

DISABILITY

LANGUAGE

**DISABILITY
LANGUAGE GUIDE**

Words carry power. When we write or speak about the Disability Community, we create images of people that stick. These images may evoke truth, empathy and empowerment about people with disabilities. On the other hand, these images may lead to misconceptions and limiting beliefs. For better or for worse, the language we use underlies our social norms that drive our communities that can, in turn, motivate our actions toward disabled individuals.

In our personal interactions, the words we use to address a person with a disability can influence whether or not that person feels accepted and safe. Indeed, one of the easiest ways to build trust with someone who has a disability is to intentionally use words that convey respect.

As our society continues to change, our language standards will evolve as well. Whether you are a person with a disability, family member, friend, teacher, service provider, or member of the media, we encourage you to continually look for feedback about your word choice from the Disability Community and practice the language tips provided in this guide. We can all change the misconceptions that so often surround people with disabilities by choosing words more mindfully.

5 DISABILITY LANGUAGE TIPS

Keep in mind that people's language preferences can vary based on their geographic location, culture, personal experience and generation. Always ask how a person identifies and wishes to be described.

● Be open to Person First and Identity First language preferences.

Disability intersects with every culture, race, age, gender and sexual orientation. As a result of its wide diversity, people within the disability community have various preferences about the words used to describe them and their disabilities, and today there are two leading camps: Person First (person with a disability) and Identity First (disabled person). People who do not define themselves by their disability and want to be recognized as more than their disability choose to use Person First language.

Examples of Person First: Person with Down Syndrome, Person with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Person with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities, Person with a Disability

Other people consider their disability to be an important part of their identity, culture, and community, and they want to assert that their disabilities are nothing to be ashamed of. These individuals prefer Identify-First language.

Examples of Identity First: Deaf person, Blind person, Autistic person, Disabled Person

Reclaimed Words: Some disability activists have embraced historically harmful words like

“cripple” and reclaimed them as identity First language (i.e. “Crip”) in order to express pride in their disability. Similarly, groups including the Mad Pride Movement have reclaimed the words “Mad” and “Crazy.” Be aware that individuals who reclaim these words do not represent all people with disabilities, and you should not use reclaimed words unless you are a member of that identity group.

Always ask an individual how they identify and wish to be described. You can also mirror the words people use to describe themselves. If you don't have the chance to ask a person, the most neutral word choice to go with is Person First. Use Identity First if you know that the majority of the community prefers Identity First. (For example, the majority of Deaf people prefer Identity-First language). If you are referring to a group of people who have different preferences, use the language that the majority of the group promotes. (For example, opinions vary on how to refer to people in the Autism Community, but the majority prefer Identity First).

2 Find ways to relate to disabled people as real people, not heroes or sensationalized characters.

We encourage a person-centered approach when communicating with or about people with disabilities, so that we can more easily see each other as whole people. When describing a person with a disability, refer to their disability only when it's relevant to your message or story.

People with disabilities generally want to be regarded as equals with everyone else. While it's great to celebrate success, it's also not unusual for people with disabilities to have talents, skills and abilities. Disabled people find it patronizing to be called inspiring or superhuman for simply living their lives with their disabilities.

When writing news stories that involve people with disabilities, a good gut-check question to ask is, “Would this be a story if the disability was removed?” If the answer is no, then it's probably not a story.

Along the lines of authentically portraying people and their disabilities, we want to avoid sensationalizing disability experiences. Sensationalizing occurs when news stories attribute a person's actions exclusively to their disability and may also involve highlighting details that shock and arouse fear. For example, giving explicit details of a person's medical condition or positioning the symptoms of a disability in headlines without providing context or acknowledging other contributing factors feeds public misperception and division.

3 Challenge stereotypes about people with disabilities.

Many of the word choices that we encourage are affirming because they challenge negative stereotypes about people with disabilities. For example, when we hear the words “wheelchair

bound,” we might assume that a person feels confined, when in fact their device gives them the freedom to be mobile – a reality which is reflected in more active language like “wheelchair user.”

Disabilities are not tragedies; they are a natural part of life. We want to stay away from descriptions of disabilities that connote attitudes of pity like, “Your life is so hard; I feel sorry for you.” or that imply that having a disability is the end of the world. For example, say, “She lives with fibromyalgia” instead of “She suffers from fibromyalgia.”

