

# How to Write Person First Language

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A Guide to Help Put the Person First When Communicating  
about People with Disabilities



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# Why Use Person First Language?

Language is described as the method of human communication, either spoken or written, that uses words in a structured and conventional way. It is a system of communication used by a particular community. Different types of language are used in other countries around the world and even in different regions of the United States.

Like all communities, the disability community has its own preferred terminology. This is referred to as **Person (or People) First Language**. The use of this type of language describes differences of people in accurate ways that convey respect.

## **Person First Language:**

- Puts the person first in word and thought.
- Is accurate without being judgmental.
- Does not mention disabilities if it has nothing to do with a conversation.

Putting the **person first** means treating others as you would want to be treated. When communicating, it goes one step further; it means that whenever possible, mention the person first, and follow it with any necessary description of a disability.

Say, **the woman who is blind**, instead of the blind woman. In other words, the person is first a person and second a person with a disability. And just as it isn't always necessary to convey the color of a person's hair, it also isn't always necessary to mention that a person has a disability.

By the time you finish reading this guide, you should be able to identify new language habits to use when describing people with disabilities.

## To Our Friends in the Media

We believe in the positive values of person first language, and we ask respectfully that you use it.

In the area of disabilities, person first language means to emphasize the person rather than the disability. For example, say **Mary Smith, who uses a wheelchair...** instead of, the wheelchair-bound Mary Smith... Notice that the preferred statement mentions Mary first.

Most people with disabilities are healthy. Therefore, it is less than accurate to stereotype them as “victims” or as being “afflicted” or “stricken.” Or using words such as “crippled” and “suffers from.” In fact, most people with disabilities prefer their disability not be mentioned if it has nothing to do with the story.

We encourage you to try not to use the “e-d” words preceded by “the.” Examples of this are “the disabled” and “the cerebral palsied.” Instead, say **people who have a disability** and **people who have cerebral palsy**.

People without disabilities sometimes look up to those with disabilities as having great courage and endurance. We urge you not to mention such thoughts in your stories as you consider the feelings of the person with the disability. Most people with disabilities want to be thought of as ordinary people.

Thank you for respecting the dignity of the more than 56 million Americans who have disabilities!

If you have questions about person first language or using the appropriate word to describe a disability, please call the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council at 614-466-5205 or 800-766-7425.

# Appropriate Terminology

This section provides a list of terms that are often used when describing people with disabilities. This information is reprinted with permission from *Guidelines: How to Write and Report About People with Disabilities, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., 2020*, © University of Kansas, published by The Research Training Center on Independent Living, Lawrence, KA.

A complete list of terms for all types of disabilities can be found on the University of Kansas website at <http://rtcil.org/products/media/guidelines>. You can also request for them to mail brochures to you in both, which are available in English and Spanish.

## Blind and Low Vision

A condition in which a person has loss of sight for ordinary life purposes. A person is legally blind when vision with best correction is no better than 20/200. Low vision and vision loss are generic terms for vision loss caused by macular degeneration and other conditions. Low vision usually refers to someone who is legally blind, but can still see large print, bright colors, light and shadow and large shapes, while vision loss refers to those who have lost vision after birth. Say **he is blind** or **girl who has low vision**. (You may ask which term best suits the person.) Some blind people consider themselves **visual thinkers** so they regard visually impaired and visually challenged as negative terms.

## Brain Injury and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

A condition where there is long-term or temporary disruption in brain function. The two types are distinguished by cause, with a non-traumatic or acquired brain injury resulting from an internal event, like a stroke or seizure, whereas a TBI results from an external injury, such as from a fall or car crash. Difficulties with cognitive (thinking, remembering, learning), physical, emotional and/or social functioning may occur. Use **person with a brain injury** or **person who has a traumatic brain injury**. Do not say brain damaged.

## Congenital Disability

A disability that has existed since birth but is not necessarily hereditary, such as cerebral palsy. Use **person with a congenital disability** or **person with a disability since birth**. Birth defect and deformity are considered offensive.

## Deaf

Deaf refers to a degree of hearing loss that is significant enough to prevent understanding speech through the ear. **Deaf people usually identify as the Deaf or Deaf community (with a capital D)** rather than people who are deaf. Deaf people are part of a specific community made up of those who share a common culture and sign language.

Hearing impairment, hearing loss, deafness, or hearing difficulties are generic terms used by some individuals to indicate any degree of hearing loss, from mild to profound, although some perceive the term hearing impaired as negative. Members of the Deaf community do not use any of these terms as they are medically defined.

