

# A very brief introduction to **ABLEISM IN IMPROV!** **HUGE** improv theater

“Ableism” is discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities, and it exists in improv just like it exists everywhere else. Like racism and sexism, ableism is complex and endemic in our culture, and not something that can be fixed with a quick and handy one-page guide. But we gotta start somewhere, so here are some common ways ableism expresses itself in improv, with very brief thoughts on ways to start recognizing and addressing them in yourself.

**WAY #1:** Using language that denigrates people with disabilities

**“ARE YOU MENTALLY RE\*\*\*\*ED?!  
THAT’S A TERRIBLE IDEA!”**

**THIS MAY HELP:**

Educate yourself on terms and phrases that rob people with disabilities of their dignity and humanity. Here’s a great place to start: <https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>

**WAY #2:**  
Making disability a punchline

**“GEE I’D LOVE TO DANCE WITH YOU,  
BUT YOU HAVE NO LEGS!”**

**THIS MAY HELP:**

Ask yourself **WHY** you just invested a character with a disability. If the answer is, “because it is funny,” maybe consider a different choice.

**WAY #3:**  
Making negative assumptions about what people with disabilities can do

**“BLIND IMPROVISER IN THE GROUP?  
GUESS FANCY EDITS ARE OFF THE TABLE...”**

**THIS MAY HELP:**

**ASK!** The best expert on any partner’s needs, boundaries, and limitations is that partner.

**WAY #4:** Basing a partner’s characters on their disability

**“HEY QUASIMODO,  
RING THIS BELL FOR ME!”**

**THIS MAY HELP:**

Improv is like the world’s biggest-budget movie. You can go anywhere, do anything, be anyone. Why put your partner in a box... especially an insultingly stereotypical box? You’re better than that.

**WAY #5:** Forgetting that mental illness can be a form of disability

**“NEVERMIND BOBBY’S BEHAVIOR.  
HE’S OFF HIS MEDS...”**

**THIS MAY HELP:**

Something to consider – making a scene partner “crazy,” senile, or otherwise mentally ill is usually just a cheap way to deny or explain away their words or behavior. That’s not just ableist, it’s lousy improv.

**REMINDER: YOU WILL SCREW UP. WE ALL DO. THAT DOESN’T MAKE YOU A BAD PERSON. APOLOGIZE, LEARN, KEEP GOING!**