

# Ethical Storytelling Guide

Communication is an important part of building an anti-racist, social justice culture. Words matter. We must be intentional in how we communicate about our work and the communities we serve.<sup>1</sup> Please note, this guide is not all inclusive. Language is constantly evolving and the guide will evolve accordingly.

Remember, taking a moment to consider if there is a more ethical way of communicating a thought or idea will go a long way in building the anti-racist, social justice culture we seek.

## CENTRAL PRINCIPLES

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**People-first language:** The goal of people-first language is to describe people by who they are and not by their circumstances. Descriptive social identities such as race, ethnicity or disability are often secondary and not essential. Only include identifiers that are necessary to the story. If an identifier, such as race, ethnicity, age, disability, etc. is not relevant to the narrative, do not include it.

**Self-identification:** Language should reflect peoples' choice and style in how they talk about themselves. If you aren't sure, ask.

**Active voice:** Active voice puts the "actor" of the sentence in the role of performing the action. Name the actors of oppression, whether human, institutional, or cultural.

**Proper nouns:** Names used for and by individual places, persons, and organizations convey respect, understanding, acceptance, and clarity. Avoid overusing words such as "it," "that," and "this," which can lead to confusion.

**Language that's potentially offensive:** Just because one person doesn't find it offensive, does not mean certain terms are not offensive to others.

**Microaggressions:** Recognize how microaggressions can occur in all forms of communication, including written form.

## FOCUS AREAS

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[Age](#)

[Disability](#)

[Economy](#)

[Food](#)

[Gender/Sex](#)

[Health](#)

[Immigration/Refugees](#)

[Race & Ethnicity](#)

[Rape & Domestic Violence](#)

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<sup>1</sup> CCALAC's Combating Systemic Racism Communications Subcommittee developed this guide to help staff and members develop ethical communications. [A Progressive's Style Guide](#) informed the development of this guide, and contains a wealth of additional information on ethical storytelling.

# Ethical Storytelling Guide

## AGE

Most times there is no need to refer to a person’s age. If age is relevant, be specific about a person’s or a group’s age or age range, instead of assigning a vague category like “the elderly.”

Yes	No
Ageing	Middle-aged
Elderly or older person	Old lady/man
People over . . .	Senile
People under . . .	The aged
Senior, senior population	<a href="#">The elderly</a>
Teen/teenager/preteen	The old
Transitional age youth (TAY) <sup>2</sup>	
Young person	
Youth	

*California recently expanded Medi-Cal eligibility to adults 50 years of age and older. This follows the expansion for young adults up to the age of 26.*

## DISABILITY

Most times there is no need to refer to a person’s disability. If disability is relevant, avoid negative or value-laden terms. Consider how certain words tend to exclude individuals with disabilities (e.g., see or hear).

Yes	No
People with disabilities	Able-bodied
People without disabilities	Addict
Person who has . . . (schizophrenia, etc.)	Afflicted by
Person who is . . . (blind, etc.)	Differently abled
Person with . . . (muscular dystrophy, etc.)	Handicapped
Physical disability	Suffering from . . .
	Disabled

### Physical Demand

Stand or Sit  
Walk, Run  
Talk, Hear  
See

### ADA-Compliant Words

Stationary position  
Move, Traverse  
Communicate, Detect  
Detect, Discern

*The Achievable Foundation is a CCALAC member that serves children and adults, in particular those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.*

<sup>2</sup> Young people between the ages of 16 and 24 (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) who are in transition from state custody or foster care environments.

# Ethical Storytelling Guide

## ECONOMY

Avoid language that replicates class stereotypes. Be specific<sup>3</sup> about what a person or community is experiencing.

Yes	No
Economic opportunity	At-risk
Equity	Disadvantaged
Financial stability	In need
<a href="#">Giving families the tools and resources they need</a> <sup>4</sup>	<a href="#">The needy</a>
Expanding access to tools and resources	The poor
People experiencing material poverty <sup>5</sup>	<a href="#">Under-served</a>
People experiencing homelessness	
People with low incomes	
Racial equity	
Under-resourced	

*CCALAC's 65 members provide quality, comprehensive care to under-resourced communities across Los Angeles. They serve 1.7 million patients a year, 75,000 of whom are experiencing homelessness. Our members are committed to giving Angelenos the tools and resources they need to thrive.*

## FOOD

Use language that is accurate (“SNAP,” not “food stamps”), but don’t miss opportunities to also be descriptive of reality (“safety net program”).

Yes	No
<a href="#">Food apartheid</a>	<a href="#">Food desert</a> <sup>6</sup>
Food security	Food stamps
Food insecurity	The hungry
Hunger	
Safety net program	

*Many community health centers have expanded their services beyond traditional health care to address issues that impact their patients’ ability to stay healthy, such as food insecurity.*

<sup>3</sup> For example, when using the word “vulnerable,” explain *why* a person or community is vulnerable – is this due to economic, health or racial disparities? Lack of resources?

<sup>4</sup> A resource can be one type of tool.

<sup>5</sup> Material poverty: the lack of sufficient material means to meet basic needs. The lack of sufficient material means could include a lack of food, drinking water, shelter, clothing, or medicine. While one can experience material poverty, they can simultaneously experience wealth in other areas, such as family, friendship and spirituality.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase ‘food desert’ implies lack, not abundance, but to indigenous people from the desert, deserts have provided sustenance since the beginning of time.

