Black Female Characters:
Authentic Representation and Storytelling Guide

SEEHER #WriteHerRight | **OWN**

In 2019, the Association of National Advertisers' (ANA) SeeHer movement and the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) partnered to encourage and empower brands to apply an intersectional lens in marketing, advertising, media, and entertainment so that more Black women and girls see themselves — and all of their potential — authentically reflected in content.

AFFIRMATION and INSPIRATION — CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS:

❑ Does the story include a **Black woman** in a **meaningful role**?

    ❑ Have the artists portraying the Black female characters been invited to **share their own experiences**, in their own words?

    ❑ Is there a Black female **lead** or **co-lead**?

    ❑ Are there other Black women in the **community** surrounding the Black female lead or co-lead?

        ❑ Casting: Is there a **range in complexion** among these women that includes **dark skin tones**?

    ❑ Do the Black female characters have any **positive** and **healthy relationships** with key people in their lives (e.g., family, romantic partners, or co-workers)? Are there positive relationships with **other Black women** or **men**?

    ❑ Does the story include at least **two named** Black female characters who have a conversation about something other than their race?

        ❑ Could the script pass the **Bechdel test**? That is, does it include at least two Black women talking to each other about something other than a man?

    ❑ Does the story incorporate **multi-generational** experiences among Black women?

        ❑ Casting: Is there a **convincing family resemblance** that references key shared features?

❑ Does the story underscore the **humanity** of **Black women** by incorporating themes that are central to the human experience?

    ❑ Are the **motivations** for the Black female character's choices and actions clearly defined?

    ❑ Does internal or external **struggle** and **resilience**, or lack thereof, play a role in shaping the Black female character's life?

    ❑ Has the Black female character's relationship to her **sense of possibility** or **perceived limitations** (i.e., what feels possible or impossible in her life) been articulated?

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❑ Does the story directly address or **debunk stereotypes** about Black women, enabling the audience to view them with complexity and greater empathy?

    ❑ For the stories that incorporate **social justice themes**, are they primarily rooted in the Black female character's personal story in a manner that enables the audience to connect and emotionally invest?

    ❑ If the story **explores** a **historical Black female figure**, is there relevance to the present-day lives of Black women that invites audiences to examine their own humanity in a new way?

        ❑ Casting: is there a convincing resemblance that **incorporates skin tone**?

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❑ Does the story encompass an **intersectional** view of the Black female character's lived experience based on the multiple dimensions of her identity (e.g., race or ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, socioeconomic status)?

❑ Is pride in **cultural heritage** and identity included in the narrative?

    ❑ Does the story celebrate the **nuance among Black cultures** (e.g., Caribbean, West African, Southern Black American)?

❑ Do any of the Black female characters identify as **LGBTQ+?**

❑ Do any of the Black female characters have a **disability**?

    ❑ Does the story incorporate other aspects of the Black female character's life **beyond her disability** (e.g., career, romantic life)?

❑ For portrayals of Black female characters living in **challenging life circumstances** (abject poverty, incarceration, etc.), is there nuance and depth to their stories that extends beyond those circumstances?

❑ Do the Black female characters have **careers**?

    ❑ Are they in **leadership** positions?

    ❑ Are Black women included among characters working in **science** and **technology** fields?

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❑ Does the story engender a **versatile view of beauty** for Black women?

    ❑ Is there a **range in body types, skin tones, hair textures**, and **natural hairstyles** among the Black female characters?

    ❑ Are any of the Black female characters **over the age of 45**?

    ❑ Could any of the following words describe the Black female characters' **personality attributes**?

        ❑ Compassionate, cautious, trusting, happy, patient, brave, adventurous, relatable, emotionally vulnerable, intelligent, ambitious, charismatic, creative, trustworthy, successful, confident

❑ Behind the camera: Are Black women represented on the **creative** and **leadership teams**?
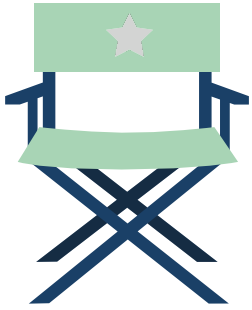
    ❑ Does the **writers' room** include storytellers who can uniquely speak to and/or relate to the Black female experience, in a myriad of ways, with a **firsthand perspective**?

    ❑ Have the writers who are not Black women **proactively educated** themselves on Black women's experiences so they can portray Black female characters with specificity and authenticity?

    ❑ Do people in charge of **visually reflecting Black cultures** through hair, makeup, costume, lighting, set design, props, etc. have firsthand experience or deep understanding of the culture they intend to portray?

    ❑ Do the **casting** and **production** teams reflect the diversity of backgrounds portrayed on screen?

❑ Does the story amplify any of the following dimensions of Black female experiences that are often **missing** from the **dominant narrative**?*

    ❑ Cultural heritage is a source of pride.

> " People are often surprised when I say that if I had a choice,
> I would come back as a Black woman every single time. "
> ~Tina Lifford, *Queen Sugar*

    ❑ **Pride in their strength.** From egregious historical injustices beginning with slavery to present-day oppressive cultural climates, Black women have a sense of pride in their resilience and how they continue to help their families and communities.

    ❑ **Black women desire more time for themselves.** As these women attempt to find balance between their kids, spouses, families, work, and more, there is a clear time deficit.

