# DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

## INTRODUCTION

These guidelines have been prepared by the United Nations Office at Geneva as part of efforts to implement the **United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy**, launched in 2019. The Strategy is a key framework for policy and action to mainstream disability inclusion at the United Nations. It is aimed at removing barriers and engaging persons with disabilities in all spheres of work and life in order to achieve sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion. Its indicator 15 on communication, in particular, requires that internal and external communications should be respectful of persons with disabilities.

This document contains **recommendations** that United Nations staff, experts and collaborators can use in their oral and written communications on disability or other subjects, including speeches and presentations, press releases, social media posts, internal communications and other formal and informal documents. It is based on an in-depth study of disability-inclusive language materials and a consultation process with a diverse range of experts, including persons with disabilities.

**Words matter**. Undeniably, the language that we use to refer to persons with disabilities has an impact, as it shapes our perception of the world. This language has evolved over time, and terms that were commonly used some years ago are no longer acceptable. It is therefore important to raise awareness about language that it is appropriate to use when talking to or about persons with disabilities. Inappropriate language can make people feel excluded or offend them and can be a barrier to full and meaningful participation. The use of derogatory or inappropriate language may amount to discrimination and impinge on the enjoyment of human rights. By adopting language that celebrates diversity, we will contribute to strengthening the human rights model of disability and to creating a more inclusive United Nations.

At the same time, inclusive language is a key tool in **combating ableism** and its entrenched manifestations. Ableism is a misguided and biased understanding of disability that leads to the assumption that the lives of persons with disabilities are not worth living. Ableism can take many forms, including harmful language.

In terms of language and terminology, the United Nations **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** sets the standard that we must all follow. The general comments issued by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, together with other authoritative United Nations documents, also provide guidance to better understand the Convention and its language.

These practical guidelines aim to foster the consistent use of respectful language at the United Nations. They contain the general principles that should be applied, and are intended to be practical and easy to use. Annex I contains a table summarizing both the recommended terminology and the terms that are considered inappropriate. Annex II consists of a list of terms that require additional clarification from a language perspective in order to avoid common mistakes and to comply with United Nations terminology standards.

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES

### 1. USE PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

People-first language is the most widely accepted language for referring to persons with disabilities. It is also the language used in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. People-first language emphasizes the person, not the disability, by placing a reference to the person or group before the reference to the disability. For example, we can use expressions such as “children with albinism”, “students with dyslexia”, “women with intellectual disabilities” and, of course, “persons with disabilities”.

However, the people-first rule does not necessarily apply to all types of disabilities. There are some exceptions. For example, when referring to persons who are blind, we can say either “blind persons” or “persons who are blind”, and the same applies to deaf or deafblind persons.

If in doubt, you should ask the person or group how they choose to identify. Indeed, persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, and they may self-identify in various ways. These identities should be respected and recognized. However, as this rich diversity of identities may hinder efforts to establish unified terminology, these guidelines recommend terminology that is commonly used and accepted.

### 2. AVOID LABELS AND STEREOTYPES

Disability is a part of life and of human diversity, not something to be dramatized or sensationalized. Persons with disabilities should therefore not be portrayed as inspirational or “superhuman”. This language implies that it is unusual for persons with disabilities to be successful and productive and to live happy and fulfilling lives. Descriptions of persons with disabilities as “courageous” or “brave” or as having “overcome” their disability are patronizing and should be avoided. Persons with disabilities are the same as everyone else in terms of talents and abilities.

The term “survivor” is sometimes applied to people who have recovered from or adjusted to a health condition. Some examples include “brain injury survivor” and “stroke survivor”. Some people also refer to a disability or health condition in terms of a “battle,” as in “to battle cancer.” Although these terms are widely understood and used, many people consider the war rhetoric inappropriate and some find it offensive.

Furthermore, the portrayal of persons with disabilities as intrinsically vulnerable is inappropriate. Vulnerability is produced by external circumstances and is not innate or intrinsic to the person or group concerned. Moreover, everyone can be vulnerable in a given situation or period of time. Some persons with disabilities may be more vulnerable than the rest of the population to certain crimes, such as gender-based violence, but less vulnerable to others, such as identity theft. When the specific barriers and circumstances causing vulnerability are addressed, they are no longer vulnerable.

