I'm Randy Olson, a Scientist Turned Filmmaker in Los Angeles, California. I do research and writing on why scientists are afraid of storytelling and how to change that. I'm here today to talk about the "ABT framework." AMA!

Randy$_{O}lsen^{1}andr/ScienceAMAs^{1}$

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April 17, 2023

Abstract

Hi reddit, Twenty years ago, I left my tenured professorship of marine biology for Hollywood. I had a single goal — the cure for being boring (especially for scientists, some of whom need it bad). I found it in a narrative template I crafted and labeled as "The ABT." It comes indirectly from the co-creators of the Emmy and Peabody award-winning animated series, South Park. In a 2011 Comedy Central documentary about the show, they talked about their "Rule of Replacing" which they use for editing scripts. They replace the word "and" with "but" or "therefore" to improve storytelling — so I turned it into the "And, But, Therefore" template (the ABT). It is now the central tool in my mission to keep people from being boring. I present it in my new book, "Houston, We Have A Narrative," use it in my work with individual scientists, and have built my Story Circles Narrative Training program around it, which I now run with scientists from NIH and USDA. Together, with this marvelous narrative tool, we are fighting to make the world a tiny bit less boring of a place. I'll be back at 1 pm EST (10 am PST, 6 pm UTC) to answer your questions, ask me anything! WRAP UP TIME: Hey Folks – The two hours is up, I want to thank ALLLLL of you for all the excellent and fun questions – hope I did a halfway decent job of at least getting to some of them. One last time, my webinar this week is the prime resource for everything I was talking about – the one hour webinar I did on Tuesday with Union of Concerned Scientists. Thanks very much to Reddit – I really appreciate this great opportunity! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfnxfNJRk7g&feature=youtu.be

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REDDIT

Science AMA Series: I'm Randy Olson, a Scientist Turned Filmmaker in Los Angeles, California. I do research and writing on why scientists are afraid of storytelling and how to change that. I'm here tod

RANDY_OLSEN R/SCIENCE

ABSTRACT

Hi reddit,
Twenty years ago, I left my tenured professorship of marine biology for Hollywood. I had a single goal — the cure for being boring (especially for scientists, some of whom need it bad). I found it in a narrative template I crafted and labeled as "The ABT." It comes indirectly from the co-creators of the Emmy and Peabody award-winning animated series, South Park. In a 2011 Comedy Central documentary about the show, they talked about their "Rule of Replacing" which they use for editing scripts. They replace the word "and" with "but" or "therefore" to improve storytelling — so I turned it into the "And, But, Therefore" template (the ABT). It is now the central tool in my mission to keep people from being boring. I present it in my new book, "Houston, We Have A Narrative," use it in my work with individual scientists, and have built my Story Circles Narrative Training program around it, which I now run with scientists from NIH and USDA. Together, with this marvelous narrative tool, we are fighting to make the world a tiny bit less boring of a place.
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Can we have an example text which is more exciting when the words are replaced, please?

I'm curious and would like to see the process in action

roamingandy

Hi Everyone - Thanks for all the great questions and comments already, this is gonna be fun! And thanks to Randal/Randy Olson (rhiever), my doppelganger of the social media world, appreciate your joining in.

First off, I have two simple opening messages — this is going to be ALL about the ABT (I welcome your challenges to it), and second, someone said they don't have time to read my new book which I TOTALLY understand, and is why on Tuesday I did this hour-long WEBINAR which is I think exactly what you're asking for — a sort of "Books on Tape (with slides!)" version of the book:

research and writing on why scientists are afraid of storytelling and how to change that. I'm here tod, *The Winnower* 2:e144923.32016 , 2015 , DOI: 10.15200/winn.144923.32016

WEBINAR: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfnxfNJRk7g&feature=youtu.be

This first reply is going to be a little lengthy because it is a good and fundamental request — basically "let's see the ABT in action." In the webinar I go through this example from my marine biologist friend Dr. Steven Miller. He was part of a committee of 20 people trying to prepare a statement for this week's Paris climate meeting. They had the usual problem of everyone wanting to get their own statements into the mix, resulting in a lengthy "AND, AND, AND" (AAA) document that was unreadable.

