

APPLYING AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL VALUES

LIVING GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL AND RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATIONS

We operate in a global, interconnected world where a message from one country will be shared with, and interpreted by, different people with different perspectives. Our communications should be rooted in the six core, universal values written in our statute: international solidarity, effective action for the individual, mutual respect, independence and impartiality, universality and indivisibility, and global coverage.

The urgent nature of our work often puts us under pressure to quickly produce powerful material that will capture people's attention, surprise them, change their minds and inspire them to take action. Our communications should also promote our values - replacing, rather than inadvertently compounding, ideas that reinforce existing stereotypes, bias, inequality or discrimination.

These guidelines will help you identify moments when you should seek advice from colleagues around the movement. Having a global brand means there are considerate colleagues around the world ready to offer support and advice. A check from a colleague or an informal focus group of colleagues, friends or supporters is a simple way to avoid communication outputs that create lasting damage to the reputation of the organization and undermine or damage the communities we work alongside.

These are living guidelines that we will update when necessary to help colleagues in different teams and from different contexts find common ground when producing Amnesty International content, whether for public communications or other work. It should also be shared with partners, supporters, agencies and others who help us articulate our messages or speak on our behalf. This document can be shared publicly.

For guidance on policy issues such as [impartiality](#) and [freedom of expression](#), please reference the [Human Rights Policy Database](#). For questions email lawpoladvice@amnesty.org. For further guidance please see the six ethical principles in relation to working with individuals at risk. This document is not a substitute for law and policy reviews and carrying out gender analysis, checking for ableist language and applying an anti-racist perspective.

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AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 

1. INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Amnesty International members come from many different cultures and backgrounds, with widely different beliefs, united by a determination to work towards a world where everyone enjoys their human rights without discrimination. We are a worldwide community of people who take injustice personally.

1.1 AM I GIVING PEOPLE A PLATFORM TO TALK TO OUR SUPPORTERS, OR EXPLOITING THEM TO GET ATTENTION?

Sometimes we try to shock people in order to grab attention. Are we using shock tactics in a way that risks degrading, dehumanizing or insulting the people we are trying to stand in solidarity with, which only perpetuates the underlying problem? Using shock as a tactic brings heightened risk, so consult with people from potentially affected groups and colleagues outside your country first.

1.2 AM I INVITING THE AUDIENCE TO ACT IN SOLIDARITY WITH OTHER PEOPLE AS EQUALS?

Our message is about how we want all human beings to treat each other. Human rights is not about handing out aid or charity, it is about people acting together to build bridges so that people recognize the things we have in common, and show what people can achieve by acting together. Tell stories that reinforce that message of common humanity, putting forward an alternative to division into groups or hierarchies.



Inspiring stories of people coming together to make change happen bring the concept of solidarity to life.

1.3 HAVE I LET THE PERSON IN THE STORY SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES, RATHER THAN SPEAK ON THEIR BEHALF?

The best storytelling makes the protagonist the hero, not the storyteller themselves. Look at who is talking or centred in your content. Our role is to listen to and make heard the voices of people experiencing human rights violations not to talk over them or glorify ourselves. Ask what power dynamics or relationship are implied in your images and content.

1.4 AM I PORTRAYING MYSELF AS THE SAVIOUR, COMING TO THE RESCUE OF PEOPLE, OR PART OF A MOVEMENT THAT STANDS WITH PEOPLE?

How we frame our role can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and cause harm. If we portray ourselves as saviours and the people we work with as passive victims, we create false hierarchies and risk reducing people and groups to caricatures or stereotypes rather than fully rounded individuals. As a movement, the people we work with and for are allies and friends, not victims. Portraying a particular group of people as victims can have lasting negative impact on your audience's perceptions and therefore on the people we want to support.

1.5 HAVE I ASKED THE PEOPLE REPRESENTED WHAT THEY THINK OF MY CONTENT?

Wherever possible, we encourage people's direct participation in our work. We ask people what terms they would like to be described with. Where possible they should be able to see the content before publication. You can also gather an informal focus group of colleagues, allies and rights holders to test your ideas or content before you show it to the public. If they object to it, ask yourself if there is a better way to communicate what we stand for. The more closely people are involved, the more powerful and authentic the final product.

