



Climate
stories
that work



Six ways to
change hearts
and minds about
climate change

Why do the stories we tell matter?

What we say about climate change and how we say it matters. It affects how people think, feel and act.

The right story can build the public appetite needed to catalyse change. Decades of research and experience shows how stories can shift how people think and feel. They can make important actions feel right, normal and inevitable.

Intentionally changing the story has shifted attitudes to things like tobacco control and equal marriage. It was a decisive factor in the referendum ending the ban on abortion in Ireland.

The last year has seen an increase in stories and campaigns on climate change. And they are having a profound impact. People in the UK are more aware and concerned than ever before.

But awareness and concern by themselves don't make change happen. In fact, they can lead to paralysis and despair.

We can transform growing awareness into widespread desire for change. We can drive and normalise action.

The story we need to tell is:

Clear & instinctive

It's a big overarching story that builds on our innate need to protect our only home.

For all

It speaks to everyone because climate change affects everyone.

Worth repeating

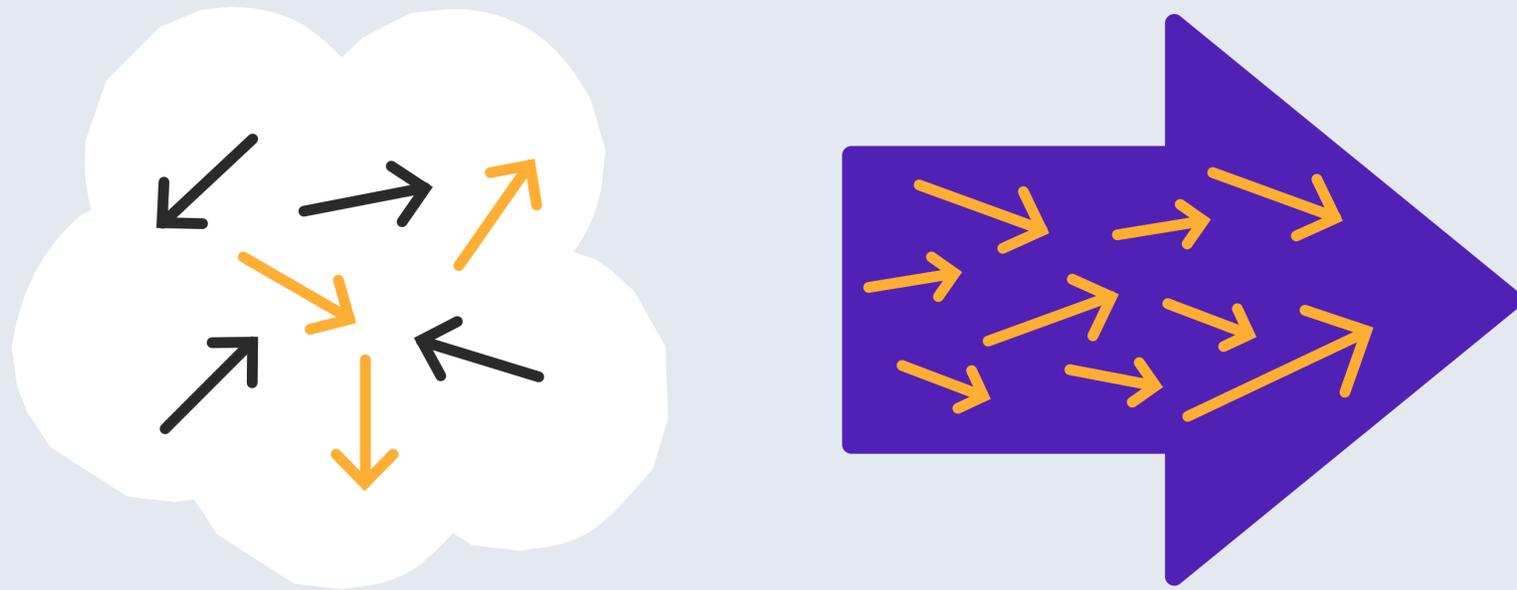
A story is only powerful if people hear it many times.

What's a framing guide?

This is a framing guide and it's a bit different to messaging advice. Where messaging guidance might tell you the specific phrases and soundbites to use, a framing strategy provides ideas and sentiments that can be articulated and expressed in different ways.

