DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATING ABOUT DISABILITY WITH DIGNITY, RESPECT, AND CLARITY

CONTENT FORUM

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COMMUNICATIONS AND MULTIMEDIA CONTENT FORUM OF MALAYSIA

Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines

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Part A : Introduction

These guidelines have been developed by the Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia (Content Forum) in collaboration with a dedicated working group comprising diverse stakeholders, including representatives from disability organisations, media practitioners, industry professionals, and advocacy groups. This initiative reflects our commitment to fostering equity, diversity, and respectful communication across the content ecosystem. The guidelines align with the principles of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code, which advocates for content that upholds human dignity, inclusivity, and the rights of all individuals.

The removal of barriers and the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of life are essential for a just and equitable society. These guidelines reflect the growing need to adopt a disability-inclusive language culture of practice, recognising that our communications shape perceptions and that thoughtful communication is key to fostering understanding, challenging stereotypes, and promoting a more inclusive and respectful environment for all.

The principles outlined in these guidelines are informed and guided by extensive research, consultations with experts, including individuals with disabilities with lived experience and lived expertise, as well as adhering to global best practices. They are also harmonised to international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

This document serves as a framework and knowledge resource for advertisers, broadcasters, content creators, industry professionals, educators, and others involved in creating or sharing content.

Our deepest appreciation goes to the contributors from OKU advocacy groups, disability subject-matter experts, media organisations, linguists, educators, and members of the public who generously shared their perspectives and lived realities. Special thanks to members of our working group from AIDA, SIUMAN Collective, and OKU Rights Matter. Their insights were invaluable in shaping a guideline that aspires to be both practical and progressive, and one that upholds the fundamental belief that language should empower, not diminish.

1. Objective

Language plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions, influencing attitudes, and defining how individuals and communities are represented. As society evolves, so too does our understanding of the impact that certain words and expressions can have; what was once considered acceptable may now be viewed as exclusionary, inaccurate, or offensive.

In the context of disability, language has the potential either to promote inclusion or to reinforce ableist assumptions that devalue and marginalise persons with disabilities. Ableism can appear in both everyday speech and institutional practices, from casual slurs to the absence of disabled voices in public discourse. Even if unintentional, such language reinforces structural exclusion.

These guidelines are developed to support the use of inclusive, respectful, and accurate language when referring to persons with disabilities. They encourage intentional language choices that reflect dignity, equality, and the diverse experiences of persons with disabilities. More than avoiding harm, inclusive language affirms the rights, identities, and agency of all individuals.

The guidelines aim to embed these principles into content creation and communication practices. In doing so, they serve as a practical reference for promoting fair, equitable, and representative content; aligned with Malaysia's ongoing commitment to a more inclusive society.

These guidelines are not intended to prescribe fixed rules but to provide a supportive framework that centres autonomy and voices of the disabled community with their lived experiences and expertise. Language is dynamic, and individuals may choose to self-identify in ways that reflect their personal, cultural, or community realities. The goal is to offer guidance that empowers media practitioners and content creators to make informed, dignified and respectful choices.

2. Practical Application

These guidelines are designed to be practical, easy to apply, and relevant across various communication contexts, whether in speech, writing, or digital content. They outline general principles that promote respectful, inclusive, and empowering language when referring to persons with disabilities. Inclusive language is most effective when developed with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations. It should reflect not only how disability is described, but also whose voices shape that description. Practitioners are encouraged to collaborate with disabled communities or colleagues to ensure language reflects lived realities and is relevant to its context.

To support everyday use, the guidelines include clearly structured examples of recommended terminology alongside terms that are outdated, inappropriate, or potentially offensive. Where possible, contextual explanations are provided to help users understand why certain terms are preferred, enabling more thoughtful and empathetic communication.

The guidelines also provide practical recommendations for using respectful and inclusive language in various forms of communication and content, including:

- **Advertising campaigns**: Ensuring inclusive and respectful language in promotional materials and advertisements.

- **Broadcast scripts and programming**: Applying appropriate language in television, radio, film and streaming content.

- **Corporate communications**: Preparing press releases, public statements, and internal communications that reflect ethical practices.

- **Media reporting**: Equipping journalists with guidelines to ensure ethical, dignified and inclusive coverage of news and stories, particularly when reporting on persons with disabilities.

