

# Balance Our Tax Code

Messaging Guide





## Vision Statement

To build a more just and equitable tax code for Washington state that creates a strong future where all our communities have the resources they need to thrive.

## How to Use This Guide

To achieve our quest, we must use values-based messaging and human-centered stories. The purpose of this guide is to provide a ready-made messaging framework and talking points that convey to lawmakers and the public why balancing our tax code is vital to the health of our communities. Informed by five years of messaging research and strategies that have shifted how Washingtonians think about government and taxes, this guide is built using elements of the empirically tested Heroes' Narrative and Race-Class Narrative. It includes:

- Core Narrative
- Framing
- Message Triangle
- Words to Embrace and Replace
- Core Values
- Copy Blocks
- Narrative Elements
- Target Audiences



## Core Narrative

The Core Narrative is the three-part central story from which all other narrative elements are derived. While various detailed narrative elements—i.e. heroes, tools, weapons—can change depending on your audience, the central quest, threat, and solution will align to our Core Narrative below. It's important to use all of the elements of this narrative statement whenever possible.

*As Washingtonians*, we know that our state is a great place to live, work, and raise a family. No matter our race, zip code, or what's in our wallets, most of us work hard for our families and pitch in for our communities. We know that when we all invest together in the foundations that benefit us all, our communities thrive.

*But today*, working families pay seven times more of their income in taxes than the wealthiest. Giant corporations and the wealthy few have rigged our tax code so that they pay the least, while we pay the most. They pit our communities against each other, hoping we'll look the other way while they rake in profits and reap the benefits of our contributions while refusing to pay their share. It doesn't have to be this way. When we join together across our differences, as we have done in our past, we can rewrite the rules and make sure that those who've done well in Washington, do right by Washingtonians.

*We make Washington*, and when we go all in for all of us, we can right our upside-down tax code, and ensure that all of us have access to world-class schools, affordable health care, and the community services our families need.



## Message Triangle

The Message Triangle is made up of the three major elements of the Core Narrative. When talking about the progressive revenue story, you can start with any of these, but our research shows it is most effective to tell a complete story by using all three elements of the triangle.

### *Quest— The world we are building. Our shared value(s).*

As Washingtonians, we know that our state is a great place to live, work, and raise a family. No matter what we look like or where we come from, most of us work hard for our families and pitch in for our communities. When we all invest together in the foundations that benefit us all, our communities thrive.

### *Solution— How we're going to achieve our quest.*

We make Washington, and by joining together to rewrite the rules, we can make sure that those who have done well in Washington do right by Washingtonians. When we go all in for all of us, we can ensure all of us have access to world-class schools, affordable health care, and community services our families need.

### *Threat— The big problem that prevents us from achieving our quest.*

But today, working families pay seven times more of their income in taxes than the wealthiest. Giant corporations and the wealthy few have rigged our tax code so that they pay the least, while we pay the most. They pit our communities against each other, hoping we'll look the other way while they reap the benefits of our contributions while refusing to pay their share.



## Core Values

If we're going to lead with values in our storytelling, we must understand what our shared values are, and how they align with our audiences. These are the values that guide us toward a future that we are responsible for creating.

***Racial Justice:*** Equitable access to a high quality of life and outcomes for communities of color.

***Intersectionality:*** Advancing policies that address historic injustices and inequities experienced by marginalized communities

***Inclusivity:*** Bringing to the table and centering those most impacted, particularly communities of color, low-income communities, and other impacted communities

***Transparency and accountability:*** Clear understanding and communication of coalition decisions, decision-making, and dynamics that inform coalition work

***Chipping in your share:*** Not everyone or every organization has equal resources or time to contribute—provide the bandwidth and energy we each, respectively, have to do the collective work

***Stepping back:*** Acknowledging the privilege and structural advantages any person or organization has and be aware of the space they take up in discussion and decision-making



## Narrative Elements

The narrative elements let you tell multiple versions of the same story. Understanding each component of the story allows you to talk about shared values through different heroes and villains, and name the tools and weapons that are used to block or advance progress. These are meant to be interchangeable, and to give you a lens through which to talk about the quest and threat. This level of fluency allows you to better tell your story.

