

Changing The Narrative

A practical workbook for environmental
justice, territorial rights, climate and
nature advocates

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Introduction

Narratives shape how people make sense of the world, whose voices carry authority, whether problems get addressed, and which solutions feel either unthinkable or commonsense. This workbook was designed to help environmental advocates identify the narratives standing in the way of your work, build stronger counter-narratives, and coordinate with others across regions and issues—because narrative change is never a solo effort. Use it on your own, with your team, and then as a shared reference across a coalition with shared purpose.

The following sections move from understanding key concepts to identifying and reshaping narratives and then to connecting that work to systems change and collaboration. Use the exercises here as a starting point, and revisit them with colleagues and partners as your thinking and efforts develop over time.

I. Four Key Concepts, Related but Distinct

Narrative change work falls apart when we use “narrative,” “story,” “message,” and “frame” interchangeably. Here are a few of the distinctions:

Concept	Definition	Example
Story	A specific tale—particular people, places, and events, told in sequence.	A river community in the Amazon documents polluted fishing grounds after a mining spill.
Narrative	A recurring pattern across many stories—the template, not the telling.	<i>The Frontier</i> narrative: Land is empty until industry arrives to develop it.
Mindset	A widely shared, often-subconscious pattern of thinking that shapes how we view the world and process information. (Also sometimes referred to as cultural mindsets, because they reflect collective rather than individualized understanding.)	<i>Individualism</i> (the idea that outcomes are the result of personal choices, good and bad) or its alternative, <i>Contextualism</i> (the idea that outcomes are a reflection of environmental factors and surrounding conditions).
Framing	Specific choices in presentation, such as what to emphasize, how to explain, and what to leave unsaid.	Describing a controversy over a mining project as an economic issue rather than a sovereignty issue is a framing choice.

IS IT ACTUALLY A NARRATIVE?

Not every recurring pattern in public discourse is a narrative. A narrative has to have the features of a story: characters, setting, plot, point of view, and a moral (an evaluative judgment about what’s right or who’s responsible). If a pattern is just a repeated phrase or a shared value with no cast of characters or plot, it’s something else—for example, a talking point, an argument, or a value claim—but not a narrative. Those are still worth tracking, but they don’t respond to the same tools.

II. Name the Narrative You're Up Against

Dominant narratives are sometimes easier to feel than to name. This exercise moves you from a gut sense of “something’s wrong with how this issue gets talked about” to a precise, workable target: an identifiable pattern that can be intercepted and changed. Work through the steps below from top to bottom. Each step builds on the last.

Step 1—Start with the mindset(s)

What are the underlying, often-unspoken assumptions that routinely show up when people (media, officials, funders) talk about your issue?

Mindset(s):

COMMON MINDSETS THAT SHAPE THINKING ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Cultural mindsets are deeply held and widely shared patterns in thinking. They reflect implicit and often subconscious assumptions and associations, rather than conscious opinions or carefully arrived-at convictions. Nevertheless, they shape how people collectively make sense of the world, and how they interpret new information.

When audiences are invited to think about issues related to climate, environment, or land use, certain dominant mindsets are easily activated. These include:

- **The Individualism mindset** leads people to focus on personal choices, household decision-making, and individual responsibility, rather than on sociopolitical context, structures, or systems.
- **The Binaries mindset** prompts a kind of “sorting” of topics and even people into diametrically opposed categories, for example good/bad, past/future, natural/human-made, us/them.
- **The Consumerism mindset** encourages people to see the environment as a marketplace, natural resources as tradable commodities, civic participants as mere consumers, and the most appropriate course of action in any given case as the one that rises to the top of a cost-benefit analysis.
- **The Determinism mindset** fosters a sense that, though we might desire to improve our circumstances or change the world, we are ultimately subject to large-scale processes playing out beyond our full comprehension and far beyond our control.

Step 2—Find the stories that activate it

Name a few specific stories—news articles, films, viral posts, official statements from institutions or government agencies—where this mindset is evident. (Remember that mindsets, unlike attitudes or opinions, are implicitly held and therefore expressed in multiple subtle ways rather than explicitly stated.)

