How to tell compelling stories that move people to action
How to tell compelling stories that move people to action
‘Everywhere and every day, ordinary people are willing to transform inertia into action, isolation into connection and destruction into beauty.

We know how to create the world we want. So let’s get on with it.’
ARE YOU LOOKING TO:

Find solutions to some of our most pressing challenges, like climate change, wildlife extinction and the destruction of our living world? Improve politics and social institutions, and rebuild trust in democracy? Deepen civic engagement? Motivate people to act?

THEN THIS HANDBOOK IS FOR YOU.

We’ve been cooking this kit for quite some time, guided by the best research from communications, psychology, academia and campaigning. It has the key ingredients to tell compelling stories that move people to act.

This handbook aims to dismantle the old story that people and nature must be in conflict. In its place, it will help you create a new story – a story of connection. In this story, we value the whole web of life and the incredible diversity of life on Earth. We stand with Traditional Owners to care for country. We find solutions. We persevere.

Together, we can take on the big structural challenges that stand in the way of change – the laws, policies, institutions, decisions and practices – and create a system that does right by people and nature.

The ingredients in this handbook will help grow a powerful movement of people who care and are willing to act – and create a future that cherishes life, with clean water, shared sunshine and big old trees.

Let’s come together to speak out for the most important thing on Earth – life itself – and make sure tomorrow is even more beautiful than today.

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“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”

– Dr Seuss
**INTRODUCTION**

Right now, a pollution and extinction crisis threatens the web of life. So much is already lost. Our children will not see the animals now extinct, the ancient forests now clear-felled or the seasons as they used to be. We are living with the consequences of bad decisions, discredited ideas and short-term thinking.

The big polluters. The coal charlatans. The dismissed extinctions. The subsidised destruction. The vested interests. The politicians who forget they represent the people.

But we don’t accept the story we must sacrifice nature for a quick buck. We can make different choices. People made this crisis and we can solve it.

The naysayers say people don’t care. Or if they do, it’s too late.

We’re calling them out. People right across our wide, brown land care deeply - and they are prepared to come together and do what it takes to create a brighter future.

Everywhere and every day, ordinary people are willing to transform inertia into action, isolation into connection and destruction into beauty.

*We know how to create the world we want.*
To solve these challenges and create a beautiful future, we must tell stories that motivate people to take action. We are replacing old, fear-based stories that define humanity as greedy, selfish, short-termist and apathetic.

Instead, we are telling new stories that reignite core values burning bright in us all – values like connection, compassion, hope, generosity and creativity. Our new stories are touching and tangible, positive and empowering, real and relatable. They convey ‘the fierce urgency of now’ and describe the challenges and choices we face. Together, we must use the power of narrative to shift the debate and move people to action.

**WHAT IS THIS HANDBOOK?**

This handbook introduces some key principles, techniques and tools so you can craft a compelling narrative that will motivate and mobilise communities. It will help you create a coherent story that can engage and strengthen the values that will, over the long term, engage more people more strongly in our cause. It provides the building blocks to construct a narrative in any situation, and provides a methodology based on a bank of evidence and practice, so you can respond as new communications challenges arise.

**THIS INCLUDES:**

- **Telling emotionally compelling stories.** Storytelling is the basis of persuasion and communications. For ACF, stories are our most important tool – in organising or communicating.

- **Speaking from our moral perspective.** Use frames, metaphors and language that evoke our worldview and tap into our pro-environment values. Don’t reject opposing arguments using their language and frames that invoke their worldview. Tell the story from our perspective, using our frames.

- **Take people where you want them to go.** We can shift the debate so it reflects our worldview and values. This means taking people where we want them to be – not saying what seems to be popular now, as that won’t create change.

- **Remembering the facts won’t set us free.** Careful footnoting and graphs alone won’t move people to action. Use statistics and science to support your story – not the other way around. Describe what a policy or process means to people and their lives.

This narrative project is the result of more than a year’s work by the Australian Conservation Foundation and our friends. We did months of desk research and qualitative and quantitative research. We researched the discourses of the environment movement, industry, government, media and pop culture. We workshoped draft narratives with people from the ACF community and beyond.

This project is insight driven, participatory, dialogue-centred and ongoing. It is not a silver bullet or the end of our inquiry. It is designed to grow over time, as the public debate shifts and we encounter new situations.

To change the world, we are changing the narratives we use to make sense of the world.

Let’s get started.
GUIDING ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Telling compelling stories can engage and grow a powerful community, reconnect people with our living world and move them to take action. These stories are not just words on a page; they are embedded in every aspect of how we design and develop campaigns, tactics and engagement journeys.

A people-centred engagement approach follows several guiding principles.

Our engagement is shifting:

From **exclusive** to **participatory** community

From **individual** to **collaborative**

From **material or information** to **experience**

From **general** to **specific and place based**

From **passive** to **active**

From **broadcast** to **dialogue**

From **protest** to **what we are for**

People in our communities are the instigators of change, the heroes and the heart of our stories.

Talk to people without being transactional. Rather than telling them what they can do for us, let’s create empowering, collaborative and transformational experiences. These experiences are specific, tangible and often connected locally.

We can inspire collective action to influence the system and create big systemic change - not just individual action to make small, isolated changes. Talk in ways that are positive and inspiring, and see challenges as solvable, not overwhelming. When we amp up the seriousness of our challenges, we need to offer plausible and commensurate pathways to solve them.

Tap into people’s compassionate values with powerful and emotive stories to connect people to our living world and drive long-term meaningful change. We are for a positive future, not only against the bad. Focus on outcomes for people’s lived experience, not only the nitty gritty of policy mechanisms and process.

This narrative approach is not a quick fix. Over time, we shape how people understand and form judgements about the environment. We can tap into values to change attitudes and create new social and cultural norms. This takes time.

Some of the ideas here may challenge conventional wisdom about what the public is ready to hear. Our premise is to find the range of ways people can, when supported by compelling stories and calls to action, come to value and speak our for our living world.
STEP BY STEP

narrative ingredients

01 PURPOSE
What do you want your story to achieve?
Always have a clear purpose and theory of change. Be explicit about the change you want, how you expect to get there and how your audience can make a difference. See page 23

02 AUDIENCE
Who are you trying to reach?
Next, define and understand the audience you are trying to reach. Who must be moved to action? Does your strategy call for your audience to be active participants in the story and activity, not just passive recipients? Will your message move the base and persuade the middle? Who does your audience trust and what do they care about? See page 27

03 VALUES
Are you engaging and strengthening compassionate values?
Use language that motivates compassionate, bigger-than-self values – such as caring about our living world and other people. Challenge selfish values – such as wealth, status, authority and conformity – and assumptions that the world is fundamentally uncaring. See page 37

04 FRAMING
Are you activating helpful frames?
Frames are the ‘meta’ concepts or ideas about how we understand the world – they shape our instinctive responses and tap into worldviews. Use frames that prime life, connection, people, democracy and responsibility. Avoid nationalistic, safety, security, defender, competitive and economic frames. But don’t think of an elephant! If you negate a frame, you just reinforce it. See page 51

05 STORY
Is your story emotionally compelling?
Tell emotionally compelling stories – not lists of facts. Give people something to believe in. People do things – so don’t forget characters and be clear about who is doing what to whom. Tell stories that motivate people to action – try a self/us/now structure with a challenge, choice and outcome. See page 67

06 LANGUAGE
Is your language concrete, personal and active?
Does it pass the 8-year-old test? Are you hedging? Are people doing things, and not zombies? Are you sending contradictory messages with mixed metaphors? Describe real experiences in evocative words, not technocratic language. See page 81
PURPOSE
What do you want your communication to achieve?

All communications should have a clear purpose. Don’t generate emails, reports or online actions for their own sake – make sure you know how and why they will create change.

If your theory of change revolves around moving people to action, be clear about how your stories and communication products help achieve this goal.

“You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”

– Jane Goodall
WHAT’S YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE?

A theory of change bridges the gap between where you are now and where you want to be.

A clear public narrative sets out a strategy for change and invites others to be part of it.

In your narratives, be explicit about how you expect change to happen and how what you are doing will impact that change. Measure the ingredients and set a timer. Map out what the various actors must do in order to achieve and sustain your vision of success.

In other words, have a reason for doing things:

• What change do you want? What is your ultimate goal?
• What is your strategy? How are you turning the resources you have into the power you need, to win the change you want?
• How does your piece of communication fit with your strategy, and how will it help you win the change you want?
• Who will read or watch this? Why?
• Who must be moved to take action?
• How is this relevant to them? (People already have 99 problems, should they listen to your problem?)
• What are you asking your community to do?
• How will that ask bring you closer to the change you want?

Don’t confuse tactics with goals. A tactic might be getting likes on Facebook or asking people to read a report or watch a film. A goal is your destination – the change you want. Make sure your tactic is not an end in itself – it is probably one tactic among many to bring you to your destination.

HOW CAN YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The world is about to end – will you sign a petition …?

Faced with an apathetic public, environment communicators sometimes resort to shock and awe tactics, framing climate change, for example, as Frankenstein’s runaway monster. They give gory details of a Pandora’s Box of horrors with freak storms and apocalyptic rising sea levels.

But by giving people no credible way to respond to these quite profound threats – and offering no solutions that are commensurate to the size of this enormous problem – people become fatalistic and despondent or they shut down and block their ears, as it’s all too overwhelming.

Make sure the steps in the pathway to your goal are plausible. If you are arguing global warming is destroying our planet and the world is ending, asking your audience to sign a petition or change a light bulb is clearly not worthwhile.

Make the solution – and your call to action – equal to or greater than the size of the problem, or a clearly defined step along the way to a larger goal.

Be careful not to raise concern and urgency without offering something people can do – a plausible pathway to action – or they will feel disempowered and lose hope.

You can break down large, overwhelming issues into smaller steps that people have the power to influence. You can also tell powerful stories of collective action to show that little things done separately can solve big, collective problems. These stories also help overcome the demotivating feeling that individual actions don’t count.

We need to match problems with plausible and commensurate action. This is no small task. It means naming the real drivers of problems and sharing your strategy for influencing them, one step at a time, often in conditions of great uncertainty. Story-telling is strategy-telling with emotion.

In the story section, we’ll discuss in more detail how stories can transform emotions that inhibit action into emotions that inspire action.

Many environmental communicators are stuck in the idea that we must tell everyone the problem, thinking that if they only understood how great the problem was, they would act. But people have moved on. Our narrative project research shows that Australians overwhelmingly accept that a pollution and extinction crisis threatens life on Earth. They just don’t really know what to do about it, and many of the solutions they hear just don’t add up.

Rather than convincing people there are problems, we need to provide plausible pathways to action where people feel they have a role to play.
AUDIENCE

Who are you trying to reach?

You can’t change the world if your message falls on deaf ears. Knowing who you are trying to reach is crucial. It is easy to default into thinking your audience is the general public. It isn’t. Your audience is not everyone.

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.”

