

# Representation Matters: Better Writing Through Diversity

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As a follow-up to the [opening plenary session](#) (organized by Shraddha Chakradhar and Jenny Cutraro) at ScienceWriters2020, we invited attendees to brainstorm ideas for improving diversity in science reporting. Participants were randomly split into seven breakout rooms, each discussing one prompt. We asked them to populate Google documents with their best ideas, strategies and resources, which we have now compiled into a single resource for the science writing community.

Please feel free to suggest additions to jeffrey dot perkel at gmail dot com.

## Prompt 1: When does it make sense to specifically include diversity and representation angles of sources and subjects in stories?

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Moderator: Rodrigo Pérez Ortega (@rpocisv)

Non-profit's [www.SciCommDiversity.org](http://www.SciCommDiversity.org) Fellowship connects diversity journalism organizations members (Natl Assoc of Black Journo, NAHispanicJ, NativeAJA) to NASW community.

Overview of fellowship program published:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2020.00051/full>. Article has examples of how to include diversity angle to science reporting (for *DiverseScholar.org* magazine [see <https://communitypartners.org/project/diverse-scholar>]). Thx to NASW Idea Grant funding for catalyzing fellowship.

FYI, if searching for diversity STEM communities, pls see Alberto's non-profit's Stakeholders page w/ many non-profits (eg NOBCCHE Black Chemists, SACNAS Latinx & Native Americans), events (eg Tapia Computing, ABRCMS Biomedical Minority) and now new online communities (#LatinxChem, #BlackAndSTEM, @500QueerSci) <https://www.minoritypostdoc.org/stakeholders>

If the person decides to go that route (of talking about their background), continue the conversation, even if you didn't plan on covering that specifically through that angle. Ask questions that continue to move in that direction.

When presented with choices of sources and angles, actively choose inclusivity.

As an ally reporting on a minority source/story, it will be difficult to please every possible reader.

- Depend on allies to tell the story if/when the reporter isn't a member of the community.
- Do try to find an ambassador/liaison to the community you're reporting on to build trust.

**Question:** how to approach identity when it's not the main subject of the story?

Ask sources how they would like to be identified, give them the space to share or to not share. If they just want to talk about science, then perhaps it might be pertinent to ask why their identity is not a part of their science or research.

I'm thinking of the Henrietta Lacks book where, IMO, the author seemed to do a good job at putting herself in a position of vulnerability and trying to be an ally, share the story of someone else and their family.

In a non-direct way, perhaps describe to source about how your news outlet has a diversity mission/initiative. Note: this tactic is more common during job interviews, where hiring manager & candidate are assessing culture of organization.

Research your source's professional organization membership and/or service activities. If any have a diversity mission, then ask about that community/work.

**Leading questions:** How did you get interested in this research or field?

**At the end of interview:** Is there anything you wished I'd ask you? Anything I might not have known to ask you?

I've found the Inclusive SciComm community to be a great place to learn about how to respectfully include DEI (or JEDI :) ) in your writing work

## Prompt 2: What aspects of diversity are science writers neglecting?

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Moderator: Doris Truong (@DorisTruong)

## Takeaways:

- Ask sources whether they're open to sharing demographic information.
- Make sure tracking diversity of sources is embedded in your business practices. Here's a [sample form from America Amplified](#). - Push people to direct you to more diverse sources. Don't let them stop with the usual suspect(s).
- Look carefully at study design and interpretation of disparate results.

## Aspects of diversity, from [Poynter's Doris Truong](#)

Race/Ethnicity\*

Class/Socioeconomic\*

Gender\*

Age/Generation\*

Sexual orientation\*

Geography\*

Religion

Military status

Intro-/extro-vert

Housing status

Language(s)

Family status

Nationality

Immigration status

Work experience

Physical (dis)ability

Neurodiversity

Passport?

