

A way with words

Guidelines for the portrayal of people with a disability



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If you need help making phone calls, contact the National Relay Service on 1800 555 677. This service is free.

If you need the assistance of an interpreter, contact the Translating and Interpreting Service, TIS National, on 131 450 and ask to be connected to the Disability Information Service on 1800 177 120.

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Introduction

Language plays a critical role in shaping and reflecting our thoughts, beliefs and feelings. It should come as no surprise, then, that the way in which we refer to people affects the way they are seen by others and, indeed, the way in which they feel about themselves. Used over and over again, a convenient phrase is no longer an attempt to describe a person — it becomes a definition.

For decades, inappropriate terms and catchphrases were all too common in the media's portrayal of people with a disability. In recent times, however, the media and the community in general have become increasingly aware that using inappropriate language when referring to people with a disability is offensive and demeaning. While it is now uncommon for the media to use terms such as 'cripple' or 'retarded', people with a disability are still often referred to in depersonalised terms such as 'the disabled' or 'the handicapped'.

One of the most damaging effects of portraying people in this way is that they are seen by others as being 'different'. With the most recent figures available showing almost one in every five people has a disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004), many people face such marginalisation daily. It is discriminatory to set people with a disability apart from the general community to which they belong.

Despite the growing number of people with a disability in the community, they are sometimes 'invisible' in the media, except when the story is about disability. The views of people with a disability as a group or individually are seldom featured in stories dealing with general interest issues such as child care, public transport or the environment.

The purpose of this booklet is to promote inclusiveness and the fair and accurate portrayal of people with a disability. It is intended as an aid for professional communicators, such as journalists, writers, producers and broadcasters, and provides suggestions for appropriate language, interviewing techniques and media coverage involving people with a disability.

As no set of guidelines can cover every possible contingency, professional communicators should adopt the underlying principle of positive portrayal of people with a disability — that is, put the person before the disability.



General guidelines

The following points are a guide to help you when reporting on disability issues or portraying people with a disability in words or images.

Emphasise individuality, not disability

People with a disability should be portrayed as individuals first. Like everyone else they have emotions, interests, problems, talents, frustrations and faults and have a number of roles such as parent, friend, work colleague and club member.

As each person with a disability is an individual, the disability will affect his or her life in different ways. You cannot assume that all people with a disability share the same viewpoint, interests or outlook on life. For example, you may find that one person with quadriplegia will be training for the Paralympics, while another might be studying at university, another working as a disability advocate, and yet another mostly interested in studying the racing form guide.

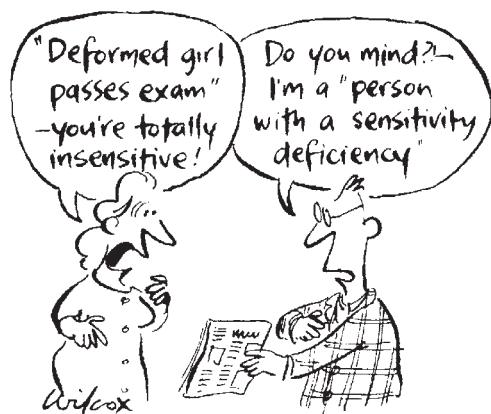
Using appropriate language emphasises this individuality, rather than the disability that a person happens to have. This does not mean that the disability should be hidden, ignored or deemed irrelevant but it should not be the focus of a story except when the subject is disability.

Avoid portraying successful people with a disability as superhuman

Stories about superhuman over-achievers, such as those who abseil down cliff faces in wheelchairs, usually attract a lot of interest. The focus of these stories is usually on the person achieving in spite of his or her disability.

People with a disability who excel in a particular sport, or area of business or study are often depicted as superheroes rather than as the successful sportspeople, students or business people they are.

Portraying the achievements of people with a disability as special or superhuman sets them apart from mainstream society and is to be avoided.



Avoid emotive portrayals of people with a disability

Media portrayal of people with a disability can sometimes imply that they are to be pitied for living with such 'tragedy'. These emotive, 'tear jerker' stories sometimes extend to the person's family or carers, again implying they are 'martyrs' for shouldering such a 'burden' as having to care for someone with a disability. On other occasions the media portrays people with a disability as somehow more courageous or special than other people for just living as 'normal' a life as possible. Stories sometimes refer to people as 'suffering' from, being 'afflicted' with or a 'victim' of a disability.

