# THE RIGHT TO TELL YOUR OWN STORY

A field guide to narrative identity, reputation, evidence, and ethical narrative engineering.

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The aim is not to control what everyone thinks about you. It is to help you speak accurately, preserve complexity, correct errors, and leave other people free to speak for themselves.

## Before we begin

A narrative is a selective, meaningful account of events: what happened, what it meant, and what may follow. Selection is unavoidable. Distortion is not. A narrative can be generous and true, or confident and false. It can clarify a life or reduce a person to a single episode.

This guide is about **human-scale narratives**: the stories individuals, families, workplaces, peers and communities tell about people. It is not a playbook for television, election, or mass-media persuasion.

**Evidence boundary:** “Narrative identity” is a research term. “Ethical narrative engineering,” as used here, is this guide’s practical design framework, not an established clinical method. Exercises support reflection; they are not therapy, diagnosis or legal advice.

## The short map

### Event

What can be observed or documented?

### Account

What do we say happened?

### Interpretation

What meaning or motive do we attach?

### Circulation

Who repeats the account and with what authority?

### Identity

How does the account change what a person believes or is believed to be?

### Revision

What new evidence or perspective should change the story?

## 01 / What makes a narrative?

A bare chronology lists events. A narrative connects them. “I left a job” is a fact claim; “I left because I cannot commit” is an interpretation. “I left to investigate a different form of work” is another interpretation. None becomes true merely because it is repeated confidently.

Narratives often contain a protagonist, a setting, a sequence, a conflict, causes and consequences, a moral evaluation, and a possible next chapter. These elements can be useful; they can also conceal uncertainty.

- Write one event without interpretation.
- Write the interpretation you usually attach to it.
- Name two other plausible interpretations.
- What evidence would distinguish them?

## 02 / Four different stories

### The private story

The story you tell yourself to make your experiences coherent. It can change, and it need not be shared.

### The interpersonal story

Descriptions produced in families, friendships, teams and relationships. These can be negotiated but are not wholly under one person’s control.

### The institutional story

Records, credentials, appraisals, biographies, decisions and policies. Their reach and consequences vary.

### The public trace

Your published work, online footprint and visible conduct. It is partial evidence, not a complete psychological portrait.

## 03 / How narratives acquire power

Stories travel through repetition, status, group belonging, selective evidence, and the ease of a simple explanation. The person who speaks first or speaks most confidently may shape a conversation, but neither volume nor popularity proves accuracy.

Power is also contextual. A manager may shape a workplace account; a family member may shape a domestic one; a search result may influence a stranger. None possesses total authorship of a person.

- Who is the audience for this story?
- Which details are missing?
- What can the speaker actually know?
- How might status or repetition change how believable it seems?

## 04 / Evidence, inference, invention

**Observed:** “The proposal was submitted on Tuesday.” **Reported:** “A colleague said it was rushed.” **Inferred:** “They may have been under pressure.” **Invented:** “They sabotaged it because they feared competition.” The last statement asserts a motive without adequate evidence.

Treat evidence as a floor, not a decorative citation. Date your claims. Preserve uncertainty. Attribute reports. Avoid turning one event into a permanent personality trait.

- Which sentence can I prove?
- Which sentence is a reasonable but uncertain inference?
- Which sentence should I remove or label as speculation?

## 05 / The ethical boundary

Narrative engineering becomes unethical when it relies on deception, coercion, selective humiliation, privacy violations, or invented motives. A person’s right to tell their own story is not a right to dictate everyone else’s account.

### Truthfulness

Use accurate claims; correct known errors.

### Proportionality

Do not convert a small event into a total verdict on a person.

### Consent and privacy

Do not publicise intimate details simply because they strengthen a story.

### Agency

Let people disagree, respond, remain private or change.

### Revisability

Make correction easier than doubling down.

### Non-retaliation

Do not use a public narrative as a punishment mechanism.

## 06 / The ethical narrative engineering loop

### 01 / Observe

Separate the event from the story about the event.

### 02 / Verify

Check dates, records, context and attribution.

### 03 / Interpret provisionally

Offer meaning without pretending to read minds.

### 04 / Compose

Choose the most useful truthful frame for a specific audience.

### 05 / Invite correction

Provide a path for additions, disagreement and revision.

### 06 / Review consequences

Ask whom the account protects, helps, excludes or harms.

*The loop is a design aid, not a scientific scale or a guarantee of good outcomes.*

## 07 / The narrative audit

Choose a sentence you often hear about yourself, or one you often say about someone else. Do not start with your most painful relationship; start somewhere manageable.

