

Water Words that Work

Step One: Begin With Behavior

Here's the most common mistake we see conservation professionals making out there when they try to reach everyday citizens:

- We try to get our audience to *care*...but we don't tell them what they would do if they *did* care...
- So they don't do anything... and then we think they don't care

So what's the solution? Begin with Behavior -- *not* awareness, *not* attitude, *not* education. Decide what you want your audience to do and build your whole message around that.

Step 2: Find Foolproof Photos

Environmental advertisements, websites, and outreach materials typically use photographs in an unbalanced way — too much nature photography, and not enough faces and photographic examples of the behavior you want. Because a picture is worth a thousand words — focus your attention on good environmental photos before you focus on your environmental writing.

Here are three categories of photos that are "foolproof" — they'll help you get the response you want:

Faces

People subconsciously tend to behave in more socially conscious ways when they detect a visual pattern resembling a gaze.

Actions

It's very simple. Select photographs that show the behavior you want the viewer to emulate.

Before and After

Your audience often doubts that their contributions make a difference. Address those concerns with before-and-after photographs that show the positive impact your work makes (with their help).

Step Three: Swap the Shoptalk

Adults learn, on average, less than one new word per week. Most are turned off by new vocabulary. That's why using outreach efforts to deliver vocabulary lessons is a generally bad idea.

Step three of the Water Words That Work message method is to swap out your shop talk and replace it with plain English. You'll give up some nuance and precision — but you'll also get more agreement, action, and cooperation.

If you are wondering if a particular word or phrase is problematic, put it to the "grandmother test." If you can imagine your grandmother using the language in conversation, then it's English. If not, it's probably shop talk that you will want to swap out.

Here are some common examples of shop talk that confuse your audience or make them feel excluded, along with some suggested substitutes.

Shoptalk	Shortcoming	Recommended "Swap"
Alternative Energy	"Alternatives" are what you get when you don't get what you really want.	Clean and Safe Energy
Biodiversity	Few have any idea what this term means.	Wildlife Conservation, Animal Protection, Nature
Global Warming	This seems mild, potentially pleasant, and natural.	Climate Change
Conservation Easement	"Easements" are associated with power lines, septic systems, rights of ways, and other intrusions on your property.	Voluntary Land Protection Agreement
Endangered Species	This term makes your friends love you more and your foes hate you more.	Rare Wildlife, Animals
Infrastructure and Green Infrastructure	Lay people have no idea what you mean by this.	Clean Water Investments, Pollution Control Investments
Landscape	This term evokes images of landscaping -- pretty but not natural.	Natural Areas
Land Use Planning	According to John Russonello, this term is "vague yet ominous sounding" to lay people.	Planning Ahead, Balancing Nature and Development
Nonpoint Source Pollution	This term means nothing to most lay people.	Polluted Runoff, Polluted Stormwater, Polluted Water
Open Space	Many assume this means "vacant lot" and hope it will be developed.	Natural Area
Recreation	The public generally rejects our claim that outdoor recreation is a big	Family Activities

	economic driver. The term has overtones of fun and triviality.	
Run Out of Water	The public perceives this term as a gross overstatement.	Chronic Shortage, Man-Made Drought
Sprawl	The term means different things to different people, and means nothing to surprisingly many.	Overdevelopment, Runaway Development
Stormwater	Many aren't sure what this means, and they assume rainwater is clean.	Polluted Runoff
Sustainable	Few lay people understand what you mean with this.	Responsible, Environmentally Friendly, Balanced
Tourism	Tourists are rude and jobs in the tourist industry are low wage service jobs.	Family Vacations
Undeveloped Land	To lay people, this sounds like land that is waiting to be developed and should be developed.	Natural Areas
Water Conservation	The term evokes individual and household actions like shorter showers and not watering the lawn. Lay people do not associate this with large scale measures.	Waste prevention, water efficiency
Watershed	For more than half of lay people, this term has no meaning at all.	Upstream and downstream, area, land and water conservation,

Step Four: Insert the Words That Work

Synthesizing years of experience and a pile of social research, here is a list of two dozen “words that work.” □ These are the words that you should use heavily in your environmental writing, social marketing campaigns, and other outreach efforts. Everyday Americans understand these terms, respond well to them — and most importantly for the purpose of general environmental awareness — feel comfortable using them among their friends and family.