Political belief

Education

Criminal background

Body shape

Intersectionality

- ◦ *These 6 characteristics are Fault Lines, a construct from the [Maynard Institute](#) that helps people identify their unconscious bias.*

## ☐☐ [Thoughts from breakout attendees] ☐☐

Body diversity is a subject that's lacking in coverage - anything from disability to different body shapes. We focus on including all races, but representation from all races are still predominantly physically fit individuals.

Often feel like we're not doing enough to accommodate for physical disability, especially alt-text and hashtags on social media- so even after stories are told, aren't always accessible

→ Read "[I live with chronic pain. Someone you work with does, too.](#)" from Poynter

Recently told that I tweeted too much about my mental health issues and it might affect my hireability...

^definitely a generational difference (e.g., students are more willing to discuss this)

→ Read "[Why we're going dark](#)" from the Daily Gamecock

Often discussion about tracking diversity of sources quickly defaults to tracking only binary gender. I think that's a significant limitation that we should work to move beyond.

^^once interviewed a nonbinary person, found out and used their preferred name when talking to

them and writing the draft, but failed to ask if that's what they wanted to appear in print so I ended up having to change it in the piece to the (different) name that they publish under

An earlier session talked about the importance of exploring how diversity intersects with the foundations of many scientific fields. How science is done, what questions are asked and how.

^Absolutely. Too often study subjects are all one sex, or not diverse in other ways.

→ Read [NLGJA Stylebook \(en español\)](#); [Transgender Journalists Association Style Guide](#)

— When writing about studies, look carefully at how the researchers interpreted results that varied by racial/ethnic/sex/age/etc groups: how do they attribute/allocate differences in results to genetic vs. environmental factors? What questions did they ask along these lines (e.g., urban vs. rural residences, SES status)

— Thinking about identity variables as representing something else (access to healthcare, experience of discrimination, cultural practices, ex). We need to fine tune our analyses so that we understand what outcomes related to identity are being invoked when we say disparities exist.

^^I think this is super important. If we're not talking about the social determinants of health in reporting on health disparities then I really fear that we're straying into the language of genetic determinism.

^^^When one observes disparities, the next step is to learn what factors might be behind that. Some are very subtle. Chandra Jackson, Ph.D. (NIEHS) looks at sleep disparities. For example, the homes of lower-income folks tend to be in noisier neighborhoods, with more disturbed sleep as a result. And guess what, cardiovascular health and so much else is related to sleep. So, not income/education/race per se, but the noise and light levels where you sleep.

^^ooh that's super interesting! Makes me think of people with little kids –like how the pandemic has especially negatively affected women because of the burden of care and invisible work?

→ Read "[How we fail black patients in pain](#)" from AAMC

As a woman of color, often writing about or communicating perspectives on "hot topic" issues can lead to being perceived as the "angry black/brown woman". Difficulty towing the line between being passionate about a subject and coming off as "angry".

^^ also a WOC, and I do feel pressure to conform to acceptable norms, which may limit my ability to tell the story / add my personal experience

+1 Yes, and it often feels like you need to write about these topics for a White audience and explain yourself...

^^Exactly! Are there any/enough pieces written by BIPOC for BIPOC?

→ BIPOC friends, find support in [Journalists of Color](#). Not a JOC? Read "[How to Be an Ally in the Newsroom](#)" from Open News.

Global diversity. Also making sure that we don't assume a single person represents an entire group. There is diversity within "diversity"

Re global diversity: reporters sometimes give different amounts of identifying information for researchers from different countries which transmits the idea that for some countries it's notable that researchers are from there and for some countries it's not, and that conveys bias.

Scientists often move around the globe. For global diversity, do you consider their location or nationality? (Sometimes you don't even know their nationality!)

→ Read (with tipsheet!) "[Updates to style guide entries related to race are heartening, but far from comprehensive](#)" from Poynter

I've been working on developing a source-tracking document for use at The Open Notebook (to also share with reporters and newsrooms who may wish to adapt it for their use), and one of the challenges in doing that has turned out to be figuring out which dimensions of diversity to attempt to track, i.e., finding a balance between too simplistic and too unworkably complex.