- ■ Exact statement (avoid paraphrasing it into something stronger):
- ■ Where did it come from? Direct observation, document, report, or assumption?
- ■ What specific events support it?
- ■ Which counterexamples complicate it?
- ■ What would a fairer, narrower sentence say?
- ■ Who might be affected if I publish or repeat it?

## 08 / Reclaiming authorship without controlling others

You can state facts, publish work, explain decisions, correct public errors, and set boundaries around participation. You cannot demand that every observer reach your preferred interpretation. Self-authorship is the capacity to contribute your own evidence and meaning, not monopoly over your reputation.

A useful formula: **What happened + what I can verify + what I learned + what remains open.** It preserves agency without pretending to know the ending.

- Write a 120-word account of one transition in your life.
- Underline the factual statements.
- Circle every claim about another person's motives.
- Replace absolute identity labels with specific behaviour or context.
- Add one honest uncertainty and one invitation to revise.

## 09 / Difficult conversations: scripts that leave room

### When someone makes a sweeping claim

"I understand that is your impression. Could we separate the specific events from the conclusion about who I am?"

### When a claim is partly accurate

"That part is fair. The broader characterisation leaves out some relevant context."

### When you do not want to participate

"I do not want to discuss the private details. I can clarify the factual point, but I am keeping the rest private."

### When you realise you were unfair

"I presented an interpretation as a fact. I was wrong to do that. Here is the narrower version I can support."

## 10 / Making a public record

A public website, portfolio, publication or project archive can let people inspect your work directly. It cannot establish your whole character. Prefer dated artefacts, clear authorship, visible limitations, accessible descriptions, and working links over inflated superlatives. Make it easy to know what you did, what collaborators did, and what remains unfinished.

- Can a newcomer see three representative pieces in two clicks?
- Are dates, sources and collaborators visible?
- Do you distinguish a prototype from a validated result?
- Can people contact you or request corrections without surrendering privacy?

## 11 / When not to tell the story

Sometimes the ethical choice is to leave a story untold: where consent is absent, a person is vulnerable, allegations are unverified, disclosure would create needless harm, or publication mainly serves retaliation. Silence can be protective without being an admission. Documenting events privately may be wiser than posting them.

If a matter concerns abuse, threats, discrimination, defamation or serious workplace harm, consider qualified professional or legal support rather than treating this workbook as a substitute.

## 12 / A seven-day low-pressure laboratory

### Day 1

Notice one narrative label.

### Day 2

Write its underlying events.

### Day 3

Find a fair counterexample.

### Day 4

Try a more precise description.

### Day 5

Ask what should remain private.

### Day 6

Create a small truthful artefact: a paragraph, note or portfolio entry.

### Day 7

Review what changed, including what did not.

*There is no score, streak, or obligation to complete seven days consecutively. A good narrative can include rest, failure, doubt and ordinary life.*

## 13 / Case studies (fictional composites)

### The “unreliable” colleague

Someone misses two deadlines, then is called “unreliable.” Ethical framing: document the missed deadlines, explore circumstances, agree on future expectations, and avoid treating two data points as an entire identity.

### The “unsuccessful” creator

A creator publishes useful free material but earns little revenue. Ethical framing: distinguish educational value, reach, commercial success, and personal satisfaction rather than collapsing all value into revenue.

### The “difficult” family member

One member contests a dominant family account. Ethical framing: seek specific examples and multiple perspectives, protect privacy, and avoid forcing consensus on intimate history.

## 14 / The one-page narrative charter

I will tell stories that are grounded in what can be known. I will distinguish observation, memory, report, inference and imagination. I will describe behaviour before assigning character. I will honour privacy, context and the right of response. I will correct what I get wrong. I will not confuse social approval with truth. I will keep room for other people to tell their stories, and for all of us to change.

**My version (write your own):**

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## Research notes & further reading

McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative Identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 22*(3). doi:10.1177/0963721413475622.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). The Psychology of Life Stories. *Review of General Psychology, 5*(2), 100-122. doi:10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100.

McAdams, D. P. (2006). The Problem of Narrative Coherence. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 19*(2), 109-125. doi:10.1080/10720530500508720.

*The research literature describes narrative identity and associations with adaptation; it does not establish that a single journaling technique will fix reputational conflict. The design principles and exercises in this guide are an original educational synthesis, not validated intervention protocols.*

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Read the companion essay: https://sahiltayal.com/narratives/

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