

Rivers Storytelling

#2 Myth busting,
structure, opinion writing



What we'll cover this session

1. Recap – why stories matter, emotions & frames
2. Misinformation and myth busting
3. Structure & personal stories
4. Writing opinion pieces
5. Next steps

1. Recap – why stories matter, emotions & frames

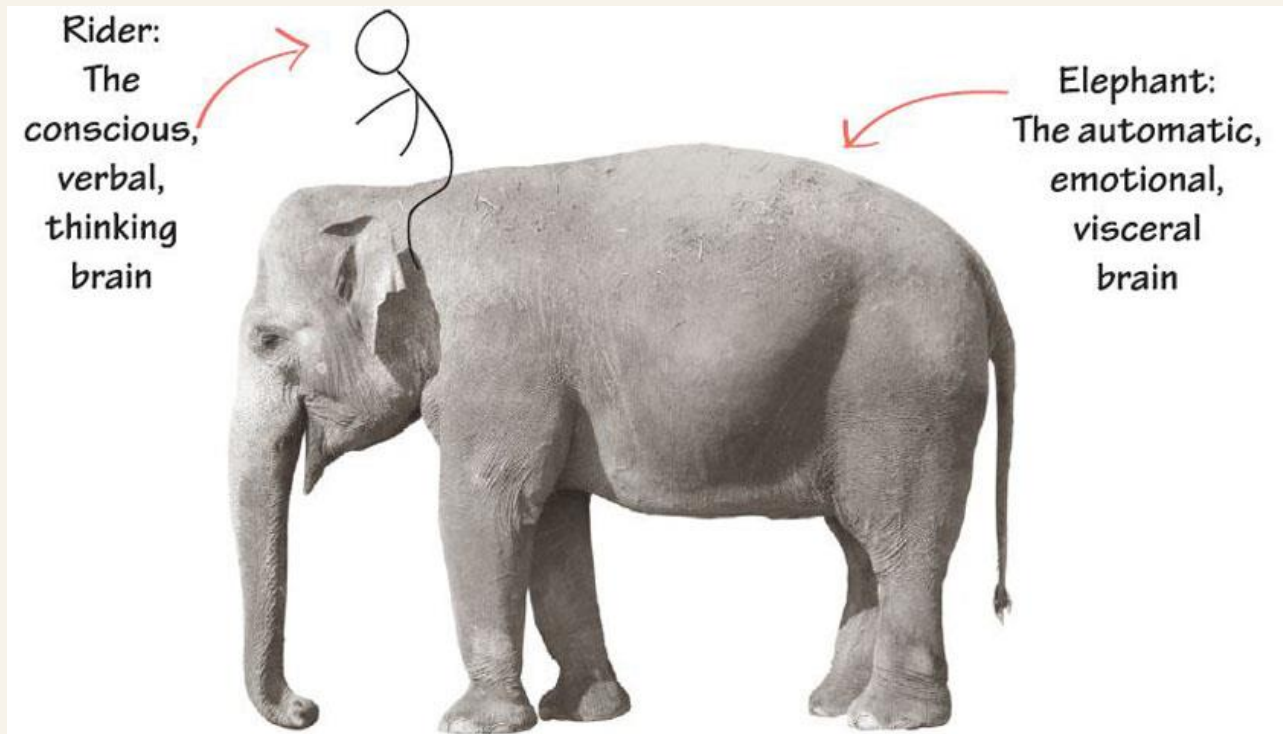
Why stories matter

Public narratives are the collective (or shared) stories we tell about ourselves as a society, country or community.

They help us interpret what is true, and they also express our worldview.

Importantly, they combine facts and **emotional appeals**.

