

# Working with Stories

*in Your Community or Organization*

PARTICIPATORY NARRATIVE INQUIRY  
Fourth Edition



**Cynthia F. Kurtz**

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in Your Community or Organization  
Participatory Narrative Inquiry

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I dedicate  
this book  
to my favorite storyteller.



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# Foreword

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by Stephen Shimshock

When I first found *Working with Stories*, I read through a few pages of it and instantly knew I wanted to read it all. I was in the middle of my dissertation project, which was stalled at the time. I felt a sense of relief, like I had found a missing piece of a puzzle. It wasn't the final piece of the puzzle, but that piece that seemed to open up new ways for the other pieces to fall into place.

My project involved working with a group of community service providers who serve youth aging out of foster care. They are held together by their mutual passion and commitment to the youth in their city, yet like most coalition groups they lack any cohesive infrastructure. This informal structure opens up many possibilities for creative solutions to tough social problems, but can prove problematic when it comes to knowledge management, evaluation, or any other type of group assessment.

Inspired by what I was seeing on the Internet in terms of open source projects, I thought it would be interesting to apply open source principles to evaluation. Can a community group conduct and author their own evaluation? The more I explored the topic with the group, the more we realized that evaluation was not what they were looking for, at least in the traditional sense of the word. Evaluation of social services can be quite difficult because at any given time there are multiple variables that you simply cannot control.

We changed the paradigm from measuring effectiveness of the collaboration to gaining insight into how the group learns and takes action. The final report would not need to make any truth claim about effectiveness of the program, but rather explain how the group learns and how they take action based on what they learn. Things that are working (effective) and things in need of improvement would become self-evident in the narrative about their learning.

Intuitively I felt like things were on the right track. I was now faced with a simple question: "How do you go about doing this type of work?" *Working with Stories* quickly became my methodology guide.

I believe story work, specifically story listening, is a very effective tool for understanding how a community creates and acts on knowledge. It also provides ample opportunity for

the group being studied to signify and make sense out of their own information. This can result in groups creating contextually specific summaries of what is happening in their community and/or group and what they plan to do as a result.

I use the phrase “contextually specific” to denote that the end result isn’t necessarily meant to lend itself to being replicated in other contexts, as is expected with most evaluations seeking to find “best practices.” It may turn out that other groups find the information useful, but the primary focus on this group was to improve local decision making regarding services to young adults.

As a long time member of a quality assurance team, I am no stranger to the buzz phrase “best practice.” The phrase has infiltrated both the private and public sector. Personally, I dislike the term because it implies that the “best” is rooted in the practice and not in the practitioner. I feel like the phrase privileges codification of knowledge over the emergent and constantly-co-evolving aspects of knowledge. A good recipe is simply no substitute for a good cook. Both aspects of knowledge are very important, and I believe story work creates space for both. Taking on a story project will likely become an intervention in and of itself.

I could continue to use hundreds or even thousands of words to “codify” the experience of the emergent aspects of this work, but that’s a little oxymoronic. This is where I will ask you to take a leap of faith. If you’re reading this, it’s likely because you are looking for something different. In your gut you know what it is, but you just haven’t been able to put your finger on it. That’s where I was. And, if you’re a fairly logical thinker, like me, you want the step-by-step playbook for story work.

Well, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is you found the playbook. The bad news is you will likely not realize it until you are halfway through your project. My copy of *Working with Stories* is tattered, dog-eared, highlighted and littered with hand-written notes. Do not expect to read it then go out and run a successful story project. My parting codified advice to you is simple: read a little, then do a little, then read again, and repeat as necessary. Good luck on your journey.

Stephen Shimshock

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## Chapter 1

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# Introduction

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Why are stories so important to human life? Because they are made of the same thing we are: time. Stories are tiny simulations of life itself. They have beginnings, middles, and ends; and so do we.

As we live our lives, we notice the things that happen, and we think and talk about the things that could and couldn't and should and shouldn't happen. To communicate, connect, and make sense of the overarching stories that are our lives, we tell and listen to stories, give and receive stories, and build and play with stories.

Of course, people vary in the extent to which stories play a part in their daily lives. Some people seem to live and breathe stories, while others rely more strongly on other ways of thinking, like building arguments, listing and comparing options, and testing hypotheses. But I've yet to meet anyone who *never* tells or listens to stories. It's part of being human.

For example, have you ever noticed yourself telling the same story to several people? Did the story change as you told it twice, three times, ten times? Did it get simpler? Did it get just a *bit* further away from the literal truth? Do you think you may have been incorporating it into the larger story you tell yourself about yourself? This is how we all use stories to make sense of our lives.

Teams, families, communities, and organizations also use stories to make sense of their collective lives. Groups plan, discuss, argue, gossip, and chat, and some of what they say takes the form of stories. All groups do this naturally, but groups that pay conscious attention to *working with their stories* can improve their ability to achieve common goals.

Conscious attention to working with stories is what this book is about. I have been helping groups work with their stories since 1999, and I have learned much. This book is my attempt to pass on what I have learned and help other people and groups learn how to work with their own stories to further their own goals.

## About this book series

*Working with Stories* is a textbook on *Participatory Narrative Inquiry* (PNI), a form of Participatory Action Research in which people in communities and organizations work with their stories. (If you want to find out what PNI is right now, turn to page 69.)

The first three editions of *Working with Stories* were released in 2008, 2009, and 2014. In this fourth edition I have expanded the book into a four-book series.

1. *Working with Stories* (this book) is the fourth edition of my original 2008 textbook on PNI, updated with new ideas and advice.
2. *Working with Stories Simplified* covers the same concepts and techniques as this book, but in much less detail. It is for people who want a quick reference guide to PNI or prefer shorter books.
3. *The Working with Stories Sourcebook* provides 50 question sets for use in your PNI projects, plus 50 brief descriptions of real-life PNI projects.
4. *The Working with Stories Miscellany* is a collection of essays and other writings about the theory and practice of PNI.

## Why work with stories?

When I first talk to people about working with stories, the most common question they ask is: “Why work with stories?”

I have come to understand that this question is actually three different questions:

1. Why work with *stories*? Why not just gather facts and opinions?
2. Why *work with* stories? What do you mean by that? Don’t we already tell stories?
3. Why work with stories? What can we get out of it? What can it do for us?

To each of these questions I have a different answer.

### Why not just gather facts and opinions?

What is it about stories that makes them useful in ways that facts and opinions are not? I can think of eight things.

#### ***Sharing stories is an ancient social ritual***

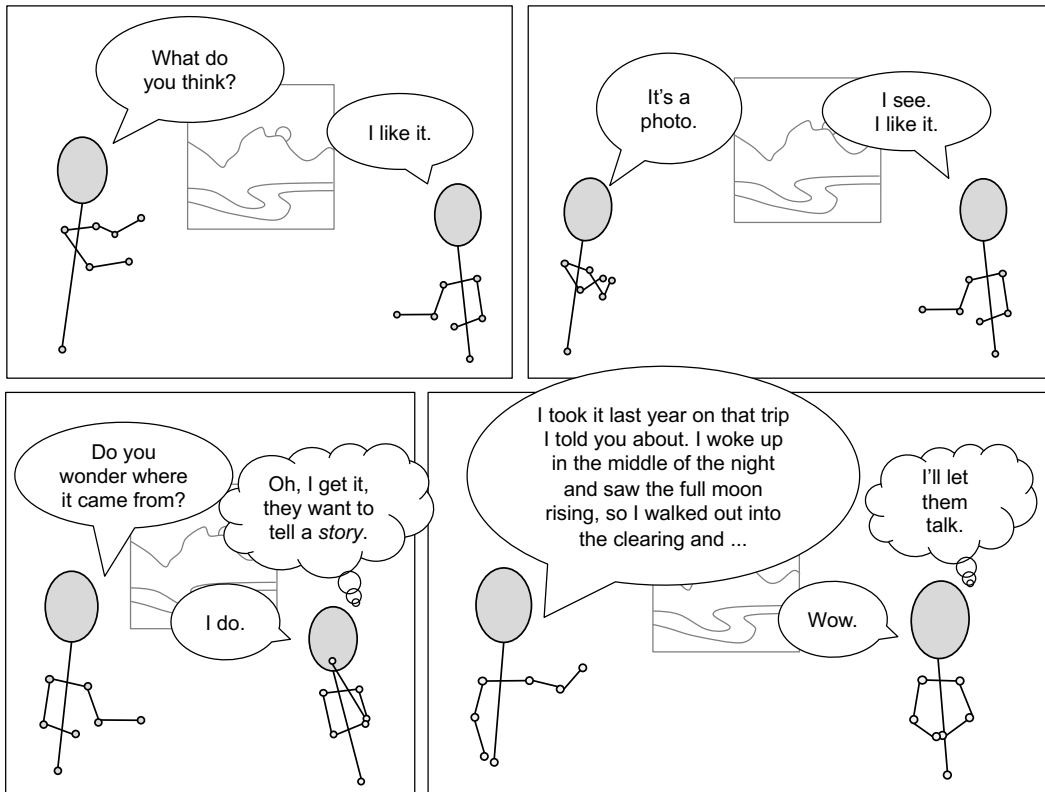
When people are talking and a story comes up, the conversation undergoes a subtle shift in tone, signaling a transition to a ritualized interaction. After a story is offered and accepted, a temporary agreement is put into place.

Under the terms of the story-sharing agreement, the storyteller has the floor and may speak freely (within limits). Everyone else must listen and refrain from attacks until the story has run its course (again, within limits).

This ritual is ancient and universal. We are all taught as children how to take part in it, though we rarely speak of it or even realize that we are doing it.



When you ask someone to share a story with you, you initiate the story-sharing ritual, and you offer to give the person your time, attention, and respect. This helps them say things they could not say without such an agreement in place. And when you ask people to share stories with each other in a group setting, you encourage them to enter into the same ritual.



### **Stories draw us in**

Once I was sitting in my kitchen leafing through a magazine. I was not paying much attention to it, but all of a sudden my hand jerked the magazine up to my eyes and demanded that I look at it more closely. The full-page advertisement I found myself examining started out with very small type, then had the words MORE IMPORTANTLY in large type, then descended into small type again. The reason I had thrust the page in front of myself with such force was that I absolutely had to know what was more important than what.

We do that. People seem to compulsively think, over and over, every day, about the way things happen. We tell and listen to stories in part because it helps us refine our model of the way the world works so we can predict what might happen next. It's a survival skill akin to our use of fire and our domestication of plants and animals.

To fulfill this cognitive function, every story conforms to the same fundamental shape. A context is introduced; a tension develops; the tension is resolved. This wait-and-see structure attracts our problem-solving brains like moths to a flame, and it helps us to

maintain the effort required to fully explore the story, learn what we can from it, and apply what we have learned.

It's easy to see that stories engage their audiences. What may not be obvious is that stories engage their tellers as well. So when you ask people to share a story about their experiences, they are drawn in by their own storytelling, and this helps them to explore their experiences more fully and deeply.

### ***A story is a social safety pin***

A story is a socially accepted package in which we learn from a young age to wrap up our feelings, beliefs, and opinions. We know that we can metaphorically place a story on a table and invite others to view and internalize it without exposing ourselves to the same degree as we would if we stated those feelings, beliefs, and opinions directly.

In other words, *telling a story is a safer way to do a dangerous thing*. The forms and rituals of storytelling are like the protective guards on a safety pin. Telling a story, like using a safety pin, isn't completely safe, but it's safer than complete candor.

For example, compare these two mini-surveys.

1. Do you think we are doing a terrible, good enough, or excellent job meeting your needs?
2. What was the last interaction you had with us? Could you tell us what happened? (Then after the story is told...) How do you feel about that story? What do you think it says about us?

Which do you think would provide a better picture of what people actually feel, believe, and care about?

### ***Story listening shows respect***

We are all used to being asked for our opinions in standard surveys, and we are used to getting out and putting on our well-worn poker faces for that game. When you ask people to share stories of their experiences, you put aside that game and start a different game, one in which greater respect is afforded to all players.

In my work with stories, I have found that most people respond to a *respectfully curious request* to tell a story with pleasant surprise. In fact, I have come to expect that among the stories told in any project I will find some that express *gratitude* for the chance to tell a story. Can you imagine people expressing gratitude for the chance to fill out a standard opinion survey?

Taking the time and care to ask people what has happened to them and how they feel about it is a nice thing to do. But it's not just nice; it's also useful. It taps into hidden sources of energy that can be applied to a common goal.

### ***Stories tell us what we don't know we know***

Our memories hold many insights, but they are not always easily accessible. When we tell stories, we sometimes reveal feelings and beliefs of which we ourselves are not aware.

So when the answer to a direct question is “I don’t know,” the contextual clues in a story can bring out relevant experiences and tacit knowledge. After the story has been told, the storyteller may *still* not know the answer to the direct question. But *the answer is in the story*. If you can ask people some questions about the stories they tell, their answers can be meaningful—often surprisingly so—to everyone.

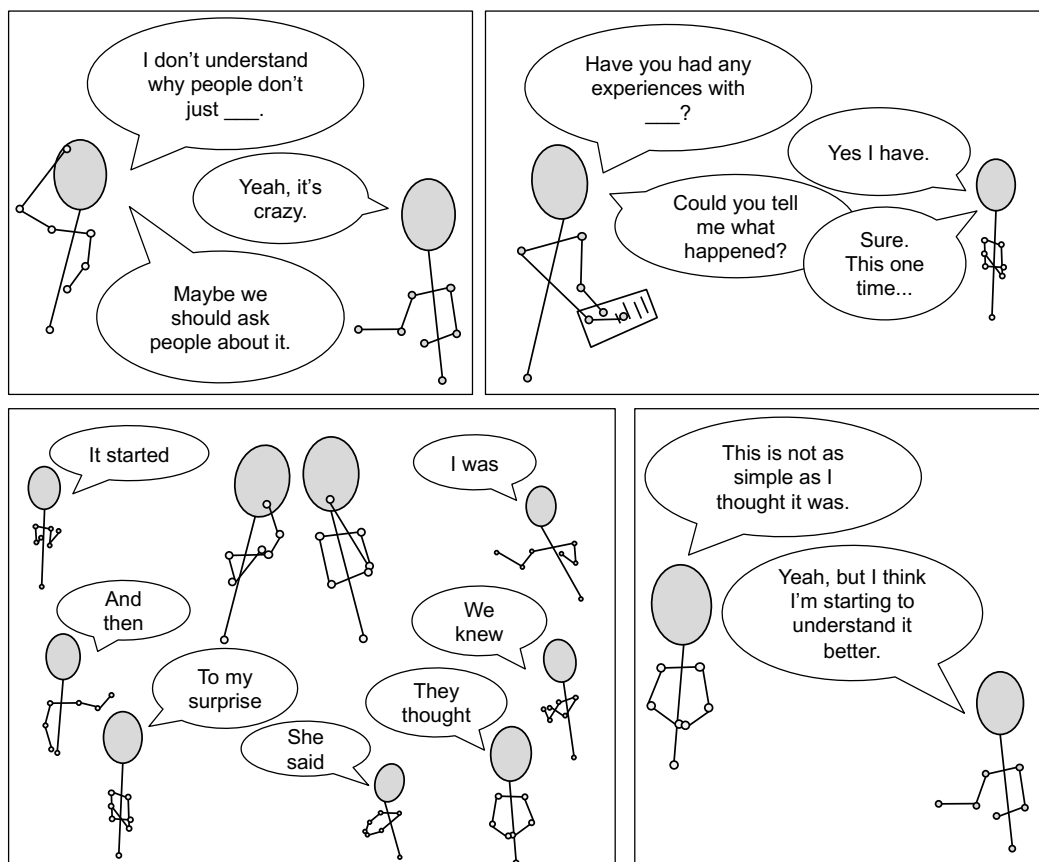
### **Stories bring our imaginations together**

When a topic is complex and many-layered, the best course is to increase diversity, generate many ideas, think out of the box, and prepare for surprise. Asking a diverse range of people what they have done and seen—and what they would and would not like to do and see in the future—brings their imaginations to bear in a synergistic explosion of creativity.

Sharing stories broadens the net of exploration by opening the inquiry to the multi-dimensional varieties of human experience. Direct questioning, though precise, is narrowly focused. It produces uni-dimensional content that can provide only one answer.

### **Stories help us to see the world anew**

When we listen to a story, we experience a suspension of disbelief and a displacement of perspective that helps us to see the things we thought we understood through new eyes. Groups of people who experience each other’s stories can achieve deeper insights than they can by considering opinions and facts.



Direct questioning may generate more precise measurements, but story elicitation ensures greater *depths of insight and understanding* into complex topics and complex people.

### ***Stories create networks of meaning***

When you ask direct questions, it is easy to guess wrongly about what sorts of answers people might want to choose, and even about what sorts of questions might lead to useful answers. This is often a problem when exploring complex topics.

Asking people to talk about their experiences can lead to useful answers *even if you ask the wrong questions*, because the contextual richness of stories provides information in excess of what was directly sought.

In fact, being surprised by the questions answered (and posed) by collected stories is a frequent event in Participatory Narrative Inquiry.

### **What is “working with” stories? Don’t we already tell stories?**

Why pay conscious attention to stories? Isn’t this a natural process? Why attempt to shape it? Won’t you just impose order on something that ought to take natural shape?

Yes, people telling each other stories in unstructured, everyday conversation is a constant human activity. It seems people cannot talk without telling stories, at least some of the time. However, we tell stories in daily life far less than we used to.

**Once upon a time.** In pre-industrial times, story sharing was strong, habitual, and useful, a valuable asset of every community.

- Travel was slow, infrequent, and local, leading to long-term, multiplex connections and high narrative continuity.
- Much time was spent doing tedious but quiet work that lent itself to story sharing, such as farming, processing food, and crafting and repairing clothing and household items.
- There were many amateur storytellers, but few professionals, mostly because a traveling life was a hard life. Bards were respected, but they could only visit one village at a time, and every household and craft workshop had its local tale spinner. These people (often elderly or disabled) were sometimes paid a trifle, or allowed to work slowly, because they provided entertainment (and sometimes facilitated group story sharing) while people worked together. As a result of this dynamic, local challenges and alterations to popular stories were both expected and accepted.

**The march of progress.** The changes brought about by the industrial age caused story sharing to grow weakened, fragmented, and disrespected.

- New modes of transportation increased the speed, range, and frequency of travel, which increased mobility, which in turn reduced long-term connections. This led to a dramatic decrease in narrative continuity.
- New labor-saving devices (such as farm machinery and washing machines) and labor-concentrating factories (for processing food and for making clothing and other household items) reduced the drudgery of everyday life. But they also removed the necessity—and the opportunity—of spending time together. Instead of meeting at the village well to

wash their clothes, people would use their washing machines at home, far from their neighbors. And because these new devices (and new places) were noisy, people found it difficult to share stories near (or in) them.

- A new wave of professional storytellers emerged to replace the stories people missed hearing, first in penny novels, then in magazines, radio shows, movies, and television shows. Those who succeeded rose far higher socially than they ever could before. Few local amateurs dared to challenge the status quo; besides, they were hard at work in the factories or isolated in their perfect kitchens. As a result, challenges and alterations to popular stories became difficult, risky, and rare.
- As we turned toward this new wave of professionally prepared stories, we turned away from our own humble everyday stories. We learned to be good audiences, and we forgot how to share and work with our own stories.

**Signs of life.** The post-modern age has ushered in a partial revival of everyday story sharing. We still share stories far less than we did in pre-industrial times, but the situation has begun to improve.

- Mobility remains high, but the increasing availability and decreasing cost of long-distance communication means that friends and families can stay in touch over long distances (somewhat) better than they could 50 years ago. As a result, narrative continuity has (slightly) increased.
- The (relative) revival of crafting and DIY hobbies has created new social contexts in which casual story sharing can take place. We used to do quiet simple tasks together because talking made the work go faster. Now we get together because we want to talk, and doing quiet simple tasks together gives us more to talk about.
- The proliferation of new forms of low-entry-cost media has (somewhat) reduced the status of professional storytellers and elevated the status of amateurs. As a result, audiences are now (somewhat) more inclined to “take over” popular stories and demand changes. Fan fiction, for example, has (to some extent) disrupted the tradition of the good audience.

In short, we are beginning to reskill ourselves in story exchange, and Participatory Narrative Inquiry is part of that revival.

### **What can we get out of using PNI? What can it do for us?**

The *why* part of the question “Why work with stories?” has to do with return on investment. People want to know what *results* they can get from working with their stories.

The following table lists some of the things you can do with PNI.

If you want to	You can	For example
Find things out	Address a specific question by looking at patterns across experiences and reflections	A hospital might examine its policies by asking its patients about their interactions with caregivers
Catch emerging trends	Pick up on growing problems and opportunities by asking people what has been happening to them lately	A non-profit organization might ask its volunteers about the high and low points of their volunteering each month
Make better decisions	Compare options by exploring relevant experiences from all perspectives	A town might compare three future scenarios, drawing from stories of the community in the present and past
Find new ideas	Address a longstanding problem with collective imagination	A community might ask its members to recall times when they saw tense confrontations defused with compassion
Reduce conflicts	Help people understand the experiences and perspectives of people in other groups	A community might explore diverse stories of everyday life to find common ground
Build connections	Help community members communicate norms and negotiate changes	A university might ask some of its students to build a story-filled orientation handbook for new students
Help people learn	Improve collective productivity with real-life stories of learning and insight	An organization might build a help system that gathers stories from software users to diagnose problems and find solutions
Enlighten people	Find authentic experiences to highlight and challenge limiting assumptions	An advocacy group might gather, then explore, then communicate stories of lived experience with their topic

### **What you can't do**

So what *can't* you do with PNI? You can't *prove* anything. You can't find specific answers, test hypotheses, or conduct experiments as you would in a scientific endeavor. Working stories is a blunt instrument. You can come up with hypotheses, but you can't control how people will interpret the questions you ask them, so you can never be sure if those hypotheses were proven or disproven. You can't create a control group, because you can't control how people will react.

Is this a problem? I don't think so. I have come to believe that when your subject is human beings and the things they feel and believe, proof isn't a very useful thing. What is useful is *help* coming to decisions. For that purpose, working with stories has an excellent record of accomplishment.

The other thing you can't do when you work with stories is *lie*. If you try to use the stories people tell you to create propaganda that distorts what they said (though not all propaganda does), chances are the truth will come out. And when it does, nobody will ever want to tell you stories again. So you can't really *use* stories; you can just *work with* them.

### ***Why not just exchange stories?***

Helping people share stories sounds great. But, you may be asking, why do more than that? Why help people "work with" their stories? Isn't story sharing enough?

It might be. If you are not interested in helping your community or organization solve pressing problems or find better solutions, helping people to simply share more stories may be enough. But if your goals are more ambitious, you can achieve more by helping people work with their stories. For example, I have seen people use PNI to:

- discover insights that had been eluding them for years
- see each other as they really were for the first time
- overturn assumptions that stood in the way of needed solutions
- release unhopd-for fountains of energy to build a better future

All of these things happened because people did more with their stories than just telling and listening to them. I hope the many brief stories about real projects scattered throughout this book (and in the *Working with Stories Sourcebook*) will give you an idea of the things people have achieved by working with stories.

Based on my experiences in this area, I believe that if you could run an experiment in which community A simply shares stories while community B both shares stories and works with their stories to build things together, community B will arrive at better, more robust, more resilient, more *grounded* decisions.

But don't take my word for it! Try it yourself and see if it works for you. Or better, *make it work* for your community or organization. If you start small and work your way into greater understanding of the techniques I describe in this book, I am confident that they will be useful to you.

These techniques were developed and refined over the course of many projects, but they share concepts and ideas with many other methods of participatory work. Pick up any book on action research, narrative therapy, participatory theatre, or decision support, and you will find parallels to what you read here. In fact, I strongly encourage you to draw widely from many techniques designed to help people think and make decisions together.

In the end, you and your community are the ultimate authorities as to what will work best for you. The ideas and techniques I describe in this book don't matter in the abstract. If they don't work in the particular context of your needs and hopes, they don't work. It is

your task to make them work, or to build what *does* work for you. It is my task to help you do that.

## How to use this book

Don't just read it. Do it. Many of the things I explain in this book are hard to explain in words. My suggestion is to read a bit, go out and try what you read, then come back and read some more. Keep doing this until you don't need the book anymore. Then write your own book. Seriously. Everyone has their own unique way of doing this work. Find yours.

## Changes in the fourth edition

I have learned a lot (more) about working with stories since I finished the third edition of this book in 2014. This edition includes many new understandings, explanations, and exercises I developed as I introduced hundreds of people to PNI and its ideas, taught and coached dozens of people through their first PNI projects, supported dozens of PNI projects, and thought (and talked) about the future of PNI as a field.

I also listened to many readers as they told me about *Working with Stories*: which parts they liked most and least, which parts they found enlightening and confusing, which parts they read over and over, and which parts they skimmed or skipped. If you told me anything about *Working with Stories*—anything at all—you helped me improve it.

One of the things people told me they needed was a shorter book. That's why I wrote *Working with Stories Simplified*, and it's why I trimmed down my writing in this book and moved some of its lowest-priority sections to the *Working with Stories Sourcebook* and *Working with Stories in Depth*.



# Part I

## Story Fundamentals

To help you get started in story work, I thought about my own discoveries in the field as well as conversations I have had with other people making the same journey. By my best estimation, these are the questions you are most likely to have at this point:

1. What is a story?
2. What are stories for?
3. How do stories work?
4. What role do stories play in communities and organizations?

Thus, this part of the book contemplates each of these questions in order to give you an essential grounding in narrative.

Chapter	Page	Name	Description
2	13	<a href="#">What Is a Story?</a>	Defines stories as messages, thinking tools, and connections
3	19	<a href="#">What Are Stories For?</a>	Describes stories as maps of experience, sounding devices, packages of meaning, and elements of play
4	29	<a href="#">How Do Stories Work?</a>	Explores aspects of how stories function in conversation, inside and alongside other stories, and in society
5	49	<a href="#">Stories in Communities and Organizations</a>	Looks at how stories work in groups of people who live and work together



## Chapter 2

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# What Is a Story?

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Most definitions of the word “story” have two parts to them: stories are this, and stories are *not* that. I’ve read hundreds of such definitions, and maybe you have too. When I first began to gather and compare definitions of the word, I noticed something curious. The same thing that made a story a story to one person often made it *not* a story to another person. So who was right and who was wrong?

I used to say what everyone else said: *I’m* right, of course, and the people who wrote these other definitions are wrong. But over time I came to realize that every definition of story I ever read—including my own—was completely wrong. Or rather, wrongly complete. The reason good people disagree on the definition of story isn’t that some are right and some are wrong. It is that we are touching different parts of the same elephant.

A group of blind travelers encountered an elephant. One traveler felt the elephant’s trunk and said, “Watch out! It’s a snake!” Another felt the elephant’s leg and said, “You’re wrong. It’s a tree.” A third felt the side of the elephant and said, “You’re both wrong. It’s a boulder!”

So rather than tell you what is and is not a story, I will tell you about *three perspectives* on stories that among them contain every definition of the word.

### **A story is a message**

We tell and listen to stories to express our identities and to negotiate and maintain our positions and capabilities in our social groups. Thus a good story is one that fits our group’s cultural expectations of what stories are like and uses that fit to deliver a message to an audience for a purpose.

This perspective on stories focuses on the dimension of *story form*, or the communicative act of storytelling. Story form has to do with *structure*: setting, characters, plot, values, conflicts, and themes. It also has to do with *engagement*: interesting settings; relatable characters; captivating plots; well-expressed values; satisfying arcs of rising and falling conflict; and coherent, relevant themes. Whether we are writing a screenplay or chatting with friends, all of these elements of story form come into play.

## A story is a thinking tool

We tell and listen to stories to understand the world we live in. Thus a good story is one we encounter in the right place at the right time, one that helps us to learn and understand and remember. We all spend our lives puzzling out life, the universe, and everything, and stories help us to do that, both individually and collectively.

This perspective on stories focuses on the dimension of *story function*, or the utility of a story to thought, decision, and action. Story function has to do with *associations*: between story characters and their plans, goals, and actions; between cause and effect; between situations in a story and analogous situations in our lives; and between a story and other stories that explore related issues and teach complementary lessons.

## A story is a connection

We tell and listen to stories to get along with each other by forming and maintaining bonds and resolving disputes. Thus a good story is one that survives and spreads through the conversation and memory of people, helping everyone it touches—like the story I told you about the elephant. That story is over 2000 years old, and it has helped billions of people understand that good people can disagree without anyone being at fault.

This perspective on stories focuses on the dimension of *story phenomenon*, or the life history of a story as it moves through time and society. Story phenomenon has to do with *context*: when and where a story’s events took place; when and where it first took form and was told; how it was passed on; how it developed and changed over time; and its current scope, variations, and interpretations.

# Exploring the three perspectives

Let’s use one of Aesop’s fables, “The Ant and the Dove,” to consider a story from each of the three perspectives.

An ant went to the bank of a river to quench its thirst, and being carried away by the rush of the stream, was on the point of drowning.

A dove sitting on a tree overhanging the water plucked a leaf and let it fall into the stream close to her. The ant climbed onto it and floated in safety to the bank.

Shortly afterwards a birdcatcher came and stood under the tree, and laid his lime-twigs [trap] for the dove, which sat in the branches. The ant, perceiving his design, stung him in the foot. In pain the birdcatcher threw down the twigs, and the noise made the dove take wing.

That’s *just* the sort of story Aesop would tell, isn’t it? The old rascal. The story never comes right out and says *anything*, but we know what it means. That sort of oblique communication is what stories do best.

## Story form in “The Ant and the Dove”

The physical setting of the story encompasses a river and a tree, in warm weather (no ice on the river), probably in the daytime. It covers a time frame of perhaps an hour or two.

The social setting of the story is remarkable: it includes unrealistically intelligent animals, though the bird-catcher does not seem to be aware of this (to his detriment).

As to the story's characters, the protagonist is the dove, and the antagonist is the bird-catcher. The ant's role is as a teacher or helper to the dove. The plot begins with an initiating event (the ant is carried away), continues with a protagonist action (the dove saves the ant), encounters a complicating event (the man sets a trap for the dove), and ends with a helper action and resolution (the ant saves the dove).

Contrasts between character abilities are important to the story. The ant is helpless against the current, but it can bite the man. The dove cannot attack its enemy, but it can fly away from danger. Thus the story is an allegory about our own complementary capabilities.

The dominant change in the story is that two characters who have no prior relationship form a bond of mutual salvation. The cause of the change is the dove's choice to take a risk to save the ant. The dove literally sticks out its neck to help the ant, and the ant reciprocates by taking another risk, as it could easily be stepped on by the man while it is biting him. The symmetry of the two actions makes reciprocity a strong theme. Thus the central point of the story is the same as that expressed by the proverb "what goes around comes around."

The story contains three kinds of conflict: internal (should I help or stay where it's safe?), inter-character (the bird-catcher's attempt to trap the dove), and external (the river's dangerous current).

Notice that each sentence in the story describes an apparently unconnected event. It never actually says that either animal saved the other, or even that they meant to do so. It only says that they took certain actions and that those actions had certain outcomes. This gives the story a secondary theme about the undercurrents of connection that lie beneath apparently unconnected actions and events.

Taken together, this story is a cleverly assembled package meant to persuade its audience that the proverb is a true one.

### **Story function in "The Ant and the Dove"**

The expectation in a situation like the one established in this story is that people (for this is a story about people) are often unwilling to take risks to help each other, especially if they are strangers (as seems to be the case here). The story explores the violation of this expectation: that sometimes taking a risk for no apparent gain results in greater safety in the long run. The animals in the story share similar goals (to survive), and this similarity connects the two animals together in a relationship that does not include the man. (Imagine if the ant had been the man's pet; would it have helped the dove?)

Also important to this story is the detection of plans. The ant is able to discern both the dove's plan (dropping the leaf) and the man's (setting the lime twigs). This is why the ant is a helper in the story and not a co-protagonist. The dove, unlike the ant, discerns no plans, not even the man's after the ant has bit him (only the noise made the bird take wing, not any dawning awareness of the man's plans).

It is in fact critical to the story's function that the protagonist, who risked her life to help another without promise of return, be unaware of any plans being made. Why? Because that is the lesson of the story: that helping without expectation of return is worthwhile. Imagine if the dove had known the man was coming to lay a trap: would its helping the ant constitute help without expectation of return? No; it would be calculating, not taking a leap of faith in unseen reciprocity.

In terms of cognitive play and life-event simulation, the utility of this story lies in considering the relative merits of risk-taking in a world in which intentions and motivations vary and may be difficult to detect. Many folk tales explore related lessons, including some where the hero unselfishly helps others and is rewarded in return.

On the other hand, there are many opposing stories in which unselfish actions result not in aid but in vulnerability to attack by deceptive antagonists. Little Red Riding Hood and other cautionary tales stand in contrast to stories of reciprocity like this one in a multi-faceted exploration of help, hindrance, trust, and deceit.

### **Story phenomenon in “The Ant and the Dove”**

The hundreds of moralistic fables attributed to Aesop, an ancient Greek storyteller, were probably handed down through oral traditions for hundreds of years before they were written down. Since then many compilations of the fables have been printed and reprinted, and they have developed many variations.

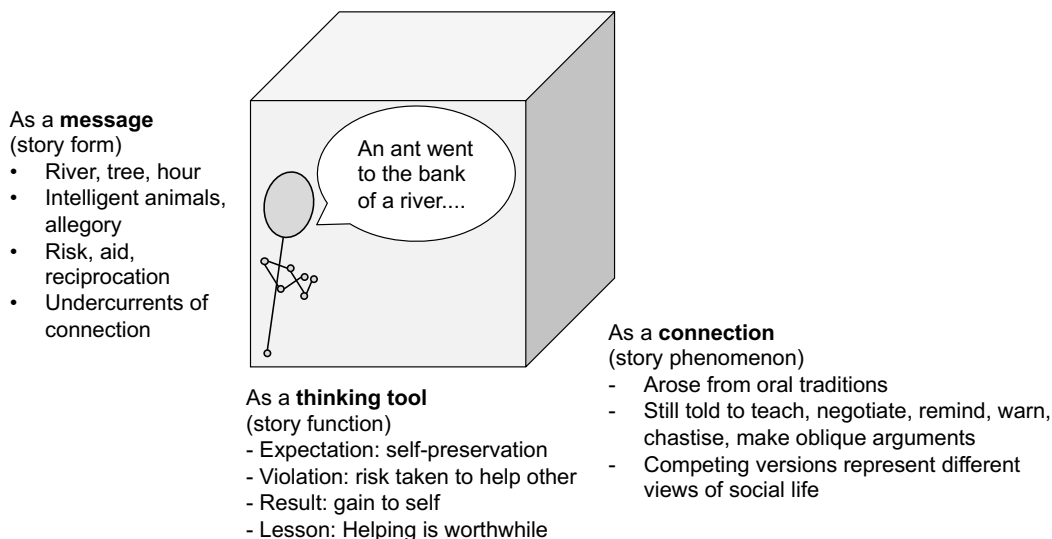
Today, Aesop's fables are read to and by children, referred to in conversation, and performed in person, in writing, and in film. People use them to teach children about human social realities; to refer to truisms; to entertain with witty performances; to pursue arguments in subtle ways; and for many other purposes. The tales are generally considered part of the cultural heritage of Europeans (and people whose ancestors came from those lands), though few people have read all of them or know what is an Aesop's fable and what is not.

At the moment, on the internet, there are two versions of “The Ant and the Dove” that convey opposing interpretations of the story's central message.

1. One version of the story gives its moral as “A kindness is never wasted,” portraying a world in which people do good for the sake of good and are rewarded through the natural balance of the cosmos. This matches the interpretation I gave to you, which is the interpretation I formed of the story when I first read it as a child.
2. A second version of the story, which I was surprised to discover as I wrote this book, gives its moral as “One good turn deserves another” and portrays a tit-for-tat world in which clever people help only those who help them. The ant is the protagonist in this version of the story, and it helps the dove only because the dove helped it first. Some of these tellings even do away with the surface-level disconnectedness of the story as I told it to you, having the ant and dove form a close bond of friendship for “many days” before the ant is called upon to help the dove—or even claiming that the two animals were friends long before the story began.

These two versions of the story seem to be waging a war for dominance in contemporary society. The interpretations themselves relate to the use of the story as a thinking tool,

but *the fact that there are two of them* has to do with how the story is playing out as a social phenomenon. Does the rise of the tit-for-tat version say something about increasing isolationism and xenophobia? Or have the two versions of the story always been present? (And did I simply happen to encounter and connect with the cosmic-balance version first, and was its impact on my worldview a matter of chance?)



## Stories of Definition

One thing I have noticed about these three perspectives is that *nobody ever seems to think about all of them at once*. You are likely to have encountered some definitions of story already, if you have been reading in this area, and you are most likely to have encountered people defining stories according to one or two of these perspectives.

Try it right now. Pick up any book about stories or storytelling, and you will find that the definition of “story” given in it describes, either only or primarily, one or two of these perspectives. I have read many such books and have yet to find *one* that covers all three perspectives equally.

Let me show you a few examples. What perspective on stories does this author favor?

[Story] Structure is a selection of events from the characters’ life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life.

Did you guess story form? The quote is from Robert McKee’s *Story*, the bible of aspiring screenwriters, and it exclusively defines story in terms of form.

Here is another:

[S]ome stories may be unjustly forgotten, but no stories are unjustly remembered. They do not survive through the vagaries of whim. If a story has been swimming in the vast ocean of human consciousness for decades or centuries or even millennia, it has earned its place.

Which perspective on stories does *that* description cover? It describes stories as societal phenomena. The quote is from Robert Fulford's book *The Triumph of Narrative*, which explores the roles of stories in society from gossip to urban legends to television.

A third quote:

When a prior experience is indexed cleverly, we can call it to mind to help us understand a current situation. This process can lead to brand-new insights.

Which perspective did you pick? The quote is from Roger Schank's *Tell Me a Story*, a treatise on stories in their functional role.

Here is a quote from an author who covers two perspectives on stories.

There is an intricate political process at work here [in sharing stories]; what I should like to call the politics of narrative identity whereby we assert and maintain our own interests not just by advancing a particular view of ourselves, but by undermining the views that others advance of themselves. Stories and counter-stories are told; history is written, subverted, and rewritten. And in this game of strategy, those who have the last word also have considerable power over those who do not.

Can you guess which perspectives it covers? It is by David Novitz in a chapter called "Art, Narrative, and Human Nature" in the book *Memory, Identity, Community*. The chapter explores story function (prediction, strategy) and also deals with stories as social phenomena (politics, representation, identity, power). But do you see much attention to story *form* there? Setting, character, plot, value, conflict, theme?

My definition of the word "story" is a story about me, and your definition of the word "story" is a story about you. In the same way that no story of humanity can be complete until it includes the story of every human being, no definition of "story" can be complete until it includes all three of these perspectives.

Stories help us to communicate, think, and connect. When we can look at a story from all three perspectives, we can explore it from every angle. We can think about why it was told, what it means, what it can teach us, and where it needs to go.



## Chapter 3

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# What Are Stories For?

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Stories serve (at least) four functions in human life.

1. We use stories to *chart* maps of the world of our experiences. Sharing stories helps us validate and improve our maps.
2. We use stories to *sound* the terrain around us with evidential reasoning, enhancing our maps with additional dimensions.
3. We use stories to *condense* our maps, reducing cognitive overhead in well-known areas and freeing up resources to explore where exploration is needed most.
4. We use stories to *explore* our maps, entering into serious play that transports us without danger and develops our understanding of difficult terrain.

This chapter explores each of these functions.

## We use stories to chart maps of the world

In order to make the decisions required to survive, all organisms need to form some idea of what the world around them contains. For people this is true in the physical sense and in many other senses as well: emotional, social, political, spiritual. From childhood on we build maps of the world we experience. The stories we tell and remember help us to build those maps.

### Mapping matters more at the edges of the map

In 2010 the University of Minnesota's *EurekaAlert!* online science news service described some ground-breaking research into storytelling, or the replay of lived experience, in the brain. Researchers placed electrode "hats" on rats as they ran around in mazes, essentially watching the rats map their worlds. Says the news article:

The hippocampus, a part of the brain essential for memory, has long been known to "replay" recently experienced events.

"Replaying experienced events" is not that different from what we mean by storytelling, even if it is not communicated to another person (or rat). When you stand on your porch

and remember the time you shared a meal there with friends, you are not that different from a rat remembering the time it found some excellent cheese in a maze.

Going back to rats: these researchers used their electrode “hats” to observe firing patterns in the brains of rats as they navigated a maze. From this they were able to compare where the rat was currently located with where the rat was remembering being.

They found that it was not the more recent experiences that were played back in the hippocampus, but instead, the animals were most frequently playing back the experiences they had encountered the least. They also discovered that some of the sequences played out by the animal were ones they had never before experienced.

When I read this, I thought of Gary Klein’s work (described in his book *Sources of Power*) on *naturalistic decision making*. This body of work describes how people make decisions in part by recalling cases from the past. Like the rats in the maze, the firefighters Klein interviewed did not recall their great masses of *mundane* experience; they compared what they were sensing mainly to the *extremes* of their experience.

For example, my strongest memory from Klein’s book is of a firefighter entering a room, feeling a hot floor, remembering a time when a floor gave way because there was fire beneath it, and ordering everyone out—just before the floor collapsed.

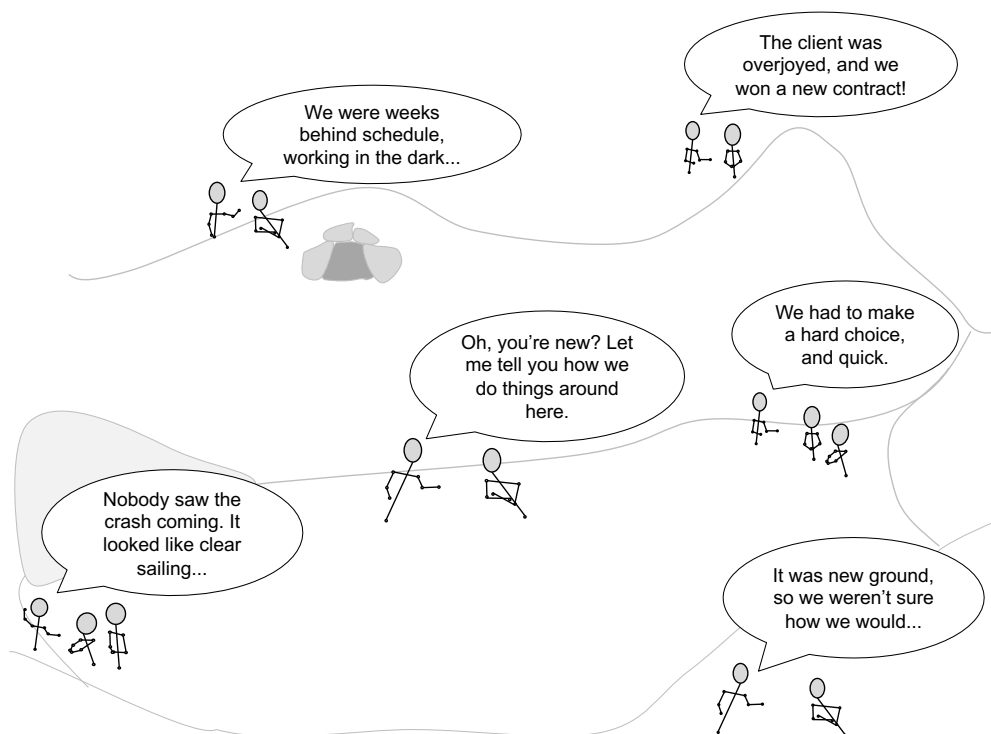
What these and other similar bodies of research tell us is that as people tell stories (to themselves and others), they explore the areas of their worlds that hold the most opportunity and danger: the *edges* of experience.

Why pay so much attention to the edges? Because telling stories takes time and energy, and only at the edges is it worth the expense. Exploring the well-known does not pay off.

### **What about rules and expectations?**

Stories about rules are valuable, yes. But stories about *exceptions* to rules are even more valuable—and the more the better, because every exception is different. Remember Tolstoy’s famous quote, that happy families are all alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way? This is why folk tale collections are made not of people sowing wheat and baking bread but of babies who drink oceans and tumble-down huts full of gold.

When you read about stories in communities and organizations, you will read about stories of unwritten rules, of “how we do things around here.” Such foundational stories are indeed important to most communities and organizations. But they are not told on an everyday basis to those who already know them. They are more likely to be told to newcomers and outsiders, for whom they *are* at the edge of experience. This is similar to the way in which people who pride themselves on the museums and monuments of their cities visit them only when visiting relatives require a tour.



Foundational stories are also told when someone is in danger of breaking the unwritten rules of the community or organization. In this instance they serve to reorient a person whose map is faulty and who has mistaken the edge of the map for its center.

Cognitive scientists often talk about how people learn how to live in the world by following *scripts* given to them by others in the form of stories. Roger Schank says in *Tell Me a Story*:

A script is a set of expectations about what will happen next in a well-understood situation. In a sense, many situations in life have the people who participate in them seemingly reading their roles in a kind of play. The waitress reads from the waitress part in the restaurant script, and the customer reads the line of the customer. Life experience means quite often knowing how to act and how others will act in given stereotypical situations. That knowledge is called a script.

We need stories in the center, in “stereotypical situations,” because they prepare us to act in ways that will keep us out of danger. But functioning adults do not exchange scripts of everyday life. Such script-stories are told to children or cultural outsiders, for whom they are at the edges of experience. For example, around the age of five or six, scripts help children map the newly-acquired space of interacting with restaurant staff. But nobody would tell stories to a teenager about how to behave in a restaurant, because by then the experience would—should—be centrally located in their map.

## We use stories to sound the terrain around us

Stories help us make decisions about what to believe in what we see and hear. A favorite example here is Lance Bennett's "Storytelling in Criminal Trials" (in the book *Memory, Identity, Community*). Bennett makes the point that we judge the story a person tells about a situation by carrying out three "cognitive operations" on the story.

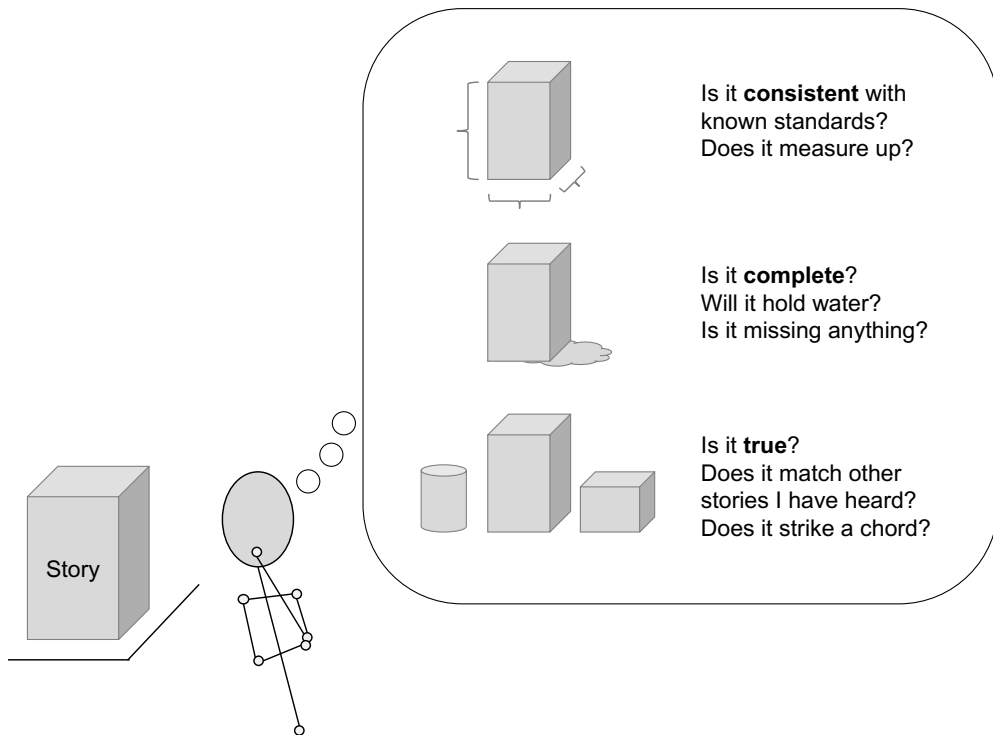
1. We judge a story's *consistency* by examining its internal *regularity*. We say a story "hangs together" or "ticks" or "runs like a fine machine." We also assess the story's consistency with cultural *standards* of story form: setting, character, plot, scene, action. Most adults can assess narrative consistency and know how to repair a story that is not functioning properly. In order to answer the question "Could it have happened this way?" we ask "Does the story hold together?"
2. We judge a story's *completeness* by looking for plot *holes* and unexplained gaps and omissions. We say a story "doesn't hold water" or "isn't the whole story" if we sense such inadequacies. In order to answer the question "Is this the *whole* truth?" we ask "Is there anything missing from this story?"
3. We judge a story's *veracity* by examining *connections* between it and the collection of stories in our memories, both those we have experienced directly and those we have heard from others. We talk about whether a story "rings true" or "strikes a chord" in light of our experience. In order to answer the question "Did it happen this way?" we ask "What stories stand with or against this story?"

The fact that nearly everyone has the skills required to work with stories makes this an essential tool in a system of jury by one's peers. Says Bennett:

[I]n the [U.S.] courtroom jurors must understand that their judgments satisfy standards of "reasonable doubt." They must try to withhold final judgements until "all the evidence is in." They must try to be "fair." They must try to be "objective." These dimensions of interpretation are stipulated within the foreign context of a trial, yet the basis for this knowledge must be part of the juror's everyday equipment for living. A solution to this problem is suggested by the story model: The cognitive operations made possible by placing evidence into a story framework provide implicit measures of these justice criteria. . . . This, in a nutshell, is our everyday measure of "doubt."

In other words, we decide whether something is true by forming it into a story, then testing the story; and when information is given to us *as* a story, we test that story directly.

What does this mean for everyday storytelling? If you watch people exchanging stories, you can see them judging elements of consistency, completeness, and veracity in the stories they hear. You can also see them adapt and repair their own stories as they detect deficiencies in any of these qualities, either in their own judgment or that of their audience. Sometimes you can see storytellers and audiences negotiate these qualities in conversation. (The upcoming section on conversational storytelling, starting on page 29, will explore this more fully.)



Other researchers and theorists have also noted the connection between stories and judgment. It plays a part, for example, in Walter Fisher's *narrative paradigm*, his description of how people use stories to make sense of the world. This quote in particular (from Fisher's book *Human Communication as Narration*) is relevant:

Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives.

Fisher's narrative probability connects to Bennett's consistency and completeness, and his fidelity to Bennett's veracity. Fisher believes that we tell stories in order to develop "good reasons" with which to guide our decisions (such as whether to convict or acquit a peer).

Alasdair MacIntyre (in *After Virtue*) speaks of stories providing *accountability*:

I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. . . . Asking you what you did and why, saying what I did and why, pondering the differences between your account of what I did and my account of what I did, and *vice versa*, these are essential constituents of all but the very simplest and barest of narratives.

Evaluative aspects of story comprehension such as are explored by Bennett, Fisher, and MacIntyre add a third dimension to our maps of experience, distinguishing peaks of truth

from valleys of doubt. Here there be dragons, say our stories; here sirens, here giants, and here lush fields of green. Without such detailed maps we would be ill equipped to survive.

## Sounding devices can be manipulated

Having said all of that, I must now say the opposite. Lance Bennett warns us that consistency and completeness can overwhelm veracity:

[I]ssues of truth or fact in our adjudication (and social judgment) processes are intimately tied to the symbolization of accounts and the ways in which the symbolizations fit into the story model. *This means that in some instances perfectly true accounts will be disbelieved due to improper symbolization or structurally inadequate presentations. Conversely, false accounts may be believed due to the skillful juxtaposition of internally consistent symbols.*

That is, those who tell wonderful stories can also tell wonderful lies. Using stories to make sense of the world around us can save us—and it can be used against us. This has been true for as long as people have been sharing stories.

## We use stories to condense our maps

When I tell you a story, I compress the breadth of my experience into a tightly packed space. Aspects particular to me are excluded or explained, and aspects I can expect us to share ride along unstated, taking no space. When you read or hear the story, you re-expand it, filling in the details with your own experiences.

Try it. Here is a tiny story by G.S. Evans from [storybytes.com](http://storybytes.com).

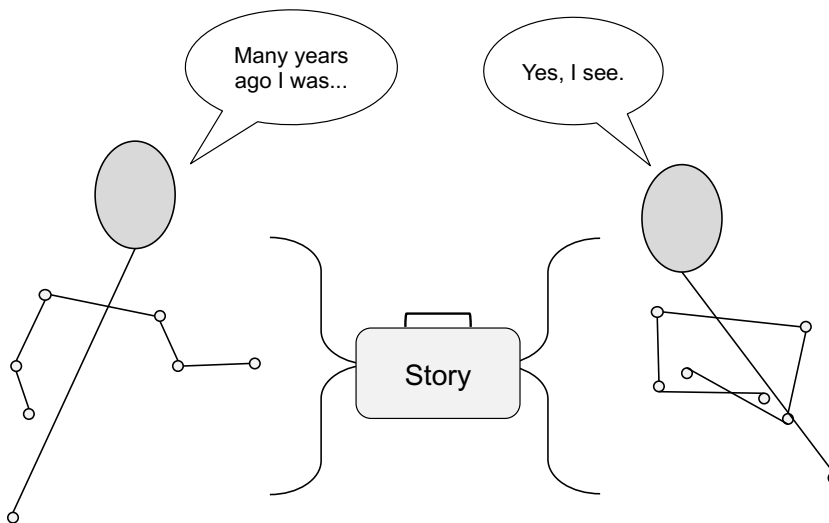
“Some things in life are so easy to do,” the man thought, falling to his death.

You can *feel* that story expanding in your mind.

A story is a way of wrapping up experience into a robust, internally stable package suitable for travel through time and space. The structures of a story protect it from dissolution in the same way a suitcase protects the clothing within it from scattering in the wind on a train platform.

Here is a beautifully illustrative quote from Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Gift*.

Now he read in three dimensions, as it were, carefully exploring each poem. . . . [A]s he read, he again made use of all the materials already once gathered by his memory for the extraction of the present poems, and reconstructed everything, absolutely everything, as a returning traveler sees in an orphan’s eyes not only the smile of its mother, whom he had known in his youth, but also an avenue ending in a burst of yellow light and that auburn leaf on the bench, and everything, everything.



The degree to which we can correctly re-expand the original meaning of any story depends on *narrative distance*: the sum of the cultural, temporal, personal, and experiential differences between storyteller and audience. The greater the narrative distance, the greater the likelihood of re-expansion errors, thus the smaller possible compression ratio.

To give an example: I like to read old novels and folk tales. When I choose book editions to read, I look for plentiful explanatory footnotes. Why? Because without footnotes, the stories are harder to re-expand. When I read Russian novels, some aspects of the stories come across very well. Dostoyevsky mentions putting straw under the table at Christmas, which I grew up doing, so I can fill in the details there. But other things, like the uses of *bast* and *kvass*, the moods of *samovars*, the types of carriages, and the grades of civil service, I cannot re-expand correctly without help.

Similarly, I can think of three children's stories—*Alice in Wonderland*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *The Wizard of Oz*—in which cultural and political messages are so deeply embedded as to be invisible without help from footnotes and introductions.

All stories have such inaccessible parts in them, even the stories we tell each other every day and the stories we tell to ourselves. Have you ever read an old diary entry and had no idea what you were talking about? You could not re-expand the compressed story because you had forgotten too much of the surrounding context.

### Extreme compression

Two types of stories take compression to an extreme: *proverbs* and *story references*.

Proverbs are tightly packed stories. Here's an exercise for you: find some random proverbs and re-expand them into stories. I'll try a few.

Proverb	Story
A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.	Some people were trying to do something. They were all needed. One of them failed. The whole effort failed.
A friend in need is a friend indeed.	I had a friend. I wasn't sure how good of a friend he was. I had a crisis, and he came through for me. Now I know that he is really my friend.
Ignorance is bliss.	I used to love traipsing through the woods, listening to the birds in the trees. What a peaceful time I had! Now I have become a birdwatcher. All I can think about is whether I have the correct identification.

But proverbs are not only very short stories. They have a unique function in society that relies on their obliqueness. We use them as a protective coating to tell stories we think may be unwelcome in an expanded state.

Another type of ultra-compact story is a story *reference*. You know the old joke about the place where everybody knows all the jokes so well that they've reduced them to numbers? And one guy says "47" and nobody laughs? And then he says, "Ah, well, I never could tell a joke"? That's a perfect example of a (joke about a) story reference. References are like proverbs, but they leave out so much context that they make no sense at all to outsiders. They are *designed* not to travel.

## We use stories to explore our maps

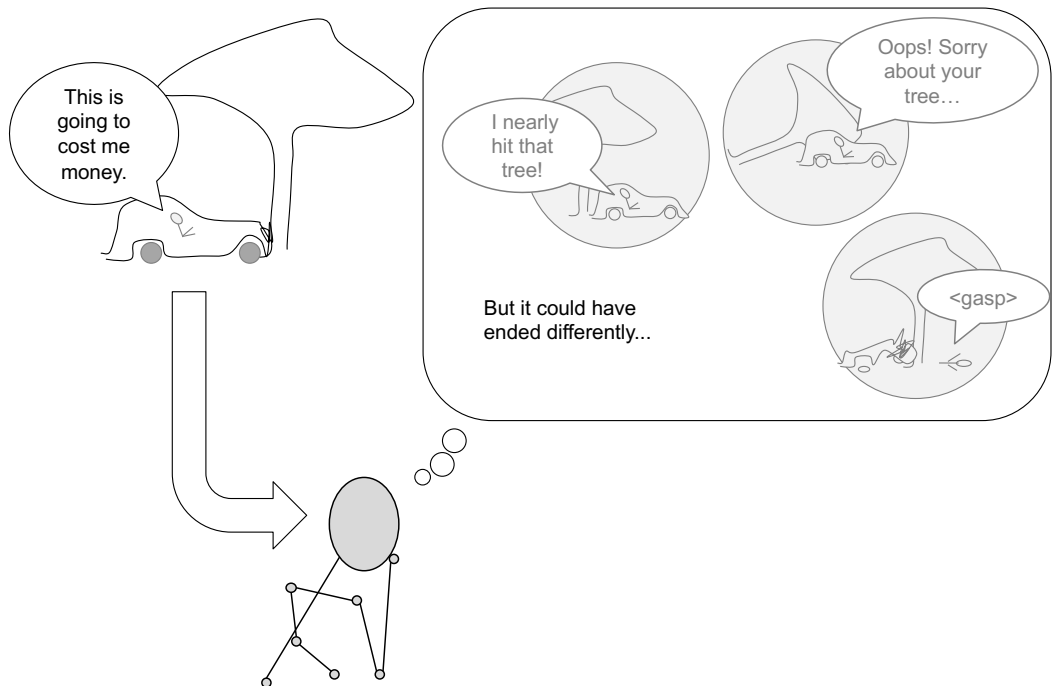
Because stories are simulations, they provide the same benefits as every other type of simulation. An article on medical simulation (by Carl Patow, in the journal *Simulation Learning*) explains:

Medical simulation . . . enables students and providers to learn, practice, and repeat procedures as often as necessary in order to correct mistakes, fine-tune their skills, and optimize clinical outcomes. They can develop and refine their skills without compromising the safety of real patients.

In a similar way, we all use stories to consider and correct our mistakes and increase our skills for coping with every aspect of life.

If you have ever watched a child tell stories in daily life, you have seen the play function of stories. The events of daily life—an encounter with a scary stranger, a challenging task, a visit to relatives, a mosquito bite, a parent's fears, a birthday party—all enter into fictional stories and are played and replayed from many angles until they have been thoroughly explored and can be put to rest.





For an explanation of stories as play I could not possibly say anything better than this quote from Brian Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories*.

All participants must understand behaviors like chasing and rough-and-tumble as play and not real attack. To initiate play, canids have a ritualized play bow, particularly stereotyped in the young, like the "Once upon a time" that signals to a human child a partial suspension of the rules of the real. . . .

In play we act as if within quotation marks, as if these were hooks to lift the behavior from its context to let us turn it around for inspection. Within the frame of play, animals make a first step toward the representation or re-representation of the real that thought and language provide and that allow us to rotate things freely in the mind, exploring them from new angles.

"A partial suspension of the rules of the real" is one of the many things stories bring to us, as children and as adults. Gary Klein calls this "mental simulation" and explains that when decision makers in situations of rapid-fire action cannot recall cases that match current conditions well, they mix and match elements from previous experience to create new scenarios. The fact that stories take place in a sort of bubble where special rules apply makes mental simulation possible with no damage to what surrounds it. Says Boyd:

Play permits detachment, yet does so by engaging players intensely. Inviting, engrossing, energetic, this self-rewarding concentrate of ordinary action makes it possible to develop rapidly skills that it would be dangerous to learn, and impossible to overlearn, within the urgencies of the real.

If you think about it, you are already familiar with stories as objects of play. Think of phrases like “the suspension of disbelief” and “the play’s the thing” (the thing we play with, that is), and think of role-playing games, which are stories in which we play characters.

Stories pull us in while simultaneously pushing away the “urgencies of the real.” But this is not a paradox; it is a journey, a flight through possibility. A game.

One critical aspect of games in social life is their volunteer nature. As James P. Carse famously put it in *Finite and Infinite Games*:

If you *must* play, you cannot *play*.

This is why we wrap our stories in such elaborate rituals of social negotiation: because we need to play with them to make sense of our lives, and we need the help of those around us to play with them. And play is serious business, even for children. Anyone who thinks play is for entertainment alone has never seen a child frantically re-enact a frightening experience a dozen times in rapid succession, seeking the resolution of understanding.

## Chapter 4

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# How Do Stories Work?

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In the first chapters of this book, I have been building up explanations based on typical questions people ask about stories. We have already covered what makes a story a story and what stories are for. The next question people ask usually turns to practical utility. They ask: How do stories work? What makes them tick?

To answer this question, I would like to take you on a journey through stories as they work within our lives. We will start with a magnified view of stories as they are told in conversation, and end with a global view of stories as they move through society. Along the way, we will consider some intermediate-scope aspects of stories in use.

### Stories in conversation

One summer evening, you and I are sitting together with a group of friends. We just came from a social event, say a sports event, and we are chatting about it. Our conversation has a tick-tock rhythm to it: you speak, I speak, she speaks, he speaks. We hand off the conversation to each other regularly and frequently by exchanging sentences, phrases, and paragraphs. When one person has been holding forth for a while on a subject, the others in the group signal their willingness to listen by chiming in with “uh-huh” and “really” and “you don’t say” from time to time. Though we don’t know it, we are all watching the rhythm of the conversation and keeping it on course.

Have you ever met a person who didn’t seem to understand this natural rhythm, who held the floor by force or volume and refused to hand over the conversational baton? Did you want to talk to them again? Not likely. Conversation is a negotiated ritual of give and take, and we know when it is working and when it isn’t.

Now let’s say you begin to tell a story. “I remember a time,” you say. There is a brief pause as you glance around. The attentive looks and body language you see indicate permission to continue, so you plunge in. During your story the ums and ahs continue, but in a subdued manner that signals you hold the floor and the permission to speak uninterrupted. If there was a talking stick you would have it. Soon you complete your story, transmitting another

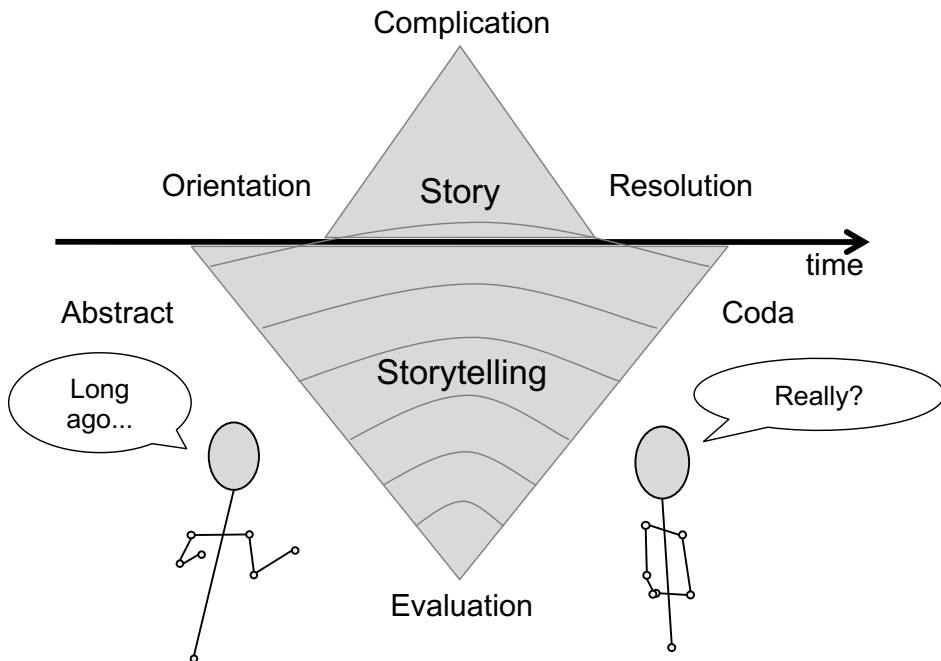
recognized signal that your turn has ended, and the conversation returns to its previous tick-tock pattern.

This dance, with its rhythms and signals and negotiations, is something children learn to expect and participate in as they grow. It is probably tens of thousands of years old.

Starting around the 1960s, researchers began to study conversational rhythms like these. What they found out can tell us much about helping people work with their stories.

### An iceberg model of conversational story

A story told in conversation has a structure somewhat like an iceberg. The story that appears to be floating on the surface of the water is supported by a larger portion below the surface. This structure was first elucidated by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky in the 1960s. My iceberg diagram is a slight modification of their diamond-shaped diagram.



The story proper, what you see above the water, contains three parts.

1. In the *orientation* of the story, the storyteller *sets* the story into context and *settles* questions of *setting*: time, place, characters, location. Whether a story is told just after it happened or centuries later, the orientation serves to define the *ground rules* of how the story is to be understood and interpreted. For example, if the story is a rumor, or true but not widely known, or fictional, this fact is typically *set out* in the orientation.
2. In the *complication* of the story, as they say, things get complicated. Some sort of dilemma or problem presents itself to the story's protagonist, and the protagonist responds. What will happen next? This is where the uncertainty comes in: we *cannot* know what will happen next, but we *want* to know. This is the hook that keeps us listening.

3. In the *resolution* of the story, we find out what *did* happen. The story comes to an end, for good or ill, and things stop happening.

That's a pretty simple structure, right? Now let's look at what lies beneath the waves.

**Abstract: Negotiating permission**

Every story told in conversation exists inside a larger story: the story of what happened when it was told. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, said it this way:

[B]efore us are two events—the event that is narrated in the work and the event of the narration itself (we ourselves participate in the latter, as listeners or readers); these events take place in different times (which are marked by different durations as well) and in different places, but at the same time these two events are indissolubly united in a single but complex event that we might call the work in the totality of all its events....

This larger story begins with an *abstract*, a sort of prelude in which the potential storyteller asks their potential audience for permission to tell a potential story. Abstracts often contain:

- offers to tell a story:
  - Would you like to hear how I won this trophy?
  - Did I ever tell you about the time I ...
  - I've had some experience with that. Want to hear about it?
- formulaic phrases:
  - "Here's one you might not have heard ..."
  - "Once upon a time ..."
  - "Back in the day..."
- past-tense references to story elements:
  - a time frame: "One day I"
  - a memory: "I remember when"
  - an experience: "I survived an avalanche!"
  - an action: "I ate glass once"
  - an event: "The dam broke up"
  - a place: "That park wasn't always a park"
  - a person: "My dad was such a character"
  - a rumor: "I heard about this guy who"

All of these formulas and references seek to *offer advance proof* that the story will be worth hearing while *declaring an intent* to hold the floor. I did the same thing at the start of this chapter, when I said, "One summer evening." I wanted you to know that I was about to tell a story, and I wanted to ask for your patience so I could tell it.

But an abstract is not a one-sided communication. It also involves elements of *negotiated accommodation* between the storyteller and audience. Tellers and audiences work together

to establish the *tellability* of the story: its teller's ability to tell it in the context of the conversation. Negotiations of tellability sound like:

- From the storyteller:
  - restarts: "I—I saw this—this man"
  - repetitions: "Did you hear about—Did you hear—There was this"
  - reframings: "I had this dog—One day I was walking my dog—This was years ago"
- And from the audience:
  - requests: "I'd like to hear about \_\_\_\_."
  - redirections: "Yeah, you told us about that, but you never told us \_\_\_\_."
  - restrictions: "Fine, but keep it short."

During such adjustments the audience may actively attempt to channel the proposed story into a version they prefer over what has been offered. Perhaps they want the story to be more exciting than has been presented, or more on topic, or less revealing. Aspects of negotiation can include tone of voice, body language, and facial expression.

A storyteller must also establish their *telling rights* to the story they want to tell. These can vary depending on the social context. For example, the storyteller might have to have participated in the events of the story to have the right to tell it, or they might need to understand the topic well, or they might need to have a certain status within the group. Sometimes others in the group will insist on their participation (or even domination) in the telling of the story—"I was there too, you know" being a bid to share in the telling.

Let's say you are talking in a conversational group, and you've just launched a story abstract into the conversation. The group could respond by:

1. giving you permission to tell the story:
  - fully, as proposed, without adaptation
  - only if you share it with someone else who also has telling rights
  - with specific alterations related to:
    - safety (okay but don't tell about this)
    - respect (okay but drop the agenda)
    - relevance (okay but keep it on topic)
    - brevity (okay but don't ramble on)
2. splitting into two groups: those who give permission and those who don't
3. roundly refusing to hear the story, even with alterations
4. failing to notice that what you said was a story abstract

If you didn't receive full permission to tell the story unaltered and to everyone, you might:

1. withdraw the story and wait for a better time and place to tell it
2. submit a new abstract for a more noticeable, acceptable, valuable, or appealing story
3. call upon your position in the group to assert your right to speak as you please

4. attempt to tell the story only to those who seem receptive to it (by speaking quietly and turning towards them, at which point they will decide whether to participate in the splitting of the group)
5. forge ahead and tell the story, unchanged, to everyone:
  - not realizing that there will be repercussions
  - realizing but accepting (or not caring) that there will be repercussions because:
    - you think your standing in the group gives you the right to speak as you please
    - you feel a duty to speak up on an important topic
    - you have an unmet need to be heard and understood

I don't know about you, but I can think of times when I've been in each one of these situations, on both sides of the conversation.

### **Evaluation: Comment and annotation**

As a storyteller is telling a story in conversation, they pepper it with *evaluation statements*, meta-comments that prove the continuing relevance of the story. Any part of a story that does not describe a narrated event (a thing that happened in the story) is an evaluation statement.

Say I am telling you a story about my dog being old and tired. When I get to the part where he was too old to walk up the driveway, I say, "I *never* saw a dog so *exhausted* in my *life*." Why did I say that when simply saying "he was very tired" would have sufficed to recount the event? Because the real meaning of that sentence was not "The dog was tired." It was "This story stands out from my entire experience as significant, and it will be significant for you as well, so you should keep listening."

Evaluation statements often include:

- repetitions: "I never—*never*—saw anything like it—*anything*"
- formulaic phrases: "isn't that *something*" or "doesn't that beat *all*"
- comparisons to other experiences: "I *never* saw a dog so *exhausted* in my *life*"
- appeals to authority: "My sister said she'd never seen *anything* like it"
- requests for feedback or support: "Can you *believe* that?"

Evaluation statements are usually spoken with heightened volume, pitch, or tone. Also, the teller's body language may indicate increased intensity.

There are also some forms of evaluation that communicate meaning in how they recount the events of the story.

- *Reported speech* is what happens when a storyteller does some play-acting in the story. They might say something like "And then he comes in and—'Yes sir, we *did* lose your luggage.'" Reported speech provides a you-are-there feeling to the story, and it links a specific event or action to the overall message of the story.
- *Parallel events* are events that are recounted in nearly identical ways but that occur at some distance from each other in the story. Their purpose is to draw the audience's

attention to a comparison the storyteller wants them to make within the story. For example, if I was telling you a story, and at the start I said “I woke up that morning,” and then at the end I said, “I woke up this morning”—with the same tonal emphasis—I would mean, “Pay attention to this comparison; it matters to me.”

- *Tense changes* can also be used to highlight parts of a story the storyteller wants the audience to pay particular attention to. Switching from “she said” to “so she’s saying” provides a sense of immediacy that means “Listen; this is the interesting part.”

When storytelling is going well, audience members pick up on evaluation statements and respond to them. They look attentive or concerned, nod, or say “Oh” or “Right” or “Wow.” When evaluation statements fail to elicit responses, they tend to increase in number, because the reason for their existence—the need for reassurance—increases.

### ***Coda: Back to conversation***

The ending point of a conversational story, called its *coda*, is yet another piece of ritualistic negotiation. In the coda, the storyteller closes the circle of narrated events and ends the narrative event, returning the time frame to the present and the control of the floor to the group. Codas may include:

- formulaic phrases: “And that was that” or “And I lived to tell the tale”
- summaries: “And so you see he never went back”
- morals: “And that’s why you should never burn your bridges”
- justifications for the story’s worth: “And that’s how I became a mechanic”
- references to authority: “My boss said he was amazed”
- requests for feedback or support: “Did you ever hear anything like that?”

Why do we try to prove that our story was worth listening to even after it is over? Because we might want to tell another story sometime.

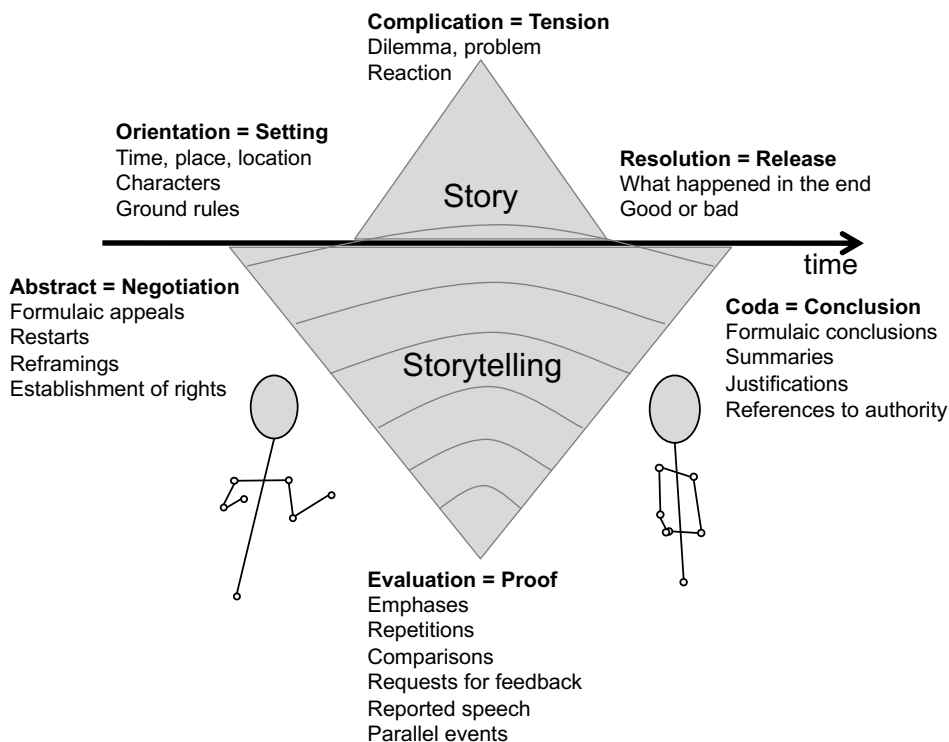
### ***Real talk is messier than this***

The iceberg model is a simplification, of course, and it smooths out many variations in actual storytelling. To quote Neal Norrick in *Conversational Narrative*:

In genuine conversation, stories often surge up and recede again in topical talk. They may consist of fragments produced by separate speakers among extraneous talk and random interruptions, so that it is often difficult to say just where they begin or end. Indeed, it is sometimes impossible to determine the legitimate teller, or even the main teller. Listeners must piece together narrative structures and reconstruct chronologies to make sense of the storytelling they experience.

Still, I have found the model useful in helping me understand the stories people tell and using that understanding to help them share stories with each other.





### Using the iceberg model

To show you how you can use this model to think about the stories you hear and tell in conversation, let's work our way through a little everyday story I recently told to my son.

So I want to tell you what happened last night with Buddy.

Most of my story abstracts are obvious requests or offers, probably because I have spent so many years studying stories that I can no longer tell one without noticing it. No negotiation was necessary in this case, since my son knows that talking to me this year means listening to stories about the puppy.

I threw balls for him in the kitchen, and then I went into the living room and laid down on the couch. Then he tried to play with Brownie and I had to stop him.

That's the orientation of the story. None of its events are important, since they are only what always happens. It's short because I could leave out a lot of context I would have to explain to you, like that I play fetch with Buddy every evening, that our two dogs make a racket when they play, and that my husband was asleep.

So I said, "Look, why don't you go find a toy, and we can play tug."

This is the inciting incident of the story, the event that started its action going. I used a bit of reported speech to draw attention to the fact that the story was starting to move.

So he goes over to the toy bin and starts rummaging around in it. Like, for a long time. And I'm thinking, what's he doing?

This is the story's complication. Notice the switch in tense, which intensifies and focuses the action. Also note the description of my thoughts. This isn't an event in the story; I can't make things happen with my thoughts. It's an evaluation statement intended to draw attention to the uncertainty of the situation.

And then he suddenly comes over with the exact toy we play tug with!

This is the resolution of the story. Note the exclamation point that transcribes my verbal emphasis of the story's final moment.

I can't believe he understood what I said! I thought I'd have to get up in a minute and find him the toy, but he went and got it himself! I guess he's smarter than I thought!

And this is the coda. It is completely unnecessary, and perfectly natural. First I repeated that what Buddy did was surprising; then I told the story all over again in miniature; then I added a lesson, making it clear what the story was *really* about: that Buddy is a great dog.

Also notice that in the coda I switched back to the past tense. This was an indication that the story proper was over and that it was no longer necessary to pay as much attention to what I was saying as it was before.

This was a trivial story, a drop in the ocean of my life, but it still has the unmistakable shape of a story. Personally, I find it fascinating to think that people were probably telling stories with this essential shape tens of thousands of years ago.

Now it's your turn. In your conversations over the next few days, notice a story as it is being told. It can be one you tell or one you hear. Afterwards, write it down as accurately as you can. Then pick it apart. Why did the storyteller say each part of the story? Can you find an abstract, evaluation statements, a coda? What is the storyteller's style?

### **Why all the drama?**

Why on earth do we enclose our stories in such complex layers of ritualized negotiations? Why don't we just tell them as they are?

The best way to protect ourselves while talking to other people is to declare ourselves: to voice an opinion, to build an argument, to defend a position, to attack an opponent. But declaration, while protective, is also isolating. Opinions and arguments are things we hold, not things we are. And as members of a social species, we want to be seen as we truly are. So we want to do more than just declare ourselves. We also want to reveal ourselves. We want to express our deepest feelings, values, and beliefs. But that could be dangerous. It could expose us to ridicule.

The story-sharing ritual exists to resolve this dilemma. Its carefully negotiated dance of connection helps us to reveal our feelings, values, and beliefs in a way that balances protection with revelation.

### ***It's like giving gifts***

The story-sharing ritual resembles another ritual of social negotiation: the exchange of gifts. We wrap gifts in paper, and we wrap stories in offers and requests. Both rituals serve the same purpose, which is to say to each other:

- I have reached out to you. — I see that.
- Reaching out has made me vulnerable. — I understand.
- Please be kind. — I will. Now you do the same for me.

We often surround gift-giving with gestures that communicate a wrapper-like appeal: tentative, do-you-like-it smiles; open, extended hands or arms; “ta-da!” performances in sing-song voices; banners strung across doorways. All of these are social signals that attempt to establish a context of noncritical acceptance. We teach our children to recognize these signals and accept gifts graciously even (or especially) when they are unwanted.

Stories work in the same way, and at two levels.

- An outer layer of wrapping is made up of conversational rituals that surround storytelling and wrap stories in banner-like announcements of intent and preferred response.
- An inner layer is the story itself, which is a package we use to safely disclose feelings, beliefs, and opinions without making claims to truth that would be open to immediate dispute without it.

Most well-brought-up people recognize the double-layered wrappings of a story and respond accordingly. Those who will not let other people tell stories probably don't get many wrapped-up gifts either.

### ***It's like shaking hands***

The custom of shaking hands is another similar ritual, one that is also thousands of years old. You can't hold a weapon in a hand you extend, so offering to shake hands is both an offer and a request. The reason we extend our *right* hand is because most of us would need it to defend ourselves from an attack. The proper response is to extend the same hand, signaling a *temporary mutual acceptance of vulnerability* in order to connect. Similarly, if you and I are talking, and you offer a story abstract and I accept it, we have agreed to a temporary mutual acceptance of vulnerability in order to connect.

All of these social rituals—telling a story, giving a gift, shaking hands—are influenced by the context in which they take place. This is why *no two instances of these rituals are the same*, even when people tell the same stories, give the same gifts, or shake the same hands.

### **More layers of ritual**

The story-sharing ritual has much more to it than the simple explanation I have given you so far. I'll tell you about a few more aspects of story sharing you might see in conversations.

### **Response stories**

People often tell stories in response to other stories, sometimes building long chains of connected stories. Common abstracts for response stories are:

- That reminds me of the time ...
- I remember that \_\_\_\_.
- My \_\_\_\_ was like that too...
- I know where you're coming from. I had a \_\_\_\_ once that ...

Telling a response story says: *I understand your experience. I have had experiences like that too. We are alike. We are connected.*

### **Counter-stories**

A counter-story is simply a response story that expresses a different perspective. People say things like:

- I had an experience with \_\_\_\_ too, but it was different.
- That's funny, I had a different experience with \_\_\_\_.
- My memories of \_\_\_\_ are a little different than yours.
- That's not what I experienced. Back when I was \_\_\_\_, I ...

Counter-stories play a balancing role in social life. They convey, reinforce, and negotiate cultural norms, and they challenge limiting assumptions and break up rigid dogmas.

Telling a counter-story says: *I understand your experience. I had a different experience. We are alike, and we are connected, but we are also diverse, and in our group we respect our similarities and our differences.*

Because of their corrective function, counter-stories tend to be offered with extra tact and accepted with extra conditions. Anyone who offers a counter-story harshly ("That's ridiculous! I never had any problem with \_\_\_\_") is likely to be cut off, asked to reframe their story, or left out of future story exchanges.

### **Co-telling**

When two or more people have telling rights to the same story, the story-sharing ritual expands to allow them to tell the story together. In some closely-knit groups, nearly every story is co-told. Story co-tellers might contribute to the story by saying things like:

- (to the audience) Oh yeah, I remember that moment ...
- (to the audience) We didn't know what to do, honestly.
- (to the other storyteller) You are being too modest! (to the audience) She did an amazing job, I can tell you.
- (to the audience) And then, bam! It was over. (to the other storyteller) Right?
- (to the other storyteller) Let me tell about what happened when we got there. (to the audience) So when we got there ...

Co-told stories strengthen connections among co-tellers even more than story chains do, because co-tellers build the story together.

### **Retelling**

A retelling happens when one person tells another person's story to another person or group. In this case the story abstract might be something like:

- Sarah told me about her experience with \_\_\_\_\_. If you don't mind, Sarah?
- My dad told me about the time he \_\_\_\_\_. I don't think he'd mind me telling you about it.
- Hey Abdul, can I tell them about the time you \_\_\_\_\_?

Notice that all of these abstracts contain a request for (or a statement of) permission. That's because retelling requires the audience to trust the storyteller, knowing that they will retell the story with fidelity and respect.

### **Mistake stories**

Abstracts for mistake stories sound like:

- I'm such an idiot! Last week I ...
- I learned something yesterday. I was ...
- I learned not to \_\_\_\_\_ the hard way. One day ...
- Back in the day, I wouldn't have \_\_\_\_\_, but then I ...

Most of us tell mistake stories only to our closest confidants. But sometimes, a particularly well-knit group can develop a supportive culture that helps its members admit, explore, and learn from their mistakes together.

### **Tall tales**

Every team, family, community, or organization has its over-the-top stories, descriptions of events that are taken seriously but not literally. For example, in a family, the story of how a child said something spectacularly precocious at a tender age might be told and retold many times, even though everyone knows it no longer resembles the literal truth. These stories are full of meaning to those inside the group and deliberately meaningless to those outside it.

### **Sacred stories**

Sacred stories are the stories everyone knows. People refer to them by saying things like:

- She almost pulled a Bruce, but she stopped at the last minute.
- You should have seen it. It was almost like that day at the orchard.
- We had a green-door moment last week, if you know what I mean.

Sacred stories are unique to each group, unknown outside of it, frequently referenced, and rarely told.

### **Parallels with gift-giving**

Each of these types of stories has a counterpart in the world of social gift giving.

These stories	are like
Response stories	Reciprocal gift exchanges (on birthdays and holidays)
Counter-stories	Corrective or provocative gifts (meant to convey messages)
Co-told stories	People “going together” on a gift to a third person
Retold stories	“Passing on” a portion of a large gift (perhaps of food) to others (requires the permission of the original gift-giver)
Mistake stories	Home-made gifts (which receivers are obligated to accept and appreciate despite their flaws)
Tall tales	Inside-joke gifts (meaningful inside the group; meaningless outside it)
Sacred stories	Gifts everyone owns and proudly displays

## Storywatching

Once you know how to recognize the social rituals of story sharing, you will start to notice them happening around you. You’ll be talking with friends and think to yourself, “Hey, this is a co-telling!” Or you’ll be in a busy restaurant and overhear an abstract for a mistake story. Or you’ll be at a work meeting and see a chain of response stories taking shape.

Learning about story sharing is like learning about birds. Every birdwatcher goes from hearing a bird and thinking “bird” to hearing a bird and thinking “hermit thrush.” In the same way, every storywatcher goes from hearing a conversation and thinking “they’re talking” to hearing a conversation and thinking “the abstract was accepted as reframed.”

After you have been noticing story-sharing rituals for a while, you will start to think about *what they mean* about your team, family, community, or organization. This is like starting to think about what hearing a bird in a particular place (and not elsewhere) means about your local ecosystem.

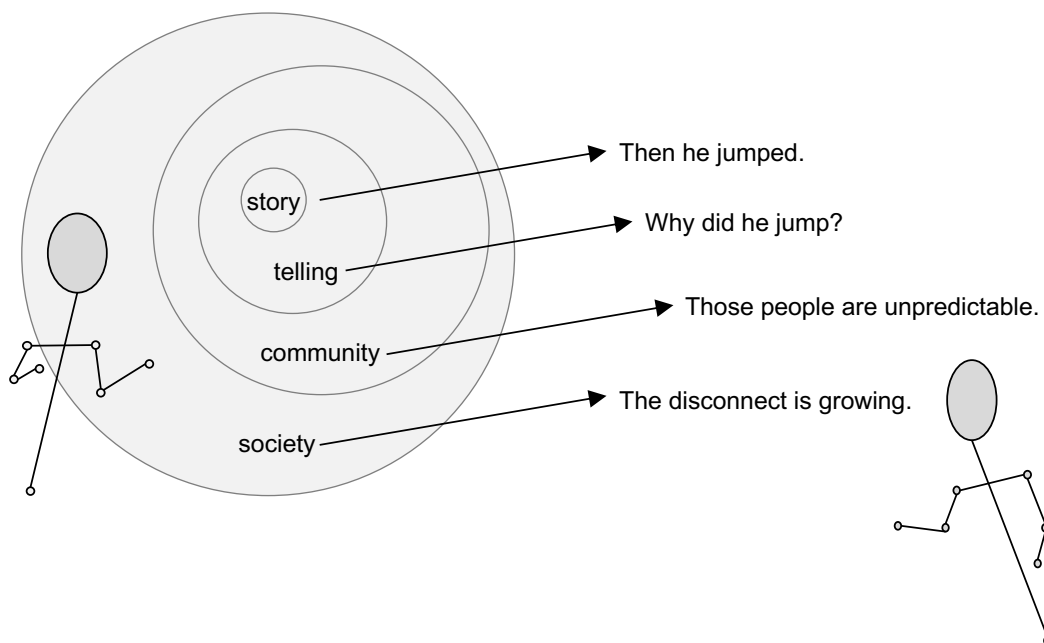
After you’ve been thinking about meaning for a while, you will start to think about *what you can do* to support healthy story sharing in your team, family, community, or organization. This is like thinking about where you could build nest boxes to help endangered bird species.

Each one of these stages builds on the previous ones. If you try to jump directly into taking action, you’ll probably make things worse. So if you want to support story sharing in your team, family, community, or organization, take the time to listen to it and learn what it’s like before you try to change it.

## Stories in stories

Like a ripple in a pond, every story is part of a nested series of larger stories. The first larger story is the telling of the story, as we have explored. But several layers of stories ripple into

the storyteller's group, family, community, or organization, and on to the entire society and world.



A simple example will prove my point. One of my favorite stories from my childhood is from when I was exactly six years old. The neighbor kid started squashing a worm, and I pulled her away, shouting, “That worm has as much right to live as you do!”

I’ve thought about that story for a long time. Why do I remember it in so much detail—the location, the exact words, the fact that I was exactly six years old? For a long time I told myself that it was important because it said something about who I was deep down.

Many years later, when my son was a toddler, I bought all the Dr. Seuss books, including my all-time favorite *Horton Hears a Who!* So one day, I sat down with my son and excitedly read the story of Horton to him for the very first time. And I came across these lines:

Please don’t harm all my little folks, who  
Have as much right to live as us bigger folks do!

In that moment I realized that my memorable six-year-old outburst was not my own unique truth. I was quoting *Horton Hears a Who!* A new sense of a larger story made me want to read more about Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel), why he wrote his books, and what impact they had on society. So I went looking, and I found out that many of Geisel’s books were themselves connected to even larger stories about the world he wrote them in.

Geisel wrote *Horton Hears a Who!* as an allegory for the American internment of Japanese-Americans and the Hiroshima bombing and subsequent occupation in Japan—and as an apology for supporting the internment during the war. He dedicated the book to a Japanese friend he met while touring Japan after the war. I didn’t know any of that when I was six, but I did absorb the book’s message: that everyone deserves respect.

Apparently, so did many other children. As Charles Cohen recounts in his book *The Seuss, the Whole Seuss and Nothing But the Seuss*:

The next time you're in a discussion about intolerance, see how many people cite a childhood encounter with *The Sneetches and Other Stories* or *Horton Hears a Who!* as the first time they learned about it. Ted's [Geisel's] long maturation process helped him surmount the attitudes of his day to become a pioneer in the fight for equality, so that children would grow up already knowing what it took him several decades to recognize.

I used to think a story was like a ripple in a pond. Now I think stories are like *rain* on a pond. Every story has its own story, yes, but every story also interacts with other stories, which have their own stories, and it all gets mixed together into an impressionistic wash—until a new story drops into the mix, and the intermingling and interacting starts up all over again.

## Stories in society

Now we have arrived at the last stop in our tour: a global view of stories as they live and breathe in human society.

The understanding I have developed of stories in society is not the same understanding another person might have developed. It has a story of its own, you could say. I was originally an ecologist and evolutionary biologist; so when I came to work with stories, I brought metaphors from those fields to work with me. The best way I know to explain stories in society is to use three ecological metaphors, and I think you will just have to excuse my not knowing how else to explain it. The metaphors relate stories to soil seed banks, biodiversity, and ecological cycles.

### Banks of seeds and stories

Stories are like seeds in that they condense complex understandings and perspectives into packages that can be transmitted and stored, then retrieved from storage, planted, and germinated again in the fertile soil of receptive minds. Also, in the same way that seeds are living beings, stories grow and change over time.

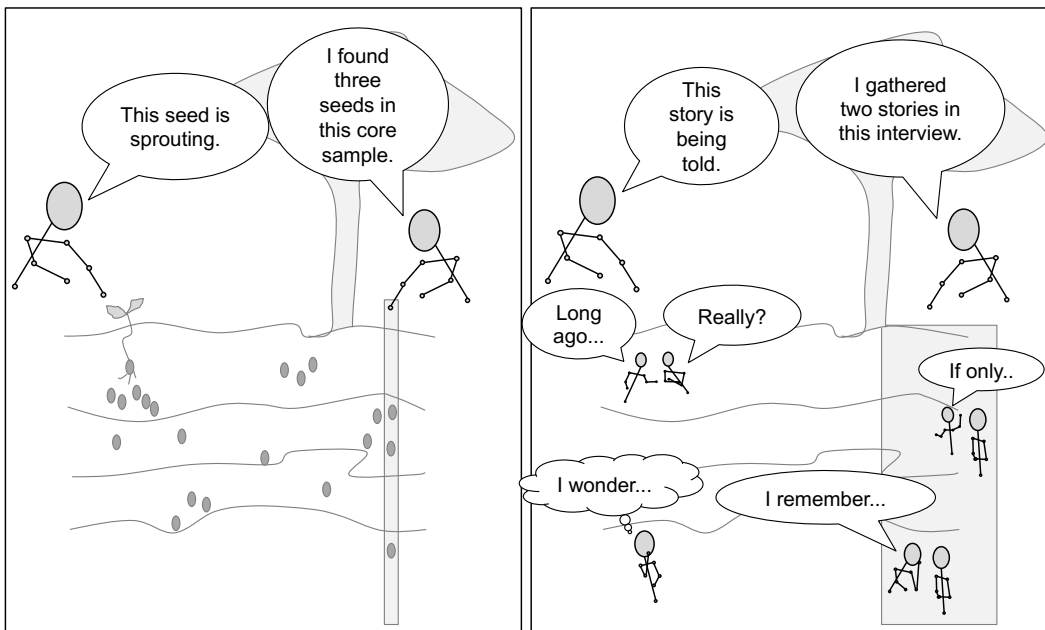
In an ecosystem, the *soil seed bank* is the body of seeds present in the soil. In a human society, the *memory story bank* is the body of stories present in the minds of those who are alive and recorded by those who came before them.

The soil seed bank is constantly being *updated* by new seeds falling and being churned deep into the soil by water percolation, decomposition, and disturbances such as falling trees. As the soil churns, old seeds come to the surface and germinate. Likewise, the memory story bank is constantly being updated by new stories being told and churning deep into minds by the percolation of ideas, the decomposition of forgetting, and disturbances such as relocations and deaths. As minds reflect, old stories come to the surface and are told and heard again. Like a message hidden deep inside an ancient structure, a story may lie untouched for thousands of years, only to reemerge and take root in new minds.



Soil seed banks are like *museums* of the plant community, places where dormant organisms are held in memory and safety for future growth and for recovery after natural disasters. Memory story banks are like museums of the human community, places where dormant stories are held in memory and safety for future understanding and for recovery after social disasters. What will be needed, by whom, when, and for what purpose cannot be predicted, so the preservation of biodiversity—of narrative diversity—is paramount.

A soil seed bank is a *reflection* of what is going on above the soil. Studying it can reveal patterns that give us insights into the biological community and its unique characteristics and needs. It can give us a glimpse into the past and future of the ecosystem. Likewise, a memory story bank is a reflection of what is going on in the world of human endeavor. Studying it can reveal patterns that give us insights into the human community and its unique characteristics and needs. It can give us a glimpse into the past and future of the community.



Large-scale commercial agriculture produces short-term vigor, but reduces *diversity* in the soil seed bank. This *impoverishes* the system and reduces its ability to help the plant community survive and recover from catastrophe. Similarly, large-scale commercial storytelling produces short-term entertainment (and even the occasional insight), but reduces diversity in the memory story bank. This impoverishes the system and reduces its ability to help the human community survive and recover from catastrophe. Overall, the modern age has been marked by a decline in biological, agricultural, and narrative diversity.

Some of the seeds in the soil seed bank are of *keystone species*, whose impact on the community's diversity and resilience is disproportional to their abundance. Similarly, *sacred stories* have a disproportional impact on a human community's diversity and resilience. Neither keystone species nor sacred stories can be detected in advance or from afar; but if either is removed from the community, the loss can have devastating effects.

In the soil seed bank, *key species* sometimes *appear* to be important because they dominate the community in number or visibility. For example, large or numerous animals and plants can seem to define an ecological community. But this is often an illusion. The removal of key species does not damage community resilience as strongly as does the removal of keystone species. The same pattern holds for *dominant stories* in the memory seed bank. The discovery and preservation of keystone species and sacred stories is a goal of conservation efforts in nature and in human life.

## **Biodiversity and narrative diversity**

What do ecologists do when faced with a dangerous loss of biodiversity? I can think of three things. Each has a corresponding activity that is also carried out by story workers.

### ***Discovery***

Ecologists map the presence and absence of biodiversity in order to understand how best to strengthen it. Global maps of biodiversity, extinction risks, human impacts on the natural world, and the impacts of climate change help people decide where resources for study and action should be focused. Decision makers use such maps to coordinate cooperative efforts and to arrive at mutually acceptable plans for restorative action.

In the same way, story workers help communities or organizations build maps of meaning using collected stories that reveal hotspots of conflict, zones of complacency, opportunities for exploration, and other features. Maps of meaning differ from ecological maps in that they integrate many perspectives on sometimes contentious issues; but their utility is similar. The creation of such a map is often a turning point in story work because it creates a new language people can use to discuss issues in a negotiated framework.

### ***Sensemaking***

Based on the maps they have constructed, ecologists make sense of what is going on in the natural world. They look for ways to find a sustainable balance between human activity and natural abundance in order to provide recommendations to policy-makers and help them make better long-term decisions.

One of the pieces of work in this area I recall from my ecology days was research done on wildlife corridors, or passages between patches of viable habitat. Such corridors are critical to the preservation of biodiversity in the patchwork of wild places between human habitations. Natural corridors are both a requirement of biodiversity and an opportunity to support it, which is why their discovery was such a boon to the field of ecology.

In the same way, story workers use the stories they have gathered to make sense of what is going on in a team, family, community, or organization. They look for ways to find sustainable balances among the various forces, intentional and unplanned, that affect the stories that are told and heard. The sensemaking process often reveals opportunities that, like wildlife corridors, can preserve narrative diversity in the face of potentially damaging forces such as corporate mergers or waves of immigration.

## **Support**

Ecologists boost biodiversity by creating and maintaining *seed banks*, artificially created collections that preserve diversity to replenish depleted soil seed banks. One of the challenges in managing seed banks is the need to continually regrow plants in order to maintain the viability of the stored seeds. In particular, maintaining the endosperm layer that surrounds the seed embryo, which provides sustenance to keep the dormant seed alive and able to germinate, can be difficult. But seeds whose endosperm is lost cannot survive.

In the same way, story workers boost narrative diversity by creating and maintaining *story banks*, artificially created collections that preserve diversity to replenish depleted memory story banks. One of the challenges in managing story banks is the need to continually retell stories in order to maintain the viability of the stored stories. In particular, maintaining the layer of context that surrounds the story embryo, which provides memorability to keep the dormant story alive and able to be told, can be difficult. But stories whose context is lost cannot survive with their meaning intact.

## **Ecological and narrative cycles**

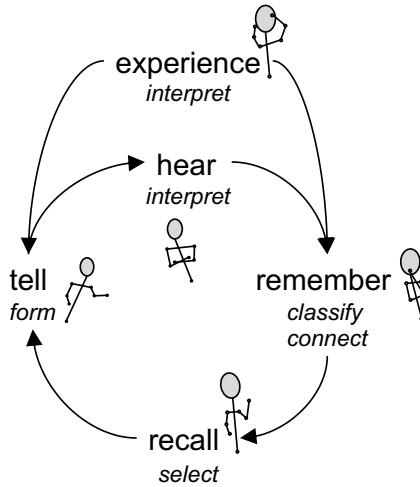
Ecologists study how energy and nutrients move around in ecosystems. Plants seek out sunlight and use photosynthesis to transform it into plant matter; herbivores transform plant matter into animal matter; carnivores turn one animal into another; and decomposers turn everything into the nutrients plants need to seek out sunlight and build their photosynthetic apparatus. When I think of this I always picture one of those pinwheel fireworks, the ones in which many little pulses of energy combine to turn a huge wheel.

In a similar way, every time we experience a meaningful event or thought or feeling, a new story enters into the *narrative cycle*. When this happens, we experience a little pulse of *narrative energy*, an instinct to tell someone what happened. So we look for an audience, just like a plant grows toward the light. If we can find an audience, we can transform the experience into a story, and the story enters the narrative cycle at the orbit of our family or group. If we can't find anyone to tell the story to, we might still tell it to ourselves, and it might still enter into the narrative cycle, but it will stay within our own private orbit.

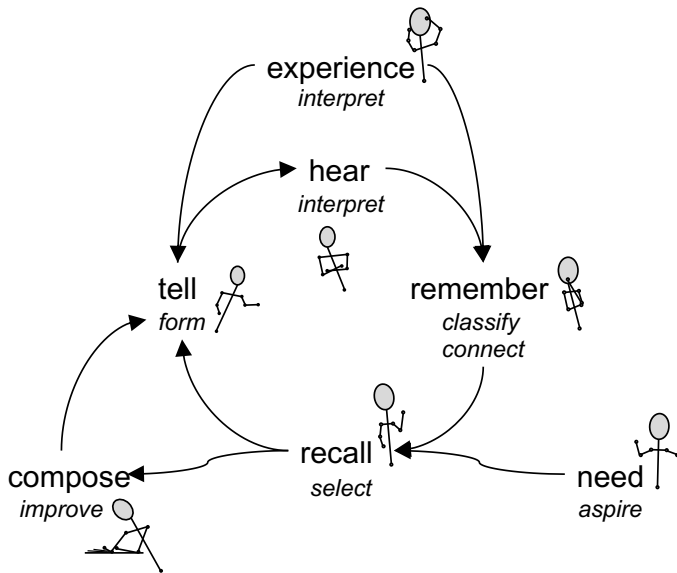
There are many orbits within the narrative cycle, from individual to group to community, society, and epoch, and stories move among them like energy and nutrients move among species in an ecosystem.

When we place a story into memory, we also classify it and connect it to other stories; and this process continues as our thoughts churn. In effect, we take out our stories, retell them to ourselves, and put them back into our memories over and over as we reflect on our experiences. But recall involves selection, which usually has a purpose, though we may not always realize it. As we recall and retell our stories, they take on stable forms, though they can change again when new experiences lead to new selections.

There are other, smaller pulses of narrative energy as well, like echoes of that first instinct to tell a story. The second is when a person hears a story, and the third is when a person is reminded of a story. In both of these moments they might experience a little pulse of motivation to tell the story to someone.



When a person (or group) discovers a need to tell a story, they feel a pulse of narrative energy that helps them craft and tell a compelling story, drawing from the experiences and stories in their memory. Whoever they tell the story to might feel a similar pulse of energy that causes them to retell the story (and other stories it brings to mind) to others.



When we tell purposeful stories, to inform or persuade or entertain, we act like “ecosystem engineers,” those animals that influence the ecosystem around them to a disproportionate extent. A purposeful story is like a beaver dam in that it affects the flow of stories in a larger area than a casually-told story.

All of these little pulses of energy create eddies of movement in the narrative cycle. Sometimes a story will take on a life of its own and swirl about with great energy for a time, rippling out into the largest orbits of the narrative cycle and creating a *narrative wave* that reverberates for a generation.

But there can also be pockets of stillness in the narrative cycle. Sometimes people have experiences that they tell no stories about, even to themselves. This can happen because the experience is painful, but it can also happen because the experience doesn't seem important at the time. Stories can hide in the quiet places of the narrative cycle, only to rise to relevance decades later when new narrative waves bring them to mind.

Notice that I did not include *events* in the narrative cycle. Not all events create experiences, and not all experiences require events. For example, a person might slowly come to realize that their memory is not what it was. Or their family might come to realize *why* their memory is not what it was. Or a scientist might come to realize why the memory of so many people is not what it was. All of these people might tell stories about these experiences, but the stories would contain few specific events.

Throughout history, people called *fabulists* have held a special place in the narrative cycle. They package and repackage stories from the past and present, always introducing some of their own unique ideas, but also preserving and highlighting (replanting, you could say) the stories they draw from the cycle itself. Aesop was a fabulist (if he existed), as were Vishnu Sharma, Alexander Afanasyev, Andrew Lang, and many others. The Wikipedia page on "fabulists" lists 67 people, and the page on "Collectors of fairy tales" lists 100. Jack Zipes and Jan Harold Brunvand are a few fabulists of recent years.

Also, some of the creators of the commercially-produced stories we talk about today (like *Star Wars* and Disney movies) are fabulists in that they resurface ancient folk tales and reinterpret them for contemporary society. For example, the tale of the sorcerer's apprentice was first written down two thousand years ago, and the tale of beauty and the beast might be thousands of years older than that. Linguistic analyses have suggested that the tale of the blacksmith who outwits the devil may have been told as early as the Bronze Age, but it keeps turning up in the stories we tell and hear today.

In other words, we churn our stories at the largest orbits of the narrative cycle, just as we churn our own stories in our own minds.



## Chapter 5

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# Stories in Communities and Organizations

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In the previous chapter we looked at stories in conversation and in society. But what role do stories play in communities and organizations? What is the function of telling and listening to stories in these groups?

### Functions of story sharing

The sociological literature includes many explorations on these topics, from the 1980s to the present. My reading of that literature, along with my own experiences helping people working with their stories, has led me to build a conceptual model with four related functions of stories in communities and organizations.

	In the short term	In the long term
Preservation	People share stories to perpetually renegotiate their social contract, preserving the boundary between what is and is not acceptable.	People share stories to build and maintain a shared identity, preserving the boundary between what lies inside and outside the community.
Adaptation	People share stories to make sense of situations, solve problems, come to decisions, and work towards common goals.	People share stories to play with possibility, combining their imaginations to help the community adapt to changing conditions.

Let's go over each of these functions. Within each one, I'll summarize some related research.

## Negotiating a social contract

People share stories in communities and organizations to negotiate the unwritten rules of the contract that binds them. Edgar Schein calls these unwritten rules “shared basic assumptions,” and Charles Perrow calls them “third-order controls” (after direct and procedural controls). They answer questions like:

- what members can and cannot do
- what is fair and just
- what happens when the social contract is broken
- who gets to decide all of these things

Story sharing brings people together, generating commitment and solidarity in a process Mary Boyce, in a 1995 paper, called *collective centering*. At the same time, it *decenters* the community or organization, challenging it to find ways to accommodate and appreciate multiple perspectives without falling apart.

People also share stories to *translate* the social contract into concrete examples they can easily remember and apply to everyday situations. For example, stories are used to:

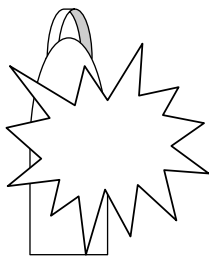
- bring new members up to speed on what is expected of them
- warn members who are in danger of violating the social contract
- mediate between views of “the way things are” in ambiguous areas
- renegotiate rules that were once simple but have become complex

### **Rehearsing reality**

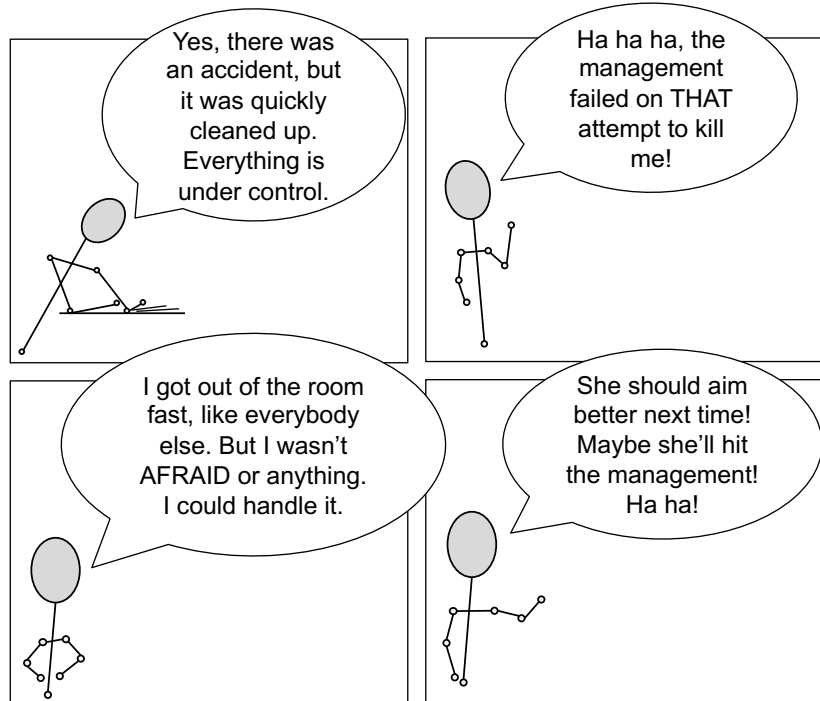
Yiannis Gabriel, in a seminal 1995 paper called “The unmanaged organization,” gives an account of an accident in which a fire extinguisher exploded in a research laboratory. He collected four unsolicited, surprisingly different accounts of the same incident:

- Raymond, a manager, downplayed the incident, giving only a “detached description emphasizing the material damage.” He “did not invest the events with any emotion or symbolic significance.”
- Maureen, the employee who had been closest to the fire extinguisher, half-seriously presented the incident as a “personal attack” on her by the management. “They failed on that attempt to kill me!” she said. Her joking account of the incident cast her supervisors in the role of the story’s villain.
- Chris wanted to make it clear that he was not frightened during the event: “I realized that everyone was trying to get out of the room, so I thought ‘I better go then.’” His account “cast himself in contrast to the others, in the role of a person who is not easily rattled or panic-stricken.”
- Peter jokingly represented the event as a failed opportunity to inflict damage “upstairs” (on the management). In Peter’s account, Maureen was cast as an “agent of retribution” who should “aim better” next time.





A fire extinguisher exploded in a research laboratory.



In each of these recountings, members of the organization used the story as a vehicle to negotiate elements of power and control: the first and third in an assertion of control, and the second and fourth in jokes about the abuse or challenge of power. Also, in all of the stories but the first, elements of fantasy came into play. Says Gabriel:

Each [story] reveals a different way of constituting the subject, whether as hero, as heroic survivor or as victim. Each narrative highlights the plasticity of turning every-day experience into meaningful stories. In doing so, the storytellers neither accept nor reject 'reality'. Instead, they seek to mould it, shape it and infuse it with meaning, each in a distinct and individual way.

By telling stories, people don't just convey rules and assumptions; they rehearse, explore, perform, and refine them. There is an interplay between communication and negotiation in story sharing: neither happens without the other. Even the simplest "how we do things around here" story told to an outsider or newcomer contains a nugget of renegotiation as the story is retold anew.

### Creating shared meaning

People who live and work together need more than just a social contract; they need a *reason* to live and work together. Of course, people have to live somewhere, and most people work for money. But few people live or work entirely by accident or misfortune. Most people have made at least some choices in where and how they live and make money. People use stories to make those choices, and to rehearse, explore, perform, and refine them. If stories about the social contract negotiate what we do and don't do, stories about meaning and purpose negotiate what we are and are not.

A useful example of creating shared meaning is the work of Joanne Martin and her colleagues, who (in a classic 1983 paper called “The Uniqueness Paradox in Organizational Stories”) collected commonly shared stories from a variety of organizations. Based on this collection, they identified seven types of stories commonly found in organizations. While their seven story types negotiate behavioral norms, they also go further into negotiating the collective identity of each organization.

The seven types of stories Martin and her colleagues found in their collection explored the following questions. I’ll explain the first two in detail and briefly mention the rest.

***What do I do when a higher status person breaks a rule?***

In these stories, a high-ranking executive attempts to do something that is against a company rule (usually of safety or security). An employee of low status confronts the executive, demanding that they follow the rule. The executive complies (or does not), and the rule is strengthened (or weakened) as a result.

At IBM, for example, a 22-year-old employee confronted Thomas Watson, Jr., “the intimidating chairman of IBM’s board,” because he did not have the “green badge” required to enter a security area. Martin et al. tell the rest of the story thus.

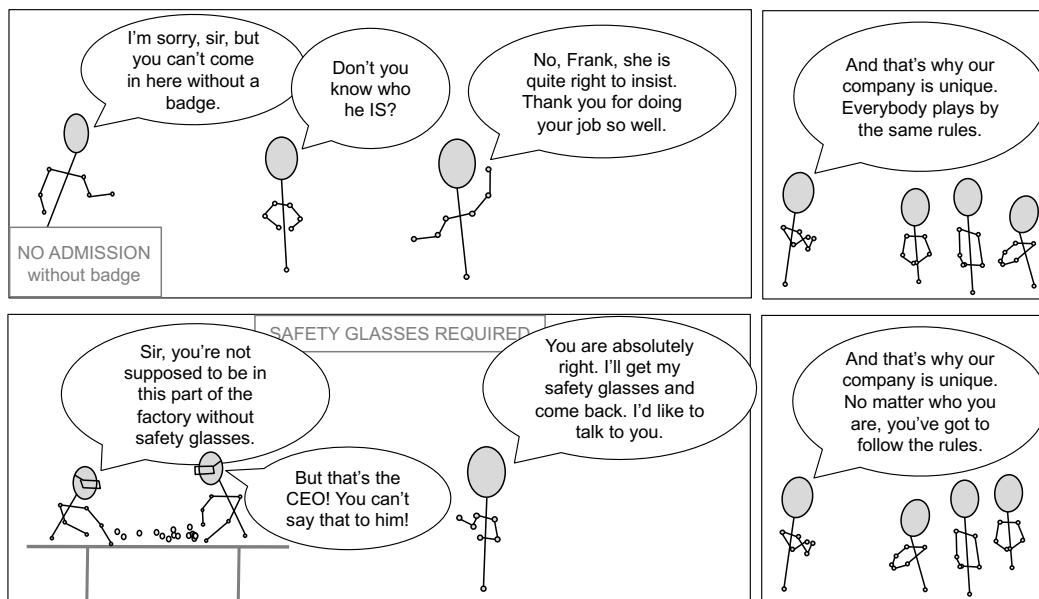
“I was trembling in my uniform, which was far too big,” she recalled. “It hid my shakes but not my voice. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said to him. I knew who he was all right. ‘You cannot enter. Your admittance is not recognized.’ That’s what we were supposed to say.”

The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable possibilities. ‘Don’t you know who he is?’ Someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge.

A similar story was collected from a plant supervisor at another company. Again an executive wanted to enter an area, and again he was forbidden to do so by a low-status employee.

He leaned over one of the assembly line workers and asked her how things were going. She interrupted him abruptly and said firmly, ‘I’m sorry, but you can’t come in this area without your safety glasses.’ He apologized, red with embarrassment, went back to get his safety glasses, and then came back and complimented her on her guts.

In each case, say Martin et al, “The inequality in power sets up a tension: Will the high status person pull rank and be angry at the attempt to enforce the rules?” In most stories the rule-breaker does not pull rank; but in some organizations the opposite story is told.



### ***Is the big boss human?***

In these stories, a high-ranking executive is presented with an opportunity to perform a “status-equalization act,” such as answering a telephone or fixing a broken machine. The executive does or does not “abrogate his/her high status temporarily by exhibiting ‘human’ qualities.” Here is a representative story from the collection:

Charles Brown was the chief executive officer at Illinois Bell during the late 1960's. A bad strike had crippled the organization, as craftspeople refused to work for several months. On the weekends, ‘Charlie,’ as he was known, would grab some tools, and start repairing telephones. One weekend, the country club where he belonged called with a complaint about a broken telephone. ‘Without batting an eyelash,’ or changing his clothes, Charlie went out and fixed the country club telephone.

The story’s most important elements are that Charlie didn’t stop to change his clothes—that is, he didn’t demand or expect special treatment—and that he pitched in “without batting an eyelash,” not questioning the unwritten rule of equality among all Illinois Bell employees. These elements mark the story as a negotiation device.

The authors’ full list of story types was as follows.

- Equality: questions of status, power, and rights
  - What do I do when a higher status person breaks a rule?
  - Is the big boss human?
  - Can the little person rise to the top?
- Security: the safety of one’s position in varying circumstances
  - Will I get fired?
  - Will the organization help me when I have to move?

- How will the boss react to mistakes?
- Control over decision making
  - How will the organization deal with obstacles?

By telling stories that explore these common themes of organizational life, people were engaged in building a larger shared story about what sort of organization they belonged to (and whether they wanted to belong to it).

The paradox of the article's title is that even though these seven story types are common across many organizations, the stories themselves are often used as proof that a particular organization is unique. Whether the stories are positive or negative, they portray the organization as uniquely the best or worst of all possible organizations. Say Martin et al.:

[T]hese attributions endow the institution with uniqueness, enabling employees to identify with a benevolent organization or to distance themselves from a less desirable institution.

## Meeting challenges

Stories help communities and organizations meet ongoing challenges by storing and transferring knowledge, making sense of situations, solving problems, and making decisions.

In a 1991 study, David Boje studied organizational storytelling in over 100 hours of conversations recorded at an office-supply distribution firm. He identified several functional patterns in the stories he heard. For example:

- A *series* of stories might be told in which a common theme is repeated, "as a way to draw parallels between two patterns."
- A *composite* story might grow up around a central theme based on the experiences of multiple tellers; thus "an analysis of the story is embedded in the telling."
- A *predictive* story might feature an analogy from the past replayed as a possible future, which "allows people to predict what may happen if a similar incident should recur."
- A *word on the street* story might "leak" a rumor (possibly one everyone already knows) to explore forces in play. "Referencing how the story has been leaked," says Boje, "adds credibility to the performance."

From his observations, Boje concluded that:

These stakeholders . . . performed stories not only to make sense of their setting but to negotiate alternative interpretations and to accommodate new precedents for decision and action. They tell stories about the past, present, and future to make sense of and manage their struggles with their environment.

Much of the rest of this book will be about helping people improve their capacity to support the strength and utility of functional patterns such as these.

## Playing with possibility

Stories revitalize, challenge, and motivate people in communities and organizations. They help them conduct what-if experiments, create new visions of hoped-for futures, process painful events, and play with the uncertainties and potentials of collective life.


The paper I want to tell you about on this topic has been widely cited as proof that stories have the power to persuade. In the 1983 paper, called “Truth or Corporate Propaganda: The Value of a Good War Story,” Joanne Martin and Melanie Powers describe a two-part study they carried out on perceptions of stories in comparison to other information.

In their first experiment, Martin and Powers showed people an advertisement for a fictional California winery. The advertisement claimed that the winery “used many of the same excellent winemaking techniques as used in the famed Chablis region of France, thus producing California wine as fine as French chablis.” Accompanying each advertisement was a personal story about the founder of the winery, a table of statistics comparing the winery with those of the Chablis region, or a combination of both. They then asked the subjects to indicate to what extent they believed the advertisement’s claim.

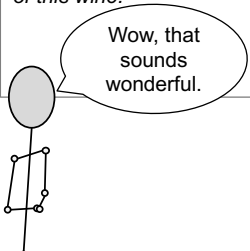
Subjects who read *only* the story “were significantly more likely to believe that the advertisement was truthful . . . and to distort their memory of the policy statement, in a direction favorable to the winery.”

story only

We produce California wine as fine as French Chablis.




*I promised my father that someday I would make a California wine using the traditional techniques of his native Chablis. My father would have been proud of this wine.*

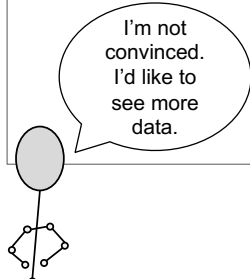


statistics only

We produce California wine as fine as French Chablis.

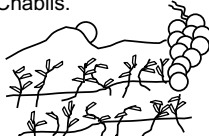


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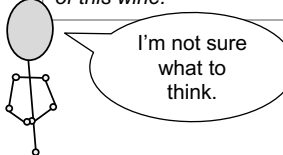
statistics and story

We produce California wine as fine as French Chablis.



	CA	FR
Temp	22	23
Humid	49	54

*I promised my father that someday I would make a California wine using the traditional techniques of his native Chablis. My father would have been proud of this wine.*

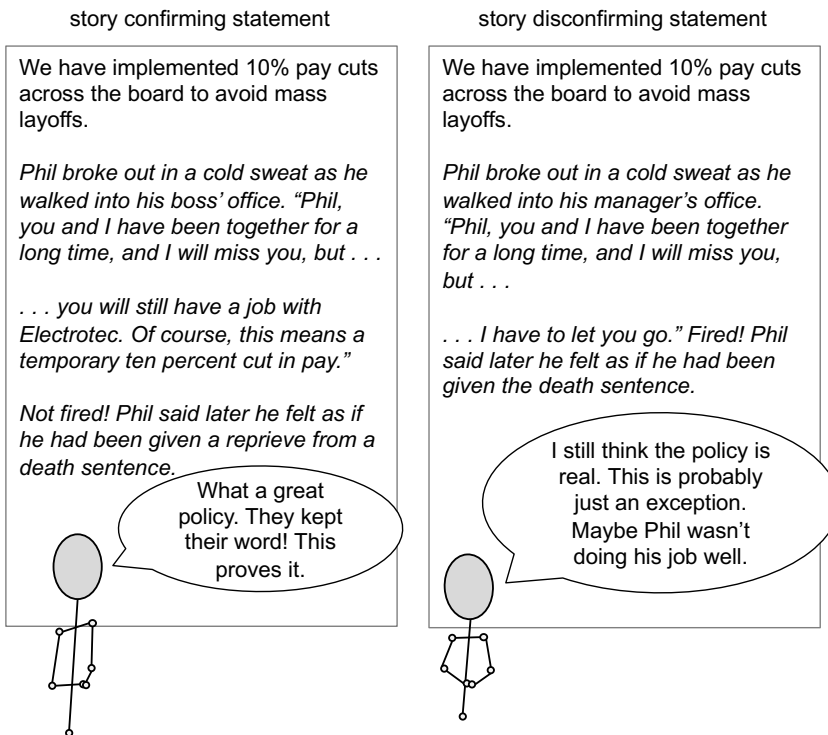


In their second experiment, Martin and Powers again showed people a claim accompanied by a story, a table of statistics, or a combination of both. The scenario this time was Alan Wilkins’ “nine-day fortnight” story (see page 450), in which managers avoided layoffs by

asking everyone in the company (including themselves) to take a cut in pay and work time. The claim was that the policy had actually been put into place.

For this second experiment, the researchers set up a second dimension of variation. Some of the stories and statistics reinforced the claim (describing across-the-board pay cuts and no layoffs), and some contradicted it (describing no pay cuts and mass layoffs).

People who read the confirming story more strongly believed the claim than people who read the confirming statistics. However, when the story *contradicted* the claim, it was dismissed “as the single exception to the general rule,” and the statistical information held more persuasive power. Said Martin and Powers, “The results of the second experiment suggest that if a story is to have strong impact, it must be congruent with previously available information.”



The reason I find this paper fascinating is that it points to the contextual boundedness of story-based play. People share stories to play with possibility in uncertain situations. Within the game, they follow the rules of the game, but outside the game—when the situation is *not* uncertain—different rules apply. You might think such a game would be too limited to be powerful; but it is powerful *because* it is limited. The power of bounded narrative exploration helps communities and organizations prepare for an uncertain future.

## Healthy and unhealthy story sharing

Because story sharing helps people do all of the things I described above, communities and organizations in which people regularly share stories are more likely to be good places

to live and work. However, just the fact that people share stories is not enough. Not all by itself. In fact, it could even be a problem.

This is the paradox of story sharing: for every positive thing you can say about it, the opposite is also true.

