



# A Deep Dive on Visual Thinking

Why our brains love to binge-watch  
and how you can take advantage

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## About Me

- ▷ Head of marketing at Vyond since April 2016
- ▷ 25 years of experience in marketing, specializing in visual communication & behavioral economics
- ▷ From Pittsburgh, PA and have lived in Seattle, San Diego, Atlanta, Melbourne, and San Francisco





**What we'll cover today**

- ▷ Why we binge
- ▷ Visual thinking principles
- ▷ Visual storytelling and narrative structure
- ▷ Employing storytelling tropes in your marketing videos



# Why We Binge



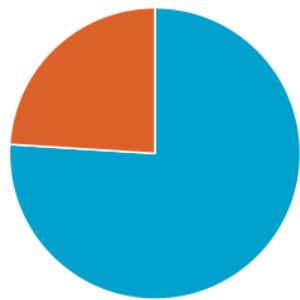
One of the reasons we turn to binge watching is to escape.

I like to think of this in terms of short vs. long. We spend large portions of our days going from one task to another or one social media post to another or one meeting to another – this is the short.

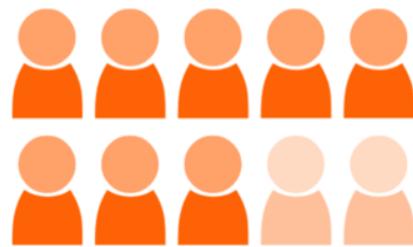
When we quickly move from one thing to another, we don't give our brains a chance to catch up and process what we've just done, watched, or read. This is why we can feel so fatigued after doing not much more than surfing social media.

So it's only natural that we seek out content experiences that make us feel more relaxed, like television programming, movies, or books. This is the long. This is the type of content that takes time to ingest and process – it gives our brains some space.

## How people feel about binge-watching



76% say it's a welcome refuge from  
their busy lives



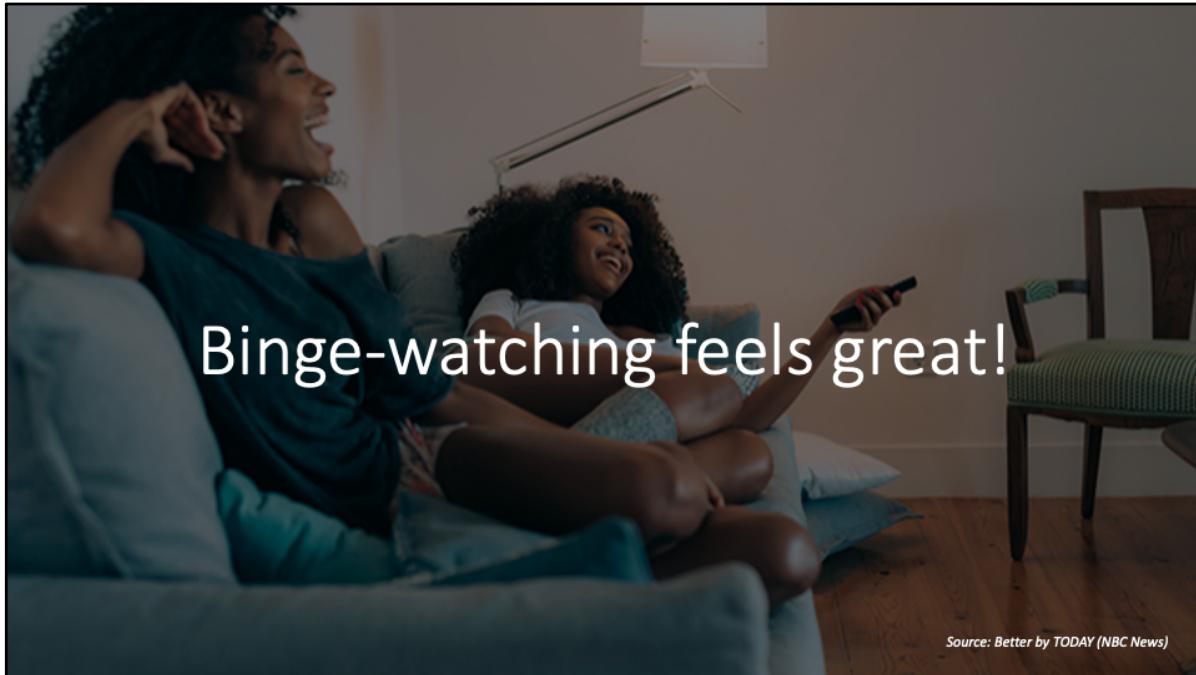
8 in 10 say it's more enjoyable than watching  
single episodes