Story #1:

Story #2:

Step 3—Name the dominant narrative

What's the pattern connecting stories under the current dominant narrative? (Describe in one sentence)

Step 4—Name the counter-narrative

What's the pattern you want to strengthen instead? (Describe in one sentence)

III. Map the Features of Your Counter-Narrative

A narrative becomes usable once you've sketched it out feature by feature. Fill in both columns below for the dominant and counter-narrative you named above. If you get stuck, work through the columns in this order: point of view first, then characters, then plot—the rest tends to follow.

Feature	Dominant narrative	Your counter-narrative
Point of view (whose vantage point?)		
Characters (who are the recurring players?)		
Plot (what causes what?)		
Setting (where, and under what conditions?)		
Intended audience (who is this really speaking to?)		
Evaluative judgment (what's the moral— who's responsible, what should happen?)		

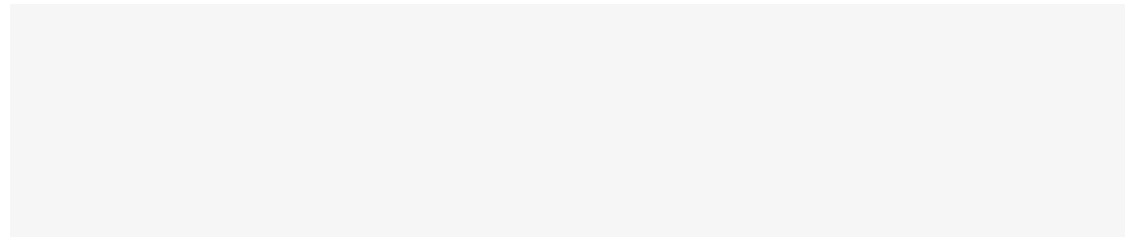
Example for Reference: A dominant “development vs. nature” narrative casts industry as forward-thinking and communities as obstacles to progress, typically set in a location where extractive benefits are accrued or profits are made. The counter-narrative—“community-led innovation”—casts the same community as the source of expertise, plays out at the site where natural resources originate, and carries a moral that environmental decisions belong to the people who bear the most direct consequences.

IV. From Narrative to Systems Change: Your Roadmap

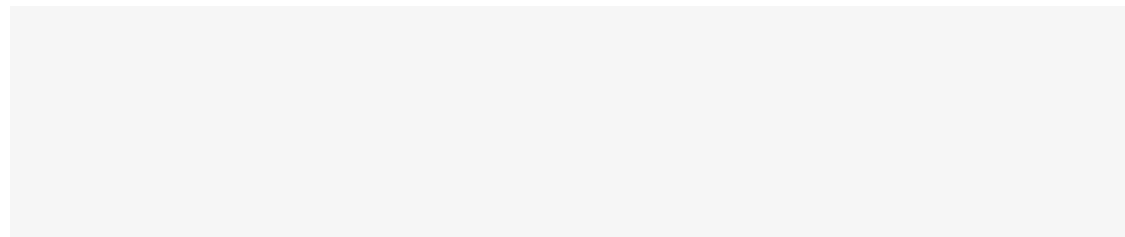
A new narrative is not the goal—it's a lever. Just like any strategic communications initiative identifies ultimate objectives, then uses operational mechanisms (like audience segmentation or influence mapping) to achieve them, narrative change work is a means to an end. Instead of influencing short- or medium-term outcomes, narrative change strategies exist to move mindsets, which in turn help create the conditions for policy, funding, or enforcement decisions that weren't possible before.

Now that you have identified the current dominant narrative standing in the way and the counter-narrative that would move things toward needed change, it's time to think through four essential questions about how process can yield the desired impact.

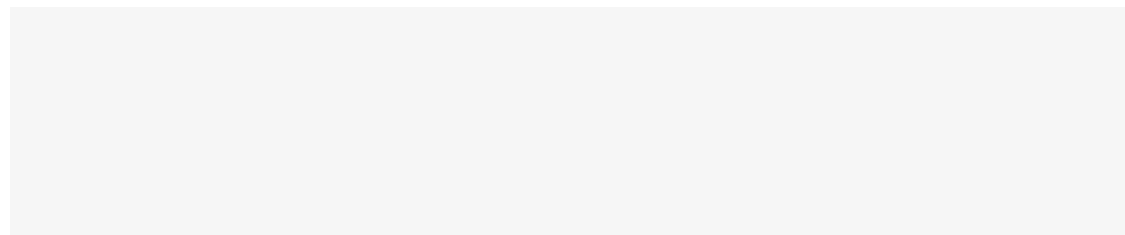
What actually needs to change? Be concrete—a policy, an enforcement practice, a funding stream, a permitting norm, a power dynamic?



