

# CLIMATE MESSAGING THAT WORKS

## Talking Energy Transition and Climate Change in Canada

The majority of Canadians are increasingly concerned about climate change and are willing to engage in a conversation about the transition away from fossil fuels. At the same time, the public is still not clear about the major causes of climate change, threats and the path forward. Demand for climate action is high, but support for specific policies is uncertain.<sup>1</sup> The topic is still polarized. Climate change and energy transition can feel distant for many and few believe that the problem can and will be addressed at the pace and scale needed.

For decades, scientists and policy experts believed providing data and evidence would be enough. Social science has made a lot of advances over the past decades and we now understand that people filter information through a lens of their own values, worldviews, identity, peer influences and emotions.

While effective framing and narrative development are important, so too are creating opportunities to listen and talk. Research consistently shows that peers are among the most influential messengers, yet most Canadians aren't talking to their friends, families, coworkers or neighbors about climate change.<sup>2</sup>

The following framework and recommendations are designed to provide communicators with an easy-to-remember tool to address the major obstacles to communicating and engaging Canadians on the urgency of climate change, and the need for an energy transition. The recommendations are based on a series of projects [testing messages](#) on social media platforms, [reviewing public opinion](#) surveys and [researching media narratives](#) in Canada.

# 1. The Message Triangle

A message triangle is a helpful way to deliver a story that sticks. It allows you to keep things simple amidst all the noise — to connect the dots between what people care about and what can be done.

The message triangle highlights key themes to integrate and repeat in communications. Tailor specific messages to the interests, concerns and values of your intended audiences.

When you hit each of the points on the triangle, you remove key barriers to public engagement and create a complete narrative for your audience, giving them a full picture of our climate predicament, the way forward and the benefits of taking action.

You can start at any point — wherever your audience is on the issue or what they care about— then weave in the other two points. Create narrative tension via the challenge (a problem to solve or aspiration to achieve), a pathway or choice that must be made (what can be done) and the opportunities or benefits of making the right choice.

## The Benefits

Tangible opportunities and benefits to lives, families and communities



## The Challenge

The cause in plain language; personal threats/impacts

## The Pathway

Choices and practical actions that are feasible and relevant

## THE CHALLENGE – LITERACY AND PROXIMITY

Most Canadians do not yet understand what causes climate change, so it's no wonder they're unclear what to do about it. When asked about the cause, they often refer to the "ozone hole" and the most common solution still given in focus groups is "recycling."

Proximity is also a key barrier. While concern about extreme weather events seems to be increasing, less than one third of Canadians see climate change harming them personally.<sup>3</sup> Part of the challenge is that people view climate change as an environmental issue and do not necessarily connect impacts to health, food, livelihoods or other parts of their daily lives. Neither do they see it as urgent.<sup>4</sup> People have a multitude of other worries and aspirations that take priority. They feel relatively removed from climate change and an energy transition in particular.

This lack of proximity can put Canadians at odds with understanding and prioritizing climate action and an energy transition. Start by framing the challenge based on what your audience cares about and link to the biggest source of the problem — burning fossil fuels — from there.

- » Use plain, obvious language, e.g.: "burning coal, oil and gas creates pollution that stays in the atmosphere for thousands of years, creating a thickening blanket that is overheating the planet. To stop the problem, we have to stop polluting."<sup>5</sup>
- » Emphasize that burning oil and gas are the biggest source of Canada's climate pollution.
- » Cite the overwhelming scientific consensus (99%!) on the causes of climate change.
- » Clarify that Canada is amongst the world's top ten climate polluters. We are a big part of the problem; we must be a part of the solution.<sup>6</sup>
- » Position the energy transition as already underway and Canada at risk of being left behind without a plan to move away from oil and gas to clean energy and other solutions.
- » Emphasize that climate change is happening right here, right now. Across the country, we're experiencing record-breaking disasters. In the west, hot, dry conditions are fueling massive fires, with smoke that blocks out the sun and poisons the air. Historic droughts threaten our food supply. On the coasts, warmer oceans are fueling stronger, deadlier hurricanes and massive rain events that are flooding communities and destroying people's homes and lives.<sup>7</sup>

