



Disability Related Language Guidelines

INTRODUCTION

What is a disability? The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) defines an “individual with a disability” as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment. (Although the legal definition uses the term “impairment,” many have moved away from this term.) The ADA provides civil rights to people with disabilities and allows for community integration. People with disabilities can and should be included in all parts of life. Part of that inclusion, as with other marginalized communities, requires everyone to become more mindful of our language generally, as well as when communicating with individuals with disabilities in the context of our disability-related advocacy efforts. The next page of these guidelines contains a chart with suggested terms and phrases to avoid, along with various alternatives.

BE GUIDED BY OTHERS’ SELF-DEFINITION

People with disabilities have varying preferences when it comes to referring to their disabilities. Some prefer person-first language, noting that identity-first language may seem to equate the person with the person’s condition. Others prefer identity-first language and may consider their disability as an essential part of their identity.

- **Person-first language:** “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person”
- **Identity-first Language:** “disabled person,” “autistic person,” or “Deaf person”

**Note what language the person or organization is using and follow that, and if necessary, ask about preferences. Respect others’ self-definition. Some advocates use person-first for*

legal documents and identity-first in advocacy/outreach settings. It’s fine to use a mix of these approaches to show inclusion.

**Note on reclaiming language: As with other communities, the disability community has a history of defining themselves. Individuals with disabilities may use language as part of self-definition that is not appropriate for others to use.*

Do not refer to a person’s disability unless it is relevant to your work or conversation and if relevant, ensure to get permission from the person beforehand.

Avoid using language that assumes that no one in the audience has a disability during presentations or in materials (e.g., generally avoid using “stand up,” “keep an eye out for,” “lift your voice,” etc.).

USE EMPOWERING LANGUAGE:

- Don’t use language such as: “suffers from” or “afflicted with.”
- Don’t use “invalid” or other words that may invoke pity.
- Don’t refer to people with disabilities as “patients” unless they are receiving medical treatment and that’s relevant to the discussion.
- Avoid erasure or language such as “regardless of ability,” “ability-status,” or “differently-abled”.

**Note: Positive words can also be used in a manner that’s offensive, such as “amazing.” For example, if you state that an everyday task a person with a disability does is “amazing,” that can be offensive. Describe people with disabilities in a balanced way, not as heroic or superhuman, brave, or special. Do not say that a person with a disability is inspiring because they are simply living their lives. This could imply that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.*

DISABILITY RELATED LANGUAGE CHART

(based on [guide from the National Center on Disability and Journalism](#) and feedback from disability justice advocates)

*Note this chart reflects a general consensus; there may be differences between relevant communities and generations.

Instead of using:	Consider these alternatives:
"normal," "healthy"	"people without disabilities" or "non-disabled"
"differently-abled" or "regardless of ability"	When referring to individuals with disabilities, the trend appears to be using identity-first language (disabled person). Others use person-first language such as "person with a disability" based on the context. Given that both approaches are used, it is suggested to take the lead from the relevant individuals or organizations based on the specific context. If that's not possible, it is suggested to include both approaches in outward-facing documents.
"afflicted with," "stricken with," "suffers from," "victim of," etc.	State in neutral terms that do not connote pity (e.g., someone who has X condition).
"bipolar" or schizophrenic as an adjective for something that rapidly or drastically changes	"it changes rapidly" or something similar
"blind"	Don't use casually to mean you missed something (or use phrases like "the blind leading the blind"). You can use "blind" to describe a blind person or use "person with low vision" as a broader term if the person does not have complete loss of sight.
"corrective device"	"Assistive Technology (AT)," which references equipment and non-equipment
"crippled" or "crippled with"	Don't use casually. Use more precise language as appropriate.
"mental retardation"	intellectual disability
"crazy," "insane," "lunatic," "mad," or "psycho"	If medical context - "psychiatric disability," "mental health condition," or "mental health disability." Avoid using such terms casually and instead use words such as "wild," "intense," "ridiculous," "absurd," "chaotic," or "bizarre," depending on context. (*Note: for some individuals, "mad" is a self-descriptor.) The term "mental illness" is used by mental health professionals and some advocates but is rejected by many who view it as disease-focused.
"depressed" or "has depression" (unless diagnosed with clinical depression)	Don't use casually and instead use "sad" or other specific words if you mean that someone is unhappy, low-energy, etc.
"Down's" or "she has Down's Syndrome"	"a person with Down syndrome"
"dwarf" or "midget"	"someone with dwarfism," or "little person"
"handicap," "handicapped" or "special needs"	"person with a disability" or "disabled person" (For the parking context, use "accessible parking.")
"hearing impaired," "deaf and dumb," or "deaf-mute"	"Deaf" or "hard-of-hearing" ("partial hearing loss" or "hearing loss" is acceptable, but "Deaf" and "hard of hearing" are preferred)
"lame"	Use specific words such as "not cool," "unfortunate," or "dull"
"OCD" (unless formally diagnosed with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder)	Don't use casually and instead use other specific words if you mean that someone is organized, particular, etc.
"spastic" or "spaz"	Don't use casually and instead use other words if you mean that someone is clumsy, high energy, outgoing, or enthusiastic.
"stammering" or "stutterer"	"someone who stutters"
"keep our eyes on XYZ"	"we need to closely monitor XYZ"
"stand up," "stand with," or "step up"	"we're with X," "support X," "demand better," "commit to," "show up for," "gear up," "join us," "be in solidarity," "take action," "come forward"
"wheelchair-bound" or "confined to a wheelchair"	"someone who uses a wheelchair"

For additional background information you may review the [NCDJ Disability Style Guide](#)