

# Changing Your Stylebook To Create a More Empathetic Newsroom

## **Step One: Reach out to your copy chief.**

Or the person in your newsroom who leads conversations about such things. It's important to partner with the right allies to create change.

## **Step Two: Recognize the updates you need.**

Where you put your focus depends on the ethnic, religious, racial, or social circumstance groups such as rape survivors, immigrants or veterans that your newsroom needs to reflect and serve. This panel will speak to three updates specifically where consciousness around issues have changed and we invite you to look over your stylebook in the following areas:

-Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual language and reporting best practices:

Social norms, language preferences and identity definitions are changing so quickly that this topic warrants an annual review. Most newsrooms have LGBT journalists, but not all spaces feel safe, and we can't ask individuals to keep the whole operation current on behalf of just one element of their identities.

-Mental Health reporting and best practices:

From healthcare stories to crime briefs to public policy explainers to features profiles, stories about the intersection of mental health and daily life are our everyday stories in every part of the paper. In any given year, a quarter of American will experience a diagnosable mental health issue. And one in 16 Americans deal with a serious mental illness. Mental illnesses are the primary cause of disability in America. While it is likely that those with mental health issues are working in our newsrooms, stigma and fear of prejudice keep them from self-identifying publically, so their voices are rarely heard during the brainstorming, reporting, writing and editing processes.

-Physical Disability reporting and best practices:

As the 2010 U.S. Census reports that roughly 19 percent of Americans live with a disability, it's imperative we more thoughtfully and sensitively cover this group. It's unlikely those with physical disabilities are going to be in our brainstorming, reporting and editing meetings. Those with physical disabilities are rarely members of our newsrooms, because of self-selection, or the physical challenges of journalism or institutional bias.

## **Step Three: Talk to your bosses and get support.**

You're about to start sending out a whole lot of emails. Buy-in from the chain of command is key.

## **Step Four: Invite your community stakeholders.**

Who are the people in your community who work with, provide services to or are responsible for this group? Who are the governmental organizations, the non-profits, the community advocates? Who are the leaders in your community who work on issues related to this group? Who are the leaders in this community?

You should get those people into the room to help you. Set up a work-group meeting in your newsroom with these stakeholders so they can address the questions and issues your newsroom has as you consider updating your stylebook.

## **Step Five: Solicit feedback, questions, ideas and concerns from your newsroom.**

Ask people what questions they have. When have they run up against a language or reporting issue related to this group in the past? When did they last find themselves at a loss for the right language? When did they last question the status quo around some language or reporting practice? You need to know so you can work on getting answers to those problems.

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## **Step Six: Host your first invite-only assessment of language and practices with stakeholders.**

Talk to the people who care about what your policies, language practices and reporting norms are now. Lay out the questions you got from the newsroom, and ask for their feedback. Bring up follow-up questions. Dive deep. This should take about 90 minutes.

## **Step Seven: Break it down.**

Type up the suggestions the group made according to the most pressing style adjustments you think you need to make. Then boil those down into actual stylebook language and best practice recommendations.

## **Step Eight: Open-invite newsroom-wide review.**

Invite your newsroom to learn about the proposed updates and provide you with feedback. Set aside at least an hour to share the proposed changes and to get feedback and respond to questions. Some stakeholders might want to attend this session, too, in the interest of transparency.

## **Step Nine: Update stylebook.**

Your newsroom might want to send out an internal note about these changes, or might want to make certain language updates public via an editor's letter. How you choose to make people aware of the updates internally and externally will depend on your newsroom culture and your community needs.