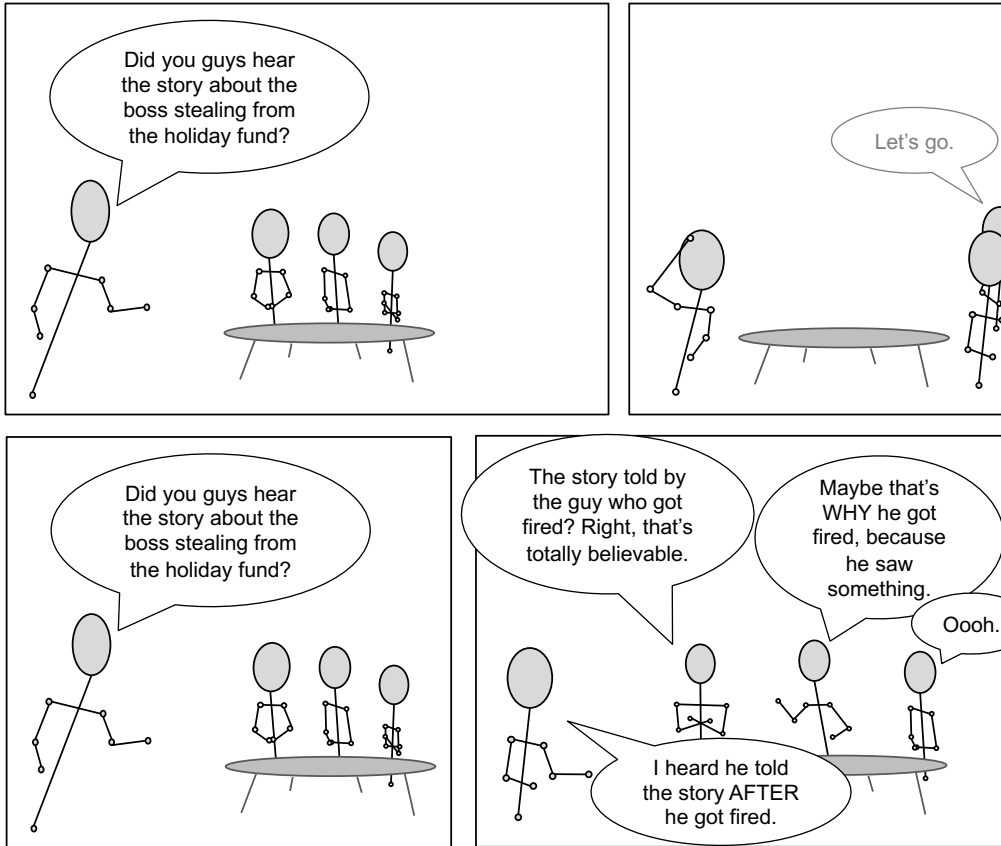
Stories can	And stories can
tell the truth	lie
harm	help
connect	divide
mislead	enlighten
reveal	conceal

Stories are like fire, which warms and burns. Working with stories, like working with fire, requires that we pay attention to both sides of the picture.

So if you want to help a community or organization share stories, *don't just help them share stories*. Help them build a healthy story-sharing culture.

In a healthy story-sharing culture	In an unhealthy story-sharing culture
Sharing stories is familiar, comfortable, enjoyable, and productive.	Sharing stories is strange, uncomfortable, unpleasant, and counter-productive.
Everyone gets to tell stories, but nobody gets to tell stories without negotiating.	Only some people get to tell stories, and only some people have to negotiate.
Everyone gets to finish their stories, and everyone has the right to speak up while a story is being told.	Some stories cannot be finished, and some stories cannot be interrupted.

I can imagine two communities or organizations in which people share an equal number of stories in a given period of time, but the nature and dynamics of the story sharing are as described in these two columns. The impact of story sharing in these communities or organizations would be vastly different as well. On the left it would support all of the story-sharing functions I described in the previous pages, and on the right it would destroy the community's or organization's collective ability to support those functions.



The things people use story sharing to do are also different in healthy and unhealthy story-sharing cultures.

In a healthy story-sharing culture	In an unhealthy story-sharing culture
People use stories to account for their actions, to judge others, and to be judged, with fairness and respect.	Stories have no connection to accountability, or they are used without fairness and respect, or they are used to judge some people and not others.
People use stories to make wise decisions, both individually and collectively.	People don't use stories to make decisions, or they use them to justify unfair or unwise decisions.
Everyone knows which stories to tell when, where, and to whom.	People don't know which stories to tell when, where, and to whom, and story-sharing attempts often end badly.
Everyone knows the sacred stories that hold the group together.	The group has no sacred stories, or multiple sets of sacred stories divide the group.



People in healthy and unhealthy story-sharing cultures tell the same sorts of stories in conversation, but they tell them for different reasons.

	In a healthy story-sharing culture	In an unhealthy story-sharing culture
Response stories are used for	empathetic connection	put-downs and one-upmanship
Counter-stories serve to	negotiate norms and challenge assumptions	silence those who disagree
Co-tellings and re-tellings are used to	build connections	seize control
Mistake stories are used for	mutual support	power plays
Tall tales are used to	play with possibility and have fun together	twist stories to suit purposes
Sacred stories are used to	crystallize shared knowledge and beliefs	maintain dogmas

And of course, elements of function and dysfunction may be present at the same time. Waves of opposing forces may intermingle and interact, pushing the group both towards and away from healthy story sharing.

## Places and times for story sharing

Story sharing doesn't happen in every conversation. It only happens—well, it happens a lot more—when three elements are present: time, stability, and permission.

### What people need to share stories

#### *Time to spare*

A story-sharing conversation has a flexible rhythm to it, with relatively long periods of time in which one person is talking and everyone else is listening. When people are busy or in a hurry, they can't afford that much flexibility, so they don't feel comfortable telling or listening to stories.

You can tell when people think they don't have the time to share stories. Someone will start to tell a story, or someone will ask a question whose answer would normally be a story, and the people around them will say, "Why don't we talk about that later?"

#### *A stable audience*

When people tell stories, they frame them to suit the conversational contexts in which they find themselves. For example, a story you tell about a storm might differ when you

tell it to a friend, a relative, a work colleague, or a stranger. It's hard to frame a story to suit a moving target, so when people are in situations in which conversational groups are quickly forming and dissolving, most people put off telling stories until they can be sure that they will be talking to the same audience from the start to the end of the story.

That's why after-parties are so comfortable: the main party is over, random people have stopped coming and going, and those who are left around the campfire or coffee table are going to stay where they are for a while. So it's possible to frame a story to suit them.

### ***A feeling of permission***

In our lives we go through many scripted activities, times when we are supposed to be doing specific things, like following a meeting agenda, listening to a presentation, buying groceries, filling out a form, seeing a doctor, cheering on a sports team, or watching a play. In most of these scripted activities, even if there is plenty of *time* to tell a story, we don't do it because it isn't part of our script for the activity.

For example, you wouldn't tell a long, winding story to a waiter in a restaurant. It would seem out of place, even rude. You might be able to *refer* to a story, and if you were lonely, you might try to squeeze a story into a single sentence. But you wouldn't—couldn't—tell a complete story full of details. On the other hand, if the restaurant was closing and the waiter was your friend, that would be a different story.

### **When story sharing happens**

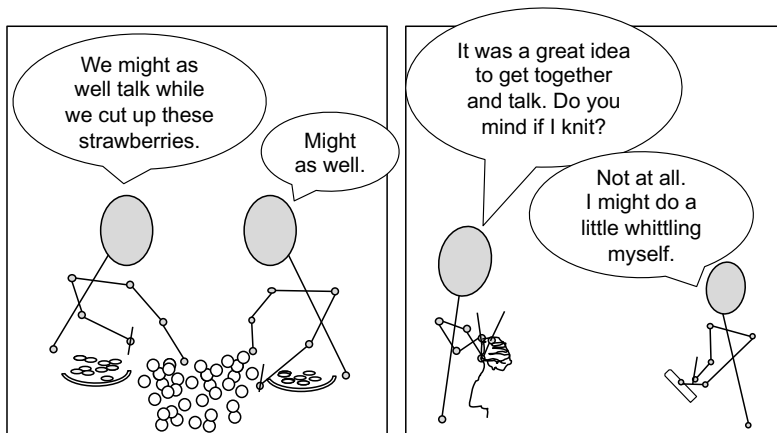
In any team, family, community, or organization, there are specific times in which people tend to have the time, stability, and permission to share stories.

### ***Common quiet simple tasks***

Centuries ago, many of the basic tasks of everyday life were tedious, quiet, simple, and easier to get through in groups. People came together to sow, harvest, and process crops; spin, weave, knit, and sew cloth; snare and hunt animals and process meat; take care of domestic animals; and repair houses, furniture, tools, and vehicles. While they were using their hands to do these things, they had nothing else to do—and it was quiet—so they talked. And while they talked, they shared stories.

Do we still get together over common quiet simple tasks? Of course we do. Not as much as we once did, but not *never* either. For one thing, we still need to eat, and while we eat many of us share stories with family members, friends, neighbors, or co-workers. Also, we still need to stay healthy, so we share stories while we do physical activities together, like walking or playing a sport.

We also share stories while we do tasks that are quiet and simple but not common. For example, when my sister and I talk on the phone, we often clean while we talk because the talk makes the work go faster. That's a remnant of what we used to do in the old days, and it still supports story sharing.

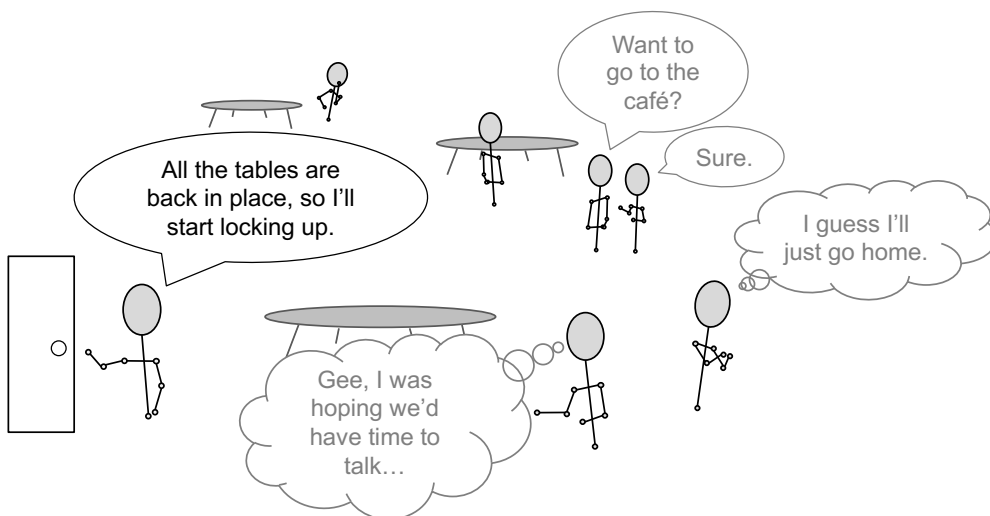


**After-parties**

When people get together to carry out a purposeful group activity, if it does not include the time or permission they need to share stories, they will come out of the interaction with a pent-up need for story sharing. If they are allowed to linger and chat in the space afterwards, they are likely to share stories then.

In communities, after-parties happen after church services, plays, musical performances, club or society meetings, sports games or practices, town hall meetings, ceremonies, festivals, parades, and so on. In organizations, after-parties happen after planning sessions, progress meetings, presentations, training sessions, feedback sessions, and so on.

After-parties always happen. If they don't happen immediately after the purposeful activity is over, they happen in patchwork ways, among two people here, five people there, a day later, a week later. Immediate after-parties support story sharing best, because that's when the urge to share stories is at its peak. So one of the simplest things any community or organization can do to support healthy story sharing is to end each purposeful activity by giving people some time (and stability and permission) to linger and chat.



## **Milestones**

People share stories when they gather at transitional moments in their lives. In communities, these are often rites of passage such as baby-naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals, or they can be simpler milestones like birthdays, anniversaries, and reunions. Seasonal events can also be milestones: coloring eggs in the spring, celebrating the fall harvest, lighting up a holiday tree in the dark of winter.

In organizations there are also such milestones, but they mark passages through work tasks. There are project kick-off events, end-of-project celebrations, new employee orientations, and promotion and retirement dinners. When work has a seasonal component to it, there are seasonal milestones as well: the start and end of the school year, the last day of the busy work season, the closing of the fiscal year, and so on.

Milestones are a natural point of intersection between time as we experience it and time as we make sense of it through story sharing. At milestone gatherings, people share stories about what has happened to them since the last such gathering, about similar events (their own weddings, for example), and about what the future might bring.

If you want to support healthy story sharing in your community or organization, ask yourself: When do we share stories? When do we do common quiet simple tasks? When do we have after-parties? What milestones do we celebrate? What is our story sharing like during these times? And what can we do to support it?

## **Where story sharing happens**

In any team, family, community, or organization, there are specific places in which people are more likely to feel that they have the time, stability, and permission to share stories.

### ***Places of relaxed purpose***

A place of relaxed purpose is a place that people go to for a reason, but while they are there, they also feel comfortable sharing stories. In any given community there may be a few such places: a library, a church basement, a community center, a park, a community garden, a barber shop, a farmers' market, a fitness center, a popular coffee shop.

Take a public library, for example. People usually go to a library with a purpose in mind: to read, check out, or return a book. But while they are at the library, they might do any number of other things as well. If they see a friend, they might sit and chat quietly with them. They might look something up on a library computer. They might sit down with a magazine. They might browse the "new books" section. They might check out what's new on a community bulletin board. Some libraries even have cafés where people can grab a drink and a snack. The opportunity to carry on all of these peripheral activities makes the library a place with a relaxed purpose.

In contrast, consider a police station or a hospital. When people have to go to one of these places, they do what they have to do, then leave. It would seem strange to sit chatting with a friend in a police station or a hospital waiting room. If you did happen to see a friend in such a place, the natural thing would be to suggest moving the conversation to a place of relaxed purpose like a park or café. Nobody would go to a police station or hospital just to

see who they might run into, at least not if they didn't work or volunteer there. But people *might* go a library or café or park just to see who might turn up.

In organizations, places of relaxed purpose are usually established by rules set up by those in charge of the workspace. If it is made clear to employees, for example, that “ad-hoc meetings” are permitted (even encouraged) in a cafeteria (outside of meal times) or in empty meeting rooms (outside of planned meetings), people will meet in those spaces, and they will share stories in them—especially since “ad-hoc” implies permission to carry on flexible conversations. But if those places are closed and locked when they are not in use, or if people are shushed or shooed out of them, people will not use them to share stories. They will still share stories, but they will share them in corridors or staircases or parking lots.

When I worked at IBM Research, I saw many people use the large, often empty cafeteria as an impromptu meeting space. People would run into each other in the hallway, start a conversation, then say, “Let's talk this over in the cafeteria.” Thus the space gave people permission to come together for purposes that might not seem all that purposeful, like doing a common quiet simple task, having an after-party, or celebrating a small milestone. Keeping the cafeteria open between meals—and letting people know that they were allowed to convene there—had a positive impact on story sharing in the organization.

### ***Multi-purpose places***

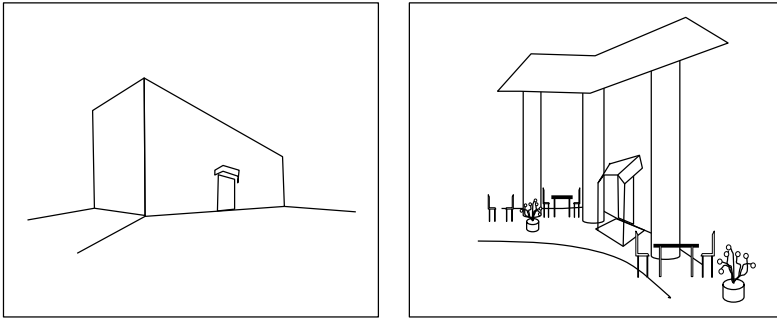
A second place in which people typically tell stories is a place designated for use by groups for a variety of purposes. Most communities and organizations have at least one of these places, and they are often called exactly that: *multi-purpose rooms*. The best multi-purpose rooms for story sharing are:

- available, easy to enter and exit on an ad-hoc basis, without a plan or purpose
- accountable, with rules for responsible use that convey a sense of shared ownership
- peripheral, not busy—but also monitored, with a nearby authority (a lobby desk, for example) in case of disputed or irresponsible use
- flexible, with chairs and tables that can be easily moved around
- small, or large enough that groups can find separate spaces where they can chat quietly without being overheard
- comfortable, not formal or impersonal; inviting to casual, lingering conversation

Spaces with these features tend to become the places people mean when they say, “Let's go somewhere where we can talk.”

### ***Inviting and improvised edges***

The architect Christopher Alexander, in his book *A Pattern Language*, speaks of the importance of edges, or places of transition, in community life. He contrasts a modern building whose featureless slab walls “cannot support any life” with an older building whose complex walls feature “benches, galleries, balconies, flowers, corners to sit, places to stop.”



In his advice to builders, Alexander says of edges:

Make sure that you treat the edge of the building as a “thing,” a “place,” a zone with volume to it, not a line or interface which has no thickness. Crenelate the edge of the buildings with places that invite people to stop. Make places that have a depth and a covering, places to sit, lean, and walk, especially at those points along the perimeter which look onto interesting outdoor life.

When people stop and linger where edges are inviting, one of the things they do is share stories. It follows that the more inviting edges you have in your organization or community, and the more inviting they are, the more (and more healthy) story sharing will take place.

An edge doesn't have to be a *literal* edge. It's just a place where people habitually stop to chat as they move from place to place. Porches, entryways, building lobbies, store fronts, “pocket” parks, bus stops, and train platforms can all be inviting edges. Even a corridor or sidewalk can be an inviting edge, if it's wide enough that people can stop to chat without disrupting the flow of traffic. If there's a bench, a nice view, or some shelter from the elements, that's even more inviting.

Most people know where the inviting edges are in the places they live and work. They might not be able to *articulate* the rules of edge use, but if they bump into somebody going somewhere, they know where it makes sense to stop and chat and where it doesn't. For example, if they meet *near* an inviting edge, they will quickly agree to move to it so they can keep talking.

**Improvised edges.** When people can't find inviting edges, they build them out of rituals. An improvised edge is not designed as a meeting place, but it is sufficiently quiet, safe, and socially acceptable to allow social rituals of connection to grow up around it.

For example, in the rural community I live in, every road is an improvised edge. When anyone is out driving or walking and runs into somebody they know, it is a country custom to stop and chat. But you can't just chat anywhere; everyone knows not to stop near an intersection or a blind curve, or at night, or when it's raining or snowing. Also, anyone chatting from a stopped car knows that they have a responsibility to keep an eye out for oncoming traffic. Drivers who come upon stopped cars also know their part in the ritual. It's polite to wait a bit to see if people are done talking or would like you to drive (carefully) around them. It's just part of living “out here” to respect the road as a meeting place.

In cities and suburbs (where you can't just stop in the middle of the road) I've seen parking lots and sidewalks used in the same way. The people who live in those places know their parts in those rituals too.

In organizations, certain slightly-wider or slightly-quieter corridors can develop similar rituals of use. For example, when I was in graduate school, every out-of-the-way corridor had an old beat-up couch dragged into it by students who needed a place to connect between classes. The university could have rounded up these eyesores, but they left them alone, knowing that they were needed (and would be replaced).

**Lifeless edges.** Some transitional spaces provide no accommodation for story sharing, intentional or otherwise. The most obvious example is the bland, featureless front of a big-box store; but lifeless edges can be found in and around many corporate, educational, and governmental buildings. People who run into each other while moving through such spaces have no option but to hope to meet in a better place the next time.

Some lifeless edges are *designed* to discourage association, usually in the service of public safety. In some places this is necessary. Still, lifeless edges reduce the amount and quality of story sharing in every community or organization in which they appear.

If you want to support healthy story sharing in your community or organization, ask yourself: Where do we share stories? Where are our places of relaxed purpose? Where are our multi-purpose places? Where are our inviting, improvised, and lifeless edges? What can we do to better support story sharing in all of these places?





## Part II

# A Guide to Participatory Narrative Inquiry

The remainder of this book is a nuts-and-bolts guide to Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI), an approach to working with stories in groups, families, communities, and organizations that I have been using (and building) since 1999.

Chapter	Page	Name	Description
6	69	<a href="#">Introducing Participatory Narrative Inquiry</a>	Defines the PNI approach: its origins, connections, and principles
7	83	<a href="#">Project Planning</a>	Helps you make decisions about your PNI projects
8	107	<a href="#">Story Collection</a>	Helps you gather stories and reflections on them
9	205	<a href="#">Group Exercises for Story Collection</a>	Describes group exercises you can use to help people share stories
10	251	<a href="#">Narrative Catalysis</a>	Helps you work with your stories and other data to build support for sensemaking
11	287	<a href="#">Narrative Sensemaking</a>	Helps you help people work with stories and patterns to make sense of a topic or issue
12	345	<a href="#">Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking</a>	Describes group exercises you can use to help people make sense of stories
13	439	<a href="#">Narrative Intervention</a>	Gives you some ideas for intervening in the flow of stories
14	459	<a href="#">Narrative Return</a>	Helps you wind down your projects



## Chapter 6

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# Introducing Participatory Narrative Inquiry

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Participatory Narrative Inquiry is a form of Participatory Action Research in which groups of people participate in gathering and working with raw stories of personal experience in order to make sense of complex situations for better decision making.

PNI focuses on the profound consideration of values, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives through the recounting and interpretation of lived experience. Elements of fact, truth, evidence, opinion, and argument may be used as material for sensemaking in PNI, but they are always used *from* a perspective and to *gain* perspective. This focus defines, shapes, and limits the approach.

## The essence and origins of PNI

Let's go over that definition of PNI one phrase at a time. Along the way I'll tell you a little bit about the history of PNI and how it shaped what PNI is today.

### **PNI is a form of Participatory Action Research**

Participatory Action Research is a way of doing social research that accepts and embraces the fact that *studying people changes people*. In the words of Yoland Wadsworth:

Things inevitably change as a result of research—the mere act of asking questions is an intervention in a situation, and giving and hearing answers and making sense of them inevitably brings about changes in those involved. . . . Participatory action

research is *aware* of its inevitable intervention in the social situations within which it operates and seeks to turn these to consciously-applied effect.

The *reason* PNI is a form of PAR has primarily to do with my background. My original academic research was on the complexities of social negotiation in animal groups. When I started studying how *human* groups use stories to support complex social negotiations, I knew I was dealing with something different that required a different approach.

If you are clever and careful, you can study social negotiation in animal groups without changing it. Similarly, you can study *some* aspects of human social negotiation without changing them. For example, you can watch people in cars or crowds as they negotiate their positions in space, and you can do this without them knowing (or needing to know) that you are watching them. But story sharing is such a complex form of social negotiation, and it is so strongly linked to issues of status, power, rights, and relationships, that there is no way you can study it without changing it, no matter how clever and careful you are.

It was my attempt to address this issue that led me to discover Participatory Action Research. I can still remember how excited I was to read Wadsworth's 1998 article on PAR (from which I quoted above), which was published only a few months before I started working on PNI. In that moment, PAR seemed to me to be the only reasonable way to work with stories. After a quarter-century of working on PNI, it still does.

### **In which groups of people**

PNI focuses on groups: groups, families, communities, organizations. It is rarely used to help individuals. Why? Because it began as a series of applied research and consulting projects at IBM. In that work our mandate was to explore ways to work with stories and storytelling in organizational learning, knowledge management, and decision support.

### **Participate in**

PNI is a participatory approach, not an extractive one. There are no experts in PNI, only co-researchers.

Actually, I don't often use the term "co-researcher" when I talk about PNI, even though PAR often uses the word. I usually speak of "facilitators" and "participants." This is not because facilitators are not co-researchers. It's because they take on the role of making participation easier—more facile—for their fellow co-researchers. The fact that you are reading this book makes you a PNI facilitator, even if you are also a participant.

### **Gathering stories**

Academic researchers have been studying the role of stories in communities and organizations since at least the 1980s. But the topic wasn't given much attention in the corporate world until the late 1990s, when people who worked in organizational learning and knowledge management began to talk about it. As part of this surge in interest, several groups scattered across IBM (in marketing, training, consultancy, and research) began to explore how paying attention to stories could help people in organizations work better together.

I happened to get a job in one of those groups. At first I was drawn to the topic because it connected so well with my previous work on the complexities of social negotiation. But

over time I grew to love story work for what it could do for the world, helping us all get along better and building better futures for our communities and organizations.

## **And working with**

PNI focuses on *working with* stories: talking about them, learning from them, using them to spur thought and discussion. It pays a lot of attention to discovery and insight, and it pays little attention to preservation or presentation. This is largely due to the focus of the work that led to PNI: applied research for practical benefit.

## **Raw stories**

PNI focuses on stories told simply, in everyday language. PNI facilitators never adorn, improve, or correct stories. They simply gather stories and carry them to where they need to go. This practice grew out of hard-won experience. Through years of trial and error, we learned that helping people work with stories is much more effective when you stop trying to find (or craft) “good” stories and simply let people tell the stories they need to tell.

By the way, when I say “we,” I mean to refer to everyone who had a hand in the development of PNI, but most particularly to (in alphabetical order) Sharon Darwent, Neal Keller, myself, and Dave Snowden. I worked with Neal in 1999 and 2000 and with Sharon and Dave from 2001 to 2009. Since then I have worked with dozens of other people, but no other collaboration has been as deep or as long as those.

## **Of personal experience**

In PNI we ask people to interpret their own stories. We ask how they feel about them and what they think they mean. We do sometimes study the stories ourselves, but our interpretations are always of secondary importance. This aspect of PNI came about because we learned (again, through trial and error) that on most topics, people know more about their own experiences than any expert can hope to understand.

## **To make sense**

PNI focuses on group sensemaking, not on study, measurement, proof, or prediction. This means that people who participate in PNI projects don't just put stories into boxes. They *play* with them, bringing their whole selves into the exploration. This focus came about, honestly, because we tried lots of ways to help people do things with stories, and sensemaking turned out to be far more useful than anything else we tried.

## **Of complex situations**

PNI focuses its attention on complex, messy, many-sided, often contentious situations. This happened for four reasons:

1. In the early days of PNI development, most of our clients (both inside and outside IBM) wanted our help exploring just these types of situations.
2. I have always been interested in helping people get along with each other. Even when I thought I would always be a biologist, I was especially drawn to contentious topics such as balancing ecological and societal needs.

3. Part of my early work on animal behavior explored how complexity theory applied to social situations, and I brought that interest into my study of story sharing in human groups. I don't know why I'm so drawn to complexity, but it has influenced everything I have done since I first learned about it in the 1980s.
4. Stories are inherently linked to complexity, in two ways:
  - a) The stories we share with each other link up into complex patterns that move through us like flocks of birds move through the sky. Every time you hear a story and pass it on, you are part of a complex pattern.
  - b) Complex patterns, like stories, have beginnings, middles, and ends. Sharing stories about complex patterns is one of the ways in which people have always made sense of them, going back to ancient times.

That last reason explains some of the unique practices of PNI, like collecting dozens or hundreds of stories, never just a few. If you want to make sense of a complex pattern, you need to consider more than just a few things. A few birds don't make a flock, and a few stories can't create the conditions under which insights are likely to emerge from complex interactions among people and stories.

### **For better decision making**

The ultimate goal of PNI is to help groups of people make better decisions together, decisions everyone can live with. This again goes back to our original research mandate to support organizational learning and decision making.

### **By focusing on the profound consideration**

Because PNI is a narrative method, it explores topics in more depth than traditional survey research. Among *narrative* methods, though, PNI is of medium depth. It's deeper than narrative inquiry (because it's participatory), and it's deeper than most story-sharing exercises (because it also looks at patterns among stories). But it's not (usually) as deep as narrative therapy or participatory theatre. Those methods tend to involve their participants in more profound and intense story work than PNI does.

PNI's depth level came about largely due to the first few dozen projects we worked on as we developed it, mostly in large corporations and government agencies. Those first projects were ambitious, but they relied on relatively sparse and unevenly distributed participation. In a sense, we had to make do with the few crumbs of participatory energy we could find. That's why participants in PNI projects have so many ways to participate at so many levels: because that was the environment we faced when we built it.

### **Of values, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives**

PNI focuses on how people feel about what has happened to them, why they think it happened the way it did, and what they think it means. We never ask people to simply state the facts of what has happened to them.

This was another hard-won set of learnings. In our many attempts to listen to stories, we found that we could help people explore topics much better when we focused on

their reflections and perspectives on what happened—their experiential truth, you could say—and not just on the literal truth of the events they described.

## PNI elements

### Narrative

The most essential part of PNI is narrative. PNI is founded on the use of *raw stories of personal experience*. In this respect it differs from other sensemaking and decision-support approaches that *sometimes* incorporate narrative but do not *require* it. Stories are essential to PNI because without them its ability to address its core goals would be reduced.

PNI is not a superior method for all decision support projects, only those for which the profound consideration of *values, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives* is required. There are many situations in which facts, opinions, arguments, and evidence are of superior utility. For example, if you want to know which of two treatment protocols has a greater effect on the reduction of chronic inflammation, PNI will not give you the result you need. However, if you want to understand the influences of societal taboos and stigmas when supporting patients with various treatment protocols, PNI is likely to give you a more deeply meaningful result than factual questioning.

### Participation

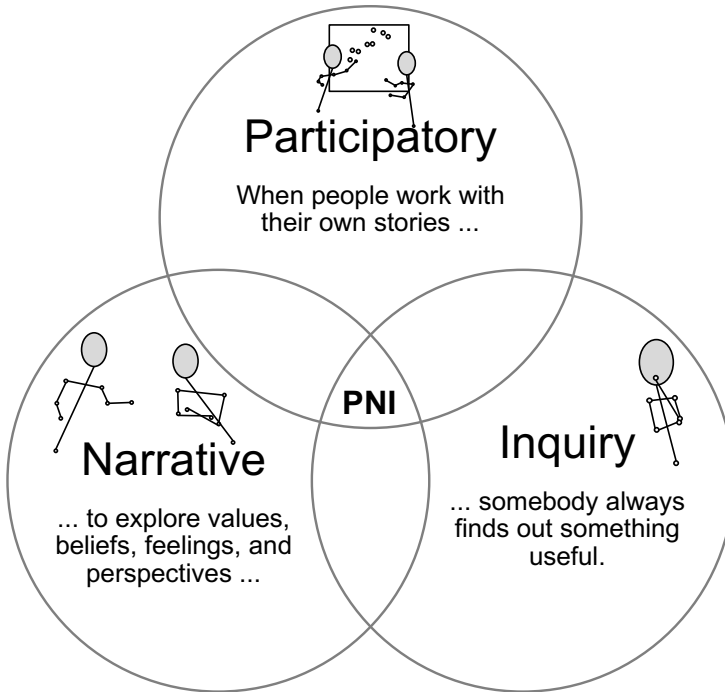
Unlike its sibling narrative inquiry, *PNI invites its participants to work with their own stories*. Participation in PNI can vary in degree from telling stories to participating in group sensemaking to playing a part in making planning decisions.

A co-researcher who facilitates a PNI project does not tell or interpret or change or even select stories. All of these things are done by the project's participants, the people who tell the stories. What a PNI facilitator does is *help the stories get to where they need to go* to help the community achieve a goal. To do this they might collect stories, ask questions about them, and help people look at, think about, and talk about the stories, the answers, and the patterns they form. But a PNI facilitator never decides for the community, by themselves, what the stories mean.

### Inquiry

In every PNI project *somebody finds out something about something*. They might better understand a conflict, or their own feelings, or the feelings of others, or the nuances of a topic, or how things got to be the way they are, or how things could improve, or any number of things. PNI helps people see things from new and different perspectives. Even when a PNI project creates change, the change takes place because somebody found a new way to look at something.

PNI is never just about telling stories, or listening to stories, or gathering stories, or connecting or teaching or persuading people with stories, even though all of those things might happen in a PNI project. The overall goal is insight, which leads to better decision making.



## PNI phases

Even though PNI projects vary widely in scope, they tend to follow a common plan.

### Essential phases

A PNI project involves three essential phases: collection, sensemaking, and return.

#### *Story collection*

Community members tell stories around a topic of concern, and those stories are brought together in some way. The nature of collection can vary widely, from 30 stories told in an hour-long workshop to 1000 stories gathered over a year and used for many years afterwards. But in one way or another, *all PNI projects start with stories.*

In PNI, *people interpret their own stories* by answering reflective questions like:

- How do you feel about this story?
- What do you wish had happened?
- Who would you like to hear this story?

They might do this directly (by answering questions on a form or in an interview) or indirectly (by participating in group exercises in which questions are embedded). The questions used are always unique to the community and to the goals of the project.



## **Sensemaking**

Community members—sometimes the people who told the stories, sometimes others, sometimes a mix—participate in facilitated group activities in which they explore the project's topic by:

- connecting the collected stories to their own experiences
- using the collected stories (and their own) to make sense of the topic by:
  - finding and discussing patterns among the stories
  - building larger stories (such as timelines or landscapes) out of the stories
  - noticing and discussing surprises and other elements of the sensemaking experience

Sensemaking may take place on the same day as story collection, or months later; it may involve few or many people; it may take place in person or online; and it may be strongly or weakly structured and facilitated. But in some way, *all PNI projects involve somebody making some use of the collected stories to better understand some situation or issue.*

## **Return**

What has been gathered and created in the first two phases is returned to the community and enters into collective discourse. Such a return may include formal reports and communications, and it may involve a wide or narrow distribution of collected stories. But it is also likely to include informal story exchanges about people's experiences in the project. These informal storytellings may be more influential than the formal outputs, for better or worse, and they merit attention on their own terms.

*All PNI projects involve someone telling stories they would not have told before the project took place.* Whether this is a stated goal of the project or not, it always happens, because the project is itself a story that takes place in the community.

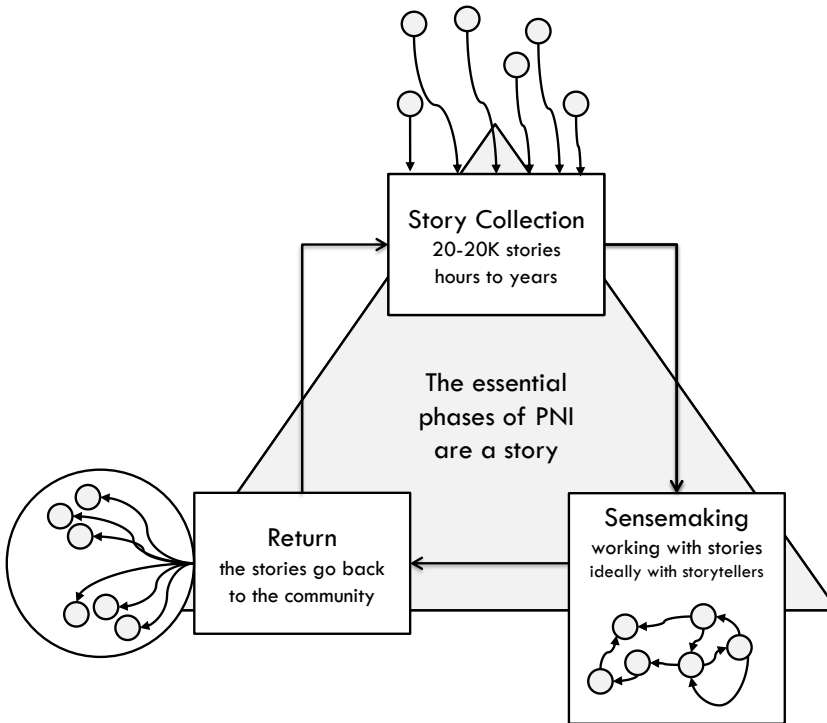
The return phase is one project planners might be unprepared for and might prefer to sweep under the rug; but it is futile to pretend storytellers and audiences are unaffected by storytelling. In fact, conscious attention to the return phase is a mark of projects that have lasting positive impacts.

## **What the essential phases are like**

The essential phases of PNI are egalitarian and multi-vocal in nature. They involve little top-down control, and in each phase the unique perspective of each participant is heard and included without coercion or artificial consensus.

In an ideal PNI project, all members of the community participate equally in all three essential phases. In reality, however, some people will always participate more than others. This can be due to indifference, power differences, or a mixture of both.

For example, most people are usually willing and able to spend a few minutes recounting an experience. But fewer people are usually willing and able to spend hours participating in a sensemaking workshop—though the problem may not be time or willingness, but the feeling of not being qualified or authorized to do so.



The more a project can offer its participants a win-win proposal that promises equality, empowerment, and respect—and delivers on that promise—the more participation it will find in all three essential phases.

## Optional phases

A PNI project can optionally include up to three supporting phases: planning, catalysis, and intervention.

### Planning

Collection is sometimes preceded by a phase in which elements such as questions, group sessions, and exercises are chosen and/or designed. For example, a small pilot project might be used to test questions and methods before the larger project takes place. Planning serves to promote the success of the overall project, not to constrict or censor what is collected and said. Note that planning may be influenced by the return phases of previous projects.

### Catalysis

Sensemaking can be preceded by a phase in which mixed-methods analysis is used to discover patterns in collected stories and interpretations.

I call this step catalysis (as opposed to analysis) because catalysis speeds up chemical reactions and catabolic processes break down molecules (while anabolic processes build them up). Thus catalysis serves to *enhance* sensemaking by asking questions, not avoid it by providing answers.

The catalytic material produced (for example, annotated images describing patterns across stories) is used as *food for thought* in the sensemaking process, but never as conclusive evidence or proof. To ensure that the material is catalytic rather than analytic, precautions are taken to *separate statements* (into observations, interpretations, and ideas) and *provide provoking perspectives* that generate questions rather than supply answers.

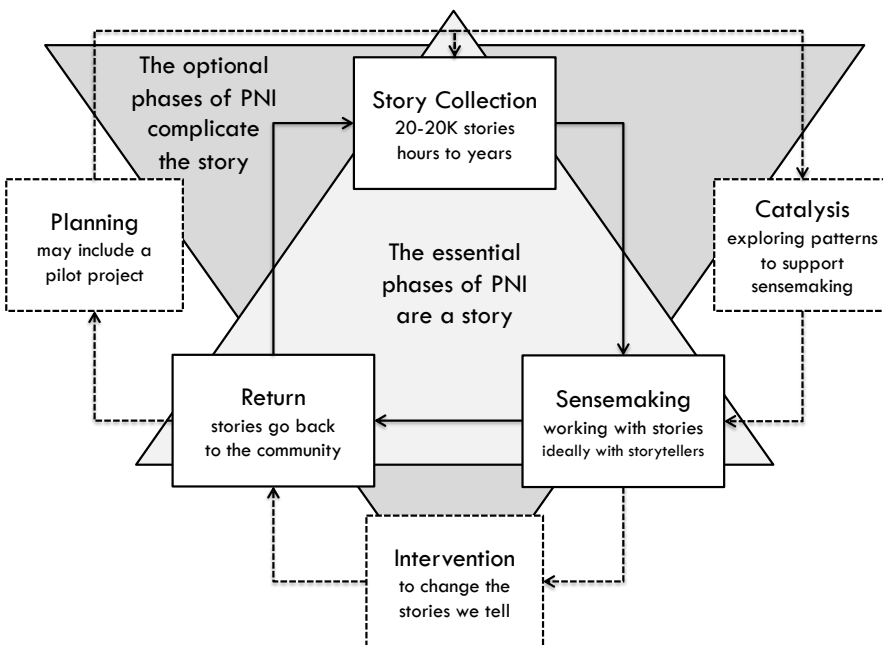
**Intervention**

The return phase is sometimes preceded by an intervention phase in which action is taken based on sensemaking. Some examples of narrative interventions are story-sharing spaces, narrative orientations, narrative mentoring networks, and participatory theatre events. (You can find out more about these and other interventions in the Intervention chapter on page 439.) Intervention serves to enhance the return of stories to the community, not to control or arrest it. Ideally, interventions grounded in narrative sensemaking produce positive change, sparking a spiral of story sharing that leads naturally into future projects.

**What the optional phases are like**

The supporting phases of PNI *can* be carried out by all community members, but in practice—and much more so than in the essential phases—they are usually carried out by limited numbers of people with the time, patience, motivation, expertise, and/or authority to do the concentrated and sometimes difficult work required.

However, the supporting phases are not levers that control the project, as anyone who seizes them for that purpose will find out. Since the essential phases are participatory and egalitarian in nature, any attempt to constrict or control them through the supporting phases will cause the entire project to fail. Outsiders in particular cannot participate in or control the essential triangle of PNI (without causing some damage) but must maintain a purely supportive role in those areas.



## Links to other approaches

In addition to its foundation in Participatory Action Research, PNI connects to and has been influenced by many schools of thought. Here are some of the things PNI shares with other fields.

- On the side of research:
  - PNI shares with narrative inquiry its focus on stories as packages of meaning and expressions of perspectives that can be studied to discover useful insights on issues of importance.
  - PNI shares with oral history its attention to respectful listening and its emphasis on the value of lived experience.
  - PNI shares with narratology its study of stories as creative conveyances of our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values.
  - PNI shares with case-based reasoning its use of stories as thinking tools and its interest in helping people use and pass on narrative knowledge in order to understand complicated topics.
  - PNI shares with cultural anthropology and folklore studies its fascination with stories as social phenomena whose study can reveal important insights about groups, families, communities, organizations, and societies.
  - PNI shares with mixed-methods research the discovery of patterns through examination of textual and numbers-based data.
  - PNI shares with complexity theory its curiosity about global patterns that emerge through many local interactions, whether those interactions are among people, stories, answers to questions, or some combination of these things.
- On the side of action:
  - PNI shares with narrative therapy its drive to help people discover, explore, challenge, and change the stories they tell as they seek to solve problems, resolve conflicts, and pursue opportunities.
  - PNI shares with participatory theatre its use of dramatic social experiences (plays in the case of theatre, group exercises in the case of PNI) to help people explore (and sometimes challenge) norms, assumptions, and conflicts.
  - PNI shares with participatory art and design its enthusiasm for helping people use their combined creativity to create positive change.
  - PNI shares with narrative coaching its support of double-loop learning and its consideration of patterns in experiences over time.
  - PNI shares with narrative medicine its attitude of respectful listening and its commitment to helping people find solutions that improve their lives.
  - PNI shares with dialogue methods the goal of helping people get along better with each other by seeing the world through each other's eyes.
  - PNI shares with decision support methods an emphasis on helping groups of people think about the future and make decisions about what to do.

More than anything else, PNI is a *practical* method. It grew over the course of hundreds of real projects with real participants, real needs, and real constraints. What didn't work fell out, and what worked stayed in.

By the way, the term “participatory narrative inquiry” has been in use—in the general sense of narrative inquiry that is participatory—since at least the 1990s. The PNI approach differs in some of its details from the participatory narrative work that came before it, but the overall spirit of the work is the same.

## PNI principles

These are some principles that help to define what PNI is and isn't. Where did they come from? They emerged. I kept finding myself saying them to people over and over, and I looked at them and thought: these things must be important.

### ***It's all about decisions***

The primary goal of PNI is decision support augmented by sensemaking improved by narrative discourse. PNI does not focus on the goals of investigation, preservation, or communication, though those things do often happen in PNI projects. All of the ideas and methods in PNI focus on helping people make better decisions together, decisions everyone can live with in peace. Why? Because it's what the world needs most.

### ***The play's the thing***

Play has a central role in PNI, for the very serious reason that play creates the most effective decision support. The telling of stories is a form of play in human life. It's a sort of reality bubble, one with its own internal rules, that helps people make sense of the world around them. PNI incorporates play into every element of its activity, from planning projects to collecting stories to helping people make sense of topics.

PNI facilitators take on a trickster role in the community or organization they aim to help, to avoid the taint of authority and to increase the benefit of participation. They shift their shapes; they lie; they break the rules; they say what cannot be said; they stand between worlds; but they do all of this in earnest and with the most constructive purpose. One of the most important elements of learning how to “do PNI” well is learning how to help people play—seriously and effectively—with their stories.

### ***PNI helps stories get to where they need to go***

The most important thing a PNI project does is not collect stories for safekeeping or tell stories for enlightenment or analyze stories for proof. The most important thing a PNI project does is to help stories get to where they need to go to have a positive impact on the community or organization. This distinguishes PNI from forms of narrative work whose goals are to preserve or persuade or study. All of the methods and ideas that make up PNI focus on discovering where stories need to go and helping them get there. Both of these tasks are rarely obvious or simple except in retrospect.

***People know their stories***

There is no better foundation on which to work with stories than stories combined with what their tellers say about them. No outsider to any community can be fully aware of this foundation. Context can upend content, rendering lies as truth and truth as lies, a fact that makes external interpretation not just futile but dangerously misleading. PNI casts aside expert interpretation as insufficiently beneficial to participatory decision support, and instead gives a central place to the interpretation of stories by people with the closest possible relationships to the stories told.

***Don't mess with the stories***

For the goals PNI addresses, true, raw, real stories of personal experience are more useful than stories of fiction. Any attempt to control or change or adapt raw stories will reduce the authenticity and therefore the effectiveness of a PNI project. There is no use helping stories get to where they need to go if they are not the stories that need to be going there. Therefore PNI never alters or "improves" the stories it considers but keeps them in as raw a form as possible, no matter where they are carried and no matter who encounters them.

***Don't boil stories down, and don't boil them out; boil them up***

This principle says that PNI should never be used to pretend to address an issue by collecting stories, then "boiling them down" to boil out emotion or pain or negativity or unwelcome perspectives. PNI takes the stance that *progress can be paradoxical*: that the best way to create a positive future is to respect and work with *all* of a community's or organization's stories through pattern exploration, ritual, and play.

***Stories nest***

Unique among our forms of communication, stories preserve rather than resolve conflicts and contrasts. This is why many folk tales have other stories nested inside them, sometimes several levels deep, sometimes in harmony and sometimes at odds.

Likewise, a PNI project aims to represent, explore, and understand the full spectrum of perspectives within a community or organization *without attempting to merge them* into a unified consensus. Methods that build consensus are worthy of respect and attention and use. But PNI aims for something different: helping people understand the experiences and perspectives of other people. This makes it a useful tool in situations where only partial trust is in place and consensus cannot be reached.

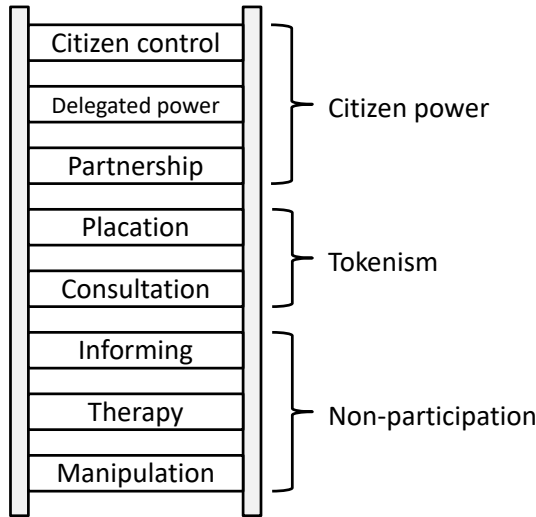
***If you do not make PNI your own, you are not doing PNI***

PNI is not a dogmatic set of fixed prescriptions. It is a complex, diverse, practical, of-its-time-and-place, living body of work. It is not a star; it is a constellation. It belongs to no one; it belongs to everyone. PNI challenges each of its practitioners and participants to add their unique talents and styles to it, to make it grow larger than it was before they got to it.

# Ethics in PNI

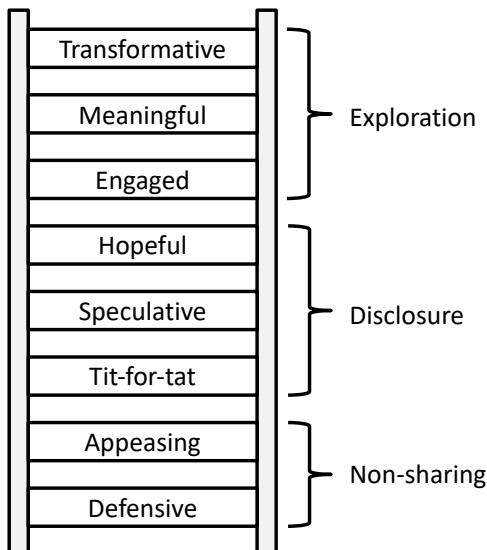
In participatory work, Sherry Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation is a respected tool for defining what counts as participation. PNI is a participatory method, so Arnstein’s ladder applies to it. The higher up the ladder you are, the more you are doing PNI.

Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation

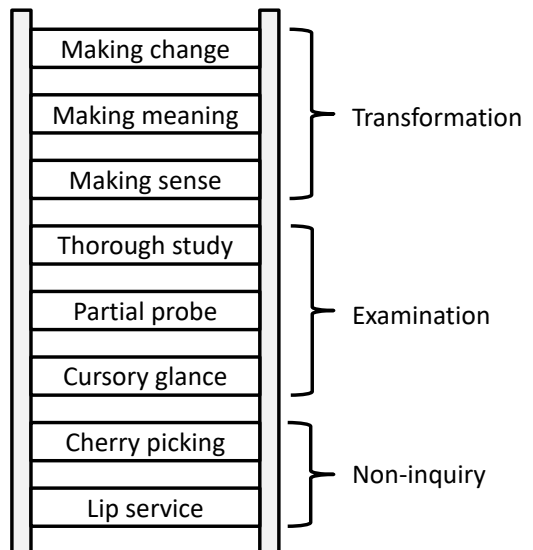


But PNI isn’t just about participation; it’s also about narrative and inquiry. So I made some ladders for those things too.

The PNI Ladder of Narrative (Story Sharing)



The PNI Ladder of Inquiry



If you are at the top of all three ladders, you are definitely doing PNI. If you are at the bottom of all three ladders, you are definitely *not* doing PNI.

If you are somewhere in the middle, whether you are doing PNI depends on *why you are where you are*. If you are trying to work your way up, you might still be doing PNI. People share stories to negotiate and to build trust, even in low-trust situations. Partial participation is not ideal, but it can sow the seeds of greater participation in time, whether the barrier comes from above or below.

What can you do to work towards the top of all three ladders? Do the things on the left side of this table, and don't do the things on the right.

If you want to do PNI	If you don't want to do PNI
Find participants who are <i>willing and able</i> to share stories with each other around a topic of common interest.	Find people who <i>have</i> stories project funders <i>want</i> .
Treat all community members, facilitators, researchers, and funders as <i>co-researchers</i> .	Treat the people who tell the stories as <i>subjects</i> to be examined by researchers for the benefit of funders.
Build a process that helps all co-researchers pursue their individual and collective <i>goals</i> by sharing and working with stories.	Build a process that provides the minimum level of participation required to get subjects to <i>hand over</i> their stories.
<i>Empower</i> co-researchers by creating an atmosphere of listening, curiosity, safety, clarity, freedom, transparency, and honesty.	<i>Disempower</i> subjects by creating an atmosphere of interrogation, criticism, intimidation, obfuscation, constraint, opacity, and duplicity.
Work with each co-researcher at the level of participation they <i>prefer</i> , from peripheral (sharing a story) to engaged (making sense of stories) to central (playing a part in decision making).	Work with each subject at a level of interaction <i>chosen</i> by funders and researchers, with no opportunity for challenge or change.
Erect no barrier but <i>interest</i> ; set no requirement but willingness.	Erect barriers and set requirements based on <i>power</i> and status.
Make all project decisions <i>transparent</i> and open to challenge by all co-researchers.	Make all project decisions <i>opaque</i> and impossible to challenge (except by funders).



## Chapter 7

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# Project Planning

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Plan: Make decisions about your scale and process . . . . .	100

The best way to plan a PNI project is to start at the broadest and most general level, then work your way toward more specific plans.

1. Build a *foundation* for your project by exploring your overall goals and topic.
2. Understand your *context* by considering people and perspectives.
3. Make specific *plans* by deciding on your scale and process.

Along the way, answering six essential questions can help you build a solid project plan.

1. Foundation
  - Goals: Why are you doing the project?
  - Topic: What is the project about?
2. Context
  - People: Who matters to your project?
  - Perspectives: What experiences matter to your project?
3. Plans
  - Scale: How big will your project be?
  - Process: How will you carry out your project?

If you are working in a group, or if you have an oversight committee, *don't move forward until you agree* on your answers to these six questions. Taken together, they will be your project's touchstone and your constitution for collaboration.

In this chapter we will go through each of the three steps and six questions.

## Foundation: Explore your goals and topic

I often find that people are reluctant to use PNI techniques in the planning phases of their PNI projects. They want a cut-and-dried plan without the touchy-feely aspects of emotion and hope. They want their *participants* to emote, but they want to be saved from exploring their own emotions. Watch out for that distancing reaction in yourself. It can make your project less effective. Soak yourself in stories from the very start.

So, to explore your project's goals and topic, I'd like to offer you a story-based way to think about why you are doing your project, what it is fundamentally about, and what you hope to achieve by doing it.

### A goals-and-topic exploration exercise

This simple exercise can help you think about why you are doing your project and what matters most to you. If you are working in a team, it can help you bring differences and misunderstandings to the surface while you still have the flexibility to adapt.

Set aside at least an hour. Include everyone who will be helping to run or make decisions about the project. If you have an advisory group, a steering committee, or an involved funder, you can include them as well.

#### *Share some stories*

Everyone in the group: working on your own, choose a scenario from the following table.

Scenario	Description	For example
Ask me anything	If you could ask a question and be guaranteed an honest answer, whom would you ask, and about what?	We asked the customers who have stopped coming here why they left.
Magic ears	If you could overhear any conversation, whom would you want to listen to, and where and when?	I overheard people talking about whether they think I'd make a good mayor.
Magic eyes	If you could observe any event, interaction, or situation, what would you want to see happen?	We watched people find courage they didn't know they had in terrible circumstances.
Project aspects	Choose an aspect of your project that matters to you. Tell a story about it.	We brought people together on both sides of the issue.

Next, choose an outcome from the following table.

Outcome	Description	For example
Amazing success	Tell the story of your project succeeding far better than you had expected. What happened, and how did you feel about it?	We learned <i>so much</i> in this project. I can't wait to put our new plans into action!
Miserable failure	Tell the story of your project failing miserably.	We didn't find out anything we didn't know already. The whole project was a total waste of time we can't get back again.
Acceptable outcome	Tell a story about the project that falls somewhere in the middle, not perfect but not a waste of time either.	We knew about these issues before we did the project, but now we have a much better idea of what is <i>really</i> going on. We can use this.

Finally, combine your scenario and outcome into *a fictional story about the future of your project*. What could happen?

When everyone is ready, tell each other the stories you imagined. Make sure everyone has a chance to tell at least one story. Don't critique the stories, and don't spend a lot of time delving into details. Just throw your game pieces (your scenarios and outcomes) together and see what comes to mind.

If you are your entire project team, you can do this exercise on your own. Think through your stories, say them out loud, or write them down.

### ***Look for patterns***

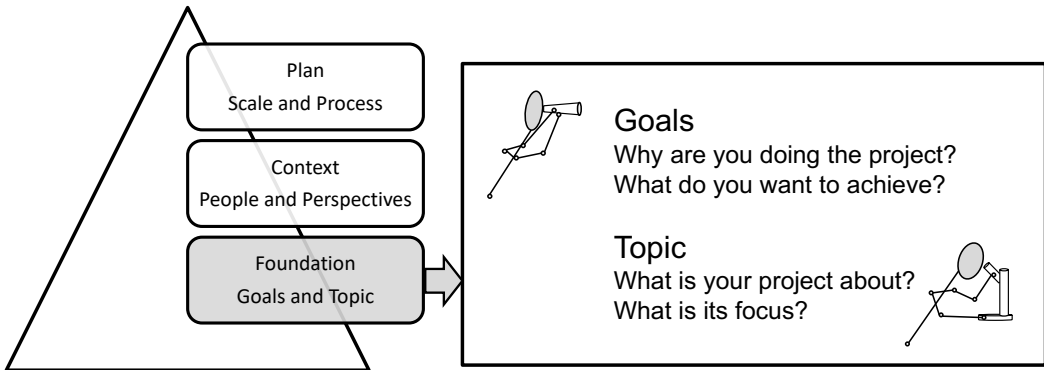
When you have told a few stories each, working together, look for patterns in them.

- What do your stories tell you about your hopes and fears for your project?
- Does anything about them surprise you?
- Do you see any dangers you should avoid or opportunities you can use?
- Are there any needs, assets, gaps, or assumptions you would like to think about?
- What do the stories say to you about your project plans? Is there anything you want to rethink or learn more about?

If your project is large or ambitious, you may want to use a longer exercise to talk about your project goals and topic. Look ahead to the chapter called "Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking" (page 345) and choose one of the exercises described there. Using the stories you just told, work together to make sense of the project you want to do together.

### **Answer the first two PNI planning questions**

After you have shared and talked about some project stories, you should be able to answer the first two of the six PNI Planning Questions.



### **Goals: Why are you doing your project?**

A project's goals seem like its most straightforward part, the part least in need of discussion. People who start a project know why they are doing it, right? Not always. I've seen more projects fail because of misunderstandings and mismatches in goals than in any other area. Sometimes the people in a project group *think* they all understand their collective goals, when in fact each person sees a different project. At other times, people go into projects without thinking through their own reasons for wanting to carry them out. Work to align your goals until everyone is applying their energy to the same purpose.

### **Topic: What is your project about?**

A project's topic has a lot to do with its goals; but it is the "what" rather than the "why" of the project. A topic can include things like:

- a question (what is the range of our views about the planned bridge?)
- an outcome (we would like to improve our services to patients)
- a decision (should we build a shopping center or a park?)
- a problem (what can we do about science illiteracy?)
- a group of people (our family's story)
- a perspective (how new immigrants see our town)
- a person (stories about our founder)

If you have done any previous work on your topic, this is a good time to consider it. Maybe you already carried out a project on the same topic using a different approach. Maybe you have discussed this topic in the past. Compare your current project plan to your previous explorations of the topic. How is your topic this time like and unlike your topic in the past? What do you want to do now that is different, and what is the same?

## **Context: Understand your people and perspectives**

The next step in project planning is to think about your participants and their experiences with (and perceptions of) you and your topic.

## Think about how many participants you want to include

How many participants does your project need? The answer is different for every project, of course. It depends on your answers to these questions.

- **Your depth of exploration.** How ambitious do you want to be? Are you just dipping your toe into exploring your topic, or do you want to explore it exhaustively? Picture yourself in the future looking at the stories you collected and saying, "I'm so glad we got what we needed." In that scenario, how many stories are you looking at? Fifty? Five thousand? Now think about how many stories you can reasonably expect each of your participants to tell about your topic. One? Four? (Most people stop at four.) How many participants does that mean you will need?
- **Your breadth of exploration.** Are there any specific perspectives on your topic you want to juxtapose? If so, how many perspectives do you want to include? Two? Five? Now picture yourself looking at the stories told from just one of those perspectives. How many stories will adequately explore the body of experience that lies behind that perspective? Now think about how many stories you can reasonably expect the people in each perspective group to tell. How many participants does that mean you will need in each group?
- **Your population sample.** If your project is about your community or organization, what percentage of its population do you think you need to include to represent it? All of it? Half? One quarter? One tenth? How many people is that? If it's impossible to include that number of participants, what sort of project can you do with the number of people you can include? Could you focus on one group within the community or organization? Or could you change your topic so representation matters less?
- **Your story collection.** If you want to gather a collection of stories to support sensemaking now and in the future, how many stories will your collection need to help people do the things you want them to do with it? If you want people to use it to resolve conflicts, for example, how many perspectives will it need to cover, and how many stories will it need to adequately cover each perspective? How many participants will you need, and from what groups, to create that collection?
- **Your available resources.** How many stories and participants can you handle? How much time, experience, and help will you have to carry out your story collection, handle your stories, and facilitate your workshops?
- **Your time frame.** Is there a deadline you need to meet? Is there a limited time frame in which you can talk to your participants? How many stories can you gather and work with in that time?

Taken together, your answers to these questions will help you come up with an ideal number of participants for your project. But don't get too hung up on that number. What you need is *participatory energy*, and that depends on more than just the number of participants. It also depends on how much time, attention, and conscious effort each participant is willing and able to put into the project. I've seen PNI projects with 20 attentive participants produce more meaningful results than projects with 1000 barely-there participants.

So ask yourself: if your participants were willing and able to contribute far less, or far more, to the project than you anticipate, how many of them would you need? That exercise should give you a *range* of participant counts, which is more useful than a single number.

## Think about how you will invite participants

How will you invite people to join your project? To decide, answer these questions:

- How many people could potentially participate in your project? How much larger is that number than the number of participants you will need for the project?
- How much do you know about your potential participants? For example, can you guess how interested they might be in your topic?

If you have a large pool of potential participants, and you know little about them, your best bet is to **help people find you**. These are some ways to do that.

Method	How to do it	Requirements	Limitations
Broadcast channels	Send an invitation to everyone on a list.	Requires a list that calls forth a common identity, which confers a social obligation to participate.	Can result in a sparse and scattered response.
Targeted advertising	Put up a sign or a website that invites people to join the project.	Requires a place (physical or virtual) that community members often visit.	Can miss people whose habits take them to other places at other times.
Spontaneous enlistment	Put yourself and your invitation in the right place at the right time, either once or at each stage of your project.	Requires you to know (or find out) the best places and times to find participants.	

On the other hand, if you have a small pool of potential participants, and you know a lot about them, it is best to reach out to people directly. These are some ways to do that.

Method	How to do it	Requirements	Limitations
Networks of influence	Ask people to ask other people to participate.	Requires a network of people who trust each other, and some who trust you.	Can leave out newcomers, introverts, and anyone who is seen as strange.
Targeted invitations	Choose specific participants to invite one by one.	Requires trust, plus knowledge about participants.	Could seem unfair to those who were not asked.
Chains of command	Ask whoever is in charge to tell people to participate.	Requires a hierarchy, but also requires some level of trust. If there is no trust, people will <i>attend</i> the project, but they will not <i>attend</i> to it.	Can produce grudging, bare-minimum participation, even if people like what the project is doing.

Since all invitation methods produce biased, self-selected subsets of participatory energy, it's best to combine at least two methods. For example, if you have access to a mailing list of thousands, it makes sense to post an invitation on it. But it also makes sense to reach out to some of the most involved members of the list and ask them who they think would like to join the project, then ask *those* people who they think would like to join, and so on.

Should you ask people to participate in your project before you start gathering stories? Maybe. If you can't do the project you want to do unless everyone you want to invite can participate in it (maybe you need to include everyone on your team), then yes, ask those people to join the project before you get started—and if they can't do it, rethink the project. But if the number of people who *could* participate in your project is much larger than the number of people you will *need* to participate, you can invite people to participate as the project goes along.

No matter how you choose to reach out to people, keep two things in mind.

1. **Find the energy.** Don't look for stories. Look for unmet needs. Find people who will *appreciate the opportunity* to be heard and to exchange experiences with other people, people who will participate in your project with energy and enthusiasm. If there are no such people, rethink your project.
2. **Be realistic.** Do not allow yourself to indulge in wishful thinking about the participatory energy you will find once you get started. I've seen more projects fail for this reason than for any other. If you aren't sure whether anyone will want to be part of the project you want to do, don't pretend you know. Find out. And even if you do know, find out anyway. You could be wrong.

## Think about how you will help people find the time to participate

Should you pay people to participate in your project? It depends. If they want to participate but can't without help, paying them for their time will strengthen the project. If they have no interest in the project, paying them will weaken it.

If you aren't sure, you can do a little thought experiment. Imagine your project taking place in a world in which everyone has infinite time and money. Would the people you intend to pay participate then? If most of them would participate in a perfect world, it is reasonable to pay them. If most of them would not participate in a perfect world, a payment scheme is *not* appropriate, and you should rethink your project to make it truly participatory.

If that thought experiment just leaves you with more questions, you can float the idea of payment with some potential participants. If they respond like this:

I like what you're doing, but I can't spare the time. Oh, you can help? Great, thanks, I should be able to join in.

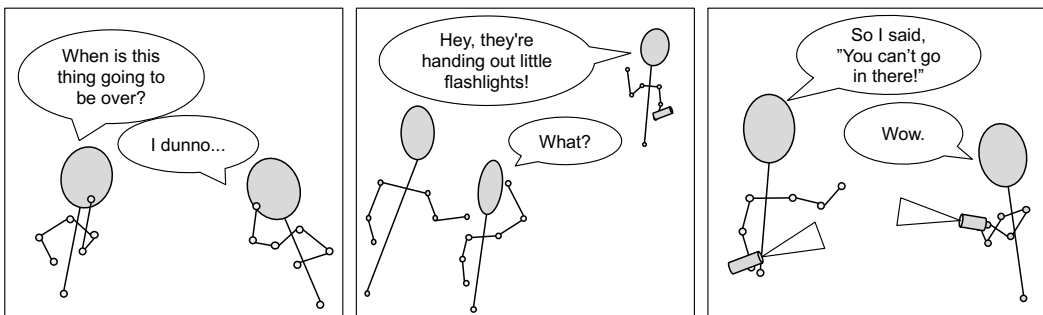
That means you will be able to pay them without ruining the project. However, if they respond like this:

So you're paying people to tell stories. Sure, I can do that. What do I have to say?

That's a red flag. If you hear anything like that, you should not pay anyone to participate in your project. Instead, go back to the drawing board. Ask people what sort of project they would like to participate in, and see if you can get closer to what they want to do.

### **The power of project gifts**

Remember, in the Story Fundamentals chapter, how I talked about the similarities between story sharing and gift giving? You can use this connection to encourage people to participate in your project. When you interact with people, whether it's in a survey, interview, or group session, you can give them a gift of appreciation that helps them feel respected and included. This may seem manipulative, but it's no more manipulative than bringing a gift to a dinner party. A project gift is a gesture of good faith, and it's a way to acknowledge that the project belongs to its participants at least as much as it belongs to you.



It is important to give your project gift *before* people start telling stories. Why?

- An up-front gift signals the start of an enjoyable social interaction. I've seen such gifts send waves of surprised curiosity through rooms full of previously annoyed participants.



- An up-front gift creates a mild social obligation that can be repaid by taking part in the project. People usually respond to such gifts with little bursts of participatory energy.

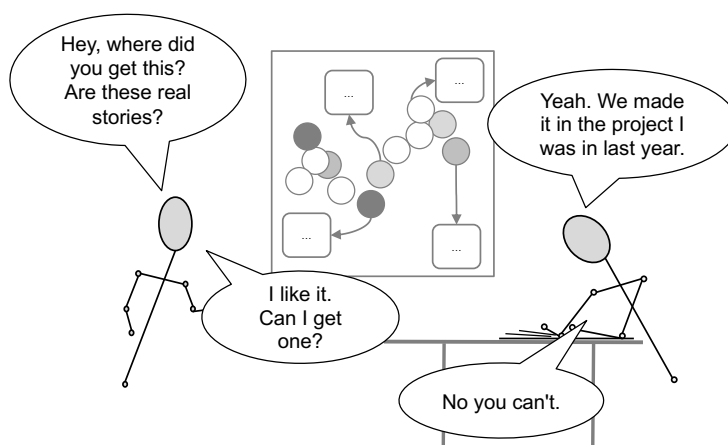
A project gift must also be unexpected, respectful, and of the right size.

- Don't mention the gift in any of your invitations to participants. If you do, the gift will become a payment in exchange, not a social signal. Of course, if rumors happen to spread about the "surprise" gift people are getting, that's great. Positive network effects are excellent recruiting devices. But don't spill the beans about the gift yourself.
- Choose a gift that will have real value to your participants. A worthless or meaningless gift will send a message of alienation and inattention, and that could damage participation more than a well-chosen gift will help it.
- Choose a right-sized gift. An expensive gift might seem like a bribe, and a cheap gift might come off as disrespectful.

The best project gift is *a gift that tells a story about the project*. Think about why you are doing the project and what it will mean to your participants, and find a gift that will help them remember the part they played in the project. For example:

- If you were doing a PNI project about the history and future of your community, you could prepare a nicely printed booklet with photographs of significant places in the community, then and now, alongside stories told in the project.
- If you were doing a PNI project to design a new museum, you could arrange exclusive viewings of early architectural plans.
- If you were doing a PNI project to improve your local train service, you could commission some special one-day-free-pass train tickets, whose stubs participants could keep.

Those are just some made-up ideas, but if you know your participants well, you should be able to think of a unique gift they will find valuable and memorable. Well-chosen gifts do more than please; they spread motivation around the community through storytelling about participation in the project. This can impact not only your own project but those that come after it as well.



## Get to know your participants

Your project's most precious resource is not your time, your expertise, your tools, or your techniques. It is the time and attention of your participants. Taking the time to think about their perceptions and needs maximizes the impact of their investment.

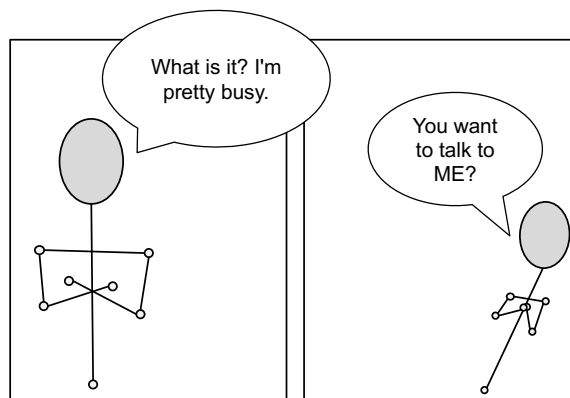
### *Participant groups*

Will all of your participants have similar experiences with, and perspectives on, your topic? Will they all feel the same way about your project? Will they all respond to your invitation to participate in the same way? Or will they differ? If they will differ, are there any groups you need to consider separately? For example, might you need to think about students and teachers differently, or managers and staff, or visitors and residents? If so, answer the following questions separately for each participant group.

### *Status, power, and authority*

Because story sharing is strongly linked to power and status in communities and organizations, you need to pay attention to those things as you prepare to ask people to share and work with stories. For each participant group you have identified, consider whether any of these conditions apply.

- Are these participants of particularly high or low social status in the community or organization?
  - If they are of high status, you will need to prove the value of the project to them, defer to their authority, and ask humbly for their help.
  - If they are of low status, you will need to encourage them to speak up, empower them to play a role in the project, and assure them that they are qualified to participate.
- Do any two or more participant groups have markedly different levels of status, power, or authority? If you asked them to tell stories in a mixed group, would the stories come out differently than if they were speaking only to their peers? If so, you might need to keep the groups separate, at least in some parts of the project.



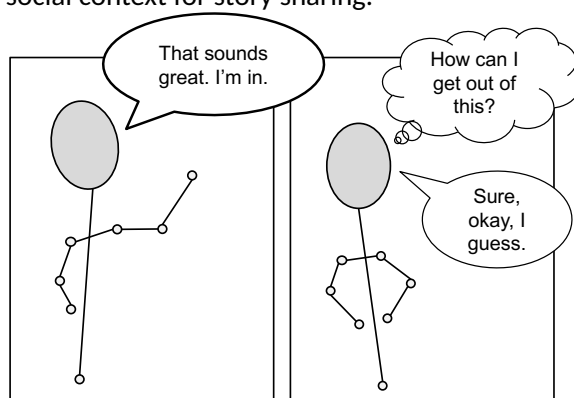
### *Perceptions of you*

In every conversation, people choose whether they will tell stories, which stories they will tell, and how they will tell stories based on their perceptions of the social context in which

they find themselves. You will hold a prominent place in the social context in which your participants will find themselves during your project. So their perception of you, your role or position, and the people or groups you represent will affect how many stories you can gather and what those stories will be like. Ask yourself these questions with respect to each group of participants.

- Is there a cultural barrier between you and these participants—whatever “you” means to them? When it comes to your shared experiences and perceptions, do you have little in common? Are you likely to have a problem understanding each other?
- Do these participants think you are incapable of carrying out a project that can actually be helpful to them and to the community or organization?
- Do these participants dislike or distrust you in general? If you, or someone like you, sat down with them, say at a meal, would they feel comfortable recounting their experiences, or would they hold back?
- Do these participants like or trust you *too* much? Are they likely to try so hard to do exactly what you ask them to do that they will disregard their own needs?

In your answer to any of these questions is “yes,” you will need to spend extra time testing and refining the approach you will use to ask people to share and work with stories. You may also need to expand your project team to include people who will create a more relevant and useful social context for story sharing.

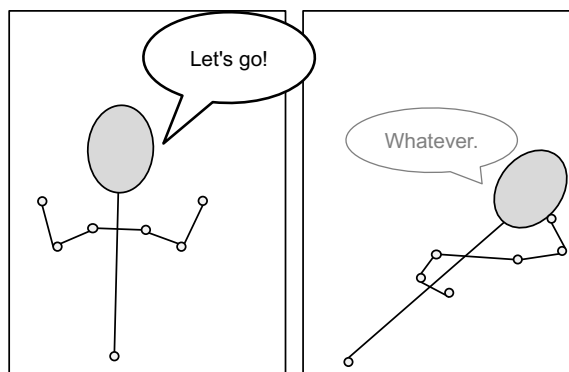


### ***Perceptions of participation***

In my project work I have come across several common misperceptions of invitations to participate in story work. If you know your participants well, you can anticipate these misperceptions and work to counter them. For each participant group, ask yourself how they will perceive your invitation to participate in the project. I've listed these in order of how often I've seen them happen.

- Will they see the invitation as a test or evaluation? Will they feel required to prove themselves qualified to be included in the project (or in the community or organization)? If so, you will need to reassure them that they are already qualified and included and that you respect and value their knowledge and experience.

- Will they see the invitation as a nuisance, a bit of tedious paperwork you are pestering them with? If you expect apathy, you will need to work harder to convince people of the value of participation, communicate the goals of the project, and ask people for their help in making the effort a success.
- Will they see the invitation as a worthless, meaningless exercise, a bit of fluff that will produce no real results? If so, you will need to work harder to explain the method you are using, to prove that it has value, and to ask for their help making the process work.
- Will they see the invitation as a favor you are asking? Are they likely to participate only to please you? If so, you will need to work harder to give them a reason to get involved for their own benefit.
- Will they see the invitation as a party, a fun time they can walk away from as soon as they're not having fun? If so, you will need to place extra stress on the serious and ambitious goals of the project (if it has them) and ask your participants to take on some of the burden of making the project work, even if it is not always fun.
- Will they see the invitation as a danger, a gauntlet they are being forced to walk through? If so, you will need to give them a sense of hope and agency in the project and what it can bring to them and to the whole community or organization. Also emphasize the fact that *they get to decide* how much they will participate in the project.
- Will they see the invitation as an opportunity to gain status in the community or organization? Will they want to use it to promote themselves or compete with others? If so, you will need to ask them to put aside their individual goals and think about their hopes for the future of the entire community or organization.
- Will they see the invitation as an opportunity to win an argument or fight for a worldview or cause? If so, you will need to communicate that the project will use story sharing to reduce (rather than engage in) conflict by helping everyone listen to and understand every point of view.



### **Participation ability**

Also consider your participants' ability to participate. For each participant group:

- Are these people too busy to participate, even if they are willing to do so? If so, you might need to scale back your ambitions, lengthen your project timeline, find more

participants, consider compensation, or choose other ways of gathering stories and bringing people together.

- Is there a logistical barrier (physical, cognitive, or legal) that will prevent these participants from being able to share and work with stories of their experiences? If so, you will need to understand the abilities they *do* have and work with them as best you can.
- Is there a behavioral barrier (emotional, psychological, or cultural) that will prevent these participants from feeling comfortable sharing stories of their experiences, even if they are willing to? Are they likely to believe, for example, that sharing stories is not something people like them can or should do? If so, you may need some extra flexibility and creativity as you shape the project to meet their needs.
- If you find that different participant groups have differing abilities to participate, you will need to think about how you can give everyone the opportunity to participate in a way that works for them.

### **Consider how your participants will interact with your topic**

The topic you want to ask about interacts with the people you will be asking to talk, so it is impossible to consider them separately. These questions pertain to that interaction rather than to the topic alone.

#### ***Emotion***

Most PNI projects—and most stories—have something to do with emotion, but some are more emotional than others. For example:

- Your participants may find your topic especially embarrassing, intimate, sensitive, or private.
- The experiences you want your participants to recount may be uncomfortable, painful, traumatic, or buried deep.
- Your topic may be dangerous for your participants to talk about in the wrong context.

In general, the more emotional of a topic you want to explore, the more you will need to test and refine your plans, listen to (or include) a larger group in your planning process, and build a supportive and transparent privacy policy. In addition, these are some extra steps that work well in projects with emotional topics.

- Look for social contexts in which your participants already share stories about the experiences you want to ask them about. Ask people where, when, and with whom they have talked about the topic in the past. If you notice any contexts mentioned often, see if you can reproduce them. For example, if people tell you that they often talk about the topic with their friends, you might want to ask friends to interview each other.
- Look for social contexts that might help your participants explore the topic in more freedom and safety than they can now. Ask people where, when, and with whom they *wish* they could talk about the topic. Then see if you can create those contexts. For example, if people say they wish they could talk about the topic with other people who have faced the same challenges (but they can't because they don't know any of those people), see if you can safely bring those people into contact with each other.

- No matter what you find out about your participants, give them multiple ways to share and work with stories. Having a choice gives people agency and helps them find a form of participation that works for them. For example, you might ask people if they want to talk about their experiences in a written survey, in a one-on-one interview with a trusted helper, or in a peer interview with a friend.
- When emotions are high, people tend to be on the lookout for subtle messages and commands. So watch your language and tone. Don't assume your participants will understand your intent; watch them respond to your invitations and instructions.

### **Understanding**

Some topics present obstacles to exploration not because they are emotional but because people aren't used to talking about them in daily life. Your participants might have a hard time talking about your topic because *they don't know what to say* about it.

- Your topic could be an abstract social, scientific, or philosophical concept that is subtle and hard to grasp, like intertextuality in public discourse.
- Your topic could be a systemic issue that few people are used to considering in its full scope, like how social and parasocial interactions influence each other.
- Your topic could be an aspect of societal or organizational infrastructure that most people barely notice, like the design of sidewalks.
- Your topic could be something so apparently trivial that most people never think about it at all, like swallowing.
- Your topic could be something that happened so far back in people's pasts that they will struggle to remember it, like infantile amnesia.

In situations like these, the obstacle is not a lack of safety or freedom; it's a lack of understanding, which can lead to muddled and meaningless results. I've seen this happen when the people who run projects live in different worlds than their participants, experientially speaking. In these cases I have found that these extra steps can help to bridge the gap.

- Spend some extra time up front asking people about the topic you want to explore. Don't gather any stories yet; just ask questions like:
  - When you think about \_\_\_\_, what words or phrases come to mind?
  - What does \_\_\_\_ mean to you?
  - Have you ever heard the term " \_\_\_\_?" What do you think it means?
  - If someone mentioned \_\_\_\_ to you, what would you think they meant by it?
- When you begin to explain your project and its topic to your participants, don't assume that they understand what you mean. Find out. Show some of them your invitations and instructions, and *ask them to say what you said back to you in their own words*. If they can't, or won't, or seem afraid to try, or if their explanations don't match yours, keep

working on your messages until people start giving you back what you meant to say to them. As you are doing this:

- Notice what people say when they *do* understand what you mean. Consider whether their words might work better than yours. Experiment with some of these alternative phrasings. When you see the light of understanding, follow it.
  - If you can, find some people who live in both worlds (yours and those of your participants) and ask them to help you translate your preferred language into terms your participants will understand.
  - Question your assumptions about what your participants can or should understand, both about your topic and about the words you would prefer to use to explain it. Challenge yourself to let go of the way you would like to talk about the topic so you can help other people talk about it.
- If you find that some of your participant groups understand your preferred terms better than other groups, you have a choice to make.
    - You can find the lowest common denominator and speak to everyone in language that works for the people who need the most help understanding what you mean. Doing this may sacrifice some nuances of meaning in the jargon-ready group, and it may even offend some people who pride themselves on their knowledge of in-the-know words. On the other hand, since you have used the same words to speak to everyone, it will be easy to compare what they say in response.
    - You can work in parallel streams, using different language to speak to each participant group. Doing this will meet each group where they are and may bring out more nuanced responses. But you may not be able to compare what they say, since they responded to different questions.

## Build your win-win proposal

Now it's time to maximize your chance of success by getting to the heart of *what your participants want* from the project. Think about every participant group separately, especially groups with different amounts of power. Ask yourself:

- What kind of project would this group be excited to participate in?
- If this project isn't like that already, how can we improve it?
- If different groups want different things, what can we do to help them all get at least some of what they want?

To answer these questions, show your project plans to some people from each participant group. Do they respond with enthusiasm? Indifference? Suspicion? Resignation? If they don't seem interested in the project, ask them what sort of project they *would* be excited to participate in. Then ask yourself the above questions again. Keep doing this until you find a project plan that works for everyone.

To do participatory work well, you need to *share your project* with your participants. And by this I don't mean "share" in the sense of "tell them about it." I mean it in the sense of "give some of it to them."

This can be a hard thing to do. You've thought a lot about this project, and you might feel a little possessive about it. These people might not care about the project as much as you do. They might not understand it as well as you do. But *unless your project belongs as much to your participants as it does to you, it will fail to achieve its goals.*

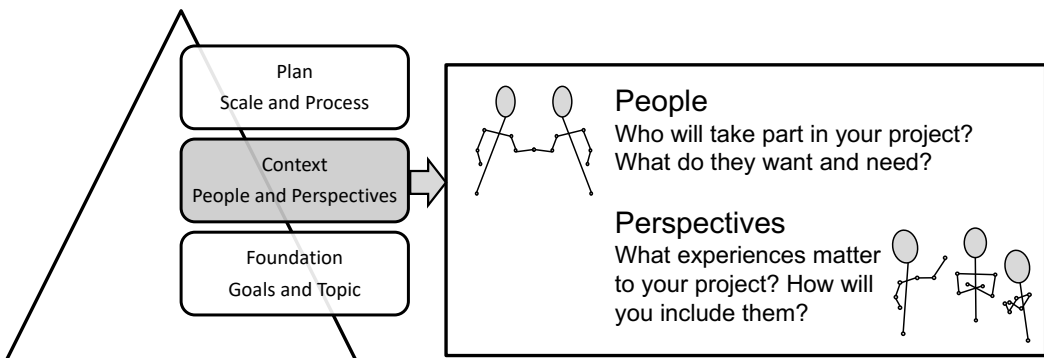
For example, when you talk about the project, don't say "the" project or "my" project or "the committee's" project or "the project I've prepared" or "the project I've invited you to join." Don't even say "your" project; that would be passive-aggressive, because you *have* done a lot of work on it. Say "our" project. You'd be surprised how much a little thing like that can matter.

Of course, the flip side of the give-and-take equation is that you need to ask your participants to share the project with *you*. You *have* worked long and hard on it, and you need them to respect that. The more put-upon or disrespected you feel, the harder it will be to carry out your plans. Don't let people walk all over you.

Which of these two sides of give and take matters more will depend on you, your participants, and your topic. If you're the dominating sort, don't dominate your project to death. If you're the self-effacing sort, don't efface yourself out of the project you've worked so hard on. If your participants are a bunch of hard-headed skeptics who will argue with every word that comes out of your mouth, prepare to assert yourself. If they are all so humble and timid that they will hide in the corners of the project, prepare to assert *their* right to participate. You know what you're like, and by now you should know what they are like. Plan accordingly.

### Answer two more PNI planning questions

Once your win-win proposal has been built and tested, you should be ready to answer the next two of the six PNI planning questions.



#### **People: Who matters to your project?**

Who will provide the participatory energy for your project? Who will tell the stories? Who will work with the stories? Who will hear or see them? Who will provide project support? Who will provide funding? How will all of these people be connected? '

If the project will call upon existing relationships, what are they like? What synergies, assets, and tensions do they contain? If the project will build new relationships, how will it do so,



and what sorts of opportunities and dangers will be involved in doing so? What do all of these things mean for the project?

How will you find your participants? Are there any subgroups among them? What are they like? How are they likely to respond to questions about your topic?

***Perspectives: What experiences matter to your project?***

What are the varieties of experience and perspective that your project will bring together or juxtapose? You might plan, for example, to cover a range of ages; living or family arrangements; educational, socioeconomic, or religious backgrounds; neighborhoods; occupations; and political affiliations. You should already have a sense of this from working through your participant groups. But this is a good time to go back over the groups and make sure you haven't left anyone out. Is there a perspective you have not yet considered? How would including it change the project?

### **Consider a pilot project**

If you are having a hard time answering the "People" and "Perspectives" planning questions, you might want to pause your planning and learn more about your participants before you move on. One way to do that is to run a pilot project.

A pilot project is a small but complete PNI project that is embedded in the planning phase of a larger project. Unlike the planning exercise I described at the start of this chapter, a pilot project gathers stories from your project participants, not just the people on your project planning team. Pilot projects are useful in four situations:

1. You are planning a large, complex, ambitious project, one that will involve many people, stories, questions, or topics.
2. You want to answer specific questions as thoroughly and completely as you can. You don't want to miss anything.
3. Your topic is emotional, sensitive, maybe even dangerous. You need to make sure people will feel safe and free to explore their experiences.
4. You don't know enough about your participants or topic to build a project plan that will achieve your goals.

In all of these cases, you will want to maximize your chance of success by gathering some extra background information before you get started in earnest.

Here's an example. Say you have worked out your project's goals and focus in broad strokes, but you feel a need to meet the people of your community where they are and give them an opportunity to talk about your topic in a way that makes sense to them. So you set up three tiny pilot projects, each involving a handful of participants, each centered around a different approach to your topic, and each running (from start to finish) in one week. Then you bring your oversight committee together, tell them what happened in each of the pilot projects, and ask them to help you make some well-informed decisions about your project plans.

## Plan: Make decisions about your scale and process

The last phase of planning wades into the details of what you will actually *do* in your project. How will you do the work that needs to be done? What will you say to your participants? What will you do with the stories you collect?

### Think about your resources

Consider your skills, time, knowledge, and tools. If any of these things are lacking, there are things you can do.

- You might never have done this kind of work before. If so, start small. Build your PNI skills—and your PNI style—one step at a time. With the help of a few friends, family members, or colleagues, you can carry out a simple PNI project in just a few days. Getting out there and doing PNI yourself will give you a better start than any amount of reading.
- You might not know enough about your participants or topic to support your project well. If so, see if you can build a project team by recruiting some friends, colleagues, or project participants whose knowledge can supplement your own.
- You might not have enough time to carry out the project you want to do. If so, get some help or scale back your plans. You can always do a bigger project later.
- You might not be ready to record, store, and process the volume of stories you would like to collect. You can use a wide variety of tools to gather stories, from pens to phones to surveys to word processors to spreadsheets to databases. Whichever method you choose, *try it out with a handful of stories* before you decide how many stories you will collect. If your collection goal seems unreachable, reduce it, get some help, or give yourself some extra time to build your skills as you go.

### Think about the phases of PNI

Every PNI project has three essential phases: collection, sensemaking, and return. You can't drop those out of your project (and still be doing PNI), but you might want to think about how important each phase will be to your overall project. Which of the three essential phases will be the most important? Which will be the least important?

Also, which, if any, of PNI's optional phases will you be using in your project? You're in the planning phase right now, so obviously that phase will be included. But do you want to prepare catalytic material for sensemaking? And do you want to make an intervention in the flow of stories? If so, how much time and attention do you want to spend on those phases of the project? If you don't think you need those phases, do you want to rule them out from the start, or do you want to leave some flexibility in your plan so you can incorporate a small amount of catalysis or intervention if the need arises?

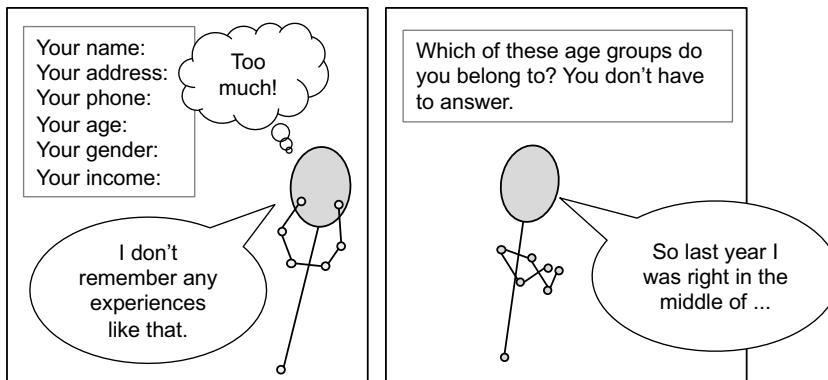
### Build your privacy policy

Every PNI project needs a clear and transparent privacy policy. To create it, there are four basic privacy decisions you will need to make.

## Disclosure

When you were working out your win-win proposal, if your potential participants told you that they were concerned about disclosing their feelings, values, or beliefs (or more concerned than you thought they would be), it might be a good idea to adjust your project to reduce the risk of disclosure. For example:

- You could reduce your project's scope or depth, gathering fewer stories and asking fewer questions than you had planned.
- You could broaden your topic to include the option of recounting experiences that seem safer to talk about.
- You could gather less information about your participants, giving up information to gather more meaning.
- You could run a pilot project to explore ways to provide greater privacy.
- You could set up a participant steering committee and give them veto power over your project plans.
- You could offer participants a variety of ways to share stories that provide varying degrees of disclosure.
- You could make it easier for participants to review and change their contributions.
- You could ask a trusted intermediary to gather stories and give you only as much as participants choose to share.
- You could set up self-running peer interviews or story-sharing sessions and let each pair or group decide which stories (and which versions of the stories) they will share with the whole project.



A lower-disclosure project might not be as impactful as the project you had wanted to do, but it could build trust that will help you do more in your next project.

## Anonymity

If you were gathering only factual information about people, it would be easy to ensure anonymity. If you were measuring heights, for example, you could just *not ask people their names*, and barring rare exceptions, nobody would know whose height was whose.

Gathering stories is different. Stories contain contextual clues that can make it possible to guess who told them *even when names are not collected*. For example, if a participant mentions picking their children up from school, that narrows the list of possible storytellers. Even a turn of phrase can provide clues to a storyteller's identity.

So you can't just provide *direct* anonymity, the kind you can ensure by not taking names. You also need to provide *indirect anonymity*. How can you do that? Tell your participants who will hear or see the stories you are asking them to tell.

That's how story sharing works. We all choose which contextual details to leave in or out of stories based on the people we are talking to. To do that, we need to know who it is we are talking to. You can provide indirect anonymity by giving your participants the awareness they need to protect themselves as they tell stories.

Indirect anonymity is not just about storytellers; it's also about the other people in the stories people tell. So if privacy is a concern in your project, ask your participants to *think about the privacy of other people* as well as their own.

It's also a good idea to remove identifying information from stories as you collect them. When someone refers to a person by name, you can replace the name with an anonymous reference like "the manager" or "the neighbor." Tell people that you will be doing this, so they won't feel censored.

### **Exposure**

People want to be heard, but they don't want what they say to be distorted, used against them, used for purposes they don't support, or told to the wrong people. As you plan your project, ask yourself these questions:

- Who will get to see or hear what participants say? The internet? Everyone who reads your research report? Everyone in the community or organization? Every participant? Every participant in a subgroup? The people who participate in sensemaking workshops? You and the project funders? Just you? Or will each participant be able to choose? How will they do that?
- In what formats will the stories and other information be recorded, stored, and made available? Video? Audio? Text? Transcripts? If there are transcripts made, how will they be made? By whom? How will they be checked for accuracy? Will participants get the chance to correct them? What will be done with the original recordings?
- How much of what participants say will be seen or heard? Every word? A summary? Excerpts taken out of context?
- To what extent will the stories and answers be edited? Not at all? Lightly, for clarity and/or length? Drastically, to suit a purpose? Will participants get to see and approve these changes?
- If participants will be given choices in what happens to what they said, how will they be given choices? Will they be requested, required, or permitted to make these choices? How will you contact participants? How will they contact you?

## Regret

When we humans get to sharing stories, we sometimes share more than we meant to, and we sometimes regret it later. I can certainly think of many times when I “got going” with a story, forgot who I was talking to, and said too much.

How strongly you will need to support amendment or retraction will depend on how sensitive your topic is and how much your participants are concerned about privacy. For example, after a story-sharing session, you could invite—or even require—participants to review the session transcript before it is used in sensemaking. Or you could say nothing but be ready to respond to any expressions of regret that arise.

I like to tell people right up front that *they can change anything they say later on*. Nobody has ever actually asked to do this, but I can see that people appreciate the option. I can also see that saying it helps people to share stories more freely.

## Explaining your privacy policy

People come to PNI projects with a variety of concerns and motivations. To meet all of their needs I have found that a multi-tiered explanation works best.

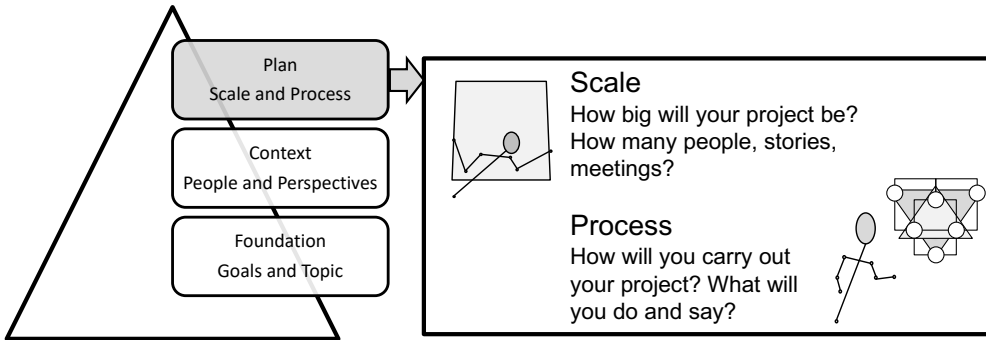
- Some people won't care about privacy at all. To avoid turning them away, keep your explanation short, simple, and easy to skim.
- Most people won't care about privacy *as long as nothing out of the ordinary happens*. So, even in a short and simple explanation, make it clear that help is available if and when people want it.
- Some people will care very much about privacy. For them, provide an easy way to access a complete (but optional) explanation of your full privacy policy.

Here is an example explanation of a privacy policy.

Tell people	For example
What you will and will not collect	Everything you say in this ___ is anonymous. Every question is optional. Say as little or as much as you like. After the ___, we will ___, taking care to ___.
What you want people to conceal	Please do not reveal personally identifying information about yourself or anyone else, including ___. We will remove inadvertent identifications by ___.
How what is said will be used and distributed	The ___ we gather in this ___ will be used, along with other ___ gathered in ___, in a series of ___, to which ___ is/are invited. To join, ___. Your ___ may also be used in/to ___. Do you give us permission to ___?
How people can change their minds	You can review your ___ by ___, and you can change or remove it by ___.

## Answer the last two PNI planning questions

Now it's time to answer the last two questions in the list.



### **Scale: How big will your project be?**

Scale has to do with the number of participants you invite, the number of stories you collect, and the depth of exploration you facilitate. For example:

- A small-scale project might invite 10 people to share 30 stories and work with them in a single 3-hour session, exploring a simple topic with no recording.
- A large-scale project might invite 2000 people to share 4000 stories, then invite 200 people to work with the stories in a series of day-long workshops, exploring a complex topic in great detail and from many perspectives, generating a comprehensive 200-page report that is returned, along with the stories, to the entire community or organization.

By this time you should have an idea of how large or small a project you want to do from exploring your project's goals and context. This is a good time to evaluate your choice of scale. *Why* do you want your project to be as large as it will be, and not smaller or larger?

Here's a quick exercise you can use to check that you have the right scale for your project.

1. Write two lists of forces: ones that push your project's scale up (like a large and diverse population you want to represent) and ones that push your project's scale down (like uncertainty about how much participatory energy you can tap into). Try to think of at least five forces of each type.
2. Mark each force by how important (high, medium, or low) it is to your goals or context. How big of an impact on the project do you think this force will or should have?
3. Now step back and look at your two lists. What do they tell you about the opportunities, dangers, and tensions in the project? Do they make you want to adjust your project scale up or down?

You can read more about project scale in the section of Chapter Eight called "How many stories to collect" on page [135](#).

### **Process: How will you carry out your project?**

Which phases of PNI will be more and less important in your project? Will you leave any phases out completely? What would happen if each phase were bigger or smaller? Which

phases are you the most excited about? Which seem tedious or unnecessary? (And if so, do you need them?)

And finally, what are the nuts and bolts of your project plan? How will do you plan to find and reach out to your participants? How do you plan to involve them in the project? What do you plan to say to them? How do you plan to work with them and listen to them?

## Write your project synopsis

After you have answered all six PNI planning questions, use them to write a *project synopsis*. Combine your answers into a sentence or two that you can use to describe the project to anyone involved.

Here are some fictional examples:

- To find out what people want for our community in the future [goal], our group of community council members [people] will ask people from all demographic categories in our community [perspectives] to tell at least two stories each [scale] about the next ten years of our community [topic], and we will look for patterns in the stories told [process].
- To rediscover forgotten ideas about the art of photography [goal], our group of students [people] will ask 20 [scale] current photographers [people] to meet and talk about [process] stories about decisions and dilemmas [topic], which were gathered from the writings [perspectives] of 150 [scale] photographers [perspectives] going back through 15 [scale] decades [perspectives].
- To improve our patient care [goal], our group of hospital support staff [people] will collect stories about office visits [topic] from 50 [scale] patients and doctors [people] across a wide spectrum of disorders and complaints [perspectives]. Then a group of patients and doctors [people] will meet to look at and think about the patterns they see in the stories [process]. Our group [people] will disseminate a report on the meeting [process] to all doctors and waiting rooms in the network [people].
- To help foreign students succeed at our university [goal], staff members at the university's international student center [people] will ask 30 [scale] students [people] from all countries attending the university [perspectives] to tell stories about their first month at the university [topic]. Those stories will be made available to other foreign students [people] who need help settling in [perspectives].

Can you write a sentence or two like these that describes *your* project well? If you can't, go back over your planning process and see what part needs more work. It is better to go over your planning process a second time than to start your project without a firm foundation.

Your project synopsis will serve as a touchstone throughout your project. Feature it in every invitation. Put it right up front so people know exactly what is going on and why.





## Chapter 8

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# Story Collection

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In Chapter Two we talked about how stories can be seen as messages, thinking tools, and connections. Looking at stories from three perspectives provided us with a general sense of the word that was suitable for any purpose.

But PNI has a specific purpose: helping people make sense of situations to achieve common goals. This means that not every story—as defined in a general sense—will support sensemaking in a PNI project. When you collect stories in PNI, you will be focusing on stories that recount experiences, have plots, and reveal perspectives.

### **The best stories for PNI recount experiences**

Stories that support sensemaking well are true, raw, and personal. They describe *things that happened to specific people*, not to entire communities, organizations, or societies, and not to no one in particular.

For example, compare these two stories:

1. The town of Eastville was founded in 1829. Its town hall was erected in 1878. The school followed in 1901, and the hospital opened its doors in 1915. During the flu epidemic, the new hospital saved hundreds of lives.
2. My grandmother started at the hospital in 1918, just three years after it was built. She was in maternity, but with the surge of flu patients, she took on a second job to help out. It was exhausting, but she was so proud of her work.

Only the second story will work well in a PNI project. Why? Because *there's nobody in the first story*. It's a de-personalized, distanced description of events.

### **Why experiences matter**

The goal of PNI is to help groups of people make sense of situations together. In order to do that, people must be able to *imagine themselves experiencing the events* described in the stories. It's hard to imagine yourself in a story that has no people in it.

Part of the work of doing PNI lies in guiding people toward *recounting their own experiences* and away from providing impersonal, newspaper-style accounts of events.

### **The best stories for PNI have plots**

Stories that support sensemaking well cover spans of time and contain *moments of uncertainty* and *tensions between possibilities*.

For example, consider these three statements:

1. I like my work. It can be hard. But I'm good at what I do, and I'm proud of that.
2. I started working here five years ago. I became a foreman last year. At the moment we are building an apartment complex.
3. When I started this job ten years ago, I didn't know what I was doing. To be honest, I wasn't sure I was going to make it. But I did, and now I help new folks get started.

Each of these statements could be called a story in a general sense, but only the last one will work well in a PNI project.

1. The first statement exists outside of time. It has no beginning, middle, or end. It just is. Nothing happens at all, so there can be no uncertainty about what will happen *next*.
2. The second statement recounts a sequence of events, but it contains no tension between possibilities. It has a beginning and an end, but no middle.
3. The third statement begins by recounting a situation at one point in time ("When I started"). Then there is a moment of uncertainty, a point of *branching possibilities*, when it is not clear what will happen next ("I wasn't sure"). Finally, the story resolves itself into a new state at a new point in time ("and now I help"). This three-part structure—a certain beginning, an uncertain middle, and a certain end—gives the story a plot, and that makes it useful in PNI.

### ***Why plots matter***

PNI helps people explore what has/not happened in the past and what could/not and should/not happen in the future. To support these explorations, people need stories to work with that are more than lists of events. They need stories with interactions between possibility, actuality, and desire.

Part of the work of doing PNI lies in guiding people away from describing simple lists of events and towards *telling whole stories with plots*, including moments in which they were not sure what would happen next.

### **The best stories for PNI reveal perspectives**

Stories that support sensemaking well *authentically express and reflectively explore* the feelings, values, and beliefs of their tellers.

For example, compare these two stories:

1. I've been working here five years. I started when was 40. Yeah, the work is okay. Sure, I like it. Yes, I am good at my job.
2. I wasn't sure if I would make it as a welder. It was daunting at first. But I like it. I like making useful things. It makes me feel like a useful person.

The second story will be much more useful in a PNI project than the first. The first is guarded and defensive, revealing nothing, and the second reveals how the storyteller feels about what happened to them, what they think it means, and why it matters to them.

### ***Why perspectives matter***

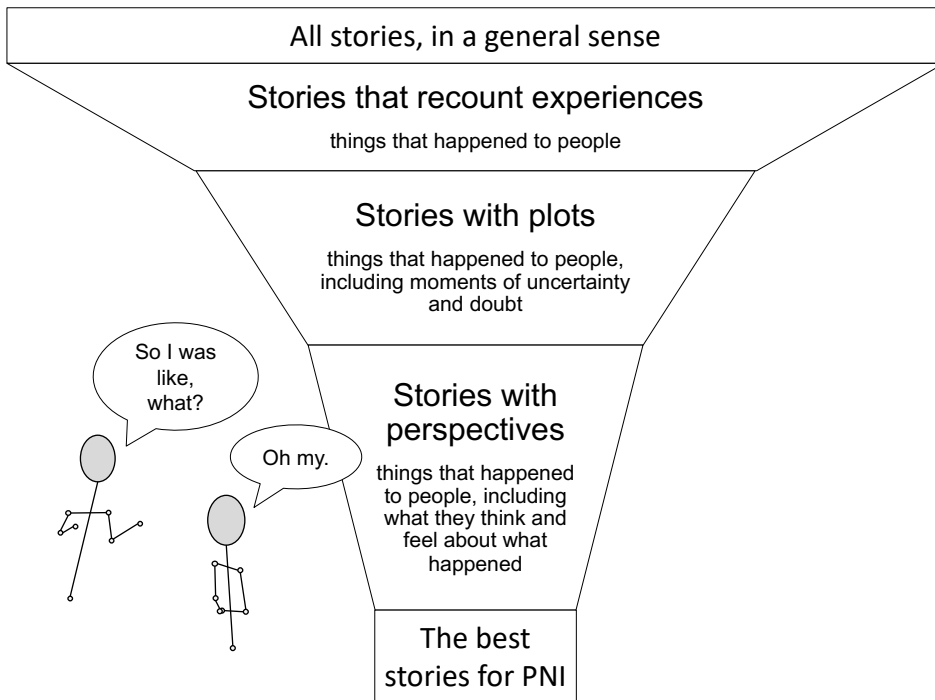
Most of the sensemaking people do in PNI has to do with making sense of *people*: how they feel about this, why they feel like that, what they think this means, why they keep doing that, what they would think if we did this, and so on. To support these explorations, people need stories to work with that do more than state the bare facts of a situation. They need stories that reveal the true feelings, values, and beliefs of actual people.

Part of the work of doing PNI lies in making sure your participants feel safe, heard, and respected enough to reflect on their experiences and tell stories that express their feelings, values, and beliefs.

### **This advice is for you, not for your participants**

As a PNI practitioner, it is your job to guide your participants toward telling stories that will support sensemaking. But don't *tell* your participants about these types of stories. Don't give them a lecture on the stories that work best for sensemaking, and don't ever criticize a story that does not meet these criteria.

Instead, guide your participants towards these types of stories *indirectly*. Embed your guidance in your introductions, your questions, and your instructions. Then, as you collect your stories, use these descriptions to think about how well you will be able to support sensemaking and whether you need to adjust your approach.



## A quick overview of story collection methods

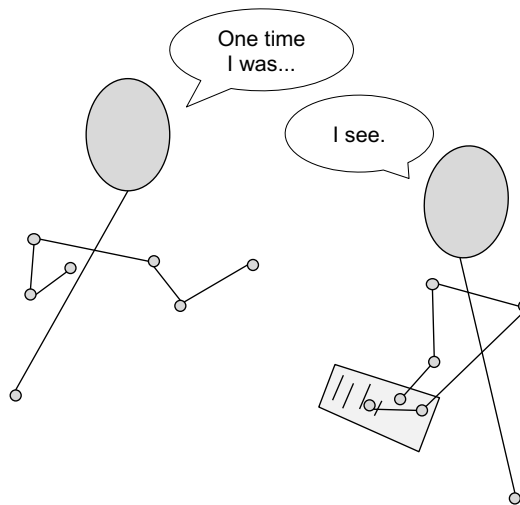
There are at least eight ways to gather stories in a PNI project. I will say more about each method later on, but for now I'll just give you a quick glimpse at your options.

### One-on-one interviews

A one-on-one interview is a *listening conversation* between you and one project participant. You ask questions and they respond.

This option is useful when:

- Your participants don't know or trust each other, but they trust you (or your role, or a group you represent).
- Your topic is personal and sensitive, and you don't think people would be able to open up about it in a group.
- Your participants are of especially high or low status in the community and must be approached with special respect.
- You want to gather fewer but longer stories.



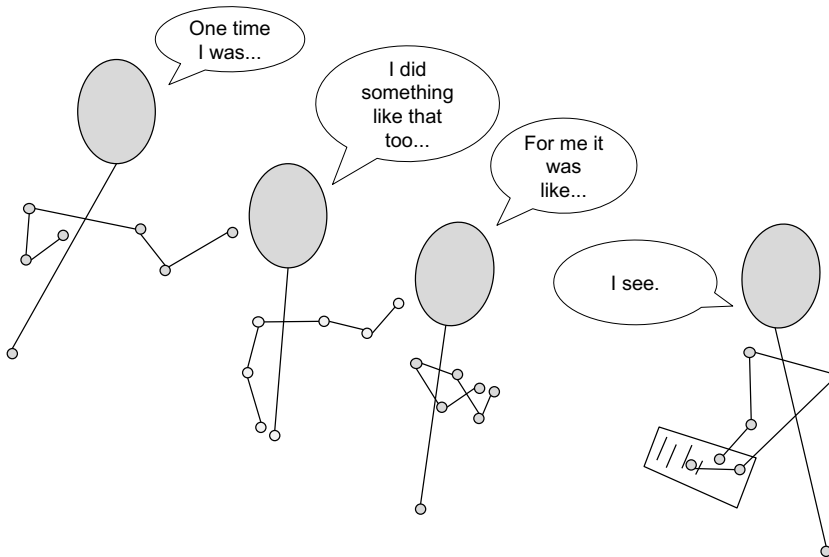
For example, say you want to improve how you help people recover from natural disasters. Recent survivors might be willing to tell you about their experiences, but they wouldn't be likely to know other survivors. Also, they are probably tired of filling out forms, but they might want to talk to a real person about their experiences.

## Group interviews

A group interview is a *guided conversation* between you and 2-5 project participants. You ask questions, and they all respond, and sometimes they respond to each other.

This option is useful when:

- You want to ask your participants to dredge up memories from the deep past. In one-on-one interviews, they might come up empty. But in a group interview, they might remind each other of stories to tell.
- Your participants are of low status in the community and are likely to think that they have nothing to offer the project. A conversation in a supportive group of equals might help them find their voices.
- Your participants are of high status in the community and might see “playing a game” as beneath them; but they would value a conversation among their peers.
- Your participants are very young or very old. In either case they aren't likely to follow an exercise or fill out a form, and they might be overly compliant in an individual interview. Having other people around of their own age will bring them into an experience of semi-random play (for children) or comfortable reminiscence (for the elderly).
- It's easy to get your participants together; in fact, they already talk to each other. They might even meet on a regular basis. But you don't think they would be able or willing to participate in a group exercise. A group interview is simple and direct, and you think they would prefer that.



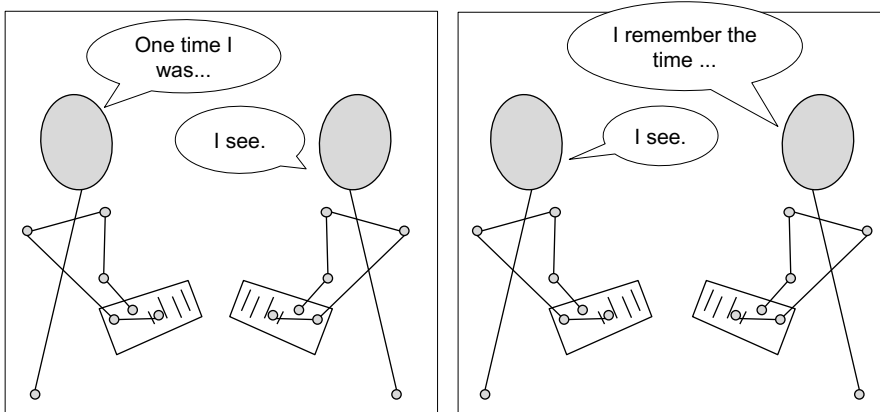
For example, say your annual conference is coming up soon. Fewer people attend every year, but some have been there since the beginning. If you were to replace your annual survey with some group interviews, it might liven up the conference, and it might help you find some new ideas you can use.

## Peer interviews

A peer interview is a *suggested conversation* among 2-3 project participants. They ask each other questions (which you gave them), and they respond to each other.

This option is useful when:

- Your participants know and trust their friends, family members, or colleagues, but they don't know and trust everyone in the community or organization, nor do they know and trust you.
- You want people to talk about experiences that are hard to explain, and you think they will find it easier to talk about those experiences with other people who have had similar experiences—but not with too many other people; just one or two.
- You don't think your participants will avoid issues they know to be taboo or leave unsaid things “everyone” knows—or at least you don't think they will do those things if you ask them not to.
- You think your participants will find the idea of interviewing each other interesting and fun. Even so, you don't think they'd go so far as to want to participate in a group exercise with random people they don't know.
- Your participants are busy, and they can't fit one more meeting into their schedule. But they might be able and willing to set up a peer interview with a friend or colleague, maybe in their off hours, especially if it looks interesting.
- Your participants have a strong sense of ownership over the project and want to take not only their stories but the conversations in which their stories are collected into their own hands.



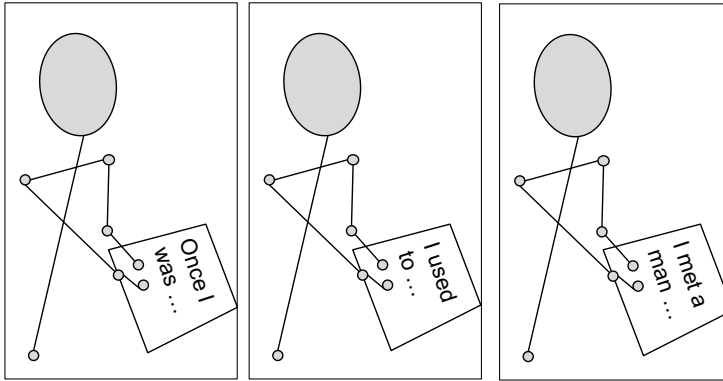
For example, say membership in your volunteer group has been declining. If you called a special story-sharing meeting, few people might come. But you could ask each member to reach out to a member who has stopped coming.

## Surveys

A survey is a *form people fill out*. They read (or hear) your questions and respond to them (in speech or writing) on their own.

This option is useful when:

- Your access to your participants is shallow. They will probably pay very little attention to anything you say or do. Most of them will not even notice that you invited them to participate in a project.
- Your access to your participants is fleeting. You may be able to get their attention, but you can only get it for a few minutes.
- Your participants consider your topic too personal to talk about with anyone at all. They might be willing to put a message in a bottle and drop it in the sea, but that's all they will do.
- You don't have any participants, not yet. This is an exploratory project. You hope to find participants by putting out a wide request, but you have no idea how many people will answer the request, and you have no idea how much time or energy anyone will be willing to put into the project.
- You have too many participants to be able to talk to them all at length, and you don't want to leave anyone out.
- You have no resources to work with in your project. You don't have time or helpers or sponsorship. Putting up a web survey is the only way you can do the project at all.



For example, say you're concerned about the future of your local farmers' market. You wonder if it needs to change with the times. If you were to place some short surveys at the tables where people sit down to eat, you might get some new ideas.

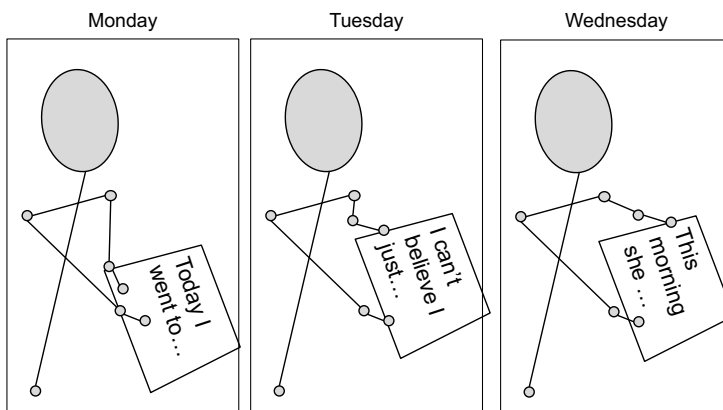
## Journals

A journal is one project participant's *periodic reflection* on their experiences. They read (or hear) your questions and respond to them (in speech or writing) on their own, just like with a survey, except that they do it multiple times, either every so often or every time something happens (whether it's an event or just a thought).

This option is useful when:

- You want to explore a topic in a deep and focused way, so you need the nuanced sorts of reflections you can only get when people go back to the same topic day after day or week after week.
- You don't need people to look back over a long period of time, and you don't need people to remind each other of stories to tell. Instead, you want people to focus on the situation they are in right now.
- Your participants are committed to the project and are willing and able to tell stories not just once but several times.
- Your topic is sensitive or private, and your participants would prefer to reflect on it by themselves, not with others.
- The topic of your project has a time element to it, such as a process people go through, and you want to follow people as they go through the process.
- Your project has relatively few participants, and it will be hard to get enough stories to work with unless you ask each person to tell several stories.
- You have enough resources to handle the greater volume of data you will collect by having people tell several stories instead of one or a few.





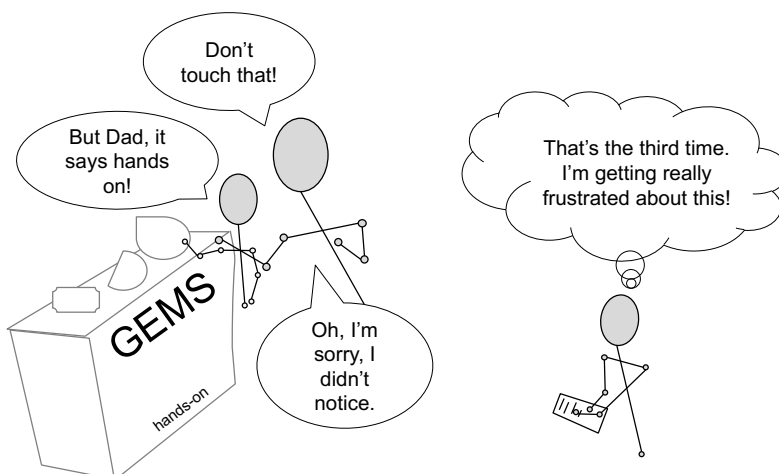
For example, say your software development team just got through an alarmingly unpopular release. After the crisis was over, you decided to take a good hard look at how you listen to your customers. Everyone agreed to keep a weekly journal for the next few months, then talk about what you found out.

### Narrative incident accounts

A narrative incident account is a *story about a witnessed event* from the perspective of a project participant. They read (or hear) your questions and respond to them (in speech or writing) on their own, just like a survey, but the story they tell is specifically about an event they saw happen.

This option is useful when:

- Your participants support other people in some way, dealing with incidents as they come up in their daily life or work.
- Your participants experience so many events that if you ask days or weeks later, the events will blend together into general scenarios, and telling details will be lost.
- Your participants already reflect on (and maybe fill out forms about) each incident just after it happens, so you have a timely opportunity to capture their experiences.



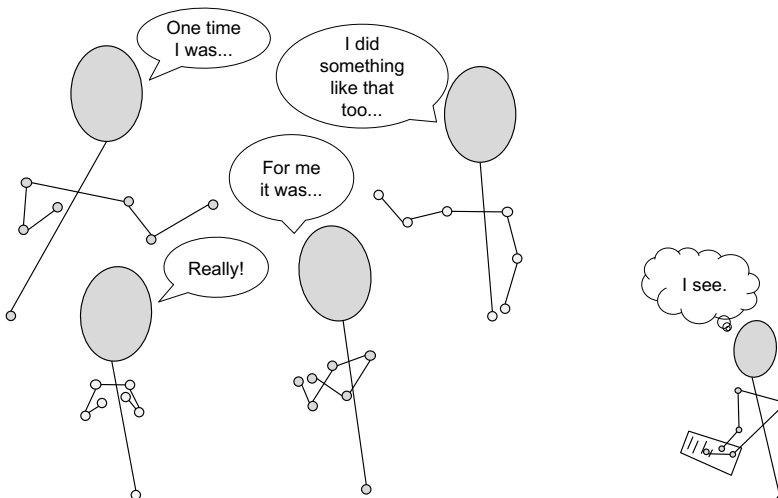
For example, say the tour guides at your museum interact with dozens of visitors every day, but when you ask them for their recollections, they speak in generalities. If you gave them a way to recount each interaction just after it has ended, you might learn some useful things about your visitors.

## Story-sharing sessions

A story-sharing session is a meeting of 3-30 participants that includes one or more *game-like activities*. The activities may or may not incorporate story-eliciting questions, but in some way or other they help people share stories with each other.

This option is useful when:

- Your goals are ambitious and your participants are enthusiastic. Everyone is ready to do whatever it takes to gather meaningful stories that will support sensemaking.
- Your participants are active people who are easily bored. Sharing stories in a game-like setting will engage them in ways that sitting for interviews or filling out forms will not.
- Your topic is not sensitive or private, and your participants will not feel uncomfortable or offended if you ask them to share stories about it in a game-like atmosphere.
- Your participants do not consider themselves to be of especially high or low social status (in general or in your community or organization), and they are not likely to react to a game-like activity as something that is beneath them or out of reach for them.
- Your topic is one your participants have not thought that much about, and you think a game-like activity will help them explore it more deeply than they could if you asked about it in a more direct way.
- Your participants trust you (or your role) enough to follow your instructions—as long as your instructions are engaging and relevant.
- You have facilitated group exercises before, or you are willing to learn as you go.
- You have a physical location or online solution with plenty of space, working surfaces, and flexibility for small-group conversation.



For example, say you're in charge of the internship program, and you want to improve it. You've been talking to interns for weeks, and you have yet to find anyone who does not want to get involved. In fact, you've already made some changes to your plans based on their excellent suggestions. It makes sense to bring them all together and give them a lively activity that will bring their fresh perspectives into the program.

## Gleaned stories

A gleaned story is a *story that was told and recorded* before your project began. You don't write questions to bring out these stories; you look for them. Using gleaned stories in PNI is useful when:

- You have access to, and permission to study, a body of recorded conversations in which people have shared stories.
- There is no way to engage with the people you need to hear from. You cannot convince—or even ask—they to join the project. They cannot or will not speak to you in any way.
- You *can* engage with the people you want to hear from, but you would like to learn more about them before you decide how you want to approach them.

For example, say you wish you could hear from customers who have canceled their services, but there is no way to reach them. The only trace of them you have left is their final conversations with your customer support staff. Still, there might be some lessons there.

A project that *only* drew its stories out of recorded conversations would be an extractive one, not a participatory one. But if you asked people to make sense of your gleaned stories together, especially if you asked them to respond to the gleaned stories with stories of their own, you could build a participatory project that *begins* with gleaned stories.

## Notes on choosing collection methods

I would like to make a few more quick points on these methods before we move on.

### ***You can use multiple methods***

You can collect stories in two or more ways within the same project. Sometimes you need to do this because different groups of participants cannot be reached in the same way. But even if you only have one group of participants, you can offer them multiple ways to share a story. For example, you can invite them to choose between joining a story-sharing session, filling in a survey, or scheduling an interview over the phone. This helps everyone find a way of contributing that works for them, and it helps the project gather a broad range of experiences.

You can also build chains of connected methods. For example, you could ask people to keep a journal for a week or a month, then ask them to attend a group story-sharing session where they explore the topic with other participants. Each element (private reflection, group story sharing) will add a complementary element to your story collection, and the combined effect will enhance your ability to support sensemaking.

### ***You don't have to record stories***

If you want to carry out a large and ambitious PNI project, one that helps dozens or hundreds of participants work with hundreds or thousands of stories, you will have no choice but to record the stories you collect in some way.

But not every PNI project is large or ambitious. You can run an entire PNI project with one group of people in one location, such as over a half-day or full-day workshop. You might need to ask people to give their stories names for easier reference, but you won't need to create a permanent record of the stories people tell.

## **Asking people to tell stories**

What is the best way to ask people to tell stories?

- You could ask directly for a story. You could say, "Tell me a story about trust."
- You could tell a story yourself. You could say, for example, "Trust saved my life one day. I was driving, and my wife suddenly grabbed the steering wheel. If I hadn't trusted her, I wouldn't have let her avoid the truck that was about to hit us." And then you could wait and see what people say in response.
- You could ask a question whose answer is a story. You could say, "Have you ever trusted anyone with your life? What happened?"

I have seen all of these techniques used to gather stories. In my considered professional opinion, only the third method is useful. Let me explain why I don't recommend the first two approaches.

### ***Asking directly for stories***

Asking someone to tell a story makes it perfectly clear what you want them to do. But it also frames a story as a noun. Stories *are* nouns, but they are also verbs, in the sense that they are communicative events that unfold in conversation. Asking a person *for* a story places an emphasis on the story as an object, and it implies that you are asking them to hand over something that belongs to them.

Most people respond to such direct requests by performing to expectation (handing over exactly what you asked for) or by making a defensive feint (handing over something they think will satisfy you so you will stop asking for the thing they don't want to give you). Neither of those responses will result in the collection of stories that support sensemaking.

### ***Telling stories to get stories***

This approach involves telling a story, then asking people to respond to it (or just waiting to see if they do). The advantage of this approach is that it is a strong focuser: it helps people understand exactly what you want. The disadvantage of this approach is that it is a strong focuser: it helps people understand *exactly* what you want.

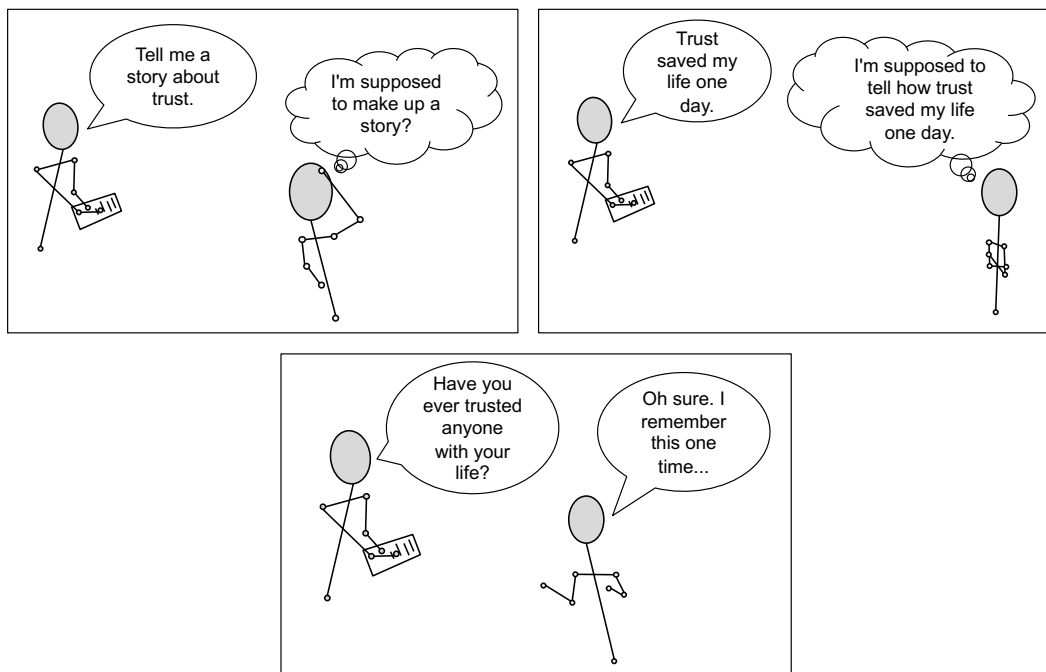
Telling a story gives people a *template* to copy. This tends to constrain their responses to what they think best matches the template, rather than what actually *happened* to them.

