Communicating About Water:
A Wisconsin Toolkit
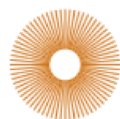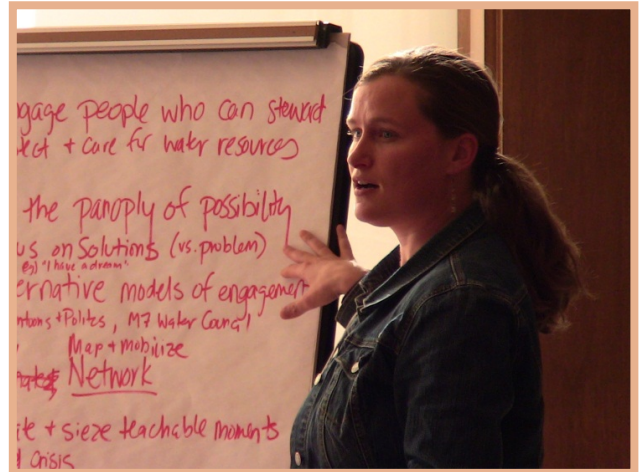
Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters

Waters of Wisconsin Initiative

2014

Primary Authors & Editors:

Jane Elder, Bret Shaw, Marian Farrior, Meredith Keller, and Aaron Fai

With contributions from the FrameWorks Institute; Water Words That Work; Belden Russonello Strategists; Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates; Public Opinion Strategies; and the Waters of Wisconsin Communications Working Group (Dennis Boyer, Ann Brummit, Kate Golden, Moira Harrington, Linda Honold, Richard Kyte, Pat Leavenworth, Ann Sayers, Ron Seely, Jenny Seifert, Bret Shaw, and Kirsten Shead).

Cover photos courtesy of
Amanda Shilling, Jane Elder, and Wisconsin Sea Grant

Message examples courtesy of
The Nature Conservancy, Midwest Environmental Advocates, and Clean Wisconsin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Background

This guide is the result of recommendations from the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters Waters of Wisconsin (WOW) communications working group. The communications working group brought together leaders across a range of communication specialties and fields, including communications research, public outreach, journalism, ethics, faith, advocacy, and marketing. These leaders came together to ask, "What are the stories that need to be told about waters in Wisconsin?," and, "What are some communication strategies and best practices that can help us tell those stories?" Their goal was to identify communications needs for engaging wider communities in the public policy process and in water stewardship.

Purpose

This toolkit includes communication strategies and a guide for message development that facilitate effective conversations about water. It is designed for people working on water issues, water conservation practices, and public engagement around water resources in Wisconsin. Users of this guide may include members of neighborhood and grassroots organizations, nonprofits, environmental and natural resource educators and communicators, Extension agents, business and sustainability leaders, policy experts, and others.

The working group applied social science research and best practices in strategic communications to develop this toolkit. By following some of the recommended strategies below, a common narrative about the waters of Wisconsin may begin to emerge—one that will appeal to the citizens of Wisconsin to help conserve and protect this crucial natural resource.

This communications toolkit is made possible by grants from the Joyce Foundation, the Brico Fund, and donors who support the Wisconsin Academy's Initiatives. We gratefully acknowledge their support for our work.

Complementary Work

In addition to communications, WOW working groups focused on the following key areas in 2013 and 2014:

- Systemic challenges in policy or structures that underlie or exacerbate water quality and water resource issues;
- Water supply and quantity in the context of the Great Lakes Compact and other water management policies in Wisconsin; and
- Implementation of the Wisconsin Phosphorus Rule.

You can learn more about the Waters of Wisconsin Initiative at https://www.wisconsinacademy.org/initiatives/wow.

- Chapter 1 -

NARRATIVES SHAPE OUR VIEWS ON WATER

In This Section…

- ❖ The limits of current water stories in Wisconsin.
- ❖ Current threats to Wisconsin's waters.
- ❖ Current narratives related to Wisconsin's waters.
- ❖ Why we need new stories (narratives?).

What Do We Mean by "Narrative"?

A narrative is more than a simple story. It is how an overarching "big story" takes shape from many related stories, the way the story is told, and in that telling, how it creates a larger, often enduring meaning that shapes the way we interpret other stories and the world around us. For example, an old narrative about environmental protection is one that involves telling how we can't have both a healthy environment and a strong economy. While this has been consistently proven wrong, if not counterintuitive, the old narrative still shapes the way many people see environmental protection.

When communicating about water in Wisconsin, a challenge we face is the established sense of general knowledge about the way things "are." The language we use shapes this knowledge, the attitudes that come along with it, and the stories we ultimately tell. Once a "narrative" is established, it can be difficult to tell a new story or to see the same issue in a different light. As the Center for Story-Based Strategies explains,

> …Humans use stories to understand the world and our place in it. Stories are embedded with power—the power to explain and justify the status quo as well as the power to make change imaginable and urgent.[1]

Current Narratives about Wisconsin's Waters

Our working group identified several ways in which individuals and groups are currently telling stories that present barriers to safeguarding Wisconsin water:

Water Supply

A common story about water in Wisconsin is that it is abundant and in endless supply. This is not true for all regions of the state. Lakes and rivers have dried up in the Central Sands region. Waukesha has overused its aquifer. Some Wisconsin aquifers have naturally occurring arsenic and radium that contaminate local water supply, driving communities to find their water

---

[1] Center for Story-based strategies, Storytelling as social change, http://www.storybasedstrategy.org/our-approach

elsewhere. Groundwater supplies continue to be stressed by expanding industrial, agricultural, and household usage along with increased pollution by manure runoff, fertilizers, and pesticides in some areas. Climate change may further stress to water supplies due to dramatic shifts between periods of heavy precipitation and periods of drought. In addition, rising water temperatures will escalate evaporation resulting in water loss.