The reality is that for many people, having a disability is just a fact of life, not something to be dramatised or sensationalised. It would be far better to focus media stories on associated disability issues such as accessible transport and housing or employment opportunities.

Portray people with a disability as part of the community and in a variety of roles

People with a disability are part of the community and should be portrayed as such. They are generally able to participate in all aspects of community life, but frequently the media report on people with a disability only in the context of disability.

People with a disability have interests, careers and families like everyone else. They also have opinions and thoughts about what is happening in their community and in other parts of the world. Be inclusive of the views of all community members by seeking out the perspectives and opinions of people with a disability on issues that affect the community as a whole.

Avoid stereotyping

Stereotypes can lead to discrimination as they take away a person's individuality. Every person with a disability is an individual and should not be expected to display a specific range of personality characteristics — for example, people with Down syndrome are routinely described as 'loving'. Such stereotyping denies the person with the disability the right to express his or her individual personality.

Some common stereotypes to avoid include the following:

- Having a disability is a tragedy.
- People with a disability are objects of pity and charity.

- People with a disability who excel are superhuman.
- People with a disability who marry and have children are extraordinary.
- People with a disability lead boring, uneventful lives.
- Families, particularly spouses, of people with a disability are heroic.
- People with a disability are asexual.

Do not focus on a person's disability unless it is important to the story

In many media stories it is quite unnecessary to mention a person's disability, yet this characteristic is often highlighted. Focusing on a person's disability may result in your excluding other characteristics of the person. This creates the impression that the person referred to is somehow an oddity and not quite an ordinary member of the community.

Frequently, when a person with a disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human interest story-line predominates — for example, how the individual has overcome overwhelming odds. This places the focus of the story on the disability.

The same is true for photographs, which can send very powerful messages. They can focus on a person's disability or equipment used for mobility or communication rather than the person. They can devalue the person by using inappropriate settings or perspectives.

Avoid describing disability in medical terms

Describing a person's disability in terms of a medical 'condition' — such as epilepsy, polio, paraplegia, blindness, schizophrenia or autism — focuses attention on the disability rather than on the person as an individual. These terms also suggest sickness and imperfection and reinforce negative assumptions and stereotypes about people with a disability.

Broaden and deepen your understanding of disability issues

Before writing about disability issues or a person with a disability, make sure you know what you are talking about. Speak to disability groups and organisations to develop a general understanding of their concerns, and ask them to put you in touch with some of their members.

When researching a story on disability, talk to a person with a disability about what he or she feels and thinks about a particular issue rather than relying on the opinions of doctors and government agencies.



Appropriate language

In the general community, as well as in the disability community, there is considerable debate about how people with a disability should be described. Words and terms that are considered appropriate and acceptable change over time. For example, once the word 'cripple' was in common and respectable use. Today its use to describe a person with a disability is considered offensive and unacceptable. The same applies to words and expressions such as 'insane', 'spastic' and 'handicapped'. Also unacceptable are words which imply a lack of something or some kind of inferiority, such as 'invalid', 'infirm' or 'incapacitated'.

The following list of inappropriate terms and appropriate alternatives is a guide only. When considering which terms are most appropriate to use in any situation it is best to ask the person how he or she would like to be referred to.

Words to avoid	Acceptable alternatives
abnormal, subnormal (These are negative terms that imply failure to reach perfection.)	Specify the disability.
afflicted with (Most people with a disability do not see themselves as afflicted.)	person has (name of disability)
birth defect, congenital defect, deformity	person with a disability since birth, person with a congenital disability

Words to avoid	Acceptable alternatives
the blind, the visually impaired	person who is blind, person with a vision impairment
confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound (A wheelchair provides mobility, not restriction.)	uses a wheelchair
cripple, crippled (These terms convey a negative image of a twisted ugly body.)	has a physical disability, has a mobility disability
the deaf	person is deaf (This refers to people who cannot hear but do not necessarily identify with the Deaf community.) or the Deaf (This refers to people who identify themselves as part of the Deaf community and who use sign language. Using 'Deaf community' is only appropriate when referring to this particular community.)
deaf and dumb (This is sometimes used to describe an inability to hear and speak, which does not imply any intellectual disability.)	person who is deaf and non-verbal or Deaf people (This refers to people who identify themselves as part of the Deaf community and who use sign language.)

