



# Telling a Story

## Participant Guide

### What's the purpose of this exercise?

The purpose of this exercise is to give you practice in synthesis and systems thinking – complementary skills that are foundational to strategic thinking.

Specifically, you will practice:

- Identifying connections across seemingly unrelated factors and integrating them into a coherent whole.
- Generating hypotheses about how a set of information fits together, adapting your explanation when new or different information is introduced, and communicating a coherent story to others.

Systems thinking (or holistic thinking) is the ability to recognize and account for the relationships and interactions among people, events, regions, and other factors. Synthesis is the ability to integrate data elements (information, opinions, and perspectives) together into a cohesive whole. As with any skill, becoming proficient in these skills requires practice.

### Why is this skillset important?

Events, people, circumstances, and information that seem unrelated on a superficial level may actually be related and interact in ways that we need to appreciate in order to effectively anticipate and shape future situations.

Systems thinking and synthesis allow us to recognize and describe a bigger picture that connects individual elements together. Appreciating a problem set more fully impacts the decisions we make to shape the future.

### Tips

To recognize connections and integrate seemingly unrelated information:

- ✓ Start by considering the features and characteristics of each of the data elements. What are they about? What are their sources? What do they tell us? What questions do they raise?
- ✓ Think about what is similar and what is different about individual data elements.
- ✓ Consider a range of factors in addition to those that are immediately apparent – e.g., politics, economics, infrastructure, social structures, physical environment, cultural norms, and religion.
- ✓ Consider the inter-relationships and interactions among data elements, instead of just considering them in isolation.
- ✓ Create a sketch, graphic, or concept map that shows connections and interactions among data elements.
- ✓ Describe the “big picture” you have discerned to others, and seek feedback to help identify gaps or relationships you might not have considered.

As with any skill, practice and reflection will enhance your ability to recognize connections and bring them together into a coherent whole.



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### Why is reflection challenging?

A few reasons these skills are challenging include the following:

- Many of us over-rely on analytic approaches to appreciate the complexity of a situation and solve problems. As vital as analytic approaches are, if used in isolation, they can be counter-productive in the context of thinking strategically and thinking about complex problems.
- Over-reliance on analytical thinking can limit our ability to see beyond the immediate situation and grasp important connections that are critical to appreciating the problem, and shaping the future.
- Recognizing and appreciating connections takes time. In the rush to move to solutions, we may minimize the importance of systems thinking and synthesis, or skip them altogether.
- We often focus on surface features and the most obvious commonalities, without digging deeper to search for nuances and more subtle connections that are critical to appreciating complex problems. Approaches generated based on surface-level understanding may be short-term-oriented and/or lack the ability to address fundamental underlying issues.

Consider the tips embedded in this document to help you overcome these challenges and improve your ability to “connect the dots.”

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### Contents of Participant Guide

This Participant Guide contains a set of questions and prompts for your reference during the skill-building exercise. Your instructor will direct you to the relevant sections during specific points in the exercise.

As you work through the exercise, keep in mind that the questions in this exercise are not intended to be completed like a worksheet where you read a question, write your answer, and go on to the next question. Instead, they are here to prompt your thinking as you work through the exercise activities. Feel free to use the white space to jot notes and ideas as you progress through the exercise.

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### Pre-Exercise Reflection

**Instructions:** In this exercise, we are going to practice the skills of systems thinking and synthesis. Before starting the exercise, take a few minutes to think about and reflect on the questions listed below. After thinking about the questions individually, we will discuss them as a group.

Thinking strategically involves appreciating how individual factors or individual pieces of information fit together to form a bigger picture. Sometimes the connections are obvious; but often they are not.

1. Can you think of an example from your own experience where you figured out how certain factors or pieces of information fit together into a bigger picture?
2. What made recognizing connections and integrating the pieces together difficult?
3. What helped you recognize and understand the connections?
4. How do you think synthesis and systems thinking can help you with strategic thinking?



**USE THE SPACE BELOW TO JOT DOWN YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS.**



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### Image Review Considerations: Part 1

**Instructions:** Take a few minutes to look at the images one at a time. Use the topics and questions below to help you think about the images. The purpose of looking at each image individually is to give yourself an opportunity to appreciate the content and complexity of each picture. Taking the time to grasp each image separately will help you make linkages across the images later on. Give yourself time to think about the layers of information contained within each image and what each image might represent.

We have provided some ideas for examining each of the images. Consider:

1. What does the image depict; what concepts might the image be representing?
2. Who the key players are; where they are located in the scene; what are they doing, and why?
3. Does the image suggest a particular location, time of day, or season? Think about what that information might mean in terms of understanding what's going on.
4. What might be going on outside the frame of the image, and what might that mean for what's going on inside the image?
5. What happens if you think about the image from a security point of view? From an economic point of view? What about from the point of view of politics, social issues, technology, or the physical environment? Does one or another of these points of view help you understand the image more completely?



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### Image Review Considerations: Part 2

**Instructions:** Use the questions below to aid your thinking as you develop a story that weaves the images together into a coherent whole.

1. When you look across the full set of images, what questions occur to you?
2. Think about how the images might be connected to each other. How are the concepts or relationships you identified in the individual images connected?
3. Think about connections among the images — the connections that are explicit and obvious, and those that are implicit, indirect or subtle.
4. What story do the images tell? What narrative takes account of all of the images?



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### Mid-Exercise Reflection

**Instructions:** Please take a few minutes to think about each of the following questions and jot down your responses. After thinking about them individually, we will discuss them as a group.

1. What did you find difficult/challenging about this activity?
2. Thinking about the story you just developed, consider what might have happened for the situation to evolve in the way it did.
  - What events might have led up to this set of circumstances?
  - What factors might have contributed to the situation?
3. If you could have one other image (or piece of information) that would make this situation clearer to you, what would that image (or piece of information) be? How does it fit into your narrative? How does it help clarify things?
4. Did you use one particular image to frame your story? Which one? And why was that the frame?
5. Did you find yourself fixating on one particular image or one interpretation of an image? If so, what was it?
  - Think about parallels in your life experience, for example, a situation in which a particular person, event, or piece of information created a “frame” for your point of view that was difficult to adjust or step away from?
  - What strategies might be useful to “break your frame” or guard against becoming fixated?
6. Think about which picture you found hardest to fit into the story you were developing. What made that particular picture difficult to work with?
7. Think about how your own experiences shaped the story you created. Was that helpful or did your own experiences seem to get in the way?
8. What did you learn by hearing others’ stories? How did their stories differ from yours? Did you understand your images and/or story differently, after hearing others’ stories (e.g., additional connections)?



**USE THE SPACE BELOW AND ON THE NEXT PAGE TO JOT DOWN YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS.**



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### Final Reflection

**Instructions:** Consider each of the following questions and jot brief notes in response. After thinking about them individually, we will discuss the questions as a group.

1. Think about what you learned from this activity. How might you approach this activity differently next time?
2. What was difficult about connecting the images into a coherent story? What helped you to do so?
3. How might you apply these skills in your personal life and/or work?
4. Think about the information you see or hear in briefings, on the news, or from other sources. How might you think differently about making sense of information, based on your experience in this exercise?



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