



A Way with Words and Images

Guide for
communicating with
and about persons
with disabilities
2024

A way with words and images: guide for communicating with and about persons with disabilities

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Purpose

This guide supports communication with and about persons with disabilities in writing, speech and images. It aims to foster an accessibility- and disability-confident Canada. It is intended to support the federal public service and all Canadians to communicate accurately and confidently.

This guide includes terms and general guidelines for communicating with and about persons with disabilities. This guide supports communication about:

- persons with disabilities
- types of disabilities
- disability-related items

Communicating effectively also needs a case-by-case approach. Specific terms and preferences for describing disabilities continue to change over time. Different groups and individuals have different preferences. Everyone with a disability goes through society and the rest of the world differently. If you're unsure, ask the person to tell you which terms they prefer. Being kind, open and curious is important when communicating about disability. This guide is a resource to support communicating, not a strict code or rulebook.

Background

Recent data shows that disability issues are important in Canada. The 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability reports that 8 million Canadians aged 15 years and older have one or more disabilities. Many persons with disabilities in Canada face significant barriers in their daily lives. These include barriers to employment, financial security and social inclusion. Society's attitudes or discrimination may be the most difficult barriers. Sometimes both occur together. Societal barriers prevent full inclusion, acceptance and participation in society. In 2020, over half of all complaints the Canadian Human Rights Commission accepted were about disability.

Canada is working toward an inclusive and accessible country for persons with disabilities. In 2010, Canada joined the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The principle of "Nothing about us without us" guided the Convention's development. This means that persons with disabilities, and the organizations that represent them, should be engaged in everything that affects them. The Convention sets out what countries who have joined the Convention have to do to make sure persons with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else. This includes promoting and protecting the full and equal enjoyment of human rights by persons with disabilities. This also includes engaging with the disability community to continue to implement the Convention. The principle of "Nothing about us without us" has changed over time in Canada. It's often written as "Nothing Without Us."

The *Accessible Canada Act* came into force on July 11, 2019. The Act is one of Canada's most important human rights laws on disability in over 30 years. It aims to

find, remove and prevent accessibility barriers under federal jurisdiction. The Act benefits everyone in Canada, but especially persons with disabilities.

In parallel, the Government of Canada also developed *Nothing Without Us: An Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada*. This strategy's goal is to make Canada's public service the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world.

To reach this vision, the federal public service will need to achieve 5 goals:

- 1) recruit, retain and promote persons with disabilities better
- 2) enhance the built environment's accessibility
- 3) make information and communications technology usable by all
- 4) support public servants to design and deliver accessible programs and services
- 5) build an accessibility-confident public service

The Office for Disability Issues has updated this guide in part to support public servants in reaching these goals. Public servants and all Canadians need to use words that support and respect the dignity of persons with disabilities.

We developed the guide with input from disability experts and persons with disabilities. In 2002, we published the first version of the guide. We updated the guide with input from across the federal government and from persons with disabilities. This update replaces the outdated terminology in previous versions. The goal is to better support public servants and all Canadians in communicating with and about persons with disabilities accurately and confidently. In 2024, we published the new version. The guide is presented as a free, downloadable publication in hopes of promoting a broad circulation of its message. The Office for Disability Issues will continue to update the guide with input from persons with disabilities. This guide will change as our understanding of disability and preferred terminology evolves.

Key definitions and concepts

Ableism: ableism is a type of discrimination that you can compare to racism, sexism or ageism. It involves discrimination in favour of persons without disabilities. Ableism is linked to socially constructed views of "normalcy" that influence society's understanding of ability and disability. Ableism is also believing that people without disabilities are superior and that being non-disabled is preferable or ideal. Ableism may be intentional or unintentional. It promotes the view that persons with disabilities are less worthy of respect and consideration than persons without disabilities. It also communicates that persons with disabilities are less able to contribute and take part in society, and less valuable. Ableism prevents inclusion and limits opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Accommodation: accommodation is a change to an environment, system or service. Accommodation allows persons with disabilities to have the same level of access, participation and opportunity as anyone else.

Audism: audism is a form of discrimination or prejudice. It targets persons who are Deaf, deafened or persons with hearing loss. This can be a lack of willingness to accommodate persons with these disabilities.

Barrier: a barrier is anything that doesn't allow persons with disabilities to be included and take part in all areas of life and society. The *Accessible Canada Act* defines barriers as "anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal. Anything based on information or communications or anything that is the result of policies or practices. Anything that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment. This includes physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairments or functional limitations".

