

Writing About Adversity - Journalists' Evidence-Based Toolkit

Writing about the diverse adversities people face (e.g., poverty, discrimination, violence, or other forms of trauma) is key to drawing attention to these important topics and finding solutions. Yet, even when unintentional, **language around adversity can be stigmatizing**, reducing people facing adversity to one-sided, negative images. In doing so, language can have tangible negative effects, like undermining people's confidence or leading others to see and treat them as less human¹.

This makes writing about adversity tricky. This toolkit aims to support journalists in dealing with this challenge. Below are concrete, evidence-based tips on how to write in a way that supports rather than hinders individuals facing adversity¹.

Avoid	Instead
Labeling “addicts, refugees, poor people” (reduces people to one experience)	✔ Use individualizing language: “People with addiction/ from refugee / lower-income backgrounds” (highlights group members as individuals)
Describing differences with a focus on disadvantaged groups only “People from lower-SES backgrounds have worse mental health” (frames lower-SES group as deficient)	Describing differences as inequalities between two groups “There are mental health inequalities between individuals from lower- and higher-SES backgrounds”
Ignoring structural factors which can lead to victim blaming “Students from lower-SES backgrounds earn worse grades”	✔ Emphasize structural factors to avoid victim blaming “Due to failed educational policies, there are educational inequalities.”
Focusing only on adversity in describing the experience of people Solely describing challenges and risks in the context of poverty	✔ Include humanizing detail that sheds light on the individuality of life stories Include individualizing details of people in poverty you report on (e.g., their hobbies, values, and goals)
Focusing on “deficits” of people facing adversity Framing people facing poverty as depressed, lacking education or passive	✔ Include descriptions of strength and agency people show Highlight how people facing poverty try to make ends meet and the strength they show doing so
Focusing only on disadvantage in explaining inequalities “What are disadvantages of people in poverty?”	✔ Consider the role of privilege in addition to disadvantage “How do privileges (e.g., untaxed inheritances & psychological over-confidence of richer people) contribute to inequalities, too?”
Including only privileged perspectives Interviewing only politicians (from higher-class backgrounds) talking about poverty	✔ Include the perspectives of people facing adversity Interviewing people with lived experience of poverty

¹ For an overview of research findings, see: <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.70035>

