Associated Press

Inclusive Storytelling

Inclusive storytelling seeks to truly represent all people around the globe. It gives voice and visibility to those who have been missing or misrepresented in traditional narratives of both history and daily journalism. It helps readers and viewers both to recognize themselves in our stories, and to better understand people who differ from them in race, age, gender, class and many other ways.

It makes our work immeasurably stronger, more relevant, more compelling, more trustworthy.

It is essential to accuracy and fairness.

It is not a “topic” to be siloed or explored here and there.

Inclusive storytelling should be part of everyday conversations, decision-making and coverage. That means integrating these goals in all aspects of conversations, from the beginning of the story idea to garnering reaction (and more story ideas) after publication.

Being an inclusive storyteller calls on all of us to stretch beyond our accustomed ways of thinking, our usual sources, our regular, go-to topics or angles for coverage. It challenges us to recognize and examine our unconscious biases, and find ways to overcome them.

It aims to infuse every aspect of coverage, both in text and in visuals, with diverse voices and faces, perspectives and context. It is considerate of language, sources and diverse audiences. It often relies on teamwork and collaboration.

Among the considerations: the stories we choose to convey; the sources we talk with; the images we select; the framing, approach and specific words we use; the details we include or don’t include — and the understanding that all of those various parts of a story can be seen and interpreted very differently, depending on a person’s background and experiences.

A notable example: The very terms diversity and inclusivity or inclusion can be interpreted as implying that the norm or the standard is being white, male, straight, not disabled, not poor, etc. That is not the intent in this chapter’s use of those terms. Rather, we strive for storytelling that both represents all people and shines a brighter light on those who have been underrepresented in traditional narratives.

Those traditional narratives — in history books, daily journalism and much of popular media — are versions of the world and specific events conveyed for decades or centuries through the perspectives of what has been the dominant demographic. That means those narratives generally reflect what is traditional for dominating groups, but not for underrepresented people and groups. In other words, not for much of the world. Not for much of our audience.

Such narratives have always fallen short. In today’s world, the inaccuracies and misrepresentations grow ever greater as the diversity of our audiences increases. As journalists and writers, we are used to asking the questions, not answering them. It’s important to shift mindsets and interrogate our own assumptions and decisions.

That means creating a culture where we can have candid conversations that will lead to richer, more meaningful and more accurate stories. And it means considering, with every story, the points raised here — plus other points for reflection and action that might arise as we expand and deepen our storytelling.

TWO PATHS

Inclusive reporting and storytelling includes two distinct and equally important paths.

One: Cast a wide net when looking for voices and images for any story.

- If a story requires some kind of expert commentary focusing on a particular area, don't stick to the same people you've always spoken to. Widen your search by going to people that aren't as well-known. Don't pigeonhole people by assuming, for example, that you should only talk to a Black academic for a story about race, or to a woman about parenting.
- Be conscious of who you're reaching out to. Are you talking only to men? Women? White people? Black people? Young? Old? Citizens? Voters? Only particular neighborhoods or geographic regions? Don't settle for the people who are quickest or easiest to interview. Be intentional about hearing from a range of people.
- Be equally intentional about the subjects of your photos and videos. Whose images are you showing? Do they represent the diversity of the topic or the community?

Two: Home in on individual communities or voices in stories focused on that group. A few examples of ways in which this can be done:

- Describing the unique obstacles faced by gay people who come out later in life.
- Explaining what has led women of color to become a growing force as so-called mom influencers, a multibillion-dollar world that has long been overwhelmingly white.
- Focusing on hourly workers, not just white-collar workers, in talking about economic pressures and gains.

TYPES OF EXPERIENCES

A person who lives an experience personally has a different perspective from someone who merely observes it or is involved at arm's length (or from a much greater distance). Some use the term lived experiences: a person's firsthand experiences, and how those experiences affect the person and their understanding of the world and of other people. This is distinct from general experiences, which can be secondhand or indirect.

