From Pitch

to Publish

Reporting Guidance

While **Language, Please** guidance focuses on terminology and framing in published work, journalists make countless decisions about language long before they create the final product.

We've rounded up key insights for every step along the way as you thoughtfully report on evolving social, cultural, and identity-related themes.

① Pitching

Story Ideas

Drawing inspiration from people and experiences you already know well can yield rich material, but you can also miss novel and neglected angles if you overrely on established contacts. Seeking publications and groups underrepresented in coverage can help give voice to important yet overlooked narratives.
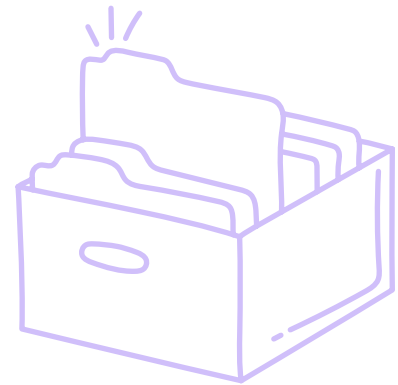
Past Coverage

It's often informative to engage with fans of your work and — perhaps especially — with thoughtful critics of it. Scan audience responses to earlier reporting on your topic, to see if communities represented in the coverage have raised insightful concerns you might use to improve your pitch.

② Sourcing

✓ Selecting Sources

Two overarching principles:

1. Reporting that is both accurate and expansive will include voices from underrepresented populations across all topics, not just stories that pertain to their membership in that community.

2. One person's opinion does not represent an entire community or school of thought. Exploring varying experiences and points of view within communities is a marker of thoughtful reporting.

Consulting Experts

Deferring to official views of policies or situations without talking directly to those affected can reinforce institutional bias and lead to stories that miss vital insights and nuances. Also, expert credentials don't always apply to the specific context you're reporting on. A professor of obstetrics might not hold all the knowledge you need on Black maternal health. A disability researcher might not be the right expert for a story on neurodiversity. If your first call doesn't deliver, ask for a referral to someone more relevant, scan prior coverage, and check advisory boards, advocacy organizations, and civic groups as sources for subject matter experts. Just make sure to provide readers with sufficient context to understand where your analysts are coming from.

Reaching Out

No one wants to be that journalist blasted on social media for an insulting interview request. Sources don't owe a journalist confidentiality. They might be fatigued by prior press encounters that were invasive, misguided, or otherwise out of touch. It's helpful to show that you've done your research and to lead with curiosity while respecting boundaries. If you're concerned about how outreach to a community you aren't as familiar with might be construed, consider consulting a colleague with direct knowledge of that community before you hit send (though be mindful of overburdening someone; see "Tips for Tricky Conversations").

Building Buy-In

It's tempting to try to convince sources to talk to you by downplaying risk and promising a positive outcome, but raising expectations can backfire if you don't achieve the impact you hoped for. Moreover, suggesting that someone owes it to others to tell their story may put an unfair burden on them, especially if past coverage has been harmful. Instead, share your newsroom's track record for reporting that's led to accountability, and get clear about ethical practices for letting vulnerable sources know how their words may add to the piece. When reporting on people who didn't necessarily ever want to be in the news, it's vital to talk through how you'll ensure that your story is thoughtful, fair, grounded in empathy and informed consent, and consistent with how you and your sources agreed they'd appear in the story.

Interviewing
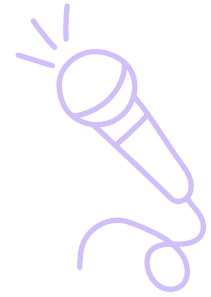
Establishing Ground Rules

If you're interviewing a public official or celebrity, they are likely to be familiar with journalism protocols, but it's not fair to assume the same media savvy for everyone. Ethical coverage requires letting sources know what to expect and the choices they can make — for example, what "off the record" means and how to request it, whether they can use a pseudonym, if you'll share quotes for accuracy, and how you'll protect their privacy and avoid putting them in danger.

Asking About Identifiers

It can feel invasive to ask someone about their race, gender, ability, etc. — especially if you know what it's like to constantly be asked, "Where are you from?" or "What happened to you?" First, make sure the question is relevant to your story. If it is, make it clear why that information is needed and emphasize the importance of accuracy. Some options: "How do you describe your ethnicity?" "Do you mind sharing your pronouns?" "The common term I hear is [fill in the blank]; is this the one you use?"

