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NARRATIVE COACHING



The Content Curve

*Leading from the edges
in an AI age*

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is the oldest tool we have.

From cave paintings to cuneiform tablets to corporate decks, we've been recording and sharing narratives for millennia. Today — whether we craft strategy presentations, pitch to investors, or write legal briefs — we are all, one way or another, engaged in storytelling. But the modern workplace leaves little room for the deep thinking and refinement that exceptional storytelling demands.

A paradox confronts today's knowledge workers: we must produce more compelling work than ever before, yet the pressure to deliver quickly and at scale forces us to sacrifice the very things that make our work stand out — originality, nuance, and genuine human connection.



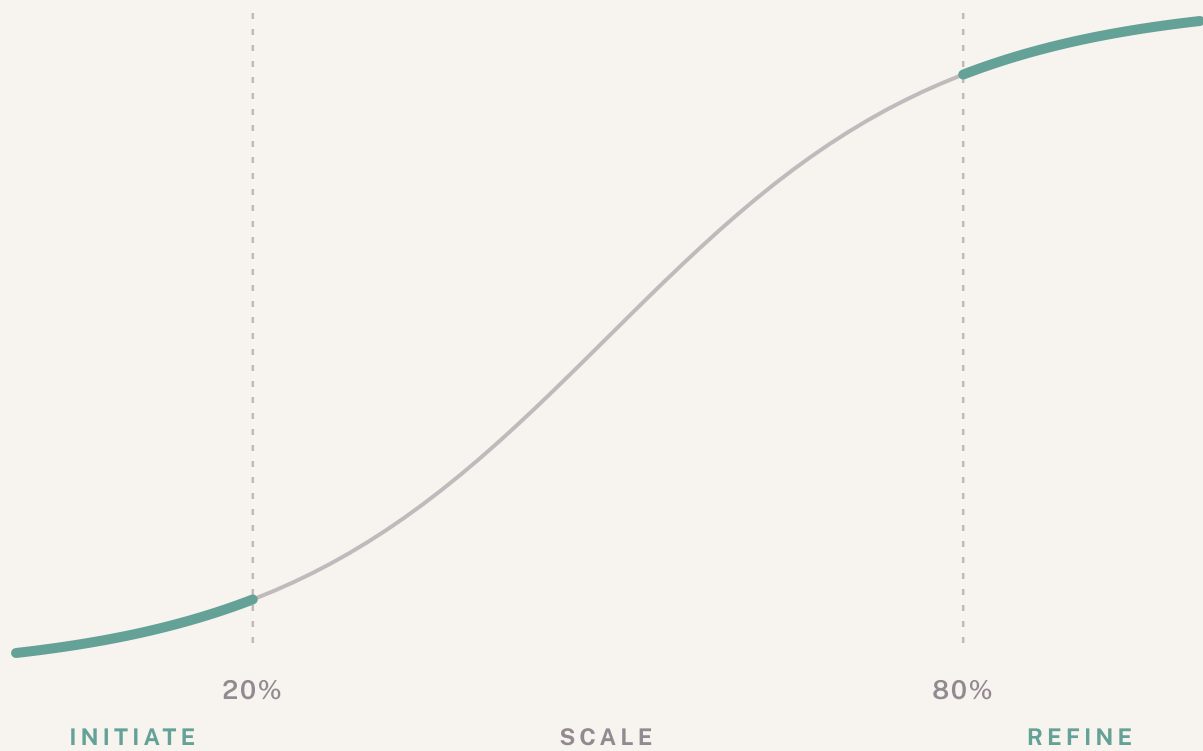
What do well-intentioned creatives do when a deadline looms? Pull up an old template, swap the details, and race to get something into stakeholders' hands.

The result? Another piece of content that checks all the boxes but fails to resonate. Another story lost in the noise. This paper introduces **The Content Curve** — a framework that maps the natural ebb and flow of creative work, and shows where AI belongs in it.

THE CONTENT CURVE

Human creativity leads on the edges.

Creative work moves through three phases. Our uniquely human capabilities shine brightest at the two ends — while the middle is where AI now does its heaviest lifting.



01 · INITIATE

0–20%

Where raw ideas are born and nurtured through deep, unstructured thinking.

02 · SCALE

20–80%

Where promising concepts are developed and tested through rapid iteration.

