SQL KONFERENZ 2026



DATA VIZ DIANA

The great dashboard debate

Can you really tell data stories with a business dashboard?

Diana Ackermann



Can a business dashboard tell a data story?

Yes

No

Sometimes

raise your hand

Even the experts disagree.

"Dashboards don't tell stories. They never were designed to."

Brent Dykes – Effective Data Storytelling

❌ **NO**

Some dashboards can and should tell a story.

Nick Desbarats – Practical Dashboards

❓ **MAYBE - some**

“I always thought that you can’t tell stories with dashboards, until someone showed me otherwise”

Julia Zukrigl – Data Story Lab

✅ **YES**

The confusion has a name.

Storytelling in dashboards is heavily promoted by BI vendors.

Microsoft | Power Platform About Power Platform Products Pricing Resources

What is data storytelling?

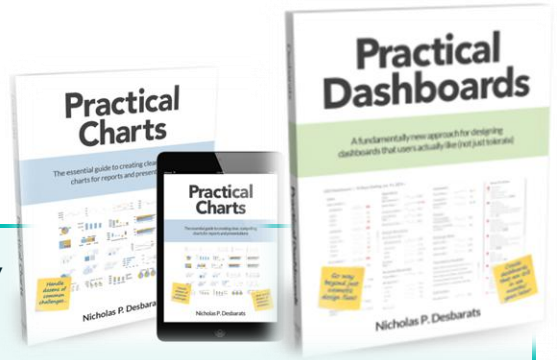
Data storytelling is the concept of building a compelling narrative based on complex data and analytics that help tell your story and influence and inform a particular audience.



https://www.microsoft.com/en/power-platform/products/power-bi/topics/data-storytelling

The core terms

What is a dashboard (part I)?



"A dashboard is any display with a bunch of charts on it"

Nick Desbarats – Practical Charts, More Practical Charts (2023) & Practical Dashboards (tbd: 2026)

Two types of dashboards

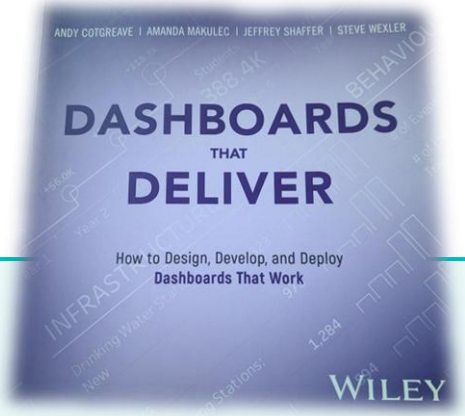
"Live Data" Dashboards

- Status Monitoring: Entity, Area or Role
- Performance Analysis
- Canned Analysis

"Static Data" Dashboards

- Persuasion
- Explanation
- Engagement

What is a dashboard (part II)?



"A dashboard is a visual display of data used to monitor conditions and/or facilitate understanding."

Steve Wexler, Jeffrey Shaffer & Andy Cotgreave, Amanda Makulec – Dashboards that deliver (2025)

monitor – facilitate understanding

Designed for multiple visits	Same dashboard, different data each time	User can or cannot drive the exploration

What is a data story?

"Data storytelling is a structured approach for communicating data insights, and it involves a combination of three key elements: data, visuals, and narrative."

Brent Dykes: Effective Data Storytelling (2020)

STRUCTURED · ONE audience · ONE insight

Linear progression	Author controls the path	Built for a single moment in time

Can a business dashboard actually tell a data story?