- **Public engagements**: Delivering speeches, presentations, and event content in a manner that respects and celebrates the diversity of human conditions and experiences.

- **Social media content**: Crafting posts, comments, and campaigns that promote inclusivity and avoid harmful stereotypes.

Additionally, Annex I provides a concise reference table summarizing preferred language practices. This serves as a quick-access tool for writers, speakers, editors, content creators, and anyone seeking to adopt disability-inclusive language in their professional or public-facing work.

The Guidelines provide a clear set of best practices for media practitioners, content creators, educators, brands, public agencies, and anyone shaping public narratives. It encourages people-first and respectful language, discourages harmful tropes and outdated terms, and offers practical examples for real-world use - all to support a more inclusive media and communication ecosystem in Malaysia.

Part B : General Guiding Principles

1. Respecting Preferences: People-First and Identity-First Approaches

A widely used and accepted approach to refer to persons with disabilities is by using people-first language. This approach puts the individual's personhood before the disability, reflecting an understanding that their disability does not define a person; it is simply one aspect of who they are. This is also the current approach adopted in international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

People-first language helps shift focus to the person and promotes dignity and inclusion. For example, use phrases such as "children with albinism," "students with dyslexia," "women with intellectual disabilities," or "persons with disabilities." This kind of language acknowledges individuality and avoids reducing anyone to a pathologized condition or a medical and psychiatric diagnosis.

However, this is not universal. Many individuals and communities prefer identity-first language, such as 'autistic person' or 'Deaf person', especially when disability is embraced as a cultural identity or socio-political position. Both approaches are valid and depend on context.

Persons with disabilities are not a single, uniform group. Each individual may use different terms based on personal preference, culture, or community. Best practice is to ask how they wish to be identified and respect their choice. Inclusive language is dynamic and should be shaped in collaboration with those it describes.

It is also important to understand that some terms, like neurodivergent (an individual) and neurodiverse (a group that includes both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals), are not interchangeable. Using them accurately helps reflect identity and inclusion more clearly.

While there may be a wide range of identities and terms in use, these guidelines recommend language that is commonly accepted and understood as respectful and inclusive in most contexts. The goal is not to impose a single standard, but to encourage thoughtful and appropriate language that reflects dignity, equality, and inclusion.

What to do:

- When in doubt, ask individuals or communities how they prefer to be identified. This is especially important as preferences may vary between communities and individuals.

- Use either people-first or identity-first language based on the expressed preference of the person or group.

- Avoid assuming a single "correct" approach applies across all disabilities or contexts.

2. Beyond Labels: Dismantling Stigma, Stereotypes and Tokenism

Media and public discourse often depict disabled people as 'inspirational' or 'superhuman' for everyday activities. This narrative, sometimes called 'inspiration porn', reduces them to objects of pity or admiration, instead of recognising them as equal participants in society.

Terms like "brave,""courageous," or having "overcome" a disability often reduce the person to their condition and can unintentionally reinforce the idea that disability is a burden to be pitied or admired only when "defeated." Similarly, using terms like "survivor" or describing someone's experience with disability as a "battle" may be common in everyday language, but not everyone identifies with these descriptions, and some may find such terms unhelpful or inappropriate.

It is also important not to generalise or portray all persons with disabilities as inherently vulnerable. Vulnerability is not inherent to disability but often arises from systemic barriers —such as inaccessible design, discriminatory policies, or lack of support. Once barriers are addressed, perceived "vulnerability" often disappears.

Avoid unnecessary mention of a person's disability when it is irrelevant. Unless it relates to access needs, expertise, or contributes to the context at hand, there is no need to highlight an impairment. Focus instead on the person's skills, contributions, or role. For example, when discussing the review of Braille materials, it is more appropriate to say someone 'is a Braille user' rather than point out that they are blind.

Representation should be balanced and equitable, to ensure disability is visible in public narratives, conversations, policy planning, and content creation. It must be respectful and dignified, avoiding tokenism.

Persons with disabilities have long been excluded from decision-making, media, policy, and public discourse. Making space for disability-related issues is essential to ensure no one is left behind.

What to do:

- Avoid terms like "brave," "overcoming," or "inspirational" when referring to routine achievements or accomplishments.

- Emphasize abilities, skills, or relevant qualities rather than focusing on the disability itself. For example, highlight a colleague's Braille expertise rather than their blindness unless the disability is contextually relevant.

