



# TIP SHEET

## INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE: PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

**Disclaimer:** Language is constantly evolving, and words concerning identity hold specific importance for those that embrace a particular label. We encourage you to listen to and prioritize a person's self-understanding over standard definitions that often sacrifice complexity to be more concise.

### BEING INCLUSIVE

When communicating with or about a person with a disability, be mindful of the powerful effect of words and language. Inclusive language seeks to avoid reinforcing stigma, biases, or stereotypes that contribute to marginalization. People with disabilities are a diverse group and experience disability in many ways. Adopting language that promotes acceptance and inclusion challenges attitudinal barriers and, in turn, creates a stronger community for all of us.

### DEFINITIONS

**Disability:** A disability is any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult to do certain activities and participate in different spaces.

Disability is interactive. People are often disabled because environments are created without them in mind (e.g., a building without accessible entrances or washrooms for wheelchair users).


### DID YOU KNOW?

All human rights legislation follows the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, passed in 1982. Section 15(1) of the Charter (1982) states: "Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability."

Learn more provincial variations of Human Rights codes from the [Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion](#).

The following definitions from the Ontario Human Rights Code are instructive to understand types of disability.

- **Cognitive Disability:** Refers to a condition characterized by challenges in cognitive functioning, including difficulties with thinking, planning, problem-solving, executive function, learning, and adapting to new situations. Examples include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder, Dementia, Down Syndrome, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and more.


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- **Health Disability:** A disability that results from specific health-related diagnoses or conditions that may develop over one's life course or the process of aging. Examples include asthma, cancer, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and more.
  - **Environmental Disability:** refers to a condition in which individuals experience a heightened sensitivity or adverse reactions to various environmental factors, such as chemicals, scents, pollutants, electromagnetic fields, or other triggers.
  - **Mobility Disability:** Refers to a condition or impairment that affects a person's ability to move or travel. Individuals with mobility disabilities may experience difficulties with walking, standing, balancing, or coordinating their movements.
  - **Physical Disability:** A disability that affects mobility or physical functioning, such as paralysis, limb loss, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, and more.
  - **Psychiatric Disability:** A disability that affects mental health, including conditions such as addiction, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, anxiety disorders, and more.
  - **Sensory Disability:** Refers to a condition or impairment that affects one or more of the senses, including vision, hearing, touch, taste, or smell. It can impact an individual's ability to perceive and process sensory information accurately, leading to challenges in interpreting the world around them. Examples include blindness, low vision, deafness, hard of hearing, deafblindness, and more.
  - **Speech/Language Disability:** A disability that affects communication, including difficulties in speaking, understanding, or expressing oneself verbally. It includes conditions such as stuttering, aphasia, developmental language disorders, and more.

**Ableism** may be defined as a belief system similar to racism, sexism or ageism, which views persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society. It can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities and reduce their inclusion in the life of their communities. (Humber College, 2017, p. 5).

**Accessibility** is designing products, content, processes, programs, activities, and environments so each person, across all abilities and backgrounds, can access or engage with them equally. Accessible design proactively considers the needs of people with disabilities and other salient barriers to use or participation.

**Accessibility Barrier:** Any physical, attitudinal, cultural, communication, or systemic obstacle that restricts or hinders the full participation of individuals with disabilities in society.

**Accommodation** is a means of preventing and removing barriers that impede full participation and access based on the prohibited grounds of discrimination. It is not a courtesy or a favour, nor is it a lowering of academic or employment standards. Accommodation is the recognition that individuals may require some adjustments in order to support their performance on the job.



**TIP:** The [Job Accommodations Network \(JAN\)](#), includes a range of potential workplace accommodations for different accessibility needs and conditions.

**Alt text:** Short text used to describe images---usually 125 characters or less.

**Alternative format:** Content provided in formats other than the standard version, such as large print, electronic text, audio, or braille, to accommodate different sensory, cognitive, or physical needs.

**Assistive technologies:** Technologies (software or hardware) that increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. For example, voice recognition programs, screen readers, and screen magnifiers, help people with mobility and sensory disabilities use computer technology. People with physical disabilities that affect movement can use wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, canes, crutches, prosthetic devices, and orthotic devices to enhance their mobility.

**Attitudinal Barriers:** Attitudinal barriers, in the context of accessibility, refer to negative or discriminatory attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions that hinder the inclusion and participation of individuals with disabilities. These barriers are based on societal stereotypes, misconceptions, and preconceived notions about disability.


**Audio Description (AD):** An additional audio track in videos, animations, movies, tv shows, and live performances that describes visual detail on screen that's not apparent from the audio alone, so that visually-impaired/blind users are able to understand all the content.

