

# The State of Disability Representation on Television:

An Analysis of Scripted TV Series From 2016 to 2023

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## Overview

This toolkit provides industry leaders in entertainment and media with recommendations for improving the representation of disability on screen. The full report, “The State of Disability Representation on Television: An Analysis of Scripted TV Series From 2016 to 2023,” analyzes disability representation in 350 scripted TV series that are currently in production from 2016 to 2023 on streaming/broadcast/cable platforms that originated in the U.S., according to Luminate Film & TV, by Variety.

## Summary of findings from the report

The study found that disability representation on TV remains low, and that over the time frame examined it isn't getting better (or worse). The share of characters with disabilities on TV ranged from a low of 2.6% in 2020 to a high of 4.7% in 2021. This is well below the population benchmark for persons with disabilities (28.7%).<sup>1</sup> Among streaming services, 4.7% of characters had a disability, while among broadcast/cable, 3.3% had a disability overall. Importantly, just 21.0% of characters with a disability were authentically cast by actors with the same (or similar) disability overall. Authentic casting is when characters with disabilities are played by actors with the same disability. Moreover, disability representation lacks racial diversity. Overall, white characters are about one-and-a-half times as likely to be portrayed as having a disability than characters of color (4.4% of all white characters compared with 3.1% of all characters of color). However, LGBTQIA+ characters were about twice as likely to be depicted as having a disability than those who are not LGBTQIA+ (8.5% of LGBTQIA+ characters compared with 3.7% of non-LGBTQIA+ characters).

# Recommendations

## Greenlight more stories performed by people with disabilities.

Support projects that are from the perspective of people with disabilities and provide the resources to bring these projects to life to increase authentic disability representation on screen. This will also help foster an industry culture that seeks out and values the contribution of people with disabilities.

## Adopt authentic casting practices.

Authentic casting will lead to more accurate portrayals in the media. By casting actors with disabilities to play characters with disabilities, productions will be less likely to unconsciously invoke disability tropes and stereotypes. Authentic casting will foster a more inclusive industry and these stories will resonate more deeply with all audiences.

## Be Conscientious of Intersectionality

The study found that most characters represented with a disability were white, and much less racially diverse than nondisabled characters. Consider various identities such as race, gender, and age when casting disabled actors. Also, write the character in a way that shows how the intersection of disability and other marginalized identities leads to a unique experience.

## Write Character-First Narratives

Narratives that integrate disability as one aspect of a character's identity, rather than the sole focus of their identity, will lead to more accurate portrayals. This approach promotes acceptance of disability and can contribute to a reimagining of disability and its meaning.

## Reject Frames of Normal and Abnormal

Disability spans across a wide spectrum of experiences and the normal/abnormal distinction creates an othering framework for understanding these experiences. Challenge the idea that disability is abnormal; recognize disability as one intersecting identity among many.

## Normalize Accessibility

Make sets accessible for those with and without apparent disabilities. Adopt inclusive design by integrating accommodations into the backdrop of the story, such as ramps, assistive technologies, or signs with braille. Equally important is ensuring that the production environment itself embraces accessibility, enabling people with disabilities to fully participate behind the scenes.

## Highlight Accurate Representation

Accurate representation requires depicting the everyday experiences and accommodations that are important for people with disabilities. For example, narratives involving deaf or hard-of-hearing characters should authentically include interpreters when appropriate, reflecting their role in facilitating communication. This approach not only enhances authenticity but also fosters audience understanding of the diverse realities of disability. By accurately showing such details, stories can contribute to more inclusive and impactful portrayals.

## Show Community

Show those with disabilities in community with one another. Research shows that when individuals with disabilities are in community with one another, they have better mental health. It is essential that media representations showcase the positive benefits of shared community and community engagement for those with disabilities.

## Avoid Ableist Language

Ableist phrases and language contribute to the devaluing of those with disabilities. It also presumes able-bodiedness is the norm. It is harmful to make ableist language commonplace as it perpetuates negative attitudes and marginalizes those with disabilities. When scripts include words like "crazy" or "lame," consider alternatives that describe what is meant, without debasing the disabled community.

# Creator Questions

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Consider these questions before you begin:

## ARE DISABLED CHARACTERS MULTIDIMENSIONAL?

Are disabled characters fully developed characters with traits, goals, and personalities beyond their disability. Avoid reducing characters to their disability status and instead ensure they have depth, agency, and a well-rounded identity. Rejecting unidimensionality for disabled characters allows for humanizing portrayals, including characters with flaws, desires, disappointments, and aspirations.

## DO SUBTLE LANGUAGE CHOICES REINFORCE DISABILITY STEREOTYPES?

The words used to describe disabled characters can shape how audiences perceive them—whether as independent and capable or as objects of pity. Avoid terms that frame disability as a tragedy or inspiration unless the character’s perspective supports that view.

Consider how common language choices can subtly suggest disabilities are abnormal, and subvert these choices, for empowering disabled narratives.

## ARE DISABLED CHARACTERS DIVERSE?

Does the script show disabled characters with a range of skin tones, body types, marital status, class, ability, and ages? Consider the intersectional representation of people with disabilities when casting disabled characters.

## IS YOUR CASTING AUTHENTIC?

Are characters with disabilities played by people with disabilities? Disabled actors, screenwriters, showrunners, and other behind-the-scenes people should be involved in productions about disability, or that feature disability.

### ENDNOTE

1. Center for Disease Control: Division of Human Development and Disability. (2025). “Disability and Data Health System.” *Center for Disease Control: Division of Human Development and Disability*.

### HOW TO CITE THE REPORT:

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