



---

Engaged Style Guides:  
*Co-Creating Standards with Your Community*

Aubrey Nagle, Resolve Philly  
May 21, 2020

# Hello!

## Aubrey Nagle

Reframe editor,  
Resolve Philly

### Previously:

- Newsletter Editor, **Philadelphia Inquirer**
- Communications Manager, **Opera Philadelphia**
- Managing Editor, Lifestyle & Entertainment, **PhillyVoice**

...**Sometimes:** Screenwriter, Crash Course  
+ (former) Publisher of Foolproof  
newsletter



# What we'll cover

- Resolve Philly & Reframe
- **What is an Engaged Style Guide?**
- Terms to consider
- Questions & wrap-up



# Poll

If your place of work uses a style guide, is there a protocol in place for updating it?



or



# RESOLVE PHILLY

Journalism rooted in equity, collaboration,  
and the elevation of community voices and solutions.

 **REFRAME**

**BROKE**  
IN PHILLY

**EQUALLY INFORMED PHILLY**

# Lucrative flips exploit the poor, naive

Border Patrol finds 31 illegal aliens living in stash house

Wheelchair-bound athlete pursues powerlifting dream

*Ex-con was doing great at Walmart - until he went for promotion*

**Neshaminy School District can keep 'Redskins' name, must educate students to prevent stereotypes,**

# What happens when we use dehumanizing language?

Audiences...

*Feel othered*

*Lose trust*

*Detach from media*



Newsrooms lose support

Communities lose their

voice



**Journalism fails its mission to inform**

The logo for 'REFRAME' features the word in a bold, black, sans-serif font. To the left of the word is a dark blue hand icon pointing downwards. To the right is a light blue hand icon pointing upwards. The word 'REFRAME' is centered between these two hand icons.

# REFRAME

A community-informed digital intervention to help journalists to use more **authentic, precise** language.

We spoke with & surveyed dozens of journalists and community leaders.  
We learned...

- Real-time language analysis is key to adoption
- Sourcing is just as important as standards
- Frequent community input is required
- No single tool can bridge the authenticity gap

# What we're building

- Initial **training** on language, framing
- **Source auditing protocol** to find representation gaps
- **Community panel** to meet with newsroom leaders
- Ongoing **community feedback** via digital surveys
- **Text-analysis tool**



# What is an Engaged Style Guide?



# An Engaged Style Guide ....

- Co-creates standards with your community
- Is people-centered, and not label-centered
- Is comfortable with change
- Values respect over catchy headlines
- Invites feedback regularly



# Self-description is sharing power

## “How would you describe your ... ?”

... race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality etc., when relevant

- Agency remains with source
- Trusts individuals to be experts in their experience

## BUT

- Don't ask someone to self-describe and *then* revert to house style rules
- Be careful with qualifiers like “identifies as” or “represents themselves as”



# People-centered, not label-centered\*

Centralize personhood, describing what someone is *experiencing* rather than what they “are.”

## Emphasize humanity above all else.

- A person diagnosed with dyslexia, rather than “a dyslexic”
- “Joe, who was formerly incarcerated,” or “a returning citizen” rather than “ex-con” or “former inmate”

**Why?** Shortcuts/labels imply that your subject is abstract, not as human, the “other.”

**\*The exception:** *identity-first preferences*



# Different communities, different needs

Broad, third-party style guides can't meet the needs of diverse and specific communities...

...But self-description and ever-evolving language leaves room for inconsistency...

## Get comfortable with change!

- Explain/gloss inconsistencies in text
  - “Alex, who uses they/them pronouns...”
- Make your style guide public
  - Explain your methodology
  - Note that it is a living document
- Remember: we notice when “rules” are broken, and audiences don't



# Respect > SEO

It's not about avoiding *being offensive*, it's about proactively being respectful and accurate.

- Many folks will *only* see your headline or lower-third. It's worth getting right.
- “But our style guide says to use ‘X’” is of little comfort to someone who feels they've been misrepresented.
- Language has an impact on trust, and trust has an impact on \$\$\$.



# Update Your Style Guide

1. Discover & understand gaps in staff & audience diversity
2. Make connections with community leaders to guide outreach
3. Collect feedback from under-represented communities
4. Establish a staff committee to finalize & communicate updates
5. Publicly acknowledge style guide changes
  - a. Give credit where it's due
  - b. Be transparent about fluidity
6. **REPEAT!**

# Collecting Feedback

- Create a survey corps (& compensate them!)
- Reach out directly to communities you're missing.
- Create static one-question forms/polls (Google Forms, Hearken, Reach) on pertinent articles
- Acknowledge when public commentary has influenced your standards

## Example questions:

How would you refer to people who have been incarcerated?

How would you describe a neighborhood where most residents have trouble making ends meet?

Do you feel like [insert term] accurately describes this community? What other term would you use?



# Terms to Reconsider



# The homeless



## Why?

AP's latest update gets it mostly right:

*“Homeless is generally acceptable as an **adjective** to describe people without a fixed residence. Avoid the dehumanizing collective noun **the homeless**, instead using constructions like homeless people, people without housing or people without homes.”*

Also: homelessness is often a transient experience and can happen to anyone

## Alternatives

- People experiencing homelessness
- People without homes/housing
- Unhoused people

# The poor

It's a dehumanizing label that doesn't really even explain what that person is going through.

## Alternatives:

People  
Person  
Neighbors  
Community  
Residents



Experiencing  
Dealing with  
Living with/in  
Facing  
or  
Who can't



Economic hardship  
Economic instability  
Economic uncertainty  
or  
Make ends meet  
Meet their basic needs

# War analogies & COVID-19

*“Cashiers and shelf-stockers and delivery-truck drivers aren’t heroes. They’re victims. **To call them heroes is to justify their exploitation.** By praising the blue-collar worker’s public service, the progressive consumer is assuaged of her cognitive dissonance.”*

— Grocery store worker Karleigh Frisbie Brogan

War analogies assist in the politicization of the crisis and downplay preventable deaths.

## Alternatives

- Use **essential workers & first responders** instead of *frontline workers*.
- Use **global public health emergency** or **global public health crisis** instead of *the war on COVID-19*.

# Reopening

- No state/city simply “reopens.” The term isn’t descriptive enough to be useful.
- The binary inherent in open/close makes reopening sound final.
- Reopened does not mean *recovered* or *thriving*.
  - It obscures the social toll in favor of economic terms.

## Alternatives:

- Describe what restrictions are actually changing.
- Use terms like **recovery** to describe public health response.

# Poll

If your place of work uses a style guide, is it available to the public?



or



# Any questions?



**Reframe Guide to Reporting on COVID-19**

Reframe.ResolvePhilly.org

[aubrey@resolvephilly.org](mailto:aubrey@resolvephilly.org)

@aubs\_n

# Upcoming Training

## **ACES Summer Webinars**

- Now through July 31, all ACES webinars are free to members and non-members!
  - For more information: <https://aceseditors.org/training>