2. EFFECTIVE ACTION FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

Everything we do affects the fate of real people, whether this be campaigning, appeals and letters, or attempting to change laws and policies. Even when dealing with atrocities on a massive scale, we always remember that these people are not just statistics. They have names. They have communities. They have histories. They have present day lives. They have futures. And each has a right to justice.

2.1 HAVE I SHOWN HOW WE CAN MAKE THINGS BETTER?

We believe that justice ultimately prevails and people make change happen. We empower our supporters and offer them a solution or response in which they have a part to play, instead of making them feel guilty or inadequate. We never criticise without saying what should be done. We do not act without a call to action. Give people a stake in making things better. We should recognise impact and moments of progress: it is ok to celebrate wins without qualification.



We show how people can take effective action for other people

2.2 AM I SEEKING TO CAUSE OFFENCE OR SHOCK JUST TO GET ATTENTION OR DO I PROPOSE CONSTRUCTIVE ACTION?

We mirror the emotions we see in the people in front of us. Content that is sarcastic, sardonic, intentionally offensive, shocking or aggressive is likely to make your audience feel cynical and frustrated. It also carries an added risk of audiences shutting out your message or inadvertently reinforcing the message you are trying to parody. Also remember that many of us have also experienced some form of violation ourselves. Think through the full emotional journey you want your audience to go. Once the initial shock or offence has worn off, what do you want them to feel or think next? There is increasing evidence showing that human beings are more likely to change their minds when positive emotions are triggered.

2.3 AM I TRIGGERING COMPASSION AND EMPATHY FOR A FELLOW HUMAN BEING, OR PITY AND SYMPATHY FOR A VICTIM?

In telling the stories of other human beings, we seek to cultivate respect, empathy and compassion – mobilizing the humanity in everyone. Our images should therefore show relatable people with stories to tell, and never as helpless victims. Try to focus the story on people in the process of overcoming, of acting for justice, rather than people in the process of being subjugated.

2.4 AM I CELEBRATING THE INDIVIDUAL OR REDUCING CHARACTERS TO A GROUP STEREOTYPE?

The best communication replaces stereotypes with completely different ways of thinking. We want to not only challenge stereotypes and biases but replace them with more nuanced and emotional stories that create new connections for our audiences. We want people to relate to each other as equals. We want to break down bias and replace it with respect, inclusion and empathy. Content that reduces people to one-dimensional portrayals to secure sympathy, rather than as multi-faceted, relatable individuals with agency, risks fetishizing or dehumanizing the people we want to support.

3. UNIVERSAL & INDIVISIBLE

Human rights are the same for all, no matter your race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, ethnicity, political or other opinion, national or social origin, work or descent, age, disability or any other status. Our vision is of a world in which every person enjoys human rights.

3.1 AM I USING SYMBOLS THAT UNITE, INSTEAD OF THOSE THAT DIVIDE?

We do not support or oppose any specific country, culture or religion over another. We are for all people and we believe in people uniting across countries. In telling stories about rights-holders, we would not seek to hide their traditional, religious or national symbols in pictures and narrative, but we should not use or highlight traditional, religious or national symbols like flags to represent them. Instead, try to use universal symbols and values, showing what humans have in common instead of what separates them into groups.

3.2 AM I USING SYMBOLS THAT INSPIRE HOPE AND EMPOWER PEOPLE, INSTEAD OF THOSE THAT TRIGGER FEAR OR TRAUMATIC MEMORIES?

Try to use symbols that reflect our universal values and belief in shared humanity. If you are using symbols of what we oppose, like life jackets, nooses, torture instruments or cages, consider what those symbols mean to victims, or what messages they



Put the "human" in "human rights" by focusing on the things we all have in common.

trigger in the minds of our audience. When we bring the suffering to light we must do so with utmost respect for the people involved.

3.3 HAVE I CONSIDERED HOW PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT RACES, GENDERS, CULTURES, CLASSES AND OTHER BACKGROUNDS WILL RESPOND TO MY CONTENT?

Things that may be surprising and amusing in one culture may be grossly offensive or inappropriate in others. When in doubt, seek second opinions from colleagues who might see it differently. Try to focus on the universal principles we seek to promote in our audiences.

