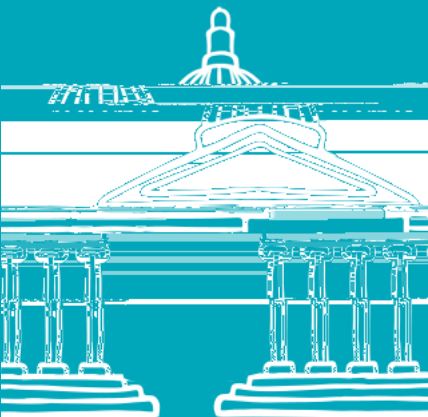


UCL Handbook for Communicating Climate Change



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2. Top Tips

The following are high-level tips that will apply for most audiences when speaking about climate change (and most are good for general science communication).

🔗 Identify your role as a communicator

- What is the specific purpose of this piece of communication?
 - In which capacity are you speaking: as an independent expert on a specific topic, a climate expert more generally, as an advocate, or as a knowledgeable concerned citizen?
- Whatever role a climate scientist undertakes, it is important to convey genuine and authentic communication. Therefore, the best advice is to be yourself.
 - Make it clear, to both yourself and any audience, whether you are speaking in a professional or personal capacity (it may be possible to undertake both within one piece of comms as long as the distinction is highlighted).

🔗 Know your audience

- Tailoring examples to the people sitting in front of you can really help with their engagement. Research in advance the audience you will be speaking to and understand what makes them tick.
 - Professor Katharine Hayhoe, Texas Tech University, gives a great example in her book *Saving Us* about rewriting a presentation at the last minute for a Rotary Club so that the presentation's format now addressed that club's four-way-test values.
- People are not a blank slate. They hold a range of pre-existing values and world views. More facts do not necessarily change mindsets and can often simply reinforce values. Listening is therefore also an important role.

🔗 Use people, places and stories.

- Make it *people* centric. Research has shown that centring on humans is the best way to engage both in the words that you say and in the images you show.
- Distance – whether in space or time – can make climate change feel far away. *Locality* can help to ground information and statistics in people's everyday lives and experiences.
- Stories can help people assimilate and retain information. Where possible use familiar examples and stories from day-to-day life that are relevant to people's lived experiences. These don't have to be about yourself.
- Give examples of people who are *like* your audience, going on a journey of discovery, or taking action.

🔗 Practice, prepare, practice

- There is no better way to prepare than to rehearse. Try doing this with colleagues or others you trust to provide honest feedback.
- Make eye contact and stay calm.
- Expect questions and prepare for them. Questions could cover a whole spectrum of topics, and this can be difficult, but any preparation will help. If speaking to a room, repeat any questions asked so everyone in the room has heard and it gives you time to think.

🔗 Afterwards

- Be approachable and open for further questions.
- Reflect, get feedback and then DO IT AGAIN!

3. What is climate communication?

This section contains a brief introduction as well as some of the literature that may be relevant and example case studies and support from across UCL. This is not in any way an exhaustive list and there are many more studies, examples and resources available. The following should only be considered as starting points. We also provide some useful guides at the end of the handbook that offer greater detail.

What is Climate Comms?

For the purposes of this handbook, climate change communication (or climate comms) refers to any formal interaction about an aspect of the global climate change challenge, often in the form of imparting knowledge on a specific aspect of the science, social science or policy.¹ In the main focus is on communication from an expert to a non-expert. This may be in the form of a presentation to government policymakers, meeting with funders, undertaking a media interview/video/podcast, or many others. The science of climate change communication is a growing area of literature (see Moser, 2016) covering a number of disciplines and can help inform academia in practice.

The mantra of the five 'w' (or four 'w' and an 'h') hold true for most forms of communications, so they are always a useful starting point when embarking on any piece of climate comms.

WHY?

Why are you doing this and what do you hope to achieve? Why would your audience want to be involved? Be clear with your aims and objectives. Why might they be interested in your research?

WHO?