Avoid labelling people and do not mention a person’s disability or impairment unless it is relevant, particularly in internal communications and emails. You should focus on skills or requirements and point to a person’s impairment only when it brings clarity or provides useful information. If you are discussing quality assessment for Braille documents, for example, you can mention that your colleague is a “Braille user” or can “read Braille” instead of saying that they are blind. Their impairment is not relevant: the relevant fact is that the person has the required skills. Always use this kind of positive and empowering language.

On the other hand, disability should not be made invisible either. Always ensure that disability is duly included in your conversations and work. You should openly and respectfully discuss disability-related issues and make disability inclusion a priority. For far too long, persons with disabilities have lacked representation and participation, and have been neglected, ignored or left behind.

## 3. DO NOT USE CONDESCENDING EUPHEMISMS

Some expressions have gained popularity over time as alternatives to inappropriate terms. However, many of them reflect the misguided idea that disability needs to be softened. We should therefore not use terms such as "differently abled", "people of all abilities", "disAbility" or "people of determination", as they are all euphemistic and can be considered patronizing or offensive. For example, "differently abled" is problematic because, as some advocates note, we are all differently abled. Euphemisms are, in fact, a denial of reality and a way to avoid talking about disabilities. "Persons with disabilities" is a more neutral term than "differently abled".

The term "special" used in relation to persons with disabilities is commonly rejected, as it is considered offensive and condescending because it euphemistically stigmatizes that which is different. This term should not be used to describe persons with disabilities, including in expressions such as "special needs" or "special assistance". We recommend more neutral or positive language when possible, such as "tailored assistance". The expression "special education" is also widely used to refer to school programmes, but this term carries negative connotations since it usually refers to segregated education.

## 4. DISABILITY IS NOT AN ILLNESS OR A PROBLEM

The medical model of disability views disability as a health condition that needs to be fixed or cured. Under this model, persons with disabilities are not seen as rights holders. Similarly, the charity model of disability views disability as a burden or a "problem" that persons without disabilities must solve. This approach depicts persons with disabilities as being objects of charity and pity, perpetuating negative attitudes and stereotypes.

Persons with disabilities should not be referred to as patients unless they are under medical care, and only in that context. You should also avoid labelling persons with disabilities by their diagnoses (for example, "dyslexic"), as this reflects the medical model of disability. Use people-first language instead (for instance, "person with dyslexia" or "has dyslexia").

Expressions such as "suffers from", "afflicted with" or "stricken with" are inappropriate. They suggest constant pain and powerlessness and carry the assumption that persons with disabilities have poor quality of life. Instead, you can simply say that a person "has [a disability]" or "is [blind/deaf/deafblind]".

The term "victim" should not be used unless strictly relevant. It is inappropriate to say that a person is "a victim of cerebral palsy", for example. Cerebral palsy does not make the person a "victim". A victim is a person who has been harmed by a crime or has been subject to a human rights violation. Victims are often seen as vulnerable and helpless. This underlying perception must be taken into account when using this term in references to persons with disabilities.

Avoid referring to a person "inside" a disability (for example, "the man inside the paralysed body") or "beyond" their disability (for example, "she transcended her disability"). Our bodies and minds cannot be separated from who we are. This is ableist language that is offensive to persons with disabilities.

## 5. USE PROPER LANGUAGE IN ORAL AND INFORMAL SPEECH

Most persons with disabilities are comfortable with the words used in daily life. You can say "let's go for a walk" to a person who uses a wheelchair or write "have you heard the news?" to a person who is deaf. However, phrases such as "blind as a bat" or "deaf as a post" are unacceptable and should never be used, even in informal contexts. You should also be careful with metaphors like "blind to criticism" and "to fall on deaf ears".