– Rachel Carson

People’s Climate March Melbourne 2015.
Photo: James Thomas/ACF.
American pastor Rick Warren knows a lot about attracting new members to a cause and deepening their engagement. His megachurch in southern California, Saddleback, is the fastest growing Baptist church in America’s history, with a 40,000-strong congregation, 5,000 small groups that meet weekly and 13 campuses around the globe. In his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren offers advice on targeting audiences to bring in a crowd, deepening people’s participation by moving them up a ladder of engagement, purpose, strategy – even selecting music.

Warren argues people are diverse. Just like churches, no single environment organisation can possibly reach everyone. He writes, “Imagine what would happen to a commercial radio station if it tried to appeal to everyone’s taste in music. A station that alternated its format between classical, heavy metal, country, rap, reggae, and southern gospel would end up alienating everyone. No one would listen to that station!”

Instead, we need all kinds of environment and civil society groups – like radio stations – to reach all kinds of people. Together, we can do what no single group, style or strategy can alone.

**DEFINING YOUR AUDIENCE**

To work out your target audience, Warren suggests researching what kinds of people live in your area and thinking about which groups your church – or organisation – is best equipped to reach. Smaller groups should focus their resources on reaching the people they can best communicate with, while larger organisations can run multiple outreach programs tailored to different audiences.

Warren suggests defining your audience **geographically** – focusing on people who live in your target area and working out how far they will travel (or how far your work is still relevant).

Then think **demographically**. Become an expert in your community, but don’t overdo demographic research; keep it relevant to your purpose. Are you targeting young people or older people? People above or below the average household income? People who live or work in areas affected by coal mines? People who live near the Great Dividing Range?

Next, define your audience **culturally** – through their values, interests, tears and concerns. To find out peoples’ mindsets, talk to them. Have face to face conversations. Circulate a survey. Run focus groups. Listen.

Warren suggests creating a composite profile of a typical person in your audience to better understand and communicate with them – like Environmental Ed who enjoys his job, reads national newspapers, composts, has a tertiary education, is concerned about climate change, enjoys bushwalking, has children in high school and so on. As Warren says, “Can you imagine a photographer shooting pictures without taking the time to focus?”
The report describes these groups as:
CONCERNED 39% This group is more knowledgeable on climate change issues than people in the previous three groups. They feel part of nature and are moderately environmentally friendly. They expressed a moderately strong belief that human-related climate change is occurring and its effects are imminent and they are distressed to hear about climate change impacts. They are more acutely aware of the risks of climate change and are concerned about the impact on the environment. Surprisingly, they are slightly distrustful of climate change authorities and only marginally in agreement that they can personally make a difference.
ALARMED 26% This group is the most knowledgeable of all on climate change issues. They tend to report strong belief in climate change, the imminence and proximity of its effects, and strong environmental values. They have moderately high levels of concern, distress and perceived risk, and believe they can personally make a difference. They are also positive about clean energy, and have higher than average levels of trust in climate change authorities.

More recent polling indicates the proportion of Australians who are concerned or alarmed about climate change is growing. In June 2016, a Galaxy Poll found 72 per cent of Australians were concerned about climate change (27 per cent very concerned, 45 per cent fairly concerned and just 7 per cent not concerned at all). People who are concerned or alarmed about climate change are the strong majority and, as a general rule, it is best to target these people. The challenge is not to convince them there is a problem – most people are already convinced. The challenge is to provide plausible pathways for action so people know they can make a difference.

If your audience is people who are uncertain, the best messenger will often be a trusted peer.
SEGMENTING YOUR AUDIENCE

Your audience for a particular communications piece or project is probably not your whole community. It might be:

- Voters in a particular electorate
- People who want their children to get out in nature
- People who have taken a number of campaign actions and are actively involved in the ACF community
- Donors
- People who care about Great Forest National Park or live near the proposed area
- Allies from the environment movement
- Federal Members of Parliament and/or their advisors
- Journalists from ABC, Sky News, Guardian and Fairfax
- Influential people from the business community

To tailor your message, segment your audience as much as possible. Is your audience local, regional or national? What do they care about? How can we help them? What are their obstacles to engagement?

Before you start working on a report, brochure, kit or action, make sure you have a clear audience – and tailor your communications approach, messaging and tone to that group of people.

WHO SHOULD DELIVER YOUR MESSAGE?

Depending on your audience, the message might be better not to come from you. Often a third party validator – such as a person in the community – will be more convincing. This might mean making a video of a person who lives near the Great Barrier Reef or promoting newspaper articles written by a fireman who has experienced the impacts of global warming first hand.

For example, it might be difficult for large environment-focused organisations alone to reach farmers directly affected by the Shenhua coal mine in New South Wales’ Liverpool Plains. However, many of these farmers share a similar goal of protecting their land and stopping the mine. Partnering with local groups is a more effective way to reach this ‘persuadable’ group – like the 2015 Liverpool Plains Alliance, a partnership between farmers, grassroots community groups, local Indigenous groups and national environment organisations.

BASE, MIDDLE, OPPOSITION

Preach to the choir – they sing to the congregation

Knowing your audience means you are not trying to communicate with everyone at once.

It is often effective to communicate with our base – people who share our values and worldview and support ACF’s work. These are the people who invite their friends to community events and who talk about the campaign issues with people they know. These days, we are bombarded with information, so we turn to our peers to help filter the noise. People in our base, then, are important messengers.

Our base is our choir. They sing to the congregation, so it is vital they sing strongly. We must empower them. They must know what they are doing and why.

We often use the base to reach ‘persuadables’ – people in the middle who think using mixture of self-interested values and worldviews, and compassionate values like care for others and concern for our natural world. Our task is to try to engage them in our worldview and strengthen the shared values they already hold.

However, if you try to please all, you will please none. If we appeal to our base, persuadables and opposition all at once, our message will be bland and uninspiring. We will stand for nothing.

It is also worth remembering – people are not in ‘any one ‘place’. We actually all believe contradictory messages at the same time. There is no ideology or moral system of the middle – people who are in the middle hold mixed positions (or worldviews) on various issues, in all kinds of combinations.

Don’t fall into the trap of communicating as if our base and the large middle of reasonable people are a minority, fighting against a majority that doesn’t care. As we explain below, poll after poll shows a majority of Australians do care about nature. We don’t need to convince people there are problems. Our critical task is to articulate a path to action that is plausible and motivating.
BRING PEOPLE WHERE YOU WANT THEM TO BE

Don’t just meet people where they’re at

While it’s important to understand your audience, we do not actually aim to meet people where they are right now. It might seem like Australians are most concerned by terrorism and the cost of living – but just because some people are afraid of terrorism doesn’t mean we should call our climate change efforts an anti-terrorism program or promote solar panels because they might make you rich.

We can shift the debate so it reflects our worldview and values. This means taking people where we want them to be – not saying what seems to be popular now, as that won’t create change.

A great message doesn’t say what’s already popular, it makes popular what needs to be said. Puppies and kittens are wildly popular, but they won’t help us create the change we want to see. Instead of trying to please people, we must figure out where they are capable of going and what we need to say to get them there.

This involves activating our worldview, values and moral system. It means thinking carefully about what we want to communicate and what we want the public to understand – and talk to people in our frames and using compassionate values.

Resources. The Five Australias: How we think and feel about climate change – Full report prepared by University of New England. Summary produced with Climate Reality Australia and ACF.
Values

How to engage and strengthen compassionate values

Values are the guiding principles of life. They shape our thoughts, actions and broadest attitudes, as well as social norms and institutions. They affect how we see the world and motivate us to behave in certain ways. They influence our political persuasions, or career choices, how we live, what resources we use, our personal wellbeing.

“Opinions are the ripples on the surface of the public’s consciousness, shallow and easily changed. Attitudes are the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger. Values are the deep tides of the public mood, slow to change, but powerful.”

– Sir Robert Worcester, Founder of polling firm MORI
Values also shape public concern. They guide how our community responds to environmental issues – and what we do about them. They motivate people to care and act about climate change, environmental destruction, persistent child poverty and rising inequality – or they drive people to strive for wealth and status instead.9

Research by Common Cause Foundation shows that engaging our common values is critical to addressing the profound challenges we face. To solve these issues, we must “deepen public commitment to civic participation...rebuild social cohesion and reshape social institutions to inspire public trust.”10 This means creating a foundation of compassionate values and encouraging people to act in line with them.

In your stories and engagement activities, always consciously engage and strengthen the compassionate values that will, over the long term, engage more people more strongly in our cause. Also challenge selfish values – such as wealth, ambition and social status. Remind people they are not alone in caring. Advocacy, civic participation and making vocal demands of decision makers in government and business are healthy, normal activities in a democracy.

THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF VALUES
On compassion and selfishness
Common Cause’s latest research focuses on compassionate and selfish values.11

Compassionate values include caring about our environment, equality, social justice, concern for future generations, honesty, peace, helpfulness, forgiveness and responsibility.

Selfish values focus on things like wealth, status, prestige, authority, conformity, controlling people, ambition, influence, popularity and social recognition.

Almost everyone holds both compassionate and selfish values, at some level. However, their relative importance varies from person to person, and changes over time.

VALUES CAN BE TEMPORARILY ENGAGED
Values are not star signs
We are not either compassionate or selfish. Instead, we are motivated by all kinds of values, just to different degrees. We might have particular experiences that temporarily ‘engage’ or bring to mind different values, and this often affects our beliefs and actions. See an advertisement and you might crave an expensive watch to feel popular and desirable (selfish values), or read a newspaper article and feel a surge of concern for the welfare of others (compassionate values).

We know people who are reminded of generosity and social justice – even very subtly – are more likely to support environmental policies than those who are reminded of financial success and status, without any mention of the environment. This is because by repeatedly engaging values, those values become stronger. Like a see-saw, when compassionate values rise, selfish values tend to fall.12

As the Common Cause Foundation notes, “Drawing a person’s attention to compassionate values tends to temporarily diminish the importance that he or she attaches to selfish values, and vice-versa. People who hold selfish values to be important are less likely to express concern about social and environmental problems. They are less likely to hold attitudes supportive of addressing these problems, and they are less likely to adopt behaviours aimed at mitigating these problems.”13

VALUES: THE BACKGROUND
Our approach draws on extensive academic research, especially from Common Cause Foundation, Professor Tim Kasser and Professor Shalom Schwartz.14

In a nutshell, our approach draws on decades of research and hundreds of cross-cultural studies.15 In these studies, researchers like Schwartz found values are surprisingly consistent and fall into ten main groups:
Shalom Schwartz’s ten values groups.

**UNIVERSALISM**
Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature.

**BENEVOLENCE**
Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact.

**TRADITION**
Respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self.

**CONFORMITY**
Restraint of actions, inclinations and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms.

**SECURITY**
Safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self.

**POWER**
Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources.

**ACHIEVEMENT**
Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards.

**HEDONISM**
Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself.

**STIMULATION**
Excitement, novelty and challenge in life.

**SELF-DIRECTION**
Independent thought and action – choosing, creating, exploring.
Here’s how those values are structured, in more detail:

Source: Common Cause, based on Schwartz’s survey \(^9\)

People’s Climate March Melbourne 2015. Photo: James Thomas/ACF.
VALUES ARE RELATED TO EACH OTHER

Bleeding values

Values are not random; they are all related. Some values overlap or bleed into others. Clusters of dominant values, such as conformity, tradition and security, for example, are quite compatible. We tend not to simultaneously strongly hold values on opposite sides of the values map, such as respect for tradition and thrill seeking hedonism.