Hard of hearing refers to those with a mild to moderate hearing loss who may use technology for amplification. A person who has hearing difficulties may have speech difficulties, too, but deafness does not affect mental abilities. **Say deaf woman or hard of hearing boy**. People who have some degree of hearing and vision loss prefer the term Deaf-Blind. Never use deaf and dumb or deaf mute.

### **Exception to the Person First Rule**

Deaf people usually identify as the Deaf or Deaf community (with a capital D) rather than “people who are deaf.” Deaf people are part of a specific community made up of those who share a common culture and sign language.

## Developmental Disability (DD)

An umbrella term for a number of life-long conditions apparent during the developmental period. The developmental period is generally understood to end at the age of 22. The most common DD conditions are intellectual disability, Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, fetal alcohol syndrome, and fragile X syndrome. Although the term intellectual disability is often used in conjunction with developmental disability, many people with a developmental disability do not have an intellectual disability. The acronym “IDD” is used to describe a group that includes people with ID, people with another DD and/or people with both. The supports that people with DD or IDD need to meet their goals vary in intensity from intermittent to pervasive. Say **she has cerebral palsy**, **he has a developmental disability** or **he is autistic**. Do not say mentally retarded.

## Disability

A general term used to indicate that the environment does not accommodate a person’s abilities. The term may refer to a physical, sensory, or mental condition. Do not use the term handicapped because many people with disabilities consider it offensive.

Some people object to the term disabled because it suggests the person has an inability to function (as in a disabled car) and it suggests that people with disabilities are a homogeneous group. Others proudly claim disabled as part of their identity, and others prefer the terms “difference” and “differently abled” because they avoid the negative implications of disability. However, some consider differently abled a euphemism that does not acknowledge the truth.

Again, language is always evolving. The range of available terms reflects a movement toward greater inclusivity, which is a positive development.

**When in doubt, ask. When you can’t ask, use people with disabilities or the disability community.**

## Down Syndrome

Describes a specific chromosomal condition that results in intellectual disability, a distinctive appearance, and particular health concerns. Down

syndrome is a developmental disability. Say **person with Down syndrome**. Do not use mongoloid or Down person.

## **Intellectual Disability (ID)**

A condition defined by substantial limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior that are apparent during the developmental period. ID is a developmental disability, and the supports that people with ID need to meet their goals vary in intensity from intermittent to pervasive. Though mental retardation was once an accepted clinical term, it became commonly used as an insult or slur, so people who have ID, their families, and advocacy organizations campaigned to end its use. Say **people with intellectual disabilities**. Do not use retarded, mentally retarded or subnormal.

## **Learning Disability**

Refers to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual disability. Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to language processing, phonological processing, visual spatial processing, processing speed, memory and retention, and executive functions, such as planning and decision making. Dyslexia is an example of a learning disability. Say **person with a learning disability**. Do not use slow learner or retarded.

## **Mental Illness and Psychiatric Disability**

A variety of psychological conditions. Say **person with a mental illness** or **psychiatric disability**. If necessary, for medical or legal accuracy, use diagnostic terms such as schizophrenia, psychosis, or bipolar disorder (which replaced manic depression). Words such as crazy, maniac, lunatic, schizo and psycho are offensive and should never be applied to people

with mental health conditions. For more detail, refer to the Entertainment Industries Council's online style guide at [eiconline.org](http://eiconline.org).

## **Nondisabled**

The preferred term when the context requires a comparison between people with and without disabilities. Use **nondisabled** or **people without disabilities** instead of able-bodied, normal or healthy.

## **Seizure**

Describes an involuntary muscle contraction and/or a brief impairment or loss of consciousness resulting from a neurological condition such as epilepsy or a brain injury. Say **girl with epilepsy** or **teen with a seizure disorder**. Do not use epileptic fit or spastic attacks.

## **Wheelchair User**

People with any number of disabilities may use wheelchairs, and people may use wheelchairs continuously or only under certain conditions. Don't say wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair, as these terms are inaccurate and convey pity, and a wheelchair or other assistive device enables the user to participate more fully in life. Say **a person who uses a wheelchair**.

# Person First Awareness

It is up to all of us to make the public aware of person first language! If you represent an agency or organization providing services or support to people with disabilities, share this guide with the local news media and public relations people in your area.

## **Remember:**

- Emphasize abilities instead of limitations.
- A disability is a condition, not a disease.
- If you are unsure about how to describe a disability, ask someone who knows.
- Describe people without disabilities as just that – people without disabilities.
- Be accurate and put the person first in word and thought.

We also recommend that you read and share our publication, “How to Write Clear Language” found at <https://ddc.ohio.gov/pub-how-to-write-clear-language>. This handbook, written by the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council, provides guidelines for writing information that all audiences will find easy to read and understand.

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