4. INDEPENDENT & IMPARTIAL

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion. We don't support or oppose any government or political system. Where a human right has been violated, we stand with the victim in their struggle for remedy. Amnesty International is neutral only on issues that are outside our mandate. (See Policy Note on Impartiality, Independence and Non-Partisanship).

4.1 AM I CRITICISING POLITICAL CONDUCT, RATHER THAN THE POLITICIANS THEMSELVES?

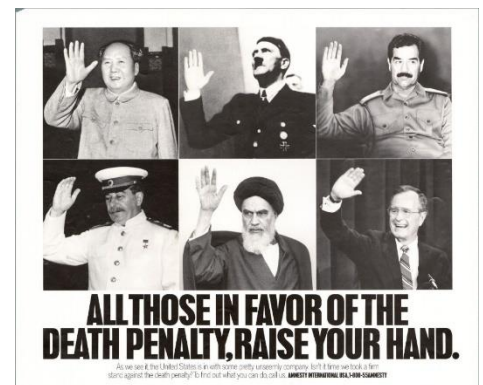
Play the ball, not the player. Talk about what politicians should be doing to live by our values. Criticise their failure to do so. Focus on their actions and words. Don't criticise the person, their appearance or their ability. For example, do not engage in body shaming.

4.2 AM I SIDING WITH PEOPLE, INSTEAD OF POLITICAL POSITIONS?

It's not about politics, it's about human rights. We oppose particular laws, or critique individual conduct that infringe people's ability to enjoy their human rights, but we do not take sides in other political disputes, on which party or leader should be in power or on who should prevail in armed conflict. We leave the door open to politicians to do the right thing, so use carrots as well as sticks. Be clear that we criticise the actions of authorities and leaders, not entire countries and not entire groups of people who live there.

4.3 IS IT CLEAR THAT I STAND FOR VALUES, NOT POLITICAL SYSTEMS?

Values unite, issues divide. Do not use terms that may imply we support or oppose any particular part of the political spectrum. Do not use Amnesty International branding in partisan political protests or material. In our partnerships with other organizations, we must not be linked to particular parts of the political spectrum. Avoid political or politically-loaded terms like progressive, capitalism, dictatorship and instead use the values that we stand for: humanity, solidarity, fairness, freedom;



We can be provocative and thought-provoking by focusing on conduct and positions taken.

and the policies and rights we want, and how they help. ([See Advice on the use of the term “terrorist” or “terrorism”.](#))

5. MUTUAL RESPECT

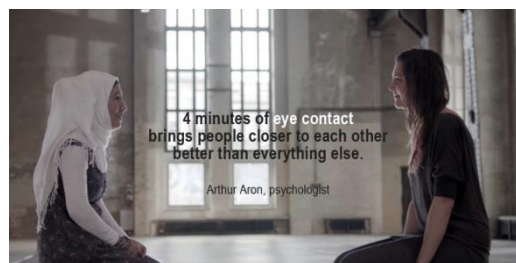
Amnesty International believes people should treat each other the way they want to be treated themselves. We model the sort of respectful, dignified conduct we want to see in others in our own behaviour.

5.1 AM I TREATING EVERYONE IN MY CONTENT WITH RESPECT?

We want to see all people treated with respect so we should not, in our position of authority, replicate the practices we do not support even in jest or parody. Use the Amnesty brand with images that empower people. Do not objectify people and do not use sexualised content.

5.2 HAVE I CONFIRMED THAT I AM NOT OBJECTIFYING ANYONE OR MAKING GRATUITOUS USE OF VIOLENT OR SEXUALISED IMAGES?

Our photography should be clear and balanced, and never be sensationalist. If you use images of violence, sexualised images or any other content that implies transgression, are you using it for the sake of shock or transgression, or because of a need to bring the content to light? Beware the risk of encouraging copycat behaviour and reinforcing stereotypes: just because it happens does not mean you need to shed a light on it without a strategy to stop or replace it with different behaviour.



Powerful ads elevate, celebrate and humanise the people we want to help.

