DEFINE AMERICAN

Best Practices for Telling Immigrant Stories

5 Tips to Consider When Creating Content About Immigrants

You have reach. You have influence. You have the power to shape culture. **And right now, that power matters more than ever.**

Read more about how to ethically engage undocumented storytellers in Define American's original report, *American Dreaming: The Roadmap to Resilience for Undocumented Storytellers.*

1. Prioritize telling a good story.

Leverage universal, relatable themes to show how deeply connected our human experience truly are. Even if one has not lived in a community with immigrants, we can all relate to ideas of belonging, success, freedom, and finding love. Nuanced and humanizing depictions of immigrants can help audiences become more understanding and better able to relate to people outside their own bubble.

2. Avoid stereotypes.

Too often, we see reductive, repetitive, and harmful portrayals of immigrants in ways we do not realize—even when writing with the best intentions. Immigrants are not a monolith. Some are newly arrived and may be rejoining family members they have not seen for many years. Some are in the process of applying for asylum, while others are waiting years for their day in court with an immigration judge. All immigrant experiences are unique. We encourage you to understand the various terms related to immigrants and migrants.

3. Use accurate and humanizing language.

Reducing people to an economic value-add or taking away their right to be flawed, complex individuals is dehumanizing. An immigrant does not have to be perfect or need to overcome every form of adversity in order to have rights, worth, or dignity as a human being.

✕ Problematic Terms:

illegal, illegal immigrant, alien, illegal alien

Bottom line: the term "illegal" is dehumanizing and replaces complex legal circumstances with an assumption of guilt.

The Associated Press writes in the AP Stylebook, "Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use illegal only to refer to an action, not a person. Illegal immigration, but not illegal immigrant."

"Alien" is also dehumanizing. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has since removed this term from its guidelines.

Preferred Terms:

undocumented immigrant, unauthorized immigrant, immigrant without legal status

"Undocumented" or "unauthorized" offer options for neutral terminology. People can also be described in detail, for example:

A native of Cameroon whose asylum application is pending. A 20-year resident of Brooklyn, originally from Mexico.

Alternatives: non-citizens, foreign national

4. Don't let fear win.

Many immigrant portrayals today are "fear-based" narratives depicting immigrants as either living in fear (of deportation or other types of discrimination) or causing fear in others (as terrorists or criminals). Narratives that exploit fear, suffering, and trauma are overrepresented in the media. Consider centering moments of joy.

5. Be sensitive to risk and privacy.

Respect privacy preferences. Undocumented immigrants are assuming a personal, and sometimes legal, risk when they speak to the news and entertainment media. Many choose not to disclose their immigration status, rather than risk deportation due to unwanted attention from this exposure. Keep in mind the risk that undocumented immigrants face when relating their personal journeys.

Fact Check

What is "The Great Replacement"?

Demographic changes in the United States are happening. The *Great Replacement Theory* is a false conspiracy theory that incites fear by claiming that real demographic shifts are part of an intentional and widespread conspiracy to "replace" the white population in the U.S. with people of color from other countries. This narrative has dire consequences, particularly for immigrants and people of color. In 2019, both the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51, and at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, killing 21, were inspired by the *Great Replacement Theory*.

In reality, "without immigration, the white population in the U.S. would have declined last year... Since the start of the pandemic in April 2020, the white population has grown by 391,000 people, all of it driven by immigration."

What is birthright citizenship?

Birthright citizenship is the right of any person born in the United States to American citizenship, as established by the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Birthright citizenship may also be acquired by being born abroad to at least one U.S. citizen parent. Some lawmakers have been very vocal about their desire to take this right away from children born in the United States to immigrant parents.

Are immigrants coming here to steal U.S. jobs?

A commonly held misconception is that immigrants come to the U.S. to take job opportunities from native-born citizens. In reality, several factors cause people to emigrate: war, natural disasters, gender inequality, political corruption, and the hope to seek better lives for their children.

Those who do emigrate often fill unique positions in the U.S. workforce by filling necessary jobs in industries facing labor shortages, making them a critical part of American society. In fact, immigration contributes a great deal to the U.S. economy, not to mention the myriad collective benefits that a more inclusive and diverse population adds to our shared culture and progress.

What does it mean to "get in line" for legal immigration?

There is often talk about a "line" for legal immigration, and the idea that people who do not have legal status are skipping that line. However, for many people, especially those who are undocumented, there is no line to get into. Many individuals fall out of legal status because of a complex and broken immigration system—not because they're trying to skip ahead. Even those with DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) have no clear or straightforward path to legal permanent residency or citizenship. The idea of a simple, fair queue misrepresents the reality of the immigration process in the U.S.

To better understand the difficulties and barriers in this system, check out our infographic: *"The Game of Getting Legal."*

What is DACA?

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a program established in 2012 that provides temporary protection from deportation and work authorization to certain young people who were brought to the United States as children. While DACA has allowed approximately 800,000 recipients to attend school, work legally, serve in the military, pay taxes, and access opportunities like in-state tuition, driver's licenses, and homeownership, it does not provide a path to citizenship or lawful permanent residency. DACA recipients are often called Dreamers.

Where Is DACA Now?

As of January 2025, the courts have allowed DACA renewals to continue, meaning current recipients can still apply to extend their protections and work permits. However, USCIS is no longer processing new DACA applications, even though they may still be submitted. Current grants of DACA remain valid until they expire, unless individually terminated. The program's future remains uncertain as legal challenges continue.

DACA Recipients CANNOT:

- Become legal permanent residents or U.S. citizens through the DACA program.
- Leave the country without advanced permission.
- Vote.
- Receive certain federal benefits such as: college financial aid and food stamps.

DACA Recipients CAN:

- Get a temporary stay (pause) of deportation for two years at a time.
- Apply for employment authorization.
- Apply for driver's licenses in several states. The licenses are clearly marked that they cannot be used for federal purposes, like voting.
- Pay federal income taxes, medicaid/ medicare, social security tax, state taxes and others. In fact, they are required to do so.
- Apply for a social security number.
- Apply for in-state tuition in certain states, although this is in jeopardy.

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