

# Chekhov's gun (or the SFW test)



*“Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it’s not going to be fired, it shouldn’t be hanging there.”*

Anton Chekhov

I’ve no idea how useful this advice is if you’re writing a play or a novel, but I always have it in the back of my mind when I’m building a strategy document. It’s a reminder that when presenting your thinking, your story will be more clearly understood if every insight, idea and source of inspiration has a clear implication for the strategy you’ve developed.

If you’re allergic to rules of thumb that reference nineteenth century playwrights, the same idea was expressed more succinctly by someone I used to work with in the early noughties, when swearing at work was still allowed. I’d talk him through a series of flipchart pages or PowerPoint slides containing all of the interesting data and insights I’d gathered. If he failed to understand the relevance of a particular point, then he would bark at me:

*“So fucking what?”*

In response, I’d either need to explain why the point was relevant and useful, or move the offending slide to an appendix (or just delete it altogether). To begin with, he used to bark this at me so frequently that we developed “SFW” as a shorthand and it has stayed with me ever since as a reminder to omit superfluous or irrelevant elements from strategy documents, as well as to explain the relevance of every remaining element.

Never introduce an insight without a clear explanation of its impact.

Aside from confidence and experience, I think this is one of the defining characteristics that separates senior and junior strategists. When you’re starting out, you want to share every interesting point you uncover. But as you gain experience, you become a stricter curator and it’s no longer enough for a point to be merely interesting: it also has to have a material impact on the outcome you’re recommending.

The result is clearer, more concise strategy as well as tighter, better strategy presentations. People will be more inclined to listen to the points you make once they understand that every point you make has a purpose.

I use the SFW test every day (or at least every working day). I apply it to every slide of a presentation and every element of a strategy. It saves me time and spares my clients from interminably long, impenetrable strategy documents. It’s one of the simplest and most powerful tools in a brand strategist’s toolkit.

But there’s one big drawback.

The SFW test is easy to use as an excuse for filtering out evidence that contradicts your preferred strategy: “this insight doesn’t fit with the direction we’re recommending, so we should hide it in an appendix, or delete it to avoid confusing our recommendation.” But this isn’t what the SFW test is intended for. Filtering out irrelevant facts or evidence that points in no particular direction is absolutely fine. Suppressing evidence that contradicts or undermines your strategic recommendations isn’t.

Consider things from your audience’s point of view. They need to learn two things:

1. Exactly what is the strategy you’re recommending, and
2. How credible is that strategy?

The SFW test is relevant to BOTH questions. In terms of the first question, it should be used to tell a clear story about the strategy you’re recommending and the supporting evidence in favour of that strategy.

In terms of the second question, I'd argue that the credibility of a strategy (as well as the integrity of the strategist) is actually helped by a clear assessment of the risk factors or relevant mitigating evidence. In more prosaic terms, if people think your strategy is a one-sided story then they will be less likely to believe it.

There's a difference between presenting a strategy and pitching a strategy. In the latter case, you're just trying to convince people that what you're telling them is right and all the evidence points in the same direction (even if it doesn't). In the former, you're trying to help people understand a particular way forward and this should include an assessment of potential risks or drawbacks you've uncovered.

Not every rifle you hang on your wall needs to point in the same direction.