



# Putting into Practice the Principles of Effective Climate Change Communication

Communicating about climate change is a nuanced challenge. Sharing the facts alone is not enough—a multitude of social and cultural factors shape people's attitudes and behaviors related to climate change. This worksheet will guide you through some of the principles of effective climate change communication, informed by social science research.

## Choosing an audience segment and desired behavioral outcome

Audience segmentation is the process of dividing your audience members into categories so that you can better tailor your communication to them. Remember, *there is no such thing as the "general public."* A message that is highly effective for one person might completely miss the mark for another person.

Some possible segmentations include (but are not limited to):

- Level of concern about climate change (e.g., Global Warming's Six Americas)
- Role in the community (e.g., city council members, environmental nonprofit leaders, lake association members, religious leaders)
- Demographic traits (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, level of education)
- Reasons for engaging with your organization.

**Narrow in on a specific audience segment below.** The more specific, the better!

*Broadest audience you work with*

*More specific audience*

*Even more specific segment*

*Can you get even more specific?*

In order to define what “effective” means in your situation, you need to explicitly decide on a desired outcome of your communication. It’s tempting to choose “raising awareness” or “changing attitudes,” but to truly move climate solutions forward, our efforts must be action-focused. So, **what is your desired behavioral outcome?** I.e., what do you want your audience to do? Again, the more specific, the better!

## Choosing how to refer to climate change and related concepts

For many audiences, the *term* “climate change” may be more politically polarized than the *actions* you are trying to promote. Based on your audience’s attitudes about climate change and the context of your communication, **how will you refer to the concept of climate change?** Circle all that apply and jot down some notes about why.

- Climate change
- Changing climate
- Climate variability
- Extreme weather
- Changing weather patterns
- Other

What other potentially contentious concepts will you have to address? What terms will you use to refer to those concepts?

Regardless of your audience’s attitudes about climate change, turning it from an overwhelming global issue to an approachable local one can help make it feel more relevant to their everyday lives. **What specific, local, and relatable examples can you highlight for your audience?**

## Designing messages that resonate with your audience's values and cultivate a sense of agency

In order to *want* to take action, your audience needs to understand that doing so would be consistent with what they **value**. Values are often tied to people's identities: where they live, their cultural traditions, their professions, their hobbies, their religious beliefs, their community groups, etc.

What does your audience value *that you (or your organization) also value*?  
(You'll want to emphasize these values in your messaging.)

What does your audience value *that you (or your organization) do not value*?  
(You'll want to avoid messaging that conflicts with these values.)

How is your desired behavioral outcome consistent with your audience's values?

Once you've demonstrated that your desired behavior is consistent with your audience's values, you need to **empower** them—if they feel like they don't have the tools to take action, or if they feel like their actions don't matter, they are unlikely to even try. So, **what barriers to action (real or perceived) does your audience face?**

How can you address these barriers and increase efficacy (a sense of agency, an active form of hope)?  
Consider one or all of these types of efficacy:

- **Self-efficacy** = "I can take action"
- **Response efficacy** = "If I take action, it will have the desired effect"
- **Collective efficacy** = "If we all take action, our collective action will make a difference"

## Leveraging social norms to spur behavior change

Humans are social creatures. We are strongly influenced by what we think people like us are doing and what we think people like us approve of us doing. People tend to underestimate the popularity of pro-climate behaviors and policies—and learning the true norms increases their willingness to act. **What social norms can you highlight?**

Descriptive (what people do)	Injunctive (what people think is the right thing to do)

If you don't know the true norms, how can you find out?

## Handling misinformation and disinformation

**Misinformation** is false or misleading information. Most climate change misinformation originates as **disinformation** spread or funded by the fossil fuel industry with the intent to deceive.

What misinformation is your audience exposed to (and where does it originate)?

Why (or why not) is your audience likely to believe this misinformation?

How can you validate their underlying concern (if relevant) and convey empathy?

What alternative (true) explanation can you give to replace the misinformation?

## Putting the pieces together

Who is your messenger? Based on who your audience trusts and identifies with, it might be you, or it might not be!

What medium will you use? Oral presentation to a group, one-on-one conversation, website, social media campaign, video, comic strip, something else, or a combination?

Jot down an outline of your message.

What do you need to understand better about your audience in order to communicate more effectively with them?  
What are your next steps?

### Author

**Scott Hershberger**, University of Wisconsin–Madison Extension  
Forestry Communications Specialist  
M.S. in science communication  
Email: [scott.hershberger@wisc.edu](mailto:scott.hershberger@wisc.edu)  
LinkedIn: [scott-hershberger-scicomm](https://www.linkedin.com/in/scott-hershberger-scicomm)

### Scan for slides and references



The University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming in compliance with state and federal law. You may request materials in an alternative language or format or other services to make this document more accessible by contacting [scott.hershberger@wisc.edu](mailto:scott.hershberger@wisc.edu). There is no added cost to you for these services.