

CAN Language Guide

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Land Acknowledgement

The Canadian Accessibility Network (CAN) acknowledges the location of its National Office on the traditional, unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg Nation. We extend our respect to all First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples for their valuable contributions, both past and present, to this land.

Research shows that Indigenous persons with disabilities often experience discrimination and face additional barriers, compared to the general population, because of this intersectionality. In our work to increase accessibility for all, may we be mindful of the Indigenous community of persons with disabilities, and work towards reconciliation by ensuring their voices/perspectives are included.

CAN recognizes the diversity of experiences of Indigenous communities, which may have their own perspectives on disability that do not align with the settler language and ideology that underpins the *CAN Language Guide*. We encourage readers to offer corrections, additions, and suggestions to continuously improve the *Guide* and more fully represent the diverse perspectives of those involved in CAN.

Introduction

We use language every day to describe ourselves and our surroundings, to tell our stories, and to communicate with each other. It is an important part of how we understand our world and impacts how we feel about ourselves and interact with other people. Language is a complex system that is always evolving. The language we use, the order of the words, and the context of the conversation all work together to create meaning and help us understand our experiences.

For people with disabilities and others in the disability community, the language used to describe identity and lived experience can be deeply personal. Words and concepts are loaded with histories and meanings.

Some words and phrases that were once commonly used related to disability are now considered outdated, discriminatory, prejudiced, or harmful. Other words and phrases that were once used to marginalize and discriminate against people with disabilities have been reclaimed and given new meaning.

Content Advisory: This document includes information about and makes references to concepts and terms relating to accessibility and disability some readers may find sensitive, triggering, or distressing. For your own self care and wellbeing, please only continue to read this document if you are prepared to engage with this content.

Language is continually changing and is used in different ways within specific contexts and cultures. The words we use are also shaped by lived experience. The *Canadian Accessibility Network (CAN) Language Guide* includes language used across the nation by organizations and individuals with a variety of perspectives and preferences. The *Guide* is meant to serve as a basis for understanding and inclusion within the Network's membership and can be used beyond the Network to increase our shared understanding of language regarding disability. It was written by people with disabilities and accessibility allies and was informed by the diverse perspectives of CAN's membership.

Purpose of the CAN Language Guide

The *CAN Language Guide*:

- Establishes the use of consistent, inclusive language for all CAN communications,
- Sets a standard for CAN that respects and acknowledges the context of the language we use,
- Honours the diverse and intersectional identities of all people, and
- Supports the use of language that challenges myths and stereotypes about people with disabilities.

The Guide has been written with plain language principles in mind, however some content was too complex to be presented in a plain language style. A plain language version of the Guide will be developed in the future.

CAN is committed to creating welcoming, respectful, and inclusive environments at all Network-related meetings and events, as well as within its communications. CAN encourages organizations and

communities outside the Network to use this *Guide* to promote the use of respectful and inclusive language.

The *CAN Language Guide* is a living document. Because language is always evolving, flexible, and open to personal preferences, CAN is committed to continually updating the Guide as language norms evolve or as new information or terminology becomes available. CAN encourages readers to offer comments, concerns, or suggestions to improve this *Guide* by contacting the CAN National Office at can@carleton.ca.

Development of Disability Legislation in Canada

People with disabilities have historically struggled for acceptance and equality in Canada and around the world. People with disabilities have been marginalized, mistreated, discriminated against, and persecuted. Even though the World Health Organization identifies the disability community as the largest minority group in the world (around 10% of the world's population, or 650 million people), many people with disabilities still experience discrimination today.

In the 1800s and 1900s, it was not uncommon for medical professionals to send people with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and mental health issues to institutions or asylums where they were isolated, neglected, and refused control over their lives and day-to-day decisions. The Sexual Sterilization Act passed in Alberta in 1928, which allowed the Alberta Eugenics Board to sterilize persons with disabilities living in government-run institutions without their consent. British Columbia passed a similar Sexual Sterilization Act in 1933. This practice remained legal in Alberta and British Columbia until the 1970s. The Supreme Court of Canada ended forced sterilization nationwide in 1986.