Disability: there are many different kinds of disability and society's understanding of disability has evolved over time. The *Accessible Canada Act* defines a disability as "any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society".

Disability models: people use multiple models to define disability or the experiences of persons with disabilities. The most common models are the medical model and the social model. The **medical model of disability** focuses on a person's impairment or condition. It focuses on preventing, treating or curing the disabling condition. The **social model of disability** says that people are disabled by society's barriers, not by impairments or differences. It views social organization as an important source of a person's limitation and disability experience. A person's condition or disability is not an issue when society removes barriers. Disability rights discussions recognize that both the social and medical models influence us.

Disablism: disablism means discriminating against persons with disabilities. It refers to the barriers, exclusion and discriminatory practices persons with disabilities experience. Unlike ableism, disablism refers to how discrimination impacts the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. This may include practices and assumptions that promote different or unequal treatment of people because of disabilities. The assumptions may be conscious or unconscious. Disablism may also promote the unequal treatment of people because of presumed disabilities. The term disablism is more common in European countries. Some publications may use the term disablism interchangeably with the term ableism. Disablism isn't the same as anti-ableism, which means to work against ableism.

Intersectionality: intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as disability, race, religion, class and gender. Individuals or groups (including persons with disabilities) experience these categorizations differently. This may create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Many factors can combine to affect the lives of persons with disabilities and multiply the barriers they experience.

Invisible disabilities: invisible disabilities may not be noticeable right away. They are also called hidden or non-visible disabilities. Invisible disabilities can be permanent, temporary or episodic. People with invisible disabilities also face barriers to inclusion. This could include having to explain why they need accommodation. Examples of invisible disabilities may include:

- deafness
- mental health, learning or intellectual disabilities
- conditions such as epilepsy or hemophilia

Neurodiversity: neurodiversity refers to how thought patterns and behavioural traits vary in humans. “Neurodivergent” can describe persons on the autism spectrum and anyone who experiences neurologically different patterns of thought or behaviour. “Neurotypical” individuals do not generally have autistic or other atypical neurological thought patterns or behaviours. Workplaces that optimize neurotypical tasks may not meet the needs of persons with disabilities. Neurotypical individuals may assume that their experience of the world is the only one or the only correct one.

“Nothing about us without us” or “Nothing Without Us”: these principles are related but not the same. The principle of “Nothing about us without us” guided the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The principle represents preamble (o) and Article 4.3 of the Convention. This principle is about the duty to engage persons with disabilities, and organizations representing them, in all matters impacting them. In Canada, we’re now moving away from “Nothing about us without us” and to “Nothing Without Us.” This aims to include persons with disabilities in all initiatives, as opposed to initiatives about them only. This is because all initiatives will also affect persons with disabilities, even if they aren’t the target audience.

People with disabilities or persons with disabilities: subtle differences between these expressions exist depending on the context. “Persons with disabilities” is often (but not always) used in an international or legal context. This aligns with the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and the *Accessible Canada Act*. In less technical documents, “people with disabilities” is more common.

Person-first or identity-first language: discussing disabilities varies depending on the person and group. Two common forms of language are person-first and identity-first. Person-first language emphasizes the person. For example, “person with a disability” or “person with Down syndrome.” Identity-first language focuses on the person’s disability identity. For example, “disabled person,” “Deaf person” or “blind person.” Some countries like New Zealand encourage identity-first language. This is based on what the New Zealand Disability Strategy Revision Reference Group says. Even so, preferences vary in New Zealand and many people and organizations believe in person-first language. No standard or universal approach exists. When possible, ask the person or group what they prefer. Use their preferred terms. This guide uses person-first language by default.

Stigma: stigma is negative attitudes, beliefs or behaviours. Stigma may target a group of people because of their situation in life. It includes discrimination, prejudice, judgment and stereotypes. Stigma isn't limited to the attitudes and actions of others. Self-stigma relates to negative stereotypes people have about themselves. Stigmatizing language and disrespectful behaviour affect the way people see themselves. This can impact how society views and treats them.

Universal design: universal design is a basic condition of good design. It means considering the different needs and abilities of everyone throughout the design and structure of an environment. This makes sure that anyone, regardless of age, size, ability or disability, can access, understand and use environments. Universal design creates products, services and environments that meet the needs of everyone who wants to use them. If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient and a pleasure to use, everyone benefits.