Use these Words to Introduce Your Work!

1. Protect nature
2. Control pollution
3. Enough Clean Water
4. Wildlife Conservation

Use these Words to Explain the Importance!

5. Future Generations
6. Healthy
7. Family/Children
8. Safe
9. Trends

Use these Words to Encourage people to Act!

10. Make a Difference
11. Doing My/Your/Their Part
12. It affects you
13. Here's what you can do
14. Working together
15. Save Money
16. Before it's too late

Use these Words to Ask for their Agreement!

17. Accountability
18. Corporations (are bad) Businesses (are good)
19. Choice
20. Fair
21. Balance
22. Planning Ahead
23. Responsible
24. Freedom
25. Investment
26. Law

Step Five: Tempting Testimonials

With the “Words That Work” in Step Four, we answer the question “is this a good cause?” In Step Five, we answer a different question your audience has: “What’s in it for me?”

The step is optional because it only suitable for pieces with several hundred words or more.

Tempting testimonials must be personal and honest. These stories must use the language that your audience would use, and you should use real faces and real names.

Sample Testimonials: Personal and Practical Benefits

Arrange for representatives of your target audience to explain what’s in it for them, not you! Find a farmer to say that responsible practices improve their crop yields. Recruit a business leader to say that a clean river helps them attract new customers. Enlist a pastor or minister to make the connection between conservation and their faith.

Sample Testimonials: Social Benefits

Have a representative of your target audience explain, in their own words, how taking this step for conservation enhanced their standing in the eyes of their peers

Step Six: Review Readability

Conservation professionals tend to have high educations and top reading skills. Most everyday citizens do not. Step Six in the Environmental Message Method is to calibrate the writing in your piece so it is suitable for the intended audience.

Here are three basic simple principles that determine how easy a passage of text is to read:

1. Longer sentences are harder to read than shorter sentences.
2. Longer words are harder to read than shorter words.
3. Sentences in the passive voice are harder to read than sentences in the active voice.

The first two principles are self-explanatory. The last principal deserves some extra explanation.

- **Passive:** A voluntary land protection agreement was signed for the farm.
- **Active:** The farmer signed a voluntary land agreement for her farm

- **Passive:** The wetland petition was signed by more than 800 citizens
- **Active:** More than 800 residents signed the petition in support of protecting the wetland.

- **Passive:** \$3500 was raised for the new boardwalk along the marsh
- **Active:** More than 30 donors contributed a total of \$3500 to build the boardwalk along the marsh.

Scientific and government writers use a great deal of passive voice -- sometimes as many as 60% of the sentences. While it is easier for you to write in passive voice, it is harder for your audience to read it. When you rewrite passages from the passive to the active voice, you will immediately notice the difference.

The Flesch Reading Ease Score

Linguists have devised any number of systems to evaluate the readability of text passages. We recommend that you check the Flesch Reading Ease score for all your messages that you intend for nonprofessional audiences. We prefer this system over other options for two reasons:

- It's built right in to [Microsoft Word](#), so it's readily available to you.
- The 1-100 scale is more useful than a 1-12 grade-level scale

Here's some guidance for how you can interpret your scores:

Score	Good Range For
80 to 100	"Underserved Audiences"
60-70	Average Readers, "The General Public"
45-55	White Collar Professionals, Elected Officials, Journalists, Most Donors & Funders
30-40	Your Professional Peers
<30	Nobody

In our experience, you probably write at a Flesch Reading Ease score of 35-45 unless you make a conscious effort to write more inclusively.

