

Narrative Building for Career Pivots

Accel Scholars

Alex Krentsel, May 2025

Why am I talking about this?

Preface

I am *not* the expert here at overall narratives...

- tons of people who do this really well in Accel



...but I did make a few early (under-qualified) pivots.

Product Eng -> Google Research -> Lecturer -> PhD Student

- Narratives served me well in enabling them
- Helped ease some anxiety around “I don’t know what I want”
- Same ideas came up a few other places

Why should one talk about this?

Good storytelling is *key* to getting access to opportunities you want.

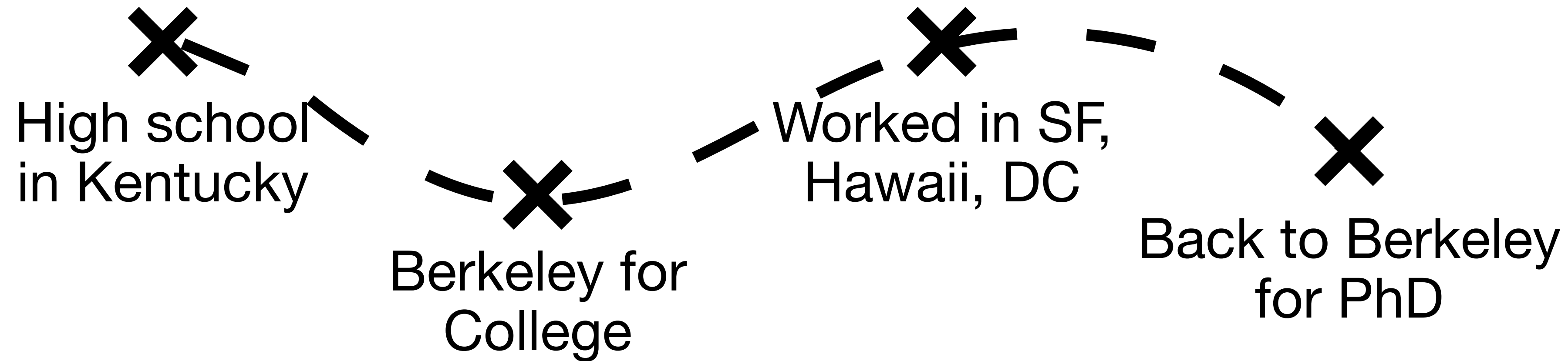
Super broad applicability:

- Job changes
- Career pivots
- Promotions
- Fundraising (?)

In many cases, you're selected for ***potential***, rather than just ***experience***.

What's a narrative?

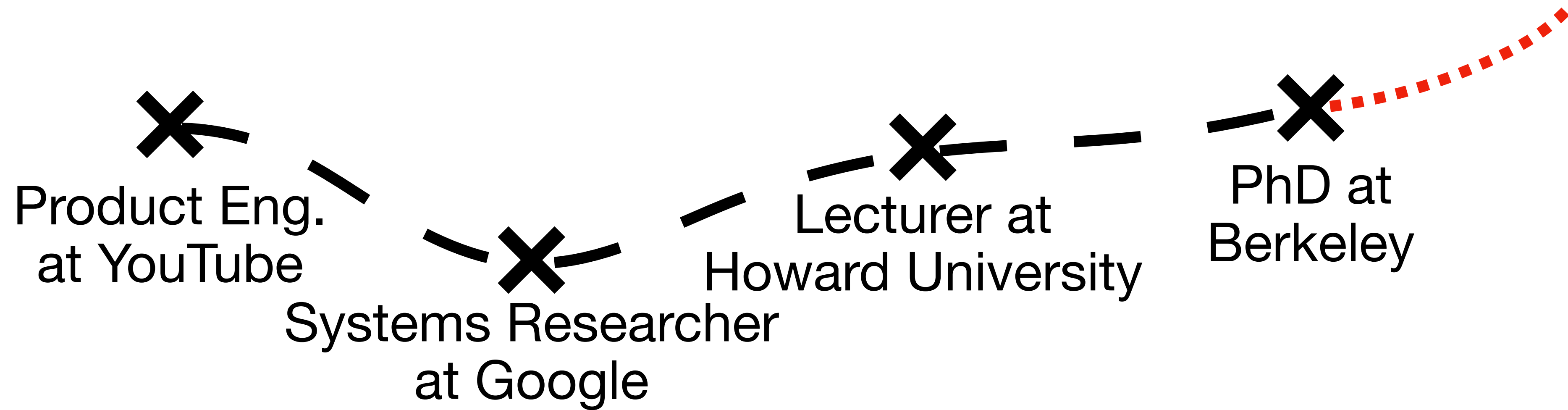
A **narrative** is a set of connected points that tell a story about who you are.



