

What's in a Word?
An Active Learning Exercise for Teaching Media Framing

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Introduction

Communicators and educators play a valuable role in translating agricultural topics to lay audiences. As such, sentence structure and word choice is vital to sharing an accurate message. Communication theories, such as gatekeeping, framing, and agenda setting, are commonly covered concepts in undergraduate agricultural communications curricula (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). These theories are crucial media processes that determine which stories reach the public and how they are prioritized and interpreted; practices associated with these theories influence public opinion and highlight the potential consequences of media bias. The communication theories represent important competencies for future professionals in the discipline (Kurtzo et al., 2016). Communication theory is traditionally taught using a lecture-based approach; however, in some cases, teacher-centered instruction may limit the opportunity for students to engage with and apply abstract concepts in a professional setting (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). In college classrooms, active learning strategies are successful for increasing student engagement, critical thinking, and knowledge retention (Bonwell & Eison 1991; Freeman et al., 2014; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023).

Constructivism models how students attain knowledge. The constructivist learning theory further supports how learners can construct knowledge through experience and reflection, rather than instruction alone (Piaget, 1980). This idea further aligns with the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which suggests that learning is a continuous cycle where knowledge is created through direct experience (Kolb, 1984). The ELT has been successfully applied in agricultural education and communication courses by establishing hands-on learning experiences that enhance active learning and reflection (Kennedy et al., 2017; Shoulders & Meyers, 2013). Together, these theories make a case for the importance of active learning experiences for future agricultural education and communications professionals as they grasp media framing concepts.

The Hayakawa-Lowry News Bias Categories can serve as an instructional lens to demonstrate framing, agenda-setting, and gatekeeping concepts in the media (Lowry, 1986). In this framework, Lowry (1986) defined nine categories to organize three types of sentences (i.e., report, inference, and judgment). This classification system categorizes sentences based on news bias (King et al., 2006). Guided by the foundations of the Hayakawa-Lowry News Bias Categories (Lowry, 1986) and the ELT (Kolb, 1984), the purpose of this innovative idea was to demonstrate how subtle language choices can influence audience interpretation while preserving factual accuracy.

How It Works

We applied this activity in a 50-minute, upper-level, media writing course for agricultural communications students ($n = 36$) at Texas A&M University during the Spring 2026 semester. Students received a short lecture (approximately 20 minutes) to introduce gatekeeping, framing, and agenda setting before engaging in the active learning experience. To begin the activity, we provided students with a simple, base sentence to read: “A new agricultural policy will affect how producers manage fertilizer use.” We designed the sentence to be vague to allow students to change the meaning. For the second step, students joined small groups. Here, we tasked the groups with rewriting the base sentence three times in three minutes by only changing one word

each time. The third step of the activity was class discussion where student groups shared their sentence revisions with the class. Students wrote the examples on a whiteboard and completed step four by discussing the following questions: (1) What version sounded the most positive? (2) What version sounded the most restrictive? (3) Which version should make producers most nervous?, and (4) Which main communication theory does this align with? We also encouraged students to share potential consequences of media bias throughout the discussion. At the conclusion of the discussion, students chose one revision to reflect on the following questions: (1) If this were the only sentence someone read, what would they think about the issue?, and (2) What ideas are impossible to infer because they are missing? We invited students to share their experience with the activity through the collection of responses on a Google Form and from an associated lab assignment.

Results to Date

Examples of sentence revisions shared were: (a) a new agricultural policy will *control* how producers manage fertilizer use; (b) a *historic* agricultural policy will affect how producers manage fertilizer use; and (c) a new agricultural *restriction* will affect how producers manage fertilizer use. As students discussed the revisions and answered the discussion questions, additional conversations regarding how the tone and meaning of the sentence could change drastically with the exchange of just one word.

After the activity, 94.4% ($n = 34$) felt the activity reinforced knowledge of gatekeeping, agenda setting, and framing theories. Self-reported, qualitative responses from students also reflected the activity was well received. Many shared they liked the activity and enjoyed seeing how one word changed the tone of the sentence. Regarding the one-word activity, one student shared, “It was eye-opening into how much one word can change the whole meaning (vibe) of the sentence!” Student responses also indicated they understood the material learned. One student shared, “Word choice, structure, and tone all play a big role in shaping how readers look at an issue. Small wording changes can make something feel serious, hopeful, or controversial.”

Advice to Others

One student indicated they would have preferred a discussion and reflection between two small groups instead of as a whole class. Adopting this type of discussion may be less daunting to students (Hamann et al., 2012), but the resulting discussions might not be as rich (Sherry, 2019). In some scenarios, students may not prefer forced group discussions, which has been supported by previous research (Deslauriers et al., 2019). Implementing the between-group discussion while maintaining a full class reflection could preserve this part of the activity. Additionally, while we developed this activity for undergraduate agricultural communications students, the activity can be adapted for agricultural education, leadership, animal science, food science, natural resources, and agricultural advocacy contexts to promote evaluation of language and message construction.

Cost and Resources

We created a slide deck to present course material and the activity instructions to students and uploaded them to the course’s Learning Management System via Canvas. A whiteboard or other display mechanism is also recommended to capture student discussion items. However, the only cost associated with this activity was time.

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