

# 15 STEPS

to create effective climate communications



ecoAmerica  
building climate leadership

# Talking About Climate Change

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**It's been challenging.** For most people, climate change is an abstract subject tainted with divisive politics. We hear bits of guidance, such as getting the message and messenger right. To some, this means having scientists explain science. To others, it means having faith leaders talk about climate to the faithful. But there's more to it than that.

**The truth is, we can all speak effectively on climate change.** Americans know that the climate around them is changing. They are overtly or latently concerned. They want information and solutions that instill confidence and are consistent with their values and beliefs. If we truly understand and connect with Americans, we can provide them with answers that build support for solutions that they, in turn, can share with their networks.

**Process is as important as content.** Even if you have all your facts down cold, people won't necessarily listen, understand, remember, and act. You need to understand and relate to them to be heard.

**15 Steps?! Yes.** The guide presents a simple but comprehensive process to create effective climate communications. Drawn from research and real life experience from ecoAmerica and our partners, it works with any audience.<sup>a</sup>

a. Over one dozen research studies have been consulted in creating the 15 steps. ecoAmerica can provide a full list of citations upon request.

## How to Use This Guide

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This guide provides a necessary **process**. It outlines the specific flow for creating and delivering successful climate change communications that resonate with your target audience.

Keep in mind that the order in which you present information matters. Research shows that the same set of facts arranged in different ways produces different results. Follow the steps in order for maximum effectiveness.



If you'd like more information on **content**, please visit [ecoAmerica.org/research](https://ecoAmerica.org/research) and download the *American Climate Values* and *Let's Talk Climate* research reports. They contain effective, tested words, phrases, and narratives for general and thematic messages on faith, health, business, communities, families, and more.

# The 15 Steps

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*The following are the 15 steps to crafting emotionally resonant, personalized, and effective messages on climate change.*

# 1

## **Start with people, stay with people**

If you want your audience to care about climate change, then care about them. Start from their perspective, not yours. Infuse your entire communication with tangible, relevant concerns. Move from people to climate, not the other way around, and keep going back to people.

# 2

## **Connect on common values**

If you really understand your audience's priorities, concerns, and values, you can open their hearts and minds by talking about those values and showing you share and honor them. Common values, such as family, community, choice/freedom, health, and fairness, are powerful motivators and connectors. Affiliation or "tribal" connectors such as being fellow congregants, business leaders, organization members, or professionals are also helpful.

# 3

## **Acknowledge ambivalence**

People approach climate from different perspectives and have different levels of concern. And we all have other priorities. Don't be self-righteous. Respect their perspectives, and allow them their own space. A simple line like "Some of us are more worried about climate change than others" allows people to be comfortable and listen with an open mind.

# 4

## **Make it real**

Many Americans are latently concerned about climate change. We need to move them from concern to action. By focusing on local realities they can see with their own eyes—simple, irrefutable facts about changing seasons, local fauna, or record weather—you can make climate change relevant for them. Assume the realities, don't argue the science. Use a light hand with one or two examples; then pivot quickly to solutions.

# 5

## **Emphasize solutions**

Many people don't yet realize we've developed solar and wind energy systems that cost less than even cheap natural gas. Transportation and energy storage systems are just around the corner. We also have proven policies that reduce carbon pollution while accelerating economic growth. There's a suite of economic, health, nature, and security co-benefits that come along with the energy solutions. Make a powerful case with tangible examples that show real solutions are here and now to inspire your audience.

# 6

## **Inspire and empower**

Americans are repeatedly told that they can't make a difference on climate change, when the exact opposite is true. Every day, almost everything you do, from the way you drive to what you eat and how you talk about climate change, impacts the problem and the people around you. America can lead on climate solutions, and so can your state, town, family, and you!

# 7

## **Focus on personal benefit**

As they burn good money that could be used on vacations, education, healthier food, or a bigger savings account, most Americans actually think action on climate change comes with a cost to their lifestyles and pocketbooks. The opposite is true. You save money by saving energy and are healthier with active transportation and better food. Always emphasize the personal benefits of climate solutions—your audience will take note.

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## 8 End with your “ask”

Always empower your audience. Encourage them to turn the information and understanding into action. Give them examples, ideas, and steps they can take to make a difference. Remind and show them how behavior change is easier and cheaper than they think.

## 9 Sequence matters

Research reveals that you can take the same set of six facts, arrange them in different ways, and end up with very different results. Connect on common values, acknowledge ambivalence, then move from impacts to solutions, and focus on personal benefits. If you start negative and impersonal, it's very hard to get back to the positive, personal, and relevant. Follow the first 8 steps in order.

## 10 Describe, don't label

Use their language, not yours. Jargon and labels confuse people. Avoid terms like “mitigation” or “adaptation.” Statements like “We need to slow and stop the pollution that is changing our climate and prepare for those changes we can't prevent.” are clearer. Rather than “alternative energy,” say we need clean, inexpensive energy from the wind and sun. The most persuasive language is vivid, familiar, and descriptive.

## 11 Have at least 1 powerful fact from a trusted messenger

One or two obvious facts with relevant and emotional power add significant weight to a message. Highly trusted messengers or organizations lend credibility and importance. Use at least one memorable and relevant example, fact, or quote from someone your audience trusts,<sup>b</sup> such as Pope Francis, the American Public Health Association, Apple, or a respected local leader.

## 12 Ditch doom and gloom

We've all heard advocates try to provoke climate action by portraying it in dire or fatalistic terms. That's true, and you can acknowledge it, but emphasizing these aspects promotes fatalism and emotional numbing, causing people to turn away and disengage. Solutions, benefits, and personal empowerment are the message you want them to leave with.

