

A Guide for Incorporating Storytelling into Research Communications for Climate and Health Research

**Research and Engagement on Adaptation for
Climate and Health Center (REACH)**

University of Washington

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Bridging the gap between research and implementation in environmental public health is crucial for improving preparedness, resilience, and overall health. Effective research communication can guide practitioners and policymakers to make informed decisions regarding interventions, engage the public with effective personal interventions, and ultimately help bridge the gap between knowledge and action. Storytelling is a component of communication that can be utilized to direct information toward specific demographics by developing a message that is relevant, understandable, and resonant. It presents information in a way that engages the audience's imagination, and consists of characters, setting, and plot. This framework was developed to guide environmental public health researchers through effectively communicating their work to achieve desired goals, such as informing the public or advocating for a public health intervention or policy. It outlines a four-step process that walks you through determining your communication goals, intended audience, communication framework, and medium, and outlining your story structure. The four steps are as follows:

- 1. Goal setting & identifying your audience(s)**
- 2. Selecting a communication framework**
- 3. Selecting a communication medium**
- 4. Outlining & developing your story**

These stages are designed to help you create intentional research communication materials that can increase the likelihood of achieving communication goals. The framework presents various pathways at each stage, ordered from the least to the most resource and time-intensive.

Why is it important to communicate your research?

Increase accessibility of information

Science communication is often tailored to other scientists or professionals in a given field, rather than the general public. It is sometimes limited to journal articles, professional conferences, and word of mouth. Tailoring communication materials to broader audiences can allow a more extensive demographic to understand and engage with scientific findings, which can increase support, momentum, collaborations, and funding, and inform further research.

Create and sustain relationships and partnerships

This framework is designed to be paired with the [Community Engagement Toolkit for Climate and Health Research](#) to guide researchers in conducting community-engaged research.

Sustaining engagement with partners throughout your research is an integral part of the communication process, and can result in more effective and wide-reaching communication materials.

What is the role of storytelling in research communication?

Storytelling elements can make research more accessible to the general public by placing the research in the context of real-world situations, helping the audience to see its practical value. Contextualization of research findings or risk management communication can greatly increase understanding and readership. This toolkit is intended to guide environmental public health researchers and communicators to incorporate storytelling components into their work, with the ultimate goal of creating communication materials that are accessible and actionable.

General Guidance for Science Communications

Keep these guiding practices in mind throughout the process of developing your communication materials.

- Note that the scientific perspective has its limitations. Be sure to incorporate and consider diverse perspectives.
- Consider the existing scientific knowledge of your intended audience. Utilize concise, accessible language, and define technical terms in your writing to maximize readability.
 - Making communication materials available in more than one language may increase accessibility.
- Consult community and/or research partners when developing a process for communication, especially if the research was collaborative.
- Ensure that calls to action are concrete and specific to motivate action: include numbers and dates.
- Draw on shared or universal experiences to engage readers with your material.

Step 1: Audience & Communication Goals

Identifying your communication goals and selecting your audience go hand-in-hand. Work through this section to determine what you are trying to say, and to whom. This exercise may involve only project leads or may be a larger conversation that includes your project team and/or external partners. Consider whose input is necessary to determine your communication goal(s) and intended audience.

Select Your Audience

Below is a list of audience types to help you think about specific demographics toward which you may want to target your communication materials.

Audience Types	Description
Populations vulnerable to the health issue & caretakers	Immunocompromised people, youth, older adults, etc. Your audience can also include those who are formal or informal caretakers (parents, schools/daycares, etc.).
Community members	Members of a specific community or population. Community can be defined in multiple ways: residents of a certain geographic region, people within a certain age range, Spanish speakers, etc.
Researchers & professionals	Individuals whose work involves aspects of your research and are more familiar with your research topic.
Policymakers	Policymakers at the federal, state, or local levels.
Funders	Federal & state grant programs, etc., that have the potential to fund continuing or further research.
Organizations & institutions	Community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, universities, etc.