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Source: Netflix

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Netflix sent cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken into the homes of TV streamers to learn about their viewing habits. McCracken discovered that 76 percent reported bingeing as a welcome refuge from their busy lives, and nearly 8 in 10 agreed that binge-watching a TV show was more enjoyable than watching single episodes. Sp. despite our hectic, digitally-driven lifestyles, McCracken concluded that we're actually craving the long narratives that today's best television series can provide.



You might think that it's the actual content that drives binge-watching, but it's more biological than that. According to clinical psychologist Dr. Renee Carr, it's due to the chemicals being released in our brain. She explains that when engaged in an activity that's enjoyable, such as binge watching, your brain produces dopamine. This chemical gives the body a natural, internal reward of pleasure that reinforces continued engagement in that activity. It is the brain's signal that communicates to the body, 'This feels good. You should keep doing this!' When binge watching your favorite show, your brain is continually producing dopamine, and your body experiences a drug-like high. You experience a pseudo-addiction to the show because you develop cravings for dopamine."



## We watch because of cognitive empathy

Source: Psychology Today

British psychologist Edward B. Titchener might have argued that we become glued to complex, emotionally-charged stories because of our ability to recognize the feelings of others. A newly identified phenomenon at the time, Titchener coined the term *empathy* in 1909. In addition to identifying others' discomfort or elation, "cognitive empathy" examines how humans can also adopt others' psychological perspectives, including those of fictional characters.

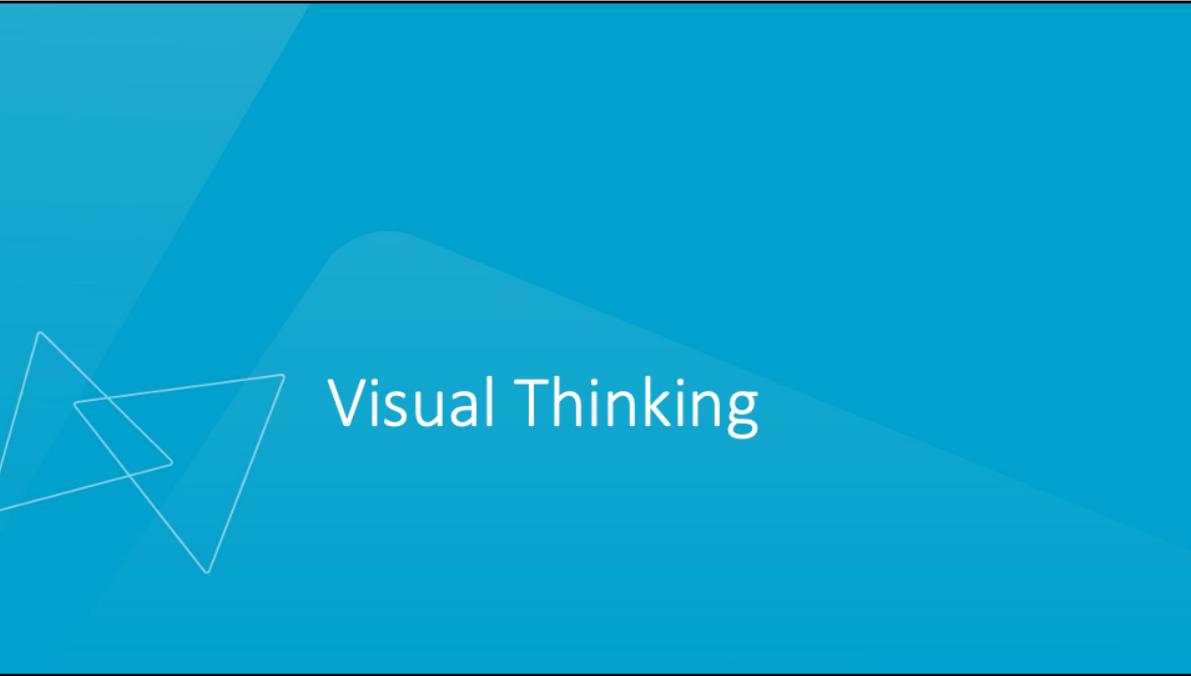
How many of us have felt so connected to a fictional character that we experience emotions far beyond what might be considered reasonable? I, for one, after having become personally invested in the mentor-slash-father figure relationship of Tony Stark to Peter Parker, cannot watch the end of *Avengers: Infinity War* without choking up. It's better now – when the movie first came out, I bawled big tears.



