

The Big Idea — Build Guide & 3-Minute Blurb

DISCOVER Framework · Stage C — Choose Your Story

Part 1 — How to Build Your Big Idea

According to Cole Nussbaumer Knaflc, the **Big Idea** (adapted from Nancy Duarte's *Resonate*) is “a single sentence that communicates what you are asking of your audience and the stakes for them if they act — or don't — on your suggestions. Forming a Big Idea forces you to slow down and communicate more intentionally.” (Storytelling with data. Before & after, Knaflc, Cisneros, & Velez (2025)).

What the Big Idea is not is a topic (“graduation trends in Engineering”), a single fact (“graduation fell 57%”), or a recap of everything you looked at.

The three ingredients

A strong Big Idea contains three things — the same three the exercise asks for:

1. **A conclusion.** Your point of view — the one thing you concluded.
2. **A so-what.** The stakes. Why should the listener care? What is being lost, risked, or made possible?
3. **An action.** What the conclusion implies we should do, or the decision it forces.

A scaffold to start from

If you're staring at a blank page, fill in one of these and then cut it down until it reads naturally:

“We assumed _____, but the data shows _____ — so unless we _____, we will _____.”

“_____ [conclusion], which means _____ [so-what], so we should _____ [action].”

Don't worry about getting it right the first time around. You will need to iterate.

Test your sentence

A good Big Idea passes all of these:

- It's one sentence.
- It takes a *position* — something a reasonable person could disagree with.
- It carries tension or stakes — a “but,” a risk, a cost of doing nothing.
- It points to a decision or an action.
- It survives the question “so what?”
- You could deliver it with the slides turned off.

Where it usually goes wrong

- **Too fuzzy.** It names a topic but takes no stance: “Engineering program has some scheduling challenges.”
- **Too long.** Three sentences stapled together with “and.” If you need “and” twice, you have two ideas so just pick one.
- **Just a fact.** A number with no so-what: “Graduation dropped 57%.” That's just a finding, not a story.
- **Buries the lead.** It opens with method or caveats instead of the point. Lead with the conclusion; the caveats go in the supporting detail.

Example

Too fuzzy: *“Female representation in Engineering was thought to be on the downward and there are a few reasons why.”*

→ A topic with no position and no stakes and one which leads with a biased assumption.

Just a fact: *“The representation of female PhD earners in Engineering has stabilized since 2020, and although Admissions have increased outreach, we have not seen growth, so maybe we should look at why.”*

→ Offers an accurate fact but does not offer an action or recommendation.

Good: *“The number of women earning engineering PhDs has plateaued for five years, and we can't grow representation until we survey incoming students to find out what's stalling the pipeline.”*

→ One sentence, with real stakes (can't grow representation), a point of view (it asserts a real claim).

[NEXT PAGE FOR PART 2]

Part 2 — The 3-Minute Blurb (HIST 218)

The following is a 3-minute blurb that Anna will read. It provides a short analysis on the synthetic course enrollment findings. Participants will then have 10-15 minutes to develop their own “Big Idea” either individually or with a partner. At the end of the allocated time for the exercise, participants and faculty will reconvene and a few volunteers will share their big idea. The Big Idea has to be a single sentence. One declarative sentence. No charts, no slides, no notes. The sentence should contain three things: a conclusion, a so-what, and an action. If you can say it in one line, you know what your story is. If you can't, you don't yet.

Let me walk you through what the data is telling us about HIST 218.

The first thing you'd notice if you opened the enrollment file is that the numbers are down. In 2022 the course had 76 students and then something changed in the scheduling policy. Last Fall it had 33. That's a 57% drop in three years. Maybe students just aren't interested in disease history anymore. Maybe it's run its course. Both are just assumptions.

When you break the enrollment down by *who* is actually enrolling we start seeing a pattern. **History majors**, who are required to take this course, show up at almost exactly the same rate every year — around 20 students, 2019 through 2025.

[Pause.]

However, **non-majors** are where the decrease is coming from. Public Health enrollment went from 20 students in 2022 to 5 in 2025. Pre-Health and Biology, from 14 to 3. Sociology, from 12 to 3. Non-major enrollment fell 77% in three years. The course used to be nearly three-quarters non-majors; today it's under 40%. The elective audience didn't shrink — it nearly vanished.

So the decline is real, but it isn't what it looks like. We are not losing our majors. We are losing everyone else.

Now, the enrollment data tells us *what* happened, but not *why*. For that we have a short survey of the students who added HIST 218 to their cart during registration and then never enrolled — 98 of them. And the first number is reassuring: their interest in the topic averages 4.0 out of 5, and 72% rated it a 4 or a 5. These are not people who think the course is boring. They intended to enroll.

[Pause.]

But there are two caveats. Eighty-eight percent of those 98 respondents are non-majors — History majors rarely abandon a course they're required to take, so they're almost absent from this survey. And everyone here got far enough to add the course *and* chose to write back; the students who never considered it at all aren't represented anywhere. So that 4.0 isn't proof the whole campus wants this course. It's proof that the people who almost took it did. It's the floor of demand among the interested — not the ceiling.

The most useful part of the survey is the answer to the question, *why didn't you enroll?* When we asked how much each factor weighed, a scheduling conflict with a required course was a major reason for 45 of the 98. The fact that the course runs only once a year, in the fall, was a major reason for 41. The early-morning time slot for 35 students.

[Pause.]

Those top three are the same problem, which is **Access** to the course. When we look at the free-text comments we see that Public Health and Pre-Health students describe required science labs (organic chemistry especially) sitting right on top of the fall morning slot. Graduating seniors couldn't wait another year for it to come around again. And students who didn't realize it counted toward their gen-ed or their electives until it was too late.

Additionally, the course description came up 20 times. Students indicate that it doesn't make clear what the class offers, or that it satisfies their requirements. A closed or full section comes up 13 times. And the instructor? Only Five so the instructor is probably not the problem.

[Pause.]

So that's the data. Enrollment is down 57% in three years, but the required majors never moved, and every lost seat is a non-major. Those students aren't telling us the course is bad; they're rating it 4 out of 5. They're telling us they can't get in: a once-a-year, fall-only, early-morning schedule that lands right on top of their required courses. And because the course runs only once a year, the next chance to fix it is the registration window a few months out. If we miss it, we wait a full year.

[Pause. Look up.]

That's everything I have for you.

Now I want you to take ten to fifteen minutes alone or with a partner if you'd like, and draft me a single sentence. No charts, no slides, no notes. The sentence should stand on its own and contain three things: a conclusion, a so-what, and an action.

If you can say it in one line, you know what your story is. If you can't, you don't yet.

Go.