

BU LEARN MORE SERIES – AMANDA LEDUC

KEY POINTS

- Disability tends to be portrayed in only a few timeworn ways in narrative—as an unhappy ending.
- Disability has been portrayed this particular way because society sees it in conjunction with the built environment, where the disabled body doesn't *fit* into the built environment. And no one assumes that the built environment can change to fit the body.
- As a result, the narrative is almost always that disability disadvantages someone—the fault is with the *body*.
- Part of this was also further entrenched by the “fairy tale influence” – Brothers Grimm, Wilhelm & the increase of disability in the tales so that the narrators would have “more to gain” at the end by having their disability taken away.
- This is called *narrative prosthesis*.

NARRATIVE PROSTHESIS: The process by which the disabled body is maligned and used in narrative in order to move a story forward to its conclusion. (Sharon Snyder and David T. Mitchell)

- What all of this means—society is used to viewing disability as tragedy because we are not exposed to other stories where society changes to *fit* the disability. And when we are exposed to these same narratives over and over again, we unconsciously take on these assumptions and prejudices ourselves.
- These assumptions and prejudices play out both overtly, in the media we consume, and less overtly, via the language that we use.

ABLEISM: discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

- Autistichoya.com—resource that breaks language into three main groups:
 - Generally ableist terms/phrases (these may or may not be slurs)
 - Terms that are not inherently ableist, but become so in *context*
 - Non-ableist language substitutions

Ableist language should not be used as shorthand for something or someone disagreeable.

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

- Someone is a person first, and has a disability second.
- “Person with a disability”
- This language is well-meaning but not preferred by most of the disability community because it separates disability from identity and thus encourages people to look away from it.

IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

- “Disabled person”
- Holds that disability is an important part of someone’s identity and shouldn’t be looked down upon. Encourages people to look directly at the structural issues that impact and compound disability so that we can work together to implement changes and made a more accessible world.

EUPHEMISMS

- Common disability euphemisms:
 - Differently-abled

- Handicapped
 - Handi-capable
 - Diverse abilities
- Euphemisms like these are problematic because, much like the use of person-first language, they force people to look *away* from disability. But we MUST face these issues—in our language, in our stories, in everything that we do—in order to make the necessary changes to the world that inclusion and accessibility require.

*Ableism is not a list of bad words. Language is *one* tool of an oppressive system. Being aware of language -- for those of us who have the privilege of being able to change our language -- can help us understand how pervasive ableism is. Ableism is systematic, institutional devaluing of bodies and minds deemed deviant, abnormal, defective, subhuman, less than. Ableism is *violence.**

-- Lydia X.Z. Brown

“[Ableism is a] system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave”. You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.”

-- Talila A. Lewis

Inspiration porn

- Coined by the late Australian disability activist Stella Young in 2012.
- When someone is said to be inspiring simply for trying to live their life as a disabled person.

QUESTIONS TO ASK AS AN EDITOR/WRITER/EDUCATOR

1. If you are writing an article or story on disability and are not yourself disabled, has a member of the disability community been consulted or interviewed for the piece? Have you consulted a disabled sensitivity reader?
2. If your main character is disabled, ask yourself: **am I the right person to tell this story?** Ask yourself: *Why* do I want this character to have a disability? Is it because I want this story to be told? And if so—is there someone else who is better equipped to tell it?
3. Ask yourself: does your disabled character have agency? **Disability and disabled characters should not function solely as teachable moments in your story.**
4. Avoid ableist language. If you aren't sure whether a word or phrase is ableist, research it!
5. Remember that disability is *complex*, and the way that someone navigates that disability is also going to be complex and layered. **We are writing toward a world where disability can be seen with nuance, just like everything else.**
6. RESEARCH. Disability authenticity lies in the mundane details of what it means to have a disabled body in the world. (This is another reason why sensitivity readers are so important.)
7. Is the article or story inspiration porn masquerading as a “feel-good” narrative? Is it newsworthy, or is it of interest as a fiction piece, only *because* of disability? **Remember: people do not *triumph* over disability: they live full lives *because* of it.**

8. Ask yourself: what narrative of disability is this piece contributing to? Is it contributing to the timeworn “disability as lesser/sad” narrative? Or is it reaching for a different kind of world, one where we recognize that change and innovation is possible through community, through relying on one another? One where disabled people have the space and the power to tell our own narratives and shape how we’re seen in the world’s eye?

RESOURCES

RESOURCES: INFORMATION

- Lydia X.Z. Brown's Glossary: www.autisticchoya.com
- National Centre on Disability and Journalism (style guide): <https://ncdj.org/>
- APA Style Guide (updated disability guidelines): <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/disability>
- Talila A. Lewis: www.talilalewis.com
- Disability Visibility Project: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/>

RESOURCES: Disability Activists to follow on Twitter:

- Imani Barbarin -- @Imani_Barbarin
- Rebecca Cokley -- @RebeccaCokley
- Matthew Cortland -- @mattbc
- Andrew Gurza -- @AndrewGurza_
- Karl Knights: @InADarkWood
- Emily Ladau -- @Emily_ladau
- Wendy Lu -- @WendyLuWrites
- s.e. smith -- @sesmith
- Alice Wong (creator of Disability Visibility) - @DisVisibility