Many of you are too young to remember the show *Dallas*, whose cliffhanger of a season ending – the shooting of main character JR Ewing – is one of the most famous cliffhangers of all time. The entire country spent the summer of 1980 asking "Who shot JR?"

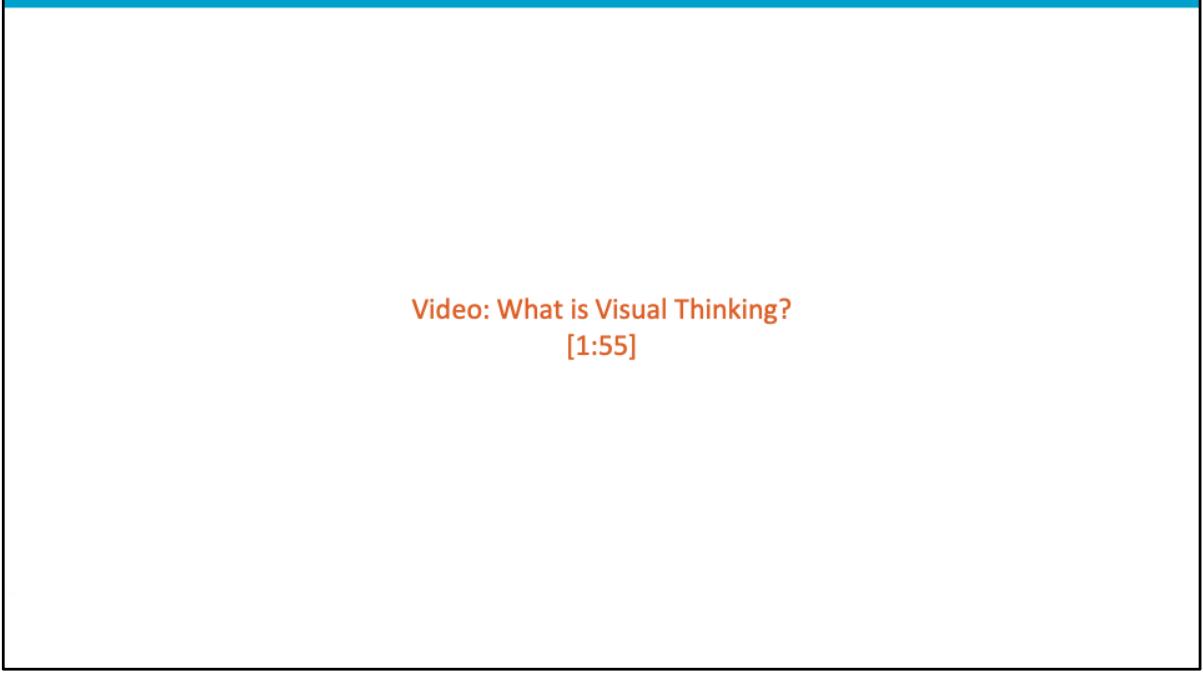
Social psychologist Arie Kruglanski coined the phrase "need for closure" in the 1990s, referring to a framework for decision making that aims to find an answer on a given topic that will alleviate confusion and ambiguity. In psychology, closure usually references a loss or termination of an event, like a relationship. In the world of content, we'll call it narrative closure. Basically, we have a driving need to know how things end.

This is why streaming services cue up the next episode or another piece of content they think you'll like as the credits start to roll on what you're currently watching. Without anything to distract you, like ads or a static screen, it's so much easier to just keep rolling. So in this instance, there's no need even for a cliffhanger (which we'll cover more of later in the presentation) – our drive to want to find out what happens or to finish something keeps us going.



# Visual Thinking

Now that we've covered a bit about what makes us binge-watch, let's go a little bit deeper on visual thinking. As marketers looking to create impactful visual content, it's important to understand how our brains process information and how this can help us make better videos.