Can be for any topic and over any timeframe...

What's a narrative?

A **narrative** is a set of connected points that tell a story about who you are.



Can be for any topic and over any timeframe...

...but for advocating for yourself, important part is **what is implied**.

Building narratives

Using narratives effectively

An effective narrative shows consistency and some trajectory on criteria of interest.

To do this, it must be:

- Cohesive
- Understandable
- Relatable

Building narratives

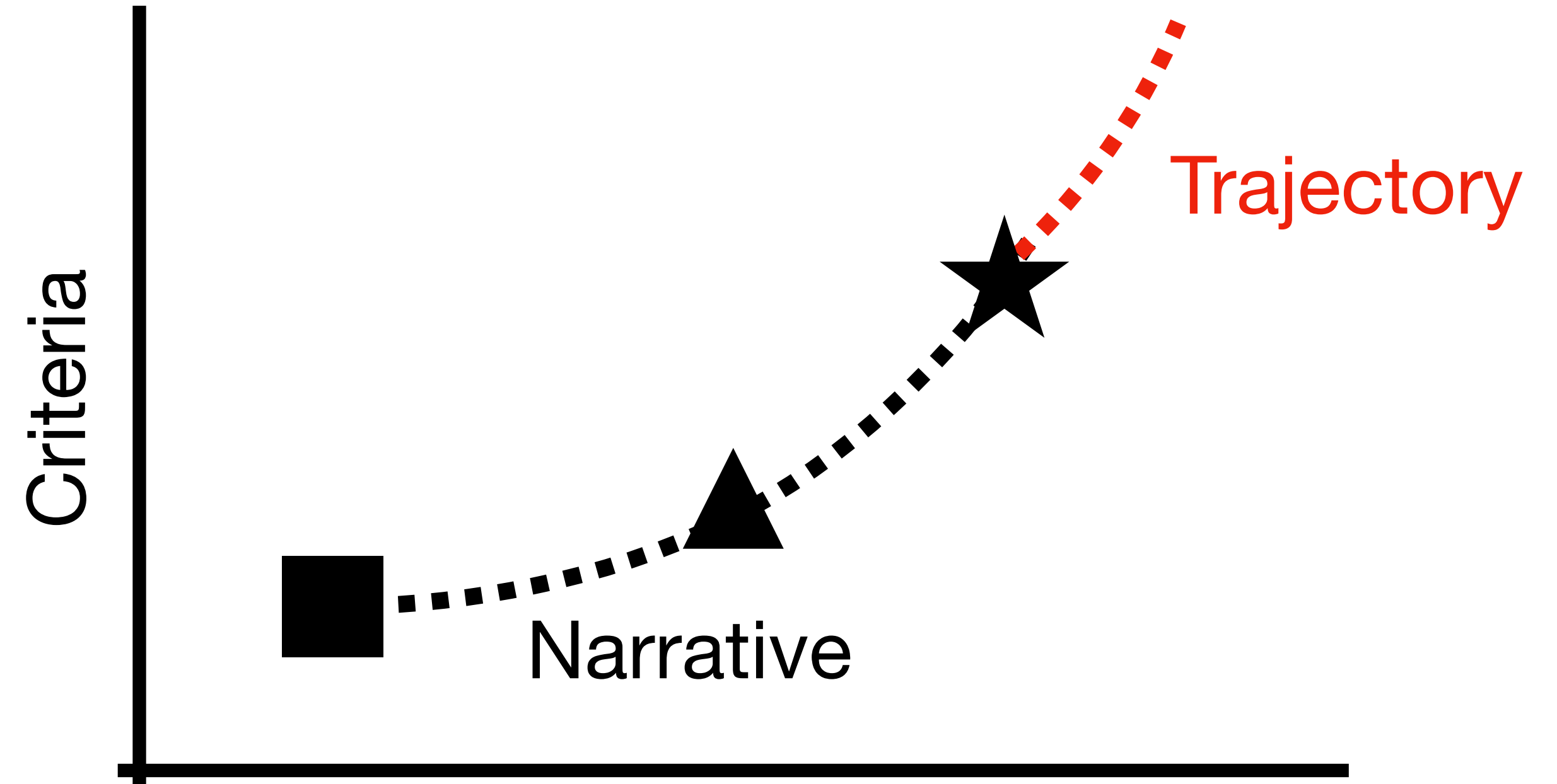
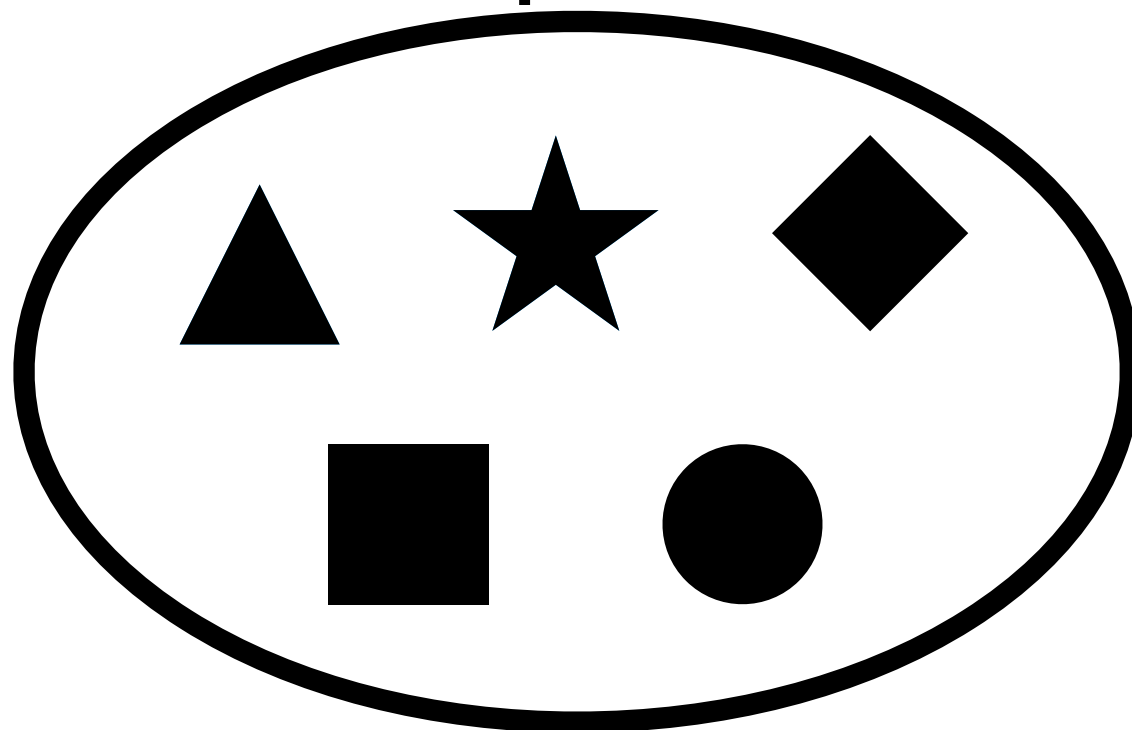
Using narratives effectively

An effective narrative shows consistency and some *trajectory* on criteria of interest.