- Reference disability only where it is contextually relevant or self-identified, while actively including disability representation in broader content and decision-making spaces.

3. Plain Language: Naming Disability Without Euphemism

Some legacy terms for disability remain embedded in media, education, and policy frameworks. Media practitioners should be aware of their historical context and potential impact, using them only when required for accuracy, legal reference, or historical discussion. When possible, pair such terms with current, preferred language to guide audiences toward more inclusive usage.

Over time, various alternative expressions have been introduced in an attempt and stereotyped assumption to position disability in a more positive or polite framing. While often well-intentioned, many of these terms, such as "differently abled," "people of all abilities," "disAbility," or "people of determination", can come across as euphemistic and patronising. These phrases tend to avoid directly acknowledging disability and unintentionally suggest that there is something uncomfortable or undesirable about using the term "persons with disabilities" or "disabled", reinforcing stigma instead of challenging it.

Using euphemisms can also blur the reality of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities and shift the focus away from the need for inclusion, accessibility, and equality. A clear and respectful term such as "persons with disabilities" is widely accepted and better reflects the language of rights and dignity. It is also the term used under Malaysia's Persons With Disabilities Act 2008. Rights-based frameworks, such as Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, use 'persons with disabilities' as the formal legal term. In practice, other terms—such as 'disabled people' in the UK, 'person of determination' in the UAE, or identity-first terms like 'autistic person'—may be preferred by communities. What matters most is context and respecting how individuals or groups identify.

Similarly, the terms like "special" are often seen as outdated and condescending when used in phrases like "special needs," "special education," or "special assistance." These terms can carry negative connotations, reinforcing the idea that persons with disabilities are separate or different in a way that is less valued. While these terms persist in most mainstream education systems and legal frameworks, inclusive alternatives like "inclusive education" or "accessible services" or "support needs" better reflect current rights-based approaches. Using straightforward plain and respectful language helps promote a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of disability in all communication contexts.

What to do:

- Use "persons with disabilities" instead of euphemisms like "differently abled" or "special needs. "Use clear, direct terms such as "persons with disabilities" in legal or formal contexts, while deferring to community or individual preference in other settings.

- Recognise that some reclaimed language is used within communities (e.g., activists using "crip") but is inappropriate for outsiders in professional or formal contexts.

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4. Describing Disability Levels: Focus on Context, Not Hierarchy and Severity

Terms such as "mild," "moderate," and "severe" are often used in medical, education or policy contexts to categorise disability. While they can serve administrative purposes, these labels are subjective and may not reflect an individual's lived experience or actual support need, as well as the impact of environmental and systemic barriers. A condition labelled 'mild' in one context may still create significant challenges in another, particularly where environmental, social, or systemic barriers exist. Such labels can also contribute to exclusion in workplaces, schools, or other settings that are not accessible.

Avoid framing disability solely by severity, as it can create hierarchies and overlook invisible or fluctuating conditions. Focus instead on the supports needed and the barriers affecting participation, rather than reducing identity to a severity label.

Where severity descriptions are used, they should be applied with care, clarity, and only when relevant to the content. Such terms must never be used to define or rank a person's worth or value.

What to do:

- Use terms like "mild," "moderate," or "severe" only when contextually necessary and with appropriate explanation.

- Focus on describing the specific support needs or functional impacts, rather than relying on generalised labels.

- Avoid using these terms in media or public-facing content unless guided by the individual or community being represented.

- When in doubt, ask the individual how they prefer their condition or experience to be described.

5. Reframing Disability: Beyond Illness and Tragedy Narratives

How we speak about disability reflects how it is understood, and Historically, disability has been framed through illness, misfortune, or tragedy, often tied to medical or charity models that reinforces outdated and harmful models. It places the focus on the individual as someone who must be "treated," "cured," or "fixed," rather than addressing the broader structural and social barriers that limit participation and access.

These outdated understanding often overlook the autonomy, rights, and agency of persons with disabilities. A progressive rights-based approach recognises that persons with disabilities are individuals of equal standing in society, entitled to the same opportunities, respect, and dignity as everyone else.

Language that evokes pity, such as terms that portray a person as "suffering from" a condition or being "afflicted with" a disability, diminishes their identity, reinforces harmful and negative stereotypes, and perpetuates the idea that persons with disabilities lead lives of constant struggle or sadness. These expressions imply helplessness and undermine efforts toward empowerment, inclusion, and equal participation.

