# Developing Materials for Deliberative Forums

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# Introduction

Democracies face many challenges. Some of these are particular to democracies—that is, societies in which the public is the ultimate political authority. These are the problems *of* democracy, or problems that get in the way of the proper functioning of self-rule.

**Here are three important problems of democracy:**

- Citizens play an increasingly narrow role in public life. They may have been shut out of politics; they may have sidelined themselves. Or both. This is a problem for any democracy, which depends on citizen participation for its legitimacy.
- Even if they step forward and take their place in public life, citizens may find it difficult to make sound decisions together. They react hastily, or act only in self-interest without considering broader perspectives.
- Even if citizens make sound decisions together about the issues facing them, they may find it difficult to act together to move forward. Citizens often do not have the habit of working with one another in the public realm.

The Kettering Foundation, a research organization that studies what it takes for democracy to work as it should, has examined public practices of politics for more than 30 years. Our research suggests that, when issues are named and framed in ways that are rooted in what people hold deeply valuable, citizens are more likely to work together in addressing shared problems. Deliberating together, people work through disagreements, make sound choices, and reclaim their voice as citizens.

*Deliberation* is a word for the careful weighing of options against the things we hold valuable in order to make decisions. When citizens deliberate together about important issues, they can reach decisions and take action together on problems that confront them. People deliberate together over problems in many settings—at home, in coffee shops, at public meetings, and in forums. Deliberation is not a specialized process—people do it naturally. (For a more detailed exploration of naming and framing, see the Kettering publication *Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions.*)

Deliberation does not require a certain kind of guide, or framework,

or language, or facilitator. But, because it can be difficult to face such choices, supporting materials can make it easier. Many community groups, national organizations, and others, including the National Issues Forums (NIF), develop materials meant to help groups deliberate together over difficult public issues. Through its research, the Kettering Foundation has learned about the kinds of materials that can spark this public work. This document explores the important elements involved in going from an initial topic to having a complete issue guide suitable to use in the kinds of deliberative forums that are the hallmark of the NIF.

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Deliberative forums are used in different ways, depending on the community and who is involved. Some communities use them to set direction on important local issues. People in other communities may hold forums in order to give citizens the opportunity to think through an important national issue and what they and others might do about it. The results of deliberating together in these ways are sometimes passed on to public officials. Other times public officials personally take part in deliberating with other citizens.

There are many ways to create materials that will support such public deliberation. As long as they are accessible to all kinds of people, allow them to carefully consider options and weigh drawbacks, no one way is necessarily better than another.

# Naming and Framing Issues in Public Terms

**A framework that will prompt public deliberation should make clear the options that are available for addressing the problem and the tensions at stake in facing it. It should lay bare what is at issue in readily understandable terms.**

When issues are named and framed in public terms, we can *identify the problem that we need to talk about (naming) and the critical options and drawbacks for deciding what to do about that problem (framing).*

When citizens see their concerns reflected in the naming and framing of an issue, they are more likely to participate in making decisions and to see that they themselves have power to affect their future. This goes beyond simply using clear language (this is part of it, but not the only aspect). It means that the problem must be stated in terms that take into account the things that people hold deeply valuable. This is the essence of naming problems in public terms.

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**Three key questions drive the development of a framework for public deliberation:**

- What concerns you about this issue?
- Given those concerns, what would you do about it?
- If that worked to ease your concern, what are the downsides or trade-offs you might then have to accept?

Responses to these questions, together, can generate a framework that makes clear the drawbacks of different people's favored options. Facing these drawbacks and coming to a sound decision about what to do is the ultimate concern of deliberation.

Issue framing is a practice, not a process or specific technique—akin to playing a musical instrument, knitting, martial arts, or exercising. The best way to learn about these things is by doing them. The more people work at the practice of issue framing, the better they get at

identifying core concerns and articulating trade-offs. Like any practice, this develops over time.

In deliberating together, people wrestle with options, face trade-offs, and make decisions about how to act. Sometimes people and organizations in communities convene deliberative forums where people come together to do this work—NIF groups have been doing this for 30 years. An issue framework, or issue guide, is intended to support this. There is no perfect issue framework. Any framework that includes the public's main concerns fairly represented and that includes the important drawbacks of each option can provide the structure for a group of people to deliberate together about how they will address a shared problem.

# A Way to Do It

In developing materials to support public deliberation, *writing* an issue guide is just the tip of the iceberg. The earlier work that goes into naming and framing the issue—work that requires time and people—is most important. The sections that follow describe one way of naming and framing issues for public deliberation. The aim is to create an issue guide that will be used by many kinds of people in deliberative public forums. This is not the only way to achieve that goal, but it is one that has worked well over time.

## Essential Elements

**A well-framed issue guide contains enough factual material and data so that citizens who deliberate together have the knowledge they need to engage productively. Its purpose is not to create experts but rather to illuminate what is at issue and allow people to make decisions about how to act together.**

An issue guide should introduce and support deliberation, collectively, among a group whose individual experiences and inclinations may differ.

The Appendix includes an annotated example of an issue framework: *Mental Illness in America: How Do We Address a Growing Problem?* This example was developed by following the principles outlined in this document.

A well-framed issue guide contains enough factual material and data so that citizens from different circumstances who deliberate together have the knowledge they need to engage productively. However, it doesn't need to serve as a primer or study guide. Its purpose is not to create experts but rather to illuminate what is at issue—the important conflicts or dilemmas that the issue raises—and allow people to make decisions about how to act together.

