

A Way with Words and Images

Introduction

People with disabilities are asking Canadians to use respectful terms when writing and speaking about them or about issues that affect their lives. They are also asking that images chosen to portray them be respectful and not reinforce outdated stereotypes.

Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier people with disabilities face in achieving full integration, acceptance, and participation in society. Since words are a mirror of society's attitudes and perceptions, we should all put great thought into how we present information about people with disabilities, to help overcome negative attitudes and shape positive ones.

Language use is changing as people with disabilities achieve equality, independence and full participation in all aspects of Canadian society. We can ensure they reach these goals by using proper words and images.

General Guidelines

It is important to remember that words have a precise meaning and are not interchangeable. The following guidelines suggest appropriate terminology to use when speaking or referring to people with disabilities.

- A disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual's ability to perform an activity. The word "disabled" is an adjective not a noun. People are not conditions. It is therefore preferable not to use the term "the disabled," but rather "people with disabilities."
- Avoid categorizing people with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures. Choose words that are non-judgemental, non-emotional, and are accurate descriptions. Avoid using "brave," "Courageous," "inspirational," or other similar words to describe a person with a disability. Remember that the majority of people with disabilities have similar aspirations as the rest of the population, that words and images should reflect their inclusion in society, except where social isolation is the focal point.
- Avoid references that cause discomfort, guilt, pity, or insult. Words like "suffers from," "stricken with," "afflicted by," "patient," "disease" or "sick" suggest constant pain and a sense of helplessness. While this may be the case for some individuals, a disability is a condition that does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.
- Avoid words such as "burden," "incompetent," or "defective," which suggest that people with disabilities are inferior and should be excluded from activities generally available to people without disabilities.

People with disabilities are comfortable with the terminology used to describe daily living activities. People who use wheelchairs go for "walks," people with visual impairments "see" what you mean, and

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so on. A disability may just mean that some things are done in a different manner, but that doesn't mean the words used to describe the activity must be different.

Instead of...	Please use...
Birth defect, congenital defect, deformity	Person born with a disability, person who has a congenital disability
Blind (the), visually impaired (the)	Person who is blind, person with a visual impairment
Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	Person who uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user
Cripple, crippled, lame	Person with a disability, person with a mobility impairment, person who has a spinal cord injury, arthritis, etc.
Hard of hearing (the), hearing impaired	Person who is hard of hearing Note: These individuals are not deaf and may compensate for hearing loss with an amplification device or system.
Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb	Person who is deaf Note: culturally – linguistically deaf people (that is, sign language users) are properly identified as “the Deaf” (upper-case “D”). People who do not use sign language are properly referred to as “the deaf” (lower-case “d” or “persons who are deaf,”
Epileptic (the)	Person who has epilepsy
Fit, attack, spell	Seizure
Handicapped (the)	Person with a disability
Handicapped parking, bathrooms	Disability parking, bathrooms

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Inarticulate, incoherent	Person who has a speech disorder, person who has a speech disability
Insane (unsound mind), lunatic, maniac, mental patient, mentally diseased, mentally ill, neurotic, psychotic	Person with a mental health disability Note: The term “insane” (unsound mind) should only be used in a strictly legal sense. The expression “person with a mental health disability” is broad. If relevant to the context you can specify the type of disability, for example, “person who has depression” or “person who has schizophrenia.”
Invalid	Person with a disability
Learning disabled, learning disordered, dyslexic (the)	Person with a learning disability
Mentally retarded, defective, feeble minded, idiot, imbecile, moron, retarded, simple mongoloid	Person with an intellectual disability Note: If relevant to the context specify the type of disability
Normal	Person without a disability
Person who has trouble...	Person who needs...
Physically challenged, physically handicapped, physically impaired	Person with a disability
Spastic	Person who has spasms
Suffers from, stricken with, afflicted by...	Person with a disability Note: People with disabilities do not necessarily suffer
Victim of cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc.	Person who has cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, etc. Person with a mobility impairment, person with a disability

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Remember that, although some disabilities are not visible, it does not mean they are less real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as epilepsy, haemophilia and mental health and learning or developmental disabilities also encounter barriers and negative attitudes.

Focus on the issue rather than the disability, if the disability is not relevant.

Appropriate images

- ✓ Use images that show people with disabilities participating in society.
 - Do not use images that isolate or call special attention to people with disabilities unless they are appropriate to the subject matter.
- ✓ Use actors or models with disabilities to portray people with disabilities
- ✓ Present the typical individual who has a disability rather than depicting him or her as a super-achiever.

Reference:

Human Resources and Social Development Canada