

Storytelling Principles for

# Creating New American Stories of Us



# Introduction

Living amidst toxic division is exhausting, and a different reality can feel hard to imagine. **But a resilient, shared democracy for an ideologically diverse, multiracial America is possible.** And storytellers—perhaps more than any group at this moment—have the power to help create that reality.

Whether you're a creator of scripted or unscripted TV shows, feature films, short form video content, documentaries, or other entertainment content, the principles below can be considered no matter what story you're looking to tell. Perhaps you're motivated to use your creative talents to strengthen America—or maybe you just want to produce richer, more compelling stories that resonate with the broadest possible audience. Either way, these tips offer ways to do both.

The surprising truth is that Americans are actually less ideologically polarized than we think and are regularly told we are. And yet our divisions feel very real. That internalized sense of hopeless division is doing profound damage—to our democracy, our communities, and our capacity to solve problems together.

Yes, we face real divides—political, racial, religious, and more—that must be acknowledged and addressed. But our problems are being made exponentially worse by the “division industrial complex” that has exploded in recent decades. Conflict profiteers amplify these divisions, intentionally fueling Americans' misperceptions of each other and reinforcing caricatures of the “other side” that pit us against each other and undermine social resilience and cohesion. We've become trapped in cycles of misunderstanding, “collective illusions,” and distrust of our fellow citizens. **We're stuck in a polarization doom loop — and a shared democratic future depends on breaking it.**

Todd Rose's concept of "collective illusions" refers to situations where a belief or behavior persists in a society not because people genuinely support it, but because everyone thinks (incorrectly) that most others do. "We conform to what we think the group wants, even if it's not what we want. That's how entire societies end up chasing goals nobody believes in".

## **Storytelling can help flip the script on these narratives of division.**

Storytellers hold the power to overcome the corrosive forces of division that are fueling and monetizing Americans' contempt for each other. You can help unwind the "us vs them" narratives that permeate American society and prevent us from making progress as a country. It doesn't take entire pieces of content being conceived of differently; we're talking about simple considerations and adjustments that—when multiplied across our content landscape—add up to an outsized cultural impact. By making relatively small changes, America's content creators can help us understand each other better and shift norms around how we're engaging across our political and social differences.

## **Storytellers: America needs you to show us a different way - and it doesn't have to be a heavy lift.**

We need you to help us get to know those fellow citizens who evoke in us the greatest feelings of fear, anger, and distrust. We need you to complexify us to each other, shattering the misperceptions and caricatures we're fed on a daily basis. We need you to model and normalize intense "good conflict" (rather than watered-down or toxic conflict). We need you to help us become more genuinely curious about each other.

Narratives about the dangerous threat posed by "those people" have become our national surround sound. And when we're constantly on high alert for threats, our brains go into primitive fight or flight mode. America's collective nervous system is in fight or flight mode right now.

That's when the higher order thinking required to process information takes a backseat, effective communication becomes near impossible, and conflict and hate escalate. America needs a new narrative soundtrack that helps get us out of fight or flight mode so we can engage across our divides in more thoughtful, empathetic, and constructive ways. The promise of a shared democracy depends on it.

# The 4 C's:

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## Curiosity Contact Complexity (Good) Conflict

The tips below - informed by bridge-building practice and conflict transformation methodologies—can be written into storylines in ways big and small. These four concepts—Curiosity, Contact, Complexity, and (Good) Conflict—are so familiar as to seem almost banal. It's not that we need brand new storytelling principles, we *need to think about these four principles differently.*

The key to rethinking these principles? **Resist the collective illusion—even if you don't think you're in one (hint: most of us are).** Become what Adam Grant calls a storytelling “creature of discomfort” rather than a creature of habit. When you think of the group(s) in America you believe are most misunderstood and most in need of humanizing representation, *pause to consider what group(s) you're not including.*

Adam Grant's "Creatures of Discomfort" refers to those who:

- Regularly question their own beliefs
- Engage with dissenting views
- Seek out unfamiliar perspectives

Focus on them, too—not to advance their cause, but to expand Americans' understanding of why they feel the way they do. It's not a betrayal of personal integrity or strongly held convictions to do so. Those Americans you're certain you already have pegged, or whom you think have already been overly represented and fairly depicted on our screens? Consider whether they may see stereotypes at play where you don't. Your audiences need to meet and better understand those Americans in all their complexity, too. Accurate, humanizing representation isn't an "either - or" proposition and can go a long way to transforming our deepest divides.