In order for Wisconsin to address these challenges, we need new stories and messages that help us understand how they affect people's lives, livelihoods, and communities. A low or contaminated water supply means a lack of access to clean, safe water for Wisconsin residents. Stories that highlight that fact with reinforce the need to integrate strategies for surface and groundwater protection, as well as highlight the need to safeguard the Great Lakes and Mississippi River watersheds.

Water Quality

Except in areas where pollution is visible and severe, the story most people tell is that Wisconsin waters are generally clean and safe. In reality, different sources of pollution contaminate water in many areas of Wisconsin. For example, nutrient and bacterial pollution contaminates many drinking water wells in Kewaunee County, phosphorus pollution facilitates the growth of harmful algal blooms that choke out fish and wildlife and sometimes produce toxic bacteria that sicken swimmers and close beaches in many of our streams and lakes every summer.

Our new story needs to acknowledge progress where it has taken place, but also the threats that still compromise water quality in many areas and the need for ongoing vigilance to safeguard our water. It must stress that water quality is integral to the health of Wisconsin people and habitats, and it is essential for manufacturing, agriculture, recreation, and our economy.

Habitat and Species

It is a common story: we are a state with abundant and thriving natural habitats that support our tourism, recreation, and quality of life. While this story is true for some Wisconsin habitats, many wetlands, shorelines, and headwaters—some of our most important habitats in Wisconsin—are still in trouble.

Our new story needs to emphasize the fact that healthy habitats are essential for wildlife, recreation, and water quality. These stories should identify species and habitats at risk, point out the threats to those species and habitats, and highlight what must be done to address those threats.

Development

Development is an ongoing threat to wetlands. Great Lakes shorelines are changing due to the increased variability in lake levels related to climate change. This damages and destabilizes shoreline nurseries for fish species like sturgeon and northern pike. Development and warming waters also threaten headwater habitat and water quality. The pristine headwaters that feed

many of our best trout streams require protection in order maintain the unique habitat. As water temperatures warm, cold-water fish (like trout) are losing essential habitats, threatening recreational and commercial fishing opportunities.

Wisconsin's wild rice lakes are another unique habitat that requires high water quality water and stable environments. Rice habitats near the Bad River are very sensitive to any impacts from mining in the area, as well as influences from climate change. These in turn will negatively affect numerous wildlife species and traditional native communities.

Invasive Species

Invasive species both on land and in water disrupt native habitats and biodiversity. Invasive species degrade habitat by out-competing native species for resources, thereby altering the chemical, physical, and biological conditions of the native ecosystem. Wisconsin and the rest of Great Lakes region have already experienced transformative changes from aquatic invasive species such sea lamprey, zebra mussels, and quagga mussels. Invasive Asian carp species (bighead, silver, grass, and black carp) currently in the Mississippi River Basin could reach the Great Lakes and other inland waters in the region, with adverse consequences to the native ecology, as well as recreation and the Wisconsin economy. Invasive species also include infectious marine diseases such as Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia (VHS), which has already caused fish kills in the Great Lakes. Invasive plants such Eurasian milfoil and reed canary grass have reshaped healthy, diverse aquatic habitats into ones that can only support a few species.

In addition to their direct impact on habitats, invasive species are also exacerbating other ecological stressors. For example, zebra and quagga mussels filter near-shore water, increasing sunlight penetration that both warms the water and boosts algal blooms. This contributes to habitat losses from oxygen depletion (through eutrophication).

Telling a New Story

Photo by Wisconsin Sea Grant

In order to shape the stories that will lead to expanded literacy on Wisconsin's water ecology, as well as improve residents' stewardship and public engagement in decision-making processes, we need new, more salient stories. This stories need to communicates concerns and solutions, particularly how these threats relate to real people in real places. These stories should capture our imagination, and engage our actions in positive ways. In some ways, the old stories make Wisconsin's water challenges almost invisible in our busy daily lives. A new story can shift our perceptions of water from something that tends to be invisible to something that we see as *invaluable*. This kit is designed to help tell a new story for Wisconsin and its invaluable waters.

- Chapter 2 -
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

In This Section...

❖ Strategic framing strategies: values and theme, issues, and specific actions.

❖ Elements of frames: context, tone, metaphors, symbols, messenger, message, images, stories, and numbers and facts.

❖ Additional strategies: emotions, fear appeals, and social norms.

Source Information

There are many theories and practices surrounding communications strategies. This toolkit draws from a variety of approaches from the social sciences, and incorporates how people think, feel, and act. These strategies connect to a person's thought processes, emotions, and sense of personal and social identity. Our goal is to draw from these to provide useful tips for communicating about water issues.

Audience-based Strategies

Before you consider any of the strategies in this kit, start with a clear sense of your audience. The best strategies start with identifying the audience you are trying to reach, and understanding what will speak to them. Then design your messages and approaches so that they have meaning in their lives and experience.

Strategic Framing

Strategic framing uses the ways people think to change their understanding of complicated issues. It is a communications approach that shapes or "frames" the way we talk about an issue in order to change the way the public *thinks* about that issue. It uses evidence-based social science research on how people process and understand new information to help experts and advocates make intentional choices about the best ways to discuss their subject matter: how to start, what to emphasize, what to leave unsaid, and how to make important information as memorable (or "sticky") as possible. Much of the information about framing in this discussion is derived from the work of FrameWorks Institute[2]. We invite you to explore their website (www.frameworksinstitute.org) to learn more about strategic framing.

Framing Basics

The way we communicate about water "sets a frame" about how water (or any issue) is perceived and understood. A frame is the lens through which people view an issue or interpret

---

[2] See, in particular, FrameWorks Institute. (2002). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, D.C. Accessed online at http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf.

information. People rely on internalized concepts and values to assign meaning to a particular issue or experience. Frames are mental shortcuts that help us to organize and file new information quickly according to these preexisting patterns of thought; how a message is framed (what values and concepts it triggers for us) determines our response to it.

