alignment between the primary messengers or tellers of the narrative and the point of view represented (e.g., scientists and young people as primary tellers of the respective climate narratives that embody their point of view). This contrasts with dominant narratives, which—as culturally pervasive ways of describing experience—have come to be told by people from a wide range of social groups.



## Evaluative judgments

Narratives, like stories, involve evaluative judgments—implicit or explicit—about plot, characters, and setting. Characters' actions, for example, can be portrayed as something to emulate or as a cautionary tale to avoid. It is the evaluative judgments of the narrative that constitute particular characters as heroes or villains. The description of the setting is often loaded with evaluation—the place where the narrative takes place might, say, be talked about as a supportive community or a place to escape. While stories involve judgments about particular characters, settings, and other parts of the story, narratives involve patterns in how stock characters and settings, for example, are evaluated.

Evaluative judgment flows from the narrative's point of view. The evaluation is based on the perspective of the social group whose point of view the narrative adopts. Climate narratives that come from scientists' point of view, for example, tend to judge lack of action as a failure to heed science and as disregard for evidence, while the youth narrative invokes legacy values—the idea that older generations are failing in their obligation to pass on a healthy planet to younger generations.

The narrative of the *pathology of Black urban poverty* provides a familiar example of how evaluation attaches to different features of a narrative. This racist narrative villainizes Black people in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty for their supposed laziness and desire to take advantage of welfare programs. The description of these neighborhoods—the setting of the narrative—is likewise loaded with loathing, as it depicts these neighborhoods and the communities that live in them as the source of purported dysfunction and deficient values.

The #MeToo narrative is another example of how evaluative judgments shape a narrative’s identity. The #MeToo narrative and the familiar *he said/she said* narrative take the same events—a woman coming forward with a claim of sexual assault—and, as a result of different evaluative standpoints, describe them in fundamentally different ways. The #MeToo narrative, told from the woman’s point of view, invests the claim with truth and treats the woman as hero, whereas the *he said/she said* narrative treats her claim as suspect and casts her as a potential villain who may be unjustly smearing the man. The narratives’ different evaluative judgments about the situation shape the focus of the plot itself: the #MeToo narrative focuses on the assault and (sometimes) the systems that enabled the violence, while the *he said/she said* narrative focuses on the woman’s accusation and the motives behind her claim.

## How the Story Is Received



### Intended audience

A narrative’s intended audience is the social group the narrative is created *for* and that it is addressed *to*. The intended audience of a narrative is distinct from the actual audiences of specific stories. Different stories will have specific audiences—like people in a given place, specific groups of voters, or a narrow demographic. Intended audiences of narratives tend to be broader—a social or economic class or racial group, for example.

Intended audience, like point of view, is closely related to the social and political function of the narrative. A narrative directed toward a group can look to shape the group’s view of itself, or it can look to shape its view of others. The *pathology of Black urban poverty* is a clear example of the latter. It is an othering narrative, directed toward white Americans (the “us” in the narrative) to talk about Black Americans (the “them” in the narrative). By contrast, the *bootstraps* narrative is directed broadly, encompassing most groups including low- and middle-income people. The narrative serves to shape people’s views of themselves through identification with the protagonist. The protagonist is held up as a model for all classes—and especially low-income people—to emulate, constituting them as subjects responsible for generating their own success through their own efforts.<sup>37</sup> Understanding the intended audience of a narrative—who it is addressed *to*—helps us understand *how* it reinforces or contests the status quo.

While clarifying the narrative's intended audience can help us understand its function and effective purpose, it doesn't tell us how actual audiences or particular people will respond to the narrative. We all constantly engage in complicated acts of cultural negotiation in which we use, adjust, and contest narratives.<sup>38</sup> These retellings and contestations of narratives can, over time, lead to changes in their cultural prevalence or changes in their form.<sup>39</sup> Actual audiences may not receive particular stories as they were intended, and people have agency in how they respond to the circulation of narratives in discourse.<sup>40</sup>



## Activated social and cultural context

All stories and narratives are culturally embedded. Their meaning depends on what creators and receivers of stories bring to the story or narrative and the cultural models and scripts through which people make sense of the story or narrative.<sup>41</sup>

Narratives activate *particular parts* of the cultural context; they pull forward and engage specific aspects of the cultural context of a place and time. For particular stories, the activated cultural context would include what is activated by every detail of the story, while at the level of narrative, activated cultural context would include only those parts of the culture that are activated by the shared features of the narrative. Let's return to the *#MeToo* narrative to ground the point. At the narrative level, the activated cultural context includes cultural mindsets about the workplace and patriarchal culture—these shape how the narrative in general is told and received. At the level of specific *#MeToo* stories, the details of specific characters and settings activate additional parts of the cultural context—the Harvey Weinstein story, for example, also activates cultural understandings of Hollywood producers and actors. These latter understandings are activated by the specific story, but they aren't part of the cultural context activated by the narrative, because the Hollywood setting isn't a shared feature of the *#MeToo* narrative (it isn't shared across *#MeToo* stories).

Cultural context matters in different ways. Cultural scripts—standard “this-follows-this” sequences of actions or speech—can shape expectations about characters and plot progression.<sup>42</sup> The *innocence* narrative, for example, takes advantage of familiar cultural scripts from courtroom dramas that involve an idealistic lawyer fighting for justice and triumphing in the face of misused authority.<sup>43</sup> Culture also shapes the deep assumptions that determine how a narrative is received. For example, the *he said/she said* narrative is grounded in the patriarchal location of authority in men over women and a corresponding distrust of women's claims.<sup>44</sup> Culture also shapes sources of resistance to narratives. For example, the *tragic death* narrative about seatbelts had to contend with the strongly held American ideal of personal freedom.



Narratives also engage with particular aspects of the social context—particular social identities, events, and structures. Dominant narratives typically engage with this context implicitly. For example, the *meritocracy* and *bootstraps* narratives indirectly invoke and refer to capitalism, but they don't explicitly discuss it as an economic system. Counter-narratives, by contrast, often highlight social context explicitly in order to critique it. For example, the *reckoning with racism* narrative about Confederate monuments is explicitly about white supremacy, and the *#MeToo* narrative critiques patriarchy (though arguably not as frontally or broadly as it could).<sup>45</sup>

This activated social and cultural context can be understood as part of the form of the narrative. While the general social and cultural context is, in a given time and place, the same for all narratives, the ways in which narratives activate and engage specific aspects of that context is particular to the narratives themselves.











## Relationships among Features

As should already be clear, the features of narratives are not cordoned off from one another but rather exist in close relationship. The form of narrative includes the relationships among its features.

