



# Metaphor Over Facts, and Why Facts Aren't All You Need

Do you use facts in your advocacy to make a case? Do you ever feel like the facts aren't getting through to your audience? We swim in a sea of statistics and alarming facts every day.

Unfortunately, facts aren't enough to motivate action and they aren't always enough to change someone's mind on an issue you care about. Through understanding the limitations of the facts you use, and combining facts with other framing techniques, you can be better heard by your audience. We know there are ways to more effectively use facts in our arguments, and to use metaphors to help increase understanding of our issues.

## Background

Our brains are complicated. We have to remember that when we start a conversation with someone, they have a whole brain full of experiences, stories, facts, and beliefs which affect the way they hear the information we present. When we present someone with a fact about our issue, the evidence is clear that they hear our facts through a filter in their brains, and whether they believe our fact depends on whether it agrees with something they already know or not.

We are not suggesting that you not use facts or be untruthful! As an advocate, you need to check your facts and get your information right. However, remember that facts alone will not win your argument. As a communicator, you need to know the limits of the facts you use to make your case.

Much of the cognitive science research suggests that facts that agree with something we already believe serve to confirm our beliefs, while facts we disagree with do nothing to dissuade us of our beliefs. Understanding something means finding a story we already know, and matching it to the new information. Even one piece of information that affirms a stereotype or belief is enough to confirm the entire stereotype, while information that disagrees with or conflicts with a stereotype does little to dissuade us of our beliefs. (Schank, 1998 & Gurwitz and Dodge, 1977)

Because we know facts don't win the day or change people's minds, we have two strategies for you to consider using:

1. Don't rely solely on facts. Use other communications strategies to start the conversation such as Level One values (see: Values).
2. Pick one or two surprising facts about your issue that few people know. Use these as a way to try to dislodge preconceived notions about your issue.
3. Provide data and facts as support for your arguments, but don't lead with them or rely on them to stand alone.

## Questions to Ask Yourself

1. What facts do I regularly use in my work?
2. If someone disagrees with me, do I try a different fact? Does that work to convince them?

## Next Steps

Recent research has demonstrated that metaphors are one of our most powerful tools to help communicate ideas and facts. You might want to consider spending the time to create a metaphor to help people understand your work. Metaphors can also help people understand why your issue matters, by connecting your story to one they already hold in their head. Metaphors can help suggest a solution or a role for the listener. Metaphors, especially when they offer a visual image, make your case more memorable. Here are some questions to ask yourself to get started:

- › Do any metaphors already exist in the current dialogue about your issue? If so, what are they? Are they helpful? Now, answer the following questions about your issue:
  - .. What is it like?
  - .. What does it do?
  - .. What qualities or images do you want to invoke in people's minds?
  - .. What frames, stereotypes or unhelpful narratives do you want to avoid?
  - .. Who is your audience? Who are you trying to persuade?

Consider the questions you answered. Does something come to mind? Try it out: Write a paragraph using a potential metaphor. Share it with coworkers and friends, see how it works.

Also of note: **Because repeating a falsehood physically embeds it in our brains, using "Myth/Fact" communications can often backfire. Stating something that is a myth or untrue only to try to refute it in the next sentence doesn't work, and re-stating a "myth" only reinforces it in your listeners' or readers' minds!**

## Exercises

- › Consider the facts you normally use when talking about your work. Read something you've written and highlight or underline all the statistics or facts. Do you rely too heavily on facts and statistics to make your argument?
- › Now, try to narrow it down. Identify two to three surprising and startling facts about your issue that are compelling and easy to understand. You can always provide facts in supporting materials or footnotes, but don't weigh down your messages with them.
- › Rather than using multiple facts in your communications, try to pick one surprising fact or statistic. Use the following formula:
  - a. Start with values. (See: Values) Open with a values statement about the importance of housing and a place to call home.
  - b. Support your values with one surprising fact. You might start this sentence with "Today, in our community..."
  - c. Now, move right into your solution (See: Aspiration and Solutions). How are you going to solve the problem you've articulated? What would you like your listener to do about the problem?
- › Write something – a newsletter article, a letter to the editor, or a letter to an elected official-in which you only use one of your startling facts or figures. How does it feel? What other language do you use to make your point with your audience?

## More Resources

"Your brain lies to you" <http://neighborhoodpartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Your-Brain-Lies-to-You.pdf>

"How Facts Backfire" [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/11/how\\_facts\\_backfire/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/11/how_facts_backfire/)

## More Resources – Advanced Reading!

Consider reading research by Anat Shenker-Osorio for a great discussion of the power of metaphors, as well as the implications of various metaphors and frames around inequality, the economy, and more: <http://www.asocommunications.com/html/findings-from-the-field/>