

Sexual harassment, assault, misconduct: Editing in a #MeToo World

You may share the content of this handout with appropriate credit. In fact, we encourage it—as editors, we can help reframe an incredibly important conversation, and the more allies we have, the better.



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Legal Definitions & Public Policies

- [Sexual assault](#) (Justice Dept.)
- [Sexual harassment](#) (EEOC)
- [Rape](#) (FBI; see also its [FAQ](#))
- [RAINN](#): Search laws in your state

Language Matters

You can reframe the conversation while maintaining good journalistic practices. Both the specific vocabulary and general conversation around sexual assault are changing, so keep your ears and eyes open.

- “Survivor” is generally preferred over “victim,” but be conscious of the language a victim/survivor uses. Don’t put words in their mouth.
- When possible, use “reported rape” instead of “alleged.”

- Avoid using “accuser” to describe a reported victim. That reinforces the notion that the real problem is women making false accusations, not men raping women.
- Pay close attention to language that perpetuates inaccurate ideas of what constitutes rape or assault. Remember:
 - Force is not always physical.
 - 70% of sexual assaults are committed by somebody known to the victim.
 - All rape is violence. Rape is not sex.
- Yellow flags: Brave, trauma(tized), tragic, violent, forcible, alleged, accused, affair, scandal, convicted.
- Question who is left behind. Assault and harassment are not just experienced by women, or white people, or able-bodied people, etc.
- Question the motives of a story, as well as its structure. Are the facts well defined? Does the story seek to speak the truth, or does it seek to further a writer’s agenda (or a publication’s agenda)? Can it withstand a lawsuit?
- Avoid language that infantilizes women. Apply the [Finkbeiner test](#).

What You Can Do

- Begin conversations with your boss and with other editors about the tone your publication is setting, and establish a process that allows people an “out” when they need one.
- When applicable, triage: Set priorities for stories so you can more easily spread the work around, and make sure that editors whose identities match the victims don’t shoulder all of those stories.
- Be a warrior for the next generation: If you experienced, for example, workplace harassment at a time when there was no recourse, don’t dismiss it as a hazing ritual everybody endured.
- Take care of yourself! Nearly all of us have been affected in some way by sexual violence, and writing and editing about it can be re-traumatizing and downright exhausting.
 - Take a walk, talk to a friend, talk to a therapist, look at [pictures of baby llamas](#), watch [paint-mixing videos](#) or [cookie-icing videos](#), do 10 jumping jacks, try [square breathing](#).

Additional Resources

[Reporting on sexual violence](#), Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma
[Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](#)

Further Reading & Listening

Bok, Hilary (as Hilzoy). [“Why do they stay?”](#), *Obsidian Wings*, April 10, 2009.

Conger, Cristen and Caroline Ervin. *Unladylike* podcast, [“Episode 10: How to Break the Silence.”](#) March 27, 2018.

Farrow, Ronan. [“From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein’s Accusers Tell Their Stories.”](#) *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2017 issue.

Giscombe Ph.D., Katherine. [“Sexual Harassment and Women of Color,”](#) Catalyst.org, February 13, 2018.

Harding, Kate. *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture—And What we Can Do about It*. De Capo Books, 2015.

Kantor, Jodi and Megan Twohey. [“Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades.”](#) *The New York Times*, October 5, 2017.

Shapiro, Joseph. [Special Series: “Abused and Betrayed.”](#) Four-part radio series, National Public Radio, January 8 - 20, 2018.

Shepherd, Julianne Escobedo. [“Babe, What Are You Doing?”](#), *Jezebel*, January 16, 2018.