Misused terminology can also be inappropriate and hurtful, so avoid saying "I must have Alzheimer's" when you forget something or "they're paranoid" when people seem to be acting with excessive mistrust. Never use disability-related terms as an insult or to express criticism. For example, do not use the word "lame" to mean "boring" or "uncool".

## ANNEX I

## Disability-inclusive language

Please note that terms in the same cell should not be considered as synonyms. They are grouped together by category.

| Recommended language | Language to be avoided |
|---|---|
| person with disability<br>person with [type of impairment]<br>persons with disabilities<br>people with disabilities (only in Easy Read documents, informal text and oral speech) | disabled person, handicapped, person with special needs, handicapable, atypical, person living with a disability, differently abled, people of all abilities, people of determination, person living with a disability |
| person without disability<br>the rest of the population | normal, healthy, able-bodied, typical, whole, of sound body/mind |
| have [disability/impairment/condition] | suffer from, afflicted by, stricken by, troubled with |
| person with an intellectual disability<br>person with an intellectual impairment | retarded, simple, slow, afflicted, brain-damaged, intellectually challenged, subnormal, of unsound mind, feeble-minded, mentally handicapped |
| person with a psychosocial disability | insane, crazy, maniac, psycho, hypersensitive, lunatic, demented, panicked, agitated, mentally deranged, mentally ill |
| deaf person<br>person who is deaf<br>person with a hearing disability<br>person with a hearing impairment<br>person with hearing loss<br>hard-of-hearing person<br>deafblind person | the deaf, hearing impaired, deaf and dumb, deaf and mute |
| blind person<br>person who is blind<br>person with a vision/visual disability<br>person with a vision/visual impairment<br>person with low vision<br>deafblind person | the blind, partially-sighted |
| person with a physical disability<br>person with a physical impairment | crippled, invalid, deformed, lame, handicapped, physically challenged, person with physical limitations, limp |
| wheelchair user<br>person who uses a wheelchair<br>person with a mobility disability<br>person with a mobility impairment<br>person using a mobility device | confined/restricted to a wheelchair<br>wheelchair-bound |
| person of short stature<br>little person<br>person with achondroplasia (only if the person has this condition) | midget, dwarf, stunted |
| person with Down syndrome<br>person with trisomy-21 | mongoloid, special person, Down |
| person with albinism | Albino |

| | |
|---|---|
| person affected by leprosy | leper, leprosy patient |
| person who uses a communication device<br>person who uses an alternative method of communication | non-verbal, can't talk |
| accessible parking<br>parking reserved for persons with disabilities<br>accessible bathroom | disabled/handicapped parking<br><br>handicapped bathroom |

ANNEX II

# Terms requiring additional clarification from a language perspective


1. ACCESS vs ACCESSIBILITY
2. BRAILLE
3. CAPTIONS vs SUBTITLES
4. DEAF COMMUNITY
5. DEAFBLIND
6. DECLARATION AND DISCLOSURE
7. DISABLED PERSON
8. EASY READ
9. HELP, SUPPORT, ASSISTANCE
10. IMPAIRMENT vs DISABILITY
11. INTEGRATION vs INCLUSION
12. NEEDS vs REQUIREMENTS
13. ORGANIZATIONS FOR/OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
14. PWD
15. PLAIN LANGUAGE, PLAIN ENGLISH
16. REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION
17. SERVICE ANIMALS
18. SIGN LANGUAGE AND INTERNATIONAL SIGN
19. VISUAL IMPAIRMENT vs BLINDNESS


## 1. ACCESS vs ACCESSIBILITY

Access means the opportunity or right to do something or enter a place. For example, if you have a United Nations badge, you have access to the United Nations premises.

Accessibility refers to the design of products, devices, services or environments so as to be usable by persons with or without disabilities, and includes information and communications. Physical accessibility, for example, involves the creation of a barrier-free environment where persons with disabilities can move freely. Using the example above, this means that you may have access to the United Nations premises, but accessibility is lacking if there are physical barriers such as stairs or heavy doors. While you may have access to United Nations documents in printed or digital form, the documents are not accessible unless they are available in the required format (such as Braille or Easy Read).