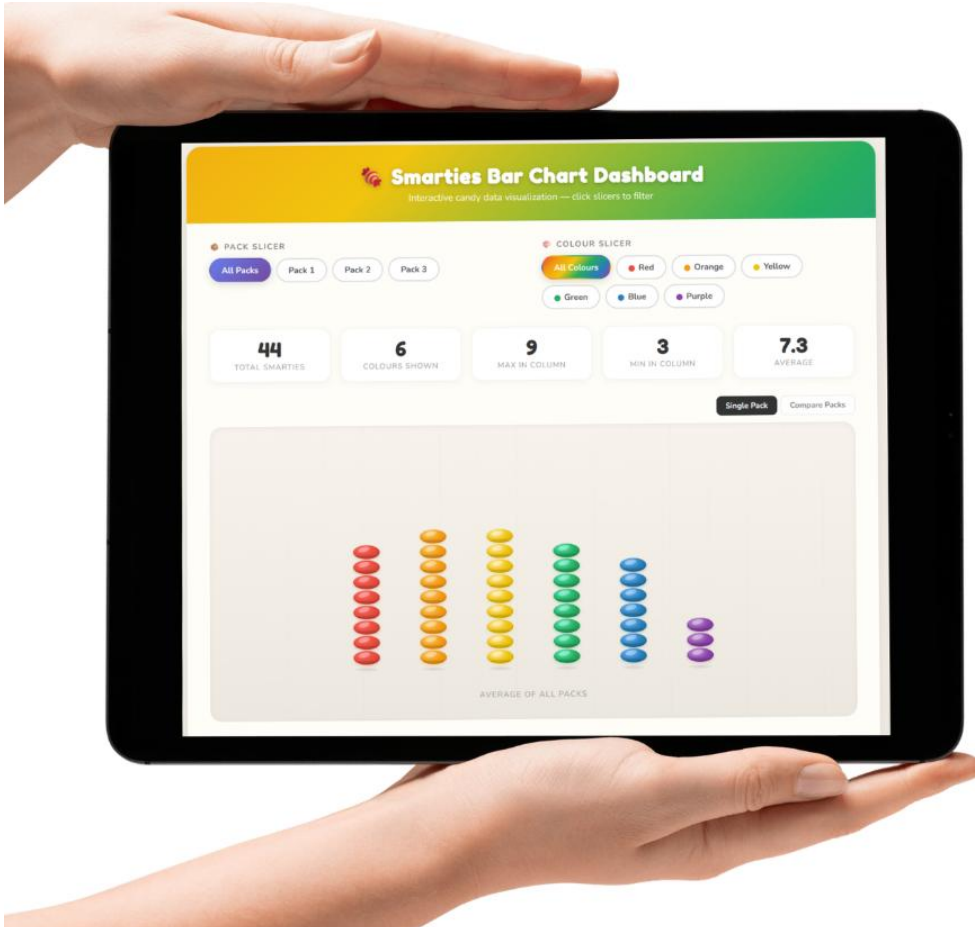
A data story has 5 elements.

Element*	Question it answers
Setting	What's the context?
Hook	What was unexpected?
Rising Insights	What evidence builds the case?
Aha Moment	What is the central insight?
Solution & Next Steps	What do we do now?

**According to Brent Dykes: Effective Data Storytelling*

Remember the smarties?





A data story has 5 elements.

Element	Question it answers	Dashboard?
Setting	What's the context?	❌ Human must provide
Hook	What was unexpected?	⚠️ Can surface, can partially frame
Rising Insights	What evidence builds the case?	✅ Dashboards do this well
Aha Moment	What is the central insight?	⚠️ Can show, cannot force a reaction
Solution & Next Steps	What do we do now?	❌ Human must provide

A dashboard can find 3 of these 5. The other 2 you have to bring yourself.

Designed to do opposite things

Dashboard	Story
Non-linear	Linear
User explores freely	Author guides the path
Multiple users, multiple goals	One audience, one message
Live data, story changes daily	Fixed moment in time
Self-service by design	Passive consumption

Sometimes dashboards can tell a story.

❌ NOT a story	✅ CAN be a story
Chart collection - charts with a title	Guided user journey with structure
No narrative arc	Forced sequence: What → Why → Now what?
No guided discovery	Context before data
30 potential stories at once	One central insight, dominant on screen

Can a business dashboard actually tell a data story?

