



Giving Hope Today

Ethical Storytelling Reference Guide



The Salvation Army exists to share the love of Jesus Christ, meet human needs and be a transforming influence in the communities of our world.

As storytellers, our role is to communicate this mission, witness to the life-changing power of the gospel and invite people to find their stories in God's story.

Stories are the building block of community and an essential way to connect with people. They evoke emotion and create empathy; educate and deepen understanding; inspire and motivate; and move people to action. In the non-profit sector, sharing stories is important because "it's one thing to read about a social issue on paper; it's another to learn about an actual person's experience with that issue and put a face or a voice to the story." ¹

How we communicate our mission is just as important as why. The way we tell stories must be in line with our mission; it must empower rather than exploit. Ethical storytelling embraces a commitment to "honesty, accuracy and empathy with an awareness of their potential impact on people's lives." ² This approach raises questions such as: ³

- Do we have the person's consent to tell their story, for this purpose and in this medium?
- Whose needs and desires are at the centre of how the story is presented, the subject, the author or the audience?
- Who is the protagonist of the story, the person or our organization? Are we empowering or disempowering the subject?
- Are we telling the story in a way that reinforces harmful stereotypes or stigmas about a social issue or the people who are affected by it?
- What will happen to the person after we tell their story? Could it cause them harm? Are we going to continue to help them and be in relationship with them where possible, or are we leaving as soon as we "get what we need"?

The following guidelines are meant to help you consider your responsibilities as a storyteller.

¹ [idealists.org/en/careers/ethical-storytelling](https://www.idealists.org/en/careers/ethical-storytelling)

² [nonprofitpro.com/article/ethical-storytelling-a-guide-for-nonprofits](https://www.nonprofitpro.com/article/ethical-storytelling-a-guide-for-nonprofits)

³ [idealists.org/en/careers/ethical-storytelling](https://www.idealists.org/en/careers/ethical-storytelling)



Assessing Risk

In the digital age, it is difficult—if not impossible—to delete information. The stories we tell will have a life far beyond our purpose, and that life can have serious consequences. Consider the following risks to privacy, safety and reputation.

- Everyone has the right to privacy. Search engines can bring unwanted attention to personal information.
- Featuring individuals suffering persecution, threats or risk of violence, such as asylum seekers, refugees, victims of domestic violence and/or survivors of human trafficking, means they can be identified, located and exposed to danger.
- Once a photo is posted online, there is no limit on who sees it, how it is interpreted or how it will reflect on the individual's reputation. It may lead to cyberbullying. It may have damaging consequences on their employability or insurance coverage.

Setting Up an Interview

When starting a new project, work with the ministry unit to identify an individual to be interviewed. The ministry unit will suggest possibilities based on best practices. Some ministry units may require individuals to be out of care for a specific length of time before sharing their story. The next step is to ensure informed consent:

- Interviewees should fully understand what they are consenting to and clearly confirm their willingness to participate. Individuals can choose to use a false name to protect their identity if desired.
- Be aware of the unequal power relationship between you and a client. Ensure that the person asked to share their story or image does not feel obliged to participate because they have received a service or may need to receive a service in the future.
- Provide clear information about why we want to interview them or take their photo, how the information will be used (providing examples, if possible) and implications for their privacy or safety.
- Explain that it is their right to refuse to disclose part or all of their story.
- Explain that, where possible, they will be given the opportunity to review and approve the final product and may request to withdraw their story at any time during the process.



During the Interview

Individuals who have experienced trauma in the past may respond to an interview in unpredictable ways, even to the point of feeling retraumatized. To avoid this, seek advice from and/or the presence of those who have worked closely with the interviewee. Inquire about potential triggering issues. Consider a pre-interview in a separate room away from cameras, with a support person present.