Sometimes access is ensured but accessibility is not, so these terms are not equivalent and should be used in the right context.

## 2. BRAILLE

Braille is not a language. It is a system of raised dots that can be read with the fingers, used by people who are blind or who have low vision. Not all blind people can read Braille. Those who do can be referred to as Braille users. Everybody has the ability to learn to read Braille, so you should never assume that a Braille user is blind.

The process of converting printed text to Braille is called “transcribing” (not “translating”). The “printing” process is called “embossing”.

## 3. CAPTIONS vs SUBTITLES

Captions and subtitles are not the same, although they both appear as text at the bottom of the screen and represent speech.

Captions are particularly useful for persons who have hearing impairments as they include information on background noises, speaker identification, description of music and other relevant details.

Subtitles assume that the viewers can hear but cannot understand the language in the video – for example, in foreign-language films – and include dialogue only.

Captions come in two forms: open or closed captions. Closed captioning can be turned off by the viewer, while open captions are embedded into the video and cannot be turned off. Live (or real-time) captioning is provided at accessible meetings, either remotely or on-site.

All of these differences should be taken into account when using these terms.

## 4. DEAF COMMUNITY

"I am Deaf" (capitalized) is often used by individuals who are proud to belong to the "Deaf Community". They view themselves as a unique cultural and linguistic minority who use sign language as their primary language and share similar values. However, at the United Nations, we do not capitalize "deaf" or "deaf community".

## 5. DEAFBLIND

Deafblind individuals are a heterogeneous group of people who have significant sensory loss, including both blindness and deafness. At the United Nations, the form "deafblind" is preferred over "deaf-blind".

## 6. DECLARATION AND DISCLOSURE

Persons with disabilities have the right to share, or not to share, information about their disability status. In the workplace, we should move away from the traditional terms of "disclosure" or "declaration" of disability, as it can make it seem like the person is revealing a secret.

The phrase "identify as a person with disability" should also be avoided, as it raises other issues around identity and belonging. Someone may have an impairment but still not identify as a person with a disability. The simple phrase "choose to share information about their disability/impairment" is appropriate when talking about people's choice to let their employer or colleagues know about their impairment or specific requirements.

## 7. DISABLED PERSON

In some countries, "disabled person" is the preferred term. This term must be kept when referring to their laws, policies or entities, for example, as it reflects the reality in the country or the author's deliberate choice. Quotation marks can be used if necessary. However, we recommend using people-first language in United Nations websites, documents and speech, with the term "persons with disabilities".

## 8. EASY READ

Easy Read is an accessible format primarily intended for persons with intellectual disabilities or who have difficulties understanding written text.

The process of drafting an Easy Read version of a mainstream document is called "adaptation", not translation. However, like any other document, an Easy Read document written in one language can be translated into any other language, in which case we can call the result a translation.

At the United Nations, when referring to this specific format, we prefer the term "Easy Read" over "easy-to-read" to avoid misunderstandings. For example, the phrase "the United Nations Chronicle is a quarterly, easy-to-read report on the work of the United Nations and its agencies" does not mean that the Chronicle is available in this accessible format, but simply that it is easy to read and to understand.



## 9. HELP, SUPPORT, ASSISTANCE

The terms “help”, “support” and “assistance” have different connotations and are not interchangeable.

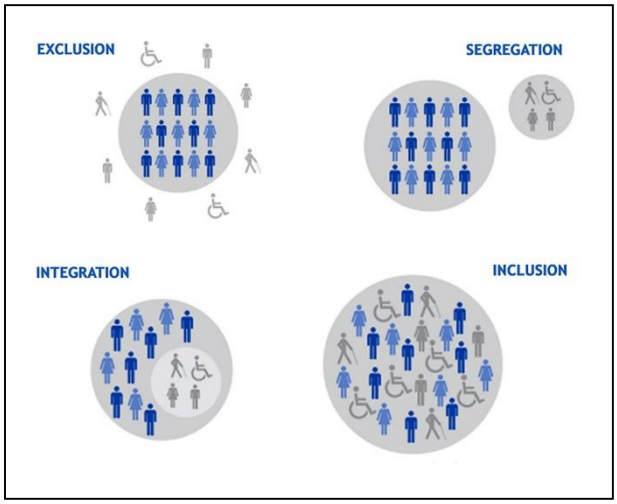
The term “help” is not recommended, as it portrays persons with disabilities as helpless and dependent. “Support” and “assistance” are more empowering and appropriate terms, and can be used in expressions such as “participants requiring assistance” or “support measures for persons with disabilities”.

