

Complicating the Narratives

| Story Recipe

INTRODUCTION:

Creating a Complicating the Narratives-style story takes experimentation, curiosity and sometimes a willingness to step outside one's comfort zone. It's about listening differently to sources, asking more revealing questions, effectively introducing opposing viewpoints, and embracing nuance in your reporting. The result is a more accurate, inclusive and comprehensive story.

As the world has no shortage of mouthwatering chili recipes, with time there will be dozens of CTN story recipes you can use as inspiration. While the ingredients may vary, the final product can satisfy the soul when a few key items are incorporated. That's how you should think about this CTN story recipe. We've listed a handful of essential ingredients, and with time you'll find yourself testing different concoctions to see what resonates with and challenges you and your audience.

Just as cooking is all about new discoveries, so, too, is the Complicating the Narratives journey. Enjoy, and be kind to yourselves.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 conflict — a controversial, divisive or polarizing issue that feels “stuck” in your community
- 1 complex headline or lead
- 1 to 4 sources, including those directly affected by the conflict
- 1 or more examples of attempts to address the problem
- 1 or 2 examinations of the issue through a different geographic or historical lens

(OPTIONAL) BONUS INGREDIENTS:

- A couple of interesting details (e.g., a metaphor used by a source)
- Visual data that challenges pre-existing narratives
- 1 or more events that bring people together across differences to listen and learn about the conflict and potential solutions

Prep time: 20 minutes to 2 hours

Cooking time: Varies by chef/reporter

DIRECTIONS:

Step 1: Ask yourself: What is the narrative that needs complicating? Don't generalize; be specific.

Suggestion: Think about a current narrative in your community or a narrative held by your audience that would benefit from being “complicated.” If a conflict is presented as having only two sides or two choices, it usually needs to be “complicated.” Reflect on how this issue has been presented as a binary problem (i.e., opening everything up in the pandemic vs. closing everything down; having no gun reforms vs. taking guns away from everyone). Do the reporting: Are those binaries actually accurate? Or, are there more groups/options in real life? What are they?

Step 2: Write a headline or lead for your story.

Suggestion: Think about how you can incorporate complexity in the headline or lead. Why? Complexity keeps people curious! And headlines are where we see the most false simplicity. This is a challenge, we know, since you may not get to write the headline, but it's worth trying to come up with one that provokes intrigue, in case your editor approves it. It can also set the tone for your writing. You want your reporting to be more like an inquiry for you and your audience. A nuanced or surprising headline or lead will set you on the right path.

Step 3: Make a list of potential sources to interview. The key is to identify stakeholders with diverse perspectives and experiences, including those directly affected by the issue you're covering. Resist the urge to immediately reach out to your “usual suspects.” Local leaders, government officials, advocates and other prominent voices may play a role in your story. But assuming the issue affects a broad range of people, who's missing from this list? Which identities aren't included (kids, occupation, ability, religion, geography, etc.)? Are there interesting cross-cutting identities that could be incorporated? If most people actually feel ambivalence or dissonance about this issue, make sure you talk to people who feel that complexity, too — and admit to it out loud.

Suggestion: Remember to loop your sources and to include one or more of the 22 interview questions to “complicate the narrative” during your interviews. Doing this will help you get clarity. It will also help you excavate their motivations, interests and/or values, not just their positions on the matter. People are not one-dimensional. Stay curious, and listen for contradictory feelings or emotions about the conflict. What are the sticking points? What do they not know or understand, but want to? Where are they confused, and why? You may find yourself wanting to leave out the quotes that don't “fit” the point you're trying to make; consider keeping them in there. Audiences can handle more complexity in conflict than we usually assume.

Step 4: As you continue to gather information for your story, visit the [Solutions Story Tracker](#) and search for the topic you're reporting on. Check to see if there have been attempts to address the conflict locally or in other parts of the world. If so, what were those attempts, and how are they working out? If time and/or word count permits, it could be valuable to include an example in your piece.

***Suggestion:** You may be able to find interesting context from solutions journalism stories that connect to your story topic. Look into the framework/options/limitations for the varied solutions that have been or could be explored in relation to the conflict. Think about who is responsible for solving the problem or able to help solve it. Also, it can be helpful to include how a community has been affected by a particular conflict and how it transformed its residents in varied ways.*

Step 5: In every hot conflict, it helps to make some space so that people can get curious again. One way to do this is by widening the lens on the story. Examine the polarizing or divisive issue from a different historical and/or geographical lens. How has the local community dealt with this issue in years past? If it's a fight over how to talk about race in American history in schools, find out what happened the last time this fight flared up. How have communities in other regions, states or countries responded to the conflict? By exploring the issue from a different lens, a wider lens, you're connecting it to a larger problem for your audience. This can help illuminate the conflict and shift the blame from individuals to governments, leaders and society.

***Suggestion:** When incorporating historical or geographical information to help make sense of an issue, think about tracing the long-term impact of this conflict and the responses to them. Be mindful of how you frame the issue, and let your audience know if something is not unprecedented (exp. "We've seen lasting impacts of this problem before," or "This conflict is not new in our community, and here's what can happen if we don't address it").*

Step 6: When you're ready to share your story with your editor or producer, first revisit the headline or lead you wrote in Step 2. After all your interviews and research, would you now change what you previously wrote? If not, why? The goal is to fearlessly challenge our own assumptions as journalists. Ask yourself: Did I approach and cover this story like a prosecutor trying to prove a point? Or did I stay curious and explore the story like a scientist? The latter will help you counter your own confirmation bias — and make the story better.

***Suggestion:** Before final edits to your story, review the [Does My Story...?](#) resource to see if your piece incorporates two or more of the *Complicating the Narratives* strategies. If it does, celebrate!*

BONUS INGREDIENTS:

The bonus ingredients can be added to your story or web-build to help further "complicate the narrative." In particular, data visualizations or infographics can help break through your audience's biases in a way that traditional story copy may not. And gatherings may help build trust with audiences, strengthen community resilience in conflict and generate new story ideas. The decision to include one or more of these ingredients will likely be impacted by story length restrictions and/or plans for the story after publication or airing. If you are thinking of hosting an inclusive gathering, conversation or listening session about the issue, be sure to check out SJJ's [Complicating the Narratives Community Dialogue Toolkit](#).

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