Avoid equating disability with vulnerability or portraying persons with disabilities as victims. Terms like 'victim' should be used only when contextually accurate, as disabilities are not crimes or acts of harm. Such framing can imply helplessness, undermine agency, and reinforce negative stereotypes. Language should convey respect, equality, and the understanding that disability is part of human diversity, not a tragedy. However, individuals have the right to describe their own experiences in the terms they choose, including medical or illness-related language.

Avoiding language that separates individuals from their bodies or implies that they must rise above their disability to be valued. Expressions that suggest someone is "trapped" in a disabled body or has "overcome" their disability to succeed is dehumanising. Disability is part of a person's lived reality and identity, it is not something separate, shameful, or to be pitied.

What to do:

- Use factual and neutral phrasing such as "a person has multiple sclerosis" or "a person is deaf".

- Refer to someone as a "patient" only when relevant in a medical context.

- Avoid identifying someone by their diagnosis (e.g., "person with Huntington's disease") unless the individual or community specifically prefers identity-first language.

- Do not use language that suggests pity, victimhood, or personal tragedy, such as "suffers from," "stricken with," or "victim of."

- Be mindful not to portray individuals as "beyond" or "trapped in" their disability; these are ableist constructs that do not reflect lived experiences.

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6. Avoiding Infantilisation and Over-Simplification

Language that infantilises or overly simplifies the lives of persons with disabilities can diminish their agency. Adults with disabilities should be referred to using age-appropriate terms and spoken to with the same level of respect and complexity as any other adult.

Infantilisation goes beyond patronising language—it reflects broader societal assumptions about disabled adults, particularly those with intellectual, learning, neurodevelopmental, or psychosocial disabilities. It often appears in public interactions, events, or media coverage when questions are directed to support workers or family members instead of the individual, erasing their voice and perspective.

This is compounded when different communication and support needs are not recognised or accommodated. Assumptions about a person's capacity frequently lead to exclusion, rather than practitioners adapting methods to enable participation. Simplifying for accessibility should not mean reducing complexity; it means using clear, adapted formats —such as plain language, visual aids, AAC, or supported decision-making—that respect dignity and promote inclusion. The same principle applies to obtaining informed consent directly from disabled individuals.

Media and cultural portrayals can reinforce infantilisation, depicting disabled people— especially those with intellectual disabilities—as comic relief, pitiable figures, or devoid of adult identities such as sexuality, leadership, and autonomy. Such portrayals narrow public perception, erase lived realities, and limit who society believes disabled people can be.

Infantilisation also intersects with systemic barriers in services, education, and legal frameworks, such as overly restrictive guardianship, which position disabled adults as perpetual dependents. Addressing this requires more than language change—it calls for active inclusion, centring disabled voices, and telling their stories on their own terms, without erasing their complexity.

What to do:

- Avoid patronising language such as "cute," "sweet," or "childlike" when referring to adults with disabilities. Use appropriate adult forms of address (e.g., Encik, Cik, Mr, Ms) rather than terms intended for children.

- Refrain from using overly simplistic stories of "inspiration" that downplay complexity or challenge. Replace oversimplified or tokenistic inspiration stories with nuanced representation of real challenges, agency and complexity of their lived realities.

- Focus on individuality, autonomy, and achievements without exaggerating or belittling.

- Communicate directly with disabled individuals and verify information with them. Engage care partners or proxies only if the individual explicitly requests it.

- Recognise diverse communication needs and use alternative methods where required (e.g., plain language, visual tools, supported communication, AAC). Media engagements should be designed to anticipate accessibility needs—such as providing accessible materials, allowing extra time, or accommodating different communication styles—beyond simply offering sign language interpretation.

7. Informal Language: Reflecting Inclusion in Daily Interactions

Inclusive language is not limited to formal communication and settings/environments; it is equally important in casual conversation, everyday expressions, and informal content. The way we speak in daily interactions shapes broader attitudes and social norms, often more powerfully than formal language. Respectful and inclusive language in informal contexts helps foster acceptance and a culture of awareness and empathy.

