1) Details matter, but…

Provide information regarding the criminal act itself, the perpetrator and how the perpetrator has been charged. Avoid stressing details about how the victim “got into the situation”.

What details are relevant to the story? Are the details a matter of public safety? Will they run the risk of re-traumatizing or blaming the victim?

- Details about the attacker (use of weapon, how they gained access, physical description, etc) can be relevant to the case; however, graphic details about what the perpetrator did can be re-victimizing.
- Details about the victim’s private life are not relevant. Do not include information regarding a victim’s sexual history, habits or physical appearance. In other words, do not protect the public’s sense of safety by suggesting victim culpability.

The assault was not the victim’s fault; such details are irrelevant to the case and can appear to rationalize the crime.

2) Nobody asks for it…

Avoid phrases that perpetuate the myth that victims are responsible for sexual assault:

- “the victim did not suffer serious injuries” – whether a victim sustained injuries, rape and sexual assault are always acts of violence
- “the victim was attractive” – comments on appearance or how the victim was dressed are irrelevant
- “the victim had sex with the perpetrator in the past” – consent for one act does not constitute consent for another
- “the victim was involved in prostitution” – this doesn’t mean they were asking to be raped
- “the victim went willingly with the perpetrator” – the intentions may not have been clearly communicated or there may have been implied consequences which made the victim comply
- “innocent victim” – all victims of crime are innocent
- “rape allegation” / “alleged victim” – consider using “reported rape” and “reporting victim”
- “date rape” – consider using “acquaintance rape” instead; this more accurately reflects the fact that the vast majority of assaults are committed by perpetrators who know their victims

3) Sexual violence is not sexy…

Sexual assault exists in the larger social context of power, control, and domination. For the culture at large, ideas about sex, sexuality, desire, and what is acceptable sexual behavior are confounded with gender stereotypes (such as masculine aggression/ feminine passiveness). An assault is not an act of “desperation” by someone “sexually starved,” “depraved” or “driven crazy with desire”; assaults are an expression of power and domination, where a person chooses to ignore another’s humanness.

4) It happens everywhere…

Sensationalized cases can eclipse the daily experiences of sexual assault victims. This emphasis leads people to believe that sexual assault is an anomaly; that violent stranger rape is the norm. This further isolates those assaulted by someone they know. Reflect the realities of sexual assault when reporting, including how often it happens and the frequency with which it is committed by an acquaintance rather than a stranger.

5) It can be done by anyone…

Often the typical assailant is portrayed as a perverted, mentally ill, lower class man – commonly a minority. This stereotypical depiction of assailants is problematic, because the public is skeptical if the accused is a popular high school student, well respected doctor, athlete, etc. In reality, there are no distinguishing characteristics among rapists – they come from all races and socio-economic groups.
6) Let them speak – if they want…

Some survivors are able to tell in their own words what happened to them and how the assault continues to affect their lives and families. If seeking an interview with a survivor, be patient and flexible. Offer to hold the interview whenever he/she is ready; allow the survivor to have control over things like location and what is to be discussed. When possible, let the victim tell their own story.

7) Anonymity by any other name…

Avoid including information that will identify, humiliate, embarrass, or otherwise discomfort the victim and their family. This requires reporters to be sensitive to what the victim may or may not want reported; focus on the most salient facts of the crime rather than unnecessary – albeit titillating – details, such as theft of intimate items from the victim, location of bodily injuries, or specific details of sex acts. The victim is not just a subject in a news story, but a person who will have to return home, to work, to school, and to her family/friends/significant other after the story breaks – details on where the victim lives/works, substance abuse, or use/non-use of contraception, can compromise the victim’s safety and lead to a sense of “revictimization.”

8) Intersectionality

Other aspects of a survivor’s identity – ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical or cognitive ability, and economic class – can add to the impact of the assault or present additional barriers to their ability to access services and get support. It is important to avoid exploitative or unfair treatment of victims who are from under-served communities; this process can be facilitated by the establishment of policies that ensure cultural sensitivity in reporting.

9) Justice can be blind…

Unfortunately, false reporting of sexual assault is believed to be widespread by the public. Particularly among high-profile rape cases, the public is quick to doubt the truth of accusations. Statistics show the false reporting of rape is no more common than that of any other crime. When reporting, please acknowledge the significant difference between a false allegation and an unfounded/unprosecuted case. Officials may not prosecute a sexual assault for a number of reasons, including a lack of corroborating evidence. Just because a case is considered unfounded does not mean a crime was not committed.

10) Get informed…

Become educated about violence against women and sexual violence in general. Sexual assault and domestic violence are some of the most complex issues in human society. You can read material on sexual assault; have discussions (off the record) with advocates or survivors whom you may know; participate in training programs for volunteers in sexual assault advocacy. Sexual assault victim advocates, counselors and educators can be excellent sources of information, assisting journalists to ensure the public receives up-to-date information about the dynamics and context of sexual violence and its impacts on victims’ lives.

Stories can include information about how to prevent violence and list services or resources for victims of sexual assault. Sexual assault should consistently be represented as wrong and unacceptable behavior.