

CIPR

DIVERSITY
& INCLUSION
NETWORK

Inclusive Language

A guide from the CIPR's
Diversity and Inclusion Network



Foreword

A core pillar of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' (CIPR) strategy is to champion lifelong learning, and as public relations (PR) professionals we understand that continuous professional development (CPD) is essential to keep our skills sharp and apace as the practice of PR evolves.

That same commitment to continuous learning is required within the area of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), because like PR practice, this is also a landscape which isn't static – it shifts as cultures evolve and as a society we better understand perspectives which are different to our own lived experiences.

As we live our lives, whether in a professional context or in our day to day living, our views, choices and decisions are hugely influenced by our own unconscious bias. To respond to this challenge, first we need to recognise that unconscious bias plays a factor in our decision making and, secondly we need to commit to understanding the perspectives of people outside our own sphere of experience. Committing to this approach will ensure the actions we take broaden inclusion and lead to better solutions. Significant data demonstrates that diverse teams perform better, so we all benefit if we work harder to ensure everyone's included and we've removed the barriers that may have prevented participation in the past.

Personally, I'm grateful to the many people, particularly within the CIPR community who have shared their experiences of walking through life in different shoes to my own. I've learnt an awful lot in recent years and I've also appreciated the time given by people to be better informed about my perspective as someone identifying as being within the LGBTQ+ community.

I don't consider myself to be an expert in EDI, but I'm committed to my own continuous personal understanding and being an ally for communities outside my lived experience. I'm privileged to Chair the CIPR's newly created Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Committee, formed with the purpose of ensuring the CIPR is accessible and welcoming to new members, that ours is a culture that is inclusive and that we demonstrate our own good faith and standing when commenting on D&I issues.

The CIPR's own EDI journey has been hugely shaped by the many volunteers who have contributed to our Diversity & Inclusion Network (CIPR DIN). This group seeks to develop an inclusive culture within the public relations industry by raising general awareness of diversity issues, by pursuing an inclusive approach which can improve communications and by increasing the numbers of public relations practitioners from diverse backgrounds.

This guide has been produced by the CIPR DIN and is one of the many resources available to support CIPR members to be better informed around many aspects of EDI. We are extremely grateful to those who have given their time to create this resource and I wish to thank Sara Thornhurst and Vickie Cox in particular for leading this work, together with CIPR DIN Chair, Avril Lee and Vice-Chair Cornelius Alexander.

Rachel Roberts

CIPR 2023 Vice-President and Chair of the CIPR's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee

Introduction

For most PR and communication organisations and teams, improving diversity, both internally and in client work, is deemed a priority but often falls down the list as other daily pressures take hold. This can result in mounting pressure and a feeling of being stuck when it comes to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), leaving organisations unsure where to start. This first in a series of guides from the CIPR is a toolkit to inspire action and progress wherever you are in your EDI journey. Each guide focuses on a different area of inclusive communications and together they form a versatile and practical resource suitable for people at any level within an organisation.

These guides align with and are written from the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, a model designed and created by and for disabled people. The Social Model takes the view that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or disability. Further reading on the Social Model can be found on the [Scope website](#).

Each guide is worth five CPD points.

How to use this guide

Using inclusive language in professional communications is an essential element in making public relations representative of the society it serves. In relation to disability, language continues to evolve and this guide should be used as a springboard to continuous learning.

Additional resources and links are provided at the end of the guide to further develop your knowledge.

You can use this guide:

- + as an onboarding tool for new employees
- + as a foundation to build inclusive processes and systems
- + as part of an exit interview
- + as a guide to make sure that your organisation's inclusion work aligns with the core values of EDI within the CIPR.

Language and inclusion

As professional communicators we are responsible for the language we use. Our choices can influence the attitudes, actions and behaviours of society. There are many words, phrases and sayings which are now commonplace in our everyday conversations that originate from negative language to describe disability and disabled people. Disability inclusion, from a language perspective, means being deliberate and considerate about the terminology we choose to use and limiting or eliminating our use of language which contributes to the oppression of people with disabilities and impairments. It's also about understanding the historical context of language and the role it plays in systems of oppression

Language and identity

Historically the language around disability and impairment was controlled and defined by non-disabled people and based on the Medical Model of disability and the Charity Model of Disability. This prevented disabled people from having agency and authority over the language used to describe them, leading to damaging stereotypes which still persist to this day. However, since the development of the Social Model in the 70s and 80s this has slowly been changing, leading to a greater understanding and adoption of more inclusive language.