Heroes	Heroes' Tools	Villains	Villains' Weapons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Front Line workers</li> <li>Low-income families</li> <li>Middle-income families</li> <li>Parents and family caregivers</li> <li>Health care workers</li> <li>K-12 students</li> <li>College students</li> <li>Teachers</li> <li>State employees</li> <li>Hospitality workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Op-ed</li> <li>• LTE's</li> <li>• Earned media</li> </ul> </li> <li>Paid media</li> <li>Public testimony</li> <li>Actions</li> <li>Email lawmaker</li> <li>Organize in community</li> <li>Kitchen table conversations</li> <li>Social media organizing</li> <li>Public policy</li> <li>Revenue champion lawmakers</li> <li>Abundancy framing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large corporations</li> <li>Greedy CEO's</li> <li>Wealthy funders of campaigns</li> <li>The wealthy few</li> <li>Big business lobbyists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Anti-tax politicians</li> <li>Fear and mistrust of government</li> <li>Trickle-down economic theory</li> <li>False narratives connecting job creation and taxes</li> <li>Media</li> <li>Public testimony</li> <li>Digital campaigns</li> <li>Campaign donations</li> <li>Division and fear of the "other"</li> <li>Racism and the dog-whistles they use to communicate it.</li> </ul>



## Framing

New research from TOPOS Partnership in August 2020 tells us that Washingtonians understand that these are not normal times, and it makes sense to them that bold, progressive revenue solutions are necessary to keep us afloat. Use the following framing when talking about progressive revenue in your work.

COVID-19 has caused a collapse of economic activity. This means a collapse in state revenue from sales and business taxes. Therefore, Washington lawmakers face a simple choice:

*We can cut spending—which will hurt people and slow economic activity as the flow of money in Washington communities dries up even further—OR*

*We can raise taxes on those at the top—which will preserve needed programs, help people who need it, keep workers employed, and ensure that money continues to circulate in Washington communities.*

Communicators should continue to reinforce the kind of state and communities within that we are creating, including excellent schools where our kids learn, safe roads to drive on, healthy parks to play in, emergency services we rely on, etc., as well as programs that meet particular needs during this crisis.

It is also still important to talk about our upside-down tax code. The following framing is startling but easy to understand, and continues to motivate Washingtonians to support balancing our tax system.

*Our combination of sales and other taxes is upside-down because it means that a low-income person pays about 17% of their income to state and local taxes, while a middle-income person pays about 7% and a wealthy person pays about 3%.*

In the context of our current health crisis, that 17% includes many of the BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ+ folks who make up the majority of our front-line workforce and are at a much higher risk for exposure to COVID-19, while simultaneously bearing the brunt of the economic downturn, and paying the highest portion of their income in taxes.

# Words to Embrace and Replace

Say This	Instead of This	Notes
People of different races and from different places; white, Black or brown; native or newcomer; Latino, Asian or white; etc.	All people; everyone	Explicit reference to race engages people of color while keeping white listeners on board
Join together across racial differences	Join together in our communities	Making racial reference increases interest of our base and persuadables
Wealthy few who rig the rules; greedy few	Elites; the wealthy	It's critical to specify we mean only certain people, thus adding "few," and to name by behavior, not category or class
Corporation	Company	Company evokes small and local; people are measurably more hostile toward "corporations"
Working people	Workers	Calling people workers reduces them to the role they play and eclipses their basic needs and desires as humans.
Shared contribution; contribute our share	Tax burden; tax relief	"Burden" and "relief" reinforce the notion of taxes as an affliction
Residents; community members	Taxpayers	Labeling people taxpayers foregrounds finances and anti-government biases
Schools where our kids learn; roads we drive on; buses we take to work	Public education; infrastructure; public transit	The more tangible we can make our messages, the more people are drawn to and motivated by them
Take resources from our communities; undermine our schools; free ride off what we contribute	Tax breaks; avoid paying taxes; get away with not paying taxes	People resent taxes and thus understand desire to avoid them; we must foreground what taxes buy, not the taxes themselves
Ensure our schools and communities get the resources they need; ensure we can stay in our homes	Close corporate loopholes; end tax breaks; stop rent gauging	We must affirm what we are for, not merely what we oppose.
Keep money flowing through our communities; irrigate our communities	Save our economy; economic recovery	Tie state resources to our behavior as we interact in our communities
Knee-jerk cuts, across the board cuts, deep cuts	Austerity	"Austerity" is a word that people say but don't understand the meaning of. Use language that regular people understand.





