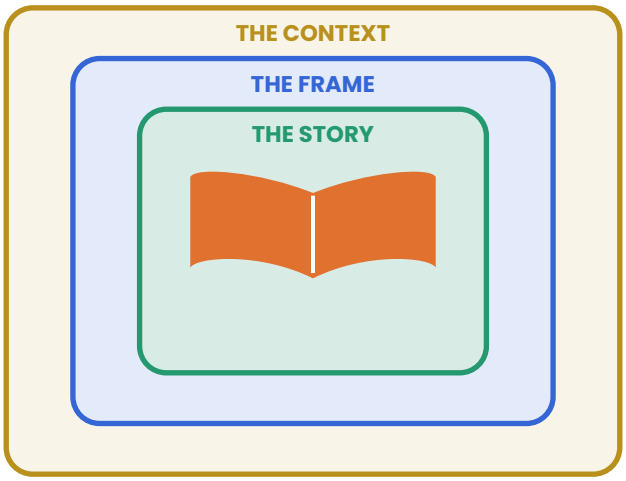


NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING · A VISUAL SUMMARY

Framing Models
& Coaching with Stories

Blame and outcome frames, reframing, metaphor and story-based coaching

Frames • Blame • Outcome • Reframing • Metaphor • Stories

Contents

1 What Is a Frame? 3

2 Roots and Influences 4

3 The Family of NLP Frames 5

4 The Blame Frame (Problem Frame) 6

5 The Outcome Frame 7

6 Blame Frame vs Outcome Frame 8

7 Shifting from Blame to Outcome 9

8 Well-Formed Outcomes 10

9 Four More Frames in Action 11

10 Pre-framing, De-framing and Reframing 12

11 Why Stories Work in Coaching 13

12 Metaphor and Isomorphism 14

13 Types of Coaching Stories 15

14 The Structure of a Coaching Story 16

15 Building an Isomorphic Metaphor 17

16 Nested Loops and Embedded Messages 18

17 Combining Frames and Stories in a Session 19

18 Worked Example: Blame to Outcome 20

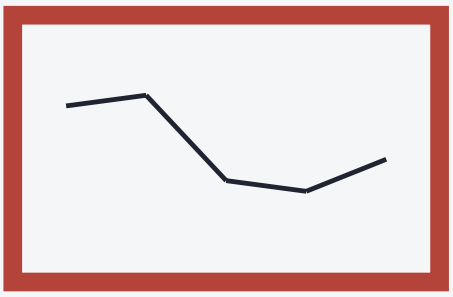
19 Pitfalls, Ethics and Good Practice 21

20 Quick Reference and Story Worksheet 22

1 What Is a Frame?

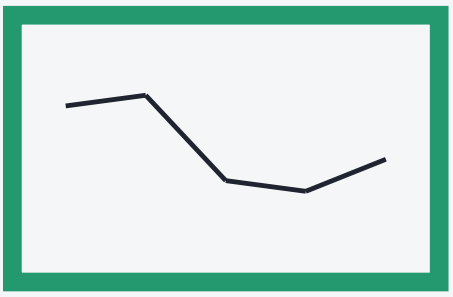
In NLP a **frame** is the context, focus or assumption that surrounds an experience and shapes what it means. Just as a picture frame directs the eye, a mental frame directs attention — and changes the meaning of what sits inside it.

The same event — a project that slipped — inside two different frames



Frame: "What went wrong?"

Meaning: a failure to explain



Frame: "What did we learn?"

Meaning: data for next time

Content stays the same; meaning, emotion and next steps change with the frame.

Frames direct attention

They decide what is noticed, what is ignored and which questions feel natural to ask.

Frames set meaning

The same behaviour can mean 'stubborn' in one frame and 'committed' in another.

Frames guide action

A problem frame invites defence and analysis; an outcome frame invites options and movement.

> **Coaching insight:** coaches rarely change a client's circumstances. What they can change — through questions and stories — is the frame through which the client sees those circumstances.

2 Roots and Influences

Framing and storytelling in NLP draw on anthropology, sociology and the work of the therapists that NLP's founders studied.

1950s — **Bateson on frames**

Gregory Bateson describes psychological 'frames' that tell us how to interpret messages — for example, that a playful nip is 'play', not a fight.

1950s–70s — **Erickson's teaching tales**

Milton Erickson becomes known for therapeutic stories and metaphors that offer clients new perspectives indirectly.

1974 — **Goffman's Frame Analysis**

Sociologist Erving Goffman analyses how people use frames to organise and make sense of everyday experience.

1975–76 — **Meta and Milton Models**

Bandler and Grinder publish the Meta Model and then the Milton Model, describing precise and artfully vague language.

1982 — **Reframing**

Bandler and Grinder's *Reframing* sets out content and context reframes as core NLP change tools.

1990s — **Frames in coaching**

Trainers such as Robert Dilts (*Sleight of Mouth*) and later NLP coaching schools popularise outcome, ecology and other frames.

Two strands that meet in coaching

Framing (explicit)

Direct questions and statements that set the focus of a conversation — e.g. moving from 'why did this happen?' to 'what do you want?'

Stories (indirect)

Metaphors, anecdotes and teaching tales that let the listener find new meaning for themselves, without being told.

Note: NLP literature comes mainly from trainers' books and seminars; dates above are approximate.

3 The Family of NLP Frames

NLP trainers describe a set of standard frames. Each one focuses a conversation in a particular direction. Blame and outcome frames are the most fundamental contrast.

Blame (problem) frame

Focuses on what is wrong, why, and whose fault it is.

Outcome frame

Focuses on what is wanted and how to get there.

As-if frame

Acts ‘as if’ the goal were already achieved to explore it freely.

Ecology frame

Checks the impact of a change on the wider system and values.

Evidence frame

Defines how you will know when the outcome is reached.

Backtrack frame

Summarises in the other person’s words to confirm understanding.

Relevancy frame

Asks how a point relates to the agreed outcome; keeps focus.

Contrast frame

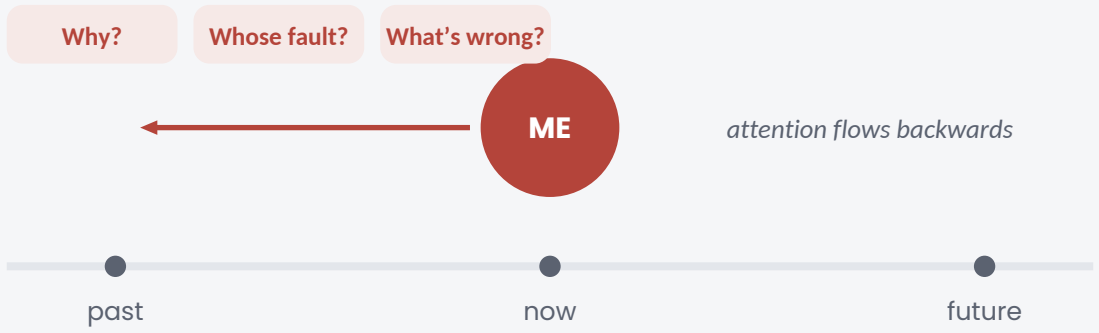
Compares what works with what doesn’t to reveal the difference.

Which frame, when?

Situation in coaching	Useful frame
Client is stuck describing the problem over and over	Outcome frame
Goal sounds attractive but something feels ‘off’	Ecology frame
Client says “I don’t know what I want”	As-if frame
Goal is vague (“be happier”)	Evidence frame
Conversation drifts or client feels misunderstood	Relevancy / backtrack frame

4 The Blame Frame (Problem Frame)

The blame frame — sometimes called the problem frame — focuses on what is wrong, why it happened and who is responsible. It is the default frame for many people when something goes badly.



Blame frame: looking back for causes and culprits

TIME FOCUS	ATTENTION ON	TYPICAL STATE
Past	**Problems, causes, faults**	**Defensive, stuck, heavy**

Characteristic questions

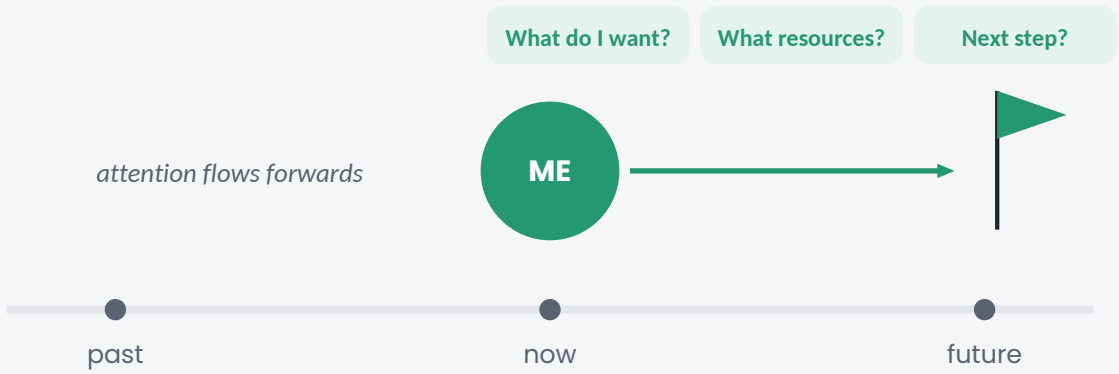
- *What's wrong?*
- *Why did this happen?*
- *Whose fault is it?*
- *Why haven't you fixed it?*
- *How long has it been bad?*
- *What's stopping you?*

Typical effects

- **Defensiveness:** people justify, explain or counter-blame rather than solve.
- **Problem amplification:** the more the problem is described, the bigger and more fixed it can feel.
- **Narrowed options:** attention on 'why' leaves little room for 'what next'.
- **Some value:** understanding causes can be genuinely useful — e.g. in safety reviews — when it serves a clear outcome.

5 The Outcome Frame

The outcome frame shifts attention to what is wanted, the resources available and the steps that lead there. It is the default frame of NLP coaching.



Outcome frame: looking ahead toward goals and resources

TIME FOCUS	ATTENTION ON	TYPICAL STATE
Future	**Goals, resources, options**	**Curious, energised, open**

Characteristic questions

What do you want?

What will that give you?

How will you know you've got it?

What resources do you already have?

What else do you need?

What is the first step?

Typical effects

- **Ownership:** the client becomes the author of the next step, not the victim of the last one.
- **Resourcefulness:** recalling resources and imagining success tends to lift energy.
- **Clarity:** vague dissatisfaction becomes a specific, testable goal.
- **Caution:** rushing to outcomes before the client feels heard can seem dismissive.

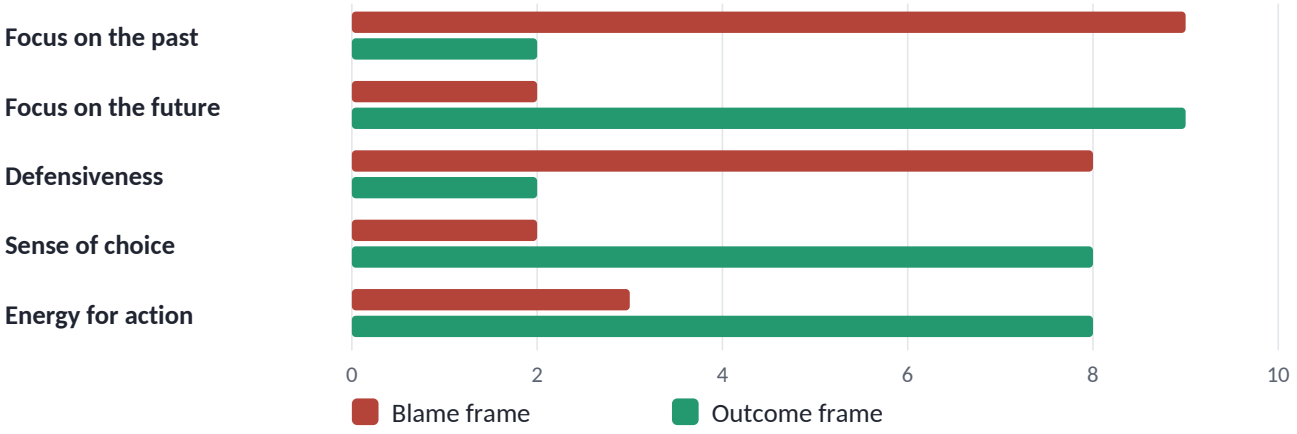
6 Blame Frame vs Outcome Frame

A side-by-side comparison of the two foundational frames. Most coaching conversations begin in one and aim to move to the other.

	Blame frame	Outcome frame
Core question	Why is this happening?	What do I want instead?
Time orientation	Past	Present and future
Focus	Problems, deficits, faults	Goals, resources, possibilities
Language	Why, fault, should have, can't	What, how, want, could, next
Emotional tone	Heavy, defensive, anxious	Curious, hopeful, motivated
Role of the person	Victim or culprit	Agent and creator
Typical result	Explanation, justification	Action plan, options
Useful when	Analysing causes to prevent repetition	Creating change and direction

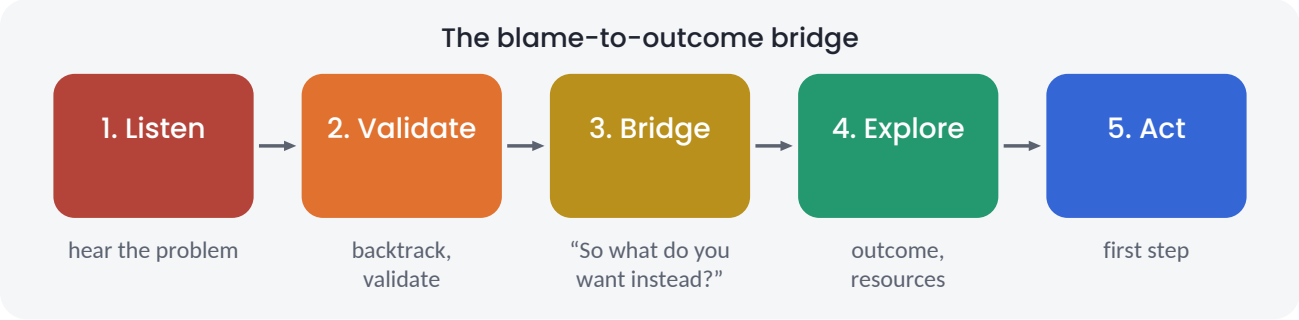
Illustrative profile of each frame

Conceptual ratings (0–10) for teaching purposes — not measured data.



7 Shifting from Blame to Outcome

The core coaching move is to acknowledge the problem, then redirect attention. The client needs to feel heard before they can look forward.



BLAME FRAME	OUTCOME FRAME
"Why does my team never take initiative?"	*"What would it look like if they did? What might help that happen?"*
"Why do I always procrastinate?"	*"What would you like to be doing instead — and when have you done that before?"*
"Whose fault was the failed launch?"	*"What do we want from the next launch, and what did this one teach us?"*
"What's wrong with me?"	*"What do you want for yourself here?"*
"Why can't I stop worrying?"	*"How would you like to feel, and what would help you feel that way?"*

Bridge phrases

- **"So what would you like instead?"**
- **"And if that were solved, what would you have?"**
- **"Given all that, what do you want now?"**
- **"What's important to you about that?"**

8 Well-Formed Outcomes

Once a client is in the outcome frame, NLP coaches test the goal against a set of 'well-formedness' conditions. Lists vary between trainers; these are the most common.

Stated in the positive

What you want, not what you want to avoid.

"What do you want instead?"

Self-initiated and maintained

Within your own control and influence.

"Can you start and keep this going yourself?"

Sensory-based evidence

Clear signs you will see, hear and feel.

"How will you know you've achieved it?"

Appropriately contextualised

Where, when and with whom.

"Where and when do you want this?"

Resources identified

What you have and what you need.

"What resources will help?"

Ecological

Fits your values and wider life.

"What might you lose? Who else is affected?"

First step defined

A concrete action to begin.

"What's the first thing you'll do?"

> **Example:** "I want to stop being so disorganised" (negative, vague) becomes "By March, I want to start each day with a 10-minute plan and finish my weekly report by Friday at 3 pm" (positive, specific, in my control).

9 Four More Frames in Action

Beyond blame and outcome, four frames appear constantly in NLP coaching. Each has a characteristic question and purpose.

As-if frame

Pretend the goal has been achieved.

"Imagine it's six months from now and this is solved. What's different?"

WHY IT HELPS

Loosens 'I don't know' and hidden resistance.

Ecology frame

Check the wider impact of change.

"If you got this, what might you lose? How would it affect others?"

WHY IT HELPS

Prevents goals that backfire or clash with values.

Evidence frame

Define the signs of success.

"What will you see, hear and feel when you've got it?"

WHY IT HELPS

Turns vague wishes into recognisable results.

Backtrack frame

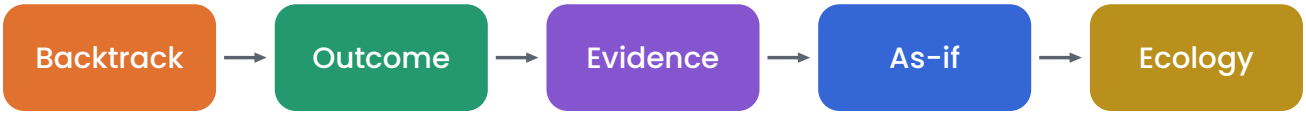
Summarise using the client's words.

"So you're saying you want more time with your family, and..."

WHY IT HELPS

Builds rapport and checks understanding.

A frame sequence many coaches follow



10 Pre-framing, De-framing and Reframing

Frames can be set before a conversation, dismantled when they limit, or swapped for new ones. Coaches use all three.

PRE-FRAME	DE-FRAME	REFRAME
Set the frame in advance	Loosen an unhelpful frame	Offer a new frame
"Today let's focus on what you want going forward."	*"Who says it has to be either/or?"*	*"What if this setback is a rehearsal?"*

Two classic reframes

Type	Question it asks	Example
Context reframe	Where would this behaviour be useful or valuable?	"I'm too picky." → "That eye for detail is exactly what quality control needs."
Content (meaning) reframe	What else could this mean?	"My manager keeps checking my work." → "Perhaps she sees this project as high-stakes and trusts you with it."

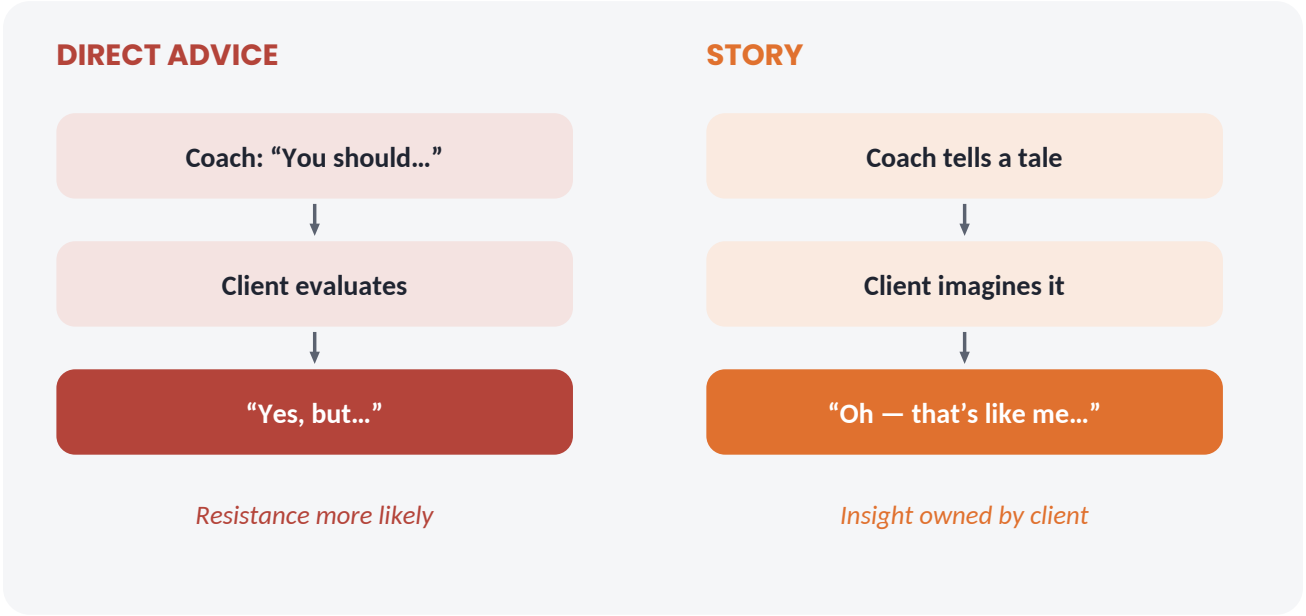
Reframing works best when…

- the client has first felt **understood** in the old frame;
- the new frame is **believable** to the client, not just clever;
- it is offered as a **question or possibility**, not a correction;
- it serves the client's **outcome**, not the coach's preference.

> A pre-frame at the start of a session ("we'll focus on what you want, not just what's wrong") can make the later shift from blame to outcome feel natural rather than abrupt.

11 Why Stories Work in Coaching

Stories carry new frames indirectly. Instead of telling a client what to think, the coach offers an experience the client can step into and draw their own conclusions from.



Reason	What happens	Coaching benefit
Bypasses resistance	Listeners evaluate advice but tend to follow a story	Less 'yes, but...'
Engages imagination	People mentally simulate the events of a story	Client rehearses new options
Self-discovery	The listener makes the connection themselves	Insights feel owned
Memorable	Narratives are easier to remember than abstract points	Lessons last beyond the session
Emotional safety	Talking about a character feels less exposing	Hard topics become discussable

Psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock described 'narrative transportation' (2000): when people are absorbed in a story, their beliefs can shift toward the story's themes. NLP story work draws on the same everyday observation.

12 Metaphor and Isomorphism

A coaching metaphor works when its structure matches the client's situation. NLP calls this **isomorphism**: the story's characters, problem and relationships map onto the client's own.

CLIENT'S SITUATION		THE STORY
Client: a new manager	⟷	A young ship's captain
Team that resists change	⟷	A crew used to the old captain
Pressure from head office	⟷	A storm approaching
Missing resource: trust	⟷	Learning the crew's songs
Desired outcome: a united team	⟷	Sailing safely into harbour

Each element in the client's world has a counterpart in the story

Why match the structure?

- The client's unconscious can 'recognise' the pattern
- The resolution in the story suggests one for real life
- Distance (a ship, not an office) lowers defences

Keep the surface different

- If the story is too obviously about the client, it becomes advice in disguise
- Change setting, characters and era
- Keep the relationships and turning points

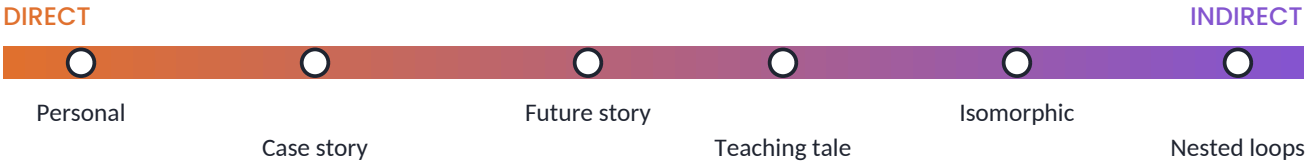
> **Rule of thumb:** same shape, different clothes. The deeper the structural match and the further the surface details, the better a metaphor usually lands.

13 Types of Coaching Stories

Coaches draw on many kinds of stories. They differ in how direct they are and how much they rely on the coach's own life.

Type	Description	Best for	Directness
Personal anecdote	A short story from the coach's own experience	Building rapport, normalising	High
Client case story	An anonymised story about someone with a similar challenge	Showing what's possible	High
Teaching tale	A traditional fable, parable or folk story	Values, perspective, wisdom	Medium
Isomorphic metaphor	A story built to mirror the client's situation	Unconscious problem-solving	Low
Nature / everyday metaphor	Images like seasons, rivers, seeds, bridges	Quick reframes	Medium
Nested loops	Several stories opened and closed in sequence	Deep change, trance work	Low
Future story	A story told from the client's achieved future	Motivation, outcome clarity	Medium

Direct vs indirect: where each story type sits



> More direct stories are easier to use and explain; more indirect ones ask more skill of the coach but can reach patterns the client is not consciously aware of.

14 The Structure of a Coaching Story

Most effective coaching stories follow a simple arc: a character, a challenge, a struggle, a discovery and a new way forward. The turning point usually carries the resource the client needs.



Stage	Purpose in coaching	Mirrors in the client's life
Setting	Creates rapport and safety	Their current context
Challenge	Names the problem indirectly	The issue they brought
Struggle	Validates difficulty; the character tries what doesn't work	Their current (blame-frame) attempts
Turning point	Introduces a resource, mentor or insight	The resource they need
Discovery	Shows the new perspective in action	The reframe
New way	Leaves an open, hopeful future	Their outcome

The arc is a simplified teaching version of classic story structures, including Joseph Campbell's 'hero's journey'.