Most persons with disabilities are comfortable with everyday phrases used in regular conversation. For example, it is perfectly acceptable to say, "Let's go for a walk" to a person who uses a wheelchair or to write, "Have you heard the news?" to a person who is deaf. These are natural expressions and need not be avoided.

However, some figures of speech and casual expressions rooted in stereotypes or outdated views of disability should be avoided. Phrases like "blind as a bat", "deaf as a post", "crazy," "paranoid," or "lame" may seem harmless, but they trivialise or misrepresent the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, especially when used casually, inaccurately, or as insults. Similarly, using metaphors like "blind to criticism" or "falling on deaf ears" perpetuates ableist ideas, even when unintended. These expressions can alienate, offend, and reinforce stigma.

It is also important to avoid using disability-related terms to express frustration, forgetfulness, or criticism, such as saying "I must have Alzheimer's" when you forget something or calling someone "paranoid" for expressing concern. Disability should never be used as a metaphor, insult, or punchline.

These issues are not limited to private conversations. Informal speech in workplaces, events, and public-facing roles (e.g., emcees, moderators, teachers, public officials) often reflects broader cultural attitudes toward disability. For neurodivergent, psychosocial, or intellectual disabilities in particular, offhand remarks or gestures—such as pointing to the head and circling it to imply 'gila'—can reinforce stigma and exclusion.

Precise, neutral language in informal contexts can reduce harm and help shift societal norms. Small changes in everyday speech reinforce that disabled people belong in all spaces as equal participants and rights holders, not as punchlines or conditional contributors.

What to do:

- Avoid disability-basedinsults, metaphors and jokes, such as "crippled by fear" or "fall on deaf ears".

- Refrain from using disability terms or diagnosis casually, as insults or as hyperbole, such as saying "That's so lame" or "I must have Alzheimer's."

- In public-facing roles, ensure moderators, teachers, presenters, and public officials are trained to avoid jokes or offhand remarks about disability Model inclusive casual speech by using neutral alternatives (e.g., 'that's unfair' instead of 'that's lame') and encourage the same in group interactions and collaborative settings.

8. Authentic Representation: Inclusive Practices in Content Creation

Everyone involved in content creation, whether as writers, editors, producers, designers, or influencers, has the power to shape narratives, influence public attitudes, and set standards across industries. The language we use and the stories we tell play a significant role in defining how disability is understood by society. When content reflects inclusive values, it not only challenges harmful stereotypes, promotes empathy, but also embeds lived experience into the way stories are conceived, developed and shared.

Representation matters. When persons with disabilities are included in media and content, not as tokens or symbols of inspiration, but as individuals with diverse experiences, identities, and contributions, it helps to normalise disability as part of the human experience. This visibility affirms belonging and sends a powerful message that persons with disabilities are integral to every aspect of life, from education and employment to art, sports, leadership, and innovation.

Authentic inclusion requires access to participation behind the scenes. Persons with disabilities should be involved not only as content subjects but also as creators, writers, editors, producers, consultants, and decision-makers. Their direct involvement grounds narratives in lived experience, prevents tokenism, and supports truthful, equitable storytelling.

Media and content have an outsized influence on public perception. Disability-inclusive practices, both in representation and authorship, ensure that portrayals are accurate, respectful, and empowering. Such practices not only benefit persons with disabilities, they also enrich the content itself, making it more reflective of the real world and more relevant to wider audiences. Visual language is just as powerful as spoken or written language. How persons with disabilities are depicted in images, whether in advertising, educational materials, social media, or campaigns, contributes to public perception and either challenges or reinforces bias.

What to do:

- **Representation**: Feature persons with disabilities in advertisements, programs, and campaigns as active participants rather than passive subjects; not just as recipients of charity or 'inspirational' figures.

- **Accessibility**: Provide subtitles, sign language interpretation, Braille formats, and other accessible features in your content.

- **Engagement**: Consult with persons with disabilities not only as subjects but also as co-authors during the planning, scripting, creation and production process to ensure authenticity and relevance.

- **Ethical Language**: Use neutral, people-first language in scripts, press releases, and news stories. Avoid emphasizing a disability unless it is contextually necessary.

- **Visual Considerations**: Ensure authentic representation through the inclusion of real individuals with disabilities rather than relying solely on stock photos and avoid using disability purely as a visual symbol of hardship or pity.