Psychologists, psychotherapists, relationship counselors, and conflict mediators are "all in" on a profound insight. Something remarkable happens when we as individuals feel accurately seen, heard, and understood: our defensive guard comes down and we become more open, less rigid, less reactive, and more receptive to each other. This simple yet powerful truth of human behavior provides an essential key for interrupting and reversing destructive cycles of polarization and division.

The principles below are essential ingredients for dynamic, resonant storytelling. An added benefit? They can transform toxic division in America and build the foundation for a resilient, shared democracy. They can be integrated across genres and formats from medical dramas to science fiction to espionage thrillers to comedy.

*"You can actually increase how receptive people are to you by being more receptive to them."*

Dr. Júlia Minson, Professor, Harvard Kennedy School of Government and expert in "the psychology of disagreement."

# Curiosity

**Help Americans become more curious about each other through stories that model and awaken curiosity about our fellow citizens.**

Many of us hold strong assumptions about our fellow Americans—often about “outgroup” members (those who we believe sit on the opposite side of political and social fault lines), but also about “ingroup” members (those who we believe share our core beliefs and are “on our side”). The problem is, these assumptions are often wrong, incomplete, or rooted in oversimplified caricatures fed to us by news media, social media, political leaders, and anyone who profits from division. We need more practice being genuinely curious about (and surprised by) each other.

# Curiosity

*“In a warring world, understanding is rebellion.”*

The Enemies Project ([www.enemiesproject.com](http://www.enemiesproject.com))

The antidote to hardened assumptions, biases and contempt is curiosity. Curiosity builds trust, lowers defensive guards, and makes people more receptive to each other. Genuine curiosity doesn't mean seeking information to confirm our biases and assumptions—it means letting go of assumptions, being open to surprise, and demonstrating intellectual humility combined with a willingness to learn.

We all have reasons for our strongly held views and convictions. Being curious about another person's reasons for their beliefs isn't the same as endorsing or agreeing with those beliefs. But genuine curiosity can yield profound and unexpected insights, shift relationship dynamics, transform communication between parties in conflict, and open the door to more productive engagement.

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## What does this look like in practice?

- » Being curious yourself about people and perspectives outside your own bubble.
- » Modeling characters being curious about each other across lines of difference without betraying their integrity.
- » Making the audience more curious about characters they thought they had “pegged”.
- » Fostering curiosity about the underlying reasons for characters' beliefs and viewpoints.
- » Presenting multiple relatable perspectives on the same issue(s) in a storyline.

# Contact

**Break our bubbles. Let audiences meet the Americans they've been told to fear.**

Expose viewers to political and social identities they're probably not encountering in their daily lives.

Content creators can help get Americans out of their social silos and echo chambers and “meeting” fellow citizens with whom they have little or no extended real-life contact. This mediated form of contact can be as powerful as in-person contact. Allow viewers to develop their own parasocial relationship with these characters and to observe these characters in positive relationships with each other.

# Contact

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## What does this look like in practice?

- » Creating characters that allow viewers to have “vicarious contact” with their political and social “others”.
  - » Creating characters that allow viewers to witness productive interactions and relationships between individuals on different sides of America’s political and social fault lines.
  - » Developing stories that equally humanize different groups to each other rather than focusing on humanizing one group in the eyes of another.
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## Background Theory and Research:

In the 1950s, Gordon Allport famously theorized that sustained interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between groups. Allport’s “intergroup contact theory” has been applied to prejudice reduction in a broad range of contexts and since expanded into theories of “parasocial contact” and “vicarious contact.” “Parasocial contact” involves audience members observing outgroups they may not be exposed to in their real lives. This sustained exposure to an outgroup — even when mediated through television or film — has been proven to reduce prejudice. Similarly, “vicarious contact” — audiences observing fellow ingroup members positively interacting with outgroup members — has been shown to have persistent positive effects on intergroup perceptions. Great examples of vicarious contact can be found in content ranging from *Will and Grace* to *Little Mosque on the Prairie* to a popular Heineken beer ad titled “Worlds Apart”; in all cases (including the Heineken ad), studies reveal a demonstrably positive impact on viewers’ attitudes towards outgroup members after viewing the content.