Who do you want to hear from? Who might want to hear from you? Why are they interested? What might be the barriers to engaging with them? Do not be afraid to re-visit your original aims and objectives after meeting the people you want to work with.

WHEN?

When do you engage? The earlier in your research lifecycle gives more opportunities for meaningful engagement, also go beyond the 'one-off' meaningful change and learning comes from long-term relationships with people, rather than short-term interactions.

HOW?

How will you do this? Choose methods that work with the context of your research/teaching and the people you want to work with. What approach works best for your public? Use an appropriate format. Use clear accessible language; make your research simple to understand.

WHAT?

What are the intended outputs (the things/relationships you create), outcomes (the short-term changes) and impacts (long-term changes) of your engagement? How do you evaluate these and how do they evidence your original objectives? Keep comms appropriate for an informed and influential lay audience. Language and tone should be straightforward, approachable – no jargon. Show, don't tell. Use examples, evidence and testimonies to underline your message.

¹ Most of the information would also be applicable to informal climate comms e.g., speaking with friends, family and colleagues. However, we limit the scope here to interactions that take place as a UCL employee or in similar public settings.

5 w's adapted from UCL Engagement.

What is your role?

In communication, the messenger is often equally important as the message itself (Hofman, 2015). On the whole, scientists are credible and trusted by the public in communicating the climate issue. However, there are many roles academics can take in such communication. The UCL Commission on Communicating Climate Science (Rapley et al. 2014) identifies five distinct roles of climate communication, based on Piekle (2007), - the 'Pure Scientist', the 'Science Communicator', the 'Science Arbiter', the 'Issue Advocate', and the 'Honest Broker'. The pros and cons of these roles are discussed in detail in the UCL report which also suggests a greater focus on co-production of scientists with policymakers and others.

There have also been calls for more fundamental adjustments to academia and expansion of the role of institutions and staff to contribute to the public good in order to tackle the climate emergency (Lubchenco and Rapley, 2020; Gardner et al. 2022). Suggestions towards greater academic advocacy and activism include broadening work allocation models, more training, and engaged research sabbaticals.

Emerging research from the [Transforming Universities for a Changing Climate](#) project (based at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society) emphasises the crucial role of higher education in responding to the climate crisis, not only through academic research, but through processes of teaching and learning (McCowan, 2022), the curriculum (McCowan, 2021), and community engagement and commitments to action (Apsan Freidani & Nussey, 2021).

Framing

The framing of climate-related communications can have a significant impact on outcomes. In particular, researchers have investigated whether certain types of messages are better for achieving certain goals e.g., whether fear or hope-based messaging is better for improving environmental behaviour (Reser and Bradley, 2017; Ettinger et al., 2021). A low perception of risk exists around climate, perhaps due to the psychological distance in space and time of the threat. Therefore, on the one hand, some posit generating greater concern to motivate action through increased fear. On the other hand, fear and doom-based frames can have the exact opposite impact. Some literature suggests that understanding the risks climate change poses (knowledge) but having little sense of our ability to act (agency) can result in a variety of negative emotional responses (Aronson, 2008; Witte, 1992).

It is clear that knowledge is not in of itself enough and that the information deficit model does not necessarily hold. Awareness and concern are not necessarily required as a precursor to action (De Meyer et al, 2021). Therefore, framing is important for different audiences depending upon their characteristics and their efficacy. Humour can even be used to elicit learning-related outcomes and positive emotional responses (Chatter and Fresh-Burter, 2019).

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Public engagement

Public Engagement is incredibly powerful, it can lead to new socially-engaged research directions, new perspectives, advocacy, empowerment and new meaningful skills for all involved. Most importantly it can change research, teaching and lives for the better. There is no single right way to do public engagement; each project or activity is as unique as the people involved.