The different features of narratives can be related in all sorts of ways. As noted above, the evaluative judgments of a narrative are closely related to its point of view. All aspects of the story world—plot, characters, and setting—are inextricably linked with each other, and each feature is subject to evaluation (e.g., characters may be evaluated as heroes or villains). The setting of the narrative is often related to the social context activated by the narrative, though exactly how these are related will differ from one narrative to another. These are only some of the ways in which the features of a narrative can be related to each other.

We've provided some examples of these relationships above, but it's useful to map them out more fully for a single narrative. To do this, we need to articulate each formal feature for a particular narrative. Below, we use the model as a template for the *bootstraps* narrative, filling in each feature of the model. This is useful for two reasons. First, it allows us to see how the model can be used to describe a whole narrative. Second, in enabling us to consider all of the features of a narrative at once, it makes it possible to illustrate how these features are related to each other.

# Putting the Whole Together: The Form of the Bootstraps Narrative

	Feature of the Model	The Bootstraps Narrative
Story World	 <b>Characters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Protagonist: an individual down on his luck (prototypically “his”), who has a deep drive to succeed</li> <li>● Surrounding characters lack grit and threaten to hold the protagonist back.</li> </ul>
	 <b>Plot</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The protagonist hits a major life challenge and, through his hard work and belief in himself, overcomes it to become successful.</li> </ul>
	 <b>Setting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An American community where life is tough.</li> </ul>
Story Told	 <b>Point of view</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The perspective of the upper and upper-middle classes (owners of capital and the professional managerial class)</li> </ul>
	 <b>Evaluative judgments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hard work is valorized. Laziness is condemned.</li> <li>● Poor communities are sometimes condemned for holding people back (though there may be people with “good old fashioned” values who are portrayed as positive influences).</li> </ul>
Story Received	 <b>Intended audience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● People with low or middle income and wealth</li> <li>● People with high income and wealth (different intent—see below)</li> </ul>
	 <b>Cultural and social context activated</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culture of rugged individualism</li> <li>● The currency and prevalence of “redemption” and “underdog” narratives in American culture</li> <li>● Capitalism</li> </ul>
Relationships	 <b>Relationship among features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The protagonist is valorized for hard work while those who don’t show grit are scorned.</li> <li>● The point of view of owners and managers of capital leads to the valorization of hard work and a sense of individual responsibility for success or failure.</li> <li>● The protagonist is cast as a model for the low- and middle- income audience to emulate.</li> <li>● The plot validates the social position of the high-income and -wealth audience (anyone can make it if they try).</li> <li>● The social context of capitalism is validated and inequality is justified.</li> </ul>

This illustration shows how the model can be used to map a whole narrative. It also provides some examples of how features are related, including how different features are evaluated, the relationship between point of view and evaluative judgments, and the relationship between protagonist and plot and intended audiences. These relationships are essential to the identity of the narrative—they give it distinctive meaning—and, as a result, should be thought of as a core part of the narrative.

## Features That Vary Across Stories

As we noted above, there are some features of stories that make sense only at the level of individual stories and don't make sense at the level of narrative. In other words, these are not features of narrative because they inevitably vary across stories.

- **Author.** Different stories have different authors.
- **Narrator.** Different stories have different narrators—who is telling the story within the framework of the story itself (e.g., in fictional stories the protagonist sometimes serves as a first-person narrator).<sup>46</sup>
- **Genre.** Different stories adopt different genres. Narratives can encompass multiple genres. For example, different genres of movies—Westerns, action movies, comedies, etc.—can all tell versions of the same narrative.
- **Storytelling strategies.** Different stories adopt different specific strategies or devices—for example, flashforwards or flashbacks.
- **Actual audience.** Different stories reach different actual audiences.
- **Complexity/simplicity.** Different stories may be simpler or more complex while sharing the same basic form.
- **Emotional tone.** This varies along with genre.<sup>47</sup>
- **Medium.** Some stories are told in newspapers, some on TV, some through social media, some in plays, some in books, etc.

This last category—medium—is particularly important, as the medium itself shapes what stories can be told and how they can be told. Different media have different “affordances”—they allow stories to be told in certain ways.<sup>48</sup> They also have limitations, constraining how stories can be told. Some media depict change over time (e.g., film, written literature) while others depict a moment in time (e.g., painting, photography, sculpture). Media can transmit live performances that change with the act of performance or delivery, as in live radio or theater, or they can be captured and frozen in a settled state, as in a recorded TV show or

a published article or novel. Media often have duration requirements or limitations; this is not only true of traditional longer-form stories, like half-hour sitcoms, but also for most social media, as with character limits on tweets and the length of TikTok videos.

The differences among media raise a question about whether the same narratives can truly be told across all of these disparate media.<sup>49</sup> Can *bootstraps* stories with all of the features laid out above really be told through photography, tweets, and TikTok videos? More challengingly, can new counter-narratives be told across this range of media?

The answers to these questions are complicated and require us to grapple with a fundamental question: can narratives be told in part, or every time they appear must they appear in full? We turn to this next.

## Do Stories Need to Include All of the Features of a Narrative to Convey the Narrative?

This question arises for multiple reasons, including the need for storytelling flexibility and the above-mentioned limits of certain media formats. For shorter formats like tweets or TikTok videos or non-temporal formats like photographs (i.e., formats that don't capture or involve the passing of time), it may be tough to lay out all aspects of the story world—to introduce characters and setting and walk through a plot—in the space or format provided.<sup>50</sup> There are, to be sure, creative ways of telling fuller stories in condensed or non-temporal formats, but longer-form formats are probably better suited for telling stories with all of the features of a narrative.

**It's the combination of features, not the individual elements, that creates narrative identity.**

Narrative identity depends on the full set of features and—crucially—the relationships among them. The features of the narrative can't be pulled, *à la carte*, from the whole set and still convey the narrative. To return to the *bootstraps* example, it's not enough, say, to have a character down on his luck with a drive to succeed. If that character tries hard but fails, it's not a *bootstraps* story. Or if, instead of valorizing hard work, the story suggests that the character is foolish in thinking that personal drive suffices for success, it's not a *bootstraps* story. It's the combination of features, not the individual elements, that creates narrative identity.

While sharing a feature or two of a narrative clearly isn't enough, narrative identity can reasonably be understood as a matter of degree, rather than as all or nothing. If a story has most of the features of a narrative but a particular feature is missing or slightly different, it generally makes sense to think of the story as carrying a version of the narrative. If a story, for example, shares most of the features of a *bootstraps* narrative, but surrounding characters are generally supportive of the protagonist rather than holding him back, so the protagonist doesn't succeed *solely* through the force of his own effort but has some help, it makes sense to think of this story as carrying and generally reinforcing the narrative.