## 13 Use stories to strengthen engagement

Stories help make your message relevant and vivid. They connect with audiences, allowing you to build bonds, enhance empathy, and open people to new perspectives. Deepen your message by weaving in your personal story—how you became concerned about climate change, for instance, or an account of how you've seen climate solutions benefit someone or some community that your audience relates to.

## 14 Stay above the fray

Focus on the big picture, on what's important. Don't get caught in a trap of arguing or preaching about details or sidetracked by an individual in the audience who tries to poke holes in your thesis. Avoid demonizing opponents, blaming, and arguing. Distractions actually distract, cause you to lose your audience, and make you ineffective.

## 15 Message discipline is critical

Stay on your talking points. Repeat key points. Don't explain the same thing in different ways—this can be more confusing than enabling. Follow the steps outlined in this guide. Be consistent across all messaging platforms and coalitions, but be sure to tailor to your audience.

b. To find more information on who Americans trust see ecoAmerica's *American Climate Values 2014: Psychographic and Demographic* report. Additionally, Pew and Gallup both conduct research on the institutions and leaders Americans trust.

# Putting Method Into Practice

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A Hypothetical Example Using the 15 Steps: *Jackie Harris' speech to the city council of Bridgeport, N.C.*

**Step 1: Start with people, stay with people**

Jackie begins with a warm thank you and by emotionally connecting with her audience with a personal acknowledgement. She connects back to them multiple times throughout her speech.

Good afternoon! Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. As some of you know, my husband and I own Gabby's Crab Shack on Water Street. A few of you are regulars! We love seeing familiar faces around our tables!

**Step 13: Use stories to strengthen engagement**

From talking about her grandmother, to the storm, to Gabby's Crab Shack, Jackie weaves story telling throughout her speech. This helps her build bonds and empathy with her audience.

Gabby was my grandmother, born here in Bridgeport. Growing up, my brothers and I spent summers surfing at Seabright Beach and camping on Cook's Island. Gabby taught me to make her famous crab cakes from blue crabs caught here in the Bonneau River. Like me, many of you have long ties to the area. Whether you've been here for generations, or are here to start a new one, we can all agree that Bridgeport is a special place to call home.

**Step 2: Connect on common values**

Jackie builds rapport by connecting with her audience's shared love of Bridgeport and their shared experience with the storm.

Things are changing here in Bridgeport, and we need to pause and take notice. Remember last October, when it seemed like it would never stop raining, and high tides flooded downtown? Events like this have become more frequent, and affect our community. Nearly every year since 2000, some part of coastal North Carolina has been declared a disaster area from storms and floods.

**Step 3: Acknowledge ambivalence**

Here, Jackie carefully introduces climate change, respects the potential spectrum of audience attitudes, and allows people in the room to hold differing beliefs.

Not everyone here agrees on whether or how much climate change is to blame. But our livelihoods depend heavily on local tourism, as does my family business, and both depend on traditional temperatures and weather patterns. And we all recognize that it's in our best interests to ensure Bridgeport is prepared for warmer weather, intense storms, and rising sea levels.

**Step 4: Make it real**

By talking about the climate in a matter-of-fact manner, and describing real-lived experiences in her preceding paragraph, Jackie leaves no room for debate. She uses storytelling to strengthen engagement.

I'll tell you what brought this issue home for me. A few years ago, the Coastal Resources Commission concluded that sea levels around here will rise 39 inches by the end of the century. Not only will our local crabs be gone, Gabby's Crab Shack will have to go with it.

The good news is, we still have time to do something about it. There are solutions available right now that can reduce the pollution that's damaging our climate, and protect our livelihoods, historic buildings, and the health of our families and future generations.

So, I'm here today to ask you, members of the city council, to make climate solutions part of our city's future. I know you are upgrading our stormwater system to manage storm flows. That's a great start. But we can do more. We can generate our own, locally-made energy that cuts pollution and creates jobs with wind and solar power.

The Charlotte Business Journal reports that North Carolina ranks second in the nation for new clean energy jobs. We could be adding those jobs here in Bridgeport. Please consider this proposal, outlining how Bridgeport can transition to clean energy within five years.

It is within your power to help protect our families from climate impacts and strengthen our community. Please help keep Bridgeport the place we all love to call home.

Thank you.

#### Step 5: Emphasize solutions

Jackie moves quickly from impacts to solutions, emphasizing that solutions are accessible now.

#### Step 6: Inspire and empower

After touching on impacts and emphasizing solutions, Jackie motivates her audience by weaving in a can-do attitude.

#### Step 7: Focus on personal benefit

Jackie ensures she maintains audience focus by showing how solutions benefit them personally, tapping into their personal and shared values of prosperity, community pride, and family.

#### Step 8: End with your ask

After building her case, and strong rapport, Jackie ends with a clear and compelling "ask" to make climate solutions part of the city's future. She presents a proposal to make it actionable.

#### Step 9: Sequence matters

Jackie has done a great job following the sequence. She has connected with her audience, created shared values and reality, allowed space for differing views, made a compelling case for solutions, and made a clear and actionable ask.

#### Step 10: Describe, don't label

Notice that Jackie doesn't call it "renewable" or "alternative" energy. She calls it clean, local, wind and solar energy, which is clear, positive, and without abstraction.

#### Step 11: Have at least 1 powerful fact from a trusted messenger

Jackie doesn't weigh down her speech with too many numbers (which causes people to tune out). Instead, she inspires them with a powerful fact from the trusted local newspaper.

#### Step 12: Ditch doom and gloom

See any doom and gloom in this speech? Jackie took care to recall and discuss past and future climate impacts, but refrained from fatalistic doomsday scenarios.

#### Step 14: Stay above the fray

Does Jackie sound argumentative? Does she go into too much detail? Does she demonize or blame anyone for the plight of Bridgeport? No! Jackie stays above the fray.

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