Brainstorm your Potential Audiences

When brainstorming potential audiences, try to be as specific as possible. Instead of listing “the general public,” try to come up with two to three demographics that narrow down your audience, such as individuals within a specific age group, location, or field of work.

Potential Audiences	How is this group affected by or involved in your work? What are their priorities or motivations with regard to your project's topic?
#1: <i>Ex. residents of Spokane, WA</i>	<i>Ex. My research involves residents experiencing symptoms or affected by wildfire smoke and extreme heat. This population holds a crucial perspective for analyzing the extent of wildfire smoke impacts on community health.</i>
#2:	
#3:	

Select Your Communication Goals

Below are types of goals that are common in research communications. This is not an exhaustive list; these general categories are starting points to get you thinking about the context in which you would like to frame your research. These goal types can be used alone or together to best complement your intended audiences and uses.

Goal Types	Description
Inform the public	Intended to educate the audience on the topic and create awareness.
Counter misinformation/ disinformation	Intended to educate the audience on true, scientifically backed information, combat false information, and build trust.
Humanize data & evidence	Intended to break down data so that the audience can more easily understand it and its significance.
Increase public engagement	Intended to motivate involvement from the audience. This could be a call to action, soliciting volunteers or donations, or motivating the audience to replicate the project in their own community.
Motivate advocacy	Intended to motivate the audience to advocate for policy that will help resolve the issue being addressed.
Facilitate policy adoption and implementation	Intended to sway policymakers or policy actors in a certain direction, based on research.

These goal types and examples for each are described in further detail on the next page.

Goal Types

Inform the public

If your goal is to inform the general public about your research, consider starting by breaking your topic down into parts (the subject, context, stakeholders, and collaborators involved, research methods, how your work addresses the issue(s), and key takeaways).

Examples & Resources

- [The Message Box](#) from COMPASS is a tool for crafting your message to communicate it in a way that can help you better connect and resonate with your intended audience. This tool is a good place to start when crafting your message and can be applied to other communication goal types. It helps you identify and break down the issue, problems, solutions, benefits, and takeaways from your work. [Here is a blank worksheet](#).
 - Refer to UW's [Research Makes America](#) branding page or the School of Public Health's [Research Makes America Healthier](#) page for language that can accompany your message.
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Counter misinformation/disinformation

If your communication goal is to counter misinformation or disinformation related to your work, you may want to consider doing this by establishing or building trust with a specific audience. This can be done in a few different ways and can be time intensive. It is a proactive approach to countering misinformation and disinformation.

Examples & Resources

- The [Practical Playbook for Addressing Health Rumors](#) from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Health Security presents an overview checklist as well as in-depth tools and tips for public health and medical professionals to prepare before health-related misinformation spreads, decide whether to address misinformation, and take action to address misinformation.
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Humanize data & evidence

If your communication goal is to emphasize the importance or impact of your data or evidence, you may want to consider putting your data/evidence into context that demonstrates how it impacts or might impact a certain individual or community. This provides your audience with a reference point when interpreting your data and can allow for a more impactful message.

Examples & Resources

- [Alaska Wildfire Explorer: Smoke Preparedness Stories](#) is a University of Washington collaboration that communicates wildfire smoke hazards by conveying risk management through short stories in comic form.
 - [Graphic Medicine in Public Health](#) is a guide to using comics to convey public health information, including examples and resources from the City of Seattle and King County.
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Increase public engagement, mobilize support, & motivate advocacy

If your goal is to increase public engagement, mobilize support, or motivate advocacy, you may want to consider incorporating a story that guides your audience to change their behavior by relaying how your project affects them and what they can do about it. Emphasizing examples of positive and co-beneficial outcomes from participating in or performing a suggested behavior is important.

