The Brief is BROKEN!



01 / THE DECISION

Repair the assignment before the execution

A brief can contain a deadline, six deliverables and a page of adjectives without making a single useful choice. The danger is not that the team cannot start. It is that everyone starts a different assignment. One person writes reassurance, another builds spectacle, and a third assumes the real job is to explain a feature. The review then becomes an argument between answers to different questions.

Your first task is to locate the decision that has not been made. What must become different for whom, in what situation, and what can communication reasonably contribute? A business ambition such as more bookings does not answer those questions. People might not know the service exists, might distrust its price, or might be unable to find an appointment. Those problems call for different work.

Treat a broken brief as an unfinished agreement, not evidence that the client is foolish. You may be missing a constraint that somebody else knows. Bring a short proposed repair and the evidence behind it. This guide produces a working brief that is narrow enough to create from and explicit enough to challenge. It cannot replace missing research, change the product by itself, or settle a disagreement about business priorities. It makes those unfinished decisions visible before they become expensive creative revisions.

02 / SORT THE MATERIAL

Do not let an assumption dress as a fact

Read the brief once for its intention, then again with four marks in the margin: supplied fact, interpretation, requested output and fixed constraint. A supplied fact still needs a source. A sales decline may be documented; the sentence "young people find us irrelevant" may be somebody's explanation of it. Keeping those apart creates room to discover a better explanation without denying the actual problem.

For each major claim, ask what it rests on and what else might explain the same evidence. Low attendance can follow weak awareness, inconvenient hours or an event people do not want. Do not manufacture certainty by choosing the explanation that makes the most attractive campaign. Write "we suspect" when you are working from a plausible but untested reading.

+ A fact: the booking page shows available appointments only after a customer enters a phone number. Confirm by using the page.
+ An interpretation: that sequence discourages people. Inspect where people leave and ask about their experience before treating it as proven.
+ A requested output: a launch film. Establish what the film must make possible before accepting its format as the solution.
+ A constraint: the service operates in two districts. Put that boundary into the assignment so a writer cannot promise citywide coverage.

Preserve genuine non-negotiables. Challenge an inherited preference by asking what it protects, rather than quietly ignoring it.

03 / THE REPAIR CONVERSATION

Ask questions that lead to choices

Use the conversation to resolve the assignment, not to demonstrate how many questions you can ask. Send the specific gaps beforehand. Bring the person who can answer for service delivery when the proposed promise depends on it. A long meeting with no decision owner is just another version of the broken brief.

01 Name the observable difficulty. Ask for the event or behaviour behind a phrase such as "engagement is low". Find out whether the team is discussing attention, understanding, enquiries or completed action.

02 Locate the audience circumstance. Ask when the problem occurs and what the person is trying to accomplish. A situation is more useful to a writer than a decorative personality profile.

03 Check the available truth. Ask what the organisation actually provides, what is variable and what it cannot promise. Request the document or demonstration that supports a consequential claim.

04 Propose one communication job. Explain why it could help and name the operational problem it cannot solve. Offer a second explanation only when it would lead to materially different work.

05 Close with a choice and an owner. Record what is agreed, which uncertainty remains, who will investigate it and when the team will decide whether to proceed.

If answers remain unavailable, write a conditional assignment: "Explore reassurance about price, pending confirmation of the quote process." Conditional permission is clearer than a false claim of strategic alignment.

04 / WORKED EXAMPLE

The problem hiding inside the request

> INVENTED TEACHING CASE
>
> Mend is a fictional bicycle repair service. Every detail below is supplied for the exercise, not drawn from a real client.

The incoming request reads: "Make a bold social film that gets commuters excited about Mend. Show our friendly mechanics, modern workshop and full range of repairs. We need more first bookings." This tells a team what to show but leaves the obstacle unexplained.

The scenario evidence is narrower. The service has appointment capacity. Its website lists repair categories but does not explain how a final price is agreed. In the supplied interview notes, several first-time customers ask whether leaving a bicycle means accepting whatever bill follows. The actual service gives an inspection price before booking and sends a repair quote for approval before extra work starts.

A plausible diagnosis is that some first-time customers cannot see where their control over spending begins and ends. It remains a hypothesis about a barrier, not a claim that all non-bookers have the same fear. The question for the business is whether that uncertainty appears often enough to address first. A separate availability review could still reveal a different obstacle.

The proposed repair is to make the approval process visible. A workshop tour could make Mend look competent while leaving the spending question untouched. That is why the new assignment changes what the film must demonstrate, not merely its tone.

