

Command Narrative Smart Guide



This guide will give you the big-picture basics for successful command narrative development and deployment, with references to material in the full RAND report so you can get the details you need.

The full report, *Developing, Disseminating, and Assessing Command Narrative*, is available at www.rand.org/t/RRA353-1.

What Is Command Narrative?¹

Command narrative is a story. It creates a framework that anchors all of the command's activities—everything from messaging to exercises. It covers operations, activities, and investments undertaken by the command to help synchronize all the command's words and deeds. It is a broad system of stories that unites themes, characters, and activities. Command narrative fosters a shared connection of who we are, what we do and why, and where and when we act.

Why a Command Narrative?²

Command narrative unifies and is supported by the various activities undertaken by and within the command: exercises and operations, messages and engagements, and should be known by everyone within the command. An effectively planned, executed, and supported command narrative can demonstrate resolve, bolstering the confidence of allies and partners, contributing to deterrence, and providing focus and purpose to staff and subordinate units.

See the main report at www.rand.org/t/RRA353-1: ¹ pp. 7–8, ² pp. 10–11, ³ pp. 11–13.

Command Narrative vs. Commander's Intent³

Command narrative is broader than the commander's intent for a single operation. Command narrative encompasses all operations, activities, and investments undertaken by the command and synchronizes all public communication undertaken by the command. Like commander's intent, command narrative needs to be easy for an audience to accurately understand, remember, and apply. It posits an end state, explains the role of military forces as characters in a story, and gives a narrative explanation of why the end state matters and how it will be brought about by the story's characters. Individual events can have their own narrative, which should nest within the broader command narrative.

NARRATIVE EXAMPLES Narratives are powerful because they are easily understood and resonate with the intended audience, offering an advantageous way to interpret words and deeds. For example:

No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy

When (then) MajGen James Mattis published a "Letter to All Hands" as I Marine Division returned to Iraq in 2006, he put the world on notice that when you dealt with the U.S. Marine Corps, you would get "No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy." Mattis was offering a command narrative: a story framework for interpreting the command's actions.

Be a Good Neighbor

During his tenure at SOUTHCOM, Admiral James G. Stravidiss stressed communication and narrative. SOUTHCOM's operations are framed around the idea that the United States is a good neighbor, and that good neighbors take care of each other, watch out for each other, etc.

I Feel Safer in Russia

Russia consistently puts out messaging in its propaganda campaigns promoting Russia as a safe, higher-quality-of-life alternative to an increasingly dangerous West.

Essential Components of Narrative⁴



Characters and Traits

Every story needs characters, including their accompanying traits, to help draw audiences in. Audiences will not care about a story if the characters are not compelling.



Goals

What a character needs or wants to accomplish in a story constitutes a goal, which provides a purpose to the story.



Motives

Help the audience interpret the character and the story. Motives should align with the audience to make the story more appealing.



Details

Paint a picture and allow the audience to better imagine the story. Details about characters and their surroundings bring them to life. Communicators should work to include elements that speak to each of the five senses, which help audiences envision a story to its fullest potential.



Plot and Climax

Plot and climax can be broken down into conflicts and problems, risks and dangers, or struggles. Audiences need this element to understand the experiences of the actor. Clearly linking the conflict or problems to the character, and to that character's goal, helps make a story worthwhile. Without overcoming a conflict of problem, audiences might see a story as pointless.

Narrative Best Practices⁵

Strategy Use narrative as a strategy to inform, engage, model behavior, persuade, and provide comfort.

Communication Commanders have to make command narrative and communication a priority.

Assessment Commands need robust communication assessment capabilities.

Investment Commands have to invest time and energy in narrative development.

Close collaboration Communications need to be synchronized across all informational activities (even PAO), working together tightly and routinely.

Command Narrative Checklist

- Does the command put out annual communicator guidance to include narrative?
- Is command narrative development, dissemination, and assessment part of the theater campaign plan?
- Do communication synchronization working groups include standing reps from every staff function, and is there continuous coordination between informational functions, including PAO?
- Does the command, including junior members, know and understand the narrative?
- Is there a "keeper of the narrative" (J-5 or PAO) who is responsible to the commander?
- Is there data collection on narrative effects that are linked to campaign objectives?
- Is the J-2 doing target audience analysis and effects assessment to support narrative?

Developing a Narrative⁶

Development Process Steps	Activities
1. Set preliminary goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Backward plan and identify desired objectives• Select audience• Identify behavior or attitude to be changed
2. Understand environment, context, and audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct target audience analysis• Conduct audience segmentation to ensure a specific focus• Conduct media and social media monitoring• Understand the language and context of the environment• Leverage behavioral, cultural, and linguistic subject-matter experts (PA, PSYOP, Intel)
3. Build candidate narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build a narrative arc that works for the audience (not you):<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Articulate the conflict• Build the desire to resolve conflict• Make visible the actions to be taken• Walk the audience to a desired resolution• Ensure that narratives have emotional appeal
4. Review and refine proposed narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Murder board/red-team proposed narratives for weakness• Conduct external pilot testing

“Stories anchor our beliefs. If you have a story, the only thing that changes your mind is a better story.”

Daniel Taylor

The Healing Power of Stories, New York: Doubleday, 1996, p. 220

⁶ See the main report at www.rand.org/t/RRR353-1, pp. 45–48.



Quality Check

- Does your proposed narrative include all essential story elements?**
 - Is your narrative nested from top to bottom—from U.S. strategic down to local in-theater?**
 - Is your narrative in harmony with planned operations, and vice versa? (This avoids a say-do gap.)**
 - Does your narrative treat audiences as both audiences and recipients of any narrative?**
 - Is your narrative compelling/engaging enough to be disseminated by outside entities?**
 - Do you have a plan for collecting data and assessing effects?**
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This tool is available online at www.rand.org/t/TLA353-1.

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