



# PASSING THE MESSAGE STICK



**When our narratives centre our strength and capability, we can build majority support for self-determination and justice.**

This practical guide draws on two years of research, for us and by us, and shares the messages that are effective in building widespread support for community-led solutions.

**The success of this project depends on all of us passing on the message stick**, so we encourage you to embrace these recommendations and share your lessons widely. Together, we can change the story and win transformative change.

# WRITING YOUR MESSAGE

## 1. Start messages with a shared value

Powerful values like fairness, taking care of one another, freedom, and knowing what's best for ourselves can build support for self-determination and justice. By crafting messages around a shared value, we can bring our audiences along, and show how the barriers we face violate widely-held values.

## 2. It's time to reclaim our strength

We need to share many stories of our strength and leadership. This helps people to believe we're capable of making good decisions and support our demands for self-determination.

## 3. Name the unfair barrier we face, who is causing us harm and why

We need to shine a light on who causes the problems we face, and why. This helps the audience to understand who is responsible for the problem, and understand it can be fixed.

## 4. Combine truth and action

Our messages need to include the current injustices we face. When we combine these with clear asks and solutions, we gain the support of both our community and persuadables.

## 5. Create a collective 'we'

Our base and persuadables are nervous that self-determination means segregation. We can overcome this by bringing them into the message and including clear asks for their solidarity.

## 6. Explain big concepts in simple language

Many people don't understand concepts like self-determination, systemic racism, colonisation and equity. We need to put these terms in plain language and use metaphors to convey our message. When we do, we get wide support.

## 7. Never negate – don't repeat the opponent's message

Whenever we try to myth bust, or say the opponent's message is untrue, we're helping them by repeating their message. Don't engage in the opponent frame, instead, we need to speak from our strength and share our truth.

# SAMPLE MESSAGE

“We know best for our community” is a strong message that highlights the ignorance of governments, and shows we have the capability and knowledge to lead our own solutions.

Here’s **an example message using our lessons:**

**4. Combine truth and action**

**5. Create a collective ‘we’**

**1. Start with a shared value**

**3. Name the unfair barrier**

People are better off when they are free to set their own course.

Yet the government keeps locking us out of decisions and forcing their policies on us, insisting they know what’s best for Aboriginal people.

But we know what our communities need. 40 years ago, when government health services were failing us badly, we took the driver’s seat and set up Australia’s first community health centres. Today, our services are the best in the country and the government models their health, legal aid and childcare systems on ours.

Our people are strong and resilient and when we are free to choose our own path, the whole country benefits.

**6. Use simple language**  
to describe big concepts

**7. Say what we want** and never negate

**2. Reclaim and share our strength**

EMBRACE	REPLACE
Vision, values and emotion: “we all deserves to be treated with respect”	Statistics and jargon
<p>“We are strong and capable”</p> <p>“We are strong <i>despite</i> ongoing injustice”</p>	<p>“We are vulnerable people”</p> <p>“The most incarcerated people on the planet”</p>
<p>“We need your solidarity / we’ve got this, back us”</p>	<p>“We need your help”</p>
<p>“X Minister has cut health funding to our communities, making us sicker”</p>	<p>“The gap in health outcomes is widening”</p>
<p>“Right” - What is morally right</p>	<p>“Human rights”</p>
<p>“Aboriginal land and our people were stolen and we want our land back” (everyone knows stealing is wrong)</p>	<p>“Aboriginal people have a special connection to country, that’s why we need protection of our unique rights” (invokes special rights)</p>
<p>Include why people do bad things – “X Minister is choosing this policy because they’re racist and ignorant”</p>	<p>Describing problems without who is causing them and why – “This government policy is unfair”</p>
<p>“Today, companies are destroying our cultural heritage, we need final decision-making power on what happens on our land”</p>	<p>Describing historic injustice without connecting to its impacts today, or how it continues into the present</p>
<p>“Whether your family’s been here five years, five generations or 5,000 generations”</p> <p>“First Nations, migrants and more recent arrivals”</p>	<p>“Indigenous and non-Indigenous”</p> <p>“First Nations and settlers” (this pits us against each other, and makes people think of competing with us)</p>
<p>“We all have a responsibility to”</p> <p>“We need to all hear our stories”</p>	<p>Talking at your audience without including them</p>
<p>“Homelands or X community”</p>	<p>“Remote communities” (avoid remoteness and separation)</p>
<p>“Aboriginal people should have the final say on what does and does not happen on their land”</p> <p>“Aggressive policing of our children, control on what we can spend our pensions on, and discrimination when applying for jobs”</p>	<p>“We want self-determination”</p> <p>“Stop systemic racism”</p>
<p><b>Free:</b> “People are better off when they are free to set their own course”, “when we are free to be who we are”</p> <p><b>Journey:</b> “in the driver’s seat”, “move forward together”, “walk with us”, “chart our own course”</p> <p><b>Build:</b> “work together to build a better future for everyone”</p>	<p><b>Black / dark:</b> “our dark past”, “a black day for this country”</p> <p><b>Gap:</b> “close the gap”</p> <p><b>Reconciliation:</b> which means to make up after a fight, but we were never friends to begin with</p>
<p>“Our families take care of one another”</p> <p>“Police target our families because of the colour of our skin”</p>	<p>“Our families are not dysfunctional”</p> <p>“Aboriginal people are not innately criminal”</p>

# SHAPING YOUR MESSAGE

Here's a **framework to shift the story** away from our 'wounded bodies' and towards a strength-based message that puts a spotlight on the people and institutions who inflict harm on us:

Start with a shared **VALUE** to hook our audience. Use a common sense statement that most people agree with.

Then describe the **VILLAIN** creating barriers for us, and name their intentions. Be as specific as possible - who is involved, what they are doing, and what's their motive?

Next, share your **VICTORY**, or a clear ask and solution grounded in strength and capability, showing we know what's best for our communities.

Finish with a **VISION** of a positive, hopeful future. This provides hope to our base and persuadables who genuinely want better lives for First Nations people.

**VALUE**

**VILLAIN**

“

Everyone deserves to be treated with equal respect and dignity.

But today, we still have a *racist system* that *unfairly targets* people based on their colour and blocks them from setting their own course. We have *aggressive policing* of Aboriginal children, *controls* put on what Aboriginal people can spend their pensions on, and *discrimination* when applying for jobs.

We need to work together, whether we've been here for five years, five generations or 5,000 generations, to redesign things so it's fair for everyone.

With a system that reflects the values we all share, everyone, no matter who they are, can be treated equally.

**VICTORY**

**VISION**



# AUDIENCES



We researched the best messages to mobilise us and our closest allies, persuade those in the middle and alienate our opponents:

**The base** – members of the broader public who strongly support self-determination and justice. **The most important part of our base is us.**

**Persuadables** – the majority of people in the middle who don't have a firm view on us, self-determination or justice. They toggle between conflicting ideas - what we say, and what our opponents say.

**Opponents** – people who strongly oppose self-determination and justice, they will never support us and we don't need them to.

The project began with a comprehensive language analysis, led by a cohort of First Nations communicators, journalists and advocates. This was followed by qualitative and quantitative research, including interviews and surveys with First Nations advocates, nine focus groups, and a representative survey of 1,700 people.

**Find out more about  
passing the message stick at**

**[PASSINGTHEMESSAGESTICK.ORG](https://PASSINGTHEMESSAGESTICK.ORG)**

