



What Is A Master Narrative?

These are formulas or “scripts” that we often use when we tell stories. Master narratives embody our expectations about how things work. Typically, they're based on actual experience. However, sometimes we grow so accepting of a master narrative that we can't see other possibilities for stories.

Our adherence to a master narrative dictates how we frame stories, whom we interview, the questions we ask and ultimately the work we produce, which typically reinforces our belief in the master narrative.

One example of a master narrative is the conflict story. Many public stories are covered based on the assumption that conflict between groups of people who hold entrenched views is the meat of the story. For instance:

- Developers vs. environmentalists
- Charter school supporters vs. the teacher's union
- Big business vs. “the little guy”
- Urban vs. rural
- Federal vs. state
- Republicans vs. Democrats

Common Master Narratives

Conflict Narratives

The focus is on conflict at the expense of other key issues, even when conflict is minor.

Faux Balance

Balance is defined almost entirely as “two sides” rather than giving relative weight to many different perspectives on issues. Extreme voices are given attention at the expense of other points of view.

Caricatures

People are assigned predictable roles as if they are stage actors: good guy vs. bad guy; money-loving developers vs. tree-hugging environmentalists, etc.

“Gotcha”

A premium is placed on tripping up elected officials and prominent community leaders. The goal of coverage appears to be proving visible public leaders don't care about the public.

Special attention is given to moments when people contradict themselves even when these contradictions are minor or thoughtful.

Event-Driven Coverage

Surface-level activities and events are featured prominently while more meaningful issues that lie below the surface are given short shrift.

Feel-Good News

“Positive news” translates mostly to fluff and feel-good stories. Progress is ignored unless it can be wrapped up neatly.

Now consider your journalism:

1. Look over some of your recent news coverage and ask yourself:
2. To what extent does your journalism rely too heavily on any of the narratives described above?
3. What are alternative ways you could tell these stories?
4. How might you better reflect what is really going on with these issues?