Steps:

1. Figure out pertinent criteria
2. Choose subset of experiences
3. Present best *angle* of each to show trajectory

Your experiences



Steps for building your narrative

(1) Figure out criteria your audience cares about

Formally specified in some case, in others ask people who have made it.

Examples:

- **SWE Promotion:** see job ladder properties
- **Lecturer hiring:** teaching ability/interest
- **Pivot to Research:** pick up new ideas quickly, depth in understanding “why,” etc.
- **Grad school:** commitment, creativity, “academia-ness”

(2) Choose subset of experiences

Looking to choose subset of experiences that show...

- (1) sustained *consistency* over time
- (2) positive second derivative, i.e. curving up

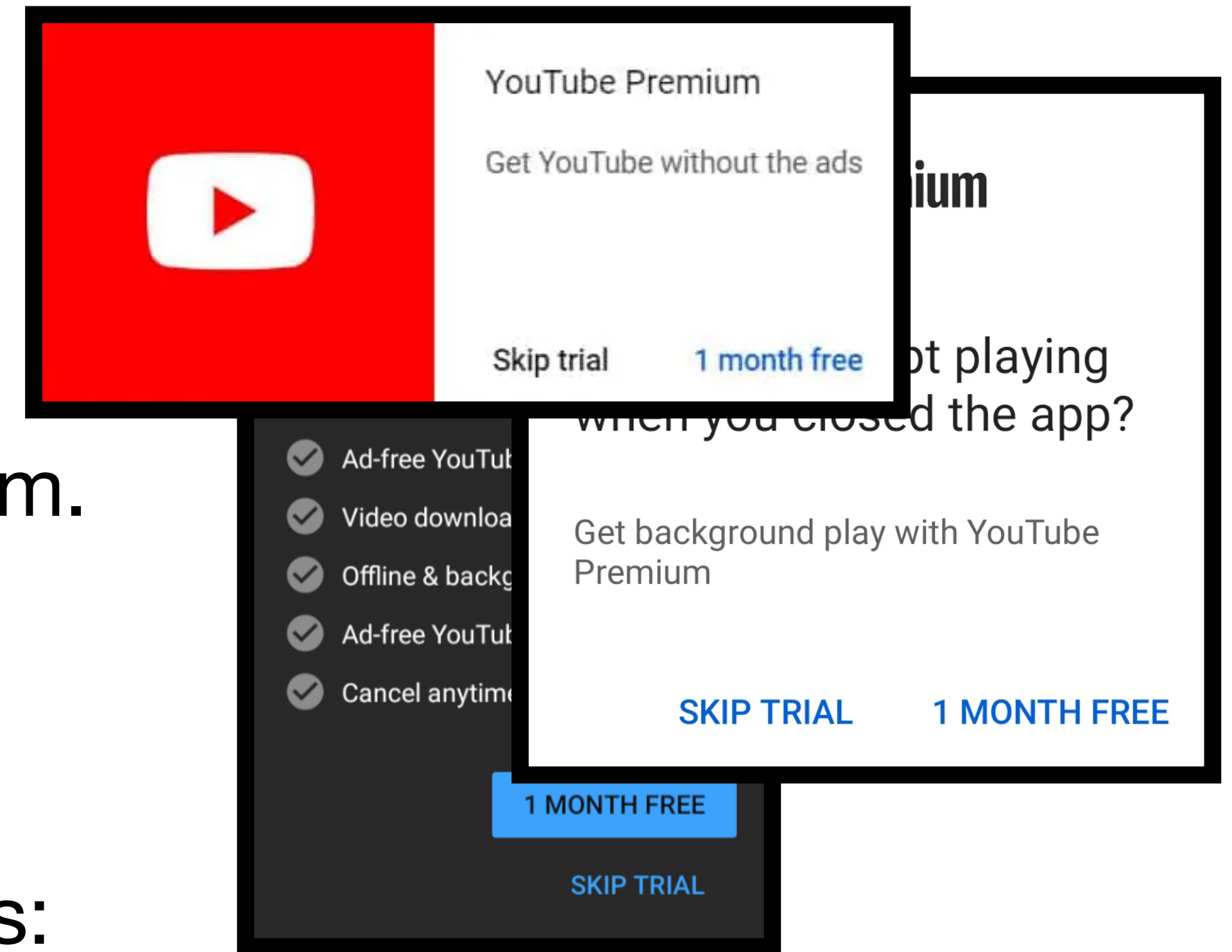
Steps for building your narrative

(3) Present best angle of each (framing)

Frame core experiences to fit the criteria.

My own experience: my work at YouTube Premium.

- “Popup Engineer”



In future pivots, I framed in two very different ways:

NFT Startup Founding Engineer

Product Engineer @ YouTube

- Growth team, A/B testing, driving signups, maximizing retention

Systems PhD Admissions

Growth Infra Eng. @ YouTube

- Designing scalable and resilient pop-up serving infra, 2B+ impressions per day

Good narrative gets people to bet on *you*

My experience has been: trajectory can make up for average of experiences

My own experience learning this:

- (unsuccessful) promotion: rejected for “not sustained enough to show trajectory”
- Grad school admissions committee:
 - reject some w/ 4 papers, no narrative
 - accept some w/ 0

Tuning Narratives: example

Oliver (younger Accel Scholar)