Such a response could be useful if you wanted to find out what people thought you *wanted* them to say, but it is not useful if you want to find out what people have experienced.

It is true that if you were in a group you knew well, like in your own family, telling a story and noting responses could work. But rarely do people collect stories for purposeful story projects in such casual settings.

### **Asking questions whose answers are stories**

Questions whose answers are stories do not command, objectify, or constrain. They start conversations, and *conversations are the natural homes of stories*. I base this recommendation on my (many) experiences watching people use these methods and watching how other people responded to them. Questions work better. Much better.



Beyond the issue of compliance or defense, there are two additional problems with asking people directly for stories:

1. To most people today, stories are not things people tell each other about things that have happened to them. Stories are television shows, movies, and newspaper articles. So if you ask someone "for" a story, you are more likely hear an amateur attempt at a screenplay or newscast than you are to hear an authentic and reflective account of the person's experiences.
2. Sometimes people tell stories without knowing they are doing it, and sometimes people think they are telling stories when they aren't. So an explicit "share your story" request can backfire when expectations and reality don't match up. For example, a person who thinks "Stories? I don't tell stories" might walk away from such a request, even though they do actually tell stories all the time (and just don't know it). Conversely, a person

who thinks “Sure, I tell stories all the time” (but doesn’t, really) might give you nothing but opinions and arguments.

Having said all of that, there are two exceptions to the “never ask directly for a story” rule, in my experience:

1. I find that it can add spice to a conversation to slip in a direct request for a story *after* I can see that people understand what sort of conversation we are having and are comfortable recounting their experiences. *Starting* with a command, or only using commands, always produces compliance or camouflage. But *after* communication has been established, a direct request can liven things up.
2. On a handful of occasions, I have had to ask someone directly for a story after a series of questions whose answers *should* have been stories failed to produce the desired response. This has happened for three reasons:
  - a) They had trouble understanding English, so they missed the subtle signs I was sending and did not realize I had given them permission to tell a story. I had to make the request explicit so they could understand it.
  - b) They were reluctant to participate, so they *pretended* to misunderstand my intent. I had to take a step back, explain the project’s goals, reframe my win-win proposal, restate my privacy policy, and ask them humbly for their help.
  - c) They belonged to the minority of people who tell stories so rarely that they needed some help doing it. I had to help them through the process of recounting their experiences by asking additional questions like “What happened next?” and “How did you feel about that?”

So while I do not recommend asking directly for a story *in general*, it’s useful to keep the option in your toolkit for times when your story gathering is going especially well or poorly.

## Examples of story-eliciting questions

You might be brimming with story-eliciting questions you want to ask. But if you’re not, don’t worry; this section will give you some ideas you can use. You can find many more examples in the *Working with Stories Sourcebook*.

### Questions about a point in time

You can ask people to choose a time (or moment, point, minute, hour, day, week, month, year) and say what happened during it. For example, you could ask:

- What was the most memorable hour of your \_\_\_? What happened in that hour?
- What moment in your visit to \_\_\_ was the most or least interesting to you?
- Could you tell us about your proudest hour as a \_\_\_?
- You \_\_\_ today. Was there a time during \_\_\_ when you felt frustrated or relieved?
- Was there ever a moment when you felt that \_\_\_ was strengthened or weakened?
- At what point during \_\_\_ did you find yourself the most tense or relaxed?

A point-in-time question helps people with long experience avoid generalizing or summarizing. Asking for a particular time reference helps people understand that you want to know about something that happened *in time*, not outside of it.

On the other hand, people might tell you what block of time was important without actually telling you what *happened* during it. They might say something like “The worst day was that day at the zoo.” Adding “What happened?” at the end of the question can help.

Note that it is often useful to give two options within one question (“most or least interesting”). Often people who are not willing to tell one story will tell another. Asking two questions in one maximizes the volume and diversity of your story collection.

### **Questions about an event**

You can ask people to choose an event (or episode, incident, occurrence, occasion, situation, circumstance) and tell about it (or describe, recount, depict, relate). For example, you could ask:

- What incident stands out in your mind the most from your years as \_\_\_? Could you tell us what happened?
- Did anyone speak to you today in a way you will remember for a long time?
- Was there ever a time when you felt too worn out to \_\_\_? Or too full of energy to stop?
- Can you recount for us an event that took place during \_\_\_ when you felt particularly calm or unsettled?
- Our motto is \_\_\_. Was there a moment during \_\_\_ in which that motto was especially relevant to you?
- Could you relate to us a situation when your \_\_\_ was challenged?

A choose-an-event question makes it clear that you want people to recall things that happened to them. This may prod people who don’t understand the recounting nature of the task to understand what is being asked of them.

On the other hand, people might think the events they remember are not sufficiently important to be counted as Events—with a capital E—and may not respond. So if you have a particularly meek group of participants who think you couldn’t possibly want to know what happened to *them*, an event question could be dangerous. But if you have a group disposed to pontification, an event question might keep them centered on the recounting of actual events.

### **Questions about extremes**

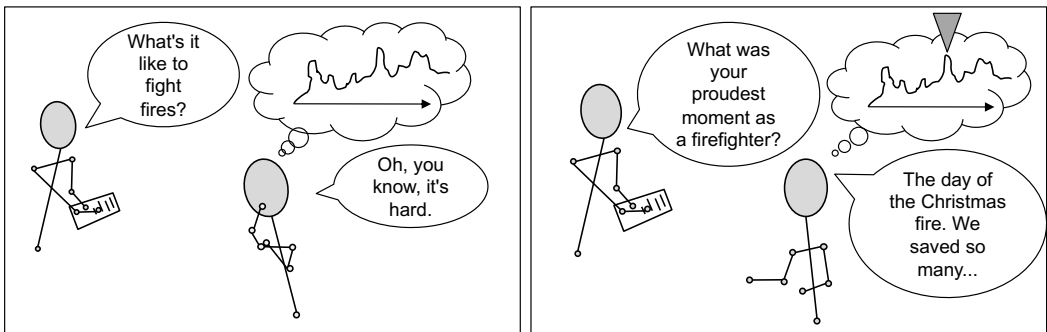
You can ask people to choose an exceptional experience. For example, you could ask:

- What was the best or worst thing that ever happened in your years \_\_\_?
- What was the best or worst moment of your visit to \_\_\_ today?
- As \_\_\_ today, when did you feel the most frustrated or relieved with the process?
- Can you remember the most or least angry you ever felt in \_\_\_?
- Can you remember feeling particularly appreciated or unappreciated in your \_\_\_?

- During your \_\_\_ today, when did you feel \_\_\_ the most or least?

Why ask about extremes? Why not ask about common, everyday experiences? Because people don't usually respond to questions about common experiences by telling stories. They respond by describing generalized scenarios. They say things like, "I usually get up around nine, and I like oatmeal for breakfast."

Why do people do this? Because we use stories to map the *edges* of our experiences, not the mundane middle (see page 19). If I asked you to tell me a story about putting on your shoes or opening a door within the past week, what would you say? You would have a hard time finding any actual events to tell me about. These events would be at the mundane middle of your experiential map, the part you never tell stories about.



Having said that, generalized scenarios of everyday events are useful, and worth collecting, in certain limited contexts.

- If you are building an oral history as a record of a community's culture, you need to map the *entire* space, not just the edges, because your audience might be located in another place or time—say a hundred years in the future—and your center may be their edge.
- When two groups of people know nothing about each other, one group's center can be the other group's edge, and vice versa. So if you are gathering stories from groups who have little knowledge of each other, especially if your goal is to help them understand each other, you might want to ask them about everyday events.

Should you focus more on positive or negative extremes? Again, it depends on your participants' experiential maps. If their experiences with your topic—and their perceptions of it—have been mostly positive, negative stories will be at the edges of their maps, so you will want to draw those out. If their experiences and perceptions have been mostly negative, the reverse will be true.

Personally, I prefer to let people choose an extreme by including both options within each question. However, if I knew that my participants' experiences and perceptions of my topic were overwhelmingly positive or negative, I would put aside that practice and focus on their least common experiences.



### **Questions about surprise and change**

You can ask people to recall a time in which their expectations were overturned or in which something important changed. (Other useful words are surprise, turning point, shift, change, climax, crux, transition, crisis, and critical moment.) For example, you could ask:

- Can you remember a time when you were surprised at how well or poorly \_\_\_?
- Was there ever a moment when things seemed to shift and change, and after that nothing was the same again?
- Can you tell me about a time during \_\_\_ when you were surprised by something \_\_\_ said?
- What do you think was a turning point in your thinking about \_\_\_? What happened then?

A surprise-or-change question can help people who think they have nothing to say find something to say. It helps them select an event to tell about.

However, it can also open the door for people to say, "I've never been surprised," or "Nothing has ever changed." If you expect indifference or hostility to your questions, you might not want to give people this exit. But if you think people are going to find it difficult to choose events to talk about (perhaps because you are asking them to reminisce about a 40-year career), this type of question can be helpful.

### **Questions about specific decisions, people, places, or things**

You can ask people to recall a particular decision, location, person, or object and talk about their experiences with it. For example, you could ask:

- What happened at the moment when you decided to join \_\_\_?
- When you \_\_\_, did you notice \_\_\_? What happened as you \_\_\_?
- Do you remember the first time you \_\_\_? What happened on that day?
- Can you recount for us the day you first met your \_\_\_?
- You've been \_\_\_ for \_\_\_ now. When you look back over \_\_\_, do any special times come to mind?

The advantage of a question like this is that it focuses people on something you want them to talk about. The disadvantage is that after you've focused them on the subject, they may forget to tell a story about it and simply start talking about it.

### **Questions that set up a fictional scenario**

Another type of question sets up a fictional situation. For example, you could say:

A parent you met at your school's open house calls you and says she is going to send her son to another school because "nobody here cares anymore." What story might you tell, either from your own experience or from another person's, to help her decide what to do?

A fictional-scenario question is useful when you don't think your participants will be willing to tell you their actual opinion on a sensitive topic. Asking them about a fictional situation

navigates them past their automatic reaction, and it may get them to talk about a touchy subject when a more direct question would not.

However, the results of questions like these can be hit-or-miss because the reasoning required to understand the request is convoluted. People sometimes reply to fictional-scenario questions with one of two misfires: they *refer* to the story they would tell without actually telling it (“I’d tell them about when I first moved here”), or they forget all about telling a story and just say how they would act in the scenario (“I’d tell them to give my school another try”).

If you expect people to be reluctant or closed-mouthed or unwilling to admit things, this approach might prod them to reveal things they wouldn’t have revealed otherwise, though they may need some help getting there. Otherwise I would use it only when there are other options available for those who can’t or won’t follow you down the path of fictional exploration.

### ***Focused and unfocused questions***

A focused question is one that directly asks someone to talk about an issue important to the project. Examples of focused questions are:

- Was there ever a time when you were surprised by how \_\_\_ you felt about \_\_\_?
- Have you ever felt overwhelmed with information? What happened that made you feel that way?
- When you \_\_\_, did anything happen that made you feel more or less important to \_\_\_?
- Can you remember waking up and not wanting to \_\_\_ because \_\_\_?

An *unfocused* story-eliciting question is one that doesn’t ask about a particular issue, but asks about the person’s experiences in general. Examples of unfocused questions are:

- What happened on your first day \_\_\_?
- Tell me about your \_\_\_.
- Can you tell me about your visit to \_\_\_ today?
- Can you remember your best moment as a \_\_\_?

Unfocused questions tend to collect more raw emotions and honest reflections. People love to talk about things like the day they met their spouse or the moment they first skydived. The disadvantage of using unfocused questions is that you cannot control *what* people will talk about, and only a fraction of the stories may be about topics important to the project. Focused questions pinpoint the issues you want to know about, but because you are asking people for something specific, people will be more likely to try to give you what they think you want rather than speaking freely from experience.

If your topics are very broad, or if you care about several things, you might be able to ask an unfocused question, then ask a question *about the story* that captures what topic it is about. For example, if you wanted to know about trust, you might ask a question about how important trust is to the story. If your topics are narrow or few, or you think people will be unlikely to talk about the topics unless you ask them to, you will need to ask focused

questions. Another approach is to balance your questions between focused and unfocused, seeking both goals (authenticity and specificity) at once.

### **Mixed questions**

You can mix different types of story-eliciting questions together. Some examples of mixed questions are:

- In the future, what do you think you might tell \_\_\_ about your best or worst moment of \_\_\_? (fictional scenario, extreme, time reference)
- At what time during your \_\_\_ did you feel the most connected to \_\_\_? (time reference, issue of interest, extreme)
- Can you remember a moment in which you were surprised about \_\_\_? What happened in that moment? (time reference, surprise, issue of interest, what happened)
- Can you remember a time in your \_\_\_ in which you felt the most \_\_\_? (memory, time reference, extreme, issue of interest)

Mixed questions give people a few different ways to figure out that you are asking them to tell a story.

## **The best story-eliciting questions for your project**

I can imagine that you might find the previous section, with its many possible questions, overwhelming. Which questions, and which types of questions, would be best for *your* project, not just in general? That's a question only you can answer.

### **Step 1. Brainstorm**

Jot down some questions you *wish* you could ask people about their experiences with your topic. Don't worry too much about whether your questions match any of the categories in the section above. Just fantasize about the questions you would like to ask.

Here's a little future-history planning exercise you can use, either by yourself or with your planning or oversight team:

1. Imagine yourself in the future. You have finished gathering your stories, and you couldn't be happier with them. They are perfectly relevant, useful, and meaningful.
2. In that ideal future, looking at your ideal stories, think of a story that stands out as being exactly what you were after when you started the project. If you can't think of a story right away, don't force it. Just reminisce in a roundabout way about the experiences you have had and heard about related to your topic. You might need to do something else for a while before a story drifts into your mind. Have something to eat or drink, then think about the exercise again.
3. When a story comes to mind, tell it. Then ask yourself: why would someone tell that story? What question would make sense for it to be an answer to? Add the question to your wish list. Do this for every story that comes to mind.

Once you have a wish list of questions, go through the next four steps for each of them.

### **Step 2. Check that each question elicits stories**

As we talked about in Chapter Four, people share stories when they sense that they are in the right context to do so. When you start a conversation with your project participants, whether it's in an interview, survey, or group session, you will need to create a context in which telling a story will feel right to them. To do this, you must *give them permission* to tell a story. If you don't make that permission explicit, people will not tell stories.

To test whether a question sets the right context for story sharing, *try to answer it without telling a story*. If you can, change the question. When you can't, stop.

For example, can you answer this question without telling a story?

When you look back on your time living in our town, can you recall the first time you felt at home here? What was that day like for you?

Yes, you can. You can say:

It was last March. It was a good day.

That's not a story. It's a *reference* to a story—to whatever it was that happened on that day last March—but it's not a *story*, at least not in the sense of a recounting of events that can provide support for sensemaking. It recounts no experience; it has no plot; it reveals no perspective. If you encountered it in a sensemaking workshop, you would skip over it, because it would give you nothing to work with.

Why wouldn't people tell a story in response to that question? Because its sense of permission is implicit and uncertain. "What was that day like" could be answered in a variety of ways, and most people would be understandably hesitant to tell a story in response to it.

Let's try again. Can you answer *this* question without telling a story?

When you look back on your time living in our town, can you recall the first time you felt at home here? Could you tell us what happened on that day?

This question is much harder to answer without telling a story. Its sense of permission is explicit and certain. It provides the social support anyone would need to choose a story and tell it in a way that expresses their feelings, values, and beliefs.

### **Step 3. Check that each question invites reflection**

The best story-eliciting questions invite participants to reflect on their experiences and convey permission and freedom to choose and recount an experience that matters—to them, not to you. For example, consider this question:

Looking back over your life, can you remember a time when you felt like someone had your back, like you could take a risk because they were there to help? Or did you ever feel like someone *didn't* help when you needed it? What happened that you remember?

There are several social signals embedded in that question.

- When the question says "looking back" and "someone had your back," it sends a request to recall a particular type of situation.

- When the question says “someone *didn't* help,” it specifies that its request includes the freedom to choose any story, positive or negative.
- When the question says “your life” and “you felt like,” it communicates a sense of *respectful curiosity*. It says, “I want to hear about you and your feelings. I invite you to think about this topic with me.”
- When the question says “What happened,” it gives the participant the floor—that is, the conversational space—to tell a story.

The overall message of this question is: I am exploring this topic, and I invite you to think about it with me. I would like to understand your unique perspective on it. I am ready to hear whatever you want to tell me about what has happened to you. *I'm listening.*

Now consider this question:

Tell about a time when someone had your back, when you could take a risk because they were there to help. What did they do, and how did it help?

That sounds like a perfectly reasonable request, but as before, there are social signals embedded in it.

- When the question says “Tell about a time,” it sends a command to provide information on a particular situation. It implies no freedom to choose an experience based on the person's feelings, values, or beliefs. It is simply a description of required conditions.
- When the question says “What did they do” and “how did it help,” it implies scrutiny and a requirement to evaluate both helper and helped in order to prove that they measure up to an implied standard.

Also note what's missing from the question.

- There is no sense of curiosity. It sounds like the person who asked the question is standing there holding a clipboard and pencil, waiting to tick off boxes.
- There is no sense that the participant has been given the floor to speak. This is not a request to tell a story. This is a command to hand over the disembodied parts of a story. There is no implied permission to tell the actual story.

The overall message of the second question is: I am researching this topic. I don't invite you to think about it with me. I don't want to hear what you want to tell me. I just want answers to these specific questions. Now *hold still while I extract them.*

People do sometimes respond to questions like this one by telling stories. But they are cardboard stories, props set up to protect the real stories people wish they could tell.

Does a story-eliciting question have to be long? No, not at all. Any question that extends an invitation to reflect and conveys the freedom to choose and permission to hold the floor is a good story-eliciting question. Let's look at a shorter example:

When you think about trust at work, what experience springs to mind for you?  
What happened that mattered to you?

How is that a good story-eliciting question?

- When the question says “When you think,” the real message is, “You think.” That is, I come to you with respect, as one human speaking to another human, on the same level.
- When the question says “trust at work,” that’s the request. It is asking the participant to recall a particular type of situation.
- When the question says “springs to mind” it adds freedom to the request. It says, in effect, “Within the request I have just made, you are free to choose any story you would like to tell me, positive or negative.”
- When the question says “what happened,” it gives the participant the explicit permission to tell a story.
- When the question says “mattered to you,” it opens the door of permission a little wider, giving the participant permission to tell an even longer story that communicates even more of their feelings, values, and beliefs.

Having read this section, look again at the question you want to ask. What social signals does it send? Do they invite people to reflect on their experiences and convey permission and freedom? Does your question contain any social signals that work against your goals?

**Open, closed, and story ended questions.** An open-ended question gives people the freedom to say anything at all about a topic. A closed-ended question solicits a specific, narrow response.

In participatory research, open-ended questions are considered best because they listen with respect, and they give people complete freedom and permission to speak freely. I said the same things above about good story-eliciting questions, but story-eliciting questions are not open-ended questions. So why are they good questions to ask?

*Story-ended questions* fall somewhere between open-ended and closed-ended questions. They use socially significant cues to ask people to tell stories, excluding non-narrative responses. But within that restriction, they give people the freedom to tell any story they like in any way they like. For example:

Question	Example
Open-ended	How do you feel about our office?
Closed-ended	When was your last visit to our office?
Story-ended	What happened on your last visit to our office?

Are story-ended questions too closed? They could be. People don’t share stories in every conversation, and people don’t respond to story-ended questions in every situation. *This is why project planning is so important.* If you can’t find a win-win proposal that makes sense to your participants, they might see more danger than privilege in your best story-ended questions.

If your participants don't respond to your story-ended questions, even though you are sending all the right social signals, step back and ask some open-ended questions instead. Stop gathering stories for a while and just listen. The answers you hear might help you build a better win-win proposal.

#### **Step 4. Check that each question fits your context**

There are no universally good story-eliciting questions. The same question that could make one project a success could cause another to fail. Think about these elements of your project's context as you evaluate your questions.

**Depths of experience.** In your project, will your participants be plumbing a deep well of experience? Or will they know just a little about the topic you want to explore?

If they know	Then	So you might ask
A little	They might think they have nothing to contribute. Look for story-eliciting questions that will help them dig into the minute-by-minute details of their few experiences.	When you were ____, can you recall a moment when you thought you ____? Or was there a moment when you thought you might not ____?
A lot	They might blend their many experiences into a generic scenario. Come up with story-eliciting questions that will help them choose a single experience to tell about.	Can you remember a day that was a turning point in your experience of ____? What happened on that day?

**Habits of thought.** Do your participants usually think in concrete terms about everyday things, like coffee cups and tennis shoes? Or do they often think about abstract concepts, like the nutritional benefits of coffee and the cultural history of tennis?

If they are	Then	So you might ask
Concrete thinkers	Don't annoy them with complex concepts or far-flung metaphors. Stick to the immediate subjective reality of their actual experiences and emotions.	What happened on your best or worst day as a ____?
Abstract thinkers	Don't bore them with the obvious. Invite them to dive deeply into the complex connections between their experiences and the way the world works (and should/not work).	When you think about what ____ would be like in an ideal world, what one experience have you had that is closest to it—or farthest from it?

**Types of participation.** Will your participants have joined your project on their own? Or will they be obliged, or maybe even required, to join it?

If they are	Then	So you might ask
Volunteers	You can count on their energy. Choose story-eliciting questions that recognize and reward their enthusiasm for the project.	What is an experience you've had with ___ that you think would make a difference to the way we think about ___?
Obligated	You will need to sell the project to them. Find story-eliciting questions that give them a sense of power over the project, even though they didn't actively choose to participate in it.	What is an experience you've had with ___ that you would like ___ to hear about? What happened in that experience?

**Time sequences.** Is there a dominant time sequence that runs through your topic? Or are there many possible time sequences in it, not just one?

Topics with dominant time sequences	Topics without them
how our organization has changed as it grew	trust in our organization
how new teachers join our staff	the qualities of a good teacher
our hiring process	building synergistic work teams
a visit to our hospital	the needs of our patients
our community's past and future	designing our new community park

If there is a dominant path through your topic, the path itself will lead people to tell stories. However, it could also lead people to describe general scenarios, obscuring the diversity of their experiences. Use your story-eliciting questions to help people focus on their unique experiences and emotions. For example, you could say:

Everyone here has experienced \_\_\_\_, but \_\_\_\_ is different for everyone. Can you remember a moment in your experience with \_\_\_\_ that could only have happened to you? What happened to you in that moment?

If there are many possible paths through your topic, there is a risk of people wandering off the topic in search of a story to tell. Use your story-eliciting questions to help people find time sequences within the topic that they can walk through. For example, you could say:

Can you remember a moment when you felt a change from being a visitor at \_\_\_\_ to being a member of \_\_\_\_? What happened in that moment?



### **Step 5. Test your questions**

Even with all of these checks, it's easy to write questions that don't bring out the stories you think they will. People are not easy to figure out; that's why you are doing PNI in the first place. The only certain solution is to test your questions before you use them.

Find one of your probable participants—even if you are planning a single workshop with ten people, find someone who will be there—and show them your questions. If you can see that they understand the question, respond to it with energy, tell a story, and tell a *relevant*, useful story, you've got a good question. If your project is a larger one, don't ask one person; ask five or 20.

Finding the best story-eliciting questions for your project might seem daunting. But that's a good thing. *It should be daunting.* You are going to ask people to open up to you and share their personal experiences. It only makes sense that you should plan to do that with care and respect.

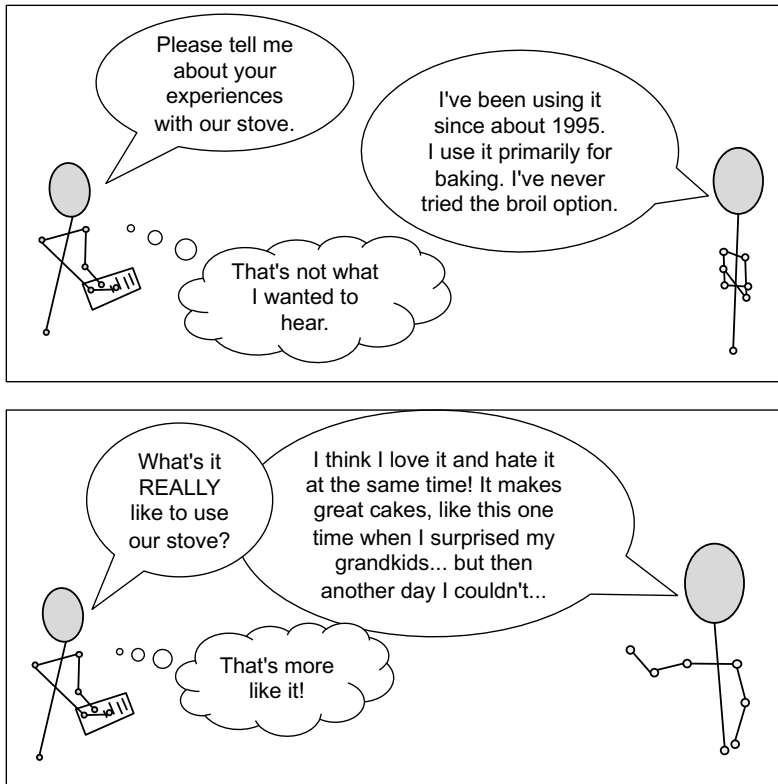
**An aside on magic words of power.** In one of my first PNI projects, my colleagues and I had a lot of trouble getting across the point of what we were trying to do. People came to our story-sharing sessions with a variety of misunderstandings. The project was about software, so some people showed up with lists of bugs. Other people thought we would be training them, and others thought we were product designers looking for feedback. When people found out that we had no training to offer and no authority to change the software—we just wanted to help people use it—some of them grew frustrated and walked out, saying “I don't have time for this!”

After a while we came upon a phrase that worked like magic. We would say:

We're trying to help people use [the software]. We know how to use it, but we don't know what it's *really* like to rely on it every day. *You* know that, so we'd like to hear about it from you.

As soon as we started saying that, it was *easy* to get people to tell stories. They would say, “Oh, *that's* what you want.” Then they'd tell story after story, and they'd stay longer than we asked them to. That one phrase—what it's *really* like—got through to them.

There are magic words in every PNI project. As you plan your project, and as you begin to gather your stories, you will notice that certain words and phrases have a unique power to communicate your project goals. Stories will gather around those words and phrases. Pay attention to them and make use of them.



### Consider a menu of story-eliciting questions

When I first started asking people questions whose answers were stories, I asked everyone the same questions. I would work long and hard to find a few questions everyone could answer, and I would ask the questions one after the other. What I found was that people varied in whether each question spoke to them. Some people would respond strongly to question one but weakly to question two, and others would do the reverse. At some point I stopped asking everyone the same questions and started giving people a *menu* of questions to choose from. This improved story collection tremendously.

So what I now recommend is that if you want to ask people to tell you three stories, you don't have to find the three perfect questions that will lead each of those people to describe their experiences. You will have better luck if you present the people with all three questions at once, or even five questions, and say: choose the question you like best and answer it. Then tell me which question you chose and why you chose it. Now, if you want to, choose another.

Why build a menu of diverse questions? To match the diversity of your participants. Menus help participants find a match between their experiences and the project's goals. They also provide a sense of agency by allowing participants to make choices that actively shape the project and its outcomes.

Say for example you know that some of your participants are more motivated to talk about a taboo issue than others. You can build in some questions that give reluctant speakers a

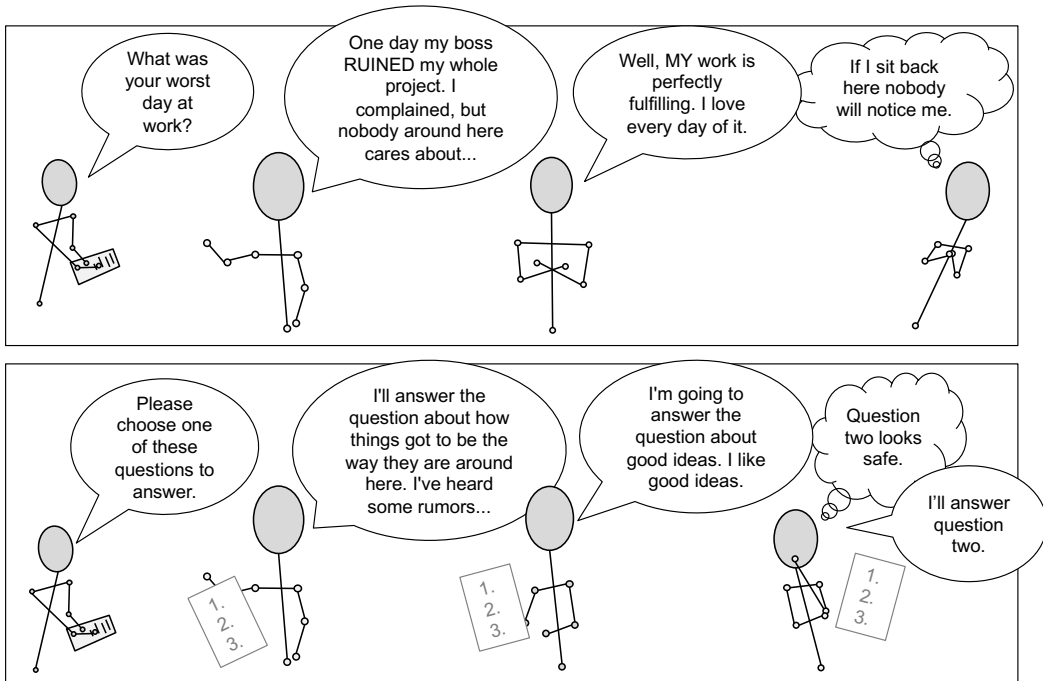
safe way to reveal only a little about the topic, and balance those with questions that give other people an excuse to “spill the beans” as fits their enthusiasm.

A menu of questions might look like this:

Example	Explanation
When you look back on your time living in our neighborhood, can you recall the first time you really felt at home here? Could you tell us what happened on that day?	This is a safe question. It appeals to people who are afraid to speak up. Always start with the safest question.
Describe your best or worst day living in our neighborhood. What happened on that day?	This is a question about extremes. It helps people who can't think of anything to say.
Did you ever see a neighbor do something and think, “If we all acted like that, we'd get along so much better”? Or, did you ever think, “If we all acted like that, we'd never get along”? What did you see?	This is a spill-the-beans question. It gives people an opportunity to bestow praise or place blame.
If none of these questions appeals to you, tell us about anything that happened in our neighborhood that mattered to you.	This is for people who want permission to tell a specific story they have in mind, permission they might not be able to find in the previous questions.

You might have noticed that the different questions in this example menu connect to different answers in the “Check that each question fits your context” section above. For example, the “best or worst day” question is concrete, and the “did you ever think” question is abstract. If your answers to those questions was “some of each,” a menu can help you to give all of your participants what they need to feel comfortable.

Matching diversity with diversity requires that you understand your participants and topic well. It takes more effort than asking everyone the same questions. And it requires your participants to process more information as they consider the questions. So the menu approach is not appropriate for the simplest of projects. Still, I find that this method collects more and better stories because it gives everyone a question they can answer.



How should you offer your menu of eliciting questions? A menu fits in more easily to some venues than others. In a group session, you can write your menu on a white board or hand out paper menus. On a survey form, you can ask people to choose a question to answer before telling their story.

In any kind of *interview*, however, presenting a menu of questions is more difficult.

If you are interviewing someone face to face, whether you should read the questions to them or simply *hand* them the sheet of paper depends on the person being interviewed. People who process auditory information better might prefer you to read the menu of questions out loud, even if they can also see them. People who process visual information better might prefer to ponder the questions on their own. I like to show people my menu, then simply ask them if they would like me to read them out loud.

Over the phone, it is impossible to hand anybody anything. When a menu can't be presented visually, you can keep your menu small, keep your questions short, and give your questions memorable *names*. For example, you might say:

I am going to read you three questions and ask you to choose one you want to answer. Here is the first. Did you ever see somebody do something and think that if *everybody* acted that way we'd all be better off, or worse off? We'll call that the *if everybody did that* question.

Then you would explain the second question with its name, then the third with its name. At the end you would restate all three question names, then ask which one the person would like to answer. This takes a bit of rehearsal, but it's worth it when you can do it.

Still, as useful as a menu of questions can be, it will not work in every project. If your participants are *very* reluctant, or you can get only a little of their time and attention, a menu might put up too much of a barrier to participation. If you are facing such a situation, put this idea away for another time when you can better afford it.

## How many stories to collect

One of the most common questions I hear from newcomers to PNI is: *How many stories should we collect?* My suggestion is to maximize *narrative richness*, or the degree to which your story collection can support productive sensemaking. Narrative richness relies on four things:

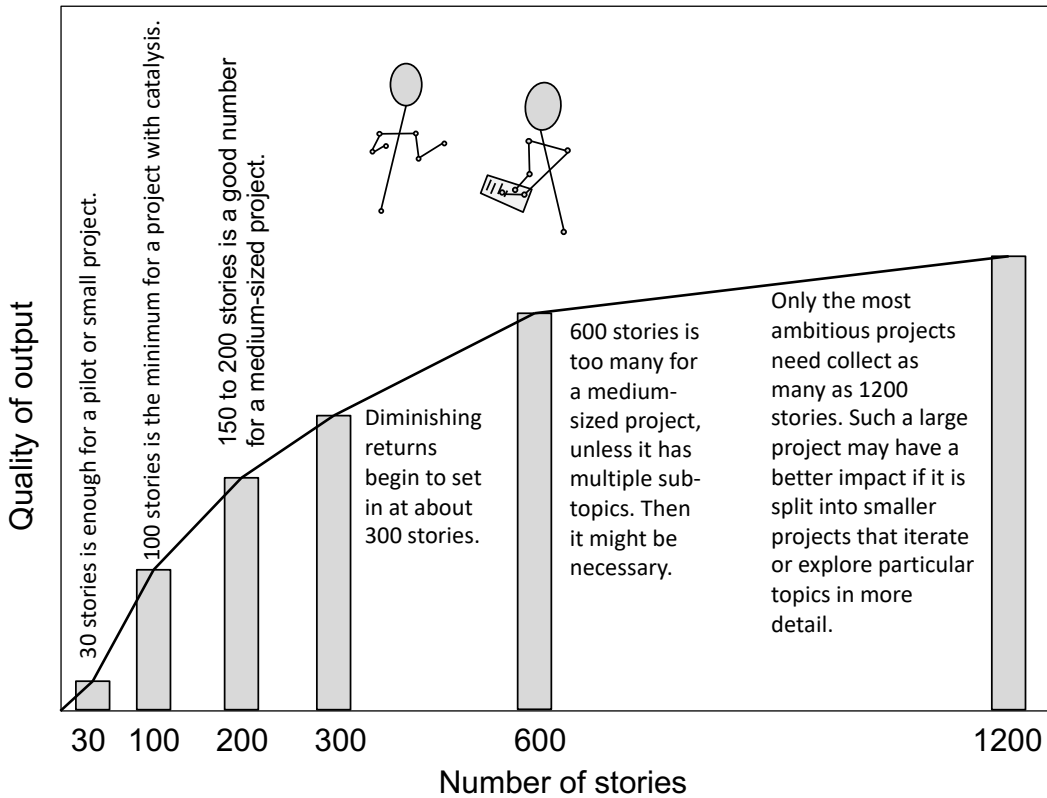
1. the number of stories in your collection
2. the utility of each story for sensemaking (whether it recounts an experience, has a plot, and reveals a perspective)
3. how many reflective questions each storyteller answered about each story (and how much thought they put into their answers)
4. how well each story is connected to the other stories in the collection (and how much thought went into the connections)

Increasing any of these things can increase the narrative richness of your story collection.

Within that general advice, I do have some advice on minimum numbers of stories for specific situations.

- If you don't plan to include the optional step of preparing catalytic material in advance of sensemaking, you will need at least 20 stories, because that's how many you need to generate some patterns to talk about. Beyond that, how many stories you should gather depends on:
  - how many participants you have
  - how many distinct participant groups you would like to hear from
  - how many stories each participant wants to tell
  - how much time your participants would like to spend reading or listening to stories
  - how much time you can spend gathering your stories and processing them
- If you plan to prepare catalytic material, you will need at least 100 stories, no matter how many participants you have. Below that number, the story subsets you can compare (18 of these, 12 of those) will be too small to create patterns worth talking about. As the size of your story collection grows from 100 to 300, your story subsets will get larger (39 of these, 42 of those), so your patterns will get stronger. At the same time, however, it will become harder for your participants to absorb a significant subset of the stories. I have found that there is a sweet spot around 150-200 stories where patterns are strong and the bulk of stories is not overwhelming.
- If you want to explore any sub-topics within your topic, or if you want to pay specific attention to any participant groups or locations, you will need to collect enough stories for each sub-topic, subgroup, or location, not just for your project as a whole. For

example, a project that aims to explore an issue across three communities will need at least 300 stories, not 100.



If you have the resources to collect thousands of stories, stop and think before you plan to collect all the stories you can. It might be better to use your resources to gather fewer but deeper stories, ask more reflective questions, explore more sub-topics, or support more sensemaking. It might also be better to split your project into a series of smaller projects, each of which informs the planning of the next.

## Asking questions about stories

Asking questions about stories is not anything new or unnatural; it's only what people have always done. If you listen to anyone tell a story in person, you will hear that they are surrounding it with commentary on why they are telling the story, where they heard it, who it happened to, why you should listen to it, who you can pass it on to, and so on. And the people who are listening to the story often ask questions about it. They say things like:

- What did they say to that?
- How did you feel about that?
- Why do you think that happened?

People ask questions like these to show that they got the point of the story (because a story is a message), to understand and learn from the story (because a story is a thinking tool), and to show respect for the storyteller (because a story is a connection).

When we ask people questions about the stories they tell in a PNI project, we do the same thing, only in a more consistent and systematic way. For example, we ask everyone the same questions so we can learn from the patterns that appear in their answers.

In the sections that follow, we will explore topics related to asking questions about stories: how many questions to ask, types of questions you can ask, and finally, putting your questions together into sets that start conversations about stories.

## How many questions to ask about each story

When thinking about how many questions you can ask about stories, you need to consider your *cognitive budget*: the time, attention, interest, ability, and willingness you can expect from your participants. Time is the obvious standout, but it's not the only thing that matters. Be careful not to think that if you have a lot of people's time you have a large cognitive budget. Any of the non-time factors can reduce your cognitive budget as well. For example:

- You might have an hour of somebody's time, but their attention might be divided between answering your questions and watching their toddler.
- You might have only three minutes of somebody's time, but you may have their complete attention and concentration as well as enthusiasm for the project.
- You might have a captive audience required to sit at a desk and fill out a form until it is complete, even if it has a hundred questions in it, but that doesn't mean they will pay attention to the 99th question (or even the 21st, or even the first).
- You may have a group with lots of time, attention, and ability to focus on your topic, but little willingness to trust you to carry out the project.

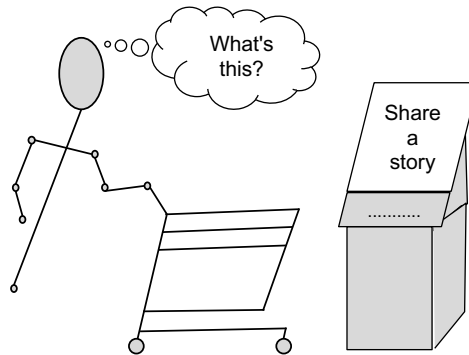
So how many stories can you expect people to tell, and how many questions can you ask about each story? I like to categorize cognitive-budget levels into three situations: kiosk, volunteer, and commitment.

### ***Kiosk situations***

In a kiosk situation, a person has randomly walked by a kiosk, picked up a brochure, or clicked a button on a web site. They feel no obligation whatsoever to help, only a momentary speck of interest so insubstantial that a breath of wind will waft it away. In this situation you can:

- Collect one story per person.
- Ask 3-5 questions about the story, plus 2-4 about the participant.
- For choice questions, provide no more than 3-5 answers to choose from.

That's not a lot of information per participant! But it's better than pushing too hard and getting nothing at all.

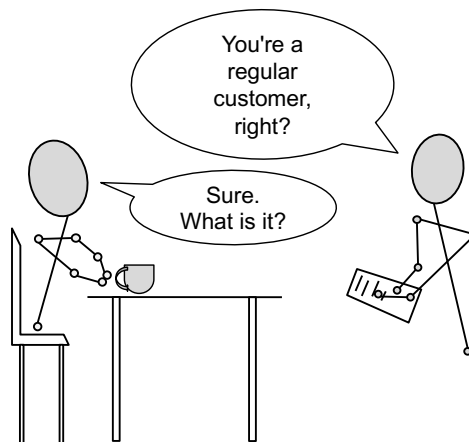


### Volunteer situations

In a volunteer situation, a participant has stated in public that they support your project or position or organization, or your goals or mission, so they feel a social *obligation* to follow through on that pledge. They might donate to your non-profit or buy your product or come to your coffee shop or vote in your community, so they feel a *bit* connected.

Volunteers are held by their social obligation *for a while*, but they can also toss off the obligation if they feel any kind of boundary has been crossed in what has been asked of them. In this situation you can:

- Collect 1-2 stories per person.
- Ask 6-9 questions about each story, plus 4-7 about the participant.
- For choice questions, provide 6-8 answers to choose from.



### Commitment situations

In a commitment situation, a participant has more than a social obligation to assist the project: they consider themselves to be part of it. The project represents some part of their *identity*, not just an obligation.

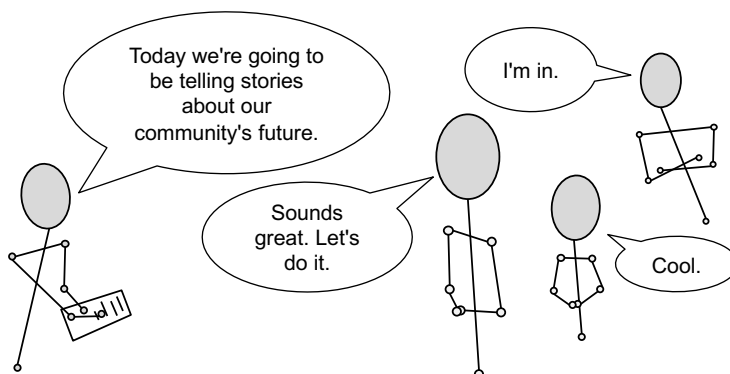
They may be an employee with a mandate to work on the issue, or they may consider it part of their professional work, or they may consider themselves committed to the issues being explored. If you collected stories about story collection, I'd be a committed participant.



It is only in situations of true commitment that you can push people to answer a relatively high number of questions. In this case you can:

- Collect 2-4 stories per person.
- Ask 10-15 questions about each story, plus 7-12 about the participant.
- For choice questions, provide 9-12 answers to choose from.

Note the larger range here, due to a larger range of variation in how much commitment people can feel.



### ***An aside on expectations and reality***

A common error in those starting story work is to mistake volunteers for committed participants. The great majority of projects involve volunteers, while the great majority of project *planners* hope to have committed participants. Be honest with yourself. Just because somebody works where you work or lives where you live does not mean they will commit to your project. Perhaps you have not hit on the essential element of their identity that will ensure their commitment. Perhaps they think the project could be run better. Maybe they just don't like you.

People are *never* as prolific with their answers as well-meaning project planners want them to be. You can be justifiably angry and disappointed about people not rising to the occasion and participating as much as you feel they should; but if you don't meet people where they are, you will waste what they *do* have to give you.

### ***Catalysis and question numbers***

If you plan to prepare catalytic material to support sensemaking, you will also need to think about aligning the number of questions you ask with your ability to work with the data they will provide. A quick look at the "Scoping your exploration" section of the Narrative Catalysis chapter will help you make this decision.

In the story collection chapter of *Working with Stories in Depth*, the section called "How not to ask too many questions about stories" gives you some ideas for reducing your question set to fit the conditions of your project.

## Some ideas for questions about stories

### *Questions about story fundamentals*

Many of the best questions about stories come from the three essential dimensions of stories: form, function, and phenomenon. These are some questions I use and recommend.

**Story form.** From the perspective that *stories are messages*, good questions about stories focus on the story itself: its setting, characters, plot, and outcome. Some examples:

- How well would you say this story turned out? For whom? Did it turn out badly for anyone?
- Where and when did the events of this story happen?
- What was unique about the time and place of this story? How would it have turned out in a different time or place?
- What was unique about the people in this story? How do you think it would have turned out differently if different people had been involved in it?
- What was the biggest change that took place in the story, from your point of view? What was the impact of that change on how the story played out?
- How many people were involved in this story?
- Which of these [roles, events, groups, etc] were present in the story?
- Who would you say acted with the most and least [responsibility, strength, creativity, compassion, cooperation, etc] in the story?
- Describe any [values, conflicts, risks, challenges, strengths, etc] you see in the story.
- Choose a person you want to think about in the story.
  - Which of these roles best describes the person you chose?
  - What did that person want or need in the story?
  - To what extent did they get what they needed?
  - Who or what helped them get what they wanted or needed?
  - Who or what stood in their way?
  - Which of these things might have helped or hindered that person if they had been present in the story?

**Story function.** From the perspective that *stories are thinking tools*, good questions about stories focus on the meaning of the story and what can be learned from it.

- How do you feel about this story?
- What do you wish had happened in this story?
- Was there anyone in the story who you think should have acted differently than they did? What did they do, and what do you think they should have done?
- If stories like this one happened every day, what do you think \_\_\_ would be like?
- What surprised you about this story?
- To what extent could you have predicted the end of this story from its start?

- What does this story say to you about [trust, conflict, cooperation, responsibility, etc]?
- What did you learn from this story? What lesson do you draw from it?
- How long do you think you will remember this story? Will it stay with you for a long time, or will you forget it soon?
- Does this story remind you of any proverbs or sayings?
- Does this story affirm or contradict any other stories you have heard or experienced?

**Story phenomenon.** From the perspective that *stories are connections*, good questions about stories focus on the story of the story—where it came from, why it was told, and where it needs to go next.

- Where did this story come from? Did it happen to you, or did you hear it from someone else?
- Why do you think you chose this particular story to tell? What does it mean to you?
- Is this a story you tell often, or have you never told it before?
- In your experience with \_\_\_\_, how common is what happened in this story? Does this sort of thing happen every day, or does it rarely happen?
- What does this story say to you about [rules, cooperation, trust, power, hope, conflict, etc] in [this community or organization]?
- Who needs to hear this story, in your opinion? What would happen if they did hear it?
- What do you think \_\_\_\_ would say if they heard this story?
  - Would they say it turned out well?
  - What would surprise them about it?
  - Would they say there was anything missing from it?
  - Would they say it rings true?
  - Would they say it was told for any of these reasons?
  - How long would they remember it?
  - What message or lesson would they take from it?
  - How might they misunderstand it?
- What would you *like* \_\_\_\_ to say about this story?

You can find more questions to ask about stories in the *Working with Stories Sourcebook*.

### **Questions about your project's topic**

Some examples of topical questions might be:

- Would you say that the people in this story trusted each other?
- Would you say that the people in this story showed compassion for each other?
- When you read this story, what did it say to you about democracy?
- Did this story make you feel more or less confident about technology as an enabler?

### **Questions based on story elements**

As I will explain in the chapter on sensemaking exercises (page 388), story elements are abstract packages of meaning about situations, themes, characters, values, relationships, motivations, beliefs, conflicts, or transitions. They are derived during an exercise in which participants answer questions about stories. Some examples of story elements might be:

- On the ropes (situation)
- Can't get no respect (theme)
- Self-serving fear-mongers (character)
- We're all in the same boat (value)

If you conducted an exercise like this as part of a previous PNI project, you may have some of these elements on hand, and you can use them as a way to ask people questions about stories. A story-element question asks “How *present* is this element in this story?”

For example, when a person has told a story about people helping each other after a storm, they might rate the “We're all in the same boat” element as having a strong presence.

There are two potential downsides to using story-element questions. First, people who think in literal, concrete terms can find these questions confusing, intimidating, or meaningless.

Second, some participants may not understand what your story elements mean. For example, say you previously ran an exercise in which the element “Only the Shadow Knows” emerged. Younger participants might not know that “The Shadow” was a popular comic-book and radio character from the 1930s, so you may get blank or nonsensical answers from that group. You may need to translate narrowly-understood story elements to more general terms, which could strip away some of their explanatory power.

On the other hand, if you can expect all of your participants to understand a particularly meaningful set of previously-derived story elements, a question based on them can provide a way for your participants to safely disclose sensitive information. For example, if you ask someone whether bureaucracy stifled their options in the story they just told, you might not get a truthful response; but if you offer them a chance to link the story to a collectively meaningful story element about the stifling hand of bureaucracy, you may get more of a telling response. So this can be a powerful technique—when it is handled well and used in the right time and place.

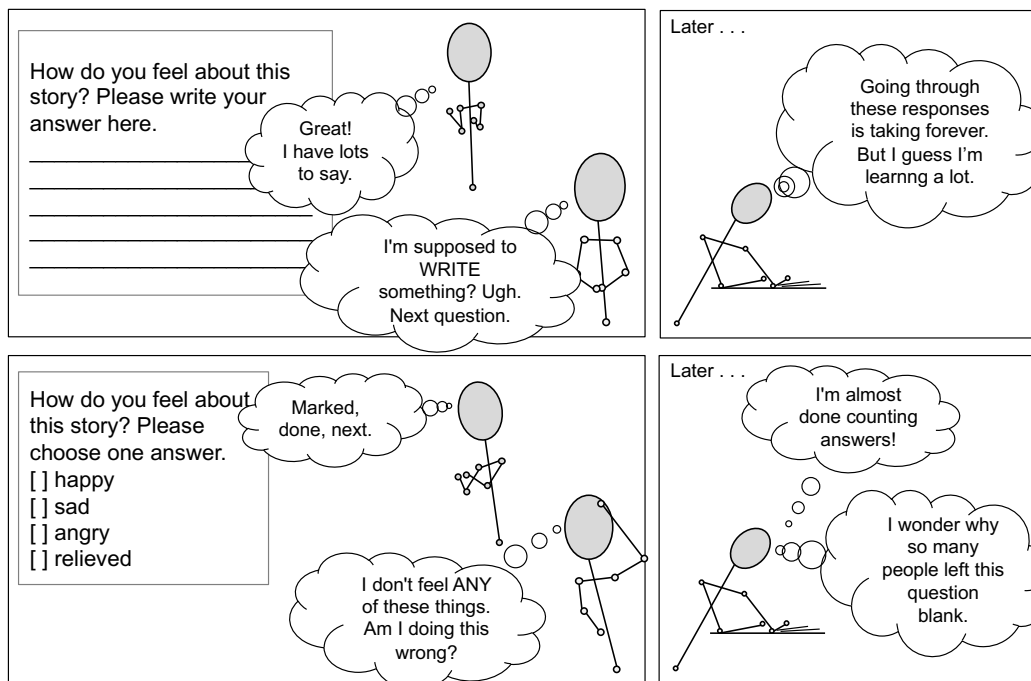
### **Open-ended and closed-ended questions**

When you are asking questions about stories (and about people), you can ask open-ended questions (no options, they just talk/write) or closed-ended questions (they choose an option from a list or a point along a scale). Which is better depends on two factors.

#### ***Do you already know the answers?***

Open-ended questions work best when you can't guess how people will want to answer the question. Allowing people to answer in their own words opens the door to the unexpected. On the other hand, open-ended questions can use up a lot of cognitive budget, and uninterested participants might skip them.

Closed-ended questions take up much less time, so when you *are* sure what the answers to a question will be, don't waste your participants' time asking for details you don't need. But make sure you are sure, because closed-ended questions run the risk of confusing or offending people who don't see the answer they want to give in the list you have provided.



If the situation falls between these extremes, you can offer a question with a fixed list *and* a write-in “other” option for custom responses.

### **What do you plan to do with the answers?**

If you plan to go straight from story collection to sensemaking, asking mostly open-ended questions is the better option. They provide more freedom to speak, show more respect, and generate more variation. People can read and talk about the answers along with the stories during the sensemaking process.

However, if you plan to generate catalytic material, you have a choice to make.

- You can ask only open-ended questions. If so, you'll have to convert the answers into fixed-list or scalar answers you can use to build graphs. How much time this will take will depend on how many stories you collected and how much help you have. If you want to give your participants as much freedom to speak as you can, you can provide it. But don't choose this option blindly. Make sure you have the resources to do it before you start the project.
- You can ask only closed-ended questions. If so, you can build your graphs using exactly the data you collected. If you don't have the time or resources to read and categorize hundreds of explanations, this may be your only option. Just be aware that it will not provide as much insight as if you had given your participants the opportunity to comment freely on their stories.

- You can use a mixture of open-ended and closed-ended questions, balancing the benefits and detriments of both approaches. You will need to read and categorize those answers, but it won't take as long as if you had asked only open-ended questions. To do this:
  - Decide how many open-ended questions you will have time to handle, whether it's just one or half of them.
  - Rank your questions by how certain you are that you already know how people will want to answer them.
  - Convert the questions at the most-uncertain end of the list to open-ended versions.

## Choice and scale questions

When we use closed-ended questions in PNI, to make sure that participation is available, inviting, and respectful to each participant, we frame our questions using simple question types that we can expect to be comfortable and familiar to every human being.

There are two questions people everywhere have been asking each other for millennia:

1. What color was the fish?
2. How big was the fish?

I call these choice questions (because people choose options from lists) and scale questions (because people mark values on sliding scales). In this book I will describe only these two types of closed-ended questions.

By doing this I don't mean to say that you aren't doing PNI if you use questions of any other types than these two. But I do mean to say that *if you want to say that what you are doing is PNI, you must ask people questions in ways that make sense to them and that do not come across as strange, intimidating, disqualifying, or constraining*. Asking questions without thinking about those issues takes the P out of PNI.

### **How to write answer lists for choice questions**

If you already know the list of answers for a question, you can just list them: departments in your organization, streets in your town, months in a year. Otherwise, follow these steps.

1. Start with open-ended brainstorming. Go on a no-limits shopping spree through all of the answers you would like to hear—and some you wouldn't. Write the longest list you possibly can. Don't stop yourself if a list item is ridiculous or even rude; just write it down. You can clean it up later. Aim for at least 20 items.
2. Shrink your list to what you can actually show to your participants (see page 137). People skip over questions with long answer lists, so if you want answers to a question, you must reduce the length of its answer list to fit your situation.
3. Once you have a draft list of the right length, test it with some fictional exploration.
  - a) Picture your participants—either in general or some particular people you can think of—looking at your answer list and thinking “None of these apply to my story,” followed by “This is frustrating!” or “Did I tell the wrong story?” What story did they tell, and what answers do you need to give them something to say?

- b) Now picture the same participants looking at your answer list and thinking “I can’t choose between these things,” followed by “This is annoying” or “Am I doing this wrong?” What story did they tell, which answers are confusing them, and how can you resolve the problem?
4. Decide how many answers you want to ask people to choose from the list, whether it’s one, two, or three. It is never a good idea to allow participants to check every single item on a long list, because some people will do that (oh yes they will), and checking every answer is the same as checking none of them.
  5. Decide how you want to introduce the question’s write-in “other” option. If you feel certain that your answer list is complete and appropriate, you can include a write-in option without mentioning it. But if you had a hard time bringing your answer list down to 6, 8, or 10 items, or if you don’t feel confident about the list you ended up with, you can say something like, “You can also respond in your own words. Feel free to answer the question in any way you want to.” That little extra hint of permission can make a question work even when your answer list is not perfect.

### **How to set up scale questions**

Scale questions invite participants to *choose a point on a line* between two end points, either literally or figuratively. You have several options for asking scale questions, each of which comes with benefits and detriments.

You can ask people to	For example	Benefits	Detriments
Choose a simple word or phrase	Choose from very bad, bad, neither good nor bad, good, very good	Can be quickly read and understood	People might be drawn to the most socially acceptable choice
Choose a complex word or phrase	Choose from awful, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, wonderful	Provides nuance and invites reflection	People might not think your words mean what you think they mean
Choose a number	Tell me a number from 0 to 10, where 0 is awful and 10 is wonderful	Simple and clear	Feelings can be difficult or uncomfortable to assign numbers to
Make a mark	Draw an X on this line between awful and wonderful	Open-ended	Marks can be complex and hard to translate into numbers

You can ask people to	For example	Benefits	Detriments
Move a physical or virtual object	Move this box/ball/button to a spot on this line between awful and wonderful	May be easier than assigning a number; may be easier to interpret than a mark	If physical, requires interpretation of the position; if virtual, requires a software implementation
Move a body part	Point to a spot on this line between awful and wonderful	Embodied movements can express hard-to-articulate feelings better than numbers or markings	Requires in-person interaction; difficult for disabled people; some may find this form of interaction childish or beneath them
Move two body parts	Place your hands to indicate your answer: touching for awful, as far apart as you can reach for wonderful		
Move your whole body	Stand along this wall between the awful corner and the wonderful corner		

My advice is to look over these options and see if any of the scenarios described (in the benefits or detriments columns) connect to your situation. Might your participants be more responsive to being asked to embody their answer in a physical movement? Or might they see that as something people like them don't do? In that case, would choosing a word or a number get a better response?

**An aside on bipolar scales**

Unipolar scale questions ask people to choose a position along a single gradient. Consider this question, for example:

Choose a person you'd like to think about in the story. How confident would you say they were in their choices?

not at all confident ———— very confident

Unipolar scales are simple and clear, but they can seem to imply that one side of the scale is better than the other. If "very confident" seems like the answer you want to hear, people might choose it without reflecting on the story at all. If they do that, their answers will not combine into meaningful patterns.



To avoid the implication of a “correct” answer, you could ask the question using a *bipolar* scale, one with two opposing ends, thus:

Choose a person you’d like to think about in the story. How confident would you say they were in their choices?

very under-confident ———— very over-confident

A two-sided scale offers a larger range of interpretation, but it can be confusing. Where should people mark the line if the person they chose was neither under-confident nor over-confident? In the middle, but it can be hard to get that point across, especially if your participants are apathetic or distrustful. I’ve seen reluctant participants take one look at a bipolar scale and stop telling stories completely.

Think about your participants. Will a bipolar scale present them with an interesting opportunity to reflect? Or will it confuse or even offend them?

## Tips on writing questions about stories

What follows is some general advice on asking questions about stories. Each of the sections below represents a lesson I learned in my own story work (usually the hard way) from which you can benefit.

### ***Ask questions that respect stories***

You may have noticed that all of the questions in the ideas-for-questions section above ask *how the storyteller sees the story, not how the story is*. There’s a reason for that.

When you are doing a PNI project, you want your participants to express themselves, learn from their experiences, and connect with other people. To make that happen, your participants must feel respected, valued, and heard. They must not feel that they are being evaluated or that they are required to perform to expectations. This means that the questions you ask about stories must send two enabling messages.

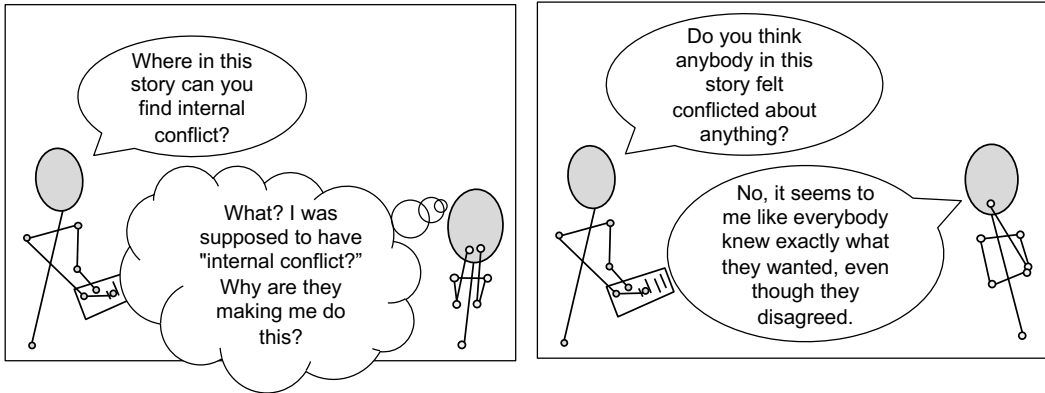
**1. If it matters to you, it matters.** The only justification your participants need to tell a story is that *it matters to them*. They do not have to prove that the story they choose to tell is worth telling. And they do not have to tell a “good” story. Any way they choose to tell a story is the right way to tell it. So when you ask questions about stories:

Don’t say	Say
What makes this a memorable story?	What do you remember most about this story?
Is this a success story?	How do you feel about how the story turned out?
Is this story worth retelling?	Who would you like to hear this story?

You might think this advice would apply only to story-eliciting questions (like the often-seen, always-harmful “Tell us your success story!”). But you can also send tell-this-sort-of-story

messages in the questions you ask *about* stories. For example, if you ask people to choose any experience to tell about—any experience at all!—then give them only a list of positive emotions to describe it, they will be more likely to *change their story to suit your answers* than they will be to explain their true feelings about it.

A tell-this-sort-of-story message embedded in a follow-up question won't just affect that question. It will affect every answer people give and every story they tell after they see it.



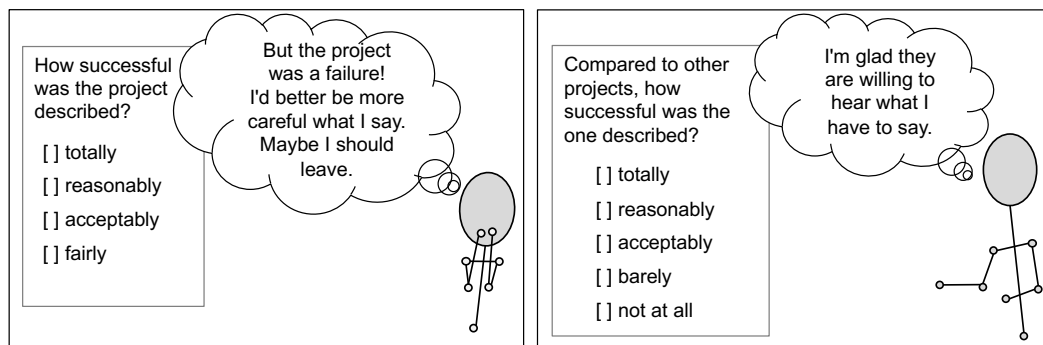
When you are testing your questions, if you see anyone go back and change a story while they are answering your questions about it, pay special attention to the changes they make. If it looks like they went back to the story because a question inspired them to reflect on it more deeply, that's wonderful; that's what you want them to do. But if it seems like they changed the story to make it conform to a subtle direction they perceived in one of your follow-up questions, that's a sign of danger.

**2. This is not a test.** You are sincerely interested in what has happened to your participants and how they feel about it. You are not there to judge them or their actions or opinions—even if you disagree with them on certain points of opinion. You are only there to listen. So when you ask questions about stories:

Don't say	Say
What could you have done better?	How do you wish this story had ended?
Why did you tell this story?	Why do you think you chose this particular story to tell, and not a different one? What does it mean to you?
Did this <i>really</i> happen?	What do you think each of the people who were involved in this story would say about it?

Communicate an invitation to *reflect* with words like: in your experience; based on what you have seen; when you consider; as you contemplate; when you think about; what would you say about; how do you find; what appears to you; how would you characterize; what do you see; what do you think. Avoid words like examine, analyze, inspect, identify, scrutinize, evaluate, rate, and categorize.

Why pamper people like this? Why does this matter? For two reasons. One, participation requires respect; and two, judgment offers poor support for sensemaking. Reflection opens up avenues for conversation; judgment closes them down.



You might be wondering how the questions you ask *after* a person has told a story can send enabling messages. Won't that be too late? It won't, because people will go back to the story after they see or hear your questions about it (and if you try to stop them from doing that, you won't get useful answers—or useful stories).

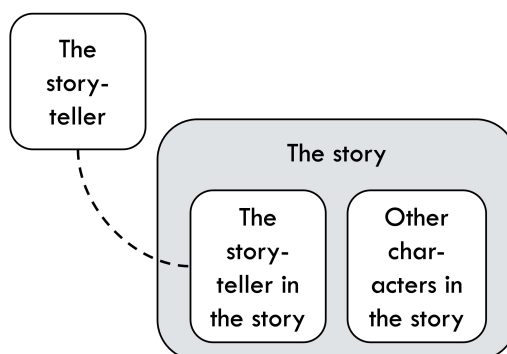
This again goes back to social negotiation. When people share stories in conversation, they decide which stories to tell and how to tell them by assessing the context of the conversation. In the same way, your participants need to assess the context of the conversation they are having with you and with their fellow project participants, whether it's in an interview, a survey, or a group exercise. If you give them the information they need to do this, they will have more to say, and your project will have more to work with.

Another reason to send enabling messages in your follow-up questions is that people might tell more than one story. Good questions about stories help people think of more stories to tell. In fact, second stories are usually more useful than first stories, especially when follow-up questions create an interesting reflective experience.

### ***Use narrative distance for safe exploration***

Good questions about stories create narrative distance between the storyteller and their character in the story, who is both them and not them. This can help participants see themselves from a new perspective, as if they were floating above themselves.

So when you ask questions about stories, don't draw attention to the storyteller. Help them maintain some distance between the version of themselves that is telling a story and the version of themselves that did things in the story.



For example, don't ask questions like:

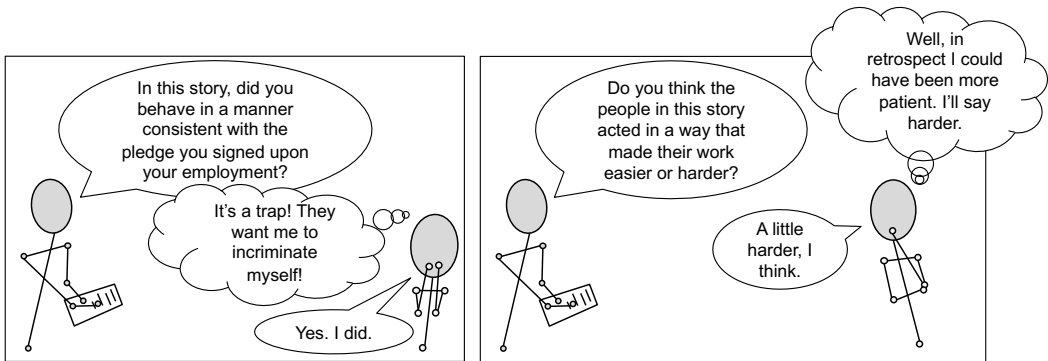
- What did you do wrong?
- Why did you do that?
- What will you do differently the next time?

Instead, ask the storyteller to think about *all of the characters* in the story. For example, you could say:

- Please choose a person in this story you want to think about. It could be anyone.
  - Did the person you chose make any mistakes in the story? If so, what were they?
  - What do you think led that person to make those mistakes?
  - If the person had not made those mistakes, how do you think the story would have turned out?

Being given a choice makes it easier for people to choose themselves. It also helps them to see themselves as a character in a story, someone they can talk about without laying their actions open to direct scrutiny.

And don't ask if the storyteller is the character they chose. I used to do that, long ago, but I found out that you get better answers if you don't ask. It's like talking to a child and pretending their feelings are the feelings of a stuffed animal. Not asking provides indirect anonymity that helps people to safely disclose their feelings, values, and beliefs.



### **Ask questions only storytellers can answer**

The best questions about stories are questions that only their tellers can answer. If anyone else can answer a question, either by reading the story or by knowing about the events described in it, don't waste your participants' precious time and attention on it.

For example, consider this story.

I got to the phone shop at 9am to open up. The door was broken in. There was glass everywhere. I called the police right away. It took them 20 minutes to get there. At first they thought I did it! Why would I call them if I did it? After a while the owner got there and vouched for me. I am going to have to be more careful.

These are some questions people other than the storyteller might be able to answer about that story.

- When did the incident take place?
- What kind of shop was it? What was stolen?
- Did the police follow normal procedures?

These are some questions only the storyteller could answer.

- How do you feel about this story?
- What did you learn from this story?
- How long do you think you will remember this story?

### ***Ask questions that matter and resonate***

Find questions that want to be asked. Don't just pull out a standard list. Think about what you want to achieve with your project. Think about its fondest hopes and dreams. Find questions those dreams want to ask.

Pretend you are sitting with the stories and answers you intend to collect. In a perfect world, what do they tell you? Then come at it from the other side: what do your participants have to say, want to say, need to say? If you can't guess, collect some stories in pilot interviews without asking any questions about them; or ask whatever questions come to mind as you listen. Find the place where what you need to hear and what needs to be said come together.

### ***Transmit your excitement and energy***

You are doing your project because you hope to achieve a goal that is important to you and to your participants. What is it about that goal that moves you the most? Does your energy come through in your questions? Do they feel like a contribution to something positive and helpful, or do they feel like a tax form? If you can't tell, watch people as they look over your questions. Do your questions seem to communicate your energy, and does their interest leap up to meet it? Or do your questions serve as a poor conduit for your enthusiasm?

### ***Do not give non-responders nothing to say***

That's a pile of negatives, isn't it? I'll wait while you work it out.

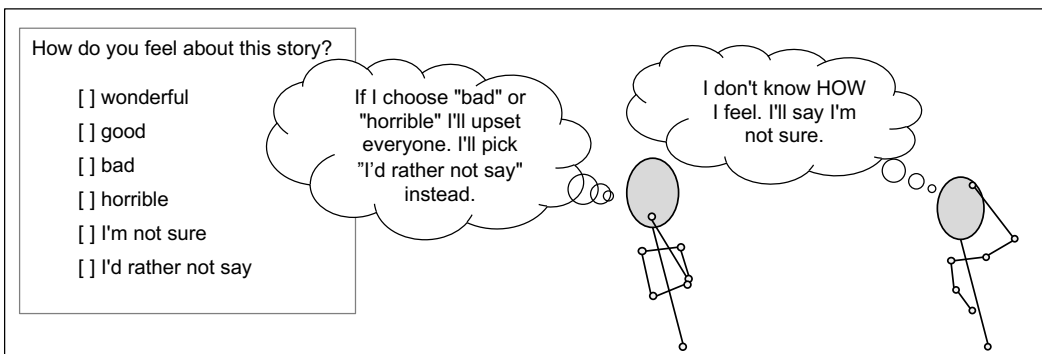
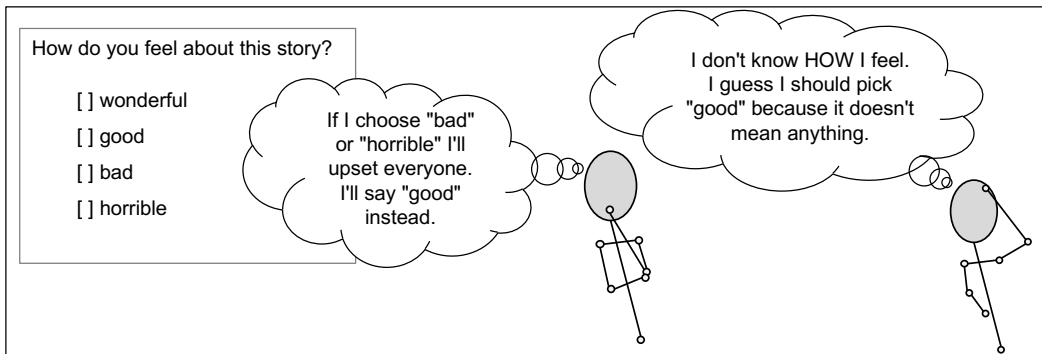
For every question there will be people who cannot or will not answer it. This hard fact can hit up against the pride of project planners. Sometimes the people designing questions do not want to admit (even to themselves) that participants may not want to choose an answer. Admit to yourself that some people will not have an answer, will not want to think hard about your question, or will not want to tell you what they really think.

Once your little pity party is over, look to your creativity to gain information *even when people choose not to respond to your questions*. How? By giving people multiple ways to not respond. Turning a lack of response into a response can create useful insights. The more information you can help people give you about *why* they aren't answering, the better you can support sensemaking.

My favorite example of this was on a project where we were doing some pilot story collection. On the “how do you feel about this story” question, the great majority of the participants chose the answer “good.” But the answers did not match the stories, which recounted a variety of pleasant and unpleasant events.

What seemed to have happened was that, not seeing a rather-not-say answer, the participants decided that “good” *was* the rather-not-say answer, in the same way as you might say “fine” when someone asked “how are you” even if you didn’t feel fine.

The clear message to us was that some of these people needed a way to say “I’d rather not tell you that.” So in our next try, we added “I’d rather not say” to the question, and the next set of answers we got matched the stories much better.



Some other non-response responses include: I don’t know; I’m not sure; I don’t remember; It’s hard to say; That’s too private; I’d like to skip this question; I don’t understand the question; It’s complicated; The question doesn’t apply; I don’t like the question; I don’t think the question makes sense; None of these answers work for me; None of these. Of course you would never use more than probably two non-response options per question, but don’t leave them out entirely. They might save your project.

## Asking questions about your participants

After each person is finished telling the stories they want to tell, it is always a good idea to ask them some questions about themselves, for two reasons. First, asking people questions about themselves can provide revelatory context that can deepen your exploration of your

collected stories. And second, pairing indirect questions about stories with direct questions about people can create revelatory juxtapositions.

There are five non-demographic categories of participant questions I have found useful: questions about issues, the community or organization, roles, habits, and demographics.

### **Views on issues**

You can ask direct questions about views, essentially embedding an opinion survey within your story collection. For example, you might ask:

- How do you feel about \_\_\_? Do you think it's helpful or harmful?
- Which of these statements do you agree with most about \_\_\_?
- If you could write a law regulating \_\_\_, what would it say?
- What do you think causes \_\_\_? What would fix it?
- In an ideal world, what would \_\_\_ be like?

You might wonder: *If I already asked people about their views through their stories, why should I ask all over again?* Because asking directly about views causes people to think in a different way about the topic of your project. The combination of these two complementary approaches (direct and indirect questioning) produces a more detailed, complex picture than either approach can alone.

Usually answers to questions like these are given on a range from strongly supporting an initiative or viewpoint to being firmly against it. Sometimes differences between what people say about an issue directly and the stories they tell related to the issue (and what they say about those stories) can provide some of the best insights in a project.

In one project I can remember, those who supported the organization's official policy most strongly also told the *worst* stories about it, and felt the most work stress related to the topic. These people, mostly in positions of oversight, were in a double bind: they *had* to support the policy in public, but they also experienced some of its most difficult repercussions. In other projects, people contradicted themselves not because of official roles but because the issue presented them with mixed feelings, some on the surface (thus easy to state) and some more deeply held (and only accessible through recounting their experiences).

### **Views on the community or organization**

You can ask direct questions about views on the community or organization. For example, you might ask:

- How good of a job do you think \_\_\_ [is/are] doing with \_\_\_?
- How would you say \_\_\_ ranks among \_\_\_?
- What do you think \_\_\_ will be like in ten years? Why?
- How happy are you with \_\_\_? Are you thinking of \_\_\_?
- Do people in \_\_\_ [listen to each other, cooperate, argue too much, etc]?
- What would you like to see happen in \_\_\_?

- Would you describe \_\_\_ as more [united, agile, smart, powerful] or more [divided, cumbersome, foolish, powerless]?  
item How do you see this project? Are we reaching deep to improve \_\_\_, or are we going through the motions to put on a show?

When you combine stated views of the community or organization with the stories people tell about it, you can discover insights in contradictions. If I say, for example, that people in our community hate outsiders, but tell story after story about people welcoming immigrants, I have revealed to you a knot of tension that begs to be explored. It may contain an explanation, a solution, a culprit, or an opportunity.

## Roles and groups

Questions about roles ask people about their positions in the organization or community and what those positions involve. In a community, for example, you might ask:

- Do you belong to any of these community groups?
- Which of these hobbies are important to you?
- How often do you visit \_\_\_?
- Where do you get your \_\_\_?
- When you hear a rumor about \_\_\_, in which of these ways are you most likely to hear it?
- How long have you \_\_\_?

In an organization, you might ask:

- What is your position at \_\_\_?
- How long have you been at \_\_\_? How long in your current position? What did you do before that?
- Do you work alone or in a team? How large is your team?
- To what extent does your work depend on plans or requests made by other people?
- How predictable is your work? Do you do the same thing every day, or is every day different?
- To what extent would you describe your work as fast-paced?
- Do you supervise other people? If so, how many?

The reason to ask these questions is to look for differences in the stories people tell that link to their positions and responsibilities, which is often a source of insight. For example, in an organization, people with a large purview might tell different stories about trust than people who are responsible for only their own work. Or people whose work never varies from day to day might speak differently about innovation than people whose work skews wildly around depending on needs of the moment.



## Habits and traits

Sometimes a project needs to distinguish between participants by the way they habitually think about things. You might ask questions like:

- Are you a big-picture thinker? Or do you tend to wade into the details?
- Are you a careful person, or do you tend to be a little sloppy? How do you feel about that?
- Are you more of a glass-half-empty or glass-half-full person? Maybe somewhere in the middle?
- Does being around people energize or drain you?
- Do people often say that you think in strange or different ways? Or does that never happen to you?
- Do you love doing new things? Or do you do new things only when it's necessary?
- Which of these ways of learning works best for you?
- Do you tell a lot of stories? Or is that something you rarely do?

I have found that questions about habits can produce hit-or-miss results. Sometimes you might think a question will highlight a fault line between different ways of being, but it turns out to show nothing. Other times you will ask simply because there is room to do so, and a difference will jump out and overwhelm everything else.

## Demographics

Questions about demographics can reveal useful patterns when it comes to common influences on perspectives, such as generational differences. You might ask questions like:

- Which of these age ranges do you fall into?
- What is your ethnic background?
- Do you rent or own your home?
- Which of these living situations best describes yours?
- Do you live in a city, suburb, town, or village?
- What is your income?
- How much formal education have you received? How about informal education?

Be careful with factual questions. Build a strong case for each one you want to use. Why do you need that information? Could you ask the question in a less precise way that provides more anonymity? For example, if you want to know where people live, what is the largest geographical area you can ask them to describe?

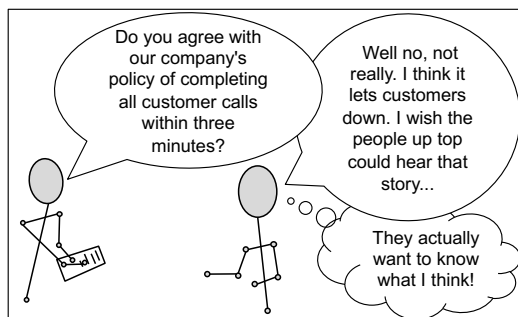
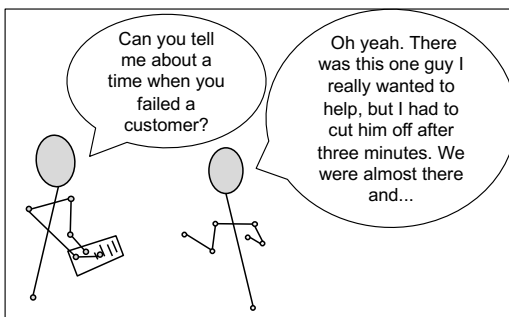
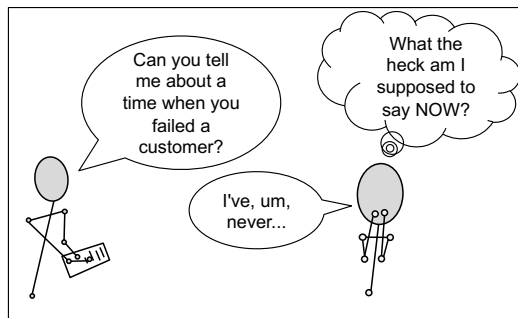
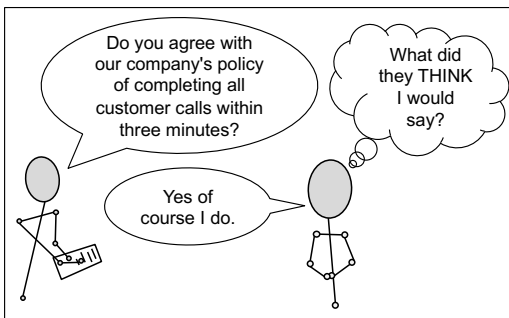
People often think I'm some kind of privacy zealot when I say not to ask for more information than you need. Nobody cares about privacy anymore, they say. I remember a conversation with a person who was asking people for their telephone number in an online form. I said, "What do you need their phone number for?" And they said, "Oh, I don't really, it's just the usual thing." That kind of might-as-well approach is fine in some contexts, but it's dangerous in story work.

When you cross the invisible line between reasonable inquiry and unreasonable intrusion, people don't stop telling stories. They just tell *different* stories. And those different stories will produce a different outcome for your project, perhaps not the one you were hoping to achieve. Asking personal questions with care and respect is not (only) a moral stance; it is (also) a tactical plan.

## Putting together your question set

The order in which you ask questions about stories can impact the quality and quality of stories you can collect. Here's the order that works best.

- Start by asking your story-eliciting question(s).
- After each story has been told, ask your follow-up questions about it.
  - Start with emotional questions about the story. Emotions are most vivid just after a story has been told. Also, questions about emotions show that you care how people feel.
  - Finish with factual questions. Up-front factual questions can come across as interrogatory. Later on, they seem clarifying, not judging.
- After the person is done telling stories, ask them some questions about themselves. Never ask people about themselves before they start telling stories. It changes the stories they tell.
  - Start with questions about views, because they are closest to the emotions of story-telling.
  - Continue with questions about habits and roles.
  - End with questions about demographics, which might seem intrusive earlier on.



## Tips on building question sets

A set of questions about a story is half of a conversation you hope to have with people about the story. To make sure the question set grows into a full conversation (of the kind that leads to excellent sensemaking support), here are some guidelines you can follow in how you put questions together.

### *Design an interesting experience*

I recommend using all three types of questions (free entry, choices, scales), and mixing up their order. It makes for a more interesting experience. Sure, it's easier to read a series of questions of the same type, but it's also easier to mix them up. Also, walls of nearly identical questions are boring. People don't talk like that, so don't ask questions like that. The best way to order your questions is like a conversation. Try asking them out loud. Does the order flow naturally? Or does it get stuck? After you ask each question, pause for a moment and think about what question it seems most natural to ask next.

Varied questions are also useful because they produce more interesting patterns for sensemaking. If you use only choice questions, all of your patterns will be bar graphs. Scatterplots are nice to have in sensemaking because they look like starry skies, and people seem to enjoy contemplating and discussing them more than they do simple bar graphs. Still, I would never design a question set that produced *only* scatterplots, because an array of diverse images supports sensemaking best.

### *Design for skimming*

Here's a common mistake: writing choice questions that assume people will read the lists of answers as well as the questions. People don't do that, especially when they are skimming. They just read the questions. So the first of these two questions will be skipped far more often than the second.

1. Which of these best describes the relationships in this story?
2. How close or far apart were the relationships in this story?

Don't write questions that can't stand alone. People will skim them and misunderstand your meaning. Write each question and answer so it makes sense all by itself.

### *Design for clarity and ease of use*

The more smoothly your questions flow, the more you can keep people focused on their own reflective processes, the better results you will see. Try your questions out on somebody you can watch, and see where they pause and ponder. Why do they stop? Is it because they are thinking about their story or because they are trying to figure out what you mean by what you said? For example, these are some common mistakes:

- Don't write questions that make no sense. Confusing sentences, such as those with subjects and verbs that don't agree ("How long ago does the events in this story take place"), confuse people and slow them down.
- Don't get basic facts about the community or organization wrong. I confess to having done this a few times early on due to outsider ignorance (now I test my questions better).

This kind of mistake communicates a damaging message: we know nothing about you or your world. Not conducive to storytelling!

- Don't give answer ranges that overlap, like for age: up to 25 years, 25 to 50 years, 50-plus years. What is a 25-year-old to do?
- Don't switch back and forth between "I" and "you." Choose to refer to the participant as "I" or "you" and stick with it.
- Don't use jargon. This is a *conversation* you are trying to imagine, not a treatise. Even with professionals you can write conversationally.

Your set of questions should be *attractive*, even appealing. Give people something beautiful that feels like an honor to use. It may sound silly, but I've seen it make a difference.

Do this with everything you provide to your participants, from invitations to explanations to thank-you gifts. And every time you have something to say to your participants, don't stumble through it; practice it until you know it by heart. Bowl people over with what you have done to support the project. This will prove two things to them: that you value their time and attention, and that you have worked hard to support the project. Both of these messages will confer on them an obligation to do their own part to make the project a success.

### ***Design for feedback***

A set of questions about stories should be a thought *landscape*, not a thought jail. At the start of each interview, session, or survey, tell people that they can comment on your questions, the session or interview, the project, or anything they like. Then give them the time and space to do exactly that. If you are using a paper form, leave plenty of white space on it. If you are using a web form, include an open-ended comment box. If you are asking your questions in a conversation, ask people if there is anything else they would like to say. You want people to see your questions as an opportunity to shape the project to suit their needs, not a trial to endure because they cannot avoid it. So let them shape the project.

I remember once doing a story-sharing session as part of a pilot project. When I got back the paper forms from the session participants, I saw right away that our questions needed some work. Quite a few of the participants had drawn long, raking lines—gashes, really—across several of the questions. It was a good thing that we had encouraged them to write anything they wanted to on the forms. On looking at which questions were defaced, I realized that they were a cluster of questions the participants felt were insulting to their professional status. We reworded the questions in the next session, and responses improved.

In another project, one of our questions contained a factual error about the organization. The participants let us know this by surrounding the mistake with question marks and exclamation points. In both of these cases, if we had ignored the annotating marks, or if we had given explicit instructions to use the forms exactly as they were written, we would have missed an important understanding that improved the project.

## Testing your question set

Put your question set in front of as many of your potential participants, and as many people who know your potential participants well, as you can. Keep testing and improving your question set until people tell you that it is:

- Safe—not insulting or intimidating
- Interesting—an invitation to reflect
- Relevant—connected to real experiences
- Clear—free of contradictions or confusions
- Respectful—tactful and well presented

## Gathering your stories

In each of the sections below I have written some basic instructions on how to gather stories. You are likely to depart from these simple plans as you grow your own unique PNI practice and draw on your own skills, background, and goals. No matter how you choose to gather your stories, remember that effective story gathering takes practice. Don't expect your first attempts to go perfectly. Take some time to build up your skills.

In most of the sections below I have included some tips based on my own experiences gathering stories. Most of these tips apply to more than one method, but I have placed them where I think they apply best. My suggestion is to read all of the sections even if you don't plan to use all of the methods, since you might otherwise miss some useful tips.

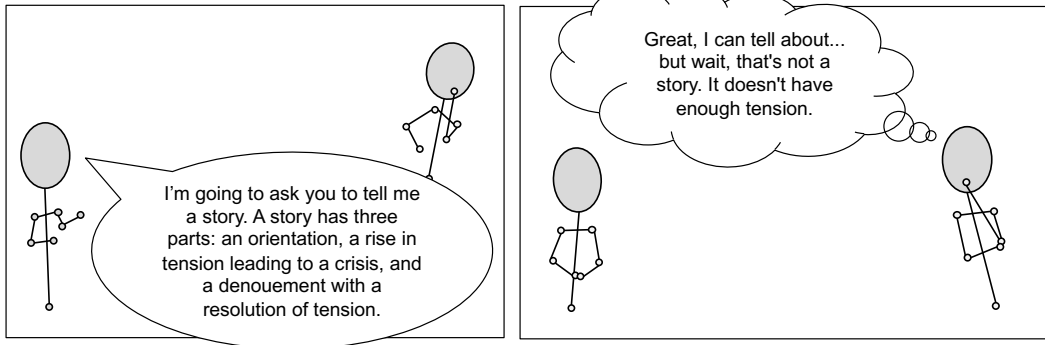
## Conducting a one-on-one interview

A one-on-one interview is a *listening conversation* between you and one project participant. Allocate 30-60 minutes, invite one person, and follow these steps.

### Write, practice, and test an interview script

Before you start your interviews, put together a script that adds to your prepared questions an overall introduction, transitions between interview parts (e.g., “now I have a few questions about you”), and a conclusion. In your introduction, which should last just a few minutes, explain the project and its goals, your win-win proposal, and your privacy policy.

Don't explain what makes a story a story. The moment you set limits on what can be a story, people will stop telling stories and start *trying* to tell stories. Nobody needs to know how their lungs work to breathe, and nobody needs to know what makes a story a story to tell a story. You may need to tell people *why you want to hear about what happened* to them, but you do not need to tell them *what a story is*. In the interview, if they press you for an explanation, just say “I'd like to hear about your experiences” or “tell me about what happened.” Don't get drawn into definition.



In fact, I suggest that you avoid using the word “story” at the start of the interview. Why? Because to most people today, “story” means “TV and movies” or “newspapers.” It does not mean “things that have happened to me.” You don’t want people to audition for a TV show; you want them to reflect on their experiences. So as much as you can, keep the word “story” out of the conversation until after your interviewee has told at least one story. Then you can refer to what they have said as a story—and they will understand what you mean.

When your interview script is ready, practice saying it out loud until you no longer sound like you are reading from a script. Then find someone who can help you test it. If you can’t find a helper who has had experiences like those of your participants, ask someone about a broader or adjacent topic.

In your test interview, watch your helper’s body language, facial expressions, and gestures. Watch the tempo of their speech: when does it speed up, slow down, pause? When do their emotions seem to rise and fall? After the interview, ask them about the experience. Ask if there were any times when they felt confused, bored, challenged, intimidated, irritated, happy, hopeful, or grateful. Use what you learn to improve your script.

### Elicit the first story

As your interview begins, give your prepared introduction, keeping it to no more than three minutes. When you’re finished, turn on your recording device or tell your interviewee that you will be taking notes on what they say.

Next, show the interviewee a menu of questions to choose from or can ask the first of a series of questions. Give them some time to take in what you are asking. If they have questions about what you want them to do, answer them quickly, then refer them back to the question(s) you asked.

If they respond to your question(s) *without* telling a story, don’t tell them to tell a story. Instead, ask a follow-up question that guides them toward choosing and recounting an experience. Say something like, “That’s interesting. Can you remember a *specific* time when that happened?” or “I see. You mentioned that you once \_\_\_\_\_. Could you tell me more about what happened then?”

When the interviewee has finished telling their first story, ask your follow-up questions, either in conversation or using a printed or online form. Don’t rush them through this

process, but don't let them linger too long on it either. You want them to be able to tell another story or two in the time you have. It generally takes people 5-10 minutes to tell a story, and it should take just a few minutes to answer your questions about the story.

## **Elicit more stories**

Next, say or show another story-eliciting question, or show your question list again and ask the interviewee to choose another question to answer. The second storytelling should take less time, since they have a better idea of what you want them to do now. If they tell a story that doesn't connect to any of your story-eliciting questions, let them, as long as they keep telling stories about your topic.

After each story, ask the same follow-up questions as you did for the first one. Some people might tell one story and want to stop; others might tell two, three, or more. (I always schedule an extra half-hour for each interview, in case people want to keep going.)

## **Finish the interview**

When there are about five minutes left in your agreed interview time, ask your interviewee to answer your questions about themselves, in conversation or using a form. After they've done that, thank them for their time and tell them how they can join the sensemaking part of the project.

If there's still a little time left, or if they seem willing to keep talking, ask for feedback on the interview itself. Ask them how it went, whether your explanations were clear, and whether they felt heard and respected. Ask them if there are any questions they wish you had asked, and give them the opportunity to answer them—or make any comment they would like to make about the interview, the topic, or the project.

Immediately after the interview, jot down your thoughts on what happened. Later, transcribe your recording or clean up your notes. This needn't take long, because you only need a verbatim record of the stories. If you asked the participant to fill in forms, they already entered their own data. If you asked your questions in speech, you only need verbatim answers for any open-ended questions you asked. For other questions, you can enter the data as you listen to your recording or look over your notes. (Also see the tip below on transcribing storytelling.)

## **Tips on conducting one-on-one interviews**

### ***Go on a story-listening journey***

The best way to use an interview script is like an expedition uses its base camp: as a place to start from and return to. To decide when to stick to your script and when to depart from it, pay as much attention to what your participants need as you do to what they say.

For example, it sometimes happens in interviews that participants hint at questions they *wish* they could answer. They want to tell a story you didn't ask them to tell, or they want to answer a question about a story that you didn't ask them. You can include a blanket

permission to speak freely in your introduction, but you can also notice such hints and follow them. You can say things like:

- I noticed that you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Is there an experience related to \_\_\_\_\_ that you'd like to tell about?
- In the story you just told, you mentioned that \_\_\_\_\_. Is there anything else you would like to say about that?

Following the participant's lead in this way will make their contribution conform less to the project's overall structure; but since you are gathering material for people to use in sensemaking, structure may matter to them less than meaning.

As you listen, show empathy and respectful curiosity. Probably the most important aspect of gathering stories in interviews is to communicate a sense of respectful curiosity. Says Yiannis Gabriel in *Storytelling in Organizations*:

In finding stories, researchers must be aware that they are furtive, fragile, and delicate creatures. They can easily be driven away, they can emerge without being noticed, they can rigidify into descriptions or reports, and they can be killed. The researcher's demeanour, attentiveness, and reactions play a decisive role in the generation of stories. . . . The stand advocated here is that of a fellow-traveller on the narrative, someone keen to engage with it emotionally, displaying interest, empathy, and pleasure in the storytelling process. . . . Like a traveller, the researcher is subject to the narrative's momentum, never seeking to control it or derail it, yet constantly and attentively engaged with it, encouraging it, sometimes nudging it forward, sometimes slowing it down.

I have developed a similar metaphor for this process. When you listen to someone tell a story, you must listen past:

- the story you *thought* they would tell,
- the story you *want* them to tell,
- and the story they *should* tell
- before you can get to *the story they are actually telling*.

For example, I've found that my interviews go best when I can come up with one respectfully curious question to ask about each story, one that is not in my interview script. It is usually about some element of the story that I find fascinating and want to know more about. Asking people such questions during or after the story helps them bring out more details of their experiences, and it helps them feel heard and respected as they explore their memories and feelings.

### ***Notice what type of storyteller you are talking to***

Storytelling is built into all human brains; it is part of how we think. But through upbringing, culture, personality, and habits, some people tell more stories than others. Think about how many stories you tell per day, on average. Then think about how many stories other people you know tell. There's probably a pretty big range.



In asking people to tell stories, I have noticed a curious pattern. There is an astounding lack of correlation between whether people tell stories and whether they *think* they tell stories. If storytelling is innate, it is not always conscious. It seems to be one of those things people do without knowing how they do it, or that they do it at all. I myself am one of those people who tell story after story, but it was only *after* I started studying organizational and community narrative that I had any inkling I did this.

Taking these two scales and pretending they are simple dichotomies (which they aren't) and combining them, you end up with four states, as follows:

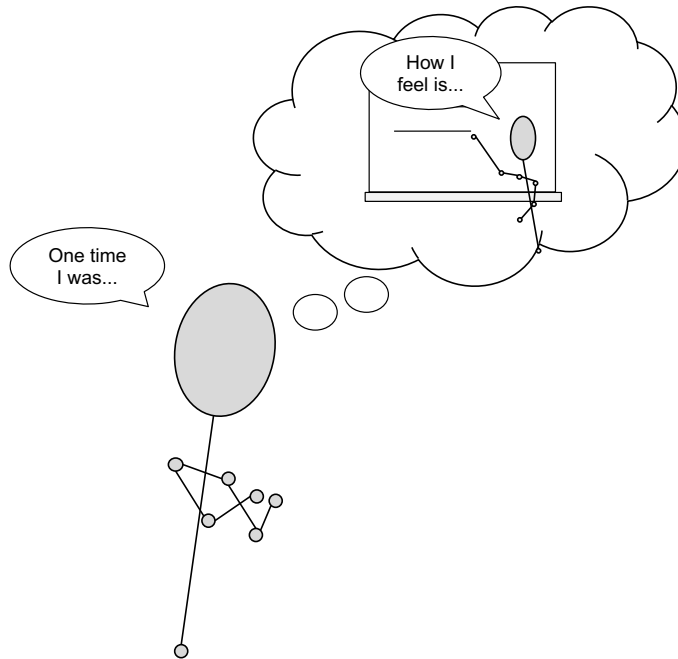
		Do they tell stories?	
		Yes, they tell lots of stories.	No, they tell few stories.
Do they <i>think</i> they tell stories?	Yes, they think they tell lots of stories.	<i>Story performers</i> think they tell many stories. They do.	<i>Confident non-story tellers</i> think they tell lots of stories, but they actually don't.
	No, they think they never tell stories.	<i>Natural storytellers</i> think they never tell stories, but they do.	<i>Unaccustomed storytellers</i> think they never tell stories, and they're right. They don't.

Now of course these are caricatures I have created to talk about extremes, and not real representations of real people. Nobody inhabits these extremes perfectly, but most people do *approach* them occasionally at different times and in different contexts. The categories are not fixed for life, or even for a day. Most people act differently with respect to narrative in their personal and professional lives and among different groups of people. Also, groups can develop a story-sharing culture (or a non-story-sharing culture) over time.

Even the people you are talking to have an effect on whether you tell stories or not. You have probably met someone who seems to suck all the stories around them into a black hole because they won't let anyone around them hold the floor long enough to tell one. So there are complex patterns that determine whether stories actually get told. But having said all of that, most people do tend more toward one of these types than others.

With those caveats in place, let's go through the four types of storytellers, because you need a different approach to interview each of them.

**The natural storyteller.** The superheroes of story collection are the people who *think* they don't tell stories but do. These people come up with story after wonderful story, and the best part is that their stories are absolutely natural and authentic. Since they don't see themselves as great storytellers, they don't try to perform or create a sensation. They just *talk about what happened to them*, in the way they usually talk, which is in stories.



A conversation with a natural storyteller might go like this.

You: What happened on your first day at the plant?

Them: Let's see, I think I got there at five that morning. I was so determined to prove myself. When I went through the front gate my stomach was in knots. I remember I kept fixating on the company logo and trying to memorize it, in case they asked me any questions. Which is really funny, you know, because why would they do that? (laughter) I can still remember how worried I was that I'd drop something on somebody's foot. (etc., etc., etc.)

You: (secret grin)

Notice a few things about this storyteller:

- They described events that unfolded over time: this happened, then that happened.
- They provided details that revealed context, emotion, motivation, and visual description—in realistic proportion.
- They responded to their own story as they told it, adding evaluation statements that deepened its reflective nature.

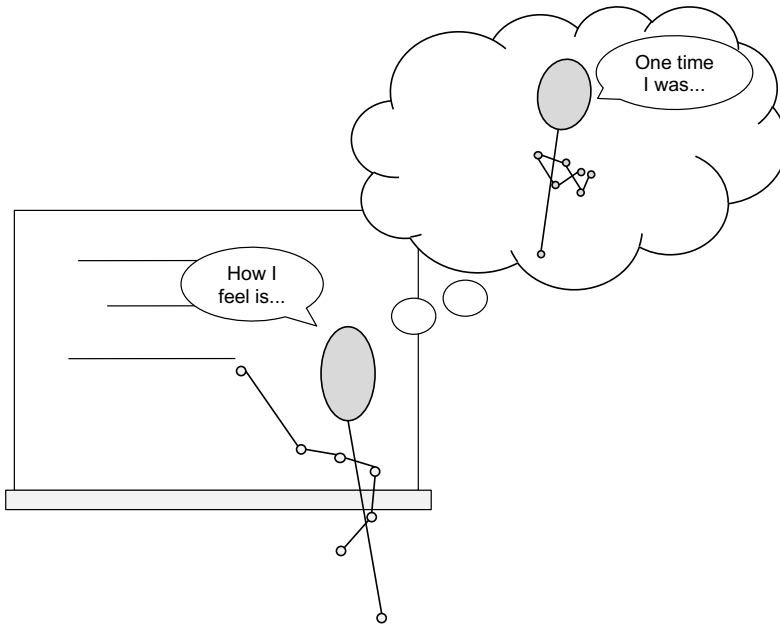
All of these aspects make the stories told by “naturals” especially useful in sensemaking.

This is the easiest type of storyteller to gather stories from. Just ask a story-eliciting question and *let them answer it*. Make sure you give them the respect and permission they need to speak freely; but that is all they will need.

**The confident non-story teller.** The most difficult interviewing situation is with a person who *thinks* they tell stories but doesn't. Often these people don't understand what you

mean by “story,” and they think you want a joke or lesson or opinion. But the problem is not so much that they don’t understand; it’s that they *cannot be helped* to understand.

I have most often encountered confident non-story tellers in positions of power. My guess is that it may have something to do with the way that power creates a reality distortion field around itself, causing people to believe that they have no reason to reexamine their definitions and assumptions. As a result, a story is what they say it is, and nothing you say can turn them from that course. So no matter what you ask for, they give you what they want to say and call it a story.



A conversation with a confident non-story teller might go like this.

You: What happened on your first day at the plant?

Them: Well, back then we knew how to work hard. I didn’t give up at the first little problem like these kids do today.

You: Can you tell me about a *specific* problem that happened?

Them: Sure. I never let up, you know? I kept trying. I didn’t let things get me down. Today all the new hires whine and complain and want us to hold their hands.

You: So what *happened* on that first day?

Them: It was hard at first, but I kept going. I’m still here, aren’t I?

You: (secret sigh)

Notice how the teller keeps drifting from narrating events to giving opinions. They don’t *mean* to frustrate you; they think they *are* doing what you have asked them to do, and they can’t understand what else you could possibly want (even as you keep telling them).

Interviewing a confident non-story teller requires patience and kindness. Control your frustration as you continue to draw their attention back to their own experiences. If that doesn't work, you may have to make a more explicit request. Say something like:

Your experiences with \_\_\_ are so unique and extensive that they are especially important to our project. So I would like to ask you to look back over your experiences and tell me—specifically—*what has happened to you and how you feel about it.*

This is a more direct—and more directive—approach than you should usually use in an interview. For most people it would come off as heavy-handed. But it might be what a confident non-story teller needs to understand how they can participate in your project.

**The story performer.** The second-worst interviewing situation is when people tell great stories *and know it*. These people *mean* well, they really do. But they can't help getting out the big circus tent and climbing up to that trapeze, no matter what you ask them to do.

A conversation with a story performer might go like this.

You: What happened on your first day at the plant?

Them: Picture this. I was shaking in my boots. I had sweat dripping off my brow. I got there at three in the morning, and I drove around the plant *two hundred times!* Finally, at 8:00, the guy at the gate let me in, and he said, I've never seen *anybody* in all my years here so scared. You really take the cake. And then I *fainted*.

You: You fainted?

Them: Well, I *felt* faint! I was that scared.

You: What happened next?

Them: What happened next I will never forget. I was ushered into a room, and the CEO of the whole company walked in and slapped me full in the face.

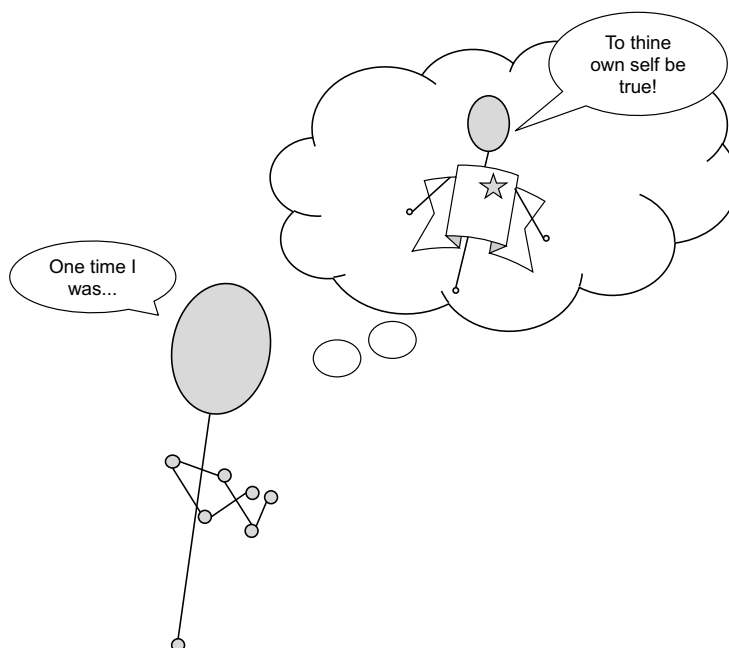
You: What?

Them: Well, he bumped into me. But it *felt* like he meant to do it.

You: (secret sigh)

Story performers tend to exaggerate and claim to be the best or worst or first or last, not because they are braggarts but because it makes the story better. They drive things to extremes in the service of drama. And you know what? There is nothing in the world wrong with that. The truth should never stand in the way of a good story, and all that. It makes life fun. But a performance-first story provides poor support for sensemaking, because it obscures rather than reveals actual experiences and reflections.

By the way, in case I sound judgmental about story performers, here is an admission: I used to be a natural storyteller, but the more I identify with my career in organizational story, the more I turn into a story performer. I've caught myself "hamming it up" with a story more times than I'd like to admit, because this little neon sign lights up in my head that says "Oooh, I can be *admired* for this!" And it's hard, hard, hard to turn that little sign off. That's why natural storytellers are so hard to find and so valuable. Naturals and performers have the same talents, but in performers the talent is hampered by awareness.



Interviewing story performers can be fun! But if you're not careful, it can prevent you from gathering the stories you need for your project. Keep guiding their focus back to *what actually happened to them* and away from what makes the best story. Ask reflective questions like "How did you feel about that?" and "Why do you think that happened?"

If that doesn't help, bring up the goals of your project. Explain that you are trying to "get to the heart" of your topic, and explain how useful their *raw, authentic, real-life, lived experiences* will be in the sensemaking part of the project. In other words, if you can't stop a story performer from crafting an amazing story, show them how to craft a story that will make your project a success.

**The unaccustomed storyteller.** These are people who don't tell stories and don't think they do. They just don't think in stories. It's not their thing. If you do story work and have not bounced off the sheer impenetrability of a personality like this yet, you are either inexperienced or in denial. They are out there, people.

You'd think this would be the worst group, but really they are not that bad. Unlike the two groups who *think* they tell stories, these people are usually willing to help you get what you need. You just have to help them get there.

A conversation with an unaccustomed storyteller might go like this.

You: What happened on your first day at the plant?

Them: It was a hard day.

(silence)

You: When did you arrive?

Them: Around six in the morning.

(silence)

You: What happened when you got there?

Them: I went in at the gate.

(silence)

You: How did you feel right then?

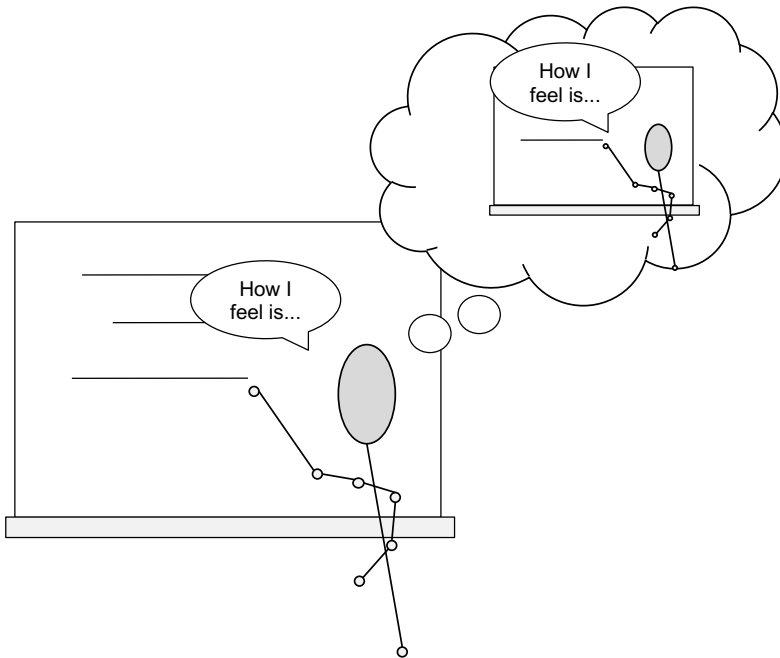
Them: Scared. I was scared that whole day, come to think of it.

(silence)

You: I see. What do you think you were scared of?

(and so on)

Note that you had to keep drawing the story out, one event or emotion or reflection at a time. This did not happen because the storyteller was uncooperative. They were just not used to recounting chains of events.



Unaccustomed storytellers are not hard to gather stories from, but it does take some practice and patience. Keep asking them questions that draw out the story, like “What happened next?” and “How did you feel about that?” After a while, they might start to anticipate your questions; but then again, they might need your help all the way through the story. That’s okay. It doesn’t mean they can’t or won’t tell the stories you need. It just means they need a little help getting their stories out. If you know you will be dealing with unaccustomed storytellers, plan longer interviews.

**Help people turn half-stories into full stories**

When you ask people to tell you a story, you are likely to collect some responses I call *half-stories*, because they don't have plots and don't reveal perspectives. These are some common types of half-stories and how to handle them.

Type	Description	For example	What's missing	Ask
Situation	A snapshot in time	I had a hard time my first day at work. I didn't think I would be able to pick this stuff up fast enough.	A change, a resolution	What happened the next day? How did things turn out?
Scenario	A blending of many stories	I used to take the train downtown all the time. It was crowded, I can tell you that.	Telling details	Can you remember a specific time when the crowding was important to you?
Reference	An inside story (without the story)	It was like that time at the park.	What actually happened	Could you tell me more about what happened that time at the park?

**Help people turn simple stories into complex stories**

Some stories are naturally *simple* because they are about uncomplicated things. We all tell simple stories every day, stories like, "I was out walking today and I saw a new construction site over by the old garage." Simple stories are not usually very useful for sensemaking, since there is not much depth to them.

Some stories are purposefully *simplified* in order to communicate or persuade. We all see (and some of us tell) simplified stories every day, stories like, "We have developed a product that will make your life better." Simplified stories are definitely not useful in sensemaking.

Some stories are *complex* because they combine many messages and purposes. Most of us tell complex stories only when we have enough time, safety, and freedom to speak and reflect on our experiences.

Complex stories are the best stories to gather for sensemaking. Only they have the depth that, upon exploration, can provide useful insights. Complexifying questions can help you help your participants explore their experiences more deeply. You can do this whether or not any such questions are in your interview script.

Type	Subtype	To help people tell them, ask
<i>Internally complex</i> stories are rich in nuance and detail.		How did that feel to you? What surprised you about it? What did you learn from it?
<i>Externally complex</i> stories are connected to other stories in networks of meaning.		Does this remind you of any other times when you felt the same way? How about when you felt the opposite?
<i>Relationally complex</i> stories come in three varieties.	<i>Nested</i> stories have other stories inside of them.	Why do you think that person responded in the way they did? Did something happen to them, maybe a long time ago, that caused them to see things that way?
	<i>Combined</i> stories mix and match elements from other stories.	If this story had taken place in another place or at another time, what would be the same, and what would be different?
	<i>Multi-perspective</i> stories contain more than one point of view.	How do you think ___ would tell this story if they were telling it right now?

### **Write a useful transcription**

For privacy reasons, most story projects transcribe their audio recordings. But because storytelling is a performance and a negotiation, transcribing conversational storytelling is not the same as transcribing other kinds of conversations. Here are some things to pay attention to as you prepare your transcriptions.

**Capture a storytelling event, not just a story.** Don't start transcribing when the events of the story begin; start transcribing when the storytelling event begins. If you can, include the abstract, the story proper, its coda, and any relevant follow-up conversation. This will usually only be a few extra sentences, but don't leave them out. Also, if the audience made relevant comments or asked questions during the storytelling event, include those as well.

**Preserve emphasis.** During a storytelling event, emphases communicate intent and meaning. Capture *how people tell their stories*, not just the words they use. For example, without emphases, it would be impossible to distinguish between these (quite different) sentences:

- We knew what to do. [*They* didn't.]
- We *knew* what to do. [We just couldn't *do* it.]
- We knew *what* to do. [But we didn't know *how*.]



- We knew what to *do*. [But we didn't know what to *say*.]

Using italics (or some other notation) to mark the emphasized words in any of these sentences makes their meaning clear; leaving them out makes it impossible to guess.

**Catch hesitations and reframings.** Breaks, irregularities, hesitations, repetitions, and confusions can be important indicators of negotiations during a storytelling event. Keep them intact. For example, the story fragments on the left side of this table would be misrepresented if only the overly-cleaned-up versions on the right were available.

If they said	It would be too simple to write
You can... It feels as if... How can I put this? I don't <i>trust</i> them anymore.	I don't trust them anymore.
It's a joke, really, and not quite a joke, but a little bit of personal experience. I, personally, feel that...	My personal experience has been that...
I just, it's not specifically—I don't think, specifically someone, it's more—it feels almost like a <i>system</i> issue. A lot of my work is about getting—well, <i>one</i> of the areas is getting information out.	A lot of my work is getting information out.

This doesn't mean you can't clean up what people say; but it does mean you should attempt to preserve as much meaning as you can—and that you should make the original, messy verbatim transcript available to those who want to see it.

**Make it make sense.** You can clean up what people say and make it more intelligible if you take care to preserve its meaning. People often talk in bits and pieces, starting and stopping. Use punctuation (commas, semicolons, colons, dashes) to represent halting speech in complete sentences.

If they say	You could clean it up by writing
It's not a problem really it's just he didn't tell me what he was thinking and so I was confused is all.	It's not a problem, really; it's just—he didn't tell me what he was thinking, and so I was confused, is all.
So he understood even though the short term outcome was not his favorite he felt and I was surprised and happy with that really felt that the experience had been worthwhile.	So he understood, even though the short term outcome was not his favorite, he felt—and I was surprised and happy with that—really felt that the experience had been worthwhile.

If you encounter a real word salad, you might have to remove a few words, or add a comment, for clarity. But you can usually use punctuation to capture people said and what they meant without making your transcript hard to read.

**Capture socially significant sounds.** Most transcripts ignore background noises like laughter, muttering, the sound of shuffling feet, and silence. But when someone is telling a story, such social cues can be useful indications of what is going on. Simple notations such as [laughter] and [long silence] can be helpful.

For example, in this transcribed bit of a conversation (from a real project), I used square brackets to mark words I changed for privacy, italics to mark emphases, parentheses to mark the storyteller's non-verbal sounds, and curly brackets to mark audience responses.

When I came into [the company], they said, well, you know, you have to work on [a process] because *everybody's* got to take a turn there, do their time (laughter) with the stupid [people] {Is that so?} and you'll get to work with the *normal* [people] later. {laughter}

Any notation system will work, as long as it's consistent and understandable.

**Capture verbal, non-textual signals.** Many of the verbal and visual cues we give each other in person are lost when our words are transcribed. Descriptive notes can help to preserve meanings that are obvious in conversation and impossible to detect in text.

If they say	You could write
Everybody knows John's big on self-promotion, right? That's why he didn't want anybody calling it "his" project.	[Said in a sarcastic tone] Everybody knows John's big on self-promotion, right? That's why he didn't want anybody calling it "his" project.
And she was like, "I will not allow this."	And she was like [in a Darth Vader voice], "I will not allow this."
So the guy comes in, and he's waving the form around like this, and he says, "Ma'am, we have received your complaint, and we are working to correct it."	So the guy comes in, and he's waving the form around like this [waving hand in air], and he says [mimicking a rude speaker], "Ma'am, we have received your complaint, and we are working to correct it."

Only add explanatory notes like these when you are sure the storyteller would agree with the note. If you aren't sure, ask. If you aren't sure and can't ask, leave the note out.

### **Take care of yourself**

Story work is emotional labor. When you ask someone to share a story with you, you are giving them permission to express their emotions, values, and beliefs. The experience can be exciting! But it can also be draining. You may not like everything they say, and you may experience vicarious emotions like sadness or anger. If you are doing a lot of interviews, you may start to feel burned out. Don't wait until your flagging energy starts to influence the stories you collect. To avoid burnout:

- Pace yourself. Plan breaks into your schedule to recover a calm, friendly demeanor.

- Know yourself. Learn what aspects of the work are easiest and hardest for you. Find some emotional support for the hardest parts.
- Get some help. If you can, gather a team so you can lean on your complementary strengths.

### ***Listen for gratitude***

Say you're working on a project, talking to people, gathering stories. How can you tell if you're doing it right? People will thank you. Once in a while, somebody will notice what you are doing, appreciate it, and tell you. If that never happens, you have more work to do.

Should you ask people what they think of the project? Yes. That's useful. But the gratitude test works best when you don't ask. For example, here's a spontaneous expression of gratitude from a real project I once worked on.

"Thank you for this opportunity to share and learn. It's great to know someone cares."

When you hear people say things like that, you are on the right track. If you never hear things like that, go back to your win-win proposal and see how you can improve it based on what you have learned in the project so far.

## **Conducting a group interview**

A group interview is a *guided conversation* between yourself and 2-5 project participants. Allocate 60-90 minutes, invite 2-5 people, and follow these steps.

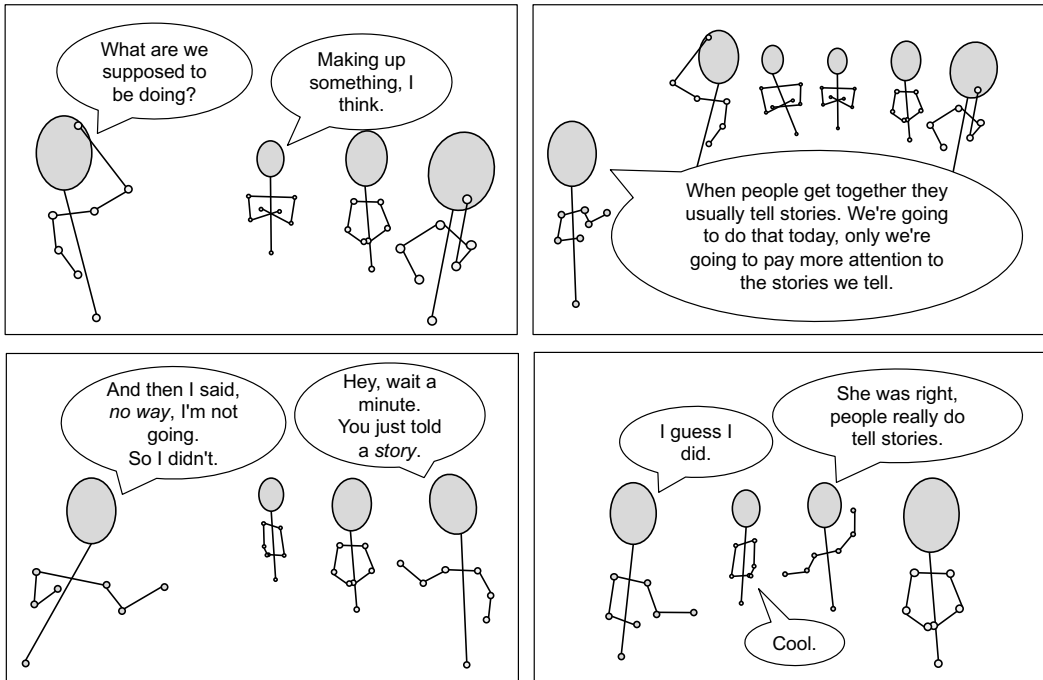
### **Write, practice, and test an interview script**

A group interview script is similar to a script for a one-on-one interview (and the advice in the previous section applies), except for one important difference. You will be talking to more than one person, so people won't feel socially obliged to respond to your questions right away. Each interviewee will have the option of holding back and letting everyone else talk. But if everyone holds back, the interview will get off to a slow start, and you'll waste valuable time your participants will wish they had back later, when things get interesting.

So as the interviewer, it is your job to get things moving as quickly as you can. The best way to do that is to *embed a self-fulfilling prophecy* into your introduction. Say something like:

When people get together, they often tell stories about their experiences. We're going to do that now, only we're going to be a little bit more deliberate about it by starting with these questions.

If you say this with confidence, people will believe you that stories will flow, and *stories will flow*. If you don't say it with confidence, people won't believe you, and stories won't flow. The secret is to practice helping people tell stories until you feel confident in it. How long will that take? It's different for each person. You might feel confident after one session, or it might take several.



## Start the interview

Begin with your prepared introduction, which should last just a few minutes. Next, give everyone an anonymous identifier, like a number, letter, animal, or any other unique thing. Ask people to write this down, or write it down yourself. You will use these identifiers to connect the stories people tell to the answers they give to your questions.

Now turn on your audio recorder or tell everyone that you will be taking notes. If you are making an audio recording, ask each person to say their identifier on the recording (so you can tell whose voice is whose when you transcribe the recording).

## Elicit the first story

Say or show your story-eliciting question(s). Question menus work especially well in group interviews because they give people an up-front choice in how they will represent themselves to you and to the other interviewees. If you can't use a question menu, ask one question, but ask it in a way that highlights the choices people can make in the story they choose to tell and in the way they choose to tell it.

If nobody tells a story, don't tell a story, and don't deliver a lecture. Just rephrase the things you have already said: why you're doing the project, what you hope to achieve, the experiences you'd like to hear about, the question(s) you asked.

If someone starts talking but doesn't tell a story, don't tell them they aren't telling a story. Listen to what they say, and—subtly, indirectly, without lecturing—guide them toward choosing and recounting an experience.

Since you probably had to use the word “story” in the self-fulfilling prophecy you embedded in your introduction, people may have misunderstood what you wanted them to say. You can listen for misunderstandings and correct them by asking questions. These are some things you are likely to hear.

People might think a story is	You can tell this because they say	You can redirect them by saying
A joke	I’ve got one. This one time—it was really funny—	Thank you so much for your help. We have big hopes that this project will make a difference in people’s lives.
A lie	But this isn’t a story! It really happened.	We would like to explore <i>what has actually happened</i> to you on this topic. Was there ever a time when you felt...
A performance	I’ve had some experiences in this area, but I don’t have any <i>stories</i> to tell.	Sharing stories is a natural part of everyday life. Today we’re just going to pay a little more attention to it than we usually do.
An opinion	The story is that I think we are going about ___ all wrong.	Exploring our experiences with ___ will help us to go beyond opinions to a deeper understanding of what ___ is like from many perspectives.
A history	Last year we completed three successful projects. This year...	We hope that by sharing our experiences with ___, we can really begin to understand it.
A lesson	The most important thing I’ve learned about ___ is that you have to...	We already know a lot about ___, but in this project we hope to explore what ___ is <i>really</i> like for you.

After the first story has come to a close, ask the storyteller to give the story a name. Write down the name and the storyteller’s identifier. I like to write these things on sticky notes and put them where everyone can see them (on a physical table or online screen). Seeing the names of the stories people have told helps people think of stories they would like to tell in response. But you can also give each person their own sticky notes, ask them to write them down themselves, or keep them to yourself.

If you know that your participants will be able and willing to fill out printed or online forms, you can wait to ask your questions about their stories until the end of the interview. Otherwise, you will need to ask your questions right after each story is told. To avoid

diverting the flow of stories, ask only a few questions, and put them together into a memorable sequence. You might ask, for example:

- Would you say that story turned out well or badly?
- Was there anyone in the story who would disagree with that answer?
- What do you think would have made the story turn out differently?

Often people in group interviews will work a simple sequence of questions like this one into their story codas. They'll say things like, "So that turned out pretty well, except for the mailman, I guess. I think a better route would have helped." When you see that happening, smile and keep quiet. When you don't, keep asking your questions.