Certain features of a narrative are typically more central to its identity than others. The *bootstraps* narrative, for example, is defined by its protagonist. If the main character isn't someone down on their luck with the determination and grit to rise above, it's not a *bootstraps* story. We can use Barthes's classic distinction between narrative "nuclei" and "catalyzers" to differentiate between features of a narrative that are *essential* to its identity (nuclei) and features that can potentially fall out of the narrative without fundamentally changing the narrative (catalyzers).<sup>51</sup> We return to this distinction below, in discussing how the model can be put into practice.

## Invoking a Narrative without Reenacting It

If a narrative is widely known, it can be referenced or invoked without a story that fully embodies it. The *bootstraps* narrative, for example, can be brought to mind by a simple use of the phrase "pulled himself up by his bootstraps." Similarly, the *pathology of Black urban poverty* narrative is triggered and invoked by language attached to it, like "inner city," "welfare queen," and "culture of poverty." Because these narratives are already deeply embedded in discourse, they can be referenced—and, in the process, contested or reinforced—with short phrases, in the absence of stories that reenact the full narrative.<sup>52</sup>

New counter-narratives can't be invoked or referenced in this way. Since they are not already known, there are no terms or phrases that audiences already associate with them. In disseminating a new counter-narrative, one of the goals is making the narrative familiar enough that it can be referenced in this way and investing key phrases or terms with the meaning of the broader narrative. #*MeToo* and the Movement for Black Lives are examples of recent movements that have successfully disseminated counter-narratives and effectively named them so that the name itself brings the full narrative to mind. In an interview, Ian Haney López summarized this idea, "When you can start to invoke that whole story with an image, with a word, with a phrase, I think ... [that] would be a good benchmark for success in narrative dissemination."<sup>53</sup>

The reality that new counter-narratives must be introduced in full and cannot be referenced in shorthand ways suggests that, in initial stages of narrative dissemination, using media that allow for longer stories and a temporal dimension is important, as these forms make it easier to convey the full narrative. Other media can be used at this point to support narrative dissemination by linking to or commenting on fuller stories in other media, or by providing condensed versions of the full narrative (e.g., in Twitter threads).<sup>54</sup> These communications can also begin to introduce shorthand—words, images, names, and phrases—that make it possible to refer to and activate the narrative without reenacting it (e.g., through hashtags).<sup>55</sup>

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Having laid out the features of the model, we can now walk through the different ways it can be used in narrative change work. We suggest ways in which narrative strategists and researchers can take up and use the model in their own narrative change efforts. We also identify the types of supports and tools that could be developed to enable others to productively use the model when working with particular narratives, including, most importantly, content creators.

# The Four Uses of the Model (the Four D's)

The model of narrative form presented above can be used to do four things, which we'll call the four D's:

- 1.**  **Distinguish between narratives and other forms of communication**
- 2.**  **Diagnose existing narratives and emerging counter-narratives**
- 3.**  **Develop and test counter-narratives**
- 4.**  **Disseminate counter-narratives**

In this section, we discuss each in turn, showing how the model can be used for each purpose.



## Distinguish What Is and Isn't a Narrative

The model can be used to distinguish between narratives and other types of frames (e.g., values and metaphors). **If a frame includes the formal features of narrative, then it's a narrative; if it doesn't, then it's not.** If a frame lacks consistent characters or a common type of plot, for example, then it's simply not a narrative.

Being able to distinguish between narratives and other types of frames matters for clarifying strategy. When you come up against a dominant frame that you are looking to counter, knowing whether that frame is or isn't a narrative is critical for identifying the appropriate response. If the frame is a narrative, it is likely to be most effectively countered with another narrative. In other words, the effort truly is about narrative change—about displacing a dominant narrative with a new one. If you're dealing with a different type of frame, then it can potentially be countered with other types of frames. Being able to distinguish between narratives and other frames is critical for identifying whether narrative change is needed or a different kind of frame shift is required.

Within the context of a broader social change effort that includes narratives and other framing strategies, we can consider the use of narratives from the perspective of their distinctive effects on thought and action. As we discuss above, narratives are particularly well-suited to motivating action and enabling people to identify with others across lines of difference. When movements are looking to accomplish these goals, they should employ narratives. They can use other frames when they are looking to accomplish other ends (e.g., values frames can be highly effective in building support for policy change). Being able to match frame type to task requires clarity about what strategies are and aren't narratives.

Finally, the decision about whether to use narratives or other frames in a given situation may depend on media type. Narratives are well-suited for media that are story-focused, including entertainment media and profile or narrative journalism. Identifying which frames are narratives and which aren't is a necessary first step in fitting message to medium.





## Diagnose Narratives

The model of narrative form can be used as a diagnostic tool to arrive at a refined understanding of existing narratives. For example, the model can help us understand what is shared and what differs between two different but related individualistic narratives—the *bootstraps* narrative and the *meritocracy* narrative.<sup>56</sup> Both narratives involve protagonists whose hard work leads to success. Yet the setting of the two narratives is arguably different. *Bootstraps* stories typically take place in communities where life is tough and opportunities are limited. The protagonist has to overcome this disadvantage. The *meritocracy* narrative, by contrast, is set in a (fictional) community where opportunities are available to all and where it is hard work and talent alone that matter.

This difference in setting has strategic implications. While the *meritocracy* narrative at its core denies inequality of opportunity, the *bootstraps* narrative does not, raising the possibility that this narrative could be adjusted or adapted to bring systemic inequality more fully into view. Could the *bootstraps* narrative be tweaked and redirected as a narrative about resistance to unfair systems—how individuals can, through determination and force of will, change the systems that constrain their communities? The model helps to bring this question into view by enabling us to unpack the narratives and articulate their features. This is just one example of how the model can be used to better understand existing narratives and their implications.

The model can also help identify new narratives that are beginning to emerge in discourse—narratives that activists, advocates, journalists, or political elites are contributing to. When there appears to be a new pattern in stories that these groups are telling, narrative strategists the model to see whether or not a new narrative is coalescing. Do the stories have a common type of character or narrative arc? Do they share a specific point of view or have a particular intended audience? Diagnosing new narratives as they emerge makes it possible to consider and potentially conduct research to determine whether and how these new narratives should be amplified or contested.



## Develop and Test Counter-Narratives

There are three related ways that the model can be used to **develop** counter-narratives:

- **Coalesce patterns in grassroots storytelling into a narrative.** Grassroots activists have a unique perspective and are often the most compelling storytellers. The stories they tell bear and convey the insight and urgency of communities' experiences. Activists are sometimes deliberate in using common narratives, but even when they aren't deploying a common narrative intentionally, there are often the seeds of counter-narratives in the stories activists tell. The model can help activists and strategists recognize these nascent patterns and turn them into full-fledged narratives.<sup>57</sup> A set of stories might, for example, be constructed around similar characters or apply a similar point of view but lack other common features. The model can help activists recognize these common patterns as well as the features of their nascent narrative that are missing. They can then fill in these missing features and, through the explicit recognition of the counter-narrative, more consistently tell it.
- **Identify ways to stretch and adjust existing narratives.** Some narrative practitioners suggest that narratives are more likely to be effective if they adapt or build on existing narratives. Familiarity with an existing narrative can potentially make people more open to it and make it more compelling to them.<sup>58</sup> If narrative strategists are looking to adapt an existing narrative, the model can facilitate consideration of how the narrative might be tweaked or stretched. Mapping a narrative using the model—specifying each of its formal features—makes it easier to think through how certain features of the narrative could be changed while holding the rest of the narrative constant.

