

"And, But, Therefore:" the ABT Approach to Narrative

Edited version of original text by former LA DIA Fellow, Katrina Durbak

As part of the LA DIA fellowship program in science communication, William Nuttle presented a webinar focused on the topic of how to engage audiences, particularly when we must speak to people who are outside our specific technical discipline.

In preparation for the webinar, we watched a [TED talk](#) in which Randy Olson speaks about communication and effective storytelling techniques, using the ABT approach. The TED talk provided an easy-to-use framework that could appeal to diverse audiences and situations. We could use it as we prepare client presentations, make an elevator pitch, write reports, or even tell stories about the weekend adventure that turned into a fiasco.

The main concept of the ABT method is that information becomes much more compelling when there are connections drawn between different pieces of information, which build tension (and interest) and are ultimately resolved. This method is much more engaging than simply listing data, facts, and findings. Instead of solely listing all the main information, data, events, and conditions, communication efforts should be structured to create a clear narrative:

. this happened/this data exists .
AND
. this happened/this data exists.
BUT
. this other data/conditions complicates our understanding or caused a problem .
THEREFORE
. this analysis was performed / this resolution was reached to resolve the problem or understand the circumstances .

As you can see, the main connections between the different pieces of information are the words And, But, and Therefore, which form the acronym of the ABT method.

Bill's presentation focused on 4 points for sharing information:

1. Structure: create a narrative and tell stories
2. Sympathy: appeal to people's head, heart, and gut
3. Specific: avoid generalities, and provide specifics
4. Quickly get to the point of tension/conflict "the BUT something"

Some reflections on this technique:

1. Structure: The ABT method would be useful for communicating information both within the same field as well as across disciplines. However, how the conflict, the point of tension expressed in the "BUT " statement, resonates may differ with different audiences.

2. Sympathy: This point will differ largely based on the particular audience. Knowing your audience will help clarify how to appeal to them, and whether to focus on their “head, heart, or gut.” Which of these is most important to a group can help determine the tone, angle, or specific information used to explain or make a point.
3. Specifics: Specifics are useful to strengthening any point to any audience. However, what specifics are presented may change based on the audience. Furthermore, I think there is a distinction not only based on the type of audience but whether or not the audience will be directly impacted by the message communicated. If an audience is simply listening to facts or a series of impacts and interventions that do not affect them, their interest in specifics will be much different than those who will be directly affected.
4. Finally, the discussion of getting to the point quickly was rooted in the cultural context and pop-culture of the day, by looking at Hollywood action movies. I thought this raised an important larger point that we should include throughout our discussions about communication. What is communicated and how cannot be divorced from how people receive and interpret different messages in their current cultural, historic, and political context. Although we can learn from a variety of past experiences, any approach to communication must directly address the issue of context at multiple levels.