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About the UCL Climate Action Unit

The UCL Climate Action Unit works to change how scientists, policymakers, businesses, media, civil society organisations and citizens engage with each other about climate change. Its approach is underpinned by a systems-based understanding of why organisations and individuals are not acting at the scale and pace needed - and how this can be resolved.

About the COP26 Universities Network

This report is published by the COP26 Universities Network: a growing group of over 80 UK universities and research centres working together to promote a zero carbon, resilient future. Its role is to ensure that the UK academic sector plays its role in delivering a successful COP26.

Acknowledgements

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This handbook is released alongside a toolkit from the AU4DM network, which can be accessed [here](#).

COMMUNICATING CLIMATE RISK A HANDBOOK

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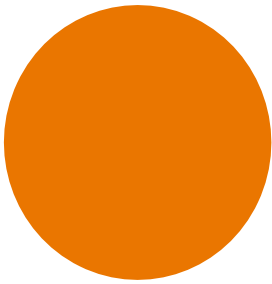
Ahead of COP26, experts from UK universities delivered a three day conference showcasing the latest research on climate risk: the Climate Risk Summit (29 Sept-1 Oct 2021).

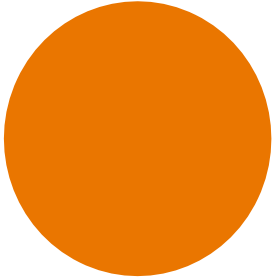
The virtual Summit, funded and coordinated by the COP26 Universities Network, featured an interactive workshop dedicated to the communication of climate risk. The UCL Climate Action Unit delivered this communication workshop in partnership with the AU4DM Network; drawing on the interdisciplinary expertise of both teams.

This handbook expands on the key ideas the UCL Climate Action Unit introduced to workshop

Risk for Elephants

Three insights from the sciences
of brain and mind





Insight

Ginger-the-Dog: what we think we say is often not what other people hear

these abstract words, they can acquire different intuitive meanings for our Elephant brains. This often happens across different disciplines or sectors which have their own practices and ways of working. The consequence is that, if you are speaking to someone with a different professional background from your own, what you think you are explaining is not what they might hear. Here are 2 relevant examples:

Uncertainty: for scientists, it may mean, e.g., 'a measure of the spread in the data'; for

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Many abstract words and phrases lack meaning or may have different meanings for different groups of people. Because we cannot point to concrete objects or events to calibrate our mutual understanding of

It doesn't require much imagination to see that Giger can cause serious problems in the cross-sector communication of climate risk. Climate scientists have generally tried to avoid misunderstanding by providing rigorous

meanings reside in our Elephant brains,

little to resolve the problem. These unfamiliar

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Although the disagreements which follow from this opinion fragmentation are subtler than the older divisions between ‘sceptics’ and ‘believers’, the consequences are no

room full of people who all agree that climate change requires urgent action, but who are deeply divided on the best strategy forward:

Do our warnings of climate risk need to be starker or not? Do we need to focus on individual behaviour change, a carbon tax, or government regulation? Do we need nature-based solutions, renewables, nuclear energy, carbon capture and storage, or should we start looking into large-scale geo-engineering? Is it still meaningful to act, or should we give up and focus on deep adaptation? Can we pull off the required transformation within the current economic system, or should we overthrow capitalism?

Paradoxically, the higher the concern in society about climate change, the more widespread this fragmentation could become. The main consequence of this is that risk

coherent policy action. What we will need in addition are credible and achievable policy and action pathways and a process of support-building to deliver them.

with someone who shares your view that climate change is a serious problem, but doesn’t agree on what to do or how to communicate about it – try to step away from that particular pyramid. high300440003004B0048

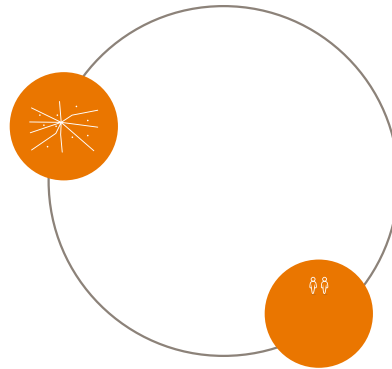
Climate Risk

Problem

Ineffective translation of science into policy

Protagonists

Our Insights



Outcomes

Long-Term Changes



a culture shift in how scientists and decision makers collaborate

Simple sentences

have one subject and one statement

e.g. "Green plants produce oxygen from carbon dioxide."

Compound sentences

have two simple sentences joined together with a conjunction

e.g. "Green plants produce oxygen from carbon dioxide and they remove pollutants from the air."

Complex sentences

have a main statement plus one or more qualifying statements

e.g. "Green plants, through a process called photosynthesis, produce oxygen from carbon dioxide."

