

## Worksheet: Message development

When it comes to developing strategic messages, if we don't know what to say, that is probably because we're not sure what we want to accomplish. That is why the message is never first. In other words, you always have to let your [overall strategy](#) guide your message and not the other way around. Once you know what action you want people to take to solve the problem you are concerned about, you can use this guide to develop your message. Our formula for a successful message is simple: 1) Name the problem 2) Talk about why it matters 3) Tell people what should be done and who should do it. Although these components do not have to be in this order, every successful message should contain them. Once you have answered these questions, you will have the core of your message, which then can be expanded or distilled, depending on the format you'll use to deliver it, whether in a 600-word op-ed or a 280-character a tweet.

Here's a guide on what to include in each component:

### 1. Name the problem

You need to clearly state your concern, which should align with your overall strategy. This statement should explain what the problem is and how we see it affecting people — but keep it short. Too often, advocates try to tell journalists everything they know about the issue because they feel this may be their only opportunity to convey the enormity and importance of the problem. Resist that urge. It is impossible to be comprehensive and strategic at the same time. Instead, focus on the aspect of the problem that your proposed solution will address.

### 2. Say why it matters

Use shared values, such as ingenuity, interconnectedness, or pride of place to describe why you care. Berkeley Media Studies Group's research shows that advocates don't do this enough. In news coverage, the value component is often absent; policies are named but not justified at a values level.



*Make every Who holler! Make every Who shout!*

> Dr. Seuss

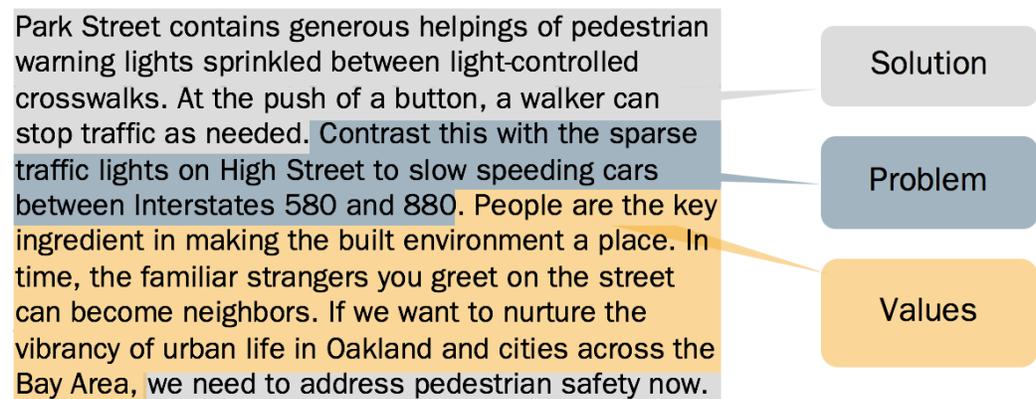
Advocates may state a fact or show data — X number of people are homeless, X number of people are hungry — but this is an expression of the problem, not why it matters and what it means to our society at large. Values statements should indicate why you and your target should care about the matter at hand. Name the value, calling on your target’s sense of fairness or duty. Remind them of our obligation to the greater good.

### 3. Emphasize the solution

Drawing from your overall strategy, keep your focus on the solution, or the change you want to see, and name the person, group, or entity that needs to implement this change. A common message pitfall is that advocates expend so much energy communicating about the problem that when the inevitable question about the solution is asked, they are ill-prepared to answer it. They give vague responses like, “Well, it is a very complex problem with many facets, so the solution is complicated,” or “The community needs to come together.” Certainly, these responses are truthful, but they are not strategic; they don’t show what action you want policymakers to take. It’s more effective to answer with a specific, feasible solution, which will usually be an incremental step toward the larger goal or vision. Spending time speaking about your solution and how it will work can invigorate your audience and remind them that all problems are not intractable, and that something can be done to solve or address the problem.

Here are some examples of how these components come together:

#### Street safety<sup>1</sup>



### Sexual violence prevention<sup>2</sup>

I'm here because as a parent, protecting kids and helping them thrive is my priority. I was surprised to learn that sexual abuse and harassment is often committed by other children, acting out things they've seen. But then I was relieved to learn that all the research shows that if caring adults can intervene early when kids start acting out in sexual ways, and get them the help they need, abuse can be prevented.

Values

Problem

That's why today I'm here supporting a proposal to ensure that every counselor and teacher in our state has the training they need to recognize early warning signs of harmful behavior and know what to do next. That will make every child in their care – and every child in our state – safer.

Solution

### Tobacco control<sup>3</sup>

Tobacco companies are targeting consumers in our state with cheap tobacco products. Sometimes this is done through discount coupons and sometimes through financial incentives provided directly to the stores that sell cigarettes. Kids are especially vulnerable to these tactics since they have less money to spend. Restricting coupons and other promotions would go a long way toward solving this problem and when we can do something to improve the health of the community, we have an obligation to do it.

Problem

Solution

Values



**Now, you try it!**

Keeping your policy goal in mind, use the space below to develop a brief message that will convey the problem, solution, and why it matters.

What is the problem?

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Why does it matter?

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What should be done?

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Now, synthesize the answers to the questions above into a cohesive message:

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from “We Must Prioritize Pedestrian Safety in Oakland and Other Bay Area Cities for the Good of Us All,” an op-ed published in the San Francisco Chronicle by Stacy Torres, PhD. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/article/We-must-prioritize-pedestrian-safety-in-Oakland-13600031.php>

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from “Where We’re Going and Where We’ve Been: Making the Case for Preventing Sexual Violence,” Berkeley Media Studies Group. <http://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/sexual-violence-prevention-messaging-guide/>

<sup>3</sup> Excerpted from “What Surrounds Us Shapes Us: Making the Environmental Case for Tobacco Control,” Berkeley Media Studies Group. <http://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/what-surrounds-us-shapes-us-making-the-environmental-case-for-tobacco-control/>