Did you know that people with mental health conditions are more likely to be a victim of a violent crime than a perpetrator? When speaking or writing about a violent crime, remember that every context is different, and try to acknowledge or explore the many factors that can lead to violence. Question the stereotype that mental health is the cause of violent crimes.

4. Avoid distancing.

Our words can foster connection, or they can separate us from one another. Other-ing terms like “the mentally ill” may evoke negative connotations, or they may distance one group from another by lumping diverse individuals together. Instead, it’s preferable to use neutral and inclusive terms, like “people with mental health conditions.” Rather than saying, “the elderly” or “aging dependents,” try using more neutral words, like “older people” or “Elder” as a term of respect.

5. Use Common Phrases.

There are lots of every-day phrases that reference abilities people may or may not have. We don’t need to shy away from them when interacting with people with disabilities. For example, don’t be afraid to say, “See you later,” to a blind person “Did you hear about this?” to a Deaf person or “Do you need a hand?” to someone with a limb difference.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Center for Disability Rights, Inc. Disability Writing & Journalism Guidelines
- Depression Bipolar Support Alliance: 10 Ways to Combat Discrimination with Compassionate Language
- National Center on Disability and Journalism at Arizona State University: 2018 Style Guide
- Autistic Self-Advocacy Network
- The Independence Center

DISABILITY LANGUAGE CHEAT SHEET

Category	Outdated or Harmful Words	Affirming Words
General Disability Terms	Impairment, Special Needs, Deficit	Disability
	Differently abled, Challenged, The Disabled	People with disabilities; Disabled person
	Handicapped	Accessible
	Special needs	Accommodations, Modifications
	Seeing Eye Dog	Service Dog or Animal, Guide Dog, Hearing Dog, Emotional Support Animal
	Abled-bodied, normal	Person without a Disability, Abled, Non-disabled, Neurotypical (for a person with typical intellectual and cognitive development)
	Suffers from _____	Lives with _____ Experiences _____
	Victim	Survivor (unless referring to someone who is deceased)
Mobility Disabilities and Medical Conditions	High Functioning/Low Functioning	Able to do ____, High support or low support needs
	Cripple, Gimp	Person with a mobility disability, Amputee, Limb difference
	Home-bound, Sickly	Does not leave their home; Chronic illness, Person who lives with chronic illness
	Confined to a wheelchair, Wheelchair-bound	Uses a Wheelchair, Wheelchair-user, Physically Disabled, Mobility Disability
	Electric Chair	Power Wheelchair; Power Chair
	Midget	Person with Dwarfism, Someone of Short Stature, Short statured person
	Vegetable, vegetative state	comatose, non-responsive, has _____ condition
Epileptic fit	Seizure	

Sensory and Speech Disabilities	Visually Handicapped, Visually Impaired	Blind/Low-Vision
	Hearing Impaired; Deaf-and-Dumb	D/deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind
	Mute, Deaf-Mute	Doesn't communicate orally, doesn't speak orally
	Person who is deaf	D/deaf person (Deaf with a capital "D" refers to a person who identifies with the Deaf Community; deaf with a lower case "d" refers to a person who does not identify with the Deaf community and refers to the medical condition)
Cognitive, Emotional and Developmental Disabilities	Nuts, Psycho; Emotionally Disturbed; Hypersensitive, Deranged, Lunatic, Mad	Person with a Mental Health Condition or Mental Health Disability; Emotional Disability
	Crazy, Mad, Schizophrenic, Anxious person	Person with schizophrenia, person with anxiety or _____ mental health condition
	Addict; Substance Abuse	Person who has an addiction, Substance Use; Person in recovery from/struggles with an addiction
	Person with Autism	Unless someone self-identifies this way, Autistic person, Neurodivergent
	Retarded, Mental retardation, Delayed, Feeble-minded, Stupid, Dumb, Idiot, Mongoliod	Learning disability; Intellectual disability, Cognitive disability, Developmental Disability, Intellectually or Developmentally Disabled, Neurodivergent
	Brain Damaged	Person with a Brain Injury/Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)



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