



Michelle Levander

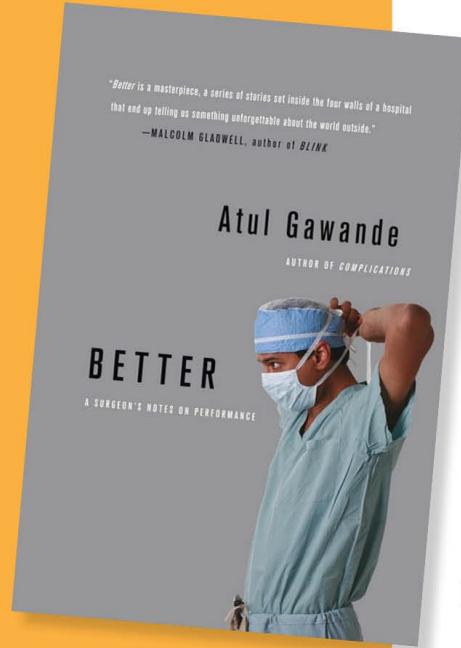
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How to Tell Your Story to Ordinary People: Practical Tips

Storytelling as a Force for Narrative Change





Atul Gawande on Writing:

Write something....Just write.
What you write need not achieve
perfection. It need only add some
small observation about your world.
...By offering your reflections to an
audience, even a small one, you
make yourself part of a larger world.

The New Yorker's Dhruv Khullar, MD, on the Power of Story



“Numbers are only numbers. We give them life. They have to be put in the right context. We have to feel the lives of the people that are affected by those numbers.”

SOURCE



Changing the Narrative on Health





Toxic City is an investigative series about the ongoing struggle to protect Philadelphia's children, many poor and minority, from environmental harm.

Narrative Change → Policy Change

Big Investigations that Animate Policy Makers and the Public

Immersive Reporting on Systemic Inequities in Health Care

CAPITAL B



In rural America, maternity care is vanishing. A reporter tells the story of the Black mothers left stranded in Florida.



Margo Snipe
REPORTER

Storytelling on Life-Threatening Risks for Immigrants with Medical Trials

Latinos in financial distress who make a living by continuously participating in clinical trials are afraid to raise concerns for fear of retaliation and losing their job. The clinics and pharma companies conducting these trials are not willing to share much either. When you mix that with important policy issues, you have a recipe for abuse and coercion.



Jorge Carrasco,
DIGITAL JOURNALIST NOTICIAS TELEMUNDO



Centering Investigative Reporting Around Community Perspectives

Pacific Islander Reporter
Anita Hofschneder of
Honolulu Civil Beat at
a listening session she
convened in Saipan.



California Ethnic Media Collaborative Healing California

Revealing Cambodian and Khmer American Trauma Through Disaggregated Data

The story was co-published with [ASanINews](#) as part of the 2024 Ethnic Media Collaborative, Healing California.



by Jia H. Jung



Erika Mey and her mother, Khao Poy Keang, holding images of Khao's parents depicted at different stages of their lives.

Photo by Jia H. Jung



Engagement: Community-Driven Insights That Shape Reporting

Community health workers head out to San Francisco's Mission District to ask Latinx residents about their experiences during the pandemic, using a survey they helped to design.

An Expansive Definition of Health

‘ The Fellowship sessions were crucial in understanding health — not as its own silo, but as an interwoven facet of society, weighed down by our systemic biases and historic discrimination. ’



Angela Chen

KESQ-TV, PALM SPRINGS
2023 CALIFORNIA
HEALTH EQUITY FELLOW

Center *for* Health Journalism

Helping Non-Journalists Tell Their Stories



Jan Gurley, MD

REPORTING ON HOMELESSNESS AND FOOD
INSECURITY IN SAN FRANCISCO



Manoj Jain, MD

WEAVING PERSONAL STORIES OF MEDICINE WITH
BROADER INSIGHTS



Arcenio Lopez

SHARING STORIES OF FARMWORKERS HE REPRESENTS
IN OP-EDS

HEAR ARCENIO TALK ABOUT
HIS WRITING JOURNEY 

“I write about the most painful and inequitable things I see in my life’s work because in the sometimes claustrophobic confines of an exam room, I am allowed to see things that other people do not often have the privilege of seeing.”



Jan Gurley, MD

“ We need a larger infrastructure for storytelling, if our capacity for storytelling will matter. In the end, we can define narrative infrastructure as the ability to learn, create, broadcast and immerse...”