WHY DO WE CONSCIOUSLY ENGAGE COMPASSIONATE VALUES?

Think with your heart

Values help us answer some big questions, such as: How can we find solutions to some of the most pressing environmental and social problems, like climate change, poverty and the destruction of our living world? We know people power can stand up to vested interests and change political and social structures, but how can we motivate people to act? How can we rebuild people’s trust in democracy, politics and social institutions? How can we deepen civic engagement?

By building a foundation of compassionate values, we can encourage people to care for our environment. By strengthening these values, we increase the likelihood that people take action to address environmental challenges and get involved with civil society organisations and political activism.

As Common Cause Foundation notes, "A large body of evidence shows that values are central importance in leading people to express concern about social and environmental issues – whether this concern is expressed by changing aspects of day-to-day behaviour, by becoming politically involved, or by volunteering." 18

The inverse is also true; people who attach more importance to selfish values are less likely to care or get involved.

DID YOU KNOW?

In an experiment, researchers asked people to sort words related to achievement values (like 'ambition' and 'success') from other words.

Afterwards, these people were less likely to volunteer time to help a researcher (a behaviour associated with benevolence values). 19

Another study asked people to think briefly about the importance of broadmindedness, affiliation, and self-acceptance (compassionate values), and found they then rated climate change and the loss of countryside as more important than another group asked to think about selfish values. Importantly, the study deliberately made no mention of the environment. 20

HOW TO USE LANGUAGE THAT MOTIVATES COMPASSION

Rather than encouraging people to do things for selfish reasons, we promote a ‘bigger than self’ worldview. For example, we encourage people to put solar panels on their roofs not because they will save money, get rich or be popular (that’s priming greed and status), but because solar panels are responsible, help reduce pollution and care for our living world.

Appeals to life as a battle, a battle against nature, national security and authority are opposed to the values that lead people to care for nature and other people.

When responding to the narratives of opponents, government or media, look at the phrases that are frequently used – what values are they likely to prime? Don’t reinforce unhelpful terms and ideas. Avoid repeating language that appeals to values related to self-interest.

A CARING COMMUNITY

In ACF’s story, we are careful to activate compassionate values rather than selfish ones. When we describe our community, for example, we do not categorise people by professional status (doctors, lawyers, gardeners, scientists). Instead, we say:

We are quarter of a million people who care. We are advocates, friends, explorers and leaders. We come from communities right across the country. We are people who love a beach, a critter, a solar panel, a mountain range and a patch of bush.

A CARING FUTURE

We describe the world we want to see – infused with compassionate values:

Imagine a world where water flows clean. Where we no longer burn dirty energy and everyone shares abundant energy from the sun and wind.

A world where communities care for the life that surrounds us and big polluters are a thing of the past.

A world where Australians stand together with the nation’s Traditional Owners to care for country. Where the idea of extinction is extinct and the places we love thrive.

A world where businesses create opportunities by working in harmony with nature, and people work in jobs with a future. Where our economic decisions are shaped by what we value in life, not by endless desires for more stuff and more profit. And the people who represent us in parliament value and protect the places we love...

We’re awed by the incredible diversity of life on Earth, shaped over billions of years. We love this ancient island continent, its seas and waters, its unique creatures and country.

We hold this world in trust for future generations of children and wildlife, and for all of life.

We are here to create a world with a beautiful future.
Caring Economic Decisions

When we talk about the economy, we do not engage selfish values where Australia gets richer or competes on the world stage. Instead, we say:  

Let’s make economic decisions that support life, not damage it. We can steer our economy to create a fair society in which our communities and all living things can thrive.  

Let’s improve our quality of life, not just the quantity of wealth. Let’s create better work with time for leisure, nature, community and democracy. We can value our rivers, oceans, forests and country for more than just what can be extracted from them.  

Challenge Selfish Values

We actively challenge selfish values and highlight their consequences, such as:  

We are living with the consequences of bad decisions, discredited ideas and short-term thinking.  


The politicians who forget they represent the people.  

We don’t accept the story we must sacrifice nature for a quick buck. We can make different choices.  

Thinking that business must destroy life just to sell more stuff is a failure of imagination. Business leaders can be a powerful force for change. Government, when held to account by people, can protect life with the stroke of a pen.  

Challenge Assumptions That the World is Uncaring

Research shows people think most other people are selfish and do not care about our environment. This is a mistaken belief – Common Cause Foundation calls this a ‘perception gap.’  

In fact, the majority of Australians do care. A large, longitudinal study by CSIRO found a large majority of Australians think that climate change is happening, but many are inaccurate when they predict what other people think. On average people predicted 25% of Australians were of the opinion climate change isn’t happening; actually, fewer than 8% are of that view.  

We are not a minority, and it is useful to remind people of this – their compassionate values align, to a large extent, with most Australians. People who care about our environment are not fighting a lonely, moral crusade. People care about what other people value – social proof shows them they are not alone.  

Cognitive scientists and researchers like George Lakoff agree, arguing people do not really make decisions purely out of self-interest. The belief that it is irrational to go against your self-interest, and that a normal person who is rational reasons on the basis of self-interest, is a myth – and a persistent one. (Modern economic theory and foreign policy are based on the myth of rational decision makers.)  

ACF’s audience is therefore not necessarily asking ‘what’s in it for me?’ – which is important in how we shape our calls to action.  

In ACF’s story, we therefore deliberately emphasise the size and diversity of our community. We challenge the myth that we are a small minority:  

The naysayers say people don’t care. Or if they do, it’s too late.  

We’re calling them out. People right across our wide, brown land care deeply – and they want to come together to create a brighter future.  

Everywhere and every day, ordinary people are willing to transform inertia into action, isolation into connection and destruction into beauty.  

We know how to create the world we want. So let’s get on with it.  

DID YOU KNOW?

There is broad public support for our agenda

89% of people are concerned that pollution and how we overuse our rivers, forests and oceans are threatening the health of people, cities and wildlife.  

89% of Australians are concerned that politicians do not have a vision, or plan to protect our natural assets while maintaining the economy.  

80% of people support a party that presents a national plan to protect rivers, oceans, forests and wildlife.  

Across voting intention, 88-90% of people agree:  

“Our rivers, land, forests, beaches and oceans are our source of clean air, water, food and health.”  

“Rivers, land, forests, beaches and oceans are life support systems for people and for wildlife.”  

“Healthy rivers, oceans, forests and wildlife are a big part of Australia’s identity.”

Auspoll 2010 ACF/WWF


“Healthy rivers, oceans, forests and wildlife are a big part of Australia’s identity.”

Auspoll 2010 ACF/WWF

FRAMING

Are you activating helpful frames?

“Unless you frame yourself, others will frame you – the media, your enemies, your competitors, your well-meaning friends.”

– George Lakoff
WHAT ARE FRAMES?

Don’t think of an elephant!

We understand things, mostly subconsciously, through frames of reference. When you read a sentence, your ‘frame’ for a word is not just its dictionary meaning – your understanding is shaped and shaded by biases, life experiences, assumptions and prejudices. When you hear a particular word or encounter a specific situation, the dictionary meaning and all those other bits of knowledge and experience are activated in your brain. This ‘frame’ sets in motion an unconscious train of thought.

Every single word you think of activates a frame. Framing is an unavoidable reality of communication. There is no such thing as unframed information, and most successful communicators are adept at framing, whether using frames intentionally or intuitively.

When you hear the words ‘knife’, ‘gun’ and ‘machete’ there’s a good chance you think of weapons and crime. But if you heard ‘knife’, fork and spoon you are more likely to think about dinner and your kitchen. Our emotional response to knife, fork, spoon or knife, gun, machete is quite different – and it’s uncontrollable and automatic.

Frames are storylines that set a specific train of thought in motion, so we can quickly work out why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it.

George Lakoff argues facts do not structure how we see the world. Instead, we make sense of the world through frames of reference. A frame doesn’t simply position an idea so it carries a certain meaning – it actually defines the terms of the debate itself.

To be accepted, the truth must fit within the logic of a person’s frame. If a fact does not fit that frame of reference, it makes no sense and the person will label it irrational, crazy or stupid. The frame stays and the fact bounces off. Scientists, for example, have stated and restated the facts on global warming for decades, but, as Lakoff says, they fall on ‘deaf brains – brains with frames that don’t fit those facts.’

WHEN YOU CRITICISE OR NEGATE A FRAME, YOU ACTUALLY REINFORCE IT

George Lakoff says, ‘Don’t think of an elephant! Whatever you do, do not think of an elephant.’ Of course, that’s impossible – the word ‘elephant’ evokes the frame of a large animal with floppy ears, even though the sentence negates it. So even though you try to reject that frame, by referring to it, you still activate it. Your negation does not form a new frame.

The carbon tax is a good example. People who did not want to address pollution and global warming deliberately renamed (and reframed) the Clean Energy Future Act the ‘carbon tax’, and in doing so, took control of the public narrative. The ‘Carbon Tax’ frame was not really about tax – it was about avoiding government regulation of powerful companies, and allowing business to act without restraint. The tax frame activated a much larger worldview framework with battlers and the cost of living and tapped into Tony Abbott’s story about the ‘liar’ Julia Gillard who wanted to put a ‘tax on everything’. It also activated a confusing science-based frame around carbon, opening up a debate over whether it is logical to tax carbon (when carbon is a natural substance and understanding carbon emissions is complex).

Instead of pushing back, supportive politicians, media and even many in the climate movement let this undermining frame take over. Sometimes, people tried to negate the frame by saying ‘this is not a tax’, but that still activated the tax frame. Eventually, they started using the phrase it themselves, making ‘carbon tax’ the accepted shorthand. This framed the whole debate.

MYTH-BUSTING IS NEGATING A FRAME!

Myth-busting – identifying and debunking commonly held myths and mistaken beliefs using facts – doesn’t work. Social research shows restating or even referring to misinformation actually strengthens it. Myth-busting gives the audience new ‘myths’ (or opposing arguments) they may not have heard before and deepens their belief in them. People are likely to remember the myths, but not necessarily the reasons they are wrong.

Of course, it is important not to let misinformation go unchallenged, but what you fight, you feed. Reiterating myths helps spread them – especially when we state misinformation affirmatively (such as Myth: Coal is good for humanity. Fact: Coal is not good for humanity.) In other words, negating a myth is negating an opposing frame – by trying to argue that frame is not true, you are actually reinforcing it.

The best way to counter misinformation is to tell our story, framed from our perspective and in our terms. Be proactive: ‘Digging up and burning coal is polluting our skies and fuelling global warming. Clean energy is the solution.’

HOW CAN WE REFRAME AN ISSUE?