# Complexity

**Ditch the caricatures. Let us be surprised by our fellow Americans.**

Every good storyteller strives to create complex characters. In this case, though, *a couple key dimensions of complexity really matter*. The antidote to damaging “us versus them” narratives is storytelling that complexifies both “us” and “them.”

Toxic division thrives on **oversimplified villains and heroes**. But all of us are more complex than the flattened, one-dimensional representations of us that we are bombarded with in our politics, news media, and social media. America’s identity groups are not monolithic - they are made up of millions of unique individuals whose life experiences, perspectives, and aspirations are different from each other’s. Each of us embodies a constellation of identities rooted in our own deeply held values, blindspots, contradictions, and life stories.

# Complexity

When we see someone we perceive to be a threat or opponent exhibiting humillity, acknowledging our perspective, or being open to changing their thinking, we become more willing to do the same.

Show us complex political and social identities that defy stereotypes and expectations. Audiences connect when characters defy the boxes we expect them to stay in. Create opportunities to showcase commonalities between characters on different sides of political and social fault lines. Champion heterodox identities.

**Make complexity cool, contradictions acceptable, and commonalities with our “others” OK.**

## What does this look like in practice?

- » Including characters with nuanced political and social identities that defy expectations and cross political archetypes.
- » Depicting characters being open-minded about the flaws, blindspots, and inconsistencies of their own ingroup.
- » Depicting characters shifting their perspective or being open to changing their minds.
- » Creating characters that contain internal contradictions and conflicting values—characters that are both principled and flawed.
- » Depicting characters who have shared identity traits, values, beliefs, and aspirations across lines of difference.
- » Incorporating storylines that explore the backstories for characters’ deeply held values and beliefs.

# (Good) Conflict

Conflict is the beating heart of compelling drama. And just as conflict is good for storytelling, it is good for America. In a diverse, pluralist democracy, conflict is not only inevitable, it is necessary. But not all conflict is created equal; there's a difference between heated, transformative / cathartic conflict and dead-end conflict. Our country is currently drowning in destructive patterns of zero-sum, unproductive conflict. Without alternatives being modeled, these patterns of toxic conflict eventually become a social norm.

A key driver of Americans' growing estrangement from and conflicts with each other is a phenomenon referred to by social scientists as "meta-perceptions": behavior towards an outgroup is fueled not only by one's own (mis)perceptions of the outgroup, but also by how one believes they are perceived by the outgroup (ie, "I dislike you because I'm convinced you dislike me.") When it comes to America's current moment, the gap between perception and reality is vast. The result is self-perpetuating cycles of misunderstanding and unproductive conflict.

# (Good) Conflict

*Studies reveal that “Democrats and Republicans equally dislike and dehumanize each other but think that the levels of prejudice and dehumanization held by the outgroup party are approximately twice as strong as actually reported by a representative sample of Democrats and Republicans”*

Samantha Moore-Berg, Lee-Or Ankori-Karlinsky, Boaz Hameiri, Emil Bruneau, “Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions Predict Intergroup Hostility Between American Political Partisans.” PNAS 2020.

What does charged, productive conflict look like? Conflict expert Amanda Ripley’s distinction between “high conflict” and “good conflict” offers a helpful guide. Rooted in “good versus evil” and “us versus them” frameworks, high conflict is self-perpetuating and counterproductive. It generates convictions of superiority, the desire to humiliate opponents, lack of curiosity, digging into entrenched positions, and righteous certainty.

