

People First Language

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Language reflects and reinforces our perceptions and misperceptions of others. All too frequently the terms used for people with disabilities perpetuate stereotypes and false ideas. This guide is offered as one means to "unhandicap" our language and thinking. It is selective, not exhaustive. It is intended as a suggestion, not censorship.

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Objectionable		Preferable
(the) disabled	Sees people only in terms of disabilities	people with disabilities
(the) mentally retarded	Robs us of individuality by lumping people into one undifferentiated category	persons with mental retardation
(the) deaf (the) blind, etc.	Humanizing nouns emphasize the person	deaf people blind people
Abnormal/normal	Sees people with disabilities less than others	Persons with and without disabilities
(birth) defected defective	Describes an object, dehumanizes a person	congenital disability
Mrs. Kelly is an arthritic patient Bill Cullen was: afflicted with, stricken with, or suffers from polio	Sees someone as an object of medical care Connotes helplessness, dependency, defeat. Denies other aspects of the person.	Mrs. Kelly has arthritis Bill Cullen had polio
victim FDR was a polio victim	Connotes pitiful helplessness	state the facts: FDR had polio
INvalid	(From the same roots as VALID). Inaccurate as most people with disabilities aren't sickly	none is needed
deaf and dumb deaf-mute	Implies mental incapacitation occurs with	deaf person person with a hearing

dummy	hearing loss and/or speech impairment physical disabilities	impairment person with a speech impairment hard of hearing person
sightless four eyes blind as a bat	Inaccurate, demeaning	blind person partially sighted person person with a vision impairment person with low vision
cripple crippled crip	No epithet is more offensive to people with physical disabilities (From Old English "to creep".) A second meaning of this adjective is "inferior"	FDR had a physical disability (or) FDR had polio
confined to a wheelchair wheelchair-bound wheelchaired	Creates a false impression; wheelchairs liberate, not confine or bind; they are mobility tools from which people transfer to sleep, sit in chairs, drive cars, etc.	wheelchair user uses a wheelchair wheelchair using
Handel was (an) epileptic Renoir was arthritic Geri Jewell is cerebral palsied	These usages see people as their disabilities Inaccurate reference; a person is not a condition	Handel had epilepsy Renoir had arthritis Geri Jewell has cerebral palsy
midget, dwarf	Mythical, denies reality Infantilizing, patronizing	short-statured person little person
deformed misshapen hunchbacked	Connotes repulsive oddity Demeaning	has a physical disability has spinal curvature
lame paralytic gimp, gimpy withered	Demeaning	walks with a cane uses crutches Senator Dole has a manual disability
monster vegetable creature	Robs people with severe disabilities of their humanity	the child has multiple or severe disabilities

freak

mentally ill crazy, insane psycho, nut, maniac former mental patient	Outdated and stigmatizing	mental disability, psychiatric disability behavior disorder emotional disability mentally restored
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retard, slow simple-minded idiot, Mongoloid	Demeaning	people with mental retardation
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spastic, spazz has fits	Demeaning	has seizures has cerebral palsy has epilepsy
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"special"	Distancing and inappropriate, patronizing; describes that which is different about any person	none is needed
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physically challenged handi-capable inconvenienced differently-abled	Euphemisms avoid reality and rob people of dignity	a person has a physical, sensory, or mental disability
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Cute labels are uninformative and trivialize an important part of a person's identity

inspirational, courageous	People with disabilities are not collectively inspirational or courageous	acknowledge the person's abilities and individuality
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isn't it wonderful how he has overcome his disability?	Inaccurate: People live with a disability, they have to overcome attitudinal, social, architectural, educational, transportation and employment barriers	accept people for who they are, including that they have a disability
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