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2025-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000350227

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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Non-violent Language

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: LANGUAGE

Module No. 3

By: Skill Up Srl

SKILL up CONSULTING TRAINING

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01. Why this subject matters

Non-violent communication (**NVC**) will equip professionals with a language of accuracy, accountability, and empathy. By prioritizing **observation over judgment**, needs over blame, and **empathy** over confrontation, NVC helps reporters avoid sensationalism, victim-blaming and dehumanizing narratives that often surround gender-based violence.

In journalism word choice can either reproduce stereotypes and normalize harm or **promote understanding, dignity and public responsibility**.

Encouraging NVC practices strengthens ethical journalism, allows better interviews with survivors and contributes to media narratives that challenge the cultural patterns sustaining gender-based violence.

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2. Learning Outcomes



01

Learners will be able to **recognize syntactic** and **lexical biases** (such as the use of passive voice, victim-blaming cues, and romanticized motives) in news reporting of gender-based violence.

02

Learners will be able to **apply micro-editing techniques** to rewrite sentences and headlines objectively, actively assigning correct responsibility to the perpetrator.

03

Learners will be able to **critically evaluate** and revise their own journalistic texts before publication using a structured sentence-level verification checklist to ensure factual and non-stigmatizing reporting.

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3. Definition

In the context of reporting on gender-based violence, **"non-violent language"** does not refer to psychological emotional regulation, but strictly to the **syntactic** and **lexical choices** made by a journalist at the sentence and headline level.
It is the practice of using objective, active, and precise grammar to assign clear responsibility to the perpetrator, while avoiding sensationalism, romanticizing labels (e.g., "crime of passion"), and passive constructions that implicitly blame the victim or obscure the abuser's agency.

4. How our mind reacts

Language is not neutral; it actively shapes cognitive processing. In the context of news consumption, the syntactic and lexical choices made by a journalist dictate how the reader's brain interprets reality, assigns meaning, and allocates responsibility.
When reading news about gender-based violence, the human brain relies on the grammatical structure of the sentence to identify the "**actor**" and the "**recipient**" of an action. If a journalist uses the passive voice (e.g., "A woman was killed"), the brain processes the event almost like a natural disaster—an event that just "**happened**" to the victim, subtly erasing the perpetrator from the cognitive frame.
Conversely, active and objective syntax ("A man killed a woman") forces the reader's brain to immediately recognize the deliberate agency of the perpetrator. Furthermore, using mitigators or romanticized terms creates immediate cognitive biases, tricking the mind into perceiving the violence as a shared conflict rather than a one-sided abuse.

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5. Common media mistakes

Common media mistakes in reporting gender-based violence often stem from poor micro-editing at the sentence and headline level. These errors fall into three main technical categories:

- **Syntactic Obfuscation (The Passive Voice Trap):** This occurs when journalists use passive or vague phrasing that shifts grammatical focus—and therefore social responsibility—away from the perpetrator. Expressions like "she was attacked" or "a woman was murdered" obscure the abuser's agency.
- **Lexical Mitigation (The Romanticization Trap):** The normalization of violence through everyday expressions that make harm appear as the result of uncontrollable emotions. Using terms like "crime of passion," "blinded by jealousy," or "a tragic love story" provides a linguistic justification for the crime, minimizing the perpetrator's legal and moral accountability.
- **The Monsterization Trap:** Violence is frequently oversimplified through labels such as "monster," "madman," or "fiend". While these words may seem harsh, they actually serve to individualize the problem, framing the perpetrator as an unnatural anomaly and preventing deeper discussion of the systemic cultural factors that enable gender-based violence.



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6. How stories shape gender-based violence

Syntax is not just a matter of grammar; it is a matter of **social accountability**. When journalists consistently use passive voice and lexical mitigations, they alter the public perception of gender-based violence.

Expressions like "a woman was killed" weaken public understanding of who acted and how accountability should be assigned. Furthermore, when the perpetrator is grammatically hidden, the **media narrative** tends to scrutinize the victim instead, focusing on her behavior, appearance, or personal history.

This subtly implies causality or shared blame and **distracts society's attention** from the violence itself. A rigorous, active, and objective journalistic language is the first line of defense against the systemic normalization of violence.



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7. What good practice looks like

"On January 5, the first femicide of the year took place. In Gualdo Tadino (Perugia), a security guard, Daniele Bordicchia (39), shot and killed his wife, Eliza Stefania Feru — a 29-year-old Italian citizen originally from Romania — before taking his own life. According to early investigations, the man killed his wife with a single shot from his service weapon, which he legally owned. The reasons behind the tragedy are being examined by investigators: in an official statement, the Carabinieri referred to a "probable motive" linked to "marital disputes," although there were no previous reports or complaints filed by the wife.

The couple had been married since last May and had no children. Eliza worked as a healthcare assistant at the Serafico Institute in Assisi, where she had recently secured a permanent position. "She worked with children and was very good at it. We are devastated," said Francesca Di Maolo, president of the Serafico.

