

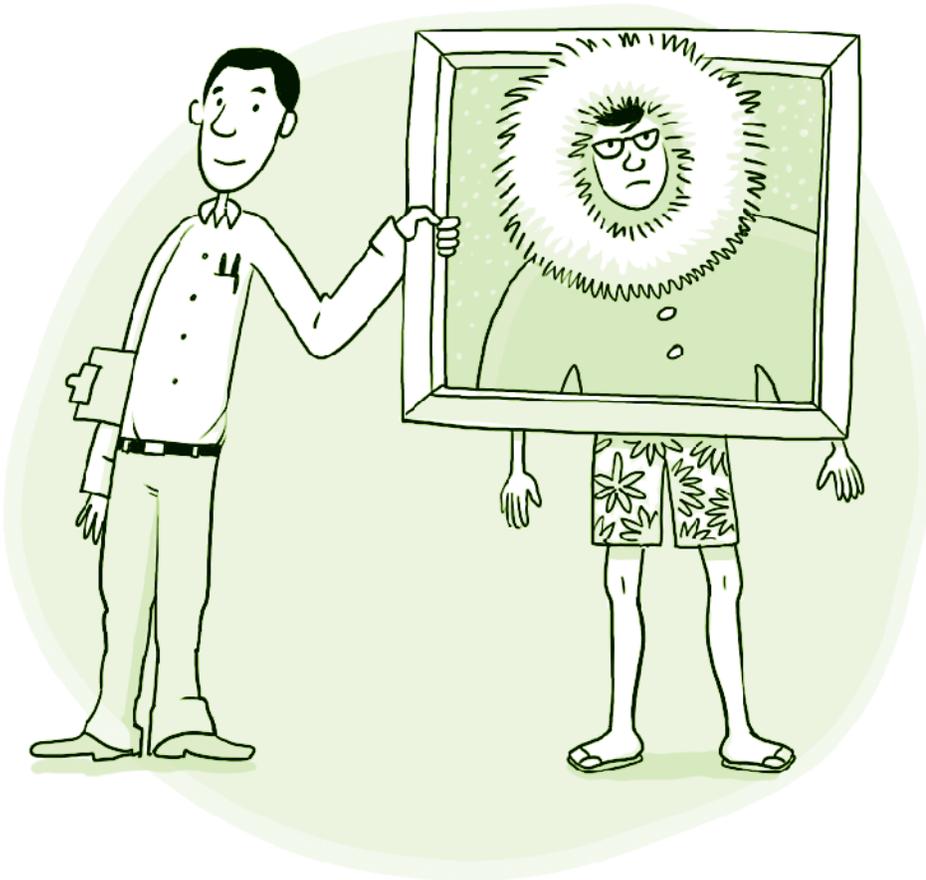
2

Get Your Audience's Attention

WHAT IS FRAMING?

Framing is the setting of an issue within an appropriate context to achieve a desired interpretation or perspective. The intention is not to deceive or manipulate

people, but to make credible climate science more accessible to the public. Indeed, since it is impossible **not** to frame an issue, climate change communicators need to ensure they consciously select a frame that will resonate with their audience.



WHY FRAME?

Below are just a few of the benefits derived from framing:⁹

- Frames organize central ideas on an issue. They endow certain dimensions of a complex topic with greater apparent relevance, more so than the same dimensions might appear to have under an alternative frame.
- Frames can help communicate why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible, and, in some cases, what should be done.
- Frames can help condense a message into useful communication “short cuts” and symbols: catch-phrases, slogans, historical references, cartoons, and images.

THE SUBTLETIES OF FRAMING

Communicators should keep in mind both form and content when framing a climate change message. The first step, as explained in Section 1, is determining as much as possible about an audience's mental models of climate change.

The next step is to consider the audience's membership in specific subcultures (groups of people with distinct sets of beliefs, or based on race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, religion, occupation). Is there a majority represented in the audience? For instance, will college

students concerned about the creation of green jobs comprise the audience? Or city officials interested in increasing energy efficiency standards in building codes? Consider the local perspective—an audience in Colorado may identify more strongly with the links between climate change and threats to the ski industry, whereas a group from Florida may care more about the links between climate change and sea level rise.

Communicators may find it useful to prepare numerous frames ahead of time, including climate change as a religious, youth, or economic issue. They should be

EXAMPLE

Framing and the Politics of Carbon

Although many top economists and climate scientists agree that a carbon tax would be the most streamlined step the US could take to reduce its contribution to climate change, support for a carbon tax among major politicians is extremely limited.¹¹ Yet, at the same time, many businesses and individuals voluntarily purchase “carbon offsets” (or “carbon credits”), which promise to balance out the greenhouse gases produced by a particular activity they are engaging in. How much of this support is a reflection of the framing power of the words *tax* and *offset*?