Examples & Resources

- [CDC Active People, Healthy Nation](#) is a national initiative intended to motivate engagement to increase physical activity among Americans.
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Facilitate policy adoption and implementation

If your communication goal is to facilitate policy adoption and implementation, you may want to consider the level of awareness your audience (likely policymakers or their constituents) may have when it comes to your topic. It is important to incorporate substantial evidence, real-life experiences, and focus on the co-benefits of the policy if adopted/implemented. It is also imperative to consider their policy stances and priorities of the policymakers and constituents you intend to influence.

Examples & Resources

- Public Health Institute's [Storytelling Strategies for Policy Change](#) is a resource that outlines how storytelling can be utilized to influence policy adoption.

Combine your Goals and Audiences

Brainstorm who you want to collaborate with and what you want to communicate to them. Start with one audience and one goal type. For now, assign only one goal type for each intended audience. You may repeat an intended audience if you have multiple goals that correlate to that audience.

Intended Audience(s)	<i>Pick a communication goal type from the table above and tailor it to your project context and intended audience. For each audience...</i> <i>What do you want your audience to know/do? Are you trying to inform, persuade, or empower your audience, or are you simply wanting your audience to explore your message/work?</i> <i>Use this space to brainstorm ideas.</i>
#1: Ex. residents of Spokane, WA	Ex. Inform the public: I want my audience to be made aware of the health hazards posed by wildfire smoke and extreme heat, as well as preparedness strategies.
#2:	
#3:	

Format your Goal Statements

Synthesize your brainstormed communication goals into goal statements, so that your intentions are clearly defined. These statements will help you stay organized and intentional throughout the remainder of your communication process. Begin your statement with an action phrase related to your communication type (such as: inform, center, collect, highlight, build trust, etc.), followed by naming one of your intended audiences. Lastly, finish your statement with specifics from your research and your brainstormed goals from the previous section.

If you identified multiple communication goals for one audience during your brainstorm, this is where you may start to combine them into a single goal statement.

Goals	Goal Statements
#1 <i>Ex. Inform the public</i>	<i>Ex. Inform residents of Spokane, WA of health hazards related to extreme weather.</i>
#2	
#3	

Step 2: Selecting a Communication Framework

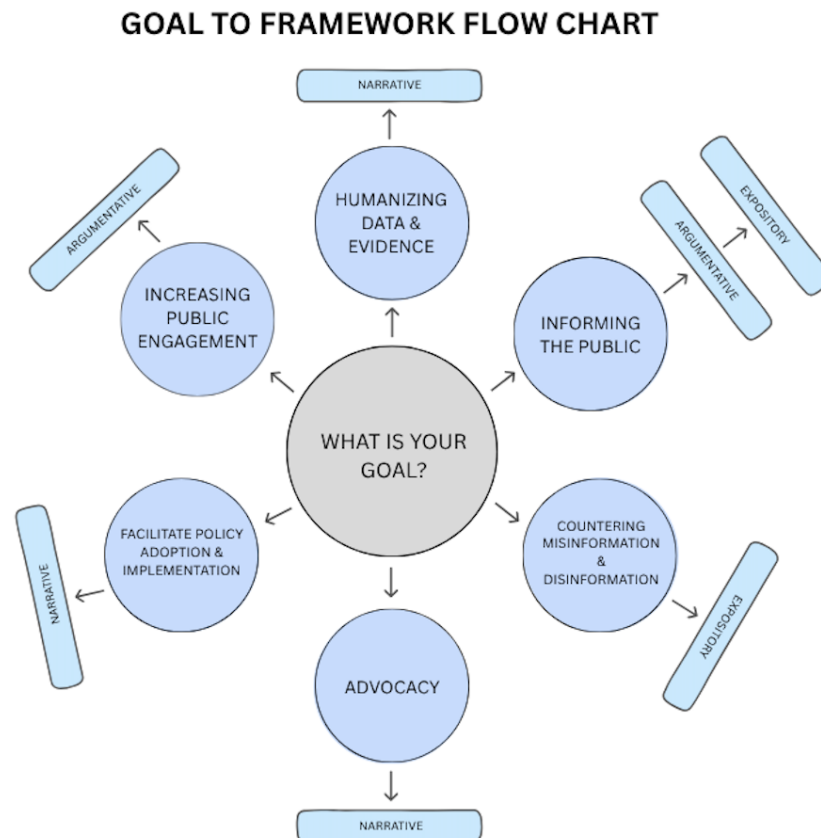
The following table outlines common communication frameworks, along with guiding considerations for before implementation.

