

REPRESENTATION PITFALLS:

Common Tropes to Avoid

While advocating for the inclusion of diverse perspectives in entertainment media is important, assessing the quality of on-screen representation is also crucial. At the Institute, we regularly analyze the quality of representations in television and film, and in so doing have identified pervasive tropes that are common in television programming. In storytelling, a trope is shorthand for a concept that the audience will recognize and understand instantly. While not all tropes are harmful, we present a list of common tropes for content creators to avoid, surrounding the six identities under analysis:

GENDER

Gender Tropes

- The Lovesick Lady: A female character who is “boy crazy” and whose life revolves around attracting, getting, or keeping a man.
- The Mean Girl: A female character who is often popular, pretty, and mean to other girls.
- The Meathead: A male character who is an incompetent jock/athlete.
- The Rational Man: A male character who is emotionally unavailable to the people in his life, and who uses logic in every situation.

RACE

Latinx Tropes

- Non-English Speaker: A female or male character is shown as speaking only Spanish and not able to speak English, or only speaks “broken” English.
- The Spicy Sexpot: A Latina character who is shown in revealing clothing and is flirtatious.
- The Help: A Latina character portrayed as a cook, maid or nanny, usually in service to a white family.
- The Laborer: This Latino character works in a job that centers around manual labor (e.g construction, gardening, hauling).

Black Tropes

- Strong Black Woman: A Black female character who is stronger than other characters around her and is able to endure trials and tribulations that would break weaker characters.
- The Angry Black (Woman/Man): This Black (often female) character is angry, loud, and aggressive.
- The Absent Father: A Black male character that is rarely involved in the life of their children or is not present.

Indigenous Tropes

- The Magical Medicine Man/Woman: This (mostly male but sometimes female) character comes to the aid of white characters by the use of supernatural or quasi-mystical means.
- The Proud Warrior: Indigenous characters who seek battle and bloodshed because their culture teaches that this is a source of personal honor.
- The Stoic: An Indigenous character who speaks few words and is emotionally flat.
- The Maiden: An indigenous female character who is young and beautiful, but also exotic and mysterious, who becomes the love interest of a prominent white man in the story. She is often very quiet and shown as a calming caretaker.

Middle Eastern Tropes

- The Primitive: A Middle Eastern character shown in places without modern technology, living in a dilapidated house, in a desert, or wearing shabby clothing.
- The Oppressed Woman: A female character who is oppressed by her culture, her husband, and/or other family members, and lacks agency to make her own decisions freely.
- The Terrorist: This male character is depicted as plotting or executing violence, whether as a "lone wolf" or part of a network.
- The Tycoon: A male character who is extraordinarily wealthy, wears expensive clothing, drives pricey cars, lives in luxurious houses, or flies in private planes.

East Asian Tropes

- The Tiger Mom: An overbearing mom who expects perfection.
- The Model Minority: A female or male character presented as excelling at school, work, and other aspects of life.
- The Dragon Lady: A female character who is powerful, deceitful, domineering, or mysterious.
- The Yakuza Crime Boss/Worker: This Asian (often male) character belongs to a gang or organized criminal group.

South Asian Tropes

- The Controlling Parent: An immigrant parent who has very strict rules for their child. These strict rules are typically presented as unreasonable, culturally backwards, and make it difficult for the child to navigate U.S. culture.
- Quirky Shop Owner: A male character who owns a corner store, chain, or other business; typically quirky in some manner.
- The Shy Nerd: A male character who is both nerdy and shy, and may work in a STEM profession.

Southeast Asian Tropes

- The Nail Tech: This (often female) character is portrayed as an owner or technician at a nail salon. They are often only seen in the salon setting, speak very little or "broken" English, and have very stereotypical American English names.
- The Masseur/Masseuse: This (often female) character works at a massage parlor and engages in sex work to bring in extra money. They are often highly sexualized, extremely beautiful, and "exotic."
- The Addict: A male who is depicted as addicted to alcohol and/or gambling.
- The Sex Worker: A female character is seductive, submissive, and likely works as a sex worker.

Pacific Islander Tropes

- The Surfer: A character who surfs, loves the beach and ocean, and is always in or near the water.
- The Hula Girl/Fire Breather: A character who wears grass skirts, leis, and flowers and often performs for white tourists, as opposed to for cultural reasons. This character is *only* seen in their hula garb, even during their everyday life.
- The Wild Samoan: A Pacific Islander character who is large in stature and is potentially aggressive and may speak in grunts and growls.

LGBTQIA+

LGBTQIA+ Tropes

- The Runaway Queer: A queer character who is disowned by their family due to their LGBTQIA+ identity. They often find a new home and “chosen family” after coming out and moving away.
- The Flaming Queen: A gay character who is feminine and flamboyant. Often shown with bright, costume-esque clothing.
- The Promiscuous Queer: This LGBTQIA+ character engages in casual sex for narrative shock value.
- The Queer Victim: The LGBTQIA+ character that is only briefly mentioned or seen, because they are violently killed, often due to a hate crime aimed at their identity.

DISABILITY

Disability Tropes

- The Savant: A character is depicted as low functioning as a result of a physical, cognitive or communication disability, but with detailed knowledge in some specialized field or with special abilities in a field (e.g. mathematics or music).
- The Sentimental: A character with eternal optimism about their disability and a “can do” fighter attitude. They are typically cure-focused and do not give up, even when setbacks occur.
- The Bitter Crip: A disabled character depicted as bitter and angry, often in ways related to their disability.

AGE (50+)

Older Person Tropes

- Sugar Daddy: An older adult male character who attracts younger women for romantic purposes through his wealth or gifts.
- The Cougar: An older woman who flirts with, dates, has sex with, or marries younger men.
- Cranky Old Person: An older character who is grumpy, complains often and is sometimes anti-social.

LARGE BODY TYPE

Large Body Type Tropes

- The Sidekick: A character who is a supportive buddy — often best friend to a pretty girl.
- The Loser: A character who is an economic and social failure.
- Mamma Hen: This character with a large body type is a nurturing mother figure; a great listener.
- The Comic Relief: This character with a large body type exists for comic relief.