

## Developing Key Messages and Talking Points

### What are key messages and talking points?

**Key messages** are the main ideas that you want an audience to remember. They can serve as the guide for marketing and communication efforts. Once determined, key messages should be used in every outlet of communication (e.g. digital media, print collateral, public speeches). By sticking to your key messages, you will help ensure the public receives consistent, accurate, memorable information.

**Talking points** are more focused than key messages and are driven by specific opportunities. They are succinct, persuasive statements tailored to an event or audience. You prepare and memorize talking points in advance of a communication give-and-take, such as an interview or debate, in anticipation of specific questions. They help you deliver your arguments effectively and concisely.

### Qualities of strong key messages and talking points

- Concise (as short as possible)
- Easy to understand and remember
- Conversational (they sound natural when said out loud)
- Jargon-free (avoid unfamiliar acronyms or complicated vocabulary)
- Persuasive and compelling
- Contrasting and differentiated
- Relevant to the audience
- Credible

### When and where should I use key messages?

Use key messages as often as possible. As with advertising, a message has to be heard multiple times to be remembered. Three to five priority messages are a good target; more than five are hard to include in all outlets. Additionally, three to five secondary messages can be created and leveraged for specific situations or lengthy interviews/discussions.

Include your key messages in every form of communication; they are not just for speeches and media interviews. Incorporate them into staff and board meetings, conversations with key stakeholders, website pages, newsletters, posters, Q&A sheets, brochures, presentations, and reports.

For example, an advocacy organization may want to bolster public support for a new education policy. It might develop three key messages: one that explains why the policy is good for students, one that explains why the policy is cost-effective, and one that explains why the policy will help families. In every email to its listserv, mailer, and public comment, the organization incorporates these same messages. Its staff has been briefed so that everyone, from the executive director to its interns, consistently communicates these ideas.

## How do I articulate my key messages?

Once you've decided on your message, you need to find ways to express it in an appealing and memorable way. For example, an advisor with teaching experience who is trying to convince a policymaker to make a certain decision might differentiate herself as “the only person here who knows the issues firsthand, because I am the only person with classroom experience.”

Take time to determine what you want your audience to remember. Say it out loud, then write it down. Finesse the message so it becomes easy to say and remember. Keep it short— the length of a Tweet or something a supporter could easily repeat.

The final step is to test your key message. If you're going for memorable and *you* can't remember it, then you've got a problem. Hold a mock interview where you include your messaging. Ask the interviewer or a listener, upon completion, if they can repeat it back to you. If they say it back in a way that is easier to grasp, consider revising it.

## Examples of talking points

Talking points are a way of programming conversation. The goal is to have everyone at your organization working from the same script so the message is consistent. Recall builds from repetition. Therefore, talking points are often composed as bulleted lists, with the first item on the list the one thing you most want people to repeat.

Here are some talking points used in different political campaigns:

- “The American people demand and deserve better, and we cannot allow President Obama to continue to run away from, or distract the American people from, his failed policies. The President’s failures have resulted in: high unemployment; lower take-home pay; the weakest economic recovery since the Great Depression” ([The Weekly Standard](#)).
- “Our students and schools have been making progress. Reading scores are up 25 percent and math scores have increased 17 percent in the last four years. This progress cannot continue with the proposed budget cuts to our public schools” ([California School Boards Association](#)).
- “It is the hardworking, everyday Americans who brought this country back from recession, and it is their time to their rewarded. When they succeed, America succeeds” ([The Weekly Standard](#)).