03 · REFINE




80–100%

Where human discernment shapes work into its final, resonant form.

ACROSS PROFESSIONS

One curve, every discipline.

Traditionally, professionals get bogged down in the middle — wrestling first drafts, organizing information, adapting content for new formats. Today's AI excels at exactly that.

	INITIATE	SCALE	REFINE
 Philosopher	Deep reflection and research on a complex ethical dilemma and its real-world implications.	Draft initial argument outlines and create rough concept maps of the key ideas.	Hone language for clarity and address potential counterarguments.
 Talk Show Producer	Synthesize the week's news, brainstorm guests, and map the arc of the show.	Draft multiple scripts and detailed crew instructions.	Fine-tune segments, run rehearsals, and make last-minute adjustments.
 Software Developer	Conceptualize new features and solutions; whiteboard the user's needs.	Code implementation and testing.	Debugging, optimization, and refinement of the experience.

By taking on this heavy lifting, AI frees our cognitive resources for the truly human aspects of creativity — propelling a project from 20% to 80% faster than ever before.

Trapped in the middle.

We underestimate how much creative energy is consumed by tasks that don't leverage our unique human capabilities — adapting content for different platforms, synthesizing vast amounts of information, selling ideas to internal stakeholders, handling formatting and data entry. These take up mental space and time that could fuel higher-value work.



Human ingenuity shines brightest at the edges of the creative process — yet most of us toil in the middle, where our capabilities are least utilized.

Although we recognize the drain these activities cause, most knowledge workers find themselves unable to escape this middle ground. Artificial intelligence is poised to change that dynamic — indeed, it already has. But several structural and psychological forces conspire to keep us here.

WHY WE STAY

Three forces keep us there.

01 Sunk-cost fallacy

Continuing down a chosen path because of past investment, even when it's no longer optimal. A marketing team persists with a campaign that clearly isn't resonating — simply because they've already poured in the time. The result is the best of limited options, not the best possible outcome.

02 Fear of uncertainty

The pressure to reassure stakeholders with consistent, linear progress — weekly check-ins, milestone tracking, predetermined deliverables. But creative breakthroughs rarely conform to such patterns, and the rigid structure forces half-baked ideas out prematurely, just to have something to show.

03 Consensus culture

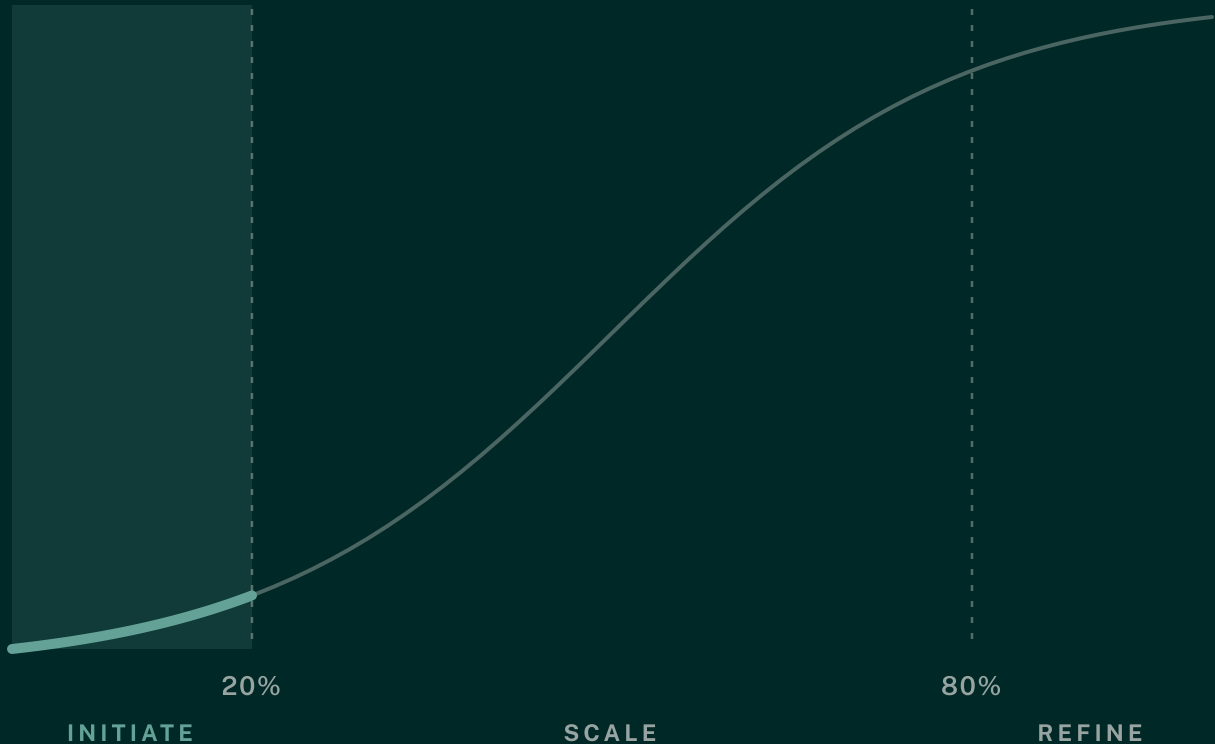
Many organizations have stretched the genuine need for collaboration into "design by committee," where unique visions get watered down to appease everyone. Flattening hierarchies and collaborative tools make it ever easier for more people to weigh in on every creative decision.