General guidelines

Language on disability continues to change. The preferences of the disability community also evolve. That's why it's important to take a case-by-case approach. We have many excellent ways to describe disability. Be aware that persons with disabilities often have their own preferences. If you're unsure, ask them to tell you their preferences.

Many persons with disabilities take pride in their differences and don't view them as limitations. The disability rights movement says that society must change, not the person with the disability. Many people note that impairments are a form of human diversity and aren't necessarily problematic medical conditions.

The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun; people aren't conditions. It's inappropriate and grammatically awkward to use the term "the disabled." Instead, use "persons with disabilities" or "people with disabilities." "Disabled" is also a verb, and attitudes, practices and physical logistics can disable people.

Avoid language that suggests persons with disabilities are separate from the community. Persons with disabilities are a part of every society, and inclusion is assumed. Words and images should show inclusion in society, unless social isolation is the focal point.

Avoid condescending euphemisms such as "special," "special needs" or "differently abled." Avoid terms such as "able-bodied" to describe persons without disabilities.

Use accurate and neutral descriptions of the person or their situation. Avoid categorizing persons with disabilities as unusual achievers or tragic figures. For example, avoid using "courageous" or "inspirational." Avoid framing stories in a way that makes the person's accomplishment noteworthy just because they have a disability. Their disability should not be the focus of the story.

Avoid using language that describes a disability as undesirable, as a deficit or in an insulting way. Be aware of the context. Appropriate terminology is still inappropriate if it's used to reinforce ableist ideas.

Avoid references that cause or convey discomfort, pity, pain, or a sense of hopelessness. Such language can make persons with disabilities feel as though there's something wrong with them. Not all disabilities cause pain or need medical attention. Use the word "patient" only in medical settings.

Avoid using "living with a disability," because that can sound like the disability is a negative burden. It's also not appropriate because a disability can't be separated from the person. Disability is an integral part of someone's being. Also, "living with a disability" doesn't convey that a disability may be episodic or fluctuating.

Avoid words that suggest that persons with disabilities are inferior. Avoid words that suggest that people should exclude persons with disabilities from activities.

Be careful about using language that ties a person's value to their ability to be productive or contribute. All people have inherent worth because they are people.

Some persons with disabilities use common language to describe their daily activities. For example, people who use wheelchairs may say they go for walks. Persons with visual impairments may say they see what you mean. But others may perceive such language as an example of ableist culture. If you're unsure about someone's preference, you should use more neutral alternatives.

Focus on the issue rather than the disability. If the disability isn't relevant to the story, there's no need to mention it. For example, don't mention the cause of a wheelchair user's disability, unless it is relevant to the story. Often, it won't be relevant.

When talking about places that provide accommodations for persons with disabilities, use the term "accessible." Don't use "disabled" or "handicapped" in this context. For example, refer to an "accessible" parking space rather than a "disabled" or "handicapped" parking space. Refer to "an accessible bathroom stall" rather than "a handicapped bathroom stall."

Remember that some disabilities aren't visible or may be episodic. The visibility of a disability doesn't relate to the need for accommodations. Some people may also have multiple disabilities. If a person requires accommodation, don't assume that their most visible disability is the one requiring attention or accommodation.

In visual treatment (for example, reports, graphics, videos, photographs):

- use images that show a diversity of persons with disabilities participating in society, including those with invisible disabilities
- use actors or models with disabilities to portray persons with disabilities. Be cautious when using stock photos. Almost all stock photos are images of people who pretend

to have a disability. For example, a model who is posing in a wheelchair when they don't normally use one. When models or actors pretend to have a disability, it's obvious to the disability community

- remember that people typically consider mobility devices an extension of the person. Choose visuals that show this respect for personal space. For example, avoid a photo of someone without a disability leaning on someone's wheelchair
- present persons with disabilities in typical situations rather than showing them as either a hero or a victim

The "Good words to choose" section of this document gives examples of respectful language.

Toward more inclusive policies and programs

It's important for public servants to approach policy work in an inclusive way. Designing programs and services should focus on accessibility from the start to make sure that everyone can contribute. It's a best practice to engage and collaborate early with persons with disabilities.

The Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada aims to design and deliver accessible programs and services. Public servants were consulted for the strategy. Many public servants expressed a need for more tools and training to better serve clients with disabilities. This guide on inclusive language can support better service for clients with disabilities. More information on work toward this goal is offered at the website for the [Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada](#).