Emotions & Reason



Framing example



Framing example



Pollution
Climate
Environment

Framing example

Electricity system

Energy Prices

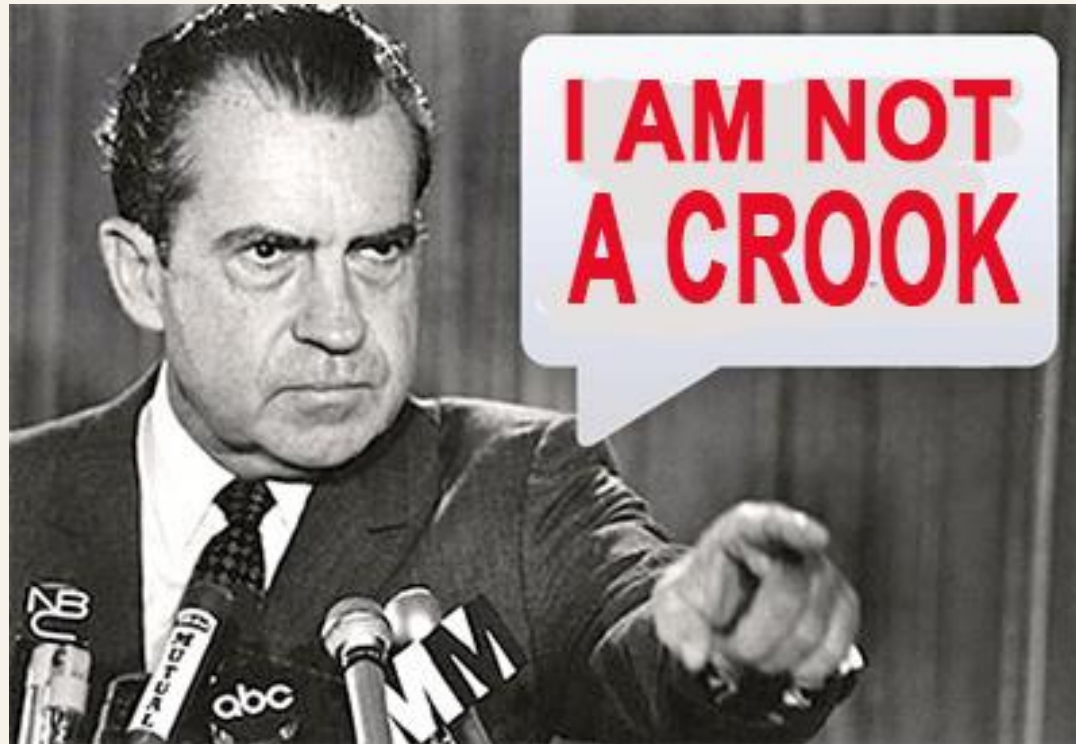
Blackouts



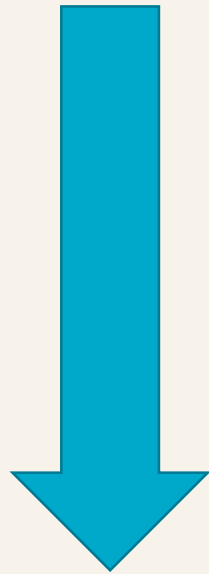
Rivers – which frame?



