

## FIVE STEPS TO WRITING EFFECTIVELY ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE:

(Note: Order may vary, depending on genre. The below steps are organized for nonfiction persuasive writing, but will trigger ideas and clarify thinking for other genres.)

### 1. Brainstorm widely. Sometimes what you already think you know well is most difficult to write about.

- Don't limit yourself to topics you're already a content expert in. Think broadly! Make a brainstorming list of social justice topics that pique your interest. Make another list of social justice concerns that have touched you and your family's lives, or those of people you know.
- While you may have heard the old saw “write what you know,” remember: you can change what you know through research. So don't be afraid to chase down a story that interests you!

### 2. Narrow your topic and find an angle.

- It's not enough to know what broad subject matter you want to write about. You must also know what *angle* you want to take—that is, what aspect of that subject you want to write about and what you have to say about it.
- The breadth of the idea should match the proposed word count of the piece. You'll need a very specific, narrow idea for an op-ed length of 750 words, whereas more complex ideas can be explored in longer pieces.
- To narrow your idea, try a decision tree in which you answer what you're interested in writing about and what you're *not* interested in. Identifying what you could focus on in the piece but choose not to will force you to clarify your thoughts.

### 3. Find a character.

- It's hard to move readers through abstract ideas. But the issue you care about, no matter how abstract, touches people's lives, and a character can help you dramatize the issue's consequences and stakes. A well-chosen character makes issues real and concrete for your readers. It's easier for a reader to care about *something* when we're given *someone* to care about.
- Considerations when choosing a character:
  - Choose someone sympathetic. That *does not* mean you can't write about a person who's done problematic things—but rather that if you're asking the reader to follow that person as a main character, you need to work harder to make that person relatable.
  - Choose someone to whom you have access, either in-person or through research.
  - If you're able to interview, choose someone who says interesting things! Not everyone makes a good character on the page.
  - Think twice before choosing the most obvious character! Your readers may pay more attention if you offer them a perspective they haven't previously considered.

- Consider entering the story yourself. Should you be a proxy for the reader? Are you able to go deeper if you make use of your own life? Or do the characters shine best when allowed to inhabit the page alone?

#### **4. Take the reader on a journey, no matter how small.**

- At its most basic, a story consists of a character who wants something encountering obstacles, and then prevailing (or not). Follow your character on a mission.
- Look for moments that exemplify larger issues, but are small and concrete enough to easily understand. The moments with the biggest real-world stakes may not be best choices here.

#### **5. Use the ladder of abstraction.**

- Move up and down the ladder of abstraction. Placing your character in a quick, illustrative scene that exemplifies a social justice issue will hook your reader. But abstract, interpretative statements will offer your insight and help them understand the deeper meaning of the small moment. Use summary sparingly, to provide context and necessary information, but don't rely on it to do emotive work. When using this technique, the bottom rungs of the ladder must support the upper rungs.

### **ADDITIONAL WRITING RESOURCES**

*Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* by Roy Peter Clark

*Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* by Jack Hart

*Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide* edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call