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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*.

**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.

Avoid sensationalising the achievements of people with a disability.

Think about...	Because...
If it's not essential to the story, do you need to focus on or include the person's disability?	People with a disability are people first – they are not all the same or defined by their disability.
Giving the person with the disability a voice, even if it's a challenge.	Otherwise, it implies they can't speak or think for themselves.
Portraying the person as part of their community.	People with a disability are not a separate class of people. They have jobs, friends, families, relationships and viewpoints.
Trying not to portray people with a disability who achieve great success or physical feats as 'heroic/inspirational'.	It suggests that it is surprising that people with a disability can achieve great success.
Avoiding terms like 'despite' and 'overcoming the odds/adversity' when describing a person's achievements.	It implies that people with a disability are limited by their disability and unable to achieve success.
Trying not to portray people with a disability who marry/have a job/have children/undertake daily activities as 'extraordinary'.	It implies that people with a disability are not capable of these things.
Being careful not to portray having a disability as a tragedy or an affliction/illness.	Every person with a disability is an individual whose life is valuable and rich.
Trying not to divulge too much information about the person.	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.

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:

- ✓ Have you thought about the right interview location, e.g. accessible via ramps/lifts/ accessible parking/accessible toilet?
- ✓ 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.

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
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	Disabled/the disabled/victim of/suffers from/ handicapped/special/stricken with/unfortunate Autistic person Epileptic person
Person with a physical disability Person with [specify disability], for example: Person with cerebral palsy	Physically challenged
Person with a sensory disability Person with [specify disability], for example: Person with a hearing impairment Person who is deaf** Person who is blind	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

Language choice
can empower
people.

Put the person
before the
disability.

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

A final checklist

Have I checked?

- ✓ Is the story about a person's disability? If not, don't mention it.
- ✓ Is the person or their disability described appropriately? ([See language section](#)).
- ✓ Does the piece use excessive emotive [language](#)? e.g. tragedy/triumph.
- ✓ Is the headline/teaser appropriate? Try to use the person first principle.
- ✓ Are the visuals sensitive and appropriate? ([See photos, videos and TV section](#)).
- ✓ Are there any quotes/grabs from the interviewee?
- ✓ 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.

CONTACT	PHONE	WEB
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
Ballarat Courier
Carers Victoria
Fairfax Media Limited
Knox City Council
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

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