



Your Presidential Debates Scorecard

Obama and Romney each have stories to tell as well as stories to rebut. Tracking how they handle these stories is one way to score the October debates.

George Lakoff, professor of linguistics at Berkeley, is one of America's leading thinkers on the use of narrative in public affairs. I recently heard him speak in a panel discussion, "Vote for My Story: Political Narratives and the 2012 Election," convened by the University of Southern California. Lakoff asserted that there are five primary storylines in every presidential campaign:

1. The President's Story About Himself
2. The President's Story About His Challenger
3. The Challenger's Story About Himself
4. The Challenger's Story About the President
5. The Story of the Race

Lakoff predicted that the ability of the candidates to sell the stories that favor them and rebut the stories that don't will be a decisive factor on November 6th. Given the current turmoil in the Middle East as well as the continuing volatility of the American economy, there are certainly other factors that could make the "story wars" look like so much idle chatter. But as I listened to Lakoff speak, it occurred to me that the Presidential debates this month provide a unique opportunity to see how one story stands up to another.

So here's my proposal for a debate scoring system. Listed below are Lakoff's five storylines with specifics filled in for the 2012 election. Consider each story worth one point. If the story holds up after all the questions have been asked and answered, assign that point to the



George Lakoff

October 2012

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Try our story-based scoring system

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storyteller. On the other hand, if the story has been significantly undermined, give the point to the opponent. In the case of a draw, give each candidate one point.

Here are the first four stories for your scorecard:



Obama's Story About Himself

The President offers his life story as yet another version of the American Dream, a journey from humble beginnings to remarkable accomplishments with enough time spent in the middle class to have a clear understanding of the challenges faced by most Americans.

Obama's Story About Romney

The President positions his opponent as a scion of privilege - a creature of a predatory business world more interested in profits than people, someone generally out of touch with the plight of working class Americans.

Romney's Story About Himself

The challenger positions himself as a successful businessman whose experience has prepared him to address our country's economic woes. He is also self-deprecating about his personality, maintaining that leadership is more about getting things done than giving a good speech.



Romney's Story About Obama

The challenger is willing to concede that the incumbent is a likable guy, but one who has failed to solve our economic problems and lacks the essential skills to do so in the next four years.

The fifth story should be treated differently because neither Obama or Romney owns it. Instead, it's a creation of the media covering the campaign:

The Story of the Race

Who's ahead? Who's falling behind? Is the gap widening or closing? No matter who the contestants are or what ideologies they represent, the media inevitably cover the election like a horse race. As of this writing, most polls show growing leads for Obama in the battleground states, putting one story point in the President's column even before the debates have begun. If Romney performs better than expected in the debates, however, he could change the narrative (even while remaining behind in the polls) and steal this point back.

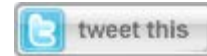
You be the judge. Tune in October 3rd, take out your scorecard, and let the story battle begin.

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Learn how to reach and engage your audience in our online strategic communications course starting October 19.

There are four potential points of connection between you and your target audience. When you know all four and design your communications around them, every minute and dollar you invest will have a better chance of paying off. Fail to connect on even one point, however, and you give your audience an opportunity to walk away. And in this age of information overload, most audiences are happy to do just that.

Strategic Communications: Cutting through the Clutter will help you to connect with your audiences. Course curriculum includes:

- The basics of framing
- Message creation and delivery
- Classic case studies from the public interest sector
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Classes are scheduled for October 19th and 26th from 11a-12n Pacific (2-3p Eastern) each day. Tuition is \$250 per student and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. Go to [The Goodman Center](#) to find out more and reserve your space.

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Based on unprecedented research and incorporating the advice of 20 highly regarded public-speaking experts, this two-hour webinar is designed to help presenters at all levels, including seasoned veterans. Course curriculum includes:

- The 5 most commonly made mistakes and how to avoid them
- How to structure presentations to help your audience learn more
- How to use PowerPoint more effectively
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