

Making History Matter: Toolkit for Communicators

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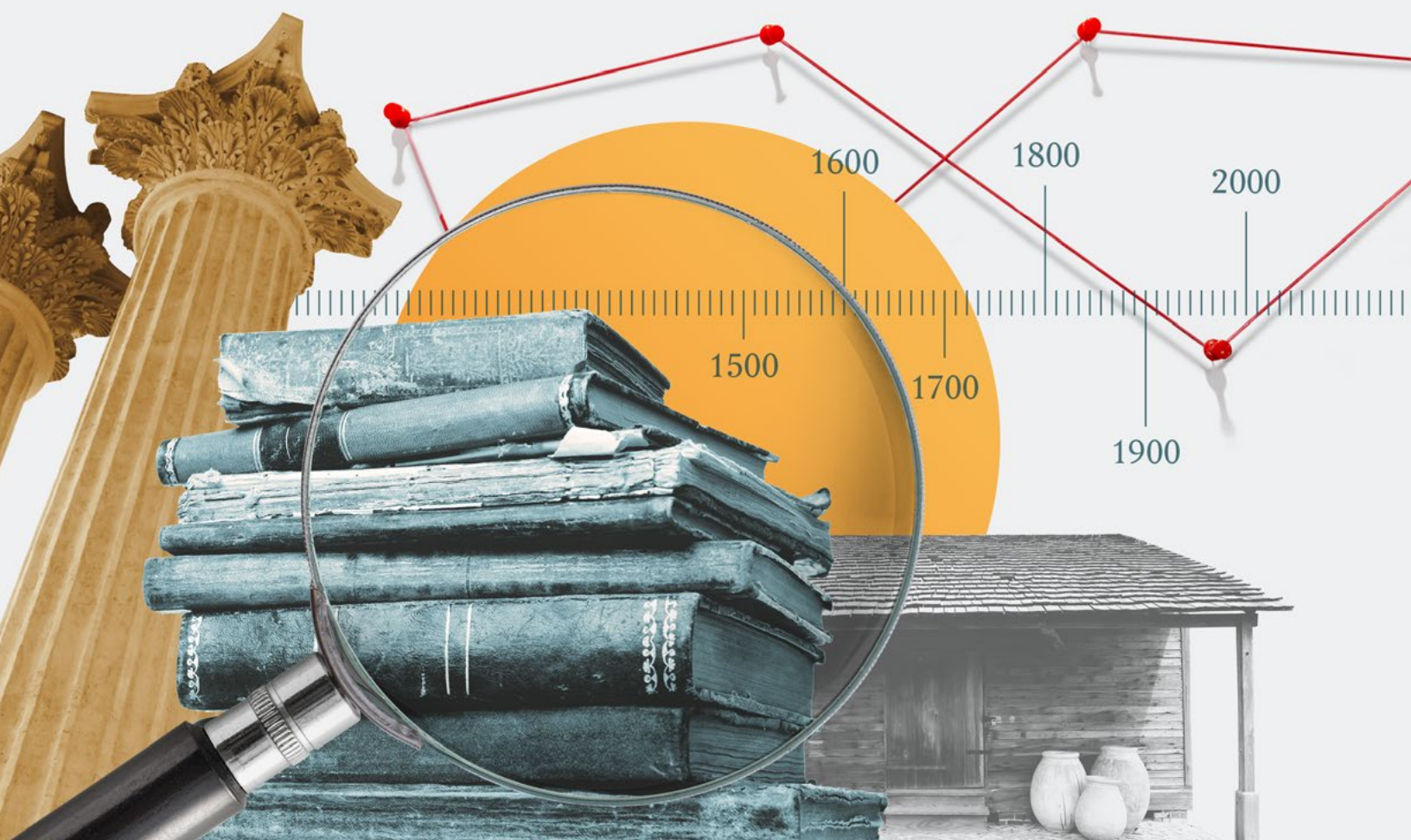
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Introduction

Welcome to “Reframing History,” a communications toolkit for historians, museum professionals, educators, and other advocates. It’s designed to facilitate more effective communication with the public about history: why it matters, how it can be interpreted, and why it is important to incorporate critical thinking and a multitude of diverse perspectives in the ways we understand it.