### Elicit more stories

After the first story has been told, give the group two options: they can answer one of your questions, or they can tell a story in response to a story somebody told. It's fine if the group never comes back to your original questions, as long as they keep talking about the topic of your project.

Keep repeating this process—elicit a story, ask the storyteller to give it a name, write it down—until 10-15 minutes are left in the agreed time.

Don't ask people to take turns telling stories. It puts people on the spot, and it results in performative rather than reflective stories. As long as nobody is taking over the conversation, it is better to let people tell stories when they think of them. If you see that someone wants to talk but hasn't had a chance, ask them if there is an experience they'd like to tell the group about. But don't pressure anyone to tell a story. If someone chooses not to tell any stories, wait until the interview is over, then quietly ask them if they'd like to share their experiences in a one-on-one interview.

Sometimes during a group interview the flow of stories will dry up and a silence will fall. When this happens, first, sit with the silence for a bit. Lulls in story sharing are natural and may resolve on their own. Sometimes a silence means that people are about to come out with something important. Wait it out for a while. Don't jump to fill up every lull.

But if the silence stretches on and on, help people across it with a connecting thread.

- Ask a *linking* question like "Does the \_\_\_ in that story remind anyone of something that happened to you?"
- Ask a *what-if* question like "I wonder what would have happened if \_\_\_\_\_. Does that remind anyone of an experience?"
- Ask a *more-so* question like "Has anyone experienced a \_\_\_ like that before? Maybe one that was more \_\_\_\_\_?" (But be careful not to imply that you want people to compete.)
- Ask an *on-the-other-hand* question like "Has anyone had an experience that was the opposite of that one?"

As you listen to people telling stories, prepare for potential lulls by keeping a running list of references (shoes, naps, thunderstorms) you can use to help the group get story sharing started again.

## Finish the interview

If you didn't ask your questions about stories during the interview, now is the time to give everyone the names of the stories they told (or remind them of where they can see them) and ask them to answer your follow-up questions about each story by filling out a printed or online form. After they have done that, ask them to answer your questions about themselves on another form (or on the same form at the end). Make sure everyone can see that everyone else is doing this too.

If you asked your questions about stories during the interview, ask each person a few quick and simple questions about themselves at this time.

Finally, bring the interview to a close by thanking everyone for their time and telling them how they can join the sensemaking part of the project. Then, if there is interest, ask for feedback on the interview and the project.

Immediately after the interview, jot down your thoughts on what happened. Later, transcribe your recording or clean up your notes, connecting the stories each person told to the answers they gave to your questions.

## Tips on conducting group interviews

If you read the section of this book on stories in conversation (page 29), you should know something about how stories flow. But don't just read that. Go out and listen to stories being told. Ask people to let you record their conversations, then mark out parts of transcripts. Get used to noticing the elements of told stories (abstract, evaluation, coda). Then get used to helping people tell stories in conversation.

### **Support story abstracts**

A story's negotiation, compromise, reframing, and eventual agreement (or not) can happen in seconds, with no particular words spoken by anyone beyond a simple "one time I . . ." put forth by a member of the group. It might seem impossible to notice this rapid series of interactions, let alone influence them. Still, your ability to spot such negotiations will grow with practice, as will your ability to manage your responses to them.

Have you ever heard someone start to tell a story, and then heard someone else interrupt them—and saw the look of disappointment on the face of the storyteller? Or have you heard someone tell a story, and then heard a pause that made it obvious the other person was not really listening, but was waiting for the storyteller to finish so they could speak?

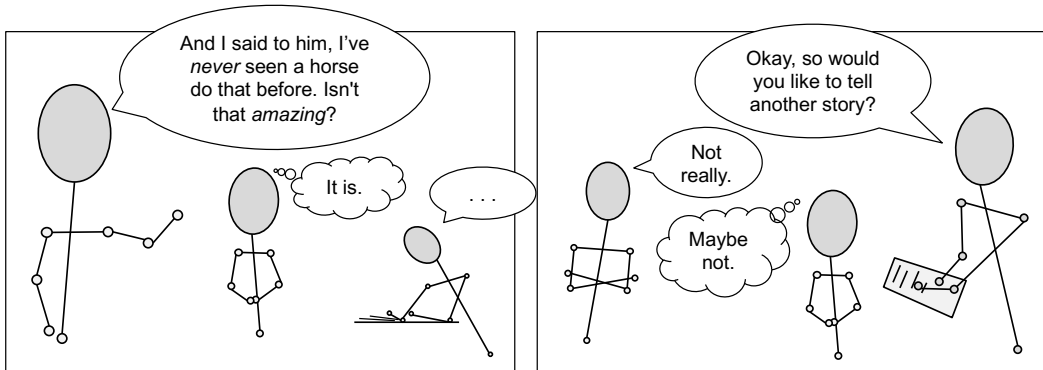
Telling a story is taking a risk in terms of conversational give and take. For this reason people can be reluctant to share stories *even after you ask them to*. This is one of the most common mistakes people make in asking people to tell stories: they *ask*, but they do not *give permission*. After you have watched people tell stories long enough, you will know what it looks like when people are looking for permission to tell a story, and you will be able to respond naturally.

Often people will start telling a story, then *pause* to see if people are going to listen to their performance (in effect, to find out whether they have the floor). If other people respond, they go ahead; otherwise they stop. If you happen to be one of the people responding,

you can recognize the start of a story and encourage the storyteller to go on by looking at them in a listening sort of way, or by saying “Uh-huh?” or “What happened?” or “I’d like to hear about it” or some such thing.

### **Support story evaluations**

As you listen to people sharing stories, practice teasing out evaluation statements. One way to do this is to record people talking in conversation, in video or audio, then make your own transcripts, marking as you go not only elements of intensity and vocal tone but also evaluation statements. It can be hard to recognize evaluations on the spur of the moment, but when you can pore over conversations, you can improve your ability to quickly pick up on evaluative speech.



In many told stories you can make out a point where its evaluative statements rise to a sort of climax. This is usually the part of the story that holds the greatest importance to its teller. When you see such an evaluative peak in an interview, you can know two things: this is *why* they are telling the story, and this is *when* they need your support.

Lean in and look at the storyteller to make it clear that you are listening. If you are conducting a group interview, you can’t make sure the rest of your interviewees are listening, but you can make sure the storyteller knows that you at least are attending.

### **Support story codas**

When you are conducting a group interview and you recognize a coda, you’ve found a good place to encourage the teller (and everyone else) by saying something that reinforces the story’s validity. Some types of useful reinforcing statements are:

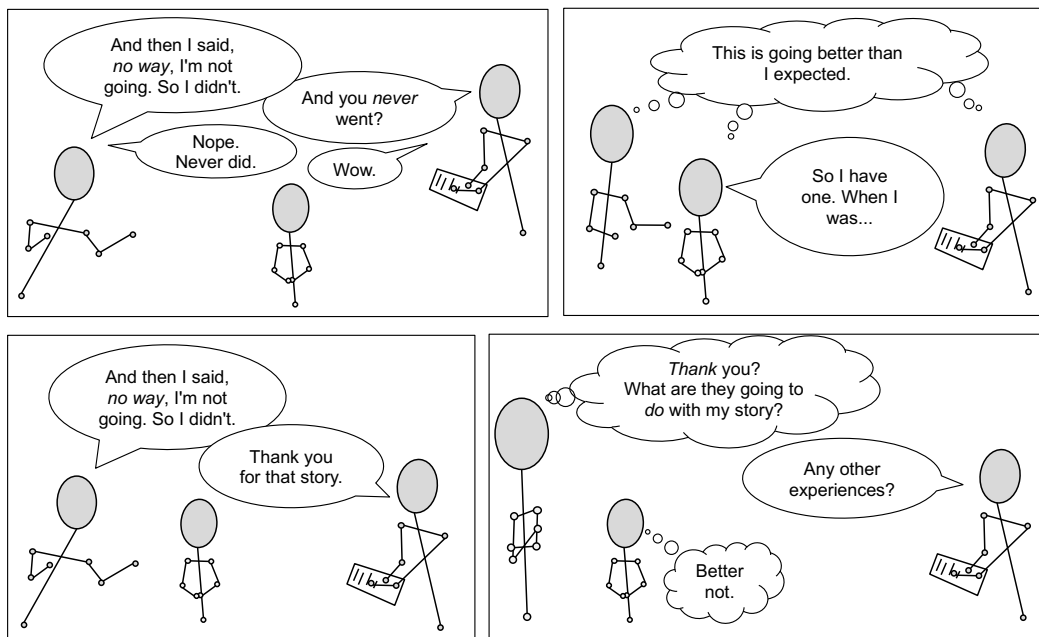
- appreciative—“Wow” or “That’s interesting” or “I never heard that before”
- summarizing—“So they caught the driver, huh?” or “So you left that day?”
- questioning—“Does it seem different years later?” or “Why do you think she said that?”
- grateful—“I’m glad you shared that” or “Thank you for telling us about that”

Do not say “Thank you for that story.” It will bring up the idea that a story is a possession, which will make everyone more reluctant to speak.



At the same time, you do need to give people *something* to go on, some kind of positive response, because otherwise they may not venture forth out of the safety of silence again. I have seen people's faces fall after they have told a story and got no response.

Besides, often it's the second or third story people tell that is the most useful, partly because they start to understand what you want to know, and partly because they feel safe enough to tell about deeper things. So it's especially important to help people get over the point of vulnerability found at the end of the first story they tell.



## Setting up peer interviews

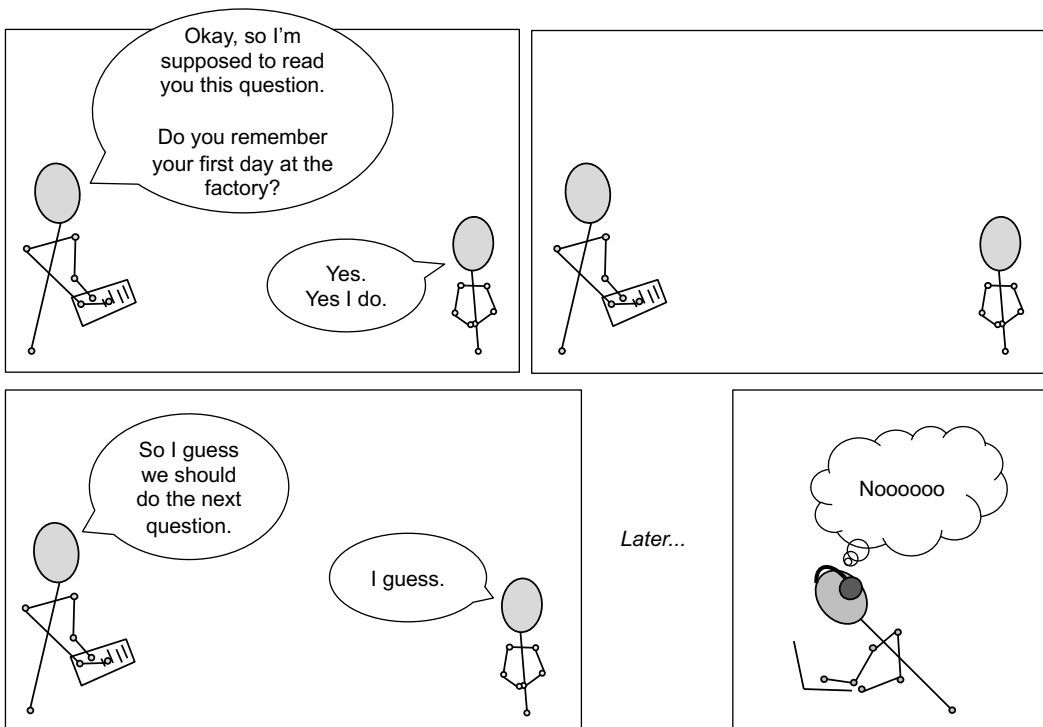
A peer interview is a *suggested conversation* among 2-3 project participants. Peer interviews are easy to set up. Just develop an interview script, give it to your participants, and ask them to interview each other and send you the result. Because each pair or trio will be able to decide what they want to share with the project and what they want to keep between them, you could say that peer interviews create many tiny projects nested within your main project.

However, peer interviews won't work for every project. They require more effort on the part of participants, so they won't work if your participants aren't motivated to participate. Also, because you can't be there at the interviews, *you can't guide people towards telling stories*. You might think you can circumvent this outcome by including an explanation of how story sharing works in the interview script; but if you do that, you run the risk of gathering performative, is-this-good-enough stories.

The only way you can make sure that peer interviews will gather the stories you need is to spend extra time testing and refining your peer interview script. Ask a few pairs or trios to use it while you record them. Then listen carefully to their conversations. Listen for:

- **Storytelling.** If people pick up the cues you placed into your script and actually tell each other stories—and not just stories; relevant and meaningful stories—you’re doing well. On the other hand, if you hear mostly explanations or opinions—or you hear stories, but they’re irrelevant, superficial, or defensive—your script needs more work.
- **Relaxed ownership.** If people seem to understand the context and purpose of the interview, enjoy the experience, and take control of the process with calm energy, you have an excellent script. It’s a good sign when people say things like:
  - Let me think a bit... oh yeah, I can remember a time like that...
  - I did have an experience like that, now that I think of it...
  - I never realized this before, but...
- **Meta-discussions.** If people struggle to make out what they are supposed to do and why, that’s a problem. If you hear them debating whether a story is “good enough” to tell, you have more work to do.
- **Pregnant pauses.** If people seem to be holding back stories they want to tell, your script needs more work. Note especially the moment after they hear or see your story-eliciting question(s). Do you hear a little pulse of gratitude or of anxiety?

Until you hear relevant and meaningful stories being told in an atmosphere of relaxed ownership, with few meta-discussions or pregnant pauses, keep tweaking your script.



You can set up peer interviews in a few different ways.

You can	This is useful when	A similar approach is
Ask people to create their own pairs or trios by giving them a matching criterion to apply	Your participants are committed to participation and ready to rise to a challenge	In a workshop: find someone with the same color shirt as you have on
Ask one set of participants to find one or two other participants to join them	One of your participant groups has more interest in participation, flexibility, or free time than the others	In oral history: ask your grandparents about their grandparents (except that these interviews will usually be reciprocal)
Give each participant the names of one or two other participants they will interview and be interviewed by	Your participants are not motivated and will not rise to a challenge, but they will probably comply with an explicit request	In a workshop: look at this list to find your participant number and the numbers of the people you will be working with

Once you have matched people up, give each pair or trio your interview script and ask them to submit their response by:

- handing (or sending) back an audio recorder
- visiting a recording booth
- calling a phone line
- using a web site
- using a smartphone application
- sending an email

## Setting up surveys

In a narrative survey, people tell stories without direct human contact. This can be done through a telephone, a piece of paper, a web form, a software interface or an email. But no matter the medium, the interaction in a survey is a distant, one-way communication, more like a message in a bottle than a conversation.

A survey is easy to administer. There is no need to gather people together and keep them interested in talking to each other; just send out a survey and hope some people respond. You can reach far more people, and more diverse groups, with a survey than you can gather in a room. You don't need a travel budget, just an address. If your expected population of participants is large, diverse, widespread, or busy, or if your resources are very small, a survey may be the only realistic way you can collect stories at all.

On the other hand, because there is no human face behind it, a survey is easy to rush through thoughtlessly, half-complete, laugh at, game, or even subvert. Survey response rates are usually low (around five percent). Surveys tend to collect more non-story responses (like opinions); and survey stories are usually less relevant and meaningful than stories told in conversation.

This doesn't mean you can't use surveys in PNI. But it does mean that *you should not expect to reach the same depth of meaning* with a survey as you would if you were gathering stories in real conversations.

Having said that, surveys are the best choice when you have only tiny crumbs of participation to work with. If you can only count on five minutes of your participants' time and attention, a survey may be your only option. In that case, the good news is that the more you test and improve your survey, the better stories and answers you will gather.

## Write your invitation

When you invite people to take your survey, whether it's in an email, on a website, or on a sign above a stack of survey forms, anticipate their questions and answer them clearly and unambiguously.

Question	Example answer
Is this for me?	We are reaching out to everyone [in/with] ____, and that includes you.
Am I qualified to do this?	If you have ____ for at least ____, this survey is for you.
Why ask me?	Hearing about your experiences with ____ will help us make ____ better.
What's in it for me?	By participating, you will be able to ____.
Will I be in control?	We want to hear whatever you want to tell us about ____.

## Write your survey

### *The introduction*

After people have clicked on your survey link or picked up your printed survey, they will want answers to a second, further-in set of questions.

Some of these questions will be similar to the questions you answered in your invitation. That doesn't matter. By the time they see your survey, people will have forgotten what you said in your invitation. Don't let that bother you. Participatory projects always go better when their planners can keep in mind that nobody is ever going to care about the projects as much as they do, and that *that's all right*.

Question	Example answer
Is this <i>really</i> for me?	We are reaching out to everyone [in/with] _____. If you have/are _____, we would like to hear from you.
Will I be able to answer these questions?	Please look back over your experiences with _____ over the past _____.
Is this safe?	Every question is optional. Say as little or as much as you like.
Will this be boring?	(As they skim the survey, they can see that it is well-written and attractive, and they can see that its questions are thought-provoking. Filling out the survey looks like it might be an interesting experience rather than a tedious chore.)
Is this important?	We will be using what you tell us in a series of discussion sessions. We invite you to join in these sessions. For more information, _____.
Will I really be in control?	Everything you say here is anonymous, and you can change or retract it later. If you have any questions or problems, contact _____ at _____.

### ***The rest of the survey***

After your introduction, the questions in your survey should follow a simple sequence:

1. Ask your story-eliciting question(s). If you have more than one, ask them to choose a question to answer.
2. Give them a nice big box to write their story in.
3. Ask them to give the story a name you can use to refer to it later.
4. Ask your follow-up questions about their story.
5. Ask them if they would like to tell another story, then repeat steps 2-4.
6. Ask your questions about the participant.
7. Thank them for their time and tell them how they can join the sensemaking part of the project.

### ***An aside on context and coherence***

If your survey is online, don't break it up into multiple pages. Keep the whole survey together, even if it's long. Why? Because in storytelling, *context trumps content*. People tell different stories, and the same stories differently, in different contexts. So if you want someone to tell you a story, *help them understand the context of your request*—not only before they tell the story, but also while they are telling it and after they have told it.

This is what I have seen most people do with a narrative survey:

1. After skimming the introduction, they notice the first question (or menu of questions) and realize that *they have been asked to tell a story*.
2. Instead of telling the story right away, in the big empty box provided for it, most people skim down through the follow-up questions they see below the box. They do this because they want to understand what sort of story they have been asked to tell.
3. After they have learned all they can about the context of their storytelling, they come back up to the top of the survey and tell a story in the big empty box.
4. After they have finished telling the story, they answer the follow-up questions. But while they are doing this, people often *go back and change their story* because one of the follow-up questions inspired them to think about the story, or how they want to tell it, in a new way. I've seen people do this several times, moving up and down the form thinking about how they want to frame their story and their answers. This makes sense, because the answers to (well-written) questions about stories perform the same expressive function as the evaluation statements people add to their stories during conversational storytelling. It's all part of the storytelling process.
5. When they are satisfied with their story and answers, people move on, either to the next story or to the questions about themselves.

This is why breaking up a narrative survey onto multiple pages, especially if the story is on a different page than your follow-up questions about it, results in the collection of less relevant and meaningful stories.

### ***An aside on collecting multiple stories***

It can be difficult to help people tell multiple stories in one survey. You can avoid the issue by collecting just one story from each participant. Indeed, in some situations one story is all people will be willing to tell, so you won't need to think about the complication.

On the other hand, if you think people might want to tell more than one story—and especially if you think the second story they tell might be more relevant and meaningful than the first (which is common)—you can give them the opportunity to do that.

- If you are writing a paper survey:
  - You can ask people to fill in as many separate (single-story) surveys as they want to and connect them by marking the same anonymous participant identifier (any identifier) on all of them. Each single-story survey will have a questions-about-you section, but they can answer those questions on just one of the forms.
  - You can embed multiple elicitation/story/follow-up sections in a single survey. If you have few questions to ask, you might be able to squeeze each section into half a page with a box around it. If not, you can staple or bind multiple section-pages together. Be sure to include (and draw attention to) the questions-about-you section at the end of the survey packet.

- If you are writing an online survey:
  - Find out if your survey tool supports the conditional display of survey sections. If it does, reveal additional elicitation/story/follow-up sections after the participant answers the question “Would you like to tell another story?” with “Yes.” You can let them do this once, a few times, or an unlimited number of times.
  - If your survey tool does not support the conditional display of survey sections, you have two options.
    - \* You can ask people to fill in multiple single-story surveys, entering the same anonymous participant identifier into each one.
    - \* You can embed multiple elicitation/story/follow-up sections in a single survey and ask people to skip over any sections they don’t want to fill out. The shorter and more separate-looking those sections look (maybe with boxes around them), the more they will make sense to people.

### Gather energy for your survey

If your first survey invitation gets you all the stories you need, that’s great! But it’s not what usually happens. You will probably need to ask people to participate at least twice, and maybe three or four times. This is what I have found to work best.

Iteration	Instructions	Example
1	Lay out the project, explain what people will get out of participating, and explain what will happen when they do.	Please help us to improve ____.
2	Include a few attention-grabbing excerpts that communicate a sense of rising excitement. Draw on peer pressure and the fear of missing out. Don’t plead or try to guilt people into participating. But do let people know that <i>something special is going on</i> .	We are learning so much about _____. For example, one person told us about a time when they “_____.” What experiences have you had with _____?
3	Include more excerpts, plus (if you have them) a few statements of gratitude or appreciation.	These are some of the things we are hearing: “I feel _____” and “This is _____.” Would you like to join in?
4	Include more excerpts and statements of gratitude, plus (if you have them) some tentative yet enticing patterns.	This is your last chance to participate in _____! People are saying “_____,” and we’ve noticed that _____. Please consider adding your perspective.

### ***What to do if nobody responds***

Let's say you have built your survey, tested it, told everyone about it, did your best to gather energy for it, and still got little or no response. What can you do? Reach out to some people who received your invitation but didn't reply to it. Ask them to help you understand what you did wrong. Think of people who might be willing to help you out. For example, if you sent a survey to everyone in your organization or community, you might be able to ask the people who work or live closest to you to help you make sense of what happened.

Based on what those people tell you, consider these possibilities.

- If they say they didn't notice your survey, ask them how you could have gotten their attention. Think of other ways you could reach out, like with text messages or signs or videos, and ask if they would have noticed those things.
- If they say they would like to respond but are too busy, ask them how much time they can spare. Then consider reducing the time required for participation or compensating people for their time.
- If they say this isn't a good time for them to participate, ask them when would be a better time. Sometimes just keeping a survey open for a few more weeks can make a difference.
- If they say they would like to respond but don't like surveys, ask them if another venue would work better for them. Would they be willing to sit for an interview or attend a group session? If so, consider whether you can adjust your mix of story collection methods.
- If they say they the survey doesn't seem to relate to them, ask them what makes them think that, and ask them who they think the survey *does* relate to. Then ask yourself:
  - Is this a communication issue? Do you need to rewrite your invitation to make it more clear why you have asked your participants to join the project?
  - Does your project need to change to suit the needs and wishes of your participants? If so, you probably need to learn more about them.
  - Have you not yet found the right participants for your project? If so, can you reach a wider or different pool of participants?
- If they say they find the project boring or pointless, ask them to brainstorm with you about a project that would be exciting to them and worth putting their energy into. Can you make your project more like that?
- If they have an objection to a specific part of your project plan, your win-win proposal, or your privacy policy, ask them what change would resolve the issue for them. Can you make that change?
- If they say people don't trust you, ask them who people do trust. Then consider asking those people to either vouch for the project or get involved in it. You might need to reboot the project with a new planning team.
- If they say people don't like the topic you have chosen, ask them what they think people would like to talk about. Sometimes it's just the words you are using that turn people off,



and sometimes you need to adjust your topic to a slightly different one that resonates better with people.

## Getting journals started

Journal-based story collection is a lot like surveying, but instead of asking people to tell you stories once, you ask them to tell you stories every so often, for example daily for a month or weekly for a year. You can also ask people to fill out a journal entry whenever they think of it, usually when something significant has just happened.

Asking people to fill out periodic diaries is a standard tool in the psychological and sociological toolboxes. However, most diary-based research projects use structured forms with check boxes and rating scales. This is mainly because collecting frequent diary entries tends to result in a *lot* of data. While a survey might gather ten data points about each participant, a month of daily journaling might collect hundreds. For that reason, diary-based research rarely asks people open-ended questions or asks them to tell stories.

An interesting exception can be found in Teresa Amabile's research on motivation at work, as described in her book *The Progress Principle*. You might find the appendix of her book, in which she describes her research methods in detail, interesting reading (I did). On each day of their participation in the study (on average, about a hundred days), Amabile asked her 40 participants to "briefly describe one event from today that stands out in your mind." Then she asked people questions about the event they had just recounted.

Says Amabile:

The idea behind the daily questionnaire was to track both inner work life and the stream of events occurring in the daily work lives of our participants in a way that was both detailed and relatively unobtrusive. In addition, the questionnaire would give us a way to examine specific reactions to the reported events—sensemaking about them, emotional reactions, and motivational responses.

That sounds a lot like story collection in PNI. But Amabile's research project was a mammoth undertaking. She and her team collected over eleven thousand diary entries in total, each of which they read multiple times. They also answered several qualitative questions about the stories (for example, whether the reported emotions were positive, neutral, or negative), then analyzed the patterns created by the answers. You can imagine that this process must have taken a lot of time, and you can see why so few researchers use journals!

Of course, most PNI projects are far smaller than this. But if you decide to collect stories via journaling, be aware that the volume of stories you collect may quickly grow larger than you expected, especially if people can add stories to their journals whenever they like.

You can deal with this issue in advance, by asking fewer people, by running the journaling period for a shorter time, or by asking people to journal less often. Even asking people to add to their journals every *other* day will collect half as many stories. Or you can deal with the issue after your collection is complete, by sampling fewer stories to use in later phases of your project.

If your topic is especially sensitive, you can avoid collecting stories at all. You can give your journal-keepers sole access to their stories, and collect only their answers to questions about the stories. When people reflect on private matters, the stories they are willing to tell *themselves* can reveal more useful patterns than the stories they are willing to tell *you*.

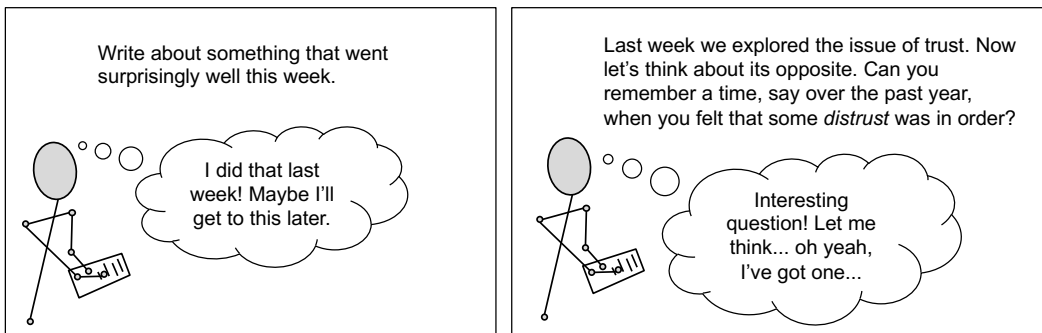
### Keeping journals going

Because of the time it takes to keep up a journal, your participants might lose interest in it sooner than they thought (or said) they would. There are a few things you can do to keep their interest alive throughout their journaling experience.

- If the journals will be periodic, you can explore a new aspect of your topic, or ask a new story-eliciting question, in each time period. You can also add new (maybe deeper) follow-up questions as the journaling period goes on.
- If the journals will be episodic, you can include some questions about what stands out about each particular incident, and you can include optional questions that pertain to some types of incidents and not others.

In other words, the more journaling feels like *building a diverse and interesting collection of memories and thoughts*, the less it will feel like doing the same thing over and over, and the better people will take to it.

Another way to keep people engaged in journaling is to *show them what they are building*. You can periodically send them meaningful snippets drawn from all of the journal entries coming in, and you can show them some simple patterns that are emerging from the data (using just a bit of low-level catalytic material to give them a glimpse of what lies ahead). Seeing a story collection begin to take shape can help participants find the time and energy to keep supporting the project.



## Collecting narrative incident accounts

In most story collection methods you ask people to recall stories about things that happened in the past. In this method you ask people to describe *things that just happened*.

Let me give you an example. Say you are the director of education at a museum. Say you have asked 20 volunteers to follow people around the museum taking notes on what they do: where they stop and read, where they glance and move on, which hands-on activities

they touch. You will probably give your volunteers forms to fill out about each visitor, such as the length of time they spent at each exhibit and whether they touched any hands-on activities.

Incident reports like these are common tools in the world of anthropological and sociological research. Most incident reports aim to maximize objectivity so as to provide solid proof. If you were conducting a hypothesis-based research project, it would be inappropriate to ask your observers if they were *surprised* by the museum visit they observed or whether they felt proud of the museum after the visit.

But let's say you are doing a PNI project for your museum. In that case, you can ask your volunteers to tell you what happened as they watched people visit the museum—to the people, *and to them*. Of course each volunteer will be biased in their reactions. But if the project collects some anonymous information *about* each volunteer (say, age, gender, background, some opinions about the museum), and if volunteers are chosen to represent a balance of viewpoints or backgrounds, their biases can add narrative richness to the story collection. Not only that, but you can *combine* the accounts of your observers with stories collected directly from museum visitors, creating an even richer body of stories.

I call these types of stories narrative incident accounts (NIAs). You can collect them from observers, as in my museum example, or you can collect them from people who interact with people directly. For example, nurses, waiters, receptionists, cashiers, teachers, security or police officers, utility workers, and first responders are all people who could contribute NIAs to a PNI project. People in these roles often collect some kind of incident reports already, so all it would take to collect stories for a PNI project would be to add a few story-eliciting and story-interpreting questions to the factual data people already collect.

## Making NIAs work

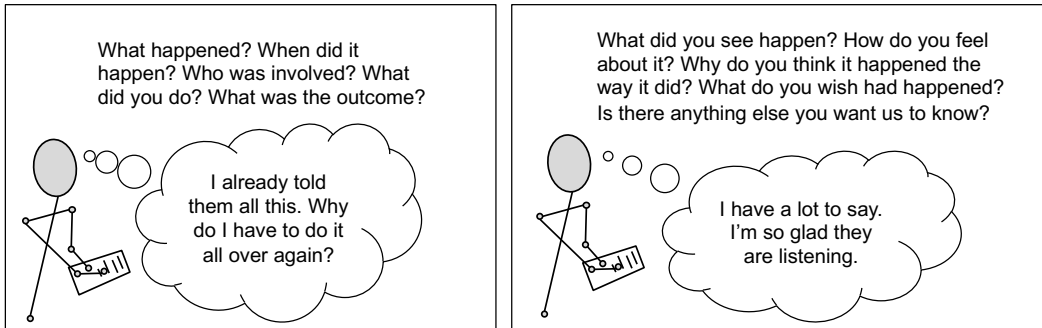
NIAs are about perspectives, not facts. The purpose of a NIA is to *put some meat on the bones of an incident* by asking the people who saw it happen to recount it *as a story*, and then to reflect on the story they told. So when you are building your NIA form, think about how you can *complement the questions people are already being asked*. For example:

- If people are being asked to describe what happened, you could ask them what surprised them about what happened, or what they think should have happened, or how often they've seen that sort of thing happen in the past.
- If people are being asked to categorize the people involved in the incident, you could ask them if they noticed anything particular about these particular people or about their behavior.
- If they are being asked what time of day the incident took place, you could ask them if there was anything about the time of day that they think might have had an impact on what happened.

Make sure your participants understand that in the NIA—and only in the NIA—they are allowed to express their feelings, perceptions, and speculations about the incident. They don't have to stick to the facts. To avoid confusion, separate the two contexts in some way. For example, you might use different styling on your NIA form, or you might use a

different mode of collection (say audio instead of text) to signal a change from reporting to recounting.

One of the best ways to use a NIA is to *ask everyone involved* in an incident to fill out one. It's rare that you can manage this, but when you can, the patterns that emerge can be enlightening.



## Facilitating story-sharing sessions

A story-sharing session is a meeting of 3-30 participants that includes one or more story-sharing exercises. This is simultaneously the best and hardest way to collect stories. It requires the most attention to planning and the highest level of facilitation skill, and it gathers the most authentic, relevant, and meaningful stories.

Why are story-sharing sessions so difficult and so valuable?

When you conduct an interview, whether it's with one person or several, you play a central role in the conversation. In that role you can communicate the energy and purpose of your project, guide the conversation to story sharing (and back again if it strays), and correct any misunderstandings as they come up. But there's a catch: people don't tell the same stories in an interview as they would if you were not present.

When you facilitate a story-sharing session, your role is deliberately peripheral. You introduce the session and provide some instructions, then step away and let people talk—to *each other*, not to you. Your participants will know, of course, that you will hear their stories later, when you listen to the recordings of their conversations. But you won't be there *in* the conversations with them, and as a result, their stories will be more authentic, relevant, and meaningful.

But again there's a catch: when you play no role in the conversations people are having, you can't communicate the energy and purpose of your project, guide the conversation to story sharing (and back again if it strays), and correct any misunderstandings as they come up. So how can you do those things in a story-sharing session? By embedding them into the design of the session itself. This is why, compared to interviews, story-sharing sessions require a lighter touch during the session itself and much more planning ahead of time.

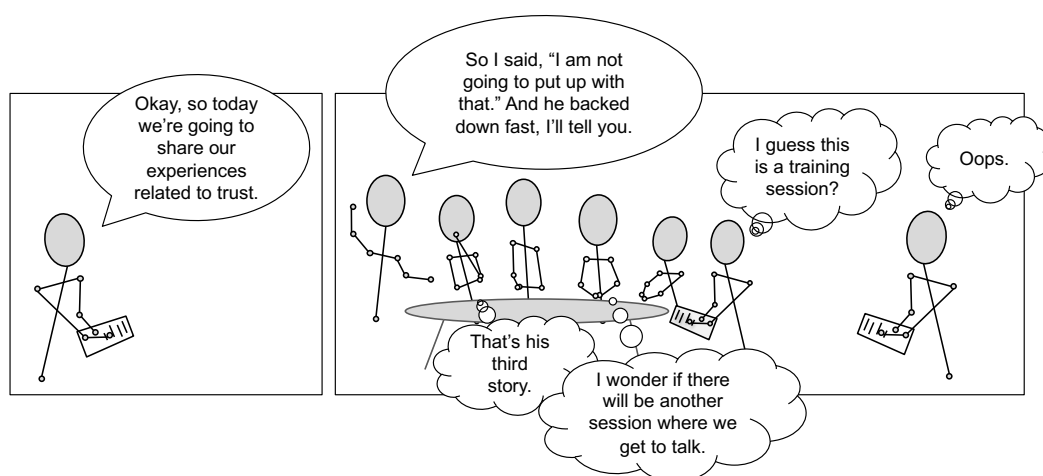
## Design an environment for story sharing

The most productive story-sharing sessions bring the right people together in the right space at the right time and in the right context.

### ***Bring the right people together***

To gather relevant and meaningful stories for sensemaking, you need to create conversations in which people feel safe to speak freely, yet also invited, encouraged, inspired, and even a little challenged to step up and play a part in making the project a success.

Safety comes first. If the people in a session have different levels of power, some will talk freely and some won't, and you'll end up with a skewed story collection that is neither relevant nor meaningful. To avoid this outcome, *invite groups with different power levels to separate story-sharing sessions*. If it's important to bring groups together in your project, do it later, during sensemaking.



Safety is paramount, but even so, it's not enough. Not all by itself. You also need an element of challenge. Uninspired participants don't tell stories that are relevant and meaningful; they tell stories that get you to stop asking them to tell stories.

So as you plan your story-sharing sessions, think about how you can bring people together in ways that will blend safety with just the right amount of challenge. For example, you might ask:

- What if we brought together people who work on the same process at different points?
- Influencers and influenced: what would they say to each other?
- What if we connected people who do the same job in different departments?
- What would happen if the creators and users of our product shared stories about it?
- I wonder if we could get in touch with all the people who have left our program. I wonder what they would say to those who are still in it.
- What would people say if they shared hobbies but not political leanings?
- We'd better not mix factory workers with managers, but they all have families. What about asking them to participate? What would happen then?

- What if we asked people to talk to their parents about their baby strollers?
- I wonder what would happen if we asked our regular customers to chat with people who've been here only once or twice.

You can form small conversational groups in a few different ways.

To split up	You might say	This is useful when	But don't use it when
In advance	Stand under the sign with the letter printed on your name tag	People are apathetic, under-confident, or frightened	People don't trust you or your choices
Using an ice-breaking activity	Find two people with a similar hobby	People will appreciate the chance to have a little fun	The topic is serious or people will be offended by the idea of having fun
Using a simple rule	Find two people from different departments than you	You want to set up conversations with specific characteristics	You can't find a rule that won't put people off, or people would like an activity better
With no explanation at all	Form groups of three	People are motivated to participate or the topic is not sensitive	People are apathetic, under-confident, or frightened, or the topic is sensitive

***Bring the right number of people together***

How many people should you invite to a story-sharing session? You can invite 3-50 (or more) people to a single session, but the more people you invite, the more facilitation skill, helpers, and technological tools you will need. Sessions with 9-12 people work well: big enough to get the busy hubbub of 3-4 small groups going, but not enough to require extensive preparation or facilitation help.

***Find the right time***

What do your participants do in a typical day and week? What are their mornings, afternoons, evenings, weekdays, and weekends like? Do any times of the day or week have a special contextual or cultural significance to them? If they were to attend a partly-purposeful and partly-social gathering, when would they expect it to happen? Would different times work better for different groups?

### ***Find the right length of time***

To decide how long your sessions should be, consider your goals, participants, and topic.

- How ambitious are your project goals? Is this a small, exploratory project? Or do you want to dive deeply into your topic? If your goals are modest, you can lead people through a quick and simple story-sharing exercise in 45 minutes. If your goals are ambitious, you will want to schedule longer sessions with more complex exercises.
- How motivated are your participants? Will they bring abundant energy to the session? Or will you be lucky if they show up at all? If you expect apathy, squeeze the session down to as small a time commitment as you can, even to half an hour. If you expect enthusiasm, give people plenty of time: two hours or more.
- How comfortable will people be sharing stories about your topic? Will they be ready to plunge right in? Or will they need some time to get past feeling wary or uncomfortable? If they will be ready right away, you can hold a story-sharing session in an hour. If they will need some time to warm up, you will need at least two hours.

As you can imagine, these three factors can interact. If you are planning an exploratory project with enthusiastic participants about a fun topic, you could probably plan a half-day session with 30 people that spills over into an after-party meal. If you are planning an ambitious project with apathetic participants about a sensitive topic, you would be better off scheduling a dozen three-person half-hour lunch-time sessions.

### ***Find the right space***

Should you meet in-person or online? In-person is better. The wider sensory bandwidth of a physical conversation helps people negotiate their way past surface-level talk faster, leading to a greater depth of exploration within the same time frame. And since in-person sessions can be shorter, more people will attend, so you will be able to gather more stories that represent a wider variety of perspectives on your topic. Even if you have to put your project on hold until you can get people together in person, it might be worth the wait.

If you really can't meet in person, online is fine. Just be aware that you will probably need more or longer sessions to support sensemaking to the same extent as if you were meeting in person. You can do that! Just be prepared for it.

In-person or online, the space you prepare for your story-sharing sessions will have an impact on the stories people tell.

- If you will be meeting in person:
  - Find a large, quiet, calm room where small groups can move around and get some distance from each other, both acoustically and socially. Avoid rooms with furniture that cannot be picked up and moved around (or seems like it should not be). As a rule of thumb, look for a space designed to hold twice as many people as you expect to have in the session.
  - If any of the exercises you chose for the session involve placing sticky notes into spaces, prepare plenty of sticky notes (in various colors) and surfaces (wall sections, tables, clean floors) for each group to work on.

- Large windows that look out on a pleasant (but not too distracting) view are a plus. This is just from my experience, but I've noticed that people who can literally see the bigger picture tend to reflect more deeply on their experiences. You can even meet outside if the weather is good.
- If you will be meeting online:
  - Find a teleconferencing solution that provides reliability (few frustrations), ease of use (few confusions), breakout rooms (easy to enter and exit), and facilitator-friendly features that make it easy to broadcast messages, check on (and speak quietly to) small groups, and generally keep an eye on what is happening.
  - Find a shared whiteboard solution people can use to place virtual sticky notes into virtual spaces. I particularly like services that offer an "infinite canvas" I can use to create a nested view of the session. People seem to value the ability to zoom out (to see the whole session's agenda, and progress, at a glance) and zoom in (to see their small group's unique space, with its instructions and sticky-note constructions sitting side by side) to meet their needs as the session goes on.
  - You can't create a pleasant view in an online session, but you can build a nice-looking space for people to work in. If you plan to show people written instructions, make them attractive as well as clear. Show your participants that you value their time by building a pleasant environment for them to work in.

### ***Create a relaxed yet focused ambiance***

People don't share stories in every situation, especially with people they don't know. To help your participants feel at ease, create an environment that feels social, like a quiet get-together, not official, like a dull presentation or a demanding examination.

- If you will be meeting in person, provide a variety of nice, higher-quality drinks and snacks. If you have chosen to show your appreciation with small project gifts (see page 90), hand them out at the start of the session.
- If you will be meeting online, plan to start with (and allocate time for) a quick, friendly check-in ritual that helps everyone feel seen and heard. You can't offer drinks and snacks, but you can give people small gift vouchers that set up a tone of pleasant celebration.

### ***Choose the right story-sharing exercise(s)***

There are seven story-sharing exercises described in Chapter Six. Here is a quick idea of which exercise fits best in different project conditions.

- The *twice-told stories* exercise is the simplest exercise in this book. People simply split into small groups, share stories in response to your story-eliciting question(s), and choose a story they want to retell in the larger group. The exercise does require at least six people to work, but it's an excellent choice when you are new to facilitation, you don't have a lot of time, or you think your participants won't be willing or able to follow a complex set of instructions.
- Asking your participants to play a *story-sharing game* is a good option when you are new to facilitation, your topic is not sensitive, and you think your participants would enjoy the creativity and fun of a game.



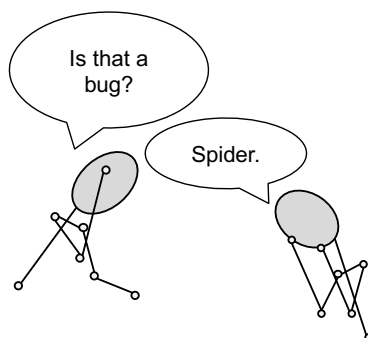
- A *timeline* exercise can only be used when the stories you expect people to tell will fit into a span of time, whether it's a shared history (like the story of your town) or a common process (like the hiring process). Within that limitation, this exercise works well for a range of topics and motivations, and it doesn't require a lot of facilitation skill. Concrete thinkers tend to like this exercise because it sticks to the facts of what happened and doesn't ask them to wrap their minds around abstract concepts.
- In a *landscape* exercise, people think of stories that fit into a two-dimensional space defined by two named dimensions. Abstract thinkers love this exercise; it helps them to probe their memories in fascinating and intricate ways. Concrete thinkers can use this exercise, but they might need some extra time to make sense of it.
- The *local folk tales* exercise is a special type of landscape exercise that explores the space of possibility (what could/not happen) and desire (what should/not happen). It requires as much abstract thinking as a typical landscape exercise, but it is especially useful when motivated participants are eager to explore a sensitive, complex, or contentious topic.
- The *ground truthing* exercise uses an official document of some kind, typically a mission or values statement, to bring out related stories. When such a document is important to your project (perhaps it's a who-we-are-and-why project), this exercise will bring out stories you can use.
- The *story-ended questions* workshop is not really a story-sharing exercise; it's more of a way to help your participants learn a little about story sharing before they start doing it in another exercise. Use it if you have ambitious goals and motivated participants.

if your goals are ambitious and your participants are motivated, you can use one of the simpler exercise (like twice-told stories) as a warm-up or ice-breaker, then follow it up with a more complex exercise in which you ask people to dive more deeply into your topic.

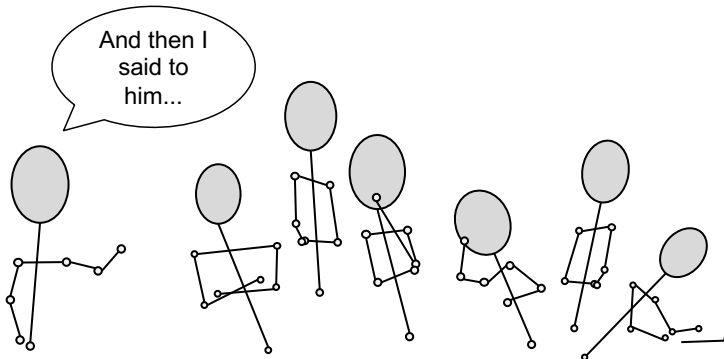
### **Use the best small-group sizes**

Don't put people into story-sharing pairs. They are more likely to simply discuss the topic—or the session, the project, you, the weather—than they are to tell stories. Trios tell more stories, and more useful stories, than pairs.

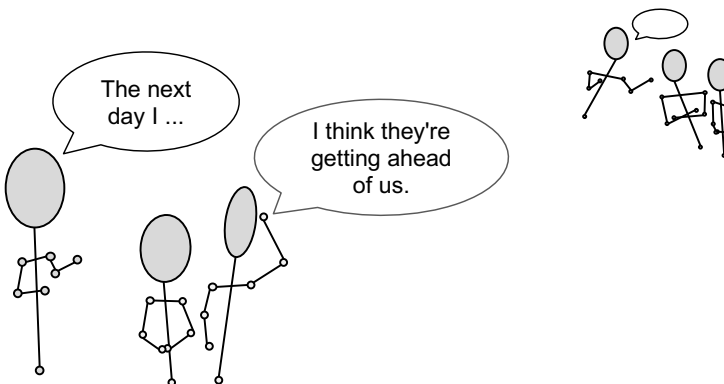
My guess is that this has something to do with the more obvious difference in a trio between the storyteller (one person) and audience (two people). But I'm not sure why it happens. I just know that it happens.



The largest small group is five people. Above that and the audience starts to have a back row, a disengaged element from which people begin to check out of the conversation, check their email, or start checking on what other groups are doing. Wandering audience members can distract the back rows of other groups, causing the whole session to unravel.



Also, avoid creating only two small groups. In that situation people can't seem to stop checking on what the other group is doing.



You might think people would only do this in person, but I've seen people do it online as well, if people can see other groups putting sticky notes into spaces. With at least three small groups, people find it too difficult to keep tabs and give up checking, returning their attention to their own group where it belongs.

So if you expect ten people, form two groups of three and one of four. Don't form two groups of five or five groups of two. If you expect seven people, form one group of four and one of three. You will break the two-groups rule, but each group will have at least three people in it. The two-person drift is worse than the two-group check.

### **Create an effective but unobtrusive recording plan**

In every story-sharing session, even though you need to stand back and let people talk to each other, you also need to record the stories they tell, and you need to ask them some questions about their stories and about themselves. And you must do this in a way that does not disrupt the flow of stories. That sounds daunting! But it is not difficult once you get the hang of it. Here's how to do it.

At the start of each session, after your brief introduction, give each participant an anonymous identifier, like a number or letter (or something more creative, like a type of animal or cloud or car, if you think people will like it). You can assign these identifiers yourself (beforehand or at the start of the session: you are Participant 1, you are Participant 2, etc.), or you can ask people to come up with their own unique identifiers (choose an animal nobody else has chosen). Ask people to write down their identifiers on sticky notes, so they can remember and use them later. After that:

- If you are meeting in person, give each participant a stack of paper forms, one for each story you expect them to tell in the session.
- If you are meeting online, give your participants a link to the online form you will be asking them to fill out about each story they will tell.

People will vary in how much attention they give to the forms you show them. That's fine. You don't need everyone to study your questions in detail. You just need them to understand what they you are asking them to do in the session. Showing them your forms up front produces three useful outcomes.

1. People will read the beautifully crafted statement at the top of your form about why they are meeting today. This will bring them on board even before you start the session.
2. People will see what they are expected to do in relation to each story (since the form says things like "please give the story you told a name" and so on). They will begin to visualize what will happen and will gear themselves up to complete the required task.
3. People will see that *everyone else is getting the same form*. This is positive peer pressure you can use. It says, "We are all going to do this together." If you think this doesn't matter, watch people as they look at their forms. They always look around to see if everyone else got one.

It doesn't matter if everyone does this; it only matters that *some* people do it, because they will send social signals to the people around them. This is part of the context you want to set up: that we are doing this together.

When should people answer your questions about their stories? Right after they tell a story? Not then. The storyteller will feel singled out (everybody else gets to have fun talking but I have to fill out this boring form). Instead, build short breaks into your session plans, and during those breaks, ask everyone to answer your questions about the stories they told since the last break. The exercises in Chapter Six all have breaks built in for question answering. Use those. Because everyone will be doing the same task at the same time, there will be peer pressure to do it. If you watch people at these times, you will see that they glance around (just like at the start of the session) to make sure everyone else is doing the task along with them.

How can you match the stories on the forms to the stories you record, whether you use audio recorders or in-the-moment note-takers? Give each story a *name* in your recording and on your form. The name can be supplied by the storyteller, by others in their group, or by a facilitating helper. You can also have someone list a few identifying *details* about the story, perhaps a visual image in it like a green door or a blue car, and make that the link.

Which you choose depends on the amount of energy you expect to have in facilitation and participation.

For example, any of these situations might take place.

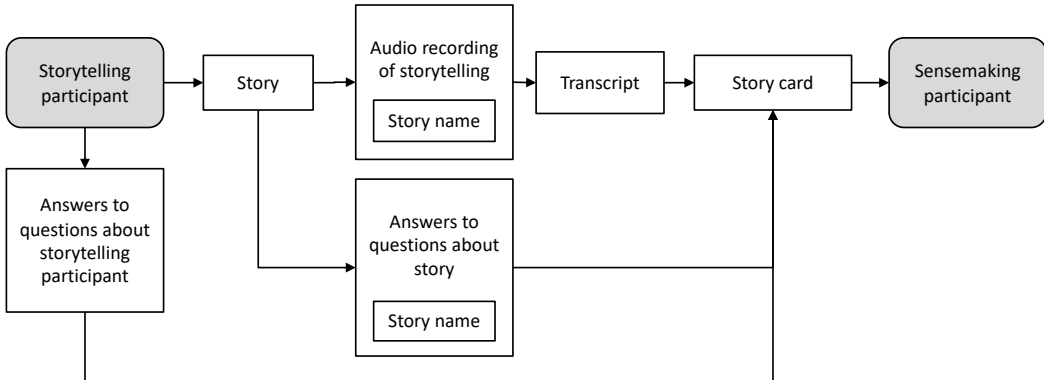
- We are meeting in person. Our session has one small group. I am facilitating. I hand everyone a stack of forms as they enter the room. As we are going through our exercise, every time anyone finishes a story, I say, "So, what do you think would be a good name for that story?" When they say the name I say, "Could you write that on one of your forms?" Later, in the break, I ask them to fill out each form with a story name on it.
- We are meeting online. Our session has ten small groups. I know that the participants will be highly motivated to contribute, and I know that our topic is not particularly sensitive. At the start of the session I show everyone a shared document that includes these instructions: "Give each story a name. Write the name on a sticky note. Place it into this space. Make sure everybody else is doing the same thing." During the exercise, I watch the shared document as it fills up with sticky notes. When I see that one group is forgetting to write down story names, I pop into their breakout room and chide them in a joking way for breaking the rules of the game. Soon after, I see their space begin to fill up with story names.
- We are meeting in person. Our session has three small groups. I have predicted that these participants will not be motivated and are not likely to carry out instructions. For this reason I have arranged to have one facilitating helper for each small group. The helpers do not ask anyone to do anything. Instead, they listen and write down a few identifying details of each story on a sticky note, along with a number that identifies its teller. They are careful to name the stories by some obvious visual detail, like "the long hallway" or "the garden path," both because they do not want to insert any interpretation into the name and because nobody is saying the name on the recording. During the break in the exercise, each helper hands each participant a stack of forms to fill out with their story names and participant numbers already filled in.

Think about how much facilitation and participation you will have in your session and plan based on that. If you know in advance that you will get little participation from the people you have invited to the session, ask your friends or colleagues to help you facilitate so you can balance the shortage of help in that way.

Another way to gain more help is to seed the session with some participants you know will be exceptionally helpful. For example, say you are asking people on your city street to come to a session. If you don't know some of the people and can't guess how much they will participate, ask some neighbors you do know (and know to be helpful) so you can increase the odds of getting the help you need.

Side note: when you are asking people to identify their stories, do not use the word "title." Stick with "name." The word "title" implies that a story is a performance or a work of art, and it causes people to worry that their stories might not be good enough to tell. The word "name" avoids that implication.

What about your questions about participants? Hold them until the end of the session, after the story sharing is over. Asking questions about people at the start of the session can seem interrogative, even if they are respectful and useful.



**Write, practice, and (maybe) test a session script**

Plan what you will say in each part of your story-sharing session: to introduce your project and the session; to introduce the exercise(s) you have chosen; to explain each transition; and to end the session. Keep each explanation as brief as possible—a few minutes at most—and practice your script until it does not seem like you are reading it. If you can find a willing group of volunteers (maybe in your project planning group), you can even run a practice session before you use it with your participants. Do what you can to refine your script before you use it (and as you are using it).

Because you will be asking people to share stories with each other, embed a self-fulfilling prophecy into your introduction, as you would in a group interview. Say something like:

When people get together, they often tell stories about their experiences. We’re going to do that now, only we’re going to help the process along with a group activity.

Whether you should say “with a group activity” or “with a game” or “with a structured process” depends on the conditions of your session. If your topic is serious or your participants are reluctant (or untrusting or easy to offend), don’t talk about a game. Talk about an activity, process, method, practice, or some other this-is-serious term. On the other hand, if your topic is light and your participants are ready and willing to share stories, calling an exercise a game can be motivating. (Some people know the term “serious game,” but most people have no idea what it means, so if you want to use it, define it as you do.)

**Start the session**

Begin with your prepared introduction. Next, give everyone an anonymous identifier, just as you would in a group interview. Ask people to write this down, or write it down yourself.

Next, if you have more than five people, form small groups of 3-5 people. Set up a way to record the stories told in each small group, using technology and helpers. If you are making an audio recording in each small group, ask each person to say their anonymous identifier out loud.

### Facilitate the exercise(s)

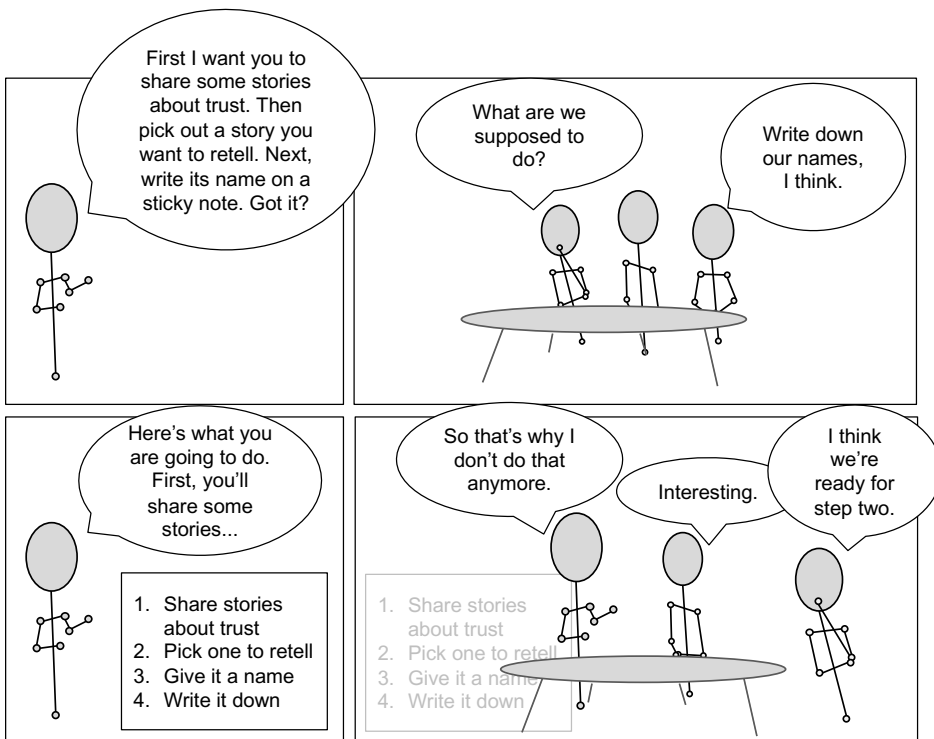
Now run the story-sharing exercise(s) you chose for the session, using the instructions in Chapter Six and your previously-prepared recording plan. Make sure to ask people to answer your questions about their stories during a break in the exercise.

While the exercise is going on, promote participant ownership with light-touch facilitation. That is, help your participants own what they do by giving them as much help as they need, and no more.

#### Let them go

Communicate a message of empowerment and freedom. Invite people to work independently of your direction. But at the same time, don't leave them confused; give them enough instruction to make their independent work productive.

**Provide a plan.** Write a brief, simple agenda that lays out what you are asking people to do and why. Make it available throughout the session so people can check on it without having to ask for help. Don't make them ask (or guess). If you are meeting in person, write the agenda on a whiteboard or give people printed copies of it. If you are meeting online, show people a document or web page.



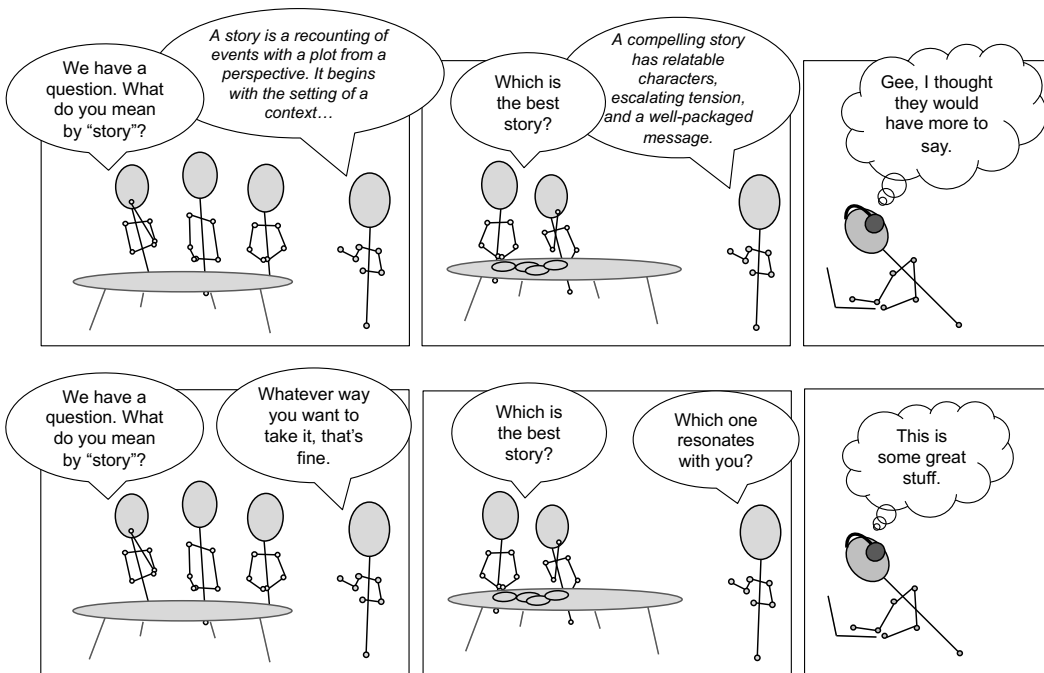
**Use your voice as a cue.** When you are giving instructions to the whole session, speak loudly and clearly. When small groups are actively engaged in an exercise, speak quietly and separately to each small group. Even if you have to tell everyone some important instruction you forgot to mention before, tell each group separately. Let each group own the space and time of their work together.

**Use music as a cue.** Restaurants play music because it covers the sounds of conversation so people can talk. If you are meeting in person, you can use quiet instrumental music as a signal that it's time for people to concentrate on their small-group work. Turn on the music every time you want small groups to work together, and turn it off every time you give session-wide instructions. You can't do this online, but you can send the same signal with a brief it's-time-for-small-groups ritual.

**Keep your distance**

Don't let reluctant or under-confident participants turn the session into a group interview. Gently push the responsibility and the ownership of the session back to them.

**Don't model.** Foot-dragging participants will sometimes ask for an example of what sort of stories they should be telling. Don't give it to them. You will only get stories exactly like the example you give. If they seem stuck, rephrase your story-eliciting question(s) or exercise instructions. Find a way to explain the task you are asking them to do without providing a template for them to match.



**Pretend you don't know, even when you do.** When people ask a lot of detailed questions, they may be trying to do things right, but they also may be stalling for time. If it's one question, answer it quickly. But if it's a barrage of questions, say "I don't know" or "I forget" or "It's all good." Then bring them back to the exercise, say "I'll let you get back to it," and leave them alone.

**Don't make decisions for people.** Nervous participants will sometimes ask you to do things for them, like choose a story to retell or put a sticky note in the "right" place. Or they will ask you to evaluate something they have done. Don't. It's their session. You are not there to judge, only to help. Briefly explain the task, then move on.

### **Watch from afar**

Keep an eye what people are doing, but don't intervene unless people aren't sharing stories.

- **Look for signs of story sharing.** As small groups work on the session's exercise(s), try to figure out if they are sharing stories. You can usually tell if people are sharing stories even if you can't hear what they are saying. In person, you should see one person talking and gesturing while everyone else listens. Online, if you can see cursors in a shared document, you should see one cursor "gesturing" by moving around more than the others. As long as it looks like people are sharing stories, don't intervene, even if people seem to be ignoring the exercise. It doesn't matter how well they carry out the exercise. It only matters that they share stories.
- **If you must intervene, do it gently.** If the people in one or more small groups do not seem to be sharing stories, try to gauge their mood before you intervene.
  - If they seem bored, suspicious, or annoyed, an intervention might get them to tell stories, but the stories will probably not be useful. It is better not to intervene in this case. Instead, use what you have learned to improve your next session.
  - If they seem engaged in a lively but non-story-sharing conversation, come up with a question to ask that will give you an opportunity to remind them of the purpose of the session. Then go to them and quietly say something like, "Hi, sorry to interrupt, I'm just checking: Did you get the handout? How's it going, by the way? Lots of experiences coming up?" Don't press, and don't criticize; just drop a hint. (This is actually a good reason to give each group a handout, no matter what it says. It gives you an excuse to check on them later on.)

### **Finish the session**

If you handed out recording devices, gather them now. Ask people to answer your final questions about themselves. Then bring the session to a close by thanking everyone for their time and telling them how they can join the sensemaking part of the project. If there is interest, ask for feedback on the session and the project.

Immediately after the session is over, jot down your thoughts on what happened. Later, transcribe your recordings or clean up your notes, connecting the stories each person told to the answers they gave to your questions.

## **Gleaning stories from conversations**

If you have access to a body of recorded conversations in which people talked about the topic you want to explore in your project, you can use the stories from those conversations (if there are any) in sensemaking, alongside the stories you collect from your project participants.

The question is: *Did* people tell stories in the conversations? And how do you draw the stories out?



There are four reliable indicators that a story is being told in a conversation. You can look for them to find stories in transcripts.

- Look for *personal pronouns*, like I, you, he, she, we, they. When people are describing facts or giving opinions, they use these words less often.
- Look for *past-tense verbs*, like “did” or “said” or “tried.”
- Look for *time references*, like “when” or “then” or “afterwards,” or “morning” or evening” or “day.”
- Look for *storytelling words*, like “happened” or “one time” or “back in the day” or “I remember.”

Print your transcript and mark each instance of each of these word categories. The places where people told stories will have more markings in them. If you keep doing this, after a while you will stop needing to mark the indicators. The stories will just jump out at you.

Consider, for example, this snippet of conversation:

“Sometimes it does have to do with cultural differences how illness and medicine are regarded in other countries because we have a very Western view here and not all of our patients come in with a Western view. And some of it has to do with family and how you tell families. *I remember a day* when this woman was *visiting* our hospital *for the first time*. It was *late in the evening* when the consultation was over with the doctor. *She walked* out crying, and *I asked* her what was happening. *She said*, ‘I am overwhelmed with the amount of information I received from the doctor.’ And *I said* to her, ‘Don’t worry, that is why I am here.’ ”

Notice how many of the story indicators show up in the quote starting when the person says “I remember a day.” That part of the transcript is a story.



## Chapter 9

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# Group Exercises for Story Collection

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This chapter describes seven group exercises you can use to gather stories in your PNI projects. They do not define PNI. You can do PNI with other story-sharing exercises, or with no story-sharing exercises. These are *examples* of the kinds of exercises you can use to gather stories for your PNI projects. I use and recommend all of them.

You don't have to do these exercises exactly as I say to do them. Use your knowledge and experience to make them work for your needs and the needs of your participants. The "Optional elaborations" and "Your own style" sections in the exercise descriptions give you some ideas on variations to consider.

## Twice-told stories

This is the easiest of the exercises in this book, and that makes it a good exercise to start with. But its requirement of at least six participants is critical to its success.

### Requirements

At least six people; at least an hour.

### Preparation

Get your agenda and story-eliciting question(s) ready to use: print them, get ready to write them on a whiteboard, or prepare a document to screen share.

**Starting out**

Minutes	Who	What to do
2	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2	You	Set up at least two groups of 3-4 people.
1	You	Read or show your story-eliciting question(s). Explain that each group will use the questions to start their story sharing.
1	You	Start a separate recording device for each small group, or ask each group to tolerate the presence of a note-taker.

Note the brief amount of time allocated to the introduction. Don't waste people's time explaining why you chose the exercise, what they will get out of it, or what makes a story a story. Just give them a quick idea of what they will be doing, then get them started.

**The main part of the exercise**

Note: In this table (and all similar ones), when the "who" column does not say "you," *the instructions are for your participants*. Give them the instructions in your own words.

Minutes	Who	What to do
25+	Small groups	Answer the questions the facilitator gave you. As you share experiences, give each story you tell a name. Write it down and say it on the recording. Also note who told which story.  Make sure everyone has a chance to share a story (or not, as they choose). Keep sharing stories until the time runs out.
5	Small groups	Talk about the stories you just told. Choose one story to tell again to everyone in the session.

**Finishing up**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5-10	Each person separately	Answer questions about each story you told and about yourself.
10+	Everyone together	Someone (anyone) from each group, <i>tell the story</i> you chose. Then talk about all of the stories and what they mean.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Use a focused story-selection question*

When you ask people to use to choose a story to retell, instead of asking in a general way, you can ask them to use a question that connects to the goals of your project. For example, you might say:

- Which story shows what \_\_\_ is really like?
- Which story do/does \_\_\_ need(s) to hear?
- Which story shows why \_\_\_ needs to change?
- Which story shows an unmet need (or an underused strength) related to \_\_\_?

Don't choose a question based on a general quality like "the most memorable story." Quality-based questions bring out performative storytelling, not generative story sharing.

### *Let groups choose (or write) their own question*

Instead of giving people one story-selection question, you can offer them a list of 3-5 questions to choose from. And if any small groups are especially interested, you can offer them the option of writing their own questions. Give them an extra five minutes to do this, and explain that the question must relate to meaning rather than quality.

## How you will know it's working

The heart of this exercise lies in its small-group story sharing. The task of choosing a story to retell to the larger group provides a source of motivation to choose and share relevant and meaningful stories. Those are the stories you want to collect. The retelling is not as important as the sharing that leads up to it.

So watch people during the small-group story sharing time. People who are sharing stories will be intent on each other, and you will see them taking long conversational turns. If you see groups engaged in rapid-fire conversational give and take, with no long turns that show stories are being told, or if some groups seem disengaged, see if they need some help.

## What can go wrong

### *People choose quality-based questions*

If you give people the option of choosing their own story-selection questions, and they choose one that has to do with quality (e.g., "Which is the best story?"), don't intervene. Let them go. It is better not to say anything to such a group, because they may take the criticism badly and stop telling stories entirely. Just think about how you can improve your instructions the next time.

### *People abandon the topic*

Don't step in to fix things if people wander off the topic. Think about how to do better the next time. Any hint of censorship will reduce story sharing.

### *People don't choose stories to retell*

Sometimes small groups will say "we didn't have time to choose a story." This is especially likely when people are apathetic or distrustful. If you think this is likely, plan to give small

groups a five-minute warning before the retelling period. Say something like, “you should be ready to retell a story in five minutes.” If groups are behind schedule (or have been avoiding the task) you will see them suddenly huddle to choose a story. If you see a lot of huddling, give people a few extra minutes.

### ***You get behind schedule***

If you start running out of time, shrink the retelling period. Divide the time you have left by the number of groups and ask people to summarize rather than retell the stories they chose. Don’t shrink any of the other time periods. You need the story-sharing and question-answering times to gather your stories, and your participants need the closure of the wrap-up time.

### ***You are disappointed at how few stories you got***

This exercise requires little facilitation expertise, and it gathers fewer, shorter, and more shallow stories than a longer and more complicated exercise. That’s all right. For a small project it may be just what you need. Don’t over-reach. Start small and you will be more likely to be pleasantly surprised.

### **Your own style**

Because this exercise is built on so basic a frame, you can bolt all sorts of elaborations onto it. For example:

- Groups could tell other groups their stories in a round-robin fashion.
- People could move around the room (or to different pages of an online document) to different “memory jogging” stations as they tell each other stories.
- You could ask people to choose one story from those retold and stage it as a brief play before the session wrap-up.

If you like, elaborate on the exercise with ideas of your own design.

## **Timelines**

Building a timeline is useful when you want to gather stories about a topic that has a strong time component to it. It might be something that happened:

- to everyone together (a flood, an election)
- to everyone individually, but similar enough to be considered together (going to the doctor, having a baby, renting an apartment, approaching retirement)
- in the entire society (changes in technology, the culture, the environment)

If you ask people about their experiences and they say, “I don’t know, it all blends together,” asking them to build a timeline can help them find particular experiences to recount.

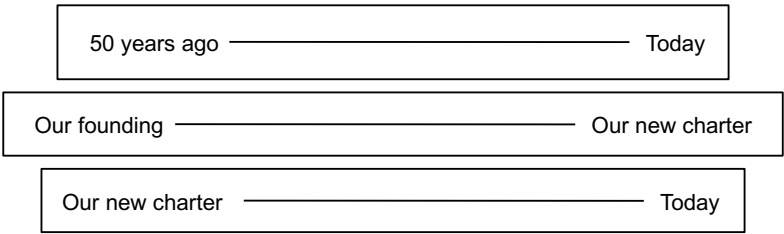
If your topic does *not* have an inherent time component, like a project on trust or leadership or nutrition, asking people to build a timeline may lead to confusion. To find out if this exercise will work for your project, picture (or build) a simple timeline of experiences related to your topic. If the exercise seems nonsensical to you, it will to others as well.

### Requirements

At least three people; at least 90 minutes.

### Preparation

Before the session, think of a time frame along which you would like to gather stories. Write start and end labels to describe it. If you think your participants would like a choice, write labels for two or three time frames. I like to write or print these on large sheets of paper (or large shapes in an online document) to illustrate how they will define each group's timeline. For example, you might write:



Also get your agenda and story-eliciting question(s) ready to use: print them, get ready to write them on a whiteboard, or prepare a document to screen share.

### Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2-5	You	If you have more than three people, split up into groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give or show everyone your story-eliciting question(s).
1-5	You	Give or show everyone your time-frame end labels (or choices). Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard to work on.
1	You	Start a separate recording device for each small group, or ask each group to tolerate the presence of a note-taker.

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	Small groups	Draw a horizontal line across your space. Then look at (or choose among) the time-frame labels you were given by the facilitator. Place the labels at the start and end of your horizontal line. Add to each label a few more sticky notes that describe what that time was (or is) like, in general.
45+	Small groups	<p>Now look at the story-eliciting questions you were given by the facilitator. When you think of an answer to a question, tell it to the other people in your group. Then give the story you told a name, write it on a sticky note, and place it where it belongs on the timeline.</p> <p>As you work, notice any patterns (including blank spaces) in your timeline. Do those patterns bring any other experiences to mind? Make sure everyone has a chance to share a story (or not, as they choose). Keep sharing stories until the time runs out.</p>
5	Small groups	Talk about the patterns you see in your timeline. What do you think they mean?

## Finishing up

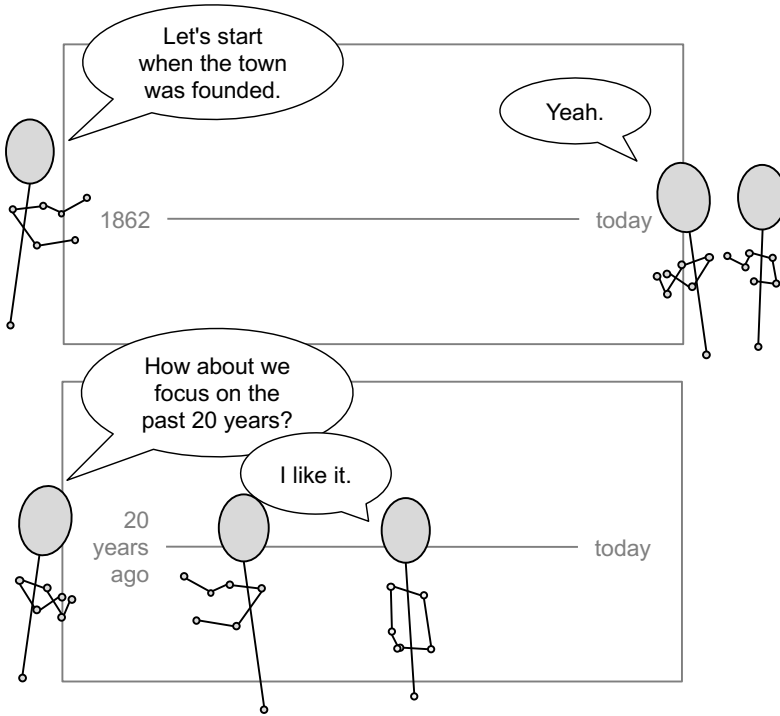
Minutes	Who	What to do
5-10	Each person separately	Answer questions about each story you told and about yourself.
10+	Everyone together	If you have more than one group, have someone from each group describe their timeline. Then talk about the patterns you see across all of the timelines.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Let groups choose their own dates*

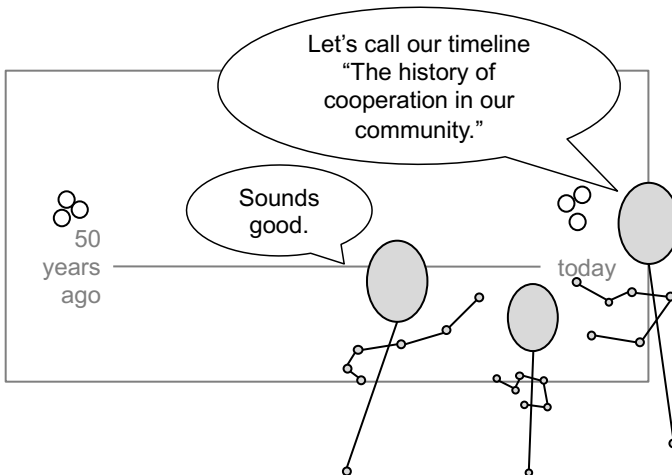
If you know that your participants will be energized and creative, you can keep your start and end labels in your pocket and ask them to come up with their own. Then, if some groups struggle with the task, you can pull out some examples for them to choose from. Having some diversity among the timelines people create can provide agency and generate a more diverse collection of stories.





**Let groups choose their own themes**

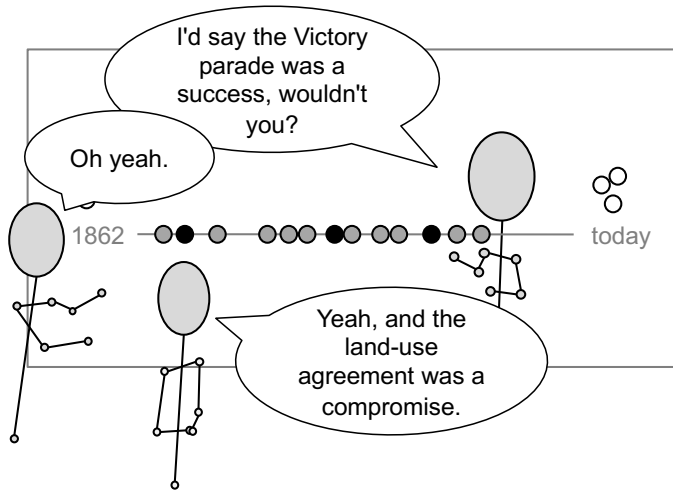
You can ask each group to come up with a theme for their timeline, one that fits inside your overall topic. Ask groups to do this before they start sharing stories, and ask them to write their theme on a sticky note and place it above their timeline.



**Add turning points**

You can ask groups to recall specific moments along their timelines: problems, solutions, successes, failures, decisions, dilemmas, crises, opportunities, plans, the falling apart of plans, learning moments, times of joy or despair, times of solidarity or conflict, compro-

mises, breakthroughs, accidents, surprises, sea changes, and so on. Turning points can help your participants build a more balanced story collection by bringing out stories whose relevance may not be obvious.



I suggest giving people no more than three types of turning point. You'll confuse them with too many. Use different colors of sticky notes to mark the different types of turning point.

You can also give people game-like rules for placing their turning points, such as:

- After you mark stories of conflict, see if you can mark as many stories of cooperation (or at least compromise).
- Your timeline must have at least three stories in which nobody could have predicted what would happen next.
- Each story about a dilemma must be followed by a story about a decision (no matter how small).
- For each story that marks a discovery or learning moment, see if you can remember what happened to make it possible, and tell about that as well.

To come up with rules that work for your project, work backwards:

1. Think about the story collection you want people to be able to use in the sensemaking phase of your project.
2. Think about the stories that will make that possible—all the stories, in their breadth and depth.
3. Think about the gaps between the stories you need and the stories people are likely to tell without additional prompting. (Some pilot story collection could be useful here.)
4. Think of turning-point rules that will help to bring out the stories in the gaps.

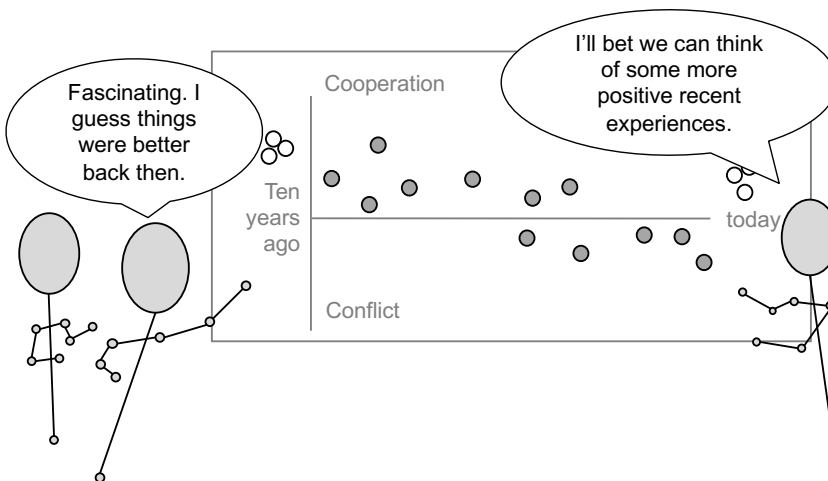
The more your participants seem willing to do complicated things, the more elaborate you can ask them to get about turning points. You can even ask people to come up with their own turning-point types and rules.

### Move stories into a second dimension

You can add depth to this exercise, literally, by adding a vertical dimension. Think of a question whose answers will fall along a dimension of meaning related to your project's goals. Some examples are:

- Should this sort of thing happen more or less often?
- Does this bring us together or drive us apart?
- How much risk is inherent in this story? How dangerous is it?
- How sustainable is the effort put forth in this story? Can we keep doing this?

Because of predominant cultural metaphors related to height, people usually think of up as better. I've found that it's better not to fight this impulse; it just confuses people. So choose a dimension that goes from up-good to down-bad in a meaningful way that adds depth to your project.



Use this option after people have completed their one-dimensional timelines. Show everyone your vertical dimension, or give them a few dimensions to choose from. Then ask each group to *move the stories they told up* (like a floating balloon) or *down* (like a falling stone) to *where they seem to belong* in the two-dimensional space. Finally, ask them to sit back, look at the pattern they have created, and see if any more stories come to mind.

### Create follow-on timelines

Often when people are constructing a timeline (or, more typically, as they are finishing it), they think of another timeline they could have (or should have) built. They say things like:

- We should have considered not just *this* oil crisis but the two before it as well.
- What if we had included not just trust but all forms of cooperation, even without trust?
- Now I want to talk about the history of the whole city, not just our neighborhood.

So another way to plan an ambitious story-sharing session is to leave time for a second timeline after the first, then give people the option of starting all over again with another time span and subtopic. Sometimes you will get better stories with a second run through

the exercise than you will with an elaboration. You can also give people the option of expanding their original timelines further into the past or future.

## How you will know it's working

Keep an eye on the timelines as they form. If the storytelling is going well, each will have stories scattered around it. If you see "blotchy" timelines, with some parts well populated and others bare, people may be going into too much detail. You might find that people vary a lot in how detailed their timelines are: one group may have 50 items while another has 10. There is not much you can do about this (and besides, the narrative richness in the sparse-item group might be greater anyway).

## What can go wrong

### *People fuss too much over their timelines*

Timelines are like scaffolding. They help people search through their memories for experiences to tell stories about. But it's the experiences, not the timelines, that matter. Don't let people get the idea that the scaffolding is the building. They might spend too much time building the perfect timeline and too little time sharing stories.

If you think your participants are likely to fuss over their timelines, prepare to explain that they don't need to precisely place each event, that their sequences don't have to be perfect, and that they can place multiple stories on the same spot. The idea is to draw out experiences, not to create a history lesson. Using the words "rough timeline" can also help people to understand that precision isn't the point.

### *People can't fill up their timelines*

I used to think you could use this exercise without story-eliciting questions. I used to think you could just show people an empty timeline and invite them to fill it up. I no longer think that. Seeing a blank timeline seems to stop people from thinking of stories to tell. This is why I (now) suggest giving participants your story-eliciting questions before you show them any timeline spaces. If you've written (and tested) good story-eliciting questions, the questions and the timeline space will work together to bring out stories people want to tell.

Having said that, even with the best story-eliciting questions, you can still end up in a situation in which people are initially flummoxed by a blank timeline. These are some ways you can help people get started.

- Ask people to mark some turning points on the timelines (without telling stories about them). For example, if there were some major events in the history of your community, groups can write those on their timeline, then look again at your story-eliciting questions to see if any experiences come to mind around those times.
- Use a "change between" method: go to two stories with nothing between them and say, "What happened between these two experiences that changed things?" People might be able to remember a change that took place then and tell about it.

- Ask people to use seasons or holidays as markers. For example, you could say, “Thinking about the spring of this year, do you remember what the situation was like? Did anything memorable happen during that spring?” And so on.
- Ask people to place nouns on their timelines (people, places, objects) that were important during a particular time period or event. Perhaps during protest marches an orange flower became significant. Nouns can remind people of stories they have yet to tell.

### ***People describe events as dry facts***

Sometimes people mistake the timeline exercise as a list-making exercise and place only events on it. The stories they tell are not actually recountings of personal experiences but simple lists of dates and incident reports, like “On November the third we lost our house. On November the ninth we filled out the insurance claim.” This is an unavoidable vulnerability of timelines: that they seem like, well, timelines. People may be used to timelines from history lessons, and they may not be able to break out of giving dull recitations of information.

Here’s a trick: spice up your turning points. Suggest more emotional turning points, like seizures of fear, sinking feelings in the stomach, leaps of elation, flights of fancy, and so on. If people ignore your recommendations and plod on marking out the mundane, set up some rules for what the timeline must contain. Tell them that each timeline must contain at least three moments of regret, or at least four events about which there are conflicting reports, or at least five arguments. It is better if you see this coming and give out the rule at the start of the exercise, but the old “I forgot to mention this” gambit can help if things are going wrong.

### ***People run out of space***

The more space you give people to work with, the more they will put into it. Groups should be able to place at least 20 story sticky notes comfortably side by side on any timeline space you give them, in-person or online. Don’t make the mistake of letting people run out of space before they run out of stories.

### **Your own style**

“Timeline” means many things to many people. It may not mean the same thing to you as it means to the people in your session. The best preparation is to accept this fact, figure out what you think timelines should look like, do what you can to steer things your way, and then let go and let people build what *they* think are timelines. And do the same thing with respect to what *I* think is a timeline, or anybody else who describes one. The general idea of building timelines is broad enough for 50 people to walk abreast. Use it the way it works best for you. Maybe it should involve stones on the floor. Maybe it should involve play-acting. Maybe it should involve challenge and competition, or holding hands around a fire. Find your way.

## **Landscapes**

In a landscape exercise, participants populate a space with stories called to mind by combinations of conditions defined by two dimensions of meaning. As the stories build up,

a landscape of features comes into view. Scattered experiences come together to create patterns that invite deeper exploration.

Landscapes work best for topics in which there is no dominant sequence of events through time. For example, while the timeline exercise is a natural choice for exploring a community's history, a landscape exercise would work better to explore how the community uses its library.

## Requirements

At least three people; at least 90 minutes.

## Preparation

### *Get your dimensions ready*

Look at your story-eliciting questions and draw from them pairs of dimensions that are:

- meaningful (they matter to your topic)
- evocative (they will bring stories to mind)
- variable (stories will range across them)
- independent (not correlated)

Each dimension should go from something to something, like "Trust: from absent to complete" or "Predictability: from clockwork to chaos." Think of gradients, not categories. You want your participants to explore nuanced comparisons.

This process can be a little hard to understand, so I'll give you an example. Say I have a menu of story-eliciting questions that goes like this:

- When you look back on your time living in our neighborhood, can you recall the first time you really felt at home here? What happened on that day?
- Did you ever see a neighbor do something and think, "If we all acted like that, we'd get along so much better"? Or, did you ever think, "If we all acted like that, we'd never get along"? What did you see?
- Have you ever thought to yourself, "This place is so crazy, who knows what will happen next?" Or have you thought, "This place is so boring, nothing ever changes.?" What happened that made you think that?
- If none of these questions appeals to you, tell us about anything that happened in our neighborhood that mattered to you.

The words that stand out to me in these questions are "at home," "acted," "get along," "who knows," and "mattered." These could all be good dimensions to explore. Converting them to ranges:

- "at home" — Belonging (from neighbor to stranger)
- "acted" — Behavior (from good neighbor to bad)
- "get along" — Harmony (from conflict to cooperation)
- "who knows" — Volatility (from predictable to unpredictable)

- “mattered” — Importance (from trivial to life-changing)

Some pairs of these dimensions would produce strong correlations. For example, good-neighbor stories will probably be harmonious. Correlated dimensions don’t work well because most of the landscape they define will be empty.

These are some interesting pairings I can see in this set:

- Belonging vs. Importance — When is belonging important?
- Volatility vs. Behavior — How does change affect behavior, and vice versa?
- Harmony vs. Belonging — Do neighbors get along better than strangers, or the reverse?

As a reader exercise, see if you can think of more good pairings.

**Decide how you will talk about the landscapes**

There are two metaphors you can use to present the landscape exercise: *graphing* and *mapping*. Each works best with different people.

**Graphing.** Most STEM professionals (e.g., doctors, engineers) are familiar with the practice of plotting data in spaces defined by dimensions. For these people it works best to speak of creating *graphs* that reveal patterns. Say things like “on the X axis, write your X dimension.”

**Mapping.** For everyone else, the language of maps works better. Avoid words like *dimension*, *axis*, *x*, *y*, *z*, *plot*, *figure*, and *diagram*. Instead use words like *direction*, *location*, *place*, *spot*, *site*, *land*, and *area*. When you ask people to define their dimensions, say “Consider what changes as you move from North to South, then from East to West.” When you ask people to define corners of the space, say “Write what it means to be located in the extreme North-West corner of the land.”

As you plan to use this exercise, decide which metaphor you will use to speak to the people you will be working with, and stick to it.

**Starting out**

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2-5	You	If you have more than three people, split up into groups of 3-5 people.
1	You	Give or show everyone your story-eliciting question(s).
1-5	You	Give or show everyone your dimension labels (or choices of labels). Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard to work on.
1	You	Start a separate recording device for each small group, or ask each group to tolerate the presence of a note-taker.

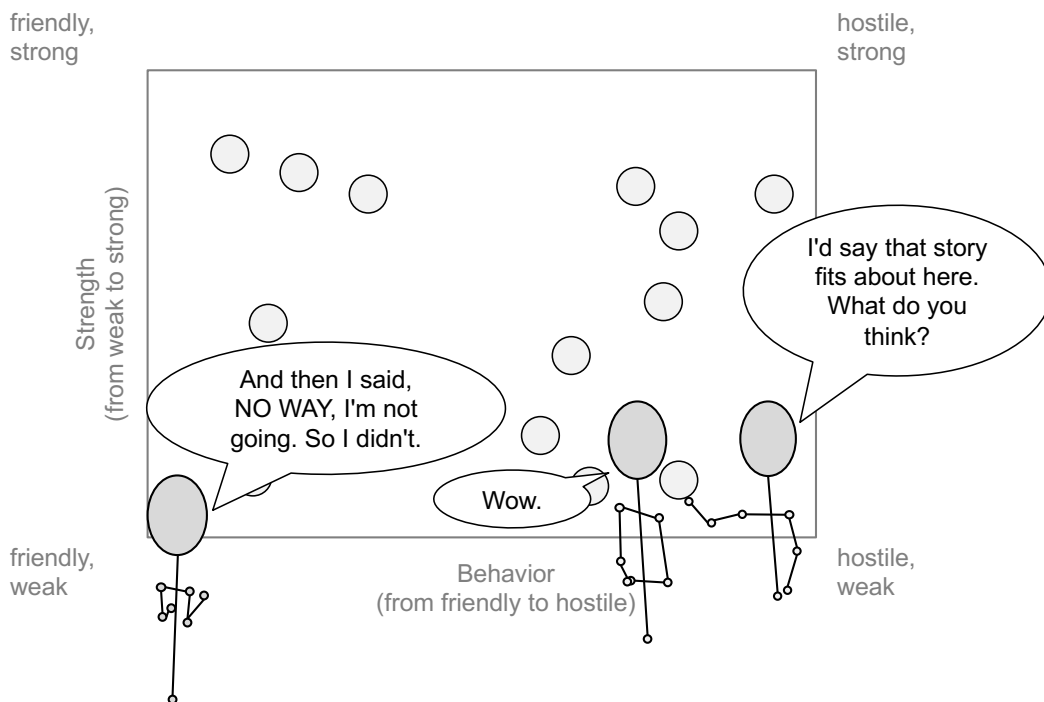
## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	Small groups	<p>If you are working in person, mark out a space of about one square meter, on a wall, table, or giant piece of paper. If you are working online, draw a box that takes up most of a page. Using the dimension names you were given (or chose), label the two dimensions (horizontal and vertical) of your space with sticky notes.</p> <p>Also label each corner of the space with a sticky note that describes the space at that corner (e.g., “High trust, low predictability”).</p>
45+	Small groups	<p>Look at the question(s) you were given. When you think of an answer to a question, tell it to the other people in your group. Then give the story you told a name, write it on a sticky note, and <i>place it where it belongs</i> on your space.</p> <p>As you work, notice any patterns (including blank spaces) in your landscape. Do those patterns bring any other experiences to mind? Can you fill up every blank space? Make sure everyone has a chance to share a story (or not, as they choose). Keep sharing stories until the time runs out.</p>
5	Small groups	Talk about the patterns you see in your landscape. What do you think they mean?

## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5-10	Each person separately	Answer questions about each story you told and about yourself.
10+	Everyone together	If you have more than one group, have someone from each group describe their landscape. Then talk about the patterns you see across all of the landscapes.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.





## Optional elaborations

### *Map one dimension at a time*

Another way to do this exercise is one dimension at a time. Start with just the horizontal dimension, asking people to think of experiences that happened along it. Then, once they have filled up that (linear) space, add a second dimension. Ask people to move the stories they already told up (like a floating balloon) or down (like a falling stone) to where they belong vertically. Then ask them to sit back, look at the two-dimensional space they have created, and see if more stories come to mind.

I have found that some people like this form of the exercise better because it only asks them to think about one abstraction at a time, while other people are annoyed at being asked to go back over their stories a second time. You can try it both ways and see which way works better for you and your participants.

### *Let groups build their own spaces*

Instead of supplying one fixed pair of dimensions, you can give your participants more control over the spaces they create. You can:

1. Let groups choose from a list of dimension pairs
2. Let groups pair up dimensions themselves
3. Let groups come up with their own dimensions

**Let groups choose from a list of dimension pairs.** You can prepare and present 3-5 pairs of dimensions and ask each small group to choose a pair to work with. This option provides more agency, but it still keeps some quality control in place, since you chose and paired

up the dimensions. You can allow multiple groups to use the same pair, or you can have groups “claim” a pair of dimensions (so no two groups use the same pair).

**Let groups pair up dimensions themselves.** The next level of freedom is to provide groups with a list of *single* dimensions and ask them to choose two dimensions to work with. To avoid having people create correlated dimension pairings, you can simply tell them which dimensions will pair well. For example, you could show them a table like this:

Dimension	Range	Pairs well with
Belonging	Neighbor to stranger	Behavior, Harmony, Volatility, Importance
Behavior	Good neighbor to bad	Belonging, Volatility, Importance
Harmony	Conflict to cooperation	Belonging, Volatility, Importance
Volatility	Predictable to unpredictable	Belonging, Behavior, Harmony, Importance
Importance	Trivial to life-changing	Belonging, Behavior, Harmony, Volatility

**Let groups come up with their own dimensions.** You can extend participation even further by giving groups the option of coming up with their own dimensions. Only use this option if you are sure your participants will be willing and able to come up with dimensions that will bring out relevant and meaningful stories. Visit each group for a quick, quiet, private review to check that their dimensions pair well and are connected to relevance and meaning rather than quality (e.g., whether a story is funny or clever or memorable).

**Offer all three options.** The maximum amount of flexibility you can offer is to give people all three options at once. To do this, give your small groups:

- some pairs of dimensions
- some single dimensions they can pair up themselves (with “pairs well with” suggestions)
- an invitation to come up with their own dimensions and pairs

This amount of flexibility can be tricky to facilitate well, but it can be useful when you think your participants will vary in how much they will be motivated to take charge of the session. It also has the potential to gather a wider variety of stories than a simpler option.

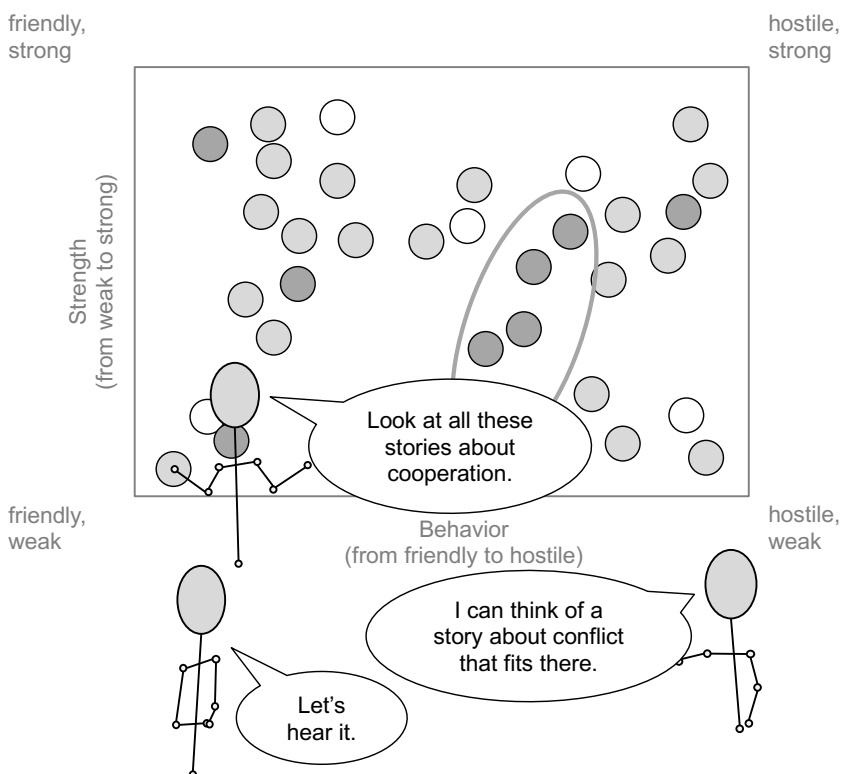
By the way, any of these build-your-own-space options meshes well with the “map one dimension at a time” elaboration. You can ask each group to:

1. choose a single dimension (yours or theirs)
2. share some stories that range across it
3. take a break
4. choose a second dimension (on their own or from your “pairs well with” table)
5. move their stories up and down
6. think of more stories to tell

Choosing a second dimension *after* sharing some stories can bring more sensemaking into the exercise, which can improve the depth of exploration in the stories. This is a complicated combination, however. Save it until you have some practice using this exercise and a particularly enthusiastic set of participants.

### Add a third dimension

Your participants can deepen their exploration (and diversify the story collection they are building) by adding a height dimension to the landscapes they create. Ask people to write their story names on any of 3-5 different colors of sticky notes that represent ranges of a third dimension (e.g., low, medium, high volatility, cooperation, etc.). They can use this third dimension to discover patterns and to think of stories that fill in gaps.



This elaboration will slow the exercise down a bit, because people will have to think about each story before they write down its name. So if you want to use it, give people some extra story-sharing time. And of course, only use it with enthusiastic participants.

It is best to give all of your groups the same third dimension, because you want them to be able to compare patterns across their landscapes. I have found that a few specific dimensions work particularly well for this purpose:

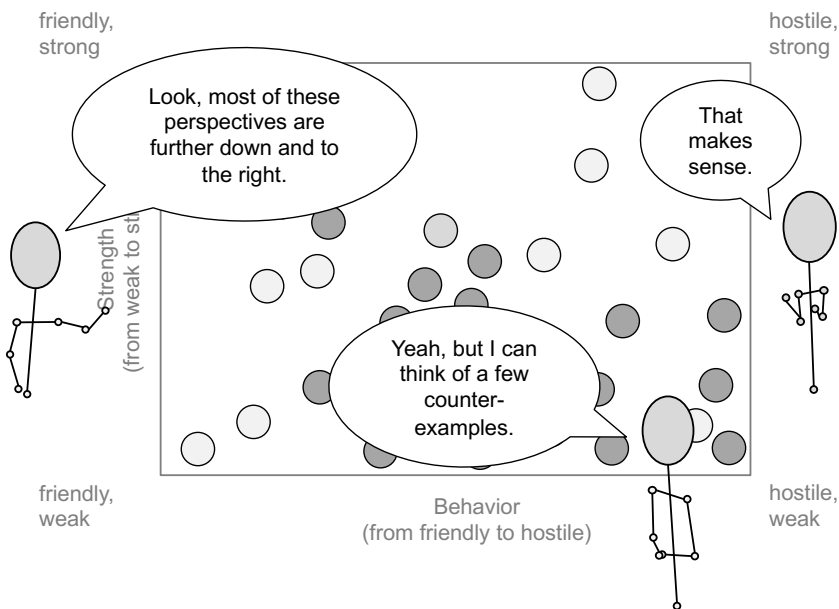
- Desirability, from horrible to wonderful (peaks are best-case scenarios, valleys are worst-case scenarios)
- Likelihood, from impossible to guaranteed (peaks are real, valleys are imaginary)

- Stability, from wildly unpredictable to rock solid (peaks are stable ground, valleys are risks/opportunities)
- Importance, from trivial to life-changing (peaks matter, valleys don't)

Note that I have arranged all of these dimensions so that up is better. People think that way about height. In my experience, it works better to use that tendency than to fight it.

### **Consider multiple perspectives**

Another elaboration is to ask groups to consider each story from multiple points of view. You can give them a fixed list of 2-3 perspectives to consider, or you can ask each group to choose 2-3 perspectives, either from a list you provide or on their own. Ask people to write each story name down multiple times, once per perspective, using multiple colors of sticky notes. Then ask them to place each sticky note where someone with that perspective (or point of view, or way of seeing things) would place it.



This elaboration is especially useful when:

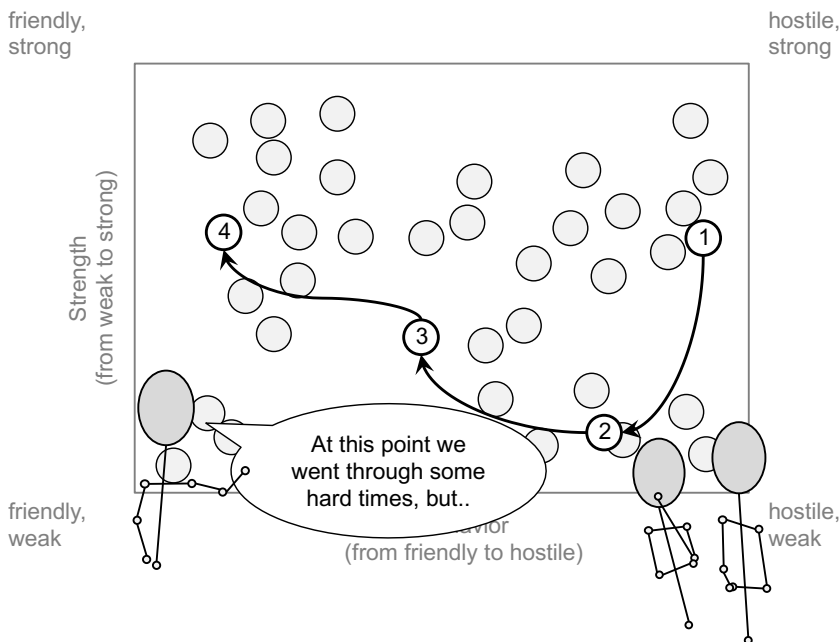
- your topic is contentious, so every story will have multiple relevant perspectives
- you think people might worry that their voices will not be heard, so they might value the opportunity to represent their viewpoints
- your participants are motivated, so they will be eager to explore the dynamics within each story

If your topic is straightforward or your participants are unmotivated, this is not the best elaboration to use.

### **Tell stories that move around in the space**

After people have finished building their landscapes, you can ask them to share some stories (real or fictional) that *move around in the space* they have created. To use this

option, give people giant pieces of paper and ask them to draw their stories as a series of point-to-point lines in the space. As always, encourage people to tell more stories that come to mind as they do this.



## How you will know it's working

In the first part of this exercise, in the 5-15 minutes when groups are setting up their spaces, check in with each group to see if they need any help. Don't just watch during that time; ask. Why? Because if people don't understand the space they are using, the exercise won't work. If you have used one of the build-your-own-space elaborations, pay even more attention to this time. Don't criticize or correct; just make yourself available to help out.

In the part of the exercise where people are supposed to be telling each other stories and placing them into the space, which is the heart of the exercise, they should be looking at *each other*, not the space. Look for storytelling during that period, because that is where things will go wrong if they are paying too much attention to the space they are filling up.

## What can go wrong

### *People draw boxes on the space*

Remember to communicate that dimensions should be gradients, not categories. Encourage groups to create wide open spaces. Don't let them build pigeonholes. If you see people boxing off areas within their spaces, stop them. Often I say "let it go" but this is a case where you had better nip categorization in the bud. Dividing the space into boxes will constrain a group's story sharing to fit a series of fixed templates. If one group out of ten does this, it will not have much of an impact. But if it catches on and every group does it, it will limit the diversity and utility of your story collection.

### ***People think about their dimensions in different ways***

For this exercise to work, all of the participants in each group must use the same dimensions. Sometimes people in groups *think* they are using the same dimensions, but they actually aren't. This can happen even if you have given everyone the same set of dimensions.

I like to give people explicit instructions about dimensions, providing a title (like "Trust") and a range ("a little to a lot") for each one. But I've noticed that people sometimes ignore my ranges and use their own. If a whole group does this together, that's fine. In fact, it's wonderful, because it adds diversity to the story collection. But sometimes, people within a single group will think about the dimensions they are using differently. One person might be thinking about trust from a little to a lot while another person is thinking about trust from too little to too much.

When this happens, it's a problem. A group that is not using the space in the same way will not see any interesting patterns in it. They will just see a mess. The crux of this exercise is the moment when groups first begin to see patterns in the way their stories are filling up their spaces. It's a magic moment, a moment of insight, and it inspires people to think of more relevant and meaningful stories to tell. If that moment doesn't happen, the exercise can fall flat, and people can walk away without telling the stories they want to tell.

To make sure that doesn't happen, pay a lot of attention to what is happening as groups set up their spaces and begin to use them.

1. When people are defining their spaces with axis and corner labels, look at what they are writing. If you see a group writing vague descriptions (like "Trust"), or leaving out some of their labels, or just seeming confused or frustrated, quietly ask them to explain their space to you. Say something like, "So I'm curious, what are the extremes here? This goes from what to what? And this corner, what is it like here?"
2. When people place their first stories into their spaces, watch them do it. Again, look for confusion and frustration. If you are meeting in person, watch their faces from afar. If you are meeting online, watch their cursors, and if that doesn't tell you enough, drop in to each breakout room for a minute or two, "just checking" on how things are going. If a group seems stuck, say something like, "So how's it going with putting stories into the space? Any issues? Like, for example, this story here, why did you put it here?"

You aren't actually asking these questions for your own benefit. You're asking them to help people come to a common understanding.

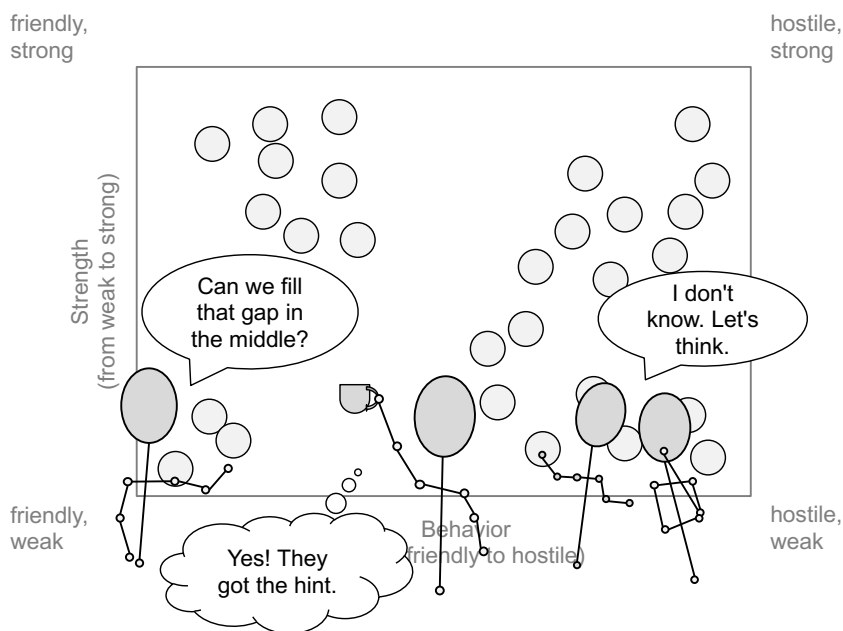
### ***People don't fill up the whole space***

Sometimes, during the part of the exercise when people are telling stories to fill their spaces, one part of the landscape becomes a "no man's land" where no stories can be found. People might avoid the strong-unfriendly area, or the place where trust breaks down and hope fails. When you are using this exercise for sensemaking, this is useful information; but when you are using it for story collection, it is a problem.

What works is to set up a *coffee mug rule*: leave no space bigger than a coffee mug empty. If the space is larger or smaller (or you hate coffee), adapt the rule: a coin, a notebook page, a plate, a book. Anything roughly one-fifth of the length or width of the space will

work. Even adding one or two stories in an empty area will improve your story collection. It is better to set up this rule up front, as groups begin to tell stories, than to add it after people have become engaged in the activity.

If you are meeting in person, you can actually carry around a real coffee mug (or other object) and place it on a group's space without saying a word. If you are meeting online, you can do the same thing with a picture of a coffee mug (or other object). Nudges work better than corrections.



### ***People try too hard to fill up the whole space***

This is the inverse of the previous problem: sometimes people try to create a perfect distribution of stories. While I said above that each part of the space should have some stories in it, that doesn't mean the stories have to be spread around with a butter knife. If, say, there are ten stories in one area but only two in another area, that's not a problem that needs to be fixed. Sometimes people get the idea that it is.

A landscape is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It's a way to help people remember stories to tell, not a creation to be perfected. Paying too much attention to the landscape will draw attention away from story sharing. So while you mention that people might see some patterns in the space as they share stories, be careful not to imply that finding patterns is the point of the exercise. (It is in sensemaking! But the focus here is on story sharing.) And watch for groups who have stopped telling stories and are talking only about their spaces or the patterns they see. If you see this happening, listen in and find out if you can gently remind them that the goal of the session is to draw out a variety of relevant and meaningful stories.

### ***People can't find any patterns in their space***

This does sometimes happen: people tell lots of stories and fill up the space, but they can't see any differences among the stories. They have mapped out a featureless plain, a desert of meaning. This tends to happen when participants are apathetic or the topic of the project feels abstract or distant to them.

When this happens, my suggestion is to be ready with a quick three-dimensional add-on exercise. Ask groups that see no patterns to quickly add one, two or three dots to each sticky note, creating a third dimension (working together, not individually). Use a simple question, like:

- Did the story end well? (one dot for no, two for maybe, three for yes)
- Did the story involve much change? (one dot for none, two for some, three for lots)
- Should the story happen again? (one dot for never, two for sometimes, three for always)

It is likely that *some* patterns will appear as a result, even if they are mild. People can even do this more than once, if they are willing, with different colors or shapes of dots.

If a group adds a third dimension and *still* finds no patterns, then *that* is the story of their landscape: that it has no patterns. Later they can talk about why the landscape came out the way it did and what it means. Sometimes a desert is all there is to see.

### **Your own style**

The way you present this exercise—as a graph or a map—should work for your participants, but it should also work for you. If you are more comfortable with maps than graphs, by all means present the exercise that way. (You can tell that I started my career as a scientist, because I keep drifting back to talking about dimensions and axes.) Whichever metaphor helps you speak with the most confidence and comfort is the metaphor you should use—as long as your participants can understand you.

Another element of style is whether you *talk* about the landscape or *show* it to people. By showing a landscape, I mean drawing one or building one with real objects, like sticky notes (or books or mugs or coins) you place into a space in front of people. Try a few different methods of presentation and see which seems most natural. Also, try building some landscapes of your own. Your experiences will give you insights into what metaphors (or lack thereof) will work best for you.

## **Local folk tales**

Centuries ago, people made sense of the past, present, and future by building, sharing, and adapting folk tales: complex, nested, nuanced stories that explored the confluence of *likelihood and longing*. In folk tales, what is *likely* to happen collides with what people *want* to happen (and don't want to happen).

Early folk tales were mostly local, that is, meant for use within one family or community. They were sometimes passed on from one community to another, but in the process they tended to change to suit the unique needs and characteristics of each community. That's



why they used to vary from place to place. When folklorists began to record folk tales for mass distribution, they often changed or removed references to local traditions and groups in an attempt to reach wider audiences.

Today, most teams, families, communities, and organizations still have some local folk tales, though they provide less sensemaking support than they did hundreds of years ago. Using this exercise can help your community find and strengthen its stock of local folk tales. You could call it a “getting to know who we are” exercise. If your project goals include working towards a more connected and resilient community, this could be a good exercise to get your project moving.

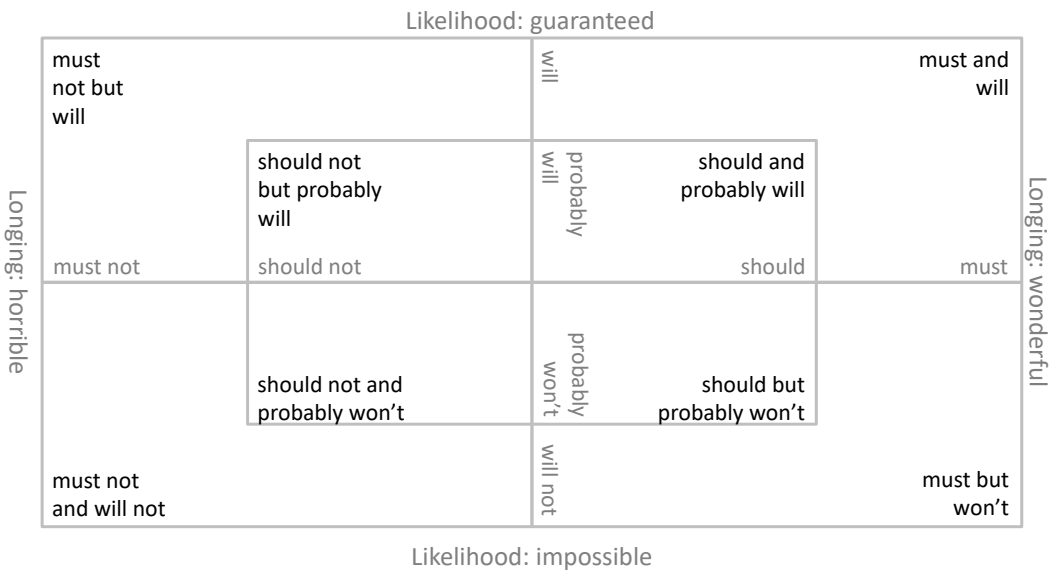
On the other hand, this exercise does challenge people more than most story-sharing exercises. It goes directly to the place where hopes and fears run headlong into reality. If your participants are reluctant, apathetic, or distrustful, they might not want to go there with you.

### Requirements

At least three people; at least 90 minutes.

### Preparation

Write or print the following diagram on poster-sized sheets of paper or full-page online documents, one per small group. Write or print its lines and words in small, light fonts (smaller and lighter than I can use here). People will be working on top of the diagram, so it should fade into the background of the space.



This exercise does not use or require story-eliciting questions, though you should keep them on hand to help people think of stories to tell if they're struggling.

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2-5	You	If you have more than three people, split up into groups of 3-4 people.
1-5	You	Give or show everyone the local-folk-tales diagram. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard to work on.
1	You	Start a separate recording device for each small group, or ask each group to tolerate the presence of a note-taker.

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
45+	Small groups	<p>Look at the diagram. Think of <i>times you remember that match the labels</i> on the space (with respect to the topic of the project). For example, in the upper left-hand corner, think of times when something happened that “must not but will” happen again. Share these stories with each other. Working together, see if you can think of a few stories that match each of the labels on the diagram.</p> <p>After each story has been told, give it a name. Write the story name on the diagram (or on a sticky note stuck to it), and say the name on the recording. Make sure everyone has a chance to share a story (if they want to).</p>
10+	Small groups	Talk about the patterns you see in your space. What do you think they mean?

## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5-10	Each person separately	Answer questions about each story you told and about yourself.
10+	Everyone together	If you have more than one group, have someone from each group describe the stories in their space. Then talk about the patterns you see across all of the spaces.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Take it in steps*

Another way to present this exercise is to start with just the inner square (should/not and probably will/won't). Ask people to tell a few stories that match the conditions in each of the four squares in the smaller diagram. When they have done that, draw or reveal the second, outer square (must/not and will/won't). Ask them to think of some stories that fit there.

This option can be useful when people are reluctant to tell dangerous stories or to reveal their true feelings about your topic. It gives them a chance to get comfortable telling safer stories first, then challenges them to expand their thinking.

### *Explore the future*

Instead of asking people to share stories about their experiences, you can ask them to move into fictional space and spin tales about things that could/not and should/not happen in the future, without any connection to what has happened in the past. This could be useful if brainstorming ideas would be helpful for your sensemaking. But don't do it if you don't think your participants would not enjoy the challenge or would not be able to come up with interesting stories about possible (and impossible) futures.

If you aren't sure what people will want to do, you can offer them both options. Say something like this:

- You can recall *things that have actually happened* that match the labels on the space.
- You can imagine *things that have not yet happened* that match the labels on the space.

I wouldn't ask people to do both things at once. It would be confusing, and some people might just walk away from the exercise. But you could ask people to go through the exercise twice, once with their recollections and the second time with their speculations.

### *Make use of gradients*

The diagram for this exercise has lines drawn through it, and it asks people to think of stories that fit into large categories—pigeonholes, if you will. But *within* each delineated

space, you can ask people to move their stories around to denote *the extent to which the story fits the described situation*. For example:

- A group might place a story that *very probably* will happen again, but *really* shouldn't, in the upper-left-hand corner of the upper-left-hand part of the inside square.
- They might place another story that *could* (but is not all that likely to) happen, and wouldn't be *awful*, but wouldn't be the most wonderful thing either, in the lower-right-hand corner of the upper-left-hand part of the inside square, just outside the center point of uncertainty/neutrality.

Whether people find this sort of fine tuning inspiring, confusing, or annoying will depend on how they like to think. So if you do offer the option of considering gradients on the space, don't require it. Let each group decide whether they want to use it or not.

### ***Consider a third dimension***

Because this is a landscape exercise, you can add a height dimension to it using different colors of sticky notes. Choose a height dimension that has nothing to do with whether things could or should happen.

### ***Consider multiple perspectives***

You can ask people to write each story's name down two or three times, once for each of a set of perspectives (things people think or feel or prefer, not things people are). Ask them to use different colors of sticky notes to mark the different perspectives. They might see some interesting patterns in their color placements, and that could inspire more (and more diverse) story sharing.

### ***Tell stories that move around in the space***

As with a general landscape exercise, you can ask people to think of (and tell) stories that move around from point to point on the space.

## **How you will know it's working**

If this exercise is working, you should see people in their small groups huddled around their spaces, eagerly coming up with stories that fit into the spaces on the diagram. If it's not working, you will see people backing away from the exercise and from each other.

## **What can go wrong**

### ***People don't understand the labels***

Like all landscape exercises, this is a somewhat abstract thing to do. If you find people struggling to come up with any stories to tell, get out your story-eliciting questions. Ask people to put aside the could/should diagram for a while and answer them instead. Once they have told a story, ask them:

- How likely do you think it is that a thing like that *will happen again* in the future?
- Do you *want* that sort of thing to happen again? Should it?

Those two questions will help them to place their stories into the space. After they have told a few stories using your story-eliciting questions, they might be able to return to the space and use it without the questions.

As you plan to use this exercise, if you think you are likely to need to do this, you might want to incorporate your questions into your instructions rather than holding them back.

### ***People think you mean Disney***

This can happen if you make the mistake of mentioning the name of this exercise while you are facilitating it. Don't do that. I can call it the "local folk tales" exercise when I'm talking to you, but I would not call it that in front of a group of project participants, not unless I knew they understood what I meant when I said it. To many people today, the term "folk tale" has lost its original meaning. Just call this a story-sharing exercise. It works better that way.

### ***People don't have enough in common to fill up the space***

This exercise will not work well if the people in the group have no connections to each other. They should be part of a community or have some kind of shared experience. If a group of complete strangers does this exercise, their landscapes of what can and can't and should and shouldn't happen will be all over the place, and the group won't be able to draw any coherent meaning out of it.

If you ever do happen to end up in a situation where you have to use this exercise with a group of random strangers, see if you can find some groups of people with similar experiences among them. For example, you could ask the parents to come together, or the pet lovers, or the scientists, or the fitness enthusiasts. Then ask them to confine their stories to the topic in which they share a common interest. Something like that might work, but I wouldn't *plan* to use this exercise with a group of unconnected people. There are better exercises for that situation.

### ***People don't want to move into fiction***

If you try to use the "what has not yet happened" version of this exercise in a work environment, people might not like it. They might think you are asking them to lie. If you find yourself in such a situation, switch gears to the factual version of the exercise. The stories you ask them to tell in that version of the exercise are real. If you still want to see if they will follow you into fiction, ask if they would like to try a fictional-future version of the exercise another time, maybe a week or two later when they have had a chance to reflect on the experience. They might be more willing to try fiction on their second time through the exercise.

### ***People don't want to say what should happen***

This exercise is likely to appeal differently to different personalities. People who love to read folk tales will probably be enthused about creating their own, while others will not. Ask groups to make sure that everyone has a chance to tell at least a few of the stories on their diagram.

### ***People don't agree on what should happen***

Sometimes, even in a group of three, people might tell stories that represent different perspectives on what should happen. That's fine; that's what you are exploring. Folk tale collections often present conflicting perspectives.

When this happens, ask your participants to annotate the story names they write on their diagrams to show the differing perspectives. For example, if a person tells a story that (they say) should happen, and another person says "No, that shouldn't happen," ask them to put the story name on the diagram twice, with "from the perspective of" or "according to" each person or perspective.

In other words, groups can use this exercise to represent their different interpretations of the stories they have told. And you can capture those different interpretations, and the people who participate in sensemaking can use them to think about your topic.

### ***People tell too-simple stories***

Sometimes when people are making up stories about impossible things, they can't get past a simple outline, like "nobody will ever commit a crime again." When you see people struggling with too-simple stories, try suggesting that they fill in Kenn Adams' story spine. It's a simple story-building exercise used in improvisational circles, and it goes like this:

- Once upon a time...
- Every day...
- But one day...
- Because of that...
- Because of that...
- Because of that...
- Until finally...
- And ever since that day...

Ask people to say the words of the story spine out loud and see what comes to mind to say next. This simple structure might help people put together stories that work for them. I wouldn't give this to people who are *not* having trouble making up stories; it might get in their way. But for people who are struggling, this is a tool they can use.

### **Your own style**

Do you love folk tales? I do. I've loved hearing and reading and telling folk tales since I was a child. That's one of the reasons I like to facilitate this exercise: because I can see people exploring some of the same fascinating aspects of life that people have used folk tales to explore for thousands of years. It feels like a human thing to do.

Does your connection to folk tales matter to your facilitation of this exercise? Not at all. It comes from the same place as folk tales come from, but it will work no matter what you think about folk tales. It will work even if you've never heard or read or told a folk tale in your life. It's a human thing to do, and you're a human, so you're fine.

# Ground truthing

This exercise gathers stories about, around, and against an official document of some sort, usually a mission or values statement. You can also use it with a set of definitions drawn from a dictionary.

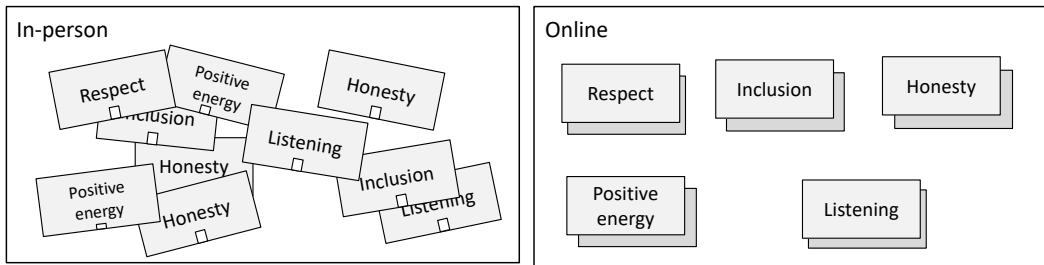
## Requirements

At least six people; at least 90 minutes. An official document or set of dictionary definitions that relates to your project’s goals.

## Preparation

If you are working with an official document, break it up into 10-20 sections, each of which covers one concept or statement. Give each section a brief descriptive name, like “Honesty” or “Diligence.” If you are working with a dictionary, choose 10-20 terms that matter to your project and participants.

- If you will be meeting in person, print each section of the document (or each dictionary definition) on its own sheet of paper. Fold each paper in half, *tape it shut*, and write its name on the outside. Prepare a few identical copies of each sheet. Then, just before the session starts, scatter the papers on a table in plain sight.
- If you will be meeting online, create a document with hidden elements so that only the names of the texts can be seen (at first). Come up with a way to (later) reveal the whole texts (e.g., by moving a name shape to reveal a text shape beneath it, by clicking an HTML link, or by clicking a button to reveal a “spoiler” text).



