Communication Guide

Created by CTC

Communication Basics

Where you see a problem, issue, or room for improvement, others may also acknowledge and have feelings about it, or may be wholly ignorant of the issue. Whatever the case may be, communication is vital not solely to raise awareness, but to gain support, educate, and build community around the issue. Your neighbors, elected officials, and fellow community members all have unique personal investments in the local environment. Communicating your passion, mission, and dedication to changemaking for a better environment isn't always the easiest task, but one essential for an effective changemaker.

Content

The information you aim to share is your content. You have to first develop some kind of content, whether it's words, pictures, video, or a combination of any of them, to start communicating with others. Knowing your content, being able to speak knowledgeably, or having talking points about your subject are all examples of how knowing the message itself is the first step in communicating it to others. While the content itself is your message, making the purpose of it clear, targeting the right audiences, and your tone as you communicate play a big part in how your content comes to life.

You can develop your content in a number of ways. When working on local issues, you can use data collected by yourself or reporting agencies to make charts and share information. Pictures often show the progression of harm, or the positive effects of cleaning up an area in a way that appeals to visual learners. Similarly, videos before

and after extreme weather events or other environmental changes may be used in tandem with pictures to show change over time in a compelling way. Building credibility is essential when attempting to educate others. Resources such as scientific journals, peer reviewed studies, or other academic sources bolster your message by lending academic credentials to your evidence and reasoning. The process of writing an argument, article, or campaign can start with something as simple as your own observations on the environment.

However you choose to develop your content, work with what first inspires you and go from there. What you initially produce does not, and likely will not, be your final draft. Sometimes the hardest part of making content is starting, so brainstorming with others, searching for research articles on your environmental topic, and reading the news are good places to look for inspiration.

Purpose

Deciding on the purpose of your content will help in deciding what type of media to create. No one that's listening, viewing, or engaging with your communications should have to guess why you created it. When communication is unclear, it is not effective, plain and simple. A good rule of thumb is to always know what your goals are for any type of communication; are you educating, persuading, or evaluating information? All of these purposes can shift how your content is created and delivered.

The purpose of your content is not necessarily the same as that of your changemaking--the two are not always aligned and do not have to be in order to be effective. For example, while you may be campaigning for environmental justice, you can write articles that work to simply educate the reader. This does not mean you aren't working for environmental justice, but raising awareness and education can also raise necessary outside support that allows you to further your efforts. Likewise, you can start a social media campaign about the state of coral reefs as part of your changemaking, but your purpose may not be educational, it could be to persuade people to take action that would in some way aid ocean life or your organization. Purpose in communications can and should change as what you need on your changemaking journey evolves.

Audience

The audience for your content is often determined by the medium in which it is delivered. With that in mind, you must meet your audience at their level--if everyone was an expert on your topic, there would be little need for you to spread the word! Keep your audience in mind as you work to create your content, define your purpose, and work on your tone.

It is crucial to keep the audience in mind as you start refining your content. While the same basic research and ideas may be applicable to many platforms, if you're delivering your content in a speech, you'll have to tailor it to your audience. Talking to people in your community about local issues means that they are often familiar with the people, geography, and companies in the area, meaning you won't have to explain them in great detail. Speaking with stakeholders outside of your community, government officials or other interested people further afield, means that they would need more information, maps, pictures, or more detailed descriptions of your community to best understand your message.

Humor is often a great tool to help ease tension and create camaraderie, but can be misunderstood or seen as unprofessional given certain topics. With your audience in mind, you may be able to craft a few jokes that help them understand your topic, but if you're unsure, it might be best to leave out any attempts at humor. Sincerity instead of humor can be a better approach when trying to connect with an audience that you don't know well.

Tone

One of the most misunderstood parts of writing is tone. Tone is the author's attitude about the subject, or how the author feels when creating the content. It's important to keep tone in mind when planning communication because your tone influences how the audience receives the message. While your overall emotions about a project, situation, or challenge to your changemaking might not change, your tone can shift. Sometimes our joy or frustration can color our words, and that tone is conveyed to your audience.

Your tone comes out when you're developing your content, so you must be aware of how you feel while working. Not recognizing the tone in your own work means that you lose out on a chance to connect with your audience on another level. Readers can

grasp the tone of the author from their level of knowledge or research, repeated phrases or themes, or the flow of the writing. Passionate writing can burst off the page, but awkward retellings can feel like the author was confused or disinterested. Being aware of your own tone while communicating allows you to develop a unique voice for yourself or your changemaking organization.

[Khan Academy Video on Tone](#)

Voice

This is the "uniquely you" part of any communication. It is how you, the organization you represent, or the cause you champion consistently sound throughout your messaging. The voice you develop as you communicate your points may evolve and be refined, but it should ultimately stay true to you. Voice differs from tone because it is not about how you feel, but rather the voice you use to "speak" to your audience. Voice includes both the rhetorical language and visual rhetoric that are tied to your brand and image, and are consistently repeated to reinforce your point. You can also think of voice as a style, your style of writing, but don't let the idea of your own style keep you from evolving and refining your voice as you better learn to communicate.

While your tone, audience, purpose, and content may change with each piece of communication, your voice should remain consistent.