For example, a Black woman's white friend may feel empathy and anger when a stranger shouts a racist slur. That is a different experience than the lived experience of the woman who was the target of that slur that day, and of other slurs (or worse aggressions) on many other days.

Both types of experiences are valid and worthy of exploration. But the fact that they are different needs to be understood as a part of accurate reporting and conveyed as a part of full and inclusive storytelling. A person's lived experiences can be very different from versions of life that are conveyed by other people.

NOT TOKENISM

The point is not to make a cursory effort to include a diverse voice or two in order to check a box, but to develop a fuller picture of people's varied experiences and perspectives.

By extension, no one group should be treated as a monolith. And one person does not represent an entire group: One person who uses a wheelchair or one gay person, for example, doesn't speak for all people who use wheelchairs or for all gay people.

Among Latino populations, how people of Mexican descent vote may differ from how Cuban Americans vote. Even within each of those populations, there are differences in voting behavior. Republicans vary in their backgrounds, including socioeconomic status and geography. So do Democrats.

Interviewing a broad cross-section of people within a certain population gives us a better sense of how their views may differ. For example, coverage of a lawsuit accusing Harvard University of discriminating against

Asian Americans would best include voices of Asian Americans on all sides of the affirmative action issue, and capture perspectives from different Asian diasporas.

It is also important to add nuance and context around experiences that people share. For instance, a Black man who says he has never been stopped by police and doesn't believe that police brutality is a problem may be accurately describing his own experiences and beliefs. But those views may be inconsistent with data and polling. It doesn't mean he shouldn't be included in coverage; it means his perspective should be situated in the proper context.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Context and background are vital in stories to give readers a full, accurate picture of the issues. Don't assume readers already know. Include the appropriate information to establish the origins of a story, its movement through time and a look ahead. Consider historical, political, economic, social, cultural, and other context and background for stories. For example, don't focus on the percentage of one's ancestry when writing about a Native American tribe that doesn't use so-called blood quantum for enrollment. The Cherokee Nation requires citizens to trace ancestry to a list of names kept by the tribe.

Seek to answer whether something is a first, part of a trend or an anomaly. Look at data and statistics to determine whether one group might be disproportionately affected by decisions or actions.
For example, racist attacks against Americans of Asian descent rose amid the coronavirus pandemic. Asian Americans pointed to other times in history when they were targeted, including in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, when the U.S. government put a moratorium on immigration from China; the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals; and the 1982 beating death of Vincent Chin in Detroit.

Be careful about drawing comparisons between two seemingly similar events, such as the removal of Confederate statues and the removal of statues commemorating Spanish colonizers and missionaries, without including the appropriate context. The events that gave rise to the statues occurred hundreds of years apart and in different regions of what's now the U.S.

UNCONSCIOUS/IMPLICIT BIAS

Everyone has unconscious or implicit biases; they form without our even realizing it, through repetition and reinforcement of stereotypes and assumptions over a lifetime. They even can contradict what we understand and declare to be our beliefs.

These biases influence the way we assess a person or a situation before we have the facts. From there, they can shape which facts we gather — and which ones we don't — and how we interpret them. They can affect the words we choose, how we cast a headline, what angle we take in photographing a person or scene. They can include implicit assumptions that we might not even realize are biases: that adults should be employed, married, parents, romantically active, sexually active, omnivores, Christian and/or religious in general, for example. Even seemingly positive assumptions grounded in stereotypes, such as of Asian Americans being smart and hardworking or of Jews being wealthy and influential, are overgeneralizations that can distort complex realities.

While you may not always be aware of your own implicit biases, there are ways that you can check yourself:

- Understand and question your own worldview and what it is based on, and its limitations in the assumptions you form, decisions you make, sources you choose and perspectives you take in your storytelling.
- Explore any preconceived notions you might have about the person and/or topic.
- Ask yourself how your own life experiences affect how you see this topic.
- Consider how all of that affects how you approach the story — how you frame it, who you talk to or photograph.

