



People • Partnerships • Knowledge



A Way with Words and Images

Suggestions for the portrayal of
people with disabilities

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Ce document est également disponible en français sous le titre *Le pouvoir des mots et des images*.

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Introduction

People with disabilities are asking Canadians, and the media in particular, 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 They are also asking that images chosen to portray them be respectful and not reinforce outdated stereotypes.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, and by changing the ways in which issues are reported.

Purpose

This booklet seeks to promote a fair and accurate portrayal of people with disabilities. It recommends current and appropriate terminology to help you reach this goal.

Content

This booklet has two sections and a removable insert.

The first section, “General guidelines,” has information on terminology and images that relate to people with disabilities.

The second section, “Media coverage of people with disabilities,” (see p. 4) deals with how the media should approach the issue.

In addition, the removable centrefold lists appropriate terminology 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-judgmental, 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, and 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 hopelessness. 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.

The centrefold in this guide contains more terms pertaining to people with 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 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.

Remember that, although some disabilities are not visible, it does not mean they are less real. Individuals with invisible disabilities such as epilepsy,

hemophilia, 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 to the context, it is not necessary to report it.

Media coverage of people with disabilities

When writing an article or reporting on people with disabilities, ensure that the words you use are factual, objective, and inclusive. Don't hesitate to seek advice from organizations of people with disabilities on how to report on, discuss, and write about disability.

Researching, writing, and reporting

Too often, when a person with a disability is featured in a story that has several possible angles, the human-interest story line dominates (e.g., how the individual has overcome great odds).

There is less in-depth coverage of issues of particular importance to people with disabilities, such as lack of physical access to facilities, employment, and poverty, and people with disabilities are seldom asked for their views on stories dealing with issues such as transportation, the environment, or child care.

Be particularly careful with terminology in titles or headlines, since they make the first impression.

Interviewing

Before the interview, ask yourself:

- “Am I reporting on this piece because it involves a person with a disability or because the issue and related circumstances are relevant to the general population?”
- “If it did not involve a person with a disability, would I still want to write it?”
- “Is a reference to a disability necessary to the story?”

Follow these suggestions to improve communications with persons with disabilities.

- It is appropriate to shake hands when introduced to a person with a disability. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb do shake hands.
- When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to him or her, rather than through a companion, interpreter, or intervenor who may be there.
- Relax. Be yourself. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as “See you later” or “Got to be running along” that seem to relate to the person's disability.
- Offer assistance to a person with a disability if you feel like it, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help. Listen to any instructions the person may want to give.
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace in walking and talking.

- Avoid putting a person with a disability on a pedestal and using patronizing terms. Interview a person with a disability as you would any other person.
- In visual treatments (e.g., television and photographs), do not dwell on technical aids or adaptive devices unless, of course, the purpose is to introduce or discuss a particular aid or device.

After the interview, ask yourself: “Have I used the correct terminology (e.g., “uses a wheelchair” and not “confined to a wheelchair”)? Is this piece accurate and unbiased? Have I avoided sensationalism?”

Conclusion

Words and images are a powerful tool in shaping society’s attitudes and perceptions about people with disabilities. However, despite the progress achieved in recent years, negative stereotypes still exist. The media can help overcome these by continuing to cover disability-related issues in an accurate, objective, and inclusive manner.

Society must do everything in its power to eliminate remaining prejudices and stereotypes. Choosing words and images that help shape positive attitudes will promote the person rather than the disability.

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Strong, Frances. "Watch Your Language, Words Shape Attitudes." *Rehabilitation Digest* (Winter 1989).

Organizations consulted

Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL)
4700 Keele Street, Kinsmen Building, York University
North York, Ontario M3J 1P3
Tel.: 416-661-9611
www.calc.ca

Canadian Association of the Deaf (CAD)
251 Bank Street, Suite 203
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1X3
Tel.: 613-565-2882
TTY: 613-565-8882
www.cad.ca

Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB)
396 Cooper Street, Suite 401
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 2H7
Tel.: 613-567-0311
Toll free: 1-877-304-0968
www.ccbnational.net

Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA)
2415 Holly Lane, Suite 205
Ottawa, Ontario K1V 7P2
Tel.: 613-526-1584
Toll free: 1-800-263-8068
TTY: 613-526-2692
www.chha.ca

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)
180 Dundas Street West, Suite 2301
Toronto, Ontario M5G 1Z8
Tel: 416-484-7750
www.cmha.ca

Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB)
1929 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M4G 3E8
Tel.: 416-486-2500
www.cnib.ca

Canadian Paraplegic Association (CPA)
1101 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 230
Ottawa, Ontario K2C 3W7
Tel.: 613-723-1033
www.canparaplegic.org

Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD)
926-294 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 0B9
Tel.: 204-947-0303
www.ccdonline.ca

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)
250 City Centre Avenue, Suite 616
Ottawa, Ontario K1R 6K7
Tel.: 613-238-5721
www.ldac.taac.ca

People First of Canada
120 Maryland Street, Suite 5
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3G 1L1
Tel.: 204-784-7362
www.peoplefirstofcanada.ca

National Educational Association of Disabled Students
(NEADS)
4th Level Unicentre
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6
Tel.: 613-526-8008
www.neads.ca

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada
3-304 Stone Road West, Suite 736
Guelph, Ontario N1G 4W4
Tel.: 519-824-5565
www.mooddisordercanada.ca

Schizophrenia Society of Canada
50 Acadia Avenue, Suite 205
Markham, Ontario L3R 0B3
Tel.: 905-415-2007



A Way with Words and Images



Appropriate words	
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 a hearing loss with an amplification device or system.

INSTEAD OF...	PLEASE USE...
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	Accessible parking, accessible bathrooms
Inarticulate, incoherent	Person who has a speech disorder, person who has a speech disability

INSTEAD OF...	PLEASE USE...
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 story, 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 disorder, 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 story, specify the type of disability.

INSTEAD OF...	PLEASE USE...
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

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.