Hi, my name is Vanessa Hunsberger, and I’m the coordinator of the Seattle-based Washington Advisory Committee on Trafficking, also known as WashACT. Today I’m going to share some best practices with you for how to present human trafficking issues in a way that empowers survivors and avoids perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

In my role raising awareness on human trafficking on behalf of WashACT, I come across a lot of websites and depictions of trafficking that make you think that trafficking only happens a certain way to certain people. The reality is that anyone, from any walk of life, can fall prey to a trafficker, and the way it happens is complex and varies from case to case. To help the public receive that message, it’s important to describe human trafficking responsibly. Ultimately, this gives more agency to survivors of this crime.

My first tip is to be careful about what images you use to depict human trafficking. It’s very common for media about trafficking to include pictures of women in chains, or shots of someone’s hands on glass, conveying a plea for help. You should know that when people see these images, they think that this is what trafficking looks like. The reality is, though, that trafficking victims will never experience physical chains, so think carefully about whether the images you use give viewers a skewed understanding of human trafficking.

I encourage you to avoid overgeneralizations about what trafficking looks like altogether, and instead opt for other imagery, such as logos of resources for learning more about trafficking, uplifting images of nature or the city that is featured in your piece, or graphics that represent sub-issues within the piece, like the scale of justice or a passport.

My second tip is also about imagery. I hope you’ll keep in mind that human trafficking does not only happen to white women. If you choose to use photos of people in your piece, think about this problem. It can be helpful to have diverse people represented in your images, but remember to avoid further racial stereotypes, such as Asian women working in nail salons. You should also never use a photo of a survivor if you do not have their consent to do so.

My third tip is about tone. While human trafficking is a despicable crime, its victims are not. In fact, people who have been trafficked have found ways to make it through extreme hardship and survive. Please try to celebrate their survivorship when you write about them. Before you share gratuitous stories of their suffering, think about whether it is necessary for the piece you’re doing. Your audience will likely want to know what happened to a survivor you’re describing, but graphic details of their ordeal are simply sensational at the cost of retraumatizing the survivor and making available on the Internet deeply personal information that they may not want shared. So, focus instead on the achievements of the survivors to remove themselves from the trafficking, and find fulfillment afterwards.

The three tips I’ve gone through should help you to shift through your portrayal of human trafficking to be more accurate and respectful of survivors’ experiences. If you are spending the time and energy to discuss this topic, you’re clearly someone who’s already concerned about this crime. Please go the extra mile to make sure that you are contributing to dispelling myths and thinking first and foremost about the people at the center of your piece, and what would be most helpful to them.