He introduced the ABT structure, they went to work, and ended up with a nicely structured 6 paragraph statement. You can see the first paragraph is the And's, second paragraph gets to the BUT ("however") then quickly moves on to the THEREFORE with the last paragraph. Nicely structured, produced consensus and a much more concise and compelling statement.

That's how the ABT works in the real world.

Here it is:

Coral reefs are structures created by coral animals and are among the most biologically diverse ecosystems on the planet. They provide goods and services worth at least US$30 billion per year (and possibly much more) and support (through such activities as fisheries and tourism) at least 500 million people worldwide.

Coral reefs, however, are threatened with effective collapse under rapid climate change. In particular, increasing sea temperatures are causing widespread coral bleaching and mortality. In addition, elevated carbon dioxide levels are causing ocean acidification that may further accelerate coral reef loss. The death of corals leads in turn to the loss of most of the fish and invertebrate populations that they support.

Over recent decades, 33-50% of coral reefs have been largely or completely degraded by a combination of local factors and global climate change. Reefs in many regions have lost half or more of their live corals. Additional extensive degradation will inevitably occur over the next two decades as temperatures continue to rise.

As a result of reef ecosystem destruction, a quarter of all marine species are at risk, while the associated economic losses will expose hundreds of millions of people to decreasing food security and increased poverty.

If average global surface temperatures increase by 2°C or more, relative to the pre-industrial period, the resultant ocean warming, along with acidification, will lead to continued widespread destruction of coral reef ecosystems over the next few decades. The emission reduction pledges submitted to date by the international community fall well short of what is required to avoid this biodiversity catastrophe.

The International Society for Reef Studies thus calls on all nations and negotiators at the Paris Climate Change Conference to commit to limiting atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO_2) concentrations to no more than 450 ppm in the short-term, and reducing them to 350ppm in the long-term.

Hi Randy! Long time fan. I'm still on a mission to unite all of the Randy Olson's out there.

I feel like this is my prime opportunity to joke around in the comments since I share the same name with you, but I'll ask some questions instead:

Question 1: If your primary goal was to make academic/scientific writing less boring, do you still think leaving academia was the best way to accomplish that? In my experience, academics are quite resistant to change from outside academia (unless it's a cool new tool that will lead to more publications), especially when it comes to core aspects of academia such as writing.

Question 2: The mods misspelled your last name as "Olsen" in your username. Do you blame the Olsen twins for people constantly misspelling your last name?

rhiever

RANDY OLSON'S OF THE WORLD UNITE!

Great first question, we're working on the second, thanks.

What I did in leaving academia was pretty much of a "one off" project. It's taken 25 years of my life. As I tell about in the webinar, I set off in 1990 with a very clear goal, and have now achieved it with the ABT.

The challenge I face now is in propagating this information from "outside" the science world -- which is definitely happening, it just needs to happen faster given how powerful the ABT is.

How do you differentiate between making something "less boring" and "dumbing it down"? We need look no further than the History Channel for an example. THC used to show history; now they have shows about Nazi bigfoots. Nazi bigfoots may well be less boring, but they are not history.

Neil Postman wrote at length about the dangers of what you're doing.

LabKitty

First off, I love the the Niel Postman book “Entertaining Ourselves to Death" — I read it back at the start in the early 90’s — he was/is right on the money. I love his line about, “Nobody ever sat up on their death bed and said I wish I’d watched one more episode of MacGyver.” Really a good book.

The divide between dumbing down and achieving concision is central to a lot of this. Let me toss this out — think about the expressions, “Well said,” “Bingo!” and “Booyah!” When do you hear those expressions?

You hear them when someone has managed to capture the entire essence of something in just a few words. That’s what we’re talking about here — finding the narrative — figuring out what’s at the core. It’s not dumbing down, it’s more like solving the equation that allows you to pack the information into a tighter, more effective package, especially in today’s information overloaded world.

Thanks for the AMA! I've noticed amongst the people I work with, at all levels from undergraduate to professors, a lot of scientists really struggle in presenting their research in an "interesting" and engaging way that really speaks to people outwith their field.

