

Adapted from “*Simple Framing: An introduction to framing and its uses in politics*” by George Lakoff

Lakoff writes...

Don't think of an elephant!

It is, of course, a directive that cannot be carried out — and that is the point. In order to purposefully not think of an elephant, you have to think of an elephant. There are four morals.

Moral 1. Every word evokes a frame. A frame is a conceptual structure used in thinking. The word *elephant* evokes a frame with an image of an elephant and certain knowledge: an elephant is a large animal (a mammal) with large floppy ears, a trunk that functions like both a nose and a hand, large stump-like legs, and so on.

Moral 2: Words defined within a frame evoke the frame. The word *trunk*, as in the sentence "Sam picked up the peanut with his trunk," evokes the Elephant frame and suggests that "Sam" is the name of an elephant.

Moral 3: Negating a frame evokes the frame.

Moral 4: Evoking a frame reinforces that frame. Every frame is realized in the brain by neural circuitry. Every time a neural circuit is activated, it is strengthened.

Long-term Reframing

Frame development takes time and work. To change a frame, you have to start reframing now and keep at it. This reframing must express fundamental values. Reframing is **telling the truth as you see it** — telling it forcefully, straightforwardly, articulately, with moral conviction and without hesitation. The language must fit the conceptual reframing — a **reframing from the perspective of your morality**. It is not just a matter of words, though the right words do help evoke a frame. Reframing requires a rewiring of the brain. That may take an investment of time, effort, and money. Moral: The truth alone will not set you free. It has to be framed correctly. If the truth doesn't fit the existing frame, the frame will stay in place and the truth will dissipate.

It takes time and a lot of repetition for frames to become entrenched in the very synapses of people's brains. Moreover, they have to fit together in an overall coherent way for them to make sense.

Effective framing on a single issue must be both right and sensible. That is, it must fit into a system of frames (to be sensible) and must fit one's moral worldview (to be right).

Framing vs. Spin

Every word comes with one or more frames. Most frames are unconscious and have just developed naturally and haphazardly and have come into the public's mind through common use. Other frames have been created. For example, over the past 40 years, conservative Republicans — using the intellectuals in their think tanks — have consciously and strategically crafted an overall conservative worldview, with a conservative framework. They have also invested heavily in language — in two ways:

- Language that fits their worldview, and hence evokes it whenever used. "Tax relief" is a good example. How can you be against tax relief? Even though taxes aren't necessarily bad.
- Deceptive language, that evokes frames they don't really believe but that public approves of. Saying "*Tax relief creates jobs*" is an example — or referring to their environmental positions as being "clean," "healthy" and "safe." This is spin.

We advise against the use of deceptive language (spin) and we will not engage in it. We believe however that honest framing is consistent with progressive values and is the most effective strategy overall. Framing is about claiming the moral high ground. And you can't do this with spin (in the long run).

To begin to regain the moral high ground — in a way that fits what most people believe, we suggest:

1. Pick out the relevant core **values** for an issue. (*Build a Mental Model*)
2. Write down how your position follows from these values. (*Describe logical structures*)
3. Articulate the facts and their consequences within this moral framing. (*Patterns*)
4. Define behavior from this moral frame. (*Tell a story – action*)

Putting Values Front and Center

Start with values. First list the core values that underlie your commitments. *Why do you show up to work or school every day? What makes your difficult work or learning worth all the effort and, too often, frustration? Why do you keep on? Why do the issues that matter to you matter so much?*

Try to keep your answers in the form of general values rather than specific outcomes. For instance

Speak your values, not specific outcomes

~~"I want to make sure every child has access to immunizations."~~

Better: "I believe the vulnerable should be *protected*."

~~"We need harsher penalties for slumlords."~~

Better: "Every family deserves a *safe* and *healthy* place to live."

~~"Everyone should join a CSA."~~

Better: "People deserve access healthy food in their own community."
