

WHAT'S IN A WORD? AN ACTIVE LEARNING EXERCISE FOR TEACHING MEDIA FRAMING

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Traditional lectures may not fully engage future agricultural professionals with abstract concepts. This creates a need for hands-on activities that demonstrate how subtle word choices influence media framing and public perception.

INTRODUCTION

Word choice and structure are essential for **accurately communicating** agricultural topics.

Gatekeeping, framing, and agenda setting **shape how audiences receive and interpret information** (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kurtzo et al., 2016).

Active learning helps students **apply theory and strengthen critical thinking** (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Freeman et al., 2014; Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023).

FRAMEWORKS

Constructivism and Experiential Learning Theory emphasize learning through experience, reflection, and active application (Piaget, 1980; Kolb, 1984).

The Hayakawa-Lowry News Bias Categories provide a framework for examining how **language choices can shape media framing and audience interpretation** (Lowry, 1986; King et al., 2006).

HOW IT WORKS

Implemented in a 50-minute, upper-level agricultural communications media writing course (n = 36) at Texas A&M University.

After a brief theory lecture, students received a **vague base sentence** about agricultural policy.

In small groups, students rewrote the sentence **three times by changing one word and examined shifts in tone and meaning**.

Groups shared revisions and discussed which versions sounded **most positive, restrictive, or concerning** and which communication theory they align with.

Students ended by reflecting on how **wording shapes audience interpretation** through a Google Form and lab assignment.

RESULTS TO DATE

94.4% (n = 34) felt the activity **reinforced knowledge** of gatekeeping, agenda setting, and framing theories.

"It was eye-opening into how much **one word can change the whole meaning** (vibe) of the sentence!" – John

"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.**" – Ella

ADVICE TO OTHERS

One student preferred **small-group discussion**, which may feel less intimidating but could reduce depth (Hamann et al., 2012; Sherry, 2019).

Small-group discussion followed by class reflection may better **balance participation** (Deslauriers et al., 2019).

The activity is **adaptable across agricultural disciplines** to strengthen language evaluation.

BASE SENTENCE AND EXAMPLE WORD CHANGES

"A new agricultural policy will affect how producers manage fertilizer use."

- 1) A new agricultural policy will **control** how producers manage fertilizer use.
- (2) A **historic** agricultural policy will affect how producers manage fertilizer use.
- (3) A new agricultural **restriction** will affect how producers manage fertilizer use.