As automation handles more routine work, there's a growing premium on human creativity — yet our work structures often inhibit the very processes they aim to foster.

Initiate

01

0–20% · Nurturing the creative spark



03 · INITIATE

Nurturing the creative spark.

In most work environments, the Initiate phase — where ideas should be generated and cultivated — falls short of its potential. It calls for time and space to think deeply, to explore without the pressure to produce immediate results. Unfortunately, the modern workplace is rarely hospitable to that kind of free-flowing ideation.

Many of our best ideas arrive during commutes, in the shower, or over drinks with colleagues. But they slip away — forgotten or dismissed before they can be properly developed. Even when we jot them down, we usually lack a place to store them, let alone an environment that encourages their growth.



A proper Initiate phase gives us permission to embrace the messy, half-baked — but wholly necessary — sludge that precedes a finished product.

Thankfully, with today's generative AI tools — and a few tried-and-true analog strategies — we can make the most of a phase that so often gets shortchanged.

STRATEGIES

Three moves for a richer Initiate.

01 Set up your creative universal inbox

Build a frictionless system for capturing fleeting thoughts — voice memos, note apps, physical notebooks. Borrowed from David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, it should be multimodal: quick voice notes on the commute, iPhone photos of napkin sketches at lunch.

02 Translate your unstructured data

Feed those collected thoughts to AI to surface recurring themes and directions — without imposing structure too early. Today's multimodal models read handwriting, transcripts, and sketches alike, finding connections you might have missed. The more you give them, the better they perform.

03 Schedule unstructured thinking time

Set aside regular blocks — daily 30-minute sessions or weekly deep dives — and reframe freewriting from luxury to necessity. Aim for 1,000 words a session; a week yields close to 10,000. Messy and incoherent, perhaps, but all yours — and valuable fuel for the AI.

CASE STUDY

Patti's Predictable Pitches

Patti, a director of strategy at a creative agency, used to approach new client pitches with dread. As deadlines loomed, she'd pull up old pitch templates and retrofit new ideas into existing frameworks. The result was functional, but lacked the spark that could set her agency apart.

For her next big pitch, she changed the order of operations. Instead of diving into presentation formats, she dedicated three full days to deep, unstructured thinking about the client's needs, industry trends, and innovative approaches.

At the end, Patti had a wealth of raw material. She used AI-powered tools to organize it — identifying recurring themes, unexpected connections, and promising directions she hadn't initially recognized. The result was a pitch that told a completely different story: one that emerged naturally from her dive into the client's world, rather than being reverse-engineered to fit a template.

