This section consists of three, different explanations of framing theory. There may be some overlap.

Framing
From Value Based Management Net,
<http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_tversky_framing.html>

Framing is focusing the attention of people within a field of meaning. Tversky and Kahneman should be seen as the founders of framing theory, although Fairhurst and Sarr actually coined the term.

Contrary to the central concept of of rational choice theory (people always strive to make the most rational choices possible), Framing theory suggests that how something is presented (the “frame”) influences the choices people make.

Frames are abstract notions that serve to organize or structure social meanings. Frames influence the perception of the news of the audience, this form of agenda-setting not only tells what to think about an issue (agenda-setting theory), but also how to think about that issue.

Framing is a quality of communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another. It is the process by which a communication source defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy.

Framing is not per se a bad thing and in fact is an unavoidable part of human communication. We find it in the media as events are presented within a field of meaning. We find it in politics as politicians attempt to characterize events as one thing or another; we find it in religion, and we find it in negotiating when one side tries to move another towards a desired outcome. Finally it can also be used by leaders of organizations with profound effects on how organizational members understand and respond to the world in which they live. It is a skill that most successful leaders possess, yet one that is not often taught.

According to Fairhurst & Sarr (1996) F consists of three elements:
1. Language,
2. Thought, and
3. Forethought.

Language helps us to remember information and acts to transform the way in which we view situations. To use language, people must have thought and reflected on their own interpretive frameworks and those of others. Leaders can and should learn framing spontaneously in certain circumstances. Being able to do so has to do with having the forethought to predict framing opportunities. In other words, leaders must plan in order to be spontaneous.

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) described the following Framing Techniques:

a) **Metaphor:** To give an idea or program a new meaning by comparing it to something else.

b) **Stories** (myths and legends): To frame a subject by anecdote in a vivid and memorable
way.
c) **Traditions** (rites, rituals and ceremonies): To pattern and define an organization at regular time increments to confirm and reproduce organizational values.
d) **Slogans, jargon and catchphrases**: To frame a subject in a memorable and familiar fashion.
e) **Artifacts**: To illuminate corporate values through physical vestiges (sometimes in a way language cannot).
f) **Contrast**: To describe a subject in terms of what it is not.
g) **Spin**: to talk about a concept so as to give it a positive or negative connotation.

---

**Framing Theory Overview**

*From Robert Owen Gardner, Guy Burgess (Colorado-Boulder), Michael Eliott (Georgia Tech), and Sanda Kaufman (Cleveland State)*

Framing is a social scientific concept that is used to describe how individuals interpret and respond to particular events or situations. Framing is often used to describe how individuals come to understand, characterize, and act upon their interpretations of a particular situation or issue. A multifaceted concept, framing has been defined as:

- the process of interpreting what is going on or what is at issue in a particular issue
- the process through which one organizes knowledge about the world
- the use of this knowledge to make sense of new information, events, or experiences
- a cognitive device used to guide interpretations of new experiences

**Frames and Framing**

Whereas *framing* refers to the overall process of interpretation, *frames* are specific “collections of perceptions and thoughts that people use to define a situation, organize information, and determine what is important and what is not,” or “an individualized definition of a situation based on an interplay of past experience and knowledge, and the existing situation.”

Because issues are often complicated, and require the processing of a great deal of information from a variety of perspectives, frames provide a shorthand understanding of a situation, by focusing only on those features deemed important by the particular individual involved. Frames are therefore interpretive devices that all people use when making sense of the world around them. They aid us in making the difficult task of processing complex and often cumbersome information about our social world much simpler, by focusing our attention only on certain features that we feel are important.

All individuals use frames to aid in deciding where and how we fit into the issue and what, if anything, we can do in response. Just as a picture frame is used to create a border around a painting or photograph to crop out unimportant features of the image, an issue frame is used by individuals to crop out particular features of the issue, and to highlight what they feel is important.