The marriage equality campaign is a great example of how an existing dominant narrative was tweaked by changing one of its features. The campaign began with a familiar narrative about marriage: two people who are in love and committed to building a life and family together get married to cement their relationship and create a foundation for a shared life. The campaign tweaked the narrative slightly, swapping out opposite-sex couples for same-sex couples but keeping the rest of the narrative intact. The campaign then told many different stories that disseminated this revised narrative. These stories not only preserved the features of the dominant narrative about marriage (including character motivation, plot, and positive evaluation of the act of marriage), they also adopted many of the familiar trappings of marriage stories (images and depictions of familiar wedding rituals, for example).<sup>59</sup>

By making it possible to map existing narratives, the model makes it easier to imagine these kinds of adjustments that change particular features of an existing narrative while keeping the rest of the narrative intact.

- **Develop wholly new counter-narratives.** The model can facilitate development of new narratives by providing a set of features that narrative strategists can explicitly brainstorm around. While counter-narrative development undoubtedly involves, at some moment, the sudden grasping of new possibilities, this creative illumination must be preceded by clarity about the problem—clear understanding of what is being brainstormed *about*.<sup>60</sup> The ability to think about different elements that can be manipulated or changed in the construction of new narratives can aid in the development of possible counter-narratives. In addition, having the model in mind can help ensure that new narratives being developed are truly narratives—that is, they have the requisite features of narrative and aren't incomplete narratives or non-narrative frames.

There are three related ways that the model could be used in the **testing** of counter-narratives:

- **Ensure the comparability of narratives being tested.** There's a danger in empirical testing of narratives that one narrative might perform better than others not because of its content, but because of how it is presented. For example, if some narratives are incomplete and lack features other narratives being tested have, they might perform worse for this reason alone—because they aren't being presented in a proper form. Differences in how narratives are ordered or what is emphasized could also distort results and make interpreting findings difficult.

The model helps to solve these problems by clarifying what features need to be included in all narratives that are being tested and by providing clear visibility around ordering and emphasis of elements. By making it possible to explicitly consider features, the model facilitates apples-to-apples comparisons of fully articulated narratives. This ensures that testing is truly measuring the effects of the narratives rather than contingent aspects of their presentation.

- **Support more thorough testing of narratives.** By identifying the different features of narrative, the model makes it easier to manipulate narratives for testing. This could mean switching out features of the narrative to see, for example, which villain works best. It could involve manipulating *how* the features of the narrative are presented. For example, let's say capitalism is the social context activated by a narrative. Is it better to explicitly activate and name capitalism as the source of problems, or is it better to activate it implicitly by mentioning familiar aspects of capitalism (e.g., market wages or "the going rate") but not naming it? By making the features of narrative explicit, the model makes it possible to consider the full range of ways in which narratives might be changed and manipulated in testing, which enables more thorough, systematic, and comprehensive testing.

- **Identify the features of narratives that drive effects.** As part of the process of manipulating narratives in testing, researchers can find out whether emphasizing particular features improves or hurts their performance, or whether leaving out specific features affects performance. This can give researchers an understanding of which features of a narrative are most important (“nuclei,” in the sense described above), and which are less important. In other words, the model makes it possible to conduct research to understand which features are driving effects on thinking and action. This can help narrative strategists know which features absolutely must be included in all stories that are mobilizing the narrative—the parts of it that are essential to include.



## Disseminate Counter-Narratives

The model provides a template that narrative strategists can use to consistently move from narrative to stories in a way that preserves the core identity of the narrative. The consistent use of the same narrative is critical for any narrative change effort. A narrative will only become familiar to people if they hear many different stories carrying that same narrative. In order to move a new narrative into the center of public discourse, it is essential that different stories truly carry *that same narrative* and are not just a jumble of loosely related tales. By providing a means to ensure that stories actually carry a narrative, the model can help support proper dissemination of a narrative.

As we discuss in the next section, resources will need to be created in specific narrative change efforts for the model to be usable for content creators. Before getting into these practical steps, we want to discuss in basic conceptual terms how the model can be used in the process of dissemination.

The basic idea is that counter-narratives can be mapped using the model, just as the *bootstraps* narrative is laid out above, and dissemination involves creating stories that contain all or the most essential features of the narrative. Dissemination requires moving back and forth between sparse, general articulations of features at the narrative level and the rich, specific details of stories. This means moving in both directions—figuring out how the features of a narrative can be embodied in a range of specific stories, whether fictional or real, and, once stories are sketched, checking back to verify that they’re actually carrying the narrative and, if not, adjusting them as needed.

To illustrate how the model could be used in dissemination, let's take a specific narrative, map it using the model, and show how the narrative could be instantiated in stories in different types of content and media—in an issue campaign spot, journalistic coverage, a TV drama, and a tweet.<sup>61</sup>

To stay as close as possible to actual narrative change practice, we'll use a counter-narrative about poverty that has been proposed by researchers and strategists—what we call the *systems* narrative. This narrative can be distilled as follows:









Poverty is a product of our choices as a society. Through our collective decisions, we have designed an economic system that produces poverty. By changing policies and institutions, we can redesign the system, change the outcomes it produces, and solve poverty.<sup>62</sup>

When we examine this description using the model of narrative form, it quickly becomes clear that this isn't yet a full narrative—it's missing key features. It's missing clear characters, and the plot isn't entirely clear. It's not clear if the plot is historical—about how current systems came to be—or if the plot involves action in the present to redesign policies and institutions to solve poverty. Point of view and audience also aren't entirely clear. Is the narrative *from* the point of view of people in poverty *for* people in poverty? Is it *from* the point of view of anti-poverty advocates *for* policymakers or affluent members of the public?

This initial diagnosis indicates that in order to arrive at a narrative that can be effectively disseminated, it's necessary to flesh out the narrative—to specify all of its formal features. In a narrative change effort, this would require collaboration among strategists, activists, and perhaps content creators and researchers to identify different ways of refining the *systems* narrative. Ideally, it would involve research to test different versions of the narrative to land on the most effective one.

