

Assumptions about the problem to be solved lead to solutions that don't solve anybody's problem

A handy decision tree for better creative briefs.

 **Steve Bryant**
Head of Content

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"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 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.

This comes as a surprise to some. It comes as a mundanity to others. But regardless of its reception, its truth has significant consequences for how creative work gets done. Especially when you're doing that work for clients.

In agency land, the constraints that 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

So in order to kill those 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 isn't the same, but every agency brief is basically structured the same way. Those briefs include:

- the problem to be solved
- the audience to target
- the single strategic insight
- reasons to believe that insight
- some sense of the brand

Of course, every agency infuses its particular point of view and attitude into the briefing process. One agency might ask, "What's the driving idea that will lead to famously effective work?" That may sound like another way of asking, "What's the single strategic insight?" But words matter — that agency clearly cares about effectiveness in market.

Another agency might want strategists to interrogate their own assumptions behind their insights, in which case they might include a question on the brief like, "Why would the target audience believe you?"

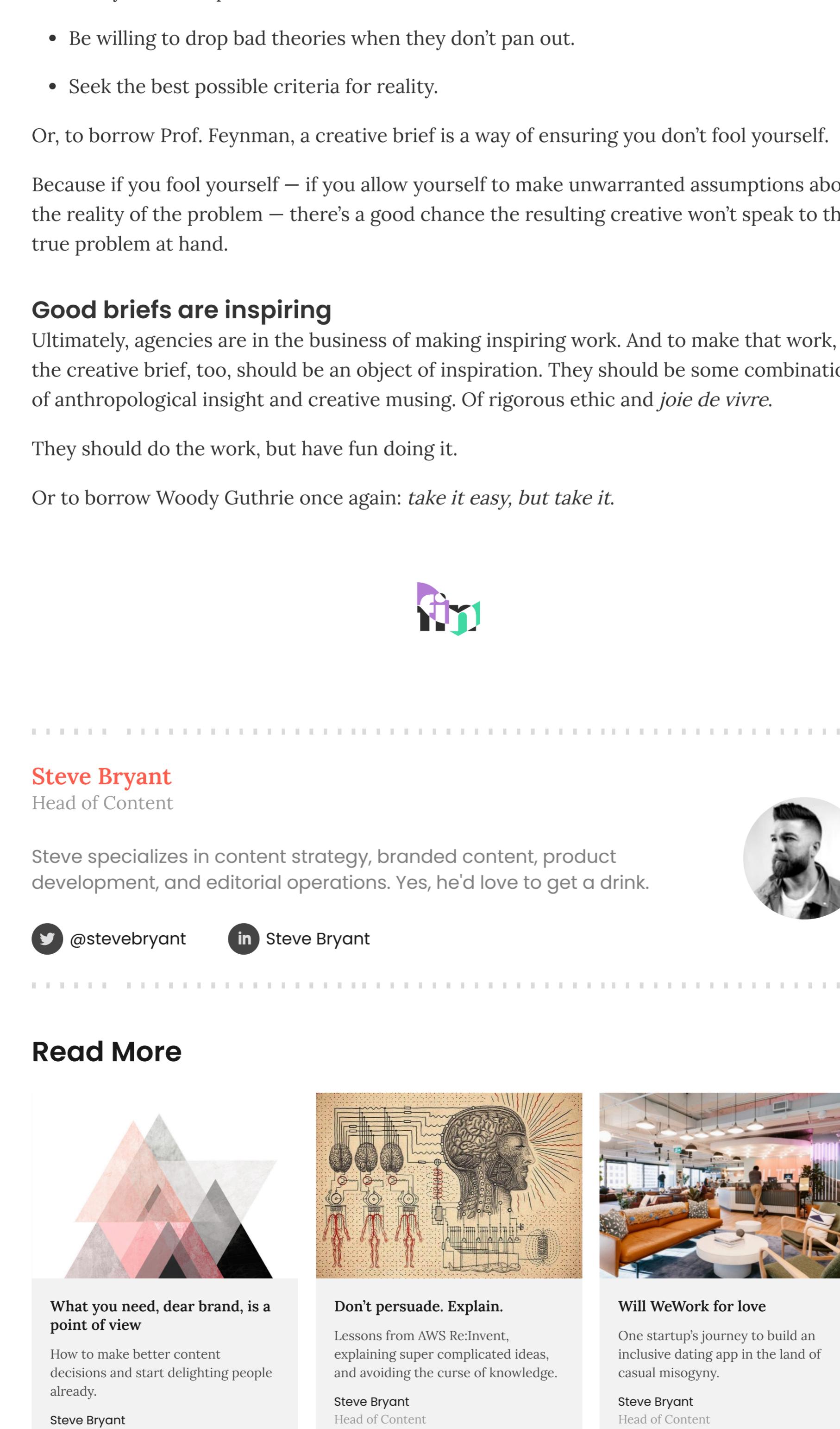
Our agency, too, infuses our briefs with our values — we always want to know, "What's the insight that will lead to shockingly useful and durably beautiful work?"

What we create needs to work in the market, and its design should rely on fundamentals — never fads.

Good briefs don't have gaps

All briefs are about explicitly framing the problem to be solved. And nothing — *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 creatively march.

Hence that recurring question you can might hear coming from a CD in our shop, itching to get started: Hey, is the creative brief ready yet?



Good briefs provide a common foundation

A good brief is an indication that the research was thorough and that the 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.

A good brief also sets expectations of what is to be done, and why. By setting those expectations, it makes the process of creating smoother and easier to communicate. It clarifies any nagging confusions. And all of that allows a creative team to move more nimbly and create on schedule with fewer revisions.

Good briefs prevent us from fooling ourselves

At the end of the day, a creative brief is, basically, the search for the best possible explanation of why a specific problem exists. In this way, creating a brief is not unlike creating a scientific theory. That is, in order to find a better explanation for a problem, you must first:

- 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.

Or, to borrow Prof. Feynman, a creative brief is a way of ensuring you don't fool yourself.

Because 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.

They should do the work, but have fun doing it.

Or to borrow Woody Guthrie once again: *take it easy, but take it.*

Steve Bryant
Head of Content

Steve specializes in content strategy, branded content, product development, and editorial operations. Yes, he'd love to get a drink.

 @stevebryant Steve Bryant

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And that point is a single sentence?

Yes

And who the audience is?

And it ends in a single strategic point?

Yes

Yezzir

Not exactly

Not exactly

Scissors

Not exactly

Scissors