Non-experts' understanding about an issue is primarily frame-based rather than fact-based. In other words, people look for cues in an unfamiliar story or concept that connect it to one with which they are already familiar. Once they have linked the unfamiliar information to the familiar story, they interpret the factual information in this new story in ways that accord with their preexisting beliefs and values. These audiences discard facts that do not fit the frame.

Strategic framing uses what social science tells us about how people think and communicate in order to help the public think productively about new topics–or to guide the public to think in new ways about issues they believe they already know. It is a means to match problems to appropriate solutions and to move policymaking into the public discourse. Information is conveyed through **context, tone, metaphors, symbols, messengers, visuals, messages, stories, and numbers and facts**. These "frame elements"[3] signal what is important and what can be ignored. Ultimately, frames define an issue, determine who is responsible, influence decisions, and offer potential solutions.

Three Levels
Strategic framers consider three "levels of thinking"[4] when crafting a message about their issue. The first level is that of the "Big Idea" to be communicated. The Big Idea should contain the values, ideals, and overarching themes of the message, which establish what an issue is about at the conceptual level. These values and ideals include such things as quality of life, responsibility, accountability, fairness, leadership, wellbeing, opportunities for future generations, etc. An example is: *Water sustains life and we have a responsibility to safeguard it for future generations.*

---

[3] FrameWorks Institute, 2002.
[4] FrameWorks Institute, 2002.

Level 1: Overarching Themes and Values

Values are at the heart of a frame. In Wisconsin, water is about…

Responsibility to…

- Each other and community.
- Future generations.
- Family.
- Living things/systems.
- Ourselves.

Fairness, Equity, and/or Justice for…

- People who use water.
- Economic impacts of polluted water, and the negative influence on those who bear the economic burden of contaminated water.
- Unequal influence and control over water use, quality, supply, access, etc.

Accountability for actions that affect water use, access, quality, and supply.

Freedom to make choices about our lives and water.

God's creation/Sacredness of water, or the spiritual value of water to individuals and cultures.

Sustaining **life**; in other words, **water sustains life.**

Building on these, there are also several powerful overarching themes to draw on when communicating about water in Wisconsin.

Sense of Place

Sense of place involves the interplay of beliefs, attitudes, identity, emotions, and behavior. Place attachment can an emotional bond, usually positive, that often develops over time between people and the significant places in their lives. Appealing to people's sense of place connects them to their emotional attachments and experiences, which may lead to a sense of personal responsibility for protecting that place. This is easy to do with the abundance of lakes and rivers in Wisconsin.

Our Waters of Wisconsin Initiative generated a wide range of stories about people's attachments to places and water. The spanned from descriptions of canoeing on an undeveloped river, casting a fly rod on a misty Wisconsin morning, listening to the sounds of a babbling brook, watching wildlife by the shore, and sharing time with family and friends by their favorite body of water.

In your communications about Wisconsin waters, identify the meanings associated with a specific place. What are the stories that are told about that place? How does water contribute to the quality of life that we enjoy? How does it influence our identity?

Some effective place-based themes to use include:

- Past cultural heritage and history
- Current cultural connections
- Connection to memorable past events
- Sense of personal wellbeing (sacred experiences, rest and escape from stress, and beauty of place)

Identity

Water is a defining characteristic of Wisconsin's identity. This includes:

- Quality of life
- History, who we are
- Our lakes, rivers, shores
- Confluence/crossroads of many waters
- Memory and experiences
- Places where we play, escape, and reflect
- Destinations, or the places where we gather
- How we are drawn to water (waterfront property, water recreation, and water images)
- How we think of our water as clean, abundant, beautiful, and picturesque at the surface (what's visible)
- How we consider our water to be free, open to public access and use

Economy

In Wisconsin, water is also central to our economy, affecting:

- Industry
- Agriculture
- Farming (family scale and tradition)
- Beer
- Recreation
- Tourism

Photo by Wisconsin Sea Grant

When the things we value *about* water (such as beauty, health, recreation, economy, etc.) are threatened or lost, most of us experience this threat or loss on multiple levels across this list of values and themes.

Level 2: Water Issues & Concerns

The **second level categorizes water themes into issues, which points to potential solutions**. Many people easily categorize water issues as "environmental issues," but this can narrow the ability to talk to the public. As discussed under Level 1, water issues are usually much broader. By taking these issues out of the environmental "box" and expanding the context, we can expand their relevance to our target audience; water issues are public health, economic, justice, human rights, agricultural, and recreational issues, among many others. These categories can align with broad public concerns such as water quality, water supply and access, safe drinking water, and access to quality recreational experiences. By expanding how we categorize water issues, the audiences will be able to view water issues across multiple lenses and deepen the context for deliberations.

Water issues in Wisconsin are about:
- Environment
- Economy (the old narrative maintains that environmental protection and jobs are in opposition)
- Recreation
- Education
- Public health
- Farming and agriculture
- Governance and democracy
- Justice
- State identity, pride, and legacy
- All regions, local and statewide

Water is also an "invisible" issue for many, and clean, abundant water is taken for granted.

Concerns

If values are the same as our deeply held beliefs, then concerns are the things we are worried about. Concerns do not have the weight of values, but they can be prominent in shaping our response to an issue. Sometimes there is a very fine distinction between where values end and concerns begin. Some concerns identified by the WOW Initiative are:

- **Water supply**: groundwater withdrawals, high capacity wells, and water access.
- **Water quality**: nutrient and phosphorous pollution, toxics, storm water contamination, contaminated wells, and sewage overflows.
- **Habitat**: lake levels, shorelines, and extreme events such as floods and droughts.
- **Health and safety**: safe drinking water, beach bacteria (especially E. coli), toxic cyanobacteria from blue-green algae, and swimming safety.
- **Community reputation and image; lost tourism income**: the loss of part of what makes us special, and the loss of an attractive asset for recruiting people to the area.
- **Lost aesthetics**: destroyed views and destroyed habitats, stinking weeds, algae-choked and foul-smelling water, and loss of water clarity.
- **Lost experience; lost way of life and traditions**: loss of fishing spots, loss of swimming quality and enjoyment, degraded experience of water (dirty, smelly water), greater health risk (bacterial exposure), more dangerous fish like Asian carp, lost springs, lost beach time from closures due to bacterial levels, etc.
- **Property values**: declining value of lakefront experience.

