



11 Foundational Principles to Make Stories More Inclusive

AS STORYTELLERS, WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADVANCE EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN THE STORIES WE TELL.

It's not only the right thing to do, it's what audiences expect from brands. We decided to take a closer look at our own editorial practices.

To begin this process, Atlantic 57 interviewed journalists and DEI specialists and reviewed some of the most respected guides on the topic to help ground our own writing. We learned that this space is constantly evolving as writers, editors, and organizations work to make their storytelling more inclusive. Here are 11 lessons that help guide our work. We hope they can help your organization, too.

1

RESPECT HOW A SUBJECT WANTS TO BE IDENTIFIED.

Do not assume details about your subject, such as their gender. Additionally, exercise caution before using loaded adjectives (e.g., “poor” or “elderly”). Only use them when they are relevant and necessary to a story.

2

AVOID GRATUITOUS DETAIL.

Is someone’s race or sexuality relevant to the passage you wrote about them? Would you have identified their race or sexual orientation if they were white or straight? Does a picture of a group of people need to be called out as a group of women (especially if it may contradict principle no. 1)? Does a subject need to be described as “limping” or “speaking with a lisp”?

3

PEOPLE ARE MORE THAN THEIR RACE, ETHNICITY, NATIONALITY, RELIGION, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AGE, AND/OR ABILITY.

Related to principle no. 2, when you do identify certain details about an individual, put the person before the detail (e.g., “person experiencing housing insecurity,” not “the homeless person”). Also, do not negatively qualify another person’s experience with phrases like “confined to a wheelchair,” but rather state the facts: “a person who uses a wheelchair for mobility.”

4

HONOR LIVED EXPERIENCE.

Occasionally, writers, in their training toward objectivity, use language that might minimize or invalidate a person’s lived experience. Treat lived experiences different from opinion, even if you’re not taking sides. For example, you could have two sources who lived something and experienced it differently—such as when profiling victims of violence; here, including details regarding a person’s race, ethnicity, or gender identity will represent a fuller picture. People’s lived experiences are not up for debate.

5

CHALLENGE YOUR NOTION OF EXPERTISE.

Maybe we don’t need a quote from the leading cardiologist, maybe we need a patient. Or maybe, in addition to having leading economists discuss minimum wage, we also need to include minimum wage workers in the discussion. Who else could be an expert from the perspective of having lived something? Consider that beyond academic experts are those who have the expertise of lived experience.

6

BE WARY OF TOKENISM.

Being the token voice for an underrepresented group is an undue burden that accumulates with time. Ask yourself: Are you including a source who is not white or not male as an afterthought, to make sure your sources are balanced? Or are you really listening and allowing them to shape the story? And are you only reaching out to female sources to comment on gender issues or to Black sources to comment on race? Are these sources actually experts in other fields?

7

BE MINDFUL OF YOUR OWN ASSUMPTIONS, REACTIONS, AND HYPOTHESES.

Pay attention to what you explain vs. what you don't and what that tells you about the assumptions you made about your audience (e.g., Do you find yourself explaining what TikTok is based on assumptions about age? Similarly, do you explain who Bill Barr is, based on assumptions about age or education level?) Also be mindful of strong reactions you have when you interview someone or write about something. Did you go in with a strong hypothesis or preconceived notions? Don't be afraid to shift direction based on what you are hearing, even if it contradicts an initial hypothesis.

8

RECOGNIZE THAT THE NORM IS NOT NECESSARILY OBJECTIVE OR FREE FROM BIAS.

It may be the norm in several media outlets to use the term "falsehood" instead of "lie" or to use "racially charged" instead of "racist" or "officer-involved shooting" instead of saying a police officer shot someone. Consider where you could be using euphemistic language to describe violent or harmful behavior and events.

9

IMAGES ARE AS POWERFUL AS LANGUAGE AND SHOULD BE DIVERSE OVER TIME.

Everyone should be able to see themselves or relate to images over a period of time. That doesn't mean every single image has to represent every identity or experience, but over the course of a certain period of time, everyone should be able to see themselves in the images used in your work.

10

BUILDING A DIVERSE SET OF SOURCES, EXPERTS, AND CONNECTIONS TAKES A LOT OF TIME.

We may naturally gravitate toward people we share obvious characteristics with. Ensure you're connecting with people who speak, act, look differently than you, and who may have different life experiences and backgrounds. Let this become a mindset with which you move through the world.

11

ULTIMATELY, AS STORYTELLERS, YOU MUST BE ACCOUNTABLE TO YOURSELF.

The Atlantic science writer [Ed Yong](#) keeps track of who he's interviewed for his stories and tallies what percentage are white or male. He is proactive about it—it's not retroactive. It's easy to have blind spots, but this is always a work in progress, and real numbers help act as a check on that.

This is just a start. Below are several resources that we also use to inform our work. Chances are, you will find the guidance your organization could benefit from here as well:

[Anti-Racism Calendar](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[raceAhead from Forbes](#)

[Cengage](#)

[NABJ style guide](#)

[Rider](#)

[Conscious Style Guide](#)

[NYT's Race/Related](#)

[Seattle U](#)

[Linguistic Society Inclusive Language](#)

[Promise 54](#)

[The Management Center](#)

These findings were developed by Atlantic 57, a creative consultancy grown from journalistic roots. We work with brands to delivery experiences that build enduring relationships beyond any single product, service, or transaction.

How is your organization making your storytelling more inclusive? We want to hear your organization's story. Let's talk.

Reach out to us at hello@atlantic57.com.