Complex-compound sentences

have several main statements, each with their own qualifying statements, joined together

e.g. "Green plants, through a process called photosynthesis, produce oxygen from carbon dioxide and remove pollutants,

sentences wherever possible.

4 Avoid repetition

Find repetition in your writing and remove it. Do this as routinely as you would perform a spell-check.

within a sentence: for example you may use two adjectives or adverbs where one is enough.

Repetition can also occur **in subsequent sentences:** you may explain the same thing twice but using different words. In this situation, pick whichever description is most concise and lose the other.

Finally, check for repetition **across paragraphs:** you may have repeatedly written a noun out in full where you could have used a pronoun.

5 Use the active voice

Using the active voice can be tricky to get your head around, but it will make your writing more concise and direct. The active voice clearly states who or what does an action.

There is a basic formula for writing a sentence in the active voice:

subject + verb + statement = active voice

Still a bit confused? Here's an example:

It is sometimes appropriate to use the passive voice, but don't do it just because you think it sounds a bit fancy. A good rule of thumb? Try to put the majority of your sentences in the active voice, unless you really can't write it any other way.

6 Apply the inverted pyramid

In short; **put the conclusion at the start of your work.**

should care. You may not have the reader's attention for long if they are in a hurry so get

Arrange details from most to least important in the subsequent paragraphs.

Golden Nuggets

Communicating with policymakers

Understanding the space in which you want to communicate





Adjust to the time constraints of policymakers

Within academia, workshops and meetings can last from a few hours to several days. In the world of policymakers, meetings are usually 1 to 2 hours long. The more senior a policymaker, the less likely you'll be able to meet with them for longer.

When planning science-policy co-production activities, consider designing these as multiple, short interactions. Each one could be with different groups of policymakers. Look at these repeated interactions as an opportunity: you have several chances to

are and what their risk currency is.



Focus on listening rather than broadcasting

In the limited amount of time you may get with policymakers, prioritise 'listening' over 'broadcasting information'. Understanding what they need is the best use of that time because it will show you what to do to make your outputs more useful and usable.

Doing so allows you to avoid the 'So what?' question; where prospective end users of your research fail to see how it connects to their own risk currencies. If this happens, they will not engage with it.



Outcomes and structure

No matter how intelligent the policy users of your research are, simply bringing them together in a room with risk researchers will usually not work. Without a structured way for the two groups to engage, the outcomes are likely to be poor.

You can avoid this by planning your

what outcomes you want to achieve from a meeting, then create a structure of

those outcomes. Think beyond the usual academic formats of presentations and panel discussions. Instead plan interactive sessions which focus on listening and understanding their risk currencies and the current policy mood music.

Designing such sessions, and formulating the right questions to ask, are skills in their own right. Because of this, work with experienced facilitators to make your science-policy interactions as effective as possible.

Crowd-sourced: questions

Explain a decision you made recently where you considered climate risk.

within your organisation?

Can you think of a challenge that made you rethink your goals?

Name one thing that's stopping you at the moment?

What do you believe your boundaries are for the problem you are trying to solve?

How do you keep your stakeholders happy?

What are you trying to achieve? What processes are you using and who are you working with to do this? These all would be followed by why.

What decisions that you need to make might be informed by weather/ climate information? How do you hope to use this data?

Have you considered what would make you fail in your objectives?

Can you tell me a little bit about your current projects to make change happen?

As a senior leader or manager, what do you consider to be your core responsibility regarding the organisation?

Who would you trust to ask for information about the environment or related issues?

How is information shared in your organisation?

What challenges do you routinely face and how do you overcome these?

How do you use academic research in your day to day work to help you achieve your goals?

What do you most desire from climate research?

What areas or decisions of your everyday work feel most unconnected to climate change?

What do you base your decisions on?

What's the worst thing that could happen?

What does your organisation do best?

Shifting the focus from risk to action

necessary, the pyramid analogy and its consequences indicate that - on its own - climate risk information will not drive policy and action. What is the alternative? Building people's capacity for action. How to do this is explored in:

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Writing for decision makers

Books

Either of these books will help you to write clearly and concisely. Their pages contain lots of brilliant writing hacks.

- Evans, H. (2018) *Do I Make Myself Clear? Why Writing Well Matters*
- Evans, H. & Gillan, C. (2000) *Essential English for Journalists, Editors and Writers*

Online resources

- Refer to this incredibly comprehensive toolkit, authored by UCL Public Policy, for tips on how to engage with policymakers as an academic.
- Troubleshoot grammar and style queries using this alphabetised treasure trove.
- Get support and skills-based training on writing for the media (and other lay audiences) from the Science Media Centre.