



Special Olympics Language Guidelines

Words matter. Words can open doors to understanding and respect in ways that help people with disabilities to lead fuller, more independent lives. Words can also create barriers or stereotypes that are demeaning to people with disabilities and rob them of their individuality.

These language guidelines have been developed by experts for use by anyone writing or speaking about people with intellectual disabilities to ensure that all people are portrayed with individuality and dignity.

Appropriate Terminology

- The terms *mental retardation* and *mentally retarded* are no longer used to describe people with intellectual disabilities.
- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as *Special Olympics athletes* rather than *Special Olympians* or *Special Olympic athletes*.
- Refer to individuals, persons or people *with intellectual disabilities*, not *intellectually disabled people* or *the intellectually disabled*. This is “people first” language, in which the person comes first; their abilities – or disabilities – are considered second.
- Do not use pity language. A person *has* intellectual disabilities. That person is *not suffering from, afflicted with* or *a victim of intellectual disabilities*.
- A person *uses* a wheelchair, rather than *is confined* or *restricted to* a wheelchair.
- *Down syndrome* has replaced *Down’s Syndrome* and *mongoloid*.
- When writing, refer to persons with disabilities in the same style as persons without disabilities. Do not call people with disabilities by their first name, unless that’s how everyone is referred to in an informal context or story.
- Use the words *Special Olympics* when referring to the worldwide Special Olympics movement, not *the Special Olympics*.

Terminology to Avoid

- Do not use the label *kids* when referring to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of the movement.
- Avoid using the word *special* when talking about persons with intellectual disabilities. The term, if used excessively in references to Special Olympics athletes and activities, can seem clichéd or cute.