The Canadian disability rights movement began gaining strength in the latter half of the 20th century, spurred by the return of disabled veterans after World War II. Activists fought to include people with disabilities in mainstream society and expand services to people who needed them. People with disabilities and their allies began forming advocacy groups at the provincial level, most focused on single disabilities. In the 1960s, groups from across Canada came together to form the pan-disability Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (later renamed the Council of Canadians with Disabilities).

In 1974, Nova Scotia amended its *Human Rights Act* to prohibit employment discrimination against the 'physically handicapped'. In 1977, the Federal Government passed the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, prohibiting discrimination based on disability along with other identities. In 1979, the Ontario Government introduced the *Handicapped Persons Rights Act* as a freestanding disability rights law. These were some of the first laws in Canada that supported the equality of persons with disabilities in society.

Since then, many people across Canada have been working hard to ensure that people with disabilities are protected from discrimination and to make Canada increasingly more accessible. The following instruments support the rights of people with disabilities across Canada.

Provincial Legislation

All Canadian provinces and territories now have their own Human Rights Codes, which generally apply to provincial and municipal governments, businesses, non-profit organization and individuals within that province or territory, and prohibit discrimination in specific areas, such as employment, housing, provision of goods and services, including healthcare and education.

Several provinces have also introduced provincial accessibility legislation, including the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#), the [Accessibility for Manitobans Act](#), and the [Nova Scotia Accessibility Act](#). These acts all operate with the goal of making their provinces accessible by removing barriers for persons with disabilities.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) forms part of the Canadian Constitution, which is a set of laws ensuring the civil and political rights and freedoms of all Canadians. Section 15 of the Charter makes it clear that every individual in Canada – regardless of race, religion, national or ethnic origin, colour, sex, age or physical or mental disability – is to be considered equal under the law.

The Canadian Human Rights Act

The [Canadian Human Rights Act of 1977](#) protects Canadians from discrimination when they are employed by or receive services from the federal government; First Nations governments; and private companies that are regulated by the federal government like banks, trucking companies, broadcasters, and telecommunications companies. The Act identifies [eleven grounds for discrimination](#), including disability.

The Accessible Canada Act

[The Accessible Canada Act \(2019\)](#) uses a human rights framework to help achieve equality for Canadians with disabilities. The Act is rooted in seven principles:

- everyone must be treated with dignity;
- everyone must have the same opportunity to make for themselves the life they are able and wish to have;
- everyone must be able to participate fully and equally in society;
- everyone must have meaningful options and be free to make their own choices, with support if they desire;
- laws, policies, programs, services, and structures must take into account the ways that different kinds of barriers and discrimination intersect;
- persons with disabilities must be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs, services, and structures; and
- accessibility standards and regulations must be made with the goal of achieving the highest level of accessibility.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

In addition to domestic legislation, Canada ratified the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) in 2010 after consultations with the provinces and territories, Indigenous self-government,

and Canadians – particularly those from the disability community. With ratification, Canada committed to applying the rights found enshrined in the Convention. It is also bound by the Convention under international law.

Definitions and Language

Disability

According to the [Canadian Survey on Disability](#) conducted in 2017, about 22% of the Canadians aged 15 years and over report living with a disability. Because some people choose not to disclose their disability out of fear of stigma and discrimination, many believe the true number of people with disabilities may be higher. So, what is disability?

According to the *Accessible Canada Act (2019)*, “disability” is:

“A physical, mental, intellectual, learning, communication or sensory impairment – or a functional limitation – whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.”

The *Canadian Human Rights Act* similarly defines “disability” as:

“A physical or mental condition that is permanent, ongoing, episodic or of some persistence, and is a substantial or significant limit on an individual’s ability to carry out some of life’s important functions or activities, such as employment. Disabilities include visible disabilities, such as the need for a wheelchair, and invisible disabilities, such as cognitive, behavioural or learning disabilities, and mental health issues.”

The United Nations defines “disability” as:

“Long-term impairments that affect the functioning of a person and which in interaction with attitudinal and environmental barriers hinder the person’s full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (UN, 2006).

Invisible Disability

An “invisible,” “non-visible,” “hidden,” or “non-apparent” disability cannot be easily seen or measured or is not immediately noticeable. This can include mental illness, chronic pain, ADHD, dyslexia, neurological conditions, and much more.