For the purpose of illustrating how the model could be used in narrative dissemination, we've made choices about how to specify all of the formal features of this narrative. The specific choices we've made about characters, plot, and other features aren't important for our purposes, and they aren't recommendations. For this exercise, the content of this sample narrative isn't what matters; it's just a means to illustrate how the model can be used to refine and disseminate a narrative.

# A Sample Counter-Narrative: The Systems Narrative

	Feature of the Model	The Systems Narrative
Story World	 <b>Characters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Protagonist: an individual with a sense of injustice and outrage</li> <li>● Supporting characters: other individuals with similar experiences and ideas</li> <li>● Villain: state and corporate authorities</li> </ul>
	 <b>Plot</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Facing the reality of systemic oppression and exploitation, <b>the protagonist becomes an activist.</b></li> <li>● The protagonist <b>acts in concert with others</b> to resist authorities perpetuating injustice.</li> <li>● This resistance yields an achievement (e.g., a policy win or the beginning of a community organization or movement).</li> </ul>
	 <b>Setting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An exploitative economy and structural oppression (racism and sexism), which have put people in poverty</li> </ul>
Story Told	 <b>Point of view</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Disfranchised groups</b></li> </ul>
	 <b>Evaluative judgments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The system is the problem, not people in poverty.</li> <li>● <b>The people have a right to redesign social systems to realize justice.</b></li> </ul>
Story Received	 <b>Intended audience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● People experiencing poverty, BIPOC people</li> </ul>
	 <b>Cultural and social context activated</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Culture of individualism (contested)</li> <li>● Structural oppression and capitalism as sources of inequality</li> <li>● <b>The democratic promise that power lies in the people; the breaking of that promise (i.e., disenfranchisement in a broad, not just electoral, sense)</b></li> </ul>
Relationships	 <b>Relationship among features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The protagonist and supporting characters are valorized while those trying to keep them down are villainized.</li> <li>● The setting of an exploitative economy and structural inequality is blamed.</li> <li>● The point of view of disenfranchised groups + the arc of resistance invest characters and audience with authority and collective agency.</li> <li>● The social and cultural contexts are criticized.</li> </ul>

In this formal outline of the *systems* narrative, we've bolded some features to identify them as "nuclei" of the narrative. These are the features of the narrative that we've decided, for the purposes of the exercise, are essential. Ideally, this would be grounded in research telling us which features of the narrative drive effects, but in the absence of such research, we've picked features so we can show how identification of nuclei can inform story creation. We've chosen as nuclei features of the narrative that center on democratic power, though we could easily have chosen sets of features that cohere in other ways (e.g., features that center on the structural sources of inequality, or features that center on the lived experience of oppression and exploitation).

Below are examples of how this *systems* narrative could be embodied within different types of stories. In each example, we highlight how each of the features of the narrative, or at least the nuclei, find their way into the story.

## Examples of how the *systems* narrative could be worked into stories


**Issue campaign ad**

**Opportunity for all,**  
*the fortunate few*

**Corporations have programmed our economy to work for them.**  
**It's time to make it work for all of us.**

Join the **Solidarity for Justice Rally**  
to demand action on **economic inequality.**

**Saturday, June 5, 1–4 p.m.**  
**National Mall, Washington, DC**

-  **Character (Villain)**
-  **Setting**
-  **Point of View**
-  **Evaluative Judgments**
-  **Plot**
-  **Cultural and Social Context Activated**

## News article (excerpt)

### Is The Equity Economy This Decade's Occupy Wall Street?

Organized demonstrations in major cities across the United States this weekend have highlighted Americans' growing frustration over an economic divide in which many face poverty or economic insecurity, especially communities of color. The protests, carried out under the umbrella of a new social justice organization, The Equity Economy, came with calls for policies to combat corporate power and systemic racism and to create a more just economy.



**Setting**



**Point of View**



**Evaluative Judgments**

The movement was founded by Imani Vance, a Boston social worker moved to become involved in community organizing efforts after witnessing the COVID-19 pandemic's outsized impact on communities of color and essential workers.



**Character (Protagonist)**



**Plot**

"The pandemic has laid bare the injustices of our systems, which promise rewards for hard work but confine those rewards to a select few based on their zip code and the color of their skin," said Vance. "It's time we came together to demand a just economy that works for all."



**Setting**



**Cultural and Social Context Activated**



**Intended Audience**



## Tweet



**Rebuild Better**  
@rebuildbetter

Corporations and the super-rich built economic and social systems that work in their favor—but the house is starting to crumble. We need a total renovation so racism and economic oppression no longer determine how well your work pays off. Join us at [rebuildbetter.org](https://rebuildbetter.org).

2:33 PM • Jun 25, 2021



**Character (Villain)**



**Setting**



**Point of View**



**Cultural and Social Context Activated**



**Evaluative Judgments**



**Character (Protagonist)**



**Plot**

## Description of a TV drama

### Just Education

On an elite East Coast college campus in the 1990s, Derrick and Spencer are roommates who become fast friends despite a cavernous gap in the life experiences that deliver them there. On paper, they could be one and the same: identical GPAs, SAT scores, high school baseball ERAs. Derrick, who is Black, received a full scholarship and is determined to prove he belongs; he aspires to partnership at a Top 10 law firm where he can earn enough to pull his family out of poverty. Spencer, who is white, plans to lean heavily on his trust fund payouts and glide into a yet-to-be-identified career.

Through a college scandal that reveals a deep history of racism, Derrick is reminded of how great the odds against him are, while Spencer comes to terms with his family's role in building systems that catapulted them while oppressing others. As terrible truths emerge, the friends find themselves redefining their future aspirations while realizing their own important roles in fighting centuries-old norms and systems. Over the course of the series, they take on campus culture, the legal profession, and higher education itself.



**Character  
(Protagonists)**



**Evaluative Judgments**



**Setting**



**Cultural and Social  
Context Activated**



**Plot**



**Point of View**



# Putting the Model into Creative Practice

The previous section shows, in general terms, how the model of narrative form can be used to distinguish narratives from other frames, diagnose existing and emerging narratives, develop and test counter-narratives, and disseminate counter-narratives. This report provides a relatively straightforward basis for using the model for the first three functions (distinguish, diagnose, develop):

- Narratives can be distinguished from non-narratives by identifying whether or not the formal features of the model are present or not.
- While diagnostic use of the model isn't as simple as its distinguishing function, the process is relatively straightforward—the act of specifying each of the narrative's features will elicit reflections on the narrative that will produce greater insight into how it is working and what it is doing.
- The model can assist with the development and testing of narratives by spotlighting the features that must be specified and that can be manipulated. The act of specifying an emerging narrative clarifies what must be added to it to turn it into a full-fledged narrative. Filling out the narrative template makes it easier to consider how an existing narrative can be tweaked and how different versions of a narrative can be tested and compared in a valid way. And by clarifying which features must be present in new narratives, the model can prevent the development of incomplete narratives.