Note that this exercise does not use story-eliciting questions. The parts of the document (or the dictionary definitions) are the questions. But keep your questions in your pocket in case people need more help thinking of stories to tell.

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise. Show people the papers on the table (or items on the screen). Ask people not to open the papers/items until you tell them to.
2	Each person separately	Look over the papers on the table (or items on the screen). Choose one you find interesting. Take it back to your seat (or copy it to your own document, or just remember it). <i>Do not open it</i> (or do what it would take to “open” it online).
5	Each person separately	Look at the word(s) on the paper (item) you chose. Think of a time when that/those word(s) mattered to you. Remember what happened at that time.
2-5	You	If you have more than three people, split up into groups of 3-4 people.
1	You	Start a separate recording device for each small group, or ask each group to tolerate the presence of a note-taker.

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
45+	Small groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One person at a time: Tell what happened at the time you thought of, the time when the words on the paper (screen) mattered to you.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- One listener: Jot down any <i>beliefs</i> you hear in the story.</li> <li>- The other listener: Jot down any <i>values</i> you hear in the story.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• After the story is over, both listeners, report back on what you heard, with respect and without judgement.</li> <li>• Open the sheet of paper (item on the screen) and read what it says inside. Discuss any connections or gaps you see between the story, the beliefs and values you heard in it, and what it says on the paper (screen).</li> </ul> <p>Repeat this process until each person has told one story (if they want to). If you have extra time, choose more papers (screen items) and go through the process again.</p>



## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5-10	Each person separately	Answer questions about each story you told and about yourself.
10+	Everyone together	If you have more than one group, have someone from each group describe what happened in their work together. Then talk about the patterns you see across all of the groups.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Change the aspects*

The default story aspects for this exercise are beliefs and values, but you can use any set of two aspects people are likely to find in most stories: emotions, conflicts, perspectives, problems, solutions, dilemmas, discoveries, helping hands, and so on. Choose aspects that matter to your participants and your topic.

### *Encourage follow-on story sharing*

After the two listeners to each story report back, you can give them the option of telling a related story (or two) of their own. As they do this, the other people in the group can be listeners for them, and afterwards, those listeners can report back on the values and beliefs they heard in *that* story. When everyone has told all of the stories they want to tell about the word on the sheet of paper (item on the screen), they can open it up and talk about how it relates to *all* of the stories they told.

### *Consider multiple perspectives*

Instead of having each person choose a sheet of paper (item on the screen), you can ask each small group to choose a sheet or item together. Then they can *each* think of a story they would like to tell, all focusing on the same label. Then, while each person tells their story, the other two people should listen, then report back. Finally, after all three stories have been told (as well as any follow-on stories, if you want to encourage that), they should open the paper/item and talk about it how it relates to all of the stories they told.

This elaboration is useful when:

- You don't have very many statements/definitions for people to work with, or you will have a lot of participants in your session
- You think people might disagree about what the labels mean (and all want a chance to be heard)
- You think people will have a variety of experiences to relate in response to each label (and you want to be sure to gather all of them)

However, this elaboration does require small groups to agree on a term they want to explore. So it doesn't work as well with complete strangers as the individual-choice option does. Consider that before you use it. Will it bother people to have to agree on a label before they can start sharing stories? Will that stop them from telling the stories they want to tell? If so, don't use this elaboration. Let each person choose a label that speaks to them.

### ***Rewrite the texts***

After each small group has discussed the connections and gaps between the stories they told and the statements or definitions they read, you can ask them to *rewrite each statement or definition*.

Unless you actually have permission to change the official document you use to start this exercise, make sure your participants understand that this is a story-sharing exercise, not an editing session. They might create a *new* document, and that new document might matter. But don't seem to promise what you can't deliver.

### **How you will know it's working**

You can tell if this exercise is going to work in the first few minutes, when people are picking out a sheet of paper (item on a screen) to share a story about. They will either pick one up quickly and with enthusiasm, or they'll linger over the task, confused or nervous or annoyed. If you see people linger on the threshold of this first step, find out what is holding them back. A simple explanation of why you are asking them to do the exercise (to hear about their experiences) and what will happen afterwards (the stories they tell will help people make sense of your topic) might be enough to get them moving.

### **What can go wrong**

#### ***People don't understand the words***

Watch your jargon. A word that means a lot to you might mean nothing at all to your participants. If you are not certain that people will understand the words you want to use as the outside labels in this exercise, consult a thesaurus. Instead of writing "Diligence," for example, you could write "Working Hard, Being Careful, Not Giving Up."

One resource I have found useful in jargon removal is a list of the "most used 1000 words" in English. There are many of these on the internet, in English and in other languages. "Diligence" is not on the list, but "work" and "hard" and "care" and "give" and "up" are.

#### ***People understand the words too well***

This exercise can be hard to facilitate when people know an official document very well, so well that they will know exactly what it says inside each statement you have hidden from them. If you think this will be a problem, obfuscate your outside labels a little. Instead of writing "Diligence," for example, write a synonym, like "Carefulness" or "Effort." Make it harder to guess what's inside the envelope.

Should you go so far as not even to *mention* the document/dictionary before people begin to tell stories about it? No. Don't do that. Once they open up their sheets/items and find out where the words came from, people may see your initial obfuscation as a betrayal of their trust.

### ***People don't want to challenge the document/dictionary***

This exercise can fall apart if people are so wary of appearing to challenge the document, or the accepted meanings of the terms, that they choose only the safest stories to tell. This can happen because they themselves wrote the document/dictionary (so they feel defensive about it) or because they fear the repercussions of challenging an official document in public.

If you think this is likely to happen, make it clear (in your introduction) that *this is just a story-sharing exercise*, meant to help people think of stories to tell about your project's topic. You are not actually challenging or criticizing anything. You are just using the document/dictionary to get stories flowing. Also mention your privacy policy and highlight the steps you have taken to make sure that stories will not be connected to personal details.

### ***People disagree on what the words mean***

If your participants come to this exercise with a variety of personalities, backgrounds, and beliefs (which is to say: if your participants come to this exercise), they might hear stories that make them feel uncomfortable. That's a good thing, in general. But because the stories in this particular exercise will be connected to statements or definitions, people will be more likely to feel offended by what they hear than they might be in an exercise that uses questions as prompts. People might say (or think), "That's not what that word means. You can't tell a story like that about that word."

If you think this is likely to happen, you can do a few things.

- Make it clear (in your introduction) that the point of the exercise is to help people think of relevant and meaningful stories to tell about your project's topic. The point is not to determine or agree on the meanings of words. Nobody needs to agree on what anything means to share stories about their experiences. And being willing to listen to a story about what happened to someone and how they felt about it does not mean that you agree with their perspective either. It just means you are both people.
- Use the "Encourage follow-on story sharing" elaboration, in which people can respond to stories by telling stories of their own. Don't present the option as an opportunity to correct or criticize another person's story. Present it as an opportunity for everyone to be heard and included.
- When you tell people about the reporting-back part of the exercise, emphasize that they should say what they heard with respect and without judgment. For example, instead of saying, "You didn't understand \_\_\_," ask them to say something like, "I heard you say that you felt confused about \_\_\_."
- If you use the "Rewrite the texts" elaboration, ask people to create *nested* statements or definitions, ones in which different interpretations of the label are included side by side. Ask them to write things like, "Some people think/feel that \_\_\_, while others think/feel that \_\_\_."

### **Your own style**

Because it focuses on a specific document (or set of definitions), variation in this exercise has more to do with your *situation* than your style. So before you use it, ask yourself: What

relationship do you and your participants have to this document (or these definitions)? How do you and they feel about it (or them)? Do you feel the same way?

- If you think there might be a disconnect between your feelings and the feelings of some or all of your participants, facilitate this exercise with an especially light touch. You might even want to set it up as a self-running workshop. Give people the exercise instructions, then fade into the background, making yourself available (to answer questions about the rules of the game) but otherwise absent from the process.
- If you think you and your participants will have the same feelings about the document or definitions, shake things up by encouraging multi-perspective thinking. For example, you could ask each group to share *two* stories about each item they choose: a story it reminds them of, and a *counter-story* in which something different happened or mattered. For example, if they chose “Diligence,” they could tell a story about a time when diligence saved the day, then another in which diligence led to failure.

## A story-sharing game

You can ask people to share stories by asking them to *play an actual game* with each other. Games shake things up and surprise people with unexpected juxtapositions. That makes them a good option when you want to explore a topic that has already been discussed at length. A game is not a good option, however, if you have a sensitive topic. In that case it could seem like an insult.

### Some examples

#### ***Narratopia***

I wrote a game you can use to gather stories in your PNI projects. You can download it for free from [narratopia.com](http://narratopia.com). In Narratopia, players share experiences as they build a linked network of stories, either in general or focused on a particular topic. The game includes three sets of cards:

- Connection cards (such as “I remember a \_\_\_ like that”) help players think of stories to tell in response to the stories they hear.
- Question cards (such as “How do you think \_\_\_ would feel about \_\_\_?”) help players think of questions to ask about the stories they tell and hear.
- Tokens (such as “I learned from you”) help players express their appreciation and reflections on the stories they hear.

#### ***Rememory***

In the game Rememory, players use three types of cards to think of stories to share:

- Generation cards (such as “parent” or “daydreamer”) help players think of people (or groups or roles) they want to tell about.
- Season cards (such as “summer” or “night”) help players recall spans of time they want to look back on.

- Prompt cards (such as “what cemented the friendship” or “listening to music”) help players remember specific moments or feelings to recount.

### ***Rory’s Story Cubes***

In the game Rory’s Story Cubes, players throw one or more dice with images (eye, house, tree, bridge) designed to evoke memories. The game has some themed versions that might work well for specific topics. You could also combine versions to broaden the scope of the conversation, or even mix in some images of your own.

### ***Ice-breaker games***

Some of the games people play to get to know each other can be adapted to help people share stories. For example:

- You can ask people to play “have you ever/never,” providing them with topical lists of situations (“had a misunderstanding with \_\_\_”), actions (“found common ground with \_\_\_”), or responses (“walked away from \_\_\_”).
- You can show people an array of (small) physical objects (a key, a flashlight, a nail, a hat) or historical quotes (“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”) and ask them to share any experiences the objects or quotes bring to mind.
- You can ask people to play “two truths and a lie” in the form of “two true stories and a tall tale.” Other players will guess which stories are true, and you’ll be able to gather (at least) two stories per participant. (Also, the stories people choose to contrast might bring out some interesting patterns about your topic.)

### ***Choosing a game***

Any of these games are good choices for this exercise. But not all games will work. To help you gather stories, a game must encourage (or at least allow) its players to:

- tell stories about things that have actually happened, not fictional stories with made-up settings, characters, or plots
- choose stories to tell because they matter to their tellers, not because they are funny or clever or will win a competition
- tell stories naturally, as they come to mind, without any need to polish or refine them
- listen to stories with respect, without competing, rating, criticizing, or making fun
- build chains of connected stories (so, for example, if someone thinks of a story they want to tell in response to a story they heard, they don’t have to suppress the urge because they are only allowed to tell a specific story described on a specific card)

### ***Adapting and testing the game***

If you find a game you would like to use:

1. Check it against the above requirements. You might need to tweak its rules, instructions, and materials a bit to use it, but you can do that.
2. Think about how you can make the game work for your topic. You might be able to embed your story-eliciting questions into the game’s rules, instructions, or materials.

If you can't do that, you can simply ask people to keep your topic in mind as they play the game.

3. Show the game to a few of the people you expect to share stories in your project. Ask them if they think they would enjoy playing the game—not in general, but specifically to talk to each other about your project's topic. If you can't ask any of your actual participants, ask someone who knows them better than you do.
4. Do a pilot test. Ask a few participants (or people who know them better than you do) to try playing the game. Listen to the stories they tell. Are the stories meaningful and relevant? If so, you have found a good game to use in this exercise.

## Requirements

At least three people; at least 90 minutes; a story-sharing game.

## Preparation

If you will be meeting in person, buy or print as many copies of the game (whatever game you choose) as you will need for the number of people you expect to attend the session. If you will be meeting online, create virtual versions of the game's elements and place them on as many separate whiteboards as you will need.

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Introduce the game.
3	You	If there are more people than can play the game, split up into groups, each with their own copy of the game. If the game requires a surface, make sure each group has its own.
1	You	If your story-eliciting question(s) are not embedded in the game you chose, read or show them, asking people to keep them in mind (and in sight) as they play the game.
1	You	Start a separate recording device for each small group, or ask each group to tolerate the presence of a note-taker.

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
45+	Small groups	Play the game, following the instructions and using the materials you were given by the facilitator.
5	Small groups	If there is more than one group, quickly look back over the stories you told in the game and choose one story you want to tell to the whole session.

## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5-10	Each person separately	Answer questions about each story you told and about yourself.
10+	Everyone together	If there is more than one group, tell the story you chose.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

Like the twice-told stories exercise, a story-sharing game provides a foundation on which you can build many elaborations. For example, you could ask people to play a game, then place the stories they told on a timeline or landscape (see below) and see if any new stories come to mind.

You can also use a story-sharing game as a peer interview script. You can give it to groups of people and ask them to play it on their own, then send you a recording of their play session (or as much of it as they want to share). Just make sure to ask them to answer your questions about the stories they tell.

## How you will know it's working

One of the benefits of using a game to gather your stories is that most people know how to play card and board games. People are more likely to follow the rules of a game than they are to follow vague instructions to share stories. But for this to work, the game has to look like a game. It should have familiar materials like cards and tokens, even if they are images in an online space.

Using a game also makes it easier to tell if people are sharing stories, because if they are, they will be handling the game's materials.

- If you are meeting in person, look to see if people are handling the game materials. They should be reading the instructions and holding the cards. If you see a group literally turning their backs on the game materials you gave them, something is wrong.
- If you are meeting online, make it possible for people to move the game materials around on a simulated table surface, and give each group its own space to work in. Then watch to see if people are moving the game materials around. If you see no movement at all in one group, come up with a reason to check on them ("I forgot to tell you something") and ask how the game is going.

## What can go wrong

### *People reject or ignore the game*

Sometimes, when people feel annoyed, intimidated, embarrassed, or insulted that you have asked them to play a game, they will pretend to play the game (while not actually telling any stories), ignore the game and just talk, or ignore each other and check their phones. If you see this happening, what you should do depends on how widespread of a rejection you are dealing with.

- If most of your groups are engaged in the game (and sharing stories), and only one or two groups have veered off course, quietly go to each game-rejecting group and give them a sales pitch for the game. In a (previously rehearsed) sentence or two, explain the game's rules and gameplay. See if you can help them get over the threshold into playing the game. If that doesn't work, tell them that instead of playing the game, they can just use its materials as "food for thought" for their conversation. If they still seem unwilling to engage with the game materials, see if they will engage with some portion of them. Pull out five cards and say "Do these cards bring any experiences to mind?"
- If the game is doing badly all over your session, stop the session and gather some feedback. In a general discussion, ask people why they don't want to play the game. If you can't address their misgivings (and restart the session) with an explanation or a tweak to the game rules, ask them to use the game as food for thought, or pull another exercise out of your toolkit and ask if they would be willing to try that instead.

### *People turn the game into a competition*

Sometimes, no matter what the game's rules say to do, people can't stop themselves from turning a story-sharing game into a storytelling competition. They "vote" for stories, award "points" for stories that have "good" qualities, or create competing teams. When people do that, let them go, and think about how you might introduce the game better the next time. Taking away their agency will do more damage to their story sharing than they can do by changing the game.

### *People argue about the rules of the game*

Sometimes people use up their story-sharing time arguing about how to play the game correctly. This is another don't-step-in situation. Watch what is happening, but leave people alone. Afterwards, think about what led people to argue, and think about how you can make your instructions more clear.

## Your own style

If playing board or card games is not something you typically enjoy, this might not be the best exercise to use in your PNI work. To make a game work as a story-collection device, you need to be able to *sell* it to your participants. That means you need to enjoy playing it, and you need to be able to transmit that enthusiasm to your participants. If games aren't your thing, that's fine. There are plenty of other ways to gather stories.



## Story-ended questions workshop

This is not really an exercise; it's an educational workshop I created to help people learn about story sharing. But it makes a great up-front on-boarding exercise when your participants have expressed an interest in learning how to work with stories. I always say not to tell people how to tell stories, but if people are interested in the approach you are using and want to know how it works, that's different. In that case, using this exercise at the start of your project could have a priming effect on the stories you gather afterwards.

Don't use this workshop if you don't know who your participants will be, if they don't trust you, or if you aren't *certain* that they are interested in learning more about working with stories. They could be offended or intimidated by it, and it could derail your project.

### Requirements

At least three people; at least 90 minutes.

### Preparation

1. Go to Chapter 4 of this book and review the section called "Stories in Conversation" (page 29). Use what it says there to create your own five-minute presentation on how stories play out in conversations (abstracts, evaluation, codas).
2. Go to Chapter 8 of this book and review the section called "Asking Questions About Stories" (page 136). Again, prepare a five-minute presentation about why people ask questions about stories. Include an explanation of the difference between open-ended, closed-ended, and story-ended questions (page 128).
3. Prepare a few example questions (story-eliciting and follow-up) for each of the three reasons people ask questions (because a story is a message, a thinking tool, and a connection). You can use your actual story-eliciting questions for this (and maybe use the exercise to test them), or you can use general questions.

Practice each of these presentations until they fit nicely into five minutes each. You might also want to prepare a simple, clear, one-page handout that summarizes both presentations.

### Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
1	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2-5	You	If you have more than three people, split up into groups of 3-4 people.
1	You	Start a separate recording device for each small group, or ask each group to tolerate the presence of a note-taker.

### Asking story-ended questions

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	You	Give the first part of your prepared presentation, the part on the iceberg model. Ask people to save their questions about it for later.
1+	Small groups	Choose one person to take on each of three roles: interviewer, storyteller, and observer. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewer: Ask a story-ended question, one that is related to the topic of the project.</li> <li>• Storyteller: Answer the question.</li> <li>• Observer: Listen, notice, and report back on what you noticed about the way the story played out in the conversation.</li> </ul>
20+	Small groups	Then rotate the roles and do this twice more, so everybody gets to tell a story. If you run out of time, don't worry; there will be another chance to tell stories later.
10+	Everyone together	Talk about what happened in your small group interactions. (If there are any questions about the introductory presentation, ask them now.)

### Asking questions about stories

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	You	Give the second part of your prepared presentation, the part on asking questions about stories.
20+	Small groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewer: Ask a story-ended question related to the project.</li> <li>• Storyteller: Answer the question.</li> <li>• Interviewer: Ask a question or two about the story.</li> <li>• Storyteller: Answer the question(s).</li> <li>• Observer: Listen, notice, and report back on what you saw. Then rotate the roles and repeat.</li> </ul>
10+	Everyone together	Talk about what happened in your small group interactions.

## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5-10	Each person separately	Answer questions about each story you told and about yourself.
10+	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Add some challenge*

If your participants are especially interested in this workshop, you can give them a bigger challenge. When the interviewer asks the story-ended question, the storyteller can *try to answer the question without telling a story*. The interviewer should keep reframing the question until the storyteller can't help but tell a story. Motivated people find this a fascinating challenge; it helps them to practice drawing out stories. But don't use it unless people are truly motivated to learn; otherwise it will just be annoying.

### *Add some retelling*

Just as the main part of the exercise is ending, you can ask each small group to choose one story from those they told and heard to retell to the whole session. Then, after each group has retold its selected stories, you can lead a general discussion about story sharing, the topic of your project, or both.

### *Get some feedback on your project plans*

If you are using this workshop before you start collecting your stories in earnest, why not end the workshop by showing people your project plans? Now that they understand a bit more about the approach you will be using, they might have some good advice for you.

## How you will know it's working

The energy in this workshop starts out tentative during the first presentation and as people begin to share stories. But at a certain point you should see your small groups drawing together around their stories and talking animatedly about the things they are hearing and seeing, usually for the first time. You should hear people saying things like, "Hey, that was the coda!" and "I guess I *did* repeat that."

People should emerge from the first story-sharing period with a feeling of discovery and heightened interest. If they don't—if they are confused or annoyed or nervous—expand the general discussion period before you move on to your next presentation. It's best to make sure people understand and are satisfied with the first part of the workshop before you move on, even if you never get to the second part.

## What can go wrong

### ***People reject your explanations***

The iceberg model of conversational story sharing is based on two things:

- decades of other people's research (which I read about in papers and books)
- my own decades of observations as a facilitator of story sharing (which increased my confidence in the model)

But there's something else I've learned from my work in this area, and it's the same thing I've seen dozens of researchers point out: real story sharing is much more varied and complex than any simple model can convey. The iceberg model describes the *general* shape of a conversational story, but there are many variations on it. For example:

- In particularly close-knit groups, you will see far less time spent on negotiation and reframing than you will see in groups of strangers.
- Some types of evaluation statements, like exaggerations or appeals to authority, might happen frequently in some groups and almost never in others.
- People in different positions within groups might have markedly different story-sharing styles. For example, stories told by novices might include more meta-commentary when they are told in front of experts.

So if the people in your workshop tell you that "this isn't how we tell stories," they may be right! If that happens, you can invite them to discuss *how their story-sharing style differs* from the generic model and what that means about their story-sharing culture. And if you *expect* this to happen, you can mention variation more prominently in your presentation.

If you need more details on this point, read the section in *Working with Stories in Depth* called "Local Story Sharing Cultures." It goes into much more detail on the issue of variation than I have in this book.

I have also seen people reject the iceberg model because, even though it *does* fit their conversation, they are so unused to paying attention to story sharing that they can't see it. Negotiations can happen in seconds, and evaluation statements can be hard to spot.

If you expect this to happen, you can incorporate a short worked example into your presentation. Do what I did on page 35 and show how the iceberg model applies to a simple story of your own. (But see my warning below.)

### ***People take your explanations as rules***

Instead of rejecting your explanations of how people share stories, people might take them as instructions for how they *should* share stories. This is the bigger problem of the two. It is most likely to happen when your participants are not used to being heard or making their own choices.

If you see this problem coming, you can place an even greater emphasis on the variations that surround the iceberg model. (And definitely read the section of *Working with Stories in Depth* I mentioned above.) You might even want to set aside some time in the workshop

to help people build a model of conversational story sharing that represents their own story-sharing culture.

If you expect this issue to arise, *do not prepare a worked example* using a story of your own. People might take it as an instruction and tell only stories that match it, in whatever way they think you want them to match it. That could have a dampening effect on your entire project.

In fact, if you think your participants are likely to take this workshop as a set of instructions for how they should participate in the project, you might not want to use it at all.

### **Your own style**

I did originally write some handouts for the use of participants in this exercise, but I decided not to include them in this book because *I want you to build your own explanations*. If you can't explain how conversational story sharing works in your own words, you won't be able to help your participants understand it. (And by the way, if my explanations aren't enough to help you understand, I recommend Neal Norrick's book *Conversational Narrative*.)

An equally important part of understanding conversational story sharing is *watching yourself do it*. You won't regret it: it's fascinating. More importantly, you can't help your participants examine their own story sharing if you haven't examined your own.

Don't facilitate this workshop until you have recorded some of your own conversations and picked apart some of your own story sharing. What is your story-sharing style? What are the styles of your friends and family members? Your town? Your department? Once you can answer those questions, you will be ready to help your participants learn.

## **General notes on these exercises**

Feel free to experiment with these exercises and adapt them to suit the unique needs of your projects and participants. If you aren't sure your changes are improvements, use the "build your own exercise" section below to test them. You can also rename the exercises. I like these names for them, but you can call them anything you want.

Also, this is not an exhaustive list. Many approaches to participatory group work include exercises similar to these. Avoid exercises that ask people to compete, rate, rank, or criticize. Seek out exercises that encourage people to listen with respect. Within those constraints, any exercise that helps people share stories in an atmosphere of safe exploration can help you gather stories for your project.

### **Sensemaking in collection?**

You may be wondering why some of the exercises in this chapter ask participants to "Talk about the patterns you see." Isn't that sensemaking? Doesn't it belong in the sensemaking phase of PNI? Yes, it is, and it does, and some of it belongs here too. There is always some

sensemaking in collection and some collection in sensemaking. When the two activities are not in their own PNI phases, they have supportive goals.

- The sensemaking that happens during story collection helps people think of more stories they want to tell, improving the utility of the story collection.
- The story collection that happens during sensemaking helps people connect the stories in the collection to their own experiences, improving the utility of sensemaking.

## Build your own story-sharing exercise

If you are interested, you can build your own story-sharing exercise, either from scratch or by amending another exercise you like. Use this section to test your designs and alterations.

### Essential elements

A story-sharing exercise requires three essential elements.

1. **A scaffold for recall.** The exercise should provide a *structure that helps people remember things they have forgotten*. This structure should have something to do with memories and meanings. Timelines use time, landscapes use space, and the twice-told stories exercise uses simple themes, but there are many more structures out of which you can build scaffolds.
2. **A vehicle for exploration.** The exercise should give people *a reason, and the power, to go on a story-sharing journey together*. The vehicle might be specific to broad or deep exploration, and it might draw its energy from a variety of sources, from questions to scenarios to objects to photographs. But something in the exercise should get things moving in an explorative and collaborative direction.
3. **A tapestry for sensemaking.** The exercise should *help people discover patterns in their experiences*. Similarities and differences should emerge, leading to insights that help people think of more stories to tell. The exercise should not just make the story collection larger; it should make it more relevant and meaningful as well.

A good story-sharing exercise must also be *universal*. All of these elements—its scaffold, vehicle, and tapestry—must be available, welcoming, and respectful to every human being, and not only to those with certain backgrounds, skills, or perspectives.

### Developing your exercise

A story-sharing exercise usually starts as an idea or image: perhaps *this* will be useful. How can you develop it from a simple idea into a useful exercise? Keep doing it. Start by playing with the idea by yourself, then ask a friend to try it with you.

At the end of each trial of your exercise, apply the above criteria to it:

- In what way does your exercise create a scaffold, a vehicle, and a tapestry?
- If any of these elements are weak, how can you make them stronger?
- If the three elements are unbalanced, how can you balance them?
- Is the exercise universal in its support for story sharing? If not, how can you make it so?

As you keep developing your exercise, use it with larger groups. Listen very carefully to what people say during your experiments.

If you can, record the whole session and transcribe it, then pore over everything everyone said. Sometimes people will provide transformative insights in off-hand comments or jokes that reveal dangers or opportunities you hadn't seen. Don't let those gems slip through your fingers. *Let the exercise teach you* how it should develop. That's the best way to move from an intriguing idea to a solid technique.





## Chapter 10

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# Narrative Catalysis

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The purpose of narrative catalysis is to resolve the paradox that lies at the heart of participatory sensemaking.

This is true	This is also true
Most people are not trained in the interpretation of patterns (especially of graphs and statistics).	Most people are used to being told what patterns mean by those who have power over them.
When you don't interpret patterns for people, they have only two options: 1. interpret the patterns themselves 2. don't use the patterns	When you interpret patterns for people, they have only two options: 1. accept your interpretations 2. reject them
Participatory Action Research requires that every participant be accepted and included as they are. Forcing people to interpret patterns on their own, with no other option than to put them aside, rejects and excludes those who are not trained in the interpretation of patterns.	The goal of Participatory Action Research is the collective exploration of meaning in an atmosphere of safety and freedom. Forcing people to accept or reject specific interpretations of patterns reduces safety, restricts freedom, and makes exploration impossible.
To empower people to make sense of a topic using patterns, <i>you must give them interpretations of the patterns.</i>	To empower people to make sense of a topic using patterns, <i>you must not give them interpretations of the patterns.</i>

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The most effective way to resolve this paradox is to provide people with *multiple interpretations of each pattern*. That's what catalysis is for.

Why do I call it catalysis? Because catalysts speed up chemical reactions, and catabolic processes break down molecules (while anabolic processes build them up). In the same way, narrative catalysis speeds up sensemaking and breaks down limiting assumptions.

In analysis:	In catalysis:
Answers (findings, conclusions) are definitively <i>presented</i> by people in positions of authority.	Questions (puzzles, perplexities) are constructively <i>provided</i> by project participants and/or facilitators.
They are passively <i>absorbed</i> , usually by individuals.	They are actively and playfully <i>explored</i> by groups of people working together.
They are sometimes <i>accepted</i> and sometimes <i>attacked</i> .	They are always <i>challenged</i> .

Catalysis uses many of the same tools as analysis, but with an opposite goal: to open up participatory discussion, not to shut it down. If analysis is like a speed train that gets people from point A to point B as quickly and predictably as possible, catalysis is more like a scenic, meandering ride through the countryside. The point is not to get anywhere in particular but to contemplate the view—and to learn from the experience.

Catalytic material is made up of:

- *patterns* in stories and answers to questions (themes, graphs, statistics)
- *observations* about those patterns
- *interpretations* of each observation from multiple perspectives
- *ideas* and *questions* about each interpretation

## When to use catalysis

There are some situations in which catalysis is especially useful.

- **You want to get to the heart of an issue.** When you ask someone follow-up questions about a story they just told, you have essentially invited them to attend a tiny five-minute sensemaking workshop of their own. Catalysis brings together all of those tiny sensemaking workshops, revealing insights that complement the stories in your collection. This is the best reason to build and use catalytic material: because it can help your participants make better sense of your topic than they can make by working only with your stories.
- **Your story collection is large.** If you have collected more than 200 stories, it may be impossible for your participants to work directly with all of them, or even a significant subset. Catalytic material can help sensemaking participants get a better sense of what people had to say.

- **You need new ideas.** Catalytic material can bring a breath of fresh air to “been there done that” situations. If an issue or problem is so well known that it’s difficult to come up with anything new to say about it, catalysis can help you break through to new insights.
- **Someone needs to say what can’t be said.** Catalytic material can help people break through social taboos that make it hard to talk about a topic in public. If your participants will have a hard time working directly with your story collection, you can use catalytic material to give them two ways to approach it, one concrete and one abstract. You do still want people to work with your stories! But you might need to give them multiple ways to get there.
- **People won’t take your stories seriously.** Sometimes people are not willing to work directly with collected stories because they see them as “anecdotal evidence” that is insufficient or even misleading. In such situations, catalytic material can help people approach the topic in a way that feels more legitimate to them. As above, you do still want people to interact with your stories, but you might need to help them approach the stories in a different way.

## When not to use catalysis

Catalysis is an optional part of PNI. Many successful PNI projects do not include it. It might not be right for your project.

- **Your project might not need it.** If your topic is straightforward, your goals are modest, your story collection is small, and your participants are ready and willing to work directly with your stories, you may not need this part of PNI.
- **Your data might not support it.** For catalysis to work well, you must have at least 100 stories to work with, and the stories must be relevant, meaningful, and authentic (not performative, defensive, or indifferent). You also must have asked at least a few follow-up questions about each story, and those answers must also be relevant, meaningful, and authentic. Few or weak stories or answers will result in weak catalytic material, which will not be useful in sensemaking.
- **You might not be ready for it.** If you don’t know how to use numbers to generate graphs (and you don’t have time to learn and can’t get help), you may be better off focusing your energy on helping your participants work directly with your stories. You can always try catalysis on another project.
- **Your participants might not be willing or able to use it.** Working with catalytic material in sensemaking takes longer than working directly with stories, so you’ll need to ask people to attend longer workshops. Also, using catalytic material requires additional trust between you and your participants, since they won’t have enough time to check that every graph you show them is correct.

Does this mean that if any of these conditions apply, you should not include catalysis in your project? Not necessarily. Doing catalysis and using catalytic material in sensemaking are two separate things. Doing some catalysis could help you plan the rest of your project, even if you don’t use it in sensemaking.

Also, these are not binary decisions. They are gradients. You can spend hours, days, or weeks doing catalysis, and you can use one, a few, or dozens of graphs in a sensemaking workshop. Find the amount of catalysis that works for you, your project, and your participants.

## The principles of catalysis

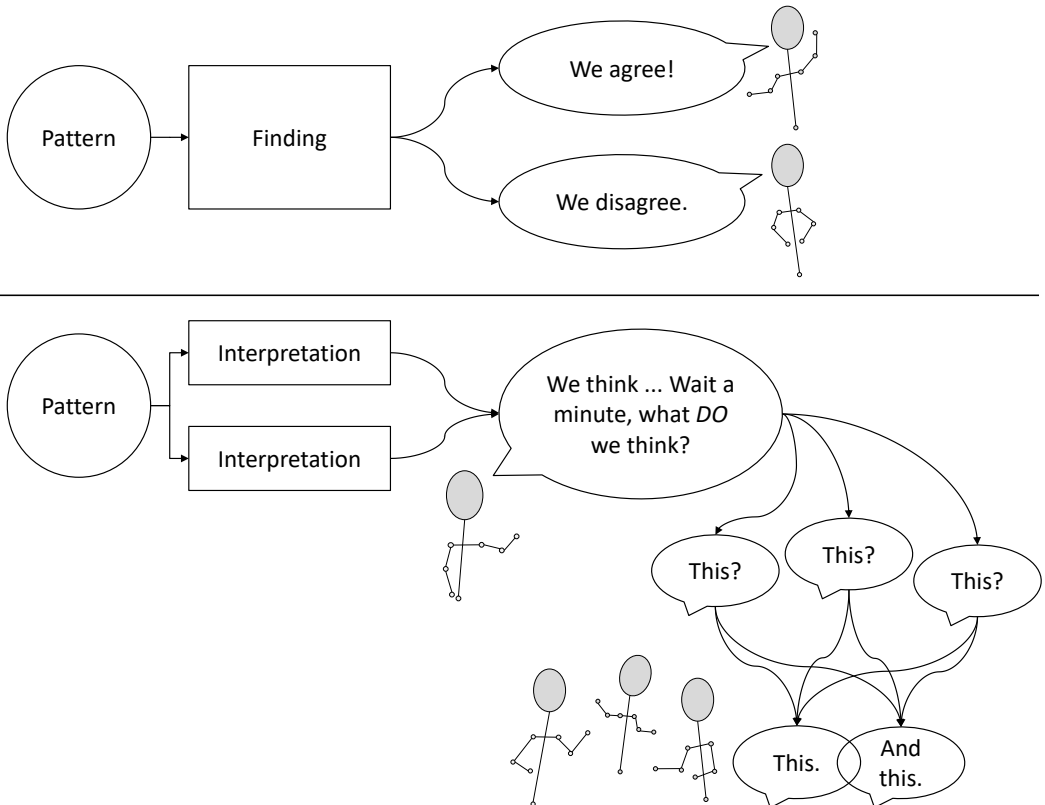
The principles of narrative catalysis, like those of PNI itself, were not received on tablets of stone but assembled from trial and error over the course of decades spent supporting sensemaking. Taken together, they can help you maximize the extent to which you can help people make use of your collected stories and data. At the same time, these principles can help you minimize the extent to which you can damage the sensemaking process by inserting your own bias or exerting your own control.

### Separate Statements

All statements in catalytic material are separated into what is *objective* (anyone would agree with it) and what is *subjective* (reasonable people might disagree about it).

### Provide Provoking Perspectives

For each *pattern* we find in the data we collect, we write a single *observation* (which anyone can see and accept) and *at least two opposing interpretations* (things reasonable people might think the pattern means). This basic structure is the heart of catalysis.



Generating multiple interpretations of patterns is the most important, difficult, and rewarding part of catalysis. Coming up with explanations that actually make sense from opposing points of view is a skill that can be learned and improved, both by individual people and by groups working together.

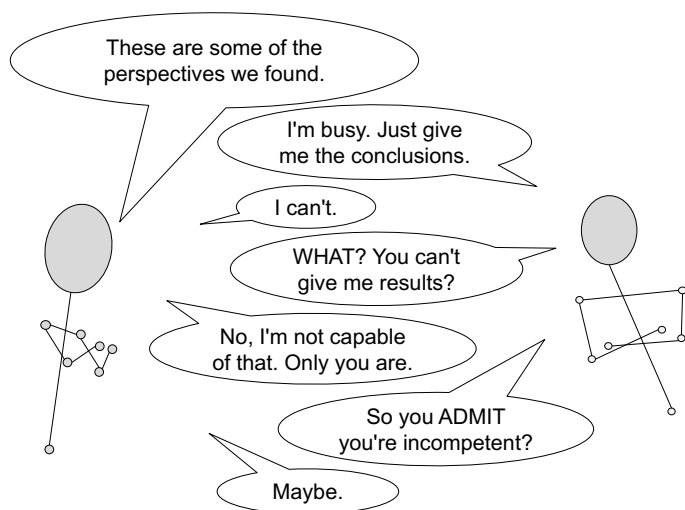
## Maintain Mischief

The folk tale trope of the runaway food item, found across cultures, taunts us with the excitement of the chase.

Run, run as fast as you can  
You can't catch me  
I'm the Gingerbread Man!

In the same way, good catalytic material challenges participants to *get up and run* after insights they can use. Announcing that your catalytic material is not only deliberately ambiguous but *maybe even wrong* entices participants with the promise of the discovery—and ownership—of new and useful insights.

Like the Gingerbread Man's taunt, catalytic material is *a story you tell to your participants*. You tell it to communicate with them, to help them think, and to help them connect with your project, your stories, and each other. Preparing to tell the story requires attention to your story abstract (how you will introduce your catalytic material), your evaluation statements (how you will communicate its intent and support its use), and your coda (how you will prepare people to move beyond it).

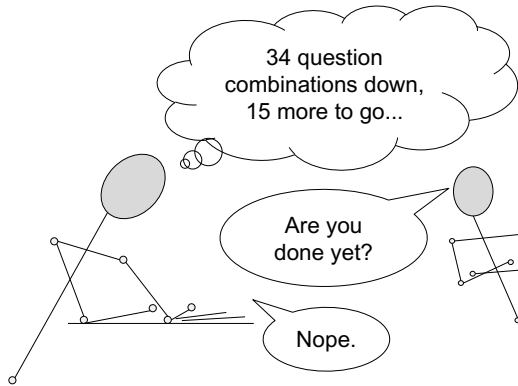


## Explore Exhaustively

The best way to remove the possibility of cherry-picking is to examine the whole tree: every fruit, flower, leaf, twig, and root. This means:

- Consider the time and resources you will have for catalysis when you decide what questions you will ask.
- Analyze your data as completely as you can.

- When you find that you have to leave out some data or comparisons, explain the reasoning behind your choices.
- Share your data with your participants and allow them to explore it with you.



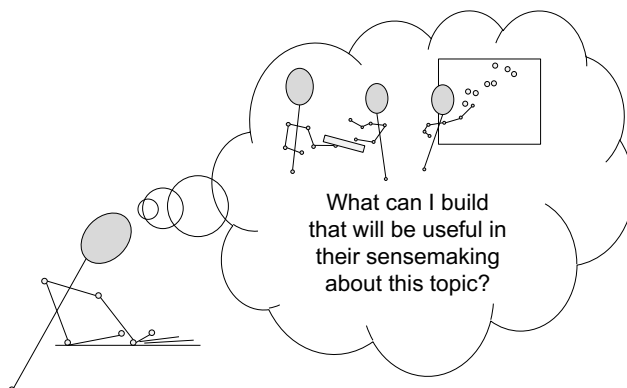
The methods I recommend to follow this principle (and still get your catalysis done on time) are detailed in the “Scoping your exploration” part of this chapter on page [267](#).

## Prepare for Participation

Getting catalytic material ready for sensemaking is more like building a game than it is like writing a report.

A report has	A game has
A fixed beginning, middle, and end	A fixed beginning, but an unknown middle and end
A fancy cover, material, or location that conveys authority	A handy box that begs to be opened (then set aside)
No moving parts	Mostly moving parts
No instructions	Plenty of instructions, options, suggestions, and ideas
A single perspective	A cultivated garden of perspectives
A request for feedback	An invitation to create

Part of doing catalysis well lies in keeping the use—and the users—of your catalytic material in mind as you build it.



## Catalysis in a nutshell

A simple example will illustrate what catalytic material looks like.

### Data to patterns

Consider this set of answers to the question “How do you feel about this story?”

Happy	Hopeful	Enthused	Relieved	Confused
19	13	10	6	1
Frustrated	Disappointed	Angry	Indifferent	
12	10	6	4	

### Patterns to observations

Now consider these observations about the answer counts.

1. “Frustrated” was chosen twice as often as “angry.”
2. “Hopeful” was chosen more than three times as often as “indifferent.”
3. “Confused” was chosen only once out of 75 total markings.

### Observations to interpretations

Now consider two interpretations of each observation: different ways people might see it.

1. “Frustrated” was chosen twice as often as “angry.”
  - a) People feel the problems they face are systemic, not anyone’s fault, and perhaps unavoidable.
  - b) People do not feel they are in a position to speak directly about anger, but can only express diffuse frustration.

2. “Hopeful” was chosen more than three times as often as “indifferent.”
  - a) People are deeply optimistic and have faith in the community.
  - b) People see it as part of their identity to appear hopeful, so they avoided choosing the “indifferent” option out of a need to maintain their identity in this context.
3. “Confused” was chosen only once out of 75 total markings.
  - a) People see confusion, like indifference, as an image they are better off not projecting, being professionals (as we know they are).
  - b) The stories that naturally sprung up in response to the questions were not stories of confusion.

## Interpretations to ideas and questions

Now consider the addition of ideas and questions that follow from each interpretation.

1. “Frustrated” was chosen twice as often as “angry.”
  - a) If people feel the problems they face are systemic, perhaps are experiencing learned helplessness and aren’t taking action even though they could. Maybe we could give people more tools they could use to improve their situations.
  - b) If people do not feel they are in a position to speak directly about anger, maybe the way we gathered our stories caused people to shy away from placing blame. Do we need to help them feel more free to talk about praise and blame?
2. “Hopeful” was chosen more than three times as often as “indifferent.”
  - a) If people are deeply optimistic about our community, this could represent a resource we have not considered in our work on solving community problems.
  - b) If people see it as part of their identity to appear hopeful, could we have damaged that sense of identity by implying that only we (the people supporting this project) care about the community?
3. “Confused” was chosen only once out of 75 total markings.
  - a) If people see confusion as an image they are better off not projecting, could we work on ways to help people admit and work past confusion without losing face?
  - b) If the stories that naturally sprung up in response to our questions were not stories of confusion, should we gather more stories focused on moments of confusion?

Hopefully you can see in this small example how these observations, interpretations, and ideas add “false color” to the picture seen in the original data, and how this color can help enrich the depth and breadth of sensemaking about the data collected.

If you picture a group of people encountering this pattern and its observations, interpretations, and ideas, in juxtaposition with the original stories, you can see how their sensemaking process would be enriched it. This is the purpose of narrative catalysis.

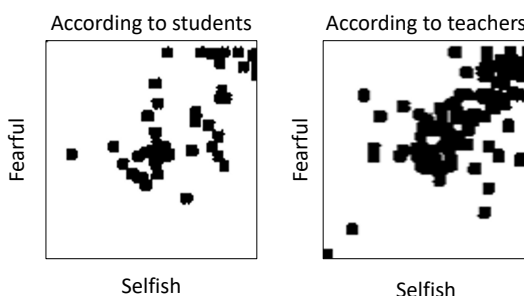


## Where catalysis came from

The first story projects I worked on were purely analytical. My colleagues and I collected stories and other data, used traditional mixed-methods techniques to analyze them, and wrote conclusive reports on our findings.

In one particular project, we were asked to explore the best ways to help children learn. So we gathered stories of classroom learning, and we came up with several questions to ask about conditions and behaviors in the stories and their effects on learning. We asked students and teachers the same questions about the same stories.

In my analysis I noticed a pattern. Teachers seemed more likely than students to associate weakness with irresponsible behavior. In this graph, for example, the dots show student and teacher interpretations of the same stories.



This was one of several correlations between weakness and misbehavior that were strong in teacher interpretations and weak or absent in student interpretations.

In my report I suggested that such an attitude could be a hindrance to learning, and that one way to help children learn might be to avoid blaming them for their struggles.

To my surprise, the report was angrily attacked, the discussion ground to a halt, and significant facilitation skill (not my own) was required to salvage the project—even though some of the people involved agreed with my interpretation of the pattern.

This was a turning point in the development of PNI. My failure to support participatory sensemaking led me to rethink the way I did story work. After that project, I began to develop the process and principles that became narrative catalysis.

## The catalysis process in brief

There are twelve phases in the catalysis process. We will go into them in more detail later on, but a quick overview will give you an idea of what is involved.

In each phase there is a potential for bias. Simple rules can help you keep bias to a minimum. See below for explanations of each bias-reducing rule.

### Generate patterns

In the first half of the catalysis process, you will enhance your data (when possible and useful) and use it to create patterns such as graphs, themes, and statistical results.

Step		What to do	Potential for bias	Bias-reducing rules
1	Prepare your data	Make sure what you have is what people said	Low	Be transparent and accountable
2	Verify data integrity	Make sure what you have is what people <i>meant</i>	Low	Be transparent and accountable
3	Answer qualitative questions	Add to your patterns by interpreting the stories themselves	High	Be transparent, accountable, and optional
4	Scope your exploration	Prioritize your catalysis effort given your needs, resources, and data	Medium	Be objective and accountable
5	Generate results	Produce clear and useful visualizations of all patterns	Low	Be transparent and accountable

**Use patterns to create catalytic material**

In the second half of the catalysis process, you will work with the patterns you generated, choosing some of them to explore, explain, and interpret. Then you will use them to build catalytic material for sensemaking.

Step		What to do	Potential for bias	Bias-reducing rules
6	Choose remarkable patterns	Select patterns that are strong, surprising, and relevant	High	Be objective and accountable; channel community voices
7	Write observations	Clearly explain the patterns you found	Low	Be transparent and accountable
8	Explore some patterns in depth	Read and theme story subsets to better understand remarkable patterns	Medium	Be transparent and accountable

Step		What to do	Potential for bias	Bias-reducing rules
9	Write interpretations	Think of 2+ opposing explanations of each observation	Very high	Channel community voices; be transparent, emergent, accountable, and optional
10	Write ideas and other extras	Add other things people can use in sensemaking	Medium	Be transparent, accountable, and optional
11	Cluster interpretations or observations	Draw your material together into coherent groupings	Medium	Be emergent, transparent, and optional
12	Prepare catalytic material	Build game pieces for your participants to play with	Low	Be transparent and accountable

## Bias-reducing rules

These rules can help you to minimize the bias you bring to the catalysis process.

Rule	What to do
Be transparent	Explain what you have done and why you did it. Make sure your explanations are clear, not confusing; comprehensive, not partial; and available, not obtrusive.
Be accountable	When you add or choose things for your participants, <i>pretend they are watching you</i> . If they would not want you to do that, don't do it.
Be optional	Explain to your participants that <i>they can disregard anything you have created</i> if they think it adds no value or detracts from their sensemaking.
Be objective	Create and follow rules based on objective thresholds ("I will include every correlation with a coefficient over 0.3") and based on what you have learned from reading the stories ("I will include every pattern that seems like it would be of interest to at least one of the people who told a story").

Rule	What to do
Be emergent	Listen to the stories. Let them tell you what to do. For example, when you cluster your interpretations or observations, you can print them and cut them apart, then let them sit on a table for a day or two, visiting them once every few hours to see how they “want” to move around and form groups.
Channel community voices	Pretend you are your participants. Do what they would do. For example, as you write each interpretation, include at least one verbatim quote from an actual story you collected. If you can’t find such a quote, it might mean the interpretation came from you and not from the community.

Another way to reduce bias in the catalysis process is to introduce diversity into it. A multi-perspective catalysis team can generate better catalytic material than one person can alone. You might need to rely on experts to carry out the first half of catalysis (the number-crunching part), but the second half can be done (with facilitation) by anyone. (See “Facilitating group interpretation” on page [279](#).)

## Catalysis in detail

### Step 1: Prepare your data

The first step in building catalytic material is to prepare your data in a way that makes it easy to work with. You collected stories and answers to questions about them; now you need to *convert* them from the original form in which you collected them into a form you can use to build comparisons of stories and answers.

This means *standardizing* your data, or making all the records the same, so you can place them in *parallel* juxtaposition. Means of standardization vary, but in each case it is important to be careful, consistent, and patient in preparing your data for use. An hour of preparation can avoid dozens of hours spent fixing problems later on. So even if your time is limited, do not stint on data preparation.

There are two types of data you might have:

1. Direct-entry data, which your participants entered into your system themselves, is not likely to contain conversion errors, so you can use it just as it is. However, you will need to check whether people understood your explanations and entered their data correctly and meaningfully.
2. Indirect-entry data, which you entered into your system based on what people said in conversation, is likely to contain conversion errors. So you will need to check that what you entered accurately represents what people said. However, you will not need to check that people understood how to enter their own data, since they never had to do that.

Many projects include both entry styles, for example combining conversational interviews or group sessions with written web or printed forms.

Once you have prepared your data for comparison, it is critical to make sure that the data accurately reflects what people actually said about their stories. Many little mistakes can creep into the data, no matter how it has been pulled together. Information can be typed or written in the wrong places; stories can be assigned to the wrong participants; you might write or type a yes when you meant to write or type a no; a computer program you used to collect your data might have a bug that garbles your information; and so on. The last thing you want is to discover trends only to find out later that you were mistaken and the trends were illusory.

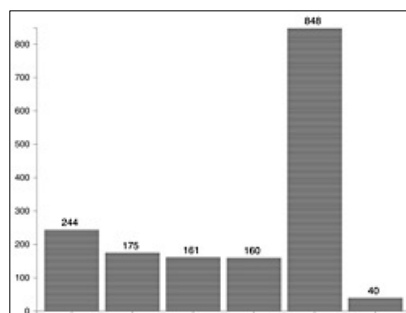
The best way to check your data is by spot-checking. Pull a story out in whatever form it was originally collected and compare the original record to the data you have prepared. Do this with 2-3% of the stories (and answer sets) you collected. If you have transferred your data more than once, for example from paper to spreadsheet to statistical package, spot-check more stories, up to 5%.

## Step 2: Verify data integrity

Your data's integrity is how well it represents the intent of your participants. Let's look briefly at some of the most common problems you might encounter with data integrity and how to resolve them.

### *Too much variation*

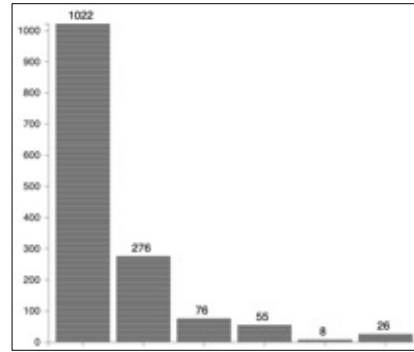
If one answer in a list (or one point along a scale) was chosen much more often than others, it might mean people thought that was the safest answer, the answer you wanted them to choose, or a way to avoid answering the question. On the other hand, it could just mean that more people thought that.



To find out, compare stories with the high-count answer to stories with other answers. Are the high-count-answer stories more distant, performative, or hesitant? If so, the question probably scared people off.

I saw this happen once when I asked some people how they felt about a story and included the answer "good" in the list. They chose it something like 70% of the time. Upon examination, I realized that they were choosing "good" to avoid answering the question. After I removed the option I got better answers.

If your last few questions were rarely answered, or if the last few answers in a list were rarely chosen, it might mean your participants lost interest or ran out of patience.

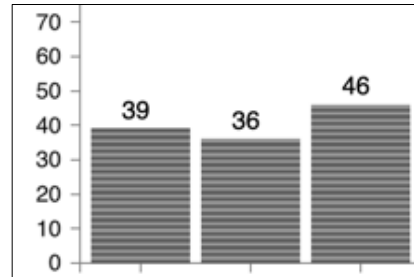


Falling-off patterns do usually mean this. I've seen them happen when people who set up projects are more excited about them than their participants. (This is why you need to understand your participants and build a win-win proposal.)

If you want to be sure, find and read some of the stories that have no answers for the last few questions (or for which people seemed to ignore the last few answers to a question). If those questions (or answers) seem like they *should* have been relevant to the stories, it's probably fatigue, and you need to trim your question set. If not, your data might accurately represent what people felt.

**Too little variation**

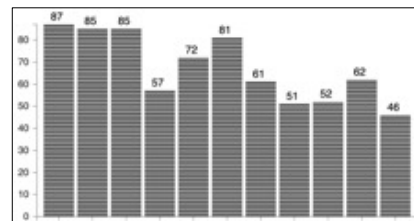
If two answer counts for a question are nearly identical, it could mean that people couldn't distinguish between two similar answers and picked one at random. Or it could mean that those two answers just happened to come up equally often.



To find out, compare some of the stories with each answer. See if you can guess why people picked one answer or the other. If you can't, people might have thought they were the same, and you might as well merge them.

I've seen this happen when facilitators want to delve into their topic with more nuance than their participants do. Writing questions, and writing lists of answers to questions, can feel like shopping, and it's easy to overspend. But remember: you don't get to decide what questions you can ask. Your participants do.

If a lot of people ticked every single box, they might have thought all of the answers in your list seemed (perhaps insultingly) the same, or they may have wanted to say "yes *all of this*."



This pattern rarely means anything else, but if you want to be certain, pull out two subsets of stories: one in which people checked all or most of the answers, and one in which people checked just one or a few answers. See if you can make the case that the people who checked a lot of answers would have had reasons to do that other than feeling frustrated or overwhelmed.

### ***If you can't guess what happened***

What can you do if you have read your stories and still can't tell why people answered a question in a way that seems like it might not represent their true feelings?

- You can *show the pattern to your participants*. For example, say people chose one answer much more often than you expected. Does that mean everyone agreed on that answer? Or does it mean they thought only one answer was acceptable? If you can't tell, and the pattern seems relevant to your project, you can include it in your catalytic material. Your participants might want to talk about it.
- You can *add context* to the pattern. It is almost never possible to go back and ask people what they meant by their answers. But you can add more information yourself. The point is not to correct what people said, but to provide additional context. For example, if people answered a question in a way that seems to indicate reluctance or distrust, you might be able to find a pattern in the stories themselves that illustrates that indication.
- You can *put the question aside*. Sometimes you can't do anything at all with a question that shows too much or too little variation. For example, I once asked a group of people how often they did a particular thing, and 90% of them chose the same answer. The only thing I could learn from that response was that I asked the wrong question. So I put it aside and focused on the questions that worked.

### **Step 3: Answer qualitative questions**

There are three reasons you might want to annotate your stories with your own answers to questions.

1. During your story gathering, you could only ask a few questions, so you don't have many patterns.
2. Your participants didn't answer your questions, or you got nothing but muddled patterns.
3. As you read your stories, you can see differences among stories that seem like they might represent useful patterns.

To avoid inserting bias, annotation answers should be objective. That is, anyone should be able to understand and agree with them. On the other hand, limiting yourself only to obvious answers limits your ability to help your participants make sense of your topic. So there is a balance to be struck.

My position is that you can use questions that involve a small degree of interpretation as long as you make it clear that patterns based on those interpretations are tentative and that *participants can put them aside* if they don't want to use them.

With that disclaimer in place, these are some questions about stories that I have often found useful.

### **Questions about the storytelling event**

- Was the story a recounting of events? Or was it a situation, scenario, fact, explanation, argument, or opinion?
- Was the story told in the first person? Or was it represented as second-hand? Or a rumor?
- How formal or informal was the wording in the story?
- Were the emotions expressed in the story strong or mild?
- Were there any meta-level proof or evaluation statements?
- To what extent did the storyteller reframe the story as they told it?
- If the storyteller expressed surprise, what was it about?
- Did the storyteller emphasize any particular aspect of praise or blame?

### **Questions about events within the story**

- Did the storyteller imply that the story ended well or badly? For whom?
- When and where did the events of the story take place?
- How many people were involved? One person? Two? A small or large group? The whole community or society?
- Were any demographic groups involved? What about roles or positions?
- To what extent did the story involve rules, norms, or procedures?
- What forces (values, beliefs, conflicts, struggles) played a part?
- Were any assets or resources mentioned in the story?
- Was anything left unresolved at the end of the story?

### **Questions based on frameworks**

People in the fields of narrative inquiry and narratology have come up with several fascinating frameworks for understanding stories. One of my favorites is the “Actantial model of narrative analysis” created by A.J. Greimas. It proposes that every story has six facets (which Greimas called *actants*) in axial pairs.

- On the axis of *desire* are the *subject* (who the story is about) and the *object* (who or what they want).
- On the axis of *knowledge* are the *sender* (who initiates the action of the story) and the *receiver* (who profits from the action of the story).
- On the axis of *power* are the *helper* (who helps the subject achieve or obtain the object) and the *opponent* (who tries to prevent this).

For example, in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the subject is Harry, and his object is the sorcerer’s stone. The sender is Dumbledore, and the receiver is both Harry and Hogwarts. Harry’s helpers are Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid, and his opponents are Malfoy, Snape, Quirrel, and Voldemort.



You are unlikely to find many project participants who want to analyze their stories at this level of detail. But with some practice, you can use Greimas' model, and others like it, to find useful patterns in the stories you collect.

### **Questions based on themes**

Story theming is a subset of annotation in which answers to the question "What is going on in this story?" emerge as you read the stories. This is an interpretive annotation, so *put it forth tentatively* and make its use optional. Still, theming can provide useful insights when juxtaposed with answers provided by participants.

On small projects (with 100-200 stories), you can theme all of your stories. On larger projects, it is more efficient to theme juxtaposed subsets of stories while exploring specific patterns.

The theming process works best in four stages.

1. Read each story and, very briefly, describe its overall message—in an abstract way, without reference to any particulars. Some example themes might be:
  - We never give up
  - The \_\_\_ can't be trusted
  - I'm doing my best, but I'm the only one
  - When we challenge ourselves, good things happen
  - Behind every \_\_\_ is a \_\_\_
  - We take care of each other

Give each story 1-3 themes. Keep a running list of all the themes you've written, and whenever you can reuse a theme, do so.

2. Reduce your theme list to 6-12 themes. Merge similar themes and remove any themes that are associated with few stories. If any themes are connected to a large number of stories (like more than 50%), consider splitting them up.
3. Go back to each story one more time, checking that the themes associated with it capture the story's message. If you aren't sure a theme assignment is justified, find an excerpt from the story that illustrates the theme. If you can't find one, remove the theme from the story.
4. Create a "Themes" multi-choice question, then convert each story's theme assignment(s) to one or more answers to the question. Then, when you look at a bar graph for the "Themes" question, you will be able to see how many stories connect to each theme. For example, you might see that 21 stories connect to "We never give up" and 64 stories connect to "We take care of each other."

### **Step 4: Scope your exploration**

Every exploration of stories and data expands to exceed the time available. To lessen the effect of this inevitability, you will need to prioritize your catalysis effort.

### ***Needs and resources***

Start by figuring out how many patterns you can *generate*, how many you *need*, and how many you can *handle*.

**What you can generate.** This depends on the number of questions you asked. If you look at each question by itself and in combination with other questions (as you should), a linear increase in the number of questions will result in a geometrical increase in the number of patterns. Five questions will make 25 patterns, 10 will make 100, and so on.

**What you need.** To support sensemaking well, you will need at least 20 remarkable patterns that are strong, surprising, and relevant. How many patterns you will need to generate to find those 20 remarkable patterns will depend on how your story collection goes.

- If you get weak or muddled patterns, maybe only one in 20 will be remarkable, so you might need at least 400 patterns.
- If you get strong and meaningful patterns, your remarkable ratio might be as high as one in five, so you might need only 100 patterns.

Since it's impossible to guess how well your story collection will go in advance, it's better to have too many patterns than too few. So in a sense, you should plan to overwhelm yourself with patterns—as long as doing so doesn't overwhelm your participants with questions.

**What you can handle.** How many patterns you will be able to consider in your catalytic work depends on several things:

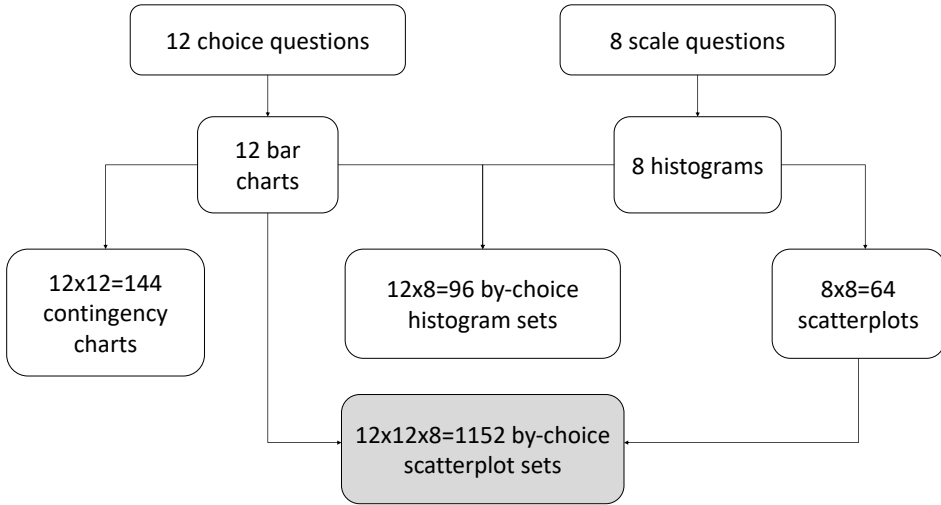
- how strong your patterns are (strong patterns are easier to interpret)
- how many stories you gathered (more stories means stronger patterns)
- how much time you have
- what software you are using
- how many times you have done this sort of thing before

Most people in most situations can handle (look at, consider) 100-400 patterns.

### ***Pattern-reducing methods***

If you find yourself with more patterns than you can handle (which is typical), there are four ways you can reduce the number you need to consider without introducing bias.

**Limit your depth.** You can simply leave out entire categories of patterns. For example, if I asked 12 choice questions and 8 scale questions, I could generate at least 1476 patterns, and some of them would contain other nested patterns. But if I was to ignore by-choice scatterplot sets (which combine three questions), I could reduce the number to 324. That's more doable.



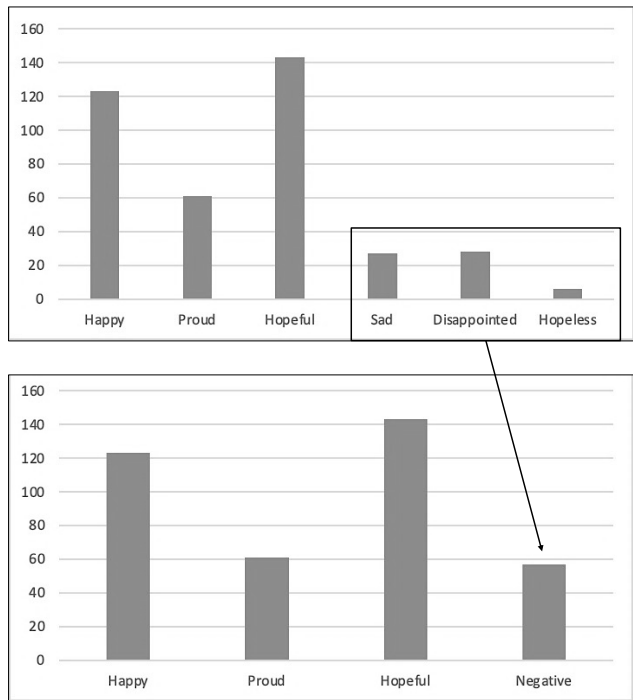
Of course, it might be *useful* to look at those by-choice scatterplot sets. So I wouldn't rule them out until I spent a little time spot-checking them. But if I took a quick look at a random sample of them and nothing jumped out at me, I would feel safe in letting that group of patterns go—with a mental note that I might want to look at some of them later when I'm exploring particular patterns.

**Lump your answers.** Another way to reduce the number of patterns you need to consider is by building a good lumping scheme.

When you ask people choice questions (like "How do you feel about this story?"), your lists of available answers should be long enough to anticipate most of their likely responses.

But when it comes to catalysis, *every answer count creates another set of patterns*. Also, since you can't use very-small subsets in statistical tests, merging similar answers can improve your ability to find useful patterns.

Looking for answers you can lump together (without distorting what people said) can help you reduce your workload while strengthening your patterns.



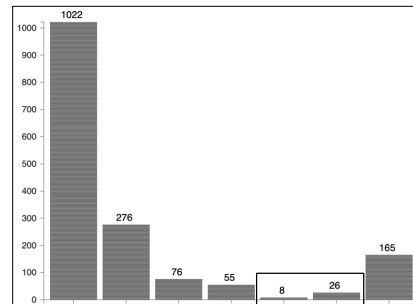
**Set thresholds.** Another way to reduce your pattern count is to set numerical or categorical thresholds. For example, you might decide to use:

- Only stories that recount events (not opinions)
- Only patterns that compare subsets of 30+ stories (trends will be weaker with smaller subsets)
- Only question combinations that include at least one question about stories (because they are more likely to address the topic)
- A different statistical test threshold than the usual  $p < 0.05$
- The five questions with the greatest range of variation (because they are more likely to contribute to useful patterns)
- The eight questions that gathered the most responses
- The seven questions with the strongest one-question patterns
- The six questions a panel of participants chose as most relevant

All of these choices exclude patterns, but they exclude them uniformly and without bias—or at least without *your* bias.

In this case, for example, the two lowest-count answers to this question could not be meaningfully lumped in with any of the other answers, so it was best to put them aside.

When you do this, be transparent and accountable. Build a case for each threshold, and explain it in your catalytic material.



**Get help.** You can reduce your catalysis load by getting some help. See if you can find some other people who can help you consider more patterns. Many hands make light work!

Other people can also help you decide how to trim the number of patterns you will consider. For example, you could talk to some of your project participants, show them your scoping plan, and ask for their feedback. They might be able to help you ground your decisions in participatory interaction.

### Step 5: Produce graphical results

I am not going to say anything specific about how to create graphs and other data visualizations here. I will just say that you have many good options, and it's easy to learn about them. Also, the Catalysis chapter in *Working with Stories in Depth* goes into abundant detail on how to make graphs. The one thing I want to make sure to tell you is that *anyone can do this*. If you can compare and contrast, you can catalyze. Start small, take your time, and build your skills.

You can generate patterns by looking at one, two, or three questions at a time.

**One question at a time**

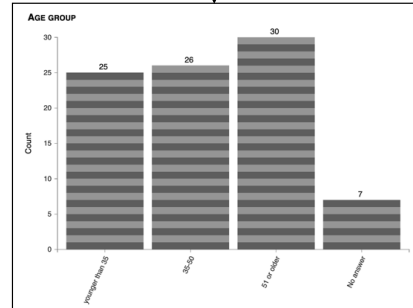
As I mentioned on page 144, to make participation available, inviting, and respectful to every human being, PNI uses simple question types that are easily understood by everyone. The most common question types present choices or sliding scales.

Choice questions are those like “What color was the fish?” They present participants with lists of potential answers. They are best represented by bar graphs, which show answer counts.

You can also convert free-text questions into bar graphs by grouping answers into descriptive categories.

What is your age group?

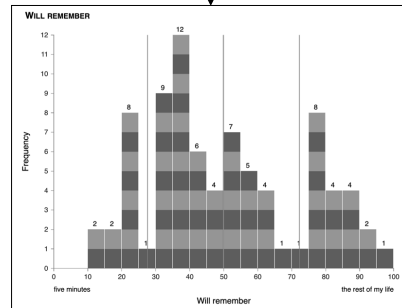
- younger than 35
- 35-50
- 51 or older



Scale questions are those like “How big was the fish?” They invite participants to choose a value along a numerical scale, either verbally (by saying a number) or physically (by moving an object or a part of their body). They create histograms, which show distributions of frequencies (answer counts) within each range of values.

How long will you remember this story?

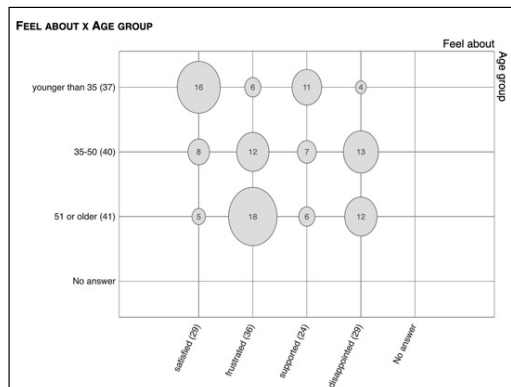
◀ five minutes  the rest of my life ▶



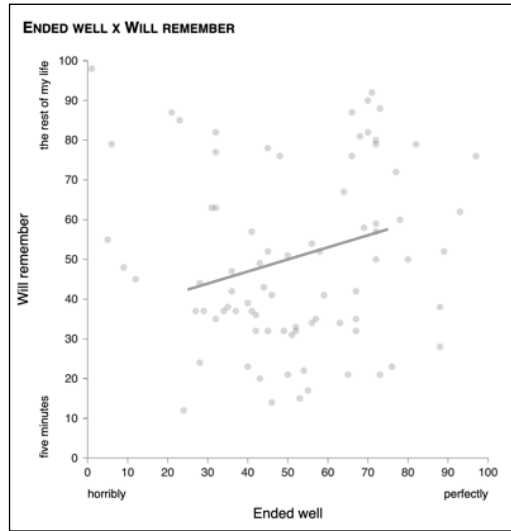
**Two questions at a time**

At the second depth level, you can look at two questions together. There are three possible combinations of the two basic question types.

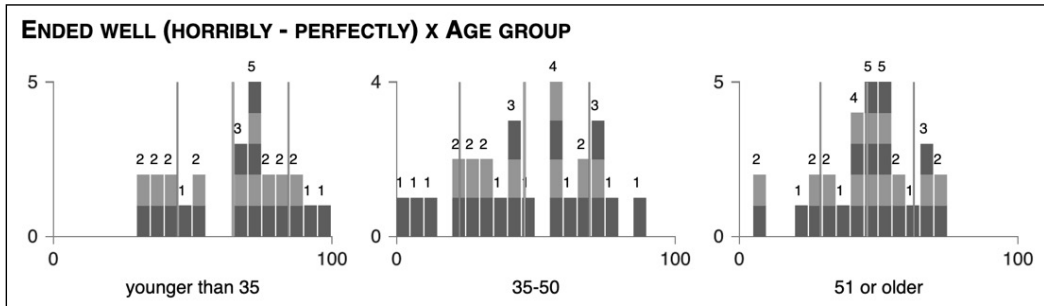
Considering two choice questions together creates a contingency table, which shows counts of co-occurring answers.



Considering two scale questions together creates a scatterplot, which shows values on both scales at the same time.



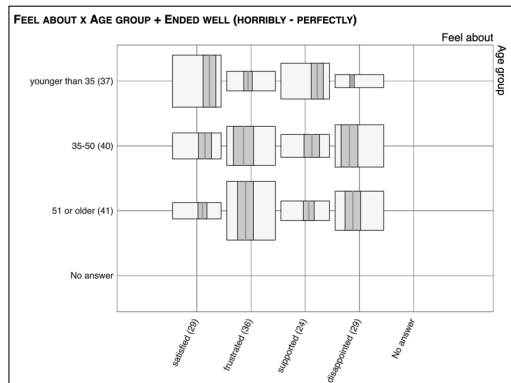
Pairing a scale question with a choice question creates a histogram set, which shows scalar distributions for subsets of stories with each answer to the choice question. (These can also be drawn as multicolored stacked distributions.)



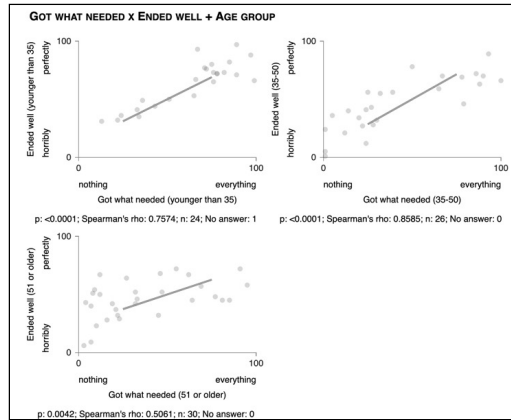
**Three questions at a time**

Finally, you can look at three questions together. Depending on how many questions you asked, how many stories you gathered, and how much time you have for catalysis, you may not want to (or be able to) get to this level of detail. However, it can be useful when you find few or weak patterns at the first and second levels.

Combining two choice questions with one scale question creates a multi-histogram chart that shows frequency distributions of scale values with particular choice combinations. (This chart shows only the means and standard deviations of each distribution.)



Combining two scale questions with one choice question creates a scatterplot set, which shows separate by-choice distributions of values for each scale-by-scale combination. (These can also be drawn as multi-colored scatter plots.)



**Statistics in PNI**

You can use a few basic statistical tests in your catalytic process, as follows.

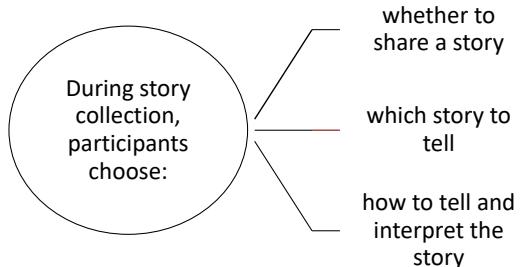
- For histograms, descriptive statistics can tell you a value distribution's:
  - mean (average)
  - standard deviation (how spread-out it is)
  - median (its middle-most value when sorted)
  - mode (its most common value)
  - skewness (its left or right shift)
  - kurtosis (its up-or-down peaking or flattening)
- For contingency charts, a chi-squared test value can tell you whether two sets of answer counts are likely to be connected—that is, if knowing one answer will give you a clue as to the other.
- For scatterplots, a correlation coefficient can tell you the same thing about two sets of values.
- For histogram sets, a difference value can tell you whether two or more distributions of values are likely to be different from each other.

That's it. Those are all the statistical tests I use in my PNI projects, and they are all you need to use in yours. This is true no matter much you know about statistics.

**A special warning about statistics in PNI**

Because of the self-selecting way PNI gathers its stories and other data, statistical test results based on PNI data must always be treated like houses built on sand.

The PNI story-collection process helps people explore their experiences in freedom and safety, and this can lead to transformative collective insights. However, *for that very reason*, PNI can only ever provide suggestive (rather than conclusive) results.



As long as you respect this limitation, you can get a lot out of using statistical tests in PNI. They can help you choose patterns to highlight, and they can help you explain those patterns. Always remember, though, that your statistical test results, *no matter how significant their values*, are vulnerable to legitimate challenge because of the way the data was collected.

Is this a problem? No, because *the purpose of catalysis is not to provide proof*. It is to support sensemaking. What really matters in PNI is the meaning created by your participants as they make sense of the patterns and interpretations you prepare for their use.

## Step 6: Choose remarkable patterns

Remarkable patterns are:

- strong and clear
- surprising, not obvious
- relevant to the goals of the project

How can you decide whether a pattern is remarkable? Describe it to yourself, in writing or aloud. Then pay attention to the next thought that springs to mind. Do you want to know more? Use your curiosity—or lack thereof—as an indicator of possible utility.

Here is a fictional example of some remarkable and unremarkable patterns.

You see this pattern	You think	Is it remarkable?
Factory workers told more stories about assembly line incidents than managers, who told more stories about meetings.	Of course. That's to be expected.	No
Factory workers told more stories about trust than managers did.	Hm. That's interesting.	Maybe
Managers under 35 were more likely to say their advice had been ignored.	I wonder why?	Maybe
Workers in Division B told 72% more stories in which (they said) trust was low than workers in Division C.	Really? That's <i>fascinating</i> . I want to learn more.	Yes

If you aren't sure you know your participants well enough to choose remarkable patterns for them, check. Pull out a random sample of 10-20 patterns. Choose some remarkable patterns among them. Then ask some of your participants to choose remarkable patterns as well, *without showing them your choices*. Then compare your choices to theirs. If they are very different, consider including some of your participants in your catalysis process.



***What if you don't find any remarkable patterns?***

This can happen. Even if you have done everything right, it can still happen. There are many possible reasons.

- People weren't ready to open up about the topic.
- People were afraid to speak up.
- People didn't trust you (or your role, or someone you were working with).
- The timing wasn't right.
- People were busy or preoccupied.
- People were confused or intimidated by your questions, your word choices, or the whole experience.
- People thought the idea of sharing stories was stupid, worthless, or disrespectful.
- The topic was more private or sensitive than you thought it was.
- People didn't know as much as you thought they would about the topic.
- People didn't care as much as you thought they would about the topic.

If you can't find any remarkable patterns, you have a few options.

- You can gather more stories. More stories means more answers, and more answers might make weak patterns stronger.
- You can ask more questions. See if you can ask some of the people who told the stories a few more questions about them. Or see if you can gather a second group of people, show them the stories, and ask them some questions about the stories.
- You can answer more questions yourself. Try answering some annotation questions and see what that brings to the surface.

If none of those things work, you still have two more options.

- You can consider your current story collection a pilot and reboot your project with new and better questions, perhaps after going through a new planning exercise to refocus your efforts.
- You can put aside your plan of using catalytic material in sensemaking and instead plan to help your participants work directly with your stories. Even if you couldn't build catalytic material for sensemaking, your exploration of your stories and other data will help you to design a better sensemaking workshop.

**Step 7: Write observations**

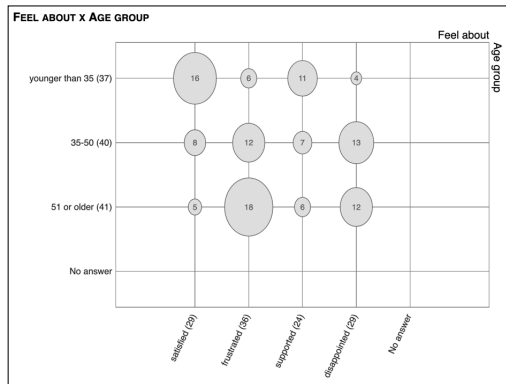
Now that you have selected some remarkable patterns, it is time to explain what you found. This is the easiest part of catalysis. Just state the obvious. Describe each pattern briefly and clearly. Include no statements that a reasonable person cannot see, understand, and agree with. Also give each observation a relative strength. This will help your participants (and you) decide how much time and attention to give it.

Aim to write at least 20 observations, of which at least 10 are strong. Don't worry about setting perfect strength values right away; you can change them later.

Here are a few examples.

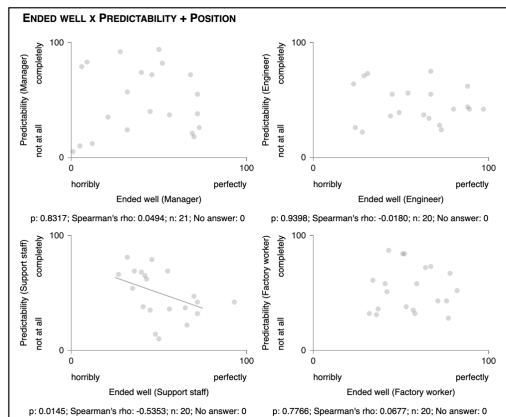
This contingency table shows that younger people more often said they felt satisfied or supported when they thought about their stories. Older people more often said they felt frustrated or disappointed.

This pattern is weak because of small numbers (27, 30). Also note that it has no statistical result because the “Feel about” answers were not mutually exclusive.



These scatterplots show that “How well did this story end?” and “How predictable were the events in this story? were correlated (stories with more predictable events ended worse) for support staff, but not for managers, engineers, or factory workers.

I would give this pattern a medium strength. Its numbers are small, but the difference is strong, so it may be worth exploring.



### Step 8: Explore some patterns in depth

Once you have written some basic observations, if you have time, you can explore some of them more deeply. To do this, *sit with the stories* in each pattern and see what they can tell you.

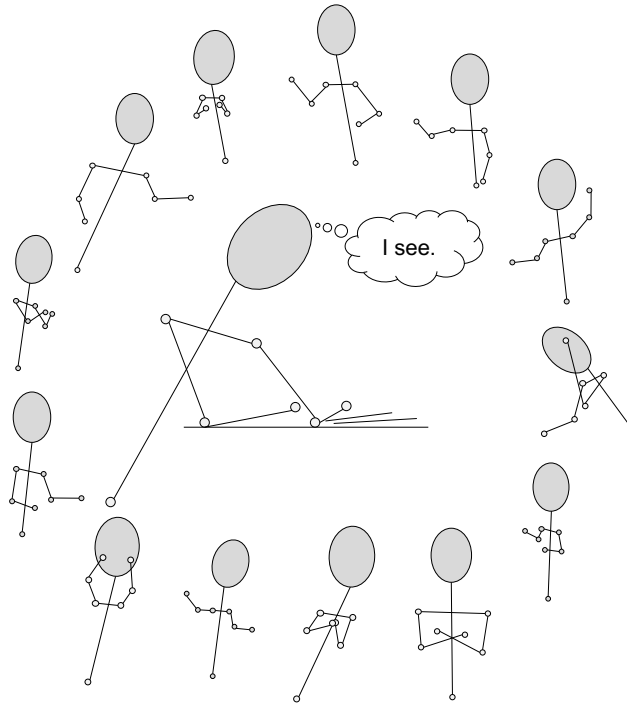
What does it mean to sit with stories? Choose some subsets of stories based on answers to questions in the pattern. Then read the stories. Look for:

- Differences in themes (using themes you marked on all the stories at the start, or using a special set of themes you mark right now on just these stories)
- Common words or phrases, or juxtapositions (e.g., in one group of stories people keep saying “our town” while in the other they keep saying “the town”)
- Story aspects based on narratology frameworks
- Any other similarities or differences that “jump out” as you read the stories

Why should you do this? Because:

- By reading the stories connected to a remarkable pattern, you might find an even more remarkable pattern.
- If your patterns are weak, sitting with stories can help you find stronger patterns.

- If you have too many remarkable patterns to show to your participants, sitting with stories can help you choose which patterns to highlight.



## Step 9: Write interpretations

Writing interpretations is the hardest part of catalysis. It requires a good imagination and the ability to step outside your own point of view. However, with practice, anyone can learn to do it well. Here's how.

1. Read each observation to yourself, either silently or out loud. Then write down what you think it means in relation to the topic of the project. Not what it *is*: what it *means*—its causes and implications.
2. Now *disagree with what you wrote* in as many ways as you can. Argue with yourself. Cross your arms, scowl, and listen to the nay-saying part of you. Write down each alternative interpretation that comes to mind.
3. If you can't think of any alternative interpretations (or if you aren't sure that what you came up with will be useful):
  - Read some of the stories you collected, either those connected to the pattern or a random sample. What would the people who told the stories say about the observation?
  - If that doesn't help, think of a person with whom you have often disagreed. What would that person say?
  - If that doesn't help, think of a fictional character who relates in some way to your topic. What would they say?

4. Now *find at least one verbatim quote* from a story that supports each interpretation. That's your test. If you can't represent an interpretation with a verbatim quote, leave it out.
5. Finally, *randomize the order* of your interpretations so your own opinion is impossible to find.

**An interpretation example**

Let's say you asked your participants how they felt about the stories they told, and their answers came out like this.

Happy	Hopeful	Relieved	Frustrated	Disappointed	Angry
130	127	62	121	97	61

You write the observation "Frustrated was chosen twice as often as Angry."

Next you think about what the observation might mean in the context of your project, topic, participants, and stories. You come up with two possibilities:

This could mean	This could also mean
A lot of <i>systemic problems</i> were described in the stories, so it makes sense that people were more likely to be frustrated in general than angry at anyone in particular.	Participants did not feel that they had been given <i>permission</i> to express anger, so they expressed diffuse feelings of frustration instead.

To test your interpretations, you look for connected story excerpts, and you find:

Systemic problems	Lack of permission
"I can tell you why it happened. We are all good people here. We are just saddled with these bureaucratic systems that were put in place in the stone age. They make us do things that make no sense."	"Can I guess why he did that? Yeah, I can, but ... you know, I'm sure he means well. He just ... it's hard to cope with all the ... paperwork."

The first excerpt seems spot on, but the second one seems a little weak. So you go looking for another one, and you find this:

"Oh, sure, she could have listened to me. That would have solved the problem. But, you know, she ... there's a lot of ... paperwork she has to deal with, and I guess she can't keep up or something."

That's another instance of hesitation and reframing, and another rush to blame "paperwork" for behavior. *Interesting*. Still, it's a big claim to say that people don't feel safe to speak out. So you find two more similar excerpts. Satisfied, you decide to keep both interpretations and include all four excerpts in the second one.

When you are writing multi-perspective interpretations like this, it can seem like you are heaping nonsense on top of nonsense. That's why it's so important to go back to the stories to check your thinking. You are representing the people who told the stories—channeling their voices, so to speak. You owe it to them to keep working on your interpretations until you feel confident in putting them forth or confident in dropping them out.

This is your catalytic material: remarkable patterns, descriptive observations, and multi-perspective interpretations. What are you going to do with it? Amass it, arrange it, and give it to your participants, who will use it as food for thought in their sensemaking process.

### ***Interpretations and your background***

If you have an analytical background, you might need to work extra hard to come up with opposing interpretations. Look to the stories for help. Ask yourself what the people who told the stories would say about the patterns you see. Remember, *you are not looking for factual evidence*. You are looking for perspectives people can talk about.

If you have a creative background, you might need to work extra hard to avoid writing interpretations that are interesting and clever but not actually useful. Use the stories to ground yourself in the reality of what has actually happened to these people and what matters to them.

The verbatim-quote rule can help with either (or both) of these issues because:

- Quotes check for bias. If you can't find a quote to support an interpretation, it might be coming from you, not the stories.
- Quotes check the remarkableness of your patterns. If you can't find support for more than one interpretation for an observation, maybe the pattern is too obvious to be remarkable. If there is nothing to talk about, the pattern won't be useful in sensemaking.
- Quotes give your participants the information they need to explore the pattern for themselves. If your interpretations include quotes, people won't have to take your word for it; they can use what you found.

### ***Facilitating group interpretation***

When it comes to writing interpretations, two minds are better than one, and three minds are better than two. Asking your participants to write interpretations is a good idea when:

- You want to include them as co-researchers in your project.
- You want to improve the utility and relevance of your catalytic material by drawing on a wide range of experiences and imaginations.
- You want to build trust in your catalytic material so your participants can use it more effectively in the sensemaking phase of your project.
- Your participants want to learn how to do PNI so they can use it themselves.

But involving participants in catalysis will only work if they are willing and able to build catalytic material that is actually useful. If they aren't, involving them in catalysis could hamper your ability to support them during sensemaking.

- Are your participants willing to do this?
  - Do they care about the project?
  - Are they invested in it?
  - Do they think it is worth their time?
  - Are they willing to learn how to do a new thing?
  - Can you picture them exploring multiple perspectives with enthusiasm?
- Are your participants able to do this?
  - Will they be able to understand and carry out this work?
  - Do they have time to do it?
  - Do they trust you and their fellow participants enough to do it?
  - Is there anything that might prevent them from exploring multiple perspectives on the topic? Inexperience? Pain? Fear? Anger? Rigid habits of thought? Defensiveness? Pride?

If you aren't sure, you can ask, and you can hold a small trial session to see how people respond to the challenge. And it's not a binary decision; you can blend your own efforts with those of your participants.

### ***How to facilitate a group interpretation session***

Before the session:

- Look at the patterns in your data, choose the most remarkable ones, and write observations for them. Get those patterns and observations ready for people to look at. Also prepare story cards for the session. (These are described on page 301.)
- Write your session agenda. You will need at least ten minutes per observation, though if you can split into small groups of 2-4 people, you can do more in less time. If you have a lot of observations, invite more people, hold more sessions, or put aside some of the least remarkable observations.
- Choose an observation to use to introduce people to the interpretation process. Pick a simple but interesting one.
- Invite some people to your session. Try to represent the diversity of your community or organization. If you can't do that, make sure each person who joins the session is willing and able to consider all perspectives.

To start off the session:

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	You	Introduce the project, topic, and stories.
5-15	You	Go over each type of graph and statistical test result you want people to consider.
1	You	Start recording the session.
15-30	Everyone together	Go through the first observation together, the one you chose before the session. Look at the pattern. Think of at least two opposing interpretations (things the pattern might mean). Summarize them in speech or writing. Give them short names. Write the names on sticky notes. Find at least one story excerpt that connects to each one. If you want to, list some ideas and questions as well.

This first interpretation, the one you all do together, is a demonstration and a test. If your participants sail through it, you can feel confident in handing the rest of the session over to them. If they get stuck on it, use it to help them understand what you are asking them to do.

If they come up with	Do this
Two opposing interpretations	You're good to go; move on to the next step.
Two non-opposing interpretations	Help them nudge the interpretations farther apart. Explain that alternatives will help people challenge their assumptions and look at the topic in a new light.
One interpretation	Explain that an interpretation is an explanation from a perspective. Ask them to imagine a person who disagrees with their interpretation. What would that person say? If they say they can't come up with an alternative interpretation, don't do it for them. Instead, offer them a selection of alternative interpretations, and ask them to choose one.
No interpretations	Offer them a selection of interpretations and ask them to choose one. Then, if necessary, do it again.

If at any point in this process you have to offer up a selection of interpretations, repeat this step. *Don't ask people to work without you until they can come up with opposing interpretations on their own.*

What if they *never* get to that point? That's okay. You can work through every single observation together. You'll still get better results than doing it by yourself.

When you think people can continue the process on their own, give everyone a 5-10 minute break to clear their minds, then start the next part of the session.

Minutes	Who	What to do
2-5	You	If you have more than four people, split them into small groups of 2-4 people.
60-120	Small groups	Go through the same process as before. Choose an observation you find interesting. Mark it to show that you are working on it. Look at the pattern. Think of at least two opposing interpretations. Summarize them in speech or writing. Give them short names. Write the names on sticky notes. Find at least one story excerpt that connects to each one. If you want to, list some ideas and questions as well. Repeat this process until you run out of time.
15-30	Everyone together	Cluster all of the sticky notes you wrote. Give the clusters names.
10-15	Everyone together	Talk about what just happened.
5	You	Take notes or photographs to capture the clustered sticky notes.

After the session:

- If you made an audio recording, transcribe what the people said about each interpretation. Abridge long interpretations, but be prepared to provide the entire texts if people want to see them.
- Enter the interpretations into whatever software you are using to build your catalytic material. Arrange the interpretations into the clusters people put them in, using the cluster names as headings.
- Now you're ready to use your catalytic material in a sensemaking workshop.

### Step 10: Write ideas and other extras

After you have finished writing your interpretations, you might want to add a few extras that will give your participants even more food for thought and discussion. Extras are especially useful in projects that surface few or weak patterns. To each interpretation you can add:

- Ideas: things the community or organization could do to resolve the problem or take advantage of the opportunity described in the interpretation.



- Questions: Invitations to discuss the interpretation together.

When there is a great distance between you and your participants, or when your participants are very sensitive or defensive about your topic, extras can be less than helpful. If you are in doubt, use verbatim quotes to test and support each idea and question.

## Step 11: Cluster interpretations or observations

Clustering your observations or interpretations gives your participants a way to zoom in and out on your catalytic material. It makes the details of what you found available but not overwhelming.

**Clustering interpretations** is useful when people are ready to challenge their assumptions and think differently about your topic. Bringing multiple perspectives to the forefront can energize the discussion—but only if people are ready for it. This approach can also be useful when people are wary (or weary) of fact-based or analytical approaches to the topic.

- Perspective: an overall point of view
  - Interpretation: A pattern as seen from that point of view
    - \* Observation: The same pattern as seen from a neutral point of view

**Clustering observations** is useful when people are reluctant to explore multiple perspectives and would prefer a fact-based discussion. With this approach, they will still encounter multiple interpretations, but they will see them after a fact-based description of each observation, making the interpretations easier (and safer) to explore in context.

- Theme: a group of connected patterns
  - Observation: A pattern as seen from a neutral point of view
    - \* Interpretation: The same pattern as seen from one point of view

The clustering process is simple. Move your observations or interpretations around in space, either on a computer screen or on a physical surface (as sticky notes or printed pieces of paper). Place like with like. Keep clustering until you have 5-10 groups. Give your clusters names that will have meaning and relevance to your participants. Use the cluster names to organize your catalytic material.

## Step 12: Prepare catalytic material

Now that you have finished building your catalytic material, it's time to get it ready for your participants to use. How you should do that depends on your answers to these questions.

- Are your participants eager to explore your topic? Or are they frightened, intimidated, defensive, or apathetic?
- Can your participants read? Can they understand graphs? Or do you need to find a way to help them make sense of what you found without showing them these things?

If you answered yes to the first question in each pair, you can use your catalytic material just as you created it. It should be attractive and inviting, but it won't need to be translated or abridged.

If you answered yes to any of the second questions, you may need to translate your material into a format that will work for your participants.

- If your participants are apathetic, prepare clear and engaging infographics that highlight some relevant and memorable stories connected to each pattern and interpretation. Present your infographics in surprising ways, such as on posters people can visit or on game-like cards people can move around and stack up.
- If your participants are intimidated or defensive, give each person their own copy of your catalytic material, and give them some time to study it in private before they are asked to discuss it with others.
- If your participants are illiterate, prepare and rehearse a series of spoken presentations in which you describe each pattern in your own words, then tell some relevant and memorable stories to illustrate each interpretation.
- If your participants don't understand graphs, simplify your graphs as much as you can, removing extraneous details. Also prepare a simple yet clear explanation of each type of graph.

Also, if you know that you will have less of your participants' time and attention than you would like to have, choose a selection of your materials to prepare for their use, and make the rest of your materials available but not required.

### ***Prepare professional yet authentic materials***

Nice-looking catalytic material shows your participants that you respect their time and attention. It also shows them that you see them as reasonable, competent people who can work with well-prepared material. (Yes, that's another self-fulfilling prophecy.)

- If you plan to give people a 20-page handout, don't just print it on copy paper. Have it bound, put it in a folder, or print it on card stock for easier handling.
- If you plan to ask people to walk around your meeting room visiting printed pages on the wall, have the pages professionally printed on poster-sized paper.
- If you plan to present your material by telling people about it, practice your presentation until it comes off flawlessly.
- If you plan to present your material on a website, you might want to include a two-minute video explanation of each cluster, observation, or interpretation.

On the other hand, you don't want your participants to be so intimidated by your professionally-prepared material that they are afraid to challenge it. For sensemaking to work well, catalytic material must be open to challenge. So be careful not to obscure the authenticity of your material. Too much prettying up could imply that the stories you collected, the way they were told, or the people who told them were not worthy of consideration without your expert touch.

**Watch your tone**

However you present your catalytic material, your tone should be one of respectful support. Invite and inspire your participants to make sense of your topic together. Make sure your material is:

Respectful	Professional	Attractive	Nice-looking, well-prepared materials help participants feel welcome and honored.
		Attentive	Play a supporting role. Don't draw attention to yourself.
	Transparent	Enabling	Explain your method and intent, especially its multi-perspective aspects.
		Available	Provide participants with at least a brief summary of the material to take home.
Supportive	Clear	Understand-able	Speak simply, avoid jargon, and check for understanding.
		Navigable	Help your participants easily zoom in (to explore details) and out (to see the big picture).
	Relevant	Meaningful	Keep your focus on the project's goals.
		Authentic	Include plenty of verbatim quotes from stories, just as people said them. Never distort or "improve" what people said.

Test your material to see if it works the way you want it to. Put it in front of a few people without a word of explanation, and watch what they say and do. And don't stop testing your material after you start using it in sensemaking. Watch people use it, and keep working to refine it.



## Chapter 11

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# Narrative Sensemaking

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On the face of it, the word “sensemaking” means what it says: making sense of things. But if that was all it meant, we might as well just define it as *being alive*, because making sense of things is what we all do every day. The word can’t mean *everything*. So what exactly is sensemaking? And what is *not* sensemaking?

The term “sensemaking” (or “sense-making”) originated in three bodies of research work:

1. The organizational theorist Karl Weick used it to talk about organizational structures and behaviors.
2. The communication researcher Brenda Dervin used it to talk about the design of information systems.
3. A group of researchers at Xerox PARC led by Daniel Russell used it to talk about the design of computer interfaces.

It’s hard to find, or write, a simple definition of this useful but nebulous term. So I’ve come up with three *aspects* of sensemaking that I think will help you understand it. Sensemaking is pertinent, practical, and playful.

### **Sensemaking is pertinent**

Sensemaking happens *for reasons that matter in situations that matter*. It centers on and surrounds the making of decisions. It’s not random, meandering, abstract thought; it has a

goal in a context, even when you don't realize or understand it. When you stand in front of your cupboard pondering whether you like your peanut butter best on a spoon or on toast, that's not sensemaking. It's just pondering. When you stand in front of your cupboard deciding what you want to make for your dinner party guests, then later reflect on what you made for your dinner party guests (and how that worked out), that is sensemaking, because *it happened for a reason and in a situation that mattered to you*.

- Weick calls this applied aspect of sensemaking *enactment*; he says that the activity of sensemaking is *effortful*, not passive; and he says it has to do with *priorities* and the extraction of relevant *cues* from the totality of experience.
- Dervin speaks about sensemaking as the act of building a *bridge* across a *gap* between the current *situation* and desired *outcomes*.
- Russell et al. speak of *task-specific* sensemaking activities.

When I say that sensemaking centers on the making of decisions, I don't mean to imply that it is merely secondary to or dependent on decision making. It is far more powerful than that. Sensemaking can change the nature of decision making itself. As people make sense of things, they can discover new possibilities that lead them in directions and to decisions they would have never thought possible.

### **Sensemaking is practical**

Sensemaking *happens in real life*. It is grounded in concrete reality, whether it involves one person or a team, family, community, organization, or society. Abstract analysis and scientific proof are not included in sensemaking because they are not focused on unique people making unique decisions about their unique lives.

- Weick speaks of the importance of *identity* and *social context* to sensemaking and how they both influence and are influenced by it.
- Dervin speaks of sensemaking as including the entire gamut of ways in which real people meet real challenges: not just rational thought but also emotion, intuition, and imagination. This also includes aspects of thought often excluded from what is considered correct or reasonable, such as power-brokering, the suppression of uncomfortable facts, and the creation of fantasies and illusions. These too are sensemaking activities, because they are human activities whose purpose is to thrive in the world.
- Central to the sensemaking process as described by Russell et al. are *frames* or *schemas*, ways of looking at the world particular to individuals or groups based on their unique histories and characteristics.

For example, say you are at your doctor's office discussing various treatments for a medical issue. Together you are making sense of the situation. Now say your doctor happens to mention a research study on the effectiveness of a particular treatment. That study was *not* carried out using sensemaking. It was carried out using the scientific method, a method designed to *avoid* sensemaking in order to arrive at universal proof.

## Sensemaking is playful

Sensemaking *happens improvisationally*. It is less about organizing, sorting, and ranking than it is about constructing, connecting, and juxtaposing. Ordered methods of thinking, such as making lists and comparing options, may be *incorporated* into sensemaking; but they do not limit or define it. Sensemaking is about *preparing* for the future, not *predicting* it. It is about *processing* the past, not *proving* anything about it.

- Weick says that sensemaking favors *plausibility over accuracy*, by which he means that it is more about what *works* than what *is*. He also talks about the importance to sensemaking of *ontological oscillation*, or rapid shuttling among different ways of looking at the world. This is also a feature of play.
- Dervin speaks of the *verbings* of sensemaking; of simultaneous views from many perspectives; of the importance of gaps and muddles; and of the play between fluid and rigid, individual and group, order and chaos.
- Russell et al. speak of a *learning loop complex* in which people *search* for frames they can use to represent the situation at hand, *build* representations of the situation using those frames, *shift* the frames where they don't fit with what has been observed, and *use* the frames to make decisions. This is a good description of what children do all day (and adults do when they forget to pretend they can't).

Finally, all of these authors speak of the importance of *time* in sensemaking: that it radiates out into the past and future. This is another playful element, because play is often about making sense of things that have happened in the past and that could/not or should/not happen in the future.

To sum up: Sensemaking is thinking about situations and issues in ways that are *pertinent* to decisions we must make (or have made), of *practical* application to our real lives, and experimentally, improvisationally *playful*.

## Sensemaking and PNI

Can you think of something else people do as they make decisions that is pertinent, practical, and playful? Hint: it has something to do with this book. Yes, it's telling and listening to stories. Stories *pertain* to the decisions we must make (or have made); they explore our *practical* needs; and they bring *play* into our thinking.

Story sharing and sensemaking are not the same thing, nor does either contain the other. But they do connect to and influence each other. When I speak of narrative sensemaking, I mean the place where the two activities intersect.

Narrative	+	Sensemaking	=	Narrative sensemaking
Narrative goes beyond sensemaking. People also share stories to strengthen bonds, explain complex concepts, entertain, inspire, persuade, and negotiate social norms.		Sensemaking goes beyond narrative. People also make sense of things by comparing options, presenting and refuting arguments, and brainstorming ideas.		Narrative sensemaking is what happens when people share stories to make decisions about things that matter to them, ground their thinking in experience, and play with possibility.

Some might say that sensemaking always has a narrative element, but that isn't what I've seen. It's like what I said earlier in the book about how some people think in stories more than others. For some groups in some contexts, story sharing and sensemaking are strongly connected; and for other groups in other contexts, the two things are weakly connected or even completely disconnected. By supporting narrative sensemaking—that is, strongly connected story sharing and sensemaking—PNI helps people make better decisions and get along better with each other.

### How sensemaking works in PNI

Say you're at a family gathering and you ask an older relative about their childhood. You have just started a tiny PNI project going. That tiny project will have a sensemaking phase to it, whether you facilitate it or not. People will think and talk about the stories they heard and told in the conversation you started. In fact, that sort of tiny project is a perfectly valid use of PNI. You don't have to wait to use PNI until you have a big budget or a large participant group. You can use it right now, in the conversations you are already having.

Still, in most PNI projects, sensemaking takes place in facilitated group workshops. Project participants come together to work with and learn from the stories the project has collected. First they take in the stories, and then they *do something* with them. They compare them, connect them, respond to them, and build larger stories out of them. They do all of this to make sense of the project's topic in pursuit of the project's goals.

A sensemaking workshop has four outcomes:

1. an *experience* people remember and tell other people about
2. a *record* of what happened, which becomes part of the story of the project
3. a set of collective *constructions*, such as themes, timelines, or larger stories
4. a set of collective *learnings*, such as discoveries, opportunities, or ideas

The experience of participating in a sensemaking workshop is its most important outcome. People always come out of sensemaking workshops with deeper and better understandings, and they take those understandings with them wherever they go. The other three outcomes help everyone else learn from what happened in the workshop.

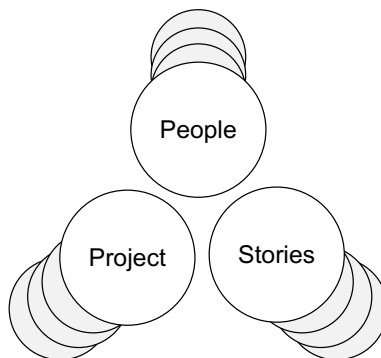


## Four phases of narrative sensemaking

The sensemaking process, when it is productive, moves through four distinct phases: contact, churning, convergence, and change.

### Contact

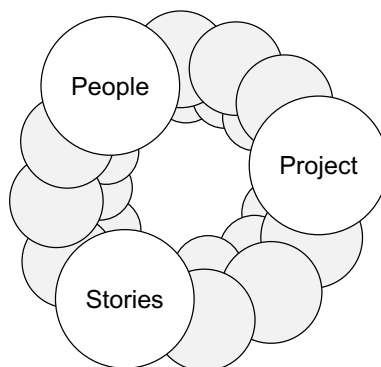
Sensemaking begins when the three elements of sensemaking—people, project, and stories—are introduced to each other and *come into contact*.



### Churning

In the churning phase of sensemaking, people, project, and stories *shuffle and reshuffle* in varied ways.

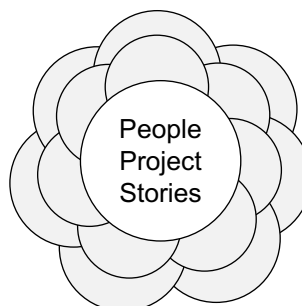
Churning is necessary because sensemaking requires that a topic be considered from a variety of different perspectives.



### Convergence

In the convergent phase of sensemaking, people, project, and stories *come together* into new understandings and negotiated commonalities.

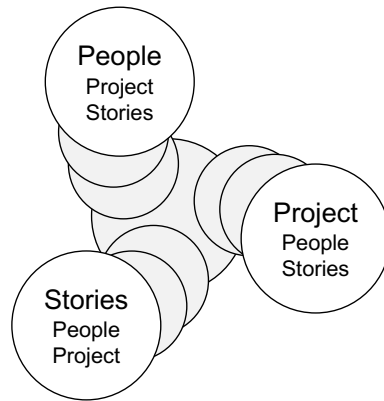
Contact and churning produce small, isolated ideas and discoveries, but unless they join up to form something larger, they will dissipate after the session and become dissolved in the everyday.



## Change

In the change phase, people, project, and stories *emerge transformed*. People see things differently than they did; new stories are told; the project evolves.

This change might not take place during the workshop itself. It might emerge days or weeks later, as people reflect on their experiences. But when sensemaking works, something always changes.



## What this looks like in practice

Most sensemaking workshops have a basic structure that looks like this.

Part	What happens	How long it takes	Sensemaking phase(s)
Introduction	You briefly describe the project, the stories, the goal, and what will happen in the workshop.	3-5 minutes	Only contact
Contact task	Working in small groups, participants encounter the stories in a simple shared task.	30 minutes	Mostly contact with a bit of churning
Exercise(s)	Small groups plunge into an in-depth sensemaking exercise, or a series of linked exercises, possibly including report-backs or exchanges among groups.	1+ hours	A little contact, a lot of churning, a bit of convergence
Wrap-up	Everyone works together to draw the workshop to a close with a concluding exercise or list-making activity.	10-30 minutes	A bit of churning, a lot of convergence, a little change
After-party	Everyone talks about what happened, what they learned, what they want to share outside the workshop, and what they want to do next.	10-30 minutes	Mostly change with a bit more convergence

I will have more to say about planning and facilitating each of these phases later on, but first let's talk about preparing for sensemaking in general.

## Getting ready for sensemaking

### How many sensemaking participants you will need

How many people do you need to participate in the sensemaking phase of your PNI project?

- A small or pilot project can get by with as few as 5–6 participants.
- A medium-sized project with one topic and 100–300 stories will need 6–30 participants.
- A project that is large (with many stories), ambitious (with a mandate for change), complex (with multiple subtopics), or contentious (with irreconcilable points of view) could need 30–100 sensemaking participants.

How many people can you *expect* to participate in sensemaking? As a rule of thumb, you can expect:

- 25% of the people who were willing to attend a story-sharing session
- 10% of the people who were willing to sit for an interview
- 5% of the people who were willing to fill in a form

So if you got 200 people to fill in a form and 20 to sit for an interview, you can expect 12 people to want to participate in a sensemaking workshop.

### How many sensemaking workshops you will need

Simple, small PNI projects will only need one sensemaking workshop. Ambitious or contentious projects will need more.

**Ambition.** Your project could be ambitious in either depth or breadth.

1. **Depth.** If you want to explore your project deeply, you will need to ask your participants to spend some serious time working with your stories, say a full eight-hour day. You could do this in either of two ways:
  - a) You could set up a day-long, in-person, retreat-like workshop, perhaps at a beautiful location, that includes three excellent meals. The feeling of a special occasion can provide motivation to participants and express your gratitude and respect.
  - b) You could split up a day-long workshop into multiple portions. For example, you could split an eight-hour workshop into four two-hour portions on successive days (or every other day). If you can meet in person, you can end each day's portion of the workshop with an excellent meal. If you must meet online, you can give your participants a small gift at the end of each day.
2. **Breadth.** If you want to include a variety of perspectives, you will need to include a variety of participants. Shorten your workshops to 2–3 hours and spread them around: on weekdays and weekends, from morning to evening, at a variety of locations, perhaps even with a variety of subgroups or subtopics. Find a way to interest and accommodate

everyone. You won't have time to offer meals, but you can create the feeling of a special occasion by providing excellent snacks or small gifts.

**Contention.** If your project covers a contentious topic, or if it includes groups with different backgrounds, viewpoints, or power levels, you might need to set up *parallel* sensemaking workshops. If every group goes through the same experience—and you can *tell* them this—they can better understand the perspectives of the other groups.

The best workshop setup in this case looks like a sports tournament, or a tree, in which leaf-workshops join into branch-workshops, which join into a final trunk-workshop. Let's say, for example, that you want to invite three groups with very different perspectives to your workshops. You don't think they would be able to make sense of your stories in the same workshop, so you invite them to three identical but parallel workshops. Afterwards, you invite all three groups to a fourth workshop that incorporates the outcomes of the three previous workshops.

### Filling your sensemaking workshops

When you are gathering stories, you might only need a few minutes of each participant's time. Sensemaking is different. Participants in a sensemaking workshop must focus on the stories you collected, react to them, learn from them, and be surprised by them—and not just for a few minutes; for hours. Most people aren't able or willing to participate at that level. But some are, and it's your job to find them.

#### *The pause before sensemaking*

You might wonder why I am writing about finding project participants, since I already wrote about it in Chapter 7 (page 88). It's because of my observation that most people learn so much during story collection that they need to revisit their project plans before they move into sensemaking. Your understandings of the people who might want to participate in your project (and why and how) are likely to have changed since you started your project. That makes this a good time to pause, reflect, and review your plans.

#### *Avoid the low-hanging-fruit trap*

One of the most common mistakes I have seen people make as they plan their sensemaking workshops is to invite only the safest people: those who are the most important, knowledgeable, or available.

These are in fact good groups to invite. Important people can increase the impact of your project; knowledgeable people can work with your stories more productively and with less help; and available people can attend longer workshops. But if you invite *only* these people, you will miss out on the unique perspectives of everyone else, and your project will fail to be as participatory as it could be.

You can avoid this mistake with a simple planning exercise. Ask yourself:

If we could invite *anyone* to participate in our sensemaking workshops, and if we could be *certain* that every person we invited would come—and would participate fully—whom would we invite?

List every group of people you would like to see in an ideal workshop. Do this even if some of the groups would have to meet separately, and even if some of the groups might intersect. For example, if you were running a project about the future of your school, your ideal workshop might include parents, teachers, students, administrators, contractors, and even local taxpayers.

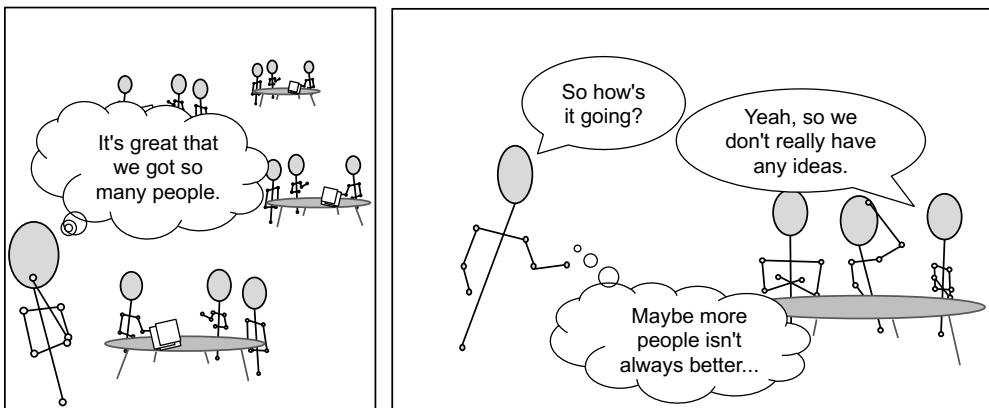
Once you've listed all of your ideal groups, ask yourself these questions about each group:

- How do these people spend their time? When could they find the time to participate, and for how long?
- What do these people care about? What would make them *want* to find the time to participate?
- What would these people bring to the project, in terms of their unique perspectives? How would the project be different with or without their participation in sensemaking?
- Are there any emotional, physical, or cognitive barriers that might prevent these people from being able and willing to participate in sensemaking?

Once you have answered these questions, think about how you might need to change your sensemaking plans to include some people from the groups you listed. For example, you might realize that:

- You had planned to hold a single half-day workshop, but you will be able to gather a more diverse group of participants if you spread the workshop across a few days.
- You had not planned to compensate your participants for their time, but some of the groups you would like to include will not be able to participate without compensation.
- You had planned to invite everyone to a single workshop, but now you can see that there is too little trust in the community to do that. You had better hold multiple workshops so people can work with the stories you collected among their peers.

And so on. Do what you can to fill your workshops, but do it without sacrificing the participatory nature of your project and the diversity of perspectives you will be able to bring together. Even if you have to slow down your project, it's better to do more slower than less faster.



### ***When you can't invite the people who told the stories***

If you can't invite the people who told your stories to your sensemaking workshops—or if you can *invite* them, but you don't think they'll come—what can you do to make sure their voices are represented? You have a few options.

- You can add more sensemaking to your story collection.
  - In a survey or interview, invite people to answer a few additional (optional) reflective questions about their stories, perhaps with open-ended free-text commentaries you can explore during sensemaking.
  - In a story-sharing session, ask participants to spend a bit more time noticing and talking about patterns in the stories they told. Include those discussions in the material you prepare for sensemaking.
- You can add more storytelling to your sensemaking. Start each sensemaking workshop with a pairing task (page 349). This will help your participants find points of resonance between your collected stories and their own experiences.
- You can amplify the voices of your storytellers. Broaden your story collection to include more contextual elements like voice recordings, photographs, drawings, artifacts—whatever will give your storytellers a stronger presence during sensemaking.

### **Writing your workshop invitation**

Everyone who comes to a story-sharing session knows what will happen there: people will share stories. Nobody is ever annoyed to find out that they are supposed to be sharing stories at a story-sharing session. Sensemaking is different. Most people have a hard time understanding the process of making sense of a topic by working with stories. We all work with stories every day, of course, but we aren't *aware* of it in the same way as we are aware of *telling* stories.

#### ***Avoid the nebulous-expectation trap***

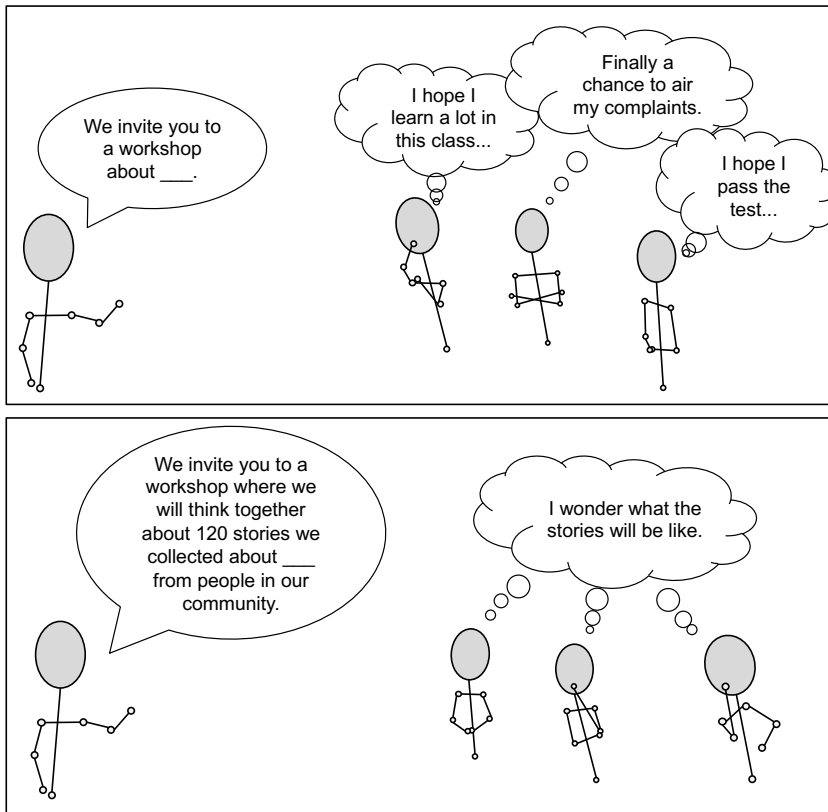
This brings me to another mistake I've seen a lot of people make: inviting people to sensemaking workshops without being clear about what will happen in them. When people don't understand what will happen in a workshop, they guess, and they usually guess wrongly. The guesses I've seen most often have been that the workshop will be:

- a lecture (we will be given information we can use)
- an investigation (we will give evidence and/or pass judgement)
- a town hall (we will be told about plans, asked for feedback, and asked to vote)
- a debate (we will present arguments in support of causes or positions)
- an outlet for creative expression (we will perform in front of an audience)

A sensemaking workshop *can* incorporate aspects of these things, but it is primarily focused on *the collective exploration of a topic*. It is your responsibility to help your participants understand that your workshops will be *explorations*, not lectures, investigations, town halls, debates, or talent shows.

Why does this matter? Because having few people show up to a sensemaking workshop is not the worst thing that can happen. The worst thing that can happen is having people show up, find out what you want them to do, realize it's not what they wanted to do, and sit through the rest of the workshop doing as little as they can. That sort of alienation can ruin a sensemaking workshop, no matter how many people show up for it.

Use your workshop invitation to *help people make an informed choice* about whether or not they want to get involved in sensemaking. That way everyone who shows up will show up ready to get to work.

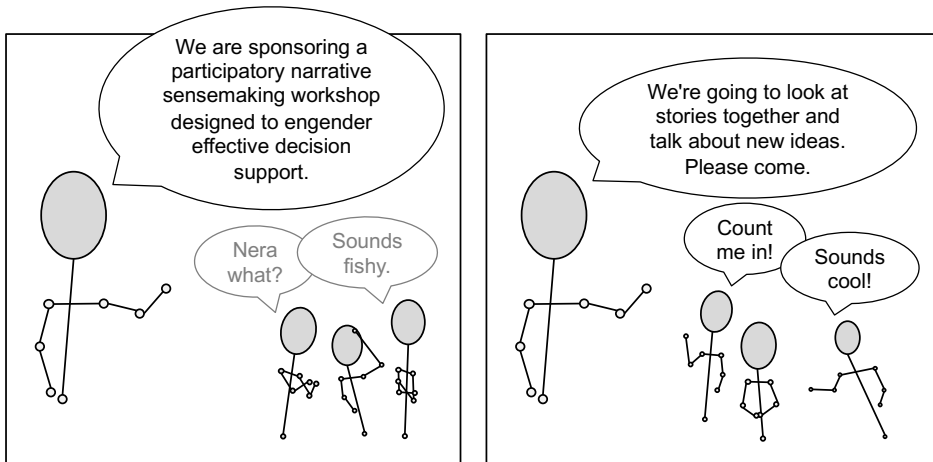


**Use plain language.** Begin your workshop invitation with a summary of *what has happened* in the project so far. Then explain *what will happen* in your sensemaking workshop(s). You don't need a long explanation, but you do have to choose your words carefully. Say something like this:

In our project on \_\_\_\_, we have gathered \_\_\_\_ stories about \_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_. We invite you to join us as we explore the stories and discover new ideas we can use to \_\_\_\_\_.

Note the lack of jargon. Don't say "narrative sensemaking." You and I can use that term between us, but you shouldn't burden your participants with it. Instead, explain what you are asking people to do in everyday terms that convey collaborative exploration.

	Collaborative	Exploration
Say	You are invited to a get-together, meet-up, conversation, discussion, dialogue, summit, forum, working group	We will explore, get to know, take in, look at, learn from, consider, discover
Don't say	Please attend a presentation, viewing, display, show, seminar, inquiry, investigation, review, probe, study	We will investigate, analyze, identify, determine, assess, evaluate



**Reconsider your win-win proposal.** This is a good time to take another look at your win-win proposal, the one you put together the start of your project (page 97). See if it needs to change based on what you have learned in the project so far.

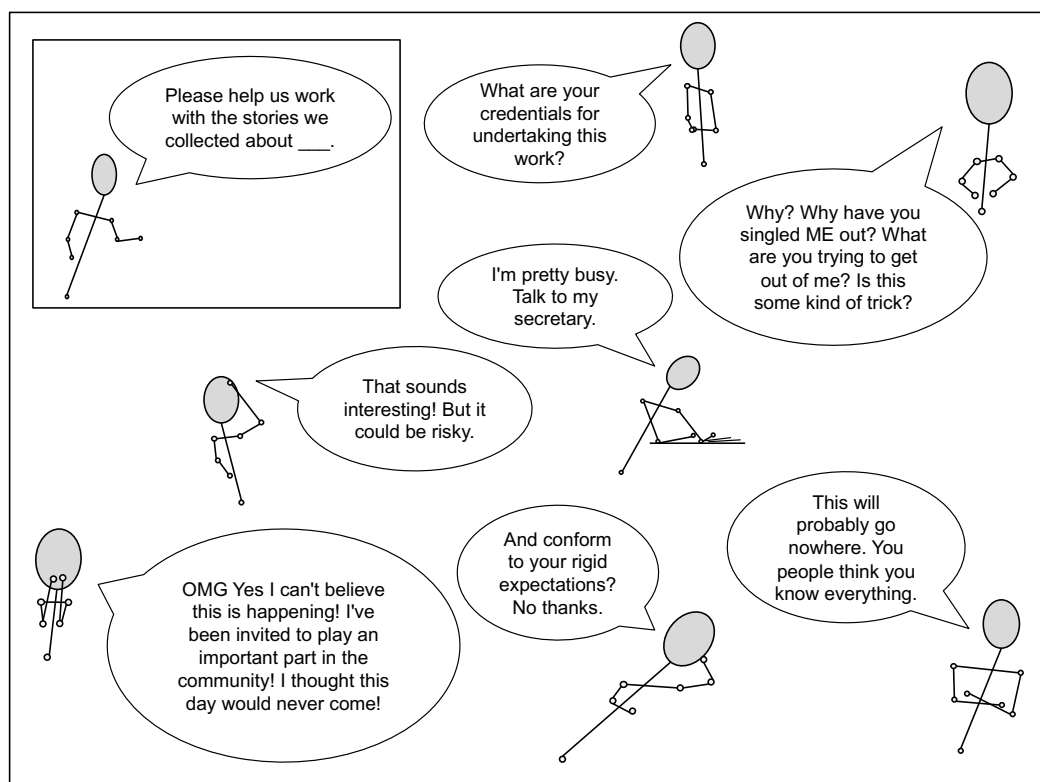
- **Their response.** How did people respond to your proposal during the story collection phase of your project? Did some parts of it work better than others? Were there any particular words or phrases that drew people in or turned them away? Is there anything you would like to say differently now?
- **Your understanding.** What do you know about your topic, your project, your participants, or your community or organization that you didn't know when you started your project? Can you use what you have learned to make the case for participation better than you could when you started the project?
- **Your stories.** What can you tell people about your story collection that will help them understand why they might want to spend some time with it? Have you come across any intriguing stories, comments, or patterns that might communicate a sense of energy, curiosity, or agency to potential sensemaking participants?

Based on your answers to these questions, you might want to revise your win-win proposal as you prepare to use it to invite people to your sensemaking workshops. You might also want to evaluate how well your privacy policy has been working and decide if you want to change it as well.



**Take another look at participant needs.** Now think about the needs of your participants. You thought about this before, when you planned your project, but think about it again. What sort of invitation (and workshop) will your participants find interesting, respectful, and safe?

- **Respect.** If you think your participants will be offended by being asked to participate in sensemaking, perhaps because they feel unappreciated or overworked, consider compensating them for their time. If you think they will be offended by *not* being asked to participate, perhaps because they feel that they are important to the project, ask them before you ask anyone else.
- **Trust.** If you think your participants will be suspicious of your motives, don't invite them to your workshops directly. Ask a trusted leader to invite them. If you think they will come to the workshop eager to promote an agenda, use your invitation to explain the sensemaking process in more detail. Make it clear that everyone will be heard, but everyone will also be expected to listen.
- **Inclusion.** If you think your participants will be intimidated by the complexity of the sensemaking process, keep your invitation brief and simple. Emphasize that you will not be asking them to do anything strange or difficult, that everyone knows how to work with stories, and that we all do it every day. If you think they will worry that they are not important enough or knowledgeable enough to participate, explain that *anyone who has had any experiences with your topic* can contribute.



**Sell your workshops to your participants.** Don't assume people will want to come to your workshops, and don't try to guilt or badger them into coming. Instead, use your invitation to *give them some reasons* to want to come.