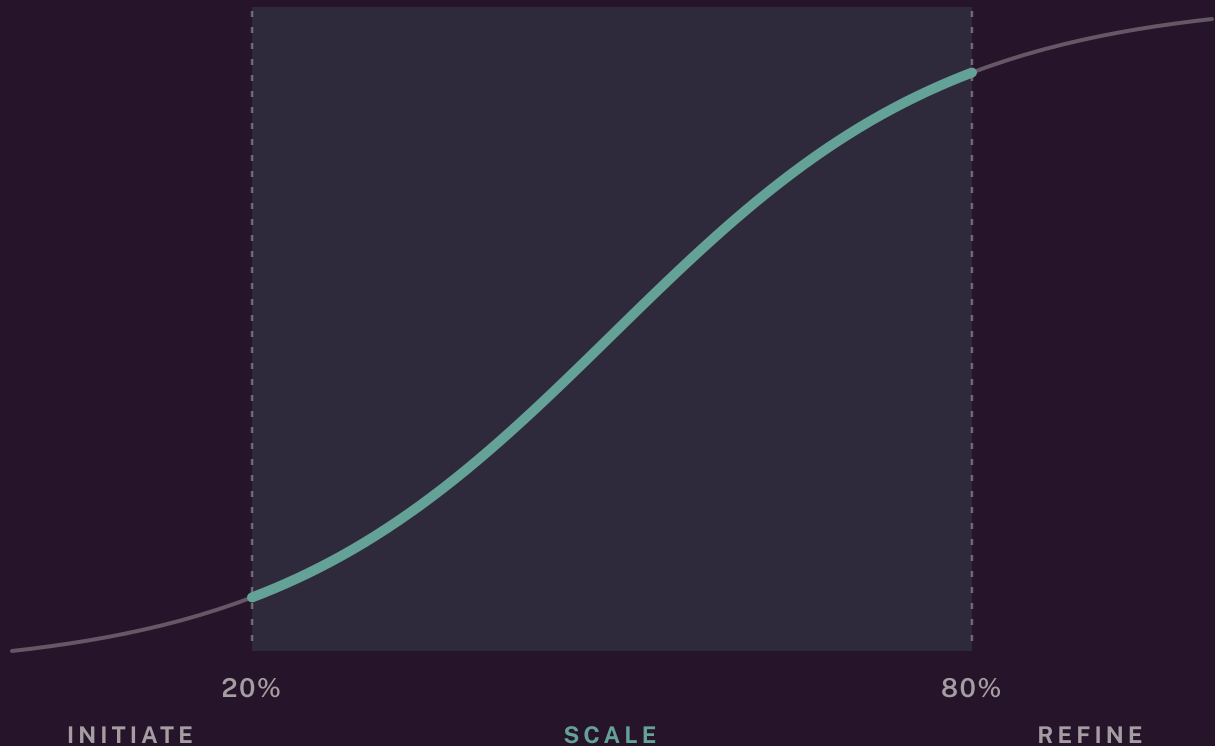
IN PRACTICE · INITIATE

- An HR director spends 20 minutes freewriting conflict-resolution strategies before mediating a tense department dispute.
- A copywriter free-writes a stream-of-consciousness history of a brand before crafting its new slogan.
- A software engineer maps potential user journeys on a whiteboard before writing a single line of code.

Scale

02

20–80% · Accelerating idea development



04 · SCALE

Navigating and accelerating idea development.

The Scale phase is where promising concepts take shape — transforming from abstract ideas into tangible prototypes. During it, we confront two competing truths.

Creativity thrives on volume |

The first idea is rarely the best one. The more concepts we can generate and test, the higher our chances of stumbling on something truly groundbreaking.

Prototyping is expensive ||

Developing even basic prototypes consumes time and energy. Traditional processes force us to commit early, because exploring multiple paths feels prohibitively costly.



These tensions — plus the pressure for visible progress — keep us in the middle far longer than we need to be.

To resolve them, we embrace generative AI tools built for quick prototyping and iteration. By letting teams explore a wider range of possibilities in parallel — without the time commitment normally required to flesh out an idea — AI eases the pain of starting over and sets us up for more satisfying, innovative results in less time.

STRATEGIES

Parallel processing for ideas.

01 Rapid prototyping

Where traditional prototyping meant vague outlines or basic wireframes, AI generates detailed mockups, written content, and functional code at unprecedented speed. Instead of one embarrassing "work-begun-two-hours-ago" draft, present stakeholders several high-fidelity prototypes — each fully exploring a different direction, all in parallel.

02 Tighter feedback loops

Rather than circulating drafts for days, gather feedback from a dozen stakeholders and feed it all into a model that instantly analyzes it, identifies common themes, flags conflicts, and suggests solutions. You remain the creative director, making the final calls — now with a tool that helps you navigate contradictory opinions far faster than before.

