



Guide to Portraying People with Disabilities in the Media

Fear of the unknown. Inadequate experience. Incorrect or distorted information. These are some of the attitudinal barriers that people with disabilities face as they become involved in their communities.

Awareness is the first step toward change. People working in the media exert a powerful influence over the way people with disabilities are perceived. It's important to the 54 million Americans with disabilities that they be portrayed realistically and that their disabilities are explained accurately.

One of the first and most significant steps to changing negative stereotypes and attitudes toward people with disabilities begins when we rethink the way written and spoken images are used to portray people with disabilities. Following are some suggestions for portraying people with disabilities in the media.

People with disabilities are not “handicapped,” unless there are physical or attitudinal barriers that make it difficult for them to participate in everyday activities. For example, a building with steps and no entry ramp creates a “handicapping” barrier for people who use wheelchairs.

It is important to *focus on the person*, not necessarily the disability. In writing or speaking, name the person first and then, only if relevant, explain his or her disability. Because a person is not a condition or a disease, avoid referring to someone with a disability by his or her disability alone. Use of “disabled” as a noun implies a state of separateness; “the disabled” are not a group apart from the rest of society. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, choose accurate descriptive words and portray people in a positive light.

Tips for interviewing/reporting on people with disabilities:

- When referring to individuals with disabilities use *disability*, not *handicapped*.
- Emphasize the person, not the disability or condition. Use *people with disabilities* rather than *disabled persons*; or an *individual with autism* rather than *an autistic*.
- Omit mention of an individual’s disability unless it is pertinent to the story.
- Depict the typical achiever with a disability, not just the super-achiever.
- Choose words that are accurate descriptions and have non-judgmental connotations.
- People with disabilities live everyday lives and should be portrayed as contributing members of the community. These portrayals should:
 - Depict people with disabilities experiencing the same pain/pleasure that others derive from everyday life, including work, parenting, education, sports and community involvement.
 - Feature a variety of people with disabilities when possible, not just someone easily recognized by the general public.

- Ask people with disabilities (or when dealing with children, their teachers or parents) to provide correct information and assistance to avoid stereotypes in the media.
- Portray people with disabilities as people with both strengths and weaknesses.
- Be mindful of connotations of words used to describe individuals with disabilities:
- Avoid referring to people who are not disabled as *normal*; the implication is that people with disabilities are not normal.
- Avoid referring to people with disabilities as *patients*, which connotes sickness; someone who is disabled is only a patient to his or her physician or in a reference to medical treatment.
- Avoid the word *invalid* as it means, quite literally, “not valid.”
- Avoid patronizing clichés, such as *unfortunate*, *pitiful*, or *poor*.
- In the same vein, use care when describing persons with disabilities as *courageous*, *brave*, or *inspirational*. Don’t glamorize or make heroes of people with disabilities simply because they have adapted to their disabilities.

Avoid Using:	Use Instead:
Victim	Person who has/experienced/with
(The) Cripple(d)	Person with a disability
Afflicted by/with	Person has
Invalid	Person with a disability
Normal	Non-disabled
Patient	Person with a disability
Wheelchair bound/confined	Uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user

Your concerted efforts to use positive, non-judgmental respectful language when referring to people with disabilities in writing and in everyday speaking can go a long way toward helping to change negative stereotypes.

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