A non-visible disability may be doubted, discounted, not respected, or misunderstood. We can all play a role in reducing “invisibility” by creating a safe system for asking, observing, and acknowledging bodily/neuro diversity in personal, social, and employment settings.

Barrier

The *Accessible Canada Act* defines a “barrier” as:

“anything – including anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice – that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with a physical, mental, intellectual, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation.”

Accessibility

“Accessibility” refers to how services, technology, locations, devices, environments, and products are designed to remove barriers for persons with disabilities. Accessibility means giving people of all abilities equal opportunities to participate in life activities. The term implies conscious planning, design, and/or effort to ensure something is barrier-free to persons with disabilities. Accessibility also benefits the general population by making things more usable and practical for everyone.

Ableism

“Ableism” is a belief that persons with disabilities are less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute to and participate in society, or of less inherent value than people without disabilities. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious, and is often embedded in institutions, systems, or the broader culture of a society.

[Talila A. Lewis defines “ableism” as:](#)

“A system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This systemic oppression that leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth or living place, ‘health/wellness,’ and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, ‘excel’ and ‘behave.’ You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.”

Language can express and reinforce ableism.

Models of Disability

Historically, disability was often defined using the “medical model,” which focused on an individual’s deficit and how those with disabilities deviated from the “norm.” This model treats people with disabilities as sick/injured and needing treatment. Those that use this model focus on treatment and care for people with disabilities, and it was, and in some places remains, the dominant model among medical professionals. This model does not take into consideration culture, societal biases, stigma, or discrimination.

The focus of the “charity model” is to take care of, or raise funds for, a person with a disability. Someone with this perspective feels sorry for the individual with a disability and takes pity on them (and feels good about themselves for being charitable).

The “vocational rehabilitation model” focuses on training for a person with a disability with the end goal of helping that person adjust, so that they can participate in the society. The experience for the person with a disability is integration (not to be confused with inclusion – see below).

Government agencies in Canada now frame disability using the “social model” of disability. This means that to understand disability, as defined by *Accessible Canada Act*, we need to consider “not just a person’s impairments or task difficulties, but also the added impact of the environmental barriers that create disability. These environmental barriers can be physical obstacles such as stairs; they can be technological such as inaccessible websites; or they can be attitudinal resulting in discrimination and exclusion.” The social model incorporates society and culture.

The “human rights model” of disability goes even further. Highlighting dignity as a fundamental human right, this model sees disability as a part of human diversity and acknowledges that people with disabilities need equitable support to enjoy their rights even after barriers are removed.

Identity-First vs. Person-First Language

“Person-first language” (person with a disability) and “identity-first language” (disabled person) are both used in Canada. Because people with disabilities have a long history of being treated as less than human or considered *only* through their disability, person-first language can be a strong reminder of people with disabilities’ personhood.

Some people with disabilities prefer identity-first language because it reflects their identity and can signal a sense of belonging to a cultural group.

Sometimes people with disabilities have strong preferences towards one or the other, so it is best to ask people what they are comfortable with and to pay attention to the language being used around you. If you’re not sure what to use, person-first language is usually recommended. The CAN National Office will use person-first language by default in all communications.

Intersectionality

American Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectionality as a framework for understanding a person’s individual experiences by thinking about the overlapping identities that person holds. The framework helps us understand that people with disabilities are diverse and multi-faceted. Being a person with a disability is only one aspect of someone’s identity. They also have experiences and attributes related to their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, national origin, and more. A person can also have one or more disabilities.

Inclusion

“Inclusion” refers to the act of acknowledging and valuing differences in identity. This process aims to ensure that persons of varying backgrounds, skills, identities and abilities are equally considered for meaningful involvement and social participation.

Accommodation

The term “accommodation” refers to arrangements or adaptations that are made to allow persons with disabilities full participation.

Ally

An “ally” is someone who supports the cause of a marginalized group. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) shares the following acronym for allies of persons with disabilities:

A: Acknowledge and respect individual experiences

L: Learn about disabilities

L: Leverage your influence to promote accessibility and inclusion

Y: Yield the floor to people with disabilities

General Guidelines

Language is both an individualizing and community building tool. Using inclusive language is a powerful tool in fighting ableism. CAN recommends the following best practices concerning language.