This process of emphasizing certain features of the issue by cropping or downplaying less prominent features allows the most important information to be filtered out from the large
pile of information surrounding the dispute. However, different people see certain dimensions of issues in very different ways. What may be of primary importance to one stakeholder may not be important at all to another. Though framing provides a shorthand filtering of essential information, it also can generate conflicts through differing interpretations of a dispute, and disagreements over the importance of its component parts.

**Framing and Dispute Resolution**

People often frame complex issues to simplify them in their own minds, and they often choose to use certain frames and ignore others. How people frame an issue is a reflection of what they define as central and critical to their objectives. Further, the framing process is often unintentional and unconscious. And, finally, frames are malleable and can be shaped and reshaped through communication and information sharing.

Framing is a useful tool for analysis, because it allows us to view the particular frames that people use when examining a particular issue. If we come to understand the various frames that individuals use to distinguish important from unimportant information, then we can achieve a better understanding of why people take the positions that they do, and we can learn about how and why people respond as they do when interpreting a particular situation.

**Identity Frames**

**Identity frames** illustrate the various ways in which people view themselves or the social groups to which they belong, in the context of specific situations. The concept of identity addresses the question, “Who am I?”

The concept of identity frames is an important one, because it allows one to analyze how individuals’ identity and group affiliation influence how they view and respond to conflict. Because we tend to protect the parts of our identity that help create our sense of self (beliefs, values, group affiliations, etc.), we tend to perceive other groups or individuals who promote decisions that negatively impact one of these characteristics of our identity as a potential threat to our sense of self.

When individuals’ identities are threatened or challenged through conflict situations, they tend to respond in ways that reinforce their allegiance to their identities. Identity frames function to “crop” information and perspectives that do not align with – or perhaps contradict – features of an individual’s core identity. In such situations, participants tend to view the conflict in ways that align with and do not threaten their identities, and therefore tend to reject or dismiss those perspectives that do threaten their identities.

**Where Identity Frames Come From**

Identity frames are created in a number of ways, and are influenced by multiple factors. Individuals’ understanding of their core beliefs, values, and sense of self influences how they will respond in a particular situation. Often, people see themselves as advocates of a particular set of values and frame the issue based on how proposed solutions to a particular issue advance one or more of a particular set of interests.

**Group Identification:** The different groups with which individuals are affiliated also influence their orientation toward the issue and toward other parties involved. For
example, when deciding whether to support new legislation calling for mandatory prayer in public schools, one’s identity as a fundamentalist Christian would result in a more favorable frame toward the policy. Such a person would likely frame the issue through the values of their church community, rather than through the values of personal choice or preference. This framing, in turn, influences how the individual will consider the merits of opposing arguments and positions on the. When people view themselves as a part of a larger group, position, institution, or set of values, they will behave in ways that protect these parts of their identity.

Social / Institutional Roles: One’s role in society (such as student, parent, friend, activist, victim, guardian, relative, boss, employee, etc.) can dramatically influence one’s framing of a situation. In turn, each of these societal roles can influence the options we see as being available. For example, when considering options for relocating students in a school attendance zone redistribution plan, how we frame the ensuing dispute depends on our particular social and institutional role. As a parent, a person may view the dispute in terms of how the outcome would affect their children or perhaps their ability to parent. School administrators may be more interested in how the outcome would affect teachers or the overall budget of the school system. As an employee, one may be more interested in how this redistribution would affect their employment status. Based on our different roles, we will see and respond to (frame) the dispute differently, based on the needs and interests of our particular role.

Our institutional affiliation (federal employee, state house representative, mayor, president of a chemical company, director of an environmental organization, etc.) may also facilitate or inhibit particular ways of looking at an issue. For example, as a politician, a person may evaluate first and foremost how the outcome of a particular dispute (or even the processes they used to address the ) may influence their ability to become re-elected. In this case, the politician would make choices based on a frame that considers only those behaviors that make for “good politics.” A sound solution may not be considered because the “politician frame” did not allow this option to come into the politician’s view.