Regardless of length, issue guides usually contain five elements:

- A *title* that reflects the major tension inherent in the issue. The title must convey that there is a difficult question or problem that must be faced and can't be ducked. An excellent title that starkly conveys one problem at the core of the health-care issue might be: "The High Cost of Good Health Care."

- An *introduction* that explains what the issue is and why something must be done about it. The introduction should make the case that this is an important issue to talk about and should refrain from "arguing" for any of the options.

- Descriptions of each *option* for dealing with the issue. Each option is an overall strategy that is driven by a unique concern when it comes to the problem. These sections are at their best when they adopt a tone that argues for each specific option—that is, each one should be persuasive and an argument against the others. It should make its own strongest case. These options each have subsections.

- The first subsection includes examples of actions that would correspond to each option, along with who would do them. The actors should be real—and varied—such as government, police, schools, or neighbors. We have found that identifying four or five actions per option helps give people a clear sense of what the option is about and what people can do to work on solutions.

- The second subsection includes examples of the drawbacks or trade-offs inherent in each action. Every action that is presented should have an inherent drawback. Some may find a drawback tolerable, and others may not; however, talking through the consequences of a particular action against what you hold valuable is the crux of deliberation. The key is to make these choices clear.

Many participants will read the guide for the first time during the forum, so presenting data and facts as charts or other easily grasped formats makes it easier to use. In many issue guides, the options are summarized in the form of a grid, which provides the basic framework at a glance.

## The Framing Team

When it comes to the practice of issue framing and issue guide writing, Kettering's experience is that having multiple participants is crucial. The best issue guides arise out of teamwork among a small group of people.

Developing an issue guide that provokes deliberation is iterative. It takes place in fits and starts. Rooting the issue guide in public concerns and

things held valuable takes a commitment to discerning and uncovering those concerns. Bringing different perspectives to the table is important if the resulting issue guide is to be useful to all kinds of people.

**The framing team can include people who play a variety of roles:**

- Someone who can write clearly and evenhandedly, constructing a good argument and avoiding jargon
- Someone who can substantively research the problem at hand
- Someone knowledgeable about public opinion, its use, and its limitations
- Someone in touch with community perspectives
- Someone who has experience in framing issues for public deliberation

The framing team develops the framework together, reviews the results of tests, and responds to drafts. This work is best done in conversation—face to face is often best, but telephone calls work, too. It is tempting, for the sake of convenience, to work primarily in e-mail and to limit time-consuming conference calls and meetings. This can be a mistake. Discussion better enables the group to grapple with issue concerns and tensions that arise spontaneously in conversation. The conversational aspect is important. It creates the environment through which the team will generate new knowledge together.

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Without such a team, without enough time together in conversation to raise new ideas and generate breakthroughs, the resulting issue guides are often flawed—meaning they derail or stymie deliberation. Having multiple voices involved in substantive and ongoing ways helps ensure that something is not overlooked, that all perspectives are included, and that the result is fair to all.

## The Topic

Public deliberation is useful when there is a public choice to be made about a shared problem. *What should we do?*

Some problems lend themselves to deliberation better than others. Some, though, are simply not suitable for public deliberation.

For instance, many problems that communities face are *technical* in nature. How large should the dam be? How wide should the bridge be? How do we plow snow most efficiently? These are the kinds of problems that it is often best to ask experts to address. They can tell us the right answer and then political leaders can drive the appropriate solutions.

Other problems are *educational* in nature. Some people don't know that they shouldn't park on certain streets in snowy weather and plowing operations get fouled up. Other people are not aware of the services available to them as low-income residents, so they do without things they need. These kinds of problems can also be solved in straightforward ways by getting more information out to the right people (not to say they are easy to solve, just straightforward).

These kinds of problems are not well-suited to public deliberation. There is no choice to be made by the public, nor work for it to do.

Then there are the kinds of problems that require public decisions leading to public actions. These are often problems that beset communities over and over or are ongoing, systemic problems that are difficult to solve. Persistent poverty is one such problem. So is persistent crime. "What should we do about health care as a community (or nation)?" is this kind of problem. These problems affect us collectively as well as personally.

**These problems are intractable because they involve tensions between things held valuable, every solution has a downside, and there is no definitive right answer.**

These problems are intractable because they involve tensions between things held valuable, every solution has a downside, and there is no definitive right answer. In many cases, there is lack of agreement about what is even at issue, and when people try to find solutions there are conflicts between things they hold valuable. And these problems can't be solved by experts or government alone—everyone needs to play a part.

Keeping in mind the characteristics of problems suited to deliberation can make it easier to clarify the topic to deliberate over.

For instance, what we should do about the possibility of terrorism in the United States is an example of a problem that might benefit from public deliberation. It appears intractable. We don't agree on the cause—is it radical Islamist politics, is it porous borders, is it oppression by developed nations? Or is the cause something else? Similarly, there is no definitively right solution—will jailing or deporting all potential terrorists do the trick, or perhaps educating people around the globe about

the freedoms America represents? Every solution has trade-offs—for example, if we drastically restrict air travel, that may be effective but at the cost of curtailing our fundamental freedom of movement. Finally, any solution will require multiple actors—government alone can't get it done, nor can watchful individuals.

We need to solve and re-solve these kinds of problems, precisely because we have to restrike a deal with one another each time we face the problem. In 2001, after terrorists struck the World Trade buildings, many people were willing to live with sudden dramatic travel restrictions in pursuit of security. Today, the public's willingness to go along with that arrangement may not be as wholehearted.