The Government of Canada also uses Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus). This tool supports the public service in delivering more inclusive and accessible programs and services. GBA Plus considers all the intersecting identity factors of diverse groups. These include facts like sex, gender, race, ethnicity, age and disability. Women and Gender Equality Canada offers a course on GBA Plus and more information is available via the [GBA Plus course website](#).

Conclusion

The references section at the end of this document gives more writing tools from Employment and Social Development Canada and other organizations.

Words and images are a powerful tool that shape society's attitudes and perceptions about disability. But despite the progress in recent years, negative stereotypes still exist. Choose words and images that enable you to communicate with and about persons with disabilities accurately and confidently.

Good words to choose

Table 1: Good words to choose

Instead of...	Please use...
Birth defect; congenital defect; deformity	Person born with a disability
Blind; visually impaired	Person who is blind; person who is partially sighted; person with a visual impairment; person with sight loss; person with vision loss Note: blind persons may refer to themselves as “blind,” or “partially sighted” if they have some degree of vision.
Caretaker	Supporter; support person; attendant
Confined/restricted to a wheelchair; wheelchair-bound	Person who uses a wheelchair
Cripple; crippled; lame	Person with a disability; person with a mobility impairment; if relevant, person who has a spinal cord injury/arthritis/and so on
Deaf-mute; deaf and dumb	Person who is deaf Note: the Deaf community is a distinct cultural and linguistic community. When referencing this community, it's best to capitalize “Deaf.” The capital D means that you're talking about the community/identity category, not the experience of being or becoming deaf. Often, people who refer to themselves as “Deaf” use sign language and identify as part of the Deaf community. Often, they are born deaf or become deaf at a young age. People who refer to themselves as “deaf” may not use sign language. They may be born deaf or become deaf later in life. People's preferences can vary.
Differently abled	Person with a disability
Disabled (noun)	Person with a disability

Instead of...	Please use...
Epileptic	Person who has epilepsy
Fit; attack; spell	Seizure
Handicapped	Person with a disability
Handicapped parking; handicapped bathrooms	Accessible parking; accessible bathrooms
Hard of hearing; hearing impaired	<p>Person with hearing loss</p> <p>Note: these individuals are not deaf. Due to a hearing loss, they may use amplification devices. People view the term hearing impaired as a negative term. It fails to recognize the difference between the Deaf and the hearing loss community. Not to be confused with persons who are deaf.</p>
High-functioning autistic; low-functioning autistic	<p>Autistic person with low support needs; autistic person with high support needs</p> <p>Note: high- and low-functioning labels are not effective in describing the strengths and barriers autistic people face. Many people interpret them as insulting. Note that Canadians on the autism spectrum have different opinions and preferences on language. Many autistic Canadians prefer identity-first language. Others prefer person-first language. Others prefer to use the terms “autism spectrum condition,” or “on the autism spectrum.” Also, some people have different preferences in terms of capitalization (“Autism” or “autism”). If you’re not sure, ask the person to tell you which terms they prefer.</p>
Inarticulate; incoherent	Person with a communication disability; person with a speech disability
Invalid	Person with a disability

Instead of...	Please use...
Learning disabled; learning disordered; dyslexic	<p>Person with a learning disability</p> <p>Note: “person with a learning disability” is a general description that may refer to one or several specific disabilities. If relevant, you can specify the type of disability, for example, “person who has dyslexia.”</p>
Living with... (a disability, autism, etc.)	<p>Person with a disability; autistic person</p> <p>Note 1: you can’t separate a disability from the person, because it’s an integral part of a person. The phrase “living with” a disability may also sound like the disability is a negative burden. Not all disabilities cause pain or need medical attention. For these reasons, we recommend you avoid the phrase “living with”.</p> <p>Note 2: “living with...” does not convey that a disability is episodic. If it’s important to refer to a disability as episodic, use terms like “temporary” or “episodic.” You can refer to experiences with disability and limitations as “progressive,” “recurrent,” “fluctuating” or “continuous.”</p>
Mentally ill; insane (unsound mind); crazy; lunatic; maniac; mental patient; mentally diseased; neurotic; psychotic	<p>Person with a mental health disability; person with a psychiatric disability; person with a psychosocial disability</p> <p>Note: only use the term “insane” (unsound mind) in a legal context. The expression “person with a mental health disability” is broad. If relevant, you can specify the type of disability, for example, “person who has depression.”</p>
Mentally retarded; mentally challenged; developmentally delayed	<p>Person with an intellectual disability; person with a developmental or cognitive disability; person with Down syndrome</p> <p>Note: only specify the type of disability if it is relevant.</p>
Midget; dwarf	Person of short stature