Ask people with disabilities if they want you to refer to their disability and, if they do, what language they prefer. People with disabilities are diverse in experiences, cultures, and beliefs. Remember that some people may feel comfortable discussing their disabilities while others may not be comfortable discussing or disclosing their disability in certain situations.

Use language that emphasizes the need for accommodations for people with disabilities rather than the presence of a disability.

Instead of using: “disabled or handicapped parking space”

Use: “accessible parking space”

Use language that highlights that people with disabilities are *people* with diverse and multifaceted identities.

Instead of using: “handicapped”

Use: “person with a disability, disabled person”

Instead of using: “disabled, the disabled”

Use: “person with a disability, people with disabilities”

Instead of using: “confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound”

Use: “person who uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user”

Instead of using: “he is bipolar”

Use: “he has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, he is living with bipolar disorder”

Instead of using: “addict, junkie”

Use: “person with a substance use disorder, person experiencing addiction”

Some disability communities have clearly established language preferences. For example, some people prefer the identity-first language “Deaf person” over the person-first language “individual with Deafness” or “person who is Deaf”. Members of Deaf culture may also want their label to be capitalized with a “D.” Another example is that some people prefer the identity-first language “Autistic person” over “individual with autism” or “person with autism”. Pay attention to the language that people use for themselves and echo their language when possible.

Describe people *without* disabilities in ways that do not perpetuate stereotypes of people *with* disabilities. Having a disability is not the same as being sick. Many people with disabilities are physically and mentally healthy.

Instead of using: “normal, healthy, able-bodied”

Use: “non-disabled, people without visible disabilities”

Avoid using exaggerated descriptions when talking about people with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are not super-achievers or tragic figures. It should not be considered unusual for someone with a disability to have talents, skills, and abilities.

Avoid using “heroic” words such as: “courageous, special, brave, exceptional, or overcome”

Avoid using “tragic” words such as: “suffers from, stricken with, afflicted by, burdened with, challenged”

Avoid using euphemisms that may reinforce disability as something shameful. Terms like “differently abled” or “handicapable” are condescending and offensive.

Avoid using historical or medical language now considered offensive, even as a joke. Words such as “freak,” “retard,” “imbecile,” “crazy,” “psycho,” “moron,” “idiot,” and “mad” are offensive. Some communities have reclaimed the offensive words, such as “crippled”, “crip”, and “mad” to describe themselves as a way of controlling the words. These words should only be used by persons with disabilities and only within specific contexts.

Seek other sources of information before asking a member of a marginalized group to answer your questions. Not every person with a disability is comfortable sharing details about their lived experience. There are books, podcasts, articles, videos, and other forms of media created by people with disabilities where folks can learn more about lived experiences of disability.

If you make a mistake using language, apologize and move on. No one is perfect. Come to each conversation with good intentions, curiosity, and an openness to learning and growing.

Process for Creating the *Guide*

The *CAN Language Guide* was co-created in 2022 by CAN Members across Canada. Each step of this co-creation process was actively and intentionally inclusive.

Phase 1: Planning

- The *CAN Language Guide* Project Team was formed.
- The Team met throughout winter 2022 to discuss accessibility and language.
- The Team created a process for drafting the *Guide* which ensured inclusion and consultation of the Network and persons with disabilities.

Phase 2: Information Collection

- The Team asked the Network to provide examples of language guides and other sources of related information.
- The Team then conducted a website review to find additional examples and sources.
- The Team reviewed all examples from within and outside of Canada, highlighting similarities and differences and considering approaches.

Phase 3: Drafting

- Members of the Team created the first draft of the *Guide*.

Phase 4: Feedback

- The Network provided feedback and input on the draft *Guide*. The Team also sought additional feedback from members of Indigenous and Francophone communities to incorporate their unique and valuable perspectives.

Phase 5: Sharing

- The final *CAN Language Guide* will be shared widely across the Network and with those interested outside the Network.

