

# COLORISM & CHARACTER BODY CREATION TIP SHEET

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**What is colorism?** A system that privileges light skin and Anglo features, directly related to racism.  
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## Recommendations for Creators:

**1 Understand the tropes associated with the intersections of race and gender and develop characters and storylines that combat them.**

**WHY?** In many cases, colorism stereotypes are different for males and females.

**RESEARCH:** In one study involving Black women between the ages of 18 and 23 years old, darker-skinned Black males were perceived to be attractive, while conversely, participants acknowledged that darker-skinned females are seen as being unattractive in society. Other research shows that for women, skin color predicts self-esteem (with darker skin generally predicting lower self-esteem). For men, skin color predicts feeling competent (with darker skin generally predicting lower feelings of self-efficacy).

**2 Casting should actively work to combat colorism. Darker-skinned characters should be cast as both heroes and protagonists.**

**3 Depict dark-skinned characters who have high socioeconomic statuses, live in affluent neighborhoods, attend affluent schools, and engage in activities that are associated with higher-class individuals.**



**WHY?** Individuals with lighter skin are perceived to have a higher social standing.

**RESEARCH:** Across many studies, darker-skinned African American individuals are more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status, diminished prestige, and fewer elected offices when compared to lighter-skinned African American individuals.

**4 Depict characters with a variety of curly hair patterns (e.g., tight curls, medium curls, loose curls) as protagonists and in positions of positive power.**

**WHY?** People are discriminated against on the basis of their hair textures & styles. For example, curly hair is stereotyped as “unprofessional” and so-called “natural” hair styles are often viewed negatively (i.e. locks, cornrows, afros, etc).



**5 Depict characters whose personality traits challenge these stereotypes, in order to boost self-esteem in viewers whose skin colors receive negative stereotypes.**

**WHY?** Colorism is associated with stereotypes about individuals’ personalities.

**RESEARCH:** In a study involving Black girls between the ages of 12 and 16 years old, the Black girls believed that girls and boys with lighter skin are more arrogant, due to the fact that they receive preferential treatment. Conversely, Black girls believed people with darker skin are loud and obnoxious.

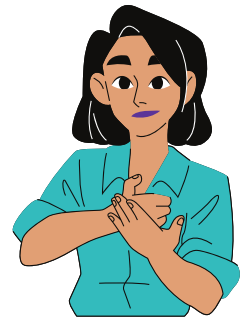
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- 6** **Depict dark-skinned individuals fulfilling roles in which they are well-paid and respected.**  
**WHY?** Individuals with darker skin tones are more likely to experience pay discrimination.



**RESEARCH:** In one study, involving fake Black job applicants, dark-skinned male job applicants with distinctly Black names were given a lower starting pay than light-skinned male job applicants with distinctly Black names, when both groups were evaluated by White participants, suggesting that the skills of darker-skinned Black males are undervalued.

- 7** **Consult with as many individuals who share the characters' races, cultures, and experiences as you can when representing racially diverse characters.**



- 8** **Create racially diverse main characters who have a variety of personality traits, quirks, abilities, appearances, and conflicts that make them relatable and able to stand on their own.**

- 9** **Create characters with intersectional identities and unique and authentic combinations of skin tone, body type, and linguistics.**

- 10** **Create characters whose vernacular goes against harmful stereotypes.**

**WHY?** Research finds that characters with positive motivations (e.g. hero) use mainstream American English, whereas characters with negative motivations are more likely to use nonstandard dialects or foreign-accented English.



## Reflection Questions?

- Which of the characters in your stories speak with a dialect? Are the "heroes" just as likely to speak with a dialect as "villains"?
- Do characters who speak with a dialect in your production use terms and cultural practices that are appropriate for their cultural identity?
- Do characters in your show with darker skin fall into negative stereotypes or is there a balance amongst various darker skinned characters being the "hero" as well.

## Research Sources:

Abrams et al., 2020; Keyes 2020; Matthews et al., 2015; Stockstill and Carson 2021; Thompson and Keith 2001; Dunham et al., 2015; Gibson et al., 2015; Hunter 2021.