To use the model for its fourth purpose—dissemination—narrative strategists will need more than we have provided to this point.

In the course of developing the model, we presented a summary description of a draft of the model to content creators and strategists. This was a way to pressure test the model and get feedback about its potential usability for dissemination. The primary takeaway from these pressure testing interviews was that in order for the model to be usable, creators would need tailored, **narrative-specific toolkits**.<sup>63</sup> Pressure testers had some specific suggestions for resources that could populate a toolkit:

**1. A filled-in template.<sup>64</sup>**

The first piece of content in a toolkit would be a specification of the narrative using the categories of the model. In other words, each of the model's features would be briefly described (similar to the tables above that sketch the *bootstraps* and *systems* narratives).

**2. Sample stories.<sup>65</sup>**

These stories would illustrate how the narrative could be used in different types of stories, in different media, with different messengers and audiences. Sample stories would show the flexibility of the narrative as well as its capacity to connect with people emotionally.<sup>66</sup> This would look a bit like the sample stories provided above for the *systems* narrative.

**3. Checklists and cheat sheets.**

Multiple pressure testers suggested the need for short checklists or cheat sheets that would provide a quick reminder of key narrative content, so creators could check their stories against these features as they went.<sup>67</sup>

These toolkits would need to be integrated with traditional creative briefs that clarify details about audiences, dissemination channels, and other strategic decisions.

These toolkits would give content creators what they need to create stories that disseminate a counter-narrative. They would also give narrative strategists working on specific campaigns or a broader narrative change effort what they need to ensure consistency in the way a narrative is being disseminated across media. The toolkits would help strategists work with creators of all sorts—from TV writers and digital media strategists to grassroots organizers and non-profit communicators—and ensure that the same narrative appears in the very different kinds of stories these different creators produce.

The model of narrative form presented in this report provides a framework that we believe is highly useful for narrative change work. Yet the model is just a tool. It can help narrative practitioners recognize when the frame they're looking to disseminate isn't really a narrative, but it can't tell them what narrative they should be disseminating. It can help narrative strategists understand existing narratives better and recognize new ones that are emerging, but it can't tell them how to respond to these narratives. It can help strategists and researchers develop a wider range of narratives and test them more rigorously and effectively, but the model doesn't provide a formula for narrative generation. And as we have just discussed, in order for the model to be useful in narrative dissemination, strategists and researchers will need to collaborate to develop narrative-specific toolkits that help creators know how to use a new counter-narrative.



# Appendix: Interview Participants

**Thank you to the following individuals for offering their expertise:**

- Dan Ancona
- Madison Smartt Bell
- Johanna Blakley
- Kirk Cheyfitz
- Wyatt Closs
- Riki Conrey
- Abigail Disney
- Holly Gordon
- Melanie C. Green
- Crystal Echo Hawk
- Julie Hermelin
- Suzanne Keen
- Peter Koechley
- Ian Haney López
- Liz Manne
- Dan P. McAdams
- Shana McDavis-Conway
- Jess McIntosh
- Yael Melamede
- Gabriella Modan
- Daron Murphy
- James Phelan
- Marquez Rhyne
- Pacita Rudder
- Jonah Sachs
- Shaul R. Shenhav
- Amy Shuman
- Erica Williams Simon
- Michael Skolnik
- Vera Tobin
- Cristina Uribe
- Robyn Warhol



# Endnotes

- 1 Domm, A. (2020, October 7). The power of narrative change for nonprofits. *Big Duck*. <https://bigduck.com/insights/the-power-of-narrative-change-for-nonprofits/>
- 2 The Narrative Initiative, whose work has played a crucial role in shaping the field’s understanding of the concept of narrative, actively disavows the possibility of understanding narratives as certain kinds of patterns: “Unlike individual stories, narratives have no standard form or structure; they have no beginning or end.” Narrative Initiative. (2017). *Toward New Gravity: Charting a Course for the Narrative Initiative*, p. 12. <https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/TowardNewGravity-June2017.pdf>. As we explain in this report, we disagree with this assessment and think that clarifying the form of narrative—the set of patterned features that make up narratives—is critical for narrative change work.
- 3 Brett Davidson rightly identified several years ago the danger that the term “narrative change” might “become a short-cut for thinking—a term without precision—where everybody thinks they know what it means, but nobody really does for sure.” Davidson, B. (2016). Narrative Change and the Open Society Public Health Program. While there have been important contributions to and advancements in the field since Davidson made this comment, there remains fuzziness in the field’s understanding of the form of narrative, which this report is intended to address.
- 4 Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.
- 5 Herskovitz, S., & Crystal, M. (2010). The essential brand persona: *Storytelling and branding*. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 31(3), 21–28.
- 6 See Conklin, L., Aassar, M., and Volmert, A. (2021). *How do other fields think about narrative? Lessons for narrative change practitioners*. FrameWorks Institute.

- 7 See Conklin, L., Aassar, M., & Volmert, A. (2021). *How do other fields think about narrative? Lessons for narrative change practitioners*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 8 Klarissa Lueg, Ann Starbaek Bager, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, citing Gee, suggest “typical stories” as a useful shorthand definition of narrative; Lueg, K., Starbæk Bager, A., & Wolff Lundholt, M. (2021). Introduction: *What counter-narratives are: Dimensions and levels of a theory of a middle range*. In K. Lueg & M. Wolff Lundholt. *The Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. Routledge.
- 9 See *Toward New Gravity: Charting the Course for the Narrative Initiative* 2017, p. 12, where narrative is described as “a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief.” See similarly Ally Domm, “The Power of Narrative Change for Nonprofits,” which cites the Narrative Initiative in describing narrative as “patterns or systems of stories,” while echoing the Narrative Initiative’s formulation that “in a story, something happens to someone or something.”
- 10 On mindset shifts, see FrameWorks Institute. (2020). *Mindset shifts: What are they? Why do they matter? How do they happen?* (A FrameWorks Strategic Report). FrameWorks Institute.
- 11 For a deeper discussion of this narrative, see Miller, T. L., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). *Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 12 For more on the *bootstraps* narrative, see Miller, Theresa L., Volmert, Andrew, Rochman, Abigail, & Aassar, Mia. (2021). *Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 13 Cf. Lueg, K., & Wolff Lundholt, M. (2021). *The Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*. Routledge.
- 14 For a discussion of narratives about the death penalty, see Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Shifting the narrative: Six case studies*. <https://www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/shifting-narrative>.
- 15 On the “every immigrant is a (potential) criminal” narrative in the US and Mexico, see Anderson, J. (2015). “Tagged as a criminal”: Narrative of deportation and return migration in a Mexico City call center. *Latino Studies*, 13(1),: 8-27.