Language has also been changing thanks to a cultural shift around disability in society. Better representation of disabled people in the media and the growth of different disability communities on social media have brought increased awareness of both harmful and helpful terminology, fostered open discussion, and centred disabled voices as the authority on disability language.

With that in mind, this guide focuses on the two most common language styles which are used in modern communications; identity-first and person first. However, we must remember that how disabled people choose to identify is a personal choice and this should always be respected, first and foremost.

Identity-first language

Generally speaking, identity-first language has become the preferred method of talking about disability and impairment and is what many disabled people prefer to use. Identity-first language was developed in line with the Social Model. It is centred around the idea that impairments are an intrinsic part of a person and should be recognised and celebrated as such.

Identity-first language is the primary style favoured by leading disability charities, organisations such as NHS England, and publications created by and for disabled people. If you are using the Social Model as your foundation, then identity-first will likely be the default style you will use.

Examples of identity-first language

- ⊕ Disabled person
- ⊕ Wheelchair user, e.g. 'Simone, who is a wheelchair user'
- ⊕ Non-disabled, e.g. 'A non-disabled person', not 'An abled/able-bodied person'
- ⊕ A d/Deaf person (many people who have hearing loss use a lower case d to differentiate from those who are part of the Deaf community)
- ⊕ An autistic person / I am autistic / They are autistic

Person first language

This language style focuses on the individual first and a disability or impairment second. It has roots in medical labelling which, as mentioned, removes agency from disabled people. Person first language is still commonly used by both disabled and non-disabled people. Many people do not want to be defined by their disability and prefer to use 'person with a disability' (person first), rather than 'disabled person' (identity first). However, keep in mind that for many disabled people, person first language reinforces outdated and harmful narratives.

Examples of person first language

- ⊕ A person with a disability or people with disabilities
- ⊕ A person who is visually impaired
- ⊕ A person who uses a wheelchair, e.g. 'Simone, who is someone who uses a wheelchair'
- ⊕ An adult who has autism / They have autism
Disability and impairment

Caution should be taken when writing about disability and impairment, and distinction should be made between the two. This is one of the defining characteristics of the Social Model of Disability. Under this model disabilities are societal, whilst people have impairments.

Disability and impairment

Additionally, not everyone with an impairment, chronic illness or who is neurodiverse identifies as disabled. For example, someone with hearing loss, or sight loss, may prefer to use the term hearing impaired or visually impaired. Similarly, someone with a long term health issue or chronic health condition may not feel comfortable being described as having a disability. Alternative phrases to use which take this into account include:

- ⊕ Disability and chronic illness
- ⊕ Disability and non-visible illnesses
- ⊕ Disabled people and those with long term health conditions
- ⊕ Disabled people and people with impairments

Which should you use?

Both identity first and person first styles are used interchangeably in modern communications. This is because language is constantly evolving and for disabled people the language they use to describe themselves is a very personal choice. If we follow the Social Model of Disability as our guide then communications should follow an identity first style in all professional communications. However, it's important to recognise and respect that disabled people and people with impairments or long-term health conditions will choose the language that is right for them.

Internal and corporate settings

The same approach applies in internal and corporate settings. For example, there may be a company-wide directive to use identity-first language as the default style, but if a disabled colleague says they prefer person-first language then their choice should be respected and followed. This also applies when communicating with colleagues and clients and other stakeholders, examples of this include:

- ⊕ Saying 'access needs' rather than 'additional' or 'special needs'
- ⊕ Avoiding asking questions like 'what's wrong with you/what's your disability/what happened to you'.
- ⊕ Telling colleagues they look better or 'well' - particularly with non-visible illnesses.

Disability language in PR campaigns

When pitching stories or working on campaigns that are either disability centric, or inclusive of disability in some way, it's necessary to consider how journalists are going to present stories. Journalists often use language which is evocative and sensationalist to grab the attention of readers however, where disability is concerned, this is often done for a non-disabled audience at the expense of disabled people. The language we use both in main campaign assets and our media relations is important.

Consider the following points when working when planning and pitching PR campaigns:

- ⊕ Has the campaign been informed and guided by disabled people?
- ⊕ Does the journalist specialise in disability stories, or are you pitching to a disabled
- ⊕ Is the story you're pitching considered 'inspiration porn', or does it fall into a damaging trope?
- ⊕ Tone is as important as language - is the tone pitying, condescending, infantilising?
- ⊕ If responding to a journalist's enquiry, check what angle they're taking on a disability story.

Inclusive language in global markets

The language around disability varies greatly across the globe. In the UK and Global North, the Social Model is more widely adopted and this has led to greater awareness, discussion and adoption of the identity-first approach. However, this is not the case in the Global South. For PR professionals working in different global markets this will impact the language in your communications.

