



INCLUSIVE WRITERS' ROOM GUIDELINES FOR PRODUCTION COMPANIES

The Case for Change

Providing a more inclusive, accessible environment for writers will benefit everyone, disabled and non-disabled people alike. It will ensure that everyone feels comfortable and a valued part of the creative process, so they will be able to contribute their finest work and you will get the very best out of your writing team. Ultimately, it will improve the creative output and set up your production for success.

Production companies are prioritising addressing diversity at the moment, but disability is often the forgotten strand. The Creative Diversity Network's Diamond Report Fourth Cut¹ found that, whilst there have been small and encouraging increases in the number of contributions made by disabled people both on and off-screen, we are still vastly under-represented. Disabled people make up:

- 3.5% of all screenwriters employed;
- 5.8% of all contributions off-screen, compared to the national workforce estimate of 17%;
- 8.2% of contributions on-screen.

Since disabled people comprise 18% of the population (14.1 million people), the case is clear for improved representation in writers' rooms in order to better reflect society and serve audiences.

About this document

These guidelines will help you plan more inclusive, productive writers' rooms and story conferences. They have been written by a small group of disabled writers, in consultation with a wider group of disabled writers and other off-screen professionals, all of whom have worked in non-disabled spaces and wish to use these experiences to help all creatives in the future. They are intended to help production companies ensure that the writer they are employing is able to focus on their job without shouldering the extra (often invisible) burdens of self-advocacy, educating the room and overcoming access barriers. We hope these guidelines may also prove useful to disabled writers who may not feel confident about providing feedback on workplace practices on an individual level.

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¹ <https://creativediversitynetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CDN-Diamond4-JANUARY-27-FINAL.pdf>

Reasonable Adjustments

Often, but not always, disabled writers need some adjustments and / or a bit of extra support in order to access the writers' room on an equal basis. Try to avoid making assumptions based on your experience of disability and/or your experience of other disabled writers you may have already worked with. The best person to ask is the disabled writer themselves, as they are their own experts on what they require. You should create an environment where they feel comfortable and know this information won't be used unfairly against them. As an employer, you are legally required to provide these adjustments under the Equality Act. **You need to take the lead in starting the conversation. Please do not leave it up to the writer to instigate.**

It is best practice to ask **everyone** coming to work with you what their access requirements are and whether they need you to make reasonable adjustments. This is because it may not be readily apparent that a writer (or employee or freelancer) is disabled. When asking, make it clear what a reasonable adjustment is and give some examples. This may be something small like "do you need to sit in a particular place in the room?"; "how long do you need comfort breaks to be?" or "would you like to know what the room looks like and how to get there in advance?" All of the writers and other participants should be asked what they need beforehand and not on the day.

It is not necessary to know what an individual's impairment / condition is, as this information may be private or personal and will not necessarily tell you what reasonable adjustments you need to make for them. Instead, ask for their access requirements.

The cost of a reasonable adjustment can range from nothing (e.g., flexible working hours) to a few hundred pounds (e.g., assistive software to help use a computer or alternative furniture). Access should be a part of every writer's room budget. Large broadcasters and streaming platforms have budgets specifically for access and diversity that you may be able to tap into. For more costly adjustments, there is Access to Work which is a grant from the Department of Work and Pensions. This funding covers expenses such as communication support, a support worker, assistive software for IT systems, or taxi fares if a person cannot use public transport. To receive the grant, the disabled writer must apply themselves, but you should support them with both the application and any subsequent admin. The application / claiming process can be lengthy (6-12 weeks or even longer), so it is important to allow plenty of time. You may need to cover some costs which you can later reclaim, however be aware that Access to Work will not reimburse any costs that have been incurred prior to the funding being agreed. Many disabled writers will already have their Access to Work funding in place and won't need support to set it up.

Please check-in with the writer regularly to ensure that the reasonable adjustments you've agreed are working. Be aware that access requirements may vary and shift as the room evolves. Do not make it the responsibility of the writer to arrange these check-ins as they may not feel empowered to do so – particularly if they can see how busy you are.

Planning The Room

Plan sessions as far in advance as possible to account for any reasonable adjustments, as well as giving individuals as much time as possible to prepare. If bespoke support staff are required (e.g., a British Sign Language interpreter), they can be hard to book at short notice. Also check there are suitable bathroom facilities at the venue.