This is not an educational question, but a political question. We must decide together what we should do and what agreements we will reach. The problems of this sort that we solve today will be back later—not because we did a bad job solving them, but because circumstances change.

### A Problem Is Suited to Public Deliberation When…

- The issue is of broad concern to the community
- There is a decision that must be made about the issue
- There is lack of agreement about what is at issue
- There is disagreement on the cause of the problem, or the cause is not clear
- There is no definitive or single solution to the problem, but a decision needs to be made about what may be done
- Every solution involves trade-offs or downsides that involve things held valuable
- The problem is intractable, ongoing, or systemic
- People will face moral disagreements in deliberating on the issue
- Any solution will take multiple actors (e.g., community groups, individuals, and government)

Even keeping these points in mind, in the early stages of developing an issue guide, the best that a framing team can do is to agree on a general topic area—"poverty," "crime in the community," "the cost of health care," and so forth. This is fine. An initial topic can be a starting point. The research into this topic, and the ensuing conversations, will hone the *topic* (which is general) into an *issue* (which is specific).

## Background Research

For many working on issue framing and developing materials to support deliberation, research can seem a daunting task. Most contentious problems involve so many facts—how can they be synthesized into a small space? Don't get lost in the weeds. The key is to remember the purpose of the materials, which is to generate public deliberation. The materials do not have to serve as an in-depth study of the topic; they simply have to provide the information necessary for people to struggle with the trade-offs inherent in the issue—the *strategic facts*.

A large portion of your research will not wind up in the text of your issue guide in all of its minute detail. But amassing this background material isn't a wasted effort because it will lend confidence to your writing and will help you make your own wise choices in organizing your research and deciding what to include in the final written version.

Most issue guides begin with "desk" research. This kind of research is straightforward. Someone—the writer of the guide or a researcher tasked for this purpose—needs to gather the strategic facts about the issue. Some framing teams divide up this task, each taking on a piece. Others delegate it to someone who enjoys research.

**This overview should include:**

- Main arguments being made about what to do about the issue and what seem to be conflicting attitudes toward it (editorials and op-ed pages are a good source)
- Scan of recent public opinion reports about the issue (Gallup, Public Agenda, and other survey organizations are useful)
- Important historical and contemporary data points needed to understand the issue
- Interviews with experts, if appropriate

As you gather the research, make sure to take note of compelling graphics or charts that might enable you to represent an array of ideas that could be reproduced in the final version of the issue guide. And always remember to flag particularly compelling anecdotes or quotes that will help lend a conversational quality to your writing.

The purpose of this research is to develop an understanding of the strategic facts about the issue at hand—those pieces of information that bear on the decisions that citizens must make—and the way the issue has been framed in the past.

For example, in research for an issue guide on the national debt, one important strategic fact relates to the sheer size of the problem. Many solutions are suggested—among them, eliminating certain government departments. Some of these ideas sound promising until a sense of scale is included, as this passage from the issue guide illustrates: "Even if we completely eliminate the federal departments of Education, Energy, Agriculture, Transportation, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development, we would save less than $300 billion, but the annual deficit is about $1.1 trillion." Citizens need to know this in order to make choices about how to tackle the debt. On the other hand, deeper detail (such as the size of each particular department) is less decisive in nature. This is also the kind of strategic fact that may well lend itself to a chart—a pie chart, in this case, showing the small "slice of the pie" that such a change would represent.

**If the materials are to support public deliberation, they must begin where the public does. There are many ways to gather the public's concerns on an issue, and they all involve actually talking to people.**

## Gathering Public Concerns

If the materials are to support public deliberation, they must begin where the public does. Most contentious issues are framed in expert terms by political and technical elites. People find such framings alien if they do not fully take into account citizens' various starting points and chief concerns. People will not have *one* starting point, but many. The key is to capture them fairly and take them seriously.

The importance of this gap between expert views and the public's view of an issue is difficult to appreciate until it has been seen a few times. It is easy to fall in line with the expert view—this is the one that typically dominates the public discourse. Only in talking with nonexperts, without preconceptions, do we see how differently citizens approach an issue. Many groups that seek to develop issue guides balk at this step because it involves some work many are unaccustomed to. Yet skipping this may result in an ineffective issue guide.

There are many ways to gather the public's concerns on an issue, and they all involve actually talking to people. In some cases, formal focus groups are used, where the recruiting and convening functions are handled in a professional facility where circumstances can be easily controlled. A professional researcher leads such focus groups, and transcripts and video are produced for later reference.

Yet some use a more community-based approach, where members of the framing team go into the community and talk to friends, neighbors, colleagues, and others. Team members talk to a number of people, some manageable number between 5 and 15 people each.

Talking to people informally in groups tends to work well. Such "concern-gathering sessions" can yield more than individual interviews, because people can hear what others are saying and respond with their own ideas.

**In these conversations, team members can ask things like:**

- When you think about [this topic], what concerns you? What bothers you most, personally?
- What concerns do you hear friends and family members—or others you don't know well—talking about when it comes to this topic?

Team members write down what they hear in these interviews—it helps to take notes verbatim if possible. Capture the language people actually use.

Note that, at this stage, interviews are on the topic in general—there is not yet a name for the issue (in the sense discussed earlier). Framing team members may in fact have a sense of what they believe a reasonable question to deliberate over might be, but the *name* of the issue emerges from these interviews and the analyses that follow. Using a placeholder name for the issue can make it easier to talk about. However, the process of concern gathering (and, later, grouping the concerns) will refine the placeholder.