Words to avoid	Acceptable alternatives
defective, deformed (These are degrading terms.)	Specify the disability.
the disabled	people with a disability
dwarf (Has negative connotations.)	short-statured person
epileptic	person with epilepsy
fit, attack, spell	seizure
the handicapped	person with a disability (If referring to an environmental or attitudinal barrier then 'person who is handicapped by a disability' is appropriate.)
insane, lunatic, maniac, mental patient, mentally diseased, neurotic, psycho, schizophrenic, unsound mind (These are derogatory terms.)	person with a psychiatric disability (or specify condition)
invalid (The literal sense of the word is 'not valid'.)	person with a disability
mentally retarded, defective, feeble minded, imbecile, moron, retarded (These are offensive, inaccurate terms.)	person with an intellectual disability
mongol (This term is outdated and derogatory.)	has Down syndrome

Words to avoid	Acceptable alternatives
patient (Only use in context of doctor–patient relationship.)	person with a disability
physically challenged, intellectually challenged, vertically challenged, differently abled (These are ridiculous euphemisms for disability.)	person with a disability
people with disabilities (Refers to people who have multiple disabilities.)	person with multiple disabilities, person with a disability
spastic (Usually refers to a person with cerebral palsy or who has uncontrollable spasms. This is a derogatory term and often used as a term of abuse. Should never be used as a noun.)	person with a disability
special (This term is overused, e.g. ‘special’ person.)	Describe the person, event or achievement as you would normally.
vegetative (This is an offensive and degrading term.)	in a coma, comatose, unconscious
victim (People with a disability are not necessarily victims and prefer not to be seen as such.)	has a disability

Interviewing a person with a disability

Before the interview

- Ask if you should make any special arrangements in advance. An interpreter, for example, may be needed if the person has hearing loss or is not able to speak or communicate in a conventional way.
- Ask the person being interviewed to choose where to meet. Not all places are accessible to people with a mobility disability. Additionally, lack of affordable, accessible transport may be an issue. A person with a hearing impairment may find it difficult to concentrate if the surroundings are noisy.
- Try to interview the person alone, although a second person may be necessary as an attendant or an interpreter. Be aware that sometimes friends and family may interrupt and presume to speak for the person being interviewed. Stay on track and remember who you are interviewing.



During the interview

- Sit at the same level as the person being interviewed. Ask if you can be heard clearly or if it is better to sit on one side rather than another.
- Speak directly to the person and maintain eye contact rather than interact directly with an interpreter or companion.
- Do not hold back from asking frank questions — for example, how the person manages certain tasks. Usually people with a disability are not precious and fragile about their disabilities. On the other hand, intrusive personal questions (for example, about a person's sex life) can be very offensive. Be matter-of-fact but remember that honest answers deserve honest treatment and should never be used in a sensational or morbid way.
- Be honest about the story angle. If the story is about discrimination in the workplace then including details about a person's medical condition, unless relevant, is quite unjustified.
- Do not gratuitously emphasise physical differences or adaptive aids and technologies in stories or photographs unless these are the focus of, or relevant to, the story. If a person in a wheelchair is being interviewed about neighbourhood environmental pollution, for example, the visual focus should be the person, not the wheelchair.
- Do not assume you understand how the person feels about having a disability. Even if you know someone with a similar condition, the person you are interviewing may not think or feel the same way. Ask the person how he or she feels.

- Do not feel embarrassed or guilty if you have difficulty understanding the person you are interviewing. He or she will probably have experienced this before and will have developed ways of coping. Be patient and persevere. Never pretend to understand. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- Resist the pressure to get the 30-second grab. Allow the person you are interviewing the courtesy of telling events and particular details at his or her own pace.

After the interview

Ask yourself:

- How can I portray the person I have just met in the most positive way, being mindful not to sensationalise or patronise his or her situation?
- Is a reference to a disability necessary to the story? If it is, am I using appropriate terminology?
- Is this piece accurate and unbiased? Have I avoided sensationalism?

Providing public information to people with a disability

Relying on print media or verbal communication only to get your message out will place many people with a disability at a disadvantage. Presenting your material in a range of formats allows a wide range of groups in the community, not just people with a disability, to access information. Some formats cater to the needs of more than one disability group, and some will be of benefit to the community in general. The following is a brief description of suitable formats for different disability groups.

