

Special Olympics Language Guidelines

Appropriate terminology

- A person has intellectual disabilities [mental retardation], rather than is mentally retarded; is suffering from, or is afflicted with, or is a victim of mental retardation or intellectual disabilities.
- Individuals, persons or people with intellectual disabilities [mental retardation].
- A person uses a wheelchair rather than is confined or restricted to a wheelchair.
- Distinguish between adults and children with intellectual disabilities [mental retardation]. Use adults or children, or older or younger athletes.
- “Down syndrome” has replaced “Down’s Syndrome” and “mongoloid.”
- Refer to participants in Special Olympics as athletes. In no case should the word appear in quotation marks. Do not refer to athletes as Special Olympians, rather Special Olympics athletes.
- When writing, refer to persons with a disability in the same style as persons without a disability: full name on first reference and last name on subsequent references. Resist the temptation to refer to an individual with intellectual disabilities [mental retardation] as “Bill,” rather than the journalistically correct “Bill Smith” or “Smith.”
- A person is physically challenged or disabled rather than crippled.
- A person is visually impaired rather than blind.
- Use the words “Special Olympics” when referring to the worldwide Special Olympics program, SOI may be used on second reference.
- Use the words “Special Olympics Texas” when referring to the Texas Chapter of Special Olympics. “SOTX” may be used on second reference.

- The three statewide competitions for Special Olympics Texas are called the “Special Olympics Texas Summer Games,” the “Special Olympics Texas Fall Classic” and the “Special Olympics Texas Winter Games.”

Terminology to avoid

- Do not use the label “kids” when referring overall to Special Olympics athletes. Adult athletes are an integral part of the program.
- Do not use the adjective unfortunate when talking about people with intellectual disabilities [mental retardation]. Disabling conditions do not have to be life-defining in a negative way.
- Do not use the word “the” in front of Special Olympics unless describing a specific Special Olympics event or official. Saying “the” Special Olympics implies that Special Olympics is a once a year event when, in fact, it is a year-round movement.
- Do not sensationalize the accomplishments of persons with disabilities. While these accomplishments should be recognized and applauded, people in the disability rights movement have tried to make the public aware of the negative impact of referring to the achievements of physically or mentally challenged people with excessive hyperbole.
- Do not use the word “special” when talking about persons with intellectual disabilities [mental retardation]. The term is distancing and inappropriate and describes that which is different about any person.