For example, a team may choose to ask people to talk about what concerns them when it comes to *education*. The team may have in mind that it will be developing materials to support deliberation on a more narrow issue such as *how best to ensure all young people have an equal chance to succeed academically*. By keeping the topic broad at

this stage, the team will likely elicit more productive responses from people it talks to.

Naming the issue is an iterative process. In this preparatory research, *concerns* are being revealed so that *options for action* may be framed for public deliberation.

Once the interviews are complete, the framing team should meet together to discuss what it heard as well as other research it has done. Be specific; stick to what people said. One person can be designated as the facilitator or leader while another member of the team records what is said. Flip chart paper works well, so everyone can see the responses.

In addition to simply reporting what they heard others say, the framing team members should also report their own concerns in the same setting, essentially answering the same questions. This should continue until it appears that the list of concerns has been just about exhausted. The facilitator can keep pressing participants to come up with more concerns. It's important to try to cast as wide a net as possible and to keep at it even when it feels as if the reservoir is dry.

This, of course, limits the concerns to those expressed by team members and interviewees. For this reason, try to have as much diversity as possible in terms of who gets interviewed as well as who is on the framing team. However, it isn't always possible to achieve the kind of cross-section that might be desirable. Therefore, once it seems that all the concerns have been aired, push ahead and ask specifically about those not in the room—how might they answer these same questions? Imagine specific kinds of people (the elderly, new immigrants, the poor, for example), and imagine what they actually might say.

This concern-gathering meeting typically takes two or three hours—resist the temptation to do it faster—and often results in somewhere around 15 pages of flip chart paper, or roughly 150 concerns.

**Three sample flip charts from a recent concern-gathering session on the general topic of jobs and the future:**

**Chart 3**

Is education about knowledge or gaining skills?

Is a job just how you make $, or something else?

Is college the only way out / up? Nothing wrong with work.

Hierarchy of jobs—some jobs are seen as better than others

Sometimes it is OK to have a job you don't necessarily want.

We need all kinds of jobs.

All work has value.

Employability—we need people with HS and PhD.

Discrimination

Negative first impressions (e.g., name, etc.)

**Chart 10**

There are not enough entrepreneurs to create opportunity—need more entrepreneurs.

My business is just trying to keep costs down.

Exploited workers.

Stay in job because of benefits.

Local entrepreneurs . . . artisans and craftsmen.

Justice system—people left behind / shut out of jobs—set it up to go back / "Give me better opportunity"

Help me with cultural transitions (out of justice system) so I can seek employment

Apprenticeships

Defense cuts will cost jobs

Farmers—reduce red tape and regulations

**Chart 12**

Young family, becomes jobless not by choice

Chronic unemployment, poverty, crime, medical status, disability

Makes more economic sense to be on unemployment

Stigma of social services

Students who drop out 2nd semester

Teenagers can't find part time work, so don't know how to work

People seeking jobs on campus so can get reduced tuition for kids

Shift from paid jobs to unpaid internships (youth)

People's responses to the question "what concerns you?" will run the gamut. Some will address the question directly, some will suggest solutions, some will build on previous statements. Some will be repetitive.

At this point, whoever is doing the recording should simply try to capture what people say, with enough detail that the point is intelligible. One-word bullet points are less helpful than phrases. Again, these sessions ought to be given their due. Though most people find them quite enjoyable (even exhilarating), there is typically an energy dip midway that is important to push through. Real attention should be given to capturing the concerns of those not in the room.

Just one such session, with one group, is not usually a good idea—convening more than one such session can be key.

## Grouping Like Concerns

The final step in this research phase is perhaps the hardest, but also among the most rewarding. All this raw material—the gathered concerns—needs to be made sense of. The idea is to group like concerns together. This is when the name of the issue will begin to emerge and get validated.

Even from the most voluminous set of concerns, a small handful of themes will emerge. Between five and seven may be a good number to shoot for at first. There should be few enough to be manageable, yet still enough to cover the main ideas—including unpopular or marginal ones—that came up in concern gathering.

This work may be best completed in a separate meeting from the concern-gathering session. The kind of work being done is different between the two meetings, and it may be difficult for people to shift gears. A rest in between can be helpful. Grouping concerns also depends a great deal on generating insights among participants, and people typically need time with the raw material for this to happen.

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One way to provide a bit of space between the meetings, when pressed for time, is to spend the larger part of a day on concern gathering, and then to break for dinner. Come back the next morning to work on grouping the concerns. Another option is to do concern gathering in the morning, break for lunch, and then shift to this grouping and sorting work. The break is important because it allows people to reflect.

Grouping the concerns, as with concern gathering, is rooted in asking simple questions. For each concern, ask:

- What is the thing held valuable behind this concern?
- What do you think was really bothering the person who said this?

These questions will generate groups of stated concerns that have, at their core, the same underlying thing held valuable: the collective desire for security, to be treated fairly, to have personal freedom, and so forth.

## Values and Things Held Valuable

As humans developed society, there were benefits that society brought that were valuable to our very survival. Had we not gotten them we would have had no reason to stick with the group. For instance, if my security does not increase in some way by being a part of the group, I might just as well go my own way. All humans can be expected to see security as a *thing held valuable* in this way.

Values—at least in the way that most people mean them—derive from things held valuable. Something I might *hold valuable* is that people do what they say they will do in predictable ways. A *value* that derives from this is honesty.