CAN Language Guide Team

A special thank you to the *CAN Language Guide* Team, who volunteered their skills and expertise:

Kathleen Forestell, City of Ottawa
Stephanie Hovey, Allied Therapy
Lisa Leblanc, Ingenium Canada
Adrienne Legault, Adaptability Canada
Danielle Lorenz, Canadian Journal of Disability Studies
Elizabeth Macgillivray, Bow Valley College
Ben Poynton, University of Toronto
Megan Richards, City of Ottawa
Farshid Safatsharifi, Accessibrand

The creation of the *CAN Language Guide* was also supported by the CAN National Office Team:

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Mikaela Stevenson, Communications and Events Coordinator
Sarah Vanderheyden, National Office Operations Support
Gab DeCastro, National Office Intern
Aidan Donnelly, Communications and Events Support

Contact Information

If you have feedback about the *CAN Language Guide* or would like to contribute to CAN in other ways, please contact the CAN National Office at can@carleton.ca.

Further Reading

Institutionalism in Canada

<https://www.manitobainstitutionwatch.ca/?msclkid=a59268bfaadf11ec849aff071b5162b0>

<https://inclusioncanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/The-Right-Way.pdf>

<https://policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/freeing-our-people-updates-long-road-deinstitutionalization#:~:text=People%20First%20of%20Canada%20defines,%2C%20segregated%20and%20For%20congregated.>

Ben-Moshe, Liat (2022). Decarcerating disability. Retrieved from

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CZPZJaxF7ez/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY=>

Invisible Institutions (2022). Retrieved from <https://linktr.ee/invisibleinstitutions>

[http://invisibleinstitutions.com/invisible-institutions-episode-](http://invisibleinstitutions.com/invisible-institutions-episode-1?utm_content=buffer57bc0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=bufferapp.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

[1?utm_content=buffer57bc0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=bufferapp.com&utm_campaign=buffer](http://invisibleinstitutions.com/invisible-institutions-episode-1?utm_content=buffer57bc0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=bufferapp.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

[r](http://invisibleinstitutions.com/invisible-institutions-episode-1?utm_content=buffer57bc0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=bufferapp.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

Intersectionality

[Intersectionality and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Global Development – Centre for International Policy Studies \(cips-cepi.ca\)](#)

[Identity beyond Disability. Intersectional Approaches to Disability | by Diversity & Ability | DnA's Blog | Medium](#)

Ableism

We recommend completing the Harvard University [Implicit Bias Test on Disability](#).

Video resource on Ableism, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdK9Av9XgjE>

<https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/2-what-disability>

Indigeneity and Accessibility

https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/opinion-editorial-nationalnewswatchcom-why-it%E2%80%99s-dangerous-be-disabled-and-indigenous-canada

https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/afn_fal_report_phase1_eng_final_pdf.pdf

Invisible Disabilities

[Words Matter - Invisible Disability Project](#)

Language Guide Resources

[“Words matter” Guidelines](#) on using inclusive language in the workplace by British Columbia Public Service

[Glossary - Accessibility strategy for the Public Service of Canada - Canada.ca](#)

[A Way with Words and Images - Canada.ca](#)

<https://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/publications/accessibilite-accessibility-eng.html>

[StanfordU Disability Language Guide](#)

[NCDJ Disability Language Style Guide](#)

[Forbes Dos and Don'ts Of Disability Language](#)

[AUCD Respectful Disability Language](#)

[Decoda Respectful Disability Language](#)

[ADA Guidelines for Writing About People with Disabilities](#)

[ADA Respectful Interactions: Disability Language and Etiquette](#)

[AMSSA What is in a word? The evolution of disability language](#)

[APA Choosing Words for Talking About Disability](#)

[UN Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines](#)

[UK Gov Inclusive language: words to use and avoid when writing about disability](#)

[Australia Language Guide – People with Disability](#)

[Australia The language of disability and political correctness](#)

[New Zealand Disability language - words matter](#)

[Ireland NDA Appropriate Terms to Use](#)

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

<https://www.the519.org/education-training/training-resources/our-resources>

[Words Matter: Guidelines on Using Inclusive Language in the Workplace](#)

[Ableism/Language](#)

[Diversity in Diction, Equality in Action Language Guide:](#)

[Avoiding Ableist Language](#)

[Five awkward things to avoid doing when you meet a disabled person](#)

[How to Sign in BASL \(Black American Sign Language\)](#)

http://www.humber.ca/makingaccessiblemedia/modules/01/transript/Inclusive_Language_Guide_Aug2019.pdf