What do you suggest could be done to help train scientists from the very start of their career in how to speak and present in a more exciting and personable way?

StonedPhysicist

Okay, here we go as I start in on my “broken record” about the ABT. Please watch the webinar, I think it will start to make a fan of you for the ABT. As I tell, I first came across it 4 years ago and was initially skeptical. I kept thinking surely somebody over the ages has spotted this pattern.

My amazement jumped up a big notch two years ago when my buddy Park Howell who teaches storytelling to MBAs at Arizona State spotted the ABT structure in the Gettysburg Address. It’s right there, plain as day, and I’m certain is the prime reason that speech has endured so powerfully — the same thing Joseph Campbell noted about myths and eternal stories — they all have this common structure.

So my answer is the ABT. It is sooooo simple. I can be taught to sixth graders (we've already done that with one group). Scientists need to be trained in the ABT from the very, very beginning of their careers. This is the overarching message of my book, and is the purpose of our new Story Circles Narrative Fitness Training we're now running with USDA, USFWS, NIH and others.

Hi Randy! Thank you for giving us your time today.

I'm a Digital Media researcher studying the potential of virtual reality (Oculus Rift, Google Cardboard, etc.) as a medium for immersive storytelling. My thesis concerns the adaptation of science documentaries to a 360-degree format, wherein the viewer freely controls their own perspective.

I'm currently working on a script for a VR paleoart documentary about one of the biggest dinosaurs ever discovered. The sense of presence inherent in VR adds a lot to viewer engagement, but controlling their attention without the use of conventional film language places a large burden on the narration. The audience ranges from museum-going children to my committee of PhD holders, so it needs to be fun and accurate.

With your film background, could you elaborate on any favorite methods for creating an engaging, visual science narrative? In your opinion, would any of these methods translate to a 360-degree environment instead of a 16:9 canvas?

I'd appreciate any and all insight. Thanks, and sorry for the wall of text!

valkyrja9

This is a very fundamental issue — not getting so caught up in the technology that you lose track of the importance of narrative. In the book I present "the one word template" which I've adapted from a famous quote of the geneticist Dobzhansky. I don't think he knew in his lifetime how deep his narrative intution was, but the quote shows it.

He talks about how the study of biology needs to have the narrative theme (or "light" as he calls it) of evolution to be effective. He says, "Without that light, you end up with little more than a sundry list of facts, some of which may be interesting or curious, but are ultimately meaningless."

I would encourage you to take those words to heart. Lots of people will find your virtual reality stuff "interesting or curious," but if you don't work towards some clear narrative theme — if you're not ultimately "saying something" with it — it will probably feel somewhat meaningless in the long run.

I enjoyed your book 'Don't be such a scientist' and I found thispowerpoint but I'm having a difficult time finding anything else, so I'm somewhat frustrated. Are there additional resources available?

Calaman012

Yes, the webinar is now the be all and end all for what I have to say at the moment:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfnxfNJRk7g&feature=youtu.be

I did the webinar because I was frustrated over the last two months at the fact that so many people were commenting on the book yet clearly had hardly delved into it. We all know that people are reading less these days. I had two options — get mad at everyone (the grouchy professor!) or work harder to convey what I have to say.

The Union of Concerned Scientist folks did a great job helping me put it together. I spent a solid month

on it. People DEFINITELY seem to be hearing what I have to say now, thanks to it, so that's where I recommend you now go.

So why are scientists afraid of narrative?

aash29

Great question and the focus of Chapter 11 of my book. If you are short on time, I strongly recommend you just jump to that part of the book. In there I describe what I call "storyphobia" — where it comes from in scientists, why it shouldn't happen.

The simple explanation is that story is narrative, and narrative is absolutely EVERYWHERE in science. The scientific method is a narrative process. In fact, I cite an editorial in Nature Methods from two years ago titled, "Against Storytelling in Scientific Results," written by an MIT scientist. Guess what the structure of his first two paragraphs is … ABT.

It's everywhere. Time to stop fearing it and simply understand it to the best of our ability.