Never negate your opponent's frame



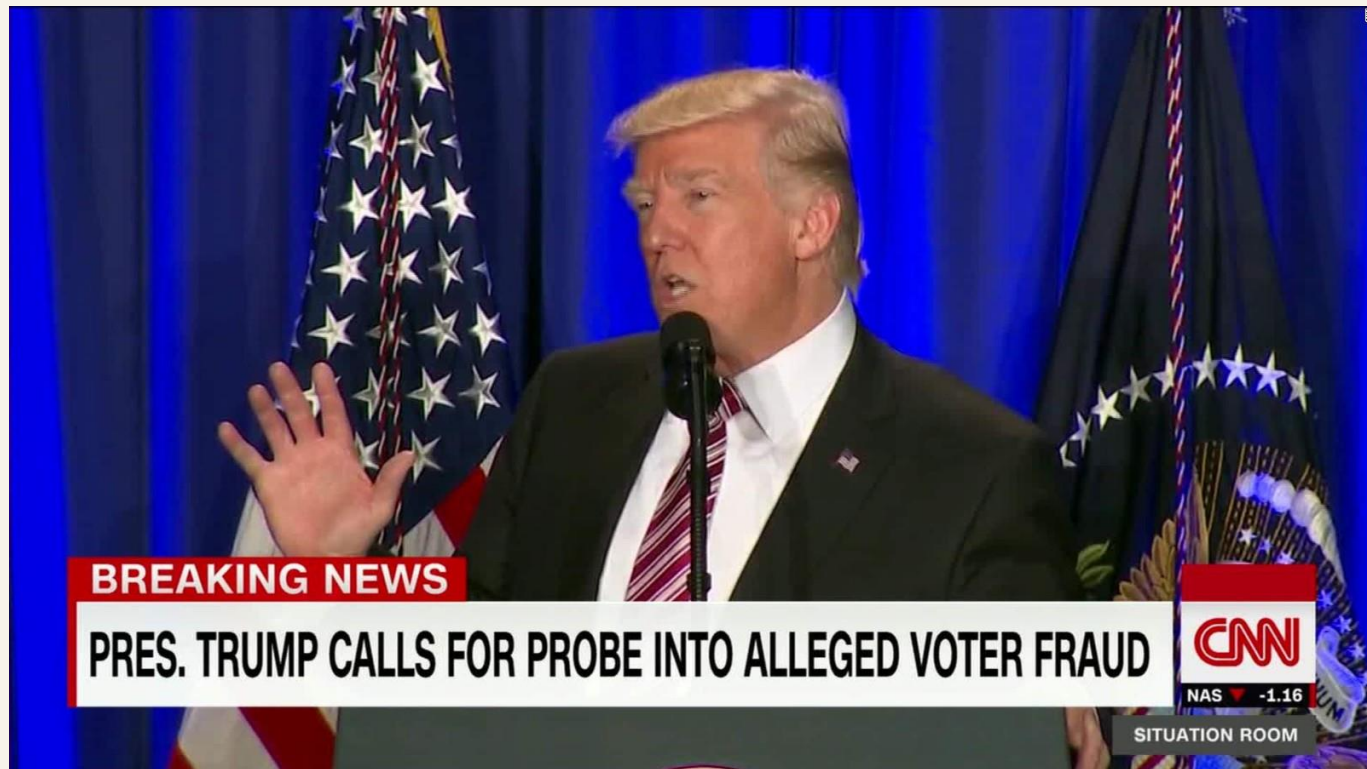
Super simple story structure for political change



- Emotion to care
- Rational problem
- Moral choice?
- Rational solution
- Emotion to act

3. Misinformation and myth busting

Misinformation



Misinformation is sticky

- It is very difficult to remove the influence of misinformation
- *Continued influence effect* = The persistent reliance on misinformation even when people can recall a correction or retraction
- Johnson & Seifert (1994) – Warehouse fire experiment