Level 3: Making Policy, Taking Action

The third level includes the **specific details of making policy or taking action**, such as a piece of legislation or a particular regulation, or personal actions like practicing water conservation techniques. It is easy to fall into the communications trap of starting with specifics. Relying on minute details can exclude people or gloss over the importance of larger themes, values, and the type of issue bring discussed.

For example, water experts might frame a conversation about phosphorus pollution by talking about enforcing NR-151. For those who do not know that this jargon refers to a specific rule[5] under a Wisconsin state statute, it has little or no meaning. Using the idea of "frames" or themes, it would be more effective to first discuss how important clean water is to Wisconsin's health, quality of life, and economy. Then, one could explain how farmers, communities, and sewage plants can come together to explore innovative new approaches to clean up sources of a major threat to clean water (phosphorus) via this state rule that outlines specific ways to do this.

---

[5] The Wisconsin phosphorus policy was enacted in WI Stat § 281.16 (2012 through Act 45). NR 151 is a rule that regulates runoff pollution performance standards for non–agricultural facilities and transportation facilities and performance standards and prohibitions for agricultural facilities and practices designed to achieve water quality standards as required by s.281.16 (2) and (3).

Other Important Framing Elements

In addition to values, themes, issues, and concerns, there are several other important communications components that shape the way a topic is framed and understood. FrameWorks Institute has developed a list of "frame elements"[6] that collectively make up the frame in which the content of any message resides. Each of these frame elements plays a role in the interpretation of your message by its recipients.

Context

In our current media-saturated world, stories are often presented as **episodic**[7], isolated events that happen to individual actors. For example, there may be a news story about flooding in a community and how individual victims are trying to cope with this disaster, but the story is not tied to land use practices that contributed to the flood event (filling in upstream wetlands, paving over floodplains, developing natural filtration areas that can slow water flow, etc.). When this happens, we miss out on the **thematic** and systemic bigger picture, those causes and conditions that can influence events. We also miss out on the social policies that may have contributed the problem or those that might contribute to the solution.

Context can help establish the cause of the problem and who is responsible. Affect communicators must build-in the context at the introduction of the problem because, once a frame is set, it is difficult to recontextualize later. Context furthers systems-thinking and minimizes the reduction of social problems to individual solutions. While the actions and solutions may be at the individual level, most water challenges affect whole communities or regions and often involve long-term strategies or solutions. By making sure water issues are communicated thematically and not just as a series of isolated crises, we can help people see the need for community and public involvement in solutions, as well as the ways they as individuals might fit into solutions.

---

[6] FrameWorks Institute. (2009). *The FrameWorks Perspective: Strategic Frame Analysis*. Washington, DC: pp. 3-4. For more in-depth discussion of each frame element, see also FrameWorks Institute. (2002). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, D.C. Accessed online at http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf

[7] For more on the comparison of episodic versus thematic media narratives, see the research of Shanto Iyengar, as cited by FrameWorks Institute: FrameWorks Institute. (2006). "Vivid Examples: What They Mean and Why You Should Be Careful Using Them." [E-zine] Washington, DC: pp. 4-5. Accessed online at http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/eZines/vivid_examples_ezine.pdf.

Tone

It is important to set a reasoned tone in communications. A rhetorical tone can be emotionally provoking and can polarize an issue. For example, a statement like, "Farmers don't care that their manure is washing into Wisconsin streams and polluting the water," is a sweeping statement that demonizes farmers, assumes they do not care, and implies that they are all the same. A more reasoned statement might be: "We can work with farmers to find effective ways to keep our waters clean. We're all partners in protecting our lakes and rivers." A reasoned and balanced tone engages people's thinking process, not just their emotions.

Photo by Carolyn Betz

Set an inclusive tone by using authentically inclusive language such as "we" and "our" (when appropriate). Be strategic when using the language of experts; sometimes an expert provides the right tone, whereas sometimes a "peer-to-peer" approach is more appealing.

When communicating data and facts, there can be a tendency to hedge and qualify (e.g. "we think that" or "it appears likely that"). Be cautious about using information that requires a lot of qualifications and explanations unless you are in an exploratory process. When you are trying to communicate a conclusion or a key point, use a confident tone that is assertive and backed-up with clear and relevant data.

Finally, use a tone and information that communicates efficacy and pragmatism. People want to know: Is there a solution to the problem? Is it practical, achievable, and affordable? Will it work? How will we know that it does work? What are the benchmarks and measures? Who is accountable for making the solution work? The more clarity that is provided to address these questions, the more effective the communication.

Metaphors

Metaphors shape our patterns of reasoning and help people file a new concept within a familiar set of concepts. Metaphors can help people understand ecological concepts or how an issue works, and can further connect people to systems-thinking. Metaphors are often highly quotable and can strengthen a story. For example, wetlands are important because they act like natural *filters* to clean our water and are also *nurseries* where fish, birds, and other wildlife breed and raise their young.

Symbols

As with metaphors, symbols can connect people into broader, conceptual thinking in a flash. Use of symbols can be iconic, such as a large sturgeon or a beautiful photo of a serene Wisconsin lake, or representative, like a glass of clean, clear water. The use of a powerful symbol can go a long way in communicating about an issue.