- **Hope.** Channel the excitement you feel about the project and its potential. Tap into the curiosity that led you to want to create the project in the first place. Give people a sense of the hope you feel for it. Show them that *the project has strength and meaning*, and show them that they can give it even more.
- **Purpose.** Convey a sense of agency. Make it clear that the project is being done *by* the community, not *to* it. Be careful not to imply that your workshops will provide opportunities to promote agendas without listening to other points of view, but do imply that everyone who comes with an open mind will be heard and respected.
- **Movement.** Provide a sense of motion that shows people what has already been happening in the project. Some story excerpts can give people a preview of the experiences they will be exploring. Think of what a train conductor might say on a busy platform: "Train's moving, folks, *get on board!*"

**Do more testing.** Finally, test your workshop invitation with some potential sensemaking participants, either people who already told stories or people who have not yet participated in the project. How do they react? How can you improve what you have written?

## Making time for sensemaking

Each activity in a sensemaking workshop must build upon the activity that preceded it. For this reason, sensemaking takes longer than story sharing and is harder to compress. You can facilitate a productive story-sharing session in an hour, even if it is your first time doing it. But a productive two-hour sensemaking workshop is hard for even an experienced facilitator to pull off. If you can, allocate *at least three hours* to each sensemaking workshop.

Sensemaking also requires more mental energy than story sharing. If you can, schedule your workshops in the morning or afternoon, when people are more alert and ready to think clearly and deeply. Also, plan ways to renew flagging energy during the workshop. At least a few minutes of break time per hour are critical. If you plan to meet in person, some food and drinks can help as well.

## Making space for sensemaking

People in sensemaking workshops need plenty of surfaces to build on.

- At an in-person workshop, surfaces are usually walls or tables, though clean floors can work too. Giant sticky notes (easel pads) make excellent sensemaking surfaces. You can stick them anywhere; people can write all over them; and you can roll them up and take them home when the workshop is over.
- In an online workshop, surfaces are whiteboards and shared documents. Look for an application that gives each small group its own page or space to edit, all at the same time. Make sure participants can move between the pages or whiteboards as easily as if they were walking between the walls of a room.

And of course, any sensemaking workshop, in-person or online, will need lots of sticky notes in multiple colors.

### Preparing story cards

A story card is a manipulable representation of a story. Participants in your sensemaking workshops will use story cards to move, sort, count, compare, array, and cluster stories, physically or online. Prepare one “deck” of story cards for each small group of participants you expect to have in your sensemaking workshops.

#### Text-based story cards

If you have transcribed your stories (or people wrote them down), and you think your workshop participants will be able and willing to read them, you can prepare text-based story cards. They should be:

- Transparent
  - Exactly what people said, and everything people said, including every answer to every follow-up question (these can be on the back or in a smaller font).
  - Attractive, respectful, appreciative, pleasant to work with. But not *too* attractive, not so “dressed up” as to seem inadequate without polishing.
- Manipulable
  - Big enough to be readable. No tiny fonts, and the story names in particular should be large enough to read from a few paces away.
  - Small enough to be arranged and sorted. Quarter or half pages (online cards can be smaller if people can zoom in and out). Stories longer than a few paragraphs should be excerpted and be made available in full separately.
- Useful
  - Simple, clear, free of errors. No unnecessary information; no cryptic terms; no confusing or distracting mistakes.
  - Visually consistent. Easy to compare when placed side by side.

For example, the story card on the right is interesting, clear, concise, free of jargon, easy to skim, easy to compare with other stories, and nice looking (but not too polished).

Story title: Working its way down

Story text (transcribed, participant 12, interviewer 3): It's not a pretty story. The people who made the mistake would not own up to the mistake. It worked its way down. The person who ultimately got stuck with it had nothing to do with it. They were just the most defenseless. It's just the way we do things here. Nobody talks about it. It's impossible.

Interpretive coding:  
 Where did this story come from? first-hand  
 How do feel about the story? angry  
 How did it end? 9  
 How long will you remember it? 48  
 How much trust do you see in it? 22

Organizational and demographic information:  
 What is your position? manager  
 What is your age group? 41-60

## Working its way down

It's not a pretty story. The people who made the mistake would not own up to the mistake. It worked its way down. The person who ultimately got stuck with it had nothing to do with it. They were just the most defenseless. It's just the way we do things here. Nobody talks about it. It's impossible.

<b>Remember</b>	trivial _____   _____	memorable
<b>Ending</b>	sad _   _____	happy
<b>Trust</b>	absent ___   _____	abundant
Source	<b>first-hand</b>	Feel <b>angry</b>
Position	<b>manager</b>	Age <b>41-60</b>

### **Symbolic story cards**

If you collected audio stories and don't have time to transcribe them, or if your participants cannot read, you can help people experience your stories by hearing them. You can play audio recordings, or you can read the stories aloud. But how can you give people manipulable representations of audio stories? You can represent them with drawings or photographs.

As you play or read each story, give each small group an image (or a series of images) that uniquely represents the story. For example, one story might be represented by an image of a boat, and another story might be represented by a bus and a crutch. Choose simple images that convey uncomplicated messages. Make sure they don't convey any messages (such as cultural assumptions) that aren't in the stories.

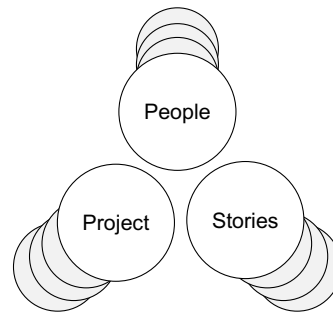
People can use these symbolic story cards just like text-based story cards. They can move, sort, count, compare, array, and cluster them as they talk about the stories.

You will need to tell fewer stories with this option. It takes most people longer to hear a story than to read it, and people will not be able to remember as many stories as they would if they had the written stories in front of them. But you can facilitate a productive sensemaking workshop even if your participants cannot (or will not) read your stories.

## **Planning and facilitating the contact phase**

Now that we've got the practical details out of the way, let's go through the four phases of sensemaking one at a time and help you prepare to facilitate them.

In the contact phase, people, project, and stories come together for the first time.



During the contact phase:

- Participants read or hear or otherwise experience the project's stories (either all of the stories or a representative sample). They get a sense not just of the individual stories but of the whole body of collected stories, and of the people who told them.
- Participants agree (and begin) to pay respectful attention to each other's points of view. This doesn't have to mean they agree on the topic of the project. Some amount of constructive conflict can be useful in sensemaking, as long as people can disagree on *ideas* without attacking each other *personally*.
- Participants understand, accept, and support the goals of the project. They also make the project their own by adapting its goals to their needs. If there is any tension between these two things, some up-front negotiation may take place as the workshop begins.

Because every other phase of sensemaking builds on this first phase, your facilitation is more important in it than in any other.

### Planning and presenting your workshop introduction

Your workshop introduction will bring your participants up to speed on your project, and it will anticipate and alleviate their concerns so they can get started working with your stories. Prepare to explain these things:

- **History.** Explain your project’s motivating purpose and describe the stories you collected.
- **Process.** Briefly outline the schedule and activities of the workshop, and explain how it fits into the larger project.
- **Privacy.** Describe how the workshop will be recorded and processed. Explain how anonymity will be guaranteed. Explain how people can see and change what they said after the workshop is over.

#### *Introducing people to your stories*

The story cards you have prepared will help your participants work with your stories. The way you talk about the stories will also influence how people perceive them. Here are some ways *not* to introduce your stories.

If you say	They might think
Here are the precious stories we carefully collected. They represent the authentic and respected voices of valued people in our community.	Wow. I guess <i>my</i> stories won’t matter as much as all that. I’ll keep quiet.
Here are some stories we collected from some people.	That sounds boring. This is going to be a waste of my time.
These are unique stories told by people who experienced unique events.	What does this have to do with me?
This is the data we will be analyzing today.	What? I’m supposed to analyze data? I don’t know how to do that. I’d better leave.
Here are some stories to spark your imagination.	This workshop must be for creative people. This isn’t the right place for me.
These stories will touch your heart.	Sounds suspicious. What do they want from me? Are they trying to change my mind?

So what *should* you say about the stories you collected? Something like this.

In our project so far, we gathered \_\_\_ stories about \_\_\_ from \_\_\_. We will be drawing from the stories and from our own experiences today as we think together about \_\_\_.

This is why I recommend the use of story cards. Most people recognize the format of playing cards right away, and they know what to do with them. Nobody expects to just look at a deck of playing cards; they expect to use them, handle them, move them around. Playing cards are never cordoned off, nor are they trivial or precious. Cards in a card game are both necessary and insufficient. That's exactly how you want your participants to see your stories: as useful, accessible, interesting, inviting, and insufficient.

### ***Anticipating common misconceptions about story work***

As your workshop begins, you are likely to encounter several common misconceptions about stories and story work. Be ready to notice and gently correct them.

If they say	Respond with
Stories? Like in movies and newspapers?	Today we will be working with everyday stories told by everyday people about everyday life.
Why? Why is that useful? Do everyday stories matter?	Yes. We can learn a lot by thinking about what has happened to people and how they feel about it.
Will this be hard? Is it only for smart or creative people? Am I qualified to do this?	You are. Working with stories is natural, ancient, and universal. Everyone is qualified.
I care about this issue. How can I make sure my side wins the argument?	You can't. We are not here today to debate, argue, prove, or win. Our goals are to listen and to be heard.
Okay. What do you want me to do?	Two things: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect the stories and the people who told them as you would like them to respect you and the stories you have to tell.</li> <li>• Respect the process of working with stories. It may seem strange to you, but it works.</li> </ul>

The most important thing people need at the start of a sensemaking workshop is not information. It's expectation. People need to know what sort of gathering they are at so they know how to conduct themselves. They need you to make those expectations clear.

### **An example introduction**

Putting these parts of your introduction together, you might say something like this.

Hello everyone. Thank you for being here.

As you know, at the town council we have been working on a project to help our community provide better support to disabled people. Over the past six months, we have gathered 108 stories about disability and accommodation from people all around our community.

We are here today to work with those stories, and to share some stories of our own, as we work together to discover new insights and ideas. The things we say and build today will form a prominent part of our final project report, which the town council will rely on as they revise the rules for new construction in our community. It will also be available to everyone in the community.

Thinking and talking about stories is an *ancient* and *natural* way of making sense of things. Don't worry about doing it right. Everyone is qualified to do it.

As we work together today, I would like to ask you to remember two things:

1. Please give all of the stories you hear and read today as much respect as you would like everyone else to give to your own stories.
2. Our goal today is not to debate or prove anything. We don't have to reach agreement. We are here to listen, to be heard, to learn, and to help our community.

Now here's the plan. I've written it here so you can check on it as we go.

1. We will start by breaking into small groups.
2. Then I'll give you the stories and ask you to do a simple task with them.
3. After that we'll take a short break.
4. Next we'll move into a more focused exercise that will help us explore the stories and our topic in more depth.
5. Then we'll have lunch.
6. After lunch we will discuss some of the things that surfaced in the exercise.
7. Finally, we'll close the workshop by talking about what happened in it and how it has changed our perspectives and our project.

Your name will not be connected with anything you say here today. You will be referred to only by a participant number, which I will give you in your small groups. In two weeks we will send you the workshop record, and you will be able to review and correct (or retract) anything you said.

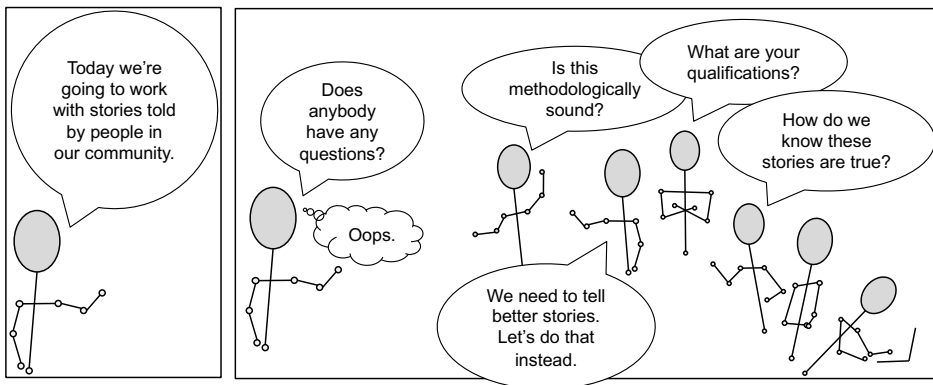
Notice a few things about this introduction:

- It *informs* the participants about the project, its goals, and the people involved in it.
- It *inspires* them to work toward a common goal.
- It *promises* them that their voices will be heard and their efforts will be valued.
- It *assures* them that they are qualified to do what they are being asked to do.
- It *asks* them to apply their energy to the tasks ahead (while reassuring them that they will have plenty of breaks to restore their energy).
- It *requests* that they show respect for their fellow participants.
- It *explains* what will happen in simple, uncomplicated language.
- It *pledges* to protect their privacy.

I timed myself saying this example introduction, just as I wrote it here. It took about two minutes to say. *That's how long your introduction should be.* Don't waste your participants' time by delivering a lecture on what makes a story a story. The stories will tell them that.

### **Avoid the any-questions derailment trap**

Don't ask for feedback or answer questions during your introduction. If people have questions, ask them to talk to you privately during the first period of small-group work. Don't derail the energy of the workshop. Get everyone started working with the stories as soon as you can.



### **Setting up small groups**

If you plan to incorporate some story sharing into your sensemaking, split up into groups of 3-5 people, as you would in a story-sharing session. If you don't plan to ask people to share stories, you can split up into groups with 2-6 people.

You also need to think about the range of perspectives you are likely to find within each small group.



If perspectives will be	Then
Very similar	You can mix people freely throughout the workshop.
Mildly different	You can build multi-perspective groups. Be transparent about what you are doing and why. Ask your participants to make a special effort to listen to the other perspectives in their small groups with respect.
Very different	Start the workshop with single-perspective small groups. Everyone should have first contact with the stories in an atmosphere of safety and freedom. Later in the workshop (possibly much later, or maybe in a second workshop), you can ask people to work together across perspectives, in a general discussion, in report-back periods, or in mixed-perspective groups.
Unknown	As you are planning the workshop, mention to a few participants that you will be asking them to talk about the stories you gathered with other participant groups. Then watch how they respond. Do they seem enthusiastic about talking to every group you mention? Or do they seem wary of working together with some of the groups? Do you see any groups it would be better not to mix, either at the start of the workshop or all the way through it?

## Planning and facilitating your contact task

Chapter 12 (Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking) describes four contact tasks:

- **Sorting stories.** In this simplest of tasks, participants sort stories into categories, count the groups, and talk about the patterns they see. For example, if your topic is trust, participants might sort your stories into three groups: stories with plenty of trust; stories with some trust; and stories with little to no trust. This task is easy to facilitate and easy to grasp. Use it if you are inexperienced, if people will be intimidated by (or not interested in) a more complex task, or if people will need some extra time to warm up to working together.
- **Arranging stories.** In this task, participants place stories in a line along a spectrum, such as from no trust to plenty of trust, then talk about the patterns they see. This is a more abstract task than sorting, and it could come across as intimidating or overwhelming to nervous participants. On the other hand, diving straight into nuance can get sensemaking started more quickly. You can, for example, use this task to fill up the first dimension of a landscape exercise, perhaps saving enough time to fit another exercise in later.
- **Clustering stories.** In this task, participants move stories that seem related or connected closer to each other, then talk about the clusters that emerge. This task is abstract and unstructured. It can be confusing to people who have never clustered anything before. But it can also be liberating, since clustering implies no evaluation or criticism of the stories.

- **Pairing stories.** In this task, each participant chooses a story that resonates with them, retells it in their own words, explains why it resonates, and shares a related story of their own. This task is an excellent introduction to sensemaking when the people in the sensemaking workshop are not the people who told the stories.

There are of course many other tasks that can help people begin to make sense of stories. Just make sure the task you choose invites participants to *respond* to stories rather than *judge* them.

### **Why you need a contact task**

You may be wondering why it is necessary to give people a task to perform while they are experiencing your stories for the first time. Why not just show them the stories?

- A task gives people a reason to work together on a common goal. This sets up an expectation that the entire workshop will be a collaborative effort. You can *say* this in your introduction, of course, but it's even better to *show* people what you mean by giving them something to do together right away.
- A task challenges participants to develop a better understanding of the stories than they can achieve by passively reading or listening to them. Without a task people might spend so much time on the first few stories they encounter that they don't get a sense of the whole collection, or they might skim the stories at such a distance that they don't get a sense of their meaning and relevance.
- A task stops people from drifting into less-than-helpful activities such as:
  - categorizing stories in a critical or defensive way: about us/them, good/bad, real/fake, interesting/boring, cool/lame, strong/weak, and so on
  - picking out a few stories that confirm their beliefs and condemning the rest as bad, stupid, boring, or useless
  - arguing about whether particular stories really happened, matter, are "good" stories, or should be in the collection
  - finding ways to *seem* to be encountering the stories while actually ignoring them and checking out emotionally or intellectually

In short, a contact task invites and challenges participants to engage with the stories, and it does so in a way that prepares them to engage with the stories even more intensely in the sensemaking exercise that will be the heart of the workshop.

### **Helping people save face during the contact task**

"Saving face" means doing things to avoid embarrassment. If you think the stories you collected will challenge your participants' sense of self-respect or self-worth, design your contact phase to help them save face.

It's hard to save face when	When we can't save face	It's easier to save face when
We are asked to <i>evaluate</i> stories that represent elements of our essential identities.	We make surface-level evaluations like "This story is pretty good." Or we make distancing statements like "I'm no good at this" or "I'm just here for the donuts."	We are asked to notice <i>connections</i> among stories and between stories and our own experiences.
We encounter stories under a <i>spotlight</i> and are expected to respond fully, immediately, and correctly.	We make nervous jokes like "That's my story and I'm sticking to it." Or we make fun of story work, saying things like "Okay, children, gather round." Or we try to win the game by picking the "right" stories.	We encounter stories in a <i>quiet and private</i> time and space. Our genuine responses are allowed to emerge without scrutiny, and we can share only the feelings we want to share.
We get no breaks from the <i>stress</i> of encountering challenging stories. Even if we care about the stories, our energy is depleted.	We start looking for exits. We ask questions like "What's left to do?" and "Is this enough?" We nitpick irrelevant process details. We check our phones. We tune out and stop listening.	Well-placed <i>breaks</i> help us restore our energy and come back ready to explore and discover even more.

### ***Sampling your story collection***

You might be able to ask your sensemaking participants to work with every story you collected, and you might not. Estimate how many stories each small group will be willing and able to read or listen to in the time you have set aside for your contact task (typically 30 minutes). If that number is substantially smaller than the number of stories you collected (and you can't extend the time, say to 45 minutes), you will need to ask people to work with a *sample* of your stories.

There are two ways to sample stories:

1. Give each group a pre-selected packet of story cards, one you have chosen at random or to represent a specific range of perspectives.
2. Give each small group your entire story collection and ask them to skim through it, choosing some stories to read or hear in full.

Both of these options seem fine in theory, but both are problematical in practice. Pre-selecting stories can cause people to feel manipulated, untrusted, and unqualified. On the

other hand, being asked to skim through an entire story collection can be overwhelming. So in practice I've settled on a combination of the two options. Here's what I recommend:

1. Before the workshop, give each story a reference number, either a random number or the order of collection (if it has no other meaning).
2. In the workshop, after your introduction, give each small group a copy of the entire story collection.
3. Suggest (but do not require) that each group start skimming the stories *at a different starting point*: group A at story 1, group B at story 50, and so on. Explain that spreading out across the collection in this way will build a better sample for sensemaking.
4. Suggest (but do not require) a *guideline* for choosing stories to use in sensemaking. If you have motivated participants, you can provide a few guidelines to choose from. Some examples:
  - Choose the stories that resonate most with your own experiences.
  - Choose the stories that surprise you.
  - Choose some pairs or trios of stories that seem to connect in interesting ways.
  - Choose the stories that most expand your thinking about \_\_\_\_.
  - Choose the stories that you would most like to talk about in your group.
5. After each group has chosen a sample of stories, introduce your contact task, asking people to focus only on the selected stories.

Notice that all of these selection guidelines ask people to choose stories that connect to *their own experiences and perspectives*. That's important, because you are not asking people to evaluate or criticize stories. You are asking people to *respond* to the stories, connecting stories to stories and people to people.

I've noticed that when I set up the selection process in this way, with suggestions and options rather than requirements, two things happen.

1. People seem to experience a surge of participatory energy when they receive the entire story collection. Seeing that *this is everything we collected*, with nothing held back, and that *they get to choose what they will pay attention to*, gives people a feeling of trust, inclusion, and agency. (The value of this surge is so self-evident that I have stopped pre-selecting stories entirely at this point.)
2. Groups vary in how they make use of the suggested starting points and selection guidelines. Some groups follow them exactly and never depart from them. Some groups begin with them, then depart from them as they become more familiar with (and more interested in) the stories. And some groups ignore the suggestions from the start, coming up with their own ways of choosing stories to work with.

A mix of guidance and permission to depart from it helps people approach the sampling task with confidence, and it brings out diversity in the sample, which adds depth to the insights that emerge.

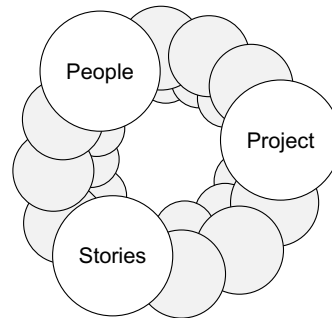
How much time your participants will need to sample your stories in this way could vary from a few minutes to an hour. To guess how much time to allocate to the task, ask yourself:

- How large of a sample do you want to use? Thirty stories is a bare minimum for most tasks and exercises. Fifty is better.
- How long will it take your participants to read or listen to your stories?
- Will groups be willing to *merge* their samples? Or will they want to focus only on the stories *they* chose? Merging is faster, but it requires more trust among your participants.
- How long will groups want to spend choosing stories to work with? Sometimes people agonize over every choice, and sometimes they “choose” every story they see, rendering their choices instant and random—which is *fine*, if that’s what they want to do.

You can ask your participants to use the same sample(s) of stories throughout your workshop, or you can allocate some time to expanding their initial sample(s) just before your in-depth sensemaking exercise. You could, for example, challenge them to pair each story they previously selected with another story told from a different perspective. Sometimes people understand the point of story selection better after the contact task than before it.

## Planning and facilitating the churning phase

In the churning phase of sensemaking, what happened during contact keeps happening—in complex, varied, and surprising ways. People, project, and stories circle each other in a dance of juxtaposition and connection.



During the churning phase:

- Participants arrange and rearrange the stories of the project in ever-changing patterns, causing new connections and insights to emerge.
- Participants move with and around each other intellectually, emotionally, and (sometimes) physically. Groups come together, move apart, and come back together again as people explore meaning together.
- Participants speak, listen, and negotiate, and the reasons they have for doing what they are doing shift and change. A workshop can start out with one focus and end up with another, without anyone becoming dissatisfied.

Churning helps the rocket ship of sensemaking achieve escape velocity and rise above the atmosphere of assumptions, misunderstandings, and entrenched thinking that holds people back from new understandings. It’s that view from space—that sight of the big blue marble—that is the ultimate goal of sensemaking. It’s up to you to build the momentum that will get everyone there and to battle the inertia that will slow everyone down.

There are three things you can do to create churning in your sensemaking workshops: plan for it; watch for it; and intervene if it's not happening.

## Planning for churning

### *Choosing a sensemaking exercise*

Chapter 12 (Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking) describes seven exercises you can use in sensemaking workshops. Five of them can also be used for story collection (twice-told stories, timeline, landscape, local folk tales, and ground truthing). In the sensemaking versions of these five exercises:

- People *choose* rather than tell stories (though sometimes they do both).
- The exercise focuses more on *patterns* than on stories.
- Additional *expansions* are available.

I won't repeat my brief descriptions of the five exercises here, but you can find them on page 194. The reasons you might want to use each one for sensemaking are the same as the reasons you might want to use it for story sharing.

The last two exercises described in Chapter 12 can only be used in sensemaking.

- In the *story elements* exercise, participants build a set of linked symbolic representations by answering questions about stories. For example, they might explore values or beliefs expressed in the stories. This is a complex, abstract, and challenging exercise. Use it when your project is ambitious and your participants are motivated.
- In the *composite stories* exercise, participants craft and tell purposeful stories that blend together selected stories from the collection. This is a demanding and time-consuming exercise. Use it when you have plenty of time and energetic participants.

You can also build your own sensemaking exercise. See “Build your own sensemaking exercise” on page 433 for details.

### *Using catalytic material*

Because this chapter is already long, I have placed my detailed instructions for using catalytic material in sensemaking in Chapter 12 (Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking), starting on page 420. Very briefly, your options are to:

- Help people make direct comparisons between subsets of stories related to patterns (e.g., comparing stories about conflict with stories about cooperation)
- Guide people through sensemaking exercises that use subsets of stories related to patterns (e.g., comparing a landscape built with stories about conflict with a landscape built with stories about cooperation)

Whichever option you choose, place the use of catalytic material after your story contact task, after (or instead of) any non-pattern-focused story exercises (ones that use all of your stories or a sample of them), and before your wrapping-up activity.

### **One exercise or two?**

Most sensemaking workshops will include only one exercise. However, if the conditions are right, you might be able to build a *chain* of two or three exercises (each feeding into the next) or a *composite* exercise (with one exercise nested inside another). Whether you can do this depends on:

- the length of your workshops (you will need several hours, though you can break it up into multiple sessions)
- the sensitivity of your topic (more sensitive, private, or emotional topics may require more time per exercise, plus more breaks)
- the motivation level of your participants (more motivated people can work faster and will work longer)
- the narrative richness of your story collection (more relevant and meaningful stories will support faster and longer sensemaking)
- the depth of your facilitation experience (experienced facilitators can keep up a faster pace than beginners)
- whether you intend to use catalytic material (exercises that use it take longer, so you may need to plan fewer of them)

If all of these conditions are favorable, you can use more than one exercise, and it will make your sensemaking workshops more productive and impactful. However, if any of these conditions are not favorable, choose only one exercise to use.

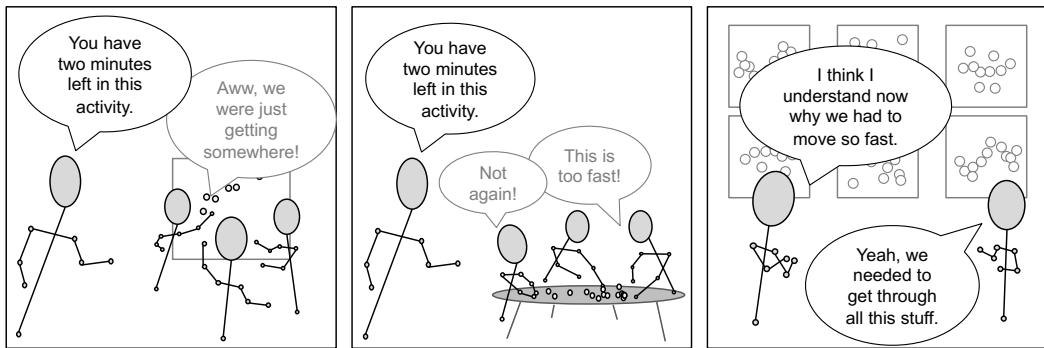
### **Planning for movement**

As you plan your sensemaking workshops, remember that they must have a faster pace than story-sharing sessions. Sensemaking requires people to approach a topic multiple times from multiple angles, so you'll need to pack more activities into a sensemaking workshop than you would into a story-sharing session. More importantly, sensemaking is more difficult and less engaging than story sharing. A long, unbroken span of time is more likely to cause people to lose interest during sensemaking than it will during story sharing.

For these reasons, sensemaking workshops should be broken into time segments of no more than 30 minutes each. I don't mean that your sensemaking *exercise* should fit into 30 minutes; none of them do. But *within* each exercise, limit each *activity* (placing stories, sorting stories, etc) to 30 minutes or less.

Don't worry that people will not be able to finish an activity in 30 minutes. Finishing activities is not the point of sensemaking. Doing *lots* of activities one after another—activities that provide multiple perspectives on your stories and your topic—is the point.

It is a common misconception among sensemaking participants (and sometimes facilitators) that people should be given the time to polish and perfect the things they build during sensemaking. But it is not the *things* people build in a sensemaking workshop that matter. It is the *building* of the things that matters. The more things people can build in the time they have, the more sense they will be able to make of your topic.



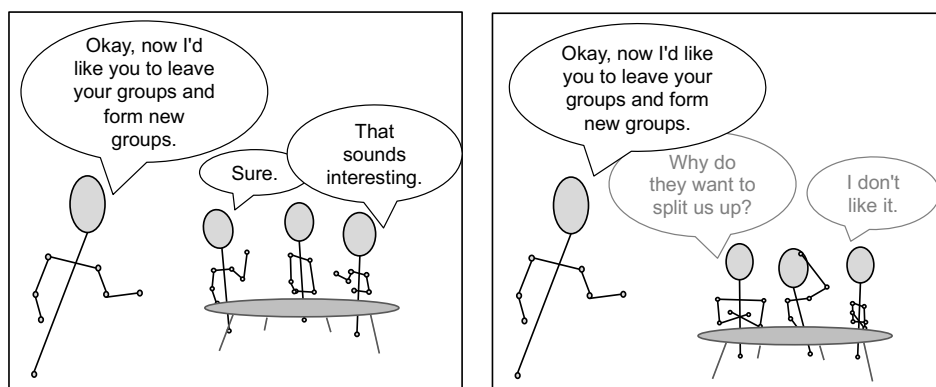
Here are some ways you can keep up a good pace.

- **Build crumple zones.** As you build your workshop plan, think about whether each time segment can be safely shortened. For example, say you plan to ask people to cluster sticky notes for 20 minutes. Could they do it in 15 minutes? In 10? If so, *mark that on your plan*. If not, mark that. Knowing which parts of the workshop you can compress can give you flexibility you might need if you get behind.
- **Set expectations.** Tell your participants about the need for speed at the very start of the workshop. Say something like, “At some points today you may feel like we are moving too fast and that you’d like more time. But the process we are using will only work well if we keep up a good pace. You’ll see by the end of the workshop why we have such a need for speed.” I have found that when I include a heads-up like this in my introduction, people are willing to do their part to keep up the pace.
- **Encourage cooperation.** Display your time schedule so everyone can see it. Do this for the entire workshop at the start, then for each task or exercise as you begin it. That way anyone can poke their head up from their group’s huddle and say, “Hey, we only have five minutes left for this part.” Don’t make people rely on you. Give them the information they need to manage their own time. And if you need to change an exercise halfway through it, update your schedule in real time.
- **Set up rituals.** Plan some reminding rituals to keep people on schedule. Choose rituals that are simple, respectful, and calm. For example, when I facilitate workshops in person, I use a little metal chime to provide five-minute and two-minute warnings. The sound reminds people that they should wrap up their conversations, but it’s pleasant and not judgmental. I haven’t yet found a way to broadcast a chime into online breakout rooms, so instead I send a pleasant-sounding message such as “Hi everyone! Five minutes left!”

### **Reshuffling small groups**

Mixing people in different ways as your workshop goes on exposes them to new experiences and perspectives. Normally this is a great benefit to sensemaking, but it will not work in every situation. If your workshops are short, your topic is sensitive, you have little facilitation experience, or your participants are fearful or distrusting, reshuffling might not be right for your workshop.





As I explained on page 192, you can split up into groups in four ways: in advance (look at your name tag), using an ice-breaking activity (find two people with a similar hobby), using a simple rule (find two people from different departments), or with no explanation at all (form groups of three). The following table shows all the ways you can chain the four methods together, sorted by how well I have seen them work in practice.

First	Second	Useful?
Ice-breaker	Rule	
Rule	Ice-breaker	Yes, always! Livens things up (but explain why you are doing it, so it is not seen as a correction)
Just form groups	Ice-breaker	
Assignment	Assignment	Useful when motivation is low but trust is high and the topic is not sensitive
Assignment	Rule	
Ice-breaker	Ice-breaker	Good if motivation is high, but being asked to do the same thing twice can be annoying
Rule	Rule	
Just form groups	Rule	Fine as long as people don't see the rule as a criticism
Assignment	Ice-breaker	Useful when people will warm up to participation slowly, but not when people are distrustful
Any other method	Assignment	Never; could be seen as correcting the initial groups
Any other method	Just form groups	Never; people will go back to the same groups

## Watching for churning

You've made your plans and rehearsed your explanations, and now you're in your workshop watching people work. They have finished your contact task and had a break, and now they're starting in on your sensemaking exercise. How can you tell if they're churning? What should you look for? Look for *surprise and curiosity*.

Times of transition are good times to look for churning.

- When you bring people back together from a task and give them new instructions, you should feel a buzzy sense of curiosity about what will happen next. If people are reluctant to move on and try new things, churning is probably not happening.
- When groups are telling everyone what happened during their previous task, they should spill over the time you give them to talk. If they have little to say, churning is probably not happening.
- During breaks, if you are meeting in-person, you should pick up a feeling of release and an air of accomplishment. (Online, you can pick up the same feeling when people come back from a break.) If things are going really well, there will be a hint of a party atmosphere, with scattered laughter and some camaraderie. If there is only an awkward silence, churning is probably not happening.

Another good time to look for churning is when people are working in small groups.

Churning sounds like	Not like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I never thought of ___ that way before.</li> <li>• That's a great idea. Why didn't we think of that before?</li> <li>• I never realized that ___ might see ___ like that.</li> <li>• This gives us a whole new way of thinking about ___.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is pretty much what I expected.</li> <li>• I liked the story about the ____. It was funny.</li> <li>• We're supposed to be finding patterns, right? I don't see any.</li> <li>• This is just anecdotal evidence, isn't it?</li> </ul>

I don't know if the difference between these sets of statements is obvious to you. I wonder if a metaphor would help. When I hear people say things like those on the left, they seem to me like explorers who have reached a mountain peak and are looking out on a landscape they have never seen before. That's exactly where I want them to be.

When I hear people saying things like those on the right, they seem to me like explorers who have lost their way and can hardly make out the path in front of them. I take this as a signal that I should try to help them find their way to a better path.

## Intervening to support churning

Don't jump to fix a lack of churning right away. Wait and watch for a while. The situation might resolve itself on its own. Someone might encounter a story that piques their curiosity, or they might suddenly see the point of an exercise they thought was pointless, or they

might finally feel safe enough to explore their feelings. Churning often starts with one or two people and spreads to the people around them.

But if you've waited and watched for a while, and you still don't see any churning going on, there are some things you can do.

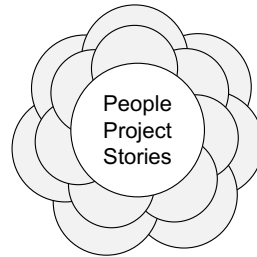
- **Supplement.** Your story collection might not have enough relevance and meaning to support sensemaking—for these people at this moment. If you think this is happening, *supplement your collection* by inserting some story sharing into your sensemaking. You can do this at multiple points within each exercise. For example, if your participants are building a timeline, you can ask them to tell (and add) their own stories at almost any time during the exercise.
- **Clarify.** Your introduction (to the workshop or the exercise) might have been lacking. It might not have given people an adequate understanding of what it means to work with stories and why you have asked them to do it. If you think this is happening, *make a pitch* to your participants. Give them a short break (during which you furiously prepare), then deliver a two-minute talk on “questions you might have.” Say the same things you said before, but *say them more simply and clearly*. See if you can reboot the workshop with more clarity and purpose.
- **Adapt.** Your exercise might not be working. It might be too difficult, confusing, intimidating, boring, touchy-feely—too *something*—to help these people talk about this topic at this moment. If you think this is happening, *change the exercise*. Sure, you gave people an agenda for it; but that doesn't mean you can't fix it if it's not working. Give everyone a break, then ask them how the exercise is going.
  - If they say they are confused and don't understand what they should do, explain the exercise again in simpler terms. If that doesn't help, offer to visit each small group as they work, one at a time, to provide support. If that doesn't help, simplify the exercise. For example, if people are having a hard time placing stories on two dimensions, you can suggest they drop back to placing them on one.
  - If they say they are bored by the exercise, complicate it. Add an elaboration or give them more options to choose from. If that doesn't help, show them some other exercises you can facilitate. Maybe they'd like to build some what-if scenarios.
  - If they say the exercise is emotionally overwhelming, fall back to a simpler task like sorting or pairing. Let them spend more unstructured (or barely structured) time with the stories and with their own feelings. Afterwards, ask if they would like to approach the exercise again (or a simpler one).
- **Listen.** People might be holding back from engaging with the topic, the stories, or each other due to disinterest, distrust, or conflict. If you think this is happening, *talk to your participants*. Give them a break, then ask how the workshop (not the exercise) is going.
  - If they say the project's topic has nothing to do with them, ask if there is a sub-topic (within or at least connected to the overall topic) that *does* have to do with them. Then put your plans aside and do a mini-project on that subtopic. Ask them to share some stories about it, then help them work with *those* stories. Afterwards, ask if they'd like to juxtapose their stories with the stories in your collection.

- If they say they don't know each other well enough to work together, switch gears to an impromptu story-sharing session. Help them get to know each other a little better. Then ask if they would like to try a sensemaking exercise (maybe a simpler one).
- If they say they don't like how you are running the workshop, give them more control over it. Tell them that *you are there to help them*, not the other way around. Ask them what they would like to do in the remainder of the workshop, and listen to what they say. Then suggest a task or exercise that might help them achieve those goals.

If you can't think fast enough to make these changes during your actual workshop, don't worry. It takes a lot of facilitation skill to redesign a workshop in mid-flight. Just stick to your original plan, support your participants as well as you can, watch what is happening, and think about how you can build a better plan for your next workshop.

## Planning and facilitating the convergence phase

Convergence in sensemaking is the pulling together that takes place after people, project, and stories have been mixed and remixed many times. Rivulets become streams and streams become rivers.



Convergence begins when workshop participants start looking forward to *the legacy of their involvement* in the workshop. They start thinking about what might persist after the workshop is over and what effect the workshop might have on their team, family, community, or organization.

During the convergent phase:

- Participants develop a sense of connection to the stories they worked with in the workshop: the stories that surprised them, that resonated with them, that inspired them to tell stories of their own. All of those stories, and the story of their participation in the workshop, enter into the larger story of their place in the team, family, community, or organization.
- Participants come to know each other better, either individually or in their roles in the community or organization. Though differences persist, gaps in understanding shrink.
- The many projects in the minds of the participants negotiate compromises and linkages. They may never merge to become one grand project, but they find common ground.

In exactly the same way as for churning, there are three things you can do to create convergence in your sensemaking workshops: plan for it; watch for it; and intervene if it's not happening.

## Planning for convergence

What conditions should you set in place to help convergence happen? Should you set an explicit goal? Should you *tell* people to seek convergence? That won't make it happen. Saying "I want us all to come together" sounds like either a Beatles song or doublespeak for "you will do what I say."

Also, that's not how sensemaking works. Goals in sensemaking are like the garden path Alice walked in *Through the Looking Glass*: the harder you pursue them, the further they recede. Narrative sensemaking in particular avoids directly addressing specific goals by passing through the indirect medium of story. You could say it walks away from explicit goals in order to arrive at them by a more scenic (thus more enlightening) path.

So if not explicit goals, what should you put in place? I find it's best to set up *expectations* and *tasks*. Expectations help people understand the social context of the workshop, and tasks give them something to do with their hands and minds.

### **Setting expectations**

To create an expectation that convergence is going to happen, talk about collaboration, emergence, and independence.

**Collaboration.** When you talk to your participants, talk about building a *coherent yet internally complex composite* that draws together many perspectives on your topic. Do not imply that they will be working alone, and do not imply that you expect them to come to a single conclusion that resolves or suppresses all differences. Avoid majority-rule words like identify, define, determine, vote, decide, and conclude. Use every-voice words like speak, listen, share, express, respond, gather, collect, bring together, assemble, and convene.

**Emergence.** Talk to your participants about *discovering emergent patterns* in the stories you collected and in their subjective responses to them. Do not imply that they will amassing evidence or advancing arguments through objective analyses. Avoid analytical words like inspect, assess, investigate, evaluate, and study. Use interpretive words like consider, think about, talk about, ponder, learn, and contemplate.

**Independence.** Remember how I said you shouldn't ask for input on your workshop plan at the *start* of the workshop (page 306)? Remember how I said it might derail the workshop if you shared control of the plan up front? That wasn't the right time for it. This is. In the convergent phase of sensemaking, begin to fade into the background. Continue to provide guidance, but do it in a looser way than you did before. Give your participants more latitude to take the workshop into their own hands.

### **Wrapping up your sensemaking exercise**

The sensemaking exercises described in Chapter 12 all end with some wrapping-up tasks.

1. Each small group talks about the patterns they see in what they have built—themes, clusters, gaps, boundaries, phases—and what those patterns might mean.
2. Everyone talks about the larger patterns they see as they compare the things each small group built and said, and they talk about what those larger patterns might mean.

3. Everyone talks about the exercise itself: what it was like, what they learned from it, what surprised them, and what they are curious to explore next.

If you are chaining exercises together, you can shorten the “everyone together” portions down to a quick five minutes. But for the last (or only) exercise in your workshop, save at least ten minutes for each of these times. This will help people begin to move into the convergent phase of sensemaking.

### ***Building and discussing wrap-up lists***

One way to bring closure to a sensemaking workshop is with a list-making activity. Building a wrap-up list helps participants *tell the story of the workshop* to those who did not attend it and gives them a chance to express their wishes and concerns.

These are some ideas for lists you can help people build. For each I have listed some prompts you can use (or adapt) to help people write list items.

Items	Prompt
Discoveries	We were surprised to find out ____.
Learnings	Hearing about ____ helped us to understand ____.
Perspectives	When we saw how ____ experienced/saw ____, we felt/thought ____.
Differences	When we saw how ____ and ____ experienced/saw ____ differently, we felt/thought ____.
Connections	When we saw that ____ and ____ shared ____, we felt/thought ____.
Curiosities	Seeing ____ made us wonder ____.
Dilemmas	When we saw ____, we wondered whether ____ or ____.
Concerns	When we saw ____, we became concerned about ____.
Ideas	Seeing ____ gave us an idea: ____.
Opportunities	Hearing about ____ made us realize that ____ could ____.
Suggestions	Seeing ____ led us to suggest that ____.

Note how each of these prompts is *a story people can tell* about the experience they had in the workshop. You don't have to use these exact prompts, but you do need to find a way to give people permission to express their feelings, values, and beliefs about what happened to them in the workshop in their own words. Don't let them get the idea that they are building lists to come to definitive conclusions (they can't), to be judged (they won't be), or to set policy (they can't, probably). They are building lists to make sense of what happened and to be heard and understood.

I find it works best to give people two or three lists to build, not just one. That way each participant can find something they would like to add. You can come up with your own

list types, and you can give (motivated) participants a choice of list types or the option to come up with their own.

As for filling the lists, you can ask people to think of list items:

- individually (and anonymously) during a time of private reflection
- during small-group discussions (followed by a report-back period)
- during a whole-workshop discussion

Which is best will depend on how comfortable your participants will be adding list items in front of their fellow participants.

You can ask people to write on (or put sticky notes on) a whiteboard (in-person or online), or you can write down what people say. In either case, ask people to keep their list items brief but clear. Make sure they understand that the lists they write will be featured in the workshop report. (Then make sure you do feature them.)

**Optional elaborations.** If you have a motivated group and some extra time, you can plan a more complex list-making activity.

- **Ask why.** You can ask people to write on each list item why that item matters to them. This can give them an extra opportunity to express their enthusiasm (or concern) about their list items. But don't use this elaboration if your participants are suspicious or fearful. They might take it as a requirement to justify their list items.
- **Illustrate items with stories.** You can ask people to choose 1-3 stories to illustrate each list item. This will give them an *indirect* way to express their enthusiasm (or concern) about their list items, and it will work even if they are suspicious or fearful.
- **Play a list-making game.** You can create a more interactive exercise by combining list items. Split people into small groups, then ask each group to come up with two (or three) pairs (or trios) of items, such as:
  - discoveries that present both concerns and opportunities
  - suggestions based on perspectives
  - curiosities about differences

You can choose combinations in advance or ask people to think of them on the spot. You can ask each group to prepare to tell everyone about their list items, or you can ask them to add their items to a shared space (in person) or document (online).

- **Cluster list items.** If you think people will build long lists, say of 20 items or more (per list), set aside 5-10 minutes for them to cluster the list items, placing similar items closer to each other. This will make the lists easier to understand, refer to, and use.
- **Connect to other methods.** Many decision support methods start where narrative sensemaking leaves off, so another way to wrap up sensemaking is to link it to a second method of decision support. Especially if PNI has been a hard sell to your community or organization (or funders), using it as a precursor to another method (perhaps a more widely known one) could bolster support for your project. Many checklists, scorecards,

models, and other structured planning methods can input the output of a narrative sensemaking exercise. For example:

- In **SWOT analysis**, participants list Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. These list elements can be drawn out of the stories, patterns, and themes discussed in sensemaking.
- In **Causal Layered Analysis**, participants consider issues at four levels: official explanations; systemic causes; worldviews and discourses; metaphors and myths. Stories, patterns, and themes discovered in sensemaking can help to build each CLA layer.
- **Scenario planning** is another activity that starts with list-making. You can start a scenario planning session by listing stakeholders, trends, driving forces, and uncertainties you discovered during narrative sensemaking.

### ***Choosing and discussing convergent stories***

A simpler way to wrap up sensemaking is to ask people to *choose some stories to highlight* in the workshop record.

Three types of *convergent stories* are likely to rise to the surface of a sensemaking workshop: *pivot* stories, *voice* stories, and *discovery* stories. You can prepare to help your participants select and discuss some stories of each of these types.

**Pivot stories.** As workshop participants follow threads of connection, they will sometimes find themselves saying, “Look, there’s *that* story again.” Those are the pivot stories.

Pivot stories keep coming up because they are *situated at the intersections* of the collection. In pivot stories, all of the things that matter in the project come together. Trust meets rebellion, or the official story meets the ground truth, or the reason nobody will talk about the problem meets the reason nobody will fix the problem. It’s all in there. Read them and you can see what the project is about.

**Voice stories.** These are the stories that sing out, that beg to be heard, that have wings and are poised to fly. They are memorable because they break through barriers of misunderstanding, assumption, and reluctance. They bring perspectives or experiences that are not widely known into wider awareness. Voice stories involve some risk to their tellers, but they also include relief and gratitude for the chance to finally speak out.

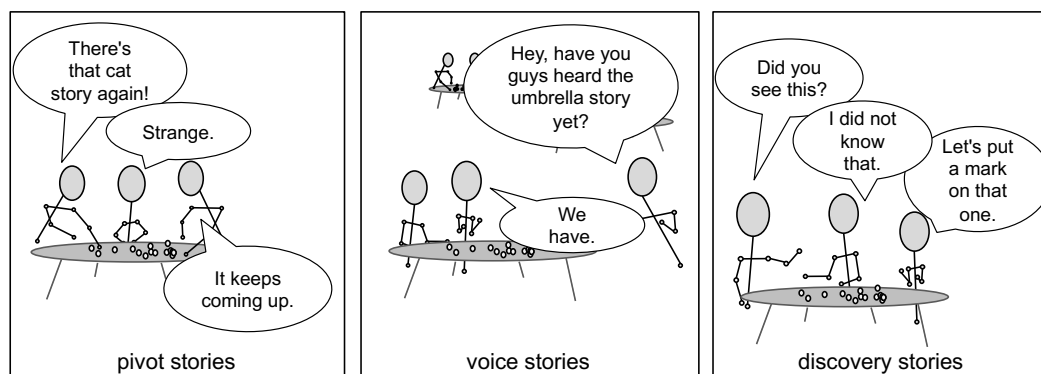
**Discovery stories.** These stories solve mysteries. They are not particularly memorable or intersectional, but they are surprising. You could also call them “aha” stories. When people encounter a discovery story, they say, “Oh, is *that* how it is?” or, “I didn’t know *that*.”

Of course, whether a story contains a discovery depends on who is doing the discovering. A discovery for one person might be something another person thinks everyone knows and still another person thinks is an outright lie. That’s fine, because discovery stories are not about *facts*; they are about *perspectives*. A discovery story reveals “how it is” not in general but *to a person in a context from a perspective*. A discovery story is one in which people discover things about the experiences of others that they had not understood before.

Discovery stories create *bridges of understanding* among the people who told the stories, the people who made sense of the stories, and the people who were not involved in



the project at all. The best discovery stories grow stories of their own, stories in which understandings change from one state (before encountering the story) to another (after). These larger stories enter into and change the stories of the workshop, the project, and the team, family, community, or organization.



**Facilitating the selection of convergent stories.** Don't ask for pivot stories, voice stories, and discovery stories by name. Official-sounding labels can intimidate people or push them out of discovering and into performing. Instead, use indirect questions like these:

1. Were there any stories that *kept coming up* for you today? Did you ever say to each other, "Hey, there's that story again"? Which stories were like that for you?
2. Which stories *cried out to be heard* today? Which stories did you find yourself wanting to tell to everyone in the workshop, or outside it?
3. Which stories *surprised* you the most today? Which stories *taught* you something? Which stories do you want to *remember* the most?

You can ask these questions in a whole-workshop discussion, or you can ask each small group to choose some stories, then describe or retell the stories to the whole workshop. In either case, ask people to also explain *why* they chose each story and what it means to them. Then write the story names (and summarize the explanations) on a whiteboard under three headings (e.g., stories that kept coming up, stories that cried out to be heard, stories that surprised us).

Don't mention convergent stories until you get to the wrapping-up part of your workshop. Don't even say that you will be asking people to pick out stories. Convergent stories can only be found in retrospect, after participants have been working with the story collection for some time. If you ask people to look for them at the start of the workshop, they won't find them.

**Choosing and discussing convergent patterns.** If you used catalytic material in your exercise (and motivation is high), you can ask your participants to list convergent patterns as well as convergent stories.

1. Pivot patterns are like pivot stories, but instead of saying "there's that story again" people will say "there's that pattern again." Participants can highlight them to help people who did not attend the workshop understand what it was about.

2. Voice patterns cry out for greater and wider attention. Participants can highlight them for wider discussion or action in the community or organization.
3. Discovery patterns are the closest a sensemaking workshop can get to the findings of an analytical study. Participants can highlight them for further discussion or exploration (maybe in a new, more focused project) after the workshop is over.

You can ask people to pick out convergent patterns using the same questions you use to help them choose convergent stories; just say “patterns” instead of “stories.” But don’t do this if your workshops are short or your participants are apathetic. Most people don’t find this activity as interesting as picking out stories.

### ***One wrapping-up activity or two?***

Should you ask your participants to build lists *and* select stories? Maybe. If your project is ambitious, your participants are motivated, and you have enough time, you can do both activities. If you do, ask them to choose stories first. It will improve the list-making activity.

On the other hand, if your project has modest goals, your sensemaking time is short, or your participants are not strongly motivated, you will probably want to choose just one wrap-up activity. Which one? If your participants are apathetic, suspicious, or fearful, use a story-selecting activity. It’s the simpler and safer option. Being asked to build a list can seem annoying to the apathetic, intimidating to the fearful, and controlling to the distrusting. But everyone loves (and nobody minds) picking out stories.

Whether you use a list-making activity, a story-selecting activity, or both, *don’t end your workshop without a wrapping-up activity*. It will give your participants the last word on how their experiences and perspectives will be represented in the workshop record you are helping them to build.

### ***Convergence under special conditions***

There are some specific conditions under which convergence is not likely to happen without some special attention. As you plan your sensemaking workshop(s), think about whether any of these conditions are likely so you can adapt your plan to account for them.

**Disinterest.** People who don’t care about or don’t feel connected to your topic (or your stories or the other people in the workshop) might not want to bother putting any energy into convergence. They might not see the point of wrapping up something that didn’t matter to them in the first place.

If you think this reaction is likely, convert your sensemaking workshops into story-sharing-and-sensemaking workshops, essentially changing them into mini-projects. You can still use the stories you previously collected, but make them optional and peripheral, and give people plenty of opportunities to share stories of their own. Even if the topics people want to talk about are not quite what you planned, and even if they have no interest in the stories you so painstakingly collected, you can still carry out productive workshops that people will be eager to draw to a successful close.

**Fear.** People who are nervous about speaking up in public might be fine in the earlier parts of the workshop, when the things they say will be lost in an ocean of conversation.

Even if they know you are recording the workshop, they might think nobody will want to wade through all of those details. (And they're right; nobody does.) But when it comes to wrapping up the workshop, they might suddenly fall silent because *what they say is starting to matter*.

If you think this reaction is likely, *be exceptionally transparent* about:

- who will have access to workshop recordings (audio, video, photographs)
- how you will provide anonymity as you prepare the workshop record
- what the workshop record will look like
- whether and how participants will be able to review and change or retract their contributions to the workshop record
- who will have access to the workshop record and what they will be allowed to do with it

You don't have to spend half an hour telling people about these plans. Just make sure everyone knows that the plans are *available*, either in written form or in your own knowledge. During breaks, you may see a few people hovering over the document you placed on a table or in a web document, or a few people may pull you aside with questions.

**Conflict.** People who experience conflict in a sensemaking workshop might hold back in the wrapping-up activity because they want to avoid being blamed for the conflict, exposing it to view, or making it worse. If you think this reaction is likely, help your participants build a *nested story*, a multi-dimensional, multi-perspective portrait of the workshop as it was experienced by its participants. Here's how:

- Use your workshop introduction to *establish an expectation of nesting*. If you aren't sure what to say about nested stories, look back at what I wrote about the "Stories nest" PNI principle on page 80, and say something like that.
- If you use a story-selecting wrap-up activity, for each convergent story people pick out, ask them to *choose at least one additional story that represents a different point of view*. Ask them to represent the full spectrum of perspectives they encountered and expressed during the workshop, not just a dominant or preferred subset.
- If you use a list-making wrap-up activity, pay special attention to the "Perspectives," "Differences," and "Connections" list items, and consider combining them with other list types, such as "Learnings about differences" or "Curiosities about perspectives." Help your participants *tell the whole story* of the workshop—including its conflicts—without censorship, but in a way that respectfully represents the diverse perspectives involved.

**Despondency.** There are two ways in which despondency can lead people to drop out of participation during the convergent phase of sensemaking:

1. When people with different levels of status work together in a workshop, lower-status participants sometimes drop out of convergence out of avoidance or fatalism because they believe that the higher-status participants will inevitably drown them out.
2. If *everyone* in the workshop is of low status in the community or organization, they might *all* balk at wrapping up the workshop because they believe the entire workshop will be ignored by the higher-status world around them. They might want to avoid the

unpleasant experience of getting their hopes up only to have them dashed after the workshop is over.

If you think lower-status people will clam up in front of higher-status people, don't ask them to come to the same workshops. If you realize during the wrapping-up part of a workshop that you shouldn't have mixed the people in it, use a story-selecting activity (it's safer) or ask everyone to quietly submit their list items (or stories) to you for anonymous assembly after the workshop.

If you think *everyone* in a workshop will expect to be ignored, come prepared to explain your plans to record the workshop and to prepare the record for use in decision support. But don't just explain what *you* will do. In their eyes (and maybe in reality), you might be as powerless as they are. Prove to your participants that your project (and your workshop) has the support of whoever actually does make decisions for the community. Even if that support is limited, tell them about it. Be transparent about what they will actually be able to accomplish. Also, tell them *what they can do* with the workshop record themselves.

**Superiority.** Higher-status participants sometimes do exactly what lower-status participants worry they will do: take over the convergent phase of sensemaking (when things start to matter) and drown out the voices of everyone around them. I've also seen higher-status people walk out of sensemaking when it has reached the convergent phase. They actually *do* get to say what will happen after the workshop is over, so why should they stick around and listen to the little people complain? What they don't realize is that walking away has as much of a dampening effect as taking over.

This isn't usually much of a problem, honestly, because high-status people don't usually want to participate in sensemaking workshops. They just want to see an executive summary of a report. But if you run into a high-status person who does want to participate in sensemaking, ask them to discuss their participation up front. During the contact task and the first part of the sensemaking exercise, ask them to contribute to the discussion, reminding them to listen as much as they talk. But when it is time to wrap up the exercise and the workshop, ask them to be silent, present, and respectfully attentive. If they are not willing to do that, ask them not to come to the workshop at all.

## Watching for convergence

Now that we've covered planning for convergence, let's talk about observing it. What does convergence look like? As I mentioned above, it looks like collaboration, emergence, and independence. Participants should work together to make the workshop their own.

### **Watching for collaboration**

When a sensemaking workshop is in a convergent phase, people should be collaborating at two levels: within each small group, and across the whole workshop. But small-group convergence drives whole-workshop convergence. If people are working well together in each small group, the effect will bubble up to affect the whole workshop.

Collaboration doesn't have to look like *agreement*. But it should look like *awareness*, *negotiation*, and *representation*. These are all things you can observe.

**Awareness.** When people in groups are aware of each other, they pay attention to what everyone is doing. You will hear them say things like this:

- What do you think is a good name for this story?
- I can relate to that. Do you want to hear what happened to me?
- Oh, you're writing down two perspectives? That's a good idea. Are we all doing that?

When people in groups are *not* aware of each other, they act as if they are in their own little bubbles. The fact that they are sitting *next* to other people, and that they have been *asked* to work with those other people, means nothing to them. As far as they are concerned, they are in a room with you (nobody ignores the facilitator) and a bunch of cardboard cutouts. When this happens you will hear people saying things like this:

- (to the facilitator) I'm done with my questions. What should I do next?
- (to the group) I have a story to tell. I'm supposed to tell it to *you*, right?
- (to nobody in particular) I'm putting this sticky note right here.

I sometimes see this behavior in people who are used to authority. They are most comfortable lecturing to an audience or being respectfully interviewed, so being asked to *work in a group* seems like an insult to their dignity. These aren't bad people; they are just used to a different way of working together. Your task is help them understand what they need to do to make sensemaking work.

You might think the same pattern of unawareness would come up in people who are so *unused* to being heard that they don't feel qualified to participate in the group you asked them to work with. But I've watched these people. They have an *abundance* of awareness, not a lack. People who want to be included (and don't think they are) pay a lot of attention to those who *are* included, just in case the door opens for them. The door should be open for them, but you may need to help them see it.

**Negotiation.** When people in a group are negotiating with each other, they don't act on their own. They talk about *what the group is going to do*. They ask questions, propose ideas, and discuss plans. You will hear them say things like this:

- How many of these do we have? Is this enough?
- I have an idea. Let's put these three stories here. What do you think?
- I suggest we use the 1986 election as the start of our timeline.

People who are not negotiating view the tasks you set out for them as *their own tasks*, not the group's tasks. They also tend to keep their own stories (whether they told them or chose them) close to their chests, almost *protecting* them from the other group members. When people do that, they are in a group of one, and they will say things like this:

- I don't know what *you're* doing, but *I'm* listing three characters per story.
- I finished my part of the timeline.
- These three stories are mine, and those two are yours.

This doesn't usually happen to everyone in a group at once. Often you will see groups where some people are working together and some aren't. Maybe three people will be negotiating while one person is off doing their own thing.

This is where the I'm-not-qualified-to-be-here people stand out. They don't feel they have any standing to negotiate, so they don't. They just wait to be told what to do by those in charge. If you notice this dynamic, it might take just a nudge to empower such a person to speak up, or to remind other group members to include everyone in their negotiations.

**Representation.** What I mean by representation is that people in a group *call themselves something*. They represent their group, to you and to other groups, with some kind of unified description: a name, a motto, a theme, a competence, or a defining characteristic. When people have created a group representation, you will hear them say things like this:

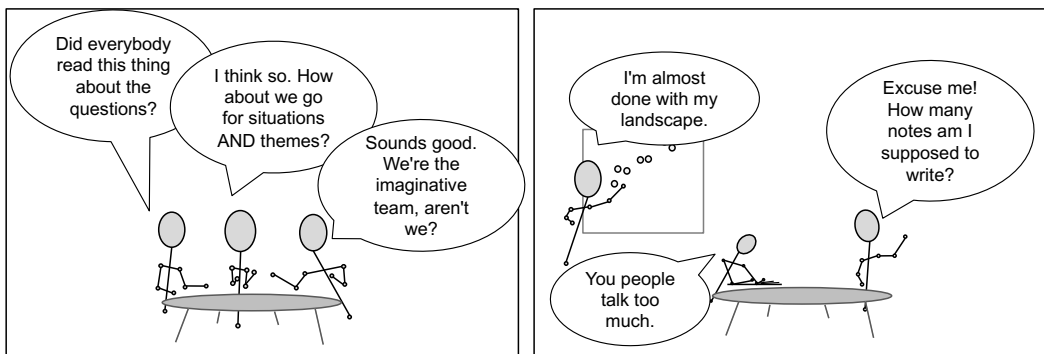
- Let's call ourselves "the smart group."
- It sounds like the theme of our group is "phoenix rising from the ashes."
- Look, our landscape has more stories than theirs.

When people *haven't* created a group representation, you will hear things like this:

- My stories all seem to be about dogs.
- Why do you keep mentioning stories about betrayal? What are you, the betrayal corps?
- You people are taking this activity way too seriously. You're such over-achievers.

Notice how all of these statements set up the individual as *separate* from the group. Some of the statements even make up names, but with a clear understanding that the speaker is *outside* the name.

When I hear people in a group creating a name or theme for themselves, I smile, because I know *that* group will discover useful insights. When people start thinking of themselves as a team that does things together—despite their differences—they start doing things together.



**An aside on competition.** You might have noticed a hint of competition among groups in the positive-representation list above ("our landscape has more stories than theirs"). Should you *encourage* groups to compete with each other?

Maybe. For some participants, competition can make a workshop more interesting. I've even heard of facilitators giving out points for doing assigned tasks and posting a "scoreboard" with team results. Some people love that sort of thing. But for others, myself included, competition sucks the fun out of sensemaking. The surest way to get me out of a room is to set up a competition. What I love is synergism and mutual aid.

So whether you should liven up your sensemaking by encouraging inter-group competition depends on the people you expect to attend the workshop. If you think they will respond well to it, by all means set it up. If you think they will be turned off by it, put it aside.

If you can't guess how people will respond, or if you think different groups will respond differently, you can use hints instead of rules to leave the door open to competition for those who like it. For example, you could include a brief "walkabout" period in your schedule, in which you give groups the option of either continuing to work on their creations or walking around the room looking at what *other* groups have produced. That way people who want to compete (or just wander and look and get inspired) can do that; and people who would rather focus on their own group creation can do that.

### ***Watching for emergence***

Emergence in sensemaking looks like *small things joining up to form larger things*. Each of the sensemaking exercises described in Chapter 12 was designed to help people discover common elements (such as themes, situations, patterns, and so on) that appear across many stories. You should see this happening as people work their way through whatever sensemaking exercise they are using. For example:

- Near the end of a twice-told stories exercise, you might hear someone say, "Isn't it interesting that we all chose stories about trust?" That's a common theme.
- Near the end of a landscape exercise, you might hear someone say, "I'm intrigued by this group of stories where unpredictability meets abundance. They all seem to involve some kind of surprise." That's a common situation and a common outcome.
- Near the end of a story elements exercise, you might hear someone say, "These two characters represent our weaknesses, and these three represent our strengths." That's a pattern. (Story elements are themselves patterns, but larger patterns often appear among them.)

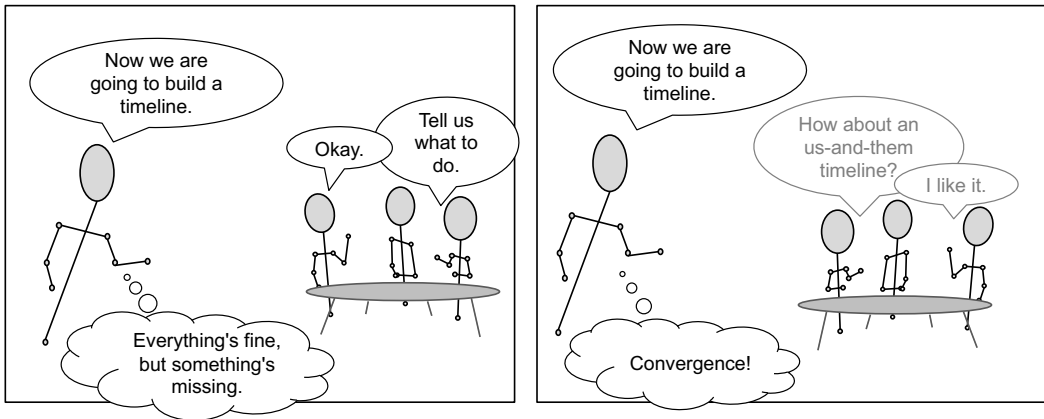
### ***Watching for independence***

If the people in your sensemaking workshop do *exactly* what you tell them to do, and not a bit more, or if they don't do what you say but don't do anything *else* either, they may not be achieving convergence. When people start finding common cause in a sensemaking workshop, they also start getting ideas about how they can tweak the workshop to make it better. For example:

- You might overhear a group saying something like: "What if we build *two* of these timelines, one from each perspective?"
- You might find six people in a huddle you didn't tell them to get into, frantically copying down names of stories for some new activity they want to squeeze into the schedule.

- You might ask people to choose three patterns, then come back to find out they chose two of one type and two of another.

So to watch for independence, *be on the lookout for small acts of rebellion*. When you see it: rejoice! It means your participants have found something they want to do together. Gently guide them, yes, if they are doing things that won't work; but don't say things like "We have to stick to the schedule." Because you *don't* have to stick to the schedule. You *want* the workshop to get away from you. That means it's working. A common purpose, and the energy to reach it, are more important than strict adherence to the plan.



### Intervening to support convergence

Don't put too much pressure on your participants to achieve convergence. Sometimes people aren't ready to arrive at (or admit to) discoveries, even when everyone can see them. Sometimes people need to both maintain and break down barriers. And a million other things can hold people back from reaching convergence, from assumptions to misunderstandings to recent events. Sometimes things just don't gel.

If people don't experience convergence *during* a sensemaking workshop, it doesn't mean they will *never* experience it. Sometimes a failure to converge is not so much a failure as much as it is feelings at work. Sensemaking without convergence can still have a positive impact, and convergence may still come to your participants days, weeks, or months later.

Having said that, if you want to intervene to help people achieve convergence, there are some things you can do.

#### ***If collaboration is weak***

Here are some things you can do if people are not collaborating as much as they could.

- **Awareness.** If you can see that the people in your small groups are ignoring each other, you can drop some quiet *reminders* about collaboration. My favorite way to do this is to sidle up to a small group (physically or online) and ask them an apparently stupid question in which a reminder is embedded. I'll say something like:
  - So how's it going choosing your [thing they were supposed to choose together]? What has everyone said about it?



- Just checking, I wasn't sure how long this would take. Has everyone had a chance to weigh in yet, or do you think you will need some more time?
- Hey, sorry, I forgot to tell you about [some thing you made up]. How does everyone feel about that?

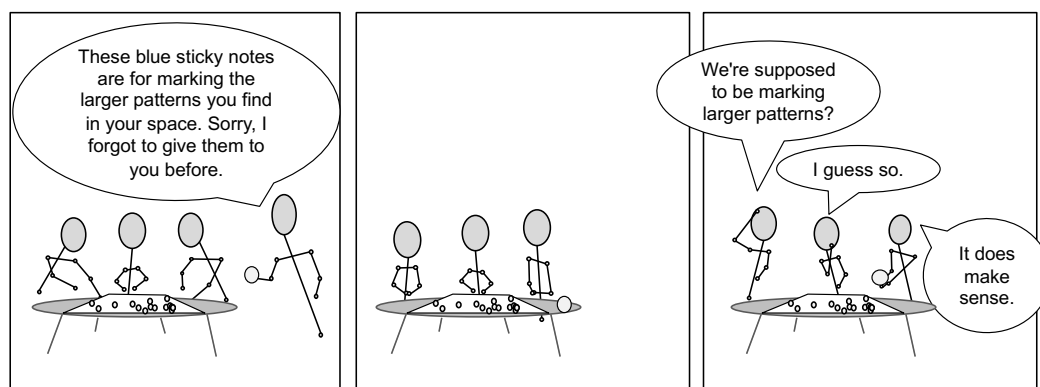
And so on. In other words, come up with a question you can ask while you are slipping in a subtle reference to collaboration. This way people will think they are helping the inept facilitator rather than being corrected.

- **Negotiation.** If you can see that people in groups aren't negotiating, wait for someone to pull you aside to ask you a question, then give your answer to their whole group. To avoid seeming to correct them, say something like, "Charlie has a great question, and you'll all want to hear the answer to this." Then answer the question. Doing this sends the message that you see the question asker as needing information *for the group*, not for themselves. (If nobody pulls you aside, fall back on the inept-facilitator trick.)
- **Representation.** There isn't much you can do if groups don't create group representations. However, you can use group representations as indicators of readiness. If you don't hear anyone giving their groups names or themes, you might want to scale back any planned activities that require strong teamwork. Or if things are going better than you expected—say each group has given itself a funny name, even though you never mentioned any such thing—you might want to offer a more ambitious activity.

### ***If emergence is weak***

During your sensemaking exercise, if you notice that a small group is not talking about any larger patterns, see if you can quietly nudge them in the direction of emergence. For example, you can:

- Give the group something to use to mark larger patterns with, like a new sticky-note color or a new marker.
- Remind the group they will have only a few minutes to sum up what they learned in the next report-back period (so they'll need to start drawing something together).
- Find a larger pattern in what the group has built or said, one you are genuinely curious about, and ask them about it in a "just wondering" sort of way.



Now, if *everyone* in the workshop isn't talking about larger patterns, you might need to make a more drastic change. Before your scheduled report-back period, give everyone a surprise 5-minute break to collect their thoughts. Then ask them to look back over what they built in the exercise one last time "to see if any more overall patterns come to mind."

You can also throw in an emergency report-back rule. Say something like, "I have an idea that I think you might like. When you tell everyone what your group found out in the exercise, *include one thing that surprised you.*" A concrete goal like this one—find a surprise to tell about—might give groups whose attention has been scattered a reason to focus.

### ***If independence is weak***

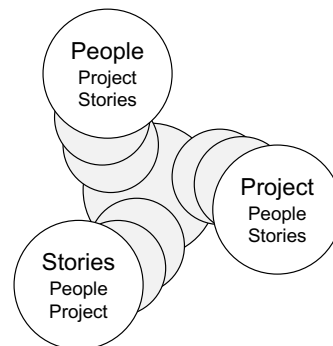
If people are doing only what you ask them to do, don't correct them. That will either cause them to try even harder to do what you seem to be asking them to do (interpretations may vary) or cause them to walk away from the workshop in frustration. Instead, look for fine-grained opportunities to support nascent rebellions.

For example, after you introduce a task to the whole workshop, quietly go around and observe what each small group is doing. If you notice that one group seems ready to do more independent work, say something like, "You might want to add a little something extra to your timeline. How about a third dimension? You seem to have a lot of ideas, and you have the time for it." You can even pre-select a small elaboration to have on hand for just such an opportunity.

## **Planning and facilitating the change phase**

In the last phase of sensemaking, people, project, and stories emerge transformed.

Change begins near the middle of the workshop and gains momentum as the workshop comes to a close.



During the change phase:

- Participants develop a new understanding of the project's topic based on the stories they heard and told. Some of the stories stay with them long after the workshop is over, and some are passed on and enter into the life of the team, family, community, or organization. The project's story collection is also changed by the people who worked with it. It grows to include more stories, interpretations, annotations, connections, and constructions.
- Participants develop a new understanding of their fellow participants. They may never see those *particular* people again, but they reason differently about people with those

*characteristics* afterwards. For example, a customer-facing staff member who has attended a sensemaking workshop *with* (not just about) customers is likely to come out of it with a different understanding of customers than they went in with, and the same will be true for the customers.

- These new understandings transform the goals and plans of the project and its participants. People come out of sensemaking workshops with new avenues for thought and discussion and new ideas for exploration and experimentation. Whether or not these avenues and ideas lead to interventions, they produce ripple effects that impact the entire community or organization.

The power of narrative sensemaking is power of transcendence. Since ancient times, people have listened to stories to rise above the plane of their individual, situated, limited viewpoints to a summit from which they can see and understand the entire landscape of perspectives around them and make sense of their place in it. The goal of sensemaking in PNI is to concentrate and focus this ancient practice to bring about transformative change.

Thus the goal of a sensemaking workshop is for its participants to begin by viewing a situation (legitimately and reasonably) from one perspective and end by viewing the same situation from a kaleidoscopic multitude of perspectives—without feeling that their own perspectives have been diminished or disqualified in any way.

## Planning for change

The first two phases of sensemaking (contact and churning) are shaped by the activities you choose, set up, and guide along. The third phase (convergence) depends mostly on what you set up in the first two phases, but you can still observe and intervene in it. The last phase (change) is not about what you *do*. It's about what *happens* because of the things you did before it got started—if you did them right.

So to talk about facilitating change, we can talk about setting expectations, and we can talk about watching change happen. But there is no point talking about intervention. Just as if you were baking a cake, you had better keep your hands out of the oven of change. You will get burned, and you'll probably ruin the cake anyway.

Am I saying you are powerless to create change in sensemaking? No, I'm not. In fact, you *are* the power that can make change happen. But to gain that power, you need to do some work *between* workshops.

Great cooks do much of their thinking between recipes. Chefs make the same dish dozens of times in succession, working to get the recipe just right. I'm no chef, but my banana bread recipe sits in my cookbook as a series of 20 sticky-note versions, starting from what I read in the book decades ago and moving forward, each recipe slightly different from the one below it, and ending with the current version on top.

My sensemaking workshop recipe sits in my mind in a similar way. Yours will too. That stack of experiences *is* your power to make change happen. But you must deliberately stack those experiences—that is, pause to reflect between workshops—if you want to improve your power to make change happen. We will talk about post-workshop reflection later (on page 340). Right now let's focus on preparation for change.

### **Setting expectations of change**

The example introduction on page 305 includes these words:

Finally, we'll end the workshop by talking about what happened in it and how it has changed our perspectives and our project.

That's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not only have you claimed that change is bound to happen; you have *set aside a time to discuss it*. People will notice this, and it will shape their expectations about what will happen, and their expectations will shape what happens.

You can also create an expectation of change—and of openness to change—in the way you talk to people throughout the workshop.

- When you tell the story of the project so far, mention any challenges you have faced. This will demonstrate your willingness to grow and change in support of your goals.
- When you describe your workshop agenda, communicate your curiosity about what will emerge in the workshop and how it will change you, your participants, the project, and the community or organization.
- When you introduce your stories, include a quick mention of how they have expanded your own awareness. Entice your participants with a vision of discovery.
- When you give your participants the instructions for your tasks and exercises, inspire them to open their minds, examine their assumptions, and broaden their horizons.
- When you listen to your participants during report-back and discussion periods (especially just after the contact task), appreciate their willingness to listen and learn.

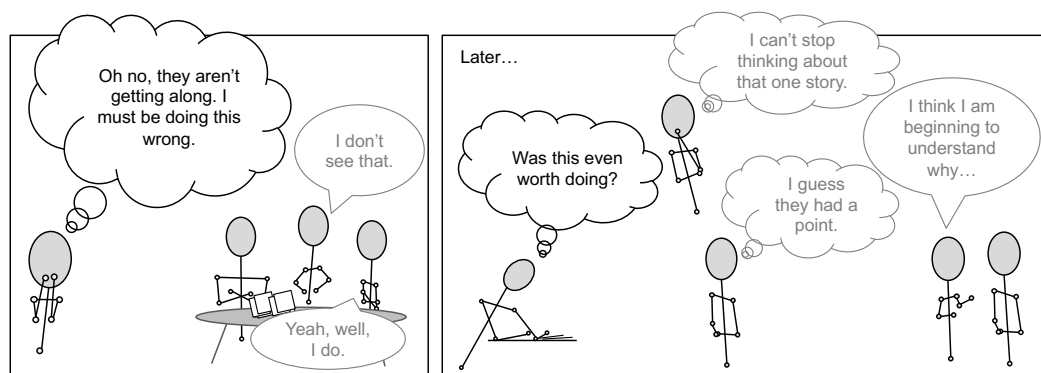
**An aside on going through the motions.** Beware of self-delusion about change, both in your participants and in yourself. It is possible to collect stories, convene participants, and conduct exercises that follow established recommendations perfectly, creating contact, churning, and convergence, all without breaking through to change. If nothing has changed as a result of a sensemaking workshop—if nobody thinks or feels differently than they did before it started—you may only have gone through the motions of sensemaking. You might have wanted to be able to *say* you supported change while actually protecting yourself against it. Or maybe you wanted to bring about change, but nobody else did.

The antidote to self-delusion is reflection. This is why, during the planning phase of your project, and again just before the sensemaking phase begins, you must explore your hopes and fears, think about your participants and the perspectives they will bring to your project, and test your plans and materials. The better map you can prepare, the better journey you can lead, and the better place you can get to.

**An aside on the limits of change.** Don't go too far in setting expectations of change. Don't pretend that everyone will leave the workshop in a state of post-cooperative bliss. That's not going to happen, and you don't need it to happen, and thinking it will happen or should happen could backfire. The best expectation to set up for a sensemaking workshop is that *we will be a working group*. We will *get things done together*, no matter how much we agree or disagree. Together we will see things we did not see before.

The goal of a sensemaking workshop is not to *cure* anything. It's not therapy, and you're not a therapist, so don't feel you've failed if people aren't holding hands and singing at the end. The goal of sensemaking is to arrive at new insights. If those insights are about the ways in which people don't (or can't or won't ever) agree on certain issues, that can still be a valuable result. I can recall sensemaking workshops that ended in people glaring at each other with arms folded. But the workshops weren't failures, because the people in them learned things they didn't know before, and the projects of which they were a part were able to use those insights to bring people closer together.

In fact, I'd say that if nobody ever gets angry or offended during a sensemaking workshop, you aren't digging very deep. Don't rile people up on purpose, of course, but don't rush to fix every uncomfortable moment. And don't set up the expectation that harmony will always prevail. Emphasize the synergy of discovery, not the balm of friendship.



### Planning the after-party

As your wrapping-up activity winds down, you will see people breathing sighs of relief. They will see that the workshop is drawing to a close (and you will soon stop asking them to do strange things), and they will see that their efforts have produced useful insights. As a result, they will naturally begin to slide into talking about the workshop itself. That's the beginning of the after-party.

There is always a sort of glow during the after-party. People speak more freely, move more loosely, laugh more readily. The greater the mayhem during the workshop, the more the after-party feels like a party, because there is more of an accomplishment to celebrate.

Why does the after-party matter? For two reasons.

**Inevitability.** The after-party will happen whether you support it or not. This workshop has been an *event* in the lives of these people. They need to process it while it is still fresh in their minds.

When you are planning a sensemaking workshop, you may be tempted to plan “productive” activities right up until the last moment of the workshop. Don't do that. I've seen what happens when you do. People leave the workshop and try to talk about it with people who weren't there—spouses, kids, people on the bus. It doesn't work, because nobody knows what they are talking about. They end up feeling unresolved and confused, and their feeling has an impact on the larger project. Maybe they don't volunteer to comment

on the workshop report. Or they dismiss the project when somebody asks them about it later. Or they don't get involved in the *next* project.

In Chapter 5, when I talked about story sharing in after-parties (page 61), I said:

When people get together to carry out a purposeful group activity, if it does not include the time or permission they need to share stories, they will come out of the interaction with a pent-up need for story sharing. If they are allowed to linger and chat in the space afterwards, they are likely to share stories then.

A sensemaking workshop is a purposeful group activity, and though it does include the time and permission to share stories, it does not include the time and permission to share stories *about the workshop itself*. Not unless you set aside a time for it and give people permission to do it.

**Utility.** Sometimes the best part of a sensemaking workshop happens after it ends. When people have time to sit around and chat about the workshop, they often say things they weren't ready to say before.

You might think people would say everything they have to say during the wrapping-up activity. But they often don't. They might feel pressured to say what is expected, or they might not want to rock the boat, or they might still be thinking things through. I have long noticed that the things people say in the after-party are more insightful and impactful than the things they say during the workshop proper. My guess is that this is because people have stopped trying to do what somebody else wants them to do.

It may seem a loss of your precious sensemaking time to let people sit around and chat. Indeed, planning a sit-and-chat time near the *start* of your workshop would be a waste of time. But at the *end* of the workshop, it's just right. Give your participants some time to make sense of their sensemaking experience together. Everyone will be helped by it: them, you, and the project you have worked so hard to support.

Now, assuming I've convinced you to support the after-party, what should you do in it?

**Celebrate.** Plan something special for the end of the workshop that signals to participants that they are done *accomplishing* things and can sit back and *reflect* on what they have done. The signal might be bringing out some sort of celebratory food, like pizza or baked goods (food is a powerful social signal). It might be handing out copies of something people built in the workshop (which you had your helpers furiously prepare in the last half hour). It could even be something as simple as playing music or opening doors or windows. Announcing the arrival of the after-party, instead of just allowing people to slide into it, creates a greater sense of release.

**Reflect.** Don't ask people to *do* anything during the after-party. Just invite them to reflect with you on the experience you all just had. Make a few positive comments on the workshop. Express your gratitude. Recount a high point or an amazing insight. Then ask your

participants a few casual questions, questions you chose in advance and practiced until they seem unpracticed. For example, you might ask:

- Being heard:
  - Is there a message you would like to convey to the people in our community who were not here with us today?
  - Is there anything you would like to say—to anyone about anything—that you didn't get a chance to say today?
  - Is there a story you didn't get to tell today but would still like to tell?
  - Is there anything else you would like to say about the experience you had here today?
- About the workshop:
  - What was this experience like for you? How did it feel?
  - If you were to sum up this experience in a single sentence, what would it be?
  - What did you think this experience was going to be like, and how did it surprise you?
  - What has changed for you because of this experience?
  - What did you learn from this experience?
- About the project:
  - Are you glad you came to this workshop? Why or why not?
  - Do you have any questions about the project and what will happen next in it?
  - What do you want to do now?
  - Do you want to stay involved in this project? Why or why not?
  - If you want to stay involved in this project, what would you like to do? [and maybe mention a list of options]
- Feedback:
  - Which parts of the workshop did you like most and least? What were the high and low points for you?
  - What did you think of the activities we did today? Which did you like most and least?
  - Was this workshop worth your time? Why or why not?
  - How could this workshop have been better?
  - If we were to run this workshop again, how would you suggest we change it?
  - What would you like to see happen next as a result of this workshop?

Whatever you do, don't *call* the after-party an after-party. When you show people your workshop agenda, call the after-party something like "reflection" or "celebration" or "closing." An after-party is a bit of a facilitation trick, like a magician's bag with a false bottom. If you *tell* people it will happen, it won't happen.

## Watching for change

Between the start and end of your sensemaking workshop, you should see changes in the ways people *think* and *feel* about your project, topic, and community or organization.

**A change in thinking.** When a sensemaking workshop ends well, its participants experience a new transcendence of thought. The things they say about the topic change in a way that indicates a broadening of the perspectives they brought to the workshop. For example:

If they say at the start	They might say at the end
How on earth could ___ think ___? I will never understand ___.	I am beginning to see how ___ might think ___. I don't ___, not at all, but I can see why ___.
There is no way ___ can/will/should ___. The situation is ___, and there is no point talking about it.	I was surprised to learn ___, I'm curious to learn more about ___, and I'd like to try ___.
I don't see why we should waste our time talking about ___. I/we already understand it.	There is a lot more to ___ than I thought. I would like to learn more about ___.
You'll never convince me that ___, so why are we talking?	I have learned so much about ___. I was particularly surprised to learn that ___.

**A change in feeling.** When a sensemaking workshop ends well, its participants experience a sense of satisfaction and a release of tension. Their speech and body language become more open and expressive. They begin to linger over tasks instead of rushing through them. They discover a new sense of curiosity about the project, asking questions they didn't care to ask before. When you see any of these things happening, you will know that people have experienced an emotional change as a result of their workshop experience.

Watch people during your after-party. If you can see transcendence, satisfaction, and release, you will know that change has happened. If not, reflect on what happened so you can support sensemaking even better in your next workshop.

## Your workshop record

There are several reasons you might want to make a record of a sensemaking workshop: to capture a once-in-a-lifetime event; to give your participants a voice; to help your project achieve its goals; to make the case for more use of PNI in the future; to improve your PNI practice; and to help other people learn how to use PNI.

There are also several reasons you might *not* want to make a workshop record: because your participants don't want to be recorded; because your participants don't trust you; because your topic is sensitive or private; because you have no budget for recording equipment; because you don't have time to process recordings; or because you just don't feel you need to record the workshop.

If making a record of the workshop will improve its utility to the project, make a record of it. If *not* making a record of the workshop will improve its utility more—which is sometimes the case—consider that option instead.



## What to include in your workshop record

Now I'll go over the things you might want to include in your workshop record.

**Summaries.** By this I mean a few brief sentences that sum up the major events of the workshop: what people explored, what they found out, how things played out. The best summaries come from the workshop participants themselves. You can ask people to sum up the workshop in their own words (in speech or writing) during the after-party. If that's not possible, you can write the summary yourself, but if you can, show it to your participants and ask if they'd like to add anything to it.

**Lists and/or stories.** You can record the lists people built (and/or the stories they selected) in your wrapping-up activity. You can record only the lists and/or stories, but you can also ask people to annotate each item or story with additional information (like why they chose it and why it matters to them).

**Constructions.** People build amazing things in sensemaking workshops: timelines, landscapes, story elements, composite stories, and so on. Sometimes these things convey meaning so well that they reach far out past the workshop and become touchstones people talk about for years afterwards. So it's important to capture them.

- If you are meeting in person, it is best to both save and photograph these constructions (in case either version is lost). This is one of the reasons I like to use giant sticky-note pads: you can peel them off the wall, roll them up, and take them home. Later, when you build your workshop record, you can reproduce the constructions in a way that makes them easier to read, like in a spreadsheet or a slide presentation program.
- If you are meeting online, you can simply save the documents people build and incorporate them into your report. (But make sure to back them up!)

Be careful not to place too much emphasis on constructions as workshop outcomes. You don't want anyone to get the idea that the point of the workshop is to build things. The point is to make sense of your topic. It's the *process* of building the things that helps people do that. The things themselves are of secondary value.

So why keep the things at all? *To tell the story of the workshop* to the people who weren't there. A workshop construction is like a sketchbook a traveler fills up on a journey. It helps the traveler think about each place they visit, and it helps them describe the journey to the people back home. But nobody goes on a journey just to fill a sketchbook.

**Audio or video recordings.** Should you record your entire workshop in audio or video format? I don't advise it. For most projects a whole-workshop recording is unnecessary and intrusive. It's better to record specific portions of the workshop.

Portion	Useful?	Welcome?	Notes
Your intro- duction and instructions	Maybe	Maybe	Recording yourself can help you improve your facilitation. If you record participant reactions, destroy the recordings after you review them, and don't include them in the workshop record.
Small-group work (telling new stories)	Maybe	Maybe	If you want to add newly told stories to your collection, ask people to record them and answer questions about them. It is best to do this lightly, letting people decide which stories they want to record.
Small-group work (not telling new stories)	Usually not	Usually not	You can give each group a recording device and <i>let them choose</i> what they want to record: their whole conversation, a few parts, a summary, or nothing. People who feel unheard might welcome the opportunity. But don't offer the option if you aren't prepared to process an unpredictable amount of material.
Report-back times, discussions, wrapping- up activity	Usually	Usually	These are good times to capture summaries of what happened in the workshop, and people usually don't mind being recorded during these times.
Descrip- tions of construc- tions	Always	Almost always	Giving people the opportunity to describe the things they built is an excellent way to make sure their voices are heard. People are usually willing to be recorded doing this, and the project will benefit from it. Cryptic constructions can be less than useful in the workshop record.
The after-party	Always	Almost always	The things people say in the after-party are usually worth noting, and people rarely mind being recorded in it.

## Your post-workshop review

As you plan your sensemaking workshop, save some time for a post-workshop review, just for yourself and any helpers you had in the workshop. Fifteen minutes per two hours of workshop time is a good ratio.

A post-workshop review will help you improve your facilitation methods and skills. Read any notes you made in the workshop; take some new notes; talk to yourself. Commit the workshop to memory. Replay in your mind what worked and what didn't. Recall every moment of disappointment, embarrassment, elation, pride, despair, mayhem. Think about what happened and what didn't, or didn't happen in the way you expected.

Here are some things you might want to think about as you review the workshop.

- **What happened.** Describe what happened in the contact, churning, convergence, and change phases of the workshop.
  - What happened when people first encountered the stories? How did they respond to them? How did they start working with them?
  - Did people tell any stories of their own? If so, what was that like?
  - What happened as people continued to work with the stories?
  - When did people seem the most comfortable or uncomfortable?
  - How and to what extent did things come together?
  - What went as you expected? What didn't?
  - What changes did you see between the start and end of the workshop?
- **Interactions.** How did people interact with each other? How did their interactions change as the workshop went on? Were any moments of interaction particularly important?
- **Stories.** Consider the stories people told, retold, chose, moved around, and built. How did the stories change as the workshop went on? Were any of the stories particularly important to the workshop participants? How so?
- **Context.** What was special about these people in this workshop at this time? How do you think the context of the workshop influenced what happened in it?
- **Impact.** How did the workshop change the overall project? Is there anything you want (or need) to do about that change?
- **Your facilitation.** How can you improve your facilitation based on this experience?
  - What was your plan for the workshop? In what ways did you stick to the plan, and in what ways did you depart from it?
  - How did the time go? Did you shorten or lengthen any time slots?
  - How was your introduction? What worked in it, and what didn't? How do you want to improve it the next time you use it?
  - When you gave people instructions for your tasks and exercises, did anything seem to come across especially well or poorly?
  - Did anyone seem energized, inspired, confused, irritated, or offended by anything you said? Is there anything you are glad you said? Is there anything you wish you had said, not said, or said differently?
  - How did the tasks and exercises go? Was there ever a moment when people seemed especially comfortable or uncomfortable? Engaged or disengaged? Collaborative or competing? Confident, fearful, or intimidated? Productive or unproductive?
  - How well did you do with managing discomfort, yours and your participants'?

- Were there any obstacles you were or were not able to help people overcome?
- If you could go back and facilitate the same workshop again, what would you do the same, and what would you do differently?
- **Your PNI practice.** What did you learn from this workshop that you want to incorporate into (or take out of) your PNI practice? What do you want to do the same and differently in your future workshops and projects?

As you end your reflections, write down your answers to all of these questions (and any more that spring to mind). Then write a list of things you want to remember, think about, experiment with, avoid, get feedback about—whatever—before your next workshop, whether it is in this project or another.

If you do all those things at the end of every sensemaking workshop you facilitate, your projects and skills will continue to improve.

## Finding your own sensemaking style

In the preceding sections I mentioned “your participants” often. Now it’s time to talk about you. If you can’t make sensemaking work for *you*, you can’t make it work. You can work on your skills in whatever areas give you pain, but until you do that, you need to go with your strengths. So what *are* your strengths when it comes to facilitating sensemaking? I can think of a few strengths you might have.

### Contagious enthusiasm

How much energy do you typically convey to the people around you? What do people say you are? A whirlwind? A quiet person? A stick-in-the-mud? If you have a lot of energy, draw on that to get other people excited about the opportunities provided by a sensemaking workshop. If you don’t have a lot of obvious energy in your personality, collaborate with some energetic people, or prepare some things to say that convey the potential of the workshop for you.

### A talent for teaching

How good are you at explaining complicated things to people without them getting confused or frustrated? Are you a good teacher? If you are great at this, you might be able to use more complex elaborations of sensemaking exercises than some others can. If you know you have a hard time explaining things, give yourself more time to gain experience before you try some of the more complicated sensemaking possibilities described in this book (like adding a third dimension to landscapes or building stories out of story elements).

### Tolerance for discomfort

How comfortable are you with the discomfort of other people? If you eat at a restaurant and you get the wrong food, do you have a hard time sending it back? If so, you may need to do some extra preparation for sensemaking, because you will need to make people uncomfortable. Yes, your role as a facilitator is to make things easier for your participants. But if things are *too* easy for them, they won’t be able to accomplish anything.

Not every moment of sensemaking is uncomfortable, of course. But some moments are predictably hazardous for people-pleasers. In particular, the start and end of each sensemaking activity can be difficult times for facilitators who can't stand to see people struggle.

- At the start of each activity, your participants might be reluctant to do a strange new thing. You must still ask them to do it.
- At the end of each activity, your participants might be reluctant to *stop* doing the strange new thing they have finally begun to understand. You must still ask them to move on.

If you have trouble causing discomfort, *write yourself verbatim scripts* for the things you will need to say at the start and end of each activity. Practice the scripts out loud until you know them by heart. If your participants can read, you can also prepare a written version of each script. During the workshop, stick to the scripts you prepared. They will help you refrain from offering too much help. And if there is so much tension in the air that you can't say what you had planned to say, fall back to showing your instructions in writing. Another option is to find a collaborator who is comfortable with discomfort and agree that *they will give out the instructions* when you can't.

If you have no trouble sending food back at restaurants, or if you have a hard time guessing how people might be feeling, *add more listening* to your workshop agenda. Set aside an extra five minutes after each task or exercise to ask your participants how the workshop is going for them. Find out how comfortable they feel, and be prepared to adjust your instructions to help them find the right level of discomfort to keep things moving. Another option is to find a collaborator who is skilled at picking up signs of discomfort and agree that *they will tell you what they see* as the workshop goes on.

## Tolerance for ambiguity

Are you the sort of person who wakes up on Saturday morning with a full list of everything you plan to accomplish in your mind? Or do you just wake up and see what happens? If you are the planning sort, think about how you can add some flexibility to your sensemaking plans. Sensemaking doesn't work as well when everything is planned out perfectly. There has to be some open space left for emergence.

For example, part of a landscape exercise involves people discovering patterns on their landscape. Will it bother you that you don't know what forms those patterns will take? If someone comes up to you during the pattern-discovery part of the exercise and asks, "What sorts of patterns are we supposed to find?" will you be able to tell them, convincingly, that the landscape will tell them what to find on it? Or will you need to have some sort of pattern-type list to fall back on?

If you do need a pattern-type list—if leaving things hanging open makes you physically sick—you don't *have* to run the exercise that way. You don't have to change your personality to facilitate sensemaking. You can give people the lists you think you would need if you were doing the exercise, if you follow two conditions. First, *test* any lists you come up with on landscapes of your own, with helpers if possible. Second, present lists as *optional resources*, never as commands. That way you and the people like you won't collapse with

anxiety over uncertainty, and the people who thrive on uncertainty will ignore your silly lists and listen to the universe breathing.

Conversely, if you are all about emergence, prepare yourself to help (and not judge) participants who have a hard time with ambiguity. Help them open themselves up to emergence with patience and compassion.

### **Multi-perspective thinking**

When people are thinking in a blinkered, closed-minded way, are you good at waking them up to other ways of looking at things? Do your friends laugh because you always have something to say for the “wrong” side of things? Or do they laugh because you never budge from your fixed opinions?

If you habitually see things from multiple perspectives, incorporate that skill into your facilitation. Use what you do naturally to help other people see what you can see.

On the other hand, if seeing things from multiple perspectives is challenging for you, work on your own skills before you ask other people to join you. How can you work on seeing things from multiple perspectives? There are many books and magazine articles and web sites with advice on how to get better at looking at things from all sides. If you are the sort of person who likes to learn how your mind works, take a look at the area of psychology called “perspective taking.” People have spent decades learning how people develop skills at seeing things from all sides, and there is much interesting work to explore there.

To start you out, here’s a little perspective-taking exercise you could use in preparation for facilitating sensemaking. Find an article written somewhere—in a newspaper, in a magazine, on a web site. Now seek out at least two articles on the same topic but likely to disagree with it in some way. Read and compare all of the articles. The challenge is to find something you can agree with *and* something you can disagree with in *each* of the articles. Start with small differences in perspective, then work your way up to differences over which people would be willing to come to blows.

Another technique is to talk about an issue with as many people as you can find: neighbors, friends, relatives, colleagues. Make sure you find people who differ in their opinions on the topic. If everyone says the same thing, seek a wider range. Now think of another issue, but this time *imagine* the perspectives you might hear *before* you actually hear them. Then go and talk to the people. Did you guess well? If you do this over and over, you will improve your ability to envision differences in perspective without actually having to find the people who might say them. Such a skill is useful when it comes to making sense of multi-vocal information such as is found in a collection of stories.

## Chapter 12

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# Group Exercises for Narrative Sensemaking

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This chapter tells you how to facilitate four story-contact tasks, seven sensemaking exercises, and three exercises that use catalytic material. As I said in the chapter on story collection exercises, you don't have to do these exercises exactly as I say to do them; you can use other exercises than these; and you can create your own exercises. Use your experience, enthusiasm, and ingenuity to build a PNI practice that works for you and for your project participants.

## Contact tasks

Contact tasks introduce people to stories. In most sensemaking workshops they are followed by more in-depth exercises. However, they can also be useful on their own when your participants are unmotivated or your time or experience is limited.

## Sorting stories

This is the simplest of the contact tasks. It is similar to the “card sorting” method used in other participatory approaches.

### Requirements

At least two people; at least 30 minutes.

### Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
2	You	Explain briefly what people are about to do.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, set up groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard.

### The main part of the task

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Small groups	Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. Absorb the stories as a group.
10+	Small groups	Talk about the variation you see in the stories. Think of a set of categories you could use to sort them. Choose categories that mean something to you. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe some of the stories are forward-looking, some consider the present, and some look back into the past.</li> <li>• Maybe you want to identify some themes in the stories, like challenge or hope or planning or crisis.</li> <li>• Maybe you notice in the stories a variety of different issues, concerns, actions, interactions, or ideas.</li> </ul> <p>Think of some way to separate the stories into interesting groups. Then sort the stories, count the groups, and talk about what you see.</p>

### Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	Everyone together	Each group, explain what happened in your group and what it meant to you.



## Arranging stories

This task is a bit more nuanced (and a bit harder to understand) than sorting.

### Requirements

At least two people; at least 30 minutes.

### Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
2	You	Explain briefly what people are about to do.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, set up groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard.

### The main part of the task

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Small groups	Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. Absorb the stories as a group.
10+	Small groups	Talk about the variation you see in the stories. Think of a way to rank the stories that seems like it might be interesting. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe some stories seem more hopeful than others.</li> <li>• Maybe some stories tell about situations with more conflict, cooperation, or innovation in them.</li> <li>• Maybe some stories seem to have been told with more confidence or self-assurance than others.</li> </ul> <p>Line up the stories in relation to each other. You can do this with the story cards you were given, or you can copy their names onto sticky notes and line them up on a wall or table (or in an online space).</p>

### Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	Everyone together	Each group, explain what happened in your group and what it meant to you.

## Clustering stories

This task is like the clustering exercises used in a variety of participatory methods.

### Requirements

At least two people; at least 30 minutes.

### Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
2	You	Explain briefly what people are about to do.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, set up groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard.

### The main part of the task

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Small groups	Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. Absorb the stories as a group.
10+	Small groups	Lay all of the stories out in front of you, or copy their names onto sticky notes and stick them to a table or wall. Then move similar stories close to each other.  Don't worry about <i>why</i> the stories are similar; just keep moving them until it feels like you have represented their similarities by how close they are together. Then stand back and look at the clusters of stories you have created. What do they mean? Can you give the clusters names?

### Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	Everyone together	Each group, explain what happened in your group and what it meant to you.

## Pairing stories

This task is especially useful when your sensemaking participants are not the people who told the stories you collected. You may also want to record the new stories people tell and use them in the rest of your workshop or project.

### Requirements

At least three people; at least 30 minutes.

### Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
2	You	Explain briefly what people are about to do.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, set up groups of 3-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard.

### The main part of the task

Minutes	Who	What to do
1	You	If the stories are being recorded, start a separate recording device for each small group.
5	Each person separately	Read the stories silently, passing them around so each person gets to read each story. As you read, choose a story that resonates with you. Then think of an experience you have had that the story reminds you of.
20+	Small groups	Each person, read or retell the story you chose, then tell the story it reminded you of. If you are being recorded, give each new story a name and say it on the recording.  If you don't want to tell a story of your own, you don't have to. Just read or retell the story you chose.
5-10	Each person separately	If the stories are being recorded (and you want to), answer questions about each new story you told and about yourself.

### Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	Everyone together	Each group, explain what happened in your group and what it meant to you.

## Sensemaking exercises

These in-depth exercises should always take place after a contact task. However, if you only have enough time for one activity, you can use one of the more complex contact tasks (or one of the simpler exercises) by itself.

I have not specified any explicit breaks in these exercise instructions. But as I mentioned on page 313 (“Planning for movement”), you should plan a series of short breaks into your sensemaking workshop, every 30 minutes or so. If any of the activities within these exercises calls for a longer time period, it’s fine to give people a break right in the middle of it. They will come back refreshed and ready to finish the activity.

## Twice-told stories

This exercise is almost simple enough to be a contact task and just barely complex enough to be a sensemaking exercise.

### Requirements

At least four people; at least 45 minutes.

### Preparation

In this exercise, each group will choose a story to retell to the whole workshop based on a question such as:

Which of these stories would \_\_\_\_\_?

What fills in that blank space can be short and simple or long and complex, but it should relate to the project’s goals, not to any general quality of what makes a “good” story.

Some utility-based questions (useful)

Some quality-based questions (not useful)

- 
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which of these stories would open our eyes to the way this issue appears to others in our community?</li> <li>• Which of these stories would help us find new solutions for this problem?</li> <li>• Which of these stories would help us heal the wounds of the past?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which of these stories would make a great movie?</li> <li>• Which of these stories would go viral?</li> <li>• Which of these stories would make people cry?</li> </ul> |
|--|---|
- 

Why is this important? Because whether a story says something *important* and whether it says something *well* are two different things. Sometimes the stories that boost a project to new levels of impact are not at all well-spoken, but are awkward, shy, painful little things. People are so used to thinking of stories as things they buy that judging stories on whether they are “hot or not” can stand in the way of using them well in sensemaking. It is up to you, the facilitator, to help people get past that limitation.

When you are using this exercise to gather stories, the function of the story-selection question is to give people a task that will bring out stories, so it doesn't need to be a particularly deep question. In sensemaking, however, the function of the story-selection question is *to make sense of the stories*, so it should probe more deeply into your topic. Take some time to come up with a question that will help your participants explore the meaning in your stories. And make sure that they will be able to answer the question by choosing a story from your collection.

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
2	You	Briefly introduce the project, the topic, the stories, and the exercise.
2	You	Set up at least two groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards.
1	You	Give everyone the story-selection question(s) you prepared.

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
20+	Small groups	Read or listen to the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. Working together, use the question you were given by the facilitator to choose a story to retell to the whole workshop. If you can't agree on one story, you can choose two.

## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
15+	Everyone together	Someone from each group: read or retell the story you chose. Explain why you chose it and what it means to you.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Give people a choice of questions*

Instead of preparing one story-selection question, you can prepare 3-5 and ask each group to choose one to use.

### ***Help people come up with their own questions***

You can help each group write their own story-selection question. This elaboration is useful when you need a simple, quick exercise, but you also think people will want to take charge of what happens. To do this:

1. Before the workshop, come up a list of 3-5 questions to use in case some groups don't want to come up with their own.
2. In your introduction to the exercise, explain the difference between utility-based and quality-based questions, using some examples to illustrate the difference.
3. After your introduction, give each group five minutes to discuss your topic and come up with their own question (or choose among the ones you brought).
4. Ask each group to tell everyone the question they chose or wrote. Ask everyone else to evaluate the question's utility to the project, perhaps suggesting changes.
5. If you think it's necessary, give groups another few minutes to refine their questions before they start to use them.
6. Carry out the rest of the exercise as described above.

The tell-and-respond period is critical. It helps everyone focus on the goals of your project.

### ***Add in some story sharing***

You can ask the people in each small group to exchange their own stories in response to the stories they hear or read (merging in a pairing task). They can then choose to retell one of *those* stories (instead of the previously collected stories) to the whole workshop.

### **How you will know it's working**

The encounter period is what makes or breaks this exercise. If it is working, people will be concentrating, as a team, on which story they will choose to retell. If they are not connecting to the stories, people will not be concentrating, and they won't be working as a team. They will be wandering off in all directions.

### **What can go wrong**

#### ***People choose quality-based questions***

Questions about the qualities of stories can push aside the most awkward, unskilled stories, even when those stories say what needs to be said. This is why, if you want to use the build-your-own-question elaboration, you must include a share-and-respond period. And if you think your participants won't be able to stop themselves from paying attention to story quality (if they are all novelists, for example), don't ask them to come up with their own questions.

#### ***You get behind schedule***

Sometimes groups don't get around to choosing a story because they go off on tangents of discussion. Remind them at halfway and three-quarter points that they should have a story ready to tell when the time interval is over.

### ***You get ahead of schedule***

Sometimes groups choose a story *too* quickly, just to get the task over with, and spend the rest of the time chatting. If you think that might happen with your participants, plan ahead by tightening the time schedule or adding an elaboration. If you didn't think it would happen but it does, you can drop a gentle hint that you expect each group to be able not just to *tell* the story they chose, but to talk about *why* they chose the story they did and *what it means* to them. If a gentle hint doesn't work, let it go. This is a low-pressure method.

### **Your own style**

This exercise straddles the line between task and exercise. You could think of it as a simple, multi-purpose frame that can support a variety of ideas you might like to develop for your own facilitation. For example, you could ask people to consider multiple perspectives, connect some stories together, or consider storyteller reflections (answers to questions) as well as the stories themselves. But keep your additions small and simple. When you are ready for more complex facilitation, move on to another exercise structure. This exercise may be versatile, but it is small, and it can't support heavy loads.

## **Timelines**

When a timeline exercise is used to collect stories, it helps people look back in time and think of stories they want to tell. When it's used for sensemaking, it helps people make sense of the stories you collected.

### **Requirements**

At least two people; at least 90 minutes.

### **Preparation**

Read through your stories and choose start and end dates for a timeframe on which the stories can be placed. This could be the history of a place or group important to the stories, or it could be stages in a process the stories recount.

*Make sure the timeframe you choose fits the stories you collected.* You can give people a few timeframes to choose from—if you can find them in the stories. But don't let people come up with their own start and end dates. The stories might not fit them. And if the stories don't take place across a coherent timeframe, don't use this exercise.

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, split up into groups of 2-5 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard.
1	You	Give or show everyone your timeframe start and end labels.

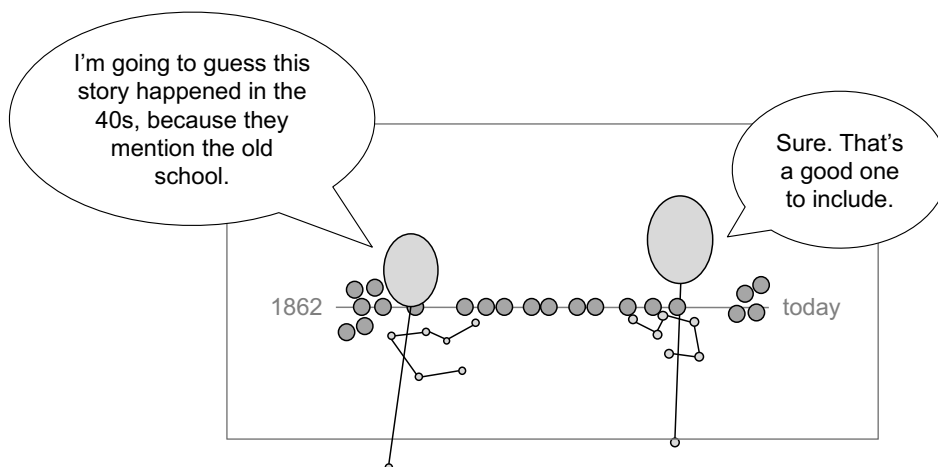
Note that groups can be both smaller *and* larger when this exercise is used for sensemaking than when it is used for story collection (as long as people won't be sharing their own stories during the exercise; if they will, groups will need three people). So which is better, small groups or large groups?

- Small groups create greater intimacy and a wider range of distinct perspectives, since more timelines will be built and can be compared. They are best suited to projects with sensitive topics or a need for breadth over depth.
- Large groups create fewer but more detailed timelines. They are best suited for projects with more complicated—but not sensitive—topics and a need for depth over breadth. You can even build only one timeline (without breaking into groups at all) if your workshop is very small.

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	Small groups	Draw a horizontal line across your space. Then look at the time-frame labels you were given by the facilitator. Place the labels at the start and end of your horizontal line.
45+	Small groups	Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. When you find a story that seems to fit on your timeline, write its name on a sticky note and place the note on the timeline where it seems to fit.  You don't have to place all of the stories on your timeline. Just place the ones that seem to fit on it. If you can't guess when a story happened, put it aside.
20+	Small groups	Look at the patterns in your timeline. How do the stories change as you move along it? Do you see any themes or trends? Annotate your space to capture your thoughts.





## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Everyone together	If you have more than one group, have someone from each group describe the timeline they built. Then talk about the patterns you see across all of the timelines.
5+	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Let groups choose their own themes*

You can ask each group to come up with their own timeline theme, one that fits inside your overall topic. Ask groups to do this before they start placing stories on their timelines, and ask them to write the theme on a sticky note and place it above their timeline. As they choose stories to place, they can include only the stories that relate to their chosen theme.

### *Add some story sharing*

As people populate their timelines, you can ask them to tell some of their own stories in response to the stories they are placing. They can give those stories names and place them on the timeline as well. Ask them to mark their newly-told stories in some way (with a different color, circled, underlined).

If you plan to use this option, make sure your small groups have at least three people in them. And if you want to add the new stories to your collection, give people a way to record the stories and some time to answer your questions about them.

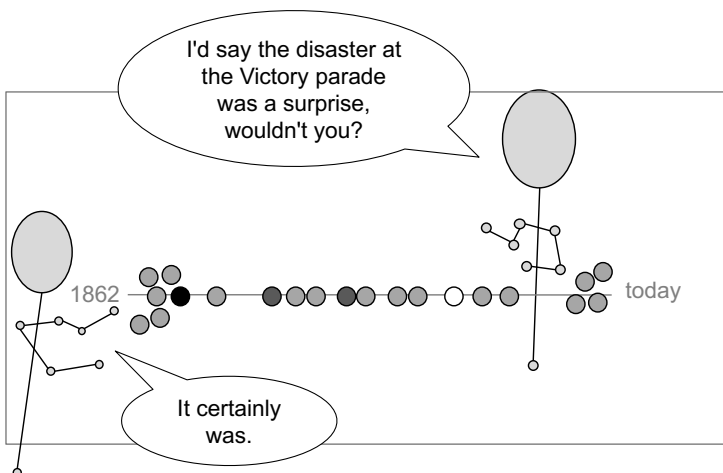
### Add visiting and revision periods

If you have more than one group, you can ask people to visit each other's timelines. Before your report-back period:

1. Ask everyone to visit all of the timelines that have been created (in person, they can walk around the room; online, they can follow links to documents). Have one person from each group stay at their own timeline to answer questions and take notes on visitor responses.
2. Bring people back into their small groups. Ask the people who stayed behind to tell their group members about the questions visitors asked and the comments they made.
3. Give groups some time to revise their timelines before the report-back period (and before the inclusion of the timeline in the workshop report). For example, groups might want to discuss:
  - A pattern a visitor noticed (and they didn't): a gap, a cluster, a boundary, a theme, a link, a movement. Do they want to explore the pattern now?
  - A suggestion a visitor made: to add a story, to represent a perspective, to counter a bias. Do they want to use, or at least discuss, the suggestion?
  - A confusion a visitor had: why they placed a story where they did, why they saw a theme in a cluster, why they highlighted one perspective more than another. Do they want to add an annotation to clarify their meaning?

### Add turning points

When this exercise is used for story collection, turning points help people think of stories to tell. When it's used for sensemaking, turning points help people notice and think about patterns in the stories they are working with.



As with story collection, you can use a wide array of turning-point types (see page 211). But in sensemaking, the turning points you ask people to find *must be in the stories*. So, before your workshop, look through your stories for types of turning points people are likely to find (and find interesting).

Game-like rules for placing turning points are even more useful in sensemaking than they are in story collection. There’s nothing like a game to get people up and running after new insights. For example, you could tell groups that their timelines must include:

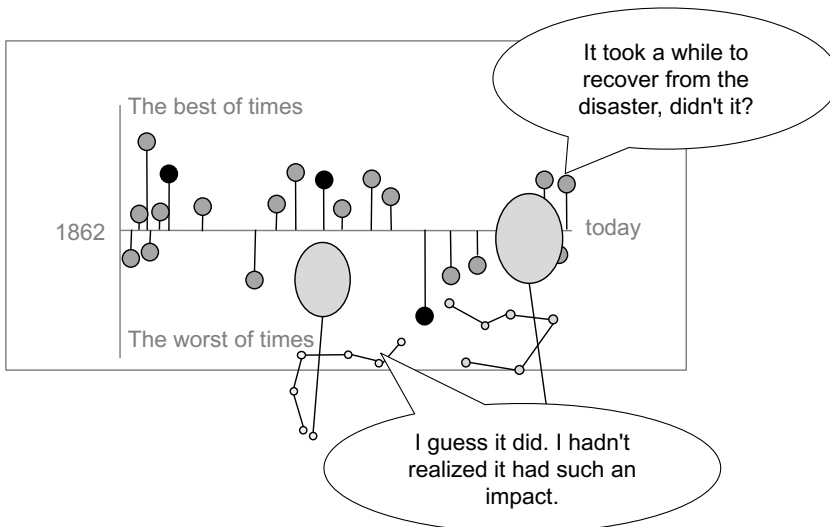
- at least three conflicts and at least three resolutions of conflicts
- some truth-telling and some lying
- an equal number of mysteries and discoveries
- for every moment of pride, a moment of shame (and vice versa)
- at least four messages everyone in the community needs to hear
- two instances of “how we used to think,” two of “how we think now,” and two of “how we should think in the future”
- three foolish actions and three wise actions

If groups can’t find these things in the stories they placed on their timelines, they can share some stories of their own, or they can simply talk about why they didn’t find the things.

To design your own rules, think about the goals of your project, and think about your participants. What sorts of rules will challenge them to achieve a new understanding of your topic, transcending the limiting assumptions that constrain their current thinking? (And are those rules supported by the stories you collected?)

**Add a second dimension**

When this exercise is used for story collection, a second dimension opens up gaps people can fill to balance the story collection. When it’s used for sensemaking, a second dimension reveals patterns in the stories.



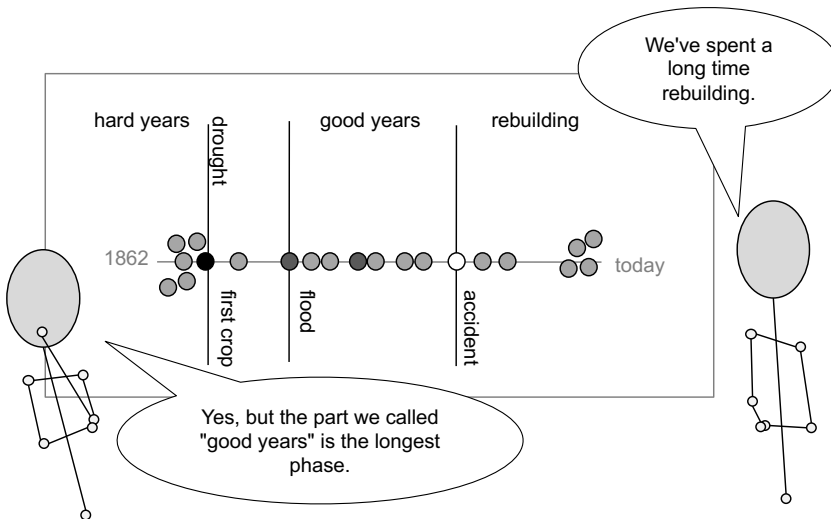
To use this elaboration, find a meaningful dimension (along which something varies) in your stories, or (better) find a few dimensions you can offer. Then during the workshop, after people have placed some stories on their timelines, ask people to move their stories up (like a floating balloon) or down (like a falling stone) in the vertical dimension.

Some example dimensions:

- The storyteller's answer to a scale question, such as "How well did this story turn out?" or "How long do you think you will remember this story?"
- To what extent (workshop participants think) this sort of story bodes well for the future of the community (or some other value axis, such as "We need more/less of this")
- To what extent (workshop participants find) the story commonplace (this sort of thing happens every day) or unique (this rarely happens)
- To what extent (workshop participants think) there was a villain (someone to blame) in the story (from nefarious actions to nobody's fault)

### **Add phases and boundaries**

You can ask groups to find and mark phases on their timelines. You can call phases periods, chapters, or states of affairs (or even eras or epochs or ages if you want to make them sound more interesting), but *don't* call them stages or steps. Those words describe plans, not events.



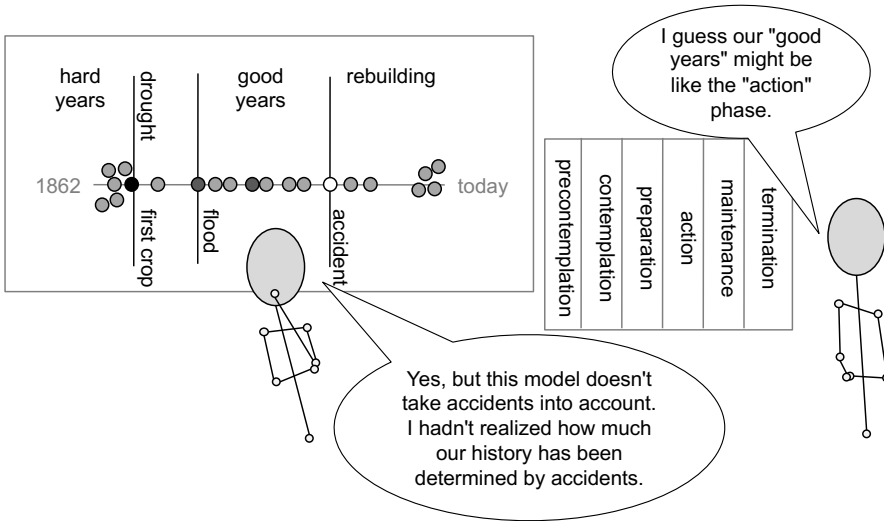
To mark phases, groups should stand back and consider how they might describe the *state of affairs* in different parts of the timeline. They should name their phases with meaningful titles, like these:

- the time of anxiety
- before we knew
- when we ran the experiment
- after the new people came

Phases can be short or long; they can overlap; they can vacillate; they can fade away. It doesn't matter how the marking of phases plays out, as long as it helps to *tell the story of what happened*. Some boundaries between phases will be at turning points, but some will mark broad, slow "sea changes" between phases. Ask people to describe both the phases and the boundaries between them.

**Compare timelines to published models**

Models are bundles of expectations and assumptions about what usually happens or should happen in some context. Departures from models are valuable because they can lead to explorations of why things happened the way they did and what could have happened had events flowed differently.



You can find models in educational materials about any topic. Models that work well in the timeline exercise describe phases or stages. In the Sensemaking chapter of *Working with Stories in Depth* I describe some examples of models that are useful in this exercise. You can offer everyone the same model, or you can offer groups a selection of models to choose from.

Ask each group to compare the stories on their timeline to the phases or stages of the model you (or they) chose. Ask them to capture their thoughts by adding annotations to their timeline. Be careful about three things:

1. Present the model(s) as *perspectives* to be considered, not as *corrections* to be applied or *standards* to be met. Explain that the places where a model *doesn't* fit a timeline are as useful as the places where it *does* fit.
2. Introduce this elaboration only *after* all of the timelines have been built. Introducing models too early can cause people to place stories on their timelines because they fit the model, not because they matter to participants.
3. Models don't work well for all groups and all topics. Think about how your participants are likely to react to these instructions. If you think they will be so intimidated by a model that they will shape their timelines to match it (instead of comparing the two things), don't use the elaboration.

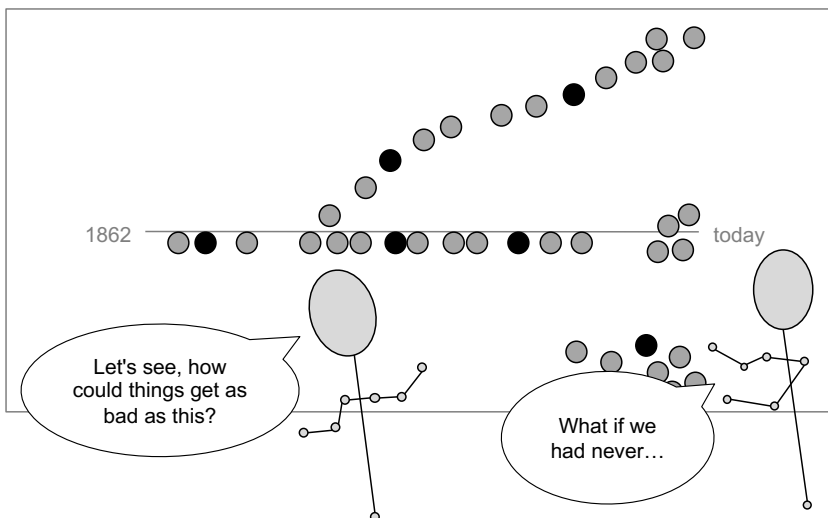
**Add fictional timeline branches**

Fiction in narrative sensemaking widens the scope of imagination. It draws out elements of the topic that are hidden or hard to articulate. Moving into fiction is particularly useful

if your project aims to find new ideas to address old problems. If your project has come to narrative sensemaking seeking depth, fiction might be the way to get it.

Before the workshop, decide whether you want to ask people to think about an *alternative history* or a *fictional future*. Then, in the workshop:

1. After groups have filled up their timelines with stories from your collection, ask each group to imagine an inconceivably utopian, perfect, heavenly state of affairs. Ask them to describe that state on a few sticky notes. What would things be like?
2. Ask them to place these sticky notes at the very top of the space, either directly above their main timeline's endpoint (for an alternative history) or to the right of the endpoint (for a fictional future).
3. Ask each group to build a getting-to-utopia branch that connects to a point *somewhere along the timeline they already built*. Encourage them to explore how (and when) the situation *could have begun to diverge* from what actually happened to lead to a state of perfection. Even if people are building a fictional future, ask them to anchor the new branch in the past. Why? Because the goal of this elaboration is not to make up stories for no reason; it's to make sense of what has actually happened.
4. When the utopian branch is finished, ask people to think about its opposite: an inconceivably *dystopian*, horrible, ruined state of affairs. Ask them to describe that state, placing those sticky notes at the very bottom of the space (and below or to the right of the main timeline's end point). Then have them work that fictional branch back to the main timeline in the same way as they did with the utopian branch.



## How you will know it's working

When a timeline exercise is used for sensemaking, it doesn't matter how full or balanced the timelines are. This was not true for story collection, because the goal there was to balance the story collection. So to find out if this exercise is working for sensemaking, don't watch the *timelines*. Watch the *people*.

When people are building timelines, you should hear them making sounds of discovery. They should say things like, “Look at *that!*” or “I never noticed *that* before.” If people are talking about nothing but the *placement* of stories (“this goes before that”), the exercise may not be helping them make sense of the stories.

But timelines take time to develop. Don’t rush to fix things during the early parts of timeline building. If most of the time has been used up and you *still* don’t see people discovering things together, you might want to offer some help, or just watch and learn how you can improve your methods the next time.

## What can go wrong

### ***People throw stories onto their timelines without paying attention to them***

A timeline is not just a catalogue of events. It is a *story* built for a purpose and with a goal. At every location in a timeline, there are likely to be several candidate stories that *could* be placed to represent that moment in time. Those choices, taken together, create a story. Tell your groups that their timelines should both *explore* your project’s topic (and maybe their theme inside the topic) and *tell a story* about it to the rest of the workshop (and to your community or organization). Be careful not to give them the impression that they should simply sort stories into time periods.

