reporting on disability

words that work

a guide for media
It’s a significant sector of the community and it’s growing. An ageing population and other factors mean that within 15 years, one quarter of all Western Australians will have a disability.

The influence of the media is wide-reaching. The way people with disability are portrayed can shape perceptions.

People with disability want – and sometimes need – to be able to listen to, watch or read the news.

‘Words that work, reporting on disability; a guide for media’ provides guidelines on how to write about and interview people with disability.

Access the guide and checklists online at

www.count-me-in.com.au
putting people first

Emphasising the person, not the disability, may seem a subtle difference but it’s important to people with disability. It takes just two extra two words or less than half a second to say ‘person with a disability’ rather than ‘disabled person’. People with disability are people first!

- **avoid collective terms** like ‘the disabled’, ‘the blind’, ‘the deaf’ – instead, use ‘people with disability’; ‘people who are blind’; ‘people who are deaf’

- **don’t describe people by their disability**; eg ‘an epileptic’, say ‘a person who has epilepsy’, or ‘people who use a wheelchair’, rather than ‘wheelchair users’

- **refer to the person first**: ‘Mrs Smith has cerebral palsy’, rather than ‘cerebral palsy sufferer Mrs Smith’. The use of Mr/Mrs/Ms at the beginning of the sentence highlights the fact that people with disability are people first.
In addition to getting your facts right, you can also get the perception right by taking small but simple steps to ensure people with disability are portrayed accurately.

- **focus on what people can do**; not what they can’t
- **respect a person’s individuality** and rights
- **adults with an intellectual disability are not children**; don’t portray them as such, eg ‘Mike, pictured with work mate Mr Smith…’
- **keep it informational** and use standard human empathy and interest when reporting
- **if a story is not about a person’s disability, then don’t mention it.** It isn’t relevant
- **avoid using excessively emotive language.** People with disability are often portrayed at either extreme – as victims who have been dealt a cruel blow or else depicted as super humanly courageous in overcoming the odds and put on a pedestal
- **include people with disability in everyday stories.** People with disability shouldn’t just be in stories about disability; use them in vox pops – they make up almost a quarter of our population
Language is a powerful tool that can change stereotypes and attitudes. You can use it to make a positive difference for people with disability in our community.

**vision**

- Use ‘person with a vision impairment’ for people who have partial sight, or ‘blind’ for people with no, or very limited sight.

**hearing**

- Use ‘person who is hard of hearing’ for people with partial hearing and ‘person who is deaf’ for those people with profound to complete hearing loss.

**developmental**

- Developmental disability refers to cognitive or physical disabilities that occur during the early years before the age of 18. Refer to a ‘person or child with a developmental disability’, or where appropriate refer to the condition eg ‘person with autism, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, Down syndrome, or spina bifida’.

**congenital**

- Say ‘person with a disability since birth’; ‘person with a congenital disability’

**physical**

- Use ‘person who uses a wheelchair’ not ‘wheelchair user’. Refer to a ‘person with a physical disability’ or ‘mobility impairment’.
Don’t assume

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t assume</th>
<th>Do consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>people with disability should be pitied and treated differently</td>
<td>everyone deserves to be valued regardless of ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people with disability who do everyday things like getting married or having children are extraordinary</td>
<td>people with disability can do many things, including everyday tasks such as paying bills, going to work, raising families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people with disability are asexual</td>
<td>people with disability have relationships just like everyone else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people with disability are a burden</td>
<td>people with disability contribute to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people with disability are superheroes</td>
<td>they are high achievers, who happen to have a disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people who don’t speak can’t communicate</td>
<td>there are ways to communicate that don’t use words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When reporting, consider whether you are stereotyping a person with disability.
Interviewing a person with disability may require a bit more forethought. Here are some ways to ensure your interviewee is comfortable and relaxed and you get what you need.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t</th>
<th>Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>stand over your interviewee</td>
<td>sit at the <strong>same level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shoot down on people, when filming or taking photos</td>
<td><strong>shoot the person with disability at their level</strong>; consider microphone height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cut away to equipment or focus on aids, such as wheelchairs when filming</td>
<td>always <strong>focus on the person</strong>, not their disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assist a person with disability without asking first</td>
<td>ask if you can assist in any way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assume every location is accessible</td>
<td>agree with the person being interviewed on a <strong>suitable location</strong> or check if they have any access needs ie parking or access to a lift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rush the questions</td>
<td><strong>give people time to answer</strong>; writing questions down, or providing them in advance, can be useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>address questions to a carer or friend</td>
<td><strong>direct your questions to the person with disability</strong> not their carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ignore what they say just because it might be hard to understand</td>
<td><strong>rephrase the question</strong> or ask them to repeat the answer — they are probably used to people asking for clarification and won’t be offended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be afraid to ask the person how they cope with certain things, such as everyday tasks, if relevant to the topic</td>
<td>be <strong>mindful of intrusive questions</strong>, such as intimate aspects of their lives which may be offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shout at someone with a disability</td>
<td>if someone is <strong>hard of hearing</strong>, seek their guidance on the best approach to communicate. Ask if one side is better than the other to hear, or if they require an interpreter. If the person lip reads, look directly at them and speak clearly at a normal pace and keep your hands clear of your face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assume a blind person doesn’t know where you are looking</td>
<td>if the person has a <strong>vision impairment</strong>, identify yourself and introduce any other people also present; maintain eye contact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
assistance/guide dogs aren’t sniffer dogs

They are assistance animals trained to perform many tasks that enable people to be more independent at home, at work and in the community.

Guiding, signalling, performing physical tasks, alerting to seizures, alerting to psychological/psychiatric disabilities and providing therapeutic companionship are typically some of those tasks.

A guide dog is specifically trained to serve as a guide for a person with a vision impairment.

If someone has an assistance dog; don’t pat or feed the dog – it is working.
making headlines

It’s understood that headlines need to be snappy but that shouldn’t mean they are disrespectful – try to use the ‘person first’ principle.

captions

People who are deaf or hard of hearing rely on captions to follow the soundtrack on television or dvds.

There are approximately **3.5 million** people who are hard of hearing or deaf in Australia.

Captions can be closed (need to be activated) or open and visible to all viewers.

Captions are not like language subtitles – they translate dialogue, are coloured and positioned to indicate who is speaking, and provide information on music and sound effects. Captions add context, tone and ease of understanding.

Currently, all broadcasters caption 75 per cent of all programming from 6am to midnight and all news and current affairs programs.

For more comprehensive information on captioning and media legislation go to: www.mediaaccess.org.au

Useful links

Disability Services Commission
www.dsc.wa.gov.au

Equal Opportunity Commission
www.eoc.wa.gov.au

UN Convention

Disability Discrimination Act

Disability Information and Resource Centre

World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) - accessible web sites
www.w3.org
words
that work

www.count-me-in.com.au