

A male athlete with a prosthetic right leg is captured in a dynamic running pose on a green track. He is wearing a black athletic top and black shorts. The prosthetic is a dark, carbon-fiber running blade. The background is a blurred stadium. The image is overlaid with diagonal blue and grey geometric shapes.

What we say matters.

A Guide on Appropriate Disability
Terminology for Journalists
and Media

26%

61 million U.S. adults (26% of the U.S. adult population) live with a disability, making this group the nation's largest minority group.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a disabled person is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

Media coverage can deeply influence public opinion and establish societal norms and perceptions. People with disabilities are occasionally included in media stories and when they are featured, they are often negatively stereotyped and not appropriately represented. This guide provides information for journalists and press members creating media stories about people with disabilities.

// I am a **person with a disability.**
I am a **disabled person.**

Use Appropriate Language

It can be difficult to know what type of language to use regarding disability. Since disability is an identity and part of a person's lived experience, it's important to understand what language the broader disability community prefers. It is acceptable to use both person-first (I am a person with a disability) and identity-first (I am a disabled person) language to represent the two most preferred language choices of the disability community.

Person-first language intends to avoid using labels and to see someone as a person first and their attribute(s) second.

For advocates of **identity-first language**, talking about being a "disabled person" is fundamentally empowering because it acknowledges that their disability is vital to their position in the world and who they are.



Avoid Euphemisms

It is important to reclaim and use the words “disabled” and “disability” rather than euphemisms such as “special needs” or “differently-abled” to remove the stigma of disability and promote a positive disability identity. Euphemisms for disability while highly popular are strongly discouraged. For example, the American Psychological Association (2010) tells writers to “avoid euphemisms” for disability, such as “special, physically challenged, handi-capable” because those euphemisms “are condescending.” In addition, the Research and Training Center on Independent Living (2013), believes that terms such as special, handi-capable, differently-abled, and challenged reinforce the idea that people cannot deal honestly with their disabilities.



Local athlete with special needs wins gold medal in archery!



How do differently-abled athletes train for events?



5 disabled athletes to cheer on at this year’s Paralympics.

Avoid Stereotypes

Journalists play a crucial role in influencing perceptions about people with a disability because they select the content to cover and how to cover it. For disabled athletes, the media provides a significant opportunity to influence public attitudes regarding disability and disability sport. In the past, the media has been accused of perpetuating the negative stereotypes by ignoring them as true athletes, projecting narratives of “overcoming” their disability to be “superhuman,” and emphasizing a hierarchy of disability. To dive a little deeper into these stereotypes and how to avoid them, let’s define them.

The “**supercrip**” narrative describes a disabled person who works hard to “overcome” his/her disability. This can be seen in “inspirational” stories of para-athletes defying the odds to succeed. It highlights conquering a disability through hard work instead of embracing the disability and seeing the achievement as that of just hard work and athletic success with a disability. This also diminishes the structural and attitudinal barriers that most people with an impairment face. Disability rights are human rights, and a disabled athlete not having access to a facility to train and yet finding a way to train should not be inspirational; it should be a social justice issue.

Use your platform to educate the audience about social justice by reporting issues that affect the quality of life for people with disabilities, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities, and discrimination.



Avoid Ableism

Ableism is the intentional or unintentional discrimination or oppression of individuals with disabilities. The hierarchy of disability is another way the media can input their ableist views on society. This provides a platform for some disabilities to be portrayed as “more normal” and acceptable for viewers. This includes individuals who acquired their disability following an accident to the exclusion of others. Alternatively, there should not be a “normal” or any levels of disability. Each person is unique with their own sets of skills, attributes, and contributions to society and sport.

Use Thematic Framing & Avoid Emotional Content

Journalists should focus on thematic media framing over episodic media practices. Episodic framing focuses on a single event while highlighting how to fix the individual experiencing a problem. In contrast, thematic framing focuses on the conditions that preceded the problem. Episodic framing is often used by the media because it is appealing to the audience by way of featuring extreme personal stories or dramatic visual footage. Emotional appeal is important, but it can be done in a way that highlights the positives. Thematic framing turns the media focus on broader public issues such as community shortcomings to provide access to sports and recreational opportunities for people with disabilities presents an opportunity for a better understanding of the issue, holds responsible organizations accountable, and demands civic action to create better access and promote inclusion.



Quick Reference Guide

Below you will find a quick reference guide to help you write and speak appropriately on some of the most commonly used terminology, as well as guidance on disability etiquette during the interview process.

Instead of...

Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair
Handicapped, Crippled
Able-bodied
Handicapped Parking
Midget
Deaf-Mute
Harelip
Insane
Mongoloid, Retarded
Special Needs, Suffers from

Use...

Wheelchair User
Disabled
Non-disabled
Accessible Parking
Dwarf, Little Person
Deaf
Cleft-lip palette
Mental Disability
Intellectual Disability
Person with a Disability

When writing or speaking about _____ or with a person with a physical disability

Use an individual's name

When speaking directly to someone with a disability, it's usually best to just use their name. If you must refer to their disability status and are unsure whether you should use person-first, identity-first, or something else, you should ask the individual you are referring to.

Never assume

Do not assume that a person with a disability is unhappy, has the desire to be "cured," or is attempting to "overcome" their disability.

You don't know someone's diagnosis

Individuals who are paralyzed have varying levels of paralysis. Do not assume a person is paralyzed from the waist down unless you are certain of his or her diagnosis.

Be mindful of the praise you give

Try not to give undue praise for everyday situations and accomplishments simply because an individual has a disability. Limit these types of praises and compliments to individuals with disability who truly accomplish inspirational or heroic achievements. Examples of this in the media are pretty pronounced including the popular prom stories of a person with an intellectual disability or the kid that gets to play in the last game of the season and everyone lets them score.

Disability is not negative

A disability is not a negative characteristic and should not be portrayed as such.



When interviewing a person with...

A physical disability

- Make sure the interview site is accessible. This could include a clear path, a ramp in place of stairs, and a chair removed if the person chooses not to transfer. There could be other accessibility issues throughout the interview site, and the best option to avoid any barriers would be to partner with a disability organization to ensure access.
- Ask ahead of time if the person will need any accommodations which could include transportation. Be prepared to adapt or modify during the interview as needed.
- Speak to the person in the same way you would to a person without disability. There is no need to crouch or kneel to the level of the individual if the interview will be brief.
- For an on-camera interview, ask how the person would like to be interviewed. A person who can ambulate may want to stand or sit, while a person who uses a wheelchair may want to sit in his or her wheelchair or transfer to another chair.
- Ensure the individual has cleared the questions that will be asked and that they are ok answering them.

A sensory disability

- Always verbally introduce and excuse yourself when you join or leave a conversation with an individual who is visually impaired.
- If an individual has difficulty speaking, do not assume he or she has an intellectual disability or alter your speech or attitude.
- Allow sufficient time for communication and do not attempt to finish his or her sentences or provide words before he or she can say them.
- If a person has hearing loss, consider writing your message or having an interpreter, as the majority of this population does not read lips.

An intellectual disability

- Provide the interview questions ahead of time to give the person time to adequately prepare.
- Keep the interview space small and preferably well-known to the individual. For example, an interview done at a public park may be overwhelming.
- The individual may easily lose focus or get off task. It may be beneficial to keep a visible schedule or list of questions for him or her to see.
- It may help to allow him or her access to a preferred location or object during the interview.
- Ask one question at a time and allow adequate time for a response.



When interviewing _____ an athlete with a disability

- Treat the athlete the same as an athlete without disability.
- Focus on the athlete's sport, not his or her disability.
- Have a basic understanding of the sport and any equipment used for the sport. If you don't know, just ask.

Understand the different levels and types of disability sport competition

- There are local, regional, national, collegiate, and international competitions.
- [The Olympic Games](#) are the largest sporting event in the world and are held every two years for elite athletes without disability.
- [The Paralympic Games](#) are the second-largest sporting event in the world and are held every four years for elite athletes with disability in both winter and summer Games. The same host city and venues are used as the Olympic Games, and the Paralympic Games takes place two weeks after the closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games.
- [The Special Olympics](#) are local, regional, national, and international sport trainings and competitions for individuals with intellectual disability.

Resources

- [Communicating About People with Disabilities](#)
- [#WriteInclusion Tips for Accurate Representation](#)
- [The National Center on Disability and Journalism](#)
- [Respectability](#)
- Gernsbacher, M.A., Raimond, A.R., Balinghasay, M.T. et al. "Special needs" is an ineffective euphemism. *Cogn. Research* 1, 29 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-16-0025-4>
- McGillivray, D, O'Donnell, H, McPherson, G & Misener, L 2019, 'Repurposing the (super)crip: media representations of disability at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games', *Communication & Sport*, pp. 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519853496>

We hope you will become a leader in the community when it comes to talking, writing, and producing stories with people with a disability and you find these resources helpful.

**If you have any further questions or resource needs, please contact NCHPAD at:
1-800-900-8086 or email@nchpad.org**