    ❑ **Aspirations lie within their current realm.** Overall, Black women aspire to live a happy and comfortable life characterized by financial security, freedom to pursue interests and opportunity, time to spend with family and friends, and the means to see and experience the world.

    ❑ **Beauty comes from within.** Beauty is much more of an internal construct than external attractiveness. For Black women, it is important for them to feel beautiful through self-love and acceptance.

    ❑ **Spirituality over religion.** While Black women are more religious than whites or Latinos, the share of Black Americans who identify as religiously unaffiliated has increased in recent years — up 18 percent since 2014. (Pew Research, August 2020)

    ❑ **Health and wellness matter.** Health means taking care of the mind, body, and spirit.

    ❑ **Education remains important, even as it evolves amid systemic issues**. Education, Black women note, is critical, but there is a shared frustration with the system, particularly regarding higher education.

*Source: OWN Persona Study, The Marian Dupree Group & Rutledge, LLC, 2019 — 2020

> " We are at an inflection point in this country. Black lives seen in media and entertainment need to be, more than ever, reflected with accuracy, authenticity, and integrity. Leverage your power and media time to rewrite and reimagine the American story, the full American story, where Black life is portrayed based on facts over stereotypes...where Black life is normalized. The common denominator in our normalcy — we love, we hope, we dream just like all people do. "
>
> ~Oprah Winfrey

PITFALLS and MISCONCEPTIONS — CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS:

- ❑ If all the Black female characters were **completely removed** from the story, would it be inconsequential to the plot?

  - ❑ Would the absence of Black female characters make the narrative **unrealistic** given the time period and/or setting?

  - ❑ Does the Black female character's primary plot contribution involve being the **victim of violence** or deciding whether or not to have a romantic or **sexual relationship** with a male hero?

  - ❑ Is the primary Black female character a **sidekick** or **best friend** to a white protagonist, and accordingly lacks a storyline of her own?

 - ❑ Does the story **normalize inequality**, **abuse**, or **violence** against Black women?

- ❑ Does the story **perpetuate stereotypes** by painting the Black female character with broad strokes opposed to a layered multi-dimensionality, implying that Black women are **monolithic**?

  - ❑ If the audience never has **interactions in real life** (in the United States or abroad) with Black women, does the Black female character in the story provide a **narrow view** of Black women?

  - ❑ Are the Black female characters presented as people who need to be **spoken for** or **rescued** by a "White Savior" trope?

  - ❑ Could the Black female character be classified as one of the following **tropes**?

    - ❑ Magical Negro, Mammy, Sassy Black Woman, Angry Black Woman, Jezebel, Sapphire/Independent Woman, Matriarch, Welfare Queen, Pious Black Woman, Black Superwoman/Strong Black Woman

  - ❑ Does the dialogue of the Black female characters tend to include more **profanity** and focus more on **sexuality** than their white counterparts?
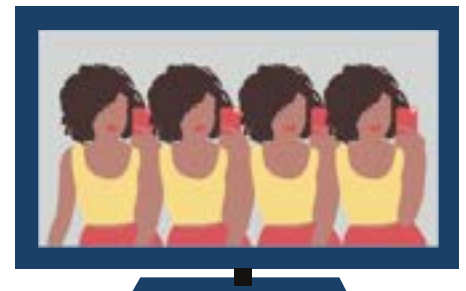
❑ Does the story present a **narrow standard of beauty** for Black women focused primarily on more stylized appearance opposed to more natural looks?

  ❑ Does the story overtly or subtly **perpetuate colorism**—prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone? Does the story suggest that **lighter complexioned** Black women are not "Black enough"?

    ❑ Casting: Are lighter complexioned actors cast in role(s) that require makeup or **digital alterations** to **darken skin tones** to create a more realistic character appearance?

  ❑ Are the Black female characters with **larger body types** presented as **damaging stereotypes** (e.g., lazy, physically slow, unintelligent, poorly dressed, clumsy, or a punchline)?

  ❑ Do the Black female characters **over the age of 45** tend to be **opposite ends of a spectrum**—extremely beautiful, elegant, tall, and slim versus a caricature that is the object of scorn, ridicule, or disregard?

❑ Is the Black female character's experience **primarily defined by her race** and no other aspects of her identity (ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.)?

  ❑ Is the Black female character an **apologist** for her Blackness?

  ❑ Does the disabled Black female character's story center around what she can do **in spite of her disability** rather than celebrate who she is because of her disability?

  ❑ Are the **LGBTQ+** Black female characters portrayed as **promiscuous** and/or incapable of monogamy?

  ❑ Are the Black female characters more likely to have **personal-life oriented** roles (e.g., wife or mother) opposed to **work-oriented roles** (e.g., business executive)?

    ❑ Are the Black female characters more likely to be an **assistant** opposed to the boss or leader?

  ❑ Are the Black female characters portrayed as having **lower socioeconomic status** than their white counterparts?

  ❑ Does the incorporation of a **social justice theme** make Black female audience members feel **burdened** more than seen?

❑ Behind the camera: Among the writers who are not Black women, are their **personal perceptions** of Black experiences primarily shaping the Black female character?

  ❑ Does the **culture** of the writers' room perpetuate **tokenism** by disempowering Black female writers and making them feel like "diversity slot" hires?

Questions are informed by creative expert insights and research from leading institutions. For more info visit seeher.com

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