In other words, *things held valuable* exist on a more basic level than those things that we commonly call values (e.g., honesty). In a useful deliberative framework, each option will reflect a different thing held valuable. Asking people about their concerns allows us to get a sense of how they are struggling and what language they use. Asking "what is the thing held valuable" that these concerns are driven by allows us to figure out what the main options are.

**Some of the common things held valuable are:**

- Safety of my person
- Security of the group against outsiders
- Freedom to act as I wish
- Being treated fairly by others
- Care for the vulnerable
- Order in the group
- Having a secure future
- Minimizing harm to others
- Self-reliance

There is no easy way to perform this work. It cannot be automated. It requires judgment. People will differ about what threads bind together disparate statements. There will be many false starts. This aspect of the work tends to result in the most disagreement and argument among framing teams. It can be frustrating.

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But discerning these cross-cutting things held valuable is at the heart of the practice of issue framing. No issue framework does this perfectly. Over time, with repetition, people who engage in this practice begin to more easily see how concerns group together, but even for highly experienced people, each issue is a new challenge.

Beginning with more obvious, or "easy," concerns and getting them out of the way first will help to build momentum. In the flip charts from the concern-gathering sessions, a number of concerns will center clearly on something held valuable. In the flip charts portrayed earlier, for example, a number of concerns revolve around the idea that *all work is valuable but in practice we value it differently*. This relates to the notion of being treated fairly. The concern expressed about "hierarchy of jobs" and "all work has value" (Chart 3), as well as the "local entrepreneurs" and "apprenticeships" statements (Chart 10) fit into this theme. (Note that even items not stated as concerns typically have a concern behind them.) Taking this as a beginning, examples can be found by looking through all of the flip charts for the session.

Once it seems as if there are enough examples to give *all work is valuable* some substance, the group can look at other concerns. A second concern that jumps out when examining just the three charts is an *anxiety about how difficult changes have made things*. "Business trying to keep costs down," "defense cuts will cost jobs" (Chart 10), "young family, becomes jobless not by choice," "chronic unemployment" (chart 12) all fit into this grouping, which relates to personal (and collective) economic security.

At this stage, don't worry about perfecting the language for each set of concerns—it is more important to begin to simply identify them as a group.

In the concern-gathering session on jobs, the work resulted in groups (in this meeting we termed them "clusters") that looked like this:

Change in economy
- less manufacturing
- layoffs
- fewer jobs
- globalization – jobs move to China
- more w/ less
- equal pay/equal work

more unfair?

How become employable
- how important is "education"
- vs. Skill aquisition
- justice system
- retraining

Generational + Cultural Issues
- Academic Institution
- Older workers pushed out
- Technology
- Older teachers not well equipped to teach young
- Lottery mentality
- distraction from --?
- How we treat each other
- Pit old vs. young

Technological Issues (?)
- Access to resources
- Marketability
- Skills
- Productivity
- Cuts out certain trades/ skills
- Creates isolation
- Industry/job death
- More w/ less

Institutions Less Loyal
- People pushed out
- Contingent workers
- Wage pressure (?) down

Uncertainty
- Risk
- Will I get a job
- Will I keep job
- Company loyalty
- No benefits
- Contractural/contingent work
- Short-term work
- "Cobble together"
- Disability
- Equal work

Honor work "quality"
- Contract work
- All work is OK
- What I do is who I am
- Trades/apprentice
- What is quality work

Discrimination / unfair barriers
- Barriers to work not present
- Everyone should get to work
- Closed societies (Fed gov., eg)
- Disability

Entrepreneurship
- Innovation
- Upward mobility
- "Always opportunity"
- More w/ less
- Greening economy

Sustainability, (?)
Greening economy

**Main groups of concerns in this example:**

- Change / difficult economy
- How become employable
- Generational & cultural issues
- Technological issues
- Institutions less loyal
- Uncertainty
- Honor work
- Discrimination

This session resulted in eight main groups, which is more than is practical to deliberate on, so they need to be refined. Eventually, the goal is to get to three or four sets of concerns. These will be developed into the options around which the issue framework will be organized. This takes repeated asking of the questions: In what ways are some of these subsets of others? What groups can be combined? What is the thing held valuable here?

Note that, in the third chart, the "institutions less loyal" group has been connected by a line to the "uncertainty" group. The decline in the loyalty of institutions (that is, the decline in the security of individual jobs) can be seen as one part of a general increase in uncertainty. The flip charts don't illustrate this, but a further move could be made to combine "uncertainty" with "change / difficult economy."

**Given the sets identified above, one combination (but not the only) might be:**

1. Anxiety that things have changed fundamentally and our ability to respond to these changes might be interfered with
2. Anxiety that people are too vulnerable in the face of declining jobs
3. Anxiety that people (especially some groups of people) are unprepared to enter the workforce or to shift jobs as necessary

At this point, the framing team can productively begin to see what the name of the issue is. One way to do this is to pose a question: *Given these concerns, what is the issue that citizens must face?* It may not be

the same as the placeholder label the team started with. In this case, it might be something like, "How should we deal with work at a time when employment and the economy are changing fundamentally?"

In deciding on the name of the issue, note that it is important to try to illuminate the core tension inherent in the issue.

## Describing the Options

The foregoing work ensures that the starting point of the issue guide matches the starting point of citizens—that their concerns are reflected. The issue guide is designed to illuminate and articulate their chief concerns in a way that results in options that can be wrestled with. But at this stage of the writing process, the job is only partially complete. These concerns must be fleshed out into options for action.