Framework	Description	Guiding questions before selection
Expository	Expository writing seeks to relay information in a straightforward manner by evaluating evidence and using clear, concise language.	- Is one of your goals to educate and inform the public? - Do you want to reach a large demographic by using concise and accessible language?
Narrative	Narrative writing can be experiential, anecdotal, and personal. It includes the standard components of a story, including perspective, plot, and message or moral, and can personalize or actualize complex information.	- Are some of your goals to inform the public, counter misinformation or disinformation, humanize data and evidence, mobilize support, or increase public engagement? - Does your research address an issue that affects a specific demographic? - If the project involves issues with non-human subjects, can those subjects be personified? - Is there one specific viewpoint that needs to be highlighted? - Whose story/narrative will you tell? Is it one person, a group of people, or a non-human subject? What is/was their challenge/barrier, and how does it impact them? How is the research/project addressing their challenge/barrier?
Argumentative	Argumentative writing contains a particular thesis or opinion on a given subject, supported by thorough research and evidence.	- Is one of your goals to motivate a change in behavior of your audience? - How can you increase the audience's confidence in their own ability to perform the behavior? - What evidence can you include that will increase confidence in the efficacy of the recommended behavior?

Connecting Your Goal and Framework

Use the flowchart on the right to identify an appropriate framework for your communication goal.

The goal/framework pairings shown here are based on what is most often seen in science communication and storytelling literature, though these pairings are not restrictive. For instance, depending on your goal(s) and audience(s), you may decide to pursue a different path than is depicted in this flowchart.



Step 3: Selecting a Communication Medium

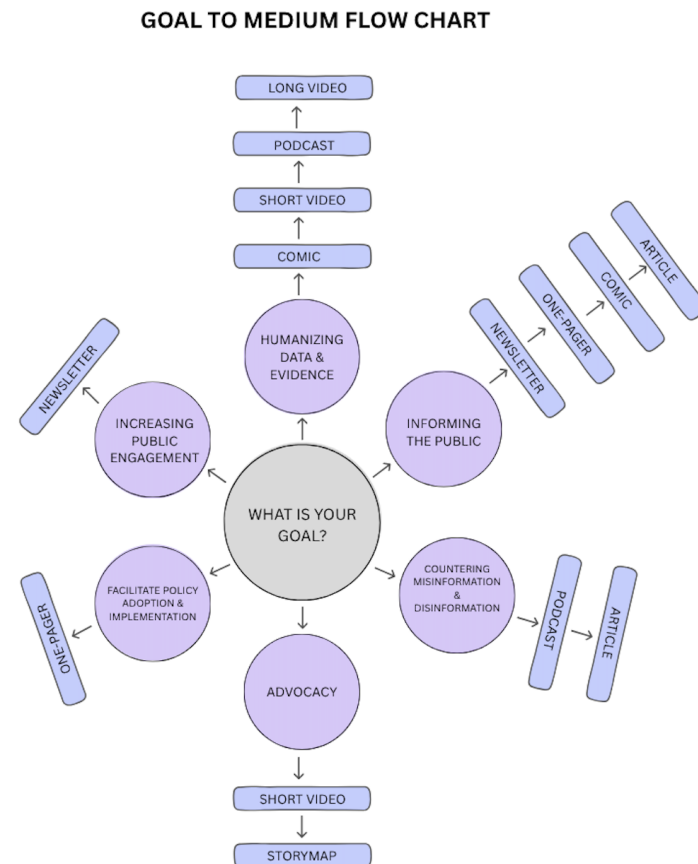
A medium is the format in which you will present your message. This step will guide you through selecting the appropriate medium given the stage of your project, available resources, and your timeline. See the table below for information regarding medium types.