**Video: What is Visual Thinking?**  
[1:55]



## Verbal vs. visual thinking



### Verbal thinking: logic

- ▷ We reduce what we see to labels
- ▷ We seek closure and only want to know "what it is"
- ▷ Once we have identified something, we are free to direct our attention and energy elsewhere
- ▷ This reduction fosters logical and precise reasoning

### Visual thinking: intuition

- ▷ Resisting labels and really looking at things allows us to see more
- ▷ Now open to new sensations, we gather more information
- ▷ We get an intuitive grasp of the information and can not only handle incredibly complex situations, but enjoy them

Ammer, Ralph (2018, Feb. 18). [Seeing vs. reading, the key to creativity](#) medium.com.

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Think about before technology like GPS and Google Maps existed. When we had to explain to someone how to get from point A to point B, we drew them a map. We used visual cues (like turn left at the blue house) because we knew that visual markers made more sense when someone is driving than having to read directions.

People learn better when extraneous words, pictures, and sounds are excluded rather than included.

Mayer, R. (2001). *Multimedia learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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According to psychologist Richard E. Mayer's [\*\*12 Principles of Multimedia Learning\*\*](#), "people learn better when extraneous words, pictures, and sounds are excluded rather than included. This is called the Coherence Principle. And although we're not necessarily talking about content marketing in a learning context, the core of this principle still applies – simplicity is key when designing visual communications.

Honestly, In all forms of communication, particularly business communication, it makes sense to eliminate clutter. From writing in a clear and concise manner to limiting the amount of text on a PowerPoint slide, we can have a greater affect on our audience by simplifying our communications.

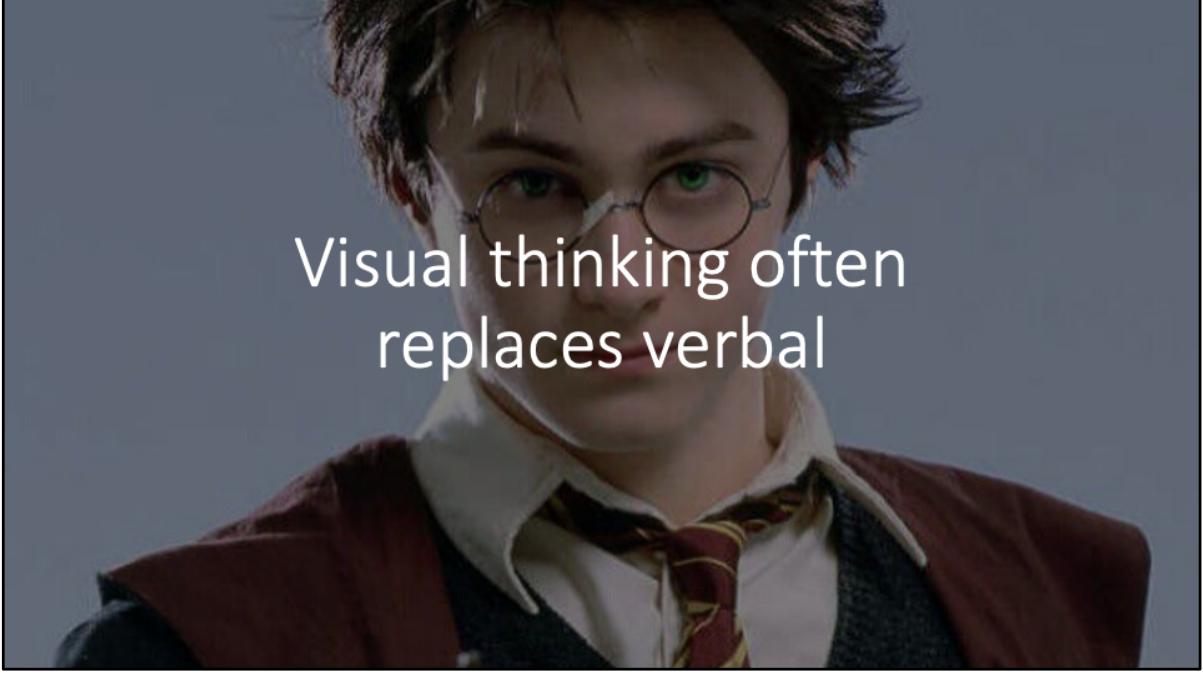
This is why I stress a visuals-first approach to video making – letting what's on the screen do the heavy lifting over heavy dialog or text.



