

# Ethics in Storytelling

A GUIDE FOR DESIGNERS



PRAGMATIC  
— INSTITUTE —

# Storytelling is a powerful skill for designers.

**WE MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT HOW TO TELL STORIES—** whether describing a user’s journey or explaining our choices in designing a product.

Proofing our stories through an ethics lens ensures our messages align with the values that we and our organizations aspire toward. Rather than a question of good versus bad, ethics is a process of deciding between conflicting values.

Consider this: you wouldn’t harm others, but what if your story is likely to displease one group or another? What if you need to move forward with information that is still being debated? How do you decide what data to use and how to represent it? An ethical approach will help you tackle decisions like these with confidence.

## FOOTNOTES

1: [UvA ComScience Microlectures]. (2017, October 15). Alternative Paradigms: Care Ethics and Feminine Ethics. [Video]. YouTube. [youtube.com/watch?v=4iaCpAFypq8](https://youtube.com/watch?v=4iaCpAFypq8)

2: [CrashCourse]. (2016, November 14). Kant & Categorical Imperatives: Crash Course Philosophy #35. [Video]. YouTube. [youtube.com/watch?v=8bl-ys6JoEDw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=8bl-ys6JoEDw)

3: [CrashCourse]. (2016, November 28). Contractarianism: Crash Course Philosophy #37. [Video]. YouTube. [youtube.com/watch?v=2Co6pNvd9mc](https://youtube.com/watch?v=2Co6pNvd9mc)

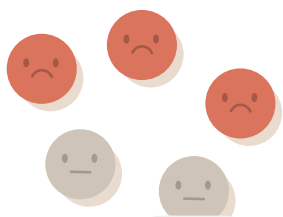
4: [CrashCourse]. (2016, November 21). Utilitarianism: Crash Course Philosophy #36. [Video]. YouTube. [youtube.com/watch?v=a739VjqdSI](https://youtube.com/watch?v=a739VjqdSI)

5: [CrashCourse]. (2016, December 5). Aristotle & Virtue Theory: Crash Course Philosophy #38 [Video]. YouTube. [youtube.com/watch?v=a739VjqdSI](https://youtube.com/watch?v=a739VjqdSI)

## Select an Ethical Approach That Aligns with Your Values

When it comes to making ethical decisions, there is often not a clear right or wrong answer. An ethical approach can help guide your choices as you construct narratives around your design work.

Applying one of the below approaches will lead to more thoughtful and nuanced decision making so you're satisfied in the end.



**2. Deontological:** Seek to uphold your moral duties above all else.



**1. Care-based:** Focus on promoting healthy relationships and the wellbeing of others.



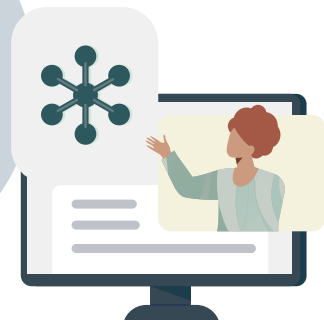
**3. Rights-based:** Attempt to live in accordance with your rights and responsibilities.



**5. Virtue ethics:** Strive to be the best person you can be.



**4. Utilitarian:** Try to generate the best outcome for the largest number of people.



## An Example

Imagine you're preparing a quarterly review for the leadership team. You want to please these important stakeholders, and you feel pressure to just share the positive news from your research. However, you also value honesty and transparency. How will you balance this tension? Applying an ethical approach that aligns with you and your organization's goals may help you decide how to move forward.



A **care-based** approach may help you see that sharing both positive and negative reviews will promote an honest, healthy relationship with your stakeholders. While it may not generate the reaction you'd like, if it supports the wellbeing of your users, it may be worth doing. So, you decide to focus on the positive reviews but also highlight how certain negative reviews led you to make improvements that are sure to help users.



A **deontological** approach may emphasize your duty to share a representative overview of the feedback, even if it means your stakeholders will be less happy with the results. So, you decide to start with the negative reviews and explain that you value truth and transparency above all else and you hope your stakeholders do too. They appreciate your explanation and are even more thrilled by the good reviews you share next.



A **rights-based** approach may push you to make all the reviews available to everyone in an appendix. But you emphasize your stakeholders' responsibility to look them over if they want to see the whole range. You'll be focusing on the ones you think best illustrate the purpose of your design story today.



A **utilitarian** approach may illustrate that very few of your millions of users provided negative feedback and there simply isn't a need to please that small percentage. So you focus your story on the designs that you're confident will please the vast majority of your users.



A **virtue ethics** approach may encourage you to envision what a great person would do in this situation and help you overcome anxieties about sharing negative reviews. So you speak candidly and confidently about the pros and cons of your design work and please the stakeholders with your sincerity and leadership skills.

Ethical dilemmas can't be solved like math equations. You need to consider competing values and goals. There may not be a perfect outcome, but you can be confident you've weighed your options and reflected on the direction your story takes.

Use this guide to help you proof your next story to make sure you can stand behind challenging decisions.



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# Proof Your Story with Conscientious Questions

With an ethical approach in mind, you can further interrogate your stories with the below considerations. If a story seems problematic, you can iterate on it before you share it with the intended audience.

## Ask yourself: does your story...

...privilege one person or group over another?

**If so, can you include more voices?**

...imply counter-factual elements?

**If so, can you make alterations?**

...have the potential to cause harm?

**If so, can you bring up your concerns?**

...challenge your values?

**If so, can you justify your decision?**

## Also consider...



## Dive in with These Practice Scenarios

Consider these common design storytelling scenarios to identify the potential conflict in values and determine how you would proceed with your chosen approach in mind.

### Would you tell a story that...

**Is less diverse?** Because emphasizing the perspective of a certain gender, age or ethnicity allows you to make a simpler point about your design goals.

**Reveals identity?** Because hinting at the biographical details of a big-name research participant or client will add more credibility than an anonymous voice.

**Links to different resources?** Because pairing a screenshot from another, unrelated project will make it easier to illustrate a point than showing your work in progress.

**Tells someone else's story?** Because a first-person story will be more compelling, even if you're taking some liberties with your subject's perspective.

**Rushes through or leaves out info?** Because you have so much to get through, and it isn't likely that your subject needs to know everything about the consent form anyway.

Remember, ethical decision making is a process, not a rulebook. By proofing your stories through an ethics lens, you can improve your storytelling and also work in accordance with your values. **■P**



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# Influence Through Storytelling

Proofing your message through an ethics lens is just one way to de-risk a design story. Sign up for Pragmatic Institute's *Influence Through Storytelling* course to access our Story Planner—an in-depth guide for designing narratives that help you achieve your strategic goals.

*Influence Through Storytelling* teaches designers how to craft stories that communicate design impact. Through interactive learning and practical application, attendees learn how to inspire action through stories and tailor them to resonate with specific audiences, while helping the business to understand the value of design.

**Learn More >**



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Pragmatic Design learning experiences are developed by design practitioners, instructional designers and industry leaders. These courses empower designers to contribute more strategically, influencing the organization's vision and uncovering new ways to add value.

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