Here is how use the Flesch Reading Ease tool when you are write your piece:

- Determine your optimal Flesch Reading Ease score.
- Check the actual Flesch Reading Ease score or your draft.
- Edit your piece — break up long sentences, replace long words, rewrite passive sentences.
- Check your score again.
- Repeat until you achieve your optimal Flesch Reading Ease score.

Outreach

Step One: Decide The Target Audience

Untrained or unskilled communicators often try to get their message to "everybody." But when experienced professionals set out to deliver a message, one the first and most important decisions they make is the target audience: What kind of person will be spend our precious time and money trying to reach? Who is most likely to engage with the message?

Here are a few sample target audiences that might be appropriate for various types of environmental outreach efforts:

Once you have determined the target audience -- and estimated how large it is -- you can make a good decision about how to best reach that audience.

Target Audience Size	Target Audience #s	Recommended Impression Types
Small	Dozens	Personal requests in person, over the phone, or via email
Medium	Hundreds, Thousands	Blast email, Direct Mail, Telemarketing, Door-To-Door, Press Releases, Craigslist, Bulletin Boards, etc.
Large	Tens of thousands and up	Web Advertisements (Facebook and Google), Broadcast Advertisements, News Stories, Billboards, etc.

Step Two: Make Impressions

Once you have selected your target audience, you have to get the message to them! There are limitless numbers of ways to do that, but only a few of them will be appropriate for any given situation. Here are a few important rules of thumb to keep in mind:

Effective Impressions

Personal requests and word of mouth recommendations are far and away the most effective. You can expect the highest rate of response -- 10% and up. This kind of outreach is labor intensive and is generally most appropriate when your target audience is counted in dozens.

Step Three: Record Conversions

If you don't convert them -- they will forget you. Design your communication program so there is an opportunity for the target audience to respond to your message -- and for you to record the response. Surveys, donations by check, facebook activity

When your target audience responds, here are four questions you want to get the answer to:

- What is your name?
- What is your phone number?
- What is your email address?
- How did you hear about us?

Once you have collected this information, you have to store it somewhere so you can contact these individuals again.

Spreadsheets, Apple computers' free address book program,

Step Four: Cultivate the Relationship

Out of sight, out of mind. What this old saying means for you is that the people you worked so hard to get your message to are busy living their lives -- if you don't follow up with them after they respond,

Cultivation is perhaps the trickiest part of an outreach effort to get right. If you *over*-cultivate, you'll chase your audience away. We've all had the experience of ending up on somebody's email address and getting pelted until we unsubscribe. That's the mistake that we tend to think of first.

But the mistake you are probably making is to *under*-cultivate: Failing to acknowledge the donation. Forgetting to report on how the policy debate turned out. Neglecting to invite a volunteer to the next event. Etc.

You must be prepared to invest time and energy into cultivating a relationship if you want to move your target audience towards big steps like this:

- Putting a conservation easement on their property
- Making a major gift to your organization
- Committing many hours to a volunteer committee or board
- Taking a day off work to lobby their state legislator in person
- Etc.

Here are a few examples of activities that follow under the heading of "cultivation:"

- Thank people when giving a speech
- Post periodic updates to Facebook page
- Newsletter or email news
- Invitation to a fun event
- Phone call to say thanks and offer a briefing on progress
- Thank you cards
- Invitation to lunch
- Awards, permanent & public acknowledgment

Step Five: Urge The Big Step

This is what you wanted all along! The actions that individuals and businesses can take that really make a difference!

Here are some examples of big steps that an individual or business are much more likely to take if you invest a little time cultivating a relationship with them and giving them plenty of encouragement:

- Install porous pavers
- Plant a buffer along the lake
- Install and maintain a silt fence during construction
- Add a rain garden

Source: Water Words that Work www.waterwordsthatwork.com