05 / THE ACTUAL BRIEF

Make the choice usable

Repaired working brief

Audience and moment: people considering their first Mend booking who are unsure what leaving a bicycle commits them to. Communication job: show that they can understand and approve the repair price before extra work begins. Useful truth: Mend explains its inspection charge upfront and requests approval for additional repairs. Creative task: make that moment of control visible and easy to remember. Boundary: do not imply the inspection is free or that every repair price is known before inspection.

First execution to develop: a short sequence in which a bicycle arrives with a squeak, the mechanic identifies the issue, and the customer sees the quote before choosing. The key action is the customer's approval. The end line could read: "Your bike needs a repair. Your bill needs your yes." Supporting copy must explain the inspection charge rather than bury it.

Review question: after seeing the rough, can a first-time viewer explain when they will know the repair price and when they can decline? This checks comprehension of the proposed message. It does not prove the film will increase bookings, nor does it establish that price uncertainty was the largest commercial barrier.

Assign the operations owner to verify the process and wording. Assign the creative lead to preserve the customer's decision as the dramatic centre. Keep scheduling, production polish and broader services out of the first concept review unless they alter that idea.

06 / TRY IT

Find the decision, then write the repair

Spend eight minutes on this invented request: "Give our evening cooking classes a younger, more energetic image." The supplied facts are that the classes welcome beginners, the page shows advanced dishes, ingredients are provided, and the booking button does not say whether specialist equipment is needed. You do not have attendance research. Write a possible barrier, one question that could disprove it and a revised creative task.

A model response

Possible barrier: the existing pictures and missing practical details may make a beginner assume the class requires skills or equipment they do not have. Disproving question: when recent visitors decided against booking, what stopped them, and did they actually make that assumption? Revised task: develop an execution that makes the beginner's first manageable action visible, while explaining what the class supplies. Treat reassurance as a route to investigate, not the established solution.

A possible rough shows an empty chopping board, then the first simple cut demonstrated beside it. The line is "Start with this cut. We'll take it from there." Before using it, the tutor must confirm the actual support offered. Avoid claiming that every participant will master cooking in one evening.

The repair is stronger than "make it youthful" because it directs the work towards a concrete uncertainty. Another answer can be equally useful if it stays within the evidence and creates a different, testable assignment.

07 / WORKSHEET

The brief repair sheet

Complete this before the next concept meeting. Keep each answer short enough for the decision owner to read aloud. An empty evidence field is a useful warning, not a reason to invent an insight. Use a second sheet for supporting material.

What observable problem are we trying to change, and where is it recorded?

Who encounters it, in what circumstance, and what explanation are we proposing?

What can communication do, and what requires an operational change?

What truth can the execution demonstrate, and what must it never imply?

What is the creative task, the unresolved question, the decision owner and the review date?

08 / BEFORE YOU PROCEED

Get agreement on the repaired version

Read the working brief to someone who was not in the repair conversation. Ask them to describe the assignment in their own words. If they name a different audience problem or promise, locate the ambiguity. Do not ask whether they like the brief; ask what work they would make from it. That answer exposes disagreement sooner.

+ The problem describes something happening, not only an ambition or a dislike of the old campaign.
+ The proposed explanation is connected to evidence, with important assumptions visibly labelled.
+ The communication task uses a truth the organisation can deliver and identifies any service dependency.
+ The assignment leaves creative room while naming the non-negotiable effect or information.
+ The owner has agreed the current version and understands what evidence could reopen it.

Use those checks as a practical review, not a scoring system validated by research. A brief can pass them and still lead to weak ideas. A surprising idea can also reveal that the brief needs another adjustment. Keep a short decision record so that a real change in circumstances is distinguishable from an old argument returning under new wording.

Your next action is small: send the repaired brief, highlight the changed decision and request a clear acceptance or correction. Once it is agreed, create the most revealing rough execution. Do not keep repairing the brief as a way to postpone making the work.

READING / PRACTICE / CONTEXT

Where the thinking starts

The methods, teaching scenarios, exercises and worksheets here are original synthesis. The books below inform particular decisions; their authors do not endorse this guide. Page references locate the supplied PDF editions and may differ from printed page numbers.

Richard P. Rumelt / Good Strategy/Bad Strategy

PDF pp. 89-91

The distinction between explaining a challenge and naming a performance goal informed brief diagnosis. This guide's questions and examples are original synthesis, not a reproduction of the book's framework.

Jon Steel / Truth, Lies, and Advertising: The Art of Account Planning

PDF pp. 15-17

Audience relationships and involvement in development informed the evidence questions. The book supports listening to people; it does not establish the fictional barriers in the worked cases.

Make the tools your own

Read the worked example, try the exercise before its model response, then use the worksheet on a real assignment. Print the worksheet at 100% or annotate a copy digitally. Check your actual product facts, audience context and production conditions before applying the advice.

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