Reach Charity Ltd

Reach language guide

December 2025

Notice to volunteers and staff using a paper copy of this guidance, the Intranet holds the most recent version of this guidance. Volunteers and staff must ensure they are using the most recent guidance.

Version no.	Type of Change: Major, minor, none or taken out of use	Date	Author of change	Description of change
1.0	Major	Dec 2025	Trustee Steve Haynes	New Guidelines
2.0	Major	19-03-26	Ashley Blackburn	Ratification

Owner: *Steve Haynes (Trustee)*

Title	Reach language Guide
Document purpose/summary	Reach's aim is not to dictate how individuals describe themselves. People with Upper Limb Difference (ULD) choose the language that feels right for them, and we respect and celebrate that diversity. This guide is designed to support media professionals, publishers, educators, health practitioners, and the wider public in using language that conveys dignity, accuracy, and respect. It is grounded in the social model of disability, which recognises that people are disabled not by their bodies, but by societal barriers—such as language, attitudes, and environments.
Owner	Steve Haynes
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Ratified by	BOT
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Reach Language Guide: Talking About Upper Limb Difference

1. Introduction

At Reach, we believe that language shapes perceptions. The words used to describe people with Upper Limb Difference (ULD) influence not only how others see us, but how we see ourselves.

This guide is rooted in the social model of disability, which recognises that people are disabled not by their bodies, but by the barriers society creates, including language, attitudes and environments.

Our goal is not to prescribe how individuals describe themselves. People with ULD choose the words that feel right for them and we respect and celebrate that diversity and choice. Instead, this guide offers guidance for media, publishers, educators, health professionals and the public on language that we believe reflects dignity, accuracy and respect.

Language evolves, and so will this guide. We see it as a living document, shaped by the experiences and voices of the Reach community.

2. Key Principles of Language at Reach

2.1 From the medical model to the social model

Historically, ULD has often been described in medical or deficit-based terms; language that emphasises what is 'missing' or 'wrong'.

At Reach, we focus on what people have - we use language that reflects variation and capability.

✅ 'A child with upper limb difference'
🚫 'A child missing an arm' or 'a child born with a deficiency'

The social model of disability says society disables people when it creates environments, expectations and conventions that exclude them (for example, right-handed handshakes or 'a show of hands' in meetings). By changing conventions, including linguistic ones, we can all share responsibility for inclusion.

2.2 Collective and plural use

We use Upper Limb Difference (ULD) as a collective term (capitalised) when referring to the concept or community:

✅ 'Reach exists to support people with Upper Limb Difference.'

When referring to individuals or types, we may use upper limb differences (lower case, plural):

✅ 'Reach has members with various upper limb differences.'

This approach avoids implying there is only one kind of experience or condition, reflecting the diversity within our community, whist recognising our collective.

2.3 Person-first vs identity-first

We recognise that preferences differ. Some Reach adults identify as disabled people (aligning with the social model to emphasise that society disables them). Others prefer the description 'people with disabilities' or 'people with ULD'.

When writing about the community as a whole, Reach uses 'disabled people' when referring to disabling social barriers, and 'people with ULD' when referring to the characteristic itself:

✅ 'Disabled people are often excluded by design.'
✅ 'Reach supports people with Upper Limb Difference.'

2.4 Our focus on capability, not loss

Many members describe their limb difference as having shaped their creativity, empathy, adaptability and success. We avoid language that implies loss, deficit or tragedy and instead reflects individuality and strength.

✅ 'Children with Upper Limb Difference often develop creative solutions.'
🚫 'Children missing a hand learn to cope despite their disability.'

2.5 Everyday language and idioms

Everyday phrases like 'give a hand' or 'go hand in hand' are part of natural speech and rarely cause offence. However, when writing formally on behalf of Reach, we aim to avoid idioms that unnecessarily highlight limb difference or reinforce stereotypes.

For example, Reach's Articles of Association now include 'voting shall be decided by an agreed voting method' rather than 'a show of hands'.

3. Words and Phrases (see also section 3.4)

Language shapes how difference is understood; the terms below reflect language that is likely to have the least negative impact on our community when exposed to it, especially those in formative years.

They are intended as guidance for respectful communication, not as rules. Where someone expresses a personal preference contrary to this guide, always follow their lead. For example, someone may prefer to use deficiency instead of difference, or amputee instead of acquired limb difference and we should always honour their choice.

3.1 Core terminology

Potentially Impactful	Often Preferred	Why
Deformity, defect, deficiency, abnormality	Upper limb difference (ULD)	Upper limb difference recognises natural variation rather than deficit.

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Potentially Impactful	Often Preferred	Why
Limb-deficiency, deformed, handicapped, anomaly, impairment	Person with ULD / Limb-different / Limb difference	Neutral, inclusive and becoming more widely understood.
Normal / Able-bodied	Limb-regular / limb-typical	Avoids setting 'normal' as the standard.
Suffers from / a victim of	Born with / has an upper limb difference	Removes pity and focuses on fact.
Is an amputee / had an amputation	Has an acquired ULD	Person-centred, factual and non-defining.
People with a disability / the disabled	Disabled people	Aligns with the social model; emphasises disabling environments rather than impairment and avoids 'othering'.

3.2 When describing function or anatomy

We aim to use plain, precise language that describes what is present, not what is missing.

Potentially Impactful	Often Preferred	Why
Residual limb / stump	Limb-different arm / side	Focuses on individuality; 'stump' can be seen as demeaning.
Missing two hands	No hands	Factual and clear, avoids deficit based terminology.
Has two short arms	Has a bilateral ULD	Respectful, accurate terminology avoiding appearance-based descriptions or comparative language that can imply deficit.
Relies on / bound to a prosthetic	Uses a prosthetic / chooses not to use a prosthetic	Avoids implying dependence or obligation.
The bad arm	The limb-different arm	Avoids negative or comparative language.
Residual limb	The limb-different arm with lesser function	Describing within the person, not against a societal norm.