CRED researchers polled a large national sample about a program that would raise the cost of certain products believed to contribute significantly to climate change (such as air travel and electricity) and use the money to fund alternative energy and carbon capture projects.¹² The identical program was described as a “carbon tax” to half the respondents, and as a “carbon offset” to the other half. This simple change in frame had a

large impact on people's preferences.

When considering a pair of products, 52% of respondents said they would choose a more expensive product when the cost increase was labeled a “carbon offset,” but only 39% when it was labeled a “tax.” Support for regulation to make the cost increase mandatory was greater when it was labeled an “offset” than when it was labeled a “tax.”

Strikingly, the framing effect interacted with respondents' political affiliations. More liberal individuals did not discriminate between the two frames (meaning, they were equally likely to support the program regardless of the label used), but more conservative individuals strongly preferred the carbon offset to the carbon tax. A follow-up study revealed that the tax label triggered many negative thoughts and associations among more conservative individuals, which in turn led them to reject the carbon tax.



Martin Jacobsen, commons.wikimedia.org

Careful when framing climate change, however, not to focus so intently on one particular aspect that the audience loses sight of the bigger picture.

When dealing with scientific communication and framing, research shows that an audience may be more receptive when they perceive the information being communicated as having salience, relevance, authority and legitimacy.¹⁰ As the example on page 7 illustrates, framing can be a subtle art—even the choice of a single word can make the difference between winning and alienating an audience.

PROMOTION VS. PREVENTION FRAME

A powerful way of framing a message considers people's goals. Do they view their goal as making something good happen, or preventing something bad from happening?

People approach goals differently. People with a **promotion focus** see a goal as an ideal and are concerned with advancement. They prefer to act eagerly to maximize or increase gains. People with a **prevention focus**, however, see a goal as something they ought to do and are concerned with maintaining the status quo. They prefer to act vigilantly to minimize or decrease losses.¹³

Research shows that tailoring messages to people's natural promotion and prevention orientations increases

the level of response for both groups, regardless of whether their response was positive or negative. These findings support the idea of framing messages from multiple perspectives to accomplish environmental goals. For example, if a local city wants people to increase their recycling, city officials should explain options in different ways, some with a promotion focus and some with a prevention focus. A promotion message would emphasize "going the extra mile" (e.g., going out of one's way to recycle, how recycling benefits the community). A prevention message would encourage "dotting the 'i' and crossing the 't'" (e.g., being careful to recycle, how not recycling hurts the community).

When communicators craft their climate change messages, they should remember that framing requires the careful selection of words that will resonate with the audience's orientations. The table to the left lists words that will help communicators frame messages that appeal to those who are promotion focused and/or prevention focused. In order to increase the chances of reaching a greater number of people in the audience, communicators should include both promotion- and

TABLE 1
Words That Appeal To Those with Either a Promotion or Prevention Focus¹⁴

PROMOTION	PREVENTION
ideal	ought
attain(ment)	maintenance
maximize gains	minimize losses
hope	responsibility
wish	necessity
advance(ment)	protect(ion)
eager(ness)	vigilant/vigilance
avoid missed opportunities	avoiding mistakes
promote	prevent
aspire/aspiration	duty
support	obligation
nurture	defend
add	safety
open	security
	must
	should
	cautious
	careful
	stop

prevention-oriented wording in their messages. People feel better and more positive about achieving their goals and are more likely to sustain their behavior when their goals are framed in a manner that feels naturally comfortable to them.

BRING THE MESSAGE CLOSE TO HOME: A LOCAL FRAME

Although the majority of US residents consider climate change a serious problem, they generally think of it in geographically and temporally distant terms. Most US residents do not personally experience effects that are drastic enough on a regular basis to alarm them about climate change.

In a July 2007 national survey, respondents believed that climate change was a “very serious threat” for “plants and animals” (52%), “people in other countries” (40%) and “people elsewhere in the United States” (30%). However, far fewer saw it as a “very serious threat” to “you and your family” (19%) and “your community” (18%).¹⁵ In other words, people perceive climate change impacts as a threat to plants and animals and people in other parts of the world, but do not see it as a local issue affecting themselves, their family, and their community.