Reframing doesn’t happen instantly. To create a new association and frame of reference in people’s minds means repeating that message over and over again until it seems natural and normal – until your message is the association that springs to mind.

But once a new frame is accepted into the discourse, it becomes common sense. Why? Because that’s what common sense is – reasoning accepted by the public. This means putting the conversation into a context (or frame of reference) where our ideas make sense – where they are morally and logically right. This means evoking a frame or worldview shaped by compassionate values like shared responsibility, protecting the environment and empathy.
DID YOU KNOW?

Framing is understanding

“How the environment is understood by the... public is crucial; it vastly affects the future of our earth and every living being on it.

The technical term for understanding within the cognitive sciences is ‘framing.’ We think, mostly unconsciously, in terms of systems of structures called ‘frames.’ Each frame is a neural circuit, physically in our brains. We use our systems of frame-circuitry to understand everything, and we reason using frame-internal logics. Frame systems are organized in terms of values, and how we reason reflects our values, and our values determine our sense of identity. In short, framing is a big-deal.

All of our language is defined in terms of our frame-circuitry. Words activate that circuitry, and the more we hear the words, the stronger their frames get. But if our language does not fit our frame circuitry, it will not be understood, or will be misunderstood.

That is why it matters how we talk about our environment.”

– George Lakoff

“The way we see the world shapes the way we treat it... that is the challenge, to look at the world from a different perspective.”

– David Suzuki
HOW TO USE HELPFUL FRAMES

- **Use our frames** – not ones that undermine our worldview. Our frames fit the values we believe in. Say what we ARE, not what we are not.

- **Remember:** if you use the opposition’s framing and just argue against it, you lose because you are reinforcing their frame. Speak in our frames about what we are for.

- **Never answer a question framed from your opponent’s point of view.** Always reframe the question to fit your values and your frames.

- **If you decide to use the opponent’s frame, lean into the frame and disrupt it** – perhaps by being over the top or endearing.

- **For example,** when an opponent calls environmentalists ‘radicals’, we could respond by saying ‘Polluting our skies so badly it warms the ocean is radical.’

THE FRAME OF LIFE

A central way ACF tells our story is through the frame (or lens) of ‘life’:

> We are all part of a thriving community of living things. We wake to birdsong, drink forest filtered water and feel cool under the canopies of big trees.

However, life is a big concept, and it features in a range of different frames. Anti-abortion activists frame themselves as ‘pro-life’, as do David Attenborough, Coke Life and even Peabody Energy with its Advanced Energy for Life campaign.

LIFE AS A BATTLE

Throughout Australia’s recent history, people viewed ‘life’ through a colonial lens. Life was a battle – Aussie battlers, dangerous animals, droughts and the outback.

Man dominated life in this battle – people tamed the wild beast and exploited nature. Australia was a country divided, quite literally, with a Great Dividing Range and Great Barrier Reef. White settlers named mountains Mount Misery, Mount Dreadful and Mount Despair.

People were not connected to nature, but saw themselves as having to fight it, dominate it and exploit it to survive. Where they were not fighting against nature and ecology, they were often in some kind of battle against people who were – fighting to save the whales or stop the mines.

But by framing life as a battle, people reinforce the notion that our collective wellbeing and national budget depend on desecrating our eco-systems. Appeals to life as a battle, a battle against nature, national security and authority are opposed to the values that lead people to care for nature and other people.

In the life as battle story, humans are apart from nature, not part of nature. We are separate. Nature is ‘over there’ and culture is ‘here’. We must be careful of becoming trapped in this battle frame by constantly using fight language, military metaphors and struggle talk – inadvertently reinforcing the very worldview we want to dismantle.
LIFE AS A BALANCE
Another dominant frame in Australia presents the environment as a balancing act with the economy.

We can develop Northern Australia, but it must be in balance.

We should do our ‘fair share’ to curb climate pollution, but it must be in proportionate to what other countries are doing, and it must not harm our economy.

You and your green cronies are sabotaging projects that are critical to the Australian economy. You don’t give a stuff about hardworking Australians who need jobs.

This frame emphasises division and discord. Again, people, the economy, business and development are separate to the environment; and with compromise to balance, our living world never wins.

From another angle, ‘life in the balance’ can invoke a sense that life is precarious, vulnerable and at risk, suggesting an emergency room situation for nature, which can tip quickly into compromised or disempowered. Instead, we see ‘life’ as something separate to the environment; and with compromise to balance, our living world never wins.

LIFE AS ALL LIVING THINGS
Instead, we see ‘life’ as something positive. Life feeds us, nourishes us, empowers us, life is local, we share it – life is us. We are part of our living world. We emphasise unity with nature, and do not place people first.

For example, in our story, we say:
Imagine a world where water flows clean. Where everyone shares abundant clean energy from the sun and wind.
A world where communities care for the life that surrounds us and big polluters are a thing of the past...
A world where we are all part of a thriving community of living things.
A world where the forests and mountains of the Great Dividing Range and the savannahs of our beautiful north are full of life. Where the Great Barrier Reef is still a natural wonder.
A world where wildlife, rivers, people forests and oceans thrive – a tomorrow even more beautiful than today.

Using this ‘life’ frame shouldn’t be too literal or heavy-handed – and be careful not to use ‘pro-life’ anti-abortion language!

To describe our community of living things, use examples rather than categories Be descriptive. For example:
We are part of a community of living things – of moss and sugar gliders, dugongs and mountain ash, ants and people. Our hearts all beat at different speeds but we are all nourished by water, sunshine, air and fertile soil. Whether we live in the sea or in the mountains, we share the same ecosystem.

LIFE AS EXPERIENCE
Life is not just abstract creatures out in the bush or a category in opposition to the economy – life is an experience.

By emphasising this, we aim to remind people of evocative experiences they’ve had in nature – the scent of gum leaves, hearing magpies warble on crisp autumn mornings, the feeling of sand between their toes.

Experiencing our living world emphasises discovery, exploration and curiosity – and fulfilment and enjoyment, rather than a hedonism or consumption.

Describe the incredible experience of snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef, but be careful not to make it sound like you’re a tourist consuming the reef.

An example from ACF’s story:
We wake to birdsong, drink forest-filtered water and feel cool under the canopies of big trees.
Making strong laws to protect the air we breathe, the water we drink and the places we love.

POWER, CONNECTION & PEOPLE
Another important frame is people and connection. Don’t frame people as lonely, isolated or disempowered. Instead, emphasise people working together for common goals, using creative and collective action. This reminds people that advocacy and citizen leadership are normal and responsible. To tap into this frame, use language like ‘we’, ‘we, the people’, ‘people who care’ to describe a growing group of people who care and act.

People power is generally a useful frame, as long as it emphasises the democratic power of people making decisions and working together to make change, rather than power over someone or something.

It is also useful to describe empowerment, energy and vitality, and the growing wave of people who care and are willing to speak out and act.

‘Power’ is also a useful metaphor for the physical force of transferring energy – often connected to electricity (like a power cord and powering up a computer), as well as clean energy powering our lives.

An example from ACF’s story:
With you, ACF is growing a passionate community for nature. It is growing fast. We meet, act and celebrate. Together, we connect landscapes and transform how we use energy. We sow the seeds of change.

People with the desire to make a difference, united with many voices – that’s all it takes to change the world.

When communities are active and engaged, political parties and businesses are compelled to do the right thing.

Throughout history, people have stood together and demanded what is right. People power gave women the vote.
It stopped apartheid. It abolished slavery, even though the naysayers said it would ruin the economy.

History shows, it is organised and mobilised people who create the change that improves lives and societies.

Together, we are growing a community that is strong enough to stand up to the power of big polluting companies and show our politicians that we, the people, care. Let’s show up, speak out and act.

PROGRESS AND PEOPLE-MADE SOLUTIONS
Always frame the challenges we face as people-made and solvable:

*People made this crisis and we can solve it. So let’s get on with it.*

Together, people can speak out for the most important thing on Earth – life itself.

It’s time to champion big ideas. And common sense. Like curbing pollution and powering our lives with clean energy from sun and wind. Creating strong laws to protect the air we breathe, the water we drink and the places we love. Making economic decisions that support life, not damage it.

In the face of climate change, communities, business and governments can solve problems together.

We can choose to connect and protect our mountain ranges, living reefs, ancient forests and life-giving rivers.

Be mindful that clean energy, for example, won’t grow arms and legs and fix global warming on its own – people will.

Don’t focus on apocalypse or doom and gloom. Speak to the truth of the challenge, rather than the drama of the apocalypse. Describe what’s required to solve the challenge. Make sure each action you ask people to take is commensurate to the scale of the challenge. Explain how the action is a logical step in your theory of change.

**DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY**
Be mindful of vilifying the government. While it is critical that we critique and hold government to account, do not undermine democracy or frame the government as the enemy. Instead, critique specific government practices or policies and offer a vision for what good governance looks like. The democratic process is important and the government should represent the views of the people. Our political representatives have a unique responsibility to listen to our communities, protect life and plan for the future.

For example:

We are living with the consequences of bad decisions, discretion over ideas and short-term thinking. The big polluters. The coal charlatans. The rigged rules. Rampant industrialisation. Mindless consumption. The dismissed extinctions. The subsidised destruction. The vested interests.

*The politicians who forget they represent the people.*

We don’t accept the story we must sacrifice nature for a quick buck. We can make different choices.

**Government, when held to account by people, can protect life with the stroke of a pen.**

We can make economic decisions shaped by what we value in life, not by endless desires for more stuff and more profit.*And the people who represent us in Parliament value and protect the places we love.*

Be tangible – the government’s role is not just ‘taking action’ or ‘addressing’ or ‘tackling global warming’ – it must create rules to cut pollution and impose fines on businesses that pollute.

Frame the government as an important part of democracy and use language such as ‘elected representatives’ to remind people they elect people to represent them. This empowers people and emphasises the importance of democracy and civil society, without invoking the frame of ‘dirty politics’.

**Pollution, not climate debate**
People often frame climate change through bureaucratic and scientific language like ‘parts per million’, ‘adaptation’, ‘mitigation’, ‘anthropogenic’ and ‘greenhouse gas emissions’. This language is not universally accessible and paints ‘climate change’ as a scientific process happening naturally, on its own. This distances people from the problem and obscures its causes – such as people digging up and burning coal and gas. When problems are not caused by humans, it is difficult to see human-made solutions.

Others frame climate change as a ‘debate’, even though the scientific evidence is overwhelming. They deliberately use confusing policy jargon to make the debate sound even more unintelligible – like ‘carbon tax’ (a tax on a natural chemical element?), ‘direct action’ (an impressive inversion of the activist frame) and ‘emissions trading schemes’ (don’t schemers make secret or underhand plans?)

Instead of framing climate change through bureaucratic, scientific or ‘debate’ frames, use plain language and the frame of pollution and energy. A moral story about big polluting companies polluting our air and water and damaging our climate taps into values of fairness and equality while critiquing greed and power.

