

# DO'S AND DON'TS OF COVERING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



UNITED STATES  
OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC  
COMMITTEE



## **DO** CONFIRM LANGUAGE PREFERENCES WITH THE SUBJECT.

Some individuals prefer people-centered language to remove the linguistic emphasis on the disability and put the person ahead of the label (e.g. person with disabilities), while others prefer identity-first language to reclaim and highlight disability as a defining identity and descriptor (e.g. disabled person). It is acceptable to use both person-first and identity-first language when discussing disabilities and it is encouraged to ask subjects for their preference.

Avoid using outdated terms, such as "handicapped" and "wheelchair-bound," as well as "soft" terms for disability including "special needs" and "differently abled."



## **DO** EMPHASIZE ABILITIES, NOT LIMITATIONS.

Emphasize abilities. For instance, assistive devices promote independence. When used specifically for competition – such as a basketball wheelchair, an ice hockey sledge or a hand cycle – devices should be viewed and described as a specialized piece of sports equipment, rather than a medical device. However, they are often described as a dependency or deficiency.

For example: Use "wheelchair user," which emphasizes a person's mobility, instead of "wheelchair-bound," which focuses on limitations related to the assistive device.



## **DO** TAKE THE TIME TO UNDERSTAND CLASSIFICATION (LINK) AND INCORPORATE CORRECT LANGUAGE IN COVERAGE.

Classification is the cornerstone of Paralympic sport, creating a system that provides structure to mitigate the impact of impairment on sport performance. Classification is one of the major gaps in understanding for the public when it comes to Para sport. It is important to correctly use classification and communicate it clearly when relevant.



## **DON'T** PERPETUATE STEREOTYPES.

Use accurate, objective and neutral language. Avoid excessive portrayals of people with disabilities as heroic, inspirational or the "overcoming narrative" where individuals are described as overcoming their disability to achieve their goal. Setting disability up as something to be overcome perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces the negative social stigma associated with being disabled. Both positive and negative emotionally charged words are often biased. No Paralympian overcomes their disability to achieve athletic success – they are eligible to be Paralympians because of their disability. As a result, achievement and disability is not an either/or, but a both/and – successful and disabled.



## **DON'T** MENTION A PERSON'S DISABILITY MORE THAN IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE STORY.

Only use relevant, necessary descriptions of disability for the audience's comprehension of the story. Showcase the subject as a human being above all else. Avoid focusing on "tragedy," "suffering" or disability origin stories unless it is a necessary component of the narrative as described by the subject.



## **DON'T** BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS.

Often, the best course of action is to ask someone what they prefer for certain terminology. Pay close attention to how people communicate and be willing to accept correction as part of the education process.

For additional information and guidance, please review the National Center on Disability and Journalism's Disability Language Style Guide or contact [Annemarie.Blanco@usopc.org](mailto:Annemarie.Blanco@usopc.org).