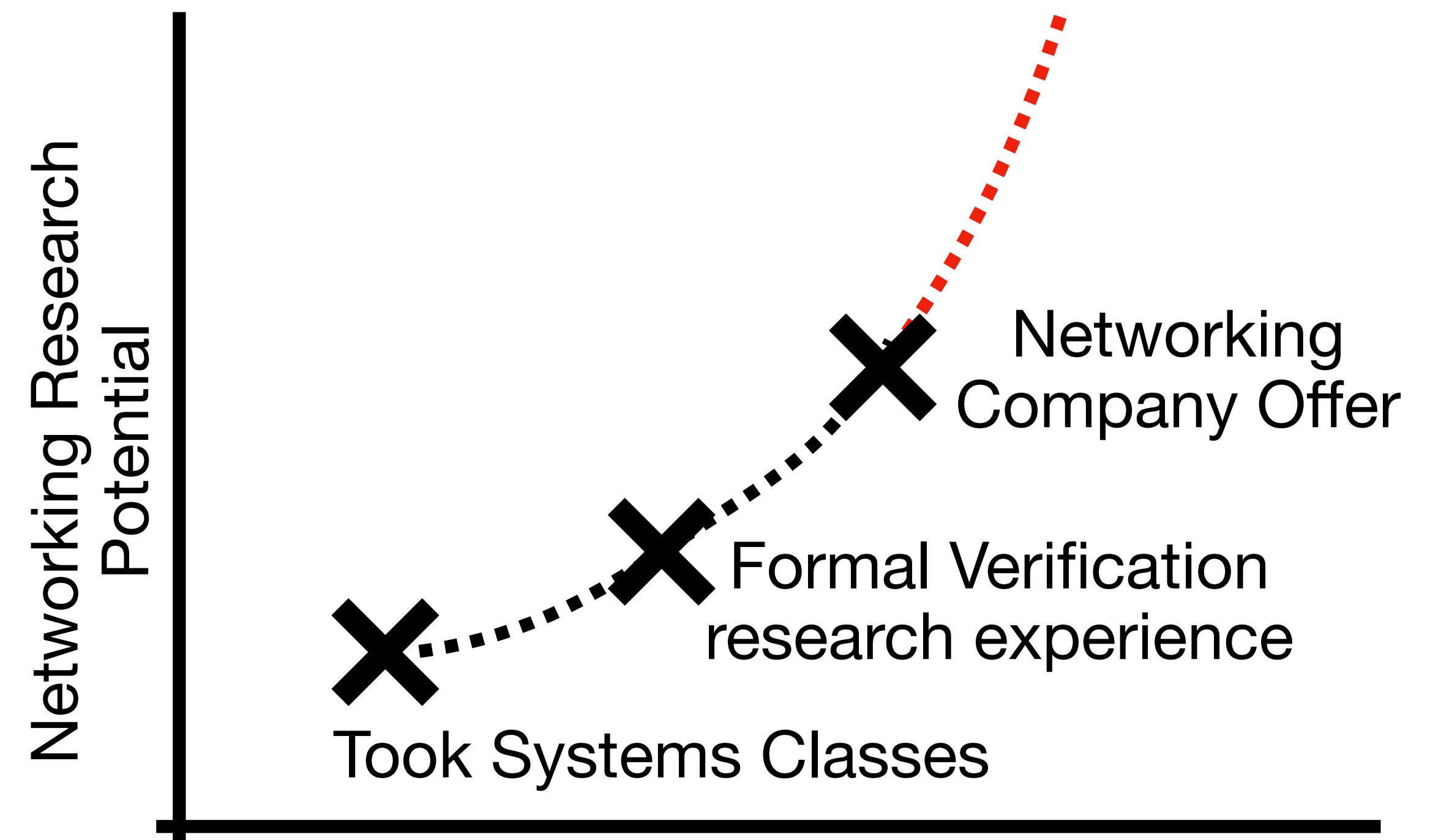


Oliver 7:02 PM

Hey Alex, would love to learn more about the research opportunity! Love systems — took 161, 162, 164, 186 and really enjoyed all of those classes — also familiar with Java and C (limited working experience with C++ constrained to some arduino/raspberry pi tinkering in EE classes)

Current rising senior @ Berkeley working under professor Sanjit Seshia (formal verification) on some autonomous vehicle stuff, although my research work is fairly auxiliary to the core research happening (so far I've just been helping write SMT translators/libraries)

Interning at Circle (financial services company) and I have an offer on hand for Starlink's distributed systems team for fall 2024, but i'd probably lean google if i had to pick between the two for the fall

