

The background of the cover is white, featuring several thick, blue, curved lines that sweep across the page in various directions, creating a dynamic, abstract pattern.

neon

The Messaging Handbook

HOW TO WRITE AN
IMPACTFUL MESSAGE

How to write an impactful message

The content of this messaging handbook and our accompanying training was written and co-developed by Funmibi Ogunlesi, Kennedy Walker, Raquel Jesse, Dora Meade, Matthew Butcher and Bec Sanderson.

Based on The UK Race Class Narrative Project led by CLASS UK and ASO Communications.

Based on materials and learnings from The US Race Class Narrative Project led by ASO Communications and We Make the Future.

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1. Why this guide and who it is for

As people who communicate progressive ideas, we have to think about how we present the facts, the powerful stories and the policies we advocate if we want to persuade people effectively. Based on [*The UK Race Class Narrative Report*](#) by [*ASO Communications*](#), [*We Make the Future*](#) and [*CLASS*](#), and on the [*Public Interest Research Centre's*](#) framing research, this guide provides a framework for writing impactful messages.

Whether you are a spokesperson preparing for an interview, a campaigner writing copy or an organiser prepping for the doorstep, you need to think about how your message will be received by the people you want to reach. This starts with public perception research to find out what helpful and unhelpful beliefs people have about your issue. Then you need to decide the best way to frame your issue to leverage or shift people's beliefs. The final stage is using this knowledge to start developing messages using clear principles.

For more specific spokesperson support, have a look at our [*Spokesperson Handbook*](#).

2. The process of writing a good message

a. Theory of Change

At NEON, we follow a proven strategy for communications, tried and tested by ASO Communications and based on learnings from The Race Class Narrative Project in the US. This is what we call our ‘Theory of Change’ for our messaging work and is key to the guidance in this handbook: when thinking about audiences, your messages should aim to engage the base, persuade the middle and alienate the opposition.

- Who is the base? These are people who already have strong progressive views on race, class, economics and gender. But you might not see them on a march or at a campaign meeting, so your goal is to fire up this group with a message that they like and feel excited to share with others.
- Who are the persuadables? This group forms a large majority on most issues. They are unsure, in the middle, or conflicted in their views, but have the potential to support your messages. Your goal is to persuade this group by having a message that they can connect with.
- Who is the opposition? This is a small number of people who are never going to connect with your message because they ideologically disagree with your politics. You want them to be turned off by your message because, if they are not, you’re

running the risk of not being clear enough and feeding their narratives instead.

b. Understanding your audience

It's important to find out what people think about an issue in order to assess how you need to shift them. You can do some desk-based research which involves reviewing and analysing research that already exists and synthesising it into a report or briefing ([here is an example of one produced by NEON](#)). Or, if you are running a big campaign and have the resources, you can commission some original research (most commonly, public opinion polling and/or focus groups) on how the general public thinks about the issue you want to deliver your message on. This helps you map which beliefs people have that are unhelpful and need to be shifted, and which are helpful and need to be leveraged.

For more on polling and focus groups, read our guides [Polling 101](#) and [Focus Groups 101](#).

If you are doing media interviews, it is especially important to listen to where the conversation is on your issue. What questions are presenters asking? What issues are members of the public bringing up when they call in to radio shows? Public opinion is always shifting and it is important to be conscious of moments when the dial is moving towards you or away from you. This should inform how to answer questions and frame arguments.

For example, right now climate change is widely understood to be an important issue and there is a broad consensus that climate change is real, is happening and has been caused by human activity. Five

years ago, spokespeople were still having to make these arguments. Today, we don't have to start at the same place - instead it is important we're talking about what needs to be done.

c. Framing 101

The [*FrameWorks Institute*](#) defines framing as the choices we make around how to package our issue: it's about what we say, how we say it, what we emphasise and what we leave unsaid. This impacts how our audience hears us, what they understand and how they feel and choose to act after receiving our communications.

Take taxation; our opposition likes to frame tax as a burden - paying less tax is framed as a good thing - tax 'breaks', tax 'relief'. They spotlight the individual payment of money taken out of someone's hard-earned pay cheque.

As progressives we can choose to frame tax differently and shine the spotlight elsewhere. We can focus on what public money builds in our communities - from roads to schools and hospitals. We can use this to emphasise the positive outcomes of paying tax and encourage people to see it as vital to our society and economy. We can also use this to show how people who try to dodge or avoid paying tax are letting society down and taking funding away from the services we all rely on.

When it comes to your own messaging, you need to define your framing task to work out how you want to frame your issue. To find out more about how to do this, read the [*Framing LGBTI Equality Toolkit*](#) by the [*Public Interest Research Centre*](#) (PIRC).

d. Messaging principles

When you have spent some time researching how your audience thinks about your issue, the next step is to develop messages that will reach and move them.