People with a vision impairment

Effective ways of providing information to people who are blind or have a vision impairment include:

- **large print**

Text can be produced in a variety of sizes to meet individual needs. Printed material should ideally be in a sans serif font and 16 point, with a minimum size of 11 point. Use a text colour that contrasts with the background (avoid red type as it has poor contrast and makes it difficult for people to read). Black type on white or off-white background is optimal. Use style devices such as underlining, italics and hyphenation sparingly.

- **information and communication technology**

Providing information electronically, either on a website, through email or an electronic file/document, can be a good option if the information is prepared in an appropriate format.

Unlike sighted people, most computer users who are blind or vision impaired do not use a mouse. Many use a screen reader

or, in some cases, a braille keyboard. A screen reader is software that works with a speech synthesiser to read aloud everything on a computer screen, including icons, menus, text, punctuation and control buttons. It reads across the screen from left to right, one line at a time.

This software will attempt to 'read' any formatting — for example, instead of reading columns from top to bottom it will read the first line of text in the first column and then jump across to read the first line of the next column. For this reason, it is best to keep formatting (including tabs, tables and columns) to an absolute minimum in your document.

Information provided as a PDF file should also be available electronically as an RTF file. This will ensure it can be read by a screen reader and will also be able to be enlarged by users to suit their needs.

Advice and guidelines for creating accessible websites are available from the World Wide Web Consortium website (www.w3.org/WAI).

- **audiotape/CD-ROM**

Newsletters, books and reports can be produced on audiotape or CD-ROM. It is best to use an organisation that specialises in the production of audio material for people with a print disability, such as the Queensland Narrating Service. Costs are minimal.

- **radio**

4RPH 1296AM is the Queensland radio station for the print handicapped. The station airs a wide range of printed material, including newspapers, magazines, books and journals to people who for reasons of age, disability or literacy problems cannot handle or read information in a printed format.

- **braille**

Braille is used by a small proportion of people who are blind. Documents on computer file can be converted into braille using braille conversion software and printed out by a braille embosser.

People with a hearing impairment

Effective ways of providing information to people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment include:

- **written/printed information**

Printed information should be written in plain English and include cartoons, diagrams, photographs and pictures to help communicate your message clearly.

- **captioning**

Captioning films, videos, television programs and advertisements assists viewers who are deaf or hearing impaired to understand what they are not able to hear.

- **telephone typewriter (TTY) and/or National Relay Service (NRS)**

Organisations can communicate with people who are profoundly deaf through the use of a TTY or the NRS.

- **sign language**

Skilled sign-language interpreters are available for seminars, meetings, conferences and other community events. Qualified interpreters can be booked through the Deaf Services Queensland and the Far North Queensland Deaf Interpreting Service.

- **audio loop**

An audio loop in public meeting places such as halls, churches, seminar rooms, lecture theatres and schools will allow people who use hearing aids to participate.

People with an intellectual disability

People with an intellectual disability may require information to be presented in a brief and clear but not patronising or childlike manner. Written information may need to be supported by symbols, pictures or photographs.

People with a physical disability

People with a mobility disability, including those with a temporary disability, may find their access to mainstream information limited. They may be unable to travel to libraries or meetings or may encounter difficulties with inaccessible buildings. They too may prefer to receive information via the internet, email, radio, DVD or disk.

People with a manipulatory disability have difficulty holding and/or moving objects as a result of nerve injuries, arthritis or amputation. They may find it difficult to hold books or papers and turn pages. When providing information for this audience, the formats to consider include the internet, disk, DVD and radio.



Communicating with a person with a disability

Some guidelines to follow when talking with a person with a disability include the following:

- Establish and maintain eye contact at the same level as much as possible.
- Face and speak directly to the person rather than through the companion, attendant or sign-language interpreter who may also be present.
- Never speak about the person as if he or she is invisible, cannot understand what is being said or cannot speak for himself or herself.
- Do not put people with a disability on a pedestal or talk to them in patronising terms as if their performing normal, everyday activities was exceptional — for example, ‘Oh, you cook your own meals. How amazing!’
- Always respect the person’s dignity, individuality and desire for independence. If help is required in a given situation, do not assist without asking first.
- Refer to adults with a disability in the same way you would refer to any other adult. Do not refer to them by their first names where in similar circumstances with an interviewee who does not have a disability you would use a title such as mister, ms or doctor.

Useful resources and references

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004, *Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: summary of findings*, cat. no. 4430, ABS, Canberra.

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Find out more

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