



Background: Why Framing Matters

Are you having the conversation with your audience you hope to? Do your conversations ever go sideways? Do you ever wonder how your audience is hearing the words you say? Framing your issues differently may be the help you need.

In communicating about our issue as advocates, it's important to understand how our audience hears the information we present. Cognitive science research tells us that people's brains are working relentlessly to connect the information we give them to stories they already know. We know our brains are constantly encountering and taking in new information, and that we experience that information through a filter of cultural models, knowledge, lived experiences, myths, stereotypes and more. All of these things affect how we interpret the world. To communicate more effectively about our issues, first we have to understand how we're being heard through our audience's filters.

Frames are mental structures that help people understand the world, based on particular cues from outside themselves that activate assumptions and values they hold within themselves.

— Berkeley Media
Studies Group

Questions to Ask Yourself

Think about how you read the newspaper in the morning. Once you read the headline and the author's name, do you have a sense of what the article will say? Once you've read through the first paragraph, do you know how you feel about what the article is saying, and whether you agree with it or not? If you disagree, do you read past the second paragraph? Your brain is trying to put the information into a context, and it's using all the available information it has to make snap decisions about what you're reading. People hear the words you speak or read the words you write in the same way.

Once you understand that the words you use may be activating frames inside people's heads that are unhelpful to your position, it's time to use framing to call up different images or ideas in people's heads. We can help direct their thinking through a number of tools and strategies, and enter the conversation about our issues through a different door. When we frame our issues, we are trying to help people understand our perspective, and solutions to the problems we see.

Once you understand framing, the other tools in this toolkit can help you work to reframe your issues in a way that is helpful to your long-term goals and outcomes.

Background

Every day, we are exposed to thousands and thousands of pieces of information. Our brains are relentlessly trying to make sense of this incoming information, and this happens in an instant as we categorize everything we hear or read. Our brains use something called "frames" to connect new information to information we already think we know. Cognitive science research tells us that once a frame has been triggered and a piece of information attached to it, it is extremely hard to dislodge. Frames are, simply, what our brains use to help make sense of incoming information. Framing is a remnant of our days living in caves or the jungle — if we saw something that might be dangerous, we had to react quickly. We saw the clues that said there might be danger, so we fled. Today, our brains still take in the same clues and react instantaneously.

As we move through the world and encounter new information, we hear that information through a filter of cultural models, knowledge, lived experiences, myths, stereotypes and more. All of these things affect how we interpret the world. Our brains are also seeking to connect this new information to the existing stories in our heads. When we hear new information, we are trying to put it into context. Our past stories, experiences and stereotypes help us do that.

As advocates, we need to realize that the people we are communicating to about our issues also have these frames and filters. They are not hearing about our issue with no previous information or knowledge. As advocates, we need to understand that people's brains are constantly seeking to connect new information to existing stories. This framing that's happening in other people's brains is directing their thinking about our issues. If we don't pay attention to how we frame stories for people, their brains will do it for us.

When we communicate about the issues that we care about, our audience may not be hearing our words the way we hope. It's time to start using framing to help our audience understand our issues more effectively.

Exercises

Look at a newspaper article that was recently published about your work or the issue you work on, and try to answer these questions:

- › **What are the dominant frames that are being cued-up in the article?**
- › **What is the debate "about" according to the author?**
- › **What is the likely take-away from the article for the average reader?**
- › **Now think about your issue more broadly – what are the typical ways your issue is framed in the public or the media? Are these frames helpful or harmful?**

More Resources

Read: "The Art of Reframing Political Debates" by Charlotte Ryan and William A. Gamson: <http://neighborhoodpartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Ryan-and-Gamson-Art-of-Reframing-Political-Debate.pdf>

Read: "Framing Public Issues" by the Frameworks Institute: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>

Read: Opportunity Agenda's "Helvetika Bold" cartoon: http://toolkit.opportunityagenda.org/assets/pdf/TOA_HelvetikaBold_Comic.pdf

Read: Topos on Framing: <http://www.topospartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Topos-On-Framing.pdf>