

GM Freeze guide
GM communications traps - and how to avoid them
A product of the [We've Been Framed](#) project, developed with [Framing Matters](#)

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Rationale

One really effective way to improve the way we communicate with others about the problems with genetic modification (GM) in the food chain is to identify and categorise problematic framing and language and use alternatives that more accurately reflect reality.

Here we unpack the language associated with GM, call out the problems, and present a comprehensive guide to how to avoid them.

Note: the traps are not mutually exclusive - words, phrases and messages can trigger more than one trap at the same time.

Key



Parrot:
repetition trap



Chameleon:
sanitising trap



Robin:
rose-tinted trap



Rat:
misunderstanding trap











Shark: contaminated or contested language trap

















Upside down parrot:
Inversion doesn't work trap


How we refer to different kinds of genetic modification

Word or phrase to avoid	Framing trap/s this falls into	Why – what is the trap doing?	What you can say instead
Gene Editing		Repeats a term used to re-brand new GM techniques and encourage public acceptance.	Messing with DNA Plants (or animals) created in the lab
	 trap	Gene editing is a metaphor – it deliberately hides the complexity and risks of genetic manipulation by comparing it with something we all do to improve our work and fix mistakes (editing text).	Genetic manipulation <i>Sometimes we need to use accepted jargon (eg when communicating with officials) but we can still frame this to focus on our perspective, for example:</i>
	 Robin: rose-tinted trap	The word editing has positive associations because it is usually done to improve things and Editors are often important people (especially in the media).	<i>Experimental forms of genetic modification</i> <i>Genetic engineering</i> <i>If you really need to differentiate between newer and older techniques: gene edited GMOs</i>



<p>Tweaking, snipping or cutting DNA</p>		<p>It makes the changes sound insignificant, quick and simple, hiding just how profound and unpredictable the effects can be.</p>	<p>Wrecking the genome</p> <p>Interfering with DNA</p> <p>Mutilating genes</p> <p>Creating mutations</p> <p>Injuring, slashing or tearing DNA</p>
<p>Precise Point mutations</p>		<p>Repeats terms used by those promoting gene edited GMOs.</p>	<p>Significant changes to the genome</p> <p>DNA changes that can have far-reaching impacts</p> <p>Genetic manipulation</p> <p><i>If you really need to talk about the way that gene-editing GM techniques are different from other forms of genetic manipulation you could say that they are intended to be more targeted but are still prone to all sorts of errors and unexpected outcomes.</i></p>
		<p>People will often assume that if something is precise then it is also accurate. This is not true – a stopped clock is very precise but only accurate twice a day!</p>	
<p>New breeding techniques</p>		<p>This is a deliberate re-branding term used to convince people that new GM techniques are completely different from older GMOs.</p>	<p>Messing with DNA</p> <p>Plants (or animals) manufactured in the lab</p> <p>Genetic manipulation</p> <p>Lab-produced</p> <p><i>See the suggested alternatives to “gene editing”, above</i></p>
		<p>The word breeding has positive associations, implying natural processes of sexual reproduction (exactly what GM is not!).</p>	



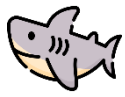
Precision Bred Organisms (PBOs)		Repeats a term used to re-brand new GM techniques and encourage public acceptance. Favoured by the UK government for new-style GMOs.	<p>Newly rebranded GMOs</p> <p>New-style GMOs</p> <p>GMOs with better PR</p>
		In this phrase two words with positive connotations are used, despite neither of them being accurate!	
		As above, a deliberate rebranding of new-style GMOs, to make them sound completely different.	
		These do not involve breeding and the extent to which the changes are precise has been challenged .	
Herbicide tolerant crops		It's jargon and people won't necessarily understand what it means.	<p>Crops engineered to survive an onslaught of chemical spraying that wrecks the ecosystem</p> <p>Plants manipulated to survive being sprayed with dangerous chemicals</p> <p>Plants designed to be used with weedkillers</p> <p>Crops that are repeatedly sprayed with weedkillers</p> <p><i>If you need to be very brief, or to keep your re-framing more subtle:</i></p> <p><i>Weedkiller-linked crops</i></p> <p><i>Pesticide-dependent crops</i></p>
		It plays down the way that these crops encourage repeated spraying with weedkillers	
		Tolerance is generally considered to be a good thing so this word has positive associations.	

<p>Bt crops</p> <p>Insect-resistant crops</p>		<p>Bt is jargon and an abbreviation so many people will not know what it means.</p>	<p>Plants manipulated to kill insects</p> <p>Plants that kill insects</p> <p>Insect-killing plants</p> <p>Plants that are toxic to insects</p> <p><i>Insecticide crops / plants (this is still jargon so take care, but it will be helpful to some audiences)</i></p>
<p>Pest-resistant crops</p>		<p>Being resistant to insects or pests sounds like a good thing so these terms hide the real impacts that the crops have.</p>	
<p>Disease-resistant GM animals</p>		<p>Repeats a claim made by those promoting GM – remember none of these animals have actually been created.</p>	<p>Abuse-friendly or abuse tolerant animals</p> <p>Animals genetically engineered for the industrial food system [or factory farming – but see below for why you should be cautious about the word farming]</p> <p>Animals manipulated to survive abuse and poor conditions</p>
		<p>Resistance to disease sounds like being healthy.</p>	
		<p>Hides the real cause of the diseases and welfare issues experienced by farm animals – poor treatment in industrial food production.</p>	
<p>“Problem solving” GM traits, such as drought-resistant; blight-resistant; high-iron; salt-tolerant</p>		<p>Presents the GMO positively as a solution. This implies that the proposed trait will do what it says and that will solve the problem.</p>	<p>Avoid mentioning the trait as far as possible and focus on the fact it is GM, patented etc.</p> <p>If you really need to mention the specific trait:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid branding (eg say GM yellow rice rather than “Golden Rice”) • Emphasize the limited appeal/impact of the traits (eg burnt-toast GM wheat rather than “low acrylamide” wheat)
		<p>Repeats the term used by those promoting GMOs and implies that the GMO trait described actually works. This is true even when we refute the claim (eg “we don’t need blight resistant GM potatoes”).</p>	