**Frames to avoid:**
Nationalism

Instead of talking about ecology and economy through the nationalist frame of ‘Australia’, we focus on ‘people’, ‘communities’ and our relationship to our living world and the places and wildlife we love.

*We love this ancient island continent, its seas and waters, its unique creatures and country.*

*We love and protect the web of life right across our continent, from the Kimberley to the reef, down the Great Dividing Range to Tasmania’s forests.*
Do not talk about the Great Barrier Reef, for example, as a tourist attraction or an Australian icon, but as a living wonder:

*The Great Barrier Reef is the largest living thing on Earth, home to an amazing array of fish, coral, turtles, whales, dolphins, sharks and rays. Yet this natural wonder of the world is at risk from mining and pollution.*

While Australia is central to where we work, do not excessively emphasise patriotic values – instead, emphasise universal human values. Talking about our great nation conflicts with the frame of life, which transcends all boundaries.

Frames and metaphors of the nation as a family, the state as a household and the national budget as a household budget all serve an anti-environment, uncaring political agenda.

Instead of nation or family, use frames of community or village. The earth is our common ground, we don't live in a nation or family, but as a global household, we live in a global village, a global community made up of local communities.

**Safety and security**

Safety, security, health and cleanliness often frame climate change and protecting our environment – such as shifting to clean energy for a safer, healthier future or improving environment laws to safeguard our future. This frame should not dominate our messaging.

Security values are on the spectrum of extrinsic values and often pull people towards thinking selfishly, priming them to be more insular, greedy, fearful and closed to change. Security values include family security, national security, social order, health and cleanliness.

Language that emphasises safety and security also activates our reptilian brains, triggering what Daniel Kahneman calls ‘system one’ thinking – impulsive, automated thinking where we react by battening down the hatches and closing borders.

Instead of a safety and security frame, our story uses self-direction values of freedom, curiosity, creativity and innovation, as well as compassionate benevolent values of responsibility and universal values of social justice, unity with nature, equality and wisdom.

*In the face of climate change, communities are coming together to look after each other.*

Rather than primarily linking environmental health to human health, focus on how we can use clean energy so our communities, our children and future generations and all living things can thrive:

*By working together, we can solve the challenges of climate pollution, limit the extremes we face and look after each other when they happen. We can make our towns and cities stronger, more resilient, better places to live.*

We want our children’s children to thrive in the places we live and the places we love. We’re working together to make it happen.

**Saviours, protectors and defenders**

Avoid frames of protectors and defenders, as this separates people from nature and presents people as dominant over and superior to our living world. In this frame, we are not part of nature, it is weak and vulnerable and we are strong, and we have a dominating or paternalistic relationship with it. It suggests locking up pristine nature and also taps into militaristic language and a battle frame.

If you are talking about protecting nature or places, think about how you could name the threat specifically, a choice that can address the threat, and describe a thriving future for life in that place if that choice is made.

Also always avoid paternalistically speaking for and protecting Indigenous communities. Respect the living culture, values and customs of the person or people. Think about whether you are the best person to tell the story and only use stories about Indigenous culture or personal experiences with the person or community’s agreement. Make sure you consult with relevant Indigenous individuals and communities and seek advice on cultural issues and sensitive and sacred material.

Examples from ACF’s story:

*We stand with Indigenous people who have cared for life here for tens of thousands of years and still do.*

*We stood with the Mirarr people to stop the Jabiluka uranium mine.*

Avoid language such as:

**Wilderness** – as it suggests a place that is uncultivated and uninhabited and reinforces the fallacy of terra nullius.

**Back yard** – Northern Australians do not consider themselves in the back yard of the Southern Australians.

**Outback/Frontier** are similarly quaint terms with colonial baggage.

**Competition, winning & races**

Avoid the frame of competition, winning and races, as it risks priming values of competition, not collective effort. It also implies winners and losers, which is unhelpful to the story of just transitions and taps into the opposition’s stories of environmental action harming hip pockets, and of coal being ‘good for humanity’. And if we frame clean energy as a race, for example, coal is still a contender – and it might win.
MONEY AND THE ECONOMY AS GOD

Avoid arguing we should save the environment/address climate change/install solar panels for the economy. We should do this for the people, our children and our community of living things. Positioning the economy as the reason to act reinforces the idea that we’re slaves to the economy. It’s not believable when we try to use the frame of our opposition to argue ‘we love the economy best’. Instead, we should argue there is no economy, or any you and me, without an inhabitable planet.

Avoid framing people as consumers or the environment as a commodity with utility value. We don’t just value trees as financial assets. The term ‘ecosystem services’ also frames our living world as a resource we can manage and exploit; it is not our frame and it damages our story. These frames also tap into the selfish values of greed and wealth, rather than compassionate values of care, wisdom and justice.

Do not focus on money as a means of valuation or as a way to make change. Avoid talking about protecting householders from rising gas and electricity prices, saving money and slashing energy bills, for example, as this taps into selfish values of wealth and security. This is also the opposition’s cost of living frame – the opposition manipulates the debate by claiming to care for Aussie battlers and ordinary Australians, and pitting business and champions opposing cost of living increases.

These frames also prime short term gains and greed – when short termism and greed are what cause so many of the problems we face.

For more on how to talk about the economy, see ‘Metaphors’, below.

Some examples of talking about the economy as a system and series of decisions that people steer and control:

Let’s make economic decisions that support life, not damage it. We can steer our economy to create a fair society in which our communities and all living things can thrive. Our governments can make decisions and laws so that what we produce, how we produce it and how we spend money does not damage our lives and the life around us.

It is a myth that we must sacrifice nature for a quick buck. If we make choices that value money and economic growth above everything else, many of the things that make a good life – vibrant communities, leisure time, happiness and a thriving natural environment – will disappear.

We need a new approach: one that is actively better than economic growth.

Let’s improve our quality of life, not just the quantity of wealth. Let’s create better work with time for leisure, nature, community and democracy. We can value our rivers, oceans, forests and country for more than just what can be extracted from them.

Right now, public money subsidises industries that pollute and destroy nature – like dangerous mining and burning dirty energy. Instead we can support industries that create jobs with a future and are good for our future – like clean energy and caring for country.

Governments and businesses do not have to be in a battle with nature. In fact, many of the world’s best companies are changing how they do things to work in harmony with nature. Governments, too, can make economic decisions that value what we rely on for life.

By making good choices, we can create a society that is good for all of us, and our children to come.

DID YOU KNOW?

Framing people as consumers reduces environmentally responsible behaviour. In an experiment, two groups of volunteers were given an identical task – labelled either a Consumer Reaction Task or Citizen Reaction Task.

The ‘consumers’ became more competitive and less likely to engage in collective action (such as volunteering to join a group). They also conserved less water in a resource management game, and felt less personal responsibility for environmental problems.

Resources


Alex Frankel, ‘Progressives failing to tell the Big Story’, The Saturday Paper, 13 June 2015.


Tell emotionally compelling stories that move people to action

Stories – whether told through books, dance, images, songs or spoken tale – are one of the most fundamental ways in which we communicate. They are much more powerful than lists of facts.

Stories spark our imaginations and help us understand the world and ourselves. They help us make sense of complex situations and conflict. They influence how we choose to act, the decisions we make and what we believe.

“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.”

– Phillip Pullman
“Stories are renderings of life; they can not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us courage to stay a given course.” – Robert Coles

EMOTIONALLY COMPPELLING STORIES

The facts won’t set you free

The environment movement often approaches people as inherently rational beings, believing if we tell them the facts, they will reach the right conclusions. We constantly give people lists of facts and policy asks, expecting to win over the world at large by our logic and careful footnoting.

To contest climate scepticism, for example, one approach of the environment movement has been to focus on the scientific evidence of climate change with graphs and factsheets about greenhouse emissions and parts per million. We used confusing jargon like CO2, carbon and emissions – not socially focused language about what’s causing climate change and how to solve it.

But developments in cognitive science have radically changed our understanding of what it is to be rational. People are not dispassionate calculating machines, objectively searching for the rights facts, figures and policies to make a reasoned decision. Ninety-eight per cent of our thoughts are unconscious. We are not even aware we are thinking these thoughts, and certainly have no control over them. Instead, we think with our guts; we think in frames, values and stories.

This doesn’t mean facts don’t matter – they are crucial. But the only reason facts have significance to us is when we have emotional associations with them (whether or not we are aware of them). In other words, facts to people are only meaningful and to the public discourse when they are framed in terms of their moral and emotional importance.

Emotion moves people to action

Emotion is one of the most potent sources of motivation that drives human behaviour. Clinical psychologist and political strategist Drew Westen argues themes that resonate with us emotionally come from the heart of our evolutionary history – survival, reproduction, connection to kin, and connection to others. Nothing is as potent as a message about the welfare of our children, followed by our extended family, local community and nation.

He describes reason as a "hapless rider on a horse, who does his best to channel and control the large beast – pulling it this way and tugging it that way – but ultimately, the power resides in the horse, not the rider. The rider could always get off, but he wouldn’t get very far on foot. And so it is with reason and passion. Reason can prod, regulate, and offer direction, but on its own it is pedestrian.”

Instead of providing lists of facts and lecturing about them, we need to move people using images, stories, emotions, values, analogies, moral sentiments and moving oratory. Logic – facts, figures and policies – plays a supporting role.

This doesn’t mean dumbing things down. It means appealing to fundamental values, morals and concerns.

SOME EXAMPLES OF FACTS IN ACF’S STORY:

People often position clean energy in a technocratic frame, with plenty of numbers and graphs. What matters here is how we interpret those numbers, such as connecting the growth of solar panels to the number of people embracing the clean energy future:

Today, more than one in five households capture sun on their rooftops. Some 23 million solar panels are harvesting sunshine, right across our big brown land. That’s a panel for nearly every single person in the country.

Over the past few years, the federal government has senselessly attacked wind farms, the laws to make polluters pay, the Renewable Energy Target, agencies created to help investment and even science itself.

In 2014, large-scale investment in clean energy dropped by 88 per cent. Jobs in renewables plummeted.

Also think about useful comparisons to help people interpret facts. Rather than listing the number of kilowatt hours saved (an abstract number that’s hard to interpret), this sentence uses plain language to quantify how much energy California saved through energy efficiency measures:

While energy use across the US has skyrocketed, by using energy wisely, Californians have avoided building more than 30 large power plants.
GIVE PEOPLE SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN
It's hard to get excited about policy mechanisms
We sometimes fall into the trap of arguing over the details of specific policy mechanisms like the ‘carbon tax’, CPRS, Direct Action and the Renewable Energy Target, hoping people will be swayed by reason, rationality and self-evident facts.

But as cognitive scientists show, people are not dispassionate calculating machines. We think using our guts; we think in frames, values, emotion and stories.

People care about what they understand. They are not motivated by unintelligible policy jargon, but by the better society and better future those policies can create. So make sure you tell a story about your vision and describe the outcome that makes the policy necessary – not the process of delivering it.