The recommendations in this guide can be brought to life in engaging and creative ways. There is room and freedom for a range of different voices to tell their own version of the shared story.

■ **And instead of telling competing stories, everyone can play their part in the new story.**



About this guide

This guide is based on a review of communications research carried out by Rose Hendricks and Nicky Hawkins of the [FrameWorks Institute](#). It has been prepared for [On Road Media](#) to support their strategic communications project funded by the Climate Change Collaboration of The Mark Leonard Trust, Ashden Trust and JJ Charitable Trust.

It outlines six tips to frame climate change to improve public understanding and inspire action. The guide translates research into practice, connecting a broad body of research to practical recommendations.

We're sharing these six tips to help communicators spark different thinking about climate change, so that we improve understanding and build appetite for change.



Here are the six ways we can frame climate change to build appetite for the action we need across society. In the course of the guide, we'll dig deeper into each recommendation and give examples of how you can apply them.

1. Make it do-able and show change is possible

The alarm bell has been rung and heard. We now need to land the idea that we can tackle climate change. That it's challenging but do-able.

2. Focus on the big things and how we can change them

Instead of getting locked in circular debates about whether people are making the right choices in their own lives, we need to pan out to look at the big picture.

3. Normalise action and change, not inaction

When we hear that no-one is doing the right thing for the planet, we assume not much can or will be done. To overcome this, show that action is underway and that we all want more of it.

4. Connect the planet's health with our own health

Human health goes hand in hand with the planet's health. Reminding people of this connection boosts understanding, concern, and support for policy change.

5. Emphasise our responsibility to young people and future generations

Talk about our duty to care for and protect the planet for future generations. Bake this sentiment into messages and stories about climate change.

6. Keep it down to earth

Down to earth, straightforward messages work. Complex language and messages can undermine our cause.



Tip 1

Make it do-able and show change is possible

Given the scale and pace of the problem, it's natural to want to sound the alarm bell.

But the alarm has been rung and heard. We know there are big problems, we just don't believe they can be fixed.

A wide range of studies show us that people are more likely to engage with climate change when they encounter positive, hopeful, yet urgent messages than when they encounter messages of pure doom and gloom.

When we've consistently heard how drastic a problem is, the odds of overcoming it seem small. When we feel that something is a lost cause, we are more likely to disengage from the issue. And when our messages turn people away, the climate movement misses out on allies and champions.

In short, pure crisis and emergency frames extinguish hope, and in so doing, they block much-needed energy and engagement. Messages that convey that action on climate change is do-able make people want to learn and contribute to solutions.

Pair problems with the ability to fix them. Don't downplay problems, but always emphasise that they can and must be tackled by presenting concrete and proportionate solutions. Use words and images that position positive change as being within reach.



Example

Before

"Climate change is the biggest challenge we face. Life on earth is in crisis. Our house is on fire and our leaders are not listening or acting. In fact, many of them are fanning the flames."

After

"We face major threats to the future of our planet and human life on it. But we have it within our power to repair and restore our world. Our leaders can and must act now."

Tip 2

Focus on the big things and how we can change them

Instead of getting locked in circular debates about whether people are making the right choices in their own lives, we need to pan out to look at the big picture.

However, we tend to think that our economies, policies and industries are fixed and incapable of changing in big ways - so the language we use here really matters.

When we talk of 'transforming systems', this can either feel bewilderingly complex or 'never going to happen.' It can reinforce the idea that tackling climate change means damaging our economy. This way of thinking can fuel fatalism, contributing to the idea that the modern economy makes it impossible to address issues like climate change.

Instead of talking about 'systems change,' give examples of what you mean, explaining why those are the things that make the most difference. This helps people to see the bigger picture.

Show how we can redesign our economy and industries if we choose to, to create a much-needed feeling of agency and possibility. Show that things have been designed and can be changed by design.

Words that work when talking about systems change

Instead of...	Try...
Choices, behaviours, lifestyles	→ Options available to us
Systems change	→ Changing the things that make the most difference for example...
Radically transforming our economy	→ Re-designing our economy with concrete policy changes

Example

Before

"We all need to act to tackle the climate emergency. This means us all making better choices, like flying less, eating less meat. It means demanding politicians transform our systems and economies."