At NEON we have six principles for how to do this based on our own work and on The [*UK Race Class Narrative Project*](#).

PRINCIPLE 1:

Open with shared values, name race and class

Your message should start with shared values that speak to a positive vision of the world and evoke people's racial and class identities. The goal is to build solidarity across race and class to actively inoculate your messages from the divisions the opposition exploit in their narratives.

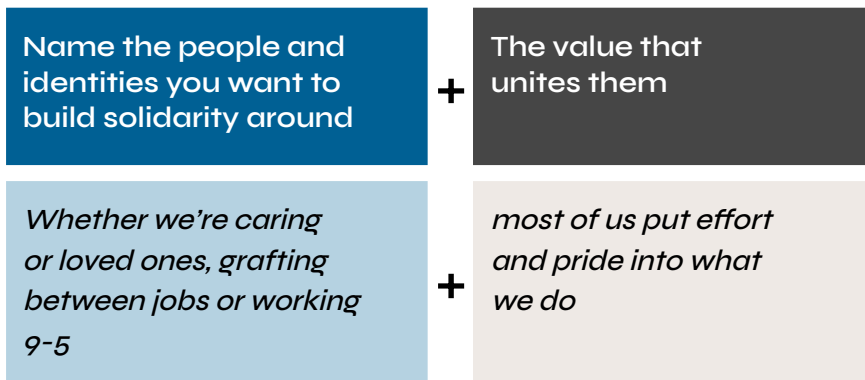
The shared value is used to speak to people's better selves. By presenting a value that most people see as positive and would agree with, you can build a common ground with the 'persuadable' section of your audience and lay the foundation for them to be more receptive to the rest of your messaging.

By naming race and class you can show that people with different backgrounds are united in this shared value. You can do this in a couple of ways, but the most important thing here is to be clear that this value is collectively shared by using phrases like "most of us", "the majority of us" or "we can all agree".

Some examples of how this can be done:

- You can name people’s race explicitly: “Whether you’re Black, white, or brown”, “no matter the colour of your skin, we can all agree that...”
- You can do it by naming religion, geography or cultural references that speak to people’s racial or class identity: “Whether you spend your Friday afternoon praying in the mosque or the synagogue, or your Sunday mornings in the church, most of us...”
- You can also be creative, according to your issue and the people you want to unite: “Whether your kids go to a grammar school or the local comprehensive, the majority of us...”

Putting it all together:



PRINCIPLE 2:

Name villains and spell out the impact

Now it’s important to be clear who is creating these problems and threatening these shared values. Tell a clear and succinct story of

who is responsible and why: what choices have been made? What policies are being pushed forward? How does this impact people's lives?

By naming a villain in your narrative, you can show your audience that problems were created by people and the choices they made. This makes space for the possibility for things to be different, which builds hope. Different choices could have been made that align with your shared values and what you want to achieve.

Spelling out the impact helps to make the issue more human and relatable. Seeing the real-life consequences will draw on people's compassion. Here's how:

- Be specific. Talk about "this government" not just about "the government" to avoid being too vague about who has responsibility and agency. Talking in general terms can also fuel the fatalistic response that all governments are bad. Name specific politicians, companies, organisations, and more.
- Talk clearly about how they (the politician, company, organisation you have just named) created these problems. Talk about actions and show that these people have agency.
- When possible, be clear on how divisive tactics are being used to distract us from policy failures or a violent policy agenda. Who are they blaming in order to distract us from their failing or violent policies?

- Use emotive language to talk about the impact on people's day-to-day lives. Make it real for people.
- Use 'agentive' language rather than passive language, highlighting the agency of those you're talking about in the impact they have on others. Bad things don't just happen to people, they are caused by the agency of certain people.
- When these impacts are disproportionate (it is almost always the case that people with marginalised identities are hit the hardest by government policies), name the people who are feeling it the most.

EXAMPLE

"But a handful of politicians in this government are refusing to tax big oil and gas corporations, allowing them to make huge profits from rising energy bills while most of us struggle to pay our bills. Families will be sitting down tonight wondering how they are going to make it through this winter."

PRINCIPLE 3:

Emphasise unity and collective action to solve problems

This, very simply, is about people coming together to create change. It is powerful to show that we are always stronger together, rather than falling into the divisions our opponents exploit. Collective

action is a way to deal with problems. Use this to make people feel empowered.

EXAMPLE

Talk about people uniting:

“Today, we can work together across our differences to demand...”

“By joining together, we can rewrite the rules...”

Or, offer specific examples of historic wins achieved by people coming together:

“In the past, we joined together to create the NHS, and today, we can work together across our differences to demand secure green jobs, good education, and a better future for all of us, our children and our grandchildren.”