		<p>Hides the systemic problems causing the issues that the trait is supposed to address.</p> <p>Implies that the named “problem” is real and urgent.</p>	<p>Highlight the real problems (eg people are short of Vitamin A because they are poor)</p>
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How we refer to individuals and organisations

Word or phrase to avoid	Framing trap/s this falls into	Why – what is the trap doing?	What you can say instead
<p>Science</p> <p>Scientists</p> <p>Images of people in lab coats</p>		<p>Scientists, Doctors and others who help us wear white coats, so these have very positive associations for many people.</p> <p>Scientists are regarded as clever in ways that most people can’t match so referring to someone as a scientist will elevate their status, particularly in comparison with a campaigner.</p> <p>Scientists have gained elevated status in response to the COVID 19 pandemic.</p>	<p>Try using metaphors about gambling or violence, perhaps also children (to highlight that genetic research is still in its infancy).</p> <p>Highlight the random and unpredictable aspects of genetic manipulation.</p> <p>Experimental</p> <p>Risky</p> <p>Industrial</p> <p>Remember GM is a technology and science is only one way to assess its place in society.</p> <p>Keep any people in images of GM in progress as anonymous and non-engaging as possible – eg just hands, in silhouette, wearing protecting gear (rather than lab coat)</p>
		<p>GM is a technology, being applied in real world situations, it is not, in itself, science.</p> <p>There is science on both sides of the debate.</p>	<p><i>If you need to talk about individuals involved in different GM developments: GM developers, companies or patent holders</i></p>


		<p>Presenting GM as “a science issue” hides all the social, economic and other problems caused by patenting, corporate control etc.</p>	
<p>Farmers, farms or farming</p>		<p>Most people have very positive associations with farming and farmers – from children’s picture books onwards. We can use this to help us when appropriate but need to watch out for times when it will undermine our message.</p>	<p>Industrial food production (rather than industrial farming or even factory farming).</p> <p>Focus on the system, corporations and big-biotech.</p>
<p>Campaigners or Activists</p> <p><i>When talking in public or contested settings about ourselves or others concerned about GM in food and farming.</i></p>		<p>Many people see campaigners and activists as troublemakers or out of touch with the general population. With GM they may also think of destroying crops which many people view very negatively.</p> <p>NOTE: we might still want to use both terms in more private spaces as some of those engaged will find these terms motivating</p>	<p>Concerned citizens – focus on the people we represent rather than ourselves.</p> <p>Concerned locals (where appropriate).</p> <p>Charities (rather than NGOs) – depending on who you are talking to.</p> <p>Farmers (when they are expressing concern about GM).</p> <p>Researchers (when presenting our own studies or assessments)</p> <p>Depending on the audience and context it might be useful to take advantage of the science Robin (see above) and highlight the qualifications of experts who are concerned about GM.</p>

Other issues and phrases

Word or phrase to avoid	Framing trap/s this falls into	Why – what is the trap doing?	What you can say instead
Regulation		Regulation and “red tape” have been presented negatively by generations of politicians and corporations.	<p>A safety net</p> <p>Safeguards</p> <p>Protections / common sense protections</p> <p>Checks and balances</p> <p>Sensible rules, playing by the rules</p> <p><i>When we want to talk about de-regulation:</i></p> <p><i>High-tech free for all</i></p> <p><i>The Wild West</i></p> <p><i>GM developers checking their own homework</i></p>

Innovation		Innovation is widely considered to be positive.	<p>Risky untested technology</p> <p>Unproven</p> <p>Experimental</p> <p>Also try shifting the focus to what's wrong with the GM approach, such as addressing symptoms rather than root problems.</p>
Monoculture		It's jargon – many people will not know what it means, even if they have heard it before	<p>Wildlife desert or wasteland</p> <p>Absence of genetic variation</p> <p>Lack/loss of diversity</p>

Special note on inverted parrots

Word or phrase to avoid	Framing trap/s this falls into	Why – what is the trap doing?	What you can say instead
Unsafe		Even though you are inverting the meaning with a negative prefix, you are repeating their frame rather than creating our own. People often only hear or process part of a word, especially if they hear that part a lot - try thinking about an un-Elephant to see what we mean.	<p>Dangerous</p> <p>Risky</p> <p>Hazardous</p>
Imprecise or Inaccurate			<p>Haphazard</p> <p>Random</p> <p>Erratic</p> <p>Error-prone</p> <p>Variable</p>



Credits and sharing

[GM Freeze](#) worked with Ralph Underhill of [Framing Matters](#) and a group of campaigners to adapt Ralph's "animal traps" framing model to the issue of GM in food and farming. See www.gmfreeze.org/framed for more resources to help you communicate more effectively about why GM has no place in a responsible, fair and sustainable food system.

With thanks to our collaborators, including: including [Beyond GM](#), [EcoNexus](#), [Food Matters](#), [Garden Organic](#), [GM Watch](#), [Organic Farmers & Growers](#) and the [Soil Association](#).

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