The barriers disabled people encounter in general in society can sometimes make spontaneity problematic, so the more time people have to plan, the smoother things will go. For example, a disabled writer may not be able to nip out for a coffee in the break, but if they know in advance then they can make other arrangements.

Some disabled writers may want to do a recce before the day so that they can anticipate any access barriers in advance and suggest solutions.

At the Start

At the beginning of the process, please ask the disabled writer if they want the opportunity to explain their access requirements to the rest of the room (for example if they use an interpreter, an Access Worker or their impairment is invisible). The other writers may have no experience of disability and may not understand what this writer needs in order to communicate and socialise. Just as we try to give everyone the opportunity to express their preferred pronouns, it is important that the needs of the disabled writer are understood. The writer may not wish to speak to the room at the beginning of the session. That's also fine. They should, however, be given the opportunity to do so. If this does not happen, you are expecting them to have to initiate the discussion themselves and self-advocate before they've even started the job.

It is also important at the beginning to clearly set high expectations for everybody when it comes to access and inclusion. It should be made clear that inappropriate behaviour or attitudes will not be tolerated.

The Only One in The Room

Just as with asking a black writer to come into an all-white space, asking a disabled writer to work on your show as 'the only one in the room' will present personal and creative challenges for the writer involved. While we would always prefer to have at least one other disabled voice in the space with us, we acknowledge that sometimes this will not be possible. Some disabled writers will simply refuse to be the sole voice of disability (disabled people make up 18% of the UK population after all) but many others will accept the role in order to gain much needed experience and income – or simply because they love your show. We will do the job we are paid to do but we often end up doing additional jobs such as self-advocacy, educating the room and overcoming access barriers. We will often do this without complaint because we do not want to be seen as a problem or a burden.

The Social Aspect of a Room

If you arrange social events for the group outside working hours, it is your responsibility to ensure that such events do not exclude disabled writers. Please discuss access requirements before booking tables in restaurants and bars, for example. A disabled writer's access requirements may differ in different settings.

And please try to encourage the other writers in the room not to arrange spontaneous social events that the disabled writer cannot access.

Advisors

It can be insulting for a disabled writer to be pushed towards an advisory role on disability, as this ignores the skills and experience the person has built up as a writer. Production companies need to be clear from the beginning what is being offered – i.e., a role as an advisor or a writer. Ideally, writers should be used as writers. Sometimes it is incorrectly assumed that a disabled person is coming in to help, not contribute creatively.

In addition, please do not assume a big charity that represents a particular impairment or condition will act as the best ambassador for that lived experience, as this is not the case. Try to use disabled-led organisations instead who will be able to facilitate access to people with lived experience. The disabled writers we spoke to were frustrated by big productions often having an over-reliance on advice from large, unrepresentative charities in order to get through a broadcaster's compliance procedures. For example, one writer said: "There was a recent episode of *Death in Paradise* with a blind lady feeling about in the dark, and they were like 'It's fine, we spoke to the RNIB'. I'm quick to tell people that, just because the RNIB said something, it's not reflective of how blind people feel."

If you are organising a consultation session to help inform the disability storyline in your show (and educate the non-disabled writers in the room), please arrange it as early as possible in your schedule. These sessions can make a huge difference to both the storyline and the way a disabled writer is understood by other writers. While it is not the disabled writer's job to educate the team about disability, it is fine to ask the writer if they have any tips or contacts for who you might use for consulting purposes. Please always pay your consultants.

Even if a disabled writer doesn't share the same impairment / condition as the disabled character in a show, their experience of a disabled identity, dis/ableism and access barriers is still relevant and, if offered up, should be heard and respected.

Representation On Screen

We believe that ableism must be treated as seriously as other forms of discrimination. We also believe that disability representation in television drama is as important as any other minority representation. If your show has only recently created a disabled character or if the disabled character has a very minor storyline, please be open and acknowledge this disparity. If the room is unable to discuss dis/ableism within the show frankly and honestly then the disabled writer will feel compromised. An open, curious and non-defensive approach to discussions will always lead to better representation on-screen and a happier, more cohesive room where a disabled writer feels welcome and valued.

