

Community Inclusion - Language Tips

As language, perceptions and social habits change at a seemingly faster and faster rate, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to figure out how to refer to people with disabilities. Even the term “disability” is no longer universally accepted.

Some basic guidelines:

modified from <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

- Refer to a disability only when it’s relevant to the story being told and when the diagnosis comes from a reputable source, such as a medical professional or other licensed professional.
- When possible, use people-first language unless otherwise indicated by the person - this is a personal choice.
- When possible, ask the person how he or she would like to be described. If the person is not available or unable, ask a trusted family member or relevant organization that represents people with disabilities.
- Avoid made-up words like “diversability” and “handicapable” unless using them in direct quotes or to refer to a movement or organization.

We urge people to refer to a disability only when it’s relevant to the story being told. People living with disabilities often complain, and rightly so, that their disability is mentioned even when the story or topic has nothing to do with their disability.

Able-bodied

Background: This term is used to describe someone who does not identify as having a disability. Some members of the disability community oppose its use

because it implies that all people with disabilities lack “able bodies” or the ability to use their bodies well. They may prefer “non-disabled” or “enabled” as being more accurate.

Differently-abled

Background: This term came into vogue in the 1990s as an alternative to “disabled,” “handicapped” or “mentally retarded.” *Currently, it is not considered appropriate (and for many, never was).* Some consider it condescending, offensive or simply a way of avoiding talking about disability. Others prefer it to “disabled” because “dis” means “not,” which means that “disabled” means “not able.” But particularly when it comes to referring to individuals, “differently abled” is problematic. As some advocates observe, we are all differently abled.

Disabled/disability

Background: “Disability” and “disabled” generally describe functional limitations that affect one or more of the major life activities, including walking, lifting, learning and breathing. Various laws define disability differently. When describing an individual, do not reference his or her disability unless it is clearly pertinent to the story. If it is pertinent, it is best to use language that refers to the person first and the disability second. For example: “The writer, who has

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a disability” as opposed to “the disabled writer.” When possible, refer to a person’s specific condition. Disability and people who have disabilities are not monolithic. Avoid referring to “the disabled” in the same way that you would avoid referring to “the Asians,” “the Jews” or “the African-Americans.” Instead, consider using such terms as “the disability community” or “the disability activist.”

Disabled people/people with disabilities

Background: The phrase “disabled people” is an example of identity-first language (in contrast to people-first language). It is the preferred terminology in Great Britain and by a growing number of U.S. disability activists. Syracuse University’s Disability Cultural Center says, “The basic reason behind some disability groups’ dislike for the application of people-first language to themselves is that they consider their disabilities to be inseparable parts of who they are.” For example, they prefer to be referred to as “autistic,” “blind” or “disabled.”

Handicap/handicapped

Background: The Oxford English dictionary defines a handicap as “a condition that restricts a person’s ability to function physically, mentally or socially.” *The term has fallen out of favor in the disability community.*

General guidelines

It is important to remember that words have a precise meaning and are not interchangeable. The following guidelines suggest appropriate terminology to use when speaking or referring to people with disabilities.

- A disability is a functional limitation or restriction of an individual’s ability to perform an activity. The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun. People are not conditions. It is therefore preferable not to use the term "the disabled" but rather "people with disabilities."
- Avoid categorizing people with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures. Choose words that are non-judgmental, non-emotional, and are accurate descriptions. Avoid using "brave," "courageous," "inspirational," or other similar words to describe a person with a disability. Remember that the majority of people with disabilities have similar aspirations as the rest of

the population, and that words and images should reflect their inclusion in society, except where social isolation is the focal point.

- Avoid references that cause discomfort, guilt, pity, or insult. Words like "suffers from," "stricken with," "afflicted by," "patient," "disease," or "sick" suggest constant pain and a sense of hopelessness. While this may be the case for some individuals, a disability is a condition that does not necessarily cause pain or require medical attention.
- Avoid words such as "burden," "incompetent," or "defective," which suggest that people with disabilities are inferior and should be excluded from activities generally available to people without disabilities.

Terms Discouraged	Terms Preferred
The disabled/A disabled person	People with disabilities/An individual with a disability
suffers from, afflicted by, victim of	has a disability
normal	typical
The handicapped, handicapped, differently-abled	People with disabilities
Mental retardation	Intellectual disability
Wheelchair bound	Person who uses a wheelchair; person with a mobility disability
Hearing impaired	People who are deaf or hard of hearing; people with a hearing disability
Mental illness, mental disorder, crazy, insane	psychiatric disability
Midget or Dwarf	Person of short stature, little person
Epileptic	Person who has epilepsy
fits, spells, attacks	seizures
Brain damaged	People with brain injuries
Slow learner	Person with a learning disability
Diabetics	People who have diabetes



**The simple rule of thumb:
it’s people first.**

**The person comes first.
The disability comes second.**