Place-Based Identities: in some situations where locale or place is an important feature of the issue, many identity statements answer the question, “Who am I?” in relation to a particular place, neighborhood, region, county, city, or street. This place-based group affiliation can influence how an individual will respond to the as various alternatives impact that particular place.

Characterization Frames
Characterization frames describe how individuals in a particular view other individuals or groups. Whereas identity frames respond to the question, “Who am I?” characterization frames respond to the question, “Who are they?” These responses are often based on our own experiences, and are heavily influenced by what others have done in the past to shape these experiences.

Closely linked to stereotyping, characterization frames influence how we view and respond to particular situations, based on how we view others in the situation. Characterization frames have a normative or evaluative quality, which can include both negative and positive (or neutral) characterizations. For example, if one frames another as evil, greedy, well-informed, or intelligent, they will respond and interact with them as if
they were indeed evil, greedy, well-informed, or intelligent. When framing another person or group negatively, stakeholders tend to minimize the role or contributions of the other person or group to the dispute.

Negative characterization frames often work to create divisions and boundaries between individuals and groups, based on identity group membership. Often, characterization frames arise out of one’s allegiance to a particular group and its representative values, interests, positions, or goals in the. When one’s personal identity is inextricably tied to that of a larger religious, political, ethnic, or neighborhood group, the individual may respond to opposing groups in ways that characterize them as inferior, unintelligent, biased, or otherwise misguided in their interpretation of the situation. This allows the individual operating under unfavorable characterization frames to discredit and discount the perspectives of the other groups, thus making their contributions appear unworthy of consideration.

**The Frame: An Introduction**

*From “Working Psychology,” by Kelton Rhoads, Ph.D.*

*Copyright © 1997 by Kelton Rhoads, Ph.D.* [www.workingpsychology.com]

The scientific study of influence is endowed with a wealth of verifiable facts, phenomena, and reliable effects. One of the difficulties in writing about influence is that different phenomena occupy different amounts of “space” in the geography of social influence.

Framing, has been only lightly researched--yet it is extremely important. Why? To answer, consider the following analogy:

Imagine that you visit Arizona, and we go to the desert and walk out under the stunning Arizona night sky. As we look up at the uncountable number of stars, we see a particularly bright grouping of them. You ask what that grouping is, and I tell you it’s the constellation Scorpio. It’s a beautiful asterism, easily observable by eye alone. Then I tell you there’s something really interesting I’d like to show you—a star cluster in the constellation Hercules. It can’t be seen by the unaided eye, so out comes the telescope—and you are soon enjoying a view of an amazing cluster of stars. One asterism was large and obvious, the other much smaller but equally beautiful. To get an appreciation of the night sky, it must be explored on both a macro and micro scale. The same holds true for social influence.

**What’s in a Frame?**

A frame is a psychological device that offers a perspective and manipulates salience in order to influence subsequent judgment.

You’ll notice this definition consists of three separate components:

1) A frame “offers a perspective.” It manages the viewer’s alignment in relation to the issue. Picture frames on expensive artwork are often deep to ensure that the viewer examines the artwork from a limited perspective... a perspective that flatters the artwork, of course. Just as a picture frame can obscure a painting from an oblique view, so a psychological frame invites the observer to view the topic from a certain
perspective. By labeling ground beef as “75% lean” rather than “25% fat,” for example, researchers Levin & Gaeth (1988) were able to impel people to consider meat in terms of its positive healthful qualities.

2) A frame “manipulates salience.” That is, it directs the viewer to consider certain features and ignore others. A picture frame sets the artwork apart from the wallpaper. A psychological frame, however, encourages the observer to attend to a feature of the stimulus within the frame, while disregarding other features of that same stimulus which lie outside the frame. To borrow the language of the Gestaltists, a frame emphasizes ‘figure’ at the expense of ‘ground.’ For example, referring to someone as “blue collar” or “intellectual” or “an athlete” emphasizes one particular feature of that person. Perception may become organized around the label.