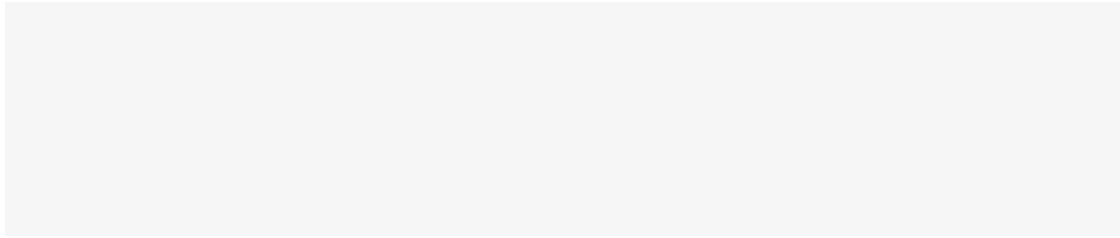
Who needs to hear it (policymakers, youth, urban residents?), who's credible enough to tell it (influencers, scientists, experts, educators?), and through which channels (local news, community meetings, film, litigation hearings, public testimony?)



What infrastructure is needed to sustain this work over years and decades, not just weeks or months? A backbone organization, shared research, a media partnership, ongoing training, dedicated funding?



How will you know it's working? Set indicators before you start (see examples in the table in Section VI).



Narrative change is one strategy among several. It runs alongside policy advocacy, grassroots organizing, and cultural strategy. The strongest campaigns use the same narrative across all three: the policy ask, the organizing message, and the film or op-ed, all drawing from one consistent story pattern.

V. Coordinating with Others (Collaboration Is Key!)

Narrative change is inherently collective: A narrative becomes powerful only when many storytellers, across many formats, repeat it over years. If you're working through this workbook on your own, treat this as step one in a collaborative process, not the whole job. Here are some questions to answer as you move from solo thinking to shared infrastructure:

Who else is already working on this narrative

- Which organizations in your region or issue area are telling stories that reinforce the same counter-narrative you named above (even if they've never used the word "narrative")?
- Is there a natural backbone or hub organization already coordinating messaging, research, or media relationships on this issue?

What to share with peers

- Your named narrative and counter-narrative (sections II and III above). Invite others to test whether it matches their experience.
- Stories and evidence that support the counter-narrative, especially ones with strong, specific, on-the-ground detail.
- Your strategic thinking, not just your finished content. A shared narrative only holds together if everyone is working from the same template.
- Wins and setbacks—including what landed with an audience, what didn't, and why.

What to ask

- Do your identified dominant/counter-narratives match what others are seeing? Where do they diverge, and how might they be aligned? (Remember that what's important is not the exact wording of the description or name, but the underlying concepts and defining features of the narrative.)
- Has anyone tested messaging or narrative framing with the audiences you're trying to reach? What did they learn? What pressing questions remain?
- Who has existing relationships with messengers you need—journalists, documentarians, community leaders, policymakers?
- What narrative infrastructure already exists that you could plug into, rather than duplicate—shared research, a joint communications calendar, a coalition backbone?

A few starting moves

- Start where you are: Bring your named narrative and counter-narrative to one existing coalition call or partner meeting and ask whether they recognize the pattern.
- Offer something concrete in the first conversation—a story, a data point, a contact—beyond just a partnership request.
- Set a recurring (even quarterly) check-in with two or three colleagues or peer organizations to compare notes on narrative.
- To build toward something bigger, look for the roles a mature narrative effort needs: a backbone/hub organization, a research partner tracking mindsets over time, storytellers with credibility in the community, and media or cultural partners willing to carry the narrative into new formats. Initiate conversations.

VI. Where Are You in the Process?

Narrative change requires persistence, as well as continual reevaluation and adaptation along the way. Recognizing your stage at a given point helps you set the right expectations going forward and be strategic in planning your next move.