It is not the first time a new year has begun with a femicide committed by a security guard. Two years ago, also on January 5, in Genoa, 32-year-old security guard Andrea Incorvaia shot and killed his 23-year-old girlfriend, Giulia Donato. In that case as well, the perpetrator used his service weapon before taking his own life."

IL MANIFESTO, 08/01/2025

A well written article, correctly phrased and with the right terminology. An example of a good practice and an excellent starting point

Micro-editing Breakdown: Why does this work?

This article is an excellent example of objective and non-victimizing journalistic language.

Active Syntax: The journalist uses the active voice immediately: "a security guard... shot and killed his wife." The perpetrator is the active subject of the sentence, leaving no doubt about agency and responsibility.

Factual Terminology: The crime is correctly labeled a "femicide" in the very first line, framing it accurately within its social context.

No Lexical Mitigation: The article avoids romanticizing the crime. It cites "marital disputes" based on official statements but refrains from adding sensationalistic descriptors like "jealous rage" or "crime of passion."

Victim Dignity: The victim is portrayed through the lens of her professional life and social value (her work with children), rather than being subjected to invasive scrutiny about her private behavior.



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8. Case study

“***The fatal encounter on a dating chat.***

TP, 55 years old, had met her killer on a dating chat four years earlier. Between them, a casual relationship began — made up of sexual encounters and, for him, also of drugs: cocaine. Their affair continued until last January 12, when LRM, 33, grabbed a full glass bottle and began striking T. in the head while she was sleeping.

Then, before leaving the house, the man turned on the gas from the stove, as he wanted to erase the evidence of the murder by setting the house on fire.

"My brain at that moment was completely scrambled from cocaine," he told the magistrates. "I had a sudden outburst." (***PANORAMA, 2017***) ”

Micro-editing Breakdown: Spotting the Errors In line with strict journalistic standards for sentence and headline-level language, this text falls into several dangerous linguistic traps:

- Headline Obfuscation: The headline uses the noun phrase "fatal encounter." An "encounter" implies a reciprocal, mutual event. A murder, however, is a one-sided act of deliberate violence. This noun choice actively hides the perpetrator's agency right from the title.
- The Romanticization Trap: Using terms like "casual relationship" and "affair" subtly romanticizes the context, shifting the tone away from objective crime reporting and into a dramatized narrative.
- Lexical Mitigation (The Excuse): The article closes with a direct quote from the perpetrator claiming a "sudden outburst" (a raptus) and blaming his actions on cocaine. By ending the article on this note without any objective journalistic contextualization, the text linguistically validates the killer's excuse, minimizing his deliberate choice to commit violence.

Your Turn: The Rewriting Challenge

As a communication professional, your task is to strip away the biased framing. Use the following tools to rewrite the news wire:

- *Headline Tool:* Remove the word "encounter." Use an active verb (e.g., murders, kills, assaults) and assign clear responsibility to the active subject (the 33-year-old man).
- *Syntax Tool:* Replace narrative or romanticized nouns (like "affair") with factual descriptions of the timeline.
- *Mitigation Removal Tool:* You cannot change the quote from the magistrates, but you can change how you frame it. Introduce the quote with verbs that clarify he is attempting to justify his actions, rather than presenting his excuse as an absolute truth.

Reflection Questions

1. How does replacing a reciprocal noun like "encounter" with a precise, active verb in a headline instantly change the reader's understanding of who is accountable?
2. Look at the final quote ("sudden outburst"). How does the uncritical inclusion of a perpetrator's self-justifying labels linguistically undermine the severity of gender-based violence?
3. Why is it dangerous to rely on narrative storytelling words (like "affair") instead of strict, factual reporting when covering cases of extreme violence?

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9. Practical Exercises

01
Fixing Harmful Phrases

Objective: To identify the misuse of passive voice in GBV reporting and rewrite sentences to restore the perpetrator's agency.

Duration: 20 minutes.

Materials: Pen, paper, and a list of standard passive news phrases.

Instructions:

- Read the following common news phrases: "A woman was murdered yesterday," "She was subjected to domestic abuse," "The victim was attacked in her home."
- Notice how the perpetrator is completely missing from these sentences.
- Rewrite each sentence using the active voice, placing the perpetrator as the active subject (e.g., "A man murdered his wife yesterday").

Expected Output: A list of syntactically active sentences that clearly identify who committed the violence.

Debriefing: How does removing the perpetrator from the sentence through the passive voice subtly shift the public's focus and blame onto the victim?

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02

Rethinking the Story

Objective: To practice micro-editing on headlines by removing sensationalism, false causes, and romanticized labels.

Duration: 30 minutes.