The ‘Public’ in public engagement can be anyone outside of higher education but is generally considered not to include businesses/industry or policy makers. It is also not usually considered to be ‘outreach’ or ‘widening participation’ – these common activities at higher education are generally focused on recruiting or addressing bØPriers

Social media

Angelica Johansson - Case Study

At COP26 in Glasgow Angelica decided to live-tweet the Stocktake Plenary on 12th November 2021 from a loss and damage perspective. In particular, she summarised in short sentences what each country said about loss and damage in real-time. “I just started live tweeting it in very simple summaries for my own benefit.” Angelica said she was inspired to do so by pre-COP UCL training which highlighted trying new approaches to be more communicative, even though she wasn’t that familiar with Twitter as a tool.

The real-time dimension required her to be succinct and highlight only the main points she interpreted. Afterwards her Twitter thread was referenced by the climate news outlet Carbon Brief in their summary of COP26.

On the experience, Angelica said that “taking notes in meetings during her PhD really helped in this instance.” However, the fact that she couldn’t type at the speed necessary to write what was being said verbatim meant that she was forced to adapt and listen for key points - “Keeping up with it was a challenge but also good to help with focus”. She was also helped by the fact that her PhD requires her to interpret quite bureaucratic UN language into something accessible. The information collected in the tweets would form ethnographic data for her PhD so the tweets did serve a double purpose, although she didn’t have to send them out to the ether, she could simply have taken notes, it was her choice to try some social media comms.

Ahead of COP27, Angelica said the experience meant that she recently took to Twitter again undertaking a thread on a new paper she published which received significant online engagement. “I think the most important thing I learned was to just try and do it. It doesn’t need to be perfect. Don’t let that put you off.”

Angelica is a PhD student in Department of Political Science on the topic of climate change loss and damage politics. Part of her PhD requires her to attend international policymaking events such as the UN

Donors

Communicating with potential donors can present a number of subtle differences to more general and informal communications to a broad public audience, particularly when the desired end result is something more tangible than information sharing – collaboration, time, or money.

When communicating with a potential donor, it is important to put the donor first. Understand who they are, what motivates

UK Select Committee Oral Evidence Session

Steve Pye - Case Study

In 2022, Steve was called to give oral evidence as part of an inquiry by the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC). Giving evidence came at the end of a series of comms based around the publication of a research paper in Nature on the fossil fuels that need to be left in the ground to meet 1.5C. The research received a lot of media attention which in turn resulted in the team being approached by a climate NGO to write a UK-focused policy briefing paper on the topic. “We were originally coming at it from a climate perspective” said Steve, “but clearly energy security is also a major part of the issue now”. The team were also encouraged to submit evidence to the EAC inquiry on ‘Accelerating the transition from fossil fuels and securing energy supplies’ and submitted written evidence outlining their research and their findings.

Then they were called to give oral evidence, and answer questions on the role of oil and gas in the energy security strategy and the North Sea transition deal as part of a panel of experts. The committee were interested in the impartial, expert evidence Steve could provide. “They’re trying to understand some of the scientific context, the evidence base” he said, that underpins the ongoing debate around oil and gas under climate targets. It was noticeable that the questioning was much broader than the narrow context of the initial research, and Steve recommends doing a lot of prep work in advance of giving evidence. “Make sure you engage with the kind of broader discussion that’s happening out there that your research sits in” he suggests. But he also recommends, given the broad context, keeping messages simple (but without losing the nuance). “The written evidence is there, so there’s no need to

go into the minutia of the detail within the evidence that you’re giving, so give those straightforward headline messages and numbers” he advises.

The experience of going to Westminster, sitting in front of a panel of MPs and being broadcast on Parliament TV can be quite daunting, Steve said, but he still recommends it. “Just having our voice in there and providing some of the kind of research into that sort of real-world discussion I think is super important.” As for his three top tips: do your preparation in advance, keep your messaging simple and direct, and “relax and enjoy it, it’s not so bad once you’re there.”

Steve is an Associate Professor in Energy Systems at the UCL Energy Institute.

REFERENCES

Apsan Freidani, A.& Nussey, C. (2021). A Protocol for Participatory Action Research into Climate Justice: Principles and Tools. Transforming Universities for a Changing Climate Working Paper Series, No. 3.

Find out more

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