**Braille:** Braille is not a language. Rather, it is a code by which text may be written and read. Braille is a system of raised dots or tactile symbols that can be read with touch, often used by people who are blind or who have low vision.

**Captions:** A textual representation of sounds--usually associated with television programming or movies; captions are meant to display in real time and to capture speech sounds and sounds beyond speech in some cases. Closed Captions (CC) are captions that can be turned on or off by the user. Closed captions can be toggled on/off, whereas open captions are always on.

**Colour Contrast:** The difference in luminance or color between foreground text or images and their background. Sufficient color contrast ensures readability for individuals with visual impairments.

**Curb-Cut Effect:** Refers to the phenomenon where accessibility improvements made for a specific group of people with disabilities have broader positive impacts on society as a whole. The term originated from the installation of curb cuts, which are sloped ramps at street corners designed to assist wheelchair users in crossing the road. However, curb cuts have proven to also benefit people with strollers, movers, tourists with suitcases, people using bicycles or skateboards.



**Descriptive Hyperlink:** A hyperlink that provides meaningful and informative text to describe the target or destination of the link. It goes beyond using generic phrases like “click here” or “read more” and instead includes specific, contextually relevant information about the linked content. Descriptive hyperlinks make content more accessible for individuals who use screen readers or other assistive technologies.

**Focus Indicator:** A visual indication of the currently selected element on a page, which enables users who are using keyboard access to know their location while navigating content.

**Invisible Disability:** A disability that is not immediately apparent or visible to others. It includes conditions such as chronic pain, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and some mental health conditions.

**Keyboard Access:** The ability to interact with a computer using a keyboard rather than a mouse. Users who have problems with fine motor skills or hand-eye coordination may prefer to use the keyboard to navigate through content. Common keyboard controls include using the Tab and Arrow keys to move from element to element (e.g. hyperlinks, buttons) and Enter/Spacebar to activate them.

**Neurodiversity:** This term refers to the variance of human minds and neurocognitive functioning (e.g., Autism, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), etc.) in society. The neurodiversity paradigm views these differences as natural, normal, valuable, and expected.


**Neurodivergent:** Someone whose cognition exhibits meaningful variations from dominant societal patterns. In contrast, neurotypical people exhibit cognition that aligns with dominant societal patterns. There is significant overlap between neurodivergent people and people with cognitive disabilities.

**Screen Reader:** A software program used to enable reading of content and navigation of the screen using speech or Braille output. Used primarily by people who have difficulty seeing. JAWS and NVDA are examples.

**Social Model of Disability:** A framework that recognizes that disability is not solely an individual’s impairment but is largely shaped by societal barriers and attitudes. It emphasizes the need to address these barriers and create an inclusive society that enables the full participation and rights of individuals with disabilities.

**Transcripts:** Basic transcripts are a text version of speech and non-speech audio information needed to understand audio. Descriptive transcripts for videos also include visual information needed to understand the content. Interactive transcripts highlight text phrases as they are spoken. Users can select text in the transcript and go to that point in the video.

**Universal Design:** The design of products, environments, and services that are accessible and usable by people with disabilities to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.



**Voice Recognition:** Technology that allows users to control and interact with digital devices or applications using spoken commands. It is particularly useful for individuals with mobility-related or dexterity-related disabilities.

**Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG):** A set of internationally-agreed recommendations and success criteria developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) to make web content more accessible for users with disabilities.

## GENERAL TIPS

There is no one way to refer to persons with disabilities that will be preferred by all. Use the language and terminology requested by the person you are speaking with or about.

- Pay close attention to how each person refers to themselves on a case-by-case basis. Some people prefer person-first language which places the person ahead of the characteristics (e.g., a person who is blind), while others prefer identity-first language and may use the term “disabled person”.
- Avoid using metaphors or slang that use words relating to disability or medical conditions – e.g., “that’s so lame” or “you’re so OCD” can be hurtful for persons with a physical disability and persons with mental health conditions.
- Using plain and literal language (e.g., minimizing or defining idioms and figurative language) is important for fostering accessibility for people with specific cognitive disabilities and language learners.
- The words “disability” and “disease” have different meanings. They can co-exist, as when an auto-immune disease causes disability. However, they can be different: a person with a cold does not have a disability, and a person who becomes deafened due to an injury does not have a disease.
- Words like addict and alcoholic are used by many people, particularly those who participate in recovery programs who use these terms. But these words can also carry stigma. Unless the person you are speaking with indicates otherwise, use person-first language instead, like “person with an addiction or substance abuse disorder/disability”.
- Some people who are deaf use sign language such as American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary language, and others become deaf over their life course and do not communicate using sign language. Deaf people that recognize a shared culture and ethnolinguistic community around deafness prefer the “D” to be capitalized in Deaf when referring to them.

