FROM NUMBERS TO NARRATIVE: KEY TAKEAWAYS

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4X4 MODEL

Create content in “layers” to get the right people to the right content at the right time. This means you need to introduce content in small pieces (water cooler moments) that lead to longer pieces (café content), that lead to longer pieces (research library/lab experiences). You have to entice people along that path and not throw them directly to long-form content.

A 50-slide deck is research library content, so kick it off with a water cooler moment (e.g., the subject and/or the short email it goes out in) to set context and prepare people for what’s being communicated. The first several slides should be café content - an executive summary - summarizing the most important points to be found in the deeper content.

Each individual slide is often a water cooler moment. Some slides are café content and may require a 5-minute examination/discussion. Either way, it must be simple, visual, and clear.
OVERALL NUMBERS TO NARRATIVE PROCESS

The process requires focusing in on your primary message, in the context of the data and your audience. Once you have your focus, you build a narrative, then you design the presentation of that narrative.

But this is not a linear process, exactly. You will likely revisit your KWYs, story, and design in a circular fashion until they all align perfectly. You must CONTINUALLY remind yourself to circle back to your KWYs every step of they way. For example, constantly pushing yourself by asking questions like:

“Why am I showing this data?” “Am I emphasizing the comparison between categories?” “Do I need to show all the data or just a sub-set?” “Are these the right ones?” “Does my audience understand/care about this?” “Does the sequence I’m using to explain this data flow?”

KWYs >> STORY >> DESIGN >> EXECUTION
The KWYs
Know What You Really Want to Say (KWYRWTS)
Know What Your Data is Saying (KWYDIS)
Know What Your Audience Needs to Hear (KWYANTH)

You must deeply think about all the KWYs for your project which will drive your overall focus, and individual KWYs for every slide/component, which will drive every bit of content of each piece - the text, the visualization, your talking points, etc. This is all about prioritizing and sequencing your message and story.

STORYTELLING
You have to communicate with humans via stories because they’re an evolutionary imperative. All stories are LINEAR. To get to a story that has impact:

Figure out your high level outline (”buckets of content”), based on your overall KWYs and the order in which they appear. This has to FLOW in a natural way.

For each bucket of content, figure out the KWYs for it. Then use your words! Write a very very detailed sentence that contains every important bit of information that will help you determine what data to display, what’s important about that data (making comparisons, showing deviation from a norm, revealing patterns, showing change over time, etc.), which will help you pick the right visualization. These sentences may not appear on screen/page - they are your guide only.
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DESIGN

Design is all about information hierarchy, which shows your reader what’s most important and the order in which you want them to read things. All design decisions have to be made in the context of pre-attentive processing (humans will process a visual immediately, and subconsciously, driven by Gestalt principles). Respect your audience’s proclivity to look at the center of a graphic first, and understand that their peripheral vision will drive where they look next.

The most important design decision is to do less (remove elements like grid lines, tick marks, and excess labels; draw the eye away from elements like axis lines/labels by fading them back; use fewer colors.)

And sketch your visualizations before you commit to execution in software. There is no better way to test your ideas quickly and easily.

FOCUS >> SEQUENCING >> VISUALIZATION
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PICKING THE RIGHT CHART
Use cheat sheets like at the links below for recommended charts for different categories of data.
http://bhv.io/datavizproject
http://bhv.io/vizvocabulary
http://bhv.io/graphiccontinuum

Be cautious using circular charts, such as pie charts and radar charts. And remember that charts using filled shapes, such as bars, pies, and area charts, will be subconsciously compared based on their area, not height, circumference, etc. Use smart design (do less) to simplify complex charts to reduce confusion and draw the eye to what’s important.

TOOLS
Use your hands (whiteboards, pencil/paper, simple sketching software, not feature-bloated software) when brainstorming. Don’t be limited by, seduced by, or driven by your visualization tool features. Instead, come up with the best way to visualize your data, then find tools to execute on those ideas. Use these links to find tools:

http://bhv.io/viztools1
http://bhv.io/viztools2
http://bhv.io/viztools3

Consider using tools like Piktochart (free online infographic creation tool), Carto (free online map making tool), and Flourish (free online animated visualization tool).
OTHER RESOURCES
To reinforce concepts learned in the workshop (and to learn some new ones!), take my LinkedIn Learning courses:

http://bhv.io/LILBillShander

Join the Rock the VizComm Facebook Group for a continuous supply of tips and resources, inspirational examples of great data storytelling, and a community to bounce ideas off of (including interaction with Bill, your host). This is NOT a marketing channel - it’s an educational and community resource.

https://facebook.com/groups/rockthevizcomm

ON YOUR NEXT PROJECT
Show it to someone who doesn’t know your data. Ask them:

- What they understand
- What’s confusing
- Whether they learned what you wanted them to learn
- How the story flows

Then re-work your KWYs and story and visuals to improve as needed!
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