Recall the three key questions that drive issue framing:

1. What concerns you about this issue?
2. Given those concerns, what would you do about it?
3. If that worked to ease your concern, what are the downsides or trade-offs you might then have to tolerate?

So far, the research has addressed only the first question. The framing team can now work on the second and third questions.

This is an exercise best done in a group setting, although at some point someone (the writer) will need to be alone to wordsmith. (This does not mean that the framing team is dismissed.) The best way to develop the options is to take the questions literally, asking what could be done, who should do it, and what might be the chief drawback if it worked as intended. Try to identify actions that implicate a range of actors, not just government or other institutions.

Consider the topic of immigration. People hold strongly divergent views when it comes to this topic. On some level, most agree that there is something out of whack that needs fixing—and fast. When considering the issue, three main concerns that Americans express are:

1. Immigration is at the core of our national identity, but it is under fire.

2. By failing to control illegal immigration, we have undermined security and exacerbated social strains.

3. Our economy and prosperity depend on immigration of both low-skilled and high-skilled workers.

**These are not "arguments against" but instead intrinsic trade-offs or consequences of taking this action. Even a proponent of the action should agree that the trade-off is real.**

Looking at the first concern, one action might be that the government could create a "path to citizenship" for immigrants currently here illegally, so long as they meet certain requirements. Someone who holds this concern may well come up with this action.

Now, the framing team must consider what the drawbacks might be. These are not "arguments against" but instead intrinsic trade-offs or consequences of taking this action. Even a proponent of the action should agree that the trade-off is real. In the case of a path to citizenship, one such trade-off is that it might reward those who came here illegally while at the same time penalizing those who followed the rules and pursued a legal route to citizenship.

Compare that trade-off to another possible argument against: it would be too difficult to administer. This is not a good drawback because it is too open to dispute. People trying to deliberate would argue over whether this action would or would not work—rather than face the drawbacks and trade-offs that each action would require.

Using a trade-off that is fundamentally tied to the action and that assumes its success yields a different kind of exchange. The question under this scenario will be whether and under what conditions the trade-off is worth it—can you accept the consequence and still consider the action worthwhile?

It sounds straightforward, but in practice, it can be very difficult to develop options with clear drawbacks. Doing it well takes a knack for making a strong argument (sometimes in favor of a position to which one is personally opposed) and then turning around and identifying the drawbacks of that same argument.

### Questions to ask as the framing team develops actions and trade-offs:

- Is this action clear?
- Who would do it?

- Does it respond directly to the main concern in this option?
- Does the drawback assume the action works?

The result of this work should be a draft framework: a brief (two paragraphs or so) statement of the overall problem and three or four options (a few sentences each) for responding to the problem, with four or five actions and associated drawbacks for each option.

Sometimes this can be done with the group, but the writer may first work with the material and then share it with the framing team.

Reviewing this framework will likely take a few iterations. Members of the framing team should examine the structure of the framing as well as looking at language and grammar. Are these the real options? Have I had an insight that shifts the way I see these? Is one option presented more attractively than the others? Are these the real drawbacks? Hard questions like these—some of which may create new work for all concerned—serve the finished product in good stead.

The framework doesn't have to be presented in a grid or table. However, these are useful ways of seeing the whole at a glance. The important thing is that the framework be complete, so the result of this work might be a grid that lays out the essential framework of the issue.

## Testing the Framework

Once the framing team members have agreed that the framework seems sound, they should test it. Almost every initial framing needs changes—sometimes big, sometimes small. The need for these often comes to light only when others use the framework to deliberate.

The best way to test the framing is to hold a couple of deliberative forums using it. Convene 12–20 people and talk through the framing. If possible, ask a number of members of the framing team to observe. Use the same agenda that you would if you were holding a forum with a finished work. Introduce the issue and consider each option systematically, as if people were actually in a deliberative forum. At the end, the moderator can ask participants for their thoughts on the framing, but in fact more is learned by simple observation.

Look for areas where people are confused, or where it is clear that terms need explanation. Look for options that fall flat. Just as important, if people in multiple conversations all tend to gravitate to one option, it may mean that the others are not argued strongly enough or don't make sense.

**Testing the framework is an important final checkpoint in developing materials for public deliberation. A guide can be artfully written, but if the underlying issue is framed poorly, the opportunity for deliberation can be derailed.**

You might ask participants whether they feel the framework is biased in any way, or subtly conveys the impression that one option is the "right" option and the others are "wrong."

After these test forums, the team should meet or talk again, with the forum moderator if possible (if that person was not a member of the team), to consider how the framing might need to be adjusted in light of what has been learned. Always be prepared for the possibility of a significant reframing based on the forums—but not just one forum (unless the feedback is very specific).

Testing the framework is an important final checkpoint in developing materials for public deliberation. A guide can be artfully written, but if the underlying issue is framed poorly, the opportunity for deliberation can be derailed.

After testing the framing, take a step back and review the framework before moving ahead with writing.

## Deliberative Framework Checkpoints

Are the things that people consider valuable reflected in the options? Do the actions logically follow from people's deepest concerns?

Are the tensions between the advantages and disadvantages of each option clear? Are the tensions between the options clear, or do they lend themselves to "all of the above" as an answer?

Are the downsides of each action described in terms of things people hold valuable, or are they just arguments against doing that action?

Do the options contain actions and work that citizens must do together (and not just as individuals)? Or are all the actors government or other institutions?

