

A Strategic Framing Overview

At one time or another, we have all had a visitor or family member approach us to ask a question about something they have read, or heard on the news, or are concerned about. People look to educators as trusted experts. As a trusted information source, how can we maintain, develop, and act on that trust? We are in a unique position to educate, inspire, and motivate our visitors and students to become global stewards.



Why framing is important:

People are deluged with information and cannot digest all of it. Careful framing can make it more likely that visitors will understand and internalize what we communicate. Framing is intended to help connect our information with values our audience cares deeply about and ideas they already understand.

Seven Simple Steps to Framing!

1. **Use a conversational TONE:** We exist in an argument culture that tends to portray all socio-political and scientific issues as debates between two sides. A reasonable tone (as opposed to a rhetorical or partisan tone) signals that this is a message for everyone not just those who already agree with the point of view being expressed. Avoiding the crisis tone allows for consideration of the problem instead of hopelessness.
2. **Start with a VALUE:** Connecting to people's values right off the bat establishes why the issue matters and what's at stake. Frameworks Institute (a nonprofit think-tank that conducts communication research to advance the resolution of social issues) has pinpointed two main "big picture values" which are proven to lead to productive consideration of such problems by Americans:

- a. **Protection:** We must protect and preserve the habitats and ecosystems we depend on. Showing concern for others is the right thing to do. Let's take measures to eliminate or reduce risks. Let's be vigilant in shielding people and places from harm.



- b. **Responsible Management:** Let's be responsible when it comes to the environment. Let's look ahead to handle problems before they get worse. Responsible managers keep an open mind, look to evidence, and take a level-headed, step-by-step approach. Future generations depend on the decisions we make today.

3. **Use EXPLANATORY METAPHORS:** Tested metaphors explain how an abstract, unfamiliar, or misunderstood system or process works by making a carefully developed comparison to a concrete, familiar domain. Here are some examples of tested metaphors:

- a. **Regular vs. Rampant Carbon Dioxide:** Some carbon dioxide, or CO₂, is needed for life processes. We can call this Regular CO₂. But CO₂ is not just something that plants breathe in or what we breathe out. It's also something that gets put into the air when we drive our cars or burn any kind of fossil fuel. We can call this Rampant CO₂ because there is too much of it and it's getting out of control. Rampant CO₂ accumulates in the wrong places, like the oceans, and causes a number of problems in the climate and ecosystems. We'll always need regular carbon dioxide, but we need to start reducing rampant carbon dioxide.

What is a frame?

The way a story is told – it's selective use of particular values, symbols, metaphors, and messengers – which in turn trigger shared mental models people already have.



b. **The Heat Trapping Blanket:** When we burn fossil fuels like coal, oil and natural gas we pump more and more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and this build-up creates a blanket effect, trapping in the earth's heat. The ocean absorbs much of this excess heat, making it warmer too.

4. **Put the issues into CONTEXT with CAUSAL CHAINS:** Widen the lens to give the issue broader context. Clear, concise connections between the underlying problems and visible outcomes are called *causal links*. Many connections that we think are obvious are not as apparent to our audiences. Ensuring that visitors and students understand how an issue works is a cornerstone of strategic framing. Many people think of it as connecting the dots. Clear causal chains (sets of links) fill in the gaps between expert and public thinking, which invites and empowers the public to think through an issue and how to address it more productively. A well done causal chain will have a link that is human related, which will allow for creative thinking and multiple solutions that are appropriate to solving the problem.

Here is an example: *As we burn more fossil fuels for energy use, we release an excessive amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This creates a heat-trapping blanket effect on our planet and increases the global temperature. With higher temperatures, the ocean has warmed and expanded. Over the last century, the waters on New York City's doorstep have been rising roughly an inch per decade. By 2050, levels could rise two feet higher than they are today, affecting homes and businesses with more frequent flooding.*

5. **Connect to COMMUNITY LEVEL SOLUTIONS:** On the rare instances where solutions are part of the conversation, the common solutions we hear from visitors, students, and the media are at an individual level – changing light bulbs, vampire electronics, etc. These sometimes lead people to thinking that they've done their one action and now they're done. Or how can that small action really help the larger problem, so is it even worth it? Telling inspiring stories where people come together to act as a group is the key. Things happening across neighborhoods, schools, institutions, cities, and regional levels inspire the “we” and activate the citizen identity. Asking questions is a great communication technique. What do you think we can do to fix this problem? What networks or groups are you a part of? What could they do together? People will often come up with short term, episodic actions they can do at home. While these individual steps are important, collective actions have a greater impact.
6. **Use SOCIAL MATH:** Numbers and data are made more relevant by making a comparison to a familiar domain on a relatable scale.

Here is an example: *in 2011, Americans experienced record-breaking weather and climate disasters that cost our country approximately \$53 billion. That is more than eight times what our government spent on financing clean energy projects in the same year.*

7. **Awaken SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:** These conversations are a call to action! By drawing upon universally shared values, we can start a dialogue which can lead people away from our tendency to identify as *consumers*, and more towards an identity as *citizens*.