- Recognize that people of any race are capable of racist behavior and assumptions (both explicit and implicit). Women as well as men are capable of sexist behavior and assumptions. Older adults may view younger people through a lens of ageism, as well as vice versa.
- Ask yourself: What steps have you taken to overcome assumptions in your reporting and storytelling once you've identified them?

LANGUAGE

The words — even a single word — that we choose to describe a person or convey a scene shape the thoughts and perceptions of readers and listeners. The term immigration sweep, for example, could sound as if something or someone dirty needs to be cleaned up. Is a person an addict, or a person with a drug dependency? Is the woman elderly, or a 70-year-old marathon runner?

Much of the guidance provided here is grounded on the principle of thoughtful and precise wording. What we say about language in one entry generally applies to all areas.

For example, people's perceptions of disabilities vary widely, as do the ways in which disabled people, or people with disabilities, describe themselves. Use care and precision, considering the impact of specific words and the terms used by the people you are writing about.

Other points:

- Use precise language, not imprecise generalizations or labels. Be as specific as possible. Japanese American women in their 20s, for example, not young Asian women. People over 80, not older adults. Rather than hero or traitor, give details: The monument depicts Gen. Robert E. Lee, a slave owner and commander of the Confederate forces after they seceded from the United States.
- Limit use of the term community in reference to groups of people. While sometimes it is the best word, it also can imply homogeneity and the idea that all members of a particular "community" think and act alike. This is similar to the concept of avoiding any type of generalization or stereotype.
- Don't use dehumanizing "the" terms such as the homeless, the blind, the mentally ill, the poor, etc.
- Understand the difference between person-first language (people with disabilities, for example) and identity-first language (disabled people). Whenever possible, determine which approach a person prefers. When preferences can't be determined, aim for a mix of person-first and identity-first language.
- Be sensitive to the various meanings and implications of words: insane schedules, lame ideas, turning a blind eye, he must be deaf, etc. Generally there are better, and more specific, ways of saying it. At the least, take a moment to pause and consider before using such words in unrelated situations.

VISUALS

For video, photo and graphics, approach assignments through an inclusion lens even before arriving on scene. Continue to assess throughout the shoot, while producing, and when editing:

- Think about the people who are affected. When covering a new infrastructure bill, for example, find the people of various backgrounds who have been harmed by poor infrastructure. Go beyond just politicians and policymakers.
- Seek out a diverse range of voices and faces for an assignment, particularly for stories that don't specifically have to do with a person's identity. For example, seek a Black female researcher focusing on vaccination rates among children, or a Latino teacher on strike in Chicago, or a gay couple struggling to make ends meet during the pandemic.
- Make sure the person's humanity is depicted with care and attention paid to lighting, angling of shots, etc.
- For video, let the subjects speak for themselves through sound bites that are chosen for the final edit.
- Be mindful not to fall into stereotypical traps. For example, avoid choosing to focus on a home in disarray when telling the story of a low-income family without spending time capturing a deeper picture of the family's story.
- When dealing with a community that has suffered a loss or trauma, or historically has been marginalized and misrepresented by the media, be respectful of hesitancy to appear on camera. Work to establish trust before pointing a camera at people.
- Accurately represent a scene. For example, if a pro-gun rally includes mostly white men with guns and a few Black men, don't focus on the Black men in your shots as though they represented what the gathering looked like as a whole.
- Question who or what might be missing while on a shoot and when editing.

- In the editing phase, consider whether a diverse range of views, voices and faces are making the final cut. Remember that who and what you choose to exclude can be as important as who and what you include.