IN PRACTICE · SCALE

- A UX designer generates multiple app-interface mockups — different color schemes and layouts — in a matter of minutes.

- A publicist drafts several versions of a press release, each emphasizing a different aspect of the story.

- A marketing manager produces multiple tagline and ad-copy variations, each targeting a different audience segment.

CASE STUDY

Brad's Boring Brand Book

Brad is a creative director at a branding agency. With a week left before an important client presentation, he found himself stuck with two underwhelming options. The tight timeline and sunk costs left no room to revisit and refine — forcing him to present work he knew wasn't exceptional.

This time, Brad takes an AI-enhanced approach. Instead of settling for two half-baked options, he spends the first two days generating a wide array of concept directions — quick, rough sketches expanded, in constant dialogue with his AI model, into fleshed-out visual worlds.

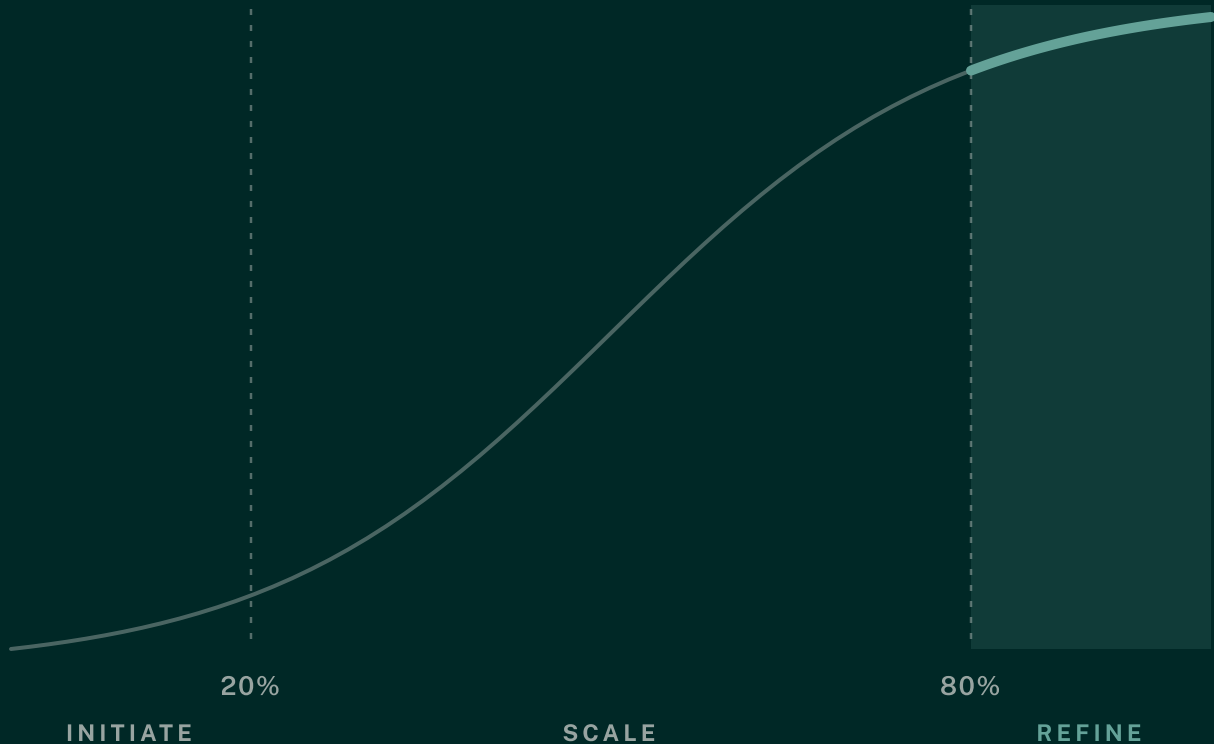
With that expanded set, he runs tight feedback loops: presenting rough concepts internally and externally, gathering reactions, and feeding them straight back into the AI. By week's end he has not just a solid primary concept but a range of well-developed alternatives — giving the client meaningful choices and demonstrating real depth, without more time or resources than the original approach.

The Scale phase, enhanced by AI, becomes a playground for the parallel processing of ideas — turning a traditionally linear, rigid workflow into the flexible, iterative model that true creativity demands.

Refine

03

80–100% · Precision and empathy



05 · REFINE

Perfecting output with precision and empathy.

