



Disability-Friendly Media Guidelines

Ensuring the positive portrayal of
individuals with disabilities in the media.



The Ability Center

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As part of The Ability Center of Greater Toledo's initiative to become the most disability-friendly community in the country – we aim to educate our local media partners to begin speaking to and about individuals with disabilities with dignity and capture inclusive storytelling.

The mission of The Ability Center is to advocate, educate, partner, and provide services supporting people with disabilities to thrive within their community.

Included in this Media Guideline:

1. Disability Etiquette
2. Social Media Accessibility
3. Outdated vs. Updated Terminology
4. Myths & Facts
5. Quick Tips
6. Myth and Facts



1. Disability Etiquette

- When reporting on an individual with any type of disability, it is important to represent him or her with respect, in a positive and equitable light. Using person-first language is always preferred unless otherwise noted.
- Speak directly to a person with a disability, making eye contact, rather than to a peer or sign language interpreter who may be present.
- Always identify yourself and others who may be with you when meeting or speaking to someone with a visual disability. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking, and identify who you are when you begin.
- Offer to shake hands or ask what they prefer as an alternative greeting when being introduced to a person with limited hand use; offering the left hand is an acceptable alternative.
- Establish eye contact with a person with a hearing disability to get their attention. Look directly at the person and speak clearly and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If a person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that they have the ability to distinguish your speaking voice.
- Respect individuals' ability to be their own self-advocate and request help, before offering.



- Treat people with disabilities in an age appropriate manner; do not talk down to or belittle them, and never assume their ability based on their disability.
- Treat people in wheelchairs and their equipment with respect; do not pat them on the head or shoulder, lean on their wheelchair, use it as a footrest, etc. People with disabilities often view their equipment as an extension of themselves.
- Listen attentively and patiently when speaking with people who have a speech disability and wait for them to finish. It's okay to ask clarifying questions or to paraphrase back.

- Always ask the owner of a service animal before interacting with (talking to, petting, etc) the animal.

1 in 4 people have a disability

- Whenever possible and appropriate, place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone (e.g. if it's someone in a wheelchair, look for a chair to sit in that places you at their eye level or take a step back so that you're not looking down on them; however, don't squat, kneel, etc- it can be perceived as condescending).

Source: International Labour Organization, IrishAid Department of Foreign Affairs



- Consider universal design when planning activities and ask preferences (e.g. dimmable room lighting, headphones available, choice meeting space- size, various/alternate seating options, offering information in different formats and with large font size, etc.)
- Prior to holding an event, interview, meeting, etc. ask guests what accommodations are needed.
- Use person-preferred language; Ask a person how they prefer to be addressed: person first or identity first. When in doubt, or unable to ask, use person-first language. (e.g. a woman in a wheelchair versus wheelchair bound woman; deaf man versus man with hearing disability).

- Only reference characteristics related to disability, gender, sexual orientation, race, etc. when relevant to the discussion.
- Avoid using terms like “retarded”, “idiot”, “crazy”, “schizo”, etc to describe someone’s behavior.

Disability is the only minority group you can join at any time.

- It’s acceptable to use common expressions such as “see you later”, “would you like to walk to lunch” or “did you hear about...?” that seem to relate to a person’s disability.



2. Social Media Accessibility

When posting a photo, include a photo description via alt tags:

1. Directions for Facebook
2. Directions for Twitter
3. Directions for Instagram

Use person-first language if you don't know the audience's preferences

Put Closed Captioning on videos:

1. Youtube
2. Facebook Live

Virtual platform etiquette and accommodations:

1. Always have an interpreter available and Closed Captioning on
2. Introduce or identify yourself every time before speaking
3. For more smaller platforms, ask the participants what accommodations are needed

3. Outdated vs. Updated Terminology

OUTDATED: Stripping People of Their Identity and Humanity	UPDATED: Humanizing and Respectful
Retarded, Mentally Challenged	Cognitive or Intellectual Disability
Suffers From, Afflicted by, Victim of, Unfortunate	Has a Disability
Normal	Typical
The Handicapped, Handi-capable, Differently-abled, Crippled, Lame, Defective	People with Disabilities
Wheelchair Bound, Confined to, Invalid	Person Who Uses a Wheelchair; Person with a Mobility Disability; Physical Disability
Hearing Impaired	Deaf or Hard of Hearing; Hearing Disability or Impairment
Mental Disorder, Mental Illness, Crazy, Insane, Psycho	Mental Health Condition, Absence of Positive Mental Health or Psychiatric Disability
Midget Or Dwarf	Person of Short Stature, Little Person
Fits, Spells, Attacks	Seizures
Slow Learner, Dumb	Person with a Learning Disability
Birth Defect	Congenital Disability
Normal, Able-bodied	Person(S) Without a Disability

Source: National Disability Institute's Training and Technical Assistance Team



4. Story Creation

When choosing story ideas involving disability, consider:

1. Does this person identify as having a disability?
2. How do they want to be spoken to/about?
3. Am I using passive or negative language when referring to this person's story?
4. Am I focusing on the independence of this person as I share their story?
5. Am I sharing this how this person contributes to society?

5. Quick Tips

1. Keep a disability and inclusion content calendar.
2. Keep it positive - language is important to individuals with disabilities.
3. Keep it accessible – lack of information in accessible formats prevents audiences from engaging with your content.
4. Keep it focused on the person – not the impairment.
5. Keep it real – don't overemphasize people with disabilities as "heroes".

6. Myth and Facts

MYTH: There aren't many people with disabilities, so it's not really an issue.

FACT: One in four people in the United States identifies as having a disability. People with disabilities are present in all societies. Many are hidden or excluded from society, either in their homes or in institutions because of social stigma. Some disabilities may not be visible while others acquire disabilities later in life. Some people who have a disability may not even think of themselves as disabled.

MYTH: Disability is a health issue.

FACT: Focusing only on the impairment or on the disability as something to be 'cured' is called the 'medical model' of disability. This approach often overlooks the abilities of the person. The 'social model' sees the barriers to participation from society.

MYTH: Accessibility only benefits people with disabilities.

FACT: Good accessibility benefits everyone. Accessibility is strongly linked to the design of products, devices, services or environments and takes into consideration everyone's needs – whether or not they have a disability. (www.disabilityaction.org).