After

"We need to change the things that make the most difference. Our leaders have the opportunity to redesign our energy system so that we're powered by clean energy. And we need clean options for our pensions so we can all invest in a healthy planet."

Tip 3

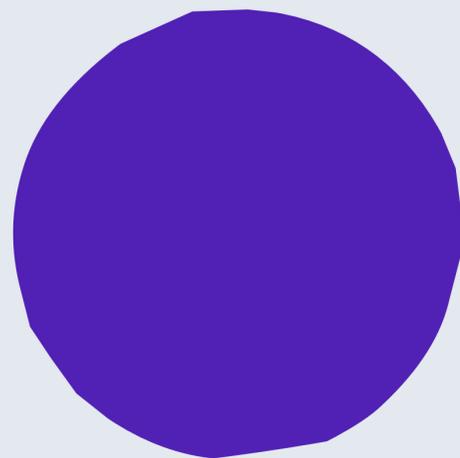
Normalise action and change, not inaction

Our perceptions of what other people are - or are not - concerned about matter enormously for how we think about and act on climate change.

When we hear that no-one is doing the right thing for the planet or that no-one cares much - from our leaders to our friends and neighbours - we assume not much can or will be done.

To overcome this, show that action is underway and that we all want more of it. Avoid talking about radical changes - which can feel insurmountable and partisan - and instead talk about necessary shifts. Show how we all want to get on with it.

If you're highlighting efforts that don't go far enough, be careful not to inadvertently undermine the very idea of doing things differently. Be specific about what more we can do and how.



Example

Before

"The truth is that we're not facing up to the climate emergency and acting like it matters. We need a radical transformation, not tinkering at the edges. But the government is not listening to the truth and not enough of us are playing our part."

After

"Most of us in the UK want to see much more action to revive our planet and secure a healthy future. Our politicians work on our behalf so our appetite for change matters. They can and must take the actions that will make the most difference, like reshaping our energy and finance industries."

Tip 4

Connect the planet's health with our own health

Human health goes hand in hand with the planet's health. Reminding people of this connection boosts understanding, concern, and support for policy change.

There are two different ways we can connect climate change to the idea of health.

Firstly, we can explain how climate change matters for **our health** - and how tackling it benefits our wellbeing.

People tend to care about health and already vaguely connect the environment to it. But they do not have a clear understanding of how these connections work. When we deepen and expand understanding, we give rise to a sense of responsibility and more support for solutions. This works for people who hold different views around climate change, reminding us that the environment is an issue for us all.

Secondly, we can talk about the planet's health and how it is threatened. Tapping into the idea of the planet's health helps people see the interconnection between the planet's systems, including the climate. It also helps people see that, while we have harmed the planet, we can also heal it.

Words like *hurting, injuring, inflicting, wounding* and *infecting* convey the active and real nature of the damage being done to the planet. Talking about *healing, reviving, treating* and *curing* conveys a sense of intentionality and efficacy when talking about solutions. Communicators can highlight specific *symptoms, conditions, syndromes* and *ailments*. They can report on the *diagnosis, the prognosis* and the *treatment* needed.

Example

Before

"Climate change threatens life on earth and this is only set to get worse. We need to act now to stand a chance of keeping an inhabitable planet."

After

"Our health depends on us having a healthy planet. But right now our actions are hurting the planet. We can and must heal our world for all of us and for future generations."

These two approaches can be used in different ways to ensure appropriateness for different audiences and channels. They can be woven into different types of communications about climate change. They can be repeated again and again without having to parrot the same phrases verbatim.

Tip 5

Emphasise our responsibility to young people and future generations

Greta Thunberg has built a global following not just because she is articulate and passionate. She represents a powerful idea – our responsibility to future generations. This idea is more effective than factual arguments when talking about climate change.

Talk about our duty to care for and protect the planet for young people and future generations. Bake this sentiment into messages and stories about climate change. Use it to introduce facts and stats.

Use words like ‘we,’ ‘us’ and ‘our’ to help establish collective thinking, connecting with all people, present and future. Show that you occupy the moral shared ground, not the moral high ground.