The “tools” in this toolkit are evidence-based strategies for reframing history, developed and tested by the FrameWorks Institute in partnership with the American Association for State and Local History, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization of American Historians. These strategies are based on a two-year deep-dive research project undertaken by our organizations to develop specific recommendations for communicators.¹ This research was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The public widely assumes that making sense of the past is about finding the one objective “truth” about what happened and recording and documenting “just the facts.” This toolkit is designed to help communicators shift the conversation about history from being about abstract truth to critical engagement with the past. This shift can help quiet the endless polarization and debate evoked by the concept of a single “truth” about what happened in the past and build the public’s understanding of the importance of learning from the past to create a more just future.

How to Use this Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to make it easy for you to incorporate our research-tested framing strategies into your communications. The intention is for you to incorporate the evidence-based messages in this toolkit. Consistency is key, and that comes when all like-minded advocates speak the same language.

In the toolkit, you’ll find:

- Common communications traps, and how to avoid them.
- A “bridge and pivot” guide, with strategies to get conversations back on track when misperceptions threaten to derail them.
- Answers to commonly asked questions about framing itself.
- A variety of sample messages that illustrate how to use the framing strategies.

You can read the toolkit from beginning to end or use the table of contents below to skip to the section that is most relevant to your immediate communications questions or goals. The focus here is on putting the strategies to work. If you want to know more about the research behind our recommendations, check out the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this toolkit.

Contents

Common Communications Traps... and How to Avoid Them:

Make these small changes to your communications to keep audiences engaged. 4

Keeping Conversations on Track:

Use the “bridge and pivot” technique to prevent dialogue derailments. 6

Sample Reframed Communications:

Use these “before and after” models as examples of how to incorporate framing into your own communications, with “Why does history matter” as the common lens in reframing. 9

Frequently Asked Framing Questions:

Answers to communicators’ most common questions about strategic framing. 7

Additional Resources:

Want more? Check out these links to our research reports about reframing history. 13

Endnotes 14

Common Communications Traps... and How to Avoid Them

Make these small changes to your communications to keep audiences engaged. Some communications habits have unintended consequences for audiences. Avoid these common traps with the alternative framing strategies offered below.

The habit:

Talking about historical “truth.”

Example: “To gain a more accurate understanding of our country’s history, we must reject mythology and grapple with the harsh truth—and the truth about Columbus is one of violent colonization, not discovery.”

The consequence:

Audiences believe that learning about the past involves finding the “one truth” about what happened. This makes them assume that any interpretation about the past—including those made by historians—is inherently “biased.”

The alternative:

Focus on critical thinking to help people recognize the value of grappling with different perspectives and understandings of the past, and of engaging actively with the practice of history.

Example: “Meaningful engagement with our past requires grappling with perspectives that might change how we see it. Reckoning with Columbus’s legacy of violent colonization is critically important to understanding our country’s history.”

The habit:

Explaining the work of historians as gathering evidence in order to document history as it happened.

Example: “Historians, like journalists, collect eyewitness accounts to hear what many different people say really happened.”

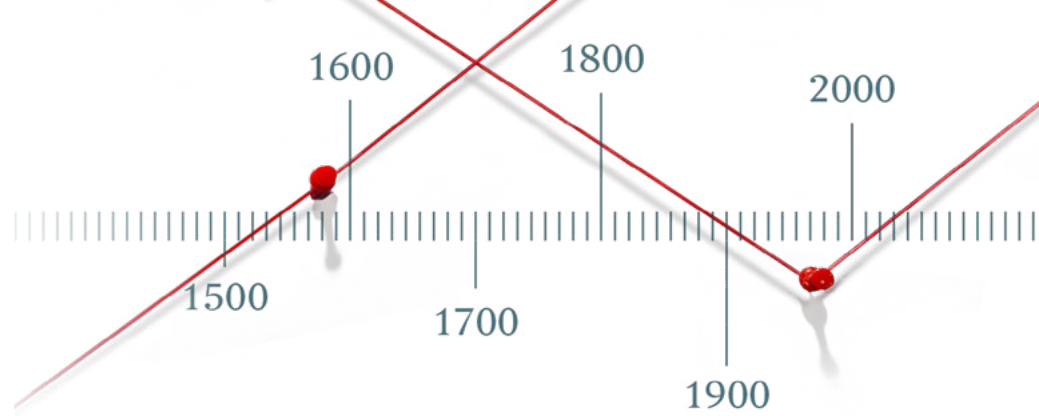
The consequence:

The public focuses on eyewitness accounts of past events as the main source of evidence, rather than understanding the ways historians use different types of sources and analysis, and process historical evidence through discussions to build consensus. Comparing historians to journalists misrepresents what historians do, and the public doesn’t have fully formed ideas of what historical practice involves that they can easily reference.

The alternative:

Explain the process of historical inquiry and interpretation using the metaphor of detective work, describing the range of sources and methods used in an ongoing process to incorporate new evidence and perspectives that lead to updated understandings of what happened. Talk about the practice of historians’ work rather than focusing on the person or directly comparing historians to other professionals.

Example: Historians’ work involves investigating the past by analyzing many different kinds of evidence to get as complete an understanding as possible, much like how detective work involves seeing how different clues all fit together.



The habit:

Overemphasizing the “progress” to date on issues of social justice.

Example: “The value of history is that it helps us learn from past mistakes.”

The consequence:

People may think we have already moved past racial and other injustices, downplay the painful past injustices of slavery and genocide that continue to inform our society today, or become fatalistic about the possibility of learning from past mistakes.

The alternative:

Make the case that history is essential for us to make progress as a country. Be clear and specific about the goal of progress, namely to help us move toward justice. Connect progress to the idea of learning from past wrongs.

Example: “History helps us to make progress toward a more just future.”

The habit:

Making sweeping statements about the lack of inclusion in history and white male-centric narratives, without specific examples that ground audiences with a sense of place or offer possible solutions.

Example: “Historic sites offer a special opportunity to engage with the past. Too often, though, that past is exclusionary and leaves out the stories of people who were not white and wealthy.”

The consequence:

Audiences may believe the problem is too big, too abstract, or too intractable to solve. They may view historical oppression of certain groups (such as BIPOC and women) as an “uncomfortable” topic.

The alternative:

Help audiences see what inclusive history can look like by offering concrete examples.

Example: Historic sites offer a special opportunity to encounter the past—especially when they give visitors a chance to grapple with our country’s historic injustices. For example, the Whitney Plantation Museum in Edgard, Louisiana, focuses on the history of the enslaved people who were held there. Making progress toward a more just society requires this deep engagement and reckoning with the past.

Keeping Conversations on Track

Use the “bridge and pivot” technique to keep conversations from going offtrack.

If a conversation focused on critical thinking about history starts getting derailed, don't worry—you can steer it back on track by following a simple three-step formula.

Step One: Analyze

Figure out what you're responding to. Pushback against inclusive history tends to use patterned, predictable frames. The most common of these are:

- Historians are biased and share their personal opinions.
- History is “just the facts,” and this seems like rewriting the facts we already learned.
- Our society is equal now; discrimination is a thing of the past.



Step Two: Bridge

When someone says something that might take the conversation off course, you first need a “bridge” between what they said and what you want to say. Acknowledge the person you are engaged in conversation with, but don't restate or try to rebut the assumptions in their message. Use an innocuous bridging phrase to redirect the conversation, such as:

- “What's most important to understand is ...”
- “Let me answer you by saying ...”
- “Another way to look at this is ...”
- “What's really at stake here is ...”
- “That's an interesting question ...”
- “That speaks to a bigger point ...”

Step Three: Pivot

Introduce the framing strategy that will get the conversation back on track.

