



Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a disabled person is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. Disabilities include but aren't limited to: developmental (Down Syndrome, Autism, ADHD, intellectual); physical/sensory (spinal cord injury, amputation, limb difference, cerebral palsy, d/Deaf and hard of hearing, blind/low vision); and psychiatric (anxiety/depression disorders, schizophrenia, personality disorders). Previously, "disability" was just a diagnosis. Through advocacy and societal changes, the concept now encompasses much more, including community, identity, constituency, history, and culture.

HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Disabled people make up one of the U.S.'s largest minority groups (1 in 4 adults) but are some of the least represented characters on screen. On the rare occasion that disability is portrayed, characters are often seen as less-than, lacking, and exploited as objects of pity, which further marginalizes disabled people.

NOTE ON LANGUAGE: Every disabled person relates to their disability differently and might prefer identity-first* or person-first language* or something else entirely. When describing that person, use the language they use to describe themselves. Their preference is often rooted in complicated societal dynamics and can be influenced by their particular upbringing, race, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, etc. As TV writers, we can choose the language our fictional characters use to identify themselves.

DISABLED PEOPLE

OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Cure at All Costs:** A character starts with a disability but is later cured through magic, miracles, or medical intervention. This promotes the harmful medical model of disability*, ignoring that disability is a valid identity—one which many people wear with pride.
- **The "Overcomer":** Disabled people "overcoming" their disability, whether to do extraordinary things or simply to live an ordinary life. As above, this implies that disabled people should want to rid themselves of their disability, and those who don't, or can't, are somehow failures.
- **Inspiration Porn:** Portrayals of disabled people as inspirational based solely on their disability, most often for the benefit of a non-disabled audience. These stories often focus on "good non-disabled people" but don't address the structural and societal barriers disabled people face.
- **A Burden:** Disabled characters shown as having a negative impact on their loved ones and society. Characters are sometimes shown dying by suicide to avoid being a burden to non-disabled characters, swaying audiences to believe a disabled life isn't worth living.
- **Disability Superpowers:** Characters with a sensory disability developing superhuman powers related to their other senses (e.g., the blind man with exceptional hearing and the deaf woman with x-ray vision).
- **Mythical Little People (Dwarfs):** Portrayed only as mythical creatures such as elves. There are an estimated 30,000 Americans with dwarfism, all with the same universal desires of average-height people to belong, succeed, feel free, and find love.
- **The "Evil Cripple":** Disabled villains who are morally perturbed, often due to anger over their disability.

THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Person Next Door:** Characters portrayed in mainstream professions (e.g., bankers, teachers, lawyers, first responders), in families, as good parents, etc. Portrayals of disabilities being unremarkable and normal.
- **Three-Dimensionality:** Stories centered on things other than a character's disability (e.g., their hobbies, friendships, career aspirations).
- **Healthy Romantic Lives:** Dating, in relationships, and having sex. It's a common misconception that disabled people aren't interested in dating and/or can't have sex.
- **Intersectionality:** LGBTQIA+, women, and a wide range of racial and/or ethnic backgrounds.
- **Pride:** Characters comfortable with, proud of, and celebrating their disabilities. Show who a character is *because* of their disability rather than what they can do in *spite* of it.
- **Oppression:** Exploration of ableism* and its impact on disabled people (e.g., ADA violations, segregation in schools and institutions, microaggressions).
- **Better Language:** Whenever possible, use non-ableist language (i.e., instead of calling someone a "psycho" or "crazy," use words like "terrible" or "irrational"). Always avoid offensive words like "r-tard" and "m-dget," a word misused to describe Dwarfs (Note: "Dwarf" is becoming the preferred term over "Little Person").
- **More Diverse Disabilities:** Go beyond portrayals of wheelchair users. Show characters as having prostheses, a limp, a stutter, using sign language, experiencing a cognitive delay, etc.

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*Denotes a term in the glossary

QUICK FACTS

- Across the 2019-2020 season, only 3.1% of series regular characters on broadcast programming had a disability, which represents a record high.
- In 2018, 78.4% of disabled characters on broadcast TV were portrayed by non-disabled actors.
- According to August 2018 figures from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 61 million U.S. adults live with a disability. That's 26% of the U.S. adult population, making this group the nation's largest minority group. It's important to note that anyone can develop a disability, so this is a group everyone will eventually belong to if they live long enough.
- In the U.S. today, less than 20% of disabled people are employed, and disabled people are more than three times as likely to be a victim of violent crime as non-disabled people.

ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- Augsburg University: [“Avoiding Ableist Language”](#)
- Bureau of Justice Statistics: [“Disabilities”](#)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics: [“Persons with a Disability Labor Force Characteristics 2019”](#)
- Ford Foundation: [“Road Map for Inclusion: Changing the Face of Disability in Media”](#)
- GLAAD: [“Where We Are on TV Report—2019”](#)
- Public Health Post: [“Say the Word”](#)
- Ruderman Family Foundation: [“The Ruderman White Paper on Authentic Representation in TV, 2018”](#)

GLOSSARY

Ableism:

Practices and beliefs that assign inferior value to those with developmental, emotional, physical/sensory, or psychiatric disabilities.

Identity-First Language:

“Disabled Person” is the term often preferred by disabled people, especially those involved in or with access to disabled culture. The Autistic community overall strongly supports this language, contrary to what has been the practice of “person-first language” (see below).

Medical Model vs. Social Model of Disability:

The medical model is a belief long fallen out of favor with the disabled community. It's the idea that disability might reduce quality of life and, therefore, it should be diminished or corrected through medical intervention. The social model holds that society's attitudes, structure, and organization causes a disability rather than a person's impairment or difference causing it.

Person-First Language:

“Person with a disability” is the term taught in academic settings and often used by non-disabled caregivers, educators, and/or medical professionals.

For in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms (Deaf vs. deaf, Disabled vs. disabled, dwarfism, limb difference, neurodiversity), please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#).

In-kind support and materials for this factsheet were provided by the following partner organizations. Please contact them for additional information, story guidance, and in-room consultations.



A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:
WriteInclusion.org/factsheets

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:

