

DEFINE AMERICAN

USING YOUR PLATFORMS FOR GOOD

FIVE TIPS FOR TELLING *IMMIGRANT STORIES*

If you're creating content about immigrants, you're shaping how your audience understands millions of people they may never meet. This is your opportunity to show more context. More range. More humanity.

1.

LEAD WITH A STORY

Lean into what's universal: culture, humor, love, freedom, the drive to build something. These themes don't require your audience to agree on politics; they just require being human.

2.

AVOID STEREOTYPES

Immigrants are not a one-size-fits-all. Some are reuniting with family after years apart, some are waiting on an asylum hearing, and some have lived here their whole lives with no clear path toward legal status. Make room for nuance.

3.

USE ACCURATE AND HUMANIZING LANGUAGE

The words you use matter. Take the time to get them right. Avoid reducing immigrants to statistics or value. Think: Humanity first, circumstances second.

4.

DIVERT FROM MAINSTREAM NARRATIVES

A lot of immigration content right now is rooted in fear, ICE raids, crisis, and suffering. These stories matter, but they're not the full picture. What's missing? Joy. Romance. Creativity. Laughter. Showcase the full nuance and complexity of immigrants.

5.

BE SENSITIVE TO RISK AND PRIVACY

Visibility comes with real risk, especially for undocumented individuals. Be clear about consent, and respect boundaries. Before posting, ask: Does this person understand the potential reach of this content? Have you discussed what details they're comfortable sharing? Do they have control over how they're identified?

PROBLEMATIC *TERMS*

illegal, illegal immigrant, alien, illegal alien

Bottom line: the term "illegal" is dehumanizing and replaces complex legal circumstances with an assumption of guilt.

The Associated Press writes in the AP Stylebook, "Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use illegal only to refer to an action, not a person. Illegal immigration, but not illegal immigrant."

"Alien" is also dehumanizing. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has since removed this term from its guidelines.

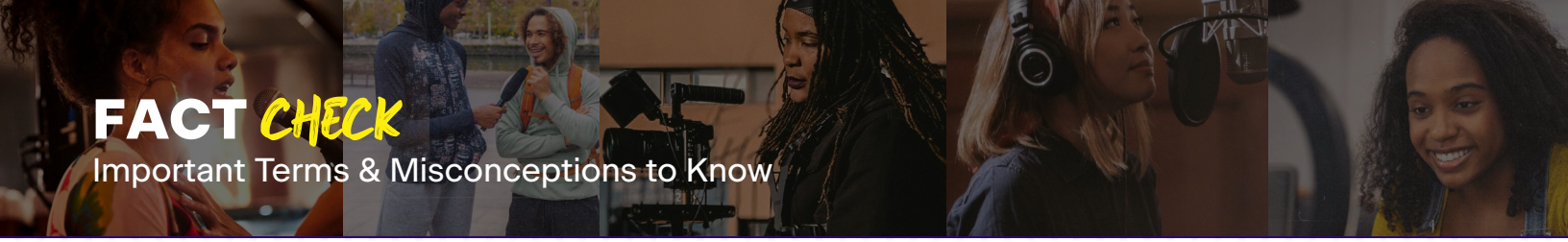
PREFERRED *TERMS*

undocumented immigrant, unauthorized immigrant, immigrant without legal status

"Undocumented" or "unauthorized" offer options for neutral terminology. People can also be described in detail, for example:

A native of Cameroon whose asylum application is pending. A 20-year resident of Brooklyn, originally from Mexico.

Alternatives: non-citizens, foreign national



FACT CHECK

Important Terms & Misconceptions to Know

THE GREAT REPLACEMENT THEORY

A debunked conspiracy theory that falsely claims that population changes are part of an orchestrated effort to "replace" white Americans with people of color. This theory is incredibly dangerous and directly linked to acts of mass violence, including the 2019 shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, and El Paso, Texas. In reality, data shows immigration has helped prevent a decline in the U.S. white population.

BIRTHRIGHT CITIZENSHIP

The right of any person born in the United States to American citizenship was established by the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Birthright citizenship may also be acquired by being born abroad to at least one U.S. citizen parent. Some lawmakers have been very vocal about their desire to take this right away from children born in the United States to undocumented parents. 64% of U.S. adults don't support this across political and racial lines.

ARE IMMIGRANTS COMING TO THE U.S. TO STEAL JOBS?

A commonly held misconception is that immigrants come to the U.S. to take job opportunities from native-born citizens. In reality, several factors cause people to emigrate: war, corruption, climate change, and hope for their families' future. Immigrants consistently fill critical workforce gaps across industries, drive economic growth, and contribute billions in taxes.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "GET IN LINE" FOR LEGAL IMMIGRATION?

You'll often hear that immigrants should "just get in line," but for many, especially undocumented people, there is no line. The U.S. immigration system is complex, limited, and often inaccessible. Even programs like DACA don't offer a clear pathway to permanent residency or citizenship.

WHAT IS DACA?

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a policy that provides temporary protection from deportation and work authorization to certain people brought to the U.S. as children. DACA recipients are often called Dreamers. The program has allowed 800,000 recipients to study, work, and build lives in the U.S, but it does not provide a path to citizenship or permanent residency.

WHERE IS DACA NOW?

As of April 2026, the courts have allowed DACA renewals to continue, meaning current recipients can still apply to extend their protections and work permits. However, new applications are not being processed, even if submitted. Current DACA grants remain valid until they expire, unless terminated individually. The program's future remains uncertain amid ongoing legal challenges.

DACA RECIPIENTS CANNOT

- Become legal permanent residents or U.S. citizens through the DACA program.
- Leave the country without advanced permission.
- Vote.
- Receive certain federal benefits such as: college financial aid and food stamps.