Emergent: <i>Narrative Product</i>	Developing: <i>Narrative Presence</i>	Advanced: <i>Narrative Power</i>	Achieved: <i>Narrative Dominance</i>
Your counter-narrative exists in at least one observable form (a report, a campaign, a set of talking points), but the dominant narrative still rules public discourse.	The counter-narrative is showing up regularly, across multiple storytellers and formats, and it's landing emotionally with audiences.	The counter-narrative is influential enough to shift decisions—funding flows, permitting outcomes, legislative language.	The counter-narrative has become the dominant one; it now shapes mindsets and systems as a matter of course.
Ways to assess <i>Narrative outputs.</i> What has been created? <i>Narrative form.</i> Do outputs use narrative/story form? <i>Narrative fidelity.</i> How closely do outputs follow the desired narrative?	Ways to assess <i>Narrative reach.</i> How many impressions? <i>Narrative targets.</i> Is the narrative reaching strategically prioritized audiences? <i>Narrative reception.</i> How do audiences respond to the narrative?	Ways to assess <i>Narrative salience.</i> Is the narrative in influential settings/channels? <i>Narrative spread.</i> Has it been picked up organically by others? <i>Narrative impact.</i> Has the narrative sparked changes in mindsets, policies, practices, or resource flows?	Ways to assess <i>Narrative dominance.</i> How thoroughly has the counter-narrative replaced or marginalized the previously dominant narrative? <i>Narrative impacts.</i> How closely do systems match the aspirations of the counter-narrative?

Check-in:

Which stage is your narrative change work in right now, and how do you know?

What would it take to move one stage forward?

As you track progress, look for movement across four kinds of evidence: **new content** being created (stories, frames, campaigns); **uptake by messengers** you don't control (media, artists, influencers repeating your narrative unprompted); **shifts in mindsets** or thinking (including opinion or attitude data); and **changes in practice or policy** (norms, legislation, funding decisions).

VII. Ready, Set, Go!

Use the following questions to *craft an elevator speech* you can start using right away to engage peers and colleagues in the work of narrative change, initiate exploratory chats with potential partners, and find entry points into broader coalition conversations. Adapt the specific wording as needed for various audiences and contexts.

The issue or systemic change I'm working on:

Hint: Keep this short and sweet. Consider a sentence like, "I'm working to ensure that ..." or "I want to live in a world where ..."

Cultural mindsets at play:

Hint: See the list of common mindsets in Section II.

The dominant narrative we're up against:

Hint: Be ready with an example of a common story that unhelpfully reinforces the dominant narrative, in case the elevator conversation continues longer than planned.

The counter-narrative folks like me are working to advance:

Hint: Have a compelling story that reinforces the counter-narrative ready too.

Here's why it matters (the positive social change we're seeking):

Hint: Describe not only how shifting the narrative will increase public understanding and build support for needed policies and other solutions, but how those solutions will ultimately improve people's lives.

Ways to join us:

Hint: Don't miss the opportunity to foster a new partnership and expand the network of advocates working to advance narrative change.

Who else should we reach out to?

***Hint:** Make sure to come away from each conversation with an action step or two.*

Now you're ready to get started!

One person or organization I will share this elevator speech with in the next two weeks:

VIII. Resources & Staying Connected

For deeper grounding on the concepts referred to in this workbook, see:

Guiding Narrative Change: Considerations for the Philanthropic Field—<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/guiding-narrative-change-considerations-for-the-philanthropic-field/>

Narrative Change: How Do We Know If It's Working?—<https://frameworksuk.org/resources/narrative-change-how-do-we-know-if-its-working/>

Moving Mindsets—<https://frameworksuk.org/movingmindsets/>

Culture Change Project—<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/what-we-do/key-initiatives/culturechangeproject/>

The Features of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts—<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/the-features-of-narratives-a-model-of-narrative-form-for-social-change-efforts/>

Case Study: Narrative Change in the Climate Justice Movement—<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/impact-stories/case-study-narrative-change-in-the-climate-justice-movement/>

How Do Other Fields Think About Narrative? Lessons for Narrative Change Practitioners—<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/how-do-other-fields-think-about-narrative-lessons-for-narrative-change-practitioners/>

Talking About Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories—<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/talking-about-poverty-narratives-counter-narratives-and-telling-effective-stories/>

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