

# Effective Communication Tips during an Emergency

## American Sign Language Interpreters

The ADA mandates that an ASL interpreter be next to an individual who is communicating emergency response information to the public. Be sure the camera includes the interpreter in its frame.

## Captioning

The communication of emergency information must be part of the scroll.

## Audio

For persons who are blind or have low vision, detailed audio descriptions should be added to describe important visual images.

## Collaboration

It is imperative that media outlets and local emergency management services confirm that these strategies are established in advance.

## Education

Media outlets should network with their local Independent Living Centers (ILCs) and other disability advocacy groups to ensure they are educated in disability awareness and response.

## Contact Us

Timon Hall, PO Box 1941  
Niagara University, NY 14109  
716-286-7355  
Email: [frdat@niagara.edu](mailto:frdat@niagara.edu)  
Website: [frdat.niagara.edu](http://frdat.niagara.edu)

See also: **National Center on  
Disability & Journalism** –  
[ncdj.org/style-guide/](http://ncdj.org/style-guide/)



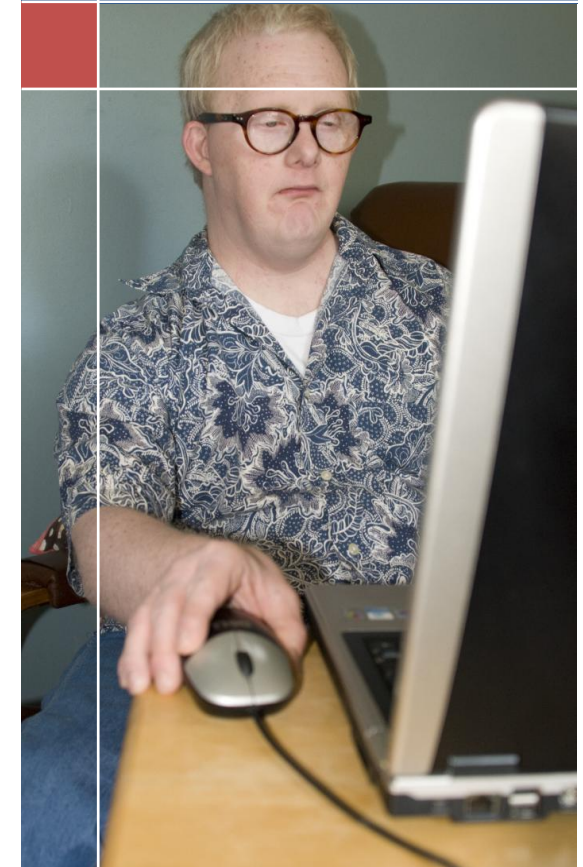
Niagara University  
Disability Awareness Training

**Content by Derek Ricioppo  
NU Sociology Student**

Format by Rachel Whalen  
Cornell University English/Literature Student

## The Media & People with Disabilities: Proper Language & Effective Communication

Niagara University  
Disability Awareness Training



## Problems with the Media & Respect for People with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities are often poorly represented in the media, and this misrepresentation comes in a couple of forms:

### **THE “FEEL GOOD” STORY**

This type of story features an individual with a disability overcoming an obstacle or achieving something. While illustrating the accomplishments of people with disabilities in breaking barriers is important and it's usually well-intentioned, highlighting an accomplishment of an individual *simply because they have a disability* ultimately demeans that individual in comparison to their peers without disabilities.

### **MISLEADING LANGUAGE**

The media tends to overemphasize the “pitiful condition” of people with disabilities without necessarily intending to do so. *MOST* people with disabilities do not suffer from them. For instance, a person with autism or cerebral palsy does not “suffer” from their disability; they simply have it. “Suffer” incorrectly implies that they are in constant pain, or their quality of life is always compromised. Additionally, language that indicates a person with a disability is a “burden” or a diagnosis is “heartbreaking” is inaccurate and degrading. Also, a person who uses a wheelchair is not “confined” or “bound to” a wheelchair – this would imply that the wheelchair is something like a punishment, instead of a tool for mobility.

## Using Appropriate and Respectful Language

### ➤ **Feature the accomplishment, not the disability**

While acknowledging a pioneer anywhere on the diversity spectrum is encouraged, the method by which that acknowledgement is communicated should display proper respect to the person being referenced. Often, news outlets depict people with disabilities as subjects of pity. Important accomplishments of individuals with disabilities are simply accomplishments, and those accomplishments should be highlighted as such. For example, Stephen Hawking's accomplishments are not altered because of his disability – the disability has no relevance and should not be mentioned in an article about his research. If a disability is mentioned, it should be done in a way that does not belittle the accomplishments of the individual.

### ➤ **Use person-first language**

The type of language used in speaking about disabilities is critical to shaping the public perception of people with disabilities. The concept of **Person-First Language** involves acknowledging the person before the disability. For example, saying “a person who has autism” is much more respectful than saying “an autistic.” Best practice would be to avoid any term that ends with “ic,” (schizophrenic, epileptic, spastic). This also applies when you are describing a group of people with disabilities. Do not label a group of individuals as “the disabled,” which puts the focus on their disabilities. “People with disabilities” or “individuals who use wheelchairs” places people first. Similarly, it is important to note that terms such as “handicapped” are no longer appropriate in describing people with disabilities (“handicapped” comes from “cap in hand,” referring to a beggar).

*Additional terms to avoid: suffering or suffers from, stricken with, challenged, afflicted, victim, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound, unfortunate, normal, hearing impaired, crazy, special needs, differently abled, insane, mentally retarded*

### ➤ **Use appropriate, specific details**

Though the phrase “a person with a disability” uses proper person-first language, it generalizes and does not further describe what the person's disability is. As a member of the media, you should be aware that “disability” is a very broad term. Specificity as to the type of disability gives the general public a better understanding of how the disability is significant only if it is pertinent to the story.

## The Media's Role in Emergency Communication

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has clear-cut expectations on how to properly communicate emergencies through media outlets. This is also an expectation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a federal civil rights law ensuring that individuals with disabilities have equal access to all services and forms of communication. While the media may not necessarily be held accountable to the ADA, municipalities/local governments are held accountable under Title II. The term **General Effective Communication** MUST be adhered to by municipalities, to include all emergency situations. Effective communication means that whatever is written or spoken must be as clear and understandable to people with disabilities as it is for people who do not have disabilities. People who have disabilities that affect hearing, seeing, speaking, reading, or understanding may use different ways to communicate than people who do not.