3) A frame influences “subsequent judgment.” The frame precedes a persuasive attempt, and implies a certain organization for the information that follows. A story tells of a Florentine patron of the arts who took a beautiful picture frame to Leonardo da Vinci and asked him to paint a picture that would fit within it. Ludicrous as this sounds, a successful psychological frame operates in precisely this fashion. Information received after the frame is delivered may be organized and resized to fit within the parameters established by the frame. The frame not only contains, but constrains. The frame helps create the picture we view.

Ancient and Contemporary Frames
Framing has recently enjoyed a renaissance of investigation in the social psychological literature. This line of research appears to have grown from a peripheral treatment in a paper on decisions under risk published by Kahneman & Tversky in 1979. Since then, social psychology has pursued the topic in much the same way it was presented by Kahneman & Tversky; however, communications and marketing have studied the phenomenon more broadly, and the scientific community is beginning to render the topic with the richness and diversity that this venerable topic deserves.

“Venerable,” because what we call “framing” Aristotle called “atechnoi” and Cicero called “statis.” Cicero was known to be a particular aficionado of the framing technique, and his lawyerly reputation in ancient Rome was based in part on his ability to demonstrate murdering villains as laudable patriots and have them subsequently acquitted (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992). What we in science are beginning to understand with methodological rigor, successful practitioners of influence from Cicero to Johnny Cochran have used with intuitive dexterity for centuries. But to take persuasive techniques from the intuitive ether and transform them into reliable, predictable incarnations is the task of social science. Let’s continue our examination of framing with the seminal 1979 Kahneman & Tversky study.

Risky Behavior and Negative Framing: The Roots of Modern Framing Research
Kahneman & Tversky (1979) were interested in understanding the conditions under which people made conservative or risky judgments. They observed evidence supporting what they called “prospect theory:” that the prospect of a loss has a greater impact on decision making than does the prospect of an equivalent gain. Considerable evidence has amassed supporting the statement that humans do not consider gains and losses logically. A decision maker will select the option with the highest subjective utility, whether or not that provides the highest objective gain (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982).
If actual gains and losses matched their psychological incarnations exactly, you’d find that people who found a $100 bill would be ten times as happy as those who found a $10 bill, and 100x as happy as the person who found a $1 bill. The inverse should also be true for losing money. If you were to plot a logical relationship on a vertical axis of value (happiness at the top of the blue line, unhappiness at the bottom) and a horizontal axis of valence (gains on the right side of the green line, losses on the left), it would look like this:

Logically, each increment in good fortune should represent an equal increment of value (happiness). But the relationship isn’t this simple or logical. Finding a single dollar makes a person disproportionately happy. Each additional dollar found makes him happier, but not in a linear fashion. That first dollar gives “the most bang for a buck” as far as pleasure is concerned. Each additional dollar found, won, or earned gives somewhat less pleasure than the previous one. Now let’s look at the losing end of the line. The loss of a dollar will make the purple line dip faster than it rose when it was in gain territory. The pleasure of winning money is less intense than the pain of losing the same sum! Kahneman & Tversky (1982) plotted the psychological relationship that exists between value, gains and losses. I’ve copied it from their article and reproduced it below:

In the upper right “gain” quadrant, notice that “value” rises rather quickly in the lower value ranges and then levels off at higher ranges. This indicates that small fortunes are very efficient in making one happy. In the lower, or “loss” quadrant, notice that the line dips sharply below where the logical 45° line should be, and stays there. This demonstrates that losses are felt more keenly than is logical. Felt losses remain below the logical line throughout the range depicted, indicating that losing continues to hurt worse than “it actually is.” Notice also that the loss line dips more sharply than the gain line ever rises. Again, we humans hate to lose. We’d rather not win, than lose!