Asking About Trauma

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma offers powerful, practical guidance on this topic, as do the Maynard Institute, Nieman Reports, and Poynter. These resources cover ways to create supportive conditions for people who have experienced trauma, and to care for yourself and colleagues when you're reporting on troubling events. It's worth spending time reviewing these resources as you're developing your approach, so you can obtain genuine consent from sources. This also ensures that when your reporting does the vital work of exposing individual and systemic misconduct, it also minimizes the risk of retraumatizing those who are already in pain and working to reclaim their lives.

④ Framing

Covering Hate and Misinformation

How can you ensure that your reporting challenges rather than fuels harmful beliefs and behaviors? With respect to hate speech, regardless of whether law enforcement has designated it as such, context is key. What does your audience need to know about the speaker's position and associations; who is hurt by the speech; the concrete impact of the speech; how it fits into a broader pattern; and whether it is likely to incite violence and/or discrimination? Countering misinformation requires that false claims are debunked right away, with evidence and a clear statement of what is true. Repeating or linking to "manifestos" or sensationalist language can amplify extremist ideologies. For detailed guidance on avoiding this pitfall and others, see Data and Society's "better practices" for covering false claims, harassment campaigns, and attacks. Additional resources include the Ethical Journalism Network for reporting on hate speech globally; the Journalist's Resource for maintaining your own safety and addressing misinformation from officials; and reporting on victim and community impact from the National Press Club Journalism Institute. For more on challenging your own preconceptions, see the "Seeking Feedback" section.

Accounting for Systems and Solutions

No matter what social issue you're reporting on, a common tendency communities rightfully take issue with is when journalists delve into people's struggles without identifying systemic factors or solutions and resources that offer hope. Highlighting innovative, community-based efforts to address the challenge you're reporting on — including concrete resources for obtaining support, for instance in the body of the story or a sidebar — goes a long way to provide a full and accurate picture of how that issue is affecting people's lives.

⑤ Finalizing

Seeking Feedback

Asking for feedback from multiple perspectives, including from those with lived experience in the matter at hand, will help ensure that your reporting adequately and accurately captures the nuance of these subjects. To guard against rooting so hard for a story that you risk losing perspective on ethical conduct, it can be helpful to run your toughest judgment calls by a trusted colleague. Be mindful when seeking feedback of not overburdening colleagues or continually asking them to perform work outside their job description. See Tips for Tricky Conversations for more.

Fact-Checking

Explaining early that fact-checking will be part of the process, and describing how you'll approach it, gives sources information they need to understand what participation in your story entails. Will someone else from your newsroom contact them? Will you need to request comment from someone they have named? If they spoke on condition of anonymity, who else in your newsroom will know their personal details? You might tell them that this is a process you go through with all of your reporting — they are not being singled out or disbelieved — and that ensuring the facts are airtight strengthens the story. Finally, fact-checking material involving trauma, disability, and mental health conditions requires extra care; please see above and relevant sections of Language, Please guidance for more.

Explaining Cuts

It's never easy to tell someone they didn't make it into your story. It helps if people don't feel betrayed by a false promise at the outset — so when they agree to talk to you, take care not to state or imply that they will definitely be in the published piece. You can emphasize how much you appreciate their experiences and insights, and how important they were in shaping your understanding. You can invite them to stay in touch and share ideas for future coverage. And, where appropriate, consider ways to acknowledge their contribution even if their quotes aren't included — for example, "special thanks" or bonus content at the end of an episode or post.

Summary

1 Pitching

- **STORY IDEAS:** Reach beyond the usual networks
- **PAST COVERAGE:** Scan community responses for pitfalls and flags

2 Sourcing

- **SOURCES:** Identify variation and nuances within communities
- **EXPERTS:** Seek precise alignment and include people most affected to avoid perpetuating bias
- **OUTREACH:** Play out how your request will land
- **BUY-IN:** Set expectations that account for asymmetries in power and exposure to risk

3 Interviewing

- **GROUND RULES:** Explain protocols and what to expect
- **IDENTIFIERS:** Get clear on relevance and share why
- **TRAUMA:** Study best practices, go slow, watch boundaries, consider unintended impact and harm

4 Framing

- **HATE AND MISINFORMATION:** Debunk falsehoods, provide context, counter contagion
- **SOLUTIONS:** Account for the role of systems, community-led resources, and people and policies that could bring about positive change

5 Finalizing

- **FEEDBACK:** Allow extra time and care to cover sensitive topics
- **FACT-CHECKING:** Introduce the process early, say how it works and why it matters
- **CUTS:** Be real from the beginning and consider alternative options for acknowledgment

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