

Narrative Framing Guide

Module 4.5 — Advanced Media Strategy: Frame Theory and Counter-Framing Protocol

What Is a Frame?

A frame is the interpretive container that determines what a story means before the facts are processed. Frames are not spin — they are the cognitive structure through which any audience makes sense of information. The advocate who sets the frame before the story breaks owns the story. The question is whether that person is you.

Frame vs. Message: The Critical Distinction

Concept	Definition	Example
Frame	The interpretive lens — what category does this event belong to?	'This is a public health crisis' vs. 'This is a government overreach issue'
Message	The content delivered inside the frame	'Tethered dogs suffer preventable injuries and stress' (inside the animal welfare frame)
Message discipline	Consistency of message across all spokespeople and channels	Every spokesperson uses the same three phrases regardless of how they're asked

How Frames Are Set

Mechanism	How It Works
First-mover advantage	The first frame applied to a story tends to stick — subsequent frames must fight uphill
Source credibility	Who says it matters: scientists frame the same data differently than politicians or advocates
Repetition	Frames that repeat across sources and channels become the assumed reality
Visuals	Images set frames faster and more powerfully than text — what you show determines what the story is about
Analogy and metaphor	Connecting a new situation to a familiar category imports the emotional meaning of that category

Analyzing Any Story for Its Active Frame

Apply these four diagnostic questions to any news story or social post about your issue:

Question	What to Identify
1. Category	What broader category does this story put your issue in? (economic, safety, rights, ethics, political)
2. Values activated	Whose values does this framing center? (efficiency, freedom, protection, fairness, tradition)
3. Who is the subject	Who has agency in this story — who acts, who is acted upon?

4. What is invisible	What relevant facts, actors, or perspectives does this frame make invisible?
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Counter-Framing Protocol

Counter-framing is offensive, not defensive. You are not rebutting their frame — you are proposing a better one. The three steps:

Step	What to Do
Step 1: Name the opponent frame	State it clearly and fairly — don't strawman it. Address the real argument they're making.
Step 2: Acknowledge what's valid	Even opponent frames contain a legitimate value. Acknowledge it. Denying it makes you look dishonest.
Step 3: Activate a competing value	Propose a frame that centers a different value — one that outweighs theirs for the target audience. Do not deny their value; outweigh it.

Counter-Frame Template

Element	Opponent Position	Your Counter
Opponent frame:		
Value it activates:		
Your counter-frame:		
Competing value:		
Language — Pragmatist:		
Language — Protector:		
Language — Traditionalist:		