PRINCIPLE 4:

Offer solutions, connect people uniting to achieving our vision

Always offer an alternative to where we are right now. Talk about solutions that meet the scale of the problem and how this can be achieved by people joining together.

Depending on your communication channels, it's not always possible to lay out every single step towards a solution. However, you don't want to offer big solutions that people won't see as possible without knowing how we can get there.

Our trick for this is to start with a solution for today, one that is tangible and could be achieved in the short term. This could be the government reversing an immigration policy, or pledging a sum of money for some infrastructure, or stopping plans for oil drilling projects. This can be followed by the wider goal you want to see; for example, a society where everyone can come safely into the UK to seek asylum, build a new life and reunite with their families.

EXAMPLE

“This government’s cruel and inhumane immigration policies are designed to shock and degrade rather than deal with the real problems this society faces. Today, the Home Secretary could choose to reverse her decision to force people seeking asylum to live on a barge. In the long term, we want to create a society that welcomes people to the UK so they can start a new life.”

PRINCIPLE 5:

Say what you are for not what you are against

Anat Shenker Osorio, director of ASO Communications, stresses time and again that the purpose of your message is to advocate for what you are for, not what you are against - because “what you fight, you feed”.

Have the debate on your own terms. This will mean you avoid falling into the trap of refuting your opponents arguments while repeating them in the process. You don’t have a lot of time to get your message across - it needs to be snappy and to the point. And you want to make sure it is your message, not your opponents.

This is part of what George Lakoff explains in his book [*Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives*](#). When someone says “don’t think of an elephant”, it is impossible to not think of an elephant. This means when you repeat the frames and arguments of your opponents, even just to say that they are wrong, you give them airtime and column inches which only strengthen their opinions in people’s minds.

For example, refuting the “tax is a burden” framing that the opposition uses with a negation like “tax is not a burden” just repeats their use of the word “burden”, making it more likely to stick in people’s minds regardless of the “not”. This applies to all mythbusting: spending time on disproving things is just having the conversation on your opponent’s terms. Be proactive about the language you’re using - once you have clearly defined what the problem is in a way that assigns accountability, move onto saying what you are for. Going back to the tax example, you could say instead: “Tax builds our roads, schools and hospitals. It’s how we contribute to the community we all live in”

PRINCIPLE 6:

Keep it real - would a ten year old understand?

Be clear: This is one of the simplest and most important things to keep in mind when communicating.

If you use jargon, acronyms and abbreviations that only your colleagues or peers understand, you risk alienating the vast majority of people you are trying to reach.

Ask yourself: “Would a ten year-old understand what I am saying?” This might sound patronising, but the truth is we often work and

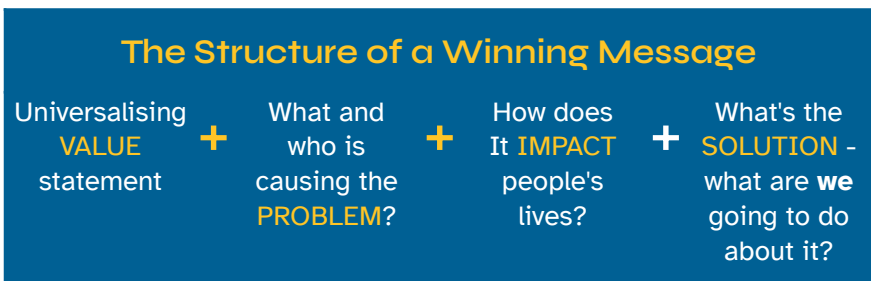
organise in a fairly small bubble. The way you speak to people in your campaign group is likely to assume knowledge and information. Even from sector to sector, terms will be different - some language used in the migration sector will probably sound alien to people campaigning against big finance. And it's not only about being understood, but also reducing the chances of being misunderstood. Take for example a term like 'institutional racism'; just saying 'institutional racism' does not give an idea of what it actually means and how it impacts people's lives. Bring terms like this to life by taking that extra step to talk about how it operates in society, using examples, case studies and real stories when possible. This could look like focusing on how racism is experienced in the job market like in the messaging guide [Reframing Race: Contains Strong Language](#). Or how focusing on institutions like the NHS where black and brown nurses were disproportionately harmed during the pandemic because they were forced to work without the right protection.

When writing your message you need to make a decision about when to:

1. Use or reclaim a term but also when to explain it, ideally using a story to show what it means, e.g. 'institutional racism'
2. Drop the jargon entirely and use a story instead, e.g. 'settlement status'
3. Spot where you are using vague terms that obscure people's understanding, e.g. 'public services' (rather than saying doctors, nurses, teachers, carers, etc.)

How does this all fit into a message?

