



Part One: Get Ready > 1. Ground the case for change in your mission and values.

# TALKING ABOUT RACE TOOLKIT: AFFIRM, COUNTER, TRANSFORM<sup>18</sup>

The Center for Social Inclusion (CSI) is committed to advancing racial equity. We work to transform structural inequity and exclusion into structural fairness and inclusion. The Talking About Race Toolkit is part of our communications strategy to 1) reframe the conversation on race and 2) move us toward policy solutions that work for everyone.

## What is the Talking About Race Right Toolkit?

To advance racial equity, we have to be able to talk about race. Too often, we avoid the topic of race, which means we perpetuate inequitable outcomes. Other times, when race is talked about without an equity strategy, implicit bias is triggered and inequities are exacerbated. How we talk about race matters.

The good news is there's a useful field of practice to inform effective communications about race. This toolkit is a collection of the key strategies we've found are necessary to combat the race wedge and advance racial equity. Effectively talking about race is an essential skill and we believe this approach can help a variety of stakeholders effectively discuss race and policy.

## How should this toolkit be used?

This is a guide for your own strategic messaging. Please use the worksheet as a medium to try out your own messaging ideas and refer to the glossary at end for definitions. This toolkit contains critical strategies that advocates can use to fight the race wedge frame— but with a caveat that each of these messages must be customized based on issue, audience, and the intention of the message.

## When should this toolkit be used?

This toolkit should be used not only for winning critical policy fights, but also for the bigger goal of changing our narrative on race. We've tested on issues of healthcare, subprime lending, immigration, and fiscal policies, and firmly believe that the following strategies can apply to a broad variety of issues. Using our strategies together with multiple research-based messages can help bring about more racially equitable results. It's not enough to talk about race. We must act on new solutions.

*This toolkit is based on more than five years of research and collaboration with leading experts in the fields of messaging, framing, and implicit bias. For a copy of our latest report on message testing, please visit our website at [www.centerforsocialinclusion.org](http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org).*

Learn more about our work at [www.centerforsocialinclusion.org](http://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org).

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## Talking About Race Guide

To effectively move someone to support racial justice or policy reform, review the following points:

- Use images and words in a story format rather than just presenting data.
- Consider what your most important outcomes are and ask yourself whether there are universal values that people can agree on.
- There is no silver bullet. Not all messages work in all contexts or on all issues.
- Message order matters—a lot! The following framework orders the conversation in a way that's engaging and persuasive. Our framework is Affirm, Counter, and Transform (ACT).

Notes

<sup>18</sup>Source: Talking About Race: Affirm-Counter-Transform, Center for Social Inclusion. Reprinted with permission.



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### Affirm

Start off the dialogue by mentioning phrases and images that hook and engage your audience. The key is to speak to their values.

#### Start with the Heart

Start your message with an emotional connector to engage your audience in the message (e.g., “we work hard to support our families” and “all our contributions help make America great.”)

#### Explain why we're all in this Together

Describe “shared fate” in racially explicit terms (e.g., it hurts the same to lose a home or job, whether you’re White or Black, male or female, a single parent or a two-parent family...)

### COUNTER

Introduce and lead a discussion of race with a brief snapshot of the historical context. Open your audience’s minds to deeper explanations about racial inequities.

#### Explain why we have the Problem

Briefly outline what has happened in the past and why we have a problem today (e.g., public dollars for schools, bus service, health care, job creation).

#### Take on Race Directly

Confront the race wedge by declaring it and dismissing it by naming institutional opportunities and actions (e.g., this is not about immigrants or welfare, it’s about whether Americans will see their children off to college).

### TRANSFORM

Leave the audience with an engaging solution. Present an action item so they’re committed and feel like they’re moving forward.

#### Reframe "Makers" and "Takers"

Change and redefine who the real good guys and bad guys are in this fight (e.g., while oil company and bank CEOs are getting richer, some are laying off workers and fighting for tax loopholes instead of investing in our nation’s future ...)

#### End with Heart

Present solutions in emotional terms (e.g., corporations can and should do their fair share so we the people can invest in schools, healthcare, transit, and services that help us all have a bright future).

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## Talking About Race Worksheet

Consider the following questions as you brainstorm and design your own messages on racial equity.

### Context Questions:

- What are the policy issues you're working on (e.g., immigration reform, public transportation)?
- Who's the target audience you're trying to talk to (e.g., White swing voters)?
- What geographic area are you focusing on (e.g., Los Angeles, the state of Michigan)?
- What medium are you using to relay the message (e.g., video, presentation, flyers)?

### Affirm:

- Start with the heart. What speaks to your audience? What group of people do they identify with the most (e.g., working class)?
- Explain why we are all in this together.
- What identity could link your audience and the issue you're addressing (e.g., parenthood)?

### Counter:

- Take on race directly.
- Explain why we have the problem. What's the social, political, and historical context of the issue you're working on (e.g., population, demographic changes, and redistricting for immigration reform look)?
- What keywords are being used in the public debate about the issue you're working on (e.g., immigration reform, security, jobs, Americans)?
- What words and images are codes or metaphors for race (e.g., welfare queen, inner city, foreigners)?

### Transform:

- Reframe "makers" and "takers."
- Who are the main players in the issue? How have people of color been depicted in it?
- Recycle the words you used in the beginning of your message.
- Leave your audience with 1–2 action items for the issue at hand (e.g., re-invest in safety net programs).
- How are these action items benefitting everyone?
- End with heart and solution.

**Try it out with a partner! (3 minutes/6 sentences max)**

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## Talking About Race Glossary

**Dog whistle racism:**

Political campaigning or policy-making that uses coded words and themes to appeal to consciously or subconsciously racist concepts and frames. Sometimes referred to as “strategic racism.”

**Framing:**

Unconscious thought process consisting of networks of associations that we use to interpret information. Frames are used as a long-term strategy in changing perceptions (e.g., individual responsibility).

**Implicit bias:**

Unconscious attitudes and stereotypes targeting individuals and social groups that “affect our understanding, actions, and decisions” (adapted from Kirwan Institute).

**Individual racism:**

Pre-judgement, bias, or discrimination by an individual based on race.

**Institutional racism:**

Policies, practices, and procedures that work better for White people than Black, Indigenous and other people of color, regardless of intention.

**Messaging:**

Re-packaging arguments using engaging and persuasive language.

**Race wedge:**

The process of using race strategically as a tactic to divide people in order to achieve a political outcome (e.g., welfare queen language).

**Racial equity:**

When race is no longer a determinant because socioeconomic outcomes have improved for all groups. It’s an inclusive approach to transforming structures to guarantee access, justice, self-determination, redistribution, and sharing of power and resources. Racial equity is our lens and the outcome we seek to achieve.

**Structural racism:**

A history and current reality of institutional racism across all institutions. This combines to create a system that negatively impacts communities of color.

## Resources Relevant to Message Development

- [Asian Americans on Sunday Shoes; What They Talk About When They Talk About Us](#), ChangeLab
- [Dog Whistle Politics](#), Ian Haney López
- [Winning Words for Closing the Racial Wealth Gap](#), Insight Center for Community Economic Development
- [State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2015](#), Kirwan Institute
- [Transforming Perception: Black Men and Boys](#), Perception Institute
- [Visions, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit](#), Opportunity Agenda
- [Getting Equity Advocacy Results \(GEAR\) Toolkit](#), PolicyLink
- [Moving the Race Conversation Forward](#), Race Forward

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The Center for Social Inclusion is available for communications testing trainings that include these strategies and facilitated conversations on how to customize your own message.