When I wrote about using timelines for story collection, I said you should give people lots of space to build timelines in, because you want them to tell lots of stories. I said, “Don’t make the mistake of having people run out of space before they run out of stories.” For sensemaking, this advice is reversed. If you give people *too much* space for their timelines, the need to choose stories for it will go away, and they’ll just throw stories onto it without thinking. There must be some kind of selection process during the creation of a timeline, to prevent it being nothing more than a catalogue of stories the group has encountered.

A space limitation can help to support this process. Compare the size of your sticky notes to the size of your timeline spaces. If people can fit more than 20 stories onto the space (horizontally), shrink the space or use bigger sticky notes.

### ***People are talking, but they don’t seem to be doing anything***

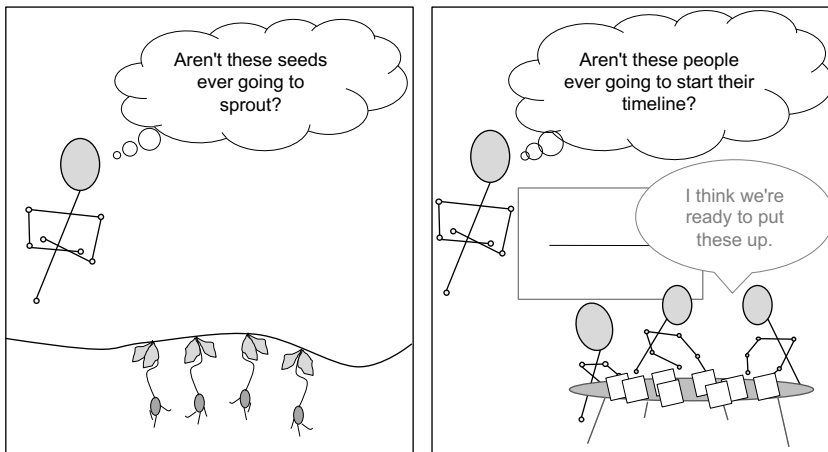
If you were to map the progress of any two random groups of people building timelines, you would be likely to see differences in how each group moves through the task. I remember once watching two groups build timelines at the same time on different walls of a room. One group populated their timeline with stories in a tick-tock fashion, one story per so many minutes with great regularity. The other group seemed to do absolutely nothing but sit and chat for nearly half the time they were given for the task. Then suddenly one of the people in the second group jumped up and placed a handful of stories on the timeline in rapid succession. I guess they *had* been working on their timeline the whole time, only it didn’t seem that way from across the room.

So if you see a group that seems to be ignoring the task, eavesdrop a little to find out what they are talking about. If the topic of discussion is lunch, you might need to nudge them to pay attention to the work at hand. But if they are saying things like, “why don’t we” and “so

this is all about” and “wait a minute, what about” then my advice is to leave them alone. They are negotiating meaning.

Sometimes it's not *you* that gets anxious about groups that seem to be making no progress; it's the groups themselves. Sometimes people get so upset about the fact that their timeline has too few items, or doesn't say anything big or important, or looks amateurish, that they stop making sense of the topic. You can help people get past these concerns.

Emergence in sensemaking is like growth in seedlings: the most important parts of the process are often the least visible. If you've ever planted seeds, then watched them with disappointment as they seemed to be doing nothing for weeks, you can remember the moment when a fully formed cluster of seedling leaves suddenly sprouted up from the empty soil. The same thing happens in sensemaking. Watch people as they are building their timelines. If they are saying the things that indicate to you that they are negotiating meaning, and if they tell you that their timeline is “not coming together,” you can feel confident in assuring them that *something* is growing, whether they can see it or not.



But what if you're wrong? What if their timeline *doesn't* come together? Well, of course, sometimes planted seeds don't emerge. The ground is too wet and they rot, or it's too dry and they die, or it's too cold and they freeze. But you are the gardener of the sensemaking workshop. You have prepared the soil as you planned and facilitated the workshop. The more your confidence grows in the process of sensemaking and your ability to guide it, the more you will be able to help people push through to emergence.

### ***People are doing things, but they aren't talking***

A narrative sensemaking workshop should be a lively place, full of energy and movement. This is especially important during the critical time period when groups are first placing stories on their timelines. Check to make sure that groups are *negotiating meaning together*, not simply assembling their individual opinions.

If you are used to facilitating non-narrative group processes, you may have to adjust your expectations as you prepare to facilitate narrative sensemaking. It's *louder* than other methods of group work. Narrative sensemaking requires negotiation, and negotiation makes noise. If you *don't* hear noise, find out why.



For example, you may have heard of a group decision support method called “dot voting” in which people vote on items by placing colored label dots on them. Each participant is given three to five votes, which they place on whichever items they think best meet some criterion. Individual voting does not belong in a narrative sensemaking workshop. Why? Because voting is a system for *collating* meaning, not for *negotiating* it.

I've watched dot voting. What I've seen happen is that the most opinionated or powerful people stride up to the white board and confidently place their dot or label or whatever, while the meek and powerless watch, and either fall into line or rebel against authority. What ends up getting created is not so much something the group has *negotiated* as it is a portrait of power as it flows through the group.

You might argue that dominant people can dominate story work too. Yes, they can. But this is where the fundamental nature of stories comes into play. You *can't* collate stories; they won't allow it. Stories *are* negotiation devices. Their messages, thoughts, and connections draw people into complex interactions that cannot be represented by a simple counting of votes. For this reason, working together with stories stands in the way of power having as *direct* an influence on what a group creates together as when what is “built” is simply a compilation of votes. Stories have been used for millennia for exactly this reason: that they move people past collation and into negotiation.

Sometimes you will come across a group that has decided to vote instead of negotiate, even though you specifically asked them to talk through the task together. (This can happen in any exercise, but since it often happens in this one, this is a good place to address it.)

When you find such a group, *ask them to describe their voting system*. If they simply fell into voting because they didn't understand your instructions, they will describe their voting system without enthusiasm. If they chose to vote in order to avoid negotiation, they will describe their voting system in a defensive and emotionally stressed way.

If you see non-defensive voting, the problem may be in your facilitation. Don't correct people during the workshop, but do think about what happened later on. See if you can improve the way you introduce the exercise. Avoid words people might associate with voting, like decide, determine, resolve, elect, specify, set, fix, assign, designate, establish, and choose. Instead, use words associated with negotiation: discuss, talk, talk about, talk over, talk through, work out, arrive at, agree on, settle on. Help people understand that they are to produce a *collaborative creation*, not a set of assembled elements.

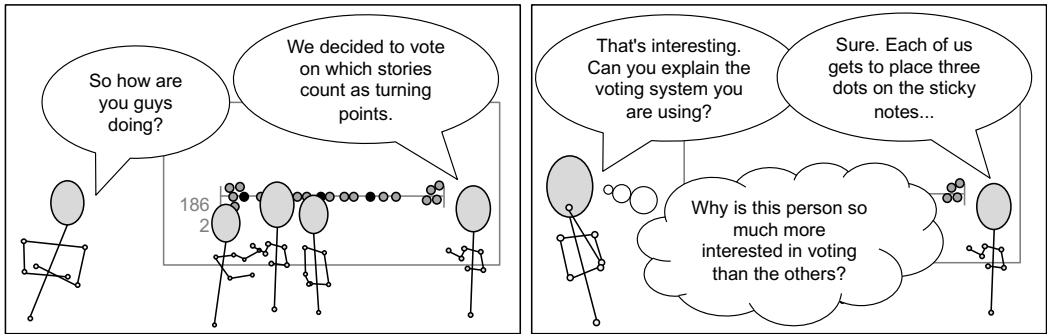
Defensive voting usually means that participants (or at least *some* participants) are trying to avoid the more difficult parts of narrative sensemaking. In this case it's important to pay attention to *who* is defending the group's voting system (and who is saying nothing).

- If only one or two people in the group seem defensive about the voting system, it might mean that the mixture of people or roles in the group isn't working out very well. People might be voting to avoid confronting their differences.
- If everyone in the group seems defensive about the voting system, there might be an emotional issue they are collectively seeking to avoid talking about.

In either case, you might want to quickly adapt your workshop schedule to:

- add a quick “how are things going” feedback period (so you can revise your plans)
- add more alone time to reflect quietly on the stories (to ground the discourse)
- throw in some story sharing (to help people feel heard on the topic)
- reshuffle groups (to see if other mixtures of people or roles might work better)
- throw in a “questions you might have” explanation about the nature of narrative sense-making and the goals of the workshop

If you can’t react fast enough to make these changes during your workshop, learn what you can and reflect on it before you plan your next workshop.



### ***The timelines are not meaningful***

In this situation, people have created timelines, and the timelines have lots of stories and annotations on them. But the larger patterns created by the stories and annotations are superficial. Timelines like this have a “just the facts” flavor. They seem more like empty recitations of lists than they do living stories.

Meaningless timelines are almost always the result of *distance*: between participants and stories, between participants and each other, between participants and the project. Sometimes distance comes about because of poor project planning, but sometimes it’s an unavoidable condition in a specific group considering a specific topic.

If you think your participants might create meaningless timelines, work on reducing distance by collecting more stories from more people, inviting more or different people to your workshops, or planning more warm-up tasks that help people connect to the project, the stories, and each other *before* you ask them to build timelines.

What can you do about meaningless timelines *after* they have been created? Not much. By the time people have created them, it’s probably too late to reduce the distance. Just learn from what happened and move on.

### ***People can’t or won’t go into fiction***

Moving into fiction brings many benefits to sensemaking, but it is not always possible. Don’t ever *force* people into fictional exploration. As you plan your use of timelines, think about whether the people you expect to attend the sensemaking workshop will feel safe enough to “make things up” about the topic they will be exploring. Picture their reactions

to such an instruction. Are they energized? Enabled? Confused? Disdainful? Afraid? If you aren't sure how they will react, make the fictional part of the exercise optional by giving groups multiple activities to choose from.

## Your own style

When you think of time, do you always picture it as a straight line? I ask because for some people, in some times and places, time is more naturally represented by other spatial arrangements. You could think of time as a series of circles, a spiral, a branching tree, or a meandering path. These are all legitimate representations of a timeline, and they can all be useful in sensemaking. Which works best for you and for your participants depends on your cultural backgrounds and thinking styles.

There is a benefit in matching your time representation to the way people think, but there is also a benefit in *breaking* expectations about how time is laid out. If you want to find new ways to look at old problems, asking people to represent time in a new way might help them see the same events through new eyes. You could even draw inspiration from fields of endeavor that have a need to represent time, for example in musical notation or historical diagrams or train schedules. (Searching the internet for images related to the word "timeline" will provide you with many ideas.)

# Landscapes

Timelines and landscapes are complementary because time and space are complementary. Both are essential elements of our lives. We move in time as we move in space, so these two ways of arranging things come about naturally. The story-time connection is the more obvious one, so the timeline exercise is easier for inexperienced participants and facilitators to work with. Mapping stories onto conceptual space is a more abstract activity.

## Requirements

At least two people; at least 90 minutes.

## Preparation

When this exercise is used for sensemaking, it's not about jogging memories; it's about noticing patterns. So while the *process* of preparing dimensions is similar for sensemaking and collection, for sensemaking *the dimensions must be present in the stories*. Read through your stories looking for dimensions (things that vary) that matter to your project.

As you would for story collection, remember that:

- Each dimension must go from something to something, like "Trust: from absent to complete" or "Predictability: from clockwork to chaos."
- Dimensions in pairs must be independent of each other. Knowing a story's value on one dimension must not provide a hint as to its position on the other dimension.
- The more dimensional pairs you can find, the better. Even if you only end up using one pair, take some time to explore a variety of possibilities.

You can also prepare a third dimension to use in this exercise (or a list of third dimensions to choose from). You will need sticky-note dots with a color spectrum such as a rainbow.

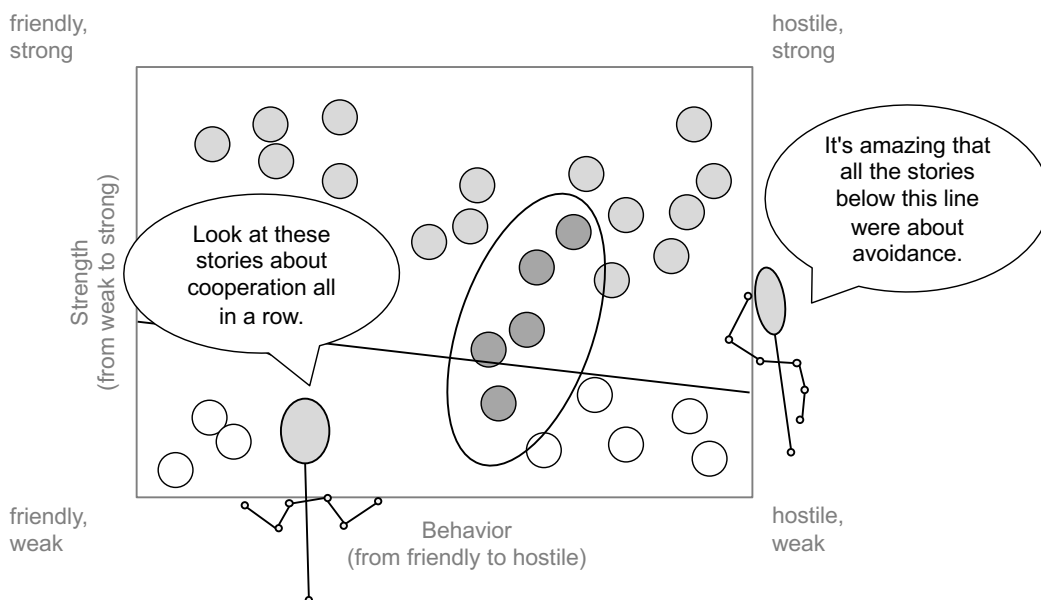
Also, as you would for story collection, decide whether you will talk about landscapes as graphs or maps. (See page 217 for details.)

### Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, split up into groups of 2-5 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard.
1	You	Give or show everyone your dimension labels (or choices of labels).

### The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	Small groups	Look at the pair of dimensions given to you by the facilitator (or choose a pair of dimensions to work with). Write the dimension names on sticky notes. Also write labels for each corner of the space (e.g., “High trust, low predictability”). If you are meeting in physical space, use your sticky notes to mark out a space about one meter square. Online, use an entire whiteboard page.
45+	Small groups	Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. As you read each story, write its name on a sticky note, then place the note into the space where it seems to belong. If you can’t decide (or agree on) where a story belongs, write its name down twice and put it in two places, writing on each note why you are putting it there. Keep doing this until you have gone through all of the stories.
20+	Small groups	Stand back and look at the patterns you have created. Do you see clusters of stories? Do they have common themes? Are there gaps where there are no stories? What does that mean? Are there boundaries between different groups of stories? Annotate your space to record what you see.



## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Everyone together	If you have more than one group, have someone from each group describe their landscape. Then talk about the patterns you see across all of the landscapes.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Build the landscape one dimension at a time*

If you think your participants will balk at the complex task of placing a story on two dimensions at the same time—sometimes people find this unbearably complex—you can ask them to place the stories along a line, take a break, then come back and move each story up (like a floating balloon) or down (like a falling stone) on a second dimension.

I've found that people mind going back over a set of stories more in sensemaking than they do in collection. We all love to revisit our own stories, but revisiting other people's stories is a bit less exciting. So this elaboration may make the exercise easier to understand and less interesting at the same time.

On the other hand, it is also true that going back over a set of stories a second time can provide deeper insights. People's perceptions of each story will change after they have placed the entire story collection (or sample). You might want to remind groups that they can nudge stories to the left or right as they move them up or down.

### Choose, assemble, or create custom dimensions

I went over these elaborations when I described the use of landscapes for story collection (page 219), and the options are the same here. There is one important difference, though. If you want to give people the option of coming up with their own dimensions, give them a little extra time in your contact task (before this exercise) to get a good sense of the dimensions of variation in your stories.

### Add a third dimension

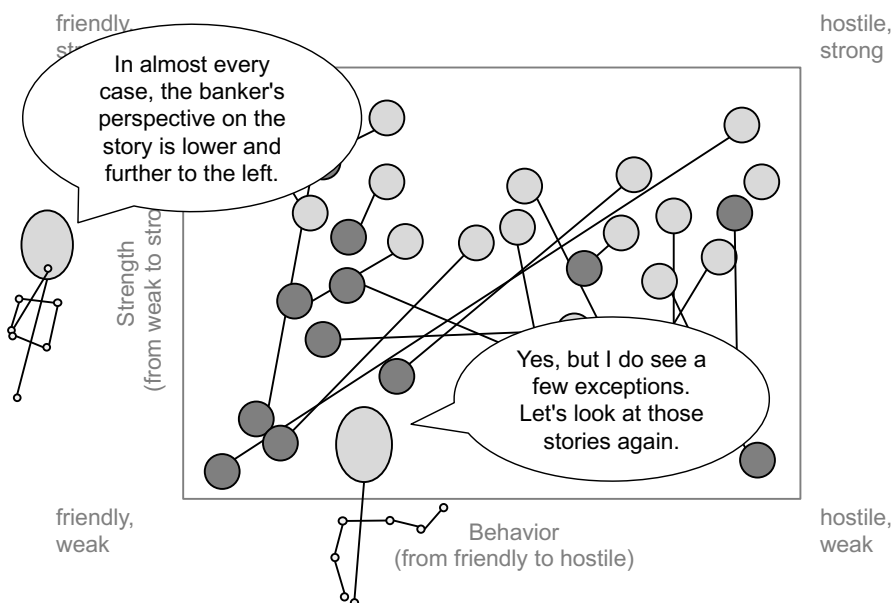
A three-dimensional landscape is deeper, more complicated, more difficult, and more revealing than a two-dimensional one. The instructions for adding a third dimension are the same as for story collection (page 221), so I won't repeat them.

### Consider multiple perspectives

As groups place stories into their spaces, you can ask them to represent each story from at least two *competing* viewpoints. If you gave people giant sheets of paper to write on (or if you're working online), you can ask them to connect these viewpoints with lines.

For example, let's say you have collected some stories about the dangers and opportunities of starting small businesses in your city. Say you are in a sensemaking workshop, and your participants are doing a landscape exercise. Say they place—that is, interpret—a story about managing small-business finances from the perspective of a banker, a local official, and an entrepreneur. This will give them a greater depth of understanding as their landscape begins to take shape.

An even more complex form of this elaboration is to generate 2-3 *parallel* landscapes. As before, each story generates three sticky notes, one per perspective. But in this case the story-perspective notes are placed on 2-3 *separate* landscapes. Thus a group could end up with a banker's landscape, an official's landscape, and an entrepreneur's landscape, on three adjacent wall spaces, all working from the same stories.



### ***Place story elements***

If you have derived story elements in a previous exercise (see page 388), you can place them on your landscape, instead of or in addition to stories. You can intermingle different types of story element (e.g., characters, situations, themes) on one landscape, or you can build separate landscapes per type.

### ***Place official statements***

Your organization or community might have some officially documented statements relevant to the topic of the session: mission statements, sets of proclaimed values, operating principles, rules of conduct. You can ask groups to place those on their landscapes as well. Do this after the stories have been placed and before any patterns have been found. That way the official statements won't influence the placement of stories (attracting or repelling stories around them), but they will contribute to the patterns.

You can also do a ground-truthing exercise (see page 385) before you do this one, placing the statements or definitions you explored in that exercise into this space.

### ***Use geographic landscapes***

Some approaches to community development work combine the use of space with participatory sensemaking, but in *real* space. Participatory mapping (also known as community-based mapping, grassroots mapping, and ethnocartography), uses cartographic representations of actual geographies to help communities represent local knowledge and perspectives. When geography is important to the context and goals of your project, you can bring these ideas into your narrative landscape exercises.

This elaboration is more useful for communities than it is for organizations, because communities *are* spaces. For organizations, whether a real-space elaboration is useful depends on what sort of work is done in the organization and how much space matters to that work. A project about cooperation in a train yard or assembly plant, or in a service organization that covers a geographical area, would benefit more from this elaboration than a project about collaboration in an office building full of cubicles whose locations are irrelevant.

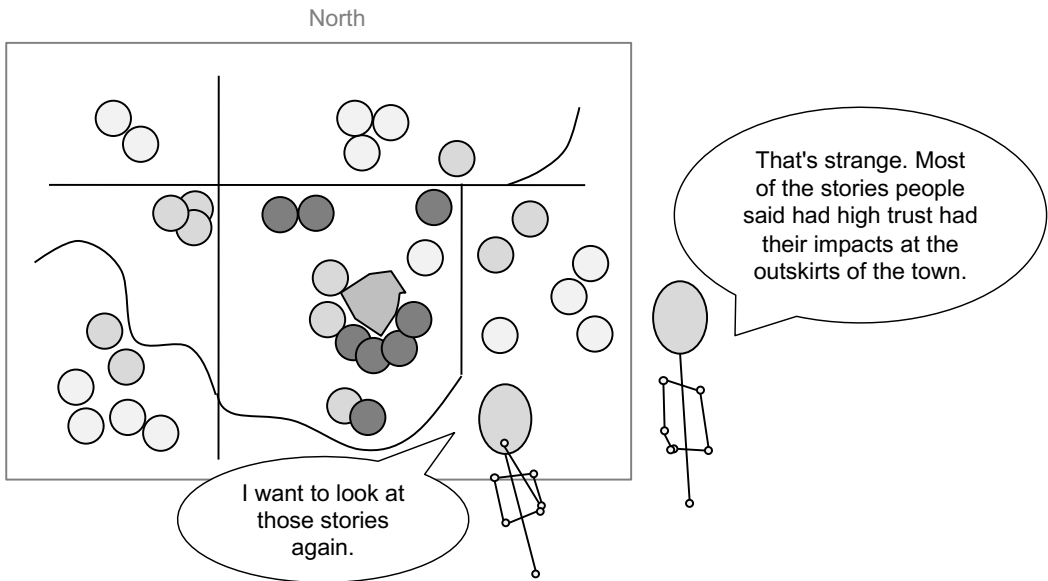
To use real landscapes, present as your primary dimensions the real dimensions of space: north to south, east to west. At the start of the exercise, ask each group to decide where the center point and outer boundaries of their landscape will be located. Then ask them to place some points of interest before they start placing stories.

Remember that people don't need to place stories simply by where they happened. They can also consider more interpretive elements, like where a story:

- was collected for this project
- was first told, retold, and spread around
- was likely to happen (and not likely)
- should be told (but has not been)
- has been told (but should not be)
- cannot be told (for good or ill)

- impacted people lives
- might impact people's lives in a realistic, utopian, or dystopian future

And so on. By incorporating perspectives as well as facts into the placement, participants can create something more than “just a map.” If people cannot agree on where a story should be placed, as usual, it can be split and written multiple times.



### **Add visiting and revision periods**

If you have more than one group, you can ask people to visit each other's landscapes. The instructions are the same as for timelines (page 356).

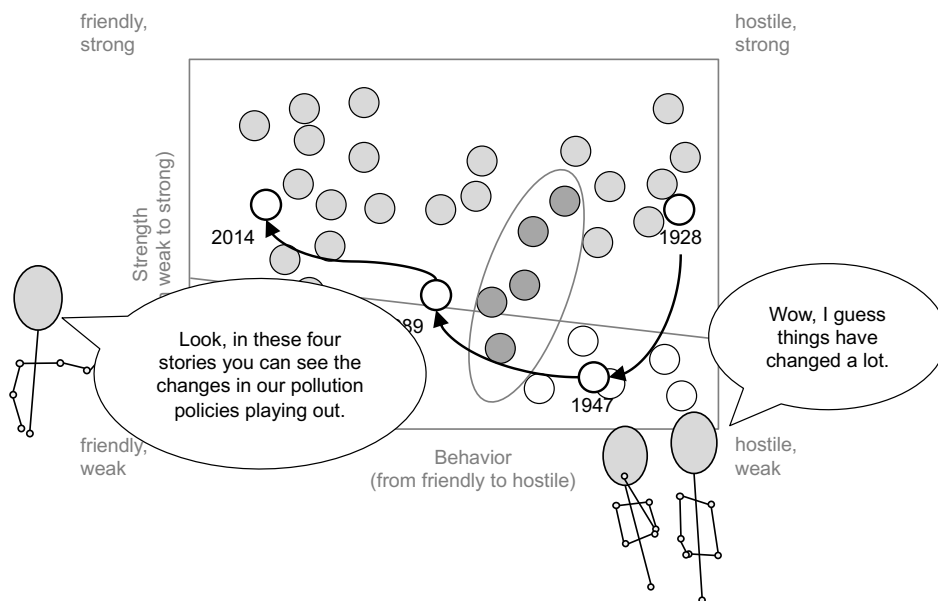
### **Tell new stories**

After each group's landscape is complete, you can ask them to use it as a *substrate* on which to build stories. This mixes a bit of the timeline and composite story exercises into the landscape. You can do this in any of three ways (from least to most complicated):

- Ask groups to choose some stories from their space that, taken together, *tell a larger story*. For example, say a story about a new bridge design sits in the upper right corner of the space. A group might choose that story, then draw a line from it to another story about the start of bridge construction in the lower right area. Next they might draw a line up to a story about an accident during construction, way up at the top of the space, and so on. The way the larger story plays out in the space—the path it takes—will help people think about what the space means in the context of the project.
- Ask groups to overlay a *larger historical story* onto the space. It can be drawn from the general history of the world or country, or the specific history of the organization or community. Episodes in the history can be placed at points in the space with a path laid between them. The relationship of the historical story-as-path can be compared to the stories placed in the space to find patterns of coincidence.



- Ask groups to overlay a *larger fictional story* onto the space. Participants can explore a realistic, utopian, or dystopian future; or they can overlay multiple scenarios onto the same space (using different colors of sticky notes), on top of the collected stories, in a sort of layer cake of reality and possibility.



## How you will know it's working

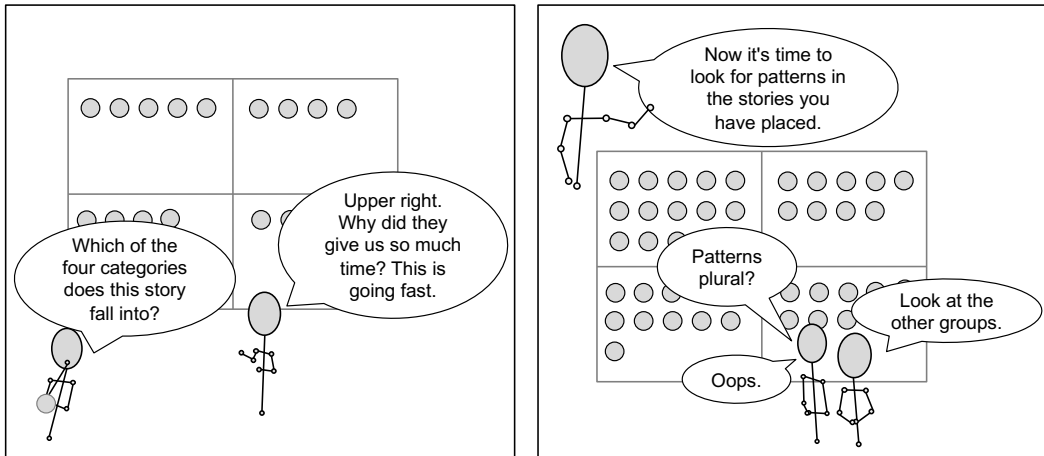
This exercise is all about flow. Things should keep moving. When people are placing stories, if you are meeting in person, you should see people walking back and forth with sticky notes in their hands. If you are meeting online, you should see cursors and sticky notes moving around. In either case you should see spaces filling up, even if they fill up unevenly. When people are finding patterns in their spaces, you should see them talking, gesturing, drawing, proposing, writing, sticking notes here and there. If you don't see movement, find out why.

## What can go wrong

### *People categorize*

Even though this exercise depends on the continuity of gradients, sometimes people can't help drawing lines in the space *before* they have placed their stories. When you see people doing this, drop in and quietly ask them to refrain from drawing any lines until *after* they have placed *all* of their stories.

Don't tell people they can't draw lines *ever*, because obviously they want to. Just ask them to *wait until the right time* to draw their lines. Then, when they do get to the point where it is reasonable to draw lines on the space (when they are annotating patterns), the lines will aid in the sensemaking, not limit it.



### ***People pay too much attention to precise placement***

When you see people coming up with “metrics” and “plans” and “yardsticks” and “protocols” for placement of stories, or when you see people talking about “evidence” and “rankings” and “levels,” it is best to step in and help them understand the exercise better. Building a landscape with stories is not a compilation of scientific measurements. It is a process of discovery, yes, but discovery of *meaning*, not of facts.

Let’s say, for example, that you are helping a group of people build a landscape with stories about religious tolerance in your community. Through this process these people are not likely to find out precisely how many visitors to church, temple, or mosque live in the community. Nor will they find out how likely a person is to live next to a person of a different religion. Those are things people find out in *quantitative* research, where researchers build compilations of measurements.

In participatory action research, people are more likely to find out things you can’t measure. For example, they might find out about some unexpected benefits and detriments of living in neighborhoods with intermixed versus separated religious groups. Or they might find out some reasons people visit or avoid houses of worship of other faiths. These discoveries cannot be precisely measured, but they can be explored and made meaningful.

It is your job to help people understand that the point of building a landscape together is not to “pin down” stories to precise locations but to *weave together threads* that will build a tapestry of understanding. Watch people to make sure they are placing stories based on what they mean in context, not based on how much of this or that quantity can be found in them. If someone says, “We placed this story here because it shows strong evidence of tolerance,” or, “We placed this story here because its level of tolerance is low,” that’s measurement. If they say, “We placed this story here because it says a lot to us about what happens when religious tolerance is lacking,” or, “We placed this story here because we think our community could benefit from this sort of tolerance,” that’s meaning in context.

### ***People pay too little attention to precise placement***

This situation is the opposite of the one before it. Sometimes people aren’t too *careful* in placing stories; they’re too *casual*. This sometimes happens when people don’t want to

think about elements of stories that are unpleasant or taboo, or when they got dragged into the session and don't want to be there, or when they're being paid to be at the session and are trying to do as little as possible to get something for nothing. You might see people placing stories based on relatively trivial things, even though you purposefully gave them dimensions that have the potential to dig deep into meaning.

An example might be that you asked people to consider how much trust is apparent in stories, but instead of actually *thinking* about whether the people in the stories trusted each other, they simply placed the stories based on what sort of trust might be *expected* given the relationships of the people in the stories. So a story about a parent and child might have been placed higher on the trust axis than one about co-workers *without actually considering the content of the story*.

When this sort of holding back happens, you can't always fix it. You can't remove emotional blocks for your participants, and you can't make people care when they don't. But you can *notice* the problem, and you can drop a few quiet hints as people are working. It doesn't work to mention the issue in a blaming way ("You didn't really consider trust when you placed these, did you?"). Instead, call attention to contrasting stories. You can ask faux-naïve questions like, "It's interesting that you saw more trust in this story than this one. Could you explain it to me?" Doing this will cause people to reexamine how they are placing items, but it won't cause them to defend their methods.

Another method is to ask people who seem disconnected from the placement of stories to place a few of their *own* stories into the space. This might increase their connection to what they are building and their motivation to finish the landscape.

### ***People are hesitant to place stories on the empty space***

This situation is like writer's block. People don't want to place stories wrongly, so they hold back and invent excuses for leaving the space blank. We don't have enough markers. The coffee pot is empty. Our table leg is broken.

If you think this is likely to happen in your workshop, break up your story-placing time into two time periods, thus:

- In the first time period (say 5-10 minutes out of 40), ask people to place only the first 5-10 stories. Because they have lots of time to place each item, they can approach the task cautiously.
- In the second time period (the rest of the 40 minutes), pick up the pace and ask people to place all of the remaining stories.

This slow-then-fast method helps people warm up to the task, then gets them moving so they can get some real work done.

### ***People think you are asking them to be rocket scientists***

When you show people a space to use in this exercise, people sometimes get the idea that you want them to measure rather than interpret stories. When they think this, you will hear them make comments like these:

- These are supposed to be *dimensions*? And those are *what* again?

- How are we supposed to *figure out* where these things should go?
- Have I got this in the *right* place? I'm not sure this is where it is *supposed* to be.
- I haven't made a graph since I was twelve. How are we supposed to *measure* a story?

People who think of themselves and their lives as far removed from the world of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics sometimes react in this way. They think you want them to define or identify or establish definitive findings, and they don't feel qualified to do that. You don't want them to do that, of course, but they don't know that, so they either refuse to do the exercise or pretend to do it while actually avoiding it.

If you anticipate this response, think carefully about the way you will introduce the exercise. Dimensional spaces are tools, just like whiteboards and sticky notes and markers. They are not meant to measure or prove anything. They are meant to help people reflect on and talk about stories. For such a group you might want to say something like this:

In this exercise you'll be using this space to talk about the stories we collected. You'll put the stories into the space where you think they belong, and then you'll talk about why you put the stories where you put them. This will help you to think and talk about what the stories have to say.

This is after all a perfectly reasonable way to introduce the exercise. I use the words "dimension" and "axis" a lot because I was trained as a scientist and that language feels comfortable to me. But you don't have to use it.

### ***People think you are asking them to be creative artists***

In contrast to the previous issue, sometimes people don't think they are *creative* enough to build a landscape. When they think this, you will hear them make comments like these:

- You said we are supposed to "place" these stories in this space, but you didn't say *how*. We need a *method* here.
- So what are we doing? Making some sort of *picture*? Of what?
- We just put these somewhere based on ... what? The way we *feel* about them?
- I'm not very good at this sort of psychobabble.

People who think of themselves and their lives as deeply connected to the world of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics sometimes react in this way, as do other professionals (such as lawyers) whose work is careful and meticulous. They think you want them to take up paint and brushes and produce a masterpiece, and they don't feel qualified to do that (or they feel it is beneath them, or both).

People like this tend to prefer logical, precise instructions. To them, saying "place the stories where they seem to fit" sounds like saying "align the story with your third chakra crystal." The whole thing seems too dangerously free of structure to be approached.

If you anticipate this response, think carefully about the way you will introduce the exercise. Give people a step-by-step method they can follow. Say something like this:

To place stories into the space, think about each dimension as a question.

- Our horizontal dimension is trust. So, in your group, working together, answer the question, “How much trust do we see in this story?”
  - If your answer is “there is a *huge* amount of trust in this story,” place the story all the way to the right of the space.
  - If your answer is “some but not a lot,” place it near the middle of the space.
  - If you see only a little trust in the story, place it somewhere on the left.
- Next, do the same thing for innovation, our vertical dimension. How much innovation do you see in the story? Move the story up or down.

Some tips:

- You can use the stories you have already placed to help you place new stories. Ask yourself, “Do we see more trust in story A than in story B?” If the answer is yes, place story A to the right of story B.
- You can move each story around as many times as you want to.
- If you can’t decide where a story should go, put it in two places: copy the sticky note, and write on each note why you put it where you put it.

Keep doing this until you feel that your landscape describes your interpretation of the whole set of stories.

That’s a long-winded explanation! But careful thinkers *like* details.

Another problem with careful thinkers is that they like to know what the end result of a task will be before they set out on it (the better to do it well). But with this exercise (as with all sensemaking exercises), the end result will emerge as the exercise proceeds. You aren’t asking people to build a house from a blueprint. You’re asking them to put boards here and there and see what they end up with. It might be a house, but it might be a boat or a fence or a sculpture of a sleeping cat. The landscape will build itself.

Of course, careful thinkers are the worst possible audience for this sort of “it will build itself” statement, since they are likely to be skeptical of such claims. If you get a negative response to a vision of emergence, you can simply admit, in truth, that working with stories is a leap of faith into the unknown. Especially when you are working with scientists, your willingness to note their concerns and *admit* that the process is unscientific will help them take the leap of faith with you.

While you can’t offer these people certainty, you can speak from experience. (And if you don’t have experience of your own, you can speak from the experiences of others. Speak from my experience if you like.) You can truthfully say to them, “I don’t know *exactly* what will happen in this exercise, but I’m confident that *something* interesting is going to happen.” Presenting the exercise as an *experiment* rather than as a creative act can help lovers of structure find their way.

### ***People argue about where to put things***

Arguing is not actually a problem. The problem comes in when people don't have any way to *resolve* arguments. You should explain that if there is disagreement over where an item should go, people can simply put it into multiple places. They should add some extra text that captures the reason the item was split up. These will come out in pairs or trios or quartets, such as "if you think of it as fact" and "if you think of it as emotion," or "from a teacher's/student's/parents' point of view."

If you expect the people you have invited to your session to be especially argumentative, plan for smaller groups. That way you will get a wider variety of perspectives *across* landscapes and less contention *within* them.

### ***The dimensions don't fit the stories***

This can happen if you or your participants choose dimensions based on goals or first principles without paying enough attention to the stories. If a group can't place any stories on their space, they can restart the exercise with new dimensions. Doing this won't eat up as much time as you might think. The stories will be the same, and considering them a second time will not take as long as it did the first time.

If any groups do need to reboot their landscapes, suggest that they choose simpler dimensions than they did the first time. Having a few very simple dimension sets on hand as you start the session (like strength versus friendliness or responsibility versus outcome) will help struggling groups find an easier way forward.

### ***Some stories fit the dimensions and some don't***

This can happen when your stories are exceptionally diverse, such as when they cover multiple topics or were collected from very different groups. There are two ways to deal with partially fitting dimensions:

- As above, you can ask people to put aside their original dimensions and restart the exercise with different dimensions.
- You can ask people to put any stories that don't fit into their spaces into a special *unplaceables* pile. After all of the stories that *can* be placed have been placed, they can come back to the unplaceables pile and consider them again. If most of the stories in the pile are still unplaceable:
  - They can put the unplaceable stories aside (as insufficiently relevant and meaningful to this group doing this exercise on this day) and finish the exercise without them.
  - They can talk about *why* the unplaceables don't fit the dimensions. Are they all unplaceable for the same reason? Or are there multiple reasons? What does that mean? Would they like to add an annotation to their landscape to capture that insight?
  - They can think of two *new* dimensions that would include the unplaceables, then build a second landscape that uses those dimensions. Afterwards, they can compare the two landscapes and talk about what they mean in combination.

### ***People don't like the dimensions you gave them***

Here's a what-if situation to consider. You have worked long and hard over your preparations for your sensemaking workshop. You have read every story; you have deeply understood the goals of your project; you have read everything you could find on how to facilitate participatory workshops. For the landscape exercise, you have carefully chosen the one perfect set of dimensions that will best suit your stories and your project.

Now you are in a workshop with your participants. You start the exercise. You give your carefully prepared instructions. You present your carefully chosen dimensions. *They fall flat.* Your participants don't like them. They don't understand them, are irritated by them, find them meaningless, demand a change. What should you do?

Give in. Give up. Ask your participants to *help you choose something better*. However, do not give in without any conditions! If your participants have not yet had significant contact with your stories, tell them that they *can* choose different dimensions *if* they first spend some time gaining more exposure to the stories. An extra 15 minutes of concentrated work should be enough. Explain that the dimensions *must* be reflected in the stories for the exercise to work. Once they are familiar with the stories, go ahead and let them come up with their own dimensions.

It is better in sensemaking for people to do something you hadn't planned than it is for people to do nothing at all, which is likely if you force your own best ideas onto them. This is true *even when your ideas are better than theirs*. Participation matters more than perfection. Don't let people use nonsensical dimensions, but do work with them to find something they can use.

### ***People place items too slowly or too quickly***

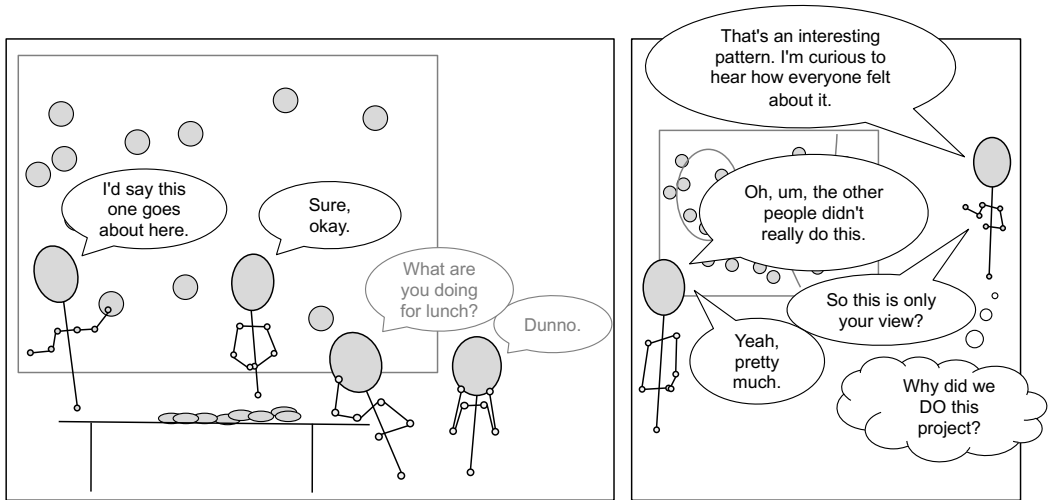
I covered these situations for the timeline exercise (see page 361), and the dynamics are the same here.

#### ***Only some people place items***

I've seen this situation happen a lot in this exercise. Building a landscape, or building anything on a large space, requires people to shuttle back and forth between some sort of central repository where the items are piled up and a surface on which they are being placed. As people do this shuttling back and forth, what typically happens is that some people shuttle and some don't.

Some non-shuttlers are just pondering, taking their time to think things through. But sometimes, reluctant participants seize upon this opportunity to say "I can't, because *they* are." That's why wallflowers grow on walls. It's away from where the action is.

But here's the problem. For sensemaking to work you need the full *diversity of thought* within the group to come into play. If only the most active people in the group build the landscape, it will be less meaningful than one built by everyone in the group.



If you think this type of holding back might happen in your workshop, design your exercise introduction to prevent it. Say something like this:

We want this process to result in new discoveries and new ideas. To make that happen, your landscape must represent *all of the perspectives* present in your group. That means that everyone in the group must agree about the placement of each item. If everyone *doesn't* agree, you must *split up* the item to represent the different views present. *Don't leave anyone out* of what you make.

In other words, set things up so that success in the exercise is *impossible* without the inclusion of every view. This will enlist the active people in drawing out the passive people, because you've shown the active people that they can't succeed alone.

Also, if you expect partial participation, make your group sizes smaller. The fewer people in each group, the greater the impact non-participation will have on group success, and the better the inclusion rule will work.

### **People guard their work**

Sometimes you will come across a group whose solidarity is very high. Such high-solidarity groups work together intensely, and what they have produced has strong and deep emotional meaning to them. That's great. But when you get to the point of the workshop where people are supposed to describe their landscapes, these groups give only partial or superficial descriptions of what they have built. They don't *want* everyone else to know what they have found out. "What happens in the group stays in the group" is their motto. This is a problem, because the point of sensemaking is for everyone in the room, and everyone *not* in the room, to gain benefits from what has been discovered there.

How can you deal with guarding? This is a tricky one, because people guard only when strong emotions are involved. You can't barge in and police transparency. But you can remind people of their responsibilities as participants in the project.

Everyone in your workshop should have some kind of *hope* that the project will create positive change for the *whole* community or organization. Call on that hope now. Ask the



people in guarding groups to share *as much as they can* with the goal of making their hopes for the project come to reality.

### ***People pay too much attention to sharing***

This is the opposite of the guarding situation. Sometimes you will come across a group for whom the fact that their landscape will be shared with others, inside and outside the workshop, is the *only* fact worth considering. They see themselves more as travel writers preparing a captivating television series than as explorers traveling through unfamiliar lands. The landscapes they create are *sensational*. They surprise! They amaze! They shock! But they don't add meaning to the project, and they don't contribute to change. They're a mile wide and an inch deep.

If you run across a group like this, draw their attention to the ambitions of your project. For example, you could quietly say something like:

So, based on all the work you've done here, which I can see is huge, what strikes you as the one outcome of this exercise that is most likely to *create lasting change* in our organization?

Then walk away and let them chew on that. If they don't *have* anything in their landscape with the power to create lasting change—which they won't, if it's sensational—a little nudge might help them approach the exercise in a different way.

### **Your own style**

This exercise is one you have to try out in practice to find out how it fits your thinking. Until you actually try this exercise in real space and time, you won't know how well it works for you. My suggestion is to go through the exercise once or a few times on your own, then read over the "what can go wrong" section above and think about whether you experienced any of those issues. If you did, what does that mean about your own ways of thinking? Where do you need to improve your facilitation skills, or change the exercise, or both, to make the fit between your facilitation and the exercise work better?

## **Local folk tales**

When this exercise is used for story collection, its purpose is to bring out stories that explore wishes and expectations. When it is used for sensemaking, its purpose is to explore wishes and expectations from multiple perspectives. It is especially useful when the people who are making sense of stories are not the people who told them.

### **Requirements**

At least two people; at least 90 minutes.

This exercise also requires your participants to guess at the feelings of the people who told your stories. This might not be possible if the stories you collected are superficial, guarded, distant, or performative, or if they are more opinions than stories. Before you

use this exercise, read through some of your stories and see if you can guess how their tellers would answer these questions:

1. Will things like this happen in the future?
2. *Should* things like this happen in the future?

If you can't guess at how your storytellers would answer these questions for at least (roughly) half of your stories, don't use this exercise.

In case this distinction is not clear, here are a few examples. Consider this (made-up) story:

"Can you believe this new software they've foisted on us? The old thing was fine. I knew how it worked. I had a nice, pleasant routine. Now everything's all up in the air again, and for what reason? I can't see *anything* about this new software that is one bit better. What a nuisance. This is just the kind of thing they do."

It's easy to guess how this storyteller feels: things like this should not happen, and they most certainly will continue to happen. Now consider this story:

"I will never forget the day I came into the building for the first time. Every single person there shook my hand. I was like, are these people strange or what? It was only later I found out that new employees are always welcomed in that way. It's not an official policy or anything, but people around here just do that. Now I do it myself. What a wonderful way to start things out."

This story is also easy to place. Things like this should happen, and they are likely to keep happening. Now consider this story:

"My dad worked long and hard, but when he retired he said he wished he had been a carpenter. Now he's having a great time making little intricate cabinets. Makes you wonder."

That's an oblique, circumspect story. It has a meaning, but it's not clear what the storyteller thinks could or should happen.

If most of the stories in your collection are like my first and second examples, this exercise will work well. If most of them are like my third example, the exercise won't work well.

## Preparation

Write or print the local-folk-tales diagram (page 227) on poster-sized sheets of paper or full-page online documents, one per small group. Write or print its lines and words in small, light fonts (smaller and lighter than I can use here). People will be working on top of the diagram, so it should fade into the background of the space.

Also prepare a few example stories that fit well into a few different locations on the diagram (like the stories I showed you, but from your own collection). Don't mention them in your instructions; just have them ready in case people are confused by the exercise.

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise. Show people the labeled space.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, split up into groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard (with the exercise diagram on it).

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
45+	Small groups	<p>Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. As you read each story, think about how the person who told it would answer these questions about what happened in it.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Will things like this happen in the future?</li> <li>2. <i>Should</i> things like this happen in the future?</li> </ol> <p>If you can't guess how the storyteller would answer the questions, put the story aside and move on to the next one.</p> <p>Now think about <i>your own answers</i> to the questions. Do you think things like this will happen in the future? <i>Should</i> they?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If your answers are the same as the storyteller's, write the name of the story on a yellow sticky note and place it onto the diagram where it fits best.</li> <li>• If your answers and the storyteller's differ, write the name of the story on two sticky notes, one red (for their answers) and one blue (for yours). Place each sticky note onto the diagram where it fits best.</li> </ul> <p>Keep doing this until you have gone through all of the stories.</p>
25+	Small groups	<p>Stand back and look at your space. Do you see any patterns in the colors of your sticky notes? Do you see any common themes among the stories in the various parts of the space? Do you see any clusters or gaps? What do the patterns you see say to you? Annotate your space to record what you see.</p>

These sticky-note colors are placeholders, of course; use any colors you like (though not a red-green contrast). You can also use different sticky-note shapes.

## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Everyone together	If you have multiple groups, show each other your spaces. Talk about similarities and differences in how you placed the stories and what you think the placements mean.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Ask your storytellers the questions*

If you are planning your project, and you know you want to use this exercise, you can ask your storytellers the two questions used in this exercise. You can ask them using:

- scales (from horrible to wonderful; from impossible to guaranteed)
- answer lists (e.g., horrible, bad, good, wonderful; impossible, unlikely, likely, guaranteed)
- open-ended opportunities to speak freely (this option is particularly useful if your topic is complex and “things like this” could mean a few different things)
- this exercise (if you use it to collect your stories, you can save participants’ story placements as list answers or scale values, possibly with some commentary)

Then, during your sensemaking workshop, you won’t have to ask your participants to guess at what your storytellers meant. They can just look on your story cards to see the answers. If the answers are paragraphs of text, your workshop participants will still have some interpretation to do; but that could be a good thing, if you want to help them understand the perspectives of your storytellers.

### *Add more information*

As groups place sticky notes that represent storyteller interpretations, they can add some extra information about each story or its teller. For example, they can add things like:

- a fact about the story (e.g., its length, the intensity of its expression, whether it mentions any specific people or places or groups)
- a fact about the storyteller (e.g., their age, position, role, location)
- the storyteller’s answer to a question about:
  - the story (e.g., “How long do you think you will remember this story?”)
  - themselves (e.g., “Are you a big-picture thinker?”)
  - their opinion (e.g., “Do you support this policy?”)

The basic idea is to add information that might reveal interesting and useful patterns when the stories are considered together. (This is why your story cards should include storyteller answers to questions: so sensemaking participants can use the information you gathered to make sense of the stories.)

People can add these additional bits of information to their story-name sticky notes by:

- writing the information (in small print) on the bottom
- circling or underlining some story names (and not others)
- adding sticky-note dots (e.g., a blue dot for stories told by managers, red for staff, yellow for customers)

### ***Consider other perspectives***

Instead of answering the could/should questions from their own perspectives, groups can answer them *from multiple specific perspectives*, using a different sticky-note color for each point of view. For example, a single story could be placed on the space:

- from the perspective of the storyteller (blue)
- from the perspective of a person who:
  - strongly supports the current policy (green and circled)
  - strongly opposes the current policy (red)
  - is unaware of or apathetic about the current policy (yellow)

The patterns that appear among these colors could be worth talking about.

### ***Add visiting and revision periods***

If you have more than one group, you can ask people to visit each other's spaces. The instructions are the same as for timelines (page 356).

### ***Talk about the quadrants***

The basic instructions for this exercise ask people to compare "the various parts of the space." But if you want to, you can be more specific. The four quadrants of the diagram represent four situations (less extreme in the center, more extreme at the edges). If you and I were members of a community or organization, we could talk about the stories on our diagram like this:

- **Cautionary tales.** The stories in the upper left (undesirable and likely) describe the thorns in our side, the longstanding problems we endure but cannot remove, the things we keep doing that keep hurting us. Could these stories help us better understand our problems? Do they suggest any solutions?
- **Creation myths.** The stories in the upper right (desirable and likely) describe our foundational assets, strengths, values, and beliefs. What can these stories tell us about who we are and who we want to be? Is there anything here that we take for granted?
- **Utopian tales.** The stories in the lower right (desirable and unlikely) describe our missed opportunities, our dreams deferred, the things we want but can't have. What can these stories tell us? Why do we want these things? Why aren't they going to happen? What could we do to make them happen?
- **Ghost stories.** The stories in the lower left (undesirable and unlikely) describe the things we avoid, and for good reason. But might we be complacent about this area? Might these stories tell us about dangers we must remember to guard against?

These are just a few ideas. You can come up with your own questions to ask, and you can encourage your participants to come up with their own questions. Going through each quadrant (and preparing something to say to the entire workshop about it) can help participants frame their thoughts about their spaces.

### ***Tell stories that move around in the space***

As with any landscape exercise, you can ask people to tell what-if stories that move around from point to point on the space.

### **How you will know it's working**

Watch people during the first few minutes of this exercise, when they are placing their first few stories into their spaces. If those first few placements seem to go quickly and smoothly, they will probably be fine. If they spend a lot of time on the first few placements (like ten minutes), they might need some help.

### **What can go wrong**

#### ***People can't guess how the storytellers would answer the questions***

Ideally this shouldn't happen, because you tested to make sure storyteller perspectives were apparent in the stories. But some people have a harder time interpreting stories than others.

This is why it's important to prepare some example stories. If you see one or two groups struggling to place stories, go to them and quietly show them your example stories and placements. If you see *everyone* struggling, pause the exercise and show everyone your stories and placements. Then ask groups to approach the task again.

Ultimately, the best solution to this problem is a large, diverse, relevant, and meaningful story collection. To see patterns in their spaces, people will need to place at least 20 stories. So if they can start with a set of 40 stories, they will be able to put aside half of the stories as unplaceable and still find some patterns to talk about.

#### ***People don't know how they feel about the stories***

If you see people placing stories based solely on the story texts (that is, without considering their own feelings), give them a little thought experiment to help them explore their responses. Say:

Put yourself in the shoes of these people. If you experienced what they experienced, how would *you* react? How would you feel about whether what happened would and should happen in the future?

#### ***No differences come up***

Your workshop participants might simply agree with the feelings of your storytellers. Every story placement might be the same because every feeling expressed in the stories seems reasonable. That's fine. People don't have to disagree to learn something from this exercise. They can move right on to looking for patterns in the placements of stories on the space.

## Your own style

Helping people talk about what happens when desire meets expectation can be fascinating and rewarding, but it can also be difficult and uncomfortable. You might want to practice facilitating this exercise with some helpful friends or with a straightforward topic before you use it to help people talk about a contentious issue.

# Ground truthing

When this exercise is used for story collection, it helps people think of stories to tell by comparing their experiences to a document or dictionary. When it is used for sensemaking, it uses collected stories to talk about how a document or dictionary could be improved (in theory or in reality).

## Requirements

At least three people; at least 90 minutes. A document or set of dictionary definitions that relates to your project's goals.

## Preparation

Preparing to use this exercise for sensemaking is the same as it is for story collection (page [233](#)), so I won't repeat the instructions here.

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise. Show people the papers on the table (or items on the screen). Ask people not to open the papers/items until you tell them to.
2-5	You	If you have more than three people, split up into groups of 3-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards.

## The main part of the exercise

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	Small groups	Look over the papers on the table (or items on the screen). Agree on one paper/item you will explore together. <i>Do not open it</i> (or do what it would take to “open” it online).
60+	Small groups	<p>Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. Working together, choose 2-4 stories that seem to connect well to the word(s) on the paper/item you chose. For example, if you chose “Cooperation,” you might pick out some stories in which cooperation is abundant or absent.</p> <p>Once you have chosen some stories, talk about your answers to these questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What <i>beliefs</i> do you see in these stories? What do the people in the stories think is true or false?</li> <li>2. What <i>values</i> do you see in these stories? What do the people in the stories seem to care about? What do they like or dislike?</li> </ol> <p>Now open the sheet of paper (item on the screen) and read what it says inside. Discuss any connections or gaps you see between the stories you chose, the beliefs and values you see in them, and what it says on the paper (screen).</p> <p>If you have enough time, you can choose more papers/items and go through the process a few more times.</p>
5	Small groups	Talk about all of the papers/items and stories you encountered. What patterns do you see?

## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Everyone together	If you have more than one group, have someone from each group describe what happened in their work together. Then talk about the patterns you see across all of the groups.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.



## Optional elaborations

### ***Change the aspects***

The default story aspects for this exercise are beliefs and values, but you can use any set of two aspects people are likely to find in most stories: emotions, conflicts, perspectives, problems, solutions, dilemmas, discoveries, helping hands, and so on. Choose aspects that are easy to find in your stories and that matter to your participants and topic.

### ***Rewrite the texts***

After each small group has discussed the connections and gaps between the stories they chose and the statements or definitions they read, you can ask them to *rewrite each statement or definition*. However, unless you actually have permission to change the official document or dictionary, make sure your participants understand that this is an exercise, not an editing session. (On the other hand, if you *do* have permission to change an official document or dictionary, this could be a great way to improve it.)

### ***Repeat the process***

If you have more time, you can ask groups to go through the choose-and-compare process with more than one statement or definition. If you have a particular document you would like to improve (like a mission or values statement for your organization), you can ask every group to go through the process for every statement in the document.

## How you will know it's working

When this exercise is used for story collection, its critical moment is when people are choosing papers/items to share stories about. When it's used for sensemaking, its critical moment is when small groups are answering questions about the stories they chose. If they are going to misunderstand your instructions, it will happen then. Make yourself available to help out during that time.

## What can go wrong

The same things that can go wrong when you use this exercise for story collection (see page 236) can also go wrong when you use it for sensemaking. Sometimes people don't understand the words, understand the words too well, don't want to challenge the document/dictionary, or disagree on what the words mean. Because people are working with previously told stories, these issues tend to be less pronounced in sensemaking. But the same advice applies: watch your jargon; obfuscate familiar terms; de-emphasize criticism; emphasize creativity and multi-vocal complexity.

## Your own style

The idea on which this exercise rests—exploring connections between stories of lived experience and codified documents—is a broad one, so its potential elaborations are manifold. Use your creativity to expand on it to suit your needs.

For example, you could help your participants build an array of parallel documents or dictionaries, each of which represents the unique perspective of a particular group of people—as expressed in the stories they told in your project. Within each parallel document

or dictionary, each statement or definition could include a set of stories chosen to illustrate the meaning of each term to that group of people.

Alternatively, you could help your participants build a single internally complex document or dictionary within which each statement or definition, aided by its accompanying stories, portrays the full range of perspectives that can be found within your community or organization.

## Story Elements

Story elements are linked symbolic representations that work like superhero teams or locations on a mythical map to encapsulate the feelings, beliefs, and values of the people who built them. With this exercise your participants can derive their own locally-meaningful symbols from the stories you gathered.

That sounds esoteric, but the exercise itself is relatively easy to understand. It relies heavily on clustering, which most people pick up quickly.

### Requirements

At least two people; at least two hours.

If most of your stories are stories—that is, they include essential elements of narrative structure such as a setting, characters, plot events (challenges, conflicts, responses), and a resolution—this exercise will work well. If you gathered mostly opinions, it won't work.

### Preparation

Before the workshop, choose a type of story element to use. Which type will work best depends on your project, your participants, and your stories.

The simplest story-element types are easy to think about. Most people will find them easy, but some might find them a bit boring.

Element type	Question	Examples
Situations	What conditions were present in this story?	on the ropes, safe haven, between a rock and a hard place, when it rains it pours, scorched ground, land of plenty
Characters	Who did things in this story?	unscrupulous opportunist, worker bee, innovative mind, heedless thrill-seeker, hero, figurehead, generalist
Values	What mattered to the characters in this story? What did they want or need?	freedom, creativity, calm, adventure, perfection, fairness, stability, challenge, connection

The more complex story-element types are more challenging. Some participants might not want to think that deeply, but some might find the challenge enthralling.

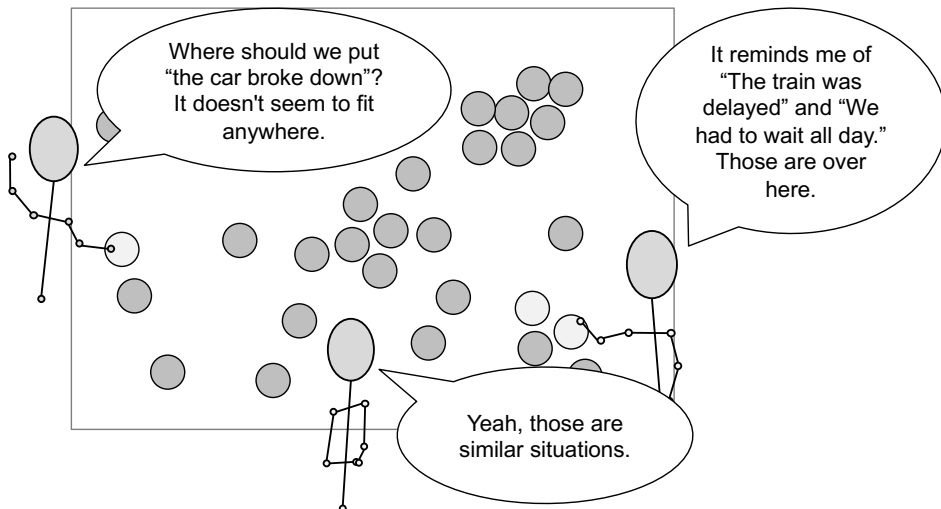
Element type	Question	Examples
Motivations	Why did the characters in this story do what they did?	climbing the ladder, making a name for myself, I did what was asked of me, moral compass, I am the change I want to see, maximizing efficiency
Beliefs	What did people believe in this story?	only the strong will survive, compassion is peril, keep your eyes open, freedom isn't free, a fool and his money are soon parted
Relationships	How did the characters in this story relate to each other?	cat and mouse, servant and master, opposites attract, planet and moon, twin souls
Conflicts	Who or what stood in opposition in this story?	arms race, simmering discontent, chest-beating, emotional blackmail, chicken-and-egg problem, vicious circle, lesser of two evils, rock and hard place, endless loop
Transitions	What changes were important in this story?	the busy streets are so quiet, enemies were once friends, remember the good old days, back to the drawing board, a new hope has dawned

## Starting out

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, split up into groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group twice as much space (on its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard) as you would for a timeline or landscape.

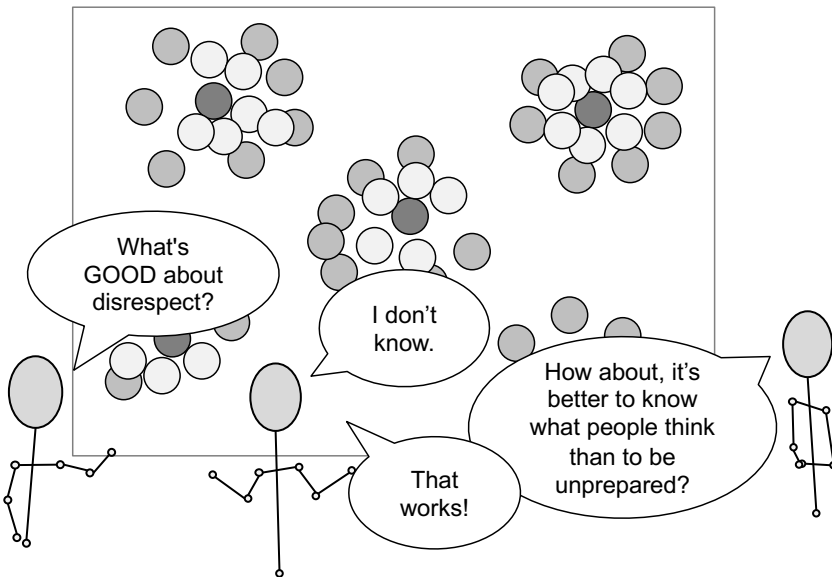
## Answering questions and first clustering

Minutes	Who	What to do
1-5	Small groups	Consider the question the facilitator has shown you (or choose one from those they show you).
45+	Small groups	<p>Read each story as a group, silently or aloud. As you read it, write 2-4 brief answers to the question on sticky notes.</p> <p>For example, if the question is “What is going on in this story?” you might write notes that say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We had an argument</li> <li>• One person listened to another</li> <li>• We found a solution</li> </ul> <p>Keep doing this until you have read all of the stories you have. You can keep the sticky notes in one pile. It won’t matter which story they came from. You should end up with at least 30 sticky notes in total.</p>
15+	Small groups	<p>Place all of your sticky-note answers onto a table or wall (or screen). Then move the answers around. Put similar answers close together and different answers far apart.</p> <p>Eventually you will arrive at several clusters of answers. Give your clusters names, and write the names on sticky notes.</p>



### Writing attributes and second clustering

Minutes	Who	What to do
20+	Small groups	<p>Look at each cluster of answers you have. List 2-4 positive and 2-4 negative attributes of each cluster.</p> <p>For example, say you have a cluster where all of the answers have to do with communication. That's what you called the cluster: Communication. So, what's a good thing about communication? It brings people together. That's a positive attribute. Write that down. Communication also helps people get help. That's another positive attribute. But communication can be deceptive. That's a negative attribute. Write that down too.</p> <p>Do this for all of your clusters.</p>
10+	Small groups	<p>Pick up your attributes and carry (or copy) them to a new, empty space. Ignoring where they came from, cluster them together, placing like with like, just as you did before with your answers.</p> <p>When you have finished, you will have a new set of clusters. Give these new clusters names. Those are your story elements: situations, characters, values, and so on.</p>
10+	Small groups	<p>Look over the story elements you have created. Talk about what they mean.</p>



## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Everyone together	If you have multiple groups, show each other your story elements. Talk about similarities and differences. If you want to, talk about what would happen if elements from different groups interacted.
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### *Merge answers*

Instead of having each small group do the entire exercise on their own, you can ask groups to answer the starting questions, then merge their answers and finish the rest of the exercise together. Groups can join up in pairs or trios, or everyone can build one set of story elements together (starting with their by-group answers).

Whether this is a useful elaboration depends on your project, stories, and people. These are some situations in which the elaboration is especially useful—or not.

If your	is/are	Merging will be	Why or why not?
Participants	Apathetic	Useful	Merging answers creates less “work” for each participant (plus it’s interesting)
Stories	Few (<50)	Useful	More variety in the answers will make up for less variety in the stories
Stories	Many (200+)	Useful	Elements based on more stories will represent the collection better
Project	About finding new ideas	Not useful	The parallel development of multiple story-element families will bring out more diverse ideas
Participants	Very different	Harmful	People might need to own the whole process to feel heard
Topic	Private or sensitive	Harmful	People might need to work in smaller groups to feel safe

### ***Build more than one type of story element***

You can help your participants build 2-3 different types of story elements. There are two ways to do this:

1. **Within groups.** As groups consider stories, they can write answers to 2-3 different questions about each story on differently-colored sticky notes. Then they can build one family of story elements at a time (e.g., first situations, then motivations). Afterwards, they can compare the families of story elements they have built. This option works best when motivation is high.
2. **Across groups.** Each group can choose a different type of story element to build (e.g., one group might choose situations while another chooses motivations). Groups can then compare their different element types. This option is best when differences of perspective or power are not a barrier.

### ***Choose exemplar stories***

After story elements have been created, groups can choose a few stories to illustrate the meaning behind each element. Doing this has two purposes:

- **As a test.** Choosing illustrative stories can help participants test story elements for bias (such as the pressure to conform to expected messages). If a group can't find at least one story to illustrate each story element, they may want to look at their answers, clusters, and attributes again and see if they want to change what they have created.
- **As a message.** Choosing illustrative stories can help participants convey the meanings they found in the workshop to those who did not participate in it. This is especially useful when workshop participants have less power than those outside the workshop. For example:
  - A group of aid recipients might want to communicate to an outside aid agency where their strongest needs—and proudest strengths—lie.
  - A group of factory workers might want to communicate to management their safety concerns and creative ideas.
  - The residents of a town might want to prepare a proposal of cooperation to send to another town with which there have been disputes over water rights.

Surrounding each story element with illustrative stories (perhaps retold with a specific audience and purpose in mind) can help workshop participants communicate what the elements mean and why they matter.

You can also suggest to motivated groups that they can illustrate their story elements with drawings or prepare and perform short skits.

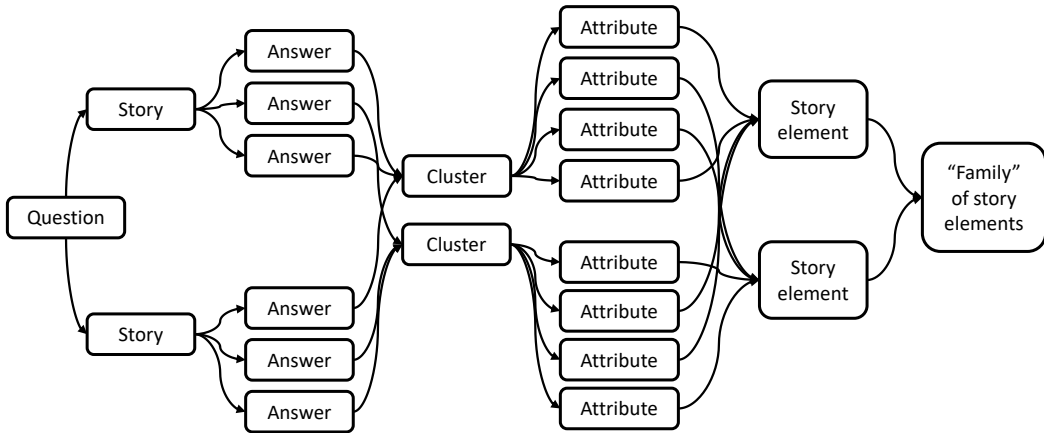
### ***Cluster the clusters***

If you have a large group of participant groups, you may end up with a large number of story elements. For example, say your workshop has 50 people divided into 10 groups of five people. Say each group has created a family of 5-8 story elements (all of the same type). That means you have 50-80 story elements, which is far too many to talk about

together. In such a situation you could ask everyone in the workshop to participate in one grand final clustering to create a single family of 5-8 story elements.

**Create link-back trails**

As they go through this exercise, participants can annotate their sticky notes, creating a web of annotations that connect stories to answers to clusters to attributes to elements.



Here’s how to make these connections explicit.

When	Do this	For example
You are gathering stories	Give each story a number	Story 23 is called “What happened at the park.”
Groups are writing answers	Add the story number	All of the answers about story 23 say “23” on them.
Groups are clustering answers	Add the name of the cluster	One of the “23” answers is in the “Distrust” cluster, so it says “23-Distrust.”
Groups are writing cluster attributes	Add the cluster name	All of the attributes of the “Distrust” cluster say “Distrust” on them.
The story elements are complete	Follow each element back to the clusters, answers, and stories it came from	Three out of five attributes in the “Backed into a corner” story element say “Distrust” on them. Going back to “23-Distrust” leads to the rereading of “What happened in the park.”

I’ll give you an example of why this elaboration is useful by telling you a true story about a sensemaking workshop. (I wasn’t there; I heard this second-hand.) The workshop was with police officers, and they were working with stories about crime. Two of their answer clusters were called something like “Lifesaving officer” and “Master criminal.” When they clustered their attributes, one of the story elements they created was called “Hero.”



Because they had noted the source of each attribute, the participants discovered that “Hero” was made up of as many attributes from the “Master criminal” cluster as it was from the “Lifesaving officer” cluster. The idea that *criminals could have courage* sparked a deep discussion. Coming to that sort of breakthrough insight is exactly what sensemaking is for. Link-back trails help people surprise themselves by examining their own thoughts.

You can explain the trail-making process to your participants and ask them to make these annotations as they work. If they don’t want to do that, you (or a helper) can add the annotations yourselves, either as groups work or during well-placed breaks.

### ***Compare story elements to official statements***

After story elements have been created, groups can compare them to established statements of the community or organization, such as a mission statement, official history, or set of values. They can ask questions like:

- How are these two representations of our community, one abstract and one experience-based, similar? How are they different?
- How do these established statements connect to these story elements? Do some of the elements connect better than others? Why?
- Are there issues, problems, or ideas that appear in the story elements but not in the established statements, or vice versa? Why is that?

### ***Compare story elements to published models***

As I mentioned in the elaborations for the timeline exercise (page 359), it can be helpful to compare sensemaking constructions with published models or frameworks. The same warnings apply here as well: present models as *perspectives* to be considered, not as *corrections* to be applied or *standards* to be met

In the Sensemaking chapter of *Working with Stories in Depth* I describe some examples of models that are useful in this exercise: ones that set up *categories* to compare. You can offer everyone the same model, or you can offer groups several models to choose from.

### ***Add visiting and revision periods***

If you have more than one group, you can ask people to visit each other’s final clustering spaces. The instructions are the same as for timelines (page 356).

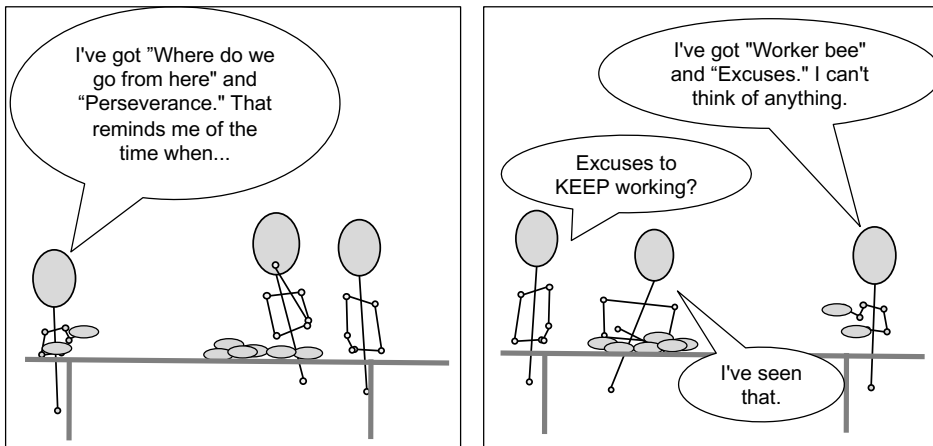
### ***Tell stories with story elements***

Because story elements come from stories, participants can combine and recombined them to create new stories.

- If participants have built a single family of story elements (of one type), they can remember or imagine stories about each element. For example, a group might tell about times when they faced an “on the ropes” situation, or about times in the future when such a situation might come up.
- If participants have built multiple families of story elements (of different types), they can copy their element names onto index cards, place the cards into a pile, shuffle the

pile, and take turns drawing out two or three cards at random and using them to tell real or imagined stories. For example:

- Two participants might role-play a skit in which a “worker bee” and a “figurehead” have been asked to work together in a “between a rock and a hard place” situation.
- A participant might draw the relationship card “cat and mouse” and the conflict card “chicken-and-egg problem,” remember a true story and tell it, then tell a fictional story about how things might have turned out differently.
- Two participants, working in a team, might draw the cards “safe haven” and “simmering discontent,” huddle for five minutes, then tell a story about a fictional crisis and its resolution by a superhero who exemplifies the “innovative mind” character.



Groups can also connect their families of story elements to a well-known story of historical importance, like how the organization got started or how the community weathered a storm. They might even build a brief factual timeline, connect their story elements to points along it, and extend the timeline into the fictional future.

### How you will know it's working

When people are answering questions about stories, the exercise is working if they are writing. If they are not writing, they will not have enough items to cluster. If you see a group looking at stories and talking—and nobody is writing anything—keep an eye on them. If a group doesn't get at least 20-30 answer notes to cluster, they won't be able to finish the exercise.

When people are clustering their answers, the exercise is working if they are negotiating. If you see a group mechanically placing notes into a space—and nobody's ever picking any notes up and putting them somewhere else—the exercise isn't going well for them. Clustering is a trial-and-error process. There should be restarts and reframings, dilemmas and discussions, proposals and compromises. Watch for negotiation, not just completion.

## What can go wrong

### ***People write too few answers to the questions***

Sometimes it takes a while for people to get started on this exercise. They sit in their groups, and they look at their stories, and they look at each other. Sometimes they get into long discussions about what is and isn't a character or a situation. Sometimes they just give up and talk about the weather. It is your job as the facilitator to ease this transition. How can you do that? Use the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Say something like this.

As you encounter these stories together, answers to the question written here will occur to you. When they do occur to you, write them on these sticky notes. Don't worry about whether they are right or wrong. If they occur to you, they are right.

Framing the task as a task of *reception* rather than *creation* takes the pressure off. It also stops people debating what is and isn't a valid answer, because the definition of a valid answer is: *what occurs to you*. If it springs to mind, it's valid.

### ***People categorize instead of clustering***

Sometimes you will hear people in a group saying things like this to each other.

- How about we write an "officer" note every time a story contains a police officer?
- These three stories all have to do with traffic, so let's write three notes for that.
- This story is in a public space. Let's label every story in a public space "public."

Watch out for people using general words like *every* and *all* or categorizing words like *label* and *type* and *category* and *class* and *group*. When you hear talk like this, intervene. There should be no categories in this exercise. Answer notes should be *unique to each story and to each group*.

There's a simple reason to avoid categorization in this exercise. The *stories* are not what participants are meant to be examining. The stories are a *means* of examining their own assumptions, feelings, and imaginations. The more people put *themselves* into this exercise, the more the exercise will do for them.

What should you do if people start the exercise by categorizing stories? Redirect their attention to *observing their reactions* to stories. Ask them to pay attention to what *jumps out* of the stories at them: what *springs to mind*, what they *notice*, what *matters* to them, what they find *memorable*, how they *feel*. Explain that what you are after is not a classification of *stories* but an accumulation of *responses*.

For example, if you see someone writing down "a man," ask them what it is about the man that they want to remember, or what strikes them as most important, or what they like or dislike about him. Is he tall? Kind? Misunderstood? Brave? Those are the sorts of things they should write down and use in their clustering.

### ***Nothing jumps out at people***

If you facilitate long enough, you are guaranteed to come across a person who, when you say, "Write down the answers that occur to you," tells you that nothing occurs to them.

Usually these are people who are very used to following rules and procedures in their lives. They are not stupid; they are just not accustomed to *waiting for things to happen* in their minds. But they *need* to wait for this exercise to work.

A helpful tweak to the exercise in this case is to have people break down stories into smaller pieces. In a group of diehard nothing-occurs-to-me participants, one group member might read a story out loud one sentence at a time. After each sentence has been read, the group can ask itself: Can we think of any answers to this question based on the sentence we just read? If they can think of an answer, they can write it down. If they can't think of an answer, they can move on to the next sentence. After they have read a few stories in this step-wise manner, answers might start occurring to them without breaking stories apart. (The observant reader will have noticed that this method is similar to the way in which unaccustomed storytellers can be helped to tell stories; see page 167.)

### ***People blur distinctions between element types***

People often don't get the distinctions right between types of story element. You ask them to build situations and they build values; you ask to build values and they build characters. Do not allow yourself to care about this. *It doesn't matter*. As long as the things people build are meaningful to them, the exercise will work.

### ***People argue about distinctions between element types***

Sometimes groups who are doing this exercise get into arguments about what constitutes a legitimate answer to the question they are supposed to be answering. If this is happening, you'll hear people saying things like this:

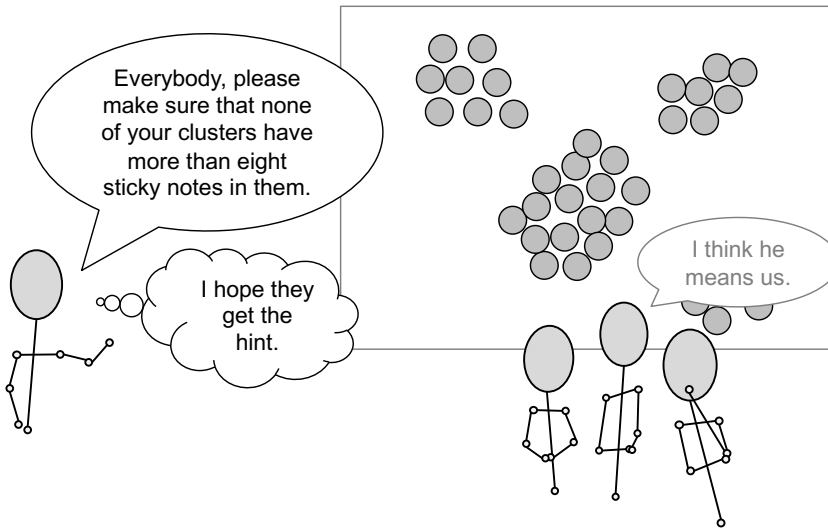
- That isn't a who, it's a what. You can't put that down for the "who" question.
- What do you mean, what's going on is "an angry man"? That makes no sense.
- We're supposed to be saying what *matters* to these people, not what they're feeling.

When you hear this, first, wait and see how long people argue about it. If the argument passes over quickly, ignore it. However, sometimes people get so mired in "doing things right" that they use up all their time without getting anything done. If you think that is happening, step in and quietly explain that *it doesn't matter if the answers to the question fit it perfectly*. Some sloppiness in the answers won't break the process.

### ***Clusters are too big***

As a general rule, any cluster (of anything) should contain no more than seven or eight items, maybe ten at the most. Sometimes you will find groups who have clusters of 15 or more items in them. Usually this happens when people are hesitating to explore the meanings embedded in the cluster.

Should you step in and help people break up large clusters? Not in a direct way. People may take it as a criticism. Instead, say something to everyone, like, "By the way, you should aim to have no clusters with no more than eight or ten items in them." Particularly if you say this while *not* looking at the giant cluster one group has been hoarding, they may take the hint and break it up. If they don't take the hint, let it go. Maybe they aren't ready to break through to that level of insight right now.



### ***People think they are done after the first clustering***

Quite often, people who are doing this exercise think it is over after the first set of clusters is finished. I don't blame them; it *looks* done. They have created a neat and tidy group of clusters with names. They feel ready to rest and enjoy the results of their hard work. However, *you cannot let them do this*. Stopping after the first clusters are complete will ruin the benefits of the exercise.

Don't even schedule a coffee break after the first clusters are complete. A better place for a break is after the attributes have been written, because it will be clear that *something* will follow from it. Keep people moving past the part of the exercise where it looks like things are finished. You don't want them to lose momentum just when they need it.

### ***People write too few attributes***

After people have created their initial clusters, they sometimes have a hard time describing them. They might list few descriptive attributes, or they might copy words from answer notes to attribute notes. If this happens, explain that the quality of the exercise outcome will depend on these attributes. If people are getting tired, you might let them take a break in the middle of writing attributes, because they might think of more to add after they've had a break to rest their imaginations.

### ***People can't or won't write attributes on both good and bad sides***

Coming up with silver linings to obviously bad situations, or bad things about revered heroes, takes imagination. Sometimes people can't or won't do it. Unbalanced descriptions will decrease the utility of the exercise. If this happens, issue a room-wide instruction to include equal numbers of positive and negative attributes for each cluster.

### ***People spend too much time making their clusters beautiful***

If people are rearranging their sticky notes not for meaning but for beauty (for example, making their clusters symmetrical), this is a sign that the exercise isn't moving fast enough. There shouldn't be enough time to think about beauty. If you see a lot of sticky-note

fidgiting in any time period, check to see if all of the groups are doing it. If they are, say something like, “I see things are moving along well, so let’s cut this time period short and move right into the next step.” It’s better to save time for discussion later than it is to lose attention because people have burned through an instruction faster than you expected.

### ***People come up with confusing story element names***

You might need to help your participants name their story elements so they can be understood outside the sensemaking workshop. Some types of names I’ve seen people create that don’t work include the following.

- **Proper nouns.** It is unlikely that people in any sensemaking workshop will arrive at any story element that means *exactly* a real person, place, or thing, no more and no less. What is more likely is that the person, place, or thing will have been *evoked in context* by the sensemaking. But using the name *outside* the sensemaking workshop will not carry that context with it, so such a name could be damaging to understandings after the session. If this problem comes up, ask people to add at least one or two words to the name that give an idea of *why* that name applies to the topic.
- **Names that could mean anything.** In one sensemaking workshop I helped with, one of the character elements created was “mom.” Another was “self.” Those names are not enough, all by themselves, to travel outside the workshop. As with proper nouns, ask people to add a few words more to clarify their meaning.
- **Buzzword names.** Sometimes people choose names they know to be safe because they are buzzwords (fashionable jargon). Some examples might be “positive mental attitude” or “education is key.” You will see this more often when participants feel constrained to speak within accepted boundaries about a topic, perhaps one on which they feel judged. If you see a lot of buzzwords, shout out, “Forgot to say: element names may not be buzzwords.” Then the people who have been hiding in the safety of buzzwords will find them dangerous (breaking the rules), and they’ll rename their elements in a hurry.
- **Names from movies or books only some have seen.** Quite often people choose names for their story elements based on movies or other things in the mass media. That’s fine if everyone in the community or organization can be expected to know what those things mean. But it’s not fine if not everyone has access to the same information. Sometimes these difficulties come up in age differences: a group of teenagers might give elements names that are unintelligible to seniors. When this happens, ask people to add a few more words to clarify what that reference means to the group.
- **Inside jokes.** Here’s a story element name from a real project: “to bee or not to bee.” It was a joke about bees, or stinging, or something. If you see a name like this, ask your participants if everyone in the community or organization would understand it. If they would, it’s fine; if they wouldn’t, ask people to elaborate.

### **Your own style**

Because this exercise is based on the simple acts of listing and clustering, you can imagine all sorts of elaborations you could add to it. Why not explore some of these ideas yourself?

- What would happen if you asked people to look at each story from multiple perspectives?

- What would happen if two groups worked with the same stories, then swapped clusters for the second round?
- What would happen if groups showed their clusters to other groups (and got feedback on them) before and/or after clustering for the second time?
- What would happen if groups used fewer stories, say only five or ten, but fully exhausted every possible answer they could come up with?
- What if everyone in the room wrote the initial answers together (by shouting out answers while you read the stories), then each group got its own copy of the whole-room answers and went through the double-clustering process with them? How would that turn out?

## Composite Stories

In a composite stories exercise, groups use collected stories as source material to build a purposeful story, fictional or semi-fictional, which they tell to other groups. As they build and tell stories, people discuss the juxtapositions of meaning created.

This is a high input, high risk, high commitment, high engagement, high output exercise. It does not require any particular types or qualities of collected stories, but it does ask a lot of your participants. Some people will eat this exercise up and ask for more, and some will find it unappealing or even insulting. But when the conditions are right, this can be the most powerful exercise in your toolkit.

### Requirements

At least nine people; at least three hours.

### Preparation

Choose a story framework—a listing of the parts of a story—that will make sense to your participants. You can also prepare two or three frameworks of varying complexity and ask groups to choose one. These are some of the best known frameworks:

- Aristotle's plot points: Setting, Complication, Resolution
- Freytag's pyramid: Exposition, Inciting incident, Rising action, Climax, Falling action, Resolution, Denouement
- Todorov's narrative theory: State of equilibrium, Disruption of equilibrium, Recognition of disruption, Attempt(s) to repair damage, Establishment of new equilibrium (positive or negative)
- Adams' story spine: Once upon a time, Every day, But one day, Because of that (repeat as desired), Until finally, And ever since then
- Budrys' seven point plot structure: A character, In a context, Has a problem, And tries to solve it, And fails, And tries and fails (repeat as desired), And finally succeeds or fails, And the story ends

I describe these story frameworks (and more) at length in *Working with Stories in Depth*. You can also find them (and more) on the internet or in books about narratology.

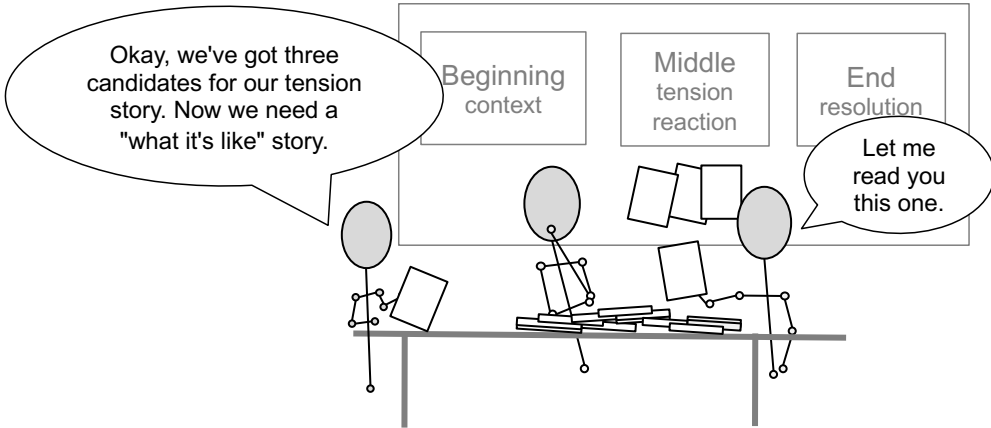
**Starting out**

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Briefly explain what will happen in the exercise. Show the story framework(s).
2	You	Divide participants into <i>at least three groups</i> of 3-5 people.
1	You	Give each group a deck of story cards. Also give each group its own wall, table, giant piece of paper, or online whiteboard.

**Filling the story template**

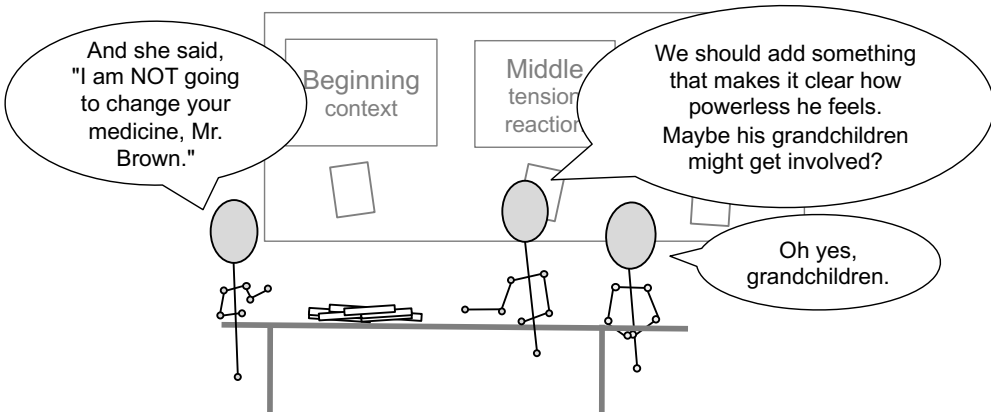
Minutes	Who	What to do
5	Small groups	Agree on a message you want your composite story to deliver. It should be related to the topic and goals of the project. What do you want your audience to take away from hearing your story? What do you want them to remember?
1-5	Small groups	Look at the framework you have been given (or choose one). Write a sticky note label for each framework slot. Place them on a wall or table or in an online document.
		Read the stories, separately or together, silently or aloud. Working together, choose some stories that fit well into each slot in your template. Match the characteristics of each slot (what it is about, what it is like) to memorable, meaningful, or relevant moments in the stories. For example:
45+	Small groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A story that fits well into an “exposition” slot should explain the way things usually are.</li> <li>• A story that fits well into an “inciting incident” slot should feature a surprising change to the status quo.</li> <li>• A story that fits well into a slot labeled “until finally” should describe the long-awaited resolution of a problem.</li> </ul> <p>Select 2-5 stories per slot. Write the story names on sticky notes and place them near your framework labels. If a story doesn’t seem to fit any of your template slots, put it aside and move on to the next story.</p>





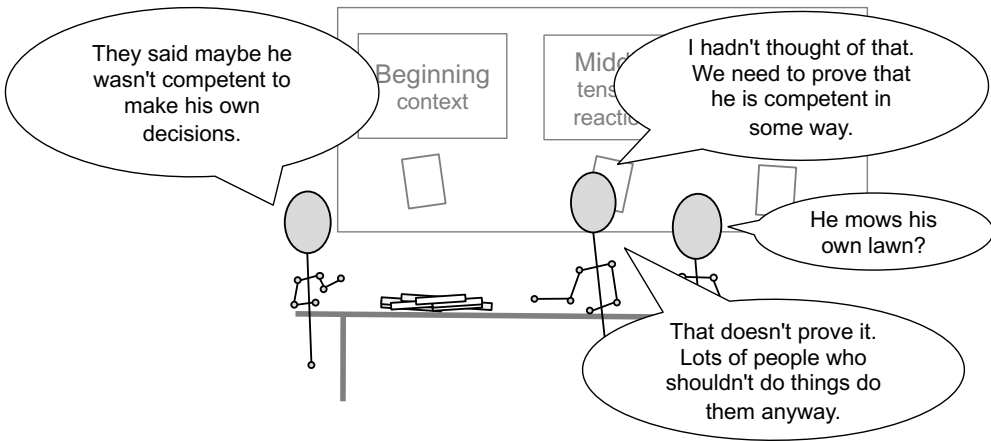
### Building and practicing the story

Minutes	Who	What to do
20+	Small groups	Using your story template and your selected stories, build a fictional story that delivers the message you chose at the start. Think of a character (e.g., a customer) and place them into a context (e.g., walking into your store). Then, drawing from the stories you placed into your template slots, come up with a series of events (e.g., the power goes out) followed by an ending (good or bad: your choice). You can also go back the stories to get more ideas.
15+	Small groups	Choose one person to be the storyteller for the group. They will tell the story to the other groups. Practice telling the story at least once within the group. Keep the story short. It should take no more than seven or eight minutes to tell.



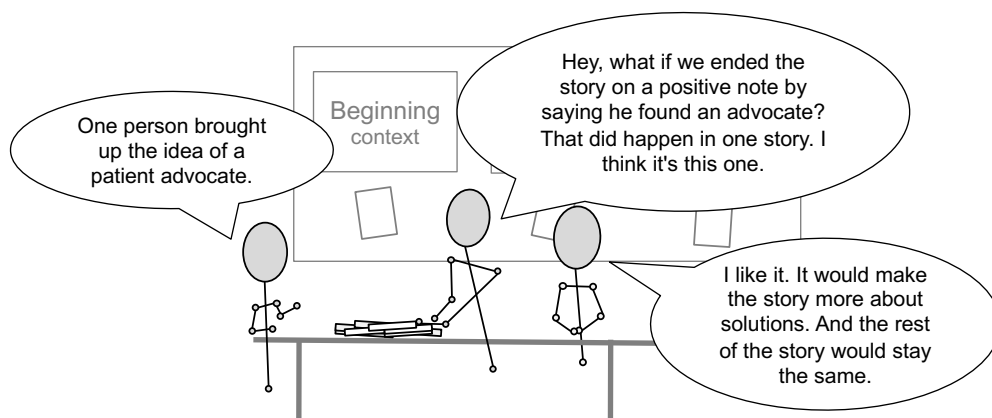
### The first telling

Minutes	Who	What to do
15+	Pairs of groups	<p>Storytellers: Visit another group. Tell them your composite story. Everyone else: Listen to the story. Don't interrupt. Afterwards, answer these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did you take away from this story?</li> <li>• What does it mean to you?</li> <li>• How do you feel about it?</li> </ul> <p>Storytellers: Listen to the answers. Take notes if you want to.</p>
15+	Small groups	<p>Storytellers, come back to your group and tell them what the other group said. Then, as a group, talk about what happened. How well did your story deliver your message? See if you can improve the story. Practice telling it again.</p>



### The second telling

Minutes	Who	What to do
15+	Pairs of groups	<p>Storytellers, visit the other group, the one you didn't visit before. Tell your improved story. Everyone else, listen, then answer the same questions again.</p>
15+	Small groups	<p>Storytellers, report back on what the other group said. Talk about it. See if you want to make any more tweaks to the story. What could you do to deliver your message even more clearly?</p>



## Finishing up

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Small groups	Talk about what happened. How did your composite story change from the beginning of the exercise to the end? What did you learn in the process: about the collected stories, your topic, and yourselves?
15+	Everyone together	Talk about all the stories. Talk about patterns that appeared across stories. Were any of the stories similar? Did the stories present different perspectives on the topic?
5	Everyone together	Talk about the exercise: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

## Optional elaborations

### **Record the stories**

After this exercise is complete, you will have the sticky notes people used to build their stories, but you won't have the stories themselves. If you want to include the stories in your workshop record, you will need to record them. You can record the second telling of the stories, or you can ask each group to tell their story one more time for inclusion in the workshop record (perhaps altered to reflect its wider audience).

### **Tell the stories three times**

In the basic form of this exercise, each group tells the story they built to two other groups. Extending the exercise to three tellings is helpful when groups start out the exercise at a slow pace or at a shallow depth. Giving groups another chance to improve and tell their story will help them get more out of the exercise.

However, if the first two tellings came off well, having groups tell the story a third time might not be helpful. People might just polish their stories instead of delving deeper into

sensemaking. In that case, it would be better to use the extra time for another elaboration, for another exercise, or for more discussion.

### ***Add more up-front story choices***

At the start of the exercise, after groups have chosen the messages their stories will convey, they can make any of several additional choices. Each of these extra choices deepens the complexity of the story-building task.

**Choose a story topic.** A topic is not the same as a message. It is more like the subject matter of the story. Choosing a story topic can be helpful when people are dealing with a large number of stories and might have a hard time choosing among the many possible candidates for inclusion.

**Choose a story genre.** Genres are categories of plots. For example, in a buddy story two people will come closer together through sharing an experience. Using genres can make the story-building experience more engaging and creative. Some examples might be spy stories, buddy stories, road-trip stories, superhero stories, satires, situational comedies, science fiction, documentaries, detective stories, gangster stories, fantasies, histories, counterfactuals, ghost stories, disaster stories, and post-apocalyptic stories. To use this option, select a list of genres that will engage your participants without boring or insulting them.

**Choose a story subtext.** A subtext is a deeper message, one that is more subtle and emotional than an explicit message. It will manifest itself more in how audiences *feel* about the story than in what they think it was about. Choosing a subtext adds another layer of complexity to the built story and makes groups work a little harder at crafting their stories well. Some groups might be eager to build more layers of complexity into their stories. Other groups might find it confusing and distracting.

**Choose a time frame.** If you don't explicitly mention choosing a time frame, people will probably tell a story set in the present, even if it is partly fictional. However, you can suggest that people consider setting their story in the past (perhaps as a counter-factual history) or the future (perhaps as a utopian or dystopian scenario).

**Choose an outcome.** If you don't mention whether the story should end well or badly, people will probably tell stories that end well. However, if you mention the choice of building a story on any point along the wonderful-to-horrible spectrum, some groups might feel inspired (and allowed) to explore their thoughts and feelings in different ways.

**Choose a fact-fiction blend.** Groups will inevitably step into fiction (at least lightly) as they blend their selected stories (with various settings and characters) into a coherent account. However, there is a wide range of possible mixes between fact and fiction. You can mention some possibilities to your participants, such as:

- this usually happens
- if only this could happen
- this must never happen

Asking groups to choose a point along the line blending fact and fiction might nudge some of them to explore further and deeper.

**Choose a metaphorical displacement.** Groups can build allegorical stories, replacing the real-life settings of their stories with metaphorically related settings. For example, if a group wants to tell a story about dangerous conditions in factories producing low-cost goods, they might tell a story about fishers being forced to go out on stormy seas because of low prices in the fish market. Such a metaphorical device can help people surround their story with a message of safety in disclosing strong emotions (it's not about factory work, it's about fishing).

The point of these choices is to help participants become more interested and engaged in the story-building process. It doesn't matter what type of story your participants build, but it does matter—a lot—whether they look forward to exploring your topic with energy.

### ***Deepen stories with repetition***

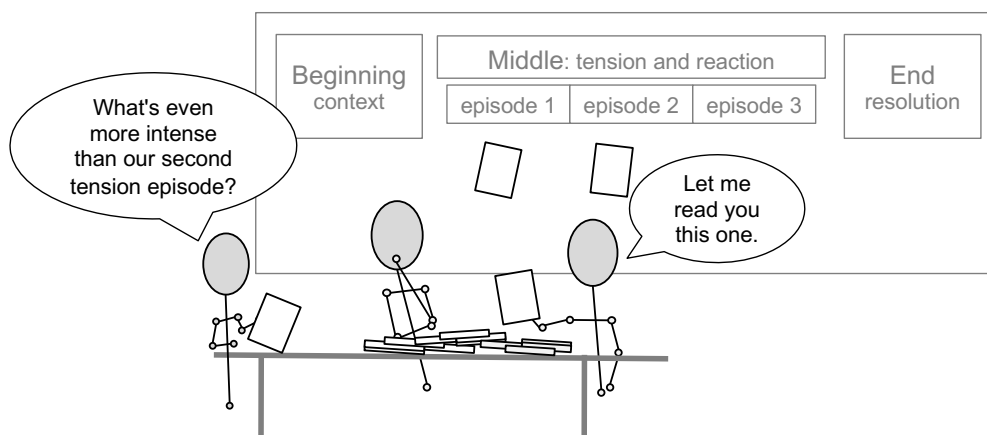
Story templates specify what sort of event should fill each slot. But in the telling of folk tales, a *series of episodes* often fits into each part of the story template. Typically the episodes in these series escalate in intensity, building to a climax as the series turns over into the next part of the story. If you've read a lot of folk tales you'll recognize this pattern immediately. The hero might encounter three giants, each stronger than the last. Or she might meet three poor old women, each more shrunken than the last (and each more shrill in her demands for charity). Or three young men might step forward to fight for the princess's hand, each stronger than the last; and so on.

Sometimes the last episode in the series is special and different, which makes the escalation even more intense. The last giant is monstrous but kind. The last old woman is magical. The last young man has a heart of gold. Escalating repetition is a technique often used in oral storytelling to make stories more compelling for the audience (and easier for the storyteller to remember).

As it happens, repetition is also useful in sensemaking. Why? Because including more than one story inevitably includes more than one *perspective*, which deepens exploration. There are three ways you can use repetition to add complexity to this exercise.

1. You can alter your story template so that, in one or more of its slots, a series of episodes must (or should or can) be placed.
2. You can include in your instructions the direction (or option) to insert a series of episodes into one (or two) of your template slots.
3. You can *listen* as groups start filling their templates. If you hear any groups leaping through the steps of the exercise quickly (and looking bored), you can quietly mention the possibility of making the exercise more challenging (and productive) by expanding one slot into a multi-part series.

Whichever option you use, remember to tell groups that the intensity of action and emotion within each series of episodes should escalate. For example, if the slot recounts a challenge faced by the story's protagonist, the episodes in the series should involve increasing challenges (and responses).



### **Deepen stories with recursion**

Another trick often used in folk tales is the inclusion of whole stories within other stories. This is often done through reported events, such as when the old woman met on the road tells the story of her adventures in early life, or when one of the young men vying for the princess' hand has a vivid dream in which he learns of the maiden's secret history. Some of the great Arab tales (*One Thousand and One Nights*, for example) embed stories within stories within stories, sometimes to a dizzying extent.

Between repetition and recursion, recursion is the more difficult option. Stories within stories are hard to keep track of. So it is best used for only the most motivated, creative, and energetic groups (or if you have lots of time and a very pressing need to make sense of things). In the same way as with repetition, you can include this elaboration by altering your template to include other, smaller templates inside it; by instructing people to include a whole story inside one template slot; or by pulling the elaboration out of your hat to engage a bored group who have already filled their slots and want an additional challenge.

### **Deepen stories with dramatic elements**

If you like, you can add a complication to the preparation for the second (or third) telling: give groups a list of *dramatic elements* they might want to add to their stories. You can find lists of these things in any book on fiction writing; I'll just throw out a few.

- Stories in which the audience can *identify* with the protagonist in some way are more memorable.
- Stories that feature *conflict* at more than one level (within the main character, between the main character and other characters, between the main character and "the world" or "the system") pack a bigger punch.
- Stories in which expectations about how people typically behave are *upended* deepen interest.
- Stories in which the stakes of success or failure *grow* larger and larger keep people paying attention.

And so on. You can introduce dramatic elements with just a few words—identification, conflict, surprise, escalation—and suggest that people pay attention to them as they improve their stories. This will complicate the task and give people a stronger challenge. It will also cause them to think more deeply about the issue they are exploring by building a story.

### ***Send an observer with the storyteller***

If there are at least four people in your small groups, you can suggest that each group send an observer along with their storyteller. The observer's job is to *watch* the audience, taking notes on how they react to the storytelling and how they answer the discussion questions after it.

This elaboration can help groups get better feedback on how their stories went over with their audiences, which can deepen their exploration. But don't do it if you have groups of three. If there is only one person left to hear the story, there won't be enough of a response to take notes on.

### ***Have two people tell the story***

If there are at least four people in your small groups, you can have two people tell the story together. This eases the burden on one storyteller, makes the story more interesting to everyone, and removes the possibility of one forceful person taking over the group and drowning out other points of view.

Is it more useful to send two storytellers or one storyteller and one observer? I'd say one storyteller and one observer is best. In this exercise, the observations are as important as the storytelling. They help groups see their stories from other perspectives, which is an important part of sensemaking.

### ***Play out the story***

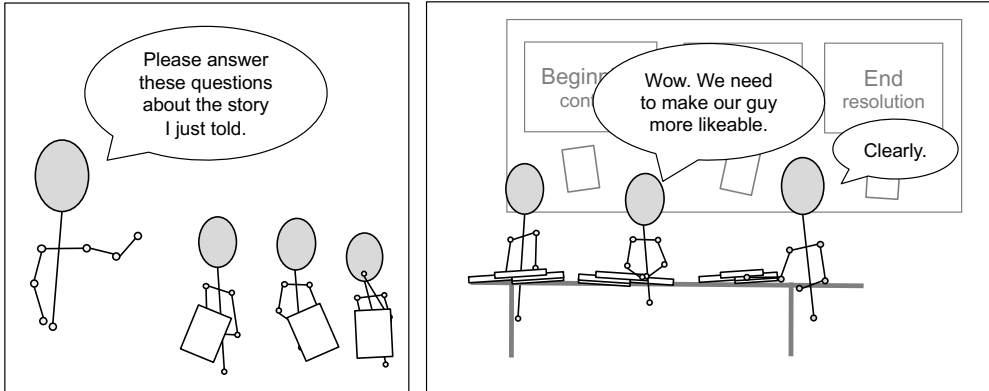
With this elaboration you again send around more than one storyteller, but this time the story gets played out, not told, in a sort of skit. Groups might have to simplify their stories so that the "cast of characters" can be minimal, or people might have to play multiple parts; but having the story "take place" instead of being told can inject more creativity into the process. As you can guess, you wouldn't want to use this option when you think people will be unwilling to leave their comfort zones; or at least, you wouldn't want to use it close to the *start* of your workshop. Later, when people have warmed up, they might enjoy the challenge.

### ***Ask more questions about the story***

Instead of giving your groups the three simple questions I outlined above (what did you take away, etc.), you can give them an assortment of 5-10 questions and ask them to choose three that seem useful to them. Before your workshop, come up with some questions that pertain specifically to the goals of your project. Some examples:

- In this story, would you say that people trusted each other?
- What surprised you about the events of this story?
- Are there any people or groups you think particularly need to hear this story?

The more (and better) feedback groups can get on their stories, the more churning and convergence they can achieve. You can even help groups give out paper forms for their audience members to fill out. Anonymous answers might prove more useful than open discussions, especially if your topic is sensitive. After each storytelling, groups can look over their filled-out forms and discuss how they want to improve their stories.



### **Build follow-on stories**

Another elaboration that deepens sensemaking (but requires extra time) is to go through the whole process again with a second story. The second time through, things should move more quickly because people will have grasped the basic process. There are many ways to go further with a second story. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

**Tell a counter-story.** Groups can challenge themselves to build a second story whose message counters the message of the first story. For example, say a group's first story is about injustices committed by officials working in the court system. After that story has been built, told, and retold, the group can build a story about court officials serving the public interest with integrity. If your story collection is sufficiently diverse, participants should be able to find stories that support opposing messages.

**Tell a similar story from a different perspective.** Groups can choose a character who played a minor part in their first story and build a second story in which events are seen from that character's point of view. They should use different stories to build the second story, finding new stories that convey how that character (in the first story) might have experienced similar events. For example, say the project is about apartment housing, and in the first story someone is frustrated by the inattention of their busy, hands-off landlord. A second story could be built about the difficulties of *being* a landlord, continually belabored with requests and complaints.

**Tell a response story.** Groups can create stories that *respond* to stories they heard from other groups. For example, a group might:

- be reminded of a story they'd like to put together
- counter a story they heard with a story that shows the same issue in a different light
- extend another group's story into the future, exploring what might come next



When groups respond to each other in this way, the entire workshop can rise above what can be achieved with parallel story building. This is a complex and difficult form of the exercise, of course, but for energetic participants, it could be just the right challenge.

## How you will know it's working

When people are building a composite story, they may or may not be moving anything around. Some groups might build their story by placing sticky notes in various locations on a table or wall or screen. Other groups might write story names on a single piece of paper or simple document. Still others might write nothing and talk their way through filling the slots in their template.

Those differences don't matter. What matters is that people in every group should be *working together*. Because this exercise includes a stronger component of performance than any other, groups should *want* to hide their preparations from other groups. People should say things like, "We're working on our story, but we're not ready to show anybody yet." So look for huddling and hiding in this exercise. Groups that huddle together like what they are making. Groups whose members show wandering attention are probably not doing very well in the exercise and may need some help.

## What can go wrong

### *The message doesn't fit the stories in your collection*

The first part of this exercise involves choosing a message the built story will convey. It does sometimes happen that the message chosen by a group and the stories they have to work with don't fit well together. Usually this happens because there is some sort of barrier between the workshop participants and the stories.

- Maybe these participants are being held back by some unexamined assumptions about the people who told your stories.
- Maybe the aspect of your topic that these participants want to explore right now is an aspect that you failed to anticipate when you were planning to gather your stories.
- Even though you asked these participants to do a contact task before they approached this exercise, maybe they are not familiar enough with your story collection to choose a message the stories can support.

The remedy for all of these problems is to *give people more time to consider the stories* they have to work with as they assemble their larger stories. If people tell you that they can't tell the story they want to tell using the stories they have to work with, give them some extra time to put stories into the slots in the story template. Ask them to *negotiate a compromise* between their message and the stories they have to work with. They might need to adapt their message to work with the stories, but that's better than ignoring the mismatch and charging on with a story that doesn't hold together.

### *People say the stories don't fit the template slots*

This often happens when people are just getting started fitting stories into the slots. The fit between story and slot doesn't have to be *perfect*; it just has to be *reasonable*. If the slot says a challenge should appear, any story in which *any kind of challenge* appears will

do. The goal of the story-building process is not to find the *best* stories for each slot. It's to find an *acceptable* story for each slot so the process can continue.

***People say that all of the stories fit all of the slots***

If any groups are having a hard time choosing stories to fit into their template slots, ask them to temporarily put aside their templates and answer these questions about a few stories:

- What was the most emotional moment of this story for you?
- Which part of this story do you think you will remember the longest?
- What was the most surprising part of the story?

People will probably answer the questions by picking out moments in the stories, like this:

- The most emotional moment was when the man saw the look on his son's face.
- I will remember the fight in the bar.
- I was surprised that the team kept working even though they had missed the deadline.

Prominent moments like these can help people see where each story might fit into the larger story they are building. For example:

- The moment when the man saw the look on his son's face was a moment of transformation. That story might work well near the end of the larger story, for example as the "until finally" establishment of a new equilibrium.
- The fight in the bar was a complication, a tension, a rising action. That story might fit well into the mid-point of a larger story, when things are heating up.
- When the team worked past the deadline, they made an attempt to repair damage. That story might work well for the part of the larger story when someone was trying and failing and trying again.

***People don't understand the template***

Let's say you have chosen a template that you think will best suit the participants in your sensemaking workshop. You have taken into account their backgrounds and their worldviews. When you get to the part of this exercise where people are supposed to fill in the template with stories, they don't want to do it. They say, "We don't understand this. What are these words supposed to mean? What's a 'de-new-ment?'" Why do we have to use this? Can't we just tell a story?"

You can respond to this problem in any or all of three ways:

1. **Explain.** You can explain what the template's words mean. If you've been doing your research, you should know that the word "denouement" comes from the French word *dénouer*, or untying, as in a knot. In the denouement of a story, the knot of tension that gives the story its forward motion is untied, and the story relaxes to its end. Whatever story template you choose to use, prepare yourself to explain what its words mean. You can also prepare some alternative, less strange words people can use instead, and offer them up if people are confused.

2. **Demonstrate.** You can apply the template to a story. Have an example ready from a well-known book or movie or folk tale so you can explain how that story fits the template. Make sure the reference is well known, or have two or three references ready in case people aren't familiar with your first choice.
3. **Offer alternatives.** You can offer a selection of templates instead of just one. Any time you want to give people a fixed structure to use in an exercise, whether it's a story template, a set of landscape axes, or questions to form story elements, it's a good idea to have one or two other structures on hand in case people don't understand (or don't like) your choice. That way, if people say, "We don't understand this," you can pull out another one and say, "How about *this*?"

Always remember that *the template doesn't matter*. It's just a way to get people to think about your topic as they play with your stories, fitting them into the slots and taking them out again. Don't let yourself be seduced by the advice of important people about proper story form. Proper stories are not the goal here. Proper *sensemaking* is. Listen and be flexible, and things will get moving.

### ***People don't like the idea of making up stories***

Sometimes people react to this exercise by thinking you are asking them to tell lies. They might be wary of manipulation; they might think you are asking them to disrespect the collected stories; they might think you want them to build a propaganda machine.

*Is it lying to merge several true stories into one fictional story in which issues common to all of the stories are explored?* It's a matter of interpretation. On the one hand, it is unlikely that events could possibly have unfolded in *exactly* the way any composite story lays them out. So technically speaking, any composite story has to be a lie.

But on the other hand, the *deeper* truths behind a composite story remain when the details of what exactly happened to whom are changed. You've probably seen movies made from novels in which minor characters have been merged. Usually this is done simply because there isn't enough time in two hours to include every word spoken by 20 people. Some people find this an abomination; others just laugh and enjoy the movie.

As you plan your workshop, think about how your participants are likely to respond to the idea of building a story out of stories. If you think they will be sticklers for literal truth, get ready to avoid the words *fiction*, *creation*, and *performance*. You don't need those words for the exercise to work. You also don't need to include any of the more imaginative elaborations of the exercise. Instead, introduce it as a means of understanding the collected stories by working them into composites.

If people still find that too close to lying, tell them that they can include side comments in their story that identify which original story lies behind each episode of the built story. Or they can tie the stories together in some other way than by merging the characters and setting. They might create a multi-threaded story in which real events come together without ever crossing the line into fiction. There are more ways to be creative than making up stories.

### ***People think the whole thing is silly***

Oh yes, this is bound to happen. For some people, the moment you say the word “story” you have identified yourself as a buffoon. They will immediately fear that you will drag them into a world of clown noses, big shoes, and pink tutus. Of all the narrative exercises in this book, this one is the most likely to trigger the silliness reaction.

Two groups of people are most likely to react to a story-building exercise as something out of clown school. First are those who are insecure in their positions of power or status, who don’t believe they can afford to take any risks with so-called “creative” methods in front of other people. Second are those who believe that the topic they have come to discuss, and perhaps their work or life itself, is so ponderously serious that any approach not strictly analytical-statistical-empirical-logical must inevitably offend them to their deepest core.

I know of two ways to get past the idea that going through this exercise will involve wearing funny hats:

- **Highlight the serious nature of narrative sensemaking.** Story work can be and is used for serious topics, and it can have serious impacts on serious situations. To get this point across, keep a few serious stories handy (like the one I tell about a post-9/11 workshop in *Working with Stories in Depth*). If you don’t have a serious story of your own yet, tell one you’ve heard from someone else. When you hear a group trading comments that include the words ridiculous, inane, trivial, absurd, childish, frivolous, and so on, quietly drop a serious story into the group. Then ask the group to check their story’s message to make sure it “cuts to the heart” of the issues at hand. A story-building exercise can be as serious or playful as people want it to be. It can even be serious and playful at the same time.
- **Talk about return on investment.** Point out to people that they are already in the workshop; they want to make progress on the goals of the project; and they might as well use their time doing *something* other than nit-picking about methods. Explain that you’ve seen this method work for real people with real needs. If you *haven’t* actually seen this exercise work for real people with real needs, shame on you, because you should have. Even if the “real people with real needs” have been yourself and two friends trying out the exercise, you should *still* have seen results using it.

I put this method last because it is the hardest to facilitate. Don’t use it with real participants in a real sensemaking workshop until you have tried it and seen it work in practice. If you have done that, you can tell complaining groups that you *know* the exercise works and you’re *sure* they will benefit from it—if they give it their full attention.

### ***People go through the process mechanically***

Sometimes you will see people doing this exercise as if they were on auto-pilot. They fill the template slots with stories, and they prepare a story to tell. But the story they tell is hollow, empty of feeling. They haven’t invested themselves in the story or the exercise. This can be because they think the exercise is silly (see above), or it can be because they don’t think they know how to build a story (see below) or tell a story (see below). It can be because they don’t really want to explore the topic deeply and are holding themselves back from it. Or it can be because they just don’t see where the exercise is going.

Sometimes when groups are going through the motions on this exercise, you'll notice that they complete their tasks early. They'll say things like, "Okay, we put five stories in the slots. We still have five minutes left, so we're going out for a coffee." What this really means is: We aren't doing the exercise, really. We're just doing the minimum so we can pretend we're doing it.

What can *you* do when this happens? Raise the stakes. Make the exercise more challenging. Sometimes adding a colorful elaboration like story genre, recursion, or a we-said-they-said debate performance can engage people who aren't getting excited about the exercise as it was presented.

It can also help (some groups) to highlight the fact that the built stories will be *evaluated* during the exercise. If a group is dragging their feet, ask them things like, "Are you sure the stories you picked for these slots are the most useful ones?" Or, "When you tell this story, the other group will be listening to hear whether you've made it engaging and memorable. Do you think it is?" You might even want to engage unenthusiastic groups in a bit of friendly competition: not for the "best" story, but for the *most useful* story.

Remind people of why they are doing the exercise. Keep the goals of the project in their minds. Ask them to do their best to carry out the exercise so that it advances those goals. Challenge them to succeed.

### ***The stories come out fake***

The emotional intensity of this exercise is high, at least as high as that of the story elements exercise. Sometimes when people feel unable to handle that level of intensity, they build fake stories. This isn't the same as going through the process mechanically, because people don't work mechanically when they make fake stories. They pay close attention to what they are doing. The serious purpose of all fake stories is to conceal and avoid, no matter what message the group *said* they would work on delivering.

You can spot fake stories in two ways:

1. **Watch the storytellers.** People who are telling fake stories exhibit signs of tension and anxiety. They sweat and stammer and look at the floor and talk rapidly to get the ordeal over with sooner.
2. **Listen to the stories.** Fake stories sound like television commercials. They are short and full of clichéd, over-the-top, absolutist phrases like "we will succeed because we have strength" or "the government is behind everything" or "we will rise again" or "this is wrong in every way." They are often bizarre, strained and weirdly cheery, like the hysterical laughter of people in distress.

When you see and hear fake stories being told during this exercise, what you should do depends on why the stories are fake. Sometimes fake stories happen because people try too hard to contribute at first, then realize they are in too deep and can't find a way out of revealing things too intense to talk about. If you think this has happened, you can mention to groups (in the usual quiet "forgot to say" way) that they can change their story's message or plot or ending—or anything they like about the story—at any time during the exercise.

This gives groups the freedom to retrench and find another story they are more willing and able to tell.

But there are times when people just can't handle this whole exercise. Their feelings about your topic might be more intense than you anticipated; there may be power elements in the room that you had not understood; or they may not trust you or their fellow participants as much as you thought they would. If giving people more freedom to change their stories doesn't work (and you'll usually be able to tell if it's going to work right away, by the looks on their faces), you can give everyone a break, shorten (or just end) the exercise, and move on to something less threatening.

This situation, in which a deeply probing exercise has to be curtailed or abandoned because it is more threatening to your participants than you anticipated, is a perfect example of why you should build crumple zones into your workshop agenda. It also explains why you should practice facilitating some extra exercises you don't plan to use. You never know when you will have to scrap your whole plan and put something else together to suit an unplanned-for contingency. If you get used to thinking of sensemaking workshops not as wholly scripted events but as packages built of scripted portions, you can shift those portions around as the situation requires.

### ***People pay too much attention to story quality***

When you facilitate this exercise, once in a while a group will think they have been asked to write a screenplay for a critically-acclaimed blockbuster movie. When you correct this misunderstanding, people typically respond in two ways:

1. **With excitement.** When people think they *could* write a great screenplay, they get so excited about making their story perfect (from the perspective of narrative form) that they forget about using the story to make sense of your topic. You'll know this is happening when you hear people debating the "top ten" films of all time, or when they want more time to practice their story or more "takes" to polish it.
2. **With despair.** When people think they *could never* write a great screenplay, they drift away from the exercise, looking diligently for excuses to avoid building a story. Or they try to learn screenwriting in five minutes, debating what Aristotle meant by "poetics" and searching the internet for fiction-writing tips.

If either of these things happens, it will be nobody's fault but your own. When you introduce the exercise, avoid any impression that its goal is to craft polished stories. Don't even mention that the stories will be recorded until it's time to do that. If you need people to sign a release form to be recorded, make it a blanket permission. Don't mention that they will be recorded *telling a story*. Legally there's no difference, but socially there is.

This exercise is not about stories as nouns, as works of art. It's about *stories as verbs*, as conversational events. If you can get that point across, you will help people understand what they need to do to make it work. *Practice* getting that point across.

### ***Nobody wants to tell the story***

This is related to people thinking they could never write a great screenplay, but it has to do with the *performance* of the story. Sometimes groups put together useful, thought-

provoking stories, but when it comes to *telling* the story in front of an audience, they all fight for the right to be silent. Then, when one poor soul has drawn the short straw and is thrust before the audience, they hesitate and stammer and mumble, and even the best story comes across as a muddle. Because the audience can't hear the story or make any sense of it, their reaction is muted, so the group reconvenes with little to think about for the next iteration. This is not conducive to sensemaking.

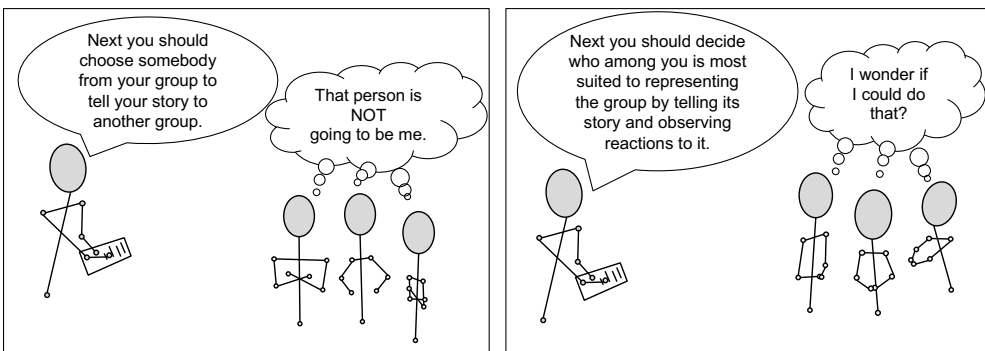
If you notice groups arguing about who “has” to tell the story, here’s a little trick that can help. Quietly explain that even though everyone in the group will benefit from the exercise, the people who tell the stories will contribute the most to—and *gain* the most from—from the exercise.

This is not a lie. As anybody knows who tells stories a lot (either professionally or because they can't help it), telling a story to an audience and watching the reactions on their faces is extremely beneficial to making sense of things. That's why we all go around telling stories all the time. It helps us think about the challenges we face. Telling stories in this exercise is no different from telling stories in daily life: *it helps us think better*. It follows, then, that the person who tells the story will get more “help thinking better” than anyone else in the group. If you look at it in that way, telling the story is not a chore to be avoided; it's an opportunity to be seized.

So, when you introduce the task of choosing a storyteller, don't say, “Choose somebody to tell the story.” That sentence sounds like it could end with “to walk the plank.” Say something more like:

- Decide who is ready to tell your story and observe the audience's reactions to it.
- Decide who will get to tell the story and observe how people react to it.
- Decide who you want to represent the group by telling its story.

Framing the selection of the storyteller as one of ability, opportunity, or privilege gets across the message that the storyteller is central to the process *and will benefit from the position*. This will also have an impact on the way the storyteller tells the story. A storyteller who is grateful for the chance to represent the group (and make discoveries on its behalf) will not stammer and stumble. They will be alert to the opportunities before them and make the most of their place in the limelight.