- Put the interviewee at ease by reassuring them you will work to honour them and their story.
- Ensure the only people in the room are those who need to be there.
- Ensure the room is a comfortable temperature and provide water and tissues.
- For video interviews, explain you will need to affix a lapel mic (for female guests, have another female do this, where possible) and that it may be necessary to dab their brow/face for shine.
- Ask questions considerately; lead up to asking about a sensitive event gradually. Give them the time and space to process and answer questions, and the freedom to decline uncomfortable questions. Be sensitive to body language and facial expressions.
- Ask people what part of their story they are most excited to share.



Writing the Story

As you write, keep the individual at the centre of their own story. There is a fine line between sharing The Salvation Army's good work and framing ourselves as the hero or taking credit for their success. Aim to empower the interviewee's voice even as we advance the objectives of The Salvation Army. Keep in mind that oversimplified stories of transformation or success can betray the complexities of what it takes for a person to overcome challenges and move forward. They can also create unrealistic expectations for clients and funders.

- Hardship is often what brings people to The Salvation Army, but no one wants to be defined by their problems. Observe hardship, but emphasize hope, resilience and growth. Celebrate small successes and moments. Focus on aspirations or contributions rather than challenges. Ensure language used represents the whole person and does not paint them as someone who needs to be rescued.
- Avoid stereotypes. Use depictions that are respectful and inclusive. Consult with experts in the field for the most up-to-date language and approach.
- Avoid sensationalizing stories in ways that manipulate, distort the truth or create bias.
- Avoid racist and colonizing language and colloquialisms. Think carefully about metaphors and analogies before using them. If you are unsure, seek out further information prior to using. The impact of your language matters more than the intention behind it. Saying, "I didn't mean it that way" does not make up for any offense felt by the interviewee.
- The Salvation Army reflects a military model. Be mindful that military language can sometimes have colonizing or oppressive connotations.
- Avoid tokenism (e.g., don't fake diversity in programming just for the sake of appearances).
- Use language that is unbiased, neutral, clear and accurate.
- Include direct quotes as much as possible.

Remember that the story you write could define someone for years to come in today's digital world. Give the interviewee an opportunity to review the final version of their story and provide feedback to ensure they are comfortable with how they have been portrayed. This step is necessary even if it extends the project timeline.

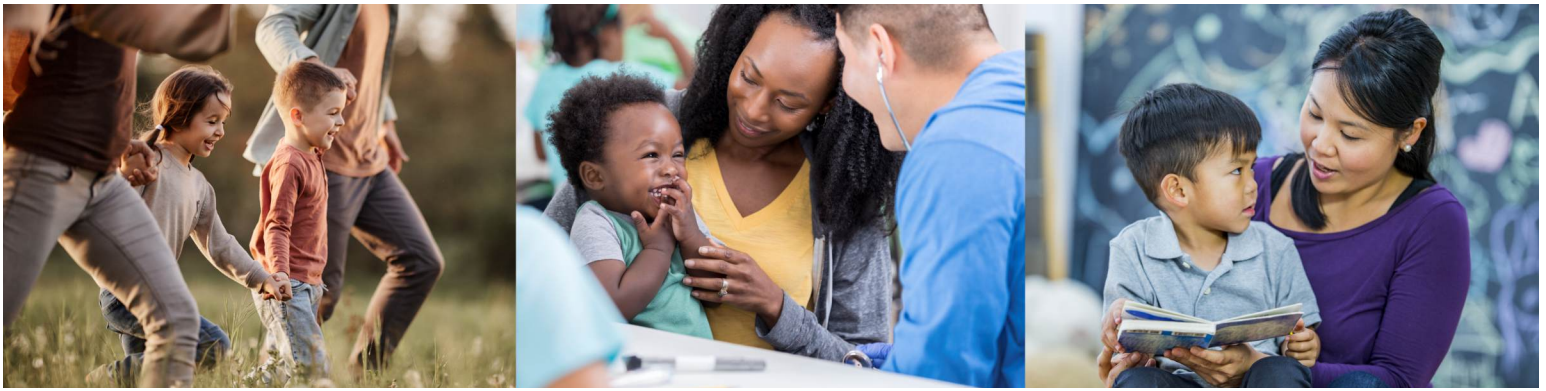


Choosing Photos

Sometimes, the interviewee consents to be photographed. At other times, it is appropriate to use stock images. When using a stock image, credit the source so that it is clear the image is not of a real client. In each case, consider power dynamics in imagery and avoid sensationalizing or perpetuating stereotypes. Make sure images reflect the communities we serve and that there is proper representation in all pieces we feature.