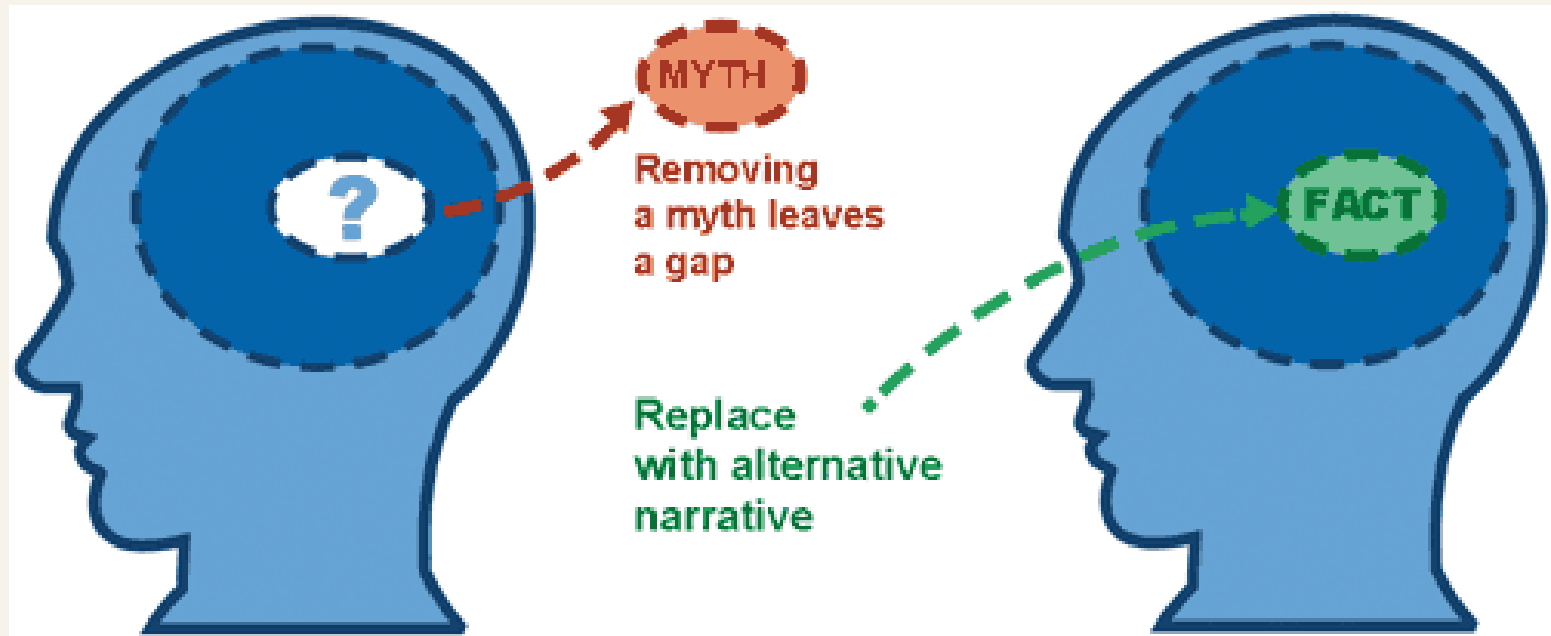
Warehouse fire experiment

- Participants first told flammable substances were left in a closet, implying the business owners were negligent.
- Then told that was false and the closet was actually empty.
- Despite understanding and accepting the correction, people still attributed negligence to the owners, **based on the misinformation they knew to be wrong.**

'Causal' role of misinformation

- Unless people were given another cause to explain the fire, they stuck with the original false version.
- People prefer an incorrect model over an incomplete model.
- In the absence of a better explanation, they opt for the wrong explanation.

You can't refute a myth, but you can replace it



What not to do

Myth: there is a large amount of voter fraud, including dead people voting

Fact: Voter fraud is extremely rare. The most comprehensive investigation of this was conducted by Justin Levitt, a law professor at Loyola University and fellow at the Brennan Center. He looked at one billion votes cast between 2000 and 2014, and he could find only 31 credible allegations of a voter pretending to be someone else at the polls. That's 0.000003 percent. Even the commission launched by the Trump administration in 2017 specifically to explore the threat of voter fraud uncovered no evidence to support claims of widespread voter fraud. Here in Alexandria, prosecutors convicted a volunteer of submitting falsified voter registration applications in 2016. None of the applications were ever processed.

What to do

FACT

Lead with the fact if it's clear, pithy, and sticky—make it simple, concrete, and plausible. It must “fit” with the story.

WARN ABOUT THE MYTH

Warn beforehand that a myth is coming... mention it once only.

EXPLAIN FALLACY

Explain how the myth misleads.

FACT

Finish by reinforcing the fact—multiple times if possible. Make sure it provides an alternative causal explanation.

Example of a Refutation

FACT

Scientists observe human fingerprints all over our climate

The warming effect from greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide has been confirmed by many lines of evidence. Aircraft and satellites measure less heat escaping to space at the exact wavelengths that carbon dioxide absorbs energy. The upper atmosphere cools while the lower atmosphere warms—a distinct pattern of greenhouse warming.

Lead with the fact if it's clear, pithy, and sticky—make it simple, concrete, and plausible.

Provide a factual alternative that fills a causal "gap", explaining what happened if the misinformation is corrected.

Do not rely on a simple retraction ("this claim is not true").

MYTH

A common climate myth is that climate has always changed naturally in the past, therefore modern climate change must be natural also.

Warn that a myth is coming.

Repeat the misinformation, only once, directly prior to the correction.

FALLACY

This argument commits the single cause fallacy, falsely assuming that because natural factors have caused climate change in the past, then they must always be the cause of climate change.

Explain how the myth misleads.

This logic is the same as seeing a murdered body and concluding that people have died of natural causes in the past, so the murder victim must have also died of natural causes.

Point out logical or argumentative fallacies underlying the misinformation.