- 16 This narrative was the dominant one on the right shortly before Trump, who reinforced the *criminal* narrative. For an analysis of pro- and anti-immigrant narratives in 2014, see O’Neil, M., Haydon, A., & Simon, A. (2014). *Stories matter: Field frame analysis on immigration reform*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
- 17 On the characterization of DREAMers as “well-assimilated” and “driven,” see Lauby, F. (2016). Leaving the ‘perfect DREAMer’ behind? Narratives and mobilization in immigration reform. *Social Movement Studies*, 15(1), 374–387.
- 18 For a discussion of narratives about poverty, see Miller, Theresa L., Volmert, A., Rochman, Ab., & Aassar, M. (2021). *Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 19 Examining the relationship between dominant narratives and counter-narratives can help us understand counter-narratives’ potential to displace dominant ones. The *DREAMer* narrative effectively undermines narratives that paint immigrants with a broad brush, but because it is about a select subset of immigrants—children—it doesn’t directly challenge the application of anti-immigrant narratives to their parents.
- 20 Gamson W. A., & Modigliani A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), 1–37; Chong, D., & Druckman, J. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, 103–126; Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611–639.
- 21 Hühn, P. (2008). Functions and forms of eventfulness in narrative fiction. In J. Pier & J. Á. García Landa (Eds.), *Theorizing narrativity* (pp. 141–63). de Gruyter; cf. Jerome Bruner on narrative vs. paradigmatic modes of thought: Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.
- 22 See Ganz, M. (2011). Public narrative, collective action, and power. In S. Odugbemi and T. Lee (Eds.), *Accountability through public opinion: From inertia to public action*. The World Bank..
- 23 In her interview, Riki Conrey helpfully referred us to this literature as relevant on this point.” Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2002). In the mind’s eye: Transportation-imagery model of narrative persuasion. In M. C.



- Green, J. J. Strange & T. C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (pp. 315–341). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 24 Narrative transportation and persuasion stand in complicated relationship. Research on narrative’s persuasive potential compared to other forms of communication is beset by methodological problems (e.g., how to operationalize “narrative” vs. “non-narrative” in testing), and, in turn, its results are unclear. See Bilandzic, H., & Busselle, R. (2012). Narrative persuasion. In J. P. Dillard & L. Shen (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of persuasion: Developments in theory and practice* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
  - 25 Interview with Amy Shuman; interview with Jonah Sachs; interview with Ian Haney López.
  - 26 Norrick, N. (2000). *Conversational narrative: Storytelling in everyday talk*. John Benjamins Publishing Co.; Schank, R. C., & Berman, T. (2002). *The pervasive role of narrative in knowledge and action*. In M. C. Green, J. J. Strange, & T. C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (p. 292).
  - 27 The Narrative Policy Framework is grounded in a similar recognition that narratives reflect and contain elements of stories, though it applies this insight in a specific context and a more limited way. See Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Shanahan, E. A. (2014). Introducing the narrative policy framework. In Jones, M., Shanahan, E., & McBeth, M. (Eds.), *The science of stories: Applications of the narrative policy framework in public policy analysis* (pp. 1–25). Palgrave MacMillan.
  - 28 For a critique of structuralist conceptions of narrative, see, e.g., Gibson, A. (1996). *Towards a postmodern theory of narrative*. Edinburgh University Press.
  - 29 Characters are critical to the power of narrative because, as Brian Boyd argues, nature did not design us to think abstractly. The power of narrative is grounded in the specific actions of specific agents. Boyd, B. (2010). *On the origin of stories: Evolution, cognition, and fiction*. Harvard University Press.
  - 30 On this narrative and for references to research on it, see Miller, T. L., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). *Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories*. FrameWorks Institute. See also Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Shifting the narrative: Six case studies*. <https://www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/shifting-narrative>

- 31 We use “plot” here in the colloquial sense. In literary theory, “plot” is used in a range of different ways, sometimes having more to do with how events are presented than with the happenings of the story. These distinct conceptions of plot aren’t relevant at the level of narrative, as we are using that concept in this report, so we don’t get into them here. For a discussion of this literature, see Scheffel, M. (2013). Narrative constitution. *The living handbook of narratology*. <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/57.html>
- 32 On causality as a key part of narrative, see Talmy, L. (2000). A cognitive framework for narrative structure. In *Toward a cognitive semantics: Volume 2, typology and process in concept structuring*. MIT Press.
- 33 For a classic critique of the view from nowhere, see Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University. Ally Dommu of Big Duck gets at the concept of hegemony in explaining that dominant narratives are dominant in the sense that “they are generated by and reinforce the dominant group’s power” (“The power of narrative change for non-profits,” available at <https://bigduck.com/insights/the-power-of-narrative-change-fornonprofits/>)
- 34 For more on the *meritocracy* narrative, see Miller, T. L., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). *Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 35 See <https://www.demos.org/research/race-class-our-progressive-narrative/> and <https://raceclassnarrativeaction.com/>. For further discussion of this narrative, see the “Solidarity” section of Miller, T. L., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). *Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 36 See Han, H., and Ahn, S. W. (2020). Youth mobilization to stop global climate change: Narratives and impact. *Sustainability*, 12.
- 37 The concept of interpellation is the theoretical background here. On interpellation and subjectivity, see Althusser, L. (2001). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation). In Brewster, B. (Trans.), *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. Monthly Review Press. On the related but slightly different concept of “virtual audience,” see Fulton, H. (2005). Introduction: The power of narrative. In H. Fulton, R. Huisman, J. Murphet, & A. Dunn (Eds.), *Narrative and media* (p. 5).
- 38 Amy Shuman interview.

- 39 See interview with Gabriella Modan: “Different communities are going to wield the forms of narrative in different ways for different purposes. And the same narrative can change over time and in different contexts. And sometimes you might lose something in a new telling because you are trying to tell it to a different audience, but there’s also a lot to be gained. Because in re-telling something about something that happened, it’s an opportunity for a teller to gain new viewpoints and insights on what they are telling about.”
- 40 In other words, interpellation is not automatic or unidirectional, but something that happens and morphs through uptake and response. While people’s subjectivity and identities are shaped through discourse and channeled by the bounds of this discourse, they have agency in how they respond to and negotiate cultural discourses, and their subjectivity is not wholly determined or exhausted by any discourse or ideology. This is the Foucauldian corrective to the Althusserian account of interpellation.
- 41 Talmy, L. (2000). A cognitive framework for narrative structure. In *Toward a cognitive semantics: Volume 2, typology and process in concept structuring*. MIT Press. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of the “fusion of horizons.” Gadamer, H.-G. (1975). *Truth and method*. Seabury Press.
- 42 On cultural scripts, see Schank, R. C., & Abelson, R. P. (1975). *Scripts, plans, and knowledge* [Conference paper]. International Joint Conferences on Artificial Intelligence, Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 151–157.
- 43 See Kuzina, M. (2001). The social issue courtroom drama as an expression of American popular culture. *Journal of law and society*, 28(1), 79–96.
- 44 For an interesting discussion of “stock characters” in the *he said/she said* narrative as applied to rape cases against Australian footballers, see Waterhouse-Watson, D. (2011). (Un)reasonable doubt: A “narrative immunity” for footballers against sexual assault allegations. *M/C Journal*, 14(1). The location of authority is, of course, complex and can shift depending on the social identities of accuser and accused. The longstanding narrative of Black men threatening white women—a narrative widely used to justify lynchings—is frequently mobilized when a Black man is accused of assaulting a white woman, and this narrative displaces the *he said/she said* narrative. This narrative is

grounded in the assumed power of white men over both white women's and Black men's bodies, locating authority in neither party but rather outside of both.