## THE PATHWAY – EFFICACY

The public isn't convinced climate change will be addressed at the pace and scale required. Most Canadians (60%) think that even if governments try, they will not be able to reduce emissions.<sup>9</sup> Half believe we are either past the point of no return, or are unsure.<sup>9</sup> Hopelessness and ambivalence (a 'both-and' attitude) are enemies to action. Inspire new thinking about what's possible by elevating practical and feasible examples — ideally local — whenever possible. Amplify a call for leaders to accelerate action.

### 1. Paint a simple picture of the overall pathway. Avoid jargon (e.g. net-zero, decarbonization, etc.) and dates way into the future.

- » Position now as the 'crossroads moment' where a different choice can and must be made. Avoid using terms that reduce urgency, such as 'clean energy future.'
- » Emphasize that solutions are available right now, such as "weather-proofing" homes and buildings, electric vehicles (EVs), public transportation, electrical grid improvements and renewable energy.
- » Name 'who' and 'what' (specific steps and measures) to explain exactly how the energy transition can realistically happen in the timeframe set out and in local communities.
- » Use specific language, for example, we need a 'plan for workers' versus 'let's support workers' or a 'just transition.'
- » Include the need to keep Canadians safe from more intense and frequent extreme floods/heat/storms/sea levels, and how cutting climate pollution is a key strategy to reduce risk.
- » Ask elected officials and candidates at all levels of government about their climate plans.
- » Call for decision makers to deliver a plan to protect oil and gas workers and communities, and prepare communities for climate impacts.
- » Emphasize the need for polluters that create the problem to pay.
- » Talk about the need for both 'carrots' (investments) and "sticks" (tough regulations and pricing) to cut climate pollution in half over the next eight years.

### 2. Illustrate momentum and the need for acceleration. Use tangible examples your audience trusts. Avoid techno-policy-speak and talk about meaningful, relevant solutions.

- » Whole towns in Alberta are going solar (e.g.: Cardston).
- » Quebec switching from diesel to electric buses.
- » Calgary's LRT (C-Train) is powered by wind.
- » B.C. will require 90% of all new car sales to be electric in just eight years.
- » Canada's clean energy sector already employs 430,500 people, and that number is set to grow by 50% over the next 9 years. Alberta will see the most clean energy job growth of any province.<sup>10</sup>
- » The nation's electric vehicle industry will employ 184,000 people by 2030.<sup>11</sup>
- » 80% of the cars sold in Norway are already electric.

### 3. Assure people they are part of a majority calling for an energy transition and climate preparedness. Emphasize that:

- » Two-thirds of Canadians want the government to do more to reduce emissions.<sup>12</sup>
- » 75% of Canadians want more renewable power and clean technologies like electric vehicles.
- » More than 70% of Canadians say the energy transition is necessary and inevitable.<sup>13</sup>

## THE BENEFITS – RELEVANCE

Climate change is still largely considered an environmental issue while the vast majority of Canadians do not see themselves — or their friends and families — as environmentalists. Polarization, sterile language, a dominance of policy and economic framing, and a lack of diversity in messengers have failed to make climate change relevant to the things that most people care about and value most.<sup>14</sup>

Hone in on the benefits of climate action most relevant to audiences by talking about what will improve for their lives, families and communities or other things they care about. Acknowledge change won't be easy but the benefits outweigh the costs of inaction.

