

DISABILITY CAN

Language, Style, and Accessible Communication Guide

Table of contents

Introduction 3

Guidance for communicating about disability and people with disabilities 4

Plain language 5

The words we use matter 6

Mechanics of style 8

- Abbreviations 8
- Capitalization 9
- Dates and times 9
- Headings 10
- Lists 10
- Numbers 10
- Punctuation 11
- Spelling 12
- Typefaces 13

Reference material 13

Introduction

Our goal at Disability Can is to create inclusive and accessible communications materials that are consistent in style and easy to understand.

Language is powerful. The words we choose shape how we view ourselves and how others view us. The way we communicate is just as important as what we communicate. Language that reflects people's agency, dignity, and full humanity builds trust and belonging.

As an organization that employs and works alongside people with disabilities, we have a responsibility to make sure our communications are understood by as many people as possible. We also have a duty to educate ourselves on respectful and inclusive ways to speak and write about disability and other marginalized identities. This guide puts our values into practice in our everyday work.

Using this guide

All communications produced by Disability Can must apply the standards outlined in the Language & Style Guide. This guide applies to staff, volunteers, and anyone who creates communications on behalf of Disability Can. Third party creators should be provided a copy of this guide.

Whether you're writing a flyer, a social media post, a funding proposal, correspondence, or an internal email, this guide is for you. You don't need to be a professional writer to use it. It's designed to be practical and straightforward.

When a question of style or format isn't covered in this guide, we use *The Canadian Press Stylebook* and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines as our fallback references.

If you have any questions about this guide or how to use it, or need feedback on a piece of writing, contact the Communications team.

Guidance for communicating about disability and people with disabilities

The following guidelines will help you to write about disability and people with disabilities in easy-to-understand, approachable, and inclusive ways.

- **Use plain language.** Use simple words and phrases. Avoid jargon and technical terms. Keep sentences short and group like sentences into paragraphs. Define uncommon terms.
- **Call people what they call themselves.** As an organization, we use person-first language (person with a disability) by default. However, we also respect identity-first language (disabled person). Ask people what their preferred terms are and respect their choices. Some communities may capitalize certain terms to signal cultural or linguistic identity, e.g. Deaf.
- **Use precise language to describe disability-related barriers and functional limitations.** Avoid vague or generalized terms such as “low functioning.” Clearly identify what the limitation or barrier is, where it occurs, and how it affects participation. Use “they have reduced lower-body strength that limits walking long distances” vs. “they struggle getting around.”
- **Describe only what’s relevant.** Include personal characteristics such as disability, age, sexual orientation, or cultural identity only when they affect understanding, context, or access to services.
- **Avoid deficit framing.** Choose terms that reflect people’s abilities rather than positioning disability as something to overcome, e.g., wheelchair user vs. wheelchair-bound, has a disability vs. suffers from a disability.
- **Avoid unintentional harm.** Word choice can unintentionally perpetuate harmful stereotypes and discrimination. Be descriptive and don’t rely on euphemisms, such as “walking hand-in-hand." Never use harmful — but common — terms such as “tone deaf,” “crippling anxiety,” or “blindly following.”

- **Account for intersectionality.** Be mindful that many people with disabilities have multiple intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, and income level.
- **Use the most inclusive language possible.** We can choose to use the most inclusive language possible. For example, use “people with a disability in Canada” rather than “Canadians with a disability.”

Plain language

Plain language removes barriers and makes our communications work better for everyone. When we write in plain language, people understand our message the first time, without confusion or extra effort. This means using familiar words, short sentences, and clear formatting. Clear writing leads to fewer mistakes, fewer follow-up questions, and more confident decisions.

Here are some plain language tips:

- **Write for a general audience.** Use everyday language people recognize, choosing the plainest possible words even when the topic is complex.
- **Avoid jargon and buzzwords.** Instead of “leveraging synergies to optimize outcomes,” say “working together to improve results.”
- **Write directly to the reader.** Instead of “we help individuals with disabilities access services,” say “we help you access the services you need.”
- **Use the active voice.** For example, “Disability Can is working to increase access to services for people with disabilities in Canada.”
- **Keep sentences short and focused.** Avoid long sentences with multiple ideas. Where possible, break complex information down into smaller pieces.
- **Organize information clearly.** Group like paragraphs and use descriptive headings and subheadings.
- **Avoid directional references.** Phrases like “see the section below” or “click the button on the right” create barriers for many people.

- **Describe images and visual content.** Include meaningful and descriptive alt-text and captions with images so people who can't see them can still understand their purpose.
- **Provide more than one way to access information.** Where possible, offer alternative formats, such as captions for videos, transcripts for audio, and plain text versions of documents.