Online Meetings

Since the pandemic, online writers' rooms and story conferences are becoming more common. In some ways, these are proving to be more accessible by removing the need to use public transport and physically access buildings. However, there are other access barriers that need to be taken into consideration, therefore it is still

equally important to ask about reasonable adjustments beforehand. A disabled writer may have a completely different set of access requirements for a virtual meeting. You should still ask everyone to introduce themselves at the start and agree how writers are to contribute to the overall discussion. If people are being expected to use something like the 'raise hand' function in Zoom, check that it is accessible to all of the writers. Similarly, if the 'chat box' is being used then check that this is OK with everyone. Breaks on Zoom should be no shorter than breaks in real life, since it still takes the same amount of time to go to the toilet etc. Indeed, it may take a disabled person longer if they have to make a drink for themselves, rather than buying one from a coffee shop. Regularly check-in with all of the writers to make sure there are no barriers to them contributing.

Some disabled writers said it can be hard getting a word in during online writers' rooms. Therefore, you should consider giving them the opportunity to pitch on a one-to-one level as well as in a group setting. It is also important to state that, for deaf people, there is a delay when captioning or sign language interpretation is happening which can make it difficult for them to contribute.

Another recent innovation is hybrid meetings where writers are both online and in the room. Whilst greater flexibility is always a good thing, it is important that disabled writers are not solely offered online participation in order to avoid physical access barriers and save money. One disabled writer commented "that actually meant everybody else was in a room and I was singled out and the only one on a computer screen. I was just staring at the backs of people's heads and felt completely outside the conversation."

Finally...

Television needs stories. And disabled people's stories are relatively unexplored territory for television. However, the only way to tell our stories in an authentic, powerful way is to make sure we are in the room.

Appendix: Further information

Who are disabled people?

The Equality Act 2010 says a disabled person is someone with a physical or mental condition that is long-lasting and has a substantial adverse effect on day-to-day activities. This covers a wide range of conditions, impairments, injuries and illnesses, including mental health, chronic illness, neurodivergence and learning disabilities. Many people have conditions or impairments which are not immediately obvious, but definitely entitle them to identify as disabled. Some have conditions or impairments which, to an outside observer, might meet the criteria, but will choose not to identify as disabled. Others may choose not to disclose or share openly that they are disabled. However, as an employer you may still have legal duties towards them under the Equality Act. The best advice we can give is to avoid making assumptions and be led by the person themselves.

Please note: in this document we use the term 'disabled people' for brevity, but we also include deaf and neurodivergent people when we refer to this group.

The Social Model

People are not disabled by their individual medical conditions of mind, body or senses, but by society not taking them into account. Disabled people are part of the diversity of the population and, as such, should be considered in all areas of life. When this does not happen, they can become excluded or restricted from taking part. So, they are disabled by their situation or environment. By adopting this approach, often referred to as the social model of disability, the focus of work shifts towards identifying solutions to removing the barriers so that everyone can participate on an equal basis.

Disablism and Ableism

Disablism and ableism are words that are used to describe disability discrimination and prejudice, a bit like sexism and racism are used to describe discrimination against women and different ethnic groups. Disablism is discrimination or prejudice against disabled people. Ableism is discrimination in favour of non-disabled people. Both terms describe discrimination against disabled people, but the emphasis is different.

Finding Disabled Writers

Because of historical, systemic barriers within the industry, disabled writers may not have had as many opportunities as their peers. This should be borne in mind when looking at whether a writer has enough experience to join your writers' room. You may want to consider running a paid shadow scheme to give potential writers more experience.

The following organisations and schemes may be useful when looking for disabled writers for writers' rooms:

- [BBC Writersroom Writers Access Group](#)
- [Deaf & Disabled People in TV](#)
- [Dandi.org.uk - the inclusive recruitment service](#)
- [Birds of Paradise Theatre Company](#)
- [DaDaFest](#)
- [Vital Xposure Theatre Company](#)
- [Graeae Theatre Company](#)
- [Unlimited](#)
- [Beacon Films](#)
- [Extant](#)
- [Shape Arts](#)

We believe there is nothing wrong with positive discrimination and quotas whilst disabled writers are still woefully under-represented within the industry.

Other useful resources:

- [Jack Thorne's MacTaggart Lecture spotlighting disabled representation on TV](#)
- [Creative Diversity Network – Doubling Disability](#)
- [Inclusion London's Factsheet on the Social Model of Disability](#)