In the Refine phase we face the challenge of preserving our authentic voice in an AI-saturated environment. This is where we polish the narrative, imbue it with distinctive character, and ensure it resonates deeply with its intended audience.

But looming deadlines and the exhaustion of earlier stages mean we tend to gloss over it. These finishing touches are exactly what elevate work from good to exceptional — yet they're the first thing sacrificed in the rush to deliver. Objectivity is another hurdle: as we become invested, confirmation bias sets in, and we see what we expect to see.



The Refine phase is where our uniquely human capabilities truly shine — nuanced judgment, empathy, and lived experience that AI, for all its power, cannot replicate.

STRATEGIES

Where AI assists, but you decide.

01 Harness collective wisdom

Establish a network of trusted colleagues for reciprocal review — fresh perspectives illuminate blind spots. Then go further: feed those diverse opinions into an AI chat and let it help you prioritize fixes and weigh common criticisms quickly.

02 Edit with empathy

Build personas to view your work through your audience's eyes. AI can assume a generic customer or board director and broaden your perspective — but it cannot replicate *your* board's quirks, your organization's politics, or a client's recent rebrand. Use AI for generalized viewpoints; rely on lived experience for the rest.

03 Cultivate distance

Build in time to step away before final refinement — that mental distance is crucial for a fresh return. It's only possible when you've used AI in the Scale phase to develop a prototype early, rather than racing to assemble the basic structure against the clock.

IN PRACTICE · REFINE

- An industrial designer 3D-prints a prototype and leaves it on the desk for a week, interacting with it casually to uncover usability issues.
- A film editor steps away from a nearly-finished cut for a few days, then rewatches it in a different environment to gauge its emotional impact more objectively.

CASE STUDY · A CAUTIONARY TALE***The ABCs of RFPs***

A defense contractor prepares a proposal for a major IT project. The team begins with ambitions of fresh, jargon-free language that would stand out in a competitive RFP process. But as the proposal develops through multiple stakeholder reviews, the language becomes bogged down in acronyms and familiar industry speak.

With so many stakeholders involved, the draft takes a long time to flesh out. A consensus-based culture demands staggered iterations and approvals, which gradually consume the time available for fine-tuning the punch of each sentence.

By the time the team has a cohesive draft, every requirement is answered — but the language has reverted to the same old jargon they set out to avoid. With 24 hours left, there's no time for wordsmithing. They ship a serviceable but uninspired version: it meets the requirements, and lacks the distinctive quality they envisioned at the outset.

Executed with care, the Refine phase isn't just a final shine. It's how we ensure our work fulfills its potential — setting it apart in a crowded landscape of ideas.

Mastering the curve.

This mindset — leading on the edges and collaborating in the middle — isn't new, or unique to the AI age. Many of the world's greatest creatives understood it intuitively, long before AI entered the picture. They recognized that their unique value lay not in doing every task themselves, but in providing the potency of initial vision and the final discerning touch — while leveraging the skills of others for the scaling and development phase.



This isn't about diminishing the creator's role. It's about amplifying it.

By focusing our energy on the stages where human creativity is irreplaceable, we produce work that is not only more efficient — but more authentically *us*. The profiles that follow show the pattern at work, decades before the tools we now take for granted.

LEADERS ON THE EDGE

Visionaries who led at the edges.

	INITIATE	SCALE	REFINE
<p>Diane von Furstenberg FASHION</p>	<p>A vision of a versatile, comfortable dress to empower women — drawn from personal experience and the shifting social landscape of the 1970s.</p>	<p>Rather than drape fabric herself, she collaborated with manufacturers and pattern makers to realize the design.</p>	<p>She personally oversaw each dress, ensuring every detail aligned with her vision of elegance.</p>
<p>Steve Jobs TECHNOLOGY</p>	<p>Envisioned products people didn't yet know they wanted — the iPhone began as one device combining a phone, an iPod, and a web communicator.</p>	<p>He didn't code iOS or build the hardware; he assembled world-class teams and steered direction.</p>	<p>Exacting to the end — scrutinizing the interface and packaging until each matched his vision.</p>
<p>Beyoncé MUSIC</p>	<p>A clear vision drawn from lived experience and social commentary — "Lemonade" began as a concept of betrayal, anger, and redemption.</p>	<p>She collaborates with writers, producers, and visual artists to scale a vision into albums, films, and tours.</p>	<p>Known for perfectionism — overseeing the edit, the mix, and the rehearsals until every detail aligns.</p>

Von Furstenberg, Jobs, and Beyoncé aren't just visionary creatives — they're exceptional *managers*, who excel at articulating a vision and guiding others to realize it. Embracing AI in the Scale phase lets us cultivate that same skill.

