

Assumptions About the Problem Lead to Solutions That Don't Solve Anybody's Problem

A guide to creating better creative briefs — why good briefs save time and money, frame problems correctly, and prevent you from fooling yourself.

"The first principle is that you must not fool yourself — and you are the easiest person to fool." — Richard Feynman

Visit almost any creative department in the world and you'll find that everybody there operates according to a simple, universal, can't-avoid-it truth: Creation is not the act of the unfettered and free. Creation is the act of embracing constraints.

In agency land, the constraints we embrace are called creative briefs. And if you're not creating thoughtful creative briefs, you're just relying on assumptions that'll come back to haunt you in the end.

Good Briefs Save Time and Money

At the center of its double-spaced, sans-serif'd heart, every brief is about saving the agency and the client time and money. Agencies and clients can't afford to rely on assumptions.

Assumptions about the problem to be solved lead to solutions that don't solve anybody's problem. That creates confusion. Which creates meetings. Which creates confused creatives. Which creates confused clients. Which creates mistrust, wastes time, and immolates an awful amount of money. All because of assumptions.

So a good creative brief — to borrow Woody Guthrie's guitar — is a machine that kills assumptions.

Good Briefs Frame the Problem to Be Solved

To kill assumptions, it's common practice for the strategy team to explicitly frame the client's problem (the what, the why) for the creative team to provide the solution (the how). Every agency brief is basically structured the same way:

- The problem to be solved
- The audience to target
- The single strategic insight
- Reasons to believe that insight
- Some sense of the brand

Every agency infuses its particular point of view into the briefing process. One might ask, 'What's the driving idea that will lead to famously effective work?' Another might want strategists to interrogate

their assumptions with questions like, 'Why would the target audience believe you?'

Good Briefs Don't Have Gaps

All briefs are about explicitly framing the problem to be solved. Nothing can get done until the strategy team completes that brief, and until creative receives its orders and understands the specific direction in which to march.

Good Briefs Provide a Common Foundation

A good brief is an indication that the research was thorough and communication with the client is good. A good brief starts the creative phase with clarity of purpose and a clear goal. A good brief acts as a contract between all parties. Without a written brief, there's no record of what we are expected to deliver or how the creative output will be evaluated.

Like the string Theseus used to escape the labyrinth, a good brief allows us to find our way back to where we started. It sets expectations, makes the process smoother, clarifies confusions, and allows a creative team to move more nimbly with fewer revisions.

Good Briefs Prevent Us from Fooling Ourselves

At the end of the day, a creative brief is the search for the best possible explanation of why a specific problem exists. Creating a brief is not unlike creating a scientific theory:

- Posit a theory (a guess for why something is how it is)
- Test your assumptions
- Be willing to drop bad theories when they don't pan out
- Seek the best possible criteria for reality

If you fool yourself — if you allow yourself to make unwarranted assumptions about the reality of the problem — there's a good chance the resulting creative won't speak to the true problem at hand.

Good Briefs Are Inspiring

Ultimately, agencies are in the business of making inspiring work. And to make that work, the creative brief, too, should be an object of inspiration. They should be some combination of anthropological insight and creative musing. Of rigorous ethic and joie de vivre. They should do the work, but have fun doing it.