Introducing narrative too early in the course of an investigation can lead scientists to miss or exclude alternative scenarios that may only come to light as more data is accumulated. (Not just their own, but by peers working on similar problems.) Therefore, at conferences and even in papers, narrative that applies cause and effect (but's and especially therefore's) is often minimal or absent from the discussion of experimental results (in my field at least). By time a narrative is comfortably applied, the topic is generally no longer a "hot" area of research interest.

Can you elaborate on the particular circumstances in which you think stronger narrative devices can improve the presentation of data? Do you think the community itself benefits from your techniques or is it more a tool for engaging with the broader public? At what point does the latter become dangerous? We see already in medical and psychological research where the popular media morphs very scant correlation into strong causation.

ohtheplacesiwent

I think the overall answer to what you're talking about is to accept that narrative is present EVERYWHERE from the very first moment of all scientific research. As soon as you decide what to put on the two axes of a graph you are already making narrative decisions. Which means I don't really follow the idea of "applying narrative" so much -- it's already there. I'm just advocating making sure everyone understands how ubiquitous it is and how it works.

So I've been doing and watching scicomm on a lot of biotech issues, **and** I've been involved with discussions on vaccines, GMOs, stem cells, evolution, now gene editing, etc.

But I'm increasingly dismayed that peddlers of false narratives (like you noted in your webinar the other day, Donald Trump--but others like the Food Babe, Mercola, Mike Adams, etc) have so much sway on the public. Even the NYT today pushed the idea that there was a ban/moratorium on gene editing when the scientists specifically said yesterday they weren't using the words "ban" or "moratorium".

Therefore it seems to me that the problem isn't only one of the science story getting out--it may be out there with appropriate clarity--but that the misinfo gang needs to be challenged.

What is effective to combat the falsehoods and the toxic misinformers directly and their appealing

simple narratives? Or do you advise not taking them on?

mem_somerville

I think the first thing that's need is more creative approaches to the challenge of combatting inaccuracy and dishonesty. I wrote this blog post a few weeks ago about a CBS 48 Hours segment where a prosecutor essentially managed to "shut off the river of story," when he got the chance to try a case the second time. He had realized how unbelievably powerful the river of story can be. He knew he couldn't beat it, so he gambled and got the testimony that presented it blocked from the trial the second time, and it worked.

This is the sort of thinking that needs to happen.

http://www.scienceneedsstory.com/2015/11/04/10-shrinking-the-river-of-story/

How do you feel Dr. Kevin Folta could have handled his situation better? He seemed genuinely interested in science communication therefore so he couldn't be *that* boring.

For those not in the know: that guy got obliterated in the court of public opinion for trying to make biotech more accessible.

JustTheDoct0r

I got asked by a couple of journalists to weigh in on the Folta situation. I decided to hold off as I didn't feel like I had a good enough feel for what happened -- it all seemed kind of wacky.

The one thing I will say is that at the end of the day EVERYONE has to have their own set of guiding principles when it comes to honesty and accuracy. You learn that early on in science -- if you fudge ANYTHING the whole system collapses and it all becomes meaningless. You just have to live by that sort of standard. Scientist don't like to talk about faith and beliefs, but sometimes you do have to have a few to make things work.

Hi Randy, Thank you for doing the AMA. I have a sort of 2 part question for you:

1) I am a graduate student studying physics right now, and am starting to think about the next steps. The more I think about it, the more certain I am that I want to go more along the path of outreach/theatre/film, but I am whole heartedly afraid to take that path as I have no idea how to sustain a job while doing it. Would you have any words of wisdom for my pursuits?

2) I had actually gone to your presentation at UChicago talking about the ABT narrative, and really enjoyed/related to a lot of your commentary. I truly agree it is a far more engaging method to discuss science with a general community. During this presentation you had brought up Al Gore's global warming movie and how it would have really benefitted from a ABT narrative (as opposed to the typical science narrative of 'And And And'). I had brought up the concern that global warming is a highly complex issues with a lot of factors at play and thereby requires, at least to some extent, some AAA narrative. Could you elaborate on the balance between these two narratives?