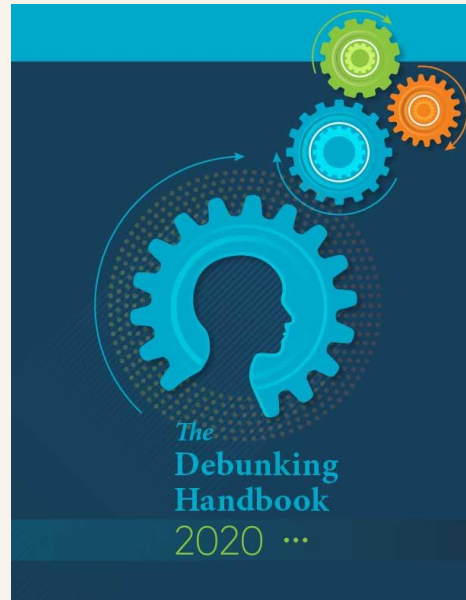
FACT

Just as a detective finds clues in a crime scene, scientists have found many clues in climate measurements confirming humans are causing global warming. Human-caused global warming is a measured fact.

Finish by reinforcing the fact.

Repeat the fact multiple times if possible.

Further reading



www.climatechangecommunication.org/debunking-handbook-2020/

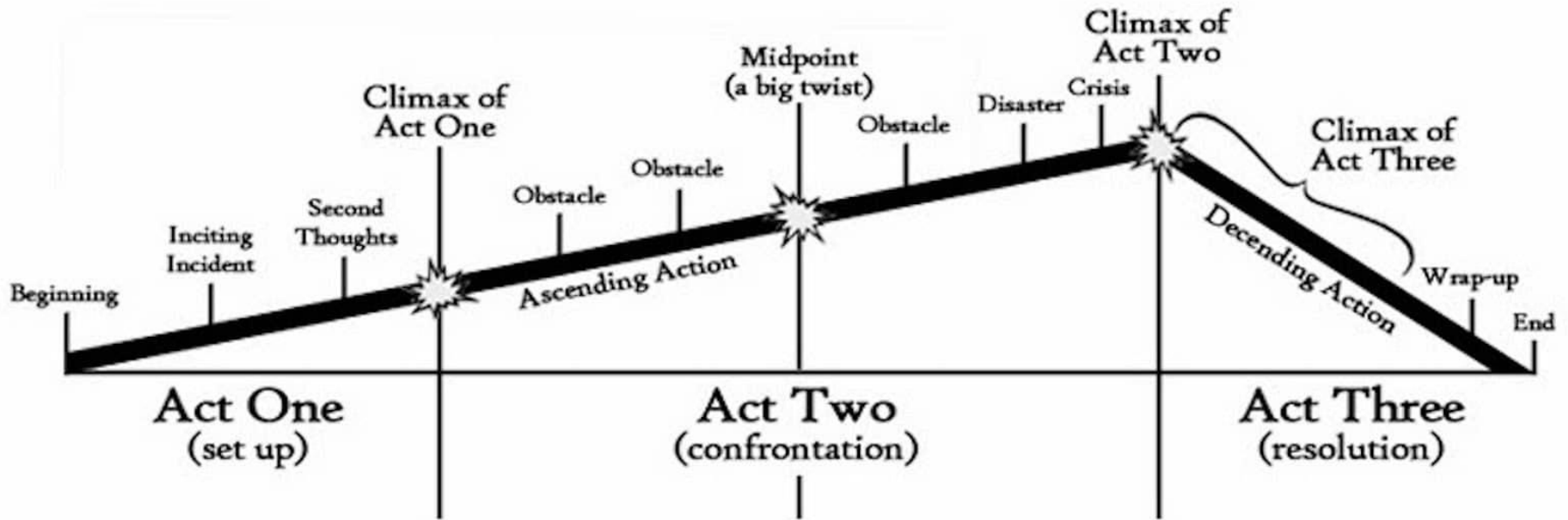
Activity 10 mins

- Explain a myth you've heard about rivers – what would you do to refute it? What fact can you replace the myth with?

4. Structure and personal stories

3 act structure

Three-Act Structure



Applying 3 act plot points

- **Before:** what life was like before the change.
- **Inciting incident:** something happens to disrupt this normal way of life.
- **Conflict and complications:** this pushes the hero on a quest.
- **Dark night of the soul (climax):** just as victory is within reach, all hope is lost.
- **Revelation:** the hero discovers something about themselves to overcome adversity and reach goal.
- **After (resolution):** a new normal is reached.