**When They
Use the Frame...**

**Respond with
This Frame:**

Personal Opinions

Critical Thinking

Revisionist History

Doing Detective Work

Racism Is Over

Progress Toward Justice

Here's What It Looks Like

Scenario One

PERSON 1

History is made up of many stories and perspectives.

PERSON 2

Is whatever history I hear just somebody's opinion?

PERSON 1 (THINKING)

That sounds like the “Personal Opinions” frame, so I should respond by emphasizing critical thinking and analysis.

PERSON 1

What's important to understand here is that *historians use many tools to evaluate those different perspectives.* That critical analysis is how we develop a deeper understanding of the past.

Scenario Two

PERSON 1

Sometimes historians need to change how we understand the past.

PERSON 2

So you're saying they rewrite history? Why would they do that—to suit their political agenda?

PERSON 1 (THINKING)

That sounds like the “Revisionist History” frame, so I should respond by using the Doing Detective Work metaphor.

PERSON 1

Another way of looking at this is by thinking of historical investigation as detective work. Sometimes new evidence comes to light. Just like good detective work takes new evidence and uses it to update a case, historians use new evidence to update and deepen our understanding of what happened in the past.

Scenario Three

PERSON 1

History is important because it helps us learn from our past mistakes.

PERSON 2

Yes—it's great to see how we've moved past segregation and racial discrimination.

PERSON 1 (THINKING)

That sounds like the “Racism is Over” frame. I should respond by making it clear that history helps us make continual progress toward justice.

PERSON 1

Let me answer you by saying that history helps us shed light on where we've gone wrong in the past, and that we need to use that knowledge to move us forward. We need to keep deepening our understanding of where we've been, where we are now, and how we can do better. That's how we can continue to make progress toward justice.

Sample Reframed Messages

Use these “before and after” models as examples of how to incorporate framing into your own communications, with “Why does history matter” as the common lens in reframing. Feel free to adapt these messages or use them word-for-word.

Sample online content for an academic course

Compare this copy (a paraphrase of one found online) to the reframed version below:

History: Interpreting the Past

This course introduces students to trends in the thought and practice of history, from ancient civilizations to the formulation of “contemporary history.” Students will examine the integral relationship between the study of history through **storytelling** from multiple sources, and our understanding of the contemporary world. They will engage with the multiple methods and sources historians use in their **pursuit of historical truths** in order to develop relevant analyses and arguments around historical events.

Emphasizing either storytelling or objective truths can cue unproductive thinking about bias and personal opinions.

After

History: Interpreting the Past

The purpose of this course is to introduce students to the nature of historical interpretation. Students will engage with the many various ways historians **interpret their evidence** and allow them to practice interpretation on their own. The goal is for students to come away from the course able to **think critically** about the nature and limits of historical evidence, the different ways of approaching it, the **importance of evaluating different perspectives**, and the art of making persuasive claims about historical events.

Using the ‘critical thinking’ frame explains how multiple perspectives are analyzed to arrive at a deeper understanding of the past.

Introduction to an exhibit

Compare this copy (a paraphrase of one found online) to the reframed version below:

Step back in time with our living history exhibit and see what colonial life was really like with **reconstructed buildings, authentic artifacts, and actors reenacting daily life** in one of the largest original colonies in America.

This message misses an opportunity to frame history as having importance beyond satisfying intellectual curiosity.

After

What was life really like in one of the largest original colonies in America? Our living history exhibit offers you a chance to immerse in recreated scenes based on a variety of historical accounts **and ask questions of actors reenacting daily life. You'll walk away with new perspectives, ideas for further study, and a deeper understanding of how our society first came to be.**

Using the 'critical thinking' frame connects the practice of history to the wider benefits of learning history.

Letter to funders

Compare this copy (a paraphrase of one found online) to the reframed version below:

Dear Friend,

Why does history matter?

An informed public is the cornerstone of a **functioning democracy**. Having a more complete understanding of our past enables people to be engaged members of our society. **In order to create a strong democracy**, we need to make sure everyone has ample opportunities to learn about the past— because decisions we make about the present should be informed by knowledge of how we got here.