When using photographs of the interviewee, consider the following:

- Informed consent requires that the person photographed consents to the photo being taken and understands its intended purpose, how it may be used, and the risks and consequences associated with publishing images.
- As with language, ensure images do not portray them as someone who needs to be rescued.
- In some cases, the interviewee's privacy and/or anonymity need(s) to be protected. Avoid images that contain excessive or unnecessary information about a person (e.g., identity or location).
- Ensure those featured are suitably dressed.
- Seek to partner with a visual storyteller (photographer or artist) with familiarity and experience with the subject or community. Consider hiring a local photographer to empower and improve sensitivity in the storytelling process.
- Consider whether the subjects of the photo or people affected by the issue would feel that the image chosen is an accurate representation of themselves or the issue.



Additional Considerations When Photographing Children:

- Separate forms are needed requiring parental consent.
- Blur out faces where no explicit consent has been given or if privacy and/or anonymity need(s) to be protected. Only use images of children in suitable dress.
- Camp and other youth gatherings are settings that require particular caution. Wristbands can be used on photoshoot days to identify which children have parental consent to appear in the photo.
- When a child or youth is being interviewed, ensure there is a counsellor/caregiver present.

In public meetings, it is not always possible to ensure consent for photos or videos. Signs should be posted and/or verbal announcements made to ensure those attending are aware that they may be photographed or recorded.

After the Story Is Published

- Remember that it may be necessary in future to remove images and/or stories for safety and privacy reasons. For instance, the interviewee may be in a dangerous situation.
- For an image or story to be repurposed, new permission needs to be sought.



APPENDIX 1

Ethical Language Principles

This guideline offers specific recommendations for using ethical language, grounded in principles that explain why these choices matter. This document cannot account for every possible instance, due to the breadth of information as well as the constantly evolving nature of language. As such, it aims to equip mission partners with the understanding needed to make thoughtful, informed decisions as situations arise in their context.

Principles

- **Accountability.** Ethical language reflects an awareness of evolving best-practices related to language. Writers should stay informed about current preferred terminology and be willing to adapt accordingly.
- **Accuracy and specificity.** Language should be precise, avoiding bias, generalizations, assumptions, sensationalism or objectification (using people, often those with disability, as inspiration when what they are doing is common for others). Specific terms help clarify rather than attach additional meaning.
- **Affirming.** Person-first language will be the default in most instances. However, when individuals or communities self-identify differently, their preferences should be respected and prioritized (e.g., identity-first language).
- **Inclusivity.** Language should respect all people and reflect a range of genders, backgrounds and identities.
- **Accessibility.** Ethical language choices must consider not only the subject being discussed but also the reader. The reading level should match the intended audience to ensure understanding.

Principles-Based Language Choices

- **Person-first language.** Prioritizes the individual before their condition or circumstance. Often used in contrast to identity-first language. It is important to first honour the way an individual or group chooses to self-identify if it differs from person-first language.
- **Strength-based language.** Emphasizes resilience, dignity and potential. Focuses on systemic factors rather than framing challenges as personal deficiencies. The opposite of deficit-based language.
- **Trauma-informed language.** Centres emotional and psychological safety, empowerment and agency. Avoids language that perpetuates judgment, stigma or oppression.
- **Inclusive language.** Recognizes diversity and does not make assumptions. Avoids centring the dominant group (e.g., white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual) as the default.