3 act structure in human interest stories

- **Before:** Abby was a marathon runner living a happy life.
- **Inciting incident:** One day she found out she had bone cancer in her leg.
- **Conflict and complications:** She went through chemo.
- **Dark night of the soul:** On the cusp of death, she reluctantly had her leg amputated. She was devastated.
- **Revelation:** But she realised her life could still be meaningful. She could adapt.
- **After (resolution):** Now she is training for paralympics.

Remember

- Contemporary storytelling is about character growth and change, so tell your “change moment”
- Stories need light and shade (or hope and fear)
- The person’s emotional journey is just as important as what happens to them
- Use before and after “snapshots” to show the change

5. Writing opinion pieces

What makes opinion?

- It's commentary on the news, not news
- It's topical
- It can generate debate
- It's controversial or contrarian
- It taps into the mood and asks a question people are thinking
- BE BOLD OR DON'T BOTHER. This isn't the place for equivocation – say it's the biggest, best, unprecedented

Common structures

- **Basic 'essay' format** – state contention in opening paragraph, build argument in body, reinforce it in conclusion
- **Contrarian** – everyone else thinks X, but I think Y.
- **Connect the dots** - how three seemingly unrelated things happening in the news are actually connected.
- **Compare and contrast** – what is happening overseas vs in Australia? In the past vs the present? One state vs another?

More structures

- **Personal experience** – I've been affected by this policy, this is what it feels like
- **Elephant in the room** – What's not being said? What hasn't been covered?
- **Zoom in or zoom out** – If everyone is talking about the big picture, then focus on a single instance. Or vice versa
- **Crystal ball** – If we continue down this path, where do we end up?

Choosing the best topic

- Recurring issue so you can pre-write it then pitch once topical e.g. heatwave, environmental water event, flood, regular ministerial meeting, Christmas, summer...
- The topic should relate to your area of expertise and your byline.
- You are more likely to get your opinion piece published if it refers to something happening that day, so search for upcoming anniversaries, events, or releases of key policy documents and note these in your diary.

Writing process

- Write hot – quick draft, don't overanalyse
- Edit cold – be critical
- Use simple language
- Use tangible examples (real things, not abstract concepts)
- If need complexity, include simple topic sentence to convey the gist "in other words" "essentially it means..."

Editing

- Opinion should have one idea only
- Use active language, short sentences, verbs not nouns, concrete not passive
- Course booklet available upon request
- <http://www.hemingwayapp.com/>

Pitching

- Read publication. Your idea has to be new
- Send pitch by email first. Very short, clipped style
- Pitch in the morning – everyone gets busy after 11
- 'On spec' means you write it first
- If relationship, can pitch idea, then submit
- Work out exact word length and submit that, no more 10% over
- Follow up with phone call

Pitch structure

Hi [editor first name],

Intriguing sentence that sums up the angle.

Dot points with details

I'm a freelance writer who has been published in XXXX.
Or I've got expertise in the subject area.

A 400 word draft is attached and below.

Let me know if you're interested.

Example pitches

Hi Name,

We've got an angle on the coronavirus, different from Bob Carr's piece on climate. Pitch below. It's already written – interested in taking a look?

How we can build back better

Now is the time to present a positive vision of the healthier and more sustainable society we want to see after this pandemic. The Victorian government can introduce policies that provide immediate relief, boost the economy and address challenges like climate change and environment degradation.

The last thing we want is to emerge from this crisis with the same problems as before but fewer resources to manage them.

Example pitches

Hi Name,

Since the *Four Corners* revelations last week, four inquiries have been announced, but they all miss the point. They focus on illegal water theft while ignoring the rigged rules that allow NSW irrigators to siphon water from the river *legally*.

Instead of four compromised inquiries, what we need is one proper inquiry that looks into this. The real question is: will we continue to allow vested interests to influence decision making in the Murray-Darling and suck our rivers dry?

See piece attached and below at 550 words.

Cheers

Greg

Example pitches

Hi Name,

Wondering if you're interested in an op-ed on Victoria's role in the Murray-Darling water rights scandal, exposed on ABC Four Corners last night?