Each country and market varies from still being heavily influenced by the Medical Model of Disability to developing their own models. It's important to remember both intersectionality and cultural intelligence when working in markets across the Global North and the Global South. The Business Disability Forum has released a Global Disability Language Guide which is linked in the resources and further reading section of this guide.

Be intentional with inclusive language

As communicators it is easy to fall into styles and patterns which are familiar, remember that ableist language is deeply embedded in the English language in particular. Being inclusive in the language we use in our role as communicators means being intentional about our choices. For example, actively choosing to replace the word 'crazy' (associated with those with mental health conditions) with 'wild', or 'outrageous'. Small changes and adjustments to our vocabulary in our communications can result in lasting, positive change helping to shift the mindsets and attitudes of the public.

Rules to remember

- ⊕ Avoid medical labelling and medical terminology.
 - ⊕ For example, instead of 'a person with Autistic Spectrum Disorder', use an autistic person (identity first) or a person with autism (person-first). Avoid the term 'Aspergers', it has a deeply ableist history.
- ⊕ Avoid stereotypes and sensational language
 - ⊕ For example labelling a disabled person as 'heroic', or 'vulnerable'.
- ⊕ Avoid negative language and terms.
 - ⊕ For example, wheelchair users are not 'confined' to their wheelchairs; people with chronic illnesses or impairments do not 'suffer from'.
- ⊕ Avoid language which infantilises disabled people.
- ⊕ Avoid language which others disabled people and people with impairments.
- ⊕ Avoid ableist substitutes like, 'differently-abled', 'handi-capable' or 'people of different abilities'.
- ⊕ Update style and language guides regularly - language continually evolves and the language around disability is fluid and continually evolving
- ⊕ Listen to and respect what disabled people and people with impairments tell you about how they choose to identify.



Creating an equitable future in PR

Creating an equitable future in PR

Thanks for reading this guide looking at accessibility brought to you by the CIPR D&I Network.

In this era of increasing EDI awareness, accessibility should be at the front of every communicator's agenda but can often be forgotten. It is vital that we work to ensure equitable access and understanding for all our audiences, allowing for the continuum of human ability and experience. These needs vary but often relate to living with a disability. Disability is still often overlooked and has not received the focus that some other areas of D&I have. Many fixed and outdated views of disability remain, and we must remember many disabilities are hidden including mental health challenges (globally the main cause of disability), and that with age, disability becomes more prevalent. Although we tend to think 'it won't happen to us', one in four 20-year-olds will have a disability before they retire. The reality is that many of us will find ourselves living with a disability at some point in our lives and may face accessibility challenges in the future.

Alongside our role as PR Professionals, we must also look to our own industry and how we best create fairer workplaces that are welcoming and flexible, enabling people living with disabilities, impairments, or other accessibility barriers, to work, progress and succeed.

This series of guides will address accessibility from a range of perspectives including a review of language – a powerful tool that can empower, include and acknowledge – as well as events and advocacy. The guides are practical as well as being thought provoking and aim to support skills development: critical more than ever as initiatives addressing a lack of diversity increase and society recognises the need for change. We hope they support better communications, engagement and action for better accessibility.

I would like to say a big thank you to Sara Thornhurst and Vickie Cox for all their hard work on the guides which has made this initiative possible, and to the rest of the CIPR D&I Network for their continuing focus on making our profession a more inclusive community.

Avril Lee
Chair of the CIPR Diversity and Inclusion Network

Resources

Stella Young's Ted Talk - I am not your inspiration:

https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much

Ally Bot - Slack bot for inclusive language:

https://slack.com/apps/A01A18SMWCC-allybot?tab=more_info

Gender-decoder - find bias in text, good for job ads:

<https://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>

Dictionary of ableist phrases (regularly updated):

<https://www.autistichoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html>

United Nations Disability Language Guide:

<https://www.ungeneva.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Disability-Inclusive-Language-Guidelines.pdf>

LSE Blog: Letting disabled people define themselves:

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2022/01/21/when-speaking-of-disability-let-people-define-themselves/>

Understanding non-visible disabilities and illnesses:

<https://hiddendisabilitiesstore.com/insights/category/invisible-disabilities>

The Business Disability Forum - Global Disability Language Guide:

<https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/knowledge-hub/resources/lost-in-translation-a-global-guide-to-the-language-of-disability/>

UK Government disability language guide:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability>

The following guides will be published in this series in 2023:

- 1 Inclusive Communications
- 2 Inclusive Events
- 3 Advocacy and Allyship

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