Does the framework recognize unpopular points of view?

Is each option presented with its best foot forward, and are its drawbacks equally and fairly stated?

Are the downsides of each option real costs of that option, or are they simply arguments for one of the other options?

Does the framing disrupt the usual conversations, or does it simply replicate the existing conventional wisdom?

Does the framing reflect people's starting points on the issue? Or does it begin from the standpoint of experts or advocates?

Is the framework likely to leave people stewing because they had to face difficult trade-offs, or will it instead result in another comfortable discussion without tension?

## Writing the Issue Guide

Once the framework is set and has been tested (and refined), the issue guide itself can be written. Getting the framing right, or as right as possible, allows it to be used as a kind of outline. All the work researching and framing the topic will lend clarity to the writing and will make writing the issue guide that much easier.

When writing the guide, it is important to keep track of your material. Footnotes are rarely helpful, as they tend to alienate people, but a list of sources to double-check facts before publication is very important. And, possibilities for using graphics or charts noted during the research will help conserve words now—and make the resulting issue guide more useful to the reader.

Issue guides can be of different lengths. Sometimes a framing team develops a longish guide with many facts and a large amount of detail. Other times, a team may wish to expand the framework only slightly. It will depend on the setting in which the piece will be used, who will be using it, and how much time is available to develop such a guide.

Because the framings are rooted in concerns and things held valuable, large amounts of background and data don't have to be conveyed—only the strategic facts. What do people need to know in order to deliberate productively?

While writing an issue guide is straightforward, that doesn't mean that it is necessarily easy. The guides are not designed to stand alone but rather to encourage deliberation in public forums.

### Voice and Language

There is a "sweet spot" when it comes to writing for the public that lies somewhere between the academic world and that of the editorial pages and op-eds. It can be tricky to capture. The narrative voice needs to make an argument, but at the same time needs to do so in a way that it admits doubt. It must be persuasive without being strident. The aim is to present each option with its best foot forward, but in an honest way that acknowledges its drawbacks.

Avoid burying the reader in detail. A conversational tone can go a long way. This is when compelling quotes or anecdotes come in handy.

You might go back to the interviews and concern-gathering sessions for quotes. Using them to convey crucial facts will keep the writing from becoming too academic, technical, or just plain dry.

Similarly, with regard to word choice, one aim of public deliberation is to allow people to reclaim their role as citizens. Many turns of phrase cut against that in subtle ways, especially in the public realm. For example, it is tempting to refer to people as "voters" when touching on political questions—however, this relegates people to one narrow (albeit important) role. Citizens, instead, do so much more than simply vote. There is no hard and fast rule about word choice, but be mindful of the need for plain language and avoid terms that are counterproductive.

## Sources

A note on source material. We live in a time marked by hyperpolarization. Public deliberation asks people to face difficult choices on difficult issues together. Participants should not see source material and supporting quotes as slanted in any way. People today are primed to see bias even when there is none—so issue guide authors need to be aware of this.

In a practical sense, this means that using data from the think-tank world, even when such organizations were seen as moderate just a few years ago, isn't helpful. Think tanks raise suspicions in the minds of many. Better to seek out source material from government data sources (such as the Congressional Research Service or Bureau of Labor Statistics). While blogs have gained in prominence and importance in the realm of ideas, for many participants they are seen as less trustworthy (deservedly or not). Online sources should be chosen judiciously. Similarly, in making the argument for each option, using quotations from public figures to illustrate (or make) some of the key arguments can sometimes be useful. But when choosing whom to quote, it is best to steer clear of polarizing figures. Sitting and recent presidents are often too polarizing to use, for example.

# Conclusion

As the saying goes, "many roads lead to Rome." This is not the only way, or even necessarily the best way, of developing materials to support public deliberation. It is just one way that has worked in various forms over more than 30 years. There is no single, correct method. Any approach that sincerely takes into account public concerns and exposes the trade-offs that we must face to move forward on difficult issues is likely to be effective.

We hope you will feel free to experiment and make changes as you see fit—and that you will share what you learn as you develop your own materials.

# Appendix: Example Issue Framework

This example issue framework is not presented as a "correct" version—it is simply designed to suggest one way an issue might be framed and to illustrate some of the aspects of this work that can be important and that are described in the foregoing text.

ISSUE ADVISORY

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# Mental Illness in America

## How Do We Address a Growing Problem?

**Many Americans share a sense that something is wrong with how we address mental health and mental illness.** More and more of us are taking medications for depression, hyperactivity, and other disorders. Meanwhile, however, dangerous mental illnesses are going undetected and untreated.

According to some, recent violent incidents reflect the need to increase security and increase our ability to detect mental illness. Others point to increasing numbers of veterans returning from overseas with post-traumatic stress disorders as a major concern. One in five Americans will have mental health problems in any given year. Unaddressed mental illness hurts individuals and their families and results in lost productivity. In rare cases, it can result in violence.