The media has focused on NSW and QLD but:

- Victoria's Water Minister Lisa Neville has been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the failed water infrastructure scheme
- When water doesn't come out of NSW and QLD rivers, it has economic impacts in Victoria
- The Andrews government needs to take some responsibility for their role in this disaster

I know *The Age* has previously run scientists on this (e.g. Prof Kingsford), but we need to hold the Vic government to account.

The piece will call for a comprehensive audit of where the money has gone and how much water has actually been saved.

5 questions editors ask

- **Newness:** How is this different?
- **Impact:** Why should readers care?
- **Timeliness:** Why now, not later?
- **Authority:** Why you? (Expertise or personal experience)
- **Ease:** Can this person deliver clean copy?

Student example – pitch to publication

Why Labor's not working

TOM QUINN

The party desperately needs to develop a new support base, but time is running out.

ROCK BOTTOM support. Plummeting membership. A broken structure. Labor is in trouble and its very existence is at stake. But if the backbenchers don't wake up, the party is in trouble. This weekend, they must deal with one more underpinning of all of Labor's hopes — the collapse of the party's traditional base.

While opinion polls this year have both named Labor the clear leader of support for Labor, with its primary vote often well ahead in the polls, the party's main concern is the plummeting number of paid-up members. Official numbers are hard to come by but various reports put membership at one below 100,000, the lowest level in decades and half the number the party had in 1990 when Kevin Rudd was elected. The collapse of this base is compounded by the changing nature of Australian society, preventing the question of whether members can be regained quickly or indeed ever.

Australia's working class has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. With the opening of the Australian economy in 1980 and the spread of technology, cheap international manufacturing and transport, the manual component of the workforce has declined significantly. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the number of workers in traditional labor-industry jobs has fallen from about 50 per cent of the workforce in 1980 to barely 30 per cent today. The loss of Labor's natural base presents a more critical problem over the medium term than simply rebuilding the party's shrunken polling numbers.

The perverse tragedy for Labor, though, is that just as it has lost the support of the traditional base, it has lost the support of the new base. For more than a century, Labor fought to improve the lot of the laboring classes by establishing public education, healthcare and workplace protections. In doing so it brought about greater equality and a fairer distribution of resources to Australian society.

The traditional base now requires stable employment, workers' rights, public healthcare and education. There is no longer the fear of debilitating economic hardship or deprivation. Furthermore, the influx of the 1980s opened markets and boosted GDP delivering unparalleled economic recovery and security to the nation. But

Because in core needs have been met, the traditional base no longer requires the party and Labor has been unable to present an alternative vision that resonates with it.

Labor's strategy to deal with this apparent crisis is to change the focus, and it's not working. Here's why. The party no longer minimally understands the group, and as such the policies it offers to keep people back slog belated. This can be seen in the current conservative policy offerings from Labor, which it hopes will win back the Liberal-voting ramp of the house.

Take Labor's current approach to asylum seekers. Its strategy is centered on "tough on refugees" — protecting and playing up the threat to national security in other words, leading struggle from John Howard's 2001 campaign diary. The approach does not reflect Labor's commitment to social values and strong justice in even the casual political chatter. Yet the apprehensions in the party believe this is what must be done to win back the base.

It is a plan that won't succeed. Producing reactionary policies that promise to combat voter demands and xenophobia is trying to outplay the Liberals at their own game. This won't work with voters. Who choose

The water before approach to policy development and presentation is even more and even again within a range of issues, from the insistence to get marriage to agreements for a carbon price and defending the national mining super profits tax. Labor is, consistently missing the opportunity to build credibility support for a more progressive Australia, precisely because it no longer understands its former base.

To deal effectively with this challenge the party must recognize that its traditional base has almost disappeared. A party built upon the foundations of manual labor can no longer survive. The typical worker is now more likely to be employed in the service industry or to be an educated professional than to be in the manual jobs that the party traditionally relied upon for support. Labor must reevaluate its base to encompass the 21st-century Australian workforce and develop policies that resonate with it.

But time is running out. The Liberals are better positioned to benefit from the new Australian workforce and their focus on sustainability has some traction under that. Labor's traditional focus on workers' rights. As the impact of climate change increases, this focus is restricted to minimum

educated professional class, a segment expected to grow, already votes Liberal. More concerning still for Labor are the growing numbers of green-collar workers who will dominate industry this century. The political alignment of these workers is still in doubt, but where they fall will ultimately determine Labor's future. Already we have seen the Electrical Trades Union, whose membership includes growing numbers of

Producing reactionary policies that pander to conservative demands and xenophobia is trying to outplay the Liberals at their own game. ♣

green-collar workers, start professing the Greens in an interview waiting for Labor. If the Greens consolidate the support of professionals, and corner the green-collar vote, Labor would be unlikely to keep its share in power, its displaced base.