You convey information by the way you arrange elements in relation to each other.

This information is understood immediately, if not consciously, by the viewer. This is great if the visual relationships are obvious and accurate, but if they're not, your audience is going to get confused. They'll have to examine the material carefully, repeatedly reviewing to make sure they understand.

For example, as delicious as it is to look at the phases of the moon presented as Oreos, the circular graphic makes more sense, because the relationship of the moon to the earth is not linear.

A close-up photograph of a young Harry Potter, played by Daniel Radcliffe. He is wearing his signature round glasses and a Gryffindor house tie. The image is framed by a thick black border.

Visual thinking often  
replaces verbal

We bring our own personal history, context, and imaginations to learning. And once we've seen something, it's very difficult to "un-see" it!



The basis of any serious binge-watch session is a great story. And for content marketing, there's no better medium for visual storytelling than video.

Video reduces cognitive load – as we discussed earlier, it's not as taxing to watch as it is to read. It's a relaxing way to get information.

Videos, especially short ones, are easier to understand and remember, especially for more complicated topics.

Videos give the viewer control: They can pause, skip, scrub, and replay anytime.

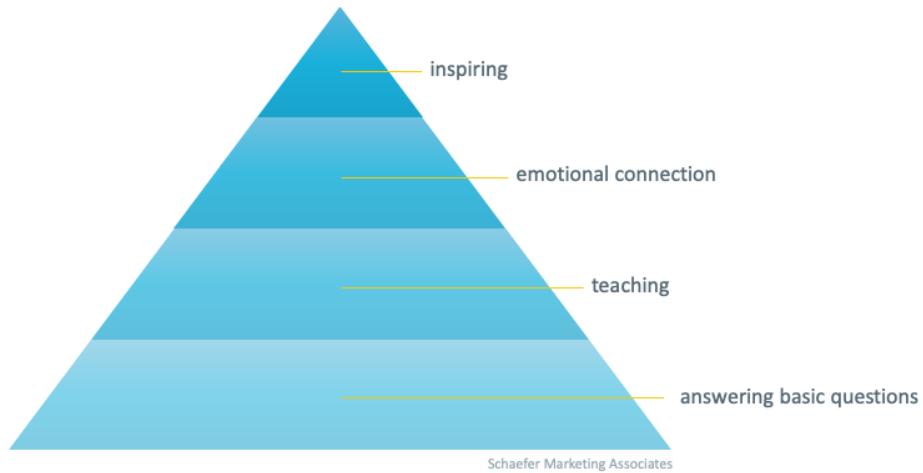
Videos are portable and can be consumed anytime, anywhere – think about reading an e-book on your phone vs. watching a sweet little video.



## Telling a great visual story

Now we'll get into how to craft a compelling story.

## Content marketing hierarchy of needs



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I really like how Mark Schaefer co-opted Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for content marketing. You can easily see how to associate different types of content to each level of the pyramid.

I also like to think of this in terms of the demand generation funnel. The closer we get to the top, the more likely our audience is to convert. And in my opinion, there's no better way to deliver inspiring content than through video. I also want to point out how important it is to make the emotional connection mentioned here. This is the cornerstone of developing a relationship with a customer, rather than just facilitating a transaction.