STRENGTHENING YOUR STORYTELLING

Consider and collaborate

- At every stage of storytelling — from generating story ideas to the final editing, and all steps in between — ask whose voice or perspective is missing or should be represented more robustly. Seek to include voices and experiences from a variety of lenses.
- Consider and reflect the wide range of interests, needs and voices of people reading and viewing your stories.
- Think about race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, geography, sexual orientation, gender identity, disabilities, education levels, religion and political affiliation.
- Diversify the sources and voices presented as important and credible.
- Avoid falling into stereotypes (going to Chinatown to get the “Asian” perspective) or relying on always-heard voices such as male financial analysts or female teachers.
- Collaborate from the outset with colleagues in all formats — and bring in perspectives from others not involved with the coverage. They will bring additional insights and can help identify inclusion holes. They also bring expertise in how a finished product will look. But they can do that effectively only if brought in early in the process.
- Remember that talking with people from all sorts of backgrounds not only improves a particular story, but also expands your understanding of the experiences and perspectives of people with backgrounds other than yours.
- If the editor who assigned you the story is not the one editing it, be sure to communicate your efforts to broaden your storytelling and the perspective and voices the story cannot do without.

Expand your circle

- Leave your bubble and stretch yourself. Explore places you’ve never been that aren’t in the news. Find sources and new voices in places you don’t normally look — then make them part of your source lists for the future.
- Follow new people from a wide variety of backgrounds on social media.
- But don’t rely too much on social media. Many excellent sources don’t use it and have valuable and often entirely different perspectives.
- Ask people you meet for other sources, including people who might have differing opinions.
- Ask colleagues — including those from other departments — for sources, then use that as a jumping-off point to expand and cultivate your own sources.
- Take time to get to know diverse sources before you need them, particularly in areas that are traditionally dominated by a particular gender, race, etc.
- Watch, read and listen to content from a variety of political views — particularly views different from your own. Find sources of different races, ages, genders, sexual orientations and geographies.

Invest the time

- Research your subjects ahead of time. This shows that you care and will help you ask more informed questions. Consider creating social media lists of groups and people related to the topic to get into their worlds, find new subjects, understand the context and find more story ideas.
- Take time to get to know your sources. Don’t rush through interviews. Listen carefully to what they’re saying and seek to understand their perspective, especially if it doesn’t conform to what you thought they would say.
- If possible, observe people in their environment. You likely will learn things you wouldn’t from an interview only.
- Be someone who shows up — and not just when news is breaking or you have a specific need. You’ll likely reap the benefits of a rich relationship (and story ideas and new contacts) with people who trust your motivations.
- Evaluate your work. Ask yourself: What can I do next time to be even more inclusive? Ask others for feedback on your work. What might you have missed?

ACCESSIBILITY

Make sure stories on your website and social media are as accessible as possible. Measures include:

- Alternative text on visuals: a short written description of an image for people who are blind or have low vision, and/or use screen readers.

- For video, closed or open captioning for deaf or hard-of-hearing people, as well as for people who process written information better than audio. See https://www.w3.org/WAI/media/av/captions/.
- For video, consider audio descriptions for people who are blind or have low vision. An audio description is narration added to the soundtrack to describe important visual details that cannot be understood from the main soundtrack. See https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/Understanding/audio-description-prerecorded.html.
- For podcasts and other audio, a transcript for deaf and hard-of-hearing people.
- For text-based graphics, the contrast ratio between the text and the image should be at least 4.5 to 1 as recommended by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. For large text, the contrast ratio should be at least 3 to 1.
- As in all news writing, use simple, plain language free of jargon, cliches and generalities. Favor smaller words over bigger words (try, not attempt; bold, not audacious; use, not utilize.) Write short, direct sentences with strong verbs. Aim for one idea per sentence. Break sentences with lots of punctuation into two sentences. Or three. Avoid strings of modifiers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A selection of other detailed guidance, which in some cases may differ from AP's approach:

Guidelines for Inclusive Journalism, by The Seattle Times (with links to a number of other guides and resources): http://st.news/inclusivejournalism

Inclusive Language Guidelines, by the American Psychological Association: https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guide.pdf

Conscious Style Guide: https://consciousstyleguide.com/

The Diversity Style Guide, San Francisco State University: https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/

Disability Language Style Guide, by the National Center on Disability and Journalism: https://ncdj.org/style-guide/