Evoking a sense of our shared duty helps people connect information about the climate to their own emotions, identity, and values. This makes it less likely that new information will be seen as conflicting with pre-existing beliefs or mindsets, and more likely that the person will be able to engage productively with new information.

Extensive research has shown that facts alone are rarely sufficient for changing minds or encouraging action – for science-based issues generally, as well as for environmental issues specifically. Facts alone aren't motivating. To motivate, reasoning must be linked to emotion, identity, and values – the things that we hold dear. When facts conflict with other powerful subconscious influences, people are likely to reject the new information.

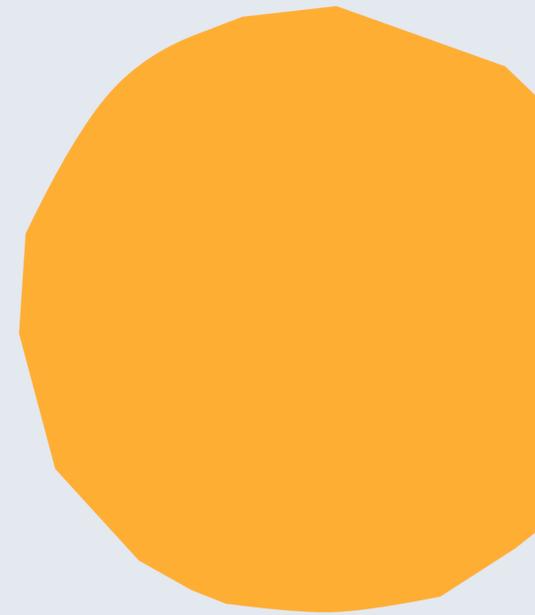
Example

Before

“The science is clear. Climate change is real and is happening now. So we need to act now to keep global temperature rises below 2 degrees.”

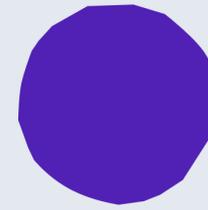
After

“We all want to pass on a healthy planet to young people, and our children and grandchildren. We can and must act now to protect and repair our planet so it’s fit for the future.”



Tip 6

Keep it down to earth



Down to earth, straightforward messages work. Complex language and messages can undermine our cause.

Jargon doesn't just fail to engage, it actively pushes people in the other direction. It signals 'this is not for me' and makes people less likely to feel involved.

Terms like 'decarbonise our economy' and 'net zero' risk having this effect. And most people don't understand 'baddie' short-hands like 'the fossil fuel industry' or 'climate change denial.' We need to explain why certain practices cause harm, instead of assuming people are motivated by this.

For many of us, climate change can feel hypothetical, abstract and hard to see. This creates 'psychological distance.' It can feel far away geographically, like it will only matter in the distant future and as if it will affect people we don't know and who seem different to us.

But there are numerous signs that are visible, palpable and all around us. Reduce psychological distance by showing that climate change is actually a problem for us, right here, right now. This helps people think more concretely about climate change, shifting it from a hypothetical, vague, dismissible problem to one that requires focused attention and specific actions right now.

Highlighting first-hand experiences - like extreme weather - can help bring environmental issues home. Start with the big picture, but connect it to local manifestations of climate change. This works because personal experiences are favoured over statistical information. And communications that recall and highlight relevant personal experience can lead to more attention and understanding.

Example

Before

"Climate change is already causing mass migration and displacement. Sadly we will see the tragic impact of more and more extreme weather events as the climate crisis worsens. The floods, droughts and fires we see raging around the world are tragic reminders of the urgent need for both mitigation and adaptation."

After

"Climate change means right now we're having to cope with more extreme weather. We're seeing more floods, droughts and fires close to home and around the world. To protect our planet's - and our own - future, we must take practical action to tackle climate change."

Thank you for reading.
We hope you've found
these tips helpful.

For more information on this project,
training opportunities, or if you'd like to
get in touch with us with your questions
on framing climate, please visit:

onroadmedia.org.uk/useyourvoice



The Climate Change
Collaboration

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These recommendations are a synthesis of what's already known about framing climate change, rather than original research. We have drawn on the following research projects.

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