## 1. Generate realistic hope by illustrating the ways in which climate action can create outcomes audiences care about.

- » Safe from the impacts of a changing climate.
- » Mental health benefits of feelings of agency and working together with others to find solutions can address feelings of isolation and hopelessness.
- » Electrification and other solutions make lives more affordable, comfortable and convenient and can increase health and quality of life.
- » Every action to cut pollution helps create safer, more stable lives for young people and future generations.
- » Access to solutions for low-income, young, old, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) and other Canadians addresses inequities.
- » Protecting special places, activities, traditions and ways of life.
- » People are more likely to believe the benefits of action when they can see them with their own eyes, or hear people like them share their tangible experiences and evidence.

## 2. Make the economic case, but tie it to values.

- » Building clean, renewable energy creates good-paying, stable, local jobs for the long term.
- » Cost effectiveness of renewable energy and EVs, including incentives that bring down that cost.
- » The world's energy systems are changing, Canada/Canadian workers/communities are in a good position to compete if we have a plan to move away from fossil fuels, protect our communities from impacts.
- » Opportunities for young people to be part of the solution and have generational employment.
- » More choice and efficiency in being proactive now to direct efforts and resources to positive solutions versus responding to increasing disasters.

## 3. Highlight leadership and innovation benefits.

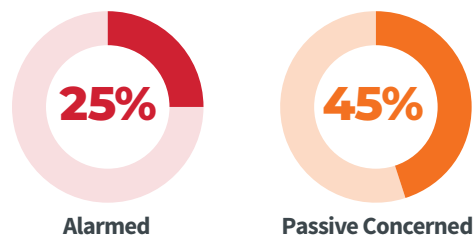
- » Being at the forefront of the clean energy sector by leveraging our ingenuity, experience and resources.
- » Stepping up, as Canada has in the past, to help address major world challenges.

## 2. Using the Triangle

### START WHERE THEY ARE: “ALARMED” VS “MOVEABLE MIDDLE”

While an overwhelming majority of Canadians now agree climate change is a major problem, only a much smaller group are reliably engaged on the issue or its solutions. There is a “base” of a quarter of Canadians who are “alarmed” and consistently give very high priority to climate, and a large “moveable middle”(roughly 45%) who care, but are not yet active, in part due to low climate literacy.

**45% of Canadians agree that climate change is a real problem, but aren't informed or engaged.**



Source: Comeau & Lachapelle 2019

The “alarmed” are ready to jump right into climate conversation, however, the “moveable middle” do not identify as environmentalists in the same way and more general topics such as electric vehicles and protecting homes from disasters is a better way to start.

Either way, both audiences are more motivated by the overall frame than the message. When it comes to the message, the messenger is 99% of the key to success and greatly influences how people respond given the influence of peers and social norms.

Keep in mind there are segments within these groups. For example, mounting evidence shows that women are more concerned than men and, most importantly, women are much more likely to support climate action. Younger Canadians also tend to be more supportive of action and there is some evidence BIPOC and New Canadians may be as well.

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**Half of Canadian women tell pollsters they vote on climate, but that's only true for one-third of men.**

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Oraclepoll Research/Friends of the Earth, 2020

## MESSAGE FRAMING THAT RESONATES FOR THE ALARMED AND MOVEABLE MIDDLE

In message testing, the most engaging frames for both the “Alarmed” and “Moveable Middle” were:

### Climate Threats & Solutions

- » Combine a description of local impacts with tangible examples of steps to take to prepare for and reduce risks.
- » Messaging on threats and solutions is highly engaging for both audiences, so be prepared to talk specifics and address adjacent topics outside the scope of your original messaging.

### Energy Transition

- » Articulate the big picture in plain language, such as “clean the grid” and “electrify buildings, vehicles and industry.”
- » Give tangible examples. For example, switch to electric buses, switch to heat pumps instead of gas furnaces.
- » Point out the writing is on the wall. “There is no need for investment in new fossil fuel supply” from the conservative International Energy Agency’s Net Zero by 2050 scenarios.
- » “We Must Move Away From Oil And Gas” received high engagement for both groups and was not polarizing.
- » “We Need a Plan for Oil and Gas Workers” tested positively with moveable middle audiences.