DACA RECIPIENTS CAN

- Get a temporary stay (pause) of deportation for two years at a time.
- Apply for employment authorization.
- Apply for driver's licenses in several states. The licenses are clearly marked that they cannot be used for federal purposes, like voting.
- Pay federal income taxes, medicaid/ medicare, social security tax, state taxes and others. In fact, they are required to do so.
- Apply for a social security number.
- Apply for in-state tuition in certain states, although this is in jeopardy.



CONTENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Messaging & Content That Actually Works

We tested real, community-generated messages against some of the most common anti-immigrant narratives. The takeaway? What resonates isn't always what you expect. Here's how to create content that actually connects:

1.

LEAD WITH REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES

Content grounded in family, caregiving, and everyday responsibility consistently outperformed anti-immigrant narratives, even the most extreme ones. Show people as parents, providers, and neighbors, while highlighting their contributions.

2.

MAKE THE FUTURE VISIBLE

Research consistently shows that people are more open to change when they can see a clear, hopeful vision of a society where immigrants belong and thrive. Frame your content around the future we're building: stronger communities, shared prosperity, and a culture where everyone has a place.

3.

ANCHOR YOUR STORY IN SHARED VALUES

Messages that focus on common ground—work, family, community—hold up across audiences, even among skeptics. Think less "issue-based" and more "based in lived experience." The more familiar it feels, the more it resonates.

4.

SHOW CONTRIBUTION IN TANGIBLE WAYS

Economic impact matters, but ground it in lived experience. Spotlight small businesses, essential workers, caregiving, and community roles. Connect contribution to culture.

5.

DON'T RELY ON "BELONGING" ALONE

Belonging is powerful, but on its own, it can fall flat or even backfire with certain audiences. Pair belonging with fairness, effort, or contribution. Don't just show that people belong, but how they show up for others.

6.

MAKE IT CULTURE-FIRST, NOT POLITICAL

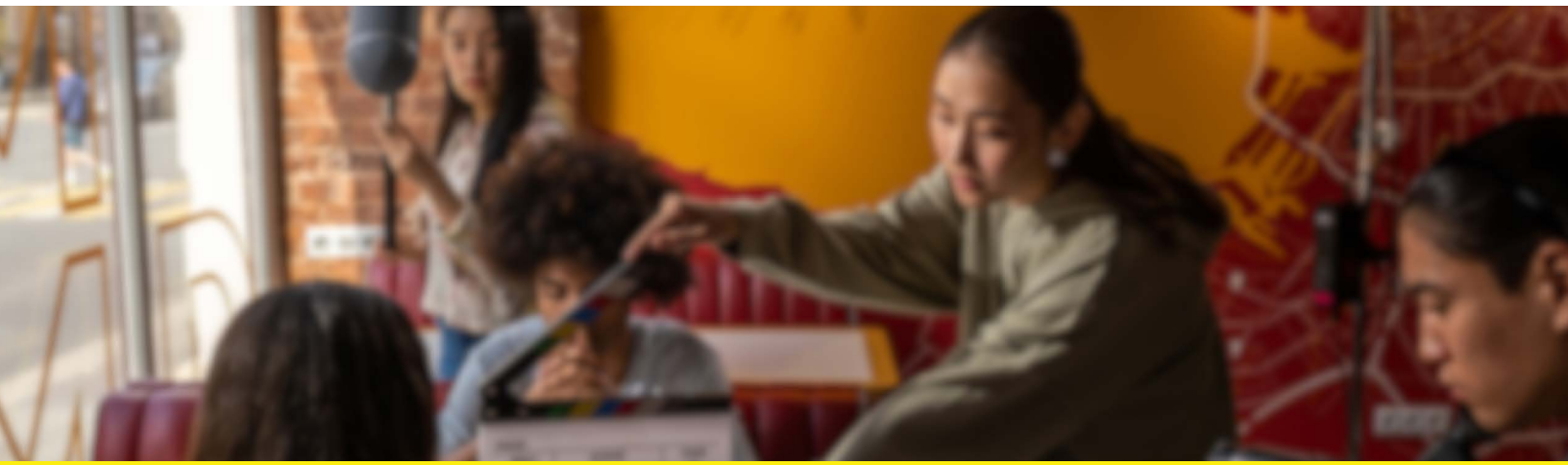
Some of the most effective content doesn't feel like "immigration content" at all. Lean away from identity politics, and let immigrant stories live inside the content people already love. Lean into food, humor, family dynamics, and lifestyle.

7.

USE HUMOR AND SATIRE STRATEGICALLY

Humor can open people up, but it can also polarize. If you use satire, ground it in something relatable (family, work, community). Avoid punching down or reinforcing harmful tropes for the sake of a joke.

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RESOURCES

Want to Go Deeper?

Explore the StoryLab Session, Using Your Digital Platforms for Good, led by content creator Ami McClure, on how to grow an audience, navigate hate and online backlash, and use your own story to shape the cultural conversation.

Explore American Dreaming: The Roadmap to Resilience for Undocumented Storytellers, to learn how to ethically engage undocumented storytellers in your work.

Explore "The Game of Getting Legal" to better understand the difficulties and barriers to legal status in the immigration system.

About Define American

Define American is an award-winning media advocacy organization and go-to resource for storytelling on immigrant experiences across film, TV, theater, publishing, and digital media. Define American engages storytellers and equips them with research and resources to combat harmful narratives and tell nuanced, authentic immigrant stories. Founded in 2011 by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and Tony and Emmy-nominated producer Jose. Antonio Vargas, Define American continues to redefine the conversation around immigration and identity, fostering a greater sense of belonging for immigrants in the U.S.

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