- **Participation in Creation**: Actively seek to include disabled professionals—such as writers, editors, consultants, and production crew—in media teams. Their involvement helps ensure narratives reflect lived realities and move beyond tokenistic or outsider-only perspectives.

- **Capacity Building**: Support pathways such as training, mentorship, and accessible hiring practices to build a pipeline of disabled media and content professionals.

9. Multilingual Sensitivity: Inclusive Language Across Diverse Malaysia

Malaysia's multilingual context requires additional care when communicating about disability across different languages. Words carry different cultural meanings and emotional weight depending on context, and direct translations can sometimes lead to unintended offence or misinterpretation.

For example, while the term "OKU" (Orang Kurang Upaya) is an official term used in legislation and identification documents, it may carry varying connotations depending on how and where it is used. In some formal contexts, it is seen as neutral, while in casual conversation it may feel distancing or overly bureaucratic. Other terms, such as "cacat", have evolved culturally – once widely used but now increasingly viewed as outdated or offensive, especially in formal or media settings. However, it may still appear in rural or intergenerational use, highlighting how class, region, and age influence language acceptance.

Language carries different histories, levels of formality, and emotional connotations across communities. A term that is acceptable in Bahasa Malaysia may lack an equally respectful synonym in Mandarin, Tamil, or indigenous languages, and vice versa. Translation should go beyond literal word-for-word substitutions; it should consider cultural meaning, tone, and intent.

Inclusive communication is most effective when it is co-created with the communities it represents. This requires engaging not only native speakers and cultural experts, but also persons with disabilities from those linguistic communities, ensuring that inclusion is grounded in real usage rather than top-down imposition.

Wherever possible, use language that reflects the same dignity and intent across all languages, and avoid idiomatic expressions that may reinforce stigma when translated. In some cases, creating new or adapted terms in collaboration with communities may be more effective than using outdated or literal translations (e.g., the Māori term for autism, 'takiwātanga')

What to do:

- Be mindful of tone, context, and usage when referring to persons with disabilities in Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, Tamil, or other languages.

- Engage cultural and linguistic experts, alongside disabled individuals from each language group to ensure respectful and accurate translations.

- When in doubt, prioritise phrasing that reflects the values of respect, personhood, and inclusion, even across different tongues.

- Acknowledge the evolving meaning of terms like "cacat" and avoid using them in official or public-facing content unless explicitly self-identified or reclaimed by the community being represented.

- Consider language-related access barriers, such as the dominance of Bahasa Malaysia in policy communication or resources available only in English. Provide materials in Malaysia's key languages and in accessible formats

10. Cultural and Religious Sensitivities in Disability Language

In some cultural or religious contexts, disability may be interpreted through spiritual or karmic beliefs, potentially shaping the language used. While cultural perspectives are important, it is necessary to approach them critically and ensure they do not perpetuate harm. Language that frames disability as a "test", "curse", "fate", or "divine retribution" reinforces negative stereotypes, deepens stigma, and undermines a rights-based understanding of disability grounded in dignity and equality.

These narratives also impact access: they can discourage individuals and families from seeking support, limit participation in public life, and reinforce exclusionary practices in communities and institutions. While acknowledging the significance of cultural and religious beliefs, communication must prioritise language that upholds the autonomy and humanity of persons with disabilities.

What to do:

- Avoid language that suggests disability is a "test," "curse," or "punishment." Or "result of wrongdoing" even when used colloquially or symbolically.

- Challenge pity-based or fatalistic framing with neutral, rights-based language that emphasises inclusion and belonging.

- Use language that affirms human dignity, capability, and equal worth, regardless of individual beliefs.

- Where such beliefs are prevalent, pair inclusive language with awareness-building— such as reframing messages in faith-based contexts to emphasise compassion, equity, and shared humanity, rather than punishment or pity. This can include addendums similar to mental health helpline messages added after news reports.

Ensure content reflects a balanced respect for cultural diversity while maintaining alignment with human rights principles and avoiding language that isolates or stigmatises disabled individuals within their communities.

11. Inclusive Digital Content and Emerging Technologies

As digital tools, including artificial intelligence (AI), increasingly shape the way content is created, reviewed, and distributed, it is essential that inclusive language principles are carried forward into these platforms. AI tools—such as text generators, automated translations, speech-to-text, and video captioning—may draw from biased or incomplete datasets. Without careful review, they can reproduce ableist language, misinterpret context, or overlook culturally specific disability-related terms in Malaysia.

