

STYLE GUIDE

Most broadcasters and NGOs have their own style guides which you should have access to if you are working with them. They run to hundreds of pages because there are so many areas of sensitivity, but here is an abridged style guide to highlight areas we consider relevant to filming in developing countries, although these suggestions can equally apply to filming in the developed world. It is far from complete and could go on a lot longer!

General Rules

1. Avoid **over-emotional language**. If the viewer is seeing corpses being pulled from a building you do not need to describe it as a horrendous tragedy. Less is more.
2. Write **clearly and simply**. Too many clauses will lose the viewer.
3. **Read out** aloud what you have written. The best way of judging if a sentence works is to say it out loud. Your words are written to be spoken, not read.
4. **Don't attribute** your or anyone's opinion or what you want to say to analysts or experts. Find someone or some group to quote directly.
5. **Active not passive** – tv is about things happening, about people doing things.
6. **Use the positive** - Make assertions wherever possible and try to avoid negatives. It's better to say "The plot failed" than "The plot was not successful"
7. **Clichés** – don't use them. If a phrase comes to mind very easily it's probably a cliché. We all have a list of phrases we hate, so let's avoid them. It's lazy. If in doubt, see the Cliché Finder at www.westegg.com/cliche
8. **Loaded language** – avoid, think before you characterise

e.g. "claim" - to say someone claimed to have seen or done something carries with it an implication of doubt and scepticism. "such-and-such says they saw it happen" is far more neutral and carries no less information.

"mob" - inherently implies that the people in the "mob" were up to no good and did not have legitimate concerns

"tarnished" - implies that whatever event was "tarnished" was good and whoever did the tarnishing was therefore bad.

9. **Would you watch or read it?** Make sure it is clear, straightforward and succinct
10. **Avoid euphemisms** - be rooted in the experience of real people and in the issues which emerge from daily life in the developing world. Readers/viewers should have the feeling that they are standing in the field, alongside the farmer, when they are reading/watching – not just learning about 'food security'.
11. **Treat people with respect:** write about people as you would write about your own family
12. A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he/she writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus:
 1. What am I trying to say?
 2. What words will express it?
 3. What image or idiom will make it clearer?
 4. Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

1. Could I put it more shortly?

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2. Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?
(George Orwell, Politics and the English language)

13. **Be specific, not abstract.** Use concrete language and examples, rather than abstractions. 'People resort to survival strategies' v 'People were forced to boil grass to feed to their children as the last grains of rice ran out'.

14. **Let people come to their own conclusions.** Don't be didactic. If they have the facts, people come to their own conclusions. Tell them what unjust trade costs in pounds sterling; they can figure out for themselves that it's unfair.

15. Do not use the following terms unless you mean something very specific, and are writing for a particular audience for whom they are meaningful:

advocacy	INGOs
capacity building	inputs
civil society	inputs framework
committed gifts	institutional inputs
convergent community action	livelihood diversification
coping mechanism	livelihood-focused reconstruction
coping strategies	needs-based
development	NGOs
enabling infrastructure	participatory process
enabling workers to advocate for...	participation
equitable distribution	partner intervention
facilitate	physical infrastructure
fisherfolk	rights-based
gender-specific	social viability
grievance-redressal mechanisms	socio-economic rural
housing intervention	transformation
in a holistic sense	southern actors
income-earning capabilities	(and any other sorts of actors)
income generation	sustainable livelihoods

16. The following words are not necessarily jargon. But they are overused – which can deaden their meaning, so beware the sin of tedium. Use with care:

appropriate	marginalised
community	mission
deliver	parable
enable/enabling	partner
empowering	processes
enabling people	relief and rehabilitation
governance	self-confidence
increasing	self-esteem
indigenous	self-reliance
international community	victimised
key	vulnerable/vulnerability
local	

17. Special care needs to be taken during emergencies and crises, when there is pressure to show the extent of the need. The Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct (see www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct) asks us to show people not as victims, but as individuals with aspirations, plans, a past and future outside the immediate crisis.