## 10. IMPAIRMENT vs DISABILITY

Impairment refers to "any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function" (World Health Organization), while disability “results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, preamble, para. (e)). Since these terms have different meanings, they are not interchangeable.

## 11. INTEGRATION vs INCLUSION

There is a substantial difference between integration and inclusion. Integration is the process of making a person adapt to or fit into society, while inclusion refers to the process of changing society to include everyone, regardless of their impairment status. When talking about persons with disabilities, the connotations of “inclusion” are positive, while those of “integration” are negative. These terms are therefore not interchangeable.




## 12. NEEDS vs REQUIREMENTS

Some United Nations entities and experts have shown a preference for the term “requirements” over “needs”. This is in line with the human rights approach to disability, whereby we recognize that persons with disabilities are rights holders. The term “needs” is perceived as perpetuating the stereotype that persons with disabilities are needy or a burden, in particular when referring to “care needs”. An example that illustrates this approach is that schools must provide Braille materials to students with visual impairments not because they need them, but because they have a right to quality education on an equal basis with other students.

## 13. ORGANIZATIONS FOR/OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Organizations “of” persons with disabilities should be distinguished from organizations “for” persons with disabilities.

Organizations of persons with disabilities are led and controlled by persons with disabilities themselves. They represent the legitimate rights and interests of their members.

On the other hand, organizations for persons with disabilities provide services or advocate on behalf of persons with disabilities, but are not led and controlled by those persons.

## 14. PWD

The abbreviation “PWD” or “pwd” to refer to persons with disabilities should never be used in formal United Nations documents.

## 15. PLAIN LANGUAGE, PLAIN ENGLISH

Plain language is communication that the audience can understand the first time they read or hear it. Complex language and jargon are avoided, and a number of other principles are applied such as using short sentences or avoiding the passive voice. It can also be called plain English, plain writing or clear writing. However, the context is particularly relevant. For example, if you mention that a document will be made “available in plain English”, it may be understood to be in the English language only, excluding any other language. If that is not the case, “plain language” would be preferable.

## 16. REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION

In disability contexts, the term “accommodation”, frequently used in the expression “reasonable accommodation”, refers to necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments to ensure that persons with disabilities can enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, other options can be used when referring to a place to live or stay, such as housing, lodging, place of residence or living arrangements. Nevertheless, the term accommodation can be used when there is no ambiguity.

## 17. SERVICE ANIMALS

Service animals have been trained to perform specific tasks for persons with disabilities. This may include animals that guide individuals with visual impairments, pull a wheelchair or fetch dropped items. Sometimes the term “animal” is preferred over “dog” to encompass other types of animals that provide similar services. For example, Capuchin monkeys have been trained to help persons with physical impairments to perform daily tasks. Other animals that can be trained or used to provide comfort include parrots, ferrets and horses.

## 18. SIGN LANGUAGE AND INTERNATIONAL SIGN

Sign languages all over the world are distinct from each other. There is Mexican Sign Language, Lithuanian Sign Language and so forth. Some countries, such as Canada, have more than one sign language. When referring to these specific languages, we need to capitalize each word in the name.

There is no such thing as an international sign language, but there is something called International Sign. International Sign is a form of signing based on a series of agreed-upon signs that are used whenever deaf people from around the world meet at events. We therefore say, for example, that the United Nations provides International Sign interpretation, without calling it a language.

## 19. VISUAL IMPAIRMENT vs BLINDNESS

The term “visual impairment”, or “vision impairment”, encompasses a wide range of vision loss situations, of which blindness is just one. These terms are therefore not synonyms.