Trapped between parties of fear and vision, Labor is being squeezed into irrelevance. Unless it cultivates a new base and develops a vision appropriate for the 21st century, Labor will not survive.

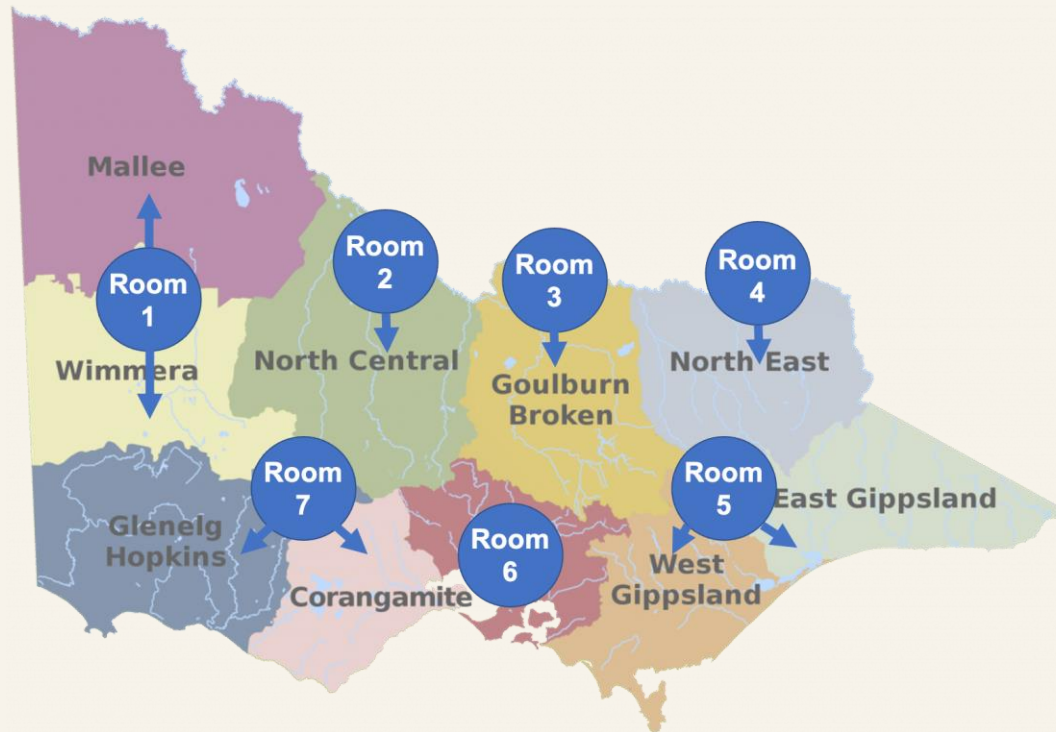
Finding the right address

- Connect Web/Margaret Gee's media guide through university subscription
- Regular opinion@ address
- Work out name of editor then structure of email address for company e.g. Rosyln Guy at The Age is rguy@theage.com.au
- Type your preferred publication in the chat, we can provide

Activity 20 mins

Break into rooms by geography. Each person to share an idea/angle they have for feedback.

These people will be your storytelling buddies. Please share contact details for future workshopping.



Next steps

Next steps

- Working with people in your area, draft by 16 December
- If possible, choose a recurring topic that often appears in the media but you can still pre-write it
- Tyler will send around a list of upcoming rivers events
- Email Tyler if you've submitted/published or fill out https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1xF9Db9lin7Njf6kOUwIIIT5PooHNNt4DRPC_-JjVHdM/edit?usp=sharing
- Poll – would you like to connect with other participants?

Upcoming sessions

- 16 Dec: Getting Local Media
- 27 Jan: Social Media & Video
- 24 Feb: Pulling it all Together (Big Picture Story)
- 31 Mar: Story Circle (Listening to Build Community)

Thanks for coming!