Instead of...	Please use...
Non-verbal; non-communicative	Person who does not use words or signs; person who uses alternate communication technology (if applicable)
Normal; able person	Person without a disability
Person who has trouble / difficulties / challenges...	Person who needs...
Person with special needs	Accommodation requirements; person who requires supports
Physically challenged; physically handicapped; physically impaired	Person with a physical disability
Profoundly disabled; severely disabled	Person with a high need for support
Seeing eye dogs; blind dogs; dogs for the blind	Guide dogs; dog guides Note: you can refer to the guide dog owners as "handlers." Together, they are a "team."
Sign language	American Sign Language; langue des signes québécoise; Indigenous sign language (including Plains Sign Language; Plateau Sign Language; Inuit Sign Language). Note 1: where applicable, refer to the specific language in question. In English, capitalize language names. Don't capitalize "Indigenous sign language" because it does not refer to a specific sign language.
Spastic	Person who has spasms
Suffers from...; stricken with...; afflicted by...	He has...; she has...; they have...; a person with... Note: persons with disabilities do not necessarily suffer because of their disabilities.

Instead of...	Please use...
Victim of cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc.	Person with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc.; person with a mobility impairment; person with a disability

Government of Canada references

Department of Justice Canada

Accessible Canada Act

<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/A-0.6/page-1.html>

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)

Employment and Social Development Canada Accessibility Plan

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/accessibility/reports-publications/accessibility-3-year-plan-2022.html>

Statistics Canada

Accessibility Statistics

<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/topics-start/accessibility>

The Dynamics of Disability: Progressive, Recurrent or Fluctuating Limitations

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2019002-eng.htm>

Translation Bureau

Accessibility Glossary in Termium

<https://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/publications/accessibilite-accessibility-eng.html>

Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology in Termium

https://www.noslangues-ourlanguages.gc.ca/en/publications/equite-diversite-inclusion-equity-diversity-inclusion-eng?view_mode=bilingual

Treasury Board of Canada

Directive on the Duty to Accommodate

<https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=32634§ion=html>

Guidelines on Making communications accessible in the Government of Canada

<https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=32728>

Measuring progress: Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada

<https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/accessibility-strategy-public-service-toc/accessibility-strategy-public-service-measuring-progress.html>

Nothing Without Us: An Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada

<https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/accessibility-strategy-public-service-toc.html>

More references

Note: the following resources from outside Employment and Social Development Canada give useful information. They may not be available in both official languages.

Adapt Your Workplace (The Inclusive Workplace)

<https://theinclusiveworkplace.ca/en/articles/adapt-your-workplace>

Audism (Canadian Association of the Deaf)

<https://cad-asc.ca/issues-positions/audism/>

Communication inclusive (Université du Québec) (in French only)

<https://reseau.quebec.ca/fr/a-propos/equite-diversite-et-inclusion>

Disability and Language (Disability and Philanthropy Forum)

<https://disabilityphilanthropy.org/resource/disability-and-language/>

Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines (United Nations)

<https://www.ungeneva.org/en/about/accessibility/disability-inclusive-language>

Disability Language Guide (Stanford University)

<https://disability.stanford.edu/news/disability-language-guide>

Disability Language Style Guide (National Center on Disability and Journalism)

<https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

Guide terminologique : Un vocabulaire approprié à l'égard des personnes handicapées de l'Ontario (gouvernement de l'Ontario, ministère des Affaires civiques et de l'Immigration) (in French only)

<https://forms.mgcs.gov.on.ca/fr/dataset/on00400/resource/9e6e767a-b78c-4810-b275-ce2c8320966e>

Infirmes à personne en situation de handicap : combat de mots (Handicap.fr) (in French only)

<https://informations.handicap.fr/a-choix-des-mots-5633.php>

Language Guide (People with Disability Australia)

<https://pwd.org.au/resources/disability-info/language-guide/>

Portraying People with Disabilities in the Media (Easter Seals)

<https://www.easterseals.com/news-and-stories/disability-in-media.html>

Say the Word (Public Health Post)

<https://www.publichealthpost.org/research/say-the-word/>

Terminology (Canadian Association of the Deaf)

<http://cad.ca/issues-positions/terminology/>

Terminology Tips: Using the Appropriate Lexicon (RespectAbility)

<https://www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/terminology-tips-using-the-appropriate-lexicon/>