To counteract this problem, an effective communicator should highlight the current impacts of climate change on regions within the US. Research suggests that it may be more effective to frame climate change with local examples in addition to national examples. For example, references to droughts in the Southwest may



resonate more with US audiences than talking about droughts in Africa. Similarly, climate change becomes a more personal threat to a New Yorker when hearing how New York City’s subway system will suffer as the result of a rise in sea level compared to hearing about the effect of a sea level rise in Bangladesh.

Scientists have found trends in extreme weather events, such as heat waves and flooding, that are consistent with climate change, such as increasing precipitation extremes in some parts of the United States.¹⁶ They project that climate change will increase the frequency and/or severity of extreme events, which may in turn cause significant damage to human health and infrastructure.

Because such extreme weather events are vivid, dramatic, and easily understood, especially to the locals who suffer through them, they provide effective frames

for the potential impacts of future climate change. The numerous examples of extreme events that may occur in a given year provide recurring “teachable moments” communicators can use to relate climate change to the experience of a local audience. For example, the long-lasting and severe drought, known as the “Big Dry,” that has gripped some parts of Australia since 1995 has increased that public’s awareness of climate change, resulting in greater support for measures to combat climate change.¹⁷

When discussing extreme events, however, communicators should bear in mind that while it is correct to say that climate change is increasing the odds of an extreme weather event, climate scientists cannot yet make the claim that climate change is **causing** such events. This important distinction often gets lost or is misunderstood, causing confusion and undue skepticism (see Section 5 for more about how to address scientific uncertainty).

For example, although scientists can link the severity of Hurricane Katrina to increased warming in the ocean, it is difficult to distinguish how much of that warming is due to human activity and how much is the result of a natural cycle.¹⁸ Therefore, it is incorrect to say that climate change caused Katrina. Communicators should also be careful not to conflate cause and effect; a variety of factors conspired to make the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina so damaging and deadly. Katrina did, however, provide a powerful example of how costly extreme weather events can be, even if they aren’t the direct result of climate change.

Communicators can also use local frames to effectively illustrate climate change solutions. In Montana’s Glacier National Park, where climate change has led to the loss of numerous glaciers, the state government has begun investing in new “green” technologies like carbon sequestration and windmills.¹⁹

By framing climate change as a local issue, communicators not only increase their audience’s sense of connection to and understanding of climate change, but also promote the development of local and regional solutions that could transfer well to the national and global arenas and, further, inspire future action everywhere.

MAKE THE MESSAGE MATTER NOW: THE NOW VS. FUTURE FRAME

People typically perceive immediate threats as more relevant and of greater urgency than future problems.²⁰ Yet communicators often portray the threat from climate change as a future rather than present risk.

The problem with this approach is that people tend to discount the importance of future events. Indeed, many social scientists believe that this is one of the top reasons that it is hard to motivate people to take action to prevent climate change. CRED research documents that many people count environmental and financial consequences as less important with every year they are delayed.²¹ For example, the average person finds little difference between getting \$250 now or \$366 in one year (implying an interest rate of roughly 46%). The rates of discounting are similar for environmental consequences; the average person finds little difference in 21 days of clean air now over 35 days of clean air next year. Fortunately, communicators can make this predisposition (to heavily discount future larger losses) work to help people overcome a reluctance to take on immediate losses.

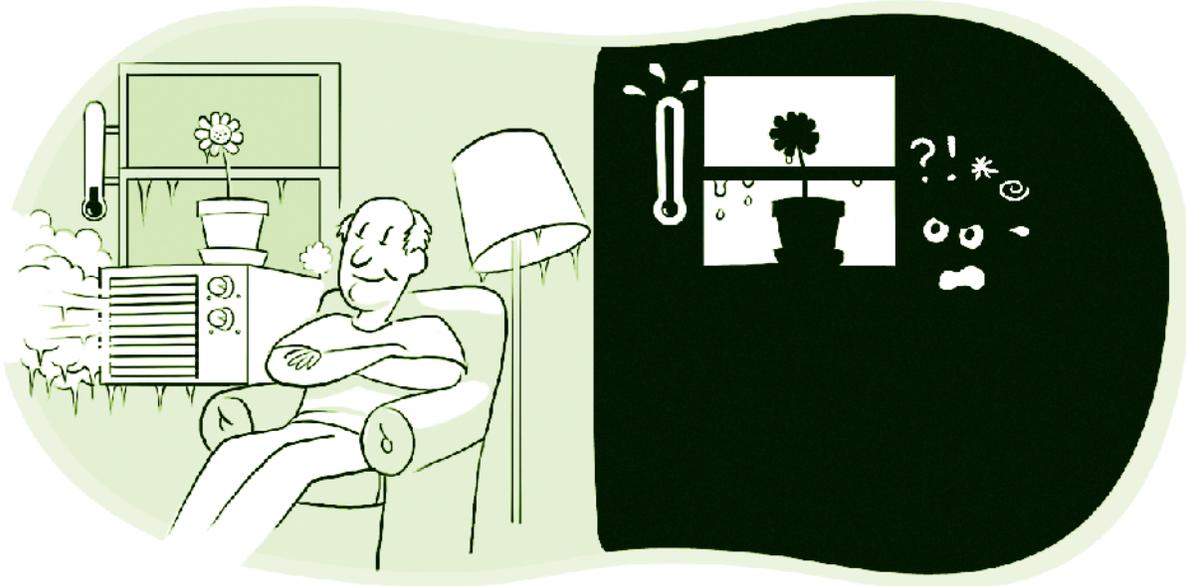
For example, if a communicator wants audience members to sign up for weatherizing their homes (which increases a home’s energy efficiency), he or she may have more success by having them commit to an evaluation of their home’s efficiency three or six months into the future rather than immediately. Because future consequences are discounted, people often think, “I’m busy now, but in the future I’ll have more time and it won’t be such a big deal.” Of course, the key is to ensure audience members make a binding agreement so that the evaluation and subsequent weatherization really happen in the near future. In this case, a communicator might want to have a sign-up sheet that will enable audience members to sign up for a specific appointment with a local company that offers this service or for a time the local power company might contact them to schedule an appointment.

COMBINING THE NOW VS. FUTURE FRAME WITH A GAIN VS. LOSS FRAME

The negative feelings associated with losing \$100 outweigh the positive feelings associated with gaining \$100. Thus people have a natural tendency to avoid losses rather than to seek gains.²² When a gain vs. loss frame is combined with a now vs. future frame, people discount future gains more than future losses.²³ For example, people may be more likely to adopt environmentally responsible behavior and support costly emissions reduction efforts related to climate change if they believe their way of life is threatened and that inaction

buy fuel-efficient vehicles could focus on how their use will avoid continuing and even increasing future losses in money to pay for gasoline instead of how such cars will save the consumer money.

To hold an audience's attention and encourage behavior change, communicators may want to present information in a way that makes the audience aware of potential current and future losses related to inaction on climate change instead of focusing on current and future gains. Audiences may be more likely to make changes to their behavior if climate change information is framed as 'losing less now instead of losing more in the future'. For example, during hot summer months, a smaller reduction in daily energy use can prevent having to deal with larger and prolonged energy blackouts.



will result in even greater loss. They are less likely to adopt these measures if they focus on the current situation which they see as acceptable and discount future improvement of it.

It may be possible to motivate environmentally responsible behavior by tapping into people's desire to avoid future losses rather than realize future gains. For instance, when communicators talk to homeowners, they could frame energy efficiency appliances as helping the homeowners to avoid losing money on higher energy bills in the future, instead of helping them save money in the future. Campaigns to encourage people to

BROADEN THE MESSAGE: THE INTERCONNECTED FRAME

“Our nation has both an obligation and self-interest in facing head-on the serious environmental, economic, and national security threats posed by climate change.”
—Senator John McCain (R-Arizona)

Communicators sometimes frame climate change as if it is only an environmental problem, which enables some people to shrug it off as something only environmentalists need to worry about. But climate change is not a disconnected phenomenon that will only affect the weather and ecosystems, but a change that will have an impact on nearly every human system, including health, the economy, and national security. Vice President Al

Gore hinted at the interconnected nature of climate change when he described it in his 2007 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech as “real, rising, imminent, and universal.”²⁴

Below and on page 13 are two examples of how communicators can broaden their messages to include such frames as national security and human health.

EXAMPLE

The National Security Frame

“We will pay for this [climate change] one way or another. We will pay to reduce greenhouse gas emissions today and we’ll have to take an economic hit of some kind. Or we will pay the price later in military terms. And that will involve human lives.”

—Gen. Anthony C. Zinni, retired Marine and former head of the Central Command

“The traditional triggers of conflict which exist out there are likely to be exacerbated by the effect of climate change.”