Messages

Messages are a primary communication tool that will be covered more in depth in the next section. A message conveys values and concerns, describes a problem statement that includes the challenges within an issue, and identifies who or what is responsible. It then bridges to solutions and inclusive actions. For the message to effectively reach target audiences, communicators use messengers, images, and stories that reinforce the message.

Messengers

Messengers can be as important as the message itself because the person (or people) who delivers your message influence how it will be received. The source you use should depend on the target audience you are trying to reach with a specific message. Good messengers should reinforce the message, and have expertise with the subject and the trust of the audience. For example, a farmer who is already using good practices to manage manure and runoff may be the most trusted source of information on water quality for other farmers. A DNR warden with formal legal authority may help communicate the need to comply with laws to protect Wisconsin's waters, such as requiring boaters to clean any weeds or other potential invasive species off their boats and trailers.

The familiarity or likeability of the messenger is also important. For many, it is preferable to choose an individual or group who is similar to your target audience, such as neighbors, friends, or local community leaders. Some citizens are more likely to respond favorably to requests from peers than to requests from government workers or other perceived authorities.

When choosing messengers, be aware that the audience may view that messenger as having a bias towards water-related issues. This will vary depending on your target audience. For example, a stereotypical environmentalist from outside the community (the

Photo by Wisconsin Sea Grant

audience) may elicit distrust or lack of credibility. For others, sources with any commercial interests related to water (e.g., agriculture or tourism) might be perceived as looking out for their financial gain or protection over other values. On the other hand, unlikely allies such as business leaders working with environmentalists can prompt reconsideration of issues and frame solutions as a cooperative endeavor.

Images

A picture is worth a thousand words, so select images that make an impact. Images should reflect the message, which will include a positive appeal to values and a description of the problem. Therefore, consider using a mix of positive images of water (a clean, sparkling lake) and disturbing images of the problem (floating algal mats, "beach closed" signs, or dried-up

stream beds). Before and after images of an area can be particularly compelling. Show faces and avoid distance shots, butts, backs, etc. Keep people in the picture and show their connection to the solution. Use photos of people engaging in the behaviors you want them to adopt. Make models as similar as possible to your target community; people must be able to relate to the person who models the behavior.

Numbers and Facts

While you must support your messages and images with facts, use numbers sparingly to prevent overwhelming people. Relying heavily on facts and quantitative data could make the problem seem scary or too big to fix, causing your audience to tune out altogether. When you do use numbers, always interpret their importance first–explain why these numbers are significant, and convey not just the size of the problem but the cost of not doing anything to solve it.

Facts should be specific, not general, in order to have the most credibility. For example, it is better to provide the number of gallons of water that will be lost due to a certain action by government or industry, rather than simply to say "huge amounts of water." Simplify statistics; say "3 out of 4" instead of "75%." Package the facts so the audience can easily grasp them, as in the analogy "27 Olympic-size swimming pools." Use facts that relate to people's daily lives or experience, such as "the water we drink every day."

Storytelling

Storytelling is the most basic mode of human interaction and a fundamental way of acquiring knowledge. Storytelling is universal across cultures and history, and has proven to be a comfortable way to give and receive information.

On the following page, see the example of a water story developed by Midwest Environmental Advocates to illustrate potential impacts of open pit mining on family farmers from their series of video stories: *Citizen Voices Matter: In the Penokee Hills.*[8]

---

[8] http://midwestadvocates.org/citizen-voices-matter/overview/sustainable-economies/in/open-pit-iron-mining

Why farmers are concerned about iron mining in Wisconsin

Steven and Landis Spickerman started Hermit Creek Farm in 1993 with a commitment to being their community's organic family farmers. Before they found their land in northern Wisconsin, they considered moving to northeast Minnesota or to Virginia, but it was the beauty and growing movement to build an economy based on sustainability that made them settle on Wisconsin's Northwoods.

"We chose not to live in a place like Hibbing, MN because of the large, extractive, open-pit mining there," said Steven. "The unemployment rates are about the same, but there wasn't a local economy to support organic farming and choosing local food."

After they reviewed GTAC's proposal for an open-pit iron mine in Wisconsin's Penokee Hills, the Spickermans had deep concerns for the future of their farm and for their customers.

"Our farm relies on clean water and iron mining makes a big impact on the watershed, both from pumping groundwater for drilling and processing, but also the runoff of sulfide pollution in lakes and streams," said Steven. "Maps from the proposal show that the mine would eventually stretch for 25 miles and would be just a few miles from our farm. It would kill our business we've worked to grow for 21 years."

As farmers, growing vegetables is more than a livelihood to the Spickermans. Beyond the field, they believe in the slow, sustainable growth of a local economy where people know where their food comes from or who made their products. Their farm has grown in staff and acreage because they are a part of a community that is choosing to buy clean, local food.

"We've heard from our customers that if an open-pit iron mine goes in, they will leave," said Landis. "We are just as concerned about the inevitable water pollution as we are with losing our customers."

Despite promises of jobs to a region that has traditionally depended on forestry and tourism, the Spickermans see mining as a short-term development.

"Agriculture has been sustaining us for thousands of years," said Landis. "We all need to eat. But once they pull the ore out of the Penokees, it's gone forever."

A classic and effective story contains common elements:

1) A protagonist–someone you can relate to who is trying to achieve something with passion and purpose; and

2) Conflict or challenge–the creative tension that holds your attention over the arc of the story and conveys vulnerability, risk, and unexpected twists that makes the audience wonder what will happen next, and how will it end?

3) Resolution or transformation–where the conflict resolves or changes, or the transformative moment where the character(s) or the world changes in a big way.

Additional Communication Strategies

Research has identified other considerations for shaping strategies that help motivate people to take action or respond to an issue.

