

Reporting it Right

Media guidelines for portraying people with a disability

Why do we need media guidelines?

Media professionals focus on reporting the news quickly and accurately, in a fast-paced world, under increasingly tight deadlines and across a broad variety of mediums.

This guide has been designed to assist journalists and media professionals when reporting on people with a disability and has been developed in consultation with experts from the disability sector and representatives from print, radio and TV media.

From interview techniques to language tips, this guide provides practical advice about the kinds of things journalists and media professionals should consider when reporting about people with a disability.

It's important to ensure that people with a disability are portrayed as real people – rather than as heroic, inspirational, victims, or sufferers. They have jobs, families, talents, opinions and faults, just like everyone else.

It's hoped these guidelines will be a valuable resource to help the media continue *Reporting It Right*.

Break out quote

One in five Victorians and over four million Australians have a disability.

Before you start

About to write, film or photograph a piece about a person with a disability?

This list may help you to present the person and their story in a sensitive and dignified way.

	Think about...		Because...
1	If it's not essential to the story, do you need to focus on or include the person's disability?	1	People with a disability are people first – they are not all the same or defined by their disability.
2	Giving the person with the disability a voice, even if it's a challenge.	2	Otherwise, it implies they can't speak or think for themselves.
3	Portraying the person as part of their community.	3	People with a disability are not a separate class of people. They have jobs, friends, families, relationships and viewpoints.
4	Trying not to portray people with a disability who achieve great success or physical feats as 'heroic/inspirational'.	4	It suggests that it is surprising that people with a disability can achieve great success.
5	Avoiding terms like 'despite' and 'overcoming the odds/adversity' when describing a person's achievements.	5	It implies that people with a disability are limited by their disability and unable to achieve success.
6	Trying not to portray people with a disability who marry/have a job/have children/undertake daily activities as 'extraordinary'.	6	It implies that people with a disability are not capable of these things.
7	Being careful not to portray having a disability as a tragedy or an affliction/illness.	7	Every person with a disability is an individual whose life is valuable and rich.
8	Trying not to divulge too much information about the person.	8	Those with a disability, like others in the community, can be targets of violence and crime. Also, like people without a disability they choose to share personal information as they see fit.

Break out quote

Avoid sensationalising the achievements of people with a disability.

Pre-interview checklist

Along with your usual pre-interview research and preparation, some things you might like to consider when interviewing a person with a disability are:

1. Have you thought about the right interview location, e.g. accessible via ramps/lifts/accessible parking/accessible toilet?
2. Will the interviewee require any additional support, for example an attendant carer or a sign language interpreter? Ask the person if they need anything.

During the interview

When interviewing a person with a disability, it's important to take a moment to think about your approach. Here are some key considerations to keep in mind:

1. Ask the person how they feel – every person is different and can view their disability differently.
2. Ask them how they would like their disability to be described.
3. Make sure you focus on the person during the interview, even if a carer, friend or family member tries to speak on their behalf. It is important the person with a disability is heard.
4. In some instances you will need to allow the person time to provide their answer.
5. Ask the hard questions (if the disability is central to the story) – don't assume a person with a disability will be too sensitive to talk about the way they deal with certain tasks in their life.

Break out quote

Try not to portray people with a disability as objects of pity or as brave.

Photos, video and TV

How people with a disability are represented visually is just as important as the language used to describe them. This list provides a guide for photographing or filming people with a disability:

- Use photos that show the person with a disability in a way that is positive and respectful, not as a victim or someone to be pitied.
- Refer to the person's disability only if it is critical to the story.
- Try not to include the person's carer or family unless it is absolutely necessary to support the person or central to the piece – show them as independent.
- Avoid cutting away to equipment like wheelchairs when filming – focus on the person, as you would in any other interview unless it is central to the story.
- Unless this is the focus of the story, try not to show the person in isolation. Many people with a disability are active in the community.

Language

Media professionals will always need to describe things in the most concise way possible, particularly when it comes to headlines. It's a journalist's job to communicate in clear and simple language.

While it won't always be possible, consider these language preferences wherever you can.

Some of the more common misused terms and recommended alternatives are provided here. The key consideration is to always put the person first, not the disability.