Prospect theory, and its function above, give us an invaluable insight into human nature. We know that a human’s first priority is not to lose—gains are secondary to the “no loss” rule. Thus, framing a decision in terms of possible loss should motivate a person more than framing the same decision in terms of possible gain. And, given various obligatory caveats and constraints which we explore later, subsequent research largely supports the

**Loss Aversion, Risk, & Framing**

The next stop in the framing inquiry involves the unique relationship of risk taking to positive and negative framing. Since losses loom larger than gains, it appears that humans follow conservative strategies when presented with a positively-framed dilemma, and risky strategies when presented with negatively-framed ones. To illustrate, consider Kahneman & Tversky’s 1984 study where they asked a representative sample of physicians the following question. Read and answer it before you continue.

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows: If program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved. Which of the two programs would you
favor?

Be sure to answer this question before you proceed.

Have you answered? OK.

Notice that the preceding dilemma is positively framed. It views the dilemma in terms of “lives saved.” When the question was framed in this manner, 72% of physicians chose A, the safe-and-sure strategy, but only 28% chose program B, the risky strategy. An equivalent set of physicians considered the same dilemma, but with the question framed negatively:

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows: If program C is adopted, 400 people will die. If program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die. Which of the two programs would you favor?

You can see that the two questions examine an identical dilemma. Two hundred of 600 people saved is the same as 400 of 600 lost. However, when the question was framed negatively, and physicians were concentrating on losses rather than gains, they voted in a dramatically different fashion. When framed negatively, 22% of the physicians voted for the conservative strategy and 72% of them opted for the risky strategy!

As you can see, framing the choice positively vs. negatively caused an almost perfect reversal in the choices of highly-trained experts making a decision in their field of expertise--saving (or is that ‘not losing’?) lives! Clearly, framing can powerfully influence the way a problem is perceived, which in turn can lead to the favoring of radically different solutions.

Let’s consider the same “negative frame ⇒ risky behavior” phenomenon from a somewhat less theoretical and more practical perspective. Imagine that you are a medical practitioner, and you have just seen your third case of advanced breast cancer in a single week. “Why,” you wonder to yourself, “aren’t these women performing breast self-exams (BSEs) and finding these lumps before they become full-fledged, life-endangering metastatic cancers?” Your clinic hands a brochure on BSE to every woman that enters the door. BSE is regularly described in newspapers and on TV; information on this topic isn’t exactly scarce! Why do your patients choose to die rather than comply? you wonder.

But consider the act of a BSE. Logically, it’s safe— but psychologically, it’s a risky procedure. If you perform BSE, you may feel a lump. So performing BSE is a risky behavior, because by looking, you may find something you don’t want to find. Not performing a BSE is a logical health risk behavior, but is safer psychologically. By not looking, you won’t find anything that may cause you to worry.

Researchers Meyerowitz and Chaiken explored this very question in a 1987 research project. They distributed one of two brochures on BSE to equivalent patients in equivalent clinics. The brochures were identical in terms of content, but one stressed the
gains associated with performing a BSE, and the other focused on the losses associated with inaction. You can guess the result, can’t you? The negatively-framed brochure lead to higher positive BSE-related attitudes and behaviors. Actually, the true strength of the negative frame emerged four months after patients received the brochures. Those who received negatively-framed brochures showed significantly greater intentions to perform BSE at the later date.

Why is it that negative information causes increased persuasion in these types of situations? Psychologists have long known of the existence of the “positivity bias,” which states that humans overwhelmingly expect good things (as opposed to neutral or bad things) to occur. If perceivers construct a world in which primarily positive elements are expected, then negative information becomes perceptually salient as a jolting disconfirmation of those expectations (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972). We also know that people stop to examine disconfirmations to a much higher degree than confirmations. Negative information is often highly informative and thus may be assigned extra weight in the decision-making process (Fiske, 1980; Smith & Petty, 1996). Let me ask you: if you learned that your friend’s auto mechanic performed an excellent valve job but botched his automatic transmission repair, would you take your car to that mechanic? No, because negative information overwhelms positive information. You expect a mechanic to be effective, period.

