

Person First Language

—a guide to help put the person first when communicating about people with disabilities

It's easy to get trapped in language habits. Remember how people used to use the term mailman, or businessman? Or use the word girl to describe a woman?

Our country has progressed socially and ethically. Today, Americans lean toward describing differences in accurate ways that convey respect—descriptions that:

- Recognize a person's right to self-esteem—a person's right to be thought of first as a person
- Tell the truth without being judgmental
- Don't mention disabilities if they have nothing to do with the story

By the time you finish reading this brochure, you should be able to identify new language habits that you need to work on when describing people with disabilities.

Some people polarize at extreme ends of the people-first language issue. On one side, there are those who believe it represents an unneeded infringement on tradition and freedom of expression; and on the other side, some continually invent new descriptions they hope could not possibly offend anyone. The latter group rallies for use of words as handicapped, physically challenged, and mentally different.

A moderate approach that is shared by many advocates and disability-related organizations is built on these two points:

- Be accurate
- Put the person first in word and thought

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 is not always necessary to mention that a person has a disability.

To our friends in the media:

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

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

Additionally, saying that a person is “confined” or “bound” to a wheelchair emphasizes limitations and is often incorrect (for example, many people who use wheelchairs sometimes use crutches, canes or walkers).

Most people with disabilities are healthy. Therefore, it is less than accurate to stereotype them as victims or as being afflicted or stricken. In fact, most people with disabilities would 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.**”

Some terms and expressions used to describe disabilities are incorrect or judgmental. For example, what used to be called mongolism is now called Down syndrome, and the words “crippled” and “suffers from” are judgmental.

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 take into account 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 53 million Americans who have disabilities.

If you have questions about person first language or using the appropriate word to describe a disability, please call: 614-466-5205.

Person first awareness

It's 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, duplicate the back of this brochure onto your organization's letterhead and distribute it to the local news media and public relations people in your area. Include a contact person's name and phone number at the bottom of the page.

Remember:

- Emphasize abilities instead of limitations. Say **uses a wheelchair** instead of “confined to a wheelchair.”
- A disability is a condition, not a disease. Therefore, it is inaccurate to speak of a person with a disability as a “patient” unless you are recounting the person's medical history.
- If you are unsure about how to describe a disability, ask someone who knows—for example, **ask the person who has the disability.**
- Describe people without disabilities as **people without disabilities.**
- Be accurate, and put the **person first** in word and thought.

For copies of this brochure or more information about people with disabilities, contact:

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Appropriate terminology*

Handicap or disability?

It is easy to confuse handicap and disability. Use **disability** when you refer to a person with a disability. Don't use handicapped. A disabling condition may or may not be handicapping. For example, a person who is blind has a physical disability. This person is handicapped when he or she does not know which room to enter because the door signs are readable only by sight.

Blind

Describes a condition in which a person has loss of vision for ordinary life purposes. **Visually impaired** is the generic term preferred by some individuals to refer to all degrees of vision loss. Use **boy who is blind, girl who is visually impaired, or man who has low vision.**

Head injury

Describes a condition where there is temporary or long-term interruption in the brain functioning. Use **people with a brain injury, people who have sustained brain damage, woman who has traumatic brain injury, or boy with a closed head injury.**

Cleft lip

Describes a specific congenital disability involving lip and gum. The term hare lip is anatomically incorrect and stigmatizing. Use **person who has a cleft lip or a person who has a cleft palate.**

Congenital disability

Describes a disability that has existed since birth but is not necessarily hereditary. The terms birth defect and deformity are inappropriate. Say **person with a congenital disability.**

Deaf

Refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech through the ear. Hearing impaired is the generic term preferred by some individuals to indicate any degree of hearing loss—from mild to profound. It includes both hard of hearing and deaf. [The National Association of the Deaf has adopted the terms “deaf” and “hard of hearing” instead of the term hearing impaired.] **Hard of hearing** refers to a mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification. Use **woman who is deaf or boy who is hard of hearing.**

Developmental disability

[Approximately two of every one hundred Americans have a developmental disability. The federal government and Ohio define a developmental disability as a severe, chronic disability of a person that:

- Is attributable to a mental or physical impairment or combination of mental and physical impairments
- Is manifested before a person reaches age 22
- Is likely to continue indefinitely
- Results in substantial functional limitations in three or more of the following areas of major life activity: self-care; receptive and expressive language; learning; mobility; self-direction; capacity of independent living; and economic self-sufficiency
- Reflects the person's need for combination and sequence of special interdisciplinary or genetic care, treatment or other services that are lifelong or extended duration and are individually planned and coordinated.]

Disability

General term used for functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability, for example, to walk, lift, hear, or learn. It may refer to a physical, sensory, or mental condition. Use **man with a disability or children who have disabilities.** Impairment refers to loss or abnormality of an organ or body mechanism that may result in disability.

Down syndrome

Describes a chromosomal disorder that usually causes some delays in physical, intellectual and language development. The occurrence of Down syndrome is not related to race, socioeconomic level, or parental intelligence. Mongol and mongoloid are unacceptable terms. Use **person with Down syndrome.**

Handicap

Not a synonym for disability. Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or by one's own self. Handicap can be used when citing laws and situations, but should not be used to describe a disability. Say **the stairs are a handicap for her.**

Learning disability

Describes a permanent condition that affects the way individuals with average or above-average intelligence take in, retain, and express information. Some groups prefer **specific learning disability**, because it emphasizes that only certain learning processes are affected. Do not say slow learner, retarded, etc. Use **has a learning disability.**

Mental disability

The Federal Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) lists four categories under mental disability: psychiatric disability, retardation, learning disability, and (physical) head trauma. Use these four terms for specific instances; otherwise, **mental disability or cognitive impairment** is acceptable.

Mental illness

Words such as crazy, maniac, lunatic, demented, and psycho are offensive and should never be applied to people with mental health problems. Psychotic, schizophrenic, neurotic, and other specific terms should be used only in proper context and checked carefully for medical and legal accuracy. Acceptable terms are **people with emotional disorders, psychiatric illness, mental problems, or mental disabilities.**

Nondisabled

Appropriate term for people without disabilities. Normal, able-bodied, healthy, and whole are inappropriate. [Many advocates and organizations simply prefer to use the term **people without disabilities.**]

Seizure

Describes involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness, etc., resulting from a neurological condition, such as epilepsy. Rather than epileptic, say **girl with epilepsy or boy with a seizure disorder.** The term convulsion should be used only for seizures involving contraction of the entire body.

Small/short stature

Do not refer to people under 4'10" as dwarfs or midgets. Use **person of small (or short) stature.** Dwarfism is an accepted medical term, but it should not be used as general terminology.

Spinal cord injury

Describes a condition in which there has been permanent damage to the spinal cord. Quadriplegia denotes substantial or total loss of function in all four extremities. Paraplegia refers to substantial or total loss of function in the lower part of the body only. Say **man with paraplegia or woman who is paralyzed.**

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