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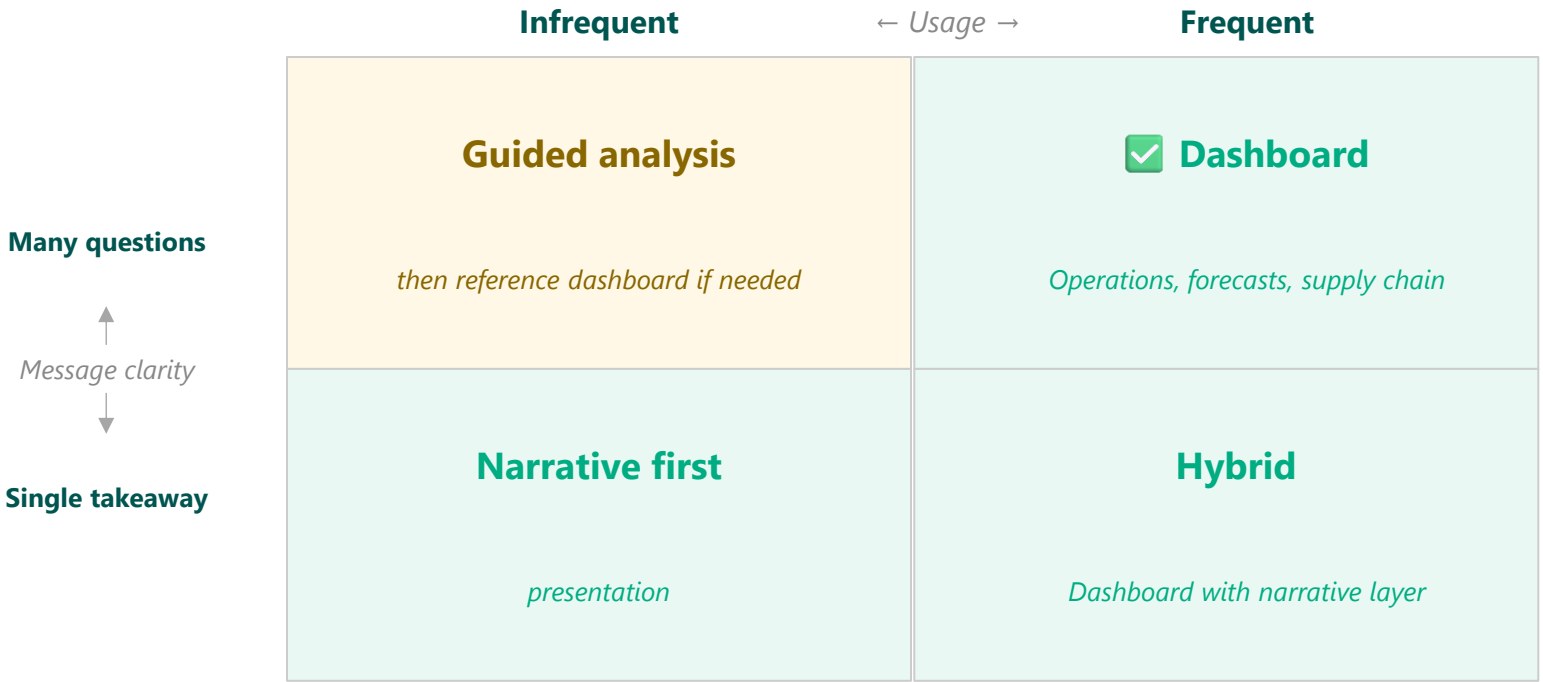
Not binary. A spectrum.

Chart Collection	Guided Dashboard	Story Dashboard
Charts + title	**Structure + hierarchy**	**Forced sequence**
No flow. No guide.	Context cues	One central insight
No context.	Better UX	Guided discovery

Most ‘story dashboards’ are actually Guided Dashboards. That’s fine - just don’t call them stories.

Dashboard or data story: how do you choose?

My 2×2 data storytelling check.



Introducing STORYFIT.

When you need precision — run the STORYFIT test. Score each dimension 0–2.

S	**Stakeholder intent**	Persuasion vs. ongoing monitoring?
T	**Tempo**	One-off vs. daily refresh?
O	**One core message?**	Single insight vs. many open questions?
R	**Repeatability**	Unique analysis vs. recurring questions?
Y	**Why needed?**	Must argue causality vs. descriptive views?
F	**Friction**	Complex setup vs. simple KPI structure?
I	**Integrity**	Contested metrics vs. trusted stable data?
T	**Triggers for action**	No thresholds vs. clear alerts and owners?

Score 0–2 per dimension , max 16 points.

STORYFIT: What does your score mean?

12–16	**Dashboard-first** Build the dashboard. Add light annotations and alerts.
8–11	**Hybrid** Lead with a short narrative (one-pager or 5-slide deck) that links to a focused dashboard.
0–7	**Narrative-first** Memo, annotated charts, or guided walkthrough. Optionally append a slim reference dashboard.

What can we borrow from data storytellers?

What’s missing from most dashboards:

Context	Narrative	Hierarchy	Action
WHY did it happen?	*What does it mean?*	*What matters most?*	*What do we do next?*

Dashboards can borrow from storytelling. 3 storytelling ingredients for Power BI.

1 Insight titles & subtitles

Not descriptive, conclusive

Title concludes. Subtitle explains.

❌ Sales by Region

✅ *North is 23% below target / Driven entirely by Q3 returns*

2 Guided page sequence

Name pages after questions

Page 1: WHAT?

Page 2: WHY?

Page 3: NOW WHAT?

3 Visual hierarchy & color

Make context visible

Biggest number = most important, use F or Z pattern, etc.

Color & Symbols as narrative and guiding principle

These won't make your dashboard a story. But they'll help users find the story faster.