Media Framing
The premiere framing institution of our time, the American media dramatically shapes the way we view current issues. As early as 1920, a scientist named Lippman proposed that the media would control public opinion by focusing attention on selected issues while ignoring others. Known as the “agenda-setting” hypothesis, the idea that people were easily susceptible to media influence was soon derided as an overly simplistic misperception of the viewing audience.

Through most of this century, media pundits claimed that the public wasn’t susceptible to simple “hypodermic” injections from the media (and you can still hear this defense put forward by today’s media moguls). But the agenda-setting hypothesis has been revisited recently by scientists like Krosnick & Miller (1996), who have traced surges and declines in presidential popularity to media contextualizing.

In 1991, the gulf war dominated media coverage, pushing Bush’s approval ratings to 90% after the war—*the* highest rating in American history. A short 12 months later, Bush was defeated at the polls. How could one of the most popular presidents in American history lose a subsequent election? There was no publicised scandal, no political gaffe, no international blunder that could explain Bush’s misfortunes.

Media personalities often explain national changes in mood by denigrating the fickle, mindless American public. Remember when Dan Rather attributed the 1994 Republican wins to a public that threw a “tantrum”? But a fickle, mindless public isn’t the answer either. The answer to national mood swings appears to be psychological rather than logical. Seemingly inconsequential changes in issue presentation have been shown to cause dramatic shifts in public preference.

Researchers Krosnick & Brannon (1993) used national survey data to answer this very question. During 1992, the media refocused its attentions from the war to the national
Based on sophisticated statistical analyses, Krosnick & Brannon demonstrated that this media refocus largely accounted for Bush’s declining popularity in 1992.

Because of this and similar research, many media experts are once again viewing the public as passive recipients of “hypodermic” media injections. Yeah, that’s right: people are told what to think by the media. And the vast majority of people obediently think as they’re told. It’s just human nature—who has the time or the energy to sort out all the issues one’s self? The media does this for us. It offers us safe, often comforting opinions that appear to be the consensus of the nation. (The internet is a chink in the armor.)

Communications scientist Robert Entman (1993) states that “Journalists may follow the rules for objective reporting and yet convey a dominant framing of the news that prevents most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation.” This requires that we ask a fundamental question: if media elites can effectively shape public opinion by emphasizing certain issues and ignoring others, what is the nature of a modern, media-dominated democracy?

Does public opinion reside in the minds of citizens, or is public opinion manufactured elsewhere and then merely deposited in the minds of citizens?

Entman thinks that attempting to determine the public’s ‘true’ opinion is often a futile effort, since opinions can be as easily manufactured as they can be measured.

Frame Defense

Although frames can be used for good or ill, you have seen how easily they can be used to manipulate people. How does one defend oneself against manipulative frames? A difficult question, to be sure. I believe most frames escape notice, because humans are generally too busy or distracted to realize an issue has been framed. Nonetheless, I recommend the following steps to combat framing manipulation:

1. Write the decision, with “vs.” between issues. Then ask: “Are these truly the issues, or have they shifted?” If so, reframe.

2. If a decision seems to be a simple open-and-shut case, ask, “What other frames would be appropriate? Is this decision really this simple or is an existing frame making it seem so?”

3. Remember that you are in charge of your frames. Ask yourself, “What’s important here?” and then act accordingly. For instance, the young parents introduced on the page entitled Three Framed Victims should have asked themselves, “Do we have money to spend on this set of books? Or is there something more important to our family’s welfare in which we should invest?”

4. If you encounter a situation in which a communicator stands to benefit from your compliance, ask: “What’s the agenda for the person presenting this information? Why is this particular aspect of the topic being made salient?” Be suspicious. Attempt to counter with alternate frames.
Beware of anything that physically frames. Like a TV! Notice its wider-than-tall proportion, and the way the TV case surrounds the picture tube? It’s a frame! Anything you see on TV has already been framed for you. The same goes for the web, radio, newspapers, and magazines, as well as pictures in museums! A frame isn’t necessarily bad, but keep in mind that it does require you view the situation from a certain perspective.