3.3 Tone and framing

We focus on capability; people with ULD prefer not to be defined by limitation, bravery or tragedy.

Potentially Impactful	Often Preferred	Why
Inspirational for doing everyday tasks	Talented musician / athlete / professional	'Inspirational' best describes achievement, not existence.
Special equipment	Adapted / inclusive equipment	'Special' can isolate; 'inclusive' focuses on design.
Overcomes disability	Plays, works, lives independently	Avoids reinforcing that disability must be 'overcome'.

3.4 Everyday phrases

Most idioms are harmless in conversation, but when writing on behalf of Reach or about ULD, we try to avoid expressions that unnecessarily centre on hands or arms.

Examples of phrases we might avoid when possible	Alternative
'Working hand in hand'	'Working closely with others'
'Lending a hand' 'Can I give you a hand?' 'Cack-handed'	'Offering assistance' 'Is there anything I can do?' Clumsy

In creative writing or quotations, context matters and authenticity and tone is encouraged over strict substitution.

4 Writing In Specific Contexts

4.1 Clinicians and researchers

We recognise that medical professionals and researchers play a vital role in supporting people with ULD and their families. Clinical terminology is clearly necessary in healthcare and academic settings. However, when writing for or about people with ULD, especially for public audiences, small shifts in language can make a big difference to how information is received.

We encourage professionals to consider phrasing that reflects dignity, individuality and inclusion alongside clinical accuracy.

Reach's aim is to help ensure information shared by professionals and researchers is both clinically clear and emotionally considerate. Working together, we can support parents to see potential, not limitation, from the very beginning.

4.2 Writing and Media Guidance

The way ULD is represented in media and public writing shapes public attitudes and influences how children and adults with upper limb difference see themselves.

Journalists, publishers, educators and content creators play a vital role in shaping this narrative.

The guidance below is designed to support accurate, inclusive and empowering communication.

4.3 Headline and media examples

Example	Preferred
Boy born without arm defies odds to ride a bike	Young cyclist celebrates inclusion in community event
Girl overcomes disability to play piano	Pianist with upper limb difference performs original composition
Child given normal life thanks to bionic arm	Prosthetic technology offers more choice and function

4.4 Focus on the person, not the difference

ULD may be part of someone's story, but it is rarely the whole story.

When writing, consider whether it is relevant to include and, if so, how to frame it.

✅ 'Hafsa, a talented designer and Reach member, has shared her latest project.'
🚫 'Hafsa, who was born without an arm, has overcome her disability to design…'

Use a person's achievements, interests or experiences as the focus. Mention their ULD only when it genuinely adds necessary context.

4.5 Avoid 'inspiration' framing

People with ULD are often described as 'brave' or 'inspirational' simply for doing ordinary things.

While well-meaning, this can reinforce the idea that life with ULD is extraordinary or burdensome.

Reserve 'inspirational' for genuine achievement, not existence:

✅ 'Ravi inspired others through his community leadership.'
🚫 'Ravi inspired others by living with one hand.'

4.6 Be careful with imagery and headlines

Avoid sensationalist or pity-based headlines:

🚫 'Boy born without hand defies odds to play guitar'
✅ 'Young musician celebrates creativity and inclusion'

When using images, show individuals as active, confident participants, not passive subjects of sympathy or charity.

Always check consent when focusing on someone's ULD or prosthetic use.

4.7 Respect self-description

If an individual chooses to use particular language about themselves, always honour that choice, even if it differs from this guide. Self-identification always comes first.

Where there's uncertainty, ask: 'How would you like this described?'

This small courtesy builds trust and ensures accuracy. If you check with people first, most people with ULD are happy to engage with open discussions as long as it's done sensitively

4.8 Summary: Context matters

Different contexts may call for different tones:

- **Journalism**: We would encourage prioritising dignity and agency over drama.

- **Education**: We would encourage using ULD to model diversity and inclusion, not limitation.

- **Healthcare communication**: We would encourage a balance of clinical accuracy with emotional sensitivity, particularly for new parents.

- **Academic writing**: We would encourage being mindful of how technical terms might be perceived beyond professional settings.

4.9 Collaboration and learning

We believe language and inclusion are shared responsibilities. Reach welcomes opportunities to work with writers, media outlets and researchers to build understanding and improve representation.

Before publishing, We would encourage consideration of:
- Would a person with ULD feel respected by this language?
- Is the difference being mentioned because it's relevant, or simply because it's noticeable?
- Does this wording highlight capability rather than deficit?

If in doubt, Reach is always happy to offer guidance.

5. Closing Note and Top Tips

Language evolves, and so does this guide. We will continue to update it as our community's perspectives and society's understanding develop.

Our shared goal is simple: to create a world where people with ULD are represented sensitively, confidently and without societal limitation.

If you're ever unsure about the right wording…
1. If in doubt, leave it out, but don't let that stop you starting a conversation about why you left it out. Thoughtful dialogue is how understanding grows and how language becomes more inclusive over time.

2. Using inverted commas around a word you're not certain about can work as a last resort, signalling reflection rather than endorsement and inviting further dialogue. However, quotation marks can also read as scepticism or irony, so context will be key.

Thank you to the Reach members who contributed to this guide.

For feedback or suggestions on future updates, please contact Reach Charity at Reach@Reach.Org.Uk / www.Reach.Org.UK.