



Communication Strategies for Interpreting Climate Change

Embrace Controversy -- Avoid Conflict

Interpreters should utilize the relevance, passion, and energy of controversy. Controversy is derived from difference but does not have to lead to conflict and threaten interpretation. Your site's resources, and resource issues such as climate change, possess multiple meanings that can be viewed from multiple perspectives. It is the diversity of resource meanings that provides the possibility of constituency building and a growing stewardship ethic. For example, audiences can disagree about the meanings of climate change but can agree that your site's resources are worthy of care. Interpreters should develop the following skills for embracing controversy as an interpretive tool, while avoiding the pitfalls of conflict and confrontation.

Know your audience -- To successfully interpret controversy, interpreters should take every opportunity to learn more about their audiences. An understanding of audience perspectives, multiple points of view, cultural backgrounds, and demographics is essential for anticipating disagreement, creating an environment of respect, establishing relevance, and provoking new connections to the meanings of the resource.

Understand, respect and acknowledge multiple perspectives -- Harnessing controversy requires the interpreter to recognize, acknowledge and truly respect the concept of multiple perspectives. If we don't, in our hearts, respect the rights of our visitors to hold a different perspective, anything we say is going to appear condescending or insincere. Tips for interpreting multiple perspectives:

- Conflict often arises from audiences feeling threatened that their perspectives are under attack. Acknowledging that there are different perspectives is a gesture of respect and inclusion that instantly diffuses conflict.
- Meet the visitors where they are -- use existing audience meanings and perspectives to establish relevance and comfort before introducing new meanings and perspectives.
- Offer new meanings and perspectives as "something else" to consider, not as a preferred or better way of connecting to the resource.
- Recognize that individuals who choose not to accept climate change science, who do not agree with the agency position, or who lack scientific or climate literacy have as much right to experience and love your site's resources as anyone else.
- Acknowledging multiple points of view does not require interpretive programs to provide equal time, or to disregard the weight of scientific or historical evidence.
- Use universal concepts to establish common ground between the interpreter and audience as well as between audience members.
- Use accurate and respectful language that identifies the perspective from which information is presented. Example: "Scientists estimate that sea level will rise..." rather than "Sea level will rise..."

Appropriately represent agency position – As federal employees, it is imperative that interpreters represent the official position of their agency honestly and transparently. To accomplish this, interpreters must familiarize themselves with their agency's climate change response strategy and its application at their site.

Interpretation vs. advocacy -- Know the difference between explaining/interpreting a perspective and advocating it. There are very few instances where there is an “official, government explanation” of specific events or causes. Care should be taken not to mislead the public into thinking we are presenting the “authorized, final version” of history or science. We are presenting multiple perspectives—and our understanding of the context of those views based on sound scholarship.

Provide a safe environment -- When engaging in critical resource issues like climate change, as well as attempting to harness the controversy of an issue, it is imperative to provide a safe environment for public reflection and expression. There are a variety of communication techniques which enable an interpreter to do this:

- Model good questioning – use open ended questions, avoid those with “right or wrong” answers. Questions should challenge people to think critically and engage their values or beliefs without judgment.
- Allow voicing of multiple perspectives
- Encourage audience members to show respect for differing ideas/opinions
- Keep things site-specific and place-based
- Practice and model active listening
- Share stories, make it personal
- Provide the proper level of authority in order to not stifle conversation or lose control
- Ask for repeating/clarification of audience statements and questions

Use facilitation techniques that turn debate into discussion. Controversial issues like climate change lend themselves to dialogue and collaborative discussions. This requires the interpreter to understand the difference between his/her role as a presenter versus a facilitator. With preparation and practice, a thoughtful interpreter can almost always pre-empt conflict and turn controversy into an opportunity for connection by facilitating a dialogue.

Presenter

Transmits information

Provides the right answers

Relies on one-way communication

Is primarily self-focused

Facilitator

Guides discussion for self-discovery

Provides the right questions

Relies on two-way communication

Actively focuses on the resource and visitors

Recognize when a situation or issue is not interpretive. Do not attempt to interpret controversy when audiences have a primary agenda of challenging or changing policy, interrupting interpretive programs, or insulting interpreters or management. Those audiences are outside the scope of interpretation. Be able to identify when visitors are trying to bait the interpreter into an argument and learn how to quickly diffuse it. Sometimes the wisest choice is to politely disengage from interpretive efforts and/or respond in a manner as directed by management.