

# HOW DISABILITY STORIES CHANGE THE WORLD

A Quick Guide for Creators



Funded by the **Ruderman Family Foundation**, *The State of Disability Representation on Television (2016–2023)* from the **Geena Davis Institute** analyzed 350 scripted series over eight years to see how often disability is portrayed — and how authentically.

The findings are clear: when disability is invisible or distorted, it shapes how millions of people understand inclusion — how they see themselves *and* how they see each other. But when storytellers get it right, they do more than change what audiences watch — they shift perceptions, influence attitudes, and open doors to entire cultural change.

## Only 3.9% of TV characters have a disability.

### Real-world impact:

One in four adults in the U.S. lives with a disability — yet almost none see themselves on screen. When disability is invisible, it quietly tells audiences that it's rare, peripheral, or somehow "other." That silence feeds stigma.

### What creators can do:

Greenlight more stories told *with* and *by* people with disabilities. Let those characters be funny, ambitious, romantic, complicated — everything real people are.

### What could change:

If we start treating disability as part of everyday storytelling, inclusion stops being a checkbox and starts feeling like common sense.

## Just one in five disabled characters are authentically cast.

### Real-world impact:

Most disability portrayals are still played by nondisabled actors "acting disabled." However skilled the performance, it shuts out real disabled talent and often leans on imitation instead of lived truth.

### What creators can do:

Cast authentically. Hire disabled actors for disabled roles — and bring disabled writers, directors, and crew into the process from day one.

**What could change:**

When people with disabilities tell their own stories, authenticity isn't performative — it's powerful. The work gets better, the culture gets better, everyone wins.

**Disability on TV is still overwhelmingly white.****Real-world impact:**

Disability doesn't belong to one race, but most portrayals make it look that way. When audiences see disability as a white experience, it erases the reality of millions of disabled people of color.

**What creators can do:**

Cast and write with intersectionality in mind. Let race, gender, class, and disability overlap naturally — because that's how life works.

**What could change:**

Audiences start seeing disability as part of every community's story, not a single narrative. That's how empathy deepens.

**Characters with disabilities are less likely to be shown working.****Real-world impact:**

Television often paints disability as dependence. When disabled characters aren't shown in jobs or leadership roles, it reinforces the myth that disability means limitation.

**What creators can do:**

Show disabled characters doing what everyone else does — working, leading, falling in love, raising kids, being messy and alive.

**What could change:**

Representation like that doesn't just shift perception; it opens doors in the real world too.

**Ableist language still appears in about a third of episodes.****Real-world impact:**

Words like *crazy*, *lame*, or *psycho* may feel casual, but they quietly teach viewers that disability equals defect. Language drives attitude — and attitude drives exclusion.

**What creators can do:**

Audit scripts. Swap the shorthand for words that respect instead of diminish.

**What could change:**

When TV stops using ableist language, audiences start to drop it too. That's how culture evolves — word by word.