5.3 AM I USING HUMOUR TO CREATE JOY OR AM I MAKING LIGHT OF PEOPLE'S SUFFERING?

Humour is a powerful tool for making an emotional connection and introducing new ideas or worldviews. But humour draws on culture, so it is very subjective. Always check if other people share the joke. In a global media landscape where content travels the world in seconds and can be resurrected years later, it is important to test whether your joke could be interpreted as trivialising an issue in a way that would offend, be disrespectful, or traumatising to the people experiencing those human rights issues.

5.4 IS MY USE OF HUMOUR MAKING IT EASIER TO RELATE TO ANOTHER'S EXPERIENCE, OR TRIVIALISING THAT EXPERIENCE?

Laugh with people, not at them. Make sure the rights holders share the humour involved as well as understanding the impact it can have on them. To avoid our jokes appearing gratuitous, use humour to capture the essence of a problem in a surprising way, tone or perspective and playfully introduce new ideas that enable more respect and dignity. Use humour to positively engage people with our

values and open their minds so that they see the world differently. A big warning signal is if the subject of humorous content is less powerful than you. If our strategy requires we punch, punch up not down.

5.5 DO I HAVE PERMISSION AND CONSENT TO USE ALL THE IMAGES IN MY CONTENT?

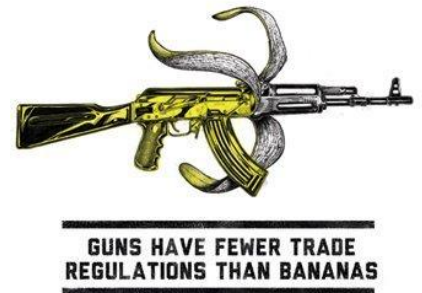
To tell the story of our global movement of human rights defenders around the world, we will seek to use authentic images of our work instead of stock images. Never, ever use images without copyright approval and consent from the subjects. Take particular care when using images of children. (See Informed Consent Policy (DOC 10/8305/2018). For questions email consent@amnesty.org)

6. GLOBAL COVERAGE

Amnesty International is committed to working for human rights everywhere. The people we defend are under all kinds of governments, with some in the spotlight of media coverage and others whose suffering is ignored by the world at large. We do not make comparisons between countries.

6.1 AM I SHOWING THE WORLD THROUGH THE PRISM OF OUR VALUES?

Do not use opponent's frames or worldviews even to subvert them. Use every communication as an opportunity to promote the Amnesty International worldview - that of shared humanity, we are all human, and should treat each other accordingly. If we do not make the case for the behaviour and the world we want to see, who will?



6.2 HAVE I REFLECTED THE DIVERSITY OF OUR SOCIETIES AND REFLECTED THE COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCING THE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES WE ARE FOCUSING ON?

Always consider who is being centred in our communications products - who is featured prominently and why, who is speaking and for whom, what experience are they speaking from and for what purpose, who or what might be missing?

Presenting facts as stories can be simple but powerful.

6.3 AM I SHOWING AN ALTERNATIVE TO PRESENT INEQUALITIES AND BIAS?

The end goal of raising awareness about abuses may not justify the means if our work reinforces bias or inequalities. Challenging, rather than using, stereotypes and centring the voices of groups affected by the issue are the main ways to avoid compounding inequalities. Beyond that, it's important to look critically at whether our content reflects the diversity of groups affected by an issue or our societies and whether we are privileging certain voices or groups.

6.4 AM I REPLACING OR REPEATING HARMFUL STEREOTYPES?

To create effective long-term change, we have to transform how people see the world. This is the time to transform the understanding of power that has oppressed women and LGBTI people in all parts of the world. Instead of repeating (even in parody) stereotypes and bias that reinforce negative power relations, promote the representation of diverse roles and diverse lives. Even stereotypes that portray the subject in an apparently sympathetic light can be damaging in the longer term if used regularly or used without additional nuance or context - such as portraying women as inherently caring and emotional.

6.5 HAVE I RESPECTED THE INTELLIGENCE OF MY AUDIENCE?

Communications can be popular without being populist, simple without being simplistic, and intelligent without being intellectual. While we need to tell a compelling and understandable story to our audience, don't assume you need to use the same approaches as other popular media like tabloids. Don't tell your audience that you are "concerned", "worried" or "welcoming" of things, but explain WHY you are and highlight the values at stake.