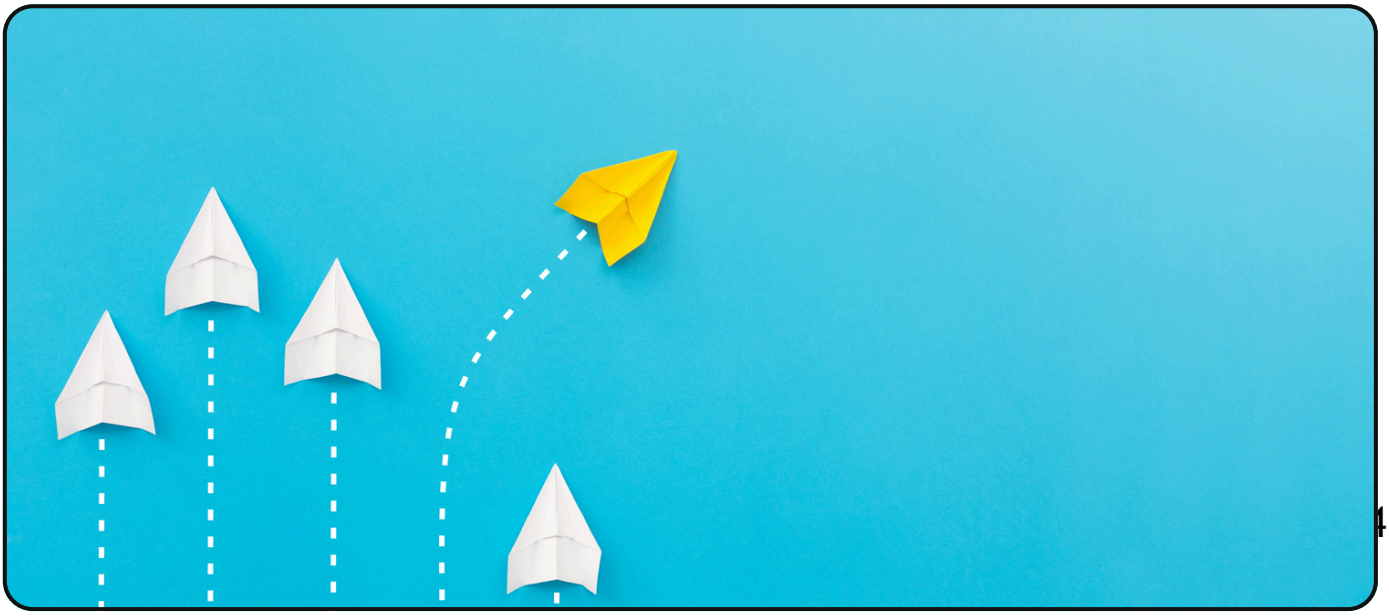
Materials: The Panorama case study provided in Chapter 08.

Instructions:

- Analyze this typical clickbait headline based on the case study: "Blinded by Cocaine: The Tragic Raptus that Ended a Casual Romance."
- Identify the lexical errors: the justification ("blinded by cocaine/raptus") and the romanticization ("casual romance").
- Rewrite the headline to be factual, objective, and non-sensational.

Expected Output: A factual headline (e.g., "33-Year-Old Man Murders Partner and Attempts to Conceal Evidence by Arson").

Debriefing: Why is the word "raptus" or "sudden outburst" grammatically and factually dangerous in a headline about femicide?



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03

Writing with Care

Objective: To self-assess and correct a draft using the verification checklist.

Duration: 25 minutes.

Materials: A short, biased draft of a news agency wire.

Instructions:

- Read the following draft: "A 40-year-old mother of two lost her life last night after a violent argument with her ex-husband, a hard-working mechanic known as a 'gentle giant' in the neighborhood. The tragedy was fueled by extreme jealousy."
- Apply the "Sentence-Level Verification Checklist" to the draft.
- Edit the text to remove irrelevant labels, passive constructs, and false motives.

Expected Output: A clean, professionally edited wire dispatch.

Debriefing: How hard is it to strip away "storytelling" habits to stick strictly to the facts of the crime?

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Checklist time!

Bias spotting card

Before hitting "publish," run your draft through this micro-editing checklist. If you answer "Yes" to any of the Red Flag questions, or "No" to the Green Light questions, revise your text immediately.

Headline Check:

- Green Light: Is the perpetrator the active subject of the headline? (e.g., "Man assaults..." rather than "Woman assaulted...").
- Red Flag: Did I use words like "raptus," "crime of passion," "tragedy," or "love" to describe an act of violence?
- Red Flag: Did I use sensational punctuation (e.g., exclamation marks, dramatic quotes)?

Body Text & Syntax Check:

- Green Light: Have I consistently used the active voice when describing the violence?
- Red Flag: Did I include irrelevant details about the victim's behavior, clothing, or past choices that implicitly suggest a "shared blame"?
- Red Flag: Did I use positive or mitigating labels to describe the perpetrator (e.g., "gentle giant," "good father," "hard worker")?
- Red Flag: Did I present jealousy, alcohol, drugs, or a divorce request as the cause of the murder, rather than identifying the violence as a deliberate choice?

If one or more boxes are ticked, revise the article!

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© May 2026 – Skill Up Srl, Hochschule Wismar, INDEPCIE sca, Innovation Frontiers IKE, Latvian Zonta E-klubs, Novi Sad School of Journalism.
This publication was carried out with the financial support of the European Commission under Erasmus + Project "MEDUSA-Rewriting media narratives on gender-based violence", N. 2025-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000350227.

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