^I would download a source-tracking Google Spreadsheet in a heartbeat

→ See [America Amplified's form](#)

My thought is that it's more difficult to address diversity that isn't immediately visible or even known to you as a writer.

In The Open Notebook's "[Finding Diverse Sources for Science Stories](#)" document, we recommend that reporters consider sending a note to sources that says something like: "Our publication is committed to including diverse sources in our stories so that we can accurately capture the range of experts whose voices, perspectives, and expertise are relevant. Toward that end, we try to track information about who our sources are. If you are comfortable doing so, I would appreciate it if you would let me know whether you identify as a member of any historically marginalized communities. This information will be used for internal accountability purposes, and no individual information will be shared publicly. Again, this is voluntary, but would be helpful to us as we work toward greater equity and inclusion in our coverage."

In the opening plenary, someone made the point that it's necessary for journalists/science writers to become more comfortable with being uncomfortable. I feel that's 100% correct. (I'm thinking of this particularly with respect to asking sources about their identities as part of a source-tracking effort)

Do societal norms prevent us from sharing our own lived experiences that would expand the list of diversity axes? As someone with unexplained infertility who conceived through in vitro fertilization, will conception status and fertility status be folded in under family status or reach more prominence as more people are conceived through interventions?

Re: imposter syndrome: Do not assume WHY the woman referred you to her male colleague: maybe there's a pecking order in her department and she'd face retaliation if she didn't toss the request to the alpha male.

Important point. Also, I wonder if we can be more forthright when a PIO tries to steer us toward a less diverse source.

^ as a PIO: respectfully ask "why the diversion" is a good place to start.

Re: immigration status, I used to write a lot about student experiences and international students were definitely less willing to speak to me about anything they perceived as a contentious issues (e.g., their university's COVID response) which was very sad :( for them and also b/c it made the story less diverse...

Has anyone found a great resource for images of members of underrepresented groups? That is so important but can also be very time intensive.

being very careful about not tokenizing people by using images out of the context in which they were intended.

- <https://www.blackillustrations.com/illustrations/the-office-hustle-illustration-pack-official>
- [Unsplash](#) (caveat: double-check photo permissions; you might want to [reverse image search](#) to be sure someone's IP isn't being violated)
- <https://tonl.co/>
- [broadlygenderphotos.vice.com](https://broadlygenderphotos.vice.com)
- [jopwellcollection.jopwell.com/internedition/](https://jopwellcollection.jopwell.com/internedition/)
- [www.flickr.com/photos/wocintechchat/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/wocintechchat/)
- [www.nappy.co/](https://www.nappy.co/)
- [www.gettyimages.com/collections/leanin](https://www.gettyimages.com/collections/leanin)
- [burst.shopify.com/](https://burst.shopify.com/)

## **Prompt 3: How can editors and writers work together to ensure more representative reporting?**

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Moderator: Sarah Zielinski (@SarahZielinski)

(From Sarah, moderator) At [Science News for Students](#), we do several things in this venue. For years we have had a requirement that features include as a source at least one woman or person of color. Our audience is young, and we have felt that it is particularly important that they see that science has a place for everyone. In 2018, we began tracking the diversity of our sources in an ad hoc manner. We use that data in house only to track our progress. This year, we asked that our writers help contribute to our diversity tracking effort, and some of them now provide that information (via a Google form) for the stories they report. To help my writers in their efforts, I provided a document with suggestions about how to find more diverse sources. It also gave a script that writers could use when speaking with sources so that they could collect demographic data as part of their reporting. (Other than the requirement for features, the rest is voluntary.)

## **Finding sources outside the US**

In the case of stories that take place in countries outside the United States, always include the testimonies of local researchers. Not just from the US.

Database of Hispanic/LatinX women scientists: <https://cientificas.amit-es.org/>

A project that profiles Indian women in STEM: <https://thelifeofscience.com/category/people/science/>

Facebook group showcasing the work of Mexican women scientists. I'm sure many of them would be glad to be consulted if needed <https://www.facebook.com/cientificasmx/>

There is also a Mexican association of science writers and journalists (Red Mexicana de Periodistas de Ciencia). This group may help you connect with sources at least in Mexico.  
<https://redmpc.wordpress.com/>

This is the Argentinian network of science journalism. <https://radpc.org/>

If you're doing reporting in another country, contact a local science writer. They are often willing to help you figure out the lay of the land.