A SIDE EFFECT WORTH NAMING

The curve is fractal — and so is the skill.

Although the Content Curve is presented as a sequence, the phases aren't strictly linear. The creative process is fluid: phases overlap and repeat. Within any endeavor you'll find smaller cycles nested inside larger ones — a software project follows the curve, but each feature runs its own mini-cycle of ideation, development, and refinement. This fractal structure allows continuous improvement at every level.

The relationship between a creative and AI during Scale closely mirrors that of a manager and their team. Success in both depends on clear communication, precise articulation of expectations, and consistent feedback. As we learn to "manage" AI — conveying ideas, providing thoughtful direction — we sharpen our ability to see the big picture and outline the steps to realize a vision.



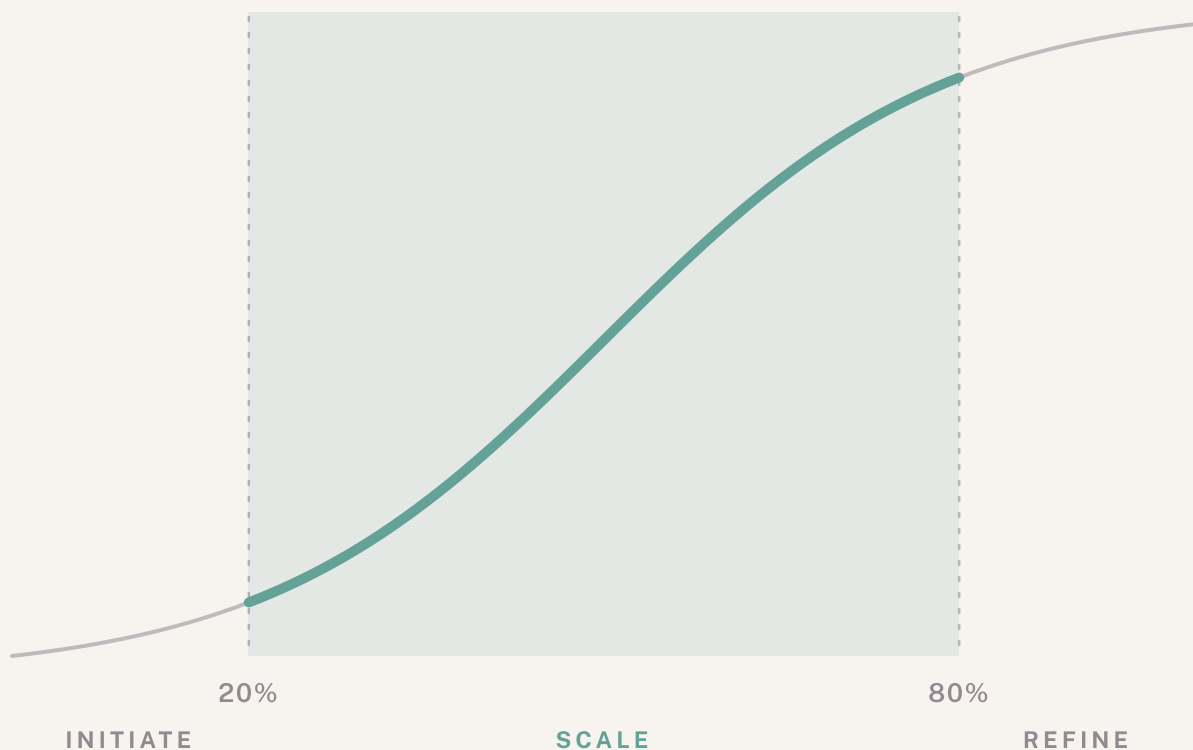
We're not just becoming more efficient creatives. We're cultivating the management skills that today's collaborative, project-driven work demands.

For "pure creatives" with little management experience, working with AI is a uniquely low-risk place to practice: no interpersonal conflict, no HR complications, and the AI won't quit if you make a mistake.