## What to Think About When Creating Your Story

## Considerations when creating your story

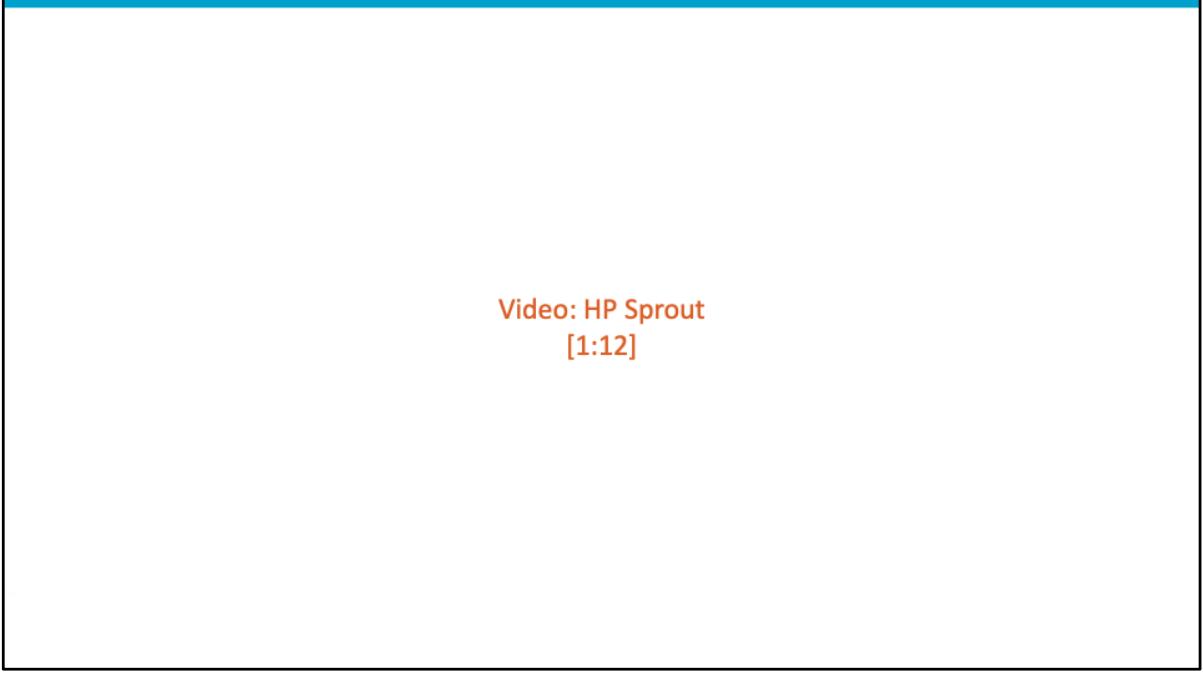
- ▷ **The hook**  
often unusual, unexpected, or poses an action or conflict
- ▷ **Change**  
great stories are about transformation
- ▷ **Connect with your audience**  
universal truths, what we all have in common
- ▷ **Authenticity**  
don't be clever, be personal and honest
- ▷ **Respect your audience**  
don't speak up/down to them

When we talk about emotional connection, that can be achieved in a variety of ways. Humor, empathy, even basic needs fulfillment can be employed to make that connection. Listed here are some basic elements of storytelling you should consider when building your narrative.

## Building your story

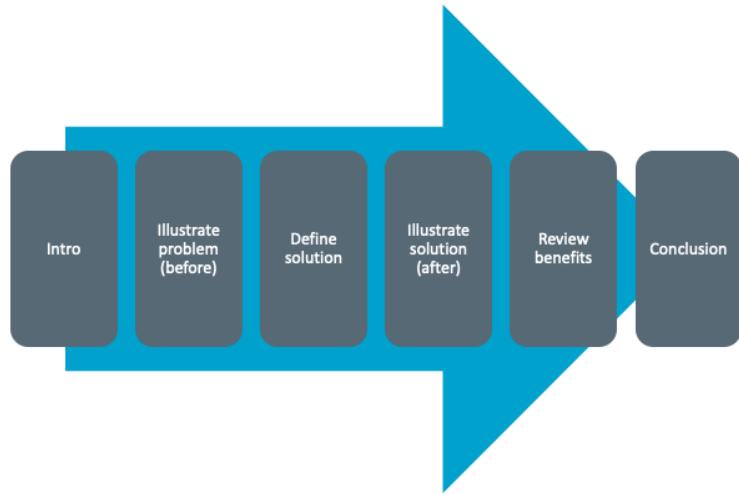
- ▷ Concept
- ▷ Timing
- ▷ Character development
- ▷ Conflict
- ▷ Emotional cadence





Video: HP Sprout  
[1:12]