Rashad Robinson

COLOR OF CHANGE

Health Equity Storytelling



- Move your audience with the power of story
- Use data and studies as grace notes
- Illustrate how systemic forces can undermine health
- Provide historical context across generations
- Challenge assumptions
- Assess whether systems even measure inequity
- If not, ask different questions
- Elevate voices that are not being heard

Questions to Ask Yourself



- Can you summarize your core idea in one sentence? If not, try again.
- Can you tell a story that will persuade your readers rather than summarizing a topic or theme?
- Can you tell your story easily to your mother?
- If you read it aloud, will you get tongue tied? If so, simplify.
- Can you convey why you are telling this story now and why it matters?

Summarize your story in one phrase



“An examination of a lifetime of health inequities that generations of Black Americans have experienced.” The project, she said, “showed how this legacy of racism in our nation has laid a foundation for much of what we have seen over decades and decades.”



Kat Stafford

GLOBAL RACE AND JUSTICE EDITOR, REUTERS

HER REPORTING



Tips from Star Tribune Data Editor MaryJo Webster

Using numbers that readers can comprehend

- Avoiding number clutter
- Characterizing findings & writing without digits
- Pick your “star” numbers & ditch the rest

.055682825

Use rates, ratios, proportions, fractions

The state spends \$16.6 billion per year on health care.

OR

Annually, the state spends the equivalent of \$3,000 per person on health care.

.07% of kindergarteners had a medical exemption to vaccines.

OR

7 out of 10,000 kindergarteners had a medical exemption

Ditch the Decimals!

Don't use decimals for something that cannot be divided (i.e. people).

Decimals imply a level of precision that cannot be guaranteed.

For the first time in history in 2000, more than half of the people in the USA — 50.5% — were 35 or older. That age group is growing fastest in the suburbs, according to a report by the Brookings Institution. Only 46.3% of people in cities are 35 or older, compared with 51.3% of suburbanites. At the same time, growing numbers of minorities and immigrants are settling into suburbs.

Tips for Good Opinion Writing from the New York Times

The best Opinion essays:

- Challenge and engage audiences that do not necessarily agree with the writer's point of view.
- Give specific and original insight into complicated problems or thorny ideas.
- Anticipate readers' questions and even confusion around news that has an impact on their lives and the world. One important role of a guest essay is to clarify and explain the stakes of changes and world events.
- Start conversations, influence policymakers and have an impact far beyond the pages of Times Opinion.
- Delight readers with great writing and originality and open a window to a world they might not otherwise see.

SOURCE



Workshop Exercise

Pair up with the person sitting next to you and answer these four questions about an op-ed you would like to write. No more than one sentence per question.

- 1 What is the core issue?
- 2 Why should we care now?
- 3 What is the impact/consequence? `
- 4 Who are the main protagonists?
- 5 What is the path forward/solutions?

Thank You!

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Tips from New York Times Health and Science Reporter Pam Belluck

- Think about why and how the subject would matter to a general audience.** What is it that general readers would care about? Does your research have potential impact for a medical condition, for an environmental problem, for better understanding of some social issue?
- Don't hype.** Don't exaggerate the importance of your research. Your credibility and the credibility of the research rest on making sure the work is being appropriately described.
- Point out, at least briefly, **what is still unknown about the subject you're writing about.** Don't imply that your research solves all the problems and answers all the important questions.
- Use examples or analogies to situations people would relate to.** But don't use too many examples or analogies — include one or two particularly applicable ones.
- Don't talk down to people in your writing.** Simplify, but don't over-simplify.
- Read your piece out loud to one or more "regular people,"** people who are emblematic of the audience you hope to reach with your piece. Do they stumble over anything or find anything confusing or too wordy? That might suggest that you need to revise accordingly.

Citation Links from Center for Health Journalism Fellows

- [Toxic City Project](#), Philadelphia Inquirer
- [Margo Snipe](#) on Black Maternal Mortality, Capital B
- [Telemundo Reporting](#) on Harms from Clinical Trials
- [Anita Hofschneider](#) Reporting on Pacific Islander Health
- [El Tecolote](#) Reporting on Undocumented Families during the Pandemic
- [Dr. Jan Gurley](#) reporting on homelessness and other topics
- [Dr. Manoj Jain](#) on the practice of medicine
- [Arcenio Lopez](#) on Mixteco farmworkers during the pandemic