TELL STORIES WITH CHARACTERS
In every good story, there are characters who do things, such as:

- Heroes, protagonists, characters who are wise, or brave, or sympathetic. People we identify with and want to win.
- Unsympathetic characters – people who are villains, who are foolish, or selfish, greedy.
- Neutral characters – bystanders.
- Enforcers – people who make sure the rules are followed.
- People who need rescuing, people who are victims.

It is important not to forget the characters in environmental stories, because people do things – fertiliser run off, systemic ignoring and federal budgets do not. Climate change is not happening on its own. Inappropriate development did not grow arms and legs to threaten bush land.

If a problem is not human made, there is no obvious human-made solution. It is difficult to protest outside structural inequality’s house or ask systemic ignoring to make better decisions. When problems are human made, with human villains, it is much easier to see human-made solutions.

Characters do not always need to be human. Central to ACF’s story is our living world, which is full of living characters, like forests, critters, people and coral. Characters can also be communities, local towns, Indigenous communities, and more broadly, local and global living communities.

The ACF community is a key character in many of our stories. Make people in the community active participants rather than passive supporters. Think about the organisation’s role in your story, too. Is the organisation the hero, using supporters as a passive mouthpiece? Should ACF (the organisation) be the hero, or the ACF community?

ACF often draws on the stories and experiences of people from our community. These stories are a powerful way to build a connection and rapport with an audience, to encourage people to join in and take action. Personal stories also remind our audience that people like them care, advocate and talk to local political representatives. (See ‘story of self/us/now’, below.)

Another key character in our story is big polluting companies, or sometimes big coal. Do not vilify coal miners themselves (we want them to be able to make the transition to clean energy jobs that help their communities thrive).

The government is another key character, but be careful about casting government as the big problem when we often need people to see government as the solution. Also think strategically: it might be better not to vilify the government or politicians, but to leave them room to become the goodies. Democracy and the government are generally not the problem – it’s politicians listening to vested interests rather than the people. Another approach is to name individual politicians in the context of policy decisions they have made and the consequences of these decisions.

You say

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Climate policy</th>
<th>They hear</th>
<th>Say instead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Something convoluted and bureaucratic</td>
<td>Laws to cut pollution and shift to clean energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What’s carbon again? Is it good or bad? Isn’t carbon in air, or are carbs from the Atkins diet?</td>
<td>Laws to transform how we use and generate energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable diversion limits</td>
<td>Huh? You’re taking something away.</td>
<td>Leave enough water for wildlife and the farmers downstream.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment laws</td>
<td>Something legal and bureaucratic</td>
<td>Laws to protect our living world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Laws to protect the air we breathe, the water we drink and the places and wildlife we love.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Say instead

Laws to make polluters pay for their pollution

Huh? You’re taking something away.

Leaves enough water for wildlife and the farmers downstream.

Laws to protect our living world

Laws to protect the air we breathe, the water we drink and the places and wildlife we love.
The **economy** is not a character. It has no agency - it is a system or machine that we, the people, control.

**Laws** do not fall by themselves – politicians create weak laws that are not strong enough to resist exploitation by big polluters. Laws are also not a character.

**WHAT DO CHARACTERS DO?**

Always think through your story’s plot and who’s doing what to whom. This is linked to your story’s theory of change. Here are two examples that demonstrate the role of people:

- **Global warming is happening largely due to an over-emittance of gases and fossil fuels (natural oil, gas, coal).** There is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today than at any point in the last 800,000 years. Since 1870, global sea levels have risen by about 8 inches.

- **Global warming puts coral reefs in danger as the ocean warms.** Scientists fear that coral reefs will not be able to adapt quickly enough to the resulting changing conditions, and bleaching incidents and diseases will increase.

In this example, the only character is fearful scientists. There are no people or companies over-emitting gases and fossil fuels, no governments giving them free rein to do the do it, and no people doing anything about the problem.

Here is another example, from ACF’s story:

- **Right now, a pollution and extinction crisis threatens the web of life.** People made this crisis and we can fix it.

We are living with the consequences of bad decisions, discredited ideas and short-term thinking.


- **The politicians** who forget they represent the people.

We don’t accept the story we must sacrifice nature for a quick buck. We can make different choices.

- **People right across our wide, brown land** care deeply - and they want to come together to create a brighter future.

Everywhere and every day, **ordinary people** are willing to transform inertia into action, isolation into connection and destruction into beauty.

We know how to create the world we want. So let’s get on with it.

In this passage, there are several characters:

- **Villains:** people who made the crisis - the big polluters, the coal charlatans, people with vested interests, politicians who forget they represent the people.

- **Heroes:** People who will solve the crisis - people who care, ordinary people who are willing.

The characters have clear roles as people causing the crisis (who need to be stopped), and people who will solve it. It is the people – the community, coming together – and not ACF as a bureaucratic organisation, who will solve it.

**TELL STORIES THAT MOVE PEOPLE TO ACTION**

**The art of public narrative: Story of self, us and now**

The following section was originally adapted from the works of Marshall Ganz of Harvard University. Modified by ACF.

Marshall Ganz – organiser, political strategist, storyteller and Harvard Professor – has developed a grassroots organising model that focuses on the power of story and public narrative to move people to take action for a shared purpose.

Ganz describes leadership as taking responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose, in the face of uncertainty.

Public narrative is a core leadership practice. Through telling and hearing stories, we learn how to take action in the face of uncertainty. It is how we learn to access the moral resources – the courage – to make the choices that shape our identities – as individuals, as communities.

Public narrative brings people together, reminds us of our shared values, helps us feel the emotion associated with those values and translates values into action. Everyone has a compelling story to tell. Because stories enable us express our values as lived experience – and not just facts or abstract concepts – they have the power to move other people to act.

**WATCH OUT!**

- Is there a villain?
- Who’s doing what to whom?
- Are you thingafying or giving things agency? Is this deliberate?
- Are the community active participants, playing a positive, empowered role in the story?
- Are any ‘them versus us’ divisions helpful?

**Remember to emphasise connection, community**
“You may tell a tale that takes up residence in someone’s soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose. That tale will move them and drive them and who knows what they might do because of it, because of your words. That is your role, your gift.”

— Erin Morgenstern
A ‘story of now’ communicates an urgent challenge you are calling on your community to join you in acting on now.

A ‘story of now’ requires telling stories that bring the urgency of the challenge you face alive – urgent because of a need for change that cannot be denied, urgent because of a moment of opportunity to make change that may not return. At the intersection of the urgency of challenge and the promise of hope is a choice that must be made – to act, or not to act; to act in this way, or in that. The hope resides not somewhere in a distant future but in the sense of possibility in a pathway to action. Telling a good story of now requires the courage of imagination, or as Walter Brueggemann named it, a prophetic imagination, in which you call attention both to the pain of the world and also to the possibility for a better future. Right now, a pollution and extinction crisis threatens the web of life. People made this crisis and we can solve it. Life can thrive if we stop the pollution that is damaging our climate and destroying the ecosystems that have nourished our planet since the dawn of time. Let’s come together to speak out for the most important thing on Earth – life itself. We can make sure tomorrow is even more beautiful than today.

A ‘story of us’ communicates shared values that anchor your community, values that may be at risk, and may also be sources of hope.

We tell more ‘stories of us’ in our daily lives than any other kind of story:

- do you remember when’ moments at a family dinner, ‘what about the time’ moments after an exciting athletic event, or simply exchanging stories with friends. Just like any good story, stories of us recount moments when individuals, a group, a community, an organisation, a nation experienced a challenge, choice, and outcome, expressive of shared values. They may be founding moments, moments of crisis, of triumph, disaster, resilience, humour. The key is to focus on telling specific stories about specific people at specific times that can remind everyone of – or call everyone’s attention to – the values that you share against which challenges in the world can be measured. A ‘story of us,’ however, is ‘experiential’ in that it creates an experience of shared values, rather than ‘categorical,’ described by certain traits, characteristics, or identity markers. Telling a good story of us requires the courage of empathy – to consider the experience of others deeply enough to take a chance of articulating that experience.

A handful of people formed ACF 50 years ago when mining first threatened the Great Barrier Reef. Now the ACF community has grown into a powerful force for nature. We are a quarter of a million people who speak out, show up and act for a world where forests, rivers, people and wildlife thrive. Our community speaks out to stop pollution and destruction, and for our living world. We hold decision makers to account. We champion big ideas and find common ground with unlikely partners.
We love and protect the web of life right across our continent, from the Kimberley to the reef, down the Great Dividing Range to Tasmania’s forests.

A ‘story of self’ communicates the values that called you to lead in this way, in this place, at this time.

Each of us has compelling stories to tell. In some cases, our values have been shaped by choices others – parents, friends, and teachers – have made. And we have chosen how to deal with loss, even as we have found access to hope. Our choices have shaped our own life path: we dealt with challenges as children, found our way to a calling, responded to needs, demands, and gifts of others; confronted leadership challenges in places of worship, schools, communities, work.

STORY STRUCTURE: CHALLENGE – CHOICE – OUTCOME

Every story has a plot. A plot begins with an unexpected challenge that confronts a character with an urgent need to pay attention, to make a choice, a choice for which she or he is unprepared. The choice yields an outcome – and the outcome teaches a moral.

A plot is a sequence of events that take place. A useful way to think about the plot, characters and ending is using a challenge-choice-outcome structure.

Because we can empathetically identify with the character, we can ‘feel’ the moral. We not only hear ‘about’ someone’s courage; we can also be inspired by it.

The story of the character and their effort to engage around values engages the listener in their own challenge, choice, and outcome relative to the story. Each story should include the challenge, the choice and the outcome. It’s not enough to say – I was scared. You need to say – I was very scared, I needed to decide, and when I did, I learned it was possible.

INCORPORATING A CHALLENGE, CHOICE AND OUTCOME IN YOUR OWN STORY

There are some key questions you need to answer as you consider the choices you have made in your life and the path you have taken that brought you to this point in time as a leader. Once you identify the specific relevant choice point, perhaps your decision to choose an environmental career, dig deeper by answering the following questions.

**Challenge:** Why did you feel it was a challenge? What was so challenging about it? Why was it your challenge?

**Choice:** Why did you make the choice you did? Where did you get the courage (or not)? Where did you get the hope (or not)? How did it feel?

**Outcome:** How did the outcome feel? Why did it feel that way? What did it teach you? What do you want to teach us? How do you want us to feel?

A challenge is not necessary the misfortunes of your life. A struggle might be one of your own choosing – a high mountain you decided to climb or a hole you managed to climb out of. Any number of things may have been a challenge to you and be the source of a good story to inspire others.

**Resources**


Marshall Ganz, ‘The Personal is the Political,’ How People Power Generates Change. Moyers and Company, 10 May 2013 [www.billmoyers.com/content/the-personal-is-political/](http://www.billmoyers.com/content/the-personal-is-political/)


Even if you have a captivating plot and great characters, sometimes the words and sentences you use can undermine your message. Use concrete, personal and active language.

“... the universe lives in the smallest things.”

– Richard Flanagan
8-YEAR-OLD TEST.
When you’re surrounded by campaign-speak and scientific, bureaucratic and non-profit jargon every day, it’s easy to forget that not everyone will understand what you’re saying.