	Do use		Instead of
1	Person with a disability* Person with [specific disability], for example: Person with autism, Person with epilepsy John has spina bifida Jane has a vision impairment	1	Disabled/the disabled/victim of/suffers from/handicapped/special/stricken with/unfortunate Autistic person epileptic person/autistic person
2	Person with a physical disability Person with [specify disability], for example: Person with cerebral palsy	2	Physically challenged
3	Person with a sensory disability Person with [specify disability], for example: Person with a hearing impairment Person who is deaf** Person who is blind	3	The deaf** The blind, blind people

* When reporting about people who are 65 years or older with age-related disabilities, use the terms 'older people' or 'seniors' instead of 'the elderly'.

**In written information, you may see the word 'deaf' with a lower-case, when it refers to all people who are deaf or hearing impaired. As a general rule, an upper-case or capital 'D' should be used when recognising a culturally unique and diverse group who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language) to communicate and who regard themselves as part of a linguistic minority.

Language (continued...)

	Do use		Instead of
4	Person with an intellectual disability Person with [specify disability], for example: Person with Down syndrome	4	Mentally disabled/intellectually challenged Down's kids
5	Person with a mental illness Person with [specify disability], for example: Person with schizophrenia or a person with bi-polar disorder	5	Insane/mentally disabled Schizophrenic person
6	Accessible toilet / accessible parking space/accessible entry	6	Disabled toilet/disabled parking space/disabled entry
7	Person who uses a wheelchair	7	Confined to a wheelchair/wheelchair bound
8	Person without a disability	8	Normal/non-disabled

Break out quotes

Language choice can empower people.

Put the person before the disability.

A final checklist

Have I checked?

1. Is the story about a person's disability? If not, don't mention it.
2. Is the person or their disability described appropriately? (See language section)
3. Does the piece use excessive emotive language? e.g. tragedy/triumph.
4. Is the headline/teaser appropriate? Try to use the person first principle.
5. Are the visuals sensitive and appropriate? (See photos, video and TV section).
6. Are there quotes/grabs from the interviewee?
7. Do I need to contact the relevant disability organisation for expert comment?

Need an expert comment or more information?

If you're seeking credible and reliable information, here are some useful links to get you started. The following list is by no means exhaustive, so if you are seeking information about specific disabilities, please consult with peak organisations, such as Vicdeaf for issues regarding deafness/hearing impairment issues or Vision Australia for issues about blindness or low vision.

Department of Human Services

1300 650 172

TTY 13 36 77 then

1300 650 172

www.dhs.vic.gov.au

Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission

1300 292 153

TTY 1300 289 621

www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au

Disability Services Commissioner

1800 677 342

TTY 1300 726 563

www.odsc.vic.gov.au

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

1300 653 227

TTY 13 36 77 then

1300 653 227

www.fahcsia.gov.au

Australian Bureau of Statistics

1300 135 070

TTY 13 36 77 then

1300 135 070

www.abs.gov.au

Australian Federation of Disability Organisations

03 9662 3324

TTY 03 9662 3374

www.afdo.org.au

Acknowledgements

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Australian Broadcasting Corporation

ACP magazines

Australian Federation of Disability Organisations

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Leader Newspapers – Bar None Review, 2007

Monash University School of Journalism

News Limited Victoria

Public Relations Institute of Australia

RMIT School of Communications

Seven Network

Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability Inc (VALID)

Victorian Disability Advisory Council

VicHealth

Women with Disabilities Victoria

Yooralla

Youth Disability Advocacy Service

3AW

References

- *Using the right words*, Dos and Don'ts for communicating about disability, Yooralla.
- *A way with words*, Guidelines for the portrayal of people with a disability, Disability Services Queensland, 2005.
- *Words that work*, reporting on disability, a guide for media, Disability Services Commission, Government of Western Australia.
- *Disability Promotion Community Awareness, Media Reporting, Fund Raising, Marketing & Communications Strategies Policy Statement*, Australian Federation of Disability Organisations.

Thank You

If you would like to receive this publication in another format, please phone 1300 880 043 or 9639 2417 (TTY) if required or email ofd@dhs.vic.gov.au.

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