Also, I have since spent some time thinking about my second question, and tried to write a short blog post that uses the ABT type narrative, while acknowledging the AAA. If you had the time, I'd love for any feedback on the post. (Here:http://www.earnestchannel.com/earnestthoughts/2015/12/2/hot-showers-and-global-warming)

Thank you for doing the AMA!

(edit:grammar)

theguywho___

Hi -- thanks for making it to my talk in Chicago!

1) One word of caution on leaving science -- once you're "outside the fold" it can be pretty harsh. I knew it would be tough for me, but figured that by having achieved tenure the profession would still support me. I was wrong.

2) Regarding the Gore movie. We all need to learn that AAA is the default form of information. If I ask you to tell me about your upbringing, you will almost certainly go into AAA mode.

In the book I quote the great screenwriting guru Frank Daniel who talked about this, saying that first drafts always start with the dreaded and then, and then, and then ..." structure (AAA). It is in the revision process that we find our way to narrative structure through the ABT elements.

That was in a speech by him in 1986. The Gore movie folks basically went with a first draft as they rushed their movie into production -- conceived in fall 2005, shot in Dec. 2005, in theaters six months later. There was no incubation and search for the narrative core, just a blurting out in AAA mode, which results in hardly anyone wanting to watch it today. Such is the price of failing to find the narrative.

I don't want to be boring, but I'm not sure I have the time to find and read your book either. Is there a shorter paper, or summary of the main points somewhere?

Sadnot

Watch the webinar -- it's your savior!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfnxfNJRk7g&feature=youtu.be

One worry that scientists may have when it comes to crafting a story is that it might obscure the more messy truth of their results. In my field (social psychology), one of the problems that many people believe to be a factor in the recent replication crisis is that writers are trained to tell a story with their results. Because of this, people may leave out some results that aren't clear cut, or change their hypotheses post-hoc, or only publish significant and surprising findings.

Your example of the replacement rule would not obscure the truth, but the broader goal of story telling can be related to presenting results in a more simple and straightforward way than the data may actually allow.

Question: In your fight to make scientific writing less boring, how do you balance the need to write an interesting narrative with the need to present the results and background as accurately as possible?

bofstein

Let me refer you to Chapter 11 in my book which takes this on directly. The words story and storytelling clearly have a TON of baggage associated with them. Scientists seem to be more comfortable with “narrative” which sounds a bit more clinical.

So the starting point is to realize that narrative is inert. Narratives don’t tell lies, people use narrative dynamics to tell lies. This is the point that MUST be conveyed throughout the science world now. It has to be.

I present a Google N-gram in the book showing that 20 years ago hardly anybody used the word

“narrative.” Today it is everywhere. It is a byproduct of the information era. Narratives are high level instruments of organization for information. It’s time for scientists to understand this and get comfortable with how it all works.

We must put an end to storyphobia — there is no place for the irrational fear of story in science.

Hi Randy! English professor here... What would you say to all of my students who major in the hard sciences and insist they won't ever need to know how to write?

Edit: I teach Composition and Rhetoric, and for a lot of these kids it's the only writing-intensive class they'll have in their college career.

Swede_Babe

THIS is core message of my book, conveyed in the simple phrase that my workshop co-instructor Dorie Barton always used to say to me, “Dude, it’s all the same story.”

Just over 50 years ago CP Snow wrote “The Two Cultures” putting the focus on how different science and the humanities had become. My feeling is that’s not helping things. In the same way that Joseph Campbell focused on the SIMILARITIES, early science AND humanities students need to be shown the similarities between STORYTELLING and THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD.

Dude, they are all the same story — both are just exercises in problem/solution. The power rests in recognizing the similarities.

Can you please elaborate on how the ABT template is implemented?

RogerThatKid

Check out my very first answer -- I gave an example of using the ABT to solve the AAA problem of their first draft.

They replace the word “and” with “but” or “therefore” to improve storytelling

How do you ensure the results is still honest? "And" doesn't have the same meaning as either "but" or "therefore", especially "therefore", which implies some form of logical or causal link which "and" does not. For example, "I like chocolate and I program computers" is honest, whereas "I like chocolate therefore I program computers" is dishonest, and "I like chocolate but I program computers" is simply nonsensical.