Use plain language. Tell stories. Explain things as you would to an 8-year-old – not to dumb down your message, but to reach the fundamental essence of what you are trying to explain.

Would an 8-year-old understand an Emissions Reduction Scheme or a Renewable Energy Target? Jargon aside, these policies are about curbing pollution from coal mines and power stations and encouraging people to use clean energy like wind and solar.

Go back to the basics so people can really understand what you are talking about – your story will be much more convincing.

Some examples of plain language that describes climate change and the economy from ACF’s story:

By burning dirty energy like coal, oil and gas, a handful of big polluting companies are damaging our climate and fuelling extreme weather.

Our governments can make decisions and laws so that what we produce, how we produce it and how we spend money does not damage our lives and the life around us.

By making good choices, we can create a society that is good for all of us, and our children to come.

PLEDGE NOT TO HEDGE
You hedge when you use imprecise and cautious language by adding qualifiers. Hedging is common in scientific and academic writing – and it creeps into advocacy writing too. Maybe you don’t want to make sweeping generalisations or offend anyone. You don’t want to take credit for something someone else did, or a situation is so complex you want to hedge your bets and leave yourself room to move.

It is also part of a tendency to be polite, especially in spoken language.

Hedging is also often used as a means to obfuscate – to hide the truth.

The problem with hedging is it inhibits trust and makes you look like you don’t know what you’re doing. Words mean things. Hedging suggests you’re not sure what you’re doing or why.

People often resort to hedging when they talk about what an organisation is achieving – for example:

We are dedicated to the idea that all people deserve the chance to live a healthy and productive life.

This sentence is full of hedge phrases – but what does this organisation actually do? They are dedicated to the chance of an idea? A healthy life is just a chance? It sounds like a lottery ticket: you could be the lucky one.

Nine times out of ten, a hedge phrase shouldn’t be there. Ask yourself: do you do it or not do it? Do you make change or not? Do you influence solutions or not?

Hedging is easy to fix: just delete the hedge word (the verb infinitive – we x to y) and leave the absolute verb (we y).

Some examples:

- We aim to protect the laws that nourish us.
- We work to influence urgent, transformative action to deliver lasting change on the scale required to secure a sustainable environment.

“Organising to win better jobs” isn’t necessarily hedging – because organising is what this organisation does.

Some common hedges to avoid:

- seek to
- hope to
- want to
- endeavour to
- aim to
- aspire to
- work to/towards

It can be suggested that

It appears, indicates

possibly, probably, apparently, basically, effectively, evidently, largely, mainly, mostly, presumably, partly

somewhat, maybe, perhaps, might, kind of, mostly, rather, slightly

TIP!
Don’t write ‘We believe’ – it’s redundant. If you’re saying it, it’s clear you believe it.
Don’t write ‘We need to’ – it’s disempowering. Instead write ‘we are’.

PEOPLE DO THINGS TEST
Far too often, we say things just happen, rather than a person is doing a thing. Some examples:

The harms being inflicted on communities in Queensland (who inflicts the harm?)

Land clearing and inappropriate development is causing (the land didn’t clear itself)

Attention must be paid to the state of forests (who is supposed to pay attention?)

Countries have failed to (Australia is a landmass – it can’t do things on its own)

The climate is changing (Who is causing the climate to change?)

Environmental vandalism is perpetrated

The state budget fails to address the environment

The system is failing (how does a system fail? A system is an abstract thing – really it’s the people – governments, corporations)

Language Language
The problem with the passive voice is it conceals responsibility. If a problem is not human-made, there is no obvious human-made solution. People can’t protest at structural equality’s house, send an email to inappropriate development or ask systemic ignoring to get his act together.

Passive voice and non-agentive constructions (sentences without an agent) make the reader work harder and often makes them feel uneasy. If you hide the ‘who’ in a sentence, you plunge the reader into a mysterious world in which things happen without actors or causes.

For example, people often use passive voice when talking about climate change:

- Emissions rose. Temperatures soared. People were affected. Towns were flattened. Glaciers retreated.

But who is responsible? In these constructions no one is responsible – these events sound like they occurred naturally. We know that’s not true. We know who is responsible: a handful of polluting companies do things – of moss and sugar gliders, dugongs and mountain ash, ants and people.

As Anat Shenker Osorio argues, ‘Our failure to put humans in the subject position of our sentences creates problems beyond recognising and punishing bad actors. When we convey faceless forces (or invisible hands) are behind good or bad outcomes, we send the message we can’t do anything about anything.’

**HOW CAN YOU TELL IF A SENTENCE IS PASSIVE?**

**Do the zombie test.** If you can add ‘by zombies’ to the end of your sentence, and the sentence still makes sense, it’s probably a passive sentence. For example:

- Land clearing and inappropriate development by zombies is causing attention must be paid to the state of forests.
- Environmental vandalism is perpetrated by zombies.

**HOW TO FIX PASSIVE VOICE**

To fix passive sentences, make them active! To do this:

**Identify zombie sentences**

Ask someone to go through your writing and highlight passive voice, or use one of the many useful software programs:

- **Microsoft Word**
- **Grammarly:** [www.grammarly.com](http://www.grammarly.com)
- **After the Deadline:** [www.polishmywriting.com](http://www.polishmywriting.com)
- **Hemingway Editor:** [www.hemingwayapp.com](http://www.hemingwayapp.com)
- **Draft:** [draftin.com](http://draftin.com)

**Break your habit**

Think about why you use passive voice.

Do you think academic and scientific writing sounds sophisticated? Actually, it creates a distance between writer and reader. It’s confusing.

Don’t know who is responsible or who should do the thing? Be honest.

Are you trying to make a vague unsubstantiated statement you haven’t done the research to back up? Did you pick up bad academic writing habits – like ‘don’t make generalisations’? Do you not want to talk about whose job it is to fix our environment?

Be an environmental advocate. Be brave. Be clear. We have solutions, and we know who and what has caused the problems we face.

Rewrite passive sentences

Put the actor at the start of the sentence.

Ask: who is placing, transforming, considering?

Then rewrite your sentence.

Often this is easy, but sometimes it can be more difficult than it sounds:

- Legislation is a highly effective way to solve our conservation challenges.
- We are experiencing an energy transformation.

In cases like these, it is best to rethink the sentence all together. Think hard about what you’re saying. Maybe do some research, or explain the characters to someone in plain, 8-year-old language. Who is doing what to whom?

**DESCRIBE REAL EXPERIENCES**

Stories are more evocative and compelling when they involve people, rather than just facts and abstractions. Instead of writing reduced precipitation or wage stagnation, you could say wondering when the paddock will get a proper drink or families can’t make ends meet.

A handful of companies, for example, are polluting the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat. People can relate to language about other people.

Describe real experiences, not abstractions. Focus on the outcomes, not the policies: “more time to care for a sick child” vs. “paid leave legislation”. Tell stories about solutions and what they will give us – don’t get stuck in the unintelligible nitty gritty of policy mechanisms. (See ‘Give people something to believe in,’ above)

**THINGIFYING**

Use specific, visceral, tangible and descriptive language. The word ‘the environment’ has become a thing devoid of life and colour, and it’s hard to be passionate about lifeless things. Instead, talk about rivers, oceans, land, forests, animals. We are part of a community of living things – of moss and sugar gliders, dugongs and mountain ash, ants and people.

**Language** 8

**Language** 85
METAPHORS

Is your language ‘on-metaphor’?

Did you know the English language features something non-literal every ten to twenty-five words? We use metaphors so frequently we usually don’t even notice them. For example, the notion that ideas are objects is so second nature to us, we routinely ask whether someone has grasped our point or it flew over his head.

Psychological and mental states (like emotion, thought and desire), personal experiences and events (time, life, death) and social groups and processes (society, politics, the economy, communication, human relationships) are complicated and abstract. We use concrete examples – metaphors – to better understand them.

We use the unconscious and automatic process of metaphors to compare one (often complex) notion with another (more concrete) entity. This process of comparison creates conceptual metaphors.

Cognitive linguists have separated conceptual metaphors into two parts: a target domain (the abstract thing you are trying to explain) and a source domain (the concrete language of a metaphor, to help explain the abstract thing). We then use a variety of linguistic expressions to express each conceptual metaphor.

To make sure you’re not sending mixed or contradictory messages, it’s important to work out which conceptual metaphors and linguistic expressions you are using.

“Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space.” – Orson Scott Card

Technocratic Language

Don’t get bogged down trying to explain the technical details or science behind complex processes. While these are part of the picture – and can occasionally be crucial when an event or crisis focuses public attention on an organisation’s response – but people are not rational calculating machines who make rational decisions based on facts. Motivate people with emotionally compelling stories.

Be vigilant with jargon, weasel words and long lists. Avoid these words and phrases:

- once-in-a-lifetime
- last chance
- never again
- only opportunity
- significantly reduce
- support us
- ensure that
economic, environmental
and social impacts
put in place
going forward

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

Use language thoughtfully to show respect and acknowledge Traditional Owners and their rich cultures, knowledge, heritage and continual relationship with their land and waters. Ask questions and listen actively. Avoid stereotyping, recognise the complexity of Indigenous history and politics and respect differences. Be honest, be flexible and build self-awareness.

Indigenous Australia is multicultural. Names like Yorta Yorta, Wiradjuri and Badu are not interchangeable for ‘Indigenous’. They refer specifically to a group of Indigenous Australians who identify with a specific area and language. If unsure, ask the local community for guidance.

Always capitalise Aboriginal and Indigenous when you are referring to Australian Aboriginal people, but not when you are referring generally to the original inhabitants of other continents.

Do not use acronyms such as ATS, TSI, TI or terms such as Abo or Aborigine. Each person has their own sense of Aboriginality, unique experiences and approach to culture. Ask the person or community how they describe themselves or say Aboriginal/Indigenous people/person.

Never use racist terms such as full blood, half caste, quarter caste and quadroon when referring to a person’s Aboriginality. It is also offensive to question how much Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander blood an Indigenous person has.

Inclusive Language

When writing about social movements, be inclusive when claiming credit for achievements. The ACF community is an inclusive group and welcomes everyone. We often work in partnership with other organisations and grassroots groups; only by working together can we solve the significant challenges we face.

When writing about social movements, be inclusive when claiming credit for achievements. The ACF community is an inclusive group and welcomes everyone. We often work in partnership with other organisations and grassroots groups; only by working together can we solve the significant challenges we face.

Language

- TIME
  - IS
  - MOTION
  - Time flies
  - The time for action has arrived
  - I’m looking ahead to Christmas
  - The holidays are coming up

- LIFE
  - IS
  - A JOURNEY
  - We go our separate ways.
  - He heads a head start in life.
  - I’m at a crossroads.
  - She’s not moving forward

- IDEAS
  - ARE
  - FOOD
  - I can’t digest all these facts
Metaphors usually only work in one direction – the more concrete metaphor explains the less concrete, abstract thought, experience or process. While we talk about the machinery of political decision making, we do not talk about the political decision-making of machinery. While we talk about the illness of society, we don’t tend to describe the society of illness.