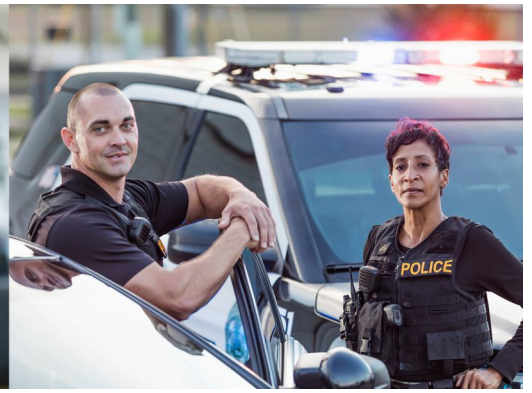
Instead of ...

Try ...

Deficit-based language	Strength-based language
Underprivileged or at-risk populations	People experiencing systemic barriers
Uneducated people	People with limited access to formal education
Wheelchair-bound; confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair
Developed/undeveloped country; third world country	High-income/low-income country; Global North/South
Low functioning	People with significant support needs <i>It is best to be more specific if referring to an individual, as needs can vary drastically from one person to another. For example: "A person has significant support needs in the area of [personal care, communication, etc]."</i>

Identity-first language	Person-first language
<i>Note: It is important to first honour the way an individual or group chooses to self-identify if it differs from person-first language.</i>	
Homeless people	People experiencing homelessness
Mentally ill people	People with mental illness or mental-health conditions
Disabled people	People with disabilities/people who experience disability
Poor people	People living in poverty



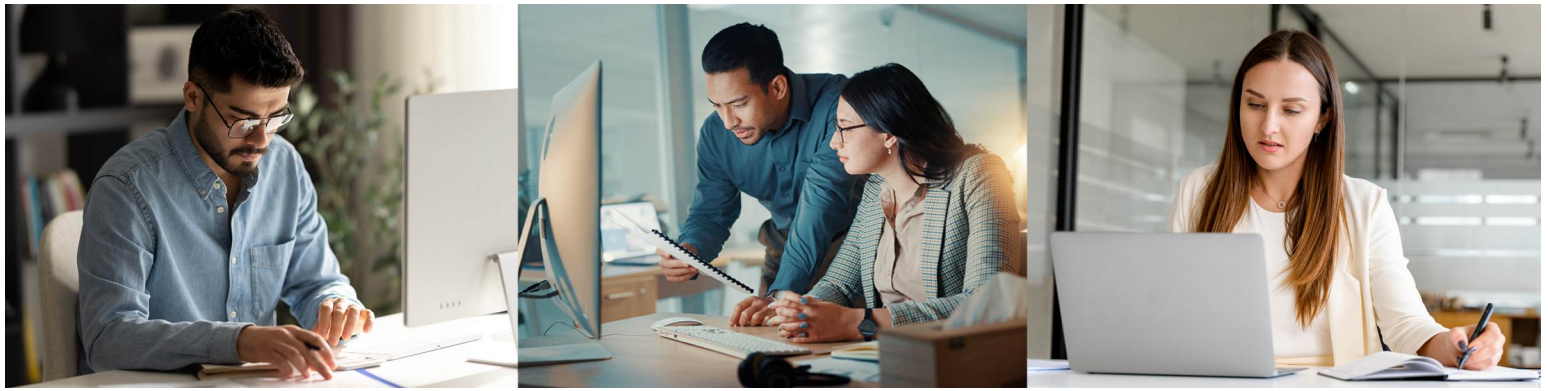


Instead of ...

Try ...

