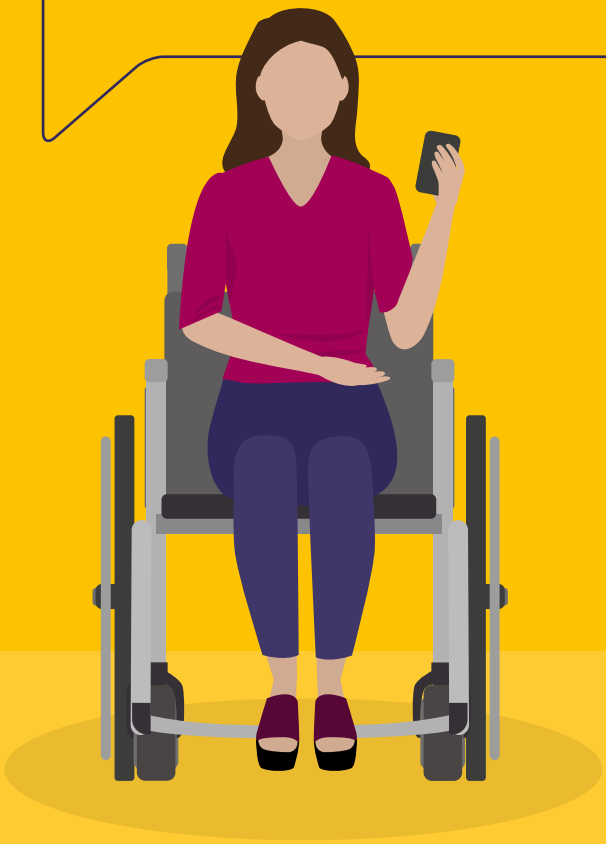
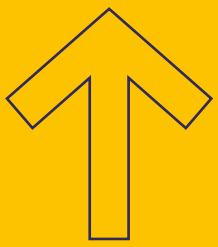
Talking about disability

a guide for media



Sightsavers

Contents



Worldwide, there are more than a billion people with disabilities*

The majority live in low and middle income countries, and more than half are women. Many are denied their human rights to education, healthcare, employment and citizenship because of stigma and discrimination.

To help address this inequality, what is written about disability – and how it is written – is important.

Since 1950, Sightsavers has advocated for disability inclusion alongside our eye health and disease elimination work.

We frequently advise journalists and news outlets on how to incorporate rights-based language and avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes when writing about disability.

We have created this set of tips for journalists who want to represent people with disabilities in an empowering and respectful way.

*Sightsavers bases its communications on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which uses the term 'people with disabilities'. In other organisations, countries or contexts, 'disabled people' may be the preferred terminology. We do not recommend using the term 'PWD' and would always write 'people with disabilities' in full.

Many people identify as disabled, and we recognise that the choice of language is personal. People's preferences should be respected - and it's best to refer to people in the way they choose.

1. Disability language

Your choice of words matters. When writing about disability, it's vital to do so thoughtfully and respectfully.

Focus on the story, not the disability

Avoid casting people with disabilities as superheroes or inspirational for just living their lives and avoid phrases such as 'despite their disability'. That they use a wheelchair should not add or take away from their achievement.

32-year-old wheelchair user appointed Prime Corp CFO

32-year-old accountant appointed Prime Corp CFO

Use positive language

Try not to portray disability as a tragedy or something to be 'overcome', or describe someone as a burden or a passive/ helpless victim.

Despite not being able to use her legs for years, Sarah has overcome her disability to attend school. Her parents struggle with the burden of her care but are grateful their wheelchair-bound daughter can now get an education.

Sarah, a wheelchair user, now attends school thanks to a new inclusive education programme that provides accessible classrooms and transportation. Her parents joined other families in advocating for their children's right to inclusive education.

Keep it neutral and factual

A person with a disability is not 'suffering from', 'afflicted by', 'confined to', or 'a victim of'; use neutral, factual terms like 'has', 'uses', 'lives with', or 'person with'

The 32-year-old accountant who suffered from polio at the age of two has been confined to a wheelchair for 30 years.

The 32-year-old, who had polio as a child and now uses a wheelchair, holds a finance degree from Harvard.

Focus on barriers and rights

Highlight the agency, expertise and voices of people with disabilities.