(Some metaphors can work in both directions, but usually the meaning is reversed. “The surgeon is a butcher” is negative and means the surgeon is rough. “The butcher is a surgeon” is positive, suggesting the butcher is meticulous and cuts precisely).

These are all ‘structural metaphors’ – they provide structure and understanding for the abstract targets we’re trying to communicate. Ontological metaphors are different – they help us understand our experiences in terms of objects, substances and containers. For example, the expression ‘I’ll give you a call’ is not literal (a call is not an object), but we use the conceptual metaphor of a physical object as an action.

Personification – giving nonhuman entities human characteristics – is another example of an ontological metaphor. Some examples:

- Life has cheated me.
- Inflation is eating up the profits.
- The computer went dead on me.

Life, inflation and computers are not humans, but we give them human qualities (cheating, eating, dying). By personifying nonhuman entities and inanimate objects, we give them personalities and liken them to ourselves so we can understand them better.

Oriental metaphors don’t give abstract things structure, but they give us conceptual coherence. They often draw on basic human spatial orientation – like up-down and centre-periphery. For example:

There are actually a limited number of ‘conventional’ conceptual metaphors. For example, Anat Shenker Osorio has identified seven conceptual metaphors we use when we talk about the economy.35 A tasty economy means nothing (economy as food is not a conventional conceptual metaphor). But we do talk about, for example:

- **The economy as journey** (movement and direction) Inflation is soaring.
  Is our economy galloping ahead or in free fall?
- **The economy as a building** Germany built a strong economy.
  The economy is in ruins.
- **The economy as plants** The economy has grown this year.
  They pruned the budget. The economy is blossoming.
- **The economy as a body** The economy is unhealthy but recovering.
  The financial sector is flat on its back. The economy is ailing.
- **The economy as weather and water** They weathered the economic storm.
  Investment flows. Dark pools. Assets have frozen or evaporated. It created ripples through the economy.
- **The economy as a moral enforcer** The economy should support and enhance traditional values. We don’t punish success through taxation. The bailout will foster a culture of dependence and entitlement.
- **The economy as an object** The economy is the foundation for prosperity.
  The economy is a machine we control.

However, while there are a limited number of conceptual metaphors, there are countless possibilities for linguistic expressions, and these can be as creative and evocative as you like. For example, there are lots of ways to express the conceptual metaphor is LIFE IS A JOURNEY:

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<tr>
<th>Target domain</th>
<th>Source domain</th>
<th>Linguistic expression</th>
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<td>A JOURNEY</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Source domain</td>
<td>Linguistic expression</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
DID YOU KNOW?

Metaphors can trump voting intention when predicting policy support.

Stanford researchers primed participants with two different metaphors about crime. The only difference was a single word, the facts were the same. People support an increase in police forces and jailing offenders if crime is described as a ‘beast’ preying on a community. But if people are told crime is a ‘virus’ infecting a city, they are more inclined to treat the problem with social reform. 71% of the participants called for more enforcement when they read: “Crime is a beast ravaging the city.” That number dropped to 54% among participants who read an alternative framing: “Crime is a virus ravaging the city.”

Which political party test subjects support also influenced their policy preference, but the difference was substantially less than the difference triggered by the metaphor. Participants who read that crime was a beast were about 20% more likely to suggest an enforcement-based solution than participants who read that crime was a virus, regardless of their political persuasion.

Resources

USING METAPHORS

As communicators, our job is not to invent new conceptual metaphors. We use surprisingly few conceptual metaphors (see some of the economic metaphors above), however there are many possible linguistic expressions of each conceptual metaphor.

Metaphors are potent little containers: they lead us to assumptions that shape how we see. When used well, they help us privilege the set of ideas we want our audience to understand. So make sure the metaphors you use work for you, not against you.

STAY ON METAPHOR

Metaphors are wonderful – and unavoidable – but we tend not to stay on-metaphor. Even within a single paragraph, we switch between conceptual metaphors (and thus different models and ways to understand abstract problems). We use metaphors that don’t help.

We use mixed metaphors, giving confusing messages. Or we use metaphors from the wrong frame, which can actually undermine our message.

To work out if a word is a metaphor, ask – is it literally true?

TIP!

Talking about the economy
Don’t talk about the economy as a body (it can’t heal itself) or as an organic plant (this implies it grows and we are subservient to it). Don’t say we shouldn’t do things because it will cause the economy to shrink or shrivel.

Instead, use metaphors for the economy as an object in motion, and especially as a vehicle or machine we can control. The economy is not above the people or planet.

WATCH OUT!

Don’t use metaphors that mean the opposite of what you intend
“We have a plan to save our wildlife, and we need your help to deliver it. With your donation today we will develop a ground-breaking proposal for a next generation of environment laws.”


Language
CONCLUSION

“If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.”

– African proverb

Galahs, Karratha, Pilbara, Western Australia. Photo: Jim Bendon (Flickr CC BY SA 2.0).
GOING FAR, GOING TOGETHER

We know how to solve some of our most pressing and profound challenges like our damaged climate, wildlife extinction and the destruction of our living world.

But governments, businesses and societies will only take action when faced with widespread public concern and demand for ambitious change.

Any one organisation is unlikely to have much of an impact driving such big changes alone, so we must collaborate and cooperate within and between different parts of civil society. We must improve politics and social institutions and rebuild trust in democracy. Deepen civic engagement. Motivate people to speak out.

Together, we must use the power of narrative to shift the debate and move society.

And rebuild faith in democracy. People caused the challenges we face, and people can solve them – so do not forget characters and be clear about who is doing what to whom.

But how?

Every day, we are bombarded with non-stop communication: billboards, jingles, ads, sound bites, emails, newslashes. How can we make our worldview and messages stand out? In a world of ‘buy now, pay later’, how can we encourage people to see themselves as part of our living world and inspire them to speak out to protect it?

We must tell emotionally compelling stories to capture the public imagination with our vision for the future and move people to take action.

Here are seven key ingredients:

**HAVE A CLEAR PURPOSE AND THEORY OF CHANGE**

Be clear about the change you want to create and which dominoes need to fall to get you there. Break down large, overwhelming issues into smaller steps which people have the power to impact.

Tell powerful stories of collective action to show that little things done separately can solve big, collective problems. These stories help overcome the demotivating feeling that individual actions don’t count.

**BE CLEAR ABOUT WHO YOU ARE TRYING TO REACH**

Tell stories that motivate the base (people who already share our worldview) and convince people in the persuadable middle to engage with our worldview and strengthen the shared values they already hold.

But don’t try to reach everyone in the base and middle at the same time. Try to please everyone at the same time and you will please no-one. Work out who your audience is and what they care about.

Nevertheless, a great message doesn’t say what is already popular, it makes popular what needs to be said. Figure out where your audience is capable of going, and what you need to say to get them there.

**COMPASSIONATE VALUES ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO CARE AND ACT**

Tell stories that grow from a foundation of compassionate values – such as caring for our living world and other people, equality, social justice, concern for future generations, responsibility, honesty and love.

Think carefully about which values you are priming and actively challenge selfish values, such as materialism, greed, status and national security. Remind people that the majority care.

**FRAME CHALLENGES AS PEOPLE-MADE AND SOLVABLE**

Use frames you really believe in, based on values you really hold. Frame people as a part of nature, not apart from nature. Use frames that prime life, connection, people, democracy and responsibility.

Avoid nationalist, safety, security, defender, competitive and economic frames. If you argue against the frames you oppose, you actually just reinforce them. Speak in our frames about what we are for. Say what we ARE, not what we are not.

**EMOTIONALLY COMPELLING STORIES MOVE PEOPLE TO ACTION**

Tell emotionally compelling stories. Give people something to believe in. Move them with images, stories, emotions, values, analogies, moral sentiments and moving oratory. If you do not stir your audience’s emotions, your message will be lost. People remember the way they felt long after they have forgotten the facts.

Tell stories that motivate people to act – try a self/us/now structure with a challenge, choice and outcome. Stories of collective action show what’s possible and rebuild faith in democracy.

**USE ACTIVE LANGUAGE AND DON’T MIX METAPHORS**

Use concrete, personal and active language that describes lived experiences. Stories resonate when they describe things people can relate to – such as the impact on people and animals, the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat.

Be careful not to hedge or write passive sentences without actors. People do things. If a problem is not human-made, there is no obvious human-made solution.

Avoid getting bogged down in technocratic language – focus on outcomes and vision, not policy mechanisms and processes. Make sure the metaphors you use do not undermine your message.

**SAY IT AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN**

Reframing will not happen instantly. To create a new association and frame of reference in people’s minds, we must repeat that message again and again.
until it seems natural and normal – until your message is the association that springs to mind.

Once your frame is accepted into the public discourse, it becomes common sense; that’s what common sense is – reasoning accepted in a common frame.

American messaging expert and political strategist Frank Lutz has a simple rule:

“You say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and you say it again, and then again and again and again and again, and about the time that you’re absolutely sick of saying it is about the time that your target audience has heard it for the first time.”

He’s right: repetition and consistency are critical to reframing issues and getting your message across. Find a good message, then stick to it.

To change the world, we are changing the narratives we use to make sense of the world.

This is the world we can see. This is the world we are creating.

Imagine a world where water flows clean. Where we no longer burn dirty energy and everyone shares abundant energy from the sun and wind.

A world where communities care for the life that surrounds us and big polluters are a thing of the past.

A world where Australians stand together with the nation’s Traditional Owners to care for country.

Where the idea of extinction is extinct and the places we love thrive.

A world where businesses create opportunities by working in harmony with nature, and people work in jobs with a future. Where our economic decisions are shaped by what we value in life, not by endless desires for more stuff and more profit. And the people who represent us in Parliament value and protect the places we love.

A world where we are all part of a thriving community of living things. Where we wake to birdsong, drink forest-filtered water and feel cool under the canopies of big trees.

A world where the forests and mountains of the Great Dividing Range and the savannahs of our beautiful north are full of life. Where the Great Barrier Reef is still a natural wonder.

We are here to create a world that is all these things and more.

We’re awed by the incredible diversity of life on Earth, shaped over billions of years. We love this ancient island continent, its seas and waters, its unique creatures and country.

We hold this world in trust for future generations of children and wildlife, and for all of life.

We are here to create a world with a beautiful future.

ENDNOTES

3 Ibid, page 160.
5 Ibid.
6 Based on online polling by Galaxy Research from 2-6 June of 1,100 Australians nationally, aged 18 years and over. The Climate Institute, Factsheet: Australian attitudes to climate change as captured in the lead up to the 2016 federal election. June 2016, www. climateinstitute.org.au/www_resources/TCCI-Pre-Election-Polling-Factsheet.pdf
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Common Cause Foundation, No Cause is an Island: How People are Influenced by VALUES Regardless of the Cause.
16 Common Cause Foundation, www.valuesandframes.org
18 Common Cause Foundation, www.valuesandframes.org
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Daniel Kahneman (2011) Thinking Fast and Slow (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).


Ibid.

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