Connecting Your Goal and Medium

Use the [flowchart](#) on the right to identify an appropriate medium type for your specific communication goal.

The goal/medium pairings shown here are based on what is most often seen in science communication and storytelling, though it is not restrictive.

Depending on your goal and audience, you may want to select a medium that is paired with a different communication goal than what is depicted here.



For Completed Projects

First, consider what materials, if any, were collected/created during the research process. This can include photos, video footage, testimonials, figures, worksheets, etc. Also, consider your project's budget and timeline, and plan accordingly. Review the list of media below and determine whether you have sufficient materials for each medium type, OR if you have the resources to create/collect materials for a given medium.

For Planned or Ongoing Projects

Consider your communication goal(s), timeline, and resource capacity to determine which medium is most appropriate. Accordingly, you can plan to collect photos, videos, participant/researcher testimonials, and document obstacles throughout the research process. Your communication goals may shift during your research process; therefore, it is important to review and adjust your goal statements as needed. Communication materials can be made at each stage of the research/project process, and/or after the completion of the project. Identify which point in the research process you are in and adjust your communications accordingly. If you are at initial stages, you have the most flexibility and time to plan for creating a communication material in almost any medium type.

Research/Project Stages:

- Project Initiation (e.g., problem identification, planning, funding, and/or goal formation)
- Data collection (e.g., literature review, community engagement, interviews)
- Data Analysis (e.g., analysis of findings, report writing)
- Publication (e.g., creation of communication materials, publication)

Medium Types

This section lists medium types in order of least to most resource-intensive. It includes descriptions of common medium types, options for publishing, and examples and resources for use in an environmental public health context.

Medium	Description	Publishing & Dissemination Options	Considerations	Resources & Materials	Examples
Blog/ Short article	A high-level overview or narrative of a project. Can highlight a recent event or notice of award, or provide a summary of the project.	• Organization or university website • Newsletters	• Is there complex information that needs to be broken down and explained? • Is the research ongoing?	• Image(s) of research setting, individuals involved, or research activities • Quote(s) from participants and/or researchers	• UW News
One-pager	A written overview or bullet points of most details of a project including the issue, setting, individuals/organizations involved, funding sources, purpose, goals, methods, and findings, outcomes, and call-to-action.	• Printed copies distributed at events • Printed copies distributed to stakeholders & community members • Digital copies on websites and	• Is the intention to influence policy or inform stakeholders in a brief and informative way?	• Printing (if presented physically)	• CDRD flood preparation

		attached to newsletters			
Newsletter	An ongoing, periodic material containing project notices or updates.	• Email listserv • Organizational website	• Is the story something that would interest a recurring audience (e.g., partners you have an existing relationship with)? • Do you have an existing community that would subscribe to a newsletter?	• Affinity (free vector, pixel and layout studios)	• DEOHS Newsletter Subscription Page
Short video (<5 minutes)	A video that introduces the project background, purpose, and individuals involved, retells a recent project activity, or summarizes project findings and implications.	• Organization or university website • Organization Youtube page • Social media (e.g., Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok) • Shown at events	• Would your audience be likely to access your website or social media to view the video? • Does your project include visuals, images, and figures that can be used to produce the video?	• Filming equipment OR access to stock photos or videos • Editing software, such as Canva Pro editing software • Adobe Premiere Pro (subscription required)	• DEOHS worker safety short video