The words we use matter

Guided by our values and the goal of clear, consistent communication, Disability Can chooses to use — and avoid — certain words and expressions to describe ourselves, the community we serve, and disability itself. Please use these words as the default for all Disability Can brand communications, adjusting for people's preferred terms where applicable.

We use…	Instead of…
Disability Can	Disability CAN, DisabilityCan, Disability can, DC
Disability Can [Program Name] Second mention: [Program Name]	Disability Can's [Program Name], [Program Name] by Disability Can
Service user	Client, consumer
Caregiver	Carer, care provider, helper
Family, family member(s), family and friend(s)	Loved one(s)
Partner with, work together with, work alongside, support, serve	Help
Disability	Handicap, special needs
Person with a disability or disabilities, people with disabilities Disabled person (if identity-first language is preferred)	Handicapped person/people, people with special needs, the disabled, differently abled, handicapable, challenged, impaired
People with disabilities in Canada Provincial/territorial: "Ontarians with disabilities" or "New Brunswickers with	Canadians with disabilities, the disability community

disabilities" is acceptable	
Born with a disability	Congenitally disabled, birth defect
Acquired a disability	Suffered a disability
Has a disability	Lives with a disability, living with a disability
Living experience of disability	Lived experience of disability
Person with aphasia, person with a communication disability	Aphasic, speech impaired
Person with Autism Autistic person (if identity-first language is preferred)	Person with autism, on the spectrum, high- or low-functioning
Blindness, low vision	Vision loss, visual impairment
Person with a brain injury	Brain injured
Deaf (capitalized), hard of hearing	Unable to hear, deaf
Intellectual or learning disability	Retarded, developmental disability, special needs
Mental illness or depression	Mentally ill, depressed
Physical disability	Crippled, handicapped, mobility-impaired
Polio survivor	Polio victim, polio sufferer
Stroke survivor, person who has had a stroke	Stroke victim, stroke sufferer
Wheelchair user	Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
Older adults, older people	Seniors, senior citizens, the elderly
Indigenous; First Nations, Inuit and Métis people	Aboriginal, native, Indian
2SLGBTQIA+ (general); specific terms as preferred by individuals	Homosexual
People experiencing homelessness, people experiencing poverty, people with low incomes	Homeless, poor, impoverished

Mechanics of style

This section outlines the technical rules of writing meant to ensure consistency in formatting, punctuation, spelling, and more. Following these rules ensures consistency across all communications, which increases readability and enhances credibility. Consistent formatting also supports accessibility by making our communications easy to read and understand. Refer to our Brand Book when formatting special documents and for design specifications.

Abbreviations

Use abbreviations for familiar multi-word terms and organization names. When using abbreviations for unfamiliar or less common terms and names, use full spelling on the first reference and the abbreviation for subsequent references. Remember: this is about what the average person in Canada knows. When in doubt, spell it out.

- Example: About five per cent of people in Canada have ADHD.
- Example: The Home and Vehicle Modification Program (HVMP) provides financial support to residents of Ontario. HVMP is funded by the Government of Ontario.
- The term “for example” can be shortened to “e.g.” The term “that is,” can be shortened to "i.e.”

Capitalization

This section outlines the rules for using capital letters and when to avoid them.

- Capitalize proper nouns, including the names of people, places, organizations, racial and ethnic groups (excluding “white”), and trademarks.
    - Example: Disability Can provides services to Indigenous service users from Nunavut.
- Capitalize job titles, positions, and honorifics only when they act as proper nouns, such as when they’re part of the person’s name.
    - Example: Prime Minister Mark Carney

    - Example: Mark Carney is the prime minister of Canada.
- Don’t capitalize the names of diseases, disorders (exception: Autism), therapies, and treatments unless the term contains a person’s name.
    - Examples: cerebral palsy, Alzheimer’s disease
- Capitalize the first word and proper nouns in headers, headings, and headlines.
- Capitalize the first word after colons and em dashes in headers, headings, and headlines.

Dates and times

- Write calendar dates as July 10, 2020 (not July 10th, 2020).
- Express dates as dd/mm/yyyy. Use 26/08/2026 for August 26, 2026.
- Write times of day without unnecessary zeroes.
    - Example: 7 to 10 am or 11 am to 3 pm.
- When indicating time zones, use ET, PT rather than EDT or EST.