—Emyr Jones Parry, Great Britain’s ambassador to the United Nations

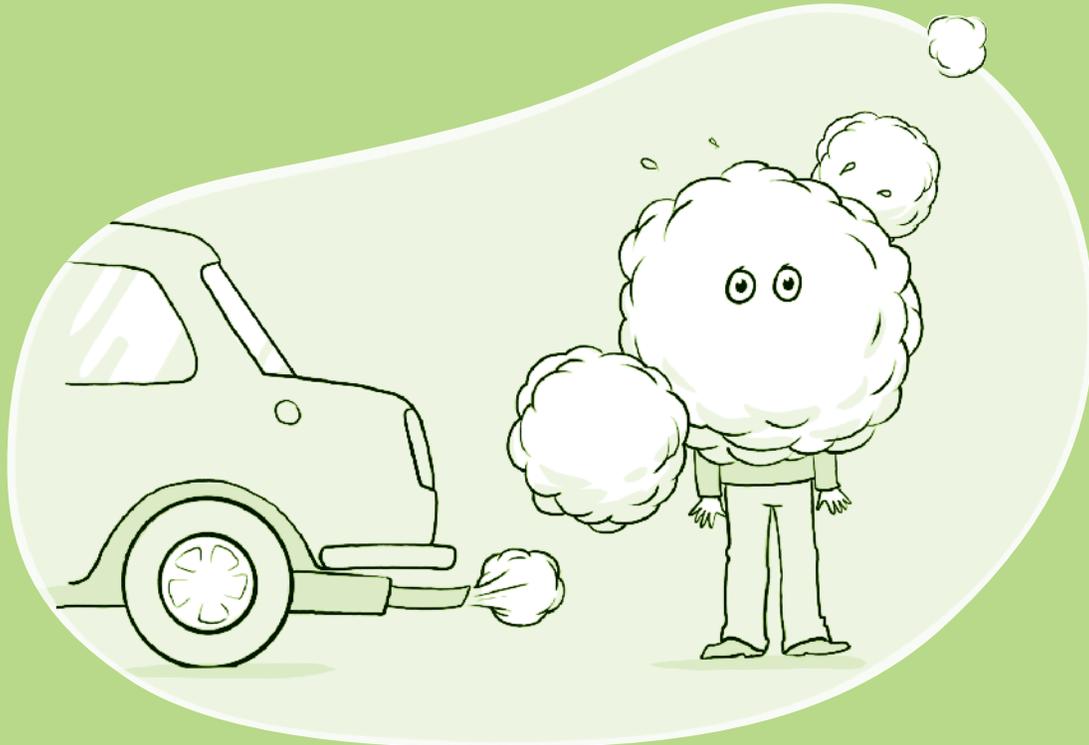
When it comes to national security threats, policymakers usually place terrorism as their main concern, with global climate change ranking far below, if at all. Recently, however, climate change has secured its place as a national security issue on both a national and global scale. In 2007, for example, the United Nations Security Council

put climate change on its agenda for the first time, warning that it could serve as a catalyst for new conflicts around the world.²⁵ National security concerns deriving from climate change include the reduction of global food supplies, leading to large migrations of populations; increased risks for infectious disease, including pandemics that could destabilize economies and governments; and increased fighting over already limited resources like water and land.²⁶

When talking about climate change, communicators should frame their messages to match what they think the audience may already relate to and worry about in terms of national security. For instance, when speaking to people in the military, communicators could highlight the connections between climate change and potential conflicts over natural resources, especially by so-called “failed states,” a term often used to describe a state perceived as having failed at some of the basic conditions and responsibilities of a sovereign government. When speaking with a group of parents, communicators might want to describe what the world could be like when their children are adults—when issues like water wars, food shortages, and sheltering environmental refugees may become realities for people in the US.

EXAMPLE

The Human Health Frame



US residents may not perceive climate change as a threat to human health, either now or in the future. Some of the health implications related to climate change are relatively well understood (e.g., an increased likelihood of heatstroke), while others are less obvious (e.g., the rapidly rising rates of asthma and respiratory conditions). Drawing awareness to the connections between climate change and human health may be an effective method for elevating public concern about climate change in the US. By articulating its serious individual health consequences, communicators can help frame climate change as a concrete, personal concern for everyone.

Framing solutions, such as developing

alternative energy, in terms of health and climate change also works well. The burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil creates “dirty energy” and emits large amounts of gases, such as carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide. In addition to advancing climate change, these emissions directly pollute air and water by forming particulates like soot. It may be beneficial to highlight the multiple positive effects of reducing the burning of fossil fuels. Since direct or indirect exposure to these pollutants can cause cancer, breathing problems, birth defects, and mental impairment, reducing climate change-related pollution would also help reduce negative health outcomes.²⁷