In a larger sense, narrativizing is dangerous. It turns correlations into causal chains: "This neighborhood has more blacks and more crime" becomes "This neighborhood has more blacks; therefore, more crime", which is not justified based on the data, to say the least. How do you make scientific writing more narrative without falling into traps like that?

derleth

I think the key operative part of the Replacing Rule is that is says, "You SEE if you can replace ands with buts and therefores." It doesn't say to do so at all costs. It's simply part of the editing process, which is what everyone does all day with everything. The big attribute of the ABT is just that it's more simple than anything else when it comes to comprehending how narrative works.

As I said in the webinar, all you have to do is look at the Writers Guidelines for pretty much EVERY

scientific journal -- what they are asking for is 100% ABT, they just haven't been able to convey it with such a shorthand device.

Great. I'm an journalist turned science journalist, and hope to engage and help scientists more into telling their story.

What I have noticed is that an audience engages when the threshold is as low as possible. And feed people info after you've lured them in. What would be your advice?

Andromeda2803

Yes, it all starts with "Arouse and Fulfill" which I told about in the first chapter of my first book. I learned that simple principle 17 years ago from Tom Hollihan of USC Annenberg School of Communication. It is fundamental and eternal. And as I argue in the new book -- the powerful solutions come in the form of the simple things, like that couplet. First you need to arouse the interest of the audience, THEN you start up the cement mixer of information and dump it on their heads. But only after you've gotten them interested and inspired!

Hey, Randy, it's your buddy Aaron Huertas, recently of the Union of Concerned Scientists. Love the book and I reviewed it here, as you know. Have you found narrative and the ABT to be useful outside of science communication, like in your personal life or with other professional projects?

AaronHuertas

Hello Aaron -- I know I've got some examples to cite AND some of them are really funny, BUT they are more fun over beers, THEREFORE I'll save them for the next time we hit a bar.

But yes, the ABT is helpful for pretty much everything as it helps to just get to the point of what you're trying to say.

Have the Dance your PhD competitions and LOL Your thesis had any affect on your own work?

sheilerama

I've seen some of them -- they are wonderful in that the encourage at least some non-literal thinking in a profession that often has the problem of becoming overly literal (the second chapter of my first book was "Don't Be So Literal Minded."

How does your framework allow for the use of rhetorical figures such as polysyndeton that require the repetition of conjunctions? Is there a simple rule of thumb to distinguish appropriate uses of 'and,' 'but,' 'therefore' and their likes?

I assume that the resistance many scholars have to applying more fluid narrative techniques in non-scholarly venues arises from the difficulty in crafting sufficiently accurate analogies and metaphors for the complex concepts of their disciplines. Technical and academic writing has been designed to exclude imprecision and ambiguity, after all. How do you resolve the tension between a scholar's inclination and training for precision and his or her desire to write accessibly and engagingly?

Is your method primarily a stylistic program (i.e. mostly syntactic and dictional in emphasis), or do you advocate practicing completely different narrative approaches such as personal narrative or dialogues?

Thanks for your AMA!

promonk

Wow. This is going to reveal what a simpleton I am, but I really can't follow much of what you've asked here -- it's kind of over my head as I have zero background in rhetoric. I'm just a kid from Kansas who prefers to keep things simple.

But here's one thought. It's been shown that short order cooks and waiters are able to develop their short term memory through repeated use all day long. I think eventually the neurophysiologists will be able to show similar stuff for narrative -- that if you workout with the ABT you will eventually reshape the narrative part of your brain, at least a little bit, away from the AAA and DHY form and more towards the ABT.

Really sorry if this was a lousy answer. One kind of awkward element to my book is I say the answers to using narrative effectively in science are to be found not in academia but in Hollywood, which is the basic divide between the complex and the simple.