### Climate Leadership

- » Messaging that “Canada is Falling Behind Other Countries” was engaging for both audiences, though had mixed reactions from those in the moveable middle.
- » The need for a “Fossil Fuel Treaty” had high engagement for both groups; but mixed reactions from those in the moveable middle.
- » Emphasize that Canada is one of top ten climate polluters because of fossil fuel production, cars and trucks.
- » Remind the audience that Canada has led on other issues, working in collaboration with other countries such as addressing the ozone hole, and we can do it again.

## 3. Issues for Consideration

### EXTREME WEATHER

Most Canadians make sense of climate change through either their direct experiences of extreme weather or stories they see or read in the media. Validate people’s experience by recognizing both the challenges of recent extreme weather events as well as the ways in which people pulled together. Position collective climate action as a way to protect the people, places and experiences your audience loves and cutting climate pollution as the way to reduce future risk.

### FOSSIL FUELS

Public support for fossil fuel production is gradually decreasing and an energy transition is now widely understood to be inevitable. However, the timeline for that transition is unclear, Canadians are fairly evenly split over support for oil and gas production and there remains strong regional support in the Prairies and other regions with significant industries. Emphasize that fossil fuels are the primary cause of climate change — the world is moving away from them and Canada needs to keep up. Lean into the unpopularity of subsidies (Canada provides more to oil and gas than any other G20 nation) and the broad support that exists to help workers transition.

### FAIRNESS

Canadians hold fairness as a strong value. Emphasize that despite having a relatively small population, Canada is among the world’s worst climate polluters and we need to do our fair share. Respecting and upholding Indigenous rights is critical in an energy transition as well as supporting workers, communities and countries most impacted. Polluters should pay.

### HEALTH

Health impacts are increasingly part of the debate around climate change and an energy transition. Talk about impacts such as how pollution from fossil fuels causes 8.7 million premature deaths per year — more than COVID-19 — and more than 1 in 5 deaths globally and 1 in 10 in Canada.<sup>15</sup> Discuss how at least 595 British Columbians died in the 2021 summer heat wave.<sup>16</sup> Tie in how moving away from fossil fuels will improve air and water quality, and talk about safety and

resilience during extreme weather. There is some evidence that shows pictures of air pollution are more effective at communicating health impacts than images of flooding or heat stress.<sup>17</sup>

## MONEY

Affordability is a big worry for Canadians and climate action is often framed as expensive. Address concerns by putting the situation into context such as the rising costs of extreme weather events and cost competitiveness of clean energy. Highlight the benefits of a transition such as Canada's potential to create 200,000 jobs this decade if we take action or the average Canadian will actually spend less on energy if we transition to a clean economy.<sup>18</sup>

## 4. Final Tips

Finding the right frames, messengers and delivery methods for public communications is critical, but so too is creating opportunities for deeper levels of engagement to overcome polarization and fatalism, and to generate new social norms. A few final tips:

- Listen and lead with empathy. Start where audiences are at. Don't alienate, build relationships. Addressing climate change means we will eventually need almost everyone.
- Research shows people are most influenced by their peers, yet most Canadians aren't talking to their friends, families, coworkers and neighbors about climate change. Explore the use of outreach strategies such as ambassador programs and conversation campaigns, where those motivated to act increase awareness and action within their circles of friends, families, neighbors and co-workers.
- Create opportunities to listen to stakeholders and foster peer-to-peer dialogues about risks, solutions and ways to take action.
- Confront false information, do not reinforce it. Use simple, factual alternatives to inoculate and prevent the uptake of misinformation. Remember the importance of the messengers and platforms you choose.
- Remember, climate change is visual. Show real people, the problem and solutions at scale, and real (local) impacts. Be very careful with protest imagery. See [Climate Visuals](#).
- Use data to drive your decisions. Test with audiences, recalibrate, scale, test, recalibrate, and share what you learn.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 For an overview of Canadian public opinion on climate change and energy transition, and current obstacles to public engagement, see Hatch, C. & Granados, M. (2021). *What Do Canadians Really Think About Climate Change?*
- 2 Field, E., Schwartzberg, P., & Berger, P. (2019). Canada, Climate Change and Education: Opportunities for Public and Formal Education (Formal Report for Learning for a Sustainable Future). Retrieved from [http://lsf-ist.ca/media/National\\_Report/Executive\\_Summary\\_Slides\\_Climate\\_Change.pdf](http://lsf-ist.ca/media/National_Report/Executive_Summary_Slides_Climate_Change.pdf)
- 3 Environics. (2021). *The Journey to Net Zero by 2050*. Retrieved from: <https://environics.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Environics-Research-The-Journey-To-Net-Zero-by-2050-Report-November-2021.pdf>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See this excellent [TedTalk](#) from John Marshall on how to talk about climate change.
- 6 Carbon Brief. (2021). Analysis: Which Countries Are Historically Responsible for Climate Change? Retrieved from: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-which-countries-are-historically-responsible-for-climate-change>
- 7 Adapted from Lachapelle, E. (2020). Presentation to COPTICOM. Unpublished work.
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- 14 See our recent [Media Analysis](#) for more information.
- 15 Vohra, K., Vodonos, A., Schwartz, J., Marais, E. A., Sulprizio, M. P., & Mickle, L. J. (2021). Global mortality from outdoor fine particle pollution generated by fossil fuel combustion: Results from GEOS-Chem. *Environmental Research*, 195, 110754.
- 16 Government of British Columbia. (2021). Heat-related Deaths in B.C. Knowledge Update. Retrieved from: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/heat\\_related\\_deaths\\_in\\_bc\\_knowledge\\_update.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/heat_related_deaths_in_bc_knowledge_update.pdf)
- 17 Climate Outreach. (2021). *Climate Visuals*. Retrieved from: <https://climatevisuals.org>
- 18 Clean Energy Canada. (2021). The New Reality. Retrieved from: <https://cleanenergycanada.org/report/the-new-reality/>

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## Developing the Message Triangle

The message triangle recommendations were derived from a series of research projects by Climate Access and the Climate Narratives Initiative and a review of best practice.

An overview of Canadian public opinion and attitudes towards climate change:

- [What do Canadians Really Think About Climate Change: Summary of Public Opinion Research for Communicators | March 2021](#)

A media analysis on the state of climate coverage in Canada's national media:

- [Climate Change in Canada's National Media | June 2021](#)

Message testing which segmented audiences in the "Moveable Middle" and the "Alarmed" subsets of the Canadian population:

- [Energy Transition Message Testing \(Condensed\) | August 2021](#)

Message triangles have been widely used for many years as a framework for developing communications and as a tool for messengers. Previous examples of message triangles adapted for climate change communication can be found at [climateaccess.org](http://climateaccess.org)

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## About Climate Access

Climate Access is a global network of climate and clean energy communicators, serving more than 3,600 members in 57 countries. Through Climate Access, members are connected to a diverse group of experts, cutting-edge research, proven techniques and hands-on support for mobilizing audiences to reduce emissions, prepare for impacts and support climate policies. Climate Access provides the knowledge that practitioners need to take their communications and engagement to the next level.

[climateaccess.org](http://climateaccess.org)

## About the Climate Narratives Initiative

Convened by the Clean Economy Fund and members of Environment Funders Canada's Low Carbon Funders' Group, the Climate Narratives Initiative supports climate communicators in Canada through research and training, grants, hands-on communications support and peer-learning through a community of practice. COPTICOM hosts la communauté de pratique sur la communication climatique in Québec.

## Project Team

We are grateful to the communicators who reviewed and provided feedback on early drafts of the document.

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