			• Would the story make sense in a narrative or short story form? • Is there an activity that will demonstrate the work in action that can be captured in video? • Short videos can easily be geared toward children	• CapCut (free)	
Storymap	All parts of a project presented via narrative, accompanied by images, maps, videos, audio, animations, etc.	• Organization website	• Are there a lot of visuals, images, and figures from your project? • Would your intended audience require a more accessible format for an in-depth presentation of your project?	• ArcGIS StoryMaps online editor (free) • Images, videos, maps, testimonials, etc. • Affinity (free vector, pixel and layout studios) • Canva for designing accompanying	• ArcGIS StoryMaps • Climate Impacts Group Storymap • Resilience on Seattle's Waterfront

			Do you have a landing webpage that can house your StoryMap, such as an organization or department website?	visuals ArcGIS Pro (desktop or online versions) for creating accompanying maps	
Podcast	Long-format conversations or interviews where project topics are discussed at length.	- Organization website - Linked on departmental newsletter or social media - Published on Spotify podcasts	- Is there high collaboration with external partners? - Does this story need to be told from an individual's perspective in a longer narrative format? - Would your audience listen to long-form content?	- Interview questions to guide discussion - Recording & editing equipment	FieldSound podcast Clean Air Methow - The Fifth Season
Comic	Short comic strips or comic books that visualize parts of a project by putting them into context for a specific audience.	- Organization or university websites - Bulletin boards - Presented at	Would the story make sense in a narrative or short story form?	- Funding for artist commission - Funding for printing	Alaska Wildfire Explorer Tool Comic

		events • Social media (e.g., Instagram)	• Can the stories of the people, environments, systems, or processes involved in your project be told through minimal words and simplified visualizations? • Does your intended audience require a more accessible version of your message? • Do your communication goals include relaying a complex concept that would benefit from visual storytelling?	• UW Creative Commons Printing Services • Affinity (free vector, pixel and layout studios) • Adobe Illustrator (subscription required)	• Comics - Public Health Seattle & King County
Long video (< 5 minutes)	A short documentary, an interview, or a retelling of a project in detail in a long video	• Organization Youtube page • Organization	• Is there complex information	• Filming equipment OR access to stock	• UW DEOHS 2026 Omenn

	format.	website	that needs to be explained and defined? Who is your target audience and are they already familiar with your topic?	photos or videos - Editing software - Canva Pro editing software - Adobe Premiere Pro (subscription required) - CapCut (free)	Lecture
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Social Media Publishing Considerations

Any of the medium options listed in the table above can be published on social media. Below are considerations and guiding practices for sharing communication materials on social media.

Considerations

- Is this a story you want to reach a large and diverse audience?
- Do you have images or videos that can be included?
- Do you have permission to share this information and content broadly?

Social Media Communication Types

- Lab or organization Instagram page post (a series of square/portrait images/videos)
 - Can be a combination of: Infographic(s), stand-alone images, images with text labels, video (with in-video captions), and/or stand-alone text

¹ Canva Pro is free with a UW email, and other software may be accessible through similar institutions.

- Instagram Reel or TikTok
 - Short video (<5 minutes)
- Instagram Story Post
 - Short video or one page image with text

Timing Your Message

Consider timing your message to maximize readership and effectiveness:

- Right before, during or after a relevant event. Doing so allows you to capture your audience when the event is fresh in their mind and can strengthen the impact of your message.
- Refer to UW's [Monthly Message Guide](#)

Step 4: Outlining & Developing Your Story

Fill out the following sections depending on the framework you chose (see Step 2). Start with section 4.1 and proceed to the appropriate framework section (4.2a, 4.2b, or 4.2c). These questions guide you through outlining your story and thinking about which aspects are most important to your chosen communication goals.