## Think differently about structure

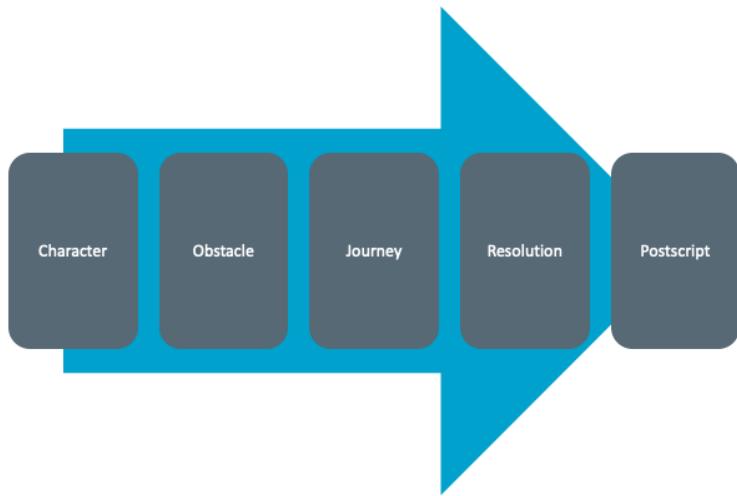


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It's also important to consider the structure of your story. This is an example of a linear narrative. It can work, but it's quite common. What if we looked at it a bit differently?

## Think differently about structure

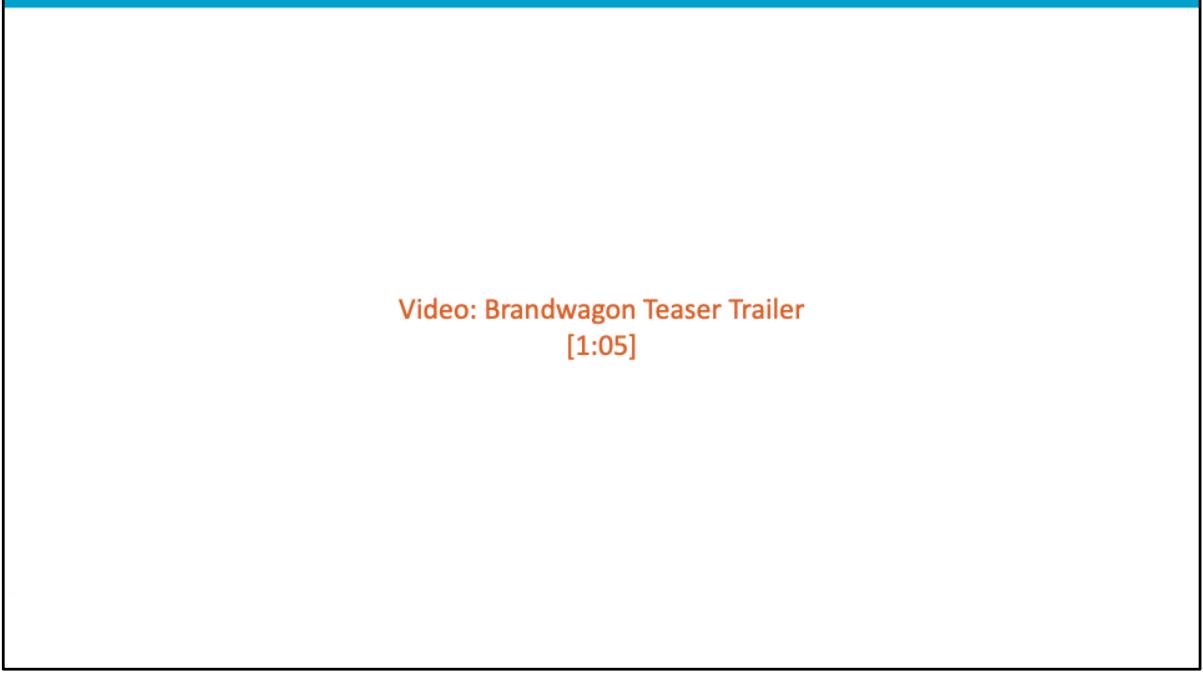


Don't be afraid to flip your story on its head – start with the postscript and work backwards, start in the middle. Do what it takes to get someone's attention right away. So many of our favorite binges use a varied story structure. Think of a story that introduces the murderer right away, then has them narrate the story vs. gathering clues and revealing the murderer at the end.



## Consider serialized videos

One great way to keep your audience coming back to your content is to create a video series. One of the brands I think who are killing it right now with content are our friends at Wistia. As a video hosting provider, it's seems only natural to promote your company with video. Only Wistia took it a step further and created an incredibly compelling series of videos that are fun and educational. Let's take a look.



**Video: Brandwagon Teaser Trailer**  
[1:05]



# Storytelling Tropes

Now that we've covered how to set up your story, let's dive a bit deeper into what makes a story interesting – common tropes employed by content creators to keep us watching.



