

Covering Disability

One in five Americans lives with a disability, including

- physical;
- medical;
- psychological;
- mental; or
- multiple, such as disabilities resulting from traumatic brain injuries.

More people are impacted by these issues through their families.

How Has Your Publication Covered These Issues?

Susan LoTempio writes at Poynter.org that many disability-related stories fall into these “easy” categories:

- Pity stories, which focus on “victims” of a disability and are designed to make others feel they aren’t as bad off as the “victims.”
- Hero stories are about those who “overcome” their disabilities (often disabled athletes) and are designed to show there is some good in the world.
- Inspirational stories—any piece on Christopher Reeve, Jerry Lewis’ “kids” during his telethon—make us believe that some good can come out of inexplicable tragedy or human suffering.

These stories each may reinforce inaccurate stereotypes, isolate and objectify people with disabilities and “prevent journalists from digging deeper and doing better.”

Don’t go for the clichéd story.

Why Should We Cover These Issues?

1. Issues of disability impact your community.
2. Your audience includes people impacted by issues of disability.
3. Our mission includes the following goals:
 - decrease isolation
 - educate and inform
 - provide context for the audience’s experiences
 - offer our audience new ways of seeing the world, of changing how they think
 - uncover injustice

Why Do We Avoid Covering These Issues or Not Cover Them Well?

1. Personal fears

Characters with disabilities in fiction have often been used as plot devices, not humans. They are

- heroic;
- villainous;
- saintly;

- superhuman;
- pathetic;
- but almost always isolated.

2. Embarrassment: How do we interview people with disabilities?

A person's disability is a part of his or her life as much as skin color, country of origin, ethnic identity or religious affiliation. It is not a source of shame to be ignored. How much of a role the disability plays in the story depends on the sort of story you are writing

3. Lack of skill: What words do we use to write about a person with a disability?

The words a journalist uses can reinforce stereotypes or help to correct them. The chart below offers suggestions for writing stories about an athlete with a disability. The same principles apply if someone won an award for service, witnessed an accident or runs for student government.



Tips for Interviewing People with Disabilities

- Focus on the person you are interviewing, not her disability.
- Speak directly to them, not to their parent, coach or interpreter.
- Ask before offering any assistance, and wait for an answer before giving assistance.
- When talking to someone with a hearing loss, be sure to face him and do not cover your mouth.
- When meeting an interview subject with a visual disability, identify yourself verbally. If they have a service animal or guide dog, do not praise, pet or talk to the animal.
- A wheelchair or other assistive device is part of the person's body space. Do not lean on or touch the wheelchair.
- Wait and listen as you interview. Do not finish sentences for someone who speaks slowly. Ask for clarification if you do not understand the person.

| Do Not | Do |
|--|---|
| <p>Emphasize the disability or the medical history.</p> | <p>Focus on the person or the sporting event. For example</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report on the game or race including highlights, scores and outcomes. • Write about how the athlete trains, who they compete against, their athletic goals and their progress toward them. |
| <p>Avoid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group labels like <i>the paraplegic, the quadriplegic, the deaf or the blind</i>. • Individual labels like <i>handicapped, mentally different or physically challenged</i>. • Descriptors such as <i>suffers from, afflicted with, victim (of a disease), crippled or confined to a wheelchair</i>. • <i>Special</i>. It often means <i>separate</i> such as <i>special teams or special competitions</i>. Avoid referring to athletes with disabilities as <i>special</i>. | <p>Use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Brown, who has a spinal cord injury ... • Basketball star Rachel Smith, who uses a wheelchair, ... • When background seems important, respect the athlete's desire for privacy. <i>Ask the people you are interviewing for their preferences</i>. • Remember they are first and foremost athletes, and you are writing a sports story. |

4. Lack of resources: Where do I get information?

- Poynter.org (search *disability*)
- National Center on Disability and Journalism at ncdj.org

5. What kind of story do I write?

Any kind at all, so long as it is thoughtful, well-researched and doesn't turn out to be exactly the kind of story you thought you were going to write.

6. When do I mention the disability?

When it is relevant to the story. Imagine the disability were an ethnic or racial identification.

When is it relevant or appropriate to mention the person is African-American or Haitian-American?