At the Historical Society, we believe that learning diverse accounts of the past helps us make informed decisions as individuals and as a community. We need your support to make that learning possible. Your gift helps us study the past and **create a stronger democracy**.

In our research, framing history as important because it strengthens democracy was found to be a less effective strategy for explaining why history matters than the critical thinking frame.

After

Dear Friend,

Why does history matter?

Studying history means **thinking critically** about the world and our place in it. It involves **evaluating many different perspectives** and figuring out **how past events affect our lives today**. In doing so, we **build critical thinking skills** that **apply to all aspects of our lives**—and we develop a **deeper understanding of our society and how it came to be**. And we learn from the past with hopes of a brighter future.

We believe **history can—and should—be used to move us forward**. At the Historical Society, we believe in **providing people opportunities to confront the painful legacy of racism**. Through history, we can better understand **where we have been, where we are now, and how we can do better**. Your gift helps us **study the past in pursuit of a more just future**.

Using the ‘critical thinking’ frame explains what historical interpretation involves and why history is important at a societal level.

The value of ‘progress toward justice’ makes the case that history is essential for making progress towards a more just society.

Opening of an op-ed

Before

As a historian and a parent of two school-aged children, I feel I have both a professional and personal obligation to wade into the contentious debate currently being held over the teaching of so-called “critical race theory” in our nation’s schools. **First, an important disclaimer: CRT is likely not being taught in your child’s school**, no matter what you might be hearing on Facebook. CRT is an academic framework used by scholars for legal analysis—hardly the stuff of elementary school curricula. **What is really at stake here is whether students learn the true history of our country, including “uncomfortable” truths like the legacy of racism.**

Our recent research has shown that denying critical race theory (CRT) is being taught in schools is an ineffective framing strategy.⁵

Emphasizing objective truths can backfire, cueing unproductive thinking about bias.

After

As a parent, I have seen first-hand how our school’s dedication to **anti-racist** approaches to education has helped my two children to develop and grow. And as a historian, I am perhaps especially attentive to the fact that our school teaches about the history of racism and ongoing forms of discrimination during the whole school year, not just in the month of February. **Our school’s curriculum is building their critical thinking skills, their ability to have open and honest dialogue with peers of different backgrounds, and their ability to collaborate with others.**

Parents are particularly effective messengers when communicating about their personal experiences of anti-racist education at the classroom level.

Pivot away from the debate over CRT and center race and racism in the conversation with the term ‘anti-racist education.’

Highlighting positive effects on children’s growth and development subverts the narrative that anti-racist education is harmful for children.

Frequently Asked Framing Questions

Answers to communicators' most common questions about strategic framing.

Strategic framing research takes the guesswork out of communications, but the findings are often surprising—even to the researchers!—and may sound counterintuitive, especially to advocates who have been communicating about the issue for a long time.

Below are answers to some of the most common questions advocates and experts ask us about our framing recommendations. If you have a question about framing that isn't addressed in this "FAQ" see the "Additional Resources" section in this toolkit, visit the FrameWorks Institute's online library at www.frameworksinstitute.org/library, or drop us a note at engagement@frameworksinstitute.org.

Q: Isn't copying and pasting information from this toolkit a form of plagiarism?

It's not—because we're not only giving you permission to use this language, we're encouraging it. These messages have all been developed based on extensive research and testing, and the way they are presented is evidence-based and intentional. The success of framing in impacting long-term progress depends on consistency and repetition.

Q: The debate around history education—including critical race theory as a red herring—is extremely polarized. How can I talk about the need for critical thinking around history without first acknowledging this reality?

Framing an issue effectively means helping people think about what should—and can—be done. Reminding people that this is a polarizing issue creates the sense of fatalism that you are trying to avoid. Instead, you want them to focus squarely on the

widespread support for critical thinking and inclusive history as a way of making progress toward justice. Our research shows members of the public have become more likely to recognize that past injustices need to be talked about and remembered in order to make sense of current problems in society, such as racial inequality and police brutality.²

Q: How do we answer questions about how our framing relates to critical race theory itself?