Traumatizing or stigmatizing language	Trauma-informed language
Victim	Survivor; person affected by
Addict; junkie	Person with a substance use disorder
Clean and sober	Sober; in recovery
Ex-convict; felon	Formerly incarcerated person
Crazy	Experiencing a mental-health crisis
Illegal immigrant	Undocumented person
The vulnerable	People facing systemic barriers; people in historically underserved/oppressed communities; communities disproportionately affected by
Unfit parent	Parent facing barriers; parent in need of support

Dominant-centring language	Inclusive language
Referring to the dominant group as the default or norm	Be specific about what you mean (e.g., neurotypical/neurodivergent, cisgender/transgender, straight/LGBTQ+)
Gendered language (when speaking about an unspecified group)	Gender neutral language
Minorities	Racialized communities; underrepresented groups
You guys	Everyone; folks; team
Manpower	Workforce
Policemen or firemen	Police officers or firefighters
Normal families; broken home	Two-parent/single-parent families; women-lead families; blended family



APPENDIX 2

Working With Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) is everywhere these days: in our homes, phones, internet searches and work systems. Though some may try their best not to use it, there's no denying that AI is here to stay.

As an Army storyteller, to what extent should you use AI in your day-to-day work? When should you avoid using it? When does using AI cross the line into unethical territory? Consider the guardrails and limitations below when using AI in an Army context.

- **Use it selectively.** If you use programs like ChaptGPT, rely on them to **inspire** your work, not to create it. AI should never replace human judgment or creativity. In short, it might be OK to ask AI to organize your work or to assess and analyse data—but stay away from using AI to create entire messaging or to fully replace content informed and shaped by a person.
- **NEVER upload confidential information.** Feeding confidential client information, such as names, birth dates, addresses, phone numbers, details from private conversations, etc., into AI programs puts it at extreme risk of being exposed in a data breach or made accessible to the public—once it's online, there's no reeling it back in.
- **Be sure to fact-check.** Misinformation is rampant, and AI sources do not have a stellar record for getting facts right or differentiating between truth and fiction. AI programs are also incredibly adept at creating authentic-looking photos and videos—and getting better at this all the time. Fact-checking, determining sources and questioning the authenticity of content is more important than ever.
- **Plagiarism is a real risk with AI content.** Such programs are trained on countless existing publications, documents and websites, and using this content could expose you (and, potentially, The Salvation Army) to a lawsuit.
- **Make it personal and detailed.** AI is only as good as the information it receives from us: living, breathing, thinking human beings. Be sure to edit and rewrite AI content as needed by adding personal, humanizing details. Real stories about real people created by real storytellers will always make the most impact.
- **Disclose its use.** Add a footnote or disclaimer to any content created with AI.

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- **Ensure human oversight.** Review AI-created content with a critical, thoughtful eye; be on the lookout for biases, untruths, mistakes, misinformation and poorly written content.
- **Be aware of the environmental impact.** The electricity required to power AI data centres is monumental, creating a massive carbon footprint. These centres also rely on water to moderate the temperature of their systems: some need up to five million gallons of water a day, the equivalent daily consumption of a town of tens of thousands of people. Then there's the endless need for critical earth minerals to build AI chips and machinery. AI's impact on the environment is wide-reaching—and growing by the day.

The Salvation Army is an organization that serves and celebrates one of God's most unique creations: humanity. As stewards of the Army's mission, mission partners are responsible for ensuring the Army's processes and systems share the love of Jesus, meet human needs and act as transforming influences in the communities we serve. Does using a system such as AI meet that standard?

While some would suggest that AI is a useful tool for supporting the Army's mission, others might beg to differ. But we can all come together around this:

“For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10 NIV).

AI should never substitute, supersede or make redundant the handiwork of God: human beings.

Additional resources:

[Introducing The Salvation Army's AI Policy](#)

[Introducing The Salvation Army's AI Guardrails](#)

[Faith in an AI World](#)

[Principles for Using Generative AI in The Times' Newsroom](#)

For Further Reading:

TSA Media Policy:

[CM 08.001 Media Relations](#) *

Decolonizing Language:

[Decolonizing Language \(sharepoint.com\)](#) *

* These links will require you to sign into your Salvation Army Outlook account.

[EthicalStorytelling.com](#)

Community of nonprofit practitioners and storytellers

[Guidelines for Obtaining Meaningful Consent](#)

Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada

[Online Reputation: What Are They Saying About Me?](#)

Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada

[Process on Obtaining Informed Consent](#)

World Health Organization



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