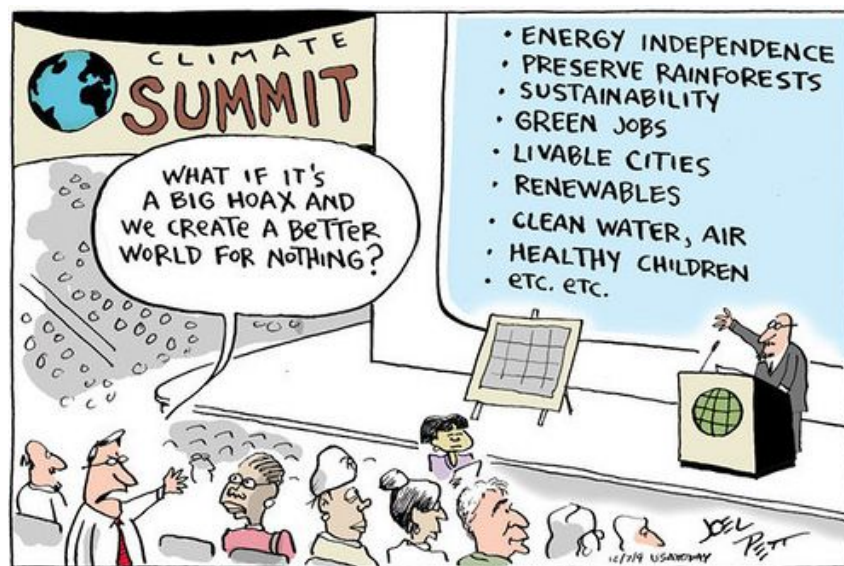


# How to Change Minds in the Climate Change Debate

“Climate change is a hoax...a liberal conspiracy targeting fossil fuel companies.” Scientists are still debating whether climate change is real.” “It’s all going to burn in the apocalypse.” If you have ever discussed climate change with those who do not believe that climate change is human-caused, you have probably heard quotes like these.

Why do climate change deniers strongly reject a 97% consensus reached by climate scientists worldwide? They may have even seen the evidence of climate change in the devastation of Superstorm Sandy, rising water levels in the streets of Miami, or the rapid disappearance of glaciers in Glacier National Park and yet, still refuse to believe that humankind is causing the climate crisis that threatens our planet.



## Understanding the Psychology of Denial

The answer lies in their worldview, that is, the lens through which they perceive surrounding events. Someone entrenched in a conservative worldview may claim that human-caused climate change is a liberal conspiracy to undermine the fossil fuel industry. People of faith may have adopted the position of the late Jerry Falwell, who declared that climate change was a tool of Satan designed to distract the faithful from spreading the message of Christ.

It would be natural to assume that, when presented with the facts and evidence of climate change, deniers would feel compelled to change their minds. In fact, their reaction is typically

the opposite—they actually feel more confident in their beliefs—a dynamic called the "backfire effect." The science behind this lies in the amygdala—an almond-shaped area of the brain that allows us respond to both physical and informational threats by shoring up our defenses.

## Say No to “Just the Facts, Ma’am”

If facts will not change minds, what will? Consider these three communication devices: how we frame our talking points, the nature of our relationship with the denier, and “sticky science”—simple, concrete, and perhaps unexpected statements that are easy to remember.

Rather than reiterating the threats of climate change, try focusing on the positive benefits of caring for the planet such as reduced health risks, job creation, and energy independence. For example, you could mention that an offshore wind farm off the coast of Rhode Island has shut down a CO<sub>2</sub>-spewing diesel plant and created 300 jobs. Re-framing climate change as ‘creation care’ tends to resonate with Evangelical Christians.

Appealing to emotions can be a powerful influencer and is a prime example of sticky science—Florida residents may be more convinced when you point out that rising sea levels may threaten their home or business. Using metaphors and stories to communicate the urgency of climate change stimulates the amygdala and sensory regions of the brain.

Linking climate change to personal health (another appeal to emotion) often resonates with deniers on some level. Heat waves, hurricanes, famine, and flooding all threaten human life; increased flooding also increases the risk of disease carried by mosquitoes and standing water. Psychologists report that climate change can lead to pre-traumatic stress and anxiety.

Trust also plays an important factor and is another trait of sticky science. You may have greater success talking with family, friends, churches, or community groups than giving presentations to strangers—the more credible and trustworthy you are perceived, the greater the chance that you will be able to influence deniers or, at least, the undecided majority.

## But It’s Cold Outside!

Deniers often cite common myths as a defense against facts about human-caused climate change. You may have heard the story of Jim Inhofe tossing up a snowball in the U.S. Senate chamber, declaring that the cold, snowy weather outside disproved climate change. While this anecdote may seem darkly humorous, Inhofe’s statements perpetuate a common climate change myth. In reality, as the Arctic grows warmer, the polar jet stream pushes south and east across North America and Europe, leading to intense winter storms.

John Cook, founder of [Skeptical Science](#), explains how to use “inoculation theory” to debunk common climate change myths.

*“In inoculation theory, you expose people to a weak version of the misconception,” Cook explains. “What I mean by this is you introduce the myth, and then identify the fallacy that the myth uses to distort science.”*

Cook explains that most myths fall prey to one (or more) of five logical fallacies summed up as the acronym FLICC: fake experts (magnified minority), logical fallacies, impossible expectations, cherry picking, and conspiracy theories. Inhofe’s myth would be an example of impossible expectations.

## Working Together for Change

As climate change increasingly encroaches on our everyday lives, knowing how to engage and win over deniers is essential. If nothing else works, appeal to the better angels of their nature—in the current environment of national polarization, the sense of working together to care for our planet may go a long way toward fostering a kinder, more responsible society.

## *Delve in Deeper*

You can learn more about how to effectively communicate with climate change deniers or non-scientists in general:

- [Making Sense of Climate Change Denial](#) - University of Queensland
- [Stand Up for Science: Practical Approaches to Discussing Science that Matters](#) - University of Michigan
- [Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die](#) - Chip and Dan Heath