Good, productive conflict, by contrast, allows for curiosity and provokes anger rather than contempt. Questions get asked and opponents feel heard and understood. There can even be spaces for humor. Good conflict isn’t watered-down conflict and doesn’t necessarily result in tidy resolution of differences - but it does result in deeper mutual understanding between opponents, recognition of shared humanity, and appreciation for how and why parties have come to hold certain views and beliefs. And these outcomes decrease the potential for violence and open the door to productive dialogue and collaboration across difference.

# (Good) Conflict

*“Looping is a communication technique that transforms how we listen and connect with others. Used by conflict mediators and psychologists, looping gets beneath talking points. By proving we are trying to understand one another, looping builds trust, creates clarity, and invokes curiosity—even amidst profound disagreement.”*

Amanda Ripley.

We need creatives to help cultivate a culture of good, transformative conflict and shape different norms for how we disagree with each other across our differences. We need stories that show us “high conflict” as the dead-end path it is.

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## From High Conflict

## To Good Conflict

Contempt	_____	Anger
Closed	_____	Open
Superiority	_____	Curiosity
Disgust	_____	Sadness
Simplicity	_____	Complexity
Predictability	_____	Surprise
Violence Likely	_____	Violence Unlikely

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# (Good) Conflict

*One of the key ways to demonstrate receptivity is through active listening and “restart[ing] your counterpart’s perspective so they understand that you actually heard them.”*

Julia Minson.

## What does this look like in practice?

- » Telling stories that lean into intense, charged conflict between parties, but do so by incorporating “good conflict” over “high conflict.”
- » Giving each side in the conflict a strong, coherent moral frame. Don’t flatten one side into ignorance or bigotry.
- » Showing listening that lands. Include moments where characters visibly absorb the other’s point, even if they don’t agree.
- » Modeling self-interrogation in real time, with characters catching themselves: “Wait—that was unfair,” or “I think I just reacted out of fear.”
- » Crafting storylines that include conflict recovery, not just conflict escalation. Include scenes where characters reflect, apologize, repair trust, or even admit uncertainty. Normalize rupture and repair.
- » Telling stories that reveal the role of misperceptions & metaperceptions in fueling toxic conflict.
- » Depicting characters that model “looping” as a feature of good conflict.
- » Including storylines that depict the role of “conflict profiteers” .
- » Telling stories that show real examples of healthy conflict in American communities right now (those examples do exist and need to be highlighted).

# Final Tips!

- **Resist one-directional intentions** (ie: “we just need more stories that get X group in America to change their prejudiced thinking about Y group”). Americans’ misperception problem is multi-directional, not one-directional. Creating a shared democracy and fostering a true culture of belonging for all Americans requires that all Americans feel accurately seen, understood, and depicted both in real life and on our screens. All of us become vastly more capable of confronting our own biases, acknowledging the full humanity of the perceived “other,” and shifting our thinking when we feel that we, too, are being accurately seen, heard, and represented.
- In addition to showing audiences good conflict, **show us good collaboration across lines of difference.** There are plenty of real examples of this unfolding across America to look to for inspiration.
- “Us vs Them” narratives hold strong appeal for some audiences; **flip the script on these narratives while leaning into their appeal by redefining who “we” and “they” are.** Instead of pitting America’s identity groups against each other in predictable ways that mirror America’s dominant divides, create unexpected, cross-ideological alliances of identities we’re used to seeing in conflict. Center the divide on an issue, not opponents’ identities. Seeing collaboration across lines of difference adds intrigue and can prevent “us vs them” storylines from reinforcing our nation’s divisions.
- **Listen to and collaborate** with members of identity groups being represented on screen. Make sure individuals who identify with those groups feel that the representation is accurate. This is essential whether you’re telling stories about Christian evangelicals, immigrants, trans Americans, Trump voters, or any other identity group.



If you're a storyteller or executive and want to use your talents to fight toxic polarization, **join the movement to tell New American Stories of Us:**

- » **Attend screenings & events**
- » **Tell us about your creative projects**
- » **Invite us to consult with your teams or amplify your content**
- » **Learn more about being a bridge-builder**

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