15 Building an Isomorphic Metaphor

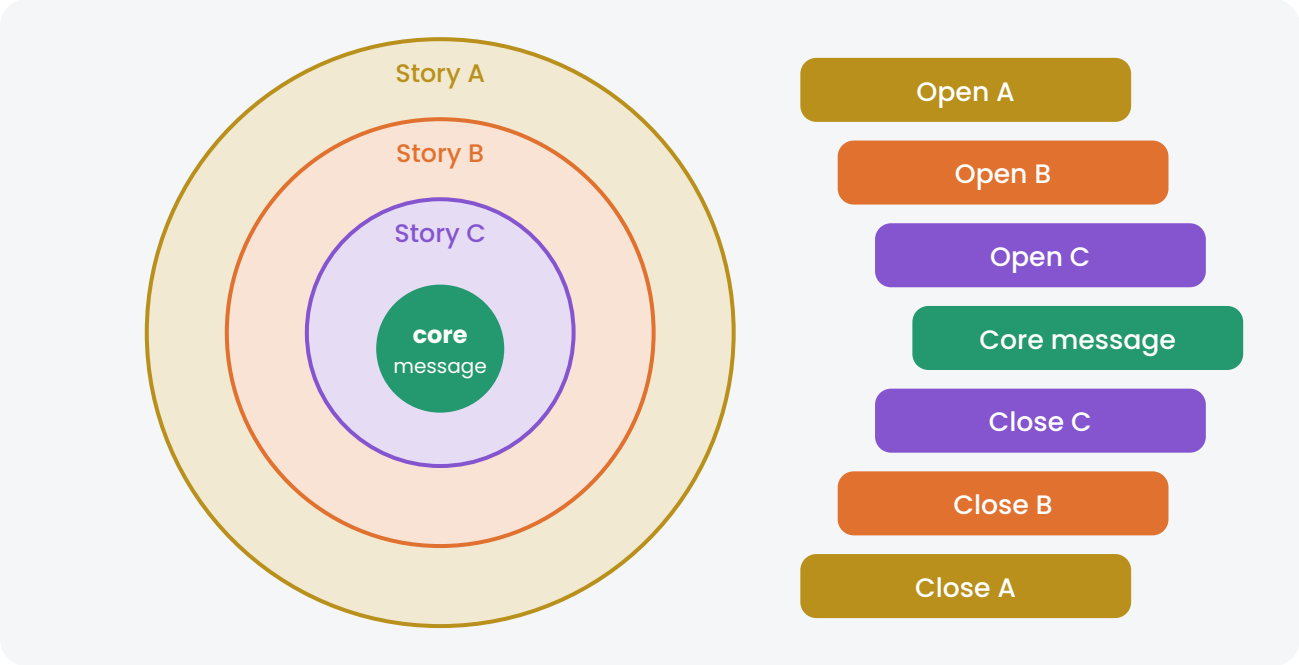
A practical sequence for crafting a story that mirrors a client's situation and carries a resource.

1. **Map the situation**
   Identify the key elements: who is involved, the problem, the relationships and what has been tried.
2. **Clarify the outcome**
   What does the client want? What resource or perspective would help them get there?
3. **Choose a new context**
   Pick a setting far from the client's world: nature, sport, history, a craft, a voyage.
4. **Match the structure**
   Create a counterpart in the story for each element, keeping the same relationships.
5. **Plan the turning point**
   Decide how the character discovers the resource — through a mentor, accident or insight.
6. **Tell it well**
   Use sensory detail, pacing and pauses. Leave the meaning implicit; don't explain it.
7. **Let it land**
   Move on or fall silent. Notice the client's response; ask open questions only if they bring it up.

> **Don't explain the moral.** Saying "…and that's just like you and your team" turns a metaphor back into advice and removes the client's chance to discover the connection.

16 Nested Loops and Embedded Messages

Advanced story work, drawn from Milton Erickson's style, opens several stories one inside another and closes them in reverse order. The innermost story carries the key message.



