

STORY ARCHETYPES





We created this tool to help folks see the value in knowing what kinds of stories your audience(s) consume. Before drafting or finalizing your narrative change work, it is important to think about and note the following:

1. Who is my Audience? Name them and list out as much detail as you can about them. These folks are different than your Target. A Target is the decision-maker that can make your desired change happen. And your Audience is the people that you need to reach & persuade who have influence over the Target (Hint: The answer is never “the general public.”) Get as specific as you can. Traditionally, we look at what kinds of jobs the Audience have? What hopes, dreams, fears, biases do they hold? What age are they and where are they geographically located? Your Audience is key! What is your audience listening to/watching/reading?






2. What specific Action is it that you want your Audience to take?

3. What kind of stories will inspire this specific desired action? What kinds of story archetypes best match that desired action?

Use the information below to help you answer some of these questions.

Story Archetypes	Archetype Description/Story Examples	Actions Inspired by this Archetype
Rebirth 	A story of renewal. It's a Wonderful Life. Stories where heroes come out of retirement. A Christmas Carol, Lethal Weapon, Jane Austen's Emma, Clueless, Luke Skywalker in the Last Jedi. Black Panther. Nannette. Many newer female-lead comedies like Bridesmaids & Girls' Trip. Hillary Clinton & Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential campaigns. Green New Deal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New legislation initiatives • GOTV (Get Out The Vote) • Long Term Movement Building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • i.e. New Poor People's Campaign, Make America Great Again • Imagining and creating a new world. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harry Potter Alliance • #WakandaCon
Quest 	A mission from point A to point B or gathering items to win something. Most video games are Quests. Pokemon. The 1st Guardians of The Galaxy movie where they're looking for the stone. Assembling a team. The Odyssey. Road trip stories- "I'm trying to find myself". Food travel shows- "We're going to find the Best Hamburger in America". Reality TV Shows like: American Ninja Warrior, The Biggest Loser, The Voice, World of Dance, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GOTV (Get Out The Vote) • A campaign to win legislation • Bill becomes a law; has to pass from House to Senate to President • Marches from one place to another
Journey & Return 	A story about average protagonists who are suddenly thrust into transformation through travel and homecoming. The Wizard of Oz, Chronicles of Narnia, Alice in Wonderland, Cast Away, and Where the Wild Things Are, Coco, The Odyssey. The return might not be to the same literal place but it's a return to the status quo. An example of this would be any political actions or lobby efforts made by everyday people who are directly affected by a recent change and are getting to action solely for the purposes of being able to return immediately to what once was (ie, Government Shutdown).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A return to values • Going to a training to bring back skills • Actions meant to lobby for an immediate intervention/change • Actions meant to get those in power to return to previous policies
Rags to Riches <i>(Rise to Prominence/Power)</i> 	In this archetype the stories have characters who have previously been overlooked and now are being recognized to the point of success. Sometimes these stories include turning a "flaw" in to an asset or finally having someone recognize a talent that has been there all along. Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. Cinderella. Trading Places. Hip-hop narratives like "Started from the bottom, now we're here. Started from the bottom, now my whole team fuckin' here" In politics it's Bill Clinton. These stories often invite/ask that the targeted audience play the role of a "Fairy Godmother" that can give the hero in the story that extra opportunity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is often a problematic archetype for progressives because it leads to isolated actions rather than collective action. • Shark Tank mentality where everyone is competing with each other for dominance. • Individuals (i.e. cultural minorities) running for office

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<p>Overcoming the Monster</p> 	<p>David and Goliath. Often underdog stories. The Hobbits against Smaug the Dragon. Harry Potter beats Voldemort. Star Wars (the 1st one). The Mighty Ducks. The Little Mermaid. The song Fight the Power. The Allies' fight against Hitler is often characterised this way in movie retellings. The People vs Richard Nixon. Kavanaugh hearings. These stories require a specific naming and/or call out of a particular character in the story that is being described as the clear villain (individual or institution.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rally • Voter Registration • Petition Signing • Lobbying decision-makers to defeat legislation • Save the building or animal or park • Remove someone from power • Testimonials (private or public)
<p>Tragedy</p> 	<p>From the Greeks through Shakespeare, these are stories of the dark side of humanity and the futile nature of human experiences. Les Misérables, Hamlet, Breaking Bad, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, the tragic end of The Paris Commune. The Soviet Union's failure to become a utopia for workers. Most initial stories that are widely shared in the media (including alternative news sources and platforms) will focus on this archetype as a primary way to get an audience direct attention to the matter at heart. Examples include stories about home and working conditions with visual documentation of the most extremely negative and shocking aspects. See: Initial stories about child separate at the borders, stories about teachers/students and the conditions of their classrooms/schools, and aspects of the #MeToo movement. These stories make sure to heavily focus on the experiences of those being cast/described as the victims of the story.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People feeling free/supported to share personal stories of how something impacts you negatively • Collecting donations of funds or supplies • Purchasing particular items as a means of making a donation (fundraiser) • #SayTheirNames • Lobbying elected officials to act <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calls, letters, email, petitions
<p>Comedy/Satire</p> 	<p>Camp and parody works here. Satirical characters undermining the powerful. A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift. Airplane, Veep, Idiocracy, The Daily Show, Pod Save America, Get Out (satirizes racism & satirizes horror movies). In activism the Billionaires for Bush or Yuppies running a pig for President. Openly Gay Figure Skater Adam Rippon getting in a Twitter war with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence. Monopoly Man photobombing congressional hearings & delivering bags of money and "Get out of Jail Free" cards to congressional leaders. Hockey mascot Gritty becoming a leftist mascot used in protests and visual memes. #PettyPatty, #BBQBecky, Baby Trump Blimp</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand Hacking • Reframing a story to highlight its absurdity and ask folks to share it. • Costumes & Cosplay • Political cartoons or image mash-ups • Parody songs
<p>COMBOS: Tragedy & Quest</p> 	<p>When there are calls to research, discovery and creation of long term solutions/cure to medical conditions. An example for this would be the fight to find a cure for AIDS/HIV. When campaigns or communities are able to combine these two it makes for a call to connect (Tragedy) and a direct explanation of what is required to change the story (Quest). An example would be the recent teacher strikes across the country.</p>	
<p>COMBOS: Rebirth & Journey/Return</p> 	<p>Most US Presidential elections will have at least one candidate who uses a combination of these two to inspire supporters to vote for them.</p>	