## **Other suggestions from the group:**

It's important to start a network early of people that you can reach out to. When you're working under pressure, it's hard to do this on the fly.

Editors could check in with who the sources are. They can't just rely on the writer.

Editors should seriously consider whether a deadline is hard or not. If writers know that an editor might be able move a deadline, it makes it easier to make finding diverse sources a priority.

When writing about a paper, look down the list of authors. There are often younger and more diverse people farther down the list. Also ask the first author for people who can comment.

Instead of starting with your story and then searching for diverse sources, you can start with the sources and then find the story. This is especially important when dealing with an overwhelmingly white area (whether geographically or scientifically).

[Eos](#) did diversity tracking for a year and has now switched to sending those sources a survey to ask them directly. The advantages of this include that data collection is more accurate and you can also ask things like if a source is early career, LGBTQIA, etc. Here is the survey (we have taken out the early career question at the moment, because the definition is fuzzy... welcome any thoughts on that):

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSelvtFUtB9IEaKz6Lijx\\_pFKnHrxZvOPRl4g4oDi8DxirS\\_g/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSelvtFUtB9IEaKz6Lijx_pFKnHrxZvOPRl4g4oDi8DxirS_g/viewform)

Diverse sources (beta): <https://diversesources.org>

It's important for an editor to have that five-minute discussion in the beginning, at story assignment, about expectations, which should include sources and voices that a reporter includes in the story. "We all need a reminder."

500 women scientists ([website](#)) has always been a good source for me.

Twitter sometimes has Black in \_\_\_\_ weeks – I try to follow and make a spreadsheet of new scholars and their expertise/contact for future stories.

There are also some smaller groups like "[Ladies of Landsat](#)" that can be good sources.

## **Prompt 4: What tools, resources, and strategies can you use to gauge and improve representation in your writing and reporting?**

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Moderator: Steve Bien-Aimé (@Steve\_BienAime)

We have to devote time to diversity

Monitor your diversity statistics. Then review them regularly. Every month? Every quarter? Every six months?

The Native American Journalists Association is a good source for media reporting guides about American Indian communities and culture. <https://najanewsroom.com/>

- What are the stories you're covering? That impacts the people interviewed.
- Seek out more voices from multiple disciplines.
- Who are the post-docs or research assistants? Try doing a group interview to avoid the PI dominating the narratives.
- It also helps to have questions prepared beforehand that involve every person in the team (provided that there is some prior knowledge about the roles of everyone)
- Journalists tend to interview the same folks ... and these practices tend to impede diversity.
- We look for experts at smaller institutions, too.
- For press officers who can, sometimes you can track down a reserved grad student/postdoc in-person after the group interview with a few follow-up questions.
- Do the universities have diverse people? It's not all on the PIOs. What is our role in diversity Initiatives?



- Identify diverse sources but also sources (who may be white men) who care about representation who will help you find others
  - Ask experts for other sources, perhaps even for diversity.
- Also look toward specialized journals for experts because the main journals often marginalize work in diversity – <https://academic.oup.com/joc/article/68/2/254/4958972>
- Know there is visible and invisible diversity
  - Visible: Race, sex
  - Invisible: SES, region, sexual orientation
- We need to think about diversity tracking in an holistic way
- Work on making experts comfortable
- Promote the work of various colleagues – embrace this ethic in diversity training
- **Question:** has anyone found a great resource for images of members of underrepresented groups? That is so important but can also be very time intensive. We currently use Shutterstock.
  - tonl specializes in diverse stock photography: <https://tonl.co/>
  - There's a new resource of free images of Black professionals. Just a sec.  
<https://www.blackillustrations.com/illustrations/the-office-hustle-illustration-pack-official>



# References

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