**This Issue Advisory presents a framework that asks: How can we reduce the impact of mental illness in America?**

Option One:

### Put safety first

| Option | Examples of What Might Be Done | Some Consequences and Trade-Offs to Consider |
|---|---|---|
| **Individuals with undiagnosed or untreated mental health problems create difficulties for themselves and those around them.**<br>While the vast majority of mentally ill people are nonviolent (and in fact more likely to be victims of violence), some are not.<br>This option holds that more preventive action is necessary to deal with mentally ill individuals who are potentially dangerous to themselves or others. We should identify those who need help and intervene where necessary, to prevent them from harming themselves and others. These individuals should be sought out and their needs addressed. | • Require mental health tests for anyone seeking sensitive jobs, such as teaching and police work.<br>• Medical boards can penalize professionals who failed to spot warning signs in people who "snap."<br>• Employers can require random, periodic testing for serious mental illness among employees, much like drug screening programs.<br>• Individuals can tell professionals about friends and coworkers who are behaving erratically. | • Many people will be denied rights and privileges, including people who are not dangerous.<br>• Health-care providers may begin to overdiagnose mental illness to avoid penalties.<br>• This would be an infringement of privacy and could result in many more unemployed or underemployed people who pose no danger to anyone.<br>• This may create a culture of informants and turn people against one another. |
| **But,** *this would interfere with people's freedom and some people could be forced into unnecessary treatment.* | • Make it easier for doctors to require medications and to institutionalize potentially violent individuals, even against their will. | • The side effects of required medications may be worse than the symptoms they treat. People may be confined unnecessarily. |

1

1. Title reflects a pressing question.
2. Introduction contains strategic facts necessary to set up the problem.
3. The "name" of the problem, or the thing that we must deliberate on. (Note that it is not necessarily the "title.")
4. Option is rooted in something held deeply valuable, in this case, security.
5. Each option reflects a different understanding of the problem.
6. Clear statement of the main thrust of the option.
7. Overall drawback to the option. Note that it assumes the option works as intended.
8. Actions reflect a range of actors and they are specific.
9. Drawbacks all assume that the actions work as intended.

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Option Two:

## Ensure mental health services are available to all who need them [10]

| Option | Examples of What Might Be Done | Some Consequences and Trade-Offs to Consider |
|---|---|---|
| **Studies show that people who have mental illness can very often recover with a combination of therapy, medical help, and continued support.**<br>Yet access to mental health services varies widely from place to place. Too many people are unable to get the help they need. In some cases they are discouraged from seeking help due to social stigma. In other cases, they cannot get a needed doctor's referral or their insurance does not cover services.<br>This option holds that people should be encouraged to take control over their own mental health and be provided the tools to do so. We should make sure that everyone who wishes can get the needed help. | • Make on-demand mental health care a part of all health insurance packages. | • This may increase the cost of even basic insurance beyond what people can bear, resulting in more people going uninsured. |
| | • Require mental health practitioners to serve residencies in rural and underserved areas. | • People may avoid entering these professions if they do not have the freedom to choose where to work. |
| | • Reward people who take the initiative to have their mental health assessed and treated. [11] | • People may become dependent on such rewards and preoccupied with checking their health status. |
| | • Provide convenient mental health screening sites throughout the community. | • People may avoid using such screening tools due to privacy concerns or for fear of the possible diagnosis. [12] |
| **But,** *even when mental health services are available to all, many will not seek the help they need.* | • Create a media campaign to promote mental health screenings and educate people on the importance of mental health. | • This may create a culture where people find it appropriate to query one another about private issues and may begin diagnosing one another. |

[13]

This Issue Advisory was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the books in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. Recent topics have included US politics, economic security, America's role in the world, and immigration. For more information on the National Issues Forums, visit the website: **www.nifi.org**.





10 Option reflects something held deeply valuable, in this case fairness to all. (Note that this thing held valuable is not necessarily stated explicitly.)

11 This action might in fact be more specific.

12 This drawback was not on the author's radar screen until it came up in a test forum, brought up by a participant.

13 Since many people mistrust the messages and materials they see in public life, it can be important to include some description of who is responsible for developing the framework.

Option Three:

## Let people plot their own course [14]

| Option | Examples of What Might Be Done | Some Consequences and Trade-Offs to Consider |
|---|---|---|
| **As a society, we have become oversensitive to behavior that previously would have simply been considered "different."**<br>In the majority of situations, a person's state of mental health doesn't affect others. Yet, professionals keep expanding definitions of mental illness to encompass more and more. But not everything has to be treated and medicated. Even when problems exist, people should make their own decisions about whether to seek treatment.<br>This option holds that we should not rely on so many medical approaches. We should reduce our dependence on drugs and allow people the freedom to plot their own course to healthy lives. In many cases, simple changes in lifestyle can improve mental health. | • Ratchet back diagnostic standards for mental illness so that odd or idiosyncratic behavior is no longer seen as requiring professional treatment. | • Some seemingly benign behavior may be an early sign of more serious problems, and people who could be helped may not be reached until it is too late. |
| | • Doctors can prescribe less medication and focus instead on counseling and talk therapy. | • Some people who could use medication will not get the relief they need. |
| | • Increase the numbers and visibility of self-help communities, such as twelve-step and other support groups. | • Self-help groups often make people feel better yet dispense poor advice that can sometimes be detrimental. |
| | • Employers can make healthy lifestyle programs like gym memberships and meditation classes available as a routine benefit of employment. | • This may be an unfair burden to place on employers. |
| **But,** *such a "hands off" approach may ignore people who are potentially dangerous and need intervention.* | • Drug companies can be prohibited from advertising prescription-only drugs on television. | • This interferes with an individual's right to learn about help and with a company's right to make potential patients aware of its products. |

Kettering Foundation

Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with offices in Washington, DC, and New York City), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It has provided issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit **www.kettering.org** or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. Phone: 1-800-221-3657.



[14] The "thing held valuable" at the core of this option is personal freedom.

**About the Kettering Foundation**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

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