

# Think about how you want to ‘frame’ your evidence

The term framing refers to the emphasis placed on specific aspects of a topic, which in turn influences how that topic is understood by the audience [\(footnote 1\)](#). Framing happens in all types of communication, especially when a complex topic, such as scientific evidence, needs to be communicated quickly and concisely [\(footnote 2\)](#). Actors compete to draw attention to one ‘image’ of a problem, and limit attention to a small number of feasible solutions [\(footnote 3\)](#). Like any evidence interpretation, how much emphasis and on what aspects needs to be carefully considered when presenting your evidence [\(footnote 4\)](#).

At its most basic level, framing your evidence can mean emphasising the ‘why’ question: ‘why is this evidence relevant’ to a particular user. It can be used as a tactic to present evidence in a way that is appealing to policymakers and practitioners, demonstrating its relevance and salience to their priorities [\(footnote 5\)](#). Frames are also useful tools to guide users to clear conclusions [\(footnote 6\)](#).

Another framing decision is whether to position yourself an ‘issue advocate’ (for example, framing the evidence in a persuasive style) or an ‘honest broker’ (framing it as neutrally as possible) [\(footnote 7\)](#). Evidence is often perceived to be ‘neutral’ rather than ‘persuasive’, but framing influences which message is conveyed to policymakers and practitioners [\(footnote 8\)](#).

“Another positive attribute [of papers which are useful to policymakers] is the authors have made a serious attempt to minimise their own biases in both methodology and interpretation. Scientists can be advocates, or they can provide the best possible balanced assessment of the evidence but they cannot do both simultaneously. It has to be clear to policymakers which horse they are riding. Papers seen as advocacy are likely to be discounted” [\(footnote 9\)](#) - Chief Medical Officer and former Chief Scientific Advisor Sir Chris Whitty

The type of evidence you are presenting may determine which approach you take. For example, if your evidence challenges an existing paradigm, you may need a persuasion strategy good enough to prompt a shift of attention to a policy problem and a willingness to understand that problem in a new way, or convince that a different course of action is possible [\(footnote 10\)](#). An example of this related to diet shift is how advocates are trying to reframe the discussion on obesity away from individual responsibility and information based policy actions, and on to a more focus on the food environments and how they influence eating habits.

"Sometimes we have elected members and senior decision-makers and it just doesn't fit their political view and they're just not having it -- and I've heard it on several occasions. And it's irrefutable evidence, but no. It doesn't fit 'the narrative' that they would like and so it gets discarded." – Regional Public Health Network

Whichever framing approach is chosen, an important rule of thumb is to be explicit about what is evidence and what is interpretation within a message [\(footnote 11\)](#).

## Telling stories to help your message stick

There is growing recognition that communicating evidence in the form of a story may help users to connect to the message and motivate action. Storytelling can be used to persuade policymakers of a course of action ([footnote 12](#)). Evidence users in local government have described how powerful stories could be for inspiring action with the public, especially when it is a first-hand experience or account. Third sector evidence users also report it can also be effective for motivating individuals and inspiring action at the grassroots level and for ‘mobilising a movement’ more broadly. However, storytelling is an acquired skill, and an acquired taste, and some users may find using it to communicate evidence suggests that evidence is less credible, or rigorous.

“We have been trying to persuade our executive team to invest in our climate impacts plan. Then we organised an event where several farmers (suppliers) came to talk using stories about the challenges they were facing from increased flooding and pests and diseases. They were brilliant and the exec team then agreed to fund the plan.” – Food Retailer

## Practical example: Framing evidence

Some food business policy teams have used farmers and those directly impacted by climate change to use storytelling of real life events and experiences to persuade their senior management team to invest in their Climate Action plans.

## Checklist

- have you framed your evidence in terms of why it is important?
- are you framing your evidence as an advocate or as an honest broker?
- have you made it clear what is evidence and what is interpretation within your message?
- would it be appropriate to incorporate a storytelling dimension into your evidence?

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4. Sources: Zampini, G. F. (2018) [Evidence and morality in harm-reduction debates: can we use value-neutral arguments to achieve value-driven goals?](#) Palgrave Communications, 4(62); Cairney, P. and Kwaitkowski, R. (2017) [How to communicate effectively with policymakers: combine insights from psychology and policy.](#) Palgrave Communications, 3(37); Druckman, J. and Lupia, A. (2017) ‘Using frames to make science communication more effective’ in [Oxford Handbook of the Science of Science Communication](#). Available at [restricted access]: [University of York](#)

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8. Sources: Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) ['The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics,'](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(21); Phoenix, J. H., Atkinson, L. G. and Baker, H. (2019) ['Creating and communicating social research for policymakers in government,'](#) Palgrave Communications, 5(98); Sohn, J. (2018) [Navigating the politics of evidence-informed policymaking: strategies of influential policy actors in Ontario](#). Palgrave Communications. 4(49); Zampini, G. F. (2018) [Evidence and morality in harm-reduction debates: can we use value-neutral arguments to achieve value-driven goals?](#) Palgrave Communications, 4(62).
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