Inclusive digital practices should go beyond accessibility features to address how AI systems produce, filter, and frame content. Designers, content creators, and platform managers share responsibility for guiding AI outputs toward rights-based, respectful language and preventing automation from reinforcing exclusion.

What to do:

- Review AI-generated or automated content to ensure it aligns with these guidelines before publication.

- Ensure accessibility in digital content through subtitles, accurate captioning, descriptive text, alt-text for images, screen reader compatibility, and user-friendly design that accounts for varied literacy and cognitive needs.

- Use inclusive prompts and review filters when using content creation platforms.

- Regularly audit and update AI tools to reflect evolving inclusive language standards and local terminology, especially in Malaysia's multilingual context.

- Advocate with vendors and developers for improvements in AI training data to better represent disability-related language and avoid harmful defaults.

12. Crisis and Emergency Communication

In times of crisis, such as natural disasters, public health emergencies, or national alerts, language must be both inclusive and empowering. Persons with disabilities are often framed as a single "vulnerable" group, a narrative that oversimplifies their diverse realities and frames them as dependent, rather than recognising their agency. This framing can lead to exclusion from emergency planning, inaccessible information dissemination, and limited representation in decision-making. Inclusive crisis communication should recognise persons with disabilities as active participants in preparedness, response, and recovery—not solely as aid recipients. This requires addressing barriers such as inaccessible evacuation information, unclear messaging, and lack of adaptive equipment, rather than assuming vulnerability stems from disability.

What to do:

- Avoid lumping all persons with disabilities into generic vulnerability categories; acknowledge diversity in needs, capacities and roles.

- Use language that identifies systemic and environmental barriers.

- In emergency content, prioritise accessibility (e.g., clear language, multiple formats and multi-lingual, sign language, easy-read) and portray persons with disabilities as active agents in their own safety and wellbeing.

- Includes persons with disabilities in public awareness campaigns and materials, to reflect their inclusion in their safety awareness, evacuation plans and disaster preparedness.

- Collaborate with disabled persons' organisations (DPOs) to develop and review crisis communication, ensuring messages are accurate, inclusive, and effective.

13. Ethics and Inclusive Practice

While these guidelines provide a foundational reference, truly inclusive content begins with internal values and systems. Organisations are encouraged to go beyond language choices by embedding inclusive principles into their governance, workflows and decision-making structures. Policies, training, and content development processes. This means not only adjusting language use externally but also transforming internal practices and communications to ensure that inclusion is built into how content is planned, created and reviewed.

Advancing inclusion across the industry requires more than meeting minimum standards. It calls for leadership commitment, adequate resourcing, and intentional action to address structural barriers in hiring, representation, and participation. Inclusion should be embedded as an ongoing organisational priority. Members are encouraged to develop ethical frameworks, inclusive language policies, and internal training aligned with these guidelines to support sustained and meaningful change.

Direct engagement with persons with disabilities—through consultation, co-creation, or advisory roles—helps ensure that inclusion efforts are grounded in lived experience and not shaped solely by top-down assumptions.

What to do:

● Adopt or develop internal inclusive language and content policies tailored to your organisation's context., with input and participation from disabled staff or external experts where possible.

● Provide regular training and refreshers on inclusive language for staff and content creators, preferably engaging PWDs in the process., ensuring these are co-facilitated by persons with disabilities or DPOs to ground learning in real-world experience.

● Establish internal review or feedback mechanisms that actively include persons with disabilities in oversight roles or advisory panels.

● Promote accountability by encouraging the integration of inclusivity into editorial standards, content approvals, and team practices, fostering responsibility at all levels.

● Support accessible hiring pathways and mentorship to increase the participation of disabled professionals in content, media, and communication roles, ensuring inclusion at both language and leadership levels.

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Part C : Conclusion

Language plays a powerful role in shaping how we understand and engage with the world around us. In the context of content creation and communication, the words we choose can either open doors to inclusion or reinforce outdated perceptions and exclusionary practices.

As a self-regulatory industry forum, the Content Forum recognises the responsibility we all share in fostering an inclusive content environment; one that not only upholds the principles of respect, representation, and equity as set out in the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Content Code., but also actively facilitates the dismantling of ableist norms embedded in media and communication practices.