You might feel overwhelmed by how to incorporate all these principles into your message, so it's easy to break it down into the components in the image below. Not every message you write will be able to have all the elements, but it is important to have each part prepared and ready to be deployed when you need it. There is more on how to use this for media interviews in our [Spokesperson Handbook](#).



Here are two full messages that contained the elements above and were successful in [The Race Class Narrative](#) strategy of engaging the base, persuading the persuadables and marginalising the opposition.

Good Life Message

Most of us put effort and pride into what we do, whatever our skin colour and whether we're caring for loved ones, grafting between jobs or working 9-5. But certain politicians, their billionaire friends and the media they own harm us all by hoarding extreme wealth and power. They rig the system to rob people of a decent wage and refuse to contribute what they owe in tax. Then they blame Black and

brown people, newcomers and families left struggling to make ends meet for the hardships the wealthy few created. When we pull together across our differences, we can make this a country where working for a living means earning a living, and we all have what we need to live a good life - no exceptions.

Future Generations Message

Whether we are Black, white or brown, most of us want to make life better for the generations to come. But certain politicians, their super-rich friends and the media they own are endangering our future to benefit themselves. They are fuelling damage to our climate, selling off our NHS and slashing funding for our youth centres and schools. Then they spread lies about ethnic minorities, Muslims and people seeking asylum to distract us from how their decisions harm us all. In the past, we joined together to create the NHS, and today, we can work together across our differences to demand secure green jobs, good education, and a better future for all of us, our children and our grandchildren.

3. Words that work

This section is about the words and phrases we say that unhelpfully bring up negative frames or play into our opponents’ arguments. It includes examples of what we could say instead.

This is a small selection of suggestions - it could be infinitely long! If you’re working on long-standing campaigns, we recommend putting some time and effort into developing a “words that work” list for the issues you’re working on.

EMBRACE	REPLACE
<p>Working class</p> <p>Black, white and brown working class</p> <p>Diverse working class</p> <p><i>We need to be able to talk about the working class, but include differences within this. ‘Diverse’ was a term preferred by working class people of colour as being racially inclusive. It has the advantage also of being adaptable to talk about other differences - like where people live in the country.</i></p>	<p>White working class</p> <p><i>Repeating this language risks reinforcing the racialisation of working class people as white, even if we want to use the term in order to critique it.</i></p> <p>Everyday working people</p> <p><i>Vague signifiers like this take us away from class as a political concept, and can reinforce the idea that we’re talking about people in work and excluding unemployed people or people claiming benefits. This phrase is also used by opponents to signal that the working class is white.</i></p>

Families left struggling to make ends meet

We can talk about experiences of class precarity with more everyday, accessible language.

Poor families

Using this language risks essentialising people as poor, and plays into 'the poor' as a frame of victimhood without agency.

People seeking asylum

Humanising language centres people rather than their immigration status.

Legal migrants

Legal language legitimises the idea that humans can be illegal, and places legality over justice.

Certain politicians, their billionaire friends and the media they own... harm / blame / spread lies

Refer to specific groups that are the agents of divide-and-rule, using an active voice and the rule of three.

Elites / politicians / the media

Being too general risks prompting the fatalism that nothing can change and there is no point in engaging.

XYZ are discriminated against

Using the passive voice or failing to name agents means people can fill in the gap with their own presuppositions.

Certain politicians, their billionaire friends and the media they own are fuelling damage to our climate, selling off our NHS and slashing youth centres and schools

They are robbing people of a decent wage and refusing to contribute what they owe in tax

Be specific about the agents who cause the problem.

They are selfish / greedy / untrustworthy

If we make it about bad character, rather than specific harmful actions, then the solutions are less clear and we risk prompting fatalism.

Certain politicians, their billionaire friends and the media they own blame (e.g. migrants and people seeking asylum) for the hardships the wealthy few created

XYZ spread lies about (e.g. migrants) to distract us from how their decisions harm us all

Be specific about who or what is the problem.

Culture war / stoking divisions

Many people don't know what 'culture war' means, plus it's also damaging to reinforce the idea that we are at war or divided. These terms also leave who or what is the problem open to interpretation.

With our voices and our votes, we can demand better

Talk about how a collective response can lead to government action.

Our elected leaders have a responsibility

Although we should talk about government responsibility, instead of using it to lead our messages we should place it within the frame of collective power,.

Secure green jobs, good education, lively highstreets, first-rate care, etc.

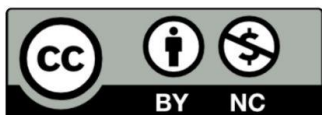
Name the outcomes that we want to work towards while making links across different policy areas.

We need change

Being too vague means we don't communicate a vision that people can understand and get behind.



To learn more about our framing and messaging
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