4.1 Outlining the research process (for all frameworks)

What is the challenge/need/issue?	<i>Ex. Wildfire smoke and extreme heat have led to an increase in numerous health issues in eastern WA. City-level resilience planning is needed in Spokane, WA, in order to protect the health and livelihoods of residents.</i>
What were the research actions taken and why?	<i>Ex. A research survey was administered in the city of Spokane using the CASPER methodology in order to gauge local perspective on the severity, impacts, and barriers to preparedness of wildfire smoke and extreme heat.</i>
What were the outcomes or impact achieved?	<i>Ex. Data on the severity, impacts, and barriers to preparedness of wildfire smoke and extreme heat was collected, and will be incorporated into the city government's resilience planning.</i>
What was the level of collaboration with stakeholders & partners?	<i>Ex. The research utilized the empower level of engagement between UW and the Gonzaga Institute for Climate, Water, and the Environment, and the involve level of engagement with community volunteers.</i>
What are the levels of familiarity and interest of the intended audience with the topic/research?	<i>Ex. The majority of the audience is familiar with the topic and has first-hand experience. The level of interest ranges, but there is generally some amount of interest among the audience.</i>

4.2a Outlining a narrative framework

What is the story setting?	<i>Ex. The setting is Spokane, WA.</i>
Who are the primary characters?	<i>Ex. The primary characters are the research team, including local volunteers, and survey participants.</i>
What are the major plot points?	<i>Ex. The major plot points include developing the survey, conducting it, analyzing the data, and incorporating the recommendations into resilience planning.</i>
What is the moral of the story?	<i>Ex. The moral of the story is that community engagement can be effective in developing recommendations that can be implemented on a broader scale.</i>

4.2b Outlining an expository framework

What was the research question?	<i>Ex. What are local perspectives on the severity, impacts, and barriers to preparedness of wildfire smoke and extreme heat?</i>
What were the research methods?	<i>Ex. The CASPER method was used to administer a survey to residents.</i>
What were the findings?	<i>Ex. 92% of surveyed households reported recently experiencing wildfire smoke in Spokane, with 62% expressing high concern. Households perceived wildfire smoke as more severely impacting their community, rather than themselves, especially regarding quality of life and economic impacts. The most preferred measures for improving community resilience were cell phone alerts on smoky days (47% of households), funding for schools to improve indoor air quality (44%), and financial assistance for portable air cleaners (41%).</i>
What were the impacts or projected impacts?	<i>Ex. Since households tended to view wildfire smoke as exerting worse impacts on their community rather than their own households, community-centered adaptation measures may be</i>

	<i>well-received and can be emphasized in the City of Spokane's adaptation planning. For instance, cell phone alerts on smoky days were the most supported action to increase community wildfires smoke resilience, and future work could conduct cost-benefit analyses on their effectiveness.</i>
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4.2c Outlining an argumentative framework

What is the setting?	<i>Ex. The setting is strengthening the Washington Department of Labor & Industries' Outdoor Heat Exposure Rules.</i>
Who are the policy actors?	<i>Ex. Washington Department of Labor & Industries, Governor of Washington, Washington State Legislatures, advocacy groups, labor unions, public health organizations and experts, employers, and affected workers.</i>
What is the policy problem?	<i>Ex. More frequent extreme heat events are putting outdoor workers and other high temperature labor groups at high risk of dangerous heat exposure. The existing standards were not sufficient to prevent heat-related illness.</i>
What are you trying to persuade or dissuade? (What is the policy solution?)	<i>Ex. Persuading lawmakers to lower temperature thresholds that trigger health protection, require more frequent paid cool-down rest breaks, expand access to shade and cool drinking water, strengthen employer training and heat response plans, and increase enforcement of heat safety standards.</i>
What do you want the audience to take away?	<i>Ex. A strong and actionable understanding of why the policy needs to change to protect the health of heat exposed workers and to prevent illness, injury, and death. The policy was successfully updated in 2023.</i>

Conclusion

Once you have completed your outline, you are ready to begin developing your research communication material(s). Refer back to your [goals & audience](#), [framework](#), [medium](#), and outline at any point during the process. Refer back to the media spreadsheet for publishing & dissemination options.

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