Headings

- Use sentence case in headings. Sentence case means capitalize the first word of a heading and use lowercase for all other words, excluding proper nouns.
    - Example: Guidance for communicating about disability and people with disabilities

Lists

Numbered lists

- Use numbered lists when items must appear in a specific order or represent steps in a method/procedure.
- Each item should be a complete sentence or full paragraph.
- Capitalize the first word after the numeral and end each item with a period.
    - Example:
        1. Write your list.

2. Check you have formatted it correctly.

Bullet lists

Bulleted lists are useful when the items don't follow a specific order, such as steps in a process, rules or guidelines, or listing examples.

- If items are written in full sentences, begin each with a capital letter and end with appropriate punctuation.
- If the items are single words or short phrases, start with lowercase (unless the item is a proper noun) and use no punctuation.

Numbers

- Spell out numbers under 10 and use numerals for values 10 and above.
- Avoid starting sentences with a number.
    - Example: Amanda has two dogs and 12 chickens.
- Write out common fractions.
    - Example: Two-thirds of participants were satisfied with the results.
- Use numerals for statistics and mathematical equations, fractions and numbers including decimals (except common fractions) and ratios.
    - Example: People with disabilities are 1.4 times more likely to experience poverty than people without disabilities in Canada.

Punctuation

Punctuation helps set the rhythm of a sentence and shows how ideas are connected. When used incorrectly, punctuation can create confusion. Here are some guidelines on where and how to use it.

- **Commas:** Use the serial or Oxford comma in lists of three or more items.
    - Example: We went to the store to buy milk, eggs, and vegetables.
- **Contractions:** Use contractions in all communication materials.

    - Example: “don’t,” “can’t,” “we’re,” and “it’s.”
- **Ellipsis:** An ellipsis is used to indicate the presence of omitted text within a sentence, paragraph, or quotation.
    - Example: “I bought a new car last week ... and it won’t start!”
- **Em dashes:** Em dashes (—) are used for asides or to signify a shift in tone within a sentence and should have a space on either side.
    - Example: Never use harmful — but common — terms such as...
- **En dashes:** En dashes (-) are used for ranges and hyphenated words. Typically, en dashes don’t require spaces on either side.
    - Example: Expanding access to accessible housing is a high-priority issue for Disability Can in 2026-2027.
- Slashes: The forward slash (/) is used in writing to indicate alternatives, fractions, or dates. The backslash (\) is almost exclusively used in computing for file paths and programming and should be avoided in writing. Use slashes without spaces on either side.
    - Example: Disability Can provides programs/services to people with disabilities.
- **Percentages:** Spell out the word “per cent” in sentences and the main body of text. Use “%” in infographics or at the start of bullet points.
    - Example: Roughly 27 per cent of people in Canada have at least one disability.
    - Example: -5% increase in spending this year.
- **Periods:** Use a single space after a period.
- **Quotation marks:** Double quotation marks are used when quoting someone directly, word for word. Single quotation marks are used within quotes and when quoting within a header/headline. Other punctuation, such as commas and periods, should appear within quotation marks.
    - Example: “We’re thrilled to partner with the Manitoba Government,” said Disability Can President & CEO Len Baker.
    - Example: We use terms such as “people with disabilities,” “person with a disability,” and “Ontarians with disabilities.”

- **Semicolons:** Semicolons may be used to separate pairs or sets of items within complex lists.
    - Example: We brought milk and cheese; fruit and vegetables; paper towel, paper plates, and straws.

Spelling

Disability Can uses Canadian English and French for all communications. All Disability Can written materials must be spell-checked for accuracy.

Typefaces

Use **bold** type for added emphasis when necessary. Avoid *italics* and underlines (except for URLs) because they can reduce accessibility.

Reference material

Reference materials provide additional information about language and style. The references below will help you in drafting communications aligned with our voice, tone, and standards.

- Government of Canada's A Way With Words and Images: Guide for Communicating With and About Persons With Disabilities
- Government of Canada's Plain Language Standard
- United Nations' Disability Inclusive Language Guidelines
- Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally by Emily Ladau
- Accessible Communications: Create Impact, Avoid Missteps, and Build Trust by Lisa Riemers and Matisse Hamel-Neils
- The Conscious Style Guide: A Flexible Approach to Language That Includes, Respects, and Empowers by Karen Yin
- Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and About Indigenous Peoples by Gregory Younging

CONTACT

For questions about Disability Can core messaging, please don't hesitate to reach out to our marketing team. We are here to help!

Sarah Ahmed

Sr. Director, Brand & Digital Marketing

Disability Can (formerly March of Dimes Canada)
99 Duncan Mill Road
Toronto, ON, M3B 1Z2
www.disabilitycan.ca