Emotions

While facts are important, people's behavior will not change if the issue does not emotionally resonate with them. An emotional response to a message is an internal indicator that something matters, so outreach is likely to be ineffective if it does not produce some level of emotional response and persuade the audience that they should care. It is particularly important to consider the functional significance of positive and negative emotions as it relates strategic communication and behavior change. Generally, positive emotions will motivate the audience towards action and reward-seeking, while negative emotions lead to avoidance–a "stop, look, and listen" response. People are especially likely to rely on their emotions in decision-making under the following conditions:

- When the motivation to process information is low
- When they are distracted or under time pressure
- When other informational sources are ambiguous
- When they lack expertise about the issue

We are also more likely to remember issues that emotionally resonate with us, which is essential given that sustained interest is needed to promote ongoing behaviors.

Fear Appeals

Another approach used in strategic communication is fear appeals. With fear appeals, the intent is to scare the target audience into starting or stopping a behavior to avoid a particular threat (e.g. aquatic invasive species, algal blooms from phosphorous runoff, nitrates in ground water, depleted aquifers).

While fear appeals can be effective, they can also be ineffective and even produce unintended, negative results. Scaring people does not always produce behavior change. It can be hard to scare people, and there is a tendency for people to think bad things are less likely to happen to

them than others. Additionally, people can tune out the message if they are too alarmed and do not feel they have the confidence and resources necessary to reduce the threat. Finally, when a target audience thinks a topic is being exaggerated, they are likely to deny the message or discredit the source. In order for a fear appeal to work, it must convince recipients that they are susceptible to negative outcomes and persuade them that the recommended actions will reduce the threat.

A successful fear appeal requires the following elements:

- *Severity information* about the seriousness of the threat
- *Susceptibility information* about the likelihood that the threatening outcomes will occur
- *Response efficacy* about the effectiveness of the recommended action
- *Self-efficacy information* indicating that the individual is capable of performing the behavior

Social Norms

Social norms emphasize group-held beliefs about how members "should" behave in a certain context (these are called **injunctive social norms**). Particularly when people are not sure what to do, they look to others when deciding how to act. Examples might be: "Your neighbors are protecting your (lakes, rivers, ground water, etc.). Are you?" Or: "Join your neighbors in protecting our (lakes, rivers, ground water, etc.)."

Photo by Wisconsin Sea Grant

Additionally, consider developing programs that highlight positive group-held beliefs about what others actually do in a given context (these are called **descriptive social norms**). Use private and public lands as examples, and shine a spotlight on good stewards in local media, neighborhood association newsletters, public meetings, the Internet, and other venues.

Finally, people can be influenced by perceived social pressure to perform a given behavior from individuals or reference groups with whom approval is desirable (these are called **subjective norms**). To enhance perceptions of subjective norms, pair your message with sources your target audience knows or can relate to, and convey their explicit or implied approval about the behavior.

- Chapter 3 -
MESSAGE TOOLBOX

In This Section…

❖ Building values-based messages

❖ Building blocks: key concepts

❖ Sample messages

❖ Message checklist

❖ Language tips

Messages are a primary communication tool. A message contains the core argument and rationale of a communications campaign or public outreach effort, and it frames the language and tone for overall communications. A good message is the starting point for more detailed communications.

Values-based Messages

Building a values-based message is a good way to capture the strongest aspects of a frame in your communications. This approach begins with identifying the key values for a targeted audience. Optimally, these are identified through public opinion research methods such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews. However, even without specific research, messages that carefully invoke widely-held cultural values could still be effective—that is: crafting a short message to speak to a particular audience, taking into consideration its common values, concerns, knowledge, and attitudes related to the particular topic.

American Cultural Values

Public opinion research[a] has identified overarching American values. These values can be ascribed to Wisconsinites as well.

Primary Values

• Responsibility to care for one's family

• Responsibility to care for future generations

• Responsibility to care for oneself

• Personal liberty

• Work

• Spirituality

• Honesty/integrity

• Fairness/equality

• Security/safety

Secondary Values

• Responsibility to care for others

• Personal fulfillment

• Respect for authority

• Love of country or culture

• Freedom of choice

[a]Belden, Russonello, & Stewart. (2002). Americans *and Biodiversity: New Perspectives in 2002.* Madison, WI: Biodiversity Project.

Bottom line: **A well-designed message invokes or implies values or big themes, identifies concerns and offers solutions, and includes a way for the intended audience to respond to the concern.**

Water Values

From the list of widely held American values, those typically linked to water are:

- Responsibility to care for the Earth and future generations
- Responsibility to one's family
- Responsibility to oneself
- Respect for God's creation (spiritual/sacred values of nature)
- Personal fulfillment: enjoyment and aesthetics
- Love of country or culture
- Personal liberty and fairness

Anatomy of a Message

Strengthen your message by ensuring that your message speaks to the way people sort through problems. Does it appeal to their emotions? Does it provide them with information? Does it offer a solution? Does it give them something to do so they can respond to the threat? Is it specific about what actions to take?

This anatomy of a message is from the Biodiversity Project's Great Lakes Forever campaign:

The ad illustrates the **value** of "responsibility to care for one's family." The **concern** is loss of recreation. The **problem statement** reveals that everyone may be indirectly responsible for beach closures because of overloaded sewage plants and polluted runoff from homes, yards, and farms.

Specific household actions and solutions are suggested: use less water during storm events or clean your septic systems each year, avoid using excess fertilizers on lawns, and bury or flush pet waste. This message implies both the problem and solutions are inclusive; we are all responsible for both the cause of the beach closing and can be part of the solution.

Additional Helpful Concepts[9]

Link messages to specific values around water:
- Clean water is a right, not a privilege (this aligns with the value of personal freedom).
- Link benefits of taking action now to "future generations."
- We are all responsible and accountable for what happens to our water.
- When possible, offer a variety of choices for solutions and actions that lead to same endpoint—people like having choices.