### The audience has no response to the story

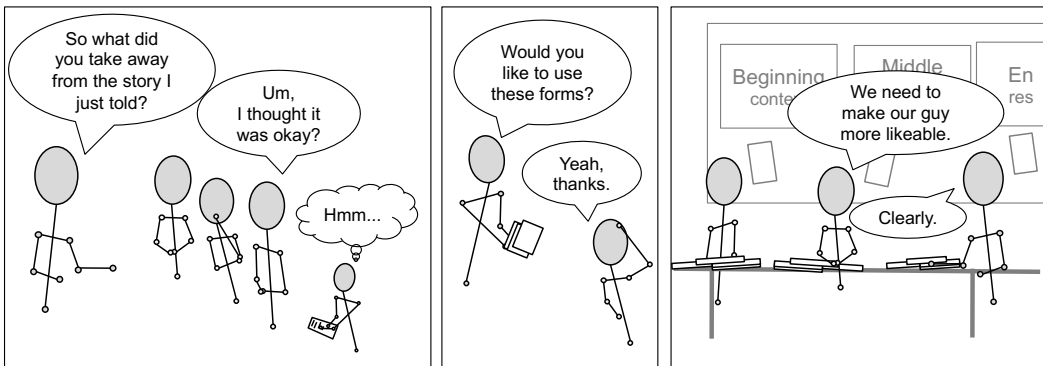
This problem is also related to people thinking they could never write a great screenplay, but this time it's the *audience* who is under-confident. Sometimes people are so intimidated by the task of responding to a story that they can't come up with anything to say about it. After the story there is a dull silence, and when questions are asked, people respond by saying things like, "I thought it was all right?" or "I liked it, I guess." Often this happens because people don't feel qualified to judge a story without being experts in narrative form. As with the above situation with the mumbling storyteller, this reaction provides too little thought power to turn the gears of sensemaking.

The best way to get past this problem is to move the audience's thoughts away from performing an evaluation and towards *observing naturally occurring phenomena*. Everyone reacts to stories, no matter how much they know about stories. Everyone has feelings. Everyone knows whether they have been "struck" with a story or not. Everyone can say whether what they have heard has surprised them. As Lance Bennett famously put it, the basic facts of narrative form are "everyday equipment for living."

So, when you explain the storytelling-and-listening part of this exercise, make sure to convey to the people acting as audiences that their task is to report not on the story itself. It is to report on their *reactions* to the story. How did it strike them? What surprised them? How did it make them feel? Sad? Angry? Confused? Amazed? What did they get out of the story? Did it remind them of any other stories? And so on.

This problem can also come up for a second reason: the story was an emotional one, and the audience feels unable to respond to it out of concern for the storyteller or fear of repercussions. If you think this reaction is likely, you can plan to:

- Help audiences answer questions about the stories using paper or online forms. In person, have a photocopier handy; online, have a simple surveying system handy.
- Send an observer with each storyteller (see above). Have *them* ask the questions after the storyteller has left the group.
- Have a facilitation helper ask the questions and convey the answers to the storytelling group. (You will need one helper per group.)





### ***The storyteller tells the story but doesn't notice the audience's response***

Sometimes storytellers come back from their visits to other groups knowing that they told the story but not noticing much more than that. They need to notice more than that, because the whole point of the exercise is to take account of multiple perspectives on stories.

If you think your participants will be especially flustered by (or focused on) the performance aspect of this exercise, to the point that they won't be able or willing to pay attention to how their audiences respond, only use it if you will have at least 12 participants. That way groups will be able to send observers along with their storytellers.

If you find yourself in the middle of a nine-person workshop and realize that your storytellers aren't paying attention to audience reactions, give them some extra time and explicitly ask them to listen to what people say.

### ***People don't want their stories recorded***

This is a simple one. If people don't want you to include their built stories in your workshop record, don't. And don't plan a sensemaking workshop that will fall apart if people suddenly decide they don't want to be recorded. They have the right to withdraw.

Having said that, there are some partial recording options that might help you get past an unexpected need for privacy. A reluctant group might be willing to:

- tell a special outside-the-workshop version of the story, maybe with less emotion
- write down their story (or a summary of it)
- allow you (or a helper) to describe the story (in writing) based on your notes (subject to their approval before the workshop record is made public)

If this workshop will be important to your project, explain this to your participants, and ask them to meet you halfway. Tell them how their built stories will help people in your community or organization, and ask them to *do what they can* to help the project without endangering their privacy.

### **Your own style**

I was trained as a scientist, and I'm sure to some readers of this book my description of this exercise will come off as dull. That's only *partly* because I'm dull. The other part of it is that I've spent a lot of time trying to get corporate types in corporate meeting rooms to accept this exercise. *Your* style in using and developing this exercise for your PNI practice might vary so much from the way I've described it as to be unrecognizable. That's a *good* thing.

Even though this exercise is difficult to facilitate, the *idea* behind it is simple. You build stories, drawing inspiration from collected stories; you tell stories; you learn from what happens. What you do with that simple plan is up to you. You could encourage your workshop participants to play out their stories using costumes, props, and sound effects. You could have them do old-time radio shows, write short stories, or create mime shows. You could even have groups direct other groups to perform stories, or bring in a troupe of professional actors to do the play-acting.

On the other hand, you may be even more dull than I am (hard to imagine, but I'm trying to be even-handed here). Or your participants may not want to take even a baby step out of their comfort zones. So you may need to tone down even the small amount of creativity I've described here. That's fine too. Whichever way you change this exercise, make sure that the storytelling is in the service of the sensemaking, not the other way around.

## Sensemaking exercises with catalytic material

There are three methods for using catalytic material in sensemaking. (Actually there are two methods, but the second method has two variations.) Each method begins like this:

1. Each group of participants chooses a cluster of observations or interpretations they would like to explore. Within the chosen cluster, each group chooses a single observation or interpretation they would like to explore.
2. Looking at the pattern described by the chosen observation or interpretation, each group selects 2-3 subsets of stories they would like to compare. These are usually stories with different answers to one or more questions, like stories about which storytellers said they felt hopeful, hopeless, or indifferent.

After the selection of story subsets, the three methods diverge as follows.

Method	What happens	Benefits	Detriments
Pattern contact task	Groups directly compare their story subsets, discussing any similarities and differences they see among them. If they have time, they can do this for more than one observation or interpretation.	Quick; simple; easy to facilitate	Timid participants can be too intimidated by fancy graphs to compare stories without the support of an exercise.
Pattern-focused intermingled story exercise	Groups use their selected stories in a sensemaking exercise, using different sticky-note colors to mark which subset each story belongs to. When the exercise is finished, they look for patterns among the subsets of stories.	Intermediate	Intermediate
Pattern-focused juxtaposed story exercise	Groups break into sub-groups and use their selected stories in parallel versions of the same sensemaking exercise. They do not mix the subsets. When the exercises are finished, groups reconvene and look for patterns among the results of the parallel exercises.	Provides the best support for deep exploration	Long; possibly confusing; difficult to facilitate; requires groups large enough to subdivide.

Which method is best for your workshop depends on the scope of your project, the motivation of your participants, the length of your workshop, the strength of your patterns, and how much experience you have had facilitating sensemaking. If you aren't sure what to do, err on the side of simplicity.

Whichever option you choose, place the use of catalytic material after your story contact task, after (or instead of) any non-pattern-focused story exercises (ones that use all of your stories or a sample of them), and before your wrapping-up activity.

### **A simple contact task with catalytic material**

This is the simplest way to help your participants make sense of your catalytic material. Use it if you are inexperienced, your project is small, your time is short, or you have only minimal interest from your participants.

#### **Requirements**

At least two people; at least 90 minutes.

#### **Preparation**

Prepare one set of catalytic material and one deck of story cards for each small group you expect to have. Prepare to explain how to pull out story subsets (see the tips below).

#### **Starting out**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	You	Introduce your catalytic material. Explain where it came from and how it connects to the stories. Then explain briefly what people are about to do.
1-10	You	If you know that people will need some help understanding your graphs, take some time to go over each graph type.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, split up into groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a set of catalytic material and a set of story cards.

**Choosing a focus**

Minutes	Who	What to do
10	Each person separately	Look over the catalytic material. Choose a cluster of observations or interpretations that seems interesting to you. Within that cluster, choose an observation or interpretation you would like to think about.
5	Small groups	Tell each other which cluster and which observation or interpretation you chose. Say why you think it is interesting. Working together, agree on one observation or interpretation to explore.

**Pulling out stories**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	You	Explain how to pull out story subsets.
30+	Small groups	Read the stories in each subset, separately or together, silently or aloud. Pull out 2-3 subsets of stories (adding up to at least 20 stories in total) related to the observation or interpretation you chose to explore.

**Making sense of the pattern**

Minutes	Who	What to do
10+	Small groups	<p>Talk about the stories in your subsets. What differences do you see between the different groups of stories? Does anything about them surprise you? What do they say to you about the observation or interpretation you chose? If you were to write your own version of the observation or interpretation, what would it say?</p> <p>If you have extra time, choose another observation or interpretation, pull out more subsets of stories, and compare them.</p>
5	Small groups	Decide together what you want to tell everyone else about what you explored and discovered.

**Finishing up**

Minutes	Who	What to do
15+	Everyone together	Someone (anyone) from each group, explain what you discussed and found out.
5+	Everyone together	Talk about what just happened: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

**Notes on this option**

You can ask each small group, after they have discussed the story subsets they pulled out, to share some related stories from their own experiences with each other.

**An intermingled exercise with catalytic material**

This is a nested exercise. It embeds an exercise that works directly with stories inside an exercise that works with catalytic observations and interpretations. Use it to help your participants dive deeply into your catalytic materials.

**Requirements**

At least two people; at least three hours.

**Preparation**

Choose a sensemaking exercise in which story subsets can be intermingled in one space (e.g., landscape, timeline, local folk tales). Prepare for it as you would normally do.

Prepare one set of catalytic material and one deck of story cards for each small group. Prepare to explain how to pull out story subsets (see the tips below). If you will be working in physical space, bring at least four colors of sticky notes.

**Starting out**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	You	Introduce your catalytic material. Explain where it came from and how it connects to the stories. Then explain briefly what people are about to do.
1-10	You	If you know that people will need some help understanding your graphs, take some time to go over each graph type.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, split up into groups of 2-4 people.
1	You	Give each group a set of catalytic material and a set of story cards.

**Choosing a focus**

Minutes	Who	What to do
10	Each person separately	Look over the catalytic material. Choose a cluster of observations or interpretations that seems interesting to you. Within that cluster, choose an observation or interpretation you would like to think about.
5	Small groups	Tell each other which cluster and which observation or interpretation you chose. Say why you think it is interesting. Working together, agree on one observation or interpretation to explore.

**Pulling out stories**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	You	Explain how to pull out story subsets.
45+	Small groups	Use your story cards to pull out 2-3 subsets of 20+ stories (each) related to the observation or interpretation you chose. Copy the names of the selected stories onto sticky notes. <i>Use a different color of sticky note for each subset.</i>  If you want to, each of you, choose a story from one of your subsets that resonates with you. Pair it with a story from your own experience. Read or retell the story you chose to the group, then tell the story you thought of. Write a name for the new story on the same color of sticky note, and circle or underline it to indicate that it is a newly told story.

**Doing the embedded exercise**

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Introduce your embedded sensemaking exercise.
60+	Small groups	Go through the exercise using the sticky notes you prepared previously. Use your colors to explore patterns among the subsets. If you want to add more new stories that come to mind (and there is time for it), go ahead and do that.
15+	Small groups	Use what you discovered in the story-based exercise to annotate the observation or interpretation to more fully capture the meaning in the stories and in your discussion.

**Finishing up**

Minutes	Who	What to do
15+	Everyone together	Someone (anyone) from each group, explain what you discovered, discussed, and wrote.
15+	Everyone together	Talk about what just happened: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

**Notes on this option**

Whether you need the pairing task (described here as optional) depends on how many stories you collected. If you have more than 200 stories, you don't need it. If you have 50-200 stories, you can offer it as an option. If you have fewer than 50 stories, don't make it optional; require it (and make 3-person small groups). In that case, groups will need it to find enough stories to explore the observations or interpretations they choose.

**A juxtaposed exercise with catalytic material**

Like the intermingled exercise, this exercise nests a story-based exercise inside a catalytic-material exercise. Unlike the intermingled exercise, it compares patterns as well as stories.

**Requirements**

At least eight people; at least 3.5 hours. Note the larger number of people required. This is because each small group will be breaking into two even smaller groups.

**Preparation**

Choose any story-based sensemaking exercise to embed inside this exercise. Because participants will be keeping their story subsets separated, any exercise will work. Even exercises that don't use spaces (twice-told stories, story elements, story construction) will work. Prepare to facilitate the exercise as you would normally do.

Prepare *two sets of catalytic material and two decks of story cards* for each small group you expect to have. Prepare to explain how to pull out story subsets (see the tips below).

**Starting out**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	You	Introduce your catalytic material. Explain where it came from and how it connects to the stories. Then explain briefly what people are about to do.
1-10	You	If you know that people will need some help understanding your graphs, take some time to go over each graph type.
2-5	You	If you have more than five people, split up into groups of 4-8 people.
1	You	Give each group two sets of catalytic material and two sets of story cards.

**Choosing a focus**

Minutes	Who	What to do
10	Each person separately	Look over the catalytic material. Choose a cluster of observations or interpretations that seems interesting to you. Within that cluster, choose an observation or interpretation you would like to think about.
5	Small groups	Tell each other which cluster and which observation or interpretation you chose. Say why you think it is interesting. Working together, agree on one observation or interpretation to explore.

**Pulling out stories**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5+	You	Explain how to pull out story subsets.
45+	Small groups	Use your story cards to pull out 2-3 subsets of 20+ stories (each) related to the observation or interpretation you chose. Copy the names of the selected stories onto sticky notes. <i>Keep the two sets of notes separate.</i>  If you want to, each of you, choose a story from one of your subsets that resonates with you. Pair it with a story from your own experience. Read or retell the story you chose to the group, then tell the story you thought of. Write a name for the new story on the same color of sticky note, and circle or underline it to indicate that it is a newly told story.



**Doing the embedded exercise**

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Split each small group into two even smaller groups. Ask each very-small group to take one subset of stories with them.
3	You	Introduce your embedded sensemaking exercise.
60+	Very-small groups	Go through the exercise using your story subset (including any new stories you told). If you want to add more new stories that come to mind as you consider only this subset of stories (and there is time for it), go ahead and do that.

**Comparing patterns**

Minutes	Who	What to do
3	You	Ask each pair of very-small groups to come back together into one small group.
15+	Small groups	Show each other what you discovered. Compare your two outcomes. Talk about what it means.
15+	Small groups	Use what you discovered in your juxtaposed exercises to annotate the observation or interpretation so it more fully captures the meaning in the stories and in your discussion.

**Finishing up**

Minutes	Who	What to do
15+	Everyone together	Someone (anyone) from each group, explain what you discovered, discussed, and wrote.
15+	Everyone together	Talk about what just happened: what surprised you, what you learned, what you are curious about.

**Notes on this option**

Note the larger number of stories required per subset (30 rather than 20). This is because each story subset has to support its own exercise.

Regarding the optional pairing task, the same recommendations apply as for the intermingled option. If you have few stories, make sure you have at least three people per very-small group, so they can share their own stories. If you have many stories, you can drop out the tell-your-own-stories option.

## Tips on using catalytic material in sensemaking

This advice applies to all three of the methods described above.

### Introducing your material

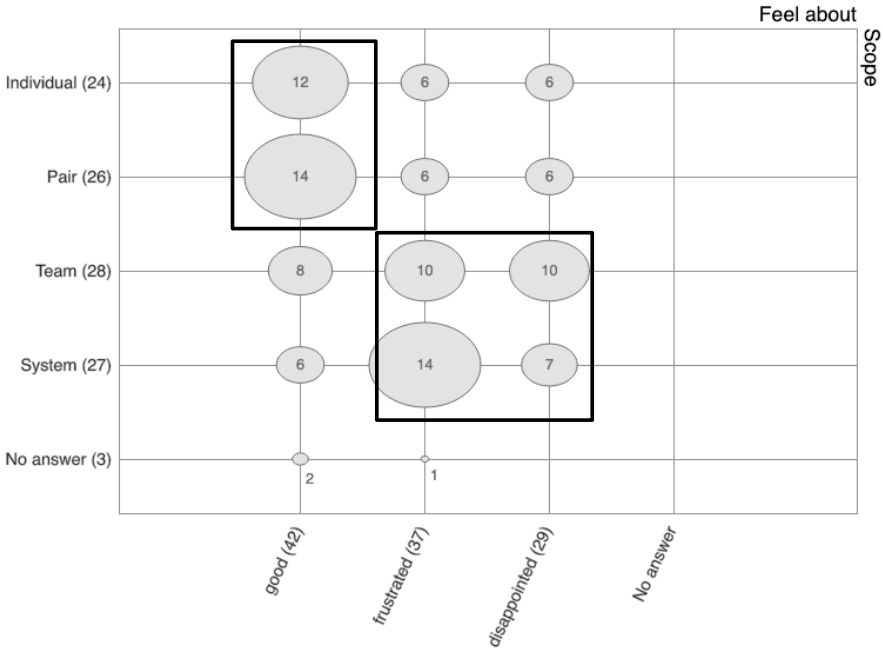
Catalytic material is like the things people use to play a board game: the board, cards, dice, tokens, and other manipulable items. The way you introduce your game pieces can inspire your participants to explore your topic with enthusiasm or intimidate them into turning away in despair. These are some things you can do to make the first outcome more likely:

- **Start with the stories.** Don't show people your catalytic material before they have encountered your stories. If you do, they may not understand that the patterns they are looking at are based on real stories told by real people. Always start by asking people to work directly with your stories, at least in a simple contact task.
- **Return to the stories.** Never ask people to use catalytic material on its own, divorced from any stories. If you do, people will forget to use the stories to make sense of the patterns. To make it easy to move back and forth between stories and patterns, include answers to questions on your story cards, and work to minimize the time it takes to find stories with particular answers.
- **Help people save face.** The "each person separately" period, when people see your catalytic material for the first time, is a time for face-saving. If you think your participants will be upset, confused, or intimidated by their first sight of the material, lengthen this time period. On the other hand, don't make it longer than 15 minutes. People might drift off and lose interest in the workshop. If you have motivated participants, you can give each group a shared time budget and let them decide how much of their time they will spend working alone before they begin to work together. If you don't, do your best to guess how much alone time people will need. And watch them. If they seem to need more time, give it to them.
- **Provide meaningful choices.** In the Catalysis chapter I said you need at least 20 remarkable patterns to support sensemaking (see page 275). This is why. Giving people an array of patterns to choose from gives them the opportunity to pursue their own interests and take ownership of their explorations.
- **Provide active tasks.** Don't ask people to just sit and read your catalytic material. I used to do that, long ago, but I noticed that people tended to make a series of wild (and usually wrong) guesses as to what they were supposed to do with it. I learned not to make people guess but to give them an interesting task with a clear purpose.
- **Start everyone on the same page.** Don't give people your catalytic material before the workshop and tell them to read it before they come. Some people will prepare and some won't, and the workshop will start off with guilt, resentment, and confusion. Show it to all of your workshop participants at the same time, even if (especially if) some of them want to see it before the workshop.

### Helping people draw out story subsets

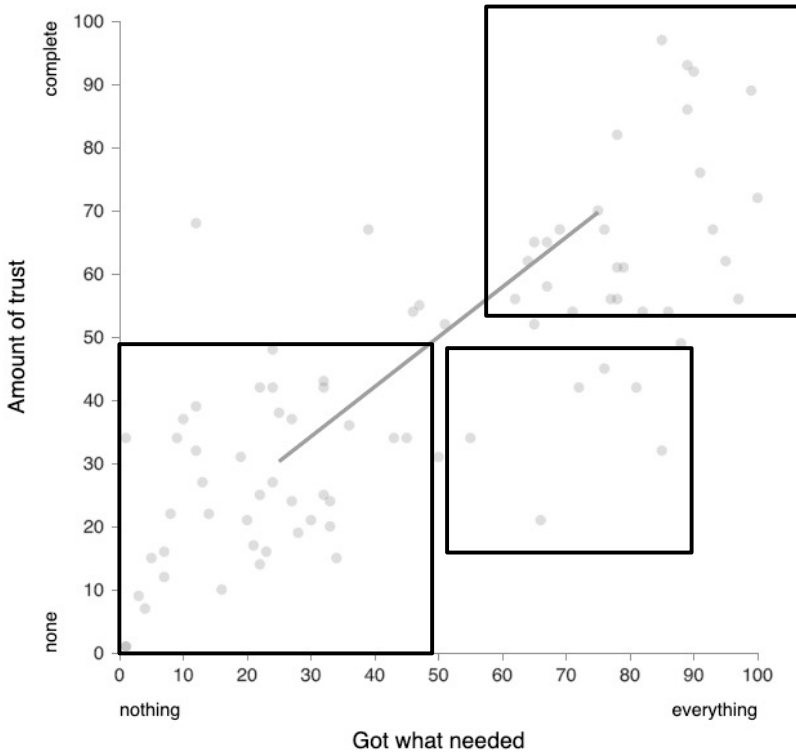
Depending on the backgrounds of your participants, you may need to help them understand how to choose story subsets to compare. Before your workshop, prepare to show them a few examples like these (but with your own data).

In this pattern, people said they felt better about stories that involved fewer people, so it might be interesting to compare some few-good stories (upper left) with some many-bad stories (lower right).

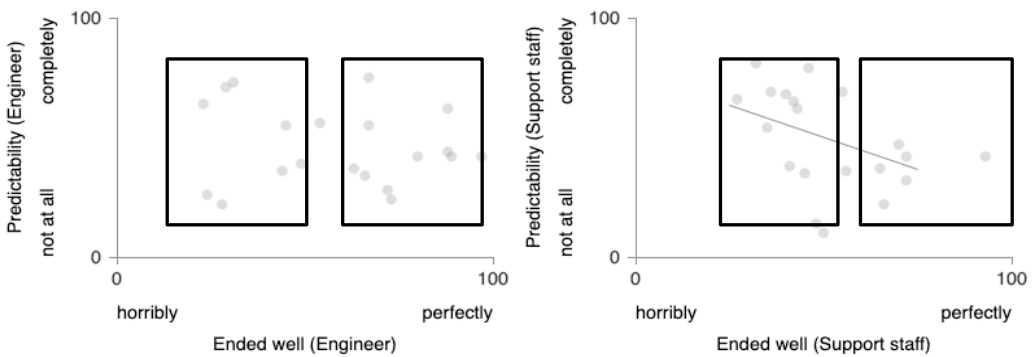


The following pattern shows a correlation between the amount of trust in a story and whether people got what they needed in it. Here it might be useful to compare three subsets of stories:

- high-trust-good-outcome stories (upper right)
- low-trust-bad-outcome stories (lower left)
- some stories outside the correlation (lower right)



Here we can see that predictable stories told by support staff ended badly, but there was no such correlation for engineers. It might be useful to compare the predictability of some bad-ending stories (on the left) with some good-ending stories (on the right) across both groups.



But even with the best of explanations, the time period when people are pulling out story subsets can be a bottleneck. Participants who are engaged with the topic, confident of their skills, and willing to put in some work can sail right through the task. But problems can arise if any of those elements are missing. These are the problems you are most likely to see.

Reaction	What to say	If this seems likely
People who are used to giving (or getting!) orders may become annoyed that they are being asked to do “clerical work.”	Explain the participatory element of the workshop. Explain that owning this task gives them the freedom and power to explore the aspects of the collected stories and data that they find most interesting and useful.	Make sure your catalytic material and story cards look professional and attractive.
People with low confidence may balk at this task because they think they are unqualified or incompetent.	If you think this is likely, take a few extra minutes to explain the process of pulling out stories. Show people that it is simple and easy. Offer to provide help if necessary.	Make sure your catalytic material and story cards are simple and approachable.
People who are apathetic about the project may find this task boring and may do it sloppily or incompletely. This will weaken the patterns they discover, proving that your approach is stupid and worthless.	Sell the effectiveness of the sensemaking process. Give them a vision of future success by describing a discovery you’ve seen in such an exercise (even if it’s a discovery you came to by yourself in preparation for the workshop). Tell them that the more they put into the exercise, the more they will get out of it.	Make sure your catalytic material and story cards look powerful and captivating.

Pulling out stories is an objective task. It simply involves looking through the story cards for specific answers to questions. Groups can split up the task without biasing the result. So if a group of four needs to choose 20 stories, each person in the group can choose five.

Could groups use a computer to pull out subsets? Yes, and if you are meeting online, they (obviously) will. However, if you are meeting in physical space, computers will probably be more hassle than help. In a busy room with lots of people doing lots of things, it is faster to look through printed story cards. (This is why your story cards should be easy to parse.)

No matter what obstacles people face in pulling out stories, it is better to let the pulling-out-stories time period run long than it is to rush into the next part of the workshop with too few stories to support the emergence of useful patterns. If you think pulling out stories will be difficult for your participants, give them extra time to do it.

Can you pull out subsets before your workshop? Yes, and it can be helpful. But you don’t know which patterns people will want to explore, so you’ll have to pull out every possible subset. Also, if people don’t trust you, they might not trust the subsets you pulled out. On

the other hand, if you think people won't be able or willing to pull out subsets, you can do it for them.

## Guiding group interactions

Games need rules as well as materials. The rules of the game people will play with your catalytic material will be defined by the instructions you give them. Some tips:

- **Provide an on-ramp.** If your participants are not used to working with bar charts, histograms, contingency charts, and scatterplots, don't just throw those things at them without any explanation. They might get the idea that they are not qualified to play the game. Instead, prepare a brief and clear explanation of each graph type, and spend a few minutes going over it. You can also give each group a handout they can refer to as they work, and you can make yourself (or a helper) available to answer questions.
- **Suggest complementary roles.** Encourage group members to take on roles that suit their unique interests and abilities. For example, one person might pore over graphs, another might pull out story subsets, and a third might read stories. Don't force people into specific roles, but do mention that complementary roles can help groups accomplish tasks (then let each group work out the details themselves).
- **Balance group time and alone time.** People need groups to bounce ideas off each other, but they also need alone time to save face as they make sense of the stories and catalytic material. Plan these times into your workshop agenda. If you think people will be wary or intimidated, plan extra alone time. If you think people will be bored or distracted, plan less alone time.
- **Provide an audience.** Plan to have each group report on what they find to the whole workshop. This motivates groups to draw their insights together into a coherent presentation. You can also give groups the opportunity to record their presentations (in written, audio, or video format) to be communicated to people outside the workshop.

## Bootstrapping your sensemaking

Each of the nested exercises above includes a time period in which small groups annotate the observation or interpretation they chose to focus on. You can ask people to record these changes (in speech or writing), and you can use them to improve your catalytic material between workshops.

In this way you can create emergent catalytic material that comes together across a series of workshops, becoming more and more representative of the diversity of thought in your community or organization as your project plays out.

In the same way that a single story can contain many perspectives without forcing consensus among them, sensemaking need not end in a grand consensus, no matter how ambitious or multi-layered it is. You can preserve intact the kaleidoscope of perspectives you have discovered and explored in your project, including the stories your participants told and heard, the discussions they had, and the things they built together.

## Build your own sensemaking exercise

You can build your own sensemaking exercise, either from scratch or by amending another exercise you like. A good sensemaking exercise needs five things: a framework for understanding, value-free negotiation support, choices to make together, cycles to iterate over, and optional elaborations.

### A framework for understanding

In a sensemaking exercise, people use some sort of framework or structure to explore similarities and differences among stories or other items. All of the exercises I describe in this book use frameworks:

Exercise	Framework
Twice-told stories	A selection criterion
Timeline	A labeled chronological dimension
Landscape	Two labeled spatial dimensions
Ground truthing	Evocative words linked to statements or definitions
Story elements	Distances between points in space
Composite stories	A story template

All of these frameworks give participants a way to arrange and combine the meanings they find in stories into larger meanings.

So as you develop your sensemaking exercise, ask yourself:

- What sort of framework does this exercise provide? What is its structure?
- How does the exercise help people explore similarities and differences among stories or other items?
- How does the exercise help people arrange and combine the meanings they find in stories into larger meanings?

As you test your exercise, ask yourself:

- Does the exercise help people arrive at new insights together?
- Do people find the exercise approachable? Does it make sense to them?
- Does the exercise add value to sensemaking? Or does it stand in the way of sensemaking?
- Do people discover anything using this exercise that they couldn't have discovered without it?

### Value-free negotiation support

For a sensemaking framework to work well, it must be *value-free*. No part of it should be obviously better than any other part. Sensemaking depends on the emergence—not

calculation—of meaningful patterns in the things considered. If the placement of items is predetermined, sensemaking cannot take place.

To illustrate this difference, let's pretend that you and I are standing in a gymnasium full of people. First we ask everyone to stand in front of a large marked scale of heights. We see a pattern in where people stand, but it is a predetermined pattern. The exercise we have just facilitated has resulted in no insight we could not have gathered from, say, measuring each person independently and collating our measurements on paper.

Now let's say we ask each person in the gymnasium to stand in a location that best fits their agreement with a series of statements we have posted around the room, such as:

- People should rely on themselves.
- People should rely on each other.
- People should summon hope.
- People should face facts.

We cannot predict in advance the patterns we will see in *this* exercise, even if we know the people in the room very well. Asking everyone to fill out a survey would not tell us what would happen either. Why? Because the people in the room wouldn't be human if they didn't negotiate meaning by constantly monitoring what everyone else was doing—while everyone else was monitoring what they were doing. Like birds in a flock, groups of sensemaking participants exhibit emergent properties. The patterns that form are more than the sum of their parts.

Now let's say that the statements we posted on the gymnasium walls have obvious value dimensions to them. They say things like:

- People should look out for their neighbors.
- People should take what they want from other people.
- People should pay attention to their health.
- People should buy everything they want and worry about the consequences later.

There would be no point in asking people to go through such an exercise. Its outcome would be as predetermined as if we had measured their heights.

So as you develop the framework of your sensemaking exercise, check it for hidden value messages. Don't rely on your own instincts. You may not see messages in the framework that others do. Show the framework to people and watch how they respond. Are they attracted to one part of it? Do they avoid any parts of it? Why do they do that? What impact might that have on their sensemaking?

### **Choices to make together**

In a sensemaking exercise, participants blaze paths through open lands of possibility. To help them do this, a sensemaking exercise must present some form of *ambiguity* to be resolved, some set of options to choose among. If every choice has been made before the



exercise begins, there won't be anything to choose *together*. When people are engaged in your sensemaking exercise, they should say things like:

- Should we do it this way or that way?
- Where should we put it? How close? How far?
- How much of this or that should we use?

The exercises I describe in this book present these choices:

Exercise	Choices
Twice-told stories	Which story should we retell?
Timeline, Landscape	Where should we place each story? What patterns do we want to highlight?
Ground truthing	Which stories should we tell/retell in response to these words? How would we rewrite these statements/definitions?
Story elements	How should we answer these questions? Where should we place these answers? How should we describe each cluster? Where should we place each attribute?
Composite stories	What message do we want to convey? Which stories do we want to put into our template slots? How do we want to shape, tell, and improve our story?

Also, every exercise in this book follows up its specific ambiguity with a series of general ambiguities that flow from it:

- What do the choices we made in this exercise mean?
- What have we learned from what we have done here?
- What do we want other people to know about what we have learned?

So as you develop your sensemaking exercise, ask yourself:

- What choices does this exercise ask groups to make together?
- How does it help groups make those choices?
- How does it help groups find meaning in the choices they have made?

As you test your exercise, ask yourself:

- What do people talk about when they are doing the exercise?
- Are they making the choices we want them to make? If not, why not?
- Are they making the choices in a way that helps them make sense of the topic? Or do the choices stand in their way?

## Cycles to iterate over

In a sensemaking exercise, people need to circle back and approach the task over and over. If you look back at the stepwise instructions for the exercises described in this chapter, you'll see that the various portions of the exercises bring people back to consider the same choices and frameworks again and again.

For example, when people build landscapes:

1. They are introduced to an empty landscape described by abstract dimensions.
2. As they place stories into the landscape, it becomes less empty and less abstract.
3. After the stories are placed, they watch as patterns emerge.
4. In the report-back period, they use their landscape to express their perspectives.
5. As they describe their landscape for the workshop record, they convey its meaning to people who did not attend the workshop.

Cycling round and round the central structure of the exercise is an important part of the sensemaking experience. So as you develop your sensemaking exercise, ask yourself:

- How do people cycle around in this exercise? What are the points of the cycle?
- How many times do people circle around? What is different in each cycle?
- How does each cycle feed into the next? How do the interactions among the cycles support sensemaking?

As you test your exercise, ask yourself:

- What do people do during each cycle of the exercise? How do they seem to feel? Do they respond to some cycles differently than to others?
- What changes as the cycles replace each other? Do the cycles seem to help people come back to the exercise framework in new ways?
- Does the energy of the exercise build as the cycles go on? Or does the energy dissipate?

## Optional elaborations

When you facilitate a sensemaking exercise, you might have an hour or a day to work with; you might be working in person or online; your topic might be trivial or life-changing; your participants might be engaged, inspired, uninterested, alienated, or angry; and you might be using the exercise for the first time or the hundredth time.

For this reason, no sensemaking exercise can or should require its participants to follow the exact same steps every time. That's why all of the exercises in this book exist both in their most basic forms (which describe the things I think you need to do to be able to get anything out of the exercise at all) and in a variety of expanded forms. Some of these expanded forms change the exercises so much that they seem like different exercises.

So as you develop your sensemaking exercise, build and test its basic form, but also build and test as many optional expansions as you can think of. What could participants do if they want to take the exercise further?

As you work on your new exercise, record or take notes on everything that happens. Capture especially the parts where you tell people what to do next and they respond and start to work (or don't). Later, review what went well and what didn't. Every time you do the exercise, change something about it and watch what happens. In this way the exercise will keep growing as you continue to use it and begin to rely on it.

Finally, tell other people how to use your new exercise! Don't keep it bottled up. Send it out into the world so it can help other people make sense of things too.



## Chapter 13

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# Narrative Intervention

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A narrative intervention is an action whose purpose is to change the flow of stories in an organization, community, or society. In PNI projects, interventions are typically carried out in response to unmet needs revealed during sensemaking.

Many types of interventions might come about as a result of carrying out a PNI project: policies might be changed, laws might be passed, funding might be approved. I will not write about any of those things in this chapter, because those things are beyond the scope of this book. I will only speak of *narrative* interventions, that is, actions taken specifically to intervene in the flow of stories.

What does it mean to intervene in the flow of stories? It means doing something that changes the way stories are told and heard and retold. Note that a narrative intervention does not necessarily involve *telling* stories. There are many other ways to have a positive impact on story flow, as I hope to show you in this chapter.

I group narrative interventions into three categories, which are based on three types of unmet needs.

- **Listening interventions.** You discovered that people need to tell more stories, which means that *other* people need to listen more (or better).
- **Story work interventions.** You discovered that people need to work more on their stories together.
- **Telling interventions.** You discovered that people need to hear more stories, both those you collected and others like them.

I will describe some examples of these three types of intervention, but first I want to explain something important about the intervention phase of PNI.

## Intervention is wide open

Intervention is the most flexible and variable phase of PNI. You can plug in many activities, programs, and projects during this time—but you don't have to! Intervention is an optional part of PNI. It does not happen in every project.

Some of the things you can plug in during the Intervention phase are other story-based methods. To be clear, you can connect PNI with other methods in every phase.

In	There are other ways to	Such as
Planning	Plan projects	Gantt charts
Collection	Facilitate story-sharing conversations	Conversation Café
Catalysis	Find patterns	Grounded theory
Sensemaking	Talk about issues	Asset-based Community Development
Return	Preserve stories	Oral history

Still, the intervention phase of PNI is the best place to connect it with other story-based methods. This is because most story-based approaches have intervention at their heart. Some approaches that connect especially well to the intervention phase of PNI are Narrative Therapy, Appreciative Inquiry, and Participatory Theatre.

## Listening interventions

In the remainder of this chapter, I will give you a scattering of ideas to explore within each category of needs. I'll describe most of the ideas briefly and some in more detail. Each set of ideas will point you in the direction of even more ideas.

Here are some needs related to listening.

- You found moments of crisis. You need to help people deal with problems before they get out of hand.
  - You could help people form story-sharing groups for mutual support.
  - You could train your customer-facing staff in story elicitation and listening.
  - You could launch a narrative support system (see below).
- You found opportunities for feedback and learning. People have stories to tell that would help you do your work better.
  - You could make story sharing a standard part of your planning process.
  - You could form story-sharing groups that provide input when policies, laws, designs, or plans are being discussed.

- You could create a narrative suggestion box (see below).
- You found energy for sharing. People are excited about the idea of feeling heard and valued in your community.
  - You could help people learn about story work.
  - You could help people set up local story-sharing groups.
  - You could set up a community story-sharing space (see below).

## A narrative support system

A common outcome of sensemaking in PNI projects is the identification of *crisis points*, or places where people face situations too difficult to resolve alone. Often the stresses created by these crisis points radiate out to affect many other people in the community.

Many communities and organizations already have systems in place to gather information about crises. One of the things you can do in your PNI project is improve the way your support system listens to people in crisis.

Support system forms typically have three parts, which taken together capture a story about the past, present, and future of the problem:

1. What is the problem? (What happened?)
2. What attempts have been made to fix the problem? (What have you done? What have others done?)
3. What is your desired outcome? (What do you want us to do to help you?)

Within each of the three time frames, a support form can ask about any or all of these things:

- facts (“Describe the problem” or “Who was involved?”)
- feelings (“How do you feel about the problem?”)
- opinions (“What do you think we did wrong?”)
- stories (“What happened?”)

Every support form asks about facts, and some ask about feelings and opinions. But few ask story-eliciting questions, especially when it comes to what happened to people and how they feel about it.

For example, consider this support form:

- Describe the reason(s) for requesting a formal complaint. Please be specific by including names, dates, and times, whenever possible.
- Have you tried to resolve the problem(s) before requesting the Formal Complaint? If yes, please describe what you have done to try to resolve the problem and include the results.
- What would you like to see happen to resolve this complaint?

The respondent is asked to tell a story about what happened when they tried to resolve the problem, and they are asked to tell a story about what might happen in the future. But

when they are asked about whatever it was that *started* the problem in the first place, they are asked only for a “reason” and for “dates.” The admonition “please be specific” almost reads as “don’t tell us *what actually happened* to you.”

By contrast, here is an example of a support form that does a better job of eliciting stories:

- What happened?
- Where did the events take place? When? Who was involved?
- Were there any witnesses to these events? Have you included their details?
- Do you have any medical evidence, photographs, or documents which may be relevant?
- Have you taken any action already in relation to your complaint? What happened?
- What action or outcome would you like to see as a result of your complaint?

This is a story-eliciting form at all three points of importance: initial event, steps taken by the applicant, desired outcome. Granted, the last question could have read, “What would you like to happen?” but this is pretty close to perfect. I would guess that this particular support service has an easier time helping people than many others do. That first, simple, open-ended question, sitting all by itself, vulnerable, inviting, reassuring, probably results in a high satisfaction level for people in need than my first example. It takes courage to ask people a simple question like *what happened*. But it works.

### **A narrative suggestion box**

Narrative suggestion boxes are useful when sensemaking reveals hints of tensions and solutions that flow beneath the surface of a community or organization. If you already have a way for people to make suggestions, you can listen more deeply by eliciting stories during the process. Here’s an example suggestion-box survey:

- Welcome to the suggestion box. Would you like to tell us about something that:
  - happened (or didn’t)?
  - might happen (or might not)?
  - should happen (or should not)?
- What was it that happened, or didn’t, or could/not, or should/not?
- This story you told us:
  - How do you feel about it?
  - What does it mean to you? What makes it important to you?
  - How does the story connect to you or to someone you know?
  - Who would you like to hear this story? If you were talking to them right now, what would you say to them about it?
  - Is there anything else you want to tell us about the story you told? Maybe something else that happened (or didn’t), might happen (or might not), or should happen (or should not)?
- Would you like to talk to someone about this? If so, contact \_\_\_ at \_\_\_.



Note the expansion of options beyond facts into fiction. This is a social signal. It says to the reader:

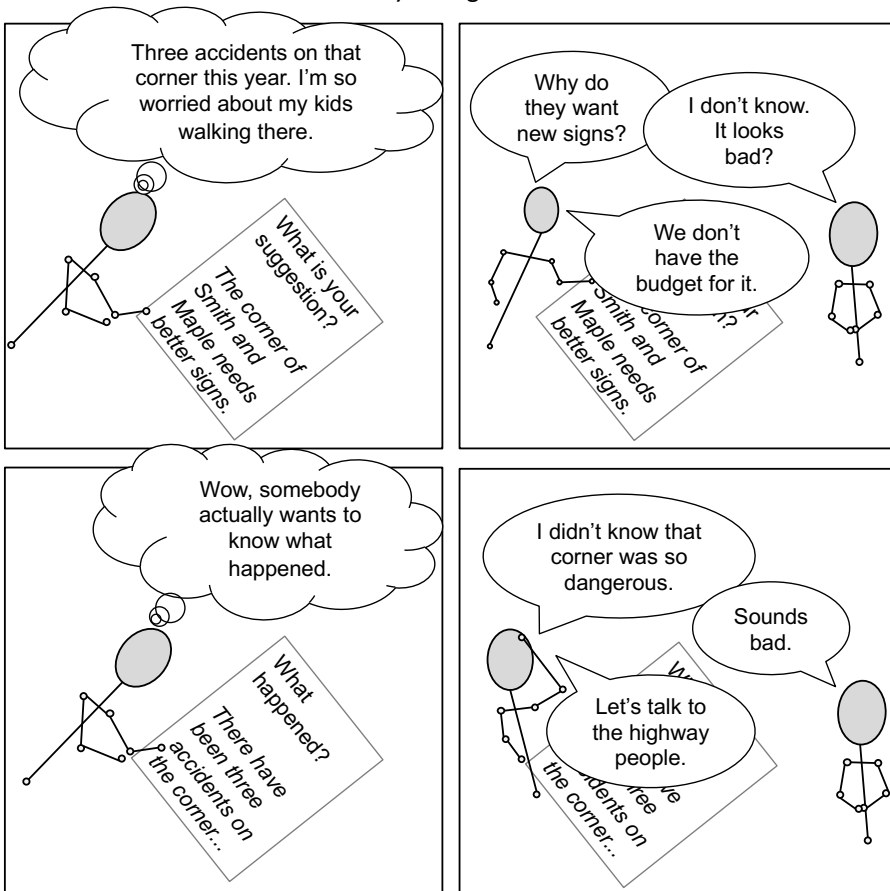
Because you are telling a story, you are allowed to do all of the things people use stories to do. You can express your feelings, communicate a message, think through a problem, question an assumption, imagine a solution, and strengthen (or challenge) a connection.

The interpretive questions after the story are also a social signal. They say:

Because you are telling a story, you do not have to provide proof that what you say happened actually happened. If you *want* to provide proof, you can. But we will take what you say seriously even if it is not the literal truth.

If you set it up right, a narrative suggestion box can tell you a lot *even if nobody tells the truth* using it. In fact, in some situations, lies and rumors can be more useful than facts, which you might already have.

Also notice the elicitation of an optional second story. I put this in because I've noticed that people often share more in the second story they tell than they did in the first, because they understand the context of the storytelling better.



## A story-sharing space

This intervention is useful when the needs that surface in a PNI project can never be met. There is no fix to be found, and nothing can be done but to help people cope with the difficult situations they face. In such a situation, giving people a place to share their experiences can provide a different kind of help than solving their problems or changing policies. It can help them find support, solidarity, and strength.

A story-sharing space should:

- Encourage people to share relevant stories in safe and meaningful ways
- Ask reflective (not performative or intimidating) questions
- Make it easy to engage with the collected stories and answers

Some examples of physical story-sharing spaces might be:

- A bench in a town park engraved with story-eliciting questions and story-sharing tips
- A story-sharing notebook sitting next to a couch in the community center lobby
- A “read a story tell a story” box in a café (like a “tiny library” but for story exchange)
- A corner of a room in a school, library, cafeteria, or community center with story cards and instructions for adding to the collection
- A story display that lines a frequently used corridor, is changed weekly, and can be contributed to by writing to or talking to someone who takes care of the story collection (the entirety of which can be seen on request)

You can provide access and transparency (and avoid mischief) by:

- situating the space within sight of people in authority (teachers, receptionists, etc)
- reminding people of their obligations to their neighbors or co-workers
- making it impossible to take away or destroy the space or its contents

In an online story-sharing space, you can use forums, persistent chats, and shared whiteboards, and you can manage visibility with links, accessibility with passwords, and mischief with rules, moderators, and reputation building.

## Story work interventions

Here are some needs related to story work—that is, making sense of stories, getting them to where they need to go, and changing how they flow.

- Your project was a great success, but too few people were involved. You need to expand your effort and make it more inclusive and longer-lasting.
  - You could make your project a yearly event, drawing in more people and becoming more ambitious every year.
  - You could create a series of new projects to explore sub-topics that came up during the project.

- You could set up an ongoing sensemaking space (see below).
- You could set up a narrative mentoring program (see below).
- Your project helped you begin to explore some important needs, but it didn't go far enough. You need to go deeper into the needs to address them fully.
  - If you found a need to process emotional or traumatic issues, you could try Narrative Therapy.
  - If you found a fixation on what is broken and a blindness to solutions in plain sight, you could try Appreciative Inquiry.
  - If you found a need to get along better, you could try Restorative Practices.
- Your project was informative, but you didn't get as many new ideas as you had hoped for. You need another way to bring your collective imagination to bear.
  - If you found a need to challenge or rethink the way you work or live together, you could try Participatory Theatre.
  - If you found a need to plan for the future, you could try Scenario Planning.
  - If you found a need to change the way you spend money, you could try Participatory Budgeting.

These are just a few ideas, but there are literally hundreds of other group-work approaches you can connect to the Intervention phase of PNI. Or, if you like, PNI can act as a ground-truthing pilot for hundreds of other group-work approaches.

## **A space for sensemaking**

An ongoing sensemaking space is useful when sensemaking reveals a need for more sensemaking. If you have a physical or online place you can set aside (and watch over), you can invite people in your community or organization (individuals and small groups) to make sense of your stories on an ongoing basis.

For example, let's imagine that you build a physical "experience room" in a side room of your community's town hall.

- The walls of the experience room are covered with story cards, and more copies of the cards sit on tables, just as if the room were about to be used for a sensemaking workshop. Visitors can read stories and rearrange cards.
- Printed indexes to the stories, by name and by answers to questions, are available to help those looking for stories they want to think about or retell.
- The project's planning documents, catalytic material, and outcomes of sensemaking workshops can also be found in the room.
- Visitors can fill out surveys and drop them into a box for inclusion in the collection. Groups can use peer interview scripts and instructions for group story-sharing exercises.
- Wall spaces, materials, and instructions are available for groups who want to use the room for ad-hoc sensemaking around an issue of concern.
- Also prominent are rules for use of the space, including the need to respect the experiences of others and the need to keep the room in good condition.

- Every so often, volunteers check on the experience room and process any new stories, constructions, or reports of sensemaking workshops.
- Planning meetings for new story projects take place in the experience room, because just being in the room helps people think about the narrative life of the community.

You can do the same thing in a virtual space, and you can create hybrid physical-virtual sensemaking spaces, with physical space for in-person sensemaking and with computers available for listening to audio stories, looking at patterns in answers, and learning from video instructions.

A sensemaking space can support	Because	This is especially useful when
Transparency	Everything from the project is available to see and use; nothing is hidden away	Trust has been lacking (before or during the project)
Participant-led sensemaking	Community members can do their own sensemaking (perhaps inviting more participants) on issues of mutual concern	Workshop recruitment was difficult, but interest in the project has grown over time
Emergency response	Community members can address newly revealed needs by drawing on the stories of the community	You want to improve community resilience
Orientation of new members	Newcomers can learn about the culture and get up to speed on current issues	The rate of new arrivals is high (or there is much to learn)
Representation	Groups that were not included (or did not participate) in the project can visit the space and join the discussion	You weren't sure who to invite; you couldn't invite the people you wanted to; some groups didn't want to participate (but they might now)
Creating a bridge to a new project	The space can support the return phase of one project and the planning phase of the next	You would like to plan a series of projects, each building on the insights from the last

A sensemaking space takes time and resources to set up and maintain. It's not worth doing for a small or short-term project. But if your project plans are ambitious, or you want to plan multiple projects that cover years, a space for sensemaking might give you a good return on your investment.

## A narrative mentoring program

Narrative mentoring is like regular mentoring—pairing people with much and little experience—but with extra support for sharing and working with stories. This is useful when sensemaking reveals a need for the passing on of wisdom.

This intervention is even more useful when you want to improve an existing mentoring program. Here are some things you can do.

- **Provide encouragement.** Mentors and mentees might not be sharing stories because they don't see the value of the practice. Every time someone starts to tell a story, they might feel the urge to get back to work. You can help them get past this barrier. You can:
  - Mention the value of story sharing during your mentorship sign-up process.
  - Consider story-sharing preferences during your mentor-mentee match-up process.
  - Include in your mentorship orientation materials a brief explanation of how story sharing works: where it comes from, why we do it, and how it helps us. Also explain how story sharing can improve mentoring:
    - \* From the mentor side: passing on wisdom; framing advice in memorable ways; getting across what things are really like
    - \* From the mentee side: explaining roadblocks and confusions; describing skills; gaining in confidence by celebrating achievements
  - Gather and distribute testimonials about the value of story sharing in mentorship.
- **Provide materials.** You can give your mentors and mentees:
  - Draft story-sharing agreements (e.g., we agree to treat each other's stories with as much as respect as our own)
  - A variety of questions to ask each other (both story-eliciting and follow-up)
  - Suggestions for integrating story sharing into mentorship (e.g., end each meeting by answering one story-eliciting question each)
  - Interview scripts to follow (for a variety of topics and purposes)
  - Exercise instructions (imagine a mentor and mentee going through a ground-truthing, local-folk-tales, or story-elements exercise together)
  - Answers to frequently asked questions about story sharing in the mentorship process
- **Provide support.** You can make yourself available to:
  - Answer questions about story sharing
  - Help one person convince the other to try sharing stories (or even broach the topic)
  - Conduct a group interview or facilitate an exercise
  - Help a mentor-mentee pair find another pair who can help them get started with story sharing
  - Bring several mentor-mentee pairs together to share tips and ideas on story sharing

## Telling interventions

Here are some needs related to storytelling.

- You found that people have more stories to tell to each other.
  - You could post some of the stories you collected in your community center, so people who did not participate in the project can benefit from it.
  - You could create a “day in the life” series that helps community members understand each other better.
  - You could create a narrative orientation to help newcomers better understand your community (see below).
- You found that people have more stories to tell to those who make the decisions.
  - You could improve your town hall format to include times for sharing stories as well as expressing opinions.
  - You could help your community members craft multimedia stories with Digital Storytelling.
  - You could take a dramatic action that changes the stories people tell about your community or organization (see below).
- You found that people have more stories to tell to those who are learning.
  - You could create a narrative learning resource in which stories are mixed with how-to information.
  - You could create an expert system using Case-Based Reasoning.
  - You could create a narrative simulation (see below).

### A narrative orientation

A narrative orientation is useful when sensemaking reveals a need to help newcomers understand your community or organization better: its history, culture, and unwritten rules. Working with the stories you have collected, you can create a story-based experience that will welcome newcomers and help them learn how to fit in and contribute.

Narrative orientations don’t have to be fancy. A sheet of paper with “the ten stories you need to hear as you join our community” can be as useful as a documentary with high production values. What is important is that the stories represent real experiences recounted by real people, not engineered fantasies of what you want people to think about your community or organization.

Here’s an example of a narrative orientation in the process of being built. It’s from a web site that provides news related to the legal profession.

[We] will be hosting an “Unofficial Orientation to Law School” [over video chat]. This three-part series will help [new law students] navigate the application process and the first year of school and hopefully steer them towards an actual lawyer job, without the crippling debt. Confirmed guest panelists for the Hangouts include professors from [two law schools], [law firm] hiring partners and associates, and current law students.

We are looking for help from those of you who have already cleared the major hurdles of a legal career: by getting into law school, by succeeding academically, and by landing a job. We are looking for three categories of stories:

1. What was your law school application strategy? Did you retake [the entrance exam]? How did you decide where to apply? How did you choose which school to attend? Did/do you plan to transfer?
2. What was your strategy for academic success? Did you join a study group? Did you buy commercial outlines or [textbooks]? Did you use a tutor or coach?
3. How did you find a job? [Interviewing?] Networking with student groups? Random luck?

So this goes out to all the success stories out there in Lawland: Share your stories with us. (Your stories may be used in the hangouts anonymously, or with the submittor's permission.)

If the people who set this up were to ask me for advice, I would suggest that they include stories of failure as well as success. And not just from lawyers! Also from people who wanted to be lawyers but gave up trying. Telling half the story isn't even half as useful as gathering every perspective on the endeavor.

The goal of a narrative orientation is not to sell anything to anyone. It is to prepare people to participate. To do that people need to know the peaks *and* valleys of the landscape.

You can build a narrative orientation in a sensemaking workshop. Once people have spent enough time with your collected stories, give them this instruction:

Thinking back through all of the stories you worked with today, choose a few stories that every newcomer needs to hear to understand [us, our group, our family, our community, our organization]. Consider our weaknesses and faults as well as our strengths and successes. Think about:

- Identity: who we are; where we come from; what matters to us
- Purpose: what we do; why we do it; how it works; where it's strong and weak
- Norms: how we work and live together; what we do and don't do; what happens when we break the rules
- Conflicts: where we agree and disagree; how we look for common ground; how we get along when we disagree
- Aspirations: where we want to be; what we are doing to get there; the obstacles that lie in our way

## A dramatic action

Sometimes PNI projects uncover needs that are too deep to be addressed by any amount of talking. Only action will make a difference.

You can change the stories people tell in your community or organization by *carrying out a dramatic action based on values*. Because people are always looking for stories to share, good and bad, stories naturally gather around such actions. If the actions are based on values that are important to the community or organization, stories will be told about them. And if they are not, stories will be told about that.

The idea of making stories happen is nothing new. I first encountered it in the work of Alan Wilkins, who in a 1984 paper called “Organizational Stories as Symbols that Control the Organization” described how managers who want to create organizational change through storytelling cannot simply rely on telling stories. They should also (or instead) make stories happen by taking what Wilkins called “dramatic action in the name of values.” (I like to call it “dramatic action *based on values*,” because “in the name of” still sounds a bit fake.)

Wilkins tells this story:

[M]ost employees at one company I researched have been told the story about how the company avoided a mass layoff in the early 1970s when almost every other company in the industry was forced to lay off employees in large numbers. Top management chose to avoid a layoff of 10 percent of their employees by asking everyone in the company, including themselves, to take a ten percent cut in salary and come to work only nine out of ten days. This experience became known as the “nine-day fortnight” by some and is apparently used as a script for the future of the company.

In 1974 the company was again confronted with a drop in orders, and it went to the “nine-day fortnight” scheme for a short period. When other companies in the industry began layoffs, the old-timers used this story to quiet the anxiety of concerned newcomers. . . . Employees occasionally tell [this] story to communicate that this is the “company with a heart.” Everyone I talked to in the company knew the story, which is used both as a symbol and a script.

Now *that’s* an effective narrative intervention. Those managers could have told a beautifully crafted story about the poor economy and their sad need to lay off employees. But instead they took an action, and the stories people told about that action strengthened the organization for years to come.

### ***The dangers of dramatic action***

Making stories happen is not without danger. One danger lies in making stories happen without knowing it. When soldiers descend to the ground in helicopters, they often ride with their booted feet hanging off the sides. When U.S. soldiers first went to Afghanistan, this innocent practice generated many local stories, because showing the soles of your feet is considered a deeply offensive (and usually deliberate) insult in most Arab countries. Soon the military started training soldiers about this and other insults, but the stories remained.

Similarly, at one point Israelis were offended by a photograph of U.S. President Obama talking on the phone with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu—with the soles of his feet prominently displayed on his desk. In both cases the dramatic actions were inadvertent, but they made stories happen nonetheless.



### ***Backflow and dramatic action***

Like viruses that lie dormant for years, stories you make happen can come back to bite you long after you have forgotten them. Sometimes they can turn into what I call “backflow” stories. A backflow story is one of my favorite kinds of story to read or see, but living through one can be unpleasant. In a backflow story, the very last part of the story flows back over the previous parts and changes them into something different than what they were.

Say a person runs for political office. Everything seems to be in order. They have built their career slowly and carefully, making many friends and few enemies. They have mastered the art of public discourse and built a deep understanding of policy. They are well loved for prominent actions that have helped many people. Many good stories have been told about them. Their story seems destined to continue with their taking on the mantle of public authority.

But then something happens that not only derails their political future, but retroactively changes the perceived story of *everything* that happened in the past. Now the fact that they led their high school debating group seems sinister instead of stately. Different stories start to come out, about how they kicked a neighbor’s dog, or didn’t show up for a job, or snapped at a customer. In the end the whole story gets rewritten, from start to finish, and they are a different person than they were—possibly even to themselves.

That sounds scary, but the good thing is that *positive* backflow works the same way. Former heads of state sometimes create positive backflow by devoting the remainder of their lives to earning their place in history.

### ***How to find dramatic actions***

At the end of the chapter on sensemaking, I talked about all the things participants might list in your wrapping-up activity (page 320). One of those things was “ideas.” Among those ideas will be some actions your group, family, organization, or community could take. Among those actions, some will be dramatic, meaning that they will cause new stories to flow around them. Among those dramatic actions, some will cause stories to flow *back* into the past, helping to heal old wounds. If this sounds like something your project needs, plan to draw out ideas for action in your sensemaking workshop(s).

### ***Beware of fake dramatic action***

I want to make a special warning about publicity stunts as dramatic actions, because when I say “make stories happen” it may seem that I am talking about this. I am not.

Publicity stunts have two inherent problems, one for each word. The first is that a publicity stunt is done to get *publicity*. This may work for a time, but it will eventually fail. People have a lot of ways of talking about the gap between what people do and what they say—not walking the talk, not leading by example, do what I say not what I do, and on and on. And it’s very easy to let your real intent slip out.

The second problem with publicity stunts is with the “stunt” part of it. By making your action deliberately exciting or provoking, you run the risk of the story-of-the-story taking over and becoming the story that happens. Nobody cares what a talking dog has to say.

The fact that the dog is talking is the story that happens. Nobody asks about the story the dog was trying to tell.

This often happens when somebody wants to tell the world a story, finds it difficult to be heard because they are not in a position of power or authority, isn't willing to build an audience slowly and patiently, and grasps at an extreme way of telling their story, perhaps using the power of voyeurism (always a sure bet). Stunts provide only a temporary spectacle to a public that rushes off to the next shiny thing without ever noticing what the stunt-maker had been trying to say.

### ***Effective dramatic actions***

So what is an organization or community to do if they want to make a positive story happen? How about this? *Do good stuff*. It's amazing how refreshing that is nowadays. In a world where everybody is spinning, standing still stands out.

Find things you can do in which your community's or organization's values are apparent. Make sure they are big enough to get noticed, but be careful not to artificially expand them. Find them, then *do* them, and don't make too big a to-do about it. Make sure your values soak all the way through the action and aren't just painted on the top of it. People will notice, because they are looking for it. They are hungry for it. And they will tell the stories *for* you.

Dramatic actions based on values are	And are not
Done to meet needs	Done to <i>seem</i> to meet needs
Honest	Manipulative
Authentic	Fake
Transformational	Surface-level
Relevant	Irrelevant
Transparent	Opaque
Useful	Useless

Here's one more example of a dramatic action. I buy most of my clothes from the Land's End company. I like their clothes and their policies, but I also remember a dramatic action they took decades ago. When I was in graduate school, one of the students I knew lived in a rented house that burned to the ground. He lost every single thing he owned. Another student sent a letter to Land's End saying how this guy and all of us loved their clothes, and could they send him a few shirts to help him out.

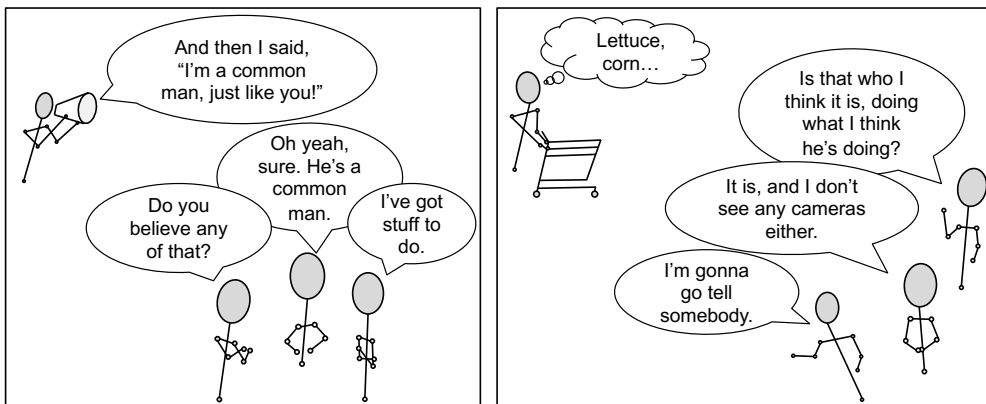
Land's End didn't send a few shirts. They sent a huge box filled with clothes, a whole new wardrobe. We guessed that the clothes they sent would have cost at least several hundred dollars. Given the fact that our graduate-school stipends at that time came to a whopping eight thousand dollars a year, and we lived on expensive Long Island, this was incredibly

memorable. I can still remember how exciting it was when the huge box came and the guy opened it.

Even more amazingly, Land's End didn't seek to publicize the incident. They didn't make the poor guy do a commercial. They just helped him out. The very fact that they didn't seek to publicize what they did proved to us that they must do this sort of thing all the time. I'll just bet that everybody who knew about that incident (and it was dozens of people) has told the story of it many times. I just told it to you. That's what I mean by dramatic action based on values.

It's not that hard to find opportunities to make positive stories happen. Just listen. Listening to stories about needs and fears and beliefs is a great way to find opportunities to take dramatic action based on values. But you can't find such opportunities by asking people to tell you "success stories." You need to find out things you aren't sure you want to know, like why people don't trust you, why they choose others over you, what they think your values are, and what nasty rumors they have heard about you.

Doing this requires a degree of self-awareness, honesty, and courage that is not always available at every level of every organization or in every part of every community. And then, when you find out what dramatic actions you could take based on values, it requires another layer of courage to actually do them, because some of them require you to give up some control or safety or freedom. But the rewards can be great.



## A narrative simulation

Building a narrative simulation is useful when your sensemaking has uncovered a dangerous excess of confidence around certain skills. When people think they know how to do something and don't, in a way that creates danger for themselves and others, a narrative simulation can help.

Simulations can help people learn to do complicated yet dangerous procedures in safety. Adding stories to simulation engages people in the learning task and helps them remember what they learned afterwards. There is a large academic literature on the creation of narrative simulations for education and training in a variety of applications. Search for the terms "serious play" or "serious games," the "gamification" of learning, and "case-

based” or “story-based” simulation to find out how to create participatory narrative training experiences.

An example is the STAR-LITE simulation created to help students learn about laboratory safety. Says the STAR-LITE web site:

Work with your colleagues (some humanoid, some not) to complete quests in a lab. The STAR-LITE laboratory can be chaotic and safety violations will occur. You will make critical safety decisions to ensure that you and your colleagues work safely in a lab. STAR-LITE (Safe Techniques Advance Research—Laboratory Interactive Training Environment) is an innovative and groundbreaking method to learn about laboratory safety techniques.

My husband and son went through the STAR-LITE simulator together. The combination of silly alien blob-people and true-to-life laboratory safety procedures helped my son learn important facts about laboratory safety in a memorable way. STAR-LITE might seem like your typical educational resource, but it is more like a PNI intervention than you might think. The simulation was developed in memory of a young woman who died after contracting a deadly virus in a laboratory. Thus the impetus to develop STAR-LITE grew out of sensemaking about real events within a community of research scientists.

I can tell you about another narrative training simulation that had an impact on my work. When I worked at IBM (at the turn of the last century), I met several people who worked with stories. One of these people was Peter Orton. Peter came to IBM after writing television screenplays and studying narratology. One of the things he created for IBM was a narrative training simulation whose goal was to help people develop better management skills.

When I heard about Peter’s simulation, I wanted to try it, mainly because I was eager to learn about all possible uses of stories. In the simulation, you took on the role of a manager in charge of several employees. At that time I had never tried to manage anybody, but I was pretty sure I knew how. I *didn’t* know how. I failed to make the right choices over and over. One employee needed encouragement and I didn’t give it; another needed more autonomy and I micro-managed them; another needed my support in a dispute and I didn’t notice until it was too late to help.

I learned something unique and irreplaceable by playing that little game: that managing people isn’t as simple as I thought it was. I don’t think I would have come to that realization as fully if I had read about management in a book. That’s what narrative simulations are best at: giving people new experiences that overturn what they *think* they know.

### ***How to build a narrative simulation***

Start by choosing an overall skill you want to help people learn, like “Putting safety first” or “Mastering time management.” Make sure the skill is well represented in the stories you collected in your project.

Next, invite some people who know a little and a lot about the skill to a simulation building workshop. You will need at least nine participants for at least four hours. Prepare to record the workshop so you can capture any new stories people tell.

**Starting out**

Minutes	Who	What to do
3-5	You	Introduce the stories and the overall skill you want to support.
2-5	You	Create groups of 3-5 people. Give each group a set of story cards.  If you can, create small groups with varying levels of experience with respect to the overall skill you chose. One way to do this is to ask people to sort themselves into three groups with low, medium, and high experience with the skill, then ask them to form groups with one person from each experience-level group.

**Pulling out stories**

Minutes	Who	What to do
30+	Small groups	Read the stories, together or separately, quietly or aloud. Choose 30+ stories that speak to the heart of the overall skill. If you think of any experiences of your own that connect to the stories you are reading, go ahead and tell them. Write the names of the stories you chose (old and new) on sticky notes.

**Finding and clustering skills**

Minutes	Who	What to do
20+	Small groups	For each story you chose, list 2-4 <i>detailed</i> skills that made a difference in the story—by being present <i>or</i> absent. For example, someone might have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• asked a clarifying question (or didn't)</li> <li>• built a contingency plan for a likely time crunch (or didn't)</li> <li>• verified that a machine was switched off before touching a belt (or didn't)</li> <li>• half-solved a problem (or didn't)</li> </ul> Write the skills on a different sticky-note color than you used for the story names.
10+	Small groups	Now set aside your stories and cluster the skills you wrote down. Place like with like until you have 5-10 skill clusters. Give the clusters names.

**Writing scenarios**

Minutes	Who	What to do
5	Small groups	Decide which skill cluster is most important to you.
20+	Small groups	<p>Go back to your previously selected stories and choose 10+ stories that exemplify the presence or absence of that skill cluster especially well.</p> <p>If any more stories from your own experience come to mind while you are doing this (as especially good examples in relation to the skill cluster), tell them, give them names, write their names on sticky notes, and add them to your selected stories.</p>
30+	Small groups	<p>Using the 10+ stories you chose (and/or told), build a fictional scenario that has this structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You are in this <i>situation</i></li> <li>• This <i>challenge</i> arises</li> <li>• You have this <i>choice</i> to make <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– You do this in <i>response</i>, and this good <i>outcome</i> happens as a result</li> <li>– You do this in <i>response</i>, and this neutral or intermediate <i>outcome</i> happens</li> <li>– You do this in <i>response</i>, and this bad <i>outcome</i> happens</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Write each of these nine scenario elements on a separate sticky note. <i>Mix up the order of the response-outcome pairs</i> so it's not obvious which is best. Hide each outcome under its response.</p> <p>Write using the second person and the present tense: <i>you have a big meeting today, you get up late, you go over your presentation one more time</i>, and so on.</p> <p>If you have extra time, choose another skill cluster and build another scenario.</p>

**Testing and refining**

Minutes	Who	What to do
20+	Small groups	<p>One person from each small group: visit another group, show them your simulation, and watch them play it. Everyone else: play the simulation. Playing a simulation means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading the situation, challenge, and choice</li> <li>• Choosing one of the three responses</li> <li>• Revealing the outcome under the response (by picking it up or moving it)</li> <li>• Reading and reacting to the outcome</li> <li>• (Optionally) Choosing one or two more responses; revealing the outcome(s); talking about it</li> </ul>
10+	Small groups	<p>Presenters: return to your group and tell them how the simulation worked. Everyone: talk about what you could do to improve it. Improve it as much as you want to.</p>
20+	Small groups	<p>One person from each small group (the same person, or a different one): visit the group that has not yet seen your simulation. Show it to them and watch them play it.</p>
10+	Small groups	<p>One last time, talk about how the simulation worked and what you could do to improve it.</p>
10+	Small groups	<p>Prepare the simulation for use outside the workshop. You might want to choose a few of your selected (or newly told) stories to illustrate each response/outcome pairing.</p>

**Finishing up**

Minutes	Who	What to do
20+	Everyone together	<p>Talk about what just happened. Talk about how people can stay involved as you prepare the simulation for wider use.</p>
10	You	<p>Capture the scenarios people built and the stories they used to build them.</p>

**After the workshop**

You might only need one workshop like this to build a simulation, but you can also merge the results from two or three such workshops.

When your full set of narrative scenarios is ready, use them to create a learning experience. For example, you could:

- make the scenarios available (for just-in-time learning) in a menu of learning needs
- intermingle the scenarios with other information (such as how-to articles)
- build the scenarios into sessions in a training course
- post a link to a new scenario in each monthly newsletter
- hold a series of workshops in which groups play and discuss each scenario

In physical space, you can print a choose-your-own-adventure story that asks readers to choose responses by turning to specific pages. With a clever, attractive, and engaging design, such a learning tool could be informative and compelling, especially if you illustrate each response-outcome pair with some interesting real-life stories.

Online, you can build a website that uses video vignettes to introduce each scenario, with response buttons and outcome revelations. If that's too ambitious, a slide set with conditionally visible items or pages will also work fine.

No matter what kind of simulation you build, test it by watching people use it and talking to them about it. Provide opportunities for feedback as people use the simulation. You can also give them the opportunity to tell a story about their experience playing the simulation, and the opportunity to read or hear stories left behind by other people who played the simulation.



## Chapter 14

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# Narrative Return

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What happens in a PNI project after the stories have been collected, sensemaking workshops have been held, and decisions have been made? People go back to what they had been doing before the project started, which includes telling and listening to stories. But the stories people tell after a PNI project are never the same as the stories people told before it. This is why I include the return of stories within the scope of PNI. It's a natural part of what happens when you start the PNI wheel rolling.

### Why support the return phase?

The return phase of a PNI project is like the follow-through phase of a tennis swing. Even though your racket is no longer touching the ball, so to speak, you need to keep your eye on what is happening as your project comes to a close.

In tennis, attention to follow-through impacts a player's game in two ways:

1. It creates a positive backflow effect on the entire swing. If you plan—or even expect—to pull back your arm after you hit the tennis ball, you will hit the ball differently than you would if you planned to act as if you were still in contact with it. Even thinking about when you will pull back can disrupt the racket's impact on the ball. It is best to swing in a fluid motion before, during, and after impact.
2. It protects the player's health. Abruptly stopping the arm's motion can injure the arm's muscles, tendons, and ligaments, especially if it's done hundreds of times a day.

Attention to the return phase of a PNI project has remarkably similar impacts:

1. Supporting the return phase creates a positive backflow effect on your entire project. If you plan—or even expect—to pull back from engagement with your participants the

moment your sensemaking phase ends, you will carry out your project differently than you would if you planned to act as if you were still in contact with them in the weeks afterwards. For example, during your planning process, if you think about how you will return the stories you collect to your community, you can tell your participants about your plans, and this will increase their interest in the project.

2. Supporting the return phase makes your project less likely to injure (and more likely to improve) the narrative health of your community or organization. An abrupt withdrawal of participation can injure the precious trust you have built, reducing the chance that people will participate in future projects.

Let's explore each of these metaphors more fully, because each of them also connects to an aspect of stories and story sharing.

### Backflow effects in story sharing and PNI projects

The idea of working backwards in time reminds me of a backflow story. That's my name for a story whose ending flows back to change the parts of the story that came before it. The story sets up an expectation of a certain state of affairs, then upsets that state of affairs in a way that recasts the story—backwards—in a new light. You could say it begins as one story, then splits itself into two stories: the one it *appeared* to be before the revelation that changed it, and the one it became after the moment of revelation.

The stories we tell in our everyday conversations often flow back on themselves as we make evaluation statements that explain why we are telling the stories and what they mean to us. For example, halfway through a story that seems to be about my dog, you may realize that it's not about my dog at all but about my relationship with my son. The story has split itself into two stories: the one before you saw its meaning and the one after.

The best literary backflow story I've ever read is Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*. Its moment of revelation, which takes place on its last few pages, ripples backward to change everything that came before it. (Mann famously recommended that readers of his book read it twice, because it is a different book the second time you read it.)

These are some reasons to support the return phase that connect to the idea of backflow:

- **Risk management.** There is a return phase in every PNI project, whether you support it or not. If you don't support the return phase, what happens during it will be entirely out of your control. I don't mean to imply that the return of stories will ever be entirely under your control even if you *do* support the return phase. But the more involved you are in the return phase, the greater the influence you will have on how it plays out.
- **Closure.** Even well-planned PNI projects can expose painful emotions. Your project may bring people into contention, and it may bring memories people want to keep hidden into the spotlight. This is not because PNI methods are flawed; it is because these are the sorts of issues narrative methods handle well. After the sensemaking phase of your project is over, people may feel a need to bring the emotional level of the discussion back down to a normal, calm, everyday level. The return phase is a time of resolution and closure, a return to safety, the *dénouement* of the project. By supporting it, you can

help people process what happened and find closure. If people don't find closure, the lack of it will ripple back and affect their memories of the rest of the project.

- **Listening.** In every PNI project, people should feel that their voices have been heard. Even after your sensemaking workshops are over, some people might not feel that your project has adequately listened to their experiences. I've said elsewhere that a good indicator of a successful PNI project is gratitude. If you've finished your workshops and have not yet heard people thank you or the project for the chance to speak out, use the return phase of your project to improve on the situation. Give people a voice to speak out once more about the project and the topic it explores.
- **Memory.** The best projects remain in the collective memory of the community or organization long after they have been completed. Supporting the return phase will help people remember your project by talking about it after its visible, official parts are over. If you don't support the return phase, memories of your project may fade faster than you would like, changing the story people tell themselves about what happened.
- **Your own skills.** Listening to the people who participated in your project (and to those who didn't) in its return phase will help you see your project with new eyes. This will help you develop your facilitation skills better than if you relied only on your own reflections about the project. It may not be fun to hear people talk about what went wrong in a project you threw yourself into, but your next project will surely benefit from the experience. If you don't talk to people during the return phase of your project, your memories of its earlier phases may become misaligned with what happened to others, causing you to plan badly in the future.

## Health-related effects in story sharing and PNI projects

Now let's talk about the second tennis metaphor I mentioned above: that attention to follow-through preserves the physical health of your tennis arm, and in the case of PNI, the narrative health of your community or organization.

Again, the metaphor reminds me of something that happens in stories. When people are sharing stories in conversation, the stories don't end abruptly when the events of the story end (see page 29). Instead, each story ends with a ritual (the coda) in which the storyteller and audience negotiate the return of the conversation to its usual rhythm.

Similarly, the return phase of a PNI project involves negotiation among the people who initiated, funded, and carried out the project (probably you and some others), those who participated but did not provide the project's central force, and those who did not participate in the project but still belong to the community.

These are some reasons to support the return phase that connect to the narrative health of your community or organization:

- **Better ideas.** By the time you have finished your sensemaking workshops, you might have come up with some ideas for PNI projects you'd like to conduct in the future. That's great, but there may be even *better* ideas for a new project out there in the community. After all, you aren't the only one who experienced the project's events. In fact, you may be in the worst position to come up with new ideas, because you were so enmeshed in

supporting the project that you couldn't see the forest for the trees. By supporting the return phase of your project, you can tap in to the ideas of everyone in the community.

- **A common language.** A common outcome of sensemaking is a set of short-hand *references*: phrases or story summaries people use to refer to complex understandings about the community or organization, like “This is just like harnessing the ostrich.” Story references are full of meaning to people inside the community and meaningless to people outside it. Sometimes these references survive far longer than the project itself, coming up in conversations years later. Supporting the return phase can help budding story references grow and spread, and this can help your community build on the work you've done instead of falling back to talking in the old ways.
- **Early warning.** Your project will undoubtedly open up some issues for ongoing sensemaking. By observing what happens during return, you can continue to monitor the situation and detect emerging problems before they grow larger.
- **Crowdsourcing.** You could think of the return phase as a very long after-party for your project. The momentum you created by organizing your project activities will prompt people to keep working together on the issues discussed in the project, if at a lower intensity. By supporting the return phase, you can build on that energy.

## How return happens

What happens during the return phase of a PNI project? These are some observations I have made about three aspects of the return phase: dynamics, rights and responsibilities, and sensemaking.

### The dynamics of return

My first set of observations has to do how participants typically react to the return phase.

**Silence.** When a project's sensemaking phase is over, there is often a sort of silent time, when people need to reflect quietly on what happened during the project, or not reflect at all but let the project “sit on the back burner” as they do other things.

This is similar to the silence that happens when people are sharing stories, those lulls in the conversation when people are thinking quietly about what has been said. When you are collecting stories, it's best to let these silences happen and not rush to end them. The same goes for the return phase of projects. People might need a little time—a week or two, maybe—before they are ready to talk about the project.

**Face saving.** Sensemaking workshops can be retroactively stressful. People can get swept up in collective energy as they step outside of their comfort zones and do things they would normally avoid. Afterwards, people sometimes feel overexposed or embarrassed by what they said and did in the heat of the moment, even if it led to useful outcomes.

**Recovery.** If your project succeeded in finding new solutions to important problems, people might need some time to recover from the solutions. If your project has explored difficult emotions, there might be a backlash in which people refuse to participate in solutions, attack your methods or intent, deny the utility of solutions they themselves helped to

create, or just don't want to talk about the problems (or solutions) at all. This does not always mean they think the project was a mistake or the solutions won't work. It might mean they need some time and space to recover their balance.

**Waves.** Participation in the return phase might start out strong, then die down as people think through the implications of the solutions they discussed. Or people might withdraw at first, but return with energy as they get excited about positive change. Expect to see some waves of rising and falling interest during the return phase.

You can find out what is happening by periodically asking people about the project and seeing how (and if) they respond. When you find a wave of rising interest, the time might be right to engage people in talking about new projects or envisioned solutions.

## The rights and responsibilities of return

This next set of observations has to do with rights: who has responsibility for what, who owes what to whom, who owns what.

**Promises.** Unlike extractive research, participatory action research makes promises to the people who are involved in it. Once you've made a promise of participation, you can't just cut it off when the main part of the project is over. People will expect to be informed as the project winds down, and they will expect to have the *opportunity* to participate, even if they don't expect to use it. Even something as simple as providing a way to append comments to your project report will help people stay involved.

**Ownership.** The return phase belongs to the people, and only the people can decide what will happen in it. You can observe and support the return phase, but you cannot control it. If you try to control it, you will create another intervention phase, which will be followed by another return phase you cannot control. An intervention is like a call, and the return phase is like an echo. Try as you might, you cannot create or control an echo. You can only call again.

**Perceptions.** How a project plays out and what it means in the long term is bound to differ to different people. If you could ask everyone in your community or organization about your project, you might find a variety of opinions on its impact, from ground-breaking to trivial to harmful. You can't change how people see your project, but you can *find out* how they see it, and you can use that information to plan your next steps. Sometimes what you learn about how a project has been perceived can be as useful as the stories you collected.

## Sensemaking during return

My final set of observations has to do with how people make sense of a PNI project as it recedes into memory.

**Stories.** As people move further away in time from the main events of your project, it will become a story to them. It will become less detailed, and it will conform to a universal plot shape. Some events will be highlighted, and others will be sidelined or forgotten. The story will develop an overall theme, which may be expressed as a catch-phrase or slogan.

All of this is as it should be. A story is what you *want* people to remember, because a PNI project is above all else *something that happens*. It's not a fact or opinion or evidence or

proof. It's a story. We started out; we made plans; we tried this; we encountered these obstacles; we succeeded; we failed; we were surprised; we changed; we learned; we arrived at a new place.

**References.** If your project has had an impact on your community or organization, there will be some changes to the way people talk about its topic. Terms that came up during your sensemaking workshops will bounce around afterwards, and you will hear them in places and times far removed from the project. Eventually these references will be repeated so many times that people will only need to mention them for everyone to know what they mean.

**Wishes.** When a project is over, participants often communicate a feeling of disappointment or letdown. This usually happens because they experienced something during the project that they don't usually have in their work or home lives, and they wish they could have more of it.

Here are some examples of wishes I've seen people express when a project has ended:

- This project was so *interesting!* I looked forward to every activity. I'd like to do another project like it, maybe about \_\_\_ or \_\_\_.
- I liked reflecting on my experiences with \_\_\_. I would like to do that some more.
- It was great to have the opportunity to compare my experiences of \_\_\_ with those of others. I'd like to go further with that.
- I've had a brief glimpse of what life is like for \_\_\_, and I would like to learn more.
- I feel connected to \_\_\_ in a way I never felt before. I would like to strengthen those connections even further.
- It was nice to feel like part of the solution to the problem of \_\_\_. If you work on it again, I'd like to participate.
- I was so glad to finally have a chance to tell someone about my experiences with \_\_\_. I felt heard for the first time. I have more to say, if anyone would like to hear it.

When you hear your participants express a wish that some aspect in your project will continue (or return) in the future, you've found energy for participation in future projects.

## Supporting return in your community or organization

In the previous phases of your PNI project, you were the driving force that kept the project moving. You asked people to share stories and invited them to make sense of things together. The return phase is different. Now it's time to let your participants do the asking.

People might say	You can respond
I would like to stay informed about the project going forward.	Here is a sign-up list to be notified of upcoming project events. We will also send you our final project report when it's ready.
If you want any feedback on the project, I can help. I know a lot about the topic.	Thank you! We would be glad to hear from you. You can fill out this survey or contact us to set up an interview.
I'm not happy with how the project went. Where can I complain?	We are eager to hear anything you have to say about the project. When can you talk to us?
I liked reading the stories. Are there any more?	You can access all of the stories we collected here.
I am interested in this topic. I would like to explore the stories and other information you collected. All of it, if possible.	That's great! Here is an archive of the entire project: our planning documents, our stories, our catalytic material, our workshop records. We would be glad to answer any questions you have about any of it.
If you do any more projects like this, I would love to get involved. How can I help?	We are putting together a steering committee and helper group for our next project. If you are interested, give us your contact information and we'll call you.
The sensemaking workshop was excellent, but it ended too soon. How can I do more?	These are some exercise instructions you can use. Why not recruit some friends or colleagues and do some sensemaking of your own? If you want us to include what you do in the project, talk to us.
This was great! I want to keep the conversation going. Is there some kind of story-sharing space I can join?	Yes, we set one up in the project. Here's how you can join it. (Or, here are some ideas for setting up a story-sharing space. We would be happy to talk about them with you.)
I want to do projects like this myself. How do you do this work?	We would be glad to answer your questions about how we carried out the project. Also, here is some information about participatory narrative inquiry.

## Supporting return with your sponsors

PNI projects are often authorized and/or funded by sponsors of some kind: a funding group, an executive office, a council, a board, or another body of people in charge. If you have received permission to conduct your project from one of those groups of people, you will need to make sure that they are informed and satisfied during the return phase of your project. You will need them to understand what happened, approve of what you did, and hopefully support you as you think about future projects.

What if you have nobody to answer to but yourself? It's still a good idea to prepare to inform and satisfy *yourself*, in your role as the person in charge. Present the project to yourself so you can improve your own confidence in what you've done.

They might say	You can respond
So what did you actually do in this project?	In a series of ___ and ___, we gathered ___ stories about ___ from ___ people, and in ___ sensemaking workshops, ___ people made sense of the stories together. This is our final project report. It tells the story of the project from start to finish.
What kinds of stories did you get? What are some of the best stories?	These are the stories our participants told us were especially meaningful and relevant to them, and these are all of the stories we collected.
What conclusions did you draw? What are your findings?	This is what happened in our sensemaking workshops, and these are the things our participants said and built. (For example: people built these three timelines, each of which covered our history from a different perspective.)
What was the outcome of the project? What are your recommendations?	Near the end of our sensemaking workshops, we asked our participants to list their discoveries, surprises, and ideas. These are the lists they built.
What about the data? What are the trends? Can we see them?	These are the patterns our participants chose to work with in our sensemaking workshops, and this is what happened when they did. If you would like to participate in the project, we can facilitate a special sensemaking workshop just for you. We'd love to include your perspectives.
Did the project succeed? Was it worth doing?	Here are some of the things our project participants said about the project and its impact for them. Here are some of the things we learned as we carried it out.
Can I just see everything?	Absolutely. Here is an archive of our entire project.

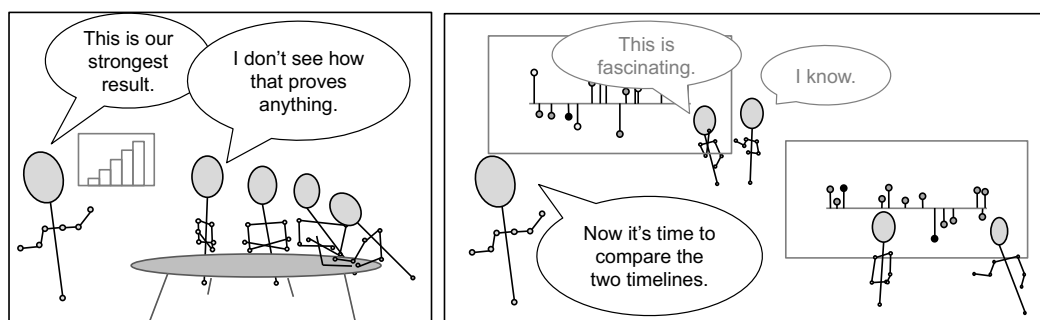


You might be surprised by the “What about the data” line in the table above. When you talk to your sponsors, draw their attention to the sensemaking that took place in your project, not the patterns that catalyzed it.

Do not present catalytic patterns to your sponsors as if they were analytical results. If you do, you will invite them to attack your methods and expertise. Even if you explain that the patterns cannot prove anything (because they rest on a mountain of complex perceptions about stories and intent and social negotiation), if you do not explain *how the patterns were used in sensemaking*, your sponsors will take them as proof—or as a failed attempt at proof.

The one situation in which it is appropriate to present catalytic patterns to your sponsors is when they are engaged in sensemaking of their own. This is actually an excellent idea. If you can involve “the powers that be” in sensemaking, you won’t be presenting them with analytical results. You’ll be including them in the project.

Why not hold a sponsor meeting that is also a sensemaking workshop? It will certainly add another dimension of perspective to your project. I’ve tried this, and I have to tell you that “powers that be” are often pleasantly surprised to be included in, and not just informed about, participatory projects.



That’s a general rule in participatory work. Don’t assume that anyone wants to be left out of participation. They might not admit it, to you or to themselves, but most people want to be included in some way, even if they are too important to be bothered.

## Supporting return in your PNI practice

The last form of support I want to mention is for yourself and your project team.

### ***Celebrate your project***

You worked hard on your project. If it turned out wonderfully, celebrate your success. Do something special to mark your accomplishment. Doing so will help you sustain your effort in the most difficult parts of the next project. If your project *didn't* turn out well, it’s even *more* important to reward your hard work. Sure, you made some mistakes. You can see them clearly in retrospect. But you worked hard, you did your best, and you learned.

In story work, it is entirely possible to do your best and *still* fail to satisfy people. That’s why I say it is high input, high risk, and high output. You will not always succeed. I haven’t,

and while I still cringe at the memory of projects that failed to satisfy, I value the lessons I learned as a result. You will too.

If you are working in a team, make sure everyone participates in your celebration. Have a party, go out to dinner, do something *together*. What if you were not a productive team? What if you argued the whole way through? It's still important to end the project as a team, if you can. You all *tried* to work together, even if you failed. Finish the story of your project together. If you don't celebrate the end of your project together, it will be harder to make sense of what happened and learn from it later on. Even if it's awkward, celebrate the end of the project together.

### ***Gather perspectives on your project***

When you finish a project, you are in danger of believing you know what happened in it. You don't. You can't possibly know how your project appeared to everyone involved (and uninvolved) in it. If you think your project has been a resounding success, you're wrong. If you think it has been a dismal failure, you're wrong. Every project succeeds and every project fails. If you don't know where your project has succeeded *and* where it has failed, you don't know what happened.

Ground truth your project as it winds down. Climb off your satellite and walk around on the ground of perception. If you don't, you run the risk of creating a rift between perception and reality that will cause you to make errors of misalignment in future projects (and worse, *you won't know why*).

In a perfect world, every PNI project would have an echo that collected stories about how the project went, and that echo would have an echo, and so on *ad infinitum*. But in the real world, that would be ridiculous as well as impossible. You have other things to do, and so does everybody else. So what can you do to find out what happened in your project without burdening everyone with another formal story collection?

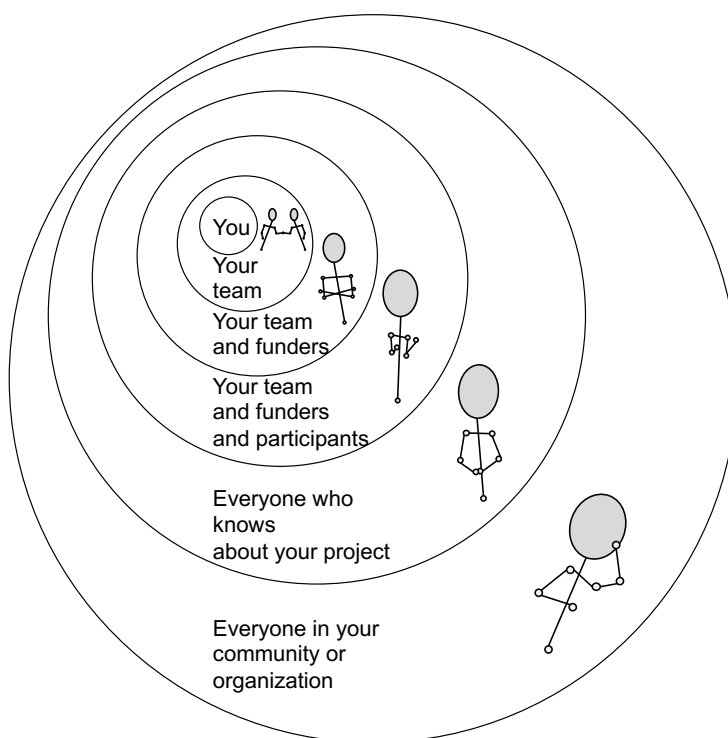
Give people some time to process the project's events—days or weeks, depending on the duration of the project. Wait until talk about the project has died down and people have gone back to their normal routines. Then ask some of the people who participated in the project to *tell you what happened* from their perspective. If your project was small, ask a few people. If it was larger, ask more, say ten. You don't have to do this formally; just start conversations and get an idea of what people are thinking. Ask questions like this:

- What surprised you about this project?
- What moments of the project were best and worst for you?
- What's different for you now than it was before the project started?
- Was there a particular story you heard during the project that meant a lot to you?
- Have you heard any of the project's stories being passed around?
- Have you heard any rumors about the project?
- Is there anything about the project that you'd like to keep going?
- Is there anything you wish *hadn't* happened during the project?
- Is there anything you think I should know about the project?

Don't ask *all* of these questions; just choose a few that you think will be useful. You don't have to record the responses. Just take notes on what people say.

**Involving the uninvolved.** In addition to asking participants questions, find some people who *didn't* participate in the project and ask *them* what happened in it.

In some ways, asking non-participants about your project is even more important than asking your participants about it. There are many special-reality bubbles you can develop as you go through a project. You can have your own bubble; your team can have one; your team and your funding or steering group can have one. A bubble might contain everyone who participated in the project in any way. And finally, there can even be a bubble enveloping everyone who even knows that the project exists. You've got to break *all* of those bubbles to find out what *really* happened in your project.

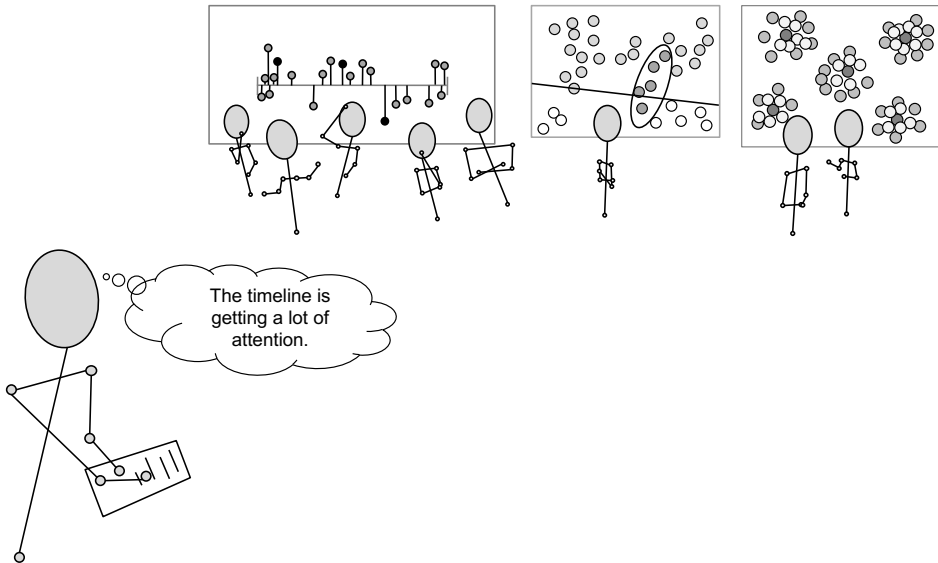


The most direct way to hear from the uninvolved is to simply engage them in conversation. Say to them: “Have you heard about the project that has been going on? (if yes) What do you think of it? (if no, describe it, then ask) What do you think of that?”

Don't let on that you spearheaded the project. Just ask as if you had a tiny role in it. If people know the project was your baby they won't answer honestly. Try to gather as many responses from non-participants as you do from participants. Draw your sample from the *entire* community or organization, not just from those who took part.

If you think it will be difficult to ask people who were not interested in your project to talk to you about it, you can find other ways to ask. Place several carefully-chosen stories or sensemaking constructions in several locations in a public place, then note how much dirt

is left in front of each one as people stop to look at it. Or write mini-reports with various significant project results on them, and leave them on a table in a public place. Vary the contents of the reports, then wait a week and count how many of each type are left. You can do all of this online as well, by putting things on the web and observing click patterns.



**References and wishes.** As you gather stories and reactions (from participants and non-participants), listen for *references* to things (stories, patterns, themes) that seem to matter to people. You are likely to hear the same references from different people. When you hear a reference that seems important to the person who is saying it, note it down. Keep a list of these references, and look for patterns in them. Also, if you can, listen to conversations about your topic. See if you hear any of the references on your list being mentioned. Which references are mentioned, and how? Do they come up everywhere, or only in some places or with some people? And if not, what *are* people talking about?

Also be on the lookout for expressions of *wishes*. Listen to see if you hear people missing anything or wishing they could have anything back. If they say something like, “I’ve never heard so much about how people see our community as I did on that day,” that’s a wish. What do the wishes tell you? What do people hunger for? Where is there energy waiting to be released? What does that tell you about what sorts of projects people might want to be part of in the future?

**Using what you have heard.** After you have heard a variety of stories, references, and wishes about your project, use them to revise and widen the story you tell yourself about the project. You might find out that some of your participants didn’t enjoy or value the project as much as you thought they did. You might find out that there are non-participants who saw the project as a problem, not a solution. You might find out that some non-participants *would* have participated if the project had been set up differently. Use the return phase of your project to open your own eyes about what happened so you can learn and prepare for future story work.

If you are working in a team, ask everyone in the team to gather stories, references, and wishes from participants and non-participants. Ask them to take notes on what they find out. Then get together as a team and review what everyone has found. You might even want to use sensemaking methods to map out what you have found, for example by clustering perceptions or building a landscape. Talk together about what surprised you in what you heard. Develop your group's story of what happened during the project, considering all points of view.

### ***Reflect on and record your project***

Now that you have celebrated your effort, and now that you have listened to the full story of your project, it's time to make sense of it all, reflect on what you've learned, and wrap up the project so you can move on to new things. Here are some things to ponder:

- Reflect on what you've learned about stories. What have you learned from the stories you heard in this project? Pull out some stories that taught you things. What surprised you about them? What did they teach you? How can you use that going forward?
- Reflect on what you've learned about facilitation. Think back over every interaction with your participants. What were the high and low points in your facilitation? What surprised you? What moments will you remember for a long time?
- Reflect on what you've learned about project planning. Did your plan turn out the way you thought it would? Did any of your plans fall apart? Did you ever discover a new opportunity you could not have seen coming? What does this project make you want to do differently in projects you might do in the future?
- Reflect on your PNI practice. How did this project challenge the way you do PNI? Did you get stuck on any obstacles? Did you find skills you didn't know you had? Did you try any experiments? What happened? Did you get any new ideas? How will the way you do PNI change after this project?
- Reflect on ideas that came up in the project. Write a list of ten follow-on projects you'd love to do, if you had the time and help and participation.
- Reflect on your community or organization. What do you know about it now that you didn't know before your project started? What about its culture, or unwritten rules, or strengths and weaknesses, is newly apparent to you? How will this knowledge impact any future projects you might do?

If you are working alone, set aside some time to reflect, review your notes, and write up some new ones. If you are working in a team, plan a meeting (or extend the meeting where you go over what you heard from people) for a final wrap-up.

While you ponder all of these things, *write down* what you think. *Please write things down.* Even one page of notes will seem like it's written with golden ink months or years later. You'd be amazed by how easy it is to forget, in a matter of months, so much useful information about a project that has wound down. Take notes on your dilemmas and discoveries, and someday you'll be ready to write your own book about PNI.



## Appendix A

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# Further Reading: Your PNI Bookshelf

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To choose the set of 14 books listed here, I asked myself a question: if one of my readers decided to provide themselves with a PNI support library, within a reasonable budget, what would they need in that library to improve their PNI skills and projects? To decide, I took all of my books off my shelves, sorted them into topics, and evaluated the books within each topic, considering the value, relevance, utility, clarity, and cost of each book.

## Books on story fundamentals

### Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction

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Author Michael Toolan, academic narratologist

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Audience College students, mostly

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Style Academic, though more approachable than many such works

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Length 272 pages

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Citation Toolan, M. 1988. *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. London: Routledge.

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### **Why you might want to read it**

Toolan's book is like a *Gray's Anatomy* of stories, illuminating in painstaking detail the internal structures of narrative and how they join together. All relevant ideas on story form are covered, going back thousands of years. Surprisingly in a narratology textbook, a section on stories in society includes some elements of story phenomenon such as story in conversation (though not in as much detail as in books dedicated to that topic).

Story in cognitive *function* is not much considered here, but the deficiency can be remedied by reading some function-oriented works in addition. Overall, however, this is an excellent reference work for those looking to understand more about narrative form.

**An example quote**

In at least implicitly seeking and being granted rights to a lengthy verbal contribution, narrators assert their authority to tell, to take up the role of knower, or entertainer, or producer. . . . Any narrator then is ordinarily granted, as a rebuttable presumption, a level of trust and authority which is also a granting or asserting of power. But this trust, power and authority can be exploited or abused. . . .

**Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting**


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Author	Robert McKee, screenwriting guru
Audience	Aspiring screenwriters
Style	Clear; authoritative; confident, perhaps a little too confident, but useful
Length	480 pages
Citation	McKee, R. 1997. <i>Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting</i> . New York: HarperCollins.

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**Why you might want to read it**

If Toolan's narratology textbook is the *Gray's Anatomy* of stories, McKee's *Story* is *The Way Things Work*. *Story* takes stories apart and tells you how to put them back together again in ways that convey powerful, memorable messages. Much of what is in *Story* is intuitively obvious, but only *after* you have read it. Some have criticized McKee for repackaging what Aristotle said about story form, but he admits this; and even if he does repackage the obvious, it works. It's impossible to deny the utility of this book to anyone who wants to understand how stories work.

**An example quote**

"Event" means *change*. If the streets outside your window are dry, but after a nap you see they're wet, you assume an event has taken place, called rain. The world's changed from dry to wet. You cannot, however, build a film out of nothing but changes in weather—although there are those who have tried. *Story Events* are meaningful, not trivial. To make change meaningful it must, to begin with, happen to a character. If you see someone drenched in a downpour, this has somewhat more meaning than a damp street. . . .



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## Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence

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Author Roger Schank, cognitive scientist

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Audience General public

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Style Clear; authoritative yet accessible

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Length 254 pages

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Citation Schank, R. 1995. *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

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### **Why you might want to read it**

This is a wide-ranging introduction to stories from the consistent point of view of cognitive function. If this were the only book you ever planned to read about stories I would *not* recommend it, because the cognitive-science slant is strong and limiting. But if you read it along with books that consider story as form and phenomenon, Schank's book has much to tell you about the way people think about stories.

### **An example quote**

When people learn to speak, they learn what each word means because they have heard the stories connected to these words first. Children learn complex words because these words are used to describe situations that they have observed or taken part in. When children are told that they have been "inconsiderate," they have no idea what that word means. They only know what they have done. In order to learn that word, they must construct a story that describes their own actions to themselves. Then, when they hear the word again, they must compare the former story with the new story that is unfolding before them. So they learn the skeleton story that underlies the word "inconsiderate" by comparing the two versions. . . .

The understanding process, however, involves constantly misunderstanding one another to the extent that the words we use refer to skeleton stories that we don't quite agree upon. Consequently, my version of "inconsiderate" is probably different from yours.

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## Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions

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Author Gary Klein, decision making expert

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Audience General public

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Style Friendly; persuasive; anecdotal

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Length 348 pages

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Citation Klein, G. 1999. *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

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### **Why you might want to read it**

This book is not actually about stories; it is about how people make decisions. Gary Klein started a field of inquiry called *naturalistic decision making*, which examines how people make decisions in real life, as opposed to how they *ought* to make decisions, or how they make them in artificial laboratory conditions. In his research, Klein set out to find out how people in time-critical situations, such as firefighters in burning buildings, decide what to do next. He thought he would find out that expert decision makers draw up lists of options and compare them, as previous decision-making theory said they ought. But he found, to his surprise, that the most experienced experts essentially told themselves stories about previous experiences.

What got me excited about this book when I first read it was that Klein didn't go looking for stories: they came looking for him. While Schank's book starts with stories and looks for manifestations and applications, Klein's book comes from the opposite direction. Taken together, the two books give you a pretty good idea of how stories help us think.

### **An example quote**

Before we did this study, we believed that novices impulsively jumped at the first option they could think of, whereas experts carefully deliberated about the merits of different courses of action. Now it seemed that it was the experts who could generate a single course of action, while novices needed to compare different approaches.

## **Story, Performance, and Event**

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Author	Richard Bauman, folklorist
Audience	Folklorists
Style	Academic, but with many examples taken from the field that provide illumination
Length	144 pages
Citation	Bauman, R. 1986. <i>Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative</i> . Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press.

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### **Why you might want to read it**

Unlike the narratologists and screenwriters and cognitive scientists cited above, in this little book Bauman explores stories as embodied contextual aspects of “deeply situated human behavior.” Through the careful examination of several long, complex, and fascinating examples of situated story exchange, Bauman explores the lives of stories in human society. He dives deep into the paradoxical ambiguities of story exchange; he speaks of truth, lies, and expectation; he destroys any possible conception of stories as “disembodied superorganic stuff” by showing them living and breathing. There is a joy in the complexity of situated storytelling here that infects you with an eagerness to hear and work with

stories yourself. This is not a reference work about story as phenomenon; it is more like an exercise in listening to stories and making sense of the way they move around in people.

### **An example quote**

When we juxtapose the personal narrative and the tall tale, actually two dimensions of “lying” become apparent. First, the unusual but not impossible events of the former are transformed into the exaggeratedly implausible events of the latter. Thus tall tales are lies, insofar as what they report as having happened either did not happen or could not have happened. There is more, though. The tall tale presented above is told in the third person, which distances it somewhat from the narrator, and contrasts with the characteristic use of the first-person voice in the personal narrative.

## **Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences**

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Editors	Lewis and Sandra Hinchman, Professors of Government
Authors	Academics from a wide range of fields from political science to social science to psychology to philosophy to law
Audience	Academics of all kinds
Style	Varied, but mostly academic and complex
Length	328 pages
Citation	Hinchman, L. P. and Hinchman, S. K. (Eds.) 1997. <i>Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences</i> . Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

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### **Why you might want to read it**

This edited volume contains fifteen thought-provoking essays and papers about stories in use. Of all the books on my shelves, this one wins the sticky-note prize, with over 50 passages marked as noteworthy. Here you will find Stephen Crites’ seminal work “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” W. Lance Bennett’s exploration of storytelling in criminal trials, and chapters by Alasdair MacIntyre and Walter Fisher that summarize the major points of their important longer works.

I think one of the reasons this book is so valuable to the person studying stories is that none of the authors represented in this book study only stories. Each comes at narrative from a different oblique perspective.

### **Some example quotes**

From David Carr’s chapter “Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity”:

I am the subject of a life-story which is constantly being told and retold in the process of being lived. I am also the principal teller of this tale, and belong as well

to the audience to which it is told. The ethical-practical problem of self-identity and self-coherence may be seen as the problem of unifying these three roles.

From Edward Bruner's chapter "Ethnography as Narrative"):

Narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience, but there are always feelings and lived experiences not fully encompassed by the dominant story. Only after the new narrative becomes dominant is there a reexamination of the past, a rediscovery of old texts, and a recreation of the new heroes of liberation and resistance. The new story articulates what had been only dimly perceived, authenticates previous feelings, legitimizes new actions, and aligns individual consciousness with a larger social movement.

From Walter Fisher's chapter "Narration, Reason, and Community":

The point I would stress is that embedded in some local narratives are narratives with potential universal application. For instance, in the example MacIntyre cites of protesters arguing past one another, they also participate in a story about how dispute in a democratic society should be conducted. The basic plot line of this story is respect for the dignity and worth of all people. Acting in accord with this story would transform the dispute into dialogue. And, it should be noted, this story, regarding the dignity and worth of all people, like other metanarratives, began as a local narrative.

## Conversational Narrative: Storytelling in Everyday Talk

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Author	Neal Norrick, linguist
Audience	The book says it "aims to advance narrative theory" so I think the audience is mainly academic
Style	Authoritative yet personable, and absolutely full of examples
Length	245 pages
Citation	Norrick, N. 2000. <i>Conversational Narrative: Storytelling in Everyday Talk</i> . Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

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### Why you might want to read it

This is the best work I've found on stories as they are actually told, retold, and negotiated in conversation. Norrick pulls together all of the relevant research in the area and adds in his own extensive (and fascinating) research. The detailed examples provide plentiful insights into the way people tell stories. They also make you want to go out and record some conversations yourself so you can start looking deeply into them like Norrick does.

### An example quote

Further, tellability is tangled up with the notion of telling rights... After all, a potential teller must assure listeners not only that a story counts as tellable, but

also that she or he is the proper one to tell it. Telling rights depend in large part on knowledge of the events related. . . . A narrator with first-hand experience of an event will generally have a better claim to storytelling rights regarding the event than another participant who learned about the event only from the accounts of others. . . . Storytelling rights depend on many contextual factors beside the matter of who has knowledge of the events reported.

## Books on story work

### The Oral History Reader

Editors	Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, oral historians
Authors	Lots of oral historians
Audience	Students and oral history practitioners
Style	Thorough; dense; careful but readable
Length	496 pages
Citation	Perks, R., Thomson, A. (Eds.) 1998. <i>The Oral History Reader</i> . London: Routledge.

#### **Why you might want to read it**

Several well-respected textbooks on oral history exist, but this anthology of important writings (past and present) gives the most “bang for the buck” in terms of bringing together many voices on the topic. I said above that *Memory, Identity, Community* won the sticky-note prize on my bookshelf, but when I counted the notes in this volume, the total came out nearly identical.

There are a few important balances covered in this book. First, approaches are included from around the world, not just from one dominant culture. Second, theoretical concept and practical advice are counterposed. Third, a balance is struck between oral history as historical documentation, as participatory sensemaking, and as political movement.

The most important thing I think you will get from this book (and possibly more than from any other in this list) is *what it’s like* to collect stories from people for a reason.

#### **Some example quotes**

From Alessandro Portelli’s chapter “What makes oral history different”:

The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no ‘false’ oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility . . . the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.

From Hugo Slim’s and Paul Thompson’s chapter “Ways of listening”:

... the interview form has a tendency to put unnatural pressure on people to find ready answers, to be concise and to summarise a variety of complex experiences and intricate knowledge. It may also mean that researchers and interviewers unwittingly violate local communication norms relating to turn-taking, the order of topics for discussion or various rituals attached to storytelling. In some societies, individual interviews are considered dangerously intimate encounters. In others, the recounting of group history can be a sacred ritual and certain people must be considered before others. Sometimes a number of clearly prescribed topics should be used to start proceedings, while other topics may be taboo, or should not be introduced until a particular level of intimacy and trust has been achieved.

From Shaun Nethercott’s and Neil Leighton’s chapter “Out of the archives and onto the stage”:

From these same voices we learned that the strike was not a monolith. It was hated and loved, endured and created, exciting and painful, foolish and wise. It was the strategic manoeuvrings of the leaders, the manipulation and counter-manipulation of the press, the boredom of those who stayed in the plant, the endless drudgery of those who ran the strike kitchen and rounded up picket lines. It was young wives with little kids wondering how they were going to eat with no money coming in. It was blacks joining the union despite the protests of some whites. It was women using blackjacks and breaking windows, defying the police. It was unlooked-for victory, and crashing defeat. It was all those things and then some. It just depended on where you happened to be.

**Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope**

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Editors	Gerald Monk, John Winslade, Kathie Crocket and David Epston, all family and community therapists
Authors	Generally more of the same
Audience	Mainly family and community therapists looking for help adding narrative methods to their practices
Style	Friendly; full of examples; practical
Length	352 pages
Citation	Monk, G. et al. 1997. (Eds.) <i>Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope</i> . San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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**Why you might want to read it**

In the introduction to *Narrative Therapy in Practice*, the editors describes its topic as “the narrative approach to therapy.” This tells you that the book is centered not in narrative but in therapy (it could have said “the therapeutic use of narrative”). You may not be all

that interested in becoming a therapist who uses narrative; but put that aside. This book has much to teach you, not about stories, but about dealing with *people telling stories*, and people not knowing they are allowed to tell stories, and people not wanting to tell stories, and people not knowing what their stories mean, and people wanting *you* to tell their stories for them. I am no therapist, but I found in this book several almost uncanny parallels with my own experiences in helping people tell their stories.

For example, the authors explore power relationships that develop in interview settings, where people attempt to perform for whatever authority they think the interviewer represents. They talk about the importance of careful wording of questions to control the messages contained therein (empowerment, not belittlement; hope, not helplessness). They talk about the paradoxical nature of participation: how it liberates but can be difficult to achieve in people long accustomed to being prodded for information. So while this book won't tell you all that much about stories *per se*, it will definitely help you improve your skills at helping people work with their own stories.

**An example quote**

Curiosity can be seen as one safeguard against the use of counselor expertise to steer the client in the direction that the counselor deems appropriate. . . . Genuine curiosity opens space for the client and the counselor to observe what is taking place in greater breadth and depth. It is a specific kind of curiosity giving rise to questions that highlight new possibilities or directions for the client to consider. . . . An attitude of curiosity allows the counselor to live with confusion and ambiguity and to avoid moving too quickly to a therapeutic fix. . . . [In our therapist training] We have found that people need practice in being curious. Some people find this approach natural to them, whereas others feel initially very uncomfortable. We give participants in our workshops plenty of practice in being respectfully curious and persistent.

**Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences**

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Author	Catherine Kohler Reissman, sociologist
Audience	Sociologists and college students
Style	Very readable actually, probably because of the many detailed examples
Length	264 pages
Citation	Kohler Reissman, C. 2007. <i>Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences</i> . Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

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**Why you might want to read it**

As you may have noticed, I have an irrational bias when it comes to narrative inquiry. I own several books on the subject, but they are the abject losers in the sticky-note contest, not a single one of them well-marked, well-thumbed, or even thumbed. They are, however, the winners in the times-thrown-down-in-disgust contest. I hate it when narrative analysts call

people “informants.” I hate it when they consider themselves more competent to interpret people’s stories than the people themselves. I hate it when storytellers are never given the chance to see or talk about or think about the stories they tell.

However, having said that, it is impossible to deny the fact that narrative analysts have developed some very useful ways of looking at the stories people tell in great detail. There is no doubt that *including* these methods in a participatory practice can be enabling to everyone involved. So if you want to do participatory narrative inquiry, it will definitely help your practice to read a book on *extractive* narrative inquiry, even if you end up throwing it down a few times in the process.

I chose this particular book to represent the field of narrative analysis for a few reasons.

1. The writing is perfectly readable for the non-academic. It is based on a lecture course, so it has been time-tested.
2. The quantity and variety of examples described, based on real research projects, is commendable. Very little in this book speaks in the abstract. In fact, you could say it’s a book of stories about working with stories.
3. Kohler Reissman covers four ways of working with stories (thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic/performance analysis, and visual narrative analysis) that all lend themselves to useful inclusion in participatory work.
4. Kohler Reissman’s tone is much less arch than some of the other books I’ve read on narrative analysis. Even though she does call people “informants” she does so with more respect than I find in some other places. If you take care to keep an open mind, you should find these methods useful in your own PNI work, as means of supporting collective sensemaking around stories and storytelling.

### **An example quote**

Stories don’t fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost “self”); they are composed and received in contexts—interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive—to name a few. Stories are social artifacts, telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or group. How do these contexts enter into storytelling? How is a story coproduced in a complex choreography—in spaces between teller and listener, speaker and setting, text and reader, and history and culture? Dialogic/performance analysis attempts to deal with these questions. . . . As a kind of hybrid form, the approach pushes the boundaries of what is and is not included in narrative analysis.



## Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research

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Authors	John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, researchers (and researchers of research)
Audience	College students and research practitioners
Style	Methodical; well-organized; practical; perhaps a bit dry, but enabling nonetheless
Length	488 pages
Citation	Creswell, J. W. and Plano Clark, V. L. 2011. <i>Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research</i> . Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

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### ***Why you might want to read it***

If you do not plan on including narrative catalysis in your PNI practice, this book will probably be overly detailed for your needs, and you can just look up “mixed methods research” on the internet to get a quick idea of the topic. However, if you do want to add the depth catalysis brings to sensemaking, this book will help you understand why and how a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches gives catalysis its power to support sensemaking.

The highlight of the book is a typology of approaches to mixing qualitative and quantitative data in research designs, including a detailed example of a study of each type. I spent a long time trying to figure out where narrative catalysis fits in Creswell and Plano Clark’s typology of mixed methods approaches, and I never arrived at a satisfactory answer.

- Sometimes I think PNI best fits the “convergent parallel” approach, where “the researcher uses concurrent timing to implement the quantitative and qualitative strands during the same phase of the research process, prioritizes the methods equally, and keeps the strands independent during analysis and then mixes the results during the overall interpretation.” That sounds *almost* right, but it doesn’t adequately represent the tacking-back-and-forth nature of the use of both “strands” of information during catalysis. The two strands are most definitely not kept “independent during analysis,” but neither are they entirely intermingled either.
- Another intriguing possibility is the “embedded” research design, in which one strand dominates the research, obviously in this case the qualitative strand, being the stories themselves. You could argue that the stories in any PNI project dominate questions asked about them and patterns in the answers to those questions.
- However, the “transformative” design is also appealing: there the way in which qualitative and quantitative data come together are not determined by a simple rule of mixing but by the role of a “theoretical perspective” that “shapes” the approach. I take this statement to mean that the researcher combines the two strands in whatever way best fits the goals and principles of the research. So a transformative design may be the best

categorization of narrative catalysis. It blends qualitative and quantitative data in a way that best supports the creation of thought-provoking materials to support sensemaking.

Transformative mixed-methods research is a pigeonhole I can live in; but if you want to explore this topic, why not read the book and see what sort of mixing *you* want to use?

**An example quote**

One might argue that quantitative research is weak in understanding the context or setting in which people talk. Also, the voices of participants are not directly heard in quantitative research. Further, quantitative researchers are in the background, and their own personal biases and interpretation are seldom discussed. Qualitative research makes up for these weaknesses. On the other hand, qualitative research is seen as deficient because of the personal interpretations made by the researcher, the ensuing bias created by this, and the difficulty in generalizing findings to a large group because of the limited number of persons studied. Quantitative research, it is argued, does not have these weaknesses. Thus, the combination of strengths of one approach makes up for the weaknesses of the other approach.

**The Applied Theatre Reader**

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Editors	Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, experts in “theatre for development”
Authors	Artists, dramatists, teachers, activists, and researchers
Audience	Primarily practitioners of applied theatre in community settings
Style	Varied, from theoretical to practical to personal
Length	400 pages
Citation	Prentki, T. and Preston, S. (Eds.). 2008. <i>The Applied Theatre Reader</i> . London: Routledge.

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**Why you might want to read it**

Books that call themselves “readers” are supposed to bring together everything the editors think people need to read on a topic. This book does the job well. It includes portions of must-read works such as those by Augusto Boal (from “Theatre of the Oppressed”) and Paulo Friere (from “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”). It provides a broad overview of the theory and practice of applied theatre today, covering examples of projects in locations from health clinics to prisons to war zones. And the book addresses some of the thorniest issues in applied theatre, those of power and voice. For example, a chapter by Ananda Breed declares, “Participation may be used for liberation, but can also become a tool for imprisonment and persecution.” Food for thought!

You may or may not be interested in pursuing theatrical means in your story work to the extent that some of the authors in this book have. I can imagine that some of my readers might consider this book a little too far “out there” for their own story practice, especially if they come from a more scientific field such as qualitative research or narrative inquiry. But

don't let the puppets and masks put you off! All participatory work must address the same issues, whether the work entails high drama or quiet conversation. You will find much to support your story work here.

### **Some example quotes**

From Adrian Jackson's chapter "Provoking intervention":

The theatre must provoke, if the target is truly to move people beyond the normative conventions which keep the spectator passive, the citizen obedient. Of course if you simply provoke, you run the risk of meaningless outrage—the question is what you do with that provocation and the resulting release of energy. You also have to seduce, by the power of the narrative and the quality of the theatrical experience. Seduction and provocation in equal measure.

From bell hooks' chapter "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness":

Often this speech about the "Other" annihilates, erases: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority."

From Sarah Thornton's chapter "The complexity and challenge of participation":

In terms of local participation, the first, key challenge was overcoming the barriers of scepticism and entrenched suspicion. Having lived through a myriad of unsuccessful short-term interventions, having explained their stories to a host of professional consultants and been offered empty promises, having built relationships with agency representatives only to have staff change and find themselves back at square one, local people were unsurprisingly wary of taking the time and trouble to expose themselves again. . . . In the face of justifiable scepticism there was little to do but accept it, respect it, and maintain contact with those who articulated these feelings in the hope that over time (but probably not during the lifetime of this project) [we] could earn people's trust.

## **Do It Yourself Social Research**

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Author	Yoland Wadsworth, action researcher and consultant
Audience	Pretty much everybody
Style	Exceptionally accessible and clear
Length	128 pages
Citation	Wadsworth, Y. 2011. <i>Do It Yourself Social Research (Third Edition)</i> . Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

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### **Why you might want to read it**

If you have never done a “research project” in your life, Wadsworth’s book will ease your path. Every step of a participatory action research project is laid out with perfect clarity, using everyday words, concrete examples, and witty cartoons. If most of the other books in this list have left you feeling overwhelmed, this book will not. If *my* book overwhelms you, take *Do It Yourself Social Research* with you into a quiet corner, then come back and see if what I have written makes more sense to you.

If you have much experience conducting research, maybe *too* much, this book will serve not as a guide but as a reminder: of what participation means; of what people need to know about research so they can participate as co-researchers; of what you may not be telling people that they need to know; of the kinds of jargon and assumptions you might be using (perhaps without knowing it) that create barriers to participation; of how to demolish those barriers so everyone in your project can work together. If you feel you don’t need to be told how to do research “yourself,” read this book anyway. It will help you share “your” research with everyone involved and avoid hoarding knowledge or plans or goals.

### **An example quote**

Most often the researchers or commissioners of research tend to ‘study down’ (the anthropologist Laura Nader’s term, 1972)—that is, more powerful people or researchers on behalf of more powerful people go and study less powerful people (typically the recipients of professional human services). In most cases the effect (even if unintended) is to suppress or distort the voices of the less empowered and results in decisions being made for and about those people on imperfect input. . . . For these purposes you will need to attend carefully to how to convert ‘studying down’ to self-study, or studying ‘across’ and even ‘up’. You may even need a research design which carefully gives a separate voice to parties with different values, interests, degrees of power so they can be heard and responded to, and so on.

## **Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas & Activities**

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Author	Robert Chambers, development practitioner and scholar
Audience	Anyone who wants to work with people in participatory groups
Style	Disarming; funny; spare; enticing
Length	224 pages
Citation	Chambers, R. 2002. <i>Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas &amp; Activities</i> . London: Earthscan.

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### **Why you might want to read it**

In terms of experience helping people in groups do things together, Robert Chambers is a giant. His book doesn’t try to tell you everything he knows about facilitating participatory

groups, which is even better proof that he knows what he is doing. Instead, *Participatory Workshops* pokes and prods you into thinking for yourself with 21 lists of 21 items: questions, ideas, activities, mistakes. The tone throughout the book is provocative, witty, insightful, and motivating. But don't let the jokes fool you: there is much anyone can learn from this book. It is not the kind of book you sit down and read once; it is the kind you keep coming back to over and over, because each time you come back (after more experience working with groups) it will teach you new things. Like a multifaceted jewel, it reflects the light differently each time you look at it.

### **An example quote**

In the workshop process itself, sometimes things being wrong or going wrong makes the best things happen. You are forced to improvise. Instead of showing slides, you demonstrate on the floor. Instead of making a presentation, you facilitate something more participatory. Disasters and difficulties are anyway for enjoying. The scope they offer for learning is generous. Treasure them. The worse they are, the better stories they will be for later.

## **Grounding your understandings in stories**

To complete your PNI bookshelf, I suggest you add two more books:

1. a book of folk tales from a culture you know well
2. a book of folk tales from a culture you do *not* know well

By “from a culture you know well” I mean that includes at least a few stories you already knew from childhood. Avoid collections created around a theme, and try to find collections gathered from real people. Looking at my own bookshelf, some examples of “other culture” collections I have read are Russian, Slovak, Dutch, Irish, Indian, Pakistani, Arab, Egyptian, West African, Yoruba, Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, Hmong, Australian, Italian, Israeli, Jewish, Greek, Native North American, Native Latin American, Chilean. Books I consider to be “from my own culture” are “American” (Johnny Appleseed, Davy Crockett, Brer Rabbit, and the like), and European (Grimm and Andersen).

I'm not saying you should read *this* many books of folk tales, but the more you read the better you will understand stories. You can read all you like about theory, but folk tales are the horse's mouth.

If you want to go even further than these 16 books, take a look at the Bibliography appendix (in this book and in the other books in the *Working with Stories* series). If I found a book useful enough to reference it or quote from it, I must think it's worth reading. So you can consider these bibliographies expanded lists for further reading.



## Appendix B

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## Cover photo credits

Front: Meeting of NYA (National Youth Administration) girls with an instructor at the Good Shepherd Community Center. Chicago, Illinois. Photo released January 1942 by Russell Lee (1903-1986). "Free to use without restriction" at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-f98e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Back: Chicago, Illinois. Ida B. Wells Housing Project. A meeting of the Cub Scouts in the community center. "No known restrictions" at <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017828851>



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Ideas are like giant but kind whales that let us swim along with them, if we behave ourselves. This book is a portrait of an idea I have come to know and love. I have had the good luck to swim alongside “my” idea—I call it “my” idea not as a possession but as a relationship—in the company of many other people. I would like to thank them here. I do not have room to thank *all* of them here, because hundreds of people helped me write this book. But I will thank those who helped the most.

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## *Appendix D*

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# About the Author

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Cynthia F. Kurtz is a consultant, coach, author, researcher, and software developer. She has been helping communities and organizations work with their stories since 1999.

Originally an ethologist (BS, MA), Cynthia discovered the field of organizational narrative at IBM Research, where she conducted research projects to help IBM develop internal and client services centered around organizational stories. She built on that work at IBM's Institute for Knowledge Management and at the consulting firm Cognitive Edge before launching her independent consultancy in 2009.

At the time of writing, Cynthia has worked on something like 200 PNI projects (she has lost count) and has coached dozens of people through their first PNI projects.