07 · AI PITFALLS

Avoiding common misuses in the creative process.

The framework's power comes with a caveat: over-reliance on AI can erode the very craft it's meant to amplify — especially when we apply it at the wrong end of the curve.



AI earns its keep in the middle. Reach for it at the edges — to *generate* the first idea or apply the *final* polish — and it tends to disappoint.

At their core, large language models are prediction machines — engines for the most likely next word. That's a strength in the middle of the curve, and a liability at its edges. The two sections that follow examine each failure mode in turn.

THE RISK AT 0-20%

Using AI too early flattens the spark.

01 Mediocrity of ideas

A successful prediction machine delivers the *most likely* outcome. For original, cutting-edge thinking, that's a misapplication — AI defaults to the median, handing back ideas that are predictable and rarely novel.

02 Short-circuiting human creativity

Applied too early, AI truncates creative possibility — forcing our hand toward something safe and likely before our minds have had a chance to play. Creative thinking is, by nature, unstructured and uncertain; it doesn't come with guarantees.

03 Comfort over creativity

Using AI at the Initiate phase can be a way of avoiding the discomfort inherent in creative work — a shortcut to immediate results at the cost of deeper ideas. Creativity isn't about immediate answers; it's about sitting with questions long enough for novel solutions to emerge.

THE RISK AT 80-100%

Over-polishing erases your voice.

01 Homogenization of voice

Run every draft through a chatbot to "clean it up" and the result is a homogenous, uninspiring mush — impossible to tell apart from anything else in a client's inbox. AI's pull toward the likely word flattens the unconventional phrasings and unexpected metaphors that make writing compelling.

02 Lack of contextual understanding

AI can frame a briefing for a board — but it doesn't know your board's history, your organization's real politics, or your audience's specific agendas. Only a professional who has invested in those relationships can tailor content to the people who will actually receive it.

03 Self-sabotaging your work

Offloading the final polish is like conceding a race at the last mile — a photographer setting up the perfect shot, then slapping a generic filter over it. The Refine phase is your chance to infuse work with your perspective; outsourcing it steps over your own creative effort.

PRESERVING YOUR CRAFT

Craft is the bootcamp for judgment.

The sweat and grit of stacking creative building blocks one atop another, the frustration of finding that a construction doesn't work, the perseverance to try again — these experiences, which we now largely outsource to AI, are exactly what develop the sophisticated judgment the Refine phase requires.

Without this "creative bootcamp," we risk never growing the critical antennae needed to refine, edit, and evaluate AI-generated content. Overreliance on a fully AI-driven Scale phase can lead to an atrophy of craft — particularly for inexperienced creatives. The AI-driven Content Curve depends on a robust, human-led Refine phase, which cannot succeed if our critical faculties were never built.



*Your craft is not just a set of skills, but
a part of your identity as a creator.
Nurture it, challenge it, and let it evolve
alongside the tools at your disposal.*

08 · CONCLUSION

From producers of content to directors of process.

As we integrate AI more deeply into our creative work — particularly in the Scale phase — we're witnessing a profound shift in the role of the knowledge worker. It's less about mastering the intricacies of technology and more about adopting a new mindset: moving from producers of content to directors of a creative process. Just as digital tools turned graphic designers from manual illustrators into creative directors, AI is pushing us to elevate our thinking and expand our sphere of influence.

It's natural to feel a mix of excitement and apprehension — to worry that "outsourcing" parts of our work compromises our authenticity or diminishes our craft. Those concerns are valid, but they stem from a misunderstanding of where our true value lies.

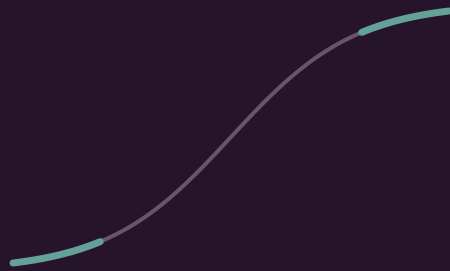
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Our most valuable contributions lie at the edges of the curve — where our lived experience, intuition, and understanding of human emotion come into play.



GABRIEL MULLER

NARRATIVE COACHING



NARRATIVE COACHING

I use the latest technology to help you communicate your narrative with precision and impact — leading on the edges, where your voice matters most.

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