Link messages to how people perceive water issues:
- Clean water has no boundaries—people understand that water issues are interconnected.
- Emphasize notions of "water protection" and "preserving water quality"—people do not necessarily see the problems now but they recognize need to protect water for the future.
- Link benefits of taking action now to "future generations."
- Water conservation and protection is both near-term and long-term.
- Solutions exist both for a short-term boost and for a long, steady climb to water quality. The results will take time but they are cumulative.
- Help people make the connection between land and water—Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic is not separate from water ethics.

Link messages to efficacy, hope, and likely outcomes for success:
- Emphasis that we know what needs to be done in terms of specific actions.
- To address immediacy concerns, encourage people that we can start right away.
- Offer meaningful actions that individuals can take that contribute to the solutions.

---

[9] Tips are derived from Water Words that Work, http://www.waterwordsthatwork.com and Jane Elder Strategies, 2011.

- Help people understand that solutions are often at the community and policy level, and that, while individual actions are important, we need collective approaches to safeguard shared resources.

Building Blocks for Messages

2002 Waters of Wisconsin Statement

In 2002, the first Waters of Wisconsin initiative developed a statement of principles that can provide some powerful language and concepts about water values in Wisconsin (below). As you read, consider that it was written for an audience of leaders and experts, and keep an eye out for any terms that might not communicate to wider audiences if you adapt it for your use. For example, "ecosystem functions" is a well-understood ecological concept, but may not mean anything to someone outside the field.[10]

Key Concepts from the 2003 WOW Report

- Wisconsin's waters are of **value** for the biological diversity and ecosystem functions they support; for the spiritual, aesthetic, cultural, health, and economic benefits they provide; and for the essential human goods and services they provide.
- Wisconsin's waters do not belong to any one generation. The relationship between Wisconsin's waters and its people extends to both **past and future generations**.
- Wisconsin's Land Ethic embraces all its waters. Our citizens recognize a **personal obligation** to safeguard our waters and to use them with care and respect.
- All Wisconsin citizens have **rights and responsibilities** in relation to water. Fair and equitable **access to water** of sufficient quality and quantity, for basic uses and enjoyment, by the people of Wisconsin shall be assured.
- With this assurance comes a **responsibility to avoid water uses that cause excessive, unreasonable, or irreparable harm** to other people, to future generations, and to other forms of life dependent on Wisconsin's waters.
- The wellbeing of Wisconsin's waters requires the **active involvement, participation, and leadership of citizens in decision making** at the local community and watershed level.
- Decisions involving Wisconsin's waters respect the values and traditions of the state's **diverse cultural groups**, while recognizing the common interest in healthy waters.

---

[10] From the report *Waters of Wisconsin, the future of our aquatic ecosystems and resources* (Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts & Letters, 2003)

Sample Messages

2014 Sample Message Template

The 2014 Waters of Wisconsin communications working group developed the following template to be adapted for specific issues and specific audiences. Various alternate phrases are included, and for specific audiences, you will probably want to consider other alternative language and terms.

Initial Framework: Big Theme and Concerns	Clean and abundant water [alternate, Protecting our water] is essential to our identity as Wisconsin [alternate, our Wisconsin way of life]. It supports our economy, recreation, and how we live our lives.
Problem/Concern Statement	However, our beautiful waters of Wisconsin cannot be taken for granted. Today [right now] our clean drinking water, and healthy lakes and streams face many threats, and these are happening at a pace and scale that may forever change what we value most about our irreplaceable waters. [Expand problem statement with specific examples of loss/threat, such: • Contaminated wells • Contamination of drinking water • Closed beaches • Contaminated fish • Landscapes and habitats destroyed or lost • Loss of ability to enforce clean water laws]
Bridge to Hope and Solutions	Safeguarding Wisconsin's waters is essential to Wisconsin's future. We can choose to change course and take actions that will keep Wisconsin waters clean, safe, and abundant for our families, our communities, and future generations. [Provide examples of where people have pulled together and have successfully moved forward that show we can do this]
Inclusive Action	Together we can….[fill in actions here] Actions should: • Have relevance for those involved and include a meaningful role for them. • Be practical and effective; the actions address the concerns that are raised • Be guided by principles that affirm our Wisconsin values

Message Samples

Here are a few examples of the principles we've talked about in use.

1. Clean Wisconsin: Our Great Lakes are invaluable, but vulnerable[11]

In the example below from Clean Wisconsin's website, look for the way cultural and economic value as well as "national treasure" and "future generations" help frame the big ideas and themes around why we care about the Great Lakes. Note the bridge to why we should be concerned: vulnerability to pollution, algae and invasive species. They also affirm that there are solutions through "work on several fronts to protect and restore the Lakes." They also offer ways to learn more and take action, such as the learning more about how to address phosphorus pollution in their adaptive management guidebook, which is just a click away.

Our Great Lakes are invaluable, but vulnerable

Words and numbers cannot express the cultural and economic value of the Great Lakes to Wisconsin and the region. Unfortunately, these magnificent natural resources are vulnerable and face serious threats. Pollution running off farm fields and city streets, sewage overflows, algae blooms and invasive species are only a few of the many threats facing our lakes.

The Great Lakes are essential to our economy and our culture in Wisconsin. Addressing the growing threats to these Lakes is necessary to protect a national treasure and our way of life. Clean Wisconsin works hard to protect our Great Lakes.

A Guide to the Adaptive Management Option for Phosphorus in Wisconsin

Clean Wisconsin
2013

Restoring and protecting the Great Lakes
Toxic pollution, sewage overflows, algae blooms and invasive species leave the Great Lakes vulnerable. Clean Wisconsin works on several fronts to protect and restore the Lakes to ensure they remain as magnificent for future generations as

One innovative new strategy for addressing polluted runoff in the Great Lakes region is Wisconsin's adaptive management option. For detailed information about this strategy, read our adaptive management option guidebook here.