- 45 On the idea that *#MeToo* doesn't truly criticize the systems and structures that enable sexual violence but rather individualizes it, see Sanin, R. (2019). *#MeToo* what kind of politics? Panel notes. *Journal of women, politics, & policy*, 40(1), 122–128.
- 46 Narrator can be related to, but is conceptually distinct from, point of view. In fictional *bootstraps* stories, for example, the narrator is often the protagonist, but the point of view embodied is, as we suggest below, arguably that of economic elites.
- 47 The *pathology of Black urban poverty* example is a case in point. This narrative can be used to tell sad, tragic stories. It can be used to tell angry, vengeful stories. Stories with these different emotional tones all carry the narrative equally and fully.
- 48 See Ryan, M.-L. (2014). Narration in various media. In P. Hühn, J. C. Meister, J. Pier, & W. Schmid, (Eds.), *Handbook of narratology, Volume 1* (2nd ed.), De Gruyter. Herman, D. (2004). Toward a transmedial narratology. In M.-L. Ryan, J. Ruppert, & J. W. Bernet (Eds.), *Narrative across media: The languages of storytelling*. University of Nebraska Press; Kuhn, M., & Schmidt, J. N. (2014). Narration in film. In P. Hühn, J. C. Meister, J. Pier, & W. Schmid (Eds.), *Handbook of narratology, Volume 1* (2nd ed.), De Gruyter; interview with Vera Tobin; interview with Riki Conrey. Abigail Disney, in an interview, suggested that certain types of stories are also better told through certain types of media (e.g., Harry Potter works better as a novel than a film).
- 49 This is the fundamental question posed by academic inquiry into “transmedial narratology.”
- 50 This led one of our “pressure testers,” Crystal Echo Hawk, to suggest that the model seems best suited for long-form stories (though interestingly, another pressure tester, Jess McIntosh, thought the model was best suited for 30-to-60-second issue campaign spots).
- 51 Barthes, R. (1975). An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative (L. Duisit, Trans.), *New literary history*, 6(2), 237–272. Cf. Chatman on “kernels” and “satellites.” Our application of Barthes's distinction is an intentional—but we think felicitous—misreading. We do not ground the distinction between “nuclei” and “catalyzers” on the distinction between “story” and “discourse” in the literary sense,

as Barthes does, as our model of narrative identity encompasses both levels (what happens in the story world and how the story is told/received). Instead, we use purely pragmatic criteria to distinguish between essential nuclei and important but inessential catalyzers.

- 52 See Schank, R. C., & Berman, T. (2002). The pervasive role of narrative in knowledge and action. In M. C. Green, J. J. Strange, & T. C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (p. 291).
- 53 Interview with Ian Haney López. In her interview, Melanie C. Green made a similar point: Even really short stories can often be effective, but I think when really short stories are effective, it's because they link into these common story forms that we've seen before—'oh, the reunited family members' or 'oh, the danger from the outside' or 'oh, the true love'—things like that. We know those stories. If you're presenting us a version of that that takes 30 seconds, we still are connected with that.
- 54 It may be possible, as well, for a series of stories about the same event or object—for example, a series of short videos for a campaign—to add up to a larger narrative when considered together. This is similar in some ways to the concept of “feuilletons médiatiques,” which involve a series of news articles that track an evolving event (e.g., a strike) without a known resolution; see Vanoost, M. (2013). Defining narrative journalism through the concept of plot. *DIEGESIS*, 2(2), 79. In both cases, the narrative is conveyed through a series of stories, each of which might include some or parts of some features but not all of them.
- 55 For an interesting discussion of hashtags as a way of spreading broader narratives, see Oates, S., & Gray, J. (2019). *#Kremlin: Using hashtags to analyze Russian disinformation strategy and dissemination on Twitter*. [Conference presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. [https:// papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3445180](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3445180)
- 56 For more on the overlap and distinctions between these narratives, see Conklin, L., Aassar, M., & Volmert, A. (2021). *How do other fields think about narrative? Lessons for narrative change practitioners*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 57 This application was suggested by a conversation among grantees at a session of the Economic Mobility and Opportunity Narrative Change Learning Community.
- 58 See Conklin, L., Aassar, M., & Volmert, A. (2021). *How do other fields think about narrative? Lessons for narrative change practitioners*.

FrameWorks Institute. It's important to caveat this by noting that there are also obvious dangers in reinforcing unproductive, oppressive, or exploitative narratives in any way.

- 59 See FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *Moving mindsets: How to shape a shift strategy*.
- 60 In other words, the model can be useful in the “preparation” or “problem construction” phases of creativity. See Kozbelt, A., Beghetto, R. A., & Runco, M. A. (2010). Theories of creativity. In J. C. Kaufman & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of creativity*. Cambridge University Press (pp. 30–31).
- 61 The model could, of course, be used to disseminate narratives in other media or through face-to-face storytelling (e.g., deep canvassing or organizing efforts). We offer these examples to illustrate how the model can be used, but we don't intend them to be exhaustive of possible applications.
- 62 See Miller, T. L., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). *Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories*. FrameWorks Institute.
- 63 This idea came initially from Erica Williams Simon. Crystal Echo Hawk and Jess McIntosh offered similar suggestions.
- 64 Interview with Erica Williams Simon; interview with Cristina Uribe.
- 65 Interview with Erica Williams Simon; interview with Cristina Uribe.
- 66 Illustrating and explaining how the counter-narrative could be used to provoke an emotional response is critical for content creators, who are first and foremost committed to making compelling stories. Julie Hermelin made this point strongly in her pressure test interview.
- 67 Interview with Dan Ancona; interview with Yael Melamede.

## About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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## The Features of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts

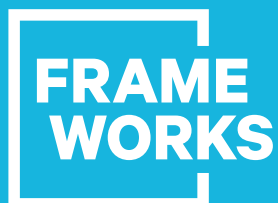
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