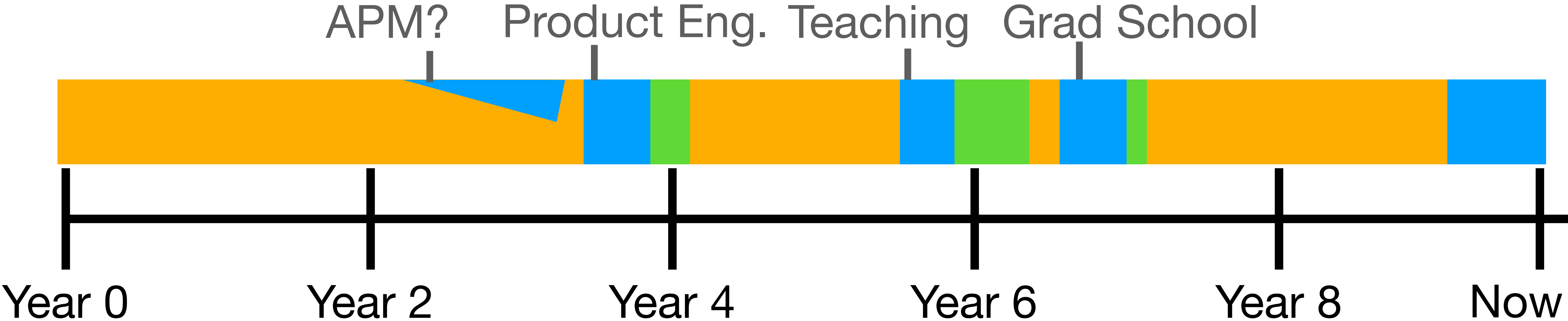
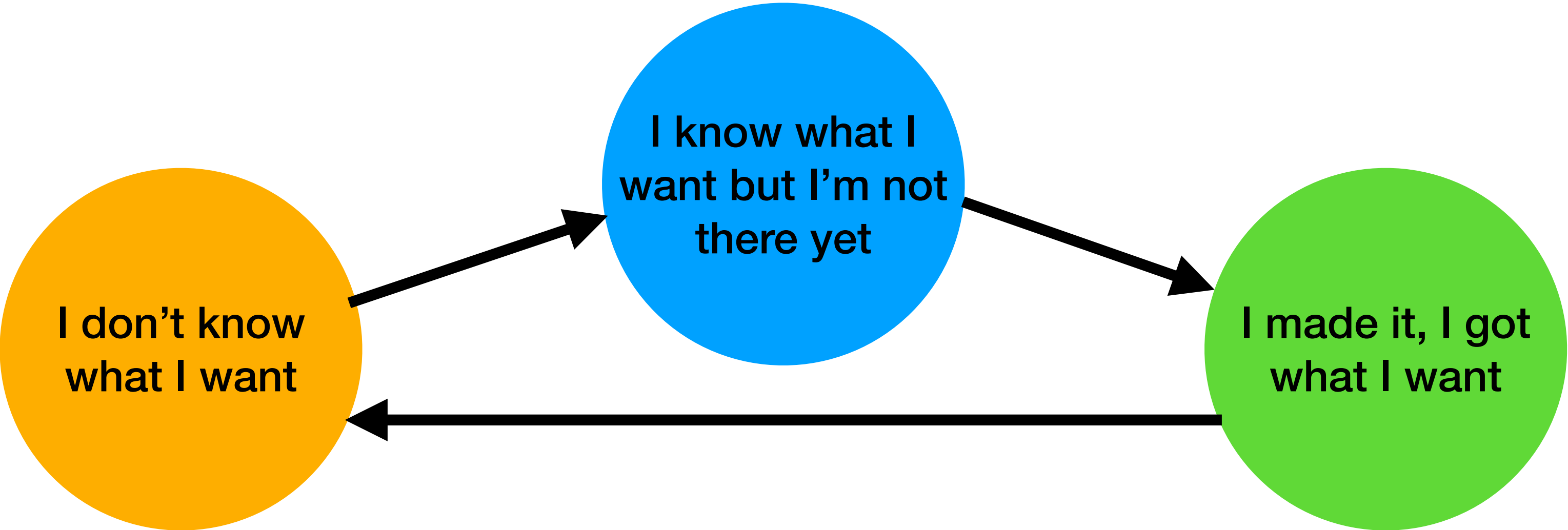


Context: Oliver responding to a posting about a PhD Student Researcher position.

Motivating observation

I spent a *lot* of time in the orange circle.

- Can be an anxious place



Motivating observation

Thinking in terms of current and future narratives can take away some of the anxiety in both cases. So, if in bucket, you should...




I don't know
what I want

Collect diverse & multifaceted new experiences...

Serves two purposes:

1. Figure out what you might want
2. Enables wider range of strong narratives in the future



I know what I
want but I'm not
there yet

Figure out criteria, and fill in any missing experience gaps for a strong narrative.

Show sustained history.

Takeaways

- Be intentional about constructing and presenting the best narrative about yourself for the opportunity you want.
 - People often betting on your ***potential***, tune the narrative to match their criteria.
- It's *ok* to still be **figuring out what you want**.
 - Best thing to do is explore around adjacent to what you enjoy, *expand* your experiences.
 - Exploration can be closer-to-home (front-end eng? Systems eng?) or more broad (art? music? economics?)
 - This enables you to
 - (1) figure out what you like more/less, and
 - (2) have more points to construct your narrative once you *do* find the direction you want.
- If you **know what you want**, pull together what you've done and focus on getting experiences that build trajectory on the relevant criteria.

Thanks!