The charity installed new water pumps to help disabled villagers in Bangladesh who could not fetch water. The project designed special handles so that even people with disabilities could use them.

Residents with disabilities in the Bangladeshi community, who identified water access as their top priority, now have universally accessible water pumps to replace the standard pumps that excluded 30 per cent of the community from getting water.

Use appropriate terminology

Avoid slurs, euphemisms, and outdated labels such as 'cripple', 'handicapped', 'differently-abled/handicapable'. Use 'intellectual disability' (not 'mental retardation/mentally defective'). Don't refer to people using collective terms such as 'the disabled', 'the blind', 'the deaf' as this can be dehumanising or othering.

The new vocational centre trains the handicapped and mentally slow youth of Lusaka. Even the differently-abled can learn skills here. The programme director says these handicapable individuals deserve a chance to work despite their limitations.

The new vocational centre trains young people with disabilities in Lusaka. The programme director explains that these trainees bring diverse perspectives that strengthen local businesses.

Use inclusive contrasts

Say ‘non-disabled’ or ‘without disabilities’ instead of ‘able-bodied’. Avoid calling someone ‘normal’ by contrast, since it implies others are ‘abnormal’.

The new school design benefits both disabled students and normal children. While able-bodied students use the stairs, those with mobility issues use ramps. The curriculum now works for regular students as well as those with learning differences.

The new school design benefits students with and without disabilities. There are stairs and ramps to suit students with and without mobility impairments. The curriculum now supports all learners, including those with intellectual disabilities.

Respect people’s wishes

Above all, always respect the dignity, agency and wishes of the people you write about. Refer to them in the way they choose, including using their preferred language/terms.

2. Disability-inclusive reporting

How you report about disability is equally important. There are a number of factors to consider.

Speak to people with disabilities

A key phrase used by many people advocating for disability rights is 'nothing about us without us.' Always interview people with disabilities themselves, not just family members or professionals. Let people tell their own stories authentically.

Portrait of Ikpeteduobogha G. Tokoni, a Sightsavers programme participant.

Identify the issues

Focus the reporting on the social or physical obstacles a person faces, and their efforts to overcome them, rather than casting the disability itself as tragedy.

Sofia ploughing her garden in Otuke District, Uganda, despite the challenges posed by lymphoedema, which caused irreversible swelling in her right leg.

Involve organisations of of people with disabilities

Collaborate with organisations working on disability rights and inclusion and organisations of people with disabilities to develop your story.

Student Josephine, a youth disability advocate in Karene District, Sierra Leone, shares a fun moment with her neighbour and mentor, OPD leader Alusine.

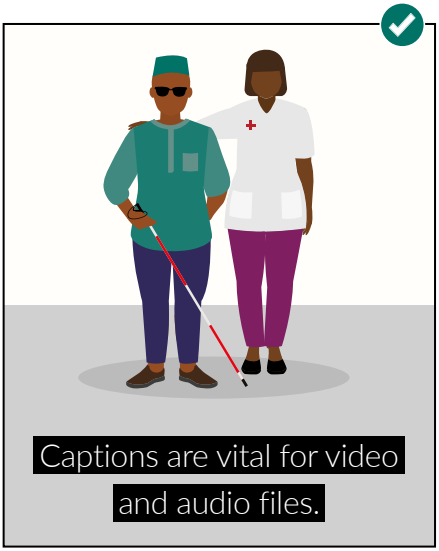
Consider imagery and captions carefully

Endeavour to choose respectful, representative pictures and visuals for your report.

Insaf inside his barn, preparing fodder for his cattle.

Prioritise accessibility

As much as possible, make your report accessible to people with disabilities. That means adding alt text to images, providing captions/ transcripts for audio and video, and ensuring content is easy to read (resizable text, screen reader-compatible).



Talking about disability is a continuous, evolving process

This is by no means a definitive guide as the experiences of people with disabilities are diverse, and we are always learning.

3. Resources

Sightsavers' disability and inclusion language guide
www.sightsavers.org/disability-inclusion-language

Inclusive Futures: Covering disability in the media guide
www.inclusivefutures.org/disability-in-media/

United Nations: Disability and the Media
un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/disability-and-the-media.html

Alternative text guide
www.sightsavers.org/alt-text

We work with partners in low and middle income countries to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities

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