## Copy Blocks

The following can be used as stand alone messages or in combination. They are designed to be used in a variety of ways such as public statements, op-eds and LTE's, interviews and speeches, social media, or in conversation with friends and family. They can be used verbatim or adapted to fit particular needs and circumstances.

- As Washingtonians, we care that our state is a great place to live, work, and raise a family. No matter our race, zip code, or what's in our wallets, most of us work hard for our families and pitch in for our communities. But today, giant corporations and the politicians they pay for have rigged our tax code so that they pay the least, while we pay the most. They pit our communities against each other, hoping we'll look the other way while they rake in profits and reap the benefits of our contributions while refusing to pay their share. It doesn't have to be this way. We make Washington, and by joining together to rewrite the rules, we can make sure that those who have done well in Washington do right by Washingtonians, and contribute to the foundations of our thriving communities like world-class schools, affordable health care, and community services our families need.
- No matter what we look like or where we come from, most of us work hard for our families and pitch in for each other. But today, communities of color hit hardest by the 2008 recession are suffering the greatest consequences of our upside-down tax code while also bearing the brunt of the health impacts of COVID-19. It doesn't have to be this way. When we join together across our differences we can right our upside-down tax code and ensure that all our communities have the resources they need to thrive.
- We pull through by pulling together, as we have done in our past. This means going all in for all of us. Working together across our racial differences we can demand that corporations and the wealthy few who have done well in Washington do right by Washingtonians. We all need to do our part to keep money flowing in our communities, and that includes making large corporations and the wealthiest few pay their share. When those who are doing well contribute their share, we all benefit.
- Together, we can rebuild an economy where all of us, no matter what we look like or where we live, can thrive.
- We can invest in us, ensuring our schools are healthy places for our kids to learn, and our communities have the resources we need to thrive.
- We can balance our upside-down tax code so that large corporations and the wealthy few pay their share.
- It's time to come together across our differences, as we have done in our past, and demand bold action.
- Keep the heart of Washington pumping by making sure money is flowing through our communities.
- Knee-jerk cuts hurt us all.



## Target Audiences

Audience	Characteristics/Commonalities	Possible Pain Points
Legislators (Base)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shares our values</li> <li>Likely former activists</li> <li>Constituents familiar with/supportive of issue</li> <li>Gatekeepers of power &amp; knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influenced by business interests</li> <li>Unwilling to alienate opposition or colleagues</li> <li>Beholden to political calculus</li> </ul>
Legislators (Persuadables)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shares our values</li> <li>Balancing personal belief with political understanding of their district</li> <li>Gatekeepers of power &amp; knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constituents are steeped in conservative framing on taxes</li> <li>Influenced by business interests</li> <li>Unwilling to alienate opposition</li> <li>Beholden to political calculus</li> </ul>
Constituent Activists (Base)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shares our values</li> <li>Employed by mission driven org</li> <li>Volunteer of mission driven org</li> <li>BOTC coalition member</li> <li>Professional motivation</li> <li>Experience with and/or understanding of government support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Live in a blue bubble</li> <li>Want an income tax</li> <li>Make the perfect the enemy of the good</li> <li>Feel the negative effects of our upside-down tax code</li> </ul>
Constituents (Persuadables)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shares our values</li> <li>Low- or middle-income</li> <li>May live in under-resourced communities</li> <li>May rely on government supports</li> <li>Friend/family may rely on government supports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can often be convinced by last/loudest argument (“good point”)</li> <li>Susceptible to conservative/scarcity framing</li> <li>Don’t understand specific tax policy</li> <li>Feel the negative effects of our upside-down tax code</li> <li>Are being affected by Washington’s high cost of living and attribute taxes as part of the problem</li> </ul>