## INSTEAD OF, PLEASE USE...

Instead of...	Please use...
Handicapped (the), handicapped (dated term), "handi-capable"(dated term),handicapped/challenged/impaired, differently abled person, diversability	The word "disabled" and its variations Person(s) with a disability, disabled person (when using identity first language), person who is/has... (specific disability, e.g., is blind, has a learning disability)
Disabled (the), disability	People/persons with disabilities, disabled people (when using identity first language)
Normal, whole, able-bodied, healthy	Non-disabled, people without disabilities (e.g., a person who is sighted, a hearing person, a person who is ambulatory)
Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user
Avoid words that imply tragedy such as afflicted by, suffers from, victim of, troubled with, suffering from, suffers with, unfortunate, stricken with	Use language such as "Josie has cerebral palsy, Juan is a person who is hard of hearing."
Person who has trouble...	Person who needs...e.g., Sonali needs to use her cane to help her with her balance.
Birth defect, congenital defect, deformity	Person with a disability, person who has a congenital disability or specific statements such as "unable to walk since birth," "blind since birth," "born without legs" etc.
Maimed, missing a limb, birth defect	Person with a prosthetic limb, person with limb difference, person with an amputation
Invalid, lame, patient	Person with a disability
Hard of hearing, hearing impaired	Person with hearing loss, person who is hard of hearing
Deaf-mute, mute, deaf and dumb	Person who is deaf, person who does not use verbal speech, person with speech-related disability, uses synthetic speech, person who is non-vocal or non-verbal
The deaf – avoid using this term as a noun as it can imply people of a separate societal class.	A deaf person, the Deaf community
The blind – avoid using as noted above	Person who is blind
Vision/visually impaired, people with vision/sight problems	Person who is blind, person with limited vision, person with low vision (Note: these words cover people with degrees of vision loss)
Learning disabled, learning disordered, dyslexic (the)	Person with a learning disability, people with learning disabilities

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## INSTEAD OF, PLEASE USE...

Brain injury, brain damaged, traumatic brain injury	Person with a brain injury, or a person with a traumatic brain injury
Spinal cord injury	Person with paraplegia, person who is paralyzed or person with a spinal cord injury
Victim	Survivor – a term used by people -such as cancer survivor, stroke survivor, psychiatric survivor, acknowledges their recovery from, or defeat of a difficult or trying health condition
Crip, cripple, crippled	This word is offensive and should be avoided, except as a self-identification/insider language term (“Crip”)
Seeing-eye dog	Service Animal.
Epileptic (the)	Person who has epilepsy, epileptic person
Fits, attacks, spells	Seizures
Midget, dwarf	A little person, a person of short stature, a person who has a form of dwarfism
Insane, lunatic, maniac, mental patient, mentally diseased, mental, psycho, unsound mind, neurotic, psychotic, crazy, nuts, looney	Person with mental health condition(s)
Senile / Demented	Person with Alzheimer’s disease,
person who has dementia	person who has dementia
Mental retardation, retardation, mentally retarded, mental, “retard,” idiot, imbecile, moron, simple, mongoloid, feeble minded, developmentally impaired	Person with an intellectual disability/person with a developmental disability
Handicapped parking/bathrooms (dated term)	Accessible parking, accessible bathrooms
That’s crazy	that’s wild, that’s frustrating, that’s ridiculous
that’s lame, that’s retarded	That’s uncool, that’s bad
Stepping up, step it up	Put in more effort/improve
Next steps	Next stage/next phase/action items
Flying blind	Unsure/Going with the flow
Blind review	Anonymous review
Blind spot	Gap/what we’ve missed/potential unconscious bias
Fallen on deaf ears	Was not recognized/was not taken into account
“You’re on mute”	“Your volume is off”



### **TIP: Colour and Colour Contrast**

Colour contrast values help make images and text visible. There are specific resources to support you in determining sufficient colour contrast. We recommend aiming for a ratio of 4.5:1.

### **[Colour Contrast Evaluation Tool](#)**

### **[Colour Contrast Guidelines](#)**

## **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- Sometimes, people or groups will reclaim language and terminology deemed as stigmatizing (like persons with mental illness describing themselves with the word “crazy”), but that does not necessarily mean that it is appropriate for someone outside that community to use that word.
- Employees with disabilities may request accommodations in order to have an equal opportunity to participate in the workplace. Framing accommodations as burdensome a hassle, as something you would prefer not to do, or as something that should not be required perpetuates stigma for individuals who need to request accommodations.
- Do not assume that you know whether a person has a disability or not. Many disabilities are invisible.
- Avoid making assumptions about people’s abilities. Talk to people about their needs.



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