Voice can include things like using terms that people are familiar with like, greenhouse gasses or eco-friendly, or you can use terms more specific for your issue. The voice that you decide on as you make messaging should strive for clarity, even if the focus of your changemaking is a complex topic. Any unfamiliar ideas or words that aren't widely known should be defined for people, and that definition should be repeated in your own voice, making them accessible for different audiences. Photos and videos can also have a unique voice, style, or look to them that marks them as your own, but this too should be consistent and strive for clarity when delivering your message.

Writing and Editing

Think of writing as a chance to generate content, ideas, and messages without the need to edit them as you go. Editing is a separate step that comes later, and may include rewriting, but the first step is always creation. The best way to get better at writing is to

simply do it and then to keep doing it. Creating written content should keep in mind the purpose, audience, tone, and voice, but not if it hampers creation. All of these can be worked on in the editing step, so long as you have a starting draft with which to work.

When writing, keep an open mind, write down ideas and text even if you don't feel you'll ultimately use it, and aim to first fulfill your purpose as you write. Once you've created your content, you can edit or make a new draft to address audience, tone, and voice.

Editing is a difficult step in writing, not because it's inherently difficult, but because it requires critical analysis of work. Remember that when you or someone else is editing your document or content, they are working to make it the best it can possibly be, and that edits aren't a personal attack. Thinking of editing as a collaboration instead of someone correcting or cutting up your work is a good way to reframe the process, and gives you professional distance to be more objective. As a changemaker, you may encounter people that will pick apart your work down to the wording. It's better to collaborate with editors other than yourself to ensure that your messaging and communication is where it needs to be so that the work can't be misunderstood.

Keep in mind that editing isn't simply about whether or not you've spelled everything correctly. It could be as simple as asking if your jokes land correctly so that your playful voice comes through on a post, or if the formal tone of your words supports or distracts from your overall message.

There are different standards for writing, depending on the venue. Social media will need hashtags to boost visibility, while articles for newspapers should adhere to Associated Press writing conventions, and magazine articles can have their own style

as well. Make sure that after you make a first pass of edits that your work is formatted correctly for the medium where it will be displayed.

Writing and Editing Resources

A great general resource with information about most of these styles and more is the Purdue OWL (Online Writing Lab). Here are a few more resources and a chart of when you might use them.

Associated Press (AP) Style AP Stylebook	Best format for newspaper articles, op-eds, press releases, and contacting news media.
American Psychological Association (APA) Style	Best for APA journal articles, writing papers, and blog posts that use psychological information or reports. Also includes a guide for bias-free language.
Bluebook Style	Best for articles about the law or legal issues, especially when citing cases, no matter where the information is published.
Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)	Industry standard for writing fiction novels but also good for blogs, articles, anthropological writing and histories (use the notes and bibliography form).
GLAAD Media Reference Guide	Inclusion and bias-free language and terms from the LGBTQIA+ community.
Modern Language Association (MLA) Style	Great general formatting style, best for English papers, or writing articles where the style is not determined by the content.
Merriam-Webster Dictionary	Online or in print, the M-W Collegiate dictionary is the standard for American editors.

Writing for Social Media

Social Media is a great form of communicating a message through short form text and/or pictures and graphics. As a tool of connection, it has the capacity to put you in touch with changemakers across the globe, and hear their ideas while sharing your own. Crafting an effective message on social media still utilizes the same good writing and editing skills from above, but the goal now is to be concise, impactful, and memorable.

[TED Talk on Social Media Eco-Changemaking by Zahra Biabani](#)

Remember the medium of the platform as you make your social media posts, and that every platform is in a constant state of change. Don't become too dependent on one platform or feature for spreading your message, and it's always a good idea to make drafts and backups of your posts, pictures, stories, or other shared media in case you lose access to any accounts.

From our toolkit: *A reminder about using social media to spread your message: Social media should be used to support work outside of social media so that it isn't just performative. This can be work that is done individually or as a group, offline or not. It can be used to uplift other creators who you support with similar audiences through tagging, replying, and sharing their posts.*

Social media is a way to spread the message about work you're already doing, not the sole place for any work to take place. Keeping that in mind, remember from the external communication section that a consistent voice, whether its visual or written, gets across your message best.

CTC's How to be an Environmental Changemaker Toolkit

Change the Chamber has developed its own toolkit that's free to download on our website. It addresses many communications related topics and aspects of being a changemaker not covered here, such as how to use narrative and storytelling to get across your message, and how to interview and be interviewed. [Download the CTC How to be an Environmental Changemaker toolkit here.](#)

Press Releases

Media changes over time, and so does the news media. What was once standard for press releases for a long time has evolved to include more information, direct quotes, and other pertinent component pieces that can be easily grabbed for social media. Communicating with media outlets still follows the procedure of the press release, but how to write a press release has also changed over time.

Understanding the changing nature of media and how to package your information so that it appeals to news media and other outlets is crucial. When an outside newspaper, station, or magazine receives information about your actions, they should be able to take your press release and amplify it easily, without the need for clarification or proofreading through any typos.

[How to write a press release](#)

We hope that the content in this guide is helpful in your work communicating with different audiences. If you have something that you would like to add to this guide, please include it in your evaluation form at the end of the module. This training and other resources only gets better with more feedback.