# Ethical Storytelling Guide

## GENDER/SEX

It is generally unnecessary to specify the gender of a person in a particular role, as most occupations are not gender defined. *They* is a good alternative if you aren't sure of the person's pronoun. The gender pronouns below are not an exhaustive list; if someone identifies with a pronoun not listed, refer to them as such.

Yes	No
Assigned [male, female, intersex] at birth	Feminine hygiene products
Birthing people / Pregnant people	Male and Female <sup>8</sup>
Bisexual, bisexual man/woman/people	Preferred pronouns
Cisgender, cisgender man/woman/people	Tranny
Gay	<a href="#">Transgendered</a>
Gay man	Umbrella terms like gay or homosexual
<a href="#">Intersex</a>	to refer to the LGBTQIA+ community
Lesbian	
LGBTQIA+	
Men and Women	
Menstrual products / People who menstruate <sup>7</sup>	
Non-binary	
Pronouns	
Sexual orientation	
Transgender, transgender man/woman/people	

*Community health centers are firmly committed to expanding comprehensive health care access to all people, regardless of ability to pay. Women, girls, and all birthing people should be free to make decisions about their own bodies and lives in consultation with their doctors.*

<sup>7</sup> Some intersex, nonbinary and transgender people menstruate, while many cisgender women do not.

<sup>8</sup> [People often use gender and sex interchangeably, but this is incorrect.](#) *Female* is a scientific term that refers to the sex of a species capable of producing offspring and many women would not be considered female by that definition. [Likewise, transgender or nonbinary people with a uterus who don't identify as women can get pregnant.](#)

# Ethical Storytelling Guide

## HEALTH

Clinics might use different terminology for patient diagnoses. Recognize the difference between referring to people and referring to data markers.

Yes	No
Mandated reporter	Alcoholic
Nicotine cessation <sup>9</sup>	AIDS victim
People diagnosed with...	Full-blown AIDS
People living with... (diabetes, HIV, etc.)	Substance user
Substance use, substance use disorder	Suffering from AIDS
	People with AIDS
	<a href="#">Tobacco cessation</a>

*In the height of the COVID pandemic health centers used telehealth to provide critical services to their patients living with chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. Remote care and patient monitoring allowed patients to stay safe while accessing care.*

## IMMIGRATION/REFUGEES

Use language that creates empathy and recognizes diverse assets, promotes cross-cultural interactions, and offers respect.

Yes	No
Children of immigrants	DREAMer <sup>10</sup>
DACA recipient	Illegal immigrant
Person seeking citizenship	Legal alien/citizen/resident
Refugee	
Second-generation	
Undocumented immigrant	

*The My Health LA program was developed to provide access to comprehensive health care for Angelenos who were ineligible for insurance due to their immigration status.*

<sup>9</sup> Many indigenous cultures use tobacco for traditional purposes and not the commercial tobacco associated with nicotine addiction.

<sup>10</sup> Identifying as a DREAMer was originally a political and strategic decision to push for DREAM Act legislation. However, DREAMer excludes millions of people who don't qualify for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and can create a narrative of Good (high-achieving undocumented youth) vs. Bad (everyone else) immigrant. There are also other connotations to it that many DACA recipients have come to reject.

# Ethical Storytelling Guide

## RACE & ETHNICITY

If referring to one specific person or group, use that person's or group's name, (e.g. Black people)

Yes	No
Alaska Native/Native Alaskan	<a href="#">Caucasian</a>
<a href="#">American Indian/Native American</a> <sup>11</sup>	Linguistic minority
Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)	<a href="#">Minority</a>
Bias/Implicit bias	Pow wow
<a href="#">BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color</a>	Spirit animal
<a href="#">Black and African-American</a> <sup>12</sup>	Totem pole
Indigenous	
Latinx/a/e/o <sup>13</sup>	
Native Hawaiian	
Person, people of color	
Racism <sup>14</sup>	
White	

*COVID 19 laid bare the systemic racism that communities across Los Angeles endure. BIPOC Angelenos were more likely than whites to be exposed to the disease and less likely to receive timely vaccination and treatment.*

## RAPE & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Yes	No
Consent	Accuser
Person experiencing domestic violence	Alleged victim
Survivor	Victim
Victim of domestic violence	

*Because computers are often in common areas of the home, telephonic care is an important mechanism for victims of domestic violence to access confidential services.*

<sup>11</sup> The consensus is that whenever possible, Native people prefer to be called by their specific nation (tribal) name

<sup>12</sup> These terms are frequently treated as interchangeable, even though they are not.

<sup>13</sup> [Hispanic](#) is used on the U.S. Census and other forms that collect information on ethnicity. Latinx is generally considered more inclusive of all gender identities. [Some prefer the term Latine instead of Latinx](#). Refer to Latinx/a/e/o as an ethnicity and not a racial category because [it relates to people from a region \(Latin America\) that are of many different races, cultures, etc.](#)

<sup>14</sup> Be specific about the action/behavior/policy; recognize that people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can engage in racism.