---

[11] http://www.cleanwisconsin.org/greatlakes

2. Nature Conservancy: Working with Agriculture to Clean Up Wisconsin's Waters

This message, from the Nature Conservancy's website, is a good example of illustrating how they are part of a group of organizations—a team effort—working with agriculture to clean up Wisconsin's Waters. Their headline shows they are effective and making progress. They show a group of people (with faces) in a real Wisconsin farm field. They also manage to get in a plug for the value of science in solving problems, and imply that both partnerships and science are part of the solution to cleaning up water.

Water: On Target to Clean Up Wisconsin Waters

We've been working with farmers and other partners in the Pecatonica River watershed to test a new approach to cleaning up Wisconsin's waters, and we're getting some great results.

The Nature Conservancy is working with a coalition of farmers, University of Wisconsin scientists and county, state and federal agencies in the Pecatonica River watershed to blend sustainable agriculture with improved water quality in streams.

The partners are showing that you can improve water quality by using science to target conservation efforts on those fields and pastures with the greatest potential for contributing nutrients like phosphorus to streams. The project could help change the way we clean up Wisconsin's waters.

Check List for a Well-Framed Message

❑ Leads with the frame or values   ❑ Messenger resonates with message

❑ Addresses concerns   ❑ Language reinforces message

❑ Supports rationale with facts   ❑ Images reinforce message

❑ Offers a solution and a way to engage ❑ Human stories reinforce message

Language Tips

Language is a powerful tool that can work for or against an issue. To have the greatest impact, bear in mind that it is not just what you say but *how* you say it. Protecting water is consistently a top voter priority so many people already resonate with the basic concepts around water. Despite the larger support, the public becomes lost in jargon. To avoid losing your audience, take care in your word selection, and use specific words that will resonate with a specific target. For example, as noted earlier under framing, use the language of inclusivity in messages, such as "we," "our," "shared," "common," and "public." Keep people in the picture when talking about water issues. Help people to see how they can be included in being part of the solution. Use phrases that imply ownership and evoke shared responsibility, e.g., "We need to protect our lakes." People need to see their role in the solutions.

Words

 Here are some basic word choice tips for avoiding jargon[12]:

Bad Words to Avoid	Good Words to Use
Environment	Land, air, and water
Ecosystems	Natural areas
Biodiversity/endangered species	Fish and wildlife
Regulations	Safeguards/protections
Riparian	Land along lakes, rivers, and streams
Aquifer	Groundwater
Watershed	Land around rivers, lakes, and streams
Environmental groups	Conservation groups/organizations protecting land, air, and water
Agricultural land	Working farms and ranches
Urban sprawl	Poorly planned growth/development
Green jobs	Clean energy jobs/jobs protecting water quality/etc.
Ecosystem services	Nature's benefits
Landscape scale conservation	Large, connected natural areas

Water Words That Work is a consulting firm that specializes in communication strategies for groups working on watershed conservation and related topics. Visit the Water Words That Work web site (http://waterwordsthatwork.com/) for access to a range of helpful resources.

---

[12] Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Public Opinion Strategies. (2009). *The Language of Conservation: How to Communicate Effectively to Build Support for Conservation*. The Nature Conservancy.

Here's what the web site says about the language and jargon on water-related words:
Synthesizing years of experience and a pile of social research, here is a list of two-dozen "words that work." These are the words that you should use heavily in your environmental writing, social marketing campaigns, and other outreach efforts. Everyday Americans understand these terms, respond well to them—and most importantly for the purpose of general environmental awareness—feel comfortable using them among their friends and family.

Use These Words to Introduce Your Work:
1. Nature protection
2. Pollution control
3. Enough clean water
4. Wildlife conservation

Use These Words to Explain the Importance:
5. Future generations
6. Healthy
7. Family and children
8. Safe
9. Trends

Use These Words to Encourage Them to Act:
10. Make a difference
11. Doing my/your/their part
12. It affects you
13. What you can do
14. Working together
15. Save money

Use These Words to Ask for Their Agreement:
16. Accountability
17. Corporations
18. Choice
19. Fair
20. Balance
21. Planning ahead
22. Responsible
23. Freedom
24. Investment
25. Law

SOURCES & RESOURCES

Belden, Russonello, & Stewart. (2002). Americans *and Biodiversity: New Perspectives in 2002.* Madison, WI: Biodiversity Project.

FrameWorks Institute. (2002). *Framing Public Issues*. Washington, D.C. Available online: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf

FrameWorks Institute Website http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/

Jane Elder Strategies. (2011). *Yahara Future Communications Guide*. Madison, WI: Dane County Office of Lakes and Watershed.

Fairbank Maslin Maullin Metz and Associates and Public Opinion Strategies. (2009). *The Language of Conservation: How to Communicate Effectively to Build Support for Conservation*. The Nature Conservancy. Available online: http://www.rivernetwork.org/resource-library/language-conservation-how-effectively-build-support-conservation-2009

Water Words that Work. http://www.waterwordsthatwork.com/

WASAL. (2003). *Waters of Wisconsin: The Future of Our Aquatic Ecosystems and Resources.* Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts &Letters.

WATERS OF WISCONSIN INITIATIVE

For more information about the Waters of Wisconsin Initiative, visit the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters website at www.wisconsinacademy.org

The Wisconsin Academy brings people together at the intersection of the sciences, arts, and letters to inspire discovery, illuminate creative work, and foster civil dialogue on important issues. We connect Wisconsin people and ideas for a better world.

Photo by Jane Elder
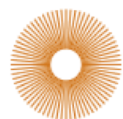
wisconsin academy
of sciences arts & letters
connecting Wisconsin people and ideas for a better world

Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters
1922 University Ave., Madison, WI 53726
608-263-1692
contact@wisconsinacademy.org