The recent backlash against "critical race theory" (i.e., teaching about systemic racism in schools and universities) is grounded in the assumption that when it comes to history, what matters and counts is the history of white people. While this way of thinking is obviously present in our current discourse, it is important to underline that people generally, across racial and ideological lines, are able to think in more productive ways about the importance of grappling with past injustices. Providing specific examples of shared, inclusive history that show how particular institutions help us reckon with past injustices activates and expands this way of thinking. In addition, moving away from abstract debate over "the truth" about our history and our country and grounding conversations in specifics and the idea of critical engagement can make it harder for people to challenge the value of inclusive history.

In focus groups conducted in 2021 that were specifically focused on the debate around "critical race theory," which FrameWorks conducted for partners who engage in anti-racist education work, we confirmed that the above framing strategies are productive ways of intervening in this debate.³

Participants widely agreed that in order to address racism, we must know our past. Clarifying how history can help us grapple with injustice and move beyond it—that is, how history helps us make progress toward justice—proved particularly effective with Republicans. These sessions also confirmed the importance of shifting from talking about “the truth” to talking about critical evaluation of evidence.

Q: The idea of history as “facts” or “truth” seems pretty entrenched. How can we help people to see its subjectivity?

Talk about how the practice of history involves critical thinking and how learning history fosters critical thinking skills. Describe in detail how making sense of the past helps develop critical thinking skills, such as the ability to analyze and evaluate evidence and diverse accounts about the past.

This framing strategy is a productive middle path between focusing on “historical truth” or describing history as simply a set of “stories” we tell. When discussions center on “truth,” they become mired in an unresolvable debate over what’s objectively “true” or “false.” Yet simply dropping references to truth and instead elevating the idea of history as “stories” is likely to cue the same worry, that those stories are nothing more than opinions. The idea of “critical thinking” is a way of talking about validity and evaluation of evidence that allows a place for interpretation without triggering worries about unfettered subjectivity.

Q: What can we say to people who suggest that interpretations of history should be left alone because that’s what they learned in school or “that’s how it’s always been?”

The public assumes that there is one “truth” to be found about the past, an unchanging truth that exists “out there” in the world. This way of thinking makes it difficult for people to recognize the complexity of historical interpretation and how understandings of history do and should evolve over time. This way of thinking leads people to assume that new interpretations of history or differing opinions are nothing more than bias. Since historical truth is thought to be singular and static, once that truth has been “found,” it shouldn’t, people assume, need to be updated.

Reframing these assumptions means talking about how the practice of history involves critical thinking and how learning history fosters critical thinking skills. Describe in detail how making sense of the past helps develop critical thinking skills, such as the ability to analyze and evaluate evidence and diverse accounts about the past. And explain how updating school curricula, to allow students to raise questions and marshal evidence that considers multiple perspectives, will help our students emerge as critical thinkers and civically engaged citizens.

Additional Resources

Communicating about History: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/communicating-about-history-challenges-opportunities-and-emerging-recommendations/>

Communicating about Intergenerational Urban Poverty and Race in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/communicating-about-intergenerational-urban-poverty-and-race-in-america-challenges-opportunities-and-emerging-recommendations/>

Is Culture Changing in this Time of Social Upheaval?: Preliminary findings from Project Culture Change: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/is-culture-changing-in-this-time-of-social-upheaval-preliminary-findings-from-project-culture-change/>

For more about implementing these recommendations, visit www.AASLH.org/reframing-history.

Endnotes

1. Miller, T.L., L'Hôte, E., & Volmert, A. (2020). Communicating about history: Challenges, opportunities, and emerging recommendations (a FrameWorks Strategic Brief). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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2. Miller, T.L., L'Hôte, E., & Volmert, A. (2020). Communicating about history: Challenges, opportunities, and emerging recommendations (a FrameWorks Strategic Brief). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
3. O'Neill, M. & Gerstein-Pineau, M. (2021). Communicating the value of culturally responsive and anti-racist education (a FrameWorks Guide with actionable insights). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.



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