

COVERING THE HARD STUFF:

Disability, illness, violence, death and other things we hoped we wouldn't have to cover

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This handout, with live links, is available by visiting Goodheart-Willcox Publisher's website at:
www.g-w.com/journalism-2016. Click on the "Look Inside" tab for access.

Student journalists must consider all the issues professional journalists face, but we must also consider the age and vulnerability of our sources, our subjects and our audience.

1. What are our journalistic issues in covering this story?

- JEA's Scholastic Press Right Commission jeasprc.org/
- Poynter.org www.poynter.org/

2. What are our ethical and legal issues in covering the story? Check out:

- The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp
- The Student Press Law Center www.splc.org/

3. Who should make the decisions?

4. Where do you go for intelligent, journalistically and ethically strong resources as you face these issues?

Covering Community Policing and Urban Violence

- www.newsu.org/resources/sri/covering-community_policing_and_urban_violence

Reporting on Suicide and Mental Health Issues

- www.newsu.org/resources/sri/covering-suicide-and-mental-health
- www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/370874/5-ways-to-prepare-your-newsroom-to-cover-suicide-more-effectively/

Handling Issues of Disability: (See also the reverse side of this sheet)

- www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/359267/6-tips-for-covering-people-with-disabilities/

Interviewing Children and Adolescents

- www.poynter.org/uncategorized/1819/guidelines-for-interviewing-juveniles/

On Naming Rape Victims

- www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/1655/naming-rape-victims/

On Transgender Issues: (Includes links to other resources)

- www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/252415/how-the-tampa-bay-times-reported-on-a-transgender-kids-prom-bid/

On Writing Obituaries

- www.nytimes.com/interactive/us/sept-11-reckoning/portraits-of-grief.html?_r=1& (*The New York Times* obituaries about 9/11 victims)

5. What documents should you have in your staff manual?

- Obituary policy
- On using anonymous sources
- On identifying victims of crimes
- On identifying people accused of crimes: minors and adults

One in five Americans lives with a disability: physical, medical, psychological, mental or multiple, such as disabilities resulting from traumatic brain injuries. More people are impacted by these issues through their families. War increases the impact on families.

How have publications covered these issues in the past?

According to Susan LoTempio (see Poynter.org), disability-related stories may fall into these “easy” categories that reinforce inaccurate stereotypes, isolate and objectify people with disabilities and “prevent journalists from digging deeper and doing better.” Don’t go for the clichéd story!

- Pity stories, which focus on “victims” of a disability and make others feel they aren’t as bad off as the “victims.”
- Hero stories are about those who “overcome” their disabilities (often disabled athletes) and are designed to show there is some good in the world.
- Inspirational stories—any piece on Christopher Reeve, Jerry Lewis’ “kids” during his telethon—make us believe that some good can come out of inexplicable tragedy.

Why should we cover these issues?

1. Issues of disability impact your community.
2. Your audience includes people impacted by issues of disability.
3. Our mission as journalists includes to
 - Decrease isolation
 - Educate and inform
 - Provide context for the audience’s experiences
 - Offer our audience new ways of seeing the world, of changing how they think
 - Uncover injustice

Why do we avoid covering these issues or not cover them well?

Personal fears:

Characters with disabilities in fiction have often been plot devices, not humans:

- heroic
- villainous
- saintly
- superhuman
- pathetic
- but almost always isolated

Embarrassment: How do we interview people with disabilities?

A person’s disability is a part of his or her life—as much as skin color, country of origin, ethnic identity or religious affiliation. It is not a source of shame to be ignored. How much of a role the disability plays in the story depends on the sort of story you are writing.

Some Interviewing Tips	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the person you are interviewing, not his/her disability. • Speak directly to them, not to their parent, coach or interpreter. • Ask before offering any assistance, and wait for an answer before giving assistance. • When talking to someone with a hearing loss, be sure to face him or her and do not cover your mouth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When meeting an interview subject with a visual disability, identify yourself verbally. If they have a service animal or guide dog, do not praise, pet or talk to the animal. • A wheelchair or other assistive device is part of the person’s body space. Do not lean on or touch the wheelchair. • Wait and listen as you interview. Do not finish sentences for someone who speaks slowly. Ask for clarification if you do not understand the person.

Lack of skill: What words do we use to write about a person with a disability?

The words a journalist uses can reinforce stereotypes or help to correct them. The chart below offers suggestions for writing stories about an athlete with a disability.

DO NOT	DO
Emphasize the disability or the medical history.	Focus on the person or the sporting event. For example, report on the game or race including highlights, scores and outcomes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write about how the athletes train, who they compete against, their athletic goals and their progress toward them.
Avoid: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group labels like “the paraplegic,” “the quadriplegic,” “the deaf,” “the blind.” • Individual labels like “handicapped,” “mentally different” or “physically challenged.” • Descriptors such as “suffers from,” “afflicted with,” or “victim” (of a disease), “crippled” or “confined to a wheelchair.” • “Special.” It often means “separate” such as “special teams” or “special competitions.” Avoid referring to athletes with disabilities as “special.” 	Use: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John Brown, who has a spinal cord injury. . . • Basketball star Rachel Smith, who uses a wheelchair. . . • When background seems important, respect the athletes’ desire for privacy. <i>Ask the people you are interviewing for their preferences.</i> • Remember they are first and foremost athletes, and you are writing a sports story.

Lack of resources: Where do I get information? Poynter.org (search “disability”), National Center on Disability and Journalism at ncdj.org

What kind of story do I write? Any kind at all, so long as it is thoughtful, well-researched and doesn’t turn out to be exactly the kind of story you thought you were going to write.

When do I mention the disability? When it is relevant to the story. Imagine the disability were an ethnic or racial identification. When is it relevant or appropriate to mention the person is Haitian-American or that they have Cambodian heritage? Use the same criteria to decide when to mention a disability.