So you built a career on an utterance of Trey Parker? People who actually study storytelling know there are infinite ways to put a story together - all templates eventually get passé and if they don't, it means the template is too vague to be used as a universal formula like you are suggesting. Matt and Trey use it as a sort of general guideline, but it always comes down to their artistic skill, intuition, emotional and intellectual intelligence - the guideline is not a revelation.

I do agree science can be an educational narrative, good work (especially now) begs to be done - however, when somebody is selling a method, it's always a pointless distraction for any serious writer.

This is only my personal opinion and of course, I wish you all the best.

Chris_the_mudkip

You might want to study the 4,000 year history of narrative -- most of the best people of Hollywood would disagree with you. The Hero's Journey wasn't a fad any more than the way that DNA is put together is a fad.

Hi Randy,

Ted Talks grew as a phenomenon because they conveyed science in a big picture format--one that grew more and more narrative-driven (and formulaic). Unfortunately, they also sacrificed the "little picture" details that allows the audience to independently assess the quality of the presenter's work and whether their conclusions are valid. If anything, Ted Talks and narrative formulas, to me, remove the audience from the scientific process, portraying science as an elite, monolithic black box. How would you compare the "ABT" template to the "Ted Talk" template?

In addition: What do you think are the pros,if any, of technical writing over ABT?

honeyandvinegar

ABT is simply everywhere. Any place you see communication happening effectively, the ABT is at work. That's the point of the Gettysburg Address -- it has endured, and it's pure ABT.

Which means the definition of good technical writing is simply that it has ABT structure -- meaning the continued laying out of the world in which we're working, the problem being addressed, and the actions being taken. Over and over again.

As for TED Talks ... I love the parodies of them. But read the New Yorker article about them from 3 years ago -- you can see the organizers embrace all the principles I presented in my first book (drawing on humor and emotion) and do their best to create tight narrative structure. They have plenty of shortcomings, but overall they have been a good thing in forcing people to raise their game.

I know personally how annoyed I was to have to put in sooooo much time, effort and even money over the past month in making my webinar, but now that it's done ... thank goodness I did.

Why do scientists necessarily need to be good at telling stories? Shouldn't their main skills be analytical thinking, objectivity, and forming creative hypotheses? Why not leave the story-telling to the science journalists and leave the scientists to do what they do best?

Not trying to be flippant. I'm genuinely curious what the benefit is.

hershmire

This is terrible, but ... "read my book"? You don't mean to be flippant, and I don't mean to be cheesy, but seriously, the book is an entire essay aimed at what you're asking.

In the simplest of terms, the answer is "We live in a narrative world, and it's been that way for at least 4,000 years." Science does not have the luxury of being able to ignore that constraint. Outside science as well as within, the world is narrative, narrative, narrative.

Hi Randy! How did you make the decision to transition from academia to Hollywood, and what were some things that you wish you had known before venturing out? And what are some tips for giving presentations or writing? I've long been thinking that taking improv classes would be great for getting used to being on stage and handling unexpected questions, but still haven't gotten the courage to take one. Anyhow, thanks in advance!

frog_in_

Hi - yes, I think much of it was about my lifelong connection with "story." Even when I was a scientist, I was intrigued by the story side of the profession, so I've never seen the transition as all that drastic, and it certainly has been an enormous amount of fun.

I have zero regrets, other than the sad state of how human thinking works, namely that "necessity is the mother of invention." All of the good things I've come up with have mostly arisen out of failure, rejection, rage, anger, determination and focus. It's kinda stupid we're built that way, but we are. Just before I left UNH one of my old colleagues and I hit the realization that "the best scientists tended to be the hungriest ones" -- meaning postdocs, starving and desperate yet doing the best work of their careers in many cases. And in the meanwhile you see all too many people "succeed" and get showered with resources for which they don't know what to do with them and lack motivation.

Best thing I ever did was keep myself hungry. Seriously. It feels good to work efficiently.

Hi, I'm currently writing my undergraduate thesis. What tips can you give to make the writing more interesting/appealing while not compromising the science?

Dawwad

Dude, it's the ABT, start to finish -- learn it, take it to heart, work out with it, and realize it goes all the way back to Gilgamesh. It's all in the book and webinar.