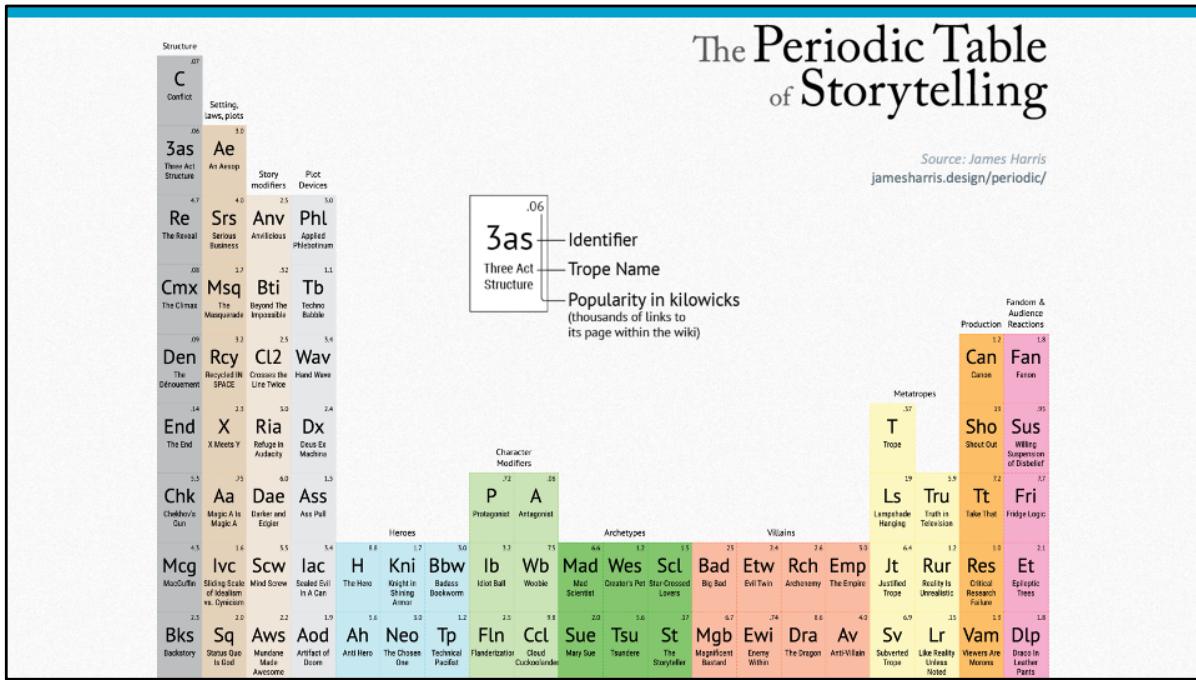
# What Are Tropes & Why Do We Use Them?

*Source: Masterclass*

The word trope comes from the Greek word *tropos*, meaning a turn or change of direction. Over time the definition has changed somewhat. In classical rhetoric, a trope refers to a specific figure of speech or literary device. Think of a trope as the moves an author makes when creating a story.

Today, writers and critics frequently use the word trope to describe themes, motifs, plot devices, plot points, and storylines that have become familiar conventions. Pop culture is full of recognizable tropes which function as a shared vocabulary for readers, writers, and critics. For example, the "chosen one" trope, in which a main character like Harry Potter is uniquely called to defeat Voldemort.

The use of tropes is key to creating writing that's fresh, memorable, and persuasive.



<https://jamesharris.design/periodic/>

There's a great online resource I found by James Harris called the Periodic Table of Storytelling. The table is completely interactive and really fun to explore, not to mention helpful when crafting a narrative.

For example, let's take one that might be familiar: Chekhov's Gun, which is used to describe an insignificant object that later turns out to be important. The trope was coined from Anton Chekhov, who said, "If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there." Basically, he meant that if it's not important, don't include it in the story.

Play around here – think about examples from your favorite binge-watch or movie. What tropes do they employ? How do they work to advance the narrative and keep you interested. We talked about emotional cadence earlier. How can you employ tropes to manage the emotional response of your audience?

My last video is particularly relevant, as it takes a common storytelling trope, the

hero's journey, and applies it to digital marketing. Enjoy!



Video: The Hero's Journey for the Digital Marketer  
[2:28]

Thank you!



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