Element	What it does
Open loops	Create curiosity and gently occupy the conscious mind with 'what happens next?'
Core message	Placed in the middle, where attention is absorbed and resistance is often lower
Closing in reverse	Gives a satisfying sense of completion; the core message is less likely to be analysed
Embedded commands	Short phrases marked by tone or a pause, e.g. a character who learns to '*trust yourself now*'

> **Ethics:** indirect techniques must always serve the client's own stated outcome. Using them to steer someone toward the coach's goals would be manipulation, not coaching.

17 Combining Frames and Stories in a Session

Frames and stories work together: frames give the conversation direction, while stories help the client move between frames when direct questions meet resistance.



Frames set the route; stories help the client over obstacles along it

Matching stories to frame shifts

When the client…	A story can…	Example theme
can't leave the blame frame	show a character who stopped asking 'why?'	A farmer who stops cursing the drought and digs a well
can't picture an outcome	describe someone discovering what they want	A traveller who finds the map was in their pocket
fears change	explore ecology and what is kept	A tree that sheds leaves but keeps its roots
doubts their resources	reveal hidden strengths	A small river that cuts through rock over time

18 Worked Example: Blame to Outcome

A fictional excerpt. Leo, a small business owner, is frustrated that his company isn't growing. Tags show the frame and technique at each moment.

LEO	*Nothing works. The market's terrible, my staff don't care and I've wasted three years.*	BLAME
COACH	Three years of effort, and it feels like the market and the team are against you.	BACKTRACK
LEO	*Exactly. Why does it always happen to me?*	BLAME
COACH	And given all that — what would you like your business to be like a year from now?	OUTCOME
LEO	*I don't know. I can't even see past next month.*	STUCK
COACH	It reminds me of a sailor I once heard about, who spent a whole voyage staring at the waves. It was only when an old deckhand told him to look at the stars that he found his heading...	STORY
LEO	*...I suppose I've been staring at the waves. I want a team that cares about customers as much as I do.*	OUTCOME
COACH	How will you know when you have that team?	EVIDENCE
LEO	*They'll suggest improvements without me asking.*	EVIDENCE
COACH	What's one thing you could do this week to invite that?	FIRST STEP

	Start of conversation	End of conversation
Frame	Blame: market, staff, wasted years	Outcome: an engaged, customer-focused team
Focus	Past and external causes	Future and his own influence
Role	Victim of circumstances	Leader with a next step

19 Pitfalls, Ethics and Good Practice

Frames and stories are influential tools. Used carelessly they can feel dismissive or manipulative; used well they feel natural and respectful.

✗ PITFALL	✓ GOOD PRACTICE
Jumping to outcome before the client feels heard	Backtrack and acknowledge first; then bridge.
Treating all problem talk as 'blame'	Understanding causes is valuable when it serves an outcome.
Forcing positivity ("look on the bright side")	Offer reframes as questions the client can accept or reject.
Telling stories about yourself too often	Keep the focus on the client; use personal stories sparingly.
Explaining the moral of every story	Trust the client to make the connection.
Using indirect techniques for your own agenda	Only serve the client's explicitly agreed outcome.
Using stories with someone in crisis	Prioritise safety and refer to qualified professionals.

A note on evidence

Solution-focused approaches (which also emphasise outcomes over problems) and research on narrative and metaphor give some support to these ideas. Many NLP-specific claims have limited rigorous evidence, so avoid promising quick or guaranteed change.

Respecting the client

Stories should be culturally appropriate and free of stereotypes. Ask permission before sharing personal anecdotes, and keep client case stories fully anonymised.

20 Quick Reference and Story Worksheet

A one-page summary of key frames, bridge questions and a worksheet for planning a story.

BLAME FRAME

- What's wrong?
- Why?
- Whose fault?

OUTCOME FRAME

- What do you want?
- How will you know?
- What's the first step?

→ *acknowledge, then bridge*

Other frames at a glance

As-if
Imagine it's done

Ecology
What's the wider impact?

Evidence
How will you know?

Backtrack
So you're saying...

Story planning worksheet

Client's situation	Story counterpart
Main character (client)	
Challenge / problem	
What they have tried	
Resource they need	
Desired outcome	

Key takeaway: frames decide where a conversation looks; stories help people look somewhere new. Together they let a coach move a client from 'what's wrong?' to 'what's next?' — with the client doing the discovering.