Technique 1: Insight titles & subtitles

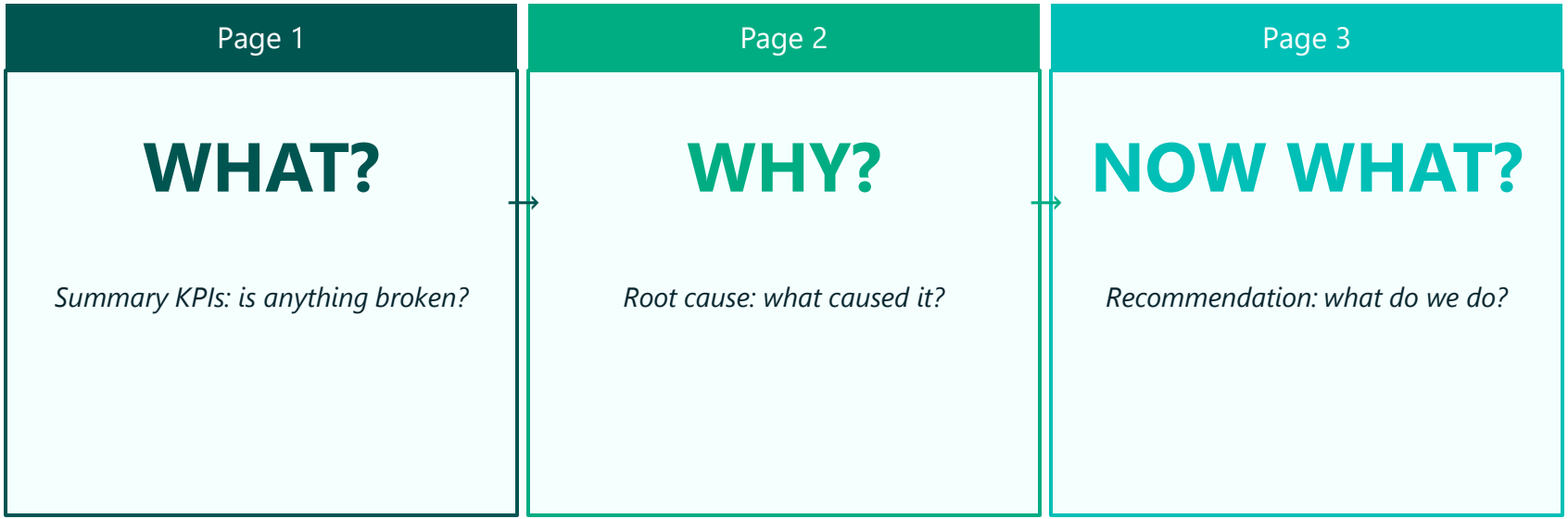
The single highest-ROI change you can make today. Takes 15 minutes per dashboard.

❌ Descriptive title	✅ Insight titles
Sales by Region	**North is 23% below target | Driven by Q3 returns**
Monthly Revenue Trend	**Revenue recovered in Q3 | Margin hasn't**
Customer Satisfaction Score	**NPS dropped in July | Correlates with product update**
Product Performance	**Product A drives 80% of profit | And only 30% of volume**

Title concludes. Subtitle explains. Two sentences. The story the chart can't write itself.

Technique 2: Guided page sequencing.

Name pages after questions, not data tables. It forces you to think about the story.



Most Power BI reports have pages named after data tables. Stop. Name them after questions.

Technique 3: Visual hierarchy & color

The eye decides what matters before the brain does. Make that work for you.

❌ Everything equal weight	✅ Hierarchy applied
All KPIs scattered or in right corner	**Use F or Z patterns for hierachy**
Multiple colors used inconsistently	**One accent color: reserved for exceptions only**
All bars same color	**Grey baseline, highlight only the outlier**
Red and green everywhere	**Red means action required: nothing else**

Interactivity: friend or enemy of narrative?

✅ Helps storytelling	❌ Destroys storytelling
Bookmarks /navigation force a predefined sequence	Slicers let users leave your narrative path
Drill-through on the story's central question only	Filters change which insight is 'central'
Tooltips add context without breaking flow	Multiple pages with equal visual weight

In Power BI, smart navigation is your best friend for storytelling. Slicers are your enemy.

If you need slicers, you're building an exploration tool, not a story.

What you'll do differently tomorrow:

Before building	Decide what question it needs to answer and how often? Different job, different tool! Or use STORYFIT to factor in more facets.
This week	Change 3 dashboard titles from descriptive to insight-led. Takes 15 minutes total.
Next report	Structure as 3 pages: WHAT? → WHY? → NOW WHAT? Name them that way.

Three things. No new tools. No new skills. Just three decisions before you open Power BI.

Thank you. Keep the debate going.

Brent Dykes	Effective Data Storytelling (book, 2020)
Steve Wexler, Jeffrey Shaffer, Andy Cotgreave, Amanda Makulec	Dashboards That Deliver (book, 2025)
Nick Desbarats	Practical Charts (2023), Practical Dashboards (book, tbd 2026)
Julia Zukrigl	Founder of Data Story Lab https://datastorylab.net/

And please give feedback!!



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