These guidelines aim to support content developers, media professionals, and communicators in adopting disability-inclusive language that reflects these shared values. They are designed as a practical tool for inclusion not only in language but also in the processes, policies that decisions that shape content creation.

We encourage all stakeholders across media, advertising, broadcasting, education, and digital platforms to use this document as a living reference and to adapt it in consultation with persons with disabilities, ensuring relevance across diverse sectors and contexts.

For members of the Content Forum, adopting these guidelines supports a broader commitment to ethical and responsible content practices. Where relevant, concerns may be addressed in line with the procedures of the Content Code. Integrating inclusive language into our communications is not just about avoiding offence; it is about recognising the inherent dignity, agency, and contributions of persons with disabilities, and embedding their presence and perspectives into the heart of our content ecosystem.

As language is dynamic, and what is respectful today may shift with evolving understanding and cultural contexts, these guidelines should not be viewed as final or rigid, but as a framework that evolves alongside the voices of those it represents.

We remain committed to self-regulation that is thoughtful, proactive, and responsive to the needs of all communities. Through ongoing reflection, co-creation, and accountability, we can shape a Malaysian media and content landscape where inclusive language drives meaningful, lasting change in practice.

Annex I

💡INFO BOX: Getting it right with Neurodiversity, Neurodiverse or Neurodivergent	
The concept and term of neurodiversity grew in the 1990s from autistic and disability rights movements that challenged the medical model of being disordered. It reframed brain differences as part of human diversity, alongside race, gender and culture, and pushed for rights-based language in media, education and policy.	
How to use it	
Neurodiversity	is a concept. It refers to the broad reality that different kinds of brains are part of human variation. Use it when talking about society or culture. Eg *"Workplaces should embrace neurodiversity."*
Neurodiverse	describes a group. A team, class or community that includes different types of brains. A neurodiverse group includes neurodivergent and neurotypical/neuro-normative persons. One person cannot be neurodiverse. Eg *"This newsroom is neurodiverse."*
Neurodivergent	describes an individual. Someone whose brain diverges from the dominant norm, for example autistic, ADHD, schizophrenia or dyslexic. e.g. *"She is neurodivergent."*
Neurotypical / Neuro-normative	refers to people whose brain processes align with dominant social expectations. It does not mean "normal," only that they represent the majority pattern within a given culture.
Common myths	Often, we see *neurodivergent* being used as a replacement for autism or ADHD. This is not accurate. Neurodivergent is broader. It covers many different conditions and identities that fall outside the majority of what's deemed acceptable as the social norm. It is not a medical diagnosis, but a social identity term. A single person cannot be described as "neurodiverse." Diversity is always about groups. A person cannot biologically have two different brain types. Even those who hear voices or identify with multiple selves still exist within one neuro system.
Quick tip! Divergent = one person. Diverse = group. Diversity = concept.	

Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines

INFO BOX: Disability-Inclusive Educational Settings and the Use of "Special Needs"

UNCRPD General Comment No. 4 on Inclusive Education affirms that all learners have the right to inclusive, quality and free education. It distinguishes between different types of educational settings:

● **Inclusive education**: Learners with and without disabilities learn together in mainstream settings, with the supports, adaptations and accommodations needed for full participation.

● **Segregated education**: Learners with disabilities are taught in separate schools or classes, apart from their peers without disabilities. Such settings are largely referred to as "special education" and "special educational programmes."

● **Integrated education**: Learners with disabilities are placed in mainstream schools but expected to adjust to existing systems, with little or no change to pedagogy or environment.

Why move away from "special needs" - The term *"special needs"* and *"special education"* is still common in policy and practice, but it frames disabled learners as having extra or optional needs rather than rights guaranteed under the CRPD. It can also reinforce stigma by suggesting difference rather than equality.

Better alternatives - Use *"support needs"* or *"accessibility requirements"* instead of *"special needs"*. These terms reflect a rights-based language approach and emphasise that education systems must adapt to learners, not the other way around.

Alternatives when referring to educational settings - Use "*inclusive education*" and *"integrated education"* appropriately as defined in the UNCRPD General Comment No. 4 stated above. For segregated educational settings, instead of *"special education"*, a better alternative is stating the target learners of the school or educational programme, e.g., school for students with disabilities, educational programme for children with cerebral palsy, school for learners who are blind and visually impaired.

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